The Masculinization of the Female Hero in Tim Burton’s Alice in Wonderland

By Alex Brink

In 2010, in conjunction with the Walt Disney Corporation, Tim Burton set out to re-create the classic tale Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, the renowned English storybook written by Lewis Carroll in 1865. The book, which shadows the travels of Alice in a fantasy world populated by anthropomorphic creatures, has been adapted countless times within theatre, videogames, television, and, most notably, in film. Burton is world-renowned for films such as Edward Scissorhands (1990), Nightmare Before Christmas (1993), and Big Fish (2003) that effectively blend the dark, gothic, and macabre aspects of horror with the quirky and magical elements of fantasy. In 2010, Burton diverged from his own original film concepts in order to build off the past work of Disney and countless other visionaries striving to adapt Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland. Burton took on the film because he admitted during an interview with Steve Weintraub of Collider.com to feeling little to no connection with the original book by Carroll or any of the adaptations, and he desired to inject his own style into the realm of Wonderland. He viewed Alice as an aimless girl who merely acted as a vehicle to introduce outlandish characters and unrealistic situations. Burton, by contrast, wanted to portray Alice as a multidimensional character in a world with a defined plot rather than a collection of arbitrary events.

The plot of Alice in Wonderland still follows Alice as the protagonist but focuses on her later years and attempts to combine both of Carroll’s tales, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass. The story takes place in Victorian England and begins by depicting Alice as a young girl who suffers from a strange reoccurring dream about a place called Underland. The film then transitions to Alice at the age of nineteen on her way to a garden party where she is expected to accept the son of Lord Ascot, Hamish to be her husband. Upon seeing the white
rabbit from her dreams during the party, Alice decides to follow the frantic creature and falls down the rabbit hole that leads to Underland. Once in Underland, the many anthropomorphich characters that reside in the magical realm question Alice about her true identity and whether or not she is “the Alice.” A highly coveted scroll amongst the characters of Underland called “the Oraculum” prophesizes that the true Alice will slay the Red Queen’s Jabberwocky, restoring peace to Underland and reestablishing power to the White Queen’s throne. As the story progresses, Alice concludes that her strange dreams as a child were actual experiences in Underland that she had since forgotten. Alice eventually surmises that Underland is a real place and that her destiny is to fulfill the prophecy and slay the Jabberwocky to restore order. Just as the prophecy foretells, the armies of the Red and White Queen meet on a battlefield with their respective champions: the Jabberwocky and Alice. Alice ultimately defeats the Jabberwocky and brings peace to the war-torn setting of Underland. Alice is then presented with the choice of staying in Underland or returning to her home in England. After great deliberation, Alice decides to return home but not to get married; rather, she decides to pursue a life of capitalistic enterprise by entering her deceased father’s trade business. Burton’s imaginatively dark, somewhat twisted vision of Carroll’s tale provides an interesting spin on the classic tale.

Along with applying his own personal flare, it was vital for Burton, during the creation of the film, to build upon Carroll’s relatively progressive and feminist undertones within the original text. Carroll challenged the domestic formula for female characters through his portrayal of Alice as a girl interested in her own imagination rather than the trivialities of domestic life. In her article “How Wanderer Alice Became Warrior Alice and Why,” Kristina Aikens states, “Carroll’s Alice in some ways appears to be extraordinarily feminine. … [S]he is embraced most adoringly by women” (2). The original Alice, while still retaining the basic components of a feminist figure, has since lost a great deal of her influence as a forward-thinking female character in subsequent adaptations. Burton capitalizes on and enhances that which initially posed *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as progressive by tapping into modern films’ ever-growing acceptance of strong female characters. Wholly domestic roles for women are becoming increasingly unacceptable and directors, including Burton; large production companies, such as Disney, are attempting to reinvent how women are presented in their films.

Disney, the producer of both the 1951 animated classic and Burton’s 2010 re-imagining of *Alice in Wonderland*, stands as a definitive culprit of forwarding a domestic role for women in
film. As Cassandra Stover claims in her article "Damsels and Heroines: The Conundrum of the Post-Feminist Disney Princess," Disney needlessly depicts its women as “voiceless heroines who perform conventional gender behaviors” (2). Disney’s rather sexist and patriarchal tendencies have since been difficult to eradicate. However, in the past two decades, Disney writers and directors have attempted to transform the traditional female role into that of a feminist heroine. The 2010 adaptation of Alice in Wonderland proves to be an effort to represent the empowering and liberating nature of feminism through Alice. However, it does so in a rather masculine fashion. The contradictory nature of Alice’s feminism proposes that femininity cannot be celebrated as a source of strength and should instead focus on that which justifies male superiority: masculinity. Burton’s modern adaptation pushes Alice into traditional male roles, such as becoming a knight in shining armor and embarking on a career in the capitalist trade industry, to prove her worth. Burton’s attempt to shatter the mold of past female Disney characters ultimately suggests that female characters can only gain equality and power by shirking femininity and instead embodying masculine qualities.

Has Alice Always been a Feminist Heroine?

In Victorian England, women’s rights, in general, were highly restricted, and the concept of feminism, first introduced in 1837, was still in its infancy. Victorian society generally supported traditional gender roles that limited women, forcing them into a domestic realm that lacked freedom and social liberties. Carroll’s iconic text, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, challenges such oppressive practices towards women and introduces a character whose intense curiosity and self-awareness allows her to break down social barriers and blur the line between the masculine and feminine. Alice became a burgeoning force in the transformation of female characters. Young girl protagonists in Victorian literature are generally not allowed to develop, and as Nina Auerbach author of "Alice in Wonderland: A Curious Child" states, “Victorian heroines tend to be static” (45), existing largely as a “diffusion of emotional and religious grace” or as embodiments of holiness and purity (45). There is an on-going debate, sparked by feminist interest, as to whether or not Alice effectively represents a departure from the well-established role of domestic servitude of women into that of a feminist heroine. The perspective held by many is that Carroll’s Alice has and continues to be an important figure within feminist literature.
It is Alice’s curiosity, first and foremost, that sets her apart from other female literary characters because of “its origin in the terrifying fear that [women] can acquire knowledge and thus threaten the patriarchal society (Aikens 4). Unlike past authors, Carroll never punishes his female protagonist for indulging her curiosity despite encountering a multitude of odd and uncomfortable situations. Alice possesses a fearless spirit and a willingness to dabble in the absurd and potentially dangerous. Carroll continues his exploration of female freedom by providing Alice with a great deal of independence, power, and agency; she “chooses an active function” in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Aikens 10). Through her interactions with strange anthropomorph and the silly conundrums they provide, Alice proves that “there are other ways to be female” (Aikens 5). Her demeanor towards the mysterious realm of Wonderland greatly contrasts with the repression of imagination and exploration that plagued a great deal of women in the Victorian era. Alice forthrightly asserts her independence and self-confidence through her acceptance and surrender to the unknown that is Wonderland. Megan Lloyd, author of “Unruly Alice: A Feminist View of Some Adventures in Wonderland,” similarly believes that Alice’s sense of liberation pushes her to “eat and drink what she sees, intrude, barge in, take her seat at the tea party uninvited … use intellect to solve her problems and frequently speak her mind” (9). As the story progresses and Alice’s self-confidence is nurtured, Carroll places greater emphasis on the gender inequalities and expectations of Victorian women.

Alice’s feminist nature reaches its climax in the text during a debate with the King and Queen of Hearts in which she denounces the importance of social etiquette and in turn overpowers their rule and influence over her. It is this battle for equality between Alice and the King and Queen of Hearts that irrevocably distances Alice from the preconceived gender norms established by a patriarchal culture. Lloyd also suggests that Alice does not merely stand as a role model for women of the past but for modern women as well:

Alice’s direct, candid approach to life is something to which today’s college-aged women relate. … She encounters all types, tests herself, tastes life around her, and once she learns the right combination to fit in and be comfortable with herself, she’s welcomed into a beautiful world where she possesses wisdom, power, and prestige. (10)

Despite being nearly 150 years old, Carroll’s tale and its main character stand the test of time in terms of their relevance to women’s rights and the progression towards gender equality.
As Aikens states in her article, “in many ways Carroll’s Alice is just an ordinary girl. … [S]he acts as a reader surrogate, allowing us access to Wonderland now matter who we are” (5). It is Carroll’s ability to balance Alice’s progressive, liberal qualities with her more relatable characteristics that poses Alice as an iconic and revolutionary feminist literary figure.

The indication that Alice stands as a powerful feminist heroine and her intention to withdraw from the proposed limitations and restrictions of society is strengthened by the stark contrasts in the beliefs and practices of her sister. Although rarely discussed within the text, Carroll uses Alice’s sister as a vessel to evoke the disparity between a traditional female mindset and that of a progressive feminist (Lloyd 16). Alice’s sister, who remains nameless throughout the text, signifies the acceptance of gender norms and the banality that such limitations suggest for women. As a character, Alice’s sister is rather lackluster and “falls into a female trap, accepting what’s in front of her and not fully understanding the agency and opportunity within herself” (Lloyd 17). Unlike Alice, who aims to lead a life of independence and exploration, the sister spends most of her time attempting to escape through reading and daydreaming. Due to her passivity and lack of courage, Alice’s sister is never rewarded with the opportunity to experience Wonderland, which serves as a representation of the adventure and opportunity that lies before women willing to break the chains of patriarchal rule. Instead, the sister is trapped in a cycle of unrewarding experiences and oppression and near the end of the text desires to “dream” herself out of the “dull reality” in which she is trapped (Carroll 81). Alice, however, once in Wonderland is granted a plethora of opportunities and the highly coveted quality of free will. Alice constantly confronts herself as well as the characters she encounters in Wonderland with questions, such as “What am I to do?” and “Which way should I go?” (Carroll 46, 51). The responses that she receives although somewhat varied—“Anything you like” or “depends a good deal on where you want to get to”—generally pertain to her newfound independence, liberation, and the ability to actively choose her own direction in life (Carroll 46, 51). Such discussions crafted by Carroll imply that even a little girl can and should be able to make her own life choices.

As the story unfolds Alice’s freedom of choice is further strengthened through her disinterest with motherhood: the primary role and duty of women in the Victorian era. Any instance or suggestion geared towards the affirmation of the importance of motherhood results in Alice’s complete and utter contempt. In one scene, when Alice is particularly large after eating a magic mushroom, a pigeon believing that Alice may be a serpent is frightened that she will
consume her eggs, or children. It would seem natural that Alice would sympathize with the pigeon, but instead she claims, “[L]ittle girls eat eggs as much as serpents do” (Carroll 56). This reaction clearly distances Alice from the domestic role, which revolves around the needs and wants of a family. On another occasion, Alice is asked directly by the Duchess to become involved in the occupation of mothering by carrying her baby. Alice shows little to no interest in the child and, as Lloyd states, is invulnerable to the so-called “cute baby syndrome,” in which the babies appearance compels women to love and care for them (13). Alice’s reaction is on the complete opposite end of the spectrum: she finds it tough to look at the child and eventually abandons it by placing it on the ground. Although not explicitly stated in the text, Alice’s aversion to the role of mother also implies that she has little to no interest in marriage or other romantic entanglements. Rather than placing a heavy focus on a romantic plot, Carroll attempts to prove that Alice is uninhibited in her desire to explore the multiplicity of life’s experiences and attempts to free her from the common role imposed upon women to marry and have children. Notwithstanding the fact that Carroll published Alice’s Adventure in Wonderland in 1865, during the pinnacle of Victorian culture, Alice’s strong sense of curiosity, courage, and independence along with her repugnance towards marriage, motherhood, and the domestic life in general supports the claim that Alice is a strong and effective literary female heroine.

Literary critics that contend with the feminist reading of Carroll’s classic text point to one quality that can potentially undermine the progressive nature of the text: Alice’s lack of control in Wonderland. The argument as to whether or not Alice stands as an effective feminist heroine due to her newfound liberation in Wonderland and distaste for preconceived gender norms is challenged by the fact that much of the experience is out of her control and lies in the hands of a male narrator. This view, that the narrator remains in control of Alice throughout the text, argues that there is a strong aversion to aggressive female sexuality and dominance. The narrator’s influence over Alice is best depicted in her relationship with appetite and consumption in the text. Carina Garland, author of "Curious Appetites: Food, Desire, Gender, And Subjectivity In Lewis Carroll's Alice Texts," alludes to the argument that in Wonderland, “[t]he male author doesn’t acknowledge the heroine’s hunger and has her consume without appetite, this being an attempt to maintain her purity by separating her appetite and consumption” (7). This method of control can be clearly observed through Alice’s repeated confrontation with food labeled “Eat Me,” consuming it simply because she has been instructed to do so. Alice is
punished for her gluttony and lack of control by being shrunken or enlarged every time she consumes: an example of Carroll’s desire to control the female body. Food, as well as her inability to choose when and what to eat in Wonderland, ultimately minimizes Alice’s sense of agency and power. In contrast Carroll portrays the Queen of Hearts as a particularly ravenous character able to satisfy her hunger and is altogether uncontrollable. Her ability to satisfy her hunger permits the Queen of Hearts a great deal of authority and power over the men she encounters. The Queen of Hearts is in fact “horrifyingly feminine” (Garland 8). Despite the Red Queen’s undeniable power and femininity, she is ultimately defeated by the weaker Alice because of the male narrator’s control over her.

However, Carina Garland argues against these claims and believes that recent analyses of Alice as a character “have misrepresented, misplaced, and misinterpreted the specificities of the gendered power dynamic present in the books” (1). Garland emphasizes that Carroll’s Alice is an empowered heroine that ultimately overpowers the controlling male narrator. The lack of control Alice experiences within the text, although difficult to consider feminist, may propose that the unruly and unpredictable environment of Wonderland is indicative of the unexplored terrain of feminism. By dipping her toes into the unchartered waters of feminism it is appropriate that Alice retains a lack of control and bewilderment, but her ability to keep her composure and continue her adventure is a testament to her fearless, revolutionary feminist perspective. Alice’s situation embodies a clear dichotomy: “She is active and passive, punisher and punished, trickster and dupe, subject and subjected” (Aikens 4). Alice never fully embodies either activity or passivity as character traits. It is instead Alice’s ability to balance both that allows her to explore the unknown while being non-resistant, or passive, to the outcomes she faces. This paradox deepens the complexity of Alice and in turn “strengthens our identification with her,” positioning her achievements as a possible goal for other women (Aikens 4). Ultimately, Alice’s somewhat aloof nature reinforces the notion that she is a feminist heroine merely exploring and experiencing the unchartered realm of liberation as a woman.

As time passed, adaptations of Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland attempted to re-imagine the fantasy world and its characters, while potentially expanding the feminist qualities of Alice. In 1951, Disney Pictures produced an animated adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s celebrated text. Disney set out to re-create Carroll’s Alice while taking a few liberties in its production that seem to hinder the feminist message that was initially set in place. Although many of Disney’s
alterations are relatively minor, the impact that they have on the original’s progressive message for women is considerable. The first and possibly most prominent change that Disney makes to the text is the removal of the male narrator, often assumed to be Carroll himself. The removal of a male narrator is the only transformation that may be considered a feminist quality. Alice is entirely alone in her adventures through Wonderland, but instead of depicting her with courage and adopting her newly inherited independence in stride, Disney paints Alice as helplessly aloof and uncomfortable with her situation. Alice’s dissatisfaction with Wonderland and herself is exemplified through a song in which she laments the fact that she did not follow the advice of others and eventually cries uncontrollably because “If I listened earlier I wouldn’t be here.” This scene suggests that Alice would have been better off following the expectations of her society, and that diverging in any way will result in failure.

Beyond these adjustments Disney finds it necessary to also modify a few minor plot details that may seem relatively insignificant, but nevertheless overshadow the film’s potential to expand upon Carroll’s message of feminism. The first of these modifications is Disney’s decision to alter the famous trial scene in which the tyrannical Queen of Hearts prosecutes the Knave of Hearts for burglary. Instead of the Knave of Hearts, in the film version it is Alice who is on trial rather than being a mere audience member of the trial as was intended by Carroll. The Queen, who is depicted as quite powerful and masculine wishes to behead Alice for shaming, or rather emasculating, her in a game of croquet. In the original text, Alice is in danger of losing her “head” until she conveniently eats bits of cake that cause her to grow to an enormous size: providing her with overwhelming power. It is only during this moment when Alice acquires greater physical strength than the Queen that she is able to speak her mind. Alice dismisses the once domineering male guards as “nothing more than a pack of cards” and describes the Queen as “nothing but a fat, pompous, bad tempered, old tyrant.” Through this scene, Disney suggests that in order to be treated as an equal and to feel empowered, one must gain physical dominance over others, a trait generally attributed to males. This scene, which is wholly absent from Carroll’s text, sparks a previously non-existent questioning of Alice’s power.

The trial chastises Alice even further by acting as punishment for her overly indulgent imagination. Her wild sense of curiosity and unique perception of the world is worthy of death. The trial then transitions into a vigorous pursuit for Alice’s demise. Alice is then presented with the opportunity to either “wake herself” from her dream world, which grants her freedom and
power, or die because of it. Disney portrays Alice as forced out of Wonderland, the symbol of female liberation and feminist exploration, and back into the traditional roles of Victorian society through fear. Although Disney attempts to follow the basic plot presented by Carroll’s original text, the minor alterations implemented into the animated film inevitably detract, and at times refute, the feminist ideals that are so tightly woven into the structure of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.

Disney’s alterations in the film are fairly mild and do not necessarily impart a strong patriarchal message. The animated film does undermine Alice, however, by weakening her in relation to the realm of Wonderland. Alice veers from Disney’s infamous princess model but is not strengthened through femininity in any other fashion. Alice is uncertain of her abilities and eventually yearns to return home out of cowardice and confusion.

Burton attempts to re-imagine Disney’s inaction and self-deprecating vision of Alice by providing her with a bit more confidence, authority, and an overall sense of empowerment. Burton’s intensified plotline also provides Alice with the opportunity to solidify her as the heroic feminist she is hinted to be in Carroll’s original. As we will see, Burton’s adaptation, however, becomes trapped in a false and rather detrimental form of feminism that glorifies the power of masculinity through the guise of a female character.

Burton’s Re-Imagining of Alice and the Postfeminist Heroine

Burton’s well-calculated transformation of Alice perpetuates the debate as to whether or not Alice has gained strength as a feminist heroine over the decades or is being pushed in the direction of regression. Burton’s adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s original tale takes quite a few liberties in order to make it more cohesive and digestible for modern audiences. In doing so, Burton implements a message of progress and transformation that he believed to be absent in not only Carroll’s text but also previous adaptations including Disney’s 1951 animated re-telling. Burton’s, as well as writer Linda Woolverton’s, desire to stray away from the aloof and aimless Alice inevitably creates a protagonist that acts as a mouthpiece for feminism—albeit a weak and distorted one. Woolverton has stated that she sought to write the character of Alice as a strong role model for modern young women (Shepard 2). Burton and Woolverton’s modifications seem to be following a trend in film and television to depict female characters in contrast to that of traditional gender norms and to allow them to adopt heroic-like qualities. J. Callen, author of the
article “Impossible Things,” describes Burton’s adaptation of the plot and Alice as “one of coming to terms, of filling her shoes, and not of one finding her place—she is remarkable; stubborn, brave, non-girlie … an Alice with gravity (2). Despite Burton’s intentions for Alice, his desire for a “non-girlie” representation backfires by purposefully overlooking many of Alice’s feminine qualities to ensure her empowerment through masculiniz.

The first and arguably most important change that Burton undertakes is depicting Alice as a young woman instead of a child. As a young woman, Alice is far more likely to face restrictive female expectations of the Victorian era and therefore has a greater opportunity to prove her confident, independent ways beyond that of her younger, less developed counterpart. Despite being much older than Carroll’s version, Alice at the age of nineteen nevertheless retains her imagination and childish mindset, which proves to aid her rejection of female expectations. Callen’s article develops this idea further and views Burton’s Alice as a “dreamer that is assertive, pragmatic, fearless, and intelligent, all of which aid in her liberation from “oppressed to privileged” (3). Callen also discusses Burton’s implementation of the boundaries within Alice’s life, such as being forced into marriage and being asked repeatedly to do what is proper for a lady, which function as a test of her feminist ideology. Alice is reprimanded repeatedly for being creative, imaginative, and curious in a society ruled by regulation. While dancing with Hamish, Alice finds herself distracted and amused by her “visions.” Hamish then urges her to “keep her visions to herself,” marking the first instance of someone trying to oppress Alice’s imagination: Hamish continues, “When in doubt remain silent.” Alice explains the importance of imagining “impossible” things to Hamish, and he simply does not understand. This pivotal scene signifies Alice’s departure from that which is deemed normal in Victorian society, finding the unexplored realms of female empowerment to be far more alluring. Hamish represents society’s unwillingness to reform the well-established gender expectations of a male dominated culture. Alice is simply unwilling to silence her inner voice that yearns for freedom, liberation, and a sense of agency despite the urgings of those around her. Burton strives to depict the discomfort and tension Alice feels in Victorian culture and pushes her to find a form of release that allows her to experience the world on her own terms.

While Underland provides Alice with an avenue to express her burgeoning feminist beliefs, she is further challenged to conform to the expectations of others and therefore must exercise an air of confidence and independence in order to assert herself. The characters and
prophecy, or Oraculum, of Underland determine a great deal of Alice’s experience in the new
realm until she states, “Ever since I fell down that rabbit hole everyone I’ve met has told me what
to do and who I am. … [T]his is my dream, I’ll decide where it goes from here.” (After a
companion retorts, “But if you diverge from the path …” Alice simply declares, “I make the
path.”) Alice is quick to demand respect and independence in Underland, which, similar to
Victorian England, seems to be heavily controlled by males and other masculine figures. Burton
clearly strives to depict Alice as a liberated woman who desires to follow her own definition of
existence: a primary tenet of feminism.

Alice’s independence is further tested and strengthened due to other outcomes within
Underland. Burton’s decision to re-interpret Underland as a tangible realm that resides under
the feet of the “real” world rather than as an imaginary place intensifies Alice’s actions and their
effects. By representing Underland as a concrete world, Alice’s feminist characteristics become
viable and relatable to the film’s female audience. Caroline and Elise Leal, authors of
"Comparing Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland and Tim Burton’s Underland," describe Alice as “a
teenager searching for autonomy in the uncomfortable world above the rabbit hole even as she
learns to assert herself strongly in the world beneath it” (20). Burton stresses the notion that
Underland is real throughout the film to prove that Alice’s actions in Underland are heavily
weighted, especially as she becomes aware of this fact herself. Once Alice understands that she
was mistaken to label Underland as fantasy—“it wasn’t a dream at all, it was a memory. This
place is real”—instances of her expression of courage and liberation are far more meaningful due
to their potential real-life ramifications. Such a realization provides Alice with the confidence
necessary to not merely postpone a domestic life but to dismiss it altogether. Upon her return to
the garden party in the “real” world, Alice officially rejects Hamish’s marriage proposal and
announces that “she will decide what to do with her life.” This statement ultimately removes the
final link that Alice has to a life of repression and restriction within the confines of female
expectations. Alice continuously finds it necessary to prove her worth, not only to herself but to
her companions as well. Alice responds to her sense of duty with a call to action and a willingness
to protect and save the realm of Underland and the characters that reside within it.

Unfortunately, it is at this point in the film that Burton begins to reveal his difficulties
portraying a feminist heroine, as he alters Alice’s path into that of a masculine female in order to
validate her empowerment. Burton’s transformation of Alice into a female hero via qualities of
masculinity inevitably undermines the many aspects of the story that prove her to be a feminist literary figure. Burton misconstrues the concept of feminism and instead imparts an artificial patriarchal view of empowerment on Alice, forcing her to shirk any remaining characteristics of conventional femininity. Caroline and Elise Leal argue that depicting “Alice in armor brandishing a sword” is a “cruel waste of an Alice. Given a girl with such intriguing traits, Burton turns her into an amalgamation of King Arthur, Prince Caspian, and a thousand other male heroes in literature and film” (16). Nearly every quality attributed to Alice that could be considered heroic is inherently masculine and follows the path of traditional, iconic male heroes. Burton’s insistence on Alice first acquiring a sword in order to be deemed a formidable force against her enemies even signifies the necessity of a phallic symbol within film to strengthen a character. Ultimately, in an attempt to glorify and expand upon Alice’s feminist qualities, Burton effectively turns Alice into a man, reversing Carroll’s progression towards producing a powerful female character.

The film also purposefully depicts Alice as sort of “one of a kind” phenomena due to the other character’s constant questioning as to whether or not she is “the Alice,” the only person capable of saving Underland. The film’s deified perspective of Alice poses an obstacle for female audiences to recognize the feminist nature of Alice as a universal possibility. By augmenting the plot of Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, and the characters as well, Burton falls into the “spiral of illusionary progress turning towards an unreachable goal of gender equality” in a patriarchal controlled world (Stover 2). In doing so, Alice in Wonderland advocates the notion that surrendering one’s feminine traits is the only way to gain power and equality as a women in modern society.

In an effort to develop a visible and linear plot, an aspect Burton felt was absent from previous adaptations, Burton delivers a promise of battles and war within Underland. Such violent scenes provide an exceptional opportunity for Alice to become a warrior, a role primarily dominated by males and otherwise restricted from women during the Victorian era. Alice is at first quite reluctant to act as the savior of Underland. She is fearful of the Jabberwocky—a large dragon-like creature—and the Red Queen, and she disapproves of the Oraculum’s authoritative role in her experiences in Underland. Alice is eventually forced into the position of soldier to prove her strength, courage, and authority. It seems that the only way for Alice to truly find herself is to don a full suit of armor and slay a dragon: the typical setup in film and literature for a successful male heroine. Luscious Shepard, author of the article “Alice Doesn’t Live Here
Anymore,” contends that Alice’s battle with the Jabberwocky should have marked as the pivotal scene for “empowering a generation of contemporary young women” but instead acts as another “ho-hum moment in the history of commercial filmmaking” (3). In an attempt to break through patterns of female representation, the film pushes Alice towards the traditional male figure as if it is the only way to effectively convince the film’s audience of her newfound authority and power. The film finds it necessary to present the Red Queen in a similar fashion. The Red Queen adheres to many emblematic aspects of masculinity: militant, physical, and plagued with the urge to conquer and exude power. The Red Queen acts as the ruling figure of Underland, which lacks a king. Throughout the film, the Red Queen derives her power by following the ideology that “it is far better to be feared than to be loved,” which focuses on the necessity for violence and war to solve problems. The White Queen, however, lies on the opposite end of the spectrum and embodies the stereotype of the wholly feminine: dainty, weak, and nonviolent. When questioned about her own ability to slay the Jabberwocky the White Queen responds, “It is against my vows to harm any living being.” The White Queen must instead find a physically capable replacement, such as an armor-clad Alice, to fight the Red Queen and her powerful forces. The Red Queen is eventually dominated once Alice destroys her source of masculinity, power, and violence: the Jabberwocky. The vital difference between Alice and the Red Queen’s authority seems to revolve around their method of attaining it. The Red Queen is portrayed as forcing her way into the position of Queen and choosing to become a masculine figure on her own accord. Alice however, is permitted by those around her to adhere to traditional masculine heroic qualities. This is a fatal mistake made by Burton, as it suggests that women cannot gain power on their own but must be granted it by society in order to be valid and effective.

Burton further separates Alice from the role of feminist heroine by portraying her as heavily reliant on male characters for advice and validation. The film proposes a biased perspective of masculinity’s power over femininity by depicting its conventionally feminine characters as weak and dependent on their male counterparts. Alice achieves the status of heroine and acquires the benefits of masculinity by falling victim to Disney’s path towards empowerment for its female characters. As Stover states, Disney abandoned the role of mature women to guide their younger counterparts after the decline of the princess model and instead replaced it with males “as a source of approval and justification for the heroine’s aspirations, in fact reducing her agency and independence” (6). These female characters are simply prohibited
from acting out on their own accord, and their illusory independence is overshadowed by male figures.

Burton follows a similar path and initiates the film with a scene depicting the relationship between Alice and her father, Charles, and her reliance upon him. After a series of nightmares pertaining to Underland, Alice retreats to her father for protection and assurance. After Alice recounts her dream to her father, he responds, “You’re mad, bonkers, off your head, but I’ll tell you secret: all the best people are.” It is only after this statement that Alice feels comforted and satisfied with the world she has conjured. It is almost as if Alice’s father is granting her permission to dabble in progressive thoughts and indulge in imagination; until then, Alice is fearful of what has become of her. Once this scene concludes, Charles remains absent from the film physically but still has a strong hold on his daughter’s mind and is channeled through the Mad Hatter as a fatherly figure. Upon seeing Alice again for the first time in years, the Mad Hatter says, “Oh it’s you. I’d know him anywhere!” By referring to Alice as a “him” both in this scene and later in the film, the Mad Hatter is alluding to her eventual transformation into a man and his secret desire for her to be a male. The Mad Hatter also finds it necessary at times to place the safety of Alice into his own hands and at one point forces her into a teapot to hide her from the Knave of Hearts who is in search of Alice. Alice is not yet fully transformed into a masculine figure and must rely on the Mad Hatter for protection and advice. In fact, it is the Mad Hatter that first sets Alice’s transformation into motion by scrutinizing her: “you aren’t like you used to be. … [Y]ou’ve lost your muchness.” This comment prompts Alice to not only prove her worth for herself but for the Mad Hatter as well: “Lost my muchness have I?” Alice ultimately exudes a great deal of “muchness” as the film progresses, yet it seems to be for the benefit and recognition of others, particularly the Mad Hatter and her deceased father.

After Alice has slain the Jabberwocky, proving her militant and physical might, she decides to leave Underland, a realm in which Alice can now potentially exercise her feminine power, and pursue a capitalistic career of trade within her deceased father’s business. In doing so, Alice defines herself in a purely masculine role of capitalistic imperialism and shirks off any remaining feminine qualities save her physical attributes. Burton’s decision to lead Alice in the direction of business and trade solidifies her position as a rather limited and problematic representation of feminism who aspires to a traditionally masculine role. Alice’s newly inherited perspective gained in Underland manifests itself in the real world through the trade business in
the world of men. Aikens argues that Burton’s rather interesting conclusion to the tale “suggests that entering a ‘man’s world’ of adventure requires compliance with capitalism and military force” (5). Previously in the film, Alice’s feminist ideals had been distorted by her appropriation of male roles and physicality, but they are completely abandoned and transformed once she adopts an ideology that further supports the rule of men in society. Alice’s decision to initiate trade with China during the time of the Opium Wars, during which Britain subjugated the people of China to military power for monetary gain, implies her interest in military and capitalistic ventures, neither of which are connected to or aid in the progression of women’s rights and in fact may hinder them.

Conclusion

Alice and the militaristic, capitalistic, and patriarchal ideologies imposed upon her are not new concepts in film. The transformation of women into masculine figures in media, particularly in military genres, emerged as the image of the domestic female waned in popularity. Bielby and Furia, authors of "Bombshells On Film: Women, Military Films, and Hegemonic Gender Ideologies," claim that this style of film “highlights the military women’s masculinity, thus undermining her femininity and consequentially her status and claim on womanhood” (16). Bielby and Furia allude to a false feminist movement that depicts female characters as progressing in gender equality and individualism but instead paints their success or achievements in patriarchal terms. Burton’s Alice in Wonderland falls victim to this construction of the female hero. In an attempt to make Alice triumphant through masculine qualities, the film reverses the feminist ideology of female empowerment gained through imagination and agency that was present in Carroll’s original text.

Burton’s flaw is a common theme in many modern fantasy films involving a female protagonist, which in turn poses many issues for the postmodern feminist heroine. The push to move female characters away from the routine role of a princess whose life is dictated by a prince or the promise of finding Mr. Right has been most prominent in Disney and their sister corporation Pixar’s films. The transition is first visible with the release of The Little Mermaid in 1989, whose main character Ariel sets out to redeem her standing with her father after falling victim to her feminine desires. The male authoritative figure has since emerged as a vital component of the female hero tale: “Disney underwent a shift towards a ‘New Wave’ of princess
films which transformed the damsel into a heroine of sorts with both a voice and a desire for adventure” (Stover 4). This model was then reproduced through later films such as *Pocahontas* (1995) and *Mulan* (1998), which helped Disney films to step further away from repressive female roles by allowing them to “perform the traditional prince role and save the day” (Stover 4). Disney discovered that it was possible to produce female characters that appeared to be liberated but in reality adhered to the many expectations dictated by a patriarchal worldview, and its model has influenced movies from other companies as well. Films including *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) and the even more recent film *Brave* (2012) seem to build upon, expand, and perfect this concept. In *The Princess and the Frog*, the protagonist Tiana is inspired to own her own restaurant business, but it is a dream she inherited from her father (Stover 6). Pixar’s *Brave* revolves around Merida, a princess who dismisses the idea of marriage and instead embarks on a quest to prove her abilities amongst male competitors to gain respect in her kingdom. Although this is a positive and progressive departure from the domestic role originally portrayed by female characters, Merida is only able to validate her worth amongst her peers once she has proven her mastery of generally male-dominated aspects of life. Tiana, Merida, and Alice perpetuate the societal standards of female and male abilities: though female characteristics are becoming more widely acceptable in film, masculine traits remain as glorified and dominating as ever.

The argument as to whether or not Alice in Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* acts as a feminist heroine seems to have a rather clear-cut answer. During its release in 1865 at the height of Victorian culture in Britain, Carroll introduced a female character that both defied female gender norms and helped to pave the way for the future representation of female characters in film and literature. Alice explores her own curiosity and imagination with ultimate freedom in the realm of Wonderland, Carroll’s representation of a feminist world, and attains a sense of liberation, independence, and empowerment. The original imagining of Alice is potentially the strongest example of feminist heroism within the long legacy of Alice adaptations despite being created in an era of female inequality.

Disney’s adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, though less harmful to society’s perspective of women than its past films, like *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, emphasizes the many qualities that make the story magical and whimsical but also weakens its feminist undertones. Though Alice is not a princess in search of a man to complete her identity, she craves the familiarity of domestic life leading her to cry for the comforts of home. Disney seemed to be unwilling to risk highlighting
the aspects that paint Alice as a feminist heroine in their adaptation and instead depicted her as an aloof girl in over her head, lost and at times scared of her own imagination. Near the end of the film, Alice is in a state of fear and regret for her involvement in Wonderland, a realm where she was open to explore her own free will, and instead wishes to return to the female oppressive Victorian era.

Burton’s version challenges the notion that Alice is a feminist heroine not by forcing her to return to gender norms and expectations but instead by pushing her to surrender to patriarchal ideologies and adopt masculine qualities. The 2010 re-imagining of Alice undoubtedly permits her with a great deal of agency, imagination, and power but does so in a rather self-deprecating fashion. Burton fails in his attempt to satisfy viewers “in search of strong, indelible female roles,” by making Alice as masculine in her actions and personal characteristics as possible (Aikens 1). Alice is independent and dismissive of society’s expectations for females, as shown in her rejection of Hamish as a husband locking her in a state of domesticity, but is only taken seriously by her peers once she becomes a warrior and a dominating force in the business sector later in the film. Stover alludes to this phenomenon, citing a study conducted by the University of Connecticut that reveals that “masculine qualities of the traditional Disney hero are increasingly applicable to the female characters … traits such as ‘assertiveness,’ ‘independence,’ and ‘desire to explore,’ are coded masculine and delineates the progression of female characters” (Stover 4-5). Stover points towards films that provide the illusion of a feminist agenda such as Alice in Wonderland but instead adhere to what patriarchal society deems as valuable qualities in a woman or man. A character such as Alice renders its audiences, especially young women and girls, complacent with the characteristics that patriarchal society deems acceptable for women seeking liberation and equality. Just as Carroll’s Alice stumbled upon the wonders and infinite possibilities of one’s imagination, so, too, should modern filmmakers realize that despite the illusory achievements established by films such as Alice in Wonderland, the goals of feminism have yet to be met fully and that a wonderland of opportunities still awaits.
Works Cited


*Alice in Wonderland.* Dir. Clyde Geronimi, Wilfred Jackson, and Hamilton Luske. Perf. Kathryn Beaumont. Walt Disney Productions, 1951. DVD.


