

# Lewis Carroll and His World (4)

## Cheshire Cat

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### § Prologue

“It’s a Cheshire Cat and that’s why,” the Duchess replied to Alice when she asked in her kitchen why the cat was grinning from ear to ear. It reminds us of the familiar saying “to grin like a Cheshire Cat”. People may imagine that the phrase has its origin in the Cheshire Cat in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The fact, however, is that the Cat had been grinning long before Carroll’s time.

Lewis Carroll, or Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, was a Cheshire-born Oxonian. He was born in Daresbury, Cheshire, in 1832. And it was in Oxford that the story was told to three little Liddell sisters: Lorina, Alice, and Edith.

The Cheshire Cat did not appear in *Alice’s Adventures Underground* (1863) — a manuscript, beautifully hand-written and illustrated by Carroll himself. The manuscript was presented to Alice Liddell as a Christmas gift of that year, when it had not yet been honoured with the grinning of the Cheshire Cat.

In the following two years Carroll enlarged and published the story, which was now a little less than twice the length of the original manuscript (from some 13,900 words to 25,900), and the Cheshire Cat was one of the newly invented characters. The original story was told during a boat trip on the River Cherwell in 1862. How the story developed depended partly on his memory of earlier stories he had invented to amuse

his family and also on some shared experiences with the little Liddell sisters in Oxford. We do not think that Carroll told the story based on an elaborate plan, nor did he foresee the end of the tale when he started to tell the beginning. He did not lead Alice purposefully through the tunnel with bends and turnings to the lovely flower garden. It happened as such by chance. Some of the stories added later to the manuscript *Alice's Adventures Underground* were a kind of afterthought or found afterwards. A talking fish show came to Oxford in the year 1863, and in 1865 we have a talking Fish Messenger<sup>1)</sup> in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Far more elaborate in nature is a Cheshire Cat.

"A cat has nine lives" is another saying about a cat, and we find below one less than nine explanations about the origins of the grinning Cheshire Cat. When did the Cheshire Cat start to grin? And how did it come to grin?

### §1 When did the Cheshire Cat start to grin?

The question predates Lewis Carroll. To find out the first thing we do is to look up the citations given in *the Oxford English Dictionary*. Then we vainly struggle to find if there are any scratches left by the Cat's claws before the O.E.D.

The earliest O.E.D. citation is from John Walcot (1770–1819) "Lo! like a Cheshire Cat our court will grin." The next one is from Thomas Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* (1837) "Lavender was there ... grinnin like a chessy cat." The third is from Thackeray's *Newcomes* (1855). Mr. Newcome says ... "That woman grins like a Cheshire Cat". These three examples in the O.E.D. predate Carroll's Cheshire Cat. As to the third, T.

Lewis O. Davis' *A Supplementary English Glossary* (1881) cites a further sentence from the same passage of Thackeray: "Who was the naturalist who first discovered that peculiarity of the cats in Cheshire?" The same question must have occurred to Carroll, too.

As it is hard to identify the said naturalist in the history of zoology, we consult dictionaries of words and phrases. Are there any traces of the Cheshire Cat before John Walcot in the eighteenth century? What we can refer to is Nathan Bailey's *Etymological English Dictionary* (1721), which gives under "CAT", Teutonic, French, and Latin forms of the word and then says most uncunningly "a Creature well known". Impressively plain. But our Cheshire Cat had not yet been registered in this dictionary, and if we look up the words "To Grin" it says "to show the teeth, to laugh contemptuously". Later in the middle of that century we have Dr. Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), but he also did not mention Cheshire Cat. Johnson's definition of a cat has not much peculiarity. He says "a domestick animal that catches mice, commonly reckoned by naturalists the lowest order of the leonine species". One of the examples Johnson gave for "grin" is "... and they would now attack our religion with the talents of a vile animal, that is, grin and grimace". Fortunately for our Cheshire Cat (but unfortunately for his origin-hunters) this "vile animal" does not refer particularly to the lowest order of the leonine species (rather, hunters' species: human, perhaps).

In 1811, Cheshire Cat enjoyed an entry in Captain Grose's *A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit and Pickpoket Eloquence*, which explains, "He grins like a Cheshire cat; said of any one who shews his teeth and gums in laughing". This gives us a clue to the time when Cheshire cat began to "shew his teeth and gums in laughing". It is sometime be-

tween 1755 and 1811, the years of publication of Johnson's Dictionary and Grose's respectively. As John Walcot's writings range from 1770 to 1819, an unofficial date of birth of the Cheshire Cat may be between 1770 and 1811.

## §2 How did the Cheshire Cat come to grin?

Believe it or not, some sources say the Cat assumed that his grin originally from a milk product — cheese. Others say that it was from a feudal definition of Cheshire county, from an inn-sign, from a coat of arms, or even from a forest warden of Cheshire county. Let us begin our investigation with cheese.

There is more than one aspect of cheese involved when people explain how the Cheshire Cat came to grin.

Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (1894) mentions among Cat Proverbs "A Cheshire Cat" saying that cheese was formerly sold in Cheshire moulded like a cat. The allusion is to the grinning cheese-cat, but is applied to persons who show their teeth and gums when they laugh.

*Brewer's completely revised Centenary edition* (1970) also follows more or less the same line adding one alternative explanation (which we shall see later). It says, "the phrase has never been satisfactorily explained, but it has been said that Cheshire cheese was once sold moulded like a cat that appeared to be grinning."

*A Dictionary of English Phrases* by Albert M. Hyamson (1970) says about the phrase "To grin like a Cheshire Cat": a simile popularized by Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland* (1865). Like Brewer, Hyamson also

mentions the story that Cheshire cheese was originally moulded in the form of a cat.

A *Browser's Dictionary* by John Ciardi (1980) states "The cat is probably from a lost folk tale, the full form of the expression being "to grin like a Cheshire cat eating cheese/gravel." This gives us a puzzling question, "Which would make the cat grin more broadly: cheese or gravel?" Ciardi adds that he has found nothing to explain why cats of the nonexistent Cheshire breed should grin more broadly than cats of other nonexistent breeds, and so much more broadly than cats of existent breeds. This comment is almost as dry as the biscuit Alice was offered from the Duchess after the hard run to remain the same spot.

A British cat's magazine once gave two "credible" explanations as to the origins of the Cheshire Cat. It says, "In the first, the peculiarity of some cats liking for cheese is recalled. Such cats were affectionately known as "cheeser cats" and cheese was a famous produce of Cheshire. Therefore whenever people spoke of someone having "a grin like a Cheshire Cat", they were in fact saying that they were as pleased as a cheeser cat which had just eaten its cheese." The second explanation refers again to Cheshire and its renowned cheese industry. Following the Norman Conquest, Cheshire enjoyed political independence from the rest of the country for nearly 500 years and claimed its own Parliament and Laws. So proud and pleased with their lot were they that people imagined their pleasure could be seen on the faces of their cats. No sooner had the myth arisen than some ingenious person found a way to immortalise it in the shape of a cheese! Hence cheeses in the form of a cat with a grin became the symbol of Cheshire's freedom and independent tradition. In Ancient Rome, it is said, the cat was a symbol of freedom, and the statue

of Liberty has a cat at her feet<sup>2)</sup>.

*The Animals' Who's Who* by R. Tremain (1982) states under the Cheshire Cat "The expression to grin like a Cheshire cat came ... from an old custom of forming Cheshire cheese into the shape of a cat and incising a grin."

Eric Partridge surmised in his *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1937) that a Cheshire Cat came from a cheeser, i.e. a cat very fond of cheese. It became a cheeser cat, and a cheeser cat became a Cheshire Cat. Philip Howard points out the possibility of it having happened the other way. He suggests that the changes could have been from cheeser to Cheshire-cheeser to Cheshire Cat. The changes, they say, could have been as follows:

Partridge : cheeser → cheeser-cat → Cheshire cat

Howard : cheeser → Cheshire-cheeser → Cheshire cat

One must say them out loud twice before choosing the one which sounds more probable. However, there is almost no evidence to support one version over the other, and the Cat may be grinning at our indecision.

There is also another explanation about the cat in connection with cheese. It says that a Cheshire Cat was so called because it was so fond of cheese that it used to say "cheese", which naturally made it look as if it were grinning. We know that a photographer generally attempts to make sitters for his camera say, "Cheese" and ask them to grin like a Cheshire Cat. Dodgson was a much devoted photographer. But if we see portraits taken by him, almost all of his sitters are not grinning at all. No wonder, because Mr. Dodgson did not like the idea of having the sitters grin for almost a minute (which was the time necessary to record an image on a wet plate). What Mr. Dodgson felt essential was that the sitters

feel natural and comfortable in order to produce the best possible effect. It is highly probable that Mr. Dodgson and the sitters for his camera did not say "cheese" at all. Yet it is not unlikely that they knew that is the word to make people grin like a Cheshire Cat.

Although no portion of any rat appears with the Cheshire Cat in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it is amusing to hear that the cheeser cat may eat the rat that would eat the cheese which used to be formed in the shape of a cat. This idea was pointed out by Dr. Greenacre<sup>3)</sup>.

Those are "the origins" of the Cheshire Cat in connection with cheese. But there are also some other tales alleged to be the origins of a grinning Cheshire Cat. So we quietly leave our cat alone with its cheese and look for other origins of the Cheshire Cat.

*Brewer's completely revised Centenary edition* (1970) gives an alternative explanation, and this may sound a more knowledgable one. It says that the native cats know that Cheshire is a county palatine and they find the idea so absurd that they are perpetually grinning at it. (A county palatine in England is a county of which the earl or lord had originally royal privileges, with the right of exclusive civil and criminal jurisdiction. The title is now obsolete. However, Cheshire and Lancashire remain nominally Counties Palatine, while Durham, Pembroke, Hexhamshire, and Ely were formerly of the number.

*A Dictionary of English Phrases* by Albert M. Hyamson (1970) mentions other derivations. One is the unhappy results of a sign-board painter's attempt to represent lions (Philip Howard calls this "the Cat unlionized", because it failed to look like a lion or a tiger). The other, he says, is the result of a similar unsuccessful attempt to depict the coat of arms of the Grosvenor family of Cheshire, a wolf. However, the coat of arms of

this family bears not a lion but one small and two large talbots<sup>4)</sup>. The Grosvenors have been succeeded by two families according to Debrett's *Illustrated Peerage*<sup>5)</sup>: the Duke of Westminster and Baron Ebury. The beasts of the Duke of Westminster's coat of arms look fierce, while those of Baron Ebury appear gentler. The Grosvenor Hotel in Chester has a magnificent reproduction of a coat of arms similar to that of the Duke of Westminster's woven in their carpet at the entrance. Two large talbots regardant with their tongues peculiarly sticking out of their mouths support the arms, and the crest is a tablot statant<sup>6)</sup>.

Howard's term "unlionized" is quite unique and interesting as it reminds us of the fact that Carroll himself was a person unlionized. He was a man who made it difficult for his enthusiasts to lionize him. In fact he hated to be widely known as the author of the Alice stories.

R. Tremain also records in *The Animals' Who's Who* (1982), "The expression to grin like a Cheshire cat came from . . . grinning cats painted on inn sign-boards in Cheshire, England".

We must conclude this section with rather a depressing grin. It appeared in a local legend<sup>7)</sup> in Cheshire. It is said that many years ago during the reign of King Richard III there was a forest warden in Cheshire called Thomas Caterling. Cheshire then was a county beyond law and order, and this Caterling was notorious for the grimaces he made as he robbed, tortured, and killed the unfortunate men he caught. So frightful was his grin that it came to be commonly known as "To grin like the Cheshire Caterling" and it became metamorphosed into "To grin like a Cheshire Cat."



### §3 The Varieties of the Cat's Grin

We have now seen various ancestors of the grinning Cheshire Cat. Some were grinning because they were well-pleased. Some were grinning for feeling proud of their independence. Some were grinning at the absurdity of humans. Some were grinning in fear of being shot with a camera. Some were grinning for being ashamed of having been degraded in species. But who would dare to look at a cat menacingly grinning at you in the solitary woodlands of Cheshire?

All these origins of our good- or ill-tempered Cheshire Cat might be classified into two types : those which have something to do with a cat and those which do not. The legend of the frightful grimace of a forest warden called Thomas Caterling belongs to the latter type as it has no connection with a cat. No other origins belong to this type; all the rest being of the former type, having something to do with a cat. We might categorize them as follows:

Type one: originating in a "cat"

Group A. Local Cheshire cats loyal to their county

1. Cheshire in the Middle Ages enjoying its political independence made the cats grin for pleasure
2. Cheshire as a County Palatine made the cats grin at the absurdity of the idea

Group B. Cat and its favourite cheese

3. Cheshire cheeses moulded in the form of a cat
4. Photographic model saying "cheese" just like a cat expecting its favourite cheese
5. Cheeser → cheeser Cat → Cheshire Cat

Group C. Cat and painter

6. Degraded lion on an inn sign-board
7. Unskilful reproduction of the Grosvenor's coat of arms

Type two: not originating in the animal species

8. The local legend of Thomas Caterling, a man with a fearful grin

#### §4 Epilogue

For three weeks during the summer of 1989, I ran around England, chasing after cheesy cats, mainly visiting on-farm-cheese-makers. People were very kind and sympathetic to my cause but I had little luck in my search. Then I was introduced to nine Cheshire cats found in and around Warrington, Cheshire. That story may be told sometime in the future. Which explanation you would favour for the origin of the Cheshire Cat of the simile depends entirely on your taste. It does not matter which explanation you would prefer. Whatever your choice may be, the cat will be grinning as broadly as ever. For "it's a Cheshire Cat, and that's why."

#### Notes

- 1) Fish Messenger: see Mavis Batey's *Alice's Adventures in Oxford*.
- 2) the Goddess of Liberty has a cat at its feet: see *A Dictionary of English and American Realien Data*. (Ms. Ooi of the American Center of Tokyo searched through the materials available at the Center in Tokyo, but no evidence of this could be found. She referred me to the Statue of Liberty National Monument and they gave me the answer that the Roman Goddess of Liberty was followed by a liber-

ty-loving cat. But the American Statue of Liberty is not followed by one.)

- 3) Dr. Greenacre: *Aspects of Alice* pp. 430–431
- 4) talbot: a figure representing a tablot hound (i.e. a larger heavy mostly white hound with pendulous ears and drooping flews) as a heraldic device.
- 5) *Debrett's Illustrated Peerage*: this reference kindly supplied by Julia Tinley of Farnham, Surrey.
- 6) statant: of a heraldic beast: standing with all feet on the ground and seen in profile.
- 7) a local legend: see *A Dictionary of English and American Phrase and Legend* by Inoue Yosimasa
- 8) on-farm-cheese-makers: Janet Faraday of the Milk Marketing Board helped me greatly by fiding proper farm house cheese makers.

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