



# THE INDEPENDENT

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## Tinkering with Mad Hatters and March Hares

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*Chasing Ratings has been the motivation behind great storytelling since before Ovid.*

Literary traditionalists are all of a fluster again with the news that yet another classic—in this case Alice in Wonderland—has been rewritten with a modern twist. An American, Frank Beddor, has written a book called *The Looking Glass Wars*, due to be published in Britain in the autumn.

Beddor says he wrote the book as an exercise in revenge, after being forced to read Alice when he was a child. “I thought it was a terrible girls’ book,” he says. “I wanted to rewrite it as book boys would enjoy.”

Mr. Beddor also happens to be a film producer, responsible for giving the world *There’s Something About Mary*, that celluloid monument to bad taste, directed by the Farrelly brothers. The film and video game rights to *The Looking Glass Wars* are, inevitably, already in negotiation. Yet if Mr. Beddor is to be believed, there is scholarship rather than cynicism at the heart of this project. He claims to have unearthed some interesting details about Alice Liddell, the little girl for whom the Reverend Charles Dodgson, under his pseudonym Lewis Carroll, wrote the celebrated stories.

“Lewis Carroll did not tell Alice Liddell the story of Wonderland, she told him,” he says enigmatically. “And Alice Liddell was not who she appeared to be.”

This will come as surprise to those who know for a fact that Alice was the second child of Henry George Liddell, dean of Christ Church College, Oxford, where Dodgson lectured in mathematics. Previously, we had supposed the only grey area in the provenance of *Alice in Wonderland* to have been the nature of the interest Dodgson took in Alice, and indeed other children. The official interpretation is that he was painfully shy with adults, more comfortable in the company of children, and that there was nothing more sinister than that. Others have suggested that he was fond of photographing children in sexually provocative poses, and may, in fact, have been the Gary Glitter of his age.

Either way, at least a debate about the source of *Alice in Wonderland* diverts attention from the unprovable allegation that Dodgson was a paedophile. It also begs the question: should Mr. Beddor or anybody else be allowed to tinker with classic works of literature? The answer, of course, is a resounding yes. After all, the arch-tinkerer of classic tales was William Shakespeare, whose play *Romeo and Juliet* clearly owes something to Ovid’s poem of star-crossed lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, written in the first century AD. The story later went through at least three different manifestations in Italian before being turned into English, seemingly by the poet Arthur Brooke, in 1562.

Similarly, Shakespeare's story of *Othello* was plainly inspired by an Italian play published in 1565 under the less-than-catchy title of *Hecatommithi*. In that version, written by a fellow called Cinthio, there was an ensign, a Moor, and, married to the Moor, a character called Disdemona. But it was the ensign, not the Moor, who killed Disdemona, beating her to death with a sand-filled stocking. And the Moor did not kill himself but was murdered by Disdemona's relatives. So when Shakespeare wrote *Othello*, around 1604, it is tempting to think that there may have been an outcry among cultivated Italians, scarcely able to believe the liberties this blasted Englishman had taken with their beloved *Hecatommithi*.

Then the moderniser himself became the modernised. The playwright Nahum Tate (1652-1715) established his reputation by giving Shakespeare's plays a contemporary angle. His play *Richard II* was "silenced on the third day" because of its supposedly subversive references to the political upheavals of the times. And his rewriting of *King Lear*, less than 20 years after the Civil War and beheading of Charles I, must similarly have resonated with a Restoration audience.

Tate conceded as much when he rewrote *Coriolanus*, explaining in the preface: "Upon a close view of this Story, there appear'd in some Passages no small Resemblance with the busie faction of our own time. And I confess, I chose rather to set the Parallel nearer to sight than to throw it off at a further Distance."

All this went down better with audiences than with critics. *Plus ça change*, we might say. In 1747, a critic asked theatrical producers: "Why will you do so great an injury to Shakespeare as to perform Tate's execrable alteration to him?" Equally robust questions were asked by some television critics when Andrew Davies, the scarily prodigious adaptor of literary classics for the small screen, introduced a bit of racy lesbianism into his version of *Vanity Fair*.

All he was doing was setting the Parallel nearer to sight than to throw it off at a further Distance, although a couple of years later he's have had an even better parallel, when the story of Rebecca Loos, alleged lover of David Beckham, hit the tabloids. She even shared a name with William Thackeray's, or rather Andrew Davies' promiscuous bisexual, Becky Sharp.

What Davies was also doing, of course, was chasing ratings—which whatever anybody says, has been the telling going back to a long time before Ovid. So, to bring all this back to the Mad Hatter, the Cheshire Cat and the March Hare, Mr. Beddor can do what he likes to *Alice in Wonderland*. The original will endure, and may the best version, original or rewrite, endure the longer.