

## Why the Queen's File?

### *Abstract*

Much has been written about the pieces and the moves they make in the chess game at the beginning of *Through the Looking Glass*, but little about the specific *squares* they occupy during the game, except concerning Alice's obvious advance from rank to rank. But what of the files? I suggest that Alice starts on d2 – the queen's file – and stays there all the way to the end (when she reaches d8 and becomes queen) is no accident. I believe the file had been deliberately been chosen by Carroll, and give a few possible reasons why.

### **Introduction**

*Through the Looking Glass* is, formally speaking, a dramatization of a chess game, but a bizarre one. It is so odd attempts have been made to make the game more sensible from the chessic point of view, or at least to make it adhere to the strict alternation of moves between white and red.<sup>1</sup> The oddness of the game made some believe it is a code, with chess being merely a “cover”. One such author, C. Leroy claims the game is a coded proposal from Carroll to Alice Liddell to live with him ‘without the benefit of clergy’ (since, *inter alia*, there are no bishops in the game), the number 42 (which, as Douglas Adams told us, is the answer to everything) playing a crucial role in the “decoding”.<sup>2</sup> Leroy somehow got former chess world champion Anatoly Karpov to visit him and discuss the matter.<sup>3</sup> Like decoders of Shakespeare who “proved” everyone

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<sup>1</sup> See Gardner [2000] for details.

<sup>2</sup> Leroy [2008].

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.lyon-olympique-echecs.com/textes/textes/accueil/photos\\_karpov\\_carroll.html](http://www.lyon-olympique-echecs.com/textes/textes/accueil/photos_karpov_carroll.html)

but Shakespeare “really” wrote the plays, M. Leroy lives (in Huxley’s phrase) in ‘a world of terrifying significance’, where *everything* has some deep meaning.

But just because Carroll’s game does not *completely* make sense does not mean *nothing* in it does. On the contrary. It is well known that only chess pieces which appear in the book as characters during the game are found on the board; that Alice only notices characters on a square next to her; and that, move order aside, the pieces follow the standard rules of chess.

(Two apparent exceptions are easily explained. First, Alice, as queen, and the two other queens, “castle”; but this does not correspond to any *move* by any piece; it’s just a note that Alice or the queens entered the red queen’s castle in the *story*. Second, the white king on c6 is put in check for two moves in a row by the red queen on e8. But according to Walker’s *The Art of Chess-Play*, which Carroll owned, this is *not* a violation of the rules, since the red queen did not *announce* “check” and therefore the king was quite correct to ignore it!<sup>4</sup>)

The most thorough exposition of such chess matters in *Through the Looking Glass* is – still – Ivor Davies’ ‘Looking-Glass Chess’. A. S. M. Dickens, an authority on fairy chess, deals with its relationship to the Alice books in ‘Alice in Fairyland’. Martin Gardner, in *The Annotated Alice*, refers often to Davies’ and to others’ observations about chess: e.g., he notes the red queen’s advice to Alice that she should speak French when she cannot think of the English word for a thing is probably a reference to the chess term *en passant*, denoting a special pawn move, which has no English equivalent.<sup>5</sup> Not everything in Carroll’s game is meaningful; but a lot is.

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<sup>4</sup> Davies [1971].

<sup>5</sup> Davies [1971], Dickens [1976], Gardner [2000].

Beginners in chess look only at the pieces. As a player becomes stronger, he recognizes the importance of files and rows, diagonals and even single squares. Many master games involve intricate maneuvers that revolve around control of a certain crucial square<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, previous commentators on chess in *Through the Looking Glass* concentrated on the pieces themselves and their moves and captures, not thinking the ranks and files on which the pieces stand have any particular significance, except for the obvious point that in every chapter Alice advances one rank further towards her goal. I After noting that it is better to see the decision as one of putting Alice on the queen's file instead of two separate decisions to make her start on the queen's file and to queen on the queen's file, I will give five reasons why this decision was deliberate. I then discuss which of these reasons I consider more likely. I do not claim these options are necessarily exclusive – Carroll may well have had two or three of them in mind at the same time. Nor do I insist they are exhaustive – that no other reason for choosing the d-file could be found. But I believe I am considering the most likely possibilities.

argue that the fact that Alice starts – and ends – her journey on the *queen's* file is significant, an intentional decision by Carroll, ignored (to the best of my knowledge) by all previous commentators.

### **Two Decisions or One?**

Pawns in chess can move from file to file, by capturing another piece. So the file a pawn starts on is not necessarily the one it promotes on. Is the significance that Alice starts on d2, then, related or unrelated to the fact that she also finishes her journey on d8?

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<sup>6</sup> For those interested, a classic explaining, *inter alia*, these advanced issues is Euwe and Kramer's classic *The Middlegame*.

Here, there is a simple explanation. From the beginning of the game, when the red queen explains to Alice her intended journey, it is clear Alice is not intended to capture any other piece in the game – and only to continue straight on to d8. This makes dramatic sense: to move from one file to another Alice would have to capture an enemy piece diagonally from her, and this would cause two problems.

First, a violent, fighting Alice, an active agent in the game, would be unthinkable for Carroll. It is significant that the only captures in the game are that of the white knight – a self-parody of Carroll himself – capturing the red knight to save the (passive) Alice, and Alice capturing the red queen on the very last move – as she is waking up and no longer part of the fantasy world. (It turns out the “queen” is actually her kitten; dream violence as a sign that Alice is waking occurs in both *Alice* books.) Those captures aside, the enmity between the opposing armies is kept to a minimum. The red queen makes no attempt to capture Alice when she meets her on d2; indeed she looks forward to her becoming an enemy (white) queen. When she rejoins Alice when Alice is a queen on d8, she also makes no attempt to capture her – or the other white queen – nor does the white queen think of capturing *her*, as they sit peacefully together in Alice’s examination.

Second, Alice capturing would require Alice to interact with pieces found, not to her side, as is the rule in *Through the Looking Glass*, but diagonally from her. There would also be a need to clarify *why* Alice would not prefer to just go straight ahead instead of having to fight – that is, there would have to be a white or red piece blocking her way, again forcing unnecessary interaction with a piece not on squares to Alice’s side. So, once he chose Alice’s starting square, Carroll *de facto* also chose her queening square, and indeed her entire route. But why did he choose *this* file?

## The First Reason

Perhaps Carroll was thinking of chess promotion according to the old rules. Today, a player can promote to any piece except the king – he can have two queens, three rooks, etc. – but this must be done immediately, as part of the promotion move, and the pawn cannot remain a “dummy pawn”. In the past, rules of promotion in chess have been quite varied.

In *Shatranj*, the Arab version of the game, the pawn could only promote to the *Ferz*, or, in the medieval European game (up to the 15<sup>th</sup> century), to its equivalent, the queen – then the weakest piece. In the modern game, when the queen became powerful, it also became customary for promotion to give the maximal advantage, not the minimal, so promotion to the now-strong queen allowed. Philidor and Staunton, two leading players in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century respectively, wrote books that did not allow promotion to a piece not yet captured (which would have meant Alice could not promote to a queen unless the original white queen were captured), while others (e.g., Sarratt) allowed unrestricted immediate promotion, which became the general rule in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>7</sup> As late as the 1880s the British Chess Association’s laws of 1862, allowing for keeping a pawn on the 8<sup>th</sup> rank as a “dummy” pawn at the player’s choice, were officially in force, though mostly ignored.<sup>8</sup> (The world champion, Steinitz, even wrote in favor of retaining that law in 1889)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Davidson [1968]; see also the entries for ‘Promotion’ in Hooper and Whyld [1992], or ‘Chess’ in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* [1948, for example], etc.

<sup>8</sup> Davidson [1968], Hooper and Whyld [1992].

<sup>9</sup> Steinitz [1990]

For our purposes, the important point is that in some cases, rules only allowed a pawn to promote to the piece associated with the file it originated on, or else with the file it promotes on.<sup>10</sup> If Carroll was aware of such variations in promotion, it would have been natural for him to decide that Alice, if she is to promote to a queen instead of a rook, bishop, or knight, should start – and end – her journey on the queen’s file.

### **The Second Reason**

A simpler reason is that it was simply a matter of elegance and unity of the novel. Promotion to any other piece (rook, knight, or bishop), even if allowed by the rules, would require her to change her sex, becoming an adult man, instead of now-royal young girl.

First, this would be absurd from the “general” literary point of view. It is curious – but true – we consider it less possible for someone, even in a fairy tale, to change their sex, while we consider it perfectly likely to them to turn into newts, rise from the dead, etc. Second, it would be hocking to the public opinion at the time to have a children’s book with a little girl who suddenly changes her sex. Ironically, this would have been a reversal of the old moral objection to chess, from the middle ages: some worried that the pawn, known as a ‘peasant’ or ‘soldier’ in many European languages, is able to change his sex upon promotion – while rising to royalty and making the king a polygamist, to boot.<sup>11</sup> Third, it would also never occur to Carroll to give his heroine such a fate, Carroll being well known for his love of young girls, but not of any particular fondness to

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson[1968].

<sup>11</sup> Murray [1913]. No such problem occurs in *Shatranj* (Arabic chess, the precursor of the European version), by the way, since the *Ferz* – the king’s advisor – is male, and the king can have many of them. Besides, a polygamous king would hardly shock the Muslim Arabs in any case.

middle-aged men. Finally it would also not make chessic sense, promotion to queen being by far the most common.

Given that Alice *must* become a queen, what is more fitting to Alice – who is told from the start by the red queen that she will become a queen, who consorts often with queens, and is told at the start that she is to become a queen, that she journey all her way to becoming queen on the queen's file?

### **The Third Reason**

A more interesting reason can be found in the diagram in the beginning of the book. The chess game is written in the then-universal (in the English speaking world) descriptive notation, in which each square has two names, one from white's point of view and the other from black's. For example, the square e5 in algebraic notation is the K5 (king five) square from white's point of view and the K4 (king four) from black's. E.g., 1. P-e4 P-e5, is written as 1. P-K4 P-K4 (*not* P-K5) in descriptive notation.

Descriptive chess notation became shorter with time. The move originally written (in the 17<sup>th</sup> century) as '1. Pawn to the King's fourth square' successively became '1. Pawn to King's 4<sup>th</sup>', '1. P to K's 4th', '1. P to K4', '1. P-K4', or even '1. PK4'. Since the 1970s descriptive notation has been *de facto* replaced with the shorter and less confusing (since every square has only one name) algebraic notation, '1. e4' (FIDE, the international chess federation, now requires that players write in algebraic notation in its tournaments).

When Carroll was writing, the English-language chess world was moving from using ‘1. P to K’s 4<sup>th</sup>’ to ‘1. P-K4’ in notation: the dash (instead of ‘to’) for example being introduced by Hazeltine in 1855 in the *New York Clipper*’s chess column.<sup>12</sup> Carroll is using the old-fashioned (for 1871) notation, since he is following the notation used in Walker’s 1841 *A New Treatise on Chess*, which he owned.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, Walker’s next book, a mere three years later, was one of the first to use the shortest, ‘1. PK4’-type descriptive notation.<sup>14</sup>

This notation has an important peculiarity. In the shorter, newer, descriptive notation, the first rank’s squares are usually known as ‘R1’, ‘B1’, ‘K1’, etc. But in the longer, older descriptive notation, these squares are written as the ‘queen rook’s square’, ‘king bishop’s square’, ‘king’s square’, etc. Carroll himself writes about the red queen’s last move as ‘8. R. Q. to K’s sq.’: that is, Q-K1 (from the red player’s point of view) in modern descriptive notation. Indeed, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when chess moves were written in complete sentences, Q1 (=d1 or d8) would be known as the ‘queen’s house’.<sup>15</sup>

This gives us another reason for Carroll to have chosen the d-file. Alice reaching d8 means that Alice had reached the red queen’s square (the square that actually *belongs* to the queen), or even her house – that is, her castle. Which is precisely what she does in the book, of course. Had Alice queened on any other file, except perhaps the king’s file, a castle being built there for a knight, bishop, or rook would have been less appropriate. And it is surely most fitting for Alice to become a queen in a *queen’s* castle, on d8, not a

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<sup>12</sup> ‘Notation’, in Hooper and Whyld [1992].

<sup>13</sup> Walker [1841], Davier [1971].

<sup>14</sup> Walker [1844]; ‘Notation’, in Hooper and Whyld [1992].

<sup>15</sup> McCrary [1999]. McCrary mentions that this is the name of the K1 square in a work published in 1614 – presumably Arthur Saul’s *The Famous Game of Chesse-Play*, the ‘earliest original [chess] book in the English language’ (see ‘Saul, Arthur’ in Hooper and Whyld [1992]).

king's castle, on e8, quite apart from the queens being (as in the chess game itself, as was often remarked) far more powerful and dominant than the kings in the novel.

What's more, if Carroll indeed was thinking of d8 as the square belonging to the queen, it would fit well with what we know of Carroll's way of thinking. The possessive 'queen's square' or 'queen's house' is a mere notational abstraction in actual chess. Unlike *Xiangqi* (Chinese chess) and many other war board games, which have special squares that act as safe-houses, barriers, goals, etc., there is no particular significance to d8 or d1.<sup>16</sup> The queen has no special powers there, nor is it safe from capture, or anything else. But in the book the words 'queen's square' (or perhaps even 'queen's house') are used in the most literal sense, to denote the red queen's castle. Such turning of "nominative" conventional phrases into "realist", literal claims, to use philosophical jargon, is a literary device often used by Carroll in the *Alice* books and elsewhere: 'murdering the time', 'to see Nobody on the road', the solutions to 'why a raven is like a writing desk' etc., etc.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Fourth Reason**

Finally, Carroll might well have chosen the queen's file as Alice's starting point to suggest from the start that it is Alice's *destiny* to become a queen from the very start. Her original presence on the queen's file is evidence she is on the "tenure track" to queenship, so to speak. Apart from the fact she journeys on the queen's file all the way, I do not believe it was noticed that not only no other piece blocks Alice or even shares the file with her during the game, but none except another queen (the white queen on the 10<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> 'Chinese Chess', in Hooper and Whyld [1992].

<sup>17</sup> Examples could be multiplied endlessly about this, Carroll's favorite (and most characteristic) humoristic literary device. See Gardner [2000] for many examples and references.

move, Qc8-h3 in algebraic notation) even dares to *cross* the queen's file during the game. It might be a coincidence – after all, the other pieces hardly move – but it might be another sign Alice is of royal blood, a princess from the start, with her own exclusive line to becoming queen.

What kind of destiny is it? It might be simple literary “destiny” – the book would be pointless if Alice did not become queen in the end, and the red queen explicitly tells her ‘when you get to the Eighth Square you'll be a Queen’, and a little later, ‘in the Eighth Square we shall be Queens together, and it's all feasting and fun’<sup>18</sup>. Another, possibility is that Carroll was thinking throughout the book of Alice's destiny of becoming queen as a metaphor for her eventually growing up and no longer being his “child friend”. (That Alice queening is a metaphor for growing up has been remarked upon many times.) If so, Carroll choosing the queen's file is another hint, of many, in his writing, pointing to his sadness of the inevitability of his losing her.

## Discussion

I am not claiming any one of these reasons is exclusive. Carroll might well have been thinking of two or three (or all) of them. But it seems to me unlikely he was thinking of *none* of them, and that it is likely the queen's file was deliberately chosen by him. *How* deliberately – whether it was just a matter of aesthetic wholeness, or a more sophisticated reason, as suggested by some of the possible reasons – I do not presume to say with confidence.

That said, if I am allowed to speculate, of the two pure “chessic” reasons – the first and the third – the latter seems to me more likely, given what we know of the chess

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<sup>18</sup> Carroll [1871].

books Carroll had in his possession, and, more speculatively, of his use of making metaphors and figures of speech literally for comic and fantastic effect. But the former reason cannot be dismissed: it is possible that Carroll knew of chess variants and the old rules, and of the fact that in some cases promotion had to occur to a queen only on the queen's file, as he was a rather enthusiastic player.<sup>19</sup>

The second and fourth reasons are almost – in retrospect – self-evident. This, of course, is not in itself evidence that they are true! They lie on a continuum, from less to more deliberate and conscious: it is possible that Alice was put on the queen's file as an instant, natural decision, simply to harmonize with her later queening and her discussions with the queens in the book. Carroll might, for all we know, not even have remembered that decision later. In that case, the fact that no pieces touch or even cross the queen's file (except another queen) is a coincidence. If, however, Carroll was trying to send a message about his sadness of Alice growing up, then it might well have been deliberate.

To sum up, Carroll chose the queen's file deliberately. Was it an almost-unconscious decision to harmonize the book's style? A deliberate attempt at humor based on chess notation? A hint about his relationship with the (real) Alice? I don't know. But it would be interesting to look for evidence.

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<sup>19</sup> See Spinard's article at <http://www.chesscafe.com/text/spinrad25.pdf> , for example, for a summary.

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