

(Un)Surprises Uncovered:  
A Reply to Jennifer Geer, Jean-Jacques Lecercle,  
and Michael Mendelson\*

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I was like a child, constantly wondering,  
and surprised at nothing.  
George MacDonald, *Lilith* 17

I am delighted at the responses to my article on (un)surprises in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-books and would like to thank Jennifer Geer, Jean-Jacques Lecercle, and Michael Mendelson for entering into a critical debate with me.

The three responses all seem to, at least partly, look at the topic from a psychological perspective. Jennifer Geer regards Alice's attitude as reactions to the familiar, and the unfamiliar, respectively; Jean-Jacques Lecercle assumes that Alice's being surprised or unsurprised goes back to schizophrenia (281); and Michael Mendelson sees the *Alice*-books as stories of developmental growth (cf. 298). I only agree with some of these readings and would like to emphasize the concept(s) of play that underlie the structure of the *Alice*-books.

In the books, Alice enters worlds of play: games are being played throughout—among the most obvious examples in *Wonderland* are the Caucus Race (ch. 3), the game of Croquet (ch. 8) and the appearance of

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\*Reference: Angelika Zirker, "'Alice was not surprised': (Un)Surprises in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*-Books," *Connotations* 14.1-3 (2004/2005): 19-37; Jennifer Geer, "(Un)Surprisingly Natural: A Response to Angelika Zirker," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 267-80; Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "Response to 'Alice was not surprised,'" *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 280-86; Michael Mendelson, "The Phenomenology of Deep Surprise in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 287-301.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debzirker01413.htm>>.

playing-cards all the way through the concluding chapters; *Through the Looking-Glass* is even based on a game of chess. Within these game worlds, psychology and psychological reactions are deliberately being played with. Alice's reactions are therefore not to be read as mimetic instances; rather, they are psychological elements which are deflated by their transformation into various play moves. The attempt to read the *Alice*-books as a kind of *Bildungsroman* which derives its *raison d'être* from the psychological development of its protagonist is therefore inappropriate: play in these narratives is not an element of psychology, but psychology becomes an element of play. The child's psychology becomes relevant in so far as play is one of the most important activities of children.

The overall playful mode influences and affects Alice's reactions, her surprises, and her 'unsurprises.' The first instance of surprise occurs, however, even before the issue of Alice's reactions arises, namely in the difference between the framing poems and the tales of Alice's adventures within the worlds she enters: expectations as to (sentimental or psychological) readings are being subverted, and the text itself points this out from the very beginning.

### The Framing Poems

Jennifer Geer writes that the "frames soften the adventures' surprises by employing images and poetic conventions that would have been familiar to Carroll's nineteenth-century readers" (268). I couldn't agree with her more in stating that Carroll draws on a literary tradition in the framing poems of the *Alice*-books. Not only does he refer to the topos of idealised memories of the "golden afternoon" (*WL* 3),<sup>1</sup> but the overall nostalgic tone and even the rhyme scheme are reminiscent of a particular type of poetry which was fashionable in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely in this that the framing poems are so very different from the tales proper. Whereas in the poems the speaker expresses

longing and nostalgia, the tone in the tales is sometimes threatening and bewildering, sometimes playful and funny but it is never nostalgic.<sup>3</sup> This difference in tone leads to some tension between the framing poems and the actual tales, as the frame sets up certain expectations regarding the story that is to follow, which are then upset.

Let me illustrate this point with a specific example. In the fourth stanza of the poem introducing *WL*, the speaker writes: “The dream child moving through a land/ [...] In friendly chat with bird or beast” (21-23).<sup>4</sup> Yet, Alice hardly ever finds herself “in friendly chat” with any of the creatures she meets in the course of her wanderings. Her conversations with them are irritating and confusing but rarely friendly—the only exceptions being her encounter with the White Knight in *LG*, who bears features of Carroll himself (cf. Gardner 247n2), and her meeting with the Fawn in the wood where things have no names (and then only because the Fawn does not recognize her as a potentially threatening “human child”).<sup>5</sup> Whereas the introductory poem makes us expect a somewhat sentimental child-in-Eden scene, we actually enter a world of play where games are taken as seriously by adult readers as they are by children.

Hence, the framing poems do not really “soften” Alice’s adventures but rather evoke expectations as to the nature of the tales that are then disrupted and destroyed in what follows. They enhance the sense of surprise through this evocation as the reader suddenly finds himself in a world of play where familiar rules are no longer applicable, expectations no longer hold, and even the notion of surprises and what is surprising becomes doubtful.

### “Down the rabbit hole”

The tale of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* begins with her following a rabbit down a hole. When she first sees the rabbit, she is not surprised at seeing a *talking* rabbit as such but rather at his having a watch. The “conventions of children’s fiction” (Mendelson 292) are

hence not “disturbed by a rabbit in gentleman’s attire” (292) but rather by his having a watch: this is what stirs Alice’s curiosity. This point is emphasized in the text: “(when she thought it over afterwards, it occurred to her that she ought to have wondered at this, but at the time it all seemed quite natural); but when the Rabbit actually *took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket* [...], Alice started to her feet [...] burning with curiosity” (9-10). It is only through reflection that the Rabbit’s overall appearance no longer seems natural and therefore becomes surprising. The real surprise at the moment of the encounter is produced by the unfamiliar watch.

One of the difficulties regarding Mendelson’s approach to surprises in the *Alice*-books lies at the beginning of his article, where he develops a distinction between two kinds of surprises: surprise that eclipses the ordinary, that is “a premonition of significance,” as opposed to surprise that is based on “recognitions that are simply unanticipated” (287); in the latter case, surprise “quickly passes because we find a way to accommodate its unfamiliarity” (287). He is interested in what he calls “deep surprise,” surprise that is “momentous” (in Kenneth Grahame’s terms), that “presages something potentially meaningful” (287) and that, according to Mendelson, brings about development and change in Alice.

This distinction, however, collapses when he gives an example from the text, namely Alice’s fall down the rabbit-hole. He states that, during the fall, Alice starts to engage “with the novelty of the experience” which then “gives way to reverie” (294). She starts not only to think about the length of her fall, but also about her cat Dinah, which Mendelson calls an “assimilation of the bizarre to the familiar” (294). But if this is really the case, then his two categories of surprise merge: she is not so much surprised but rather starts wondering—which could be seen as an effect of her being surprised at what is unfamiliar. But this surprise passes and she starts to think of all different kinds of things. At the same time, her fall down the rabbit hole is certainly “meaningful,” if not necessarily in terms of her psychological development but rather for the development of the story as a whole.

What is more, while she is falling down the hole, Alice starts playing around with words and ideas; for instance, she thinks about what might happen if she fell down the stairs after this experience:

“Well!” thought Alice to herself. “After such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!”  
(Which was very likely true.) (10; my emphasis)

This ‘playing around’ is actually one form of pretend play. And without being aware of it, she makes a joke here<sup>6</sup>: she would indeed be unable to say anything if she did fall down the stairs; the parenthetical comment by the narrator points this out. Her play goes on shortly after this. When Alice thinks about her cat who might catch bats, she starts to play around with language, with sounds: “But do cats eat bats, I wonder?” (11). She then transforms this question into “Do bats eat cats?” ‘Cats’ and ‘bats’ are a minimal pair and she simply swaps the initial sound. Her usual reaction to surprise is “to wonder what was going to happen next” (10), which is followed by different kinds of plays and games.

### Pretend Play

One of these games is Alice’s pretend play. Lecercle refers to an early example of this in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, just after Alice has shrunk and “shut[...] up like a telescope” (14). She starts crying and tells herself to “leave off this minute” (15), “for this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people” (15). Lecercle reads this statement as evidence for his thesis of Alice’s “mild schizophrenia” (281).

Developmental psychology has long shown that pretend play is quite natural and normal in children.<sup>7</sup> By relating Alice’s behaviour to schizophrenia, Lecercle follows a cliché in Carroll-criticism that is connected to psychoanalytical readings of the *Alice*-books<sup>8</sup> and that

was especially popular in the early 1980s.<sup>9</sup> When Alice pretends to be two people at the same time, she is playing; a split personality can simply be part of playing a game: “Man exists in two spheres simultaneously, not for lack of concentration or out of forgetfulness, but because this double personality is essential to play” (Fink 23). In play, everyone can be someone else for the duration of the game; this is why we like to play from time to time: play allows us, among other things, to escape from who we usually are—and a child, in this respect, is no different from this.

I should like to think that there is more to the *Alice*-books than a mere psychological projection (and also more to Carroll than simply his search for a psychological outlet for his schizophrenia which he projected onto Alice in his tales). Preconceived ideas of this kind hardly ever do justice to a text. To suppose that Alice’s behaviour is grounded on some pathological problem is as far-fetched as the idea of her becoming a “subject” in the course of the text, i.e. that the *Alice*-books are some kind of novel of development. Lecercle assumes that there are ideological pressures on Alice. This becomes evident in remarks like “And if the individual is interpellated into a subject by ideology, a process that concerns all individuals and never fails, it leaves open a space for counter-interpellation [...]. This double dialectics of determination [...] and of interpellation by ideology, the workings of which are as eternal as the Freudian unconscious [...] is the source and rationale for the literary dialectics of surprise and unsurprise” (285). I would be curious to see in which way the games played by Carroll could become expressive of such an eternal truth.

A further example will prove the point that a psychological reading does not do justice to what actually happens in the text. At the beginning of the second chapter of *WL*, Alice opens out “like the largest telescope that ever was” (16) after eating the cakes she finds in the hall:

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice (she was so much surprised that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English). (16)



Alice is surprised, and she is so surprised that she forgets how to speak good English—she is not surprised “at what she can utter beyond and against the rules of language” (284); this is only a *consequence* of her surprise. What she is doing here is rather typical of a child much younger than Alice: she follows linguistic rules rigorously. The regular comparative of adjectives in English is formed by adding the suffix *-er* to the adjective: big—bigger, large—larger, nice—nicer. In analogy to that, Alice invents the form curious—curiouser—and shortly afterwards realizes that she is talking “nonsense” (17). She learns through play: she follows a linguistic rule (not unlike a foreign learner) but then recognises that this is not the correct form. In this situation, Alice is far from “establish[ing] her personality and becom[ing] a subject” (284); she is *interacting* with herself.

#### Alice’s Interaction(s)

I appreciate Jennifer Geer’s reading of surprises in the *Alice*-books and how she addresses the “question of what is natural.” She finds that there are “different definitions of nature”:

Alice’s working definition of the natural as something that is ‘part of the world she is accustomed to’ ties it to her cultural and social experience as an upper-middle-class Victorian girl. For her, a natural situation is one that conforms to some aspect of this experience. On the other hand [...] Alice is able to accept the fantastic because she is a child [...]. This argument rests on a conception of nature that is far more essentialist than Alice’s working definition; it assumes that children have an affinity for the fantastic that is independent of social and cultural variations. Technically speaking, this is a contradiction in Zirker’s argument, but it reflects the books’ own shifting definitions of what is natural. (Geer 271-72)

Geer seems to see a contradiction in my reading of the term natural: firstly, ‘natural’ refers to what corresponds with Alice’s experience, i.e. what she knows and has seen or experienced before; secondly, it can also refer to what is fantastic as the fantastic is part of the child’s

experience, e.g. from fairy tales, and therefore a 'natural' part of the child's world. The child therefore does indeed have "an affinity for the fantastic that is independent of social and cultural variations" (272) but this does not exclude a similar affinity for what has been experienced before and thus become natural. In Alice's case, both the fantastic as well as social and cultural concepts are natural to her. This is not so much a contradiction as a combination or amalgamation of different concepts that relies on the different kinds of experience a child is exposed to: "I was like a child, constantly wondering and surprised at nothing" as Mr. Vane, the protagonist in George MacDonald's novel *Lilith*, puts it. Children wonder, but because they are accustomed to different realms of experience—the social and cultural world they grow up in as well as the realm of fairy tales and fantastic stories—they are hardly ever surprised. As Geer explains, "[l]ike many common terms, 'natural' may mean several things, and ordinary usage tends to overlook the differences between them" (272). Carroll's notion of what is 'natural' is not restricted to "ordinary usage" and therefore he "question[s] the nature of nature and of natural behaviour" (272), but he also plays with the different connotations the word may have in different perspectives: Carroll plays with the question of how a child perceives the world.

Through the eyes of a child, what is perceived as natural changes perpetually: not only is a child constantly confronted with new experiences that qualify the evaluation of something as natural or unnatural; the child also moves in different realms, e.g. in the realm of the fairy tale, of reality, etc. There is not necessarily an affinity in the child for the fantastic but more so for the "willing suspension of disbelief." A child has a yet unfixed notion of what is natural and only vague ideas of "social and cultural variations" due to lack of experience.

The *Alice*-books therefore illustrate that what appears to be natural (or not) and what is surprising (or not) is a matter of experience and perspective—one need only think of Alice's reaction to the White Rabbit. When adults return to childhood, which is what they are



supposed to do when entering Wonderland and the world behind the mirror, they have to adapt themselves to different and unknown rules. Such a change in perspective implicates the realisation that what they think is natural or conforming to rules known in their adult world does not necessarily apply to the world they now move in. “[W]hat the natural might be” (279) thus depends on one’s perspective on the world.

This becomes particularly clear, as Geer points out, in Alice’s encounter with the Unicorn in chapter seven of *LG*: “The Unicorn offers a mirror image of Alice’s view of nature, an alternate perspective in which unicorns are perfectly ordinary and children are fabulous monsters. [...] [T]he Unicorn’s perspective reverses her conceptual framework rather than challenging its basic premises” (275). That such a reversal of “conceptual framework[s]” would appear in a mirror world should not really be surprising to either Alice or the reader. It shows, however, that she is not yet accustomed to this reversed way of thinking as it contradicts her experience (and also her preconceived ideas); it has not as yet become natural *to her*, but it is natural (and logical) in the context of the world she moves in<sup>10</sup>: it is thus not the Unicorn who is a “fabulous” monster but the child.<sup>11</sup> The characters within this world of play perceive one another as real, and hence they identify Alice as different. Carroll reverses the ‘normal’ order throughout his books and thus plays with different concepts.

This is why I would also hesitate to agree with Michael Mendelson regarding another point he makes. He compares Alice’s behaviour in the Rabbit’s house (chapter 4: “The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill”) with that in the concluding chapter after she has upset the jury-box. Mendelson writes:

[...] her confinement in the Rabbit’s house, where she *outgrows* her ability to move and so must stay and submit to the Rabbit’s assaults [...]. In the courtroom, however, she has *grown into* her own and can act as she thinks best. [...] Alice’s change is progressive, the development of a bolder, more assertive person, someone prepared to respond with resolve when opportunity appears. (297)

He concludes that she has not only literally grown but also matured. But this interpretation is based on a reading of the text that overlooks significant hints regarding the very fact that Carroll explicitly did not aim at showing any maturation on Alice's part. Neither is she clearly presented as a child at the end (within the day-dreaming of her sister) nor does she change from submission to outspokenness. When she is in the Rabbit's house and grows so large that she cannot leave it, she gives Bill the Lizard a kick when he wants to climb down the chimney and defends herself against the Rabbit who wants to burn down the house: "And Alice called out, as loud as she could, 'If you do, I'll set Dinah at you!'" (36). She is as 'bold' and "assertive" this early in the story as she is in the final scene when she ends her adventures by crying out "You're nothing but a pack of cards!" (109).

While she travels in her dream worlds, Alice's development is pending. If she 'develops,' this is a move within a game. In *Through the Looking-Glass* she starts off as a pawn and wants to become Queen, which she does in chapter nine, but this does not mean that she has become a grown-up—neither have the Red and the White Queen 'developed' within the game. Becoming a Queen is a game, and it is something that is being played with.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the text hints at the reverse direction: in the play worlds of Wonderland and behind the Looking-Glass, maturation and developmental growth are not the issue. Alice is characterised as a child throughout the tales.

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The above examples are meant to illustrate one particular issue or even a pattern in the *Alice*-books, namely that of play. The *Alice*-books are not psychological narratives, although psychological reactions, for instance, may be used as elements of play. Hence, Jean-Jacques Lecercle's question "is the dialectics of surprise and unsurprise a psychological one" (282) is, in my opinion, not an appropriate one as this dialectics depends on the ability to play and to enter a world of play by reading the *Alice*-books. Alice is not "forgetting the rules of

[grammatical] decorum" (284) when she cries out "curiouser and curiouser"; this is rather one of the games Carroll plays and that the reader is supposed to understand in order to share the fun.

Taking this overall playful approach into consideration also solves the problem of the ending of the *Alice*-books. She does *not* achieve a "quantum leap of character" (Mendelson 289) but stays very much the same. The narrative of *WL* ends with Alice's older sister, who "[l]astly, [...] pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood" (12.111). Alice's sister pictures the younger girl as "remembering her own child-life" (111) in later years.<sup>13</sup> It is the intention of the *Alice*-books to stir this memory of childhood and to enable the adult reader to re-enter childhood in order to relive experiences and to think differently again, namely more playfully.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All further quotations are from the Oxford edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*, ed. Roger Lancelyn Green.—For this idealisation see, e.g. Černý, who refers to Sidney's golden world and emphasises that Carroll does not, in the first place, refer to weather conditions but to the moment of his first telling the tale of Alice: "[Carroll dachte] nicht in erster Linie an das Wetter [...], sondern [wollte] dem Moment der Entstehung ein Wertattribut verleihen"; "Autor-Intention" 291. For the real weather conditions on July 4, 1862, see Gardner's comment: "It is with sadness I add that when a check was made in 1950 with the London meteorological office [...] records indicated that the weather near Oxford on July 4, 1862, was 'cool and rather wet'" (AA 9n1). For Carroll's treatment of the topos of a 'golden' time, see also the poem "Solitude" (1853), where he makes use of a very similar imagery: "Ye golden hours of Life's young spring,/ [...] Thou fairy-dream of youth!" (CW 860-61).

<sup>2</sup>See, e.g., Tupper's "Of Memory": "He gazeth on the green hill-tops/ And the partial telescope of memory pierceth the bland between,/ To look with lingering love at the fair star of childhood" (22); and Samuel Rogers's *The Pleasures of Memory*: "Childhood's lov'd group revisits every scene,/ The tangled wood-walk

and the tufted green!/ Indulgent MEMORY wakes, and, lo! they live!/ Cloth'd with far softer hues than Light can give./ Thou last best friend that Heav'n assigns below,/ To sooth and sweeten all the cares we know;/ Whose glad suggestions still each vain alarm,/ When nature fades, and life forgets to charm/ Thee would the Muse invoke!—to thee belong/ The sage's precept, and the poet's song" (81-90.7).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Kelly: "Alice is constantly at odds with the creatures and situations of Wonderland" (82).

<sup>4</sup>Cf. also the very notion that Alice is a "dream-child."

<sup>5</sup>Another case in point is the beginning of *LG*, which Geer describes as a "safe, cozy point of departure" (269). We meet Alice while she is playing one of her favourite games, she pretends. And while she is playing this pretend-game, she remembers one incident: "And once she had really frightened her old nurse by shouting suddenly in her ear, 'Nurse! Do let's pretend that I am a hungry hyaena, and you're a bone!'" (1.126). This is anything but cosy.

<sup>6</sup>This is actually the first death joke in Alice's adventures. The concept of death jokes goes back to William Empson (cf. 268-70; 287). Gardner refers to Empson in his *Annotated Alice* (13n3).

<sup>7</sup>Greta G. Fein defines 'pretend play' as follows: "In pretend play, one object is used as if it were another, one person behaves as if she were another, and an immediate time and place are treated as if they were otherwise and elsewhere"; „Pretend Play: Creativity and Consciousness" 283. See also Fein's overview regarding research on pretend play, "Pretend Play in Childhood: An Integrative Review." According to Fein, pretend-play is an expression of creativity: "[...] pretend play is viewed as a natural form of creativity" (283). This has already been stated by James Sully: "[...] the characteristic and fundamental impulse of play, the desire to be something, to act a part" (36).

<sup>8</sup>Another commonplace in the context of psychoanalytical readings goes back to the essay "Alice in Wonderland Psycho-Analyzed," published by Anthony Goldschmidt in Oxford in 1933. His reading was the first instance of explaining the *Alice*-books as "sexual symbolism in any medium" (279). This interpretation (which was four pages long) resulted not only in long psychoanalytical tracts on the *Alice*-books but also in the idea that Carroll was a paedophile. What critics failed to recognize, however, was that Goldsmith's reading was meant as a spoof: "His friend and fellow Carrollian, Derek Hudson, claimed that his 'tongue was half-way into his cheek' when he [Goldschmidt] wrote it" (Leach, *Shadow* 36). Leach refers to backgrounds of myths around Carroll, especially in the context of earlier biographies (cf. her chapter "A Necessary Otherness," 15-60, esp. 19-43). Subsequent generations of psychoanalytical critics misinterpreted Goldschmidt's spoof, which resulted in questions like: "What was his [Carroll's] relation to his sex organ anyhow?" (Schilder 291); see also Róheim and Skinner. In 1921, J. B. Priestly made fun of German professors, asking what would happen to the *Alice*-books once they got hold of them and started to read them psychoanalytically and -pathologically.

<sup>9</sup>See, e.g., Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du Sens*, chapter 13: “Du Schizophrène et de la petite fille” (101-14); Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan* 3; Géza Róheim, “From Further Insights.” According to Miyoshi, Alice’s split into two persons can be regarded as being symptomatic of the Victorian era: “[I]n the nineteenth century, each individual was ‘divided against himself’” (*The Divided Self* ix). He does not explain, however, why “each individual” suffered from this condition.

<sup>10</sup>Georgina Barry refers to the concept of perspective: “[...] our normative conceptions are relative only to our environment. Alice perceives Fabulous Monsters and is perceived as a Fabulous Monster” (84).

<sup>11</sup>This incident seems to trouble critics. James Suchan, for example, claims that the encounter between Alice and the Unicorn illustrates “the ambivalent attitude that Victorian adults held about children”: “If the Unicorn is right in his assessment of Alice, she belongs more to the lineage of fictional heroes and heroines like Heathcliff, Cathy, and Becky Sharp than with innocent waifs like Little Dorrit, Sissy Jupe, and Oliver Twist” (78). William Sacksteder explains: “The Lion and the Unicorn both call Alice ‘the Monster,’ as indeed she is in the original sense of a hybrid. For she partakes of two worlds, the natural, represented by the Lion, and the imaginary, represented by the Unicorn” (352). This view, however, ignores the fact that both, Lion and Unicorn, appear in their form of heraldic signs and figures from a nursery rhyme, i.e. they belong to a fantastic and imaginary world in the first place.

<sup>12</sup>This is also true for the game of chess that is being played: it does not follow the usual rules: “[Carroll] based his story, not on a game of chess, but on a chess lesson or demonstration of the moves such as he gave to Alice Liddell [...]. That is to say, he abstracted from the game exactly what he wanted for his design, and expressed that as a game between a child of seven-and-a-half who was to ‘be’ a White Pawn and an older player (himself) who was to manipulate the other pieces” (Taylor 102).

<sup>13</sup>This becoming a child again has a salutary effect: “Kein erwachsener Mensch kann die Kindheit mehr haben, wer aber liebend zu seinem eigenen Urbild in der Kindheit hinblickt, hat daran ein Mittel gegen die Selbstverwerfung und also gegen die Menschenverachtung” (Leimberg 456).

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