

Alice in the Academy: A Farce In Thirteen Scenes

By Deborah Lee Schneer

SCENE ONE—[Each scene is introduced with a *Legend* printed on a large sign carried by two actors.] *Legend*: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

Alice: I've been teaching three courses a semester for eight years at Wonderland State College. That's a full load at some institutions. They pay anywhere from \$1,500 to \$2,600 per course—a modest sum (you do the math) especially when \$2,000 is subtracted for health insurance. That's the way it goes, here in the beautiful state of Wonderland, where 40 percent of faculty are adjuncts. Part-time? That's a fantasy. Partly-paid? Reality. So when I learned that a fully paid and benefited position was opening up at Wonderland State, I applied. [*Blackout*]

SCENE TWO— *Legend*: DEPARTMENT MEETING—DECISIONS ARE MADE.

[*The fully-paid faculty decide to hire a postmodernist. The advertise-*

ment asks for someone to teach courses in American literature, Shakespeare, business and technical writing, gender studies, and postmodernism. There are 400 applicants, among them is Alice. The committee selects six for an initial telephone interview. In fairness to those six, the committee members decide to interview Alice, already teaching at Wonderland, by telephone, too.]

SCENE THREE— *Legend*: SOME GOOD ADVICE.

[*Dr. Turtle, partly-paid, helps Alice prepare. She tells her to use words like "empower," "problematics," and "slippage."* She gives her a "thinking-cap," a kooky hat with a propeller on top and advises her to wear it from now on.]

SCENE FOUR— *Legend*: THE TELEPHONE INTERVIEW.

[*Alice at her desk. The phone rings. She puts on her thinking-cap and answers. Lights come up on the*

Deborah Lee Schneer received her Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst where she wrote about issues of psychology and society as reflected in literature of the 1930s. She currently teaches courses at Westfield State College in drama, writing, and literary modernism. *Alice in the Academy* is excerpted from a longer play.

Dr. Tweedle: Alice, why do you suppose Shakespeare has lasted for all these years?

faculty seated in a semi-circle right next door. She can hear them through the walls! They are dressed in their graduation gowns. They all wear thinking-caps and twirl the propellers when deep in thought, as one might twirl a lock of hair when engrossed in a good novel.]

Dr. Duchess: Hello, Dr. Alice? This is Dr. Duchess. I'll be moderating the interview. Can you hear me?

Alice: *[static on the line]* Hello? *[They go back and forth—"Can you hear me?" "Hello?" etc.]*

Dr. Duchess: We'll call you back. *[Hang up-hub-bub, etc.—Brring Brring]*

Dr. Duchess: Dr. Alice? This is Dr. Duchess speaking. Can you hear me? *[It's better.]* Well now, we have some questions for you.

Dr. Knight: Hello, Alice. This is Dr. Knight speaking. Would you please comment on the study habits of our students.

Alice: I think that the students don't study enough and that they should be better prepared for class. Very problematic. *[He nods approval. Duchess gives the floor to Tweedle ...]*

Dr. Tweedle: Alice? This is Dr. Tweedle. Could you comment on the Shakespeare requirement.

Alice: I think that Shakespeare is an important requirement.

Dr. Tweedle: Would you tell us how you would teach Hamlet? I have a class in an hour. Any

ideas for me?

Alice: I would deal with the question of character. What sort of man is Hamlet.

Dr. Knight: And what do you think?

Alice: I'd say he was confused. Not unlike our students. *[He approves, she pats herself on the back.]*

Dr. Tweedle: Alice, why do you suppose that Shakespeare has lasted for all these years?

Alice: I would think it's because people like the plays. Very much.

Dr. Tweedle: Could you tell us how you would fit a play like *Hamlet* into your course on postmodernism?

Alice: I would ... *[searching for a good postmodern answer]* talk about his relationship with Gertrude. This could be empowering.

Dr. Dee: Can you tell us how many papers you would assign? Do you think five is fair?

Alice: *[gravely]* Five sounds fair.

Dr. Gryphon: Alice—would you comment on Hawthorne and curricular issues?

Alice: I think Hawthorne is very important ...

Dr. Tweedle: How would you rank him next to Shakespeare?

Alice: Well, maybe it's like apples and oranges?

Dr. Tweedle: Is that a mathematical metaphor?

Alice: I don't believe that it is.

Dr. Dee: How might a postmodernist, such as yourself, deal with the lack of coherence in student writing?

Dr. Duchess: Dr. Gryphon has the floor.

Dr. Gryphon: Alice, I take it you don't think that Hawthorne is as important as Shakespeare?

Alice: I don't recall saying ...

Dr. Duchess: We are running out of time. Thank you Alice, thank you all.

[Faculty mill about and discuss the interview. As lights fade to black on Alice, they come up on Dr. Hatter. She is 5,000 miles away in Jabberwocky and is now seated at her dining room table. Expensively dressed—clothing is black with a punk edge. She's smoking and she wears a thinking-cap. Brring Brring.]

Dr. Hatter: Hello?

Dr. Duchess: Hello Dr. Hatter? Can you hear me?

Dr. Hatter: Yes. Perfect connection.

Dr. Duchess: This is Dr. Duchess from the English department at Wonderland State College. Are you ready for the interview?

Dr. Hatter: Yes, thank you.

Dr. Knight: Hello, Ms. Hatter. Would you be so good as to comment on the study habits of students these days.

Dr. Hatter: Well, as you know, study habits are problematic depending on one's perspective ...

Dr. Knight: Thank you. *[He is charmed.]*

Dr. Tweedle: Hello Dr. Hatter.

Could you comment on core requirements as they apply to Shakespeare?

Dr. Hatter: I believe that Shakespeare is a postmodern phenomenon, if one knows how to read him.

Dr. Tweedle: Interesting. So you would include him! I have no more questions. Dr. Gryphon?

Dr. Gryphon: Would you comment on Hawthorne and curricular issues.

Dr. Hatter: To a postmodernist such as myself, Hawthorne has the complexity of a Thomas Pynchon, although not the same distance from the text's predisposition to slippage.

Dr. Gryphon: Does it follow then that *Rappaccini's Daughter* has relevance for a postmodernist such as yourself?

Dr. Hatter: To a postmodernist such as myself, *Rappaccini's Daughter* is quintessential subjectivism, which is to say in the postmodern paradigm, although not exclusively so, as the problematics of the Hawthornian period must take account for inconsistencies represented in the author's writing as well as in the very title of the short story.

Dr. Dee: To follow up, would you comment on the postmodern approach to teaching composition? How might a postmodernist, such as yourself, deal with the lack of coherence in student writing?

Dr. Turtle: Today is Friday, and I only have 450 essays to grade by Monday.

Dr. Hatter: Even a postmodernist such as myself, would need to read some samples of student writing before venturing an opinion no matter how subjective, for I do not know from here in Jabberwocky what an essay looks like 5,000 miles away in Wonderland. Even the weather is contradictory and eludes definition. *[Murmurs of "sound," "practical," etc.]*

Dr. Duchess: Our time is up. Thank you, Dr. Hatter. The committee will be in touch.

[Hang up. Much discussion. As lights dim on the faculty, they come up on the two candidates, both at their desks, both staring into space. At this moment they look an awful lot alike—then blackout.]

SCENE FIVE— *Legend:* WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE WEEKEND?

[The scene is the main office. Alice is xeroxing papers. Enter Dr. Turtle. She is frazzled, overworked, exhausted—but retains a sense of humor. She is carrying a carton full of student papers. Alice peeps in the box.]

Alice: How many papers are in there?

Dr. Turtle: Oh, several hundred. Just listen to my schedule! Monday, Wednesday, and Friday—two morning classes at Looking Glass State—then two afternoon classes at Wonderland, with lunch in the car on the way over. Tuesday

and Thursday—night class at Queen's College. That's five classes total. Do you realize I'm teaching in three states?

Alice: Your tax returns must be complicated. How many students do you have?

Dr. Turtle: Let's see. Twenty five times five. That's about 125 students.

Alice: How many papers do you assign?

Dr. Turtle: Six. With drafts. That averages out to 750 papers a week. Multiply that by six and you get 4,500 papers a semester. Today is Friday, and I only have 450 essays to grade by Monday. [calculating] Now! If I start when I get home I can put in four hours. Maybe if I spend 10 minutes per paper, I can do 6 an hour and finish 25 today. That only leaves 425 for the rest of the weekend. Won't work. Hmm...If I spend 8 minutes on a paper, I could finish ... *[enter Knight]*

Dr. Knight: Good afternoon, ladies. Busy Busy. *[Alice puts on her cap]* Could I get in there for a moment? *[He moves in and starts to xerox pages. Machine jams.]* Oh fiddlesticks! How do you fix this thing? *[Turtle examines it. Enter Duchess]*

Dr. Duchess: Hello everybody. I see this is xerox time. *[Turtle fixes the machine!]*

Dr. Knight: Thank you! And thank god it's Friday! My wife and I

***Dr. Turtle: Did I hear someone say 60?
I applied for 75 jobs. But that was in
1990, the last of the good years.***

are going to the opera tonight. [*Collects his papers.*] Now it's time to get my pittance. Did you know that today is pittance day? I'm going to collect my pittance. [*Starts to leave, Duchess catches him.*]

Dr. Duchess: [*Whispers*] Don't say that around them.

Dr. Knight: Don't say what?

Dr. Duchess: Pittance day. Don't talk about pittances around them.

Dr. Knight: But it is a pittance!

Dr. Duchess: I know. But just don't say that around them!

Dr. Knight: Why not?

Dr. Duchess: They only get paid once a month. And they don't make a quarter of what you do.

Dr. Knight: Once a month? How can anyone survive like that?

[*He exits. Duchess rejoins Alice and Turtle.*]

Dr. Duchess: So! Still xeroxing. And what exciting plans do you ladies have for the weekend? [*Blackout*]

SCENE SIX— Legend: BED-TIME.

[*Alice is awakened by a phone call from partially-paid friend, Dr. Hedgehog. Her sections have been cut. On no! Another beheading! What should she do? During this frantic conversation in which it is revealed that Hedgehog still owes \$40,000 on her graduate student loan, Alice plays with her cap—putting it on and taking it off—as if in struggle with two worlds.*]

SCENE SEVEN— Legend: COMPETITION.

[*At the xerox machine. Alice and partially-paid Dr. Gardner.*]

Dr. Gardner: How many letters of application have you sent out?

Alice: Just the one to here.

Dr. Gardner: How many people applied here?

Alice: Four hundred. So how many did you apply for?

Dr. Gardner: Sixty. [*Enter Turtle.*]

Dr. Turtle: Did I hear someone say 60? I applied for 75. But that was in 1990, the last of the good years. How did you find 60 jobs to apply for?

Dr. Gardner: I apply for everything. Not just my specialty. That's a job in itself! I've got it down to a science. Ten resumes. One for British, one for American, one for tech writing, one for comparative lit, one for multicultural lit, one for women studies, one for Shakespeare, one for Hawthorne (for when Dr. Gryphon gets his way around here. They say he may be chair someday. When that happens you can bet there's going to be an opening for a Hawthorne scholar, and guess who'll be ready? I've even got the letter written.) Then, there's my all purpose resume for the real world. Actually, I've got a whole set of those, too. Social Service resume, writing for state agencies resume, writing for computer companies resume ...

'I just learned that my article, 'Images of Bowler Hats in Gothic Novels,' has been accepted by Victorian Studies.'

[Enter Duchess carrying a box of folders.]

Dr. Duchess: Hi everybody! Make way. *[To Alice]* Want to see your competition?

Alice: Are those the applications?

Dr. Duchess: Yes. Grand total of 400, plus or minus another 50 or so. *[Enter Gryphon, followed by Knight, carrying boxes. They come and go until there are 10 boxes.]* You should feel proud to have been selected.

Dr. Turtle: Have you read all those?

Dr. Duchess: Yes. *[To Knight]* Get the trolley. We're going to put them in storage.

[Exit Knight, Duchess, Gryphon.]

Alice: *[Peeps into a box and pulls out a letter.]* Dear Dr. Knight: My publishers include Random House, Harvard University Press, Yale University Press. *[Another]* Dear Dr. Knight: I am writing in haste. I have just learned that my article, "Images of Bowler Hats in Gothic Novels," has been accepted by *Victorian Studies*. Please add this information to my file! *[Another]* Dear Dr. Whatever: Are you really reading this? *[Another]* Dear Dr. Knight: I write to recommend Ms. Cat—the best student I ever had. Sincerely, Saul Bellow.

[Enter Duchess and Knight with trolley. Alice and others try to look busy.]

Dr. Duchess: Now get them all on here. *[Knight drops the last box. Papers everywhere. Alice and Gardner try to help. Turtle reads a newspaper.]* Oh well. Don't bother to sort now. We'll do that later.

[Exit Knight and Duchess. Alice straightens out papers. One catches her eye.]

Alice: Dear Professor Knight: I write to recommend Dr. Mouse. She was on a woman's job development committee that I chaired last month in D.C. She is the most extraordinary individual I have ever had the pleasure to employ. Sincerely, Hillary Clinton. *[Alice gasps. Turns to Turtle and Gardner who are engaged with the newspaper.]* Any jobs in there?

Dr. Turtle: They're hiring at MacDonalds ... No? How about this one ... "World Express: Be a Financial Planner. Free Training Program. Informational session tonight, eight o'clock. Meeting at the Sheraton Wockfield." *[Blackout]*

SCENE EIGHT— *Legend: A JOB FOR THE NEW AGE.*

[Room at the Sheraton. Present are Dr. Rabbit, adjunct historian at Wock State; Dr. March, tutor at the Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Wockfield; Dr. Hare, adjunct English faculty at Looking Glass State; Mr. Jub, gas station attendant; Alice, and Mr. Cheshire, CEO for World Express.]

The faculty decide that the candidates should pretend that students are present even if they are not.

Mr. Cheshire: (wide grin) I'm thrilled to have so many educated people. We find you Ph.Ds are very cooperative. Now let me explain our goal. It is, in a word, creativity. Creativity facilitated by NAFTA. No borders, boundaries, rules, or regulations. All that you have to do is go out into the vast global unknown and bring back one customer a week.

Mr. Jub: Excuse me, but what does the program cost?

Mr. Cheshire: It's free! As long as you bring in one customer a week.

Mr. Jub: 'Bout how many hours?

Mr. Cheshire: Eighty a week!

Mr. Jub: That's a lot of time.

Mr. Cheshire: You've got to get over these rigid attitudes. Learn to appreciate the experience—the moment.

Mr. Jub: Yeah, but you're getting free labor. I ain't no grad student or nuthin', but it don't sound right.

Dr. Rabbit: [*to Jub—condescending*] Rewards are not always tangible. I learned that in grad school.

Mr. Cheshire: (grinning at Rabbit) Think of the market as an idea. Can't touch it, can you? And yet, it's there. Or is it? It goes up, it goes down, and once you think you've got it—it's gone. It's slippery! Problematic! And yet, if you study it, you will feel empowered. Trust me.

This will be a growth experience for you. If you're from the old school of "give me my pay check, benefits, vacation and sick leave," then World Express is not for you. But if you're up to a challenge, it is. The old era is over. This is a job for the New Age man and ..'er woman.

Mr. Jub: I'll keep my job at the station. I got benefits there, thank you. [*Leaves*]

Mr. Cheshire: Thank you for coming sir. Now, how many of you educators have benefits? None? Here, you will find that work itself is a benefit. Here, work is potential and potential is power ... [*Blackout*]

SCENE NINE —*Legend:* STUDENTS WILL/WON'T BE PRESENT.

[After much deliberation the faculty decide that the candidates should pretend that students are present at the interview even if they are not.]

SCENE TEN— *Legend:* THE ON CAMPUS INTERVIEW.

[Seminar room. Faculty are seated in a semicircle. They are wearing black gowns and thinking-caps. As before, they twirl the propellers when they are deep in thought. Alice is at the front, next to Duchess. Beside them and facing the audience is a screen on which the poems will be projected.]

Dr. Duchess: For those of you who haven't met her, this is Dr.

‘I have decided to compare two poems to demonstrate differences between Postmodernism and Modernism.’

Alice. Dr. Alice has a Ph.D. from King University as well as ten years of teaching experience. She gave a paper at Looking Glass State last winter. Alice, do you have any preliminary questions?

Alice: Yes. Are you going to be acting the parts of students or will you simply be yourselves today? [*Murmurs of “What’s this about,” “Didn’t we make it clear,” etc.*]

Dr. Duchess: I thought that I had clarified that. We’ll just be our boring old selves.

Dr. Knight: [*joking*] I’m a student. Can I go to the bathroom?

Dr. Dee: My dog ate my paper. [*Laughter—“My grandmother died,” etc.*]

Alice: I have decided to compare two poems to demonstrate differences between Postmodernism and Modernism. The first is a poem you will recognize. It is by William Carlos Williams. [*“This Is Just To Say” is flashed on the screen.*]

This Is Just to Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in the icebox

and which you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

Here is an example of modernist writing. It breaks with previous literary conventions, for example, in the absence of meter and rhyme. Is this a sonnet? No. A villanelle? No. A ballad? No. However, the poem is comprehensible. It follows a line of thought. It has a center, the center is a plum. A sweet and delicious plum—a known subject. [*Nods from group—“ah yes,” and “good,” etc.*] Now let us turn to some postmodern writing samples, which should illustrate differences between the two periods. [*Three new poems are flashed on the screen.*] The first is entitled “Star Motel,” the second is “Familiar Music,” the third, Cakewalkman.”

Star Motel

Inside I could hear
a party of people
the aimless cars
and in the middle distance
inexorable murmurs
of the ice machines.

Familiar Music

A pair of dark blue panties
among hairbrushes

Cakewalkman

everybody dancin
all the time as
we have
learned
at
scott joplin
university

'I wasn't presenting the poems as good or bad, I was presenting them as examples of postmodern writing.'

Three examples of a postmodern sensibility. Take Cakewalkman. The end could be the beginning, the beginning could be the end. Notice the absence of punctuation! Is there a reason behind the structure of any one of these poems, except to challenge the whole notion of structure, indeed, to challenge the very institutions where structure is taught? [*Knight begins to nod off.*] Let us consider "Star Motel." What is "middle distance?"

Dr. Gryphon: Excuse me, Alice; in "Familiar Music" doesn't there seem to be a subject?

Alice: No, the subject could be panties, or it could be hairbrushes. [*Knight snores.*]

Dr. Gryphon: Yes, but could it not also be the panties *in* the hairbrushes ...

Alice: Yes, I suppose, you have a good point there ...

Dr. Gryphon: Ah yes. Interesting. Thank you.

Alice: [*sincerely*] You're welcome. [*Knight wakes up.*]

Alice: I would like to continue with "Star Motel." It doesn't seem to have a beginning or an end ... indeed, the cars are aimless ...

Dr. Knight: I'm uneasy ... Should we be exposing our students to this sort of writing?

Alice: This is touchy territory ...

Dr. Knight: Why have you selected these poems? Are they, in

your opinion, examples of good writing?

Alice: I wasn't presenting them as examples of good or bad, I was presenting them as examples of postmodern writing ... which is what the advertisement calls for ... [*Faculty are agitated. They twirl their propellers.*]

Dr. Tweedle: Alice, we are looking for someone to run the high school writing program.

Alice: [*confused*] I wasn't aware...

Dr. Tweedle: Are you certified to teach in a high school?

Alice: I don't believe this was mentioned in the job description.

Dr. Tweedle: That depends on the job description that you read. Which one did you read?

Alice: The one on the bulletin board in the English department. Were there two?

Dr. Tweedle: Oh, at least. We sent out several.

Alice: I think that should be rather confusing.

Dr. Tweedle: Not for us.

Alice: I don't see how a candidate can know what to do, if she applies for the wrong job.

Dr. Tweedle: Yes, but we know what to do, and that is all that matters.

Dr. Duchess: Excuse me—our time is up. Thank you all for coming. Thank you, Alice, for your presentation.

‘My essential anti-essential position is the interrogation of the post. Oh dear. I seem to be nervous.’

[Comments like “very good ...” etc. as lights fade to black. Lights come up again. Same setting, Dr. Hatter is the candidate. She is dressed as before and wears a thinking-cap.]

Dr. Duchess: For those of you who haven’t met her, this is Dr. Hatter. Dr. Hatter is finishing her dissertation at Jabberwock University. Her title is *Negative Dialectics in a Postmodern Discourse: An Anti-Essentialist Critique of Epistemology*. Dr. Hatter, I understand that you wish to make an opening statement.

Dr. Hatter: My essential anti-essential position is the interrogation of the post. Oh dear. I seem to be nervous.

Dr. Knight: Is that an essential case of nerves? *[Everyone laughs.]*

Dr. Gryphon: No—she has an inessential nervous system. Ha!

Dr. Duchess: Would you please let Ms. Hatter get on with the show? *[Star Motel is flashed on the screen]*

Star Motel

Inside I could hear
a party of people
the aimless cars
and in the middle distance
inexorable murmurs
Of the ice machines

Dr. Hatter: Thank you. The poem on the screen is “Star Motel.” To read this text is to interrogate the post of postmodern. This, of

course, is a paradox—an oxymoron, which is a paradox in and of itself. There is an irreducible inessence here; the absence of narrative turns in on itself and is disruptive of its own disruptions.

Dr. Gryphon: I can see that where the poet says “inexorable murmurs.” To what does “murmur” refer?

Dr. Knight: Perhaps to the poet’s sense of loss?

Dr. Duchess: Isn’t it to the ice machines?

Dr. Hatter: One needs to transcend conventional definitions ...

Dr. Dee: I like “inexorable murmurs ...”

Dr. Knight: Very compelling.

Dr. Tweedle: Indeed.

Dr. Duchess: Dr. Hatter, am I correct in saying that this is an example of quintessential postmodernism?

Dr. Hatter: I would say so. It is quintessential postmodernism, although there is nothing essential about postmodernism. The poem cannot be pinned or even located. In a sense, it offers the reader potential.

Dr. Gryphon: I like that.

Dr. Hatter: It is an invitation to the reader to discover a transgendered self in the gaps.

Dr. Knight: The gaps?

Dr. Hatter: In the unthought known ... in the inexorable murmur if you will ...

‘Dr. Hatter, would you object if we were to tell you that several different descriptions of the job were posted?’

Dr. Knight: Ah yes.

Dr. Gryphon: What do you mean by transgendered?

Dr. Hatter: A multigendered nexus, but I was referring to potential ... As the reader discovers that potential she discovers the poem, so in a postmodern sense the poem is potential, and to be potentialized is to be empowered ...

Dr. Knight: Dr. Hatter, the more I read it, the more I see in this poem. What made you choose it?

Dr. Hatter: I chose it because I thought it would demonstrate the amorphous, yet fecund, reductivity of the postmodern. It is, as you can see, predisposed to collapse and is contradictory, problematic, inconsistent as it is polymorphous and clearly overrides the influence of Modernism. [*Nods to signify “Hey! Pretty good!”*]

Dr. Tweedle: Ah Dr. Hatter? Which job description did you happen to read?

Dr. Hatter: I read the one on the internet.

Dr. Tweedle: [*impressed*] I didn’t know it was advertised on the internet! [*All look around with pleasant surprise ... “On the Internet, My goodness! ...” etc.*]

Dr. Tweedle: Dr. Hatter, would you object if we were to tell you that the description you read was not the only one we published? That there were several different descriptions?

Dr. Hatter: A true postmodernist would have been pleased to read any one of them. [*Nods of approval.*]

Dr. Duchess: I think we have learned a great deal today. Thank you all for coming. We will be in touch with you, Dr. Hatter. [*Applause and discussion as lights fade to black.*]

SCENE ELEVEN— *Legend: A LETTER.*

[*The position goes to Dr. Hatter. Alice removes her thinking-cap. Faculty express their regrets.*]

SCENE TWELVE— *Legend: POLISH.*

[*Dinner table set for two.*]

Dr. Duchess: How are you?

Alice: I am fine, thank you. And you?

Dr. Duchess: All right. I guess I am disappointed.

Alice: Disappointed?

Dr. Duchess: Yes. I wanted you to get the job.

Alice: You did?

Dr. Duchess: Dr. Gryphon said he thought that you were surprised you didn’t get it.

Alice: Oh?

Dr. Duchess: Were you?

Alice: Was I what?

Dr. Duchess: Surprised?

Alice: Well, I really couldn’t say, exactly. Were you surprised?

Dr. Duchess: Yes I was. Alice, I

‘Do you think it’s polite to hire 30 people, cut their salaries in half, deny them benefits, and pretend that’s OK?’

was more than surprised. I was disappointed in you.

Alice: In me? Good heavens, why? I was very good!

Dr. Duchess: Yes, you were, but you looked awfully tired!

Alice: I can’t see what bearing that should have on your opinion of my performance.

Dr. Duchess: It made you look sleepy!

Alice: I didn’t feel sleepy, not a bit. If memory serves, Dr. Knight is the one who was sleepy. Indeed, he went to sleep right then and there!

Dr. Duchess: Yes, I suppose that he did. But you looked sleepier than he did, nonetheless.

Alice: That is just too silly for words.

Dr. Duchess: I’m sorry, Alice. You’re a fine teacher. She was just more, well ... sophisticated.

Alice: Sophisticated?

Dr. Duchess: Polished.

Alice: What kind of polish? Shoe polish?

Dr. Duchess: Very funny.

Alice: Or was it nail polish?

Dr. Duchess: Ha ha.

Alice: Maybe a little furniture polish. Furniture polish never hurt, you know ...

Dr. Duchess: Oh come on. You’re being rude.

Alice: How do you define that word?

Dr. Duchess: What word?

Alice: Rude.

Dr. Duchess: Rude means impolite.

Alice: Do you think that it’s polite to hire 30 people, cut their salaries in half, deny them benefits, and pretend that’s OK because they’re called “adjuncts”?

Dr. Duchess: Sour grapes! Look. We couldn’t have hired you. We’re legally bound!

Alice: To what?

Dr. Duchess: To the descriptions. She fits them better than you do! She’s better on paper!

Alice: I should think that anyone on that committee could be replaced by someone who looks better on paper!

Dr. Duchess: Well! *[standing]* You are really going too far! If you say that to anyone besides me, you’ll never get rehired here! Why, I’ll have your head cut right off!

Alice: Excuse me, Dr. Duchess, but I have thought it over and have decided that I won’t be here to rehire.

Dr. Duchess: What does that mean?

Alice: It means that I am leaving! *[Pulls her thinking-cap out of her purse and lays it on the table.]*

Dr. Duchess: You are not leaving!

Alice: Yes I am. In fact I am late for another appointment at this very moment.

Dr. Duchess: You mean you won’t join us for drinks tonight?

Alice: Stuff and nonsense!

Dr. Duchess: Hold your tongue!

Alice: I won't!

Dr. Duchess: Off with her head!

Alice: Who cares for you? *[Puts down her share of the bill.]* Why, you're nothing but a pack of cards! *[Exits leaving Dr. Duchess, who dissolves in a flood of tears.]*

SCENE THIRTEEN— *Legend:*
SPIRIT.

[Spotlight on Alice.]

Alice: I finished up the semester. There was lots of carrying on. Dr. Dee cried whenever she saw me, Dr. Duchess stopped speaking to me, Dr. Gryphon tried to date me, even Dr. Tweedle invited me to lunch. Before I turned in final grades, the department bought me a present—a volume of plays by Shakespeare and a copy of *The*

Scarlet Letter: They enclosed a note saying “Hope you're leaving in body only, not in spirit.” *[Pause]* So where am I now? Well, in body, I'm at Looking Glass State College teaching courses in American Literature, Shakespeare, Contemporary Literature, and Women's Studies. I'm paid \$5,000 a semester, which actually is a cut from Wonderland. I've been told that an opening for a Generalist is coming up in the spring. It's tenure-track. Do you think I should apply?

[Projected on the screen is a video clip of the UPS strike. The tape rolls for a minute and freezes on a frame of workers carrying picket signs. Alice watches the tape and when it freezes turns to the audience.]

Alice: Goodnight.

[Blackout] ■

Endnotes

Abrams, Sam, “Cakewalkman,” *American Poetry Since 1970*, Andrei Codrescu, ed., 1987

Berkson, Bill, “Star Motel,” “Familiar Music,” *American Poetry Since 1970*, Andrei Codrescu, ed., 1987