Galatea’s Daughters: Dolls, Female Identity and the Material Imagination in Victorian Literature and Culture

Dissertation

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Abstract

The doll, as we conceive of it today, is the product of a Victorian cultural phenomenon. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that a dedicated doll industry was developed and that dolls began to find their way into children’s literature, the rhetoric of femininity, periodical publications and canonical texts. Surprisingly, the Victorian fascination with the doll has largely gone unexamined and critics and readers have tended to dismiss dolls as mere agents of female acculturation. Guided by the recent material turn in Victorian studies and drawing extensively from texts only recently made available through digitization projects and periodical databases, my dissertation seeks to provide a richer account of the way this most fraught and symbolic of objects figured in the lives and imaginations of the Victorians.

By studying the treatment of dolls in canonical literature alongside hitherto neglected texts and genres and framing these readings in their larger cultural contexts, the doll emerges not as a symbol of female passivity but as an object celebrated for its remarkable imaginative potential. The doll, I argue, is therefore best understood as a descendant of Galatea – as a woman turned object, but also as an object that Victorians constantly and variously brought to life through the imagination. The chapters of my dissertation examine how this imaginative potential was put to use but also how it was perceived as coming under threat by the pressures of materialism and commercialization.
In my first chapter I examine the doll’s role as creative muse that elicits imaginative fictions by means of its intrinsic impassive nature but that also embodies and gives material shape to those imaginings. I consider how Victorian authors like Stevenson and Hodgson Burnett saw the fanciful animation of dolls in play as a precursor to the animation of characters in literary production and, in particular, Dickens’s use of this trope to articulate a vision of himself as an author that draws from the child’s more fluid relationship with the material world. Then, in Chapter 2, I turn to the “doll memoir,” a once popular but now neglected subgenre within children’s literature in which dolls are endowed with subjectivity as the narrators of their own stories, to examine how these tales co-opted the imagination to generate a sense of disciplinary surveillance in their young readers, threatening to reverse the power relationship between girls and their dolls.

In chapter three, I study the rise of the luxury doll industry and consider how the material excess and consumer promiscuity associated with this “doll of the period” was perceived not only as endangering childhood imagination but also used by writers like Eliza Lynn Linton and Mary Elizabeth Braddon to explore femininity as a commodified form. In my final chapter I turn to narratives of doll production in periodical publications to show how a visit to the factory could deconstruct the fantasy of the doll by reducing it to its material parts, but could also give rise to a more imaginative way of understanding commodities as objects shaped by their material histories. As a mediator between the real and the ideal, I argue, the doll embodies a new kind of imagination, one that operates in conjunction with, rather than against, materiality, and in which woman acts both as medium and as agent.
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“Dolls are trifles,” declares George Dodd in the opening sentence of his 1853 *Household Words* article “Dolls;” “but,” he qualifies, “are they such trifles as to be quite unworthy the notice of all except miniature-women of doll-loving juvenility?” (352). The answer to this question, provided in the remainder of Dodd’s article, and echoed in the great variety of doll-related literature generated during the Victorian period, is a resounding “no.” Dolls certainly existed before the Victorians (in fact, Victorians delighted in thinking that their children’s love of dolls was shared by the children of ancient Egyptians) but the emergence of the doll as we conceive of it today is, I would contend, a Victorian phenomenon. It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that a dedicated doll industry was developed and that dolls began to find their way into children’s literature, the rhetoric of femininity, periodical publications and canonical texts.

So dynamic was the doll phenomenon that new words emerged to talk and write about it. As a quick glimpse at the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry for “doll” reveals, the nineteenth century sees an explosion of doll-related language. From doll we get dolly, doll-face, doll-kind, doll-maker, doll-like, doll-sized and doll-land. We also get “dolldom,” referring to the realm or world of dolls, “dollhood,” referring to the state or condition of being a doll or like a doll, and, perhaps most significantly, we get “dollatry,” which (after idolatry) refers to the worship of dolls.
The doll’s popularity is likewise manifest in the literary world. Dolls, actual or figurative, enter into almost all of Charles Dickens’s works. They also play important roles in the works of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Charlotte Yonge and Vernon Lee, and receive at least passing mentions in the works of Trollope, Thackeray, Mona Caird, Dina Mulock Craik, Marie Corelli and Anne Brontë. This list is by no means exhaustive. Dolls are also featured in the memoirs and autobiographical writings of Frances Hodgson Burnett, E. Nesbit, George Sand, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and are written about at some length by education and conduct writers like Maria Edgeworth and Sarah Stickney Ellis. Dolls even entered into the feminist and anti-feminist rhetoric of writers such as Frances Power Cobbe and Eliza Lynn Linton, among others. Poems and stories are written about them in periodicals, and, as I show in chapter two, dolls even give rise to a sub-genre in children’s literature in which they figure not only as the heroines but also the narrators of their own stories.

As with many of the trends that flourished during the Victorian period, the fascination with the doll can be traced back to Queen Victoria herself. Between her birth in 1819 and her fourteenth birthday in 1833, Princess Victoria amassed a collection of one-hundred and thirty-two dolls. Her collection was made up of tiny Dutch style dolls ranging from three to nine inches in size, simple in construction but intricately dressed to represent famous characters. Court ladies and theatrical personages that the princess had seen perform featured most prevalently, but the collection also included a few males and

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1 Dutch dolls were made of jointed wood. Although they had the advantage of being movable, they were comparatively unsophisticated. They were also not, as their name suggests, made in the Netherlands, but in Germany.
babies. According to Victoria’s own records (for she kept a detailed ledger appropriately entitled “List of my dolls”) as many as thirty-two of them were dressed by herself, though she is scrupulous to note which were completed with the aid of Baroness Lehzen.\(^2\) When the Princess turned fourteen, the collection was put away. Four years later she would become Queen (Low 222-5).

If the image of the young Queen at play with her dolls is a prepossessing one today, it was even more so to her contemporaries. Writing for *The Strand* in 1892, by which point Queen Victoria would have been a grown woman of seventy-three, Frances Low describes the collection and imagines young Victoria surrounded by her dolls – a future sovereign commanding “among her Lilliputian subjects.” The article, written with her majesty’s approval (and a few of her corrections in the shape of curt footnotes), was so well received that it motivated Low to publish an expanded version of it in book format. *Queen Victoria’s Dolls* was published only two years later with the addition of extensive color illustrations that allowed readers to experience the collection for themselves.\(^3\) This publication was soon after followed by “Distinguished Women and their Dolls,” also written for *The Strand*, in which Low expands her purview to include the doll-related recollections of various celebrities, including Hester Helena Makepace Thackeray Richie (Thackeray’s grand-daughter), Mona Caird, “Mary Maxwell” (Mary Elizabeth Braddon), and Frances Power Cobbe (although, as we shall later see, the latter had nothing good to say about them).

\(^2\) Baroness Louise Lehzen was Victoria’s governess and, later, her confidante.

\(^3\) Low’s initial article was also reprinted with slight variations in other publications and also seems to have spawned a series of stories about Princess Victoria postponing the pleasure of buying a doll as a child in order to perform an act of charity to a poor man she met on the street. I discuss these stories further in chapter three.
Indeed, the Victorian delight in sharing the “host of happy childish recollections” of “many mature doll-lovers” made enough of a mark as to be parodied in magazines such as *Funny Folks*, which suggests that given the popularity of this new trend, “‘At Homes’ should be held to meet dolls, thus giving ladies an opportunity of bringing to light some of the more or less battered relics of their childhood” (308, see the accompanying illustration in figure 1). This pleasure in reviving the doll-related memories of authors and other celebrities should alert us not only to the doll’s ubiquity during the Victorian period, but also to the fact that, although dolls were ostensibly made for children, it was perhaps adults who were most interested in theorizing their role and importance in little girls’ lives. Dolls, to return to Dodd’s opening question, were
therefore emphatically not “unworthy the notice of all except miniature-women of doll-loving juvenility,” but as Ina Schabert has noted, very much a “part of adult culture” (121).

For the purposes of this dissertation, I define a doll as a plaything made to represent a female body (child, baby, or adult). Because I am interested in dolls as playthings, I do not include under this definition wax figures such as those displayed by Madame Tussaud or used in medical training. Because I am interested in the ways dolls were brought to life by use of the imagination, I do not include mechanical dolls or automata. Although I occasionally briefly discuss stuffed animals, toy soldiers, male dolls or mechanical toys, it is usually only when they are presented as functioning in a similar way to the female doll. Even under such a relatively narrow definition, dolls could be found in many shapes and sizes during the Victorian period. By the time *Sybil’s Dutch Dolls* was published in 1887, its author, F.S. Janet Burne, is able to endow her eponymous heroine with a vast range of doll possessions:

Sybil had dolls of every variety – dark dolls, fair dolls, big dolls, little dolls, wax dolls, china dolls, composition dolls, rag dolls; dolls which were warranted unbreakable, and dolls of the most fragile description; dolls which squeaked if you so much as patted their chests ever so gently, and dolls who bore their sufferings mutely, even if you slapped your hardest; dolls who opened or shut their eyes to order, and dolls who regarded you without so much as the suspicion of a wink; dolls which walked, and dolls which talked. (5)

Dolls had not always existed in such dazzling variety. Eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century dolls were of a rather rude, basic nature. These usually had china

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4 I make an exception for dolls that possessed simple mechanical devices permitting them to open and close their eyes, walk a few paces, or say “mamma” because they were still intended as playthings and would have made their inanimate nature clear in having to be pressed or wound up.
heads and leather bodies or were entirely made of wood and were typically made by individual craftsmen, often in a home workshop.\textsuperscript{5} “Alas for the anatomy of the wooden doll!” writes Dodd, “Her body has very little symmetry, and her legs and arms are little-better than bits of lath” (352). It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that the doll industry really began to flourish, thanks in part to the use of new materials that lended themselves to specialization through the division of labor and to other technological developments, which led to greater diversification in the doll as a commercial product.

For the greatest part of the nineteenth century, dolls were made to represent not babies or infants but adult, and often fashionable, ladies that little girls would have been more likely to look up to and admire than to coddle or nurse as pretend-children.\textsuperscript{6} It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that more child-like or baby-like dolls were made. As Ina Schabert notes, Victorian dolls tended to emphasize dolls’ heads and clothes at the expense of their bodies, which were simple and pared down. “The sex characteristics of breasts and genitals,” she notes, “had, of course, to be left out” (126).\textsuperscript{7} Dolls’ bodies were typically made from leather or calico and stuffed with bran. The problem with bran, as doll historian Max von Boehn points out, was its tendency to escape its encasement all too easily, often causing dolls to end their careers in premature

\textsuperscript{5} While wooden dolls continued to be made throughout the nineteenth-century, as new kinds of materials emerged, wood was used only for the least expensive, most rudimentary dolls.

\textsuperscript{6} That is not to say that children did not engage in play in which dolls acted as their children – they certainly seem to have done so. The fact that dolls were not made to represent babies, however, should temper claims about the doll’s exclusive use as an outlet for maternal instinct.

\textsuperscript{7} Although Schabert seems to suggest that this is a symptom of Victorian prudishness, it is worth noting that most dolls today also lack genitals. The curves that dolls like Barbies display today were easily effected through the clothes dolls wore, which could accentuate the waist and create the illusion of a curvy female body underneath.
deflation. The more sophisticated bodies were subdivided into different sections (trunk, legs and arms), which made the dolls more flexible (Schabert 126).

The vast majority of developments centered on dolls’ heads. The most written-about doll in the Victorian period is the wax doll, which Britain specialized in making, and which epitomized the elegance but also the fragility associated with dolls from the period. Wax lent dolls a more realistic, flesh-like appearance than glossy china or dull wood, but it also made them susceptible to damage by demonstrations of affection and rage alike. Maggie Tulliver from George Eliot’s The Mill on the Floss (1860) could hammer nails into the head of the wooden fetish doll she kept in her attic and it still retained its shape, but the wax doll that is fit to lounge in the rest of the house is so fragile that it cannot even withstand her displays of affection, and we are told that as a result its “waxen cheeks had a wasted, unhealthy appearance” (16).

Another important innovation was the introduction of “composition dolls,” whose heads (and hands) were made from papier-mâché, a mixture made primarily from paper pulp. Composition dolls were not only inexpensively made but also resulted in a much more durable product. Some doll-makers sought to achieve a balance between sturdiness and beauty by dipping composition dolls into wax, or by covering the wax with a thin layer of calico. Later on in the century, doll-makers experimented with gutta-percha, a rubbery substance that provided a far more durable alternative. These dolls never rose in popularity, however, because they appear to have turned an unappealing color with age.

8 Doll historian Laura Starr notes, doll-makers also experimented with other fillings, such as cork shavings, hair, cotton and excelsior, some of which yielded better results than bran (65).
Towards the end of the century, when the French bébé became the highest standard in luxury doll-making, bisque (a kind of opaque, unglazed porcelain) became popular.

Hair, which had previously merely been painted on dolls’ wooden or china heads, also became more sophisticated. Victorian dolls’ hair usually came in the shape of a wig made from flax, goat’s hair, or even human hair (Starr). These could be replaced when dolls began to suffer from hair-loss or when their hair became too dingy. The very finest dolls had hairs applied in individual clumps rather than being pasted wholesale as wigs, providing a much more realistic effect. While bodies and faces changed very little over the course of the century, dolls’ hair and wigs were inspired by the latest fashions in hairdressing and therefore varied from season to season.

Most important of all, however, were the advances made in the province of dolls’ eyes. Whereas earlier in the century eyes had merely been painted, towards the middle of the century, almost all dolls had glass eyes. The cheaper dolls had simple beads glued on for eyes while the costlier dolls had realistically-painted glass eyes inserted into sockets. According to the dolls’ eye-maker interviewed by Henry Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), blue eyes were most in demand during the reign of Queen Victoria in patriotic emulation of the sovereign’s eyes and brown eyes were only made for export to Spain and America. To many children’s relief, these new dolls were no longer compelled to sustain an unflinchingly blank stare, as their eyes were given eyelids that could be made to open and shut on demand by means of a mechanism regulated by wire attached to the side of the head or through a weight system which automatically shut dolls’ eyes when they were laid down.
Dolls could be purchased dressed or undressed. Undressed dolls would come in nothing more than simple undergarments. Depending on the expense of the doll and the abilities of the owner (or, indeed, the owner’s mother, nurse, or older sister), the clothes would either be made by hand or bought from a specialist shop. Some dolls, generally of the less expensive kind, came with the clothes sewed on, which meant that the purchaser would not need to face further expenses in clothing the doll. However, since these clothes could not be washed or taken off (and dressing and undressing was often one of the chief pleasures of doll ownership) they were generally perceived as less desirable.

Another important technological development was the speaking doll. Although dolls were made which could walk and talk and perform a variety of tasks (one, for instance, was dressed like a bride and when wound up would gracefully take a few steps and emit a cry of joy), these dolls were usually made for the purposes of exhibitions and were out of reach of most children, and indeed most adults. Dolls that could say “Mama” or “Papa” when pressed, however, were much more widely available from 1850 onwards. Unlike Edison’s failed experiment of the talking doll, which had actual women’s voices recorded into small phonographs inserted in the dolls’ bodies (and were far too expensive, heavy, fragile, and unreliable to succeed in the market), these dolls used a bellows mechanism which emitted a non-human sound intended to resemble “mama.” The sounds emitted, however, were mockingly referred to as “shrill sounds” by George Augustus Sala, who claimed that they could only be supposed to resemble a human voice “by a wild stretch of imagination” (374).
While the cheapest dolls were generally sold by street vendors, costlier dolls were sold at places like the Soho Bazaar, and the Lowther and Burlington Arcades. The finest dolls of all were to be found in elegant shops like Cremer’s of Regent Street, or at major exhibitions, both in England and in France (King). Madame Montanari, one of the most celebrated wax doll-makers in England, received a medal for the dolls she presented at the Great Exhibition, one of which was made to resemble Queen Victoria.

Despite their firm association with national character, Victorian dolls frequently crossed national borders, both as physical exports and as characters on the pages of stories and novels. English girls would beg their mammas to bring their dolls new clothes from their visits to Paris, and French girls clamored for a delicate wax doll as a gift from England. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, doll production was so far specialized that a doll whose body had been made in England might carry a German head and be clothed in France. Young English and Continental audiences were also brought together by their desire to read about dolls. Two of the texts discussed in chapter two, for instance, were originally published in France and later translated and adapted for English readers. Despite these exchanges, each country tended to view their dolls as expressions of national identity. France therefore makes an important appearance in chapter three, where I consider the way Victorians defined their own dolls in contrast to the French bébé, which was perceived as embodying characteristics of French consumerism and material excess. Continental relations surface once again in chapter four, where I consider British descriptions (sometimes critical, but often laudatory) of the German doll industry.

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9 Thackeray’s daughter, for instance, appears to have purchased her two dolls “Dover” and “Calais” from the Great Exhibition (Low)
Because dolls are essentially miniaturized, objectified versions of women, discussions about these playthings have typically been absorbed into larger questions about gender and identity and have focused on dolls’ abilities to either shape or emblematize a patriarchal ideal of femininity. The doll’s association with this patriarchal ideal can be traced back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who expounded on the doll’s ability to train girls in proper feminine behavior in *Emile* (1762), his treatise on education. Rousseau believed that woman was “specially made for man’s delight” and that her role was to complement man’s innate strength with her passivity. The doll he saw as “the girl’s special plaything,” a choice which he believed demonstrated “her instinctive bent towards her life’s work,” which consisted for Rousseau primarily in “the art of pleasing.” By adorning her doll, the little girl learns to adorn herself, which is just as well since “in due time she will be her own doll” (263). In other words, for Rousseau dolls could train girls to become the playthings of men.

By the nineteenth century, however, the doll’s ability to inculcate in little girls a fondness for self-decoration and the development of a pleasing exterior ceased to be viewed as a desirable trait. Writers wishing to defend dolls as suitable playthings therefore seized on the doll’s instructive potential as a makeshift baby or child and argued that they provided little girls with an opportunity to exercise little girls’ innate maternal instincts. *Miss and her Doll* (1821),\(^\text{10}\) one of the earliest doll books extant, provides a

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\(^{10}\) The author is unknown.
good example of this. The book consists of a series of engravings (two examples can be seen in figure 2), accompanied, as the prefatory address informs us, by “a moral explanation” in verse form intended to make the book “instructive as well as amusing.” “Our little Heroine,” the note continues, “is supposed to consider her Doll as a living person, and is made to address it agreeable to this supposition.” Immediately upon receiving her gift of a doll the little girl takes on a maternal role, declaring, “My little Miss, to you I’ll be / As kind as my Mamma to me” (1). Each plate depicts the little girl engaging in maternal duties, dressing her doll, feeding her, teaching her to walk and putting her to sleep. And although the child in the story is pleased to discover how beautiful her doll is – “Oh, sure / No doll so handsome was before” – she is more interested in instilling moral virtues than in admiring her physical ones, for while “soon the prettiest face decays,” “to be gentle, good, and kind” are charms that “will last, and always please” (13).

But dolls could be used to instill other virtues than those associated with the little girl’s assumed maternal instinct. *The New Doll* (1825), another early doll tale, functions as an extended advertisement for the doll’s multiple didactic applications. In this story, the gift of a doll causes Ellen, the story’s young protagonist, to precipitate into a series of promises of self-improvement. Not only does she vow to “dress it, and nurse it, and rock it to sleep, and be very good to it” (7) and to “hem a whole handkerchief” if her sister teaches her how to dress the doll, but she also promises to set a good example to her “pretty baby,” vowing never to be “cross, nor careless” and to become the most attentive

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11 The author is unknown.
of students. By the end of the book, with the doll’s aid Ellen has managed to keep all her promises and is transformed from the “little wild, simple girl” (73) she started out as, to a thoughtful, generous and accomplished young lady. These improvements her father is quite happy to attribute to her formative doll play. If Ellen’s younger sister (who is to inherit Ellen’s doll now that she no longer has a use for it) can make equally good use of it, he says, “I shall think it my duty to recommend every parent to buy their little girls each ‘a New Doll’” (76).

![Figure 2. Images of maternal doll play in Miss and her Doll.](image)

As the nineteenth-century wore on, however, these didactic applications had to compete with what Victorians were beginning to consider dolls’ most prized virtue: their ability to ignite and to nurture little girls’ imaginative powers. Victorian authors like E. Nesbit, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and George Sand wrote about the role of their dolls in the development of their imaginative lives as children. Conduct
book writer Sarah Stickney Ellis championed doll play as a way for girls to exercise “the faculty of invention” (44). Through the imagination, such writers professed, little girls could bring inanimate dolls to life as daughters, mothers, sisters, servants, heroines, villains, literary characters, and whatever else they fancied. It is no accident that in describing Queen Victoria’s doll collection Low praises the dolls’ carefully crafted costumes as signs of industriousness and admires the simplicity of the dolls themselves as evidence of a Victorian (both the woman and the period) preference for “the pleasures of the imagination” – the “planning, creating and achieving” which she infers gave the Queen more pleasure than the finest dolls could ever have done (238).

One of the most passionate accounts of the little girl’s ability to bring her dolls to life through the imagination can be found in Otto Ernst’s unusual little book, *Dolls – Dead and Alive* (1911). Ernst confesses that dolls had no appeal for him as a child and that it is only since becoming a father that he has “begun to understand these ungainly images” (9). It is his daughter Roswitha’s ability to bring dolls to life that enravels him, as in the process of play, “the apparently dead come out again into the light of day, and open their eyes” (8). This imaginative ability makes his daughter God-like in her life-creating power: “Roswitha takes one of these lumps of earth and breathes into it the breath of life, and straightaway the clod becomes a living soul” (11). Her generative powers do not stop with giving life, but also permit her to create entire kingdoms:

> With her dolls, houses, and trees, Roswitha can be alone for hours at a time. Towns and homesteads, fields and gardens, footpaths and woods rise up where before all was a dreary waste, and vanish again into empty air without leaving a trace behind. (14)
Like many Victorians, Ernst saw the day when the little girl set down her dolls for the last time as a terrible loss of this power and causes him to bemoan his own loss: “O days of make-believe, perfect and complete illusion, what has become of you!” (12), he writes.  

This valorization of the little girl’s (and of the child’s, more generally) imaginative powers was rooted in changing attitudes towards children over the course of the nineteenth century. Mary Thwaite summarizes the transformation as follows: “The child, no longer regarded as an ineffectual and incomplete adult-to-be, was often in the century ahead to be idolised as a little demi-angel, living closer than his elders to the ‘immortal sea’” (82). This change, as Thwaite and others have suggested, was at least in part precipitated by the Romantic idealization of the child as a yet untarnished soul and the notion expressed by poets such as Blake and particularly Wordsworth, that in matters of innocence, feeling, and proximity to nature, “The Child is Father of the man.”

This new idea that children were not merely defective adults, but beings with needs and desires of their own, was reflected in the creation of a literature written

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12 It is somewhat surprising that very few people seem to have been making connections between this lauded imaginative animation and the kind of primitive animism which Edward Burnett Tylor introduced in his anthropological study *Primitive Culture* in 1871. One notable exception to this is of course George Eliot, who refers to Maggie Tulliver’s doll as a “fetish doll.” Since the girl’s animation of the doll was idealized, it is possible that few wanted to associate it with what Tylor calls the “cognitive underdevelopment” of primitive peoples. Emma Brewer, for instance, describes an anecdote about “a couple of Aztecs . . . exhibited in London.” The Aztec woman, Tola, she writes, “was difficult to manage or rouse; she was stubborn or wilful” until she was given a doll. Upon first seeing it, “she was like a mad thing; she was down on her knees beseeching for the doll” and it when it was given to her, she “moved it gently backwards and forwards, making a cooing noise over it and kissing it wildly.” After this, Brewer writes, “there was no difficulty now in obtaining her obedience” (124). The English doll is presented as having a civilizing effect on the unruly native.

13 Thwaite’s “immortal sea” is a reference to Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood”: Hence in a season of calm weather / Though inland far we be, / Our souls have sight of that immortal sea / Which brought us hither, / Can in a moment travel thither, / And see the children sport upon the shore, / And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore (1807).

14 Reference to “My Heart Leaps Up” (1807). Wordsworth returns to these words and develops this idea further in his “Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood” (1807).
specifically for children that sought to entertain as well as to teach. That is not to say that
didacticism was completely displaced by a literature exclusively designed to amuse, but
that the development of children’s literature in the nineteenth century was characterized
by a tension between didacticism and the enjoyment of reading, the latter being usually
represented by fantasy. The Grimms’ retelling of classic fairy tales, for instance, despite
remaining fairly violent for Victorian tastes, removed from these tales elements that
might be deemed “offensive to middle-class morality” and also “added numerous
Christian expressions and references” in addition to emphasizing “specific role models
for male and female protagonists” (Hunt 50). Dickens famously came to the defense of
fancy with his essay “Frauds on the Fairies” when Cruikshank took the moralizing
impulse too far by deciding to retell stories like “Jack and the Beanstalk” and “Puss in
Boots” as teetotaler tracts (Hunt 50). Dickens felt that “In a utilitarian age, of all other
times, it is a matter of grave importance that Fairy tales should be respected” (quoted in
Hunt 50). Although fantasy could clearly be used to instill moral lessons, it was typically
the more Puritan or Tractarian inflected realist children’s works that tended to carry,
sometimes subtly and sometimes overtly, moral lessons directed at children. During the
second half of the century in particular, fantasy tended to be associated with a more
moral-free fanciful style, as, for instance, in the case of Edward Lear’s Book of Nonsense
(1846) and Lewis Carroll’s Alice books (1865 and 1871).

The combination of the Victorian fascination with dolls and the increasing
valorization of the imagination results in the phenomenon that this dissertation sets out to
explore: the repeated and varied animation of dolls in Victorian literature and culture.
Dolls come to life in imaginative play and they are metaphorically brought to life as literary characters. They are animated as the conscious, sentient beings that narrate their life stories in doll memoirs. They come to life as commodities that speak as women, and as women turned into commodities. Authors, journalists and lay-people write about the doll’s soul. Dolls are the humanized recipients of love, secrets, and vented frustration.

One dolls’ eye-maker talks about the export of dolls in terms of their propensity for “going abroad” and one illustrator depicts dolls’ eyes literally growing legs and walking about a surreal landscape.

This tendency to bring dolls to life did not mean that Victorians were not interested in the material qualities of their dolls. In fact, quite the opposite was true. Doll tales and memoirs spend many pages describing the contents of doll shops, the glittering displays within glass cases and behind shop windows, and the vast array of dresses and accessories available to young shoppers. In many instances girls are described as painstakingly making their dolls’ trousseaux instead of purchasing them. Where dolls are endowed with consciousness they define themselves in terms of whether they are made of wax, composition, wax-over composition, china, gutta percha, wood or bisque. Authors of doll tales draw their readers’ attention to the effects of time, play and rough usage on dolls’ bodies. Victorians also seem deeply interested in the material origins of their dolls. In his two most doll-centric fictions, Dickens gives us two characters who dedicate their lives to the making of dolls, Caleb Plummer (who also makes other toys), and Jenny Wren, the dolls’ dress-maker. Finally, as I examine in chapter four, not only were children curious to know what the insides of their dolls looked like, but Victorians of all
ages appear to have been sincerely interested in learning about the origins of the materials from which their dolls were made as well as all the details of the manufacturing processes that made them.

Hence the usefulness of the reference in my title to the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, a myth that crystallizes with poetic concision the centrality of the female form in mediating the material world and the fantasies that transcend it. The story, simply told, is this: Pygmalion, a young sculptor from Athens, becomes disillusioned with women and decides to abandon his pursuit of them and to turn to his art instead. Unwittingly, however, he focuses his artistic efforts towards the sculpting of a statue of a beautiful woman, which represents his ideal. Pygmalion, who had rejected real women as artificial and stony, falls in love with his own stony artifice. Venus, the goddess of love, takes pity on Pygmalion and allows the statue to come to life. She is henceforth known as Galatea.15

On one level, the myth can be read as an essentially misogynist tale. Pygmalion narcissistically rejects all women in favor of the one he has created as a reflection of himself and his own desires. Disgusted by the women animated by lives and feelings of their own, he instead prefers a woman who cannot meet his gaze – who is, quite literally, objectified. This rendition of the story certainly resonates with Victorian notions that women could be shaped to fulfill a certain ideal. Frances Power Cobbe denounces this kind of thinking in “The Final Cause of Woman,” where she writes:

Of all the theories current concerning women, none is more curious than the theory that it is needful to make a theory about them. That a woman is a

15 As Gail Marshall points out, it was only from the eighteenth-century onwards that the living statue is called Galatea.
Domestic, a Social, or a Political creature; that she is a Goddess, or a Doll; the “Angel in the House,” or a Drudge, with the suckling of fools and chronicling of small beer for her sole privileges; that she has, at all events, a “Mission,” or a “Sphere,” or a “Kingdom,” of some sort or other, if we could but agree on what it is,– all this is taken for granted. But, as nobody ever yet sat down and constructed analogous hypotheses about the other half of the human race, we are driven to conclude, both that a woman is a more mysterious creature than a man, and also that it is the general impression that she is made of some more plastic material, which can be advantageously manipulated to fit our theory about her nature and office, whenever we have come to a conclusion as to what that nature and office may be. “Let us fix our own Ideal in the first place,” seems to be the popular notion, and then the real Woman in accordance thereto will appear in due course of time. We have nothing to do but to make round holes, and women will grow round to fill them; or square holes, and they will become square. Men grow like trees, and the most we can do is to lop or clip them. But women run in moulds, like candles, and we can make them long-threes or short-sixes, whichever we please. (1)

Interestingly, both the myth of Galatea and the Victorian insistence on making women fit a man-made mold that Cobbe criticizes rely on a particularly material view of women. Pygmalion’s initial dislike of women is fuelled by what he perceives as their artificial materiality. As J. Hillis Miller summarizes it, it is “To make up for women who have become painted ladies with hearts of stone” that “Pygmalion fashions another painted lady out of another hard, inanimate substance” (3). Similarly, Cobbe links the pointless theorizing about women to “the general impression that she is made of some more plastic material” and that “women run in moulds, like candles” (or dolls, one might add).

On one level, doll-making itself becomes a version of Pygmalion’s myth, as doll-makers mold the lifeless bodies of dolls to represent their ideal of femininity

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16 In view of Cobbe’s association of dolls with a patriarchal idea of femininity it is hardly surprising that when Low interviews her for her “Distinguished Women and their Dolls” piece, she has nothing positive to say. “A few of the ladies who have kindly responded to my inquiry seem to be exceptions to the general rule,” Low writes. Among them is “Miss Frances Power Cobbe,” Low writes, who “loved the woods” better.
(predominantly blue-eyed and blond-wigged for Victorians, as it turns out). But the most important transformation could be said to take place on another level. The idea that an ideal woman could be crafted out of a little girl, if only she was taught to play with the right doll in the right way, was, of course, one of the assumptions underlying the didacticism of doll play. But as critics such as Valerie Lastinger and Miriam Formanek-Brunell, have shown, girls did not always play with dolls in the ways that adults might have prescribed. Furthermore, as I hope to show in the chapters that follow, neither dolls nor the girls and women who wield them are represented in Victorian literature and culture as passive.

Here it becomes important to remember that even in the Greek myth it is not Pygmalion’s desire that animates the stone that he has sculpted into his ideal woman but another woman (goddess, really) – Venus. It is Venus who permits the statue to come to life when she takes pity on Pygmalion. She, not he, is the life-giver and animator of dead things. Similarly, it is little girls, not boys or men, who are presented as having the power to bring dolls to life, if not by supernatural powers, by the power of the imagination. In the case of Galatea as in the case of her Victorian doll descendants, women act both as the material medium on which fantasies of the ideal are projected, but also the agents that have the power to animate such fantasies and bring them to life. Through the power of imagination encapsulated in Victorian images of doll play, girls are able, through their

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17 The idea that doll-making was an opportunity to flesh out a culture’s ideals about femininity as well as other matters is crucial to Miriam Formanek-Brunell’s Made to Play House, which I discuss later on in the introduction.
privileged alliance with the material world, to transform not only themselves but also the world.

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Despite their prominence in Victorian literature and culture, the dolls of the Victorian period have received very little scholarly attention. In fact, dolls in general, have suffered from academic neglect. Why, we may wonder, has an object so symbolic and so integral to notions, past and present, about the construction of femininity, been so overlooked by literary scholars? Almost every critic writing on dolls begins by asking this very question. Juliette Peers, whose work I discuss later on, writes that “remarkably, the dollworld, from the industrial production of dolls to the particular choices and behaviors of private collectors, has been an aspect of white Eurocentric cultural experience that has only infrequently been subject to academic analysis” (4). Eva-Maria Simms identifies a similar pattern in the treatment of the doll in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic criticism. Simms contends that despite its importance in the lives of many female children, the doll “has found little attention from the academic community” (663). “The doll is not explored,” Simms argues, “but taken for granted as a symbol within the oedipal struggle” (663). Modern critics are not the first to utter this reproach, which can be found as early as 1899 in “Dollatry,” a piece written by James Sully for the Contemporary Review. “We grown-ups are a strangely incurious folk” begins Sully, “A

18 “[E]ven, she adds, “in the twenty-first century when fresh subjects for post-graduate theses are at a premium” (4).
land of Liliput [sic], inhabited by a charming and amusing little people, lies close to us, yet . . . we are not moved to a serious investigation of its quaint and puzzling manners” (58).

Part of the reason that dolls have been neglected is that they appear to wear their meanings too openly on their lady-like sleeves. Their symbolic meaning seems too apparent, and they are dismissed as patriarchal envoys delivering the recipe for a passive ideal of femininity. They are seen as makeshift babies, preparing little girls for their future roles as mothers and wives, or alternatively considered objects designed to train girls to think of themselves as commodities. The past decades have seen some important changes in this regard and scholars have started to identify some of the less obvious roles that dolls may have played in Victorian literature and culture.

One of the first critics to make a strong case in favor of moving beyond such simplistic readings of the doll is Valerie Lastinger, whose readings of doll-girl relationships in Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables and the Comptesse de Ségur’s Les Malheurs de Sophie are exemplary of the rewards such narratives yield when we finally accept that “not all dolls are a metaphor for motherhood” (22). In the case of Hugo, Lastinger reveals the violent undertones of Cosette’s doll play, which not only go unnoticed, but are often misinterpreted by a narrator, who persistently attempts to read these scenes conventionally.19 In her analysis of Ségur’s novels, Lastinger reads Sophie’s (the protagonist’s) violence against her dolls as violence against the ideal femininity that

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19 Cosette is first described as having a sword that she dresses, cradles, and otherwise treats like a doll. When she is finally given a traditional and expensive wax doll, Cosette names her Catherine, which Lastinger connects to the powerful Catherine the Great.
the doll is understood to embody. While Lastinger admits that the heroines of both texts ultimately remain strictly inscribed within the limits set for women in nineteenth-century France, she does excellent work in complicating the way dolls function in these narratives. In her own words, “Ségur and Hugo transcend patriarchy by reimagining the roles of dolls and girls” if only momentarily in childhood and in play (39).

More recently, Sharon Marcus’s treatment of dolls in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007) has also provided several original insights. Although Marcus’s examination of dolls is relatively brief and is ultimately interested in uncovering the same-sex eroticism involved in doll play, particularly in terms of physical proximity and play involving dressing and un-dressing and physical punishment, her readings of texts featuring dolls provide fresh insight into the doll-girl relationship in Victorian literature for children. Unlike Lastinger, who is examining canonical texts in French literature, Marcus analyzes and draws attention to some more obscure English texts, such as Clara Bradford’s *Ethel’s Adventures in the Doll Country*, many of which are central to the analyses in this dissertation. Marcus is also the first to indentify the doll memoir as a sub-genre of children’s literature worthy of study in the context of other doll literature.20

Another work that does much to revise traditional readings of the doll-girl relationship is Lois Kuznets’s *When Toys Come Alive*, which seeks to uncover “the secret life of toys” in literature from the eighteenth century to present time. Although Kuznets’s

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20 The wider dissemination of the lesser-known texts discussed by critics such as Kuznets and Marcus has only recently been facilitated by large-scale digitization efforts. Texts of which there exist only a handful of copies which had previously only been accessible to a few readers are now available to all readers in digital form.
work covers an extended period and is not solely focused on dolls, her section surveying various narratives of doll animation in the nineteenth century helpfully moves beyond simplified readings of dolls as agents of acculturation and hints at the doll’s potential for bringing about transformation in their roles as transitional objects, as gendered and racial others, and as embodiments of wish fulfillment. Because Kuznets privileges breadth of coverage over depth, however, she is not able to examine any of these roles beyond their summary exposition. The fact that her work focuses almost exclusively on children’s literature also means that many of the resonances of how these dolls reflect the ideas of adults are lost.  

Apart from collectors’ books, of which there are many, there are no more than two full-length studies on dolls. The first among these is Miriam Formanek-Brunell’s *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood, 1830-1930* (1993), an extensive study of doll culture and the doll-making industry in nineteenth-century America. In each of her chapters, Formanek-Brunell traces the production practices of different kinds of dolls, from the home-made rag doll, to Edison’s machine-made doll, to the turn of the century Kewpie dolls, and argues for an ideological link between the methods of production employed and the ideas about girlhood that the dolls were intended to represent or that they represented symptomatically. In making her argument Formanek-Brunell draws from a great variety of texts, including advertisements, popular magazines, autobiographies, juvenile and children’s literature,

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21 Gaby Wood takes a different approach to animation in *Living Dolls: A Magical History of the Quest for Mechanical Life* (2002), which examines the fantasies of animation surrounding mechanical toys and automata. Unlike toys, however, which rely on the imagination for their animation, these creations are designed to be self-moving, creating the illusion of life that is powered through a mechanical device rather than by the mind. Their animation therefore raises entirely different questions.
patents, photographs, and even the dolls themselves. Although her argument is sometimes narrowly-defined, Formanek-Brunell’s use of such a broad variety of texts lends strength to her study.

The other full-length study on dolls is Juliette Peers’ *Fashion Doll: From Bebe Jumeau to Barbie* (2004), which focuses on the ties between the nineteenth-century doll industry and France’s status as fashion capital of the world. Peers’ methodology is similar to Formanek-Brunnell’s in that she employs an approach of empirical historicism in analyzing a wide array of doll-related texts and materials. Through her study, Peers proposes to mediate between the “content-rich but discourse-poor collector literature and academic literature that is methodologically assured but limited, predetermined in its understanding of the elusive and complex culture of the doll” (5).

In attending to the material aspects of dolls’ cultural lives in order to enrich our understanding of their meanings, therefore, my dissertation follows in the footsteps of Formanek-Brunell and Peers. Neither of these two authors, however, takes into consideration the representation of dolls in literature. Although they occasionally turn to literature to provide particularly evocative illustrations of cultural phenomena, they both use these instances in ways that reduce them to cultural artifacts. My dissertation, on the other hand, is interested in exploring the rich area at the intersection between Victorian doll culture and literature. Each of my chapters therefore focuses on the role played by doll culture in a different literary genre or subgenre: Dickens’s own particular brand of fantastic realism in Chapter 1, the doll memoir, a sub-genre of children’s literature in
Chapter 2, the sensation novel in Chapter 3, and the periodical production narrative in Chapter 4.

My study also differs from those by Formanek-Brunell and Peers in wanting to consider dolls beyond the context of their status as commodities. In fact, as I hope to show in Chapters 1 and 2, much of the doll’s imaginative potential hinged on the doll not being treated as a commodity. As a non-commercial thing, the doll could function as a kind of muse, prompting imaginings, or conversely, giving material shape to what had previously only existed in the imagination, enabling it to be acted out in reality. As dolls became more and more refined as commercial objects, however, this imaginative potential was presented as being under threat. Otto Ernst, whose praise for the doll’s ability to ignite the imagination I cited earlier, was suspicious of more materially sophisticated dolls and toys; “a plaything has to be incomplete if it is to be satisfactory,” he wrote, “play should be play and should not degenerate into reality” (24). Furthermore, a doll that was an object of admiration in itself could risk becoming a mere commodity – an object that could be related to only through consumption and display.

Fully exploring the role of dolls as mediators between the real and the ideal, the material and the imaginary, requires a broader framework through which to understand materiality – one that does not stop at the commodity. In recent years, the “material turn” in Victorian literary studies has been enriched by the work of critics such as Bill Brown and Elaine Freedgood, who have expanded our sense of what attention to the things in literature can look like. In *The Ideas in Things* Freedgood argues that Victorians “were not fully in the grip of the kind of fetishism Marx and Marxists have ascribed to industrial
culture” (7). “A host of ideas resided in Victorian things,” she argues, and “abstraction, alienation, and spectacularization had to compete for space with other kinds of object relations” (7). Freedgood argues for a shift in our understanding of the things in literature from the relatively restrictive view of commodity culture to a more comprehensive sense of “Victorian thing culture.”

In exploring the meanings of things beyond their status as commodities and considering how ideas might reside in things by other means than by metaphor, critics have found the work of Gaston Bachelard, and, in particular, his formulation of the “material imagination,” to be helpful. The term “material imagination” was originally used by Bachelard to distinguish between two kinds of imagination: the formal and the material. While the formal imagination is concerned with the visual perception of things as images, the material imagination “thinks matter, dreams in it, lives in it, or, in other words, materializes the imaginary” (10). The material imagination therefore refers both to the ways in which we imagine the material, and the inherent material nature of the imagination.

At the hands of Victorian literary scholars, however, the term has come to encompass something broader. In her introduction to 19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century’s special issue on “Victorian Fiction and the Material Imagination” Victoria Mills uses the term to describe more generally “how the material is brought into collision with literature” (1). It has come to be used, along with thing theory, by those who want to examine the relationships between people and things that can not be accounted for by thinking about the things in literature as either commodities or
symbols. It is this broader meaning, the idea that matter and imagination are not at odds with each other but exist in mutual cooperation, that I want to capture by using the term in the title of this dissertation. The doll, as an object that was so often not intended to be treated like an object, demands both a more imaginative view of the material world and a more material understanding of the imaginative world.

My dissertation begins with an examination of the doll as a mediator of material reality and fantasy in imaginative play. Drawing from the writings of Rainer Maria Rilke and Robert Louis Stevenson, I argue that as an impassive object that nevertheless invites interaction, the doll acts as a first literary muse, prompting creative imaginings with its very silence. In their capacity as props, however, dolls also facilitate a kind of mimetic play that functions as an important precursor to literary production. For writers such as Frances Hodgson Burnett, who recalls using her dolls to act out the adventures of characters from her favorite books as a child, the doll functioned as a bridge between abstract inventiveness and the material work of fiction-writing.

I then turn to the works of Dickens, which are not only riddled with dolls and doll-like figures, but also display an aesthetic that can be likened to Baudelaire’s description of the toy, “that strange statuary art which, with its lustrous neatness, its blinding flashes of colour, its violence of gesture and decision of contour, represents so well childhood’s ideas about beauty” (198). I first examine how the doll house, as a fictionalized and idealized representation of domesticity, can shed light on Dickens’s pursuit of the domestic ideal in his works, but also how it can present a limiting creative model. Focusing on “The Cricket on the Hearth” and Our Mutual Friend, I then explore
how the character of the doll-maker in these works, Caleb Plummer and Jenny Wren respectively, acts as a figure for Dickens as an author. Like Caleb’s and Jenny’s dolls, Dickens’s characters are built from the outside in, combine material detail and abstract qualities, and animate, through a kind of novelistic doll-play, fantasies that either escape or transform reality. By articulating his position as an author through doll-play, Dickens is able to tap into the more fluid relationship with the material world that characterizes childhood and that animates his novelistic worlds.

In Chapter 2 I turn to the doll memoir, a subgenre of Victorian children’s literature, to examine how child’s ability to think imaginatively of her dolls as living things is co-opted for didactic purposes. In their earliest appearances in children’s literature, dolls are cast not only as the heroines but also the narrators of their own stories. In books such as *Memoirs of a London Doll* and *Lady Arabella: Or The Adventures of a Doll* dolls are given both voice and consciousness. These doll memoirs, I argue, are the didactic descendants of the generally picaresque eighteenth-century it-narrative, in which commonplace objects such as coins and umbrellas tell the stories of their lives as they circulate from one owner and situation in life to another. But while previously the inanimate object’s ability to observe and narrate the lives of humans had been used for satirical purposes, in the nineteenth-century doll memoir, the doll’s powers of observation create a domestic system of surveillance.

These doll memoirs therefore act as cautionary tales to the young reader: beware what you do before the all-seeing and all-telling doll. Unlike some of the more overt forms of didacticism that sacrifice fantasy and imagination to a moral lesson, the
didacticism in these stories relies on children’s use of their imagination and on their ability to see their dolls as more than objects and endow them with sentience. This didactic misappropriation of the imagination begins to be contested towards the end of the century in works such as Clara Bradford’s Ethel’s Adventures in the Doll Country. Bradford’s tale parodies the doll’s tyranny of surveillance and allows Ethel, her girl protagonist, to resist it. By reducing her doll to its sheer materiality and asserting her own role as owner and consumer, Ethel is able to take control of the doll-girl relationship as the creator of her own fantastical narratives.

For many Victorian writers, the imaginative potential within the doll hinged, to a great extent, on its material incompleteness. The doll’s vague features were intended to offer mere suggestions that needed to be fully fleshed out by the imaginative child. No doll could be more aptly accused of imagination-crushing completeness than the luxury doll, which I examine in Chapter 3. The luxury doll was characterized by unprecedented physical sophistication and associated with Paris, material excess, and consumer promiscuity. By examining the treatment of the luxury doll in tales intended for children and periodical pieces written for adult audiences, I show not only how dolls were accused of having a pernicious influence on innocent girlhood but also the ways in which dolls themselves became vehicles for critiquing the changes in femininity that vocal critics of new womanhood, such as Eliza Lynn Linton, condemned in that “rampant modernization,” the infamous “girl of the period.”

I conclude the chapter by turning to Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley, the luxury doll as femme fatale par excellence, who like the “doll of the period,” functions
both as a satire of the society woman, distilling her to her material substrate, but also as her advertisement, offering instructions as to how such a model of femininity could be attained by material means. In fashioning her social identity by the same means available to the luxury doll – paint, clothes, and accessories – Lady Audley demonstrates the powerful potential in woman’s alliance with the material world and why it was so key an ingredient in the sensation novel genre.

Chapter 4 paradoxically concludes this study by taking us to the place where dolls’ lives begin – it examines the world of spilled sawdust and melted wax in which dolls were produced. Thanks to the Victorian curiosity about the origins of common household objects evidenced by “process” articles, periodicals of the period abound with pieces describing every curious detail about the doll industry. By some accounts the dolls seem to come to life through the very specialized process of manufacture that dehumanizes the workers who make them. The doll seems to dramatize the Marxist commodity fetish, capable of evolving “grotesque ideas” from “out of its wooden brain.” At the same time, I argue, looking inside the doll industry is motivated by the same curiosity that leads the child to unsew her doll to see what it – and indeed the whole world – is made of. And while many Victorians saw the doll’s destruction as a moment of loss of innocence in which fantasy and illusion are sacrificed on the altar of adult realism, these narratives reveal the imaginative possibilities that arise from this quest for the “soul” of the doll.
Chapter 1:

Literary Doll Play and Dickens’s Fantastic Realism

In *Mimesis as Make-Believe* Kendall L. Walton argues that make-believe activities such as doll play are early instances of representational art and that studying the first can provide us with insights about the latter. “In order to understand paintings, plays, films, and novels,” he writes, “we must look first at dolls, hobbyhorses, toy trucks, and teddy bears” (11). Objects such as dolls, according to Walton, can play an important role in imaginative mimesis. They can prompt or provide occasions for imaginings, act as material counterparts to imaginary things, function as props in imaginative play, or perform some combination of all of the above (21). This, as I hope to show in this chapter, is a notion with which many Victorian authors would have agreed. The doll’s ability to ignite and fuel the child’s imagination was not only celebrated as a sign of the child’s untarnished mind, but was also central to many Victorian authors’ ideas about literary production.

Dolls and doll play bridge reality and fantasy in that they give material shape to what previously existed only in the imagination, thereby helping to realize it. They allow for both the representation of reality and the creation of variations within it. Even at their most imaginative, Walton argues, make-believe activities are “in one way or another dependent on or aimed at or anchored in the real world” (21). The other side of the coin, I
would add, is that even at their most representationally realistic, dolls and doll play express something of the fantastic. The idea that doll play participates in this imaginative realism is a useful one, not only in thinking about doll play as an early form of fiction making, but particularly in shedding light on the works of Charles Dickens, a Victorian author whose works are characterized by the tension between realism and fantasy. As I show in this chapter, Dickens not only participates in a kind of literary doll play but he also thematizes it in his works. Focusing on “The Cricket on the Hearth” (1845) and Our Mutual Friend (1864), I argue that Dickens uses the doll-maker characters in these works to articulate his own authorial position in relation to materialism and imagination, reality and fantasy, but also to explore the perils of imaginative manipulation, particularly in relation to gender.

I. The Doll as Muse

In “Some Reflections on Dolls,” Rainer Maria Rilke looks back on the dolls of childhood, not with nostalgic warmth but with a bitter memory of their “waxy nature” (50). Rilke sees the doll as the most soulless of things. He fondly remembers the “great, courageous soul of the rocking horse” (48), as well as the souls of the tram, the ball, the domino.

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22 These thoughts are occasioned, the subtitle to the essay tells us, “by the wax dolls of Lotte Pritzel.” Although Rilke writes about toy dolls, Pritzel’s “dolls” are actually artistic wax figures. The fact that Rilke does not position himself in a particularly gendered way towards the dolls of his childhood is interesting considering his unusual upbringing. During the first five years of his life, Rilke’s mother, mourning the loss of a daughter who had only lived one week, dressed young Rilke like a little girl and brought him up as a girl. “I had to wear beautiful long dresses,” Rilke recalled many years later, “and until I started school I went about like a little girl. I think my mother played with me as though I were a big doll” (Book of Hours xiv).
pieces and the picture book. Of dolls, however, he only asks, “When were you ever really present?” (48). At the heart of Rilke’s critique of the doll is that it placidly receives everything from its owner but offers nothing in return. It is passive and inert. Dolls allow themselves “to be lived unwearyingly with energies not their own” (44).

Rilke recognizes the developmental importance of the doll. Although he does not put it in psychoanalytic terms, he sees the doll as a transitional object – and as an object that bridges the developing character of the child to the material world it inhabits. The doll is chosen by children precisely because of its passivity – “with the doll we were forced to assert ourselves.” The doll requires its owner to play his own role as well as the doll’s, “having to split our gradually expanding personality into part and counterpart … to keep the world, which was entering into us on all sides, at a distance” (45).

As such, the doll initiates the child’s first entry into the realities of the outside world:

At a time when everyone was still intent on giving us a quick and reassuring answer, the doll was the first to inflict on us that tremendous silence (larger than life) which was later to come to us repeatedly out of space, whenever we approached the frontiers of our existence at any point. (46)

Rilke’s rage against the doll is the child’s rage at his discovery of the stubborn rigidity of the material world, inflexible to our desires. In its silence, “the plump, unchanging dolls of childhood” (43) become aligned with “Destiny, and even God Himself” who “have become famous above all because they answer us with silence” (46). Presented this way, the doll appears as a malignant force in league with material realism to take childhood joy and illusion away.
And yet, it is the very irresponsiveness that Rilke so deeply resents that gives the
doll the pliability that allows children to exert their imaginations. It is the doll’s
impassive impenetrability that forces children to assert themselves in the world and to do
so through the imagination. As Rilke himself recalls, the doll is so “abysmally devoid of
phantasy, that our imagination became inexhaustible in dealing with it” (45-46). Dolls
may not offer the child any signs of appreciation, but they nevertheless instigate “the
ceaseless golden rain of our inventiveness” (46). Then, if the doll-soul, as Rilke mourns,
is “not made by God,” it is only the more valuable, because it is breathed into the doll’s
lifeless body by the child’s imagination.

Robert Louis Stevenson’s poem “The Dumb Soldier”\(^2\) demonstrates precisely
this process; it shows how a doll or similar toy’s silence, in this case a toy soldier’s, can
actually lead to imaginative production.\(^3\) The poem tells the story of a boy who buries a
toy soldier underground one summer and leaves it there through the seasons until he goes
in search of it the following year. This experience permits the toy soldier to see the world
from a different perspective; “He has seen the starry hours /And the springing of the
flowers; / And the fairy things that pass /In the forests of the grass” (75). Yet for all the
“little thing” has experienced, the boy knows that when he goes looking for his toy
soldier, he will find him impassively quiet about them: “But for all that’s gone and come,
/ I shall find my soldier dumb.” Although there is a distinct note of resentment in the
speaker’s tone that recalls Rilke’s disillusionment with dolls – after all, the soldier has

\(^2\) The poem is from *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885).
\(^3\) Although toy soldiers do not fit my definition of the doll as a plaything in the shape of the female body,
because they serve a similar purpose as dolls, as set out by the authors I discuss in this section, I have
included them in my discussion.
been able to do “Just as I should like to do” and has seen a world inaccessible to the little
boy— as the poem draws to a close, these feelings give way to a more positive stance as
the soldier’s silence fuels the child’s creative impulse:

Not a word will he disclose,
Not a word of all he knows,
I must lay him on the shelf
And make up the tale myself

In supplying the lack of communication from his adventurous soldier, the speaker of the
poem becomes the poet.

Stevenson’s poem fictionalizes, in a way, the creative process of so many authors
in their childhood. Stevenson’s mute soldier finds its real-life counterpart in the Brontë
household. Charlotte describes the now-legendary anecdote as follows:

The Young Men’s play took its rise from some wooden soldiers Branwell had. . . Papa bought Branwell some wooden soldiers at Leeds; when Papa came home it was night and we were in bed, so next morning Branwell came to our door with a box of soldiers. Emily and I jumped out of bed, and I snatched one and exclaimed, “This is the Duke of Wellington! This shall be the Duke!” When I had said this Emily likewise took up one and said it would be hers; when Anne came down, she said one should be hers. Mine was the prettiest of the whole, and the tallest, and the most perfect in every part. Emily’s was a grave-looking fellow, and we called him “Gravey.” Anne’s was a queer little thing, much like herself, and we called him “Waiting-Boy.” Branwell chose his, and called him “Buonaparte.” (quoted in Gaskell 70)

Unfortunately, Charlotte does not describe the role of the toy soldiers in the writing of the
“Young Men’s Play” that gave rise to the chronicles of Angria. Although she remembers
the plays fondly, and enticingly writes that “All our plays are very strange ones,” she
unfortunately goes on to say that “Their nature I need not write on paper, for I think I

25 Because Stevenson was often sick as a child, it is possible that the poem refers to the adventures he
should have liked to go on outdoors but could not because of his health.
shall always remember them” (quoted in Gaskell 71). Her account therefore remains as enigmatic as it is evocative.26

Frances Hodgson Burnett, however, goes into much greater depth on the relationship between dolls and creativity for herself as a child and as a budding author in her childhood memoir, The One I Knew the Best of All (1893). Looking back at her childhood games, Burnett recalls the dynamic interaction between literature (stories, the imagination) and dolls; the two are so closely entwined that “Whether as impression-creating and mind-moulding influences, Literature or the Doll came first into her life it would be most difficult to decide” (44).27 Before stories, she recalls, dolls were nothing but “things stuffed with sawdust,” but before dolls, stories were but something “imperfect, unsatisfactory, filling her with vague, restless craving for greater completeness of form” (44). It is the doll that gives the imaginings of a child concrete form, and imagination, spurred by literature, that gives life to the doll.

Like Rilke, Burnett believes that it is because dolls lack in themselves the power to satisfy that they ignite the imagination. She compares the dolls of her childhood to those she sees as an adult: “To-day dolls have cheeks and noses and lips and brows, they look smiling or pensive, childlike or sophisticated. At that time (the time of her childhood) no doll was guilty of looking anything at all” (50). This idea is also echoed by Otto Ernst, who, in a curious book I will discuss later, argues that “a plaything has to be

26 This idea is taken up by Pauline Clarke in The Return of the Twelves (1962), a book for children that recounts the story of a boy who accidentally happens upon the Brontës’ toy soldiers and then awakens them back to life from their century of sleep.

27 Throughout the memoir, Burnett refers to her childhood self in the third person. She explains that she seeks to understand and write about the experiences of all children but speaks mostly from the point of view of “the one I knew the best of all” – herself.
incomplete if it is to be satisfactory, and that those very cleverly thought-out toys that leave nothing for the child to do are of no value at all” (24).

But most importantly, perhaps, the creative leap that transforms the limp sack of bran into a living creature, heroine of many adventures, can also offer respite from the harshness of material reality. If the doll teaches us, as Rilke would have it, the inflexibility of the universe, the doll also teaches us how to overcome the limitations of the real through imagination and fantasy. Burnett recalls seeing a little girl put this function of the imagination to great use:

One day, in a squalid London street, I drove by a dirty mite sitting upon a step, cuddling warmly a little bundle of hay tied around the middle with a string. It was her baby. It was probably lily fair and had eyes as blue as heaven, and cooed and kissed her again – but grown up people could not see. (52)

Through this childish power, this “right of entry into fairyland” possessed by all children, the little girl is able to transform the bundle of hay into a love object that both needs and offers comfort (58). It is something the adults would perhaps see as childish delusion – but for the child it holds the power to transform reality. Though the “grown up people” cannot see it – the bundle of hay is for a moment whatever the child needs it to be.

This imaginative power transforms the child’s relationship not only to the doll but to the material world in general. Recalling the important roles played by all the household furniture in her imaginary adventures, Burnett explains how they become so much more than mere objects:

It would seem simply graceless and irreverent to write the names of these delightful objects, as if they were common nouns, without a title to capital letters. They were benevolent friends who lent their aid in the carrying out of all sorts of fascinating episodes, who could be confided in, as it were, and trusted never to laugh when things were going on, however dramatic they might be. (62)
Objects are trusted friends, accomplices in the child’s transformation of experience through imagination. They offer no resistance and allow the child to assert his or her will completely.

The end of childhood is marked by a break in this fluid relationship with material objects. Adulthood ushers in a new way of relating to the world in which our whims and desires are more often rebuffed than magically enacted. This is reflected in doll play as well. As the child enters adulthood, the doll is no longer a figure that enables the child to enact fantasies, literary or otherwise. Adulthood brings with it an acknowledgement of the doll as a manufactured commodity, an acknowledgement that is often expressed, in literature as well as in real life, through the exploratory destruction of such childhood friends. Julie Gouraud evocatively describes this destructive impulse in her Preface to *Memoirs of a Doll*:

And if, urged by that fatal curiosity which lost the whole human race in the person of the first woman, too many little girls unsewed their friend to see what was inside – dreadful inquiry! fear all the errors, all the faults, all the regret occasioned by the desire to know that which we ought not. Fear the results of such a mournful disenchantment! What are our illusions, but the *bran* from which our life takes its tone, its joys, and its pleasures? The veil torn, the illusions vanish. What remains? an empty doll-case. (vii)

For Gouraud, the destruction of the doll functions as both coming of age and original sin. If we think of the young girl’s unsewing of her doll as a sign of emotional maturity in passing from childhood to adulthood, or as a proactive attempt to come to terms with the material world around her and understand what it (and as a consequence we) are made of, then casting this moment as a crime seems like an attempt against intellectual growth – an expression of a patriarchal desire to keep women in an infantilized state of innocence.
Yet if we read further, Gouraud seems to suggest that this search leads not to discovery but only to a disenchantment that makes us sadder though none the wiser. By revalorizing the illusions of doll-play and presenting it as a manifestation of creative power rather than delusion, Gouraud empowers little girls – seeing in their imaginative play the ability to animate the dead matter of the world into life. Destroying the doll is thus like Eve’s original sin in that it banishes the child from the edenic imaginary world and reverts what Hodgson Burnett refers to as “the right of entry into fairyland” (58).

Charles Baudelaire, who similarly puzzles over this “overriding desire of most children to get at and see the soul of their toys” (202, emphasis in the original) in “A Philosophy on Toys,” also considers this a moment of disillusionment. The moment when the child is finally victorious and opens up the toy “is the beginning of melancholy and gloom” (15).

When the doll-girl alliance is not broken violently, it slowly dissolves through the increasing consciousness of the demands of the real brought on by maturity and age. Gouraud’s Memoirs of a Doll, cited above, also includes an example of this when Henrietta, one of the heroines of the story, witnesses the poverty of an actual family. As she sees the poorly-clad children before her, her thoughts are turned to her doll’s relative wealth. She thinks to herself, “Violet, my doll, has nice warm stockings, fur shoes, in fact everything she does not want; but these poor children are almost barefoot” (16). After the incident, Henrietta is persuaded by her mother to sacrifice her doll to a charity raffle hosted by them and the money raised is given to the poor family. Her transition to adulthood is completed as her mother tells her, “instead of doll’s clothes, we will make clothes for poor children this winter” (20). This glimpse into the material reality of the
external world dissolves the imaginary kingdoms of childhood – the little girl has eaten from the tree of knowledge and is now expelled from Eden, just as the spell of fantasy is dissolved by reality when the doll is pulled apart. The doll, which was once a child, mother, companion, literary heroine or friend, is reduced to its material reality – a mere sack of bran or a finely treated lump of wax or a commodity that can be exchanged for money – and the child’s privileged, pseudo-animistic relationship to the material world is severed, seemingly, for good.

What these writers describe in their essays and memoirs would half a century later become one of the central questions guiding psychoanalytic study. With his identification of transitional objects and transitional phenomena,28 D.W. Winnicott shed light not only on the way a child experiences the world but also how relationships with material objects are crucial in the emergence and construction of identity. At the heart of Winnicott’s work is the question of the child’s transition from a world of fantastic omnipotence to a more realistic experience of reality. In infancy, Winnicott argues, there is an overlap between what is experienced and what is desired, leading to a mistaken belief that we obtain just what we desire. We come to believe that we are omnipotent and that the world responds to our desires by adjusting to them. As we grow, we gradually become disillusioned and learn the limitations of our desires. Winnicott therefore presents a narrative of growth that moves from illusion to learning to cope with disillusion through fantasy: “From birth therefore the human being is concerned with the problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of”

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28 These ideas were first put forward in Winnicott’s “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena,” which was published in 1951.
For Winnicott, however, the process is never fully accomplished; “the task of reality acceptance is never completed,” he argues, and “no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality” (269).

Objects, in this case transitional objects, play a crucial role in this gradual disillusionment, but so too does play, which Winnicott sees as existing “in a space somewhere between the interior psychic life governed by magical thinking and wish fulfillment and the external world” (Playing 19). Play is of crucial importance in this process of gradual disillusionment, since it allows us to experience some of that early power and omnipotence without the expectation that it will produce an effect upon the world. “In playing,” he says, “the child manipulates external phenomena in the service of the dream and invests chosen external phenomena with dream meaning and feeling” (Playing 70). But Winnicott is adamant about emphasizing that play, though mostly developed and practiced in childhood, does not leave us in adulthood. This is crucial for, according to Winnicott, it is “in playing, and perhaps only in playing, that the child or adult is free to be creative” (Playing 71). In adulthood, the engagement with illusion that characterized play in childhood continues to be experienced in the form of other creative expressions, such as “art or religion or philosophy” (269).

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29 Winnicott does not provide a definition. Instead, he provides a list of special qualities exhibited between the baby and the transitional object: 1) “the infant assumes rights over the object,” 2) “the object is affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated, 3) “it must never change, unless changed by the infant,” 4) “it must survive instinctual loving, and also hating,” 5) “it must seem to the infant to give warmth, or move, or to have texture, or to do something that seems to show it has a vitality of reality of its own,” “it comes from without from our point of view, but not from the point of view of the baby,” “its fate is to be gradually allowed to be decathected, so that in the course of years it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo” (258-9).
This is a notion with which Stevenson would certainly have agreed. Although in his poem “The Dumb Soldier” Stevenson depicts the child’s creative process with seeming wistful nostalgia, he presents a very different view of the child’s inventive abilities in “Child’s Play,” an essay he wrote for *Cornhill* in 1878. Whereas in his poem, he depicts the child’s special alliance with things and his ability to draw stories from an inanimate object as powerful and perhaps enviable, in his essay, the reliance on objects for creative pursuits is presented as a limitation. “It is, in some ways, but a pedestrian fancy that the child exhibits” (37), Stevenson argues. The child’s reliance on material inspiration or stage props of sorts for play “testifies” for Stevenson “to a defect in the child’s imagination which prevents him from carrying out his novels in the privacy of his own heart” (38). Children must supply with these materials the lack they have in the “stage-wardrobe and scene-room that we call the memory” simply because they cannot act out their fantasies “without some external aid” (38).30

We grown people can tell ourselves a story, give and take strokes until the bucklers ring, ride far and fast, marry, fall, and die; all the while sitting quietly by the fire or lying prone in bed. This is exactly what a child cannot do, or does not do, at least, when he can find anything else. He works all with lay figures and stage properties. When his story comes to the fighting, he must rise, get something by way of a sword and have a set-to with a piece of furniture, until he is out of breath. When he comes to ride with the king’s pardon, he must bestride a chair, which he will so hurry and belabour and on which he will so furiously demean himself, that the messenger will arrive, if not bloody with spurring, at least fiery red with haste. If his romance involves an accident upon a cliff, he must clamber in person about the chest of drawers and fall bodily upon the carpet, before his imagination is satisfied. Lead soldiers, dolls, all toys, in short, are in the same category and answer the same end. (38)

30 In spite of this movement away from the doll-play model of authorship, Stevenson returns to a similar idea in his essay “A Chapter on Dreams,” in which he describes a process of inspiration in which playful brownies visit a man (who we later discover is Stevenson himself) in his sleep. These, he writes, “played upon their stage like children who should have slipped into the house and found it empty” (99) but ultimately provide him with “better tales than he could fashion himself” (100).
The transformation in adulthood that writers like Gouraud and Burnett tend to see as the loss of the ability to animate the material world to enact our fantasies Stevenson sees as the acquisition of the valuable capacity for abstraction. The adult’s imagination remains very much alive, but instead of requiring its fancies and desires to be acted out bodily and materially, they are played out instead in the theater of the mind. That this intellectual creative play can lead to literary output is evident not only from Stevenson’s own profession but also from his statement that the child’s over-reliance on the material “prevents him from carrying out his novels in the privacy of his own heart” (38, emphasis added).³¹

II. Dickens’s Doll-Houses of Fiction

Fiction, and perhaps especially novel, writing thus becomes a kind of literary doll play in which dolls are replaced with characters and the fictional worlds formerly fashioned out of living-room furniture are constructed and developed abstractly in the mind. Like the child at play, the author can use fiction to carry out acts of violence not acceptable in the real world, to enact fantasies prohibited by material limitations, or to repeat and gain control over a traumatic experience. In this sense, every writer of fiction engages in a kind of literary doll play, with characters of his or her own design and outcomes that accord with the writer’s sense of truth or justice. Like child play, too, literary doll-play

³¹ It is possible that Stevenson’s relative disparagement of childhood imagination has to do with his inability to engage in its physical nature as a result of his illness. This limitation may have caused him to rely less on physical enactment and play and to develop a more mature, abstract mind even as a child.
involves not a complete forsaking of material reality but an imaginative relationship to it that can lead to transformation. Of all Victorian writers none embodies the transformative potential of this literary doll play better than Charles Dickens. Dickens creates fictional worlds that are replete with the heavy furnishings of material reality, but that are brought to life like the heavy wooden dolls of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Nutcracker*, recreating within his novels the imaginative relationship with the material world that is enjoyed by the child engaged in doll play.

The connection between Dickens’s work and the world of dolls is already hinted at by G.K. Chesterton in his *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens* (1911). Writing about *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), a Christmas story tellingly subtitled “A Fairy Tale of Home,” G.K. Chesterton characterizes Dickens as a “romantic tramp” observing humanity through the windows of houses:

The Cricket on the Hearth, though popular, I think, with many sections of the great army of Dickensians, cannot be spoken of in any such abstract or serious terms. It is a brief domestic glimpse; it is an interior. It must be remembered that Dickens was fond of interiors as such; he was like a romantic tramp who should go from window to window looking in at the neatness of funny little humanity in its funny little houses, like doll’s houses. To him every house was a box, a Christmas box, in which a dancing human doll was tied up in bricks and slates instead of string and brown paper. He went from one gleaming window to another, looking in at the lamp-lit parlours. Thus he stood for a little while looking in at this cozy if commonplace interior of the carrier and his wife; but he did not stand there very long. He was on his way to quaint towns and villages. Already the plants were sprouting upon the balcony of Miss Tox; and the great wind was rising that flung Mr. Pecksniff against his own front door.\(^{32}\) (20-21)

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\(^{32}\) The balcony and door correspond to *Dombey and Son* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* respectively.
The image painted by Chesterton is a compelling one, but it requires careful consideration both in terms of what he is suggesting about Dickens’s aesthetic as an author and his personal longings as a man.

Dickens’s fondness for doll houses is well recorded. Writing a letter to W.H. Wills in which he describes his search for lodgings during his stay in Lausanne, Dickens is in raptures about the house on which he finally settles. He writes: “[The house] is in the country, though not more than ten minutes’ walk from the post-office, and is the best doll’s-house of many rooms, in the prettiest French grounds, in the most charming situation I have ever seen” (Letters 290, emphasis added). The reasons for his fascination are further developed in an essay he wrote for Household Words, in which he describes the incredible sense of wonder occasioned by a doll-house remembered from childhood.

Ah! The Doll’s house! – of which I was not proprietor, but where I visited. I don’t admire the Houses of Parliament half so much as that stone-fronted mansion with real glass windows, and door-steps, and a real balcony – greener than I ever see now, except at watering places; and even they afford but a poor imitation … there were three distinct rooms in it: a sitting-room and bed-room, elegantly furnished, and best of all, a kitchen, with uncommonly soft fire-irons, a plentiful assortment of diminutive utensils – oh, the warming-pan! – and a tin man-cook in profile, who was always going to fry two fish. (290)

The doll house seems to reunite for Dickens the best of realist detail – seen in the “real glass windows” and “real balcony,” and in the “plentiful assortment of diminutive utensils” – with a perfect idealism that surpasses reality. Even the greenest, most

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33 Dickens had met Wills during his editorship of The Daily News; Wills later worked with Dickens again as sub-editor of Household Words.
34 Even though the narrator seems to assume a different persona, some of the biographical details make him resemble Dickens and suggest that he was using his own observations and possibly some of this own childhood memories.
blossoming balconies in real life are “but a poor imitation” of the doll house’s ideal standard.

Dickens was aware that a similar aesthetic combination characterized his own fiction. As Michael Slater points out, Dickens saw himself as a kind of “fanciful photographer” whose mind was a “highly sensitive plate” that recorded what it saw in minute detail while giving it a “fanciful treatment” that transformed it into something not altogether of this world (11-12). This “fanciful treatment” of reality recalls Baudelaire’s characterization of the childhood toy – “that strange statuary art which, with its lustrous neatness, its blinding flashes of colour, its violence of gesture and decision of contour, represents so well childhood’s ideas about beauty” (198). Like Dickens’s fiction, Baudelaire’s toy shop presents an enhanced microcosm of the world: “Is not the whole of life to be found there in miniature – and far more highly coloured, sparkling and polished than in real life?” (198).

While the doll house image succeeds in capturing Dickens’s authorial aesthetic, it also provides an assessment of a more personal nature. Dickens’s wistful memory of the doll house is colored by nostalgia. His melancholy qualification regarding the childhood doll house – “of which I was not proprietor, but where I visited” – recalls Chesterton’s characterization of Dickens as “romantic tramp” and suggests a connection between Dickens’s personal longing for these glowing domestic interiors and his fond representation of them in his works. Theorizing about the miniature, Steven Millhauser writes that the doll house “invites possession” while paradoxically shutting its admirer out. “Hence the sadness, the secret poignancy, of dollhouses,” he writes: “I want to be
small, I want to pass through the door into the enchanted garden” (135), but instead “we are banished forever” (135). The poignancy of this banishment would perhaps have been felt particularly strongly by Dickens, who saw the day in which he left his home in Chatham at the age of twelve to work at a blacking factory as the day in which he closed the door upon his childhood. This house had been not only the place where he had experienced happy childhood but also the house that contained “that blessed little room” full of adventure books, fairy tales and romances (Stone 56-8).

Dickens’s description of “a tin man-cook in profile, who was always going to fry two fish” presents the doll house as a Victorian domestic version of Keats’s Grecian urn. The doll house captures a moment in time (albeit a rather mundane one) that is forever happening but never lost and that relies on the imagination for being awakened from its material slumber. For Susan Stewart, the doll house represents an impossible ideal – it is “a material allusion to a text which is no longer available to us, or which, because of its fictiveness, never was available to us except through a second-order fictive world” (60). It is perhaps for this reason that the image of the doll house is for Dickens so closely associated with an impossibly idyllic domesticity and is almost compulsively re-constructed in his works of fiction. In Martin Chuzzlewit, the doll house is a symbol of domestic felicity: “Pleasant little Ruth! Cheerful, tidy, bustling, quiet little Ruth!” the narrator begins, “No doll’s house ever yielded greater delight to its young mistress, than little Ruth derived from her glorious dominion over the triangular parlour and the two small bedrooms” (599). Similarly, in Bleak House, the ideal home that Mr. Jarndyce prepares for Esther and Allan Woodcourt is described as a “rustic cottage of doll’s
rooms” (795). Shut out from the doll house of his childhood, Dickens recreates its magical combination of realism and wonder in his doll houses of fiction.

It is in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, however, “A Fairy Tale of Home,” that we find one of his most fully developed doll houses. The idyllic home of the Peerybingles is, as Chesterton points out, a perfect example of the Dickensian doll house. As we, like Chesterton’s romantic tramp, look in on the Peerybingles through the window of their home we are presented with a veritable doll house come alive. Even though, when we first look in, there are no people in sight, the house is alive with movement. The house seems to double as Baudelaire’s childhood toy shop, with all the toys set in motion. There is a “little waxy-faced Dutch clock” (159), whose very description is suggestive of the small wax faces of dolls, and whose boisterous striking seems to alarm the “the convulsive little Haymaker at the top of it, jerking away right and left with a scythe in front of a Moorish Palace” (159). Even the kettle is animated, described at first as “aggravating and obstinate,” refusing to make itself supple in the capable hands of Mrs. Peerybingle but ultimately making up for this by “burst[ing] into a steam of song so cosy and hilarious, as never maudlin nightingale yet formed the least idea of” (161). Employing a kind of child-vision, Dickens transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. Dickens describes something similar in his essay, “A Christmas Tree,” in which he describes his view of the world under the fantastic influence of the Arabian Nights as a child. “Oh, now all common things become uncommon and enchanted to me,” he recalls,

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35 Here, as elsewhere, wax functions as a synecdoche for dolls. Since wax dolls were most popular amongst Victorians, references to wax are often used to elicit images of shallow beauty or of childhood play.
“All lamps are wonderful; all rings are talismans. Common flower-pots are full of treasure, with a little earth scattered on the top” (291).

Within the doll’s house we find Mrs. Peerybingle, “Dot,” who, is both doll-like herself and like a child at play with her dolls. She moves about her home “as briskly busy as a child at play at keeping house” (165) and busying herself with “a very doll of a baby” (164). In her miniaturized embodiment of idealized domesticity, however, she becomes like the doll that dwells in the doll house. Dot is variously referred to as “little Mrs. Peerybingle” (166), the “little mistress” of her home (167), and as Peerybingle’s “little wife” (169). This miniaturization also has the effect of enhancing her domestic qualities. According to Susan Stewart, “Minute description reduces the object to its signifying properties, and this reduction of physical dimensions,” she argues, “results in a multiplication of ideological properties” (47-8). It is not surprising then that Dot’s smallness is often linked to her aptness in domestic matters. For instance, after Dot gets splashed with water as a result of the stubborn kettle’s antics, the narrator tells us that she “with restored good humour, dusted her chubby little hands against each other, and sat down before the kettle, laughing” (160). She also promises to help her husband with his parcels “like a busy bee,” as useful as she is small (165).

Dickens uses a similar mechanism in highlighting Mrs. Chirrup’s domestic abilities in Sketches of Young Couples:

[Mrs. Chirrup] is the prettiest of all little women, and has the prettiest little figure conceivable. She has the neatest little foot, and the softest little voice, and the pleasantest little smile, and the tidiest little curls, and the brightest little eyes, and the quietest little manner, and is, in short, altogether one of the most engaging little women, dead or alive. She is a condensation of all domestic virtues, – a pocket edition of the young man’s best companion, – a little woman at a very
high pressure, with an amazing quantity of goodness and usefulness in an exceedingly small space. Little as she is, Mrs. Chirrup might furnish forth matter for the moral equipment of a score of housewives, six feet high in their stockings. (quoted in Slater, 312)

Mrs. Chirrup is “a condensation of all domestic virtues” that contains “an amazing quantity of goodness and usefulness in an exceedingly small space” (312). This condensation is not additional to her virtue, it seems, but possibly its source, since each of Dickens’s superlatives, “prettiest,” “neatest,” “pleasantest,” “brightest,” and so on, are followed by their being “little.”

Like Mrs. Chirrup, then, Dot Peerybingle amasses great virtues in a small space. To emphasize this, Dickens plays with proportions and scale to render her charmingly diminutive. He has her wear oversized pattens that highlight her littleness and likewise gives her an oversized husband, “a man, much taller and much older than herself, who had to stoop a long way down to kiss her” (163). She is even seemingly dwarfed by a heavy wedding cake which leads to a spectacle of size mismatch, “It weighs I don’t know what – whole hundredweights!’ cried Dot, making a great demonstration of trying to lift it” (168). The effect of this disparity, far from disturbing us with its incongruity is meant to be charming. The narrator tells us as much on a similar occasion: “To have seen little Mrs. Peerybingle come back with her husband, tugging at the clothes-basket, and making the most strenuous exertions to do nothing at all (for he carried it), would have amused you as much as it amused him” (166). More importantly, perhaps, these instances present “little Mrs. Peerybingle” as a doll or figure inside the doll house, unaware that her movements are being carried out by Dickens, the relatively gigantic human who is
playing with her as a character housed in his doll house of fiction, where life is reduced to a more manageable scale.

In presenting Dickens as domestic voyeur, Chesterton highlights the pleasure of viewing which the doll house produces. This is emphasized throughout the first pages of the story, which depict the Peerybingle’s happy domestic circle. As the family creates a still or a tableau of domestic happiness, the narrator draws our attention to this viewing pleasure: “It was pleasant to see Dot,” he begins, “with her little figure, and her baby in her arms: a very doll of a baby.” The narrative gaze then turns to John Peerybingle: “It was pleasant to see him, with his tender awkwardness, endeavouring to adapt his rude support to her slight need.” Then, we take a step backwards and admire the figure of an observer looking on at that very same scene, Tilly Slowboy, who “stood with her mouth and eyes wide open, and her head thrust forward, taking it in as if it were air” (164). Each successive frame only drives us further away from the inviting interior. Like Dickens, we are only permitted to admire the doll house from the outside.

The Peerybingle’s doll-house is not an expression of a perfect world; on the contrary, it is a refuge from a very imperfect and inhospitable world. While it is warm within, outside the scene is very different:

It’s a dark night, sang the kettle, and the rotten leaves are lying by the way; and above, all is mist and darkness, and below, all is mire and clay . . . the wide and open country is a long dull streak of black; and there’s hoar-frost on the finger-post, and thaw upon the track; and the ice it isn’t water, and the water isn’t free; and you couldn’t say that anything is what it ought to be. (161, emphasis added)
It is precisely because nothing is “what it ought to be” that Dickens has created in the Peerybingles’ doll-house an actualized fantasy of “what ought to be.” It is the childish spirit of make believe that transforms the Peerybingles’ modest home and makes it so much more than a mere structure.

The threat to the Peerybingles’ fantastic domestic bliss will come from Tackleton, the toy-making ogre, whose strongest weapon is his refusal to believe in the Peerybingles’ doll-house of domestic bliss. “Bah! What’s home?” he cries, “Four walls and a ceiling” (176). In failing to recognize their home as anything more than “Four walls and a ceiling,” it seems, Tackleton risks their home becoming just that. Dot and the Carrier believe in home, and in the fantastic setting of Dickens’s story, belief has the ability, to some degree, to make it so. Tackleton will also threaten to dissolve the Peerybingle household when, seeing Dot secretly speaking to the stranger they have been letting a room to in their home, he assumes that Dot is having an affair and persuades John of the same. The stranger turns out to be John’s returned son and Dot’s conspiring, we discover, was only an attempt to surprise her husband with the happy news.

“Chirp the Second,” the story’s following chapter, takes us into another fictional home that has been created as an antidote to the real world; this home belongs to Caleb Plummer, the poor toy maker, and his blind daughter, Bertha. So that Bertha’s “deprivation might be almost changed into a blessing” (183), Caleb takes advantage of his daughter’s blindness to keep her ignorant about their poverty and the real squalor of their lives. He replaces the lurid reality with alternative fantasy world in which he wears a bright blue coat instead of a garment made from a sack, where he has a quick and happy
step, instead of a tired limp, and in which Tackleton, the toy merchant for whom they work, is a benevolent patron whose gruff manners are a mere pretence. Caleb’s core deception, however, and the one that Dickens describes most fully, concerns their home, which is described as “a little cracked nutshell of a wooden house, which was, in truth, no better than a pimple on the prominent red-brick nose of Gruff and Tackleton” (182). Caleb chooses to inhabit this dreary place alone, while his daughter, Bertha, lives deluded in “an enchanted home of Caleb’s furnishing, where scarcity and shabbiness were not, and trouble never entered” (182). If the Peerybingles’ home is a manifestation of the transformative powers of fancy, Caleb and Bertha’s dramatizes the struggles of the creator of fictions who attempts to create an alternative, fictional reality. Unfortunately, this fantasy relies on Bertha’s ignorance:

The Blind Girl never knew that ceilings were discoloured, walls blotched and bare of plaster here and there, high crevices unstopped and widening every day, beams mouldering and tending downward. The Blind Girl never knew that iron was rusting, wood rotting, paper peeling off; the size, the shape, and true proportion of the dwelling withering away. The Blind Girl never knew that ugly shapes of delf and earthenware were on the board; that sorrow and faintheartedness were in the house; that Caleb’s scanty hairs were turning greyer and more grey, before her sightless face. (182-3)

This emphasis on what “The Blind Girl never knew” highlights the fact that Caleb’s undertaking is based on deceit and presents it as problematic.

Bertha’s, however, is not the only “enchanted home” that Caleb has fabricated. Like Dickens, Caleb is a maker of doll houses – fictional houses – by profession. Caleb spends much of this time making homes for “Dolls of all stations in life” (183). Together with Bertha he makes “Suburban tenements for Dolls of moderate means; kitchens and single apartments for Dolls of the lower classes; capital town residences for Dolls of high
In creating this toy microcosm, Caleb and Bertha give the fictional world an order that is lacking from the real world:

There were houses in it, finished and unfinished, for Dolls of all stations in life. Suburban tenements for Dolls of moderate means; kitchens and single apartments for Dolls of the lower classes; capital town residences for Dolls of high estate. Some of these establishments were already furnished according to estimate, with a view to the convenience of Dolls of limited income; others could be fitted on the most expensive scale, at a moment’s notice, from whole shelves of chairs, tables, sofas, bedsteads, and upholstery. The nobility and gentry, and public in general, for whose accommodation these tenements were designed, lay, here and there, in baskets, starting straight up at the ceiling; but in denoting their degrees in society, and confining them to their respective stations, (which experience proves to be lamentably difficult in real life), the makers of these Dolls had far improved on Nature, who is often forward and perverse; for they, not resting on such arbitrary marks as satin, cotton-print, and bits of rag, had superadded striking personal differences which allowed of no mistake. (183)

These dolls create a place of friction between the real and the ideal as it becomes clear that the fantasies that dolls help produce come from very real and often grim places. This friction is explored by Mayhew, in his *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), where he demonstrates over and over again the bleak places in which many of London’s pleasures are made, and, more specifically, in the case of dolls, by George Dodd in his “Dolls” article for *Household Words*. “There are dolls for the little lady and dolls for the little peasant” Dodd writes, “the former made of some material requiring taste and tact in its production, the latter made of unmistakable wood” (352). But of course, those who actually make the dolls could never afford to play with one; “Little girls would look sad to learn what a small fractional part of a penny a woman receives for stuffing a pair of arms,” he writes (353).

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36 Here Dickens seems to be rehearsing the tendency that Jenny Wren will later be known for in *Our Mutual Friend* of referring to the dolls themselves as paying customers rather than as the commodities being purchased.
37 Among others, Mayhew interviews makers of doll’s eyes and Punch and Judy men.
The same is true of Caleb and Bertha. Not only can they not afford the toys they make, but they also lack the very things they are responsible for giving them, so that the dolls end up becoming an expression of their deepest desires. Ironically, doll-making puts Caleb and Bertha in a strangely god-like position. Even though they have so little control over their own lives, they become the architects of the grand (and sometimes cheerfully modest) lives of these miniature others. Taking a piece of wood into their hands, they decide whether to carve a body for poverty or nobility; taking a piece of cloth, they decide whether it is destined to adorn the head of a rich lady or to warm her servant. As toy-makers, Caleb and Bertha manipulate materiality and seal its fate in the same way as authors determine their characters’ fates. Theirs, however, is but a stilted doll play that only replicates and reifies the material conditions of the real world.

At one point the narrator describes Caleb and Bertha at work: Bertha, “busy as a Doll’s dressmaker; Caleb painting and glazing the four-pair front of a desirable family mansion” (184). Bertha makes dresses for dolls that she could never afford to wear and whose beauty she has not the sight to admire. Caleb works away at perfecting “a desirable family mansion” while he sits in his “little cracked nutshell of a wooden house” (182). Most importantly, Bertha, though blind, gives the dolls their sight. Caleb is conscious of this irony and expresses it early in the story when John, the carrier, delivers him a box full of doll’s eyes.38 “I wish it was her own sight in a box, John . . . To think

38 Mayhew writes about dolls’ eye-makers in one of the articles collected in London Labour and the London Poor (1851). The dolls’ eye-maker was taken up by many writers as an example of the shocking discrepancy between the poverty of those who worked in the toy-making industry and the wealth of its intended consumers. Dickens would very likely have been aware of this discussion since George Dodd wrote about it for Household Words in 1851 in an article simply entitled “Dolls.”
that she should never see the Dolls – and them a-staring at her, so bold, all day long!

That’s where it cuts” (173). 39

Though they work together, Caleb and Bertha are not equal partners in this fantastic enterprise. Bertha works under false pretences, which makes her more like a doll made and manipulated by Caleb than a doll-maker. This becomes evident when Caleb finally confesses his deceptions to her:

The world you live in, heart of mine, doesn’t exist as I have represented it. The eyes you have trusted in, have been false to you. . . I have altered objects, changed the characters of people, invented things that never have been, to make you happier. I have had concealments from you, put deceptions on you, God forgive me! and surrounded you with fancies. (222)

Caleb’s articulation of his deception reveals him as an authorial figure; he has “altered objects, changed the characters of people, invented things that never have been” for the sake of giving others pleasure and happiness. Caleb seems to embody Dickens’s belief “that Fancy had the power to compensate for disappointment in life, loneliness and failure” (Fancy 21). In his “Preliminary Words,” a kind of editorial manifesto published on the very first issue of Household Words on March 30, 1850, Dickens argues that we must all, rich or poor, “cherish that light of fancy which is inherent in the human breast” (143). He argues that fancy has a transformative power and that “in all familiar things, even those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find out” (105). If anything, fancy is especially important for the poor, “to teach the hardest

39 This image echoed (with an eerie twist) in Our Mutual Friend with the death of Jenny’s father: “and there, in the midst of dolls with no speculation in their eyes, lay Mr. Dolls with no speculation in his” (712).
workers at this whirling wheel of toil, that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact, excluded from the sympathies and graces of the imagination” (143).

This idea that “that Fancy can actually transform the dreary and mundane, even painful or depressing, reality, into something rich and strange” (Slater 22) is a guiding principle for many of Dickens’s characters and leads to the construction of many an “enchanted home.” In another of Dickens’s Christmas stories, “The Poor Relation’s Story,” Michael, the poor relation of the title, transforms in his imagination his poor lodgings in Clapham road into a veritable “Castle” – a “very comfortable house” that is presented as “quite a picture of home” (21). We are likewise reminded of Wemmick’s “castle,” which protects him and the “aged P” from the harshness of reality. It is also possible that there is an element of self-mockery in these architects of “enchanted homes.” Doris Alexander argues this to be the case, at least, in Dickens’s depiction of Mr. Pocket’s pursuit of domestic felicity in Great Expectations. Alexander contends that “Dickens poked fun at the discrepancy between his marital misery and his fame as a celebrator of domestic joys” (136). Caleb Plummer, fabricator of fictional homes, I would argue, similarly seems to ironize Dickens’s own creation of novelistic domestic bliss.

Like an author, Caleb Plummer has created a fictitious world unlike the real world for the enjoyment of his daughter. This resemblance between Dickens, the character-maker, and Caleb, the toy-maker is (possibly unwittingly) represented in R.W. Buss’s 1870 unfinished painting “Dickens’s Dream.” The watercolor depicts Dickens at his desk in Gad’s Hill, surrounded by his characters, who appear as miniature people around him, animated and seemingly playing out various scenes from his novels. This depiction of
Dickens and his characters is very much reminiscent of the way in which Richard Doyle had depicted Caleb with Bertha amongst his toy creations in 1845. Although it was quite common for Doyle to illustrate miniature vignettes representing scenes from Dickens’s novels in his frontispieces, this particular plate highlights the connection between the toy creations sitting on the ground next to Caleb below and the character creations floating above him in a state of animation.

Of course, if toy-making is equated to fiction-making in *The Cricket*, we must also consider Tackleton, the actual owner of the business that employs Caleb, as a potential creative figure. Significantly, while Caleb is called a toy *maker*, throughout the story, Tackleton is described instead as a toy *merchant*, suggesting that he is more interested in making money than in crafting beautiful toys. But Tackleton is not completely devoid of creativity, it only seems to be of a different kind. He is first introduced to us as the “domestic Ogre, who had been living on children all his life, and was their implacable enemy” (174). He does not make toys to please children; on the contrary, he sees toys as a way of funneling his frightening and grotesque fantasies into their innocent young minds. He not only despises all toys but delights, we are told, “in his malice, to insinuate grim expressions into the faces of brown-paper farmers... and other samples of his stock in trade” (174). Where Caleb draws inspiration from the world for his artistic creations and then improves upon it, reality is hardly nasty enough for Tackleton, who must make it more dreadful still. We see this, for instance, when Caleb is admiring the figure of the stranger staying with the Peerybingle and considers him as an inspiration for one of this creations: “A beautiful figure for a nutcracker; quite a new
model. With a screw-jaw opening down into his waistcoat, he’d be lovely‖ (178), and, later, “what a model! Unscrew his head to put the matches in; turn him heels up’ards for the light; and what a firebox for a gentleman’s mantel-shelf, just as he stands!” (178).  

Tackleton, who is only interested in depicting the ugliest and the scariest, dismisses the idea, “Not half ugly enough!” he retorts, storming off (178).  

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40 In the very same essay in which Dickens sings praise to the queer charm of the doll-house, he also talks about some other toys with very different feelings. He describes “that infernal snuff-box, out of which there sprang a demoniacal Counsellor in a black gown” and which he feared might “suddenly, in a highly magnified state, to fly out of Mammoth Snuff-boxes in dreams, when least expected.” And though he is not frightened by a “cardboard lady in a blue-silk skirt, who was stood up against the candlestick to dance,” “the larger cardboard man” with “a sinister expression in that nose of his” he considers “ghastly, and not a creature to be alone with” (289). These figures resemble the figures imagined by Caleb quite closely, and may therefore have been the inspiration for the toys described in this passage.  

41 In using toys to represent the ugliest rather than the best of society, Tackleton seems to represent Dickens’s perception of Thackeray at his satirical worst. Even in his moving obituary for Thackeray Dickens could not help but point out their “differences of opinion”: “I thought that he too much feigned a want of earnestness,” Dickens wrote, “and that he made a pretence of under-valuing his art, which was not good for the art that he held in trust” (Shillingsburg).
Figure 3. “Dickens’ Dream” by R. W. Buss. Painting depicting Dickens at his desk at Gad’s Hill surrounded by his characters.
Figure 4. “Chirp the Second” by Richard Doyle. Wood engraving. Full-page illustration for Dickens's *The Cricket on the Hearth*. Scanned image and text by Philip V. Allingham.
Although Caleb’s view of fiction is presented as infinitely preferable to Tackleton’s satirical view, as authorial figure and architect of “enchanted homes,” Caleb is presented as a failure. Although Caleb’s fictions are ostensibly designed to make his daughter happy and to shield her from the sadness of reality, they put Bertha in a position of ignorance, often causing her to inadvertently speak or act foolishly. Writing about the role of the imagination in the works of Dickens, Robert Higbie reads *The Cricket on the Hearth* as Dickens’s critique of his own use of the imagination in his previous works. Although the story does suggest that we can “transform reality through the imagination,” Higbie argues, Dickens is much more ambivalent than in his earlier works about the powers of imagination (71). Caleb’s is “a mistaken use of imagination” (71) because it relies on turning a blind eye to reality rather than facing it and transforming it.

The most damning evidence against Caleb’s mode of fiction-making is in the narrative resolution of Bertha’s character. Bertha falls in love with the Tackleton that her father has invented for her and is consequently humiliated by the real Tackleton, who is instead courting the young May. May possesses the very things that Bertha lacks but is fated to create in her dolls: sight\(^{42}\) and a doll-like beauty. Caleb unintentionally makes the differences between them clear when he describes May’s beauty to Bertha: “There’s not a Doll’s in all the room to equal it, said Caleb. And her eyes! – ” (190). Although Caleb checks himself soon enough to catch the insensitivity of the comparison, the point has already been made. Even if Tackleton were not courting May, however, the Tackleton

\(^{42}\) Although, as critics such as Elisabeth Gitter have argued, the story suggests that Bertha’s blindness opens her up to a deeper kind of perception, this never brings any benefit to Bertha, while the consequences of being deceived are, as we shall soon see, very real.
that Bertha has fallen in love with is the fictional character that her father has created, not the man himself. There is therefore no possibility for mutual affection between them as people. At the end of the story, everyone couples up and lives happily ever after. Bertha, however, as Elizabeth Gitter points out, is excluded from this bliss. In the closing scene of the story all the couples dance while Bertha plays for them, unable to join since she is lacking a partner. Caleb’s creation of a fictional “enchanted home” from Bertha has prevented her from creating one of her own in reality.

Indeed, part of the problem is that Caleb is a dreamer who neglects reality. He is first introduced as having “a wandering and thoughtful eye which seemed to be always projecting itself into some other time and place, no matter what he said; a description which will equally apply to his voice” (172). Later, when he is addressed by John Peerybingle, he acts as though he were awaking from a reverie, “with the distraught air of someone who was casting about for the Philosopher’s stone, at least” (172). These descriptions depict Plummer as a Romantic and an idealist, but they also present him as someone who is more interested in fancy than reality. Caleb is so invested in this game of make believe he has been playing all his life that he no longer seems to be able to distinguish truth from fantasy himself: “How could the little man be otherwise than bewildered, after labouring for so many years to destroy his own identity, and that of all the objects that had any bearing on it!” (186).

Not only has Caleb been blind to the effects of his fictions, but worse still, he has used his daughter’s blindness to allow him to project onto her his fantasies, reducing her to a manipulated doll. While Caleb chooses to live in a world of fantasy over the real
world, he does not allow Bertha that choice. As Elisabeth Gitter has pointed out, Bertha’s blindness is crucial to Caleb’s fantasies. “The blind girl,” she says, functions as “the perfect mirror” giving him “the power of self-invention” (684). Thanks to her blindness, Caleb can “create himself for her” (684) and become who he truly wants to be at the expense of her knowledge, and to some degree, her agency. As a receptacle for Caleb’s fantasies, Bertha is thus more of a doll than a doll-maker, toyed and played with to enact a fantasy that is not of her own design.

II: Dickens’s Galatea: Creating the Doll in the Doll’s House

Dickens returns to the thematization of literary doll play in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). As several critics have pointed out, *Our Mutual Friend*, though vastly panoramic and intricately interconnected, can be divided into roughly two parts: the river story, whose central characters are Lizzie Hexam, Eugene Wrayburn, and Jenny Wren; and the dust heaps story, involving Bella Wilfer, the Boffins, and, of course, the mutual friend who connects them all, John Harmon. Each of these parts also reprises an issue introduced but not resolved in *The Cricket*, namely the doll-maker as authorial figure with the character of Jenny Wren and the question of (gendered) manipulation with the doll-like Bella Wilfer. This section addresses the question of Bella Wilfer, whose transformation into the doll in the doll house of fiction complicates the dynamics of authorial doll play by exploring some of the gendered repercussions of its manipulation.
If Dickens’s domestic ideal could be represented by the doll’s house, it is also possible to argue that this feminine ideal was of the animated doll within the doll’s house. Although he doesn’t specifically identify them as doll-like figures, Michael Slater argues that characters like Dot Peerybingle, Ruth Pinch and Bella Wilfer (after her transformation, of course) “represented [for Dickens] the feminine ideal more truly satisfactorily” than any other kind of woman (238). These women, he writes, are “obviously the result of masculine wish-fulfillment (a variant of the standard mother/mistress fantasy)” (238). Even though Slater presents a nuanced understanding of Dickens’s representations of women in his works, and the possible influences of his own relationships with the women in his life, he does not deny that they are problematic. One of the examples he cites as particularly troubling is that of Mrs. Belltott, who appears in *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* (1857), a novella Dickens wrote in collaboration with Wilkie Collins:

She was a little saucy woman, with a bright pair of eyes, rather a neat little foot and figure, and rather a neat little turned-up nose. The sort of young woman . . . who appeared to invite you to give her a kiss, and who would have slapped your face if you accepted the invitation . . . Being the *kind of neat little woman it was natural to make a toy of* – I never saw a woman so like a toy in my life – she had got the plaything name of Belltott. (358, emphasis added)

Mrs. Belltott shares with Mrs. Chirrup – the “little woman at a very high pressure” – a toy-like smallness and also a doll-like neatness. These doll-like characters, I wish to argue, are to actual women what doll houses are to actual houses – miniaturized, idealized versions of reality, nostalgic for an ideal that never was. But these characters’
doll-like nature also makes them vulnerable to being made a toy of, played with and manipulated to enact a masculine ideal.

The idea that Dickens would use the image of the doll to represent his feminine ideal is somewhat counter-intuitive. As human-like forms that lack humanity, dolls would appear to encapsulate one of Dickens’s greatest concerns: the mechanization or thingification of human beings. Throughout his novels, Dickens plays with these boundaries, making people like things and animating things into life. This confusion is particularly noticeable in *Our Mutual Friend*. Indeed, the novel opens with this very consideration as Gaffer Hexam argues that it is impossible to steal from a corpse (things cannot own other things). What is living and what is dead, what is animate and what is not, is never completely clear. John Harmon is a living dead man, while Rogue Riderhood and Eugene at different points oscillate between the two worlds. Jenny Wren seems to make a game of this border-crossing between life and death when she frames her invitation for Riah to join her and Lizzie at her rooftop garden, by enjoining him to “Come back and be dead” (279).

The novel also displays a confusion between people and things. Twemlow is for several pages referred to as a piece of furniture, and, for a while, the Boffins, failing to see any resemblance between John Harmon and a writing desk, are puzzled by his self-designation as a secretary. Lady Tippins, who is in the habit of being “dyed and varnished” (122) for special occasions, is such a confusing amalgam of person and thing

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43 See, for instance, Dorothy van Ghent’s chapter on Dickens in *The English Novel: Form and Function* and Owen Knowles’s “Veneering and the age of Veneer: a Source and Background for *Our Mutual Friend*.”
that “you might scalp her, and peel her, and scrape her, and make two Lady Tippinses out of her, and yet not penetrate to the genuine article” (122). Miss Peecher’s status is equally suspect – she is “A little pincushion, a little housewife, a little book, a little workbox, a little set of tables and weights and measures, and a little woman, all in one” (219). Bradley Headstone, who fails to notice the hybrid Miss Peecher, is himself named after the stone that marks the burial spot for a corpse and is at one point in the novel described as a mechanical warehouse (218). This kind of ambiguity is present with the more agreeable characters as well. When John Harmon (then Rokesmith) first encounters Sloppy, he finds himself “in doubt whether he was a man, boy, or what” (199). Even Jenny Wren is first introduced to us with similar ambiguity as “a child – a dwarf – a girl – a something” (222). Jenny Wren’s child-father is “Mr. Dolls” while Jenny’s dolls are referred to as “ladies.” People are like animated dolls and dolls are referred to as people.

While in some instances Dickens’ objectification of his characters is playful, in other instances, a person’s proximity to thinghood is presented as a sign of a failure to be human in some important regard. Such is the case with the Veneerings and Lady Tippins, and, for a significant part of the novel, one might argue, such is the case, too, with Bella Wilfer. Bella may strike us as more materialistic than material, but the two are very much linked. Bella is a self-confessed “mercenary wretch” (318) fully conscious of her fixation on attaining material wealth. Money matters, for her, are very much what makes up the real world. Where Jenny Wren escapes to her rooftop garden and smells imaginary flowers even though hers is not a flowery neighborhood, Bella has her feet planted firmly
on realist ground. She dismisses the stuff of fairy tales: “Talk to me of fiery dragons! But talk to me of poverty and wealth, and there indeed we touch upon realities” (318).

Although her materialism does not in itself render her object-like, her drive for material comforts eventually leads her to think of herself as a commodity. John Harmon is concerned that if he reveals his identity to Bella and then marries her he would be haunted by the consciousness of having “purchased her . . . as a Sultan buys a slave” (367). Bella echoes this concern a few pages later when she asks, “Am I forever to be made the property of strangers?” (371). Mr. Boffin, albeit while pretending to be a miser for Bella’s edification, likewise remarks, “This young lady was looking about the market for a good bid. She wasn’t in it to be snapped up by fellows that had no money to lay out; nothing to buy with” (578). Bella is like many a haughty doll from children’s doll tales, who looks in disdain from behind the shop windows at anyone who admires but cannot afford to purchase her.

Through John Harmon and Noddy Boffin’s elaborate ploys, Bella is transformed. She suddenly abandons all material ambitions and becomes Harmon’s doll-child-bride. Bella’s attempts at any housekeeping arrangements present her more like a girl playing house than an actual woman keeping house. Her cooking, for instance, is an ineffectual but “pleasant cookery” that consists of doing things like “giving the unfortunate fowls an extra spin, which made their chance of ever getting cooked exceedingly doubtful” (447). Bella is described as forever “playfully setting herself about the task” without ever

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44 A good example of this appears in Mrs. Castle Smith’s *Victoria Bess: The Ups and Downs of a Doll’s Life*, which I discuss in Chapter 3.
successfully completing it, but looking lovely all along. Bella’s charm, as Lizzie Hexam pinpoints, consists in her appearing “at once so womanly and so childish” (516).

Bella’s description of her household once she marries John Harmon further supports the notion that she has become the doll in Harmon’s doll house. She tells her mother and sister, “we live on Blackheath, in the charm–ingest of dolls’ houses, de–lightfully furnished, and we have a clever little servant who is de–cidedly pretty, and we are economical and orderly, and do everything by clockwork. . .” (663). In fact, when Bella and John have a child, her maternal interactions with it are presented as an extension of her doll play as a child.

It was charming to see Bella contemplating this baby, and finding out her own dimples in that tiny reflection, as if she were looking in the glass without the personal vanity. Her cherubic father justly remarked to her husband that the baby seemed to make her younger than before, reminding him of the days when she had a pet doll and used to talk to it as she carried it about. (736)

Far from guiding Bella towards maturity, her doll-child seems to be but a reflection of her childish self that highlights her childishness even further. Nobody, we are told, could have been “dressed and undressed as often in four-and-twenty hours as Bella dressed and undressed this baby” (736).

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45 Here Bella’s language resembles that of Dot Peerybingle when she talks about her baby: “Two months and three da-ays! Vaccinated just six weeks ago-o! Took very fine-ly! Considered, by the doctor, a remarkably beautiful chi-ild! Equal to the general run of children at five months o-old! Takes notice, in a way quite won-der-ful! May seem impossible to you, but feels his legs al-ready!” (171).

46 Indeed, it is not necessary for the child to be born to bring out Bella’s childish nature, since she treats her father like a doll as well, “accustomed as she ever had been to make a plaything of her good father” (669) combing his hair and in one instance putting him in unusual garb and playing at having tea.
Bella is a kind of Galatea to Dickens’s Pygmalion. According to the myth, it is Pygmalion’s hatred of actual women that causes him to create his statue. Edith Hamilton recounts the origin of the story as follows:

A gifted young sculptor from Cyprus, named Pygmalion, was a woman-hater. Detesting the faults beyond measure which nature had given to women, he resolved never to marry. His art, he told himself, was enough for him. Nevertheless, the statue he made and devoted all his genius to was that of a woman. Either he could not dismiss what he so disapproved of from his mind as easily as from his life, or else he was bent on forming a perfect woman and showing men the deficiencies of the kind they had to put up with. (108)

Although it seems excessive to accuse Dickens of being a woman-hater, it is true that, at least in literature, he held a high standard for women, and could be cruel to the characters that fell short of that ideal. Critics have done much to elucidate his conflicted relationship with the women in his personal life, particularly his distancing from his wife, Catherine, and his disillusionment with his earlier love, Maria Beadnell. Even without recourse to biographical details, we can assert that Dickens saw literature as a way of redressing the shortcomings of reality and that women would not have been excluded from this rule. Dickens not only compulsively sketches idealized doll houses to make up for his own disappointing domestic life, but he also fills those houses with idealized doll-women superior to all the real women he had ever known.

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47 It is worth noting that the story of Pygmalion and Galatea was frequently revisited in Victorian literature. For more on the subject see Gail Marshall’s Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth.

48 Another important archetype to consider is that of Olympia in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “The Sandman.” Although, as a life-sized automaton doll, Olympia may seem like a better parallel, she was created by Spalanzani not because of a disappointment with women, but as a result of his desire to make a mockery of life by perfectly recreating it.
But Dickens’s enterprise is marked by the same irony that J. Hillis Miller points out in *Pygmalion’s*: “To make up for women who have become painted ladies with hearts of stone,” he writes, “*Pygmalion* fashions another painted lady out of another hard, inanimate substance” (3). In the case of Dickens, frustrated with the thingified likes of Lady Tippins, he creates his doll-like characters as a solution, though ironically, they too are made of “another hard, inanimate substance.” But as Hillis Miller argues, what matters most about the myth is the materialization of fantasy. In Bella, Dickens is able to materialize his fantasy of the ideal woman, just as *Pygmalion* is able to do in Galatea. The story then uses prosopopoeia to “give life to the inanimate in a dream come true” so that Galatea is in fact “the mirror image of [Pygmalion’s] desire” (4).

Thus Bella is shaped in two ways. On the one hand she is created as a character by Dickens, “the mirror image of [his] desire,” and then, within the novel, she is shaped by John Harmon and Noddy Boffin, who reform her from “mercenary” woman to ideal doll-wife. Bella not only ceases to care for material things (and therefore ceases to think of herself as a commodity) but she also comes to believe in fairy tales, which her realism had prevented her from doing before. Bella’s new belief is evidenced in her declaration to John that his wishes for her are as good as come true because his wishes are better than any thing that could be wished for. When John asks Bella whether she wouldn’t prefer to life in a large house with a comfortable income, she responds:

> I shouldn’t like it for its own sake, half so well as such a wish for it. Dear John, your wishes are as real to me as the wishes in the Fairy story, that were all.

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49 The fact that “*Pygmalion* is Galatea’s fathering maker as well as her husband” (10) likewise likens him to Dickens, who was not only the creative maker of many of these infantile doll-women but who also usually paired them in his novels with older men who were more like paternal figures and guardians to them than husbands.
fulfilled as soon as spoken. Wish me everything that you can wish for the woman you dearly love, and I have as good as got it, John. I have better than got it, John! (665)

Thus concludes the fairy-tale and the Bella doll comes to life – like a Galatea that has been shaped out of the joint fantasies of John Rokesmith and Mr. Boffin but also like Pinocchio, whose reward for learning what it means to be a good boy is that his wish of being one becomes granted. The Bella doll, the Bella that “knew her price,” comes alive and becomes a person.

Bella’s transformation at the hands of Dickens, via Boffin and John Harmon, is so problematic that some critics, such as Syd Thomas, have been tempted to interpret this doll-ification as a conscious criticism on Dickens’s part. Thomas argues that by the end of the novel, Mrs. Rokesmith is “domesticated” and “will-less” and that she has become precisely what she sought to avoid, “an articulated doll in a doll’s house” (8). Thomas’s argument carries special weight when considered in light of the various other negative portrayals of articulation that take place in the novel. The Lammles have attempted to articulate Georgiana Podsnap by making her into their puppet and it is only after Mr. Venus has agreed that he will limit his craft “to the articulation of men, children and the lower animals” – as Thomas notes, not women – that Pleasant Riderhood agrees to be his wife. As Thomas points out, “women in the novel experience masculine courtship as a sometimes subtle, though not always, coercive “articulation” of their feminine wills into obedience, worship, docility and “death” (6).

In support of Thomas’s argument, one might also add that Dickens had already been critical of the male attempt to reform a woman in David Copperfield. When David
attempts to transform his “child-wife” into a woman, it is of David that Dickens is critical rather than of Dora, silly though she is. As his aunt Betsey Trotwood reminds David, when he asks her to aid him in his reform, it is his duty “to estimate her (as [he] chose her) by the qualities she has, and not by the qualities she may not have.” And though David holds for a while the hope that a child’s “lighter hands” would better “help to mould her character” (704) he finally realizes that “it would have been better to have done nothing, than to have tried to form my little wife’s mind” (702).

The dangers of this manipulation are already introduced with Dickens’s first doll-maker, Caleb Plummer, who uses his blind daughter Bertha as a receptacle onto which he can project his fantasies about himself, their home, and their lives. Dickens, I would argue, admires the doll in the doll’s house, but is wary of the kind of objectification and manipulation that threatens to turn innocent play into a sinister game. Bella’s declaration, therefore, that she wishes “to be something so much worthier than the doll in the doll’s house” (663) should be read as evidence that Dickens ultimately resists the temptation of reducing her to a mere puppet in John and Boffins’s plot, but makes it possible for her to develop her own agency and identity within her doll-house of fiction. For a more complete sense of Dickens’s rehabilitation of the doll-maker as authorial figure, however, we must turn to Jenny Wren. She alone is able to facilitate transformation without becoming guilty of manipulative toying.
IV. Jenny’s Transformative Doll-Play

Writing about the theme of artistic regeneration of waste in *Our Mutual Friend*, Nancy Aycock-Metz argues that “there is no artist-hero whose expanding perceptions guide us through the world of the novel” (61). Instead, she argues, the novel presents a “splintering of the artist’s role” so that Dickens might “explore more fully the ways in which the imagination is called into play in everyday life” (62). While I agree that the novel’s panoramic scope permits for the figure of the regenerative artist to be refracted into a variety of different characters and sub-plots, most notably Venus’s articulation of “human warious,” I would argue that Dickens does offer a centralized artistic figure in the character of Jenny Wren.

Jenny’s transformative powers are crystallized in her doll-dressing, which involves the creation of beautiful, fanciful objects out of mere scraps. As Riah explains to Fledgeby on the rooftop garden, “Our waste goes to the best company, sir, on her rosy-cheeked little customers. They wear it in their hair, and on their ball-dresses, and even (so she tells me) are presented at Court with it” (278). For Jenny, the disorder and chaos of material reality, the bits and scraps that make up the world, are not an enemy to fantasy but its raw material. Dickens’s decision to switch from a toy maker to a doll’s dress-maker may in part have been driven by the realities of the doll industry. By the time Dickens was writing *Our Mutual Friend*, dolls were being mass-produced\(^5\) so that it was

\(^5\) The doll industry was marked by great specialization and division of labor. Some workers would only stuff limbs, while others would only paint eye brows or dip molds into molten wax. Doll millinery, however, particularly for luxurious dolls, could be a highly creative endeavor. Indeed, some of the
quite often in the making of their garments that the most imaginative work was required. But this decision has other important consequences. Whereas Caleb “not resting on such arbitrary marks as satin, cotton-print, and bits of rag, had superadded striking personal differences which allowed of no mistake” (183) in determining the social status of his figures, in effect sealing their fate by imprinting the markers of class on their bodies, Jenny gives her dolls their identities through their clothing. The fact that she relocates identity in changeable material appurtenances that have the potential to transform and to be transformed, signals an important departure from Caleb’s fettered play.

Another consequence of this shift is that it brings Jenny even closer to Dickens, who, as critics such as Malcolm Andrews have noted, often constructs his characters from the outside in. Andrews cites a wonderful passage from Sketches by Boz (1836) in which Dickens presents clothes as powerful carriers of meaning and identity. Boz recounts an excursion to Monmouth Street, where second-hand clothes were sold, and describes how these used clothes revealed the identities of their former owners to him and his companions:

> We love to walk among these extensive groves of the illustrious dead, and to indulge in the speculations to which they give rise; now fitting a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat, upon some being of our own conjuring up, and endeavouring, from the shape and fashion of the garment itself, to bring its former owner before our mind’s eye. (75)

The clothes bear the marks of the identity and the life of the person who wore them. In one instance, Boz writes, “the man’s whole life was written as legibly on those clothes, as garments worn by some luxury dolls were said to rival the most elegant garments worn by elegant ladies and Parisiennes.
if we had his autobiography engrossed on parchment before us‖ (75). From heaps of dead clothes, Boz can conjure up the image of the living man who wore them. Jenny Wren reverses this process, giving her dolls their identities and bringing them to life through the garments that she makes for them. It is Jenny’s choice of fabric, cut, and trimmings that determines whether a doll is to be a lady, a pauper or a priest. This point is emphasized when Jenny shows Riah the toy-shop window which displays “a dazzling semi-circle of dolls in all the colours of the rainbow” which, as Jenny brags, have all been dressed by her. The dolls are “dressed for presentation at court, for going to balls, for going out driving, for going out on horseback, for going out walking, for going to get married, for going to help other dolls get married, for all the gay events of life” (430, emphasis added).

Jenny’s dolls also seem, like Dickens’s more broadly-sketched characters, to represent traits or characteristics rather than full-fledged, psychologically complex individuals. Henry James, who had paid Dickens the dubious compliment of calling him “the greatest of superficial novelists” (quoted in Andrews 72) declared that in his characters, Dickens “created nothing but figures” (quoted in Andrews 73). Even Chesterton, who clearly held Dickens in high regard, described his characters, in an extension of his doll house metaphor, as “dancing human doll[s]” (21). Jenny is not only a maker of human dolls – her so-called “ladies” – but also has a tendency to make them represent particular characteristics. This is evident in “Mrs. T.,” who, as her name suggests, stands for capital-“T” truth. When Bradley Headstone tries to wheedle himself into Jenny’s good esteem, Jenny brings in “Mrs. Truth. The Honorable. Fully Dressed”
(337) and has her turn her back whenever she suspects him of coming close to telling a lie.

In Jenny’s inspiration from actual people for the construction of her “ladies” we can also draw a parallel with Dickens’s characterization. Critics have long seen traces of Mary Hogarth in little Nell and his other angelical child-women, and of Ellen Ternan in Estella and Bella Wilfer (125); some have even argued that the Micawbers were modeled after Dickens’s own parents. Jenny’s process is not too different. As she tell us, “When I see a great lady suitable for my business, I say ‘You’ll do, my dear!’ and I take particular notice of her, and run home and cut her out and baste her” (431). Similarly, Jenny’s having to “scud about town at all hours” (431) looking for inspiration also recalls Dickens’s own inspiration-seeking, which involved lengthy walks about London.

Dickens was also not immune from the tendency he makes famous in Jenny Wren of referring to his characters as people just as she refers to her dolls as ladies. In the postscript to Our Mutual Friend, Dickens recounts the train accident in which he was involved while writing the novel. “On Friday the Ninth of June in the present year,” he writes, “Mr. and Mrs. Boffin (in their manuscript dress of receiving Mr. and Mrs. Lammle at breakfast) were on the South Eastern Railway with me, in a terribly destructive accident” (800). After attending to the other people in the carriage, he returns to aid his fictional wards, “I climbed back into my carriage . . . to extricate the worthy couple. They were much soiled, but otherwise unhurt” (800). Dickens not only refers to

51 Doris Alexander provides many other examples. She argues that Hans Christian Andersen was a model for Uriah Heep and that Leigh Hunt provided Dickens’s inspiration for Harold Skimpole. Alexander remarks, however, that Dickens did not copy characters exactly. He often changed certain aspects so as to make them unrecognizable, thus requiring several “try ons” (Alexander 2-3).

52 According to Michael Slater Dickens typically walked about twelve miles a day (12).
his characters as people, but, like Jenny, he also thinks about them in terms of their “manuscript dress.” This incident furthermore suggests a propensity in Dickens to use his “manuscript” friends as a means of distancing himself from the reality of a traumatic incident through a kind of literary play.

What Jenny does within the novel, therefore, is equivalent to what Dickens does in constructing the novel that contains her. And just as Dickens can manipulate his doll-like characters to effect a desired outcome, so too can Jenny use her imaginative doll play to plot a better life for herself and those around her. In plotting these improved story-lines Jenny draws from fairy-tales, the most magical of genres but also the most closely associated with “happily ever after.” She assumes a name that, unlike the decidedly less poetic Fanny Cleaver, links her to a world of fantasy and nursery rhymes and casts herself as the protagonist. More often than not she is Cinderella, with Riah as her unlikely fairy godmother, whose ancient-looking staff takes the place of a magic wand. When Fascination Fledgeby tries to effect a plot twist by lying to Jenny about Riah, Jenny responds by switching to an entirely different story, identifying with Little Red Riding-Hood, and framing her decision about whether to believe Fledgeby in terms of deciding which of the two men is the Big Bad Wolf. Furthermore, her expectation of a future “him” appearing at the end of her narrative also seems to obey the rules of fairy-tales; and when “he” appears in the shape of Sloppy, Jenny is quick to accept him into the fairy-tale narrative of her life by casting him in the role of the friendly giant.

53 It is interesting that Jenny casts herself in the role of Cinderella whereas throughout the novel she plays the role of the fairy godmother, enabling the transformations of others. It is possible that Jenny’s identification with Cinderella points to a desire for the transformation of her own circumstances.
Perhaps it is hardly surprising that Jenny should draw from the fairy tale in her imaginative plotting. As Harry Stone vividly puts it, in the fairy story, like in play, “The solid ordinary world, mundane and incomprehensible, dissolves into wild distortions and derangements, and emerges, paradoxically, ordered and interconnected” (36-7). And while “the fabling power of fairy stories” is strongly associated with childhood, Dickens does not abandon it in his adult fictions. On the contrary, “The potencies and transformations of fairy stories became part of his vision of life and part of his way of conveying that vision” (37) through his fictional works.

In casting herself in the role of Cinderella, Jenny expresses a desire for a fairy-tale transformation in her life. They toys in *Our Mutual Friend* are presented as having a similar ability to express children’s deepest desires. When little Johnny falls ill, the Boffins immediately go to a toy shop to cheer him up. In the hospital, the other children are similarly equipped:

and there Johnny came to himself lying in a quiet little bed, with a little platform over his breast, on which were already arranged, to give him heart and urge him to cheer up, the Noah’s ark, the noble steed, and the yellow bird; with the officer in the Guards doing his duty over the whole, quite as much to the satisfaction of his country as if he had been upon Parade. . . and on all the little beds were little platforms whereon were to be seen dolls’ houses, woolly dogs with mechanical barks in them not dissimilar from the artificial voice pervading the bowels of the yellow bird, tin armies, Moorish tumblers, wooden tea things, and the riches of the earth. (325-6)

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54 The description of the children’s hospital in *Our Mutual Friend* very closely resembles Dickens’s own description of a hospital he visited, which is as follows. “In the airy wards into which the old state drawing-rooms and family bed-chambers of that house are now converted, are lodged such small patients that the attendant nurses look like reclaimed giantesses, and the kind medical practitioner like an amiable Christian ogre. Grouped about the little low tables in the centre of the rooms, are such tiny convalescents that they seem to be playing at having been ill. On the doll’s beds are such diminutive creatures that each poor sufferer is supplied with its trays of toys: and, looking round, you may see how the little tired flushed cheek has toppled over half the brute creation on its way into the ark; or how one little dimpled arm has mowed down (as I saw myself) the whole tin soldiery of Europe. On the walls of these rooms are graceful, pleasant, bright, childish pictures. At the beds' heads, hang representations of the figure of Him who was
The toys certainly seem to distract the children from their pain and illness and have a general salutary effect. Even Johnny’s neighbor benefits from the salutary effects of the toys as the narrator tells us that he “was so enchanted by this spectacle that his delight exalted its enthralling interest; and so came to rest and sleep” (326). But the toys also serve a sadder purpose, especially for those children who are not destined to get better:

Over most of the beds, the toys were yet grouped as the children had left them when they last laid themselves down, and, in their innocent grotesqueness and incongruity, they might have stood for the children’s dreams. (327)

Dickens’s use of the word “dreams” is helpfully ambiguous. It refers to the content of the children’s unconscious minds, but also suggests their dreams as desires or fantasies. These toys, like the run-down toys and desolate dolls in The Cricket, seem to represent the potential but also the failure of fantasy to transform.

The “toys” at Jenny’s disposal, however, are not the bright and shiny creations found in a toy shop. In some instances, Jenny’s play takes on a rather sordid hue, especially when her father, appropriately christened “Mr. Dolls” by the cynical Eugene Wrayburn, is involved. Jenny plays a kind of make-believe with Mr. Dolls. Because he is a failure as a father, she treats him and addresses him as her wayward child. She berates him, calling him a “bad old boy” and a “naughty, wicked creature” (239), sends him to sit once a child Himself, and a poor one. But alas I reckoning up the number of beds that are there, the visitor to this Child's Hospital will find himself perforce obliged to stop at very little over thirty; and will learn, with sorrow and surprise, that even that small number, so forlornly, so miserably diminutive compared with this vast London, cannot possibly be maintained unless the Hospital be made better known.

Interestingly, the idea of children using toys to visually illustrate the matter of dreams also appears in Winnicott, who recalls asking his patient’s child: ‘Oh look! You are putting on the floor around these babies’ heads the dreams that they are having while they sleep.’ The idea intrigued her and she took it up and went on developing the various themes that developed, each kept separate from the other” (61).
in the corner or orders him out of the room when he’s been bad. Unlike the little girl’s traditional manipulation of her doll as a form of liberating expression, however, Jenny’s manipulation of “Dolls” is a burden. When Jenny confronts him about having spent the bulk of his wages on drink, Mr. Dolls merely asserts his helplessness. “Circumstances over which had no control” (241) is all he can muster. “Dolls” becomes putty in Jenny’s weary hands; “I’ll circumstance you and control you too,” she tells him (241). Like the heroines of many a nineteenth-century doll story, Jenny plays the role of the parent – with her strange, oversized doll.

In the case of Mr. Dolls, his resemblance to a toy reveals a kind of death in life; he is the material outer shell of humanity, without the humanity. This thingification leaves him particularly vulnerable to manipulation but also signals a loss of all human qualities. When Eugene wants to find out about Lizzie’s whereabouts, therefore, he finds that it is necessary to “wind up Mr. Dolls” (527) with drink before, automaton-like, he is able to set himself upright and speak. The process of dehumanization is completed when in death he seems to rejoin his inanimate brethren, “and there, in the midst of dolls with no speculation in their eyes, lay Mr. Dolls with no speculation in his” (712).

Despite the novel’s manifest material flexibility, the possibility of a person being turned into an object is tinged with threat. This danger is particularly evident in Eugene Wrayburn’s treatment of Lizzie, which threatens to reduce her to a doll for him to toy with. It is Lizzie who Eugene has in mind when he tells Jenny that he is thinking about “setting up a doll” (237) – a proposition that may strike us as particularly inauspicious in light of the seventeenth-century associations with prostitution of the “doll common.”
fact that Eugene thinks of Lizzie as a doll to be toyed with is also suggested by his
approaching Jenny to have a doll dressed as a pretext to discover her whereabouts. Jenny,
who is no fool, immediately understands the real object of Eugene’s visit, which she
interprets as “the subject of a doll’s dress – or address – whichever you like” (523).
Jenny’s response to Eugene “setting up” this hypothetical doll is defensive. “You had
better not,” she tells him, “You are sure to break it. All you children do” (237). As Mark
Henelly notes, Our Mutual Friend delves into “the sinister depths of the playworld” (60)
and becoming objectified leaves characters vulnerable to being toyed with.

Unlike Eugene, Jenny does not want to make a doll out of Lizzie. Instead of
making Lizzie into a doll to manipulate, Jenny makes herself a doll for Lizzie to confide
in. The way this moment is described in the novel recalls the oft-depicted scene of
intimacy between a girl and her doll:

It being Lizzie’s regular occupation when they were alone of an evening to brush
out and smooth the long fair hair of the dolls’ dressmaker, she unfastened a ribbon
that kept it back while the little creature was at her work, and it fell in a beautiful
shower over the poor shoulders that were much in need of such adorning rain.
(342)

Jenny, who has “lovely hair” and “enough to make wigs for all the dolls in the world”
(434) becomes like a broken doll for Lizzie to coddle and nurse and in whom to confide.

We can best understand this scene by considering it alongside its parallel in Bleak House,
where Esther Summerson recounts her intimacy with her beloved doll:

I can remember, when I was a very little girl indeed, I used to say to my doll,
when we were alone together, ‘Now, Dolly, I am not clever, you know very well,
and you must be patient with me, like a dear!’ And so she used to sit propped up
in a great arm-chair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips, staring at me –
or not so much at me, I think, as at nothing – while I busily stitched away, and
told her every one of my secrets. (30)
It is with her doll, the most tolerant of audiences, that Esther first finds the confidence to articulate her feelings and to develop her voice as the narrator of her own story. Similarly, in her role as doll, Jenny enables Lizzie to regress to a state of imaginative childhood unhampered by realist limitations so that she can give voice to her desires. Indeed, it is only when Jenny asks Lizzie to imagine what she would think of Eugene “if you were a lady” (343) that she considers answering. Yet even that proves to be a difficult imaginative leap for Lizzie:

“I a lady!” she repeated, laughing. “Such a fancy!”
“Yes. But say: just as a fancy, and for instance.”
“Too much, Jenny, dear, too much! My fancy is not able to get that far.” (343)

“Just as a fancy, and for instance” becomes Jenny’s refrain as she persuades Lizzie to allow herself to play pretend and imagine the kind of lady she would be, were it not for the material limitations imposed by reality. At Jenny’s urging, Lizzie finally allows herself to imagine. “She will be rich,” Lizzie envisions, “She is very handsome” (343), and she loves freely, “Her heart – is given him with all its love and truth” (344). As the scene ends, and Jenny “rocked herself on Lizzie’s breast” (344), we are reminded once again of the image of the little girl and her doll confidante.

In his reading of the passage, Frederick Aldama suggests that yet another kind of doll play is taking place. When Jenny urges Lizzie to imagine herself as a lady, it is one of her lady dolls she has in mind. He writes, “For Lizzie, a poor river dredger’s daughter, to imagine herself a lady is too fantastical for her. So instead, Jenny asks her to imagine a doll as a ‘Lady’ who might be after Eugene” (9). I would argue that the link between ladies as dolls and ladies as rich, beautiful women is more than metaphorical in this
passage, and is employed for the purpose of suggesting the possibility of Lizzie transforming herself into a lady worthy of Eugene out “of such material as myself.” In any case, if Lizzie does temporarily imagine herself as a doll, it is a doll of her own design. This kind of fantasy allows Lizzie to be transformed on her own terms, instead of becoming the toy of Eugene Wrayburn or a person to be molded by Bradley Headstone and Charlie Hexam.

Jenny’s “lady”-making approach is different. Lizzie becomes a “lady” not as one of Jenny’s creations or as a reflection of her own fantasies but as a result of Lizzie’s own desires. In order to help Lizzie tap into these, Jenny becomes a kind of doll to her, and replicates the intimacy and warmth of a doll-girl relationship. In this way, Lizzie is able to go back to a childish way of thinking that allows her to tap into her own desires. She allows for Lizzie’s transformation into a “lady” but not as a doll, like the one Eugene wants him to make for her, but as a real one, recognized by Twemlow at the conclusion of the novel – not by virtue of being married to a gentleman, but rather of having made, or at least rescued, one.

Once Jenny has coaxed Lizzie into admitting to herself her own desires, she helps her fantasies become actualized by quite literally plotting her happy ending with her dolls. Just as with her doll’s dress-making, Jenny’s transformative play involves a kind of recycling. She makes ladies from scraps and weddings from funerals. Using the pieces at her disposal, she arranges them in original ways to create a different and happier outcome. Jenny describes her creative epiphany to Riah: “So, it came into my head while I was weeping at my poor boy’s grave, that something in my way might be done with a
clergyman” (716). When Riah, who still has death on his mind, expresses doubts about the marketability of such a figure, Jenny corrects him, “Not a funeral, never fear! . . . a doll clergyman, my dear – glossy black curls and whiskers – uniting two of my young friends in matrimony” (716). Jenny’s plotting results in wish fulfillment: “If you don’t see those three at the altar in Bond Street, in a jiffy, my name’s Jack Robinson” (716), she says to Riah. Her wishes, as Bella comes to believe about John’s, are like “the wishes in the Fairy story, that were all fulfilled as soon as spoken” (665).

Jenny’s self-assurance is justified. A clergyman does indeed “unite two of [her] young friends in matrimony” thanks to her imaginative efforts. Out of death comes life, and Eugene’s deathbed becomes the setting for a wedding, rather than a funeral. That Jenny is instrumental in this transformation is further suggested by the fact that Eugene calls for her when he is ill so that she becomes, at least in part, responsible for his healing. Not coincidentally, her ability to understand Eugene and to nurse him so delicately is explained as an effect of her working with dolls. Not only is Jenny possessed of a “natural lightness and delicacy of touch which had become very refined by the practice of her miniature work” but she is also able to act as “an interpreter between this sentient world and the insensible man” (720), who, like Dickens’s other thing-like characters risks permanent de-animation.

In extending this authorial responsibility to Jenny, permitting her to plot the resolution of one of the novel’s most significant narrative strands, Dickens clearly identifies Jenny as an authorial figure. Unlike Caleb, who creates fictional doll houses which can be longingly peered into but never truly inhabited and whose fantasies rely on
a manipulation that reduces her daughter to a mere doll, Jenny transforms the world through her imaginative doll play without ever dangerously objectifying those who play with her. Jenny therefore presents a revised model for Dickens’s authorship. By drawing from the child’s imaginative relationship with the material world in doll play, Dickens is able to reconcile the two opposing forces that drive his fictional creations: the desire to represent reality in all its material authenticity and the impulse to animate the material world, suspending the laws of nature in favor of a more fantastic view of the world. Through Jenny’s doll play, which plots fairy tale endings using dolls that are made from the bits and scraps that make up the real world, Dickens is able to articulate a vision of his authorial imagination as a playful but powerful force at once grounded in reality and able to surmount it.
Chapter 2:
Silent Surveillants: Imaginative Discipline in the Doll Memoir

“I sometimes think she is a spy on all my actions,” declares Adelaide, one of the frustrated young heroines of Julie Gouraud’s *Memoirs of a Doll* (1856). The “she” that Adelaide suspects of espionage is not another little girl; nor is it her mother, her nurse or her governess. “She” is a doll – one of the many to appear in Victorian children’s literature. Given the desire to combine instruction and amusement that characterized the early years in the development of children’s literature, it is hardly surprising that dolls should be featured so prominently. As Sharon Marcus has noted, dolls were perceived as objects “that could both impart lessons and rouse a girl’s pleasure and fantasy” (158) and were therefore particularly apt subjects for this emerging literature. What may be surprising, however, is that in their earliest appearances in children’s literature, dolls are often cast not only as the heroines but also the narrators of their own stories. They, rather than the little girls who play with them, are presented as the protagonists of Memoirs, Adventures, Rises and Falls, and all manner of autobiographical reminiscences.

These doll memoirs, as I will henceforth refer to them, have, despite being numerous enough to warrant consideration as a sub-genre, so far eluded critical attention. This may be attributable, at least in part, to the difficulties presented by attempting to categorize them. Doll memoirs were longer than short stories, but not as lengthy or as
complex as novels.\textsuperscript{56} Many of them were written by authors (generally women) who made a living writing for children,\textsuperscript{57} but many were also the sole contributions to children’s literature of authors who typically wrote for adult audiences.\textsuperscript{58} Although they were published with attractive illustrations and marketed for children, they sometimes touched on topics that would have seemed more at home in a sensation novel. Doll memoirs also tended to combine settings of domestic realism with elements of fantasy in perplexing ways. Not only did they ask readers to think of their dolls as sentient beings, but, particularly towards the end of the century, they often involved journeys into magical lands where dolls held sway. Most puzzling of all, perhaps, is the fact that although the dolls in these narratives were granted consciousness, they nevertheless remained firmly planted in the territory of thing-hood.

The idea of speaking, narrating objects is not original to the doll memoir but hearkens back to the inanimate narrators of the eighteenth-century it-narratives. Told by objects as varied as coins, coats, and umbrellas as they circulated in the various social circles in which they are purchased and sold, used and neglected, these narratives provided a unique perspective on the world from the point of view of objects. As

\textsuperscript{56} This confusion is often compounded by the fact that although these memoirs were published individually as books, they have subsequently been anthologized as stories.

\textsuperscript{57} Unfortunately, and despite their prolific output, frustratingly little is known about some of the authors of these stories. Julie Gouraud is a pseudonym for Louise d’Aulnay (1810-1891); she wrote as many as forty-nine children’s books in her lifetime but little else is known about her life. Jeanne Sylvie Mallès de Beaulieu (1760-1825), whose \textit{Memoirs of a Doll} I discuss next, appears to have been a teacher in addition to writing a number of novels and instructional books for the young. Her books ranged in topic from French history to religious instruction. Her most famous work, \textit{Le Robinson de douze ans}, was translated from French into English, Dutch, Italian and Swedish. Clara Bradford is even more elusive. \textit{Ethel’s Adventures}, which was reprinted four times in England and published in America as well, seems to have been her only work and there are no biographical entries for her name.

\textsuperscript{58} Two examples of this that I discuss in this chapter are \textit{Memoirs of a London Doll} by Henry H. Horne and \textit{Lady Arabella: Or The Adventures of a Doll} by Julia Pardoe.
Christopher Flint argues, it is precisely the object’s status as an artifact that gives it a “wide-ranging knowledge of human transactions” and “the authority to tell tales” (212). But as Flint goes on to note, the autobiographical suggestions in the titles of these tales are misleading: “the titles of object narratives, which typically cite adventures, histories, and memoirs, refer not to the title character’s “life” but to its accounts of others. The narrating objects have little agency and very little experience of their own” (221). It is not difficult to imagine why the narrating objects of such stories could slip into the roles of spies.59 They would accompany their owners in public and in private and, being objects, would be privy to the most intimate of moments without ever arousing the slightest suspicion in their owners of being observed. The narratives describing their observations would then be published and go on to circulate among the public, much like the objects themselves, and much, we must imagine, to their owners’ consternation.

The dolls in these memoirs inherit the it-narrative’s objects’ peculiar history as observers and chroniclers of human nature and its foibles, but, as I hope to show, in the context of Victorian children’s literature, this role is used to very different effects. In it-narratives, Flint argues that the object’s proximity to its human owner tends to give rise to feelings of disgust: “when they find their voices, things and creatures use them not to admire and claim association with human beings but to report matters that humiliate and disgrace them, such as their avarice, delusion, cruelty, ugliness, and mortality” (134). But while in the eighteenth-century it-narratives this observation had been used to satirize the faults of adults, doll memoirs attempt not only to highlight possible personal weaknesses,

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59 As Christopher Flint points out, these narratives were also alternately known as spy novels. Indeed one of the very first specimens of the genre is often considered to be Charles Gideon’s The Golden Spy (212).
but to shape the little girls that read them by instilling in them a sense of unrelenting surveillance on the part of their dolls.

Although the doll’s sphere of circulation is reduced in comparison to that of a coin, an umbrella, or a coat, within the home and among the family, the doll has unlimited access. The doll penetrates into the deepest recesses of the domestic space, from tea parties and social calls to the privacy of the bedroom and nursery. As the doll narrator of *The Morals and Emotions of a Doll* (1897) tells us, “My greatest educational advantage was that people spoke frankly in my presence. They did not know how much I took in, but they honestly believed nothing would ever come out again” (13-14). Hearing and seeing everything but suspected of nothing, the doll is poised to become a perfect agent of surveillance.

It is worth noting, however, that the doll’s observant nature is not always pitted against its young owners in the doll memoir. In some instances, the doll witnesses and relates behaviors that incriminate adults in favor of their younger wards. Such is the case in Richard H. Horne’s *Memoirs of a London Doll* (1852), which describes the urban adventures of a humble doll named Maria Poppet. These memoirs belong to the subset of doll tales that Sharon Marcus characterizes as providing a sort of “sociology for girls” in that they “offered readers a panoramic survey of the nation’s many classes” (Marcus 159). The book describes the life of Maria Poppet as she moves among the richest and the poorest of Londoners and describes in particular detail the difficulties experienced by the

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60 The book’s emphasis on the conditions of the poor is fitting given Horne’s background as sub-commissioner on the royal commission to investigate the employment of children in mines and factories. The report resulting from the investigation, according to Robert Dingley, provided the inspiration for Elizabeth Barrett’s poem “The Cry of the Children” (1843).
youngest among these. Horne uses the doll’s surveillance not to scrutinize the behavior of children, but to address some of the abuses under which they suffered.

While belonging to a poor girl named Ellen, for instance, the doll’s spying is used to denounce the excesses of Miss Sharpshins, a woman who uses children for child-labor under the guise of offering them an apprenticeship as milliners. At the beginning of the chapter that describes this supposed apprenticeship, Maria Poppet reminds us of her watchful nature, telling us: “My eyes were constantly employed in observing the different people who came in and out, or passed by the door and the window; my ears were constantly attentive to all that was said” (28). A few pages later, when Ellen is removed from the comfort of her father’s pastry shop to finally begin her apprenticeship, the doll has occasion to tell us about the intelligence she has been gathering:

Now this tall Aunt Sharpshins, with the parrot’s nose, made her fifteen little milliners all work together in the same room, all seated upon small chairs without backs, so that they could not lean backward to rest themselves. And she made them work the whole day, from six o’clock in the morning till eight o’clock at night, with only about half an hour’s rest at one o’clock, when they were all called back to dinner in the back parlor of the house. Some of the poor girls often cried, or fell asleep and tumbled off their chairs, they were so tired. If this misfortune happened to them, Mrs. Sharpshins used to give them only bread and water for dinner; and sometimes she was so cruel as to give them a loud slap on the shoulders. (30)

Although the doll does not engage in an extensive condemnation of Sharpshins’ behavior, there is no doubt about where her allegiances lie. That Miss Sharpshins is not a good woman is also made plain by the doll’s description her bird-like physiognomy and her suggestive name.

Perhaps in an effort to distance themselves from the relish with which their eighteenth-century predecessors describe the vanities and failings of their owners, the
dolls in these memoirs are cautious to frame their observation in more ladylike terms.

Maria Poppet is at pains to emphasize that her observant nature arises not from a desire to pry or to indulge her curiosity but to become more educated about the world:

   By these means I advanced my education very much, because my memory became stronger by practice, and my understanding improved by this habit of thinking over everything to myself. I believe no doll ever lived who was more anxious to learn and know about all sorts of things – good, pretty, or wonderful – than I was. (29)

Maria Poppet’s explanation of her motives accords perfectly with the kind of observation that Sarah Stickney Ellis, whose conduct manuals written for mothers, daughters and wives enjoyed enormous popularity among her contemporaries, describes in The Daughters of England, where she lauds observation as one of the most underused and underappreciated occupations for young women. Ellis frames observation in terms of self-reflection rather than communication. “Far be it from me to recommend idle and vulgar curiosity,” she clarifies, “Observation is a faculty which may be kept perpetually at work, without intrusion or offence to others” (107). The observation that Ellis recommends is not only compatible with a passive attitude, but originates in inactivity. Women would never complain of boredom, lack of visitors or entertainment if they learned to observe. In fact, a passive body seems all the better equipped to examine the world around it, since being unengaged in any activity it is at leisure to observe the activities of others. As an object with the ability to observe but without recourse to action, the doll embodies this kind of observation in the extreme.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) The doll’s physical passivity, through it renders her such an excellent observer, does occasionally present some narrative difficulties. Narrating dolls will often remark on the limitations of their field of observation. They note their pleasure when they are positioned in such a way that allows them to survey the scenes before them and complain when their mistresses have the incivility to leave them facing downward or
The dolls in these memoirs appear equally eager to distance themselves from the worldliness of it-narrative objects, who gleefully narrate the often criminal or lascivious behavior of the humans who possess them. We find an example of this in *Lady Arabella: Or The Adventures of a Doll* by “Miss Pardoe” (1856), a doll memoir in which most of what the doll discovers hardly seems fit for a children’s audience. Arabella shows readers the truth that lies beneath the glossy veneer of an upper-class wealthy English family. The world that the doll unveils makes for unusual reading in a children’s book. We find that Lady Breezeby, Miss Tantrum’s mother, is buried in debt, quarrels with her husband, flirts with several men, and eventually runs off to Paris with one of them. We also find that the servants despise every member of the family they work for; they (rightly) think Miss Tantrum is a brat, read French novels while pretending to be at work, criticize Lady Breezeby behind her back, try to make a profit whenever they are sent on an errand, and repay themselves for missing wages with many of Lady Breezeby’s belongings once she has abandoned the family. The satirical representation of the world is not limited to the upper-class. When Arabella has the misfortune of becoming the property of Jane Pulson, the maid’s daughter, she encounters similar behavior with them. Far from discovering the idyllic society of virtuous poverty that is typical of such stories, obscuring their view with a curtain or similar obstacle. The effect of these comments is not so much to highlight the dolls’ narratorial limitations, but rather to remind us of their constant and tireless observation. Almost always, the doll’s remark about an obstacle is followed by its removal, or by an explanation that emphasizes how much the doll usually does see.

62 This story presents some difficulties in categorization. Even though critics such as Victoria Ford Smith, have identified it as a children’s story, the content hardly seems appropriate. The author, Julia Pardoe, was known among her contemporaries for writing historical books and novels and *Lady Arabella* is her only foray outside of those writings.
she discovers that the Pulsons live with the same pretensions as the rich and differ only in having more limited means with which to indulge them.

When it comes to describing these events, however, Lady Arabella acts the part of the ingénue, pretending not to understand the significance of what she is witnessing. This attitude is particularly apparent in the doll’s discovery and consequent revelation to the reader that Lady Breezeby is in debt:

Fortunately Miss Barton had placed me very conveniently with my back resting against one of the cushions on the sofa, so that I could see every part of the room; and a very pretty room it was. Pink silk curtains were drawn across the windows; and a large glass, reaching nearly from the ceiling to the floor, stood between them. On a dressing-table which faced the fireplace were scattered such a number of toys and trinkets, of which I knew neither the names nor the use, that it was almost fatiguing to examine them. On the sofa beside me lay a French novel; and, littered over a richly inlaid desk on a writing-stand, were a heap of tiny notes of all the colours of the rainbow, and a great number of very alarming-looking bills, none of them receipted; a fact which I discovered at once from having often seen things of the kind at the shop of my first mistress. (23)

The doll takes curious delight in having been placed in a position that allows her to survey the room but then seemingly undoes that image of idle curiosity by immediately presenting herself as a naïve interpreter of that space, who hardly knows the meaning of the things she sees displayed, and complains that it was “almost fatiguing to examine them.” Likewise, her initially naïve observation of “a heap of tiny notes of all the colours of the rainbow” is followed by a worldlier admission that she in fact recognizes them as “very alarming-looking bills.”

This dynamic is even more pronounced in the doll’s assessment of Lady Breezeby’s flirtations with her frequent male visitors:

It was really wonderful how few of them could speak plain, and how vain they were of their curls and their varnished boots; and how they lisped out all kinds of...
pretty nonsense to my lady, much in the same way that my little mama talked to me when she had a fit of fondness upon her; nor did I fail to remark that my lady herself was quite another person when she had a crowd of these fashionable young gentlemen about her, and when she was alone with my lord, which, however, was very seldom. In company she always spoke in so low a tone that you were obliged to listen very attentively to catch her words; but to my lord she talked loud enough to be heard all over the room... I confess that I lost all respect for Lady Breezeby, when I heard her complain of her husband to half a dozen friends, and particularly to the Honourable Frederick Fitzfidget, who was unfortunately so very deaf that he was obliged to lean over her seat, and put his ear quite close to her lips all the time she was murmuring out her troubles. (32)

The doll remarks on the gentlemen’s vanity and derides their childish lisping to Lady Breezeby by likening it to Miss Tantrum’s superficial affections. The doll’s satire then turns into disingenuousness, however, as she recounts the story of Honourable Frederick Fitzfidget, with whom Lady Breezeby appears to share all her troubles. While the doll seems perfectly aware that it is wrong for Lady Breezeby to be discussing her marital troubles in such a public manner, she presents herself as innocently unaware of the possible real reasons for Fitzfidget’s proximity to the Lady. Such purported innocence in the face of such pointed observation, however, we can only interpret as being disingenuous. The doll extends the irony throughout her narration, reprimanding Mary for interrupting her relation of the story, “if you were only as good a listener as the Honourable Frederick Fitzfidget, I should have finished my story long ago” (35).

I. Rendering Girls Visible
This chapter, however, is interested in what happens when the eyes of surveillance are turned not towards the ills of society or the indiscretions of the adult world, but towards the activities of little girls. Before we can turn to these instances, it is important to understand the educational context in which these memoirs were being written and read. The idea that doll play, or play of any kind, can be employed to bring out children’s characters so as to “lay bare their unconscious mind” (Steedman 87) is not new to us today. As Caroline Steedman notes, Freud, and to a greater extent, Piaget, grounded their theories on childhood and development on the basis of their observations of children at play (87). This kind of observation is precisely what Gouraud advocates in the preface to her *Memoirs of a Doll* (1856). The doll, she argues, is a “pivot of humanity” that has the power to reveal the innermost qualities of the girls who play with them as well as to foretell their futures as women and mothers. While Gouraud passes over many of the theories of education of her day and scoffs at Rousseau’s Emile as a mere puppet, an hour spent watching a girl with her doll, she argues, “will teach you more . . . than the two thick volumes of Aimé Martin.”63 “Such are the little girls of one period with their dolls,” she tells her readers, “such will be the women of the world of a few years later . . . Should one generation of dolls be whipped with too much choler, or embraced with too much ardor, the fate of the world depends on it” (vi). For this reason doll play must be subjected to the closest scrutiny, “Watch the behaviour of your little girl with her doll,” Gouraud counsels, “listen to what she says” (vii).

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63 Louis Aimé-Martin (1781-1847) was a French author. Among his works was “L’Education des mères de famille” (The Education of Family Mothers) which is cited by Sarah Stickney Ellis in *The Mothers of England*. 
Gouraud’s emphasis on maternal observation inevitably brings to mind Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*, which describes the way in which power shifted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries into a diffused and surreptitiously subtle mechanism that disciplines and produces the moral subject. Part of what makes Foucault’s account so influential is that it is not restricted to prisons and institutions, but explains the mechanisms of power even among school children and in the privacy of the home. The panoptic model, Foucault argues, “is polyvalent in its applications; it serves to reform prisoners, but also to treat patients, *to instruct schoolchildren*, to confine the insane, to supervise workers, to put beggars and idlers to work” (205, emphasis mine).

The shift towards control through surveillance that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* is manifest in the transformations undergone by theories of children’s education during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The idea that vigilance had a role in children’s education can be traced as far back as John Locke, who in his work, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), was already proposing a shift from the threat of violence to more psychological methods of discipline. “Ingenuous Shame, and the Apprehension of Displeasure” he argues, “are the only true Restraint: These alone ought to hold the Reins, and keep the child in order” (quoted in Burdan 8).

As Burdan points out, a “pedagogy of surveillance” emerged in which the child was placed “in a spotlight of visible individuality” while simultaneously rendering “parental authority ‘benignly’ invisible” (8).

Sarah Stickney Ellis, whose general praise for the practice of observation I cited earlier, also highlights the importance of maternal surveillance. Gone are the days, she is
happy to report, of “those horrible whippings of former times, those shuttings up in dark chambers, and those other varieties of mental and bodily punishment” (20). Instead, Ellis favors gentle maternal influence and careful surveillance. It is common, Ellis states, to see careful mothers “observe with the most scrutinizing attention the bodily health of their children believing that even where no disease exists, there may still be tendencies in the constitution, and liabilities to certain ailments, which maternal love is ever quick to detect in their first appearance” (15). Ellis commends this vigilance, but reminds her readers that the same attention should be turned to the child’s mind, which, though “less palpable” is yet equally vulnerable “to seeds of disease, individual tendencies, and peculiarities of nature” (15). These it is the mother’s duty “to search for, to detect, and to turn into healthy course” (15) even more diligently, for they had the power to affect the child’s spiritual welfare.

Instead of punishments, or even the explicit use of authority, Ellis recommends maternal influence.64 If a mother applies her influence with some tact, “the child grows up without the least idea that the rule of obedience is a hardship, or in fact without any idea of obedience at all; for it submits habitually to rightful authority” (21). Thus the child obeys without knowing it; “the habit of submitting the natural will is imperceptibly acquired . . . and the child really enjoys the advantage of being constantly under the direction of wisdom” (21). In the best cases, the child may even begin to anticipate the mother’s wishes so that it becomes unnecessary for her to intervene with her authority at

64 In fact, for Ellis authority is not really within the woman’s province, especially over young boys. For this reason she recommends the more subtle method of influence, which she thinks is better suited to women’s strengths, and which she also suggests is a better alternative.
all; “the child soon learns, as if by a sort of instinct, what is the general nature of its mother’s wishes and is able to partake in the pleasure of anticipating them” (23). Ellis’s language is highly suggestive of Foucault’s formulation of disciplinary power, especially when she suggests that “the influence of a mother, [is] often felt more powerfully when absent, than when under the inspection of her ever-watchful eye” (38).

The need for surveillance is even greater in the education of little girls, whom Ellis identifies as being especially liable to lies and deceit. Girls, she cautions, are “more tempted to have recourse to artifice, if not to falsehood, in order to escape what they dread” (192). In mothers’ relationships with their daughters Ellis thus advocates complete openness, seeing every instance of privacy as forbidden secrecy. For instance, she tells us that “A novel read in secret is a dangerous thing” (196) and that mothers must find ways to become a part of the private lives of their daughters so that they may “really know the whole heart of their daughters” (197). Ellis distinguishes between a young woman’s public or social demeanor and her more private and presumably authentic self; it is “With this second life, so often hid in the bosom of her child,” she argues, “the mother ought to live” (197). Establishing a higher degree of intimacy with her daughter will not only allow the mother access to this second, secret life, but will also put her in a position to monitor her daughter’s performances in public, giving her “an opportunity of watching every look, and hearing every word” that may tell on her daughter’s secret emotions (202).

Maternal surveillance was widely-practiced and even sanctioned by pedagogical texts of the nineteenth century. Since mothers were considered responsible for the moral
upbringing of their children, it became their duty to observe them (Clarke 83). Many
women made a study of this. As Steedman notes, “Recounting the natural history of child
development was the self-elected task of many upper-middle-class women in the
nineteenth century” (85). Sara Coleridge, for instance, kept a diary of her children’s early
years from 1830 to 1838. By the time Robert Louis Stevenson was born, child watching
had become so far commercialized that in 1850 Isabella Stevenson “was able to set down
Robert Louis's childhood in one of the blank ‘Baby Books’ then available” (Steedman
87).

One of the principles of discipline was, for Foucault, the exposure of the
individual. Writing about the architectural composition of the military camp, he
articulates one of its goals as being “to render visible those who are inside it” so as “to
make it possible to know them, to alter them” (172). This, I would argue, is precisely
what maternal observation of doll play seeks to achieve, at least in Gouraud’s
proposition. The doll renders the girls’ secret flaws visible so that they may be corrected.
Before the doll can even speak against her little mistress, or even draw out her less
attractive qualities through play, she can serve in herself as a material manifestation of
her flaws. Without saying a word, her very appearance can tell her story. When Adelaide,
one of the girls in Memoirs of Doll, to which I will return anon, is discovered to have
been neglecting her doll, her mother remonstrates: “Oh! who would not recognize the
doll of an idle, untidy girl? . . . and if the Miss Russells come, as I expect, your
negligence will be exposed, and serve as a lesson to them” (31). Mrs. Vernon recognizes
Violet’s appearance, with her clothes torn and her limbs black with dirt, as an external
manifestation of her daughter’s character. While Adelaide may be able to hide these flaws through her behavior in her public appearances, the doll offers incontrovertible evidence of her more private self. By remarking on this material marker of Adelaide’s carelessness, she hopes to correct her, by shaming her into reform.

This externalization takes an even more symbolic turn in *Victoria-Bess: The Ups and Downs of a Doll's Life* (1879), by Georgina Castle Smith. As its title suggests, the book tells the story of the social rise and fall of Victoria-Bess, a haughty beauty of a wax doll who only learns the value of kindness when she loses her good looks and is abandoned by Angela, her young mistress. Angela’s superficial regard for Victoria-Bess is contrasted to her cousin Katie’s affection for her unassuming rag-doll Mignonette. While Victoria-Bess once reveled in Angela’s bragging about her doll’s superiority, she lives to repent her hubris, when having reached the bottom of the social scale, she re-encounters the doll that she had looked down upon in her days of glory to find her looking better than herself. Each doll has now become representative of her little mistress. Mignonette, who belonged to the kind and humble Katie, has preserved her bloom, while Victoria-Bess, who belonged to imperious Angela, shows physical signs of decrepitude:

I turned my eyes with painful scrutiny towards the cot, and there recognised in the child’s arms Katie’s little rag doll, looking as fresh and blooming as the day I had first met her at Eaton Square, when she had come with Katie to drink tea with Angela and me. Her nose was not broken; her cheeks were not pale; her dress was not faded, and looking up at her with sad, remorseful eyes, remembering how I had despised her in my days of insolent prosperity and pride, because she was

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65 Georgina Castle Smith (1845–1933), née Meyrrick, was a writer of children’s literature. She first found success writing ‘street arab’ or ‘waif’ stories, which emphasized practical philanthropy and were characterized by a “mildly evangelical Anglicanism” (Mitchell). She also wrote under the pseudonym of “Brenda.”
made of rag, I remembered poor Katie’s words to Angela, and thought “how true they have come!” (76)

In her state of worn haggardness, Victoria-Bess becomes a representation of the character of her owner. Her body, with its broken nose, faded cheeks and worn dress bears the material evidence of her mistress’s carelessness, fickleness and hard-heartedness. In a childish version of Wilde’s picture of Dorian Gray, the little girl’s looks remain untarnished while each of her sins leaves a visible mark on her likeness. Katie’s ragdoll, on the other hand, looks as fresh as ever.  

Brand new, the dolls represent no more than the wealth and social status of those who purchase them; it is after they have been played with that they reveal the hidden truth about their possessors.

More frequently, however, the doll brings out the girl’s qualities through play. As Violet remarks, “Adelaide showed in her plays all the vices of her character” (34). One day, for instance, when Adelaide is playing with Susan, the lodge-keeper’s daughter, who is not as wealthy and therefore only has a wooden doll dressed in rags, Adelaide suggests that they “play at ladies.” Adelaide describes the game as follows: “you shall be my maid and dress me then I shall scold you and discharge you. That is a much nicer play” (34). It is true that this game seems to reflect the behavior that Adelaide has been in contact with, but if that is the case, it also suggests that she has accepted this behavior and takes pleasure in it.

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66 Mignonette’s eternal bloom also seems to represent Katie’s eternal innocence, in that having died a child, she remained forever innocent and good.
Nowhere is this doll-facilitated surveillance more evident than in Jeanne Sylvie Mallès de Beaulieu’s *The Well-Bred Doll*, which traces the education of two young girls who are themselves charged with the duty of educating their doll, Lottie. The story begins at a fair, where Laura and Florence set their hearts on a doll they cannot afford. Proud of her daughters’ self-restraint, the girls’ mother rewards them by surprising them with that same doll as a gift. The only condition she gives them is that they must share the doll and never fight about her. As a result, the girls decide that Laura, the youngest, will play the role of the doll, while Florence, the older sister, will play the doll’s mamma. The two sisters dedicate all their play time to Lottie’s education. They teach her how to read and spell but also how to curtsey and speak to servants. When Lottie misbehaves, they put her before a mirror to see “how ugly you look when you are in such a temper” or lock her in a closet (44).

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67 The exact year of original publication is unknown. The earliest copy extant is an 1819 English translation by “J.C.,” which suggests that the French original must at least predate that year.
Figure 5. “The Arrival of the Doll.” From Jeanne Sylvie Mallès de Beaulieu’s *The Well-Bred Doll.*
While the sisters are intent on their task of raising a “well-bred doll,” however, it soon becomes apparent that their doll play has been the object of their mother’s surveillance. One day, for instance, just as the girls are being tempted to buy fruits from an unknown woman, appears “a gentle voice behind the m” (32) belonging to their mother, who had been watching them all along. Likewise, when the mother first acquires the doll for her daughters, rather than simply giving it to them, she leaves it in the garden for them to discover when (they think) they are alone. The mother, we are told, “had been hidden behind a laurustinus” to observe them and “would have retired without saying a word” (20) had it not been for her children’s discovery of her there. The illustration that accompanies this part of the story (figure 5) is especially striking, revealing the mother lurking behind the happy trio in the dark background of the garden bushes, directing her gaze towards their daughters as they direct theirs towards their doll. The image is in turn viewed by the reader, who, unseen, is able to observe the depicted pyramid of surveillance. By inviting the reader to survey the scene, this image also suggests, as we will soon see, that the mother is just as vulnerable to such surveillance and scrutiny as her daughters are.

Although the girls are delighted to discover their new doll and seem generally unfazed by these instances of maternal espionage, the narrative suggests that their behavior is self-monitored as a result of it. One day, for instance, when the two girls are discussing how pleasant it is to read books about “amiable little girls and good little boys” (38), Laura asks Florence whether she will not one day write a history of their doll Lottie’s life. Florence’s response to her sister’s question is telling: “Would Lottie not be
afraid of that?” she asks, for “if her history were to be written, everyone would know that Lottie is sometimes willful, and disobedient and ill-tempered” (39). Although Florence couches her concern in terms of the doll’s misbehavior, because the doll’s history is also the history of the two sisters’ doll play, it would equally threaten to expose them. Thus, when, on the following day, the girls play that their doll is misbehaving and Laura says that she “trembled to think that all this would be written in her history” (45), it is clear that the girls consider themselves as much the objects of their mother’s surveillance as their doll is of theirs.

To this, we must add yet another layer of surveillance. If we revisit Gouraud’s preface to Memoirs of a Doll, we find that maternal supervision of the doll-child relationship is not only for the sake of the child. Certainly, Gouraud begins with an invitation for mothers to observe their daughters more closely: “Watch the behaviour of your little girl with her doll,” she urges, “listen to what she says” (vii). The emphasis on surveillance in this passage, “watch,” “listen,” “examine . . . and correct,” “study, learn,” seems to be all about the child. But as the passage continues, the disciplining gaze is turned from the child to the mother:

Thus you will see an exact mirror of yourselves – the child will scold her doll as she is scolded, she will repeat to her what she hears, she will make her do what she sees done by you. Examine, then, what you are yourselves – correct your teaching – find out what will touch that soul so dear to you – study, learn: dolls were surely given to children for the education of their mothers. (vii)

Underlying Gouraud’s injunction to mothers to supervise their daughters is a warning to mothers themselves, for just as a dirty doll betrays a careless girl, a naughty girl betrays a deficient mother. Watching a girl at play with her doll thus not only exposes the girl’s
character, but also reflects her upbringing and consequently her mother’s work. The supervisor is therefore equally liable to supervision as the supervised; the daughter’s behavior exposes the mother, rendering her visible.

Burdan characterizes this triangulation of the supervising gaze as an effect of the proliferation of educational treatises that emphasized the role of the mother:

These works increasingly encouraged a domestic surveillance which simultaneously placed mother and child at the center of a complex network of disciplinary observation: the mother watched the child; she watched herself; and she watched herself watching her child. (9)

Thus, the mother has more motivation than ever to pay close attention to the behavior of her child, lest it betray a fault in her own educational or mothering abilities. Read in this context, the language of surveillance that seemed in this passage to be directed towards the child can really be re-directed towards the mother of the child, responsible for the child’s upbringing.

Sarah Stickney Ellis, who advocates the careful observation of children, is equally firm on the matter of the mother’s “self-government” (27). In setting out a plan for their children’s education she urges mothers to examine themselves and their own educations, to “think back on own childhood to consider flaws in her own upbringing” (7) in order to determine the degree of its success. Mothers must examine themselves for their own flaws so that they can “endeavour to obviate, in the education of their children, the evils they have to deplore in their own” (27). Furthermore, since woman’s strength is not authority but influence, the mother must at all times seek to model for her children the behavior she wants them to adopt, “And here, if ever, we see the necessity there is for
women to attain that self-mastery, and to cultivate that moral courage, without which they are incapable of working out any lasting good by the influence over others” (27).

The idea that mothers are just as vulnerable to surveillance as their daughters is also hinted at in *The Well-Bred Doll*. When Lottie and Laura’s mother is explaining to the two girls the importance of bringing up of their doll in the right way, one of the most pressing arguments she presents is the desire to gain approval and praise from the outside world. She tells them to attend to her education “and so teach her to behave that all your friends shall say when they have seen her, ‘What a well-bred Doll that is!’” (21). The mother further reminds them of other girls, Emma and Fanny, who “are always neat, and that every one compliments their mamma upon their genteel appearance” (59). A neat doll will earn their play-mammas many compliments just as a neat girl will earn her real mamma the praise and approval of the world.

II. The Doll’s Surveillance

So far I have shown how dolls work to externalize the hidden traits of girls, or to put it in Foucault’s terms, how they “render visible” the little girls who play with them so as “to make it possible to know them, to alter them” (172). The agent of surveillance so far has thus been the mother, while the doll has merely served to aid the mother in this task. But the doll too could serve the function of surveillant alongside the mother as a kind of intermediary. This point is illustrated in Gouraud’s Introduction to her *Memoirs*, which is presented in the form of a brief play. It is New Year’s Eve and Mrs. Mansell, her
daughter, Caroline, and a few friends of her friends are discussing the gifts that they expect to receive on the occasion. Each child speaks in turn; Laura expects to receive a velvet dress and a muff, Elizabeth will be receiving a case of books, and Mary has been promised a doll. When Caroline, who turns out to be the only one in the dark about her gift, asks her mother what she is going to get, her mother tells her that she is to receive a little book. After a series of questions about its author, the mother reveals to her daughter that the author of the book “is a Doll” who “has written her own memoirs” (xv).

The children are immediately excited by the notion, but when Mary exclaims how amusing the book must be, Mrs. Mansell corrects her: “Perhaps you may not think it altogether so very funny, for I assure you this doll does not hesitate to say what she thinks of little girls, and there are some stories which certain young ladies might fancy related to themselves” (xvi). The children’s delight remains unhampered, however, so Mrs. Mansell promises to read the story to them before tea when they visit the following day. The scene closes with little Mary, who does not seem quite as enthusiastic as the others, mumbling to herself, “I shall take care to put away my things after me now, when my doll is in sight” (xvi).

This little play, whose characters are completely different from those that appear in the main story, sets up the narrative frame, and a viable explanation for the origins of Violet’s story and how it came to be written. As several critics have noted, the non-human narrators of it-narratives, or in this case, the doll memoir, always involve certain maneuvers on the part of the author to explain how the story came to be. As Toby A. Olshin points out, the genre gives rise to “the need for a series of rationalistic gyrations before the narrator can speak” (45). The narrative frame of Gouraud’s story is complicated even further when the narrative is suddenly interrupted and is replaced by a series of texts. An extract from a newspaper tells us that the doll has died in a tragic fire and announces that her memoirs were discovered in a trunk. The
is this doll memoir that Mrs. Mansell has somehow acquired and will read to her daughter and a group of her friends. More importantly, however, it also introduces in clear and abbreviated form the main theme of the story and its central lesson, which has been quickly absorbed by Mary at the end of the scene when she vows to be more conscious of her behavior before her doll. The message to the little girls is clear: watch what you do, because dolls see everything and are happy to report it, not only to your parents, but also to the world in the shape of a publicly circulating narrative.

The story’s theatrical introduction, I would argue, is meant to provide young readers with a model for how the story ought to be read. In this regard the introduction’s proximity to the eighteenth-century dialogue genre is crucial. For Penny Brown, the success of the dialogue genre hinged on the identification of the child reader/audience with the child character portrayed in the text, which is “intended to mirror and serve as a role model for the real reader” and whose “responses are therefore carefully scripted to seduce the reader into a desire to emulate that behavior” (207). Mrs. Mansell steers the girls towards this didactic identification by suggesting that the doll will tell some stories “which certain young ladies might fancy related to themselves” (xvi). Following Mary’s example, then, real life readers are encouraged to believe themselves the subjects of their own dolls’ scrupulous surveillance and to monitor their behavior accordingly. This narrative closes with the doll’s last will and testament, in which the doll imparts her last words of wisdom for the children she has left behind.

69 The dialogue genre, which reached the height of its popularity in the eighteenth century, was known for harnessing the persuasive power of the dialogue form for didactic purposes (Brown 204). As Penny Brown states, it typically consisted of exchanges between young people, often under the supervision of a parent or tutor, “in which knowledge was encouraged to emerge and errors in thinking were corrected through debate and systematic questioning” (204). Although such dialogues were designed to give an impression of spontaneity and freedom, Brown argues, they were in fact “carefully constructed to lead the child to the correct answer but with the appearance that they have indeed worked it out for themselves” (206).
suggestion is also reinforced by another realization prompted by the dialogue introduction, which is that although the book Caroline will receive is presented as a doll’s memoirs, its contents are much more likely to relate her own behavior than to the doll’s experiences.

Following the circulation conventions traditional of it-narratives, *Memoirs of a Doll* follows the steps of Violet, its doll narrator, who has the dubious pleasure of belonging to a number of girls throughout the course of her career. The story follows Violet from her earliest memories of waiting to be purchased in Mrs. Ainsworth’s toy shop, to being given away as a raffle prize, stolen in a park, taken away to a boarding school in France, witnessing the financial downfall of one of her mistresses’ family, being shipwrecked and later rescued in the West Indies, repeatedly falling into neglect, and finally meeting a cindery end. The story concludes with Violet’s obituary, which describes how her remains were found by the fire, consisting of “only a patch of wax burnt into the carpet” (169) and Violet’s last will and testament, which provides children with a few words of wisdom, culled from her years of observation as a doll. Throughout these various adventures, the story alternates roughly between the narratives of girls who have nothing to hide from Violet’s inquisitive eyes, and are therefore presented to the reader as examples to follow, and the girls who present negative examples and whose various vices Violet reveals.

It is Adelaide, one of Violet’s first mischievous mistresses, who draws attention to the doll’s role as an agent of surveillance. Adelaide is in the habit of punishing her dolls for her own blunders and unleashing her frustrations on them. Violet, who boasts about
being “the most impartial doll ever modelled” (30), has no compunctions about divulging these faults. She tells us that “Adelaide showed in her plays all the vices of her character” (34) and then goes on to narrate them in detail. She tells us how Adelaide liked to play the role of the lady while forcing another girl to play her servant and how when her lessons went poorly, she would “revenge herself on me for all the scoldings she so well deserved” (30). Tired of this exposure, Adelaide is happy to part with Violet when her cousin Susan admires it. “Oh! take her, my dear . . . and keep her till I ask for her; it will be so much less trouble for me, for that doll is the torment of my life, and I sometimes think she is a spy on all my actions” (34, emphasis mine).

Fittingly, Adelaide’s accusation appears immediately after her cousin Susan has been praising Violet’s looks, especially drawing attention to her life-like eyes. Susan is mesmerized by them: “such sweet eyes, just like real ones! How they shine!” (34). While for Susan the eyes only contribute to the doll’s general beauty and life-like nature, for Adelaide, they are reminders of her watchful rule. Unconsciously, perhaps, Adelaide appears to dread the doll’s eyes as the physical embodiment of her silent surveillance.

Although Adelaide is unique in making the connection between her doll’s eyes and its surveillance, she is not alone in her fear and hatred of dolls’ eyes. Indeed, doll literature is peppered with instances of violence instigated by the doll’s gaze. It is a doll’s eyes that inspire Geoffrey’s act of violence against the doll, Seraphina, in Julia Maitland’s The Doll and her Friends (1852). Although Geoffrey seems to have a general dislike for dolls, and indeed, as Seraphina notes, he “never lost an opportunity of expressing his mortal hatred to me,” it is the doll’s gaze that drives him to violence and leads him to
exclaim, “don’t stare so. I hate to have a doll’s eyes gogling at me” and then later threatening, “If you don’t leave off . . . I’ll poke out your eyes, as I did those of the ugly picture in my room. I won’t be stared at” (55). Geoffrey’s threat is also carried out by Artie in Clara Bradford’s Ethel’s Adventures in the Doll Country, when “a sudden impulse seizing him, he pushed both her eyes in” (172).

Lest we think ocular castration is limited to the province of boyhood malice, Vera, the girl heroine of The Morals and Emotions of a Doll (1897), reprimands Nancy, one of her old dolls, in front of her new doll Angelina (seemingly by way of warning) for her staring ways: “Really, Nancy, how can you stare so? . . . I thought I had at least taught you that it was rude to stare at strangers. You must surely know by this time that it was because of your staring ways that you lost your eye” (87). Unable to bear the gaze of her doll “from two eyes at once” Vera pushes one of her eyes in, “just to see if it would make any difference” (87). Whether prompted by a sudden impulse or rationalized as a way of teaching a doll a lesson in polite behavior, each of these instances of violence against dolls’ eyes suggests an unconscious fear of the doll’s impassive gaze.

Unlike Adelaide, Julia, one of the exemplary girls in Violet’s Memoirs, has internalized the gaze of surveillance so as to render it unnecessary. When Julia recovers from illness, Lady Campbell, Julia’s mother, asks her what kind of amusement she would like to celebrate her recovery. Lady Campbell, Violet is pleased to tell us, “promised beforehand to grant her request, well knowing that Julia would not propose anything extravagant or impossible” (51). In other words, Julia’s mother need not set any limitations upon her offer to her daughter because she knows that Julia will impose such
limitations herself, having properly internalized them and treating them as her own desires. The mother’s offer is therefore not really an offer, but an exercise for Julia in self-control. It is because of this internalization that Lady Campbell can say to her daughter, “Julia, study as if I were here, my love” (119) and that Cecelia, another of the story’s virtuous girls, can likewise congratulate herself on her self-vigilance, thinking, “My dear mamma, who is so delicate, can sleep peacefully because she knows her eldest behaves just as if she were present” (148). Once the young women have become truthful, careful, studious, considerate of others, and ladylike, they no longer have a need for their dolls’ surveillance.

The “bad girls” in the narrative, however, need to undergo a process of reform through exposure before they can attain such levels of self-control. In the case of Matilda, Violet’s next mistress, the story exposes her flaws in two ways. On a structural level, it reveals her secrets to the readers by means of the doll’s narrative, in essence confessing them for her, while on a thematic level, it drives Matilda to make her own confession of them within the plot. Matilda is doomed from the outset, since she only comes to possess Violet by stealing her from Julia the day before going off to a boarding school in France. This theft launches her into a series of secretive acts that plunge her lower and lower in the doll’s esteem. In order to avoid discovery, Matilda has to smuggle Violet into her house and hide her in her closet. Then, in order to pack the doll among her luggage without it being perceived, she must make room in a trunk full of preserves and other treats that her mother had set aside for her to take to school and then get rid of the removed items in order to hide the evidence. Secrecy is at the bottom of all her petty
cries. As the doll auspiciously tells us, Matilda “began by bolting the door” and concluded her transgression by hiding the key to the trunk used to smuggle Violet “in a ribbon from her neck” (90). The desire for privacy is presented as symptomatic of wrongdoing, for the doll sighs, “Ah! little girls, what very wicked things must be in progress, when you fear to be seen by your own mothers!” (92). Remarkably, Matilda’s mother remains completely oblivious to her daughter’s secretive mischief and is only consoled to think that her daughter seems more reconciled with her upcoming departure.

Young readers who identify with the characters in Violet’s narrative are therefore taught not only that no bad deed goes untold by their dollies, but also that dolls do not reciprocate the affections of children who misbehave. Writing about the transformations that object narrators undergo as they become a mainstay of nineteenth-century didactic children’s literature, Lynn Festa identifies a shift in the mode of instruction from satire to “emotional blackmail” (314). When the children characters in these stories act out, Festa argues, their “misbehaviour is recounted in a sorrowful tone, reinforced by a threatened withdrawal of the object’s affections” (314). Violet is well versed in the strategies that Festa describes, maintaining throughout the story the impossibility of really caring for Matilda, who has disappointed her with her deceptive behavior. The doll is not softened by Matilda’s fear of loneliness in being sent away alone to a new school or by the suffering that keeping her secret causes her. She even admits that she “had nothing to complain of in Matilda’s conduct” towards herself and considers Matilda a sharing and generous girl thanks to “the goodness of her heart” (99). And yet, for all this, Violet is coldly withholding in her affections, steadfastly holding to her position that “I should
have a bad opinion of a child who had any secrets from her mother, even in the case of
doing a good action” (99-100). Nor is there much hope for the future, for even if Matilda
eventually reforms, it will be too late for her to gain her doll’s affection. “Matilda may
become a worthy and upright child,” Violet tells us, “but you must remember that we
dolls have no time to wait for these changes, we require little girls to be amiable while
very young” (100). To drive her point home even further, Violet praises Marie, a girl who
“was never caught in such disorder” (101) and confesses that she “should dearly like to
have belonged to this sweet French girl” (102). Because Matilda is not privy to the doll’s
thoughts and her evaluations of her behavior, however, the lesson is imparted for the
benefit of the young readers of the Memoirs, who, perhaps identifying with Matilda, take
heed and see her story as a cautionary tale.

The valuable effect of the cautionary tale is also illustrated within the story, since
it is not until Matilda hears a cautionary tale unwittingly imparted by Mademoiselle
Agathe, the school nurse, that she is brought to the crisis of conscience that leads to her
confession. When she was a young girl, Mademoiselle Agathe tells Matilda, she too had a
doll that she would never part with. One day, the young Agathe wandered into the forest
and encountered a young boy who played music and had puppets that he could make
dance with strings. The boy entices Agathe to show him her doll, telling her that he can
make her dance, too, but dances off with her doll instead. The story concludes rather
grimly, as the boy is finally discovered hiding in a tree, and is then sentenced to be
imprisoned for a year on a diet consisting exclusively of bread and butter, for “he who
steals a doll is capable of anything else” (108). Although the boy’s sentence is later
reduced, Agathe tells us, his crime was used as an example to other children: “The little musician’s board and his puppets were, by the order of the mayor, nailed to the top of the same tree, in order that, if any boys given to pilfering should pass that way, they might be reminded of the ‘Boy and his Dancing Dolls’” (109).

Fearing a similar end, Matilda confesses her theft and returns the doll to Julia, her rightful owner. The story of the dancing dolls is therefore something like a cautionary tale within a cautionary tale, highlighting the didactic purpose of Gouraud’s text. Children who behave badly become cautionary tales – they become text. This narrative aspect of the doll’s discipline recalls Foucault’s description of disciplinary examination, which not only works to render subjects visible but furthermore engages them “in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (189). In endowing the dolls with subjectivity as narrators, the power dynamics of the girl-doll relationship are reversed so that dolls manipulate girls in their narratives just like girls would manipulate them through the narratives of their imaginative play. The girls are thus reduced to docile bodies, “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136) through discipline.

III. Ethel’s Rebellion, or, The Doll and the Birch Rod

All of these stories suggest the subtle ways in which the doll, an inanimate object, can be perceived as holding power over the live little girls that ought to be able to have complete control over them. In both Gouraud’s Memoirs of a Doll and Malles de Beaulieu’s The Well-Bred Doll, dolls are a part of the web of surveillance that at first monitors and
shapes girls, and then incorporates and assimilates them. The child reader’s imagination is co-opted into making dolls come alive, not as companions or friends, but as agents of their surveillance. In Clara Bradford’s *Ethel’s Adventures in the Doll Country* (1880), however, though the apparatus of surveillance is as present as ever and the doll’s narrative is employed to bring Ethel before the eyes of examination, the system fails to form or reform Ethel as a particular kind of subject, and she remains the same as ever.²⁰

By the standards of nineteenth-century doll literature, Ethel is a terrible doll owner. Ethel’s first fault is that she fails to conceive of her dolls as surrogate children—indeed, when one of her favorites cries for her “ma and pa” she is quite puzzled as to whom the doll could possibly want.²¹ Nor does Ethel partake in the practice sanctioned by didactic literature of exercising her sympathy by investing her dolls with sensations and feelings. On the contrary, Ethel punishes her dolls for her own blunders and even joins in her brothers’ games, trying her dolls by court-martial, sentencing them to death by hanging and later gleefully enacting that sentence. At the heart of Ethel’s presumed failure is the fact that rather than employing her imagination to bring dolls to life she cherishes them in their inert, material state and collects them with a great acquisitive spirit, complaining about possessing “only eleven” while aspiring “to have hundreds” (125). What Ethel does not know is that in treating her dolls as material objects designed

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²⁰ Ethel’s Adventures is not a doll memoir and focuses, as the title suggests on Ethel’s experiences rather than those of her dolls. The entire second half of the book is occupied, however, by an internal narrative, which is told in first-person from the perspective of Ethel’s “ma and pa” doll.

²¹ The doll in question is one of Ethel’s older dolls, who possesses auburn hair “arranged in the latest Parisian style” (121) and striking violet blue eyes. The doll has a mechanism that enables it to say “Ma-ma” and “Pa-Pa” so Ethel refers to it as her “Pa and Ma” doll.
for her amusement and manipulation, she threatens to divest them of the very disciplinary powers with which nineteenth-century doll literature often sought to endow them.

In the fantastic landscape of Doll Country, to which Ethel travels during a dream, the power reversal in the doll-girl relationship suggested in Gouraud’s story becomes real. Whereas before the doll’s consciousness was unknown to the other characters and only imagined by the reader, in Doll Country, it is an obvious reality – the dolls not only look and think but they walk and talk and exercise their power with great alacrity. The doll’s alliance with discipline also becomes literal, as the dolls, too dainty to enforce the discipline that they seek to induce by subtler means, outsource the actual exaction of punishment to the rods; “I warn you,” the fairy doll says to Ethel, “you must be very careful what you say in this country; the birch rods are our guardians, and they punish all incivility to us” (35). In a gendered division of labor that seems to parodically reflect the roles of nineteenth-century parenting, the fairy doll entices Ethel to be good by providing a virtuous example and shaming her where she falls short, while the rod, phallic and aggressive, means to reform her with the threat of physical punishment.72

Ethel’s behavior towards her dolls is not the only behavior that the fairy doll and the birch rod seek to reform. Ethel’s doll mistreatment is treated as a symptom, rather than as the entirety, of her problems. Throughout the course of the story, the rod constantly reprimands Ethel, showering her with injunctions and commands that often verge on the satirical. The bulk of the rod’s commands work towards limiting the agency

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72 This is not to suggest that fathers were solely responsible for children’s corporal punishment. For more on women’s participation in nineteenth-century birching practices as well as an excellent discussion of the erotic undertones of the rod’s threats to birch Ethel see Sharon Marcus’ Between Women (135-152).
of little girls. He considers that girls should not have minds of their own (“what business has a girl like you to think at all? you ought to allow others to think for you” [22]); that they should not employ their minds for imaginative purposes (“little girls shouldn’t pretend” [27]); or even be allowed to express opinions (“You have no business to have opinions [...] You are much too young” [43]). He also tells Ethel, “Have you not learnt the etiquette of polite society? – think what you please, but don’t put your thoughts into words” (42). If the rod is a mouthpiece for the educational precepts of his day, he makes them seem ridiculous and untenable.

Although some of the rod’s rules are not nonsense in themselves, his application of them is can be nonsensical. The rod always seems to want to apply his trite formulations of social behavior when they are least appropriate, as Ethel sometimes confusedly tries to point out. He yells at Ethel, “Don’t stare at people; it’s rude!” (28) after making it abundantly clear that he has been spying on her all along. Likewise, when they happen upon some flowers, the rod tells Ethel to look at them with her eyes and not with her hands, to which Ethel aptly responds that she had no intention of doing either, since she is in the habit of smelling with her nose. The rod’s ineptitude as a keeper and enforcer of politeness is further confirmed when he responds to Ethel’s complaint that he is being rude by saying, “Besides – I never was brought up – my business is to bring up little girls properly” (66). Impatient to crow about his responsibility in the upbringing of others, the rod is impervious to the irony in his admission of having had no upbringing of his own.
The satirical tone of the story also suggests the possible influence of Lewis Carroll, who had written several poems that mocked the persecution of children with rules of behavior and etiquette. Among them was “My Fairy,” a poem about a “nuisance fairy who pursues him with prohibitions” (Matthews 110) (which has more than a passing resemblance to Bradford’s doll Fairy), and another called “Rules and Regulations,” which includes such nonsense advice as “Drink tea, not coffee; never eat toffy” (quoted in Matthews 111). Such satirical highlighting of the arbitrariness of the rules of social behavior is also evident in the Alice books, according to Charles Matthews, and is shown to govern Wonderland, especially in characteristic moments such as The Mad Tea Party. For Matthews, “the arbitrary nonsense of such rules is perhaps a commentary on the arbitrary nature of etiquette” (111).  

The rods of Doll Country are particular, however, in that although they embody traditional power as the ultimate symbols of corporal punishment, they also participate in a more Foucauldian disciplinary mode. One of the rods follows Ethel, constantly hovering above her, disappearing and reappearing to remind her of his presence though he is almost always out of sight. This rod ironically becomes a disembodied disciplinarian voice from the ether – Ethel can hear his chiding voice but she cannot see him. The trick is to be invisible while constantly making his presence known. “I have not left your side, though sometimes I am invisible to you” (49), he tells her. He reminds her too of his constant observation, “my eye is upon you!” (56) and rather more eerily, “I am

73 Other possible influences might include Samuel Butler’s dystopia Erewhon (1872) and W.S. Gilbert’s ballad “My Dream,” which describes the experience of going to sleep and awakening in Topsyтурveydom, a land “Where vice is virtue—virtue, vice” and “Where right is wrong and wrong is right.”
here! – re-e-e-member me!” (100). The birch rod is himself quite conscious of his
panopticism, explicitly telling Ethel, “I have no wish to be forgotten, and you are sure to
behave yourself, when you know a birch rod is hanging over your head” (50).

Just as in the previous stories, eyes continue to be the loci of surveillance. They
spring out of unexpected places and unexpected objects, causing Ethel to exclaim of
some Chinese lanterns, “I did not know before that they had eyes” (8). The rods’
watchful presence is also marked by their enormous green eyes; wherever Ethel goes she
sees “hundreds of eyes looking at her” (16). Driving down a country lane that is hedged
on either side by rows of birch rods, Ethel cannot help but notice that “their green eyes
were open, and they stared at Ethel as she passed, and said, in stern tones, ‘Be civil, or
beware of us’” (37). The emphasis on the birch rod’s visual aggression on Ethel is also
evident in one of T. Pym’s74 illustrations of the story (figure 6), where the birch rod’s
gaze is visually represented by rays darting from his eyes towards Ethel, who stands
clearly outnumbered.

74 The gender neutral T. Pym was a pseudonym for the female illustrator Clara Creed (1876-1964) who
illustrated, among other works, Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen.*
Figure 6. Ethel and the Birch Rod. From Clara Bradford’s Ethel’s Adventures in the Doll Country.
Ethel’s ability to resist the disciplining gaze of both the doll and the rod, as we shall see, hinges on her ability to subvert the traditional association of the gaze with power. Instigated by her nurse’s command that she shut her eyes and go to sleep, Ethel launches into a series of thoughts about the relationship between sight and power. “All very well for nurse to say, ‘Go to sleep,’ says Ethel to herself. “How can I? I don’t feel a bit sleepy. My eyes won’t shut, and I can’t sleep with them open!” (3). With these words Ethel is led down a strange succession of associative images and thoughts, whose lack of logic suggests that she is gradually falling asleep.

Ethel begins by imagining what it would be like if people, like dolls, were unable to shut their own eyes and had to rely on others to close them for them. “How funny people would look lying in bed asleep, with wide-open eyes!” she ponders, “just like great big dolls!” (3). While Ethel at first wonders what it would be like to experience this passivity, her thoughts quickly change direction so that she imagines herself as the only agent in a passive world, “What fun it would be, too, if no one could shut my brothers’ eyes but myself!” (3). Whereas in Gouraud’s Memoirs Violet gains her power from having her eyes constantly open, Ethel re-interprets this as a doll’s inability to shut her eyes and as a sign of passivity and weakness. Ethel imagines the powerlessness of the position, thinking that “silly little midges, or something, would be sure to fly in” (3). The image of the passive open eye, unable to protect itself from the invasion of an insect

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75 One of the many similarities between Ethel’s Adventures in the Doll Country (1880) and Lewis Carroll’s Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) is that both adventures begin by their heroines falling asleep and transition from their waking thoughts into their surreal adventures unaware that they are dreaming. As both Sharon Marcus (150) and Victoria Ford Smith (194) have noted, there are many other similarities. These include the disorienting dream logic of the land they visit and the fact that both Ethel and Alice encounter a Queen that is active in administering justice.
eerily illustrates not only the frightening passivity of a trapped consciousness unable to react to the world that acts on it, but also turns the phallic aggression of the gaze against itself. Ethel then sadistically imagines the punitive applications of having this power and imagines using it to punish her brothers who Ethel pictures “beseech of me to relent” while she would “creep into their room, to see how they looked.” In fantasizing about gazing on their suffering as they are painfully reduced to doll-like passivity, she transforms for herself the doll’s passive gaze into a more aggressive, penetrating gaze.\(^{76}\)

Ethel’s fantasy, with its dream logic and displacement, presents an important variation on traditional ways of understanding the relationship between the gaze and power. The person who sees can render others into objects of his or her gaze. And, as Foucault contends, the gaze is also associated with the idea of surveillance, which is designed to keep subjects in check, and which is precisely what gives Violet the power and authority that she holds in Gouraud’s Memoirs. Later on in the book, the “ma and pa” doll relates a conversion she has with the lady doll, Ethel’s new favorite, on the subject:

‘I am weary, please shut your eyes and go to sleep.’
‘Shut my eyes?!’ she exclaimed, ‘certainly not.’
‘Do you mean to tell me,’ I said, ‘that you sleep with them open? how dreadful! All first-class dolls are able to close their eyes, I believe.’\(^{77}\)

\(^{76}\) There is also an element of emasculation involved in Ethel’s fantasy that recalls Freud’s interpretation of children’s eye-related fears to fears of castration. In his famous interpretation of Hoffmann’s tale in his essay on the uncanny, Freud reads Nathaniel’s fears about eyes as standing for his fear of castration: “We know from psycho-analytic experience, however, that the fear of losing one’s eyes is a terrible one in children. . . A study of dreams, fantasies and myths has taught us that anxiety about one’s eyes, the fear of going blind, is often enough a substitute for the dread of being castrated. The self-blinding of the mythical criminal, Oedipus, was simply a mitigated form of punishment of castration” (938). Although Ethel does not imagine harming her brothers’ eyes, her fantasy of manipulation does take away their power and emasculates them just as she emasculates the rod by making a mockery of his gaze.

\(^{77}\) The “ma and pa” doll is referring to more modern dolls that had a mechanism that allowed their eyes to open and close from the outside by means by moving a wire, or whose eyes shut when the doll was laid down.
‘I did not say I could not close them,’ she replied, ‘but I prefer to keep them open.’
‘Nonsense,’ I replied, ‘no one would sleep with them open from choice.’
‘I do,’ she answered, ‘because you miss so much when you close your eyes, and I like to see what is going on around me’
‘Then of course you never really sleep,’ I said. (165)

In Ethel’s musings, however, to see constantly is to be unable to close one’s eyes, which in turn is to passively lack control over one’s own body, and to be subject to the wills and whims of others. The very ability that gives dolls the power of surveillance over girls is converted by Ethel into the ultimate sign of passivity and one that she imagines herself manipulating. Furthermore, if we consider, as Laura Mulvey does, that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance” the pleasures of looking have been “split between active/male and passive/female” (2186), Ethel is appropriating for herself a traditionally male source of power.78

In view of this, then, it is not surprising that Ethel is resistant to the birch rod’s disciplinary threats. If the rod is meant to frighten her into submission through his relentless surveillance, Ethel misses the point and only considers his intermittently invisible presence a nuisance, often to comic effect. At one point, for instance, Ethel reprimands the rod for eavesdropping. She taunts him, “why don’t you come out, and show yourself like a man?” forcing the rod to produce an answer that makes him sound both emasculated and silly, “Because I’m not a man – I’m a Rod” (36). Ethel disarms the rod’s power by dismissing him as a sheer source of irritation, complaining, “am I never to be without your company?”(40) or asking him to “Do be quiet” (43). Ethel is equally

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78 Of course, this is complicated when we consider that in Gouraud’s story it is a distinctly female doll that objectifies girls with her gaze. One could also argue that the birch rods are only executing this surveillance in service of the dolls, to whom they are subordinate in the story.
dismissive of her dolls’ acts of espionage, which she perceives as mere impudence. “This is certainly very pleasant,” she says full of indignation, “to hear yourself talked about by those bits of dolls” (90).

Even the Fairy doll has no effect on Ethel’s attitude. When she gravely reprimands Ethel and tells her that the dolls’ reports should be used as an opportunity to learn a lesson and that surely the dolls would not speak of her in such a way without cause, Ethel only responds by saying, “Cause or no cause, it is very presuming of them to speak of me” (90). But just as in Gouraud’s *Memoirs*, dolls can betray the weaknesses of their mistresses even without uttering a word. When the fairy doll allows Ethel to enter Doll Country, she shows her a progression of her dolls, who have been invited by the doll Queen to a tea party. The dolls parading before Ethel paint a rather grim picture: “some were untidy and dilapidated – some without arms, or hair, and some without eyes” while “others had bandages round their heads to keep them together” (79). Rather than feeling sorry for her dolls, however, Ethel is stricken by the absurdity of the situation, “Just fancy those wretched objects going to a garden party!” (79) she exclaims.

If Gouraud presents us with a model reader in *Memoirs of a Doll*, one that earnestly identifies with the characters in the story and monitors her own behavior as a result, in Ethel’s character Bradford proposes an alternative, more skeptical reader. Florry, Ethel’s cousin, treats her dolls with love and respect and represents almost to parodic perfection the kind of readership implied by stories such as Gouraud’s. She delights in the stories of Hans Christian Andersen, where all manner of things come to life, and is correspondingly cautious of her dolls. “I never tire of the book,” she says,
“and it does me a great deal of good, for whenever I feel inclined to be angry with my dolls I think of what they may say of me in the night” (164). But Ethel does not share Florry’s admiration for animate toys and has no inclination to be so bullied about by her dolls. When Florry shares with Ethel her fear of her dolls’ surveillance, Ethel remains undaunted, declaring, “I shouldn’t mind what they complained of me,” and redirecting the gaze of surveillance against them, threatens to get up in the middle of the night to listen at the nursery door and catch them at it (164).

Ethel continues to exhibit this rebellious attitude when she is brought before the Queen of Doll Country to be accused by her mistreated “Pa and Ma” doll. In a queer reversal of Ethel and her brothers’ pretend court-martial trial of her doll, it is now Ethel who stands small and defenseless before the court. The way in which Ethel is made to listen to “Pa and Ma” doll’s incriminating narrative is very similar to the way in which Violet’s narrative would have been intended to be heard by little Mary from the story’s introductory play. However, where Gouraud imagines or seeks to create a reader who will listen to the doll’s narrative with interest and learn from the lessons imparted, Ethel is resistant. Like Violet and many other dolls before her, the “Pa and Ma” doll presents a narrative that incriminates Ethel, exposes her flaws, and turns her over for discipline. And just as with Violet’s indictment of Matilda, this reversal takes the shape of a Foucauldian examination, whereby “it is the ‘subjects’ who are presented as ‘objects’ to the observation of a power that was manifested only by its gaze” (188).

The incriminating narrative of the mistreated doll functions not only as an indictment on Ethel, but is also meant to work on an emotional level by making Ethel feel
sympathy for her doll and move her to feel guilty for her past behavior. But the first-
person doll narrative, which can be so moving in other doll memoirs,\textsuperscript{79} seems in this story to be a mere going through the motions. Occupying the entire second half of the book, the doll’s tale, far from evincing sympathy comes across as rather lengthy and decidedly maudlin. Anticipating this, Ethel refuses to hear the doll’s story from the very start, telling the doll Queen, “I don’t want to listen to her string of complaints” (119). Yet listen Ethel must. And as a further limit on her agency, Ethel is ordered to listen to the doll’s narrative in complete silence and threatened with the birch rod’s punishment should she speak while the doll presents her incriminating narrative. This setting, which as Victoria Ford Smith notes, replicates and inverts “the doll-girl relationship of the speaking and the silent, the active and the passive” (178), puts Ethel in a doll-like passive position.\textsuperscript{80} Strikingly, however, the fact that Ethel is forced to listen in silence does not stop her from registering her displeasure. When the doll is recounting her tragic hanging, Ethel begins “to laugh softly to herself as at some amusing recollection” (140). Making a virtue out of necessity, Ethel challenges the rod with her quiet, subversive laughter, and looks at him as if to say “I know you’d like me to speak, so that you might punish me, but I won’t thus please you” (142). Through laughter, Ethel is able not only to circumvent the prohibition but also to make a mockery of it.

\textsuperscript{79} Some examples of this are Victoria-Bess: The Ups and Downs of a Doll’s Life by “Brenda,” The Doll and Her Friends; Or, Memoirs of the Lady Seraphina by Julia Maitland, and Margaret Gatty’s Aunt Sally’s Life.

\textsuperscript{80} Focusing on the relationship between power and size in the girl-doll relationship, Victoria Ford Smith reads Ethel’s Adventures as an example of “the tyranny of the gigantic over the miniature” and the way in which this relationship is reversed in the story, “where a series of distortions of size allow the long-abused dolls to exact their revenge” (175).
This resistance prevents Ethel from following the footsteps of Mary, Adelaide, Matilda and Florry, all of whom succumb, in one way or another, to the disciplinary power of the doll. Unlike them, Ethel does not surrender to the dolls’ plotting and is able to remain in control of her own story. Writing about doll tales, Sharon Marcus expresses skepticism about presenting dolls as dictating the behavior of girls; “to endow dolls with the power to foist passivity on girls paradoxically assumes that dolls are supernaturally active and women and girls already so passive that they could hardly be made more so” (158). Marcus’s objection is important because it puts the relationship between girls and dolls in due perspective. However, doll narratives complicate this scenario. By endowing dolls with a voice, and consequently with subjectivity, authors of doll narratives did make dolls come to life. And when dolls came to life, they often did threaten to diminish the agency of the girls who were meant to assert themselves in playing with them.

This threat is perhaps best expressed by one of the dolls in F.S. Janet Burne’s *Sybil’s Dutch Dolls* (1887), who after springing to life explains to Sybil the rules of this new doll-imposed world order: “*We* shall play with *you*, and *you* will have mind what *we* tell you” (18). Sybil, who has just purchased five-hundred farthing dolls in an act of rash and exuberant but also empowering consumption will learn her lesson throughout the rest of the story and will be taught in the end to return to her old doll Evangeline, whom Sybil must love and pet “like a real *live* child” (173, emphasis mine). The money she had spent on her army of wooden dolls Sybil finally decides, in an act of contrition that proves her reformation, to donate to charity, for “the children who sleep five in a bed” (174). Although Sybil is ultimately reformed so that by the end of the story she is engaging in
appropriate doll play, it is important to note that her mode of rebellion consists, like Ethel’s, of an attitude of material consumption towards dolls.

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that what allows Ethel to emerge from Doll Country unreformed is her staunch refusal to see dolls as living things to which particular deference is owed. Even though Ethel has a lively imagination, she does not want to apply that imagination towards conceiving of her dolls as endowed with life or feelings. Sharon Marcus reads *Ethel’s Adventures* as an example of dolls functioning in literature not as agents of acculturation, but as objects that allow girls to exercise their agencies. However, in making her argument Marcus interprets Ethel’s behavior as stemming from a sadistic impulse. She writes: “Ethel claims the right to inflict suffering on a doll to whom she attributes sentience, precisely because the doll’s imagined pain yields the girl pleasure” (152). I would argue that this is not exactly the case. Certainly, Ethel derives pleasure from putting the doll through a number of punitive scenarios, but it is precisely because she does not attribute sentience to the doll that she thinks herself free to do so. When her brothers suggest that they hang the doll, Ethel hesitates at first, and it is only when she remembers that “It is only to be done to a doll, and dolls can’t feel” (139) that she agrees to the game. Ethel is therefore neither unusually cruel nor acting out on some unconscious source of anger, but seems rather to offer a corrective of common sense to the stories that animate dolls to the detriment of the girls who would play with them.

Ethel puts dolls back in their place – as objects.

This gives her great power over the dolls and birch rods of Doll Country. When the rod brags about his ability to reform little girls with “a few applications of me” (23),
Ethel redirects the threat of physical punishment back to him, saying to him: “If I had you in my nursery I would burn you” (23). She seems prepared to do the same with her other toys, declaring: “I don’t care for old broken toys! I would burn them if they came back!” (35). Ethel’s power over the doll and the rod lies in her human superiority to their inert materiality. Bringing them to life through the imagination only reduces the scope of her power over them and renders her vulnerable to their tyranny. In the illogical landscape of dreams, the rod may have power over Ethel, but Ethel is conscious of the fact that as soon as she returns to the world of her nursery (or, though she is not aware of it, as soon as she awakes from her dream), the rod will be nothing more than a piece of wood and both its authority and the doll’s will have vanished for ever.

This point is reinforced by the conclusion of the story, where Ethel, having awakened from her dream just as the rod was about to strike her, runs to her cupboard to see if all her dolls are in place. Having ascertained that they are all still in her possession, she remembers her dream and the characters in it, recalling that “the prettiest thing there was a sweet little fairy doll” only to immediately declare “and I will try to get one like it” (184). This line, which provides the closing of the story, suggests that Ethel’s dream has done nothing to put a damper on her appetite for doll consumption. In expressing her desire to buy a fairy doll, Ethel is reasserting herself in the doll-girl power structure, positioning herself as a purchaser and an owner rather than as a pawn at the mercy of the disciplinary alliances of the doll and the birch rod.

The idea that a failure of the imagination could be liberating may, of course, strike us as highly ironic. The imagination, in its ability to transcend reality and to escape the
strictures of both the laws of nature and the rules of society, is understood as the ultimate liberating force, rather than as a tool for mental confinement. But when the imagination is co-opted for didactic purposes, the solution seems to lie in refusing to imagine. In refusing to imagine her dolls’ animation Ethel divests them of the power that they would otherwise hold over her. It is therefore Ethel’s rebellious and subversive literal-mindedness and that enables her to emerge victorious.
Chapter 3:
Rampant Modernizations: The Luxury Doll, the Girl of the Period and
the Sensational Heroine

Around the middle of the nineteenth century a new kind of doll was born. Her features
were more realistic and her demeanor more refined. She wore dresses made from the
finest fabrics cut according to the latest fashions and possessed every accessory that a
fashionable woman could possibly require. She was a fine lady, and, though she was
often found in the best neighborhoods in London, she typically hailed from Paris, or at
least had every appearance of being well acquainted with its fashions. The luxury doll,
most popular between 1860 and 1880, was characterized by her association with
extravagance and display. Her mission, according to Juliette Peers, was to “improve upon
the stylized, relatively crude and folkloric doll formats pre 1850” and to “wear glorious
clothes” (36).

Although luxury dolls were produced in other countries, they were primarily
associated with France, where the most famous doll designers, among them Huret, Bru,
Jumeau and Steiner,81 were producing the most sophisticated dolls (two examples of
these dolls can be seen in figures 7 and 8). Their link to France also had to do with the

81 Jules Nicholas Steiner (not to be confused with late nineteenth-century German doll-manufacturer
Hermann Steiner).
city’s renown for fashion. In some ways, the luxury doll could be considered a descendant of fashion dolls or Pandoras, which acted as “fashion emissaries” during the period between the renaissance and the eighteenth century, before designs could be shared in print (Peers 15-6). The luxury doll phenomenon, however, was not exclusively French. The dolls of celebrated English doll-maker Augusta Montanari, for instance, which were displayed at the Great Exhibition of 1851, would certainly have been classed among them, and so would many of the costly dolls sold at high-end toy shops such as Cremer’s of Regent Street. English dolls, in particular wax dolls, also appear to have enjoyed great popularity in Paris, where they were considered “chic and exclusive” (Peers 51). For the purposes of this chapter, I use the term luxury doll to include French fashion dolls as well as the more sophisticated English wax dolls, which participated in the same trend towards fashion and display and were equally sophisticated in appearance.

Exclusive by definition, the luxury doll was by no means in a position to crowd out of the market the more modest and financially accessible dolls with which most girls in fact continued to play. Indeed, most children could only afford to admire luxury dolls from afar, either in exhibitions or through the glass panes of elegant window displays in

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82 As Peer notes, little is known about these fashion dolls since no physical examples seem to remain and we know of them only through anecdotal evidence. While some sources suggest these dolls were life-size, so that the garments could be used by women or serve as templates, other evidence suggests that at least some were made in miniature size (Peers 16). According to doll historian Max von Boehn, these dolls fulfilled a role at a time when no other mode of communication was available. They thrived “when the press was non-existent, long before the invention of such mechanical means of reproduction as the woodcut and copperplate” and disappeared in the late eighteenth century when their role was fulfilled by fashion journals (136).

83 Some doll historians and collectors would refer to these French dolls as fashion dolls. Because there is some ambivalence about what this term actually designates and because I am talking about a more inclusive phenomenon I refer to them as luxury dolls instead.
London and Paris shops. But the luxury doll did epitomize a general trend in doll-making that increasingly saw the doll as aspirational consumer ideal, a trend, it is worth mentioning, that continues with us today. More importantly, these new dolls became the emblems of a new generation of girls and women who would reshape the meaning of femininity.

The rise of the luxury doll not only coincided with the growth of a culture surrounding shopping (in which women were seen as the prime agents of consumption) but also ushered in a shift in Victorian thinking about dolls from innocent playthings and didactic tools to consumer objects. Dolls were no longer perceived as toys that would inculcate domestic values but as shiny commodities that would lure little girls into lives driven by the desires instilled by this emerging culture of consumption. This chapter examines not only how these new dolls were accused of having a pernicious influence on innocent girlhood but also the ways in which dolls themselves became vehicles for critiquing the changes in femininity that vocal critics of the various embodiments new womanhood, such as Eliza Lynn Linton, condemned in that “rampant modernization,” the infamous girl of the period. As beautiful husks without interiority, dolls (and luxury dolls in particular) provided critics with a vocabulary with which to condemn the changes in femininity that they saw as damaging to the very fabric of English domestic life. I conclude the chapter with an examination of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley, who, as a sensational heroine, epitomizes the doll-woman as femme fatale, and who illustrates better than any other character in literature the dangers that the doll of the period posed to cherished traditional ideals of class and gender.
Figure 7. Nineteen-inch “Portrait” Jumeau doll. Kid leather body, bisque head, pierced ears and mohair wig. Dressed in silk cut velvet and straw hat. Image courtesy of the Michael Canadas and David Robinson Collection.

Figure 8. Thirty-one inch Jumeau doll. Kid leather body, bisque head, pierced paper-weight eyes, and mohair wig. Dressed in camel and black silk ensemble with fitted bodice and prominent bustle and wearing beaded and jet jewelry. Image courtesy of the Michael Canadas and David Robinson Collection.
I. Material Idols

Victorian luxury dolls gave rise to much criticism. As one journalist reporting on the newest trends in Paris writes, these dolls are “very pretty, certainly” but they are emphatically “not the kind of doll one would wish one’s own little daughter to pet, and hug, and cherish” (emphasis mine). These new dolls, the reporter continues, are not at all “the thing to teach our little ones to be mothers” (“Our Paris Letter” 78). Another critic of the Parisian luxury doll enigmatically writes, “I tremble when I think of the lesson your Exhibition doll inculcates” (The Ladies’ Treasury). As such anxious criticisms hint, but never explicitly state, the luxury doll, with its emphasis on the pleasures of luxurious fabrics, coquetry, and dressing and undressing, seemed to have been associated in the minds of many with sexual availability and promiscuity. At the root of this anxiety was the idea that the emphasis on external beauty that these dolls encouraged was inversely proportional to inner virtue.

The problem with luxury dolls was that in their unprecedented material splendor, they were objects worthy of admiration in themselves. Up until this point, Victorians had celebrated dolls not for what they were or how they looked, but for the uses to which they could be put and for the virtues they were thought capable of inculcating. Dolls were dummies on which little girls could practice their sewing skills, makeshift babies on which to lavish their maternal instincts, even actors with which to enact their various imaginative plots. Luxury dolls had no such utilitarian purposes to fulfill; they were merely beautiful, ostentatiously lavish objects that had no other use than to be coveted or
possessed. This material admiration of dolls interfered with the Victorian idealization of the doll as an object perplexingly exempt from any criticisms it might have drawn as a commodity designed for consumption by children. It was a commodity, pure and simple, and as such, it not only lacked the ability to imbue young girls with various virtues but threatened to redirect their attention from abstract questions of inner virtue to the material allures of consumption, surface and materiality.

These concerns were not entirely new. As early as 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft had already criticized dolls in *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for their tendency to draw girls’ attentions away from more substantial occupations to superficial concerns about beauty and fashion. Wollstonecraft worried that the girl’s dedication to the doll’s external qualities, to “dress up her doll, to make its sleeve-knots, its flounces, its headdress, etc.” would translate into a desire in little girls “to decorate themselves” (84). Maria Edgeworth would express a similar concern six years later in *Practical Education* (1798). Although Edgeworth acknowledged the utility of dolls as “the means of inspiring girls with a taste for neatness in dress, and with a desire to make those things for themselves for which women are usually dependant upon milliners,” she cautioned against their potential to promote vanity and encouraged mothers to watch their daughters carefully for “the first symptoms of a love of finery and fashion” (15).

Victorians had been able to counter these arguments by emphasizing the doll’s utility as a medium for the development of more abstract qualities, and de-emphasizing the doll’s attractiveness as an object. Retroactively at least, if the dolls of the past were

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84 Although the book was co-authored by Maria with her father Richard, as the preface to the book makes clear, the chapter on toys was written by Maria herself.
not presented as outright ugly, they were at the very least considered plain. In describing
the dolls that Queen Victoria had collected as a girl, Low delights in describing their
homely appearance. Her dolls Low blankly identifies as “not aesthetically beautiful”;
they are the kinds of dolls which would be “regarded with scorn by the average Board
school girl of today” (235). In describing a group of small dolls representing children of
aristocratic personages, Low exclaims that they are “dressed by the Princess with a
simplicity that would as much delight the Rational Dress Society as it would pain the
aesthetic sensibilities of a Parisian mother” (236). The young princess’s choice of dress is
thus seen as offering insight not only into the future monarch’s judiciousness, but also her
Englishness, in her rejection of French fashion and excess. The exemplary simplicity of
the monarch’s dolls stems, for Low, from a preference for “the pleasures of the
imagination” – the “planning, creating and achieving” which she infers gave the Queen
more pleasure than the finest dolls could ever have done.85

There was a distinct sense of nostalgia for the old dolls of yore as if they
represented happier, simpler times. “Where are the dolls with red dabs for mouths and
bodies composed of one thick pink-kid sausage” (598), asks one writer for the London
Review with seriocomic bathos. For many, the complaint was that these new dolls were
so materially complete that they left nothing to the child’s imagination. In her childhood

85 The young Victoria’s doll play was not only associated with a judicious attitude towards attire but also
with self-sacrifice. In 1887, Alfred T. Story writes a tale for Quiver in 1897 in which the young Victoria, on
her way to purchase a beautiful doll, sees a poor man on the street and decides to give to him the money
that she would have spent on a frivolous doll. This image of Victoria as willing to sacrifice material luxury
for the wellbeing of one of her subjects would have played in stark contrast to the image the English might
have of the excesses associated with the Second French Empire, and in particular with Empress Eugénie,
whose connection with the famous couturier, Charles Worth, was well known and frequently discussed and
who herself became the model for many luxury doll designs (Peers 57).
memoirs, *The One I Knew the Best of All* (1893), Frances Hodgson Burnett bemoans the loss of the old, simpler dolls of her youth. “To-day,” she writes, “dolls have cheeks and noses and lips and brows, they look smiling or pensive, childlike or sophisticated” but before “no doll was guilty of looking anything at all” (50). These new dolls, Burnett believes, leave nothing to the imagination and therefore require no mental exertion or creativity on the part of the child whose only recourse is to admire them. This idea is also echoed, among many others, by Otto Ernst who argues in his book, *Dolls – Dead and Alive* (1911), that “a plaything has to be incomplete if it is to be satisfactory, and that those very cleverly thought-out toys that leave nothing for the child to do are of no value at all” (24).

The debate over the doll’s didactic value and the increasingly accepted opinion that the new dolls had none, go to the core of what Teresa Michaels calls “the nineteenth-century preoccupation with distinguishing between the Good Toy – the symbol and instrument of childhood innocence, freedom, intellectual and emotional development, and ultimate professional success – and its evil twin, the corrupting, commercial Bad Toy” (30). As the nineteenth century wore on, the doll began to gain a more negative reputation as a “Bad Toy” that could dangerously initiate the child into “the pleasures of ownership” (32). This had to do in part with the development of a dedicated doll industry. As Michaels notes, the development of toys as items designed exclusively for the purposes of play and meant to be possessed by the child rather than by the parent or

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86 Indeed, Edgeworth’s concern with this distinction can also be perceived in her championing of “rational toy shops” which would sell such things as tools, modelling clay, and other such items rather than automata and elaborately dressed dolls.
family “helped children develop a sense of private property” (33). Unlike the spools of wool and other regular household items that Edgeworth advocated for play, “Toys – objects given by parents to children to play with – were for a child’s exclusive use. He or she owned toys, whereas they had formerly shared playthings” (Michaels 33). While the older dolls had somehow elided the criticism that might have befallen them as commercial products created for the use of children, luxury dolls could no longer avoid their fate as objects.

Figure 9. “Dolls I have Known” from *Little Folks* (date unknown).

The complaints against luxury dolls brought together two camps that might otherwise have been thought of as being in opposition to each other: those who feared the luxury doll would undo its didactic value in instilling feminine and maternal virtues, and
those who feared the doll would extinguish the doll’s imaginative potential. While the first group was interested in the doll’s ability to mold girls’ characters, in a sense restricting them, the latter group was interested in the doll’s liberating potential by transcending the strictures of both reality and social norms. What both of these had in common was a concern that these new-fangled luxury dolls would do nothing but encourage consumerism, which was perceived by one set as unfeminine, and by the other, as simply unimaginative.

These critics converged on one matter: that these aesthetically-pleasing new dolls encouraged consumerism. As Krista Lysak shows, the middle years of the nineteenth-century saw a huge revolution in the development of consumer culture. She writes:

The material conditions of Victorian shopping were an effect of an expanded industrial and commercial age, including nineteenth-century developments in mass production and circulation, new practices in advertising, an increase in the flow of capital associated with imperial expansion, and the growth of the middle classes and their unprecedented access to expendable income. (6)

Children were not excluded from the pleasures of consumption that this revolution brought about. With the emergence of shops specializing in products specifically targeted at children, such as dolls, dolls’ clothes and accessories, and other toys, children were as much subject to the lures of the shop window as adults were. Toys were also increasingly being sold at places such as the Soho Bazaar or the Lowther or Burlington Arcades (King 190).

The verse that accompanied an illustration by Crane captures the allure of such places for children:

Dolls that smile and dolls that cry,  
Soldiers ready for parade,
All are here for you to buy
In this wonderful Arcade.

Toys are hanging up on strings,
Toys are laid in tempting rows,
And each shop with pretty things,
Is so full it overflows. (quoted in King 190)

But it was the well-lit and lavish displays of the shop windows that were perhaps the most appealing. As one character in Celestine and Sally remarks, “I used to be mortal fond of looking at the shops when I was a little girl, to be sure!” (14). She recalls the spectacle provided by “the streets bright with gas, not from the street lamps, which were anything but brilliant, but from the dazzling lights in shop windows, where most attractive displays of all kinds of articles served both to entice customers and to amuse those who had no intention of becoming purchasers, for either lack of money or of inclination to buy” (16). In London, children could visit toy specialist shops such as Cremer’s, described by one writer in The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine as Merlin, a magician, King of Lilliput, and “monarch of this world in miniature” (“Lilliput in Regent Street” 361), and other famous shops such as Noah’s Ark. In Paris, Juliette Peers produces an astounding list of thirteen shops that sold dolls to the public, among them the famous Au Caliphe de Bagdad, which I discuss later in this chapter.87

The pleasures of the visit to Cremer’s are best described in Georgina Castle Smith’s Victoria-Bess (1879), which describes the experience from the doll’s perspective. Victoria-Bess is “a Paris doll,” we are told, and costs the extravagant sum of three

guineas “as she stands” and five “with a wardrobe” (28). The doll is quite vain about her appearances. She begins her memoirs by reminiscing about her glory days of “standing up in a large glass case” at the centre of the toyshop’s window display, “the admired and coveted of every little girl-child who passed down Regent Street” (15). Anticipating the reader’s wish to know about her appearance – “What did I look like?” – she provides a full description:

My face, neck, arms, and legs were of the finest wax, dimpled where dimples ought to be, and modeled to perfection after the most approved forms of feminine beauty. My hair was golden, streaming down my back, and fastened with a coloured ribbon tied in a bow at the side. My eyes were bluer than the bluest April skies, shaded by lashes thick and long. My lips were “oh! ruddier than the cherry’s!” and my little ears were like delicate pink shells, nestling under hair which rippled daintily over them into a golden glory in the back. (15)

The doll is equally eloquent on the matter of her attire:

Little girls will want to know how I was dressed. I was arrayed in the pinkest of pink silks, flounced up to my waist, the skirt standing out very much, and showing underneath a petticoat of the finest white cambric, tucked and befrilled and ornamented to such an extravagant extent. . . I wore white thread stockings, which were so fine as to shew the pink wax through, and on my feet were dainty little pink kid boots, very high in the ankle, with two tassels in front, and military heels, which had been made in Paris especially to fit me. I had a row of tiny seed pearls around my neck, and a pink ribbon, you know, in my hair. (16)

Clearly, Victoria-Bess is intent on demonstrating that she is not just any doll, she is a luxury doll.

After much futile admiration, Victoria-Bess eventually finds her match – and a purchaser – in a girl as vain and as luxuriously attired as she. Angela is so like a doll herself that Victoria-Bess thinks her “a most lovely little object” (26). Her clothes, just like the doll’s, are described in minute detail, and Victoria-Bess recognizes her as a kindred spirit when she notices that Angela had “very high French boots like mine, only
hers were of black kid and mine of pink” (26). Although Angela’s grandmother briefly tries to persuade her that perhaps they need not buy her doll any clothes, as a modern girl, Angela knows better. “I couldn’t possibly take her out in the Park dressed as she is now,” she argues, “She must have a proper cloak and bonnet, Granny, and a night dress, and all that” (28). By the time Angela leaves Cremer’s she has acquired for her doll a wardrobe that includes a walking dress and bonnet, an indoor costume, a second set of underclothes, walking boots, gloves, a brush, a comb, and “numerous articles for the toilet” all enclosed within the “daintiest little leather trunk you ever saw” (28-9). The doll was no longer the single object a girl would desire to consume, but the first of many. For the less extravagant pocket, dolls could also be purchased with ready-made trunks containing accessories and clothes, as shown on figure 10.

Figure 10. Miss Dollie Daisie Dimple. From Chambers’s Magazine, September 29, 1888.
It was precisely this need for a large and extravagant trousseau that solidified the luxury doll’s, and in particular the French doll’s, association with what Juliette Peers calls “consumerist promiscuity” (42). The writer of “Fashionable Dolls,” an article that appeared in *The London Reader* in March 31, 1877, describes this very phenomenon:

> It is an amusing proceeding to buy a doll and to note how her ladyship’s wants are well supplied. First she must be dressed, and you are called upon to select what style of under-garments you would prefer, whether embroidered, trimmed with lace, or plain, and the tiny articles are produced, folded and tied up with blue ribbons in packages of half-a-dozen each, exactly as they are in real-life lingerie. The dresses are charming, all silk or velvet, sometimes trimmed with real lace and fashioned as stylishly as Worth himself could do. . . Then mademoiselle must have her poodle and her prayer-book, her writing case with letter and note paper, stamped with her monogram, her work-box and her jewel-case, her set of furs in muff box, with some dozen of “practicable” gloves, etc., etc. . . . She has her library of small volumes just proportioned to her size, she has brushes of real ivory and combs of real tortoise shell; she has tea services of solid silver and shawls of veritable India cashmere, and under the empire she was occasionally known to wear diamonds, and to indulge in tea-sets of solid gold. She has dresses, even now, trimmed with real Valenciennes, and she costs a good deal more than any toy ought to. (522)

Like several other authors describing dolls’ trousseaux, the writer resorts to listing as a way of emphasizing the sense of sheer excess, luxury and variety which these accessories elicited. In describing the doll’s various appurtenances, the author begins to attribute to “mademoiselle” the most voracious appetite for material possessions. Mademoiselle “must be dressed” in such and such a way and she “must have” this or another fashionable item.

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88 This fascination with the doll’s trousseau is not exaggerated. In 1994 an auction house discovered in a chateau near Rouen a doll named Blondinette Davranches, possessed of a trousseau of more than one-hundred and fifty garments, accessories and furniture (Peers 42).

9 Charles Frederick Worth (1825–1895) was a famous English-born couturier who established his own fashion firm in Paris. Worth was known for “extravagant combinations of floating tulle and richly coloured taffetas and velvets.” His clientele included Empress Eugénie of France, the queen of Sweden, and Pauline, Princess von Metternich. Today he is recognized as one of the forefathers of modern couture (Breward).
The role of accessories in doll play gave an additional dimension to critics’ concerns about the luxury doll’s excessive material definition, since they too could be seen as limiting the imagination by prescribing a very particular form of play and thereby possibly foreclosing other creative possibilities. The different costumes suggested a various but limited number of possible social engagements that could be “played at.” The very multiplicity of available accessories would seem to suggest to us their inclusiveness, as if there were no possibilities outside of this predetermined set. If a doll has a walking dress, a riding dress and a ball gown, these are the things the doll can play at. An even more reductive toy could be found in Steiner’s waltzing bride doll, which came dressed in wedding garb, with a veil attached to her head and a bouquet attached to one of her hands and which, when wound up, would walk, as if to glide down the aisle, and emit a cry (an expression of joy, we must assume). It is difficult to imagine how these articles might come into use in one of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s games, where her dolls acted out the adventures of characters from novels by Sir Walter Scott. These dolls, if anything, seem ready to act out the scenes of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, or might people, as we shall later see, the similarly extravagantly furnished world of the sensation novel.90

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90 That is not to say that children will always play with their toys in the manner prescribed. Today, many a Barbie has crossed gender barriers with a mere haircut and a change of attire. Stanley Hall, who wrote what appears to be the first research study on doll play suggests that this was common enough in the nineteenth century as well.
II. The Toy Shop as Social Parody

From an adult’s perspective, the precision with which these miniature accessories replicated those of real life seemed to blur the line between life and play, person and toy. We see this attitude expressed in a piece written in April 21, 1860, for *All the Year Round*, in which the writer, identifying himself as an English flâneur in Paris, describes the pleasures to be had in admiring the marvels of “Au Caliphe de Baghdad,” a shop dedicated entirely to dolls’ clothes and accessories created by the Caliph himself, “modiste in ordinary to the Infinitesimal world” (34).

The author wavers between taking delight in the fantastic miniature sight before him and viewing it with a more cynical eye. The shop replicates society life so closely that it seems to make a mockery of it. The items in it are such exact copies of their originals that it is difficult for him not to picture the dolls that would attend such a shop as society women. He writes:

The ingenious Caliph dexterously conveyed to you the idea that the dolls for whom this wardrobe was laid out, were alive; that they were dolls in good society; dolls occupying elevated positions; dolls marriageable or married, and who would come presently in carriages of their own to choose their trousseaux and their ball toilettes. (35)

The shop seems to reduce society life to its material paraphernalia. The resulting vision of life is superficial and impoverished, a mere series of occasions for which to dress and their corresponding accessories.

His cynicism reaches its highest point when considering the “several complete suits of dolls’ mourning – morsels of millinery furnished forth with crape, and
bombazine, and black bugles” (36). Beholding “these little sable vanities” he writes, “made me laugh a bitter laugh, and think there might be often quite as much, or as little, genuine grief in a doll’s mourning, as in the black weeds we wear for grown up men and women” (36). The artificial nature of the doll’s funeral grief seems to him only to parody the lack of feeling in living and breathing human beings.

Charmed by the magnificent sight of such miniature delights, the author seems determined not to spoil his pleasure with cynical thoughts but is unable to do so:

I tried to banish from my mind the notion that the Caliph was a profound and Machiavellic politician, and that bearing Béranger’s immovable song of the “Infinitely Little” in his mind, he intended his wardrobe-shop to be a satirical microcosm of Petty France, of the Human Smallnesses of Bagdad, and of the world; a foreshadowing of the time when the Infinitely Little was to reign on earth . . . till at last a great man came and put priests and people – all the Lilliputians – into his pocket. (36)

In the end, though he tries half-heartedly to persuade himself “how happy we should all be, if the world were a nursery, and dolls and little children had the best of it,” he seems to have left with a more grim impression of the place as “a satirical microcosm of Petty France” and of “Human Smallness” in general.

The idea that the toyshop is a microcosm of the world was taken up by many. A journalist writing for The London Reader in October 21, 1878 writes that the person “who cannot be attracted by a doll-shop must be hard to please and of restricted sympathies, for it is a world in little, and represents society not only in its simplest elements, but in its complicated forms and varieties.” Likewise, Baudelaire had written of

91 Pierre-Jean de Béranger (1780-1857) was a prolific and popular French poet and songwriter. The song mentioned enjoins children to dance and enjoy childhood since the future is bleak as France is being ruled by “little people”: “A set of dwarfs have got our place” and “France, but the shadow of a shade / Of France that I in youth surveyed. / Is now a pretty kingdom made – / But still the dotards reign” (192-3).
the toy shop as presenting a visually enhanced version of the world: “Is not the whole of life to be found there in miniature – and far more highly coloured, sparkling and polished than in real life?” (198). For him, the toy shop represents a version of the world which is simplified, but bolder and brighter. But the world of the luxury doll shop did not seem to lend itself to such bright idealizations. If it represented the world it seemed to present a caricatured version of it, with all its vices enhanced through miniaturization and reified in material and commercial form. All the world’s a shop, it seemed to say, and everything in it for sale.92

Although the toyshop could be seen as satirizing the world at large, it was the doll that was most frequently focused on as a caricature, more or less exaggerated, of the society woman. “The Doll’s Diary,” a piece appearing in *Punch* in December 31, 1892, moves the satire from the shop to a child’s well-stocked nursery and places the doll at the center of its mild satire as its heroine and its narrator. The doll is vain, empty-headed, and cares only about flirting. As she tells us herself, “besides being extremely beautiful and expensive, with refined wax features and golden hair – I am a very clever doll indeed. Frivolous, no doubt; heartless, so they tell me – but the very reverse of a fool” (310). In her snobbery, the doll only attends balls hosted by the only other wax doll in the nursery and looks down on the composition dolls. She flirts with the ninepins who “keep a good deal to their own set” and is disappointed that the captain of the marching regiment,

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92 Although it replaces the toy shop with the puppet theater, a similar sentiment runs though Thackeray’s preface to *Vanity Fair* in which he presents himself as the “Manager of the Performance” and the characters in his novel as his dolls or marionettes.
quartered in that neighborhood, cannot dance, since his legs are “glued on to a yellow stand” (310). She even causes a scandal by being the cause of a broken engagement:

April 1. – Have just heard the Skipjack is engaged to a plaster Dairy-maid. A little annoyed, because he really seemed — Have been to see his fiancée, a common-place creature, with red cheeks, and a thick waist. Congratulate the Skipjack, with just a hint that he might have looked higher. (310) —

Then, when the Skipjack breaks off his engagement and has the impertinence to ask for our doll’s hand in marriage, she turns him down on account of the “social barriers between us” and when he is found “dead” the following morning, the doll seems hardly to repent her coy manipulation, telling us, “Am sure I gave him no encouragement – or next to none” (310).

The development of Edison’s “talking doll” created much comedic fodder along the same lines. One short verse piece that appeared in December 1, 1888 in *Moonshine* best encapsulates their general bent. The little poem begins:

Edison’s last invention
Is wonderful indeed;
But one thing we may mention,
Such toys we hardly need;
For does not friend or lover,
Among the sex that’s weak,
Enough of dolls discover,
Who can do naught but speak? (256)

These women, the poem goes on to say are “Quite wonderfully pretty” but as the simpletons who woo them will eventually discover, have “wit and sense excluded /
Entirely from the brain.” The doll-woman receives the attention but does not pay heed, for “fashion, parties, dances, / Are all the love she knows.” But then the poem takes an
interesting turn from this light mockery of the society lady. The doll-woman, the poem
tells us, “scarcely is more human / Than Edison’s new toy” (256).

Pieces such as these abounded, especially in comic publications such as *Punch*
and *Fun*, and while their tone was generally light-hearted, they got to the core of a very
serious concern. On the one hand, they mocked what was perceived by some as excessive
realism in the luxury doll. On the other hand, however, the suggestion was that if the
luxury doll and the fashionable women of the period were alike, it was because the
fashionable woman was already so much like a doll. In part because they were perceived
as beautiful husks devoid of interiority, but also in part as a result of their engagement
with consumer culture. As Krista Lysak points out, some of the anxiety surrounding
women’s involvement in consumer culture had to do with the idea that “Woman is
subject to exchange because of her associations with the commodity” (4) – the idea,
succinctly summarized by Walter Benjamin, that woman could function as “saleswoman
and wares in one” (quoted in Lysak 4). The luxury doll phenomenon did much to
highlight this paradox – the doll represented not only the birth of a whole generation of
new female shoppers, with access to new avenues for expressing and indulging their
desires and shaping their own identities, but also functioned as a potent symbol of
women’s vulnerability to objectification and commodification.

These dual possibilities are explored in *Lady Arabella: Or The Adventures of a
Doll* (1856) by Julia Pardoe, a work which, as I mention in Chapter 2, was ostensibly
written for children but which raises serious doubts about its suitability for that
audience. The book, Pardoe’s only incursion into the world of children’s literature, seems more closely allied to the satirical it-narratives of the eighteenth-century that gave rise to the doll memoir subgenre than to its child-friendly progeny. In it we find what Pardoe was generally understood to do best in her works of fiction: the “sharp observation of the greed and affectations of both fashionable and middle-class circles” (Lee). In fact, *Lady Arabella* in many ways invites comparison to one of her novels, *The Confessions of a Pretty Woman* (1846), the memoirs of a faded beauty who tells of her triumphs and her regrets. Like the narrator of *Confessions*, Arabella, the doll-heroine of this story, is a woman who achieves great social success through her beauty only to fall to the lowest level once she loses her physical attractions.

Arabella’s social ascent begins in the toy shop, which is described in such a way as to resemble a cynic’s view of the marriage market. Arabella describes her delight upon arriving at the shop, where all the other dolls were assembled, to discover her superiority. There she finds old-maid dolls, who “had already lost the freshness of their beauty” for waiting to be purchased, and dolls of a lower class, whom she looks down upon for wearing “soiled and crumpled dresses” (7). These less desirable dolls suffer the indignity of having “a large paper pinned to [their] breast[s] . . . to inform purchasers that they were to be ‘sold at a reduced price’” (7). To better compete with her rivals Arabella

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93 The book was published by Kerby and Son of Oxford Street, which appears to have specialized in religious works and children’s books with a pious tendency. Among the works advertised as recently published in Pardoe’s volume are books such as *The Sabbath Companion, Discourses on the Lord’s Prayer and Daily Devotion, My Own Garden, Tales for Young People*, and *Cards of Prayer for Children and Adults; to Be Used in the Cottages of the Poor*.

94 The story presents an unusual departure for the author, whose fame as a writer was primarily based on her travel writings about Portugal, Turkey and Hungary, and her historical works on French sixteenth and seventeenth-century court life (Lee).
learns how to apply her charms to their utmost advantage: “I half-closed my eyes with a charming expression of offended modesty, which I at once discovered must greatly add to my beauty” (8).

As Sharon Marcus has noted, doll tales often took a shape suggestive of courtship and marriage narratives. This was in part because “Like women in Victorian society, dolls are valued for their looks.” Yet the similarities do not end there; in imitation of marriage narratives, the relationship between girls and their dolls in such tales is one that “begins with love at first sight, leads to a honeymoon period spent in bed, and culminates with social reintegration through the paying of calls to exhibit the new love object” (163).95 This is precisely the process that Arabella goes through. Like a woman courted but ultimately abandoned as too lofty a target, she is “more than once lifted out of my glass prison and displayed to strangers, who, after admiring me, decided that, beautiful as I was, I was too dear” (11). Arabella must look on as the “very inferior dolls” are “joyfully carried away” by owners “who could scarcely wait until the money was paid before they were smothered with kisses” (11). Arabella’s waiting finally pays off when casting her eyes upon an approaching “open barouche with two footmen and fine prancing horses” (11) she does indeed experience love at first sight. “All the bran in my body seemed to melt away as I watched them” (12), she tells us.

Although such scenes certainly bring to mind a cynical view of marriage, they also present the doll as a kind of prostitute, or high-end courtesan. We see this

95 It is important to note, however, that Marcus ultimately sees this as an expression of the homoerotic attachment underlying a girl’s attraction to her doll. She writes, “Like women in Victorian society, dolls are valued for their looks, but in doll world, the purpose of feminine beauty is to appeal to girls” (163)
particularly clearly in Paul Laure’s description of the way the Jumeau dolls were
displayed in Paris in “Le Bebe Jumeau et le Magnetisme,” an article written for a Parisian
newspaper in 1887:

He saw them in all the shops for novelties and toys unceasingly provoking the
admiration of visitors . . . he contemplated them in their naïve splendour, with
their beautiful blond or brunette hair, their large expressive eyes, their arms
extended to be kissed, their beautiful dresses in Marquise style, their beautiful
hats in today’s fashion. (quoted in Peers 92)

Like the prostitute, the doll is as an objectified (literally) image of woman designed to
draw admiration and passive to this admiring gaze, becoming the property of whoever is
willing and able to pay the price.96 If the prostitute, as Peers, quoting Hollis Clayson,
argues “highlighted the understanding that modern social relationships were ‘more and
more frozen in the form of the commodity’” the doll seems to highlight “the monetary
exchange in transactions between adult males even more than the prostitute” (92).

Arabella’s questionable decency is suggested in the text by the fact that although
Miss Tantrum, the little girl who purchases her, is completely “enraptured” by her new
acquisition, her mother-in-law to be, Lady Breezeby, does not entirely approve of the
choice: “She even declared me to be vulgar, and wondered that her daughter should show
such bad taste” (12). Arabella’s “tawdry dress,” designed, no doubt, to draw the attention
of many suitors, must now be replaced with “something a little more ladylike” (14) to
reflect her newly acquired position in society. Arabella grows to dislike the dress she had
previously thought so beautiful: “elegant as I had once thought it, I soon learned, by
studying the appearance of my new mistress, that I was as absurdly bedizened as a sweep

96 In fact, according to the OED, a “doll common” was slang in the eighteenth century for prostitute or
courtesan.
on May-day; and heartily did I long for the moment when the mysterious Lenox [Lady Breezeby’s maid] . . . should release me from the vulgar finery which so disgusted her mama” (16).

Arabella’s social transformation is transacted, unsurprisingly enough, through extravagant consumption. She is taken to “a large shop brilliantly lighted with gas” on Regent Street, where she is welcomed by “half a dozen fashionably dressed young ladies” (23) who assist her in her material transformation. Arabella’s tawdry dress is replaced by one that is less ostentatious though significantly more expensive. She is dressed in “real French cambric, richly embroidered, and edged with Valenciennes lace” (25) and her cap alone costs ten pounds, with her entire dress adding up to “Thirteen pounds, five” (26). Through shopping Arabella is not only able to dress the part of her new social status but also to transform her physical appearance to disguise her flaws. The knowing shop-women immediately seize on these and recommend a way to disguise them: “The length of my legs was particularly condemned,” Arabella tells us, and “it was finally decided that by putting me into long clothes my long legs would be rather an advantage” (24). Indeed, her dress is credited with a wonderful transformation; “Only see what a change this dress has made in the narrow-chested, long-legged, gawky-looking thing” (25), one of the shop women says. The change from gaudy, ostentatious clothes designed to attract suitors to long clothes, which were used on infants, not only bestow on Arabella an appearance of genteel respectability, but also diffuse her sexuality by infantilizing her.

From this point on, Arabella lives a rich material existence. Having risen to her desired social status through a transaction akin to marriage, she finally begins to feel
“quite in my proper place” (14). Finally surrounded by the things she has long desired, when her eyes are closed she burns with “impatience to open them again, that I might admire these fine things” (13). The excessive consumption that is displayed in Arabella’s new attire is only symptomatic of the spending habits of the household. Arabella describes Lady Breezeby’s dressing room:

Pink silk curtains were drawn across the windows; and a large glass, reaching nearly from the ceiling to the floor, stood between them. On a dressing table which faced the fireplace were scattered such a number of toys and trinkets, of which I knew neither the names nor the use, that it was almost fatiguing to examine them. On the sofa beside me lay a French novel; and, littered over a richly inlaid desk on a writing-stand, were a heap of tiny notes of all the colours of the rainbow, and a great number of very alarming-looking bills, none of them receipted; a fact which I discovered at once from having often seen things of the kind at the shop of my first mistress. (23)

Lady Breezeby’s dressing room is a repository of consumerist excess that recalls not only the most extravagant of luxury dolls’ trousseaux but also, with the exception of the “very alarming-looking bills,” Lady Audley’s infamous boudoir, to which I will return later on in this chapter. The large mirror points not only to the Lady’s vanity but also suggests the magnification of the room’s multiple “toys and trinkets” in a shiny spectacle of glittering surfaces. Even the reading material, a French novel, points to a life dedicated to consumption and other libidinal impulses. All of these, however, come at a cost, evidenced in the “heap of tiny notes of all the colours of the rainbow” whose varied colors suggest their multiple and various sources and whose aesthetic effect appears to make a mockery of the acts of consumption that led to them.

This reckless appetite for consumption is either cause or symptom of other kinds of appetites. Lady Breezeby, we eventually discover, has left her husband and daughter
and run away to Paris with the Honourable Frederic Fitzfidget, who had purchased his way into her heart by “always bringing [her daughter] flowers and trinkets” (33).\footnote{Curiously enough, Juliette Peers writes that “A critique of the dolls at the 1867 Paris Exhibition says that [dolls] were given to women by men, potential lovers, who ‘covered their intentions with the pretext of offering the present to the woman’s young daughter’” (64).}

Arabella, now a symbol of Lady Breezeby’s promiscuity, consumerist and otherwise, plays a crucial role in Miss Tantrum’s initiation into this adult world. When Miss Tantrum asks her father what debt is, he cynically responds: “I will explain that to you another time, my dear, unless you learn it without my assistance, which is likely enough” (37). That she is well on her way to making the discovery herself is suggested by Miss Tantrum’s last words in the story as she plans their trip to Paris: “you will take me to see the Exhibition and the palaces, and the Madeleine, and the Palais Royal, will you not?” (38). Far from having learned the lesson of her mother’s ruin, she looks forward to immersing herself in the culture of spectacle and display that may have caused it in the first place.

At this point in the story we part company with Miss Tantrum and her family, but not with Arabella, who, as though she had absorbed the burden of Lady Breezeby’s sins, shows the reader what Lady Breezeby’s fate could be as a fallen woman. Arabella is doomed to a life of degradation, first with the servants, who take advantage of the general state of confusion upon Lady Breezeby’s sudden departure to steal Arabella and several other valuable objects from the house, and later living with a poor but virtuous woman who rescues her from the street and her brother, who has been driven to mental illness by the loss of his wife and daughter during childbirth. Although this is presented as a happy
ending for Arabella, its propriety is not completely clear, since she ends up sharing a bed with the lady’s brother, who seems to alternately confuse her with his lost daughter and his lost wife. In view of both Arabella’s and Lady Breezeby’s ends, it becomes clearer why luxury dolls such as Arabella were, in the words of the “Paris Letter” reporter, “not the kind of doll one would wish one’s own little daughter to pet, and hug, and cherish” (78). Pardoe uses the structure of the doll memoir/it-narrative to demonstrate both the possibilities for self-definition (primarily in the shape of social ascent) in the world of consumption, but also the dangers to which a woman who banks on herself as a commodity can be exposed. And although Arabella’s complicit engagement in the world of commodities ultimately reduces her to a fallen woman, through her Pardoe begins to hint at some of the ways in which it could lead to material self-definition.

III. The Doll of the Period

The extravagant consumption by, or on behalf of, children was frequently tied to the extravagant consumption associated with luxury dolls. According to one writer, a Paris special correspondent for the London Journal, the “sinful extravagance” that has come to be “displayed in children’s dresses, jewelry, and toys” should come as no surprise to us given the money expended on dolls’ clothes. “Who can be surprised at such a freak,” the correspondent writes, “when it has almost become a necessity for friends to present dolls the clothes of which cost a small fortune, and are faithful reproductions of those of the grande dame” (15). While the old wooden dolls invited the projection of various not-me
characters in addition to versions of the child’s own self (a baby, a student, a child being scolded or punished), the luxury lady dolls seemed to invite only two forms of relating: admiration and identification.

The extent of this identification is explored by Prince Böjidar Karageorgevitch in an article written for *The Magazine of Art* in January 1899:

In the corner of the drawing-room, as I write, a little girl is playing with her doll – to say that she is playing is, perhaps, to put it too strongly; she has the doll in her arms – a huge doll – dressed out like a lady in the latest fashion, its hair dressed, shoes and gloves, and a china head with preposterous eyes, set in darkened circles, as large as those of a real woman, looking like black holes in the pinky-white face with scarlet lips. To the child this doll is an ideal of beauty, a miracle of loveliness . . . and which, with secret but cherished pride, she hopes she may some day resemble, when, like her mother and the other women she sees, she may heighten her own good looks with the help of cosmetics – a first aesthetic concept to be realized in a painted face, with the carmine gash of her lips, unnatural hair dyed red or gold, with a dark growth at the roots, hardening the rigidity of features loaded with powder and rouge. Can we wonder that the women of our day look alike – all have a face which, by uniform colouring and dyeing, is more or less the same in every lady of fashion? Shall we blame them if they hide their natural complexion under cold cream and powder, if they do not think it white or pink enough, or quite so lovely as that unnatural doll which is their first idea of beauty? In young girls and women it would be unpardonable, were it not that in their earliest youth their taste is vitiated by the doll, almost human in its imitation of all that is most false in such a caricature of humanity. (119-20 emphasis added)

For Karageorgevitch, then, the problem with the doll is that it provides a poor aesthetic model of beauty. Unnatural itself, it sets a first precedent of artificial beauty, which girls grow up to pursue as women with the aid of cosmetics.

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98 Prince Bojidar Karageorgevitch (1862-1908) was a Serbian artist and art writer (NYT). He was a frequent contributor to *The Magazine of Art* and various other publications.

99 Karageorgevitch may possibly be describing a Jumeau doll, which, according to Peers, “from 1880 onwards increasingly shared the moulds of his child dolls, and featured eyes that became over life-size . . . tipping the doll towards a surrealistic and artificial stylization” (56).

100 Some dolls had eyelashes painted around the eyes.
This problem, Karageorgevitch argues, is a recent one. “In the days when those old dolls were young,” he writes, “a woman who wore paint was rarely seen.” He recalls the single exception in his youth in which he saw “a lady berouged, dyed, and re-dyed” and remembers finding it both humorous and shocking, an experience quite out of the ordinary. He remembers calling her “the horrid painted lady” and then, finding that too long, “the caricature.” Now, however, this doll aesthetic has become only too common. His own niece, “very modern, and the owner of a magnificent doll,” looks to her doll for inspiration, telling him, “When I am grown up I will have light hair, and eyes as large as hers, with painted black lashes all round!” (120).

The connection between dolls and loss of innocence is also explored by the author of a “Paris Letter” written in *The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* (February 1, 1878) by a correspondent:

> We are very far from the baby doll which its little girl mother was so happy to dress in a clean white frock and blue sash. The modern doll is no baby; it is a lady of fashion, dressed up in a puff and train, with Angot bonnet and Louis Quinze boots, who carries a glass in her eye, and a poodle dog under her arm, in imitation of – well! Not of the élite of elegant women. But then, if we deplore this state of things, we are answered that, *if the doll of the period is no baby, the little girl of the period is no child*, which certainly is no comfort to us, and we had rather hope the well-dressed little creatures of affectation we sometimes meet in our streets are the exception, not the rule, and there are children still in France, as well as in other countries. (79 emphasis added)

The writer begins by rehearsing the familiar accusations leveled against the luxury doll. She is not an innocent baby, she is a grown and knowing woman, and not quite of the élite among them. But by framing her discussion on the changing nature of dolls and girls in the late nineteenth century in terms of “the period,” the author inserts the luxury doll
into a much larger debate that was raging at the time about the changing shape of femininity itself.

In 1868 Eliza Lynn Linton wrote an article for the *Saturday Review* denouncing the girl of the period as a “rampant modernization” and a specimen of womanhood that England could no longer proudly claim as her own. There was a time, she writes, “when the phrase, ‘a fair young English Girl’ meant the ideal of womanhood” and “we had the pick of creation in this fair young English girl of ours.” Britons might have temporarily admired “the vivacious sparkle of the trim and sprightly Parisienne” but, ultimately, their hearts returned to their “old insular ideal” (339).

This ideal of femininity, however, was under threat since it could only exist “when English girls were content to be what God and nature had made them” and the girl of the period was characterized by doing precisely the opposite of that. She “is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion” and whose “main endeavour is to outvie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion” (339) without any concern over sacrificing decency. In this regard, Linton’s nostalgia for the “genuine girl of the past” (339) seems to echo Dodd’s critique of Montanari’s “frenchified” Great Exhibition dolls, which are merely “stuck up there to serve as dummies for the gorgeous robes” (354) in contrast to “our dolls” which are “beautiful in themselves, and only attired because it is proper so to be in public” (355).
The girl of the period finds her model in the queens of the demi-monde,\textsuperscript{101} which many a doll critic seems to suggest is also the inspiration for the modern doll. Like the modern doll, too, in imitating them she becomes just as pernicious and then, Linton writes, “she wonders that men sometimes mistake her for the prototype, or that mothers of girls not quite so far gone as herself refuse her as a companion for their daughters” (252). The problem, according to Linton is that young girls fail to see the connection between “modesty of appearance and virtue in deed” (340). Looking the part of the prostitute, she acquires a “general fastness” and the imitation “in dress” leads to imitation “in manner and feeling” (340). External appearance and inner virtue are so “inseparable,” Linton seems to suggest, that the very appearance of immodesty or indecency could lead to the acquisition of these failings themselves.

Linton’s description of the girl of the period’s mercenary attitude towards marriage is reminiscent of Pardoe’s description of the doll Arabella and her comfort with her status as a commodity: “The legal barter of herself for so much money, representing so much dash, so much luxury and pleasure – that is her idea of marriage.” Like Arabella, who falls in love at first sight of the elegant carriage that stops in front of the toy shop, the girl of the period marries not the man but his material possessions: “She has married his house, his carriage, his balance at the banker’s, his title; and he himself is just the inevitable condition clogging the wheel of her fortune” (340).

\textsuperscript{101}Although the demi-monde initially referred to bohemians and hedonists, by the time Linton uses the word it had come to be associated with prostitution.
Although Linton makes no specific mention of dolls in this piece, she would dedicate an entire *Saturday Review* piece to them the following year in 1869. She defines the doll-woman as follows:

Now there are women who are dolls in all but the mere accident of material. The doll proper is a simple structure of wax or wood, its knees and elbows glued together; and the human doll is a complex machine of flesh and blood. But saving such structural differences, these women are as essentially dolls as those in the bazaar which open and shut their eyes at the world of command enforced by a wire, and squeak when you pinch them in the middle. These are women who seem born into the world only as the playthings and make-believes of human life. (235)

Linton’s version of the doll-woman and the girl of the period are by no means identical; the doll-woman’s failings arise “from want of brains” (236) rather than anything else. What brings them together is dangerous investment in surfaces and materiality. Although the doll-woman lacks the GOP’s cunning and enterprising spirit in matters of self-decoration and material self-determination, the doll-woman’s intellect can at most stretch to “a mild curiosity about the outsides of things” (240) and “the utmost limit to which enthusiasm can be carried with her is in the matter of dress and fashion; and the only subject that thoroughly arouses her is in the last new colour, or the latest eccentricity in costume” (240).

But while for Linton the doll-woman was a burden, to put it in her own colorful if misogynistic rhetoric, “a living corpse to be carried on the shoulders of those who are struggling for their own lives” (237), she was not deceitful or dangerous. It was another article, an unsigned piece appearing in the October 1868 issue of *St. James’s Magazine*, which made the connection between the doll-woman’s veneration of surfaces and her deceitfulness and consequent dangerousness. This author presents a tongue-in-cheek
solution to the difficulty of understanding the GOP: she is not a girl at all, but a doll. Using a mock-scientific approach, the author announces the discovery of a new “class of beings,” a “numerous tribe of so-called young women” that will have been noticed “by all who have gone about London with their eyes open” (62). Of the fact that these creatures cannot be women the author is certain; “Were the doll a genuine English girl,” the author reasons, “she would exhibit some of the characteristics of a genuine English girl” (62).

Having established the doll’s intrinsic biological difference from the English girl, the author goes on to share with his readers some observations “that may be useful to physiologists” (62). These remarks take the shape of a study of the doll’s anatomy that would be impermissible if scrutinizing a woman. A cross between the child who unsews her doll curious about its contents and the scientist wielding a scalpel on an exotic specimen, the author enjoins us to wonder with him, “What are they like when divested of their trappings? What resemblance does the plucked bird bear to the proud beauty flaunting, complete, in her feathers? does the doll undressed look as little as a human being as the doll adorned?” (62). The author then proceeds to examine the doll from head to toe:

Begin with her head. Had ever young woman of this or any other period excrescence so preposterous! And remember that this fearful bump is growing bigger and bigger every day! Sausages by the couple of pounds, horse tails, and baker’s twists, are no part of the human form divine. Pass down Oxford Street, look in at the shop windows, and examine the different articles of wearing apparel said to be for women. Glance, for instance, at the dabs of confectionery called bonnets. It is absurd to maintain that such contrivances were ever intended for the heads of rational beings. They are only fit for dolls – who use them. But true women never wear these specks, these blurs, nor do they patronize the other ridiculous contrivances you see offered for sale, for the simple reason that such
fantasies do not conform in the slightest degree to the undulations of the female figure. But dolls wear them, shall we add because they are not human creatures and have forms shaped altogether differently to those of fair young English girls and able-bodied matrons. Then, look at the boots. Now no woman ever yet born had feet shaped like a savoury ox tongue, and consequently it would be impossible for any member of the sex to crush her feet into the preposterous cases exhibited in West-end windows. But dolls wear them, shall we add because they have not feet at all, but claws, or hoofs, or some novel and graceful compromise between the two. (63)

The author’s main objection to the doll’s attire is that it disguises the real, natural female form. These unnatural “excrescences” that women wear on their hair, the author writes, are “no part of the human form divine,” and while doll-women may delight in these “contrivances” that pass for bonnets, “true women” have no interest in desecrating their natural form so. These items of clothing are “fantasies” and “do not conform in the slightest degree to the undulations of the female figure.” In the process of decorating herself the woman becomes represented metonymically in a series of objects; she is the sum total of “sausages by the couple of pounds,” “horse tails,” and “baker’s twists” (63).

The female consumer herself appears to become an object who, according to the author, would look puzzled “if you address her in a more serious strain than you would use to your pet dog, your horse, your gun” (64). The more women consume, it would seem, the more they become like commodities themselves.

Although the author presents these sartorial transformations as turning women into objects, that does not mean that he views them as powerless. On the contrary, this alliance between women and materiality seems to makes the doll-woman dangerously deceptive. The articles and accessories worn by the doll-woman seem to transform the appearance of the female figure and threaten to destroy our ability to judge what is
underneath on the basis of the exterior. For what might the woman’s real hair look like underneath these elaborate hairdressings, and what kind of face might be hiding under these bonnets? After all, the West-end contraptions shaped like “savoury ox tongue” may be hiding underneath “not feet at all, but claws, or hoofs, or some novel and graceful compromise between the two,” a sign, the author seems to hint, that these women are hiding in their shoes the secret to their identity in a devilish cloven hoof.

These doll women could be said to participate in what Krista Lysak identifies as an engagement with consumer culture that provides “an alternative model of female identity beyond that of the self-regulating subject who keeps her appetites in check” (8). In using a vocabulary that draws from the luxury doll phenomenon, critics such as Linton and the author of the piece above attempt to ridicule and neutralize the possibilities for material self-determination in consumer culture. As Juliette Peers puts it: “When the male edits and re-orders the world he is an artist, when the female edits and re-orders – principally herself – she is a doll” (9). Despite their derisive tone, such articles express great anxiety about how women’s alliances with the material world can paradoxically render them unreadable. It is the power that accompanies this unreadability that makes Lady Audley so dangerous.

IV. The Doll as Femme Fatale: Lady Audley’s Secret

It may hardly come as a surprise that the best example of the luxury doll as woman should be found in sensation fiction, a genre characterized by its unique combination of
domesticity, femininity, consumption and transgression. Luxury dolls and sensation novels were not only popular during the same period, between 1860 and 1880, but were also both characterized by attracting considerable criticism from self-appointed arbiters of taste while enjoying substantial commercial success. The two phenomena even seemed to share a similar aesthetic. Bojidar Karageorgevitch, who, as we earlier saw, was concerned about the effects of the doll aesthetic on girls and women, also expresses the fear that this modern doll aesthetic might extend beyond women’s self-decoration and into the realm of other more established arts. In doing so he ascribes to these dolls many of the same characteristics which were also found in sensation fiction by critics of the genre. He writes:

To carry the question to a higher level, it may quite seriously be pointed out that it is but natural that [doll owners], accustomed to the chalky colouring, the rouge and the bistre of their dolls’ faces and their mothers’ should also seek in paintings and in every product of art exaggerated effects, dazzling variety, works designed for reproduction by the vile process of chromo-lithography. (120)

Although Karageorgevitch is talking about the visual arts, he uses much of the same language that was used to criticize the sensation novel’s aesthetic qualities. The luxury doll, it seems, is the material equivalent of the sensation novel, vitiating taste by training readers to seek thrills from its “exaggerated effects” and “dazzling variety” and spoiling them from appreciating more subtle aesthetic pleasures. Karageorgevitch’s disdain for “the vile process of chromo-lithography,” which allowed for multiple copies of highly colored images to be reproduced, is likewise suggestive of the doll’s, as well as the popular novel’s, reproducibility, as its features were churned out through a process of mechanical reproduction.
Sensation fiction’s characters were also accused of being doll-like. Henry Mansel, famous for his condemnation of the sensation genre, wrote that the characters were “for the most part, but so many lay-figures on which to exhibit a drapery of incident,” echoing early criticisms of Montanari’s exhibition dolls as being merely “stuck up there to serve as dummies for the gorgeous robes” (354). For Henry James, however, it was not a “drapery of incident” that clothed characters like Lady Audley but the drapery of superficiality and material excess. “Lady Audley is a nonentity, without a heart, a soul, a reason,” he famously wrote in an 1865 review of Lady Audley’s Secret and Aurora Floyd for The Nation, “But what we may call the small change for these facts – her eyes, her hair, her mouth, her dresses, her bedroom furniture, her little words and deeds – are so lavishly bestowed that she successfully maintains a kind of half illusion” (593).

The fact that these descriptions of Braddon’s characterization of Lady Audley are figured in terms of “drapery” is particularly interesting given her own admission about the centrality of dolls and doll-dressing in her childhood. When asked to contribute her doll-related memories for Low’s “Distinguished Women and their Dolls” article, Braddon writes:

I was passionately fond of dolls from my earliest recollection of anything in the way of a plaything, and I played with them, dressed them, worked for them, and made believe about them until I was in my teens. Dolls and dolls’ houses were my dream of bliss, and my amusement alternated between literary composition and dolls’ dressmaking. The only rival for the doll in my affection was a toy theatre – Believe me, very truly yours, Mary Maxwell. (256-7)

The way in which for Braddon “dolls’ dressmaking” and “literary composition” go hand in hand should remind us of Jenny Wren’s dolls’ dressmaking as Dickensian character-making in Our Mutual Friend. Indeed, James expresses a similar dissatisfaction with the
characters of Dickens, which he describes as ―mere figures.‖ And yet while James might begrudge in Dickens’s characters a lack of psychological sophistication, in the context of the sensation novel, the accusation of Lady Audley being a doll-like, materially rich ―nonentity‖ takes an entirely different tenor. In a genre which Mansel describes as being ―redolent of the shop‖ (―Introduction‖ xiii), Lady Audley’s doll-like nature asks to be read in terms of the consumerist promiscuity and potential for material manipulation associated with the luxury doll.

It is only fitting then that Alicia, Lady Audley’s step-daughter, and the character who most explicitly identifies her as a doll figure, thinks of Lady Audley as possessing the kind of beauty ―to be found in a toy-shop‖ (262). ―I’m sorry you can only admire wax dolls,” she reproaches Robert (58), and suspecting that her cousin’s inattention to her is due to an infatuation with her step-mother, she attributes this to his poor taste in women, telling herself that, ―nothing but a blue-eyed doll can set [his heart] going‖ (262).

Physical descriptions of Lucy, who becomes Lady Audley after marrying Sir Michael, place her within the realm of the doll aesthetic:

The innocence and candor of an infant beamed in Lady Audley’s face, and shone out of her large and liquid blue eyes. The rosy lips, the delicate nose, the profusion of fair ringlets, all contributed to preserve to her beauty the character of extreme youth and freshness. She owed to twenty years of age, but it was hard to believe her more than seventeen. Her fragile figure, which she loved to dress in heavy velvets, and stiff, rustling silks, till she looked like a child tricked out for a masquerade, was as girlish as if she had just left the nursery. (55)

Like one of Jumeau’s or Bru’s famous bébés (figures 11 and 12, respectively), Lucy has a child’s face and a youthful body dressed in a decidedly grown-up wardrobe. Her most remarkable features – “her large and liquid blue eyes” her “rosy lips,” “her delicate
nose,” and above all, a “profusion of fair ringlets” – are all characteristic of the best luxury dolls. Only her white waxen hands emerge from under her elaborate dresses, and these, too, are hidden under a glittering spectacle of jeweled rings.

Figure 11. Bébé Jumeau.
Lady Audley also participates in the consumerist promiscuity associated with the luxury doll. Her boudoir looks as though the contents of more than one extravagant doll’s trousseau had been emptied into it. On her marble dressing-table “the whole of her glittering toilette apparatus lay about” (70) in luxurious disorder: “Two or three handsome dresses lay in a heap upon the ground, and the open doors of a wardrobe revealed the treasures within. Jewellery, ivory-backed hair-brushes, and exquisite china were scattered here and there about the apartment” (70). Lady Audley surrounds herself with these “womanly luxuries” (71) and is “happy as a child surrounded by new and costly toys” (55).

The life Lady Audley leads is precisely the kind of life that we would imagine little girls to act out in play with their luxury dolls, as suggested by their various

Figure 12. Bébé Bru
accessories. One of her favorite pastimes is to “loll on one of the sofas discussing a new costume for some coming dinner party, or sit chattering to the girl, with her jewel box beside her, upon the satin cushions and Sir Michael’s presents spread out on her lap, while she counted and admired her treasures” (55). She flits from room to room or accessory to accessory almost as if she were the doll a girl is playing with, “now sitting down to the piano to trill out a ballad . . . now hovering about a stand of hothouse flowers, doing amateur gardening with a pair of fairy-like silver-mounted embroidery scissors – now strolling into her dressing-room to talk to Phoebe Marks, and have her curls re-arranged for the third or fourth time; for the ringlets were always getting into disorder, and gave no little trouble to Lady Audley’s maid” (79).

Lady Audley is also doll-like in her consciousness of herself as a commodity. As a woman, her best chance at social ascent is through marriage, which she sees as an important financial decision in which, as she pleads to Sir Michael Audley, she “cannot be disinterested” (16). The advantages are material. She may care little for Sir Michael, but she is deeply invested in the things with which he can provide her. As she tells Phoebe, Audley Court may be dull, but boredom is but a small price to pay for all her possessions, for “it is something to wear sables that cost sixty guineas, and have a thousand pounds spent on the decorations of one’s apartments” (110).

Lucy’s hair, one of her most representative and most frequently described features, is also of crucial importance in her association with the commodity. As critics such as Lynette Felber and Elizabeth Gitter have argued, “Victorians were particularly ambivalent about blonde hair because of its association with gold or money.” According
to Felber, Lucy, “not only entraps men with her blonde beauty but, in a kind of marital prostitution, she also exchanges her golden hair for the literal gold of material possessions.” It is hardly surprising then, that when Lucy’s fate appears to be doomed she resents her own hair as a useless currency, almost tearing it out from its roots.

Whether Braddon really did have the doll-woman in mind in writing the character of Lady Audley we can only speculate. However, that she was aware of the stereotype, at least in later years, is quite clear from her use of it in a story she would later publish in *Leigh Journal and Times* in 1898.102 “The Doll’s Tragedy” tells the story of Theodora, a doll-woman who marries Dr. Kirkland, “an elderly, grey-haired, spectacled college Don” who succumbs to Theodora’s “delicate oval cheek and full blue eyes, hair of palest gold” and “lily and rose complexion.” From the very beginning of the story, Theodora is likened to a doll:

Theodora Marlow had very little more in her than that cherished doll, now lying, with cotton-wool over its waxen chubbiness, in a lavender-scented drawer, to be handed down to the first granddaughter. No, there was nothing in her. She was a placid piece of prettiness, just human enough to open and shut her eyes without wires, and with a more pleasing speech than the phonograph has yet imparted to dolls. (155)

Like Lady Audley, Theodora is described as an ornament, a thing among things – “nothing could have been prettier than Theodora’s panelled drawing-room, painted white and pink, and with Theodora in a pale pink frock, the whitest, pinkest and prettiest thing in the room, the fairest flower in a room that seemed full of flowers” (156).

Like Lady Audley, too, Theodora engages in various forms of extravagant consumption after her marriage – “the sensation of spending being new she gave herself

102 According to Chris Willis, the story was previously published in 1896 as “Theodora’s Temptation” (8).
up to the pleasure very freely” (156). Unlike Lady Audley, however, Theodora appears too ignorant of financial matters to realize that she has spent three times their income threatening to ruin Dr. Kirkdale, who, “too wrapped up in the pleasures of the intellect” (159), fails to notice this until it is too late.  

The story reaches its crux when, noticing a decline in his wife’s blooming health, Kirkland decides to take Theodora for a change of air at his former pupil’s Lakeside home. Jack Tremaine, the old pupil, is immediately struck by Theodora and makes excuses to delay his departure to spend more time with her and eventually confesses his love to her. It is here that we begin to question whether Theodora is as thoroughly devoid of mind as the narrator presents her to be. Although throughout the narrative she is only referred to as “the doll” and her thoughts, if they exist, are kept from us, we do get a glimpse into her mind when she encounters this temptation. Theodora is not romantically in love with Tremaine, but she does harbor feelings for his home. Theodora “looked at the furniture, and considered the plate and china at dinner, and thought how much nicer it would be to the mistress of this house” (162). She even comes close to exhibiting some cunning when admiring Tremaine’s widowed sister’s, Mrs. Holloway’s, gown and cap “which were in such perfect taste,” she begins to consider that widowhood might be “the most advantageous period of a woman’s life” (162).

The night before they are meant to return to London, however, Theodora unwittingly turns the fantasy of widowhood into reality. During Theodora’s tête-à-tête

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103 There are some echoes of Dora’s housekeeping in David Copperfield in this respect. When Dr. Kirkland confronts Theodora about her spending, she acts like a naïve child and blames it all on the cook who she claims uses too much sauce. Check details.
with Tremaine, Kirkdale overhears her complain about how old and stingy he thinks him and how she only really married him because people “said he was rich,” and is later discovered in the lake with his pockets full of stones. The story ends abruptly when returning to her home near the university, Kirkdale’s friends accuse Theodora of causing his death and Theodora flies into a hysterical fit from which she never recovers. “Her small intelligence,” we are told, “had been shattered by the dreadful circumstances of her husband’s death. The doll was broken” (169).

Although this story may in itself possess little literary merit, its deployment of the doll-woman motif in a plot which so closely mirrors that of Lady Audley’s Secret does suggest that Braddon may well have been thinking about Lady Audley in the doll-woman discussion context. But although Theodora’s material disposition proves to be dangerous, the short story simplifies this tendency by attributing it to mental failing – her “small intelligence.” While Braddon eventually explains away Lucy’s materialism with insanity, the sensation novel allows her to dwell much longer on Lucy’s material self-construction and the power it gives her, if only temporarily.

Because we first encounter Lady Audley as a finished product, we do not get to witness the intermediary steps that lead to her transformation. It is through the novel’s treatment of the similarities and differences between her and Phoebe that we are invited to think about the constructedness of identity and the way a woman’s alliance to materiality and its potential for transformation can be her greatest power. Phoebe’s similarity to Lady Audley is so great that it undermines our sense of the latter’s authenticity as a person. They resemble each other to such a degree that, we are told,
“there were certain dim and shadowy lights in which, meeting Phoebe Marks gliding under the shrouded avenues in the garden, you might have easily mistaken her for my lady.” Although Phoebe meekly denies the resemblance, telling Lady Audley, “your ladyship is a beauty, and I’m a poor plain creature,” Lucy makes no secret of the fact that these differences could be easily be eliminated with the aid of cosmetics; “it is only colour that you want,” she tells her:

My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, and yours is drab; my eyebrows and eyelashes are dark brown, and yours are almost – I scarcely like to say it, but they’re almost white, my dear Phoebe; your complexion is sallow, and mine is pink and rosy. Why, with a bottle of hair dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you’d be as good-looking as I any day, Phoebe. (60)

Pale Phoebe is like a doll yet unpainted, not yet given her characteristic rosy coloring with paint. She recalls the descriptions of unfinished dolls by doll-makers, one of whom plainly states that the doll is “not a lovely object in this stage” (“Common Things” 65). Phoebe is thus a blank canvas with the potential to become a painted doll like Lady Audley.

Although there is no explicit indication that Lady Audley has employed the assistance of cosmetics in the studied production of her appearance, the novel does play with this suggestion when it describes the secrets to which many a lady’s maid is privy: “she knows when the ivory complexion is bought and paid for” and “when the sweet smile is more false than Madame Levison’s enamel and far less enduring” (331). The Madame Levison of Braddon’s text is a direct reference to the infamous Madame Rachel
of London,\textsuperscript{104} who claimed to supply the rich and aristocratic of London with cosmetic treatments, the most famous of which was “enameling.” This procedure was not only designed to provide a doll-like “smooth and transparently white quality to the face, as lovely and delicate as a piece of Sèvres porcelain” (Rappaport 40) but was also highly reminiscent of the process of lightening, smoothing, painting and varnishing undergone by dolls’ faces in the latter stages of production. According to Rappaport, the process of enameling generally included “a careful removal of rough hairs or fuzz on the face and bust by the use of various lotions and/or tweezers; followed by the application of copious amounts of alkaline toilet washes, then a filling-in of wrinkles and depressions in the skin with a thick paste (usually made of arsenic or white lead and other ingredients), followed by applications of rouge and powder to finish off” (41).

The artificiality of the promised effect was the subject of much mockery. An example of this is a \textit{Punch} piece entitled “Stucco for the Softer Sex,” which highlights the grotesque way in which such cosmetics were supposed to render women doll-like – or worse:

\begin{quote}
The female loveliness which these preparations may be supposed calculated to restore and preserve, appears indeed to be, as it were, that of the ladies in the hairdressers’ windows, bright and brilliant with their glass eyes – radiant in red and white wax. Imagination pictures Madame Rachel’s patronesses as having been fashioned out of that plastic material, and animated with a faint life by a disciple of Frankenstein. (124)
\end{quote}

The “ladies in the hairdressers’ windows” referred to are most likely doll-heads used for the purposes of advertising the latest in hair fashion. The description of these

\textsuperscript{104} Her full name was Sarah Rachel Levison. “Madame Rachel” was not only a peddler of cosmetics but also a con-artist and blackmailer, who ended her life in prison. For more on Sarah Levison see Helen Rappaport’s \textit{Beautiful For Ever}. 180
disembodied mannequin heads, glass-eyed and with complexions eerily “radiant in red and white wax” elicit grotesque images of femininity. Women who use these treatments are equated to Frankensteinian creations, half doll, half animated corpse. A similar eeriness surrounds the supposed toilette of Lady Audley, in which only the lady’s maid knows, “when the pearly teeth are foreign substances fashioned by the dentist – when the glossy plaits are the relics of the dead, rather than the property of the living” (311). Doll-women like Lady Audley, the piece suggests, are not only half-person, half-thing, but also a composite of the living and the dead.

Just as the St. James article discussed above began to hint, this doll-like ability for physical transformation is linked to deception and suggests that something monstrous and dangerous may be lurking underneath. The lady’s maid, we are told, also “knows other and more sacred secrets than these” and these secrets are the key to the doll-woman’s deception:

She knows when the sweet smile is more false than Madame Levison’s enamel and far less enduring – when the words that issue from between the gates of borrowed pearl are more disguised and painted than the lips which help to shape them. When the lovely fairy of the ball-room re-enters her dressing room after the night’s long revelry, and throws aside her voluminous Burnous and her faded bouquet, and drops her mask; and like another Cinderella loses the glass-slipper, by whose glitter she has been distinguished, and falls back into rags and dirt; the lady’s-maid is by to see the transformation. The valet who took wages from the prophet of Korazin, must have seen his master sometimes unveiled; and must have laughed in his sleeve at the folly of the monster’s worshippers. (331)\(^\text{105}\)

Underlying is an anxiety about the disconnection between interior and exterior and about the increasing difficulty of making assessments about one on the basis of the other. The

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\(^{105}\) “The Veiled Prophet of Khorassan” the footnote tells us, “is one of the tales in Thomas Moore’s popular verse narrative *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance (1817)*” (449). The references to Moore’s romanticized and exotic Orient, together with the reference to the Bourbons are suggestive of Madame Rachel’s references to ingredients brought from Arabian countries in her advertisements.
artificial mouth, “gates of borrowed pearl” becomes a vehicle for false smiles and false words. This inauthenticity, the passage suggests, is required to disguise an interior that is monstrous. While the Cinderella reference is not particularly damning – after all, even before her fairy transformation she is much prettier and kinder than her step-sisters – the reference to the prophet of Korazin equates woman with a monster both physically and morally hideous. 106

The narrator’s reference to secrets known only to the lady’s maid echo the curiosity expressed in the St. James article about the doll’s interior: “What are [dolls] like when divested of their trappings? What resemblance does the plucked bird bear to the proud beauty flaunting, complete, in her feathers? does the doll undressed look as little as a human being as the doll adorned?” (62-3). Robert Audley asks himself a similar question of Lady Audley. Comparing her to Alicia he asks himself: “can these two women be of the same clay? Can this frank, generous-hearted girl, who cannot conceal any impulse in her innocent nature, be of the same flesh and blood as that wretched creature whose shadow falls upon the path beside me?” (274). 107 This question, the question of what Lucy is made of underneath all her trappings, becomes the guiding principle that directs his investigation and the plot of the novel. Although Robert’s investigation takes him to different places and requires him to interview a number of individuals, the main object of scrutiny remains Lady Audley herself, who becomes, in

106 In fact, the scene described seems to echo the frightful moment when Christabel disrobes in Coleridge’s poem to reveal her (monstrous, though undescribed) breast as well as Thackeray’s description of Becky Sharp as a dangerous siren who hides a “monster’s hideous tail” under the water.

107 Robert Audley’s question seems to echo the words of the speaker in D.G. Rossetti’s “Jenny” who, in comparing the prostitute Jenny to his cousin Nell refers to them as “Two sister vessels” made “Of the same lump [of clay]” yet each respectively “For honour and dishonour made.” This would suggest that Robert thinks of Lucy as a prostitute.
the words of Rachel Bowser, “the object of fervent investigative aggression” (76). Lady Audley is, as Bowser writes, “a creature of pure surface” (79), and it becomes Robert’s task to become a competent reader of the surfaces that make up her identity.

The question about the legibility or impenetrability of surfaces is first introduced in the novel in the scene in which Robert Audley takes George Talboys to see Lady Audley’s painting. The painting, which the narrator repeatedly tells us “[n]o one but a pre-Raphaelite could have painted” is also, we are told, “so like and yet so unlike” (72) its subject:

No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the pale complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No-one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait. (72)

Like Lady Audley herself, the painting is a celebration of surfaces. Reminiscent of the doll aesthetic, it reproduces material detail in such a way as to make it both realistic and exaggerated. Being simultaneously “like” and “unlike,” the portrait both reveals and conceals Lady Audley’s real identity. It reveals to George Talboys the woman currently posing as Lady Audley is his Helen Talboys, his wife, and suggests to Alicia that there is something sinister about her. Robert fails to see these realizations, however. When George looks distraught after looking at the paining, he mistakenly attributes it to the storm that is raging outside the house. More importantly, Robert also dismisses Alicia’s theory that “sometimes a painter is inspired, and is able to see, through the normal expression of the face, another expression that is equally a part of it, though not to be
perceived by common eyes‖ (73). Robert dismisses Alicia’s theory as “metaphysical” and tells her not to be “German” (73) – he, we are to understand, is a modern, rational Englishman who relies on empirical knowledge and who prides himself on knowledge of the rules of circumstantial evidence.

Despite his dismissal of Alicia’s “metaphysical” reading of the portrait, Robert is confident about his ability to read people, particularly Lucy, from their external characteristics. When he sees Lucy’s handwriting, he imagines it to be a perfect reflection of her identity. As he tells Alicia, “upon my word I think that if I had never seen your aunt, I should know what she was like by this slip of paper. Yes, here it all is – the feathery, gold-shot, flaxen curls, the penciled eyebrows, the tiny straight nose, the winning childish smile, all to be guessed in these few graceful up-strokes and down-strokes” (66). Yet when he confronts Lucy with his calligraphic evidence, later on in the novel, threatening to reveal her true identity by offering her handwriting as proof that the woman now posing as Lucy Graham/Lady Audley is in fact Helen Talboys, she scoffs at him. “The resemblance between the writing of two women is no very uncommon circumstance now-a-days,” she tells him, “I could show you the calligraphies of half-a-dozen of my female correspondents, and defy you to discover any great differences in them” (268). Handwriting, it seems, is as replicable and falsifiable a marker of identity as clothing, hair, and a painted face.

Lucy’s face also proves not to be as readily readable as Robert at first supposes. He thinks to himself, “I will read her as I have read her before. She shall know how useless her artifices are with me” (216-7). But when Robert looks at her, Lucy only defies
him with “a smile of fatal beauty” so that it is Robert who finds that he must turn away and shade his eyes to put “a barrier” between her and himself (217). Lucy’s doll-like demeanor hides her secrets well.¹⁰⁸ Robert seems to have stumbled against what Max Beerbohm half-mockingly, half-seriously, identifies as the greatest advantage of this “new epoch of artifice” in his “Defence of Cosmetics”: that “surface will finally be severed from soul” (116). Like one of the old guard, Robert commits the crime of gazing “into [a woman’s] face anxiously, as into the face of a barometer” regarding it as “a mere vulgar index of character or emotion” (117). In reading women, Robert tends to think not only that surfaces will yield important information about identity, but that a developed exterior signals an impoverished interior. Or, as Beerbohm puts it in his essay, “that the fairer the fruit’s rind and the more delectable its bloom, the closer are packed the ashes within it” (111).

We find this kind of reading in his observation of Phoebe, who in her lack of ornamentation is presented as the polar opposite of Lady Audley:

   Her pale hair was as smoothly braided, and her light grey dress fitted as precisely, as of old. The same neutral tints pervaded her person and her dress; no showy rose-coloured ribbons or rustling silk gown proclaimed the well-to-do inn-keeper’s wife. Phoebe Marks was a person who never lost her individuality. Silent and self-contained, she seemed to hold herself within herself, and take no colour from the outer world. (135)

Phoebe’s appearance simultaneously reveals and conceals her. On the one hand, her hairstyle and clothes do nothing to detract attention from her natural self. Unlike Lady Audley’s hair, which seems to emanate from her head like a nebulous cloud, Phoebe’s

¹⁰⁸ The connection between a woman’s doll demeanor and her ability to hide a secret is by no means exclusive to Braddon. Dickens employs the same image in his description of Miss Lillerton in Sketches by Boz: “Her complexion – with a slight trace of powder here and there – was as clear as that of a well-made wax doll, and her face as expressive” (437).
hair is “smoothly braided” so as to obscure nothing. And while Lady Audley’s attire seems to hide and cover up her body – she “loved to bury herself in soft wrappings of satin and fur” (65) – Phoebe’s dress is “fitted precisely,” presumably revealing her real shape rather than disguising it. And yet, despite the artlessness of her attire, Robert thinks of Phoebe as “a woman who could keep a secret” (136). He imagines how well she would perform in a witness-box; “it would take a clever lawyer to bother her in a cross-examination,” he muses (136). The seeming unconstructedness of her exterior self therefore renders her inscrutable.¹⁰⁹

Material self-construction, it seems, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it offers the possibility to shape and create one’s own identity, while on the other it seems to leave one vulnerable to deconstruction. In creating her new identity by material means, Lady Audley leaves behind her a trail that becomes the basis of Robert’s empirical investigation. The very material details that Lady Audley prided herself in controlling, her hand-writing, her hair, the labels with her different names representing different identities pasted on her luggage one over the other, are the details that form Robert’s chain of circumstantial evidence, link by link. And once the investigation becomes the driving energy of the novel’s plot, Lady Audley is necessarily sacrificed to the novel’s resolution, which cannot provide readers satisfaction without the revelation of her multiple identities.

¹⁰⁹ There is also the possibility that Phoebe’s seemingly natural appearance is as much a construction as any other. Indeed, it may well be this discovery that causes Lady Audley to smirk when she goes into Phoebe’s room at the Inn and discovers her feeble attempts at dressing up her plain furniture with gauze.
The novel’s conclusion, with Lady Audley’s unhappy ending, has been troublesome to those critics who have rightly recognized in Lady Audley’s capacity for material self-determination a subversive, feminist strain. Some have turned to the novel’s final pages to find in the museumification of Audley Court one last victory for Lady Audley while others have chosen instead to emphasize everything that happens before her declaration of insanity. Others yet, like Andrew King, have done much to shed light on the novel’s conclusion by contextualizing it in terms of its intended readerly audience, which would have been used to and would have expected a closing at least shrouded in conventional morality. The tension between Lady Audley’s subversive power and her narrative chastisement parallels in some ways the tension between the critical treatment of luxury dolls by periodicals and writers of children’s literature and their commercial success among young consumers.

This final chastisement, however, does nothing to invalidate Lady Audley’s victory over essentialized ideas about the nature of class and gender. She is a self-made doll who is able to construct her identity as a genteel woman and as an embodiment of the ideal of femininity by material means. She wears the garb of innocence to appeal to Sir Michael Audley as an angel in the house and then embodies gentility by burying herself in her cashmere shawls and fine furs. In the process she deconstructs these ideals by reducing questions of class and femininity to their material substrate. As Lynn Pykett has written, Lucy “threatens bourgeois culture by too closely parodying its ideal, and revealing it as a hollow idol” (quoted in Lysack 62). But if Lady Audley, like the luxury doll, is a parody of the society lady, she also functions as an advertisement for a luxurious
lifestyle, offering instructions as to how it could be achieved by consuming and surrounding oneself by the right consumer goods. Katherine Montwieler, for instance, sees the novel as a “tell-all manual” for becoming the product that is Lady Audley (48). The novel’s secret, she writes, is that it “includes the proper recipe – instructions and ingredients – needed to become the next Lady Audley” (54); it teaches the readers “the proper objects to desire, the items one must possess in order to affect gentility” (55).

What this suggests, however, in anticipation of more contemporary theories of performativity, is that Lady Audley’s various material shells were not masks after all, concealing an interior shielded from view, but her own identity: a secret hidden in plain sight. What is most frightening about Lady Audley is not the secret identity hiding underneath her doll-like exterior but the fact that there is no self pre-existing that outer shell. If, at the end of the novel, Lady Audley stuffs into her trunk and luggage as many of the objects and trinkets that have come to define her, it is not because she is driven by a manic compulsion revealing her insanity but because they are quite literally a part of her. To return to Beerbohm, then, who in his mock celebration of an age of artifice rejoiced at the fact that surfaces can no longer be trusted to provide information about what lies beneath them, it is not because the surface is now severed from the soul but because as Lady Audley and the luxury doll reveal, they were never as distinctly separate as we might have thought them to be.

Lady Audley seems to embody Joan Riviere’s statement that womanliness is masquerade and Judith Butler’s assertion that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed” but instead “an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519).
Chapter 4:
The Work of Fairies: Deconstruction and Imagination in Narratives of Doll Production

Seraphina, the doll heroine of *The Doll and her Friends* (1868), describes her first experience of consciousness as the moment of her unwrapping upon being delivered to the Bazaar in which she is to be sold. “I first opened my eyes to the light of the Pantheon Bazaar,” she tells us, “How I came there I know not; my conscious existence dates only from the moment in which a silver-paper covering was removed from my face, and the world burst upon my view” (5-6). Other doll memoirs begin very similarly. Sophronia, the heroine of *Dolly Dear* (1883), “found herself carefully wrapped up in folds of silver paper, and tightly fixed in a long card-board box just large enough to hold her” when “she first opened her blue eyes upon the gay world” (10). Daisy, the narrator of *More Dolls* (1879), begins her story at the elegant shop of Madame Bernersconi, who keeps Daisy and her other best dolls on display in a glass show-case. Similarly, the haughty beauty and eponymous heroine of *Victoria-Bess* (1879), tells us that her very first memory is of being admired as a commodity: “I first remember myself, standing up in a

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111 The name of Madame Bernersconi is very likely a play on Madame Montanari, England’s most famous and celebrated doll maker, whose dolls achieved their greatest fame after winning a medal at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Montanari, however, did not have her own shop. Her dolls would most likely have been commissioned or sold at higher-end toy shops like Cremer’s.
large glass case in the middle of a Cremer’s toyshop window, the admired and the coveted of every little girl-child who passed down Regent Street” (15).

Figure 13. Sophronia opens her eyes for the first time. From Dolly Dear by “Mrs. Gellie.”

These stories date the beginning of the doll’s existence to its emergence from its wrappers as a commodity ready for sale. Once arrived at the shop, the dolls come to life as if by magic. As Sybil learns in F.S. Janet Burne’s Sybil’s Dutch Dolls (1887), when one of her wooden dolls comes to life upon being purchased, dolls can sometimes
literalize the animation of the commodity fetish. When Sybil reminds the Dutch doll of its station as a mere object, the doll is glad to explain to Sybil the error of her reasoning:

“Only a Dutch doll!” he repeated. “Ah, you did not guess the change that would take place when you paid that half-sovereign for us! Know now that we are no longer mere wooden dolls, but that with the touch of that magic gold, we are gifted with life, speech, and movement” (16).

The financial transaction, sealed by capital, that “magic gold,” has turned the Dutch doll into a living thing that like Marx’s famous table is able to “[ evolve] out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (163). And while Sybil is at first rather pleased to discover the dolls’ animation – “it is so tiresome always to have to make-believe” she says – it soon becomes evident that the dolls are not there to act out Sybil’s fantasies. In fact, a complete power reversal is at hand. “I suppose you play with dolls,” the Dutch doll asks Sybil. “That will be all altered now,” he then tells her, “We shall play with you, and you will have to mind what we tell you” (18).

The doll’s tendency to come to life through imaginative play is in this instance being conflated with the life that dolls take on as fetishized commodities. At the end of Burne’s book we discover that the Dutch dolls’ fetishized animation has only been dreamed by Sybil and has therefore been a product of her imagination. The confusion between imaginative and fetishistic animation is also caused by the fact that both grant objects tremendous power over the people who would presumably be empowered by possessing them, as I show, for instance, in Chapter 2 with the doll’s imagined disciplinary power. More importantly still, however, both kinds of animation rely on a kind of forgetfulness. Both the consumer under the charm of the commodity fetish and
the imaginative child who gives life to her dolls must forget about the process of production that actually gives birth to these objects. It is this forgetfulness that mystifies both the consumer’s and the child’s relationships to things. The narratives of production I examine in this chapter sought to counteract the forgetfulness that animated the commodity fetish, but, as I hope to show, they did so without threatening the doll’s status as imaginative object.

The doll’s mysterious origin therefore contributes to this dual magical life. As Emma Brewer writes in “Toys,” a short piece written for *Leisure Hour* in December 1884, new toys “look so dainty and fresh that you might believe them the work of fairies” (729). Brewer’s statement recalls Charlotte Brontë’s famous declaration that the Great Exhibition resembled “a Bazaar or a Fair – but . . . such a Bazaar or Fair as eastern Genii might ‘have’ created” (quoted in Badowska 1511). And yet, Brewer emphasizes, these dolls did not appear in their shops by dint of magical forces, nor were they made by fairies. Indeed, as Brewer points out, some toys “pass through the hands [of mere earthly workers] a hundred of times before they are on view at the toyshops” (Toys 729).

In “Toydonia; Or, The Land of Toys,” an expanded version of her shorter piece “Toys,” appearing in nine installments from October 25, 1884 to July 25, 1885 in *The Girl’s Own Paper*, Brewer likens the making of dolls to the preparation of young women for entering society:

> The anxiety that parents feel on the introduction of their daughters into society is equally experienced by the Sonneberg toy-makers when they send forth their...

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112 Brontë appears to be concerned not only with the seemingly magical commodities but also with the magic required to bring such a broad array together in one place. She goes on to write: “It seems as if magic only could have gathered this mass of wealth from all the ends of the Earth” (quoted in Badowska 1511).
beautiful dolls to bear the test of the world’s scrutiny. They prepare them for their journey with the utmost care, laying them so carefully in their travelling carriage that neither land nor sea may be able to bruise their beautifully formed limbs, or soil their dainty dresses. Many a consultation has been held over their wardrobe, on which neither pains nor expense has been spared, for it is a matter of great moment to the toymakers that their work should be successful – their character and living depend on it. (124)

As Brewer shows, it would be a grave error to believe that such wonderful creations as dolls emerge fully formed. In making her point Brewer effects an interesting reversal. Unlike in the instances described in Chapter 3, where the doll’s experience in the toy shop is used to comment on women’s experience in the marriage market, here the human relationship is used as a metaphor to elucidate the relationships between things, and between people and things. The doll’s entrance into society may be a key moment both for the doll and its maker, but it is hardly where things begin. The doll’s making, Brewer seems to suggest, is equivalent to a person’s upbringing, and a crucial period to examine if we want to get to the heart of things.

In *May’s Doll: Where its Dress Came From* (1851), this knowledge is presented as an important prerequisite for doll ownership. When little May is given an elegant doll as a gift by her uncle, she is told by her mother that she will not be permitted to play with it “until you can tell me all about your doll – where and by what process she was made, and where and how this lace and silk were manufactured” (6). Only then, her mother tells her, “you shall have her all to yourself” (6). The task before May seems at first insurmountable. “And how,” she asks in despair, “how am I to find out who made my doll, and how she became so beautiful and so gay? I cannot find all this out” (6). May need not have been so discouraged, however. Her mother, being a good Victorian, is
ready to furnish her with all the requisite information; “every morning you shall sit for an hour with me, while I explain to you all I know about your doll,” she tells May (6). At the end, May will be questioned on the substance of these lectures and will only be allowed to play freely with her doll if she can prove that she knows all the details about her doll’s material origins. May must earn the right to own such a beautiful object by learning about how it was made and by whom, what materials are used in its making, and how these are taken from nature. As May’s mother tells her daughter, “when you have learnt what I can teach you on the subject, you shall have her for your own, to play with all day long in the nursery, and to sleep beside you in your crib at night” (6). The book is organized so that each chapter reflects one of these morning lectures. A “Question and Answer” section at the end, presumably representing May’s final examination, provides a demonstration of how the book ought to be used, presumably offering a model for its young readers and their parents. The price of ownership, it seems, is not only hard cash, but also hard facts.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, this kind of information was beginning to become increasingly easy to come by. Not only did books like May’s Doll exist to encourage knowledgeable consumption in children, but writers like George Dodd and F. M. Holmes, whose works I discuss later in this chapter, made their living by writing almost exclusively about industrial processes and innovations for a large and interested public. The phenomenon was particularly dynamic in periodical publications. In Household Words, for instance, “Process articles” became an important fixture of the magazine. These articles, to which I will return later on in this chapter, were characterized by the combination of fact and fancy in the description of various industrial
processes and could claim a long and illustrious list of authors. These writings must also be considered in conjunction with the Great Exhibition (the complete title of which importantly makes reference to “the Works of Industry of all Nations”), which would have provided a visual and tactile counterpart to industrial writing, and quite possibly helped fuel their popularity. The Victorian reading public was presented with more opportunities than ever to become acquainted with the lives of products before they began their lives as commodities.

That is not to say that this trend started with the Victorians. As early as 1833 a writer for the Athenaeum complained about the great proliferation of such writing: “[t]his is the age of the subdivision of labour: four men make a pin and two men describe it in a book for the working classes” (quoted in Factory Production 85). In a nineteenth-century precursor to the light-bulb joke, the Athenaeum writer suggests that even before the Victorian period was starting, this kind of writing was common enough to be considered a nuisance. By the time books like May’s Doll were being published, however, the phenomenon was no longer limited to dry descriptions of pin-making aimed at the working classes. Writing describing industrial processes was now of interest to men, women, and children of all classes, and while it continued to seek to inform readers and often continued to highlight the conditions of the working poor, the genre also took on a life of its own as a form of entertainment.

113 Pin-making is Adam Smith’s primary example of the division of labor, which is praised in The Wealth of Nations (1776) as one of the main causes of industrial improvement and growth.
114 This quotation also suggests the centrality in such writing of critiques of the impact of industrialization on working conditions, which I address later on in this chapter.
It is thus with great assurance that Brewer invites young readers to join her in
discovering the inner workings of the doll industry: “You, whose experience of dolls is
limited to the time subsequent to their entrance into society, be my companions in
Sonneberg, and with me see the dolls made, learn of what they are made, and make
acquaintance with those who make them” (124). Confidently assuming that her interest
will be matched by the reader’s – “We naturally want to know of what these dolls are
made, and where the material comes from for such an enormous supply” (124, emphasis
added) – Brewer invites her readers on her virtual tour of the doll industry, where, she
promises her readers, “We shall be able to see the whole machinery of doll-making set in
motion” (125).

The attitude characterizing such writing and embodied in the unflinching assertion
that we “naturally want to know” how things are made lends strong support to Elaine
Freedgood’s thesis, as articulated in The Ideas in Things and elsewhere, that Victorians
“were not fully in the grip of the kind of fetishism Marx and Marxists have ascribed to
industrial culture” (7). “A host of ideas resided in Victorian things,” argues Freedgood,
and “abstraction, alienation, and spectacularization had to compete for space with other
kinds of object relations” (7). In other words, while goods were indeed sometimes
perceived fetishistically, even magically, out of the context of their production, this was
not always the case. Victorians, as these writings suggest, were very much interested in
the material histories of things even before they came into social circulation as
commodities. George Dodd, author of Days at the Factories (1843), wrote that “the bulk
of the inhabitants of a great city, such as London, have very indistinct notions of the
means whereby the necessaries, the comforts, or the luxuries of life are furnished” (Quoted in Freedgood 12). In what Freedgood aptly calls a “proto-Marxian moment” Dodd argues that money becomes a kind of “veil which hides the producer from the consumer” (12). The writings I discuss in this chapter served to remove this veil, promising a more complex and more intimate relationship with things.

The doll-making industry was a particularly attractive subject for this kind of writing. In a piece entitled “Making Dolls’ Eyes: A Curious Industry,” which nevertheless discusses the entire doll-making business, F.M. Holmes calls the doll industry “surely one of the strangest of the many strange industries which mankind has found wherewith to earn his bread” (106). While writing about commonplace objects like buttons and pins could delight readers by revealing how much thought and work could go into something so little, dolls, which were not perceived as quite so ordinary, presented different possibilities. Unlike buttons, for instance, which, as Harriet Martineau argues in an article she wrote on the button industry for Household Words, we tend to treat with unwarranted indifference, dolls, if anything, commanded disproportionate regard.

115 The (often hyperbolic) pronouncement about a lack of knowledge about production processes is a common rhetorical strategy used by industrial writers to justify or lend greater significance to their contributions.

116 Although the author of the piece has been catalogued as F.M. Holmr, the author is most likely F. M. Holmes. There is no biographical information on Holmes, but his other writings, which focus primarily on adventure and school house books for boys and books on industrial progress, suggest he is likely to be the author. Some of Holmes works include: Winning his Laurels: The Boys of St. Raglan's (1887), The Island House: a Tale for the Young Folks (1898), Chemists and their Wonders: the Story of the Application of Chemistry to Various Arts and Manufactures (1896), Engineers and their Triumphs: The Story of the Locomotive, the Steamship, Bridge Building, Tunnel Making (1894), Miners and their Works Underground: Stories of the Mining of Coal, of Various Metals, and of Diamonds (1896), These Sixty Years, 1837-1897: A Sketch of British Progress under Queen Victoria (1897).

117 In her article “What there is in a Button,” she writes: “‘I don’t care a button,’ we say: but little as a button may be worth to us, one single specimen may be worth to the manufacturer long days of toil and nights of care” (13). “It is wonderful, is it not? that on that small pivot turns the fortune of such multitudes
Dolls were consumer products that were often not intended to be treated as such. In children’s play as in adults’ writing about it, dolls feature as fashionable ladies demanding of respect, as children or babies to be coddled and cared for, as playmates and confidantes. In the case of dolls, therefore, such industrial excursions presented different questions and possibilities.

In fact, though Martineau might show us how very much work goes into a button, even for Victorians, the more interesting the object, the more appealing the proposition of the discovery of its inner workings would seem. Thus, when George Dodd marvels in his 1853 piece for Household Words at the automaton-like powers of the speaking doll, his admiration is irrepressibly coupled by a desire to tear it apart, causing him to exclaim that, “such a doll would be worth picking to pieces” (355). But there was also an element of deconstruction inherent in every production piece that created special tensions in the case of the doll. Looking inside the doll industry, in deconstructing the doll as a manufactured good, promised not only to complicate its status as a commodity but also threatened to undo some of the fantasy with which it was associated.

I. The Doll’s Material Revolution

Part of what made the doll industry such a popular subject for description was its relative novelty. While dolls, as Victorians liked to note, had great claims to antiquity, having...
been found among the tombs of little Egyptian children, it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that they were produced in such vast quantities and in such great variety as to become a mainstay of childhood and important figures in popular culture and literature. Dolls were also seen as an expression of national identity and ingenuity. As George Dodd writes in an 1853 piece on dolls for *Household Words*, there are many matters of national importance tied up in England’s infatuation with dolls: “There are the aesthetics of doll-making, and there is the mechanical skill to which taste gives rise; and there are national and individual idiosyncrasies which they serve to bring into play; and there are the curious branches of commerce to which this doll-nursing tendency directly contributes” (352).

While France, as I show in Chapter 3, was the most important point of comparison in matters of taste and the shaping of female identity, it was to Germany that the English turned their attention in discussing the advances of the doll industry. Germany had always been a key player in the history of doll-making and toy-making in general. Its doll industry had its roots in its wood-carving tradition, dating back to the fourteenth century. The making of wooden dolls and other toys in the Gröden Tal\(^{118}\) region of St. Ulrich appears to have emerged as an off-shoot of the making of wooden carvings for churches. As Walter Benjamin ominously puts it: “The toy industry itself emerged, as it were, as a side-effect of the decline of the Church.” The advance of the Reformation, he writes, forced many artists who had formerly worked for the Church “to shift to the production of goods to satisfy the demand for craftwork, and to produce

\[^{118}\text{Hence the name of “Grödnerthals” for the wooden dolls made in the region also sometimes misleadingly referred to as “Dutch dolls.”}\]
smaller art objects for domestic use, instead of large-scale works” (“Cultural History of Toys” 114). Despite their seeming association with this shift from religious idols to commercial ones, these early dolls and the methods of their production were held by Victorians in the highest regard. Wherever they appear, these old wooden dolls are treated with respect and looked upon with nostalgic wistfulness.

As Lynn Festa notes, the majority of objects in nineteenth-century it-narratives are presented as nonindustrial. She writes: “The objects are all raised and educated on an individual basis; none of them are industrially manufactured. The manner of their crafting is lovingly described” (Festa 317-18). Indeed, the only production narrative to appear in a doll memoir is the idealized story of the birth of Maria Poppet in Henry Horne’s *Memoirs of a London Doll* (1852). Horne introduces us to the Sprat family, who share an only room, which is “the workshop by day, and the bed-room at night.” Although we are told that Mr. Sprat could make wax and composition dolls, quite meaningfully “his usual business was to make jointed dolls . . . and these were *of course* made of wood” (4, emphasis added).

All the family worked at Doll-making, and were very industrious. Mr. Sprat was of course the great manager and doer of most things, and always the finisher, but Mrs. Sprat was also clever in her department, which was entirely that of eyes. She either painted eyes, or else, for the superior class of dolls, fitted in the glass ones. She, moreover, always painted the eyebrows, and was so used to it, that she could make exactly the same sort of arch when it was late in the evening and nearly dark, before candles were lighted. The eldest boy painted hair; or fitted and glued hair on to the heads of the best dolls. The second boy fitted half legs and arms together by pegs at the joints. The little girl did nothing but paint rosy cheeks and lips, which she always did very nicely, though sometimes she made them rather too red, and looking as if very hot, or blushing extremely. (3-4)
Although there is an element of the mechanistic in the high degree of specialization, especially in Mrs. Sprat, who is so automatic in her painting of eyebrows that she can essentially do it in the dark, there is also a hint of the artisanal in their work. In the girl’s painting of cheeks, which importantly, suggests some degree of feeling or emotion, the dolls are not identical, and the little girl’s enthusiasm for pink leaves a personal mark that makes the dolls to some extent unique.

The mechanicity is also substantially tempered by giving the doll a benign conscience that allows her to relate the process of her making as a kind of childbirth:

The first thing I recollect of myself was a kind of pegging, and pushing, and scraping, and twisting, and tapping down at both sides of me, above and below. These latter operations were the fitting on of my legs and arms. Then, I passed into the hands of the most gentle of all the Sprat family, and felt something delightfully warm laid upon my cheek and mouth. It was a little girl who was painting me a pair of rosy cheeks and lips; and her face, as she bent over me, was the first object of my life that my eyes distinctly saw. The face was a smiling one, and as I looked up at it I tried to smile too, but I felt some hard material over the outside of my face, which my smile did not seem to be able to get through. (5)

The “pushing” and “scraping” and “twisting” suggest the more traumatic aspects of birth, possibly like passing through the birth canal, while the doll’s first sensation of something “delightfully warm laid upon my cheek and mouth” as she gazes into a smiling face, “the first object” she ever sees, suggests images of nursing and maternal bonding. Once finished, Maria Poppet is handed to Mr. Sprat, who like a doctor ascertaining the health of a new-born “turned me about in his hands, examining and trying my legs and arms” until “he was satisfied that I was a complete doll in all parts” (6).

Horne’s depiction of the Sprat family’s doll-making business simultaneously sheds light on the plight of the virtuous working poor and imbues it with a kind of
nostalgia. Indeed, the kind of industry that Horne describes was in fact beginning to disappear by 1852 when his book was published. This revolution in the doll industry is attributed by Martin Hardie, whose work I discuss in the next section, to the “discovery” of papier-mâché for the making of dolls’ heads. The main draw of this material was that it was substantially stronger than plaster, earthenware, porcelain or wax and also comparatively cheap to produce, since it was essentially made from waste material. As King notes, “Paper pulp was becoming an increasingly useful waste product, because of the rapid increase in the number of books produced, especially in the Sonneberg area” (78). Makers were not always scrupulous about the ingredients in this composition, however, and the paste became an opportunity to get rid of a wide range of waste materials. This paste was then made into flat sheets that were pressed into moulds and left to dry and then usually covered with a coating of wax to create a smooth surface on which the doll’s features could be painted (King 78).

Papier-mâché, which, like its failed plaster predecessor, “lent itself to more careful modeling,” caused a “revolution in the trade” of doll-making (Hardie 282). This revolution was not occasioned so much by the change in materials as by the effects these new materials had on the form of production, and, of course, the end product. Wooden dolls had to be hand-carved and would usually be carved by a single person who would maintain control of the entire artistic process. This led to an increased possibility for individual artistry, but also for more variation in quality, especially in those made hastily for a lower price. Even Caleb Plummer complains about the inaccuracies that hurried work causes him to commit when there’s “a run on Noah’s Arks” that causes him to work
quickly. “I could have wished to improve upon the Family,” he writes, and “It would be a satisfaction to one’s mind, to make it clearer which was Shems and Hams, and which was Wives” but he cannot “see how it’s to be done at the price” (172).

Papier-mâché, on the other hand, was highly conducive to a more systematized mode of production. Instead of carving out each individual doll, it was only necessary to sculpt one original model out of clay and that model would then be used to create a mold that could be used to replicate the same head or limb by the thousands. This led to a more uniform result and meant that dolls could also be produced at a much faster rate and at a consistently higher quality. Created by a less imaginative process, these dolls, in their uniformity and increased realistic representation of the female form, were often perceived as less imaginative objects.

Although these composition dolls were also made in England, it was Germany that specialized in this new development. In the doll-making section of her multi-part series “Bread-Winning at Home,” written for The Girl’s Own Paper, Margaret Bateson compares the British home industry with the larger-scale German manufactories:

The doll trade, in truth, does not flourish nowadays as well as it once did. British doll-makers have never pretended to make those exquisite wax creatures that are bought for the nurseries of the wealthy. These have always come from France. On the other hand, our workers are outsold in the cheap market by the Germans, who offer for less money a prettier article. That it is prettier British doll-makers, of course, indignantly deny. My poor friend spoke with conviction of the inferiority of German dolls, although, as one looked at her own images which littered the floor, it did not seem possible that there were many grades of descent from her models. (219)

119 This statement is contradicted, to some extent, by other doll historians. Although it is true that by the time Bateson was writing the high-end market was probably being dominated by the French dolls by Bru and Jumeau, the English wax doll did enjoy a period of supremacy. As Eileen King notes, the wax doll was an English point of manufacturing pride and their “supremacy in making poured-wax dolls was acknowledged all over Europe” (267).
The key difference between the German and British industries appears to have been in degree of centralization. Although much of the work that went into doll-making in Germany continued to be carried out from the workers’ homes, the great concentration of doll-makers in a single geographical area made it easier for work to be divided among workers so that the pieces to be assembled together by a main manager. In England, work continued to be carried out in its entirety from home.

This method had both advantages and disadvantages. Bateson visits a maker of rag dolls and a dolls’ dress-maker. Her account of them is balanced. They are poor and their living conditions are pitiable but they do not live in complete dissipation and squalor. In both instances Bateson finds that their working conditions would be improved under a model similar to the German one. The woman who makes a living alternating between stuffing rag dolls with sawdust and shavings, coating wax dolls’ faces with calico and painting doll faces tells her that it is “a drawback . . . that she was constantly obliged to change from one branch of work to another” (219). She is also required to obtain the materials herself, in advance of being paid for her work, which also causes difficulties. Writing about the dolls’ dress-maker, Bateson writes that “It can scarcely be doubted that some improvement would be effected in the quality of the dressing if workrooms were established under the direction of women with ideas and taste” (220). She goes on to write that one such establishment has been created in London and that not only do its workers earn higher wages but also “that during the few years the

120 The name of rag-doll is misleading. These dolls were similar to wax dolls but differed in that their wax faces were coated with a thin layer of muslin, which was then varnished over to create a more resistant doll.
workroom has been in existence, the quality of the dolls’ dress-making had distinctly risen” (220). In spite of all this, the dolls’ dress-maker who works from home finally tells Bateson that she would not choose to change her situation: “she liked her work, and she esteemed her employers” and most importantly, perhaps, she felt that in her work she was helping “to fight the terrible German giant” of the doll-making industry (220).

II. German Giants: Industry’s Hideous Progeny

While some writers like Margaret Bateson did explore British doll-making it was “the terrible German giant” – the Sonneberg doll industry – which most authors chose to describe. Part of this may well have had something to do with the allure of visiting a foreign land. Exploring the English industry simply involved knocking on the doors of the homes doubling as workshops of individual doll-makers, who sometimes inhabited some of the least pleasant neighborhoods in London; examining the German industry, however, involved an excursion to Sonneberg, one of Germany’s more picturesque regions. Another appeal of Sonneberg was its astonishing concentration of people dedicated to the doll-making trade in a single, defined geographical location. Hardie does not exaggerate Sonneberg’s centrality to the doll-making industry in dubbing it “The

121 In “Toys and their Makers,” for instance, Mary Spencer Warren describes “the conditions under which many of our English toys are made – the want, squalor, and misery of the makers and their residences” (239). She also writes that when her search for a doll-maker led her to one particular neighborhood, she was cautioned by the police to stay away, since it was an area in which they only ventured to visit in pairs.
kingdom of dolls.” Another journalist writing for *Chatterbox*\(^{122}\) in 1893 makes similar claim, writing that “At Sonneberg . . . all the inhabitants are in the business” and that as many as “twelve thousand people are all more or less doll-makers.” “Among them,” he writes, these doll-makers “produce no fewer than twenty-five million dozen doll babies\(^{123}\) every year.” To emphasize just how astronomical these numbers are, the writer explains that “out of one million dozen [alone] everybody – men, women, and children – in London and Manchester could be given two dolls!” Alternatively dubbed “the kingdom of dolls,” “Toydonia,” or “the capital of Toyland,” Sonneberg was presented as a fantastic land dedicated to bringing children happiness and delight.

Such fanciful depictions of a magical toy land were often at odds with the reality of industrial production, however. Part of the dreadful mystery that writings about the doll industry threatened to unveil was the sad truth about the poverty and the working conditions of doll makers that had already been exposed, to some degree, by Dickens in the characters of Caleb Plummer and Jenny Wren. Though dolls might be perceived by children as wondrous things, they sometimes came from places that were not so wonderful. Furthermore, the fact that dolls were luxurious objects with no practical application could make the poverty of those who made them seem particularly cruel. Indeed, the people entrusted with making dolls very often lacked the very luxuries which they were fated to endow on their senseless creations. It is therefore with irony that one

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\(^{122}\) Although *Chatterbox* was not a particularly serious publication, the article on the doll-making industry was written as a piece as a series entitled “How Common Things are Made” which describes how common household objects such as pins, pens, glass, and even cheap jewelry are made.

\(^{123}\) This does not necessarily mean that the dolls were babies rather than ladies – dolls were often indiscriminately called “babies” without regard for the kind of figure they actually represented. The figure is presented in dozens because dolls were often sold wholesale in bundles of twelve.
observer notes of the manufacture of dolls’ eyes, that “They are made in cellars and
basements, where there is scarcely a hands breadth of sunshine to cheer the weary artists” (65). The men responsible for creating the most realistic illusion of vision for an
inanimate object seem to be condemned to darkness themselves, even though they, unlike
the dolls they make, can actually experience the difference.124

This irony was heightened by the fact that the very dolls that were made for
children were often made by children. For those children, being employed in doll making
meant not having the leisure time in which to play with them. This mordant truth is
encapsulated in the little verse legend inscribed on some Dutch dolls exported to England
according to Laura Starr: “The children of Holland take pleasure in making / What the
children in England take pleasure in breaking” (38).125 This kind of inequality was not
hidden from child readers. The author of “The Making of Common Things,” for instance,
who writes about the doll industry for Chatterbox, a children’s magazine, casually
broaches the topic as follows:

We said above that all little girls like dolls. An exception should be made in the
case of those who help to produce them. The work, both in this country and in
others, is so poorly paid that those engaged in it cannot help detesting dolls. In
Sonneberg, for example, the average earnings are only 3s. a week for children, 8s.
for girls and women, and 16s. a week for men. The hours worked, as in London,
are very long. (215)

124 As I show in chapter two, Dickens also comments on this irony in “The Cricket on the Hearth” by
making Bertha, the daughter of Caleb Plummer, a doll and toy maker, blind and unable to return the steady
gaze of the dolls she makes.
125 This would not have been entirely accurate, however. The dolls typically called “Dutch dolls” were not
made in Holland but in Germany. Their denomination as “Dutch” is likely to have been a degeneration
from “Deutsch” (German). These dolls are also sometimes called Grodnertals after the region of Gröden Tal,
where such dolls were usually made, particularly during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.
The author does not go on to express sympathy with these young workers, nor is the description followed by any plea for reform.

Not all writers treated these matters with the same detachment. One of the most interesting critical treatments of the doll industry can be found in Martin Hardie’s “The Land of Dolls,” written for the *English Illustrated Magazine* in 1904. Writing as an art historian for a magazine dedicated primarily to art and other cultural content, Hardie views the doll industry through a Ruskinian lens. Hardie is at first inclined to view Sonneberg in a romantic light; “with its high-pitched roofs, its red tiles, its foreign quaintness,” he writes, it “is like a town of dolls’ houses nestling among the trees” (282). From afar, Sonneberg appears to him like an enchanted kingdom in which “the doll holds undisputed sway” (282).

Yet as he begins to wander the streets “towards sun-down,” the images he sees are more disturbing than picturesque:

As you go through Sonneberg streets towards sun-down, you meet a constant procession of small carts, laden high with the headless bodies of dolls. Women and children stream past with great baskets strapped upon their backs, full to the brim, with heads, arms, legs, shoes, and little garments. It seems like some grim and ghastly funeral cortège, till you remember that these *disjuncta membra* are dolls in the making, dolls destined to fill young hearts in distant lands with life and laughter and love. (283)

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126 Martin Hardie (1875–1952) was an English art historian and administrator. Immediately after graduating from Oxford he began to work in the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, where he remained for the following thirty-seven years. Despite his work as historian and administrator, Hardie continued to paint and exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy (ODNB). He does not appear to have been a regular contributor to periodicals, so this piece was likely written on commission.

127 In *Victorian Periodicals and Victorian Society*, edited by J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel, the *English Illustrated Magazine* (1883-1900) is described as follows: “A general-knowledge miscellany treating, among other subjects, music, the visual arts, literature, and such professions as architecture, law, and archaeology. Each issue included a list of those who contributed to its pictorial content. Among such contributors were Walter Crane and engravers Charles V. Brownlow and Octave Lacour. This was among the earliest magazines to use photoreproduction” (136).
In comparing this procession (figure 14 shows the illustration provided in another article) to a funeral cortege Hardie likens dolls to dead bodies – corpses. Seeing them in this strange context, the mangled body parts fail to recall the “life and laughter and love” he is accustomed to associating them with but elicit instead grotesque images of death. In a moment defined by the uncanny, the familiar image of the doll is rendered utterly unfamiliar when regarded in a new context. Most eerily, this sight suggests that dolls, as lifeless bodies, have been corpses all along, only we have failed to see it by not seeing them in their proper context. Although Hardie does not smell the dolls’ decaying flesh, he is nevertheless met with a smell almost as repugnant; the air, he tells us, is “pungent with the smell of glue, used for sticking dolls’ heads and limbs” (282).

Figure 14. Workgirls. From “Toydonia.”
Perhaps, however, the reason why Hardie finds the image of these disjointed limbs so repugnant is because it represents to him the figurative fragmentation of the workers employed in making them. Within German manufactories Hardie encounters “the old story of the sweating system, the same tragedy of the crowded rooms and small wages of women and children, ‘the young, young children,’ toiling from early morning till late night” (284).\textsuperscript{128} Not only are the workers overworked and underpaid,\textsuperscript{129} but they are also reduced to mere tools in their work, an idea taken up by Ruskin in his defense of Gothic architecture. Like Marx, Ruskin believed that performing precise and automatic work ad infinitum could reduce men to mere machines. “Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions,” he wrote, and to insist on this and to “make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them” (173). In this mechanical work in which all the workers’ “attention and strength must go to the accomplishment of the mean act” the soul is “worn away” and the human being reduced, like a mere doll, to “a heap of sawdust” (173).

Although Ruskin was writing about decorative work in architecture, his remarks are perfectly suited to comment on the doll industry. In fact, this emphasis on mere accuracy of execution rather than individual artistry was precisely the effect of the doll

\textsuperscript{128} Hardie’s reference to “the young, young children” is from Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Cry of the Children”: “The young fawns are playing with the shadows, / The young flowers are blowing toward the west: / But the young, young children, O my brothers, / They are weeping bitterly! / They are weeping in the playtime of the others, / In the country of the free.”

\textsuperscript{129} Hardie highlights the stark contrast between the meagre earnings of the doll makers and the wealth generated by the industry: “Adults are paid at the rate of two shillings for ten dozen articles, and must provide their own thread. A twelve hours’ day brings them in some six shillings a week, while a sempstress [sic] in a factory earns fifteen. In the open market the dolls they make range in price from five-pence a dozen to 12s. 3d. each. Great Britain alone pays Nuremberg and Sonneberg £700,000 yearly for dolls and toys. The total value of the exports from the Sonneberg district is £1,500,000 a year!” (287).
industry’s shift from wood carving to mold-based composition dolls. As one writer gleefully notes in the *Art Journal* in a piece entitled “The German Toy Manufacture” (1853): “The use of papier-mâché in place of wood-carving has been the real secret of the great improvement in toys; for a good model in clay or wax being obtained, it could be reproduced in casts by the commonest workmen, women, or children” (357). In other words, artistic skill would only be required of the maker of the initial mold, while all other workers would be limited to mindlessly reproducing the model put before them.

This mechanized model for production also lent itself to specialization through the division of labor. According to one account, as many as eighty workers had a hand in the making of a single doll. “Doll-making is pretty much the same in essentials all the world over,” the author writes, “but in Germany labour is subdivided as much as possible, or, in other words a doll-maker does one little thing from year’s end to year’s end, and thus it comes about that it takes eighty people to make a doll” (*Chatterbox* 215). It is this subdivision that leads, according to Marx, to the worker’s alienation. In Sonneberg the worker cannot lay claim to a single one of the thousands of dolls he has made, since he is only ever responsible for a meaningless fraction of its making. The middleman, Hardie writes, functions as a kind of central intelligence and “distributes the work among all the separate craftsmen, who carry it out in their own homes” (284). Each one is only responsible for a fraction of the final product: “One undertakes the heads, another the eyes, a third the arms and legs, a fourth the clothing, and so on” (284). The dolls are produced in a kind of domestic conveyor belt of mass production. In one room, a family sits around a tub of sawdust and while the mother cuts out the body’s shapes in
calico or kid leather, “one daughter is sewing it; another is stitching the joints; and a youngster, only eight years old, is glueing [sic] on arms and legs” (286). Of another set of workers Hardie remarks: “From long practice the men work with the regularity of a machine” (286).

In reducing the workers to mindless tools, the disembodied limbs of a giant man-made machine, the doll-making industry reifies or objectifies its workers. In the process of making one kind of life-less body, the live bodies that make them lose their own life and animation. For Marx, the narrative of production, at least as described in his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* is positively gothic. The product of labor takes on a life of its own. As if feeding vampirically from the workers that produce it, the product develops “a separate existence” and comes to possess “a self-sufficient power” (69). The doll becomes a kind of Frankensteinian creation, whose “various parts,” in the words of one writer, are gathered “from different quarters” to “make the perfect doll” (Holmes 105) and then as a product of labor “confronts [the worker] as something hostile and strange” (Marx 69). The uncanny life taken on by the dolls as products of labor at the expense of the workers is eerily illustrated in an illustration by “Poyej” to an article written by F.M. Holmes (figure 15). The illustration shows the workers, all looking identical to each other, in a slightly stooping attitude. By contrast the dolls have been posed in such a way as to suggest action and liveliness, making them seem more alive than the women who are employed in making them.
The doll is presented as having a similar parasitic relation to its maker in Margaret Howitt’s “A Tribe of Toymakers,” published in 1875 in The Leisure Hour. Nanna, one of the “tribe” of women who makes a living by “administering little dabs of vermillion on the cheeks of a multitude of farthing dolls” (772) seems to grow unhealthier the more she endows the marks of blooming good health on her dolls. Her painting, writes Howitt, is “extremely pernicious, as the health is often injured by the employment of white lead, arsenic, and other poisonous paints.” “Thus,” writes, Howitt, “Nanna and other girls and women have a pallid, sickly look, not otherwise to be accounted for in this bracing climate, which gives most of their sex that blooming complexion which they endeavour
to convey to the faces of their dolls” (773). The dolls seem to feed, as if vampirically, on the girls who make them, robbing them of their health and of any visible trace of it.

It is surprising that the product such a process would produce would be anything less than monstrous. A French critique of the “German giant” is similarly channeled through an aesthetic critique of the doll. In the passage below, a French bébé expresses an almost xenophobic disgust for German dolls:

They are ugly and ridiculous enough, those German dolls with their stupid faces of wax-over composition, their goggle eyes, and their meager straw bodies. I would rather be mute than have an animal’s sound come out of my chest. I am not a fighter young Miss, but I can assure you that when the day happens that I come face to face with one of them, I will break her cardboard body as if it were glass, with its stench of candle grease and wax. I am of course a true French bébé! (quoted in Peers 93)

The German doll is turned by the French bébé into a kind of racialized inferior monster, representative not only of German industry but also of German femininity and national identity.130

Hardie, however, limits his critique to finding fault with the doll’s monotonous aesthetic. Just as for Ruskin, Gothic architecture is aesthetically superior as a result of the freedom given to the worker, for Hardie the dolls’ mass-produced beauty is not only tainted because of its origins but also aesthetically inferior and cloying. “You see to satiety the same sweet faces, the same smile, fixed and inevitable” (286), he writes, and “In the kingdom of dolls, as among human beings, a “doll face” connotes a cheap,

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130 Although French dolls would have been produced by a similar industrial process, French producers criticized German dolls as inferior products, particularly towards the end of the century when they started to produce imitation French dolls at a more affordable price (Peers 94).
common, unsatisfying form of beauty” (286). Ruskin’s critique of this kind of perfection resonates particularly well with the changes taking place in the doll industry. He writes: “No human face is exactly the same in its lines on each side” and “to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality” (185). He would furthermore have found nothing artistic about the modern mass-produced doll because of his belief “that great art, whether expressing itself in words, colours, or stones, does not say the same thing over and over again” (188). This sense of monotony and repetitiveness is apparent in another of the illustrations by “Poyej” for Holmes’ piece. Figure 17 shows women at work painting the disembodied heads into which the eyes will be inserted. Not only does the illustrator depict seemingly endless rows of identical doll faces, but the use of perspective elongates the image, making it seem as through their worktable extends into infinity.

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131 Other writers exhibit a similar disdain for the doll in its manufacturing context. One man describes the process as wax is poured over moulds to harden into doll’s heads: “It is not a lovely object in this stage, nor ten minutes later, even, when the polisher has trimmed off the ragged seams and the dyer has dipped it in flesh-colored paint” (65). The dolls eye-maker interviewed by Mayhew exhibits similar disdain for gutta-percha dolls. He complains that “the gutta-percha dolls look rather bilious” and refuses to make his naturally colored eyes “bilious to match” (345).
We get a similar sense of Hardie’s frustration with the ubiquity of the doll face in his description of what he calls the ‘pattern room,’ a kind of large warehouse for one of Sonneberg’s larger exporters:

Pattern room it is called, but in reality it is a whole suite, a whole house, a Lowther Arcade of pattern rooms. And every room is full to overflowing of dolls – dolls – dolls! Dolls in cupboards, dolls on racks, dolls on tables, dolls with eyes wide open and eyes tight shut, dolls young and old, baby and grandmamma, mulattos, negroes, Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Red-ridinghoods, wolves with grandmother’s cap, chimney-sweeps, sailors – laughing, crying, sleeping – everywhere dolls, dolls, dolls! (285)

The pattern room, which might otherwise have been a fantastic place and a child’s dream, is presented by Hardie as a vision of nightmarish proportions. In view of the doll’s role in dehumanizing and dominating the worker in Hardie’s account, the doll’s multiplicity, seemingly augmented by its endless repetition, becomes almost threatening. Hardie’s declaration at the beginning of his piece that in Sonneberg “the doll holds undisputed sway” takes on a more menacing meaning.

Hardie’s alleged purpose in exploring the doll industry in Sonneberg is to shed light on the “real nature” of dolls. “To understand the real nature of the doll in being, the doll clothed as you see it in the shop,” Hardie argues, “you must study the component parts of the great industrial system at Sonneberg” (284). The “real nature” of the doll, Hardie contends, is not in its state as a finished commodity but in the truth about its production. This pursuit of the “real nature” of the doll parallels what Baudelaire describes as the “overriding desire of most children to get at and see the soul of their toys” (202, emphasis in the original) by literally taking them apart to look inside their
material shells. Similarly, to get at the very truth of the doll we must study it in its “component parts,” we must, in other words, look inside the doll – or the doll industry.

For many Victorian writers, the doll’s destruction was presented as a loss of innocence in the search for knowledge. Gouraud describes this loss in her Preface to Memoirs of a Doll:

And if, urged by that fatal curiosity which lost the whole human race in the person of the first woman, too many little girls unsewed their friend to see what was inside – dreadful inquiry! fear all the errors, all the faults, all the regret occasioned by the desire to know that which we ought not. Fear the results of such a mournful disenchantment! What are our illusions, but the bran from which our life takes its tone, its joys, and its pleasures? The veil torn, the illusions vanish. What remains? an empty doll-case. (vii)

For Gouraud, the destruction of the doll functions as both coming of age and original sin. Opening up the doll leads to knowledge, but that knowledge does not make the child any wiser, it is only the original sin that inaugurates the child’s transition to adulthood and that revokes what Hodgson Burnett refers to as “the right of entry into fairyland” (58). Charles Baudelaire, too, saw this as a moment fated for disillusionment; for when the child is finally victorious and opens up the toy “This is the beginning of melancholy and gloom” (15).

Hardie’s experience is similar; in looking within the doll industry in pursuit of the doll’s soul or real nature he finds nothing magical or beautiful but only the dehumanization of its makers. The result for Hardie is just as disillusioning as for the child who unsews her doll. “Perhaps,” Hardie concludes, “it is better to follow Topsy’s plan, and to expect that dolls just grow. When you insist on seeing the wheels go round,
there comes the inevitable disillusion” (284). For Bill Brown, the child’s pursuit of the toy’s soul is also fated to fail:

For of course there is no soul within the toy, not even the mechanical toy. Not even the worker’s image of the thing really lurks there in it, however convinced Walter Benjamin was, in the case of the hand-crafted toy, that children could still feel the hand of the worker on it. (6)

But perhaps Brown is too quick to claim that the worker’s hands are not to be found inside the doll. Even as he describes the workers’ alienation from the objects produced by their labor, Hardie reinserts them into the narrative of the doll’s material life, revealing them within the doll as part of its “real nature.”

III. Creative Destruction

The idea expressed by writers like Gouraud and Baudelaire that the exploratory destruction of the doll signals a break with the child’s imaginative relationship with this childhood toy may be less straightforward than it initially seems. For Gouraud, the child’s disillusionment is presented as a consequence of the discovery of the doll’s mere material nature. The doll, in its ability to come alive through the imagination, would promise to be animated by something more ethereal than handfuls of bran. Perhaps, however, this kind of thinking relies on a false dichotomy that puts materiality and imagination unnecessarily at odds with each other. As the writer of “Popular Toys” writes in the January 13, 1866 issue of The London Review:

132 This is a reference to Topsy from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852). When asked whether she knows about God or who has made her, Topsy famously retorts “Nobody, as I knows on,” later adding, “I spect I grow’d. Don’t think nobody never made me” (38).
A little girl playing with her doll knows quite as well as her mother that it can neither speak nor hear; that the face she so fondly gazes on is executed in wax or porcelain; that when she lays her darling down to rest, those beady eyes would never close but for a mechanical contrivance which can more easily be guessed than described. Of all this the child is perfectly aware, and yet she continues day by day to treat the puppet as if she were flesh and blood – to kiss it, to talk to it, to lavish upon it in her childish way, but with perfect sincerity . . . This, we repeat, is not the result of delusion, but of active fancy . . . The origin and use of toys may be referred to that lively imagination which is the peculiar characteristic of the infant mind. Their tendency not only to amuse children, but to make them think. (64)

The little girl is no fool. If she treats the doll as a living thing it is not because she is deceived as to its true nature but because it gives her pleasure to exercise her imagination. Since the delight of fantasy comes from imagination rather than from a lack of a particular knowledge, there is no risk of losing that delight in increasing that knowledge. The knowledge about how the doll’s complexion is “executed in wax” or about how the doll’s gaze is operated by means of “a mechanical contrivance” does nothing to undo the doll’s imaginative potential.133

In fact, as early as 1798, Maria Edgeworth had defended the child’s impulse to destroy his or her toys in Practical Education as a creative act rather than a destructive one. For Edgeworth, it is not “from the love of mischief, but from the hatred of idleness” that a child breaks a toy. We should not, therefore, “discourage the inquisitive genius from examining into the structure of their toys, whatever it might be” (13). To support her claims Edgeworth provides as an example the dissection of a wooden cuckoo which she was able to witness first-hand:

133 The author nevertheless endows the “contrivance” that moves the doll’s eyes with an aura of mystery, confessing that such a mechanism “can more easily be guessed than described” (13).
We were once present at the dissection of a wooden cuckoo, which was attended with extreme pleasure by a large family of children; and it was not one of the children who broke the precious toy, but it was the father who took it to pieces. Nor was it the destruction of the play-thing which entertained the company, but the sight of the manner in which it was constructed. Many guesses were made by all spectators about the internal structure of the cuckoo, and astonishment of the company was universal, when the bellows were cut open and the simple contrivance was revealed to view; probably more was learned from this cuckoo, than was ever learned from any cuckoo before.

A broken cuckoo, according to Edgeworth, is therefore more entertaining and more instructive than an unbroken one. An important tension nevertheless remains, for we may be sure that looking inside the cuckoo would not have been nearly as interesting were the cuckoo not as fascinating in its whole, functioning state.

A similar creative impulse seems to govern production pieces written about dolls. In revealing to us “the whole machinery of doll-making set in motion” (Brewer 125), they threaten to extinguish the doll’s ability for imaginative animation. As the author of “Toys” writes in Chambers’s Journal, at the conclusion of his piece: “And now we replace our puppets in their box, grateful for having been let into some of the mysteries of their creation” (658). But perhaps we need not take such authors at their word in their promises to demystify the objects they describe. As Jonathan Farina argues, “factory-tourism articles” such as those featured in Household Words, “were to some degree re-mystifying what might have become, through excess representation, a familiar topic” (42). These articles, Farina continues, “infuse . . . common goods with uncommon effects” that endow them with the very “mystery and wonder” that such articles “paradoxically profess to demystify” (42).
This was perhaps particularly true of the “process articles” appearing in *Household Words*, which sought to combine fact and fancy in describing a variety of seemingly mundane industrial processes. These pieces, written individually by writers such as George Dodd and Harriet Martineau and in collaboration between Dickens and contributors such as Mark Lemon and W. H. Wills, were intended to be highly informative and usually incorporated facts from books, reports, pamphlets and the writer’s original research “with an eyewitness account of the visit” (45). At the same time, they exemplified Dickens’s mission for the journal as set out in his manifesto for *Household Words*: that “in all familiar things, even those which are repellent on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will find out” (105). As Harry Stone notes, this was true of the process article by definition, since in it “the familiar work-a-day world must be reseen and reexperienced” (57).

The process article provided an ideal framework through which to see seemingly mundane reality in a different context, and through the process of decontextualization to endow materiality with a new life. Thinking about dolls in terms of their material components permitted readers to view a familiar object in a new, extraordinary light. This effect was enhanced in the case of the doll industry by a tendency to view even the material fragments that went into doll making as individually animated. An example of this kind of playful animism can be found in Mayhew’s account of the dolls’ eye-making industry. The craftsman that Mayhew interviews provides a lively description of how the

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134 Indeed, so many of these pieces were written as a result of physical trips to the relevant locations that Melissa Valiska Gregory recategorizes them as “excursion” articles instead.
eye-making business begins to “look up” after the holidays in a narrative that is both disquieting and amusing:

After the Christmas holidays up to March we have generally little to do, but from that time eyes begin to look up a bit, and the business remains pretty good till the end of October. Where we make one pair of eyes for home consumption, we make ten for exportation; a great many eyes go abroad. Yes, I supposed we should be soon over-populated with dolls if a great number of them were not to emigrate every year. The annual increase of dolls goes on at an alarming rate. As you say, sir, the yearly rate of mortality must be very high, to be sure, but it’s still nothing to the rate at which they are brought into the world. (344-5)

Eyes are presented as individual agents in this account. They “look up” during certain seasons or decide to “go abroad.” Dolls are similarly humanized and animated. They are almost dangerous, threatening invasive over-population by increasing their number “at an alarming rate.” Danger is only averted because many of them choose “to emigrate every year” and because they suffer from a very high “rate of mortality.”

This kind of humorous animism is also adopted in the illustrations in F.M. Holmes’s piece for The Children’s Friend, “Making Dolls’ Eyes: A Curious Industry.” The text of the essay is hardly worth describing since it relates almost word for word Mayhew’s own account from the dolls’ eye-maker. It is in the illustrations that the queer animism comes through, as for instance in the title of the essay (figure 17), which shows, among other curious things, an eye-less doll with a cardboard sign hanging round her neck that identifies her as “blind.”135 The doll is sitting in a strange fantastic wasteland, next to a broken wooden doll and surrounded by a number of frog-legged eyes, who wander around and stare at her. In addition to the inexplicable inclusion of frogs and

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135 As Catherine Waters points out, because Household Words did not include illustrations, all the fancifulness had to be injected into these process pieces through the language. Publications which had recourse to images and illustrations, however, could organize pieces differently. In fact, many would relegate the fanciful elements to the illustrations, using a text that only relayed straightforward facts.
lizards, the background, made up of thousands of miniature spheres on one side and loose semi-circles on the other is also suggestive of piles upon piles of eyes (or perhaps of frogs’s eggs, which are about to hatch into perambulating eyes). The legged eyes seem animated, as they are depicted clambering over this surreal landscape. The two dolls depicted, on the other hand, are static. The one with the blind sign is of the more realistic kind, which makes her empty eye-sockets all the more disquieting, the other, a plain wooden Dutch doll, is only visible from behind, but seems equally crippled by her legs, which stick up at an awkward angle as if broken.

The effect of the illustration can be described as uncanny. Freud had remarked on the disconcerting effect of dismembered limbs in his essay on the uncanny: “a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist . . . feet which dance by themselves . . . all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them, especially when, as in the last instance, they prove capable of independent activity in addition” (946). Ultimately, however, Freud’s definition of the uncanny as a mark of the return of the repressed – in the case of severed limbs, he ascribes it to a displacement of a fear of castration – is ultimately unsatisfying. It is Jentsch’s definition of the uncanny (which Freud rejects) as that which in being experienced simultaneously as familiar and unfamiliar causes a sense of “intellectual uncertainty” (931) or unease that is most helpful in this instance. In the case of this illustration, things that are familiar to us, like eyes, are ripped out of their natural context and endowed with a life of their own to eerie effect.
Figure 17. Title Illustration. From “Making Dolls’ Eyes: A Curious Industry” by F.M. Holmes.

Imagining the material fragments of the doll out of their familiar context not only has the ability to render them uncanny, as in the narratives and images just described, but it also draws our attention to their material composition. The effect is similar to what Bill Brown refers to as “misuse value,” in which an object becomes dislodged “from the circuits through which it typically is” (399). For Brown, it is only in “dislocating [an object] from one routinized objectification and deploying it otherwise”’ that “we have the chance (if just a chance) to sense its presence” (399). The “life of things” that becomes manifest in this misuse is for Brown “a secret in plain sight” – this is not a life to be found “behind or beneath the object but a life that is fluctuating shape and substance and surface” (399). This search for the “life of things,” characterized by Baudelaire as a “first metaphysical tendency,” is literalized for Brown in the child’s destruction of the toy in search for its soul (A Sense of Things 7). What production narratives may ultimately suggest is that the toy’s soul, like Brown’s “life of things” is not located within the toy but in its material construction. Part of what these production narratives suggest is that it
is the stuff from which the dolls are made that give them their own particular histories and identities.

The idea of the toy soul and the question of where such a thing, were it to exist, might reside is taken up in typically comedic fashion by *Punch* in “The Evolution of a Toy Soul; or Nursery Karma” (1893). Although the article considers other toys besides dolls, its use of the animation trope aligns it with writing on dolls. The piece begins by telling us that “People are greatly mistaken when they imagine that Toys have no souls.”

The truth, we are told, is that:

They *have* – only they don’t choose to make a fuss about it. Such, at least, is now the accepted opinion among the most eminent Baby Esoteric Buddhists, who contend, moreover, that the Toy Soul is every whit as capable of Spiritual Evolution, after its own fashion, and as liable to generate what is known as “Karma” for good or evil in successive states of objective existence, as the Human Monad itself. (310)

The very fact that an extended comic story (the piece is eight pages long) could be published in a magazine like *Punch* suggests that speculations about toy souls, comedic or otherwise, would have resonated with a large audience. What is most interesting, however, is that the piece repeatedly points to the toy’s materiality as the location of its essence. As an India-rubber ball, the toy admits to being “assailed by a sinister longing to break a pane of glass” and to “never been trained to resist my impulses” (310). The ball is presented as full of ideas and intentions. It confesses to “[i]mpenitently meditating indiscretions” but these intentions are based on the characteristics of its material composition. In its fourth incarnation as a brown fur Monkey the toy tells us that “My stuffing, which was made of the mane and tail of a highly conscientious old bus-horse who had died in harness, was animated by a strong sense of duty” (312). Later on, when
the same monkey is called upon to become the companion of a child bed-ridden by illness, the stuffed toy confesses that “I took no pleasure in the work; there was a certain harshness about the horsehair of which I was composed, that prevented me from feeling more than a decorous sympathy with the sufferer” (312). It is from the toy’s material elements, therefore, that its soul is made.

Gouraud’s claim, therefore, that the discovery of the doll’s material content would rob it of its imaginative potential seems to be false. On the contrary, the doll’s materiality is not only the source of its identity but also the source of much imaginative speculation. The idea that the doll soul was to be found in its materiality was perhaps easier to accept when the doll was conceived as a product not far removed from nature. We find a romanticized vision of this in Margaret Gatty’s “Aunt Sally,” where a little girl describes her doll’s origins as follows:

This is a doll. It was once a tree, and lived in a wood, and birds sat on the top of it and sang. Then came carpenters and cut it down, and made it into a doll, and (perhaps) a coffin as well. So when the doll’s mistress is grown old enough to die, there will be the coffin ready for both, and then all the tree will come together again, and birds will sit outside the grave and sing. (85)

It is the syntax of this poetic expression that makes it so interesting. The doll is not presented as having been made from a tree, but rather as having once been a tree. The qualities associated with the tree, the benevolence suggested by having been a welcoming spot on which for birds to perch and sing, for instance, are therefore passed on to the doll, which contains these traits in its material. In a somewhat macabre twist, the fact that the same tree was also made into a coffin would suggest that the characteristics of this vessel
intended for enclosing the dead also exists within the doll’s material nature, once again highlighting the doll’s uncanny position between life and death.\textsuperscript{136}

It is the doll’s connection to nature, viewed in opposition to other dolls’ industrial origins, however, that seems to make this romantic material soul seem possible. The fact, as I mentioned earlier on, and as Lynn Festa has argued, that the dolls and other objects that are endowed with subjectivity as the narrators of their own stories tend to be presented as nonindustrial objects seems to suggest that the industrial object, distanced from its human maker as it is distanced from nature, would be an object without a soul. What kind of doll soul would an industrial process produce? We know that beautiful trees give us sturdy, benevolent dolls like Aunt Sally, but what kind of doll soul can we expect from what Vance Thompson describes as “a dingy paste of old cardboard, even old gloves, old rags, and gum tragacanth” (quoted in Starr 64-5)?\textsuperscript{137}

The answer to this question is provided in Olive Thorne’s “How Dolls Are Made” written in 1875 for St. Nicholas, a children’s magazine.\textsuperscript{138} In it, Thorne (a pseudonym for Harriett Mann Miller) turns her observational powers honed through her extensive bird-watching experience to describe the doll industry. The piece is written as a monologue with a silent interlocutor. Thorne writes as though she were having a conversation with a child, but what the child might be saying we are only able to surmise through her

\textsuperscript{136} This macabre aspect seems to be played out in other parts of the story, particularly when Aunt Sally is “buried alive” and continues to narrate, as it were, from her grave.

\textsuperscript{137} Though the paste must have been unpleasant to behold, it was problematically very attractive to vermin. This, according to Eileen King, led doll-makers to experiment with adding materials such as garlic, tobacco, and arsenic to make it less attractive to them (78).

\textsuperscript{138} Olive Thorne (later Olive Thorne Miller) was a pseudonym for Harriet Mann Miller (1831-1918), an American writer and naturalist. She is particularly known for her children’s writing (including her regular contributions to St. Nicholas) and her writing on birds. Fittingly, she once referred to her writing as “sugar-coated pills of knowledge” for children (American National Biography).
responses. It begins in medias res, as a child being told that her doll, Rosabel, “came from the rag-bag” is presumably expressing disbelief:

From the rag-bag! you don’t see how anything nice can come from such a place, do you say? I fear you’ll be shocked when I tell you that not only Rosabel, who is a “perfectly lovely” wax doll, but your own most precious dolly, if she’s anything better than china, probably came out of the same dreadful place. (228)

The child’s disbelief about her doll’s provenance becomes Thorne’s hook, her reason for providing what becomes a virtual tour of the doll-making industry. Like Brewer, Hardie, Holmes and others, Thorne’s account promises to offer a look inside the doll for the truth of the doll’s identity. This truth, for Thorne, is to be found hidden underneath her opaque waxy exterior. “To be sure,” Thorne writes, “her head, neck, hands and feet are all wax outside” but, “you know the old saying,” she continues, “that ‘beauty is but skin deep’” (228). The idea is not really that the doll is hiding anything unattractive underneath this solid exterior, except perhaps her humble origins, but to suggest that there is more to the doll’s history than her seemingly plain surface suggests. Thorne’s exploration of the doll-making industry, presented as the doll’s life story, permits the reader to peek underneath this surface.

Thorne thus sets out to provide the doll’s material biography, necessarily abridged in view of practical constraints: “The true story of her life, since she was first created, would be very interesting,” she tells us, “but it would make a big book, and I can’t tell you half of it” (228). Despite this disclaimer, Thorne ventures quite far into the doll’s past, providing a narrative of her previous lives, before she was even a doll. “A new doll, did you say?” Thorne asks her assumed child audience, “Well, I know she has not lived
long in her present shape, but you must remember that she was not always a doll.” For Thorne there is no such thing as a new doll, because even the newest doll must be made of something, and whatever material that “something” may be, is likely to have a long and interesting history. Thus Thorne suggests that whatever the doll “is” now was also the essence, or soul, or spirit of the doll’s previous material incarnations. It is as if the matter of which she was made had a memory, and that memory gave the doll, in its present state, its identity.

Like Gatty, who traces Aunt Sally’s origins to a tree, Thorne traces the doll’s existence back to nature in a cotton flower:139

she was once wrapped up in a green bud, growing on a bush. She came out of that a long white bit of cotton, went through ever so many processes, and became cotton cloth of some kind; was bought and sold, and made up, and used, washed and ironed, and worn out as cloth, just to begin with. Think of all that probably happened to her before she even became rags! (228)

The doll is presented as coming from nature but it is her material circulation that gives her meaning. Thorne provides some examples of what the doll’s life in its incarnation as fabric would have been, but it is up to each little girl to imagine what rich experiences are hidden within her doll, to “Think of all that probably happened to her before she even became rags.” Would the cotton have been used to make a humble fabric or a fine cloth? In what kind of shop might it have been sold? Would it have been worn by a Queen or a pauper? Would it have been a favorite or frequently used garment or would it have sat unused in a drawer? Dickens begins to hint at the potential (particularly for upward social mobility) of social circulation of materials in the dolls made by Jenny Wren in Our

139 The author of May’s Doll performs a similar move: “You will be surprised to hear that this soft and white undergarment, as well as this full upper petticoat, alike grew in the fields” (30).
*Mutual Friend*, which, though made out of scraps from Pubsey and Co., go, as Riah explains to Fledgeby on the rooftop garden, “to the best company, sir, on her rosy-cheeked little customers. They wear it in their hair, and on their ball-dresses, and even (so she tells me) are presented at Court with it” (278). This idea is corroborated by Juliette Peers, who claims that in Paris, at least, it was not unusual for lower-priced dolls to be dressed in second-hand fabrics. This causes her to ponder: “How strange that the doll may have been dressed in silks cast off from either a society lady or a courtesan” (78).

The doll’s life as cloth would have had its own highs and lows, until, worn out, she would become rags. But that, Thorne writes, “was only the beginning”:

After being worn-out rags she went into the rag-bag alley, made a journey on the back of a rag-man, went through a dreadful course of soaking and washing, and boiling, and bleaching, and pressing, and drying, and ever so much else, before she came out nice clean paper, ready for use again. Did you suspect your dolly had ever been paper? Well, she was paper once, and who can tell what may have been her life while in that state, whether she was beautiful note-paper and carried loving messages from one friend to another, or whether she was used for business writing, or for wrapping up confectioners’ dainties, or whether she was made into a book or note, or did good or harm. (228)

As paper, Rosabel would not only have had a variety of possible lives, carrying love notes, recording business writing, wrapped around pastries, or helping transmit ideas and stories as a book, but would also have been able to do “good or harm.” Only when she was no longer of use as paper did she then go to Sonneberg and undergo “the operations that made it into a pretty doll” (228).

Thorne was not the first to consider the fascinating histories contained in the transformation of rags to paper. This process had already been examined by Dickens and Mark Lemon in “A Paper Mill,” one of the most frequently discussed process articles.
published in *Household Words*. In this piece, Dickens and Lemon present the process of paper-making as a democratizing procedure that brings together “The coarse blouse of the Flemish labourer, and the fine cambric of the Parisian lady, the court dress of the Austrian jailer, and the miserable garb of the Italian peasant; the woolen petticoat of the Bavarian girl, the linen head-dress of the Neapolitan woman, the priest’s vestment, the player’s robe, the Cardinal’s hat, and the ploughman’s nightcap” (Stone 139). Like Thorne’s supposed audience, Dickens and Lemon begin with a sense of wonder that fresh, white paper could come from such a source: “Paper! White, pure, spick and span new paper, with that fresh smell which takes us back to school and school-books; can it ever come from rags like these? (139).

Part of Thorne’s motivation, as indeed, Dickens’s and Lemon’s, in providing the material biography of things like dolls and even paper, is to demonstrate, the way so many Victorians were eager to do, that just as nothing is every completely “new,” if we are willing to inquire into its production history, nothing is ever complete waste, either. Freedgood cites a particularly clear example of this in P. L. Simmonds’s 1862 *Waste Products and Underdeveloped Substances*, which “adumbrates the possible commercial resuscitation of bile, bird’s nests, dead horses and soot” and whose index contains such startling items as ‘Bread made from acorns,’ ‘Flushings, what,’ ‘Horses, use of the dead,’ and ‘Gum Arabic as food’” (“Objects” 90). It is hardly surprising then, that when the child addressed by Thorne expresses skepticism about the possibility that such a beautiful doll could come from “the rag-bag” Thorne responds by providing her with a lesson in the provenance of her doll.
More importantly, perhaps, one of the expected consequences for Thorne of knowing about the doll’s rich material past is increased respect. “You see she’s very old, older than any of you,” she tells her audience of children, “and I don’t think it’s respectful to old age to treat her as some of you do. I hope you’ll mend your manners towards her, now that you know about her age and dignity” (228). Like most old people, the doll has seen and experienced many things and as Thorne tells us, she “could tell strange stories of what she has seen, if she could remember – and talk” (228). Thorne’s attitude exemplifies what Freedgood identifies as the “Victorian wish to know – or to imagine what objects know,” a desire that ultimately speaks to “a lingering sense that objects are alive to the world around them, and possessed of valuable intelligence about the human community” (89). But since, as Thorne tells us, the doll cannot “open her lips to tell of her past life,” it is up to each child to imagine what rich experiences are encoded within the doll’s material soul.

As a parallel to the child’s destruction of her doll in an effort to find out of what it is made, explorations into the doll industry might be looked upon by many adults in the same light as Keats regarded “cold philosophy” in “Lamia,” which with its “dull catalogue of common things” could “Conquer all mysteries by rule and line” and “Unweave a rainbow.” In revealing to us “the whole machinery of doll-making set in motion” (Brewer 125), doll production narratives threatened to extinguish the doll’s seemingly magic ability for animation. But the doll’s animation stems not from any kind of magic but from imagination, and as these production narratives show, inquiring into the material histories of things, and particularly dolls, promised not an end to the
imaginative relationship to the doll but a richer, more imaginative relationship grounded in its material history. As the author of “Toys” writes in *Chambers's Journal*, at the conclusion of his piece: “And now we replace our puppets in their box, grateful for having been let into some of the mysteries of their creation” (658). Having been let into these mysteries, however, far from extinguishing our interest in dolls, only makes us “more sensible of a sympathy with doll-nature” (658).
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