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Original Article

The Tables Turned: Curious Commodities in Victorian Children's Literature

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that children's literature and political economy developed a common language to articulate the bewildering world of consumer culture, which took shape following the 1851 Great Exhibition and flourished in the 1860s and 70s. At the centre of consumer culture was the mysterious and mystifying commodity, an object that took on subjective traits when it entered the marketplace and earned exchange value. Karl Marx famously attempted to illustrate the commodity through a metaphor of a wooden table. As a material object, the table is only wood, but it comes to life during the process of exchange, a phenomenon later termed reification. During the same process that animates objects, labourers become objectified. Social relations are filtered through things rather than subjects. Mid-Victorian children's literature simultaneously began to explore the wonders and dangers of the marketplace by placing young protagonists in worlds where objects come to life. In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), the intrepid Alice enters upside-down and inside-out worlds where commodities become subjects. Alice ultimately learns that the real world that she inhabits resembles nonsense. Capitalism is based on rules that are just as arbitrary as the games she plays in wonderland. Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) develops similar themes and environments, but takes a decidedly darker approach to illustrating the danger of the marketplace. In her imaginative worlds, children become commodities – objectified, replicated, and consumed.

KEYWORDS: commodity, Marx, Carroll, Rossetti, children, reification, Victorian, marketplace, Great Exhibition, labour

Come forth into the light of things — William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned'[1]

My life seems like Alice and the glass table — T. S. Eliot, 18 May 1933[2]

In November 1863, George Eliot and George Henry Lewes moved to 21 North Bank, Regents Park, and 'want[ed] a few details of furniture for a new stage in our life's journey'.[3] Shopping for these new items, however, was not just physically and emotionally taxing; it was traumatic. In a 14 November letter, Eliot writes: 'Such fringing away of precious life, in thinking of carpets and tables, is an affliction to me, and it seems like a nightmare from which I shall find it bliss to awake into my old world of care for things quite apart from upholstery'.[4] Eliot's frustration suggests that playing the role of consumer in mid-Victorian England was

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1 William Wordsworth, 'The Tables Turned', ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 130, l. 15.

2 *The Letters of T. S. Eliot*, vol. 6, ed. Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haffenden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), p. xxxiii.

3 *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 119.

4 *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 4, ed. Gordon Haight (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956), p. 113.

an intense experience. Ironically, she feels more at home in the 'old world' of her fiction than in the reality of domestic goods. This response reveals the dazzling scope of consumer culture, which flourished with rapid, seemingly irrepressible, energy in the 1860s and 1870s. By considering the experience a 'nightmare', Eliot suggests that the hypnotizing allure of market products had otherworldly effects. Consumers found themselves transported by both products of technological fascination and objects from far-off lands. But representations of the subject's bewildering encounters with these wares were not limited to the period's realist novels. In fact, some of the most dynamic portrayals of the simultaneous marvel and danger of the marketplace were located in children's literature.[5] The wonderlands of the 1860s and 1870s – the fairytale realms where precocious children interacted with anthropomorphized objects, plants, and animals – not only represented the experience of the Victorian consumer, but also acted as guidebooks on how to resist the dangerous, addictive attractions of the market. That these warnings were directed to children suggests that many Victorians approached consumer culture with caution, if not outright fear of a future world fully tethered to the unreal.

This essay argues that children's literature and political economy constructed a shared discourse that sought to articulate and negotiate the burgeoning capital-economy that centred on the mysterious and mystical figure of the commodity. In the nineteenth century, 'the spirit of childhood and the spirit of capitalism became virtually synonymous'.[6] The commodity, the fuel of capitalism's runaway train, is as much a fantasy as the Bandersnatch and the Jabberwocky. I do not wish to suggest that Marx drew his concept of the commodity from children's literature or that children's authors read Marx's texts. (*Capital* was not translated into English until 1887). Nor will I offer Marxist readings of select literature. Rather, I am solely focused on examining the similar way that the commodity was defined, discussed, and deployed by two seemingly disparate literary genres.[7] Although the second half of this essay

[5] That the most dynamic portrayals of commodity culture appear in children's literature demonstrates that Victorian authors were drawing upon the successful didacticism that children's texts had enjoyed since John Newbery (1713–67). Laurence Talairach-Vielmas has noted critiques of commodity culture in both children's literature and sensation fiction in *Moulding the Female Body in Victorian Fairy Tales and Sensation Novels* (London: Routledge, 2016). In 1863, Henry Mansel criticized sensation novelists' attention to the marketplace: 'A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop'. Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *London Quarterly Review*, 113 (April 1863), pp. 251–67 (p. 252). These critiques are also present in Victorian science fiction, such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871). Commodity culture is, of course, omnipresent in Victorian realism, often represented by the 'useless' objects that, for Roland Barthes, constitute a 'reality effect'. Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *Roland Barthes: The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 141–48 (p. 142).

[6] Christopher Parkes, *Children's Literature and Capitalism: Fictions of Social Mobility in Britain, 1850–1914* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1. Dennis Denisoff similarly argues: 'Consumer culture was a large-scale phenomenon that relied for its development on small-scale acts of identity formation, acts that were often most readily fulfilled through the young, who were seen as especially open to and in need of influence, control and shaping'. Dennis Denisoff, 'Small Change: The Consumerist Designs of the Nineteenth-Century Child', in *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 1–26 (p. 1).

[7] This essay focuses on the mystical nature of the commodity and ignores the wealth of recent work on 'thing theory'. Arjun Appadurai was the first to complicate Marx's formula by considering the '*situation in the social life*' of the thing during exchange. Arjun Appadurai, 'Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3–63 (p. 13). Bill Brown offers the first formal definition: 'We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us . . . when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested'. Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 4. Elaine Freedgood persuasively argues against the anachronism of judging Victorian things as Marxian commodities: 'Commodity culture happened slowly: it was preceded by . . . and was for a long time survived by what I call Victorian "thing culture"'. Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 8.

will focus on three related children's tales – Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871) and Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* (1874) – its argument applies to any number of mid-Victorian texts wherein fantasy worlds figure.[8] Children's literature, I argue, promoted the nineteenth-century pursuit of 'rational recreation' by adapting marketplace environments to teach children to be literate, cautious consumers.[9] To do so, it engaged concepts of political economy – chief among them the commodity. At the same time, however, Marxian political economy relied on the imaginative language and imagery of children's literature to elucidate the fantastic, frightening, and frustrating ecosystem of capitalistic society. By examining the genres' similar treatments of the commodity, I wish to demonstrate that mid-Victorian authors conceived of consumer capitalism not just as complex and disorienting, but also as resembling nonsense. Through their experience with curious commodities, the protagonists of Victorian children's literature learn to be shrewd consumers in the adult marketplace.

Capitalism runs on fictions – money, credit, representation. In late-eighteenth-century England, the influx of varied forms of paper currency destabilized the reciprocity of circulating money and gold reserves. Under the Bank Restriction Act (1797–1821), the Bank of England was no longer required to convert paper currency to gold. Mary Poovey notes that 'the nation's welfare seemed to be imperilled by a fiction whose effects had been contained for most of the eighteenth century'.[10] The 1844 Bank Act checked the circulation of paper bills both by giving monopoly power to the Bank of England and by limiting the ability of other banks to tender and circulate money. Thus, for the time being, the 'fiction' of the credit economy was curbed by government legislation. In the coming years, however, English society became enveloped in another fiction, which appeared in the form of the bewildering commodities that flooded urban markets. Deregulation of imports encouraged free trade, resulting in a robust economy grounded in industry. As Lori Anne Loeb points out, '[b]etween 1850 and 1870 incomes for middle-class people rose as much as £100 per head'.[11] To meet the demands of consumers with newly disposable income, England became inundated with goods, both practically useful and entirely decorative. The 1851 Great Exhibition prognosticated a financial system driven by commodities. It emboldened the new economy, and by the early 1860s consumer culture had taken hold.[12]

[8] For example, in Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies* (1862–63), the young chimney sweeper, Tom, seemingly drowns and embarks on a series of adventures until he proves his moral worth. Similarly, in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871), the narrator mistakenly plummets down a mine shaft and discovers an antediluvian race of people who consume Vril, a product of boundless power that might be read as the ideal commodity.

[9] Both Carroll's *Alice* books and Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* straddle the boundary between didactic and subversive children's literature. Jack Zipes identifies a shift from the social conservatism of early children's literature to a focus on dissidence: 'No longer was the fairy tale to be like the mirror, mirror on the wall reflecting the cosmetic bourgeois standards of beauty and virtue that appeared to be unadulterated and pure. The fairy tale and the mirror cracked into sharp-edged, radical parts by the end of the nineteenth century'. Jack Zipes, *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), p. 107.

[10] Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 6.

[11] Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 8. Regulations imposed by the 1844 Bank Act were loosened in 1857, becoming one ingredient in a global panic. England experienced a short recession, but bounced back quickly.

[12] Walter Benjamin asserts that '[t]he phantasmagoria of capitalist culture attains its most radiant unfolding in the world exhibition of 1867'. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 8.

The Crystal Palace that housed the Great Exhibition has been called the 'first department store, the first shopping mall'.[13] Indeed, in the coming decades department stores dotted the urban landscape, borrowing from the glasswork technology of the Exhibition to create 'elaborate fantasies of consumption, sensuous experiences of imagined acquisition'.[14] The event resulted in the 'invention of new desires', which 'reflected the assimilation by the middle class of a hedonistic ethos'.[15] Mid-Victorian children's literature critiques the voracious values of consumer culture by punishing the unchecked desires of its protagonists. Since shopping was an especially transformative experience for women, who gained 'agencies and mobilities' and developed 'lived relationships to consumption', it is not surprising that children's authors directed their implicitly didactic fantasies to female readers.[16] Insatiable consumers in mid-Victorian children's literature, from Rossetti's Laura in 'Goblin Market' (1862) to Carroll's Alice, reflect – and perhaps admonish – this culture of consumption.

The Great Exhibition also inaugurated the phenomenon of the spectacle, which 'elevated the commodity above the mundane act of exchange and created a coherent representational universe of commodities'.[17] Attendance to these events was driven by the experience of not just leisure, but also the promise of sensory pleasures. Josephine Guy notes that spectacle 'makes the capitalist system legitimate' by presenting commodities as 'autonomous objects of desire for "anyone and everyone"'.[18] Viewers lost themselves in foreign worlds represented by a dazzling array of products. Walter Benjamin observes that exhibitions 'open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted'.[19] Contemporary visitors found the Great Exhibition to be a disorienting, bewildering space, and many left exhausted from the experience.[20] In July 1851, Charles Dickens writes: 'I find I am "used up" by the Exhibition. I don't say "there is nothing in it" – there's too much. I have only been twice; so many things bewildered me. I have a natural horror of sights, and the fusion of so many sights in one has

[13] Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 17.

[14] Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 1. Lara Kriegel identifies the 'narratives produced around the displays' as another way that Exhibition products came to life: 'these texts sought to impart to their readerships . . . a sense of wonder toward the real and the everyday'. Lara Kriegel, 'The Pudding and the Palace: Labour, Print Culture, and Imperial Britain in 1851', in *After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 230–45 (p. 233).

[15] Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York, NY: Methuen, 1985), p. 2; Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, p. 3. In 1860, John Ruskin writes, '[t]he wealth of a nation is only to be estimated by what it consumes'. John Ruskin, 'Unto This Last', *Cornhill Magazine*, 2.11 (November 1860), pp. 543–64 (p. 557). Deborah Cohen notes that the Victorians were the 'first people to be so closely identified with their belongings'. Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), p. xi.

[16] Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 8.

[17] Richards, *Commodity Culture*, p. 4. For Guy Debord, the spectacle, 'as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living'. Guy Debord, 'Separation Perfected', in *The City Cultures Reader*, ed. Malcolm Miles, Tim Hall, and Iain Borden (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 82–87 (p. 83).

[18] Josephine Guy, 'Aesthetics, Economics and Commodity Culture: Theorizing Value in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain', *English Literature in Transition*, 42 (1999), 143–71 (p. 151).

[19] Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 7.

[20] John Tallis asserts that '[s]cience unfolded her wonders before the astonished gaze of the bewildered spectator'. John Tallis, *Tallis's History and Description of the Crystal Palace* (London: J. Tallis & Co., 1852), pp. 162–63. In her journal, Queen Victoria chronicles her several trips to the Crystal Palace: 'I came back quite dead beat and my head really bewildered by the myriads of beautiful and wonderful things, which now quite dazzle one's eyes'. C. R. Fay, *Palace of Industry, 1851: A Study of the Great Exhibition and Its Fruits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 45.

not decreased it'.[21] Dickens's assessment speaks to the potential damage that the exhibition could inflict on the visitor's psyche. The assault on the senses was overwhelming. It was a disorienting cornucopia of the strange and the unfamiliar, in great part due to the exotic nature of foreign products. Nancy Armstrong observes that 'occult objects began to flood into [British] culture from all over the Empire' and notes that these '[o]bjects would become dangerous . . . as their value became increasingly legible as social currency'.[22] Much of the Great Exhibition's spectacle was literally otherworldly to domestic visitors who saw at first hand the distant cultures that had seemed alien, if not outright fictional. The fantasies of newspapers and novels permeated reality, unsettling the barriers between fact and fiction.

For contemporary visitors, the most common way to describe the Exhibition was to note its resemblance to fairy tales.[23] Benjamin furnishes a valuable quotation from art historian Julius Lessing (1843–1908), which notes the Exhibition's childlike allure:

> Overall, it seemed a wonderland, appealing more to the imagination than to the intellect . . . I myself recall, from my childhood, how the news of the Crystal Palace reached us in Germany, and how pictures of it were hung in the middle-class parlors of distant provincial towns. It seemed then that the world we knew from old fairy tales – of the princess in the glass coffin, of queens and elves dwelling in crystal houses – had come to life.[24]

When the Crystal Palace was relocated from Hyde Park to South London in 1854, Dickens's *Household Words* featured a piece titled 'Fairyland in Eighteen Fifty-Four. The article concludes by praising the Palace's architect and suggesting that his invention has surpassed the wonders of any fairy tale: 'do you think I shall have been guilty of exaggeration in calling it Fairyland? In calling its accomplished inventor a magician? In declaring that magic and magicians are not dead when such structures exist as the Crystal Palace, and such men are among us as the Djin[sic], Josephus Liliensis, otherwise Sir Joseph Paxton?'[25] It is no coincidence that Lewis Carroll, having himself visited the Exhibition in July 1851, wrote to his sister: 'I think the first impression produced on you when you get inside is of bewilderment. It looks like a sort of fairyland'.[26] Carroll's own wonderland similarly exhibits an overwhelming assortment of curious and unstable commodities that provoke, perplex, and imperil his intrepid heroine.

The multitudinous objects displayed at the Great Exhibition achieve their otherworldly wonder through the animating process of commodification, which occurs when an object

[21] *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 6, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey, and Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 428–29.

[22] Nancy Armstrong, 'The Occidental Alice', in *Contemporary Literary Criticism: Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer (New York, NY: Longman, 1998), pp. 537–64 (p. 554). Paul Young traces an opposite reaction to the Exhibition, in which attendees experienced a 'comforting rationalization of the complex processes and interactions that made life in the Victorian metropolis what it was'. Paul Young, *The Great Exhibition: The Victorian New World Order* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 3.

[23] Queen Victoria acknowledged that it had 'quite the effect of fairyland' (Fay, *Palace of Industry*, p. 46); Tallis observed 'the glories and the wonders of the Fairy Palace' (*Tallis's History*, p. 146); and another contemporary reviewer commented on the 'fairylike structure'. 'Bird's-Eye View of the Crystal Palace', *The Illustrated London News*, 18.494 (14 June 1851), 566–68 (p. 556).

[24] Benjamin, *Arcades*, p. 184.

[25] George Augustus Sala and William Henry Wills, 'Fairyland in 'Fifty-Four', *Household Words*, 8.193 (3 December 1853), 313–17 (p. 317).

[26] *Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, ed. Morton N. Cohen (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 12.

transcends its material existence and enters the marketplace untethered from either its utility or the means of its production.[27] The effects of commodification spread wide, well outside the economic sphere. Workers produce goods that do not possess personal use-value, but are only made to be exchanged for money or other goods. What was, in pre-capitalist societies, 'concrete labour' becomes 'abstract labour', in which the labourer is alienated not only from his work, but also from other subjects. Labourers become commodities and 'sell themselves piecemeal . . . like every other article of commerce'.[28] Carroll's playing-card workers in *Alice's Adventures* epitomize this concept: producers of goods and goods themselves, the Queen's spades are both labourers and commodities, painting roses and being wickets in a game of croquet.

Since social relations are negotiated through the exchange of commodities, things become active agents while people are rendered passive participants. Georg Lukács termed this process 'reification', which

> requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange. The separation of the producer from his means of production, the dissolution and destruction of all 'natural' production units, etc., and all the social and economic conditions necessary for the emergence of modern capitalism tend to replace 'natural' relations which exhibit human relations more plainly by rationally reified relations.[29]

The animation of things and de-animation of subjects that occur during reification are central tropes of children's literature. Everyday reality bores restless children and prompts them to enter fantasy worlds where things come to life. Carroll's Alice drifts off to sleep because her sister's book contains no pictures or conversations, and C. S. Lewis's Pevensie siblings explore Professor Kirke's wardrobe while separated from the theatre of war. In both texts, and in countless others, children encounter alternately fascinating and frightening anthropomorphized things. And these things – as in the classic *Wizard of Oz* example – stand for real subjects ('And *you* were there'). The labourers at Dorothy's farm are commodities, and through reification they appear as animated things in her dream.

The 'magic and necromancy' of commodities might also be tied to the fact that characters in children's literature often access fantasy worlds during dreams or other unconscious

[27] Karl Marx begins *Capital* (1867) by defining the commodity as 'an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another'. Karl Marx, *Capital*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 13. In 1862, William Stanley Jevons offered a more grounded definition of a commodity: 'any object, substance, action or service, which can afford pleasure and ward off pain'. William Stanley Jevons, *The Theory of Political Economy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1871), p. 45. More recently, Christoph Lindner has called it the 'linchpin of capitalist order'. Christoph Lindner, *Fictions of Commodity Culture: From the Victorian to the Postmodern* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), p. 7; and Thomas Richards has similarly noted: 'the commodity became and has remained the one subject of mass culture, the centerpiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead center of the modern world' (*Commodity Culture*, p. 1).

[28] Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, in *Karl Marx: A Reader*, ed. John Elster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 225–34 (p. 230).

[29] Georg Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in *History and class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 83–222 (p. 91). Marxist philosopher Gajo Petrović is perhaps clearer in his definition of reification: 'the act . . . of transforming human properties, relations and actions into properties and actions of things independent of man and governing his life. Also transformation of human beings into thing-like beings which do not behave in a human way but according to the laws of the thing-world'. Gajo Petrović, *Marx in the Mid-Twentieth Century* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), p. 135.

states.[30] Slavoj Žižek locates connections between Marx's commodity and Freud's dream: 'the commodity remains for classical political economy a mysterious, enigmatic thing – it is the same as with the dream: even after we have explained its hidden meaning, its latent thought, the dream remains an enigmatic phenomenon'.[31] So transformative and transgressive is the commodity that Žižek engages it as an example of Kant's 'transcendental subject', the supersensible part of knowledge that is not based in sensory, empirical experience: 'the commodity-form articulates in advance the anatomy, the skeleton of the Kantian transcendental subject – that is, the network of transcendental categories which constitute the a priori frame of "objective" scientific knowledge'.[32] For Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the 'secret mechanism of the soul' that Kant posits as the a priori knowledge of the individual subject has been supplanted in capitalist regimes by the 'power of society' that is 'processed by commercial agencies'.[33] Commodities forge and manipulate the unconscious, replacing innate knowledge with capital desires.

The commodity's supernatural properties hold even deeper ties to the unconscious, ones related to Jacques Lacan's Real/imaginary/symbolic triad, the orders that structure subjective experience. Žižek writes, 'the Real is the inexorable "abstract" spectral logic of Capital'.[34] As the impossible, indefinable, 'hard kernel' of pre-symbolic existence, the Real both structures our reality and remains inconceivable. Yet it occasionally irrupts into our everyday world through the fissures of trauma. As the 'representational agent' of capitalism, the mysterious, unreachable commodity is the Real.[35] As Marx entreats, '[t]urn and examine a single commodity, by itself, . . . yet in so far as it remains an object of value, it seems impossible to grasp it'.[36] Fantasies and dreams act as screens that allow subjects to encounter the Real without coming 'too close'.[37] The portals in children's literature – Carroll's rabbit hole and looking-glass, Rossetti's yew tree, Baum's cyclone, Lewis's wardrobe, L'Engle's tesseract – introduce fantasy worlds populated by implications of the Real. For children's literature of the 1860s and 1870s, however, the Real is represented by commodified things that possess 'secret signs of terror' to form what Tricia Lootens has termed 'commodity Gothicism'.[38] Objects in Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses* are explicitly Gothic, horrifyingly personified to the point of monstrosity, but we should not overlook the nightmarish landscape of Carroll's wonderland, in which domestic items – playing cards, foodstuff, and furniture – turn the tables to 'rule the producers instead of being ruled by them'.[39]

Marx famously attempts to articulate the commodity's charmed existence through a metaphor of a wooden table. He begins by noting that the commodity initially seems a simple thing, but seen through another lens it becomes 'a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'.[40] He proceeds by explaining these curious properties:

30 Marx, *Capital*, I, 47.
31 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 15.
32 Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 16.
33 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), pp. 124–25.
34 Slavoj Žižek, *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 244.
35 Lindner, *Fictions of Commodity Culture*, p. 1.
36 Marx, *Capital*, I, 23.
37 Slavoj Žižek, *The Abyss of Freedom / Ages of the World* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 23.
38 Tricia Lootens, 'Fear of Furniture: Commodity Gothicism and the Teaching of Victorian Literature', in *Approaches to Teaching Gothic Fiction: The British and American Traditions*, ed. Diane Long Hoeveler and Tamar Heller (New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America, 2003), pp. 148–58 (p. 156).
39 Marx, *Capital*, I, 46.
40 Marx, *Capital*, I, 42.

'The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent'.[41] As wood, the table retains its inanimate material existence, but when the wood is assembled into a product it comes alive: 'It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than "table-turning" ever was'.[42] For Jacques Derrida, the commodity is 'so disturbing' that it is 'ghostly', a 'mutant' that 'haunts the thing'.[43] Once the wooden table enters the market, 'the ordinary, sensuous thing is transfigured', and it 'becomes someone, it assumes a figure. This woody and headstrong denseness is metamorphosed into a supernatural thing, a *sensuous non-sensuous* thing, sensuous but non-sensuous, sensuously supersensible'.[44] As if writing his own children's tale, Derrida continues his adaptation of Marx: 'the table has feet, the table has a head, its body comes alive, it erects its whole self like an institution, it stands up and addresses itself to others, first of all to other commodities, its fellow beings in phantomality, it faces them or opposes them'.[45] Why is a raven like a writing desk? Because, formed into a commodity, the latter also flies.

Marx's most fanciful description of the commodity appears in the third volume of *Capital*. In a chapter on the 'economic trinity' of land, labour, and capital, Marx argues that we see the 'complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the transformation of social conditions into things'.[46] He proceeds to describe the effect in further detail: 'It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Mister Capital and Mistress Land carry on their goblin tricks as social characters and at the same time as mere things'.[47] Economic elements become the trickster figures of a children's tale. 'Throughout Marx's writings', Chris Baldick observes, 'some of the most gruesomely archaic echoes of fairy-tale, legend, myth, and folklore crop up in the wholly unexpected environment of the modern factory system, stock exchange, and parliamentary chamber'.[48] I argue, conversely, that Marx's language and allusions are not archaic, but rather contemporary. As Melanie Keene remarks, '[w]e will discover that fairy tales might have been made to look a lot like science; but also that science . . . could look a lot like fairy tales'.[49] The commodity wonderland that Marx imagines – an inverted, uncanny, fantastic world of animated objects – is fundamentally Victorian.

Writing of his July 1851 trip to the Great Exhibition, Carroll recalls his 'bewilderment' triggered by the excess commodities arranged for display: 'As far as you can look in any

41 Marx, *Capital*, I, 42. Bill Brown's understanding of 'thing theory' relies on the 'unwillingness' of Marx's table 'to abandon its physicality' (*A Sense of Things*, p. 28).

42 Marx, *Capital*, I, 42. By 'table-turning', Marx is referring to rise of séances in the nineteenth century, during which contact with the dead was indicated by a shifting or shaking table. Marx adds an equally obfuscating footnote to the passage: 'One may recall that China and the tables began to dance when the rest of the world appeared to be standing still – *pour encourager les autres*'. Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), p. 231, n. 18.

43 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx, the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York, NY: Routledge, 1994), pp. 188–89.

44 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 189.

45 Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 190.

46 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3 (Chicago, IL: Charles H. Kerr, 1909), p. 966.

47 Marx, *Capital*, III, 966.

48 Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 121.

49 Melanie Keene, *Science in Wonderland: The Scientific Fairy Tales of Victorian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 6.

direction, you see nothing but pillars hung about with shawls, carpets, etc., with long avenues of statues, fountains, canopies, etc., etc., etc.'[50] Some of these products, including a mechanized bird that chirped and hopped along a tree branch, literally came to life. The experience was equally stimulating and disorienting, in great part because visitors could not process the vast number of sights. 'I cannot describe to you 1/100 of what I saw', Carroll writes to his sister.[51] Ultimately, he suspends his narrative. Since the 'subject is quite inexhaustible, there is no hope of ever coming to a regular finish'.[52] It is no stretch to suggest that he drew from his experience to imagine his 'dream-child moving through a land / Of wonders wild and new'.[53] Even more significant is that Carroll visited the International Exhibition, held in South Kensington, three times during the summer of 1862. On 7 July, he notes: 'my first impression was of its being smaller than the 51 one'.[54] Carroll was incorrect: the 1862 Exhibition featured over twice as many exhibits as its precursor. Regardless, Carroll attended the Exhibition again the next day, this time accompanied by the Liddell family. Just four days prior, Carroll had embarked on the famous boat trip with the three Liddell siblings, during which he recited the 'fairy-tale of "Alice's Adventures Under Ground"'.[55] In this version of the story, Carroll explains in a 10 June 1864 letter, the 'heroine spends an hour underground, and meets various birds, beasts, etc . . . endowed with speech'.[56] Commodities come to life in his wonderlands, which 'mix[ed] together things grave and gay' to teach Alice lessons about how to exist in a world where reality is not grounded on relationships with subjects, but rather invented through interactions with things.[57]

In her classic study 'The Occidental Alice', Nancy Armstrong argues that the *Alice* books follow a young woman who must learn to control her desires to differentiate herself from deviant women. 'Alice's problems with appetite', Armstrong observes, 'tell us how desire changed as women became consumers in the world of the department store'.[58] Thrust into a 'world made of beckoning objects', Alice learns to suppress her appetites and thereby to develop 'the taste identifying women of the privileged classes'.[59] In one of several evocative passages, Armstrong writes: 'the way Marx says objects behave under conditions of late capitalism resembles their behavior in the fantasy Carroll attributes to a child'.[60] Personified animals and animated objects in wonderland reflect the way that mid-Victorian consumer culture's commodities transcended their materiality and utility when they entered the marketplace. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas has recently supplemented Armstrong's analysis, arguing that Alice's adventures 'call to mind the ambulatory figure of the modern female consumer walking the fashionable districts of the capital and being lured by the dazzling commodities exhibited in shop windows'.[61] Indeed, Alice enters a wonderland of commodities that are both tantalizing and treacherous. During both of her visits, she rises through the social hierarchy,

50 *Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 12.
51 *Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 12.
52 *Selected Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 13.
53 Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass*, ed. Peter Hunt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 3.
54 *Lewis Carroll's Diaries*, vol. 4, ed. Edward Wakeling (Bedfordshire: Lewis Carroll Society, 1997), p. 97.
55 *Lewis Carroll's Diaries*, p. 95.
56 *The Letters of Lewis Carroll*, vol. 1, ed. Morton N. Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 65
57 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 249.
58 Armstrong, 'Occidental Alice', p. 547.
59 Armstrong, 'Occidental Alice', p. 549.
60 Armstrong, 'Occidental Alice', p. 552.
61 Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body*, p. 49.

which Carroll designs as parlour games. Ultimately, however, she becomes disillusioned by the capitalist system, acknowledging its arbitrary rules and unjust outcomes.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland begins with the lure of a peculiar commodity. Bored by her sister's reading, Alice is startled by a passing rabbit, adorned with human wares: 'it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it'.[62] The watch and the waistcoat – emphasized by Carroll with an underline in *Alice's Adventures Under Ground* (1864) – are the first attractions of the wonderland marketplace, and Alice cannot control her desire to see more. She impetuously follows the rabbit into a rabbit-hole and eventually plunges downward into a seemingly endless chasm. In this portal between reality and wonderland, Alice encounters commodities, arranged on shelves as if she were shopping in a store. She ultimately chooses a jar of orange marmalade. To her disappointment, however, it is empty, and she deftly places it on a passing shelf. This 'empty sign of gratification' suggests already the lessons that Alice will learn about the dynamic nature of commodities.[63] Since she possesses nothing to exchange, neither commodity nor money of equal value, Alice cannot purchase the product. It is a refuse receptacle, drained of the contents that mark its value.

Continuing to fall down the rabbit-hole, Alice begins to speculate on where she will arrive: 'I wonder if I shall fall right *through* the earth! How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! The antipathies, I think—'.[64] Alice's vocabulary error, mistaking antipathies for antipodes, is itself telling of the kind of hostility that she will face in wonderland as a foreigner. The Unicorn, for example, calls her a 'fabulous monster', and Humpty Dumpty asserts – in familiarly prejudicial language – 'you're so exactly like other people'.[65] But even more significant is Alice's assumption that she will enter an upside-down world. Although she will later describe wonderland as 'queer' and 'out-of-the-way', her first guess is probably most appropriate.[66] The world of commodities is upside-down – at least how Marx imagines it. For the wooden table 'not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head'.[67] In volume three of *Capital*, Marx writes, '*Everything appears upside down in competition*', and elsewhere argues that competition 'turns all natural and rational relations upside-down'.[68] Carroll designs his games of cards and chess as class competitions, and Alice meets several upside-down figures during her wonderland contests. In the song she sings to the caterpillar, Father William '*incessantly stand on* [*his*] *head*', and wishes to sell a revitalizing ointment for '*one shilling*'.[69] Perhaps most notable is the White Knight in *Through the Looking-Glass*, who invents peculiar products while upside-down: 'the more head-downwards I am, the more I keep inventing new things'.[70] Critics have often suggested that the White Knight is the closest analogue to Carroll, which not only might indicate the books' 'antipathy' to Alice Liddell and her family – the inventions of a March

62 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 10.
63 Armstrong, 'Occidental Alice', p. 546.
64 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 11.
65 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, pp. 206, 196.
66 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 21.
67 Marx, *Capital*, I, 42.
68 Marx, *Capital*, III, 244; Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2009), p. 195.
69 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 43.
70 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 216.

Hare – but more likely suggest that his publications have been an unstable commodity, animated and full of 'grotesque ideas'.

Marx's wooden table finds another important parallel early on in *Alice's Adventures*. After she lands unhurt on a pile of leaves and sticks, Alice finds herself in a long hall with many locked doors on either side. Eventually, she notices a glass table, which frustrates and fascinates for much of her first stay in wonderland. The table alternately features not only foods that will alter Alice's size, but also a key that will allow her to open a small door that leads to a luxurious garden. The composition of the table is significant: 'three-legged . . . all made of solid glass'.[71] The material might refer to the glassworks of the Great Exhibition, and Carroll elsewhere implicitly alludes to John Ruskin's sardonic description of the Crystal Palace as 'a cucumber frame between two chimneys', when both the White Rabbit and his associate Pat crash into glass: 'What a number of cucumber-frames there must be!'[72] More important, the construction of the table also resembles the glass shop windows that displayed commodities in mid-Victorian marketplaces. Alice finds a bottle on the wonderland table with 'DRINK ME . . . beautifully printed on it in large letters'.[73] The potion causes her to shrink, and thus fit through the garden door, but she no longer possesses the key: 'when she went back to the table for it, she found she could not possibly reach it; she could see it quite plainly through the glass, and she tried her best to climb up one of the legs of the table, but it was too slippery'.[74]

The key becomes a tantalizing product that the glass table exhibits for purchase and yet secures from reach. Once again, Alice possesses nothing to exchange. Food alters her size, but it cannot help her acquire the key. A box of currants makes her grow, but she is now too large for the door. Fanning herself makes her shrink, but once more the key remains out of reach: 'the little door was shut again, and the little golden key was lying on the glass table as before'.[75] Alice eventually reaches the key by nibbling different bits of a mushroom, advice she earns from the Caterpillar in exchange for a circular conversation and an inaccurate song. In a sense, Alice buys the commodity that has evaded her grasp. But the purchase, like all consumer exchanges, is based on arbitrary rules determined by random value identities. For another example, in *Looking-Glass* Alice learns that a ticket officer's 'time is worth a thousand pounds a minute!'[76] Carroll's wonderland is a world that seemingly parodies capitalism, but in fact it merely demonstrates that its logic is illogical, that its reality is nonsense.[77]

Carroll's most overt representation of the nonsense of capitalism occurs in *Looking-Glass* when Alice enters a shop managed by a sheep. After the shop materializes, the sheep immediately asks, 'What is it you want to buy?'[78] This is Alice's first experience with what seems to be a normal marketplace interaction. There are goods for sale, and she has money to buy

71 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 12.

72 David Day, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland Decoded* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2015), p. 78; Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 35.

73 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 13.

74 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 14. Alice's physical alterations might metaphorically suggest the way that commodity culture manipulates labouring bodies to meet consumer desires. The commodities (the potion, the boxed currants, and the fan) render her physically unstable, unable to control her own body. The mushroom, however, which is natural and not part of an economically conditioned mechanism of desire, restores her self-governance.

75 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 20.

76 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 149.

77 Jessica Straley notes that Carroll 'opts . . . for education in linguistic nonsense and literary forms', finding in language the means to address 'questions of change and continuity, language and meaning, and self and volition'. Jessica Straley, *Evolution and Imagination in Victorian Children's Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 88.

78 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 178.

them. Acting like a responsible shopper, she inspects the sheep's wares: 'I don't *quite* know yet . . . I should like to look all round me first, if I might'.[79] Yet the products that she attempts to appraise evade her sight: 'The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things – but the oddest part of it all was that, whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty, though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold'.[80] The commodities achieve such dynamism in the shop that they begin to be immaterial, impossible to grasp and difficult even to see directly. 'Things flow about so here!' Alice suggestively remarks.[81] The scene, in some ways, expresses commodity fetishism better than Marx's wooden table. As Alice tries to fix her attention on a 'large bright thing' that changes forms, the object 'went through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it'.[82]

Ever hungry, Alice eventually decides to buy an egg for '[f]ivepence farthing for one – twopence for two'.[83] Alice is understandably confused about the pricing, which is yet another example of arbitrary economy in the books. Deciding to purchase one egg, she 'put the money down on the counter'.[84] In spite of the value-equivalent exchange, Alice still cannot grasp the egg; when she comes nearer, it moves farther out of reach. As if signifying market inflation, the egg gradually grows in size until it possesses human attributes as Humpty Dumpty. The reification process means that the commodity takes on human properties – 'it had eyes, a nose, a mouth'.[85] Alice should be able to purchase the egg with currency, but it seems that everything in wonderland remains circulating as a commodity in the process of exchange; nothing becomes a 'thing' in someone's possession: 'All that is solid melts into air'.[86] The unreachable objects in the sheep's shop might also suggest the fleeting, capricious, insatiable desires of the Victorian consumer. Once possessed, the object loses its value; desire relies on the new and the unattained.

Wonderland features several fascinating performances of reification, in which social relationships are defined by the interaction between things, with the result that subjects are objectified and objects acquire human properties. Michael Parrish Lee observes, 'Alice faces the refusal of these "things" to be pinned down and reduced to concretely identifiable objects of consumption. The things seem uncannily alive precisely in their ability to evade human categorization and use and their consequent ability to render Alice thing-like'.[87] Alice tellingly remarks: 'you've no idea how confusing it is all the things being alive'.[88] When she enters the second iteration of wonderland in *Looking-Glass*, where 'the things go the other way', she notices that 'the pictures on the wall next to the fire seemed to be alive, and the very clock on the chimney-piece . . . had got the face of a little old man, and grinned at her'.[89] Stumbling upon Tweedledum and Tweedledee, Alice initially assumes they are waxwork models.

79 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 178.
80 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, pp. 178–79.
81 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 179.
82 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 179.
83 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 183.
84 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 183.
85 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 184.
86 Marx, *Communist*, p. 227.
87 Michael Parrish Lee, 'Eating Things: Food, Animals, and Other Life Forms in Lewis Carroll's *Alice* Books', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2017), pp. 1529–46 (p. 1535).
88 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 75.
89 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, pp. 127, 129.

Tweedledum is incredulous and demands payment for being objectified: 'Wax-works weren't made to be looked at for nothing'.[90] At the momentous final banquet scene, all the objects of wonderland spring to life like Marx's table, as if they have been crowned as commodities: 'The candles all grew up to the ceiling, looking something like a bed of rushes with fireworks at the top. As to the bottles, they each took a pair of plates, which the hastily fitted on as wings, and so, with forks for legs, went fluttering about in all directions'.[91] Anthropomorphized foods castigate Alice, and a 'soup-ladle . . . walk[s] up the table towards [her] chair'.[92] This terrifying confusion of commodities, which echoes Carroll's 'bewilderment' at the Great Exhibition and Eliot's 'nightmare' shopping experience, triggers Alice's escape from wonderland. She rips out the tablecloth, overturning the reified objects, and rendering them inanimate things that are the property of her domestic reality.

While things come to life in wonderland, Alice becomes a thing. In the looking-glass house, she is imperceptible to the now-animated chess figures ('I feel somehow as if I was getting invisible'), and she uses her 'invisible hand' to move them about.[93] When she leaves the looking-glass house, she 'float[s] on through the hall', as if she has become immaterial.[94] During his analysis of Marx's wooden table, Derrida writes: 'The ghostly schema now appears indispensable. The commodity is a "thing" without phenomenon, a thing in flight that surpasses the senses (it is invisible, intangible, inaudible, and odorless)'.[95] In wonderland, Alice becomes a commodity, stripped of her subjectivity and made into a thing that can be exchanged in the marketplace. The shop-owner sheep asks, 'Are you a child or a teetotum?' and the Lion inquires, 'Are you animal – or vegetable – or mineral?'[96] In fact, Tweedledum and Tweedledee argue that Alice exists as part of the Red King's dream. 'You know very well you're not real', the former asserts.[97] At the very least, she is split, in much the same way that commodities possess both use-value and exchange-value. Early on in *Alice's Adventures*, Carroll explains, 'this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people'.[98] But Alice acknowledges the untenable challenge of being two people at once: 'Why there is hardly enough of me left to make *one* respectable person!'[99] Indeed, in Victorian reality Alice was quickly commodified, both in the many editions of the *Alice* books and in such products as biscuit tins, which were authorized by Carroll.

Although Carroll could be neglectful of his financial accounts, he was meticulous about the value and the cost of his books. Joining the long list of market-savvy children's authors that began with John Newbery (1713–67) – whose mid-eighteenth-century gift books were perhaps the first fully commodified fictions – Carroll was a master manipulator of the literary market. Ever fastidious concerning printing, Carroll was dismayed in the summer of 1865 to learn that the illustrations were not up to Tenniel's standard. Carroll agreed on a reprint, deciding that the 'first 2000 shall be sold as waste paper'.[100] This was not the case, however;

90 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 159.
91 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 236.
92 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 237.
93 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, pp. 130, 132. Carroll might be alluding to Adam Smith's economic concept of the 'invisible hand', which asserts that self-interested efforts unintentionally benefit society as a whole.
94 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 136.
95 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 189.
96 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, pp. 179, 206.
97 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 168.
98 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 15.
99 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 15.
100 *Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 77.

Carroll sold them to an American publisher. The next year, Carroll's publisher suggested printing on cheaper paper at the original cost, but Carroll refused: 'I can *not* consent to the one being reduced without the other, so that people might say "here is an inferior article sold at the old price"'.[101] Nearly three decades later, in an 1893 advertisement to *Alice's Adventures*, Carroll apologizes for a printing error that corrupted the illustrations, and laments that 'the book [was] not worth buying'.[102] Ultimately, he comes to the conclusion: 'Instead . . . of destroying the unsold copies, I propose to utilize them by giving them away'.[103] A few years later, Carroll was forced to quarter the price of his 'Nursery "Alice"' (1889) – an adaptation meant for 'Children aged from Nought to Five' – because 'the Public have practically said "We will *not* give more than a shilling for a picture-book, however artistically got-up"'.[104] It seems that Carroll learned the same lesson as his heroine concerning the arbitrary rules of capitalism. At any rate, his work with pricing, printing, and charity shows just how involved Carroll was in the commodification of his art. This was the way that he could make *Alice*, if not Alice, come to life.

In the early 1860s, Carroll became acquainted with the Rossettis, and he eventually sent Christina Rossetti an inscribed copy of *Alice* in the autumn of 1865.[105] Nearly a decade later, Rossetti informed her brother, Dante Gabriel, that she had written a 'Christmas trifle, would-be in the *Alice* style with an eye to the market'.[106] Several points are of interest here, namely that she expresses immediate interest in her story's financial prospects. Indeed, on 26 January 1875, Rossetti wrote to Alexander Macmillan, the publisher she shared with Carroll: 'I am pleased to hear of more than 1000 "Speaking Likenesses" having been disposed of: truth to tell, I had feared the reviews might this time have done me a very real injury with the buying public; but, for me, such a sale is certainly not bad'.[107] Rossetti had already successfully explored the dangers of the consumer world in 'Goblin Market' (1862), which many readers have observed.[108] Perhaps more important, Rossetti sought to capitalize on the success of Carroll's *Alice* books by writing a story in the same 'style'. Yet critics have been divided regarding the level of 'likeness' between the texts. For example, U. C. Knoepflmacher considers the

101 *Letters of Lewis Carroll*, p. 95.

102 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 117.

103 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 117.

104 Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 119.

105 Rossetti first met Carroll in 1863. The latter visited the Rossettis to take photographs of Dante Gabriel's art and convinced the family to sit for photographs. Eventually, Dante Gabriel received the photographs and was charged precisely £2.3.6. Rossetti called *Alice* a 'funny pretty book' and revealed to Carroll that the Rossetti women 'made ourselves quite at home yesterday in Wonderland'. *The Letters of Christina Rossetti*, vol. 1, ed. Antony H. Harrison (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 257. Rossetti did not return the favour with *Speaking Likenesses*, though Carroll did own a copy.

106 *The Family Letters of Christina Georgina Rossetti*, ed. William Michael Rossetti (New York, NY: Haskell House, 1968), p. 44. The letter is dated 4 May 1874.

107 *The Rossetti-Macmillan Letters*, ed. Lona Mosk Packer (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963), p. 105.

108 See Elizabeth Campbell, 'Of Mothers and Merchants: Female Economics in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Studies*, 33 (1990), 393–410; Elizabeth K. Helsinger, 'Consumer Power and the Utopia of Desire: Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *ELH*, 58 (1991), 903–933; Mary Wilson Carpenter, '"Eat Me, Drink Me, Love Me": The Consumable Female Body in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Victorian Poetry*, 29 (1991), 415–34; Richard Menke, 'The Political Economy of Fruit: *Goblin Market*', in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999), pp. 105–136; Rebecca Stern, '"Adulterations Detected": Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57 (2003), 477–511; Victor Roman Mendoza, '"Come Buy": The Crossing of Sexual and Consumer Desire in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*', *ELH*, 73 (2006), 913–47; and Clayton Carlyle Tarr, 'Covent Goblin Market', *Victorian Poetry*, 50 (2012), 297–316.

stories 'anti-Carrollian', while Anna Despotopoulou argues that Rossetti 'reproduce[s] the atmosphere of aggression and anarchy that characterizes Wonderland'.[109] Both assessments hold merit. *Speaking Likenesses* assertively contradicts the *Alice* books, but in so doing it reveals the latent danger of Alice's adventures that Carroll might not have recognized. Specifically, Rossetti follows Carroll in representing the spectacular and spectral world of commodities in the marketplace and their pernicious effects on young consumers.

Rossetti constructs *Speaking Likenesses* as '3 short stories in a common framework'.[110] The tales follow the imaginary adventures of three separate girls, Flora, Edith, and Maggie, whose first initials spell out 'FEM' to suggest that the subject matter is directed exclusively towards young women. In the 'framework' that Rossetti supplies, an unnamed narrator acts as a story-teller to a group of young girls. But she is also a task-master: 'Silence! Attention! All eyes on occupations'.[111] She uses her stories as payment for the girls' domestic work: 'no help no story. I have too many poor friends ever to get through *my* work. However, as I see thimbles coming out, I conclude you choose story and labour'.[112] The narrator has been called a 'tyrannical bully' and a 'despot' and the children 'slave-labourers'.[113] But she might most resemble a factory owner, the bourgeois 'industrial capitalist', who commands the proletariat labourers, 'organized like soldiers'.[114] Regardless, the narrator's method deftly sets the stage for the economic focus of the embedded tales. For the stories to come to life, they must become commodities. To do so, they establish exchange-value relationships with other commodities, the girls' labour and their products. Perhaps most significant, however, the narrator's frame does not return. As Roderick McGillis notes, '[t]he book begins with a call to story, and it ends within the world of story'.[115] Since it is unclear in the final tale whether Maggie has re-entered her own reality or remains unconscious, both the labouring girls and readers remain trapped in a nightmarish wonderland. But the truth is that reality is already wonderland, the realm of speaking likenesses.

The first tale is the most complex and certainly the strangest, the pinnacle of the text's 'unremitting violence'.[116] It begins at Flora's birthday party, which is attended by relatives and friends. She receives several extravagant presents: 'the most tempting of sugar-plums, the most beautiful of curly-pated dolls, they appeared in her eyes'.[117] One of the guests particularly admires Flora's doll: 'Why, Flora, she must have cost pounds and pounds'.[118] The animatronic doll mimics the process of reification with its life-like movements. 'Look at me opening and shutting her eyes', Flora exclaims, 'and I can make her say Mamma'.[119] Eventually, the children

[109] U. C. Knoepflmacher, 'Avenging Alice: Christina Rossetti and Lewis Carroll', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 41 (1986), 299–328 (p. 307); Anna Despotopoulou, 'Nowhere or Somewhere?: (Dis)locating Gender and Class Boundaries in Christina Rossetti's *Speaking Likenesses*', *The Review of English Studies*, 61 (2010), 414–34 (p. 415).

[110] *The Rossetti-Macmillan Letters*, p. 98.

[111] Christina Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, in *Selected Prose of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent and P. G. Stanwood (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), pp. 118–151 (p. 118).

[112] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 136.

[113] Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepflmacher, *Forbidden Journeys: Fairy Tales and Fantasies by Victorian Women Writers* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 319; Knoepflmacher, 'Avenging Alice', p. 314.

[114] Marx, *Communist*, pp. 230–31.

[115] Roderick McGillis, 'Simple Surfaces: Christina Rossetti's Works for Children', in *The Achievement of Christina Rossetti*, ed. David A. Kent (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp. 208–230 (p. 226).

[116] Auerbach and Knoepflmacher, *Forbidden Journeys*, p. 130.

[117] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 118.

[118] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 120.

[119] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 120.

head outside to play. Their games turn to fights, however, and Flora wanders off to cry herself to sleep. During her dream, she enters a familiar row of yew trees, normally 20 in number, but she notices that a twenty-first tree now exists. This tree contains a door, which Flora enters. She finds herself in a

> large and lofty apartment, very handsomely furnished. All the chairs were stuffed arm-chairs, and moved their arms and shifted their shoulders to accommodate sitters. All the sofas arranged and rearranged their pillows as convenience dictated. Footstools glided about, and rose or sank to meet every length of leg. Tables were no less obliging, but ran on noiseless castors here or there when wanted. Tea-trays ready set out, saucers of strawberries, jugs of cream, and plates of cake, floated in, settled down, and floated out again empty, with considerable tact and good taste.[120]

Flora has entered a room of dynamic commodities, much like the banquet scene at the conclusion of Carroll's *Looking-Glass*, but even more reminiscent of Marx's wooden table. Rossetti offers several more descriptions of ambulatory furniture, including 'telescope tables' that 'expanded and contracted of themselves without extra pieces, and seemed to study everybody's convenience'; a chair that 'bulged out its own back comfortably into hers, and drew in its arms to suit her small size'; and a footstool that 'grew somewhat taller beneath her feet'.[121] Perhaps most interesting is a specific table that 'ran up with tea for one', but then 'glided away with its delicious untasted load'.[122] The animated chair was evidently so important, to either Rossetti, her illustrator Arthur Hughes, or her publisher Macmillan, that it appeared in the title-page illustration to the first edition (Figure 1). Rossetti's chief 'speaking likeness' is a similar object to what Marx endows with 'metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties'.[123]

Flora thereafter encounters an abusive group of grotesque children, led by a cruel queen. The children complete the metaphor of reification that the personified furniture began by representing the commodification of labourers. There are three boys (one with quills, one with angles, and the last with hooks) and two girls (one who is sticky and the other slimy). Hughes's illustration of the scene is significant not only for its depiction of the children, but also for its representation of the table that walks away with Flora's teatime treats (Figure 2). Several critics have noted the sexual implications of the children's deformities, the boys' phallic appendages and the girls' fluidity. But once the violent games begin, Rossetti gives a better clue regarding what the children's peculiar bodies might actually represent.

Flora is the victim of both games. In the first, 'Hunt the Pincushion', the children run about, 'sticking pins into her here or there'.[124] The second game, called 'Self Help', also centres on physical assault, but this time the children must use their deformities rather than pins: 'Hooks, as a Heavy Porter, shone in this sport; and dragged about with him a load of attached captives, all vainly struggling to unhook themselves. Angles, as an Ironer, goffered or fluted several children by sustained pressure. Quills, an Engraver, could do little more than prick and scratch'.[125] The children are labourers who have become the tools of their trade. Marx argues

[120] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 125.
[121] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 125.
[122] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 125.
[123] Marx, *Capital*, I, 42.
[124] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 131.
[125] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 132.

Figure 1. Arthur Hughes, in *Speaking Likenesses* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1875), p. 22. [Courtesy of the University of Michigan Library and HathiTrust].

Figure 2. Arthur Hughes, in *Speaking Likenesses* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1875), p. 24. [Courtesy of the University of Michigan Library and HathiTrust].

that the mechanization of industry has caused the labourer to 'los[e] all individual character . . . He becomes an appendage of the machine'.[126] The deformed children are labourers and commodities, producers of goods and goods themselves, similar to Carroll's playing-card landscapers.

Flora's dream presents a fascinating example of reification, in which objects adopt human characteristics and subjects become objectified. As Flora 'is violently exposed to commodity culture', Talairach-Vielmas observes, 'she experiences the erosion of the boundaries of the self'.[127] She is pinned and displayed, while tools come to life. Following the cruel games, the children begin a house-building competition during which Flora finds herself trapped inside the queen's structure. Notable here is that the houses are constructed with glass bricks, which not only evokes both the Crystal Palace and mid-Victorian glass displays, but also suggests that Flora has become a commodity to be showcased to consumers.[128] Once the children begin throwing rocks at each other's houses, the glass spectacle shatters, and the commodities lose their lustre. Flora quickly awakens to find herself in the 'pleasant coolness of approaching twilight'.[129]

The third tale reengages the theme of consumerism, beginning in a store run by Old Dame Margaret and her granddaughter Maggie.[130] The shop's 'window was always filled with novelties and attractions, but with Christmastide, it put forth extra splendors, and as it were blossomed gorgeously'.[131] Rossetti directly addresses the power of glass displays to entice customers with what they can see but cannot touch. Buzzing with customers, the shop overflows with reified commodities: 'wax dolls, wooden dolls, speaking dolls, squeaking dolls; . . . wooly lambs and canaries with removable heads'.[132] Through the commotion, Margaret notices that a customer has left his purchases behind. Maggie volunteers to deliver them, but falls on the ice outside and hits her head, which begins her 'marvelous adventures'.[133] Encountering a host of strange characters and scenes, Maggie eventually meets the most disturbing character of all – a boy who has 'arms, legs, a head, like ordinary people: but his face exhibited only one feature, and that was a wide mouth' (Figure 3).[134] U. C. Knoepflmacher considers him a 'hideous distortion of one of the Tweedle twins', whose 'mouth is also that of the Cheshire Cat'.[135] Among other possibilities, the boy might embody the voraciousness of mid-Victorian consumer culture.[136] He begs for food, but his mouthful of 'teeth and tusks' suggests that Maggie

126 Marx, *Communist*, p. 230.

127 Talairach-Vielmas, *Moulding the Female Body*, p. 80.

128 It is worth addressing the literal commodification of women through prostitution, especially given Rossetti's decade-long volunteer work (1859–70) at the St Mary Magdalen home for fallen women. Flora is abused by phallic appendages, her body objectified and debased. As Benjamin notes, the prostitute's 'job . . . entails the fiction that she sells her powers of pleasure. Insofar as this represents the utmost extension attainable by the sphere of the commodity, the prostitute may be considered, from early on, a precursor of commodity capitalism' (*Arcades*, p. 348).

129 Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 135.

130 In the second tale, a young girl, Edith, is sent to boil water in a forest. She attempts, again and again, to light the fire with her 'Lucifer' matches, but her efforts are futile.

131 Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 143–44.

132 Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 144.

133 Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 145.

134 Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 147.

135 Knoepflmacher, 'Avenging Alice', p. 318.

136 Kathryn Burlinson reads the boy as an 'image of the *vagina dentata*, surrounded by a mop of thick hair'. Kathryn Burlinson, '"All mouth and trousers": Christina Rossetti's Grotesque and Abjected Bodies', in *Women's Poetry, Late Romantic to Late Victorian: Gender and Genre, 1830–1900*, ed. Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Bain (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), pp. 292–312 (p. 294).

Figure 3. Arthur Hughes, in *Speaking Likenesses* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1875), p. 85. [Courtesy of the University of Michigan Library and HathiTrust].

is his ultimate prey.[137] Maggie's labour in her grandmother's shop has fashioned her into a commodity, one that is consumed by insatiable capitalistic consumerism. Indeed, when she finally delivers the forgotten goods, the family is curiously ungrateful. As Julia Briggs argues, they 'have no sense of the labour of a world beyond'.[138] Maggie is merely a delivery service, an objectified component of the assembly line that provides commodities to the moneyed consumer.

Shunned and left out in the cold, Maggie becomes fully dehumanized, while the products she supplies – the nonessential commodities of sweets and toys – enter the warm Christmastime house. Maggie finally begins her journey home, picking up some stray animals on the way. She enters her grandmother's house and all retire to rest. Whereas Flora awakens from her dream, however, Maggie remains unconscious. The closing scene with her grandmother is not reality, but rather the imaginings of a young girl who is at best freezing and severely concussed, and at worse dead. More disturbing is that the frame narrative never returns. The young labourers and readers alike are trapped within Maggie's nightmare. In both *Alice* books, Carroll restores his protagonist to her 'dull reality', which seems far removed from the bewildering landscape of wonderland.[139] Through her experience, Alice has learned consumer culture's nonsense rules, and she will be better prepared to negotiate them as an adult. Rossetti provides no such relief for Maggie. There is no Lizzie to save Maggie from this goblin market. Trapped in the nightmare of consumption, Maggie cannot return to the safety of childhood. She is comatose, vegetative, fully alienated from reality – 'an appendage

[137] Rossetti, *Speaking Likenesses*, p. 147.

[138] Julia Briggs, '*Speaking Likenesses*: Hearing the Lesson', in *The Culture of Christina Rossetti*, ed. Mary Arseneau, Antony H. Harrison, and Lorrain Janzen Kooistra (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999), pp. 212–31 (p. 226).

[139] Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 111.

of the machine'.[140] In 'Goblin Market', Rossetti suggests that children who succumb to consumer desire face the prospect of death. Her assessment is even bleaker in *Speaking Likenesses*: Maggie does nothing to deserve her fate. She is a victim of a ruthless economy that favours lies over lives.

In 2012, German artist Martin Stiefermann opened an adaptation of *Alice's Adventures* in a Berlin department store. Presented to an unsuspecting audience, the performance featured a mature Alice finding herself lost in a disorienting world of consumption, in which Carroll's familiar characters were transformed into sales associates, security guards, and store managers. The production, as one reviewer noted, was a 'capitalist critique' of contemporary Western society.[141] That the *Alice* books made for such a fitting modern revision is a testament to their implicit treatment of nineteenth-century consumer culture. Yet Carroll is not the only mid-Victorian author to imagine capitalism as fantasy world. Both Rossetti and Marx also employed the language and imagery of children's fairy tales to represent a world driven by commodities, where social relationships do not occur between subjects, but rather circulate through objects. One must agree with Carroll's Walrus that mid-Victorian society was a time '*To talk of many things*'.[142]

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

[140] Marx, *Communist*, p. 230.

[141] Derek Scally, 'Alice in Deutschland: Lewis Carroll Novel Gets 21st Century Makeover', *Irish Times*, 7 April 2012, par. 13, <www.irishtimes.com/news/alice-in-deutschland-lewis-carroll-novel-gets-21st-century-makeover-1.496747.S.>

[142] Carroll, *Alice's Adventures*, p. 164.