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Variations on Darwin

Dennis Denisoff (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*

Laurence Talairach-Vielmas



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REFERENCES

Dennis Denisoff (ed.), *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 339 p., ISBN: 978-0-7546-6156-6

- 1 We often have the feeling today that children are turned into voracious consumers even before they leave their cradles. In fact, as Dennis Denisoff's edited collection, *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, points out, the targeting of young people by consumer culture started decades before, at a time when the definition of the child was changing and consumer culture boomed, modelling identity and children in need of influence and control. As Denisoff's introduction underlines, notions of consumerism and consumption differ and may be looked at through different lenses. His collection aims to fill a gap in childhood stories by probing the impact of consumerism on childhood in the nineteenth-century, as consumer culture arose. In so doing, his collection adds greatly to works on childhood and twentieth-century consumer culture, such as Karin Lesnik-Oberstein's *Children in Culture* (1998), Peter Stoneley's *Consumerism and American Girls' Literature 1860-1940* (2003) or Daniel Thomas Cook's *The Commodification of Childhood* (2004).
- 2 The collection falls into four parts: "Play Things: Toys and Theatre", "Consuming Desires", "Adulthood and Nationhood" and "Children and the Terrors of Cultural Consumption".
- 3 The first part takes us into the world of manufactured toys and entertainment. Teresa Michals's essay on manufactured toys and the links between consumption and education shows how the definition of the toy evolved in the nineteenth-century, participating in the child's physical, social, intellectual and emotional development. By focusing on Maria Edgeworth's writings on education, the essay brings to light the two-

fold aspect of the manufactured toy as both educational instrument and signifier of market forces. Liz Farr's following article on toy theatres relates toy theatres to nineteenth-century conceptions of manliness. The Victorians' passion for the stage explains why the culture of spectacle reached childhood, and Farr refers to Charles Dickens and R.L. Stevenson to support her discussion. As they became a sign of commodity culture, toy theatres were once again positioned and defined as both a recreational pursuit and an educational instrument. Marah Gubar's essay on child performers recalls the Victorian public's fascination with precocity and deals with the appeal of child performers, as proficient as they were innocent. Underlining how child performers were also seen as potential victims of a consumer culture, Gubar also underlines how exploitation of the innocence of children raised public protest in the 1880s.

- 4 In the second part, Michèle Mendelssohn's chapter on Henry James and the sexualization of the Victorian girl brings into play the connections between childhood and adult desire: as she explains, because the child is invested with meaning by the adult who controls her, she becomes aligned with commodities. Mendelssohn connects James's children with W.T. Stead's 1885 article "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon", and looks at the issue of marriage or prostitution in terms of productivity, showing how children were seen both as potential consumers and as available to (sexual) consumers. The following chapter on Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books dovetails issues of consumption and memory, eating and forgetting. Carol Mavor's psychoanalytical approach highlights how Carroll's tales emphasize food while preventing the little girl from eating, bringing out the tales's anorectic/hedonistic tendencies in ways similar to Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Richard A. Kaye's chapter on Wilde's *Salome* also uses Freud's arguments on sexual instincts, rooted in childhood and adolescence. Kaye deals with the figure of Salome, hovering between the nymphet and the predatory *femme fatale*, underlining how Salome projects an image of the child as consumer in Wilde's but also Johann Strauss's *Salome*, and looking at twentieth-century productions as well.
- 5 In part three, Claudia Nelson's article probes the influence of children's fiction on Victorian literature for adults, paying particular attention to MacDonald's tale, "The Light Princess", which was included in an adult novel, *Adela Cathcart*, hence playing with questions of audience. Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's study lays stress on another product of nineteenth-century culture: gift books packaged for Christmas consumption. As Kooistra examines their cultural content and ideological function (in particular *Home Thoughts and Home Scenes*), she points out the way childhood became a consuming theme of such objects of domestic consumption, not only targeting children but also confirming the fantasies of adults. Ymitri Mathison analyses the commodification of imperialism in boys' adventure fiction through props, such as maps, pirates and treasure, and makes explicit how such books developed further a view of the world as a giant marketplace. As Mathison makes clear, the connections between imperialism and capitalism in such adventure books (Mathison also looks at adventure novels aimed at adults, such as H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*) contributed to strengthening the definition of the self through material possessions.
- 6 In part four, Patricia Demers's study of Lucy Clifford's *Anyhow Stories* and the objectification of children caught within a culture of commercial exchanges, and Tamara S. Wagner's chapter on orphans as commodities in sensation fiction investigate

the literature of the period a little more. Wagner stresses the commodification of bodies and the child's fictional value in some of Charles Dickens's (especially *Our Mutual Friend*), Ellen Wood's or Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novels (notably *The Trail of the Serpent*). This argument is taken further in the following and last chapter by Monical Flegel. Flegel investigates as well the way children were reduced to commodities and converted into raw materials by taking a look at the 1890s campaigns of the NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) against child abuse, examining most particularly the practice of child-life insurance and its association with the working classes.

- 7 Denisoff's edited collection, *The Nineteenth-Century Child and Consumer Culture*, will undoubtedly be valuable to students and scholars interested in the Victorian period and in search of interdisciplinary approaches. Though most of the essays offer a sociological approach to the nineteenth century and very little room is offered to literary studies *per se*, the collection's contextualisation of a wide range of topics is undoubtedly highly valuable. The reader may feel that the links between chapters are sometimes a little loose but the arguments of each individual chapter are generally well constructed and thoroughly referenced.

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Keywords: consumer culture, children's literature, Alice, Salome, NSPCC

Mots-clés: société de consommation, littérature pour enfants, Alice, Salomé

AUTHORS

LAURENCE TALAIRACH-VIELMAS

Professeur

Université de Toulouse II-Le Mirail

talairac@univ-tlse2.fr