

# Out of the Closet, into the World: The Power of Puppets in Jessie Burton's *The Miniaturist*

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**Abstract:** The present paper examines the topological significance of miniature figures in Jessie Burton's novel *The Miniaturist*. By highlighting the ways in which the narrative's figural system negotiates the structural and conceptual dichotomies of *human/doll*, *object/thing*, *interiority/exteriority*, *authenticity/artificiality*, and *mobility/stasis*, this reading of Burton's novel attempts to show how the literary text rethinks the social life of things and the ambiguity of subject-object relations in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. Aligned with the commercial circuits of material culture, which underscore the moral ambivalence of the novel's Dutch society, material objects are shown to exceed their decorative function and reveal their destructive purchase on human life.

**Keywords:** dolls, puppets, cabinet house, sugar, miniature, *sapient agency*, object, *thinking thing*, commodification, capitalism, Calvinist ethics, human subjectivity

## Kalvinizmas ir komercija: lėlės tropologija Jessie Burton romane *Miniatiūristas*

**Santrauka.** Pasitelkiant naujojo materializmo, daikto teorijos, Juriiaus Lotmano, Kennetho Grosso ir šiuolaikinės fenomenologijos samprotavimus apie medžiagiškumą bei subjekto ir objekto santykius, straipsnyje aptariama *lėlės* figūros reikšmė anglų rašytojos Jessie Burton istorinio romano *Miniatiūristas* (2014) tropologinėje sistemoje. XVII a. Amsterdamo visuomenės kontekste pagrindinės veikėjos lėlių namelis įkūnija kertines semantines įtampas, struktūruojančias pasakojimo dinamiką: *išorė / vidus*, *žmogus / lėlė*, *daiktas / objektas*, *mobilumas / statiškumas*, *autentiškas / pseudo gyvenimas*, *gyvenimas / mirtis*. Homologinio santykio tarp romano veikėjų ir daiktų ar dalykų išryškėjimas analizėje leidžia daryti prielaidą, kad *lėlės* pasakojime veikia, viena vertus, kaip neautentiško gyvenimo tropas, liudijantis vartotojiškumo ir modernaus subjektyvumo genealoginę samplaiką, ir, antra vertus, kaip *išmanaus medžiagiškumo (sapient materiality)* figūros, kvestionuojančios *subjekto / objekto* dichotomiją Vakarų metafizinėje tradicijoje. Kitaip tariant, tiek žmonės, tiek lėlės *Miniatiūriste* gyvuoja daiktiškumo kontinuumu, kurio reikšmės ekonomiją struktūruoja etiškai įpareigota santykiškumo ontologija (*relational ontology*).

**Raktiniai žodžiai:** lėlės, miniatiūra, objektas, daiktas, kalvinistinė etika, komodifikacija, subjektas

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We are all cupboards, with obvious outsides –  
 which may be either beautiful or ugly,  
 simple or elaborate, interesting or amusing –  
 but with insides mysteriously the same –  
 the abodes of darkness, terror and skeletons.

Lytton Strachey, *The Letters of Lytton Strachey*

## Introduction: Eidolons, Automata, Objects, and Things

Our interest in human-like objects – dolls, puppets, wax figures, and sculptures – has a long and complex genealogy. In anthropological terms, it relates to the funeral rites in ancient cultures, where images of the dead were installed in artificial bodies in order to reposition their lost human presence in the community of the living. Although culturally distinct in their role of mediating the experience of death, such artifacts as Neolithic skulls, Egyptian mummies, and Roman effigies testify to the power of art to incorporate the realm of the dead in the social domain. In the words of Hans Belting, “the dead were given back a status that they needed in order to maintain their presence in the social group.” (Belting 2011, 86) In the early cults of the dead, masks, dolls, or puppets, in particular, assumed the capacity to prompt remembrance through representation by virtue of their visual embodiment (and, by extension, virtual resurrection) of the deceased. Neolithic “life-size human dolls”, for example, Belting argues in *An Anthropology of Images*, “played a temporary role in cult ritual and then were stored in so-called “depots”. It is conceivable that they stood in for the deceased in a preliminary internment ceremony.” (Belting 2011, 93) Across time, whether conceptualized as doubles, substitutes, or equivalents, arcane figures in funeral rites – manufactured human-like models and embalmed bodies, as in mummies – had a transformative effect on both the empirical and spiritual dimensions of communal life, amplifying the social character of the ontological change that defines human existence. As a consequence of such material engagement with death in ancient societies, the creation of images – Gr. *eidolons* – contributed in no small measure to the construction of social memory, at the same time calling for a more profound philosophical reflection on (dis) embodiment. In this regard, *eidolons*, ancestors of modern dolls (Fraser 1973, 6), cannot be overlooked as “sapient objects” (Miller 2005, 34), material agents of intentionality holding together the two sides of the seeming rift between *mind* and *matter* and *life* and *death*. Liminal figures as they were, *eidolons* were stewards of the two orders of being, whose relational dynamics, to use Daniel Miller’s phrasing, showed the grounding of “the less tangible” in “the more tangible” (Miller 2005, 6).

In contemporary critical discourse the conceptual impact of simulated material forms in human interaction with the transcendental world bears the inescapable stamp of Plato’s philosophy, which dislodged *matter* from *ideas*, *body* from *form*, and *life* from *imitation*, overturning the old ambiguity of *eidolons* as referring “not only to a soul in search of a body, but also to a body waiting for a soul.” (Belting 2011, 108) Unlike the ancient Egyptians, who performed embalming and mummification as part of the human transaction with the

divine, where the creation of plastic models functioned as a means of re-embodiment and therefore eternal life, Plato offered the Greeks a view that located eternity in the realm of ideas free from the illusions of material surface. At the expense of *eidolons* conceived as both material and spiritual doubles, Plato elevated the significance of ideas, which alone gave access to truth and living memory. Material images of the dead, as Belting points out, became “a metaphor for death itself.” (Belting 2011, 111) The enduring legacy of Plato’s idealist argument has been such that the creative force of matter gradually migrated from the domain of religion to the domain of art, where dealings in counterfeit life fell below the radar of epistemological certainty bound to scientific or metaphysical truth. As Victoria Nelson observes in *The Secret Life of Puppets*,

*In our officially postreligious intellectual culture, we miss the idols, too, and we have similarly aestheticized them. Just as the mad scientist figure carries the negative but still highly charged projection of the holy man who would otherwise have no place in our living culture, the repressed religious is also visible in representations of puppets, robots, cyborgs, and other artificial humans in literature and film.* (Nelson 2001, 20)

This is not to say that the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, or Romans were unfamiliar with the ethos of play. To recall the English historian Antonia Fraser’s observation in *Dolls*, “toy dolls are to be met fairly freely among the various civilized races of antiquity.” (Fraser 1973, 7) Most of these toy figurines, as she demonstrates, were made of clay and often were dedicated to goddesses upon marriage. The English word “puppet”, in fact, bears the legacy of the “Latin word *pupus* or *pupa*, meaning a newborn child” (Fraser 1973, 7), suggesting that dolls and other toy figures had a cultural significance beyond the ambit of religion. Today, perhaps more so than in the past, at the furthest reaches of the material imagination, dolls and puppets problematize not only the boundary between the living and the dead, but also the correlation of creation to knowledge, which grounds the current intellectual debate over the role and status of cognition and sentience in natural and synthetic forms, as well as the links between cybernetics and modern biopolitics (see O’Connell 2017; Riskin 2007).

From the historical perspective, the rise of anthropomorphic machines in today’s technology-driven world derives substantially from the automata of the ancient and medieval times – think of moving toys, clockwork mechanisms, church altars and organs (see Truitt 2015; Riskin 2016) – which accompanied the spread of atomistic and mechanistic conceptions of life in philosophical thought, whose major offshoot was modern scientific materialism. Because atomism, a philosophical discourse of materialism primarily associated with the teachings of Epicurus, maintained that our knowledge of the world derives from our sensual engagement with the physical universe, which consists of invisible particles, the mechanical toy or automaton proved to be an excellent way to explain the properties constitutive of living bodies. The revival of philosophical atomism in the seventeenth century, in conjunction with the Cartesian conception of body as machine, emancipated clockwork to a mode of intelligibility, where, as Daniel Tiffany reminds us in *Toy Medium: Materialism and Modern Lyric*, “the automaton stands readily for a method obliged to

deduce from external features the hidden corpuscular mechanisms of natural bodies.” (Tiffany 2000, 53) Jessica Riskin makes a similar point in her account of how this technology of motion and illusion, which dramatized “the intimate, corporeal relation between representation and divinity, icon and saint” (Riskin 2016, 22) in the visual culture of the medieval Church, was spurred on by the Reformation to graduate into the medium of the philosophical toys of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe: Christiaan Huygens’s, Jacques de Vaucanson’s, and Pierre Jaquet-Droz’s mechanical inventions come readily to mind (see Riskin 2007).

At the heart of both the atomistic and mechanistic approaches, however, we find two major contradictions that provide intellectual fuel to the engines of the New Materialism of today. These contradictions cluster around the *mind/body* relation in atomistic reasoning, on the one hand, and the *agency/passivity* binary in the mechanistic model, on the other. The ontological significance of the automaton in atomistic metaphysics derives from its alignment with the idea of “materiality founded on immateriality” (Tiffany 2000, 49), which underlies the *aporia* of its reasoning. As Tiffany convincingly argues, though the doctrine claims “that nothing we do not perceive can be real”, atoms, the essential constituents of the physical world, are “infinitesimally small and hence imperceptible.” (Tiffany 2000, 44) To the extent that philosophical atomism relies on the atom as a physical component of reality, this blind spot seems to pull the conceptual rug from its own feet. It leads Tiffany to claim that “Western materialism...depends, paradoxically and irremediably, on the equation of materiality and invisibility (insofar as atoms are permanently beyond the reach of our natural senses).” (Tiffany 2000, 44) Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the mechanical doll brings back the old conflict between *mind* and *body*, for it “symbolizes the hypothetical modeling of invisible matter: it becomes an emblem of the rational divination of science, thereby recalling its mythical origin as an oracular device. The toy divines the invisible substance of things.” (Tiffany 2000, 52)

The implications of the epistemological and ontological revolutions instigated by the Cartesian conception of living beings are similarly complex. In thinking about bodies as clockwork and man as a thinking thing, Riskin maintains, Descartes did not seek to reduce life to mechanism, but “meant to elevate mechanism to life: to explain life, never to explain it away.” (Riskin 2016, 45) For Descartes, in her reading, the mechanistic view offered a comprehensive understanding of our material agency in the world without recourse to divinity or any other external source of power. This agency, Riskin argues, derives from the Cartesian view of living creatures as essentially responsive: “Responsive machinery implied that sensation, the way in which living creatures respond to the world, could be understood in mechanical terms.” (Riskin 2016, 47) Hijacked by the Reformation and seventeenth-century science, however, the clockwork metaphor was put in the service of exegesis which postulated that “a mechanism is something lacking agency, produced and moved by outside forces; and nature, as a great mechanism, is similarly passive.” (Riskin 2016, 3) Herein, then, lies the contradiction of the mechanistic conception of life: by depriving the material world of agency, this mode of science subjected the study of the physical universe to the argument from design: “The authors of the argument

from design sought proof of the existence of God in the evidence of mechanical design in nature, God's artifact." (Riskin 2016, 4) This may partly explain why the Reformers were keen to destroy the mechanical dolls operating in Catholic churches: defenders of the inert and passive material world, they could not tolerate the assault on God's monopoly on agency borne by life-like machines. As Lois Rostow Kuznets adds in *When Toys Come Alive*, "Possession of dolls was considered evidence of guilt, for instance, during the seventeenth-century witch hunts in New England." (Rostow Kuznets 1994, 14) The old cosmology of matter as permeated by spiritual agency seemed to have lost its former significance in Western metaphysics.

Yet the Cartesian legacy embedded in the philosophical encompassment of the human subject as a thinking thing has recently been revised and revitalized in the intellectual debate over the subject-object relations that bear on specific conditions and dynamics of power, the social organization of space, economic, racial, and bioethical justice, and the material practices of everyday life, among other things. The dialectic of *materiality/immateriality* has been shown to be coextensive with a number of other conceptual dichotomies, which map the landscape of the New Materialist thought, such as *centre/margin*, *mind/body*, *activity/passivity*, *rationality/irrationality*, *normativity/transgression*, and *visibility/invisibility*, to name but a few. What the work of sociologist Bruno Latour, anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Daniel Miller, philosopher Michel Serres, cultural historian Steven Connor, and literary critic Bill Brown has fleshed out is the way our thinking about the agency of material objects is inextricably connected to our notions of subjectivity and its boundaries. In New Materialist terms, the dearth of critical acknowledgement of the sapient agency of the material world, whether in scientific discovery, cultural inquiry, or household routine, speaks of the extent to which we have internalized the instrumentalist ethos of post-industrial modernity, which relegates non-human others to the status of tools subject to the whims of human authority. If we accept Latour's sociological critique of Western scientific thought, however, modernity itself appears to be an ideologeme, which has pushed the work of non-human agents into the backstage of history. In Latour's actor-network theory, it is nonhuman agents that shape and solicit our actions and instil us with ethical behaviour. The ontological distinction between humans and non-humans merits questioning because no human action or thought is unaffected by the contribution of non-human actors, which makes all agency collective and distributed. We may never have been modern, but, for Latour, we have always been hybrid: "Nature does revolve, but not around the Subject/Society. It revolves around the collective that produces things and people. The Subject does revolve, but not around Nature. It revolves around the collective out of which people and things are generated." (Latour 1993, 79) This rings particularly true in the market economy of global capitalism, where the mobility of (im)material things "illuminate[s] their human and social context" (Appadurai 1986, 5), heaving into view the co-dependence and reciprocity of the human and non-human actors on the planetary stage.

Latour's questioning of the ontological boundaries of human subjectivity finds an echo in the critical inquiries of Steven Connor and Bill Brown, both of whom emphasize

the material and metaphysical enmeshment of human subjects in the shared network of non-human agents. Like Miller, who observes that material things “determine what takes place to the extent that we are unconscious of their capacity to do so [...]” (Miller 2005, 5), Brown calls our attention to our reliance on objecthood, whose availability we tend to take for granted, shying away from the semantic opacity things may, in fact, harbour. By virtue of the categorical distinction of *object* from *thing* in his paper “Thing Theory”, we are made to reevaluate the transparency of matter as it ascends to the status of *thing*:

*As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture – above all, what they disclose about us), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A thing, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily. (Brown 2001, 4)*

In this account, to call something a *thing* is not to describe it, but rather to position it in a hermeneutic circle, where subjectivity is anchored in “different registers of materiality” (Miller 2005, 19) and subject-object relationality. In fact, Brown aligns the agency of *things* with the thingness of subjectivity, highlighting the shared vulnerability of all embodied beings as a conceptual premise of subject-object transactions that structure the relations of creation, kinship, cognition, commodification, and consumption.

The ontological co-extensiveness of things and humans also comes to the forefront in Connor’s essay “Thinking Things”, which gives the Cartesian dictum a phenomenological recasting. Rather than offer a critique of the mechanistic view of life, however, Connor examines the relation of thought as process and thing as a material anchor of cognition: man and world are thinking things in that they constitute and provoke thinking. Insofar as we are embodied creatures, he argues, our thinking has a material premise, where the body acts as a container of thought. In phenomenological terms, thinking is always a thinking *of*, which is to say that we find our thoughts in material objects, allowing thought to acquire a body at the expense of our own corporeality. This allows Connor to conclude that thinking things “constitute a surrogate way of thinking about the things that thinking takes to itself in order to think about the way it thinks about things [...]” (Connor 2010, 10). In other words, thinking about things is also a conceptualization of the thingness of thinking, where our interest in the things that defeat our cognitive grasp are “incipient figurings of thought’s desire to encounter in things the objects of its own thinking.” (Connor 2010, 17) Arguably, because both humans and things are material vessels, simultaneously excessive and productive of thought, their co-constitutiveness defines the aporetic nature of a thinking thing: it is both abstract and material, both a thing and a no-thing. Tied to the map of the New Materialist logic, this view of subjectivity bolsters the anthropological defence of “sapient materiality” (Miller 2005, 34) and the Latourian conception of hybridity in the



distribution of intelligence and agency at the same time as it reinforces the conceptual links between organic bodies and artifices that negotiate the ambivalence of embodied life. In this respect, whether bound to metaphysical reflection, social critique, aesthetic experiment, or political *praxis*, the conceptual freight of the New Materialist vocabulary delivers a relational ontology absorbed in the dialectic of *materiality/immateriality*, which organizes the intellectual frames of our ethically contingent worldviews. More than just children's toys, then, dolls and puppets, too, call for an admission into the moral economy as sapient agents of embodied knowledge.

### Reading as Play: The *Oikos*, the *Polis*, and the Dolls

The preceding brief overview of some of the tenets of the critical discourse on material culture and the status of objects in post-industrial modernity marks an attempt to sketch out a few conceptual tensions that orient my own reading of the role of dolls in Jessie Burton's novel *The Miniaturist*. Brown's *object/thing* distinction is particularly pertinent since the miniature dolls in the narrative exceed their status as prized possessions by participating in acts of social mobility that unfold in the web of social-political relations keyed to Calvinist ethics as well as seventeenth-century Dutch commercial and colonial interests. As a metaphor for the novel's political consciousness, dolls must also be thought of in conjunction with the miniature house in which they dwell, calling attention to the social distribution of spatial divisions, which mirror and double the binaries of *exterior/interior*, *public/private*, *visible/secret*, *orthodox/transgressive*, *authentic life/pseudo life* characterizing the space of the Brandt household. It is at the crossroads of the material and the immaterial that *The Miniaturist* locates its characters, suggesting that finitude is always the price exacted on infinite transactions.

While often indispensable stock figures of children's literature, from Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), A. A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* (1926), and Rachel Field's *Hitty, Her First Hundred Years* (1929) to Sylvia Waugh's *The Mennymys* (1993), Pauline Clarke's *The Twelve and the Genii* (1962), and Bill Waterson's comics *Calvin and Hobbes* (1985-1995), doll figures have emerged as cultural agents in a number of recent literary fictions in English meant for adult audiences. Keith Donohue's *The Motion of Puppets* (2016), Robert Dinsdale's *The Toymakers* (2018), Nina Allan's *The Doll Maker* (2019), Elizabeth Macneal's *The Doll Factory* (2019), and Ian McEwan's *Machines Like Me* (2019) are just a few that merit critical attention. Threatening the anthropocentric dream of sovereignty and self-sufficiency, the plastic figures in these fictions bring to mind Kenneth Gross' insight into the epistemology of puppetry:

*The puppet serves as an ambassador or pilgrim to human beings from the world of things. The puppet is a material thing that has got an education, that has learned to act. The puppet reminds us of our powers of animation... We bring objects to life in a world where human beings make themselves into their own effigies. The life is provisional, always emerging, or recovered from life that has been lost.* (Gross 2011, 33)

The significance we may derive from this observation bears on our understanding of dolls and puppets<sup>1</sup>, which, by virtue of their civility, i.e. ability to act, become not only emissaries of the material realm, but also our moral kin, straddling the shared boundary of *animate/inanimate* being. Yuriy Lotman's semiotic analysis of the puppet as a cultural figure reinforces this idea by showing how the conceptualization of the puppet negotiates the distinction of "the puppet as a toy" from "the puppet as a model", a binary that leads to the synthetic image of "the puppet as a work of art". At the core of this dichotomy is the ethos of play, which stipulates that unlike monumental, high-art plastic forms like statues, puppets appeal to audience participation, laying bare the shared agency of humans and non-humans. But, Lotman reminds us, the puppet also operates as a powerful social metaphor, which emerged with the rise of the bureaucratic state at the end of the eighteenth century, exposing modernity's obsession with technology, which solicits new convergences between man and machine and organizes transformations of both living and inert matter. For Lotman, then, the cultural ambiguity of puppetry stems from two sources: 1) the life of a child (the world of folklore); and 2) pseudo-life or death that pretends to be life (the world of machines and doubles). In the theatre, especially, the puppet, which performs the role of an actor and thus acts as an image of an image, highlights the aesthetic conventions of the play and calls our attention to the theatrical self-awareness of the staged world. (Lotman 2004, 320-323)<sup>2</sup> Given the complexity of the epistemology of puppetry, Burton's novel *The Miniaturist* is a good example of how a historical fiction, by staging a world in which humans and dolls operate as elements of the paradigm of emerging commodity capitalism, reconsiders the social life of material bodies, in both animate and inanimate states.

The novel unfolds with a photographic reproduction of Petronella Oortman's cabinet house, literally open to the visual inspection of both the visitors of the Rijksmuseum and Burton's readers. The use of this pictorial paratext has a few important implications. For one, it negotiates the relation of analogy between the cabinet house and the novel itself as a material object circumscribed by the dialectic of *exteriority/interiority*. Also, insofar as it contains miniature dolls, the cabinet house evokes the hermeneutic principle of play, which Lotman attributes to the cultural imaginary of puppets and Hans-Georg Gadamer ascribes to the essential character of representational art: "All presentation is potentially a representation for someone. That this possibility is intended is the characteristic feature of art as play." (Gadamer 2012, 108) This is to say that like Petronella, the novel's protagonist, we are invited to "play" with the puppets in the narrative world of seventeenth-century Amsterdam, allowing the law of fiction to assert the primacy of the game over the player (Gadamer 2012, 106). Lastly, as much as the visual paratext doubles the

<sup>1</sup> I use the two words synonymously to highlight the conceptual overlap in the tropological weight of the miniature models, which are treated as both *eidolons* and *pupas* in the figural system of Burton's narrative.

<sup>2</sup> For the original source please see Лотман Ю.М. 1992. *Избранные статьи в трех томах. - Т.1. Статьи по семиотике и типологии культуры. Таллинн: Александра. С.377-380*. An online version is available at <http://philologos.narod.ru/lotman/lotman-pupp.htm>, accessed on 10 August, 2019.



verbal image of the cabinet house, so the narrative trope functions as a fictional double of the historical artifact, foregrounding the moral implications of the act of doubling in the novel's relational ontology.

As a dialectical structure of *exteriority/interiority*, the cabinet house is a material space of concentrated intimacy, amplified by its status as a double of the Brandt household in Amsterdam, into which eighteen-year-old Petronella, accompanied by her caged parakeet Peebo, enters as a new bride: "On the step of her new husband's house, Nella Oortman lifts and drops the dolphin knocker, embarrassed by the thud." (Burton 2014, 7) Met with asperity by Marin, her sister-in-law, Nella waits for Johannes Brandt, a man she barely knows, to settle her in and consummate their union. However, when the husband does turn up, he does not follow through with the marriage protocol and, to Nella's amazement, leaves her to sleep alone: "Retreating into the yellow glow of what looks to be his study, Johannes shuts the door." (Burton 2014, 21) In the days that follow, we learn that "Nella waits for Johannes to put his hands on her and start her life anew. She leaves her bedroom door ajar, the key hanging off the thick oak panel – but when she wakes in the morning, it is, like her, untouched." (Burton 2014, 39) Instead of the shared intimacy of the conjugal bed, Johannes presents Nella with a miniature house, a mirror image of the Brandt household: "In the middle of the tiles is a cabinet – an enormous, looming structure, measuring nearly half Johannes' height again; a huge cupboard supported by eight curved and sturdy feet, two mustard-coloured velvet curtains drawn across its front." (Burton 2014, 44) The miniature dollhouse is an ambivalent trope. Most obviously, it operates as a substitute for the marital relationship Nella does not possess. Johannes makes a gift whose material presence is forever haunted by the absence of connubial ties between them. This seems to align with Susan Stewart's conclusion that "the miniature universe of the dollhouse cannot be known sensually; it is inaccessible to the languages of the body and thus is the most abstract of all miniature forms." (Stewart 2007, 63) Metonymically, the dollhouse is tied to Johannes himself, inviting us to think, alongside Marcel Mauss, that his gift is a pledge "imbued with the personality of the partner who gave it." (Mauss 1969, 61) Which is to say that the wooden container partakes not only of the man's moral fortitude, but also of his material finitude, especially as its ligneous medium is "used for coffins." (Burton 2014, 45) As a consequence and unbeknownst to herself, upon receiving the wedding gift, Nella enters a space of social transactions charged with the axiological polarity of what is *visible* as opposed to *secret*, which correlates with the psychological rift between the Brandts' *private* and *public*, i.e. *authentic* and *pseudo*, life, for which the cabinet's capacity to open and close becomes an apt visual sign.

If we agree with Gaston Bachelard that "Values become engulfed in miniature, and miniature causes men to dream." (Bachelard 2014, 170), then the cabinet house in *The Miniaturist* may be seen as an oneiric device deployed to unleash Nella's imagination as much as instruct her in the civil protocols of Amsterdam's high society. The material premise of the conceptualization of Nella's mind and its agency here is worth highlighting: "The threads of Nella's imagination begin to spool, embroidering conversations, patches of

which it stitches loosely together.” (Burton 2014, 207) The social world itself thus assumes the form of a quilt sown together through the material agency of the human mind, which is another way of saying that Nella is described as a “thinking thing” (Connor 2010, 3), not unlike the dollhouse with which she is presented. In answer to Marin’s frustration with wasting money on a flamboyant gift for his wife, Johannes says: “It’s for her education [...]” (Burton 2014, 45). Nella herself, however, recognizes in the dollhouse a power that exceeds its function as an educational toy. Reminiscent of Stewart’s quip that “The dollhouse must be consumed by the eye.” (Stewart 2007, 62), she attends to the cabinet’s interior. The narrative description of this visual scrutiny has the tenor of a confrontation, with the miniature asserting its agency as a sentient being: “As Nella stands before the exposed interior, it begins to make her uneasy. Its hollow carapace of elm and tortoiseshell seems to watch her back as if its rooms are eyes.” (Burton 2014, 49)

The eerie emptiness of the toy house is contrasted to the material abundance Nella finds in the Brandt household, with the sumptuousness of its lodgings and “initialled cushions, a new bedspread and two pairs of recently refreshed curtains” (Burton 2014, 12) in her own room. Its walls, she finds, are opulently decorated with still lifes:

*Marin gestures to the wall where a brace of game-birds has been captured in oil, hanging from a hook, all feather and claw. Further along the wall is a portrait of a strung-up hare, a hunter’s prize. Next to it a painted slew of oysters are piled on a Chinese patterned plate, shadowed by a spilt wineglass and a bowl of over-ripened fruit. (Burton 2014, 14-15)*

Marin’s own room, although “[n]un-small” and thus not unlike a miniature, is a metaphorical cabinet of curiosities, a “cell of fantasy”, and a veritable sensorium contrasting sharply with the austerity of its ascetic occupant:

*Dangling from the ceiling is the shed skin of a huge snake, draped like a pennant, papery to the touch. Plumes of all patterns and shapes, once attached to the most exotic of birds, brush against her outstretched fingers. Instinctively Nella looks for a green feather, relieved to find none that resembles Peebo’s. A butterfly, wider than her palm, is pinned to the wall, the sky blue of its wings overwritten with swirls of black. The room is full of smells. The strongest is of nutmeg, but there is also a sandalwood tang, and clove and pepper imbuing the very walls, such scents of heat and warning. (Burton 2014, 51)*

Metaphorically, the room’s contents speak of its owner’s secret urges while metonymically, of the invisible links between the Brandts’ material possessions and their role in seventeenth-century Dutch society: “This is the republic’s reach, in four small walls.” (Burton 2014, 51) On the one hand, the room signifies the longings and limitations experienced by Marin as an unmarried seventeenth-century woman: she longs to travel and learn like her brother Johannes. In fact, she not only runs the household, but also offers her brother wise business advice and takes interest in his foreign dealings: “Bullion prices, paintings as currency, the carelessness of some of the cargo-packers moving his stock from Batavia – Marin devours Johannes’ far tastier titbits.” (Burton 2014, 28) Her business acumen is also indicated in the array of maps tracing Johannes’ travels and trade:

*There is a map of the African continent, huge, so much unknown. Ringed in the centre of the western coastline is a place called Porto-Novo. There are questions written over it, in Marin's neat hand. Weather? Food? God? There is a map of the Indies, with many more circles and arrows, marking from where the flora and fauna found in this room have come. Molucca 1676, Batavia 1679, Java 1682 – all voyages Marin has surely never made herself. (Burton 2014, 52)*

Barred from the political agency afforded to men, Marin restrains the public displays of her intellect and imagination, turning her room into a private exhibition of her material limitations. Her objects, e.g. botanical, ornithological, and entomological specimens, maps, books, paintings, and sculptures, however, tell us about more than just Marin's dreams. Put in the context of the historical processes that brought them to the household, their material possessions bind the Brandts to the “colonial food chain” that “tied European consumers to the fate of African slaves.” (Trentman 2016: 128) A superb trader in luxury goods, particularly sugar, Johannes is a merchant who works for the East India Company (VOC), whose commercial practices sustain the imperialist ambitions of the Netherlands of the seventeenth century. As Marin rather cynically notes to Nella: “He turns mud to gold.” (Burton 2014, 42) It is thus that our understanding of the Brandts hinges on their position in the network of the social-political relations of seventeenth-century Amsterdam and the operations of the country's “rich trades”, which produce the Dutch merchant élite (Israel 1998, 344). As Nella accurately notes: “[...] all things here have one purpose – the raw end of commerce, the storing of supplies, the repair of ships, the sustenance of sailors and captains alike.” (Burton 2014, 295) The transformative power of the subject-object relation underlying seventeenth-century Dutch merchant capitalism calls our attention to the moral contingencies of the human mastery of the material world in *The Miniaturist*. A metonymic alignment of Nella's miniatures with Marin's possessions sheds light on how the colonial system, which reduces human subjectivity to commodity, ends up initiating a cycle in which the colonial masters themselves lose aspects of their humanity or even their life altogether. For Johannes, especially, trading in colonial goods has enormous consequences – both tangible and intangible – because it relates directly to what has purchase on him and ultimately dispossesses him of wealth, honour, and life.

The circulation of goods derived from the Dutch colonial interests nourishes the arteries of the Brandt household economy as much as the country's body politic: not just sugar and spices, but Otto, Johannes' black manservant, is a case in point. A rare sight in seventeenth-century Amsterdam, his dark complexion attracts leering looks and laughs at church (Burton 2014, 115) and racism in élite circles: “‘They've brought the savage,’ she whispers in earshot to her husband, her eyes riveted on Otto.” (Burton 2014, 120) It serves us well to remember that in the seventeenth-century, the Netherlands were at the height of their imperial ambitions: “During this period Dutch commerce and shipping expanded in both the eastern and western hemispheres and the contribution of colonial enterprise to the functioning of the Dutch trading system, as a whole, increased.” (Israel 1998, 936) At the forefront of the Dutch trade in luxuries, Simon Schama argues, was sugar: “By the 1640s there were already more than fifty sugar refineries operating

in Amsterdam, and traditional favorites like waffles, pancakes and *poffertjes* could be supplemented with dustings of sugar or coatings of caramelized sauces.” (Schama 1987, 165, italics in the original) On the novel’s figural plane, commerce brings together the images of *sugar* and *dolls*, on the one hand, and *verkeerspel*<sup>3</sup>, a boardgame Marin plays with her maid, and the *cabinet house*, on the other, heaving into view the conceptual homologies of monetary, social, and sexual transactions. By showing the co-extension of the mobility of human – particularly black – bodies and material goods, Burton endows things with political significance, drawing our attention to the material traces of human agency and its limitations, for, as Frank Trentmann rightly observes, “Things [...] recruit us into politics as much as we recruit them. [...] Things are not just friendly companions or instruments of power. Things are also trouble. They break down. They cause us grief, anger, or bewilderment.” (Trentmann 2009, 300)

Let us consider this idea more closely. Like the dolls, which the novel’s miniaturist designs for the cabinet’s interior, sugar participates in the dialectic of *exteriority/interiority*, which magnifies the moral conflict between the public and private experience of the Brandt family. As a luxury food and colonial commodity, sugar alludes to the Brandts’ status among Amsterdam’s social élite: this is particularly apparent in the episode depicting a feast at the Guild of Silversmiths, where Nella first encounters Frans and Agnes Meermans, the owners of the Surinam sugar loaves Johannes stores in his warehouse: “For a moment this scene, – this man standing, the woman sitting by his side, dressed in their wealth, bound by invisible ties – is the most perfect image of a marriage Nella has ever seen.” (Burton 2014, 98) The public sharing of food shows the extent of license Johannes enjoys as a wealthy VOC merchant: his financial success is simultaneously respected, revered, and loathed. To the Meermanses, especially, Johannes represents their dependence on the proliferation of capital as a means of upward social mobility. It is because Johannes is stalling on his promise to sell the Meermanses’ sugar that we understand how material possessions organize the social life of Burton’s characters. As Agnes reveals to Nella: “The weather is not always kind to Surinam, and foreigners are constantly attacking my father’s – that is to say, our land. This crop could be our only fortune for many a year.” (Burton 2014, 139) In its capacity to sell well or badly, to give pleasure or rot, sugar either boosts or hinders the commercial cycles that transform materiality into meaning and vice versa. On their way back from the feast, Johannes describes the conceptual paradox of his wealth: “You cannot really touch my wealth, Nella. It is in the air, swelling, diminishing. Growing again. The things it buys are solid but you can put your hand through it like a cloud.” (Burton 2014, 102) For this reason, the agency of sugar is not limited to the strings of social-political or economic power either. By virtue of its significance to the social construction of value, the colonial delicacy brings to light the uneasy intersections of human possessions and their passions.

<sup>3</sup> *Verkeerspel* (Dutch for “traffic game”) was a board game, often likened to backgammon, instructing the players in the codes of territorial surveillance and traffic. Consider a satirical print of Oliver Cromwell playing *verkeerspel*, which is kept in the British Museum: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=1557851&partId=1&people=25809&peoA=25809-1-7&page=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1557851&partId=1&people=25809&peoA=25809-1-7&page=1)

The tropological weight of sugar in *The Miniaturist* seems to be consonant with Alexandra Plakias's observation in *Thinking Through Food* that "Eating is a social act, but the experience of flavors is ultimately private and inner, so our ability to communicate and share what we experience is necessarily limited." (Plakias 2019, 8) Much like the ingestion of food in the narrative, trading in sugar draws on the oppositional values of *exteriority* and *interiority*, whose tension structures the figural diffusion of desire as the novel's organizing trope. While Marin appears to be the public face of restraint, substituting sweets for herring, Johannes delights in the sensual pleasures delivered by nourishment: "Cumin seeds, studding a new cheese, remind me that I am capable of delight,' Johannes says loudly. 'Delft butter – so fine and creamy, so different from the others, gives me enormous satisfaction. I sell China-ware plates in Delft and pick it up in pats. And Cornelia's marjoram and plum beer makes me happier than a successful deal.'" (Burton 2014, 91) His propensity for sensual gratification is complemented by an aversion to polishing the veneer of social conventions associated with the regimen of Calvinist ethics, of which the still lifes in the Brandt household are a good example. In fact, the contradiction at the origin of this pictorial genre is homologous with the *aporia* of Calvin's teachings against which we measure the life of Burton's characters. The "homely art" of still life painting, as Guy Davenport astutely points out, derives from two attitudes to material plenitude: as an offering to the dead, on the one hand, and a reminder of death, *vanitas vanitatum*, on the other. (Davenport 1998, 9) As material agents of religious orthodoxy, the Brandts' still lifes pull into the purview of embodied life the moral conflict between material bounty and spiritual piety that also characterizes the VOC's commercial ventures. Seen within the context of Max Weber's analysis of the social correlations between the rise of capitalist rationality and the Protestant work ethic, Johannes' and other merchants' trading becomes "labour in the service of impersonal social usefulness" promoting "the Glory of God" and hence his will (Weber 2005, 64). However, the material proximity of the sugar loaves to other merchandise in the Brandt warehouse heaves into view the moral ambiguity of sensual pleasures: "Past Delft plates, casks of wine branded *Espanã* and *Jerez*, boxes of vermilion and cochineal, mercury *for mirrors and the syphilis*, Persian trinkets cast in gold and silver." (Burton 2014, 296, italics in the original) In Johannes' ultimate downfall we recognize Schama's observation that "The very success of Dutch society, that material abundance which was the recompense of ordeal, was itself threatening when it reached the point of glut." (Schama 1987, 47)

This is not to say that Johannes, Marin, or Nella are gluttons. But because of how the novel's Calvinist moral economy is split along the axis of the *public* vs. *private* spheres continuous with the duality of *orthodoxy* vs. *transgression*, the trope of sugar subtends the novel's relational ontology, in which human subjectivity cannot be conceived without the mesh of materiality giving purchase to its life. An agent of fluidity, sugar crosses borders, both geographical and ontological, connecting social *exteriority* to the *interiority* of human subjectivity, i.e. what the characters *appear to be* to who they *are*, their *authentic* life to *pseudo* life. As a metaphor for desire, sugar binds both Johannes and Marin to the economy of transgression, which highlights the continuity of the moral and the material in

the *praxis* of embodied life. In relation to both siblings, sugar, “a tireless worker for Satan” (Schama 1987, 165), evokes sexual activity, culminating in Marin’s unwanted pregnancy and Johannes’ exposure as a “sodomite”. Behind the façade of social respectability and civil consumption central to seventeenth-century commodity culture (Trentmann 2016, 102), Burton’s characters live double lives. On the one hand, as a seemingly pious Calvinist, Marin attends church, reads from the Bible at home, and refrains from public displays of opulence. Though Johannes does not attend church and enjoys sensual pleasures, he builds social capital as “a performance of duty” (Weber 2005, 108) put forth by the Calvinist dogma. The signs of material affluence in the Brandt household, too, are tempered by the novel’s frame of Calvinist ethics conveyed through Pastor Pelicorne’s sermons and the epigraphs preceding each narrative chapter, such as “Be not desirous of his dainties: For they are deceitful meat. Proverbs 23: 3.” (Burton 2014, 5) At the same time, though, Marin’s room hides a sexual passion, inscribed in a letter Nella discovers: “*I love you. I love you. From back to front, I love you.*” (Burton 2014, 54, italics in the original) We are also told that she eats candied nuts on a sly: “Sugar and herrings – Marin’s commodities beautifully define her infuriating contradictions.” (Burton 2014, 191) Likewise, Johannes takes epicurean liberties in his sexual relationship with Jack Philips, an Englishman he has hired to guard the loaves of sugar in the Brandt warehouse, where Nella finds them: “Lying at the back of the room, Johannes is stretched out on a couch, eyes closed, naked, so naked, unable to move for a head of dark curls that hovers over his groin.” (Burton 2014, 149) Nella’s discovery of her husband *in flagrante delicto* unleashes a series of consequences that bear in equal measure on the material and moral welfare of the Brandt family. Indeed, the dualism of *public* vs. *private* life the Brandts embody suggests that the immaterial dimension of the Brandt *oikos* is homologous with the material form of desire as stored in the transformative powers of sugar.

Arguably, nowhere is this dynamic of doubling revealed more pointedly than in the image of Nella’s cabinet. The dollhouse operates as a metaphorical space for the accommodation of transgressive desire and secrecy tied to the trope of sugar. In writing to the miniaturist, “[t]rained with the great Bruges clockmaker, Lucas Windelbreke” (Burton 2014, 58), Nella asks only for a limited set of furnishings: a lute with strings, a betrothal cup, and a box of marzipan. However, when the items are delivered, she discovers that the miniaturist also produced a cradle “with intricate floral inlays” (Burton 2014, 78), “two exquisite wooden chairs” (Burton 2014, 78), and “a pair of miniature dogs” (Burton 2014, 79), which are the spitting images of Johannes’ hounds, Rezeki and Dhana. Not only that, but the package contains a message to Nella, which reads: “EVERY WOMAN IS THE ARCHITECT OF HER OWN FORTUNE” (Burton 2014, 76, capitals in the original). In the course of the following months, new packages arrive, bearing new messages and new dolls. A set of eight miniatures representing the residents of the Brandt household is particularly evocative and deserves a lengthier quote:

*So life-like, so delicate; they are items of such humanly unreachable perfection. Nella feels like a giant, picking one up as if it might break. Johannes lies in her palm, a cloak of dark indigo slung over his broad shoulders, one hand balled into a fist. The other hand*



*is open, palm offered and welcoming. His hair is longer than Nella has seen it, reaching just below his shoulders. Dark-eyed, the shadows on his face make him look weaker than he is in real life. At his waist is a heavy bag of coin, nearly the length of his leg, and he is thinner. The bag burdens the joints in his hips, weighing him crookedly to one side.*

*The hair of Nella's own doll escapes its cap, as in reality it is wont to do. Wearing a neat grey dress, her miniature stares straight up, a look of faint surprise across her frozen face. In one of her tiny hands is an empty birdcage, its door swinging open wide. Nella feels a strange sensation in her body, as if pins are picking the inside of her skin.*

*In the doll's other hand, is a miniscule note written in neat black capitals: THINGS CAN CHANGE. (Burton 2014, 180-181)*

Conceptually, the logic of doubling that the dollhouse embodies exacerbates the subject-object relations, which unfold along the axes of *public/private*, *visible/secret*, *pseudo/authentic* life in *The Miniaturist*. To the extent that “The dollhouse is a version of property which is metonymic to the larger set of property relations outside its boundaries.” (Stewart 2007, 62), Burton foregrounds “the socializing function of dolls” (Rostow Kuznets 1994, 101), materializing the language of things that Nella needs to learn in order to understand the contradictions of the social order she inhabits. To that end, it serves us well to remember Trentmann’s observation about the impact consumption had on the codes of civility in the seventeenth century: “In Britain and the Netherlands [...] the domestic interior was the centre stage for sociability and self-fashioning; the built environment was secondary. Furniture, wallpaper, chinaware and other possessions showed that one was in harmony with refined taste.” (Trentmann 2017, 108) In furnishing her dollhouse, then, Nella is also studying the duplicitous nature of the Amsterdam social élite, especially as represented by the Meermanses, whose public displays of civility, Calvinist piety, and gourmet tastes belie the emotions of envy, arrogance, and greed as the engine of social success through rivalry. After meeting the Meermanses for the first time, Nella unsuccessfully attempts to imitate what she interprets as marital intimacy in her relation to Johannes, but when the Meermanses visit the Brandts in order to discuss the distribution of their sugar loaves, Nella recognizes the pettiness of their ambitions. This is particularly true in respect to Agnes’ wish to have a dollhouse of her own: “What a strange wedding gift – the way these great minds work! I’m having one of my own, Frans. We can afford it soon. And I want mine to be better than hers.” (Burton 2014, 145) This rivalry culminates with their discovery of Johannes’ sexual transgression, allowing the Meermanses to take revenge on him for failing to sell their sugar and thus seal his death verdict.

As far as the dollhouse is concerned, to Nella it offers a cultural narrative steeped in the subtleties of social conduct that guide her coming-of-age as a lady of the house, who takes charge of the family affairs after the demise of the Brandt siblings. More importantly, though, as a medium of doubling, it operates as a critical lens laying bare the invisible ties that tether human passions to their possessions and bring into view the significance of materiality in the construction of modern subjectivity. For like the novel’s characters, the miniature cabinet is a container of transgressivity embodied in the dolls as false idols, on the one hand, and tropes of human interiority, on the other. Both dimensions of trans-

gressivity correlate with the circulation of desire in the novel's moral economy: the dolls are not only delivered by Jack Philips, whose transgressions go beyond sodomy and include threatening Marin and Nella, killing Rezeki, and betraying Johannes in court, their social agency also ties in with that of the gingerbread cookies, whose representational accuracy poses a threat to the novel's Calvinist metaphysics: "Idolatry. A heinous attempt to capture the human soul." (Burton 2014, 199) This casts a new light on the miniaturist's own work: it mediates transgression, first, by breaking the law which states "that dolls and puppets are forbidden" (Burton 2014, 199) and second, by unmasking the Brandts' secrets through visual representation. Appropriately, her figuring as Nella's *alter ego* – she is also called Petronella – informs the narrative arc of Nella's coming-of-age through material agency.

The trope of a miniature container used for social discipline has a firm historical basis: in fifteenth-century Florence special boxes, called *tamburi*, were located in public places and used to collect denunciations of moral transgression. In the words of Allie Terry-Fritsch, "Anyone who witnessed deviant behaviour in the city could use a *tamburo* to transmit an anonymous denunciation against the malefactor; the witness would write down information regarding the identity or identities of the deviant(s) along with a description of the incident, then place it into one of the *tamburi* without signature." (Terry-Fritsch in McCall, Roberts, and Fiorenza 2013, 162) In *The Miniaturist*, however, the cabinet is a receptacle not so much of denunciation as agency of transformation animated through Nella's engagement with the puppets. In line with her own treatment like "a rag doll" (Burton 2014, 54), Burton's protagonist accepts the silent wisdom of miniature puppets, finally maturing from the state of "pupa" into a woman. If we agree to suspend the categorical distinction between dolls and puppets for the time being, Gross' insight into their sapient agency reinforces the argument: "Puppets [...] have often been asked to say things or show things otherwise not permitted; it is a theatrical mode whose words and actions are more able to slip under the radar of official censorship." (Gross 2011, 18) In New Materialist terms, it is because the dolls communicate what has been repressed that they act as "sapient objects" (Miller 2005, 34), showing how the art of doubling captures the principle of truth. For example, by inspecting the dolls, Nella discovers that the miniaturist had been aware of Rezeki's death and Marin's pregnancy: "Unmistakeable, Marin's diminutive body holds the curve of an unborn child. A nub, a walnut, a nothing-yet, but soon-to-be. The doll appears weighed down like the woman along the corridor, full-bellied with time." (Burton 2014, 286) Notice how the narrative puts forth the material premise of comparison; when the child is born, it is likewise aligned with the world of things: "It is the most extraordinary thing she has ever laid eyes on. Neither fish nor fowl, nor godly nor human, and yet strangely all these things at once." (Burton 2014, 352) In the moral economy of *The Miniaturist*, both humans and objects are "thinking things" (Connor 2010, 3), partaking of the capacity of materiality to construct subjectivity and empower it with agency. For that reason alone the dollhouse may be read as a conceptual *mise en abîme*, suggestive of the mutual imbrications of humans and objects as tenants of the same epistemological space.

The last part of my reading of the co-constitutiveness of subjects and objects in *The Miniaturist* concerns the topological significance of *verkeerspel* as opposed to the dollhouse in the dialectic of *authentic* vs. *pseudo* life and, by extension, *life* vs. *death*. Both the dollhouse and the board game speak of the social embeddedness of human identity shaped by the rites of civility and politeness, which emerge in the seventeenth century. However, unlike *verkeerspel*, whose epistemology of progress is comparable to that of maps, the cabinet has an interiority comparable to that of a human subject and thereby brings forth the idea of authenticity measured against the moral voice within and articulated through the work of (secret) emotions as giving access to inner depth. Historically, it was the eighteenth century that initiated a shift in the conceptualization of human subjectivity by giving rise to the idea of authenticity circumscribed by the moral agency of emotions. From then on, to be truly and fully human meant to attain the moral significance of feelings in the decisions of right and wrong. As philosopher Charles Taylor notes in *Modern Social Imaginaries*:

*The enhanced value placed on family life, in the context of another long-term development toward greater concentration on subjectivity and inwardness, has as one of its fruits the eighteenth-century cherishing of sentiment. Another shift occurs, as it were, in the center of gravity of the good life, within the broad development that affirms ordinary life, and a new importance comes to repose on our experiencing fine, noble, or exalted sentiments.* (Taylor, 2004, 104)

Somewhat anachronistically, perhaps, a similar emphasis on inwardness is placed in Burton's seventeenth-century Amsterdam. But here psychological depth is shown to be connected to transgressive practices associated with sensual pleasure and conveyed through acts of nourishment and miniaturization. Like the dollhouse, Johannes and Marin are complex entities, who gain inner depth by virtue of giving privilege to emotion (both suffer because of love) rather than social convention. In the *private* sphere, they live *authentic* lives rooted in intimacy and secret affection. In the *public* sphere, they live *pseudo* lives anchored in commercial enterprise and Calvinist ethics. For Burton, the tension between the two lies at the basis of the *aporia* of modern subjectivity. The characters' metonymic links to the VOC colonial agenda also demonstrate the tenuousness of their social agency in a *polis* permeated by the contradictions of Calvinist teachings. Because this pertains to the logic of commodification that makes humans and material objects equally susceptible to the vagaries of power, a look at the dialectic of *mobility/stasis* in light of Brown's distinction between *object* and *thing* deserves mindfulness on our part.

The *mobility/stasis* binary in *The Miniaturist* is predicated on the circulation of desire linked to the images of sugar and dolls. In figural terms, both are material items of exchange, yet with regard to Brown's theorizing of the instrumentality of *objects* as opposed to the recalcitrance of *things*, the novel's sugar loaves and dolls assume antithetical values in the narrative organization of meaning. To the extent that sugar operates as an *object*, it aligns with the dynamism of the markets and the metonymic contingency of new economic ties. This is what the Meermanses expect from Johannes: to realize sugar's potential as *object*, i.e. capital. The trouble is that linked to transgressive desire, sugar

assumes metaphorical excess in relation to Johannes and turns into *thing*, moored to the walls of his warehouse. Deprived of mobility, it starts to rot, foreshadowing Johannes' own material demise: "At the back of the sugar structure, tiny black spores have indeed spread over a quarter of the Surinam side." (Burton 2014, 297) The dolls uncover a similar, if inverted, structure of epistemological modalities. In their capacity as *objects*, they are expected to be static, defined by their metaphorical significance to their owner and appreciated as social capital. Yet because of how the miniature dolls mysteriously arrive and disappear in Burton's novel, their agency seems to have more affinity with *things*. In fact, their transformative effect on Nella largely derives from the metonymic contingency that animates her imagination and the logic of play that subtends the narrative arc of her coming-of-age. As she opens her eyes to the metonymic ties between things and their provenance, Nella learns to empower herself in the social order she inhabits: she sells the Meermanses' sugar, takes care of Marin's daughter, and destroys the dollhouse, except for the dolls that remind her of the Brandt siblings.

If we accept the contention that the logic of play in *The Miniaturist* is opposed to the logic of commodification and forms a premise for the narrative dialectic of *authentic* vs. *pseudo* life, then the figuration of the cabinet house and *verkeerspel* also has important moral implications. Whereas the cabinet offers a metaphor for the "epistemology of the closet" (see Sedgwick 1990), moral transgression, and intellectual freedom, the *verkeerspel* is bound to the Dutch commercial and colonial instinct, capitalist ethos, and the Calvinist dogma. This dichotomy heaves into view the moral asymmetry in the values cultivated through play: like the Brandt maps, the board game visualizes the material flows of the Dutch capital in the form of education in the material worth of goods; the cabinet, by contrast, visualizes the boundaries of human agency in its interactions with material culture. In light of this binary, we understand Burton's insight into the ethics of materiality: because subjects are commodified like things, things act like subjects. In tropological terms, the characters are routinely compared to material objects: Nella thinks of herself as a puppet (Burton 2014, 103), the Brandts' maid is nicknamed Cornflower (Burton 2014, 66), Marin is compared to "the figurehead on the bow of a ship" (Burton 2014, 116), and Johannes calls Jack "a stone, thrown upon a lake" (Burton 2014, 366), to give but a few examples. It is in this respect that the relationship between (wo)man and doll, set up as an act of doubling and, implicitly, ontological substitution, unfolds the Lotmanian dialectic of *authentic* vs. *pseudo* life as versions of life and death. Appropriately, the inscription on the miniaturist's plaque reads: "*Everything Man Sees He Takes For A Toy.*" (Burton 2014, 69, italics and capitals in the original) Magnified by the death of its characters, the novel's miniature puppets highlight the extent to which commodification has invaded human interiority in industrial modernity and turned human subjects into either desirable or disposable objects.

### **Conclusion: the Dolls' Diet**

As a trope of commodified life, the puppets in *The Miniaturist* carry a warning against reductionist attitudes to the material companions of modern life. Given the moral implic-

ations of the sapient agency attributed to objects in the novel, Trentmann's contention seems particularly resonant: "Modernity gave Western man the delusion that he controlled matter. Our dependence on things was forgotten. Objects became subordinate and disposable." (Trentmann 2017, 95) Read as a subtle indictment of contemporary consumerist ethos, the novel argues that the meaning of things is far from exhausted by capitalism; in fact, they have an interiority of their own, encapsulated in the miniaturist's note to Nella: "*THINGS CAN CHANGE.*" (Burton 2014, 181, italics and capitals in the original) The ambiguity of the phrasing pertains directly to our conceptualization of objects as sapient agents: "things" may refer to 1) material objects and circumstances; 2) thoughts and ideas; 3) people. The semantics of "change" is far from straightforward too, for it is both a transitive and intransitive verb. In its intransitive mode, "change" refers to the things' capacity to transform themselves; as a *transitive* verb, by contrast, it speaks of the power of materiality to affect others. *The Miniaturist* celebrates the ontological uncertainty of subject-object relations: change in the life of objects in the novel is directly bound to the life of its human characters. Much like "Things will spill over." (Burton 2014, 37), so humans, we understand, will collapse under the weight of material circumstances they cannot control.

Following the principle of reciprocity that structures the novel's relational ontology, infinite consumption appears as a corollary of the logic of substitution that casts things as subjects and humans as objects. Inasmuch as they organize the characters' way of life, the dolls have a "dietary"<sup>4</sup> value: not only do they guard the boundary between *mind* and *body*, sense and sensuality, but also diagnose the latency of economic and political symptoms in the cultural metabolism of the Dutch body politic. Epitomized in the trope of sugar in *The Miniaturist* is the conceptual overlap of commercialism and colonialism, whose biopolitical regime gradually sets up the ideological structures of life for humans as puppets. By dint of its complicity in colonial slave labour, the infinite cycle of consumption revokes the distinction between *life* and *death*, abolishing, by extension, human pretensions to existential autonomy and cognitive authority. In the narrative empire of things over which presides the dollhouse, the puppet masters are no more than unacknowledged figureheads of material contraptions cued to the mobility and volatility of desire.

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<sup>4</sup> The word *diet* derives from the Greek word *diata*, meaning "a way of life". (Plakias 2019: xv)

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### Out of the Closet, into the World: The Power of Puppets in Jessie Burton's *The Miniaturist*

#### Rūta Šlapkauskaitė

#### S u m m a r y

The curiosity about toy-like objects in contemporary Anglophone literature, while part of a millennia-long human fascination with artificial life, also squares palpably with the *material shift* that took place in the humanities in the 1980s, reinvigorating the fields of history, anthropology, philosophy, and literature with a new concern for the world of things and material culture. The present paper employs the critical lens of the New Materialism, Thing Theory, and phenomenological reasoning to examine the tropological significance of *sapient objects* – both organic and man-made – in English author Jessie Burton's historical novel *The Miniaturist* (2014). By highlighting the ways in which the narrative's figural system negotiates the structural and conceptual dichotomies of *human/doll*, *object/thing*, *interiority/exteriority*, *authenticity/artificiality*, and *mobility/stasis*, this reading of Burton's novel attempts to show how the literary text rethinks the social life of things and the ambiguity of subject-object relations in the seventeenth-century Netherlands. A critical emphasis on the fluidity of matter in *The Miniaturist* brings to light the invisible boundaries of human agency and the role of commodity capitalism in the genesis of modern subjectivity.