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Secondhand Economies:
Recycling, Reuse, and Exchange in the Victorian Novel

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines patterns of secondhand exchange in the Victorian novel as a critical counterpoint to the more frequently discussed literary representations of industrial production and consumption. Analyzing representations and transfers of well-used, secondhand, and even discarded objects as they change hands in the work of writers including Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Henry Mayhew together with archival material, I argue that the secondhand economy reveals a cultural ambivalence toward the devaluation of material objects accompanying new modes of production, strongly tinged with a nostalgia for supposed precapitalist affective ties between persons and things. The significance of my exploration of the secondhand economy in literature is not limited to representations of material objects, however; it also facilitates a more nuanced understanding of Victorian class and especially class mobility as it relates to moments of exchange in the novel. While redirecting our attention to economically marginalized characters and the often neglected patterns of circulation that govern their social roles, it also problematizes rigid notions of class by tracing the mobility of both objects and persons as sellers and purchasers of all classes negotiate social position with the exchange of objects.
Following an introduction that situates my project at the nexus of economic criticism and material culture studies, I argue that Victorian writers including Carlyle, Dickens, and Mayhew used the circulation of secondhand clothing to signify a rupture from the past and from sartorial social ties. The second chapter examines literary representations of the pawnshop in the work of Dickens and George Eliot; while the pawned object symbolizes the uncertain fate of fallen or endangered women, the site of the pawnshop itself stores forgotten history and facilitates the redemption of both persons and pledges. The third chapter examines auction narratives in the work of Thackeray, Dickens, and George Eliot, identifying in these texts the narrators' efforts to guide readers toward a more acute perception of irony and proper feelings of sympathy in response to these spectacles of dispossession. The concluding chapter revisits Mayhew, Carlyle, and Dickens to examine profitable second lives of persons and things.
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Bending my steps to the old historical quarter of the town, whose hoar and overshadowed precincts I always sought by instinct in melancholy moods, I wandered on from street to street, till, having crossed a half-deserted place or square, I found myself before a sort of broker's shop; an ancient place, full of ancient things. What I wanted was a metal box which might be soldered, or a thick glass jar or bottle which might be stoppered or sealed hermetically. Amongst miscellaneous heaps, I found and purchased the latter article.

—Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*

Many characters in nineteenth-century fiction wander into strange shops to gaze at curiosities, and almost as many find their way to such places to part with cherished possessions. The protagonist of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* is almost unique in that she seeks out a secondhand shop in order to buy something. Yet Lucy Snowe’s action highlights the very qualities of secondhand exchange that drew me to this project. In this passage as in others, the secondhand economy has its own temporality; as she wanders into the historical part of town, Lucy steps into an indefinite past, a world of memory and unfulfilled dreams. The “ancient things” in the shop, including the glass bottle she purchases, materially embody forgotten history. And while Lucy enters the shop as a buyer, she has come to leave something behind: a packet of letters once cherished as material tokens of unrequited love. As the shopkeeper hermetically seals the jar with her letters inside, Lucy both preserves and inters the past, codifying a loss that has already
taken place. The past thus contained, she returns to the world of the present, and prepares for a future that does not include the love of Graham Bretton.

Why does Lucy venture to “an ancient place, full of ancient things” to purchase a receptacle for Graham’s letters? It is not a question of cost, surely, and she notes that she visits this part of town often in her melancholy moods. “The impulse under which I acted, the mood controlling me,” she elaborates, “were similar to the impulse and the mood which had induced me to visit the confessional.”¹ Seeking both absolution for unfounded hopes and secrecy from prying eyes, Lucy turns to a space where material memories are severed from personal attachment by the marketplace. Her transaction with the shopkeeper is not incidental to the distance she desires to put between herself and the past. The shopkeeper—a memory keeper of sorts—officiates at a ceremony of calculated alienation between person and possession.

The tendency of Victorian literature to linger over such moments of loss—and specifically to do so in the context of the secondhand marketplace—is the focus of this project. As Ian Watt first noted, objects in literature multiplied concurrently with the development of capitalism and industrialism in the eighteenth century.² The insatiable desire of the consumer for newly affordable commodities arguably became in the novel a surfeit of objects—the tangible elements of formal realism. But this proliferation of things in the novel was not necessarily restricted to new, mass-produced objects. Nineteenth-century novels, especially social problem novels, are rich in descriptions of

² Ian Watt argues that the rise of capitalism and the concomitant emergence of a new ethos of individual freedom in the eighteenth century were reflected in the particularity of character and background in novels (*The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962], 17, 61).
the well-used, the secondhand, and even the discarded. These secondhand commodities have largely been neglected by economic and material culture studies of the nineteenth-century novel, which tend to focus on the freshly produced and fetishized commodity. My project looks beyond more familiar patterns of desire and display associated with the upper classes to reveal other types of circulation: the overlooked consumption patterns of the economically marginalized lower classes and the painful surrender of cherished possessions from ruined middle-class homes. The study of the secondhand economy of the novel, characterized by the devaluation, degradation, and alienation of the recommoditized object, will provide a new framework for studying both the objects that appear in the Victorian novel and the novel itself.

The secondhand economy, as I define it, is the exchange of items which have been incorporated into the domestic sphere of use that are then recommodified at a loss. These items are devalued not only by the practical circumstances of their use and exchange, but also by a cultural alienation. A new commodity, according to Karl Marx, is alienated from the social conditions of production. A secondhand item, unlike an antique or heirloom, is alienated not only from its maker, but also from its original owner, or even a series of owners. The term “secondhand,” together with other numerical variations—“third-hand,” “forth-hand,” and so on, which are typically applied to information rather than things—in itself implies both the existence and the erasure of a history. “Secondhand” and its variants, while suggesting a catalog of ownership, are rarely used in a way that accurately quantifies an object’s life-history with regard to the changing of hands. A secondhand object may be exchanged five times and be sold yet again as “secondhand.” The degree of alienation from any authentic history of an object
or idea only increases if the numeral designation in the term is increased: “third-hand,”
when describing information, emphasizes not its history so much as its unreliability and
lack of authority. Nevertheless, the notion of the second or third hand does imply a
history of firsthandedness, however unrecoverable or unreliable that history might be.
Secondhand items in fiction are haunted by a past—all the more so because that past
cannot be recovered. In a climate of new goods, the secondhand object is more than used;
it is alienated and degraded, but also ineffably profound.

The significance of my exploration of the secondhand economy in literature is not
limited to representations of material objects, however; it also facilitates a more nuanced
understanding of Victorian class and especially class mobility as it relates to moments of
exchange in the novel. While this project redirects our attention to the role of
economically marginalized characters in the novel and the often neglected patterns of
circulation that govern their social roles, it also problematizes rigid notions of class by
tracing the mobility of both objects and persons as sellers and purchasers of all classes
negotiate social position with the exchange of objects. Furthermore, it highlights a
metaphorical or thematic secondhand. This thematic secondhand offers a new lens to
study other patterns of circulation and disconnection in the novel: like objects,
information and persons become alienated from points of origin, and the metonymic
connections between persons and things often play a significant role in narrative
development. This thematic “secondhandedness” and the material secondhand come
together in the texts treated in this study as characters shadowed by lost or unsavory
origins find fragmented clues to the past while visiting pawnshops, rag and bottle shops,
and auctions.
Many recent studies have explored the relationships of material and consumer cultures to nineteenth-century British literature, but these studies tend to focus on production and firsthand consumption. The secondhand trade is largely absent from current scholarship. My project insists on the importance of an understanding of the secondhand economy as a complement to existing studies of the impact of mass production and consumption on affective and imaginative relationships between persons and things.

Secondhand Commodities and the Consumer Revolution

Historians agree that modernity brought about a shift in patterns of consumption: a change not so much in the desire to consume, but rather in the ability to do so. The precise origins of this cultural shift, and the question of whether or not it can be termed a "revolution," have prompted considerable debate. It was long thought that the industrial revolution prompted increased consumption, but beginning in the late 1970s, the centrality of the industrial revolution in the history of economic growth in Britain has been questioned; as Jan De Vries observes, at least five distinct consumer revolutions have been proposed by various and numerous historians, ranging in period from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century.\(^3\) Despite the lack of consensus on any specific

consumer revolution, the preponderance of research suggests that the consumption of consumer durables has consistently increased over the past three to four centuries, slowly changing the way that people relate to things.

While a number of scholars, notably Carole Shammas, offer evidence that preindustrial households were both less rudimentary and less self-sufficient than previously thought, others, including Neil McKendrick and Lorna Weatherill, emphasize that it was not until a greater variety of goods became available and affordable in the eighteenth century that these patterns of competitive consumption made a noticeable impact on purchasing habits of the middle ranks. This particular "revolution" was facilitated by a variety of economic and cultural factors that took place over the course of the century or more, including a shift in political thought from mercantilism to capitalism, the growing influence of liberalism, the industrial revolution, increasingly efficient production technology, a drop in the price of imports, the advent of a regulated credit system, urbanization, an overall increase in incomes due to wage rate increases, and the participation of women and children in wage labor. By the nineteenth century, market expansion throughout much of Europe had become self-perpetuating. The quantity and variety of goods continued to rapidly expand, accompanying increasing

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5 McKendrick, 9–33.
volumes of marketing material, increasing differentiation in design, and the emergence of large-scale retail institutions. Thus, while consumption, and even the growth of consumption, cannot be said to be unique to the industrial age, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries certainly witnessed a marked acceleration in the rates of the production and purchase of material goods.

England offered particularly fertile ground for consumer growth. Its advanced textile and iron industries placed it at the forefront of the industrial revolution, and it possessed abundant capital and an advanced banking and credit system. Culturally speaking, the close stratification of class in England inspired both industriousness and emulation. Perhaps the most favorable condition for consumption in England in was the large migration to London from rural areas, which played a significant role in driving consumer activity by the late eighteenth century.

McKendrick comments,

With 16 per cent of the total adult population being exposed to the influence of London’s shops, London’s lifestyle and the prevailing London fashions, its potential for influencing consumer behaviour was enormous. It served as the shopwindow for the whole country, the centre of forms of conspicuous consumption which would be eagerly mimicked elsewhere, the place which set


7 Weatherill, 70. Weatherill’s compilations and comparisons of household inventories in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries provide evidence not only that ownership of consumer durables steadily rose among the middle ranks through this period, but also that ownership of consumer durables was significantly greater in urban areas than rural areas. She suggests that this might be the case because urban life and culture focused on display and social activities, or because the stress of living in close proximity to other families might require the compensation of a more pleasing or comforting space (76, 79–83).
the style for the season and saw the hordes of provincial visitors and their retinues of servants carry back those styles to the rest of the country.\(^8\)

England thus became both the world’s workshop and the world’s marketplace during a period of unprecedented economic growth.

The precise origin or cause of the consumer revolution is, for my purposes, less important than the change that it may have brought about in the way that people thought about the goods that they owned and purchased. As McCracken observes, the wealthy ruling class increasingly displayed their authority through sumptuous purchases rather than through ancestral items that, by virtue of their inimitable patina, denoted generations of power and prestige.\(^9\) For the middle ranks, emulation through the consumption of new items was more attainable and prompted growing demand, especially for fashionable cottons and china. “Objects which for centuries had been the privileged possessions of the rich came, within the space of a few generations, to be within the reach of a larger part of society than ever before, and, for the first time, to be within the legitimate aspirations of almost all of it,” McKendrick comments. Novelty and fashion, rather than mere function, became ends unto themselves. The impact of this expanding availability of goods on the way that people felt about long-held material objects may be surmised; in McKendrick’s words, “What men and women had once hoped to inherit from their parents, they now expected to buy for themselves . . . Where once material possessions were prized for their durability, they were now increasingly prized for their

\(^8\) McKendrick, 21. 
\(^9\) McKendrick, 39–41.
fashionability.” The availability and affordability of new goods lessened the demand for secondhand items. One might even go so far as to claim that this expanding firsthand economy redefined how secondhand items were understood culturally. While the term “secondhand” had been applied to used objects since at least the seventeenth century, the rapid evolutions of fashion and the wider availability of novelty set secondhand goods apart. Ownership of used goods had been taken for granted, but became increasingly stigmatized and associated with the lack of taste and resources.

This does not mean that the middle class no longer invested in secondhand purchases. The secondhand market continued to offer, as it does today, a cheaper alternative and often better quality merchandise for the careful and discerning shopper, and even less discerning shoppers might anticipate a bargain. Secondhand shopping could even be entertaining; as numerous archives of auction catalogs can attest, auctions were a popular diversion for the middle class throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, and curiosity shops served those with eccentric tastes from the eighteenth century onward. Moreover, even as the consumer revolution took hold across England, a backlash of nostalgia for supposed precapitalist relationships between people and things emerged. Among the earliest to voice such views was William Cobbet, who objected to the new pretensions and modern frippery of rural farmers in his 1830 travel narrative, *Rural Rides*:

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11 OED, s.v. “second hand, second-hand.”
Every thing about this farm-house was formerly the scene of *plain manners* and *plentiful living*. Oak clothes-chests, oak bedsteads, oak chests of drawers, and oak tables to eat on, long, strong, and well supplied with joint stools. Some of the things were many hundreds of years old. But all appeared to be in a state of decay and nearly of *disuse*. . . . [W]orst of all, there was a *parlour!* Aye, and a *carpet* and *bell-pull* too! . . . and there was the mahogany table, and the fine chairs, and the fine glass, and all as bare-faced upstart as any stockjobber in the kingdom can boast of.\(^{13}\)

Cobbet's objections suggest that even at the outset of the Victorian age, not everyone was enamored with the broad influence of the consumer society. By the end of the nineteenth century, sentiments like his would be more common, leading to a demand for antiques among those who wanted to distinguish themselves as more sophisticated consumers. As Deborah Cohen remarks, "Shoppers who rejected the goods of their own time embraced the antique, combing salerooms, auction houses, bazaars, and curiosity shops for objects that predated the machine."\(^{14}\) She suggests that the *fin de siècle* craze for antiques and reproductions was a backlash against the banality of Victorian consumer culture. But for much of the nineteenth century—and especially for the mid-nineteenth century, which is the focus of my own research—that those who prized used and secondhand possessions purely for their age rather than for sentimental family associations were the exception rather than the norm. According to Cohen, "Before the 1880s, the suggestion that one should buy old furniture would have been greeted by most middle-class citizens with


\(^{14}\) Cohen, 146.
derision."  For the middle class, the designation of something as secondhand marked it as inferior, degraded, illicit, unpleasant, or unusual—something outside of the dominant economic engine of production and consumption.

Apart from its tangential effect on changing modes of production, the consumer revolution seems to have had less impact on the lives of the working class until material living standards improved during second half of the nineteenth century.  The industrial revolution expanded the wealth of the nation at the expense of the poorest laborers, for profits were largely reinvested as capital rather than doled out through better wages or invested in better urban infrastructure. While records show that real earnings among factory workers rose in response to growing industry, and perhaps also in response to increasingly harsh working conditions, wages among domestic workers and independent artisans fell. Moreover, as eighteenth-century employers often paid in kind, an increase in real earnings in the nineteenth century might or might not correspond to an improved standard of living. All this is to say that it is difficult to categorically determine what economic advantages might have accrued to the majority of the laboring class as a result of the industrial revolution; therefore, it is difficult to conjecture much about their increasing participation in any kind of consumer revolution during this time—especially since most evidence about historical consumption patterns is drawn largely from probate inventories, wills, and other documents that only exist for the middle and upper classes.

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15 Cohen, 148.
17 Mokyr, 458.
18 Berg, 373. Shammas and Weatherill both derive their source material from probate inventories (Shammas, 18; Weatherill, 2).
Nevertheless, contemporary sources and a limited amount of historical scholarship confirm what might safely be surmised: members of the working class were among the most active sellers and buyers of secondhand goods during the nineteenth century. The best-known and most comprehensive source on the consumption habits of the working class and the poor in the nineteenth century is Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*, a massive survey of working-class London street life during the mid-nineteenth century. Many of those interviewed or observed by Mayhew were secondhand dealers of various sorts. They describe an active secondhand trade that principally served the needs of the working class with a wide range of offerings, including metal articles (tools, hardware, trays, fire irons, cutlery, scissors), glass, crockery, linens (towels, sheets, curtains, blankets), carpeting, bed-ticking, fringe, clothes, shoes, stocking legs, games, books, musical instruments, and antique curiosities.

According to Mayhew’s sources, most customers of secondhand dealers are from members of the working class who are trying to increase their wealth and comfort through material possessions. “O, working people’s by far my best customers,” a street-seller of metal articles tells Mayhew; “Many of ‘em’s very fond of jobbing about their rooms or their houses, and they come to such as me” (11). A seller of sheets also comments that many secondhand customers are those looking to improve their lot by accumulating household goods. “It is common for a single woman, struggling to ‘get a decent roof over her head,’ or for a young couple wishing to improve their comforts in furniture, to do so piece-meal. An old bedstead of a better sort may first be purchased,

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and so on to the concluding ‘decency,’ or, in the estimation of some poor persons, ‘dignity’ of curtains. These persons are customers of the street-sellers” (14).

Melanie Tebbutt’s study of working-class credit suggests that this sort of consumption by the working class might have had as much to do with saving as with comfort or pleasure. While the working classes were not immune to the temptations of the kind of conspicuous consumption that seemed to prevail among middle and upper classes, they also sought value in consumer durables as investments. Both Tebbutt and Beverly Lemire, another historian who has explored the role of pawnbroker’s shops in the lives of the poor, argue that goods like clothing, flatirons, and even musical instruments held long-term value and could always be pawned in times of need.20 Tebbutt and Lemire’s insights are particularly useful as a correction to the observations of nineteenth-century moralists who condemned the inability of the poor to save money as a moral failing. Whatever the weaknesses in logic might be apparent in their resource management, Tebbutt asserts that storing savings and material assets was a viable strategy for “making ends meet.” Although banking through pawnbroking was far more costly in the long run, its basis in material goods seemed much more secure than the increasingly abstract forms of money. Tebbutt speculates, “It is possible that the material security on which the pawnbroker relied may even have reinforced consumer spending. Customers knew that such goods remained a realizable asset for times of need, and rejected the inert value of money in a savings account in favor of the positive enjoyment

to be gained from buying something new." 21 So in a sense, working class consumers not only bought secondhand items, but also bought items with the expectation that they would very likely be surrendered to the secondhand economy during hard times. This made them more likely to select goods that would hold their value through multiple cycles of exchange; cheaply produced new items would not serve this purpose as well as higher quality used items. According to Mayhew, some purchases were even made to facilitate the cycling of possessions in and out of the working-class home, especially secondhand tea caddies: "‘Working people buy them,’ I was informed, and ‘working people’s wives. When women are the customers they look closely at the lock and key, as they keep ‘my uncle’s cards’ there’" (22).

Aside from such firsthand accounts, there is very little history of the secondhand trade in the mid-nineteenth century. While pawnbroker’s shops and auction houses were required to maintain elaborate records, few historians have made use of this information. As for other secondhand trades, they have left almost no trace. Mayhew comments, "I found no miscellaneous dealer who could tell me of the proportionate receipts from the various articles he dealt in even for the last month . . . It should be recollected that the street-sellers do not keep accounts, or those documents would supply references. ‘It’s all head work with us,’ a street-seller said, somewhat boastingly, to me, as if the ignorance of the book-keeping was rather commendable" (24). Therefore, in contrast to the consumer revolution of the firsthand economy, it is difficult to know just how the sale of secondhand goods evolved. The very market shifts that enabled greater consumption by members of all classes also pushed secondhand exchange to the very margins.

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21 Tebbutt, 32.
New Economic Criticism, Studies of Consumption, and Material Culture

Most economic literary criticism of the past few decades has taken one of two general approaches, both of which are fundamentally new historicist. The first is to look at the production of the novel itself in a larger economic context, taking into consideration contemporary economic debates or the material conditions of its production. The second approach centers instead on internal patterns of circulation and consumption within the novel that are isolated through close readings and supported by historical and cultural contextualization. Broadly speaking, the first category tends to focus on labor, production, and capital; while the second category is interested in circulation and consumption, often from a psychoanalytical standpoint. Both to some degree share an interest in the novel as a commodity. These generalizations offer a useful framework for discussing different modes of economic criticism, but it should be noted that the two categories are not perfectly discrete.

The first category includes what has come to be called the New Economic Criticism, named after the collection edited by Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen (1998): a body of criticism “founded upon economic paradigms, models, and tropes” that considers, among other topics, the relationship between money and language, and the economics of authorship.22 Woodmansee and Osteen point to the work of Marc Shell (1978) and Kurt Heinzelman (1980) as foundational in establishing the relationship

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between the economic nature of all metaphors, for metaphors are always a sort of
exchange. Rather than seeing money as something "real" and prior to the artistic
developments of literature, these critics tend to see money and literature as different but
related systems of knowledge that both seek to establish and understand value.

Notable scholars of Victorian literature who have contributed to this branch of
criticism directly or otherwise include Patrick Brantlinger (1996), Regenia Gagnier
(2000), and Catherine Gallagher (2006). Brantlinger's work on public credit and the
novel predates the volume by Woodmansee and Osteen, but he anticipates many of their
concerns. He argues that "the Victorian novel simultaneously registers both the
substantiality of British power and prosperity and it insubstantiality, its basis only in
'credit' and 'debt,' in part by a metaphor rising its own lack of reality (its fictionality) as
no different from that of money (always a form of debt)." In other words, public credit
and the novel, both fictions, work together to strengthen and undermine the state
simultaneously. Gagnier, rather than looking for broad economic themes in literature,
traces the development of classical and neoclassical economics in the context of broader
cultural debates, including those in literature; her goal in doing so is to recover the
Victorian origins of market culture while correcting what she sees as an impoverishment
of contemporary economic discourse. Wealth, as the preoccupation of neoclassical

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23 Marc Shell, *The Economy of Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press,
1978); Kurt Heinzelman, *The Economics of the Imagination* (Amherst: University of
Massachusetts Press, 1980).
24 Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994*
(Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human
Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 2000); Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in
25 Brantlinger, 7.
economics, is an inadequate measure of human needs, she argues, for it fails to consider either aesthetics or morality. More comprehensive measures of human wants were considered by early economists, but abandoned as economics established itself as a social science. Most recently, Gallagher, rather than privileging either classical political economy or nineteenth-century literature, reads them together, arguing these two cultural institutions worked together to relocate the source of the value of labor from transcendent spirituality and moral well-being to organic, human sensations, especially pleasure and pain. While she observes that fiction writers of the period—notably Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle—objected to the cold calculations of political economists such as Thomas Malthus, the objectives of socially conscious novelists and political economists were remarkably similar in that both sought to understand the lives of the poor more holistically and sympathetically than previous generations.

The work of these scholars and others in this area of criticism is often predicated on the supposed opposition between literature and the marketplace, ironic in light of the substantial role that fiction played as a commodity in the marketplace of the nineteenth century. While it has been argued that the marketplace degrades the artistry of literature even as it sustains literary production, these scholars suggest that this relationship between novels, political economy, and the marketplace opens the door for a new mode of interdisciplinary scholarship that makes room for broader understandings of how value is constructed. However, such constructions of value, as they pertain to the period I study, are largely derived from labor and production and the conditions that surround them. Since my work examines value and especially its loss in relation not to conditions of
production, but rather to the recommodification of personal possessions, my exploration of value must begin elsewhere.

The second school of economic criticism—perhaps more properly called consumption-based criticism—focuses on the demand rather than the supply side of economics, specifically on the impact of the consumer society and the commodity form on culture and subjectivity. Much of this work draws upon the interdisciplinary material culture studies initiated by historians and anthropologists such as McKendrick and McCracken who began studying the consumer revolution in the 1970s. A resurgence of interest elevated it to particularly prominent place in cultural and literary studies during the past twenty years, peaking in the mid 1990s. Generally predicated on the idea that consumption is a social rather than individual act, it tends to focus heavily on the world of fashion and the influence of gender in socializing the individual—a consistent theme within most studies of consumption dating back to Thorstein Veblen’s late-nineteenth-century theory of conspicuous consumption.26 The preponderance of this scholarship is especially preoccupied with questions of consumer agency and anxiety, asking whether consumers played an active or passive role in self-formation through consumption while also seeking to determine the degree to which the commodification of all material goods posed a threat to domestic stability. In addition to a collection edited by historian Victoria DeGrazia (1996), scholars interested in recuperating the agency of the nineteenth-century

26 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: Macmillan, 1917); See Victoria de Grazia, ed., *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), which provides historical discussions of various forms of consumer culture from the pre-capitalist era through the post-industrial era that speak to the ways that gender, class, family, and state are constructed through consumption. Most essays explore the political and economic pressures that helped form the stereotype of women who consume and men who bankroll.
female consumer include literary critics Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace and Lise Shapiro Sanders. Kowaleski-Wallace (1997) examines the relationship between the development of female subjectivity, a masculine world of business, and the consumer society of eighteenth and nineteenth-century novels, paying particular attention to literary constructions of the insatiable female shopper as a reflection of the culture’s growing anxieties about women in the marketplace and the power of consumerism to corrupt. More recently, Sanders (2006) has looked at the ideological construction of the London shopgirl as both a consumer fantasy and a consumer of goods and fantasies, arguing that this figure served as a locus for various debates about women in the public sphere as both consumers and workers. As a response to the cultural and scholarly feminization of consumption, others, including historians Christopher Breward (1999) and David Kutcha (2002), as well as literary critic Brent Shannon (2006), have sought to recuperate the role of the overlooked male consumer in the marketplace. These gendered studies and others like them usefully note that patterns of consumption are not only socially constructed, but socially constructing, crucial in both gendering and classing consumers. However, these studies of consumption are more concerned with desire than with fear and nostalgia, and are therefore preoccupied with firsthand rather than secondhand things. The secondhand

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consumer—often a window shopper rather than an actual purchaser—is much more likely to desire a nostalgic experience than a particular item.

Two notable studies by literary critics Jeff Nunokawa (1994) and Andrew H. Miller (1995) explore the impact of the alienable nature of the commodity form on human subjectivity and the Victorian novel. This more comprehensive view of the cultural impact of the commodity form considers both the delights of consumption and the fear of loss. Using Marxist frameworks supported by psychoanalytic theory, Nunokawa and Miller separately argue that the increasing pervasiveness of the commodity form in the nineteenth century prompted a cultural anxiety about the stability of property ownership and domestic life that the Victorian novel both reflected and perpetuated—an anxiety that extended to the ownership and alienability of women. Nunokawa begins by observing that notions of property ownership changed over time; as the patriarchal system of landed property with accompanying residual rights and duties gave way to absolute ownership, property became alienable. The consequence of this was the intrusion of the market on the private spaces of the home, manifested in the novel. Looking at both the world of the novel and its larger cultural context, Miller develops a similar theme, but approaches the subject by arguing that the nineteenth-century growth of the visual spectacle of commodities, from plate glass shop fronts to the Great Exhibition of 1851, prompted worry that the social and moral world was becoming little more than a display of goods for sale—an argument that does not explicitly take up the

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private and public dimensions that Nunokawa addresses, and yet gestures at the same
rupture of domestic space by market forces.

Nunokawa and Miller share many of the concerns that animate my own project:
the relationship between the construction of subjectivity and material possessions, the
fear that private property may be reabsorbed by the marketplace, and the complicated
emotions—ranging from desire and discomfort to sympathy and despair—that attend
spectacles of recommodification such as the auction. Together they suggest that be
solidifying of the commodity form as the basis of value and the increasing access to
consumer goods as personal possessions counterintuitively prompted anxiety about the
perpetual threat of forfeiture. While only my chapter on the auction shares source
material with Nunokawa and Miller, their work helps me to think more about how the
middle-class consumer might have approached the secondhand marketplace predisposed
to fear the instability of their own wealth.

Numerous critics have voiced concern about the wealth of studies of consumption
and the commodity form, claiming that such scholarship has less to do with nineteenth
century culture or literary realism that it does with the commodity-driven preoccupations
of our own postmodern critical context. Some of the criticism has come from those
aligned with the New Economic Criticism model, including both Paul Delany and Elaine
Freedgood. Delany comments that what he calls the new historicist tendency to

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31 The ennui that characterized the initial backlash was perhaps captured by the title of a
review essay by Timothy Morton: “More Books about Buildings and Food” (Victorian

32 Both are included in Osteen and Woodmansee’s collection; see Freedgood, “Banishing
Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy,” New Economic
Criticism, 180–95; and Paul Delany, “Who Paid for Modernism?” New Economic
Criticism, 286–99.
emphasize the commodification of everything has run its course. Freedgood argues that it is time for a more complex understanding of the symbolic values of things. “We often read the welter of things in Victorian novels as symptomatic of what we reflexively understand to be the bad materialism of commodity culture,” Elaine Freedgood comments; “We are all commodity fetishists now.”

An alternative way of thinking about commodities, secondhand or otherwise, is that branch of material culture studies that is less tied up with consumer culture and more interested in other kinds of cultural or material significance. This scholarship evolved out of interdisciplinary anthropological and sociological studies, such as the work of Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981), which explores the interaction between the self and the domestic environment. Notable contributions to this field by scholars of nineteenth-century culture include Cohen (2006), whose work on the relationship between the British and their households has already been cited, and Thad Logan (2006), who has explored the particular significance of the parlor to Victorian domestic life.

A somewhat more recent shift in the study of objects in literature has been thing theory, originated by Bill Brown, who edited a volume of Critical Inquiry on the subject.

33 Delany, Literature, Money and the Literary Market: From Trollope to Amis (Houndmills, Basingstroke and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 5.
in 2001.37 Rather than merely focusing on the cultural significance of objects, thing theory tends to highlight moments when the representation of a thing collides with the thing itself, calling into question the distinction between the materiality of a thing and the prejudicial or cultural knowledge that mediates our perception of it.

Freedgood has recently done work in this area as well (2006).38 Freedgood argues for a “strong metonymic” reading practice that literalizes things—in this instance imported commodities—that modern readers have supposedly fallen into reading only symbolically. She claims to recuperate readings that were accessible to contemporary Victorian readers, who might have made associations of certain items with certain global markets. Freedgood’s approach to reading things in the novel is disruptive and in some ways anti-literary; the objects in her study, as she reads them, tend to work against or in spite of the narrative rather than with it. Yet her study has been quite influential to in my thinking about the significance of economic circulation on figurative language, especially metonymy, which I will discuss more fully in the next section.

Of this branch of material culture studies, the most influential on my own thinking about things specifically has been the work of Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, who examine the substantial role that clothing played not only in the economy, but in the formation of subjectivity during the Renaissance.39 In order to reveal the multifaceted significance of material objects in the past, they work to reforge the link between the

39 Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 7–8. It is not entirely clear why Jones and Stallybrass consider themselves thing theorists rather than scholars of material culture, as much of their work seems to attend specifically to the cultural significance of things.
economic value and the social or personal associations of objects, which they argue was severed by the formation of a disembodied, rational, colonial, and capitalist subject between the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They preemptively refute any criticism that their interest in material object’s power to shape the self is fetishistic; they argue that their work reverses the effects of the commodity fetish, restoring rather than obscuring the social relationships that governed the production, exchange, and use of clothing. Their argument that previously used objects were overdetermined by factors including economic value, sentiment, politics, and fealty highlighted for me the way that used clothing in the nineteenth-century novel seems to wear an aura of lack and prompted me to look for the system of values that coded used objects in the industrial era so differently than in the past.

One idiosyncratic text that resists the prior categories and yet is worth mentioning is Francesco Orlando’s recently translated exploration of “nonfunctional corporeality” in literature (1993, 2006). Orlando traces a proliferation of obsolete objects in literature across several languages and centuries, arguing that it can be understood as a growing psychological and aesthetic reaction to functionality as dominant measure of value in the West. His many categories of “useless, or old, or unusual things” do overlap with my own study of secondhand objects, but while my study is defined by patterns of circulation, Orlando’s is guided by textual patterns—specifically lists of items. This makes the material scope of his study much broader; he includes not only grotesque old clothes, piles of curiosities in shops, and repossessed furniture in auction houses, but also

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ruined cities, desiccated flowers, and buried treasure. Of the twelve subcategories he uses to distinguish between the varying affective and aesthetic investments of nonfunctional corporeality from various periods, the most useful for my work are the threadbare-grotesque, the worn-realistic, the reminiscent-affective, and the desolate-disconnected, all of which he dates from the mid-eighteenth century onward through the mid to late nineteenth century.

Orlando’s literary scope is tremendous, and his work offers a useful reminder that items need not be secondhand to evoke nostalgia or fear. However, his contextualization is quite shallow. While much of the critical work on material culture in English literature is at least partly influenced by new historicism, Orlando’s work is informed by Freudian psychoanalysis and literary tradition with little reference to historical objects and events. Given Orlando’s suggestion that the literary trend he traces is a reaction to the changing economic and ideological climate of the West, it is surprising that he does not attend to these influences in crafting categories; in fact, circulation plays no role in his analysis of material objects in literature. As a result, the disconnectedness he traces in objects has frequently as much to do with his methodology as it does with any intrinsic qualities in the texts he reads.

My work attempts to attend to the economic, cultural, and material dimensions of objects and their firsthand or secondhand circulation. Certainly, I am interested in the cultural significance that adheres to certain objects moving through certain types of economies: clothing tends to evoke not only absent body, but a socialized body of a certain gender and class; pawned items of personal significance, such as wedding rings, prompt different imaginative reactions than practical household items like flatirons; and
the auctioning off of the family plate is a very different spectacle than the disposal of a book marred or embellished by the scribblings of children. I am also interested in the resolute materiality of secondhand items that are too deteriorated to sustain cultural significance; dust and rags hint at the past while simultaneously obscuring it. But part of what highlights the significance of such objects in the texts that I study, I argue, is their actual or potential shift into the commodity form. Something possessed or taken for granted cannot prompt the same feelings of desire and nostalgia as something lost. In order to sustain such narrative interest, objects must circulate; for my purposes, then, the circulation and recirculation of these objects—and especially the impact of such circulation on narrative—is perhaps of greater importance than any of their intrinsic qualities.

This circulation tends to echo the movement of various marginalized characters in fiction—especially unprotected women and the poor—and the relationship between such figures and the secondhand economy distinguishes my work from other economic or material cultures studies of the novel, which tend to focus on firsthand consumption. The relationship between the secondhand economy, women, and poverty is at first glance unremarkable. When considering the supply side of secondhand exchange, the high level of participation by women is somewhat self-evident, for women were custodians of the home and its contents; in absence of spending money, items in the home were the primary financial resource available to women of all classes in times of hardship. Moreover, as suggested above, the historical secondhand economy was dominated by buyers and sellers from the working class and the poor. Consumers with more money had more options in buying consumer durables and were not restricted to the purchase of used
things. Street-sellers, too, often participated in the secondhand economy due to a lack of alternatives, for many other trades required start-up funds or expensive licenses. Foreigners, women, and the poor flocked to the secondhand trade because of its informality. This relationship between the secondhand economy in the novel and these marginal characters is therefore largely mimetic.

However, as this project will demonstrate, the secondhand economy of the novel is also self-consciously literary. Secondhand items that circulate in the novel often mimic the movement and social trajectory of endangered persons—especially women in economic crisis. Writers such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot often foreshadowed threats to the economic and moral well-being of significant characters through the circulation of items lost from the domestic sphere. As items in their novels are degraded through exchange, so too are the characters associated with these items threatened or even debased by social instability. In studying the circulation patterns of the objects and the marginal characters associated with the literary secondhand economy, we gain greater insight into the gendered dynamics of poverty in the Victorian period. One of the priorities of this project is to recover precisely this cultural history.

The Secondhand Commodity Fetish, Metonymy, and Methodology

The material secondhand economy, as I define it, is the exchange of items which have been incorporated into the domestic sphere before being surrendered to the marketplace at a loss. These items are devalued not only by the practical circumstances of their use and exchange, but also by a personal and cultural alienation that accompanies
commodification. This alienation of the secondhand commodity is a key limitation in my definition of the secondhand economy and distinguishes it from other exchanges of used objects, such as the gift economy as articulated by anthropologist Marcel Mauss.\(^\text{41}\) I do not intend to suggest that such exchanges outside of the marketplace are economically insignificant. Margot C. Finn (2003), for example, makes compelling connections between the obligations incurred by seemingly informal gift exchanges in fiction and the cultural importance of public credit; secondhand gifts, such as clothes in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, make up a significant portion of her argument.\(^\text{42}\) However, the economic value of this type of exchange is predicated upon incurred obligations, and these obligations tend to forge rather than sever relationships between people through things. I, too, consider the role that the exchange of material objects plays in the formation of subjectivity and social bonds, but I am more interested in the severance of these connections which can only be realized in the context of the marketplace.

My definition of the secondhand economy imposes other limitations as well. By specifying items of a domestic nature, I eliminate from consideration a wide range of items that circulate without private ownership, such as library books or hired carriages. While these items might pass through many hands or even through the home, they do not encourage the formation of deep ties between a person and an object. They are, in essence, alienated prior to their circulation. The same might be said of machinery or other capital belonging to a business. While it is true that a business owner—say John Thornton in Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel *North and South*—might feel strong attachments to his or her establishment, capital


investments are primarily valued for what they produce and not for what they signify. In this they differ from domestic items, which are acquired in part for aesthetic and affective purposes and which tend to encourage personal attachment.

Other items or possessions not considered here, including real estate, valuable antiques, and heirlooms, may be associated with a domestic space and yet may be exchanged with no necessary loss, for the fact of prior ownership does not necessarily decrease their exchange value or degrade them in any way. Indeed, value may be enhanced through illustrious associations. Items that tend to gain rather than lose value fall outside of the purview of this study because the personal attachments and fantasies they inspire are quite different: often lofty, inspiring, or covetous rather than melancholy. Even in the case of items with unsavory associations—for example, jewels with ancient curses such as the Moonstone in Wilkie Collins’ novel—have storied and traceable histories rather than an aura of loss and disconnection. This project focuses instead on the somewhat more modest domestic accoutrements of the middle class because their loss and circulation inspires a particular sort of grief in nineteenth-century fiction.

The grief or sympathy resulting from this trauma, as well as the attempt to restore meaning and significance to degraded and alienated secondhand items, is my primary focus. This perspective allows me to discuss not only the pain of the actual moment of loss, but also the imagined trauma imposed by would-be consumers of secondhand items—window shoppers who are compelled to ruminate upon the tragedy that such items materially encode. I argue that as personal possessions become secondhand commodities, they also become symbols of the market’s power to disrupt the domestic sphere and the affective relationships between persons and things. In the context of this
symbolic power of the secondhand commodity, I would like to suggest the existence of a secondhand commodity fetish.

Early political economists—Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill—were interested in the origin of the commodity state because they sought in it the source of exchange-value. According to most definitions, the moment that an object becomes a commodity is the moment that it is understood to have value in the marketplace—value being determined partially by the desirability of the item and partially by the conditions of labor required to produce it. Marx’s formulation of the commodity fetish has become the standard description of this process as it is understood by the labor theory of value, perhaps in no small part due to its literary qualities, evident here in his description of the quasi-magical transformation of a thing into a commodity:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties . . . Man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. 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, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. 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.43

It is not until the table is perceived as a commodity—an object understood to have exchange-value—that it becomes animate, bearing exchange-value that both represents and elides a complex web of human relationships. Marx's anthropomorphism of the table is intended to dramatize what had previously taken for granted—the remarkable power of this shift in (mis)perception. Jean-Joseph Goux, in his own work on symbolic economies, likens this distinction between object and commodity to the body and the soul: “Use-value is the physical, incarnated, perceptible aspect of the commodity, while exchange-value is a supernatural abstraction, invisible and supersensible.” Exchange value is thus a sort of life-force that animates material goods.

In looking at items that have left the private sphere to become commodities, I too am interested in what animates objects put up for sale. But the type of animation that I explore is quite different. The value of a secondhand table is certainly partially determined by the same qualities that determine the value of the new table: the quality and rarity of the wood and the conditions of labor that produced it. But the passage of time impacts the value of the secondhand table as well, either positively or adversely. If the table is a rare antique, or has been owned and used by someone of consequence, its value will rise. But if time has imparted no prestige, it will almost certainly have brought about deterioration in loss of value. Thus when a secondhand table “steps forth,” its “grotesque ideas” may include not only the conditions of its production, but also the history of its ownership, whether real and traceable or effaced and imaginary.

To explore the significance of secondhand rather than firsthand commodity status, a more nuanced and diachronic understanding of the commodity that privileges the

moment or moments of “stepping forth” is necessary. Anthropologist Igor Kopytoff offers this kind of analysis in his discussion of the “biographies of things.” He argues that “commoditization . . . is best looked upon as a process of becoming rather than as an all-or-none state of being.” He identifies two poles, commoditization and singularization, observing that items in all societies tend to move back and forth along this spectrum. Some items—for example, those with ritual significance—tend to resist commodification and remain singular, while other items, like tools, are more vulnerable to purchase or trade. By identifying “shifts in differences in whether and when a thing is a commodity,” we can “reveal a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.” This moral economy operates differently in times of prosperity and in times of hardship, for no durable item, however sacred, can remain perfectly singular—and thus totally resistant to commoditization—amid conditions of poverty and famine. As Kopytoff argues, “The only time when the commodity status of a thing is beyond question is the moment of actual exchange. Most of the time, when the commodity is effectively out of the commodity sphere, its status is inevitably ambiguous and open to the push and pull of events and desires, as it is shuffled about in the flux of social life.” Therefore, analyzing the way that objects move in and out of commodity status over time reveals a community’s moral and affective valuations as effectively as its economic valuations. By looking at the way that secondhand items are portrayed in the novel, I hope to reveal this sort of moral economy. Rather than looking at the moment of

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46 Kopytoff, 73.
47 Kopytoff, 64.
48 Kopytoff, 83.
commodification as a source for exchange-value, I look at these moments of loss and alienation to understand what they reveal about the social and individual patterns of ownership as they appear in the novel.

As I suggest above, Marx's description of the commodity fetish is compelling in part because of its literary qualities—not just the anthropomorphizing of the table that "steps forth," but also the fetish concept itself. The fetish, understood as a material object that carries magical or metaphysical properties, evolved from eighteenth century descriptions of West African idol worship. Europeans quickly came to recognize that the apparently irrational and primitive worship of the fetish-object paralleled their own misattribution of power to mere symbols. Thomas Carlyle, for example, noted the similarity of the construction of the fetish to the European construction of kingship, and ironically notes that African fetishes were in all likelihood more worthy and enduring objects of such devotion than European monarchs: "Does not the Black African take of Sticks and Old Clothes (say, exported Monmouth-Street cast-clothes) what will suffice, and of these, cunningly combining them, fabricate for himself an Eidolon (Idol, or Thing Seen), and name it Mumbo-Jumbo; which he can thenceforth pray to, with upturned awestruck eye, not without hope? The white European mocks; but ought rather to consider; and see whether he, at home, could not do the like a little more wisely." Marx takes this critique a step further with his use of the term: while reverence for monarchs was socially acceptable, if perhaps inadvisable, reverence for wealth as an end unto itself was not. Moreover, the enlightened rational commerce of the modern era seemed the very

50 Brantlinger, 6.
antithesis of superstition. Marx's commodity fetish deconstructs the apparent rationality of the post-Enlightenment marketplace. The concept of the fetish thus began as a metaphor in which "primitive" worship of mere objects was understood as analogous to the ideological investments of more complex societies.

When Marx adapted the term, the concept of the fetish became metonymic as well as metaphorical. The object derives its value and becomes a commodity through its contiguous relationship with the labor that produces it. The metaphorical and especially the metonymic functions of the commodity fetish makes it particularly useful as a point of departure in articulating the symbolism of the secondhand object in literature.

The centrality of metonymy to this project—or really to any project that takes material objects in the novel seriously—is not particularly surprising. Roman Jakobson argues that while metaphor is widely understood as the most important device of poetic language, "it is the predominance of metonymy which underlies and actually predetermines the so-called 'realistic' trend." 52 That is to say, while metaphor certainly appears in the novel, metonymy governs the logic that groups characters and objects in meaningful ways.

Some critics and theorists argue that metonymy is more a function of basic human cognition than creativity or artistry. 53 Metaphor functions best when it forges unexpected and surprising connections; the greater the dissimilarity of the two objects compared, the

53 "The grounding of metonymic concepts is in general more obvious than is the case with metaphoric concepts, since it usually involves direct physical or causal associations" (George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984], 39); Hugh Bredin, "Metonymy," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1984): 45–58, 58.
more pleasing, artful, and potentially insightful the resulting metaphor. Metonymy, on the other hand, requires obvious contiguity to function, and this limits its ability to surprise and delight. In the words of Hugh Bredin,

A metonymy neither states nor implies the connection between the objects involved in it. For this reason, it relies wholly upon those relations between objects that are habitually and conventionally known and accepted. We must already know that the objects are related, if the metonymy is to be devised or understood. Thus, the metaphor creates the relation between its objects, while metonymy presupposes that relation. This is why metonymy can never articulate a newly discovered insight, why it lacks the creative depth of metaphor. Metonymy is irresistibly and necessarily conventional. 54

In other words, metonymy can be understood simply as a process by which we detect associations that already exist, suggesting that it is mimetic rather than artistic.

Two literary critics of note have attempted to reclaim metonymy as a more creative process. One of the most useful discussions of metonymy appears in J. Hillis Miller’s discussion of mimesis and imagination in Charles Dickens’s Sketches by Boz. 55

In distinguishing the sketches from a purely journalistic account of London, Miller isolates Dickens’s penchant for describing and listing objects as a shorthand for describing the city itself:

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54 Bredin, 57.
The speculative pedestrian is faced at first not with a continuous narrative of the lives of London's people, not with the subjective state of these people at the present moment, and not even with people seen from the outside as appearance or spectacle. What he sees at first are things, human artifacts, streets, buildings, vehicles, objects in a pawnbroker's shop, old clothes in Monmouth street. These objects are signs, present evidence of something absent. Boz sets himself the task of inferring from these things the life that is lived among them. Human beings are at first often seen as things among other things, more signs to decipher, present hints of that part of their lives which is past, future, or hidden.  

Miller emphasizes the constructedness of these sorts of links between objects and their imaginary human context. Frequently presented without their human or cultural contexts, the metonymically evocative objects in Sketches by Boz are indeed contingent upon the reader's ability to supply the missing metonymic links. Yet Dickens's disconnected lists of items often demand not a passive response, but rather a cooperative effort from the reader. Moreover, Miller argues that when Dickens does provide a more thorough exegesis of his own metonymic links, metonym slides into a more metaphor-like ingenuity. As Miller wryly observes, "A man's doorknocker is no necessary indication of his personality."  

Freedgood recuperates metonymy by distinguishing between what she calls "weak" and "strong" metonymy.  Weak metonymy corresponds with what Bredin calls the "necessarily conventional" interpretations: furnishings, clothing, and so on convey

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56 J. Hillis Miller, 10.
57 J. Hillis Miller, 35.
something about a character’s personality and class to readers who know the code. Freedgood suggests that this sort of metonymy is, from the reader’s perspective, passive. Rather than examining metonymy as a literary device that betrays its own artifice, Freedgood advocates a historically and globally contextualized reading practice. For example, according to her readings, checked curtains evoke the complicated history of the British importation and manufacture of cotton, and mahogany furniture tangentially suggests the narratives of deforestation and slavery in the West Indies. Her method “requires a moment of forestalling allegory, and of taking things literally”; she imagines, “like Benjamin’s collector, that ‘the world is present, and indeed ordered’ in certain objects. That ordering is not an allegory, but a history. And it is not the history that the novel narrates, but the history that the novel secretes: the history it hides and emits, the one it conceals and produces as it calls to mind the locations of deforestation and slavery for which mahogany is a metaphor, a metonym, and a literal representation.” Freedgood’s metonymy, in other words, is a global and literary manifestation of the commodity fetish; both simultaneously reveal and conceal a history that is evident to those who understand its context and are capable of reading it. Therefore, strong metonymy is a particularly reader-centered instantiation of metonymy; it betrays history rather than artistry. Because of this heavy reliance upon conjectures about what Victorian readers might have known about the things they purchased, its reception has been mixed.

What is particularly useful to me, however, about the work of Miller and Freedgood is the way that they each hint at the relationship between metonymy and

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movement or circulation. Miller, in his work on *Sketches by Boz*, explores the relationship between metonymy and the anthropomorphic animation of material objects. For example, in Dickens’s sketch on Monmouth Street secondhand clothing stalls, the coats and boots spring into life and dance a jig after Boz imagines their former owners. But Miller provides a more illuminating example of the animation conferred by metonymy in the following extended quotation from “The Parlour Orator” in *Sketches by Boz*: a passage that illustrates not so much the potential, but rather the limits of metonymy:

If we had followed the established precedent in all such instances, we should have fallen into a fit of musing, without delay. The ancient appearance of the room . . . would have carried us back a hundred years at least, and we should have gone dreaming on, until the pewter-pot on the table, or the little beer-chiller on the fire, had started into life, and addressed to as a long story of days gone by. But, by some means or other, we were not in a romantic humor; and although we tried very hard to invest the furniture with vitality, it remained perfectly unmoved, obstinate, and sullen. 

As Miller comments, these objects are precisely the sort that attract Boz’s metonymic and anthropomorphic fantasies in other sketches. Their ability to “start into life” is contingent on Boz’s imagination and his appreciation of their history. Miller sees in this “failure to start in to life” a revelation that “the vitality of such objects does not belong in reality to them”—in other words, metonymy is more than mimesis. “In such moments the *Sketches* make problematical their mimetic function . . . [and] fulfill, in a way appropriate to

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narrative fiction, the definition of literature as a use of language which exposes its own rhetorical devices and assumptions.\textsuperscript{61} Miller’s reading of this passage is useful not only in revealing the artistry behind Dickens’s use of metonymy, but also in highlighting the association between metonymy and movement, or “starting into life.” Much like the “stepping forth” of Marx’s table, the animation of Dickens’s material objects is contingent upon the author’s creative exploitation of contiguous relationships. This yoking of anthropomorphism to metonymy parallels the mental agility required to follow a web of associations to the surprising, creative, and insightful potentials inherent in this literary device. Metonymy makes things move.

With “strong metonymy,” Freedgood tracks a different kind of movement. She suggests that the everyday objects in the novel offer invitations to explore beyond the boundaries of the text—to follow commodities on their journeys around the globe to their final destinations in real or fictional British households. Thus for Freedgood, objects do not “start into life,” but rather open windows that offer a certain type of reader insight into the industrial and imperial context that the novel half reveals and half conceals. This version of metonymic movement parallels the mental agility of the reader but is also literal in that it reveals the global trade routes that lay dormant in seemingly innocuous things. To emphasize the movement of metonymy, Freedgood contrasts it with the stability of metaphor and George Eliot’s fiction, who attempts to eliminate unauthorized interpretation by foreclosing strong metonymic readings with a forceful

\textsuperscript{61} J. Hillis Miller, 37.
underdetermination. "Meaning is stabilized in Middlemarch so that metonymic relations (which, strictly speaking, stop nowhere) can stop just when they should."\(^{62}\)

My work also explores the relationship between metonymy and movement, and in doing so it also seeks to demonstrate how metonymy can function in a more sophisticated and consciously literary way. Commodities in the secondhand economy do much more than tacitly indicate details of personality or station. As I will demonstrate in the four chapters that follow, the movement of secondhand commodities through specific markets metonymically parallels the movement of characters through the plot. Clothing decays as characters wither under the moral and physical hardships of poverty, and pawned items hang suspended in pledge as women hover between domestic security and illicit sexuality. Furthermore, these patterns of movement play a key role in the narrative structure of many of the texts that I study. The dramatic rupture of the private sphere by a bankruptcy auction is often accompanied by a narrative rupture, and the collection and removal of waste in literature tends to prompt an amassing of chaotic details that must ultimately be resolved by a plot of renewal. While Miller's dissection of Dickens's metonymy focuses on the way that an object's imagined past prompts it to start into life as a literary device, and Freedgood's metonymy centers on the object's ability to travel the world and back through the reader's tangential associations, my exploration of metonymy demonstrates how the secondhand commodity simultaneously fetishizes the history of its use and metonymically anticipates its movement through the marketplace and the narrative trajectory of the novel.

The Literature of the Secondhand Economy

The texts I have chosen for my study are largely social problem novels that conspicuously feature the circulation of objects amid circumstances of economic loss or poverty. This selection necessarily includes a number of novels by Dickens, not only because of his interest in poverty and the intrusive thrust of the marketplace into domestic life, but also because of his exaggerated attentiveness to materiality. Particularly important are *Sketches by Boz* (1836), *Oliver Twist* (1837–38), *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), *Bleak House* (1852–53), and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5). George Eliot’s novels are also prominently featured. While her depiction of material goods is far more restrained in Dickens, moments of secondhand exchange in her novels often parallel important thematic developments, especially in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Middlemarch* (1871), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Individual texts by other authors include Thomas Carlyle’s genre-defying *Sartor Resartus* (1833–34), William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847–8), and Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851). Carlyle’s use of clothing as a metaphor for binding cultural institutions relies on the processes of decay, alienation, and recycling as analogies for social revolution. Thackeray’s constant recirculation of goods and persons in *Vanity Fair* destabilizes any notion of ownership. And Mayhew’s encyclopedic survey of urban poverty is critical not only as a historical source, but also as a literary text in its own right that demonstrates the author’s preoccupations with order and value in the midst of human suffering and chaos.

These texts and others are grouped thematically according to four culturally dominant models of secondhand exchange in the nineteenth century: the secondhand...
clothing trade, the pawnbroker's shop, the auction, and waste management and reuse. All four of these economies are characterized by the severing of ties between person and position, the degrading of the material object, and the metonymic connections between lost objects and endangered characters. However, I argue that each serves a different narrative purpose. Old clothing evokes the fear of death and chaos—the decay of the individual and the social body. Pawnbroking is often accompanied by a plot of redemption that centers around the recovery of a pledged object. Auctions are characterized by the violence of the public gaze and the narrative rupture that results when person and possession are severed. And finally, waste management and recycling offers an analogy for social and individual renewal out of the dust of apparent ruin. Taken together, these literary economies demonstrate the yearning of Victorian writers to restore value to persons and things alienated and degraded by the ongoing intrusion of the marketplace into private life.

My first chapter, "Obfuscations in Monmouth Street: Secondhand Clothing and the Social Body," begins with one of the most economically significant and metaphorically rich secondhand commodities of the early nineteenth century—clothes. Victorian writers including Carlyle, Dickens, and Mayhew wrote figuratively of the often grotesque spectacle of old clothes for sale, not only to ruminate on the abjection of death—evoked by the empty garment's resemblance to a corpse—but also to signify a rupture from the past and from social ties. In Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, clothing is the dominant metaphor for the cultural and social institutions that socialize the body; secondhand clothing, then, specifically symbolizes worn-out institutions. However, the role of Carlyle's metaphorical clothing in forming the individual makes the transfer of
clothing from one body to another potentially disruptive. Carlyle forecloses this possibility by reimagining the secondhand clothing trade as a graveyard rather than a marketplace. Dickens, too, crafts character through costume, and in Sketches by Boz and Little Dorrit, he weaves morbid narratives from the creases and stains of secondhand garments. His reanimation of old clothes suggests that clothing is indelibly marked by the singular individuality of the firsthand consumer, uncanny yet sartorially incoherent when reanimated on the body of a new wearer. Finally, Mayhew, in his survey of the trade in London Labour and the London Poor, is struck by the disturbing spectacle of old clothes, evocative of poignant human loss even amid the chaos of the Old Clothes Exchange. The disintegration of garments into piles of rags parallels the unruliness of a trade that dissolved social and cultural boundaries between classes, genders, and public and private. Taken together, the work of these authors suggests that old clothes are symbolically potent because they simultaneously evoke and disrupt representations of the past.

I continue to probe the relationship between objects and memory in my second chapter, “A Pledge Out of Time: Romance, Redemption, and the Literary Pawnshop,” which examines representations of the pawnshop in the novels of Dickens and George Eliot, as well as articles from the Pawnbrokers’ Gazette, a nineteenth-century trade journal that collected a wide range of fictional and nonfictional material on pawnbroking. I argue that the suspended alienation of the pawned item, or “pledge,” operates both materially and thematically in the literary secondhand economy, not merely painting the circumstances of poverty and loss in bleaker shades, but also endangering middle-class identity and morality through associations with lower-class urban life and sexual shame. This danger is often fetishized in a pawned item—a physical token of domesticity that
hovers between home and the marketplace as a symbol of a character’s uncertain sexual and economic fate. Beginning with a brief discussion of the legal status and popular perception of pawnbroking in the nineteenth century, I argue that the legislation and the press constructed the pawnshop as a place where objects were not merely lost, but also found, and as an institution where female clientele were in particular danger. I then examine the conflicting accounts of the trade printed in the *Pawnbroker’s Gazette*, isolating tensions and trends in the depictions of pawnshops as sites of forgotten history and sexual peril. In Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, I argue, these themes are developed in increasing complexity. While in Dickens’s novels, illegitimate orphans are redeemed and reconciled to middle-class identity following the disclosure of artifacts from pawnshops, in George Eliot’s novels, the space of the pawnshop itself leads to revelations of Deronda’s and Will Ladislaw’s maternal heritages, their acceptance of their previously unknown alterity, and their embrace of meaningful vocation.

In my third chapter, “One of Those Public Assemblies: Readers, Spectators, and Auctions,” I examine the uneasy relationship between narrators, readers, and spectators of auction narratives. The sympathetic narrator of an auction narrative, in witnessing and recording the auction’s events for the reader, must uneasily share the role of spectator with these more problematic figures who gossip, jeer, stare, and ultimately call attention to the narrator’s own outsider status. In order to distance their narrators from materialistic and unfeeling spectators, Victorian writers instructed their readers in how to read the irony and sentiment of the auction, both as text and spectacle. George Augustus Sala, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Dickens each play with the conventions of auction
advertises, contrasting the commercial phrasing of descriptions of objects with the reality and affect beneath the surface of these passages. Lady Blessington, Elizabeth Gaskell, Sala, and George Eliot, on the other hand, demonstrate through positive and negative examples not only how one should read the event itself, but more specifically, how one should feel and act as a spectator and a potential consumer. Finally, I look at George Eliot’s treatment of the auction, which differs from other narratives in focusing on the private family and the grief of characters over the loss of objects and the family history that they encode, while leaving spectators to recede into the background of the narrative as a malicious and haunting presence. In each of these texts, the sale of personal possessions is accompanied by narrative ruptures that underscore the violence of the transition from the first to the second hand.

My concluding chapter, “Collection, Congestion, and the Economy of Recycling,” examines the parallels drawn by Mayhew, Carlyle, and Dickens between the collection and reuse of waste in the nineteenth century and the renewal of economic and cultural resources. While waste material must be collected before it can be sifted, refined, and processed for reuse, collection has the potential to create blockages—impediments such as looming mounds or impassable streets resulting from systemic inefficiency or even pathology. Beginning with Mayhew’s description of street-finders and collectors in London, I explore the relationship between his admiration for the population-sustaining wealth recovered from London’s refuse and his corresponding fears of fatal blockages: poverty, famine, and poor sanitation. I then read Carlyle’s more playful representation of collection and congestion in *Sartor Resartus*: Teufelsdröckh, who is described by his neighbors as a “Thing” also collects and hoards things as part of his scholarly method.
But this compulsion is not merely method: it also reveals his philosophy. While these decayed symbols of moribund civilization choke his small apartment, they nevertheless hold the possibility of renewal and revolution. Finally, in reading Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*, I explore the complicated relationship between Harmon's collection and recycling business and his miserly ways. Harmon's business, properly understood, is one of both collection and circulation, yet Dickens figuratively conflates Harmon with the hoarders described in F. Somner Merryweather's *Lives and Anecdotes of Misers*. This conflation not only confounds the novel's villain, Silas Wegg, an amateur scholar of miserhood, but also promotes economic rebirth through recycling as the novel concludes. Read together, these texts suggest a Victorian ethos of recycling: one motivated not so much by the desire to preserve resources, but rather by a desire to see renewed value in things grown old.
1. Obfuscations in Monmouth Street: Secondhand Clothing and the Social Body

Alas, move whithersoever you may, are not the tatters and rags of superannuated worn-out Symbols (in this Ragfair of a World) dropping off every where, to hoodwink, to halter, to tether you; nay, if you shake them not aside, threatening to accumulate, and perhaps produce suffocation!

—Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*

In Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, Professor Diogenes Teufelsdröckh warns that rags, symbolizing obsolete epistemologies and social hierarchies, hamper the progress of modernity “in this Ragfair of a World.” But a certain amount of sifting through the past seems to be necessary for both the Professor and his perplexed Editor to see their way into the future clearly. The Professor’s “Volume on Clothes” begins with a chaotic history of clothing through the ages before its “sansculottism,” or revolutionary sentiment, fully reveals itself, and the Editor must delve into Teufelsdröckh’s own past in a dauntingly jumbled sack of autobiographical fragments to make any sense of the Professor’s ideas. Thus, even as Teufelsdröckh urges us to embrace a new vision of mankind, at the heart of *Sartor Resartus* we find a deep concern about the past. One possible source for historical inspiration for both Teufelsdröckh and his Editor is Monmouth Street with its “stainless Ghosts,” long known in London as the center of the secondhand clothing trade (183).

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While we must be careful not to make too much of the clothes in the Clothes Volume (Carlyle, after all, warns us that "[t]he beginning of all wisdom is to look fixedly on Clothes . . . till they become transparent" [52]), Carlyle was not the only Victorian author to view old clothes as a darkly suggestive secondhand commodity. Both Charles Dickens in *Sketches by Boz* and Henry Mayhew in *London Labour and the London Poor* discuss the "venerable" history of the old clothes trade in London and reconstruct the past wearers of old garments. Unlike Teufelsdröckh's old clothes, which are—no doubt ironically—stainless, Dickens and Carlyle dwell on stains: the physical decay of the garments, the unease provoked by contemplating past wearers, as well as the uglier aspects of the secondhand clothes trade itself, which even as they wrote was approaching economic obsolescence brought on by the cheapening of mass production. These garments prompt confusion; they muddle identities, class and gender roles, and even blur the line between people and things. Yet as the authors describe the objects in terms to inspire revulsion, they also invoke a reverence for these relics of the dead.

In her articulation of the abject, Julia Kristeva writes, "In that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders."² The aversion to cadavers that she describes parallels the disgust and fascination evoked by Victorian descriptions of garments in a Monmouth Street shop, but with one difference: it is not because clothing fails to signify that it provokes unease, but rather, because fails to signify coherently—because it signifies so powerfully a body that cannot be known, a history that cannot be recovered, that the present is overwritten. Thus, old clothes, the most intimate of commodities,

simultaneously embody and disemboby history, while inspiring both reverence and rejection.

Old clothes were not always imagined this way. Eighteenth-century writers, including Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson, wrote prosaically of secondhand clothing as a sometimes distasteful but always practical part of middle and lower-class economics. Neither Pamela nor Robinson Crusoe wax sentimental as they weigh the clothes of the dead for their own use, considering use and exchange value. In contrast, Carlyle, Dickens, and Mayhew each poetically defamiliarize these material objects, exhibiting a strong nostalgia for the irrecoverable history of the garments they encounter, for the bodies that wore them that are no more, and even for the “venerable” history of the secondhand trade itself. When contemplating the history of a garment, Dickens and Mayhew are always conscious of the materially codified but hopelessly fragmented history that eludes them, while Carlyle—drawn to the old—must nevertheless turn to the new.

In this chapter, I explore the meanings of secondhand clothing in the nineteenth-century literary imagination, revealing its significance as an intersection of the personal

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3 Robinson Crusoe finds the clothes of dead sailors on a shipwreck: “I found some very good Shirts, which were very welcome to me... The other Chest I found had some Cloaths in it, but of little Value; but by the Circumstances it must have belong’d to the Gunner’s Mate” (Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe, ed. Michael Shinagel [New York: W. W. Norton, 1994], 139). Pamela accepts a gift of her dead mistress’s clothes from her surviving son: “He has given me a Suit of my old Lady’s Cloaths, and half a Dozen of her Shifts, and Six fine Handkercheifs, and Three of her Cambrick Aprons, and Four Holland ones: The Cloaths are fine Silks, and too rich and too good for me, to be sure. I wish it was no Affront to him to make Money of them, and send it to you” (Samuel Richardson, Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded, ed. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely [London: Oxford, 2001], 18). While Pamela has misgivings about these gifts, her misgivings are based on her concerns about the son’s propriety and her sexual chastity and have nothing to do with superstition about her dead mistress.
and the social, the material and the metaphorical. I begin with a historical outline of the secondhand clothing market, exploring how the secondhand clothing trade changed with industrialization and arguing that it also served as an alternate economy, one associated with criminality, marginalized races, and women. Shifting my attention to clothing as the dominant metaphor of Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, I highlight the way that Carlyle’s highly symbolic clothing shapes human culture and identity rather than being shaped by it and probe the significance of this reversal for Carlyle’s musings on secondhand clothes. I then reveal how Mayhew and Dickens illustrate the secondhand trade in the nineteenth century, with particular focus on their depictions of marginalized people and their associations of the authenticity of clothing with the firsthand rather than the secondhand consumer. Finally, I look at Mayhew’s depiction of the secondhand clothing trade at large, noting the way that secondhand clothing seems to override and erase the social distinctions it was once imagined to sustain.

*Venerable from Antiquity*

Mayhew called “[t]he trade in second-hand apparel . . . one of the most ancient of callings,” and Dickens, describing Monmouth street as “the only true and real emporium for second-hand wearing apparel,” hailed it as “venerable from antiquity.”

Ancient though it may be, the trade in secondhand clothing has left relatively few records and

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prompted very little scholarship. Historian Beverly Lemire, who has made the largest
collection of secondhand clothing sales in the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, has called the trade "largely invisible," but it seems to have been so
pervasive and so enduring a feature of the London cityscape that few records were
needed to confirm its place in the history or popular imagination of urban life.⁵ Enough is
known to sketch out its evolution in the centuries leading up to the Victorian period and,
more importantly, to demonstrate a shift in cultural values brought about by the industrial
revolution. At the historical moment that Carlyle, Dickens, and Mayhew wrote, the
meanings of secondhand goods, and secondhand clothing in particular, were in flux, and
that shift in meaning, I suggest, was intrinsically connected to changes in the way that the
British understood, bought, and sold secondhand clothes.

The first useful references to the trade in England are from the early modern
period. Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass argue that clothing was not only a
crucial component of the early modern economy, but also a material component in the
formation of subjectivity.⁶ In Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory, they
work to bridge the divide between the economic value and the social or personal
associations of objects, which they argue was severed by the formation of a disembodied,
capitalist subject between the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Before this time,
they argue that the personal associations of clothing were largely constitutive of its value.
Therefore, old clothes were not merely reused for practical and financial reasons; they

⁵ Beverly Lemire, "Consumerism in Preindustrial and Early Industrial England: The
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⁶ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass, Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of
were an important tool in forging links of sartorial signification between persons and classes.

Jones and Stallybrass note that while many servants would have received an annual wage, most received far greater economic gains from the system of livery. Livery encompassed all kinds of nonmonetary payment, including food, lodging, and clothing, which sometimes took the form of a uniform indicating their status. However, livery was also paid in gifts of the master’s or mistress’s used clothing to the servant. This was one of the primary ways in which both male and female servants were reimbursed for their services for over two hundred years. In this way, the value of clothing as an economic unit was enhanced by its personal associations. While a new garment might have a higher exchange value and would certainly be more desirable than an older one, the personal associations of used garments nevertheless had a symbolic cultural value.

Of course, servants often understood that they were expected to sell or modify rather than wear the finery of their employers. Dressing out of station violated good taste, if not actual sumptuary laws. Nevertheless, goods purchased secondhand could carry with them the desirable aura of higher classes, and this was part of the appeal as they entered the market. Lemire observes that a garment’s origin could be as flattering as its color and cut, especially its quality betokened use by the upper class. This was particularly important for the large, intermediate class that made up the majority of secondhand clothing consumers; men and women of median income were eager to demonstrate material proof of their upward mobility. Of course, changing fashions made it easy to spot the secondhand garments, but only the well-to-do kept to the latest trends.

In this way, the market established a pattern in which articles of clothing progressed downward through social classes, creating links between classes even while reinforcing their distinctions.

In purely economic terms, clothing during this era sustained its value well, and it was an important medium of exchange as well as a critical part of the household economy. Before the industrial revolution, clothing was expensive and served as an investment for the wealth of middle and lower class wearers. “At the same time,” Lemire observes, “secondhand apparel and accessories functioned as a type of alternate currency, circulating during a time when there was a scarcity of coinage, during the gradual formalization of fiscal media.”  

For example, from the early eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, items of clothing were the most common type of collateral offered for modest loans. During the eighteenth century, this practice was common to the largest sector of England’s population, “those earning from between fifteen and fifty pounds annually.”  

Since clothing made up a significant portion of household expenses, and women were responsible for the home’s domestic economy, Lemire argues that the trade in used clothing gave women control of a substantial portion of a family’s wealth. It was women who pawned the family’s clothing to make ends meet, or bargained with dealers at the back door. While no records of these casual exchanges exist, pawnbroker’s ledgers provide evidence that the overwhelming number of those who pledged were women, and

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the majority of items they pawned was made up of clothing. Lemire makes a convincing case that the trade in secondhand clothes gave them greater access to cash and credit. Therefore, while both genders participated in this economy, it was a particularly important trade for women.

However, the cultural dominance and economic value of this trade doesn’t necessarily mean that it was a glamorous one. The secondhand clothing trade itself was smelly and unruly. By the time a garment reached the lower classes, traces of its past would be far from flattering. Most clothing during this period was wool or linen and was so durable that it might be worn for decades before it became unusable. Emily Cockayne, describing the state of old clothes bought by the poorest classes in colorful terms, observes that they were “smutted, food-stained, sweatridden, pissburnt and might shine with grease. . . Clothes in such a state would be hard, unyielding, and smelly.” The trade itself was plagued by undesirable elements as well. Clothing was one of the most frequently stolen items because it was relatively easy to sell, and such thefts might occur by opportunity, deception, or even robbery. The ease and informality with which clothes were exchanged at this time made stolen garments very difficult to trace, but nevertheless, Lemire notes that in urban districts during the eighteenth century, more than a quarter of all prosecuted thefts were thefts of clothing. This reputation would persist into the nineteenth century.

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10 Sheffield pawnbroker’s ledger, J 90/504, National Archives, London; East London pawnbroker’s ledger, C110/134, National Archives, London. Lemire also examines these documents (“Shifting Currency,” 38).
The informality of the trade during this early period also made it attractive to newcomers, and as a result, a racial minority gained control of the trade in the late seventeenth century, increasing popular prejudice against secondhand dealing. Records of Jewish old clothes dealers in England date back to at least the late seventeenth century, shortly after Jews were readmitted to England in 1656. At this time, records indicate that there were perhaps fewer than five hundred Jews living in England. For the next century or more, many of the Jewish inhabitants of London were recent immigrants, and the secondhand clothing trade offered newcomers the opportunity to gain the commercial foothold in London with little initial investment and few legal restrictions. The trade was passed down from established Anglo-Jewry to newcomers and from father to son, and by the mid-eighteenth century, the Jewish race and the secondhand clothing trade were so commonly associated that porcelain figures of Jewish old clothesmen were produced as collectibles.\(^{12}\) Anti-Semitic prejudice colored popular ideas about the secondhand clothing trade, and the reputation of the secondhand clothing trade as a network for fencing stolen property came to reinforce anti-Semitic stereotypes. According to Lemire, "Jewishness also came to be associated with a trade which was increasingly despised for its arcane, unhygienic, disorderly functions. . . The presumptions and assumptions about the second-hand clothing trade altered the characteristics of expressed bigotry as manifested toward English Jews."\(^{13}\) This would continue well into the nineteenth century.

In an 1829 letter addressed to Robert Peel, then Home Secretary, James Barlow pressed for regulations monitoring old clothesmen. "It has been frequently observed by the

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\(^{12}\) Betty Naggar, *Jewish Pedlars and Hawkers, 1740–1940* (Camberley, Surrey: Porphyrogenitus, 1992); see colored plates.

Magistrates of the Metropolis," he wrote, "that the present Old Clothes men are for the most part composed of the lowest, most immoral class of the Jews; and that many of these people do not hesitate in purchasing stolen property when they think they can make a good profit, and escape detection. The property of numerous felonies have been found in their possession. These truths may perhaps be thought sufficient to show the utility of having some check over these people." He calculates "that at least one half the amount of the lost and stolen property is accepted of by the proprietors of the Old Clothes Shops of the Metropolis."  

Whatever its associations, the trade in secondhand clothes touched the lives of most of the inhabitants of England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. All but the most wealthy wore the clothing of others. While new items were certainly more desirable then as now, in earlier centuries, used clothing carried both substantial cultural and economic value linking classes through patterns of distribution and exchange. It was moreover taken for granted, offering both a cheap alternative to expensive fabrics and a practical currency for a wide range of classes with limited access to money.  

The role of the industrial revolution in reshaping the secondhand market for clothes is complex. While clothing itself could not be assembled through industrial production, fibers could be spun and woven, and textile prices plummeted. Moreover, new labor practices set the stage for the mass-production of cheap, ready-made garments by unskilled, poorly paid workers.  

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14 James Barlow to Robert Peel, 1829, "Suggestion to Regulate Old Clothes Dealers," HO 44/18, National Archives, London.  
15 Ibid.  
clothing trade by supplying greater quantities of goods, keeping up with the increasing rapidity with which fashions came and went. The heyday of the secondhand clothing trade roughly corresponded with this period, lasting from the early eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, and its zenith was marked by the creation of the Old Clothes Exchange in Houndsditch 1843. At this time Mayhew saw it as a lively trade with a degree of success that corresponded with national economic interests.  

Nevertheless, as Lemire observes, the industrial and increasingly cash-based economy worked against the trade in secondhand clothing in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most obvious result was that mass production ultimately lowered the cost of new clothing to levels that competed with the secondhand trade and lowered the demand for outmoded goods. Newly affordable ready-made garments allowed most classes access to the newest fashions at once; new, trend-conscious garments, even when poorly made, were considered a better option than purchasing stained and dated cast clothes. Moreover, the new fabrics that working class families could afford—cotton and shoddy, a fabric recycled from wool rags—were far less durable, and could not survive as many cycles of use and resale. By the second half of the nineteenth century, used clothing went almost exclusively to the very poor, Ireland, or the colonies—to consumers for whom the latest London trends were unaffordable, irrelevant, or both. To buy and wear secondhand clothes in Britain became a mark of dire poverty.

17 Mayhew comments, “Were it possible to obtain the statistics of the last quarter of a century, it would, perhaps, be found that demand of the important interests I have mentioned has there been a greater increase in business and in the trade of old clothes. Whether this purports a high degree of national prosperity or not, it is not my business at present to inquire” (2:26).
The trade practices of the secondhand economy were entering obsolescence as well. The secondhand clothing trade simply did not operate by the rules of the modern, firsthand economy: “[f]ixed prices, fixed premises, new varieties of goods, no haggling, fair dealing . . . the retailing equivalents of rational enlightened commerce”—all of these ran counter to the trade historically practiced by old clothes men.18 While Mayhew noted that the Jewish clothes men preferred trades which left them ample scope for speculation, gratifying their supposed proclivity for gambling, one of his interviewees complains, “Everyone knows the value of an old coat now-a-days” (2:120). Bartering persisted into the second half of the nineteenth century, but the values were more carefully weighed and measured, limiting the scope for profit.

As profit margins slimmed, so did cultural value. The role of secondhand clothing in master-servant relationships was beginning to dissolve. While in upper-class homes servants were often the members of the household to arrange for the sale of secondhand clothes, increasingly middle-class women dealt directly with secondhand clothing dealers. This trend effectively eliminated the traditional middlemen, the servant, interrupting the link between classes that secondhand clothing exchange had once fostered. Evidence for this cultural shift can be found both published and non-published accounts. In a closet drama inspired by Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor, the character of the “Jew Clothes-man” describes this shift: “Formerly shen’elfolksh ushered to kive their ould clouthesh to their sharvintsh, but now ladish shells em

18 Lemire, Dress, Culture, Commerce, 77.
their shelves."¹⁹ In other words, women were more likely to pay servants wages and do what they liked with their own old clothing. Another example of this shift comes from a personal account, the diary of Elizabeth Smith; Smith urges her daughters to keep old clothes for charity: “I consider the servants sufficiently well-off of their wages, well fed, well housed, and no hardship, and all the old clothes I put carefully away, sure that someday some distressed persons will want them. The merest rag goes into a rag bag which when full a poor woman will sell for a few pennies.”²⁰ While Smith is still participating in a system of charitable donation benefiting lower classes, her beneficiary is anonymous. Instead of forming a sartorial link with her servant through the gifting of clothes, she is engaged in a more distant, even commercial transaction. While by this period servants would no doubt have preferred cash payment, what these two accounts demonstrate is that Victorians were aware that the cultural value of old clothing had faded along with its exchange value.

The history of the secondhand clothing trade is important in understanding how the Victorians understood their own secondhand clothing, and moreover how their understanding of clothing may have developed out of an earlier system. Jones and Stallybrass, in their book on clothing in the early modern period, suggest that in earlier times, clothes were understood to have a more intimate relationship, not only with the bodies of their wearers, but with their identities and relationships. “To understand the significance of clothes and the Renaissance, we need to undo our own special categories,

in which subjects are prior to objects, wearers to what is worn. We need to understand the animated mass of clothes, their ability to ‘pick up’ subjects, to mold and shape them both physically and socially, to constitute subjects through their power as material memories.”

Shells and Outer Husks of the Body

Carlyle certainly understood the ability of clothing to shape the subject, and in *Sartor Resartus*, he uses the mutually constitutive relationship between humans and their clothing as a metaphor for the layers of human culture that stand between the individual, self-realization, and divinity. Clothing is a useful metaphor because it makes the abstract functions of culture visible and tangible: it marks distinctions of gender, rank, profession, religion, and nationality. It is assembled and removed in layers that each have special functions and significance. But most importantly for Carlyle’s purposes, it wears out. It ceases to be fashionable, develops holes and tears and stains, and at last decays to rags. In doing so, it renders the passing of time and the inevitable change of society visible and tangible as well, demanding renewal.

However, there is one aspect of clothing that does not suit Carlyle’s purposes: its potential for exchange. Clothing in *Sartor Resartus* is not totally static, but it is so closely identified with the wearer that the two are almost inseparable. Since Carlyle playfully

21 Jones and Stallybrass, 2.
22 Bernard Beatty comments that “The point about clothes for [Carlyle] is that they are changeable” (“Two Kinds of Clothing: *Sartor Resartus* and *Great Expectations*,” in *Rereading Victorian Fiction*, ed. Alice Jenkins and Juliet John. [Houndmills, Basingstoke: MacMillan Press, 2000], 44–58). Let me emphasize the distinction I draw
reversers the binary that human agency crafts the signifying power of clothing, the clothing in *Sartor Resartus* possesses tremendous disruptive potential; swapping clothing might result in swapping identities, cultures, religions, class, or status. While Carlyle urges readers to recognize the superficiality of the cultural ties that bind us, he does not wish to suggest that such superficialities are endlessly and easily transferable.\(^{23}\)

*Sartor Resartus* establishes the signifying power of clothing very early in the text. Teufelsdröckh wishes to persuade his reader—and especially his conventional, unimaginative Editor—to see beyond the layers of clothing and culture that obscure the universal dignity of the human soul. But in order to drive home this point, Carlyle first reifies the ability of clothing to shape the individual by emphasizing the Editor’s conformity to the very superficial distinctions that Teufelsdröckh intends to destroy. This dynamic first emerges in Teufelsdröckh’s dogged emphasis of the seemingly obvious point that clothing does not, in fact, make the man: “Within the most starched cravat there passes a windpipe and a wesand, and under the thickest embroidered waistcoat beats a heart” (23). The Editor sees in these egalitarian but not by this period necessarily unconventional sentiments evidence of “a strange scientific freedom,” exclaiming, “Wonderful it is with what cutting words, now and then, he severs asunder the confusion; sheers down, were it furlongs deep, into the true centre of the matter; and there not only

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\(^{23}\) It is worth noting as an aside that Carlyle uses the insuitability of clothes on the wrong person as a metaphor for a writer being barred from his rightful vocation in *On Heroes, Heroism, and the Heroic in History*: “Whatsoever thing, as I said above, has virtual unnoticed power will cast off its wrappages, bandages, and step forth one day with palpably articulated, universally visible power. That one man wear the clothes, and take the wages, of a function which is done by quite another: there can be no profit in this; this is not right, it is wrong” (*On Heroes, Heroism, and the Heroic in History*, ed. John Chester Adams [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907], 230).
hits the nail on the head, but with crushing force smites it home, and buries it” (23). Part of our understanding of Teufelsdröckh as a radical, then, must be constructed by the Editor’s ham-fisted incredulity at the notion that we are all the same under our clothes.

By way of explaining the injustice of the power of clothes to create difference, Teufelsdröckh offers a number of examples of the ways in which clothing, together with the culture that it signifies, shapes men’s individual conflicts and fates. Perhaps borrowing from Carl Linnaeus’s sartorial taxonomy of the human race, Teufelsdröckh comments that according to “vulgar Logic,” man is merely an “omnivorous Biped that wears Breeches” (51). Such logic denies man both a soul and his autonomy and reduces him to the sum total of his superficial appearance (51). As Teufelsdröckh explains, this can have devastating consequences if you wear the wrong outfit. “You see two individuals, . . . one dressed in fine Red, the other and coarse threadbare Blue: Red says to Blue, ‘Be hanged and anatomised;’ Blue hears with a shudder, and (O wonder of wonders!) marches sorrowfully to the gallows.” “How is this?” asks Teufelsdröckh. He muses,

Red has no physical hold of Blue, no clutch of hand, is no wise in contact with him . . . Thinking reader, the reason seems to me twofold: First, that Man is a Spirit, and bound by invisible bonds to All Men; Secondly, that he wears Clothes, which are the visible emblems of that fact. Has not your Red, hanging individual, a horsehair wig, squirrel skins, and a plush gown; whereby all mortals know that he is a JUDGE?—Society, which the more I think of it astonishes me all the more, is founded upon cloth. (48)
Here, Teufelsdröckh elides the magnitude of different circumstances that separate the convict from the judge; clothing rather than class is what constitutes and symbolizes the doom of one and the power of the other. Later in *Sartor Resartus*, Teufelsdröckh describes the inevitable conflict between the fashionably wealthy Dandies and the miserable Poor-Slaves as an antipathy based on cultural difference, signified primarily by clothing. In contrast to the Dandies’ fashionable waistcoats and trousers, the Poor-Slaves choose to wear “a raiment [that] consists of innumerable skirts, lappets, and irregular wings, of all cloths and of all colors” (213). In this case, clothing stands in for wealth as the principal difference between the two.

Because Teufelsdröckh has so carefully established the principle that society limits our roles based on what we wear, Carlyle deemphasizes the exchangeable nature of clothing. This is not to say that he portrays clothing as utterly indetachable or inalienable. The fact that “a *Naked World* is possible, nay actually exists (under the Clothed one)” is acknowledged (50), and one of Teufelsdröckh’s favorite fantasies is to imagine dignitaries suddenly unrobed (48). Moreover, as I noted earlier, the text includes a chapter on the ghost-like old clothes of Monmouth Street. Both men without clothes and clothes without men feature prominently at various moments in the text. But never does an article of clothing change hands. This at first seems like an oversight on Carlyle’s part. Quite apart from any consideration of historical accuracy in writing about clothing and culture—one must recall, after all, that Carlyle’s purpose wasn’t really to write about clothing—the failure to consider livery and other kinds of exchange among Teufelsdröckh’s ramblings on the role of clothes in constructing society is a missed opportunity to represent a more complex version of class hierarchy, and class is one of
the major preoccupations of the text. The men and women that Teufelsdröckh writes about in his clothes volume are strangely disconnected from their greater social context. There is no portrayal of feudal or master/servant relationships at any point in his history of fashion—only persons whose contrasting garb renders them mutually incomprehensible. However, by sidestepping the matter of the transferability of clothing, Carlyle emphasizes that the distinctions between persons of different classes and societies are not easily altered, no matter how superficial or even accidental their origins. The solution lies not so much in transferring clothing from one body to another, but rather in seeking to see through and beyond it.

It is not surprising, then, to find that Monmouth Street secondhand clothing in *Sartor Resartus* is somewhat alienated and disconnected from its former and potential wearers, although it remains evocative of a forgotten past. Since Teufelsdröckh argues that we are all the same under our clothes, and the clothes themselves are understood to create rank, it follows—according to Carlyle's satirical logic at least—that Teufelsdröckh finds more to contemplate and admire in empty clothes than in the human form. He describes his visit to Monmouth Street in terms of evocative of a church or a graveyard.

The gladder am I, on the other hand, to do reverence to those Shells and outer Husks of the Body, wherein no devilish passion any longer lodges, but only the pure emblem and effigies of Man: I mean, to Empty, or even to Cast Clothes ... That reverence which cannot act without obstruction and perversion when the Clothes are full, may have free course when they are empty ... Often have I turned into their Old-Clothes Market to worship. With awe-struck heart I walk through that Monmouth Street, with its empty Suits, as through a Sanhedrim of
stainless Ghosts. Silent are they, but expressive in their silence: the past witnesses and instruments of Woe and Joy, of Passions, Virtues, Crimes, and all the fathomless tumult of Good and Evil in 'the Prison called Life.' (182–3)

In this passage, the clothes are evocative of the dead, but are not quite the same as corpses. They are effigies: symbols of status and rank that no longer carry the taint of vanity, stupidity, desire, or other vices common to humanity. Although Carlyle and his readers know that old clothes were, in fact, anything but stainless, Teufelsdröckh’s attitude toward the clothing makes the idea that such clothing could be reinvested with a new human form almost sacrilegious.

The secondhand clothing business is described in terms of religious rites. The old clothes man, who roams the city soliciting old clothes, is transformed into a figure out of Old Testament prophecy, a “bearded Jewish Highpriest, who with a hoarse voice, like some Angel of Doom, summons them from the four winds!” (183). The secondhand hats and clothes that he collects and hangs about his person are reimagined as priestly vestments: “On his head, like the Pope, he has three Hats,—a real triple tiara; on either hand, are the similitude of Wings, where on the summoned Garments come to alight; and ever, as he slowly cleaves the air, sounds forth his deep fateful note, as if through a trumpet he were proclaiming: ‘Ghosts of Life, come to Judgment!’” Rather than souls being purified of corrupt human forms, here we have clothing purified from corrupt humanity by a ritual of divestment. The process of patching and dyeing that old-clothes dealers often used to refurbish garments for sale to new owners becomes the final right of purification; “Reck not, ye fluttering Ghosts: he will purify you in his Purgatory, with fire and with water; and, one day, new-created ye shall reappear” (183). What is happening,
of course, is not a preparation for Heaven, but rather for reincarnation: the process of alienation and recommodification. However, no garment is sold; the reanimation seemingly anticipated by these preparations is never portrayed. Because of the necessity of stabilizing the meanings that clothes confer, Carlyle’s portrayal of the secondhand clothing trade must foreclose any notion of exchange, emphasizing instead the ability of empty clothes to speak movingly of the past.

The Editor has no illusions about this process, and he seems unenthused about Teufelsdröckh’s flight of fancy, commenting, “To most men, as it does to ourselves, all this will seem overcharged. We too have walked through Monmouth Street; but with little feeling of ‘Devotion:’ probably in part because the contemplative process is so fatally broken in upon by the brood of money-changers, who nestle in that Church, and importune the worshipper with merely secular proposals” (184). For the Editor, the marketplace is devoid of spiritual significance. Yet Teufelsdröckh’s reverence anticipates other secondhand shoppers in literature, especially Lucy Snowe of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, who enters an “ancient place, full of ancient things” (a secondhand shop) as though she were visiting a confessional. Carlyle, through Teufelsdröckh, urges us to leave the past behind, but in *Sartor Resartus* as well in his later writings—*The French Revolution*, *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic in History*, and *Past and Present*—he urges us to return not only to the events of the past but also to its humanity in order to better understand ourselves and our future.

Before leaving the subject of secondhand clothes in *Sartor Resartus*, it is worth mentioning that Carlyle’s interest in paying homage to cast-off things rather than

24 See Mayhew, 2:27.
reassembling them for future use is not merely a comment on the nature of history and human culture. It also offers some insight into the process that led to the creation of *Sartor Resartus*, Carlyle’s first creative work after years of editing and translation. G. B. Tennyson observes that Carlyle had a strong urge to become an original—that is to say, a firsthand—author.26 As Tennyson notes, this ambition is mirrored in the tension between the Editor and Teufelsdröckh throughout *Sartor Resartus*. But it also manifests itself more specifically in the attitudes of the Editor and Teufelsdröckh toward old clothes. While the editor doesn’t quite understand Teufelsdröckh’s fanciful reverence for old clothes, he speculates that Monmouth Street was the origin of Teufelsdröckh’s philosophy. “[I]t cannot be uninteresting that we here find how early the significance of Clothes had dawned on that now it’s so distinguished Clothes-Professor. Might we but fancy it to have been even in Monmouth Street, at the bottom of our own English “ink-sea,” that this remarkable Volume first took being.”27 However, in spite of the Editor’s suspicions, Teufelsdröckh makes it clear that his inspiration originated not with the past, but with the present.

I came upon a Signpost, whereon stood written that such and such a one was “Breeches-Maker to his Majesty;” and stood painted the Effigies of a Pair of Leather Breeches, and between the knees these memorable words, *SIC ITUR AD ASTRA*. Was not this the Martyr prison-speech of a Tailor sighing indeed in bonds, yet sighing toward deliverance; and prophetically appealing to a better day? A day

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27 Carlyle, 184.
of justice, when the worth of Breeches would be revealed to man, and the Scissors become for ever venerable.

Neither, perhaps, may I now say, has his appeal been altogether in vain. It was in this high moment, when the soul, rent, as it were, and shed asunder, is open to inspiring influence, that I first conceived this Work on Clothes; the greatest I can ever hope to do; which has already, after long retardations, occupied, and will yet occupy, so large a section of my Life; and of which the Primary and simpler Portion may here find its conclusion. 28

Thus Carlyle explains what is, for him, the chasm between the original and the editorial in terms of clothes. The Editor, as demonstrated by his struggles to keep up with Teufelsdrockh's sansculottism, clings too much to the past—old, tattered things. But the creative visionary seeks not origins, but new beginnings. In the context of the entire work, the value cast-off garments symbolizes the value of an editor or critic's work in purifying the original thoughts of others, but also suggests both Carlyle's anxiety as a translator and critic that he may not have the "force . . . to produce something original" and the determination with which he did so. 29

Speculations to Which They Give Rise

According to Teufelsdrockh, clothing both constructs our social identity and threatens to subsume our individuality: "Clothes have made Men of us; they are threatening to make Clothes-screens of us" (32). In the sketches and novels by Dickens,

28 Carlyle, 220.
29 Tennyson, 127.
we find a number of characters who are so caricatured by their clothing that they seem at first little more than clothes screens. His obsessive descriptions of dress shape our impressions of a number of his most memorable characters—a for example, Mrs. Jellby of *Bleak House*, whose badly mended dresses reflect her badly managed family, or Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, whose septic memories find material expression in her tattered wedding dress. In the most extreme cases, clothing actually precedes characterization. In *The Pickwick Papers*, for example, we know that the “tights and gaiters” in Robert Seymour’s original illustrations, prepared before Dickens began his own work on the project, necessarily preceded Dickens’s textual realization of the immortal Pickwick. \(^{30}\) Even other Pickwickians who had not yet been illustrated—Tupman, Winkle, and Snodgrass—are preceded by their wardrobes. Tupman’s waistcoat, not his body, develops inch by inch; Snodgrass is “enveloped in a mysterious blue coat” while Winkle “communicates additional luster to a new green shooting coat,” not the other way around. \(^{31}\) Rarely in his work do we see the garments of his characters strewn on the floor or hung in a wardrobe, but the effect of such grotesquely caricatured garments hanging empty can be imagined.

In *Sketches by Boz*, Dickens paints just such a scene in his own musings on the “venerable” old clothes market on Monmouth Street. His clothes are not stainless ghosts emptied of humanity, but rather an imaginary humanity reconstituted—stains and all—out of the evidence that clothing leaves behind. Dickens’s impression of the secondhand clothing trade as a business perpetually haunted by the past influenced Henry Mayhew’s

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\(^{30}\) Mayhew, 1:34.

exploration of the same topic in *London Labour and the London Poor*. Mayhew demonstrates this influence explicitly by incorporating long passages from Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz*, but he also liven his otherwise factual account with his own digressions on the specters of former owners whose presence is sustained in the material memory of the garments they once wore. Moreover, Dickens and Mayhew, unlike Carlyle, are interested in the significance of the transfer of old clothes through the marketplace. Reading them together in contrast to the more abstract symbolism of Carlyle’s secondhand clothing highlights their more individualized version of clothing’s retention of individual and social significance, and it also reveals the economic and metaphorical significance of such history when it is exchanged.

If Carlyle’s Monmouth Street is a synagogue of sorts, Dickens’s version is much more like a museum. He sets the stage for his readers to look into the past by describing a neighborhood untouched by change even as fashions come and go:

> We have hinted at the antiquity of our favourite spot. “A Monmouth-street laced coat” was a by-word a century ago; and still we find Monmouth-street the same. Pilot great-coats with wooden buttons, have usurped the place of the ponderous laced coats with full skirts; embroidered waistcoats with large flaps, have yielded to double-breasted checks with roll-collars; and three-cornered hats of quaint appearance, have given place to the low crowns and broad brims of the coachman school; but it is the times that have changed, not Monmouth-street. Through every alteration and every change, Monmouth-street has still remained the burial-place of the
fashions; and such, to judge from all present appearances, it will remain

until there are no more fashions to bury. (74–5)

Such did not prove to the case. By the time Mayhew wrote about Monmouth Street in the late 1840s, the old clothes were gone, replaced by boot refurbishers. But nevertheless, we see in this passage that Dickens marks the passage of time through the passage of clothes and the “burial” of fashions rather than lives.

Dickens’s Monmouth Street is replete with not only its own history, but also the history of the clothing itself. Moreover, while Carlyle’s secondhand clothing gestures toward former ways of life but is “purged from the grossness of sense” (182), Dickens’s clothing evokes the experiences and emotions of the specific human form it once covered. The metonymic associations between clothing and former owners are so powerful in fact, that the clothing becomes animate.

We love to walk among these extensive groves of the illustrious dead, and to indulge in the speculations to which they give rise; now fitting a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat, upon some being of our own conjuring up, and endeavouring, from the shape and fashion of the garment itself, to bring its former owner before our mind’s eye. We have gone on speculating in this way, until whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers; lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them; waistcoats have almost burst

32 See Mayhew, 1:34.
with anxiety to put themselves on; and half an acre of shoes have suddenly found feet to fit them. (75)

Like the Pickwickians, who are preceded in existence by their distinctive wardrobes, the Monmouth street clothes are so highly individualized as materially coded history that they can be read and interpreted. Browsing a rack of various articles of clothing as though paging through a book, the narrator speculates that “There was the man’s whole life written as legibly on those clothes, as if we had his autobiography engrossed on parchment before us” (76).

The narrator then begins to piece together a life out of various well-worn suits crafted for boys and men, a story of decline and loss written in old clothes. The first two garments are those of a boy: a “patched and much-soiled skeleton suit,” that bears evidence of education, income, and sugary traces of indulgent pampering, followed by a “long-worn suit . . . rusty and thready before it was laid aside, but clean and free from soil to the last,” evidence of poverty and motherly solicitude (76). But then the clothes of the young man prove that the mother’s care was in vain. A suit “smart but slovenly; meant to be gay, and yet not half so decent” proves to be a bad omen. The grown man appears in “broad-skirted green coat, with the large metal buttons,” the garment of an idle ruffian, fulfilling the promise of his youth (77). The tale then concludes with a “coarse round frock, with a worn cotton neckerchief—indicating “prison, and the sentence—banishment or the gallows.” “We had no clue to the end of the tale,” says Dickens’s narrator, “but it was easy to guess its termination”—implying its sartorial denouement, a shroud (78).
Dickens echoes this theme of lost histories in his sketch on "Brokers and Marine-store Shops," speculating that, "If an authentic history of their contents could be procured, it would furnish . . . many a melancholy tale." Dickens once again spins a such a tale from secondhand goods, this time looking at items on the shelf in a Southwark pawnbrokers, and speculating on the economic collapse that led a family to part one by one with the items on display. "First, watches and rings, then cloaks, coats, and all the more expensive articles of dress, have found their way to the pawnbroker's," he observes. He continues,

But hunger must be allayed, and what has already become a habit, is easily resorted to, when an emergency arises. Light articles of clothing, first of the ruined man, then of his wife, at last of their children, even of the youngest, have been parted with, piecemeal. There they are, thrown carelessly together until a purchaser presents himself. (181)

"The make and materials" of these secondhand clothes "tell of better days"; and Dickens notes that the older they are, "the greater the misery and destitution of those whom they once adorned." Just as Dickens hints at the death of the clothes-wearer in his Monmouth Street sketch, the image of the inanimate clothing heaped on the floor of the brokers' shop hints at a tragic conclusion. While clothing in Dickens is far more evocative of specific persons than it is in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, there is this similarity: collections of old clothing remind us of absent corporeality; they are indeed a sort of "burial place."

The terror of these passages in *Sketches by Boz* is the insidious and inevitable perpetuation of poverty. In seeing used items of clothing, destined to walk again on other bodies, Dickens anticipates another cycle of loss, decay, and death. We find here the
realization of the threat implied by Carlyle’s powerfully symbolic clothing: if clothing precedes characterization—if it actually shapes individuality—then secondhand clothing, if actually transferred from one person to another, can also transfer one person’s fate to another in a sort of metonymic contagion. Carlyle forecloses this possibility, but Dickens deploys it repeatedly.

It perhaps is used to best effect in Dickens’s novel *Little Dorrit*, in which old clothes do appear on a new body and present a sight even more unsettling than empty garments. In the following passage, poor messengers waiting outside of the Marshalsea Prison are described, and their clothing fulfills the promise that the fate of poverty passes through clothing.

The shabbiness of these attendants upon shabbiness, the poverty of these insolvent waiters upon insolvency, was a sight to see. Such threadbare coats and trousers, such dusty gowns and shawls, such squashed hats and bonnets, such boots and shoes, such umbrellas and walking-sticks, never were seen in Rag Fair. All of them wore the cast-off clothes of other men and women, were made up of patches and pieces of other people’s individuality, and had no sartorial existence of their own proper. Their walk was the walk of a race apart. They had a peculiar way of doggedly slinking round the corner, as if they were eternally going to the pawnbroker’s.33

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33 Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999) p. 75. Catherine Waters has also drawn comparisons between these passages in Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz* and *Little Dorrit*, noting that “these descriptions also capture the uncanniness of second-hand clothing, its disturbingly liminal quality: cast-off clothes are inanimate things that somehow retain the vestiges of the lives of former wearers”; she examines these passages.
As in *Sartor Resartus*, clothing almost totally eclipses the person within. However, in *Sartor Resartus*, humans are reduced to clothes screens, to mere objects. In *Little Dorrit*, the messengers of the Marshalsea are something less—something abject and altogether alien because of their secondhand clothes. The effacement of their individuality is so complete that their personhood is utterly eradicated; to have “no sartorial existence of their own proper” is to exist outside a system of meaning, to be unreadable and unknowable. But this does not mean that secondhand clothing signifies an absence of meaning for Dickens; rather, its meanings are indelibly, if inscrutably, marked. Like the secondhand clothes for sale on Monmouth Street, these garments serve as material autobiographies of their original, rather than their current owners, redolent with their unknowable and unsettling histories.

Mayhew’s writings on the secondhand trade are in the journalistic rather than the literary mode, but nonetheless he borrowed substantially from Dickens’s *Sketches by Boz*—specifically from “Meditations in Monmouth Street,” “Seven Dials,” and “Brokers and Marine-Store Shops.”\(^3_4\) Mayhew even claims that Dickens’s imaginative depictions enhance the accuracy of his portrayal of secondhand sellers; prior to quoting the majority of the sketch on brokers’ shops, Mayhew comments, “On this subject I cannot do better than quote Mr. Dickens, one of the most minute and truthful of observers” (2:24),

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\(^3_4\) These passages appear in Mayhew 2:24, 35–6.
suggesting that he subscribes to Robert Browning’s philosophy that “fancy with fact is just one fact the more.”

Moreover, he seems to have borrowed Dickens’s metaphorical language in his own descriptions of secondhand clothes for sale. In certain passages, his statistics and personal interviews give way to more figurative language that describes the eerie and ineffable history that old clothing materially encodes. For example, Mayhew’s description of Petticoat Lane on a Saturday evening is evocative of both Carlyle’s “stainless ghosts” and Dickens’s “extensive groves of the illustrious dead”:

As the Jewish Sabbath terminates at sunset, the scene may be the most striking of all. The flaring lights from uncovered gas, from fat-fed lamps, from the paper-shaded candles, and the many ways in which the poorer street-folk throw some illumination over their goods, produce a multiplicity of lights and shadows, which, thrown and blended over the old clothes hanging up along the lines of street, cause them to assume mysterious forms, and if the wind be high make them, as they are blown to and fro, look more mysterious still. (39)

Here Mayhew’s old clothes do not speak of the past directly; instead, they look “mysterious” and “more mysterious still.” Mayhew relies on his reader to complete his unspoken thought: that the motion imparted by flickering lights and wind animates the clothing, making it appear strange and ghostly. While Mayhew does not fully articulate this idea, the fearful animation recalls a long quotation from Dickens’s Monmouth Street sketch that appears only a few pages earlier; Dickens thus anticipates and completes

Mayhew’s description of the uncanny relationship between clothes and the people who wore them.

In his discussion of the wholesale business at the Old Clothes Exchange, Mayhew indulges in another Monmouth-Street-like reverie, contemplating for a rare moment the history of material objects instead of their exchange value, and the attractions of things rather than people.\textsuperscript{36} However, he does so in his own fashion by attempting to categorize the clothing laying in piles destined for the poor in Ireland. The piled garments are a microcosm of London from the highest to the lowest classes, and in them, Mayhew traces the web of connections simultaneously forged and lost through marketplace exchange.

It is curious to reflect from how many classes the pile of old garments has been collected—how many privations have been endured before some of these habiliments found their way into the possession of the old clothesman—what besotted debauchery put others in his possession—with what cool calculation others were disposed of—how many were procured for money, and how many by the tempting offers of flowers, glass, crockery, spars, table-covers, lace, or millinery—what was the clothing which could first be spared when rent was to be defrayed or bread to be bought, and what was treasured until the last—in what scenes of gaiety or gravity, in the opera-house or the senate, had the perhaps departed wearers of some of that heap of old clothes figured—through how many possessors, and again through what new scenes at middle-class or artisan comfort had these dresses passed, or through what accidents of “genteel” privatization

\textsuperscript{36} Mayhew, 2:24, 36.
and destitution—and lastly through what necessities of squalid wretchedness and low debauchery. (27)

While Dickens constructs a singular individuality from the shapes suggested by the old clothes he contemplates, Mayhew is interested in imaginatively reconstructing the path of old clothes from one owner to the next, and the next, and so on. Thus the biography of any one former owner is eclipsed by the more interesting biography of the garment which has passed through so many different hands. Unlike Carlyle, and even to decree unlike Dickens, Mayhew is intrigued rather than troubled by the recommodification and sale of old clothes. Their symbolism for him is perhaps less powerful and less easily disrupted by fragmentation and exchange, but then part of the symbolism of old clothes for Mayhew is their economic value; their inevitable loss tells part of the story of poverty that he is attempting to recover.

For Victorian writers such as Dickens and Mayhew, old clothes are powerful referents of the past even when that past is difficult to decode. For Dickens, who chose to see clothing as a reflection of singular individuality rather than serial ownership, these descriptions of old clothes suggest that these garments are overwritten by the history of social exchange and economic trends; for Mayhew, the history of exchange of secondhand clothing—its ability to both transcend and define the categories he so carefully draws—is in fact its most interesting symbolic property. For both, the redistribution of these old clothes from body to body mirrors the insidiousness of poverty; the idea that the fate of poverty forever repeats itself—a repetition that seems to echo continuously and contiguously through the transfer of secondhand clothes from the
poor to those who are poorer still. In wearing secondhand clothes, one might be marked with not only the stains and creases of another’s life, but also the inevitability of another’s fate.

Confusion and Clamour

The signifying potential of secondhand clothing in the work of Carlyle, Dickens, and Mayhew evokes fear and fascination, especially when these authors contemplate possibility of the transfer of the material memories to new owners and wearers. But what of those who sell secondhand clothes? In Mayhew’s detailed accounts of secondhand clothing dealers, the business of old clothes—ragged, mismatched, dirty, and disordered—seems to stain every one involved in it. If old garments muddle identities and histories, the fragmented piles of old clothes and rags that make up the old clothes exchanges muddle social distinctions. This chaotic world of abundance, noise, filth, and unspecified value leads to breakdown in social order that crosses classes, gender, and the public-private divide.

Mayhew’s descriptions of the Old Clothes Exchanges in Houndsditch appear in separate accounts written two years apart and divided between the first two volumes of London Labour and the London Poor. As a result, even before we consider the chaos of the clothing exchange itself, his narrative is fragmented and somewhat inconsistent: the first emphasizes the chaos and disorder that has historically characterized the

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37 Mayhew acknowledges the two-year gap between his two descriptions of the Old Clothes Exchange (2:28). These versions appear in “Street Sellers of Manufactured Articles” (1:323–456, 368–9) and “Street Sellers to of Second-hand Articles” (2:5–46, 25–9).
marketplace, while the second account emphasizes changes and expansion that have taken place over time. In spite of their differences, each demonstrates the way in which secondhand goods confuse identity and value, yet hold surprising wealth.

The first account is included as part of his discussion of crockery barterers—a subcategory of old clothes dealers, initially Irish rather than Jewish, who traded various items and especially crockery for old clothes. Mayhew observes that these traders are a “new class” that had operated in London for less than twelve years at the time of his writing (1:365). They carry showy looking seconds of china and glass to trade for old clothes, tempting servants and housekeepers as well as middle-class women. This bartering practice, with its advantages of indeterminate value and consumer appeal, is taken up by other street dealers as well: costermongers, plant sellers, and old-clothes men learn that bartering increases the potential scope for profit by clouding value.

Following his description of the somewhat shady dealings of crockery barterers, Mayhew describes the teeming, cosmopolitan, and filthy marketplace where they exchange the clothes they collect: “a large square plot of damp ground, about an acre in extent” (1:368). “Here,” he writes, “meet all the Jews clothesmen, hucksters, dealers in secondhand shoes, left-off wardrobe keepers, hareskin dealers, umbrella dealers and menders, and indeed buyers and sellers of left-off clothes and worn-out commodities of every description. The purchasers are of all nations, and in all costumes. Some are Greeks, others Swiss, and others Germans” (1:368). The discord is so great that the seller of clothes at the exchange may fear that his bundle will be taken from him. “Such is the anxiety and greediness of the buyers, that it is as much as the seller can do to keep his bundle on his back . . . I am assured that it requires the greatest vigilance to prevent
things being carried off unpaid in the confusion” (1:368). In all, Mayhew declares, “no other place is such a scene of riot, rags, and filth.”

Business is carried out via a mix of crafty bargaining and deception. Appearances are not what they seem; the wildest traders may be the most poorly dressed. “Everyone there is dressed in his worst. If he has any good clothes he would not put them on” (1:368). He cites in particular “the man with a long flowing beard and greasy tattered gabardine” who is “worth thousands” and will make another sixpence out of the rags and tatters select that are strewn about the ground in heaps for sale.” He adds, “The stench of the old clothes is positively overpowering,” but it is not entirely clear if he refers to the piles of old clothes for sale, or the old clothes worn by the dealers (1:368). In this way, he subtly compares the secondhand goods with the secondhand dealers: both secondhand goods and dealers are repulsive and rejected from the dominant production based economy and the mainstream of society, yet in spite of their apparent alterity, both can conceal great wealth.

Mayhew’s second description of the Old Clothes Exchange is considerably more positive, focusing on the advancements in the trade brought about by the opening of the improved exchanges 1843. Mayhew observes that “[t]he confusion and clamour before the institution of the present arrangements were extreme. Great as was the extent of the business transacted, people wondered how it could be accomplished, for it always appeared to the stranger, that there could be no order whatsoever in all the disorder” (2:26). He notes that before this time, the exchange of old clothes often resulted in physical altercations, prompting nearby businesses, including the East India Company warehouses, to complain about the secondhand fracas.
This second account mentions with the first does not: that the Old Clothes Exchange was essentially privatized and greatly improved by an entrepreneur named L. Isaac, who purchased land and built covered markets and in general brought a semblance of order and reduced the need for police interference. While at his first account, he emphasizes how difficult it is to hold onto one’s belongings in the confusion, in his second he notes that “pilfering one from another by the poor persons who have collected the second-hand garments, and have carried them to the Old Clothes Exchange to dispose of, is of very rare occurrence. This is the more commendable, for many of the waiters could not be identified by their owner, as he had procured them only that morning . . . he might have some difficulty in swearing to identity of the [items] purloined” (2:29). It is unclear whether this represents an improvement in the business practices of the old clothes exchange since he wrote his first account, or whether it merely indicates that he has become more familiar with the improvements of the past decade.

In spite of the improvements, Mayhew continues to draw comparisons between the secondhand clothing dealers and the merchandise they sell. In the first account, all the dealers wear old clothes, and as a result, they look and smell very much like the piles of goods they exchange. In his more complimentary second account, he elaborates and draws a more explicit comparison between the dealers, the covered market places where the exchanges take place, and the old clothes. “The Old Clothes Exchanges have assuredly one recommendation as they are now seen,” he comments, “their appropriateness. They have a threadbare, patch, and second-hand look. The dresses worn by the dealers, and the dresses they deal in, are all in accordance with the genius of the place. But the eagerness, crowding, and energy, are the grand features of the scene; and
of all the many curious sites in London there is none so picturesque (from the various costumes of the buyers and sellers), none so novel, and none so animated as that of the Old Clothes Exchange” (2:27).

Mayhew demonstrates that the signifying power of the secondhand clothing trade is far more complex than more imaginative accounts by Carlyle and Dickens or even the history of preindustrial clothing exchange would suggest. Historical discussions of the preindustrial trade and clothing, such as those by Lemire, suggest that the dirtiness of the clothes and their general appearance of secondhandedness would directly correspond with the poverty if the wearer. Clothes were expected to have a predictable biography, marching down through ranks and classes as they gathered the characteristics of poverty and decay. Carlyle and Dickens, observing the trade, assume that clothing—whether secondhand or not—conveys a specific message about the person who wears it. Mayhew suggests that secondhand clothing may speak a misleading language, especially within the confines of the mid-nineteenth-century exchanges as he describes them. While used clothing of an earlier era might have been understood to order the social body, this clothing is worn to muddle identities and confuse perceptions so that secondhand clothing dealers can maximize profits.

These passages represent a very public instantiation of the old clothes trade, but the exchanges were merely the public face of the trade that penetrated domestic spaces across the city. Mayhew’s accounts of the secondhand clothes trade also exposes the disorder of the secondhand clothes trade as it pervades even the private, sometimes middle-class, space of the home. For old clothes could not reach the marketplace unless they were purchased by “street-buyers” who solicited them from households and brought
them to the Old Clothes Exchange to sell. Old clothesmen and crockery barterers walked
the streets, shouting “Clo’! Clo’!” and hawking their wares, inviting household managers
to bring used garments out for them to inspect and purchase.

As noted above, women, as domestic managers, were the ones who dealt
clothesmen, crockery barterers, and other street buyers and sellers. And despite the
disorder and dirt of the secondhand clothing trade, Mayhew reveals that these women are
not reluctant participants. While Mayhew frequently asserts that old clothes men
routinely attempt to cheat their customers, his accounts nonetheless suggests a lively
competition between both the sellers and purchasers of secondhand goods. In dealing
with the secondhand trade, the middle-class women become participants, absorbing the
characteristic combativeness and deception apparent in Mayhew’s account of the Old
Clothes Exchange.

In fact, no human specimen treated in Henry Mayhew’s survey of the working
poor so thoroughly troubles Mayhew’s class-based moral and economic distinctions as
the middle-class woman. Notorious for “Jewing away as hard as they can, pricing at their
own things, and downcrying youm,” Victorian women of means played a critical and
even combative role in the supply chain of London’s vast secondhand clothes trade as
Mayhew describes it (1:367–8). Mayhew himself understands these women as the
customers, and even the scammed victims, of old-clothes men and crockery barterers. But
that is not the only possible interpretation of his quoted sources—dealers who term
middle-class women “she-dragons” and “screws” (1:367–8). The competing voices in
this polyphonic text work against Mayhew’s classifications, unhinging his binaries
dividing seller from buyer, and public from private.
A number of feminist scholars have complicated and challenged literary and historical stereotypes of voracious middle-class female consumption in a variety of ways, these studies have generally been limited to the consideration of newly purchased items; and therefore to the consumption of luxuries in shops with cash or credit. While Mayhew portrays crock bartering as a variation on stereotypical patterns of female consumption—voracious and dangerous to the economic stability of the home—I argue that the women in these narratives, otherwise barred from commerce and other useful occupation, evade the cash economy and its gendered binaries to sell out of their homes. By reading for the middle-class woman’s role in a text often read only for its depiction of working-class poverty, and by reading Mayhew’s quoted sources against his mediating interpretations, we gain a more nuanced understanding of women’s economic life outside of the dominant capitalist economy.

In the most obvious sense, of course, middle-class women in Mayhew’s narratives are clientele rather than traders. But a barter economy blurs distinctions, and this is particularly true in *London Labour and the London Poor*. Mayhew’s classification of street-folk—especially “street-sellers” and “street-buyers”—cannot precisely distinguish between all trades. For example, when sellers of live plants accept clothes for trade, and old-clothes men carry plants for trade, binaries begin to unravel. This is true with basic class distinctions made in his text as well; Mayhew’s principle distinction in his

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introduction—the distinction between “the more industrious portion of the community” and those who “prey upon” them—is particularly cloudy; not only do many street-sellers in his pages appear very industrious relative to the classes they serve, but women seem to avoid categorization altogether; they are the property rather than the members of their class (1:2). Finally, through the narratives of his sources, we see inversions of the public and private as women chase traders down in the streets and lure them back to the home’s private spaces for discreet bargaining.

But the most powerful inversion of all is our view of the middle-class woman herself; through the eyes of Mayhew’s street-sellers, middle-class women do appear in a very different light. Notable is one account of them from a crockery barterer:

But the greatest “screws” we has to deal with are some of the ladies in the squares. They stops you on the sly in the streets, and tells you to call at their house at sitch a hour of the day, and when you goes there they smuggles you quietly into some room by yourselves, and then sets to work Jewing away as hard as they can, pricing up their own things, and downcrying yourn. (1:368)

The crockery barterer reverses expectation; the middle-class client chases him in the street, advertises her wares, and she initiates the exchange. Moreover, she cheats. The crockery barterer cites a specific incident in the same passage:

The lady took us both into a private room unbeknown to the servants, and wanted me to go and buy expressly for her a green and white chamber service all complete, with soap trays and brush trays, together with four breakfast cups — and all this here grand set-out she wanted for a couple of old washed-out light

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39 Mayhew distinguishes the class of nomad, to which street-traders belonged as having “a lack of chastity among his women” (1:2).
waistcoats, and a pair of light trowsers. She tried hard to make me believe that the buttons alone on the waistcoats was worth 6d. a piece, but I knowed the value of buttons afore she was borned. (1:368)

The crockery barterer’s complaints about the she-dragons and screws are matched in vitriol by a tree and shrub seller, who exclaims, “I’d rather sell polyanthuses at a farthing a piece profit to poor women, if I could get no more . . . than I’d work among them screws that’s so fine in grand caps and so civil. They’d skin a flea for his hide and tallow” (1:134). And an old-clothes Jewess later sneers, “‘O, it’s ridiculous to see what things some ladies—I suppose they must be called ladies—offer for my glass . . . People say, “as keen as a Jew,” but ladies can’t think we’re very keen when they offer us such rubbish” (2:125).\footnote{Mayhew offers a rare example of an independent female clothes trader (2:125).}

While these traders claim imperviousness to the women’s shrewd bargaining, others, including Mayhew’s flower-root seller, acknowledge they’ve capitulated: “There’s one pleasant old lady, and her two daughters, they’ll talk me over any day. [They] got me to take togs that didn’t bring the prime cost of my roots and expenses. They called them by such fine names, that I was had” (1:137). Through the eyes of street traders then, it is ironically the middle-class woman, not the lower-class huckster, who does the “Jewing”—who sells, who strikes a hard bargain, who tries to cheat.

Moreover, the women’s transactions violate the ostensibly uncommercial space of the home with a sort of sartorial cuckoldry. In the words of the crock barterer, they “smuggle” traders into “private rooms” and sell their husband’s clothes “unbeknown to ‘em.” The crockery barterer even describes being caught by the husband in metaphorical
flagrante delicto: “[O]ften the gentleman of the house, coming up to the door, and seeing us make a deal—for his trowsers, maybe—puts a stop to the whole transaction.” Other studies of consumption have commented on the emasculating effect of female consumption on the male provider—or, at least, on his wallet—but these encounters, in which the women drag members of the lowest classes into the home’s private spaces to sell such sexually charged items as their husbands’ trousers, are far less about the desire for goods than the transgressive and eroticized pleasure of the exchange.41

In texts predating London Labour and the London Poor, intrusion of the clothes dealer into domestic space is an occasion for horror. In Maria Edgeworth’s Harrington, for example, the protagonist’s youthful anti-Semitism leads to hysterics when Simon the old-clothes man enters his home.42 And in Charles Rowcroft’s Chronicles from the Fleet, a prankster disguised as an old-clothes man intrudes into the protagonist’s room evoking riotous disgust, especially when he embraces a hapless female guest; it is notable that this disgust is rendered humorous only because the reader knows the true identity of the prankster.43 However, later texts not only capitalize on the humor and shock value of the old-clothes dealer in the middle-class home, but literally reenact it. One of these, from 1884, is a closet drama called The Old-Clothes Merchant of Venice, obviously a parody

of Shakespeare. In acting out the play, the players symbolically bring the old-clothes dealer into the private space. Even more surprising is an 1857 closet drama inspired by Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, in which the character of the "Jew Clothes-man" not only enters the domestic space, but interacts with the audience, attempted to peddle his wares. For the first few pages, the player attempts to barter a variety of goods to the presumed and imagined listeners, then gives them up as all being "shrews." The character then provides the most clear—lisping accent aside—contemporary description I’ve found of the shift over time in the old clothes trade—the shift that has brought the middle class and the clothes trader together:

Formerly shen’elfolksh ushed to kive their ould clouthesh to their sharvintsh, but now ladish shells em theirshelves and decoratesh their mantel pieshes and palconish vith old cowts, and casht of wellingtonsh, and fillsh their consharvatoriesh vith plosshuming palletotts and shweet-shented pantaloons. Ah, yer shen’elfolks ketsh meaner and krander every day. Any flowersh! shweet-shented flowersh.

The "Jew Clothes-man" not only explains the shift in his trade and its relationship to the changing dynamics of class, but furthermore embodies these changes in his symbolic presence in the home. Moreover, the commercial viability of these dramas underscores the appeal of a cross-class encounter with a clothes-barterer, real or imagined, for the middle-class woman of leisure.

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Whether imaginatively slumming through participation in a drama, or actually engaging in these sorts of commercial exchanges in the home, middle-class women, it seems, relished opportunities for economic play. Certainly these accounts hint at the transgressive thrill of the sexualized racial other in the home’s private spaces, but the sexual dynamics of this exchange cannot be divorced from the exchange of goods and the forbidden pleasure in the unwomanly act of sale itself. And while Mayhew viewed these encounters as evidence of women’s desire to consume, it is clear that this pleasure eclipses mere desire for cheap knick-knacks, for these “screws” are notorious for refusing trades on the dealers’ terms. As neither sexual nor commercial desire can fully explain the behavior of women in these narratives, we must look for explanation in the words of the dealers themselves, who suggest, “Perhaps they’re dull, and likes to go to work at a bargaining” (1:137; my emphasis).

Whether writing about the public commotion of the Old Clothes Exchange or the more subversive bartering practices taking place at the backdoors of private homes, Mayhew’s account of the persons engaged in the trade of secondhand clothes in nineteenth-century London reveals a world that is both chaotic and contagious. Jumbles of garments and jumbles of people circulate in a pattern of exchange that blurs social boundaries. As disreputable people and dirty goods mingle, distinctions between classes—be very distinctions that clothing is imagined to maintain—dissolve, and even distinctions between institutions, persons, and goods seem to fade.

**Conclusion**
The work of Carlyle, Dickens, and Mayhew demonstrates a cultural consciousness of the changing value of the most intimate, and yet perhaps most public of commodities. Even as industrial production changed the landscape of clothing forever, undercutting a secondhand market that for centuries had served most classes of British people, old clothes were newly understood as deeply symbolic of past human lives and institutions. These three writers imaginatively portray clothing's ability to materially capture and to mold humanity, both making and confusing meaning. Together, the work of Dickens, Mayhew, and Carlyle underscores the particular power of clothing among all other secondhand commodities to embody both our organic connection to the past and our desire to break from it.
There are mysterious tales connected with Pawnbrokers' shops. The very name summons up pictures of wretchedness and woe. How easy it is to see the long low room piled high with the wreck of a thousand households . . . [But] it is more than doubtful if the above picture conveys an accurate idea of the average pawn-shop of to-day.

—“Three Golden Balls,” *The Evening Bulletin*

The metonymic link between items and absent owners in Dickens’s “Meditations in Monmouth Street” in the previous chapter also animates Victorian anecdotes of pawnbroker’s shops. The premises of the shop and the diversity and plenitude of the pledged items themselves, “the wreck of a thousand households,” attracted canonical and noncanonical writers alike and prompted a desire to catalog the items, to trace their origins.¹ It is true that in some narratives, such as Dickens’s and Thackeray’s sketches and George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, these items appear in shop windows as curious but disconnected objects of desire: “turquoise lizards and dragons,” “fine old clasps in chased silver,” or hearth rugs embellished with a strange animal.² But in certain other passages

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For more on Victorian shop window gazing, see Andrew Miller, *Novels behind Glass*:
by Dickens, George Eliot, and lesser known authors such as George Augustus Sala, pawned items are accompanied by specters of “[l]aundresses, mechanics, clerks, costermongers, and a formidable subsidy of local freebooters,” “the tenants of the gloomy causeries of ‘Mine Uncle.’” Unlike the shadowy figures imagined to fill the sleeves of old clothes, these figures are traceable. While the shape of old clothes may visually and viscerally evoke the absent body, a pawned item is tangibly and textually linked to the past and past owners by the ledger and the duplicate: alienated from domestic space, but not yet surrendered to the anonymity of recommodification.

This suspended alienation of the pawned item, or “pledge,” operates both materially and thematically in the literary secondhand economy, not merely painting the circumstances of poverty and loss in bleaker shades, but also endangering middle-class identity and morality through associations with lower-class urban life and sexual shame. During the nineteenth century, the always reviled pawnbroker became a target of middle-class moralizers, who failed to grasp the critical role of the pawnshop in the economics of urban poverty and instead equated it with the gin-shop, the fence, and even the brothel. A visit to the pawnbroker was thought to precipitate an economic fall that paralleled, and in fiction sometimes accompanied, a sexual fall. The threatened or actual fall is often fetishized in a pawned item—a physical token of domesticity that hovers between home and the marketplace as a symbol of a character’s uncertain fate.

Among the most important novels that imagine the pawnshop this way are Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*. In *Oliver Twist*, the locket

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3 George Augustus Sala, “My Uncle,” *Pawnbrokers’ Gazette* No. 2108, 22 July 1878, 229.
and ring of Agnes, the fallen women, hang in suspended circulation in pawn as does the
identity of her illegitimate, orphaned child, Oliver. In *Daniel Deronda*, both the
pawnshop and the diamond ring Deronda pawns foreshadow and symbolize the
revelation of his mysterious parentage and racial otherness, while Gwendolyn Harleth’s
pawning of the necklace foreshadows her decision to marry Grandcourt against her
principles. In both novels, however, the themes of pledging and redemption echo far
beyond the circulation of material objects. While Dickens and Eliot use the trope of the
pawnshop in different ways, each imagines it as a site where forgotten history may be
accessed, and where persons, like pledges, may be redeemed.

The pawnshop, whether literary or historical, has received scant attention from
scholars, but those who have done the most to uncover the social significance of British
pawnbroking in the nineteenth-century have approached their project from a feminist
perspective. Historian Melanie Tebbutt, followed more recently by Beverly Lemire, has
done much to uncover the function of the pawnbroker’s shop, not merely as a den of vice,
but as a necessary part of working-class life that allowed working class men and
particularly women to leverage their small capital for greater financial flexibility.\(^4\) The
figure of the pawnbroker, euphemistically called “Uncle,” also features prominently in
Eileen Cleere’s study of avuncularism as an alternative to the patriarchal conceptual

\(^4\) Melanie Tebbutt, *Making Ends Meet: Pawnbroking and Working Class Credit* (New
York: St. Martin’s Press, 1983), 115–7. Lemire’s project centers not on pawnbroking but
on the value and recirculation of old clothes, which was supplied by forfeited pawns; see
Lemire, “Shifting Currency: the Culture and Economy of the Secondhand Trade in
Hudson’s *Pawnbroking: An Aspect of Social History*, while less focused and thorough,
nonetheless provides a general overview of British pawnbroking from its earliest days to
the twentieth century (London: Bodley Head, 1982).
framework for understanding the dynamics of family, wealth, and power in nineteenth-century literature and culture. These scholars are primarily interested in the figure of the pawnbroker as a small-scale lender: a figure analogous to or, in literature, symbolic of the commercial capitalists who managed the much larger debts and assets of the upper classes in the nineteenth century. As these scholars demonstrate, nineteenth-century prejudices against pawnbrokers were sustained in part by class, gender, and race-based prejudices and the resistance of the intrusion of extrafamilial finances into the domestic space.

This chapter, however, is more concerned with the pawnshop's role in the transfer of secondhand items, and thus more in an economy of things and memories rather than in an economy of labor or commodities. Previous discussions of literary pawnshops have been surprisingly resistant to this interpretation. Cleere, drawing on Karl Marx and Elaine Scarry, sees the effect of the avunculate on the items it contains as "homogenizing," a transformation of particularity into generic capital, and while her work convincingly links the literary pawnshop with the grander mechanisms of capital in the nineteenth-century, it fails to account for the difference between selling and pledging. Andrew Miller, too, in his brief discussion of the pawnshop, asserts that "[p]awnshops tend to strip narratives of the past from objects, to insist that value resides in the mobility and the power of exchange." And yet, in the very novels these critics cite—Oliver Twist, Daniel Deronda, Middlemarch, The Moonstone, Mary Barton—the pawnshop is not where the past is lost, but where it is traced. Although the tendency of fictional accounts of pledging is to

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6 Miller, 213–4.
prepare or even tease the reader with an artificially constructed likelihood of forfeit—the threat of homogenization—it is almost inevitably eventual redemption on which the plot hinges.

Beginning with a brief discussion of the legal status and popular perceptions of pawnbroking in the nineteenth century, this chapter argues that the legislation and press constructed the pawnshop as a place where objects were not merely lent or lost, but also found. I then examine the conflicting accounts of the trade printed in the Pawnbroker's Gazette to isolate tensions and trends in the depictions of pawnshops as sites of forgotten history and female endangerment. Finally, in Oliver Twist and Daniel Deronda, I isolate the literary pawnshop as distinct from the historical one, tailored to middle-class prejudices, but reflective of middle-class anxieties.

Lost and Found

Although pawnbroking had existed in England since the time of William the Conqueror, it was only by the nineteenth century that it became possible to imagine pawnshops as a tenable link between past and present. The trade, as practiced by all but the most elite of financiers, remained in the shadows for centuries, and the line between pawnbroking and secondhand dealing was, to most, a shadowy one, perpetually darkened by the stigma of stolen property. While many pawnbrokers may have kept fair and accurate records and legislation protecting borrowers—and indeed, property owners at large—appeared as early as the sixteenth century, legal restrictions on the trade did not truly become effective until the eighteenth century. The most important piece of
legislation for the nineteenth-century pawnbroker was passed in 1757 as part of a larger act that also encompassed fraud and gaming. According to Tebbutt, it was the first effective and most important definition of the pawnbroker’s obligations: pawnshops became liable to search; suspected stolen property was liable to seizure; the safeguarding of property was to some degree guaranteed; and better recordkeeping was mandated, including an up-to-date register and the distribution of duplicates, or receipts, to clients. These obligations, together with caps set on interest and the stipulation of a year and a day as the period after which pledges became forfeit, were solidified in 1784 and 1800, by which time the business had achieved the form it would take throughout the nineteenth century and had evolved into one of the most tightly regulated of trades. The importance of this legislation in shaping popular imagination about the pawnshop is clear: these establishments where property routinely disappeared subsequently became known as places where lost property could be found.

It was also during this period that the business of pawnbroking entered a rapid expansion accompanying industrialization and urbanization. Contemporary figures suggest that there were just under 400 licensed pawnbrokers in the metropolitan area during the 1830s, a number that would grow throughout the decade, and it has been suggested that the inclusion of unlicensed pawnbrokers, impossible to document, could have doubled official figures. Extrapolating from more readily available data from the charitable lending institution, the Mont-de-Piété, in Paris in 1833, the British Association

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7 Tebbutt, 70–5.
8 Ibid; Hudson, 35.
for the Advancement of Science estimated that roughly two million pledges were made in London per year.\textsuperscript{10}

As the trade became increasingly visible and the income of average clientele dropped, the pawnbroker became a popular scapegoat for urban working-class poverty and a target of middle-class moralism. Pawnbrokers were castigated in the press and Parliament alike for capitalizing on the bad judgment and vice of the poor and encouraging theft. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Tebbutt notes a growing acceptance of this "necessary evil" in journalism, parliamentary discussion, and economic theory.\textsuperscript{11} The pawnbroker relieved class tensions by ameliorating the immediate difficulties of laissez-faire capitalism, and Tebbutt suggests that savvy politicians came to appreciate the contribution of the pawnshop to social stability. For middle-class readers, then, the pawnshop—already an absorbing urban spectacle of financial ruin and loss of status—came to serve as a subject for weighing moral objections against economic benefits and the fear of crime against faith in law enforcement.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Penny Cyclopaedia}, 341.

\textsuperscript{11} One midcentury proponent of this more balanced view was economist John Ramsey McCulloch, who argues that while pawnbrokers may "foster habits of imprudence" and "afford [thieves and swindlers] ready and convenient outlets for the disposal of their ill-gotten gains," "the capacity of obtaining supplies on deposits of goods, by affording the means of meeting pressing exigencies, in so far tends to prevent crime, and to promote the security of property; and it would seem as if the desire to redeem property in pawn would be one of the most powerful motives of industry and economy" (McCulloch, \textit{Dictionary of Commerce} [1869]: 1041–3. Qtd. in "Pawnbroking," \textit{Pawnbrokers' Gazette} no. 286, 20 May 1844, 267).

\textsuperscript{12} Tebbutt comments on the literary outpouring on pawnshops thusly: "The pawnshop remains a source of dramatic reflection, representing as it did the world’s tribulations in microcosm . . . There were usually sales premises at the front, with dresses hanging around the door, and all sorts of unredeemed pledges in the window. Comprising every kind of article on which [capital] might be borrowed, the contents of such displays were
Sentiments about the pawnbroker's customers were similarly mixed, alternating between pity and disdain. This was especially true for female clients, who far outnumbered men.\textsuperscript{13} Lower-class women often financed domestic expenses by storing clothing, bedding, and other temporarily unused possessions on a weekly or daily basis; the constant rotation of domestic and professional accoutrements in and out of the pawnshop may have been costly for clients in the long run, but it also made it possible for working class men and especially women to leverage their small capital for greater stability. While Tebbutt is demonstrably more concerned with the way that pawnbrokers were used than the way that they were popularly understood by nineteenth-century writers, in her chapter on the pawnbroker's role in domestic management, she comments on the competing perceptions on women who pawned: "[T]he manner in which his clientele was depicted really encapsulated the conflicting images of Victorian and Edwardian womanhood. Poor management was invariably represented as the root cause of regular pledging, but in the minority category of occasional pledgers was the idealized image of the Perfect Lady," a "passive victim of unhappy circumstance in the form of an irresponsible husband."\textsuperscript{14} Female pledging was not in accordance with good management; but it could, occasionally, be understood in terms of sacrifice. Both of these stereotypes, of course, hinge on women's commitment to and ability to carry out their domestic responsibilities.

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\textsuperscript{13} Tebbutt, 43.
\textsuperscript{14} Tebbutt, 48.
One of the most important and persistent misconceptions about pawnshops during this period, and one which regularly found its way into fiction, is that a pawned item was likely to be forfeited, and that the sale of forfeits made up the majority of the pawnbroker's profits. Certainly most middle-class readers would have seen no more of a pawnshop than the goods in its front window, and that display would tend to emphasize forfeit over redemption. However, most estimates suggest that at least ninety percent of pledges during the Victorian period were redeemed—a number somewhat inflated by regular customers with weekly bundles, but also somewhat deflated by those who pawned merely to sell items conveniently with no intention to redeem. The sale of forfeits was unlikely to produce much profit; most forfeits, by law, were sold at public auction, and excess returned over the amount leant plus interest was by rights the property of the pledger. Pawnbrokers who wished to sell the forfeits essentially had to buy them back. Sales were unreliable in terms of profit; it was in the interest of the pawnbroker to restore items even when past the date of forfeit and to seek profit primarily from interest. Nevertheless, pawnbrokers, who sought to distinguish their role as lenders from other less-regulated secondhand businesses, were essentially written into the secondhand economy of fiction due, apparently, to misconception.

What I wish to draw out from the history of British pawnbroking during this period is the contradictory attitudes toward this institution during the period in which it became most professional and most pervasive. Popularly associated with crime, it became tightly regulated; blamed for social ills, it was recognized to sustain the poor; and thought to serve the lowest class of woman, it most poignantly served those meant for "something better." Its primary business practice of small-scale lending was almost
willfully understood as fraudulent secondhand dealing. These tensions carry over into
nineteenth-century fiction, which tended to dramatize the pawnshop as a site of loss and
ruin even while relying on the pawnshop as a storehouse of material memories.

_Lombardian Legends_

Such contradictory Victorian attitudes about the pawnshop are manifest in the
_Pawnbrokers’ Gazette_, a trade circular first published in 1838 with the goal of uniting
British pawnbrokers in the defense and improvement of their trade in the face of popular
and legal prejudice. Although the _Gazette_ was produced with the specific goal of
fostering cohesion among a select audience of tradesmen, the weekly pressure of filling
eight folio-sized pages seems to have encouraged in its earlier years of publication the
sort of “encyclopedic ambitions” shared by other periodicals of its era; as Robert L.
Patten comments, authors and editors might “throw in anything that came to hand.”

Regular features in the _Gazette_ include police intelligence, fashion advice (presumably to
aid valuation), reporting on the state of trade and foreign affairs, warnings about active
informants and duffers in London, and copious advertisements, which themselves gave
notice of upcoming auctions, want ads, listings of missing or stolen items, ads for lots of
various items such as cigars or cricket balls, and so on. Amid these regular features are
wedged a hodgepodge of literary odds and ends: amusing anecdotes (not infrequently
relating to pawned prostheses), historical and scientific trivia, original fiction and poetry,

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15 Robert L. Patten, “Publishing in Parts,” in _Palgrave Advances in Charles Dickens
Studies_, ed. John Bowen and Patten (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave
and "secondhand" literary scraps copied from novels and other periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic.

The literary pawnshop, as distinct from the actual one, appears regularly in the *Gazette* in various forms, generally as excerpts unmediated by commentary, making the journal a sort of pawnbroking anthology. Two typical examples, both from 1878, are "My Uncle" from George Augustus Sala and "The Pawnbroker’s Shop" by J. Sawtelle Ford, the first a sentimental and sympathetic portrayal of trade, while the second is both negative and sensational. In spite of their differences, these two passages introduce qualities shared by many literary accounts of pawnshops: the figure of the pawnbroker as a collector and a sort of historian or storyteller, the emphasis on pledges rather than lending, and a certain set of character types, including the endangered woman.

"My Uncle" is, on the whole, a favorable insider’s look at a pawnshop. The melancholy of ruined lives and lost objects is screened by the pawnbroker’s industrious respectability. Surveying the dressers lining the warehouse, the narrator and visitor observes,

> In these were deposited the hopes and fears of thousands; the tools of the carpenter, the watch and ring of the roué, the last rags of the outcast, the wedding dress of the bride, the ill-gotten spoil of the thief—all screened alike from view in dingy wrappings. A methodical arrangement was visible throughout; separate spaces being allotted to the numerous parcels of unredeemed effects, or goods "out of time," as they are professionally termed. The uniformity and cleanliness
which prevailed, formed a striking contrast to the chaotic state of the shades below. 16

The items listed are metonymic representations of stock characters, and while the overt symbolism of the bride’s wedding dress and the carpenter’s tools requires no explication, the unambiguous ties between the items and their presumed owners underscores the narrator’s perception of these items, not as commodities, but as possessions or artifacts. While the objects are “screened from view,” their link to past owners is not. Indeed, this description of a purgatorial warehouse is like nothing so much as a museum in which each specimen is labeled and preserved.

Sala elaborates on this link between pledger and lost pledge as the piece concludes with the histories witnessed by “Mr. Pledger” and materially inscribed in his shop:

He has heard the history of the fascinating Madame X——, whose cashmere shawl, long since “out of time,” parades its beauties in the front window. Mr. F. Emera, the short-lived scion of a noble family, could, if he were at hand, swear to the late ownership of that handsome set of diamond studs. Mr. Crowquill, the poor clerk with £100 a year, and eight children, will tell you that the faded black suit before you was his last tie to society and respectability. Mr. Harlow, a gentleman without any visible means of subsistence, whose recent exit from the box, with a seedy coat buttoned up to the chin, suggests the suspicion that the

16 George Augustus Sala, “My Uncle,” Pawnbrokers’ Gazette no. 2108, 22 July 1878, 229. I have not been able to trace the original printing of this piece. Sala writes of pawnshops in many of his works, notably in Twice Around the Clock, but this piece does not appear in any of his more well-known writings.
shirt just pledged was his last, is a familiar and natural denizen of the avuncular domain.\textsuperscript{17}

These characters—Madame X and Mr. F. Emera—are no less types than the bride and carpenter. Here, however, Sala conjures them not merely as the embodied complement to their forfeited treasures, but also as source of oral history, all of which the pawnbroker has heard and retained. Thus, the memories are not only materially encoded in the forfeited pledges; the pawnshop itself is a site that invites storytelling.

It is easy to imagine the tradesman who would enjoy Sala’s imaginative view of pawnbroking. Not so with Ford’s contrasting piece, which is deeply anti-Semitic and critical. The pawnbroker, “almost always a Jew,” is “keen, crafty, and cunning by nature,” leering gleefully over pawned treasures and wrecked lives. As for the clientele, “[h]ands from which bloodstains have been hurriedly washed pass . . . gold watches and chains which will never be redeemed.” Ford indulges in the same impulse of reconnection as his narrator peruses forfeited pledges, but with a far sharper edge.

Beneath the show-case was a small plain gold ring which I asked permission to examine. It was an engagement ring, and on it was engraved the word “Mizpah.” Why was this precious emblem of plighted love thus rejected and despised? Where were now the soft whispers, and tender caresses, and promised love which gave it its birth? Was he faithless, or was she false? But no answer came to these thoughts which crowded into my mind, and I placed the broken promise and forfeited pledge back in its resting place.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} J. Sawtelle Ford, “The Pawnbroker’s Shop (from the Chicago Standard),” \textit{Pawnbrokers’ Gazette} no. 2120, 14 October 1878, 326.
The wedding ring, engraved with the Hebrew pledge “may the Lord watch between us,”
is similarly metonymic to Sala’s wedding dress.19 As the passage continues it includes the
virgin’s Bible (over which the Jew predictably gloats), the baby shoes brought by the
mother, and the watch of the sailor. The pawnbroker’s revolting self-satisfaction is most
fully realized in his last treasure: its worth constituted seemingly for himself as well as
the reader by not only the value of the gems, but also the poignancy of the tragedy it
encodes.

The Pawnbroker took from the bottom of the box a card on which was written in a
delicate feminine hand the name of a young actress whose grace and beauty had
filled one of the theatres of this city with her admirers less than a year ago. These
beautiful jewels had then flashed and sparkled in the bright footlights as she
danced and tripped smilingly over the stage. But what a change is this! The little
old Pawnbroker was the only witness of this the second scene in the poor girl’s
life. The curtain rises on the third and last seen in the morgue of an Eastern city.
All in one short year.20

Again, the pawnbroker is a witness, although in this instance, a sardonic and callous one.
As the “uncle” in Sala’s piece records and reminisces, Ford’s “Jew” hoards and
tantalizes; his collection of stories is less like history than gossip. In each the pawnbroker
and narrator linger over the particularity and significance of the artifacts rather than
dwelling on rates of interest. The endangered and possibly fallen woman features
prominently in both. But most importantly, in neither account is the past portrayed as

19 OED, 2nd ed., s.v. “Mizpah.”
20 Ford, 326.
forgotten, lost, or homogenized; whether through the perusal of the shops contents or through an audience with a pawnbroker, the past can be called forth again.

The Gazette’s interest in the literature of the pawnshop was not limited to borrowings; during the late 1840s and early 1850s, outraged editorials and letters of correspondents decried fictitious representations for their inaccuracy and bias, suggesting that pawnbrokers were keenly interested in their own representations. In an 1848 issue, the editors reprinted a scene of a pawnbroker’s callous refusal to restore a forfeited item; the contributor comments, “The paragraph seems to have been written for the silly purpose of creating a little sensation, arousing prejudice against the Trade, and leading [readers] into the opinion that heartlessness and oppression are the chief characteristics of Pawnbrokers, whether at the sale-room or behind the counter.” Observing that, without pawnbrokers, the public must resort to less-principled secondhand dealers and loose items outright, the editor reminds the reader that a pawnbroker is a lender, not a buyer, and that redemption, not purchase, is his aim. Moreover, loss, he suggests, is part of a changing world: “Would the writer . . . only look occasionally at the apparently commonplace everyday disposals of household furniture in his own city, he would find the household gods of the old . . . swept away in the current revolutions which hourly change the bearings of society.”21 In 1853, another correspondent wrote, “We can trace the cause, or part of the cause, of prejudice [to] authors who write about Pawnbroking knowing literally nothing of what they write about, but represent the Trade as they view it

21 [“A Pawnbroker East of Temple-Bar”], “Romance of Pawnbroking and New York,” letter to the editor, October 11. Pawnbrokers’ Gazette no. 517, 16 October 1848, 332. See also the source of the epigraph for this chapter, which goes on to note, “it is more than doubtful if the above picture conveys an accurate idea of the average pawn-shop of today” (“Three Golden Balls,” 78).
from police reports, tales of distress, and through the prejudiced spectacles they themselves wear.” 22 The contributor cites at length a short story called “The Curate’s Daughter” from Tales for All Readers (1849), a present given to his daughter at school, in which a young woman, Helen Selby, is treated offensively by a leering and cheating pawnbroker. “Having given your readers a fair sample of this untrue and overdrawn picture,” the writer asks, “is it any wonder that prejudice should strike its root deep against our Trade, so long as articles of this kind are allowed to pass current from book to book, from lip to lip, and no means taken to expose such untruths?” 23

But beginning in the late 1840s, the editors went further than merely exposing untruths by printing a number of original, positive portrayals of pawnbrokers, including enthusiastic if less than inspiring poetry and, remarkably, serial fiction. On February 5, 1849, the first “Lombardian Legend” appeared, a short story published in four parts. More “Legends” appeared irregularly in following issues. Thus, pawnbrokers, as a trade, not only identified contemporary fiction as a source of their image problems, but also wrote back, contesting the depictions of their trade that populated the novels of Dickens, George Eliot, and others while maintaining that pawnbroking was worthy of literature. Yet this body of pro-pawnbroking fiction shares as many tropes with mainstream fiction as it repudiates, chiefly that of the miraculous restoration of lost human connections triangulated through lost objects.

The first tale, beginning with a frame story, seems to draw inspiration from Dickens’s first novel, The Pickwick Papers (1836–37), in which four members of a club

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23 Ibid.
travel throughout England and periodically interrupt the frame narrative to share tales with each other, fellow travelers, and the reader. While the Lombardians are not perambulatory, they share a certain fondness for stories and settings of times past.

The Lombardian Legends owe their origin to certain periodical meetings of the members of the Lombardian Club, which said club was founded some twenty years since in the good old town of C——, by a worthy Pawnbroker, who doubtless wishing to create good and kindly feeling among his fellow tradesmen, and at the same time bring about that degree of union so conducive to their interest, first suggested the idea of a monthly meeting... The first of these social gatherings was held on the first Thursday in January, 18—, in one of those homely and antiquated rooms whose oaken panels and rudely carved furniture forcibly remind one of the ancient hostelry, now fast disappearing in this modernizing age.24

*Pickwick Papers* was at the time of its own publication somewhat retrospective, looking back not only to the eighteenth-century picaresque but also to modes of travel quickly passing into obsolescence with the advent of rail transport.25 The first Legend, then, in drawing upon *Pickwick* is doubly retrospective even before the first tale—an autobiographical tale of the club’s President—begins:

> [O]n a recent occasion of our meeting it so chanced that a worthy brother remarked upon the many strange incidents that daily occur at the counter of the Pawnbroker. . . which, in the hands of a Bulwer or a Warren, would furnish

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materials for many a new and all-absorbing romance . . . Little do the unthinking suspect that the daily routine of our business offers to the contemplative endless matter for calm and deep reflection. In one short hour the man of money oft observes amidst the throng of his needy clients the titled aristocrat, the bold and haughty courtezan, the giddy spendthrift, the aged matron, the plodding merchant, the industrious tradesmen, the distressed artizan, and the abashed and trembling virgin . . . His is a calling much maligned and more misunderstood; but he is, if I mistake not, cast in the great drama of life which, while it gains but little notice for itself, of necessity brings the actor in contact with all the more distinguished characters. 26

Rather than focusing on the receptivity of the pawnbroker—his interest in and recording of history—the “Legends” suggest that pawnbrokers, too, are storytellers, thus well-suited to counteract their own negative portrayals in the contemporary press. Thus the “Lombardian Legends” begin as the outpouring of shared experience, boasting of a unique knowledge of the human condition gathered from experience even while invoking the same cast of pawnbroking types Sala and Ford would later draw upon.

The President takes his listeners back to his days as a young pawnbroker’s assistant. Pining after one such “trembling virgin,” he redeems the heirloom locket she has pawned in distress, and returns it to her years later when they meet by chance in America (where she is now supported, appropriately enough, by her uncle), fall in love, and return to England to become proprietors of the pawnshop where they first met. While the tale avoids the negative tropes of pawnshops, we see once again an interest in the

26 “Lombardian Legends,” 45.
material object, the history of patrons and pledges, the type of the endangered woman, and the improbable connection of past to future through coincidence.

The *Pawnbroker's Gazette* underscores the artificiality of the literary pawnshop in its juxtaposing of elements, often printing these literary depictions on the same page as reports on new pawnbroking legislation or threats posed by duffers, dealers, or other shady competitors. Even when these imaginative versions of pawning appear without comment, the contrast between the practical concerns of actual pawnbrokers and such fanciful depictions is jarring. But it is not their fact-based critique of the literary pawnshop that is of interest here so much as their redeployment of similar tropes. Pawnbrokers were not distressed by errancy, but rather by negativity in their literary depictions; the trappings of the literary pawnshop—the temptations of nostalgia evoked by lost possessions, histories, and even lives—appears no less colorfully in the pages of the *Gazette* than in the fiction that it contests.

**Telling Strange Tales at Last**

The “trembling virgin” of the literary pawnshop is one of a type that, if not originated by Dickens, was at least popularized in his *Sketches by Boz*. In the last box in his sketch of a pawnbroker’s shop, “situated in the darkest and most obscure corner,” a young girl waits for the pawnbroker to appraise a few trinkets; in the next stall, a prostitute, “miserably poor but extremely gaudy, wretchedly cold but extravagantly fine,” watches curiously; and in the common shop, a woman “dirty, unbonneted, flaunting, and slovenly” watches both. The three women constitute a tableau of the stages in life of the
fallen woman. “Who shall say how soon these women may change places?” Dickens’s narrator asks, suggesting the inevitability of the first young woman’s fate; as she becomes accustomed to the loss of her trinkets, she will become resigned to the loss of her sexual purity and end her life as those beside her will do. 27 The slip between lost pledge and lost soul echoes a turn of phrase used by another client in the shop: frequent pledger Mrs. Tatham, wishing she were as sharp as the pawnbroker himself, says, “see if I’d be up the spout so often then!” It is not only the pledge, but also the pledger, who is in danger of forfeiture, and no one is more vulnerable than a young woman. These three young women may also be Dickens’s modern counterpart to the legend of the three golden balls that serve as the traditional emblem for pawnbrokers. The legend goes that a nobleman lost all his wealth and had no food for his daughters; in desperation, he considered sending them into prostitution. Saint Nicholas, hearing of their plight, tossed one bag of gold through the nobleman’s open window each night for three nights, providing dowries for the three daughters to enter honorable marriage. 28 The three bags, St. Nicholas’s emblem, were adopted by the Lombards and later by all other pawnbrokers. 29 Dickens’s three women are likewise driven to prostitution by poverty, but the three golden balls are their downfall rather than their salvation.

29 The Lombardi golden balls have also been explained to represent three gold coins, and in later days, it was suggested that the three golden balls represented the low odds—one out of three—that one’s pledge would ever be redeemed (Hudson, 33).
In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens further develops this theme of the pawnshop and tripartite endangered young womanhood in his creation of Agnes, Nancy, and Rose Maylie: all caretakers of Oliver, and all threatened by economic circumstances and illicit sexuality. While the literal pawnshop appears only briefly in the story, patterns of pledging and redemption resonate throughout the text and the lives of its female characters and play a critical role in the resolution of the plot.

Agnes Fleming, the fallen woman and single mother who dies at the commencement of the novel, does not visit a pawnshop, but her newborn son and her gold locket are alike “badged and ticketed” by the nurse guarding her deathbed. The locket, carrying tokens of the illicit love of Agnes and Edwin Leeford, is the last tangible proof of Oliver’s heritage, and the nurse’s theft and pledging of the locket parallels Oliver’s alienation from his heritage and identity; both hang in suspended alienation during Oliver’s early years. The discrediting of Oliver and the destruction of the material evidence of the locket are the twin goals driving the villain, Monks, Oliver’s half-brother. By fully alienating Oliver from his heritage, Monks secures his full inheritance. The significance of the pawnshop would seem to end with the loss of the locket, which is ultimately redeemed by Mrs. Corney and sold to Monks. The villain sends it down “the spout” rather than up by dropping it into the Thames beyond recovery. But Oliver’s redemption plot intersects with Nancy’s own redemption. It is her “pledge” that ultimately restores his identity.

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Nancy, like Agnes, never visits a pawnshop, although she does participate in the secondhand economy as one of Fagin’s “workers,” “producing” goods by stealing them (66–8). However she, like Oliver and his locket, is in dire need of redemption on a larger scale, not only from her life among thieves, but from her abusive relationship with the murderous Bill Sikes. The title of chapter 44, “THE TIME ARRIVES, FOR NANCY TO REDEEM HER PLEDGE TO ROSE MAYLIE. SHE FAILS” (357) prepares the reader to see Nancy’s salvation through the analogy of pledging and redemption. Rose Maylie pleads with Nancy, “your coming here, at so great a risk . . . your manner, which convinces me of the truth of what you say; your evident contrition, and sense of shame; all lead me to believe that you might be yet reclaimed . . . Think once again on your own condition, and the opportunity you have of escaping from it. You have a claim on me: not only as the voluntary bearer of this intelligence, but as a woman lost almost beyond redemption” (325–6). Rose’s language suggests that Nancy both can be claimed and has a claim; Rose feels a responsibility to save another of womankind, and Nancy, because of her selfless act, is worthy of that redemption. However, for Nancy it is too late. She redeems her pledge by divulging the whereabouts of Monks, claiming in return only Rose’s handkerchief—an item she once would have acquired and alienated through theft, but now reformed, she begs as a gift to carry as a personal memento of her short-lived friendship with Rose before returning to Sikes and her death.31 While the locket is lost forever, Nancy’s fulfilled pledge allows Monks to be apprehended, and with the additional evidence of the pawnbroker’s testimony against Mrs. Corney, Oliver’s true heritage is restored.

Oliver’s redemption by Nancy’s sacrifice redeems the third woman of the text, Rose Maylie. Rose, Agnes’s sister, is tainted by her associations with Agnes’s sexual fall. She rejects Henry Maylie’s offer of marriage because of her own associations with illegitimacy, but she permits him a pledge to renew his suit “at any time within a year”: the period of time allowed up before a pledge is declared forfeit by a pawnbroker. When the secret of her past is finally uncovered at the end of the novel, Henry redeems his pledge, renewing his suit, having so lowered his prospects that she is willing to share them. Once alienated from each other by class and rumors of Rose’s “tainted blood,” the two are reunited in modest, middle-class marriage.

In this way, the pawnshop, while making only a minor literal appearance in the text, governs it thematically as it explores the fate of three women shadowed by sexual shame: the sisters Agnes and Rose, and their sister in kind, Nancy. Agnes is redeemed through her son’s restoration, Nancy by her pledge to save Oliver, and Rose through the revelation of her own heritage and her middle-class marriage.

So Deep, So Sly, and Secret

Like Oliver Twist, Esther Summerson in Dickens’s Bleak House is orphaned at birth, and the key to her mysterious origins lies buried in the recesses of pawnshop, or, at any rate, something very like one. While there is no legitimate pawnshop in Bleak House, Krook’s rag and bottle shop—reputedly, an unlicensed pawnbroker’s shop—holds the novel’s secrets. And the cluttered shop, managed by an illiterate drunkard, at first seems the perfect place for the past to remain undisturbed—even buried:
Everything seemed to be bought and nothing to be sold there. In all parts of the window were quantities of dirty bottles—blacking bottles, medicine bottles, ginger-beer and soda-water bottles, pickle bottles, wine bottles, ink bottles . . . There were a great many ink bottles. There was a little tottering bench of shabby old volumes outside the door, labelled “Law Books, all at 9d.” . . . There were several second-hand bags, blue and red, hanging up. A little way within the shop-door lay heaps of old crackled parchment scrolls and discoloured and dog's-eared law-papers. I could have fancied that all the rusty keys, of which there must have been hundreds huddled together as old iron, had once belonged to doors of rooms or strong chests in lawyers' offices. The litter of rags tumbled partly into and partly out of a one-legged wooden scale, hanging without any counterpoise from a beam, might have been counsellors' bands and gowns torn up. One had only to fancy, as Richard whispered to Ada and me while we all stood looking in, that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients, to make the picture complete. (67)

Meant to satirize the Court of Chancery, Krook’s shop is a monument to stagnation and decay, and while it seems to contain all of the material history of its neighborhood, its disorderliness offers a tacit promise that its secrets will be kept.

According to Henry Mayhew, marine stores shops often doubled as unlicensed pawn shops or “dolly” shops, which escaped the need for licenses because rather than accepting pledges, per se, they purchased items with the tacit promise to sell those items
back at a penalty. Striking similarities between the description of Krook’s shop and Mayhew’s description of rag and bottle and dolly shops in *London Labour and the London Poor* suggest that Mayhew inspired Dickens’s creation of Krook’s shop, but the novel offers more explicit clues that Krook’s shop is an unlicensed pawn shop as well. Guppy, who believes that Krook knows more than he lets on about the neighborhood’s secrets, suggests that Krook may have earned his reputed wealth as an unlicensed pawnbroker. As he tells Tony Jobling, “[S]uch an old card as this, so deep, so sly, and secret . . . I never came across. Now, he must be precious old, you know, and he has not a soul about him, and he is reported to be immensely rich; and whether he is a smuggler, or a receiver, or an unlicensed pawnbroker, or a money-lender—all of which I have thought likely at different times—it might pay you to knock up a sort of knowledge of him” (325–6). Another clue is metatextual: the illustration of Krook’s shop by Hablot K. Browne, or Phiz, includes the hanging doll used as the symbol for dolly shops (77). However, while Krook is probably an unlicensed pawnbroker, he is certainly not an active one. No business is conducted in the shop throughout the course of the novel; Krook seems to attract only lodgers, and he accrues material possessions only by appropriating their forfeited belongings.

Even if Krook takes in no pledges, it is symbolically significant that he is an unlicensed pawnbroker. It emphasizes the unlikelihood that anything useful could ever be

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32 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 2:110. Licensed pawnbrokers—at least those who wrote in to the *Pawnbrokers’ Gazette*—were frustrated by the lack of regulation for dolly shops in contrast to the elaborate set of laws that governed their own trade, and some felt that pawnbroking legislation should be expanded to cover these shops as well. However, at least one astute reader commented that pawnbrokers should leave well enough alone: “Is it desirable, then, to have ‘Pawnbroker’ written over every marine-stores shop?” (Letter to the editor, *Pawnbrokers’ Gazette*, 23 June 1856, 196).
redeemed from his shop, and moreover darkens the stain of illegitimacy that colors his character and belongings. While licensed pawnbrokers were required to maintain records and a semblance of order, dolly shops were not. Because of this lack of record keeping, dolly shops were even more notorious as receivers of stolen property than pawnbroker's shops. An item might be recovered from a pawnbroker, but an item taken to a dolly shop was in all likelihood gone for good, leaving no trace. Krook's illiteracy parallels the lack of record keeping common to dolly shops; although he although he hoards documents, he cannot connect letters into words. Whatever suspicions he may have about the massive paper trail in his possession, he cannot assemble a coherent narrative. Therefore, while Krook is alive, he impedes any discovery of the truth.

In *Bleak House*, the counterpart to Agnes Fleming's locket—the material token of Esther's heritage—is a packet of letters written by her mother, now Lady Dedlock, to her father, Captain Hawdon. They are brought to Krook's shop by Captain Hawdon himself, now an indigent copier who calls himself Nemo and lodges there. Upon Hawdon's death, the letters are found by Krook, who secretes them among his supply of documents; upon Krook's death, the letters are found by his legatees, the Smallweeds. The Smallweeds—appreciating their utility for blackmail—turn them over to the lawyer Tulkinghorn, whose "calling is the acquisition of secrets, and the holding possession of such power as they give him" (581). The letters hang as a threat over Lady Dedlock for most of the novel; any knowledge of her sexual history could end her marriage and destroy her status.

However, the letters are only the metonymic counterpart to Hawdon himself, who lives above the shop prior to his death, a living pledge "out of time," alienated from a former, more respectable life. A number of details in the novel tacitly compare Hawdon
to the other objects in the shop. Krook and Tulkinghorn find Hawdon’s corpse among some worthless clothing and “a bundle of pawnbrokers’ duplicates, those turnpike tickets on the road of Poverty,” suggesting that he has forfeited one by one all material pretensions to respectability (171). When Allan Woodcourt, looking at Hawdon’s corpse, observes that “he must have been a good figure when a youth” and that “there was something in his manner . . . that denoted a fall in life,” Krook replies that he knows nothing of the man’s origins: “You might as well ask me to describe the ladies whose heads of hair I have got in sacks downstairs. Than that he was my lodger for a year and a half and lived—or didn’t live—by law-writing, I know no more of him” (168). Having surrendered his valuable possessions and pretensions to respectability to the secondhand economy, Hawdon is in the end just another bit of rubbish collected by Krook. Jo’s description of Hawdon’s final resting place in the graveyard could almost apply to description of the disordered piles of rags and bones in Krook’s shop: “Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that their kitchin winder! They put him very nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to get it in” (262).

Like the other alienated items from Krook’s shop, Hawdon is separated not only from his past, but also from the entire human race in a variety of ways. Most obvious of these is his pseudonym, Nemo, Latin for “no one,” adopted to escape both his debts and his past. The narrator, describing his still corpse in his room, observes that he is as disconnected as “a deserted infant” (173). But the narrator is more generous than others in the book, for multiple characters, including Flite (75), Krook (164), Snagsby (169), Woodcourt (169), Jo (264), and George Rouncewell (348), suggest that Hawdon is severed from both humanity and God eternally—that he is damned.
Unlike Oliver, Esther has nothing to gain from recovering the history of her parentage. She can claim no legacy, for Lady Dedlock acquires wealth and status through marriage. Moreover, Esther’s wants are entirely supplied by Mr. Jarndyce, and he does not mind her illegitimacy; in fact, one suspects that Jarndyce prefers to have sole claim over her. While curious about her history, she is resigned to the lack of knowledge about her birth; her childhood caretaker, Mrs. Rachael, persuades her to cease her questions, and Jarndyce encourages her to “take the past for granted” (80). When she is finally told of her past by Lady Dedlock, she is almost as eager to efface it as her mother: “I had a terror of myself, as the danger and the possible disgrace of my own mother, and as a proud family name” (583). She even feels “a burst of gratitude to the providence of God” for the smallpox that has disfigured her; “nobody could ever now look at me, and look at her, and remotely think of any near tie between us” (579). She begs Guppy to cease his efforts to uncover her past, explaining, “you could make no discovery in reference to me that would do me the least service, or give me the least pleasure. I am acquainted with my personal history; and I have it in my power to assure you that you’d never can advance my welfare by such means... I beg you to do this, for my peace” (617). Therefore, while the goal of the protagonists in Oliver Twist is to uncover Oliver’s past, the aim of the protagonists in Bleak House is to keep Esther’s origins a secret: an objective which should have been safe enough during Krook’s life, but is frustrated following his death by an unlikely chain of circumstances and by the various motivations of Guppy, Smallweed, and Tulkinghorn.

Lady Dedlock is not redeemed in life. The threat of exposure prompts her to escape, leading to her death—literally of “exposure”—at the entrance of the burial
ground that holds the body of Captain Hawdon. And yet the discovery of the truth in the recesses of Krook’s shop does bring her a measure of redemption from her living death of boredom and deceit. Although Sir Leicester loves her, he is known to be “an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man” (22), and Lady Dedlock must hide her past from him. The family legend of the Ghost Walk at Chesney Wold reinforces the potentially adversarial relationship that Lady Dedlock could have with her husband were the truth of her history known. As Mrs. Rouncewell tells Rosa and her grandson, Watt, the seventeenth-century counterparts of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock “led a troubled life. She was a lady of a haughty temper. They were not well suited to each other in age or character, and they had no children to moderate between them” (113). When Sir Morbury retaliates for his Lady’s betrayal by causing the injury that leads to her death, she vows, “I will walk here, until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity, or when disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!” (113). The superficial resemblance of this marriage to Lady Dedlock’s own marriage haunts her, and even amid noisy distraction, she can hear the footsteps on the Ghost Walk, reminding her of the disgrace her own history would bring to the Dedlock name.

She confesses her ongoing torment to Esther. “I must travel my dark road alone, and it will lead me where it will. From day to day, sometimes from hour to hour, I do not see the way before my guilty feet. This is the earthly punishment I have brought upon myself” (579). When Esther begs her to cease prostrating herself, Lady Dedlock claims that as she “must be proud and disdainful everywhere else,” she wants to acknowledge her humility and shame to Esther in order to experience “the only natural moments of her
life” (580). In response to Esther’s desire to help, Lady Dedlock protests that it must be “her solitary struggle always; and no affection could come near her, and no human creature could render her any aid” (580).

However, she is wrong. It is Lady Dedlock’s fear of the truth so long hidden that causes her to die alone and friendless—not the revelation of the truth itself. Sir Leicester proves unexpectedly gallant in the face of her shame, and every resource is deployed in order to save her from doing herself harm. While she does not live to see the evidence of his love, he proves it after her death. Paying off “some who could have spoken out,” he buries her among his ancestors and pauses with head bowed whenever he passes her grave before returning home to sit in front of her portrait (981). The fashionable world wonders that “the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company,” but we are told that “the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly, and have never been known to the object” (981).

Lady Dedlock’s redemption is also carried out through Esther. Had the rag and bottle shop not yielded up its secrets, Lady Dedlock would never have experienced “the only natural moments of her life”—the brief moments spent with Esther. Esther lives on untouched by shame. Rather than concealing her heritage from Allan Woodcourt’s proud mother, Mr. Jarndyce shares it openly, scolding “to mince it.” “Now, madam,” he tells Mrs. Woodcourt, “come you, knowing this, and live with us. Come you, and see my child from hour to hour; set what you see, against her pedigree, which is this, and this . . . and tell me what is the true legitimacy, when you shall have quite made up your mind on the subject” (965). In the end, then, it is the revelation of secrets from the recesses of Krook’s
shop that offers redemption, although the revelation can neither save Lady Dedlock's life, nor erase her past.

The Brass As Well As the Gold

The themes of loss, rediscovery, and redemption also echo throughout George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Gwendolyn Harleth's process of redemption begins when Deronda, another orphan of mysterious parentage, redeems her pawned necklace in the novel's second chapter, while Deronda finds the key to his own and Mirah's past in the Cohens' pawnshop. The site of the pawnshop literally and thematically brings the narratives of the two protagonists together.

Gwendolyn, a more complex instantiation of the endangered pawnbroking "virgin" visits the Leubronn pawnshop in the novel's second chapter in order to raise money for gambling and travel expenses on a necklace made from her father's chain, "the ornament she could most conveniently part with." Although she is not, like Agnes, a fallen woman in the traditional sense, her calculated alienation of this last of her departed father's possessions anticipates another sort of sexual compromise: her mercenary decision to accept Grandcourt's offer of marriage in spite of his illegitimate family. But while Gwendolyn's visit to the pawnshop may foreshadow her downfall, it also prompts the moral and spiritual awakening that guides the rest of her plot and sets the confessional tone for her relationship with Deronda.

Although the wordless exchange between Gwendolyn and Deronda at the roulette table dominates their conversations about Leubronn when they return to England, the subtext of each conversation is their private and supposedly anonymous encounter over the return of the necklace. Deronda does not identify himself as her benefactor and critic, but Gwendolyn pursues an intimate friendship with him based on her suspicion that it was he who redeemed the necklace—a suspicion that develops into the conviction that Deronda can redeem her as well. Her initial resistance to any kind of criticism, first apparent in her anger and shame at his return of her necklace and later manifested in her resentment of Herr Klesmer, evolves with Deronda into a perpetual and desperate question: “What should you do if you were like me? . . . What should you do—what should you feel, if you were in my place?” (445, 449). Deronda’s responses that she should think of things beyond herself—that she should “care for what is best in thought and action” (446)—are somewhat unsatisfactory, reflecting his own uncertainty as to what he should do with his life. Finally, unable to fulfill his “impetuous determining impulse to . . . carry out to the last the rescue he had begun in that monitory redemption of the necklace” by marrying her, Deronda must finally end their romantic attachment with the announcement of his engagement. Nonetheless, Gwendolyn cries, “I said . . . it should be better . . . better with me . . . for having known you” (805). His redemption of the necklace at the book’s commencement reaches fruition at the end, when Gwendolyn declares to her mother that she “will live” (806).

The redemption Deronda seeks for himself takes a different form from that of Gwendolyn. Like Oliver Twist, Deronda is a victim of generational sin; his mother, the actress Alcharisi, abandoned him in the arms of Sir Hugo, hoping to spare Deronda the
burden of his Jewish identity. Deronda, increasingly alienated from his guardian by his ambiguous heritage and unable to decide upon a vocation, must be redeemed to his personal history and his race before he can accept his calling.

His redemption, and by extension the redemption of his mother, begins at the novel’s other pawnshop: Ezra Cohen’s establishment and the home of Mordecai. At the end of book 4 and almost precisely at the novel’s midpoint, this visit proves the turning point of his own narrative. As he rambles through Whitechapel, Deronda has “a presentiment of the collision between [Mirah’s] idea of the unknown mother and brother and the discovered fact—a presentiment all the keener in him because of a suppressed consciousness that a not unlike possibility of collision might lie hidden in his own lot” (381). These speculations precede the remarkable coincidence that leads him directly to the Cohens.

The Cohens’ shop does not openly invite the sort of morbid speculation on sad histories readily apparent in the selections from the Pawnbroker’s Gazette. Like the shop in Leubronn, is of the higher sort, dealing with jewelry, laces, and other more expensive items; Deronda is initially attracted to its bright display of items purchased abroad for sale in England as antique curiosities. Ezra Cohen, cheerfully vulgar, is less whimsical a historian than a pragmatic philosopher. Much like the President of the Lombardian club, he sees his trade as one that gives him a broader view of the world:

I wouldn’t exchange my business with any in the world. There’s none more honourable, nor more charitable, nor more necessary for all classes, from the good lady who wants a little of the ready for the baker, to a gentleman like yourself, sir, who may want it for amusement. I like my business, I like my street, and I like my
shop. I wouldn’t have it a door further down. And I wouldn’t be without a pawnshop, sir, to be the Lord Mayor. It puts you in connection with the world at large. I say it’s like the Government revenue—it embraces the brass as well as the gold of the country. And a man who doesn’t get money, sir, can’t accommodate. (391)

Following an awkward split in the chapter, during which Sir Hugo exhorts Deronda to take up politics, the pawnbroker’s speech anticipates Deronda’s ultimate Zionist aims. While Deronda refuses to humor Sir Hugo by taking up the causes of his English countrymen against his own inclinations, he does ultimately pursue the establishment of a homeland for his race, both the brass—represented by worldly and secular Jews—and the gold—embodied in saintly Mordecai. Moreover, the split, which bridges Deronda’s first abortive visit to the pawnshop and his eventual return to meet the proprietor, underscores not only his vacillation about accepting his Jewish identity, but also his indecisiveness as to vocation: both are ultimately resolved by his growing friendship with Mirah and Mordecai as well as the Cohens.

In spite of Cohen’s speech, however, very little pledging occurs in his shop. Deronda contemplates the purchase of silver clasps for Lady Malliger, but they are not a forfeited pledge; Cohen had purchased them secondhand in Cologne, “a bargain” (389). Indeed, Cohen, like other literary pawnbrokers, seems far more interested in secondhand dealing than lending; his “glistening eyes seemed to get a little nearer together” as he contemplates Deronda’s ring and his naivete in “suppose[ing] that redemption was a satisfaction to pawnbrokers” (396). But while Deronda’s ring is the only actual pledge described in the shop, the shop nonetheless fulfills a function similar to that of other literary pawnshops. Like Gwendolyn’s pawned necklace, Deronda’s ring is seldom worn
and has a history he does not yet fully appreciate: it belonged to his father and
grandfather and is a symbol of the history his mother effaced from his young life. By
pawning the ring, and thus gaining admittance to the Cohens’ private Sabbath, Deronda
begins to approach the history concealed in his own artifact. It is the space of the
pawnshop itself, and not the items it contains, that opens the door to Deronda’s past.

Deronda’s gradual discovery of his own and Mirah’s heritage beginning with the
pawnshop in many ways parallels George Eliot’s other hero of mysterious heritage, Will
Ladislaw of Middlemarch, who does not visit a pawnshop but instead learns of his ties to
the business through his maternal grandparents. The primarily urban institution of
pawnbroking thus plays a more peripheral role in George Eliot’s “study of provincial
life” as the shady source of Bulstrode’s wealth and the key to Will Ladislaw’s history.

The business was a pawnbroker’s, of the most magnificent sort both in extent and
profits; and on a short acquaintance with it Bulstrode became aware that one
source of magnificent profit was the easy reception of any goods offered without
strict inquiry as to where they came from. But there was a branch house at the
west end, and no pettiness or dinginess to give suggestions of shame.34

The above description, taken with George Eliot’s erroneous suggestion in Daniel
Deronda that most pawnbrokers profited from sale forfeits rather than interest on
redemptions, suggests somewhat scant familiarity with pawnbroking and pawnbroking
law in the nineteenth century. According to Tebbutt and a number of Gazette
contributors, it was not merely the reception of stolen goods that placed the pawnbroker
at odds with the law: it was the failure to carefully note the origin of every item. A

receiving house need not have been hampered by the intricacies of pawnbroking law.

While the Dunkirk pawnshop in *Middlemarch* must predate the formation of the Metropolitan Police in 1829—approximately the time in which the present action of the novel is set—a secondhand shop or auction house would nonetheless have provided a far better cover for the sort of business apparently run by the Dunkirks. But for George Eliot and for other authors, the secondhand shop does not connote what the pawnshop does: not only the reception of the past, but the regurgitation of it. An item or history sold is gone with no trace, but pledging, like murder, will out.

Deronda’s friendship prepares him for the revelations and the redemption of his mother, the Princess Leonora Halm-Eberstein and formerly the actress Alcharisi, whose rejection of her race and her son brings her bitterness, if not true regret, as she dies. “Do I seem now to be revoking everything?—Well, there are reasons. I feel many things that I can’t understand. A fatal illness has been growing in me for a year. I shall very likely not live another year. I will not deny anything I have done. I will not pretend to love where I have no love. But shadows are rising round me. Sickness makes them. If I have wronged the dead—I have but little time to do what I left undone” (628–9). Her redemption of Deronda’s history is not without its material restored pledge. She sends Deronda to Mainz to receive from Joseph Kalonymos a chest of historical documents, not from a pawnshop, but from a Jewish banking house. While Deronda loses the ring of his father to theft, in the chest he retains its essence: lost history.

*Conclusion*

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In Krook’s rag and bottle shop, “everything seem[s] to be bought, and nothing to be sold” (67); it is, in the words of Cleere, “the epitome of blocked circulation.” But the same might be said of almost any literary pawnshop, licensed or otherwise. Although the function of the actual pawnshop was, to paraphrase Dickens, to make a capitalist of any washerwoman with a flatiron, in the novel the pawnshop does not primarily serve to facilitate the transformation of passive capital into active capital. As Elaine Freedgood has noted, “mid-Victorians, and the objects in their novels, were not fully in the grip of the kind of fetishism Marx and Marxists have ascribed to material culture. The abstraction of the commodity into a money value, the spetacularization of the consumer good, the alienation of things from their human and geographical origins—these were not the only ways of imagining the things of that crowded world.” The pawnshop, with roots in a system of selling and borrowing that was far less well defined, not only predates the sort of capital relations that were to develop in the nineteenth century, but also, as the trade became increasingly regulated in later days, it became, if anything, less likely to render objects into anonymous commodities, devoid of attachment. The pledged artifact, combined with the textual artifacts that recorded its history, loaded these objects with traceable personal significance and retained them, if not indefinitely like Krook’s shop, at least for a year and a day. It is this material history and this period of suspended alienation—the material embodiment of a story interrupted—that tempted the nineteenth-century novelist.

35 Cleere, 111.
3. One of Those Public Assemblies: Readers, Spectators, and Auctions

I have mixed with a crowd and heard free talk
In a foreign land where an earthquake chanced;
And a house stood gaping, naught to balk
Man's eye wherever he gazed or glanced.
The whole of the frontage shaven sheer,
The inside gaped: exposed to day,
Right and wrong and common and queer,
Bare, as the palm of your hand, it lay.
The owner? Oh, he had been crushed, no doubt!
Odd tables and chairs for a man of wealth!
What a parcel of musty old books about!
He smoked—no wonder he lost his health!
I doubt he bathed before he dressed.
A brazier? the pagan, he burned perfumes!
You see it is proved, what the neighbours guessed:
His wife and himself had separate rooms.¹

Robert Browning's defense of domestic privacy in the poem "House" (1876)
illustrates many of the crucial tropes that distinguish narratives of bankruptcy auctions

from other secondhand exchanges in Victorian literature. Rejecting any intrusion into his
domestic sphere, he compares public interest in the author’s private life to the morbid
curiosity of onlookers gazing into a home devastated by earthquake. In spite of the
detailed description of the home’s scattered contents, the earthquake is clearly figurative
rather than literal. Details of the quake are left indeterminate, and its setting in “a foreign
land” is belied by the characteristically English idiom of the onlookers’ gossip.
Moreover, earthquakes have long been metaphors for sweeping financial disasters—from
those that ripped apart the homes of middle-class British speculators prior to the passing
of the Limited Liability Act in 1856 to those that characterized the recent global
economic downturn.\(^2\) Thus, the earthquake metaphor works on a number of levels: the
image of the shattered home, perhaps literally “shaven sheer” by a tectonic shift,
exaggerates the violence of the public exposure that Browning abhors, but the universal
tendency to such invasive voyeurism is reinforced by his figurative representation of
what would have been a common event in nineteenth-century England: the forfeiture of a
middle-class family’s chattels and the concomitant invasion of bailiffs, auctioneers,
buyers, and spectators.

I am here specifically addressing auctions that result from financial failure. While
even a brief perusal of the nineteenth-century *London Times* offers substantial evidence

\(^2\) A typical, but certainly not the earliest instance of this metaphor: “A financial
earthquake was rocking its moneyed institutions to their centre. One fell after another;
shock followed shock; and in the panic no one felt sure that, at the day’s close, anything
would be left to tell the tale of the wealth, and the commercial credit, and the mercantile
honour of this community” (qtd. in “The Crises and Its Causes [‘The Times.’ London.
1857],” *Westminster Review*, 135 [January 1858]: 89); “The Great Wall St Earthquake,”
that estate sales following a death were far more common than sales resulting from insolvency, Victorian fiction is particularly preoccupied with the sort of auctions that follow financial ruin. That such fears might have circulated in this period is not surprising; even well-to-do members of the middle class were vulnerable to a sudden loss of all they owned during nineteenth century. The banking system in England—comprised of the government affiliated Bank of England and a number of smaller private banks throughout London and the provinces—was arguably more advanced and sophisticated than others in Europe and efficient in circulating capital throughout the nation. However, it was also quite volatile and “sharply accentuate[d] the impact of business cycles,” according to François Crouzet. Crises brought about by panics and bankruptcies occurred almost once per decade, and their impacts were felt in both London and the provinces. In the words of Crouzet, “The failure of the local bank could sow desolation over the whole of a small region.”

A number of scholars including Andrew Miller and Jeff Nunokawa have written about auctions scenes in the novels of Thackeray and George Eliot with particular attention to the disruption of the domestic sphere by the market forces of capitalism, noting that the auction is among the most violent and most frequent upsets of the public/private dichotomy to occur in literature of the period. Barbara Wiess’s

5 Crouzet, 321n9.
6 Altick, Andrew Miller, and Jeff Nunokawa have all noted what Miller, in Novels behind Glass, calls a “penetrating anxiety” among mid-Victorian novelists that the growing power of the commodity had taken over the social world and that human relationships could not be disentangled from the relations between humans and objects (Miller, Novels
monograph on bankruptcy explores the broader set of fears surrounding early nineteenth-century financial crises, and her work shares many of the same concerns. The Victorian middle-class home was popularly imagined as a sacred space set apart from the marketplace, and nothing proved the fiction of this notion more conclusively than auctions, which allowed any passerby into the vacated residence. In Richard D. Altick's words, auctions "entailed a grim violation of the sanctity that contemporary domestic mores prized over all others—a desecration, not a consecration, of the house."8

But the literary conventions of writings about auctions have yet to be addressed. As I have argued in previous chapters, literary secondhand exchanges often reveal middle-class anxieties about working-class poverty rather than reflect the reality of secondhand markets. In the case of auctions in literature, such as the one in Browning's poem, the anxieties apparent in the text reflect a fear a specifically middle-class financial and social crisis: loss of wealth and the exposure of the home to public gaze. While the auction often takes place in the private space of the home, auctions are in many ways more public than other secondhand exchanges—such as, for example, pawnshop exchanges in closeted stalls or backdoor sales to itinerant old clothes dealers. Auction narratives therefore often demonstrate far more interest in the torment of public gaze or spectatorship than in the loss of the auctioned items themselves. The violence of the tropes of auctions signal the sort of anxiety these events inspired: bailiffs "invade," hammers "strike," and the bankrupt are "smashed" or "crushed." In literature, men so

8 Altick, 666.
ruined frequently sicken or die—naturally, like Mr. Tulliver in George Eliot’s *Mill on the Floss*, or suicidally, like Mr. Merdle in Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*.

Auction narratives are also far less nostalgic than other writings on the secondhand economy because the sale itself is surrounded by a sense of immediacy. While the wares of old clothes shops and pawnshops seem timeless, auctions occurred at specific dates and times that were noted in catalogs and newspaper advertisements. Moreover, the trauma of the family’s loss is too recent and well-known to prompt romantic speculation. One could attend an auction any day of the week just as one could always wander down Monmouth Street, but while the suffering potentially encoded by old clothes was a distant memory, the tragedy of the auction was forever fresh.

Finally, the spectator—easily overlooked in other narratives of the secondhand—is a key figure in auction narratives. Appearing as the frequently unnamed, seemingly objective narrator or journalist—almost never an actual purchaser—this figure reminisces and moralizes among the relics of bygone prosperity. The imaginative voyeurism of the narrator/spectator figure is mitigated by the discourse of sympathy that overlays the narrator’s account, as well as by the shared gaze of narrator and reader. But the typical auction-goer in the novel is a far more invasive kind of spectator, often criticized for callousness and greed. As Browning’s poem demonstrates, the sympathetic narrator of an auction narrative, in witnessing and recording the auction’s events, must uneasily share the role of spectator with these more problematic figures who gossip, jeer, stare, and ultimately call attention to the narrator’s own outsider status.

Thus the auction narrative is fraught with divisions and dichotomies: the severance of ties between person and object, who are often bound through the same
metonymic ties evident in other literary secondhand economies; the unsteady divide between public and private; and the distinction between good and the bad spectators. It may then seem natural that the auction narrative, too, should have its divisions. Like the split home in Browning’s poem, many auction narratives in the Victorian novel—including Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, Dickens’s *Dombey and Son*, and George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*—feature narrative ruptures. These gaps and incongruities in style and plot that further dramatize the auction’s unstable binaries.

In this chapter, I begin by examining the way that Victorian writers instructed their readers in how to read the irony and sentiment of the auction, both as text and spectacle. George Augustus Sala, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Charles Dickens each play with the conventions of auction advertisements, contrasting the commercial phrasing with the reality and affect beneath the surface. Lady Blessington, Elizabeth Gaskell, Sala, and George Eliot, on the other hand, demonstrate through positive and negative examples not only how one should read the event itself, but more specifically, how one should feel and act as a real or imagined spectator. They address the conflict between the social event and the personal tragedy. Finally, I look at George Eliot’s treatment of the auction, which differs from other narratives in focusing on the private family and the grief of characters over the loss of objects.

*One of Those Public Assemblies*

“If there is any exhibition in all Vanity Fair which Satire and Sentiment can visit arm in arm together,” Thackeray writes, “it is at one of those public assemblies, a crowd
of which are advertised every day in the last page of the *Times* newspaper."

His comment does more than remind us that auctions were daily events. Thackeray here assumes, as Browning does in "House," that the spectacle of the auction is so familiar to his readers that he need not name it directly; by referring to "those assemblies" obliquely, he indicates that the seizure of goods by a broker is no less mundane than it is tragic.

Thackeray might have so addressed not only the routine spectacle of the auction in life, but also its frequent appearance in print. While bankruptcy and its attendant misfortunes does not necessarily crowd out other disasters in nineteenth-century fictional narratives, it is certainly a common plot device—in the words of John McVeagh, "an omnipresent calamity in the whole creative writing of the age."

What I wish to suggest here, before moving to more detailed examinations of auctions in the novel in the following sections, is that the very universality of the auction and the presumed familiarity of readers with the tropes of auction narratives often form part of conventional portrayals.

As Thackeray reminds us, auction narratives appeared more widely in newspapers than in novels, with advertisements regularly filling between two and five columns of the *Times* alone throughout the nineteenth century. These auction notices are the most basic and universal of auction narratives and arguably the most influential, governed by a set of conventions that in turn shape the language used by novelists and other writers to describe fictional auctions. Frequently denoting class, profession, and (ostensible) reason for sale, these advertisements furnish small narratives of loss with the full trappings of narrative realism.

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9 Thackeray, 169.
A typical example, from 1834, reads as follows:

No. 71 Wyndham-place, Bryanston-square,—Lease. Excellent Furniture, a pleasing Collection of Pictures, fine Sculpture, Iron Repository, and Effects, the property of a gentleman going abroad. MESSRS. OXENHAM and SON will SELL by AUCTION, on the Premises, Wyndham-place, To-morrow, as IS, without reserve, all the genuine HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE, comprising the usual assortment for the drawing room, dining parlour, and chamber, in curtains, tables, chairs, sofas, carpets, bedsteads and furnitures, beds and bedding, drawers, &c.; china and glass, culinary articles, 10 pleasing pictures by esteemed artists, a clever sculpted group in statuary, book, iron repository, and various effects. At 1 o’clock will be sold the valuable Lease, held for an unexpired term of 11 years, at the low rental of only £60 per annum. To be viewed, and catalogues had on the premises, and at Messrs. Oxenham’s offices, 353 Oxford-street.

Like almost all auction advertisements, the text lists predictable categories of items, identified by the part of the house to which they belong. This strategy emphasizes the typicality of the items for sale—"the usual assortment"—over individual characteristics. Even the paintings advertised above are praised not for vivid colors or rarity, but for their ability to generally "please."

But these advertisements are more than a list of items. Equally common in these advertisements, and more surprising, are references to the former owners of the auctioned items. These references allow us to read the advertisements as narratives in which the protagonist—usually a "proprietor" or "gentleman," sometimes an officer, surgeon, "lady

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11 The Times, Tuesday, Jul 22, 1834, 8 (Issue 15536; col A).
of fashion, a "PERSON OF DISTINCTION," or even "a bankrupt"—disappears by the end of
the story, erased from existence by the dispersal of their belongings, anticipating Deborah
Cohen’s argument that according to the Victorians, "possessions... made the man."12

George Augustus Sala teaches us to read the story of the auction advertisement
between the lines, to peer beyond what Miller might call the "plate glass" of commodity
display to isolate the narrative archetypes that lie in the middle distance. In Twice Round
the Clock (1859), Sala provides a gloss of auctions and their advertisements:

We know when a gentleman "going abroad" or "relinquishing
housekeeping," and who is never—Oh dear, no!—in any manner of
pecuniary difficulty, honours Messrs. So-and-So with instructions to sell
his effects, what we may look forward to when the carpets are hung from
the windows with the sale-bills pinned thereon, and the auctioneer
establishes a temporary rostrum on the dining table. We know that after
the "elegant modern furniture" will come the "choice collection of
pictures, statuary, and virtue," then the "carefully-selected library of
handsomely-bound books," and then the "judiciously assorted stock of
first-class wines."13

In this passage, Sala implies the universality not only of the proceedings and auctioned
items themselves, but also of the auction advertisement as a textual representation.
Moreover, he suggests that representations of auctions, by their very nature, invite satire.
This is especially true of the reasons listed for sale. Code phrases such as "going abroad"

12 Deborah Cohen, Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions (New Haven:
Yale University Press, 2006), xi.
13 George Augustus Sala, Twice Around the Clock, Or, The Hours of the Day and Night
signal both financial loss and a genteel pretension to cloak misfortune. A search of the
digital archives of the nineteenth-century *Times* supports Sala’s summations of these
euphemistic conventions. Only a few hundred ladies and gentlemen are said to
“relinquish,” “decline,” or “quit” housekeeping, but the number of auction
advertisements for gentlemen or ladies “going abroad” is well into the thousands—
roughly equivalent to the number identified outright as bankrupts. Having been coached
in such a reading of the seller’s motivation, the reader is taught skepticism of the
elegance of the furniture, the judiciousness of the wine selection, and especially of the
home’s “virtue.” Most significant is Sala’s royal “we,” which, in assuming the equal
canniness of his contemporary readers, suggests not only the universality of the auction
as visual and textual spectacle, but also the universality of a certain ironic interpretive
practice. Auction notices, it suggests, are read just so.

Satirical portrayals of auctions in fiction sometimes borrow the tone and
terminology of these advertisements. Thackeray’s description of the Sedley auction notes
the sale of “excellent drawing room furniture by the best makers,” “rare and famous
wines,” “rich and complete set of family plate.” His phrasing so clearly evokes the
language of advertising that it yields near exact matches to *Times* advertisements—for
example, “famous old Wines” are listed in 1817 and “excellent drawing room furniture”
appears in 1885.  

Similarly, “Capital Modern Household Furniture,” the refrain the
punctuates Dickens’s chapter on the Dombey auction, appears verbatim in dozens of

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14 *The Times*, Oct 9, 1885, 16 (Issue 31573; col E); *The Times*, Dec 16, 1817, 4; (Issue
10329; col B).
advertisements throughout the nineteenth century. In both novels, the satirical
descriptions rely upon the assumed familiarity of readers with the auction
advertisements—particularly in the case of *Vanity Fair*, in which the phrasing is
seamlessly integrated into the narrative without emphasis.

The textual shift whereby household items become commodities through the
language of advertising accompanies narrative shifts in both *Vanity Fair* and *Dombey and
Son*. These shifts in tone and perspective together allow Thackeray and Dickens to situate
the particular tragedy of their protagonists amid the universal misfortune of loss. In
*Vanity Fair*, such a narrative shift can be observed in chapter seventeen as a drawn-out
slip between Lord Dives’s sale and Mr. Sedley’s. The auctions of Dives and Sedley are
clearly in one sense one and the same, but the overlap is not perfect. While Mr.
Hammerdown, the auctioneer, presides continuously over the events throughout the
chapter, we learn that “My Lord Dives’s remains are in the family vault” and his heir “is
disposing of his goods,” in contrast to Sedley, who lives on, having become dependent on
the wealth of his son.

The actual shift happens in stages. The satire of the chapter opening, which dwells
on the hypocrisy of the Dives’s auction attendees, is broadly painted:

Even with the most selfish disposition, the Vanity-fairian, as he witnesses this
sordid part of the obsequies of a departed friend, can’t but feel some sympathies
and regret. . . . How witty people used to be here who were morose when they got out the door; and how courteous and friendly men who slandered and hated each

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15 Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Peter Fairclough (New York: Penguin, 1970), 928–9; See, for example, *The Times*, Jun 17, 1841, 8 (Issue 17699; col A); *The Times*, May 4, 1843, 8 (Issue 18287; col B); *The Times*, Feb 27, 1855, 12 (Issue 21988; col B); *The Times*, Jan 14, 1861, 16 (Issue 23829; col C).
other everywhere else! He was pompous, but with such a cook, what would one not swallow? he was rather dull, perhaps, but would not such wine make any conversation pleasant? . . . O Dives, who would ever have thought, as we sat round the broad table sparkling with plate and spotless linen, to have seen such a dish at the head of it as that roaring auctioneer?¹⁶

Both the characters and the objects described in this initial passage are flat stereotypes, and the narrator's commentary dominates the scene described.

After describing the preparations and proceedings of the auction from an abstract distance, Thackeray transitions abruptly from present to past tense as the narrator's presence recedes with the sentence, "It was rather late in the sale." In this second section, the home's grander objects, described in the satirical auctionese noted above—"[t]he excellent drawing-room furniture by the best makers," "the rare and famous wines" (171)—are also shifted from present to past, having been sold on previous days. The reader is then alerted that this auction takes place in the Sedley home by the appearance of recognizable characters and items. The wines are purchased specifically by John Osbourne's butler for his master, who "kn[ows] them very well" (171). The reader soon recognizes Rebecca, Rawdon Crawley, and Captain Dobbin. Amid the auctioned items are two that resist universalizing language: the portrait of Jos Sedley on an elephant and Amelia's sitting-room piano. The absurdity and even the undesirability of Jos Sedley's portrait sets it apart, while the piano, otherwise wholly generic, is invested with sentiment initially by its connection with Amelia and later as evidence of Captain Dobbin's unrequited love. The contrast between the commercial descriptions of the home's grander

¹⁶ Thackeray, 169.
objects and the particularity of the less significant but more personally meaningful items indicates the gap between the universal auction narrative and the private misfortune of a single ruined family. Only after a section break in the text does the narrator explain, “The sale was at the old house in Russell Square, where we passed some evenings together at the beginning of this story. . . Good old John Sedly was a ruined man, His name had been proclaimed as a defaulter on the Stock Exchange” (173).

As in *Vanity Fair*, the auction scene in *Dombey and Son* emphasizes the discord between the satirical universal and sentimental particular. The chief strategy employed by Dickens to emphasize the auction’s universality is repetition, particularly of the refrain, “The Capital Modern Household Furniture, &c.” which echoes repeatedly throughout the bleak passages of the seizure and auctioning of Dombey’s possessions. But other phrases are repeated as well, including “mouldy gigs and chaise-carts,” “herds of shabby vampires, Jew and Christian,” “fluffy and snuffy strangers,” “stout men with napless hats,” “men with carpet-caps,” “screw-drivers and bed-winches” and “Spanish mahogany.” These repetitions not only echo the repetitive genre of the auction advertisement, but the repetition of the spectacle itself. These repetitions do not so much indicate the repeating of certain actions or types of persons or items in Dombey’s home as they emphasize the repetition of his financial ruin across the city. The broker’s men and their paraphernalia become the churning cogs of a machine of dispossession that proceeds across London with all the relentless disruption that accompanies the progress

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17 Dickens, 923–9.
of the railway.\(^1\) The single element of sentiment and particularity in amid the chaos of the Dombey auction is "Poor Paul's little bedstead," "carried off in a donkey-tandem."

Thackeray and Dickens, and even Sala, in borrowing phrasing from the conventions of auction advertisement, do not merely enhance the realism of their characters' financial crises. They assume that readers share their familiarity with the advertisement and invite them to both imagine and examine the linguistic and affective gap between object as cherished possession and object as commodity. Finally, these scenes achieve their greatest poignancy in playing upon their readers' discomfort with the subtlety of this difference.

\textit{All with a Taste for Moralizing}

But of course, readers were not merely familiar with such "public assemblies" as a textual artifact. The spectacle itself was a familiar one as well. Thackeray, Dickens, and Sala each make reference to the practice of hanging a carpet from the upstairs window or balcony of a home where an auction will soon take place, a sign that their readers would be even more adept at identifying than subtle changes in tone and description. And just as Sala teaches his readers how to "read" the advertisement, a

\(^{1}\) This scene of echoing ruin is anticipated in the credit problems of Solomon Gills; Walter, horrified, runs to seek Captain Cuttle, and the entire city reflects his anxiety: "Everything seemed altered as he ran along the streets. There were the usual entanglement and noise of carts, drays, omnibuses, waggons, and foot passengers, but the misfortune that had fallen on the wooden Midshipman made it strange and new. Houses and shops were different from what they used to be, and bore Mr Brogley's warrant on their fronts in large characters. The broker seemed to have got hold of the very churches; for their spires rose into the sky with an unwonted air. Even the sky itself was changed, and had an execution on it plainly" (178).
number of Victorian writers attempted to teach readers how to rightly read the auction itself.

As a spectacle, the auction could be quite polarizing—both fun and fearful. The balance between satire and sentiment that Thackeray describes—and, indeed, deploys—seems to have been one strategy used by nineteenth-century writers to negotiate the dilemmas of representing bankruptcy auctions to a predominantly middle-class audience that alternately loved and loathed them. As the celebrity status of auctioneers like George Robins would suggest, auctions were entertaining and drew large crowds. And yet, as novels reinforce, this pleasure was often precipitated by devastating losses including death and bankruptcy. Moreover, in describing the auction, novels replicate what many Victorian novelists would have us regard as the auction’s chief torment for the dispossessed family: the exposure of a private home to public scrutiny. In speculating on the secondhand goods displayed for sale, the narrator—and in turn, the reader—risks identifying too closely with the wrong type of auction spectator: the type represented by Becky Sharp. The solution for Thackeray and other writers was to provide a sympathetic and sentimental model for auction-going together with a critique of inappropriate viewing.

Both Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* and Sala in *Twice Round the Clock* suggest that there is a particular disposition best suited to auction watching. This disposition is not so much a predilection for antiques or bargains, however; the two authors pointedly do not address the obvious pleasures of bidding and buying.19 In noting that “[t]here are very few London people . . . who have not attended at these meetings,” Thackeray speculates

19 While Sala’s auction goer does bid and speculate on the goods, he is unsuccessful (169).
that “all with a taste for moralizing must have thought, with a sensation and interest not a little startling and queer, of the day when their turn shall come too” (169, my emphasis). Sala similarly describes the habitual auction-goer not as a collector, but rather as a type of darkly philosophical hobbyist. “Each man’s mind, his idiosyncrasy, leads him to frequent a certain place till he becomes habituated to it,” he writes, noting peculiar men who enjoy watching surgical operations, hangings, coroners’ inquests, marriages, funerals—“and finally . . . people who haunt SALES BY AUCTION.”20 These last, he suspects, must be “cynical philosophers, who delight in the contemplation of the mutabilities of property; who smile grimly—within their own cynical selves—and hug themselves at the thought, not only that flesh is grass, that scepter and crown must tumble down, and kings eat humble pie, but that the richest and the rarest gems and gew-gaws, the costliest garments, the bravest panoplies, must come at last to the auctioneer’s hammer.”21 Regular auction attendees, Thackeray and Sala suggest, find such scenes morally instructive rather than strictly pleasurable.

Perhaps the best narrative to raise the question of morality and good and bad spectatorship is a much earlier one, found in The Magic Lantern (1822) by Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington. Her sketch satirizes the callousness of bad auction spectators while modeling proper feeling at what she calls “that selfish vortex” that is the auction.22 “There are few occasions that, in a greater degree, furnish food for reflection, or indeed, more powerfully excite it, than an Auction; and I am grieved to say, few that

20 Sala, Twice Around the Clock, 167.
21 Sala, Twice Around the Clock, 169.
22 Marguerite Gardiner, Countess of Blessington, The Magic Lantern; Or, Sketches of Scenes in the Metropolis (London: for Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1823), 24; future references will be made parenthetically in the text.
can show us our fellow beings in a less favourable point of view,” comments the narrator, who criticizes the materialism and schadenfreude of fashionable women, dandies, old women, and collectors alike (1–2). She is appalled yet unsurprised that “those who have partaken of the hospitality of the once opulent owner of the mansion, now come to witness his downfall.” The dialogue of the spectators blatantly displays their selfishness and greed, as well as a fatalistic attitude toward the probability of future auctions among acquaintances.

“Well, I must say, I always thought how it would end,” says one; “What a very conceited woman Mrs. B—was,” cries another; “Yes, and what fuss people made about the beauty and accomplishments of the daughters;” observes a third . . .

“They gave devilish good dinners though,” said one of the beaux, “and I must do B— the justice to say, that he had one of the best cooks in London.” “Yes, and he gave capital claret,” rejoined another. “I thought his white hermitage better than his claret,” said a third; while another exclaimed, “Well, give me his hock in preference to all his other wines, for that was unique.” “I hope G— will buy B—’s wines; as he gives such good feeds.” (10–2)

When one speaker comments that G—’s “cellar is not nearly so cool” as B—’s and will spoil the wine, another prosaically replies that it matters little: G— “will be done up himself” in a short time anyway. The behavior of these gossips—“fashionables,” as Blessington labels them—is so vulgar as to pose its own critique. What is more surprising is that Blessington lumps them together with serious buyers and collectors, including those who collect books, busts, sculpture, paintings, and miniatures.
One sapient looking gentleman observed, that “Mr. B—, though foolish and extravagant in some things, had considerable taste and judgment in others; — for instance, his books were all well chosen and well bought; he has two capital Wynkyn de Words, and three fine Caxtons...” “His busts too are very fine,” exclaimed another, “and were bought for a sum much under their value. His Socrates is inimitable; I am determined no money shall keep it from me.”... “For my part,” said a third, “I like his statues better than all. What can be finer than his Venus by Canova, except it be the Nymph, by the same divine master? That I will bid for.” “Give me B—’s pictures,” said a fourth, “for they are exquisite, and I shall not envy you the possession of all his other treasures.”... “I am surprised,” observed a fifth, “how you can look at the oil pictures, when those divine miniatures by Pettitot and Zink are present: they are indeed beautiful.” The first speaker now observed, that “had B— confined himself to books, he would not have been blamable.” “Or to busts,” said the second, “for that is a rational taste.” “I differ from you,” said a third; “statues are the only things worth collecting.” “No, no! pictures, pictures are alone worthy the attention of a man of true taste.” (16–9)

The narrator comments, “Here all the voices became clamorous, each giving the preference to the objects of his own pursuit, and decrying those of the others, with no small degree of acrimony and ill-nature. I left them, with feelings very similar to those excited in my mind by the fashionables.”

On the surface of the sketch, it seems that the speakers’ absurd dialogue is what condemns them. The fashionables and the collectors are demonstrably callous,
quarrelsome, and selfish. But as Blessington shifts from negative to positive examples of auction participation, it becomes clear that the true crime of the fashionables and collectors is less hypocrisy and selfishness than mere materialism, for the only spectators who escape the narrator’s censure don’t plan to buy anything for themselves at all. “[H]urrying from this scene of heartless selfishness,” the narrator encounters the wealthy friend and a former dependent of the bankrupt family. These two women, “whose looks were expressive of the sympathy which they felt,” together discuss their love for the family’s daughters and their plans to buy in some of their friends’ cherished belongings (20). The narrator’s faith in humanity is restored by witnessing this scene of generosity. The “buying in” of certain items occurs in a number of auction narratives, including *Vanity Fair*, *Cranford*, and *Mill on the Floss*. But only Blessington goes so far as to criticize all who attend an auction with the intent to buy the items sold there for their own purposes. The narrator seems to instinctively blame the auction goers for the sale itself rather than any of the family’s circumstances or business dealings. Bad spectators, rather than bad finances, are what ruin the family in her sketch.

What I call the ethical problem for readers and narrators of literary auctions is illustrated by Blessington’s own narrator, who seems caught in her own critique. While the narrator castigates earnest buyers and gossips alike—going so far as to predict sexual disgrace as the likely outcome of one female spectator’s inappropriate levity and admitting to “more of anger than a Christian ought to feel”—the narrator has far more in common with those she critiques that with those she praises. She confesses that the “bustling crowd” “attracted” her, and that “[c]uriosity”—not pity—induced [her] to enter” such a ““deeply engage[ing]” scene. If the buyers are intrusive, they are hardly
more so than "I" of her first-person narration; in contrast to Thackeray's and Sala's more detached narrators, who rarely drop into first person and instead hover omnisciently, Lady Blessington's is a figure moving amongst the crowds: "I was attracted," "I was now in," "I discovered," "I gazed," "I mingled," "I anticipated," "I observed," "I was disturbed," "I enquired," and finally, "I exclaimed." Other spectators have come to observe ruin in progress; Lady Blessington's narrator has come to predict yet more ruin. Only the narrator's moralizing, and more specifically her praise of proper feeling, saves her from bad spectatorship.

Blessington's life can tell us as much about the humiliations of the auction narrative as her writings can, for ironically, she was herself "sold up" on May 10, 1849, following the insolvency of Count D'Orsay, as Altick notes.23 Dickens and Thackeray both commented sadly on the fate of Gore House, a haven for artists and writers. Given her legacy among such prominent wordsmiths, it is somewhat surprising that Frances A. Gerard, in a brief 1897 biography of Lady Blessington, draws on a far less dignified source for information about her downfall and death: an uncited auction notice. "Magnificent furniture, rare porcelain, marble, bronzes, jewellery, services of rich-chased silver and silver-gilt plate, superbly-fitted dressing case, collection of ancient and modern pictures, fine engravings, extensive library of upwards of 5000 volumes and other useful effects, the property of the Right Hon. the Countess of Blessington, retiring to the Continent"—true enough; she died in Paris less than a month later on June 4.24 Gerard notes that those present at the sale joked and prodded the furniture; "Lady Blessington's

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23 Altick, 662–3.
24 Frances A. Gerard, Some Fair Hibernians, Being a Supplementary Volume to "Some Celebrated Irish Beauties of the Last Century" (London: Ward & Downey, 1897), 173.
French man servant wrote to her that the only person who seemed to be at all affected"—the only good spectator, in short—"was Mr. Thackeray: ‘il avaist les larmes dans les yeux.’" But Thackeray was not alone in providing sympathy; "Poor Lady Blessington!" announced the Times.  

While not all literary auctions are unhappy occasions, even the more cheerful sales in nineteenth century literature are sensitive to the problems of spectatorship. These notably include Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford and George Eliot’s Middlemarch. And while Sala’s sketch in Twice Round the Clock might lead us to expect more of the same cynicism in his other treatments of the subject, he also wrote two short stories about the charity a kindly auctioneer for Household Words in 1854. In these happier versions of the auction, which almost always take place outside of the commercial center of London, the sale is an opportunity for entertainment, a new beginning, or for personal or collective generosity. Nevertheless, each of these narratives is haunted by a darker vision of public loss and humiliation.

In Cranford, what begins as a hardship becomes a collection of organized generous impulses, beginning with Miss Matty’s own instinctive sense of justice. Upon the failure of Town and Country Bank, she insists on an auction of her belongings "because her tender conscience would be soothing by feeling that she had done what she could," although the worth of her old-fashioned furniture is estimated to be "but a drop in the sea." We are told that "Miss Matty’s sale went off famously," which judging by the text, seems to mean that although everything is bought, very few of her belongings

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26 The Times, Wednesday, Jun 6, 1849, 5 (Issue 20195; col F).
actually leave the home (199). Amid the furniture for her sitting-room and bed-room, which she keeps, Miss Matty must “cram all sorts of things, which were (the auctioneer assured her) bought in for her at the sale by an unknown friend.” Mary Smith, the narrator, who buys a room of furniture for her own use in Miss Matty’s home, assures us that these items were carefully chosen by a few working in concert who “knew what articles were particularly regarded by Miss Matty on account of their association with her early days.” (200). We learn that Miss Matty’s books, relics of her father’s position as rector, are bought by the new rector, and thus in a sense restored to their rightful shelves even as they change hands. As Miss Matty sets up her new life selling tea, Mary Smith comments, “It was really very pleasant to see how her unselfishness and simple sense of justice called out the same good qualities in others.”

Much of what is described as trauma in other literary auctions is shielded from view in Cranford. We don’t see the dirt or the auctioneer, and especially not the crowds who come to purchase her belongings for their own use. That we might not even imagine such a thing, Mary Smith’s father dwells on the worthlessness of Miss Matty’s belongings, implying that sentiment only gives them value. Such unfashionable items could not possibly serve as objects of desire. The furniture that is not bought in for her simply disappears, leaving the rest of the “house . . . rather bare.” Exchange value seems almost irrelevant in Cranford, which seems to subsist instead on a gift economy. Taken together with other auction narratives, Cranford suggests that the credit economy and its resulting instability exposes the worst in buyer and seller, while the gift economy and its protection of social order are thought to exemplify the best.
We find a similar theme of generosity that ameliorates tragedy in Sala’s stories about auctioneer and broker Lile Jack. Jack “[buys] all sorts of things and [sells] most,” and as a result is a collector of both secondhand objects and people (10). His home is “crammed with the most heterogeneous miscellany of furniture imaginable”: “a four-post bedstead in the parlour, and carved oak sideboards in the kitchen... chairs without number, and busts cheek by jowl with agricultural implements” (10) as well as “a prodigiously old grandmother,” “a pale-face niece, tall, and woefully marked with the small-pox,” and “an ancient man in a smock-frock, who was nearly a hundred years of age, past all work, hearing, sight, and almost speech” (10–1). In the second of the two stories, this slip between objects and people becomes complete when Jack must sell up an impoverished widow and finds himself in possession not of her property but of her young son, Oby, when she dies of misery.28

Both the narrator and Jack himself paint a dualistic view of auctions, especially in the second of the Lile Jack sketches, called “The Compassionate Broker,” which opens with a lengthy sentimental contemplation of the sad duty of the auctioneer:

To be a George Robins... must be hard enough to a man of sensitive feelings. To have to sell the broad green acres that have been in the good old family for generations and generations, to have to build one’s auctioneering nest in the scathed branches of the old mahogany tree, and knock down, one by one, the withered blossoms of friendship and hospitality, and love; to see the Turkey carpets rolled up, and the pictures turned with their faces to the wall; to value the goblets that have held a

thousand loving pledges, and the heir-looms that have been won by
wisdom and bravery, only as so much metal, at so much per ounce . . . all
this must be hard a cruel enough . . .

But when, as is the case in the provinces, the auctioneer is also a
broker and valuer; when he seizes as well as sells . . . the vocation becomes
doubly painful, doubly melancholy. The auctioneer becomes the
undertaker of the family happiness, and with his hammer nails up the
coffin of their hopes . . . The bed is his, the ticking clock, the little old
miniature on the mantle, but a few books on the hanging shelf, the bright
pots and pans, the father’s gun, the children’s little go-cart. He can take a
hearth-rug from under the cat, and though that domestic animal herself is
beneath his notice, if she had a brass collar it would be his, and down as an
item in the inventory in a moment. To seize the poor man’s sticks is
utterly to beggar and crush him . . . But though hard, it is the law; and the
law must be obeyed. (199)

Following on the heels of such an overwrought account of the miseries of auctioneering
as a profession is, surprisingly, an assertion that auctions are tremendously fun to attend.
The genial and thoroughly likeable townspeople of Dodderham have “a strong
predilection for attending sales, and bidding for articles thereat” (199). Moreover, “as so
many Dodderham fold are so fond of buying,” we are told, “it may readily be imagined
that a considerable number are as addicted to selling their goods through the same
channel. Thus you will scarcely meet a Dodderham burgess, or small annuitant, but talks
of his sale, his father’s sale, aunt’s sale, or brother-in-law’s sale. A marriage, a death, a
removal, a family quarrel, a rise or a fall in fortune, are all so many incentives to the Dodderham people to call in the auctioneer and have a sale” (200). We learn that Little Miss Ogle, “the confectioner,” “has quite a museum of articles she has picked up at sales”—boxes of cigars, gas fittings, and so on—”with a vague notion that they may turn up handy some day” (200), and that Miss Reek the milliner and Old Puckfist, the druggist, have engaged in a furious bidding war over a “hideous figure of a river god” from Jerry Morson’s sale” that neither really wants. The contrast in tone between this humorous passage and Blessington’s critique of auction festivity is no more profound than is this turnabout from Sala’s musing on only the previous page that “the auctioneer’s hammer in its verberations seems but to punctuate the text that Favour is deceitful and beauty vain, and that there is no profit under the sun” (199).

With the story of Jack and orphaned Oby, however, the melancholy tone reappears. While Jack’s adoption of the orphaned boy is sentimental and touching, the boy dies just as he reaches adulthood, lost like the rest of his family and their belongings. Thus, while the central section of the sketch celebrates the pleasure of auctions and the desire for eccentric items, this pleasure is bracketed by more morally instructive passages on the pain of insolvency and the importance of generosity.

Finally, the Larcher sale in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is perhaps the best known of all enjoyable auctions. Much like Dodderham, in Middlemarch “a large sale was regarded as a kind of festival,” and the Larcher auction is a particularly good one:

There was a table spread with the best cold eatables, as at a superior funeral; and facilities were offered for that generous-drinking of cheerful glasses which might lead to generous and cheerful bidding for undesirable articles. Mr. Larcher’s sale
was the more attractive in the fine weather because the house stood just at the end of the town, with a garden and stables attached. . . . In short, the auction was as good as a fair, and drew all classes with leisure at command: to some, who risked making bids in order simply to raise prices, it was almost equal to betting at the races. The second day, when the best furniture was to be sold, “everybody” was there. (573–4)

George Eliot invites the reader to join in the good cheer by reassuring us that “[t]his was not one of the sales indicating the depression of trade”: “on the contrary, it was due to Mr. Larcher’s great success in the carrying business, which warranted his purchase of a mansion near Riverston already furnished in high style by an illustrious Spa physician—furnished indeed with such large framefuls of expensive flesh-painting in the dining-room, that Mrs. Larcher was nervous until reassured by finding the subjects to be Scriptural” (573). George Eliot thus grants her readers permission to read the Larcher auction cheerfully, assuring us that no misfortunes have befallen anyone concerned.

However, before proceeding to a more detailed examination of George Eliot’s treatment of the auction, I wish to point out the threat concealed by the festivities. As Miller has observed, the Larcher auction takes place just as the Lydgate’s approach their financial crisis, shortly after Lydgate has asked a broker to come and inventory the items in the home—a procedure that Victorian readers would have understood as a measure taken before an auction. The trauma that does not surround the Larcher auction in therefore displaced onto the Lydgate’s and onto Rosamond Lydgate in particular, who so dreads the exposure of a sale that she cancels the inventory altogether without warning her husband.
While in each of these narratives, the auction appears as a beneficial and even pleasurable event, each carries the shadow of Blessington’s critique. In Cranford and “The Compassionate Broker,” the arrival of the broker only heralds the community goodwill that will soon relieve the anxieties of the dispossessed. In Middlemarch, the narrator makes a point of placing the sale in the best light possible, but nonetheless foreshadows the potential of true ruin to come. Whether instructing readers in sensitive behavior or assuring them that cheerful feelings are warranted, Victorian authors overtly guided their readers in negotiating the boundary between auctions as pleasure and as pain.

Old and Inferior Things

In a number of the novels and sketches that I have discussed, the narrative supplies a textual gap between the scene of the auction itself and the ruined families. As mentioned earlier, the auction in Vanity Fair is identified as the Sedley’s only after a lengthy slip between the Sedleys and the Dives as well as a change in tense from present to past. In Dombey and Son, the reverse occurs, as Dickens sets off the narration of the broker’s operations and the auction itself from the surrounding text in the novel by placing the passage in the present tense. Blessington’s narrator must leave the dining room where the sale in her sketch takes place in order to encounter women who speak sympathetically of the family’s trials. In Cranford, the sale occurs off-stage and no one appears to buy any items except with the intent to please Miss Matty. In “The Compassionate Broker,” the discussion of the auctioneer’s duties and of auctions

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themselves are divided from the story of Oby and his family by a section break. And finally, in *Middlemarch*, this break between the represented sale and the ruined family is so great that the auction occurs in an adjacent chapter and for another household altogether. Such divisions reflect the finality and the trauma of the moment of the sale—the rending between person and possession, and perhaps between person and class identification.

In most texts, readers find themselves on the spectator side of this divide. With the narrator, we join in the crowd at the sale, and while we may see the spectacle through a sympathetic gaze, we are fundamentally separated from the dispossessed family as surely as the auctioned items are. The novels by George Eliot that feature auctions—*Middlemarch* and especially *Mill on the Floss*—offer a glimpse of the other side of the divide, and especially a glimpse of the grief that accompanies the loss of possessions. These novels also offer a much more nostalgic point of view of cherished objects soon to be lost. In *Vanity Fair* and *Dombey and Son*, only a few token items such as Amelia’s piano or Paul Dombey’s bedstead are distinguished by sentiment, and the pain of loss of these items pales in comparison to the crises of fractured human relationships that occur at similar points in these texts. In *Cranford* Miss Matty seems to keep all of her most cherished items. But in both *Middlemarch* and *Mill on the Floss*, we see Rosamond and the Tullivers grieving at length over the items they will lose and the items they have lost. While the narrator is critical of their materialism, the losses in these novels are nonetheless poignant, for the metonymy linking owner and possession in George Eliot’s novels is far more complex than the one-for-one correlations in Thackeray’s or Dickens’s auctions. While Rosamond and Mrs. Tulliver are shallow and deeply flawed characters,
their objects are so integral to their self-construction that their anticipated loss brings about a crisis of the self.

In *Middlemarch*, Rosamond and Fred Vincy are raised by their indulgent mother to appreciate the finer things—a tendency that proves disastrous for Lydgate when he finds that his struggling medical practice cannot accommodate Rosamond’s expensive tastes. As Miller observes, “Rosamond is fully associated with commodified goods”; “the commodities with which Rosamond surrounds herself are synecdoches for the other commodified elements in her life”: affectations in language and manner. Her reality is so entirely constructed by conspicuous consumables that she is incapable of discussing their cost or potential loss.

While Rosamond’s habitual acquisitions differ from the more modest pretensions of the Dodsons and Tullivers in *Mill on the Floss*, her shallow materialism cannot exceed that of Mrs. Tulliver and her sisters; even the sensitive and far-from-worldly heroine, Maggie, builds her early world around possessions she is doomed to lose. The early chapters of *Mill on the Floss* anticipate the losses that will govern the rest of the plot; just as river imagery foreshadows the drowning of Tom and Maggie, passages on the cherishing of material objects anticipate the tragic loss of fortune precipitated by Mr. Tulliver’s lawsuit. Following Tom’s first half-year at the Stellings’ home, the narrator describes the sensations of his joyful return with Maggie to Dorlcote Mill:

There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of

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29 Miller, 197.
our own personality; we accepted and loved it as we accepted our own
sense of existence and our own limbs. Very commonplace, even ugly, that
furniture of our early home might look if it were put up to auction; an
improved taste in upholstery scorns it; and is not the striving after
something better and better in our surroundings, the grand characteristic
that distinguishes man from the brute—or, to satisfy a scrupulous accuracy
of definition, that distinguishes the British man from the foreign brute? But
heaven knows where that striving might lead us if our affections had not a
trick of twining around those old and inferior things, if the loves and
sanctities of our allies had no deep and movable roots in memory. (164)

While the passage initially references to the “scenes” of one’s childhood, its descriptive
powers are not devoted to the geographical space of birth. Instead, the narrator, slipping
into an intimate first person, dwells on the constellation of material objects by which we
all—like the Tullivers—plot our early senses of self.

Maggie’s psychic connection to her possessions is indicated early in the novel by
her abuse of a wooden doll, alternately loved and hated, that, over time, becomes
“entirely defaced by a long career of vicarious suffering” (34). And while Maggie’s love
for things is often proportionate to their defacement—the Pilgrim’s Progress that Tom
has painted, Bob’s brittle and marginalia-filled secondhand copy of the writings of
Thomas à Kempis, and even Philip Wakem’s twisted form—the Dodson sisters
demonstrate a similarly powerful tie to their possessions through exacting and even
irrational preservation. The elder Dodson sisters carry this tendency to humorous degrees.
Mrs. Pullet displays her new bonnet for Mrs. Tulliver only after obtaining a door key

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from the recesses of a locked wardrobe, entering the sepulchral sanctum of the “best room,” and unlocking yet another wardrobe that contains the desirable article: a fussy bit of millinery that she may “never wear . . . twice” (99). As for Mrs. Glegg, “it was not her way to wear her new things out before her old ones”; the narrator reveals that when Aunt Glegg died, “it would be found that she had better lace laid by in the right-hand drawer of her wardrobe in the Spotted Chamber than ever Mrs. Wooll of St. Ogg’s had bought in her life” (61). On more than one occasion, Mrs. Glegg’s spotted and mouldy garments are referred to in geological terms: her slate-coloured silk gown, for example, “belong[s] to a stratum of garments just old enough to have come recently into wear” (62, my emphasis).

Sister Deane, whose husband’s growing wealth funds the acquisition of newer and grander household wares, is a notable exception; “Mrs. Glegg [feels] that Susan [Deane] was getting ‘like the rest,’ and there would soon be little of the true Dodson spirit surviving except in herself” (219).

Mrs. Tulliver’s attachment to her possessions is certainly in keeping with the Dodson spirit, yet her miserable keening over forfeited housewares is painted in pathetic rather than humorous terms. After the bailiff enters the house, Tom and Maggie find Mrs. Tulliver in the storeroom among “her laid-up treasures”: “One of the linen-chests was open; the silver tea-pot was unwrapped from its many faults of paper, and the best china was laid out on the top of the closed linen-chest; spoons and skewers and ladles were spread in rows on the shelves; and the poor woman was shaking her head and weeping, with a bitter tension of the mouth, over the mark, “Elizabeth Dodson,” on the corner of some table-cloths she held in her lap” (215). Following the auction, the always foolish Mrs. Tulliver becomes feeble-minded: “Poor Mrs. Tulliver, it seemed, would never
recover her old self, her placid household activity; how could she? The objects among which her mind had moved complacently were all gone; all the little hopes and schemes and speculations, all the pleasant little cares about her treasures, which had made the world quite comprehensible to her for a quarter of a century since she had made her first purchase of the sugar-tongs, had been suddenly snatched away from her, and she remained bewildered in this empty life” (291). While the association between Mrs. Tulliver’s possessions and her mind may seem exaggerated, Deborah Cohen’s study of late nineteenth-century British interiors argues that Victorians did draw a sense of self from what they owned: “They were the first people to be so closely identified with their belongings.”30 To have lost their ownership of their possessions is not only a loss of class status indicators, but a loss of material memories. Maggie cries amid the newly empty house, “Everything is going away from us—the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!” (254).

As both the Tullivers of Mill on the Floss and the Lydgates of Middlemarch come to realize that their lifestyle is in jeopardy, their anxiety is largely for the public exposure rather than for the loss of items. It is the fear of scorn, and particularly the scorn of the Plymdales, that drives Rosamond to the notice that their home is available for lease and to protest the taking of inventory. “When we were married everyone felt that your position was very high. I could not have imagined then that you would want to sell our furniture, and take a house in Bride Street, where the rooms are like cages. If we are to live in that way let us at least leave Middlemarch” (627).

In *Mill on the Floss*, the prospective spectacle of loss is not only a one-time event, but an ongoing exposure: the family’s shame, as embodied in their alienated possessions, becomes a souvenir of misfortune. Mrs. Tulliver attempts to persuade her sisters to buy her things, particularly her teapot. “‘I should be so loath for ’em to buy it at the Golden Lion,’ said the poor woman, her heart swelling, and the tears coming,—‘my teapot as I bought when I was married, and to think of its being scratched, and set before the travellers and folks, and my letters on it,—see here, E. D.,—and everybody to see ’em.’” Sister Pullet agrees that “‘it’s very bad,—to think o’ the family initials going about everywhere,” but helpfully observes, “What’s the use o’ buying the teapot, when there’s the linen and spoons and everything to go, and some of ’em with your full name,—and when it’s got that straight spout, too’” (226). And in the end, it is the sale of the mill itself, rather than the teapot, that takes place at the public house.

As noted above, the spectacle of the sale itself is displaced from the narratives of the insolvent families in both novels. The need for an auction of the Lydgates’ belongings is forestalled by Bulstrode’s ill-fated loan, but another auction does take place. The Larcher auction in *Middlemarch* has already been discussed in an earlier chapter as the site of Will Ladislaw’s confrontation with his disagreeable past. The auction also serves as what Miller terms a “displaced and comic version” of the threatened sale of the Lydgates’ possessions, following as it does almost immediately on Lydgate’s decision to have their home inventoried to fend off creditors—a narrative rupture that echoes the displacement of Sedley’s sale on the euphemistic Lord Dives.

Unlike most other auction narratives, in which the dispossessed family is shrouded in privacy during the very public proceedings, the auction goers in *Mill on the*
Floss are heard but never seen—specters rather than spectators. The auction takes place as Mrs. Tulliver and the children sit “imprisoned in the silent chamber,” watching Mr. Tulliver’s prostrate body for signs of awareness of the “sounds which fell on their own ears with such obstinate, painful repetition”: “The sharp sound of a voice, almost as metallic as the rap that followed it” and “the tramping of footsteps on the gravel” (251).

The torment of loss is said to age “Mrs. Tulliver’s blonde face . . . ten years by the last thirty hours”: the poor woman’s mind had been busy divining when her favourite things were being knocked down by the terrible hammer; her heart had been fluttering at the thought that first one thing and then another had gone to be identified as hers and hateful publicity of the Golden Lion” (251).

Before the family has time to look over their home, Kezia the housemaid, has effaced the grimy residue (“dirt . . . of a peculiarly vile quality”) of the sale (251). Having entered Mr. Tulliver’s room with their possessions intact, they leave it with nothing. The family is struck not with the influx of strangers, but with the sudden absence of cherished possessions. For Mr. Tulliver, who moves in and out of consciousness after his fall, the disconnect is yet more marked. Two months after the auction, he awakes to find “everything is changed,” in Maggie’s words. It is decided that “the full sense of the present [can] only be imparted gradually by new experience,” and after warning him, the children lead him downstairs, where he pauses, “looking round him at all the bare places, which for him were filled with the shadows of departed objects, —the daily companions of his life. ‘Ah!’ he [says] slowly, moving toward his chair, ‘they’ve sold me up—they’ve sold me up’” (276). The auction has come and gone, leaving nothing but an absence—both an empty space and a narrative gap.
Conclusion

Unlike auction narratives, other examples of the secondhand allow the narrator to contemplate material goods and their imagined histories from a discrete distance. Browsing through a rack of clothes in an open shop can offend no one; former wearers may have long since departed. And while perusing the items in a pawnbroker’s shop, various structural contrivances such as separate entrances and wooden booths shielded those who shopped from those who pledged. The bankruptcy auction, however, is immediate and traumatic, bringing the consumer and the spectator into the private spaces of the home for the most public and humiliating of spectacles. This invasiveness makes spectatorship morally problematic. As a result, Thackeray, Sala, Dickens, Blessington, and George Eliot each grappled with the crisis of representation brought about by the narrator’s uneasy alliance with the noisy crowds. The narrator of the auction must struggle to gain distance and avoid complicity, either by focusing attention on a critique of the spectators, or by displacing the traumatic spectacle altogether. The result is a narrative rupture corresponding to the devastating sunderance between person and possession.
4. Collection, Congestion, and the Economy of Recycling

In the mean while, is it not beautiful to see five million quintals of Rags picked annually from the Laystall; and annually, after being macerated, hot-pressed, printed on, and sold,—returned thither; filling so many hungry mouths by the way?

—Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus

Ebenezer Scrooge’s old clothes, Agnes Fleming’s locket, Paul Dombey’s bedstead—all of these items symbolize the tragic events that bring them to the marketplace. And as Dickens demonstrated in Sketches by Boz, even secondhand items with no known origin can prompt speculation. But what of objects that cease to signify the past, or even the present—objects that deteriorate beyond all use, so fragmented, burned, or decomposed that they become formless substances? What, in short, of trash?

“Recycling” is a twentieth-century term, first used to describe industrial processes and not applied to the collection and reuse of domestic waste until the 1970s.¹ The term we use now may be something of an anachronism when applied to nineteenth-century waste management, but archaeological records indicate the concept is nothing new.² Even literary references to recycling are ancient: the figurative melting of swords into plowshares that Isaiah foretold may never come to pass, but his metaphorical prophesy

¹OED, s.v. “recycle,” v., I. 1–3.
suggests that Israelites were not only recycling metals thousands of years ago, but also seeing the process of recycling as symbolic of cultural renewal.  

In nineteenth-century London, recycling was a large industry: rags, bones, dust, metals, and other materials were collected by a population of trash pickers who collected and sifted refuse from homes, businesses, streets, sewers, and the river in order to live. Such a thorough recycling industry was then and remains now a side-effect of extreme urban poverty, found only in densely inhabited cities with a large class of otherwise unemployed laborers—a precondition that Dickens and Mayhew recognized. Dickens notes in *Our Mutual Friend* that in Paris, “nothing is wasted, costly and luxurious city though it be”: “wonderful human ants creep out of holes and pick up every scrap . . . [S]harp eyes and sharp stomachs reap even the east wind, and get something out of it.” (192). In Mayhew’s similar description of England’s indigent population, he offers further explanation of the phenomenon: “In London, where many, in order to live, struggle to extract a meal from the possession of an article which seems utterly worthless, nothing must be wasted. Many a thing which in a country town is kicked by the penniless out of their path even, or examined and left as meet only for the scavenger’s cart, will in London be snatched up as a prize; it is money’s worth.” Such populations can be found living under similar conditions in developing nations today, especially in Central and South America where *hurgadores* or *pepenadores* (“scavengers” or “garbage people”) can be found living and working in cities of trash because they can find no other

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3 Isaiah 2:4. The earliest Biblical reference to recycling would actually be the melting of Egyptian plunder into the golden calf, estimated to have occurred by 1290 BCE (Exodus 32:1–29).
4 Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, 2:6. All references to this text are to the second volume, and future citations will be made parenthetically in the text.
employment. In Mayhew’s elaborate system of classification, their nineteenth-century counterparts have many names—bone-grubbers, rag-gathers, dredgermen, mud-larks, sewer-hunters, dustmen, nightmen, sweeps, and scavengers—although he generalizes them as “street-finders and collectors” (136).

If we return to Mayhew’s distinction between “thing” and “prize,” we find a useful inroad to the difference between patterns of recycling in fiction and patterns of other types of secondhand exchange. Hitherto this project has explored the metonymic relationship between objects and their real or imagined histories, and the metonymic relationship between the patterns of secondhand circulation and the social decline of persons who are losing their items to poverty and misfortune. But the secondhand economy of recycling begins not with an object, but with a “thing”—a piece of trash that fails to evoke its past either because it is indistinguishable from other such substances or because its appearance prompts revulsion rather than speculation. The difference is not so much in the object itself, but rather in the perception of it.

“Thing” is a slippery and all-encompassing word—defined by the OED as “an entity of any kind.” In common use it serves as both a receptacle for any meaning and a placeholder for that which cannot be known or said. It is simultaneously insistently material (“What is that thing?”) and insubstantial (“It could be anything.”). Bill Brown, one of the originators of “thing theory,” notes that things “perpetually pose a problem

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6 OED, s.v. “thing,” n., II.
because of the specific unspecificity that things denotes.”7 The word “tends, especially at its most banal, to index a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurable, the identifiable and unidentifiable.”8 “Thing,” then, isn’t merely indeterminate; it is oxymoronic.

The difference between things and other objects is that objects have a known place and function; because they fall into a known order, they recede into the background noise of narrative realism. Things resist this familiarity. As Brown argues:

> 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. The story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.9

Brown indentifies nonfunctionality as a mechanism for making things of objects—a notion with clear relevance for literature that deals with waste. Yet objects need not deteriorate to become things; the distinction does not imply any intrinsic property or condition. Rather, the shift between object and thing is a quality of perception.

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8 Brown, 5.
9 Brown, 4.
In the case of trash, the transition from object to thing is the result of the shift in perception brought about by obsolescence and decay: it is a transition from object to abject. The thing is cast off from the subject-object relations of useful and desired items. This does not mean that it lacks value; rather, it lacks intrinsic value. What makes recyclable things prized is their potential: in the work of the authors in this chapter, waste signifies not what it has been, but what it can become. Waste projects not backward, but forward in time. The secondhand economy of recycling is a process from things back to objects—back to prizes.

Part of that journey is collection. The things I consider here often appear in the aggregate as a fungible commodity: warehouses of rags, piles of dust, and so on. Such material must be collected before it can be sifted, refined, and processed for reuse. But collection has the potential to create a blockage—an impediment resulting from systemic inefficiency or even pathology. Thus we have looming mounds, impassable streets, and even chaotic apartments in which objects of every description have become “things” via the perverse subject-object relationship of hoarding. Just as I am interested in the process of recycling—new objects and new lives—I am also interested in the potential for blockages, and the way in which these blockages function in the plot of renewal.

Dickens’s final completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, has been much discussed by scholars interested in the symbolic significance of waste, especially in tandem with Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor*. Most studies have in some way explored Dickens’s dust heaps as a metaphor for the infectious power of wealth, while nonetheless taking the material history of the London dust heaps seriously: a lively scholarly debate of several years centered on the contents of historical and literary dust.
heaps. However, *Our Mutual Friend* is neither the only nor the first work of Victorian fiction to be interested in the notion of recycling and renewal. Thomas Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, discussed in my first chapter on secondhand clothing, is also premised on the metaphor of renewal. In my first chapter, I explored the way that old clothes are imagined to absorb the essence of the human experience just as they encase and mimic the human form. But *Sartor Resartus* also explores the reduction of all symbols and institutions to rags and dust, and the rebirth of these fragments in new meanings. While Mayhew portrays the wealth that literally clogs London’s streets, and Dickens sees in hoarded Dust an impediment to the natural flow of human affection, Carlyle sees a scholarship of accretion that will ultimately give rise to a new Society out of the decay of the old. Read together, these texts suggest a Victorian ethos of recycling: one motivated not so much by the desire to preserve resources, but rather by a desire to see renewed value in things grown old.

In this final chapter, I will begin with Mayhew’s description of the recycling trade in London in his section on “Street-Finders and Collectors.” While *London Labour and the London Poor* is not chronologically first, he brings us to the source of the metaphor that Carlyle and Dickens both exploit: the processes by which used items are collected and reused in order to create new wealth and life. However, I do not reference Mayhew as a purely historical source: Mayhew’s text reveals both his admiration for recycled wealth that can feed coming generations and his fears of blockage: poverty, famine, and sanitation problems. The statistics that reveal the potential value collected everyday in London’s streets also reveal a shadowy danger of congestion and contagion. I then look at the problems of collection and congestion as Carlyle explores them more playfully in
Sartor Resartus: Teufelsdröckh, who is described by his neighbors as a "Thing," also collects and hoards things as part of his scholarly method. But this compulsion is not merely method: it also reveals his philosophy. Things—decayed symbols of moribund civilization—are like star dust or stemcells: unformed, but full of possibility. When things are recycled rather than hoarded, they lead to social rebirth. Finally, in reading Our Mutual Friend, I explore the complicated relationship between Harmon’s collection and recycling business and his miserly ways. Harmon’s business, properly understood, is one of collection and circulation, yet Dickens figuratively conflates Harmon with the hoarders described in F. Somner Merryweather’s Lives and Anecdotes of Misers. This conflation not only confounds the novel’s villain, Silas Wegg, who misunderstands the nature of wealth, but also promotes economic rebirth through recycling as the novel concludes.

The Great Doctrine of Waste and Supply

According to Mayhew’s section on “Street Finders and Collectors,” nineteenth-century London faces two dilemmas: a massive underclass with limited access to gainful employment, and an ever-expanding, waste-producing population in an increasingly crowded space. While acknowledging the dire situation brought about by urban congestion, Mayhew objects to what he interprets as the callousness and fatalism in Thomas Malthus’s theories of population, specifically his suggestion that voluntary population control is the only means to avert famine. Science, Mayhew argues, proves that political economists are short-sighted, for they fail to consider the laws of nature, specifically interdependence of a natural life. “If the new notions as to the chemistry of
vegetation be true, then must the old notions as to population be utterly unfounded. If what we excrete plants secrete—if what we exhale they inspire—if our refuse is their food—then if follows that to increase the population is to increase the quantity of . . . the plants themselves. If the plants nourish us, we at least nourish them.” The moral and scientific solution to urban poverty and waste is by this logic self-evident: recycling. The collection of human waste from the metropolis by “street-finders and collectors” removes a health hazard while creating fertility and wealth, moreover “enabl[ing] us almost to demonstrate the falsity of [Malthus’s] creed which is opposed to every generous impulse of our nature, and which is utterly irreconcilable with the attributes of the Creator” (161). That is to say, the efforts of the finders and collectors have the potential to increase England’s production at a geometric rate that keeps pace with population growth.

Since natural science provides Mayhew with the critical apparatus through which he views the population and waste management problem, he consistently employs terminology that positions the city as integral rather than antithetical to nature’s cycle—assuming the city’s resources are managed responsibly. “[I]n Nature everything moves in a circle—perpetually changing, and yet ever returning to the point whence it started,” writes Mayhew (2:160, my emphasis). A properly run city should form part of this natural circle, continually enriching its own supply.

In the economy of nature there is no loss: this the great doctrine of waste and supply has taught us; the detritus of one rock is the conglomerate of another; the evaporation of the ocean is the source of the river; the poisonous exhalations of animals the vital air of plants; and the refuse of man and beasts the food of their food. The dust and cinders from our fires, the “slops” from the washing of our
houses, the excretions of our bodies, the detritus and “surface-water” of our streets, have all their offices to perform in the great scheme of creation; and if left to rot and fust about us not only injure our health, but diminish the supplies of our food. The filth of the thoroughfares of the metropolis forms, it would appear, the staple manure of the market-gardens in the suburbs; out the of the London mud come the London cabbages: so that an improvement in the scavaging [sic] of the metropolis tends not only to give people improved health, but improved vegetables; for that which is nothing but a pestiferous muck-heap in the town becomes a vivifying garden translated to the country. (2:258)

The geologic cycle, the water cycle, and the carbon cycle offer a template that can be applied to substances that might originally seem to be perversions of the natural world: dust, slops, detritus, and filth from the city should become part of this cycle, too. Nature is the teacher of the basic principle: poor resource management leads to sickness and starvation, while careful waste management leads to health and prosperity.

Mayhew was not the first writer to see London’s waste problem in this way. Edwin Chadwick, in his push for sanitary reform, identified the sewage of London as both a nuisance and potential source of wealth, and he, too, emphasized that resources should flow cyclically: in 1845 he wrote that transporting human waste from city to farmland via household plumbing would allow engineers to “complete the circle, and realize the Egyptian type of eternity by bringing as it were the serpent’s tail into the serpent’s mouth.”

Indeed, Priti Joshi argues that Mayhew’s cyclical motif is “plucked

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straight from [Chadwick's] *Report.*” However, the industry of collection and reuse that Mayhew outlines in such detail is not limited to the agricultural applications of human and animal excrement; Mayhew is explicit about agricultural and industrial application. For example, in his discussion of scavengers he inserts a lengthy survey of all recycled goods that are collected in the city—a list indicating a remarkably comprehensive system of reuse that includes but is by no means limited to agriculture. Among the uses for various materials, he notes that “[t]he refuse materials of our woolen clothes . . . are . . . re-manufactured into shoddy,” while “leathern materials, become, when worn out, the ingredients of the prussiate of potash and other nitrogenised products manufactured by our chemists.” More recognizable to twenty-first century readers are the uses for “worn-out metal commodities,” which “are newly melted, and go to form fresh commodities when the metals are of the scarcer kind, as gold, silver, copper, brass, lead, and even iron; and when of the more common kind, as in the case with old tin, and occasionally iron vessels, they either become the ingredients in some of our chemical manufactures, or . . . are cut up into smaller and inferior commodities” (2:281–4). Thus, while agriculture is indeed a large part of the city’s waste exportation plan, a significant part of the cycle of reuse is not natural at all; fabric, chemicals, metal containers—all of these are remade through artificial rather than natural processes. The “great doctrine of waste and supply” is universally applicable: in Mayhew’s survey of waste management, every item or substance discussed has worth and purpose.

Because of his preoccupation with the use-value of recyclable waste, Mayhew is particularly interested in the economic motivations for waste collection. “Up to the present time we have only thought of removing our refuse—the idea of using it never entered our minds,” he comments; “It was not until science taught us the dependence of one order of creation upon another, that we began to see what appeared worse than worthless to us was Nature’s capital—wealth set aside for future production” (2:160, original emphasis). The Victorians did not invent fertilizer, of course; what Mayhew identifies here as an innovation of “the present time” is not so much the concept of reuse as the motivation for reuse in this distinctly urban and industrial setting. London’s growing population has such a massive potential to consume that resources for agriculture and industrial production are becoming increasingly valuable, and the removal of the potentially infectious detritus that is the side effect of such consumption has become valuable as a service as well. Thus, two economic models for waste removal emerge from Mayhew’s text. The first and preferred one treats waste as a recyclable commodity—potential wealth—and the second treats it as trash. This distinction first appears in his categorization of workers as either finders or collectors. Finders are paid for the value they can obtain by what they sell, while collectors are paid for removal.

Mayhew explores the significance of this difference in greater detail in his section on dust-contracting, a business that had shifted over time as London’s population grew. According to Mayhew, dust and cinders were used as a means to prepare inhospitable soils for agriculture. As the population of Great Britain expanded and more arable soil was required to feed it, the value of dust rose. But the population continued to rise and the balance shifted: the concentration of dust and other waste exceeded demand and
moreover became such a public nuisance that rather than paying for the right to collect and sell dust, contractors began to demand payment for the public service of removal. “The collection of ‘dust’ is now, more properly speaking, the removal of it,” Mayhew clarifies. “The collection of an article implies the voluntary seeking after it, and this the dustmen can hardly be said to do; for though they parade the streets shouting for the dust as they go, they do so rather to fulfil [sic] a certain duty they have undertaken to perform than in any expectation of profit to be derived from the sale of the article” (166–7).

Mayhew here shifts away from his earlier and more precise definition of “collection,” yet he maintains the distinction between gathering something for its value and removing something because it is unwanted. Practically speaking, Mayhew felt that this shift made for less diligent dustmen. “It need hardly be stated that the parishes always employ the man who requires the least money for the performance of what has now become a matter of duty rather than an object of desire” (167, my emphasis). Mayhew’s point is that wage workers do not have the same motivation for their work as street-finders, who are essentially entrepreneurs. But in choosing the word “desire” rather than “motivation” or “impetus,” he suggests that London’s detritus deserves more respect—that London’s role in the chain of being demands a recognition of the value and potential of all waste.

It bears repeating that Mayhew values waste not intrinsically, but as part of a fragile cyclical process that, if interrupted, results in inefficiency and loss. One already-discussed impediment to the cycle is the disposal rather than the reuse of waste—a break in the chain that, according to Mayhew’s logic, might eventually starve London’s indigent population including its finders and collectors. But another and far more frightening disruption for Mayhew is the possibility of waste accumulation. At various
moments throughout his section on finders and collectors, he reveals his concern about the dangers of blockages.

Mayhew’s fascination with accumulation begins with the metropolis itself, a mass of people and buildings that continues to accrue at a pace that can hardly be calculated. Among the experts that Mayhew cites on this subject are John Weale, author and publisher of *London Exhibited in 1852*, and John Ramsay McCulloch, author of *London in 1850–1851*.12 Together with Mayhew, both contend that an accurate census of London is impossible because of its unstable boundaries. According to McCulloch, “The continued and rapid increase of buildings renders it difficult to ascertain the extent of the metropolis at any particular period.”13 Weale’s description is yet more ominous. He describes London’s growth as insidious and organic: the boundaries and extent of London “cannot be defined, as every day some new street takes the place of the green field, and it is therefore only possible to adopt a general idea of the giant city”; it “has now swallowed up many cities, towns, villages, and separate jurisdictions.”14 London itself aggressively “collects” the communities around it, forming an unmanageable conglomerate that is not only difficult to survey, but also difficult to clean.

Mayhew’s preference for statistical data on London’s various inhabitants and material contents yields fascinatingly horrible results when applied to the subject of waste. Throughout his section on finders and collectors, Mayhew quantifies London’s waste with alarming specificity; 3,744,000 pounds of bones (140), 1,240,000 pounds of rags (140), one ton of refuse tobacco (146), 900,000 tons of dust and cinders (170),

14 Weale, 59–60.
52,000 tons of horse and cattle dung (note here that Mayhew differs from the Board of Health estimate of 200,000 tons, noting dismissively that they “seem to delight in ‘large’ estimates” [2:195–6]), 25,000 loads of oyster shells (2:284), and 15,000,000 cubic feet of human excrement (from cesspools alone [2: 449]), and annual quantities of various other types of filth are figuratively piled before the eyes of its readers, culminating in a table that neatly outlines the collection and purchase of every imaginable waste item. “Curious and ample as this Table of Refuse is . . . it is not sufficient, by the mere range of figures, to convey to the mind of the reader a full comprehension of the ramified vastness of the Second-Hand trade of the metropolis,” Mayhew insists, moreover observing with the pride of a true collector that his “Table of Refuse” is “perfectly original” (464).

While Mayhew claims his table cannot “convey to the mind of the reader” the enormous quantity of London’s recyclable or reusable waste, he clearly wishes to render abstract figures into a concrete vision of potential obstruction within the metropolis. In his section on dust, for example, he quantifies the annual mass of material burned and collected and notes, “Now the ashes and cinders arising from this enormous consumption of coal would, it is evident, if allowed to lie scattered about in such a place as London, render, ere long, not only the back streets, but even the important thoroughfares, filthy and impassable” (166). In conjuring a visual approximation that gives life to his abstract figures, he also crafts a revolting imaginative spectacle: what if waste remained uncollected for a year? And not all such scenes that appear in London Labour and the London Poor are imaginary. The most grotesque scenes of urban poverty in Mayhew’s texts are not those of deprivation, but rather those of excess. One example is a neighborhood where many street and chimney cleaners live.
Between the London and St. Katherine's Docks and Rosemary Lane, there is a large district interlaced with narrow lanes, courts, and alleys ramifying into each other in the most intricate and disorderly manner, insomuch that it would be no easy matter for a stranger to work his way through the interminable confusion without the aid of a guide, resident in and well conversant with the locality. . . .

Foul channels, huge dust-heaps, and a variety of other unsightly objects, occupy every open space. (140)

While Mayhew elsewhere boasts that London is "by far the cleanest city in the world," by his own accounts (and by those of Chadwick who preceded him) blocked arteries remain where those responsible for this cleaning live. With no economic motivation to clean the slums, waste piles up around them (159). Improperly valued, waste is no longer a commodity, but rather a contagion. Thus, as Mayhew tabulates each ton of refuse that is carted away and sorted, he evokes a shadowy threat of the congestion that might take over without proper diligence and remuneration.

For Mayhew, the unstable binary of waste collection and accumulation hangs as a promise and a threat over the city. By gathering materials that enrich both the agriculture and industry that sustain them, the London poor—the very population no doubt regarded as most expendable—can support their growing numbers and produce not only future commodities, but also future prosperity. According to Joshi, Mayhew produces "a seamless narrative in which science discovered nature's larger purpose which was the same as the capitalist one, and which ultimately led to a stronger nation . . . Mayhew's easy use in this story of nature and the nation of words like capital, wealth, worthless, production, compensation, and supply not only naturalizes the capitalist venture
("Nature’s capital"), but also posits economic value at the center of the transformation of wastes.¹⁵ Yet waste constantly threatens to accumulate and overwhelm the system of municipal by-laws and economic motivations that prompt its removal. Without careful tending, London might drown in its own potential wealth.

**Despise Not the Rag**

As I mentioned in my first chapter, which explored the symbolic importance of secondhand clothing in *Sartor Resartus*, relatively few scholars have taken the materiality of *Sartor Resartus* seriously, having engaged instead with the text’s publication history or its philosophy. Yet I argue that the materiality of *Sartor Resartus* does more than merely enliven Carlyle’s ontological and epistemological abstractions. While Carlyle suggests that the underlying order of existence and knowledge can only be accessed by peeling up the layers of culture and tradition that lay in between, he does not propose that such material, whether tangible or intangible, is insignificant to our understanding of humanity. If Teufelsdröckh’s supposed insights are the crux of the text, then Teufelsdröckh’s obsession with materiality must be necessary for understanding it. Furthermore, clothing is not the only material metaphor in Carlyle’s text, nor is it the only important one. Dust, rags, scraps of paper, and other detritus are scattered throughout *Sartor Resartus*, emblematic of the decay of society and the need for collective renewal. In fact, *Sartor Resartus* treats waste recycling not only

¹⁵ Joshi.
metaphorically, but also earnestly and profoundly: Teufelsdröckh’s and thus Carlyle’s new ideas are born out of scrap material.

To examine the functions of waste and recycling in Sartor Resartus, it is best to start with Teufelsdröckh himself, the hoarder whose scholarship of accretion accumulates the raw materials for a new social philosophy. One of the “originals and nondescripts, more frequent in German Universities than elsewhere,” Teufelsdröckh is himself, like “rocks” and “ruins,” unproductive but resolutely material; in fact, according to the residents of Weissnichtwo, he is “not so much a Man as a Thing.” He and similar “nondescripts” “have been created by unknown agencies, are in a state of gradual decay, and for the present reflect light and resist pressure; that is, are visible and tangible objects in this phantasm world, where so much other mystery is” (14).

Teufelsdröckh’s unique university appointment as “Professor of Things in General” reinforces his useless materiality. His professorship “seems largely a non-functional position,” for he offers neither courses nor public lectures, and the position offers no payment. His mere existence in space is the sole responsibility, and his title is the sole remuneration. Yet his professorship has a stated purpose. “[I]n times like ours,”” states the “the half-official Program” of the University of Weissnichtwo, “when all things are, rapidly or slowly, resolving themselves into Chaos, a Professorship of this kind had been established; whereby, as occasion called, the task of bodying somewhat forth again from such Chaos might be, even slightly, facilitated” (14–5, my emphasis). While this nonsense is partly satirical, it is not merely a critique of academia. Teufelsdröckh’s materiality or “thinginess” is relevant to Carlyle’s larger claims about the dissolution of Society in the present age. As the known social order and established
beliefs and customs seems to unravel, Teufelsdröckh, as an embodied “Name” and thing, signifier and signified, is a textual and physical obstruction in the way of meaninglessness: his existence is a bulwark against “Denial and Destruction” (19).

Teufelsdröckh’s scholarship, fittingly, begins with a process of material accumulation—what some, including his housekeeper Old Lieschen, might call hoarding. Our first hint of this is the description of his tower in Weissnichtwo, which reveals him to be more than a little untidy:

It was a strange apartment; full of books and tattered papers, and miscellaneous shreds of all conceivable substances, “united in a common element of dust.”

Books lay on tables, and below tables; here fluttered a sheet of manuscript, there a torn handkerchief, or nightcap hastily thrown aside; ink-bottles alternated with bread-crusts, coffee-pots, tobacco-boxes, Periodical Literature, and Blucher Boots. (19)

Orderly bookshelves and stacked manuscripts are the customary equipment for scholarly men in literature; books and manuscripts convey through quiet metonymy the learning they are understood to contain, and their materiality is unobtrusive. Teufelsdröckh’s chaotic and illegible collection of books and other “conceivable substances” works quite differently. Failing to perform a transparently metonymic role, his belongings instead assert themselves physically, simultaneously barring comprehension and entry into Teufelsdröckh’s private space. In short, we find an insistent materiality in Teufelsdröckh’s library that corresponds with what we already know of him from the residents of Weissnichtwo.
The geologic quality of the sediment that accrues in his apartment is underscored by Lieschen’s “earthquakes”—her periodic removal of “such lumber as was not Literary” (19). It is Lieschen, in fact, who seems to incite literary productivity, for Teufelsdröckh, who fears these purgings “worse than the pestilence” is otherwise content “to sit here philosophizing forever, or till the litter, by accumulation, drove him out of doors.” Without prompting, Teufelsdröckh doesn’t appear to accomplish much beyond amassing an inchoate heap of both ideas and waste.

When Teufelsdröckh does produce text, it is scarcely more orderly. Aside from the “almost formless contents” of the philosophical book itself, the requested biography of Teufelsdröckh appears as “miscellaneous masses of Sheets, and oftener Shreds and Snips” divided among six paper bags, perhaps a random sampling from the strata of his cluttered home. The Editor tries to give the reader a feel for the chaos he confronts:

Amidst what seems to be a Metaphysico-theological Disquisition, “Detached Thoughts on the Steam-engine,” or, “The continued Possibility of Prophecy,” we shall meet with some quite private, not unimportant Biographical fact. On certain sheets stand Dreams, authentic or not, while the circumjacent waking Actions are omitted. Anecdotes, oftenest without date of place or time, fly loosely on separate slips, like Sibylline leaves. Interspersed also are long purely Autobiographical delineations; yet without connection, without recognizable coherence; so unimportant, so superfluously minute, they almost remind us of “P. P. Clerk of this Parish.” Thus does famine of intelligence alternate with waste. Selection, order, appears to be unknown to the Professor. In all Bags the same imbroglio; only perhaps in the Bag Capricorn, and those near it, the confusion a little worse.
confounded. Close by a rather eloquent Oration, “On receiving the Doctor’s-Hat,” lie wash-bills, marked bezahlt (settled). His Travels are indicated by the Street-Advertisements of the various cities he has visited; of which Street-Advertisements, in most living tongues, here is perhaps the completest collection extant. (60–1)

From this colorful if chaotic scrapbook, the Editor pieces together the vaguest of biographies and ultimately surrenders, suspecting the biography to be a red herring on the part of the whimsical and elusive Teufelsdrockh.

But this fragmentary and possibly fictional biography is in fact the key to the professor’s methodology. “To look through the Shows of things into Things themselves he is led and compelled... Is not this same looking through the Shows or Vestures into the Things even the first preliminary to a Philosophy of Clothes?” (155–6).

Teufelsdrockh looks through the materiality of ‘things’ to see ‘Things’: the material world and its cast-offs are the beginning of insights into the great truths of existence. In Teufelsdrockh’s own words,

[N]othing hitherto was ever stranded, cast aside; but all, were it only a withered leaf, works together with all; is borne forward on the bottomless, shoreless flood of Action, and lives through perpetual metamorphoses. The withered leaf is not dead and lost, there are Forces in it and around it, though working in inverse order; else how could it rot? Despise not the rag from which man makes Paper, or the litter from which the Earth makes Corn. Rightly viewed no meanest object is insignificant; all objects are as windows, through which the philosophic eye looks
into Infinitude itself... Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and body it forth.” (56)

Teufelsdröckh’s own seeming unproductivity and the geologic tropes that surround his professional life thus fall in line with his philosophy: the meaning of withered leaves and rags and “things in general” lies in part in their impermanence, especially when viewed collectively. The accumulation, decay, and reformation of material things offers insight into the continual reshaping of culture that is constantly fragmented and reformed by revolution. And the instability of Society, while an imperfect measure of the nature of being, when viewed over time, allows us to peer beyond the vestures of the world into the otherwise inaccessible infinite divine.

When the materiality of Sartor Resartus is taken seriously, even Carlyle’s satirical mutterings become relevant. Take, for example, the epitaph that Teufelsdröckh composes for Count Zähdarm. Following his “Historical rather than Lyrical” principles (102), Teufelsdröckh prepares the following inscription: “Philip Zähdarm [w]ho during his sublunary existence destroyed with lead five thousand partridges and openly turned into dung, through himself and his servants, quadrupeds and bipeds, not without tumult in the process, ten thousand million pounds of assorted food. He now rests from labour, his works following him. If you seek his monument, look at the dung-heap” (256n102). The humorous epitaph simultaneously spoofs the famous epitaph of Christopher Wren, mocks the stagnation of the aristocracy, and enrages the Zähdarms, but it can also be read quite seriously and even complementarily from Teufelsdröckh’s perspective—especially considering that his own name translates as “devil’s dung.” Zähdarm is not useless. As an
agent of decay, he is part of the same cycle of deterioration and rebirth that continually remakes the world.

For Teufelsdröckh, the threat of uselessness and stagnation is not decay, but rather the potential for accumulation without renewal. “Alas, move whithersoever you may, are not the tatters and rags of superannuated worn-out Symbols (in this Ragfair of a World) dropping off everywhere, to hoodwink, to halter, to tether you; nay, if you shake them not aside, threatening to accumulate, and perhaps produce suffocation?” (171). Although the professor, by his own inclination, might suffocate under his own hoarded piles of waste without Lieschen, he recognizes the need for cleansing and renewal, for an excess of material, even printed material, could bring humanity to a standstill. “If such supply of printed Paper should rise so far as to choke up the highways and public thoroughfares, new means must of necessity be had recourse to. In a world existing by Industry, we grudge to employ fire as a destroying element, and not as a creating one. However, Heaven is omnipotent, and will find us an outlet” (35). The world needs an act of God or an act of Lieschen—in other words, an “earthquake”—to avoid suffocation under the weight of its own dead symbols.

Thus far, all of this materiality remains largely metaphorical, standing in for Carlyle’s more abstract ideas. Yet I argue that Carlyle’s materiality transcends metaphor and becomes method in earnest when he connects these disparate threads of scholarly accretion and cyclical natural processes to paper-making, and therefore to the process of printing:

[I]s it not beautiful to see five million quintals of Rags picked annually from the Laystall; and annually, after being macerated, hot-pressed, printed on, and sold,—
returned thither; filling so many hungry mouths by the way? Thus is the Laystall, especially with its Rags or Clothes-rubbish, the grand Electric Battery, and Fountain-of-motion, from which and to which the Social Activities (like vitreous and resinous Electricities) circulate, in larger or smaller circles, through the mighty, billowy, storm-tost chaos of Life, which they keep alive! (35)

Rags were, of course, the principal ingredient in making paper when *Sartor Resartus* appeared, although wood pulp would soon come to dominate the industry. Moreover, Hamburg, Germany was at this time the site of a rag market that was important in supplying paper to publishers across Europe.¹⁶ The recycling process that creates paper feeds both the minds and the mouths of Society, and is therefore an agent for both bodily and cultural renewal.

Other passages that hint at a connection between recycling, printing, and renewal are marked by Carlyle’s use of the word “ferment” to mean the process of decay preceding a rebirth. Fermentation was a particular stage in the production of paper at this time. In order to reduce rags to pulp, workers heaped large piles of rags in warehouses, drenched them with water, and allowed them to ferment. The resulting pulpy substance was strained to produce new paper. When the process of fermentation is understood, the significance of printed material and the ideas they encode for social revolution is subtly but effectively evoked in passages such as the following: “All kindreds and peoples and nations dashed together, and shifted and shovelled into heaps, that they might ferment there, and in time unite. The birth-pangs of Democracy, wherewith convulsed Europe was groaning in cries that reached Heaven, could not escape me” (135).

Finally, Teufelsdröckh’s scholarship of accretion can be understood as a metaphor for the papermaking process itself. By collecting scraps of this and that in his apartment, sorting them, and reassembling them into a new whole, Teufelsdröckh and the Editor mime the process by which all new ideas are produced and disseminated for the public—a process that makes old things new.

_The Human Magpie_

John Harmon of Dickens’s _Our Mutual Friend_ is a dust contractor—a recycler of the more practical sort. His sole motivation is the pursuit of wealth. Yet in his own way, he, too, paves the way for rebirth. In collecting the waste materials that will become new material things, he also amasses an estate that will change the lives of a number of characters by the end of the novel. This process of collection, of discerning value and potential in cast-off things, is what links him to the impish but ultimately benevolent Teufelsdröckh. Capital, whether cultural or monetary, can be gleaned from waste only if waste is collected and sifted.

Of course, collection, when embodied by Teufelsdröckh, looks more like a pathology than a planned endeavor. If we read him as a character rather than a caricature, we see that his hoarding habits are an impediment to his daily life. In fact, at first glance he seems to have far more in common with another of Dickens’s characters: Krook of _Bleak House_, owner of the rag and bottle shop where “[e]verything seem[s] to be bought and nothing to be sold.” A metaphor for the blocked circulation of the Court of Chancery, Krook accrues material purposelessly and compulsively, resulting in an eclectic and
grotesque accumulation of materials that should be recycled—rags, bones, bottles, paper—but aren't. "[A] ll's fish that comes to my net," Krook's wheezes, "And I can't abear to part with anything I once lay hold of" (70). Morbidly obese, Krook accumulates so much material into his own person that he ultimately spontaneously combusts, recalling the Teufelsdröckh's prediction that society will inevitably, like the Phoenix, be destroyed by fire before its aging symbols and institutions can be renewed. In contrast to these two hoarders, Harmon is not a collector of materiality; after all, the mounds must be parted with and recycled to create money. The home he leaves behind is the very antithesis of Teufelsdröckh's tower apartment or Krook's fire-trap of a shop.

Bare of paint, bare of paper on the walls, bare of furniture, bare of experience of human life. Whatever is built by man for man's occupation, must, like natural creations, fulfill the intention of its existence, or soon perish. This old house had wasted—more from desuetude than it would have wasted from use, twenty years for one.

A certain leanness falls upon houses not sufficiently imbued with life (as if they were nourished upon it), which was very noticeable here. The staircase, balustrades, and rails, had a spare look—an air of being denuded to the bone—which the panels of the walls and the jambs of the doors and windows also bore. The scanty moveables partook of it; save for the cleanliness of the place, the dust—into which they were all resolving would have lain thick on the floors.

(231–2)

Harmony Jail is denuded of all excess materiality; it is too Spartan to contain even the dust that one expects in a home so devoid of humanity (presumably the dust has been
carted to the mounds in order to be rendered into money). This, of course, is because Harmon isn’t precisely a hoarder like Teufelsdröckh and Krook; he is a miser.

Harmon’s business of dust contracting, however, looks quite a bit like Teufelsdröckh’s scholarship of accumulation and Krook’s collection of documents and debris. In Mortimer Lightwood’s words, Old Harmon “grew rich as a Dust Contractor, and lived in a hollow in a hilly country entirely composed of Dust. On his own small estate the growling old vagabond threw up his own mountain range, like an old volcano, and its geological formation was Dust. Coal-dust, vegetable-dust, bone-dust, crockery dust, rough dust and sifted dust,—all manner of Dust” (55–6). Lightwood’s description suggests that Harmon was fond of dust itself, yet the state of his home and his preoccupation with wealth suggests otherwise. His home’s proximity to the mounds is thrift, not attachment. And even though activity at the mounds is stalled throughout the novel, suggesting that the mounds tend to accumulate rather than to disperse, that is an effect of the novel’s chronology. All of the action takes place between Harmon’s death and the final righting of his estate, and during this time, Boffin allows the business to come to a temporary standstill. Therefore, the mounds, potentially a symbol of the active process of reuse and renewal, stagnate and become material embodiments of static capital. In playing with the difference between material and immaterial accumulation, Dickens paints Harmon as both a miser and a hoarder of material waste.

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Before proceeding further, it is worth establishing the distinction between hoarding and miserliness for the sake of clarity. Historically there has been considerable overlap in the use of the two terms—both originally referred to the amassing of great wealth, and both can be applied to the collection of other things. However, “hoarding” has long carried stronger material connotations, for the root word “hoard” refers to a collected mass, while “miser” designates something more abstract: a person with a greedy or stingy disposition, and someone who might well rely on banks and figures rather than piles and stashes. This distinction has been exaggerated by modern psychology in the past two decades as psychologists have devoted more resources to the study of pathological hoarding.

While I will maintain the distinction between these terms, Dickens and other nineteenth-century writers generally did not. Moreover, while hoarding and miserly characters are not quite interchangeable in his fiction, they do serve a similar narrative purpose, often offering a critique of some type of blocked circulation that manifests itself in physical items. For example, in addition to Krook, whose pathological hoarding parodies the Court of Chancery, we find Jacob Marley, a miser who unwittingly forges heavy chains of “cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel” that he must carry about in death as a penance for the withholding of charity. Ultimately, each character meets an end that releases the blockage and promotes new circulation: Krook’s death frees his legatees to sift through mounds of paperwork that

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18 OED s.v. “hoard”; OED, s.v. “miser.”
20 Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings (New York: Penguin, 2003), 44.
will ultimately end Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and Marley’s warning prompts Scrooge to loosen the purse (and heart) strings. In spite of these similarities, Dickens makes the distinction between Krook’s preoccupation with things and Marley’s preoccupation with money clear.

But this distinction is not at all clear in the case of Harmon. His professional and personal practices seem to correspond: he collects waste, he collects money. And Lightwood encourages us to make this link between hoarding dust and accruing wealth. Yet Harmon’s hoarding is not hoarding at all; it is really part of the process of circulation. Only Harmon’s wealth is locked away, waiting to be released at the end of the novel. Therefore, what really makes Harmon distinctive among Dickens’s miserly and hoarding characters is that his mounds represent blockage and (re)circulation simultaneously.

Dickens was not the only writer to note the similarities between hoarding and the recycling trade. F. Somner Merryweather explores this connection in Lives and Anecdotes of Misers; or The Passion of Avarice Displayed (1850).²¹ Lives and Anecdotes collects material from a number of pamphlets on the subject of avarice and hoarding behavior, and it is recognizable to readers of Our Mutual Friend as the text Silas Wegg reads to Mr. Boffin and Mr. Venus.

[P]roducing a little book from his breast-pocket, he handed it with great care to the literary gentlemen, and inquired, “What do you call that, Wegg?”

²¹ F. Somner Merryweather’s Lives and Anecdotes of Misers; or The Passion of Avarice Displayed: In the Parsimonious Habits, Unaccountable Lives and Remarkable Deaths of the Most Notorious Misers of All Ages, with a Few Words on Frugality and Saving. (London: Simpkin, Marshall and Co, 1850). All references will be made parenthetically in the text.
“This, sir,” replied Silas, adjusting his spectacles, and referring to the title-page, “is Merryweather’s *Lives and Anecdotes of Misers*. Mr Venus, would you make yourself useful and draw the candles a little nearer, sir?” This to have a special opportunity of bestowing a stare upon his comrade. . .

“Give us Dancer, Wegg,” said Mr Boffin.

With another stare at his comrade, Silas sought and found the place.


“Eh? What’s that?” demanded Mr Boffin.

“‘The Treasures,’ sir,” repeated Silas, reading very distinctly, “‘of a Dung hill.’ Mr Venus, sir, would you oblige with the snuffers?” This, to secure attention to his adding with his lips only, “Mounds!” (542–3)

The scene derives its humor and suspense from the characters’ differing motives; each sees the book’s practical application, but while Boffin wants to mimic the misers, Wegg wants to learn how to outsmart them. What makes the characters’ loaded readings of Merryweather yet more humorous is that Dickens invites the reader to share in them by providing a precise citation. On page 109 of *Lives and Anecdotes*, the reader finds the same chapter outline that Wegg reads in the above passage. As the scene continues and Wegg winks and nudges Mr. Venus in response to each similarity between Dancer and
the deceased dust contractor, Dickens winks and nudges his reader, offering clues to a richer context beyond the pages of his own novel.

Some of this context is only superficially illuminating. For example, one of Merryweather’s more amiable characters, a dust contractor, offers a dust heap as a dowry for his daughter. This scenario, which also appears in R. H. Horne’s well-known *Household Words* article, “Dust; or Ugliness Redeemed,” is instantly recognizable as part of the narrative of John Harmon as told by Mortimer Lightwood to the guests at the Veneerings’ party.22 In Lightwood’s account, Harmon “ma[kes] his money by Dust” and offers his daughter an “immense” quantity of “Dust” as her marriage portion, but only on the condition that she marry the right man (56). Merryweather’s dust contractor, like Horne’s, is more generous. Pointing through his window at the dust mounds adjacent to his home, the father addresses the groom, “[Y]ou observe . . . that large heap of dust, I give it you as my daughter’s dowry.” In response, the suitor thinks, “A heap of dust and dirt, the scrapings of the public street! A fine marriage gift . . . and a vexatious disappointment!” (47). Unlike the dust contractor in “Dust; or Ugliness Redeemed,” Merryweather’s contractor does not offer a choice between a monetary dowry and the mound, and the ignorant groom is insulted and disappointed. However, any reader of Dickens and Mayhew will anticipate that the dust heap turns out to be quite valuable, and it sells for two thousand pounds. Although Merryweather’s dust contractor proves far kinder than Dickens’s variation in *Our Mutual Friend*, the similarities are unmistakable, and it is significant that his rich gift is originally misunderstood as a miserly one; it

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suggests the play on the various connotations of “Dust” that Lightwood makes use of in his own narration; dust can represent wealth or waste, miserliness or generosity, depending on one’s perspective.

However, as I hinted above, the most compelling link between the two texts is their perspective on hoarding and recycling. Most of Lives and Anecdotes explores the eccentricities of wealthy pathological hoarders (Merryweather favors the term “miser”), the most notable being Boffin’s favorite, Daniel Dancer (1716–94), whose scavenging behavior recalls Mayhew’s finders and collectors.

It happened one morning, as Mr. Dancer was taking his usual walk upon the common, to pick up bones, sticks, or any bit of rag or other matters that might go towards repairing his clothes or his house; that he found a sheep that had apparently died from natural disease, and most probably in a putrid state: this was a rare prize for Mr. Dancer; and incredible as it may appear, he took it up, and bore it home on his shoulders in triumph to his sister, who received it as the immediate gift of heaven to bless their poor souls with a change of food, and enable them to feast without expence, which was, to the appetite of a miser, the most savoury sauce that could accompany such a delicious morsel as carrion mutton. (116)

Merryweather accentuates his biography of Dancer with sarcasm, calling the sheep a “rare prize” and “delicious morsel” to highlight Dancer’s warped perception. Yet the “rare prize” of the sheep brings to mind Mayhew’s insight into the economics of trash picking and poverty: one person’s thing, vile and abject though it may be, is someone else’s prize.
The disgust and subtle mockery Merryweather evinces for hoarders and misers contrasts starkly with his favorable discussion of London’s finders and collectors, who also generate wealth by collecting seemingly worthless things as part of the recycling trade.

There is nothing without its use, and nothing that will not produce a price. Thousands of pounds are earned in London every year, by collecting fragments of old rags, pieces of old nails, and remnants of old cord and twine. These are hoarded up, sorted out, and sold to the proprietors of those dingy receptacles of filth and fat, which are to be found in all the back streets of the metropolis. The “marine store” trade is one of the most profitable in London; by encouraging thrift in others, the dealers in such things grow thrifty themselves. They learn by their business the value of little things; they will buy a farthing’s worth of iron, and a pennyworth of dirty rags. In London, there are a number of amphibious kind of human beings—in appearance neither men nor women, but something between the two . . . They keep their eyes constantly on the ground, glancing along the gutters of the street with amazing rapidity; and, considering how old they are, it is surprising how quickly they discern the objects of their search. They usually carry a coarse dirty bag, into which they put promiscuously every little bit of linen or woollen rag, string, bone, or iron, which they may be fortunate enough to discover in the mud. The little heaps of dust, swept out by shopboys from behind the counters, are constant mines of treasure. (50–1)

Merryweather portrays the rag and bone collectors as grotesque and less than human—"amphibious . . . beings." Yet their strangeness is poverty, not pathology, and he is


sympathetic rather than sarcastic. While he derides the needless economy of the misers, he represents the ability of the London poor to generate value out of small hoards of trash as a wonder of human resilience.

This discussion of rag and bone collectors and other participants in the recycling economy appears in a chapter entitled, "A Few Words on Frugality and Saving," an endorsement of the wisdom of thrift that seems out of place in a book largely devoted to the dark side of collecting. He explains this apparent inconsistency thusly: "Rather would we, that our pen fell powerless from our hand, than that we should inadvertently have said one word of discouragement to they who are striving, by cheerful and willing self-denial, to provide out of humble incomes a provision against the hour of misfortune" (32). Merryweather is torn between the desires to pathologize and moralize: while pointing to misers and hoarders as specimens of hereditary mental illness, specifically, monomania, he wishes to exhort his reader to respectable frugality (162, 167). This dual agenda is a tricky one to maintain, especially as misers frequently behave like rag and bone men. The difference, of course, is the question of circulation; those in the recycling trade understand the "value of little things"—a phrase used repeatedly throughout the section on frugality—but they do not value such things intrinsically. Like Mayhew, they value waste as part of a process, and their participation in the cycle of recycling is what distinguishes them from those who hoard rather than circulate wealth.

Read together with *Our Mutual Friend, Lives and Anecdotes* underscores Dickens's artistic conflation of the hoarding-like recycling trade and miserliness. Harmon isn't much like Merryweather's hoarding misers at all; he is greedy, parsimonious, peculiar, and unkind, yet he does not hoard and reuse filth himself; he sells it. Moreover,


his liquid assets are not hidden in Harmony Jail for Silas Wegg to find; they are, in all likelihood, deposited in a bank. Boffin, who plays at being a miser, isn’t interested in retaining the mounds for their own sake either, although he does demonstrate some sentimental attachment by installing a gazebo at the summit of one of them. Asked by Harmon/Rokesmith if he plans to sell the mounds, he replies,

Ay, ay, that’s another thing. I may sell them, though I should be sorry to see the neighbourhood deprived of ‘em too. It’ll look but a poor dead flat without the Mounds. Still I don’t say that I’m going to keep ’em always there, for the sake of the beauty of the landscape. There’s no hurry about it; that’s all I say at present. I ain’t a scholar in much, Rokesmith, but I’m a pretty fair scholar in dust. I can price the Mounds to a fraction, and I know how they can be best disposed of; and likewise that they take no harm by standing where they do. (233–4)

In fact, in reading Merryweather to better understand the behavior of Old Harmon and Boffin, we see just how thoroughly Silas Wegg fails in his attempt to read their characters. He assumes similarity, looking to Merryweather for clues, without being attuned to signs of difference. Even Mr. Venus warns him of his mistake.

“Did you ever hear him mention how he found [his wealth], my dear friend? Living on the mysterious premises, one would like to know. For instance, where he found things? Or, for instance, how he set about it? Whether he began at the top of the mounds, or whether he began at the bottom. Whether he prodded”;

Mr Wegg’s pantomime is skilful and expressive here; “or whether he scooped? Should you say scooped, my dear Mr Venus; or should you as a man—say prodded?”


"I should say neither, Mr Wegg."

"As a fellow-man, Mr Venus—mix again—why neither?"

"Because I suppose, sir, that what was found, was found in the sorting and sifting." (354–5)

Wegg wants an easy answer to the riddle of Old Harmon’s wealth. But Venus, himself a recycler of sorts, must appreciate what street-finders, misers, Boffin, and Merryweather all understand, but Silas Wegg never will: the mysteriousness not of hidden gold, but of wealth hidden in “small things.”

Wegg can be pardoned to some extent, for Dickens goes to some trouble to conflate Old Harmon’s miserliness with materiality. The effect is to make his cold-hearted nature appear even more revolting and reprehensible. Yet this conflation of money and materiality is not Dickens’s starkest critique in the novel, and Harmon is not the only character in the text whose wealth is rendered figuratively into materiality. The Veneerings’ wealth appears largely through the evidence of their conspicuous consumption: an entire household of new items upon which their new status in society rests.

Mr and Mrs Veneering were bran-new people in a bran-new house in a bran-new quarter of London. Everything about the Veneerings was spick and span new. All their furniture was new, all their friends were new, all their servants were new, their plate was new, their carriage was new, their harness was new, their horses were new, their pictures were new, they themselves were new, they were as newly married as was lawfully compatible with their having a bran-new baby, and if they had set up a great-grandfather, he would have come home in


Horne, R. H. “Dust; or Ugliness Redeemed.” Household Words, July 13, 1850, 379–84.


matting from the Pantechnicon, without a scratch upon him, French polished to the crown of his head.

For, in the Veneering establishment, from the hall-chairs with the new coat of arms, to the grand pianoforte with the new action, and upstairs again to the new fire-escape, all things were in a state of high varnish and polish. And what was observable in the furniture, was observable in the Veneerings—the surface smelt a little too much of the workshop and was a trifle sticky. (48)

If Harmon’s dusty wealth seems, in Gallagher’s terms, to be a “hoarding and expanding of his own substance,” the Veneerings sticky furniture materially embodies their lack of substance. If Harmon threatens to “make Dust of [his daughter’s] heart and Dust of her life,” the Veneerings do make “an innocent piece of dinner-furniture” out of their “oldest friend,” Twemlow (49). Harmon, modeling an economy of refuse, and the Veneering family, modeling one of frivolous consumption, both translate wealth and human connections into materiality. For Harmon, all decays and becomes dust, while the Veneerings render everything new by purchasing and therefore objectifying taste, heritage, hospitality, and friendship.

The materiality of both Harmon and the Veneerings embodies their failure to establish proper human connections. However, Harmon is redeemed through the Boffins, to whom he ultimately bequeaths the entire estate, while the Veneerings’ consumption and display accelerates their inevitable “resounding smash” (886). The Veneerings, like the Lammles, will lose their belongings in an auction, and as these objects disperse, so too will the Veneerings. The useless and even repulsive things that constitute the mounds, however—bones, crockery, rags, dust, and whatnot—each hold the germ of future wealth


http://www2.ucsc.edu/dickens/OMF/joshi.html.


and renewal. This renewal of both objects (new commodities) and subjects (those sustained by new production) proves that from Harmon’s very ashes, new life can be sustained.

As the novel winds toward its conclusion, a number of characters are revived in some way or another as a result of Harmon’s death and estate; Eugene Wrayburn is restored to industry from indolence; Lizzie Hexam is saved from a fate worse than death (when she escapes the city to work in a paper mill, significantly); Jenny Wren and Sloppy are employed by the Harmons and find happiness together; Bella’s character is redeemed from the dangers of her shallow fixation on wealth; Mr. and Mrs. Boffin have not only newfound wealth, but a happy home occupied by loving surrogate children and grandchildren at the end of the novel in the form of John and Bella and their fledgling family. But the most central of these, of course, is John Harmon himself.

John Harmon first appears in the first scene of the novel an abject thing, an “it,” a corpse “in an advanced state of decay” (74) being towed along behind the boat of Gaffer and Lizzie Hexam. Lizzie protests, “No, no, father! No! I can’t indeed. Father!—I cannot sit so near it!” Vexed, Gaffer replies, “What hurt can it do you?” Lizzie, however, “cannot bear it” (45, my emphasis). Lightwood, hearing that Harmon’s corpse has washed ashore, mentions it as a “remarkable thing” (59). And Harmon himself, in the guise of Julius Handford, looks upon what is supposed to be his own corpse and comments, “It’s a horrible sight” (68). Harmon knows, of course, that he is really alive, yet he makes the decision to remain dead upon weighing the pros and cons. Having done so, he metaphorically buries himself.


"Lombardian Legends." *Pawnbrokers' Gazette.* February 5, 1849, 45.


He . . . buried John Harmon many additional fathoms deep. He . . . heaped mounds upon mounds of earth over John Harmon’s grave . . . And so busy had he been all night, piling and piling weights upon weights of earth above John Harmon’s grave, that by that time John Harmon lay buried under a whole Alpine range; and still the Sexton Rokesmith accumulated mountains over him, lightening his labour with the dirge, “Cover him, crush him, keep him down!”

(435)

Harmon’s exaggerated self interment echoes his father’s formation of a mountain range of dust, and his burial echoes his father’s own burial. I would even suggest that the lack of a given name for Old Harmon suggests that he, too, was named “John Harmon”; his son and (as I presume) his namesake, in returning, is therefore something of a revenant in a novel that never shows his father’s living face, and John Harmon is doubly reborn when he arises from the dust at the end of the novel.

John Harmon, reborn, does restore circulation to the stagnating wealth of his father. The dust mounds are sold and rapidly moved away, and he spends lavishly to prepare the home he will share with the Boffins for Bella. All of this newness initially recalls the Veneerings and the wasting disease of their conspicuous consumption. Yet consumption is the final chapter of the cycle of Harmon’s wealth, long stalled by his miserly withholding. Therefore, Harmon’s purchases and preparations are described in terms evocative of nature and fertility, reminding the reader that the source of the wealth is dust that will be used principally in agriculture. In contrast to the Veneering’s furniture that smells too much of the workshop, the new Harmon home is described in naturalistic terms.


Miller, Andrew. *Novels behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative.*


The house-door was opened without any knocking or ringing, and John promptly helped her out. The servant who stood holding the door, asked no question of John, neither did he go before them or follow them as they went straight up-stairs. It was only her husband's encircling arm, urging her on, that prevented Bella from stopping at the foot of the staircase. As they ascended, it was seen to be tastefully ornamented with most beautiful flowers. . .

Going on a little higher, they came to a charming aviary, in which a number of tropical birds, more gorgeous in colour than the flowers, were flying about; and among those birds were gold and silver fish, and mosses, and water-lilies, and a fountain, and all manner of wonders. (838)

It is also significant that Bella does not want the new things for herself. She wants them for the infant she carries with her into the new home. The old man's hoarded dust and wealth has come full circle, spent at last to create a home of fertility and affection.

Conclusion

In our own culture, recycling is motivated by a deserve to preserve resources and thereby to mitigate the harm humanity poses to the natural world. As the work of these authors suggests, Victorian recycling was prompted by a desire not to save the planet, but rather to save humanity. Mayhew's vision was to direct the horrifying accumulation of London's waste toward the feeding of the urban poor. By gathering the scraps of material that threatened to clog the very streets, the urban scavenging population collected resources that Mayhew argued could be used more efficiently to feed their growing


[Rowcroft, Charles], “The Turnkey’s Daughter.” In *Chronicles from the Fleet, Hood’s Magazine and Comic Miscellany*, 5: 133–46. London: Hurst, 1846

numbers, if only the value of such recycled material could be sustained. Carlyle and Dickens, drawing figuratively on the idea of hoarding and recycling, suggest that collection and recycling can lead to other kinds of human renewal. Teufelsdröckh, by hoarding scraps of knowledge, and Harmon, by professionally gathering waste, both accumulate the materials that will feed a new generation. Together, they realize the literal and figurative value of a past that has been rendered into decayed fragments and small things.

—. "My Uncle." *Pawnbrokers' Gazette*. July 22, 1878, 229.


Conclusion

This project seeks a more complex understanding of a simple concept: the notion that certain objects in literature tend to collect and retain an aura of past associations that remains perceptible when such items are surrendered to the marketplace. This relationship between person and possession appears routinely in Victorian literature, certainly, but it persists in our own culture as well. Museums, antique stores, and even university storerooms seem inevitably to prompt superstitious or sentimental musings, and one of the greatest pleasures of this project has been the tendency for discussions of my work to elicit confessions of this kind from academics and nonacademics alike. It would seem that we all share a cultural and perhaps even a psychological predisposition to think of an object's history as one of its intrinsic qualities, as though an alternate temporality were embedded in its fibers. This is particularly true of domestic items such as clothing and furniture with their intimate code of stains, tears, scratches, and scents—tangible markers that can be easily confused with the history they seem to signify.

However, my work argues that rather than merely persisting after an object passes from private to public sphere, such seemingly personal associations originate in the shift from home to the marketplace. It is not the object itself, but rather the object's alienability and its actual transformation into a commodity that prompt musings about the past or speculations about the future in these narratives. This is not to diminish the importance of material culture studies; certainly objects do have stories to tell. Yet my purpose here is not to examine the past of any particular real or literary object or to suggest any method for extracting this kind of history; rather, I wish to explore the


spatial, economic, and cultural conditions that prompt certain readings of certain types of literary objects.

With that purpose, I have examined literary representations of four sectors of the historical nineteenth-century secondhand economy—old clothes markets, pawnshops, estate auctions, and waste processing. The isolation of these specific patterns reflects this project’s origin in cultural studies and its investment in the mimetic function of literature: idea that fiction can tell us something of reality. Why was this shift from possession to commodity so deeply absorbing for Victorian writers?

As I noted in my introduction, other explorations of the affective significance of secondhand objects in nineteenth-century literature such as those by Jeff Nunokawa and Andrew Miller tend to focus on feared rather than actual losses of objects from the domestic space. These projects have viewed such moments in literature as indicative of a cultural angst about the economic instability and burgeoning consumer culture of the times. Such projects seem increasingly relevant in the context of our own recent global economic downturn, which not only forced many would-be consumers out of the marketplace, but also produced a widespread disaffection with consumerism and materialism generally. The work of these scholars reflects our own postmodern uncertainty about the reality and permanence of our material surroundings. Over each consumer durable hovers the specter of its vanishing worth.

One of the lingering cultural effects of the dominance of Marxist thought over the past century is the idea that personal property—through the strange alchemy of capitalism—can be dissolved into an indeterminate mass of wealth. This notion has sometimes tempted scholars to see the loss of possessions from the domestic sphere as a
—. “Fashion in Undress: Clothing and Commodity Culture in Household Words.”


process of abstraction—seemingly an effacement of materiality. While the enduring
descriptive power of the commodity fetish testifies to its usefulness in helping us to
understand the interconnectedness of persons and objects, readers of the Victorian novel
must remain alert to the artificiality of this economic trope and its power in shading our
perceptions. A transfer is not the same as a transformation. In changing form into a
commodity, objects merely lose one set of personal associations to gain another.

My project attempts to counteract readings that overemphasize this notion of
abstraction by examining the process of commodification from the far side. A
secondhand item for sale in a shop emphatically attests to its own materiality and thus
redirects our attention to the genuine abstraction. In George Eliot’s *The Mill on the
Floss*, for example, we know that the items that figuratively vanish from the Tulliver’s
home do not truly disappear; they merely move to other homes. What has been erased is
not the physical item but the imaginary hand of ownership: the “first hand.” Replaced by
the vague if evocative metaphor of the “second hand,” these objects do not cease to exist
or cease to signify. Rather, they appear in a new context where they signify something
different—yearning back to the lost meaning that the term “secondhand” implies. Each
transfer of a secondhand item, then, represents a metaphorical death of the first hand; for
this reason, I argue that these patterns of circulation in fiction, considered jointly, reveal
middle class fears and fantasies about the permanence of life, wealth, and status.

However, in investigating the various facets of the secondhand economy, I have
not limited my work to an analysis of culture. This project also analyzes the figurative
and self-consciously literary role of these patterns of exchange in the novel. The
economies represented here reflect not only specific cultural and historical conditions, but
also specific narrative functions. Old clothes markets in literature serve to remind the reader of the past and past social order while gesturing toward fears of future poverty and chaos; pawnbroker's shops serve heighten narrative suspense by suspending the consequences of loss and concealing information; auction narratives reenact the trauma of the dispossessed family through fractured narratives; and narratives of recycling figuratively accumulate and hoard materials that must be renewed in order to achieve resolution. As these patterns trace the varying trajectories by which a possession becomes a commodity, they simultaneously reveal a cultural discomfort with the unstable nature of personal property and demonstrate a variety of techniques that Victorian authors used to reflect content with form.

Metonymy is often thought to be the weak link of figurative language—less powerful and less creative than metaphor. Yet just as this project insists on broadening our understanding of nineteenth-century consumer culture through attentiveness to the materiality of poverty and loss, it also insists on the literary value of metonymy as a sophisticated and consciously employed trope of nineteenth-century fiction. The writers studied in these pages deployed metonymy to echo and to animate the instability of their social world: its perpetual threat of chaos and its endless hope for renewal.
Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that even as Victorian society witnessed a rapid expansion in the availability and variety of newly manufactured commodities, Victorian literature reflected a cultural preoccupation with secondhand things and the sad, lost histories they were thought to encode. The mute ghost of a frayed coat, the fallen woman's forfeited pledge, the shreds of carpet hanging from the home of ruined family, and the ultimate symbol of abjection, discarded human waste: all of these circulated and recirculated through an imaginative economy pulsing just below the cultural veneer of mass production, consumption, and desire. The degraded and alienated commodities and accompanying fantasies that made up the secondhand economy were, strangely enough, produced by the same well-oiled machinery that assembled the firsthand world of goods, for only in contrast to new things could secondhand commodities come to evoke the complicated mixture of nostalgia, fear, and sadness that characterize their depiction in Victorian literature.

It is worth noting that even the firsthand commodity of the Victorian period was haunted by the past. While consumers of the mid-nineteenth century may have preferred new things, high Victorian design often mimicked the styles of earlier eras, such as Italian Renaissance, French Rococo, and Gothic. Nikolaus Pevsner wryly comments that “one is so used to defining Victorian architecture and design in terms of what style of the past it imitated that not enough attention is generally given to the fact how very rarely the
real date of a piece of 1850 is not written all over its period disguise.”¹ In an era
dominated by the ethos of progress, then, material goods often yearned for earlier days.

As the novelty of cheap and mass-produced items faded into the background of
everyday life by the end of the century, this cultural fascination with old things would
evolve into something considerably more positive and discerning: a “triumph of
substance over mere style” that deserved new terminology and different associations.²
Deborah Cohen suggests that what was once “simply secondhand furniture” was
increasingly termed “antique”—a usage that evolved as recently as the 1820s.³ Those
who purchased antiques considered themselves collectors, and their taste for what was
now considered “authentic” was a mark of distinction. Of course, then as now, the most
desired antiques were the oldest and rarest. “Secondhand” came to refer to items from the
more recent past, an era not yet distant enough for distinction.

Our own era has witnessed yet another shift in the secondhand lexicon. Aside
from that popular automotive euphemism, “pre-owned,” the most remarkable recent
development has been the pronounced uptick in the use of the term “vintage” to describe
used goods that fail to qualify as antique. Once used to mark an item as a distinctive or
even a superlative example from a certain period, “vintage” is now used to refer to almost
anything barely (or not even) twenty years old; a search for “vintage 1990s” on the
popular online auction site Ebay.com yields over 10,000 matches.⁴ Even more
remarkable is the appearance of the “vintage” on the popular indie niche site and

¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, High Victorian Design: A Study of the Exhibits of 1851 (London:
² Cohen, 145–56, 147.
⁴ OED, s.v. “vintage” n. 4 b, c.
"second-wave dot-com success story," Etsy.com—"Your place to buy all things handmade, vintage, and supplies [sic]." Etsy yokes together the sale of "vintage" items with a genre of earth-friendly products that can only be described as obsessively firsthand: knitted knickknacks, acorn earrings, hand-dyed fabric accessories, "and supplies." These items attempt to sidestep the commodity fetish entirely. Etsy sellers often identify themselves by name and detail the amount of effort and craft invested in each item or do-it-yourself kit they offer. The purchase premium is the knowledge that a specific, highly educated, Caucasian woman (that is to say, not an anonymous child in a developing nation) lavished hours over your selection. The vintage items sold on Etsy share this aura of cultivated genuineness; polyester jumpsuits, Bakelite bracelets, and steampunk scraps salvage a new model of singular authenticity from the refuse of an earlier age of mass production.

This blurring of the secondhand and the homemade is characteristic of a new model of "green" consumerism that seeks to reduce the impact of consumer culture on the environment by privileging items that self-consciously announce their exclusion from the dominant global marketplace. While purchasing secondhand items once marked a buyer as working class, green consumerism has given secondhand sale new prestige. Ironically, the sort of used goods that might once have summoned the ghosts of

nineteenth century urban waste have become status symbols of upper-middle class organismism.
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