

## Magical Agents and Material Objects

TILI BOON CULLÉ

At the turn of the eighteenth century, in the years 1704-17, Louis XIV's antiquary Antoine Galland published the first French translation of the *Arabian Nights*, whose widespread popularity rapidly transformed the European cultural landscape. The arrival of the oriental tale on the scene, complete with its genies, magical lamps, and flying carpets, constituted what has been characterized as a veritable invasion of the land of fiction, already populated by the talking beasts and seven-league boots of French fables and fairy tales. While the cultural influence of French, Danish, German, and Russian folk tales has been amply documented, insufficient attention has been devoted to the far more direct impact of the oriental tale on French libertine fiction. The serial publication of *Les Mille et une nuits, contes arabes* rapidly gave rise to both serious and satirical spinoffs. Penning pastiches of such tales soon became a popular parlor game in the French salons, in which philosophes of the ilk of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Charles Duclos indulged. As imports from the French colonies flooded the European marketplace with textiles, porcelain, and furniture that had a distinctly eastern flair, the oriental tale left its indelible mark on the form and function of French libertine fiction. My book project, *Animate Objects: Magic, Mediation, and Illustration*, situates French libertine fiction within this transformed European cultural landscape, one that "naturalized a vision of an enchanted universe, in which artefacts were protagonists" (Warner, *Stranger Magic*, 190). Situated at the nexus of media studies, print culture, and book illustration, my project considers how the magical agents (whether beings or objects) that animated the oriental tale impacted the economy of French libertine fiction on the level of both text and image. These agents walk the fine line between object- and person-hood that Anne Anlin Cheng examines in *Ornamentalism*.

In *Enlightenment Orientalism*, Srinivas Aravamudan suggests that the ways in which Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno characterized the former (Enlightenment) and Edward Said the latter (Orientalism) were equally reductive. He places the oriental tale at the center of an alternate narrative to the rise of the novel (or domestic, realist fiction), one that does not eschew the allure of the exotic, the magical, the fanciful, or the unknown. My study is informed by recent scholarly interest in thing theory, it-narratives, material culture, and media studies as represented in compendia such as Mark Blackwell's *The Secret Life of Things*. Lorraine Daston, Barbara Benedict, Lynn Festa, and Jonathan Lamb join Deidre Lynch in their investigation of stories shaped and told by objects (a status occasionally extended to women and slaves). Oddly, these studies do not encompass objects properly considered magical, as I contend they should. I am interested in magical agents that function as fetishes, talismans, amulets, or transitional objects, that are infused with vital force and, much like currency, enter into what Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin later referred to as "phantasmagorical" relationships. Central to my study is the question Philip Stewart raises in his article "Images de ce qui ne fût jamais," namely how do we verbally or visually represent the unreal, materialize the immaterial, those beings or things that possess "the ambiguous ontological status of the imaginary"? Magical and mutable objects serve to ground the marvelous and the ephemeral in the real and the concrete. I argue that from the Enlightenment through modernity, consumer and commodity culture, far from being purely secular and material, has in fact been infused with the ineffable appeal of the mystical and the magical.

The term fetish was first coined in 1757 by Charles de Brosses in his treatise *On the Cult of Fetish Gods*, substituting it for the term “polytheism” in David Hume’s *Natural History of Religion*, which came out the same year but had circulated previously in France (Pietz, *The Problem of the Fetish*, 97). De Brosses’ departure from Hume lay specifically in his definition of the fetish, or “the attribution of superhuman powers and religious values to material entities” (Pietz, 103). Jean Baudrillard subsequently shed light upon the etymology of the term, exploring its changing signification across languages over time, revealing its association with fabrication (suggesting fiction- as well as object-making, or making something up out of whole cloth) as well as makeup, adornment, and ornamentation (Baudrillard, “Fetishism and Ideology,” 91). According to William Pietz, Baudrillard’s essential move was to “collapse the distinction between exchange value and use value, developed in the abstract discussion of the commodity form [...], with Saussure’s distinction between the signifier and the signified. The logic of ideology thereby becomes the internal logic of the commodity and the sign alike” (123). It is this connection between commodities and signs in the fabrication, circulation, and veneration of objects and texts that I propose to investigate. As Massimo Fusillo reminds us, “Animating the inanimate is a constant feature of the magical mentality (as defined by anthropologist Marcel Mauss in 1903), which continuously responds to things as though they were living organisms” (Fusillo, *The Fetish: Literature, Cinema, Visual Art*, 61).

Nicolas Edme Restif de la Bretonne’s *Le Pied de Fanchette, ou le soulier couleur de rose* (1769) constitutes the first documented instance of a foot (and shoe) fetish in French literary history. Apart from the evident allusion to Perrault’s *Cendrillon, ou la petite pantoufle de vair*, the work is littered with references to the oriental tale that have previously been overlooked. Made of the same fabric used for upholstery and clothing, shoes were an eighteenth-century luxury item often shaped and adorned in what was thought to be an oriental style. I read Restif’s novella as a repurposing of the *conte merveilleux*, situated in the context of cloth merchants and the textile industry and predicated on commodity fetishism and ornamentation. Remarkably, Restif preserves yet transforms the magical agents characteristic of the genre. While women are seemingly reduced to their overdetermined signifiers, the shoe and the foot, I argue that they are both concealed and constituted by the ornaments they wear, which acquire and endow them with an agency shrouded in mystique that Anne Anlin Cheng terms “subject-as-object enchantment.” Cheng links ornamentation to Orientalism, to which it is semantically related, but differentiates it from Freudian and Marxian fetishism, emphasizing the “alchemy between things and persons” that become mutually constitutive, animating rather than petrifying one another. Restif first employs the term “fétiches sacrés” in reference to the queen’s foot. I trace the pink shoe from the streets of Paris to Paris Hilton’s shoe closet in Sofia Coppola’s films *Marie Antoinette* and *The Bling Ring*, revealing the power of Cheng’s “logic of yellow femininity” as a transhistorical, cross-cultural encomium to and critique of consumer culture (*Ornamentation*, 18-19, 117).