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# From Playground to Fetish: The Identity of (the) Mary Jane

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MACAA 2012: “Strange Movements”

### **From Playground to Fetish: The Identity of (the) Mary Jane**

Christened by the manufacturer Buster Brown at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the practical shoes hence known as Mary Janes have a lengthy history as footwear constructed specifically for active children's feet.<sup>1</sup> The rounded toes, flat soles and buckled strap across the instep are practical features which define the style. Yet in the approximate 150 year history of the Mary Jane, the style has been adopted by adult women, fetish culture and high fashion, transcending its original purpose of being a shoe meant to stay on the foot of a running child.

This study is particularly concerned with the Mary Jane of the later 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Shoe trends change continuously (remember velcro sneakers?), and the most basic formulation of the Mary Jane: a durable sole, strapped to the wearer's foot across the instep, can be found in ancient Greece. In the corner of Jan van Eyck's portrait of somber newly weds (*Arnolfini Portrait*, 1434) lies a pair of seemingly cast off proto – Mary Janes that document the utilitarian nature of footwear in Northern Europe at the time.<sup>2</sup> However, the modern period transcended both utilitarianism and the dictatorial (fashion) powers of monarchy (think of Louis XIV's penchant for heels) with scientific mechanization. Industrialization and the fashion industry colluded to offer the consumer both new potentials for variety and economy, while modern marketing practices realized the potential of print advertising.

Richard Felton Outcault was a modernist paradigm. Draftsman, artist, and advertising man, the story goes that Outcault successfully pitched his comic strip “Hogan's Alley” personally to Joseph Pulitzer. In 1895, *The New York World* became the first U.S. newspaper to run a cartoon in color, “The Yellow Kid” contributing his hue to Pulitzer and Hearst's infamous battle of yellow journalism. Outcault however, had other cartoon ideas. In 1902 *The Herald* debuted “Buster Brown,” a wide-eyed boy in Little Lord Fauntleroy attire, who also happens to wear the shoes in question, his loyal dog Tige, and soon after, his sister Mary Jane. At the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Brown Shoe company debuted “Buster Brown” as their new spokesperson, a contract that continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a wide variety of merchandise,

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<sup>1</sup> The shoes were named after comic strip character Buster Brown's little sister, Mary Jane. Richard Outcault sold the comic characters' rights to the Brown Shoe Company for marketing purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Although we know that nothing in this work is as casual as it appears.

promotions, and personal in-store appearances. The practical shoes: a simple rounded toe with a strap over the inseam that children had worn for years were christened Mary Janes, and both Buster and his sister sported the style throughout the comic's initial printings and into the 1920's. After this period, the comic was sporadically revived for Buster Brown Shoe company marketing purposes; Buster's footwear varies, although Mary Jane's remains of the standard namesake.

In photographs from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mary Jane shoes can be seen on the feet of dancing children such as Gertude Käsebier's *The Dance*, (ca. 1895). The small girl in Cecelia Beaux's *Dorothea and Francesca* (1898) carefully advances her Mary Jane clad foot in dance practice, in an imitation of her older sister, whose barely disclosed toe reveals a more "grown up" style of shoe.<sup>3</sup> In both of these instances, it is the youngest who wears the Mary Janes, perhaps because the shoe is easily secured by the child themselves (no elaborate buttons that required a button-hook, etc.). Print advertisements from the time list the Mary Jane as a "misses" or "children's" style, and often remark on their durability rather than fashion.

Perhaps the best Mary Janes model in our late 20<sup>th</sup> century experience, is Alice, of Wonderland and Looking Glass fame. Charles Dodgson (better known as Lewis Carroll) created Alice from an amalgamation of a friend's daughter (Alice Liddell) and the fantastic stories that he told to amuse her.<sup>4</sup> Dodgson's passionate hobby was personality study photography, specifically of young girls (*Alice Constance Westmacott*, ca. 1860), whom he staged in relaxed poses against simple backdrops, a dramatic contrast to the Victorian photographs of his era.<sup>5</sup> The published edition of *Alice in Wonderland* was illustrated by Sir John Tenniel (a professional from the *Punch* staff) under the very critical eye of Dodgson.<sup>6</sup> The footwear in the original 1865 edition bears a remarkable resemblance to that worn by the little girls (and boys) in Dodgson's photographs: simple black slippers with an ankle strap. Through various reprintings and illustrations, Alice's shoes vary considerably (as does her hair color!) even to this day. However, the seminal Alice, and the one possibly most familiar to today's audience is the blond-haired, blue dress and white apron version introduced in 1951 by Walt Disney.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/80499>

<sup>4</sup> Diane Waggoner, "Photographing Childhood: Lewis Carroll and Alice," in Roy Aspin, *Lewis Carroll and His Camera* (Essex, UK: Brent Publications, 1989). ii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. There has been some concerns as to Dodgson's motives for these pictures, however by all known accounts his interest in the children was photographic.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 32. The story is that Dodgson had wanted to illustrate the text himself, but was dissuaded by none other than John Ruskin.

Alice's age is a primary consideration for the *Alice in Wonderland* (and *Through the Looking Glass*) premises. In both adventures, Alice “grows up” in some way; Professor U. C. Knoepfmacher has argued that the stories function as “...mediators between childhood and maturity.”<sup>7</sup> Alice is constantly pressing forward, toward a more grown up goal, but her reasoning, demeanor, and dress are steadfastly that of a child. As in this excerpt from an attempt to fetch the White Rabbit his gloves:

'There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up I'll write one – but I'm grown up now,' she added in a sorrowful tone; 'at least there's no room for me to grow anymore here. But then,' thought Alice, 'shall I never get any older than I am now? That'll be a comfort, one way – never having to be an old woman – but then – always to have lessons to learn! Oh, I shouldn't like that!'<sup>8</sup>

Growing up (and down), pursuing rabbits and being pursued by Queens, one of the few constants in Alice's world is her wardrobe, which serves reminds her of her true self – a Victorian era little girl. Scholar Diane Waggoner, writing of the similarities between the text and Dodgson's photographs of Alice Liddell and her sisters notes that, in both mediums, the author/artist represents the girl(s) as playful children and uses the story or photograph to arrest the natural process of maturation.<sup>9</sup>

The final piece of the Mary Janes legacy from the 19<sup>th</sup> century comes not from the feet of children, but rather from the feet of their playthings. Between the years of 1879 and 1889, doll production by a single Parisian firm tripled to 300,000.<sup>10</sup> Dolls took many forms (and still do), although a dramatic increase in little girl dolls during the 1870's seems to indicate their function as surrogate for the female child; little girls were given female dolls which often appeared to be the same age as the child, yet clad in fancier clothes.<sup>11</sup> The doll's shoes however, were very close in style to that of their caretakers: simple ankle-straps or Mary Janes, again possibly due to the ease with which these style could be fastened by small, unpracticed hands. Professor Miriam Formanek-Brunell, writing of the many facets of the conception, marketing, and use of dolls,

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<sup>7</sup> U. C. Knoepfmacher, "The Balancing of Child and Adult: An Approach to Victorian Fantasies for Children," *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 37, no. 4 (March, 1983): 498.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* (London: Chancellor Press, 1987). 45-46.

<sup>9</sup> Diane Waggoner, "Picturing Childhood: Lewis Carroll and Alice," Marilyn Brown, *Picturing Children : Constructions of Childhood between Rousseau and Freud* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002). 151.

<sup>10</sup> Greg M. Thomas, "Impressionist Dolls: on the Commodification of Girlhood in Impressionist Painting," in Brown, 103. The firm was founded by Pierre François Jumeau in 1846.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas in Brown, 104.

suggests that doll's wardrobes were central intentions of their makers.<sup>12</sup> Doll clothing speaks not only to the role the doll might play, but also to the relationship between the doll and its owner. Mary Jane shoes reminded the child that their doll was of similar age to themselves, despite the fact that their clothing, hair color, or facial type might differ.

This practice of demonstrating childhood through doll wardrobe is still practiced today, most notably by the American Girl Company; several of their dolls, especially the original “historic” personalities, wear Mary Janes (Ruthie from the Depression Era to name but one). The American Girl promotional text states:

Every American Girl doll encourages hours of imagination and play—from dreaming up adventures to styling hair to sharing every little secret. Whether her doll is from America’s past or present day, there’s a friend for your favorite girl to love and learn from.<sup>13</sup>

Your American Girl doll is intended to be a “friend” to her owner, and most of the dolls are designed to appear similar in age to their target market of “tween” girls – around the ages of 9-12. The focus of the American Girl line is to promote a pure ‘girlhood’ that can be purchased by affluent American families (the current base price for Caroline Abbott, a historic personality from 1812, is \$105), connecting contemporary children to their historical counterparts. The dolls, their accessories, and the matching clothes and lifestyle products marketed to girls are wholesome, non-sexual, and almost puritanical in their relationship to surrounding contemporary consumer culture. Contemporary fashion is disregarded in favor of the evocation of a historical idea of children through period or dated dress; this can be compared to Walt Disney's preservation of Alice's Victorian styling, despite releasing *Alice in Wonderland* in 1951. American Girl takes the role of wardrobe one step further however, offering clothing for the consumer as well as the doll. Although shoes are not currently an option for girls clothing through American Girl, one can suspect that little girls, dressing to match their dolls would also request the correct footwear.

How then, did the shoe move from the innocence of childhood to the fashion and fetishistic circles of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Photographs from the 1920’s and 1940’s picture women wearing higher heeled Mary Jane styles for outdoor leisure pursuits such as attending tennis matches (still played on grassy

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<sup>12</sup> Miriam Formanek-Brunell, *Made to Play House: Dolls and the Commercialization of American Girlhood* (Boston, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). 8.

<sup>13</sup> <http://Store.americangirl.com/agshop/static/dolls.jsp>

lawns at the time) and riding bicycles through Parisian parks.<sup>14</sup> In these contexts, the practicality of the shoes is logical – the instep strap serves to help keep the shoe on the foot, although the slight heel is a concession to fashions of the day. In this context, the Mary Jane can also be related to other styles of women's shoes, such as the T-strap or ankle strap, that gained favor during the Roaring Twenties for their ability to stay on the feet of dancing women. An instep strap is not exclusively practical for children, and so shoe manufacturers adapted the styles of the day to the Mary Jane silhouette. In this way, the women's Mary Jane remained a practicality through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while simultaneously being a staple of children's footwear.

During the 1980's the punk movement adopted the shoes manufactured by the Dr. Martens brand, initially designed as a “work shoe” for those spending hours on their feet (think postal workers and police). Marketed as work shoes for the urban youth, the soles alone were “Oil, fat, acid, petrol and alkali resistant” indicating to the wearer the possibility of encountering these substances. Clearly the intention was a collapse of fashion and function, already a hallmark of the punk movement. Yet the Dr. Martens Mary Janes line injected a slight femininity to the brand that had quickly transitioned from work to punk fashion.

In the early 1990's, the Dr. Martens style Mary Jane was adopted by other shoe companies for marketing to the new “Kinderwhore” subculture. Popularized in America by rock stars such as Kat Bjelland of “Babes in Toyland” and Courtney Love of “Hole,” the style combined baby-doll dresses and Mary Jane shoes with exposed bra straps, torn stockings, and other trappings of adult female sexuality.<sup>15</sup> Mary Janes however, remained low-heeled, often clunky, and modeled in a manner indicative of little girl innocence. Love modeled “Kinderwhore” fashion on the pages of *Vanity Fair*, projecting simultaneous mixed codes of adult-as-child and child-as-sexual object.

A contemporary and perhaps influential trend in Japanese popular culture, “Lolicon” (a hybridization of “Lolita complex”) combined the cuteness of “kawaii” (literally “cute” or “adorable”) with the sexuality of manga comics. The trend was described by scholars as “...little girl heroines of Lolicon manga [that] simultaneously reflect an awareness of the increasing power and centrality of young women in society, as well as a reactive desire to see these young

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<sup>14</sup> Lady Crosfield and the Duchess of York, 1925, at a tennis match and French cyclists in the 1940's.

<sup>15</sup> Even the band-name “Babes in Toyland” serves as a double entendre for children and attractive adult women. In a similar manner, “Hole” could be construed as an anatomical reference or the rabbit hole through which Alice explored her imaginary realm.

woman infantilized, undressed, and subordinate.”<sup>16</sup> This look is epitomized in the work *Ogata Rina* (2000) by Bome, who translates the Lolicon manga as faithfully as possible into sculpture. The Mary Janes here might be argued as practical, given the action packed realm the character inhabits, however, they also function as part of the childlike costume of the obviously adult female figure.

The combinations of coding in both Kinderwhore and Lolicon subcultures, of babydoll dresses, school uniforms, pigtailed hair, and grown-up Mary Janes indicate a new direction for the marketing of the traditionally plain, functional shoes. Suddenly, Mary Janes went decidedly up-market, in both fashionability and age appeal. As heels started to grow faster than Alice after drinking a potion, Mary Janes sprouted to 4 and 5 inch heights that could no longer be considered “practical” footwear. Designers such as Christian Louboutin and Manolo Blahnik created styles with price tags upwards of \$500, and styles are now modeled by celebrities such as Madonna and Mariah Carey. In these cases, the instep strap is no longer enough to ensure the safety of the wearer – women often require assistance to negotiate rough terrain in 5+ inch heels. Second-wave feminists argue that the high heels alone indicate a subordination to male hegemony, hence, strapping the female foot into the inhibiting form only serves as reinforcement of patriarchy.

In 2009, Annie Leibowitz shot a “retelling” of the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale for *Vogue* magazine. The images depict the 21<sup>st</sup> century sublimation of the Mary Jane by art and fashion: the woman/child dressed in a combination of adult/adolescent fashion, playing in an mature fantasy of a children's tale, wears Mary Jane shoes but with impractical heels even for the activities depicted. The comfortable rounded toe has become pointed in the fashion of women's shoes, just as Gretel's “little girl” clothes are made for the form of an adult woman. The practicality of her wardrobe could be argued from a different perspective – less practical for the physical task of escaping the witch, more suitable for the task of appearing attractive to the opposite sex.

While fashionably high heeled Mary Janes subverted their original practical nature, the shoe fetish subculture's adoption of the Mary Jane style completed their transition from footwear

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<sup>16</sup> Sharon Kinsella, *Adult Manga: Culture and Power in Contemporary Japanese Society* (Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2000). 121. This is the seminal discussion of adult manga and otaku (obsessive) culture is used extensively by Michael Darling in his discussion of Takashi Murakami. This quote is also cited in his article.

to accessory. 7.5 inch heels and a 3 inch platforms beneath the sole of the shoe belie the useful and comfortable nature of the original shoe design, and “pony” shoes in the Mary Jane style make simply standing completely impossible for the wearer. Pony shoes are worn for enjoyment, often in a specific, indoor location that doesn't require ambulation on the part of their wearer.

Which begs the question: If Mary Janes have become a fetish object in contemporary culture, who are they a fetish for? The women purchasing and wearing the style, or the men who find this collapse of girl/woman appealing?

A traditional reading of Freud would point to the use of the Mary Jane by men or women as a fetishistic replacement for the desired phallus. In the case of “pony” shoes, this argument could be valid: “What is substituted for the sexual object is some part of the body...or some inanimate object which bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person’s sexuality.”<sup>17</sup> This reading assumes that either the woman wearing the pony shoes is doing so for psychologically selfish reasons, satisfying a desire for her missing penis by replacing it with an almost phallus shaped substitute that simultaneously dominates her. Or that the male fear of castration, evoked by the sight of the female body sans phallus, uses the fetish object of the shoe as a substitute. In her explanation of the fetish object through Freud and Marx, Linda Williams puts this more succinctly: “Fetishes as thus short-term, short-sighted solutions to more fundamental problems of pleasure and power in social relationships.”<sup>18</sup>

In contemporary culture, the Freudian role of the fetish has expanded to include not only the alleviation of the castration anxiety, but also desire for the impossible or unattainable (as in the previously discussed manga and otaku cultures). In this manner, Mary Janes can be construed as a desire of the part of the adult female to return to both the innocence and protected status of girl-hood: a completely impossible wish. And so, the mediation of little girl style (the rounded toe, the instep strap) with the high heel serves to indicate both the current status and the secret desire of its wearer. This argument could also be applied to the “Kinderwhore” conflation of little girl fashion with the trappings of the knowing adult – as the 2007 *Bazaar* spread of a naked, bejeweled and Mary Jane-d Courtney Love perhaps demonstrates. It is hard to leave the innocence of girlhood behind, to balance without regret on the 5 inch heels of woman-hood.

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<sup>17</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” in Peter Gay, ed. *The Freud Reader*, (New York: The W. W. Norton Company, 1989). 249.

<sup>18</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible,'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). 105. Williams continues to expand upon this reading of the fetish as a commodity, an argument which would also be fruitfully applied to the Mary Jane as an consumable good.

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