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The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Dollhouse as Ludic Space, 1690-1920

Frances Armstrong (bio)

"The modern girl . . . is tired of living in a doll's house," says the first editor of *The Girl's Realm*; earlier generations were brought up under the rule of "Don't," but for the girl of 1899, the rule is "Do" (The Editor 216). The

dollhouse metaphor evidently needed no explanation; it had been twenty years since the heroine of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* had startled audiences by walking away from a belittling domestic life. Yet one of the things a modern girl could do, according to an article only five pages earlier, was help make a dollhouse for her younger sisters. Might she not have wondered whether she was encouraging those sisters to perpetuate an ideal she had already rejected? Or was Ibsen's title by then a dead metaphor—perhaps a metaphor that had never had much connection with small girls at play?

Taking as an initial hypothesis the idea that by 1899 there were two distinct meanings attached to dollhouses—as metaphorical places of imprisonment for women and as actual structures used in play—I set out to trace the textual history of dollhouses. Precursors of Ibsen's metaphorical dollhouse are easily found in a series of references in Dickens's later novels. Bella Wilfer wanted to be worthier than a doll in a dollhouse (*Our Mutual Friend* 746); Esther Summerson, given a miniature version of Bleak House on her marriage, soon expanded what she saw as "quite a rustic cottage of doll's rooms; but such a lovely place" (*Bleak House* 912); she was preceded by the unhappy example of David Copperfield's wife, Dora, who was unable to stop behaving like a doll, and by Little Em'ly, who chose disgrace rather than live in a "little house . . . as neat and complete as a doll's parlour" (*David Copperfield* 501). In Dickens's earlier novels, however, dollhouse living is delightful, particularly in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. To the best of my knowledge, the pejorative **[End Page 23]** metaphor of the dollhouse (or baby-house) as a place of restriction is rare in any texts before *David Copperfield*—though likening women to dolls goes back much further.¹

The dollhouse metaphor as developed by Dickens and Ibsen, then, seems to have had a short history in comparison with the history of the dollhouse itself. Miniaturized domestic settings are found in Egyptian tombs dating from about 2000 B.C.; dollhouses in their current Western form go back to the mid-sixteenth century. But the hypothesis of two distinct sets of meanings is too simple: neither dollhouses themselves

nor textual references to them can be divided neatly into adult and child categories. It is true that adults have used dollhouses for their own purposes (as I am doing in this essay), but the purposes may be playful as well as analytic or didactic; it is also true that children's dollhouse play may carry its own conscious or intended metaphorical meanings, but these are rather different from those of Ibsen and Dickens. Although early dollhouses were valuable artifacts supplied and controlled by adults, it seems quite clear that most girls were able to regard dollhouses as their own ludic spaces, places dedicated to their own play, rather than as sites for training in compliance. Showing flexibility and individuality, they interspersed reassuring enactment of routine with humorous or subversive innovation and readily improvised both narratives and accessories.

I have taken 1690 as the starting date for this essay because the first written evidence in English of children playing with dollhouses comes from the baby-house given to Ann Sharp, who was born in 1691. The evidence is believed to be in her own hand, name tags that have remained pinned to the dolls in the house ever since ([Greene, *English Dolls' Houses* 87](#)). Although many baby-houses were made in the decades that followed, for children as well as for adult collectors, the first detailed textual references to children playing with them seem to come from the 1780s, when literature for or about children became more prevalent.² To make things more...

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