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Handling the Stock: Women, Fabric and Tactility in Nineteenth-Century, English Shops

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The phenomenon of the female consumer was nothing new in the nineteenth century. Women have, throughout English history, been the main consumers for the household and this has necessitated trips outside the home.[1] However, throughout the 1800s the extent of this grew, owing to increases in wealth (particularly among the middle classes) and urbanisation which altered living and working patterns.[2] Alongside these changes the place of shops and the female shopper in the public imagination similarly evolved. Research in this area has emphasised the changes that were brought about by the department store with its bright lights and window displays. To the public, the department store was a modern-day Babylon, enticing women to sin. For Erika Rappaport the new culture of visual display dazzled and delighted women and for Elaine Abelson it even helped to create nimble-fingered kleptomaniacs.[3]

However, such representations were often more illustrative of social fears, rather than representative of any true phenomenon. As Crossick and Jaumain have noted, the department store transformed actual practices of shopping less than they did its representations.[4] Focusing on novel display techniques and fears of female behaviour is both interesting and informative but these analyses ignore how women really engaged in shopping, in particular with physical places and material objects. Nineteenth-century shopping has been transformed from being an occasion to acquire to an activity indulged in solely for entertaining the eye.

While shopping no doubt offered much to gaze at, I propose that we need to refocus our attentions and ask exactly how women shopped, concentrating on what they were buying, and how they interacted with these items. I will do this here by discussing shopping for fabrics, as middle-class women frequently purchased these. First I will outline my reasons for doubting the importance placed on cultures of display, and then I will argue that the female experience of shopping could be very tactile. This skill of judgement was recommended to women so as to navigate frequently confusing and unregulated shopping environments. Finally I suggest that the use of tactility in shopping practices should not be considered in isolation. Judgement through tactility was a skill that was developed in the home through the continued practice of needlework. As the goods that a woman wished to buy would then be used at home, the transfer of these domestic skills into the public, consumer sphere was logical. This argument therefore raises wider questions concerning female agency, sensory experiences, and the division between public and private spheres.

Bright Lights and Window Displays

The sensory experience of modernity in the nineteenth century is often discussed in visual terms. In a highly influential narrative, Thomas Richards locates the Great Exhibition as the moment when capitalism showed not only that it had become the dominant mode of exchange, but also that the spectacle should be the dominant mode of representation to accompany it.[5] Representation was elevated above exchange value, and this was promoted through mass advertising and shop displays. In this vein, Rappaport claims that window displays taught women how to see and so formed them as spectators.[6]

However, these conclusions are drawn from a focus on a handful of very large department stores and there is reason to be sceptical of the visual paradigm. Even in 1915, department stores made up only two per cent of the nation's shops.[7] Moreover, the majority of department store displays were widely considered to be drab. The *Warehouseman and Draper's Trade Journal* frequently noted their poor quality; in 1873, Swan and Edgar's was cited as having nothing but a sign denoting a sale and Peter Robinsons merely had poorly dressed mannequins.[8] This sentiment was echoed by H. G. Wells who trained as a draper, in his 1910 novel, *The History of Mr Polly,* in which a senior draper remarks,

> The art of window dressing is in its infancy…All balance and stiffness like a blessed Egyptian picture. No joy in it, no blooming joy! Conventional. A shop window ought to get hold of people, grip 'em as they go along. It stands to reason. Grip![9]

But even the best window displays faced problems. In November 1874 the *Warehouseman and Draper's Trade Journal* complained that there was no remedy for steam on windows, which meant that displays had little effect because of the 'watery veil' which covered them.[10] Ironically that other hailed development, lighting, was the cause of this. Gas lighting steamed up windows and the journal's report on shopping in Kensington and Hammersmith in 1873 also lamented that bad lighting was off-putting to customers.[11] A comic passage in Grossmith's *The Diary of a Nobody* recalls how Charles Pooter was put out after buying trousers by gaslight:

> By the by, I will never choose another cloth pattern at night. I ordered a new suit of dittos for the garden at Edwards', and chose the pattern by gaslight, and they seemed to be a quiet pepper-and-salt mixture with white stripes down. They came home this morning and, to my horror, I found it was quite a flash-looking suit. There was a lot of green with bright yellow coloured stripes.[12]

Clearly, cultures of display were first, limited in their use and second, their effect often fell foul of technological limitations. Yet interestingly, and contrary to what is often argued, many women were not interested in fancy spectacles. Shopping was one more thing to fit into a busy day. *A Handy Guide for the Draper and Haberdasher* wrote in 1864,

> Many, from the midst of domestic engagements 'run out' to make purchases, and will much rather go in to some quiet, unexposed place, than be exhibited and reflected in every possible way by a variety of mirrors.[13]

Judging Quality

Already we are presented with a weaker scopic culture than has been claimed, but also a reminder that shopping was a practical necessity, primarily about acquiring goods. Buying goods was not simple though. The focus here is on fabrics which formed a key area of expense for females. Shopping for these items was a complicated occupation because of increasing adulteration and fraud. This has been well covered in relation to the risks that assailed the food industry but adulteration and cheating were also pervasive features of the drapery trade.[14] As with the food industry, problems flourished in the nineteenth century. New and improved manufacturing techniques allowed seemingly familiar fabrics to be sold to women as top quality when the reality was that they were made up of cheap materials, benefitting from clever technologies of disguise. Mayhew noted how old clothes were 'restored', being re-collared and finished with 'a substitute for silk'. He reported that these technologies even affected the wealthy.[15]

The triumph of consumer fraud was aided by the sprawl of urban society. As the chain of production and supply increased, it was impossible to know where to point the finger when a problem was discovered because the product had passed through multiple pairs of hands.[16] Furthermore, state intervention was limited because adulteration was seen as a necessary price to pay for market supremacy. The *Warehouseman*

and Draper's Trade Journal, in October 1884, argued that legislation was '…contrary to the general method of English procedure'.[17] This led to an atmosphere of consumer anxiety, as reflected by Samuel Smiles in his book *Duty*. He wrote:

> A young woman buys a reel of cotton marked 250 yards. When she works it out with her skin and bones, she finds it to contain only 175 yards. What can she think of the truthfulness of her countrymen?[18]

Confronted by this situation, female shoppers could not afford to be bowled over by enticing displays but needed to rely on their abilities of inspection. While Berry and Smith concur that this occurred in the eighteenth century owing to a lack of standardisation, they claim that tactile inspection faded in the nineteenth century because improvements in technology allowed for greater standardisation.[19] Certainly technologies did advance but this potential was often abused and it was in the nineteenth century, the age of *caveat emptor,* when inspection actually became more important for women.

It was in this climate that literature was produced to guide women on shopping, advocating that judgements on fabrics would be best made through the sense of touch. As early as 1834, a book entitled *The Lady's Shopping Manual* was published to assist women in the shops of London. The introduction acknowledged the possibilities of the Metropolis but mentioned the dangers of assistants whose, '…object too frequently is to sell *by any means'* (author's emphasis).[20] The author stated the need to render women, '…independent of the recommendations of interested persons, and qualifying them to judge for themselves…'[21]

To this end, the book listed all the goods to be found within a draper's and haberdasher's, with descriptions of their qualities, so that a woman would know what to search for in a particular article. For example, the entry for Dutch diaper tape reads,

> This tape is made of linen and is by some called heron-bone tape; it is softer, stronger, and has a neater appearance, than any other tape: it has some resemblance to stay-binding, from which however it may always be known by its being thinner, and in pieces of 9 yards each.[22]

A woman could thereby avoid the dangers of trickery by assessing product quality through tactile engagement.

Of course, sight was not redundant: women wanted their dresses to look good. However, for quality and truth, tactility was lauded. With Dutch diaper tape, for example, the problem was that it bore a close resemblance to stay-tape. Relying on sight alone could be problematic. The author went on to remark:

> Of many years a great many goods have been made, half cotton and half linen, done up in the same form, and labelled in the same manner as Irish cloths. Such goods have the appearance of being great bargains, but on examination they will be found too sleazy to be all linen, and too light for Irish cloth; and if chaffed a few minutes with the hand, the coldness peculiar to real cloth is not felt, while the action produces a woolly appearance. The buyers of lawns are subject to similar frauds.[23]

In another publication, *The Life of a Dundee Draper,* an anonymous, retired draper also acknowledged that fabric goods should be inspected by the hands because sight could mislead. Of blankets he noted,

> It is a mistake to judge a blanket by its appearance only. One comes to learn that many a fine woolly aspect lack warmth and durability, which can only be obtained where the blanket is well-knit in texture, and of sufficient weight.[24]

Heeding Advice?

Although women received much advice to avoid being swindled, these diverse sources cannot reveal whether this counsel was followed. The work of many academics would suggest not. Again Richards claims that, for the Victorians, shopping lost its multi-sensory aspect, and instead became a visual overload that drove shoppers to distraction.[25]

But we obtain a more nuanced understanding by expanding our focus from the shopping expedition to briefly discussing the home and women's interaction with fabrics there.

The middle-class dictum of keeping up appearances gave clothes and fabric a vital role and women were central in organising this area of life. Yet thrift was also a virtue, and often a very necessary skill if desired appearances were to be maintained.[26] This meant that women could not afford to make mistakes over quality. The wider life of a middle-class woman did not revolve around exciting spectacles. From early childhood, girls learnt how to sew, to handle fabrics and to recognise the correct materials for each task. As noted by authors such as Burman and Parker, the Victorian woman had, what to us would be an unrecognisable familiarity with sewing and the qualities of a wide range of materials.[27]

This skill was not left at home but was transported to the draper's shop. Women were advised to feel for the quality of goods because of fraud but we have a good indicator that they knew how to do this and to make comparisons because they had first developed these skills in the home. Sewing fostered tactile skills which women used when shopping. The work of Merleau-Ponty is useful for understanding this interaction between the body and world. In this case, practising needlework allowed habit memories of material encounters to be incorporated within the body.[28] Such embodied memories could be recalled when needed for comparison, such as with the need to check for quality in an item required for sewing. So the habits developed in the home could act as a barometer, checking the new against knowledge of old.

An excerpt from the memoirs of the draper, George Sandford, illustrates that women did this.

> When a lady comes to the shop to purchase, say a silk dress, every piece of the description must be shown her, and if she chooses at all, it is only after having examined and turned over every one.[29]

The extract explains that this woman knew what she wished to buy; she clearly had prior experience of the fabric and its requisite qualities. She then used this habit knowledge to approach the situation, combining it with the cognitive facilities as she 'examined and turned over every one'.[30] Hence, tactility was used to measure the new against the old, embedded in memories of skills learnt in the home.

As is clear, this meeting of the past habit skills and the present was always orientated around future use. Shopping was not just about going out for entertainment but was about buying goods that would be made up and worn or used in the home, hence the need for reliable tactile judgment on their suitability. The skills for this were first developed within the home.

Conclusion

This short presentation has introduced some of my research, aimed at understanding how nineteenth-century middle-class women experienced shopping through the senses and why the touch of fabrics mattered. A few conclusions and implications should be mentioned in closing. First, the research reinforces a growing scepticism about the importance of the department store, and the idea of shopping as spectacle. Second, and more broadly, modernity is often associated with a general growth of the visual but this paper shows a more nuanced understanding and opens up a space for analysing more gendered sensory experiences in the modern period, something currently lacking.[31] This could help our understandings of female agency too, something that has been threaded throughout this talk. The final implication is the need to continually reassess the question of public and private. Women used skills in the public shops that had been first gained in the private home, and fabrics bought in public were taken back

home. The implication of this is that in any area of study, there is a need to consider much wider experiences and how these interacted, affected and contextualised each other.

[1] Although the female role in shopping has been central, men should not be wholly overlooked, even in the nineteenth century. See M. Finn, 'Men's things: masculine possession in the consumer revolution', *Social History*, 25:2 (2000), pp. 133-155 and B. Shannon, 'Refashioning men: fashion, masculinity, and the cultivation of the male consumer in Britain, 1860-1914', *Victorian Studies*, 46:4 (2007), pp. 597-630.

[2] The capacity for consumption within the nation as a whole grew over the course of the nineteenth century, thanks to the growth of the British population, which rose from 10.7 million to 37.1 million in 1901. By 1851, half of the English population lived in towns and cities. The new urban-dwellers were the chief beneficiaries of rising wages and the middle classes profited the most. In 1860, those receiving over £160 per annum amounted to 280,000, while those falling just below that tax bracket, receiving between £100-150 per annum, stood at 160,000. In 1880 however, 620,000 were paying income tax, and in 1913, this figure was 1,190,000. See J. Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (Harlow: Longman and Fraser, 1994) and W. H. Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1981).

[3] E. S. Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving. Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); E. D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure. Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[4] G. Crossick and S. Jaumain, 'The world of the department store: distribution, culture and social change', in G. Crossick and S. Jaumain (eds), *Cathedrals of Consumption. The European Department Store, 1850-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 29.

[5] T. Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England. Advertising and Spectacle* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 3-4.

[6] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, p. 28.

[7] Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market*, pp. 136-39.

[8] *The Warehouseman and Draper's Journal* (London, 1873), p. 3.

[9] H. G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly* (London: Penguin, 2005 [1910]), p. 26.

[10] *The Warehouseman and Draper's Journal,* (1874), p. 552.

[11] *The Warehouseman and Draper's Journal* (1873).

[12] G. Grossmith and W. Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (London: Penguin, 1999 [1892]), p. 162.

[13] Anon., *A Handy Guide for the Draper and Haberdasher, Embracing Hints on the General Drapery Business etc.* (London: F. Pitman, 1864), p. 4.

[14] See B. Wilson, *Swindled. From Poison Sweets to Counterfeit Coffee. The Dark History of the Food Cheats* (London: John Murray, 2008) and L. Kassim, 'The co-operative movement and food adulteration in the nineteenth century', *Manchester Region History Review*, 15 (2001), pp. 9-18.

[15] H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor. A Selected Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 [1861]), p. 149.

[16] Wilson, *Swindled*, p. 68.

[17] *The Warehouseman and Draper's Journal* (1884).

[18] S. Smiles, *Duty* (Edinburgh: R and R Clark, 1889), p. 51.

[19] H. Berry, 'Polite consumption: shopping in eighteenth-century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 6 (2002), pp. 375-394; K. Smith, 'Sensing design and workmanship: the haptic skills of shoppers in eighteenth-century London', *Journal of Design History*, 25:1 (2012), pp. 1-10.

[20] E. E. Perkins, *The Lady's Shopping Manual and Mercery Album; Wherein the Textures, Comparative Strengths, Lengths, Widths and Numbers of Every Description of Mercery, Hosiery, Haberdashery, Woollen and Linen Drapery are Pointed Out for Your Domestic Economy* (London: T Hurst, 1834), p. iii.

[21] Perkins, *The Lady's Shopping Manual,* p. iii.

[22] Perkins, *The Lady's Shopping Manual,* p. 5.

[23] Perkins, *The Lady's Shopping Manual,* p. 67.

[24] Anon., *The Life of a Dundee Draper* (Dundee: W. M. Kidd, 1878), p. 46.

[25] Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, p. 25.

[26] J. Flanders, *Consuming Passions. Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (London: Harper Press, 2006); L. A. Loeb, *Consuming Angels. Advertising and Victorian Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[27] B. Burman, 'Made at home by clever fingers: home dressmaking in Edwardian England', in B. Burman (ed.), *The Culture of Sewing. Gender, Consumption and Home Dressmaking* (London: Berg, 1999); R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch. Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

[28] M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[29] G. Sandford, *George Sandford; or the Draper's Assistant: By One Who Has Stood Behind the Counter* (Edinburgh: Thomas Grant, 1853), p. 23.

[30] Sandford, *George Sandford; or the Draper's Assistant,* p. 23.

[31] M. M. Smith, *Sensory History: An Introduction* (London: Berg, 2007).