Danger & Delight: Women and Consumer Culture in Mid-Nineteenth Century London & Paris

Abstract

The mid-nineteenth-century mushrooming of consumer culture sparked a transformation of London and Paris and bestowed newfound mobility upon its female inhabitants. Urban commercial spaces such as the nascent department store were billed as safe havens for the unchaperoned lady. In actuality, the Victorian public sphere symbolised a double-edged sword: it conjured up sites of delight that any class of woman could frequent, offering an overdue escape from the tedium of home, yet it also exposed them to unprecedented sexual danger; spawning incidents (downplayed as 'street annoyances' or 'impertinences') for which female victims were habitually blamed. Stretching from streetwalkers to the bourgeoisie, this essay explores the complex relationship between mid-nineteenth-century women and consumer culture in London and Paris

> Although I was quietly dressed, and I hoped looked what I was, a respectable young woman, scarcely a day [passed] when I, while waiting for an omnibus, was not accosted. — C.S. Peel¹

The mid-1800s mushrooming of consumer culture sparking a transformation of London² and Paris³ into nonpareil pleasure domes - bestowed newfound mobility upon its female partakers. While previous societal constructs had chained women to the precepts of domesticity, consigning wives and daughters alike to a passive, private life,⁴ the nascent department store offered a dazzling space wherein women could 'safely' amass, unchaperoned.⁵ A simultaneous surge in print production fostered the diffusion of specialist journals and periodicals, each striving to embody their city's vibrant spirit.⁶ Amidst such progressions, middle-class women proved instrumental in moulding the fashion press, chronicling the latest dress plates and schooling readers on shopping etiquette and society news.⁷ This

- ¹ David Rubinstein, *Before the Suffragettes: Women's Emancipation in the 1890s* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), 76.
- 2 Erika Diane Rappaport, Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.
- Ruth Iskin, Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 184.
- Rachel G. Fuchs and Victoria E. Thompson, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Macmillan International Higher Education: 2004), 120.
- Clarissa Campbell Orr, *Women in the Victorian art world* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 79.
- H. Hazel Hahn, Scenes of Parisian Modernity: Culture and Consumption in the Nineteenth Century (London: Palgrave Macmillan,

fledgling influence was by no means confined to sarto- 7 Justine De Young, "Fashion and rial commentary, with female Londoners and Parisians also courting acclaim for their achievements as artists, composers, scientists and critics.⁸

Nevertheless, to consider this epoch one of a seamless liberation of women would overlook the violation and cavilling they were forced to endure. The public sphere, in truth, symbolised a double-edged sword: it conjured up sites of delight that any class of woman could frequent, offering an overdue escape from the tedium of home,⁹ yet it also exposed them to unprecedented sexual danger; spawning incidents (downplayed as 'street annoyances' or 'impertinences')¹⁰ for which female victims were habitually blamed.¹¹ Stretching from streetwalkers to the bourgeoisie, this essay will explore the complex relationship between mid-nineteenth-century women and consumer culture in London and Paris; the latter toggling between ally and adversary.

While the concept of shopping as a pleasurable pastime had begun to prosper in the 1700s,12 the following century expanded this notion to an unforeseen scale. By the 1860s, Haussmannisation (signifying the radical and unrestrained modernisation of central Paris, as spearheaded by city prefect Georges-Eugène Haussmann) had transfigured the Parisian streetscape: congested labvrinths were swiftly demolished in favour of spacious *boulevards*.¹³ Spurred on by rapid industrialisation, the city's shopping districts were upsized accordingly: specialist boutiques morphed into bustling grands magasins, or department stores, whose resplendent interiors became as remarked upon as the collections they housed.¹⁴ Seminal Modernist writers such as Benjamin declared Paris the capital of fashion and luxury¹⁵ - a title it retains to this day - and while the city did thrive at the apex of capitalist aesthetics, London possessed commercial gravitas on a similar par, having surpassed Paris in both size and affluence.¹⁶

Indeed, some forty years prior to Haussmann's innovations, John Nash swept away a cluster of cramped roads and domiciles to create London's 'thoroughfare of fash-

- the Press," in Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity, ed. Gloria Groom (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2012), 233.
- 8 Fuchs and Thompson, Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe, 119.

9 Ibid

10 Judith R. Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," Representations 62 (Spring 1998), 2. 11 Katherine Mullin, James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 68.

12 Helen Berry, "Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England," Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 12 (2002): 377.

13 Temma Balducci, Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture: Beyond the Flâneur (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 8.

- 4 Françoise Tétart-Vittu, "Shops versus Department Stores," in Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity, ed. Gloria Groom (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2012), 209.
- 15 Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 897.
- 16 Hollis Clayson, Is Paris Still the Capital of the Nineteenth Century? Essays on Art and Modernity, 1850-1900 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 7.

ion',¹⁷ Regent Street, while the illustrious Burlington 17 Tammy C. Whitlock, Crime, Arcade, unveiled by Samuel Ware in 1819, was distinguished by 'fancy articles of fashionable demand'.¹⁸ At the time of conception, these upmarket spaces proved the reserve of aristocratic crowds but, as the West End's reputation for top-tier retail flourished, so too did mass consumerism, forcing the nobility and gentry to share their playground with the non-landed shopper.¹⁹ Across London and Paris, women were not billed as the sole beneficiaries of these commercial advancements, but their role in this modernity narrative proved indispensable: politicians, entrepreneurs and other pundits defined the department store as female domain,²⁰ prompting a feminisation of shopping to which retail is still indelibly bound.²¹ Institutions such as the Bon Marché, a paragon of Parisian grand magasins, conceived spellbinding shop floors at which women would marvel. As Miller records, "merchandise formed a decorative motif ... silks cascaded from the walls of the silk gallery, ribbons were strung above the hall of ribbons, umbrellas were draped full blown in a parade of hues and designs";²² such descriptions pervade Zola's Au Bonheur des dames (1883), whose setting was modelled on the Bon Marché.²³ The store's pioneering of prêt-àporter fashions - paired with the advent of exchanging and returning goods - encouraged women to indulge in impulsive purchasing,²⁴ whereas the in-house opening of restaurants and reading rooms provided further incentive to linger.²⁵ These sites may have offered women their first taste of consumer agency, but they also lulled them into a false sense of security; leaving them vulnerable to 'gentleman' predators that viewed them as desirable as the surrounding goods.²⁶

In supplying a definition for 'street harassment', Di Leonardo considers the perpetrator's asserted right 'to intrude on the woman's attention, defining her as a sexual object'.²⁷ Irrespective of social standing, a female victim of unsought advances would sooner face blame than her aggressor, with the former routinely accused of flaunting her sexuality through improper

- Gender and Consumer Culture in Nineteenth-Century England (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 22. 18 Nigel Cawthorne, The Strange Laws Of Old England (London: Hachette UK, 2015), 213. Although the benefits of urbanisation in mid-nineteenth-century London and Paris were propagated by the press, in fact these renovations sparked life-altering ramifications for many working-class citizens. The city-centre neighbourhoods in which labouring communities had long resided and sourced their livelihoods were altered beyond recognition, causing gentrification, rising rents and dispossession. 19 Whitlock, Crime, Gender and Con-
- sumer Culture, 23. 20 Enrica Asquer, "Domesticity and Beyond: Gender, Family, and Consumption in Modern Europe,' in The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption, ed. Frank Trentmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 575.
- 21 Daniel Miller, A Theory of Shopping (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 39.
- 22 Michael B. Miller, The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 168.
- 23 Hollis Clayson, Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era (Santa Monica: Getty Publications, 2003), 63.
- 24 Béla Tomka, A Social History of Twentieth-Century Europe (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 236.
- 25 Fuchs and Thompson, Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe, 125.
- 26 Judith R. Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 110.
- 27 Micaela Di Leonardo, "Political Economy of Street Harassment, Aegis (Summer 1981): pp. 51-52.

Trinity WGM Review 104

dress.²⁸ Yet archival records from mid-nineteenth-cen- ²⁸ Walkowitz, "Going Public," 7. tury London and Paris reveal the extent to which writers, painters and caricaturists, most of these male, nurtured the concept of woman-as-object; their depictions of female figures soon turning from admiration to fetishisation.²⁹ Prior to this epoch, fashionable men and women had paraded on equal footing - texts such as Castiglione's Libro Del Cortegiano (1528), a foremost example of Renaissance courtesy literature, disclose a male fixation on dress that matched, if not surpassed, his female counterpart.³⁰ By the 1850s, menswear had lost its once-lavish connotations, casting the frivolity and vibrancy of women's fashion into sharp relief.³¹ Just as consumption became the prerogative of women, Simon affirms, 'the wife became the main indicator of a couple's social status'.³² These developments fuelled the invention of *la Parisienne*, an exemplar of beauty, style and modernity whose image dominated all manner of popular media.³³ Espoused by intellectual linchpins such as Baudelaire, this fictitious icon placed fashion at the forefront of modern art: she appealed to precise society painters such as Tissot, who sought to recreate the lustre of her dernier cri dress, whereas the likes of Monet and Manet realised her voguish attire through Impressionist brushstrokes.³⁴

The impact of *la Parisienne* on mid-nineteenth-century women forms an insightful case study in the context of this essay, as it exposes the role of consumer culture in disciplining and sexualising the female figure. Journals such as Le Moniteur de la mode informed women of this icon's extensive dress rituals, encouraging their readers to follow suit: 'a society woman who wants to be well dressed for all occasions at all times needs to make seven or eight changes of outfit a day . . . there is nothing exaggerated about this.' Engineered to financially benefit the fashion industry, these reports emphasised la Parisienne's erotic desirability whilst promoting the best products to mimick her silhouette - one such article cites La Maison Séguy's 'Pompadour Cream' as preventing a lady's complexion from changing due to 'late

- 29 Françoise Tétart-Vittu, "Who Creates Fashion?" In Impressionism, Fashion and Modernity, ed. Gloria Groom (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2012), 63.
- 30 Eugenia Paulicelli, Writing Fashion in Early Modern Italy: From Sprezzatura to Satire (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) 58. 31 Peter McNeil, Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni Men and the Eighteenth-century Fashion World (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 15. 32 Marie Simon, Fashion in Art. The Second Empire and Impressionism (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 1995), 11.
- 33 Tétart-Vittu, "Who Creates Fashion?", 63.

34 Ruth Iskin, Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 200.

nights and bright lights', ³⁵ a clear allusion to after-hours debauchery. Despite this coaxing, fashion critics were just as swift to condemn women for their sartorial excess. Preaching from her journalistic soapbox, Madame de Simiane of Magasins des Demoiselles warned that 'extravagance in dress leads to extravagance in manners and in speech, the same way that ruin leads to ruin',³⁶ while Baudelaire's pivotal essay, 'The Painter of Modern Life', regards the 'unnecessary extravagance'37 of a woman's toilette as denoting ties to prostitution. To her fellow female citizens, la Parisienne was a capricious sort. At times, she reinforced socioeconomic distinctions through her donning of aristocratic garb, saving the city's hierarchy of class from further erosion; on other occasions, she commodified this aristocratic look, assuring women of all stations that fashionability could be bought.³⁸ Thus women were constrained to walk a tightrope of morality: to dress unfashionably would spawn insults regarding one's démodé dullness, and to dress too fashionably would prompt charges of indecency.³⁹ Their challenges were only heightened by the ascent of another class-hopping figure: the courtesan.

Ubiquitous in the urban public sphere, the mid-nineteenth-century sex worker served as both scourge of respectable women and scapegoat for male sexual 'pests'.40 Masking her plebeian roots through the artifice of fashion, she sidestepped authorities by mirroring the dress of a moneyed demoiselle. By no means was this figure, nor the trouble she caused, a new phenomenon: the Renaissance trend of *chopines* - a towering heel that snaked through Venetian society - made it difficult to discern courtesan from court lady,41 whereas the sex workers of seventeenth-century Amsterdam were infamous for their deceptive finery.⁴² Nevertheless, the societal climate of mid-1800s London and Paris leant itself especially well to the courtesan's subterfuge. Thanks to the industrialisation of fashion, sex workers could freely, if stealthily, frequent the same stores as well-to-do women. Some courtesans would purchase confection, also referred to as ready-to-wear, which closely matched the ensem-

35 Kate Nelson Best, The History of Fashion Journalism (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 51.

36 De Young, "Fashion and the Press," 233.

37 Baudelaire, The Painter of Modern Life, 51.

38 Best, The History of Fashion Journalism, 53.

39 De Young, "Fashion and the Press," 236.

40 Walkowitz, City of Dreadful Delight, 50.

41 Catherine Kovesi, "Brought to Heel? A Short History of Failed Attempts to Bring Down the High-Heeled Shoe in Venice and beyond," Vestoj 6 (Autumn 2015): 67.

42 Lotte van de Pol, The Burgher and the Whore: Prostitution in Early Modern Amsterdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 177-178.

Trinity WGM Review

106

Danger & Delight

bles of costlier fashion houses.⁴³ Others rented garments 43 Iskin, Modern Women and Parisian from vintage and second-hand shops, or utilised the domestic sewing machine (omnipresent since the 1830s) to fashion their own frocks.⁴⁴ Moreover, the rising mobility of mid-nineteenth-century women proved most advantageous: encircled by crowds of unchaperoned ladies, a courtesan could blend in with greater ease than ever before.⁴⁵ Though beneficial to the latter's trade, many innocent women traversing these sites were subjected to grievous acts of harassment. As previously stated, the mindset of mid-nineteenth-century society was to hold victims accountable for such transgressions, calling their morality and self-costuming into question. To illustrate this mindset, Walkowitz highlights the acerbic comments of one distinguished anatomist, retrieved from a private letter dated 1887: 'Lankester finds the "women who object to be spoken to in the street" to be "comic". What can women who "dress themselves up" with "false bottoms and stays — and other erotic adornments" expect? If women "really do wish to be left alone," they should dress to be "plain and unappetising and avoid the haunts of men" '.46

The notion that sex workers and 'honest women'⁴⁷ were indiscernible is both supported and dismantled by contemporary scholarship. Social observers such as Dickens perceived a courtesan's appearance as conspicuous, betrayed by her 'miserably poor, but extremely gaudy'⁴⁸ attire; this view is substantiated, to cite but a few scholars, by Bellavitis,⁴⁹ Valverde⁵⁰ and De Young.⁵¹ Yet Clayson has gathered numerous reports of 'prostitutes' that oozed elegance and wealth, citing Dumas' remarks, circa 1890, on courtesans and society women sharing the same designers⁵² - this certainly applies to the trailblazing Maison Worth, which dressed queens and *demimon*daines indiscriminately.⁵³ Ultimately, both viewpoints hold true: as Jozé's Les Usages du Demi-Monde (1909) documents, sex workers inhabited a hierarchy of their own, with rich courtesans claiming its highest tier - her impoverished confrères, conversely, occupied the lowest class.⁵⁴ Despite a pervasion of police activity in the courtesan's stamping ground, neither Paris nor LonConsumer Culture, 191.

44 Sonya Rose and Laura Levine Frader, Gender and Class in Modern Europe (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 116.

45 Kasia Stempniak, "Fashioning Revenge: Costume, Crime and Contamination in Barbey d'Aurevilly's La Vengeance d'une femme," in Fashioning Horror: Dressing to Kill on Screen and in Literature, ed. Julia Petrov and Gudrun D. Whitehead (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 106.

46 Walkowitz, "Going Public," 6. 47 Stempniak, "Fashioning Revenge," 106.

48 Vivienne Richmond, Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 125. 49 Anna Bellavitis, Women's Work and Rights in Early Modern Urban Europe (Berlin: Springer, 2018) 164

50 Mariana Valverde, "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," Victorian Studies 32, no. 2 (Winter 1989): 168. 51 Justine De Young, Fashion in European Art: Dress and Identity, Politics and the Body, 1775-1925 (London: Bloomsbury Publishing) 2017), 115. 52 Clayson, Painted Love, 62.

don's authorities could save their theatres, cafe-concerts 53 Diane McGee, A Passion for or shopping streets from the 'plague' of sex work. If anything, their actions provoked further instabilities: strolling through these commercial sites, the finely dressed courtesan would pass as respectable, whereas virtuous women engaged in a spot of window-shopping were often accosted as streetwalkers.⁵⁵ Taking refuge inside the department store (or equivalent venue) did not save them from such 'annoyances', despite claiming to be a lady's safe haven - enclosed in these resplendent spaces, women suffered the encroachment of men just as often.⁵⁶

Women shoppers of mid-nineteenth-century London and Paris were also threatened by shoplifting allegations. As both cities became increasingly shaped by industrialisation, some critics expressed concern over the dangers that mass consumption posed for the working woman. Should the unaffordable contents of a window display catch her eye, they claimed, she might be driven to theft or prostitution in order to obtain them. These social observers soon expanded their fears to include the middle-class shopper - multiple stories emerged of once-decorous women who, upon browsing a store's tempting commodities, would transmute into thieves or nymphomaniacs.⁵⁷ While critical portrayals of the female consumer as a 'shopping demon'58 were doubtless hyperbolic - not to mention damaging for the legitimate lady shopper - a number of women partook in such thievery. Akin to the courtesan, these retail criminals used their unsuspicious mien as camouflage,⁵⁹ with many acquiring goods by creating false names, addresses and credit.⁶⁰ Despite evidence that men also engaged in shoplifting,⁶¹ a feminisation of the retail thief began to surface. No perusing woman was safe from suspicion, leading both critics and relatives to demand she stay at home; hence discarding her hard-won mobility. Depending on the shoplifter's class, however, her punishment would visibly differ. On many occasions, a wealthier woman accused of retail theft was excused by blaming disreputable shopkeepers, or by medicalising her crime through the diagnosis of kleptomania.⁶² Conversely, a

Fashion: Antique, Collectible, and Retro Clothes (Omaha: Simmons-Boardman Books, 1987), 30.

- 54 Elizabeth K. Mix, "Paper Ladies: Locating the Nineteenth Century Cocotte in Popular Literature and Journal Illustrations," in Twenty-first-century Perspectives on Nineteenth-century Art, ed. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Laurinda Dixon (Newark: University of Delaware, 2008) 201.
- 55 Walkowitz, "Going Public," 7.
- 56 Robert Garis, The Nineteenth Centurv: The British Isles, 1815-1901 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 65.

57 Fuchs and Thompson, Women in Nineteenth-Century Europe, 118. 58 Whitlock, Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture, 5.

- 59 Kerry Segrave, Shoplifting: A Social History (Jefferson: McFar-
- 60 Whitlock, Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture, 5.
- 61 David Churchill, Crime Control and Everyday Life in the Victorian

62 Whitlock, Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture, 151.

Amelia O'Mahony-Brady

working-class shoplifter was regarded as hardened and inherently criminal. Prosecutors were often bereft of sympathy in contrast to the trials of her genteel peers; the working woman would rarely escape imprisonment.⁶³ Mid-nineteenth-century consumer culture may have espoused, if superficially, the congregation of all citizens. However, as the above incidents testify, this did nothing to diminish class tensions. By consequence, women found themselves fighting a war on two fronts; against the patriarchal ideals that still curbed their agency, and against females of a contrasting social rank.

The industrialisation of London and Paris promised to extricate women from their passive lifestyle and, to some degree, it delivered. Yet this liberation was tempered at best - the female consumer was valued for her financial bolstering of the fashion industry, but her beneficiaries seldom showed concern for her dearth of civil rights beyond shopping; her as-yet unattained national suffrage.⁶⁴ Women were encouraged to navigate the urban space by entrepreneurs and the press, but were simultaneously punished for doing so, whether through harassment by male strangers or false criminalisation from shoplifting claims. Blame for such incidents was societally levelled at other women: the sex workers and 'morally unsupervised'⁶⁵ shop-girls that attracted men to feminine locales; the 'fast' but pedigreed mademoiselles whose fashionability sought to mimic the courtesan's; the 'hard-wired' criminals that plundered fine establishments for goods to pawn.⁶⁶ While these figures did successfully deceive their chosen targets, their actions do not absolve those of lascivious men, who continued to frighten women in spite of their lucid disinterest.⁶⁷ The feminine press also prove accountable, having chastised readers for the consumer appetite they had helped to stoke, while in turn stating it was usually a woman's fault if she were 'spoken to'.⁶⁸ Echoes of this mentality prove tangible to this day. The experimental style enthusiast, whose fashionability may manifest in revealing or cleavage-enhancing dress, is still misconstrued as sexually available or 'asking for it'.⁶⁹ Nineteenth-century

63 Krista Lysack, Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008), 194.

64 Clayson, Painted Love, 58.

65 Mullin, James Joyce, 68.

110

66 Whitlock, Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture, 76.

67 Helena M. Swanwick, I Have Been Young (Gollancz: London, 1935), 82.

68 Walkowitz, "Going Public," pp. 6-7.

69 Louise O'Neill, "My outfit is not an invitation for comment or for assault. Women are never asking for it," *The Irish Examiner*, 12th November, 2016.

Trinity WGM Review

feminists such as Swanwick and Robins were met with hostility when speaking out against 'street annoyances',⁷⁰ but the comparative mobility of present-day Western women stems, without doubt, from their trailblazing strides.

70 Walkowitz, "Going Public," 1-2.



Isnard Desjardins (Engraver), Adèle Anaïs Colin Toudouze (Draftsman), Paris Fashion Ad for *Magasin des Desmoiselles* 1864 | Etching, Stipple Engraving, Hand coloured print on wove paper, 26 x 17.2 cm © Museo del Prado



Pears Soap advertisement. From *Illustrated London News*, 11 February 1888, 152 (New York Public Library, General Research Division © Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)