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April 2nd, 2025

Reflective Essay

My honors thesis, *"I Look in People's Windows": Exploring Women's Experiences in Victorian Consumer Culture*, grew out of a long-standing fascination with gender, material culture, and the historical construction of public and private space. The specific idea to explore the intersection of femininity and consumerism in Victorian Britain crystallized during a seminar on modern British history, where I was introduced to Erika Rappaport's *Shopping for Pleasure*. This work illuminated the department store as a paradoxical space of both feminine empowerment and surveillance, and I became intrigued by how women's movement through urban and commercial environments could be used as a lens to interrogate broader structures of power. That initial curiosity, bolstered by my interest in social history and cultural theory, evolved into a project that aimed to map a "day in the life" of a Victorian woman—using her consumer experiences to trace the gendered contours of agency, respectability, and desire.

The UCSB Library was absolutely indispensable in every stage of my research—from formulating a viable topic, to refining theoretical frameworks, to assembling a corpus of primary and secondary sources that would anchor my analysis. I made extensive use of the UCSB Library's online catalog and interlibrary loan system, particularly when seeking out rare or out-of-print books, diaries, and period-specific conduct manuals that were crucial for reconstructing the social world of Victorian women. The Library's Interlibrary Loan service allowed me access to volumes such as *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, which became a centerpiece of my project. Without access to this diaristic source, much of the emotional and material texture of my thesis—especially the interplay between women's domestic and public lives—would have been significantly diminished.

I also relied heavily on specialized databases available through the UCSB Library portal. The 19th Century UK Periodicals Archive and British Library Newspapers enabled me to locate fashion advertisements, etiquette articles, and opinion pieces that conveyed the prescriptive dimensions of femininity during the period. These were invaluable in establishing the normative ideals that women both internalized and contested. The digital collections of *Punch* magazine and *The Lady's Realm* revealed the satirical and aspirational narratives that surrounded Victorian female consumers, while primary texts like *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (accessed via HathiTrust through UCSB) helped me analyze the domestic ideologies embedded in consumer discourse.

My research strategy evolved iteratively. Initially, my topic was somewhat abstract: I wanted to study "women and shopping in the nineteenth century." Through keyword searches combining terms like "Victorian," "consumerism," "women," "respectability," and "department stores," I gradually narrowed the focus to how middle- and upper-class women experienced and

negotiated the public visibility afforded by commercial spaces. The Library's research guides, particularly for British history and gender studies, helped me understand which databases would yield the richest results. As my argument developed, I began integrating cultural theory—particularly Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Michel de Certeau's work on everyday resistance—to frame consumerism as a site of negotiation rather than passivity. Theoretical texts were obtained both through the library's holdings and via interlibrary loan. This theoretical integration required me to revisit and reframe earlier research questions, ultimately making the final product stronger and more nuanced.

Several challenges emerged throughout the process. One of the most persistent was balancing breadth and specificity. Victorian consumer culture is immensely vast, and it was easy to become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of sources. I had to learn how to evaluate the representativeness and analytical utility of my materials. For example, when examining etiquette manuals, I asked: Who is the intended audience? Is this prescriptive or descriptive? Does this source reflect lived experience or idealized norms? Similarly, personal diaries were rich in emotional detail but required contextual framing. The diary of Maud Berkeley, for instance, offered poignant accounts of shopping, anxiety, and intellectual life, but I had to situate her within her class position and cultural milieu to responsibly interpret her writing. Another challenge involved accessing and interpreting visual sources—such as fashion plates, advertisements, and store layouts—which are crucial to understanding Victorian consumer aesthetics. I turned to JSTOR and Artstor, both accessible through the UCSB Library, to find visual materials and accompanying scholarship that helped me decode the iconography of femininity. These materials added a visual and rhetorical layer to my analysis, allowing me to explore how women were imagined as ideal consumers and how they manipulated these portrayals.

Throughout the research process, I developed a deeper appreciation for how historical inquiry relies not only on the accumulation of sources but on the interpretive strategies used to make sense of them. I learned to think critically about genre, voice, and form—to ask not just "what does this source say?" but "how does it say it, and why?" My work with library databases taught me how to construct complex search strategies and navigate bibliographic metadata to locate elusive materials. These are skills I will carry forward into future research, whether at the graduate level or in independent scholarly work. More broadly, this process taught me how archives—both physical and digital—are shaped by power, availability, and institutional priorities. The gaps in what has been preserved and cataloged, especially regarding working-class women's experiences, made me acutely aware of the partiality of the archive. At the same time, it reinforced the importance of interdisciplinary and imaginative historical methods—of reading between the lines, comparing genres, and attending to silences as well as presences.

The UCSB Library served not simply as a resource hub, but as an intellectual partner throughout this journey. It enabled me to access rare sources, engage with global scholarship, and refine my methodology. My thesis would not have been possible without the robust

infrastructure of access, expertise, and support that the Library provides. This project has deepened my belief in the value of historical research and the necessity of libraries as both custodians and creators of knowledge.

“I Look in People’s Windows”

Exploring Women's Experiences in Victorian Consumer Culture

Cece Chao

Advisor: Dr. Erika Rappaport

Senior Honors Thesis: March 2025

University of California, Santa Barbara

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Introduction

The Victorian era (1837–1901) was a period of immense social, economic, and cultural transformation. Rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and a growing consumer economy redefined the landscape of British society, altering the ways in which individuals engaged with both private and public life. Central to these changes was the shifting role of women, who, while still tethered to expectations of domesticity and moral virtue, found new opportunities to navigate public spaces through the burgeoning world of consumerism. Shopping, once an activity limited to the elite, evolved into an accessible form of public engagement for middle- and upper-class women, granting them a degree of visibility and autonomy previously denied. Yet, as Victorian women stepped into commercial spaces, they did so within a rigid framework of social expectations that simultaneously granted them agency and subjected them to scrutiny. Their presence in department stores, arcades, and shopping districts such as London's West End was both a reflection of their expanding roles in society and a site of contention in debates over respectability, propriety, and gender norms.

This study examines how Victorian women's experiences with consumer culture shaped and redefined their identities, providing a nuanced understanding of the intersection between gender, class, and capitalism in nineteenth-century Britain. By tracing a "day-in-the-life" of a Victorian woman—from the private sphere of the home to the public world of shopping, leisure, and socialization—this research illuminates the complexities of female autonomy within a society governed by strict gendered

expectations. Utilizing a broad array of primary sources, including personal diaries, etiquette manuals, fashion magazines, advertisements, and periodicals, this thesis explores how women's engagement with consumerism was both a means of adhering to social ideals and a form of subtle resistance against them. These sources reveal how Victorian women used consumption not only to fulfill their domestic roles but also to assert their presence in the public sphere, negotiating the constraints imposed upon them by patriarchal structures.

A significant component of this study relies on personal narratives such as diaries, which offer invaluable insight into the daily lives of Victorian women. The diaries of figures such as Maud Berkeley provide first-hand accounts of shopping excursions, domestic management, and engagements with public life, illustrating the ways in which women navigated both material consumption and social expectation. These personal writings reveal how shopping functioned as both a necessity and a social experience, with women forming communities through shared commercial activities. Furthermore, they shed light on the anxieties and pleasures associated with public consumerism, from the excitement of exploring new fashions to the fear of transgressing the boundaries of respectability.

In addition to personal writings, etiquette manuals and conduct literature serve as critical sources in understanding how Victorian consumer behavior was shaped by societal prescriptions. Books such as *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861) delineated the expectations of middle-class women as household managers and arbiters of taste, reinforcing the notion that a woman's shopping habits reflected not only

her personal virtue but also her family's social standing. Similarly, periodicals such as *The Lady's Realm* and *Godey's Lady's Book* provided women with advice on fashion, beauty, and proper conduct, positioning consumerism as an extension of femininity and moral responsibility. These sources illustrate the ideological underpinnings of Victorian consumer culture, where women were expected to exercise financial discretion while also demonstrating refinement through their purchases.

Advertising and commercial ephemera, including department store catalogs, fashion plates, and print advertisements, offer another crucial perspective on the consumer experience. The rise of department stores such as Whiteley's, Harrods, and Selfridge's in the latter half of the nineteenth century coincided with the development of sophisticated marketing strategies that specifically targeted women. Illustrated advertisements from publications such as *The Queen* and *The Illustrated London News* depict women as central figures in consumer culture, emphasizing the transformative power of fashion, cosmetics, and household goods. These materials not only reflect contemporary aesthetic trends but also highlight how consumerism was framed as both an aspiration and a moral imperative for Victorian women.

Satirical and critical literature further complicates the narrative by exposing anxieties surrounding women's increasing participation in public consumer spaces. Writers such as Eliza Lynn Linton, in her infamous essay *The Girl of the Period* (1868), lamented the perceived moral decline of women who indulged in fashion and materialism, portraying them as frivolous and devoid of substance. Likewise, satirical publications such as *Punch* frequently caricatured women shoppers as vain and irrational,

reinforcing the tension between female autonomy and societal control. These critiques underscore the broader cultural debates of the era, wherein women's growing independence through consumerism was simultaneously celebrated and condemned.

The experiences of Victorian women within consumer spaces can be understood through the dual lenses of gender performativity and spatial negotiation. This thesis engages with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not an innate characteristic but is continuously constructed through repeated social behaviors and performances.[1] In the context of Victorian consumerism, shopping became an arena where women enacted femininity through their purchasing decisions, their public comportment, and their adherence to fashion norms. Shopping was not merely an economic activity but a highly visible performance of social class, taste, and propriety.

Complementing Butler's framework is Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, as articulated in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). While Victorian society imposed strict gendered "strategies" to control women's roles, women engaged in "tactics" to subtly maneuver within these constraints. Department stores, for instance, were designed as spaces that catered to respectable female shoppers, yet women also used these spaces in ways that extended beyond the intentions of store owners—lingering in lounges, socializing with other women, and engaging in consumer practices that blurred the boundaries between leisure and duty.[2] De Certeau's theory provides a valuable framework for analyzing how women appropriated consumer spaces

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[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
[2] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

for their own purposes, subtly redefining their roles within Victorian society.

This thesis contributes to the evolving historiography of Victorian gender and consumer studies by offering a comprehensive analysis of how shopping and consumerism functioned as both a form of empowerment and a mechanism of social control. While earlier scholarship tended to portray Victorian women as passive consumers dictated by male-driven economic structures, more recent studies recognize their active participation in shaping consumer culture. Historians such as Erika Rappaport, in *Shopping for Pleasure* (2000), have illuminated how department stores became carefully curated spaces that both encouraged female consumer participation and subtly reinforced gendered norms of public behavior.[3] Meanwhile, scholars like Judith Walkowitz have examined the contested nature of women's visibility in urban commercial spaces, highlighting how shopping could serve as both a source of autonomy and a site of moral scrutiny.[4] By incorporating both primary source analysis and theoretical frameworks, this study builds upon these discussions, demonstrating how Victorian consumerism provided a paradoxical space where women could assert autonomy while remaining bound by societal expectations.

This thesis undertakes a detailed examination of Victorian women's daily lives, tracing their movements from the private domain of the home to the increasingly accessible public sphere of the streets. By following a woman through the contours of a typical day, this study seeks to uncover the ways in which consumerism subtly yet

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[3] Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[4] Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

profoundly influenced her roles, responsibilities, and sense of agency within a society governed by strict social codes and gendered expectations. This nuanced examination highlights how factors such as class, region, and age shaped Victorian women's experiences, all of which operated within a rigid societal structure that perpetuated their subjugation through legal, social, economic, and cultural constraints. Victorian women were thus placed in a continuous struggle to adhere to the confining expectations of both society and patriarchal norms, all while attempting to carve out spaces within and beyond these boundaries. This negotiation between established roles and emerging ambitions became particularly pronounced as opportunities to step outside the domestic sphere began to surface, presenting them with both agency and conflict regarding their roles and desires. Through an in-depth analysis of primary sources—including personal diaries, etiquette manuals, advertisements, and periodicals—this exploration reveals how Victorian women's participation in consumer culture also served as a form of soft resistance, enabling them to assert their autonomy and shape their social identities within the limits imposed upon them. Each chapter will consider distinct aspects of a woman's day to illuminate the shifting boundaries of her agency.

Beginning with the home, this study examines how women's control over domestic purchases allowed them to influence family consumption, reinforcing their status as moral and cultural gatekeepers of the household. Household management, which included selecting goods for the home, thus became a platform through which women exercised discretion and expertise, asserting their roles as arbiters of taste and propriety. This domestic sphere provided women with an initial taste of consumer autonomy, as

they navigated decisions that impacted both the financial and moral standing of the family. Transitioning to public life, the analysis will then follow women as they move into commercial spaces, where consumerism brought both opportunity and scrutiny. Women in public spaces encountered a complex landscape of social expectations and potential risks, navigating interactions within shops, markets, and social venues that reflected their class, gender, and adherence to societal standards of respectability. Their public presence, mediated through the act of consumption, provided opportunities to engage with broader society, allowing them to experience a degree of visibility and self-expression previously unavailable within the strictly private realm of home life. However, this newfound agency was tempered by the risks inherent in public exposure, where women were often subject to judgment or potential impropriety, underscoring the precariousness of female autonomy in Victorian society.

Theoretical Framework

The experiences of Victorian women within the consumer landscape were multifaceted, reflecting both adherence to and subversion of societal norms. These negotiations can be framed through the theoretical perspectives of Judith Butler's gender performativity and Michel de Certeau's tactics versus strategies, which together provide a nuanced understanding of how women navigated and reshaped the boundaries of gender and class in Victorian society.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, articulated in *Gender Trouble*, argues that gender is not an innate quality but is continually constituted through repetitive acts that align with cultural expectations.[5] For Butler, these acts are not merely expressions of a pre-existing identity but the mechanisms by which identity is formed and maintained. This framework is particularly relevant to Victorian women, whose engagement in consumer culture can be seen as a performative act that reinforced societal ideals of femininity while simultaneously offering a means to negotiate personal identity and autonomy.

In Victorian society, femininity was rigidly defined by ideals of respectability, modesty, and domesticity. Shopping, especially for middle- and upper-class women, became a socially sanctioned form of public engagement, allowing women to perform their prescribed roles as arbiters of taste and moral guardians of the household. By adhering to prevailing norms of propriety in public settings, women enacted a

[5] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999).

performance of respectability that aligned with their societal roles.[6] However, Butler's concept of performativity highlights that these performances are not entirely passive; the very act of engaging with public consumer spaces allowed women to subtly reconfigure gender expectations. Through choices in fashion and public behavior, women could express individuality, albeit within the constraints of societal norms. Moreover, fashion itself was a critical medium through which gender was performed. Victorian women's attire, subject to intricate codes of propriety, served as both a marker of social status and a performative tool. While outwardly conforming to ideals of modesty and decorum, women's sartorial decisions also reflected personal agency and engagement with modernity. As Butler notes, performativity is subject to iteration and variation, meaning that while societal norms are reinforced through repeated acts, these acts can also open spaces for reinterpretation and resistance.[7] Thus, Victorian consumerism became a site where femininity was both enacted and reimagined, offering women limited but significant avenues for self-expression.

Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategies and tactics, as outlined in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, provides a complementary perspective to Butler's performativity by emphasizing the agency of individuals within structures of power. De Certeau defines strategies as the mechanisms employed by institutions to exert control and maintain order, while tactics are the improvised actions of individuals who operate

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[6] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).
[7] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999).

within these structures, finding creative ways to subvert or circumvent them.[8] In the context of Victorian consumer culture, the dominant strategies were those of a patriarchal society that sought to confine women to the domestic sphere and regulate their behavior in public spaces.

However, women's engagement in shopping and urban spaces can be viewed as tactical maneuvers that challenged these strategies. Department stores and arcades provided women with semi-sanctioned public spaces where they could engage in consumerism without overtly transgressing societal norms. By framing shopping as a domestic duty aligned with their roles as household managers, women appropriated these spaces in ways that subtly subverted the strict division between public and private spheres.[9] De Certeau's notion of tactics thus highlights how Victorian women, while appearing to conform to patriarchal expectations, engaged in acts that reshaped the socio-economic landscape and expanded their public presence. For example, women's use of credit—often extended in their husbands' names—can be interpreted as a tactic that allowed them to exercise financial agency within a system that officially relegated them to dependency. While the strategy of Victorian law positioned men as the financial heads of households, women's tactical engagement with credit blurred traditional gender roles and introduced new dynamics into household economics.[10] Similarly, women's presence in public spaces such as tea rooms and department stores represented a form of

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[8] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, vol. 1 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).
[9] Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[10] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure.*

spatial appropriation, where they navigated and occupied urban environments in ways that defied conventional gender boundaries.[11]

For middle- and upper-class women, this paradox was particularly pronounced. Their consumer activities, while framed as an extension of domestic duties, enabled them to gain visibility in public spaces and exert economic influence. Yet, they remained subject to intense scrutiny, with any deviation from prescribed norms risking social ostracism. Even as they navigated these constraints tactically, their actions were ultimately shaped by the strategies of a society that valued them primarily as symbols of familial virtue and social stability. In this sense, consumerism functioned as both a tool for self-expression and a mechanism of social discipline. Women could construct identities through their sartorial choices, assert financial influence through credit, and claim public spaces through shopping, but these acts were always bound by the parameters of respectability and propriety. This dual role of consumer culture—as both a site of empowerment and a means of constraint—reflects the broader dynamics of gender and class in Victorian society.

By applying Butler's and de Certeau's theories to the study of Victorian women's consumer culture, we gain a deeper understanding of how women navigated the rigid boundaries of their era. Their engagement in shopping and public life was both performative and tactical, reflecting a complex negotiation between societal expectations and personal agency. While consumerism provided women with new forms of visibility and influence, it also reinforced the hierarchies it seemed to challenge. As Butler's theory

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[11] Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

of performativity reveals, women's public engagement was a continuous enactment of gendered respectability, while de Certeau's concept of tactics highlights how they maneuvered within and subtly resisted these constraints. Together, these frameworks illuminate the shifting boundaries of femininity in Victorian society, where women's everyday acts of consumption played a pivotal role in reconfiguring the public and private spheres.

Through this day-in-the-life framework, this thesis argues that women leveraged consumer activities to subtly negotiate and expand their social roles, participating in a form of economic and social agency that was at once empowering and constrained. Victorian consumer culture, while emerging as a source of independence, also required women to carefully balance autonomy with adherence to respectability. By examining these daily interactions, this study reveals that consumerism allowed women to assert a new form of influence, crafting identities that bridged the private and public spheres, and reshaping their place within the cultural and economic landscape of Victorian society. This thesis argues that Victorian consumer culture, while deeply embedded within rigid social and gendered structures, offered middle- and upper-class women a paradoxical space in which they could exercise autonomy and influence over their social identities. By examining the daily lives and consumer practices of these women, this study contends that consumerism served as both a tool for self-expression and an arena where women navigated societal expectations of respectability and propriety. Ultimately, consumer activities allowed Victorian women to subtly redefine their roles within both the private

and public spheres, creating pathways toward agency within a culture that simultaneously empowered and restricted them.

Historiography

The historiography of Victorian women's roles in consumer culture has evolved significantly over the past several decades, moving from traditional interpretations that emphasized women's subordination within the domestic sphere to more recent analyses that recognize their agency and influence within both private and public realms. Early studies of Victorian women largely focused on their prescribed roles as "angels of the house," underscoring how societal expectations confined them to nurturing and morally guiding the family within the household. Scholars like Barbara Welter, in her foundational work on the "cult of true womanhood," outlined how Victorian values placed women in a position of moral purity, piety, and submission, all of which were seen as crucial to maintaining the moral fabric of society.[12] This paradigm emphasized women's confinement to the domestic sphere, portraying their engagement in consumer activities as an extension of their role as dutiful wives and mothers, rather than as an expression of individual autonomy or agency. However, by the late 20th century, feminist scholars began to challenge these earlier interpretations, proposing that Victorian women's participation in consumer culture represented a form of subtle agency and self-expression. Influential historians such as Judith Walkowitz, and Leonore Davidoff and Erika Rappaport broadened the scope of analysis, suggesting that the act of shopping and participation in public life allowed women to negotiate the constraints of Victorian

[12] Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151–74, https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179.

social norms.[13] Walkowitz, in particular, examined how women's presence in urban spaces—while fraught with risks related to propriety—enabled a new visibility and engagement with public life, granting them opportunities to assert independence and autonomy.[14] These scholars argue that women were not simply passive consumers but active agents who used consumer culture to engage with broader social changes, redefining their identities beyond the domestic sphere.

Further contributions from economic and cultural historians have emphasized the relationship between consumerism and class in Victorian society, noting that middle- and upper-class women used consumer practices to signify social status and to differentiate themselves within the social hierarchy. Scholars such as Lorna Weatherill expanded this view by examining how Victorian women influenced household spending and consumption patterns, thereby shaping the family's social identity and reinforcing their roles as cultural gatekeepers.[15] Rappaport's research on the department store and other urban institutions such as tea shops, restaurants and the theater store as a "feminine" space highlights how consumerism facilitated women's presence in public spaces without necessarily threatening their respectability.[16] Department stores and other consumer venues became semi-sanctioned spaces for middle- and upper-class women, reflecting an

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[13] Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[14] Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[15] Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660–1760*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996).
[16] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure.*

evolving society where women were beginning to claim more autonomy in both economic and social terms. More recent scholarship has taken a nuanced approach, exploring how consumerism intersected with issues of class, gender, and morality to complicate women's pursuit of autonomy within Victorian society. Historians such as Erika Rappaport and Deborah Cohen have argued that consumer culture offered a paradoxical blend of independence and constraint. Rappaport's work suggests that while consumerism provided women with new forms of social and economic influence, it also subjected them to intense societal scrutiny and reinforced norms of respectability and modesty. Cohen, in her examination of Victorian families, emphasizes that women's consumer choices were laden with expectations to uphold family honor, virtue and reputation, especially in middle-class households.[17] Thus, while consumerism afforded a sense of agency, it also demanded that women navigate the cultural imperatives of respectability and class distinction, often restricting the extent of their public presence and personal freedom.

In sum, the historiography of Victorian women's roles in consumer culture reflects a shift from traditional views of domestic confinement to a recognition of women's agency in navigating and shaping the consumer landscape. This thesis builds upon these discussions, proposing that Victorian consumer culture provided women with a distinct, albeit limited, pathway to autonomy. By examining the daily interactions of women with consumerism, this study contributes to the understanding of how women

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[17] Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

used the acts of purchasing, socializing, and managing household needs to negotiate their identities within a society that both enabled and constrained their agency. This approach aligns with the evolving historiographical recognition that Victorian women, through consumer activities, played an active role in challenging and redefining social norms, establishing themselves as influential participants within the broader economic and cultural landscape of the time.

Chapter One

Class, Gender, and Recreation in the Age of Revolution

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, recreational activities underwent a process of commercialization, retail establishments proliferated, and some scholars have posited that a consumer revolution paralleled the industrial revolution. The Industrial Revolution amplified the dynamics of this consumer revolution through the advent of innovative technologies for the mass production of goods and the development of transportation systems to facilitate their distribution. In Victorian Britain, the rise of disposable income among consumers catalyzed a cyclical relationship: consumer demand spurred the production and accessibility of goods, which in turn perpetuated further consumption. This transformation exerted a profound influence on women, who emerged as pivotal participants in the expanding consumer culture. The rapid industrialization and mechanization of production introduced an unprecedented array of goods, ranging from textiles to domestic wares, which were marketed directly to women, emphasizing their roles as homemakers and arbiters of fashion. The proliferation of department stores and specialized boutiques in urban centers revolutionized the shopping experience, catering specifically to women's preferences and necessities. For many women, shopping evolved from a mere obligation into a form of leisure, redefining their societal roles. The increased availability of goods enabled women to engage with consumer practices that had previously been confined to the upper echelons of society, thereby diminishing class

distinctions and fostering a sense of individuality through personal choices in attire, home decor, and other acquisitions.

Furthermore, the industrial and consumer revolutions intersected with evolving societal norms. Advertising campaigns frequently targeted women, casting them as custodians of domestic taste and guardians of familial well-being. This cultural narrative reinforced the idealized image of the "domestic goddess" while simultaneously encouraging women to venture into public spaces such as shops and arcades, domains from which they had traditionally been excluded. As a result, Victorian consumerism presented women with both opportunities for agency through economic engagement and constraints, as it anchored their social identity to their function as consumers. The ramifications of these changes extended well beyond individual households. Women's growing involvement in consumer culture significantly shaped the broader economy, as they influenced market trends and drove demand for mass-produced goods. In this way, the consumer and industrial revolutions not only transformed the commercial landscape but also redefined women's social and economic roles, embedding consumerism into the fabric of Victorian society and providing critical insights into the shifting gender dynamics of the period. At the same time that more goods and recreations were available, to those who could afford them, moral reformers deemed most popular recreation as dangerous to the social and moral order. Evangelicals especially despised most recreations as inherently hedonistic. Employers implored workers to be sober and productive.[18] Reformers developed the idea that rational recreation, however, could bring

[18] Catriona M. Parratt, *More than Mere Amusement: Working-Class Women's Leisure in England, 1750-1914* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2002) 55.

forth self-improvement and emphasize respectability. The notion of rational recreation sought to define the boundaries of acceptable behaviors and reemphasize the importance of adhering to societal norms for the different sexes.[19] Supporters delineated ideas of order and the preferred relationship and interactions between men and women and coupled such ideas for specific roles for women and how they ought to behave.[20]

The Evangelical movement of the early 19th century was instrumental in embedding these ideals into the collective consciousness. Evangelicals viewed the home as a crucible for moral and spiritual refinement, a place where Christian values could thrive in contrast to the unregulated chaos of capitalist enterprise. This vision of the home as a microcosm of an ideal society reinforced the notion that domestic life was inherently superior to public life. Moreover, it allowed for a striking compartmentalization: men could participate in the competitive, often ruthless world of commerce without moral compromise, secure in the knowledge that the home provided a moral counterbalance. Over time, this religiously infused ideal of domesticity evolved into a secular norm, demonstrating how deeply religious ideologies can be absorbed and reframed within broader cultural narratives. This transformation underscores the adaptability of societal values, where once-rigid theological frameworks became embedded in everyday life, shaping behavior and expectations even among the non-religious.

The dynamics of the Victorian household also shed light on the interplay between authority, discipline, and social order. Historically, households had functioned as economic units where children contributed to their families' material well-being.

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[19] Parratt, *More than Mere Amusement,* 55.
[20] Parratt, *More than Mere Amusement,* 55.

However, the Victorian era redefined the family's purpose, positioning it as a site of moral development. Evangelical Christianity, with its emphasis on original sin, portrayed children as inherently flawed beings in need of salvation and discipline: "Original sin, through the Evangelicals, meant that all children were born needing to find salvation."[21] Discipline within the family was thus not merely a practical necessity but a moral imperative, rooted in the belief that disobedience undermined divine and social order. "The head of the family derived his authority from God; the wife of the head derived hers from the head... Any disobedience subverted this notion of order."[22] This hierarchical structure, with its emphasis on obedience, mirrored broader societal hierarchies and justified the subjugation of women and children within the domestic sphere. Disobedience was treated as a form of rebellion, threatening not only familial harmony but also the moral fabric of society itself.

Evangelicals were challenged, however, by liberal feminists, such as, Mary Wollstonecraft, who during the late eighteenth century wrote extensively on why girls and women should receive an education in *The Vindications of the Rights of Women.* Wollstonecraft saw one inherent detriment to girls and women, women were "confined… in cages like the feathered race," they had no capacity to grow or seek opportunities as "they have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch."[23] The state of women that Wollstonecraft describes persisted well into

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[21] Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2006), 69.
[22] Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 70-71.
[23] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, reprint (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 145.

the Victorian Era where women were meant to be the "Angels in the House." A sentiment born out of the Victorian era, the "Angel in the House" references an idealized vision of women and their roles in Victorian society, both outside and within the home. This term held broad meanings: its literal definition equates the woman as an angel close to god whose purpose was to keep the family on a Christian path. On the other hand, the "angel" is one who provides for the home and created an environment that positively promoted her husband and children's state of being; the home was transformed into a haven all tied together with her "sweetness of temperament."[24] This vision was wholly encapsulated in Coventry Patmore's poem *The Angel in the House* (1854-1862).[25] In the poem, Patmore described the proper virtues for a woman to have, especially in the case of a wife, as she must be devoted, self-sacrificing, submissive, and attentive to the needs of the home and family. As the "angel," women were meant to embody and achieve perfect femininity by protecting their purity and acting as gentle nurturers to support their husbands and children. So Wollstonecraft contends that while "they are provided with food and raiment, for which they neither toil nor spin," she ultimately must sacrifice more as she gives up her "health, liberty, and virtue […] in exchange."[26] This metaphor exposes the superficial nature of the expectations placed on women, emphasizing how they were denied opportunities for growth, self-expression, or engagement with the world beyond their homes. By arguing that women sacrificed their "health, liberty, and virtue" in

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[24] M. Jeanne Peterson, "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 677.
[25] Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, 1854–1862, reprint (London: Penguin Classics, 1995).
[26] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* 145.

exchange for the comforts provided by their husbands, Wollstonecraft emphasizes the inherent cost of being the "Angel in the House"—namely, the suppression of women's potential, autonomy, and individuality.

The concept of the "Angel in the House" served as a prescriptive ideal that reinforced Victorian society's rigid class and gender hierarchies, intertwining notions of femininity with status and respectability. While this ideal portrayed women as paragons of domesticity and moral virtue, the realities of Victorian life, as Trish Bredar suggests, often deviated from this archetype.[27] The expectation of women to embody respectability, particularly through modest behavior and appearance, reveals the broader societal mechanisms that sought to discipline and control women's roles. However, these same mechanisms also provided opportunities for women to assert moral authority and gain a sense of agency within their constrained roles. This duality is further complicated by the rise of female consumerism and women's increasing presence in public spaces during the latter half of the nineteenth century, challenging the boundaries of domestic ideology.

The definitions for the Angel in the House lends itself to a picturesque interpretation of women and the ways in which they should conduct themselves; their supposed "natural" tendencies for domesticity, purity, and were inherently too weak to address the problems of the outside world. To date, historians have yet to deviate from this archaic depiction of women, believing that it was not an ideal, but a reality for most

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[27] Trish Bredar, "A Voyage of Discovery: Reimagining the Walking Woman through Nineteenth-Century Diaries," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 50, no. 4 (2022): 609–638, https://doi.org/10.1017/S106015032100019X.

genteel Victorian households.[28] Bredar brings up a significantly consequential notion: "perhaps the angel in the house never really existed, and perhaps students of the Victorian period have been substituting fiction for fact, idealizations for realities, prescriptions for descriptions."[29] Bredar's assertion that "perhaps the angel in the house never really existed" presents an opportunity to critically assess how historians and scholars have understood Victorian women. Bredar's statement suggests that the portrayal of the "Angel in the House" might have been more of a prescriptive ideal than a lived reality; it was an expectation imposed upon women rather than an accurate reflection of their experiences, choices, and behaviors. This raises consequential implications as it indicates that Victorian women were not as universally confined to the domestic sphere as previously thought, and that they were active agents in negotiating, challenging, and redefining their roles within Victorian society. If the "Angel in the House" was truly more of an idealized fiction than a reality, it substantiates the idea that many Victorian women did not lay down and accept their restrictive roles and confines, but rather, sought ways to assert their independence and autonomy. By the 1860s, Victorian women increasingly chose to step beyond the boundaries of the home—in large part due to their desires to engage in consumer culture—and entered the bustling cityscape. This shift in behavior and attitudes amongst women allowed for them to cultivate their identities, exercise their power to make decisions, and actively participate and exist in the public sphere; all actions that defied the constraints of domestic ideology. The rise of female consumerism hinted at a

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[28] M. Jeanne Peterson, "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 3 (1984): 678.
[29] Bredar, "A Voyage of Discovery: Reimagining the Walking Woman through Nineteenth-Century Diaries."

society in reorientation, where the once rigid boundaries that once separated male and female roles began to blur. Such a transformation threatened the patriarchal order; it incited fear as it signified that women were no longer content with being confined to the ideals of the "Angel in the House" and the “ideal” Victorian woman, but were instead seeking autonomy, self-expression, and participation in the public sphere.

The expectations for women within the Victorian home and marriage were intricately tied to the social and cultural norms of the era, reflecting a spectrum of experiences influenced by class and societal ideals. Status and respectability were paramount, permeating even the smallest details of daily life. Victorian society was defined by “infinite gradations of status, expressed not only in dress, style and location of house, number of servants, and possession of personal transport in the form of a riding horse, a carriage and pair, or a pony and trap, but also in the intangible rules about who spoke or bowed to, called on, dined with or intermingled with whom.”[30] These intricate hierarchies shaped the roles and behaviors expected of women, particularly within the domestic sphere. Respectability was a central tenet of a woman’s identity, especially for working-class women, who were expected to uphold moral standards and modesty in their behavior and appearance. To be deemed respectable, a woman needed to “not live a riotous life, not drink or gamble or use bad language, not go in for rough sports and pastimes, and not get into debt. Respectability meant having a good self-image, dressing modestly and keeping up reasonable appearances.”[31] While such lives might appear “drab and colourless to outsiders,” they provided women with “satisfaction and a sense of

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[30] Joan Perkin, *Victorian Women* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995) 100.
[31] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 111.

moral superiority."[32] This adherence to decorum and propriety was both a means of self-discipline and a marker of one's social standing.

Marriage was often seen as a woman's primary aspiration, offering both opportunities and constraints. For many, marriage represented a form of liberation from the strict oversight of their parental homes: "Freedom is a relative concept, and for many women marriage meant release from a childlike and humiliating dependence on parents."[33] Yet this freedom was limited, as marriage typically confined women to the roles of wife and mother within a tightly circumscribed domestic sphere. This tension is encapsulated in the notion of the "gilded cage of bourgeois marriage," which "was approved by those who idealized its comfort and security, but hated by those who found it claustrophobic and frustrating."[34] The domestic ideal lauded by Victorian society provided comfort and status, yet for some, it also symbolized a stifling lack of autonomy. Within these confines, however, women of all classes found ways to carve out spaces for personal agency. Despite the "narrow limits imposed on them by law and custom," wives often managed to "follow their own inclinations" unless faced with deeply unhappy marriages.[35] This agency sometimes extended to the formation of social connections, as marriage "offered the possibility, on however unequal terms, to create a home and family of one's own and, surprisingly, the chance to go about and make separate friends, even

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[32] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 111.
[33] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 75.
[34] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 76.
[35] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 112.

ones of the opposite sex."[36] These limited freedoms underscore the duality of marriage as both a structure of constraint and a potential avenue for personal growth.

Credit, Class, and Constraint: Women's Economic Agency in the Victorian Marketplace

The Victorian Era, spanning from Queen Victoria's accession in 1837 until her death in 1901, marked a transformative period of societal and cultural shifts in Britain. Central to this transformation were the extensive socio-economic developments catalyzed by the First and Second Industrial Revolutions. These revolutions spurred unprecedented industrial growth, which in turn reshaped the economic landscape and the composition of the British middle class. Traditionally, the middle class had been narrowly defined, encompassing only the relatively affluent and socially elite. However, the burgeoning industries broadened this categorization, expanding the middle class to include a significant segment of the working population. This redefinition introduced a pronounced economic diversity within the middle class, spanning from those just above subsistence to comfortably prosperous households. This expanded range must be considered when analyzing the experiences of individuals labeled as "middle class" in this period, as economic circumstances varied dramatically within this category. For example, while the income of an average middle-class family ranged from £300 to £500 annually, the threshold for middle-class status extended down to an income as low as £150 per year.[37]

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[36] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 75.
[37] Lydia Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women* (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013) XXI.

Such disparities in wealth within the middle class reflect the nuanced social realities and economic pressures faced by Victorian households, revealing a complex interplay between class identity and economic capital that defined the era's consumer culture.

There were multiple "middle-classes" and "working-classes": each had their own distinct set of values, a range in finances, and their own fundamental practices.[38] The social landscape of Victorian Britain was characterized by a rigid yet nuanced class structure, profoundly influenced by economic and industrial developments of the 19th century. The rapid expansion of industry and commerce brought unprecedented changes to British society, altering traditional class divisions and creating new social identities. The Industrial Revolution spurred urbanization, which led to a concentration of wealth among the elite and the emergence of a more diverse and stratified middle class. At the same time, the working class expanded, composed of both skilled and unskilled laborers who faced varying degrees of job stability and economic security. These changes intensified class distinctions, as people's identities, opportunities, and lifestyles became increasingly tied to their economic roles and incomes. Understanding this hierarchy is essential to interpreting the lived experiences of Victorians, as each class bore distinct social markers, expectations, and levels of security.

For middle- and upper-class women, the ability to participate in consumer culture further shaped their domestic and social roles: "The Victorian woman could buy anything she liked in London, and provincial shops followed the fashions as soon as they could."[39]

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[38] Kelley Graham, *Gone to the Shops: Shopping in Victorian England* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008) 4.
[39] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 101.

This access to consumer goods allowed women to assert their taste and status, even as their engagement with shopping and fashion was scrutinized within broader societal debates about propriety and morality. Thus, the home became both a reflection of a woman's respectability and a site where societal expectations were performed and negotiated. The Victorian ideal of womanhood within the home and marriage was marked by a delicate balance between societal constraints and personal agency. While the strictures of respectability and domesticity dictated much of women's lives, they also found ways to navigate and, at times, subtly challenge these limitations, shaping their identities within the frameworks of law, custom, and class-based expectations.

Upper-class and aristocratic women in Victorian society enjoyed the freedom to make purchases on credit, a privilege underpinned by the social and financial structures that placed the legal burden of any incurred debt upon their husbands. Women made these purchases using their husbands' names, which carried an inherent assumption of trustworthiness and reliability. Credit-based shopping was not merely a financial arrangement but also a "cultural transaction," imbued with moral judgments about class, gender, and respectability.[40] In practice, consumer credit throughout much of the Victorian era operated informally, grounded in personal trust and existing social relationships. The shopkeeper's decision to extend credit often hinged on a moral evaluation of the consumer's character and the likelihood that the debt would be repaid—a judgment that ultimately implicated the husband, as head of the household, in his wife's financial conduct. This practice placed husbands in a complex position: they

[40] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 50.

were held legally liable for any debts incurred by their wives under the prevailing assumption that the male head of household bore responsibility for supporting the family. Up until the 1860s, Victorian law reinforced this by holding men accountable for family debts and placing them in charge of household expenditures.[41] As women began exercising newfound control over financial matters within this credit-based system, tensions arose, highlighting a growing conflict between bourgeois ideals and the evolving capitalist economy. The traditional gender roles and organization of the domestic sphere began to clash with the financial independence that women could exercise through credit, creating concerns that this new financial agency might destabilize existing social hierarchies.[42]

This shift in economic power was met with ambivalence and, at times, outright fear. As consumer society expanded, the portrayal of women evolved: they were now seen as potential agents of financial ruin, capable of endangering their husbands' financial stability and burdening shopkeepers with uncollectable debts. Victorian authorities often viewed the financial interactions between women and retail institutions with suspicion, framing them as "inherently immoral" acts that afforded women undue influence over household finances. This suspicion reflects a broader societal anxiety about the growing intersection of consumerism, gender, and financial autonomy, as women's roles in the economic sphere began to challenge deeply ingrained norms of the domestic and social order.[43] The Victorian domestic ideal did more than reflect societal

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[41] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 51.
[42] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 49.
[43] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 50.

values—it actively reinforced them. By imbuing the home with moral, aesthetic, and religious significance, Victorians created a cultural institution that regulated behavior, justified social hierarchies, and addressed the anxieties brought on by modernization. The home's dual role as a site of refuge and discipline reveals the complexity of Victorian domesticity, which sought to balance the competing demands of moral purity and social conformity. This intricate interplay of religion, gender, and material culture offers profound insights into the ways in which societal norms are constructed, maintained, and internalized, leaving an enduring legacy on the cultural landscape.

This access to consumer goods allowed women to assert their taste and status, even as their engagement with shopping and fashion was scrutinized within broader societal debates about propriety and morality. Thus, the home became both a reflection of a woman's respectability and a site where societal expectations were performed and negotiated. The Victorian ideal of womanhood within the home and marriage was marked by a delicate balance between societal constraints and personal agency. While the strictures of respectability and domesticity dictated much of women's lives, they also found ways to navigate and, at times, subtly challenge these limitations, shaping their identities within the frameworks of law, custom, and class-based expectations.

The tiered structure demonstrates the varied economic experiences within each class, as well as the rigid social boundaries that defined Victorian society.[44] This hierarchy illuminates the ways Victorian consumerism reinforced social divisions, with each class participating in consumption based on economic constraints and aspirations.

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[44] Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 4.

The range of goods available—from luxury items to essential, low-cost alternatives—mirrored these class distinctions, making consumption both a reflection and reinforcement of Victorian social structure. Thus, Victorian consumerism was a system that both bridged and highlighted the divides between classes, illustrating the pervasive impact of socio-economic hierarchy on daily life and social identity. The rigid class distinctions of Victorian society not only structured social identity but also deeply influenced patterns of consumption, which became a vehicle through which economic and social divisions were both reflected and reinforced. As consumerism evolved, it offered each class a means to express their social standing, with choices constrained by both financial capability and social expectation. For the elite, consumption encompassed luxury and exclusivity, while the middle and working classes navigated an expanding market of goods that catered to their economic means and aspirations. The growth of urban centers, particularly London, catalyzed this consumerist culture. The establishment of new commercial districts, such as London's West End in the 1860s, redefined urban spaces and facilitated the public presence of women as consumers, a significant shift in societal norms. These transformations were underpinned by the Industrial Revolution, which brought a vast increase in the production of affordable goods, effectively democratizing consumption. Consequently, consumerism emerged as a socially integrative yet divisive force—allowing diverse social classes to participate in new patterns of spending while underscoring the era's stark socio-economic stratifications.

Victorian society was characterized by rigid yet nuanced class distinctions that profoundly influenced women's roles, consumer behavior, and engagement with public

life. While the broad categories of "middle class" and "working class" are frequently invoked in discussions of this period, they conceal significant internal stratifications. Each stratum operated under distinct social, economic, and cultural pressures, which shaped women's access to consumer culture and their ability to navigate the shifting boundaries of respectability. By examining these internal divisions more closely and considering how respectability functioned as both a constraint and a form of social capital, we gain a deeper understanding of how Victorian women from various classes engaged with consumer culture in ways that reflected their economic realities and social aspirations. The Victorian middle class was far from monolithic; it encompassed a broad spectrum of households, ranging from the prosperous upper-middle class, who could afford luxury goods and leisure activities, to the lower-middle class, who aspired to emulate their wealthier counterparts while contending with financial insecurity. These internal divisions had significant implications for women's consumer behavior, particularly as consumerism became a key means through which class identity was performed and reinforced. For upper-middle-class women, consumption was often an exercise in conspicuous display, as theorized by Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.[45] Their purchases signaled wealth, taste, and social standing, with particular emphasis on luxury goods, fashion, and home décor. The rise of department stores and specialty shops catering to this class enabled women to curate a public image of refinement and respectability through their clothing and household choices.[46] In this

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[45] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, 1899, reprint (New York: Dover Publications, 1994).
[46] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*.

context, respectability was intertwined with aesthetic display, where adherence to contemporary fashion trends and the acquisition of high-quality goods became markers of moral and social superiority.

In contrast, lower-middle-class women engaged with consumer culture in more pragmatic ways, often navigating a delicate balance between aspirational consumption and economic constraint. While they sought to emulate the respectability of the upper-middle class, their purchasing power was limited to more affordable, mass-produced goods. The expansion of industrial production and the growth of retail establishments offering installment credit allowed lower-middle-class women to participate in consumer culture, albeit in a more restricted and carefully managed manner.[47] Respectability for this group was less about luxury and more about maintaining an appearance of modest propriety, with particular attention to cleanliness, orderliness, and appropriate attire.

While middle-class women engaged with consumer culture primarily through new retail establishments, working-class women operated in a parallel economy**,** relying heavily on second-hand markets, pawnbrokers, and informal networks of exchange. The limited disposable income of working-class families meant that women in these households had to be resourceful, often purchasing second-hand clothing and household items or making their own garments and goods.[48] This economy created an alternative consumer world, one that mirrored the practices of the middle class but on a more modest

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[47] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).
[48] Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006).

and practical scale. Working-class women's engagement with consumer culture was also shaped by their participation in the labor force. Many worked as domestic servants, factory workers, or seamstresses, occupations that exposed them to the material culture of wealthier households and influenced their consumer desires. However, unlike their middle-class counterparts, working-class women's respectability was often judged less by the quality of their possessions and more by their moral behavior and work ethic. Respectability in this context was closely linked to sobriety, frugality, and domestic virtue, as moral reformers and social critics frequently admonished working-class women to avoid the temptations of excessive consumption and public leisure.

The interplay between Victorian ideals of respectability and the act of shopping reveals a nuanced relationship between gender, class, and consumption. While middle-class women were expected to embody moral virtue through domesticity and eschew wage labor, their engagement with shopping introduced a paradoxical dynamic. Shopping, often characterized as a domestic duty aligned with a woman's role as caretaker of the home, simultaneously became a space where women could exercise agency and interact with the public sphere. This activity was shaped by complex class distinctions, with middle-class women's shopping habits reflecting their adherence to respectability, as they navigated consumption as a moral and social responsibility. In contrast, working-class women's participation in shopping was often dictated by necessity, further reinforcing their differing social roles within the marketplace. As historians shift their focus from macroeconomic trends to the lived experiences of individuals, the act of shopping emerges as a critical lens through which to examine how

Victorian values intersected with evolving economic and social structures. Shopping was a dynamic human experience: "constantly changing, and unrecognizable from one generation to the next."[49] Shopping was interwoven with the lives of women but yet, the knowledge we currently have is obscure; traces of it were left behind in diaries and letters, left up to us to piece together. Historians have just recently begun to consider the complexity of shopping and the questions that come along with it. The traditional approach meant looking at the "big picture of economic history," as they "studied the market;" they focused their attention on studying how goods were made and the general way that they were exchanged rather than the dynamics and sense within the marketplace.[50]

Respectability in Practice: Maud Berkeley and the Gendered Boundaries of Public Life

Maud Berkeley's diary provides an invaluable lens through which to explore the daily experiences of Victorian women navigating the emerging consumer landscape. As a middle-class woman living in late 19th-century Britain, Maud's entries offer a rich account of her routines, desires, and social interactions, revealing the complex interplay between private domestic duties and public consumer activities. Her reflections illuminate the shifting boundaries of femininity and respectability during a period marked by rapid industrialization and urban expansion. In one entry, Maud describes a shopping

[49] Graham, *Gone to the Shops,* 1.
[50] Graham, *Gone to the Shops,* 1.

excursion to a newly opened department store, vividly recounting the allure of the elaborate window displays and the excitement of browsing a wide array of goods under one roof. Such accounts underscore the importance of consumer spaces as sites of both social engagement and personal expression. For women like Maud, shopping extended beyond mere necessity; it became a form of leisure and a means of asserting individuality within the constraints of societal norms. This dual role—consumption as both obligation and pleasure—reflects broader tensions faced by Victorian women as they navigated the growing public sphere while remaining tethered to traditional ideals of domesticity.

Maud Berkeley's diaries offer a compelling lens through which to examine the tension between traditional Victorian domesticity and the expanding roles of women in the late nineteenth century. While her writings contain the expected reflections on home life, social engagements, and concerns about propriety, they also reveal a woman who traveled extensively and engaged with public spaces and intellectual debates. This complexity challenges the rigid ideal of the Victorian "angel in the house," demonstrating how women, even those embedded in elite social circles, navigated a broader and more dynamic existence than traditional norms might suggest. Berkeley's experiences exemplify the contradictions inherent in the Victorian gender order—women were expected to maintain and cultivate domesticity, yet they frequently participated in activities that took them beyond the domestic sphere. By examining her reflections on household duties, social rituals, intellectual encounters, and public performances, it becomes evident that her life, and by extension the lives of many Victorian women, was far more fluid than prescriptive gender ideologies would suggest.

One of the dominant themes in Berkeley's diaries is the centrality of domesticity in women's lives, a reality that she both acknowledges and subtly critiques. Her accounts of home-centered activities reinforce the significance of the domestic sphere in shaping women's identities. In February 1890, for example, she describes an afternoon spent painting a bookshelf with her companion, Lilian, on a rainy day: "Too wet today to do anything, so we both, Lilian and I, kept ourselves very busy, painting a bookshelf. Terrible trouble, painting round our feet. Though we both wore huge aprons, we still contrived to deposit a large part of the enamel over ourselves."[51] This passage captures both the constraints and creativity inherent in domestic life. On the one hand, the rain prevents them from venturing outdoors, reinforcing the idea that women's lives were often bounded by their immediate domestic surroundings. On the other hand, their decision to engage in a practical and creative task suggests that the domestic sphere was not simply a site of passive confinement but one of activity, problem-solving, and even amusement. The humorous depiction of their struggle with the paint underscores a sense of agency within domesticity, where women could engage in productive labor, albeit within the constraints of their prescribed roles.

This scene stands in contrast to the ways in which Berkeley describes public spaces, which serve as sites of both familiarity and discomfort. In November 1889, she writes with great enthusiasm about a trip to the market: "Overjoyed to see familiar faces. All the ladies of York busy about their shopping."[52] This brief but telling moment reveals

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[51] Maud Berkeley, *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, ed. Flora Fraser (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), 76.
[52] Berkeley, *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, 68.

the importance of shopping not only as a necessity but as a vital social ritual. Victorian women were responsible for provisioning their households, but such errands also allowed them to engage with the world beyond the home. The market, as depicted by Berkeley, is a distinctly feminine space, populated by women actively participating in the economic life of the community. This description subtly challenges the notion that the domestic ideal required women to be entirely sequestered within their homes. Instead, they moved through public spaces, forming social bonds, exchanging information, and managing economic transactions.

Yet, even as Berkeley actively participated in public life, her writings reflect an awareness of the shifting gender discourse of the period. This is most evident in her October 1890 diary entry, where she observes Steakie reading *A Woman's Place is Not in the Home*: "Wondered aloud where, in that case, it was, but Steakie only looked mysterious. Feel she is taking New Woman literature rather too seriously. Hope she does not cherish any dreams of making a convert out of me."[53] This passage is particularly significant because it situates Berkeley at the intersection of tradition and change. The emergence of the New Woman—a figure who sought independence, education, and professional opportunities—was a direct challenge to the Victorian ideal of feminine domesticity. Berkeley's response to Steakie's reading material is tinged with skepticism and irony, suggesting that she views the radical ideas of the New Woman movement with amusement, if not outright dismissal. Her comment, however, also reveals a level of discomfort with these new gender ideologies. By questioning where a woman's place

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[53] Berkeley, *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, 96.

might be if not in the home, she acknowledges the ideological shift taking place, even if she is not entirely prepared to embrace it.

Berkeley's own life, however, suggests that she was not as firmly rooted in traditional domesticity as her commentary on Steakie might suggest. Her participation in elaborate social events, such as the August 1888 bazaar, illustrates her engagement with both cultural performance and economic activity. She describes the event in vivid detail, noting how "Lilian went as one of the 'three little maids from school'. She refiled Mollie Boucher's collection of Japanese paraphernalia for the purpose, and sold a hotchpotch of items, Benares brass pots and all, from a tent emblazoned…"[54] This passage is revealing on multiple levels. First, it highlights the performative nature of women's public engagement—social events like bazaars allowed women to assume playful and theatrical roles while remaining within the bounds of respectability. Second, it underscores the link between gender and empire. The presence of "Japanese paraphernalia" and "Benares brass pots" points to the ways in which women's consumer culture was deeply intertwined with Britain's imperial interests. By participating in the sale of these exoticized goods, Berkeley and her peers engaged in a form of cultural exchange that, while seemingly innocuous, reflected Britain's larger colonial enterprise. Her personal longing to purchase ferns, but her subsequent decision to buy a "charming pen-wiper in the form of a water-lily" because Nannie would deem ferns "unhealthy in the home" , further underscores how domestic norms shaped even minor decisions about aesthetics and taste.[55]

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[54] Berkeley, *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, 32.
[55] Berkeley, *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, 32.

Another key example of Berkeley's public engagement is her participation in musical performance. In November 1889, she describes preparing for a concert at The Retreat, expressing anxiety over her voice and choice of attire:

> My voice not in its best shape. Dr Baker, the principal at The Retreat, told me affectionately that I sounded like a corncrake. My sagging confidence drooped a little more. Terrified I will dry up completely after the opening chord. Such a waste for all the people who have bought tickets. Drank a quart of hot lemon with honey to try and restore the vox humana. Worried what to wear. My black satin is not very gay. Foolishly, did not think to bring my Milkmaid outfit, which might have distracted the eye.[56]

This account is significant because it demonstrates the high degree of social visibility that women could achieve through artistic performance. While women's public roles were often limited, musical talent was considered an acceptable means for them to engage in public life. Berkeley's self-deprecating humor and concern about her appearance reflect the pressures placed on women to present themselves aesthetically even in artistic endeavors. Her mention of the "Milkmaid outfit" humorously suggests that visual appeal was just as important as musical ability, further reinforcing the gendered expectations surrounding women's public appearances.

Ultimately, Berkeley's diaries provide a rich and nuanced portrait of a woman negotiating the boundaries of Victorian domesticity and also serves as a microcosm of the broader tensions that defined Victorian femininity. While she actively participated in

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[56] Berkeley, *Maud: The Diaries of Maud Berkeley*, 68.

household tasks and adhered to certain social norms, her engagement with public life, travel, and cultural performance reveals a life that extended far beyond the home. Her reflections on New Woman literature indicate an awareness of the shifting ideological landscape, even as she expresses skepticism toward it. Likewise, her involvement in bazaars, concerts, and travel demonstrates that the strict binary between the public and private spheres was, in reality, more permeable than Victorian ideals might suggest. Berkeley's writings thus serve as a valuable testament to the complexities of female identity in the late nineteenth century, illustrating that Victorian women were not simply confined to the home but were actively engaged in shaping the world around them. However, this participation did not necessarily equate to full autonomy; rather, it was carefully mediated by the prevailing expectations of respectability that governed women's behavior. Even as Berkeley navigated public spaces and engaged with New Woman literature, her skepticism toward certain feminist ideals reflects the deep entrenchment of Victorian moral codes, which continued to dictate the acceptable boundaries of female ambition and visibility.

This delicate negotiation between personal agency and societal constraint was emblematic of the wider discourse surrounding women's roles in Victorian Britain. Respectability remained a defining force in shaping not only women's conduct but also the opportunities available to them. While middle-class women like Berkeley could engage with intellectual and cultural life, their ability to do so was contingent upon maintaining an image of moral propriety. At the same time, working-class women, though granted some social acceptance for their labor, were still subject to the same

ideological framework that positioned wage work as a deviation from the domestic ideal. The notion that women's primary duty was to the home persisted, reinforcing a system in which their public presence—whether as consumers, professionals, or intellectuals—was always scrutinized and subject to social policing. Thus, Berkeley's reflections provide a window into the broader paradox of Victorian womanhood: while women's lives were far more dynamic than the rigid prescriptions of domestic ideology allowed, their engagement with public life remained inseparable from the cultural imperatives of respectability and class distinction.

A key to understanding this period lies in the values and beliefs that shaped Victorian society, particularly within the English middle class, where the prevailing ideal of "respectability" dictated social behavior and moral standards. Respectability emphasized social credibility, personal discipline, honesty, sexual morality, and for men, a measure of individualism—a set of virtues that reflected and reinforced class status and social order.[57] The ideal of respectability imposed upon middle-class women a profound expectation to cultivate and preserve the domestic sphere as a marker of moral virtue. The patriarchal interpretation of respectability declared that any woman who sought employment outside the home threatened the sanctity of her role as wife, mother, and homemaker, thereby compromising her respectability.[58] This ideological framework posited wage labor as antithetical to a woman's true purpose, which society strictly confined to domestic responsibilities. Despite this overarching standard, there were exceptions: working-class women who entered the workforce were sometimes regarded

[57] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, XXIII.
[58] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, XXIII.

with respect, as their labor could be framed as a commitment to familial duty and maternal care. Nevertheless, these instances did little to shift the dominant discourse. For many, women's growing participation in wage labor was perceived as a destabilizing force—a breach in the male-dominated social order and a direct threat to male authority, marking a symbolic erosion of the patriarchal control that had, until then, largely defined women's social and economic lives.

Respectability in Victorian society was not a fixed attribute but a fluid and context-dependent construct, particularly in the public sphere. While women across all classes were expected to maintain a respectable appearance and demeanor, the specific expectations varied depending on the location and the nature of the public space. In suburban high streets, for example, middle-class women could shop and socialize with relative ease, as these spaces were seen as extensions of their domestic sphere. Local shops catered to their needs, and their presence was both accepted and encouraged as part of the growing consumer economy.[59] However, in more cosmopolitan environments such as London's West End, the boundaries of respectability became more precarious. The visibility of women in these spaces, combined with the presence of entertainment venues and luxury goods, heightened the risk of being perceived as morally dubious, particularly if they were unaccompanied by male chaperones.[60] Thus, women's ability to navigate these spaces without compromising their respectability required careful attention to dress, behavior, and the nature of their social interactions. The fluidity of respectability is

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[59] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure.*
[60] Judith R. Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," *Representations*, no. 62 (1998): 1–30, https://doi.org/10.2307/2902937.

further evident in the moral panic surrounding the phenomenon of mistaken identity. As noted by Walkowitz, respectable women who ventured into urban spaces risked being misidentified as prostitutes, particularly in areas where commercial and sexual economies overlapped.[61] This fear highlights the fragility of respectability and the extent to which it was contingent upon both context and perception. Respectability, while ostensibly tied to behavior and social standing, was ultimately a performative construct, dependent on the ability of women to present themselves in ways that aligned with societal expectations.

The Gendered Geography of Consumption: Women and the Making of London's West End

While many men and women shopped in their local towns and fairs, London's West End became a shopping and entertainment district, particularly after the 1860s. London's West End became the key destination for women and as such, these spaces had to create new designated spaces for the influx of women into the city. Successively, The Victorian Era saw the exponential growth of civic and public spaces within the urban hub of London as the subsequent development of the new consumerist society; these new spaces were once considered to be wholly off-limits to such women, but in the last decades of the nineteenth century, became commonplaces for them to congregate and rest. The West End's development in the mid-nineteenth century not only accommodated the rising number of female consumers but also cultivated new cultural norms around

[61] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London."

public life and shopping practices. This growth reflected a broader consumer revolution, driven by innovations in retail and urban design that reshaped both the literal and social fabric of the city. Bazaars and arcades emerged as fashionable spaces, pioneering the integration of leisure and commerce, where individual retailers rented stalls to showcase their wares in a bustling, collective environment. By the 1860s, however, the proliferation of larger stores through "shop amalgamation" began to redefine these consumer spaces, leading to an expansive, interconnected urban shopping experience. Drapers and other retailers recognized the importance of appealing storefronts, enlarging their windows to draw the gaze of passersby and encouraging the act of "looking" as an integral part of consumer culture. This transformation of store design not only reinforced the allure of goods within but also reoriented public engagement with shopping, emphasizing the visual spectacle of commodities. Hence, the West End's evolution into a hub of modern consumerism exemplified the intersections of urban expansion, retail innovation, and shifting social roles in Victorian London, offering women—and the broader public—a new sphere in which to participate in the symbolic act of viewing and desiring.

Looking specifically at the geographical and demographic changes throughout London, it was clear that growth and change was happening at a rapid pace. Well-known journalist, George Augustus Sala, was fascinated by the creation of the newly established western suburbs colloquially known as "Young London." Central to his understanding of a modern suburbia was Westbourne Grove, a place "full of emporiums for the supply of almost every conceivable human want and wish; and all creation, so to speak, of the day

before yesterday."[62] The emergence of London's West End started in the 1830s and 1840s with the construction of bazaars: these were the equivalent of market halls where fashionable goods were sold and individual retailers could rent stalls. [63] The second development in the consumer landscape was linked to retailers who began to increase their shop sizes through a process of "shop amalgamation."[64] Another contributing factor was the rapidly urbanizing city that had seemingly changed overnight from small, individually owned stores to a seemingly endless landscape of windows. The emphasis on windowed storefronts began as a problem shared amongst the draper's shops as their stores were once dark with minimal light coming through the small windows. They reshaped their stores to have large paneled plate-glass windows so that the women walking the streets could see the materials that they were selling. Historians believe that the changes made by the drapers defined the archetype for a storefront–they had successfully reformed a flawed system and made a lasting impression on the landscape of London.[65]

The evolution of London's retail landscape in the mid-to-late nineteenth century was characterized by two primary patterns of growth: the gradual expansion of established retail institutions situated in fashionable districts and the emergence of new commercial establishments post-1850. The latter, typified by pioneering ventures like Whiteley's department store, catered to a diverse consumer base by offering a wide

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[62] As cited in Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 21.
[63] Gareth Shaw and M. T. Wild, "Retail Patterns in the Victorian City," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 4, no. 2 (1979): 284.
[64] Shaw and Wild, "Retail Patterns in the Victorian City," 284.
[65] Graham, *Gone to the Shops,* 42.

assortment of goods under one roof, thus exemplifying the growing appeal of comprehensive, all-inclusive shopping environments. This wave of retail innovation not only transformed consumer culture but also necessitated the physical expansion of London's retail infrastructure, as entire streets were repurposed or newly constructed to support burgeoning commercial demand.[66] Although early chroniclers such as Sala highlighted Westbourne Grove as an emerging retail hub, the commercial epicenter increasingly shifted toward Regent Street and its surrounding neighborhoods between the 1850s and 1880s. This reorientation reflected broader socio-economic trends, with Regent Street epitomizing the fusion of commerce and spectacle within the urban fabric of Victorian London. While Sala emphasized Westbourne Grove, the commercial focus gradually shifted between the 1850s and 1880s toward Regent Street and its surrounding neighborhoods, as illustrated in the figure below.

[66] Shaw and Wild, "Retail Patterns in the Victorian City," 286.

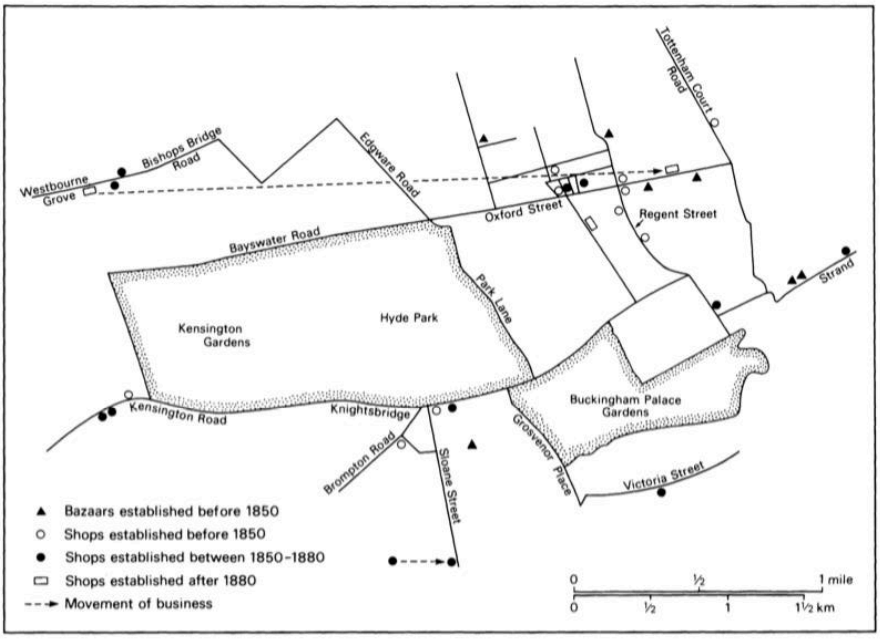

FIGURE 3. The evolution of department stores in London's West End. *Source:* Trade Directories

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In parallel with the transformation of retail spaces in Victorian London, women began to assert their presence within these burgeoning urban commercial hubs, navigating them independently and engaging in consumer practices without the accompaniment of male chaperones. This shift in behavior marked a significant cultural and social departure from established norms. Early in the Victorian era, it was not only customary but expected for women to be accompanied by a male counterpart while venturing into public spaces, a stipulation tied closely to concerns over women's respectability and social standing. Moreover, the act of shopping itself—a pursuit of aesthetic and desirable goods—was generally restricted to the elite, who alone possessed

[67] Shaw and Wild, "Retail Patterns in the Victorian City," 285.

both the leisure time and the financial means to partake in such consumption.[68] Therefore, as more women across a broader social spectrum began to frequent the city's expanding commercial districts, they were not merely participating in consumer culture; they were actively challenging established social boundaries and gender norms of their time.

[68] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 216.

Chapter Two

From Desire to Derision: The Female Shopper in Victorian Discourse

Victorian women's identities were profoundly shaped by the burgeoning consumer culture of the nineteenth century. This chapter delves into how fashion, as both a personal and public expression, became a key site for negotiating individuality within societal constraints. Women's attire served as a visual marker of class, respectability, and adherence to gender norms, while also providing a means of self-expression. Fashion publications, etiquette books, and women's magazines of the time reveal a dual narrative: one that promoted conformity to societal ideals and another that encouraged women to use dress as a means of crafting their identities. By examining these sources alongside the works of critics like Eliza Lynn Linton, this chapter uncovers how women engaged with fashion both as a means of asserting agency and as a response to the cultural pressures they faced.

This trend did not go unobserved or unchallenged. As with most shifts in social behavior, this newfound female autonomy in urban consumer spaces elicited critique, often framed within a moralizing discourse. The act of shopping, in this context, became both a site of empowerment for women and a flashpoint for criticism. Satirical periodicals frequently portrayed women engaged in shopping in an unflattering light. The humor magazine *The Girl of the Period Miscellany*, for instance, reflected anxieties about shifting gender roles. In one article, the author condemned the apparent transformation of

"girls" who embraced commercial culture, asserting that their engagement in such activities imbued them with "ugly, tasteless characteristics."[69] This reactionary commentary exemplifies the Victorian societal struggle to reconcile the emerging figure of the independent female consumer with deeply entrenched gender expectations. By disparaging these women, critics aimed to uphold traditional values while exposing societal anxieties about women's growing visibility and autonomy in public life. This critique, however, can also be viewed as indicative of a broader societal discomfort with the blurring of class and gender distinctions; as consumer spaces opened to a wider segment of women, they also became arenas for the re-negotiation of social identity and respectability. The tension surrounding women's roles as consumers thus reflects a broader Victorian ambivalence toward modernity itself, as new social behaviors unsettled longstanding cultural ideals.

The framing of women's visibility through the male gaze—a concept later articulated by feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey who authored *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*—was evident in the ways Victorian society perceived and policed women's presence in public.[70] While women were active participants in consumer culture, their visibility in public spaces often transformed them into objects of observation, both by male onlookers and through the design of commercial environments such as shop windows and arcades. Shop windows, a hallmark of Victorian consumer culture, were spaces designed to invite both looking and being looked at. While women

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[69] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 32.
[70] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 14–26. First published in *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975).

gazed at the goods on display, they themselves became objects of the public gaze, particularly that of men who loitered in shopping districts. This dynamic underscored a paradox in women's public engagement: although consumer spaces ostensibly empowered women by allowing them to participate in urban life, they also reinforced their status as spectacles subject to male observation and judgment.

In satirical periodicals, caricatures of female shoppers often depicted them as vain and superficial, emphasizing their outward appearance and consumer desires rather than their individuality or agency. This portrayal not only trivialized women's participation in consumer culture but also reinforced the notion that their presence in public was inherently tied to display and performance. By transforming women into passive objects of observation, Victorian cultural narratives sought to diminish the autonomy women exercised through consumerism. The concept of the male gaze is further relevant in understanding the moral scrutiny women faced when venturing into mixed-gender spaces. Public venues such as tea rooms, department stores, and theaters offered women opportunities to engage with public life but also subjected them to observation and judgment based on their comportment and attire. As Judith Walkowitz argues, the Victorian urban landscape was a contested space where women's visibility invited both empowerment and regulation, with their respectability perpetually at stake.[71] The commercial and social evolution of Victorian shopping spaces did not occur in isolation but was intrinsically tied to broader urban transformations and the shifting roles of women in public life. The emergence of department stores and suburban high streets

[71] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London."

symbolized not merely a shift in retailing practices but also a critical renegotiation of gendered identities. As department stores became more prevalent, the built environment itself reflected changing societal norms. The architectural grandeur of establishments like Whiteley's, with their expansive interiors, elaborate window displays, and specialized amenities, signaled a departure from the intimate, personal scale of traditional shops. These vast spaces offered an environment where women could engage in both social and economic activities, fostering a sense of agency in an era when their roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere.[72] Moreover, the creation of gendered public spaces like tea rooms, ladies' restrooms, and lounges within department stores further reinforced the notion of women as central figures in the consumer economy. While these spaces ostensibly provided women with autonomy in public settings, they also perpetuated Victorian ideals of femininity by ensuring that women's public behaviors adhered to socially acceptable norms. The design of these spaces reflected a delicate balance between empowerment and containment, granting women greater visibility while simultaneously reinforcing societal expectations of decorum and propriety.[73]

The democratization of shopping spaces, however, brought with it considerable social anxiety, particularly concerning class. While department stores initially catered to the middle and upper classes, they gradually began to attract a more diverse clientele. This inclusivity blurred traditional class distinctions, leading to fears about the erosion of social hierarchies. Critics of these establishments often invoked nostalgia for a bygone era when retail interactions were more personal and class boundaries more rigid. The

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[72] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure.*
[73] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure.*

presence of working-class women in spaces traditionally dominated by the middle class was viewed as emblematic of the disorder brought about by modern retailing.[74] Simultaneously, the rise of female consumers provoked moral panics about the nature of consumption itself. Department stores were portrayed in some circles as sites of excess and temptation, where women could succumb to their supposed innate frivolity. This critique was part of a broader cultural discourse that associated women's desires with irrationality and excess, reflecting deeper anxieties about women's expanding roles in society.

"The Girl of the Period": Fashion, Fear, and Female Agency in Victorian Culture

Eliza Lynn Linton's critique of women's engagement with consumer culture reveals the complex tensions surrounding femininity, autonomy, and materialism in the nineteenth century. Linton, a sharp social critic, expressed disdain for what she saw as the superficiality of women's obsession with fashion, viewing it as symptomatic of a broader moral decline.[75] Her essays reveal a deep-seated anxiety about the shifting boundaries of acceptable femininity, particularly as women ventured into the public sphere as consumers. Linton's portrayal of the "fine lady" and "The Girl of the Period" serves as a biting satire on Victorian consumerism, describing these women as prioritizing luxury,

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[74] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
[75] Eliza Lynn Linton, *Ourselves: A Series of Essays on Women* (London: G. Routledge & Sons, 1870), 22.

fashion, and self-gratification over substantive virtues or intellect. For Linton, this pursuit of "material refinement" stripped women of their individuality and dignity, reducing them to mere mannequins—figures defined by their appearance and adherence to the latest trends rather than by their moral or intellectual contributions.[76]

In her description, the "fine lady" and the "Girl of the Period" symbolize women who have subordinated all else to materialistic pursuits, abandoning traditional virtues for the allure of ephemeral fashions. By critiquing these figures, Linton touches upon a larger societal fear: that consumerism, while offering women access to public spaces and a form of self-expression, also presented a challenge to the established social order and values. Linton's lamentations underscore a tension within Victorian consumerism, where women's newfound agency through consumption was seen as both a liberating and destabilizing force.[77] While shopping and fashion empowered women to construct identities beyond the domestic realm, conservative voices viewed this as a deviation from Victorian ideals of femininity—ideals rooted in domesticity, piety, and modesty. Linton's criticisms thus reflect the cultural anxiety surrounding women's shifting roles, as consumerism became a vehicle for autonomy that threatened to blur the lines between respectable womanhood and perceived vanity.[78]

Through her critique, Linton conveys a sense of loss for an imagined era when women were guided by moral standards rather than by fleeting trends. By emphasizing that the "chief object of thought and intellect" for these women was their attire, she

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[76] Linton, *Ourselves,* 38-39.
[77] Eliza Lynn Linton, *Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1884), 3.
[78] Linton, *Ourselves,* 38-39.

suggests that consumerism had hollowed out their inner lives, supplanting intellectual and moral pursuits with a focus on external appearance.[79] Yet, this scorn for consumerism inadvertently highlights a paradox central to Victorian society: although consumer culture allowed women to exercise a degree of agency and self-expression, it simultaneously reinforced the very social structures that constrained them. Women, thus, occupied a contradictory position within consumer culture, where their agency in consumption was bound by societal expectations and judgments. The conflicting perceptions of femininity and consumerism that Linton's critique embodies underscore the core purpose of this thesis: to reveal that Victorian women, despite societal constraints, wielded more influence over consumption and production processes than Linton's conservative critiques would suggest.[80]

In her essays, published in her book, *Ourselves: Essays on Women*, Eliza Lynn Linton developed a scathing critique of Victorian women's obsessions over the latest fashion trends and with consumerism as a whole. In it Linton highlights how the pursuit of material refinement or "materialism" eclipsed what she believed to be the true qualities of women. Linton paints almost an almost satirical image of a "fine lady":

> A fine lady is one who imagines herself to be born into this great, suffering, toiling world of ours, for her own pleasure only; and in nowise for more than this. What relations she holds with her fellow man or woman, she holds for herself not for him–still less for her; for such good and advantage as she may be enable to

[79] Linton, *Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays,* 3.
[80] Linton, *Ourselves,* 22.

> draw out of the association, but in no sense whatever for any good that she can bestow.[81]

The "fine lady" was one whose identity was solely based on her attire, thus suggesting that a woman's worth was based on her ability to maintain her image as fashionable, regardless of the situation or location. This distinct portrayal reflects a paradox within Victorian consumerism: though shopping and fashion offered women control and a sense of agency, as well as the ability to access the public sphere, they were still subjected to societal constraints and judgments. Linton's judgments also suggested that women were incapable of separating themselves from consumeristic ideals and expectations imposed on them though they constantly struggle to maintain an image of refinement and class; women who overindulged on fashions and trends were reduced to objects or live mannequins, wholly devoid of individuality and agency.

> The fine lady is nothing if she is not well-dressed. Take her at the sea-side, where others go about in colours and materials that sea-water does not spoil, and there she is, a marine Regent Street lounger, trailing her silks and laces among the sea-weed as she trailed them last week over the city dust. Take her in the country, where the cows and the crows are the only creatures to look at her– but her boots are irreproachable, her chignon is of the orthodox dimensions, her fashions come from London, and she is as unexceptionally got up as if she was engaged to a "drum" or a fête. She would be miserable else. For she is never superior to her

[81] Linton, *Ourselves,* 22.

> boots, never above her gown, or better than her gloves. An immortal creature, with a soul to be saved, she degrades herself to the worth of a milliner's dummy as the sign of her superiority. And this she calls being "ladylike" and "refined!" Heaven help the pretty fool, and give her sense to understand the wholesome beauty that lies in strength– the grace of a capable, practical womanhood! –give her sense too, to see her own abounding vulgarity, and the poverty of a ladyhood which cannot rise above material conditions, but which must be draped and labeled to be accepted or believed in!"[82]

While her critique condemned the superficial nature of a consumer-driven society, it brings forth the question: how can femininity be defined and were there really any set guidelines? Viewing this from a female perspective, this particular quote perfectly captures the tension between consumerism and autonomy in Victorian Britain: on the one hand, consumer culture offered women an opportunity to engage in self-expression, integrate into public society, and access public spaces. On the other hand, conservatives and critics like Linton saw shopping as a superficial pursuit where a woman's value was measured through their ability to conform to the ever changing trends with the goal of seeking material refinement. Two things can be true as society tends to have contradictory elements, hence underscoring the main purpose of this thesis: though Linton's critique reveals the innate complexities of Victorian consumerism, ultimately

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[82] Linton, *Ourselves,* 38-39.

women had more influence over the process of production and consumption as opposed to it being imparted on them

> The Girl of the Period is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion—a creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses. Her main endeavour is to out vie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion. No matter if, in the time of crinolines, she sacrifices decency; in the time of trains, cleanliness; in the time of tied-back skirts, modesty; no matter either, if she makes herself a nuisance and an inconvenience to everyone she meets;—the Girl of the Period has done away with such moral muffishness as consideration for others, or regard for counsel and rebuke. It was all very well in old-fashioned times, when fathers and mothers had some authority and were treated with respect, to be tutored and made to obey, but she is far too fast and flourishing to be stopped in mid-career by these slow old morals; and as she lives to please herself, she does not care if she displeases every one else.[83]

Linton characterized "The Girl of the Period" as one who prioritized "unbounded luxury" and external appearances; she viewed her life as being centered around fashion, trends, and pleasure. Her criticisms reflect a broader societal anxiety about the growing

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[83] Linton, *Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays*, 3.

power and influence of consumerism and its impact on women's behaviors and values. By emphasizing that "dress is the chief object of such thought and intellect as she possesses," Linton implied that consumerism reduced women's identity and worth to superficiality and materialism, overshadowing their intellectual capabilities or moral qualities. She further implies that women's pursuits of fashion and consumer goods represented not only a rejection of traditional femininity but also a broader disregard for Victorian social norms and expectations; it captures the fear that women who engaged in consumerism were stepping outside the acceptable boundaries of Victorian womanhood, contradicting the ideal woman who was supposed to embody domesticity, selflessness, and moral purity.

While Linton saw waste and frivolity, Victorian women's engagement with consumerism granted them an opportunity to proclaim their independence, express their individuality, and participate in public life as the public sphere was priorly dominated by men. By shopping for goods and fashionable items, reading women's magazines, and visiting department stores, women subsequently became active participants in a consumerist culture that allowed them to shape their identities and experience a form of autonomy that was otherwise denied to them. However, Linton's critiques demonstrated that such participation came with significant societal pushback. The idea that "The Girl of the Period" was frivolous, vain, and driven solely by the desire to "out vie her neighbours in the extravagance of fashion" reflects general criticisms that women's engagement with consumerism was seen as a threat to Victorian values.[84] Linton's view embodies the belief

[84] Linton, *Girl of the Period and Other Social Essays,* 3.

that women's growing presence in public spaces and their active participation in consumer culture represented a significant loss of moral and social control. This fear of women's autonomy was deeply rooted in the idea that consumerism could corrupt their virtue and distract them from their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and moral guardians of the home. Additionally, Linton's disapproval of women who "live to please [themselves]" calls attention to the broader societal discomfort with women exercising personal agency and making choices independently of male authority; her reference to how, in "old-fashioned times," women were expected to be obedient pacifists who deferred to their fathers and husbands spotlights the clash between traditional patriarchal norms and the ever-evolving reality of women who, through consumerism, were beginning to assert their desires, preferences, and ultimately, their independence.

Linton's demonstrated beliefs were not isolated but rather echoed the anxieties of Victorian society which was actively grappling with the formation of new identities and roles for women. The critique of "The Girl of the Period" undoubtedly impacted on how Victorian women engaged with consumerism: many women had to navigate the delicate balance between participating in consumer culture and maintaining an image of respectability and morality. This pressure often meant that while women enjoyed the newfound freedom to shop, dress fashionably, and engage with public life, they were also under constant scrutiny and faced the judgment of those around her. This aforementioned pressure reinforced the double standard that women's engagement with consumerism was both frivolous and dangerous, while men's participation in the public sphere was seen as a sign of success, ambition, and moral responsibility to their families. The fear of being

labeled as a "Girl of the Period" influenced some women to downplay their consumer habits; it tended to force women to conform to the morally correct choices when shopping, propounding the importance of modest fashion choices to avoid being seen as superficial, senseless women. However, it is also of paramount importance to recognize that many Victorian women actively resisted such criticisms and continued to use consumerism as a means of asserting their autonomy and individuality. By choosing how to dress, where to shop, and how to engage with trends and fashions, women were able to challenge the restrictive ideals imposed on them and in due course, carved out spaces for themselves in a society that sought to confine them to the domestic sphere. Such acts of resistance suggests that, despite the intolerant opinions of Linton and other like-minded individuals, consumerism did ultimately provide women with a sense of empowerment and freedom, though it was imperfect and fraught with many contradictions.

This shift was met with ambivalence by many contemporary commentators, who viewed the new consumer culture as both a social threat and a moral challenge. Prominent intellectuals such as John Ruskin and Coventry Patmore, alongside conservative periodicals, argued that women's participation in public consumption eroded traditional gender roles by allowing them to engage with public life beyond the confines of the home. Like Linton, other conservative intellectuals such as John Ruskin expressed concern over women's participation in consumer culture, fearing that it undermined traditional gender roles. Ruskin's lecture *Of Queen's Gardens* (1865), for example, encapsulated the Victorian ideal of women as passive, domestic figures whose primary responsibility lay in the moral cultivation of the household. In his view, consumerism,

which necessitated women's physical presence in urban spaces and their engagement with public commerce, was incompatible with this ideal.[85] Ruskin's critique reflects a deeper societal anxiety about the shifting boundaries of private and public spheres. He feared that as women embraced the consumer lifestyle, they would neglect their supposed spiritual duties as moral exemplars within the home.[86] Beyond intellectual critiques, satirical periodicals of the time also contributed to the discourse surrounding women's engagement with consumerism. Publications such as *Punch* and *The Girl of the Period Miscellany* frequently lampooned women who embraced fashionable trends, portraying them as frivolous, vain, and morally compromised. These satirical representations not only mocked women's consumption of luxury goods but also underscored broader fears about class mobility and social instability.

Underlying many of these critiques was a palpable anxiety about the blurring of class boundaries brought about by consumer culture. As department stores and fashion boutiques became more accessible, women from various socio-economic backgrounds began to participate in consumerism, challenging the traditional association of refinement and respectability with the upper classes. Critics feared that this democratization of luxury goods would lead to social disorder, as women used fashion to transcend their class status and craft new identities. This anxiety is evident in Linton's critique of the "fine lady" and Ruskin's lamentations about the decline of traditional moral values. Both commentators expressed concern that consumerism allowed women to adopt the outward

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[85] John Ruskin, *Of Queen's Gardens*, in *Sesame and Lilies*, ed. Deborah Epstein Nord (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 61–88. Originally published in 1865.
[86] Ruskin, *Of Queen's Gardens*.

appearance of refinement without embodying the virtues traditionally associated with their social class. The notion that women could manipulate their social identities through fashion and consumption destabilized the rigid class distinctions that underpinned Victorian society, prompting critics to denounce consumerism as a corrupting influence.

The critiques of women's engagement with consumer culture by figures such as Ruskin, Patmore, Linton, and contemporary satirists reveal a broader cultural anxiety about the destabilizing effects of modernity on traditional gender roles and social hierarchies. While these critiques sought to reassert conservative ideals of femininity, they also underscored the transformative power of consumer culture in allowing women to exercise a degree of autonomy and self-expression. Ultimately, Victorian consumerism occupied a dual role in women's lives: it was both a site of liberation and a source of societal tension. The backlash against female consumerism highlights the contradictions inherent in a rapidly modernizing society, where new social behaviors both unsettled and reshaped longstanding cultural ideals. By engaging with consumer culture, Victorian women navigated these contradictions, asserting a form of agency that, while constrained by societal expectations, enabled them to challenge and reshape traditional notions of respectability and femininity. This duality underscores the central argument of this thesis: that consumerism, though fraught with societal tension, ultimately provided women with new avenues for self-expression and influence.

Despite the pervasive critiques of women's consumerism, it is essential to recognize that many women actively resisted these moralistic condemnations and used consumer culture as a means of asserting their agency and individuality. By engaging

with fashion and shopping, women carved out spaces for self-expression and social participation that were otherwise denied to them in a patriarchal society. Department stores and women's magazines became sites where women could explore new forms of identity, creativity, and autonomy.

Marketing Femininity: The Role of Women's Literature in the Modern Marketplace

The nineteenth century saw a significant transformation in literary production, as successive publications evolved in style, tone, and focus. These changes had tangible implications for female consumers, who relied on magazines to shape their choices and daily attitudes. A pivotal transformation can be observed between the 1830s and the 1860s: during the former decade, the pages of women's magazines were predominantly filled with romantic fiction, reflecting an emphasis on escapism and fantasy. In contrast, later publications prioritized practicality and political awareness, reflecting the evolving realities and aspirations of their readership.[87] This female readership wielded considerable influence over magazine content; a competitive marketplace emerged where publishers were compelled to attune their offerings to meet the evolving tastes, values, and aspirations of their audience. Consequently, women's magazines began incorporating a broader range of themes, shaped by the diverse desires of their readers.[88] Jeffrey A. Auerbach, in his seminal article, "What They Read: Mid-Nineteenth Century English

[87] Jeffrey A. Auerbach, "What They Read: Mid-Nineteenth Century English Women's Magazines and the Emergence of a Consumer Culture," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 30, no. 2 (1997): 121.
[88] Auerbach, "What They Read: Mid-Nineteenth Century English Women's Magazines and the Emergence of a Consumer Culture," 122.

Women's Magazines and the Emergence of a Consumer Culture," captures this reciprocal dynamic between literary producers and the female readership: "authors and editors created women consumers, and women readers in turn help shape what it was they consumed."[89] This interplay not only fostered a growing consumer culture but also established women as active participants in shaping the content they engaged with, positioning them as influential contributors to the periodical landscape.

The evolution of women's magazines and the codification of Victorian dress both reflect the broader cultural dynamics of the nineteenth century, where the intersection of individual expression and societal mandates played a defining role in shaping female identity. Just as periodicals began to shift from romantic escapism to practical and politically aware content, reflecting the desires and realities of their female readership, Victorian dress evolved as a site where individuality was negotiated within the confines of societal propriety. Both media—literature and fashion—functioned as tools for women to navigate and assert their identities, simultaneously adhering to and influencing cultural norms. The reciprocal relationship between literary producers and consumers, as observed in the magazine marketplace, mirrors the tension within Victorian dress between visibility and concealment, where self-presentation was regulated by aesthetic and moral expectations. When amalgamated, these spheres highlight the ways in which women actively engaged with cultural prescriptions, using both the written word and visual appearance to navigate the complexities of societal expectations and their own aspirations within an era of transformation.

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[89] Auerbach, "What They Read: Mid-Nineteenth Century English Women's Magazines and the Emergence of a Consumer Culture," 123.

As women's periodicals evolved in content and tone throughout the nineteenth century, so too did the visual and textual discourse surrounding fashion. While early Victorian magazines emphasized romantic narratives and moral instruction, the mid-to-late century witnessed the proliferation of illustrated fashion plates and increasingly elaborate fashion commentary—positioning women not merely as passive recipients of trends, but as discerning participants in the creation of visual culture. The *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* is emblematic of this shift, reflecting the intricate interplay between idealized femininity, consumerism, and middle-class aspirations through both image and prose. The fashion plates published in the magazine serve as more than simple guides to style; they construct and disseminate a visual ideology of respectable femininity.

THE FASHIONS. 49

The Fashions.

We this month give one of the most beautiful of the Paris costumes. The robe is of printed taffetas, with four embroidered scalloped flounces. The body is open over a chemisette of plaited muslin. The sleeves are open, the sides being held together with bands of quilled ribbon. The under-sleeves are of muslin, to match the chemisette, and are fastened round the wrists by ribbon bracelets, with long ends, to correspond with the colour of the dress. The bonnet is of lace, with small roses and leaves made of crape. The child's dress is also very elegant. Her bonnet is of silk,

THE FASHIONS. 5

The Fashions.

We have chosen this month two of the most beautiful of the Parisian dresses. The dress of the one on the left is of taffetas, with high closed body, with basquines, with small bows of black velvet up the front and on each opening. The sleeves are open very high up, and fastened likewise with bows of velvet. The skirt is ornamented with ruches of ribbon and bows of velvet. The dress of the lady on the right is of silk, with bands of velvet or moire of a brighter colour than the dress; the under sleeves of both are made very full. Collars of broderie Anglaise, or lace. Bonnets still keep small, but are made of very light materials. Those in our engraving are of crape, with few [illegible] lace. Roses are much worn inside.

In the first image, a woman and child are adorned in voluminous, highly ornamented gowns with embroidered scalloped flounces, ribboned undersleeves, and lace bonnets accented with roses and crape. The accompanying description praises the ensemble as "one of the most beautiful of the Paris costumes," emphasizing its delicacy and detail. This visual framing of fashion not only reinforces the association between femininity and ornamentation, but also aligns with what one scholar describes as the "commercial ideal of feminine appearance"—an ideal that demanded imported fabrics, constant variety, and a degree of leisure that signified social status.[90]

[90] Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 29.

Victorian fashion, particularly as depicted in such plates, became a performance of class as much as of gender. In the second image, featuring two elaborately dressed women adorned with bows, ruches, and velvet panels, demonstrates how fashion was employed to signal refinement, propriety, and affluence. Their rigid postures and mutual admiration encapsulate what Historian Lori Anne Loeb calls the "pleasures of the social use of the middle-class figure."[91] These visuals reinforced the view of the woman as both subject and object—expected to maintain a standard of fashionable respectability while being consumed visually by others. The fashion plate thus became a cultural script, one in which middle-class women learned to read and perform their roles through the consumption of visual cues, magazines, and garments. The increasing visual sophistication of fashion advertisements by the late nineteenth century further attests to the heightened significance of female self-presentation in Victorian society. Early advertisements were dense and utilitarian, functioning as little more than inventories. By the 1890s, however, they had transformed into lush, full-page illustrations, echoing the aesthetics of Parisian fashion plates and signaling a shift in consumer priorities toward pleasure, ornament, and visibility.[92] This transformation reveals a cultural recalibration: women were now expected to master both the subtle codes of taste and the overt display of refinement, turning the act of dressing into a performance of social legitimacy.

Within this system, magazines taught women how to consume fashion as a moral, aesthetic, and economic choice. Despite the financial dependence of most Victorian women on their husbands or fathers, they exercised considerable influence over

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[91] Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 28.
[92] Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 26-27.

household consumption. As Loeb notes, the woman of the house often retained the final say over what was purchased, particularly when it came to clothing, furnishings, or goods associated with domesticity and propriety. Advertisers knew this and targeted their messaging accordingly, recognizing that women "did not earn the money," but "could significantly control the way that it was spent."[93] This purchasing power offered women a form of soft agency, particularly in matters of taste, status, and aesthetic self-fashioning. Notably, fashion served not only as a marker of personal refinement but also as a visual declaration of class. The elaborate dresses and accessories depicted in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* were attainable only to those with disposable income, leisure time, and access to fashionable shopping districts such as Regent Street or Oxford Street. This reflects what Loeb terms the image of the "Victorian woman as leisured ornament," whose wardrobe, though ostensibly trivial, demanded both material wealth and cultural literacy.[94] Thus, the ideal of respectable womanhood was increasingly codified through consumption: the right gown, the correct silhouette, the appropriately tasteful bonnet.

And yet, even as women were being disciplined through fashion, they also shaped its trajectory. Magazines depended on their readership to dictate content, and this feedback loop gave women indirect influence over the visual and moral direction of fashion culture. The tension between individuality and conformity played out within the pages of periodicals, where women could assert taste, express preference, and claim knowledge of "domestic economy" while still navigating the expectations of moral and

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[93] Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 34.
[94] Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 29.

visual restraint.[95] This duality—of autonomy through consumption and discipline through visibility—defined the Victorian woman's experience with fashion. Furthermore, Victorian advertisements often employed classical imagery to elevate the cultural legitimacy of fashion consumption. Women were depicted as Grecian goddesses, draped in timeless elegance, a far cry from the layers and stiffness of real Victorian dress. These "classical commercial goddesses" functioned as aspirational figures, symbolizing intellectual and aesthetic refinement, while subtly reaffirming the consumerist underpinnings of the imagery.[96] The visual contrast between classical ideals and contemporary fashion not only reveals the tension between art and commodity but also reinforces the aspirational fantasy offered by fashion magazines—where beauty, refinement, and status could be purchased, assembled, and worn.

In sum, the fashion pages of women's magazines like the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* served as both prescriptive and participatory texts. They instructed women on how to dress and behave, but also responded to their desires, anxieties, and ambitions. Through the codification of taste, the aestheticization of status, and the visual spectacle of dress, Victorian magazines helped shape the cultural logic of femininity. And within these ornate pages, women found both boundaries and opportunities—learning how to be seen, and, increasingly, how to shape the terms of that visibility.

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[95] Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 34.
[96] Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 34.

Fashioning Morality: Dress, Virtue, and Aesthetic Discipline in Victorian Culture

Ideas of acceptable Victorian dress are exemplified in Mary Eliza Haweis' works, most notably in T*he Art of Dress* (1879). Born into a middle- class family in Chelsea, London in 1848, she grew up under the influence of her father, Thomas Musgrave Joy. Following in her father's artistic footsteps, she became a prominent British author of both books and essays which were particularly influential for women of the time. Known for both her art and literature, she authored many books of which she also designed artwork for. After marrying into a middle class family, she focused her efforts on studying the history of fashion and design; her broad knowledge proved to be useful for women of all classes as she synthesized all the latest trends and acceptable fashions while subsequently acknowledging the dangers that came with passing trends. She often deceived people who believed her to be of a higher social class, doing so through her thrifty, but intrinsically elegant clothes and tastes.

Victorian dress functioned as both personal expression and societal obligation, balancing individuality with propriety. In *The Art of Dress*, Haweis highlights this tension, noting that "'costume vibrates perpetually in our country between the need of being seen and the need of being covered.'' Now one bit of the body's beauty is displayed, and the rest is sacrificed and covered up: it is invariably felt to be an incomplete experiment, and thrown over."[97] This oscillation reflects the Victorian effort to balance aesthetic display with moral decency, revealing cultural anxieties about bodily

[97] Mary Eliza Haweis, *The Art of Dress* (London: Chatto & Windus, Piccadilly, 1888), 29.

exposure and societal judgment. The codification of dress as a "fine art" is epitomized by the "Three Rules in Dress": adherence to the natural lines of the body, proportionality, and the expression of character. These principles assert that clothing must align with comfort, health, and propriety, reinforcing the idea that beauty is inextricably linked to functionality and moral appropriateness.[98] By promoting these standards, Victorian society sought to regulate individual self-presentation while upholding broader societal values.

Beyond aesthetics, dress was also imbued with a moral and generational responsibility. Women, particularly young girls, were framed as custodians of the nation's "health and happiness."[99] This perspective underscores how clothing choices were interwoven with ideals of female virtue and their perceived impact on the social fabric. The emphasis on teaching girls their duty to posterity reflects the broader Victorian preoccupation with women's roles as moral and physical exemplars. Economic considerations further shaped attitudes toward dress. While extravagant dress did not equate to good taste, critiques of 'unhealthy habits' and 'shoddy' fashion highlight the intersection of consumerism and ethics.[100] This condemnation of frivolous fashion extends to those who followed fleeting trends, which were dismissed as wasteful and "outré," doomed to obsolescence.[101] Instead, the text advocates for durable, high-quality

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[98] Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 32.
[99] Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 34.
[100] Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 49.
[101] Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 54.

materials that endure over time, reinforcing the virtue of economy in personal adornment.[102]

Both guide books and criticisms of excessive fashion consumption were part of a broader societal conversation about women's place in the economy and in public life. Many women, despite having the means and sensibility to make more prudent choices, were described as "mischievously extravagant" by succumbing to "foolish fashions" designed to waste material and deceive perceptions of utility.[103] This wastefulness, combined with the aesthetic flaw of garments that "give the impression" of restricting movement, represents a failure to align dress with the principles of good art and practicality.[104] In summary, the Victorian ideal of dress emphasized balance: beauty without compromising health, individuality within the bounds of propriety, and economy without austerity. This ethos shaped personal behavior and reflected broader cultural dynamics, positioning clothing as both a form of self-expression and a moral obligation.

Fictional Femininity: Literary Reflections on Morality and Materiality

Works of fiction were also part of this conversation on women, consumerism and social roles. Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) occupies a significant place within the Victorian literary canon as a quintessential example of the sensation novel, a genre that

[102] Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 52.
[103] Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 60.
[104] Haweis, *The Art of Dress*, 63.

blended melodrama with social critique to engage with contemporary anxieties surrounding morality, gender, and class. The novel follows the tragic downfall of Lady Isabel Vane, a woman whose misjudgments and emotional vulnerabilities lead to her social ruin. Deceived by the unscrupulous Captain Francis Levison, Isabel abandons her husband, Archibald Carlyle, and her children, only to experience profound regret and disgrace. Assuming the identity of Madame Vine, she returns to her former home as a governess, where she covertly cares for her own children while witnessing the reconstitution of her husband's domestic life. The narrative culminates in her eventual death, underscoring the Victorian ethos of redemption through suffering and moral atonement.

As a work of sensation fiction, *East Lynne* reflects broader cultural concerns of the mid-nineteenth century, particularly regarding the precarious position of women within a rigidly stratified social order. The novel engages with discourses on gender, respectability, and transgression, highlighting the punitive consequences of female indiscretion. Furthermore, its use of disguise, mistaken identity, and heightened emotionalism aligns with the conventions of sensation literature while simultaneously critiquing the rigid moral expectations imposed upon women. This thesis situates *East Lynne* within the context of Victorian literary and social history, examining its engagement with contemporary notions of the "fallen woman," the interplay between melodrama and realism, and its lasting influence on the representation of gender and morality in nineteenth-century fiction. *East Lynne* provides a striking commentary on the rigid moral expectations placed upon Victorian women, particularly those of the upper

class. Lady Isabel's characterization reflects the deeply ingrained ideological constructs of the nineteenth century, which positioned women as the guardians of virtue and the bearers of social decorum. Through Lady Isabel, Wood critiques the restrictive framework of Victorian morality, where a woman's purity was not only a private matter but a public performance. The novel underscores the ways in which female virtue was scrutinized in every aspect of life—from conduct and emotional restraint to material choices and self-presentation—revealing how social status and personal worth were inextricably linked to an idealized vision of femininity.

From the outset, Lady Isabel is depicted as the epitome of the Victorian ideal—a woman of exceptional beauty and moral fortitude who has been "reared as an English girl should be, not to frivolity and foppery."[105] The emphasis on proper rearing reflects contemporary concerns about the moral education of women, reinforcing the belief that female virtue had to be carefully cultivated. This passage highlights the role of both maternal influence and formal instruction in shaping a woman's character, indicating that Isabel's refinement is not simply inherent but the product of a structured and disciplined upbringing. Her training under an "admirable governess" further reflects the Victorian emphasis on female education as a means of moral conditioning rather than intellectual empowerment. Isabel is not merely expected to embody virtue but to internalize it as a guiding principle, ensuring that she will not deviate from the standards of respectability imposed upon her.

However, while Isabel's virtue appears natural, it is also deliberately staged for

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[105] Mrs. Henry Wood, *East Lynne* (London: Richard Bentley, 1861), 7-8.

public consumption. The reference to her causing "quite a sensation at the drawing-room last week" reinforces the performative aspect of Victorian femininity, where a woman's moral standing was publicly assessed through her appearance and comportment.[106] The phrase "as good as she is beautiful" is particularly telling, as it reflects the prevailing assumption that physical beauty was a reflection of inner purity. Victorian culture often linked external attractiveness to moral worth, a notion that placed women in an impossible position: they were expected to be beautiful yet modest, alluring yet chaste. This paradox manifests in Isabel's own self-consciousness regarding her adornments, as demonstrated in her decision to remove her diamonds for fear of appearing too ostentatious. When pressed about this choice, she states, "I did not like to look too fine… I feared that it might be thought I had put them on to look fine."[107] Her hesitation exemplifies the social anxieties that governed women's behavior, particularly in relation to material display. The expectation that a woman should be well-dressed yet not vain, refined yet unassuming, encapsulates the contradictory pressures of Victorian moralism.

The exchange between Isabel and Mrs. Vane further illustrates the broader cultural tensions surrounding female self-presentation. When Mrs. Vane mockingly accuses Isabel of aligning herself with those who "pretend to despise ornaments," her scorn highlights the precarious balance that women were expected to maintain in their sartorial choices. Too much adornment could be read as a sign of vanity or material excess, while too little could invite criticism for affectation or undue modesty. Victorian women were thus placed in a position where their every action and decision—down to

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[106] Wood, *East Lynne*, 10.
[107] Wood, *East Lynne*, 10.

their choice of jewelry—was subjected to moral interpretation. This regulation of female appearance speaks to the wider system of social control that dictated how women should navigate public life. Unlike men, whose status was largely determined by professional or economic success, women's social standing was tethered to their ability to project an image of virtue that was simultaneously appealing and respectable.

Isabel's character also reflects another crucial aspect of Victorian moral ideology: the belief that female virtue must be carefully guarded against external threats. Her initial seclusion from the "great world" is presented as a safeguard against corruption, reinforcing the notion that women's purity could be compromised through exposure to immoral influences.[108] The insistence on her isolation mirrors broader anxieties about female agency and independence, as Victorian society often viewed the public sphere as inherently dangerous for women. This belief was rooted in the idea that women, particularly those of the upper class, were inherently more susceptible to moral downfall than men, necessitating their protection through strict social conventions. Isabel's later fate in the novel—her fall from grace and ultimate suffering—serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of stepping outside these rigid boundaries. Her tragedy is not solely a personal failure but a manifestation of the broader societal fears regarding female transgression.

Wood's portrayal of Isabel ultimately exposes the contradictions and limitations of Victorian moralism. While Isabel embodies the ideals of beauty, virtue, and restraint, her downfall reveals the impossibility of maintaining such a rigidly defined role. Her

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[108] Wood, *East Lynne*, 10.

story reflects the broader plight of Victorian women, who were held to unattainable standards and judged as much by their public appearances as by their private virtues. The novel suggests that the very system designed to preserve female purity is also the one that sets women up for failure, as the slightest deviation from these ideals results in harsh social condemnation. Isabel's experience underscores the precarious nature of female respectability in Victorian society, where women were not only expected to embody virtue but also to constantly perform it, lest they be judged and punished for failing to meet an impossible ideal. By situating Lady Isabel's character within the larger historical and cultural framework of Victorian morality, *East Lynne* critiques the oppressive standards imposed on women and the relentless scrutiny they faced in both their personal choices and public lives. Wood's novel ultimately reveals how Victorian ideals of purity and self-restraint functioned as mechanisms of control, limiting women's autonomy while demanding their constant vigilance in maintaining an image of perfection. Through Isabel's tragic arc, the novel exposes the inherent flaws in this moral framework, highlighting the ways in which societal expectations rendered women vulnerable to both personal and social ruin.

Chapter Three

The Middle-Class Angel in the House Goes Shopping

Understanding Victorian women's engagement in consumerism requires examining the formative experiences and societal expectations that shaped their childhood. In middle-class families, prevailing norms dictated a preference for sons, who were seen as the bearers of the family name and legacy. Daughters, while valued, were often perceived primarily in terms of their future roles within the domestic sphere, expected to remain "within the family circle up to and beyond marriage."[109] For aristocratic families, daughters were embraced as suitable companions for their mothers, provided a male heir was present to secure the family lineage. This class-based structure of familial roles highlights a significant cultural expectation: daughters were anticipated to assume caregiving roles and contribute to the stability of the home, reinforcing a broader Victorian ideal of feminine domesticity.

Before the Victorian era, only the aristocracy could afford to delegate child-rearing to servants or governesses. However, the economic rise of the middle class allowed them to adopt this model, employing household staff to manage child-rearing and reduce domestic duties.[110] This shift reflected not only economic change but also an evolving class-based structure of family life, where middle-class daughters were increasingly distanced from household labor, aligning them more closely with the genteel

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[109] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 7.
[110] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 16.

ideals of their upper-class counterparts. For working-class families, however, circumstances were markedly different. Working-class daughters were raised with strict adherence to Victorian standards of duty and respectability, emphasizing obedience to their mothers and devotion to family responsibilities. These young women frequently assumed significant domestic roles, taking on household tasks that their mothers were unable to fulfill due to work or other obligations. This burden often led to tensions within the family, as daughters observed their brothers' relative freedom from domestic labor, fostering a sense of inequity and frustration.[111] This early introduction to domestic responsibility, combined with class-specific expectations, heavily influenced the desires and ambitions of Victorian women, who later turned to consumerism not only as a form of personal expression but also as a means of negotiating their identities within rigidly defined social structures.

The gendered upbringing of Victorian children further reinforced these ideals, shaping boys and girls to fulfill specific societal roles. Boys, prepared for the public sphere, were socialized early, often leaving home to attend school by the age of seven. "Even a day school ensured that boys spent much of their time with other boys: they became socialized early."[112] This early exposure to male networks prepared boys for their eventual roles as participants in commerce, politics, and other public endeavors. Girls, on the other hand, were kept within the confines of the home, their development deliberately delayed to prolong their dependence and reinforce their role as custodians of domestic

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[111] Perkin, *Victorian Women*, 19.
[112] Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2006), 89.

morality. "Girls who did not need to go out to work had no break to mark their passing from childhood to adolescence: they were often children until they married.[113] This disparity in upbringing highlights the rigid gender roles of the time, where male independence was cultivated while female autonomy was suppressed. The case of Louise Creighton, who "had barely been out for a walk alone until her marriage in her twenties," exemplifies the extent to which girls were sheltered, reflecting a broader societal effort to confine women to the domestic sphere.[114]

The experiences of Victorian women, shaped by their class-based roles within the household and their interactions with emerging consumer culture, are richly exemplified in Elizabeth Lee's journal. As a young middle-class woman navigating the transition from adolescence to adulthood, Lee's reflections reveal the intricate interplay between societal expectations and individual agency within the confines of her social standing. Her diary not only provides insight into the daily routines and aspirations of a middle-class Englishwoman but also serves as a valuable artifact for understanding broader social dynamics of the period. The distinctions in domestic roles and opportunities for self-expression, heavily influenced by class, are vividly illustrated through her entries. By chronicling her personal experiences, Lee's journal offers a rare and intimate lens into how Victorian women negotiated their identities amidst the rigid structures of family, gender, and class, challenging the dominant narratives that often prioritize the lives and perspectives of the elite.

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[113] Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 89.
[114] Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home*, 89.

While diary-keeping was a common practice in the late Victorian period, Elizabeth Lee's journal stands out due to its remarkable span from 1884 to 1892. Unlike the ephemeral nature of many diaries kept by teenage girls during this era, which were often limited in duration or lost to history, Lee's extensive record offers a sustained and intimate chronicle of her transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Covering her life from the age of sixteen to twenty-five, her diary captures a wide spectrum of experiences, ranging from the mundanity of daily routines to the exhilaration of excursions, allowing modern readers a rare window into the life of a young, middle-class Englishwoman in the late nineteenth century. This significance is compounded by the fact that most surviving diaries from this period belonged to individuals of social prominence or cultural influence, whose narratives reflect the concerns and privileges of the elite. In contrast, Lee's diary provides an invaluable perspective on the experiences of an "ordinary" individual, offering a lens into the more representative, and often overlooked, aspects of English life during this period.

Elizabeth Lee was born into a middle-class family in Birkenhead, the only surviving daughter among at least six brothers.[115] Her father, John Lee, was a prosperous draper, gentleman's outfitter, and hosier who had relocated to Birkenhead to establish his business.[116] The family's relative affluence is evident in their ownership of a substantial property in Prenton, where Lee spent much of her youth and recorded the events of her

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[115] Elizabeth Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee: Growing up on Merseyside in the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. Colin G. Pooley, Siân Pooley, and Richard Lawton (Liverpool University Press, 2010), 17.
[116] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 17.

life.[117] Her writings are steeped in the Victorian values that shaped her existence, reflecting a life centered around the domestic sphere, where she managed household tasks and assumed a role in caring for her younger brothers. Yet her diary reveals a compelling tension between these traditional roles and her activities outside the home, which included frequent trips to urban centers for shopping and, at times, socializing with young men—a behavior that historians have argued would have been considered bold, if not scandalous, for a woman of her station.

A diary entry dated October 17, 1884, offers a vivid example of Lee's excursions and her preoccupation with fashion, a hallmark of her era's burgeoning consumer culture:

> **Friday 17th** Ma and I went to Liverpool today to the Bon Marché and bought the stuff for my new dress. It is a brown sort of Ottoman cloth and the trimming is gold stuff embroidered on net. It is quite a new fashion and looks rather like beads. Very expensive *4/11* yd. Bought *1* yd.[118]

This entry is revelatory in its portrayal of Lee's material desires and the cultural values underpinning them. For a young woman from a middle-class background, the fabric's opulence—described as both novel and expensive—signals the importance of sartorial expression in establishing social identity. By emphasizing that the fabric represented a "new fashion," Lee reflects the pressures of Victorian consumerism, where outward appearance was not merely a personal concern but a societal imperative. Clothing served as a visual marker of one's social standing, respectability, and adherence

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[117] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 18.
[118] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 119.

to contemporary trends, underscoring the extent to which individuals, even adolescents, internalized these values. Lee's account also speaks to the broader historical context of the late Victorian period, which saw the rise of department stores and the democratization of luxury goods. Her visit to the Bon Marché department store in Liverpool, a notable urban hub, underscores the intersection of class mobility and the evolving retail experience, where even middle-class women could partake in the allure of fashion once reserved for the elite. The detail with which she records her purchases reflects not only personal pride but also a consciousness of participating in a larger cultural movement driven by the commodification of modern life.

A recurring theme in Lee's diary is the extent to which shopping and leisure were woven into the fabric of her daily life. Unlike the traditional narrative that confines middle-class women solely to the domestic sphere, Lee's accounts demonstrate that consumer culture played an active role in shaping her experiences, providing both routine engagement and social enjoyment. Shopping was not merely a functional necessity but a significant social activity that allowed her to participate in public life while maintaining her respectability. Whether traveling to Liverpool for extensive purchases, selecting fashionable items, or engaging in casual browsing, Lee's experiences illustrate the growing accessibility of urban consumer culture to middle-class women by the late nineteenth century.

Her diary entry from October 25, 1887, captures the integration of shopping into her everyday routine:

> **Tuesday 25th** Ada and I went a long walk down Oxford Rd this morning, to see the Shops. Very frosty and cold. After dinner Mr. S. took Ada, Bertha and I to the "Exhibition." Mrs. S. came later on. Heard De Gohng, the great flute-player. Enjoy all very much.[119]

Here, shopping is not framed as a mere obligation but as an enjoyable pastime, embedded within a larger social and cultural experience. The act of "seeing the shops" was itself an activity—one that reflects the growing appeal of window-shopping and the increasing prominence of retail spaces designed to attract female consumers. Lee's visit to an exhibition and attendance at a musical performance further highlight the fluid intersection between leisure, public life, and consumption, demonstrating that young women of her class were actively engaging in both the economic and cultural dimensions of the city.

Similarly, her December 18, 1889, entry reflects the role of consumerism in cultivating self-image and social distinction:

> **Wednesday 18th** Went to L'pool. had a lot of shopping to do. Bought an 'oxydised silver Chatelaine' for myself. Shall feel a swell when I wear it. Bought a fancy inkstand for Belle A. Got my photos today. They look very jolly. Met Mr. Mackenzie as I was getting in tram. Had such a jolly walk with him tonight. So tired.[120]

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[119] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 256.
[120] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 338.

Lee's purchase of a chatelaine—an ornamental clasp worn at the waist, often used to carry small household tools or accessories—suggests a keen awareness of fashion and self-presentation. Her remark, "Shall feel a swell when I wear it," signals an understanding of how material possessions contributed to social perception, aligning with broader Victorian consumer culture, in which appearance was intricately tied to class identity. The acquisition of a "fancy inkstand" also underscores the significance of taste and refinement, demonstrating that consumer choices extended beyond clothing and into the domain of cultivated aesthetics.

Her February 3, 1890, entry similarly emphasizes the value she placed on material goods and the careful consideration given to her purchases:

> **Monday 3rd** Had a good day's shopping in L'pool. Bought a Brussels net, (white), skirt made-up, beautifully trimmed with watered silk ribbon, for 17/-. (at a sale at Owens Owens) It had been 4 guineas). Had a walk with Mr. M. Dreadfully tired.[121]

The specific mention of both the fabric and the financial details of her purchase reflects a consumer's awareness of value, quality, and fashionability. The contrast between the original price and the reduced sale price suggests that Lee, while indulging in luxury, also considered economic prudence—an important factor in middle-class consumer behavior, where display and modest restraint coexisted as social imperatives. Beyond shopping, Lee's diary also illustrates the importance of entertainment and leisure

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[121] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 347.

in the life of a middle-class Victorian woman. Cultural outings—concerts, exhibitions, and social gatherings—played a crucial role in her personal development and public engagement. Her October 7, 1890, entry reveals the extent to which these experiences enriched her life:

> **Tuesday 7th** Wet day. Lizzie and I went round the town after dinner and had a good look at the shops. Tonight we went to a Concert at the Town Hall. Madame Marie Roye, Miss Lily Moody and the Meister Quartett, were the chief artists. We enjoyed it very much indeed.[122]

This passage highlights how leisure and cultural participation were integral to the experiences of middle-class women, reinforcing their position within respectable society while also allowing them to engage in forms of self-expression and entertainment outside the home. Concerts, in particular, were a socially acceptable means for women to engage with public life, and Lee's enthusiastic account reflects the enjoyment and enrichment these events provided.

Her July 19, 1887, entry further underscores the intersection of routine domestic responsibilities with personal leisure:

> **Tuesday 19th** Very busy, baking and preserving. The house seems so quiet without the children. Went to the shop tonight, and got a lovely new umbrella. Went to see Miss Somers. Very tired.[123]

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[122] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 374.
[123] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 246.

This illustrates the dual nature of middle-class femininity—balancing domestic duties with engagement in consumer culture. While her day begins with traditionally feminine labor in the home, it concludes with a shopping excursion, reinforcing the idea that consumption was a structured and essential aspect of her daily life. Additionally, the presence of cafés and social spaces in her shopping experiences reflects the growing role of consumer culture in fostering female sociability. Her December 5, 1890, entry notes:

> **Friday 5th** Louie Beale and I went to L'pool, I had a lot of shopping to do. We had tea at the Café. Enjoyed ourselves very much but I am very tired.[124]

The inclusion of a café visit signals the increasing normalization of women's presence in urban spaces, where shopping was not merely an act of transaction but an experience that encompassed leisure, socialization, and modernity. In Lee's case, she frequented the cafés often– to the extent that it seemingly a part of her weekly routine–bringing up her visits to them quite regularly throughout her diary. The ability to dine in public spaces without male chaperones marks a cultural shift, revealing how middle-class women were beginning to claim their place in the public sphere in ways that earlier generations had not.

Elizabeth Lee's diary entries provide an invaluable glimpse into the ways in which shopping and leisure were woven into the everyday fabric of middle-class female life in the late nineteenth century. Her meticulous recording of purchases, her delight in acquiring fashionable goods, and her frequent excursions to shops and concerts all

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[124] Lee, *The Diary of Elizabeth Lee*, 380.

indicate that consumer culture was not merely a passive element of her existence but an active, deliberate, and deeply meaningful aspect of her identity. Through her engagement with fashion, urban spaces, and cultural outings, Lee exemplifies the ways in which middle-class women negotiated the shifting boundaries of respectability and agency. Her diary reveals that shopping was not simply a necessity but a structured social practice—one that enabled women to construct personal identity, foster social ties, and engage with modernity on their own terms. Her experiences reflect a broader cultural transformation, wherein Victorian women—though still tethered to domestic ideals—began to carve out greater autonomy through participation in consumer and leisure activities, foreshadowing the increased public roles women would assume in the Edwardian period and beyond.

What is perhaps most striking is how Lee's diary challenges the prevailing Victorian ideal of the "angel in the house," which confined women to the domestic sphere. Her engagement with fashion, urban environments, and consumer culture hints at a subtle yet significant assertion of agency. By shaping her public image through fashion and venturing beyond the domestic sphere, Lee exemplifies the gradual shift in Victorian women's roles, as they began to assert agency in public life. Her diary entries, particularly those centered on shopping and social engagements, highlight the gradual loosening of rigid gender norms and the burgeoning acknowledgment of women's presence in public spaces. Lee's diary is more than a personal record; it is a cultural artifact that illuminates the interplay between individual agency and societal expectations in the late nineteenth century. It documents how a middle-class Victorian girl navigated

the liminal space between tradition and modernity, adhering to the domestic ideals of her upbringing while embracing the expanding opportunities for women to participate in broader societal currents. Through her detailed accounts, Lee offers a textured portrait of a transitional era, one in which the personal and the public increasingly intersected in the lives of women.

Elizabeth Lee's diary provides a lens into the shifting expectations for Victorian women, including the evolving perceptions of education and public engagement. While Lee's experiences reflect a middle-class woman's exploration of agency through consumer culture and urban spaces, they also highlight the broader societal tensions surrounding women's roles and opportunities. The growing emphasis on education for girls, as championed by figures like Clara E. Collet, represented a critical step toward expanding women's potential beyond the domestic sphere, even as this education was often limited by societal constraints. The implementation of the 1870 Education Act, though initially uneven in its enforcement, marked a significant turning point by fostering basic literacy among girls, even in families that resisted formal schooling. Lee's engagement with the public world through her diary entries underscores the interplay between emerging educational opportunities and a gradual redefinition of women's roles, illustrating how middle-class women began to navigate and challenge the boundaries of tradition in a society undergoing transformation.

Lessons in Virtue: Education, Womanhood, and the Aesthetics of Respectability

Women noticed the growing importance of receiving an education and notable economist and civil servant Clara E. Collet who authored *Educated Working Women (1902)*, reached out to a target demographic that had been neglected by the educational system– girls. She wrote of a world they could achieve through education but recognized that generally, "women were prohibited from doing what they could, on the ground that they could not if they would."[125] There was a permeating fear of successful or talented women, one that is she would "lay a real conviction, that if she could do so successfully, the more desirable it was to prevent her having the change of proving it."[126] So while proponents of women's rights continuously fought for girls to have the opportunity to receive formal education, the "education" that middle-class girls received was largely informal and done within the confines of their homes; the content being taught primarily still asserted that their primary role was to serve within the domestic sphere. With the passing of the 1870 Education Act, a national system of elementary board schools in England was established and though it was meant to be mandatory, it was not until 1880 when parliament declared that attendance at schools was compulsory for children under the age of 10.[127] Many parents resisted formal education for daughters, believing their primary role was within the home. Despite this, the increasing prominence of education led to improved literacy among girls, even if traditional schooling remained limited. Together, these developments reflect the transitional nature of the late Victorian era,

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[125] Clara Elizabeth Collet, *Educated Working Women: Essays on the Economic Position of Women Workers in the Middle Classes* (London: P. S. King & Son, 1902) 2.
[126] Collet, *Educated Working Women,* 3.
[127] Murdoch, *Daily Life of Victorian Women*, 166.

where individual aspirations and structural reforms began to reshape the possibilities for women's lives.

Molly Hughes (1866–1956), an English writer and educational reformer, provides a unique perspective on the intersection of gender, education, and societal expectations in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Her autobiographical works, particularly *A London Child of the 1870s*, offer a vivid account of her upbringing and the broader societal shifts that shaped the lives of middle-class women during this transformative period. Hughes' recollections illuminate the gradual expansion of opportunities for women, particularly in the realm of education and public engagement, challenging the rigid domestic ideals that had long confined them to the private sphere.

In her writings, Hughes presents a childhood defined by both traditional Victorian values and an emerging sense of modernity. As the daughter of a lower-middle-class family, she navigated a world where respectability and propriety were paramount, yet she also benefited from her parents' progressive outlook on education. Her father, a merchant with a keen interest in self-improvement, believed in the importance of learning for both boys and girls, an attitude that was still relatively uncommon at the time. This emphasis on education laid the groundwork for Hughes' later career as a teacher and advocate for women's access to higher learning.

Hughes' experiences exemplify the shifting boundaries of women's roles in the late Victorian period. Unlike many of her contemporaries, who were expected to remain within the confines of the home, Hughes was encouraged to pursue intellectual and personal development. Her later involvement in the educational sector reflects a broader

societal trend toward expanding women's participation in public life, particularly through education. By the 1870s and 1880s, educational reforms, such as the 1870 Education Act and the increasing availability of girls' schools, provided new avenues for middle-class women to engage with the world beyond the domestic sphere. Hughes' life and writings serve as a testament to the ways in which these changes allowed women to navigate and, in some cases, transcend the constraints imposed upon them by Victorian gender norms.

In *A London Home in the 1890s*, Hughes recounts her experiences managing a household and engaging with the city's consumer spaces, particularly the well-known department store Whiteley's. Recalling advice from a more experienced acquaintance, Hughes writes: "Bessie of Guernsey, of mature experience, had advised me to get everything at Whiteley's.… She was right, but I soon found that this easy way of buying had to be paid for by too high prices, so I determined to explore the neighborhood, buy what I wanted, and bring it home myself."[128] This decision—seemingly practical—reveals much more than thrift. In choosing to forgo the streamlined convenience of a centralized, upper-middle-class shopping experience, Hughes instead embraced a more active and autonomous role within the public space of her neighborhood. Her participation in the local retail economy highlights the expansion of the domestic woman's sphere, as consumerism allowed women to move through the city independently, assess value, and engage with multiple classes of shopkeepers and laborers. This marked a significant departure from the static Victorian ideal of the passive, homebound wife and mother.

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[128] M. V. Hughes, *A London Home in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946) 146-147.

Moreover, her approach to consumption reflects the moral pressures surrounding respectability and the performative nature of taste. While department stores catered to women's desires for elegance and efficiency, they also imposed expectations of feminine refinement and class conformity. By consciously choosing to shop on her own terms—and rejecting the passive consumer model promoted by Whiteley's—Hughes subtly rejected the assumption that women's value lay in appearances or performative gentility. Her consumer behavior thus mirrors a broader trend in late Victorian society, in which middle-class women increasingly used consumer spaces not only for provisioning the home, but also for asserting a selective, personal sense of taste and judgment. These decisions, though small, challenged the notion that consumption simply reinforced materialism or feminine frivolity; for women like Hughes, it also provided a venue for modest self-determination.

Hughes' engagement with education offers an equally telling view of shifting female roles. As a teacher and administrator of training lectures, she reflected critically on the content and impact of women's educational experiences. "Among the lectures that I had to administer," she writes, "I came to feel that those on nebulous psychology were not so valuable as those on famous teachers of the past.… Such knowledge would bring a balanced judgement when the students were later on to be confronted with some world-shaking 'new method.'"[129] Her emphasis on historical pedagogues such as Comenius, Milton, and Pestalozzi was not merely a personal preference; it reveals her skepticism of fleeting educational trends and her deep investment in grounding female

[129] Hughes, *A London Home in the 1890s*, 96.

education in intellectual tradition and pedagogical continuity. In this moment, Hughes is doing more than recalling her teaching career—she is asserting a vision of women as intellectual agents capable of shaping future educational policy and resisting the ephemeral nature of fashionable theories. By aligning herself with educational reformers and privileging substance over trend, Hughes again positions herself at the nexus of Victorian contradictions: upholding respectability through her commitment to moral and historical knowledge, while also carving out space for female authority in an arena traditionally dominated by men.

Nevertheless, Moreover, Hughes' narrative highlights the importance of leisure and consumer culture in shaping women's identities during this era. She frequently describes outings to London's growing number of public spaces, including parks, museums, and shops. These excursions, often undertaken without male chaperones, reflect the gradual acceptance of women's presence in urban environments. As with many young women of her time, shopping and socializing became important aspects of her public life, offering both a form of leisure and a means of self-expression. Yet, Hughes' accounts also underscore the persistent tension between respectability and autonomy that defined women's experiences in public spaces. While she relished the freedom that these activities provided, she remained acutely aware of the social expectations that governed her behavior and appearance. Hughes' life illustrates the nuanced negotiation between traditional roles and emerging ambitions, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of women during a period of profound social and cultural change. Her story underscores the central argument of this thesis: that Victorian women, despite the

constraints imposed upon them, actively engaged with and shaped the cultural and economic landscapes of their time.

Negotiated Lives: Gender, Marriage, and Intellectual Aspiration in Victorian Memoir

Victorian women's memoirs offer a unique window into the lived experiences of women navigating the complexities of gender, morality, and social expectations in the nineteenth century. *Reflections of Louise Creighton* is particularly illuminating in this regard, as it not only provides an intimate account of one woman's intellectual and moral development but also serves as a broader commentary on the expectations placed upon Victorian women in both private and public spheres. As the wife of a prominent clergyman and historian, Louise Creighton occupied a position that required careful negotiation of the competing demands of domesticity, religious duty, and social engagement. Her memoir reflects the tension between the Victorian ideal of the self-sacrificing, morally upright woman and the realities of intellectual ambition and public influence.

This section will examine how Creighton's reflections align with and challenge the dominant discourses of Victorian womanhood, particularly in relation to moral authority, female education, and the role of women in shaping public and private morality. Creighton's writings reveal the extent to which Victorian women were expected to uphold moral standards, not only in their own conduct but also in their influence over family and community life. Her reflections also illustrate the ways in which women's

intellectual and moral contributions were often framed within the boundaries of religious and philanthropic work, reinforcing traditional gender roles even as they provided opportunities for public engagement. By analyzing *Reflections of Louise Creighton* within the broader context of Victorian memoir writing and gender ideology, this section will explore the ways in which Creighton's experiences reflect both conformity to and subtle resistance against the constraints of her time. Through close textual analysis, this discussion will highlight how Creighton navigated the complex intersection of personal conviction, societal expectation, and historical change, offering insight into the evolving role of women in late Victorian society. Creighton's recollections illustrate both her adherence to and subtle negotiation of these norms, positioning her as a woman who navigated traditional Victorian ideals while engaging meaningfully in the political and ecclesiastical discourse of her time.

One of the recurring themes in Creighton's memoir is the emphasis on social ritual and the performative nature of Victorian upper-class life. Her description of dining at Brasenose College encapsulates her simultaneous admiration for and critique of the luxurious entertainments characteristic of elite society. Writing to her mother, she expresses her astonishment at the "luxury of these entertainments," detailing the "dark oak panels" and "old Venetian looking glasses three hundred years old."[130] Her appreciation for the opulence of such settings reflects the Victorian fascination with tradition and heritage, particularly within academic and aristocratic circles. Yet, her remark about astonishment suggests a level of detachment, as if she is both an observer

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[130] Louise Creighton, *Memoir of a Victorian Woman : Reflections of Louise Creighton, 1850-1936*, ed. James Thayne Covert (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994) 37.

and a participant in this world. This dual position—both engaged and reflective—mirrors the broader experience of Victorian women who were expected to partake in social life while maintaining an awareness of its underlying structures.

As Creighton's life transitions from the provinces to London, she becomes increasingly involved in orchestrating and attending social functions, which, as her memoir suggests, were as much about fostering intellectual and philanthropic engagement as they were about leisure. Upon moving to London, she describes how her home became a site for both grand social events and gatherings for working-class mothers from the East End, noting that "there were all endless entertainments in the garden to be planned for" and that a marquee was erected to accommodate such meetings.[131] This passage underscores the dual role of upper-class Victorian women as both hostesses and moral arbiters. While social events were expected in elite households, the inclusion of philanthropic meetings suggests an awareness of social duty, particularly towards the urban poor. Creighton's reflections reveal the ways in which philanthropy and hospitality were intertwined, reinforcing the Victorian belief that women's influence was best exercised through charitable engagement rather than direct political action.

Despite her immersion in London's elite social circles, Creighton acknowledges the unpredictability and sometimes superficial nature of high society interactions. She notes that large dinners were a "novelty" but that their success depended entirely on "who took me in."[132] This remark highlights the gendered nature of socialization in Victorian society, where women's conversational agency was often dictated by their male dining

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[131] Creighton, *Memoir of a Victorian Woman,* 121.
[132] Creighton, *Memoir of a Victorian Woman*, 123.

partners. While Creighton enjoyed the intellectual stimulation of such events, the phrase "a great toss up" suggests the limitations imposed on women within these settings; their experience of social life was often contingent on external factors rather than personal agency. The very structure of these events—where men led conversations and women were expected to engage accordingly—illustrates the broader constraints of Victorian gender norms, even within the seemingly progressive milieu of London's elite social scene.

Beyond social life, Creighton's engagement with intellectual and organizational endeavors reveals a woman actively participating in the structuring of knowledge and history, albeit in a traditionally "acceptable" feminine role. Her work in arranging the Muniment Room at Fulham reflects an interest in historical preservation and archival organization—tasks that, while scholarly in nature, were framed as extensions of domestic order rather than professional intellectual labor. She writes, "It was a great thing to get it all ordered & arranged," suggesting a sense of accomplishment that aligns with the Victorian ideal of the disciplined, methodical woman.[133] Women's contributions to historical and archival work during this period were often subsumed under domestic or clerical duties, reinforcing the idea that intellectual pursuits were permissible so long as they did not challenge male authority in academic or professional spheres.

Creighton's reflections on her marriage further reveal the tension between traditional Victorian domestic expectations and the emerging idea of female autonomy. She writes that her husband Max's "life & work" became her "chief occupation" and that

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[133] Creighton, *Memoir of a Victorian Woman*, 128.

she experienced "real pain" at being unable to assist him more meaningfully, though he "did not want me to be a slave for him but to live my own life."[134] This passage reflects the idealized Victorian marriage dynamic in which a woman was expected to support her husband's career while maintaining her own personal fulfillment—an expectation that often proved paradoxical. While Max's encouragement for her to "live her own life" suggests a degree of progressive thought, Creighton's frustration at being unable to contribute more directly to his work reveals the limitations that still bound women, even in seemingly egalitarian partnerships. The passage captures the broader Victorian struggle to reconcile the notion of companionate marriage with the lingering belief that a woman's primary duty was to facilitate her husband's success.

Ultimately, Creighton's memoir serves as a valuable document for understanding the gendered expectations of Victorian society, particularly among the educated elite. Her reflections on social life, philanthropic engagement, intellectual pursuits, and marriage reveal a woman who was both deeply embedded in and, at times, critical of the structures that governed women's lives. While she conformed to many of the period's ideals—acting as a gracious hostess, a moral guide, and a supportive wife—her active participation in intellectual and social spheres hints at a quiet resistance to the limitations imposed on women of her time. Through her careful negotiation of these roles, Creighton provides insight into the complexities of female agency in the late Victorian period, illustrating both the constraints and the subtle forms of empowerment available to women navigating this world.

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[134] Creighton, *Memoir of a Victorian Woman*, 128.

Just as Creighton maneuvered within the limitations of her prescribed roles, Victorian women engaging in consumerism encountered both newfound freedoms and enduring constraints. The act of shopping, while affording women decision-making power and increased public presence, was fraught with the same anxieties surrounding propriety and respectability that governed women's social lives. The expectation that their behavior remain above reproach underscored the broader societal discomfort with their expanding roles beyond the home. Moreover, the call for male figures and law enforcement to take women's concerns seriously highlights a crucial tension: the recognition of women as economic agents in the marketplace did not automatically translate into an acknowledgment of their rights and autonomy in public life. This contradiction—where women's consumer activities granted them visibility yet subjected them to scrutiny—exemplifies the broader duality of Victorian gender roles. Thus, Creighton's memoir and the experiences of female consumers converge in their demonstration of the complex interplay between empowerment and restriction, illustrating how women's agency was both exercised and contested within the rigid structures of Victorian society.

Although consumerism allowed women to exercise decision-making power and a degree of economic influence, it also exposed them to societal constraints that sought to keep their public behavior within the bounds of respectability. The author's call for male figures and the police to take these women's concerns seriously reflects a broader appeal for societal acknowledgment of women's legitimate place in public spaces. This recognition would ideally reinforce women's autonomy, both as consumers and as

individuals deserving of safety and respect. Thus, while consumerism granted Victorian women greater freedom and public presence, it also revealed inherent contradictions: they were simultaneously empowered as consumers and constrained by societal expectations, continually needing to prove their respectability to avoid condemnation.

Windows of Temptation: Exploring Streets and Shopfronts

With the rise of department stores and suburban high streets, Victorian consumer culture transformed both public and private life. This chapter investigates how the development of these commercial spaces catered specifically to women, offering amenities that enabled them to navigate urban life independently. Entrepreneurs like William Whiteley, who pioneered the concept of the department store, recognized the economic power of female consumers and sought to create environments that accommodated their needs. However, the growing visibility of women in public spaces also sparked debates about morality, gender roles, and class boundaries. Through an exploration of contemporary critiques, this chapter highlights how department stores became both sites of empowerment and arenas of social tension, where women's roles were constantly contested.

In the following decade, the founding of Whiteley's department store symbolized the rapid growth of consumerism and the rising demand for diverse goods driven by mass production. William Whiteley, often called the 'Universal Provider,' transformed both

public and private spaces by reshaping economic and gender norms through his department store.[135] Prior to the invention of a department store, neighborhoods were formed by independent shopkeepers who sold limited goods. Whiteley challenged such entities by selling a wide range of goods, thus upsetting the existing balance and receiving criticism from such small shopkeepers as they perceived his creation as a threat to their livelihoods.[136] Opponents accused Whiteley of threatening traditional trade and values, claiming that his department store encouraged unhealthy behavior among women and disrupted established social boundaries.[137] On both sides of the line, liberals and conservatives found themselves agreeing that Whiteley's invention was dangerous as he had supposedly created a "new woman," deeming him as a vendor of new identities.[138] The founding of department stores, coupled with the magnitude of influence the women had over consumption, led to the creation of public spaces intended for women, spaces such as restaurants and tea rooms meant women no longer had to enter spaces that served and were intended for a male clientele.

The development of Victorian suburban shopping spaces highlights the intersection of class, gender, and societal norms, as suburban high streets evolved into contested arenas of commercial activity and social change. The departure of men to workplaces in the city left suburban women to dominate the local shopping sphere. As noted, "while male suburbanites abandoned their neighborhoods each morning, their female relatives apparently remained at home, spending their day shopping in the local

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[135] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 17.
[136] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 17.
[137] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 29-30.
[138] Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure,* 33.

high street."[139] This gendered dynamic framed shopping as an inherently feminine activity, yet the implications of this shift went beyond mere convenience, intersecting with anxieties over class stratification and the transformation of suburban spaces. The suburban high street, in its essence, reflected the needs and social fabric of its immediate community: "A street and the business done in it is, or ought to be, fashioned in consideration of its particular neighbourhood, and result generally from the necessities of the inhabitants."[140] However, this alignment was increasingly challenged by large-scale retailing and the integration of different classes into shared commercial spaces. Residents, merchants, journalists, and officials grappled with these changes, embodying a tension between the segregationist ideals of Victorian society and emerging integrative discourses: "Residents, local merchants, journalists, and government officials each attempted to control suburban change and, by extension, class and gender relations. As they did so, a desire for segregation confronted a newer integrative discourse."[141]

Shopping also became a site for debates about appropriate feminine behavior, as women's visibility in public spaces blurred traditional boundaries of the private domestic sphere. The prospect of women consuming alcohol in public, for instance, was seen as a direct affront to Victorian ideals of womanhood: "The possibility of lady shoppers imbibing spirits in public violated this [...] image of proper Victorian womanhood."[142]

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[139] Erika D. Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire*, 2014, 22.
[140] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 26.
[141] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 24.
[142]Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 30.

This moral anxiety was further amplified by associations between female public drinking and prostitution: "Wright knew that women who drank in public were assumed to be prostitutes. This assumption was underscored by a disquieting geographical correlation between the West End clothing and sexual markets."[143] Thus, shopping spaces were not just economic hubs but also moral battlegrounds where societal values were contested. Moreover, the perception of shopping as an inherently "amusing" activity for women—a leisure pursuit rather than a necessity—added another layer of contention. While some viewed this pleasure as "healthy and profitable," others deemed it "socially and economically destructive."[144] Critics of suburban retail spaces often tied their objections to broader cultural critiques of suburban modernity, seeing such developments as emblematic of "the new, inauthentic, and vulgar suburban world that now ringed London."[145] This perspective framed women's participation in consumer culture as symbolic of societal decline, particularly as young middle-class women were depicted as "out of their place, out of control, and willingly engaging in a sensuous and potentially sexual public culture."[146]

The expansion of large-scale retailing further heightened these tensions. Disputes surrounding these commercial developments often revolved around the delineation of acceptable feminine spaces and behaviors: "Disputes over large-scale retailing, then,

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[143] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 31.
[144] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 31.
[145] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 32.
[146] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 33.

were also debates about acceptable feminine spaces and behaviors outside the private home and family circle."[147] Entrepreneurs like Whiteley, who pioneered such enterprises, defended their role as serving the community's needs rather than indulging consumer desires, arguing that they were "a benefit to the neighbourhood, a provider of necessities, not a stimulator of desires."[148] Nevertheless, critics invoked longstanding moral frameworks, as "almost ancient conceptions of gluttony, luxury, intemperance, and abundance thus took on specific meanings."[149] The portrayal of the female consumer as ravenous and uncontrollable served as a socially sanctioned critique of changing retail dynamics: "The publicans developed an image of a ravenous and uncontrollable female consumer as a socially and legally acceptable method of restricting competition."[150] This construction reinforced traditional gender norms while also seeking to curb the disruptive potential of suburban retail modernity. As such, the suburban high street emerged as a focal point for Victorian anxieties, where the intersection of commerce, gender, and class played out in a microcosm of societal transformation.

As Victorian society evolved, new commercial spaces emerged, offering women unprecedented access to the public sphere. This chapter focuses on women's transition from the domestic realm to public urban environments, where department stores, arcades, and suburban shopping districts became integral to their daily lives. While these spaces

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[147] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 33.
[148] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 33.
[149] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 35.
[150] Rappaport, "The Senses in the Marketplace: Stimulation and Distraction, Gratification and Control," 35.

allowed women to engage in consumption beyond the home, they also subjected them to societal scrutiny. Respectable women, when venturing into public, faced constant judgment, as the association between unaccompanied women and immorality lingered in Victorian culture. Despite these challenges, women's increasing presence in public spaces marked a shift in gender norms, granting them visibility and agency that had previously been denied.

The rapid commercialization of London's West End exemplified this shift. Recognizing the economic potential of female consumers, retailers redesigned their establishments to attract middle-class women by offering not only goods but also essential services such as restaurants, restrooms, and writing rooms.[151] These additions not only accommodated women's practical needs while away from home but also subtly encouraged their prolonged engagement with the urban sphere, transforming public spaces into accessible realms for women. However, the emerging presence of women in these public commercial spaces was fraught with social implications, challenging the established Victorian norms that relegated women to the private, domestic realm. While consumer culture came to assume a distinctly feminine character, Victorian society remained apprehensive about the sight of "respectable" women navigating urban spaces independently. This visible shift, wherein the "shopping public" became almost synonymous with female consumers, began to undermine bourgeois ideology, which traditionally regarded public spaces as male domains and associated feminine virtue with

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[151] Judith R. Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," *Representations*, no. 62 (1998): 5.

privacy and domesticity.[152] By redefining public engagement and subtly contesting gendered boundaries, Victorian consumerism not only expanded women's roles in urban economic life but also initiated a cultural re-evaluation of gender, space, and respectability that redefined the social fabric of late nineteenth -century Britain.

Consequently, the increasing presence of women in public spaces where they once did not exist was deemed a threat to traditional patriarchal values that asserted the notion of separate public and domestic spheres. The actions taken in retaliation were extensive in trying to tyrannize women into returning and remaining in the domestic sphere but more dangerously, could result in the utilization of violence. With the feminine space growing into public spaces, a new problem arose: street harassment became a profound social problem with its growing frequency and its inherent attack on women. It first arose as concern for the unaccompanied and unsuspecting middle-class women who were entering supposedly "privileged spaces" of politics, commerce, and consumption.[153] Shopping women were frequently subjected to 'humorous' comments by critics, who deemed them 'morally dubious' and reduced them to objects of male desire.[154] The West End of London was seen as an inherently negative environment for women to exist in; the urban setting of clubs and political institutions once considered to be the male sphere became an eroticized zone of commercialized sex while simultaneously being a fashionable district for women–thus transforming the West End into a "pleasure

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[152] Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) 19.
[153] Judith R. Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," *Representations*, no. 62 (1998): 2.
[154] Judith R. Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," *Representations*, no. 62 (1998): 6.

capital."[155] This created the problem of "mistaken identity": women on the streets might find themselves being deemed a "streetwalker" though they are proper ladies and find themselves being accosted while prostitutes dressed in "meretricious finery" passed for presentable ladies.[156]

As women increasingly frequented urban centers for shopping and leisure, they faced harassment that highlighted the precarious nature of their respectability in public spaces. Male harassment of women on the streets was a pervasive social issue, reflecting broader anxieties about the shifting gender norms and women's increasing visibility in previously male-dominated spaces. Contemporary newspapers, etiquette manuals, and personal letters reveal the extent of this harassment and its impact on women's public engagement. Such accounts illustrate the tension between women's newfound public roles and the enduring societal expectation that respectable women should remain within the confines of the home. The very act of navigating public spaces, even for ostensibly respectable purposes like shopping, subjected women to the risk of being perceived as morally suspect. The moral ambiguity of women's presence in public was further complicated by the cultural association between unaccompanied women and prostitution—a pervasive stereotype that forced many women to tread carefully in urban environments.

Court records and contemporary social commentaries further illuminate the legal and social ramifications of public harassment. Women who brought charges against men

[155] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," 2.
[156] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," 7.

for harassment often faced skepticism from magistrates, who questioned their motives or implied that their behavior had invited such attention. The limited legal recourse available to women in such situations highlights the extent to which public spaces were gendered domains, where male privilege was protected, and female respectability remained precarious.[157] Despite these obstacles, many women continued to assert their right to occupy public spaces, challenging the implicit message that their visibility rendered them vulnerable or illegitimate participants in urban life.

As the boundaries of class and gender became fluid, the general societal fear was that as women were submerged in "the sensuous world of consumption," women were rendered "suspect," and as such fell "subject to the seduction of men and sales promotion and to their own uncontrollable impulses."[158] While walking on the streets of London, women could expect to be accosted by "male pests." Female correspondents insisted on their respectable identities: they sought to change the public perception of "so-called gentlemen," arguing that a true gentleman was one who "restrains his sexuality outside of marriage and acts chivalrously to women on the streets."[159] In response, W.T Stead allowed for men to speak for themselves and on their actions in a column entitled "What the 'Male Pests' Have to Say for Themselves." In the column, the aforementioned "gentlemen" defended their practice in following and approaching respectable women on

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[157] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London."
[158] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," 5.
[159] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," 13.

the streets as it was both "harmless and consistent with English principles of liberty."[160] Such opinions served to hypersexualize the Victorian women who shopped and walked the city streets; while men defended their rights to "draw women into conversation," while distinct from sexual commerce was an inherent part of existing in a sexualized marketplace. The irony that such behavior was justified by men when one of the key principles for Victorian society was respectability and decorum as described in Ms. Leslie's Behavior Book. Speaking specifically on the interaction between women and men on the street, she writes:

> When a gentleman meets a lady with whom his acquaintance is very slight, (perhaps nothing more than a few words of talk at a party,) he allows her the option of continuing the acquaintance or not, at her pleasure; therefore, he waits till she recognizes him, and till she evinces it by a bow, –he looking at her to give the opportunity. Thus, if she has no objection to numbering him among her acquaintances, she denotes it by bowing first.[161]

This reflects a key aspect of Victorian social etiquette, highlighting the rigid codes governing public interactions. The exchange between a gentleman and a lady was not merely a polite gesture but a marker of social propriety, reputation, and boundaries. The woman's right to initiate recognition—by choosing to bow or not—suggests a controlled autonomy within the public sphere, allowing her to determine the continuation or

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[160] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," 14.
[161] Eliza Leslie, *Miss Leslie's Behaviour Book: A Guide and Manual for Ladies* (New York, NY: Arno Press, 1972), 67.

limitation of a social connection. In the context of Victorian consumerism, these formalities underscore the performative nature of class and gender in social spaces where consumer identities were also displayed and shaped. Public encounters, whether at a gathering, shop, or promenade, were opportunities for individuals to assert and maintain social standing through both behavior and appearance. The gentleman's respectful waiting for acknowledgment before proceeding aligns with the broader social customs that regulated not only interactions but also the consumption of public spaces. This ritualistic approach to acquaintance demonstrates how even casual social exchanges required careful adherence to unspoken codes that reinforced hierarchical and gendered distinctions.This convention allowed women to exercise a form of social gatekeeping. In the context of consumerism, this aligns with Victorian ideals that positioned women, particularly in the middle and upper classes, as the arbiters of taste and propriety. Women were seen as guardians of morality and decorum, often influencing their family's consumer choices in alignment with these values. The choice to acknowledge or ignore a gentleman could be seen as an extension of this role, reinforcing the social boundaries that dictated which relationships and interactions were deemed acceptable within the confines of class and propriety. Thus, this structured formality in social recognition mirrors the selective nature of Victorian consumerism, where interactions and acquisitions alike were filtered through the lenses of class, gender, and decorum. Victorian consumer culture was not only about what one purchased but also how one presented oneself in the public eye, where maintaining the appearance of respectability and moral virtue was paramount.

> The growing misery of the situation has at last overcome the reticence of modern women; they have told us now–are telling us with an anguish we ought to pity, and with blushes that every father, husband, and brother should respect–what the state of the streets if for them, not after dark, but in broad daylight; yes, while we are at our desks or on change–too busy mayhap to think about them and their shipping and their enforced strolls… At present it is clear the police will not act promptly against a well-dressed man: they have received no instructions, they have not been encouraged by public opinion, and they fear, in view of brother Endacott, the consequences of a mistake. But these obstacles are very superable…The only formidable mistake which might be dreaded is the black mailing of gentlemen by prostitutes who pose as unprotected females; but such an attempt would be utterly abortive, the essence of the case on the demonstrated respectability of the woman who promotes the arrest.[162]

Walkowitz highlights the societal neglect of these challenges by male relatives and authority figures, who, preoccupied with their own pursuits, remain largely unaware or dismissive of the potential threats to women's respectability and safety in public. This situation, as described, underscores the complex balance between autonomy and respectability that women had to navigate in Victorian consumer culture. While consumerism provided women with a new form of agency—granting them the ability to influence household purchases, shape family consumption patterns, and partake in the

[162] Walkowitz, "Going Public: Shopping, Street Harassment, and Streetwalking in Late Victorian London," 14.

increasingly public world of shopping—this agency came at a social cost. In response to these challenges, Victorian social etiquette sought to delineate appropriate interactions in public spaces, reinforcing the delicate balance women had to maintain. Women's movement in public spaces, while indicative of greater independence, was still constrained by expectations of propriety and modesty. The “anguish” expressed by women over their treatment in public underscores the fact that their public presence was often scrutinized, and any deviation from idealized femininity or modesty risked jeopardizing their social standing. The concerns raised about police reluctance to act against “well-dressed” men illustrate how class and gender intersected to affect women's safety and autonomy. A woman’s “demonstrated respectability” was central to her credibility and protection under the law, indicating that societal perceptions of class and virtue determined whether a woman’s complaint would be taken seriously. This implicitly places a burden on women to constantly display and uphold visible markers of respectability while engaging in public life, highlighting the social risks they navigated as consumers and actors in public spaces.

Although consumerism allowed women to exercise decision-making power and a degree of economic influence, it also exposed them to societal constraints that sought to keep their public behavior within the bounds of respectability. The author’s call for male figures and the police to take these women’s concerns seriously reflects a broader appeal for societal acknowledgment of women’s legitimate place in public spaces. This recognition would ideally reinforce women’s autonomy, both as consumers and as individuals deserving of safety and respect. Thus, while consumerism granted Victorian

women greater freedom and public presence, it also revealed inherent contradictions: they were simultaneously empowered as consumers and constrained by societal expectations, continually needing to prove their respectability to avoid condemnation.

The development of Victorian shopping spaces was more than an economic phenomenon; it was a microcosm of the societal transformations that defined the era. The rise of department stores and suburban high streets revealed shifting gender dynamics, class tensions, and cultural anxieties about modernity. While these spaces offered new opportunities for women to engage in public life, they also subjected them to heightened scrutiny and reinforced existing social hierarchies. Entrepreneurs like William Whiteley, who championed large-scale retailing, found themselves at the center of these debates, embodying both the promise and perils of consumer modernity. Ultimately, the Victorian era's commercial revolution reshaped public and private spaces, transforming social norms and setting the foundation for the consumer-driven society of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This study has examined the intricate ways in which Victorian women engaged with consumer culture, navigating the complexities of agency and constraint within a society that both enabled and restricted their autonomy. By tracing women's daily movements from the private domain of the home to the increasingly accessible public spaces of shops, department stores, and urban thoroughfares, this thesis has demonstrated that consumerism served as a critical site of negotiation. Far from a passive extension of domestic responsibilities, the act of consumption allowed women to exert influence, craft identities, and challenge prevailing norms of respectability, albeit within carefully delineated boundaries. The Victorian woman, though ostensibly confined by patriarchal structures, found in consumer culture a means of subtly reshaping her social role, balancing adherence to societal expectations with a measured assertion of personal agency.

The implications of this study extend beyond the Victorian period, as the consumer practices that emerged in the nineteenth century continued to evolve and expand into the Edwardian era. The early twentieth century witnessed a further transformation in women's economic and social participation, facilitated by the increased accessibility of commercial spaces and the growing visibility of women as both consumers and employees. Department stores, which had initially functioned as carefully curated environments designed to accommodate the presence of "respectable" female shoppers, became sites of both leisure and labor, providing women with new avenues for

financial independence and social interaction. The Edwardian period, with its shifting attitudes toward gender roles and its embrace of modernity, saw a continuation of the trends established in the late Victorian era, further blurring the boundaries between the private and public spheres.

Furthermore, the anxieties that surrounded Victorian women's engagement with consumer culture did not dissipate with the turn of the century but rather intensified as female autonomy became increasingly visible. The critiques levied against the "Girl of the Period" in the latter half of the nineteenth century found new expressions in Edwardian discourse, as conservative commentators continued to view female consumerism as a destabilizing force that threatened traditional social hierarchies. Yet, by the early twentieth century, women's participation in consumer culture had become deeply embedded within the economic and cultural framework of British society, rendering such anxieties increasingly untenable. The growing presence of women in public life, whether as shoppers, professionals, or activists, was no longer an aberration but an established reality.

This thesis contributes to the broader historiographical discourse on gender, economy, and public life by illustrating how the seemingly mundane act of shopping functioned as a conduit for larger societal shifts. The Victorian woman, gazing into a shop window, was not merely indulging in the act of consumption; she was engaging in a complex negotiation of identity, class, and autonomy within a rapidly modernizing world. Her presence in the commercial sphere—once seen as a transgression—became, by the Edwardian period, an expectation. The tensions surrounding femininity, consumerism,

and public visibility that characterized the nineteenth century laid the groundwork for the social transformations of the early twentieth century, where women's roles continued to evolve in ways that challenged and redefined the limits of respectability.

Ultimately, this study underscores the significance of consumer culture as both a reflection of and a catalyst for change within Victorian society. While consumption was never a straightforward path to liberation, it provided women with new opportunities to assert influence and navigate their position within a rigidly stratified world. The contradictions inherent in Victorian consumer culture—wherein women could simultaneously reinforce and challenge societal norms—mirror the broader complexities of historical change, wherein progress often unfolds in subtle, contested, and uneven ways. The Edwardian period did not mark a rupture from the past but rather a continuation and acceleration of the shifts already set in motion by the previous generation. In this regard, the Victorian woman’s engagement with consumer culture was not an isolated phenomenon but part of a longer historical trajectory that shaped the modern understanding of gender, economic agency, and public life.

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