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Shopping for Themselves: Women, Identity, and the Market, 1862-1914

Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing. Krista Lysack. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008. 238 pp.

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<1> Krista Lysack's engaging and informative story of Victorian women's consumer practices begins with Jane Eyre's resistance to them, as Rochester pushes her to select her trousseau. Lysack attributes Jane's dislike of shopping to her desire for self-control, introducing Jane's dilemma in order to underscore the difficulty of gender relations in the market and suggesting that this self-regulating version of femininity was only one of many different identities available to female shoppers of the nineteenth century. Jane might find consumption more pleasurable, Lysack suggests in *Come Buy, Come Buy*, "if she were to go shopping on her own in the decades to follow, without the impositions and meddling company of a Rochester" (6).

<2> Jane in fact (and in support of Lysack's argument) experiences this pleasure much sooner. Once she has inherited her own money, she delights in her "carte blanche" for shopping, redecorating Moor House for her cousins' return by tastefully selecting "[d]ark handsome new carpets and curtains [...], new coverings, and mirrors, and dressing-cases for the toilet tables [...]."(1) Jane's excited enumeration of interior décor here offers a striking contrast to the earlier scene of resistance. Shopping by this point no longer makes Jane an object of consumption. In this scene, she joins other women of Victorian literature and culture, who, as Lysack goes on to argue, found pleasure and "expansive" forms of identity when they went to the market as desiring subjects (11). Indeed, Jane undoubtedly owes her taste, her knowledge of where to shop, and her delight in fitting out a home in a suitable yet novel fashion, to the proliferation of guides, advertisements, and displays that Lysack details in her well-researched and instructive study of women's consumption in the second half of the nineteenth century.

<3> Lysack's emphasis — in the introduction and throughout compelling readings of "Goblin Market" (1862), *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), *Middlemarch* (1871-72), Michael Field's *Sight and Song* (1892), and the suffrage paper *Votes for Women* — is on subjecthood, forms of individual identity formed through active and transgressive engagement with the market. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's view of shopping as a "tactic" for intervening in and resisting the "dominant economic order" (7, 8), Lysack focuses on the specific practices of individual consumers. Her study stresses the range of consumer practices to discard the myth that women could seek

autonomy only through self-renunciation; "'what [each shopper] "makes" or "does"' with commodities" varies greatly, as Lysack argues via de Certeau (40).

<4> While the larger idea that Victorian markets both catered to and also produced women's desires and subversive acts has been made familiar by studies such as Erika Rappaport's *Shopping for Pleasure* (2000),(2) Lysack gestures toward additional arguments that might benefit from further articulation. Most interesting to me were the ways in which so many of her chapters detail women shopping not as individuals but among and in relation to other female selves whose "expansive" identities (12, 111) form not simply through the market but through engagement with others in and through market activity. Jane Eyre cannot share her consumer desire with Rochester, nor can she share it with St. John, who finds little pleasure in the "sordid and trivial" affairs of interior design. But her cousins Mary and Diana give these activities their due: "They were delighted [...] with the new drapery, and fresh carpets, and rich tinted china vases."(3) Shopping thus allows Jane to become part of a female community that shares her tastes as well as her delight. Similarly, the women Lysack describes in these chapters don't actually go to the market on their "own." As she notes, the shopping guides and ads they encounter create a larger culture of consumption. From the paired observers of a shop's plate-glass window on the cover of her book, to the circulation of desire "through a female bodily economy" (30) in Rossetti's poem; from the proliferation of feminized objects and subjects in Braddon's sensation novel to the "production of desire between women" (129) in Michael Field's poetry; from the suffragettes' collective militancy to their desire to coordinate suffrage accessories (144), Lysack's chapters provocatively suggest the pleasure of *shared* consumption and *communal* engagement in the market.

<5> At times, then, *Come Buy, Come Buy* might make more of its local observations. Its chapters, however, are persuasive, rich with historical detail and nuanced readings. Lysack writes in an accessible and appealing manner, offering full but refreshingly concise explorations of wide-ranging topics. Through examinations of department-store advertisements for "Eastern" wares, chapter 1 shows how women found pleasure through (and in resistance to) imperial capitalism. The chapter's focus on the "indeterminate creatures" of "Goblin Market" contributes to other discussions of the market in Rossetti's poem by reminding us of the violence embedded in both "commodification and orientalism" (38). Chapter 2 carries forward the possibility of women's transgressive consumption. By attending to the mid-century pathologizing of "new shopping disorders" such as shoplifting, it argues that Victorian anxieties around the "disorderly woman shopper" reveal the constructed nature of femininity itself (46). Chapter 3, the last in a group that depict the institutionalization of "a female sphere of [...] consumption" (13), turns to household management guides to argue that *Middlemarch*'s extravagant Rosamond Vincy and thrifty Dorothea Brooke actually share a desire to create social meaning out of expenditure (89). These three chapters, together, identify "cultural practices that emerge and recur from the 1860s through the 1880s, as a female sphere of urban consumption is institutionalized" (13).

<6> Consumption itself is of course a broad term. I found Lysack's symbolic extension of it beyond the shop exciting; she differentiates between commercial, libidinal, and performative economies through solid historical analysis. At times, however, these distinctions are under-theorized. Lysack's discussion of shoplifting, identity theft, and *Lady Audley's Secret* draws on

de Certeau's concept of "cultural poaching" to describe "the disorders of consumption" (48). Here, I would have appreciated a fuller sense of how theft itself opens up or shuts down the expectations of reciprocal exchange demanded by shopping. Does it oppose (or is it, after all, just the logical extension of) buyers' efforts to "get a steal"? The *OED* attributes this expression to 1942, but it seems that what Lysack gestures toward is in part how theft itself was legitimated through these disorderly and performative forays in the marketplace. Similarly, Lysack's discussion of *Middlemarch* would benefit from further speculation on how Rosamond's accumulative "spending" differs from Dorothea's "ethical spending," which seems to approximate philanthropy. Here, Margot Finn's observation that market economies coexisted with gift economies throughout the nineteenth century would be useful.(4) While Lysack pushes past traditional understandings of female "renunciation" through her emphasis on pleasure, it is worth recalling that even in "all out" expenditure, Victorian men and women did more than merely renounce, seeking to "find in loss" (as Tennyson puts it) "a gain to match."(5)

<7> Along these lines, turning to subsequent chapters that "consider a women's consumer culture" (13), one of the aspects that I most appreciated about Lysack's exploration of Michael Field's poetry was her discussion of an aesthetics that engaged with and opposed traditional market strategies but also constructed an alternative economy, resisting "an acquisitive [male] gaze" (131) to produce "a new theory of visuality that emphasizes the value of reciprocity and exchange between women" (119). Here, Lysack shows how Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper eschewed masculine "possession or ownership" to locate pleasures "in the female body, rather than […] through the universalizing masculine aestheticism" (132). However, I would have liked to see these insights regarding non-acquisitive exchanges "between women" extended to her important study of the weekly paper of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU), *Votes for Women*. In chapter 5, Lysack examines newspaper advertisements, photographs, and fiction to demonstrate how turn-of-the-century "suffragettes were shopping for the vote" (147). Drawing on accounts of WSPU stores, she reveals how the work of consumption and sale were interrelated with political agitation for the vote; "militant suffragettes […] play[ed] both sides of the counter simultaneously" (164). This is an extremely compelling account, and, like much of this interesting book, it is a valuable scholarly contribution. At the same time, however, it misses an opportunity to achieve greater theoretical complexity. Lysack's explanation that these shops privileged the performance of shopkeeping over profit, and her noting that women volunteered their time, contributed to the shops' rent, and donated the items up for sale at bazaars reminds us that the very appearance of consumerism relied upon alternative economic strategies, such as the tradition of women's gift practices, which must be set alongside our understanding of the marketplace.

<8> Overall, this is a book that convincingly argues, in a smart, clear, and entertaining manner, how much women could gain in the markets of Victorian England. It also demonstrates, through the very questions its provocative readings raise, how much more work remains to be done on the important stakes and strategies of women's economic engagement during the nineteenth century.

Endnotes

(1)Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001): 333-34.(^)

(2)Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).(^)

(3)Brontë 334, 335.(^)

(4)Margot C. Finn, *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).(^)

(5)Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam, A. H. H.* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004): 7.(^)