

Propriety, performance and *desire*: an analysis of consumer
culture in early nineteenth century Britain

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral
Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

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Ottawa, Ontario

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Abstract

This thesis argues that the development of consumer culture in early-nineteenth century Britain formed part of a broader conservative response to a series of severe and sustained political, economic, social, intellectual and military upheavals that followed the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. It argues that the early nineteenth century in Britain represents a moment where the demands of expanding productive forces and consumers coalesced with the anxieties caused by successive internal and external crises to produce a marketplace that was at once a source of liberation and excitement for those wishing to engage in aesthetic pleasure-seeking through consumption, but also heavily intruded upon by a resurgent conservative discourse desiring to restore and maintain socio-economic and cultural stability in the nation. In the Victorian period, politicians, social elites, and moral reformers once again turned to material goods and consumer culture in order to revise existing narratives about consumption to incorporate new and broader, though still immanently conservative, messages about consumption and the consumer. In this way, the material culture of this earlier period served as a kind of model for the Victorians, who appropriated many of its features in the production of a mass consumer society.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Carleton University and the department of history for providing me with the opportunity, support, and resources necessary to undertake and complete this project. I owe particular thanks to the graduate administrator Joan White, whose meticulous attention to detail never failed to catch a mistake or missing information that would otherwise have led to many headaches. I am also grateful to my committee members, Professors David Dean and Julie Murray for taking the time to engage with, and offer constructive feedback about my work. I would also like to thank my family for offering their support when I needed it most and providing reality checks when I least wanted to hear them. I owe the completion of this project in many ways to their insistent prodding and encouragement. Finally, I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisors, Professors Danielle Kinsey and Mark Phillips. Professor Phillips provided me with guidance in the earliest stages of my work that directed my research towards material that I doubt I would have encountered otherwise, and for which I am thankful to have discovered. Professor Kinsey provided insight and support throughout the entirety of my graduate career which made this project possible, and rather than provide a list of the many times that her assistance proved invaluable, I will simply say that the greatest credit is owed to her for the finished product.

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Introduction

I: Thesis Argument

This thesis argues that the development of early nineteenth-century consumer culture was a key conservative response to massive political, economic, social, intellectual, and military upheaval that followed the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. The early nineteenth century in Britain represents a moment where the demands of expanding productive forces and consumers coalesced with the anxieties caused by successive political, economic, and social crises in the nation to produce a marketplace that was a source of liberation and excitement for those wishing to engage in aesthetic pleasure-seeking. At the same time, however, coercive forces - discoverable in the form of publications such as etiquette manuals, periodical articles on consumption, novels of conduct, and other sources - desiring to restore and maintain socio-economic and cultural stability in the nation intruded heavily upon the marketplace. The effect of these combined efforts was to produce a consumer society that was suspicious of change, and anxious about the future, but still passionately engaged in pleasure seeking and performance through cultural material gain.

Consumer culture in the early nineteenth century was produced by competing forces and interests, which resulted in a body of middle-class and elite consumers that found itself at once gravitating towards the world of goods and anxious about maintaining respectability in the social realm. On the one hand, an expanding marketplace of things, taken together with a growing push towards pleasure-seeking advocated by the intellectual currents of sentimentalism and romanticism, propelled consumers towards materialism. On the other, a conservative backlash to successive

internal and external crises sought to stabilize the nation by turning attention towards market transactions and the regulation of consumer behavior as a means of ensuring social stability. The resulting marketplace was animated by an ever-expanding array of goods, but increasingly as well by the development of conservative narratives regarding class, gender, hierarchy, taste and conduct. This means that while individual expression still formed a part of consumer culture, this seeming freedom of expression was curtailed by the need to conform to accepted messages about material goods and their place in the social world. This examination of the consumer culture of early nineteenth century Britain identifies and analyzes both the forces of pleasure-seeking and conservatism as they clashed, viewing the resulting consumer society as a site where a culturally conservative response to successive crises was constructed and articulated. As with any historical project, it is difficult to delineate a specific chronology, but for the sake of clarity I will say that this study is primarily concerned with the period ranging between 1789-1837. That is, from the onset of the French Revolution to the ascension of Queen Victoria.

This is a critical period in the history of British consumer society for two reasons. First, it represents a moment when cultural and social forces, forming part of a broader conservative backlash against successive internal and external crises in the nation, intervened in material culture and forcefully shaped attitudes about consumption and the consumer. This intervention occurred in the publishing of etiquette manuals, periodicals about consumption and consumer culture, novels of conduct, and other sources that worked to codify and curtail expressions of consumerism and stabilize ‘traditional’ hierarchies of class, gender and sociability. This vein of consumption discourse revealed

a novel feature of material goods: that they could be appropriated by dominant cultural forms and elites to regulate and order social space around a given narrative or series of narratives. So, in the early nineteenth century, articulations of ‘the consumer’ became fashioned around strict adherence to particular codes of conduct and consumer behavior. Thus, analyzing the material culture of the early nineteenth century is critical to understanding the broader conservative shift in the nation that took place in this period. Second, by beginning a process of bridging a gap in consumption literature between the eighteenth century and the Victorian period, this thesis argues that questions involved in any analysis of Victorian consumer culture should be reformulated to acknowledge the critical importance of this earlier period in shaping Victorian consumption discourse. As will be discussed later, the consumption literature on Victorian England has had a tendency to view the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as anticipating material culture but not possessive of it. In contrast, this thesis argues that many Britons in the early nineteenth century were deeply immersed in consumption and material culture. Rather than anticipating the consumer culture of the Victorian period, therefore, it is more accurate to view Victorian consumer culture as a product of this earlier period. In Victorian Britain, politicians, social elites, and moral reformers once again turned to material goods and consumer culture in order to revise existing narratives about consumption and the consumer. In this way, the material culture of this earlier period served as a kind of model for the Victorians, who appropriated many of its features in the production of a mass consumer society.

II: Historiography

My introduction to the subject began with an examination of McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb's *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*. This publication sparked an explosion in scholarly interest concerning the role of consumption and the consumer in the evolution of modern capitalist (and commodity) cultures. Written in 1982, *The Birth of a Consumer Society* catalogues the commercial and consumer growth of England during the eighteenth century and argues that there "was a consumer revolution," during this period, whereby "more men and women than ever before in human history enjoyed the experience of acquiring material possessions."¹ In conducting this examination of the 'consumer revolution,' Mckendrick, Brewer and Plumb locate two crucial features of eighteenth-century British socio-cultural (and economic) life that formed the necessary ingredients for an explosion in consumerism. The first was an observable increase in real-wages amongst the artisanal and bourgeois classes that expanded the possibilities for social mobility and granted access to the market for a broader spectrum of the population.² Secondly, new formats of economic exchange and expression began to overtake and subsume previous practices: "the economic advantages of competition, envy, emulation, vanity and fashion were more and more explicitly stated," and by the late eighteenth-century, "the doctrine of beneficial luxury had taken over from the doctrine of the 'utility of poverty'."³ In essence, Mckendrick historicizes the consumer revolution by connecting it to two mutually constitutive forces: an increase in monetary agency and an ideological shift away from

¹ Neil Mckendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb. *The Birth of a Consumer Society: the Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*. London: Europa Publications, 1982, p 1.

² Ibid. p, 23.

³ Ibid, pp 15, 19.

functional utility and towards superfluous consumerism. This investigation of eighteenth century England has influenced my thinking about consumption most importantly as it relates to the shift away from sumptuousness, utility and restraint, and towards embracing the benefits of luxury consumption and superfluity. My thesis will intervene in Mckendrick, Brewer and Plumb's work in two key ways: first, it will nuance ideas about superfluous consumption articulated in this work by linking them specifically to forms of aesthetic pleasure-seeking observed in contemporary consumers. Secondly, the third chapter will address issues in the text that are raised by a reliance on Veblenesque notions of emulation to explain consumer behavior.

The Commodity Culture of Victorian England by Thomas Richards is an exploration of commodity culture in Britain from which I draw particular insight for my own work. Richards examines the mid and later Victorian period and argues that modern (British) commodity culture had its origins in The Great Exhibition of 1851, which was the first of its kind. In light of this, Richards' work can immediately be distinguished from the work of Mckendrick, Brewer and Plumb, both because it considers a later period, and because it relies on space as a methodological category. More specific detail regarding Richards' arguments will be discussed in the third chapter; broadly speaking however, Richards argues that modern (British) commodity culture had its origins in the Great Exhibition of 1851, which was the first of its kind.⁴ Richards views the 1851 Exhibition as the moment where commodities achieved a new semiotic potential, a process which is located within the context of the 'spectacle' of the exhibition itself, as he

⁴ Thomas Richards. *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, p 3.

explains in his analysis.⁵ Richards draws an explicit connection between the elevation of the commodity and the spectacle of the Crystal Palace, viewing the two as mutually constitutive of Victorian commodity culture, and insisting that one is wholly contingent upon the other.

Furthermore, Richards shows how the coupling of spectacle and commodity and the realization of the semiotic potential of the object, was intimately linked to its setting in a monumental public space such as the Crystal Palace. Ultimately, the remainder of Richards' text and the legitimacy of his argument rests upon this reading of the Crystal Palace - as a public site which elevated the status of the commodity by putting it on display for a public eager to expel its doubts and fears about capitalism and mass consumption. Richards' explorations of space and the intimate relationship that it shares with objects and bodies in the creation of meaning, and the formation of consumer identities, forms a central theoretical pillar of my investigation of the early nineteenth century. I argue that it is impossible to explain the unique marketplace of this period without understanding the centripetal importance of spatial relationships both as they contribute to and define acts of aesthetic pleasure-seeking and simultaneously work to reinforce notions of order, hierarchy, civility, class and taste, perhaps most especially in the form of private-public displays and events.

This is in fact a point that is discussed helpfully by John Styles and Amanda Vickery in their work, *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North American, 1700-1830*: "Tabletops, metaphoric fields of social play, strategically enabled the assertion of self as actor, witness and judge, through the deployment of objects and the ability to enact their rituals," revealing as well that "the same interior spaces could be

⁵ Richards. *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*. p 18.

more or less public, more or less formal, according to the time of day, the arrangement of furniture and tableware, the level of ceremony, and the status and number of guests.”⁶ It would be woefully inadequate to form a study of this period and not consider the position that spatial engagements occupy in the activity of consumption, the performance of class and gender and the push for social cohesion. I will add to the work of Richards and others by demonstrating how private space and private spectacle formed constitutive elements in the construction of consumer identities in the early nineteenth century in Britain, and served as a critically important setting where individual consumer behavior was met by the gaze of critical observers. In contrast to Richards, I argue that the imposition of spectacle and its implications for material culture occur much earlier than the Great Exhibition and other similar public events. Rather, it is evident that individuals in this earlier period were very conscious of the importance of space and proper spatial adornment, and sought actively to organize displays of material goods that would identify them as deft consumers in a conservative marketplace.

Deborah Cohen’s *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions*, though also about British consumption during the Victorian period (and the early twentieth century) represents a major break from Richards and an important contribution to the historiography of consumption in Britain. Cohen’s work is distinguished by its emphasis on the home and the domestic as spaces of consumption and materiality.⁷ Through the lens of domestic space, Cohen explores the mid and later Victorian period and argues that the bourgeois obsession with material objects and private furnishings emerged out of a

⁶ John Styles and Amanda Vickery eds. *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700-1830*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, pp 42, 10.

⁷ Deborah Cohen. *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p xi.

Christian revivalism – referred to by Cohen as ‘incarnationism’ – which preached ‘heaven on earth,’ and therefore discarded a previous link between restraint and orthodoxy.⁸ Of all the themes in Cohen’s work this is by far the most important feature of Victorian culture that impelled men and women to consume and to fill their domestic interiors with material goods. For Cohen, this helps to explain why the Victorians appeared to have been such eclectic consumers, buying anything and everything: “From their historic specimen rooms to the exhibitions they staged, shops offered the public an instruction on taste – defined not as a set of immutable rules but as the *sine qua non* of individual distinction: not discipline, in other words, but liberation.”⁹

Here then, Cohen is adding another characteristic of commodity culture that is critical to understanding how consumer attitudes and consumer society develop: namely, the emerging belief that commodities could express the self. Not only this, but that they actively assisted in the construction of selfhood: “possessions were the very stuff out of which the self was made.”¹⁰ Cohen’s work links the commodity, the home, and domestic space by arguing that the Victorian obsession with ‘things’ was reflective of their evolving belief in the power of objects – in the ‘correct’ spatial context – to construct and express individual meaning. I wish to nuance Cohen’s argument concerning the relationship between goods and self-identity by observing this process in its embryonic state. Specifically, I am interested in how rapidly forming notions of desire and pleasure-seeking relate to later and more modern forms of direct commodity fetishism. The early nineteenth century is particularly interesting, because it is evident that questions about the relationship between material goods and consumers remain largely unsettled. However,

⁸ Cohen. *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions*, pp 12-14.

⁹ *Ibid*, p 61.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 137.

there is clear evidence to suggest that consumers were beginning to view goods as extensions of self, as much a part of self as any limb or appendage. I also wish to add to Cohen's discussion of the home as a site intimately involved in the construction of consumer identity and the performance of self by looking at how the domestic spaces of early nineteenth century consumers also served as sites for judgment and critique.

I see my work as contributing to the debate that has been formed regarding sites and cultures of consumption, and their broader importance to culture, politics and the nation begun by those authors mentioned above, and others.¹¹ My intervention into the early nineteenth century is motivated primarily by a desire to connect the movements of the eighteenth century to the culture of the Victorian period. What I have observed in the literature that I have encountered is a noticeable gap in the chronology of consumption historiography between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The purpose of this thesis is to assist in the process of connecting the two. First, I will reveal how consumer and industrial movements in the eighteenth century impacted the early nineteenth century marketplace by producing a society that found itself increasingly entangled in material culture. Secondly, I will contextualize this marketplace within the setting of the early nineteenth century, a period ripe with internal and external crises, to determine how a unique consumer culture emerged in this period. That is, one that was rooted in consumer, industrial, and intellectual movements which began in the eighteenth century,

¹¹ I am thinking in particular here of *Consumption and the World of Goods* by John Brewer and Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1993.), *Market a la Mode* by Erin Mackie (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997.), *Shopping for pleasure: Women and the making of London's West End* by Erika Rappaport. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.), *Consumers and Luxury, Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850*, edited by Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, *The Industrious Revolution – Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650-present* by Jan De Vries (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.), and "Men's things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution," by Margot Finn (*Social History*. 25:2 (May 2000) 133-155.).

and by a passionate conservatism reacting to a sustained instability unique to the early nineteenth century by producing discourses of consumption and material culture that sought to reify distinctions of class, gender, and cultural belonging.

III: Methodology

With regards to methodology, my work has primarily been influenced by the theories of three scholars whose work, in different but equally important ways, has come to shape my own. The first, as has already been mentioned, is regarding space and its importance in the negotiating and constituting of material relationships as framed by Thomas Richards in *Victorian Commodity Culture*. First, and perhaps most obviously, spaces act as the venues where social and consumer transactions take place, and where the bonds between people and things are mediated. Secondly, space actively participates in this mediating process as a force that delimits and restricts the field of social possibilities, an engagement that is perpetually being negotiated between bodies, objects, and the space itself. This means that any study of consumption and consumer culture that does not treat space as an active agent in the socio-material engagement between people and ‘things’ misses a critical component that facilitates, and therefore renders these material relationships intelligible. When an individual adorns a given space with a display of goods, that space comes to define an individuality as much as it reflects it. In simple terms, the space does not merely reflect an image of self, rather, it is viewed as an extension *of* self, with material objects representing personal tastes and consumer desire. Ultimately, this formulation can be expressed by a simple inversion of stakes, where the question evolves from one which asks: what do spaces reflect about the individuals and

objects which occupy them, to one which asks how spaces *assist in the production of* those very bodies and ‘things.’

Secondly, my work has been greatly influenced by Colin Campbell’s concept of self-illusionary hedonism, first articulated in his monograph *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Campbell argues passionately that the combined demands of the Sentimentalist and later Romanticist movement for greater emotional experience and aesthetic pleasure-seeking caused a reformulation of the nature of pleasure more broadly, and its potentiality as a contingent and malleable expression of self. As a result, Campbell argues that the exploding popularity of emotional reverie and day-dreaming has led to a psychological condition defined by an infinite series of wants and desires that become impossible to acquire, and thus, come to constitute what is now understood in consumer studies as longing and manufactured wants. This process is best explained by Campbell himself in two passages that summarize succinctly the incredible importance of this shift in psychological understanding and experience new to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. In the first, Campbell explains why material goods form such a convenient canvas for the expression of longing and desire:

Objects possess utility or the capacity to provide satisfaction. It is, in a sense, an intrinsic attribute of real things; food can relive hunger, clothes provide warmth, house shelter, people affection. Pleasure, on the other hand, is not an intrinsic property of any object but is a type of reaction which humans commonly have when encountering certain stimuli... to search for satisfaction is thus to engage with real objects in order to discover the degree and kind of their utility, whilst to search for pleasure is to expose oneself to certain stimuli in the hope that they will trigger a desired response within oneself.¹²

Superfluous goods, things unnecessary but desirable, and forms of luxury consumption emerging in the early nineteenth century provided the symbolic space for these

¹² Colin Campbell. *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*. Oxford: T.J. Press, 1987, p 61.

engagements because these kinds of commodities possessed a broad semiological potential to derive meaning from their interpretation by others, and thus worked suitability as the object towards which of pleasure seeking moved.

Understanding this, Campbell moves forward to explain the outcome of such material entanglements, constantly moving between experiences of longing, desire and fulfillment that never seem to satisfy individual fantasy:

The consumption of desire is thus a necessarily disillusioning experience for the modern hedonist, as it constitutes the ‘testing’ of his daydream against reality, with the resultant recognition that the reality of a thing never lives up to our vision of it. As a result of this, it is likely that the dream will be carried forward and attached to some new object of desire... in this way the modern hedonist is continually withdrawing from reality as fast as he encounters it, ever-casting his daydreams forward in time, attaching them to objects of desire, and then subsequently ‘unhooking’ them from these objects as and when they are attained and experienced.¹³

The experience that Campbell describes in this passage is admittedly more akin to the modern pastiche, as the outcome of a long development of mass commodity culture and increasingly effective advertising not visible in the same way in the early nineteenth century. Yet, this period is where such an experience finds its genesis, and as primary evidence will reveal, the internal questions, anxieties and *desires* that drove the consumers of this period reveal that such a process of aesthetic pleasure-seeking, longing and reverie formed a central part of the consumer ethos of the early nineteenth century.

Lastly, and briefly, I have found that my work has been profoundly influenced by theories of performance and performativity, espoused by many of the authors already mentioned, but in particular those ideas illuminated by Judith Butler in her germinal work, *Gender Trouble*. Butler maintains in her work that the supposedly naturalized system of heteronormativity (whether understood in terms of biology-as-destiny or

¹³ Campbell. The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism, p 87.

gender/sex as innate, internal human qualities) is wholly *illusory*. That is to say, it is discursively constructed, and is maintained and consolidated through a process which seeks to conceal its origins and assume a natural, universal status. Taking her methodological cue from Foucault on the question of the discursive production of sex (and the body), this point is best explained in the third chapter of the text via a direct reference to Foucault's own work:

For Foucault, the body is not 'sexed' in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an 'idea' of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is a historically specific organization of power, discourse, bodies and effectivity.¹⁴

This essentially takes the categories of gender and sex as they have been defined in discourse and inverts them. In essence, any idea which proclaims that gender and sex represent the natural status of the body, one that is predicated on any number of proofs (biological, structural, based on the law of the father, or the incest taboo etc...) is in fact a discursive production itself, one which is invoked to reify and stabilize naturalized conditions of sex and gender to construct and maintain a given hierarchy.

Ultimately then, what Butler does is use the very discursive status of gender and sex to demonstrate what can only be the logical outcome of such an orientation: if gender and sex are produced and maintained discursively, then it follows that what inheres these categories with the appearance of stability is a repeated set of engagements, or performances: "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results."¹⁵ If there is the appearance of a stabilized binary which is regimented via a compulsory

¹⁴ Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990, p 117.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 33.

heterosexuality, this is only because such a system has (and continues) to exercise disciplining technologies to promote and conceal the produced nature of these categories, rendering them with the appearance of a natural or universal denomination: “the ‘unity’ of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality.”¹⁶ For me, what is most interesting and useful about Butler’s work is her analysis of performance within a deeper Foucauldian reading of the discursive and the genealogical. Not to take away any of the explanatory or transformative power of performance for gender or queer theory (where it undoubtedly has worked to reveal the illusionary status of binary and hegemonic orders of gender, sex, and sexuality), performance is an important lens through which to investigate and analyze consumption and material engagements. It contributes to and produces material relationships and consumer outcomes on the basis, or perhaps based on a perceived impetus of the need to conform to a particular sense of style, taste, class, and to fulfill gender expectations.

All material engagements are mediated through a lens of performance, whether they are viewed as the most trivial of activities (the wearing of gloves on certain occasions or at certain hours) or the most meaningful (proper dinner etiquette and spatial adornment). No consumer act happens or can happen in a vacuum outside of performance, because to consume is understood as performing the role of the consumer. That said, it does not immediately seem clear what the stakes of performance are, if its presence in consumption is so totalizing. However, what makes performance important in this (and any other) investigation is its particular intricacies (expressions) in this moment of British history; that is, how the execution of performance correlates to coercive social

¹⁶ Butler. Gender Trouble, p 42.

and cultural forces, and the stakes that are involved at the level of consumers. This can say a great deal about how that society considered the relationship between desire and respectability; or, to put it another way, stability. The position that material possessions maintain in any culture is constantly in flux, being negotiated and renegotiated between bodies and spaces. Performance, then, provides one way among others to examine these engagements and try to determine how these contemporaries feel about goods, what significance they attach to them, and why.

In different ways, and to varying degrees, all three of these theoretical points have worked their way into my research, my analysis and my writing throughout this process, and have thus come to form the constituent sources of my own ideas and arguments. Each chapter of this project will undoubtedly touch upon all of these theoretical understandings to a certain extent, though it is possible to align each of the following chapters as interested in exploring one of these theories through the primary source material more prominently than the other two. The first chapter, which examines etiquette manuals and periodical articles will reveal most especially how contemporaries were thinking about consumption and behavior in the context of performance (of class, of gender etc...) while the second chapter, focused on analyzing a number of diaries from the period, will reveal to a certain extent the psychology of individual consumers, what drove them and constrained them, with a particular focus on internal anxieties that were experienced over new feelings of a desire for things that seemed to fall outside of the old hallmark of goods of utility, purpose and function. The last, which explores a number of 'novels of fashion' or *Silver Fork Novels*, will illuminate the crucial importance of space in the construction of material relationships

IV: Historical Context

This period in Britain witnessed a number of external and internal events that threatened the social and political stability of the nation. At the same time, the encroaching forces of commerce, trade and industrialization were continuing to push for greater economic resources and government support while Britain was dealing with external conflicts. It seems fitting to begin by highlighting the intractable legacy of the French Revolution. This is primarily because it is events that come to define the revolution – the storming of the Bastille, the Regicide of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette – that produced a concerted conservative backlash against the revolution in Britain, which came to view the uproar in France as a direct threat to the traditions of the nation. Of course, the impact of the French Revolution is not just a French, or British story, since its consequences were felt across Europe, as is summarized helpfully by T.C.W. Blanning in *The Nineteenth Century*: “Similar developments in European politics owed much to a broadly shared chronology caused by events on a continental or global scale... the first phase, covering the first decades of the century, was the aftermath of the French Revolution.”¹⁷ However, the English response is important to understand at least at a basic level, since the revolution in France coincided in Britain with ongoing reform movements, which is really where the seeds of this political crisis were sown: “To others, including some of the opposition Whigs, and radical groups outside parliament, the revolution carried a more positive message. The attack on the monarchy, priesthood, and

¹⁷ T.C.W. Blanning, ed. *Short Oxford History of Europe - The Nineteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p 12.

aristocracy in France encouraged them to continue the cause of reform.”¹⁸ Herein lies the essential the experience of the French Revolution for the British, or at least the British parliament and government, which viewed events in France as clear proof of the consequences of too sudden a change in the traditional operating structures of the government and society as a threat to traditional sources of power.

Even more frightening to those Tories and more moderate Whigs in parliament was the possible inspiration (if not direct example) the revolution provided for those already clambering for reform, even though the reform bill proposed in 1793 was defeated handily in a vote of 282 opposed to only 41 in favor.¹⁹ From ‘Friends of the People’ to Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, many chose to interpret the ongoing revolution in France as part of a broader movement towards liberty and personal self-determination. So much was this at least perceived to be the case by those in power, that while holding a convention at Edinburgh in late 1793, the government decided that the only effective response left to take was to suspend Habeas Corpus temporarily and prosecute many radical leaders for crimes of high treason.²⁰ In sum, it is important to understand that Britain entered the nineteenth century against this backdrop of internal instability and continental fears of war with France and revolution spilling over into its borders. And, “ironically, the measure taken by the government (to stomp out radicalism) produced the situation it had most feared. The reformers’ failure to make progress by open, constitutional means... drove some underground into a murky world of clandestine

¹⁸ John Ramsden and Glyn Williams. Ruling Britannica – A political history of Britain, 1688-1988. London: Longman Press, 1990, p 141.

¹⁹ Ibid. p 144.

²⁰ Ibid. p 147.

activity.”²¹ In effect therefore, even measures taken to quell the rising tide of calls for reform produced more internal, if invisible, sources of instability, not less.

At the same time as revolution and eventually war with Napoleon were putting external stress on the nation and its economic and political status, the forces of industrialization, trade and commerce were continuing to cause sweeping socio-cultural changes across the countryside. In a process that began long before the Revolution in France, trade and industry came to dominate the eighteenth century in Britain especially, as a source of national pride and intellectual conversation. Paul Langford emphasizes commerce in particular as a central pillar of emerging British nationalism in the eighteenth century, explaining that “faith in commerce and commercial growth worked so effectively at so many levels of society to unite private aspirations and public goals. Trade was an eighteenth century icon uniting otherwise diverse interests... it provided thinkers and writers with a topic of inexhaustible interest... it was indissolubly joined with favorite British values.”²² Langford views the growth of a credit society and the emergence of an ‘industrious revolution’ whereby the domestic economy became increasingly orientated towards and reliant upon the public marketplace, as telltale signs that the eighteenth century witnessed the beginnings of a movement towards mass forms of production, consumption and culture.

In particular, Langford’s exploration of the emerging credit system is fascinating because it reveals a specific movement away from a reliance on the ‘real’ value of things and currency and towards a more interpretative, though no less regulated, system of exchange: “The system of credit rested on reputation, a judgment on the value of other

²¹ Ramsden and Williams. *Ruling Britannica – A political history of Britain, 1688-1988*, p 149.

²² Langford, Paul ed. *Short Oxford History of the British Isles – The Eighteenth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p 13.

members of the community, on the confidence that the debtor would make payment in due course, that the bill and note were no more than worthless scraps of paper. The development of a culture of civility and politeness... were essential to credit-worthiness and business success.”²³ That last point is crucially important, because it contextualizes the push made by conservative discourse for certain forms of consumer behavior and etiquette in the marketplace in purely economic terms. The success of a business could hinge on the credit-worthiness of its patrons, and so it makes sense to want to codify and spread a system of consumer etiquette that was observable and identifiable in order to protect business interests - on top of the already expressed goal of nurturing a ‘respectable society’. To this there can be added another image as well, one illustrated helpfully by Colin Heywood in his work on the nineteenth century: “the industrial revolution had thrown up a new figure of the self-made man; someone who had risen from rags to riches on the basis of sheer hard work... he was, in truth, something of a myth.”²⁴ Even as a myth this kind of narrative served an important function: to unify otherwise disparate groups under the common banner of commercial self-interest and to inspire greater productivity and economic activity on the part of the consumer.

To be sure, however, industrial expansion was as much a ‘real,’ physical process as a social and cultural movement. It is perhaps understood best by looking at two of its constitutive elements, the real economic growth and expansion brought by the industrial revolution and a consumer revolution ongoing as well during the eighteenth and spilling into the nineteenth century. It is clear from much that has been written about the period by historians, that Britain underwent dramatic economic expansion over the course of the

²³ Langford. Short Oxford History of the British Isles – The Eighteenth Century, p 166.

²⁴ Blanning. Short Oxford History of Europe - The Nineteenth Century, p 57.

eighteenth century in real economic terms. For example, Ramsden and Williams describe the period this way:

Stretched across the length of the eighteenth century industrial output increased almost fourfold, home consumption trebled, and exports increased more than sixfold... Clearly, no analysis of the economy can ignore this growth... By the outbreak of war in 1793 many of the developments and technical innovations associated with new industrialism were already in place. In the early 1700s had come Darby's breakthrough when he developed the smelting of iron with coke; in the middle decades of the century Watt's steam pumping-engines; and in the 1780's Cort's puddling and rolling process which made possible the large scale production of bar-iron.²⁵

Though this illuminates but a scattered and incomplete picture of the scale and momentum of industrial change during the eighteenth century, it is enough to capture some idea of the various ways in which new technologies and innovations dramatically altered labour, the nature of work and the productive capacity of the British economy. It is enough to say the culture of mass production and consumption of the later nineteenth century found its origins in these technical and productive innovations of the eighteenth.

At the same time as industrialization was inexorably remodeling the British landscape, the eighteenth century also bore witness to another revolution of consumerism, one which formed a symbiosis with industrial processes and carried them forward with greater momentum. What is critical to understand is how increasing consumer demand and industrial/commercial growth formed constituent elements of the same revolutionizing process. So, while the British landscape was being transformed in the north by factories, canals and coal mines, Britons were themselves engaging in what Langford refers to as "orgies of consumption."²⁶ I would argue that the consumer society of the eighteenth century existed on a scale that was minute in stature in comparison to

²⁵ Ramsden and Williams. *Ruling Britannica*, p 132.

²⁶ Langford. *The Eighteenth Century*, p 201.

the Victorians who followed after, but nevertheless a clear movement towards increased consumption is present in this period: “a consumer revolution, based on luxury goods such as books, newspapers, prints, paintings, domestic artifacts, and furnishings, clothes and personal accouterments... underpinning this efflorescence of leisure and luxury was the notion that consumption of the *appropriate* activities and objects in an *appropriate* way was a life-enhancing experience” (italics added).²⁷ The last point raised by Langford here is of particular importance, because it speaks again to a British culture that internalized and comprehended material transactions and relationships along lines of conformity, civility and respectability.

The overarching message is clear: the growing fruits of industrialism were met with an equally growing demand for things, facilitated in part by an expanding marketplace that such industrial processes were able to foster and support, and also by an increased turn towards aesthetic pleasure seeking expressed in a desire for *things*, as Maxine Berg identifies in *Consumer and Luxury*: “It (consumption) can be linked to a new form of ‘hedonistic self-consciousness’ that was emerging as a product of romanticism in the early nineteenth century... One defining feature of the romantic movement was the preoccupation with ‘expansion,’ of both emotional range and experience. In response, domestic objects and architecture were often designed to evoke the exotic, in terms of place and past.”²⁸ This explains in part the steady flow towards a particular form and style of material good or space, as an outlet and expression of individual emotions. But, as Berg continues to explain, there was a unique eighteenth century sentimentality attached to these material goods as well, one that carried forward

²⁷ Langford. *The Eighteenth Century*, p 188

²⁸ Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford. *Consumers and Luxury – Consumer Culture in Europe, 1650-1850*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, p 14.

into the early nineteenth century as a means of understanding and interpreting the value of goods for contemporary consumers:

What of the new commodities of the eighteenth century? What was their attraction to consumers? On the one hand, these were commodities conveying a new appreciation of ‘decency’ and ‘utility’ in middle-class domestic environments. On the other, they were novelties, fashion goods, and new things. They included new luxury and semi-luxury clothes, light furnishings, ornaments... they undermined the uniformity and clear social hierarchies previously imposed by sumptuary legislation, and made individuality and variety an option to much broader parts of society.²⁹

The tension between these two forces cannot be understated in its importance in understanding the early nineteenth century marketplace. Goods continued, as they had previously, to be markers of civility, taste, class, and gender. Yet, at the same time, they increasingly came to emblemize individual choices and agency, in short, the performance and expression of self. This tension is in many ways what gives this period in Britain its status as a unique social and commercial setting, one where the demands of individual choice and expression came up against the perceived need for civility, conformity and above all stability. Ultimately, it is most important to understand that the combined forces of industrialization and increasing consumerism worked to produce a landscape in Britain that was undergoing intense and oftentimes uneven change, which, as the example of credit indicates, was prone to uncertainty and upheaval.

Taken as a whole, it is clear that the nineteenth century was a period of incredible change, as is pointed out by T.C.W. Blanning: “to live in nineteenth century Europe was to witness social change on a scale that was both exhilarating and disturbing. It was exhilarating in that the developments associated with the Industrial and French revolutions encouraged hope of conquering some of the age-old scourges of humanity...

²⁹ Berg. “New Commodities, Luxuries and their consumers in 18th century England,” in Consumers and Luxury, p 66.

at the same time it was disturbing in that these same revolutionary forces appeared to threaten the whole fabric of society.”³⁰ Such change weaved its way through the contexts of social, economic and political life in a number of ways. So for example in Britain, calls for political and economic reform, fears of violent revolution, global war with France, Napoleon’s continental system, all of these events are linked to the legacy of industrialization and the French revolution. It is also evident, therefore, that the early nineteenth century was, at least for Britain (though many other European countries are swallowed up by the Napoleonic war and other crises) one of successive internal and external conflict: “Britain’s history in the early part of the century can be told as a succession of crises averted or postponed by a mixture of concessions and repression by a powerful and confident ruling elite united in its determination to defend the system against democratic disruption.”³¹ As will be revealed, emphasizing etiquette and codifying forms of ‘proper’ consumer behavior was one way that those who considered themselves ‘taste-makers’ exercised their perceived power over consumers in an attempt to create a uniform and regulated marketplace.

Important to understand, though, before moving forward, is that Britain in the early nineteenth century is also distinguishable from Britain in the Victorian period, and that the often-drawn link between the two as part of the same period of mass production is not a satisfactory way to define the pre-Victorian landscape. In F.M.L Thompson’s *The Respectable Society* this is clarified early on in the book, as a means of setting up a distinction between the 1830s and the *fin de siècle*:

Transformation was a long drawn-out process, longer drawn out than the coming of machines and power and the transformation of the means of production. The

³⁰ Blanning, *The Nineteenth Century*, p 23.

³¹ Blanning, *The Nineteenth Century*, p 34.

making of the working class, one thought to have been accomplished by 1830, is now placed firmly in the 1890s; and many of the features of modern society, trivial and profound, from smaller families to bacon and eggs, from production-line working to fish and chips, or from class politics to branded foods, only make a strong appearance in the closing years of the nineteenth century... the economy and society of the 1830s, then, was not grossly distorted by the political mirror of the first reform act. Factory industry and urban concentrations were present but not in sufficient proportion to eclipse the familiar world of farm and workshop, labour, costumer, and trader, village and small town.³²

In the early nineteenth century, Britain was in the process of industrialization but not yet industrialized or prominently urban. At the same time, elites and tastemakers were seeking to classify and produce narratives about goods that fit into a larger story about the nation and worked to stabilize traditional hierarchies related to class, gender, and sociability, while it was still suffering the after-shocks of successive crises and a long drawn-out war with France. In essence, the early nineteenth century in Britain was unique precisely because it cannot be neatly defined as a seamless extension of those social and economic changes undergone in the eighteenth, or mark the beginning of a truly urban, mass production/industry based society. Rather, it stood at a crossroads between both. In discussing the opening of the first public railway line in coincidence with the passage of the first reform act, Thompson captures vividly the special quality that this period possessed: “Reform essentially glanced backward with an approving eye on the traditional order which it sought to buttress, and the railway pointed forward into the unknown territory of urbanized and industrialized society. Therein lies the kernel of their message: not that 1830 was some decisive turning point and outstanding landmark in social history, but that it stood in a particularly prominent way at the crossroads between

³² F.M.L. Thompson, *The Rise of the Respectable Society: A social history of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988, p 30.

the traditional and the new, neatly demonstrating the twin forces of continuity and change that are always at work in society.”³³

V: Chapter Breakdown

My thesis consists of three chapters, each of which explore different sources of primary evidence and discusses different topics related to the consumer culture of the early nineteenth century in Britain. The first chapter explores a particular manifestation of the conservative response to those forces that were shaping the British marketplace of the early nineteenth century by examining a sample of etiquette literature. Analyzing this literature will provide insight into how contemporaries framed discussions of social and consumer behaviour and encoded them within broader customs and traditions related to civility, elitism, propriety, respectability and gender. To put it another way, etiquette literature represented one form of response to the conflicting needs of consumers and the nation, and enshrined certain duties, performances and behaviors as acceptable consumer expressions while it delineated others as deviant. These categories were inter-related, in that all formed a part of an overall process whereby the consumer emerged as someone maintaining strict adherence to social and consumer customs. Ultimately, this chapter argues that elites and tastemakers attempted to exercise some form of control over the marketplace through their intervention into discourse about etiquette and consumer conduct. Furthermore, it contends that they framed this discussion within a conservative thematic, which reveals both their nuanced understanding of a changing consumer atmosphere and the fragile status of the nation in a tumultuous period.

The second chapter focuses on a number of diaries, and looks to reduce the discussion of consumer culture and material relationships to a more microscopic level,

³³ Thompson. The Rise of the Respectable Society: A social history of Victorian Britain, 1830-1900. pp, 13.

maintaining that even personal accounts of consumer experience provide evidence of the unique space that I identify as the early nineteenth century in Britain. Diaries and other forms of personal writing and correspondence form a unique body of primary source material in any historical work that is both beneficial and problematic. Problematically, and unlike the etiquette literature that will be analyzed in the first chapter, diaries and personal documents do not provide a space for broad or overarching contextual analysis. That is, they are confined in their subject matter and its implications to the lives that they document. At the same time however, they provide a window into affective and personal experiences that etiquette literature can only offer anecdotally. In these sources, it is possible to witness real consumer transactions and material engagements. That is, to witness a growing desire for consumer products in the experiences of individuals. The goal of this chapter then, is to explore consumption and questions of desire as they pertain to the experiences of individual men and women living during this period. This analysis will demonstrate that questions of performance, etiquette, space and gender were not merely hypothetical's confined to the pages of professional journals or manuals, but real and important considerations taken into account by contemporary consumers.

The third and final chapter takes as its focus a series of novels written during the early nineteenth century and the early Victorian period, about British culture and society in early 1800's. This sub-genre, known as *Silver Fork Novels*, or novels of conduct, explored the lives of elite and aristocratic individuals and families, with a particular focus on elite expressions of civility, etiquette, gender and taste. As a consequence, these novels were intimately concerned with questions of consumption and material culture. In fact, it could be argued that novels of this genre combined structures and themes from

etiquette literature and the personal/epistolary form of writing to generate fascinating stories about elite families and aristocratic life during the Regency period. The purpose of this chapter is to analyze a series of novels written in the period between 1826-1841 and examine questions of consumption, space and private spectacle as they relate to broader themes already discussed regarding the consumer marketplace of early nineteenth century Britain. For the purposes of this chapter specifically, I will argue that an emphasis on the display or 'performance' of goods contributed to the development of a consumerist ethos. These novels provide evidence for the relationship between commodities and spaces, and the growing importance of creating an environment of 'private spectacle' constitutes evidence of a developing material culture.

I will further explain how an emphasis on personal and domestic display, expressed in these novels, highlights the tensions of the marketplace at work. In these novels are characters that experience both the salutations of elite peers and their disgust, testifying to the fine line observed by contemporaries between proper and deviant forms of consumption. Finally, this chapter will contest that later public spectacles, which became popular in the Victorian period, were informed by these earlier domestic displays of goods. It must be stated that these novels centre on fictional settings, events and characters, though their interest in the regency period, and particularly surrounding questions of conduct (etiquette) and materialism make these sources relevant and useful for the purposes of this project. While recognizing that the use of fiction as a historical source presents certain limitations and complexities in terms of their reliability and scope, I argue that novels, and particularly social novels such as these, offer important insight into the period on the basis of interpretations drawn from contemporaries. To put it

another way, they extend the dialogue of the personal document into the public, and take questions about consumption, etiquette and fashion, and propel them into public discourse.

All three focus on the central question and argument that guides this project, regarding the often contradictory forces that coalesced to produce a unique marketplace in this early nineteenth century moment for Britain that deserves to be investigated and analyzed, in order to understand how it contributed to later economic developments and to add the historiographical record a context that has often been overlooked or given little attention. It is my goal that this work will complement what already exists in order to provide a more complete picture of the history of consumption and consumer culture in Britain. On top of this, this study will gesture towards the coming Victorian age, and demonstrate how these conservative narratives about consumption, etiquette and the marketplace formed the beginning of a process whereby cultural forces attempted to capitalize on the incredible semiotic potential of material goods to construct stories and myths as a means of regulating consumer conduct. In this instance, this is most visible in the coercive and often prescriptive tone attached to a discourse that was committed to seeing a consumer culture deeply entrenched in conservative values. In the Victorian period, following on the heels of the violent 1840's and continental revolutions, conservatives will once again turn to material goods and consumer culture in order to revise existing narratives about consumption to incorporate new and broader, though still immanently conservative messages. This is particularly evident in the story that will link consumption to Empire and construct the consumer as a citizenship of Empire, whose duty it is to consume for the good of the nation and the colonial project.

Chapter One: Etiquette and the performance of ‘the consumer’

I: Introduction

The importance of etiquette, mores and customs in the regulating of social behavior and in rendering that behavior intelligible to other observers is not unique to early nineteenth century Britain. In the context of Britain in the early nineteenth century however, the purpose of this opening chapter is twofold: I will introduce and define etiquette and surrounding notions of respectability, as they were understood in this period. Second, I will examine a sample of etiquette literature from the period and demonstrate how the codifying of consumer behavior through the publication of conduct manuals formed one key part of a broader conservative intervention into material culture. In essence, this literature will illustrate the intense importance that was placed upon social convention and the performance of respectability manifested in acts of refined, tasteful consumption. Specifically, it will address how notions of propriety and properness permeated through various rituals of etiquette, becoming of paramount concern to would-be consumers. What was most at stake in acts of consumption in this period was reputation and self-image. Maintaining proper etiquette in dress and domestic adornment was a necessary prerequisite to being accepted in the social world. Therefore, by acknowledging that strict notions of class, gender, taste, and civility were taken into consideration during any consumer transaction, what was really being affirmed through participation in material culture was consumer morality.

This particular genre of etiquette writing, with its specific focus on displays and consumption, forms part of a broader response to new marketplace possibilities coming up against social and political uncertainty. An expanding marketplace of *things* appealed

to a growing swath of would-be consumers while a strong emphasis on social conformity produced at least the appearance of cohesion and unity. The desire for such an illusion of stability is not surprising, considering that the early nineteenth century still had fresh in its collective psyche the image of the French Revolution, and Britain was still waging a global war against Napoleon while the country was experiencing incredible economic and geographical tumult as the process of industrialization carried on. Regulating material culture and consumers represented one way that a conservative backlash to various crises responded to the perceived needs of the nation. Conformity and unity were instilled into the marketplace through the codifying of certain consumer practices as ‘proper’ and the condemnation of others as ostentatious or profane. The juxtaposition that was formed within this literature between proper consumers and deviant ones served to curtail expressions of individual taste and adornment that were viewed as ‘outside’ of accepted etiquette while it advocated styles and goods that reinforced distinctions of class, gender, and sociability.

The etiquette manuals discussed in this chapter represent, more than anything, an introduction into the subject matter and its context in the period, rather than a specialized analysis of any one particular author or publication. What is most important here is to reveal, if only by touching the surface of a vast archive of material, how etiquette formed part of the response to a growing consumer marketplace in tandem with a society looking for sources of comfort and calm in a time of internal and external stress. It makes sense, as has already been noted, for etiquette literature in particular to fulfill a role as a moderator of consumption because it provided a stage for those with ‘expert credentials’ to proclaim and codify sets of behavior expected to be followed by consumers

increasingly exposed to new goods and fashions. Such expertise was often claimed by the authors of this literature during the process of writing, and represented more than anything a perceived mastery of style that compelled them to produce manuals of conduct and self-fashioning. At once etiquette writing elevated and complimented new styles and fashions, providing some direction for individual pathos and desire while it reasserted distinctions of class, civility, taste, and gender centred on propriety and ‘properness’ in consumer choices.

For the purposes of this analysis I have selected three sources of information to draw from. Two come in the form of etiquette manuals, *Etiquette for Gentlemen* (1838) and *Etiquette for the Ladies* (1837), while another comes in the form of a general interest magazine marketed towards women: *The Lady’s Magazine*. With regards to the last source, which has an impressive circulation period of over 60 years (1770-1837), I have pulled various snippets from issues in 1801 that deal specifically with consumption, fashion, and etiquette. The first two sources deal explicitly with codes of conduct and etiquette expected to be followed by consumers desiring to participate in the marketplace. Helpfully, these two sources also cut across gender lines, which will allow for a more nuanced understanding of the particularities of etiquette as they related to men and women separately. Most importantly in these two sources though, is how they related notions of conformity and the maintaining of proper etiquette to acceptance in the social world as well as the consumer marketplace. The final source addresses questions of etiquette and fashion in a different way, through anecdotal stories and personal tracts. The two pieces that I have pulled out for examination are a call for the formation of a parliamentary committee on dress, and a story told in the form of an advice column. The

first provides additional evidence for the growing prominence of certain forms of materialism in the early nineteenth century, and the apparent need that was advocated by many to regulate consumer culture in order to maintain the moral health of the nation. The second piece is purely anecdotal, and relates the story of a wealthy lady who aspired to recognition as one of the fashion elite. In it, the author tacitly, and in some cases explicitly, draws attention to many of the transgressions against propriety and etiquette that the lady was guilty of committing. By looking at these three avenues of etiquette discourse, this chapter shows how etiquette manuals and related publications framed discussions of material culture and the consumer within narratives about individual propriety, respectability and sociability as a means of directing consumer behavior. As such, these manuals and publications provided a platform for the construction and articulation of conservative messages about goods and consumers that sought to utilize material culture to reinforce and stabilize traditional hierarchies of class and gender. Etiquette literature, by producing definitions of material culture and the consumer that were closely linked to distinctions of taste, class, gender and propriety, sought to mold the consumer culture of the early nineteenth century into a crucial aspect of British stability.

II: Charles Tilt & *Etiquette for Gentlemen*

Charles Tilt, born June 1797, was a prolific bookseller and publisher during his time involved in the trade between the late 1810s and the early 1840s.¹ In 1826, Tilt opened his own “extremely lucrative,” publishing and bookselling business at 86 Fleet Street in London.² Tilt’s business would become well known to his peers and the public

¹ “Charles Tilt,” The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Accessed July 1st 2013,

² Ibid.

(earning him various mentions in *The Times*), and was easily recognized by the display of illustrative volumes that occupied his store window.³ Tilt was a shrewd businessman and published based on popularity and demand. Though his store was probably most well known for its illustrative prints, Tilt also published gift books, annuals, children's books, travel literature, almanacs and etiquette literature.⁴ Tilt operated his business based on the simple policy that he would publish what the public demanded, and both of the etiquette manuals being analyzed here highlight that practice, each going through several editions.⁵ Tilt retired from his business in 1843 and began an extensive period of traveling the continent and the Middle East, even penning a children's book based upon his travels in Egypt and Syria.⁶ Tilt's business was enormously successful, earning him the notoriety of his peers and the public, and the popularity of his publications attest to the fact that Tilt had a particular skill for reading public demand and capitalizing on public interest. He published etiquette literature because it sold, which attests both the popularity of the genre and its relevance during this period in Britain. This discourse drew in a public deeply concerned about appearances and desiring to perform well in material and social settings as consumers and as respectable members of the community.

Etiquette for Gentlemen was written and published by Tilt in 1837 and provided a roadmap for young and inexperienced gentlemen to follow in navigating the marketplace and maintaining proper social conventions. As the author is quick to state, it was in no way an attempt to radicalize or reimagine etiquette, but rather a space to document some important lessons for gentlemen: "It is, of course, scarcely possible that anything *original*

³ "Charles Tilt," The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Charles Tilt would republish and update *Etiquette for Gentlemen* into a larger manual in 1838. The second edition of that manual is used here, while the fourth edition of *Etiquette for the Ladies* is used.

⁶ "Charles Tilt," The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

should be found in a brochure like the present: almost all that it contains must have fallen under the notice of every gentlemen who has been in the habit of frequenting good society.”⁷ This sentiment emphasizes the distinction between those gentlemen whose etiquette and conduct rendered them acceptable in the social realm against the inexperienced, suggesting that educating this group of ‘young men’ was critically important to maintaining social order. Also clear is that the intended audience for this work was not the poor or laboring classes, which would have had little use for etiquette regarding balls, fine dress and dinner parties, but rather for those men with the means (or aspiring towards them) and the interest in attending such social outings, and in appealing to fine taste in dress and show. Evident is the direct link that Tilt acknowledges between sociability and etiquette more broadly. Though it is not my argument here that the consumption of the lower classes is unimportant or irrelevant (which is of course not true), participation in the marketplace, measured by contemporaries and peers, required a level of wealth above the means of those who were not members of the middle-classes or the elite.

Tilt begins his manual by discussing the importance of dress in correlation to first impressions and immediately evident is that others measured appearance and appeal as a marker of civility, taste and status. Indeed, as Tilt explains, “first impressions are apt to be permanent; it is therefore of importance that they should be favorable. It is from the dress of an individual that you first form your opinion of him. It is even more prominent than manner. It is indeed often the only thing which is remarked in a casual encounter, or during the first interview,” and Tilt goes on to list some of the social and economic stakes involved in dress, “what style is to our thoughts, dress is to our persons. It may supply the

⁷ Charles Tilt. Etiquette for gentlemen. London: 86 Fleet Street, 1837, v.

place of more solid qualities, and without it the most solid are of little avail. Numbers have owed their elevation to their attention to the toilet. Place, fortune, marriage, have all been lost by neglecting it.”⁸ In other words, dress and appearance formed one, if one particularly important, part of the process whereby the individual consumer defined himself and performed in the marketplace and the social world. Most importantly, Tilt grounds this performance within the context of propriety in manners and fashion. In a critical way, outward appearances animated the moral character of the gentleman to peers and observers. Improper or inadequate attention paid to dress, as Tilt makes evident, resulted in any number of negative outcomes, from the loss of possible business contacts, to the loss of stature and even the end of possible courtships. Clearly, the stakes for dress were high, and they appealed in this case both to a desire for conformity and a demand for performance, either of class or taste, civility and gender, all defined within the umbrella of ‘properness’.

Not satisfied with merely stating the importance of dress however, Mr. Tilt continues to explain a number of rules regarding dress in an attempt to highlight the various ways that dress can be used to conceal certain social (read physical) ‘deformities’:

Your dress should always be consistent with your age and your natural exterior. That which looks outré on one man, will sometimes be agreeable on another... if, for example, you have a stain upon your cheek which rivals in brilliancy the best Chateau-Margoux; or, are afflicted with a nose whose lustre dims the ruby, you may dress so that the eye, instead of being shocked by the strangeness of the defect, will be reconciled at least, if the not charmed, by the graceful harmony of colours... the effect of the frock coat is to conceal the height. If, therefore, you are beneath the ordinary stature, or much above it, you should affect frock coats on all occasions that etiquette permits.⁹

⁸ Charles Tilt. *Etiquette for Gentlemen*, p 9.

⁹ *Ibid.* p 10-11.

The stakes therefore become clearer as the document continues in its expose on dress. Acute knowledge of clothing and attention to fashion can have the affect of ameliorating striking physical qualities that might otherwise be debilitating in social situations, while simultaneously affirming the delicate tastes and commitment to respectability in dress of the individual. This is illustrated in Tilt's caution regarding ensuring expert dress before attending a social outing: "Before going to a ball or party it is not sufficient that you consult your mirror twenty times, you must personally be inspected by your servant or a friend." The reason for this becomes clearer when Tilt introduces a personal anecdote: "I once saw a gentlemen enter a ball-room, attired with scrupulous elegance, but with one of his suspenders curling in graceful festoons about his feet. His glass could not show what was behind."¹⁰ This mishap overshadowed the gentleman's otherwise careful attention paid to personal adornment, and at once the image of respectability and propriety he had worked to obtain is threatened by a wardrobe malfunction. What is at stake however reaches beyond the casual observations of some critic. Rather, this example is meant to illustrate more broadly the consequences for inadequate attention paid to self-fashioning and not following the rules of proper dress.

The reasons behind such a regulated system of social conventions should also be clear, participation in the upper echelons of social life mandated a certain level of cultivation in consumption, to be distinguished from those who did not possess such a level of taste and civility and therefore did not form part of this elite marketplace. In order to express this point, Tilt once again relies on an anecdote about an individual known for his lack of concern for etiquette in dress: "if the benefits to be derived from cultivating your exterior do not appear sufficiently powerful to induce attention, the

¹⁰ Charles Tilt. Etiquette for Gentlemen, p 12.

inconveniences arising from to great a disregard may perhaps prevail. Sir Matthew Hale, in the earlier part of his life, dressed so badly that he was once seized by the press-gang.”¹¹ Again, this example introduces a public element to fashion and dress and attaches the importance of etiquette to acceptance and success in the social world. It should also be reiterated that luxury consumption requires means. Therefore, even though this particular source describes a marketplace that seems exclusive rather than broad, that has more to do with the ability to consume conspicuously than a diminishing of the importance of social and consumer conventions. In fact, Tilt makes sure to clarify that excellence in dress is about much more than simple ornamentalism: “when we speak of excellence in dress we do not mean richness of clothing, nor manifested elaborations. Profusion of ornaments, rings, charms, etc.. are in bad taste. Faultless propriety, perfect harmony, and a refined simplicity, -- these are the charms which always fascinate... A gentleman will always be tastefully dressed... avoiding foppery on the one hand and carelessness on the other.”¹² In this passage, Tilt helpfully clarifies the distinction between tasteful adornment and ostentation, locating consumer propriety within, as he states, ‘a perfect harmony’ and ‘refined simplicity’ in self-fashioning. At once the proper consumer was tasked with dressing in such a way that reflected his rank in society while at the same time avoiding foppery or excess in personal adornment.

I wish to draw attention also to another section of the text, one that deals with etiquette at the dinner table, because it provides fascinating and nuanced insight into the negotiations of etiquette and expressions of material culture in a social context. After all, the consumption of fine foods with luxury silverware and dinnerware is as ripe with

¹¹ Charles Tilt. *Etiquette for Gentlemen*, p 13.

¹² *Ibid.* p 12.

potential sources of appropriate and inappropriate consumer behaviour as personal dress is. Here, more than anywhere else in the tract, Tilt goes into great detail to explain proper dinner etiquette and its consequences, beginning fittingly with the announcing of dinner:

When dinner is announced, the host rises and requests his guests to walk to the dining room. He then offers his arm to the lady of most distinction in the company, and leads the way thither. He is followed by the lady of the house, conducted by the gentlemen who has the greatest claim to this honour... on entering the dining-room, the host seats the lady whom he had conducted thither close beside himself; take his stand behind his chair, and directs the rest of his guests to their appointed places. To perform faultlessly the honours of the table, is one of the most difficult things in society.¹³

The symbolic importance of this event in the dinner party is readily apparent. The entire act, it would seem at least, could be compared to the performing of an olden dinner ceremony on a stage as part of a play. The host and hostess provide the lead, while the other actors clamber behind them, each with a specific duty in order to perfect the performance. Keeping in mind of course, that the actual act of eating dinner has yet to begin, so much is invested in the act of arranging and seating the guests, precisely because this reflects directly on the etiquette and civility of the host. Everything is on display for the guests of the party, which means that every moment represents an opportunity for judgment and critique should something seem out of place, improper or excessive.

After this, Tilt details the process of actually eating dinner, which if anything, was even more complicated and laced with risk than the ceremony of entering the dining the room:

When you are helped to anything at a dinner table, do not wait, with your plate untouched, until others have begun to eat. This stiff piece of mannerism is of frequent recurrence in the country, and indeed among all persons who are not thoroughly bred. As soon as your plate is placed before you, you should take up

¹³ Charles Tilt. Etiquette for Gentlemen, p 28.

your knife and arrange the table furniture around you, if you do not actually eat. Fish is eaten with a fork, a knife not being used at all. The fork is held in the right hand, and a piece of bread in the left. For any dish in which cutting is not indispensable, the same arrangement is correct. Never use your knife to convey your food to your mouth.¹⁴

Everything is given its due consideration, from the appropriate time to wait for a dish, to the manner in which to pass it along, to the arrangement of silverware and dishware, the manner in which a specific food is meant to eaten or not eaten. Every act at the dinner tables served as another opportunity for critique or judgment at the hands of other would-be performers, and so the acting must be perfect to avoid scrutiny. This is not dissimilar to the stakes of personal fashion and dress. Inadequate attention paid to the dinner ceremony, just like inattention paid to dress, could result in negative reviews from peers and thus threaten the reputation of the host and hostess. To put it another way, poor reception of the dinner party could jeopardize the social standing of the host and hostess. At the same time however, inappropriate behavior from guests could also threaten their reputation, as Tilt makes clear: “Some persons, who cannot draw the nice distinction between too much and too little, desiring to be particularly respectable, make a point of appearing unconcerned and quite indifferent to enjoyment at dinner. Such conduct not only exhibits a want of sense and a profane levity, but is in the highest degree rude to your obliging host. He has taken a great deal of trouble to give you pleasure, and it is your business to be, or at least to appear, pleased.”¹⁵ Clearly, the stakes in this case were not dissimilar from those regarding dress, and proper attention to these and seemingly endless other social conventions in relation to material culture and consumer behavior

¹⁴ Charles Tilt. *Etiquette for Gentlemen*, p 31.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp 36-37.

were critical to the furnishing and maintaining of a reputation of propriety (inner-morality) and respectability.

III: *Etiquette for the Ladies*

The second etiquette manual I wish to analyze for the purposes of this chapter is directed towards female consumers, and, is also authored by Charles Tilt. As with the etiquette manual for gentlemen, Tilt begins his work by expressing the inspiration behind it:

The frequent and sudden changes in the observances of fashionable life, render a little manual of this sort necessary, to guard those who move not in the immediate circle of society in which such changes originate, from the violations of laws which, though often of the most ephemeral existence, are, for the time being, regarded with feelings of almost superstitious regard, and any departure from which is sure to subject the unhappy culprit to ridicule and contempt. It is hoped that, in the narrow space to which these Maxims have been limited, enough has been said to enable the reader to vindicate her claim to knowledge of the courtesies of life as practiced in the most polished and fashionable country.¹⁶

Two differences are immediately noticeable between this declaration and that offered at the beginning of the *Etiquette for Gentlemen*. First, the language has been altered to reflect the character of the women in relation to men. In this case, the author sees himself as the guardian of women and their virtue in etiquette and dress, protecting them from the consequences of poor consumer choices, and thus ascribing the feminine to a subservient and ignorant position. Secondly, Tilt draws attention to a particular quality relating to the ebb and flow of fashion, noting that fashion seems to move almost too fast to properly internalize. This confirms for Tilt the importance of an etiquette manual such as this, to clarify the rules of fashion and thus inhere the fashion marketplace with some semblance of cohesion, especially for those consumers most vulnerable to getting swept up in fashions of the moment.

¹⁶ Charles Tilt. *Etiquette for the ladies*. London: 86 Fleet Street, 1837, 5-6.

All of this notwithstanding, Tilt's primary concern, as in *Etiquette for Gentlemen*, is with the actual rules of fashion and conduct that women should be sure to follow. Unlike the other manual, this one follows no clear series of subsections but rather touches on different subjects unevenly, making it difficult to pull specific examples from the manual in any chronological order. Still, certain themes are clear in this manual, such as the importance of dress: "It is not considered proper for ladies to wear gloves during dinner. To appear in public without them—to sit in church or in a place public amusement destitute of these appendages, is decidedly vulgar."¹⁷ It is evident that women were not at all sheltered from the importance of strict social conventions regarding dress, as Tilt continues to explain: "In choosing a dress, it is of the first consequence that the colour suits your complexion. Good taste proscribes whatever would heighten or given undue prominence to personal defects. For a lady of warm complexion to wear a bonnet lined with white is in the worst taste—the striking contrast serves to make the face look still more ruddy."¹⁸ There are many examples such as these two, which read almost parallel to Tilt's advice for men, and once more evidence the incredible importance placed both on conformity and performance in consumer culture and personal adornment.

In another section, Tilt dutifully documents the care and delicate touch required in the furnishing of the dinner table and other rooms:

Two hints may... be allowed for the benefit of young and inexperienced house-keepers. In furnishing the dinner-table, variety is of more consequence than quantity, as no guest is supposed to partake twice of the same dish. In fashionable society vegetables are placed on the side-table, and are handed round to each guest. Light dinner-wines are placed on the table, along with covers, the number of decanters varying with the size of the party. Water is also placed on the table,

¹⁷ Charles Tilt. *Etiquette for the ladies*, p 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p, 41.

in small decanters, but other beverages are supplied by the attendants, as they are called for.¹⁹

Testimonials and stories from the *Lady's Magazine* will show that events at the dinner table had a real and lasting impact. To the issue at hand, though, the message again is clear, neither too much nor too little in the way of display and in the ceremony of eating was permissible. Rather, a balance was important for any hostess wishing to affirm her propriety as a consumer and her respectability as a woman. A direct connection was formed between the morality of the hostess and the properness of her material settings, just as a link was drawn by Tilt between personal dress and respectability. The real importance of material culture was its capacity to serve as a barometer for 'properness' more generally. Every decision, display, and personal fashion choice could be weighed and judged by observers and peers as reflective of that individual consumers' concern for propriety and respectability. Thus, success in the social world hinged on the appropriation of material practices and goods to serve as an example of the 'properness' of the consumer. And again, Tilt is careful to tease the distinction between too much and too little, arguing that excellent execution of consumption formed a middle space.

In fact, if there is any theme in Tilt's work that permeates through all of his advice, it is that consumer tastes should occupy a space that is neither too plain nor too ostentatious. The same rule also applies to spaces within the home: "good taste forbids too lavish a display of ornament; it looks as if you wished to impose on the sense of the company by a display of your wealth. A simple appropriateness of decoration will more recommend you to persons of taste."²⁰ Spaces were judged as extensions of the consumer, and were as open to critiques of clutter and ostentation as an individual who

¹⁹ Charles Tilt. *Etiquette for the ladies*, p 17.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p, 28.

was dressed too extravagantly. As a result, it was equally important to organize private displays in such a way so that they reflected refined elegance and simplicity, as it was to dress with these things always in mind. It is also interesting to note once more the shift in tone and language between the two manuals. Where there is an expectation in the first that all refined gentlemen will ‘already know’ how to perform well in the social and commercial world, the assumption repeatedly expressed here is that women begin from a state of ignorance to fashion and etiquette, and must be helped along vis a vis the advice of others. Of course what is most important for my purposes is the reissuing again of the stakes that are attached to proper etiquette and performance, in this example relating to spatial adornment. That is, that ideal practices and model behavior stemming from involvement in the marketplace (and elite social spaces) required adherence to proper modes and structures of etiquette and propriety in consumer decisions.

For female consumers in particular, the striking of a balance between simplicity and ostentation was critically important, as Tilt goes on to point out, “it is a feeling too prevalent among the young and inexperienced, that mere personal charms alone... are sufficient to secure permanent attention and respect. No mistake can be more fatal. How many fair starts, who have burst as it were on the world with only their beauty to recommend them, have, when the novelty of their appearance wore off, been doomed to suffer the darkest neglect!”²¹ This caution was directed towards women specifically, advising them not to rely solely on the beauty of youth. Rather, Tilt is emphatic that female consumers learn and appropriate the rules of fashion and etiquette early, so that they are able to mask and direct attention away from the signs of aging as they appeared. This particular outcome seems somewhat removed from the fears that men faced for not

²¹ Charles Tilt. Etiquette for the ladies, p 43.

conforming to proper conventions in etiquette and appearance, but the overarching message is similar between both manuals. Proper adherence to the rules of etiquette in fashion served the interests of individual consumers both by covering physical or mental deformities and projecting an attitude of propriety. This was understood most in striking a balance between expression (via performance) of self and strict adherence to properness in personal adornment: “if you wear ornaments they should always be of the best description. Paste beads and mosaic gold must be carefully eschewed. With refined few simplicity is the feature of greatest merit in ornament. The trifling, the vulgar-minded, and the ignorant, prize only what is striking and costly.”²² Once more the conversation is broadened beyond women simply wishing to be fashionable, and generalized in the form of Tilt’s argument that refinement and cultivated simplicity remain more important in personal and spatial fashioning than simple and vulgar affirmations of wealth. While this is not the same thing as bringing lower orders ‘into the tent’ of the fashionable marketplace, it does evidence the competing interests of conformity and self-expression, and the need above all, and regardless of rank, to conform to certain social conventions in consumption if the goal was to be viewed approvingly by peers and therefore to excel in the social world.

IV: *The Ladies Magazine*

The *Lady’s Magazine*, the final source under consideration here, is distinguished from the first two sources in that its contents introduce subject matter that extends beyond etiquette and into topics of domestic politics, foreign affairs, short fiction, fashion, and many others. That said however, very often there appeared within the editions of this magazine stories related to dress or anecdotes regarding etiquette. In fact, as a contributor

²² Charles Tilt. Etiquette for the ladies, p 51.

from the December 1801 edition argued, questions about dress appeared to reflect a prime concern of the nation: “there have been at all time violent disclaimers against an attention to dress, which has also had, from time immemorial, illustrious defenders. In fact, it is averred, that the most polished and enlightened nations have been precisely those that have been most addicted to the cultivation of the arts of dress,” the reason being, as the author writes, that “it seems as if there were an immutable analogy between a taste for the arts and a taste for dress, in such a manner that the latter may almost be considered a certain thermometer of the degree of the former.”²³ Emphasis in this case was placed upon the perceived relationship between dress and refinement or taste. This may explain in part why topics on dress and fashion continually appeared in the magazine, often being linked as they were here to broader questions about the nation or individuals, and their desire to be perceived as proper consumers.

I wish to draw attention to two specific pieces pulled from the 1801 edition of the magazine. Both are from separate issues in that year, and they provide additional evidence for many of the questions regarding etiquette and its importance to the marketplace already discussed here, while capturing helpfully how the push for conformity and civility was expressed in many different contexts. The first example comes in the form of an essay regarding ‘the importance of dress’. The author begins by defining dress and arguing for its importance mainly as a compensatory force: “Of the importance of dress we shall be fully convinced, if we consider that with some people it in a great measure constitutes what we call a gentlemen or a lady; and with others it has altogether this effect, no attention whatsoever being paid to any other qualification than

²³ “Essay on Dress,” *The Lady’s Magazine*. December 1801, p 635.

what are external.”²⁴ This language is very similar to that used by Charles Tilt in his mission statement, wanting to educate a public about etiquette some thirty-five years later, most particularly the belief that good dress could mask other shortcomings. However, this author carries this argument further, drawing a direct link between dress and the nation, and using this to call for the strict regulating of all dress and fashion: “if dress be of the great importance to the nation that I have stated; if without it we should be a nation of clowns and bumpkins, instead of fine ladies and gentlemen, ought not so great a concern be established upon certain fixed principles and laws, that we may not lie at the mercy of people who have, perchance, very little skill and ability?”²⁵ This argument extended calls for etiquette and the regulation of the marketplace to their extremes, calling for a specific regulatory body whose sole task would be the passage of legislation regarding dress and fashion.

In this case the underlying argument is stated explicitly, the connection between fashion and the nation is made directly, and the solution to a perceived imbalance between the importance of dress and the skill level of those currently tasked with the manufacture of it is proposed to be remedied by direct intervention and regulation. While not specifically outlining the rules of fashion and etiquette, the author of this tract embroils himself in the centre of an important conversation about material culture, recognizing even at this early moment in the century that consumerism is becoming more and more the activity of the day. The author is not ambiguous in his desire to see the state become involved in the process of shaping the marketplace:

My idea is to propose that a parliament should be summoned for the express purpose of weighing and considering all the grave and important matters of dress.

²⁴ “On the importance of dress,” *The Lady’s Magazine*. February 1801, pp 91-92.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p, 92.

In this, not a cap, not a ribband, a button, nor a button-hole, should be allowed to pass without having gone through all the regular forms of first, second, and third reading; with solemn debates from time to time, and suitable amendments etc... After the bill enacting a coat or a gown of such a particular description had passed, the tailors and mantuamakers might then proceed according to law, and make up the same for their customers. A parliament thus constituted, would soon have sufficient business to employ one week in each month to enact laws for the remainder of the said month. Their control should be over every article whatsoever that makes any part of dress; or, in other words, that constitutes a lady or a gentlemen.²⁶

A point could be raised that this is representative only of the sentiments of a single author concerned about the nation's public image, yet his calls for the regulation of dress clearly extend beyond any personal mission and touch upon common marketplace values. If anything, this author was drawing from what was already understood about consumerism and etiquette to make an idiosyncratic argument regarding the need for direct and real regulation as a means of maintaining national integrity. Given his closing argument, it is clear that his thoughts regarding dress in many ways mirror Tilt's writing about etiquette and its relationship to performance in the social realm: "if such a plan as I have now laid down had been carried into execution some years ago, our manufacture of ladies and gentlemen would have been greatly improved. We should not have seen, at one time, the whole female sex in a state of pregnancy; nor all the gentlemen of London with their necks swathed."²⁷ It is evident that concerns about fashion were far-reaching, and this author shared common anxieties regarding dress, fashion, the marketplace and the health of the nation.

The last piece under examination here is an epistolary fiction, in the form of an advice column authored by one of the magazine's contributors. In light of this, questions of etiquette and fashion were expressed by the writer implicitly as part of the story, rather

²⁶ ²⁶ "On the importance of dress," p 93.

²⁷ Ibid. p 94.

than forming its subject directly as was the case with the etiquette manuals and the essay on dress. Still, this piece is insightful because it provides a window into an imagined experience of the marketplace that identifies helpfully many of the rules of etiquette and conduct discussed so far in this chapter and contextualizes them in the experiences of the protagonist of the story, a lady of fashion. Thus, while it is presented as a fiction, the story was nevertheless interested in revealing many of the intricacies of the marketplace and material culture. The author begins by establishing the credentials of the lady about whom the story is concerned: “Sir, I am a woman of fashion, I have one of the most splendid mansions in London, and my lord allows me seven thousand pounds a-year.”²⁸ This is important, because it reveals the lady as an individual who, at least in her own regard, has successfully appropriated material culture (and thus followed the rules of the marketplace) into forms of sociability, becoming both a taste-maker and a socialite: “During the last season my parties were more crowded than any of my rivals; it was upon me that forgeries were most frequently attempted; and such was the eagerness of people of fashion to be able to say that they had been at lady ****’s, that had it not been for the constant attendance of Mr. Townsend, my house would have been taken by storm.”²⁹ Evidently, whatever she had done to make herself and her home appealing had the desired effect, attracting the most important audiences, those also wishing to be perceived as individuals of ‘fashion’. This is how the author of the column introduces the lady and sets the stage for her decline in the fashionable world.

The problem, as the lady goes on to explain, is twofold. First, there is the changing of the seasons, which, if she is to be believed, has had the effect of essentially

²⁸ “Fashionable Embarrassments,” *The Lady’s Magazine*. September 1801, p 464.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p, 464.

altering what is 'fashionable' almost completely. Second, and in relation to the first, what has become 'fashionable' is also problematic for the lady because it is now common, and therefore lacks the value attached to unique and exotic objects meant to attract the gaze of observers. Both points are explained briefly in the following passage: "But, sir, although my intervention continues as fertile, and my taste as refined, I am able to do nothing. Why did I ever experience the pleasure of creating amazement, and of occasioning despair? Flowers are now exhibited at every window, peaches are as plenty as potatoes, and anyone may purchase a pineapple for a half-a-guinea. What an enemy to happiness is an English Autumn!"³⁰ Ironically, it appears to be the very outcome of her former success that she laments here, that is, others appropriating her styles and objects of display and adornment. If anything, the author of the column is highlighting the extent to which fashion was susceptible to the banality of 'the common'. However, the statement is also important because it reveals something interesting about the experience of performance, even in a tightly constrained marketplace (the existence of which is never explicitly mentioned by is nevertheless understood by the lady). The lady personalizes both her experiences in their triumph and their failure, noting that what is lost is the *pleasure* she extracted from successfully meeting the criteria of etiquette in her appeal to other individuals of fashion. The experiences that she had therefore were both public and personal, as much about her as about her perceived propriety as a consumer. Whatever his motivation for personalizing the experiences of the lady, its inclusion in the story is evidence that the author also recognized this duality inherent in consumption, that it was both a personal experience and part of the process involved in making a public self.

³⁰ "Fashionable Embarrassments," p 464.

This is evident for example in a story the lady recounts about one of her failed attempts to reclaim the status she perceives she has lost as a desirable hostess and lady of fashion:

You cannot say that I have sat down in sullen inactivity. About a month ago, at our villa, I had the honour of the company of H.R.H. ****, the duke and duchess of ****, &c &c to breakfast.—well, I thought I was sure I should regain my éclat, as I had two dishes, by producing which I had at once violated the laws of nature and divers act of parliament. In the second course there appeared an omelet made of partridges' eggs, and a pair of roast moor-fowl. The dishes were, to be sure, in very great request, and I observed lady ***** turn as pale as ashes, and the honourable Mrs. ***** grow red with spite. But I had not enjoyed my triumph two minutes, when a gentlemen observed that the omelet was much better than the one of the same kind at alderman Greenfat's the other day.³¹

Again, she attempts to draw the focus towards her expertise and unique vision as a tastemaker by offering her guests exotic foods, only to be cast down once more when the guests of the party begin to reminisce about past encounters with the very food they are being served. All of these activities are assumed to follow the strict rules of etiquette required for the performance to be well received. Though, time and again the lady forgets the constant warning against ostentation and the show of luxury at the expense of simple refinement (almost certainly an intervention that the author makes into the story to highlight the negative consequences of ostentation at the expense of propriety).

Ultimately, the twin forces always at work in the marketplace of early nineteenth century Britain, the expression of self (through performance) and the adherence to strict social conventions, are illuminated here through a personal lens. Indeed, the very reason for choosing the epistolary form is because it allows for the narration of events involving the characters of the story to be personalized. The lady may not be real, but her experiences represent the consequences of desire coming up against the demand for conformity

³¹ "Fashionable Embarrassments," p 465.

through adhering to strict codes of etiquette and propriety. Even against the backdrop of all the internal and external strife that defined Britain in the early nineteenth century, the experience of a breakfast gone wrong, one assumed to have conformed to all necessary pretensions of etiquette while incorporating unique fashionable qualities, is revealing of how the paradoxical forces that produced this marketplace worked to muddle individuals who strived to navigate the ambiguous waters of conformity and performance.

V: Conclusion

What is most interesting about the author's story is its seeming ordinariness, at least among the elite and fashionable in society. Undoubtedly, those former breakfasts being referenced by the lady's guests were full of experiences just like those that she went through; indeed all events move this way in the ebb and flow of fashion, where one style once fashionable is in the next moment almost foreign to behold. What is important to understand about the story is that it is meant to illustrate this marketplace and social world in effect, not simply in theory as in the case with the etiquette manuals. As they are described, these are 'real' people of fashion, whose judgments matter dearly in the struggle for recognition as tastemakers. The story, in sum, is one example of how such a consumer society functions at the level of those most committed to obtaining recognition as men and women of fashion and taste. Most importantly, it evidences the delicate balance constantly being negotiated and renegotiated between etiquette and the real, underlying force that drives consumption, *desire*. Whether in the form of performance or expressed more vulnerably – as the lady does in her laments – it is desire that pushes back most forcefully against the forces of conformity and etiquette, though not

necessarily intentionally, but more likely as an unintended consequence, a reality that speaks to the incredible power of desire to shape demand.

The codifying of etiquette represented a key conservative intervention into material culture and the marketplace. Formulated around notions of propriety and respectability, rules of etiquette in fashion, dress, spatial adornment and ritual provided a basis for the measurement of a consumer's commitment to maintaining a standard (a performance) of refined, tasteful consumption. Success in appropriating the rules and standards set for etiquette were equated with acceptance and excelling in the social world. This is because goods came to be viewed as outward evidence of individual propriety, and thus could be regarded as a barometer for an individual's commitment to principles of morality and civility more generally. Thus, a 'refined simplicity' as Tilt suggests was desirable while overtly cluttered or ostentatious displays of consumption were to be avoided at all costs. The stakes therefore are clear: conformity to codes of conduct and etiquette reflected an inner morality and projected it outward in refined expressions of materialism, while profane and vulgar material displays showcased individuals as vain and deviant consumers rather than respectable members of society.

In a period defined by internal and external crises, uniformity in the social world through the policing and regulation of material culture formed one part of a broader conservative response to the pressures exerted on the nation. As will be evidenced in later chapters, the importance of etiquette extended far beyond the pages of a professional manual or popular interest journal. Rather, what made the codifying of consumer conduct such a successful and powerful intervention into consumer culture was the capacity for these practices to permeate down through all the levels of society. Though this is not an

experience unique to this period, its effects on consumers are directly related to the specific crises that shaped Britain in this moment. Responses to the threat of instability came in the form of an energetic reshaping of the marketplace as a space where propriety and respectability dominated discourses about goods and consumption, a process that has already been discussed at length in this chapter. The next chapter will examine another element involved in the process of shaping consumer culture in the early nineteenth century in Britain, the growth of *consumer desire*. It is clear from this analysis that codes of etiquette were critically important in molding narratives about consumer goods and material culture, but it is equally true that emerging notions of desire and an advocacy of aesthetic pleasure-seeking actively shaped consumer attitudes and propelled consumer culture forward during this period.

Chapter Two: Conformity and Consumer Desire

I: Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze a number of diaries and journals ranging from the period of 1800-1837, and illuminate the changing nature of consumer and spatial relationships in a personal context during this period. In essence, this chapter forms one piece of a broader argument concerning the evolution and development of consumer culture in the early nineteenth century. This analysis will demonstrate that questions of performance, etiquette, space and gender extended far beyond the pages of a particular etiquette manual or publication. Rather, they informed choices and judgments of material culture at a most basic and personal level. Ultimately, this chapter will show how individuals in this period were internalizing and contending with a changing commercial dynamic. That is, one moving to incorporate new and reimagined motivations for consumption. Most importantly, I am interested in exploring questions of desire and pleasure as contemporary consumers identified them within these diaries, and how these very personal and individuated forces came up against the demands of a deeply conservative marketplace.

I will be analyzing four specific diaries that range in periodization from approximately 1799-1837, with a particular concentration in the period between 1800-1830. To be clear, I am not contending that four diaries represents the minimum possible to illuminate broad historical changes or to prove entirely that every individual with some level of purchasing power was experiencing similar tensions with regards to material relationships as the diarists. Nevertheless, I believe that these diaries provide critical insight and clarity into the personal nature of consumer relationships during this period,

evidencing the increasing importance and relevance of consumption in private life (and private spaces) and therefore illustrating that the position of material culture was undergoing immense change before the Victorian period. The decision to focus on these four diaries out of dozens that I encountered in the archives while in England represents an attempt to include individuals of different social classes, wealth, employment, gender, and location who participated in and wrote about consumption from varied perspectives. Their personal reflections on material culture detail in different ways how a desire for things came up against a consumer culture that curtailed expressions of individuality within a discourse of consumer propriety and respectability. Specifically, I will be looking at the personal diaries and correspondence of Richard Hodgkinson¹, William Holland², Miss. (Ellen) Weeton³, and Robert Sharp.⁴

Richard Hodgkinson was of modest birth and rose in status due to his skill and ambition, leading him both to wealth and great sadness in his life. William Holland was another man of considerable means, and as vicar of Overstowey he also possessed modest power and social privilege, as his continuing correspondence with the Duke of Somerset indicates. In conjunction with this, Holland was keenly aware of the increasing importance of ‘appearances’ and much of his detailing of consumption correlates to the relationship between goods and performance, especially in the context of domestic display. Weeton’s journal is almost entirely composed of her correspondence with friends and family, though there are moments where she records (seemingly at random) personal

¹ Kenneth and Florence Wood eds. *A Lancashire Gentleman: the letters and journals of Richard*

² Jack Ayers eds. *Paupers and Pig Killers: the diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson, 1799-1818*. London: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1984.

³ Ellen Weeton. *Miss Weeton’s Journal of a Governess*. New York: Augustus M. Kelly Publishers, 1969.

⁴ Janice and Peter Crowther, eds. *The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave: Life in a Yorkshire Village, 1812-1837*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997.

entries. Her story is one of immense tribulation and hardship; losing both parents while still a child, she was forced to make incredible sacrifices in order to ensure the education (and hopeful success) of her brother. As a result, she often had very little in the way of disposable income and as such little opportunity to participate in consumption. However, she gives intense accounts of her stays in various homes as a governess, and here she reveals her knowledge of conspicuous consumption and the importance of image. Finally, Robert Sharp worked as a school master in South Cave for nearly four decades, and in the same period also operated a shop for some time. On top of this, as one of the few residents able to read and write well, Sharp was constantly employed in various tasks from collecting taxes to measuring lands to writing probates. His diary contains a more critical reception of encroaching consumerism than the others, as he struggles with the need for progress measured against the costs of industrialization. Taken together, each diary highlights consumer tensions at a most basic level, as these four individuals contended with a changing commercial dynamic advocating for increased participation in consumption clashing with a dominant discourse that maintained a deep suspicion of unfettered consumption and prescribed a strict adherence to proper conduct in commercial and social engagements. These diaries illuminate the psychologies of desire and pleasure-seeking that were taking shape in this period and highlight the stakes - experienced on a personal level - that were involved in participating in the marketplace.

II: Diaries as a Source

Diaries form a unique primary source that provides a window into a personally shaped historical setting. At the same time, this source poses serious hurdles to the historian due to their lack of scope and attention paid to broad contextual interests. So for

instance, while diaries and other - perhaps more personal – ‘narrow’ sources can illuminate the affective status of various relationships within the context of an historical period, questions are often raised as to the extent that these more personal pasts can be appropriated to history more generally (i.e. what is their relevance?). Margot Finn perhaps best summarizes this problem in her article *Men’s Things – Masculine*

Possession in the Consumer Revolution:

As historical sources, diaries suffer from obvious limitations, most notably their preoccupation with the experience of exceptional individuals, the inevitably selective working of authorial recollection and the difficulty of determining the diarist’s intended audience. In published editions of journals... these limitations are exacerbated by the editorial process, which often excludes materials perceived to be inappropriate, marginal or simply lacking in historical interest to modern readers.⁵

Beyond questions of relevance to a broader historical context then, one of the perceived weaknesses of diaries is that their singular focus often makes them problematic as primary sources that are capable of providing the nuance and detail necessary to reveal something useful about the nature of historical movements.

On the other hand, and as Finn goes on to argue, many of the perceived weaknesses often ascribed to the diary can in fact be viewed as its strengths:

Daily journals afford a wealth of descriptive detail about economic activities that stretched over prolonged periods of time and extended beyond the immediate ambit of the individual diarist... As economic activity expanded in the eighteenth century, the diary’s function as a commercial record grew apace. Georgian women’s diaries, as Amanda Vickery’s research has revealed with particular éclat, provide a veritable ‘reference manual on the business of consumption and servicing a household’.⁶

In essence, Finn is arguing for a greater appreciation of diaries as a primary source that provides nuance by illuminating historical circumstances from an unabashedly human

⁵ Margot Finn, “Men’s Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution,” *Social History*. 25:2 (May 2000) 136.

⁶ *Ibid.* p, 136.

(affective) perspective. In relationship to consumption and consumer culture, diaries are especially helpful sources because they reveal important details that may be lost in more general analyses. Consumerism happens most basically on the level of individual transactions and material relationships, and neglecting these becomes incredibly problematic to any history that wishes to elucidate how and why a more consumer-orientated culture emerges and becomes dominant during the course of the nineteenth century in Britain. To put it another way, diaries provide nuance and insight into the nature of consumerism and material culture from an openly individuated perspective, laying bare anxieties, expressions of longing and desire, and vulnerabilities that are critical to understand, but may be overlooked in more survey-based approaches to historical analysis.

To this point I would add a further one: while diaries may be limited in scope to the lives of individuals, they nonetheless still form part of a broader narrative about locality and community. The individuals in these diaries do not exist in a vacuum, alone or cut off from others. Rather, they exist as part of a community, large or small. This means that their personal reflections on material culture and consumption are littered with references and anecdotes about public and social experiences. Thus, the conversation about materialism taking place in these sources, while primarily private and personal, does extend beyond the concerns of individual people. This is important to understand because it clarifies a key point of contention in this chapter. These diaries provide substantiating evidence regarding the weight of conservative pressures on the early nineteenth century marketplace and, most importantly, the development of a consumerist pathos centralized around pleasure-seeking and desire.

III: The diary of Richard Hodgkinson

The diary of Richard Hodgkinson reflects the life of an individual who rose from relative obscurity to great success after acquiring a position as a steward to a local gentleman. As a result, his journals provide unique insight into consumption from a pioneering member of the bourgeoisie. That is, someone who, through hard work and ambition, managed to overcome his modest origins and join the emerging consumer class. The editors of the diary emphasize the importance of this characteristic of Hodgkinson in the preface to the diary: “these parcels of documents reveal the everyday life of a resolute, self-made man during the dynamic years of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hodgkinson was a founder member of the bourgeoisie, but near to humble beginnings to have close relatives living in poverty.”⁷ Hodgkinson therefore represents a critical demographic, the *bourgeois* consumer, someone with both the financial means and the social impetus to participate in material culture. Hodgkinson’s diary is not specifically about consumption, but rather focuses on his professional and personal life. However, to the extent that Hodgkinson does relay some personal or anecdotal reflections relating to either consumption, adornment (in personal and spatial terms) or the performative value of proper display, it is clear that he emphasizes the growing prominence of material culture, especially as this relates to a broader conservative discourse about goods and their place in daily life.

There are two moments in the diary in particular that I believe are helpful to examine in full, as they both illustrate the complex nature of consumption in the context of performance. In each instance, the descriptions provided are of the homes of wealthy

⁷ Kenneth and Florence Wood eds. A Lancashire Gentleman: the letters and journals of Richard Hodgkinson, 1763-1847. London: Butler and Turner, 1992, p 1.

individuals and in each case, Hodgkinson is as meticulous in detailing the various spaces that make up the home, as he is passionate in his praise or criticism of their stature, style and adornment. In the first illustration, Hodgkinson is invited to the Slathrop house, the recently purchased summer home of Mr. and Mrs. Pye, while visiting Wiltshire in 1803.⁸ Very critical in his description of the home, it is important to quote the passage in full in order to bring into relief the specifics of Hodgkinson's impression:

The house I perceive must have cost a large sum of money, and still it is a little better than a heap of ruins. New sash windows have been put into most of the rooms. The dining room has been made out of no less than three rooms and here a new floor has been laid. The drawing room is small but it is in tolerable good condition. The stairs case are the worst I ever saw in any house which at any time had been the residence of a family and there is scarcely one step from the bottom to top that is perfectly sound and lies as it shd. Turning to the right at the top of the stairs is a door leading to a room which was the best bedroom but is now undergoing a complete repair and alteration, and is fitting up for a tea room so that now they will only have one spare bedroom in the whole house. The marble chimney piece is set up and a marble hearth laid in this new tea room, but no plastering is yet done. The door onto this room is not more than five feet from head of the stairs, and yet at the door the floor is six inches lower than at the stairs. The bedrooms are very mean. The kitchen and servants offices are low, dark, uncomfortable places. This part of the house will inevitably want taking down and indeed I understand it is Mr. Pye's intention to take them down as soon as his finances will admit it.⁹

To be clear, much of the problem that Hodgkinson finds with the house is related to its poor structural condition. However, in conjunction with the amount spent on it (he estimates that it probably cost about 3000 pounds), Hodgkinson explains that the house does not appear to befit the status of its owners – ‘the house I perceive must have cost a large sum of money, and still it is little better than a heap of ruins’ – while further noting that responsibility for the houses deplorable state lies with Mr. Pye, who has been fixated on renovating the grounds of the house rather than its interior: “the money has been laid

⁸ Wood. *A Lancashire Gentlemen: the letters and journals of Richard Hodgkinson, 1763-1847*, pp 167-173.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp, 170-171.

out to better advantage in the Grounds than in the House.”¹⁰ Ideally, all forms of material expressions, either large or trivial, are meant to affirm the status of the individual and thus align with the key conservative demand that material culture maintain a strict hierarchy in all its forms. As is clear from Hodgkinson’s dismay however, this does not appear to be the case with this particular estate.

Beyond this, there are also a number of subtle hints in the passage that suggest Hodgkinson’s negative impression of the home extends past its plainly dilapidated state. Take for example Hodgkinson’s pause to mention the room immediately to the right of the stairs, ‘a room which *was* the best bedroom but is now undergoing complete repair and alteration.’ That is, alterations that Hodgkinson is critical of because it will lead to the home having only one spare bedroom. The room is being refitted to serve as a tearoom, and so the future purpose of the room is, in Hodgkinson’s view, being undermined by the cost of altering the space. Importantly, Hodgkinson implies that the space the Pyes have chosen may not be suitable for the purpose intended of it: ‘the door onto this room is not more than five feet from the head of the stairs, and yet at the door the floor is six inches lower than at the stairs.’ While such a description may seem overtly technical, it also infers something implicit about the space and its intended purpose. If the goal of the tea room is to serve as an area for guests, while presumably also serving as a showcase of the owners’ respectful performances of class and refined consumer tastes, as the imposition of the marble chimney piece and hearth suggests, then Hodgkinson appears to be drawing attention towards the impracticality of the space fulfilling this role. In this passage, Hogkinson is revealing the power of predefined narratives about the

¹⁰ Wood. *A Lancashire Gentlemen: the letters and journals of Richard Hodgkinson, 1763-1847*, p 171.

proper allocation of space and material goods to shape first impressions, in this case in a negative way.

If the goal of space is to serve as a further expression of proper conduct in material culture (through its adornment and its organization) it is not surprising that an entrenched position of ‘properness’ inherent in a conservative discourse about the marketplace would permeate down to the level of personal anecdote, because that is purpose of publishing such guidelines in manuals and professional publications. In this instance Hodgkinson highlights the impact that such a discourse has had on his own thinking about consumption (in the form of spatial adornment) by drawing attention to the inadequacies of the Pye home. While not revealing specific insight regarding the nature of the adornment of these various spaces, Hodgkinson is nevertheless relating their relative value by taking into consideration motives directly correlated to consumption and performance. Ultimately, what affirms the homes’ poor stature is a combination of both basic structural problems (which in part explains Hodgkinson’s opening quip regarding the cost versus the value gained from buying such an estate) and its more singular unsuitability as a domestic space meant to radiate the elevated status of its owners. The ‘small’ drawing room, the ‘mean’ bedrooms, the awkward room at the top of the stairs being refitted into a tea room, even the servants’ quarters, described as ‘dark, uncomfortable places’ all indicate that Hodgkinson is struck both casually and as a ‘bourgeoisie gentlemen’ by the state of the home.

In the second case, Hodgkinson describes a radically different experience. In this instance, it is an anecdotal account regarding the home of the Duke of Devonshire relayed by his wife that Hodgkinson has recorded. Nevertheless, this passage also employs a

dedication to detail in describing the home's various rooms, their adornment, and the general impression that Mrs. Hodgkinson is left with after viewing the estate. Again, it is important to quote the passage as a whole so as to demonstrate both the detail that Hodgkinson gives it within the space of his diary, and to affirm the immense importance of domestic spectacle in revealing the habits of consumers and the crucial link between performance and display as both relate to expressions of material culture in domestic settings:

It is built in the form of a large square with an open area in the centre. The first room we entered was paved with black and white marble with a handsome staircase of the same materials. The walls and ceiling represent the life of Julius Caesar. From thence we ascended the stairs to the state rooms (viz) 2 dining rooms, 2 drawing rooms, music room and picture gallery which is occasionally used as a dancing room. They so far exceeded any idea I had formed of them, in grandeur and elegance that I was completely dazzled. I find it impossible to describe them, all the walls and ceilings are covered with paintings by the most eminent masters representing the actions of several great personages. We were next shewn the ancient state rooms which remains yet as there were first furnished when the house was built. They must have been very elegant. They contain many valuable paintings and the carving in wood and stone of which there is a great deal is said to be the best in the kingdom. The unfortunate Queen of Scots was confined here some years, she was allowed three rooms only, in one of them is a bed which she used. It is of crimson velvet with a silver fringe, it is fast going to decay and is a sad emblem of a fallen greatness. That room is never used but the other two have largely been fitted up for use. The bedrooms are in a stile of elegance equal to the visiting rooms. The walls of all are either covered with paintings or tapestry in a high state of preservation. In the dressing room of the late Duchess are 2 Cabinets of fossils and plants, one filled entirely with productions of Derbyshire, the other are principally foreign. They are very neatly eranged and have a very pretty effect.¹¹

Immediately evident is the vast difference in style, stature and grandeur of this estate as opposed to the Pye home, though both are large, expensive and owned by wealthy individuals. On top of this, as Mrs. Hodgkinson explains, the Devonshire house is also historically significant as the site where Mary Queen of Scots was confined periodically

¹¹ Wood. *A Lancashire Gentlemen: the letters and journals of Richard Hodgkinson, 1763-1847*, p 354.

after 1568. In fact, Mrs. Hodgkinson makes a specific reference to the Queen's apartment during her tour of the home: 'she was allowed three rooms only. In one of them is a bed which she used. It is of crimson velvet with a silver fringe, it is fast going to decay and is a sad emblem of fallen greatness.'

It is also clear from Mrs. Hodgkinson's descriptions that the spaces and goods on display in the home are affirming a radically different message about their owners than the shabby structure of the Slathrop house. At the same time, it is evident that these spaces are having the desired effect on guests and casual observers. So for example, Mrs. Hodgkinson takes pause after viewing the rooms on the second level, seemingly overcome by their splendor: 'From thence we ascended the stairs to the state rooms (viz) 2 dining rooms, 2 drawing rooms, music room and picture gallery which is occasionally used as a dancing room. They so far exceeded any idea I had formed of them, in grandeur and elegance that I was completely dazzled. I find it impossible to describe them, all the walls and ceilings are covered with paintings by the most eminent masters representing the actions of several great personages.' Everything that disappointed Richard about the Pye estate, the 'mean' rooms, dilapidated stairs, unsuitable tea room, radiates in the Devonshire estate, at moments leaving Mrs. Hodgkinson bereft of words. And though it could be argued that the style and arrangement of this space is a specific iteration of ornamental, noble themes not uncommon in the great estates of important personages, this does not undermine the fact that all of these things are immensely costly, both to construct and to maintain/modernize. In other words, this home is as much an expression of material culture as it is a testimony to the style, tastes and vision of its owners. Its

positive reception serves as a confirmation that its decorator(s) have followed the guidelines of proper consumerism and spatial adornment.

Each passage addresses the adornment of space, and illuminate in critical ways both the emphasis being placed on the adornment of domestic space and the relationship between space and goods more broadly; that is, how *private* space possessed the capacity to produce a spectacle of goods. At the same time, both passages entertain a critical reading of both the spaces and the goods occupying them that illuminates many of the characteristics contained within the material culture of the early nineteenth century. Hodgkinson's decision to include these anecdotes is itself evidence that consumption and display are important enough to status and self to be critiqued or praised. As well, his reflections reveal the personal context in which these material relationships are being affirmed and produced. His seeing what is expected or unexpected in the domestic spaces of others further demonstrates how goods and spaces were interacting in such a way as to produce certain messages regarding consumerism and its changing position in British life (or at least, its changes position in the lives of the bourgeoisie and *nouveaux riches*). Ultimately, Hodgkinson's reflections serve as a helpful starting point for this chapter because they throw into sharp relief both the proper and improper manifestations of consumption in its performative capacity. Thus, they highlight the tensions within a material culture that is dominated both by a drive towards pleasure-seeking and a demand for stability expressed in deeply conservative narratives about proper forms of consumer behavior.

Finally there is a real consumer component to these displays that is revealed in the interplay between spaces and goods. Mr. and Mrs. Hodgkinson not only view the spaces,

and critique them, they are further introduced and reintroduced into the ‘do’s’ and ‘do not’s’ of home decorating. The confluence of forces at work in spaces produces the effect of spectacle and fashions certain messages about consumption. This can be as simplistic as guiding consumer choices based upon the relative impression that one display or another leaves an individual with, but also involves a complex set of consumer negotiations that reflects the marketplace from which such narratives about material culture were formed; that is, one driven simultaneously by desire and the need for conformity to accepted styles and material expressions. It is further evident that the role of space in these engagements is critical, and importantly, *not passive*. Mr. Hodgkinson indicates that the space Mr. and Mrs. Pye have chosen for their tea room is unsuitable, not just because of its poor structural state, but also because *the dimensions* of the space do not, to his mind, suit its intended purpose. In the case of the Hodgkinson’s and many other bourgeoisie or *nouveaux riches*, questions about material culture were often described in terms of the relationship between goods and performance. This emphasis is further connected to a broader series of narratives about goods that shaped an understanding about material culture within the context of a deeply entrenched cultural conservatism. The reasons for such a response in the marketplace have already been discussed in the introduction and opening chapter, what is important here is to recognize that these conservative forces were being reified by specific consumers, in this example in Mr. and Mrs. Hodgkinson’s critical readings of the spaces they encountered.

IV: The Diary of William Holland

The diary of William Holland, vicar of Overstowey, also contains examples of Holland's investment in material culture, and reveals poignantly many of the tensions at work in the early nineteenth century marketplace. Born May 9th 1746, Holland rose through the clergy to the position of Vicar in Overstowey. Over the course of his time as a diarist, Holland compiled some ninety journals, though unfortunately many have been lost or badly damaged.¹² Nevertheless, the information that is accessible reveals a man deeply aware and interested in the power of goods to reflect and produce status. This means that Holland was concerned both with the proper appropriation of goods in spaces and with proper etiquette regarding the performance of individuals in these settings of domestic display. Finally, and unlike Mr. Hodgkinson, Holland is much more direct in his elaborations on material relationships. That is, while he discusses space and clarifies the importance of space in the context of a performance of goods, he is much more explicit than Hodgkinson about his personal involvement in consumer culture.

For example, in one of the opening entries in the diary, Holland revels in the fact that a parcel of clothing he had previously ordered has finally arrived: "I am wrong in my conjectures about the Pooles for this morning a person brought me a very handsome stain hatband and scarf, white, and two pairs of gloves... I expect a hatband but not a scarf and *it is not the value of either I regard so much as the intimation of respect it conveys.*"¹³ Similarly to Hodgkinson, Holland shares an intimate concern with the link between goods and status, and the capacity for goods to perform and aspire towards status. Unlike Hodgkinson however, Holland is unabashed in his own personal status as a consumer.

¹² Jack Ayers eds. Paupers and Pig Killers: the diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson, 1799-1818. London: Sutton Publishing Ltd, 1984, pp 10-11.

¹³ Ibid. p 18.

This point is simple but important, because it clarifies that consumption is not just an idea or an impersonal series of symbolic entanglements relating to space, self, status etc...

Holland physically purchased these things with the expressed purpose not of receiving exact value in regards to money spent, but because of their capacity as apparel to reflect a specific message about him as a person. In other words, Holland had sought out these products because he desired them for some individualized purpose, in this case to achieve greater respectability. Such material transactions throw into sharp relief the real importance of consumer goods in daily life in the early nineteenth century, especially as a means of producing self. This is apparent in Holland's stated reason for wanting the clothing, not to ensure economic value for dollars, but to elevate his image of himself to a viewing public. At the same time, this passage reveals forces at work outside of individual pleasure-seeking that influence Holland's purchasing decisions. While it is evident that he entertained a desire for these products, it is also clear that he latched this desire onto a larger goal of affirming his dedication to the strict codes of conduct implicit in the marketplace through his personal dress.

In another example, while on a trip to Bath with his family in 1800, Holland records another purchase in his diary: "After breakfast went about town in search of chairs, found six, very elegant, cheap. He being a workman who supplies great shops where we found them."¹⁴ Notice that in Holland's description of the chairs and the purchase, he highlights both the ornamental value of the chairs by describing them as 'very elegant' and the stature of their designer 'a workman who supplies *great shops*'. Again, this passage reveals both ostensible consumerism – that is the literal purchase of superfluous goods – and the thoughtful consideration involved in such transactions.

¹⁴ Ayers. Paupers and Pig Killers: the diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson, 1799-1818, p 31.

Holland takes into consideration both the actual value of the chairs and their symbolic value. This is indicated when he mentions in the following entry why he bought the chairs: “new chairs purchased for our best parlour.”¹⁵ Considered together, these entries reveal Holland’s investment in both in illicit consumption and domestic adornment. That is, his interest in producing an image of himself rooted in his thoughtful consumer habits and illustrated to others who observe Holland’s domestic displays. Certainly, it is evident in the diary that Holland uses this measure to gage the consumptive habits of others: “My wife and I and little William walked to Stowey, called on the Northey’s. She had finished her drawing room in very good taste.”¹⁶ In sum, and evident in Hodgkinson’s diary also, domestic displays were used as a barometer to make judgments about individual consumer habits by gaging the extent to which private displays of material goods affirmed (or failed to affirm) the propriety and respectability of their owner(s), again revealing the influence of a dominant conservative discourse about goods and spaces in pre-Victorian England that viewed all material engagements through the lens of a polite society of consumers.

In a final example, Holland and his wife attend a social party at a friends along with other couples, and Holland describes the evening in meticulous detail. In his description, Holland draws specific attention to etiquette, formality and most importantly nuanced performances of material culture, encapsulating many of themes encompassed within this chapter:

We were ushered into the little parlour, not into the best for alas the best I fear has not been opened these twenty years and had we gone in we must have caught an Ague apiece. Mrs. Betty had now got on her best Gown and Best Cap and an Apron as white and clear as new fallen snow. In came Mr. James all spruced up

¹⁵ Ayers. *Paupers and Pig Killers: the diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson, 1799-1818*, p 32.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p 87.

and with his hat on. Oh master Holland do keep your hat on. Not said I (rather unguardedly) before the ladies. This threw poor James into a kind of quandary – why sir, we keep our hats on! On this, starting up, he boldly claps his hat on a peg. Oh no, cried I. oh no, cried the ladies, that must not be. Then immediately I put my hat on. At last he was prevailed to take his hat down from the peg and, put it on, cried everyone. No says master James, not this one, I know better. So out he stepped and brings down a new handsome hat. It seems James and his Virgin housekeeper had had some deep and serious discourse about the Etiquette of the Tea Table. Madame thought it was her absolute prerogative to make the tea for the ladies, but James thought otherwise and so pushed the table towards one of the Nymphs who was seated on the window. Then in came all the old china and accoutrements and loads of bread and butter and cakes and Mrs. Betty curtsying low and handing round and very gracious she was truly to everyone. By this time Master Thomas had returned from his walk and had got his best wig with a Knocker behind, and best coat. As the tea went round Mr. Thomas recollected himself and started up, I drink no tea ladies, excuse, I must go to the kitchen to smook a pipe, will be in again presently. All this time the company kept steady fixed countenances they bit their lips now and again but not a smile escaped, no more than if it had been a funeral. After Mr. Thomas finished his pipe he came to us once more. though very rich, both of them yet they are near in disposition and that may be owing in great measure to education and mode of living.¹⁷

The passage is quite long, but it contains an excellent summation of many of the qualities taken into consideration in the critique of individuals and domestic spaces.

Immediately, for instance, Holland points out that his party was ushered into ‘the little parlour, not the best’ indicating that something in the space is giving away its inferior stature. Following this, he comments on appropriateness of Mrs. Betty’s dress - ‘Mrs. Batty had now got on her best Gown and Best Cap and an Apron as white and clear as new fallen snow’ – for the role of hostess, and following this an awkward engagement ensues between Holland and Mr. James’ over the propriety of wearing a hat while attending this kind of party, though Holland, who is apparently against the practice, cannot contain his admiration of James’ ‘handsome new hat.’ Perhaps the most important observation Holland makes is what appears next in his description: ‘James and his Virgin housekeeper had had some deep and serious discourse about the Etiquette of the Tea

¹⁷ Ayers. *Paupers and Pig Killers: the diary of William Holland, a Somerset Parson, 1799-1818*, p 146.

Table. Madame thought it was her absolute prerogative to make the tea for the ladies, but James thought otherwise and so pushed the table towards one of the Nymphs who was seated on the window. Then in came all the old china and accoutrements and loads of bread and butter and cakes and Mrs. Betty curtseying low and handing round and very gracious she was truly to everyone.’ This entry reveals the extensive staging and performing involved by parties at this kind of gathering. Everything is strictly planned and managed, even the pouring of tea, in order to ensure that the rules of proper etiquette are followed.

From the room, to the guests, to their clothing, to the tea, to *what is it served on* and with, all of this is deemed important enough by Holland to record in full. And in every separate observation, commodities, people and spaces are actively negotiating the ‘appearance of things’. The room disappoints Holland but Mrs. Betty’s appropriate and elegant attire seem to compensate for this initial unpleasantness. He disapproves of wearing hats at gatherings like this but seems defeated by the ‘handsome’ appearance of Mr. James’ new hat. The contest between James and his housekeeper over who serves the tea, the attention Holland draws to the china the refreshments are served on, and the amicable graces of Mrs. Betty, the entire evening is a performance involving the interplay between bodies and material goods. Every encounter and observation is based upon the reception of these convergent factors at various moments in the course of the evening, and in each instance Holland’s description reveals not the triviality of any one thing, but the incredible importance of these actors working constitutively to produce an overall effect of conviviality, status, and refined (cultured) consumer style. In every minute detail, the performance of the dinner party provides an opportunity for the hosts and their

guests to demonstrate their propriety and respectability as individuals of distinction and rank, and as consumers.

V: Ellen Weeton's *Journal of a Governess*

The Diary of Ellen Weeton represents a relative contrast from the first two, and from Mr. Sharp's. First, a woman writes it, whereas men pen all of the other diaries, and as a consequence it provides a different perspective on consumption. Secondly, it is written by an individual whose employment forced her into a transient lifestyle. As a governess, Weeton moved often from one place to another, staying for as long as her services were desired or required. This means that much of the information about consumption and material culture contained in the diary comes in the form of her observations about others, because as a governess, Weeton possessed neither the financial means nor the static living conditions necessary to accrue much in the way of personal effects, furniture, and superfluous goods (although, she was fairly active in investing and especially in the buying and leasing of land and homes).¹⁸ Finally, this diary provides unique insight into an emerging consumer society from someone who saw superfluity at its most flagrant. In her relationship with her brother, and during her stay with Mr. Pedder at Dove's Nest between 1809-1811, Miss Weeton was exposed to individuals whose consumptive habits highlight many of the tensions present in a society dealing with an evolving material culture. While not neglecting the themes of the previous two diarists

¹⁸ Ellen Weeton. *Miss Weeton's Journal of a Governess*. New York: Augustus M. Kelly Publishers, 1969. Page 84 contains the passage: "I should wish, if convenient, to have a bedroom to myself. I should require no more, except the occasional use of a parlour to entertain a few friends in." This illustrates the minimalist existence that Miss. Weeton was forced to live as a governess, while a passage in pages 304-305: "I have been examining an agreement drawn up by mr. clements between mr. m'cartney and myself, at the time I purchased the houses, in which m'cartney is bound to take the houses for 5 years, paying me an annual sum of 55 pounds clear of any deduction whatever, except for income tax; the windows to be left in perfect repair whenever I take the premises into my own hands," offers one example among many of Miss. Weeton's involvement in investments.

then, Weeton describes material relationships that manifest in more unflattering ways than the previous diarists seem to have been exposed to. Nevertheless, like Hodgkinson and Holland, Weeton's journal provides nuanced detail regarding the critical role that consumption played in the production (fashioning) of self.

As previously indicated, Miss. Weeton's exposure to consumption came primarily in the form of her interactions and observations of others, especially her brother and the Pedders. And in both cases, her descriptions of these individuals illustrate the troubling and often problematic behavior of those more interested in superfluous gratification than meaningful, 'proper' consumption. So for instance, in the context of learning of her brother's hastily planned marriage, Weeton writes a sharp critique of his character in her *retrospect* at the beginning of the diary:

He formed an attachment to a young lady, and hastily and imprudently married, neither of them being able to command a farthing. She married without the knowledge of her friends; my brother had no house to take her to. I offered them mine. They come on the day they were married, not knowing any more than myself that they should have any other home for many months. The plan of my living with them when they had a house of their own was still talked of. Mrs. W. did not object, and it was settled--- but on terms very ungenerous to myself, had my brother but considered it. They were his own proposing, and I did not like to object. I had sacrificed everything for him, and was willing to do so still... I told him of my mother's request. He stood almost aghast, expecting still to have had a whole share, notwithstanding that for above five years he had had the whole income within ten pounds. I had paid off a debt of near fifty pounds; had paid for all his washing; the carriage of his cloaths from Preston to Holland, and back as far as Wigan,... had repaired his linen, and bought him many articles of dress such as a pocket handkerchiefs, neck handkerchiefs, stockings, flannel waistcoats... he thought I had given him all these, without the hope of return. By my mothers will he could have claimed one half of her property. That will was made when we were infants, and she never made another. He she lived only three weeks longer, she intended to have done it. I should have then been of age, and she wished for some reason or other to defer it till then. Circumstances were greatly altered at the time of her death. My brother had a great deal more money expended upon him, than had been paid out on me.¹⁹

¹⁹ Weeton. *Miss Weeton's Journal of a Governess*, p 34-38.

While not explicitly about consumption, this passage is nevertheless intimately concerned with the outcomes of a particular manifestation of ‘the consumer.’ Her brother, young naïve, and lacking the proper financial stability to provide for himself, let alone a family, marries hastily, and then pleads with his sister for help.

More significantly, he does not seem to understand the importance of prudence or the need to be generous towards his sister, having neglected the incredible sacrifices she has made for him so that he could go to school and increase his likelihood of finding stable and decent employment. Often, the events of her life evidence that his greed and vanity overcome his better sense, and, that she is continually put into unwelcome positions because of his improper consumer habits. For example, and as the above passage makes reference to, Weeton is faced with an extremely ungenerous offer if she wishes to live with her brother and his family: “My brother told me one Saturday that if I lived with them, I must pay 30 guineas a year for board. This was nearly the whole of my income... however I said nothing... he had just bought a house, and that sum would pay the rent and taxes.”²⁰ Furthermore, even when she agrees to these terms, her brother ultimately decides that it is better if she does not live with him, after she had already refused an offer of marriage under the auspices of joining his family. Finally, in a most telling example of his greed, Miss. Weeton’s brother later orchestrates a marriage between her and a widower friend, netting himself 100 pounds in the form of a dowry.²¹ Weeton’s relationship with her brother signals how consumption, and particularly *the desire* to consume, affected individuals who were increasingly invested in the world of goods and pleasure-seeking through cultural material gain.

²⁰ Weeton. *Miss Weeton’s Journal of a Governess*, p 36.

²¹ *Ibid.* p i.

During her stay with the Pedders between 1809-1811, as a governess to Mr. Pedders daughter and wife, Miss Weeton took a keen interest in methodically recording the tumultuous relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Pedder. Importantly, Miss Weeton indicates that the basis of the domestic strife among the Pedders is firmly rooted in Mr. Pedder's selfish consumer habits. Again, her writings highlight rampart consumption and the evolving power of goods and spectacle as a means of defining (performing) self. So for instance, commenting on Mr. Pedder's library, Miss Weeton expresses that, "Mr. P., like many of the wealthy, possesses a library of little real use. He himself reads little, so that the shelves make a display of knowledge that he possesses not... the collection is numerous, valuable, and well-selected. How rich I should be in books if I had all Mr. P's library that has never been opened."²² While critical in her assessment, Miss Weeton also acknowledges that the books have been well-selected, that their value in literal (monetary) terms is evident, and most importantly, that the display dually suggests the wealth of knowledge that its owner possesses, while simultaneously evoking the envy and awe of others. In essence, the library is an example of wealthy consumption that is well executed, though transparently performative. If this were the only indication of Mr. Pedder's consumptive habits as a wealthy individual of relative esteem there would be little to suggest that he had done anything other than fulfill the role of the wealthy male consumer.

However, the longer that Weeton stayed with the Pedders the more openly, even aggressively critical, she became of Mr. Pedder's selfish spending habits. Most often, these entries centre on domestic clashes between Mr. and Mrs. Pedder that occur as a result of Mr. Pedder's vain behavior. In one such passage, Weeton laments to her brother

²² Weeton. Miss Weeton's Journal of a Governess, p 255.

about the state of the domestic affairs between the Pedders and her unhappy situation there:

He seems to think a gentlemen is one who has many dependants, whom he may use and abuse as he pleases; at one time lavishly bestowing upon them spirits or any other liquid that intoxicates, to the serious injury of themselves and their families; at others, withholding from them wages they have hardily earned, and are justly their due. Money he is ever unwilling to part with. He bestows none charitably, except where he can put his name to a subscription list. His tradesmen's bills are not punctually settled... he thinks he does enough for his wife by feeding and clothing her. She has, at this time, been weeks, almost months, begging from him to pay the washerwoman, and cannot get it. She may be said to live in splendid misery... she has not even the power to order the necessary provisions into the house. M. P is master, mistress, housekeeper. He will sometimes order such quantities of perishable and household articles, that one half are sometimes wasted; at the same time, money thrown away he would grudge to bestow in a useful charity... He will grudge his wife a decent gown at the very times he spends 30 or even 60 guineas on another hobby horse, of no use to any living creature but himself; and even he gets tired of one hobby horse after another, before he has had them many weeks in his possession. I am only kept here for ostentation, not out of real kindness to his wife. I was a sort of hobby for a time.²³

This reflection succinctly links the tumult between Mr. and Mrs. Pedder, the state of the Pedder home, and even the condition of those that work there, directly to Mr. Pedder's consumer habits. It is clear, for example, that Mr. Pedder considers himself before others, and is not beyond manipulating or enticing them with gifts for his amusement. In his relationship to his wife, Mr. Pedder appears even more malicious, opting to gratify his own consumer desires while not providing anything but the basic necessities for Mrs. Pedder. As Miss Weeton puts it, she is a woman living 'in splendid misery.' Beyond the critical character of the passage, it also illustrates the changing nature of material relationships. The presumed qualities of structure, conspicuousness and refinement expected of proper consumers are apparently lacking in Mr. Pedder, who instead represents an emerging model for the consumer. That is, someone who is increasingly

²³ Weeton. *Miss Weeton's Journal of a Governess*, p 256-257.

enchanted by the desirability of commodities as a means of gratification, a case of pleasure for pleasure's sake. In other words, this passage contains a clear example of the clash between individual pleasure-seeking and a discourse desiring to mold the marketplace into a site of stability through linking acts of consumption to personal image and respectability.

There are a number of other recordings in the diary that evidence this tendency in Mr. Pedder, and based upon their tone as well as that of the passage above, such behavior is not only troubling to Weeton, but also difficult for her to internalize. This is especially significant, because such a cognitive dissonance reveals both how quickly material relationships are changing and evolving, and the extent to which Mr. Pedder appears to emblemize a consumer type that remains relatively uncommon, or at least that Weeton sees as exceptional. In one example, Weeton scolds Mr. Pedder for his treatment of his wife, and his fixation on his own gratification, commenting: "At the very time he bought an ass out of frolic, for which he gave five guineas; saddle etc... two more; at the very time a boat was building for him, on which he was going to expend between two and three hundred guineas, he could abuse his wife in the most virulent manner for giving five shillings to a poor man."²⁴ In another example, she criticizes him for indulging his consumer desires while neglecting his faith: "For some time, we have been very little at church indeed. Mr. P. has subscribed ten guineas for a set of etchings of landscapes of the lake; and for two or three pairs of views taken of Dove's Nest... He will probably pay ten or fifteen more. How the man who can afford the expence of a conveyance of a six miles journey to church once a week, can afford to squander so much on drawings, I know

²⁴ Weeton. Miss Weeton's Journal of a Governess, p 278.

not.”²⁵ Again, beyond the critical tone in both observances, Weeton draws an explicit connection between Mr. Pedder’s consumer indulgences, his wife’s troubles, and his domestic image, and each example details a man deeply invested in consumption as a source of pleasure. While both the drawings and the expensive boat would surely have bolstered his image as a wealthy man of status and taste, at the same time, Weeton indicates that each was motivated from selfish considerations not properly attended to the fashioning of a respectable self-image.

To be clear, the diary does not indicate that Mr. Pedder is motivated more by one consideration than the other (though if Weeton is taken at her word, Mr. Pedder is a selfish man who seems always to put his needs and wants first), rather, both appearances – measured by adherence to codes of conduct related to genteel consumption - and desire seem to drive Mr. Pedder’s consumer habits, providing evidence of an interesting synthesis between want and taste. Though it may not seem that Mr. Pedder is particularly concerned with image while he intoxicates his employees for his own amusement, Weeton indicates that in public, Mr. Pedder transforms into a different kind of consumer, revealing a stark contrast between his public and private self:

I always advise Mrs. P. to quietness and submission when he is in one of his strange humours; a kind of advice she is sometimes unwilling to take... Submission has certainly less effect upon him than it has upon some men, for, where he finds he can tyrannize, he will. Were I to tell you how he sometimes treats his wife, your blood would almost boil; yet, before his Preston friends, he appears so doatingly fond, so lavish of his money upon her, which when he gets home he is continually to reproach her with.²⁶

Both publicly and privately, Mr. Pedder is ever the consumer, though this passage illuminates a stark contrast between his private and public self in that he appears far more

²⁵ Weeton. *Miss Weeton’s Journal of a Governess*, p 279.

²⁶ *Ibid.* pp, 315-316.

concerned with appearances and propriety when he occupies a space where peers and other observers are exposed to his consumer habits. Ultimately, the importance of Weeton's time with the Pedders is her exposure to an individual who is himself being redefined as a result of his consumerism. For Mr. Pedder, the competing interests of self-gratification and image are in contest with one another, resulting in various tensions both in his character and his relationships with others. This evidences how the imposition of the commodity in a new context (the context of personal gratification and pleasure-seeking) disrupted previous material relationships, revising previously understood bonds between self and good. To put it another way, it demonstrates how a growing marketplace of things, taken together with intellectual movements like sentimentalism and romanticism that were advocating for emotional expression and pleasure-seeking, produced a contest in material culture between individual motivations for consumption and conservative demands for propriety.

VI: The Diary of Richard Sharp

The diary of Robert Sharp represents the latest source in terms of period, encompassing the two decades before the accession of Victoria, and including some entries from the beginning of the Victorian period. Robert Sharp was a school master at South Cave for nearly four decades, including the entire period of the diary. On top of this, Mr. Sharp also opened and ran a shop for a number of years encompassed in the diary, and performed a number of miscellaneous tasks in the village due to his literacy skills and education. Most importantly, Robert Sharp's diary reveals how intimately invested in consumption he was, paradoxically as both a consumer himself and as a severe critic of much that allowed for manufacturing to expand and consumer opportunity

to grow. Similarly to Holland, Sharp directly engaged in consumer acts that testify to the growing relevance of possession and spectacle. Again, this represents an irony in the diary in that Sharp was so often critical of the consumer habits of others, and of the cost of expanding consumer markets generally, and yet was himself a member of a growing community of active consumers. Unlike Mr. Holland and Mr. Hodgkinson, Sharp did not possess the wealth to allow for endless trail of ornamental goods in his home. Yet, he still found himself engaged in superfluous consumption. The diary of Richard Sharp provides complementary evidence of the changing nature of material relationships, and his writings detail that navigating the marketplace of the early nineteenth century was a complex process.

Sharp's diary is rife with examples that illustrate his attachment to material possessions and define him as a consumer interested in more than just the utility of goods. For instance, at different moments in the diary Sharp records the purchase of "Half a dozen Silver tea Spoons," for two pounds and the purchase of "two new penknife blades," from a traveling salesman, which, though "not of much value" are "a great favorite."²⁷ In another example, in a letter to his son William, Richard makes the following request: "Wrote this day to Wm. To ask him if he could fall in for a little pocket globe second hand; it will be useful to shew the situation and distance of one country from another, I do not know that such a thing is absolutely necessary for me; *but if I can be gratified for a few shillings, it will not very dear*" (italics added).²⁸ In each case, Sharp is actively the consumer, demonstrating his participation in the marketplace of goods. More significantly, none of these purchases is motivated by want or even as a

²⁷ Janice and Peter Crowther, eds. *The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave: Life in a Yorkshire Village, 1812-1837*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997, pp 62, 216.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p 249.

means of reflecting certain messages of taste. As well, none of these purchases are underlined by a necessity for the exchange to be equal in monetary terms. None of the purchased items is described as necessary or important (with the possible exception of the spoons, since Sharp does not indicate explicitly his reasons for purchasing them) and in the later two examples, Sharp states affirmatively that there may be inequalities in the exchange of money these goods, but insists nevertheless that they *gratify* himself or someone else he wishes to please, and for this reason they are worth having. This consideration is not only important but *more important* than receiving his money's worth in terms of quality or utility. In sum, what is most on display in passages like these ones in the diary is the power that desire exercised over Sharp's consumer choices, expressed in the notion that goods provided their own form of pleasure and gratification, which alone, was worth their acquisition.

In the context of display and performance, Sharp, while not as focused on these facets of material engagements as Holland and Hodgkinson, nevertheless demonstrates a firm understanding of how space participates in the creation of narratives about goods, and how the relationship between objects and display functioned as a motivator in the decision to buy something. In one especially revealing example, Sharp describes a purchase he makes of new decorative items for his home: "bought a set of China 1 doz. Cups, 1 doz. Saucers, teapot, a milk jug, 2 Basons, 2 plates, double gilt edge all for 12 shillings, but as we *neither want them nor have any place to put them in for display, we have packaged them in a Basket and put them in the Garrett closet*" (italics added).²⁹ Perhaps as no other example thus far reveals, this reflection illustrates definitively how material relationships are increasingly becoming obscured by the growth of superfluous

²⁹ Crowther. The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave: Life in a Yorkshire Village, 1812-1837, p 43.

consumption. This encounter also evidences the central importance of space in producing narratives about goods and consumers, in Sharp's acknowledging that the purpose for the purchasing of the china is to put it on display. As has already been demonstrated in other examples, the production of domestic displays like the one Sharp was hoping to produce provided the further benefit of affirming the refined and proper tastes of consumers. Finally, and as Sharp himself comments, this purchase highlights how gratification and superfluity were disrupting material relationships previously defined in part by the capacity to resist unnecessary consumer transactions: "If this is not encouraging manufactures," exclaims Sharp, "I know not what is!"³⁰

This sentiment also helpfully focuses attention on the other component of Sharp's relationship to consumption. That is, as someone who is both actively involved in activities of consumption and someone who is deeply conscientious and critical of encroaching consumerism, seeing it as a kind of 'moral threat' to individuals and the nation. As a result, Sharp is consistently critical in his assessment of others and of the industrial system that propels their superfluous consumption. So for example, Sharp comments extensively on the plight of labour in an increasingly manufacturing-heavy economy, and at one particular moment, is struck by his experiences with a woman from a workhouse:

Last night I had to go down to the Workhouse with a poor woman to get her lodgings, she had neither shoes nor stockings, and was almost starved to death, she is one of the victims of the accursed cotton trade there is scarcely a day but some of the poor creatures who have been brought up in these abominable mills, are begging for their bread; happy it would have been for England if never a pound of the infernal fuzz had ever found its way into this country. Had it not been for cotton we should not have been taxed as we are; when the country went

³⁰ Crowther. The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave: Life in a Yorkshire Village, 1812-1837, p 43.

mad, cotton was to do everything; and indeed it has done every thing but make us prosperous and happy.³¹

In another equally emotional example, Sharp reflects on the growing disparity between those involved in the labour that produces the products of a consumer economy and those who get to indulge in this expanding marketplace of things:

It must be that labour makes things valuable, the land is cultivated by labour, the abominable cotton has its value chiefly from labour, it is labour that converts the clothing of the sheep to the valuable clothing of the rich, and of the poor too; then how would the great aristocrats look if they were to be deprived of the labour of those whom they want to keep down with the smallest allowance, the men who work and sweat to procure large crops, merely that the owners of land, and power looms may live in all manner of luxury.³²

The tone in these two passages is explicit, and they reveal both Sharp's extensive breadth of knowledge regarding the nature of commercial growth and his seeming ignorance to his own participation within the system he so laments. Never once in the diary does Sharp critique his own behavior as a consumer, and yet he is fully aware of the costs that coincide with increased consumerism. Regardless, these and other reflections provide a key link between the individual consumer and the broader society. Clearly, these observations evidence that consumption was expanding, and at the same time highlight one of the greatest and most recognizable tensions involved in the changing dynamic of material relationships. That is, the tension between consumption and marketplace accessibility.

Sharp's criticism is not limited to a broad and overarching assessment of industrialization either. Rather, he also demonstrates an awareness of issues related to consumer habits in a personal context in his interaction with members of the community. As a result, he discusses not only the extensive changes ongoing in an industrializing

³¹ Crowther. *The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave: Life in a Yorkshire Village, 1812-1837*, p 90.

³² *Ibid.* p146.

England and their connection to consumerism, but also the personal consequences of consumption. Perhaps the most significant example of this is his commentary on Ms. Marshall, the wife of his close friend Richard, whose consumer habits have, in the opinion of Sharp, led to a decline in her moral and physical health:

Mrs. Rd. Marshall has been and is very ill and I think pride has brought much of it on, for they have got a parlour filled up with a good carpet, the walls painted, fine window curtains, polished irons, grand glass etc... but fine furniture like fine clothing is of no use to the owner except it creates the envy of those who cannot afford to be ridiculous. But the lady about Christmas thought she was not very well so she adjourned to the parlour and sat in a state, where her neighbours had an opportunity of seeing her and her furniture together; but, lo and behold! She really grew ill from the dampness of the room, and the doctor was obliged to be had, and her display brought down by bleeding and blistering, and she now has a screen put up to keep the cold off. O, vanity many are thy votaries.³³

Again, Sharp's apprehensions regarding consumption are made explicit: the relationship he asserts between Mrs. Marshall's desire for domestic spectacle, enacted through her purchasing and decorating of the parlour, and her failing health suggests that he sees a definitive link between improper, imprudent consumptive behavior and personal wellbeing. In a sense, Sharp relies on an increasingly archaic understanding of material relationships in his assessment of others consumer choices. Mrs. Marshall is ill, determines Sharp, because she has focused too much attention towards the adornment of her home, too much interest in making a spectacle of her parlour, and not enough on her moral wellbeing. That Sharp believes it is possible for material displays to reveal certain truths or tensions within the self suggests that there was a link between material goods and morality that was directed by a discourse about moral health, the avoidance of senseless consumerism and the maintenance at all times of propriety. It is precisely the

³³ Crowther. The Diary of Robert Sharp of South Cave: Life in a Yorkshire Village, 1812-1837, pp 182-183.

absence of these things that Sharp views in Mrs. Marshall in his observations of her lavish parlour.

Ultimately, his own status as a superfluous consumer essentially undermines his desire to make this an issue of morality. Even as he relies upon an understanding of consumption and consumer behavior that draws a direct link between consumption and morality, his own consumer habits complicate questions about material culture and undermine his efforts to assert that engaging in consumption constitutes a moral act. It is clear in the narratives that were fashioned about consumers and material culture in this period, that such a link was argued in favor of and held great power over determining consumer choices and policing social spaces. However, the imposition of desire and want is also evident in Sharp's diary, expressed in an emotional longing for things that challenges entrenched notions of the relationship between goods and morality. Even while leveling harsh critiques against those in his life who seem to be enchanted by the allure of consumerism to the extent that their moral health is jeopardized, Sharp acknowledges at various moments in the diary the seeming inexplicability of his own consumer habits (buying the spoons without apparent cause, buying the China without a place to put it on display, wanting a globe while knowing it serves no real function). He writes repeatedly that the country as a whole suffers from serious problems in the context of industrialism and the labouring poor, but Sharp nevertheless is overcome again and again by his own prevailing desire *for things*. The result of this interplay between his own desire for things and his anxiety about consumption and industrialization more generally is a tension in the diary that is expressed both inwardly and publicly, in his seemingly contradictory sentiments about material culture and in his observations of other people.

At one and the same time, Sharp stands on the side of that growing choir which experienced and expressed material want through the engine of desire and pleasure-seeking, and yet he is unable to overcome the impression that materialism must be ordered towards a purpose that is linked to morality and personal wellbeing.

VII: Conclusion

The diaries analyzed here can provide only a limited view of the broad and sweeping changes ongoing in material relationships over the course of the early nineteenth century. Apart from Sharp, and not surprisingly, the diaries attest more to personal consumer habits, and their authors are less interested in linking these to broader social and economic changes in England. As this analysis has shown, however, very often these diarists framed questions and critiques of material culture within broader social relationships. Certainly it is the case that they were influenced by a discourse about goods and consumer behavior that sought to regulate consumption and police consumer and social etiquette. As such, it is clearly not the case that these diaries were interested *only* in their respective author's lives, both in consumer and non-consumer contexts. Each author, while reflecting upon their own material choices and consumer attitudes, also took time to observe and expose the consumer conduct of others, whether friends, employers, acquaintances etc... in sum, their writings, whether personal or anecdotal, attest to the significance and relevance of consumption in daily life, ranging in scope from its importance to self-identity, to the affirmation of status or wealth, or to the indulgence in displays and private spectacle. In every case, the performative capacity of goods and spaces is elevated, and as a result the relevance of commodities in daily life was expanded. A critical dynamic was emerging where the impact of a growing

marketplace of things propelled an increased fervor for material indulgence, which further enticed a desire for consumption as the place of material goods and their discursive potential was reimagined.

William Hodgkinson's careful appreciation of private spectacle provides a window to analyze the nature and place of spectacle in affirming status, wealth and self, evidencing both its productive capacity (that is, producing consumers) and its central importance in self-identity. His diary details what is and is not ideal in spatial organization and decoration, and every detail links itself to material transactions. Thus, Hogkinson provides readings of spaces and material displays that reveal implicit and explicit codes of spatial adornment and consumerism that were at work in his own observations and judgments. William Holland is careful in his selection of chairs, meant to add elegance and ornamental value to his best parlour, because he recognized that by adorning a space with goods, he was attempting to produce a particular vision of himself as a refined, respectable and tasteful consumer.

Miss Ellen Weeton, though not able to participate extensively in the consumer marketplace herself, nevertheless provides insight into the more nefarious iterations of 'the consumer' in her reflections on her brother and Mr. Pedder. Both men were driven by a desire for goods, for the sake of appearances and as a means to their own gratification. This is especially true of Mr. Pedder, who appears to have disregarded his obligations as a man of wealth, a gentleman, an employer and even a husband, opting instead to indulge in his consumer desires by buying frivolous novelties. Though, in the public eye, Mr. Pedder remained ever the conspicuous and 'proper' consumer, in the privacy of his home, he was free to consume insatiably. Lastly there is Robert Sharp, who

willingly participated in an increasingly consumerist world while simultaneously expressing deep apprehension towards, and criticism of, both superfluous consumption and the industrial machinery that propelled these consumer activities forward. If Hodgkinson, Holland, and Mr. Pedder can be viewed as occupying opposite extremes in the emerging consumer scale, Sharp appears to occupy a tenuous middle. That is, as someone who, while attempting to distance himself from it, was nevertheless drawn continually towards the allure of, and a desire for, *things*.

Chapter Three: Consumption, class and the ‘Silver Fork’ society

I: Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to analyze three novels written in the period between 1826 and 1841 (and situated in Britain) in order to explore ideas of consumption, space and private spectacle as they relate to broader themes already discussed regarding the consumer marketplace of early nineteenth century Britain. For the purposes of this chapter specifically, I am interested in how an emphasis on the display or ‘performance’ of goods assisted in the development of consumer identities. Ultimately, it is my intention to argue that the relationship between commodities and spaces, and the growing importance of creating an environment of ‘private spectacle’ constitutes evidence of a developing material culture; that is, there are moments in these novels that provide evidence on how bodies, spaces and objects were interacting in new, and immanently consumerist ways. To this end, I will be examining Catherine Gore’s *Cecil: or the adventures of a coxcomb*, E.L Bulwer’s *Godolphin*, and L.E.L’s *Romance and Reality*. As with the previous two chapters, the goal of this analysis of Silver Fork Novels is to provide a window into this unique moment in British history and explore questions of consumption and material relationships. In much the same way as the etiquette literature and diaries already examined, this analysis of Silver Fork literature will reveal the tensions inherent in a consumer society that was negotiating the often contradictory demands for things against a desire for cohesion and stability in an often unstable period. In these texts, this latter point is often expressed through demands that are made regarding the performative function of goods and spaces, and their place in genteel life.

The novels that I will be analyzing for the purposes of this chapter constitute a sub-genre of early nineteenth-century fiction known as ‘Silver Fork novels’ or novels of fashion.¹ These novels are linked as a subgenre by their dual concern with the lifestyles of the wealthy and the importance they place on proper conduct; that is, the way in which they attempt to provide lessons to the reader(s) as to how a true gentlemen and gentlewoman is to conduct him or herself. These novels often centre on a story about fictional aristocratic characters and focus on important rituals in aristocratic life such as marriage or attending elite social events like royal balls. Incidents and conflict typically relate to foibles committed by hapless characters attempting to conform to the expectations and rituals of conduct expected of the elite in society. Judgments of material culture and personal or spatial adornment, therefore, figured largely in these texts as a barometer for measuring a character’s success or failure in this regard. Utilizing stylizations of aristocratic life and ritual, authors of these texts satirized and critiqued aristocratic excess and ostentation and at the same time empowered certain rituals of performance and material culture by contrasting deviant forms of consumerism against proper, refined and tasteful expressions of aristocratic style. At the core of these novels, therefore, was an emphasis on performance and ritual – acting the correct way so as to be judged appropriately by peers and others. In correspondence with this, these novels also dealt intimately with issues of material culture, especially in their portrayal of elite lifestyles.

¹ Henry Colburn, and later his partner Richard Bentley were the two key publishers of the genre, which

II: Victorian Consumer Culture & Space as a Category of Analysis

It is important to briefly cover some of the major scholarship that has been written on the origins and evolution of British commodity culture, in order to better situate my own work within (and against) some of the foundational arguments that have been advanced in this scholarship. In particular, I believe it is important to reintroduce, if only briefly, some of those works discussed in previous chapters in order to explore questions of space, spatial engagements, and their relationship to the consumer as a means of connecting my work with the theoretical work done by other historians of consumption while distancing myself from some of their more contentious arguments regarding the genesis of British commodity culture. In *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*, Thomas Richards examines the later part of the nineteenth century in England, exploring questions regarding British commodity culture and locating its origins in The Great Exhibition of 1851, which was the first of its kind in Britain: “the great exhibition of things... showed once and for all that the capitalist system had not only created a dominant form of exchange but was also in the process of creating a dominant form to go along with it.”² In essence, Richards argues that the Great Exhibition represented a unique moment in British history, where commodities occupied centre stage for the first time: “until the exhibition the commodity had not for a moment occupied center stage in English public life, during and after the exhibition the commodity became and remained the still center of the turning earth, the focal point of all gazing and the end point of all pilgrimages.”³ Most important for my purposes, is the critical position of space in Richard’s formulation of commodity culture. That is, how space and spatial engagements

² Thomas Richards. *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990, p 3.

³ *Ibid.* p 18.

provided the necessary canvas for new considerations regarding the *place* and *meaning* of consumer goods, and therefore, how such material relationships become unintelligible outside of the matrix of intimate spatial interactions between selves, bodies, and goods.

Erika Rappaport, in *Shopping for Pleasure: Women and the making of London's West End*, follows a similar vein by exploring the development of the department store and arguing that the spectacle of public shopping (in spaces like department stores) eventually led to a reimagining of consuming for pleasure. By viewing the 'universal provider' and the department store as emblematic of mass culture in late Victorian London, however, Rappaport also sets her study apart from Richards, by focusing on how gender in correlation with a disruption between public and private contributed to the reconfiguration of consumer attitudes and modes of behaviour. In a sense then, Rappaport argues similarly to Richards' that the spectacle of department store shopping impacted the socio-cultural meanings of consumerism and commodities, and she adds to this analysis as well by recognizing the central importance of gender and private/public conflicts in the development of mass (commodity) culture: "consumer practices such as shopping thus fashioned identities by disrupting and reconstructing social categories and their perceived relationship to public and private spaces."⁴

Finally, Deborah Cohen's *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions*, also about British consumption during the Victorian period, and the early twentieth century, represents a major break from Richards and Rappaport in that she looks specifically at private space in correspondence with Victorian material culture:

The Victorian preoccupation with possessions reflected an age in which once rigid distinctions of class and rank seemed to be rapidly eroding... among the middle

⁴ Erika Rappaport. *Shopping for Pleasure: Women and the making of London's West End*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p 19.

classes... possessions became a way of defining oneself in a society where it was increasingly difficult to tell people apart. Homes... became flexible indicators of status.⁵

Through the lens of the domestic Cohen examines the mid and later Victorian period and argues that the bourgeois fascination with consumer goods and private adornment emerged out of a Christian revivalism ongoing during the period – referred to by Cohen as ‘incarnationism’ – which preached ‘heaven on earth,’ and therefore discarded a previous link between exercising personal restraint and moral wellbeing.⁶ In doing so, Victorians opened themselves and their homes to the influence of mass manufacture and the fruits of industrialization. Acts of consumption and the assembling of domestic space became geared towards the art of self-determination and individuality: “what made the ‘at home’ genre work was the conviction, much discussed from the 1880s onward, that the domestic interior expressed its inhabitants’ inner self.”⁷ Cohen points toward the intimate link which was fashioned during this period between people and things, a link that would lead to a reimagining of the relationship between individuals, objects and spaces.

I think Richards is correct to address the role of space in correspondence to consumerism and the development of commodity culture. Furthermore, I agree with Richards’ argument that public space and public spectacle necessarily impacted how the commodity was received and interpreted by a public. As well, I believe that Rappaport’s argument contributes greatly to a reworking of space in any discourse on British consumption during the Victorian period, and her illuminating work on the relationship between space, gender and consumerism is invaluable to any methodological approach

⁵ Deborah Cohen. *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, p xi.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp 12-14.

⁷ *Ibid.* p 123.

that seeks to view spaces as sites where meaning is constructed, expressed and contested. Finally, Cohen's work is helpful because it intersects neatly with many of the themes that have emerged in the work of others. Her discussion of the domestic is tied up in questions of gender (though I would argue that this does not form the focus of her work) that she engages with repeatedly, highlighting the interesting transition of interior decorating from a male to a female pursuit. Furthermore, her analysis of commodities and the home, as windows for self-discovery and self-expression, in many ways mirrors Richards' semiological discussion of the commodity.

However, there are a number of problems with how each of these scholars treats the relationship between space and consumer culture, both in public and private settings. So while I agree with the general link that Richards draws between space, spectacle and the semiotics of the object, I disagree with Richards' contention that commodity culture blossoms only after the Great Exhibition. The novels examined in this chapter contain many examples that demonstrate the importance of private spectacle in producing and affirming performances of aristocratic style. Similarly, while I agree with Rappaport's assertion that to consider space is to consider gender and power; that is, how spaces are negotiated and how this process impacts their potential to contribute meaning to a given interaction between bodies, I believe that her work would have benefited from exploring how the consumer goods/behaviours which come out of the department store resulted in a reconfiguration of private spaces. The issues that she examines concerning the correspondent conflicts over spaces and gender are relevant to private space as well as the public sphere, and therefore I would argue that by exploring these issues only in correlation to the department store (and urban space), Rappaport is leaving out an equally

important 'sphere' Lastly, while I find Cohen's inclusion of private space both necessary and helpful; and while Cohen treats questions of gender and the self in such a way as to link them together in the production of the 'Victorian consumer,' she does not actively examine the link between spaces and objects, and spaces and identity. Indeed, she tends towards looking only at the goods themselves and does not provide a satisfactory defence for viewing space as a stage where meaning is formed and reformed. Instead, Cohen seems to treat space as *passive* in this process. While it is evident that commodities confer meaning, it is important to bear in mind that space has the power to affect and alter meaning as well. Put simply, just as where an object is located has the power to illuminate space, the configuration of space similarly has the power to cloak objects in the periphery or to place them at the centre.

In conducting this analysis of Silver fork Novels, one of my aims is to refute claims that commodity culture is contingent upon the development of public spectacles like the Great Exhibition, which placed commodities on public display and allowed them to 'speak for themselves,' thus raising their semiotic potential. Just as placing an object on display in the Crystal Palace empowered and elevated the status of material goods, placing them on display in the home similarly contributed to how consumer goods were received and absorbed by viewer(s). Another tendency I wish to address here is the treatment of space by other scholars as a *passive* force in the construction of consumer relationships. In opposition to this, I argue that space, as an immanent material reality which determines – and therefore actively delimits – the geographical possibilities for all social relationships, is an active force which directly engages in these power negotiations in at least two key ways, which have been referred to in previous chapters. Most

importantly however, I wish to examine the early nineteenth century in Britain through an analysis of these novels. In particular, I am interested in examining private and intimately personal negotiations of consumption and consumer culture through the lens of space in order to illuminate how a restrictive discourse about material culture produced and affirmed inter-personal spatial and material relationships. To put it another way, my interest is in determining the ways that narratives about consumer and spatial entanglements that desired to direct consumer behavior towards the affirmation of traditional hierarchies such as class, gender and sociability, reveal the constitutive forces that were generating a marketplace that was both expressive and personal, and also coercive.

In essence then, I wish to reformulate the current argument concerning the origin of British commodity culture and reposition it so that the home becomes the central vehicle through which issues of space, performance and spectacle lead to a 'reimagining' of the material goods. If the present historiography links the emergence of commodity culture to the great public spectacles of the mid and later Victorian period, I argue that the performance of private spectacle in the home, beginning much earlier, actually informed these later events. In light of this, there may be an interesting connection between Silver Fork novels and later public exhibitions waiting to be discovered (are public exhibitions also teaching a kind of 'conduct' to a public largely removed from a direct and habitual relationship to the developing consumer culture?). However, I want to state clearly that my concern in this analysis is to examine moments within these texts where spaces, bodies and objects are interacting in such a way as to evidence a deep concern for expressions of material culture in its fashionable (aristocratic) form. This means that I am

more invested in determining how these texts reveal the importance of spectacle as a means of displaying an individual's proper consumer tastes to a public, than in a broad analysis of the pre-Victorian period, which has already been undertaken in previous chapters. My analysis does not attempt to show how, broadly, an emphasis on spectacle in conjunction with increased production ultimately created a new consumer society, but rather how in intimate moments, individuals grappled with material culture, space and spectacle within the private space of the home.

III: Catherine Gore & *Cecil; or, adventures of a coxcomb*

Catherine Gore (1798-1861) was an author and playwright active primarily between the 1820s and 1850s and is known as one of the progenitors of the Silver Fork genre, which she helped to popularize and formalize. Gore's affinity for writing novels of conduct began in 1830 with the publication of *Manners of the Day*; considered a pioneering work of the Silver Fork genre, the novel was very popular and well received.⁸ Between the publication of this work and the early 1840s, Gore published numerous Silver Fork novels, the most well remembered of which (though not the best selling) being the Cecil Danby stories, published over six volumes in two novels.⁹ Best sellers in their own time, Gores novels were read "both as exposes of aristocratic corruption and hornbooks of useful information for social climbers."¹⁰ Though not of aristocratic ancestry herself, Gore had a preoccupation with stories about the aristocracy, which were marketed to an emerging middle-class readership interested in stories about high life during Regency period and its aftermath. Even after she stopped producing Silver Fork

⁸ "Catherine Gore," *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Accessed July 1st 2013, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/11091>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

novels, Gore continued writing about the aristocracy, and her later novels often focused on teasing the distinctions and tensions between the ‘old wealth’ of the landed gentry and the new wealth emerging in the Victorian period.¹¹ Her preoccupation with scenes of aristocratic life and the popularity of her novels attest to her significance as a literary figure in the nineteenth century as well as a public interest in this period in the lifestyles of elite personages, both as a source of outrage and as a roadmap for aspiring individuals.

Cecil: or the adventures of a Coxcomb, published by Gore in 1841, and written in a pseudo-memoir style, follows the story of Cecil Danby, the second son of Lord Ormington, from early life until his ascension into the court of George the fourth. Set primarily during the time of the regency (1811-1820), the novel focuses on Cecil’s various love interests – of which there are three major ones – and his unfortunate tendency to make calamitous mistakes. A vain, self-indulgent and ultimately Byronic figure, Cecil is led at an early age into a life of extravagance and material indulgence, both because of his mother’s (Lady Ormington’s) own consumptive habits and his insatiate taste for a grandiose lifestyle. Though he is cut off from direct inheritance of his family’s titles and estates, due to his filial position as the second son, Cecil is nevertheless privy to a sizeable inheritance on his mother’s side, and receives many additional advantages with regards to income and employment due to his family’s rank. This leisurely lifestyle weighs heavily upon Cecil’s beliefs, tastes and habits from a very early age and informs the core of his adult character. In light of this, the novel is in many ways woven together as a portrait of aristocratic (i.e. ‘fashionable’) life; Cecil attends the most exclusive parties, he tours Europe, and he never misses an opportunity to indulge in ‘the pleasures’.

¹¹ “Catherine Gore,” The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Ultimately, however, the novel primarily centres on Cecil's three major love interests, Emily, Francetta, and Helena. In each case, Cecil is introduced to the young lady under auspicious circumstances – so for example Cecil 'rescues' Emily from the public gaze of men, nobly offering to escort her to her carriage when her chaperone fails to arrive on time. In each circumstance Cecil inevitably, and quickly, falls deeply in love. True to his Byronic constitution however, Cecil manages in each case to commit some egregious mistake that costs him the love of the woman he seeks, and that costs the woman her life. For example, Cecil ultimately shuns Emily's company due to a combination of her social status and his fears (fears of not being able to maintain an indulgent lifestyle should he marry her), and this causes her to fall into a depressed state that eventually kills her. At its nucleus then, and true to early Victorian style (that is the melodramatic) this novel is dually a story of fashionable life and of unrequited love. Problematically, this means that despite the novel's overarching interest in revealing the materialistic style of aristocratic life during the Regency, it is not specifically concerned with the domestic spaces of consumption. This does not mean however that the marketplace and elite cultures of consumption are absent from the text. Rather, the novel is overflowing with narrative relating to fashion, materialism, etiquette and spatial adornment. By examining these moments in the text, it becomes clear that a discourse about goods and material culture is taking place in the novel which views aristocratic consumption as a crucial site of stability in consumer culture. As a result, it is in the failures of characters in the novel to conform to the expectations of aristocratic consumption that a lesson (and a warning) is provided to readers regarding how to consume properly.

For details about material culture and the importance of proper conduct, it is important first to turn to Cecil's descriptions of his mother, her possessions, her own coxcombic tendencies and their imprint vis a vis domestic spectacle. After divulging about his early experiences as a child at the opening of the novel, where Cecil reveals spending the majority of his time in his mother's toilet (dressing-room) Cecil then turns to the objects which fill the space under consideration, describing a number of them in turn: "When my little self... grew tired of the dancing system, there were other glittering object's in my mother's sanctum which I found almost equally attractive,- jewels, feathers, flowers, and frippery of all descriptions."¹² This passage suggests both that the space is full of material objects and that they perform a particular function that is addressed at the viewer. As is evidenced by Cecil, their aura almost seems to entrance the viewer, drawing their gaze towards the objects that fill the space. At one and the same time then, this passage gestures to an ever expanding marketplace of things (the outcome of technological and productive changes) and the symbolic capacity of goods and spaces to produce or reify certain notions of consumption and of the consumer.

This is perhaps best illustrated by the specific example of the mirror, which seems to mesmerize the young Cecil. He talks about his experiences with his mother's looking-glass at the opening of the text: "I choose to tell it in my own way; and am free to confess that the leading trait of my character has its origin in the first glimpse I caught of myself... in the swinging glass of my mother's dressing room. I looked, and become a coxcomb for life!"¹³ This memory illuminates the powerful connection that Cecil draws between objects and his own self-image, even going so far as to claim that his most

¹² Catherine Gore. Cecil: or the adventures of a coxcomb. London: Richard Bentley, 1841, p 3.

¹³ Ibid. p 1.

intimate character was founded by these very early experiences in his mother's dressing room. This also suggests a particular link between the mirror as an object, a broader spatial context, and the development of his vanity. As both an object of the space and reflective of this space and its contents, the mirror is exemplary of a symbiosis being formed between Cecil, the dressing room, its objects and his development: "it was unquestioningly to my personal charms I was indebted for my *entrée* into Lady Ormington's *sanctum sanctorum*. I was the first of her children admitted to be danced before her glass, or roll upon her soft carpet."¹⁴ In his reveries Cecil draws a direct and intimate link between his development as an individual and the combined influence of his mother's dressing room and the objects that adorn it. It is not merely the impression that the objects imprint on him, but rather the productive capacity that resides in the spectacle of the space itself.

This is also evidenced in Cecil's description of his mother and her passion for adornment, a passion which appears to have, in conjunction with the space of the dressing-room, overtaken this space and made it into a shrine of consumption, a spectacular display of goods that teem with meaning:

My mother's instinctive vocation was for the toilet (dressing-room). Her beauty had been her stepping-stone to distinction; and she seemed to think too much care could not be bestowed on its adornment, as devotees erect a shrine to a favorite divinity. It was true, the worship was gratuitous... there was an Ormington *pouf*, and an Ormington *vis-à-vis*; and Ormington green and an Ormington minuet.¹⁵

It would appear in this passage as though the auristic is imbedded in the space itself, summarized in Cecil's descriptions of his mother's treating it – and the act of fashion – like a religious shrine. In this space there is a negotiation between the room and the

¹⁴ Gore. *Cecil: or the adventures of a coxcomb*, p 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p 6.

objects within it, both of which assist in defining Cecil's memories of it. This explains why Cecil is at once describing it as a shrine and taking time to locate and name some of the objects within it (in the earlier quote it was jewels, feathers and frippery, in the latter is a number of the lady's wigs). Gender is also implicated in Cecil's description of his mother and her dressing-room, for instance in his insistence that adornment is her 'instinctive' calling and that beauty has served as the vehicle through which she has achieved distinction (in the act of marrying Cecil's father, Lord Ormington). Perhaps most interestingly, he illuminates the productive character of the space itself: Lady Ormington's 'vocation' is shaped dually by her natural beauty and by her reliance on the space in question in the maintenance of this beauty. In essence, this vitally important fashioning of the self is as much a consequence of her needs as it is produced by the effect that the dressing room has upon her, which may explain why Cecil describes it as a shrine to her divinity, fashion.

In a further example, which takes place later in the novel, Lady Harriet, one of Lady Ormington's friends, accosts Cecil in Lady Ormington's dressing room while she is getting prepared to go to the opera. During this encounter, Lady Harriet sizes up the dressing room, taking note of its organization and its decoration:

Is it not a horrible vulgarism... to cram a habitable room with little tables, showered over with trumpery, of which one risks the fracture of a hundred pounds' worth, at every turn? One might as well lay out, for show, one's stomacher and diamond necklace! Look at my friend Lady Ormington's confusion of cabinets and tables, rivaling an old curiosity shop, or Week's museum!¹⁶

This critique of Lady Ormington's dressing room evidences both the centripetal importance of spaces with regards to the conceptualization of material goods and introduces the topic of conduct within the context of spatial organization. On the one

¹⁶ Gore. Cecil: or the adventures of a coxcomb, p 73.

hand, Lady Harriet's criticism suggests that the space should be performing a certain function within the broader context of its purpose (i.e. as the dressing room of an aristocratic woman) while on the other, she argues that the smorgasbord of goods causes the intended role of the space to become confused. Ultimately, this conflict suggests a broader tension as well. Lady Ormington's dressing room is critiqued because it is attempting to display *too much* in the way of material indulgence. In plain terms, this is an example of expressions of material culture taken too far. In her desire to show off her trinkets and wealth, Lady Ormington has crossed the boundary of acceptable display and into ostentation. In essence, Gore is dwelling upon questions of consumption that are materializing within this space. At the same time, Lady Harriet's critique of the space evidences the power that a restrictive discourse about consumer culture held over goods more generally. Lady Ormington has an obligation to arrange this space in such a way that it serves as a reflection of her gender, her refinement, and her rank, a task that she has not succeeded in, in the gaze of her peers. Herein lies the kernel of the book's underlying tension as well; because Lady Ormington is representative of the aristocracy, her inability to conform to the expectations of a Woman of distinction could, if not adequately addressed, serve as a spark for the unraveling of aristocratic society more generally.

Beyond the immediate context of space, therefore, the novel also speaks to consumption and the stakes at play in the adornment of domestic spaces. Indeed, Cecil's childhood obsession with the space and, his mothers devotion to it as a shrine to consumption as well as Lady Harriet's critical reading of it all suggest that the objects and the space are mediating a spectacle of display to the viewer(s) of the room. To put it

another way, the space has been organized by Lady Ormington in order to impress a specific message about taste and aristocratic style upon those who visit the room. In the case of Lady Ormington's dressing room, this process is highlighted by a failure to conform, and an overindulgence in individuality, expressed via her eclectic adornment of the room. Indeed, as Lady Harriet's critical reading of the space illustrates, there is an obvious process at work in the room that aims to convince the viewer of Lady Ormington's refined tastes. Yet, Harriet remains unconvinced, an attitude which reveals both the intention of spectacle and its failure. As Lady Harriet explains, there is a 'confusion' as to the placement of tables, and there is too much in the way of 'foppery' (novelties) that obscure and confuse the room's intended message (as a spectacle of display reflecting tasteful and refined self indulgence). At an earlier point, Lady Harriet comments explicitly on the Chelsea China, "with which Lady Ormington has the bad taste to encumber her rooms!"¹⁷ This dismayed remark, and others similar to it, draw an explicit link between the space, its defined purpose, the exercise of producing spectacle, and the fine line that separates proper taste from philistine adornment. Crucially at work in the text then, is a mediation occurring between spaces, bodies and objects that relates to questions of etiquette and self-expression, and which reveal the inter-play of these tensions within this space. The policing of material culture in this context occurs through Harriet's condemnation of Lady Ormington's style as cluttered and not reflective of her status, a confusion of spatial adornment that (presumably) needs to be addressed and corrected.

Ultimately, while not directly a novel about material relationships and domestic spectacle, *Cecil* nevertheless expresses a deep interest in consumption; or, put another

¹⁷ Gore. *Cecil: or the adventures of a coxcomb*, p 72.

way, about the consequences and outcomes of consumption. Instead of tracing the veins of production from the factory to the store, *Cecil* explores more intimate responses to, and appropriations of, new material possibilities within spaces like Lady Ormington's dressing room, where both the goods and the space itself testify to a belief in the indulgent habits of the aristocracy during the Regency period. Beyond this, the occasions in the novel where spaces and goods are both at issue (or in question) evidence a concern with how material culture and space interact with individuals to produce certain ideas regarding the proper adornment of spaces (or of people for that matter). Furthermore, Cecil's descriptions of his mother's dressing room and his encounter with Lady Harriet in this room both illustrate the process of private display and spectacle being put into practice. As Lady Harriet's initial reaction to the room evidences, there is an overt set of relationships being negotiated between the dressing room and its decorators over the implementation of a specific display of goods in the space with the intent of emanating a particular message to possible audiences of the room. Most importantly, Harriet's various critiques of the room reveal how Lady Ormington has taken her desire to produce a personalized space past the acceptable boundaries outlined in a restrictive discourse about goods and their place/meaning in the home. As a consequence, though indirectly, Lady Ormington has become vulnerable to the un-approving gaze of her peers and more explicit forms of judgment and condemnation.

IV: Edward Lytton-Bulwer & *Godolphin*

Edward Lytton-Bulwer is the most well known of the three authors whose novels are analyzed in this chapter. Unlike Gore and Landon, Bulwer was born into the aristocracy, and died a peer as the Baron of Knebworth in 1873.¹⁸ Bulwer was a prolific writer, and his body of work covered a broad range of subject matter and genre, ranging from historical fiction, to poetry, non-fiction, plays and Silver Fork novels, the most famous of which was *Pelham, or, adventures of a Gentleman* penned in 1828.¹⁹ No doubt as a result of his heritage, education, and rank, Bulwer's Silver Fork novels always featured a male protagonist who was introduced as vain and egotistical, and over the course of the novel gradually came to accept his responsibilities and obligations to others, completing the transformation from self-involved to philanthropic (Percy certainly follows this course in *Godolphin*).²⁰ Over the course of his literary career, which spanned an impressive six decades, Bulwer published numerous works that achieved spectacular popularity in England and abroad.²¹ Like Gore, Landon, and his close friends Disraeli and Dickens, much of Bulwer's fiction focused upon the nature of aristocratic life and the relationship between the privileged and the less fortunate. Bulwer was also active politically, achieving electoral victory as an independent in 1831. Bulwer delivered a speech in favor of the Great Reform bill of 1832, in a move that ultimately cost him his seat in parliament. Bulwer would return to parliament again in the 1840s, and once more in the 1850s at the behest of Disraeli. During this time, Bulwer continued publishing at an

¹⁸ "Edward Lytton-Bulwer," *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Accessed July 1st 2013, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/17314?docPos=2>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Outside of *Pelham*, Bulwer also authored the wildly successful *Last Days of Pompeii*, which was easily his most famous work, sold across the continent and translated into ten languages. In all, only Charles Dickens outsold Bulwer in this period, and no less than twenty-five multi-volume collections of his complete novels were issued in Britain and America between 1875 and 1900.

astonishing pace and in various subjects, including two novels that were published posthumously after his death in 1873. Though he was by no means concerned only with publishing Silver Fork novels, Bulwer spent much of the late 1820s and 1830s publishing works of the genre, preoccupied as he was with questions of morality as they related to his aristocratic protagonists. As his novels reveal, Bulwer advocated for a vision of aristocratic life that was refined, tasteful and above all adherent to a strict concept of 'properness'. By successfully appropriating such a lifestyle, the aristocratic gentleman could assume his calling as an emissary for the cultivated and respectable society, an example to others.

Godolphin, like *Cecil*, is a novel that is not directly concerned with material or spatial relationships. Written by Bulwer in 1833, the novel instead centres on the story of Percy Godolphin, the only son of a formerly wealthy aristocrat, whose lineage and finances are in a ruinous state. Despite the tenuous position of his family's aristocratic status however, Percy nevertheless occupies a position in the privileged social stratum. Like *Cecil* therefore, *Godolphin* is a novel about privileged life and aristocratic relationships. Furthermore, and similarly to other Silver Fork novels, the story's protagonist Percy is a Byronic figure, someone whose virtuous and amoral personality form a paradox that make him interesting as a character. The majority of the novel traces the life of Percy from adolescence to adulthood, and focuses upon his two intimate relationships, first with Lucillia Volkman and later with Constance Vernon. In the first case, Percy is introduced to Lucillia through his friendship with her father, and feeling a duty to her wellbeing after he dies, Percy embarks on a life with her, though all the time aware that the combination of her foreign and un-aristocratic status make the relationship

impossible to maintain. Indeed, it is after Percy leaves Lucillia for Rome that he is reintroduced to his first love, Constance Vernon, with whom he elopes back to England after confronting Lucillia. Within the story of love gained, love lost, and love united however, there remains an intimate interest in material culture and consumption, especially as these concern the contrast developed between Percy's poverty, and Constance's and Saraville's (Percy's uncle and mentor) wealth. Buried within the dominant plot, therefore, is a narrative about spectacle, fashion and consumption.

In order to highlight the extent to which spectacle and material culture operate as a means of producing and reifying these aristocratic figures, it is helpful to look at the contrast that manifests between Percy, whose limited means necessarily constrain his consumption, and Constance and Saraville, whose respective fortunes allow them to organize domestic displays of consumer goods that effectively inform and reflect their taste and status. Early on in the text, the reader is provided with a description of the Godolphin estate, seeing what Constance and Lady Erpingham see as they tour the ruins:

The scene, as they approached, was wild and picturesque in the extreme. A wide and glassy lake lay stretched beneath them: on the opposite side stood the ruins. The large oriel window- the Gothic arch- the broken yet still majestic column, all embrowned and mossed with age... fragments of stone lay around, for some considerable distance.²²

The Godolphin ruins evoke an intimate engagement with the viewer just as that Lady Orminton's dressing room does with guests. Constance and Lady Erpingham are drawn into the space itself, mesmerized by its historical stature and dilapidated state: "there was something quiet and venerable about the whole place... The hour, the stillness, the scene, all conspired to lull the heart into that dreaming and half-conscious reverie."²³

²² E.L. Bulwer. *Godolphin*. Paris: Baudrey's European Library, 1840, p 33.

²³ *Ibid.* p 35.

Interestingly, this scene suggests that it is both the attitudes of the two women and the space itself that combine to produce this affective state. And in its own way, the space emanates a kind of spectacle, where the past, and more importantly the inherent absence of material splendor in the way of ornamental goods, are made visible to Constance and Lady Erpingham. On the one hand, therefore, this scene evidences the active participation of space in spectacle, as it is the space that reinforces and therefore produces the emotional sentiment that its viewers experience. On the other, it highlights the degenerate state of Godolphin's finances, which explains, for instance, why the ruins move Constance to feelings of reverie and historical contemplation of what *was* rather than to a fine appreciation of the manor's current stature.

In contrast to the description of Godolphin's estate, the reader is provided with a description of two richly adorned aristocratic dwellings, those of Augustus Saraville and Constance. In the case of Saraville, the contrast is immediately striking between his estate and Percy's: "the furniture was new, massive, costly, and luxurious without ostentation of luxury. A few good pictures, and several exquisite busts and figures in bronze, upon marble pedestals, gave something classic and graceful to the aspect of the room."²⁴ There are two critical observations that can be made in light of this description. First, the room's adornment evidences the consumptive behaviour of its owner, who appears to be driven by a desire for things expressed in a refined aristocratic style. Second, this description of the space is provided by Percy, and is therefore in a way his reaction to it, or in other words, his explanation of the room's *impression* upon him. Furthermore, and unlike Lady Ormington's dressing-room, this space is received positively by Percy, who notes for instance that it is 'luxurious without ostentation of luxury' and thus indicates that

²⁴ Bulwer. Godolphin, p 76.

Saraville has successfully appropriated material goods and fashioned the space so as to adhere to the expectations of aristocratic consumption.

Similarly to Saraville, and unlike Percy, Constance's first marriage, into a family of considerable means, allows her to be able to decorate and furnish her home in such a way as to impress upon visitors the status and taste of its inhabitants. This process is perhaps best highlighted in a brief but revealing description that is given of the home during the evening of a party to be held there: "Erpingham house was not large, but was well adapted to the description of assembly its beautiful owner had invited. Statues, busts, pictures, books, scattered or arranged about the apartments, furnished matter for intellectual conversation, or gave at least an intellectual air to the meeting."²⁵ This passage illuminates a specific expression of material culture (and wealth) being put on display within the home for the purposes of generating a particular spectacle for the guests of the evening (in this, an 'air of intellectualism' and evidence of refined tastes). What is significant about this description, in fact, is that it directly references the performative value of space, as well as its malleability. That is, the home has been organized in such a way as to present guests with a sense of the worthiness (or status) of its owners. Indeed, the desire that the space assist in affirming this version of Constance and her husband to the guests attending the party is readily apparent. Unlike Percy's estate, which only seems to evoke a kind of romantic reverie from the viewer, Saraville and Constance's homes impress a more immediate and materialistically determined message that is both reflective and productive of their present status as elite consumers and aristocrats. At work in these descriptive moments therefore is the confluence of material culture and a conservative discourse about consumers and consumer spaces. At

²⁵ Bulwer. Godolphin, p 93.

once these are spaces that speak to the desires and passions of individual consumers and yet also affirm the status of those consumers and individuals within particular definitions of taste, style and fashion that are all meant to enforce and reflect a strict adherence to a specific form of consumption. In appropriating space and material goods to serve the function of confirming their status as members of an elite marketplace and social world, Saraville and Constance serve as examples that form a contrast to Lady Ormington, and their consumptive habits work to stabilize and strengthen hierarchies of class, taste, and sociability.

In light of the numerous spatial descriptions that are littered throughout the text, it is perhaps particularly interesting that the novel ends with a scene that takes place in the recently restored Godolphin estate. Indeed, in a story where the intimate relationship between bodies and spaces is so heavily attested to, it makes sense for the story to end with the re-igniting of the former passion between Constance and Percy within the space of Godolphin Priory: “‘surely,’ said he, ‘I remember this view. Yonder valley! This is not the road to Wendover Castle; this,-- my father’s home! – the same, and not same!’”²⁶ Having returned to England and married Constance, after the unexpected death of her first husband, Percy acquires access to the level of wealth expected of his status, and as a grand gesture Constance decides to spend many years, secretly, rebuilding his family’s estate, in a sense, elevating it to its previous stature: “the scattered arch, the mouldering tower, were left indeed – but new arches, new turrets had arisen... still alike in shape and outline, and such even in size as would have contented the proud heart of its last owner.”²⁷ As this particularly emotional encounter illuminates, Godolphin’s estate has in

²⁶ Bulwer. *Godolphin*, p 278.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p 278.

fact been resuscitated as a symbol of the renewed wealth of its owners. And perhaps as a testament to the symbiosis that spaces and people share in the novel, the old structure is not entirely gone, and its romantic radiance is not lost. Indeed, just as the love between Godolphin and Constance is both old and new (or more accurately, renewed) so to is the estate a testimony both to the lineage of the Godolphin name and its resurgence.

Ultimately, this is simply to demonstrate that spaces and bodies do share a contingent relationship, one that involves both reflection and production; and finally, one that is immanently material, because of course, the mere cost of such an extensive remodeling is itself a testimony to wealth and to the kind of consumption that the characters of Godolphin all continually engage in. In a sense, the consumptive moments in the text reveal in a broader way what the interplay of bodies in Lady Ormington's dressing-room did in *Cecil*. That is, that spaces and spatial adornment function as individual expressions of material culture and *desire*, but simultaneously serve to structure rooms as spaces where critique become possible and necessary. Spaces in the home are particularly powerful in serving this function because they both reveal a consumers level of adherence to codes of consumer conduct in an immediate way, and impress upon other viewers those qualities that make a certain space refined, tasteful and fashionable in an acceptable manner. In this way for example, Constance's home is both reflective of Constance's vision for her self, while at the same time it assists in the production of this performance. In other words, without the space being organized in this way, the performance loses its impetus. Perhaps the best example of this symbiosis though is the evolution of Godolphin's estate. In the opening of the novel, the estate is dilapidated and continuing to succumb to time and elements, a condition that is reflective

– as well as the product of – neglect due to the financial state of its owners. In effect, this both reflects and produces the version of Percy at the opening of the novel, a youth of unrequited wants and tastes who grows into a Bryonic figure. At the story’s end, the estate is rebuilt (and effectively re-established), again productive of the new vision that Godolphin and Constance have of each other and themselves. And of course, the new is melded with the old, in keeping with the novel’s romantic tone, as a tale of love lost and love united.

V: Letitia Elizabeth Landon & *Romance and Reality*

Letitia Elizabeth Landon is the most obscure of the three authors analyzed in this chapter, undoubtedly due to the tragic circumstances surrounding her later life and mysterious death in 1838 at the age of only thirty six.²⁸ Landon achieved notoriety in the 1820s as a talented poet, becoming a regular contributor to the *Literary Gazette* as a writer herself and a popular reviewer.²⁹ *Romance and Reality* was Landon’s first published novel, and her first attempt at producing a work of the Silver Fork genre. Moderately popular, many reviewers of the novel argued that the story of Emily Arundel mirrored in many ways Landon’s own journey to literary popularity in the London scene.³⁰ Unfortunately, as a single and successful woman, Landon was vulnerable to intense gossip and personal attacks leveled against her by many in the literary establishment who argued that she must have possessed an immoral character to be unmarried and self-dependent. Though she did eventually marry George Maclean in 1838 (partially in an attempt to quash the gossip about her ‘improper’ lifestyle) a combination

²⁸ “Letitia Elizabeth Landon,” *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Accessed July 1st 2013, <http://www.oxforddnb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/view/article/15978>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

of sustained slander and repeated illness had already taken its toll on Landon, who died in October of that year from apparent accidental suicide.³¹ Unlike Gore and Bulwer, Landon's personal story was often an unhappy one, and she was never able to overcome the criticism leveled against her for being a single woman making her own way in the literary world. Undoubtedly drawing from her own experiences, *Romance and Reality* is as much about navigating the harrowing waters of elite social circles as a woman as it is concerned with aristocratic style and manners more generally. In a significant way, Emily Arundel is representative of individuals like Landon, who were tasked with wading the waters of elite social life in a deeply conservative society.

Like *Cecil* and *Godolphin*, the majority of *Romance and Reality* is set during the Regency period, and follows the lives (and loves) of various aristocratic personages. Unlike the previous two novels however, the protagonist in *Romance and Reality* is a female heroine, Emily Arundel, a confessed romantic who is making her first appearance in London society at the story's opening. Emily, like Cecil and Percy, is both a heroic and tragic figure, someone who struggles with love and loss. In a very real sense, the romance of her country upbringing meets (and at times clashes) with the rampant consumerism that defined the aristocratic community in London. On the one hand, her experiences in London form a critical part of the novel, one that is concerned with showing her growth from a romantic figure to one who is forced to come to terms with her reality. On the other however, and in much a more transparent way than either *Cecil* or *Godolphin*, the novel illuminates the obsession that London aristocrats shared for fashionable consumerism. Similarly to *Cecil* and *Godolphin* therefore, *Romance and Reality* is replete with evidence that reveals both an evolving materialist society and the power that a

³¹ "Letitia Elizabeth Landon," [The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#).

dominant conservative discourse about, taste, class and gender held over the fashioning of aristocratic bodies and spaces.

When Emily is first brought to London, to ‘make her first appearance in society,’ she is taken to parties and balls in order for her to be introduced to others amongst the privileged class. In one particular instance, upon arriving at Lady Mandeville’s, Emily is immediately struck with the spectacle of Mandeville’s home and describes her impression to the reader:

As they entered, an opening in the figures of the dance gave a transient view of nearly the whole length of the apartments. It was a brilliant *coup d’ail*: mirrors... up to the ceiling, and down to the ground, reflected an almost endless crowd... the rich decorations—alabaster vases... the sweep of purple curtains--the gold mouldings, a few beautiful pictures—while all terminated in a splendidly illuminated conservatory.³²

In this passage, Emily reveals both the effect that the space has on her, and the principles that guide its organization and adornment. While always maintaining the importance of tasteful and fashionable consumption, the scene presented here of Lady Mandeville’s home nevertheless testifies to expressions of material culture that are produced via domestic grandeur and spectacle. Both the objects in the rooms and the numerous mirrors that line the walls effectively produce a scene where bodies blend in with the spectacle of the house itself: “an almost endless crowd—the graceful figures ‘in shining draperies enfolded,’ the gay wreaths round the head of the young, the white waves of feather on their seniors—the silver light from the moon-like lamps flashed back from bright gems and brighter eyes.”³³ Emily’s impression of the scene, taken as a whole, is one where spaces and bodies are seemingly melded together in a spectacle that radiates aristocratic style as its key guiding principle. Crucially, it is neither the house or the guests

³² L.E.L. *Romance and Reality*. London: J & J Harper, 1832, pp 28-29.

³³ *Ibid.* pp 28-29.

themselves that produce this display, but both working constitutively. Most significantly, this passage suggests that this style of spatial adornment is effectively creating a scene full of genteel men and woman. Every object that adorns the space reflects a distinctive aristocratic style that produces as much as it affirms the scale and grandeur of the event and the attendees. Appropriated in this way, material goods distinguish Mandeville's home as that of an elite personage and consumer, and thus reify social distinctions of class to the reader in an elementary way.

In a final example, the reader is introduced to Lord Etheringhame's estate, through the eyes of his younger brother Edward. The Etheringhames' are an ancient and powerful aristocratic family that has a lineage extending generations, and the description of their estate illustrates both its history and the imprint of an evolving consumer society:

A huge black screen, worked in gold, hid the door; and the fantastic gilded Chinese people that covered it, with their strange pagodas... placed in the Gothic arches of carved oak, thousands of books were ranged around—many whose ponderous size and rich silver clasps told of past centuries... and between, placed on altar-like stands of variegated marble, were bronze busts of those whose minds had made them gods among their kind.³⁴

This is the scene as Edward is describing it, one of his brother's favorite rooms in the house, decorated according to his specifications (and with a specific exhibition in mind). Immediately this depiction reveals both wealth and an interest in fashionable consumption, as well as particular spatial organization. Interestingly, this passage also evidences the growing extent of global connectedness in relation to material culture. The Chinese pagodas for example reveal how increased access to international markets is contributing to an expanding marketplace of goods considered proper and stylistically ornamental without being ostentatious. The room's windows, its arches, its books, the

³⁴ L.E.L. *Romance and Reality*, pp 80-81.

portraits that cover the walls, all are gathered and displayed specifically in order to radiate a particular spectacle to the viewer. Edward in fact summarizes the impression that the room has on him, upon taking a seat beside Lord Etheringhame: “There was beauty, there was grandeur in the room; it spoke both of mind and of wealth.”³⁵ In both his practical and personal adornment of the space, therefore, Lord Etheringhame has desired to exhibit a specific performance that illustrates his own, refined character. Thus in his adornment of the space, Etheringhame has paid careful attention to ensure that the room adheres to the expectations laid forth in a restrictive discourse about goods and material culture. In so doing, and as the passage illustrates, he has generated a space that highlights his aristocratic character and thus reveals the alignment between a desire for aristocratic self-expression and practices of consumption designed appropriate material culture as a means of generating a society of respectable consumers.

VI: Conclusion

Ultimately, though perhaps at times indirectly, it is clear that all three of these novels evidence a growing investment and interest in consumerism and material culture (usually in the guise of ‘fashionable’ or tasteful consumption), while simultaneously illuminating how space is engaged with – both directly and indirectly – in order to assist in the production of spectacles and performances of wealth and aristocratic style. Cecil’s experiences in his mother’s dressing room, the symbiosis that Percy shares with his namesake’s decrepit estate, and Emily’s awestruck reaction to Lady Mandeville’s home all reveal how space, bodies, and objects operate constitutively in defining and mediating material relationships that simultaneously reflect and produce who these characters are and what they wish for others to see in them. Cecil teases this connection explicitly,

³⁵ L.E.L. *Romance and Reality*, p 82.

declaring that his current character is intimately linked to the both the space of dressing room and the various objects that filled his childhood fancy. For Percy, the process is symbiotic, the spaces he occupies reflect his current state of being, a theme that is traced from his early poverty to his eventual reclamation of wealth and status, symbolized in the reconstruction of Godolphin manor. Perhaps even more overtly in *Romance and Reality*, Emily and Edward both intimate the connection that they view space as sharing with its owners; that is, both the spectacular exhibition of Lady Mandeville's party and the solemn and haughty display of goods in Lord Etheringhame's study radiate an impression of what Mandeville and Etheringhame think of their own character, and what they wish for others to see in them.

At the same time, it is also evident that the adornment of domestic spaces and the home more generally, while seen as a productive act where spaces possess agency, was nevertheless part of a much broader process whereby individuals attempted to appropriate goods and spaces into confined narratives about consumption and material culture. The outcome is clear, for example, for those who did not organize or fashion their rooms in such a way so that these spaces confirmed and adhered to strict codes of taste and refinement, defined by a broader conservative discourse about goods and material culture. Such stakes are evident both in Lady Ormington's failures and in Saraville's and Constance's successes. Lady Ormington is subject to the ridicule of her peers because she has taken her personal consumer and decorative tastes too far, adorning her dressing-room with improper objects and at times, simply too much clutter. In contrast, the space should attest to her refined and luxurious (but unostentatious) tastes as a wealthy aristocratic woman. Saraville's and Constance's rooms appear to accomplish this task,

though no less luxuriously adorned, they are organized in such a way so as to meet the expectations of observers informed by a dominant discourse that views goods and private spectacle as monikers of class and respectability. Such moments in these texts attest to the delicate balance that was negotiated time and again in this marketplace between individual expression and a dominant conservative discourse about material life that was seeking to direct consumption and expressions of material culture (for example in the decoration of rooms in the home) as a means of stabilizing and strengthening the nation. These novels evidence a tension between conformity and self-expression, one that was corrected by maintaining a strict adherence to a specific practice (an aristocratic form) of consumption. Thus material indulgence in its correct form appropriated goods in the service of fashioning an image of aristocratic grandeur, taste and style that reified the elite position of genteel consumers and strengthened traditional hierarchies of class, gender and social belonging.

Conclusion

This project originally began as an analysis of commodity culture in Victorian England (for the sake of argument, denoted as Victoria's reign, 1837-1901). Initially, my intention was to repudiate the historiography of consumption in the Victorian period for not adequately examining issues of space, *desire* and spectacle in shaping material relationships and consumer demand. What I found when I began researching however, was that this topic could not be adequately addressed without looking back to the early nineteenth century – a period rarely highlighted in consumption literature and yet one that seemed to me to be crucial in discussing the formation of British consumer culture. I shifted my focus away from the Victorian period, and towards an analysis of consumer culture in this earlier frame. What I discovered was a society deeply entangled in consumption and material culture, a society where questions of desire, space, spectacle, conduct and respectability were being negotiated between consumers and an often-coercive marketplace. I was exposed to many of the same questions and contentions surrounding material culture that I had once thought were settled only in the Victorian period. Even more significantly, I found that understanding the consumer culture of this earlier period became key to explaining expressions of material culture in the later nineteenth century.

As I outlined in the introduction, the reason for focusing on this period was twofold. First, as political historians have shown this moment in British history witnessed conservative backlash against a series of internal and external crises in the nation. My goal was to explore how discourse about consumerism, products and the marketplace was part of this backlash and worked to stabilize “traditional” hierarchies of class, gender and

cultural belonging. As I have shown, actors and cultural agents capitalized on an expanding marketplace of things to promote certain forms of consumer behavior and condemn others. Most significantly, this stream of consumption discourse highlighted a novel feature of material objects, that they could be used to regulate and order social space. Second, by beginning the process of bridging a gap in consumption literature between the eighteenth century and the Victorian period, I argued that the questions involved in any analysis of Victorian consumer culture can and should be reformulated to acknowledge the critical importance of this earlier period in the formation of Victorian material culture. As was discussed in the introduction, the consumption literature on Victorian England has had a tendency to view the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as anticipating consumer culture but not possessive of it. In contrast, this thesis has shown that Britons in this period were deeply immersed in consumption and material culture. Rather than anticipating the consumer culture of the Victorian period therefore, it is more accurate to view Victorian consumer culture as a *product* of this earlier period. In the Victorian period, politicians, social elites, and moral reformers once again turned to material goods and consumer culture in order to revise existing narratives about consumption to incorporate new and broader, though still immanently conservative messages about consumption and the consumer. In this way, the material culture of this earlier period served as a kind of model for the Victorians, who appropriated many of its features in the production of a mass consumer society.

With regards to the first point, I argued that the development of consumer culture in the early nineteenth century in Britain was a key conservative response to massive political, economic, social, intellectual and military upheaval that followed the French

Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. I argued that this period in Britain represented a moment where the demands of expanding productive forces and consumers coalesced with the anxieties caused by successive internal and external crises in the nation to produce a marketplace at once a source of liberation and excitement for those wishing to engage in aesthetic pleasure-seeking, and heavily intruded upon by coercive forces desiring to restore and maintain economic and cultural stability in the nation. Finally, I argued that the effect of these combined forces was to produce a consumer society that was suspicious of change, and anxious about the future, but still passionately engaged in pleasure seeking and performance through cultural material gain. I argued these points in the three chapters of thesis by analyzing etiquette literature, diaries, and silver-fork novels.

In the first chapter, I examined two etiquette manuals and series of articles pulled from the periodical *The Ladies Magazine*, and argued that etiquette literature codified and regulated consumer behavior by emphasizing the importance of maintaining consumer propriety and respectability in all material and social engagements. I argued that this formed one key part of a broader conservative intervention into material culture in the early nineteenth century in Britain. I did this first by introducing and defining etiquette and other terminology related to conduct, as they were understood in this period. Specifically, I argued that this literature established a direct connection between etiquette, propriety and respectability and acknowledged that success in the social world was contingent upon an outward appearance of propriety (understood as morality) and respectability (understood as adhering to the expectations of class, aristocratic taste, and gender). As a consequence, this literature argued that what was most at stake in acts of

consumption in this period was reputation and self-image. Material culture was to be expressed in acts of ‘refined’ and ‘tasteful’ consumption that appealed to an elegant simplicity rather than a show of wealth or ornamentalism. This is evident in the various anecdotes that litter the two etiquette manuals about would-be consumers who had somehow failed to conform to the expectations of etiquette. It is also on display in the story about the lady of fashion, who time and again crossed the all-important boundary between a ‘refined simplicity’ and ostentation in her attempts to win back the fawning praise of her peers. Ultimately, this chapter argued that conformity and ‘morality’ were instilled into the marketplace through the codifying of certain consumer practices as ‘proper’ and the labeling of others as deviant and profane.

In the second chapter, I analyzed the diaries of Richard Hodgkinson, William Holland, Ellen Weeton and Robert sharp, and argued that questions of performance, etiquette, space and gender – outside of their treatment in etiquette literature – informed choices of material culture at a most basic and personal level. I argued as well that these diaries revealed that other element always at work in consumer culture, individual *desire* and longing. Finally, I argued that these diaries provide substantiating evidence regarding the weight of conservative pressures on the early nineteenth century marketplace, most often expressed in the form of judgments that these diarists levied against their peers. Personal testimony from William Holland regarding the clothing he received, and from Robert Sharp regarding the purchasing of a China set and a pocket globe, evidence how individual desire influenced consumer choices. Holland states explicitly that the clothing is pleasing both because of its elegance *and* its desirability to him personally. Sharp bought the China set despite having no room to put it on display, and requested that his

son acquire a pocket globe for him not because it was necessary that he own one, but for his *amusement*. At the same time, Hodgkinson's lengthy critique of the newly purchased home of Mr. and Mrs. Pye, Ellen Weeton's repeated entries on the profane and selfish behavior of Mr. Pedder, as well as Sharp's critique of Mrs. Rd. Marshall illustrate that consumers in this period were deeply affected by an ongoing effort to link material culture and consumerism to the moral health of the nation. This is expressed both in Hodgkinson's dissatisfaction with the Pye home as underwhelming and not properly reflective of their status as gentry, and Sharp's genuine belief that Mrs. Marshall's imprudent consumer behavior had caused her decline in health. It is forcefully and repeatedly asserted by Miss Weeton, who views all of the problems in the Pedder home as the outcome of Mr. Pedder's impropriety.

In the final chapter, I examined three Silver Fork Novels, *Cecil: or the adventures of a coxcomb*, *Godolphin*, and *Romance and Reality*, and argued that these novels reveal how an emphasis on the display or 'performance' of goods assisted in the development of consumer identities in the early nineteenth century. I argued that these novels evidence the tensions inherent in a consumer society negotiating the often-contradictory demands for things against a desire for social stability. In particular, I argued that this latter point was expressed through demands that were made regarding the performative function of goods and spaces, and their place in genteel life. Evident in these novels are the importance of etiquette and consumer propriety that was also of concern to the diarists and the authors of etiquette literature. Lady Harriet rebukes Lady Ormington's dressing room because it does not conform to the expectations for a dressing room of a lady of distinction. Rather, it appears cluttered and disorganized instead of refined, simple and

tasteful. Evident in Harriet's conversation with Cecil about the space is that she views it *as an extension* of Lady Ormington's personality and self, and thus a constituent part of her very identity. The problem in this instance is that Lady Ormington has put too much of *herself* on display in the room. The objects that fill the space speak to her consumer tastes, when they should conform to a standard of taste and respectability meant to apply to all consumers. In contrast, Percy views the refined elegance and aristocratic style of Saraville's home with great admiration and respect. Unlike Lady Ormington, Saraville has successfully corralled his consumer tastes to fit within the expectations of propriety and respectability. In the end, such moments in these texts attest to the constitutive forces that generated a marketplace that was at once deeply expressive and personal, and also coercive. Through the specific lens of space and spatial adornment, these novels evidence how such a delicate balance was negotiated time and again between the expression of individual taste and a strict adherence to notions of consumer propriety and respectability.

All three chapters focused on the central question and argument that has guided this thesis, relating to the often paradoxical forces that came together to produce a unique marketplace in the early nineteenth century in Britain. An ever-expanding marketplace of things appealed to would-be consumers while the intellectual movements of sentimentalism and romanticism advocated in favor of increased indulgence in emotional experiences. Individuals had to look no farther than the marketplace to satisfy their desire for self-expression and self-discovery. At the same time, a conservative response to crises in this period, ranging from the French Revolution through to the Napoleonic Wars, sought to engender material culture with a morality centred upon narratives about

consumption and the consumer. These narratives, expressed in etiquette manuals, periodicals, diaries, novels and various other sources identified the consumer as an individually constantly striving to maintain an outward expression of propriety and respectability. Every consumer choice fell within this umbrella, tasked with meeting the expectations laid out in conduct literature and attested to in the personal writings of diarists. In this way, a resurgent cultural conservatism sought to develop a material culture that would inhere the nation with the appearance of cohesion, at least at the level of social interactions. Proper consumers were quickly identified as those whose personal and spatial adornment reflected a commitment to a refined simplicity and taste, neither overtly personal nor ostentatious. It is difficult to gauge whether such efforts undertaken to regulate the marketplace and consumer behavior were largely successful or unsuccessful, at least within the purview of the material that has been examined in this thesis, which represents only a small sample from the period. I will say that by acknowledging the rules of etiquette, propriety and respectability, the diarists examined here attest to the power that such narratives about material culture had to affect the choices and mentalities of individual consumers.

The decade of the 1840's would once again bring conflict and distress to Britain and the continent. The revolutions of 1848, the Chartist movement, and calls for reform and revolution more broadly echoed throughout England and Europe. In response, Britain looked towards consumer culture as one sector where providing greater accessibility and mobility did not necessarily disrupt the institutions, traditions and hierarchies that had sustained the nation thus far through the nineteenth century. Drawing from the example of the earlier nineteenth century, cultural elites and tastemakers advocating for a return to

stability in the nation and a renewed focus on Imperialism turned to the marketplace and consumer goods, arguing for consumption as a patriotic act and civic duty. In so doing, they argued that it was a duty of the citizen of Empire to participate in consumerism. In this way, Britain simultaneously invited new consumers into the marketplace and restricted the focus of consumption to the continuing strength of the British Empire, without having to undertake serious or drastic political reforms. Richards and others have shown how over the course of Victoria's reign, commodity culture developed and expanded, permeating through all levels of society and altering the structure of social and material relationships. The Great Exhibition of 1851 invited all spectators to observe the consumer good on display in way that it had never been before, occupying the central position of the exhibition itself, just as it would come to occupy 'centre stage' in Victorian life. As this thesis has shown, the groundwork for consumerism to assume its position at the centre of social life in the Victorian period was laid by those actors and cultural agents – and most importantly by an emerging consumer class – that had a generation earlier molded consumer culture to serve as a crucial pillar of stability in an unstable period. In so doing, they established an indissoluble link between consumer culture and social stability, and elevated the importance of material goods in daily life.

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