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Book Review: Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End

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Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End. Erika Diane Rappaport. 2000. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. 323 pp. \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewed by Yasemin Besen²

Women and shopping have often been linked in the literature on consumption and gender, and traditional accounts analyzed shopping as a way in which women are manipulated as passive objects of capitalism. In *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*, Erika Rappaport explores the complex relationship between women and shopping in a different light as she focuses exclusively on the making of London's West End shopping district in the Victorian and Edwardian era. She investigates the intertwined relationship between the rise of consumer culture and women which resulted not only in making shopping a leisure activity for middle class women where they became consumers and objects of consumption, but also in emancipation of women through shopping. The book captures, describes and illuminates the dual role of one of the most central and ubiquitous practices of the modern world--shopping--by historically tracing how consumer culture thrived on women's shopping while at the same time helped women's emancipation by increasing their visibility in the public domain.

The Rappaport ably captures this historically complex process of the incorporation of women into the public sphere through shopping as a multi-faceted change of the British society. Instead of reducing the mechanisms behind the incorporation of women into the public sphere to shopping, she portrays it as the result of a unique combination of a myriad of factors such as the rise of capitalism, proliferation of consumer culture with the opening of department stores, availability of credit and the simultaneous rise of the feminist movement. She analyzes a dual problem where women are not only manipulated as objects of consumption in the act of shopping, they simultaneously gain public visibility and are incorporated into the public sphere. Rappaport's rich, insightful analysis is reinforced by her consideration of other movements and developments, such as the feminist movement, which helped the process, as well as counter-forces that hindered the incorporation of women into the public sphere, including anxious husbands and judges who viewed women's shopping on credit as immoral.

The book consists of six chapters. Rappaport begins by describing the historical emergence of shopping as an everyday, leisure activity for the middle class, as well as its uniquely gendered nature. The author identifies a dramatic change in British society starting in the 1870's with the rise of capitalism and consumer culture, in which not only did shopping become an acceptable leisure activity, but women also started to appear in public in the shopping districts. The increased visibility of women in the public sphere through shopping not only emancipated women from the domestic sphere, but also transformed the public sphere; it was feminized as an extension of the domestic sphere, and thus, gave rise to a unique female urban culture.

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The second chapter explores how this new leisure activity resulted in the increased visibility of women in the public sphere and unravels the tension and anxieties experienced by the actors, including women customers, husbands and credit traders. The author identifies the economic factors, such as the availability of credit, that enabled women's shopping, and discusses the counter-forces that hindered it, including husbands who were apprehensive about this new activity. This chapter relies in particular on a rich source of trials and court cases involving women's use of credit, including an 1892 case involving a tailor working on credit for a woman shopper and the refusal of the latter's husband to pay for his wife's shopping. Through a rich analysis of this case (particularly the judge's praise of the husband who refused to pay for his wife's shopping), Rappaport portrays the counter-forces standing against women's shopping and increased public visibility from moral and judicial standpoints.

The discussion of counter-forces is followed in the third chapter by an extensive analysis of the combination of forces which helped the incorporation of women into the public sphere through shopping and the role played by the burgeoning feminist movement in shaping the gendered nature of shopping in the West End district. Parallel to the development of retail stores, there emerged feminist-inspired tearooms, public toilets, clubs and restaurants, all of which inevitably contributed to the creation of a feminine public sphere as a safe extension of the domestic realm in the shopping districts. While the emerging feminist movement created such establishments as an alternative to retail stores, they not only facilitated women's incorporation into the public sphere through shopping, but simultaneously reinforced the idea of shopping as a distinctly feminine activity.

While the earlier sections focused on structural changes in the society, the fourth chapter explores the role of women as consumers and attempts to revive the "lived experience" of shopping. Rappaport discusses the rise of the modern women, who appropriated the public sphere as a distinctly feminine space and thus, the emergence of a modern feminine shopping culture. Through the examples of women's magazines and the Lady Guide Association's tour guides, she identifies the emergence of shopping as an "urban leisure activity, akin to sightseeing." By instructing middle-class women on consumption, such magazines and guides established the experience of shopping--both seeing and being seen in the shopping districts--as a "central component of a modern women's identity."

The next section identifies how these forces, which started in the late 1870s, resulted in the extravagant opening of the first American-owned and influenced department store, Selfridges, on Oxford Street in 1909. The opening of this large-scale department store not only symbolized the pinnacle of consumerism, mass consumption, marketing and advertising, and highlighted the newly emerged role of women as consumers, but also raised important questions about the decline of British power and the increasing American dominance.

The final section offers an analogy to this newly emerging form of leisure and attempts to compare shopping with the theatre of the time as a form of female spectatorship. The author points to the alliance between the theatre and commercial culture between the 1890s and WWI. During that period the theatre functioned as a store window, displaying the fashion of the time. Through musical theatre, Rappaport

identifies the emergence of woman's consumption as a tool to create herself as a sexual object.

To accurately portray the complex relationship between the rise of consumption, modern femininity and women's visibility in the public sphere, Rappaport employs a rich collection of historical data. Primarily historical in approach, the work recaptures the emergence and the lived experience of shopping through historical records and a detailed literature review of secondary sources. The historical accounts are reinforced also by the extensive use of women's journals, court records, novels and songs. While the historical records and official accounts help to describe the over-time changes, the detailed use of court cases, anecdotes, newspapers, women's journals, novels and songs of the period better capture the lived experience of these changes from the perspective of the actors involved--women, husbands of the women who shopped, women's organizations, shopkeepers, etc.

The wide array of sources and the rich historical analysis is presented with an extensive use of visual aids consisting of maps of the shopping district, photographs of the shops and clubs women enjoyed, store advertisements, and caricatures and social satire from the press of the period. Such visual aids help to revive the lived experience of shopping by portraying the actual physical appearance of the shops, the way they were marketed and promoted to the women who shopped them, and the way it was perceived and portrayed in the media. Such aids not only lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the lived experience, but also render such a detailed historical study more accessible to a wider audience.

Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End offers a welcome contribution to the understanding of shopping for pleasure and its implications for women, with a fine-grained analysis of rich and detailed historical data from a myriad of sources. Through evocative examples and anecdotes it helps revive the emergence of shopping as a leisurely activity and explores its implications for the British society. Rappaport addresses shopping as a social experience, rather than taking it for granted, and brings into light the experience of consumers and those around them, all of whom have been traditionally neglected in the study of consumption.

The rich historical analysis is embellished with interesting examples, anecdotes and court cases; however the nature of these examples, as well as the large number of them, calls for further exploration and analysis. The overwhelming majority of interesting examples require a more organized presentation and further clarification in their support for and effects on the larger themes the author explores.

Furthermore, while all of the perspectives on shopping in the West End presented by the author are of vital importance to the understanding of the emergent experience studied, each of the sections appears to be independent of the others. These different aspects of the shopping experience, such as the lived experience of the women involved, and the structural barriers against the incorporation of women into the public sphere call for a more organized presentation and require more detailed linkages.

Overall, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* focuses on shopping--an important, widespread and often taken for granted practice. By tracing it from its emergence in the context of London's West End with in-depth analyses of it as a leisure activity, as well as its gendered nature, the author is able to provide the reader with both evocative examples and a comprehensive study of the historical data.

With its rich historical analysis and multi-faceted perspective, not only does it constitute a valuable contribution to the literature, but with its current subject matter, accessible language and interesting examples, it would be an excellent source for the classroom in the understanding of gender and consumption.