THE DISRUPTION OF VICTORIAN CLASS AND GENDER NORMS: BRITISH ANXIETIES REGARDING SHOPGIRLS

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In an *Edinburgh Evening News* article published in 1884, the author noted that “[o]ne of the largest classes of working women, especially of young working women...is that of the shopgirls.”¹ During the late nineteenth century, the topic of shopgirls appeared not only in newspaper articles, but also popular romance novels, as well as political literature such as trade union journals. The new interest in debating and discussing shopgirls allowed the female occupation to permeate British society and culture. It was ultimately through literary and cultural texts, and particularly those incorporating romantic fantasies, that “the shopgirl” emerged as a social construction, obscuring the experiences and shaping the identity of “ordinary” female shop assistants.² Paying attention to what Lise Sanders terms the “...slippage between subject and representation...,” the study of shopgirls illuminates social anxieties and gendered discourses that emerged alongside shifting consumption practices and concepts in Britain.³ This paper argues that the emergence of female shop assistants and the socially constructed “shopgirl” in the latter half of the nineteenth century transformed pre-existing Victorian class and gender norms in British society.

Shopgirls not only embodied fantasies connected to consumer culture, but disrupted class and gender norms resulting in a variety of social anxieties. Such anxieties pertained to the loss of female domesticity, social mobility, morality, as well as the dangers of London, especially for

¹ “Shopgirls,” *Edinburgh Evening News*, no. 3497 (26 July 1884): 3.
<http://tinyurl.galegroup.com.proxy.library.brocku.ca/tinyurl/8UWjD1>

² Lise Shapiro Sanders, *Consuming Fantasies: Labour, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006), 1-2.

³ Sanders, 2.

women. In its exploration of these circulating anxieties, the structure of this paper is twofold. The first half outlines arguments presented by historians regarding the identity and textual representation of shopgirls in Britain. Contextual information highlights nineteenth-century Victorian gender norms in order to illustrate women's increasing roles in the public sphere over the century due, in part, to consumption. The latter half of the paper offers various textual examples illustrating the ways that perceptions of female shop assistants and "shopgirls" instigated widespread social anxiety, disrupting Victorian class and gender norms.

Historical studies of women's role in the public workforce gained scholarly attention during the era of second-wave feminism, which began in the early 1960s.⁴ Since the second wave feminist movement, an increase in scholarly studies concerning gender has taken place. From the study of gender, some academic scholars in the twenty-first century have examined the shop girl specifically. In her book *Consuming Fantasies*, Lise Sanders examines the emergence of the shopgirl, in which she contends that "the shopgirl" was a socially constructed identity that developed in late Victorian England through fantasies constructed in popular culture.⁵ Sanders argues that while the modes of identifying women in regards to work were vast, shopgirls held "a unique position" as they came to symbolize "...the intersection between conservative ideologies of gender and class and new modes of female identity, behaviour and experience that suggest an ongoing resistance or discomfort with these ideologies."⁶ Additionally, Sanders contends that, at the turn of the twentieth century, "the shopgirl" literary figure illustrated that the Victorian

⁴ Ellen Jordan, *The Women's Movement and Women's Employment in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), xiii..

⁵ Sanders, 1.

⁶ Sanders, 2.

notion of separate gendered spheres was volatile, leading to numerous debates around female employers' moral, social, and sexual practices.⁷

Other scholars support this position, arguing for the construction of a “shopgirl” identity in late nineteenth century cultural productions. For example, Kate Krueger advances Sanders’ argument that the shopgirl was a socially constructed identity created by popular culture through her examination of Evelyn Sharp’s short stories. According to Krueger, Sharp’s writings became a part of the branch of New Woman fiction that emerged in the late nineteenth century.⁸ Through a micro-historical analysis, Krueger argues that women’s choice to obtain a career in the public sphere did not just reform her time, but essentially “altered her identity.”⁹ Krueger further develops Sanders argument that class was “defined by the bodily occupation of space” through textual representations of women in the public sphere, arguing that spaces that women occupy and their actions transform their identity in terms of status.¹⁰ Yet, Krueger also argues that the ways in which men responded to Sharp’s female heroines impersonating shopgirls in an attempt to free themselves from elite social norms suggests that gender and class status still constricted women’s sense of freedom, regardless of the fact that they gained increased liberty through their adoption of a professional career.¹¹ This paper will continue to advance Sanders’ and Krueger’s theories regarding shopgirls in Britain in the late-nineteenth century, focusing largely on the social anxieties that manifested with the emergence of female shop assistants in the public sphere, as well as “shopgirls” in popular culture.

⁷ Sanders, 1-2.

⁸ Kate, Krueger, “Evelyn Sharp’s Working Women and the Dilemma of Urban Romance,” *Women’s Writing* 19, no. 4 (November 2012): 563.

⁹ Krueger, 564.

¹⁰ Krueger, 573.

¹¹ Krueger, 564.

The Victorian era and its legal system reinforced the unequal treatment of women. In comparison to their male counterparts, women's legal and political inequality upheld Victorian ideas regarding gender and society, underlying social assumptions that twentieth and twenty-first century historians have termed the theory of separate spheres.¹² The concept of separate spheres structured British society by defining public and private spaces founded on gender. Such assumptions reinforced that the domain of men was within the public realm, such as spaces of employment, politics, and economy, whereas domestic spaces like the home were thought of as the domain of women. The concept of gendered spaces was further perpetuated by nineteenth century writers, such as John Ruskin who wrote in 1864 "that men should 'pursue rough work in [the] open world,' while for the 'true wife' the 'home is always around her.'"¹³ Ruskin argued that women were inherently expected to openly embrace their domestic duties. Subsequently, a "cult of domesticity" emerged leading to the manifestation of an ideal Victorian woman, who was responsible for providing a suitable home for both her husband and children.¹⁴ Ultimately, by the mid-nineteenth century, public and private spaces and socio-cultural roles became increasingly gendered and, therefore, differentiated.

While Victorian gender norms through the nineteenth century attempted to restrict women to the domestic sphere, the gendered separation of spaces began to unravel during the latter half of the century, in part due to new consumption practices. Women increasingly began to enter public spaces by way of consumption, as large-scale retailers such as department stores along with increased urbanization began to transform class and gender norms.¹⁵ The nature of

¹² Stephanie Barczewski, et al., *Britain since 1688: A Nation in the World* (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), 135-136.

¹³ Barczewski, 136.

¹⁴ Barczewski, 136.

¹⁵ Erika Diane Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

public shoppers became predominantly feminine and fluid in terms of social class, disrupting “bourgeoisie gender ideology,” which deemed public spaces and more generally the public sphere to be exclusively masculine.¹⁶ The emergence of female consumers resulted in multiple debates concerning the social implications of women engaging in public consumption, such as intermingling among different social classes, class emulation, frivolous spending, sexual morality, as well as public dangers within urban centres. Ultimately, female shopping practices in the late nineteenth century disrupted gender and social norms in Britain, leading to socio-cultural anxieties.¹⁷ In a similar fashion, the anxieties that arose due to the emergence of female shoppers paralleled social anxieties around the entrance of women into the public workforce, particularly with the rise in female shop attendants.

Indeed, the disruption of gender norms extended beyond female consumers. By the late-nineteenth century numerous women from working and lower-class backgrounds found work in shops and department stores in London, as well as in other industrial centres and towns throughout Britain.¹⁸ Many middle-class women became employed as shop assistants when they were forced to find employment due to “...trade-failures, the exigencies of a numerous household, or the early death of a husband or father...”¹⁹ The National Amalgamated Union to Shop Assistants (NAUSA) claimed that “[n]o other class of workers [was] at once so numerically strong...,” and by 1907, estimates suggested there were approximately one million females employed as shop assistants.²⁰ Thus, Victorian women increasingly disrupted the socio-cultural gender norms through their employment in the public sphere.

¹⁶ Rappaport, 19.

¹⁷ Rappaport, 19.

¹⁸ Sanders, 19,

¹⁹ Jordan, 23.

²⁰ Sanders, 19.

A shift in cultural rhetoric regarding women and employment, most notably in the case of shop girls, emerged at this time. This was partially due to historical change in the methods of production and circulation of consumer goods. However, even in the twentieth century, female workers were still largely termed shop assistants in nonfiction texts, so the increased use of the term “shopgirl” cannot be completely seen as a historical evolution. Rather, the shift to the term “shopgirl” illustrates that, during the late Victorian era, a socio-cultural attempt was made through popular culture to impose the concept of “girl,” which holds connotations of both femininity and youth, on to all shop assistants regardless of age.²¹ Even though increasing numbers of women throughout the nineteenth century entered public spaces through means of employment and still upheld the notion of femininity through the term “shopgirl,” their presence in the public sphere and in romantic texts illustrates their disruption of Victorian class and gender norms in the latter half of the century.

Female shop assistants and the fictional “shopgirl” generated social anxieties, including the loss of female domesticity, social mobility, morality, as well as urban dangers. Both men and women in Victorian Britain held these anxieties. In terms of the loss of female domesticity, the topic of shopgirls and their ability to be good wives appeared in several circulating articles. Contemporary debates questioned whether female shop assistants were suited for domestic duties.²² One contemporary author argued that female shop attendants were simply an illusion of a proper Victorian wife, which men only determined after marriage, stating:

During that blissful period, when love is young and love is all, his vision is ravished by the sight of a girl attired in the latest fashion...but once marriage has removed the necessity to serve behind the counter, the girl of fashion disappears and in her place is the slovenly woman...whose shoes are trodden over and...who doesn't care a pin of how she looks.²³

²¹ Sanders, 20

²² Sanders, 165.

²³ Sanders, 166.

The author presents shopgirls' inability to meet middle-class domestic norms and behaviours as a side effect of their lack of self-management, due to their working-class standing as represented in their unkempt garments and lack of care for their appearance.²⁴ Shopgirls' ability to present themselves as a proper Victorian lady through their work and fashion allegedly misled men into believing they were suitable Victorian wives. In this way, shopgirls generated socio-cultural anxiety through their ability to emanate proper femininity, leading to widespread fear that female domesticity was disappearing.

Many of the short stories written by Evelyn Sharp imposed a drastically different narrative regarding the process of courtship of "shopgirls," further disrupting Victorian gender norms. Sharp proposed in her writing that the New Woman, who was involved in the public sphere as a shopgirl, needed a New Man in order to find marriage. The New Man character was both respectful and courteous towards women, and Sharp portrayed them in her stories as an equal partner for new modern women.²⁵ The abandonment of superiority by the New Man offered readers a balance between genders in regards to equality. Yet, Evelyn Sharpe's male characters demonstrate contemporary anxieties within Britain in the late nineteenth century. The New Man in romance fiction presented shifting ideas pertaining to masculinity in order to respond to feminine transformations.²⁶ Ultimately, shopgirl characters in New Women fiction disrupted Victorian gender norms regarding male superiority and femininity related to the domestic sphere.

²⁴ Sanders, 166.

²⁵ Krueger, 576.

²⁶ Krueger, 567-577.

Nineteenth-century also novels portrayed young shopgirl heroines as incapable of resisting a longing for stimulation, resulting in their inability to reproduce proper feminine norms. In a contemporary novel written by Gissing, *The Odd Women* (1893), the fictional ex-shopgirl Monica Madden argues that having been able to leave behind the monotony “...of working life, [due to marriage], one should not impose on oneself the dullness of domestic work [which was] simply an alternative to idleness.”²⁷ In the novel, Madden demanded more freedom by way of developing interests, such as making friends, as well as reading books that were not only meant to amuse but to ponder. Thus, Madden sought pleasure rather than performing her domestic duties, ultimately disrupting Victorian gender norms.²⁸ The increased freedom which female shopgirls experienced while working resulted in their inability to resist distracting pleasures, which, once married, took away their attention from husbands and children, as well as other domestic duties. Not only did shopgirls illicit anxiety over improper femininity and inability to perform domestic duties, but other articles warned shopgirls, who were no longer in their youth, to be careful not to become spinsters.²⁹ Overall, nineteenth century fiction and nonfiction texts frequently highlighted socio-cultural fears over the loss of female domesticity, as shopgirls were perceived as unable to reproduce Victorian gender norms in their marriage or via their behaviour, their appearance, and more broadly within the domestic sphere.

The mixing of socio-economic classes and the emulation of upper-class social practices generated further anxieties around the emergence of nineteenth-century female shop assistants and “shopgirls”. Shops, and particularly department stores, attracted people from all backgrounds, which subsequently led to class mixing, as the majority of female shop assistants

²⁷ Sanders, 112-113 and 116.

²⁸ Sanders, 116.

²⁹ Sanders, 166.

were from lower or working-class backgrounds due to the occupation's low pay, long hours, and demanding working conditions. Yet, by the turn of the century, "young ladies of birth and education [stood] behind counters," suggesting class mixing among employees.³⁰ Ultimately, the behaviour and appearance of working-class shop assistants gained attention from both employers and customers, particularly upper-class female shoppers. Within contemporary textual accounts customers were often disgusted by the demeanour, language, and clothing of female shop assistants. One shop observer wrote that female shop attendants often used the term "Dearie" when conversing with customers. The author argued that upper-class women began to resent being called terms, such as "Dearie."³¹ Middle and upper-class customers were also annoyed when approached by a shopgirl "who [was] overdressed and who bears on her person marks of opulence which...do not accord with her [social] position."³² Increasingly shops became a space of class mixing and, as textual documents have signified, places of social conflict that generated public anxiety and discontent over shopgirls' inability to adopt specific Victorian class norms.

The ability of female working-class shopgirls to emulate upper-class material practices were not relegated to the shop floor and permeated various textual sources of the late nineteenth century. Novelette writers often exaggerated accounts of grand events, such as balls, describing extremely elegant gowns.³³ Since the intended audience for these novelettes were shopgirls, these descriptions worked to reproduce imitative identifications, providing ways for shopgirls to "mimic the taste and appearance of the upper classes, reproducing the narrative of social

³⁰ H. Coleman Davidson, *What Our Daughters can do for Themselves: A Handbook of Women's Employments*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co.: 1894), 249. <https://archive.org/details/whatourdaughter00davigoog/page/n8>.

³¹ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 128-130.

³² Benson, 130.

³³ Sanders, 150-151.

mobility that emerges elsewhere in contemporary accounts of shop life.”³⁴ Advertisements that highlighted dress improvements offered strategies for elevated class standing and fashioning, according to female protagonists in fictional texts. Thus, lower-class shopgirls could have read that, by purchasing a few crucial items that they could supplement through their income, they could transform themselves into elegant consumers, like middle and upper-class women.³⁵ At the same time, shopgirls were expected to wear clothes deemed “smart” to draw in high-class customers. Thus, fashion allowed shopgirls to manipulate their appearance, obscuring their class identity.³⁶ This class emulation was allegedly dangerous as it led many lower-class shopgirls to marry into wealth and higher status.³⁷ Through novelettes, advertisements, and the shopgirl occupation itself, women from working-class backgrounds employed as shop assistants were able to replicate the appearance of the higher classes, which generated social anxieties as it blurred Victorian class distinctions simply through the means of fashion.

Anxiety over social emulation was also produced when fictional novels presented upper-class women transforming themselves into working-class women. For example, the periodical *Yellow Book* incorporated many of Evelyn Sharp’s short stories addressing such class transformations. Identity in the latter half of the nineteenth century increasingly became based on a person’s profession, classifying woman as specific social types, such as the “showy shopgirl.” The “showy shopgirl” not only indicated class differences, but social respectability. Sharp’s heroines often imitated shopgirls in an attempt to liberate themselves from bourgeois social rules.³⁸ One of Sharp’s heroines, Anna, did not need to work due to her financial situation, but

³⁴ Sanders, 151.

³⁵ Sanders, 152-153.

³⁶ Krueger, 568.

³⁷ Sanders, 165.

³⁸ Krueger, 564.

nonetheless found employment as an artist's model, transforming into a professional wage-earning woman. Anna's reliance on mimicking a working-class woman illustrated her lack of liberty within her own class station.³⁹ Thus, texts featuring shopgirls illustrated female shop assistants' disruption of Victorian class structures. The mixing of classes within shops, the ability of shopgirls to emulate a higher social status, as well as fictional depictions of upper-class women transforming themselves into shopgirls produced social anxieties in Britain. The emergence of female shop assistants highlighted the ways that class structure was becoming increasingly fluid.

The emergence of female shop assistants and "shopgirls" also disrupted Victorian gender norms in terms of female morality. Nineteenth-century Victorian moral practices of the middle-classes regulated social interactions in both public and private spheres through an intricate set of rules outlined in books and etiquette manuals.⁴⁰ Although a handbook on women's employment published in 1894 deemed shop assistants to be an acceptable means of public employment for Victorian women, especially for women in need of an income, many citizens feared a decline in female morality, including female sexual morality.⁴¹ Looking back to the female character created by Gissing, Monica Madden failed to maintain proper domestic practices once she married, illustrating to readers her lack of moral instruction during her upbringing. Madden represented the notion that young shopgirls received inadequate upbringings because they were not trained in domestic skills.⁴² Thus, shop attendants' lack of domestic abilities equated to their decline in morals.

³⁹ Kreuger, 571 and 575.

⁴⁰ Sanders, 101.

⁴¹ Davidson, 249.

⁴² Sanders, 101.

These moral concerns extended to the commercial setting, as shopgirls allegedly faced temptation in the form of fashionable goods and objects. As noted earlier, female shop assistants were expected to dress a certain way. For example, assistants who worked for drapers were expected to buy clothing attire from the shop, as a way to advertise, but also to maintain a uniform class status within the consumer space.⁴³ However, a few middle-class writers argued that this practice tempted shopgirls to purchase unnecessary items, leading them into debt and the decline of their morality. One writer noted that, “[t]he [shop] girl loses in self-control and self-respect. She overspends herself in dress, and, tempted by the credit as well as the discount, runs up bills with her employer—an unscrupulous but not uncommon practice which secures the return of her wages to himself.”⁴⁴ Socio-cultural notions regarding desire presented women as weak and unable to resist temptations, particularly when it came to consumer purchases. Therefore, many citizens considered shop assistants at risk of going into debt due to their surroundings and frivolous desires for unnecessary consumer goods.⁴⁵

Fears over female moral decline were further perpetuated by newspaper articles, which reported on the crimes of shopgirls. This comes to the fore in an 1898 court case, when a shopgirl was charged with theft. Having visited the hardware shop, one Mrs. Williams reported to the police that her purse had been stolen after placing it on the counter to pay. A seventeen-year-old shop assistant, Laura Greenfield, was later charged for stealing the purse. The detective on the case “...explained that the prisoner had admitted the theft to him, and restored the purse, which had been placed in the store-room...[and] that...none of the money [had been touched].”⁴⁶

⁴³ Sanders, 34.

⁴⁴ Sanders, 35.

⁴⁵ Sanders, 35.

⁴⁶ “Birmingham Shopgirl's Lapse from Honesty,” *Leicester Chronicle* 89, no. 4579 (27 August 1898): 2, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8UWuJ9>.

In addition, her employer testified on behalf of her good character. Yet, regardless of Greenfield admitting her wrong and returning the money, the court case reveals that women had increased opportunity to be immoral through their employment in the public sphere, perpetuating social anxieties pertaining to female shop assistants.

Anxieties over female shop assistants' morality extended to their sexual practices as well. In the novels of Gissing, shopgirl transgressions of normative Victorian behaviour were expressed through sexual desire.⁴⁷ The "shopgirl" in novels was portrayed as "'a streetwise urbanite, a knowing city character of questionable respectability.'"⁴⁸ These narratives also figured in the periodical press, such as the *Southampton Herald*, which featured an excerpt of "A Shopgirl's Story" in 1885. The author described a public ball where a shopgirl met a former male customer. The male whispered to the shopgirl, "'may I call upon you the day after to-morrow?'" to which the shopgirl replied, "'Do...come and buy some gloves. I'm one of the young ladies at Plush and Storson's Cosmopolitan Emporium.'"⁴⁹ Upon hearing she is a shop attendant the man runs off, illustrating negative connotations of the sexual morality of shopgirls held by Victorian men.⁵⁰ Due to the sexualized rhetoric used to portray shopgirl characters, Victorian men often projected these portrayals onto female shop assistants, assuming them to be sexually accessible.⁵¹ Ultimately, social anxieties arose, as female shop assistants were able to meet men in their work environment without adhering to proper Victorian courtship rituals. Novels and other written forms increasingly portrayed the shopgirl figure as sexually available, which transferred to everyday female shop assistants, leading to concerns over their sexual morality.

⁴⁷ Sanders, 100.

⁴⁸ Krueger, 568.

⁴⁹ "A Shopgirl's Story," *Southampton Herald* 62, no. 4125 (26 December 1885): 7, <http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/8UWpJ3>.

⁵⁰ "A Shopgirl's Story," 7.

⁵¹ Krueger, 568.

Lastly, female shop assistants generated concerns regarding the dangers of urban centres, especially London. Shopgirls were generally young working women associated with independence with no chaperones or supervision while working in urban cities.⁵² By the 1880s, trade union activists increasingly complained about the work conditions of shop assistants, arguing that the work environments were dangerous. However, female shop assistants were also vulnerable to exploitation from their employers.⁵³ In an article produced by the *Women's Industrial News*, the author wrote that “[a] young girl needs, besides fresh air and exercise, a run, a change of scene. The night, the lights, the throngs of men and women, youth is called to adventure. Her chosen playground is thus the street—a place of hazard...”⁵⁴ The article illustrates how working women, including shopgirls, sought pleasure in urban centres, which held delight, but also dangers. The shopgirl's becoming a part of the urban crowd was highly frowned upon. Urban streets were characterized as sites of both temptation and attraction, making the shopgirl a spectacle to leering men due to her dress and demeanour.⁵⁵ Therefore, urban centres, such as London, were allegedly dangerous for shopgirls not only because of hazardous working conditions, but dangerous public elements as well.

Ultimately, the figure of the shopgirl disrupted Victorian class and gender norms in the late nineteenth century. Further research could investigate the ways that socio-cultural anxieties and gender discourses that emerged alongside shifting consumption patterns in Britain during the latter half of the century carried into the twentieth century or whether the increase in women's involvement in the public sphere led to the disappearance of the socio-cultural anxieties examined in this paper. What is clear, however, is that female shop assistants and the

⁵² Sanders, 20.

⁵³ Sanders, 19.

⁵⁴ Sanders, 38.

⁵⁵ Sanders, 38.

“shopgirl” figure portrayed in nineteenth-century texts generated socio-cultural anxieties related to the loss of female domesticity, social mobility, female morality, and the dangers of urban centres for working women through their disruption of Victorian class and gender norms.

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