

## POLITE CONSUMPTION: SHOPPING IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Shopping was increasingly seen as a potentially pleasurable activity for middling and upper sorts in Hanoverian England, a distinctive yet everyday part of life, especially in London. This survey considers the emergence of a polite shopping culture at this time, and presents a 'browse-bargain' model as a framework for considering contemporary references to shopping in written records and literary texts. The decline of polite shopping is charted with reference to the rise of cash-only businesses at the end of the century, and the shift towards a more hurried and impersonal form of shopping noted by early nineteenth-century shopkeepers, assistants and customers.

RECENT years have witnessed the rise of a flourishing historiography of consumption for the period 1700–1800. Seminal works by historians such as Paul Langford, John Brewer and Peter Borsary from the late 1980s onwards have posited the role of the middling sorts in generating new patterns of acquisition and leisure in Georgian England.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1990s, a highly influential collection of essays, edited by John Brewer and Roy Porter, and another by Brewer and Ann Bermingham, established the subject of consumption in eighteenth-century studies.<sup>2</sup> These succeeded in incorporating the perspectives of economic historians, together with insights from historians of literary and material culture. More recently, the historiography has diversified to consider other nuanced aspects of consumerism, such as the personal use and meaning of material possessions to Georgian consumers, gender and consumption, contemporary ideas about luxury and the significance of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727–1783* (Oxford 1989); John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (1997); Peter Borsary, *Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (1993); *The Consumption of Culture, 1660–1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. John Brewer and Ann Bermingham (1995).

'hidden' second-hand markets.<sup>3</sup> Many have welcomed this trend as an important counterpoint to the over-emphasis on the supply side of eighteenth-century markets, which to a large extent resulted from a pressing concern to anatomise the origins of the Industrial Revolution. It is no doubt symptomatic of the vastness of the subject, however, and the many different approaches to its study, that the historiography of consumption, and the historiography of politeness, have often experienced a failure of communication. In one corner, we find historians quantifying wage-rates, while in another, we find them re-reading Shaftesbury.<sup>4</sup> The controversies generated by such differences of approach to the study of politics, culture and economics in eighteenth-century historiography are frequently animated.<sup>5</sup>

One significant omission in the increasingly well-worked area of eighteenth-century 'consumer studies' is the almost total failure on the part of historians to consider *how* goods were acquired. Material things transport themselves from shops into people's homes and are mysteriously described as part of the process of the 'flow of goods', or attention is given to their display and use, with little attention paid to

<sup>3</sup>The re-orientation towards the consumer was anticipated by Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold in 'Consumerism and the Industrial Revolution', *Social History*, 15 (1990), 151–79; for new directions, see Amanda Vickery, 'Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and her Possessions, 1751–81', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. Brewer and Porter, 274–301; Beverley Lemire, *Fashion's Favourite: The Cotton Trade and the Consumer in Britain, 1660–1800* (Oxford, 1991); see also *idem*, 'Consumerism in Pre-Industrial and Early Industrial England: The Trade in Secondhand Clothes', *Journal of British Studies*, 27 (1988), 1–24; Stana Nenadic, 'Print Collecting and Popular Culture in Eighteenth-Century Scotland', *History*, 82 (1997), 203–22.

<sup>4</sup>The vast literature on the economic history of eighteenth-century England in a global perspective may be no more than represented here; see for example J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (1978); Carole Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990); Jan de Vries, 'Between Purchasing Power and the World of Goods: Understanding the Household Economy in Early Modern Europe', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. Brewer and Porter, 85–132; Nuala Zahedieh, 'London and the Colonial Consumer in the Late Seventeenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 47, 2 (1994), 239–61. Influential in studying the Shaftesbury model of politeness is the work of Lawrence Klein; see his 'The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 8 (1974), 186–214; and *idem*, 'Politeness for Plebes: Consumption and Social Identity in Early Eighteenth-Century England', in *Consumption of Culture*, ed. Brewer and Bermingham, 362–82. A useful over-view of the recent historiography is Sara Pennell, 'Consumption and Consumerism in Early Modern England', *Historical Journal*, 42, 2 (1999), 549–64.

<sup>5</sup>As witnessed, for example, by the criticism levied against the work of Neil McKendrick by economic historians Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold for his 'trickle-down' theory of cultural emulation. McKendrick's hypothesis was that the dissemination of genteel taste was a stimulant to the rise of commercial culture, whereas Fine and Leopold's preference is for a more precise study of the incomes that made consumer spending possible. See Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (1993), 120–3; *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (1982).

the social interactions (in addition to the economic means and processes) which were required to procure them. Yet it is here, at the moment of purchase, that the exercise of politeness interacted with the complex forces of economic opportunity and choice. The expectations of polite society, and motivation to better oneself socially, did not *cause* people to buy things: as the work of Lorna Weatherill has shown, the idea of social emulation is an insufficient model to explain the distinctive spending habits of the middling sort.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the impulse to acquisition was in itself as variable as the individual consumer, and proscribed according to a range of factors such as financial means, degree of access to local markets and awareness of the variety of goods on offer.

However, if we pause to consider the influence of prevailing social norms, beyond trying to uncover an elusive causal relationship, we may see how a vital component of the routine lives of eighteenth-century people who were among, or who aspired to join, the ranks of what was known at the time as ‘polite society’ has been largely overlooked. Shopping, unlike assembly-going, parading in pleasure gardens, conversing in coffee houses or dancing at balls, is seldom described by historians of the eighteenth century as a distinctively ‘polite’ activity, yet it was a constituent element of, and of itself produced, a polite lifestyle. In other words, for a certain section of society at this time, polite shopping rituals framed the social experience of consumption as an everyday activity. Like assemblies and pleasure gardens, shops aimed at the middling and upper sorts (especially those in London) were crucial features of the urban landscape, the venues for the interaction of social relationships, leisure and commerce. The unwritten social rules of encounter in shops constituted a form of polite deportment, encompassing gesture, verbal exchange and a ritualised pattern of behaviour as the customer engaged with the shopkeeper. For an increasing number of middling-sort consumers with polite aspirations, the rituals of shopping could thus in themselves become a pleasurable pursuit, associated with sociability, display and the exercise of discerning taste – in sum, the performance of the Addisonian model of politeness.<sup>7</sup> What follows is an investigation into a different perspective on consumption: the process of developing a specifically polite ‘shopping culture’ in eighteenth-century towns, including the exceptional case of

<sup>6</sup> Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture, 1660–1760* (London and New York, 1988); see also *idem*, ‘Consumer Behaviour and Social Status in England, 1660–1750’, *Continuity and Change*, 2 (1986), 191–216.

<sup>7</sup> See in this volume, Paul Langford, ‘The Uses of Eighteenth-Century Politeness’, *passim*. Another useful survey of middling-sort consumers is Stana Nenadic, ‘Middle-Rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1720–1840’, *Past and Present*, 145 (1994), 122–56.

London. This survey pursues an ethnographic approach, drawing upon a wide range of contemporary sources (diaries, correspondence, didactic literature, newspapers, periodicals, plays and novels) in order to piece together something of the experience of polite shopping in eighteenth-century England.

There were more places to shop, and an ever-growing range of goods to purchase, as the century progressed. Since the early medieval period, the main centres of consumption in England, outside of London, had been local markets.<sup>8</sup> However, these underwent a crucial transformation during the period 1690–1801, when trade ‘passed into the hands of shopkeepers’.<sup>9</sup> In the capital, and in provincial urban locations – whether spa towns such as Bath, or proto-industrial centres such as Newcastle upon Tyne, shops were increasing in number and in specialisation. While on her country-wide tour at the end of the seventeenth century, Celia Fiennes noted that in Newcastle, ‘their shops are good and are of distinct trades, not selling many things of one shop as is the custom in most country towns and citys’.<sup>10</sup> In smaller towns, fewer shops served a broad spectrum of social classes with a wider range of goods under one roof, such as Abraham Dent’s shop in Kirkby Stephen, which sold candles and soap to workmen and artisans, and luxury goods, books and stationery to local doctors and clerics.<sup>11</sup> The increase in the number and range of goods in shops (even in rural areas), and signs of rapid expansion in trading activity, were thus prominent features of economic growth in England at this time.<sup>12</sup> But who went shopping in the eighteenth century? The subject of consumption may be approached through the identity of the shopper,

<sup>8</sup> Richard Hodges, *Primitive and Peasant Markets* (Oxford, 1988). Religious houses were also significant centres of consumption before the Reformation. See Derek Keene, ‘Shops and Shopping in Medieval London’, in *Medieval Art, Architecture and Archaeology in London*, ed. L. M. Grant (British Archaeological Association, London, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Julian Hoppit, *A Land of Liberty? England 1689–1727* (Oxford, 2000), 331. Hoh-Cheung Mui and Lorna H. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England* (Montreal and London, 1987), *passim*, observe this trend nationally, focusing chiefly upon the trade in tea.

<sup>10</sup> *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, ed. Christopher Morris (1949), 210–11. On the development of English towns, see Penelope Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700–1800* (Oxford, 1982); *The Eighteenth Century Town: A Reader in English Urban History, 1688–1820*, ed. Peter Borsay (London and New York, 1990); *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, II: 1540–1840, ed. Peter Clark (Cambridge, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> T. S. Willan, *An Eighteenth-Century Shopkeeper: Abraham Dent of Kirkby Stephen* (Manchester, 1970), 19.

<sup>12</sup> Craig Muldrew has calculated that trade tokens, which served as change when small coins were scarce, were issued in over 1,500 places between 1649 and 1672, almost double the number of market towns then in existence. In, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (1998) 54. See also by the same author ‘Hard Food for Midas: Cash and its Social Value in Early Modern England’, *Past and Present*, 170 (2001), 78–120.

purpose of the trip and nature of the goods purchased. There is a distinction (a somewhat ill-defined one then and now) between 'luxury' and 'essential' items: consumables which are purchased rarely, as a special event, involving pleasure in the exercise of choice, and those repeat-buys which are mundane, for which those of sufficient means in the eighteenth century could have despatched a servant.<sup>13</sup> There is shopping in person and shopping by proxy, shopping for pleasure, and of necessity. For the purposes of this study, we shall be focusing our attention exclusively upon the shopping trips made by middling or higher-ranking individuals in person, rather than by their servants. The emphasis here is thus upon polite conduct in shops, rather than the sorts of material goods purchased. This approach is useful in that it allows us to consider even small purchases of relatively mundane items (of miscellaneous haberdashery, for example). By concentrating upon the social groups who comprised, or who aimed to join, polite society, we shall be able to undertake a closer study of the factors that made eighteenth-century shopping distinctive in their social milieu.

Who, then, was likely to fall within this group of shoppers? It was usual for unmarried women of a higher social status to be chaperoned on shopping trips by a relative, governess or servant, but, as the female characters of Fanny Burney's and Jane Austen's novels illustrate, evidently even single girls could make short visits to shops unaccompanied. The shops they visited were prescribed by the nature of the establishment, and the degree of respectability held by the shopping district. The heroine in *Cecilia* passed her time 'greatly to her own satisfaction' in London buying books, thereby furnishing herself with 'the mind's first luxury'.<sup>14</sup> This fictional gentlewoman was also portrayed making philanthropic and solitary visits to a haberdasher's shop in Fetter Lane, near the booksellers' quarter in St Paul's churchyard.<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen uses the public streets and shops of Bath as the setting for encounters between the main characters in *Persuasion* (published in 1818). In Bath, high-class retailers were originally to be found in the south-east corner of the city, around the Orange Grove, the Terrace Walk and the Abbey churchyard.<sup>16</sup> By the 1790s, as Peter Borsay's extensive study of Georgian Bath has shown, the focus was shifting northwards to where the exclusive Milsom Street was 'developing its

<sup>13</sup> Lorna Weatherill, 'The Meaning of Consumer Behaviour in Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth-Century England', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. Brewer and Porter, 207–8.

<sup>14</sup> Frances 'Fanny' Burney, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), ed. Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody (Oxford, 1998), 103.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 200–1.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Borsay, *The Image of Georgian Bath, 1700–2000* (Oxford, 2000), 30.

legendary reputation as a shopping mall'.<sup>17</sup> An anonymous contemporary poet described how, after breakfast in Bath, 'You may stroll for an hour up and down Milsom-street, / Where misses so smart, at ev'ry fine shop / (Like rabbits in burrows) just in and out pop.'<sup>18</sup>

For ladies in the metropolis, and in provincial towns, going shopping was a familiar part of the rhythm of their day, an activity undertaken in the morning after breakfast while men went about their business. Their afternoons were then occupied with social visits, followed by dinner at approximately four o'clock. This was a synchronised pattern to the day, followed by the wives and daughters of polite families around the country. Fanny Burney's fictional gentlewomen found their mornings 'all spent in gossiping, shopping and dressing'.<sup>19</sup> There is much evidence in gentlewomen's diaries and correspondence that art imitated life: like other young women of their rank across the country, Annabella and Harriet Carr stepped out on morning shopping trips from their house in Charlotte Square, Newcastle, and headed for fashionable Westgate Road.<sup>20</sup> In this, as in many other customs, English women were thought by other Europeans to have considerable freedom. Johanna Schopenhauer (mother of the philosopher) recorded that in her youth in Danzig, 'No woman of the upper classes would have gone ever so short a distance in the streets unattended by her manservant . . . no lady went to the shops to make her purchases.'<sup>21</sup> Solitary shopping trips by Englishwomen were thus not uncommon, but in general, company cemented the social pleasures of shopping, and it is instructive how many fictitious and real-life trips are described with two or more companions, friends who may or may not have been related. Groups of women on shopping expeditions were so commonplace as to attract little contemporary comment. Visitors, rather than those for whom it was a routine, were more inclined to comment on their shopping trips in English towns. In September 1786, Sophie La Roche, from Augsburg in southern Germany, went on a trip with a female friend to Leicesterfields in London. As rather starry-eyed tourists, Sophie and her companion marvelled at a pastry-cook's shop, 'surrounded, like a large and spacious room, by glass cases, in which all kinds of preserved fruits and jellies are exhibited in handsome glass jars'. 'What we women liked best of all', Sophie enthused to her family, 'was a large but delightful

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Burney, *Cecilia*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> A. W. Purdue, *Merchants and Gentry in North-East England, 1650-1830* (Sunderland, 1999), 192-4.

<sup>21</sup> 'E. W.', *Youthful Life, and Pictures of Travel: Being the Autobiography of Madam Schopenhauer: Translated from the German*, 1 (1847), 243.

covering made of gauze which . . . kept the flies off [the pastries].<sup>22</sup>

Where incidences of men going shopping are recorded, either in diaries or in surviving bills and account books, it is tempting to conclude that the only type of shopping that men did was for high-value, high-prestige, one-off purchases. An example of this was James Boswell's triumphant and detailed account of how he convinced Mr Jefferys of the Strand, 'sword cutter to his Majesty', to sell him on credit a silver-hilted sword worth five guineas, even though he was a stranger to the shopkeeper: 'This I think was a good adventure', recorded Boswell, 'and much to my honour.'<sup>23</sup> (We shall return to look more closely at this purchase later.) The horse-loving menfolk of the Baker family from county Durham were typical of provincial gentry in their preference for shopping for luxury items in London, as an extensive collection of eighteenth-century bills testifies. The main focus of their attention, however, was the trade in horseflesh (hardly 'shopping' in the strict sense we have defined it).<sup>24</sup> Historian Margot Finn has shown how it was a common pattern for unmarried men or widowers to rely upon female relatives to shop for their material comforts and necessities, but also how some men were highly adaptable (if not acquisitive), and preferred to shop for themselves.<sup>25</sup> Other evidence suggests that within families men did not conserve their energies for 'luxury' purchases, but were sent on short errands to buy small items for their households. Edward, Jane Austen's brother, was sent to buy necessities for his family, newly arrived in Bath ('I trust the bustle of sending for tea, coffee, and sugar &c., and going out to taste a cheese himself, will do him good', observed Jane).<sup>26</sup> As with servants sent on errands, when men went shopping, the female organising principle was often still in evidence. Male customers appeared in all manner of shops, even those selling women's consumer items. The shoplifter Charles Speckman recorded in his confession from the gallows that it was not his gender,

<sup>22</sup> *Sophie in London, 1786, Being the Diary of Sophie V. La Roche*, trans. and ed. Clare Williams (1933), 111–12.

<sup>23</sup> *Boswell's London Journal, 1762–1763*, ed. F. A. Pottle (New Haven, 1950), entry for 1 Dec. 1762, 59–60.

<sup>24</sup> Helen Berry, 'The Metropolitan Tastes of Judith Baker, Durham Gentlewoman', in *On the Town: Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, ed. Penelope Lane and Rosemary Sweet (Ashgate, forthcoming, 2002).

<sup>25</sup> Margot Finn, 'Men's Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution', *Social History*, 25, 2 (2000), 135. Other gender-specific accounts are Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1997); Lorna Weatherill, 'A Possession of One's Own: Women and Consumer Behaviour in England, 1660–1760', *Journal of British Studies*, 25 (1986), 131–56; Vickery, 'Women and the World of Goods', 274–301.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen (17 May 1799). *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 1 (Oxford, 1932), 61.

but his youth, that had provoked comment when he asked to see some lace in a milliner's shop.<sup>27</sup>

As by far the largest and most diverse commercial centre in England, London was a magnet for polite society from all corners of Britain and abroad to spend their money. Cesar de Saussure, a young French Protestant from Switzerland, described London's four main shopping streets in the 1720s – the Strand, Fleet Street, Cheapside and Cornhill – as 'the finest in Europe'.<sup>28</sup> Cheapside had been the hub of shopping activity in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, although from the Restoration period onwards, the central business district for retailing shifted north and westwards, to Covent Garden, the Strand and (later) Oxford Street and Regent Street. Although London streets for passing traffic were still filled with mud, wide and handsome pavements now made leisurely browsing a more civilised and leisurely pastime. The cleanliness and convenience of the environment, and civil sociability of shopkeepers, helped to make browsing a polite activity. Sophie La Roche enthused about London's streets, 'pedestrians need dread neither dirt nor danger here', a pleasure which was lacking in other European capital cities (such as Paris) at this time.<sup>29</sup> To this convenience was added the extra pleasure of sensory stimulation. In Oxford Street, for example, artificial lighting was used to allow shoppers (who could pass by six-deep upon the broad pavements) to gaze at the brightly lit silver, china or glass within, long into the night.<sup>30</sup> Watchmakers and glassmakers eclipsed even goldsmiths' and jewellers' shops with their displays of 'fanciful clocks set in alabaster . . . gold and silver, and the richest cut glass lighted by patent lamps at night'.<sup>31</sup> The booksellers placed the most expensive books in their windows, the printsellers their most eye-catching artists, while the undertaker, not to be outdone, covered his window panes with 'escutcheons, crowns and coronets, and the lid of a little velvet coffin'.<sup>32</sup> Visitors to London also commented upon the elaborately decorated street signs outside of shops, some dangerously large and heavy, which were known to cause accidents

<sup>27</sup> Charles Speckman, *The Life, Travels, Exploits, Frauds and Robberies of Charles Speckman, Alias Brown* (1763), reprinted in Philip Rawlings, *Drunks, Whores and Idle Apprentices: Criminal Biographies of the Eighteenth Century* (1992), 189.

<sup>28</sup> *A Foreign View of England in 1725–29: The Letters of Monsieur Cesar de Saussure to His Family*, trans. and ed. Mme Van Muyden (1995), 50.

<sup>29</sup> *Sophie in London*, 111–12. For a European perspective see Roy Porter, 'Material Pleasures in the Consumer Society', in *Pleasure in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Roy Porter and Marie Mulvey Roberts (Basingstoke, 1996), 219 n. 21.

<sup>30</sup> *Sophie in London*, 141–2.

<sup>31</sup> J. P. Malcolm, *Anecdotes of the Manners and Customs of London during the Eighteenth Century* (2 vols., 1808), II, 473.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



and even fatalities if they fell from their moorings.<sup>33</sup> In provincial towns such as Chester, a similar process of modernisation, specialisation and competition was taking place in the retailing trades, with modern brick or plaster replacing medieval, half-timber shop fronts, accompanied by environmental improvements such as pavement cleaning and refuse collection.<sup>34</sup>

The imposing bow-fronted shop windows that appeared towards the end of the eighteenth century were no doubt as much a deterrent to those who could not afford the goods within as a magnet to those who could. Francis Place recorded that in April 1801, his new tailor's shop at Charing Cross had a frontage 'as elegant as the place would permit', with each of the panes of glass in the window alone costing him the grand sum of three pounds. 'I think mine were the largest plate-glass windows in London', he later recalled proudly, 'if indeed they were not the first.'<sup>35</sup> Retailers in London, where the market exhibited the widest range of specialist shops, became extremely adept at attracting wealthy customers. This was evident not only in the quality of goods in stock, and the manner of their display, but also in the location of the retail outlet, and the language used to advertise the shop in trade cards and newspaper advertisements. It became fashionable, for example, to describe shops as 'warehouses' from the 1760s onwards, a semantic distinction maintained by Josiah Wedgwood, who encouraged the snobbish illusion of exclusivity among his customers by such singular measures as not issuing trade cards, and choosing smart locations for his exhibition rooms.<sup>36</sup> Polite shoppers from among the nobility and gentry, reflected Wedgwood, 'will not mix with the rest of the World any further than their amusements or conveniencys make it necessary'.<sup>37</sup> Another innovation made by shopkeepers by the end of the Hanoverian period was the practice of placing large and brightly coloured 'by appointment' crests above the doorways of their shops if they were patronised by royalty, a highly visible endorsement of the quality of the goods contained therein.<sup>38</sup> As customers crossed the threshold of a shop, the royal crest over the door fostered the illusion that they were entering temporarily into a space favoured by the ruling elite, even if the latter never went there in person.

<sup>33</sup> David Garrioch, 'House Names, Shop Signs and Social Organisation in Western European Cities, 1500–1900', *Urban History*, 21 (1994), 20–48; see also Ambrose Heal, *Sign Boards of Old London Shops* (1957), 2 and *passim*.

<sup>34</sup> Jon Stobart, 'Shopping Streets as Social Space: Leisure, Consumerism and Improvement in an Eighteenth-Century County Town', *Urban History*, 21, 1 (1998), 3–21.

<sup>35</sup> *The Life of Francis Place, 1771–1854*, ed. Graham Wallas (1898), 34.

<sup>36</sup> Eliza Meteyard, *The Life of Josiah Wedgwood from his Private Correspondence and Family Papers*, II (1866), 31–2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Malcolm, *Anecdotes*, II, 473.

The interiors of shops, particularly those where higher value and status goods were sold, were no less alluring, and, for many, intimidating. The study of the spatial organisation of the exterior and interior of shops is a burgeoning field of historical inquiry in its own right. Clare Walsh, for example, has shown how eighteenth-century goldsmiths and jewellers were highly sophisticated in their strategies of display, exhibiting high-quality and high-value specimens of their craft in long, glass-fronted cabinets.<sup>39</sup> One contemporary observer likened shops on Ludgate Hill to ‘perfectly gilded theatres’ for their ‘variety of wrought silks’ and ‘so many changes of fine scenes’.<sup>40</sup> Just as today, when window-shoppers may look from the street but not cross the sacred thresholds of designer emporia, there were unwritten, though widely understood, rules about who could enter these eighteenth-century theatres of consumption. These rules are by their nature extremely difficult to reconstruct in history, but are alluded to in the fictional works of contemporary writers such as Daniel Defoe, who had first-hand knowledge of retailing as a former tradesman himself. Our modern notion, for example, that a shop is either open for business or closed and the front door locked was anachronistic in this context. It was not unusual for shopkeepers to leave their premises to visit customers in their homes, or on other short errands. Usually an apprentice or servant was left in charge, but there were potential hazards in this method, as the sharp rise in shoplifting at the start of the eighteenth century testifies.<sup>41</sup> In *Moll Flanders* (1722), Moll finds a silversmith’s shop unlocked, with no one in attendance on the valuable goods in the shop window.<sup>42</sup> She is witnessed by a neighbour (described as ‘an officious Fellow in a House, not a Shop, on the other side of the Way’) who catches her just as she is about to steal a piece of plate. Her subsequent actions are suggestive of the normal conduct that was expected when a passer-by entered a shop and found it unattended: ‘I had so much presence of Mind as to knock very hard with my Foot on the Floor of the House, and was just calling out too, when the Fellow laid hands on me.’<sup>43</sup> Caution was required on the part of the shopper in order to avoid suspicion, particularly if he or she entered a place where valuable goods were displayed. In this scenario, the

<sup>39</sup> See Clare Walsh ‘The Design of London Goldsmiths’ Shops in the Early Eighteenth Century’, in *Goldsmiths, Silversmiths and Bankers: Innovation and the Transfer of Skill, 1550–1750*, ed. D. Mitchell (Stroud, 1995), 96–111.

<sup>40</sup> Malcolm, *Anecdotes*, II, 132.

<sup>41</sup> J. M. Beattie, *Policing and Punishment in London, 1660–1750: Urban Crime and the Limits of Terror* (Oxford, 2001), 328–30. Beattie cites the appearance of pamphlets with titles such as *Hanging, Not Punishment Enough* a ‘Case of Traders relating to Shoplifters ... &c.’ (1701).

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Defoe, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders*, ed. G. A. Starr (Oxford, 1981), 269.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

silversmith responded to Moll's protestations of innocence thus: 'Mistress, you might come into the Shop with a good Design for ought I know, but it seem'd a dangerous thing for you to come into such a Shop as mine is, when you see no Body there.'<sup>44</sup>

The rules of conduct varied according to location and type of shop. It was especially important to be aware of these rules when shopping in the metropolis: a telling part of Moll Flanders's defence against the accusation of shoplifting was that she claimed to be a 'Stranger in London . . . newly come out of the North.'<sup>45</sup> The observation of difference between social mores in different parts of England is well documented in contemporary travellers' diaries, and suggests that Moll's plea of ignorance as a 'northerner' was more than a literary conceit. While the elucidation of these cultural differences is an intricate task (and beyond the scope of the current survey) one example will suffice. The Cambridge clergyman James Plumptre, visiting the north of England in 1799, thought it worthy to record 'the civility of a young man, apprentice to Mr Wilkinson the Chemist', in the market town of Morpeth.<sup>46</sup> The youth advised him upon the cure for a headache, and then resisted any attempt at payment. Plumptre insisted upon giving him something, but reported that the apprentice 'seemed scarcely to be pleased when I left an acknowledgement upon the [shop] counter'. This southern English visitor thus encountered unusually polite generosity from a northern shop assistant, but an equally unfamiliar surliness.

It is surprising, given the expansion and diversification of metropolitan and provincial shops, that little was written on the subject of the art of selling in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century tradesmen's manuals. There was little notion of specialisation in marketing or sales techniques in the early modern period. *The Compleat Tradesman: Or, the Exact Dealer's Daily Companion* (1684), for example, contains advice 'For all Merchants, Whole-sale men, shop-keepers, Retailers, Young Tradesmen, Country-chapmen, Industrious Yeomen Traders in Petty Villages', but consists substantively of guidance on the use of weights and measures, property and quality of goods, how to avoid bankruptcy, etc., but nothing specific on how to sell to customers.<sup>47</sup> 'Merely selling', argues the historian of shopping, Dorothy Davis, was considered 'child's play, and very often children, or at least young apprentices were left to do it'.<sup>48</sup> As the

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 270

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *James Plumptre's Britain: The Journals of a Tourist in the 1790s*, ed. Jan Ousby (1992) (entry for 24 May 1799), 101.

<sup>47</sup> 'N. H.', *The Compleat Tradesman: Or, the Exact Dealer's Daily Companion* (1684). For a survey of the genre, see Natasha Glaisyer, 'The Culture of Commerce in England, 1660–1720' (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Dorothy Davis, *A History of Shopping* (1966), 155.

eighteenth century progressed, this changed, so that shop owners became increasingly aware of salesmanship as a vital ingredient to their prosperity, less the provenance of child employees, and more in need of careful stage-management. Josiah Wedgwood explained in 1767 that he needed a 'Large room' to display his various wares in their most visually appealing manner, since he anticipated that this would give him space to 'do the needfull with the Ladys in the neatest, genteelest, and best method'.<sup>49</sup> We have already seen how Wedgwood judged that his gentry customers preferred not to rub shoulders with the lower ranks on shopping expeditions. That he enticed them into his warehouse at all was a considerable achievement. A traditional mark of gentility and noble status was the ability to summon shopkeepers to a private residence or carriage parked outside a shop. In Fanny Burney's play, *The Wiltings* (1778), set in a milliner's establishment, the proprietor Mrs Wheedle is summoned by Lady Bab Vertigo's footman to wait upon his mistress in her coach outside. This convenient theatrical device for introducing off-stage action was also plausible in that a titled lady would not have condescended to inspect 'trimmings' within the shop itself. To do so would have entailed rubbing shoulders with the likes of Mrs Voluble, the wife of a prosperous merchant who (as her name implied) had few polite graces.<sup>50</sup>

When well-off customers of the middling sort like Mrs Voluble entered a shop, they would first have been invited to take a seat at the counter, and perhaps to take refreshment.<sup>51</sup> Many illustrated trade cards and shop floor plans indicate the presence of ante-rooms, in which polite customers were invited to take tea before making their purchases. An advertisement for John Gibson's warehouse 'at the Shop lately possessed by Mess. Hodgson and Ormston, the Door above the Flesh-market, Newcastle', boasted 'The Tea Kettle will be always boiling. Gentlemen and Ladies may try the Teas.'<sup>52</sup> A subsequent advertisement for the same establishment developed an even more politely worded invitation from Mr Gibson to prospective customers: not only would he have the kettle on, but 'every Gentleman and Lady that please to favour him with their Custom, may depend upon being well served'.<sup>53</sup> Customers were often invited to take refreshment in a side room or parlour within shops, a custom which was later continued in the earliest nineteenth-century department stores.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Wedgwood, *Life*, 32–3.

<sup>50</sup> Fanny Burney, *The Wiltings* (1778) Act 1, in *The Complete Plays of Frances Burney*, 1, ed. Peter Sabor (1995), 9–10.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Newcastle Courant* (15 Aug. 1752).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* (14 Oct. 1752).

<sup>54</sup> Clare Walsh, 'The Newness of the Department Store: A View from the Eighteenth

Once tea and conversation had been dispensed with, the customer would move to browsing in the shop. In an era before quality control and extensive use of brand names, the expectation was that browsing would be a visual and tactile experience, with proper scrutiny and inspection of the goods on sale.<sup>55</sup> Here, the polite shopper combined the exercise of discerning taste in selecting an item that was aesthetically pleasing and suitable with a pragmatic evaluation of its merits. This was not always easy: some customers even suspected that shopkeepers deliberately kept their premises dark so that the true quality of the goods on offer would not be revealed.<sup>56</sup> Jane Austen, ever a prudent shopper, wrote to her sister Cassandra in June 1799 to express her vexation that she had wasted half a guinea on a muslin veil, bought as a present for their future sister-in-law, which turned out when she got it home to be 'thick, dirty and ragged'.<sup>57</sup> The experience of shopping then, even more than today, was bound up with sensory discernment: sight, touch and even smell were important means of gauging first hand the quality of the goods on offer. Some eighteenth-century women turned browsing into an art form, and a distinctive pleasure in its own right. The appearance of new language and social stereotypes to describe women who shopped as a form of recreation is powerfully suggestive that this was more than just a satirical play upon a pre-existing phenomenon, but a new and observable social development. Mr Spectator in August 1712 reported his discovery among the 'fraternity' of Hackney-coachmen, that there was a 'Cant' or slang phrase for women 'who ramble twice or thrice a Week from Shop to Shop, to turn over all the Goods in Town without buying any thing'.<sup>58</sup> These women were known as 'Silk-Worms', by virtue of their habit of unravelling yard upon yard of cloth for inspection. Favoured by the coachmen as their best customers, the 'Silk-Worms' were also indulged by shop assistants, 'for 'tho they never buy' explained the *Spectator*, 'they are ever talking of new Silks, Laces and Ribbands, and serve the Owners in getting them Customers'.<sup>59</sup>

On the other side of the counter, shop assistants had to be skilful in the art of flattery and reassurance, and display a considerable knowledge of their stock. The polite attendant who laboured over elaborate

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Century', in *Cathedrals of Consumption: The European Department Store, 1850–1939*, ed. G. Crossick and S. Janmain (Aldershot, 1999), 62; see also Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (Leicester, 1995).

<sup>55</sup> On the increasing use of brand names for medicines, and product standardisation in the ready-to-wear clothes trade, see John Styles, 'Product Innovation in Early Modern London', *Past and Present*, 168 (2000), 148–64.

<sup>56</sup> Malcolm, *Anecdotes*, II, 473.

<sup>57</sup> Austen, *Letters*, I, 68.

<sup>58</sup> *Spectator*, no. 454 (11 Aug. 1712).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

deportment and dress, and lapsed into obsequiousness towards his customers, was fertile ground for satire. As early as 1709, the male shop assistants on Ludgate Hill were described as ‘the sweetest, fairest, nicest, dished-out creatures’ who ‘by their elegant address and soft speeches you would guess . . . to be Italians’.<sup>60</sup> ‘These fellows’ were seemingly ‘the greatest fops in the kingdom; they have their toilets and their fine night-gowns, their *chocolate in the morning* and their *green tea two hours after*; Turkey polts for their dinner; and their perfumes, washes, and clean linen, equip them for the Parade.’ Although this account was evidently satirical, it is instructive to note the carefully calibrated response on the part of the foppish shop assistant to different ‘degrees’ of customer; an usher (whom we would now recognise as a modern ‘greeter’) waits at the door to bow to passing coaches and hand ladies in and out of the shop with ‘an obliging smile and a pretty mouth made’. Once inside, ‘ladies’ are shown the most expensive fabrics: Italian silks, brocades, tissues, English velvet embossed’. By contrast, the ‘meaner sort’ are presented with ‘fine thread satins, both striped and plain . . . Norwich crapes . . . gentlemen’s night gowns ready made, shalloons, durances and . . . Scotch plaids’.<sup>61</sup> Successful eighteenth-century shop assistants would have been highly skilled at ‘reading’ their customers’ needs, and judging creditworthiness according to outward appearance. Let us return to the incident involving James Boswell and his purchase of a sword on credit, and scrutinise the exact transaction between Boswell and Mr Jefferys, the shopkeeper, more closely. Boswell records:

I . . . looked at a number of his swords, and at last picked out a very handsome one at five guineas. ‘Mr Jefferys,’ said I, ‘I have not money here to pay for it. Will you trust me?’ ‘Upon my word, Sir,’ said he, ‘you must excuse me. It is a thing we never do to a stranger.’ I bowed genteelly and said, ‘Indeed, Sir, I believe it is not right.’ However, I stood and looked at him, and he looked at me. ‘Come, Sir,’ cried he, ‘I will trust you.’ ‘Sir,’ said I, ‘if you had not trusted me, I should not have bought it from you.’<sup>62</sup>

The rituals of polite browsing had the advantage in that it gave the shop assistant time to evaluate the customer’s status and credit through his or her outward dress and deportment, if they were not personally acquainted. The early modern economy, as the work of Craig Muldrew and Keith Wrightson has shown, was largely based upon credit networks, with cash only used upon certain specific occasions, such as the posthumous settling of debts by the executors of a will, or when a

<sup>60</sup> Malcolm, *Anecdotes*, II, 132–4.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Boswell, *London Journal* (1 Dec. 1762), 60.

traveller made purchases on a journey.<sup>63</sup> An individual's capacity to acquire goods was thus to a large extent determined by their ability to establish a personal relationship with the shopkeeper, and to convince him or her to part with them on account. The mutual return of a steady gaze, and a 'genteel' deportment was crucial to Boswell's success. The diarist was gratified to have tested his own credibility as a polite gentleman, which successfully secured for him a degree of credit that was not his by right as a stranger. Returning to pay his bill the following day, Boswell thanked Jefferys ('You paid me a very great compliment. I am much obliged to you') but warned the shopkeeper 'pray don't do such a thing again. It is dangerous.'<sup>64</sup>

Contrary to the idea that there was no such thing as salesmanship in the early eighteenth century, J. P. Malcolm recalled a vivid account from this period of a sales assistant actively courting a female customer with the following patter: 'This Madam is wonderfully charming. This, Madam, is so diverting a silk. This, Madam – my stars! How cool it looks. But this Madam – Ye Gods! would I had 10,000 yards of it!'<sup>65</sup> The tactile nature of the encounter, and unusual degree of licensed handling of the customer's person, is emphasised here. Loose fabric is gathered into a sleeve and set upon the shoulders of the customer with a: 'It suits your Ladyship's face wonderfully well.' Through familiarity and general chit-chat, the shop assistant forges a social bond with the customer in a diverting conversation which masks the underlying commercial purpose of the encounter ('Was you at the Park last night, Madam? Your ladyship shall abate me sixpence. Have you read the Tatler today?').<sup>66</sup> What we are hearing in a distant voice is the flattering tone of polite browsing in action.

There was clearly a gendered dimension to the art of salesmanship, and a long-standing notion by the end of the eighteenth century that the female shopper required cajoling and flattery. References in the popular print culture from as early as the 1690s suggest that it was recognised that male shop assistants could use their sexual allure to court women's custom. One letter to the coffee house periodical, the *Athenian Gazette, or Casuistical Mercury* in 1692 was from a young tradesman at the Royal Exchange who feared that if he were to marry, it would be the ruin of his business. He was probably a haberdasher, a business

<sup>63</sup> Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (1998), 68–101; see also his 'Hard Food for Midas: Cash and its Social Value in Early Modern England', *Past and Present*, 170 (2001), 78–120; Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (London and New Haven, 2000), 289–306.

<sup>64</sup> Boswell, *London Journal* (1 Dec. 1762), 60.

<sup>65</sup> Malcolm, *Anecdotes*, II, 133–4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

‘chiefly relating to the Female Sex’, and his trade was reliant upon his personal charm, for as he explained ‘I have many Visitants purely to view my Person, with the pretence of buying some trifle.’<sup>67</sup> His sales technique was to court each female customer equally, thus ‘by my fair and impartial Behaviour most have deem’d themselves the absolute Mistress of my Affections’. Whether or not this entertaining first-person account was ‘real’ is largely irrelevant for our purposes: it is one of the earliest representations of a man using his sexuality to increase his retail trade among female consumers. It is also significant that the *Athenian Mercury* was prompted by this scenario to mock salesmen in general for their vanity, a trait which was thought to belong more properly to the female sex.<sup>68</sup>

For all the rituals of flattery, and indeed flirtation, that went with sales patter, the moment came when dissembling ceased, and the customer moved to find out the price of the goods on offer. The fact that prices were not displayed had two effects upon the experience of polite shopping. First, when a person of ‘quality’ entered a shop, the immediate social exchange, mirrored in the hospitality, cordiality and deference of the shop assistant, made no reference to the express purpose of the customer’s visit: the exchange of goods or services for money. The parameters of these social interactions were framed by the social requirements of polite, ‘feminine’ sensibilities and ritual courtesy, from ‘small talk’ to the taking of tea. The goods for sale could be scrutinised and handled without mention of price – free from any commercial connotations, and discussed politely on their merits and suitability alone. Indeed, as the historian of consumption in classical Athens, James Davidson, has suggested, it is a phenomenon common to both ancient and modern civilisations that the lack of a price tag serves to increase the desire on the part of the consumer.<sup>69</sup>

The first stage of shopping, the browse, was facilitated essentially by social interaction. The second stage, however, the bargain, unmasked the illusion that this was a purely social encounter. It was expected that at some stage the price of the goods would be negotiated, adjusted according to the status, and skill, of the customer, and flexibility of the shop assistant. (There were certain exceptions: many eighteenth-century books, pamphlets and news-sheets had the prices printed on the frontispiece or header, although these too could be open to negotiation

<sup>67</sup> *Athenian Gazette or Casuistical Mercury* [hereafter *Athenian Mercury*], ed. John Dunton, undated [Mar.–Apr. 1692].

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* The Athenian Society’s exact retort was: ‘Sweet sir, The Character you have given of your Self denotes [what] great Humility and low Esteem you have of your self.’

<sup>69</sup> James Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes: The Consuming Passions of Classical Athens* (2000), 110–11. Davidson uses the example of hetaeras (courtesans) and their skill at masking ‘fees for service’.



at the point of sale.)<sup>70</sup> Bargaining was integral to the experience of polite consumption, and was bound up with the notion that the higher the status of the consumer, the greater discount he or she could expect, and the easier it would be for them to obtain credit with the retailer. It was up to the customer to decide when the conversation should move to discussing actual price. Following the shop assistant's elaborate flattery, the shopper made a bid for a price: 'When we had pleased ourselves [looking at the goods, we] . . . bid him ten shillings a-yard for what he asked fifteen.' The shop assistant protested 'Fan me, ye winds, your ladyship rallies me! Should I part with it at such a price, the Weavers would rise upon the very shop.'<sup>71</sup> Quaker shopkeepers were exceptional in their refusal to take part in such haggling, since it was part of their religious conviction that they would never overcharge for goods, but offer only the lowest price they could take for them. The fact that they attracted comment for doing so is indicative that this was an anomalous practice. Cesar de Saussure told an anecdote about a man who swore that he would not pay for a piece of cloth after a Quaker merchant refused to lower his price. The man later sheepishly returned once he realised he could not obtain a cheaper one elsewhere, but the Quaker refused to serve him, since he was on oath. 'Few merchants', observed Saussure, 'would have had the delicacy of feeling this Quaker merchant had.'<sup>72</sup>

Polite shopping of the browse/bargain model here described belongs to an era when ties of sociability and mutual obligation, mediated through the operation of credit networks, were a prevalent and meaningful form of consumption for a particular sector of society, but this was soon to change. By the early to mid-nineteenth century, the rise of industrial production, economic expansion and the efforts of successive governments to rationalise the currency and encourage free trade were transforming the English economy into a modern capitalist system.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>70</sup> For auction sales 'by the candle' in coffee houses, see Brian W. Cowan, 'The Social Life of Coffee: Commercial Culture and Metropolitan Society in Early Modern England, 1600–1720' (PhD dissertation, Princeton, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> Malcolm, *Anecdotes*, II, 133–4. Another literary example of enthusiastic salesmanship, followed by a cavil upon the price, made by 'the first architectural upholsterer of the age', Mr Soho, in Maria Edgeworth's *The Absentee*, 1812 (1904), 101–4. The upholsterer finishes his elaborate plans for his customer's apartment thus: 'And, of course, you'd have the *sphinx candelabras*, and the Phoenix argands. Oh! nothing else lights now, ma'am. Expense! Expense of the whole! Impossible to calculate here on the spot – but nothing at all worth your ladyship's consideration!' I am extremely grateful to Nicholas Cooper for drawing my attention to this reference.

<sup>72</sup> Saussure, *Foreign View*, 201–2.

<sup>73</sup> *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, ed. Roderick Floud and Donald McCloskey (2 vols., Cambridge, 1981); D. E. C. Eversley, 'The Home Market and Economic Growth in England, 1750–1800', in *Land, Labour and Population in the Industrial Revolution*, ed. E. L. Jones and G. E. Mingay (1967). For Jan de Vries's influential theory of an 'industrious

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, new forms of shopping emerged. On the initiative of shop owners, many realised that there were ways of making larger profits than the old credit system had allowed. Those who witnessed a change in attitudes and practices commented upon the erosion of polite shopping rituals. One pioneer of new retailing practices in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was the bookseller James Lackington, whose novel plan was for a 'ready-money business' that denied credit to all customers: '*no exception was ... made, not even in favour of Nobility*'.<sup>74</sup> Universal cash-based transactions in shops required a sea-change in attitudes among shop assistants and customers alike. Lackington recorded, 'I was much laughed at and ridiculed, and it was thought that I might as well attempt to rebuild the tower of Babel, as to establish a large business without giving credit.' Responses from the public were at first highly unfavourable: 'Many unacquainted with my plan of business were very much offended', Lackington recalled, while others actually became angry and abusive.<sup>75</sup> These reactions were indicative of the way in which the ability to shop had hitherto been intimately bound up with individual reputation: refusal of credit would have been highly insulting to a polite customer.

The young Robert Owen also contrasted polite shopping with this new form of retailing. In his first job, working at McGuffog's haberdashery in Stamford, Lincolnshire, during the 1780s, he had served only county gentry. Owen later reflected that there had been 'a well-established routine of politeness' at the Stamford shop, 'and nothing had been done in a hurry'. Flint and Palmer's, his next employers, on the other hand, was a cash business, which Owen thought perhaps was the first 'to sell at a small profit for ready money only'.<sup>76</sup> Here, Owen observed the contrast between the old and new approaches to retailing:

The customers were of an inferior class, they were treated differently. Not much time was allowed for bargaining, a price being fixed for everything, and, compared with other houses, cheap. If any demur was made or much hesitation, the article asked for was withdrawn, and, as the shop was generally full from morning till late in the evening, another customer was attended to.<sup>77</sup>

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revolution', see 'Understanding the Household Economy', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. Brewer and Porter, 108, 113–15 and *passim*.

<sup>74</sup> James Lackington, *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington* (1791), 214–15.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> E. D. H. Cole, *The Life of Robert Owen*, (1930), 50–1.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

In part, Owen's observations reflected upon the contrast between two separate worlds: one, that of the provincial gentry, locked into older patterns of consumption and credit; the second, a rapidly changing metropolitan environment, where an increasing sector of middle-class society had the means to acquire more consumer goods for 'ready money'. However, as the cash nexus became more firmly entrenched, and the language of 'sorts' gave way to what we would recognise as class awareness, one of the signs of social change was a secretly militant objection on the part of those whose position it was to serve that their performance of politeness was both artificial and humiliating. Francis Place, himself a student of Rousseau and Godwin, resented the fact that his trade as a tailor was 'all a matter of taste, that is, of folly and caprice', and regarded the social expectations upon him with a degree of considerable bitterness: 'The most profitable part for me to follow was to dance attendance on silly people, to make myself acceptable to coxcombs, to please their whims, to have no opinion of my own, but to take special care that my customers should be pleased with theirs.'<sup>78</sup> For Place, the polite show of manners that his customers expected was a source of loathing to him, a subservient self-denial of his own individualism and identity. His observations went to the heart of the problem that an increasing number of people had noticed with politeness from mid-century onwards. Originally, as Philip Carter has shown, it had been equated with 'relaxed and genuine sociability' as an 'essential means of establishing the originality and merits of new modes of social refinement', a reaction against the 'stiff formality' of social manners that preceded it.<sup>79</sup> Politeness had offered the illusion of a civil society based upon quasi-democratic principles of civic humanism and mutual respect, accessible to anyone who studied and adopted its precepts. By the end of the eighteenth century, artisans and tradesmen were increasingly political in their awareness that politeness could not gloss over the social and economic inequalities upon which society was based.

Shopping in the eighteenth century was neither as straightforward nor as familiar an activity as one might assume; it required a considerable amount of social skill and economic nous on the part of the consumer. Viewed in this light, the endless modest purchases and prices chronicled by gentlewomen in their private correspondence and personal accounts read less as proof of their inclination to luxury, nor the 'triviality' of their lives, than a proud record of their almost daily ability to negotiate the rules of polite consumption to their own social and economic advantage. The moment when shopkeepers started to

<sup>78</sup> Place, *Life*, 34.

<sup>79</sup> Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society: Britain 1660–1800* (2000), 125 and *passim*.

use royal crests as marketing devices was emblematic of the social and economic transformation that took place in England during the eighteenth century. To shop at the same retail outlets as illustrious patrons represented a mark of one's own discernment, but paradoxically, this illusion was only sustained through commodifying, and thus opening up to a wider purchasing public the very 'quality' which was associated with social exclusivity. It was some decades before this symbolic move towards the 'democratisation of luxury'<sup>80</sup> was truly made possible with the arrival of the department store from the 1830s onwards. Vestiges of eighteenth-century forms of polite shopping survive today only in specific minority situations, such as the invitation to take a seat when one enters a high-class jeweller's shop, the personal service offered by the most expensive bespoke tailors or the habits of the current queen of England, whose personal credit is so well established that she famously carries no cash.

We have seen how the application of politeness to social behaviour in shops had a dimension of staged flattery from its earliest stages. Within the context of a society where personal acquaintance and credit still had some purchase, the illusion that this was underpinned by mutual loyalty could have gone some way to authenticating polite interaction between shop assistant and customer as a genuine mark of esteem. In the transition to a cash-based economy, however, and as the nineteenth century progressed, a persistent suspicion emerged among hard-pressed shopkeepers and employees that they were merely exhibiting a sham courtesy in order to obtain the customer's cash in the least possible time. Resistance to customary deference was a contributory factor to the class antagonism that found expression in campaigns for political reform among tradesmen and artisans of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Not only this, but the civilising vision of eighteenth-century urban life was eroded, as an overriding respect for the pound gradually replaced a polite regard for the person as society's consuming passion.

<sup>80</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 16–44.