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book review of

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Susan Hiner,

Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France.

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There can be no doubt that fashion both influences and reflects the cultural milieu in which it exists. Susan Hiner, Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Vassar College, examines a particular set of fashion accessories in literature, and to a lesser extent theatrical productions and popular visual culture, for evidence of what she calls the "complex processes of modernity (1)." The accessories in question (shawl, parasol, fan and handbag) were easily dismissed as trivial, Hiner asserts, and could therefore accomplish the "ideological work [of modernity] imperceptibly" (1).

In the prologue to the book, Hiner defines modernism as "conflicts between and collusion among rapid social mobility and notions of legitimacy, colonialism and domestic retrenchment, and mass culture and elite aesthetics" (2), – in other words, a set of binary conditions and boundaries which, along with those of gender, the accessories can both indicate and transgress. These transgressions occurred, in part, because the 1793 "freedom of dress decree" in France meant that fashion could no longer clearly demonstrate the social status of the wearer. This was particularly evident with items that were supposed to symbolize feminine virtue and bourgeois respectability, such as those found in the *Corbeille de mariage* – a wedding basket filled with fashionable accessories, and gifted to the bride from her future husband in exchange for her family's dowry payment.

The first chapter, "*La Femme comme il (en) faut* and the Pursuit of Distinction" considers the boundary between the respectable woman of the "*monde*" and the morally compromised woman of the "*demi-monde*." While French society may have wished for a clear distinction, Hiner's examination of Honoré de Balzac's novel *Ferragus* (1833) and essay "*La Femme comme il faut*" (1840), and Alexandre Dumas fils's *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848) makes it clear that the line was not easily drawn. The popular and usually satirical literature called *physiologies* ostensibly

existed to define social types, but Hiner demonstrates that Maurice Alhoy's *Physiologie de la Lorette* (1841), Alexandre Dumas père's *Filles, Lorettes et Courtisanes* (1843), and Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's, *La Lorette* (1852–53) don't provide clarity on the boundaries, yet still demonstrate the fetishistic nature of the fashion accessories that moved easily across them. The descriptions of fashion accessories in these primary texts are supplemented by Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) and Georg Simmel's essay "On Fashion" (1904), and more contemporary works by Rosalind Williams' *Dream Worlds* (1982), Cissie Fairchild's, "Fashion and Freedom in the French Revolution," (2000), David Harvey's *Capital of Modernity* (2003), and Barbara Vinken's *Fashion Zeitgeist* (2005).

The focus of chapter two, "Unpacking the *Corbeille de mariage*," describes the repository of over determined objects to be described at greater length in the remainder of the book's chapters. Illustrations spanning the period 1820 to 1880 demonstrate the visual nature of the wedding basket as an "order making enterprise" to be unpacked both literally and figuratively by Hiner (44). Commonly among its contents were fashionable objects--the shawl, the parasol, the fan and the handbag--that transgressed boundaries between respectable and erotic objects through their connection with marriage, its consummation through sex, and then the woman's domestic duties as wife and mother. These over determined (in the Freudian sense) objects were collected into the gift box given to the bride as compensation for a dowry, and while the value of them could vary, they never represented more than a fraction of the payment the groom received. The *Corbeille de mariage* blended the feminine *trésor* of virtue and respectability with the masculine world of *fortune* in its property and hard cash (61). Literature examined to map out these concepts includes Honoré de Balzac's *Le Contrat de Mariage* (1835), Edmond Duranty's *Le Malheur d'Henriette Gérard* (1860), and Gyp's, *Pauvres Petites Femmes* (1880).^[1] Hiner also examines at length an 1869 article by Marie Emery, "Un Corbeille," which appeared in *Le Journal des Demoiselles*.

"'Cashmere Fever': Virtue and the Domestication of the Exotic," chapter three, examines the significance of the shawl as both a luxury object of fashion and an indicator of France's colonialist expansion into Algeria, as its material was taken from that country. Originally a signifier of exoticism, it quickly became part of the French domestic economy, and although shawls eventually went out of fashion, they were retained for the sake of tradition in the *Corbeille de mariage*. Hiner compares and contrasts two literary works that feature what she calls "cashmere plots" that use the shawl to symbolize the blurring of social boundaries--Honoré de Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* (1846) and Gustave Flaubert's *L'Éducation Sentimentale* (1869). Hiner includes an 1811 play *Le Cachemere, ou l'étrenne à la mode* as a literary example of a more popular nature, and uses a chapter from Walter Benjamin's unfinished *The Arcades Project* (1927–1940) as theoretical support.

The parasol is the focus of chapter four, "*Mademoiselle Ombrelle*: Shielding the Fair Sex," which features discussion of Honoré de Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1836), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) and Emile Zola's, *Nana* (1880), along with Octave Uzanne's *L'Ombrelle, le Gant et le Manchon* (1883). The umbrella, Hiner says,

"dehumanizes and fetishizes" the woman who uses it (108) and Uzanne's text "expresses an assimilation of woman to accessory" (112). The parasol links leisure and whiteness while inscribing gender, class and race. Early mechanics of the umbrella allowed the user to tilt it for

use as a sunscreen to preserve the white skin that separated the leisure class from the working class. Because they were used by royalty in the Orient prior to their introduction to France, like the shawl, the parasol is capable of signifying exoticism. Like the fan, the umbrella aided feminine flirting by modulating the gaze of interested suitors.

Chapter five, "Fan Fetish: Gender, Nostalgia, and Commodification," features Honoré de Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons* (1847), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), and Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (1913–27), in addition to a chapter on the fan in the popular literature *Paris Vivant: les Coulisses de la Mode* (1888). Fans are particularly complicated, as they represent both a nostalgia for the aristocracy of the eighteenth century and the exoticism of China and Japan, as well as being both functional and decorative objects (portable paintings) that can cool one off after dancing, facilitate both gossiping and flirting, and were sometimes created to commemorate special events. As Hiner explains in her prologue, "More than any other women's fashion accessory, the fan works erotically and has a long history of association with female seduction; but this accessory also functions as hyperbolic art object, combining a variety of media and signifying the exotic" (6).

The final chapter, "Between Good Intentions and Ulterior Motives: The Culture of Handbags," features just two major works of literature--Honoré de Balzac's *La Bourse* (1832) and Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883)--for, as Hiner points out, this item was discussed and illustrated less frequently than the others examined in her book. The connection with the handbag and the *Corbeille de mariage* is somewhat tenuous, as Hiner explains that what would actually be found in the marriage basket would most likely be an *étuis* (needlecase), which symbolized domesticity and the alms purse, which alluded to charity. Hiner carefully maps the evolution from the deep pockets incorporated into elaborate gowns to the *réticule*, an external bag made necessary by First Empire sheer and fitted dresses. With the embroidered *bourses*, the handbag evolved into the "vehicle of consumption" symbolizing women's "vexed relationship to money" as they gained greater agency through shopping, which this portable object supported (7). Like the parasol and the fan, the handbag suggested games of hide and seek with feminine secrets, but further, as a "portable foyer" or "scandalous instrument of female pleasure," even the sexual symbol of Pandora's "box" as articulated by Sigmund Freud in his examination of the supposedly hysterical patient, Dora (181).

Hiner's "Epilogue. The Feminine Accessory," is a disappointing four-page summary of the book. In the prologue to the book, that author promised to examine several concepts that remain unacknowledged in the "Epilogue" summary. These include: 1) woman as an "...aestheticized accessory in the social theater of male success and status" (1–2); 2) an elaboration on legal definitions of "accessory," the implication of collusion in a crime, in this case the "offenses of modernity" (3); 3) "The cultural pressure to possess certain accessories rendered these objects accomplices in an economy of subordination, and the close association between accessories and women caused an oscillating convergence and divergence of subject and object" (3); 4) "...the processes of modernity from which bourgeois and elite women were ostensibly excluded – colonialism, nationalism, industrialization, and commercialization" (3–4); and 5) that "As cultural signs of identity (class, race, gender), these accessories become vital documents in the construction of modernity itself" (4). While it might be true that these ideas are *implicit* as the book develops, they are obscured by intricate discussions of a wide range of documents ranging from primary to secondary, archival to theoretical, "high" to popular,

without careful articulation of the distinctions among them in terms of the respective authors' and audiences' social class and political affiliations.

While Hiner may indeed make a significant contribution to the study of the works of literature she includes, because the works of Balzac and Flaubert, in particular, have not been read from the perspective of fashion to the degree that the works of Zola have been, there is the danger of isolating the references to the items in Hiner's study to such a degree that the nature of the work of literature as a whole is somewhat distorted. This, of course, matters less should the audience for Hiner's book be limited to those who know these works of literature well.

It would also be ideal if the audience were limited to those who are sufficiently familiar with nineteenth-century French culture to be able to distinguish between primary and secondary literature; Hiner omits many of the dates I've provided above, and cites contemporary translations in her bibliography, further confusing the issue for anyone unfamiliar with this material. She also fails to differentiate between the satirical and serious, leaving the reader to guess at the original writer's intent. Finally, Hiner never articulates her methodological position, which includes elements of both structuralist and post-structuralist theory. For a reader unfamiliar with these conceptual frameworks, the text becomes chaotic. The reader must attempt to reconcile how a long list of nineteenth-century French periodicals and archival institutions, such as the Bibliothèque Nationale, fit with oblique references to the much more contemporary theories of Walter Benjamin, Judith Butler and Roland Barthes. Add the overuse of the term *metonymy*, and variations thereof, to describe the accessories in relationship to their wearers, and the reader is thoroughly befuddled. The use of jargon (the author's and others') further hampers an already clunky read, as long passages of French are followed directly by their translations within the body of the text.

Hiner is not an art historian, and so should probably be allowed some slack on the paucity of illustrations and their seemingly random choice; none of them are from the visually rich *La Vie Parisienne*, nor from the well-illustrated *physiologies* Hiner terms to be "protosociological" (13), and only one is from Octave Uzanne's illustrated volumes on the umbrella and the fan. The only actual illustration of a fan is a copy after Antoine Watteau rather than an original nineteenth-century example. Further, the illustrations that are included lack identification (provenance, date, original purpose) and analysis. Even in the realm of literature, there are surprising oversights. In using plays as examples, *Le Cachemere, ou l'étréenne à la mode* (1811) for one, Hiner provides no information about where and when they were performed, what audience was being addressed, and what the critical reception was. All of these factors have a bearing on its interpretation, and are a necessary component in establishing the context of an analysis. Equally perplexing is an unnecessary digression about René Chateaubriand's *Atala*, as interpreted by Naomi Schor, during a discussion of how the umbrella maintains the whiteness of the user's skin (133–134); and an unfinished discussion of *haute couture* versus *prêt-à-porter*, and copy versus original *à la* Elizabeth Outka's "commodified authentic" (149). In sum, the usefulness of this book will depend greatly on the individual reader's academic discipline, and his or her ability (or willingness) to either ignore or fill in the gaps.

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Notes

[1] Gyp was the pseudonym of Sibylle Aimée Marie Antoinette Gabrielle de Riquetti de Mirabeau, (1849–1932). She wrote humorous novels satirizing fashionable society. See Willa Silverman, *The Notorious Life of Gyp: Right-Wing Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).