

Stealing femininity: department store kleptomania as sexual disorder

Leslie Camhi

differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies. 5.1 (Spring 1993): p26+.

Copyright: COPYRIGHT 1993 Duke University Press

<http://dukeupress.edu/>

Abstract:

Women in 19th century Paris reportedly performed mass acts of kleptomania. Psychoanalysts attributed this widespread phenomenon to certain female sexual disorders. It was believed that women exhibited this form of behavior as a means of externalizing deep-rooted feminine sexual fetishes. Department stores were often victimized by this mass form of hysteria since they provided the commodities most sought after by women.

Full Text:

To the extent that the social fabric is unraveling, that's an issue tailor-made for women.(1)

Voler, c'est la geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler....
(Cixous 178)(2)

Psychoanalysis evolved in a dialogue between male doctors and hysterical women patients. Together "Anna O." and Josef Breuer arrived at the "talking cure" as treatment for her hysterical illness. Fourteen years later, Breuer transformed his recollections of their meetings into the first case history of the volume he jointly published with Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*. Her story, with its gaps, omissions, incompletions, consciously-embroidered fictions, inconsistencies, and doubled narratives, stands at the origin of psychoanalysis, the highly literary construct upon which a science was founded.

For feminist critics, the case has held a particular fascination, largely due to the revelation (in Ernest Jones's biography of Freud) of the secret identity of Breuer's patient. Years after her failed analysis, "Anna O." would emerge in the public eye as Berthe Pappenheim, a pioneering German feminist and social worker. Critics of psychoanalysis have frequently puzzled over the relation between the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious and the movement for the liberation of women, beyond their merely anecdotal or biographical embodiment in this extraordinary case of double identity.(3) Yet one aspect of Pappenheim's life has received scant attention: while her social work focused on the problems of illegitimate children, prostitutes, and abandoned women, privately she was passionately devoted to her considerable collection of rare laces, which now hangs in the Viennese Arts and Crafts Museum (Edinger 18).

In their "Preliminary Communication," which serves as an introduction to *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud and Breuer wrote that "needlework" left women prone to daydreaming and split states of consciousness, in which hysterical traumas were more easily impressed upon their minds (13). "Anna O."

embroidered her monotonous daily routines with waking fantasies. The "talking cure" involved following the "thread of memory" back from her somatic symptoms to their precipitating traumas (35). Thus, hysterical illnesses were themselves like obscure forms of weaving, tying together past and present, memory and the body. Breuer described his patient's memory work as a "tissue of data with such a degree of internal consistency" that it could only have been woven by the unconscious (43).

In an oft-cited passage from his late essay, "Femininity," Freud describes weaving as the paradigmatic feminine cultural achievement. The passage is reproduced here in its entirety, both for its unflinching strangeness, and for its foundational status in figuring feminine "lack" through the unstable image of fabric.

The effect of penis envy has a share, further, in the physical vanity of women, since they are bound to value their charms more highly as a late compensation for their original sexual inferiority. Shame, which is considered to be a feminine characteristic par excellence, but is far more a matter of convention than might be supposed, has as its purpose, we believe, a concealment of genital deficiency.... It would seem that women have made few contributions to the discoveries and inventions in the history of civilization; there is, however, one technique which they may have invented - that of plaiting and weaving. If that is so, we should be tempted to guess the unconscious motive for the achievement. Nature herself would seem to have given the model which this achievement imitates by causing the growth at maturity of the pubic hair that conceals the genitals. The step that remained to be taken lay in making the threads adhere to one another, while on the body they stick into the skin and are only matted together. If you reject this idea as fantastic and regard my belief in the influence of the lack of a penis on the configuration of femininity as an *idée fixe*, I am of course defenseless. (132)

According to Freud, women learned to weave by looking at their own anatomy. Shame, caused by their lack of a penis, made them imitate the veil of pubic hair which Nature drew over this absence, by plaiting and weaving threads into fabric. Women's single technological invention and original contribution to the history of civilization would then be like hysterical fantasies; a woven tissue, derived from the body, to cover and repress their own "genital deficiency," like the knitted or embroidered text of the pathologically feminine hysterical body.

Structuring the above passage is a series of oppositions, between anatomical essence and social convention, between the imitation of nature and technological invention - oppositions which oscillate confusedly within the theoretical armature of Freudian "penis envy." Feminine shame, more conventional than essential, is nevertheless anatomically based in a "concealment of genital deficiency." Women's sole cultural invention in fact imitates the bodily logic of nature, and is the technological heir to the body's imperfect and precarious cover. "Penis envy" charts the movement from the perception of sexual (anatomical) difference to the construction of explanatory theories. Yet its unstable logic continually threatens to collapse the two,

making "penis envy" a theoretical armature reinforcing the little boy's defensive theories.(4)

Freud's myth of origin, locating women's cultural achievements in their "aberrant" bodies, was hysterically symptomatic of psychoanalysis itself. The mythic veil of shame that Freud would have had women draw across their bodies was a tissue of his own weaving, drawn to protect him from their difference. The lifting of this veil and exposure of these foreign bodies left him naked and "defenseless."

In 1893 (the year of Freud and Breuer's "Preliminary Communication"), Dr. Paul Dubuisson described a new set of relations between hysteria, femininity, and fabric, in *Les Voleuses des grands magasins*.(5) Founded upon the ruin of the *magasins de nouveautés* at mid-century, the Parisian department store's sensational rise to prominence in that "pilot plant of mass consumption" was accompanied by a new and disturbing urban phenomenon: female kleptomania, in epidemic proportions.(6) Prompted perhaps by the anonymity of these vast commercial spaces, their liberty of access, the unprecedented array and promiscuous mingling of merchandise, or the illusion of possession arising from the commodity's new nearness to the consumer's touch, women from a broad range of classes began stealing from department stores without need or reason.

"Real" crimes, those committed rather than merely detected, are a gray area of historical investigation. Department stores regulated most thefts internally, without recourse to the courts, making reliable statistics on shoplifting rare.(7) Thus they shielded the reputations of their bourgeois clients, diverted public attention from the questionable ethics of modern retailing, and avoided police surveillance, so detrimental to a commercial atmosphere fostering imaginary acquisition. Since kleptomania was contagious, authorities may also have assumed that merely reporting the incidence of theft would cause it to increase.

At the same time, forensic medical chroniclers of fin-de-siècle feminine aberrance (doctors such as Dubuisson, Legrand du Saulle, and others) found proof in kleptomania of both the deregulating effects of modernity and the feminine subject's fundamental unaccountability before the law, and medical discourse around the epidemic mushroomed.

In a series of forensic case histories, Dubuisson attempted to distinguish criminal from pathological theft. He was inclined toward a simple, class-based analysis. If a bourgeois woman stole something of little value, her act was deemed pathological. If a working-class woman stole a useful or valuable object, she was far more likely to be considered a thief. Kleptomania could be caused by feeble-mindedness; physical and moral exhaustion, from the effects of neurasthenia or morphine addiction; and most commonly, hysteria, in addition to which Dubuisson cited all those "critical periods" in the female reproductive cycle capable of affecting the brain: menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause. Any moment in a woman's reproductive cycle could incite

her to criminal acts. A diagnosis of hysteria, or temporary moral insanity as a condition of femininity, could absolve the suspect of all criminal responsibility.

Like hysteria, and like "normal" feminine fashion, the epidemic of department store kleptomania spread through imitation. The very sight of women stealing prompted others to do the same. While hysteria was a frequent diagnosis in younger women, older women seemed to compensate for the "uterine losses" of menopause with their propensity for kleptomaniacal acts. In the atmosphere of feminine moral lassitude that the department stores engendered, kleptomaniacal mothers corrupted their weak-willed hysterical daughters, drawing them into guilty complicity, using them as lures in crime (Legrand du Saulle 443).

Professional female thieves shared this propensity for "working in pairs, or when alone, they wore

... a large, double-skirted dress, with a diagonal slit, into which they stuff pieces of silk, velvet, lace, lingerie, and all manner of objects. (Legrand du Saulle 338)(8)

Their specialized garments were redolent with feminine anatomical complicity, a mise-en-abime of duplicity in which the fetishized commodities of an entire culture could be consumed.(9)

When caught, kleptomaniacs sometimes expressed relief, as if delivered of an obsession. Others merely lamented the lost pleasure of their daily visits to the Bon Marche, Printemps, or Louvre. Many confessed to previous crimes, and, in their homes, disclosed to the authorities a myriad of stolen objects

... hidden in the depths of dark corridors, in armoires which were never opened, even inside of furniture which had been re-upholstered or re sewn. The objects had never been touched, they were in the same condition in which they had been taken, and still had their price-tags on them. (Dubuisson 50)

Illegitimacy and theft invaded the secret corners of the bourgeois household, insinuating themselves into femininity and furniture, the very foundations of the middle class home. In this early aberration of consumer culture, private space (the domestic refuge from exchange value) became haunted by the ghost of the marketplace, the fetishized commodity and the pleasure of pure possession.

If the nooks and crannies of the Victorian household concealed so many illicit pleasures, what about the Angel of the House? The unused, fetishized objects that she stole had a particular relation to her person. The kleptomaniac's stolen goods of preference included lace, silk, handkerchiefs, gloves, combs, and all articles of feminine adornment. Never used, they were largely "useless" objects, their entire utility consisting in the service they rendered to the feminine masquerade. In the complex dialectic between the cultural production of femininity and the commodity productions of the marketplace,

their use value served to increase the exchange value of women between men.

One hysteric stole only bracelets, while the onset of menstruation in another was accompanied by a pathological attraction to lace (Dubuisson 152, 166). A third dated her exaggerated love of ribbons from early childhood, and chose the career of milliner in order to satisfy this need. Marriage with a thread salesman temporarily reconciled conjugal with sartorial passion; but when their business failed, the love of ribbons reasserted its priority, and caused her to steal (Boissier and Lachaux 47-48).

Young, working-class kleptomaniacs were frequently drawn from the milieu of fashion,

... practicing most often the professions of linen-makers, milliners, department store workers, and teachers, frequently engaged in illicit relationships or seeking to marry. (Legrand du Saulle 446)

Attracted (like our ribbon-loving hatmaker) to the professional production of femininity, these makers and sellers of the appearance of leisured, fetishized feminine sexuality were paid insufficiently to maintain the illusion themselves. Teachers, one assumes, were included in the list because of their poverty, and their role as pedagogical models of femininity. All these women stole to supplement their toilette, that necessary surplus of a saleable surface, whose maintenance was required for both professional and personal gain.

Department store workers, in particular, navigated uneasily between the demands of feminine appearance and the economic and sexual constraints of the commercial environment where they both lived and worked.(10) Fixed prices, a department store innovation, suddenly made the commodity's aura its sole negotiable consideration. Mediating between goods and consumers, saleswomen had to reflect the aura of their merchandise, selling femininity to bourgeois women with a thin veneer of class covering their salaried condition. Their meager wages made the supplemental income of a love affair almost essential to maintaining this illusion; but relations between male and female workers in the same establishment were frowned upon, marriage forbidden, and pregnancy immediate cause for dismissal. The female department store worker's position was predicated upon a paradoxical femininity to be both perpetually offered and never consumed.(11)

Department store workers, bourgeois consumers, and kleptomaniacal hoarders all expressed the impossibility of maintaining an economy of just measure in relation to feminine goods. Workers, shoppers, and shoplifters, with varying means at their disposal, were bound to the demands of an endlessly-produced and ever-insufficiently feminine body, whose surplus value needed to be continually increased. Consumption was part of the work of producing this body; while those who labored to sell the illusion had to mime in their person the newly-acquired aura of mass-produced goods. Kleptomaniacal fixation on the accoutrements of feminine fashion responded

to the demands of this all-consuming economy with theft, an act of economic evasion in response to an economy without just measure.

The identifying characteristic in the new consumerist culture was not the purchase or even the use of goods -- it was the possession of them.... And if it was true that kleptomaniacs were stealing apparently useless goods, did that not also mean that many honest women were buying them? (O'Brien 72)

The epidemic of department store kleptomania can be seen as an extreme (but in no way antithetical) response to the social role of the department store in inciting feminine desire for new commodities and regulating the consumption of fashionable goods.(12) Like the hysteric, the department store kleptomaniac merely took a socially-prescribed norm of feminine sexuality to its extreme (but nevertheless intrinsic) conclusion: the female consumer denuded of resistance, feminine sexuality entirely formed and possessed by the fetishized commodities sold to create it.

Nineteenth-century medical authorities were quick to blame the unhealthy atmosphere of the stores themselves.

The customers' eyes and hands are solicited at every step by fabrics glistening material, things of little value placed next to the most precious objects. (Lasegue 470)

The "democratization of luxury" made possible by the new techniques of mass production (as more goods became available to greater numbers of people) provoked a crisis in consuming identities. The dangers of the urban crowd, in which classes promiscuously mingled, were reflected in the department store's hybrid displays of luxurious and inexpensive objects, disorienting the consumer by transgressing the boundaries of class identity. Like a mass hallucination, the objects in these "brothels of modern commerce" suddenly became invested with life and powers of solicitation (Zola 271, 336).(13) The most solid constitutions were powerless to resist the enervation, fatigue, and bewilderment of hours spent in these establishments, a condition which Dubuisson called magasinite ("store-itis"), and which one observer of late twentieth-century consumer culture has referred to as mal de mall (Dubuisson 187, Kowinski). No wonder, then, that women's more permeable constitutions were defenseless against such stimulation.

Once plunged into the heady atmosphere of the department store, in the midst of sounds, movements, comings and goings, she felt herself little by little invaded by a trouble which could only be compared to drunkenness, with the dizziness and excitation proper to that state. She saw things as if through a cloud. Every object provoked her desire and became extraordinarily attractive to her. She felt herself drawn toward it, and seized it without any foreign or superior consideration intervening to hold her back. She took things by chance, as often useless objects of no value, as well as useful and valuable objects. It was, she said, like a monomania of possession. (Dubuisson 111)

Kleptomania was an addictive sexual disorder, prompted by contact with the commodity form. It was frequently accompanied by alcoholism, etherism, or absinthe-drinking, and like these substance addictions, it dispersed individual subjectivity onto the world of things. As consumption migrated ever closer to the center of social identity, the kleptomaniac presented the spectacle of a thoroughly modern subject, without the slightest hint of a barrier intervening between herself and the marketplace of goods. The anxieties of an emerging culture of consumption invested her pathological image: the fear that strangely-animated objects directed the consumers' desires, and that consumption itself, last bastion of individual prerogative in an increasingly-regulated industrial society, was entirely determined by the marketplace of goods.

What social parameters made the female consumer so susceptible to this loss of ego boundaries, between herself and the commodity, at the inception of our endless modern appetite for things? How has contemporary culture regulated nineteenth-century hysteria, so that relations between feminine sexuality and the commodity now take newly-aberrant forms? I must beg these historical questions, and instead consider the transformations of consumer pathology in a literary economy.

Published in 1883, Emile Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames* (The Ladies' Paradise) charts the rise of an eponymous department store under the direction of a bachelor, Octave Mouret, who ruthlessly drives to ruin the small, family-run boutiques in his corner of Paris. *Au Bon Marche*, which expanded rapidly after its founding in 1862, provided Zola with a model for Mouret's enterprise, while his portrait of the store's daily operations was drawn from meticulous observations he conducted in 1882 at the *Bon Marche* and *Louvre*.

Mouret alternately describes his store as a "modern temple to the cult of woman" and a mechanism to exploit her: "awakening new desires in her flesh, an immense temptation to which she would fatally succumb, ceding first to good housewifely purchases, then gained by coquetry, and finally devoured" (69, 91).⁽¹⁴⁾ Denise, the niece of a neighborhood shopkeeper, arrives from the provinces and becomes a department store employee, slowly gaining Mouret's heart while her uncle is driven out of business.

Rachel Bowlby has argued that *Au Bonheur des dames* represents not merely a new economic order, but also a new sexual order, a place where apparently new gender relations obtain (66-82). Denise's uncle came to possess the boutique which formerly employed him by marrying the owner's daughter; his own employee, scheduled to inherit both shop and daughter, is in love with a shopgirl of dubious reputation from the department store across the street. This giant market, modeled on the orientalist fantasy of the souk, holds out the promise of social mobility through sexual means, though Denise, the ultimately prudent consumer, wins the heart of the patron by conserving her goods.

Au Bonheur des dames is infused with a highly diffuse sexuality, inciting desire by displaying the merchandise, so that shopping (or rather, browsing)

becomes a strangely narcissistic substitute for the sexual act, as if fabric could stand in for the bodies it would ultimately drape.

A crowd was stopped before the shop windows, women pushing and squeezing, devouring the finery with longing, covetous eyes. And the stuffs became animated in this passionate sidewalk atmosphere: the laces fluttered, drooped ... even the lengths of cloth, thick and heavy, exhaled a tempting odor, while the cloaks threw out their folds over the dummies, which assumed a soul, and the great velvet mantle particularly, expanded, supple and warm, as if on real fleshly shoulders, with a heaving of the bosom and a trembling of the hips. (17-18, 25)

Specular feminine desire animates feminized goods; crowds of female consumers surrender sexuality to objects, coveting their own femininity in its ultimately reified form. The French naturalist novel develops character through cumulative descriptions of material detail. But the central subjects of representation in Zola's novel are the strangely reflective processes through which human beings are drawn one step closer to objects, while consumer desire invests material goods with independent life.

On a sale day, inaugurating the store's renovation,

... this sea of faces, these many-colored hats, these bare heads, both dark and light, rolled from one end of the gallery to the other, confused and discolored amidst the loud glare of the stuffs. Madame Desforges could see nothing but large price tags bearing enormous figures everywhere, their white patches standing out on the bright printed cottons, the shining silks, and the somber woollens.... |O~n all sides the mirrors carried the departments back into infinite space, reflecting the displays with portions of the public, faces reversed, and halves of shoulders and arms.... (222, 276-77)

Commodity culture reversed the subject's progress through the mirror stage, the illusion through which the infant acquires a unified body-image. The department store fragmented the consumer's body into infinitely expandable rayons, departments catering to each of its parts. Here the feminized crowd of shoppers is objectified and re-hysterized by its reflection and refraction in the marketplace of goods. Price tags, supplemental signs of exchange value, are the only legible items amidst the crowd of objects and part-objects, flesh and goods.

Zola's portrait of the animating force of consumption celebrates the representational techniques of both modern commerce and the naturalist novel, while bearing witness to lingering anxieties about literary and commercial blurring of distinctions between animate and inanimate, fiction and life. The architecture of Zola's fictional store, based upon a layout by Frantz Jourdain, influenced that designer's subsequent construction of *la Samaritaine* (Ross vii). Zola's meticulous attention to detail has made *Au Bonheur des dames* a primary source for histories of modern commerce (Parent-Lardeur, Miller, et al.), and led an American management consultant to praise the novel, in 1976, as a "pragmatic guide to retail merchandising

effectiveness" (Ross xxii). What then distinguishes Zola's enterprise from Mouret's?

In the anxieties surrounding this question, the female kleptomaniac represents an unaccountable element in both naturalist and capitalist relations. Mouret's department store is a great financial success, even though the crowd of nervous shoppers conceals an unknown number of thieves.

"They must steal from you enormously," murmured Vallagnosc, for whom the crowd took on a criminal air.

"My dear friend, it surpasses the imagination," [Mouret replied~ First, he cited the professional thieves, who did the least harm, because they were all known to the police. Then, there were those who stole from mania, a perversion of desire, a new neurosis which a psychiatrist had classified.... Finally, there were the pregnant women, who specialized: at the home of one, the police commissioner found 148 pair of rose-colored gloves, stolen from all the Parisian counters. (226, 283)

Feminine sexuality is the motor of desire fueling Mouret's commercial machine -- yet it is also the site of incalculable drains. The pregnant woman is the source of constant human fodder that the marketplace requires to maintain itself. Yet this image of fecundity is also profoundly duplicitous, concealing immeasurable perversions of desire and loss. Theft and feminine sexuality are both points of slippage, incalculable elements within capitalist relations. Mouret's profitable enterprise is founded upon feminine desire for goods which ostensibly serve to incite men's desire for women. Yet built into the system is its own perversion, the necessary surplus of female narcissism that taints feminine consumer desire as illicit because focused on goods as self-sufficient mirrors of sexuality, as ends in themselves.

Theft from within the organization was also prevalent. Scandal breaks out when the glove salesman, Mignot, is caught surreptitiously helping a client to pad her hips and bosom with sixty pair of gloves. The woman, a former department store employee turned prostitute, is the mistress of cashier Albert L'Homme. The unaccountability of certain bodily sites and desirable attributes of femininity allows multiple thefts to slip by unnoticed. Merchandise is smuggled from the store "hidden underneath a raincoat, rolled around the waist, even suspended between the legs" (302-03, 372). All bodily sites of seduction were available to assist in fraud.

Curiously enough, theft could also be a source of profit. Department stores in London, for example, kept lists of clients with well known kleptomaniacal propensities.

When a merchant notices the disappearance of an object, he tries to recall which kleptomaniacal clients had visited the store recently, and sends a circular out to their relatives, asking that they either pay for the object or return it. Sometimes, though the kleptomaniac may not have stolen anything, she can't remember with any certainty, and doesn't dare affirm her innocence. Her

relatives pay to put an end to the affair, and thus a dozen families may respond to the merchant's request. (Lacassagne 78)

If buying and stealing could be momentarily confused in a feminine economy, sale and theft could also be confounded as sources of profit. As a site of slippage in a capitalist economy, the permanent indebtedness of feminine sexuality to social reputation could work in either direction, for loss or gain.

The novel's most notorious kleptomaniac is Mme de Boves, a countess who is arrested en flagrant delit at the lace counter.

Besides the flounces of Alencon lace, 12 meters at a thousand francs, which were hidden in the depths of her sleeve, they found, in her bodice, flat and warm, a handkerchief, a fan, a tie, all in all about 14 thousand francs worth of lace. For a year, Mme de Boves had been stealing, ravaged by furious, imperious needs. The fits got worse, increasing until they became a sensual pleasure necessary to her existence, causing her to cast aside all prudent considerations, satisfying her with a pleasure [jouissance~ that was all the more eager because she risked, under the eyes of a crowd, her name, her pride, and her husband's high position. (374, 459)

It is an entire social order that the female kleptomaniac calls into question by her actions. It is, perhaps, this very gamble with an entire social identity that compels her, the unconscious need to establish the fraudulence of inherited wealth and social position. The lace itself, hidden and pressed against her body, is a preeminently fraudulent fabric, a veil which promises the vision of something withheld, paradoxically hidden in the very interior of her person.

Thus the difference between buying and stealing, or between normal women and thieves, becomes increasingly attenuated, because the commodities that are bought or stolen are used to produce and maintain the permanent fraud of feminine sexuality, the deception of the feminine masquerade, that, seemingly directed toward others, is in truth a solitary pleasure.(15)

Lay analyst Joan Riviere, in her oft-cited essay "Womanliness as Masquerade," declined to draw the distinction between "natural" and artificial femininity while making reference to theft. Riviere's subject is an accomplished female intellectual who, after each of her public performances, dissembles her mastery of her subject by appearing "excessively" feminine, and unconsciously solicits the sexual attentions of paternal figures present.

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it -- much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen the goods. The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the "masquerade." My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.(38)

For Riviere, an originary "theft" of masculinity lies at the heart of feminine display. The feminine masquerade is a dissimulated lack used as protection from the reprisals which possession of masculine "goods" would presumably entail. Femininity is always already stolen, a dissimulated mask, veil, or fiction of difference that functions, like fetishism, through the substitutional logic of the same.

Riviere's influential essay has been criticized recently for its heterosexual presumption and lack of attention to the influence of sociocultural factors (particularly, racism) on the fantasy life of her American patient (Butler 43-57, Apter 89-98). It falls beyond the scope of the present essay to engage this broader debate. While it is true that the theory of the feminine masquerade follows Freud in positing masculinity (and its fundamental lack) at the center of feminine non-identity, it also suggests that this originary "theft" is powerfully deconstructive, unconsciously "unmanning" also the spectators of feminine display. Riviere's essay, when read together with *Les Voleuses des grands magasins*, suggests alternative uses of the masquerade, which in their very excess upset the logic of both capitalist and sexual exchanges.(16)

Perhaps the most extreme diversions of the masquerade, from its use as a tool in patriarchal and heterosexual exchanges, to its unfolding as a source of destabilizing feminine auto-eroticism, were recounted by a well known French psychiatrist, Gatan Gaetan de Clerambault, who published three case histories in 1908 under the title "*Passion erotique des etoffes chez la femme*" ("*Women's Erotic Passion for Fabrics*"). Two years later, he added a fourth case to the collection. The patients under consideration, all diagnosed as hysterical, were women between forty and fifty years of age suffering from a specific type of department store kleptomania. Generally frigid in heterosexual contacts, they derived intense sexual arousal and satisfaction from stealing silk, which they would fondle and rub against their bodies (often in the genital region), and then discard before leaving the department store vicinity.

The women were arrested, sometimes caught obsessively palpating their stolen silk not far from the scene of the crime. Clerambault's psychiatric interviews with them were part of the juridical process. All were repeat offenders. Several combined drug addiction with their addiction to fabric. The subject of Clerambault's third case history only stole silk while under the influence of ether.

At thirty-eight my period stopped, since then I've suffered greatly, and I began to take ether.... At times, I've tried cocaine and morphine, which I swallowed along with ether. I drank rum, especially, to mask the smell of ether; and to cover the smell of rum, I drank white wine.... To the same end, I also tried eau de Botot and eau de Cologne.... (696)

In infinitely expanding addictive layers, she added veil upon veil of substances, vainly attempting both to mask and satisfy deregulated desires for unidentified lost objects, which are endlessly substituted, but never replaced.

Clerambault describes the stolen silk as "acting" in the capacity of a first lover, occasioning the women's first intense sexual sensations. The subject of his fourth case history pictured to herself when masturbating, not a lover, but the non-image of formless fabric. "Only hearing the word silk pronounced, or merely thinking about it, was enough to arouse her" (716). The onomatopoeic quality of *soie* makes it a transparent signifier, capable of jumping the boundaries between sign and object, as arousing as the thing itself.

Most of Clerambault's analysis is devoted to distinguishing between women's erotic passion for fabrics and the predominantly masculine perversion of fetishism -- as if feminine aberrance were itself too formless to describe without recourse to its masculine counterpart. In his account, it is silk's extremely ephemeral qualities that are arousing to his patients:

The fabric seems to work upon them with its intrinsic qualities, its consistency, shine, smell, and sound -- but even most of these are secondary to its tactile qualities. These tactile qualities are certainly very variegated, subtle, complicated, innumerable for a fine epidermis.... Their ensemble, however, appears very minimal and schematic next to the complex of sensorial, aesthetic, and moral evocations which the fetish evokes in man. (699)

In *Sex and Character*, Otto Weininger (that preeminent fin-de-siecle misogynist) pronounced the sense of touch to be (epistemologically) the lowliest of senses, and the one most highly developed in women.(17) According to Clerambault, it is principally the tactile qualities of silk that are attractive to women. The kleptomaniac finds in silk a redoubling of her own epidermis, a mirror which renders, not a fetishized image, but a sensual impression of sameness. Clerambault writes of a "reciprocal adaptation of the epidermis to the fabric" (701). Unlike the fetish, silk is "devoid of individuality," and it is merely rubbed against the surface of the body, rather than manipulated in a manner that would suggest the ("essentially masculine") pleasure of prehension and possession.

Clerambault compares his kleptomaniacs to Krafft-Ebing's accounts of fur fetishism in men, and finds their difference to lie chiefly in women's more passive relation to the "object" of their passion. The fur fetishist prefers

... a certain sensation of soft resistance, accompanied secondarily by a little warmth.... We like to run our hand over fur; we would like silk to glide by itself over the back of our hand. (713)

Women's passion for fabric animates its object, surrendering both agency and identity. The fetishist distinguishes between himself and the object of his fixation, and thus (according to Clerambault) participates in a properly "sexual" relation. The silk addict seems precisely to desire in fabric an absence of boundaries, a loss of distinction between the thing and herself.

The women are passive in their contact with the silk. Their personality is closed to the exterior world, denuded of vision, denuded of desire. The other

sex does not exist for them. Their jouissance is genital, but it is so self-sufficient that one could almost call it asexual. (704)

This self-sufficient female eroticism exists in a universe of pure, undifferentiated substance. The formlessness of silk mirrors the formlessness of pure feminine materiality.(18) Unlike masculine fetishism, women's erotic passion for fabric is not a surrogate (hetero)sexuality. "When the goods get together," surfaces meet without possession, passive and active exchange their meanings, distance is effaced and identification completed.(19)

Clerambault earned the homage of Jacques Lacan for his work on mental automatism, which theorized a part of the psyche utterly irreducible to will (Lacan 168). Modern psychiatry also remembers him for numerous studies of addiction, among which his work on "shopping addiction" takes its place. Recent critical attention, however (Joan Copjec, Serge Tisseron, Yolande Papetti, et al.), has focused on a curious body of aesthetic research, which he left to the Musee de l'Homme in Paris. During separate stays in Morocco while recovering from war wounds, in 1912 and again in 1919, Clerambault photographed North African men and women, variously veiled. An admiring biographer probably exaggerated her estimate of 40,000 photographs (Renard).(20) After the French psychiatrist's death, the Musee de l'Homme received about five hundred of these photographs, ranged in file folders marked "Prefecture de Police: Service d'alienes" (Paris Police Headquarters: Insane Ward), stolen (or "borrowed," as polite language would have it) from Clerambault's bureau.

The Moroccan photographs were part of an international study of drapery, which Clerambault never completed. He believed that styles of cloth, if examined closely, could yield insights into the essence of racial identities. He presented this research in annual lectures to the Societe d'Ethnographie de Paris, and in an (apparently very popular) course at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, which ran from 1923 until 1926, when it was cancelled by school authorities for unknown reasons (Renard 63). (21)

Only two of Clerambault's lectures on drapery remain. One attempts to prove the existence of scalloped hems in ancient Greek dress; the other expounds the virtues of a type of ligature (a faux bouton) popular among Berbers. Gracefully bordering cloth, and binding it without penetration, are subjects of investigation which suggest that Clerambault (like his kleptomaniacal patients) sought in fabric the possibilities of infinite surface expansion. Writing to authorities in defense of his canceled course, Clerambault described his work as "research into an exact rendering of the Fold (le Plis)" -- that infinitely expandable, and potentially erasable marker of difference (Renard 63).

The photographs were ostensibly visual aids for these technical studies, fixing the elusive folds of fabric as only photography could. Yet, clearly, fetishistic and technical needs combine in them. Shroud-like, many images (such as fig.1) document the body's entire disappearance, obscuring (as Copjec has noted) "the very prop upon which the drapery's purpose hangs" (69). Cemeteries were among the few public gathering places for veiled women,

reinforcing for Western observers the conflation of their image with death (Khemir 53-54). Clerambault's photographs also evoke processes of mummification, bodying forth an absence and creating an extreme distance between observer and the object of observation.

Mothers and daughters are presented as repeating figures, locked in a kind of maternal mimesis, reminiscent of those daughters who learned to steal by following their mothers' example. Serial images, carefully arranged, document gestures used in the process of veiling. Forty years earlier, Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot and his assistants at la Salpêtrière hospital in Paris used photography to study the movement of hysterical attacks, fixing those formerly wandering wombs in a new medium and joining technological fantasies with anxieties surrounding feminine sexuality. Clerambault's photographs attempt to capture, in a medium of fixed images, the infinite fluidity and mobility of fabric itself. These gestures of progressive bodily concealment point to a disjunction at the heart of Clerambault's images. For it is not "only the fabric that interest him" (Tisseron 25), but rather the relations beyond reasonable measure of cloth to the bodies it covers.

Copjec has related the decay of aura brought about by techniques of mechanical reproduction (first described by Walter Benjamin) to the increasing claustrophobia of the social subject in nineteenth-century culture. In her discussion, Clerambault's photographs both reinscribe this distance (now between colonial observer and his subject) and fetishistically deny the loss of presence that distance implies.

Thus, like addiction, Clerambault's photographic fetishism substitutes fantasized images of presence for unidentified lost originals, in endless repetition. Like his kleptomaniacal subjects, Clerambault has substituted cloth for sexuality, investing the body's covering with an obsessive and illimitable need to render its infinite account. Mechanical reproduction is essential to this process, for, like addiction, it replaces the aura of a lost original, with a series of copies (like the addict's substances) through which the very possibility of originary loss decays.

Photography in this case becomes a screen, like the tissue with which Freud would have women cover their "genital deficiency." Photography creates a wall between the colonial observer and his object of observation, which, like the kleptomaniac's love of fabric, is then fetishized for itself alone.

... the feminine gaze that filters through the veil is a gaze of a particular kind: concentrated by the tiny orifice for the eye, this womanly gaze is a little like the eye of a camera, like the photographic lens that takes aim at everything. (Alloula 14)

In photographing the veil, Clerambault represented the fantasies of presence surrounding his own image-making process. Rather than signaling their own lack and inviting us to look behind the veil, Clerambault's images offer this obstacle to sight as fully present, endowing the veil with a gaze of its own. Like the fetishist, who responds to the image of difference (castration) with a

fantasized projection of sameness, Clerambault's photographs collapse the distance between colonial observer and his object into their own project of representation.

Presumably masculine bodies could also serve in this process, for castration anxiety is translated in these photographs into a problem of colonial legibility. At stake is the interposition of multiple levels of abstraction between observer and object.

Clerambault committed suicide in 1934, shooting himself while seated in front of a mirror. In a brief note, he accused himself of having recently stolen a painting. Depression ensuing from the cancellation of his courses, and his imperfect recovery from an eye operation (for cataracts) the previous year, may have been among his reasons. Such an ending was entirely consistent with a private life devoted primarily to visual addictions.

In a curious text, written during the last year of his life and published posthumously, he encouraged doctors and patients to perform and undergo the cataract operation, still in its experimental stages. It recounts his disturbances in vision, his visit to an eye specialist in Barcelona, the operation and his partial recovery of vision. "We hold our eyes at the disposition of any colleague who wishes to examine them," the text concludes ("Souvenirs" 83). This self-castration before the medical profession, offering up the organs of his vision for technical observation, performs the very act for which veil upon veil of images were only imperfectly prophylactic, and strangely prefigures the interest that later observers would take in his pathological sight.

Notes

1 A political analyst, speaking on the possible effect of the Los Angeles riots on the chances of female candidates in the 1992 elections (National Public Radio, 4 May 1992).

2 It is difficult to render Cixous's pun in English. "Stealing/flying is a woman's gesture, to steal/to fly in language, to make it steal/fly...."

3 On "Anna O.,"/Berthe Pappenheim, see Hunter, Jacobus, and Koestenbaum. On Pappenheim's life, see Edinger.

4 Irigaray and Kofman, in separate commentaries on this passage, emphasize the paradoxical combination of nature and artifice structuring feminine shame and relate it to the "veil" of denial which (according to Freud) the little boy throws over his first perception of the female genitals, a veil which the (adult) fetishist maintains (Irigaray, *Speculum* 115-17; Kofman 48-50).

5 Dubuisson's book was only one example of a growing medical discourse surrounding the epidemic. See Boissier and Lachaux, Lacassagne, Lasegue, Legrand du Saulle, Letulle, and others.

6 Williams uses this phrase to describe the French capital's prominence in the evolution of modern consumer culture (11).

7 O'Brien, while taking note of the unreliability of data in this area, cites an 1896 account in which "at the height of the reported epidemic, two department stores alone (the Bon Marche and the Louvre) were responsible for bringing over 1,000 individuals to court in a single year" (66). The incidence of unreported thefts was estimated at double that figure, while actual theft remains an incalculable element. (I am grateful to Margaret Cohen for this reference.)

8 All translations from medical texts are my own.

9 In her chapter on kleptomania in *Female Perversions*, Kaplan cites an American sociologist from the 1950s, who linked women's propensity to shoplift and their genital formation. "The related feminine fakery to women's sexual performance, suggesting that a woman's genital arrangements, her secretive inwardness, not only encouraged her to practice deceit but also made it fairly easy for her to do so. The way Pollak described the situation, the step from orgasm fakery to criminal fakery was virtually inevitable" (301).

10 Women (almost exclusively under the age of thirty) constituted a very small percentage of department store workers. French grands magasins were sex-segregated by departments (rayons), with women selling mostly pre-fabricated clothing (confections), coats, dresses, underwear, etc., and men handling the sale of bulk items (silk, lace, etc.) and smaller accoutrements such as gloves and umbrellas (Parent-Lardeur 53-66).

11 "Pour que le grand magasin fonctionne, il faut que la vendeuse soit une salariée qui accepte de mettre en jeu sa féminité dans son travail, tout en renonçant à une part de son destin de femme |In order for the department store to function, the saleswoman had to be a salaried employee who agreed to put her femininity into play in her work, while at the same time renouncing part of her feminine destiny~" (Parent-Lardeur 115).

12 Miller makes a similar point about the department store and consumer culture at large, without considering femininity as a special case. "Bourgeois institutions were expected to uphold the moral order, not threaten it, and yet this did not seem to be the rule in the case of the department store. Indeed, it no longer mattered whether one stole or not -- in the eyes of inspectors and employees all shoppers already possessed criminal-like status. All of which pointed to something still further: that the pathological frenzy to which some women were driven had become simply the seamier side of the new consumer society, where the old virtues of thrift and self-control were giving way to a culture of gratification" (205-06).

13 See note 14.

14 I have relied upon the recent reedition of an 1886 English translation of *Au Bonheur des dames*, modifying it in the interest of accuracy, or where an

implicit sexual meaning is suppressed. The first number after citations refers to the English translation, the second to the French edition I have used.

15 See also Schor's reading of *Au Bonheur des dames* as a gothic novel in the tradition of *Jane Eyre*. "A la fin du XIXe siècle le roman gothique sert à mettre en évidence l'extrême fragilité de la différence sexuelle, voire de la féminité qui ne s'avère être enfin de compte qu'un bien de consommation comme un autre, qu'on acquiert au grand magasin et qu'on peut à la limite rendre comme un habit inconfortable, mal ajusté |At the end of the nineteenth century the gothic novel makes the extreme fragility of sexual difference apparent, and even the extreme fragility of femininity, which finally turns out to be just a consumer good like any other, that is acquired at the department store and that could in extreme cases be returned, like an uncomfortable, ill-fitting piece of clothing~" ("Devant le château" 186).

16 Apter provides a useful summary of the ensemble of debates surrounding the theory of masquerade (90-98).

17 "A woman's thought is superficial, and touch is the most highly developed of the female senses.... Touch necessitates a limiting of the interest to superficialities; it is a vague effect of the whole and does not depend on definite details" (191).

18 Elaborating a theory of female fetishism through a reading of the novels of Sand, and linking the (female) fetishist's denial to Derridean undecidability through a concept of feminine "bisexuality," Schor writes: "... ultimately female travesty, in the sense of women dressing up as or impersonating other women, constitutes by far the most disruptive form of bisexuality; for, whereas there is a long, venerable tradition of naturalized intersexual travesty in fiction, drama and opera, the exchange of female identities, the blurring of difference within difference remains a largely marginal and unfamiliar phenomenon" ("Female Fetishism" 370).

I see the disruptive force of Clerambault's kleptomaniacs, their disarticulation of individuation and erotic blurrings of distinction between the subject and commodity as an extension in the culture of mass consumption of the literary phenomenon Schor describes.

19 The phrase is free translation of the title of Irigaray's essay, "Des marchandises entre elles," the conclusion of which is perhaps relevant here. "Exchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end ... Utopia? Perhaps. Unless this mode of exchange has undermined the order of commerce from the beginning ..." (*Speculum* 197). I do not mean to suggest "women's erotic passion for fabric" as a utopian sexuality, but rather to sketch the alternative theoretical paradigm it offers.

20 The figure, from Renard's medical thesis on Clerambault, is cited erroneously by later writers, including Copjec.

21 Renard never met Clerambault. She was assigned his biography as the topic of her medical thesis, which was submitted to the Faculte de Medecine de Paris on 23 Apr. 1942, in the midst of the German occupation of France. One wonders about the possible relation between this assigned act of medical hagiography, leading to the restoration of Clerambault's reputation, and the influence of the Nazi racial theory on the French medical faculty.

Works Cited

Alloula, Malek. *The Colonial Harem*. Translated by Myrna Godzich and Wlad Godzich. Intro. Barbara Harlow. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

Apter, Emily. *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken, 1969. 217-51.

Boissier, Francois, and George Lachaux. "Contribution a l'etude clinique de la kleptomanie." *Annales medico-psychologiques* Jan. 1894: 42-54.

Bowlby, Rachel. *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

Breuer, Josef, and Freud, Sigmund. *Studies on Hysteria*. 1896. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. Vol. 2. London: Hogarth, 1955. 24 vols. 1953-74.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Cixous, Helene, and Catherine Clement. *The Newly Born Woman*. 1975. Trans. Betsy Wing. Intro. Sandra M. Gilbert. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986.

Clerambault, Gaetan Gatian de. "Passion erotique des etoffes chez la femme." 1906-08. *Oeuvres Psychiatriques*. Paris: Frenesie, 1987. 683-720.

----- "Souvenirs d'un medecin opere de la cataracte." 1935. Papetti, et al. 71-83.

Copjec, Joan. "The Sartorial Superego." *October* 50 (1989): 56-95.

Dubuisson, Paul. *Les Voleuses des grands magasins*. Paris: Storck, 1893.

Edinger, Dora. *Berthe Pappenheim: Freud's Anna O*. Highland Park, IL: Congregation Solel, 1968.

Freud, Sigmund. "Femininity." 1933. *The Standard Edition*. Vol. 22. 112-35.

Hunter, Diane. "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism: The Case of Anna O." *Feminist Studies* 9 (1983): 464-88.

Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985. Trans. of *Speculum de l'autre femme*. Paris: Minuit, 1974.

----- . *This Sex Which Is Not One*. 1974. Trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

Jacobus, Mary. "Anna (Wh)O.'s Absences: Readings in Hysteria." *Reading Woman: Essays in Feminist Criticism*. New York: Columbia UP, 1986. 195-228.

Kaplan, Louise J. *Female Perversions: The Temptations of Emma Bovary*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Khemir, Mounira. "Clerambault ethnographe." *Tisseron* 45-60.

Koestenbaum, Wayne. "Privileging the Anus." *Double Talk: The Erotics of Male Literary Collaboration*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 17-42.

Kofman, Sarah. *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*. 1980. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

Kowinski, William. "The Mall of America." *New Times* 1 May 1978: 33-55.

Lacassagne, A. "Les Vols a l'etalage et dans les grands magasins." *Revue de l'hypnotisme et de la psychologie physiologique* Sept. 1896: 76-82.

Lacan, Jacques. "Propos sur la causalite psychique." *Ecrits*. Paris: Seuil, 1986. 151-93.

Lasegue, Charles. "Le vol aux etalages." *L'Union medicale* 23 Dec. 1879: 989-95.

Legrand du Saulle. *Les Hysteriques: Etat mental et etat physique, actes insolites, delictueux et criminels*. Paris: Bailleire, 1883.

Letulle, M. "Voleuses honetes." *Gazette medicale de Paris* 1 Oct. 1887: 469-71.

Miller, Michael B. *The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920*. Princeton: Princeton U, 1981.

O'Brien, Patricia. "Bourgeois Women and Theft." *Journal of Social History* 17 (1983): 65-77.

Parent-Lardeur, Françoise. *Les Demoiselles de magasin*. Paris: Ouvrieres, 1970.

Papetti, Yolande, Francoise Valier, Bernard de Freminville, and Serge Tisseron. *La Passion des etoffes chez un neuropsychiatre*. Paris: Solin, 1981.

Renard, Elisabeth. *Le Docteur Gaetan Gatian de Clerambault: Sa vie et son oeuvre (1872-1934)*. Paris: Francois, 1942.

Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as Masquerade." *Formations of Fantasy*. Ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Kaplan. London: Methuen, 1986. 35-44.

Ross, Kristin. Introduction. *Zola, Ladies' Paradise v-xxiii*.

Schor, Naomi. "Devant le chateau: femmes, marchandises et modernite dans Au Bonheur des dames." *Mimesis et semiosis*. Ed. Philippe Hamon and J.-Pierre Leduc-Adine. Paris: Nathan, 1992. 179-86.

----- . "Female Fetishism: The Case of George Sand." *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986. 363-72.

Tisseron, Serge. *Gaetan Gatian de Clerambault*. Paris: Les Empecheurs de Penser en Rond, 1990.

Weininger, Otto. *Sex and Character*. 1903. New York: Putnam, 1906.

Williams, Rosalind H. *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1982.

Zola, Emile. *Au Bonheur des dames*. 1883. Paris: Librairie Generale de France, 1984. Trans. as *The Ladies' Paradise*. Intro. Kristin Ross. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.

I wish to thank my colleagues at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women of Brown University, who responded to the first draft of this essay in the spring of 1992, and especially Elizabeth Weed, Lisa Cartwright, and Jennifer Terry. This research was supported by grants from the Pembroke Center and the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University.

Leslie Camhi has taught at New York University and has been a fellow at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women of Brown University and the Center for the Humanities of Wesleyan University. She writes frequently on feminism, psychoanalysis, literature, and visual culture. This essay is part of a book-length study of feminine sexual aberrance in late nineteenth-century culture.

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Camhi, Leslie. "Stealing femininity: department store kleptomania as sexual disorder." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1993, p. 26+. *Academic OneFile*,

<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/A14506253/AONE?u=jrycal5&sid=AONE&xid=4c60d399>. Accessed 24 June 2019.

Gale Document Number: GALE|A14506253