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Susan Hiner, *Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France*. Philadelphia and Oxford: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. viii + 281 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$47.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-8122-4259-1.

Review by Dorothy Kelly, Boston University.

Readers of nineteenth-century French novels have long noted the cashmere shawls that punctuate the texts, such as those that conflate Madame Arnoux and Rosanette in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, and the one so coveted by Lisbeth Fischer in *La Cousine Bette*. These shawls have usually been read as realist details that serve as objects of desire and link various characters and plot lines. Susan Hiner's *Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France* breaks open these seemingly mute and trivial objects—shawls, parasols, fans, handbags, and the marriage baskets that contain them—to reveal the rich social meanings they harbor in their historical context. Drawing on a variety of sources, from the popular *physiologies* and fashion press to canonical novels, she makes these objects expand like Proust's Japanese paper flowers into meaningful and suggestive signs.

Hiner argues that fashion accessories may seem tangential, as the word “accessory” would imply, but they actually function significantly in the study of cultural production, because they constructed, displayed, and sometimes contested the role of bourgeois and elite women in French modernity. Furthermore, a woman was herself an accessory to the bourgeois husband in his quest for success and status, and frequently these fashionable objects acted as symbols of the woman herself. To study these objects, Hiner analyzes the role of fashion in their popularity, drawing on the writings of Benjamin, Baudelaire, and current theoretical analyses of fashion. Her methodology is what one might generally call the archaeology of the cultural object, the investigation of its provenance, history, and role, and thus is broadly influenced by Benjamin, who incorporated several texts mentioning cashmere, including one on “cashmere fever,” in *The Arcades Project*. The structure of the book reflects its content: the presentation in the second chapter of the *corbeille de mariage*, a wedding “basket” packed with luxury items given by the groom to the bride-to-be, is followed by the unpacking of the *corbeille* contents item by item, chapter by chapter. The historical scope of the study spans the period from the July Monarchy through the Second Empire, with brief excursions into the Napoleonic era and the Belle Époque.

After a useful and informative prologue, the first chapter lays out the problem of social distinction that the fashion accessory was used to address. The post-Revolutionary social demarcations of class grew less clearly defined as the nineteenth century progressed into modernity; consequently dress and style took on much of the burden of displaying distinction. As Hiner shows, social differences were defined in spatial terms, symbolically and literally: the *monde* and the *demi-monde*, and the *quartier* in which one lived. They were also defined in moral terms of respectability and propriety: the *femme comme il faut* and the *femme comme il en faut*. The loss of the *grande dame*, the ancien régime's great lady, reflected the loss of guaranteed authenticity in the bloodlines of aristocracy, and thus distinction had to be defined through dress and comportment. As Hiner cleverly notes, the coat of arms gave way to the coat of

cashmere (p. 25). The luxury fashion accessory thus served to separate those who could afford such superfluity from those who could not.

Hiner goes on to analyze how Balzac, Dumas, the Goncourt brothers, and certain *physiologies* represented these constructions of distinction by means of a particular luxury item, such as a fancy feather or an authentic cashmere shawl, and disclosed at the same time the anxieties produced by the revelation of this constructed nature of identity. Even as these authors showed how lower class women attempted to imitate elegance and thus gain stature, their texts frequently managed anxieties about identity by showing how the imitation could not match the authentic article. For Balzac, as Hiner observes, the lower class woman showed her poorly made seams and thus her seamy side. However Hiner also remarks that both types of women were defined by their clothing and the way they wore it, in a sense women defined themselves with and against each other, and thus both identities rested on fragile bases. These nineteenth-century authors also at times represented the dangers of lower class women who imitated style and who might have lured males and destroyed fortunes: the authors thus in a sense gave a guide to hapless men, so that they might be able to read the signposts of style, authentic and fake.

The remaining chapters of the book each examine a particular accessory, the first being the *corbeille de mariage*, a gift that was given by the groom to his fiancée at the time of the signing of the marriage contract and that was worth between 5 and 10 percent of the value of the dowry. And what a strange gift this turned out to be. A piece of furniture and not really a basket, it was loaded with luxury items: cashmere shawls, laces, handkerchiefs, fans, gloves, purses, prayer books, and sewing bags. It was also packed with social meanings that linked together the odd bedfellows of respectability, luxury, virtue, and eroticism. Eroticism clearly had its links to marriage, and certain period texts brought out that eroticism in the wedding basket, such as Mallarmé's description of the ideal *corbeille de mariage* that linked soft female flesh covered by the soft cashmere shawl with the basket that contains precious jewels, themselves symbols for female sexuality. Many of its items served both to hide and reveal this female flesh and face, such as fans, shawls, and parasols, which are three of the other items studied by Hiner. Moreover, the items were meant to seduce the fiancée, just as their display on her person would itself become seductive. However the fiancée could not display too much desire for these objects lest she suggest a future threat to the man's fortune.

If the basket connoted the erotic, it paradoxically represented propriety and virtue as well. It conferred respectability on the woman as it gave her the fashion that constructed that respectability. The conflicted meaning of eroticism and respectability paralleled another lodged in the role of marriage itself which was at once a financial transaction and an idealized social institution. Several of the literary texts analyzed in this chapter brought out these contradictions in their plots. Duranty's novel, *Le Malheur d'Henriette Gérard*, told the story of a *corbeille de mariage* that was simply not enough of a "bribe" to make a young woman desire to marry an old man. Although this woman could not stop the wedding, she took revenge on her husband, threatening him with a symbolic porcelain *corbeille*, and ended up gaining his fortune for herself. Hiner's analysis of the *corbeille* in this novel expertly brings out the subtle rhetoric of violence in its description, the violence of the act of "selling" a young woman to an old man. Likewise, her analysis of Balzac's *Le Contrat de mariage* reveals the dark core of the *corbeille*, when a mother and daughter benefited from their negotiations surrounding it, gaining a fortune and giving away very little to the husband.

The third chapter deals with the cashmere shawl, an important item in the *corbeille*, and brings into view French colonizing practices in this valuable object from exotic lands. Historically a war souvenir brought back by Napoleon's soldiers, this women's fashion accessory inscribed

itself in the French colonialist project, and in a sense domesticated the exotic. Its wartime origin linked it as well to male power and conquest, as it sparked Western fantasies of feminine exoticism. The cashmere had to be legitimate, however, and thus the authenticity of the item reflected the authenticity of its owner's class. In this chapter, two important literary texts are analyzed: Balzac's *La Cousine Bette* and Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*. Balzac's novel linked Hulot's dishonest dealings in Algeria with less than virtuous feminine behavior in Paris, and this double-edged political and social plot was figured by the multivalent cashmere shawl. Likewise in Flaubert's novel, the shawl was linked to the circulation and substitution of women of different class and status, and more generally provided an allegory of the "shifting social landscape" of Paris (p. 105).

The fourth and fifth chapters deal with two other *corbeille* items that covered, yet revealed a woman: the parasol and the fan. The parasol's function was to shield the woman from the sun and to preserve her whiteness. It signified both domesticity and leisure, in that it acted as a kind of portable house or dome used by non-working women. Its protective function maintained woman in her pure domestic sphere even when she was out and about. These various meanings carried information about class, gender, and race. However, like the other objects in the *corbeille*, it could be also used by non-virtuous women. And like the other objects, it could stand for the woman herself: dainty and delicate, dressed in fabric like the woman, when closed it had an inner and hidden existence that could be opened and revealed. In addition to analyzing Octave Uzanne's curious fashion writings on the parasol, Hiner studies the uses of the *ombrelle* in a vaudeville play and several important novels, such as Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and *Éducation sentimentale*, Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée*, and Zola's *Nana*.

The other handheld accessory, the fan, actually had "body parts" that made visible its function as a symbol of the woman: it had a *pied*, a *tête*, and a *gorge*. The fan could bear conflicted meanings: a sign of luxury and leisure associated with ball-going, and at times a rare aesthetic object, it could also be mechanically reproduced. Associated with moral propriety, it could be used to seduce. Like other *corbeille* items, it hid and revealed, and in fact could express things that propriety prevented a woman from saying aloud. Through a reading of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Hiner brings out Emma's association of an amorous escapade, involving a fan at the ball at the Vaubyessard, with a fantasized past that Emma tried to realize in her own life. In Balzac's *Le Cousin Pons*, the fan purportedly painted by Watteau symbolized the loss of separation between aesthetic and commercial worlds, as well as between the masculine world of collecting and the feminine world of decoration. Its circulation in society, linked to the attempt to set up a marriage, made clear that the woman and the fan served as exchangeable commodities. The chapter ends with a brief discussion of the role of the fan in Zola and Proust.

The final chapter deals with the woman's purse and its various incarnations throughout the nineteenth century. It was a kind of an object *en abîme*, a commodity in which one put other commodities, a kind of miniature store, as Hiner so aptly observes. Again, as did the other objects in the *corbeille*, the purse hid and revealed. In this case, it hid a woman's secret possessions yet revealed that they were there by its very presence. Hiner presents an informative history of the purse, from "pockets" worn under the skirt, through the *bourse* in the *corbeille* that linked marriage to finance, through the small reticule with a cord, and the alms purse embroidered by ladies of the leisure class who used it to hold charitable contributions, to the *sac à ouvrage* that displayed at once one's needlework and social standing. Hiner explores the role of the *bourse* in two Balzac texts, *La Cousine Bette* and *La Bourse*, where the purse exposed once again the financial transactions involved in marriage. In Zola, these financial interests were completely laid bare in *Pot-Bouille* and *Au Bonheur des Dames*, in which the consumer pleasures associated with the purse were sexualized. However if the *corbeille* was a static object meant for display in the home, the purse was destined to go out with the woman, signifying a new female

autonomy and buying power. This double aspect of an object that accessorized woman, while at the same time calling that role into question, is the subject of the brief epilogue.

This book is a pleasure to read: extremely well-written, elegant, clear, fascinating, and witty. Hiner admirably weaves together disparate texts and illustrations into a coherent and cogent argument. Each chapter can be read in isolation; although because of this, one who reads through the entire book does come across some unavoidable repetitions. Hiner's arguments and explanations are convincing, although in a few places I have questions: why Emma's real life experience at the Vaubyessard ball would itself be nostalgic when it embodies for her in that present moment (and not in the past) the actual existence of the life she desires and works to realize; how the oyster shell and ironwork in *Le Cousin Pons* are linked to the ivory of his specific fan. These are, however, the only two questions I have after learning much from a book that will sit prominently on my reference shelf.

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