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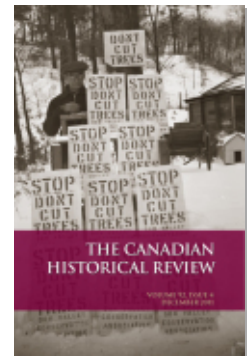
## Crazy for Bargains: Inventing the Irrational Female Shopper in Modernizing English Canada

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# Crazy for Bargains: Inventing the Irrational Female Shopper in Modernizing English Canada



**Abstract:** *Between the 1890s and 1930s, anglophone politicians, journalists, novelists, and other commentators living in western, central, and eastern Canada drew upon established connections among greed, luxury, hysteria, and femininity to describe women who went shopping as irrational. Their motivations for doing so included their desires to assuage feelings of guilt about increased abundance; articulate anger caused by spousal conflicts over money; assert the legitimacy of male authority; and assign blame for the decline of small communities' sustainability, the degradation of labour standards, and the erosion of independent shopkeeping. By calling upon stock stereotypes of femininity, and by repositioning them to fit the current capitalist moment, English-Canadian commentators constructed disempowering representations of women to alleviate their anxieties about what they perceived as the ills of modernization.*

**Keywords:** shopping, shopper, women, femininity, masculinity, consumption, gender, modernity, modernization, bargain hunting, bargains

**Résumé :** *Entre les années 1890 et les années 1930, politiciens, journalistes, romanciers et autres commentateurs anglophones vivant dans l'ouest, le centre ou l'est du Canada se sont inspirés des liens établis entre cupidité, luxe, hystérie et féminité pour qualifier d'irrationnelles les femmes allant magasiner. Parmi les motivations qui orientent leur action figurent leurs désirs d'apaiser un sentiment de culpabilité relativement à l'abondance croissante, d'articuler une colère causée par des conflits domestiques concernant l'argent, d'affirmer la légitimité de l'autorité masculine, et de désigner les responsables du déclin des petites collectivités, de la dégradation des normes du travail et de l'effritement du petit commerce indépendant. En faisant appel aux stéréotypes classiques de la féminité, reconfigurés afin qu'ils fussent ajustés au moment capitaliste d'alors, les commentateurs canadiens-anglais ont élaboré des représentations infantilissantes des femmes pour alléger leurs angoisses concernant ce qui leur semblait être les maux de la modernisation.*

**Mots clés :** magasinage, magasinieuse, femmes, féminité, masculinité, consommation, genre, modernité, modernisation, chasse aux aubaines, aubaines

The 'millions of women who are to be seen every day going from shop to shop,' said an article in the Winnipeg-based *Grain Growers' Guide* in 1916, were responsible for the 'huge cost of living.' As a result of their natural 'feminine extravagance,' women were unable to resist 'fritter[ing] away' their 'time and energy' out shopping. Not only did they waste money on purchases, so did they pay exorbitant 'car-fares,' wear out their 'shoe leather,' and tear and soil their clothes. The solution to such depravity, suggested the article, was male control. 'It is a weakness of ... men to encourage' women's materialism; husbands must 'instruct their wives and daughters how to be intelligently economical.'<sup>1</sup>

Claiming that spendthrift women caused inefficiencies, the *Grain Growers'* article echoed the concerns of dozens of writers throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Between the 1890s and 1930s, several anglophone Canadian commentators argued that shopping women were destroying the well-being of their husbands, families, communities, and nation. Women's weak natures and lusts for goods, they contended, were causing them to neglect their children, waste their husbands' earnings, and erode the self-sufficiency of their families, towns, and country. Such portrayals of shopping women demonstrated that a profound sense of social and moral unease accompanied the emergence of modern retailing and shopping practices. To assuage their unease, critics blamed women who went shopping for the perceived ills of modernizing consumer society.

When they contended that shopping women were responsible for moral decline, English-Canadian commentators revealed their adherence to a Western European discourse of corrupt feminine materialism that stretched back to the eighteenth century. In their studies of consumer culture in England and France during this period, Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace and Jennifer Jones find that when the bourgeoisie began incorporating more goods into their daily lives, critics responded by blaming women's irrational and lustful natures for the social decay they assumed would result from increased material abundance.<sup>2</sup> In the late nineteenth century, when the Western European and North

1 Theodore H. Price, 'The Mail Order Business,' *Grain Growers' Guide* (16 February 1916), 17. Reprinted from *The Outlook* of New York.

2 Jennifer Jones, 'Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Régime Paris,' in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, 25–53 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 1–10.

American *petit bourgeoisie*, working people, and rural people began displaying increased consumer desire, critics on both sides of the Atlantic stepped up the attack. New to the polemic, though, was the suggestion that the female shopping masses were becoming crazy for bargains. In their quests for 'sham finery,' as one Canadian critic put it in 1897, women lost control of their senses and morphed into dangerous shopping crowds. Lurking within such depictions was a fear that increased abundance would destabilize class hierarchies. Whereas previously the bourgeoisie had legitimized their prominence by purchasing and displaying consumer goods, now both middle- and lower-income people were participating in consumer culture.<sup>3</sup>

A sense of masculine persecution, too, pervaded the English-Canadian discourse of the 1890–1939 period. Prior to the 1870s, Canadian retailing and consumption had been characterized by bartering, trading, and purchasing in local markets.<sup>4</sup> During the late nineteenth century, however, a new form of retailing – the department store – emerged. With wide assortments of stock, generous return policies, commitment-free browsing, guaranteed low prices, and powerful mail order divisions, department stores quickly outpaced other retailers.<sup>5</sup> They had established themselves only in 1845, 1869, and 1871, respectively, but by the early twentieth century Morgan's in Montreal and Simpson's and Eaton's in Toronto had captured enough consumer dollars to become significant threats to independent shopkeepers. Since department stores bought in bulk, they were able to demand discounts from suppliers, and since suppliers depended on mass retailers' orders, they cut production costs, including wages. Department stores' low prices thus affected not only merchants but

- 3 Elaine Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store* (New York: Oxford, 1989), 42–62; Joseph Clark, 'The Barnums of Business,' *Saturday Night*, 24 Apr. 1897, 8; Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 15–52; Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1–58. For a detailed study of increased Canadian spending patterns, see David Monod, *Store Wars: Shopkeepers and the Culture of Mass Marketing, 1890–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 110–14.
- 4 Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel, with Cornelius Jaenen, *History of the Canadian Peoples: Beginnings to 1867*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1998), 332–5, 118; Beatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 113–36, 199–220.
- 5 Joy Santink, *Timothy Eaton and the Rise of His Department Store* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 159, 266.

craftspeople, who could not afford to sell goods at the prices set by mass retailers, and industrial labourers, who worked in the factories that made consumer goods. Many shoppers, however, prioritized low prices, convenient services, and quality merchandise over other considerations, and their purchasing decisions enabled three department stores in particular – Eaton's, Simpson's, and the Hudson's Bay Company – to dominate Canadian retail between 1890 and 1939. With mail order outlets and department stores in every province except British Columbia, Eaton's was particularly aggressive and was, according to one estimate, the eighth largest retailer in the world.<sup>6</sup>

Since arriving on the Canadian retailing scene, department stores had formed special relationships with female shoppers. Industrialization and urbanization had changed working-class women's duties by making it more difficult for them to grow produce and raise livestock. As well, since many men and women worked long hours away from home, and since children were absent as a result of labour or school, it became difficult to find time for sewing and cooking. Middle-class women had a different problem. When servants left their positions to take jobs in the industrial and service occupations, housewives had to tend to tasks performed formerly by employees. In response, working-class, petit bourgeois, and bourgeois wives all turned to the expanding world of retail, where they used their husbands' – and sometimes their own and their children's – wages to purchase affordable food, ready-to-wear clothing, and other goods. These activities, in turn, aided them in their efforts to make their homes comfortable, keep themselves and their family members dressed and fed, promote their own and families' social status and success, and express their own and their families' identities.<sup>7</sup> Since department stores offered among the best prices, selections, services, and policies in the dominion, it is

6 Dominion Bureau of Statistics, *Seventh Census of Canada, 1931, Volume X: Merchandising and Service Establishments – Part I, Retail Merchandise Trade* (Ottawa: J.O. Patenaude, 1931), xix–xx, lxxxiii; Santink, *Timothy Eaton*, 266; Statistics Canada, *Department Stores in Canada / Les Grands Magasins au Canada, 1923–1976* (Ottawa: Statistics Canada, 1979), 17.

7 Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993), chap. 5; Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Owl Books, 1999); Katrina Srigley, 'Clothing Stories: Consumption, Identity, and Desire in Depression-Era Toronto,' *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 82–104; Joan Sangster, 'Consuming Issues: Women on the Left, Political Protest, and the Organization of Homemakers, 1920–1960,' in *Framing Our Past: Canadian Women's History in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Sharon Anne Cook, Lorna R. McLean, and Kate O'Rourke, 240–7 (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's

unsurprising that many women patronized the big stores, both in person and through mail order. By 1932, women comprised 82 per cent of Canadian department stores' customers.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the range of factors behind women's decisions to shop at Eaton's, Simpson's, and other stores, critics of mass retail tended to chalk up department stores' success to an inherent gullibility, covetousness, and rebelliousness among female shoppers. Women who went shopping, they said, wilfully ignored the concerns of their husbands, communities, and nation; they were thus responsible for the financial difficulties of these groups. Yet, and at the same time, the sense of masculine persecution that pervaded references to the irrational female shopper between 1890 and 1939 also grew out of another circumstance particular to the period: conflicts over family finances. As standards of living increased, so did familial tensions over how much income was necessary for comfort and status, as well as over which family member should receive such income and how that income should be spent. Thus, although many working husbands had since the turn of the nineteenth century turned over their pay to their wives who then spent such earnings in the marketplace, by the early twentieth century husbands were demanding a larger say in how family income should be managed. Such tensions were especially severe during the Great Depression. As Lara Campbell shows with reference to working-class couples in Ontario, husbands sometimes accused their wives of spending their families' ever-shrinking earnings on seemingly unnecessary items. Indeed, the prevalence of the figure of the spendthrift wife during the 1930s demonstrates that when money became scarce, conflicts arising from men's and women's divergent financial interests became acute.<sup>9</sup>

Through its explorations of English-Canadian depictions of female shoppers, this article demonstrates that many male commentators tended to hold up the figure of the irrational shopping woman so as to maintain male authority during this period of rapid economic and

University Press, 2001); Louise Tilly and Joan Scott, *Women, Work, & Family* (London: Routledge, 1989), 147–213; Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (London: Berg, 2004), 101–40.

- 8 Donica Belisle, *Retail Nation: Department Stores and the Making of Modern Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011), chap. 5; 'Calgary Women Observe Home Economics Week,' 1933 news clipping, *Scrapbook: Home Economics Week*, 1–8 Apr. 1933, file 67, M1670, Alberta Home Economics Association, Glenbow Museum and Archives.

- 9 Lara Campbell, *Respectable Citizens: Gender, Family, and Unemployment in Ontario's Great Depression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 130.

social change. Its analyses are based on references to shopping made in magazines, newspapers, fiction, sermons, and other materials published in western, eastern, and central Canada between 1890 and 1939. These include the *Gateway* and the *Red and White*, which were the student newspapers of the University of Alberta and St Dunstan's University (Prince Edward Island), respectively; the daily *Red Deer News* of Red Deer, Alberta; the newsletter of a populist reform organization, the United Farmers of Alberta; the Winnipeg-based *Grain Growers' Guide*, which was an advocate for rural economic and social improvement; the *Bay Builder*, which was the monthly magazine of the Hudson's Bay Company in Winnipeg; Toronto's daily *Globe* newspaper; Toronto's weekly *Saturday Night*, which was a conservative literary and political magazine; *Chatelaine* of Toronto, which was a national women's monthly; the daily *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* newspaper of Montreal; and the *Quebec Daily Telegraph* of Quebec City. They also include fiction by prairie author Robert Stead and Ontario intellectual B.K. Sandwell, and speeches and letters by H.H. Stevens, a prominent member of Parliament from Vancouver for several years between 1911 and 1940. Together these materials provide a broad sample of views on female shoppers held by people of conservative, liberal, and populist backgrounds who had lived in British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Prince Edward Island. This sample, in turn, was derived from my own familiarity with publications from this period, as well as from keyword searches for *shopping*, *spending*, *consumer*, and *shopper* in print indices and online databases.<sup>10</sup>

#### DESTROYING FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND THE NATION

That they were irresponsible was the most common claim made about women who shopped. Commentators from a range of backgrounds suggested that when women went shopping, they endangered the security of husbands, children, wage earners, communities, and the

10 Such indices and databases include *Canadian Periodical Index, 1920–1937* (Ottawa: Canadian Library Association, 1988); Google News, 'Advanced News Archive Search,' [http://news.google.com/archivesearch/advanced\\_search](http://news.google.com/archivesearch/advanced_search); Grace Heggie and G.R. Adshead, *An Index to Saturday Night: The First Fifty Years, 1887–1937* (Toronto: Micromedia, 1987); Peter Mitchell, *An Index to Maclean's Magazine, 1914–1937* (Ottawa: Canadian Library Association, 1965); University of Alberta Libraries, 'Peel's Prairie Provinces,' <http://peel.library.ualberta.ca/index.html>; University of Prince Edward Island, 'St Dunstan's University *Red and White*,' <http://vre.upei.ca/uasc/>.

nation. Central to such arguments were anxieties about the dangers posed by mass production and distribution to more traditional ways of life. Echoing the nineteenth-century Parisian writers Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, who each portrayed the female shopper as 'a reckless egotist, prepared to deceive her husband' and 'ignore her children' so as to 'satisfy her cravings,' English-Canadian critics suggested that female department store patrons were sending their families and communities into depravity.<sup>11</sup>

An especially vehement attack on female department store customers appeared in Toronto's *Saturday Night*, a conservative weekly news and fiction periodical with ten thousand subscribers during this period. Between February and June 1897 the organ published a series called 'Barnums of Business,' aimed at curbing department stores' incursions into what the magazine saw as independent merchants' rightful markets. It was named after New York's most famous nineteenth-century showman, P.T. Barnum, who coined the phrase, 'There's a sucker born every minute.' Authored by Toronto printer and journalist Joseph Clark, the series suggested that budget-minded female shoppers caused male wage earners' and independent businessmen's ruin. Arguing that department stores' low prices drove down manufacturers' wages, destroyed local stores, and caused unemployment in the wholesaling trade, it asked, 'What does it profit a man that his wife can get bargains if he can no longer get work?' Indeed, 'There may be one bargain day in the week for the wife of the workingman, but every day in the year is bargain day for the owner of a departmental store when he buys the products of labor to sell over his counters.'<sup>12</sup>

Along with ruining working and business men's livelihoods, irresponsible female bargain hunters threatened their communities. One's local druggist was a community institution: one could 'rouse' him in the night for medicine, one could use his directory to 'find anyone's address,' and one could use his 'telephone.' Therefore, when 'you go to a departmental store to buy your perfumes, or soaps, or patent medicines a few cents cheaper ... you destroy the vitality of your own neighborhood.' Small towns, too, suffered. 'If you pay the local merchant ten dollars ... perhaps he pays it to the doctor for attendance, he to the druggist for drugs, he to the butcher for meat, he to the farmer for mutton ... but if you send it away ... then that dollar

11 Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market*, 35–6.

12 Robert Fulford, 'Introduction,' *A Saturday Night Scrapbook*, ed. Morris Wolfe (Toronto: New Press, 1973), xii; Wolfe, *Saturday Night Scrapbook*, 83; Joseph Clark, 'Departmental Stores,' *Saturday Night*, 27 Feb. 1897, 8.



bill may never again enter your community.' These passages' portrayals of local businessmen as responsible, hardworking, and honest – and therefore manly – suggests that department store owners were irresponsible, greedy, and underhanded. These passages also imply that all who patronize department stores are dishonourable and selfish. In contrast to such entitled men as 'the merchant who helps to keep up your schools and churches, your sidewalks and roads, [and] the men to whom you can appeal in an emergency to play the part of a neighbor,' department stores' patrons are those who irresponsibly seek bargains in such feminized goods as 'perfumes' and 'soaps.'<sup>13</sup>

Family members suffered too. According to Clark, 'The housewife used to decide that she needed certain things and that she could afford to buy them, and then she would set out to purchase them.' Lately, however, she had been holding herself 'in readiness to rush out shopping any morning to buy things that seem to be offered for sale cheap' and 'she never knows what she needs ... until she has read the bargain day advertisements.' As a result, 'there must be tons of sham finery in the homes of this city where square meals are not absolutely sure.' Clark is probably being rhetorical on this point, but his belief that bargain-hunting women are neglecting their families is clear. Harkening back to a time in which women supposedly made careful purchases and spent more time at home, Clark suggests that new modes of shopping threatened the healthy and happy patriarchal family. His phrase 'sham finery' further indicates he believed that low-priced furnishings and clothing, increasingly important to those who participated in Canada's growing consumer culture, were tacky and useless.<sup>14</sup>

For such commentators as Clark, mass retail unleashed women's materialistic desires and threatened not only independent shopkeepers' livelihoods, but also male wages and local sustainability. When women had limited access to temptation, they were content to stay home and look after their families, thus allowing men to manage broader economic affairs. Yet when mass retail tempted women out of their homes to squander money and time, women wreaked economic havoc, not only by upsetting their families' finances but also by destroying local male-owned businesses and by lowering employment standards. Clark's invective against department stores was hence aimed at curbing mass retail, but it also chastised women for interfering in the male world of

13 Clark, 'Departmental Stores,' 8.

14 Ibid., 3; Joseph Clark, 'The Barnums of Business,' *Saturday Night*, 24 Apr. 1897, 8.

business. On a broader level, it revealed that the late nineteenth-century increases in monopolistic forms of retailing, low-priced commodities, the practice of bargain hunting, and individual material possessions created anxiety for those who believed that independent shops, self-sustaining communities, ascetic ways of life, and male familial authority represented ideal modes of being.

Many commentators on shopping women in English Canada between 1890 and 1939 kept their comments secular. It is possible, however, that religious associations among femininity, greed, and vanity influenced commentators' portrayals. As is evidenced by the Old Testament figure of Eve, whose inability to resist the fruit of knowledge caused the downfall of humankind, the Judeo-Christian tradition has long linked desire to both sin and femininity. A 1914 report on the Young Men's Hasidic Association in the Montreal-based *Canadian Jewish Chronicle* demonstrates that this association remained strong into the twentieth century. The YMHA's drama club was going to perform *The Penalty of Pride*, stated the article; the play was about 'the effects that a woman's false pride and extravagance can have on a husband' and 'how, through ambition to enter society at any cost, a woman unknowingly forces her husband to lead a double life, and to become a defaulter for her sake.' Echoing Clark's suggestion that women's greed hurts her family, the *Chronicle's* description of the YMHA's play takes the critique one step further, arguing that women's materialism forces husbands into ruin. The lesson of the play, according to the *Chronicle*, was the Bible's Tenth Commandment: 'Thou shalt not covet.'<sup>15</sup> For some Jewish residents of 1914 Montreal, then, the ancient association of women with the sins of pride and desire had resonance in modern times. It was women, not men, who desired and purchased material possessions, and they did so because they wanted to advance their social standing. *The Penalty of Pride* and the *Chronicle's* commentary articulate a moral discomfort with the expansion of living standards and shopping behaviours and demonstrate that commentators drew upon religious connections among vanity, desire, and femininity to suggest that women were causing social decline.

Religious critiques of spendthrift women also appeared in Atlantic Canada. In 1929 the Christmas issue of the student newspaper of St. Dunstan's University on Prince Edward Island offered a polemic by student John Connolly. 'Jesus teaches us to eschew the materialism of the world,' he wrote, but 'this lesson of His humble birth is too often forgotten' during the 'holy season.' Rather than 'honoring' the

15 'The Penalty of Pride,' *Canadian Jewish Chronicle*, 9 Jan. 1914, 15.

'Infant Jesus' and aiding 'the poor and helpless,' 'men are lost in money-making' and 'women in an orgy of shopping and spending.' Connolly's contrasting of Christ's humility with year-end celebrations of abundance was part of an ongoing Protestant effort to supplant older traditions of autumnal carousing and indulgence with newer ones of charity and sobriety. Yet it was also a condemnation of female shoppers. By singling out male money earning and female money spending as the causes of degradation, Connolly's article indicates that the male breadwinner/female consumer family model was entrenched in PEI by the end of the 1920s. It also reveals, through its use of the phrase 'orgy of shopping,' that some thinkers ascribed to women's shopping behaviour the same traits they did to sexual revelry. Indeed since Judeo-Christian theorists had long portrayed women as greedy and base, it might have been difficult for Connolly to interpret women's quests for goods as anything but the enactment of their own animalistic desires.<sup>16</sup>

With the exception of the *Chronicle* and Connolly pieces, allusions to religion were rare in English-Canadian portrayals of shopping women. Connections among femininity, vanity, and selfishness, however, were not. Throughout this period, comedy featuring beleaguered husbands of spendthrift wives was a staple in the anglophone press. 'My dear, I will have to ask you to give me a little money to do some necessary spring shopping. I haven't a thing fit to wear,' said a wife to her husband in a joke that appeared in 1907 in the *Red Deer Times*. 'All right, my dear,' he answered. 'Just wait a few moments until I run downtown and put a mortgage on the house.' Turning on the theme that women's material desires were limitless, this joke suggests that wifely greed jeopardizes husbands' solvency. Jokes printed in the newsletter of the United Farmers of Alberta offered similar messages. 'Dad, is \$5 much money?' a son asks his father in a 1929 piece. 'That depends,' the father replies. 'When I earn it, it is a lot of money, but when your mother goes shopping with it, it is nothing.'<sup>17</sup>

Comedy about beleaguered husbands and spendthrift wives demonstrates that older associations between femininity and materialism made their way into twentieth-century commentary upon shopping women. It also reveals that in modernizing Canada, disagreements frequently

16 John Connolly, 'Editorial,' *St Dunstan's Red and White*, Dec. 1929, 1-2.

17 'On the Trail,' *Saturday Night*, 27 Feb. 1897, 8; 'He Knew Her Limit,' *Red Deer News*, 3 July 1907, 2; 'Is Mr Einstein in the House?' *United Farmers of Alberta*, 15 Oct. 1929, 6.

arose between husbands and wives regarding the appropriate disbursement of earnings. As Keith Walden and Katrina Srigley have separately argued, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries possessions became increasingly important to many English Canadians' comfort, status, and sense of success.<sup>18</sup> In response, Canadian female homemakers became responsible for procuring the goods and services necessary for their families' well being.<sup>19</sup> Yet, and as the 1907 and 1929 jokes make clear, some commentators had difficulty legitimizing women's labour and choices involved in shopping. Rather than granting consideration to the pressures, needs, and desires that motivated women's spending decisions, they characterized women's consumption as frivolous.

If, according to commentators, shopping women could threaten husbands' and families' financial health, so could they endanger the nation's. Worried about the effects of declining international trade, and hoping to drum up support for the Conservatives during the 1930 federal election, Conservative Minister of Trade and Commerce H.H. Stevens embarked on a wide-ranging campaign to promote domestic industry. Since being elected to the federal government in 1911, Stevens had been influential both in and out of Parliament, leading the 1926 corruption investigation into Mackenzie King's Liberal government that eventually ousted the government. As part of his 1930 election campaign, Stevens published in *Saturday Night* a letter addressed to 'Women, Everywhere in Canada.' Titled 'Protect Your Breadwinner's Job!' it suggested that homemakers were responsible for the economic health of the nation. It also asserted that when Canadian women purchased foreign products, they were hurting their nation's and their husbands' prosperity. Reiterating the accusations of irresponsibility and selfishness that Joseph Clark, writing in the same periodical, had levelled against women thirty-four years earlier, Stevens asked female readers to imagine if 'next week your house allowance were suddenly ... shut off.' Whether one's breadwinner was a 'professional man,' 'merchant,' 'farmer,' or 'employee,' his job depended upon the manufacture of Canadian goods. Therefore, if such goods 'should fail to find a buyer, for no better reason perhaps than that you and other women thoughtlessly allow yourselves to be sold articles that have

18 Sangster, 'Consuming Issues,' 240-7; Srigley, 'Clothing Stories,' 82-104; Keith Walden, *Becoming Modern in Toronto: The Toronto Industrial Exhibition and the Shaping of a Late Victorian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 86.

19 Belisle, *Retail Nation*, chap. 5.

been imported,' they would lose their incomes. Through such accusations, Stevens played upon stereotypes of frivolous female buyers and suggested that the economic depression was caused by irresponsible women. Despite the economic hardships both men and women were experiencing during the thirties, critics' assumptions of feminine extravagance remained strong.<sup>20</sup>

Four years later, Stevens again turned to the figure of the self-centred female purchaser. After convincing Prime Minister Bennett to launch a royal commission on 'price spreading and mass buying,' a commission that Stevens himself chaired, he set about investigating the difference between the costs of commodity manufacturing and retail prices. Aimed at exposing profiteering, the commission attracted widespread interest. Stevens himself worked hard on the commission's behalf, offering critical commentary on the monopolistic tactics of department stores. In such speeches, he sometimes invoked stereotypes of irresponsible female shoppers. At an address at Toronto's Trinity Church in June 1934, for example, he asked 'all earnest and honest church women' to 'cease buying the products of sweatshops' so that 'women and girls' would no longer be 'forced to work under conditions that ought to shame any self-respecting people.' Juxtaposing church women's consumption with working environments that would 'come under the scathing condemnation of the Man of Nazareth,' Stevens implied that it was hypocritical and selfish for religious women to support both sweatshops and Christianity.<sup>21</sup>

Stevens's critique found receptive audiences. In 1935 the Toronto-based magazine *Chatelaine*, Canada's premiere women's periodical with over 57,000 subscribers, ran a condescending piece titled 'Two Sides to a Bargain,' by Editorial Director H. Napier Moore. Moore, also editor of Canada's major news monthly, *Maclean's*, had just read the commission's report. Since it was over '500 pages' and had no 'love interest,' he said, *Chatelaine's* subscribers 'wouldn't want to read it.' Yet because Canadian women 'depend ... upon somebody's earnings' and purchase most household requirements, it 'affects' readers 'personally.' It affected the 'chronic bargain-hunter still more, because you are ... responsible for the fact that a lot of working women are suffering from malnutrition.' Moore suggested that 'absolute paternalism,' by

20 H.H. Stevens to 'Women, Everywhere in Canada,' 11 Oct. 1930, qtd in Morris Wolfe, ed., *A Saturday Night Scrapbook* (Toronto: New Press, 1973), 90.

21 Monod, *Store Wars*, 305, 316; H.H. Stevens, qtd in Ruth Frager, 'Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Eaton Strikes of 1912 and 1934,' in *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women's History*, ed. Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 208.

which he meant strict male guidance, could help consumers make responsible buying choices; he also maintained that before they rush into their next 'buying stampede,' the 'womenfolk of this country' should 'ask themselves at what cost to others they are getting the so-called bargain.' Portraying Canadian women as preferring bargains over fair working conditions, Moore suggested that male supervision was the best way of ensuring that women made wise purchases. Playing upon themes offered by Clark and Stevens, Moore affirmed the belief that bargain-hunting women were threats to both male and national viability. He also articulated what Clark, Stevens, and other commentators only implied: that men needed to rein in female shoppers.<sup>22</sup>

#### FOOLS OF THE MARKETPLACE

If some commentators portrayed female shoppers as selfish and dangerous, others represented them as dim-witted. Female consumers' actions, critics suggested, were influenced more by their emotions than by their intellects. Reinforcing broader assumptions about feminine emotionalism and passivity, English-Canadian commentators implied that women's ability to reason was overwhelmed by bargain counters, sales pitches, and attractive goods. They did not go shopping and make purchases because they had decided to do so, but because they had been tricked.

Critics of mass retail were among the first to portray shopping women this way. In his attempt to understand why Eaton's and Simpson's had become so influential, Clark suggested in 'Barnums' that department stores' success arose from customers' gullibility. Department stores had all the 'Features of a Circus and the Principles of a Lottery,' he said. Unlike 'honest' independent shops, Eaton's and Simpson's offered 'the music of steam-organs,' 'the pleasure of walking under "thousand dollar arches of flower,"' and 'other vulgar ostensions.' Both men and women patronized the big stores, but women were especially susceptible to such 'Punch and Judy' shows. One of his columns included a fake advertisement for 'Ketchem, Skinem, and Cookem's Mammoth Department Store,' which lampooned department stores' grandiosity. The ad proclaimed, 'The ladies – bless 'em – are our game. It if wasn't for them we couldn't make the thing work at all. Men are not so easily caught, but the women just fall into our trap by the thousand.' Another week Clark quoted an advertising

22 H. Napier Moore, 'Two Sides to a Bargain,' *Chatelaine*, June 1935, 88.

journal named *Brains*, which urged readers to 'listen to women when they read ads or talk about bargains, and note how lovingly ... they dwell upon' the words, 'reduced from.' When women go shopping they 'buy on account of the reduction' in price, 'not because they really need anything of that kind.' Further illustrating Clark's gendering of gullibility were anecdotes meant to instruct readers in department stores' trickery. A husband in a small town, he noted, bought his wife a three-dollar Bible from a local store. Believing she could get a better one from a Toronto department store, she returned the local Bible and bought one through a catalogue. To her surprise, the department store sent her the same Bible, but charged six dollars for it.<sup>23</sup>

As early as the eighteenth century, commentators had been suggesting that retailers tricked women. Stated English writer Bernard de Mandeville in 1723, the merchant 'makes [the female shopper] swallow very contentedly the substance of everything he tells her.'<sup>24</sup> Evidence from English-Canadian publications shows that assumptions of retailers' mastery over women remained alive well into the twentieth century. In 1904, Toronto journalist T.M. Humble blamed Eaton's and Simpson's for gobbling up business that formerly went to 'stores dealing in dry goods, groceries, crockery, furniture and fancy goods.' They did so by advertising loss leaders, or goods priced below cost. As one department manager told the writer, 'That is a molasses trap spread out to catch flies. People will flock where they think they are buying the cheapest and we make it up on other lines.' The manager did not indicate the gender of such 'flies' but Humble did. He included the manager's statement in his article, he wrote, 'with the hope that it may arrest the eye of certain women who ... visit these stores.'<sup>25</sup>

Much of the anglophone Canadian commentary featuring foolish female shoppers appeared in critiques of mass retail, but ignorant female customers also arose in other publications. Manitoba author Robert Stead's bestselling novel *The Bail Jumper* (1914) portrayed independent merchants as eager to trick women. Store owner Mr Gardiner, later revealed as the book's villain, regularly duped his female patrons. 'Tell a man, or better still, a woman,' he said, 'that you are selling a two dollar article for a dollar, and she will fight her way to the counter;

23 Clark, 'Barnums of Business,' 8; Clark, 'Departmental Stores,' 3; Joseph Clark, 'Ketchem, Skinem, and Cookem's,' *Saturday Night*, 27 Feb. 1897, 3.

24 Bernard de Mandeville, qtd in Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 87.

25 T.M. Humble, 'How They "Catch Flies": Seductive Methods Pursued by Departmental Stores,' article in a Toronto newspaper, ca. 1904, file 664, OOS54, series 162, T. Eaton Papers, Archives of Ontario; 'Merchants Pleased,' *Vancouver Sun*, 20 Nov. 1936, 2.

but tell her the truth, that you are selling an article worth a dollar for a dollar, and she will pass your store in search of fictions more to her liking.' Gardiner had his patter down pat, appealing to 'the lady's instinct for flattery.' In conversation with customer Mrs Mandle he described his eight-cent line of cotton as 'a regular ten-cent line' that he normally did not discount, but 'with [a] customer like you hard and fast rules don't always apply.' So pleased was Mandle that she purchased eight yards of cotton more than she originally desired. This passage demonstrates Stead's distaste for puffery, but it also reveals his assumption that women are susceptible to retail's tricks. Indeed Mandel's husband had no interest in shopping, wishing only to obtain some chewing tobacco, and letting his wife 'fight' everything 'out' with Gardiner.<sup>26</sup>

As a result of women's inability to resist bargains, sales pitches, and attractive merchandise, they often spent more time than necessary out shopping. This, at least, is what commentators often stated. One of the many jokes about female consumers offered by the *Red Deer News* was about a woman in a toy department who had examined 'rabbits, monkeys, jacks-in-the-box, jumping jacks, trains, velocipedes,' and more, but 'still she could not make up her mind.' At the rate she was going, noted the salesclerk, the nephew for whom she was buying a present will have 'outgrown all these toys.' In 1923, the *Quebec Daily Telegraph* of Quebec City offered a similar piece. 'Excuse me, madam, but are you shopping here?', says a clerk to a 'woman who has looked over about everything without buying.' After the woman replies, 'Certainly, what do you think I'm doing?', the clerk responds, 'I thought perhaps you might be taking an inventory.'<sup>27</sup>

Jokes about indecisive shoppers were seemingly harmless, but they did confirm suspicions that female customers were impressionable and inefficient. Their appearance in such periodicals as the *Red Deer News* and the *Quebec Daily Telegraph*, moreover, suggests that publishers believed they would appeal to broad readerships. At the same time, and as the case of anti-retail rhetoric reveals, stereotypes of foolish female shoppers were also employed to support specific polemics. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a distaste arose among Western intellectuals toward artworks made and distributed through industrial, capitalist means. The profit motive pre-empted whatever creative integrity the product might have once held, and the

26 'Evolutionary Shopping,' *Red Deer News*, 8 May 1906, 2; Robert Stead, *The Bail Jumper* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1914), 36, 37, 46.

27 'Evolutionary Shopping,' 2; untitled joke, *Quebec Daily Telegraph*, 9 Feb. 1923, 9.



supposedly passive consumption of such products by the 'masses' diluted the product's distinctiveness. Gender was central to such criticism. Notes Andreas Huyssen in his discussion of late nineteenth-century European modernism, 'woman' is always 'positioned as reader of inferior literature – subjective, emotional, and passive – while man ... emerged as writer of genuine, authentic literature – objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means.'<sup>28</sup>

English-Canadian critics shared in this association of femininity with mass commodity culture. Some of them also took this relationship a step further, suggesting not only that women were unable to recognize aesthetic value, but neither were they able to appreciate any kind of art at all. B.K. Sandwell, a leading figure in the interwar anglophone movement to develop a non-commodified Canadian culture, proposed in his 1925 short story 'December Afternoon in a Book Store' that women's materialism, combined with their intellectual inferiority, rendered them incapable of understanding real literature. Consisting of a female customer's one-sided conversation with other female shoppers and a male bookseller, 'December Afternoon' implies that housewives' naiveté, together with their obsession with home decorating, was exasperating for learned men. Seeing a friend in the store, the shopper asks if she could help her find a novel for her husband. 'I always put a book on top of his cigars and neckties and things,' she says. She confides that the bookseller, Mr Shelfs, usually recommends 'dreadful' books, such as ones by American realist George Cable, 'who used to write nicely about Louisiana,' but has now 'gone quite off his head.' She then rejects Mr Shelfs's suggestion that she purchase Walter Page's war diaries. She also dismisses a sports book because it is red, a colour she does not like. At the end of the story, she spots some 'lovely book rests,' which are 'just about the color to go with our new curtains.' Concluding that Jim has 'at least a dozen books' and does not need any more, she asks Mr Shelfs to put aside the rests so she could 'bring in a sample of the curtains and make quite perfectly sure' they match.<sup>29</sup>

Sandwell's withering portrayal of married women in 'December Afternoon' illuminates the deep investment that some critics made in the masculinity of modernism. Setting up the female shopper as emblem of triviality and the male bookseller as defender of integrity,

28 Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Post-modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 46.

29 B.K. Sandwell, 'December Afternoon in a Book Store,' reproduced in 'Professor Sandwell Writes about Christmas Shopping,' *Gateway*, 17 Dec. 1925, 7.

the piece implies that true, noble art is threatened by the feminized forces of consumption. As well, and as in other depictions of foolish female shoppers circulating during this period, this story suggests that female buyers flit about, make impulsive decisions, and buy worthless goods. 'December Afternoon' furthermore exemplifies the superior tone many adopted when describing female shoppers. The protagonist of the piece does not understand weighty writing, but the reader, it is assumed, does. Sandwell invites his audience to enjoy a moment of smugness, one that relishes its insider knowledge and encourages condescending views toward women.

#### SHOPPING MANIACS

Commentators who invoked the stereotype of the frivolous female shopper assigned her a number of characteristics, but central to each was the belief that women were irrational. It was women's lack of reason that led them to make unwise purchases, just as it was their inability to think clearly that caused them to fall prey to the seductions of the marketplace. Therefore, just as many commentators projected the Judeo-Christian sins of greed and pride onto women, so did many draw upon contemporary assumptions of women's weak intellects. According to late nineteenth-century theorist Herbert Spencer, for example, the energy required by women's reproductive systems sapped their brains, causing them to become 'heavily handicapped, even developmentally arrested, in intellectual competition.'<sup>30</sup> So feeble were women's minds, in fact, that they were constantly at risk of letting their ids overcome their egos. This loss of control could result in 'hysterical fits,' as Wendy Mitchinson finds in her study of nineteenth-century Canadian psychiatric texts.<sup>31</sup>

In the early twentieth-century United States, merchants were unable to perceive the female customer as rational and economical. Instead they saw her, as Meg Jacobs states, as a 'shopper who easily fell prey to fake deals, bought discounted merchandise in a state of near delirium, and presented a danger to herself and to society.'<sup>32</sup> Canadian commentators offered similar observations. In his 'Barnum's' column, Joseph

30 Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 122.

31 Wendy Mitchinson, *The Nature of Their Bodies: Women and Their Doctors in Victorian Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 282.

32 Meg Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics: Economic Citizenship in 20th-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 16.

Clark suggests that department stores promoted an atmosphere of frenzy. Their displays are 'in gorgeous and abundant disorder, one thing priced away up and the next thing priced away down.' Within this chaotic world, and accompanied by 'the din of steam-organs,' the 'half-made multitude tries to appear sane and to buy shrewdly,' all the while 'squeezing, crushing, [and] clutching at the things that others are clutching at.' Clark does not specify here that the customers he is describing are women, but the next sentence articulates his gendered imaginings. When they arrive home, shoppers pretend to 'be satisfied' because it 'wouldn't do for a woman to admit that she lost her head and misspent her money.'<sup>33</sup>

Clark's descriptions indicated a familiarity with international critiques of mass retail. Research on American and French department stores reveals that critics often associated their interiors with disorder, temptation, and immorality. So attractive were their displays and so low were their prices that women who entered them lost control of their intellects and individualities, morphing into an undifferentiated mass of dangerous desires. For French writers especially, department stores' effects threatened the bourgeois order. Crazed female bargain hunters, they asserted, represented the 'loss of spiritual values,' the 'degeneration of Parisian taste,' the decline of 'social democracy,' and the decay of 'individualism.'<sup>34</sup> Drawing upon stereotypes of hysterical women, commentators expressed their fears about various aspects of modernity, even while they shifted the blame for such fears onto women.

Clark was not the only Canadian to draw connections between hysteria and bargain hunting. Around the same time in which 'Barnum's' appeared, articles for the *Dry Goods Review*, a national publication sympathetic to small merchants, offered similar depictions. Over the last ten years, the periodical claimed in 1897, 'there has been a perfect frenzy . . . for cheap goods.' This craze 'has taken almost entire possession of the female sex.' Two years later it offered a variation on this theme, suggesting that female bargain hunters were not out of control but rather unnaturally self contained. The modern shopper, it said, was a 'gambler' whose 'speculations' caused to 'prowl,' animal-like, 'around the stores.'<sup>35</sup> As these passages indicate, the *Dry Goods Review* was just as reluctant as Clark to take female shoppers' preferences for low prices seriously. Rather than acknowledging the seemingly logical

33 Clark, 'Departmental Stores,' 8; Jacobs, *Pocketbook Politics*, 16.

34 Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market*, 56.

35 *Dry Goods Review*, qtd in Monod, *Store Wars*, 234.

choices that women made when they purchased affordable products, the *Dry Goods Review* characterized bargain hunting women as deviant.

Shopping women were also maniacal. In her study of shoplifting in nineteenth-century England, Whitlock finds that the era's 'feminization of madness' had 'forged ... links between women' and what had become known as 'the thieving mania.' Accounts of female shoplifters in the English-Canadian press indicate that such beliefs had migrated to twentieth-century Canada. Whereas most newspaper coverage of stealing provided few details other than the name of the person who had been arrested, one notice published in the *Toronto Globe* in 1900 said that after Mrs Lettie Robinson of 105 Logan Avenue was taken to a police station after being discovered hiding 'goods under her clothes' in Simpson's department store, she 'went into violent hysterics.'<sup>36</sup> The *Globe* did not apply the term *kleptomaniac* to Mrs Robinson, but its use of the term 'hysterics' drew upon medical terminology. During the nineteenth century, French, English, and American physicians had believed that a person could be sane in one realm of life but manic in another. They invented manias, including kleptomania, to explain behaviour exhibited by otherwise sane people who occasionally transgressed 'conventional morality.' Some critics are now hesitant to apply the term *kleptomaniac* to shoplifters, but English-Canadian experts did confirm this condition's existence until at least until the 1930s. In his 1935 interview with the *Globe* about kleptomania, Dr Clarence B. Farrar, medical superintendent of the Toronto Psychiatric Hospital, said, 'Some [women] steal because of improper home training; some steal because of lack of will-power; others are mentally immature or underdeveloped, or not entirely responsible for their actions.' The newspaper noted that, although few of the prisoners 'referred to the Psychiatric Hospital ... when caught shop-lifting are totally irresponsible,' the affluent woman who stole the cheap 'bauble' was the most likely candidate for the kleptomaniac designation.<sup>37</sup>

When a 1935 issue of the staff magazine of the Hudson's Bay Company's department store in Winnipeg published a cartoon depicting a store's entrance just before it opens for a 'Great Sale,' English-Canadian discursive connections among femininity, hysteria, and shopping were firmly in place (figure 1). In the illustration's foreground, Mr Frayer is

36 'The Shoplifting Craze,' *Globe*, 2 May 1900, 14; Tammy Whitlock, 'Gender, Medicine, and Consumer Culture in Victoria England: Creating the Kleptomaniac,' *Albion* 31, no. 2 (Autumn 1999): 437.

37 Abelson, *When Ladies Go A-Thieving*, 183; 'Note to Shoppers: Store Detectives Hard to Recognize,' *Globe*, 18 Dec. 1935, 11.



FIGURE 1 D.R. Leslie, 'Great Sale,' *Bay Builder*, May 1935), 4.  
 Reproduced with permission from the Hudson's Bay Company Archives,  
 Archives of Manitoba.

wearing a protective rubber suit and is assuming a battle-like posture. Behind the store's doors await a mass of frenzied women, whose body language – including bulging eyes and narrowed eyebrows – indicate they are about to rip the store apart. The humour of this piece lies in the assumption that women are crazy for bargains. When in the proximity of marked-down goods, they lose their inhibitions and their identities, becoming a dangerous crowd. In keeping with broader notions of male persecution caused by female greed for goods, the cartoon affirms the suspicion that women's uncontrollable desires threaten male authority and efficiency. It also exposes the feminine greed, baseness, and degradation that critics believed to be at the heart of consumer culture.

#### RESPONDING TO THE STEREOTYPES

Images of female shoppers as irresponsible and irrational may have infused English-Canadian print media between 1880 and 1939, but

they were not the only depictions. A minority of voices, all of them women's, challenged the stereotype of the irrational shopping woman. Forthcoming research will explore Canadian women's consumer activism in more detail.<sup>38</sup> Here, however, it is important to note that during this period of consumer capitalist expansion, some female commentators attempted to understand and to celebrate women's shopping decisions and experiences.

In 1911 and 1922, respectively, the *Grain Growers' Guide* and *Saturday Night* printed articles that, at first glance, supported the assumption that female shoppers were irrational. The *Grain Growers'* selection, called 'The Shoppers' Philosophy,' offered a light-hearted look at women's supposed inabilities to resist sales. Consisting of a conversation between a male onlooker and a group of women, the observer asks the women their destination. A bargain sale, they reply. 'We'll be mauled and pushed and stabbed, / Puffs all torn and feathers grabbed; / Tho' we're battered in the strife, / Glad are we to 'scape with life.' The trouble was worth it, though, for it would 'be a heinous sin / Not to take these bargains in.' The *Saturday Night* piece, titled 'Christmas Shopping' and authored by 'Luce,' was a sketch about a 'bachelor' in a department store, who was looking for a Christmas gift for his secretary. The store's walls rang with a 'babel of voices,' all of them belonging to the women who made up the shop's 'mauling mob' of 'frantic shoppers,' he said. 'Women rushed at me from every direction, bumped into me, glared at me and sheered off again.'<sup>39</sup>

'The Shoppers' Philosophy' and 'Christmas Shopping' turned on common stereotypes of shopping women, but they did so in ways that celebrated women's consumer knowledges. In both pieces, shopping is a skill, one that men's simplicity prevents them from understanding. Indeed the latter sketch closes by poking fun at men's cluelessness. The main character ends up buying a hat, which he describes as 'velvet, or sateen, or something like that, with ribbon or feather trimmings ... The color is mauve, or maybe pink, or perhaps sea-green.' This passage affirms male commentators' arguments that men do not care for commodities, but rather than portraying this aloofness positively, Luce suggested that it betrayed unrefinement. This piece thus challenged

38 This research will culminate in a monograph called 'Buying Citizenship: Women and Consumer Activism in Modernizing Canada.'

39 'The Shoppers' Philosophy,' in 'Around the Fireside,' *Grain Growers' Guide*, 21 June 1911, 21; Luce, 'Christmas Shopping,' *Saturday Night*, 16 Dec. 1922, 5.

the view that spendthrift wives were frivolous; it also implied that women were better financial managers than were men.<sup>40</sup>

In 1929 writer Margaret Butcher affirmed the insinuation that shopping was a desirable talent. Her *Saturday Night* article, 'The Art of Shopping, If You Know What I Mean' confronts those who castigate female shoppers. 'There are certain strong-minded people who will tell you that Right Shopping is merely a matter of knowing exactly what you want and seeing that you get it.' According to Butcher, however, most women ignore this advice, not because they are obtuse, but because they understand the real nature of shopping. 'A truly artistic shopper,' she says, 'knows how to make the most modest [clothing] purchase ... thrilling .... She will linger over pale blue for the sheer pleasure of deciding on apricot and eventually buying eau-de-nil. She tells herself – and the saleswoman – that she positively cannot give more than four dollars, thereby enhancing the delight of spending the fourteen she has all ready in her purse. A good saleswoman gets the idea very quickly and the fun ... is fast and furious.' 'It is this ancient and amiable ruse,' she continues, 'that has led men to decide that women do not know their own minds.'<sup>41</sup> Echoing the arguments made in 'Shoppers' Philosophy' and 'Christmas Shopping' that female buyers were connoisseurs, Butcher here defends the dignity of shopping women.

Another, much different attack came from the domestic science movement. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the National Council of Women of Canada, the Federated Women's Institutes, and other women's organizations promoted what became known as home economics. Arguing that homemaking should be made more efficient, this movement emerged from a maternalist push to legitimize and defend mothers' and wives' interests.<sup>42</sup> As part of this imperative, supporters argued that since consumer goods were integral to Canadians' well-being, wise shopping choices should be incorporated into the domestic regime. As Grace Duggan, lecturer in household science at the University of Alberta, said in the *Edmonton Journal* in 1933, 'families' are now 'consumers rather than producers.' The 'home-maker' should therefore learn how to 'spend her money wisely, as it is only through the sane use of her resources that she may take care of her

40 'The Shoppers' Philosophy,' 21; Luce, 'Christmas Shopping,' *Saturday Night* (16 December 1922), 5.

41 Margaret Butcher, 'The Art of Shopping, If You Know What I Mean,' *Saturday Night*, 30 Nov. 1929, 37.

42 Robert Stamp, 'Teaching Girls Their "God-Given Place in Life": The Introduction of Home Economics in the Schools,' *Atlantis* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 18–34.

family's needs and requirements.' As did certain male critics, Duggan believed that shopping wives could be extravagant. She also, as did some of her male counterparts, displayed class snobbery, contending that uneducated women needed to be taught how to shop. At the same time, though, Duggan was different from male critics in that she proposed that female shoppers could be efficient. Her view was also unique in that she believed that shopping women, far from being drains on familial and national coffers, were valuable contributors to modern Canadian life.<sup>43</sup>

Clare Almas, a detective in interwar Toronto, would probably have had little in common with Grace Duggan. She might have agreed, however, with Duggan's assessment of female shoppers' rationality. In an interview with the *Globe* in 1927, she was asked about kleptomania. 'Women are the greatest offenders, as far as store thefts are concerned,' she responded. But she also said, 'I don't believe in kleptomania. There may be a person here and there who suffers from some uncontrollable impulse to steal, but ... Thefts, as a rule, are intentional and premeditated.'<sup>44</sup> Though not a psychiatrist, Almas refuted prevailing medical understandings of women. Rather than excusing female thieves on the basis of insanity, she insisted on the rational character of shoplifting and hence also on female shoppers' possession of their faculties.

A final defence of the female shopper came from Winnipeg feminist Francis Marion Beynon, who edited the women's section of the *Grain Growers' Guide* between 1912 and 1917. Anticipating by half a century the arguments made by such second-wave feminists as Ellen Willis, who in 1969 contended that women's consumption was, first and foremost, hard labour, Beynon wrote in the *Guide* that shopping women were not frivolous, or irrational, or even very happy. She herself had seen mothers in stores with 'a two-year-old child dragging at their skirts and a four-year-old kiddie doing his best to get lost in the crowd. The mother I have in mind has a sallow face and she has her hair drawn up straight and tight on the top of the head ... and she looks worried and tired.' Calling attention to the rift between the stereotype of the frivolous shopper, on the one hand, and the reality of everyday provisioning, on the other, Beynon castigated those who portrayed

43 Grace Duggan, 'Home Biggest Business in This Modern World,' *Edmonton Journal*, ca. 1933, in *Scrapbook: Home Economics Week, April 1-8, 1933*, file 67, M1670, Alberta Home Economics Association, Glenbow Museum and Archives.

44 'Woman Detective Employed in Store Speaks of Thefts,' *Globe*, 26 July 1927, 11.



shopping women as extravagant. Instead of condemning female shoppers, she argued, readers should work to make shopping easier and more fulfilling.<sup>45</sup>

Beynon also addressed bargain hunting. In 1915 she acknowledged that there are 'thousands of ... women ... who haunt the bargain counters.' Rather than portraying them as irrational, though, she argued that husbands' parsimony forced their wives to hunt for deals. 'A great many women have no household account, merely getting five or ten dollars from their husbands now and again without any regularity.' For this reason, they must 'buy their supplies in little dribbles, thereby paying a price and a half for everything they get.' Condemning men's tightfistedness, Beynon contended that women deserved an 'equitable division of the profits.' Only once the farmwife had full access to her family's income would she be able to 'plan her year's expenditure intelligently.'<sup>46</sup> Making the novel observation that men, not women, were responsible for bargain hunting, Beynon rescued bargain-hunting women from the condescension of those who claimed that they were irresponsible, frivolous, and out of control.

#### CONCLUSION

Despite the prevalence of the irrational female shopper in English-Canadian discourse between 1890 and 1939, a variety of commentators – all of them women – supplied other portrayals. Some suggested that female shoppers were talented and sophisticated, others said they were calculating and sane, and still others proposed that they were downtrodden and overworked. In that they did not encourage critical perspectives on the monopolistic organization of commodity production, distribution, and consumption, such depictions were not particularly progressive. Yet neither were they insignificant. In an era that witnessed increased inducements to consume, together with an ongoing denigration of women's intellects, they were important attempts to understand, dignify, and defend women's economic interests, responsibilities, and actions.

Given the increasingly central role that shopping played in Canadians' cultural, social, and economic activities during the first half

45 Francis Marion Beynon, 'Care of Mothers,' *Grain Growers' Guide*, 19 Mar. 1913, 20; Ellen Willis, 'Women and the Myth of Consumerism,' *Ramparts* (1969), <http://fair-use.org/ellen-willis/women-and-the-myth-of-consumerism>.

46 Francis Marion Beynon, 'Wasteful Saving,' *Grain Growers' Guide*, 24 Nov. 1915, 10.

of the twentieth century, it is unfortunate that sensitive and nuanced approaches to women's motivations for shopping remained rare. Rather than looking seriously at reasons compelling mothers, wives, daughters, and others to spend time and money in stores, anglophone commentators tended to suggest that women shopped because they were inherently vain, greedy, foolish, gullible, and maniacal. Critics had a host of motivations for making such accusations. Especially important was a sense of masculine persecution engendered by the rise of mass retail, the growth of international trade, a concern about the commercialization of literature, and spousal conflicts over money. Fears of class destabilization also influenced such portrayals. According to some, the low prices that made goods affordable to working and rural people blurred the line between the bourgeoisie and the masses, and thus caused both aesthetic standards and class status to disintegrate.

If the figure of the irrational shopping women assuaged commentators' class- and gender-based anxieties about the coming of modernity, so did she enable critics to articulate a specifically modern masculinity. When commentators suggested that husbands needed to rein in their wives, they implied that it was up to men to manage their families' finances. They hence challenged the century-old practice of working-class husbands handing over their earnings to their wives; they also denigrated wives' abilities to manage budgets. Similarly, when critics argued that women's foolishness was leading the nation into decline, they hinted that only men could make the fiscal decisions necessary for Canadian society. Holding up stereotypes of corrupt and spendthrift women, commentators hence asserted a virile and modern masculinity that fused intelligence and civic-mindedness with financial privilege and responsibility.

In their studies of female wage earners in English Canada at the turn of the twentieth century, Carolyn Strange and Lindsey McMaster demonstrate that the figure of the young working woman featured prominently in narratives of decline. Politicians, journalists, social reformers, religious leaders, women's groups, and labour leaders in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia all agreed that the 'woman adrift,' as they called her, was a victim of modernity. After she abandoned her parents' protective home and ventured into the city, her moral and sexual innocence was endangered by exploitative employers, lustful male strangers, and the temptations of vaudeville, ice skating, bicycling, dancing, and, later, Hollywood movies. Yet if young women were victims of change, so were they agents of

degeneration. Their feminine desire for clothes and jewellery, critics suggested, caused their descent into depravity.<sup>47</sup>

Exploring how English-Canadian commentators depicted female shoppers between the 1890s and 1930s, this article confirms Strange's and McMaster's contentions that critics drew upon derogatory constructions of womanhood to express concerns about modernization. The woman adrift was different from the irrational female shopper in that the former was young and single while the latter was married and often a mother. She was similar, though, in that she was impressionable, weak, and covetous. The figures were also alike in that they defied patriarchal authority. If the woman adrift abandoned her parents' home to find excitement in the workplace, so did the female spendthrift abandon her family to spend time and money in the marketplace. Both figures, then, were not only articulations of anxieties about urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism, so were they attempts to enforce feminine docility. During this era of rapid social change, condescending portrayals of materialistic women helped to affirm the legitimacy of male authority, both in the home and in the broader economy.

47 Lindsey McMaster, *Working Girls in the West: Representations of Wage-Earning Women* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 88–120; Carolyn Strange, *Toronto's Girl Problem: The Perils and Pleasures of the City, 1880–1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 22.

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