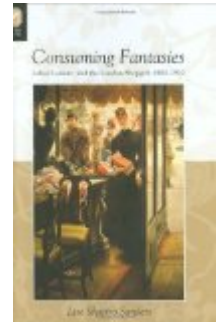


**Lise Shapiro Sanders.** *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London Shopgirl, 1880-1920.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006. xi + 279 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8142-1017-8.



**Reviewed by** Lara Kreigel

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Cultural historians and literary critics have done a truly spectacular job of excavating the history of the shopping lady whose natural habitat was the urban environs of London's West End. In *Consuming Fantasies*, Lise Shapiro Sanders takes us around the counter to examine her literal counterpart, the London shop assistant, and her literary analogue, the "shopgirl." In this rich study, Sanders builds on a solid foundation of social history to understand the shopgirl as a "discursive entity" and an "identity category" (pp. 2-3). Sanders demonstrates that the shopgirl was a cultural embodiment of anxieties about morality, sexuality, and class, just like her well-known Victorian and Edwardian counterparts, the shopping lady and the fallen woman. To show as much, she analyzes an impressive array of sources, including social investigation, personal journals, romance novels, popular novelettes, music hall performances, and early film. The subject of legislation and managerial textbooks, the shopgirl was the focal point of debates about women's labor. The protagonist of romance novels, novelettes, and serial fiction, she was a figure whose doubtful destiny required resolution through the formulaic

marriage plot that led to her union with a shop proprietor. An urban consumer herself, she became the audience for novelettes, music, hall, and eventually film. The absorbing fantasies and distracted pleasures afforded by these productions would ideally act as a salve, opening up "new possibilities for imaginative rewritings of everyday life" and thereby providing "a first step in the process of social and political transformation" (p. 10). Ultimately, Sanders argues that the transformative effects of these fantasies were limited, however. To be sure, they offered social critiques, individual correctives, and personal release. These cultural productions could not, however, redress the social predicaments of the shopgirl, whether the vulnerability of her labor, the anonymity of her existence, the monotony of her hours, or the ambiguity of her class position.

Sanders unfolds this argument successively through her five chapters, which move, by and large, from a discussion of shop labor and management to an examination of the cultural fantasies that sought to govern, manage, and save the shop girl. Chapters 1 and 2 offer the welcome re-

minder that the shop was not just a site of display, but a place of labor and a locus of management. In her first chapter, Sanders brings into clear focus the social and material conditions of those lower middle-class and working-class women who undertook shop work in order to escape the drudgery of the factory and the limits of rural life. Often, the shopgirl found her dreams of advancement thwarted. She labored in sweated conditions and worked up to one hundred hours a week for low wages, which were often reduced to pay "living-in" fees. Perhaps the Edwardian Department Store offered more possibilities for advancement, as chapter 2 suggests. Here, Sanders offers a fascinating rendition of the managerial culture of Harrod's, which sated the modest ambition of its female employees, and Selfridge's, which adopted Taylorist principles of management and allowed for individual success. Sanders offers a fascinating glimpse into the work culture of these firms, enlivened by photographs of the Ladies' Hockey Team and Rifle Team taken from the *Harroldian Gazette* and of Selfridge's "Personality Tree" as featured in the *London Magazine*.

While it was a site for labor and a place to be managed, the shop was also "the central locus for the playing out of fantasy and desire" in the consumer culture of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (p. 13). It is to these fantasies and their uneven possibilities that Sanders dedicates the remainder of her text. She reads novels, both canonical and lesser known, as well as cheap novelettes, personal memoirs, serial fiction, music hall performance, and early film to explore the potentials of romance for redressing the shopgirl's condition. The genre of romance, along with its modulation on stage and screen, was not sufficient to the task, we learn. One highlight of these chapters is Sanders's practice of analyzing fiction and fantasy against the grain of personal memoirs, trade newspapers, and managerial tomes. The effect is one of mutual illumination. Sanders demonstrates, on the one hand, that labor concerns informed romance and its modulation on

stage and screen; she shows, on the other, how social texts relied on romance to make their very appeals. Historians will also appreciate Sanders's attention to the practice and pace of reading among shopgirls and other urban laborers, who consumed fiction on the omnibus and at the counter. These very habits, Sanders demonstrates, facilitated the rise of the novelette and serial fiction. In similar fashion, Sanders illuminates the consumer practices of the music hall, which tended to encourage audience engagement, and the cinema, which demanded a more tractable audience. For Sanders, these investigations are prompted by an engagement with German theorist Siegfried Krackauer's notions of absorption and distraction. Two modern modes of cultural consumption, they seemed to offer the shopgirl redress, particularly in enabling the fantasy of escape from her limited livelihood. Intriguing as they may be, for some readers, these lines of discussion may prove more useful for what they do to enliven the sociocultural world of Victorian and Edwardian England.

This is a truly interdisciplinary study, both in the sources that it employs and the approach that it adopts. Sanders joins canny attention to the social life of the shop assistant to interesting readings of the texts that this figure inspired. On occasion, however, the histories marshaled by this literary critic fall short. At times, for instance, Sanders relies on Victorian notions of labor and domesticity that would have been outmoded by the turn of the century. For instance, she leans heavily on Sarah Stickney Ellis's *The Women of England* (1839) to delineate a pervasive ideal of womanhood. Certainly, this notion had undergone important transformations by the turn of the century due to the very intensification of commodity capitalism discussed in this book. Additionally, to illuminate the culture of the factory, Sanders looks to Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854). Yet, by the later Victorian and Edwardian age, labor historians tell us, factory culture had improved significantly. There is also a tendency to characterize the

shop as a truly spectacular space. However, recent literature has called into question widespread preconceptions about the modernity of late nineteenth-century consumer culture. Finally, the epoch under discussion in Sanders's pages was one of great upheaval and gender disorder. One need only think of Victorian high imperialism, the suffrage movement, and the First World War. We gain little sense of how these developments may have punctuated the story of the shopgirl and the many fictions that surrounded her ascendancy. There are some missed opportunities for discussion here, such as the photographs of the Harrodian rifle team taken in 1915, which might attest to the penetration of militarism into London's West End.

Sanders's *Consuming Fantasies* is an intelligent, original, and interdisciplinary book. It is particularly innovative in its intriguing sources and its creative juxtapositions of them. But in some regards, it is a lot like shopping itself. That is, it is deceptively hard work. And at times, one is left with the feeling of having at once too much and too little. Yet, this is a tribute to the diverse array of evidence that Sanders marshals to illuminate the complex cultural politics of consumerism. It is also testimony to the abundance of stories that addressed the shopgirl, and to the richness of her very fantasies.

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