

Introduction: Fashion and Its Vicissitudes *Contingency, Temporality, Narrative*

Fashion always occupies the dividing-line between the past and the future, and consequently conveys a stronger feeling of the present, at least while it is at its height, than most other phenomena.

– Georg Simmel, “Fashion” (1904)¹

In 1839, on the strength of his success with *Rookwood* (1834), which featured the eighteenth-century highwayman Dick Turpin, William Harrison Ainsworth published another novel about a legendary eighteenth-century criminal: *Jack Sheppard*. The new novel was an instant hit. Kathryn Chittick has observed that “*Jack Sheppard* may now be a forgotten book, but in 1839 it inspired a mania that went beyond the literary pages of the newspapers.”²

Collaborating with George Cruikshank who produced 27 illustrations for the novel, Ainsworth fictionalized the remarkable true story of the young thief who escaped from prison four times, including two escapes from Newgate Prison, before being hanged at Tyburn in 1724 at the age of 21.³ A century later there were few cobwebs to dust off this historical figure: Sheppard’s extraordinary prison breaks made him a household name in his own day, and through the remainder of the century his fame rarely waned. His crimes were reported in the newspapers during his lifetime and a biography attributed to Daniel Defoe was sold on the day of his hanging and republished frequently in the years afterward.⁴ Sheppard’s story was widely available through the eighteenth century in the form of ballads, penny narratives, and street theatre; it may have inspired John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) and William Hogarth’s print series *Industry and Idleness* (1747).⁵ Sheppard was a key figure as well in *The Newgate Calendar*, a five-volume compendium of criminal biographies first published in 1774 and updated and republished twice in the early nineteenth century. As Patricia Anderson has shown, moreover, the proliferating print culture

market of the 1830s and 40s that was aimed specifically at working people gave new life to the Sheppard legend in the form of many more narrative and illustrated versions of his story.⁶

If Ainsworth turned to the pages of history for his latest story, his criminal protagonist seemed to speak to contemporary readers in the 1830s in an idiom of their own moment. Ainsworth brought his characteristic historical assiduity to details of setting and plot such as the interior of Newgate and the legendary prison breaks, but the criminal's story and image proved conducive to a translation into contemporary nineteenth-century media that made Jack's figure singularly current; at the same time, I will suggest, this translation revealed the complex interplay between residual and emergent cultural forms, technologies, and organizations of collective life that distinguished this moment in British history. As the novel's serialization drew to a close in *Bentley's Miscellany* in late 1839, fans in the metropolis could purchase inexpensive reproductions of Cruikshank's illustrations at print shops all over town, hum the songs that Ainsworth had written for the novel, or take in one of eight theatrical adaptations running concurrently.⁷ W. M. Thackeray remarked that one could even buy "Shepherd-bags [*sic*]" in one of the theatre lobbies that would include "a few pick-locks ... a screw driver, and iron lever."⁸ This 100-year-old figure was the talk of the town, his long-familiar story and image intersecting with new media and forms of consumption to create something distinctly contemporary. *Jack Sheppard* remediated Jack Sheppard in ways that have a great deal to tell us about the work of the novel in Britain in the nineteenth century and especially the permeation of currency, contingency, and spectacle into the novel form and its conception of modernity.⁹ That work, and its implications for our histories of the novel, constitute the focus of this study.

As I will argue in the following pages, *Jack Sheppard* is one of a raft of novels published in Britain from the 1820s through 1860s that gave narrative form to the sense of contemporaneity developing in the nineteenth century through shifting notions of temporality and history and new forms of individual and collective identification. These novels conceptualized emergent social formations of spectacle, spectatorship, and what I will call demotic celebrity. They registered a structure of change that unfolded apart from history's grand narratives of causality. They were regularly accused of neglecting what William Hazlitt called the proper "business of literature" in preference for ephemeral matters such as the movements of high society and consumer-focused urban panoramas; cultural sensations in the form of fads and fashions; or the experience of contemporary life in an age of proliferating media. Their narrative emphases on immediacy and proximity left

them, Hazlitt insisted, unable “to direct the mind’s eye beyond the present moment and the present object.”¹⁰ I contend that these novels had their finger on the pulse of the age. Their interest in manners, custom, novelty, and spectacle constituted an effort to conceptualize in narrative form the texture of the contemporary and the “powerfully modern feeling” that the “extraordinary [might] emerge ... from the fabric of the mundane.”¹¹

The novels on which I focus belong to three nineteenth-century schools – the silver-fork, Newgate, and sensation novel – that embodied what Hazlitt termed in the same period, albeit with reference to quite different literature, “the spirit of the age.”¹² Widely popular during their respective heydays, these schools innovated narrative models that allowed them to articulate the temporality of modern life and “the bent of the public mind,”¹³ and to do so largely outside the conventional bounds of domestic realism, the provincial novel, and the *Bildungsroman*, which orient our accounts of fiction in the period. The cultural phenomenon that informed their generic innovations, I argue, was fashion: pervading British society since the consumer revolution of the eighteenth century, fashion became a force central to economic, commercial, and cultural development, and, as Timothy Campbell has shown, a new model of historical consciousness.¹⁴ By the nineteenth century, fashion had established itself as a fully synthesized system that organized virtually every aspect of contemporary life. Paul Keen remarks that fashion’s power was “simultaneously social and deeply personal, inseparable from the broader web of commercial transactions that helped to define the nation but inextricably linked by an economy of desire to the private world of affective interiority.”¹⁵ Fashion came equally to embody “an aesthetic of the urban,” a newly honed sense of taste and style that Roy Porter suggests “was now defined not by King, court, or country but by the manners of town, that is, the West End.”¹⁶ According to Ulrich Lehmann, two of the leading theorists of fashion and modernity, Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin, “regard[ed] fashion as the obvious *determinant* of modernity,” not its by-product.¹⁷ Premised on what Anne Hollander describes as an “ideal of perpetual contingency” and “perpetual currency,” fashion offered nineteenth-century novelists an apt idiom in which to articulate the cultural energies and customary practices of the present.¹⁸

The Fashion System

Fashion was of course not new to the eighteenth century. Since antiquity it had been associated with opulence and indulgence: the ancients possessed a concept of fashion-consciousness and recognized fashion’s power

to induce frivolity and excess.¹⁹ Most fashion historians agree, however, that a distinctly modern notion of fashion emerged in Western societies in the late medieval period which turned on principles of novelty and ephemerality. Gilles Lipovetsky observes, for example, that “it was only at the end of the Middle Ages that the order of fashion itself became recognizable – fashion as a system, with its endless metamorphoses, its fits and starts, its extravagance.”²⁰ From this point on, he suggests, “the transitory would come to function as one of the constitutive structures of modern life.”²¹ In Britain, Campbell argues, fashion extended its reach further into the social order and the collective psyche “in the mid-eighteenth century, when the visual and textual genre of the ‘dress of the year’ first became iconic.”²² Fashion engravings began to appear regularly in British periodicals in the 1750s; by the 1780s, coloured fashion plates accompanying the latest fashion news were published monthly.²³ Publications such as *The Lady’s Magazine* and *La Belle Assemblée* illustrated for their readers the latest London fashions, and as Campbell contends, bred in consumers a consciousness of fashion’s temporality, or the “now-familiar dynamics of currency and obsolescence in everyday commercial life.”²⁴

The “revolution in consumption” that transformed Britain in the eighteenth century has been well remarked.²⁵ Fashion played a key role in driving and consolidating such widespread change: it worked hand in glove with commerce and the pictorial arts, fuelling the imagination, stimulating desire, and, in Bernard Mandeville’s words, “turn[ing] the “very wheel ... [of] trade.”²⁶ Fashion’s permeation of British society depended not only on material developments in production and consumption such as increased global trade, a growing abundance of commodities, the industrialization of textile manufacturing, the proliferation of printed matter, and the establishment of communications infrastructure.²⁷ The generalization of the fashion system turned as well on the penetration of visual culture into the domain of everyday life and the bases of individual and collective identity. Jonathan Lamb argues that from the early eighteenth century, the “effects of market uncertainties upon the imaginations of people” obliged individuals to conceptualize themselves and their relation to the social in increasingly abstract, phantasmatic terms: “Whether they wanted to or not, men and women living in these circumstances [commercial society’s unpredictable fluctuations] were forced to *imagine* who they were and how they related to things.”²⁸ By the turn of the nineteenth century, fashion’s extensive reach ensured that it furnished many of the forms in which these imagined relations took shape. People’s imagination of their own identity and their relationship to the world around them drew on available

imagery, making fashion a constitutive structure of modern selfhood and social organization.

Leo Brady observes that the early nineteenth century saw a “remarkable flurry of new visual forms” in print culture: these fostered a new emphasis on visibility and spectacle in public life and, as we will see, a modern notion of celebrity.²⁹ The visual array of dress fashions – the patterns, colours, textures, and shapes that people saw around them in print, in shop windows, and on the streets – merged with ubiquitous images of prominent individuals to create a pictorial language that was widely shared and increasingly became the means by which individuals signalled their participation in the social. The visual language of fashion also produced new forms of social consciousness: Campbell suggests that “community ... came together” in the nineteenth century through “a collective practice of deciding what counted aesthetically.”³⁰ Feeding what Hollander describes as “an independent imaginative life for the eye,”³¹ fashion enabled individuals to position themselves distinctively, seemingly autonomously; at the same time, it ensured that such self-fashioning meant something only insofar as individual “looks” referred back to the dynamic pictorial lexicon held in common and thus available to all.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith offers one of the period’s most incisive theorizations of fashion and its role in structuring the individual’s relationship to the social. Smith insists that the “principles [of] custom and fashion ... extend their dominion over our judgments concerning beauty of every kind.”³² Their influence is by no means limited to the familiar domains of “[d]ress and furniture,” he observes, but rather “extends itself to whatever is in any respect the object of taste, to music, to poetry, to architecture.”³³ Although in some domains, he suggests, fashion’s pace of change is comparatively slow – architectural style, for example, moves on a much longer cycle than dress fashion – Smith contends that all shifts in taste are the products of fashion’s movements.³⁴ This applies equally to artistic productions and objects of the natural world, to “the human form,” “flowers,” or “any other species of things.”³⁵

Crucially, Smith argues that our notions of taste and beauty are shaped by the “conjunction[s]” and “arrangement[s]” with which custom familiarizes us, rather than any meaning inherent in objects themselves.³⁶ Perceiving well before Karl Marx or Walter Benjamin the distance between “the function of objects and the desires congealed there,”³⁷ Smith theorizes the contingent process through which certain objects and styles become invested with aesthetic value and possessed of allure. Dismissing the widely held belief that principles of taste are disinterested and rational,

he insists that we perceive beauty according to custom's "habitual arrangement of our ideas."³⁸ "Tho' independent of custom, there should be no real beauty" in the "union" of particular objects or forms, "yet when custom has thus connected them together, we feel an impropriety in their separation."³⁹ Smith makes clear that the principles on which fashion and custom operate are not simply interested; they are arbitrary and illusory. Even when a fashionable object is tiny and insignificant, its customary association with a particular form can make it essential to the beauty of the whole: "we find a meanness or awkwardness in the absence even of a haunch button," he remarks, if custom has associated its particular placement with the elegance of a "suit of cloaths."⁴⁰ However "indifferent" the object in itself, once it has become integral to the fashion image, it "is connected in our imaginations with the idea of something that is genteel and magnificent."⁴¹ Smith's analysis of the power that resides in a fashionable detail reveals that imagination and fantasy are bound up with supposedly universal judgments of taste and beauty; he also shows us the formative role that fashion and custom play in organizing community by means of a shared aesthetic sense.

James Noggle reads in Smith's theory of fashion and custom an exposure of the ideological illusions that underpin our collective ideals of beauty and our individual experience of taste and desire. In the example of the haunch button, Noggle contends, Smith acknowledges that "*knowing* about the arbitrariness of the connection in no way dispels its glamour. ... One knows very well, but still."⁴² We might expand Smith's insight into the illusions that invest a button with a general sense of elegance to apply it to the fashion system as a whole. One knows well that fashion's dictates are irrational and sometimes outrageous; we may decry fashion's influence and rail against its folly. That knowledge proves insufficient, however, to disenchant its allure. A critique of fashion has in fact been built into the system's mechanisms from the outset. Hollander contends that from the beginning of modern fashion's "robust, long life," it was clear that "the charm of fashion would always lie in its treacherous unconscious operation, its necessary visualization of fantasies otherwise not expressed."⁴³ Fashion's appeal arises precisely from its independence of intellectual and moral ideals. Neither purely individual nor wholly imposed from without, fashion infuses the cultural discourse from which we learn principles of taste and beauty, and through which we identify the desires that distinguish our interiority. There can be no rational explanation of the beauty of a "haunch button," but to wear it – or equally to renounce it – is visually to signal something about ourselves and our relation to the social.

Smith's investigation of the magnificence of a humble button brings into focus as well the class inflections of custom's habitual arrangements. He associates fashion with those perennial arbiters of style, the "great": the "graceful, the easy and commanding manners of the great, joined to the usual richness and magnificence of their dress, give a grace to the very form which they happen to bestow upon it."⁴⁴ Smith's alignment of fashion with the elite, however, in no way naturalizes their sense of style as innately superior. Following Smith's theory through to its logical ends, Noggle argues that the "magical power of the great to make clothes fashionable ... is also based on an association," and thus as much a product of custom as any other notion of beauty.⁴⁵ To confirm Noggle's point, we need only think of "fashion from below," a phenomenon which emerged in the late nineteenth century to invert the customary associations of trendsetting and social status.⁴⁶

Fashion infiltrated the lower orders, moreover, as fully as it shaped the practices of the wealthy and elite. John Styles confirms that, as a temporal and social concept, fashion permeated the "customary assumptions and practices that ordered many aspects of plebian life."⁴⁷ Where the consolidation of consumer society across Britain's diverse population and geography was halting and inconsistent, dress fashion proved an exception: Styles contends that for working people in the later eighteenth century, clothing constituted the one reliably accessible "area of consumption where relative abundance prevailed and the exercise of discrimination was a possibility," allowing them "to participate in attractive forms of commercialized consumption."⁴⁸ However modest such forms of participation might be, perhaps involving only the alteration of a piece of trim on an existing garment, their possibility meant that fashion-consciousness was a regular part of daily life for almost everyone. Styles argues that fashion became "implicated in the fundamental temporal ordering of everyday life."⁴⁹

In identifying fashion's ubiquity across ranks, however, Styles stresses the importance of recognizing the autonomy and agency of the lower orders in their fashionable consumption. Emulation was one motive, but he cautions against overreliance on imitation as the sole explanation of fashion's social significance: "The cut and decoration of the clothes donned for [religious and festive] events may often have descended to their plebeian wearers from the *beau monde* by a process that can be termed emulative, but the same cannot be said of the uses to which the clothes were put or the ways they were understood."⁵⁰ The *ton* may have been set by the fashionable elite – or by their dressmakers and tailors, as critics would insist⁵¹ – but as fashion moved through different spheres, it gained new life and new meaning,

simultaneously connecting consumers across the nation and fostering a degree of autonomous significance within local communities.

With the expansion of the ready-made and second-hand clothing trades in the nineteenth century as well as the explosion of print imagery on city streets, fashion's "temporal ordering of everyday life" extended even into the customary practices of the poor.⁵² While the scant resources of the poor severely limited their ability to exercise choice in dress, Vivienne Richmond contends that "this did not mean they were entirely without agency": "the very absence of clothing enhanced the significance of the garments they did possess."⁵³ Richmond remarks that the customs governing community identity and belonging among the poor extended to sartorial practices, which "could be read as immediate indicators of respectability." Not to conform to those "most basic social codes" was to "risk exclusion, scorn or ridicule."⁵⁴ One hesitates to overstate the fashion-consciousness of poorer communities, where customs did not change quickly and metropolitan trends would have little impact. Nonetheless, minor alterations of style did find their way into local practices, the new visual media penetrated into poorer neighbourhoods, and the illusory, variable bases of taste and beauty that bind communities together pertained as much there as in wealthier circles. James Laver comments, "Clothes are never a frivolity. They are always an expression of the fundamental social and economic pressures of the time."⁵⁵ Inflected by the circumstances and practices of local populations, fashion served as a material signifier of currency for almost everyone.

That individuals of any station might find themselves beholden to fashion alarmed commentators in the period, as it does today. There seemed few effective means, however, to distance oneself from a system increasingly bound up with every aspect of society. Fashion was seen on the one hand to enslave the individual and cultivate caprice and extravagance, and on the other to drive commerce and trade.⁵⁶ It seemed poised to level traditional distinctions of rank, beguiling alike the "peer, prince, peasant, soldier, squire, divine,"⁵⁷ but in place of these to erect a new status hierarchy based on an adherence to fashion's arbitrary laws. As Erin Mackie has shown in her influential work on the early eighteenth-century periodicals *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, the contradictions inherent in fashion were part and parcel of its power as an emergent cultural phenomenon. Fashion inspired denunciations of waste, fickleness, and effeminacy but simultaneously provided an "unruly" object around which "rationalizing projects of social management" could coalesce.⁵⁸ Mackie argues that *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* made themselves "fashionable and innovative" in order to "compet[e] on the opinion market for the role of principal

cultural arbitrator”; as such, they used fashion as both object of critique and cultural medium to establish their own timeliness and appeal.⁵⁹

By the end of the eighteenth century, commentators acknowledged that few spheres were immune to fashion’s influence. Condemnations of fashion’s tyranny persisted, but most observers recommended a tempered adherence to fashion’s dictates on the grounds of its wholesale permeation of modern life. In *Lectures on Female Education and Manners* (1793), for example, John Burton remarks: “Seeing ... that the decrees of Fashion are so arbitrary and universal, you might incur the censure of singularity, were you wholly to disregard them.”⁶⁰ Lord Chesterfield comments similarly, in his *Advice to his Son on Men and Manners* (1775), that “it is necessary to dress to avoid singularity and ridicule. Great care should be taken to be always dressed like the reasonable people of our own age in the place where we are.”⁶¹ Individuals must take the measure of the customary practices of the age and place in which they find themselves, he counsels, in order to mark their rationality and community-mindedness.

As these authors demonstrate, commentary on fashion in the period rarely focused on garments themselves but rather on the ideas and values with which the fashion phenomenon was associated.⁶² The tension between fashion’s materiality and immateriality lies at the heart of its social mechanism – between actual clothing, on the one hand, and the concepts, idioms, and imagery that fashion sets into motion, on the other. “‘Fashion’ is racks of garments we can touch and feel,” Elizabeth Wilson observes, “but it is equally a virtual spectacle, a regime of images, celebrating a continual carnival of change.”⁶³ Fashion is nothing without material objects, but those objects possess aesthetic significance only insofar as they relate to a “regime of images” shared collectively. “[W]e are usually brought to fashion objects only by a parade of prior images,” Campbell suggests, which leaves us prone to perpetual disappointment: “Fashion inevitably gives us objects that do not and cannot fully correspond to the images it has shaped for our fantasies.”⁶⁴ In late eighteenth-century Britain, fashion’s growing hold over the collective psyche did not result from all individuals seeing and desiring exactly the same clothes or emulating the same styles.⁶⁵ Rather, fashion’s dominion arose in tandem with the expansion of consumer needs and the conception of those needs as temporalized.

Fashion epitomized what critics agree was the “objective acceleration of material life during the eighteenth century.”⁶⁶ “At the turn of the nineteenth century,” Ina Ferris observes, “temporal concepts entered rapidly into the everyday and the public domain, impelled largely by an acceleration of time widely (and still) understood as modernity’s hallmark.”⁶⁷ The serial renewal

of fashion imagery made individuals alert to the currency or datedness of objects, styles, and forms; while the pace of renewal varied significantly from one sphere to another, the principle underlying such change, which Lipovetsky identifies as “the law of *obsolescence*, *seduction*, and *diversification*,”⁶⁸ remained constant. The broad applicability of a “law” that webbed together commerce, aesthetics, and individual desire helped to reorganize society at large on the model of the fashion system. Lipovetsky observes that as the “taste for novelty bec[ame] a consistent and regular principle, ... function[ing] as an autonomous cultural requirement,” ever greater swaths of society were “tilt[ed] ... into the orbit of the fashion form.”⁶⁹ Intimately bound from the outset with commerce and commodity culture, fashion extended its logic of change, of planned obsolescence and an insatiable appetite for novelty, into literally every social domain, from literature, media, and performance to economics, politics, and national identity.

The effect of fashion’s generalization was, quite simply, to heighten a collective sense of the present. In the epigraph with which I began, Georg Simmel claims that “[f]ashion always occupies the dividing-line between the past and the future, and consequently conveys a stronger feeling of the present, at least while it is at its height, than most other phenomena.”⁷⁰ By the turn of the nineteenth century, fashion had become no mere index of style, but the epitome of social currency as such. Fashion invested the present age with a spirit that could be easily defined by comparison with the styles of the recent past.⁷¹ As a “practice of pleasures,” especially the pleasure “produced by the stimulus of change, the metamorphosis of forms,” fashion also promised a future full of potential for novelty if not more meaningful change.⁷² That future would arrive, moreover, not at some distant moment, but imminently. Simmel contends that “[f]ew phenomena of social life possess such a pointed curve of consciousness as does fashion. As soon as the social consciousness attains to the highest point designated by fashion, it marks the beginning of the end for the latter.”⁷³ Far from diminishing its value, however, fashion’s ephemerality sharpens its appeal and signficatory power.⁷⁴ Perpetually poised on the cusp of the future, signifying that sliver of time we know as the present, fashion embodies what Benjamin terms “the presence of the now.”⁷⁵

History, Custom, and the Dual Temporality of Fashion

In an important modulation on eighteenth-century commentary, nineteenth-century critics began to identify in fashion’s cyclical rhythms less the principle of novelty intrinsic to commercial modernity than the