Title of Paper: Top Hat, Fashion Magazine, and Shoppiness: Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Material Culture and the OED
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Abstract:

Among the 1,478 Oxford English Dictionary entries that cite works by Mary Elizabeth Braddon we find multiple words that pertain to the language of commodity and material culture. This paper investigates Braddon's engagement with the rapidly evolving material culture of the Victorian middle class consumer through her use and coinage of language to describe that world. Braddon’s descriptive prowess in this arena has been noted in her lush illustration of Lucy’s private rooms in Lady Audley’s Secret, but beyond this famous passage lie her original use of words like “top-hat,” “fashion magazine,” and “shoppiness” in works that are less widely read, such as Mount Royal, Vixen and Asphodel. The commodity words that are often “first in entry” or “first in sense” fall into three categories; those that describe dress, like “stylishly” or “chic;” those that describe accessories, like “gingham” meaning umbrella; or “in the fashion” and “honeymoon tour” in reference to the world of fashionable society. From the slang echoes of “towniness” to her later use of “beauty specialist” in our contemporary sense, Braddon performs for her reader the language of commodity and exchange, while critiquing the fetishistic nature of Fashion and Society.

Keywords: Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Oxford English Dictionary, language, material culture, fashion, society, consumerism, commodity fetish

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“There were so many new things and so many words naming them, that it was impossible to keep them all straight, and a new class of words came into being to describe things in general- words like gadget, dingus, thingamajig, jigger.” - Thomas Richards from *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England*

Rapidly advancing nineteenth century material culture brought with it a new language. The things being produced were innovative as was the process of production, but language too had to innovate in order to keep up, keep pace and keep moving. Words for the habits and habitus of the fashionable world, accessories, fabrics and trimmings, the bits and bobs that litter a lady’s dressing table or for the table itself, came into being alongside the things they described. Mary Elizabeth Braddon employs her knack for describing excess to bring words for material clutter into print and her usage of words for fashion and the fashionable find their way into OED citations with amazing frequency. Among the 1,478 OED entries that cite works by Braddon, we find multiple words that pertain to the language of commodity and material culture. Her original use of words like “top-hat,” “fashion magazine,” and “shoppiness” illustrate her engagement with the material world in three categories: dress, things, and environment. Reading these words in their context reveals a contradictory impulse to both glorify the material and condemn those who participate in commodity fetishism. In a trio of novels, *Vixen*, *Asphodel* and *Mount Royal*, written between 1878 and 1883, Braddon pays serious attention to the world of “Fashion.” She pits the artifice and excess of society against natural emotional and physical expression. This trio of novels is also the location of many of her contributions to the language of commodity as cited by the OED. In these novels we see contradictory passages criticizing the classes that can afford elaborate dress and life style alongside the fetishizing of commodities, while through her own lush use of language to describe that world, Braddon invites us to fetishize the words themselves.

First, the words. Because there are almost 1500 to chose from, I will give a smattering of examples from the three categories that pertain to material culture; words describing dress, modes of dress or materials for dressing the body; words for decorating, describing objects and furniture; or the words that speak to the overall habitus, or daily practices of the fashionable.

Among the words for dress are multiple fabrics: batiste, crape, sateen, gauze, linen, sicilienne and serge. They range from the decadent to the utilitarian and of course serve to tell the reader something about the characters who wear them. In *Asphodel*, fashion obsessed Rhoda Ferrers waffles over wearing “pearl-gray sicilienne” while in *Mount Royal*, the impoverished Vandeleur sisters make do with “home-made gowns of dark brown serge” (208). We also find multiple words for specific articles of clothing. Both “top-hat” and “dinner-jacket” make appearances in Braddon’s work, “top-hat” for the first time as a compound word. In *Vixen*, Violet Tempest wears “Cromwell shoes” and Lady Mallow sports “Irish linen” in support of her husband, an Irish peer and politician. There are multiple dress words that connote more than an article of clothing. When Violet Tempest asks her mother, Mrs. Winstanley, whose chief delights in life have been her appearance and collecting lace,
why she should have to “leave off dressing stylishly?” it signals Mrs. Winstanley’s death is near. The words for clothing frequently carry evidence of social class as well.

In Asphodel, a tourist party of gauche Americans are “waterproofed” to explore the popular Swiss countryside and in Mount Royal, the slangy “frock” worn by actress Stella Mayne is contrasted with the plethora of “gowns” owned by heiress Christabel Tregonell. Words for things include “gingham” meaning umbrella, and its feminine counterpart tussor or “tussore parasol,” both being named for the fabric used in manufacturing the item in question. There are a variety of words for bric-a-brac, “crackle-vases,” “Carcel-lamp,” and “chinoiserie,” for example. In fact “bric-a-brac” itself appears second in its entry with an example from Braddon’s Strange World. Most interesting might be the words that illustrate the activities of the fashionable world. A “beauty-specialist” is required in Dead Love Has Chains. In Mount Royal and Vixen characters with “chic” participate in “fads.” Those who are “in the fashion” “hob-nob,” read “fashion magazines,” and take “honeymoon tours.” They lament not being able to afford “tailor-made” clothes and discuss where one might be able to purchase “wearable” gloves that will not betray their lack of money and social standing. Although the evidence of material culture provided by these words is interesting in and of itself, Braddon employs them with subtle wit and a critical eye to demonize idle wealth.

In Vixen, Mount Royal and Asphodel particularly, the language of material culture is used both critically and fetishistically. Biographer Robert Lee Wolff has called these three novels examples of Braddon’s radicalism in critiquing the idle rich. One way Braddon does so is by exposing the folly of participating in Fashion and Society. She often capitalizes these two words which lends them weight as entities or actors within the text. It is also in this trio of novels that Braddon explores the fetishizing of commodity in two ways. The first is through objectification of women in clothing, in the way that Sharon Marcus highlights in Between Women. In Asphodel and Vixen, older women dress younger girls like dolls and groups of women gaze at reproduced images of fashionable clothing, or at the clothing itself dressing the bodies of their peers. Second, in exposing the class division and snobbery that go hand in hand with what is “in the fashion.”

Vixen, 1879, tells the story of Violet (Vixen) Tempest, her frivolous tea drinking mother, and the rakish Captain Winstanley who comes between them. In this novel, Braddon uses the language of commodity to highlight the difference between Violet Tempest, and her mother, who is characterized by her material desires. Words like “honeymoon tour” and “fashion magazine” illustrate the heavily material world Mrs. Winstanley occupies, while Vixen is depicted as a free spirit content to ride her horse and keep company with only her immediate neighborhood. The language of fashion and commodity also show the reader the way in which Mrs. Winstanley fetishizes her daughter’s appearance and her ineffectual attempts to mother Vixen by turning her into one of Marcus’s “live dolls.” Mrs. Winstanley’s main sensual outlet in the text is her attention to her dress and her desire to outfit her daughter. She is an example of the way in which Marcus tells us “Victorian commodity culture incited an erotic appetite for femininity in women” (112). Mrs. Winstanley’s “erotic appetite” for the fashionable characterizes her relationship with her daughter.
As Mrs. Tempest prepares to marry the much younger Captain Winstanley, she is increasingly obsessed by appearance. Vixen and her mother have been at odds since the older woman broke her promise to remain true to Vixen's father and agreed to marry the captain in her widowhood. In the days leading up to her wedding, Mrs. Winstanley laments Vixen's estrangement from her, but always what she really regrets is the lost opportunity to talk about the process of trousseau planning. Indeed, her literal worst nightmare at this time happens after she has been lulled to sleep by “thoughts about her trousseau, her wedding dress, [and] the dress in which she would start for her wedding tour.” She dozes off amidst a reverie of Valenciennes lace, old English monograms, satin stitch and peignoirs, and awakens from a nightmare in which she dreamed that, “Theodore [her seamstress] sent [her] home a trousseau and there was not a single thing that would fit.”

The problem of the trousseau is raised again when Vixen rejects an offer of marriage from Lord Mallow. Unlike many other literary mothers, Mrs. Winstanley does not chastise her daughter as much for turning down the advantageous marriage to an Irish peer as she does for the lost opportunity to plan a trousseau worthy of that marriage. She says, “it would have been such a pleasure for me to plan your trousseau darling” and “I know the exact shades that suit your complexion, the dashes of color that contrast with and light up your hair, the style that sets off your figure,” ending her complaints with “your trousseau should be talked about in society and even described in the fashion magazines.” This line is quoted in the OED to define “fashion magazine” in our contemporary sense and is the first in entry for the definition. The next example defining fashion magazine in this sense comes from 1966. It is also a passage in which Mrs. Winstanley transfers the obsession with dressing her own body to her daughter’s body.

The erotic possibility present in older women's dressing younger women comes up again in the tragic Asphodel, as Lina Lawford and her Aunt Rhoda Ferrers argue pleasurably over who will chose clothing for Lina’s sister, beautiful young Daphne Lawford. The women sit and engage in “the usual talk about gowns” with Daphne at their feet “turning over a book of fashion plates” (Asphodel Vol. II 231-232). Fashion plates are a main example Marcus uses to illustrate the way in which women's bodies are consumed by other women. She writes that “fashion plates solicited a female gaze for images that put women, their bodies and the objects that adorned them on display” (119). In this exchange, peppered with material words such as “cloud like lace,” sicilienne, fur and pearls, there is a subtle conflict between Lina and Rhoda Ferrers as Daphne becomes the plaything to be dressed in imitation of a fashion plate. Daphne rejects this role and rejects becoming like the images she sees in the magazines by saying “every one of the dresses is utterly hideous; stiff, elaborate, fantastical, without being artistic, gaged and puffed and pleated and festooned and cringed and gimped. Please dress me for the ball as you have always dressed me, out of your own head, Lina” (232). In this passage, Daphne is a doll to be dressed by her sister or her aunt, but her choosing Lina's style of dress highlights the way the novel is a “pungent comment on the rich” (Wolff 284). Aunt Ferrers, we are consistently reminded, lives her life for what is in Fashion, be it dress or place and by choosing Lina’s style, Daphne places Fashion in a contemptuous position and her
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The litany of tortured fabrics draws attention to the unnaturalness that Fashion requires of her adherents.

In passages like these it is not just the things that are fetishized. The women are worshipping at the altar of materials as exhibited in the “fashion magazine;” however, we readers are participating in their commodity fetish experience through a fetishizing of the commodity words. The language of material culture in these novels is lush and rich and portrays a kind of opulence typified by the useless and expensive nature of things they describe. Braddon invites us to be commodity fetish peeping toms, participating voyeuristically alongside her characters through the sensuality of materialistic words.

Also in Asphodel, Braddon attacks the world of Fashion and what is “in fashion” by contrasting Rhoda Ferrers and Mrs. Turchill’s views on the habit of vacationing. Rhoda Ferrers is distinguished as “fashionable” through her denigration of the common locations of the tourist industry. Stuck on Lake Geneva with her brother’s family, Rhoda thinks to herself “had not all these easily-reached districts long ceased to be fashionable?” The “railways and monster steam engines” have “vulgarized Savoy” and “today when every Cooks tourist had scaled the Montanvert, when 'Arry was a familiar figure of the skirts of the glacier, who could feel any real pride or real satisfaction in a prolonged residence on the Lake of Geneva” (Asphodel Vol. III 182). We can read her worldliness against Mrs. Turchill who enjoys the median pleasures of common tourist destinations and is “delighted with Torquay in its increased shoppiness and towniness” (Asphodel Vol. II 143). Both “shoppiness” and “towniness” from this quote appear first in sense in the OED, with Braddon's use of “shoppiness,” meaning overrun by shops, as the only instance of this particular usage that is cited. Both speak to Mrs. Turchill's representation as a vulgar tourist and foil to Rhoda Ferrers’s equally vulgar snobbery. The fashionable watering place with its overbuilt streets filled with shops delights Mrs. Turchill, where Rhoda Ferrers thinks “contemptuously” of Lake Geneva precisely because tourists like Mrs. Turchill can now go there with ease.

The debate concerning the distinction between high and low fashionable society continues in Mount Royal (1883) through conversations between minor characters Mopsy and Dopsy Vandeleur. Mount Royal tells the story of Christabel Courtenay, who overthrows her first engagement to Angus Hamleigh out of a misguided sense of duty and marries her cousin, Leonard Tregonell. Christabel is an irritatingly selfless paragon, who rejects notions of fashion and the fashionable in favor of simplicity of lifestyle and dress, rather like Dorothea Brooke with less religious fervor. The Miss Vandeleurs, sisters of hanger-on Captain “Poker” Vandeleur, dress aesthetically because they cannot afford the extravagant clothing they covet. They are not well off enough to indulge in materialism, but it does not keep them from fetishizing the fashionable. Over the course of two years and two visits to the titular country house, the Vandeleur girls have several discussions about Christabel’s “chic.” The possession of “chic” becomes important in defining Christabel’s movement in society and the social superiority or inferiority of the characters surrounding her. Braddon’s use of chic as cited from Mount Royal is in the sense of “artistic skill and dexterity; ‘style’” and takes its example “she had no chic” from Mopsy and Dopsy discussing Christabel. The longer quotation reads: “It was
obvious that she was better informed than they, had been more carefully educated, played better, sang better, was more elegant and refined in every thought, and look and gesture.... Her gowns were simply perfect-- but she had no chic” (Mount Royal 191). The use of “simply” in this passage does double duty. Christabel’s taste is simply perfect because it is perfectly simple. Like Asphodel’s Daphne, Christabel is not “particularly interested in the leaders of fashion, their ways and manners- the newest professed or professional beauty- the last social scandal” (Mount Royal 63). She is admired for her natural beauty in the first half of the novel and wears her lack of chic as a kind of protection against the “fast” society of town.

After the crisis of the novel, the death of Angus Hamleigh under mysterious circumstances, Christabel disappears for a year and resurfaces a changed woman, now possessed of tremendous chic. She is described as “dressed... with a style, a chic and a daring,” (Mount Royal 272). Her previous “perfectly simple” mode of dress is replaced with “an elaborate costume of brown velvet and satin, in which a Louis Quinze velvet coat with large steel cut buttons and a Mechlin jabot was the most striking feature. Her fair soft hair was now fluffy... diamond solitaires flashed in her ears,” and “she came to meet her husband with a Society smile” (Mount Royal 272). Christabel’s exterior change mimics an interior change. It is slowly revealed that after Angus died she suffered an actual “mental illness.” As she recovered, she joined the fashionable world that had seemed frivolous to her before. She changes her dress, but also changes her company, picking up a shifty Baron, a “lively” and “modern” widow, a journalist/editor and voluntarily seeking out the Miss Vandeleurs. Altered physical appearance is a precursor to an alteration in lifestyle and adoption of the “ways and manners” of Fashion. Praise for this change comes from Mopsy Vandeleur who says the new Christabel is “a wonderful improvement” and that “she’s ever so much easier to get on with. I didn’t think it was in her to be so thoroughly chic” (Mount Royal 275). The reader of course sees this as a negative change related to the emotional stress of Angus’s death. Christabel has lost her unique sense of self and joined the anonymously fashionable. The implication is clearly that participation in Society and Fashion, to possess “chic,” is itself a kind of madness. Her mental illness brings her into society and makes her its belle. Only after the brainstorm passes in the final pages of the novel does she confess that she was driven into Fashion by grief and revenge.

Vixen, Asphodel and Mount Royal are only three out of the numerous texts by Braddon that are cited in the OED, but they are distinguished from the group by number of entries and importance of terms. Asphodel and Mount Royal are in the top three most quoted with a combined 323 entries between them. Vixen, with only 51 entries, gives us a series of first uses, including words like “fashion magazine” and “stylishly” that produce in print the daily practice of the fashionable set. These three novels also illustrate a frustration with and critique of that world by privileging the characters who reject it, Violet Tempest, Daphne Lawford and Christabel Tregonell, over those who embrace it, Mrs. Winstanley, Rhoda Ferrers and the Vandeleur sisters. Although the words used to describe it are rich and multiple, the fashionable world and its inhabitants seem thin and pale when placed beside characters with greater intellectual, moral and emotional substance. When Braddon wrote to Edward Bulwer-Lytton “I have learnt to look at everything in a mercantile sense” (Wolff 14)
she could have easily have been referring to the mercantilism populating the pages of these three novels, her own products, and to their reproduction of the world of Fashion. But Fashion and the words that describe it are not depicted in a positive light. Many of the OED citations use passages in which the trappings of material culture are belittled. The reader is left with the impression that materialism is a shadowy imitation of a life of substance.

Works Cited


