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'Important Trifles': Jane Austen, the fashion magazine, and inter-textual consumer experience

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ABSTRACT

Austen's letters, maligned by E. M. Forster, a self-confessed 'Jane Austenite', as 'catalogues of trivialities which do not come alive', have in many ways brought to life the consumer world of the late eighteenth century. However, we cannot pass over Austen's letters as simple historical records of how and where the author participated in a burgeoning consumer culture. Rather, we must consider them alongside her fiction as literary artefacts actively engaging with the rising fashion system. In her letters and early fiction Austen cultivates a style that is precariously positioned between satire and earnestness in her depiction of consumer experience, celebrating ambivalence and paradox. This article reads Austen's playful linguistic representations of the trifles of fashionable consumption alongside the flourishing market of fashion-related literature, in particular the nascent fashion magazine. In doing so, it reveals the diverse ways in which these magazines, like Austen's letters and fiction, both contested and aggrandised the triviality of fashionable consumption. This article seeks to reassess – indeed recover – fashion magazines of the late-eighteenth century, publications which have been largely overlooked by historians and literary critics, in order to conceptualise the textual experience of fashionable consumption in the period.

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In October 1798 Jane Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra, detailing purchases made whilst in Basingstoke. The letter is characteristic of Austen's epistolary discourse, in which she conveys the minutiae of fashion and commerce with scrupulous detail. Austen describes her various transactions with a knowing, comical lexicon of scepticism and superlatives:

> […] I went to M^{rs} Ryders, & bought what I intended to buy, but not in much perfection. – There were no narrow Braces for Children, & scarcely any netting silk; but Miss Wood as usual is going to Town very soon, & will lay in a fresh stock. – I gave 2^{s}/3^{d} a yard for my flannel, & I fancy it is not very good; but it is so disgraceful & contemptible an article in itself, that its' [*sic*] being comparatively good or bad is of little importance. I bought some Japan Ink likewise, & next week shall begin my operations on my hat, on which You know my principal hopes of happiness depend.[1]

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[1]Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 27–28 October 1798, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 16. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

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Elsewhere in her correspondence Austen deliberates over past and future purchases; she agonises over the judiciousness of her bargains and half-jokingly frets over 'Commissions' that have been made.[2] Austen gives her reader exact measurements and costs: no detail is superfluous, no description without veiled significance. She accompanies the trivia of pocketholes and bonnet ornaments with an affective register: she is 'tired & ashamed' of her 'present stock' of clothes,[3] feels 'self-congratulation' upon the purchase of some figured cambric muslin for her brother,[4] is 'astonished' by the beauty of her lace,[5] and adds dying a gown blue to her 'subjects of never failing regret'.[6] Austen reflects with playful yet sincere fascination on consumer experience: 'You know how interesting the purchase of a sponge-cake is to me,' she writes with meaningful and collusive obscurity to Cassandra from her brother's estate in Kent.[7]

Austen's letters, maligned by E. M. Forster, a self-confessed 'Jane Austenite', as 'catalogues of trivialities which do not come alive', have in many ways brought to life the consumer world of the late-eighteenth century: it is now rare to encounter a history of shopping, fashion or consumption of the period that does not draw upon the experiences recorded in her 'unique' correspondence.[8] With their detailed descriptions of shopping excursions, whether at fashionable London warehouses such as Grafton House, Crook & Besford's, Layton & Shears, Wedgwood, and Newton's; the mantua-makers and shops of Bath's Milsom Street; trips to the provincial Basingstoke haberdasher; or visits from the itinerant 'Lace Man',[9] Austen's letters reveal how the eighteenth-century consumer navigated numerous distinct commercial environments. Yet we cannot pass over Austen's valuable letters, as many readers have done, as anecdotal records of how and where she participated in a burgeoning consumer culture. To do so is to undermine and overlook the textual complexities of Austen's correspondence. Rather, we must consider them alongside her fiction as literary artefacts worthy of rigorous scholarly attention.

Austen, in her letters, is actively engaging with a rising fashion system which was, as Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace contends in her examination of the 'eighteenth-century coinage' of the verb 'to shop', as much a 'linguistic' as a 'cultural process'.[10] This is not to say that fashion itself must be treated as a language. Rather, it suggests that the rise of fashion necessitated accompanying linguistic transformations: consumers required a language in which to frame and describe fashionable consumption. Fashion thus also

[2]Austen writes: 'I am now able to thank you for executing my Commissions so well. – I like the Gown very much & my Mother thinks it very ugly.' *Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 25–27 October 1800, 51.
[3]*Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 24–26 December 1798, 30.
[4]*Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 1 December 1800, 65.
[5]See *Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 1 November 1800, 52.
[6]*Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 7–9 November 1808, 143.
[7]*Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 15–17 June 1808, 128.
[8]E. M. Forster, *Abinger Harvest* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), 158. Alison Adburgham discusses Austen's 'unique' letters in *Shops and Shopping, 1800–1914: Where, and In What Manner the Well-Dressed Englishwoman Bought Her Clothes* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964), 5.Other examples of histories of consumption and fashion that use Austen's letters include, for instance, Neil McKendrick, 'Commercialization and the Economy', in *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb (London: Hutchinson, 1983), 41; Ann Bermingham 'The Picturesque and ready-to-wear Femininity', in *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics Since 1770*, ed. Stephen Copley and Peter Garside (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 94; Jane Ashelford, *The Art of Dress: Clothes and Society, 1500–1914* (London: National Trust Books, 1996), 170.
[9]*Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 27–28 October 1798, 17.
[10]Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 6, 74.

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became a textual process, entailing the consumption of certain texts (such as magazines), which served as fashionable objects of consumption themselves whilst offering their readers narratives, genres and linguistic strategies in which to express and consume fashion. In his analysis of French fashion magazines Roland Barthes argues that sartorial fashion 'can only be *transformed* into "representation"', whether via image or language, and values verbal representations of fashion for their semantic transparency.[11] Austen, however, embraces the potential for paradox, indefiniteness and ambiguity in textual representations of fashion, cultivating a style that is precariously positioned between satire and earnestness. It is 'precarious' precisely because it is neither entirely mocking nor completely 'serious', and because it appears to celebrate the very textual and consumer practices it concurrently critiques, thus relishing interpretive uncertainty rather than eradicating it.

This essay reads Austen's linguistic representations of fashionable consumption alongside the flourishing market of fashion-related literature, in particular the emerging fashion magazine. In doing so, it reveals the diverse ways in which these texts, like Austen's letters and fiction, contested the triviality of fashionable consumption. This essay aims to reassess – indeed recover – the language of fashion magazines of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, publications which have frequently been marginalised by historians and literary critics, in order to conceptualise the relationship between Austen (as reader, writer and consumer) and these texts.

In her study of the lives of eighteenth-century women, Amanda Vickery observes that the moment of commercial exchange itself is fleeting: it is 'a mere snap-shot in the life of a commodity'.[12] Yet Austen's correspondence returns to and lingers upon the transitory moment of purchase. Austen explicitly raises fleeting instances of exchange to scenes of prolonged narrative and linguistic 'interest', a term which, in Sianne Ngai's account, denotes 'the capacity for duration and is fundamentally recursive, returning us to the object for another look'.[13] This sense of 'interest' in the snap-shot moment of commodity exchange, experienced by Austen, mimics at a textual level the experience of shopping itself. Increasingly during the eighteenth century shops were designed to draw customers in, enticing them to stay, browse and 'inspect goods closely'.[14] As in her letters, in Austen's fiction the pleasure of shopping is drawn out. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) Mrs Palmer, shopping in London's West End, becomes paralysed by consumer desire: her 'eye was

[11]Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2010), 60. In his examination of the communicative potential of fashion Malcolm Barnard observes that *The Fashion System*, which applies the principles of structural linguistics to fashion, has been written off as a 'semiological disaster'. Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1996), 96. Criticism of Barthes stems from the argument that fashion clothing cannot communicate with any precision, and thus cannot be seen as a form of language. Austen's writings show that even those attempts by eighteenth-century fashion magazines to transform fashion into language (verbal representation) result in paradox and linguistic contradiction.

[12]Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale Univeristy Press, 1998), 183.

[13]Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2012), 133.

[14]Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann and Victoria Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c. 1680–1830* (London: Routledge, 2007), 157. See also Claire Walsh, 'Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of Design History* 8, no. 4 (1994): 157–76; Claire Walsh, 'Shops, Shopping, and the Art of Decision Making in Eighteenth-Century England', in *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America, 1700–1830*, ed. Amanda Vickery and John Styles (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 154; Jon Stobart, 'A History of Shopping: The Missing Link Between Retail and Consumer Revolutions', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* 2, no. 3 (2010): 346.

caught by every thing pretty, expensive, or new' on display in the shops of Bond Street; she 'was wild to buy all, could determine on none, and dawdled away her time in rapture and indecision'.[15] Consumer desire in Austen manifests itself as a peculiar kind of charged inertia. As Clara Tuite notes in her analysis of *Emma* (1815), Emma Woodhouse's protégée Harriet Smith is '"always very long at a purchase"'; Austen thus conveys the shopping experience as 'a compounded desire that forestalls activity'.[16]

Regardless of one's purchasing power, the shopping experience is one of pleasurable delay and anticipation: suspending and lingering upon the 'snap-shot' moment of purchase, whether narratologially or experientially, intensifies the pleasure and raises the interest of shopping. In these fictional scenes of consumer behaviour, Austen appears to critique the 'interest' of shopping by aligning it with characters such as Mrs Palmer and Harriet Smith who are easily absorbed (if not overwhelmed) by the experience. Yet, such a reading is unsettled by Austen's own urge, both here and in her letters, to textually draw out and unapologetically indulge in the minutiae of shopping. As critics such as Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, Laura Engel and Jodi L. Wyett have sought to show in readings that perceptively bring together Austen's writings and contemporary periodical culture, it is not the case, as Ann Bermingham insists, that 'fashion – or at least an over-concern with fashion' is merely 'a sign of superficiality and vulgar materialism' in Austen's characters. The presence of fashion in Austen's writing also signifies something far more complex and 'interesting'; the shared values it produces between reader and writer, and the narrative tensions it generates between the transient and the enduring, require a more nuanced reading of her letters, juvenilia and novels.[17]

The prevailing (and continuing) assertion that Austen's letters deal with 'trivialities' exemplifies a form of discourse that censures attention to putatively feminine and thus frivolous preoccupations such as fashion and shopping.[18] It draws on the long tradition of viewing fashionable consumption as a reflection of 'female superficiality and depraved attraction to things'.[19] 'Triviality' is thus a particularly charged term, encompassing a sense of diminution and marginalisation that can be readily applied to both fashion and text. Textually, it signals incongruence between the (in)significance of the subject and the time, space and language applied to it. Austen's writings, whether those deemed marginal (her letters and juvenilia) or her more 'serious' novels, aggrandise the

[15] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. James Kinsley, introduction by Margaret Anne Doody (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, [1980] 2008), 123.

[16] Clara Tuite, '*Sanditon*: Austen's pre-post Waterloo,' *Textual Practice* 26, no. 4 (2012): 618–19.

[17] Bermingham, 'The Picturesque and Ready-to-Wear Femininity', 94. See Jillian Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Laura Engel, *Austen, Actresses, and Accessories: Much Ado About Muffs* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Jodi L. Wyett, 'Female Quixotism Refashioned: *Northanger Abbey*, the Engaged Reader, and the Woman Writer', *The Eighteenth-Century* 56, no. 2 (2015): 261–76.

[18] Many readers, critics and biographers of Austen have, historically, expressed similar dissatisfaction with her letters. Susan J. Wolfson summarizes responses to Austen's letters in 'Boxing Emma; or the Reader's Dilemma at the Box Hill Games', in *Re-Reading Box Hill: Reading the Practice of Reading Everyday Life, Romantic Circles*, ed. William Galperin, Praxis Series (2000), https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/boxhill/wolfson/wolfson (accessed March 29, 2016). The diaries and letters of men such as James Woodforde, a country parson, and Francis Place, a tailor, show that men were equally preoccupied by shopping and the purchase of clothing. Vickery argues that 'Ancient prejudices' against women have incorrectly 'been passed off as actual behaviour', thus damaging 'research on women's consumption'. She shows that 'while men bought luxuries for themselves and certain commodities for the household and the dynasty, it was still women who were principally identified with spending in the eighteenth-century imagination'. Amanda Vickery, 'Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751–81', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 277, 281.

[19] Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2005] 2007), 245.

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status, affect and interest of trivialities, serving to challenge the trivial status of fashion whilst evoking fashionable consumption with an ostensibly disproportionate level of interest and emotional investment.

For Austen, textual representations of fashionable consumption rest between a series of ironies and paradoxes: fashion and text are at once transient and enduring, trivial and serious. The inflated language that underpins Austen's letter to Cassandra, in which her 'principal hopes of happiness depend' on the decoration of a hat, raises the significance of sartorial decoration to mock-epic proportions. Her use of ironic hyperbole in matters of consumption extends from her letters to her fiction, most obviously in *Sense and Sensibility*. In this novel, the foppish Robert Ferrars debates between toothpick cases made of 'ivory, gold and pearls' at the counter of Gray's jewellers, a real shop which occupied No. 41 Sackville Street in London's West End between 1802 and 1814.[20] He finally concludes his order, 'having named the last day on which his existence could be continued without the possession of the toothpick-case'.[21] Life itself hangs on the purchase of fashionable goods. Yet, Austen's textual representations of consumer experience, whether real or fictional, are by no means limited to satire; rather, they are complex and ambivalent, circulating between sarcasm and sincerity, concurrently scorning and celebrating the trifles of fashionable consumption.

The scene at Gray's recalls a letter Austen sent to Cassandra in 1801 in which she again mentions the Mrs Ryder of Basingstoke whose goods so disappointed her in 1798:

> 'The Neighbourhood have quite recovered the death of M^rs^ Rider [*sic*]' she writes, ' – so much so, that I think they are rather rejoiced at it now; her Things were so very dear! – & M^rs^ Rogers is to be all that is desirable'.[22]

Austen blithely elevates the cost of trivial 'Things' above the very existence of the haberdasher. The letter again exemplifies the precariousness of Austen's tone in matters of consumption. The facetious letter is not so much an expression of Austen's callousness; rather, like the scene in which Robert Ferrars mentally engages with the precious toothpick cases before him for an excessive quarter of an hour each, it is a shrewd observation of the commodity fetishism that preponderates amongst her neighbours.[23] It is a reflection of the distinctive culture in which Austen grew up, which witnessed 'the commercialization of culture and the rise of the fashion system'.[24] The caustic and even macabre tone that saturates her letters and fiction satirically undermines by reproducing and exaggerating contemporary linguistic strategies that aggrandise fashionable consumption; it relishes the effects produced by fashion-centric texts that give great significance and interest to the frequently depreciated subject of fashion.

[20]Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, 165. On the location of Gray's see Ambrose Heal, *The London Goldsmiths 1200–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), 163.
[21]Austen, *Sense and Sensibility,* 166.
[22]*Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 21–22 January 1801, 76.
[23]Marvin Mudrick misreads Austen's jokes about death in *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 193.
[24]Gary Kelly, 'Jane Austen and the Politics of Style', in *Re-Drawing Austen: Picturesque Travels in Austenland*, ed. Beatrice Battaglia and Diego Saglia (Napoli: Liguori, 2004), 61.

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Fashion and print culture

During the rising fashion system the experience of consumption was reflected, guided and re-envisioned through texts. The growing fashion industry and consumer market resulted in an outpouring of fashion-centric publications. Lee Erickson points to a direct correlation between the rise in printed material towards the beginning of the nineteenth century and quickening cycles of fashion: improvements in textile manufacturing had increased both the availability of clothes and the rapidity with which old clothes were discarded, thus augmenting 'the supply of rags available for paper production'.[25] Textual and textile production thus became 'interlocked' in the period.[26] Austen's textual representations of fashionable consumption should be understood alongside the coeval surge in fashion-related literature, literature that was intimately related to the concurrent 'evolution' in consumer practices.[27]

The growing fashion industry resulted in the first fashion magazines for women, a genre that has been largely and unfairly overlooked in studies of Romantic-era periodical culture.[28] These fashionable literary magazines emerged within a growing market for periodicals and magazines. The year 1770 marked the birth of the *Lady's Magazine; Or, Polite and Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex*. The impact of the periodical – which placed dress 'at the very core of the [its] ideology'[29] – and other similar publications upon their largely female readership should not be underestimated. Whilst Edward Copeland maintains that '"everybody" read the *Lady's Magazine* […] That is, everybody prosperous enough to afford a ticket to the local circulating library where current issues and copies of back years in bound volumes could both be obtained', estimated figures suggest more precisely that it reached 16,000 readers at its height.[30] Certainly, the accessibility of the *Lady's Magazine* meant that keeping *au courant* with the latest fashions was not limited to an elite few. Moreover, these magazines facilitated the circulation of fashion knowledge outside London: a Miss Ellen Weeton, a governess from the environs of Preston, was amongst its many readers. In a letter in 1810 she asks a friend to send her 'patterns of fancy work; I am not quite sure whether they are in the workbag in the

[25]Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1815* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 7.

[26]Chloe Wigston Smith argues that 'the production of paper interlocked print culture with the culture of clothing' in *Women, Work, and Clothes in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 48.

[27]Edward Copeland discusses the terms 'evolution' and 'revolution' as they are used by economic historians. Edward Copeland, *Women Writing About Money: Women's Fiction in England, 1790–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7.

[28]I categorise the magazines discussed in this essay as 'fashion magazines' due to their dominant and shared emphasis on fashion; the magazines also emphasise their own fashionability as reading material. Jennie Batchelor is currently leading 'The *Lady's Magazine* (1770–1818): Understanding the Emergence of a Genre', a Leverhulme-funded project at the University of Kent. The project analyses the *Lady's Magazine*, one of the periodicals examined in this essay. Discussion of fashionable magazines can be found in general surveys of women's magazines, including Alison Adburgham, *Women in Print: Writing Women and Women's Magazines from the Restoration to the Accession of Victoria* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972); Ballaster et al., *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991); Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own? Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 1996); Robert Mayo, *The English Novel in the Magazines, 1740–1815: With A Catalogue of Magazine Novels and Novelettes* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1962); Kathryn Shevelow, *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (London: Routledge, 1989); Cynthia L. White, *Women's Magazines 1693–1968* (London: Michael Joseph, 1970).

[29]Jennie Batchelor, 'Reclothing the Female Reader: Dress and the *Lady's Magazine*', *Women's History Magazine* 49 (2005): 16.

[30]Copeland, *Women Writing About Money*, 119. Figures based on Jean Hunter, 'The *Lady's Magazine* and the Study of Englishwomen in the Eighteenth Century', in *Newsletters to Newspapers: Eighteenth-Century Journalism*, ed. Donovan Bond and W. Reynolds McLeod (Morgantown: West Virginia University, 1977), 105.

bottom, or the middle drawer, or bound up with the new Lady's Magazine in the top drawer'.[31] Weeton's practice of keeping the periodical ensconced in petticoats, dresses, workbags and coats attests to the perceived intimacy of text and fashion, particularly in the consciousness of eighteenth-century women consumers. The success of the *Lady's Magazine* spurred on similar publications, including the *Lady's Monthly Museum* in 1798 – a magazine that in 1805 boasted of reaching 'FIFTY THOUSAND' readers[32] – and *La Belle Assemblée* in 1806, a more up-market and typographically impressive magazine that could be purchased for three shillings.

Austen was undoubtedly familiar with these fashion magazines: she borrows and parodies the titles, plot formulae and character names that appeared in the fiction of both the *Lady's Magazine* and the *Lady's Monthly Museum*.[33] Edward Copeland notes a particular association between the material of Austen's juvenilia, which is highly conscious of consumer fashions (whether in books or clothing) and the narratives of the *Lady's Magazine*.[34] These magazines offered a gauge and catalogue of current tastes in all areas of fashionable consumption, from literature to clothing. Austen and her female relatives had a shared knowledge of these publications: whilst evidence suggests that Austen's mother subscribed to the *Lady's Monthly Museum*,[35] Fanny Knight, a niece whom Austen frequently accompanied on shopping excursions and who, in 1813, she jovially lamented was apt to 'chuse [*sic*] in a hurry & make bad bargains', owned an 1814 issue of *La Belle Assemblée*.[36] Fashion magazines represent one of many ways in which women were, by the end of the eighteenth century, expected to engage in fashionable consumption at a textual level, whether by browsing the fashions and fictions featured in fashionable magazines or recording their expenditure in fashionable pocketbooks.

Fashion magazines were quick to dispute the triviality of fashionable consumption. Such publications had to justify their existence by precipitately defending themselves against claims of frivolity. In 1794 *The Gallery of Fashion* became, as Alison Adburgham observes, the 'first English publication devoted entirely to fashion'; the monthly magazine contained high quality coloured fashion-plates, yet omitted the journalism, fiction and poetry that was typical of similar publications.[37] In 1795 the editor insists that, 'however trifling' a magazine devoted entirely to fashion

> may appear at first view to the eye of the philosopher, yet as it records all the elegant varieties in female dress, it is not only interesting at the present moment, but must become much more

[31] Ellen Weeton to Miss Winkley, 11 May 1810, in *Journal of a Governess, 1807–1811*, 2 vols. ed. Edward Hall (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), i, 261.
[32] 'Preface', *Lady's Monthly Museum,* July 1805, ii.
[33] See Edward Copeland, 'Money Talks: Jane Austen and the *Lady's Magazine*', in *Jane Austen's Beginnings: The Juvenilia and Lady Susan*, ed. J. David Gray (Ann Arbour, MI: UMI Research Press, 1989), 160 and Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 112.
[34] Copeland, 'Money Talks', 153.
[35] Le Faye, who contends that Austen borrows the title 'Sense and Sensibility' from a 1799 *Lady's Monthly Museum* article, conjectures that her mother subscribed to the periodical (Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 112). See 'Effects of Mistaken Synonymy', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, January 1799, 21–24.
[36] *Letters*, Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 23–24 September 1813, 225. Mary Hafner-Laney notes that Fanny Knight's copy of *La Belle Assemblée* still survives in '"I was tempted by a pretty coloured muslin": Jane Austen and the Art of Being Fashionable,' *Persuasions* 32 (2010): 135–43. Whilst *La Belle Assemblée* was more expensive than the *Lady's Monthly Museum* or the *Lady's Magazine*, Beetham notes that'[w]hat distinguished this magazine from its rivals, however, was the quality of its production and its coverage of "fashion". Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 32.
[37] Adburgham, *Women in Print*, 204.

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> so at a remote period, being a complete history of the Fashions of the day, and as such it may not be undeserving a place in the first libraries in Europe.[38]

Philosophy, and thus intellectual rigour, is aligned with the vacuous and 'trifling' subject of sartorial fashion: the magazine treats fashion with full seriousness. The *Gallery*, established by the French émigré Niklaus von Heideloff who fled to London during the French Revolution, inveighs against anglophile derision of fashionable consumption.[39] As Aileen Ribeiro argues, fashion was held in much higher esteem in eighteenth-century France, where 'salon culture [embraced] the latest modes in dress and design alongside those in literature and philosophy'.[40] History, *The Gallery of Fashion* insists in its address to British readers, validates the potentially trivial and inescapably transient subject of fashionable dress: as a text that encapsulates a particular moment in time, it can only increase in value. By envisioning a future in which *The Gallery of Fashion* is placed on the shelves of the 'first libraries in Europe', the editor swiftly stymies any suggestion that the magazine's seasonality renders it, like the objects of fashion it promotes, throwaway trivia.[41] Equally, at seven shillings six pence a copy this finely engraved magazine was by no means disposable. *The Gallery of Fashion*, like Austen's correspondence and fiction, elevates fashionable consumption by appealing to the value of 'interest' and thus durability: it acknowledges the ephemerality of fashion (which exists only in the 'present moment'), only to emphasise its own enduring value as a text to which readers will return. Although Austen expresses anxieties regarding the ability of texts that rely so strongly on references to fashion to endure (a concern which is most palpable in her 1816 'Advertisement' to *Northanger Abbey*) the paradox implicit in Heideloff's statement, which is that textual permanence can be achieved through topicality, is equally applicable to Austen's own works.[42]

Years after Heideloff's defence of fashion and fashion-centric texts Emma Parker published *Important Trifles: Chiefly Appropriate to Females on Their Entrance into Society* (1817), the title of which exemplifies the tensions embedded in both discussion and textual representation of fashion. Parker had published several novels with a variety of fashionable publishers including Benjamin Crosby and William Lane's Minerva Press. By 1817 Parker had turned her attention to those issues that were 'Chiefly Appropriate to Females on their Entrance into Society'. In *Important Trifles* she attempts to 'convince' those women who have 'attained all the advantages of a liberal education' that 'much importance may be justly attached to some particulars, which they have probably been

[38]'Advertisement', *The Gallery of Fashion*, April 1795.
[39]See Ashelford, *The Art of Dress*, 177.
[40]Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750–1820* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 30.
[41]David Stewart notes that it was in part the '*periodical* nature' of magazines that made 'them so worryingly like commodities' for contemporaries. David Stewart, *Romantic Magazines and Metropolitan Literary Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011), 165. Beetham argues that

> the periodical is above all an ephemeral form, produced for a particular day, week or month. Its claims to truth and importance are always contingent, as is clear from the date which is prominently displayed (sometimes on every page). This affects its material form as well as its meaning. Because they are designed to be thrown away, most periodicals are physically more fragile than books, produced on cheap paper and without stiff covers.

Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?*, 9. However, *La Belle Assemblée* was designed so that copies could be bound together into volumes and kept for future reference. See Adburgham, *Women in Print*, 220.
[42]See 'Advertisement, by the Authoress, to *Northanger Abbey*', in Jane Austen, *'Northanger Abbey' and Other Works*, ed. James Kinsley and John Davie, introduction by Claudia L. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [2003] 2008), 3.

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in the habit of supposing unworthy of their consideration', amongst them 'Dress and Manners'.[43] Parker's essay is significant due to the way in which it encapsulates the language related to fashionable consumption, and women's association with the trivial, that runs throughout fashion magazines of the period. Parker magnifies the status of 'trifles' such as dress by highlighting the 'exercise of judgement' that is 'as essential in guiding our dress, and controlling our manners, as in enabling us to decide on the most important action of our lives'.[44] Parker places fashion on the same level as the most significant life decisions (whilst Austen satirically elevates it above life itself) by arguing for a correlation between these two forms of judgement. Fashion is allied to the thoughtful, rather than the vacuous:

> To attach any importance to the outward appearance, or study the effect of dress and manner, may perhaps be deemed subjects beneath the consideration of a reflective mind. Yet is it precisely by a mind accustomed to reflect, that these things are discovered to be of consequence.[45]

As in Heideloff's magazine, Parker seeks to challenge the vacuity of fashion. Yet, unlike Heideloff's text, in which that which is erroneously labelled 'trifling' (both fashion and the fashion magazine) can be redeemed by the anticipation of its obsolescence and thus its future value, Parker aligns fashion and her text with a different language of philosophical reflection. Fashion, for Parker, must always possess value in the present. Parker's aggrandisement of fashion is seemingly distinct from that which we observe in Austen's writings, which magnify fashion through linguistic techniques of hyperbole and irony. Yet Parker's emphasis on fashion's paradoxical status as an 'important trifle' echoes the tensions present in Austen's letters and fiction.

Sensibility and taste in the fashion magazine

Parker's text, its very title even, must be read in light of the prevailing language of popular women's magazines. One month after the *Lady's Monthly Museum* had published a discussion of the 'Effects of Mistaken Synonymy' in relation to the terms 'SENSE and SENSIBILITY' (a phrase Austen would borrow for the title of her first novel), the magazine published a treatise 'On Taste'.[46] The article stresses that trifles and small details are just as worthy of attention as the sublime. The contributor, promoting equilibrium in aesthetic judgement, writes,

> I would not be understood to give a preference to the taste for minute beauties, in opposition to the magnificent and the sublime. All I contend for is, that, in the admiration of the former, there is nothing derogatory of the greatest genius; and that a truly comprehensive mind is that which can embrace 'all forms, the vast and the minute'.[47]

The author defends the aesthetics of detail, a fashionable picturesque aesthetic developed by William Gilpin in the late-eighteenth century which concentrated on 'the minutia of

[43]Emma Parker, *Important Trifles: Chiefly Appropriate to Females on their Entrance into Society* (London: T. Egerton, 1817), ix–x.
[44]Ibid., 66.
[45]Ibid., 65.
[46]On Austen's use of the title see Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 112
[47]'On Taste', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, February 1799, 102–3.

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trifling circumstances' and was, as Bermingham suggests, appropriated by magazines to 'serve the nascent mass-marketing needs of a developing commercial culture'.[48] The contributor, repackaging the language of Gilpin, calls upon a form of taste that values the minute, thus implicitly, even covertly, instilling the fashionable trifles purveyed by the magazine with deeper aesthetic significance. In Maxine Berg's account of eighteenth-century consumption, '[t]aste conveys aesthetically based reason, and custom an appeal to comfort or morality. Fashion, by contrast, is associated with the irrational and impermanent'.[49] By aligning fashion with a standard of taste these magazines sought to challenge the widespread assertion that fashion was capricious and arbitrary whilst again instilling it with a sense of permanence.

Included in the same issue as this essay 'On Taste' is the article, 'How to Cultivate and Improve the Sensibility of the Heart', in which taste is emphasised as an essential element of female education.[50] Whilst these magazines are characterised by heterogeneity and polyvocality due to their reliance on unpaid or low-paid contributors, there is a clear pedagogic editorial emphasis on the co-operative cultivation of taste and sensibility. They promote the aesthetic importance of sensibility, encouraging an affective response to fashion that Austen reworks in her letters. As the *Lady's Magazine*'s 'Preface to the Public' in 1786 insists, 'A Delicacy of Sentiment, and a Disposition to Moral Excellence' will result from reading the magazine; as a text that aims to 'improve the Understanding in useful Knowledge, to cherish in the Mind a Love of Virtue', it will also '[refine] the taste', making 'British Ladies not only the Pattern of every Domestic Virtue, but the Delight and Ornament of Society'.[51] The corresponding domains of sensibility and taste, of 'Virtue' and 'Ornament', are interlocked. The magazine seizes on key terms such as 'delicacy', a word which encompasses the psychic and somatic qualities of sensibility: moral sensitivity, refined taste and a particularly fine nerve structure. In 1786 the association between virtuous sensibility and tasteful fashion is implicit; by 1789 the connection was unmistakable: the magazine was to promote various 'improving Sentiments' whilst giving 'Prints of Ladies elegantly dressed in the prevailing Mode of London and Paris', thus teaching its female readers how to feel through 'Examples of Virtue' whilst instructing them in the most tasteful attire.[52] These magazines marketed themselves as indispensible objects of textual consumption to the woman who wanted to engage in tasteful fashionability.

Sensibility, depicted as an essential moral virtue, is conveyed via 'its cognate category, taste', and taste is in turn most palpably expressed through fashionable commodities.[53] The fashion magazine turns to an enduring branch of aesthetic and moral philosophy, promoted earlier in the century by Lord Shaftesbury in his *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) and popularised by Joseph Addison, in which aesthetics and ethics are intertwined. Throughout fashion magazines one encounters a Shaftesburian

[48]Bermingham, 'The Picturesque and Ready-to-Wear Femininity', 83, 81.
[49]Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure*, 250.
[50]Edward W. R. Pitcher notes that this latter article is 'bafflingly inconsistent in its principles and assumptions', regarding sensibility. Edward W. R. Pitcher, *'Lady's Monthly Museum' First Series: 1798–1806: An Annotated Index of Signatures and Ascriptions* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2000), 10.
[51]'Address to the Public', *Lady's Magazine*, January 1786, 3–4.
[52]'Address to the Public', *Lady's Magazine*, January 1789, 3.
[53]Miranda Burgess, 'Sentiment and Sensibility: Austen, Feeling and Print culture', in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 231.

discourse of sensibility, virtue and taste, thus following the tradition of earlier periodicals (such as Addison's *Spectator*), which attempted to reconcile virtue with consumer wealth. Indeed, many contributors to fashion magazines sought to treat fashions in dress as periodicals such as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* had treated fashions 'in "culture" (literature, drama, opera, music, painting)': 'as avenues for sociocultural reform'.[54] This reform centred upon the language of taste and beauty. Specifically, these new magazines resituate the language of taste within the realm of fashion, offering a counter-narrative to the prevailing notion of fashion as frivolous. In 1806 a contributor to *La Belle Assemblée* argues that it is possible to discern a woman's virtue merely from reflecting on her taste in dress:

> Women ought not only to adopt colours as suit their complexions, but they should likewise take care that these colours harmonise with each other. It is particularly by this that females of taste may be discovered; habituated to dress with propriety, they possess that delicacy of feeling, that exquisite sense, which admits nothing false – nothing discordant.[55]

The belief that good taste in dress is both, as *The Mirror of the Graces: Or, The English Lady's Costume* (1811) contends, 'inseparable from propriety' and an 'index of the wearer's well-regulated mind' affirms the assimilation of fashion into the discourse of taste and ethics.[56] As Colin Campbell insists, bad taste came to be indicative of 'a moral lapse, whilst correspondingly virtue became an aesthetic quality, such that, in turn, any moral lapse was "bad taste"'.[57] The ability to engage tastefully with the trivial and the vast becomes evidence of both a 'comprehensive' and a virtuous mind. As Batchelor concludes,

> [t]he status of dress in the *Lady's Magazine* is always precarious. On the one hand, dress is a trivial subject, whose inclusion must always be justified. On the other hand, and as a commodity that emblematizes so many of the magazines concerns, it appears as the very crux upon which virtue, various social institutions, and the social structure itself, rest.[58]

Austen finds this 'precarious' linguistic and narrative strategy ripe for exploration, but extends this precariousness further, showing through her writing how she is able to parody this strategy whilst implicating herself in the satire.

As Vickery observes, invoking taste alongside props such as 'French silks' and 'chinoiserie' enabled eighteenth-century writers to reconcile wealth with virtue, yet there were 'no attempts to differentiate between tasteful and tasteless teacups in a way that would inform the consumer'.[59] By the late-eighteenth century the *Lady's Magazine* attempts to undertake this task of differentiation: it combines the language of taste and the marketplace, offering simultaneously to teach its readers good virtue and good taste in relation to fashionable commodities. As McNeil and Miller surmise, fashion magazines 'introduced the lofty concept of taste into the everyday' aiming not to 'make accessible aesthetic concepts such as beauty and the sublime' but rather to help its readers decide 'which latest millinery

[54]Erin Mackie, *Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity and Gender in 'The Tatler' and 'The Spectator'* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 207

[55]'Ladies' Toilette', *La Belle Assemblée*, March 1806, 80.

[56]'A Lady of Distinction', *The Mirror of the Graces, or, The English Lady's Costume* (London: B. Crosby, 1811), 62–3.

[57]Colin Campbell, 'Understanding Traditional and Modern Patterns of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century England: A Character-Action Approach', in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), 49.

[58]Batchelor, 'Reclothing the Female Reader', 16.

[59]Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 167.

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or head-dress was in the "best possible taste"'.[60] The value of fashion magazines ostensibly lay in their ability to guide readers towards tasteful fashions; these texts had become an invaluable part of consumer information. In 1808 the *Lady's Magazine* targets a particular style of tasteless dress:

> We cannot help remarking that we have of late seen some few attempts to introduce the long waist: we can only say we sincerely hope the good sense and taste of our fair country-women will prevent so Gothic and barbarous a fashion from becoming general.[61]

Comically, the *Magazine* rehearses the language of David Hume and Hugh Blair, who assert that good taste requires 'good sense' and that, however subjective taste may be, *linguistically* we all agree that the term 'elegance' signifies beauty in opposition to that which is 'barbarous'.[62] Moreover, the *Lady's Magazine* underscores the united principles of taste and virtue by appending its fashion advice with an instructive 'MAXIM', confirming the magazine's ongoing efforts to simultaneously edify its readers in morality and fashionable consumption.

Fashion magazines had thus found a way to legitimise the fashionable consumption endorsed by their content by appealing to the ethical implications of taste. In this sense, as Campbell maintains, 'not to be "in fashion" was tantamount to being of dubious moral standing' and so 'fashion-conscious conduct' was 'for those who subscribed to this ideal of character'.[63] However, this elevation of fashionable consumption went hand in hand with the fashion magazine's concurrent insistence that female virtue also relied on economy and modesty, qualities that were expressed linguistically through diminution, rather than elevation. Fashion magazines surreptitiously promoted a particular ideal of fashionable consumption via their serialised fiction. Much of the fiction featured in fashion magazines belonged to the sentimental genre, writers of which keenly searched 'for virtue's most appropriate dress', thus crystallising a blatant, if ambivalent, association between individual morality and sartorial fashion.[64] As the fashion magazine's dominant literary genre, sentimentalism offered a framework in which fashionable consumption could be reconciled with virtuous femininity. In one of many 'Sentimental Tales' published in the *Lady's Magazine*, those who 'vie with fashion's queen' are unfavourably compared to the sentimental Maria who 'could only exhibit a few choice muslins, a small addition of chintz, and other trifling acquisitions which served rather to display a delicacy than magnificent taste'.[65] Maria's sensibility is expressed through qualifying and negating terms, such as 'only', 'small', and 'trifling', that reflect her 'delicacy' of feeling and modest consumption of fashion.

By deploying linguistic strategies that simultaneously aggrandise and attenuate fashionable consumption, the fashion periodical reflects the impossible ideal of the female

[60]Peter McNeil and Sanda Miller, *Fashion Writing and Criticism: History, Theory, Practice* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 55
[61]'London Fashions', *Lady's Magazine*, July 1808, 312.
[62]David Hume, 'Of the Standard of Taste', in *Four Dissertations* (London: A. Millar, 1757), 229, 203–4. Hugh Blair argues that real discernment of beauty is the 'Offspring of Good Sense and Refined Taste' in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1784), 3rd ed., 3 vols. (London: A. Strahan, T. Cadell, 1787), i, 11.
[63]Campbell, 'Understanding Traditional and Modern Patterns of Consumption', 49.
[64]Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, 2005), 7. This association was 'ambivalent' because clothing offered the potential for disguise and because sentimental authors frequently attempted to disassociate their narratives from the fashion system whilst displaying fashion-consciousness.
[65]'The Illusions of Love, A Sentimental Tale', *Lady's Magazine*, May 1786, 255.

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consumer. In Harriet Guest's account, whilst 'the figure of the woman of fashion' continued to provide, 'a focus for anxieties about the morality of commercial culture', there emerged a 'counterimage' in 'the figure of the woman who does not consume enough' and whose failure to buy was, 'the sign not of prudence, but of a hardhearted lack of sensibility'.[66] Maria is not barred from an interest in fashion; a failure to follow fashion at all signalled lack of feeling, virtue and even, as Parker intimates in *Important Trifles*, the undesirable quality of 'eccentricity'.[67] Rather, Maria evinces a 'refined consumerism', a quality which, according to Barker-Benfield, became 'an inevitable dimension of female sensibility'.[68] Female consumerism had become interwoven with a particular textual representation of consumption found within the genre of sensibility. By assimilating fashionable consumption into the discourse of ethics and feeling, the fashion magazine served to both encourage women's restricted consumption of the latest and most fashionable products whilst elevating the acknowledged 'trifles' of fashion to paramount importance.

The language of sensibility was particularly appropriate for the discussion of contentiously trivial consumer objects: one criticism that was levelled against sensibility, even within the *Lady's Monthly Museum*, was that it often juxtaposed intense and serious issues with the trivial. 'I have known many a fair one', the contributor complains, 'bathed in tears for the loss of a favourite parrot'.[69] Such criticisms recall Hannah More's 1782 poem 'Sensibility': real sensibility, More maintains in an allusion to Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), is 'not to mourn because a sparrow dies'.[70] However, such attacks against 'ill-directed sensibility' conflict with the fashion magazine's recurrent evocation of the language of sensibility in seemingly trivial matters of fashionable consumption.[71] Such inconsistencies result not only from the cacophony of voices present in the multi-authored magazine, but also from the fashion magazine's 'arduous' endorsement of ostensibly incompatible ideologies: 'domestic morality and fashion'.[72]

Austen and the sensible consumer

Austen astringently reinterprets these textual representations of fashionable consumption, which assimilate fashion and feeling. Austen plays on the emerging image of the 'delicate' and sensible consumer of fashion, particularly in her youthful parodies. As Copeland argues, 'the great joke in the juvenilia is Austen's youthful discovery of the paradoxical affinity of sentimental literature and consumerism'.[73] Austen recognises that reading sentimental literature, a genre frequently associated with clothing and fashion, has become yet another form of fashionable consumerism.

[66]Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 76–7.
[67]Parker, *Important Trifles*, 66.
[68]Barker-Benfield makes this point in reference to Mary Hay's 1796 novel, *Emma Courtney*, although, as the fashion periodical shows, it has its roots in earlier fiction. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 210.
[69]'How to Cultivate and Improve Sensibility of the Heart', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, February 1799, 121. Pitcher notes how the writer mixes 'the trivial with the serious' (10).
[70]Hannah More, 'Sensibility', in *Sacred Dramas: Chiefly Intended for Young Persons* (London: T. Cadell, 1782), 282.
[71]'How to Cultivate and Improve Sensibility of the Heart', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, February 1799, 121.
[72]Batchelor, 'Reclothing the Female Reader', 14. Beetham discusses the concept of the 'multi-authored' magazine in *A Magazine of Her Own?,* 19–21.
[73]Copeland, 'Money Talks', 155.

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Austen's juvenile writings, which she copied into three mock-published *Volumes*, have a complex chronology: they were written between 1787 (when Austen was not yet twelve years old) and 1793 (when she was aged seventeen), yet Austen returned to these volumes to revise, erase and alter their content until at least 1811 (aged thirty-five).[74] In 'Frederic and Elfrida', first drafted in 1787 and copied into *Volume the First* of her juvenilia, Austen deploys the term 'delicate' to describe her sentimental heroine.[75] She recalls the lexicon of the fashion periodical, opening with a letter from Elfrida to her friend Charlotte in which the heroine requests a 'new and fashionable Bonnet' that will 'suit' her 'complexion'.[76] Her delicacy, however, soon emerges as debilitating: because of it, and in spite of having already bought her 'wedding cloathes', for twenty consecutive years Elfrida's parents refrain from pressing their delicate daughter on fixing a date for her marriage to her fiancé.[77] Eventually, on hearing that her fiancé plans to elope with another woman, Elfrida's delicacy of feeling surfaces: she falls into 'a succession of fainting fits', persuading her fiancé to marry her immediately.[78] Austen, comically, marks the twenty-year gap not with seasons of nature, but of fashion: 'Weeks and Fortnights flew away' she writes 'without gaining the least ground; the Cloathes [sic] grew out of fashion'.[79] Austen raises delicacy and clothing to the level of melodrama only to deflate the two. This comic disjunction, prevalent in sentimental fiction, between trivial concerns and intense feeling, mirrors the affective dimensions of fashionable consumption cultivated by the fashion magazine and deployed by Austen in her letters. In 'Frederic and Elfrida' Austen deploys the extraneous detail of changing fashions not simply to draw attention to the prevailing fashion-consciousness of sentimental novelists, but also to suggest that sensibility itself is nothing more than a passing vogue by aligning worn sentimental clichés with outmoded clothes. Austen again returns to the idea of the textual duration, revealing the extent to which literary modes are interwoven with patterns of fashionable consumption.

In another youthful pastiche, 'The Beautifull [*sic*] Cassandra' (*c.* 1788), a condensed twelve chapter 'novel' which spans a mere three pages, Austen again couples commodity fetishism with the sentimental rubric of the fashion magazine. The 'novel', like Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* (a favourite text amongst literary contributors to fashion magazines), sidelines plot in favour of episodic chapters. It tells the story of Cassandra, the 'Daughter and the only Daughter of a celebrated Millener in Bond Street' who happens to 'fall in love with an elegant Bonnet', so much so that she steals it.[80] In a prefatory dedication to Cassandra, the eponymous heroine, Austen frames her sister hyperbolically as a woman of feeling: 'You are a Phoenix. Your taste is refined, your Sentiments are noble, and your Virtues innumerable. Your person is lovely, your Figure, elegant, and your Form, magestic [*sic*].'[81] Cassandra takes the qualities of taste and sensibility – so praised by the fashion magazine – to excess. Her behaviour in the narrative parodies through exaggeration the

[74]On chronology see Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 203–4 and Peter Sabor, 'Introduction' in Jane Austen, *Juvenilia*, ed. Peter Sabor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xxiii–lxvii.
[75]Jane Austen, *Catharine and Other Writings*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray, introduction by Margaret Anne Doody (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1993] 2009), 9.
[76]Ibid., 3.
[77]Ibid., 6.
[78]Ibid., 10.
[79]Ibid., 9.
[80]Ibid., 43.
[81]Ibid., 41.

analogous forms of response that women of feeling were supposed to have to both fiction and fashion: as Barker-Benfield explains, '[f]ashionable books of sentimental fiction celebrated their own emotional effects on properly sensitized readers' and 'registered that readers should have the same sensitized and tasteful relationship to fashionable "objects," selected from the increasing range of consumer items women wore, carried with them, or used to characterize domestic space'.[82] Austen is thus engaging with a genre that collapses the distinctions between textual and fashionable consumption, promoting them as interrelated affective forms.

Barker-Benfield calls attention to sentimental fictions, including Elizabeth Inchbald's novel, *A Simple Story* (1791), in which Lord Elmwood strictly orders his daughter Matilda to stay out of his sight as a form of hereditary punishment for his wife's infidelity. After her father's departure from their country home Matilda is permitted to leave 'her lonely retreat', venturing 'into that part of the house from whence her father had just departed'.[83] The sight of her father's hat in this new domestic space gives way to a profusion of feelings indescribable:

> a hat, lying on one of the tables, gave her a sensation beyond any other she experienced on this occasion – in that trifling article of dress, she thought she saw himself, and held it in her hand with pious reverence.[84]

Cassandra, however, does not experience pious reverence in the observation of so-called 'trifling' articles of dress within the domestic environment, as a sentimental heroine should do; instead she experiences erotic feeling in millinery found within the commercial space of the shop. The bonnet does not become a receptacle of feeling in the sense that it becomes a fetishised surrogate for a loved one. Instead, the fashionable bonnet is sufficiently appealing on its own for Cassandra to develop passionate feelings.

Austen undermines the sentimental framework in which women display their taste and sensibility through their responses to fashionable clothes and books. The woman of feeling becomes associated with erotic fetishism of fashion, as she is led by her indiscriminate feelings to steal the bonnet. Moreover, the narrative as a whole shows that Cassandra, unlike the lovely Maria of the *Lady's Magazine* two years earlier, is excessive in her (anti-)consumer behaviour: she also devours 'six ices'[85] and refuses to pay for them, then ascends a 'Hackney Coach' without the money to pay her driver. Austen satirically elevates the article of dress, instilling it with romantic significance. Meanwhile, by allowing a character of sensibility to participate in excessive consumption, Austen undermines the dubious association between virtue and restrained consumption promoted by the very texts that sought to elevate fashionable objects of consumption.

The texts that emerged out of the rising fashion system, and which were themselves a significant part of fashionable consumption, influenced and reflected consumer experience in ways that should not be sidelined. Fashion magazines, and the women who were encouraged to contribute to their content, adopted diverse linguistic and textual strategies

[82]Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, 208.
[83]Elizabeth Inchbald, *A Simple Story*, ed. J. M. S. Tompkins, introduction by Jane Spencer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1967] 2009), 245.
[84]Ibid., 246.
[85]Austen, *Catharine and Other Writings*, 42, 43.

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to promote fashionable consumption within the frameworks of ethics, economy and taste.[86] These strategies entailed raising the acknowledged triviality of fashionable consumption to unlimited moral and aesthetic importance, reframing a potential vice as a virtue. Yet, contained within these strategies of aggrandisement are tensions and contradictions that Austen reconfigures in her own writing: she delights in the troubling precariousness of fashionable consumption, which lies between the trivial and the serious. Austen's epistolary and literary representations of consumer experience are infused with superlative and incongruous feelings; they convey an affective response to fashionable consumerism that both undermines and mimics the language of the fashion magazine and the narrative of sentimentalism. The way in which Austen responds to these texts is characteristically complex. Austen's writings often legitimately celebrate the deceptive and inescapable significance of consumer experience. Yet Austen also appropriates the language of the fashion magazine in order to challenge the indefinite and contradictory visions of consumer behaviour that characterised such publications.

In her fiction and correspondence Austen aggrandises the trivial and ephemeral experience of fashionable consumption through elevation, prolongation and hyperbole. These techniques, which reflect and exaggerate textual representations of consumption in coeval magazines, novels and essays, achieve different effects including irony, satire (of both fashion and literature), textual mimicry of the consumer experience itself, a heightening of the affective qualities of shopping and an avowal that the details of fashionable consumption can create value, meaning and interest. Reading Austen in this way demonstrates that it is productive, if not necessary, to value Austen's letters not only because of the information they convey regarding consumption, but also because they reveal that participation in the rising fashion system was not simply a cultural, but rather a an inter-textual experience, relying on the shared reading experiences of consumers.

Notes on contributor

Jane Taylor is currently a Teaching Fellow at University College London where she recently completed her doctoral thesis, 'Beyond the Trivial: Austen's Narratives of Fashion', funded by the AHRC. She also lectures on eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature at Somerville College, Oxford and Trinity College, Oxford. She has published her work on Austen's poetry in *Women's Writing*; her essay on 'ennui' and Maria Edgeworth will be published in the forthcoming volume, *Death and Disease in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture: Fashioning the Unfashionable* (Palgrave, 2016). Her research interests include fashion theory, the novel, material culture in the eighteenth century and the periodical press.

[86]In a letter to the *Lady's Monthly Museum*, one male writer acknowledges that the 'publication is professedly the employment of the female pen'. 'To the Editors of the Monthly Museum', *Lady's Monthly Museum*, August 1798, 136. Beetham asserts that women's magazines expected their audience 'to write or read "as women"'. Beetham, *A Magazine of her Own?*, 21.

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