

Shoplifting in Eighteenth-Century England

Review Number: 2329

Publish date: Thursday, 15 August, 2019

Author: Shelley Tickell

ISBN: 9781783273287

Date of Publication: 2018

Price: £19.99

Pages: 222pp.

Publisher: The Boydell Press

Publisher url: <https://boydellandbrewer.com/shoplifting-in-eighteenth-century-england-pb.html>

Place of Publication: Woodbridge

Reviewer: Jonah Miller

It has become commonplace for historians to refer to 18th-century England's 'consumer revolution'. Empire, international trade and later industrialisation brought goods to English homes in ever greater numbers and variety. Debate continues, however, on the extent of participation in this revolution. Were poor and working people just as excited about the latest imports and manufactures as their richer compatriots, or were such trinkets irrelevant in the daily struggle to survive? Were they consumers or, in E. P. Thompson's words, 'those whom the consumer society consumed'?⁽¹⁾

Shelley Tickell addresses this question from an unusual angle. *Shoplifting in Eighteenth-Century England* is a book about crime, but it is also about clothes, credit, consumption and, perhaps above all, class. An assessment of shoplifting as 'an alternative, if aberrant, form of consumer acquisition' (p. 9) offers historians the chance to see what people really wanted, regardless of what they could actually afford. This is the premise for Tickell's most direct historiographical intervention, but readers interested in legal, economic and social history will find many other evocative pieces of evidence and analysis. If it is overstating the case to call shoplifting 'the most emblematic of eighteenth-century crimes' (p. 2), it was nonetheless a crime with many resonances, worthy of thorough investigation.

Any history of shoplifting is inevitably also a history of shops, shoppers and shopping, and 18th-century England witnessed a shopping explosion. In 1700, most people still bought food, clothes and other necessities from markets and fairs; as the century progressed, shops displaced these ancient institutions in many parts of the country. On one estimate, the number of shops tripled between the late 17th century and 1759 to 137,000, or roughly one for every 45 people (p. 3). More shops meant more shoplifting. The Old Bailey heard 17 shoplifting cases a year in the middle of the 18th century, rising to almost eighty per year in the first decade of the 19th (p. 36). Tickell's first four chapters outline who stole, what they stole, where, when, how and why. This is a model of what can be done with legal records, based on over a thousand cases heard at the Old Bailey and the Northern Circuit assizes from the 1720s to the 1820s. Detailed case studies complement broader statistical analysis; there is a map following the route taken by three particular shoplifters through west London in 1787, and a chart showing the time of day at which thefts were most often committed – between 4pm and 7pm, the busiest trading hours and end of the working day (pp. 89, 25).

Small neighbourhood shops suffered more than grand stores selling the latest luxuries. Only 35 percent of London shops sold textiles, clothes and haberdashery, but these accounted for 69 per cent of all shoplifting cases in the capital (p. 48). Geographically, the focus gradually shifted from Cheapside and Fleet Street to Oxford Street to the city's periphery in Shoreditch, Holborn and St Giles. The victims were small, family-run premises staffed by the owners and perhaps one apprentice or employee. This has implications for the question of plebeian consumption: 'there was little tendency for shoplifters to seek out the greater choice and range of goods that larger stores might offer.' Thieves tended to stick to the shops and streets they knew best; as one shopkeeper explained in court, the woman who robbed him 'took them [stolen goods] from time to time; she has been an old customer' (pp. 53, 57).

This was partly because smaller shops were easier to steal from. Their layouts were simpler, there were fewer possible witnesses and opportunities to snatch something unobserved were many. Tickell distinguishes between two types of shoplifting, the 'snatch raid' – a straightforward grab and run – and the 'stealth theft' – distracting staff while slipping the loot into a pocket, apron, cloak or petticoat (p. 65). Most snatch raiders were men, while women's more expansive clothing gave them an advantage in stealth theft. Some wore tie-on pockets 'almost as big as sacks' under floor-length gowns and petticoats, 'transforming themselves into walking storage systems' (p. 80). Working in teams, one shoplifter might ask to see an obscure item or haggle for an implausibly low price while the other slipped goods into her clothes.

More than half of those accused of shoplifting were women, typically aged around 30 and often married. These were people 'at a life-cycle stage when the financial demands of maintaining a home and family would be most pressing', especially for those with children and no support from husbands, like the suspect in a 1743 case who 'has three small children; her husband is in Flanders' (p. 19). Poverty was the most common motive. As Tickell puts it, 'shoplifting was for most a form of makeshift, supplementing an inadequate or irregular employment income' (p. 23). The most efficient way to do this was to steal goods which could be easily sold on or pawned for ready cash. The majority of shoplifters' plunder took the form of clothing, textiles and cheap jewellery. These were stolen with an eye on the second-hand plebeian market which, while not indifferent to fashion, seldom stretched beyond patterned cottons, silk handkerchiefs and colourful ribbons. Thefts of gold-laced hats, hessian boots, and other high-value accessories, were the exception, not the rule. For the most part, shoplifters 'remained largely marginalised from the new consumer culture so enthusiastically adopted by wealthier households' (p. 124).

The records reveal only a handful of middling thieves, though this may be slightly misleading. Shopkeepers were much less likely to prosecute richer customers, bearing in mind the possible costs of a claim for false accusation – 'it was a dangerous thing to stop him, as he had the appearance of a gentleman' (p. 32). Tickell's work shows how appearances, and assumptions about appearances, made 18th-century shopping a starkly stratified activity. She repeatedly quotes shopkeepers who judged the character of a customer by how they looked: 'I did not like the appearance of the girls, so I took the handkerchiefs off the counter'; 'being a man of a genteel appearance I had no suspicion of him'. Some enterprising shoplifters took advantage of this prejudice by disguising themselves as richer than they were. Mary Cummins transformed herself into Mistress Forbes, a wealthy Winchester milliner, to gain unrestricted access to a haberdashery on Pall Mall. Her performance was good enough to convince one member of staff he remembered her visiting the year before. With a similar ruse, an east London sailor's wife was admitted to 'drink a dish of tea' with the wife of a linen draper whose shop she rifled for 16 yards of muslin (pp. 75–6).

Better-off customers were not only above suspicion and treated to snacks while they shopped, they were also permitted to take goods without paying for them. Respectable people shopped on credit, and shopkeepers could ill afford to lose valuable custom by insisting that their most illustrious clients paid in cash. Tickell does not probe the relationship between shoplifting and 'buying' on credit as far as she might, but suggestive snippets of evidence are scattered throughout the book. First, the fact that almost none of the people prosecuted for shoplifting were credit customers; indeed, one woman was acquitted on the basis that she did have a credit account at the shop in question, so the goods may have been as-yet-unpaid-for, not stolen (pp.

133–4). One elite shopper was profoundly disturbed by the parallel between shoplifting and shopping on credit, writing to a newspaper that ‘I am sometimes a shoplifter in my dream; which has such an effect on me that I am not easy ‘till all my tradesmen are discharg’d; and fancy that whilst their goods are unpaid for in my possession, I am but little inferior to the character I assumed in my sleep’ (p. 186).

The difference, of course, was that defaulting on a credit arrangement resulted, at worse, in imprisonment for debt, while those who were caught shoplifting faced far more severe punishment. One of the organising structures of Tickell’s book is the Shoplifting Act of 1699, under which theft of goods worth more than five shillings carried a death sentence. This law was passed after City of London retailers petitioned parliament about their *Great Grievance*, claiming shopkeepers were ‘insensibly ruined’ by theft and their losses ‘very much exceed in value all other robberies within this Kingdom’ (pp. 129, 145). Tickell’s fifth chapter sets out to assess whether or not this was true. This is the weakest part of the book. There is no evidence to suggest that shoplifting actually caused, or even contributed to, shops going bust – the primary culprits were debt and the failure of credit. Daniel Defoe made it clear where the real menace to shopkeepers lay: ‘the loss of his money or goods is easily made up, and may be sometimes repaired with advantage; but the loss of credit is never repair’d; the one is breaking open his house, but the other is burning it down’ (p. 128). Nonetheless, Tickell insists, with a mounting pile of conditionals, that ‘if many shopkeepers were operating on the margins then shoplifting *could* have tipped the balance’; ‘the economic situation of some retailers suffering consumer theft *might* be grave’ (p. 134, my italics).

What is certain is that shoplifters were a far easier target than creditors or the wealthy customers whose unpaid debts left retailers with gaping holes on their balance sheets. In the spirit of the 1699 Act, one shopkeeper apparently said to a man he caught stealing that ‘if it was in my power I would hang you, and if you are not heavy enough, if I could have my will, I would pull your legs’ (p. 143). Such vehemence may not, however, be representative of all retailers. As Tickell shows in chapter six, many shopkeepers did not have a straightforward relationship with the law. Some avoided prosecution altogether by asking captured shoplifters to pay for what they had taken or simply return the goods (‘you have got something of my property about you, deliver it, and you shall go about your business’) (p. 45). Others, unwilling to send someone to the gallows, made use of loopholes in the 1699 Act to bring cases under larceny law, which carried lighter sentences. The Shoplifting Act stipulated that the theft had to be accomplished ‘privately’ – without anyone seeing. Juries could therefore avoid the 1699 legislation by claiming the theft had, in fact, been observed, or by deliberately undervaluing the stolen goods. By the later 18th century, those calling for reform of the penal system argued that hanging for shoplifting was ‘a punishment so much out of all proportion to the crime’ that it rendered the law ineffective by making shopkeepers reluctant to prosecute: ‘the punishment is too great for the offence; and prosecutors are very tender in pressing for a conviction upon it’ (pp. 157, 161). The Act was amended in 1820 and finally repealed in 1823, after which transportation and imprisonment were the maximum possible punishments.

Tickell does not make the connection, but reform of the laws on shoplifting may have had something to do with the emergence, early in the 19th century, of a new type of offender: the middle-class housewife. In the final chapter, she notes that these ‘ladies’ who, in the words of one contemporary, ‘mistake other people’s property for their own’, became the subjects of a new ‘psychologising of shoplifting’ (pp. 189–91). Inexplicably stealing what they could easily afford to buy, these women were branded ‘kleptomaniacs’ – victims of a medical condition, not dangerous thieves, and certainly not worthy of capital punishment. It is tempting to connect this development to the oppressions of the 19th century’s middle-class ‘domestic ideology’ but, as Tickell shows, gendered ideas about shoplifting had a longer history. 18th-century writers frequently associated shoplifting with sex work. Ned Ward, for example, complained of a ‘durty salt-ass’d-brood of night-walkers and shop-liftes’. According to one witness in a case at the Old Bailey, some shoplifters themselves gave credence to the association, asking ‘how do you think we can live, but by whoring and thieving’? The assumption of loose morals, combined with a tendency among female thieves to hide things in their clothes, led to highly sexualised searches of women suspected of shoplifting. As one offender recalled in 1753, a male apprentice ‘put his hand down my bossom, and up my coats; I asked what that was for, he said he thought I had something about me that did not belong to me; I said if I had, it was

proper a woman should search me, he said he should think it no sin to rip me open, and let my puddings out' (pp. 180–4).

The study of shoplifting has much to tell us about the face-to-face workings of class and gender in 18th-century English society. Tickell provides striking material on, for example, the stratification of shopping and the sexualisation of searches, but these are not her primary focus. *Shoplifting in Eighteenth-Century England* sets out to puncture any inflated expectations of plebeian participation in the 'consumer revolution' and is undoubtedly successful. In the process, it points to other, perhaps more fruitful questions about hierarchies and power dynamics in the great age of shopping.

Notes

1. Quoted on the dust-jacket of Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1993). [Back to \(1\)](#)
-

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/2329>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/300953>