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Fashion and Frugality: Eighteenth-Century Pocket Books for Women

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Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 32, 2003

pp. 1-18

10.1353/sec.2010.0086

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Fashion and Frugality: Eighteenth-Century Pocket Books for Women JENNIE BATCHELOR When the pleasing, affectionate yet 'ignorant and uninformed' Catherine Morland is 'about to be launched into all the difficulties and dangers of a six weeks' residence in Bath,' her mother is understandably anxious. Ignorant and uninformed herself, however, Mrs. Morland fails to see the threat that mischievous lords and baronets pose to impressionable young women like Catherine and confines her maternal advice purely to issues of practicality: 'wrap yourself up very warm [and] try to keep some account of the money you spend.' To facilitate the latter Mrs. Morland gives Catherine a 'little book on purpose' in which to keep her daily accounts. This reference to the little book remains unglossed in editions of Austen's novel, a

circumstantial detail that has little bearing upon the narrative as a whole. After all, as we later learn, the real dangers Catherine faces in Bath lie not in her financial affairs, catching cold or even in the persons of lords and baronets, but rather in her own imagination. Yet behind this oblique, circumstantial reference lies an intriguing and little known publishing phenomenon that blossomed and flourished throughout the second half of the eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth. Catherine's 'little book' appears to be a reference to ladies' pocket books (sometimes known as memorandum books): duodecimo, annual publications that uniquely blend the characteristics of the account book, diary and eighteenth-century ladies' magazine. Mrs. Morland's maternal concern over her daughter's financial well-being anticipates a conventional eighteenth-century narrative plot in which heroines, regardless, or often because of their virtue, face seemingly insurmountable financial difficulties which threaten their reputation, that of their family and even their very lives. Pocket books fashioned themselves as indispensable shields against the economic and moral trials and tribulations faced by such heroines as Burney's Cecilia and Camilla, by directing women to be perpetually accountable for their own limited finances. As Susan Staves has demonstrated, the eighteenth century witnessed new forms of women's property, such as pin money, supposedly created to contractually provide security for women and their children independently of their husbands and their potentially wayward lifestyles. These new forms of property raised anxieties, however, not least because they apparently failed to 'provide social control over women,' effectively allowing them to acquire any kind of property they saw fit to purchase.² Pocket books embody some of the paradoxical responses to the status of pin money in the eighteenth-century legal system, as explored by Staves. For while the pocket book acknowledges and even affirms (albeit in a somewhat guarded fashion) women's independent financial property, it is simultaneously anxious to police and control its readers' use of that property. Ladies' pocket books distinguished themselves from gentleman's pocket books and their spiritual predecessors, almanacs, by their attention to fashion, usually concentrated in one or two engravings, displaying gowns and headaddresses worn in the metropolis (fig. 1), and occasionally supplemented by written fashion reports. These plates implicitly acknowledge the desirability of fashionable attire to their readers, and implicitly endorse an attention to dress as a prerequisite of a desirable woman. Furthermore, pocket books recognize dress as one of their reader's most significant financial considerations. Despite their interest in fashionable life and fashionable commodities, however, pocket books assiduously seek to contain this interest within a prevailing economic and moral framework designed to cultivate socially and economically desirable wives and daughters. As Harris's *Complete Ladies Pocket Book* declared in 1792, the not inconsiderable task of its editor was 'all of fashion and dress, / With oeconomy's dictates ... to express.'³ This article will explore this forgotten genre in order to highlight its centrality to issues of female morality in the period and its importance as a site, predating and subsequently coexistent with ladies' magazines, in which ideals of femininity could be disseminated and contested. *Eighteenth-Century Pocket Book for Women* / 3 Figure 1. By permission of The British Library, frontispiece engraving to the *Ladies Complete Pocket Book for the Year 1762* B.L. cl36.bb.30 I. Periodical print culture witnessed significant changes during the mid-eighteenth century...

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JENNIE BATCHELOR

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