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Pockets, Consumption and Female Sociability in Eighteenth-century Britain

Ariane FENNETAUX

When a lady was attacked on Barnes Common in London in 1754, her pockets contained ‘among other things’

a small round Tortoiseshell Snuff box, [...] a London Almanack, in a black Shagreen Case, [...]; an Ivory Carv'd Toothpick Case, [...]; a Silver sliding Pencil; a white Cornelian Seal [...]; a Tortoiseshell Comb in a Case; a Silver Thimble and Bodkin; a Bunch of Keys, a red Leather Pocket-book; a green knit Purse, containing Half a Guinea, [...] with two Glass Smelling Bottles.¹

The list of near-on 15 objects all carried in the pocket by the well-to-do woman illustrates the host of pocket-sized objects which the eighteenth-century consumer society produced specifically for the pocket. In an age of expanding consumption, the small space of the pocket was commodified. Useful contraptions shrunk in size by the engineering spirit of an industrial age were repeatedly marketed in contemporary advertising as pocket-sized, commodious, or portable.² These consumer goods were not entirely a female specificity of course and men had their fair share of natty contraptions in their own pockets.³ But whilst men had had pockets integrated to their garments since at least the sixteenth century in the west, women did not usually have pockets in their dress.⁴ Between the end of the seventeenth century and the end of the nineteenth century, women's pockets were discrete articles of clothing rather like bags that tied around the waist under the dress and were accessed through an opening in the side of the petticoat or skirt. So that when the woman on Barnes' common was attacked the thief made away not just with the contents of her pockets but with the actual pair of pockets that she had been wearing under her petticoat. [Fig. 1]



Fig. 1. Pair of linen pockets, 1700–1725, inv. T.281A–1910 © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

The current chapter is based on a larger research project that uses a combination of written, visual and importantly material sources to contextualise tie-on pockets as socially and culturally embedded artefacts that shed light on some of the interpretative paradigms frequently used to study the two-hundred-year period of their use.⁵ Trivial as they may appear, pockets had to do with gender but also with women's links to consumption and property, work, their mobility but also their experience of privacy and self, as pockets often were one of the few spaces under female control.⁶ With a material archive of over 350 pockets from about thirty public and private collections in Britain, the project uses objects not as mere illustrations but as one of its key primary sources at a time when very few women could read and write but all had a pocket regardless of their ranks and circumstances.⁷

The chapter proposes to explore how pockets and their contents were linked to consumption and fashionability in the long eighteenth century but also accessorised specific modes of women's sociability at the time. As we saw from the opening story, eighteenth-century pockets could serve as containers for various trinkets that were characteristic of the emerging consumer society but were also often props to fashionable sociability. By carrying snuffboxes, pocketbooks and portable writing sets, pockets armed women with accessories for playing their parts in the theatre of sociable occasions and enabled them to carry and keep at hand, the wherewithal of polite sociability. But pockets' role in fostering female sociability was not limited to their capacity to carry along fashionable props. Because of their proximity to their owner, pockets were also choice repositories for small personal items. As such they fostered specific modes of female sociability in particular through the exchange of handmade mementos for the pocket whilst pockets themselves, another product of female needlework, could sometimes materialise bonds between female friends and kin. As objects that were used to keep personal keepsakes and could themselves be turned into personal mementos, pockets thus nurtured links between women and supported specifically female modes of sociability.

Pockets as aides to sociability

Because they could hold cash, entry tickets, fans, opera glasses, snuff, patch and bonbon boxes, etuis, or pocket books, women's pockets contributed to women's active participation in various sociable activities. Women's account books and private papers record the use women made of their pockets when out and about, manifesting the role pockets played in aiding female sociability. One such pocketed woman was Lady Arabella Furnese, the daughter of the first Earl of Rockingham who married Sir Robert Furnese MP in 1714. The couple divided their lives between London and their estate of Waldershare in Kent.⁸ Extremely elegant — her accounts show regular purchases of silver stays, embroidered slippers, or gold laced shoes — Arabella seems to have paid meticulous attention to her appearance with frequent purchases of fans and white gloves, whilst she was regularly getting her clothes refashioned, 'new dyed' or altered. Her accounts show several purchases of pockets with, in particular, a pair of silk pockets made in 1719 and, in 1726, an order for pockets made of holland, the best quality linen available.⁹ The rest of her *à-la-mode* lifestyle as it transpires from the accounts shows she put her fine pockets to regular uses. She was a socialite who took part in a multitude of entertainments going to plays, the opera, masquerades, attending assemblies but also playing — and regularly losing money — at cards, buying lottery tickets and taking part in raffles. Lady Arabella was fond of the theatre and bought tickets two to three times a month.¹⁰ With regular outings to operas, 'ye popet show', ridotti, the

masquerade, 'musickmeetings', 'the waxwork', or to Hyde Park's modish Keeper's Lodge for refreshments, Lady Arabella was a voracious consumer of fashionable entertainment.¹¹ Her appetite for these pleasures entailed much travelling, and there are regular entries in her accounts for 'chair hir' to go various places which we would have had to pay out of her pocket.¹² Besides paying for transport, Arabella's pockets would have enabled her to make small disbursements along the way, paying for entry tickets, gambling, or refreshments such as when on 2 April 1720, Arabella, on a night out at the opera, bought for herself 'ye opera book'; or when on 19 March 1723 she recorded paying 2s.6d for 'Green Tea at the Opera'.¹³

But pockets were not just a tool to go out and enjoy the pleasures of the new consumer culture which had turned cities such as London into places of leisure and fashionable entertainment, they were also themselves a place for consumption and fashionability, a sort of 'niche market' in itself for printers, toymen, jewellers and other traders who produced and marketed a host of small things to be carried in pockets. Pockets indeed furnished accessories for polite interactions and equipped gentry and elite women with adequate props for the performance of fashionable sociability, tools to navigate and appropriate various social spaces and practices.

Fashionable consumption

Small printed books and pocket books, sometimes in extremely small format, were advertised for the compendium of useful information they contained ranging from hackney coach fares to, usual prices for various commodities or to rules of 'precedency among ladies'.¹⁴ From almanacs to snuffboxes or writing sets and opera glasses, a host of objects were shrunk in size to be made pocket-size. Natty portable 'fashionable conversation cards' advertised in a newspaper in 1791 provided women with appropriate conversational cues in both French and English for drawing-room chit-chat whilst some ladies' pocketbooks promised 'upwards of one thousand droll questions and answers [...] to create mirth in mixed companies'.¹⁵ These portable aides to sociability were typical of the inventiveness of a commercial age where the small place of the pocket was the focus of an encroaching marketplace that produced and advertised innumerable pocket accessories.

In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), drawing attention to the excesses of modern consumption, Adam Smith writes:

How many people ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility? [...] All their pockets are stuffed with little conveniences. They contrive new pockets, unknown in the clothes of other people, in order to carry a greater number. They walk about loaded with a multitude of baubles, in weight and sometimes in value not inferior to an ordinary Jew's-box, some of which may sometimes be of some little use, but all of which might at all times be very well spared, and of which the whole utility is certainly not worth the fatigue of bearing the burden.¹⁶

Smelling bottles, snuff boxes, etuis, tooth and ear picks, writing sets and other pocket accessories often sold by toy men and jewellers were associated in discourses with the orgy of consumption supposedly witnessed by Britain. Made in a variety of finely crafted precious and often exotic materials such as tortoise shell, ivory, porcelain or shagreen, they were linked to the rise of global trade, but they were also underpinned by new



Fig. 2. Scent bottle of soft paste porcelain in the shape of a closed flower, Chelsea Manufactory, c.1755–1758, inv. 1199–1864 © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

engineering and design possibilities that came with the development of new hinges, sliding and screwing mechanisms that made them foldable and small enough to fit into a pocket.¹⁷ [Fig. 2] Although the clever contraptions were targeted at male and female consumers alike, in discourses at least they were often seen as a trope for female vanity. In *The Female Spectator* in 1745, Eliza Eliza Haywood writes:

The snuffbox and smelling bottle are pretty trinkets in a lady's pocket, and are frequently necessary to supply a pause in conversation and on some other occasions, but whatever virtues they are possess'd of, they are all lost by a too constant and familiar use and nothing can be more pernicious to the brain or render one more ridiculous in company than to have either of them perpetually in one's hand¹⁸

However, when looking at trial records for pickpocketing cases, a type of source that enables us to peep into the contents of pockets, what is striking is the absence, rather than the abundance, of these objects from female pockets. Some snuff and patch boxes, a rare few necessaires and etuis are found in some trials or adverts for lost pockets but on the whole, these precious pocket accessories seem not to have been prevalent in women's pockets. Despite textual accounts of female overconsumption mainly derived from looking at published commentary and satire rather than archival evidence, women did not stock their pockets full of trifle little gadgets.

If we turn to pockets themselves which after all were consumer items in their own right, they also challenge the vision of women as inordinate consumers. Pockets were textile objects in existence at a time when cloth was going through transformative years with the supposed triumph of cotton over traditional fibres, the advent of new dyeing and printing techniques, an age allegedly governed by fashion, novelty and change. Yet women's pockets did not necessarily reflect those transformations. Taken as a group, the 350 pockets that make up our material archive, do register something of the so-called 'Industrial revolution' witnessed by Britain in the course of the 18th and 19th centuries but they also manifest resistance to change and conservative

choices being made by women as consumers of cloth. Routinely hand made by women themselves, they also evidence many instances of recycling and repair. Driven by thrift and industry, the use they made of fabric was ingenious and economical, rather than lavish or extravagant.

Conversely, although not recorded in court indictments because of their lack of market value, tokens of sentiment were routinely kept in pockets as we can read from diaries and letters. Because pockets were choice recipients for the small tokens of friendship exchanged between friends and kin, they connected women. This can be read from private letters and from pockets themselves which sometimes carry the marks of their participation in these material networks of sociability.

The pocket as shared space of female sociability

Purses, handkerchiefs, hair lockets or miniature portraits were but a few of the pocket-sized objects that turned the pocket into a shared feminine space where friendship, bonding and female networking processes were expressed and materialized. Pockets were worn close to the body, in a physical proximity associated by anthropologists and sociologists with intimacy and intense sentimental investment.¹⁹ This made them privileged receptacles for mementos given by loved ones, the physical closeness of the object mirroring the emotional closeness of donor and recipient. Some of these tokens of friendships were indeed the small pocket-sized articles marketed by toymen and jeweller that we encountered earlier. Sentimental tokens even became a class of products in its own right when the vogue for all things sentimental swept the country in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Sentimental snuffboxes, lockets for hair locks, etuis exchanged as tokens of friendship were part of the paraphernalia of *à la mode* sensibility — commodities that could be bought ready made off the shelves of fashionable tradesmen. Yet, pockets also sheltered less commodified items that somewhat escaped the reach of the market. Because these tokens relied on the needlework skills of women, the modes of sociability they fostered were more specifically female.

Humble handmade objects such as pincushions, handkerchiefs, neeldecases or purses were frequent participants in the traffic of pocket-sized keepsakes between women. [Fig. 3] In a tender letter to her close friend Jane Pollard dated 1788, Dorothy Wordsworth writes

I have got the handkerchief in my pocket that you made and marked for me, I have just this moment pull'd it out to admire the letters. Oh! Jane! It is a valuable handkerchief. [...] Adieu my love, do not

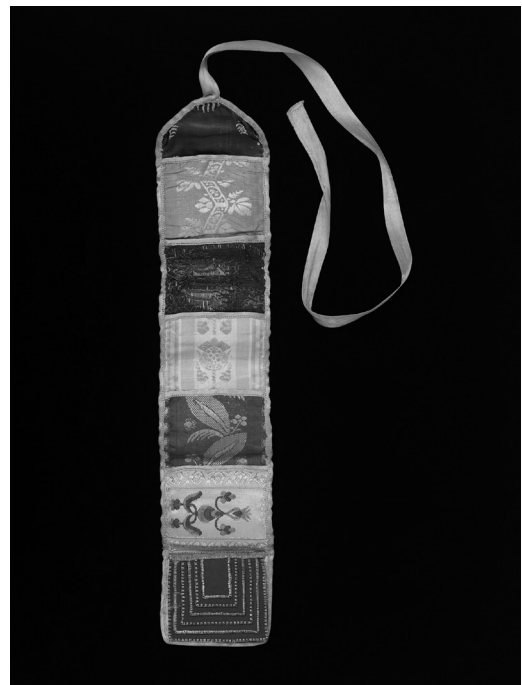


Fig. 3. Folding needlecase embroidered with initials 'SH' and the date 1754, inv. 285.1984 © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

forget to send me a piece of hair.²⁰

The pocket, as the chosen repository for the handkerchief that Jane has made and marked for her friend, is integral to a gift economy characterized by reciprocation and is put on a par with such personal tokens as locks of hair.²¹ Something made by a woman with another woman already in mind as recipient throughout the hand-making process, then pocketed by the recipient for a further period of time, gave the gift particular potency.

Sometimes it was the pockets themselves that materialized bonds of friendship as when Hannah Lord of Ipswich, in her 1787 will, left a pair of dark calico pockets, white dimity pockets, a patch pocket, a pair of pockets each to a different female friend²². Some pockets in our survey still carry the marks of serving as mnemonic embodiments of those who had worn them like this pocket that came with a handwritten note saying it used to be worn by a Mrs Rolland.²³ The female sociable networks evidenced in such surviving pockets had little to do with fashionability, consumption or luxury, instead they were more linked to practices of preservation and conservation. A well used pocket which was made by a woman named Sali Jones is thus known to have been worn by woman by the name of Jane Thomas, indicating the pocket was given and probably much cherished, judging by the way it was extensively repaired and patched at the back.²⁴ These plebeian pockets were objects of desire of sorts but materialized bonds of friendship that would normally escape the historian as these left little evidence in the traditional archives. A poignant expression of this is a small pocket made by Margaret Deas an inmate in a Glasgow prison in 1851 as a gift for the governor's wife.²⁵ The motto 'forget me not' and her name, embroidered in her own hair on the face of the pocket are powerful reminders that destitute women with limited resources also formed strong bonds of friendship that could overcome class difference. Women didn't have to be wealthy socialites to use their sometimes rather humble pockets as part of the currency of female friendship and bonding. Made of modest materials, preserved over time and patched up to make them last, these pockets are material manifestations of specific forms of female sociability. Importantly, they remind us of what we stand to gain by moving away from the traditional written archives used by historians of consumption. Unlike Dorothy Wordsworth or Arabella Furnese who left papers in the archive, Margaret Deas has left no will, letters, diaries or account books behind. In the absence of such sources, looking at objects themselves sometimes enables historians to expand their gaze to embrace the plebeian and not just the elite. This material approach to consumption and sociability through the small lens of the pocket thus complicates our reading of consumer culture, of sociability and of women's relationships to both.

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1 *Public Advertiser* (London). Tuesday March 12th 1754.

2 See Gianenrico Bernasconi, *Objets portatifs au siècle des Lumières* (Paris: Editions du comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2015). Liliane Hilaire-Pérez, “Techno esthétique de l’économie smithienne,” *Revue de synthèse* 133, no. 4, 6e série (2012): 495–524; Liliane Hilaire-Pérez, *La Pièce et le geste. Artisans, marchands et savoir technique à Londres au XVIIIe Siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2013).

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4 Although the precise date of origin of tie-on pocket is difficult to ascertain, evidence for them becoming widely available points to the second half of the seventeenth century. There is sporadic evidence that they might have originated from Southern Europe. On early tie-on pockets see Rebecca Unsworth, “Hands Deep in History: Pockets in Men and Women’s Dress in Western Europe,” *Costume* 51, no. 2 (2017): 148–70.

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7 The project was carried out with the support of the AHRC and led to the creation of an online database now available on VADS : <https://vads.ac.uk/collections/POCKETS.html>

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- 9 Personal Accounts of Lady Arabella Furnese, EK/U471/A50, East Kent Archives.
 10 Ibid.
 11 Keeper's Lodge is referred to on several occasion in Samuel Pepys's Diary as a place for fashionable refreshments. See for instance on April 25 1669, Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews (London: Bell & Hyman, 1983), vol. IX, 533–534.
 12 Personal Accounts of Lady Arabella Furnese, EK/U471/A50, East Kent Archives.
 13 Ibid.
 14 For an example of pocket book with such information see Anon., *Crosby's Royal Fortune Telling Almanak or Ladies' Universal Pocket-Book* (London: Crosby, 1795).
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 23 Pocket, Acc. No. MS. H.RHB.11, National Museum of Scotland.
 24 Acc. No. 31.31.3–4, National Museum of Wales, St Fagans.
 25 The pocket is in a private collection.