



When Ladies Go A-Thieving: Middle-Class Shoplifters in the Victorian Department Store

Elaine S. Abelson

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This book focuses on middle-class urban women as participants in new forms of consumer culture. Within the special world of the department store, women found themselves challenged to resist the enticements of consumption. Many succumbed, buying both what they needed and what they desired, but also stealing what seemed so readily available. Pitted against these middle-class women were the management, detectives, and clerks of the department stores. Abelson argues that in the interest of concealing this darker side of consumerism, women of the middle class, but not those of the working class, were allowed to shoplift and plead incapacitating illness--kleptomania. The invention of kleptomania by psychiatrists and the adoption of this ideology of feminine weakness by retailers, newspapers, the general public, the accused women themselves, and even the courts reveals the way in which a gender analysis allowed proponents of consumer capitalism to mask its contradictions.

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