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## Bon Marché Mantle

Emily Kelley

University of Rhode Island, ejkelley@my.uri.edu

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**"...to the right and the left, were heaps of mantles, pelisses, and capes, garments of all sizes and materials."**

One of the most popular ladies' items sold in department stores was the mantle. This garment, being loose fitting over the shoulders, allowed it to be mass produced to fit nearly everyone with little to no alterations.<sup>1</sup> One such article is present in the University of Rhode Island's Historic Textile and Costume Collection. This mantle, dated 1890-1900, is from Au Bon Marché. While there is little provenance attached to the garment, it is possible to speculate that the owner travelled to Paris and purchased this garment. Following its expansion in the 1860s,<sup>2</sup> it was quite popular for tourists to visit Bon



Wool mantle from Au Bon Marché. URI 1961.02.05.

Marché and other large stores in order to soak in the latest French fashions and bring them home. Ready-made attire was perfect for travellers, for it did not require numerous fittings and a lot of time to acquire.<sup>3</sup>

The mantle is made of tan fulled wool, is unlined, and has a shorter, decorative cape. It also has a fold-down collar, which is covered in brown/burgundy silk velvet. It is trimmed in rows of self-fabric, with a chevron detail on the collar. The style and detailing is quite masculine in its appearance. The body of the mantle is made of one solid piece of fabric, and when lying flat, the circumference is larger than a half-circle.

The consumer revolution caused by the introduction of ready-made clothing and department stores is a major social phenomenon. It can be called a revolution because of how it completely changed the way that people shopped. No longer were they going to tailors and dressmakers, buying their clothes secondhand,<sup>4</sup> or making them at home. The shopping experience became democratized, with people of wealth and moderate means both pining over luxurious goods. The wool mantle from Au Bon Marché is an example of this democratization.



Au Bon Marché label. URI 1961.02.05.

The setting of Emile Zola's *The Ladies Paradise* is based on Bon Marché, where Zola studied the inner workings of department stores. The main character, Denise, works in the ladies wear department at The Ladies Paradise, where the main business is fitting and selling mantles. "In order to please a few customers who had called, they had been obliged to ransack all the cupboards, and on the two long oaken tables, to the right and the left, were heaps of mantles, pelisses, and capes, garments of all sizes and materials."<sup>5</sup> Although the story takes place in the 1860s and the mantle from URI is from the 1890s, it is still representative of the types of objects being sold at The Ladies Paradise.

<sup>1</sup> Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Richard Bienvenu (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 54.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: A Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), 17-18.

<sup>3</sup> Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, 39.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-52.

<sup>5</sup> Emile Zola, *The Ladies Paradise*, trans. Alfred Earnest Vizetelly (Digireads.com Publishing, 2011), 83.