

Hyenas in Scarlet Petticoats



Re-Dressing the Heroine in the Novels of the Brontës, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf

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Introduction

Clothing Theory and History

...that hyena in petticoats, Mrs Woolstencroft [sic], who to this day discharges ink and gall...

Horace Walpole, Letter to Hannah More, *Complete Correspondence*, Vol. 31. 24th Jan 1795, p.397.

‘On the literary side, it is important for critics to be fully alert to dress, since in the novel in many periods, as in cinema and television, dress may be a vital part of characterisation, and may carry a burden of broader meaning’.

John Harvey, *Men in Black* (Reaktion, 1995), p.19.

Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. (Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*)¹

In a parodic reversal of *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1837) literary academics have, until fairly recently, failed to acknowledge the significance of clothing in the novel, even though it is considered an integral, and often symbolic, part of stage and screen.² In the last two decades the increasingly popular genre of the 'Costume Drama' has attempted to visualise the novel with a degree of success, intimating a renewed revelry in the aesthetic design of the complete authorial vision. The bosom-heaving empire-line dresses as featured in Andrew Davies' highly auspicious adaptation of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) created a surge in demand for Regency style wedding gowns, and with the addition of an extra scene he triggered a national obsession with Mr Darcy's wet shirt. As the modern doyen of literary adaptation Davies acknowledges the importance of the 'costume' in the 'drama' insisting that 'the interest is not in how pretty the clothes are, but in what they express about the characters'.³ Unfortunately however, 'dress' is a subject still associated with female vanity and triviality, a speculative combination of gender and morality which utilises the traditional anti-feminist rhetoric on the dangers of a frivolous femininity. This is a concept that has permeated society since the seventeenth-century, if not biblical in origin. Despite the influence of postmodernism, which serves to evacuate the old

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (OUP, 1998), p.96. All further references to this text will be to this edition and abbreviated to *AROO*.

² Hans Christian Andersen, 'The Emperor's New Clothes' (1837): "But he has nothing on at all," said a little child at last. "Good heavens! listen to the voice of an innocent child," said the father, and one whispered to the other what the child had said. "But he has nothing on at all," cried at last the whole people. That made a deep impression upon the emperor, for it seemed to him that they were right; but he thought to himself, "Now I must bear up to the end." And the chamberlains walked with still greater dignity, as if they carried a train which did not exist." *Hans Christian Andersen: Fairy Tales* (London: Cathay Books, 1979), pp.68-9.

hierarchies of cultural value, the prejudices linking fashion to moral and aesthetic condemnation persist today. This thesis therefore intends to repudiate this belief and acknowledge clothing as a powerful and valuable interpretative tool in relation to the sartorial semantics present in the novels of the Brontë sisters (1816-1855), George Eliot (1819-1880) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). Spanning over a century of publication it will attempt to evaluate, appraise and decode clothing and relate it to biographical influence, theme and character.

Fashion Theory

Since the 1970s and the emergence of the structuralist and post-structuralist schools of thought there has been a renewed interest in the field of sartorial semiotics and clothing theory. However, its evolution is not linear and the study of fashion is acknowledged as a 'hybrid subject' which both encompasses and overlaps the disciplines of art, history, psychology, sociology and anthropology.⁴ Thus, to fully comprehend its significance for English Literature, and more specifically the novel, it requires not only a multi-disciplinary approach, a consideration of the lifetimes of the women writers in question, but also, recognition of the actual chronological ranges of the novels, which extend back as far as the sixteenth century in the case of Woolf's *Orlando* (1928). However, the main eras which are progressively examined across the three chapters of this thesis are the early Victorian, high Victorian, the Edwardian and the Modern.

The first major and perhaps most basic strand of clothing theory is that of 'Costume History' which evolved naturally out of 'Art History' as a means of dating paintings. In the field of Art, studies such as Anne Hollander's *Seeing Through Clothes* (1978)

³ Andrew Davies interviewed by Lisa Armstrong, 'Old is in. Period', *The Times*, 'Culture', 2 November 2001, p.6.

and Aileen Ribeiro's *The Art of Dress* (1995) are seminal in detailing and describing the changing fashions using the visual records of fine art. In the 'History' strand, still dominated by C. Willet and Phyllis Cunnington's many studies of clothing across several centuries, James Laver's *Taste and Fashion* (1937) and Geoffrey Squire's *Dress and Society: 1560-1970* (1974) the garment is treated as an 'object' divorced from the 'subjective' body, and is primarily a tool for analysing the development of fashion over time. These studies utilise references from art, photography and even literature, as well as considering intricate details of textile construction. This discipline provides the objective and factual touchstone for the thesis, helping to classify, delineate and identify potential symbols within the context of social history.

In marked contrast to the latter's objectivity, the 'Sociological' or 'Anthropological' approach to fashion moves away from dress as an object and understands it as embodied by activity and social relations. J. C. Flügel (who also overlaps with 'Social Psychology' below) memorably describes the human need for clothing as 'a perpetual blush on the surface of humanity' in *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930).⁵ Similarly, Virginia Woolf's nephew, Quentin Bell in *On Human Finery* (1976) posits:

...our clothes are too much a part of us for most of us to be entirely indifferent to their condition: it is as though the fabric were indeed a natural extension of the body, or even of the soul.⁶

However, even earlier than this, the Victorian sociologist Thorstein Veblen in his *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) famously coined the phrases 'conspicuous consumption' and 'conspicuous waste' in order to describe the sociological display

⁴ E. Leopold, 'The Manufacture of the Fashion System', in J. Ash and E. Wilson (eds.), *Chic Thrills* (London: Pandora, 1992), p.101.

⁵ J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth, 1930), p.21.

function of ever-changing fashions. He then goes on to provide an interesting feminist-anthropological analysis of the purposes of clothing for those 'exquisite slaves', adorned Victorian wives and daughters whose main function in regard to dress was as a decorative bauble who 'put in evidence her household's ability to pay'.⁷ Erving Goffman in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1971) further uncovers the role that the body plays in social interaction, with dress as the primary dialectic between body and self; whilst Nancy Etcoff in *The Survival of the Prettiest* (1999) scientifically examines the anthropological reasons for clothing, including modesty, warmth, display, emulation, consumption, and sexuality:

...fashion is an art form, a status marker, and a display of attitude. We create it...to help us negotiate our relations with the outside world and to provide us with comfort and protection. But as visual extensions of our persons, they also mirror our desires in complex ways.⁸

The relatively recent rise of 'Cultural Studies' as aided by structuralism provides the third category of fashion theory. Led by Roland Barthes' seminal work *The Fashion System* (1985) it provides the first sustained attempt to understand the workings of fashion as a language, or 'vestimentary code' with its own rules and structures: a textualised, semiotic understanding of dress as a 'system of signs'. Barthes' highly theoretical approach analyses texts not bodies, and in itself rises from Saussurian semiology, or the 'science of signs' which can be applied to all communicative practices, including dress and other non-verbal phenomena. Ultimately, Barthes' aim is to see fashion as a 'system' rather than as everyday 'dress', and he produces a

⁶ Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (London: Hogarth, 1976), p.19.

⁷ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, (1899, 1953, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999), especially chapter viii: 'Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture', pp.167-187.

⁸ Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest* (London: Random House, 1999), p.207.

methodological, purely structuralist, functionalist approach which ultimately recognises the limitations of a strictly sociological perspective:

...only written clothing has no practical or aesthetic function: it is entirely constituted with a view to a signification: if the magazine describes a certain article of clothing verbally, it does so solely to convey a message whose content is: *Fashion*...⁹

In his analysis of youth subcultures, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) Dick Hebdige draws directly on this Saussurian tradition in order to talk about the 'signs' adopted by the subculture to create meaning within, and give identity to the group. His semiotic analysis moves from the written to the uses of 'objects' (garments) which are 'stolen' from mainstream culture: uniforms and past traditions. Like Barthes, he also 'brackets off' the world beyond the text, textualising 'style' and bypassing the real bodies behind the garments. Both Elizabeth Leopold and L. Wright, in Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson's *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader* (1992), extend this 'system' beyond mere cultural phenomena, considering the manufacture, economic (marketing and retail) and technological aspects of clothing production in contemporary fashion, all framed by a Marxist materialist analysis.

However, two of the more interesting and useful categories of fashion theory, especially regarding its use in the woman's novel, are those of 'Social Psychology' and 'Feminist' discourses. Advocates of the former, such as Flügel, seek to outline a specific meaning and intention of clothing within social interaction, regarding fashion as an unconsciously registered 'language', or form of non-verbal 'communication', and deeply symbolic of individual identity and desire. The author and critic Alison

⁹ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (London: Cape, 1985), p.8.

Lurie in *The Language of Clothes* (1981) vehemently and confidently presents dress as 'a language' with its own 'grammar' and 'vocabulary' very like spoken language, and consisting of an actual range of garments with their cut, colour and pattern; which extends to accessories, hairstyles, posturing; and is resplendent with anarchic words or taboos, like dresses for men, and slang words, for instance, jeans. Citing Balzac in *Daughter of Eve* (1839) these proponents believe that 'Dress is a continual manifestation of intimate thoughts, a language, a symbol'.¹⁰ Although Lurie can often go to extremes in her theory and be too precise about interpretation, a courageous groundwork for a modern psychological interpretation is laid, which is followed and developed by Fred Davis in *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (1992). In his study he suggests that although clothing can be regarded as a language, the more ambiguous language of music is better suited to capturing its equally ambiguous nature. He acknowledges Lurie's idea of a code as useful in that:

...the code is the binding ligament in the shared understandings that comprise a sphere of discourse and, hence its associated social arrangements.¹¹

Along with Nathan Joseph in *Uniforms and Non-Uniforms* (1986) they both stress the analogy is metaphorical rather than literal, as the social codes of dress are extremely context bound, and its real power comes from the ability to suggest, evoke and often resist fixed meaning; creating a more subjective, interpretative category.

Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (1985) and Juliet Ash and Wilson's fashion reader *Chic Thrills* (1992) subtly bind the area of 'Social Psychology' with 'Feminist' theory, and Wilson posits that 'fashion is obsessed with

¹⁰ Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (London: Random House, 1981), p.3.

¹¹ Fred Davis, *Fashion, Culture and Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 1992) p.5.

gender...[it is] constantly working and reworking the gender boundary.¹² Expanding Veblen's sociological view of women as the 'exquisite slaves' of fashion who visually enact a repressive patriarchal ideology, sartorial feminists such as Stella Mary Newton, Valerie Steele, David Kunzle and Helene Roberts have examined the literal and mental shackles of historical and contemporary women's dress. They highlight restrictive items such as the corset, stays, crinoline, hoops, bustles and high-heels in their studies as examples of fashion's tyranny, as well as re-dressing the 'frivolous' and 'foolish' tags which associate fashion primarily with femininity, and which by extension implicitly condemns both women and women's culture.¹³ Newton's *Health, Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the Nineteenth Century* (1974) provides a fascinating account of the Bloomer Costume (and other bifurcated garments), Aesthetical Dress, and the Rational Dress Society of the late nineteenth century. She examines the medical and aesthetic reasons for getting rid of the corset and crinoline as adopted by feminists and suffragettes campaigning not only for radical change to women's dress, but also to their social standing. These critics are not so much chastising the women who wore the constricting garments as condemning certain items and styles, regarding women's relationship to fashion as one of socio-economic exploitation, and not vanity. However, whilst Roberts in 'The Exquisite Slave' (1977) follows Veblen's charges in attacking the role of the corset and tight-lacing in subjugating women, both Kunzle and Steele in *Fashion and Fetishism* (1982) and *Fashion and Eroticism* (1985) respectively, are more restrained and often turn the argument on its head when stressing the importance of erotic display in fashion as a potentially liberating means of social and sexual empowerment.¹⁴

¹² Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, 1985), p.117.

¹³ See T. Polhemus, *Bodystyles* (Luton: Lennard, 1988), pp.4-5 and the introductory chapter of E. Tseelon, *The Masque of Femininity* (London: Sage, 1997).

¹⁴ Helene E. Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman'. *Signs*, 1977, 2 (3): 554-69.

In recognising the possible pleasures afforded women through clothing, Marjorie Garber, Terry Castle, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar take female 'costume' to another level by acknowledging the liberating and transgressive powers of disguise, masquerade and transvestism. As Gubar puts it '...cross dressing [is] a dream of prophecy and power for women' and she uses episodes from *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Villette* (1853) and *Orlando* to illustrate her point; whilst her authorial counterpart Gilbert adds in a separate essay that male modernists like Joyce, Eliot, and Lawrence viewed transvestism in women as unsettling and for men, degrading.¹⁵ In the visionary *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (1992) Garber challenges the modern assumption that 'pink' is for a baby girl and 'blue' is for a baby boy on her very first page; for once (pre-World War One) it was the other way round. Immediately she refutes sartorial preconceptions of gender, as opposed to a natural biological sex, which sees clothing as the constructor or deconstructor of the heteronormative gender code. The feminist Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and Elizabeth Grosz in *Space, Time and Perversion* (1989) and *Volatile Bodies* (1994) further add the necessary elements from modern corporeal feminist theory which cites the body as a passive medium: a surface of cultural inscription; a variable boundary and potential site of transformation. This idea is connected, as in Joan Riviere's seminal essay 'Womanliness as a Masquerade' (1929), with issues of 'performativity' by which 'costume' becomes a necessary prop for expressing and disguising gender, and thereby identity.¹⁶

'Literary Sartorialism'

¹⁵ Susan Gubar, 'Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists', *Massachusetts Review* (Autumn 1981), pp.447-513. Sandra M. Gilbert, 'Costumes of the Mind: Transvestism as Metaphor in Modern Literature', *Critical Enquiry* 7, 2 (Winter 1980): 394. Both essays are reprinted in a combined and revised form in *Sexchanges*, Vol.2 of Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land* (Yale University Press, 1988), pp.324-76.

¹⁶ Joan Riviere 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', in *Formations of Fantasy* eds. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (New York: Methuen, 1986) pp.39-43.

- As already can be surmised from the above synopsis, various types of clothing theorists often utilise examples from English Literature to illustrate their facts and theories. The historian C. Willett Cunnington cites in his 'Authorities' list 'contemporary novels and magazines';¹⁷ Ribeiro quotes Rousseau and Henry James' Madam Merle in *Portrait of a Lady* (1881):

I know a large part of myself is the clothes I choose to wear...I've a great respect for things...[as they] are all expressive.¹⁸

Lurie also makes reference to Rousseau, Dickens, Trollope, James, Colette, Eliot and Woolf alongside many others to illustrate her varied sartorial interpretations; Davis cites Oscar Wilde in his preface, continuing with the poet Robert Herrick and the literary philosopher Henry David Thoreau; Wilson uses Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) to analyse clothing fetishes, as well as Pauline Reage's erotic modern classic *The Story of O* (1970); whilst Garber, Gilbert and Gubar all make use of *Orlando*. To me this intimates a whole new sub-category of clothing theory, which this thesis implicitly espouses: 'Literary Sartorialism'.

It was Castle's hugely enjoyable *Civilisation and Masquerade* (1986) and *The Female Thermometer* (1995) which formed the theoretical basis of my earlier postgraduate research into clothes in the eighteenth-century novel, culminating in my M.Litt. dissertation looking at sartorial usage and meaning in the works of Jane Austen.¹⁹ Early novel writers such as Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, Burney, Edgeworth and Inchbald utilise the transformative and transgressive carnivalesque power of sartorial

¹⁷ C. Willett Cunnington, *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Faber & Faber 1937, reproduced 1990), p.442. Hereafter referred to as 'Cunnington'.

¹⁸ Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France 1750-1820* (Yale University Press 1995) p.220.

¹⁹ Suzanne H. Fairless, 'Clothing, Appearance and Identity in the Work of Jane Austen', unpublished M.Litt. thesis, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, Michaelmas 1999.

disguise as encapsulated in the public masquerade ball, and it becomes an important plot device and characterisation tool for the newly established fictive genre.

However, it is only very recently that a few invaluable and innovative literary sartorial studies have appeared, including John Harvey's *Men in Black* (1995) and Clair Hughes' *Henry James and the Art of Dress* (2001). The former considers the importance of the predominance of black for male dress in the nineteenth-century novel, and also hints at an idea of 'Women in White' in chapter six. Hughes' study comprises a detailed analysis of dress as used in Henry James' novels, concluding that he uses clothing not only to fix his character's social and financial status, but that it is also symbolically suggestive of psychological states and emotional undercurrents which may have otherwise escaped the reader's attention. Short papers occasionally appear in journals, such as *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *Novel*, *English Studies*, *MLN* and *TLS* examining the sartorial semantics of a specific piece of literature, for instance the use of 'riding dress' or 'embroidery' in the novel, but these are few and far between and provide the colourful patches for a base fabric of a potentially larger material of work where literature is stitched to fashion theory and history.²⁰

The History of Fashion

Clothing historians tend to agree in dating the beginning of a modern concept of 'fashion' as arising in the late fourteenth-century or Renaissance; starting in the luxurious courts of Burgundian France, it soon spread throughout the West. This was

²⁰ Interesting examples include: Lisa Hopkins', 'Clothes and the Body of the Knight: the Making of Men in Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman*', *Wordsworth Circle*, 1996, Vol.27., no. 1., pp.21-24; John Stuart Batts', 'Of Dickens, Clothes and Bagpipes', *Dickensian*, 1987, Vol.83., no.413, pt. 3., pp.136-138; A. C. Hilfer's, 'The Philosophy of Clothes in Melville's *Benito Cereno*', *Philological Quarterly*, 1982, Vol. 61., no. 2., pp.220-226; F. G. Butler's, 'Lear's Crown of Weeds and Clothing and Imagery Derived from it on *King Lear*', *English Studies*, 1989, Vol.70., no.5, pp.395-406; Milad Douglas', 'Flaubert's Costumes and Importance of the Character's Clothing in *L'Education Sentimentale*', *MLN*, 1986, Vol.101, no.5, pp.1086-1109.

the era of individualism, emphasising self-consciousness and responsibility, as well as increasing social mobility alongside changes in status, all of which were not apparent beneath the rigid feudal hierarchies of the Middle Ages. Instead of women being unflatteringly bundled-up like parcels - as they had been for nearly a thousand years - devices such as tight-lacing and splendid décolletage allowed them to enhance their bodily charms and thus prospects for marriage. As people grew more self-aware, clothing, and in particular fashionable clothing, increased in importance during the Renaissance. Fashion, once a pastime of the rich, became a preoccupation of a thriving middle-class, and as communication and transport became faster and more sophisticated, the spread of luxury goods became regular and people began to desire similar merchandise.

By the sixteenth-century it was becoming so difficult to distinguish between different classes and ranks that Queen Elizabeth I introduced the deeply unpopular 'Sumptuary Laws' to stipulate specific rules of dress, and establishing decrees against 'the inordinate excess in apparel'.²¹ They detailed everything from the censorship of colours (purple was royal only), to the choice of fabrics for linings, and even stipulated the specific types of fur allowed as trimming, not only for those members of the Royal Court, but the general public too. Interestingly, more royal orders concerning dress were issued – or at least have been preserved – from her time than at any other point in English history. Essentially, however, these laws were elitist, curbing what the upper classes regarded as sartorial transgressions, 'confusion', or rather 'disguises' of status and gender. Treatises such as the famous 'Homily Against

²¹ In the sixteenth-century 'there was...concern that dress should reflect the wearer's class, rank and profession, as it had done in earlier centuries. A series of ten proclamations, or sumptuary legislation was issued by Elizabeth I between 1559 and 1597. These divided society into nine groups....This legislation sought to define exactly what fur, fabric and trimming could be worn by each rank...' Jane Ashelford, *The Art of Dress: Clothes and Society 1500-1914* (London: The National Trust, 1996), p.27. For the laws in detail with a comprehensive overview see Maggie Secara, 'Elizabethan Sumptuary Laws' <http://renaissance.dm.net/sumptuary/>.

Excess of Apparel' were, rather hypocritically, 'dressed up' in a cloak of morality that was reinforced by biblical patricians like St Paul, see below.²² The problem was that they were in practice unenforceable and had all but died out by the eighteenth century. An early sartorial tract from the late seventeenth-century called 'A Moral Essay Concerning Cloaths' laments:

Richness of Habit is not only unnecessary to keep up the Distinction of Degrees, but insufficient: For where there are no *Sumptuary Laws* to confine the Condition of Persons, and ascertain the *Heraldry* of the *Wardrobe*, every one has the Liberty of being as Expensive, and Modish as he pleases. And accordingly you may observe that ordinary People, when they happen to abound in Money and Vanity, have their Houses and Persons as richly Furnished as those who are much their Superiors....The Prostitution of Finery is enough to make it nauseous...²³

Albeit, sartorial rules recur, if not directly in law, then in prejudicial belief over the course of the next three centuries, stalwartly upheld by those of parochial mindset such as the snobbish Lydia Donnithorne, who is part of the declining landed-gentry at the turn of nineteenth century in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859).

Women especially were negatively affected by such polemical and pejorative tracts over the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries; as predominantly male moralists and writers sought to connect them innately with vanity and fashion. Anti-fashion rhetoric vociferously condemned the 'prostitution of finery' in women, whilst men such as Beau Brummel and the Prince Regent continued to dress up as fops and dandies. A

²² *Homilies: Sermons or Homilies Appointed to Be Read in the Churches in the Time of Queen Elizabeth*, third edition, corrected (Oxford: Clarendon, 1814), p.262.

law was even passed by the English Parliament in the early eighteenth-century which attempted to impose upon women the same penalties for adornment as had been formerly in place for witchcraft, rather conveniently freeing up those husbands who had married them under false pretences:

All women...that shall from and after this act impose upon, seduce or betray into matrimony any of His Majesty's subjects by the use of scents, paints, cosmetics, washes, artificial teeth, false hair, Spanish wool, iron stays, hoops, high heeled shoes, or bolstered hips, shall incur the penalty of the law now in force against witchcraft and like misdemeanours and that the marriage, upon conviction, shall stand null and void.²⁴

The law was effectively unenforceable, and although the magical and metamorphic power of women's clothes and make-up is hereby acknowledged, it does not condemn those 'poor' beguiled men who desire, and thereby create the demand for, such women in the first place.

Divinely ordained pseudo-sumptuary-laws were taken from the Bible, targeting sartorially effeminate men and emasculated women, and transvestism was condemned as a sin:

²³ Jeremy Collier, M.A. *Essays Upon Several Moral Subjects*, in two volumes (London: R. Sare and H. Hindmarsh, 2nd edition, 1697), vol. II., pp.87-102. With thanks to the Special Collection at the Robinson Library, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne.

²⁴ As quoted in R. Corson, *Fashions in Makeup: From Ancient to Modern Times* (London: Peter Owen, 1972), p.245.

The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God.²⁵

This only fortified the beliefs of puritanical antitheatricalists and anti-masquerade rhetoricians whose rigid essentialism forbade any form of fluid identity. Laws against cross-dressing existed in England until the end of the seventeenth-century; for which 'a person could be hanged for dressing in the clothes of the opposite sex'.²⁶

Equally, and further qualified by the Bible, they condemned what they regarded as vanity and immodesty in women, connected directly to their choice of apparel. According to St Paul, women should be suitably 'veiled' whilst praying to detract from their natural charms, which borders on the similarly fanatical repression of women in Islam: mummified in their burkas.²⁷ However, as Virginia Woolf would later shrewdly observe of St Paul in the polemical *Three Guineas* (1938), it is actually the covetous male eye and insatiable passions of the men which are at fault, and not women's beauty, hair or garb; whilst she also recognises the overt hypocrisy of a highly visible male vanity evident in the ritual pomp and ceremonial display of their public lives, especially in the high church. In Judeo-Christian teachings, post-lapsarian nakedness becomes a shameful thing, and since the fall is blamed on woman, then 'links between sin, the body, woman and clothes are easily forged' and thus became the subject of a lengthy, heated debate between moralists and clergy from the middle-ages. Sumptuary laws also attempted to help by distinguishing between the elaborate dress of the 'good', gentle wealthy woman and her 'fallen'

²⁵ Deut. 22:5.

²⁶ Catherine Smith and Cynthia Greig, *Manly Maidens, Cowgirls, and other Renegades* (London: Harry N. Abrams, 2003), p.5.

²⁷ 1 Cor. 11: 4-15.

sister, the prostitute; although the two were often blurred in the general condemnation of feminine excesses thereafter.²⁸

Nonetheless, as Terry Castle perceives:

Eighteenth-century culture as a whole might be termed, without exaggeration, a culture of travesty...manipulation of appearance was both a private strategy and a public institution.²⁹

At the masquerade, pomp and excess in costume, and accordingly a non-fixed identity, held sway, as moralists condemned its sartorial-moral libertinism.

Traditionalists, such as Henry Fielding, saw the collapse of the equation between dress and status as pointing to wider themes of social disorder; the symbolical function of dress was becoming ever more susceptible to manipulation and accordingly he condemns it in his fiction, whilst Defoe, Richardson and Walpole celebrate its devilish delights. Meanwhile, satirists such as Pope and Swift lampooned and mocked those lavish middle and upper class women obsessed with the fripperies of high-fashion; in their powdered wigs, pomade, rouge, mantua, sac dresses, hooped petticoats and exotic trimmings they were vain and thereby immoral: a combination of sartorial morality which continues to the present day.³⁰ Pope's satirical epic *The Rape of the Lock* (1714) condemns its fashionable, masquerading heroine, Belinda by suggesting that she deserves what she got for dressing that way:³¹ an idea which has recently been more sinisterly resurrected by a male judge presiding over a rape trial in

²⁸ Tseñlon, p.14.

²⁹ Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (OUP, 1995), p.83.

³⁰ This sexist assumption has only recently been challenged with the rise of the 'new man' whose narcissistic preoccupation with his appearance became the stuff of advertisements and men's magazines from the late 1980s.

³¹ Alexander Pope, 'Moral Essays: Epistle II', *Pope: Selected Poems*, sel. Douglas Grant (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988), p.139.

an British court of law.³² A warning against the sexual beauty tricks of women is given in an anonymous poem published in *Gentleman's Magazine* in 1764:

...At that the prude, coquette and saint
Industrious sets her face;
White powder, patch, and wash and paint,
Repair or give a grace.
To arch the brow there lies the brush,
The comb to tinge the hair,
The Spanish wool to give the blush
The pearl to dye them fair.³³

And a tract of 1740 includes:

...although her children may be dying of hunger, she will take food from their bellies to feed her own insatiable desire for luxury. She will have her silk fashions at any cost.³⁴

Despite, and perhaps in spite of this, the newly emergent romantics, as inspired by continental writers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, regarded women's dress in a different light. In his educationally influential *Émile* (1762), Rousseau describes his heroine as adorned in a new sartorial language, that of modesty:

³² The judge was the Rgt. Hon. Judge Pickles in 1992: an incident and attitude that S. Lees refers to and condemns alongside its persistent recurrence in the modern judicial system: in one U.K. case a woman's shoes (not leather but 'from the cheaper end of the market') were used to imply that she too was 'cheap', 'When in Rome', *The Guardian*, 16th Feb 1999, pp.6-7. See also Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth* (London: Vintage, 1991) who notes that lawyers in rape cases in the U.S. (with the exception of Florida) can legally cite what a woman wore at the time of the attack and whether or not the clothing was 'sexually provocative', p.46.

³³ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 1674, vol. 85, p.181.

Sophy is fond of dress, and she knows how to dress...she has taste enough to Dress herself well, but hates rich clothes; her own are always simple and elegant....she dares not know what colours are fashionable....there is no trace of artificiality. Her dress is extremely modest in appearance, and yet very coquettish in fact.³⁵

Though the figure of artful artlessness is somewhat paradoxical in purpose and intention, due to the creating male pen, Sophy aspires toward a new naturalness in fashion and appearance, and inadvertently Rousseau creates an inspiring literary-sartorial icon. Although Mary Wollstonecraft shrewdly added in her 'Vindication of the Rights of Woman' (1792) that Sophy's dress is:

...extremely modest in appearance, and yet very coquettish in fact: she does not make a display of her charms, she conceals them; but in concealing them, she knows how to affect your imagination....every part of her dress, simple as it seems, was only put in its proper order to be taken to pieces by the imagination.³⁶

Nonetheless, as a profoundly philosophical writer Rousseau was also aware of the uses and abuses of fashion, and his theories on the duplicitous nature of public and private display pervade his works.³⁷

³⁴ Quoted in J. Jones, 'Coquettes and Grisettes: Women Buying and Selling in Ancien Régime Paris', in V. de Grazia and E. Furlough (eds), *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (London: University of California Press, 1996), p.37.

³⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, or, On Education*, trans. Barbara Foxley (London: Everyman, 1993), v.v.91.

³⁶ Mary Wollstonecraft, 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman', *Political Writings* (OUP, 1994), p.161.

³⁷ For a detailed dissemination of Rousseau's sartorial theories as exhibited in his writing see Charles E. Ellison, 'Dress as a Code of Public Life'; a section of 'Rousseau and the City', *Political Theory*, 1985, Vol.13, no.4, pp.513-522.

If Sophy is the female romantic literary mannequin, so the eighteenth-century male, inspired by revolution moves away from the iconic, melancholic 'man in black' of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1601) towards romanticism embodied in Goethe's moody, artisan hero in *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). The ultimate man of sentiment was attired in a suit of 'wertherian' or later 'byronic' blue. For ladies the new Grecian style of dress, including the flowing, flimsy muslin drapery, cheaply printed white cottons, and the fashionable 'empire line' (1804-15) created the requisite heaving bosom and long, slender doric column shape, symbolising hopes for a more utopian society based along classical lines. Fashionable 'un-dress' was the name of the game, as obsessive devotees in the early 1800s weighed the already slight new fabrics so that altogether they were no more than an acceptable 8oz!³⁸ Less was definitely more as the pared-down elegance of the Romantic style was adorned in the revolutionary political ideologies and liberalism already sweeping two continents. Concern with these fashions is overt in the novels of Jane Austen and in the contemporary diaries of rich ladies. The early years of the nineteenth-century charted the rise of mercantile capitalism, and fashionable consumption in both senses of the term: significantly, the killer lung disorder was nicknamed the 'muslin disease' for being prevalent amongst those stylish ladies dressed in lightweight fabrics. Albeit, the era of the 'naked fashion', liberal in ethos and frugal in the use of fabric, had ended by 1820, as it was considered indecent by the next generation, whose own cumbersome, lavish styles were in themselves a form of patriotism, and deeply engendered safeguards for a new patriarchal backlash. It was also becoming ever-more difficult to enforce status through dress, as maids emulated mistresses, and the growing middle-classes with their puritanical 'men in black' began to dominate industry and politics; creating a stiflingly oppressive society for women, ironically, under the rule of a supreme matriarch, Queen Victoria.

³⁸ Dr. Oskar Fischel and Max Van Boehn, trans. M. Edwards, *Modes and Manners of the Nineteenth*

The Fashionable Woman in the Nineteenth-Century

Fashion thrived in this new world of increased social mobility as the 'aping of betters', and, more importantly, the display of status through the dress of wives and daughters was considered essential for any self-respecting patriarch, especially when promoting their decorative saleability on the marriage market. The French, American and Industrial Revolutions had created a restless desire for change which became evident in the growth of 'mass culture' and its ever-shifting styles. Clothing was now cheaper and easier to make because it was mass-produced,³⁹ and Britain became ever-more literally Napoleon's 'nation of shopkeepers', especially dressmakers, haberdasheries, department stores.⁴⁰

By the mid-nineteenth century the sharp distinctions that had been drawn between the roles of the male and female sexes, as characterised in the doctrine of 'separate spheres', was manifest in the visual extremities of highly engendered clothing.

Accordingly, the old adage 'the clothes maketh the man' was not merely an empty cliché to Victorian society, and alongside the more appropriate inversion, 'the clothes make the woman', states a profoundly literal truth about the nature of its fashions and provides an interesting perspective on the workings of society and the individual.⁴¹

Century: As Reproduced in the Pictures and Engravings of the Time (London: P.Dutton, 1909, revised edition, 1927), p.109.

³⁹ The invention of the sewing machine by Isaac Merit Singer in 1851 meant that they were available to professional and amateur dressmakers by 1856, and afterwards in the private home decreased the domestic burden on wives and daughters, see Alison Adburgham, 'Home Dressmaking and Private Dressmakers', chapter xi in *Shops and Shopping: 1800-1914* (London: Barrie and Jenkins), pp.113-122; Napoleon quote from *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, eds. J. M. and M. J. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1991), p.268.

⁴⁰ The first department stores in the world were Bainbridge's of Newcastle Upon Tyne (1830) founded by Emerson Muschamp Bainbridge (and now also called John Lewis): 'in 1845 its stock included 'dress and furnishing fabrics, fashion accessories, furs and family mourning, as well as 'sewed muslin dresses' – an early form of ready-to-wear clothes'. The other was Kendal, Milne and Faulkner of Manchester (1831) formerly called 'The Bazaar' which sold 'silk mercery, linens, shawls, Tuscan and straw bonnets and other items essential to the lady of fashion'. Although, ironically, the French claim it was *Bon Marché* of Paris (1852), quoted in Adburgham, pp.138-9.

⁴¹ 'The clothes maketh the man' i.e. 'Appearances count for a lot'. 'A similar expression was current among the ancient Greeks: 'The garment makes the man'. In the form 'apparel makes the man' the idea turned up in England as early as the sixteenth century. A century later it was sometimes put as 'the

Physiological and anatomical differences between the sexes were enormously exaggerated by clothed bodies. More than identifying each sex, clothing defined the role of each, rigidly confining them into polarised gender codes: namely, the public and domestic; the active and the passive; the subject and the object. Men were seriously sombre: they wore dark colours, mostly black, and little ornamentation; women were frivolous: they wore light pastel colours, especially white, with ribbons, lace and bows. Men were active: their clothes, including new trousers, allowed them movement; women were passive: their clothes inhibited movement; men were strong: their clothes emphasised broad chests and shoulders; women were delicate: their clothing accentuated tiny waists, sloping shoulders, and a softly rounded silhouette; and, finally, men were aggressive: their clothing had sharp definite lines and a clearly defined silhouette; and women were submissive: their silhouette was indefinite, their clothing constricting.

Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4) posited that clothes were not merely an aesthetic ornament, but were emblematic of a marked social hierarchy and symbolic of the spirit. 'Man's earthly interests,' he observed, 'are hooked and buttoned together and held up by clothes,' and he went on to declare that not only could clothing transform a person's appearance, it could also influence the actions and attitudes of both the wearer and the viewer.⁴² After reviewing the contemporary fashion studies of J. R. Planché and F. W. Fairholt, the *Quarterly Review* of 1847 declared that dress was an important means of communication:

taylor makes the man''. From James Rogers, *The Dictionary of Cliches* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985). A similar phrase is also used by William Shakespeare in *Hamlet* (1601), in which Polonius observes of the melancholic prince: 'For the apparel oft proclaims the man' (Harlow: Longman, 1993), I.iii.72.

⁴² Thomas Carlyle, *Carlyle: Sartor Resartus; Lectures on Heroes; Chartism; Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1890), I. viii. p.30, 34.

Dress becomes a sort of symbolic language – a kind of personal glossary – a species of body phrenology, the study of which it would be madness to neglect.⁴³

What society thus recognised, to use the phrasing of the sociologist Erving Goffman, was that dress performed the function of an ‘identity kit’.⁴⁴ The Victorians were interested in all aspects of reading appearances, and the popularity of the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and physiognomy pay tribute to this. Based upon seminal essays by Dr. Franz Joseph Gall, George Combe and Johann Caspar Lavater instances of this kind of exterior/interior correspondence are influential to the Greek and Gothic polarised physiognomic characterisations in the writings of Charlotte Brontë, and in the character descriptions of George Eliot; as well as recurring directly in both their lives when they had their ‘heads read’ (see corresponding chapters for full details).⁴⁵ If Brontë and Eliot were influenced by such ‘fashions’ in their novels, correspondingly, fashion was also influenced by literature. Sir Walter Scott’s highly successful *Waverley Novels* (1814-31) caused a pandemic of ‘Highland Fever’, or rather ‘Tartanitis’ across Britain, this Scottish romance later being fuelled by Queen Victoria’s love for her new Balmoral retreat.⁴⁶ The dowdy ‘quakerish greys’ of the Brontës’ governesses and the famous puritanical ensemble of Dorothea Brooke were also considered sartorial role ‘models’ for those who displayed their ostracism from, or rejection of, the fashionable world as will be shown in chapters one and two.

⁴³ Anon review, ‘Art of Dress,’ *Quarterly Review* 79 (1847), pp. 375-76.

⁴⁴ Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (New York: Garden City, 1961), p.20.

⁴⁵ Johann Caspar Lavater’s *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-8); Franz Joseph Gall’s *On the Functions of the Brain* (c1790, London: G. Berger, 1844); George Combe’s *Elements of Phrenology* (Edinburgh: John Anderson, 1824). See also Wilfred M. Senseman, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s use of Physiognomy and Phrenology’ in *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, 1952, vol.38, pp.475-486. For a ‘History of Phrenology’ see *The Victorian Web*: <http://landow.stg.brown.edu/victorian/science/phrenology/chron.html>.

⁴⁶ See Adburgham’s chapter vii, ‘The Tartan Epidemic and Highland Fever’, pp.70-78.

It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible...⁴⁷

Equally, the writings of those outrageously dandyish dressers, Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde, as well as French authors such as Charles Baudelaire, Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert, are strewn with descriptions of and references to dress. Often this is to the point where certain female characters are fetishised into erotic, demonic or angelic stereotypes: who can forget Miss Havisham in her decaying wedding dress (1); Emma Bovary's 'loose' *chemisette* and torturously high heels; or Wilkie Collins' ghostly sprite in *The Woman in White* (1860).



1. Harry Furniss' unsettlingly resplendent illustration of Miss Havisham for Dickens's *Great Expectations*.

For example, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) the reader is shown Tess Durbeyfield's entire wardrobe, variously and femininely attired in her best 'thin white gown' being the only girl with 'a red ribbon in her hair', and wearing her working 'pink print pinafore...worn over a stuff frock that had lost its original

⁴⁷ Oscar Wilde's cheeky inversion of a biblical command 'not to' (St John 7:24) in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) (Ware: Wordsworth, 1992), pp.34-5.

colour'. These feature strongly alongside multitudinous other fetishised sartorial descriptions, and yet the author disclaims in *The Woodlanders* (1887):

For there is hardly anything less connected with a woman's personality than drapery which she has neither designed, manufactured, cut, sewed, nor even seen, except by a glance of approval...⁴⁸

Hardy perpetually uses and describes women's clothing, equating the sartorial with characterisation, as well as the moral: i.e. that old cliché of 'red' for the scarlet woman.

The increasing popularity of the fashion plate and magazine from the turn of the nineteenth-century saw the escalation of changing 'seasonal' fashions and consequently the boost of the conspicuous consumer's desire to keep up with the pace of change by displaying the latest trends. Early magazines such as *Le Beau Monde or Literary and Fashionable Magazine* (1806) and *La Belle Assemblée: Lady's Magazine and Museum* (1806) were inspired by Parisian fashions and were targeted primarily at middle-class ladies of leisure, encouraging them to mimic the latest frivolous best. In contrast later magazines such as the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* or *EDM* (1852) run by Isabella and Samuel Beaton stressed not only the new nationalism, but also 'practicality': constructing your own dresses with the magazine's own detachable patterns and templates was highly original after the formerly exclusive 'fashion plate'. The latter targeted a different type of 'woman', a

⁴⁸ Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1992) p.26, p.21, p.46; *The Woodlanders*, ed. Dale Kramer (OUP, 1985) ch. 5, p.83.

feminine ideal highly endorsed by the Victorian Empire: the new domestic angel of the house.⁴⁹

Correspondingly, highly desirable 'feminine' characteristics were projected through women's dress: frivolity, delicacy, inactivity, and submissiveness, and embodied in the heroines of literature and praised by writers and journalists. John Keats' ideal woman is like, 'a milk-white lamb that bleats for man's protection'.⁵⁰ Coventry Patmore in his long and sentimental poem on ideal marriage *The Angel in the House* (1854-63) depicted the betrothed woman in abject subservience to her fiancé, her own self and identity eradicated. Of Amelia in *Vanity Fair* (1848) Thackeray, echoing Rousseau, writes, 'I think it was her weakness which was her principal charm; a kind of sweet submission and softness, which seemed to appeal to each man she met for his sympathy and protection'.⁵¹ He went on to describe the model woman as found in the novels of Scott as 'an exquisite slave'.⁵²

The clothes of the Victorian woman not only projected the message of their willingness to conform to a submissive, masochistic pattern, but they also helped to mould female behaviour to these highly idealised roles. Sleeves of the late 1830s and 1840s were set low over the shoulder, tightly encasing the arm so that it was virtually impossible to raise the arm to shoulder height or make an active gesture, and heavy, wide skirts also impeded and inhibited movement. 'No-one but a woman,' Mrs Oliphant wrote in *Dress* (1879?), 'knows how her dress twists about her knees, doubles her fatigue, and arrests her locomotive powers'.⁵³ In the 1850s the floor-long

⁴⁹ For more information on the growth of fashion magazines and thus female consumer desire see the invaluable Margaret Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?: Domesticity and Desire in the Woman's Magazine, 1800-1914* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.216-7 has a full list of titles and dates.

⁵⁰ John Keats, 'Imitation of Spenser', in *Poetical Works*, ed. H. W. Garrod (OUP, 1978), p.23.

⁵¹ William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1848), ed. J. I. M. Stewart (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.43.

⁵² William Thackeray, 'Sketches and Travels in London,' in *Works* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869), 15:274.

⁵³ Margaret Oliphant, *Dress* (Philadelphia: Porter and Coats [1879?]), p.55.

petticoats that were worn to inflate the floor-sweeping skirt made rapid movement of the legs difficult. By the mid-1850s and throughout most of the 1860s the crinoline, or cage, as it was ominously called, replaced the numerous petticoats. A 'helpful' innovation that eliminated the need for such layers, the crinoline and its complicated paraphernalia metaphorically transformed women into caged birds ensconced in hoops of steel.⁵⁴ Difficulties in manoeuvring crinolines were well documented in cartoons and caricatures, just as the hoop had been by Hogarth in the eighteenth-century. More seriously, the light material of the crinoline posed the very real danger of inflammability. The *Illustrated News of the World* warned in 1863 that '[Women] are living under a sentence of death which may occur unexpectedly in the most appalling form'.⁵⁵

The *EDM* of 1867 reported that 3,000 women were burned to death annually and another 20,000 injured because they wore the crinoline.⁵⁶ The tyranny of fashion for 'the fair sex' did not stop at this caged adornment, or with the promotion of female vanity and narcissism through the media; but actually went beyond the peripheral; attempting to alter female anatomy toward an ever more submissive ideal through the use of the 'laced corset',⁵⁷ which, somewhat ironically giving its alleged moral connotations, featured heavily in the images of Victorian pornography.⁵⁸ The tight

⁵⁴ The Crinoline was invented by Charles Frederick Worth in 1856. Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale, the two major icons of Victorian femininity, never actually wore crinolines, and were in reality its vociferous opponents. On 1 August 1863, Queen Victoria addressed a letter '*To the Ladies of England*,' expressing the pain with which she read, 'the account of daily accidents arising from the wearing of that indelicate, expensive, dangerous, and hideous article called the Crinoline.' Quoted in Adburgham, p.93.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Alison Gernsheim, *Fashion and Reality* (London,: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.47.

⁵⁶ *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 3 (1867): p.102.

⁵⁷ 'Corsets were worn all through the century and tight lacing was the rule, except during the height of the crinoline period. It was perhaps most excessive in the '40's, the 70's and the '90's.' Cunningham, C. Willett, *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p.20.

⁵⁸ See Beetham's section on the 'Corset Controversy' that raged throughout the 1860s and 70s in the pages of the *EDM*'s 'Conversazione' section. It involved overly graphic letters that were most probably written by male fantasists detailing the agonising pain of young girls in corsets: it was notoriously erotic and a flood of complaints finally stopped the correspondence, pp.81-84.

confines of the strings and its overt sexual enhancements ensured that it lent itself well as a fetishistic object of an ultimately sadomasochistic fantasy.⁵⁹

Corset usage was widespread amongst upper and middle class young ladies across the western world in the nineteenth century, and was designed to change the configurations of the body to accord more closely with the feminine ideal of the small waist which dominated the period. It exaggerated the differences in female anatomy by constricting the waist and enlarging the hips and bust, and it also constricted the diaphragm, forcing women to breathe from the upper part of the chest; from this resulted the peculiarly feminine heaving of bosoms so lovingly described in popular novels. The degree of physical debility caused by the corset depended upon the tightness of the lacing. The size of the desired waist varied depending on social occasion, age and marital status, and seventeen or eighteen inches was the average according to historians of costume.⁶⁰ It became an obsession for its female devotees, and was used as early as possible, the object of which was to achieve the thinnest waist physically possible by prolonged usage over a period of months, or indeed years when practised by certain girls' schools (see 2a, 2b and 2c).⁶¹

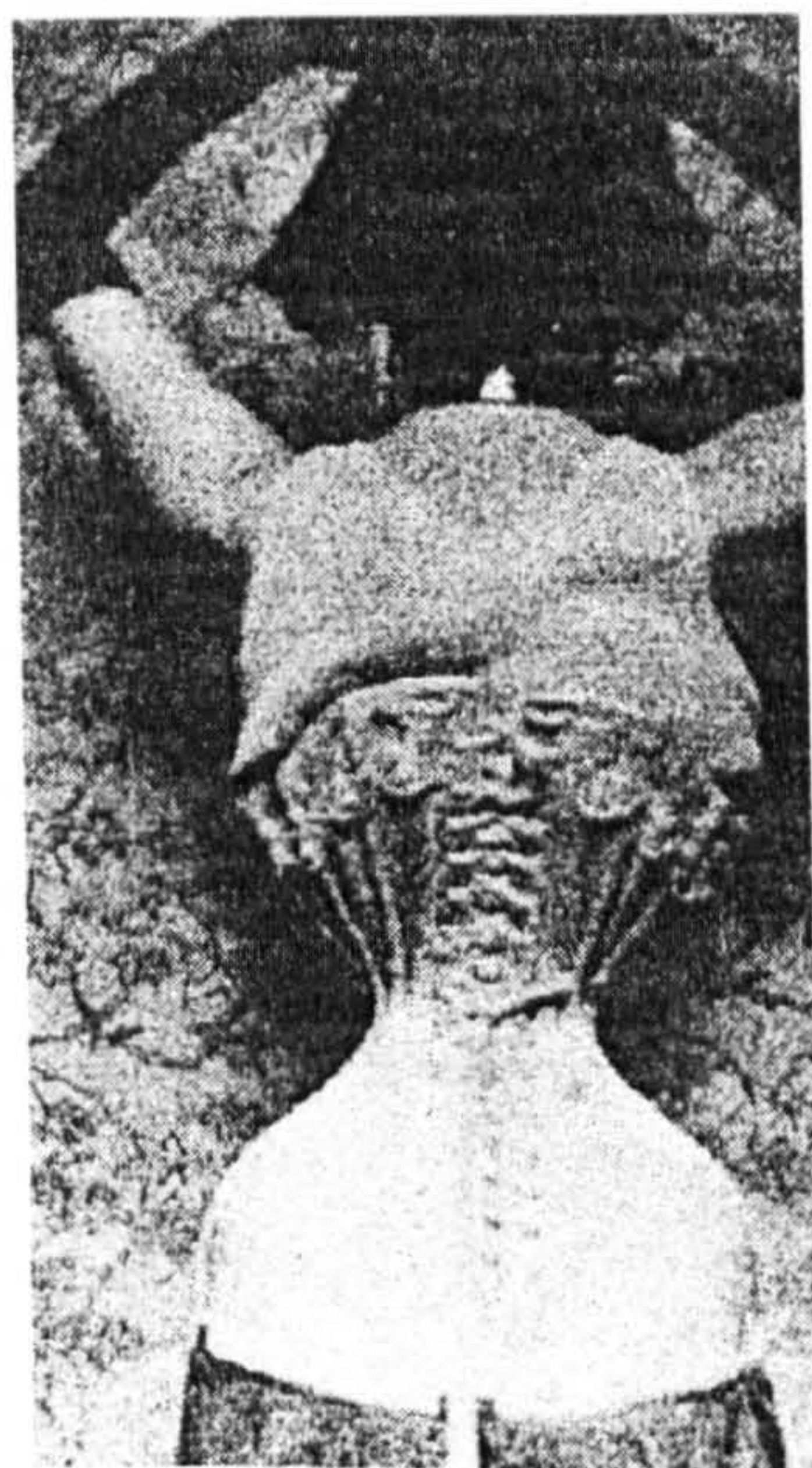
To train a young woman to wear a corset a steel rod with a semi-circle went under the chin and was clasped to the steel busk in the stays. In this constrained state many young girls were made to sit for many successive hours of reading or sewing and they invariably relaxed out of the recommended upright position, and since their muscles were underdeveloped by lack of exercise, their spines developed a curvature that inevitably meant that they were put in stiffer and stronger stays to correct the slump.

⁵⁹ The author Pauline Réage graphically details the often brutal nature of the sexual fantasies surrounding the rigid and constricting clothing of this period, especially the corset and crinoline, in the erotic classic the *Story of O* (London,: Olympia, 1970).

⁶⁰ Cunnington, p.131.

⁶¹ The *EDM* of September 1872 included a pattern and sketch for a garment called 'baby stays', which were not boned but all too often were tied very tightly.

The results, Dr. Andrew Combe in *The Principles of Physiology* (1860), said, are a ‘fragile and airy form, a sylph-like figure, an interesting paleness occasionally relived by a touch of



2a. An horrific example of extreme tight-lacing. 2b. Advertisement for the Survival Corset in a souvenir guide at the International Health Exhibition in 1884.

**Ball's
Celebrated
Waist for
Children,
38 Cents.**

No. 18R4052
Dr. Ball's
Child's Corset
Waist will train
your child's fig-
ure while young.
The Dr. Ball's
Waist is easy,
comfortable and
perfect fitting.
patent tape fas-
tened buttons
and taped button-
holes. White or
drab. Sizes, 18 to
28. Always give
waist measure.
Price, each, 38c
If by mail, post-
age extra, 10
cents.



2c. Dr Ball's Child's Corset waist, from the Sears –Roebuck Catalogue, 1904.

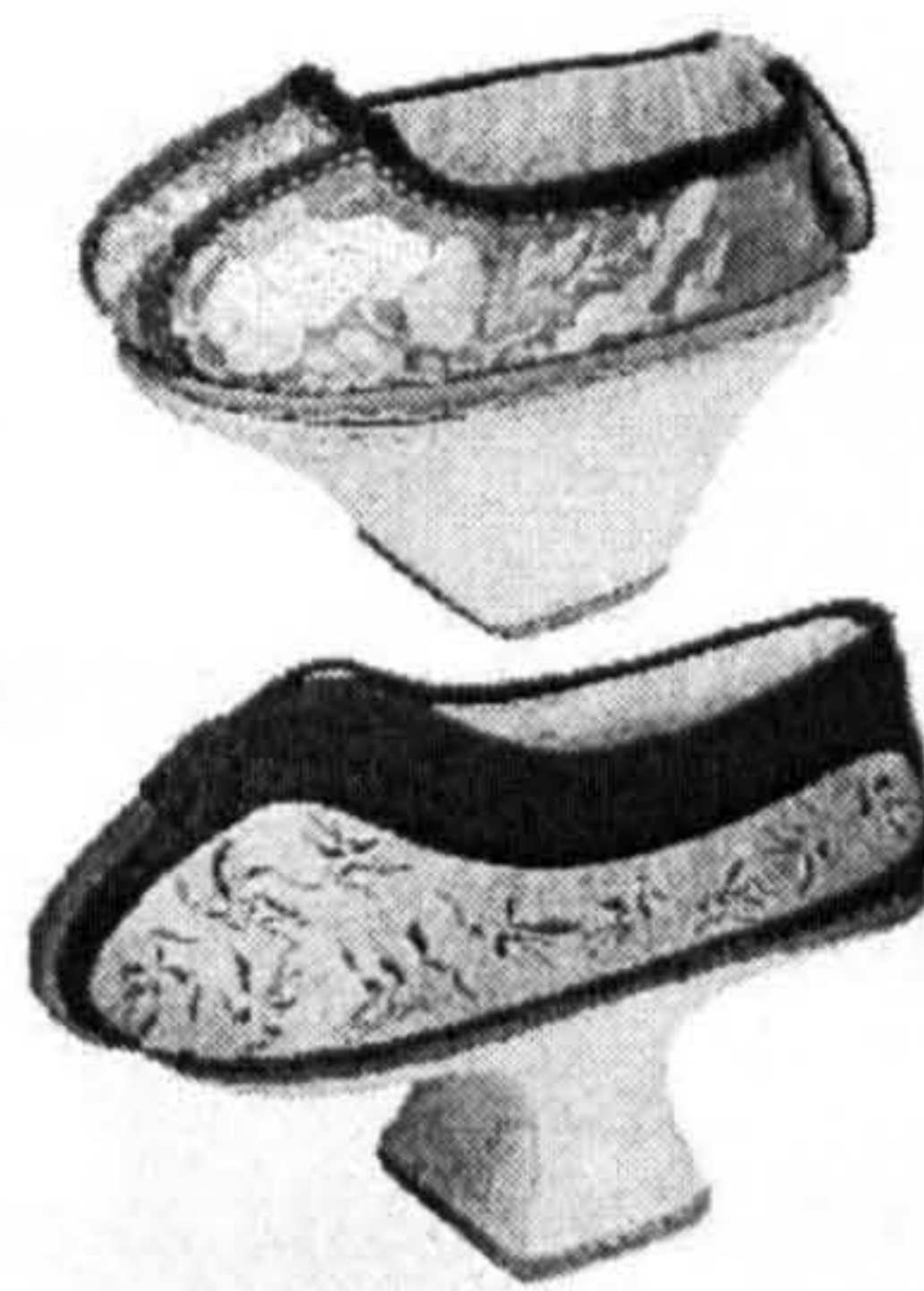
carnation (rouge). It is an expressive look, softly shaded by melancholy,' but adds with emphasis, ‘most of these indications are precisely those of feeble health.’⁶² Many

⁶² Andrew Combe, *The Principles Of Physiology Applied to the Preservation of Health and to the Improvement of Physical and Mental Education*, 15th ed. (Edinburgh: Maclachan & Stewart, 1860), pp.91-92.

doctors and dress-reformers insisted that tight-lacing caused deformity and compared the practice with Chinese foot binding (3).⁶³

Combe's anti-corset rhetoric has echoes of the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft's earlier concerns as voiced in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), which analyses the female obsession with appearance and clothing:

To preserve personal beauty, woman's glory! The limbs and faculties are cramped worse than Chinese bands⁶⁴...[which] weakens the muscles and relaxes the nerves.⁶⁵



3. Manchu women's tiny shoes, embroidery on satin weave silk, late nineteenth-early twentieth-century, top: 11 x 18 cm, bottom: 12 x 23.5 cm.

She is referring to the hoops and corsets of a century earlier, but it has a profound resonance for the crinolines and corsets of the nineteenth-century. She denounces women as mere dolls and 'slaves to their bodies' dressed in their 'gilt cage[s]' and

⁶³ To make women's feet look infantile and like a lotus flower, 'many women of the Han Chinese majority...had their feet deformed in childhood. Inside the shoes the feet were kept tightly bound with first bandages, and then broad ribbons....As late as the 1930's an Englishman living in Tianjin could write home and relate how he was kept awake by girls of six years old crying through the night because their broken and bound toes were too painful. A generation earlier Mrs Little had founded the Natural Foot Society while living in Peking. She travelled around China with examples of unnaturally small shoes as aids in her lecturing campaign against this brutal custom'. Wilson, Verity, *Chinese Dress* (V&A, 1986), p.70. This is presumably related to the western fantasy of *Cinderella* (Perrault, 1706) in which the beautiful heroine has much smaller feet than her ugly sisters, or indeed any other woman in the land; fitting them into a tiny glass slipper to win her a husband. Which is, however, derived from a Chinese legend, for its origins see *The Classic Fairy Tales*, collected and ed. by Iona and Peter Opie (OUP, 1974).

⁶⁴ Chinese foot binding, *ibid.*.

⁶⁵ Wollstonecraft, p.109.

using the many ‘bodily inconveniences’ and ‘fripper[ies] of dress’ to ‘adorn their prisons’ and thereby ‘cramp the activity of the mind’; radically concluding that ‘an air of fashion is but a badge of slavery’.⁶⁶ Ironically, this radical protest earned her Horace Walpole’s infamous and derogatory description of her as a ‘hyena in petticoats’ which combines a debasing animal image with a superficial reduction to an item of the ‘feminine ideal’; and seems to me to be a perfectly relevant corrupted quotation for the title of this thesis in that the four women writers analysed were/are suitably radical (hyenas) and passionate (scarlet petticoats) in either their writings, lives and/or use of clothing.⁶⁷

Simone de Beauvoir in the seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949) reiterates Wollstonecraft’s feminist, anti-clothing discourse for the twentieth-century:

Woman...is required by society to make herself an erotic object. The purpose of the fashions to which she is enslaved is not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires...The skirt is less convenient than trousers, high-heeled shoes impede walking; the least practical of gowns and dress shoes, the most fragile of hats and stockings, are most elegant; the costume may disguise the body, deform it, or follow its curves; in any case it puts on display...her vocation as a sexual object.

She continues with reference to the past:

Costumes and styles are often devoted to cutting off the feminine body from any activity: Chinese women with bound feet could scarcely walk, the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.111, 112, 220.

polished fingernails of the Hollywood star deprive her of her hands; high heels, corsets, panniers, farthingales, crinolines were intended less to accentuate the curves of the feminine body than to augment its incapacity...Paralysed by inconvenient clothing and by the rules of propriety – then woman's body seems to man to be his property, his thing.

This 'ambiguous idol' as pertaining to male perceptions of what de Beauvoir subsequently terms 'the eternal feminine' constructs woman as an object which is all surface and appearance, and denies her essential subjectivity by crowding it with 'unnatural' disguises:

Woman becomes plant, panther, diamond, mother-of-pearl, by blending flowers, furs, jewels, shells, feathers with her body; she perfumes herself to spread an aroma of the lily and the rose. But the feathers, silk, pearls and perfumes serve also to hide the animal crudity of her flesh, her odour. She paints her mouth and her cheeks to give them the solid fixity of a mask...⁶⁸

The anti-adornment rhetoric is clear, adjectives such as caged, confined, bound, cramped, and imprisoned decorate the text, and thus the female body.

Arguments for health and hygiene used by both women are certainly appropriate to nineteenth-century England when women conformed to the sartorial-feminine ideal with disabling and often terminal results. Fatal 'stays' created the headline in the *Cheltenham Free Press* of June 4th, 1842, 'Death caused by Tight-Lacing', and the Registrar General in the *Nineteenth Annual Report* of 1857, voiced an eloquent,

⁶⁷ Horace Walpole in a letter to the writer Hannah More on 4th January 1795. *Complete Correspondence of Horace Walpole*, in 48 vols., ed. W. S. Lewis (Yale University Press, 1937-61), vol.31., p.397.

official condemnation in which he directly linked the corset to a high mortality rate amongst women:

...the effects of a tight cord around the neck and of tight-lacing only differ in degree...for the strangulations are both fatal. To wear tight-stays is in many cases to wither, to waste, to die.⁶⁹

Closely related to low vitality, fainting fits, and the mysterious indispositions that were a frequent occurrence, the corset, along with lack of exercise and other excessively heavy clothing (a dress could easily weigh fifteen pounds), played a crucial part in forming the image of the petite, weak and submissive Victorian 'angel'.

Why then did she undergo the pain and inconvenience of fashionable dress and encourage the ultra-feminine ideal impelled upon her? In an age where alternatives to marriage were notoriously grim, becoming a governess or a spinster, and good husbands were scarce, the pressures to conform to the submissive model that the media and most men expected were overwhelming. Also, defenders of tight-lacing, including some doctors, frequently used the language of sadomasochism; speaking of 'discipline,' 'confinement,' 'submission,' and 'bondage'.⁷⁰ They referred to it as 'training the figure' and as a form of 'moral discipline', and the wearing of corsets came to be seen as an respectable imperative.⁷¹ An un-corseted woman was in danger of being accused of loose morals. Conditioning in childhood, physical dependence, an ideal of masochistic submission and discipline, pride in moral rectitude, female

⁶⁸ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans., Jonathan Cape (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1953), pp.543-4, p.190.

⁶⁹ *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Register-General of Births, Deaths, and Marriages in England*. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1858 [for the year 1856]), pp.194-95.

⁷⁰ Beetham, p.83.

⁷¹ As quoted in C. Willett and Phyllis Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p.180.

narcissism and intense media influence all combined to encourage the practice of tight-lacing and the adoption of cumbersome adornments.

Furthermore, women's preoccupation with appearance also performed the function of displaying the family's wealth through 'conspicuous consumption', 'conspicuous waste' and most importantly for their passivity, 'conspicuous leisure'. In the famous nineteenth-century sociological study *The Theory of the Leisure Class* Thorstein Veblen dedicates a whole chapter to 'Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture' in which he elucidates the nature of 'respectable appearance' and 'elegant apparel' in Victorian England. These highly-decorated images are far from being practical, especially for the ladies of the house, and are contrived in such a way as to suggest that the wearer does not habitually put forth any useful effort, i.e. they are white or pale in colour. This, he denominates, 'Conspicuous Leisure', where the wearer 'is seen to consume without producing'.⁷² Women's drapery is made to conform to a passive ornamental ideal:

The substantial reason for our tenacious attachment to the skirt is just this: it is expensive and it hampers the wearer at every turn and incapacitates her for all useful exertion...The corset is, in economic theory, substantially a mutilation, undergone for the purpose of lowering the subject's vitality and rendering her permanently and obviously unfit for work...[the gain is made] in reputability...[and in] visibly increased expensiveness and infirmity.⁷³

Veblen discusses the 'woman's proper sphere' as being that of the household, which she should beautify, being its 'chief ornament', and thus her clothing is conspicuously

⁷² Veblen, ch.VII, pp.167-187.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.172.

impractical for the male public sphere. In conclusion he suggests that women are reduced to an economic servitude and disabled for this function by their attire:

The high-heel, the skirt, the impractical bonnet, the corset, and the general disregard of the wearer's comfort, features of all civilised woman's apparel, are...evidence to the effect that in the modern civilised scheme of life the woman is still, in theory, the economic dependent of the man...In a highly idealised sense, she is still man's chattel...Conspicuous leisure and attire on the part of women lies in the fact they are servants to whom...has been delegated the office of putting in evidence their 'masters' ability to pay...The lady of the house is the chief menial of the household.⁷⁴

Accordingly, the *Quarterly Review* of March 1847 disturbingly comments, 'We should doubt whether the woman who is indifferent to her own appearance be a woman at all'.⁷⁵ Hence, Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* peeking at her image in polished tables and pewter dishes, clandestinely buying earrings, secretly lighting candles to gaze at herself in the gilded mirror, dreaming of the effect on her admirers of a new ribbon, is only encapsulating 'desirable' narcissistic 'feminine' traits; trapped by her own expectations and desires. As are Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* (1871-2), Ginevra Fanshawe in *Villette*, and Rosalie Murray in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847), who can all be regarded as frivolous women, and who are either rewarded for their vanity by men and money, or, perhaps more justly, punished for it by their creators.

To conclude and summarise; this thesis therefore aims to draw upon the aforementioned historical and theoretical material in order to investigate the

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.179-182.

significance of dress in the writings of four female novelists. The first chapter 'Survival of the Plainest' on The Brontës includes works by Charlotte and Anne, but with recourse to Emily; the second chapter, exclusively on George Eliot (Marian Evans), 'Puritan Asceticism and Bejewelled Aesthetics', examines three of her major novels; and the final chapter on Virginia Woolf, entitled 'A Woolf in Sheep's Clothing', looks at the significance of clothing in both her life and work. Chapter One comprises a gradual build up of materials, beginning in the nineteenth century and culminating in the feminist anti-sartorial rhetoric of the twentieth century. It is worth remembering that all four women writers included found it hard to conform to the public pressures of what was expected of their appearance, especially under the rather glamorous title of 'lady writer', and in their private 'sartorial' lives they were famously insecure; something this thesis aims to address in part. However, the primary focus is on the central heroine(s) of each novel, exploring sartorial transformations and pairings of opposites. Although none of the following novels contains explicit references to the sartorial extremities listed above, they do hint at the uncomfortable and time-consuming tasks involving all aspects of a woman's dress and appearance. The vast majority of women, corsets and crinolines aside, felt under enormous pressure to conform to the aforementioned 'feminine ideal', and this was metaphorically just as cumbersome and crushingly powerful as the clothing itself.

For example, Veblen's sartorial theory is useful in an analysis of *Jane Eyre*, as Charlotte Brontë ominously presents the hypocritical patriarch Mr Brocklehurst in terms of 'conspicuous consumption', his austere and cruel treatment of the girls in their 'brown dresses' is immediately contrasted with his elaborately attired wife and daughter. Yet later in the narrative, even the heroic Mr Rochester makes an attempt to

⁷⁵ 'Art of Dress,' *Quarterly Review* 79 (1847), p.375.

adorn 'his plain Jane' in jewels and lavish draperies, which she fiercely resists with a notably feminist, anti-sartorial rhetoric:

"I will myself put the diamond chain around your neck, and the circlet on your forehead...and I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings."...

"Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them...Don't address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess." (*Jane Eyre*, pp.287-8)⁷⁶

Brontë recognises not only the polarised nature of the sexes in her society, as described through the passionate eyes of the plain, Quakerish-grey clad heroine who observes the rigidly monochrome gender chiaroscuro from the sidelines of Thornfield's ballroom: 'The collective appearance of the gentlemen, like that of the ladies, is very imposing: they are all costumed in black', whilst the ladies are, 'dressed in white...reminding me...of a flock of white plummy birds'; but also that the drab 'uniforms' of Agnes in *Agnes Grey* (1847), Jane in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (1853) mark them out as 'different', deliberately setting them apart from the Victorian ideal of womanhood (*JE*, 199-200). Notwithstanding, Anne and Charlotte attempt to 're-dress' their literary governess-heroines into real women who triumph over their humble station without losing their integral individuality.

Conversely, Eliot, in chapter two, adopts this idea and yet goes a stage further; she identifies the black and white gender-dichotomy only to reverse it in relation to morality. Her real heroines, such as Dinah Morris in *Adam Bede* (1859) and

Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* (1871-2) are in black, and the frivolous girls around them, i.e. Hetty Sorrel, Rosamond Vincy and even Celia Brooke are in white or pink. However, it would also seem that there are purposefully evident 'shades of grey' in this superficially simple sartorial-morality, especially as the heroines grow beyond their earlier puritanical confines in recognising their inner desires and passions, and culminating in the stunning Gwendolen Harleth, of *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and her predominant choice of green dresses and accessories; directly opposed to the dainty, but ultimately tiresome heroine, Mirah Lapidoth arrayed in her sombre black outfit with strangely petite shoes.

The final chapter examines Virginia Woolf's intense personal preoccupation with clothing, as it is seen to become an integral part of her art and aesthetic philosophy. Amongst others it explores: her 'clothes complex'; the relationship of clothing to memory and character; the recurrence of the colour green for her female characters; and explains the reason for her 'costumed' transcendence of heteronormative gender assumptions in *Orlando* (1928), *The Years* (1937) and *Between the Acts* (1941) with its implications for modern feminism.

Finally, the question remains: were these women writers using clothing references with a conscious awareness or a subconscious cultural influence? It seems to me that this does not have a simple answer as the Brontës, Eliot and Woolf do not so much *think* about sartorial semantics in their writings, but *feel it* in a form of literary synaesthesia, and as perceived and embodied in the apparel people wore in the immediate world around them: creating a highly woven 'textilic text' that forever records sartorial history and semantics.

⁷⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Q. D. Leavis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988). All future references will be to this text, and abbreviated to *JE*.

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Chapter One

The Survival of the Plainest:

The Brontës and Sartorial Triumph

The Literary Governess



4. Rebecca Solomon 'The Governess' (1854).¹

When Jane Fairfax in Austen's *Emma* (1816) parallels her destiny as a governess to that of the 'slave trade' she states perceptively,

There are places in town....Offices for the sale – not quite of human flesh – but of human intellect...I was not thinking of the slave-trade...[but the] governess-trade...²

The role of the governess in nineteenth century society was a complex one, requiring a negation of the female body, and also, as the namesake heroine of Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* details, there is a personal fear of intellect and morality slipping away within the confines of the vulgar households of the Bloomfields and the Murrays. In denying their sexuality, which was paramount to the feminine ideal of the young middle-class lady, governesses were expected to conform to an austere dress code: a symbolical uniform, analogous to an outfit of mourning, and in almost the same way a

¹ In this picture, the governess, pictured at right, appears to be wearing a modest black silk or woollen dress, with a white collar and bow at her neck, as her former pupil (the girl in white) flirts with a suitor.

² Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Ronald Blythe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.300.

nun's habit signifies the loss of earthly sexuality. Accordingly, a more acceptable fate as an angelic wife or mother within the patriarchal dominated domestic sphere is denied.

The governess was a breed apart from the average middle-class lady, even though they had usually been educated in a comparable manner to their pupils and originally came from similarly middle-class backgrounds. The Brontë sisters were regarded as ladies and educated as such, but because of poor marriage prospects, due to their isolated locality and their clergyman father's poor pay they were expected to work for a living rather than be supported. Likewise, the vast majority of governesses were created through the unstable economic climate of industrial England, put out to work because of financial misfortune or family crisis.³ In Agnes' case the patriarch of the Grey household fails to provide for his family through financial errors and the heroine chooses to sell herself, by advertising as a governess in the local press. When Agnes arrives, the frivolous Mrs Murray, with a misquoted reference to St Matthew, announces what she expects of this marginalized figure, '[We] want a meek and quiet spirit which St Matthew, or some of them, says is better than the putting on of apparel' (AG, 120).⁴ The governess is expected to be all virtue and intellect, with no related passions: a literal no-body.

Governess literature flourished in the 1830s and 40s until the 1860s, becoming a genre of its own, and where the figure of the governess exhibited a broad characterisation

³ Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: Hambledon, 1993), especially the chapter, 'A Matter of Necessity,' for an overview of the kinds of women who became governesses: clergymen's daughters made up a significantly high proportion, pp.11-25. Hereafter referred to as *Governess*.

ranging from the scheming seductress, the victim, the evil crone, the loyal friend, the mother-figure, and the disadvantaged beauty:

It is a curious proof of the present feeling towards governesses, that they are made the heroines of many popular novels.⁵

There is Mrs Sherwood's *Caroline Mordaunt* (1835), Lady Blessington's *The Governess* (1839), Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* (1839), Elizabeth Sewell's *Amy Herbert* (1844), the class conscious Hyacinth Gibson in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1866), as well as the seductive Becky Sharp of Thackeray's acclaimed *Vanity Fair* (1848), not forgetting previous incarnations in Austen's fiction, and also the presentment as a future threat posed to Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* (1876): see Chapter two. For a generation of female readers they became daring alter-egos who could wander a world they could not; or equally they could serve as a warning of a fate that may befall their middle-class homes in an increasingly turbulent capitalist economy; and even as evil invader into the cosy Victorian homestead. The governess-figure ranged across melodrama, romance, morality tale, silver-spoon fiction etc, and was accordingly: wicked and pious; English and French; victims and schemers; playing major and minor roles, and was portrayed from the outside as well as through their internal thought. Agnes Grey often seems to exist purely internally as she even withholds her deepest passions from the reader, and almost belongs to a pious morality tale complete with a predictable ending:

⁴ Her misquotation is a kind of private joke at the expense of the real Mrs Murray – the worldly Mrs Robinson, Branwell's seductress – who was in fact a canon's daughter. Anne Bronte, *Agnes Grey*, ed. Angeline Goreau (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988).

The governess has fallen, to a careless stereotype of the plain clergyman's daughter, obliged to spend her time fending off slights from both servants and employers, before escaping a prim middle-age by last-minute marrying to the curate.⁶

Nevertheless, this quotation is an unjust and narrow trope to which Anne Brontë's realist novel does not entirely conform. In real life governesses were isolated, or indeed exiled, from society: often confined to the immediate household and the attention of the pupils alone; just as Agnes Grey is literally imprisoned for a duration within Horton Lodge by her manipulative pupil Rosalie Murray, and she is also not expected to participate in the social events of the house.⁷ Governesses were suitably humbled and objectified into a potent status symbol for the wealthiest sections of the middle-class. Unable to fulfil the highest female goals of marriage and motherhood, the popular stereotype had them 'plain and sexless' and also portrayed as celibate, frustrated-hypochondriacs, hysterical, and nervously irritable, with neurotic symptoms relating to suspected masturbatory tendencies; this stereotype ultimately culminates in the unstable governess of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).⁸

However, these wild prejudices were not strictly true. In 1861, according to Hughes, two-thirds of governesses were under thirty; some as young as eighteen. Thus the 'old-maid' stereotype articulates a latent fear in the middle-class household of allowing a young, independent, nubile, and possibly beautiful woman into their

⁵ Mary Maurice, *Governess Life: Its Trials, Duties and Encouragements. By the Author of 'Memorials of Two Sisters'* (London, 1849), p7.

⁶ *Governess*, xvi.

⁷ See chapter 'They Dwell Alone', *Ibid.*, pp.85-116.

homes. The threat of unregulated sexuality meant that she was also likened to the prostitute, who was the other permanent fixture of the Victorian family and who also helped create the necessary domestic harmony. Just as the prostitute was the surrogate wife, so the governess was the surrogate mother and accordingly both took on the responsibilities that these roles implied: conveniently replacing the impractical, disembodied and ethereal 'Angel of the House' figure of idealised Victorian womanhood. In *Vanity Fair* Miss Pinkerton knowingly points out:

“...as [Becky Sharp] is only eighteen years of age, and of exceedingly pleasing personal appearance, perhaps this young lady may be objectionable.”⁹

There was a marked preference for the plain and quiet governess in the mould of the Brontës. Society looked for those suffering women who had known hardship, were obliged to work, and were ultimately chastened by the experience. For this reason, the question of how the governess was to dress became a subject of intense debate: a battleground of conflicting desires and prohibitions. Clothing had always been used to fix and display social status and the drab-dress of the governess, perceptively exhibited in *Agnes Grey*, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* became the de-individualising uniform, or badge of a degraded and ambiguous status; if not directly symbolical through the dominance of melancholic blacks and greys of a mourned exclusion from the 'lighter' gaieties of the feminine *Beau Monde*. As Gwendolen Harleth later states in *Daniel Deronda* upon its being an imminent prospect, as her mother vainly encourages her to take her jewellery,

⁹ See chapter 'A Tabooed Woman', *Ibid.*, p126.

“That would be quite useless, mamma...Governesses don’t wear ornaments.

You had better get me a grey frieze livery and a straw poke, such as my aunt’s charity children wear.” (*DD*, 233)

However, as a lady the governess was expected to look like one and pay for it, unlike the nurse or lady’s maid, out of her own pocket. Looking shabby or too conspicuous damaged career prospects. A real life example, May Pinhorn relates:

I felt very shy and lost in London Life...and I soon found that my clothes were not suitable, which did not add to my comfort.¹⁰

One source says that governesses were obliged to spend almost half their annual salary on suitable apparel, just as Agnes weighs up the cost of living with dress expenses for both of her posts, ‘I must have some decent clothes becoming my station,’ (*AG*, p70, 114). They were expected to be ‘clean and decent’ and were easily spotted by their ‘unfashionable dress’, especially in places like London. Charlotte Brontë dressed and appeared among the capital’s fashionable literati attired in a governess-style, mourning dress and was observed by the writer Harriet Martineau,

‘Miss Brontë’ was announced; and in came in a young-looking lady, almost child-like in stature, ‘in a deep mourning dress, neat as a Quaker’s, with her beautiful hair smooth and brown, her fine eyes blazing with meaning, and her sensible face indicating a habit of self-control.’¹¹

⁹ William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), Ch.2.

Likewise Jane Eyre encounters Mr Rochester dressed in the self-effacing, funereal uniform consisting of ‘...a black merino cloak, a black beaver bonnet; neither of them half fine enough for a lady’s maid’ (*JE*, 146).¹²

This sobered appearance is depicted in Richard Redgrave’s painting of *The Governess* (1844) which was part of a series of pictures detailing the plight of the respectable woman obliged to work for her living (see 5 below).¹³

The music sheet reads ‘Home Sweet Home’ and the dress is in striking contrast to that of her femininely adorned pupils in pink and powder blue shades, who are symbolically playing outside. The governess wears a plain black dress and the black-edged letter she reads suggests a literal mourning, as well as metaphorical one. The

¹⁰ *Governess*, p127.

¹¹ Charlotte Brontë was often remarked as being ‘odd looking’ and ‘old fashioned’ in her dress and appearance on her major visits to her London, and always felt awkward and ugly at social functions. See Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Alan Shelston (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p.346, 392, 417. Hereafter referred to as *Life*. Though she was not a teacher or governess at this time she appears to be attired in the traditional governess garb she usually wore, and which is constantly referred to by herself in her novels as ‘drab’ ‘Quakerish’ ‘nunnish’ in the style of an old maid. However, at the time of this quotation she was actually mourning for her sisters and brother, but the multitudinous references in Gaskell to her quaint image suggests that she constantly appropriated for herself a drab, old-fashioned, funereal style of dress, originally adopted at the austere Cowan Bridge school. Even when she and Anne went to London for the first time she sticks to this ‘uniform’ and never quite fits into the glittering authorial model which seems to have been expected of her.

¹² Though John Harvey designates nineteenth-century black for men as symbolic of power, sexuality and the new puritan industrialisation, he makes an exception for women who only really wore black for funerals, mourning and as a trimming to offset another colour. In this respect the smart blacks and drab greys of the governess were a form of uniform, not commonly worn by other women of the same social class. Of women who chose to wear it he applies both moral and psychological factors, saying that it has ‘humbling’ qualities and is used for indication of a sombre mood or occasion and contrasts it with the majority of women who wore pastel shades and white to visually declare their femininity in relation to the powerful masculine black, *Men in Black*, pp.195-197.

¹³ Redgrave’s two sisters were governesses and he was undoubtedly sympathetic to their plight.



5. *The Governess* - 'She sees no kind domestic visage near' by Richard Redgrave, 1844. Henry Cole wing, V&A museum.¹⁴

announcement of a death in the family possibly suggests that there is even less hope of an economic escape from her life-long vocation. The high, white collar of her dress is in furthermore in visual contrast to the bare shoulders and *décolletage* of her students. She has allowed herself a couple of modest ringlets, whereas her pupils' hair is styled in an abundance of curls falling luxuriously over their neck and shoulders and signifying female sexuality.

Anna Jameson, a real governess writing in the 1820s and 30s sums up the governess' humble uniform as:

...perfect neatness, a simplicity, not without elegance, because dictated by the sense of propriety and natural good taste, will be found most lady-like and most economical.¹⁵

The visual contrast between mother and governess is, so to speak, plain, as Fanny Almedington, a late-nineteenth century pupil explains on meeting her governess, Miss Jardine, for the first time (see 6 below).

¹⁴ The picture was also painted without the pupils as 'The Poor Teacher' (1848).

In her pretty, sunlit sitting-room my mother sat very upright as was her custom. She wore a pale-blue stuff gown with touches of lace at the throat and wrists. She sat facing a thin, middle-aged woman, pale and grey-eyed, in a plain dark-blue dress; two bony hands were folded in her lap.¹⁶



6. An apprehensive child is urged to shake hands with her new Governess, 1892. (The Mary Evans Picture Library)

Agnes Grey (1847): The Model Governess

Relatively little is known about Anne Brontë's life. Records indicate where she was and suggest general outlines of what she was doing; her published works suggest something of her experience and beliefs; but few records survive of her daily life and feelings, in her own words or those of witnesses. Anne Brontë was born on 17

¹⁵ Quoted in *Governess*, p.129-30.

¹⁶ Martha Edith von Almedingen, *Fanny*, illustrated by Ian Ribbons (OUP, 1970), p.71.

January 1820, at Thornton, a small village just outside Bradford, of which her father, Patrick Brontë was the curate, and was the last of six children born to Maria Branwell Brontë. Given the size of the family, Patrick actively sought a better clerical appointment, and eventually he was appointed to the perpetual curacy of Haworth, West Yorkshire, to which the family moved in April, 1820. After the death of their mother in 1821 their Aunt Elizabeth Branwell provided the maternal guidance, though Anne was formerly educated at Roe Head School in October 1835 as a replacement for the homesick Emily, and funded by her older sister, Charlotte, who was teaching there. She stayed for two years, winning a good-conduct medal in December 1836, and returning home only during Christmas and the summer holidays. At some point prior to December 1837, Anne became seriously ill and underwent a religious crisis. Charlotte returned alone to Roe Head after Christmas, while Anne remained at home to recover, never to return.

By 1839 Anne was actively looking for a teaching position, and she left the Parsonage on 8 April 1839, travelling alone, at her own request, to Mirfield. It was here that she first began work as a governess at Blake Hall, the home of the Ingham family. Blake Hall was an imposing eighteenth-century mansion with a small wooded park. Joshua Ingham was 37, his wife 10 years younger. Their two eldest children, Cunliffe, age 6, and Mary, age 5, were put into her care. Anne drew on her experiences at Blake Hall to write *Agnes Grey*, and her heroine's first position is very similar to her creator's: supervising children of much the same age and sex. The fictional descriptions convey both detail and conviction, and independent anecdotes which suggest that the Ingham children may well have been models for the Bloomfield children of the book. As adults, Cunliffe and Mary Ingham were known to be difficult and wilful; if they were as unmanageable in real life as the children of the corresponding novel, Anne's stay at

Blake Hall was hardly pleasant. The Inghams, unsatisfied with their children's progress, dismissed Anne at the end of the year, and she returned home at Christmas, 1839, to join Charlotte and Emily, who had also left their positions.

Not easily dissuaded, Anne was determined to find another post as a governess. The presence of four young Brontës at home was a financial drain, and she wished to support herself, and soon obtained a post with Reverend Edmund Robinson and his wife Lydia, at Thorp Green, a wealthy country house near York. This time she was to have four pupils: Lydia, 15, Elizabeth, 13, Mary, age 12, and Edmund, age 8. Anne probably left home for Thorp Green on May 8, 1840. She could not know it at the time, but for the next 5 years she would spend no more than 5 or 6 weeks a year with her family, during holidays at Christmas and in June. The rest of her time would be spent with the Robinsons at their home Thorp Green, or on holiday with them in Scarborough. Her employers were satisfied with her work, and as Bessy and Mary Robinson grew older, Anne became close to them. Of all her sisters, Anne spent the most time away from Haworth, establishing fond associations and a relative independence elsewhere.

Albeit, there is no question that she missed her home and family: 'Lines Written at Thorp Green' or 'Appeal' (1846) was written only a few months after her arrival there and it speaks of 'loneliness' and 'repining'.¹⁷ Similarly 'Home' pleads for the 'grey walls' of Haworth rather than the beautiful grounds of Thorp Green.¹⁸ Yet while Anne repeatedly writes of her depression and unhappiness, these are not her only emotions. In 'Retirement' she turns from 'earthly cares' and 'restless wandering thoughts' to

¹⁷ Brontë, Charlotte, Emily and Anne, *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, pseud. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1846), p.140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.27-8.

seek comfort in God, and in 'Lines composed in a Wood on a Windy Day' she exults in the beauty and wildness of nature.¹⁹

Whilst Anne's feelings about Thorp Green were certainly mixed - she commented in a diary paper in 1841 that she did not like her situation and wished to leave it - she also chose to repeatedly return to Thorp Green, in spite of her sister's schemes for opening a school, and the death of Elizabeth Branwell in early November 1842, while her sisters were away in Brussels. Anne Brontë returned as a governess again in January 1843, but this time she was accompanied by her brother Branwell, who went as a tutor for Edmund Robinson, previously Anne's pupil. Though Branwell did not live in the house with the Robinson family, as Anne did, his presence at Thorp Green may have lifted her spirits. They continued to teach there for the next two years, but when they returned home for the holidays in June 1845, Anne had startling news: she had resigned her position and would not be returning. In the same diary papers, the sisters commented briefly on Branwell, who had now also left, and Emily simply notes 'Anne left her situation at Thorp Green of her own accord-June 1845 Branwell left-July 1845'.²⁰ What the notes do not mention is that Branwell had been dismissed from his post at Thorp Green because he was having an affair with Mrs. Robinson, seventeen years his elder. Nonetheless, Anne retained close ties to Bessy and Mary Robinson, remaining on good terms and exchanging frequent letters with them even after Branwell's disgrace. The Robinson sisters turned to Anne for advice, rather than to their mother. They also came to visit Anne in December, 1848. Charlotte wrote of

¹⁹ *Poems*, p.125; Written on Sunday 13 December 1840, first published in *The Complete Works of Emily Brontë. Volume I, Poetry*, ed. Clement K. Shorter (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), p15.

²⁰ As quoted in Juliet Barker's recent biography, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1994, 2001) p.456.

them that ‘they seemed overjoyed to see Anne; when I went into the room they were clinging round her like two children’.²¹

Over the next few years Anne remained at the Parsonage with her sisters, writing *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) which had surprising success. However, in Christmas 1848 Anne caught influenza, and Patrick Brontë called in a consumptive specialist, Mr Teale, who examined Anne on 5 January 1849. She made a final pilgrimage to Scarborough on 24 May accompanied by Ellen Nussey and Charlotte, but at about two o'clock on Monday 28 May 1849 she died. The doctor, who had returned several times throughout the day, said that he had never seen such a tranquil deathbed.

Anne Brontë was regarded as the prettiest of the Brontë sisters, yet in response to Charlotte’s feminist challenge, to create a ‘plain heroine’²² who would be interesting enough to empathise with, Anne responded with a self-effacing, self-negating, plainly dressed governess-heroine (see 7 above for the famous portrait of the Brontë sisters by their brother Branwell). Anne’s heroine in *Agnes Grey* becomes the first in a published Brontë novel to contain a repressed literary heroine, incarnate in the figure of the Victorian governess, to which Charlotte’s own radical heroines owe a huge debt. The conflict between the included and the excluded woman is also set up by Anne Brontë in *Agnes Grey* through exteriority and interiority especially.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.574.

²² *Life*, p.308.



7. *The Brontë Sisters*, c.1834, painted by Patrick Branwell Brontë. Left to right: Anne, Emily and Charlotte. Digitally restored by M. Armitage.

In the Biographical Notice, written by ‘Currer Bell’, Charlotte describes Anne as,

Long-suffering, self-denying, reflective and intelligent, a constitutional reserve and taciturnity placed and kept her in the shade, and covered her mind, and especially her feelings, with a sort of nun-like veil, which was rarely lifted. (*AG*, 57)²³

This *nun-like veil* is comparable to a social mask or guise that conceals and constricts interior sensibilities.²⁴ As the young Agnes departs for her first vocation her governess costume is comparable to that of a nun, just as it is to be made directly analogous in *Villette* - below. This not only has moral implications for the characterisation of Agnes as a Christian, but also denotes a similar restraint of her emotional selfhood,²⁵

²³ Brontë, Anne, *Agnes Grey*, ed. Angeline Goreau (Harmondsworth, 1988). All future references will be to this edition, and abbreviated to *AG*.

²⁴ When the Brontë girls were younger their father attempted to learn more about his children by placing each of them behind a mask, in order to let them speak more freely... Anne asked for ‘age and experience’. See Angeline Goreau’s ‘Introduction’ to *Agnes Grey*, p.16.

²⁵ After the uses and abuses of the nun’s costume in Gothic fiction and eighteenth-century masquerade, the habit, wimple and collar survived into the nineteenth-century, more or less in that formal style until the present day; though it has been more relaxed and informal since the 1970s.

To conceal my emotion, I buried my face in my hands...in silence [my family] betook ourselves to repose...I mounted the gig, drew my veil over my face, and then, but not till then, burst into a flood of tears. (*AG*, 71)

Weddings and funerals aside, women in the first half of the nineteenth century regularly wore veils as part of their outdoor wear, and the clothing historian Cecil Willett Cunnington details this as a necessary part of a travelling outfit: '*Veils*. Long and white, with small bonnets; or black and white with carriage dress'.²⁶ These monochrome colours are highly appropriate to the traditional nun's habit and are further complemented by the sober ensemble expected of a governess. This would further constitute a parallel between heroine and author as being 'nun-like', but also suggests an adherence to practicality in Agnes' character through her choice of travelling garments.

The literal and metaphorical 'veiling' of the internal passions of both Anne and Agnes posits them as women of disguise who are controlled to differing extents by the restrictive guises of the role of the governess and those of the dutiful Victorian daughter. When Agnes is imprisoned in the house by the spiteful Rosalie Murray she calmly states,

I was used to wearing a placid smiling countenance when my heart was bitter within me...I sat with an assumption of smiling indifference...I was a close and resolute dissembler...in my fetters. (*AG*, pp.200-201)

This semi-autobiographical account by Anne shows that she, like Jane Austen, writes about what she knows and creates a quiet, plain, self-effacing little governess-heroine in the mould of herself. Like her literary successor, Lucy Snowe, there is never a comprehensive description of her features and figure, but only ambiguous and abstract paeans on the nature of beauty; which are ironically recited in front of that traditional symbol of female vanity, a mirror. Upon arrival at the Bloomfields' she laments, 'I was somewhat dismayed at my appearance on looking in the glass' (*AG*, 74). Yet is this merely the result of being dishevelled and untidy from travelling? When later she is unpacking we discover that her small room only contains a chest of drawers, 'which served as a dressing-table': a sign of the expected non-attention to the usual lady's toilette, and further suggests what Agnes has sacrificed in transforming herself into a governess. Her clothes and appearance are described as '...my homely garments, [and] everyday face' and this is in marked contrast with the party guests at the house, who display their 'fine clothes and new faces', and also later with the conceited Mrs Murray's 'rouged face' (*AG*, 106). Even the lady's maid she meets on the stairs and whom she nearly mistakes for the mistress is described as 'a well-dressed female'. This is not the mere social and love humiliations of Jane Eyre clothed in her best 'silver-grey' dress at Rochester's party, but the dawning of a painful realisation of the governess' humble status, and ultimately her banishment as a woman to the periphery of nineteenth-century society.

Agnes, again in front of a mirror, bewails the nature of female beauty:

...but now, also, it is no uncommon thing to spend as much as two minutes in

²⁶ Cunningham, c1823, p.96.

the contemplation of my own image in the glass; though I never could derive any consolation from such a study: I could discover no beauty in those marked features....Plainness is commonly inveighed against as [woman's] greatest crime, because to common observers, it gives the greatest offence...

(AG, 192-3)

This image of the heroine is finally given to the reader in chapter seventeen, after Agnes has drawn brief and physiologically acute sketches of the other characters. Like her more famous literary successor, Lucy Snowe, Agnes Grey does not appear to be centralised in her own story: at least not until the very end. She is de-centralised and effaced by her own narrative, and even her name is linked to martyrdom.²⁷ Furthermore, she often describes herself in abstract by turning away from the individualising pronoun, or the 'I' of assertive autobiography, to the 'you/she' of a third person narrative:

Miss Grey was a queer creature; she never flattered, and did not praise them half enough...She was very obliging, quiet and peaceable in the main...

(AG, 129)

She refers to *her* 'quiet, drab-colour life...with dull, grey clouds,' which is an overt pun on her surname, the colour of her dresses and subsequently the life and mind of the governess. This queer 'grey' creature is constantly juxtaposed with her more worldly and fashionable pupils who are 'coming out' into the *Beau Monde* and the conventional middle-class lady's life she has left behind. She is contrasted with

Rosalie Murray in the same way that Fanny Price ('is she out?') is held up against her fashionable Bertram cousins in *Mansfield Park* (1814). Agnes Grey almost effaces herself completely in rhapsodising about Rosalie's conventional beauty and style. Miss Murray's story is the more traditional tale of the romantic literary heroine who talks of balls, dresses, her own beauty and finally is rewarded by being 'transformed' into the wealthy Lady Ashby. Agnes describes her:

...[she was] a decidedly pretty girl;...time...added grace to her carriage and deportment, she was positively beautiful; and that in no common degree. She was tall and slender, but not thin, perfectly formed, exquisitely fair, but not without a brilliant, healthy bloom; her hair, which she wore in a profusion of long ringlets, was of a very light brown, strongly inclining to yellow, her eyes were pale blue, but so clear and bright...a very lovely girl. I wish I could say as much for her mind and disposition...The love of display had roused her faculties. (AG, 121-2)

This feminine love of display is inversely comparable with the negation of Agnes' body in her role as governess. On her walk to church with the Misses Murray and their fashionable acquaintances Agnes deplores the fact she must be seen to:

...submit and oblige was the governess' part...None of the before-mentioned ladies and gentlemen ever noticed me...if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on vacancy – as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so. (AG, 162)

²⁷ Agnes is 'from the Greek word meaning 'pure'. There was an early Christian martyr called St

The domestic-family friend dual role of the governess is ambiguous depending on the specific situation. For example, Mrs Bloomfield has Agnes dress her daughters as if she is a 'tire-woman' even before she has had time to rest and re-dress herself soon after arrival.

[Mary Ann's] abundant hair was to be smeared with pomade, plaited in three long tails, and tied with bows of ribbon...[I was unable] to satisfy Mrs Bloomfield with her daughter's dress; and the child's hair was never fit to be seen... (AG, 81-9)

Mrs Murray clearly regards this as a more important duty than the educative role that Agnes was originally employed for. Not only does this quotation highlight the confusing status attending her appointment, but it also reveals the misdirection of female 'education', where the emphasis is primarily placed upon obtaining a husband with the help of the frivolous and entirely superficial 'accomplishment' education which Austen so deplored and satirised through the Bertram sisters of *Mansfield Park*.

I was obliged to render them superficially attractive and showily accomplished...with no trouble to themselves...to amuse and oblige, instruct, refine and polish...with the least possible exertion on their part... (AG, 120)

The emphasis is placed upon appearances and manners, making young girls into the idealised baubles and ornaments to grace their father and husband's home. Like an earlier prototype, Fanny Price, Agnes is skilled at 'plain hemming and seaming'

Agnes...' *First Names Dictionary* ed(s). Sandra Bance, Mary Laird, Charles Wachter (London:

which is a more practical form of sewing for making, adjusting and repairing clothes. Conversely, Rosalie Murray has a 'basket of German wools' for her ultra-fashionable 'Berlin-wool work' and this is for decoration alone. Nevertheless, like the humble Miss Price, Agnes is always finishing and adjusting their idle and unproductive 'fancy work' of which she originally 'knew nothing':

...no sooner was I was initiated, than [Rosalie] made me useful in twenty different ways: all the tedious parts of her work were shifted on to my shoulders; such as stretching the frames, stitching in the canvas, sorting the wools and silks putting in the grounds, counting the stitches, rectifying mistakes, and finishing the pieces she was tired of. (*AG*, 122-3)

This suggests that she does *all* of the work and ultimately replaces her more useful sewing achievements with mind-numbing frivolity: Agnes is no romance heroine.

Rosalie's story, however, begins much as those heroines who can be called coquettish, vain, frivolous, flirtatious and consumed by consumerism, i.e. fashion. In this I include, to radically differing extents, former paragons of literary womanhood such as: Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), *Clarissa* (1747-8), *Sir Charles Grandison*'s Harriet Byron (1753-4); Rousseau's Sophy in *Emile* (1762); and Burney's *Evelina* (1778), *Cecilia* (1782) and *Camilla* (1796). Combined with such 'virtuous' ideals are those negatively depicted heroines of satires such as Pope's Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* (1712-4) and Fielding's overt attack on what he sees as Pamela Andrews' scheming femininity and vanity in the parody *Shamela* (1741), and also those sexually

lascivious title characters from Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) and *Roxana* (1724). In the mould of the passively feminine ideals of Rousseau and Richardson, Rosalie Murray is accordingly beautiful, though not so virtuous, and 'comes out' in grand style: adorned in the wealth of her father in order to attract a husband. Her thoughtless vanity is used as a mirror to Agnes' humbled plainness, as she states, 'You [Agnes] will see me in my splendid new dress...you'll be ready to worship me' (AG, 131).

In contrast to this external idolatry Agnes stresses her emotional need to go home for the holidays, which accentuates the importance of seeing real people who need her, rather than become a sartorial voyeur. Yet Rosalie replays her 'ball story' for Agnes inside her own narrative, and thus creates a series of diegetic layers which compete against each other for dominance within the humble tale of the governess. Rosalie is almost apologising to the reader for the non-inclusion of her own 'dressed-up' story, which does battle on the page alongside Agnes' recounting of her family visit:

I'm so sorry you didn't see me! I was *charming*...I may be allowed to be a little vain. I know you think me a shocking, conceited, frivolous girl, but then, you know, I don't attribute it *all* to my personal attractions: I give some praise to the hairdresser, and some to my exquisitely lovely dress – you must see it to-morrow – white gauze over pink satin...and so *sweetly* made! And a necklace and bracelet of beautiful, large pearls!' (AG, 134)

This sartorial description is contrasted with Agnes' 'quakerish' dress, and immediately follows the discussion about Agnes' sister Mary who is to marry Mr

Richardson the local vicar: which is a positive option in her socially limited sphere, yet Rosalie responds with stereotypical bombast:

Mercy, how shocking! and will she wear a white apron,...And will she go about in a plain shawl, and a large straw bonnet, carrying tracts and bone soup to her husband's poor parishioners? (AG,132)

If a governess did marry she could only really do so within a limited domestic sphere as she was usually confined to the household or regular trips to church, and 'gentlemen followers' were usually forbidden. Accordingly, she either married the local vicar, like Mr Weston in both *Agnes Grey* and Austen's *Emma*; or a private tutor like M. Paul in *Villette*; and rarely 'the master' of the house or 'above their station' as in *Jane Eyre*.²⁸ Whereas daughters like Rosalie Murray would eventually make their grand entrance into Society and make an appropriate costume-transformation into bride, whilst ascending the social ladder through marriage.

Rosalie Murray's story is almost that of a typical romance heroine, as she 'innocently' flirts with the foppish Mr Hatfield and others, whilst feigning to read romantic literature, which only really provides a demure literary cover for her clandestine meetings. Agnes' *Bildungsroman* adventure in the world is almost displaced by a somehow more suitable and beautiful heroine, or a rather one that is closer to the

²⁸ *The Victorian Governess*, p.140, p.143.



8. Claude Monet, 'Son and Governess', c.1870.²⁹

feminine ideal of mainstream social and literary perception. Yet ultimately, Anne Brontë makes this novel of self-effacement one of empowerment for her heroine, whilst also providing an astute critique of a society dominated by image and appearance. Rosalie as Lady Ashby becomes a 'prisoner and slave' in the beatified tomb of Ashby Park, as conversely, Agnes Grey experiences the 'triumph of the plainest': both in her experience as a governess and later in her independent school-room which is beyond the boundaries of her former role. The realistic, true history of female instruction becomes a proto-feminist polemic.

As aforementioned, there are signs early in the novel of her social 'mask' or 'façade', which is necessary to conceal deeply felt emotions and a keen intellect. Anne's brave heroine does not really *need* to face the governess life, as Jane Fairfax, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe do, but she actually chooses, like Anne, to embark upon what she sees as an 'adventure' and her 'freedom'. In a novel originally entitled *Passages in the Life of an Individual* Anne Brontë attempts to define her heroine as such, as realistically and as plainly as possible. The narrative does not appear to only lead up to the eventual marriage of the heroine to a dashing, Byronic saviour; indeed, the meeting of the lovers is relatively near the end of the novel, and he is an equally 'plain', if not quite

‘ugly’ curate, who, according to Agnes, has ‘a face, too square for beauty’. Mr Weston is her counter-part in every way, and he does not romantically offer the only escape from her ‘grey’ existence. Albeit, the sense of female triumph she feels when he holds out his umbrella for her, and not Rosalie Murray, in chapter sixteen gives Agnes a ‘secret gratification’, and puts Rosalie distinctly ‘out of humour’ after she has just sniffed at the parishioners’ ‘ugly faces, and dirty, vulgar clothes...’ (AG, 183-190). However, her satisfaction is short-lived at this point in the narrative as she is immediately made into a literal ‘prisoner and a slave’ at the jealous whim of her pupil. Agnes Grey astutely recognises the world of male tyranny in the course of the novel: not only in Mr Bloomfield’s open berating of his wife, but in the hypocrisy of the openly misogynistic uncle, Mr Robson, who proudly says of his young nephew:

[Tom’s] beyond the petticoat government already: by G--, he defies mother, granny, governess, and all! (AG, 105)³⁰

The coarse comment seeks to reduce female intellectual power by linking it to their undergarments, and it has distinct allusions to Horace Walpole’s infamous denunciation of Mary Wollstonecraft (see Preface). Both men scornfully substitute a ‘petticoat’ as the shorthand for being female which suggests that women are weak and frivolous, and also in regard to Wollstonecraft’s condemnation of the sartorial

²⁹ Notice that in this painting the governess, although in the foreground, sits to the side and in the shade. Her apparel is simple, mainly black with white blouse and apron, in visual contrast to her Madame Monet in the sunny background.

³⁰ Petticoats were worn by women throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries underneath the skirt or dress, attached to the bodice and were accordingly classed as ‘underclothing’ of which men only saw the hem (embroidered or plain). They varied in fabric depending on the season ranging from cotton, cambric, linen, and muslin to fine flannel in the winter. With the expansion of the skirt from the 1830s and 40s several were worn together at a time, stiffened with wool and heavily corded. See Cunningham, p.70, p.104, and p.165-6.

dependencies of her own gender, it is perhaps meant to indicate that she lacks the prescribed 'femininity' in her belligerent polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Nonetheless, Miss Grey is accorded an equally witty, sartorial retort, as she notices that, 'The scorner of the female sex, was not above the foppery of stays' (AG, 102).³¹

Mr Robson's feminised appearance as constructed by Agnes effectively negates his anti-feminist effusions by comically aligning the two female undergarments with each other. The disruptive element of young male pupils for governesses was notorious and was often seen as an acceptable masculine uprising necessary for them to grow up into the dominant patriarchal figure (see 9 below for an image of a young boy rebelling under the *petticoat government*).

Agnes also incisively recognises Rosalie Murray's marriage to the odious Lord Ashby is a sham. Essentially it is a middle-class financial and homosocial transaction, which requires the female only to be a beautiful, passive possession and this is reflected in the ceremony's costumed pantomime of artifice:

The first of June arrived at last; and Rosalie Murray was transmuted into Lady Ashby. Most splendidly beautiful she looked in her bridal costume.
(AG, 203)

³¹ Stays were predominantly a female undergarment, though the fops and dandies of the latter half of the eighteenth-century had used them for the cosmetic purpose of holding in the stomach, which is presumably why Mr Robson wears them. They made of tough material such as jean or buckram, with an abundance of whalebone and usually went below the hips and above to the breasts: pushing them up whilst the waist and stomach was made as narrow as possible by being tightly laced down the sides or front. The corset from the 1850s slowly replaced them. See Cunnington, p.70-1, p.127, and p.205.



9. Small boys, chafing under petticoat rule, were perceived as a disruptive element in the home schoolroom (1873). (Mary Evans Picture Library)

Though Rosalie eventually recognises that her ‘fate is sealed’ and later physically changes for the worst with the aid of the lavish excesses of an upper-class world, she proceeds to patronise the dress of the classes beneath with similar arrogance to Austen’s Lady Catherine de Burgh in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).³² Though Agnes defiantly remarks:

I was rather annoyed at [Rosalie’s] evident efforts to reassure me, and prevent me from being overwhelmed by too much grandeur...or too much ashamed of my own humble appearance – I was not ashamed of it at all; for, though plain, I had taken good care not to be shabby or mean...Nothing that met my eyes struck me...half so much as her own altered appearance. Whether from the influence of fashionable dissipation, or some other evil – [she had] reducing the plumpness of her form, the freshness of her complexion, the vivacity of her movements, and the exuberance of her spirits. (AG, 228-9)

As Lady Ashby, Rosalie becomes the fashionably disabled figure of the feminine ideal and is suitably punished by Brontë for all her dissipation by spending the rest of

³² It is the obsequious Mr Collins who speaks to Elizabeth on lady Catherine’s behalf, ‘lady Catherine will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved’, *Pride and Prejudice* (OUP, 1990), p.143.

her life with a man she hates, and who is only attracted to her superficially. In marked juxtaposition, Agnes at this point has triumphed, for though she appears 'plain', she is also 'neat and clean', and now has her own school. She can even be called young, free and single: a situation which Lady Ashby can only desire, as she considers herself to be living 'the life of a nun' which provides a neat conclusion for the ironic reversal of their respective positions (*AG*, 237). Rosalie Ashby's beauty is one for which Agnes feels only pity:

I was sorry for her; I was amazed, disgusted at her heartless vanity; I wondered why so much beauty should be given to those who made so bad a use of it, and denied to some who would make it a benefit to both themselves and others...perhaps, such women may be useful to punish [men]
(*AG*, 180)

Agnes' almost magical transformation is made complete by the re-appearance of Mr Weston into her 'quiet, drab-colour life...with dull grey clouds'. The clothing Agnes now prefers are those of nature, or rather the genuine adornments she witnesses on her daily walks, such as '...the low rocks out at sea...looking, with their clothing of weeds and moss, like little grass-grown islands' (*AG*, 241). She has come a long way from those 'sober Quaker ladies' she sees out for a morning walk, and is soon to metamorphose into Mr Weston's 'beloved Agnes', leaving behind once and for all the stereotypical moniker of Miss Grey (*AG*, 241, 248). Significantly, she philosophically contemplates her as yet solitary future, musing, 'As I was not rich enough to possess a watch, I could not tell how time was passing' (*AG*, 234). This seemingly prosaic detail goes beyond mere realist, sartorial verisimilitude as Agnes mourns a potential

lifetime of solitary spinsterhood. Mr Weston, who was formerly mocked by Rosalie for merely having 'silver watch', adds significance to this detail as he surprises Agnes on her coastal walk with symbolical gesture. She remarks:

..."it must be almost time, I think."

He consulted his watch – a gold one now – and told me it was only five minutes past seven. (*AG*, 242)

A seemingly minor detail is transformed, like Agnes, into a profound metaphor for a successful life. The time-piece is presented as the concluding part of the governess' story, and as the silver watch is replaced by a gold watch it is further symbolical of her move to an exalted social status: her placement within Victorian family life rather than on its boundaries. Her consciousness of a lonely existence in the eight pages between her 'question' and his 'answer' suggests a clever reversal of the marital proposal, although her affirmation is ultimately necessary for the completion of her emotional selfhood and the novel's triumphant resolution. Mr Weston accordingly dismisses the required previous formality by calling her Agnes and especially beloved, she notices that '...he seemed to greatly prefer that appellation to 'Miss Grey' and so did I' (*AG*, 248).

This denotes the end of her grey-governess 'death in life' and her vital re-entry into the world as a happy and fulfilled schoolteacher-wife, who now takes 'a little more pains with [her] attire' which only suggests a growing self-confidence and renewed sense of pride in her appearance (*AG*, 249). Accordingly, the final image of Agnes is one that is highly-coloured, not by clothing, but by the passionate and natural glow of

a 'splendid sun-set' which transforms her out of the 'grey' existence and into a happy ending, regardless of what colour she is actually wearing (AG, 250).

Critiques of Anne Brontë's writing often include her overt didacticism and pedagogic morality, but when this fiction is given a sartorial analysis she can be seen to show the radical triumph of a plain, dowdy governess-heroine who embarks on a personal adventure which the majority of young middle-class ladies would never experience; a journey of growing self-awareness and self-confidence. It is as if Agnes has to visually witness what she could have been in order to move beyond it. This opens up its somewhat narrow autobiographical scope, taking it beyond an easy comparison with Maria Edgeworth's stiflingly moral *The Parent's Assistant* (1796) by imbuing it with a realistic-romanticism. No novel of this period is as emphatic as *Agnes Grey* in stressing the truth of its fiction, as it seeks to invent a new genre of romantic fiction, which is made realistic with seemingly inconsequential verisimilitude. Anne Brontë's plain style can make *Agnes Grey* seem like a purely functional text, for there is no glamorising in her fiction, but this serves only to extend to the governess-heroine who is plain and unassuming: but only in appearance.

JANE EYRE (1847): A Plain Jane?

...[Charlotte Brontë] told her sisters that they were wrong – even morally wrong – in making their heroines beautiful³³ as a matter of course. They

³³ This refers to Emily and Anne's beautiful Gondal heroines of the juvenilia and can also be seen to include Emily's Catherine/Cathy Earnshaw in *Wuthering Heights*, but not Anne's *Agnes Grey* which Charlotte had read as it was being written in 1846, who appears to be the first plain, drably dressed,

replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms... "I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours..."³⁴

Charlotte Brontë was extremely conscious of her own 'plainness', though she was not as overtly 'ugly', one suspects, as her contemporary and successor, George Eliot. This consciousness stemmed from a repressive childhood at Cowan Bridge school: the experience of which is directly reproduced in the semi-autobiographical *Jane Eyre*. Consequently she felt awkward with distinct feelings of 'oddness' when she was amongst stylish city society and the fashionable London Literati. George Eliot's future life-partner George Henry Lewes observes upon first meeting Miss Brontë, that she was, 'a little, plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid...' and yet immediately qualifies '[but] what passion, what fire in her!'³⁵ This under-whelmed reaction to her appearance, as played against an inner passion or light, became the accepted way of portraying Charlotte. Elizabeth Gaskell observes,

At fifteen years of age, very small in figure, 'stunted' was the word [Charlotte] applied to herself – but as her limbs and head were in just proportion to the slight, fragile body, no word in ever so slight a degree suggestive of deformity could properly be applied to her; with soft thick, brown hair, and peculiar eyes...They were large and well-shaped; their colour a reddish brown...The usual expression was a quiet, listening intelligence...but now and then a light would shine out...which glowed behind those expressive orbs. I never saw the

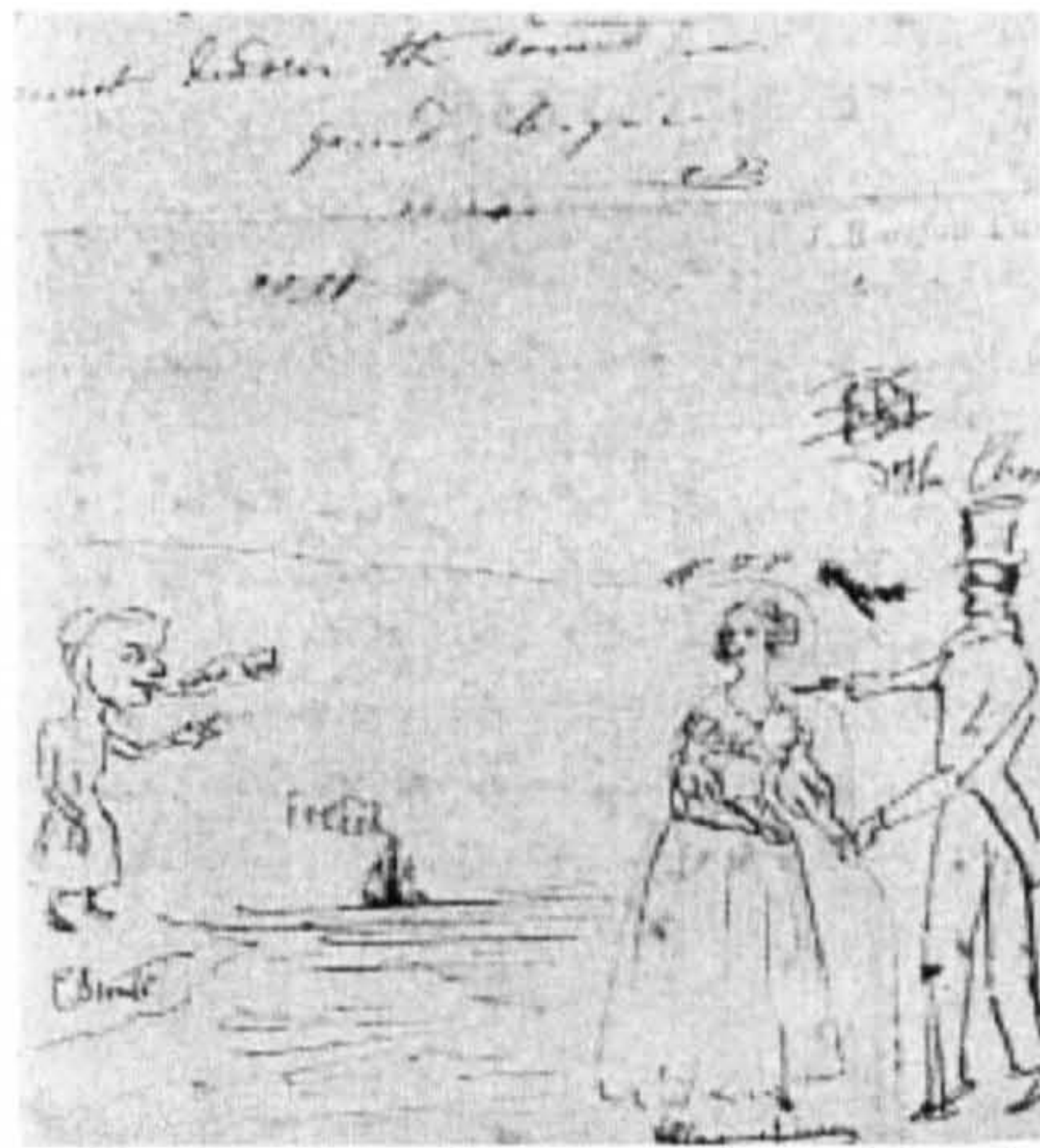
governess-figure prior to Jane. A fact, which Charlotte chooses to ignore in her declaration, though more emphasis, is placed upon Jane's austere dress and her 'plainness' than Agnes'.

³⁴ Charlotte Brontë as quoted in *Life*, Vol. II, Ch.1

³⁵ Introduction to *Jane Eyre*, by Q.D. Leavis, p.7.



10a. *Charlotte Brontë* by George Richmond (1850).



10b. Charlotte's caricature of herself at the bottom of a letter to Ellen Nussey written from Brussels on 6 March 1842.

like in any other human creature. As for the rest of her features they were plain, large and ill-set...A little set, antiquated girl, very quiet in manners, and very quaint in dress.³⁶

Gaskell's chapters on Charlotte's school days draw on reminiscences from former students from both Cowan Bridge and Roe Head, and by whom Charlotte is described in similar terms to her heroines as 'remarkably neat in her whole personal attire', 'dainty as to the fit of her shoes and gloves', 'old fashioned' and an 'oddly-dressed, odd-looking little girl' who is emphatically 'plain'.³⁷ Gaskell attributes this ill-fitting appearance to the austere influences of her father who had ideas concerning the simplicity of attire as to 'befit' the daughters of a country clergyman, and also her eccentric Aunt Branwell on whom the duty of dressing devolved, but who had never been in society since leaving Penzance nine years before. As **10a** and **10b** reveal, Charlotte was painfully self-conscious of how she was 'perceived' or rather 'beautified' as set against how she saw herself: **10b** being a sketch from one of her letters depicting herself as the monstrous caricature on the far left (Ellen is the pretty lady next to her suitor, Mr Vincent).

³⁶ Quoted in *Life*, pp.124-125.

³⁷ *Life*, vol.I, ch.iv and vi.



10c. 'A friendly hint to those young ladies who wear those delightful *barège* dresses. Always let the slip (or whatever that mysterious garment is called) be as long as the outer dress'.
Punch, July-Dec 1850.

Whenever she was encountered as the famous lady novelist endless literary voyeurs dwelt upon her odd rural appearance and dress; just as George Eliot's 'unfeminine' and 'ugly' appearance would be constantly mused upon a decade later. The world was determined to judge Miss Brontë, and subsequently other famous women writers upon her appearance, and her evident 'plainness' was politely tempered against a fiery, covert intelligence, which was often described as sparking through the outer veneer, and with an attractive passion shining from her eyes. This intimates a marked disappointment with what they found superficially, measured against what they expected, and further suggests a desperate, possibly subconscious attempt to rehabilitate or even 're-dress' her into the accepted Victorian feminine ideal.³⁸ This of course becomes deeply ironical when set against what she actually wrote and re-created in order to defy traditional constructions of the literary heroine in her creation

³⁸ Official portraits of Eliot and Charlotte Brontë were accordingly softened and sentimentalised as with much of Victorian portraiture: both writers commented on the unlikeness. Indeed, after tearfully resisting sitting for this now famous portrait by George Richmond 'When she was finally allowed to see the finished work she again burst into tears, exclaiming that it was so like her sister Anne', Barker, p.644.

of the painfully plain heroine.³⁹ Harriet Martineau describes Charlotte's entrance into society:

'Miss Brontë' was announced; and in came a young-looking lady, almost childlike in stature, 'in a deep mourning dress'⁴⁰, neat as a Quaker's, with her beautiful hair smooth and brown, her fine eyes blazing with meaning, and her sensible face indicating a habit of self-control.⁴¹

One of her London publishers, Mr Smith, of Smith, Elder and Co., was clearly disappointed with the 'old-fashioned' look that the Misses Brontë presented on first meeting them,

[Mr Smith could not accept it]. 'Where did you get this? [letter of introduction]' said he, - as if he could not believe that the two young ladies dressed in black, of slight figure and diminutive stature, looking pleased yet agitated, could be the embodied Currer and Acton Bell...⁴²

When invited to Thackeray's London residence on 12 June 1850, Charlotte Brontë was the author of the moment, exhibited for all to see and talk to, and dressed

³⁹ This is reminiscent of the way Brontë treats her heroines, both Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe. The motif of 'eyes' is crucial opening to an understanding of *Jane Eyre*; often signifying the soul, and the pre-Freudian sexualised 'eyes', reminiscent of Austen's passionate use of them in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as Elizabeth Bennet's 'fine, dark eyes'.

⁴⁰ In 1849 Charlotte was in mourning for her siblings, who died within a year: Branwell in September 1848, Emily in December 1848, and Anne in May 1849.

⁴¹ Comically, but somewhat tellingly, this directly followed 'Currer Bell's' metamorphosis into Charlotte Brontë: made more confusing by an unknown gentleman who entered the room at the time the initial 'Currer Bell, Esq.' was announced, and to whom all eyes turned in expectation, before it was corrected to 'Miss Brontë' and the real, more '*feminised*' (?) appearance of Charlotte. *Life.*, p.392.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p346.

demurely in ‘a little *barège* dress,⁴³ with a pattern of faint green moss’ (see 10c above).⁴⁴ She deliberately shirked being the centre of attention, embarrassingly silent and nervous during dinner, and when finally left alone with the fashionable ladies whilst the gentlemen went for a post-prandial smoke, she retreated to the sidelines in obvious social discomfort, and rather tellingly choosing to sit next to ‘the only person with whom she felt comfortable, Miss Truelock, the governess’.⁴⁵ The evening was a failure and was retold at Charlotte’s expense for years to come as a literary anecdote. Sadly, as even her friend and publisher, George Smith would later observe of her profound self-consciousness in his privately circulated *Memoir* (1902), ‘I believe she would have given all her genius and fame to have been beautiful’.⁴⁶

These instances of painful, self-torture connote a previously nurtured inferiority complex, one that was conditioned, like her fantasy-fulfilling, alter-ego Jane Eyre, from childhood and the disciplinary asceticism of the Cowan Bridge-Lowood experience. Charlotte’s acknowledgement of her non-conformity to the feminine ideal leads her to re-create for herself and from herself, an unapologetically plain and thus rebellious heroine, who would both reject and defy the expectations of the established

⁴³ In the Winter of 1850 *barège* dress was extremely popular. As a fabric it was ‘a semi-transparent textile of silk and wool, the former thrown up on the surface; open mesh. Sometimes of all wool’, from the description of Charlotte’s dress it was probably a *Barège de Pyrenees* which was similar to the above in fabric but ‘printed with delicate foliage and flowers’ as perhaps inspired by the French fashions on her travels to the continent. As such it would have been one of her best outfits. The fashionable ‘50s *barège* style was slightly risqué, as detailed by *Punch* in a cartoon, for the lower ‘slip’ came well above the ankles, with the outer semi-transparent fabric reaching the floor, but tantalisingly not fully concealing what was perhaps required by Victorian standards. Cunningham, p.429; *Punch*, July-Dec 1850.

⁴⁴ Barker mentions that the dress ‘was cut up to give as mementoes to souvenir hunters...preserved in the Brontë Parsonage Museum [Haworth]....As it was now over a year since Anne’s death, Charlotte would have come out of mourning a few days before her trip to London’, p.643, p.949.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.643.

⁴⁶ As is evidenced in the confessional letter Charlotte wrote about her unrequited love for her married tutor M. Heger (the prototype for Mr Rochester and M. Paul) to the man himself. In it she related her repressed passion: ‘I could not restrain the ebb and flow of blood in my arteries and that ebb and flow always showed itself in my face and in my hard and unattractive features. I wept in secret’, ‘Lettre d’un Pauvre Peintre à un grand Seigneur’, 17 October 1843, Barker, p.417, p.559.

literary canon.⁴⁷ Both Brontë and later Eliot were relentlessly and harshly judged by the fashionable London voyeurs, and so Charlotte judiciously sends her own scathing indictment of the nineteenth-century 'Cult of the Feminine' into a literary and cultural battle: fully embodied in the minutely detailed appearance of *Jane Eyre*'s 'drably-dressed' heroine, who is eventually and triumphantly re-dressed through sartorial signification.

I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for
I had no article of attire that was not made with
extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous
to be neat. ...I sometimes regretted that I was not
handsomer: I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a
straight nose, and small cherry mouth: I desired to be
tall, stately, and finely developed in figure; I felt
it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had
features so irregular and so marked...However, when I
had brushed my hair very smooth, and put on my black
frock – which, Quaker-like as it was, at least had the
merit of fitting to nicety – and adjusted my clean
white tucker, I thought I should do respectably
enough...' (*JE*, 130)

⁴⁷ Notable exceptions to this are Fanny Price (especially in the first half of *Mansfield Park*), who in some ways can be said to be Jane Eyre's older, and equally physically and mentally repressed, sister; and also the near old maid Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1818).

Like her author, Jane's self-description is immediately transcended by what she desires to be, with the portrait of her plain features made secondary to an ideal. Such painful instances of self-abnegation constantly recur in the text and provide a basic negative image that must be re-coloured in order for Jane to obtain self-fulfilment.

The early critical reviews of *Jane Eyre* dwelt relentlessly on the unconventional appearance of this newly-styled literary heroine. J. G. Lockhart claimed she was 'a thin, little, unpretty slip of a governess...', and rather scathingly the critic John Eagles declared, 'In spite of all novel rules, the love heroine of the tale has no personal beauty to recommend her to the deepest affection of a man of sense, of station...'.⁴⁸

However, the enlightened George Henry Lewes finally seems to perceive what Brontë is trying to achieve through her characterisation of Jane Eyre:⁴⁹

We never lose sight of her plainness; no effort is made to throw romance about her – no extraordinary cleverness appeals to your admiration; but you admire, you love her – love her...[she is] *a woman, not a pattern*.⁵⁰

This woman develops from a girl throughout the novel, and her repressive childhood is realistically and psychologically detailed, in what is a profound study of the youngest literary heroine since Austen's Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* (1818).

⁴⁸ J.G. Lockhart, from a letter, 29 December 1847. Quoted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Routledge, 1974), p82: John Eagles, *Blackwood's Magazine*, October 1848, I, xiv, pp.459-74.

⁴⁹ Who was to become the infamous adulterous lover of George Eliot - they started living together in 1853.

⁵⁰ Unsigned Review, *Fraser's Magazine*, December 1847, xxxvi, pp.686-95. Emphasis their own.

On a primary level, as analysed through Jane's 'theoretical reverence for beauty,' and her detailed observations of appearances, Charlotte Brontë polarises her characters into dark and light: hair and eye colour; gothic and classical physiognomy; as well as masculine and feminine dress codes. This leitmotif presents Jane and Rochester as both dark-haired, dark-eyed and plain in features, which is in marked opposition to the more unsympathetic characters who are endowed with fair hair and blue-grey eyes: Mrs Reed, Georgiana, St John Rivers, the dowager Lady Ingram, Blanche, Mr Mason and John Reed; though with the exception of Rosamond Oliver and Bertha Mason. Conventional, or rather 'classical' beauty in *Jane Eyre* invariably connotes either an empty head, or, most frequently, a hard-heart incapable of feeling. It is also appropriate that this positive physiognomy is apparent through the eyes of the main characters, which as the traditional 'window of the soul' accordingly signify depth of character.⁵¹ Mrs Reed has 'a cold, grey eye'; Lady Ingram has 'a fierce and hard one' recalling a mythical Cyclops; Georgiana and Eliza have eyes that have an 'indescribable hardness'; Mr Mason's are 'tame and vacant'; and St John Rivers are 'cold, bright blue gem[s]'. Conversely, the hero and heroine are drawn antithetically with darkly gothic, ugly, and even barbaric exteriors that conceal an inner warmth and deeply passionate nature, and which, pre-Freudian, are indicated in their eyes. Mr Rochester has 'very fine eyes with hidden depths' which constantly seek to read Jane, in descriptions saturated with sexual overtones, as she states, 'His glance seemed to dive into my eyes,' (*JE*, 164).

⁵¹ See Paul Foss' article 'Eyes, Fetishism and the Gaze,' *Art and Text* 20, Feb-April 1986, for a range of references: classical, cultural and psychological that contribute to this powerful motif, pp.24-43.

Similarly, Jane's eyes are 'soft and full of feeling' and are continually juxtaposed with the repressed significance of her plain, governess garb and homely appearance. This dichotomy continues throughout the novel and prompts the reader to read character by external appearance. At the Thornfield party the superficial Louisa and Mary Eshton consider Mr Mason to be 'a beautiful man', and the equally superficial Georgiana Reed finds Mr Rochester is 'an ugly man'. Blanche however, recalling Isabella Linton's delusions over Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, wrongly attempts to romanticise his dark, gothic looks into those of a dangerous rogue and Byronic hero, as she compares him to Corsairs, Italian bandits, highwaymen and Levantine pirates. In perceiving him only as a literary type with angular, hyper-masculine⁵² and unconventional features she refuses to penetrate his exterior, or use his tenderly expressive eyes as an indicator of his inner vulnerability, as Jane later does (*JE*, p.220, 261, 208). The dichotomy is one of surface and depth, or as Brontë portrays it: a clash between the old classical ideals of beauty and her new gothic-romance, anti-type. Blanche and St John, who represent an antithesis to Jane in character as well as appearance, are regularly described as 'Grecian' and with 'a Greek face' or profile; whereas Jane has 'irregular features' where 'grace and harmony are quite wanting'. The physiognomic motif efficiently establishes the basic foundations for the more elaborate sartorial signifiers, and also links neatly with Brontë's 1848 caveat in the Preface in which she defiantly states that 'appearance should not be mistaken for truth' (*JE*, 35). Charlotte Brontë appears to be enticing her reader into analysing and yet questioning the nature of initial appearances, rather than accepting them blankly.

⁵² In Nancy Etcoff's *Survival of the Prettiest* (London: Random House, 1999) she defines dominant 'hyper-masculine features' as related to higher testosterone levels, and the features include: rectangular face shape, heavy brow ridges, deep set eyes, prominent chins, sharp jaw-line with powerful-looking masticatory muscles; which are repeatedly emphasised in Mr Rochester's appearance, pp.155-6.

She encourages the reader to look closely to interpret the minutiae of physical and clothed appearances, rather than rashly assuming a superficial character judgement.

At the beginning of the novel, Jane Eyre's initial character formation takes place at the oppressive home of her Aunt Reed at Gateshead Hall. The reader is repeatedly informed that the women in the affluent Reed family 'dressed well' in silks, lace frills, satin and jewels: resplendent in the full pomp of the Victorian wife and daughters (*JE*, 41, 46, 54). Their taste for fashionable excess extends to a silk and satin bonnet made especially for Georgiana's doll from shreds of leftover fabric, and furthermore allies the status of the daughters to that of their adornable dolls. This beautification is in contrast to the self-conscious 'physical inferiority' of their cousin Jane, who is reminded constantly of her diminutive status as the poor cousin who is 'clothed at [Mrs Reed's] expense' (*JE*, 39, p.42). The maids, Bessie and Abbot, are required to dress Georgiana and Eliza, but not Jane, and she is shown several times to be dressing and undressing herself, but as to whether this is deliberate neglect on the part of Mrs Reid in order to reinforce her inferior status in the household or Jane's own conscious declaration of independence remains unanswered in the text: though one suspects it is the former. Abbot further compounds this theory by confessing that she gives Jane less attention than the beautiful Georgiana primarily for superficial reasons:

If she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that...A beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition...with her long curls and her blue eyes, and such a sweet colour...as if she were painted. (*JE*, 58)

The unadorned and neglected Jane overhears this comment, and this is the same plain Jane who reads of the beautiful *Pamela* (1740-1) and old fairy tales as a means of escape: the Richardson story being the literary reincarnation of a Cinderella formula of sartorial transformation and hypergamic fantasy which is mirrored in the plot of *Jane Eyre*. The young Jane harshly learns to acknowledge that the fashionably 'thin muslin frocks and scarlet sashes' worn by the beautiful Reed sisters will not be given to her and she must dress herself. As she describes: 'I undressed harshly, tugging at the knots and strings as I best might...' (*JE*, 61).⁵³ This un-dressing battle further signifies Jane's individual struggle with fashionable sartorial confines on her body, as she is metaphorically breaking free of the corseted feminine ideal. It is therefore no surprise that, like Lucy Snowe, she cannot fully recognise herself in the mirror, which thwarts the required Lacanian recognition of the subjective self⁵⁴, especially in the overtly symbolical 'Red Room' of female adolescence and puberty,

I had to cross before the looking-glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me with a white face and arms specking the gloom...had the effect of a real spirit.

(*JE*, 46)

⁵³ The evening untying of these knots and strings would suggest that Jane is indeed wearing a form of laced stays, which were the forerunner of the corset, and that young girls were encouraged to wear to help create the perfect feminine shape from an early stage. Cunnington, pp.71-2. Maidservants were usually required for the tying and untying of the laced version which Jane appears to be wearing.

⁵⁴ The Lacanian Mirror Stage of development is when the infant or *imago* (at approximately eighteen months) sees and thus 'identifies' themselves as a subject or individual. See 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience' (1949) essay in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, eds. Rice, Phillip, and Waugh, Patricia, 3rd edn. (London: Arnold, 1996), pp.126-30.

This enforced disembodiment, and eventual de-sexing, of the orphaned child is continued by the phallic and sadistic, 'erect, masked, black pillar' figure of Mr Brocklehurst; who is appropriately dressed in the quintessential Victorian raiment of masculinity, with overtones of a deeply sinister and mournful asceticism (*JE*, 63, 94). John Harvey notes that Mr Brocklehurst is 'a black policeman of the soul, who is even more, a policeman of social attitudes'.⁵⁵ He is the Lacanian 'phallus' of nineteenth-century patriarchy: a definitive 'sable-clad shape...erect' and a 'black column...buttoned up in a surtout, and looking longer, narrower, and more rigid than ever'. In his authority he addresses the humbled ranks of crop-haired, inadequately dressed girl-pupils whose 'vile bodies' he attempts to chastise, or indeed erase. As he chops off the vibrant red curls of Julia Severn, and then unjustly reprimands Jane, he 'plays with' and 'fondles' the 'top button' of his 'black column' coat: an unconscious metonym for the controlling of female sexuality by men in the contemporary society (*JE*, 97-99). His clothing and appearance act as a detailed microcosm of Charlotte's world, and his actions are akin to a rapist, as he, with overt sadomasochistic pleasure removes their natural 'crowning glory' and strips them of all adornments, and indirectly, their natural bodily desires. His language is that of a cruel misogyny:

'My mission is to mortify in these girls the lusts of the flesh, to teach them to clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel...' (*JE*, 96)

The girls are repressively clothed:

⁵⁵ *Men in Black*, p.38.

...Eighty girls sat motionless and erect: a quaint assemblage they appeared, all with plain locks combed from their faces, not a curl visible; in brown dresses, made high, and surrounded by a narrow tucker about the throat, with little pockets of holland...tied in front of their frocks...wearing woollen stockings and country-made shoes, fastened with brass buckles...It suited them ill, and gave an air of oddity even to the prettiest. (*JE*, 79)

His evangelical hypocrisy lies in his own conspicuous consumption, and in the conspicuous leisure of his wife and daughters:

...some ladies entered the room. They ought to have come a little sooner to have heard his lecture on dress, for they were splendidly attired in velvet, silk and furs. The two younger of the trio...had gray beaver hats, then in fashion, shaded with ostrich plumes, and from under the brim of this graceful head-dress fell a profusion of light tresses, elaborately curled; the elder lady was enveloped in a costly velvet shawl, trimmed with ermine, and she wore a false front of French curls...The Mrs and Misses Brocklehurst... (*JE*, 96-7)

In Mr Brocklehurst the reader encounters most clearly the political and sexual politics of the colour black. The presentation of Mr Brocklehurst is so blackened that one might accuse Charlotte Brontë of a black and white melodrama, and yet Mr Brocklehurst is not just a villain, but a portentous figure and an ominous reminder that, as concerns mastery, the story of these men clothed in black is a intensely dark one indeed, especially for women. This is immediately comparable to the 'dark master' figure of Mr Rochester. However, it can be argued that Rochester's black is a

more sexualised and virile black: his erect and dark verticality impresses Jane, and he becomes the personification of its potency, with the play of 'jet' in his physique as well as in his clothes. In terms of natural selection, and in Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) black is not only the colour of a smart, glossy coat, but it is also daring and a sign of dangerous and potent sexuality.⁵⁶ This is a gender code, or coat, which the drab Jane Eyre also defies, immediately prior to the publication of Darwin's polemical tract.

The women Jane encounters in the course of the novel play witness to her as she in turn attempts to gain something from them or to identify with them. The characters all appear to contribute something tangible to her evidently frail self-image. Both the 'divine' Miss Temple and the 'spiritual flame' that is Helen Burns attempt to teach and befriend Jane at Lowood School. Miss Temple, who is always dressed warmly, appears as:

Tall, fair, and shapely; brown eyes with a benignant light in their irids...on each of her temples her hair, of a very dark brown, was clustered in round curls, according to the fashion of those times;...her dress, also in the mode of the day, was of purple cloth, relieved by a sort of Spanish trimming of black velvet; a gold watch (watches were not so common then as now) shone at her girdle. (*JE*, 79-80)

She wears a warm 'plaid coat' outdoors, though Jane comments that 'our clothing was insufficient to protect us from the severe cold' (*JE*, 92-3).

⁵⁶ Harvey discusses the genderised colouration of blackbirds, and examines the Darwinian traits

After becoming a teacher at the school, the adult Jane suitably negates herself further through the governess-garb which she chooses to adopt in order to escape the confines of Lowood; though this is qualified with the conscious prayer ‘grant me at least a new servitude’:

I had not a very large wardrobe, though it was adequate to my wants...I had brushed my black stuff travelling-dress, prepared my bonnet, gloves, and muff... (*JE*, 117, 121)

A painful self-image of Jane, drawn by herself, is finally drafted by chapter eleven. Her aforementioned, subdued self-portrait, has her painting herself in darkened shades in ‘my black frock...Quaker like’ clothing, and is immediately succeeded by Jane noticing a beautiful portrait of, ‘a lady...with powdered hair and a pearl necklace’. Conversely, Jane, as later discovered, has only a small pearl brooch, given to her by



11. Charlotte Gainsbourg as Jane in Franco Zeffirelli's recent version of *Jane Eyre* (1996).

Miss Temple for her wedding, and is reminiscent of the symbolical, memory-value of objects treasured by Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* (JE, 130).⁵⁷

It is in this costume of shadowy self-effacement that she first encounters Mr Rochester, and who accordingly cannot deduce her status from it:

He stopped, ran his eye over my dress, which as usual, was quite simple – a black merino cloak, a black beaver bonnet, neither of them fine enough for a lady's maid. (JE, 130)

Rochester is a shamelessly 'ugly', darkly-dressed voyeur, and self-appointed reader of physiognomy and appearances, however, at this point their blackened figures are unequal: for where Rochester's 'black' is one of a powerful, male sexuality and authority, the humbled status of Jane Eyre's 'black' governess attire is one of effacement and powerlessness.⁵⁸

Importantly, Rochester realises this and draws attention to it, as signified by her demeanour and appearance, and he begins to draw out his own passionate, and also mythical Jane. He concludes:

⁵⁷ See the symbolical 'amber cross' incident, *Mansfield Park* (Harmondsworth, 1966), ch.26.

⁵⁸ M. Paul also reads phrenology and uses it to 'realise' Lucy Snowe's character from her head and visage when she first arrives at the Pensionnat. Charlotte Brontë believed in the two pseudo-sciences of Physiognomy and Phrenology (made popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1780s and 90s), Franz Joseph Gall's *On the Functions of the Brain* (1790s) and George Combe's *The Constitution of Man* (1851). Charlotte visited a spookily accurate phrenologist, Dr J.C. Browne, with George Smith one of her publishers, on a visit to London, as detailed in Sally Shuttleworth's, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (C.U.P., 1996), p57, and also in Wilfred M. Senseman, 'Charlotte Brontë's use of Physiognomy and Phrenology' in *Papers of the Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters*, 1952, vol.38, pp.475-486.

‘You have lived the life of a nun...you have the air of a little nonette; quaint, quiet, grave, and simple, as you sit with your hands before you, and your eyes generally bent on the carpet...’ (*JE*, 155, 162)

Upon their return to Thornfield Jane is required to ‘change’ for dinner, as requested by Rochester, and without any real reluctance she immediately goes to transform herself as best she can, though still arrayed in black:

I replaced my black stuff dress by one of black silk; the best and only additional one I had, except one of light gray, which in my Lowood notions of the toilette, I thought too fine to be worn, except on first rate occasions.
(*JE*, 151)

In addition to this discourse on colour, a new polemic can be posited about the ‘middle-class’ white frocks of the majority of ladies in the novel, which seek to negate by their very absence of colour. The feminist critic, Nancy Chodorow has suggested that ‘white’ is most often the colour of femininity because it is ‘an absence’ or ‘other’.⁵⁹ See 12 below for the plate of Whistler’s famous painting of a beautiful girl dressed in white.

Similarly, in *Jane Eyre* white and other blanched pastel hues are worn by the more negative female characters, including Blanche Ingram, whose name actually means white, and the young Misses Reed. Conversely, the more positive, and eventually triumphant women’s colours in *Jane Eyre* are the creative and passionate ‘purples’ of



12. James McNeill Whistler, *The White Girl (Symphony in White, No.I)*, 1862.

Miss Temple and Rosamond Oliver, who both, unfortunately, marry as an escape. In addition to this Jane appears in her special ‘silver-grey’ dress at the Thornfield ball, and which is all too quickly replaced by a false ‘white wedding dress’ that is suitably cast off, and then finally, and triumphantly superseded by the colours of a ‘happily married’ Jane in a ‘pale blue dress’: the traditional the colour of the Virgin Mary which signifies faith and loyalty; and also indicating artistic creativity and sensibility along the line of the romantic Werther-style blue; as well as being the colour of the sky and air/Eyre.⁶⁰

It is at Thornfield, with the help of Rochester, Bertha, and Blanche, but most importantly by her own strength, that Jane Eyre begins her positive and triumphant, literary and sartorial transformation, in the anthropological battle for ‘the survival of the plainest’.

⁵⁹ Chodorow, Nancy, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), esp. pp.180-190.

⁶⁰ See Lurie, pp.198-9, and also a fascinating study by Michel Pastoureau on the the colour’s anthropological and historical significance in *Blue: The History of a Color* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

However, the dark figure of Rochester has already been toying with a superficial womanhood, incarnate in the coquettish figure of the French opera singer Celine Varens, of whom he remarks, ‘Little fool...[she was] shining in satin and jewels – my gifts of course...’. Celine cheated on him, rather aptly running away with an ‘officer in uniform’: a stereotypical choice and mocking, fashionable indictment, which alludes to the limited notions of Austen’s Lydia Bennet and her attraction for the lascivious and morally dubious ‘red coat[ed]’ men of fiction.⁶¹ This foolish affair leaves him literally with her miniature in the form of Jane’s little ward, Adèle, who serves as a permanent and painful reminder to Jane of Mr Rochester’s penchant for the feminine ideal. He even continues to clothe the doll-like Adèle with similar feminine adornments to her mother:

[He bought her] a dress of rose-coloured satin...very short, and as full in the skirt as it could be gathered, replaced the brown frock she had previously worn; a wreath of rosebuds circled her forehead; her feet were dressed in silk stockings and white sandals... (*JE*,170)

This reiterates the disconcerting patriarchal creation and control of the ideals of womanhood in contemporary society, but also predicates how he will later attempt to envisage and adorn Jane as his future fiancée:

”In a day or two I will pour [certain jewels and heirlooms] into your lap...”

“Oh, sir! – never mind the jewels! I don’t like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them.”

⁶¹ *Pride and Prejudice*, p.282.

“I will myself put the diamond chain around your neck, and the circlet on your forehead...and I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings.”

“No, no, sir!...Don’t address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess.” (JE, 287)

Albeit, Jane’s first feminine rival for Rochester’s affections is the ‘stately, Grecian’ form of Blanche Ingram, who is fittingly first attired in ‘white’ by the rapturous descriptions of Mrs Fairfax even before her actual physical arrival at the Hall. Jane responds to this stark antithesis by talking to herself in the third person in front of a mirror, and painting herself in austere, darkened shades: effectively punishing herself:

Listen then Jane Eyre, to your sentence: to-morrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully, without softening one defect; omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity, write under it, “Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor and plain”. Afterwards take a piece of smooth ivory...mix your freshest, finest, clearest tints;...delineate carefully the loveliest face you can imagine; paint it in your softest shades and sweetest hues...omit neither diamond ring nor gold bracelet; portray faithfully the attire, aerial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose: call it, “Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank”.

(JE, 190-1)

Jane responds to her self-effacement by dressing in her own, slightly ambitious ‘silver-grey’ best dress, and attempting to lighten her former shadowy state, but which

only further encapsulates the ambiguous role of the governess in a society polarised into monochrome genders or 'separate spheres'. Grey, an accepted colour of half-mourning, symbolises something entirely different on the body of the governess, and Jane Eyre:

Gray, which is neither black nor white but a combination of these two opposites, is an ambiguous, indefinite color. It suggests fog, mist, smoke and twilight – conditions that blur shapes and colors. An all-gray costume can indicate a modest, retiring individual, someone who prefers not to be noticed, or someone who whether they like it or not merges with their background.⁶²

See 13 below which is Rolinda Sharples' depiction of an early nineteenth-century ballroom: with the men in black and the women in white. By literally standing on the edge of the ballroom in her 'medium' of silver-grey Jane is exiled to an observational role only: '...as [the women] flocked in, they gave the impression...[many were dressed in white]...of a flock of white plummy birds.' (*JE*, 200)

She accompanies her creative observations with astute annotations or thumbnail sketches of each of the women characters, which are supported mainly by clothing and physiognomic details. The men, of course, are adorned in black, and the darkest of them all is Mr Rochester, the dark master of the games. His teasing charades, especially in reference to the marginalized Jane are sartorially-based parodies of what may happen to her and himself, for in one he is clad in regal oriental garb with a sultan-style turban, all too apt for the dominant patriarch. Yet, most importantly, it is

⁶² Lurie, pp.193-4.

the elusive shadowy figure of the Victorian governess that he finally selects over the frigid coldness of Blanche Ingram and her white dress.



13. Rolinda Sharples, *The Cloak-Room, Clifton Assembly Rooms*, 1817.

However, though he chooses Jane, he immediately attempts to change her, starting with a sartorial transformation, even though any change should start with Jane herself, who considers upon her engagement:

While arranging my hair, I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect and life in its colour...I took a plain but clean and light summer dress from my drawer and put it on: it seemed no attire had ever so well become me, because none had I ever worn in so blissful a mood. (JE, 286)

Rochester's overwhelming attempt at a Cinderella-style transformation of Jane, either misled or conditioned by the patriarchy, seeks to dismiss her true nature and former identity, and is therefore destined to result in tragedy. As Alison Lurie notes:

Such a gift is a mixed blessing, for to wear clothes chosen by someone else is to accept and project their donor's image of you; in a sense, to become a ventriloquist's doll. Often...the gift is felt as a demand, one harder to refuse because it comes disguised as a favor.⁶³

He attempts to re-dress Jane and thereby control the symbolic 'hymeneal veil' of his bride to be, even though she desires to wear her own modest 'square of unembroidered blond' fabric (*JE*, 315). The expensive 'veil' which Rochester chooses is the very same which the first, and still living, Mrs Edward Rochester soon tears in half and thereby directly allows Jane to wear her own, much plainer choice for the wedding.⁶⁴ This split veil is furthermore highly appropriate to the split Mrs Rochester figure, and the self-divided Jane Eyre of chapter twenty-five:

The cards of address alone remained to nail on [my trunk]...Mr Rochester himself had written the direction, 'Mrs Rochester, - Hotel, London', on each...Mrs Rochester! She did not exist: she would not be born till to-morrow...It was enough that in yonder closet, opposite my dressing-table, garments said to be hers had already displaced my black stuff Lowood frock and straw bonnet...[with the wedding raiment]; the pearl-coloured robe, the vapoury veil...wraith-like apparel...[and] ghostly shimmer... (*JE*, 303)

⁶³ Lurie, p.22.

⁶⁴ This is a biblical allusion, as Jesus dies on the cross the altar veil of Jerusalem's Holy Temple is torn in two, symbolical of God's wrath: 'And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom', Mark.15.38.



14. Charlotte Gainsbourg and William Hurt as Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester (Zeffirelli, 1996).

Consequently, after the proposed wedding does not fully materialise the new Mrs Edward Rochester, Jane symbolically re-dresses herself in her old, but neat and perfect-fitting governess uniform in order to run away.

I was dressed; for I had taken off nothing but my shoes...[I found] some linen, a locket, a ring. In seeking these articles, I encountered the beads of a pearl necklace Mr Rochester had forced me to accept a few days ago. I left that; it was not mine: it was the visionary bride's who had melted in air.
(JE, 346)

Jane's penultimate home is Marsh End: the cold and watery house of St John Rivers, and his sisters, Mary and Diana. This family not only represents the Brontë family as a whole, but also serves to provide Jane with an opportunity of a pause for refreshment and spiritual regeneration. After a stormy night an exhausted, wet and bedraggled Jane collapses outside their home, only to awaken in a bed transformed the next morning. The episode recalls Catherine Earnshaw's re-dressed metamorphosis in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847):

[Cathy] sat on the sofa quietly. Mr Linton took off the grey cloak of the dairy maid...Then a woman servant brought a basin of warm water, and washed her feet...Afterwards, they dried and combed her beautiful hair, and gave her a pair of enormous slippers, and wheeled her to the fire.

(*WH*, 92)

As comparable to:

On a chair by my bedside were all my own things, clean and dry. My black silk frock hung against the wall. The traces of the bog were removed from it; the creases left by the wet smoothed out: it was quite decent. My shoes and stockings were purified and rendered presentable. There were the means of washing in the room, and a comb and brush to smooth my hair. After a weary process, and resting every five minutes, I succeeded in dressing myself.

(*JE*, 366)

Whereas Cathy is more passive in her transformation, Jane is active in combing her own hair and washing herself: only her *own* clothes have been cleansed for her. For Jane Eyre is a free aerial spirit and must be cleansed of water and earth before her metaphorical fire can be re-kindled; whereas Cathy Earnshaw, who really belongs to the earth and Heathcliff, has all traces of her past life and innocent happiness removed from her, and is re-dressed in restrictive, but ladylike, Linton clothing,

...[They, the Lintons] commenced [their] plan of trying to raise [Cathy's]

self-respect with fine clothes and flattery, which she took readily: so that instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into [Wuthering Heights], and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in...[Hindley exclaimed delightedly], “Why, Cathy, you are quite a beauty! I should scarcely have known you – you look like a lady now...” (*WH*, 93)

The transformation of the ‘wild’ Catherine into ‘a lady’ is superficially completed, only to end in her tragic death, resulting from an enforced separation from her true self: Heathcliff. The unnatural artifice of the ‘feathered beaver’ is combined with the repressive image of a nunnish ‘habit’ which has to be held up in order for her to move. Transformed and disabled by borrowed clothes, she is repressed physically and mentally and is consequently on course for self-destruction.

However, the loosening constraints on and the necessary transition of Jane Eyre are signified through the restoration of her own clothing, which Mary and Diana conclude is ‘worn’ yet remarkably ‘fine’. They deduce that she must be ‘a lady’ or a ‘dressmaker’ and even challenge the austere and prosaic St John to claim that she is not pretty, though he sourly denotes that she has a ‘plain physiognomy’. Her clothes are freer now as they ‘[hang] loose’ for she reduced her bodily frame during her dramatic escape, and it is as if she must re-grow into them in order to return to her true physical passions and integral identity exemplified in the eventual reunion with Rochester.

In order to achieve this completed state she must meet and confront a final feminine ideal in the form of Rosamond Oliver; a positively idealised Romantic heroine for Brontë, and whom Jane refers to as an 'earthly angel'. She regards her with a similar reverence for beauty and dress that she had for Miss Temple, and significantly they are both enrobed in purple. Rosamond, even in name, has all the pinkish-hued femininity of a traditional literary heroine, and as Jane sees her she excitedly rhapsodises her description:

Anything more exquisite than her appearance, in her purple habit with her Amazon's cap of black velvet placed gracefully above the long curls that kissed her cheek and floated to her shoulders, can scarcely be imagined...Of course, she knew her power... (*JE*, 393-4)

Rosamond asks Jane to 'sketch a portrait' of her, about which the reader can feel her excitement:

"With pleasure," I replied; and I felt a thrill of artist-delight at the idea of copying from so perfect and radiant a model. She had then on a dark-blue silk dress; her arms and neck were bare; her only ornament was her chestnut tresses, which waved over her shoulders with all the grace of natural curls...I drew a careful outline. I promised myself the pleasure of colouring it; and as it was getting late then, I told her she must come and sit another day. (*JE*, 395)

A page later Jane is in an almost ecstatic reverie as she finishes off the picture:

...I got my palette and pencils, and fell to the more soothing, because easier, occupation of completing Rosamond Oliver's miniature. The head was finished already: there was but the background to tint and the drapery to shade off; a touch of carmine, too, to add to the ripe lips; a soft curl here and there to the tresses, a deeper tinge to the shadow of the lash under the azured eyelid. I was absorbed in the execution of these nice details... (*JE*, 396)

Jane finds her natural creativity through this beautiful muse, and from this blue-dressed 'earth-bound angel' she skilfully re-creates a completed picture of a fully-coloured self: as she is able to conclude the absent 'bodily details' and 'warm, background colours' of Rosamond purely from her own memory and imagination.

In a classic fairy tale plot Jane's true Christian hero would be St John Rivers, the more traditional moral hero of the literary canon, but one which Jane chooses to reject in order for Brontë to achieve her ultimately sensuous fantasy of the hypergamic triumph of the plain governess. Jane recoils from St John's cold and misogynistic proposal of marriage, in which he brutally declares:

'God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you; you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary's wife you must – shall be.' (*JE*, 428)

Re-telling this proposal to his sisters, Jane defends herself by claiming that she is ‘too plain...we should never suit’, which they reject along with the very idea of the union, and victoriously revealing, ‘Plain! You? Not at all. You are much too pretty, as well as too good, to be grilled alive in Calcutta!’ (*JE*, 441).

During Jane’s final journey back to a now blinded Rochester at Ferndean Lodge she directly hears her own story, which is re-told to her by a servant who does not recognise her new self. Re-robed in her own, more appropriate apparel she completes not “The Portrait of a Governess” or a lady, or a mother; but a real woman and literary icon, and she no longer conforms to any one stereotype. She famously and actively declares, ‘Reader, I married him’ in the novel’s final chapter, but it is a wedding that is not pictured with the usual wealth of literary detail, and elaborate descriptions of extravagant bridal garments and trousseau, for their love transcends the material. However, later, when Rochester starts to see again, she is incarnate in a ‘pale blue dress’: the colour of the sky, faith, loyalty and finer feeling, and accordingly her true-self.⁶⁵ The complete and equal Jane Eyre-Rochester is fully liberated from her familiar, de-individualising governess uniform.

Subsequently, Rochester sees Jane properly for the first time, as he asks:

...’Jane, have you a glittering ornament round your neck?’

I had a gold watch-chain: I answered ‘Yes.’

⁶⁵ This nature-clothing motif is evident in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) in which the radical Shirley Keeldar tells the governess-to-be, Caroline Helstone, of a new ‘religion’, which consists of worshipping the figurative hem of the spiritual-natural garments of an Eve/Gaia mother figure who is ‘robed in starry night skies’ and whom she has created to defy the biblical patriarchy, (OUP, 1998) vol. II. ch.VII., p.321. Similarly, Jane Eyre often appears adorned in natural elements. Mr Rochester, her

‘And have you a pale blue dress on?’

I had.’...’ (JE, 476)

The re-dressed Mrs Jane Rochester confirms this and also metaphorically suggests to the reader that ‘the sky is no longer a blank to him – the earth no longer a void’ and the plain governess is transformed: triumphing through her own intrinsic merit. The literary and literal, almost schizophrenic split of Charlotte Brontë between the restrictive role of the dull-coloured Victorian-daughter-governess ‘duty’ and the highly-coloured ‘blues, purples and pinks’ of escapist daydreams, is skilfully and painstakingly painted and recreated in the novel, especially in the sartorial-characterisation of its endearing heroine.

VILLETTE (1853): Nonette or Scarlet Woman?

Of her heroine Lucy Snowe, Charlotte Brontë declared, ‘A cold name she must have...for she has about her an external coldness’.⁶⁶ As such Lucy’s impenetrable wintry facade is primarily described for the reader through the eyes of those around her, who often obsessively dwell upon it as if trying to crack a secret code. With the exception of the two who know her best: M. Paul Emanuel and Paulina/Polly, the remaining characters are to greater and lesser extents superficial and shallow, and portray only her plain, drab and seemingly cold facade. She is a poor middle-class teacher, and like Jane Eyre and Agnes Grey before her she wears the expected

fiancé, describes her as adorned in magical natural garments: ‘a white or pink cloud answer[s] for a gown’ and ‘a pretty scarf [can be cut] out of a rainbow...’ for her, pp.295-7.

⁶⁶ C. K. Shorter, *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle* (London, 1896), p.286.

uniform of self-effacement: the dull greys and blacks of a feminine mourning. Similar to Jane she also seems to represent for Charlotte the personification of a pseudo-schizophrenic split (she is seen to lose her mind twice in the novel) between a repressed Victorian duty and the dangerous, passionate creativity of the Romantic imagination.

Charlotte, with a condonable arrogance, affirmed her intentions to one of her male publishers' colleagues, Mr Smith-Williams in a letter:

The regular novel reader [a phrase which includes him] will not find the colours dashed on to the canvas with the proper amount of daring....My palette affords no brighter tints; were I to attempt to deepen the reds, or burnish the yellows, I should but botch.

In further response to one of her male publishers, George Smith's objection to the 'plain-grey' Lucy Snowe's acceptance of her true Romantic hero in the 'dark' and 'ugly' M. Paul, which he saw as rejecting the 'auburn' conventionality of Dr John/Graham Bretton, Brontë rebukes in the same letter:

The spirit of romance would have indicated another course, far more flowery and inviting...but this would have been unlike life, inconsistent with truth – at variance with probability.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington, *The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence*, in 4 vols. (OUP, 1932), vol. 4., p.17, pp.22-3.

Villette is another triumph for the plain governess-teacher. However, Brontë also chooses to strip away the fantastical Gothicism of *Jane Eyre*, symbolised in the literal costume of the NUN, and replaces it with brutal and painful psychological realism. Following Brontë's usual pattern, she has coded her characters into dark and light, but has added to the initial, superficial contrast: French and English; Protestant and Catholic; and gothic-fantasy and realistic-romance. The triumphant 'pale-blues' of *Jane Eyre* are furthermore replaced by Lucy's final 'pale pink dress', which is not allowed in the words of Brontë to *deepen to red* except through the loving jealousy of M. Paul.

Lucy Snowe is as opaque as her name suggests, both to other characters and the reader; from whom she withholds much personal information, denying her feelings and detailed self-description (internal and external). Though she stands in front of mirrors as often as Jane Eyre does, she is always blurred for the reader's lens.

"Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?" (V, 287)

Is the question asked by her superficial, coquettish pupil Ginevra Fanshawe. Ginevra is so entirely constructed of surface appearance, dress and adornments that these materials literally make, and unmake, her character's destiny. She is Lucy Snowe's visual and psychological antithesis, and is consequently the 'object of adoration' for such foolish fops as M. de Hamal and Dr John, who both seek to adorn their adored object with accessories that objectify her within the confines of the Victorian feminine ideal. Such is Ginevra's ultimate objectification and subjection to the male scopophilic fantasy that she cannot see or define her real subjective self, and she sees

only the surface of Miss Snowe. When Lucy is finally admitted into Villette Society, clothed in apposite attire, the vain Ginevra responds by condoning a merely superficial transformation;

”I thought, by offering to take your arm, to intimate approbation of your dress and general appearance: I meant it [the above question too perhaps?] as a compliment.” (*V*, 288)

Conversely, when Lucy first sees the as-yet-unknown Ginevra Fanshawe on board her ship to the Continent, she finds her very beautiful, and adorned in the raiment of a more natural and innocent beauty:

The other lady-passenger, with the gentleman-companion, was quite a girl, pretty and fair; her simple print dress, untrimmed straw-bonnet, and large shawl, gracefully worn, formed a costume plain to quakerism: yet, for her, becoming enough. Before the gentleman quitted her, I observed him throwing a glance of scrutiny over all the passengers... With a dissatisfied air did his eye turn from the ladies with the gay flowers: he looked at me. (*V*, 46)

Lucy later admits to Ginevra that she preferred her in this dress of a plain, natural, and unfallen state, and never flatters her when dressed in her later coquettish clothing.

Equally, the narrow-minded Ginevra cannot and will not accept Lucy’s dowdy governess-style appearance and, intimating a fear born of incomprehension, calls her such mythical names as: ‘Mother Wisdom,’ ‘Crusty - old Diogenes⁶⁸,’ ‘Crosspatch,’

⁶⁸ A Greek philosopher renowned for his austere style of living.

‘Wolf, and ‘the Dragon’ (*V*, 79-81, p.132). The eternally vain Ginevra attempts to personify the wished-for beauty of a fairy tale heroine (for example Grimms’ *Snow White* - 1812-14) by standing with Lucy Snowe in front of a mirror. Thus the ‘mirror’ in *Villette* is the realistic equivalent of the magical all-knowing ‘Mirror of Truth’.

Ginevra declares:

“Caustic creature! [to Lucy] You never have a kind word for me; but inspite of you, and all other envious detractors, I know I am beautiful: I feel it, I see it – for there is a great looking-glass in the dressing-room, where I can view my shape from head to foot.” (*V*, 132)

She persists in castigating the heroine of her own tale with painful desperation:

“Lucy Snowe! Lucy Snowe,” she cried in a voice, half hysterical.

The words and tone recall the narcissistic confidence of Grimms’ Wicked Stepmother calling out, ‘Mirror Mirror’. Significantly, Lucy is a petit, pale and ebony haired figure; whereas Ginevra’s curls are blonde, and thereby on a mythical level she cannot be the heroine of the fairy tale. Although the triumph Lucy desires is on a completely different level, Ginevra is all self-consumption and thus further attempts to devour Lucy’s already fragile self-image:

She turned me and herself round; she viewed us both on all sides; she smiled, she waved her curls, she retouched her sash, she spread her dress, and finally, letting go my arm, and curtseying with mock respect, she said:

“I would not be you for a kingdom.”

Ginevra's attractiveness is superficial and transient, with an even more fragile ego unstably based on her beauty; whereas Lucy is the necessary antithesis of a reflective, inner beauty: though not of the overtly virtuous kind present in Agnes Grey. It is therefore further significant that Ginevra is portrayed as constantly needing Lucy's reassurance on her clothing and appearance: things Lucy knows little about. Yet she does provide Ginevra with sustenance: with her own food at the Pensionnat and later at the picnic; she also provides a literal and physical body to lean upon when Ginevra is tired due to her dissipated lifestyle.

With the exception of Miss Maria Marchmont, who is a Miss Havisham prototype wrapped up in tragic wedding memories, Paulina/Polly Home de Bassompierre is the first real potential heroine that the reader is confronted with in the novel. Lucy Snowe does not nominally appear until chapter two, when she declares herself without elaboration or much description. However, Polly is minutely detailed with a similar rhapsodic reverence to Rosamond Oliver.

She is first viewed by Lucy swaddled in an oversized shawl; 'cocooned' is the word Lucy uses to refer to this precious feminine bundle. As a miniature lady she makes much of her clothing, and her sewing utensils are comically outsized, dwarfing her, and thus reduce her to a doll-like 'woman'. Unfortunately she is to be groomed as a

homosocial gift and magically delivered to the 'Bretton-Home' by her adoring father:⁶⁹

Relieved of her wrapping, she appeared exceedingly tiny; but was a neat, completely fashioned little figure, light, slight, and straight...she looked a mere doll; her neck, delicate as wax, her head of silky curls, increased, I thought, the resemblance. (*V*, 4)

Paradoxically, Polly is further portrayed by Lucy as a child-doll:

I observed her draw a square-inch or two of pocket handkerchief from the doll-pocket of her doll-skirt, and then I heard her weep...the tiniest occasional sniff testified to her emotion...

And miniature adult:

On going to bed an hour afterwards, I found her still wide awake...with an old-fashioned calm most unchildlike...She took some tiny article of raiment from the chair at her crib, and with it covered her shoulders...On awaking with daylight...she washed and dressed, so small, busy and noiseless.

Evidently she was little accustomed to perform her own toilet; and the buttons, strings, hooks and eyes, offered difficulties which she encountered with a perseverance good to witness. She folded her night-dress, she smoothed the

⁶⁹ In an extremely patriarchal society, like Victorian England, or the nineteenth-century generally, daughters would pass straight from their fathers to their husband after a brief period of courtship and thus freedom for the woman. Essentially she is being transferred from one patronym to another: a homosocial gift.

drapery...withdrawing into a corner, where the sweep of the white curtain concealed her. (V, 5-6)

This juxtaposition of ladylike decorum and duty intimates a repression of natural emotions and thereby identity; neatly analogous with Lucy Snowe. The suffering angel of Victorian literature has to be beautiful, and Polly certainly is, but Lucy does not fit the mould due to her lower status, and most importantly, because of her apparent plainness. Polly mourns her absent father as would the perfect and devoted Victorian daughter:

...the demure little person in a mourning frock and white chemisette,⁷⁰ that might just have fitted a good sized doll...[next to] her toy work-box of white varnished wood, and holding in her hands a shred of a handkerchief, which she was professing to hem, and at which she bored perseveringly with a needle, that in her fingers seemed almost a skewer, pricking herself ever and anon, marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots...but still silent, diligent, absorbed and womanly. (V, 11)

This image has a multiple significances: it elaborates on the theme of the self-sacrificing woman; is suggestive of the 'cambric-handkerchief' sensibilities of the traditional romance heroine; subtly alludes to *Snow White*'s real mother sewing, and indirectly creating her daughter; as well as a clever intertextual juxtaposition of the 'red' sacrificial blood on the pure 'white' material which is later repeated in her adult

⁷⁰ A modest covering of lace or muslin at the neck of a dress.

clothing in the novel.⁷¹ Though Dr. John rescues her frail feminine figure when the fire breaks out during the performance of *Vashti*, the unrecognised Paulina (formerly Polly) is carried out of the performance by both her father and Dr. John, but it is Lucy whom she chooses to appear to first and she is significantly dressed:

...between the candles, and before the glass, appeared something dressing itself – an airy, fairy thing – small, slight, white – a winter spirit... With a distrustful eye I noted the details of this new vision.⁷² It wore white, sprinkled with drops of scarlet; its girdle was red; it had something in its hair leafy, yet shining – a little wreath with an evergreen gloss...(V, 250)

In this almost divine scene Paulina laments to Lucy about her rich uncle de Bassompierre; the man on the boat with Ginevra, and who has succeeded in re-dressing her from her aforementioned ‘straw bonnet’ natural style and has turned her into a vain coquette, adorned with his presents, clothes and money. He has trained her in the same way Rousseau educated ‘Sophy’, and how Jacques Henri Bernardin de St Pierre (almost a pseudonym for ‘de Bassompierre’) who wrote the popular romantic tragedy *Paul et Virginie* (1787) created his own coquettish-innocent ‘Virginie’ in a similar manner to his friend and tutor, Jean Jacques Rousseau. Paulina informs us that this former ‘uncle Home’ deliberately ‘romanticised’ his British surname a few years previously: from ‘Home’ to abroad. This subversive literary allusion is dramatically concluded when Brontë allows M. Paul to ominously sail away in a ship called the *Paul et Virginie* in the novel’s closing chapters, see p.132 below.

⁷¹ Hereafter Graham Bretton will be referred to as Dr. John, and Polly as Paulina.

This uncle figure is someone Paulina wants to resist, she believes him to be a 'stupid...odious man' who 'killed [her] Aunt Ginevra with kindness' just as he may yet do with his own daughter (V, p.251). He helps to introduce Paulina into the Villette *Beau Monde* where she eventually meets and marries the equally superficial Dr. John, and thereby indirectly rescues Lucy from nearly ingratiating herself to him dressed in a more feminine 'pink dress' at the Concert Hall.

As a pairing of cousins, Ginevra and Paulina are appropriately polarised into: light and dark; art and nature; fallen woman and angel; which is sustained primarily through their appearance. Though Ginevra was an unspoiled beauty at the beginning of the novel she develops into a vain coquette; conversely, Paulina is a more spiritualised ethereal and natural creature, in a similar vein to Lucy Snowe. Lucy and Paulina are somehow allied, if not fully related to each other through the maternal lineage of Lucy's magical 'Godmother' Bretton. However, Paulina and Ginevra are placed at dichotomous extremities. In the 'Hotel Crecy' chapter their observer, Lucy Snowe sartorially and physiognomically delineates them:

At dinner that day, Ginevra and Paulina each looked in her own way, very beautiful; the former, perhaps boasted the advantage in material charms, but the latter shone pre-eminent for attractions more subtle and spiritual: for light and eloquence of eye, for grace of mien, for winning variety of expression.

Ginevra's dress of deep crimson relieved well her light curls, and harmonised with her rose-like bloom. Paulina's attire – in fashion close, though faultlessly neat, but in texture clear and white – made the eye grateful for the delicate life

⁷² Lucy has just seen the terrifying gothic vision of the NUN for the first time.

of her complexion, for the soft animation of her countenance, for the tender depth of her eyes, for the brown shadow and bounteous flow of her hair – darker than that of her Saxon cousin, as were also her eyebrows, her eye-lashes, her full irids, and large mobile pupils – Nature having traced all these details slightly, and with a careless hand in Miss Fanshawe's case; and in Miss de Bassompierre's wrought them to a high and delicate finish.

(V, 292)⁷³

Thus drawn, they are the two extremes of biblical and Victorian femininity: the Virgin and the Whore, and both are subsequently 'rewarded' by Brontë with the same end: a dubious marriage.

So where does this leave plain, old Lucy Snowe? Dressed in her ambiguous medium of 'pink': somewhere between Ginevra's Red and Paulina's White. She is not at all 'Snowey' and cold, but is adorned in all the positive romance connotations of the colour. As Alison Lurie describes:

Lighter shades of red, from rose to the faintest shrimp-pink, appear to be related to the affections. A deep rose is the traditional colour of romantic love, both sexual and emotional. As more and more white (purity, innocence) is added, the sensual content diminishes and finally disappears.⁷⁴

⁷³ A necessary long quotation which neatly encapsulates the two girls. This seems to be further linked to another version of the *Snow White* fairy tale, called simply *Snow White and Rose Red* which is also by the brothers Grimm. It splits the characteristics of the original Snow White into two beautiful and contrasting (in appearance) sisters. They are dressed in red/white and light/dark hair respectively as Rose Red and Snow White. Snow White marries the Prince and Rose Red marries his brother. *Grimms': Fairy Tales*, trans., Vladimír Vařecha (London: Cathay, 1979), pp.195-201.

Lucy must strike a balance between these two limited, male-created stereotypes. The sexualised individualisation of Lucy Snowe is conveyed to the reader primarily through clothing, appearance, and those guises which finally transform her into an iconic literary figure. Her story is crucially punctuated by three 'costumed-instances' of self-revelation; three symbolic-truths of looking in the mirror; and three appearances of the NUN! to coincide with each. This tripartite structure mirrors that of the traditional fairy-tale formula of personal revelation and the ultimate 'happily ever after'.

The first mirror incident with Ginevra is immediately followed by the first of the self-revelatory costumes in the pseudo-masquerade scene of M. Paul's vaudeville play, in which Lucy is forced to take part with an appropriate costume. Ironically, she is playing the part of a male fop or dandy figure (recalling de Hamal) whose counterpart is played by Ginevra Fanshawe as the coquettish romantic-heroine. At this point in the novel M. Paul has already read Lucy's physiognomy for his cousin Mme. Beck to see if she will fit into the Pensionnat when she first arrives. Lucy recognises on first seeing M. Paul that 'a veil would be no veil for him' (*V*, 58). Like Rochester before him he proceeds to read her dress and features and concludes that she is suitable for the post, but with potential for dangerous passions. This 'vague arbiter of her destiny' fully reads her features and now knows her 'plainly'. The play in chapter xiv is therefore crucial to a further unravelling, or rather a stripping away of the layers of Lucy's reserve to reveal her real character. At the vaudeville production M. Paul passionately rebukes the girl cast, calling them 'des poupees'. He tells them:

⁷⁴ Lurie, p.196.

“Are you no more than dolls? Haven’t you any passions...Is your flesh made of snow, your blood of ice? What I want is that this should be alight, with its own life, and soul!” (Trans., *V*, 468)

Though he is missing a part for his play, Lucy assumes that he will choose the dissembling, coquettish young teacher, aptly named Mademoiselle St. Pierre for the part. However, he asks, or rather tells Lucy to do it. The fete is comparable to a pagan initiation rite with all its frivolity. Each pupil and female teacher is required to be transformed into a feminine art object:

Each girl was summoned in turn to pass through [the coiffeur’s] hands; emerging from them with head as smooth as a shell, intersected by faultless white lines, and wreathed about with Grecian plaits that shone as if lacquered. I took my turn with the rest, and could hardly believe what the glass said when I applied to it for information afterwards; the lavish garlandry of woven brown hair amazed me - feared it was not all my own, and it required several convincing pulls to give assurance to the contrary. (*V*, 119)

The overall result is a production line of girls in:

A clear white muslin dress, a blue sash (the Virgin’s colours), a pair of white, or straw-colour kid gloves, such was the gala uniform...

Albeit, if even for a few lines the reader presumed to think that Miss Snowe is wearing this ensemble, Brontë is challenging them to know the real Lucy Snowe, who retains her dignity:

In beholding this diaphanous and snowy mass , I well remember feeling myself to be a mere shadowy spot on a field of light; the courage was not in me to put on a transparent white dress: something thin I must wear...I lit upon a crape-like material of purple-gray – the colour, in short, of dun mist, lying on a moor in bloom... (V, 120)

The *snowy mass* is not Lucy Snowe, and the more romantic colour of ‘dun-mist of the moors’ reveals her natural passions, but conceals her true self to undiscerning eyes. In this *gown of shadow* Lucy feels at ease on the side-lines, and marginalized by the *diaphanous* society; wearing clothes similar to Mme. Beck’s modest and ‘quiet dress’. After three pages of sartorial detail Lucy is approached by M. Paul to play the part of the ‘empty-headed fop’ in his play, and although she reluctantly agrees, she vehemently refuses to wear a male costume:

To be dressed like a man did not please, and would not suit me. I had consented to take a man’s name and part; as to his dress – *halte là!* No. I would keep my own dress; come what might. (V, 127)

Unafraid to defy the tempestuous M. Paul, she withstands the attempts to forcefully dress her in foppish costume. The compromise is to only wear some of the male

ensemble and so diplomatically she retains her own new dress with the unobtrusive addition of male accessories:

Retaining my woman's garb without the slightest retrenchment, I merely assumed in addition, a little vest, a collar, and cravat, and a paletôt of small dimensions; the whole being the costume of a brother of one of the pupils...⁷⁵
(*V*, 127)

Yet her performance convinces all, even Ginevra, and as Lucy triumphs in her own adaptation of the costume she feels alternately 'excited' and 'guilty' as her creative spirit is unleashed and she is transformed on stage:

By-and-by, feeling the right power come – the spring demanded gush and rise inwardly...I observed that [Ginevra] once or twice threw a certain marked fondness, and pointed partiality in her manner towards me – the fop...
(*V*, 128)

This overtly sexualised triumph over Ginevra's admirers gratifies both women, as for a brief moment Lucy has created and satiated a sensual appetite: a passion is unleashed which receives Ginevra's phallic 'arrows'. M. Paul and the audience commend her 'passions' and in the first costume-incident Lucy's fiery individuality is conspicuously unbridled.

⁷⁵ M. Paul always wears a paletôt, as will be discussed below.

The second costume-incident is part of a visualised conception of womanhood which is encapsulated and personified in the painted models in the Villette Art Gallery. Lucy reveals an overt disgust for the two polarised and stereotyped portrayals of womanhood or rather male prescribed femininity she sees. Her antipathy is in evidence even before she gets to the two main pictures as the art gallery is filled with female images, painted, clothed and ultimately controlled by the male brush:

Several very well executed and complacent-looking fat women struck me as by no means the goddesses they appeared to consider themselves...excellent for fashion-books, displaying varied costumes in the handsomest materials, gave laudable evidence of industry whimsically applied. (V,186)

Lucy emphatically refuses the various interpretations of femininity offered and is therefore true to Brontë's brand of nineteenth-century individualism. Lucy, like Charlotte, demands unrestrained nature not regulated artifice. As the detached, Austenite observer she displays a dry, caustic wit as upon the *Cleopatra* portrait; a rich Rubenesque depiction, she muses, 'It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life' and concludes that it is 'an enormous piece of claptrap' (V, 186-7). For a similar painting by Rubens see 15 below. In the juvenile Angrian world of the Brontës such a model of womanhood may indeed have been approved: sensual and aesthetic, but in *Villette* Lucy's rational enumeration observes only its comical characteristics which gravely undermine any superficial eroticism, and thus reveal it for the artifice it really is. This artifice is dangerously masked as idealism and a potentially potent feminist icon is fleshed out, bloated, and inappropriately adorned:

...[she was at least] sixteen stone. She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat...to attain...that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on the couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed around her; she appeared in hearty health...she could not plead a weak spine...She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly...out of abundance of material; seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery – she managed to make inefficient raiment...' (V, 186)

Her flesh is equated with money, food and materialism, her physical attitude is reduced to absurdity, and even her nudity is derided and set against Lucy's natural propensity for cleanliness and neatness. Such is the model of this 'huge, dark complexioned gypsy queen' that Cleopatra the woman becomes anachronistic and unrecognisable to her. The somewhat puritanical Lucy Snowe finds the picture comic instead of sensual or shocking and for her the nude represents an incomprehensible and supremely ridiculous masculine ideal of the erotic.



15. Peter Paul Rubens, *Cimon and Iphigenia*, c.1687.

4. Paul immediately takes her to another opposing depiction of femininity, one which she finds more suitable: *La Vie d'une Femme* or *The Four Stages of Woman* which consists of: a girl; a married woman; a mother and her daughters; and a widow arranged in chronological progression from left to right. For a similar allegorical image see 16, 'Stages of Womanhood', by Currier and Ives below. The painting is akin to a restrictive *Art Nouveau* style of art that personifies and categorises women for morally didactic purposes. Lucy however, only sees the women as 'flat, dead, pale and formal' as she calls the first *jeune-fille* a 'she-hypocrite' with her downcast eyes, immured in a 'prim dress' (V, 188). Yet for Lucy she does not embody virtue and modesty, but coquettish hypocrisy. The second, *Mariée*, is described by Lucy as being 'clothed' in a 'long white veil' whilst kneeling and 'showing the whites of her eyes in an exasperating manner'. The third is the 'disconsolate...*Jeune Mère*' who is firmly attached to a 'clayey and puffy baby'; and the fourth, *Veuve* is 'a black [clothed] woman' who is also unappealing and uninspiring. The four angels are 'grim and grey as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts' and Lucy is unimpressed, choosing to reject M. Paul's oppressive gender philosophy which is both ascetically and aesthetically based around his Catholicism.



16. Currier and Ives, *The Life and Age of Woman: Stages of a Woman's Life from the Cradle to the Grave* (1850).

Lucy rebelliously declares that these prescriptions produce ‘insincere, ill-humoured, blood-less, brainless nonentities’ and these nonentities are worsened because the women are relative creatures; defined chiefly by their relation to men. Are they then what Dr. John and M. Paul really desire, and do they even know what they want? For all that M. Paul rallies against stiff-necked Englishwomen, he admires Lucy as the antithesis of his prejudices, as sincere and intelligent. Even Dr. John, rather too conventional in his attitude to women, chooses the sensitive and intelligent Paulina above the empty-headed Ginevra: although it could be argued that they are merely two halves of the same coin: the *Jeune Fille* and *Cleopatra*.

Lucy’s third option for iconic womanhood arrives in the form of *Vashti* a few chapters later and immediately prior to the opera is the second costume-incident and the second mirror appearance. The ‘fairy’ godmother figure of Mrs Bretton commands Lucy ‘to open [her] drawers and show [me your] dresses’ and magically declares, ‘you must have a new one’ in order for her to go to the Concert Hall. The ‘pink dress’ that Mrs Bretton selects produces the following reaction in Lucy:

I would almost as soon clothe myself in the costume of a Chinese lady of rank...No human force should avail to put me into it. A pink dress! I knew it not. It knew not me. I had not proved it. (*V*, 193)

However, in *Villette* it seems that there are fairy-tale powers of transformation at work:

I was ushered up-stairs. Without any force at all, I found myself led and

influenced by another's will, unconsulted, unpersuaded, quietly over-ruled. In short the pink dress went on, softened by the drapery of black lace. I was pronounced to be en grande tenue, and requested to look in the glass...I turned away. (V, 193)

Is the dress put on by magic or by Lucy's subconscious desires? Either way she will go to the Concert: but how does she really look? This question, at least for the moment, remains tantalisingly unanswered as Lucy's self-conscious uneasiness with her metamorphosis is further evidenced:

I *do* hope [Dr. John] will not think I have been decking myself out to draw attention...[Dr. John gives her flowers]...He took no further notice of my dress than was conveyed in a kind smile and satisfied nod, which calmed at once my sense of shame and fear of ridicule. For the rest, the dress was made with extreme simplicity, guiltless of flounce or furbelow; it was but the light fabric and bright tint which scared me, and since Graham found in it nothing absurd, my own eye consented soon to become reconciled. (V, 194)

The language of female desire is muted by shame and guilt and is further modified by the male scopophilic gaze which appears to control her self-esteem. Even in the beautiful rococo surrounds of the Concert Hall Lucy still refuses to, or indeed cannot, see herself as the heroine of her own tale:

We moved on – I was not at all conscious whither – but at some turn we suddenly encountered another party approaching from the opposite direction. I

just now see that group, as it flashed upon me for one moment. A handsome middle-aged lady in dark velvet; a gentleman who might be her son – the best face, the finest figure, I thought I had ever seen; a third person in a pink dress and black lace mantle...I believed them all strangers, thus receiving a partial impression of their appearance...before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror...the party was our own party...I enjoyed the ‘giftie’ of seeing myself as others see me.’ (V, 195)

This pleasurable sensual experience within the Concert Hall’s lavish and beautiful décor has plain old Lucy Snowe subtly blend into the fashionable crowd in her pink dress. She literally and figuratively becomes part of *Villette’s beau monde*. However, when M. Paul witnesses this transformation he immediately disapproves, but especially of her dress, which he later claims as ‘deepened to red’ or perhaps more significantly he labels it ‘scarlet’.

It is immediately after this point of narrative pleasure that Lucy first sees the ghost of the NUN enrobed in suitably gothic attire:

I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black and white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white. (V, 229)

Its appearance is appropriately ‘in the attic’ of the Pensionnat which ingeniously alludes to and develops *Jane Eyre’s* madwoman, and it appears whilst Lucy reads an affectionate, though misguided letter from Dr. John. Consequently her desires are over-heated and the resultant effect appears to be the vision of the ghostly NUN. Dr.

John later diagnoses the vision as a product of hysteria or a 'distempered mind' and only condescends to ask, 'was she a pretty nun?'

This black and white figure of female oppression is immediately replaced in the next chapter by the third and final costume-instance in the production of the mythical, biblical role of *Vashti* at the opera. The impromptu accompaniment by a 'dark merino' clad Lucy at the last minute ensures that she has no time to be as suitably attired as before, as she states prosaically that 'there was no occasion for showy array ; my dunmist crape would suffice' (*V*, 238-9). Yet she still requires the help of a dresser for its finishing touches:

I trembled too much to dress myself: impossible to arrange hair or fasten hooks-and-eyes with such fingers, so I called Rosine and bribed her to help me...she did her best, smoothed and plaited my hair as well as a coiffeur would have done, placed the collar mathematically straight, tied the neck-ribbon accurately... (*V*, 239)

The erotically attired and yet empowered image of Queen Vashti at the theatre beguiles Lucy Snowe as she enjoys a female fantasy of revenge on the stereotypes of delicate and frigid femininity. Vashti is lavishly detailed by Lucy:

I had heard this woman termed 'plain,' and I expected bony harshness and grimness – something large, angular, sallow. What I saw was the shadow of a royal Vashti: a queen, fair...an unique woman, who moved in might and grace! (*V*, 240)

Lucy's sensualised appreciation of her image is overt:

She stood, not dressed, but draped in pale antique folds, long and regular like a sculpture. A background entourage and flooring of deepest crimson threw her out, white like alabaster – like silver: rather be it said, like Death.

Where was the artist of Cleopatra? Let him come and sit down and study this different vision...let all the materialists draw nigh and look on. (*V*, 241)

Vashti is female strength incarnate as 'she grapples' and is 'a tigress' and 'a rebel' who is both 'wicked' and 'strong', and Lucy concludes:

...her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace...Her hair, flying loose in revel or war, is still an angel's hair, and glorious under a halo. Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled.⁷⁶

Lucy now has a fully-clothed female role model, which is significantly one that has been ignored and banned by the male-created Heaven of the drama. Her powerful androgyny is disclosed in this material vision, as a potent combination of both masculine and feminine attributes, just as was Lucy's earlier costume performance in the vaudeville production. The description of Vashti's dress necessarily becomes ambiguous as the image is filled with vague silvers and alabasters so that she is beautiful only to a select few, and decidedly unbeautiful and threatening to the male majority. Vashti is the concealed, deeply passionate nature of Lucy Snowe.

Accordingly, Lucy rejects the cold and passionless Dr. John after his muted and judgemental reaction to Vashti at the opera and she begins to fall in love with the ‘ugly’ Brontean anti-hero of M. Paul, who loves her but not yet equally. His ascetic nature as revealed through his austere, dark clothing seeks to condemn the fiery frivolity he detects within Lucy. She daringly weaves him a lavish sash, which the formerly modest M. Paul in his Spartan paletôt and black surtout covets and wears with all the vain pride of a love token (*V*, 314). However, he chooses to rudely interrogate the recent ‘change he had noticed in my dress’ and questions ‘what had impelled me lately to introduce flowers under the brim of my bonnet, to wear “des cols brodés?”’ (*V*, 311).⁷⁷

He further condemns her appearance in the ‘*scarlet* gown’ which significantly refers to the aforementioned ‘pink dress’ and black mantle worn to the concert with Dr John. M. Paul creates the distinctly masculine type of the ‘scarlet woman’ in his heated jealousy: a vision of herself which Lucy vehemently denies as she attempts to correct this distorted patriarchal perspective, ‘Scarlet, Monsieur Paul? It was not scarlet! It was pink, and pale pink, too; and further subdued by black lace’ (*V*, 311). Lucy’s self-assertion is not immediately acknowledged for the misogynistic eyes of M. Paul choose only to see and believe what they choose, and not actually what Lucy is:

Pink or scarlet, yellow or crimson, pea-green or sky-blue; it was all one: these were all flaunting, giddy colours; and as to the lace I talked of, *that* was but a

⁷⁶ This fallen woman alludes to Milton’s paradoxical description of Eve in *Paradise Lost* (1667) (London: Norton, 1993), Book IV., ll.304-311, ll.7717-719, and Book V., ll.9-10, p.94, 104, 113.

⁷⁷ Embroidered collars.

“colifichet de plus.”⁷⁸ And he sighed over my degeneracy...[but only on general terms he was correct]...my costume had of late assumed “des façons mondaines,”⁷⁹ which it wounded him to see.’ (V, 312)

His bombastic rants with the demure Lucy before his eyes, clad in ‘my present winter merino and plain white collar,’ are absurd and demonstrate only that the plain truth is plain to see; even if the irony is not. The pedantic debate continues for another page as he again rebukes her for the ‘scarlet dress’:

“Pink! Pink!” I threw in)...’[but] he had no intention to deny it the merit of looking rather well’ (the fact was M. Paul’s taste in colours decidedly leaned to the brilliant); ‘only he wished to counsel me, whenever I wore it, to do so in the same spirit as if its material were “bure,” and its hue “gris de poussiere.”’⁸⁰ ‘And the flowers under my bonnet, monsieur?’ I asked. ‘They are very little ones -?’ ‘Keep them little, then,’ said he. (V, 312)

Albeit, the reader can perceive the sensual pleasures of her re-clothing. At the Edenic school picnic she triumphantly declares:

[There was] a light dew-mist that promised heat. We all said it would be warm, and we all felt the pleasure in folding away heavy garments, and in assuming the attire suiting a sunny season. The clean fresh print dress, and the light straw bonnet...so as to unite the utterly unpretending with the perfectly becoming, was the rule of costume. Nobody flaunted in faded silk; nobody

⁷⁸ Further decoration.

wore a second-hand best article. (V, 353)

Her sombre 'dun-mist crape' has gone, superseded by a light dress of summer, and Lucy Snowe is on the road to recovery as a literary subject and heroine.

The jealous hypocrisy of M. Paul is only a small part of Brontë's wider condemnation of the damaging façade of Catholicism, and which is most clearly personified in the devilish priest Père Silas. Ultimately it needs to be unmasked, or stripped away from M. Paul by Lucy, who will rescue her hero just as Jane rescues Rochester. In this respect Lucy triumphs by eventually stripping bare the gothic, Catholic veneer of the fake NUN; which is actually Ginevra's lover, M. de Hamal dressed up for a cruel practical joke. Haunted one last time by the stark vision of black and white austerity and repression that she could become, she gathers her strength and tears the costume apart: exposing the religious masquerade for what it really is; a hollow illusion and ludicrous hypocrisy. Upon retiring to her bedroom at the Pensionnat she discovers the neophytic raiment:

My head reeled, for by the faint night-lamp, I saw stretched on my bed
the old phantom – the NUN.

A cry at this moment might have ruined me...[but] I was not overcome.

Tempered by late incidents my nerves disdained hysteria. Warm from
illuminations, and music...I defied spectra. In a moment, without exclamation

I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out or sprang, or stirred; all
the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the

⁷⁹ Society fashions.

force...I tore her up – the incubus... – the goblin ... – the mystery! And down she fell-down all around me – down in shreds and fragments – and I trode upon her. (V, 439)

Violently empowered through her heroine Brontë uncovers the superstitions and superficialities of the clothing to reveal Lucy's real, individual nature and passions. Like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, the list of garments in the laundry chest represents not merely a stripping away of fake gothicism, but becomes revelatory in informing the fully realised heroine of a new life and perspective: which leaves her old, cold, nun-like existence liberatingly unmasked:

The long nun proved a long bolster dressed in a long black stole, and artfully invested with a white veil. The garments in very truth – strange as it may seem – were genuine nun's garments...Who contrived this artifice?...[A note attached to the 'head bandage'] bore these mocking words: - 'The nun of the attic bequeaths to Lucy Snowe her wardrobe. She will be seen in the Rue Fossette no more.'" (V, 440)

Lucy's former costumed role as the solitary governess is explicitly linked with the role of a novitiate. Metaphorically imprisoned in her 'robe gris' of drab-grey and its corresponding spinster lifestyle, the NUN-governess will no longer exist as de Hamal and Ginevra have eloped, and the nun (now in lower case) has been torn up, bundled up, and slept upon by a now calm, beloved and complete heroine. With the nun unmasked and M. Paul's eyes open to the flaws of his damaging Catholic asceticism

⁸⁰ Homespun...grey as dust.

he can now adorn his new self and new life in softened garments, appropriately shod with velvet 'M. Emanuel wore the dress in which he probably purposed to travel – a surtout, guarded with velvet...' (V, 448).

Charlotte Brontë's famously ambiguous ending sees M. Paul set sail for the West Indies to sort out his financial affairs as Lucy remains behind setting up her school to rival Madame Beck's Pensionnat. The reader only learns there has been a violent storm, but does not know explicitly whether M. Paul is dead or will return to marry Miss Snowe. However, a small literary allusion gives the sartorial clue necessary for an interpretation of the ending. Previously, the boat he eventually takes, after delaying the first departure is called the 'Paul et Virginie' (V, 435) This is the title of the aforementioned popular moral love-story, *Paul et Virginie* (1771), by Bernardin de St Pierre, which details the innocent and sheltered love of two children who grow up with each other on a mythical island paradise. When Virginie comes of age, however, she is sent away to live in Europe with an aunt who is to leave her a vast inheritance, but misses her lover, Paul, so much that she eventually returns; only to die in a storm-caused shipwreck in visible sight of the island's shoreline, as witnessed by Paul, her mother and the small population. Accordingly, not only does Brontë use the hero's name for her own, but she also knew that the real reason Virginie drowns is because she refuses, self-effacingly to take off her heavy eighteenth-century dress, whilst Paul watches helplessly from the shore:

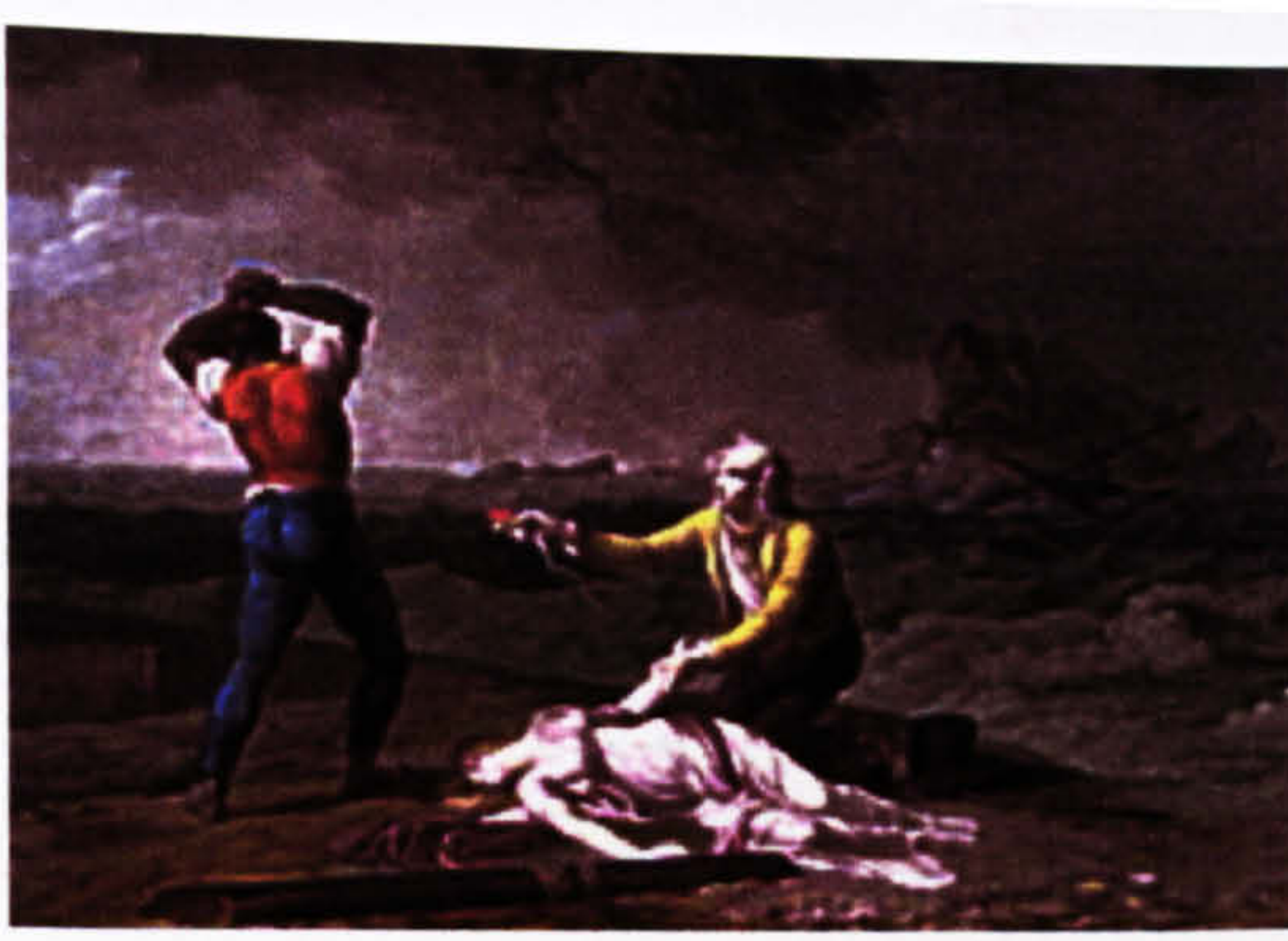
As for Virginia, with a firm and dignified mien, she waved her hand, as if bidding us an eternal farewell. All the sailors had flung themselves into the sea, except one, who still remained upon the deck, and who was naked, and

strong as Hercules. This man approached Virginia with respect, and, kneeling at her feet, attempted to force her to throw off her clothes; but she repulsed him with modesty, and turned away her head.... Oh, day of horror! Alas! every thing was swallowed up by the relentless billows. The surge threw some of the spectators, whom an impulse of humanity had prompted to advance towards Virginia, [her dead body] far upon the beach, and also the sailor who had endeavoured to save her life. This man, who had escaped from almost certain death, kneeling on the sand, exclaimed, 'Oh, my God! thou hast saved my life, but I would have given it willingly for that excellent young lady, who had persevered in not undressing herself as I had done'.⁸¹ (see 17 below)

Acknowledging that M. Paul is not vain about his appearance, and as a man does not fall into the category of 'helpless defender of chastity' constricted by corsets, crinolines and numerous petticoats, it can be assumed that although the storm Lucy calmly describes, in the novel's closing paragraphs, as 'frenzied' and lasting for 'for seven days' leaves the Atlantic 'strewn with wrecks'; M. Paul Emanuel jumped from the ship unencumbered, naked and with his life, if not dignity, intact (V, 462). As the saviour of Lucy's life and the winner of her love he is potentially redeemed through his own sartorial humility and austerity.

The promised happy ending, seemingly manifest in the novel's closing pages, is not merely for the two lovers, but can be seen as part of a proto-feminist utopian vision which belongs to Agnes, Jane and Lucy.

⁸¹ Jacques Henri Bernardin de St. Pierre, *Paul et Virginie*, trans. Helen Maria Williams (Oxford:



17. Charles-Melchoir Descourtis, The Paul and Virginie Series: 'Paul and Virginie 5: Virginie Drowned', 1795. The William A. Whitaker Foundation Art Fund.

To conclude, in *Agnes Grey*, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* Anne and Charlotte both utilise the unwritten codes of dress and appearance to explore the complex relationships between the physical and the cerebral. The details of dress allow them, through their heroines, a legitimising of their inner, creative talents. In explaining the governess' exterior-interiority they skilfully use clothing as a slow, unravelling, revelatory narrative device. The governess-heroines are painstakingly portrayed with the adornments and accoutrements of highly creative and sexualised desires (Anne to a lesser extent). This literary and literal split, of Charlotte especially, between the drab-coloured Victorian governess and duty; from the highly coloured 'blues, purples and pinks' of escapist daydreams provides the basis for the triumph of the plain governess, who can become a literary heroine.

[For her wedding] Charlotte wore one of her new dresses from Halifax, made from silvery grey silk with a lavender tinge to it, with large sleeves narrowing to the cuff, a full skirt, tight waist and velvet trimmed neck.⁸²

Charlotte Brontë subtly and triumphantly re-dresses the stereotypical model of the governess: in art and life.

Woodstock, 1989), chapter two, pp.191-2. Paul eventually kills himself and is buried by her side.

⁸² Barker, p.758.



Chapter Two

**Puritan Asceticism and
Bejewelled Aesthetics:**

George Eliot and Sartorial Conflict



‘Was She Beautiful or Not Beautiful?’¹

...the Lady of Quetcham...[had] a squat figure, a harsh parrot-like voice, and a systematically high head-dress; and since these points made her externally rather ridiculous, it appeared to many only natural that she should have what are called literary tendencies. (*Daniel Deronda*, Bk.1, Ch. 5, p.35)

[Herr Klesmer’s] tall thin figure [was] clad in a way which, not being strictly English, was all the worse for its apparent emphasis of intention. Draped in a loose garment with a Florentine berretta on his head, he would have been fit to stand by the side of Leonardo da Vinci; but how when he presented himself in trousers which were not what English feeling demanded about the knees? – and when the fire that showed itself in his glances and movements of the head...was turned into comedy by a hat?....*One sees why it is often better for greatness to be dead, and to have got rid of the outward man.*

(*Daniel Deronda*, Bk.1, Ch.10, p.86. Emphasis my own)

When George Eliot the novelist initially describes the eclectic sartorial mix and eccentric appearance of the musician Herr Klesmer, at the post-archery ball, she passively laments that this strange spectacle is ‘mocked by’ and ‘disgusts’ the suitably attired, if a little ‘uninspired’, English middle-classes. An impassioned defence, by means of the awe-struck heroine Gwendolen Harleth, however, immediately follows, in which his appearance is excused as an integral part of ‘the majesty of genius’ to which ‘profane’

¹ George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), ed. by Graham Handley (Oxford, 1996, reissued 1998), p.3. All future references to this text will be to this edition.

Victorian voyeurs are 'blind'. Conversely, and significantly, one cannot help but feel that in this extract Marian Evans, the woman, is the presiding influence: woman writing to defend her own brand of artistic genius against those who sought only to scorn, mock and even condemn her for what she apologetically termed her own 'general neglect of personal adornment'.² Furthermore, her black-humour in considering the liberation of the artist only in death from the external shackles of the 'outward man' indicates the acute insecurity and painful lack of confidence which haunted Marian Evans throughout her life, and which was accordingly manifest in her unique and ever-evolving personal style and dress. Described in the words of Henry James:

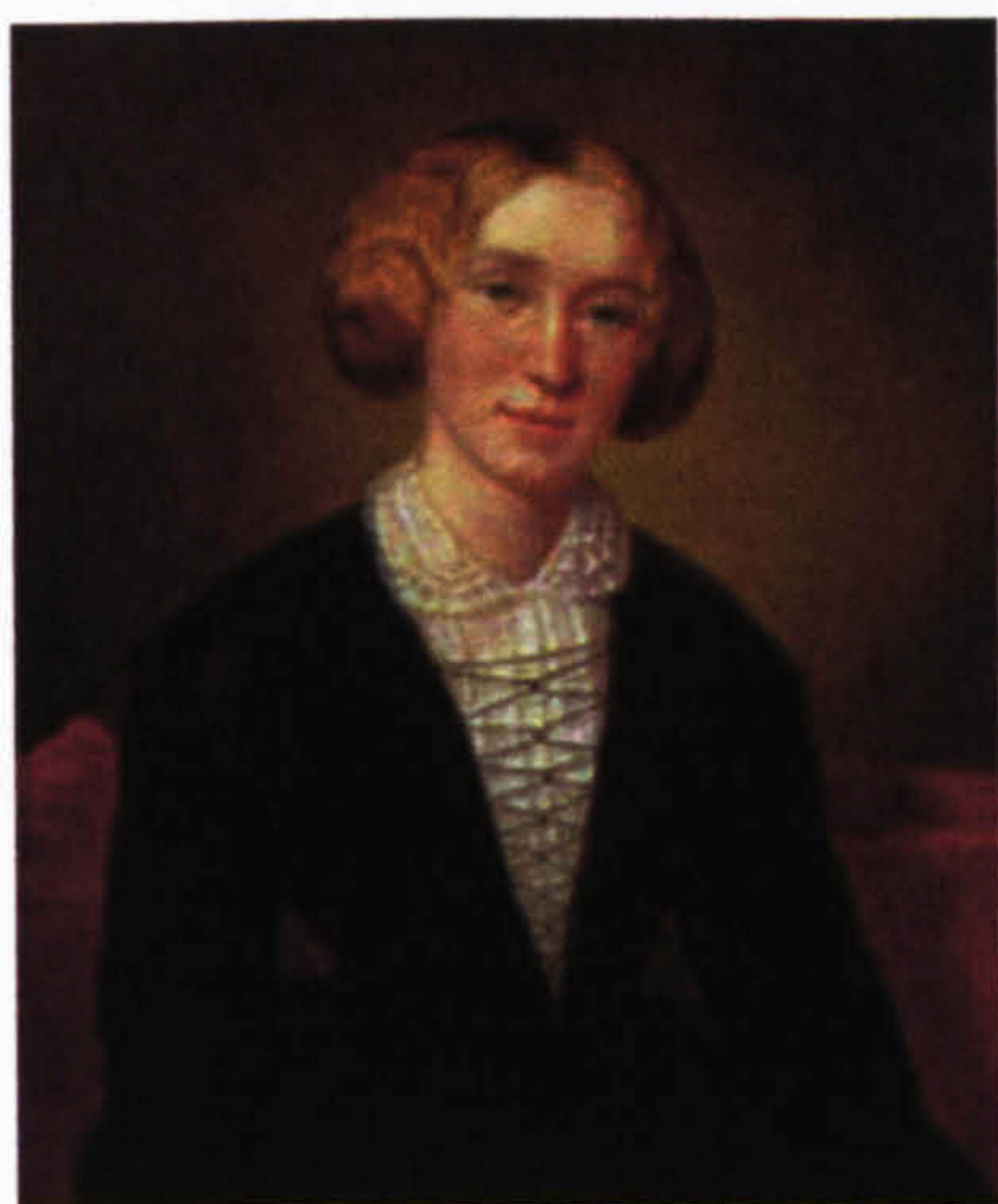
...She is magnificently ugly – deliciously hideous...in this vast ugliness resides a most powerful beauty which, in a very few minutes steals forth and charms the mind, so that you end as I ended, in falling in love with her....This great horse-faced blue-stocking....[There is] a great dignity and character in those massively plain features.³

² George Eliot is the pseudonym for Marian Evans (1819-1880) under which she published her early short stories and essays in various magazines, and ultimately her novels. It was rumoured and eventually uncovered that she was the woman behind the male mask shortly after the publication of her first novel *Adam Bede* in 1859. In this biographical section I will refer to George Eliot as the more personal Marian Evans, but later, when discussing her more mature writings and the novels I will revert to the famous pseudonym. Letter to Mrs Richard Congreve, 28 November 1863. *The George Eliot Letters*, 9 vols. ed. Gordon S. Haight (OUP, 1954), IV. p.116. Hereafter referred to as *Letters*.

³ The young Henry James was a close personal friend of both Marian and her partner George Henry Lewes. The above quotation is from a letter to his father, 10 May [1869] (Harvard). Quoted in the classic biography by G. S. Haight: *George Eliot: A Biography* (OUP, 1968, revised 1978; reprinted by Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p.417. Hereafter referred to as *Biography*.

Marian Evans' antithetical attitudes toward dress and adornment in both life and novels, can be said to be directly related to her own physical appearance, which Kathryn Hughes politely addresses in the most recent biography,

The question of George Eliot's ugliness has always embarrassed her biographers who at times seem almost unable to bear the truth. In this they are no different from many of Marian's friends at the time whose solution was to rewrite or redraw the heavy, horsy features.⁴



18a. *George Eliot* (1850) by Francois D'Albert Durade.



18b. *George Eliot* (1858) by Mayall of Regent Street.⁵

In a chapter significantly entitled 'The Most Important Means of Enlightenment,' Hughes reinforces what she regards as the adult Marian's progressive 'pit of self-loathing' with reference to the painful instance when the sensitive thirty-two year old was, with a cruel

⁴ Kathryn Hughes, *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* (London: Fouth Estate, 1998), p.120. Hereafter referred to as Hughes.

⁵ Like Charlotte Brontë before her Eliot was also aware of the incongruity of how she was 'perceived' on canvas set against the photographic reality.

indirectness, rejected by John Chapman on a supposed romantic, riverside picnic at Kenilworth Castle. He recorded in his diary:

...I dwelt [also?] on the incomprehensible mystery and witchery of beauty. My words jarred upon her and put an end to her enjoyment. Was it from a consciousness of her want of beauty? She wept bitterly...⁶

This was not the first or last time that Marian would be usurped as a lover by a more beautiful woman: Charles Bray, Dr. Brabant, and especially Herbert Spencer⁷ made it plain, either in their subsequent choice or writings, that she did not fit their aesthetic ideal of womanhood, and the painfully insecure woman who had, 'an insatiable desire for the esteem of [her] fellow creatures,' was cruelly subject to a number of forceful rejections in her personal relationships.⁸ This was of course an age when feminine beauty was not merely a superficial bonus for the middle-class lady, but an integral part of her social, sexual and thereby economic status. If the young Marian Evans was initially ignorant of the requirements of the aesthetic female marketplace, she was all too quickly made aware of her lack of such charms by the brutal directness of Mrs Evans, who gave her none of the motherly encouragement for making the best of herself.⁹ She was duly informed that the only option being considered for her was that of becoming a governess: the social exile considered for unmarried and/or impoverished young women, and a vocation

⁶ Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot and John Chapman: with Chapman's Diaries* (OUP, 1940), p.172.

⁷ In *An Autobiography* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904) Herbert Spencer writes, '...In physique there was, perhaps, a trace of that masculinity characterising her intellect...' (I, 395), and soon after Marian's death he subsequently wrote, 'The lack of physical attraction was fatal. Strongly as my judgements prompted, my instincts would not respond'. *Letters* VIII. pp.42-3n.

⁸ Letter to her devout Methodist aunt, Elizabeth Evans, in 1839. *Letters* I. p.19.

⁹ See Hughes, 'Chapter One: Dear Old Griff', especially pp.13-19.

which was already considered in full social-sartorial 'insignificance' in Chapter One. It becomes apparent that, analogous to her final heroine's feelings about this metaphorical 'taking [of] the veil', Marian's early 'griefs were feminine'.¹⁰ Certainly, this would have further perpetuated any insecurities, and compounded what both Hughes and Haight see as evident self-disgust. Accordingly, her rejection of all things material and external is most likely to have been an active decision, so as not to feel too great a loss at any future change of status. As Gwendolen Harleth realistically states about the impending 'nunnery' of becoming a governess,

Governesses don't wear ornaments. You had better get me a grey frieze livery and a straw poke, such as my aunt's charity children wear. (*DD*, 233)

Puritan Asceticism

As if in anticipation of this, the puritanical schoolgirl made what I believe to have been a deliberate social, moral and even asexual statement in her style of dress. Her *Letters* and *Journals*, and the recent biographies, all reveal extensive instances in her puritanical childhood and young adulthood where her evangelical response to her lack of beauty is made painfully obvious, if not worsened by her choice of clothing.

At Miss Lathom's school the five-year-old Marian Evans was ironically nicknamed 'Little Mama' for being all too often upset when her clothes were dirtied or torn. Like the prim young Charlotte Brontë, she seems to have been overly obsessed with the neatness and cleanliness of her dress. Both girls were variously described by fellow classmates as,

¹⁰ *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Graham Handley (O.U.P., 1984, reissued, 1998), pp.234-5. Referenced as *DD*.

‘odd-looking’ and ‘old-fashioned’, and finally, the astonishingly similar sartorial appearances of Currer Bell and George Eliot on the London circuit were never to be considered as fashionably acceptable, to the obvious detriment of their self-esteem. A further parallel can be drawn between Maggie Tulliver and Marian in both of their ‘swoops from showy self-display to brutal self-punishment,’ for which Hughes cites the contrasting anecdotes of the four-year-old Marian showing off noisily at a piano to get attention, with one from five years later which sees her cutting off her hair in a presumably puritanical form of self-disgust, self-denial and flagellation.¹¹ It would seem that the young Miss Evans with no positive encouragement or support from her mother, was from an early stage in childhood not able to make the best of her apparent lack of beauty, and I aim to further suggest that it was with a conscious defiance that, at least externally, she became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Her early writings reflect this conscious dismissal of appearances. In the poem ‘On Being Called a Saint’, the final poem in her ‘School Notebook’, the fourteen-year-old, increasingly evangelical Marian piously desires to belong to a heavenly, ‘saintly band’, which, rather too conveniently, discards the shackles of the earthly man: after all, celestial beings are not expected to be concerned about their dress or appearance.¹² It is important to remember that this poem was written in her early-teenage years which was an extremely sensitive time and when even the most moral of her peers would be starting

¹¹ Hughes, p.19, p.16.

¹² The Notebook was discovered in 1943 and now belongs to Yale University. The poem is, however, fully quoted in Haight’s *Biography*, p20. In Appendix I he dates the contents of the ‘A opening’ of her ‘School Notebook’ (which includes the essay ‘Affectation and Conceit’) from the watermarked paper, 1830, when Marian would have been either eleven or twelve. The reverse ‘B opening’, (which includes the poem ‘On Being Called a Saint’) is precisely dated by Marian herself as ‘16 March 1834’, when she was fourteen years old.

to worry about how they looked. This suggests that her early moral allegiances were part of a necessary strategic defence of her own pessimistic assessment of her own external appearance. It is the very 'externals' of this appearance which had been described and condemned as 'frivolities' by herself only a few years earlier in a highly moralistic essay from the same school notebook, 'Affectation and Conceit'.¹³ In this she sets out her adolescent sartorial manifesto in an overtly didactic tone, condemning with all the bitter relish of the 'odd-looking' schoolgirl those 'vain' women,

...who set great store by their personal charms....Their whole thoughts are how they shall best maintain their empire over their surrounding inferiors, and the right fit of a dress or bonnet will occupy their minds for hours together.

The astute George Eliot reader may immediately recall the detailed sartorial foibles of Hetty Sorrel, Rosamond Vincy and Gwendolen Harleth, as she goes on to write that such women live only in a world of 'flattery', 'envy' and 'vanity'. A further condemnation of what she regards as the deceit of women's guises is further developed in her early fiction. First published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1859, 'The Lifted Veil' is a short story which sees Latimer, the gullible intellectual hero, being duped into a bad marriage by the fashionable beauty of Bertha Grant.¹⁴ Bertha, a possibly ominous name in allusion to *Jane Eyre* (1847), is described, or rather condemned as being, 'very fond of ornaments' and in correspondingly lavish detail in her overtly feminine, 'white silk[s]'

¹³ *Ibid.*, Appendix I, pp.553-4.

¹⁴ *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 86 (July 1859), 24-48 (p.26, 32, 42, 47).

with their 'green leaf' patterns and 'green jewel' accessories which hypnotically lure the young Latimer. The symbolism is intense; as she wears a 'glittering serpent' brooch, 'like a familiar demon,' attached to her breast, just before she eventually poisons him. He is killed by the duplicity that is literally and metaphorically concealed behind the 'lifted veil' of her appearance, and is also symbolically 'written' across her chest. Latimer, in missing the sartorial signifiers, becomes Eliot's first fashion-victim in the broadest sense of the term.

Nonetheless, this fashionable world of 'systematic coquetry' and 'petty artifice' was one which was seemingly denied the plain-looking Marian Evans from a young age, and would continue to be an important, if sensitive, issue in both her later life and art.¹⁵

Consequently, I believe that it was with a conscious defiance that the adolescent Marian, in her unflattering Quaker-style cap and plain black dress, was actually inventing her own sartorial code.¹⁶ Interestingly, it is in this garb that she becomes the prototype for the 'moral-sartorial' style of dress worn by nearly all of her 'good' heroines: including the ascetic garments of the young Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris, in *Adam Bede* (1859); and the 'Quakerish dress' of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch* (1871-2).¹⁷ It is furthermore tempting to suggest that this 'anti-fashion style' is a form of uniform in itself, chosen deliberately to reflect her Puritanical fervour, whilst also defensively and

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p38.

¹⁶ Mathilde Blind, *George Eliot* (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1883), p.19. In the biographies the young Marian's adoption of Puritanical evangelism is dated as 1829-40: encompassing her adolescence, teenage years and early twenties.

¹⁷ George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll (OUP, 1988, reissued 1998). All future references to this text will be to this edition and abbreviated to *MM*.

defiantly rejecting the more conventional 'coverings' of the *Beau Monde*.¹⁸ The now twenty-two-year-old Marian continued in this 'moral-sartorial' covering whilst musing, with shock and apparent sadness, upon witnessing a 'gaily dressed' congregation at her local church,

I could not help thinking how much easier life would be for me, and how much better I would stand in the estimation of my neighbours, if only I could take things as they did, be satisfied with outside pleasures, and conform to popular beliefs without any reflection or examination.¹⁹

This moral-sartorial code was one which she saw fit not only to adopt in her own life, but also in the sermonizing and corresponding dress of the heroine of her first novel, the Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris. The late eighteenth-century writings of the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, would further reinforce this sartorial-morality, which also sought to condemn the frivolity of dress and high fashion. In his essay 'Advice to The People called Methodists with Regard to Dress' (1780) Wesley cites with a certain disgust, curiously analogous to Marian's shock and sadness, his reaction upon witnessing a proudly 'well-dressed' congregation in Savannah, Georgia,

¹⁸ In the highly regarded fashion study, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, (London: Routledge, 1979), Dick Hebdige argues that all styles of 'anti-fashion' (Punks, Teddy Boys, Goths etc...) which reject mainstream fashion actually contain implicit sartorial statements through which they ironically make a conscious 'fashion statement' and thereby have adopted a mode of 'uniform' by which groups of like-minded people are visibly linked.

¹⁹ Journal entry from 30 July 1841, in J.W. Cross: *George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals*, (3 vols, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood & Sons, 1885; revised and reprinted in 1 vol. with additions, 1887), p.54. Hereafter referred to as *Life*.

...Soon after, [I] took occasion to expand those scriptures²⁰ which relate to dress, and to press them freely upon my audience....All the time that I afterward ministered...I saw neither gold in the church, nor costly apparel; but the congregation in general was almost constantly clothed in plain, clean linen or woollen.²¹

His own tracts further expound this rejection of outward show and adoption of a new style of dress, and he acknowledges that his own ideas on clothing and morality were directly observed from those of the Quakers whose 'plainness of speech, and plainness of dress' had impressed him with their 'neatness' and 'cleanliness', and which he now encourages his followers to 'willingly adopt'. These sartorial rules and regulations are accordingly delineated in a suitably didactic tone, but in a predominantly negative mode:

That your apparel be *cheap, not expensive*....That it be *grave, not gay, airy, or showy*; not in the point of fashion....Wear no gold...no pearls, or precious stones; use no curling of the hair, or costly apparel, how grave 'soever....Buy no velvets, no silks, no fine linen, no superfluities, no ornaments, though ever so much in fashion...wear nothing...of a glaring colour, or which is in any kind gay, glistening or showy; nothing made in the very height of fashion, *nothing to attract the eyes of by-standers*. I do not advise women to wear rings, earrings, necklaces,

²⁰ The two passages from The Bible which he cites previously in the essay relate to, 'modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety' as the morally correct adornments of women and the rejection of, 'broidered hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly apparel,' and, 'that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel'. I Tim 2. 9-10; I Peter 3. 3-4.

²¹ This essay is dated 1780 in the standard edition of *Wesley's Works*, ed. Nehemiah Curnock, 14 vols. (London: Charles H. Kelly, 1931), XI. pp.466-477 (p.473). With special thanks to *The Literary and*

lace, (of whatever kind or colour) or ruffles, which, by little and little may easily shoot out from one to twelve inches deep...²² (Emphasis my own)

The reasoning behind all this of course was highly moral: not to incite jealousy, petty rivalry, or to be seen, but to be 'adorned' only in spiritual works. The ideology is a simple one in that the internal is truthfully and honestly reflected in the external, and that 'cleanliness is next to godliness' as in the adage.²³ The symbolical significance of the Quaker and Methodist dress, or rather uniform, was therefore fully interpretable and fully comprehensible:

The whole visible manner of their life...was to be an embodied rebuke to the follies, vanities and compromises of their neighbours....Their dress was to be as plain as their deportment was severe.²⁴

Though this style of dress was intended not to '[attract] the eyes of others', the irony is that, like Marian, they were made conspicuous by their very difference. Even as they claim a lack of self-consciousness, and disregarding modesty in the ascetic severity of their garb, they are consciously and deliberately choosing to dress themselves in a highly symbolic egalitarian uniform, or costume. They increasingly drew attention to themselves with their correspondingly strong anti-fashion beliefs. In linking the Methodist style with

Philosophical Society of Newcastle Upon Tyne for access to the 'Northern Methodist Collection' which includes many rare editions of Wesley's Journals, Letters and Essays.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.467-8.

²³ 'For cleanness of body was ever esteemed to proceed from a due reverence to God, to society, and to ourselves', Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (1605) ed. Michael Kiernan (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), p174; although Wesley is almost certainly the first to express this idea in these exact words.

that of 'Quakerish' dress, examples of sartorial extremities, sometimes bordering on fanaticism, were intended to shock, and thereby underline the conscious deliberation with which such 'rules' were observed.

Barry Reay in his book *The Quakers and the English Revolution* cites several examples of this: one enthusiastic member, George Emmanuel, a gentleman from Durham, tore off his fine clothes and ribbons and dressed himself in a plain garb and a hat with a piece of string in place of a hatband, and stated, 'In this same garb I thought myself not worldly, but all spiritual'; Sarah Goldsmith walked naked through Bristol market in 1655 with her 'haire about her eares, bare legged', and clad only in 'a long hairy coat'; Richard Sale, a Quaker tailor from Hoole, stood clothed in sackcloth with flowers in one hand and weeds in the other, and ashes sprinkled in his hair; and Quaker shopkeepers in Malton went on to '[burn] silks and ribbons in a testimony against extravagance'; but perhaps even more fanatical (in regard to the British climate) is his final example of an 'external' signifier of inner spirituality:

Several Quakers went 'naked as a sign'; as a testimony to the spiritual nakedness of the world, as a forewarning that all pride would be cast aside at the Last Judgement, and as a symbol of their regenerate nature.²⁵

²⁴ *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, ed. R.E. Davies and E.G. Rupp, 3 vols. (London: Epworth, 1965), I. p.188.

²⁵ Barry Reay, *The Quakers and the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1985), all examples cited are taken from p.36. The chapter chronicles the sartorial rebellion inherent in the rise of the religion during the seventeenth century, until the Toleration Act of 1689, when they were no longer persecuted for their beliefs, and accordingly adopted the sombre, ascetic style which Wesley also condones.

Thus the analogous Quaker and Methodist style of dress was deliberately symbolical, and loaded with all the moral justifications which rejected the cultural and sartorial hegemony of the elite, in its vivid violation of the accepted sartorial code. Reay goes on to conclude that, 'In their own dress (plain dress) they threatened the conventions of social distinction'.²⁶ This breaching of social etiquette demonstrates that they metaphorically and literally refused to doff their hats.

Returning to Marian Evans, it would seem that her moral-sartorial ideology was perhaps used in accordance with the moral mind and subsequent 'costume' of these burgeoning evangelical sects. Dressed in her own interpretation of this ascetic religious uniform, she signified not only a rebellion against high fashion but also a deliberate and conscious regulation of her own clothing. Perceptively, but gently, Hughes in her biography claims that Marian was just as guilty as those femininely dressed women she so liked to vilify as manipulators and deceivers in the control she seems to have exerted over her appearance; only, of course, that her quakerish garments were used to maintain a moral superiority,

Evangelical and dissenting Protestantism had always warned against the pleasures of the flesh, identifying vanity as a particularly besetting sin. Mary Anne seized on this licence with enthusiasm, deliberately playing up her plainness by looking unkempt and adopting a severe style of dress, including an unflattering Quaker-type cap. If being pretty were the one thing at which she did not excel, she would turn the situation on its head and become an expert at looking plain.²⁷

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.58.

²⁷ Hughes, pp.24-5.

This more active interpretation of Marian's response to her own plainness would certainly be in keeping with the strong-willed and passionate character of the defiant, social rebel she was to become and the confident authority of her narratorial voice. However, it is also vital in establishing a premeditated motive for choosing the costume of the characters in her fiction, for it determines one half of what I will attempt to establish as the conflicting sartorial impulses of her heroines. At this point the dress of the youthful Marian Evans is directly allied to the 'Methodist' and 'quakerish' style of heroine, who is all too neatly and morally pitted against an equally beautiful, but frivolously dressed, feminine counterpart. So now the other half of the dichotomy remains to be considered. How far did the more mature and successful George Eliot continue to dress to personify this ascetic ideal?

Bejewelled Aesthetics

Even when later in life several attempts were made on the now famous George Eliot to make the best of her appearance, she was so convinced of her own ugliness, that other people's kind intentions were always suspected as possible teases. In 1849 Marian writes to her friends the Brays with a humouring disbelief, which intimates acute insecurity, about an incident at a boarding house in Geneva, when the Marquise (a fellow guest) offered to re-style Marian's unruly brown hair in a more flattering and fashionable style,

The people dress and think about dressing here even more than they do in England. You would not know me if you saw me. The Marquise took on her the

office of *femme de chamber* and drest my hair one day. She has abolished all my curls and made two things that stick out on each side of my head, like those on the head of the Sphinx. All the world says I look infinitely better so I comply, though to myself I seem uglier than ever – if possible.²⁸

Another instance of her awareness of her lack of sartorial self-confidence was manifest in her reluctance to attend public, social occasions, where she always made her eccentric and austere wardrobe an excuse for not going. In 1851, though she was in her early thirties, she explains in a letter to another female confidante that ‘It would be a crucifixion of my own taste as well as other people’s to appear like a withered cabbage in a flower garden’.

This is immediately complemented by a marked preference for staying at home, hosting intimate dinner parties, as she continued to do throughout her life; where her intellect and wit would ‘shine’ through, and where ‘people think only of conversation, [and] one doesn’t mind being a dowdy.’²⁹

In her twenties Marian nicknamed herself ‘Pollian’, after Apollyon: the monster who challenges the hero, Christian, in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678),

²⁸ Letter to Mr and Mrs C Bray and Sara Hennell, 20 August 1849: In which Marian begins a diatribe of self-consciousness with a reference to Cara’s borrowing of her ‘muff and tippet’, with further enquires as to whether she actually got into ‘the black velvet dress’ which Marian had also loaned her; Marian had an oft envied slim figure (see Mrs Tennyson’s quotation below). *Letters*, I. p.298.

²⁹ *Letters* II. p.138.

...Now the Monster was hideous to behold, he was cloathed with scales like a Fish (and they are his pride) he had Wings like a Dragon, feet like a Bear, and out of his belly came Fire and Smoak, and his mouth was as the mouth of a Lion.³⁰

In this quotation the most interesting detail of the appearance of the beast is the parenthetical aside concerning the pride which is invested in the hardened scaly surface, and which to others would seem hideous and unappealing. This continues the question: just how far was 'Pollian's' surface appearance a deliberately unappealing, armed uniform which was part of a defensive strategy rather than a truly individual sartorial style?

In addition to this, and at various stages of her life, she detrimentally referred to herself as 'a hideous hag, sad and wizened old witch'; and even a 'jellyfish'.³¹ She continued to mock her appearance even whilst gathering fame, which is appropriately demonstrated in a letter of 1863, detailing the sartorial effects of a critique of her personal aesthetics by Owen Jones, the rather overly-concerned interior designer of their new home,

...You would perhaps be amused to see an affectionate but dowdy friend of yours, splendid in a grey moiré antique³² – the consequence of a severe lecture from Owen Jones on her general neglect of personal adornment.³³

³⁰ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. J.B. Whorey and Roger Sharrock (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1960), p.56.

³¹ Hughes, p.79, 120.

³² In *Cunnington* this is described as 'A heavy stout watered gros grain [silk], the watering being in irregular waves,' an expensive fabric in which she sees fit to dress both Dorothea Brooke and Gwendolen Harleth, as I will later detail and explain. p.433.

³³ *Letters* IV. 116.

The heavy, but lavish fabric is not only appropriate to her new income as a novelist, but can also be seen as a sign of a mature, yet feminine interest in fashion. Hughes chronicles, what she regards as a recaptured 'young girl's delight' in fashion:

Marian started investing in expensive clothes, depending on her team of 'spiritual daughters' for advice about the latest fashions. Where once upon a time she had worn whatever came to hand, now she started worrying about what kind of dress would be suitable for a morning visit at Oxford or Cambridge. Emilia Pattison and Jane Senior took her round the shops and guided her towards the best fabric and design, while Lady Castletown and Alice Helps helped her choose furs – a subject with which both the Leweses were obsessed...³⁴

Was this perhaps, a sudden change of attitude? Hughes and Haight both interpret it as an almost magical transformation, catalysed not only by financial security, but also by the confidence she gained from a stable relationship with the dandyish-dresser, George Henry Lewes.³⁵ As George Eliot the novelist her signature-wear became 'black velvet' and 'black satin' gowns worn with a 'black lace mantilla' in which she confirms herself in a solemn colour, but lavish fabric, of which it is further noted was, 'then seldom adopted by unmarried ladies.'³⁶ The now famous George Eliot's 'new' clothing was a clear statement of intention, as I fully intend to show in her fiction, where the full range

³⁴ Hughes, p.337, 306.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

of the symbolical semantics of the colour black are fully detailed and used for various effects. However, in addition to this, the continuing sombre tones, though significantly more expensive, provide the necessary backdrop for the vivid visual antithesis which is punctuated by her sporadic adoption of striking bursts of colour and her incongruous adornment in the most lavish Parisian fashions. The ever critical and fashionable London Literati and *Beau Monde* unfortunately witnessed these instances in her later years. The writer Edmund Gosse noted George Eliot's 'newfound' sense of style in a scornful tone on several occasions when he passed her on the street around 1876, claiming that her choice of clothes was too bombastic when set against her evident plainness, which presumably would have been acceptable on a younger or more established beauty:

[Her] massive features, somewhat grim when seen in profile, were incongruously bordered by a hat, always in the height of Paris fashion, which in those days commonly included an immense ostrich feather. The contrast between the solemnity of the face and the frivolity of the headgear had something pathetic and provincial about it.

The 'Lady Novelist' Eliza Lynn, with a curious venom, sneered,

³⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'George Eliot', *TLS*, 20 November 1919. Quoted in *Haight*, p.103. The 'mantilla' is beautifully detailed in the famous sketch of George Eliot at a concert in 1877 by Princess Louise, Queen Victoria's daughter.

There was something underbred and provincial about her...she held her hands and arms kangaroo fashion; was badly dressed; had an unwashed, unbrushed, unkempt look altogether.³⁷

Finally, after her marriage to John Cross in 1880, adorned in part of her new wedding trousseau in clothes that were clearly designed, 'to show her slenderness, yet hiding the squareness of age,' the young Mrs Tennyson contemptuously snorted, 'no amount of high fashion can disguise the fact that a rickety woman of sixty is marrying a sporty man of forty...'³⁸

Tragically, in respect to her own insecurities about her looks, it seems that however Marian/George Eliot chose to express herself in dress, even exhibiting in her more public and famous years a refreshing 'frivolity' that was usually expected of women to various degrees, she would always meet with scorn and derision, a reaction not only embedded in the fact that she did not physically conform to the aesthetic ideals of the Victorian lady, but perhaps attributable to a deep-rooted jealousy that lay beneath the surface of the above quotations. Where formerly she had perhaps envied and coveted the beauty of the 'outward man', this was countered by a corresponding envy of her 'internal genius' and literary fame.

³⁷Marghanita Laski, *George Eliot and Her World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p.97, 36.

³⁸ As quoted by Lady Caroline Lane Jebb in, *With Dearest Love to All: The Life and Letters of Lady Jebb*, ed. Mary Reed Bobbitt (London: Faber & Faber, 1960), p.163.

The Sartorial Conflict

This renewed interest in something she had previously condemned as female vanity was now embraced with a fervour that was in complete antithesis to her deliberately humble 'non-conformist' style. It raises the question of whether this 'frivolous' interest in clothing was not there all along? On the night of the 30th 31 May 1849, during the final hours of her father's life, she declared,

I had a horrid vision of myself...becoming earthly, sensual and devilish for want of that purifying, restraining influence.... I am afraid of outward images lest they should corrupt the inward.³⁹

This residual fear of her internal passions conquering all restraint is in contrast with her puritanical distrust of appearances and personal adornment.

The sudden, if somewhat unsuccessful, transformation from 'provincial bluestocking to cosmopolitan intellectual' as suggested by Hughes and Haight can only be explained so far by burgeoning finances, kind friends and male influence, and I would suggest that these expressive sartorial impulses lay wilfully buried beneath, if not manifest in her 'quakerish' surfaces. The apparent conflict in regard to dress and morality: overtly exhibited by the above quotations which detail the extreme oscillations between the sombre black dresses and the lavish fashions, bespeak a latent desire for sartorial expression, passion for colour and lavish fabric that is nowhere better exhibited than

through her own sartorially conflicting heroines. In the famous first scene of *Middlemarch* the two sisters, Celia and Dorothea - the former a blue-eyed blonde, dressed Henrietta-Maria style,⁴⁰ with a 'shade of coquetry in its arrangements' - and the latter a dark-eyed brunette dressed in 'plain style' with sleeves unfashionably 'bare of style'. George Eliot, through Dorothea and her 'plain' dress (ultimately described in the second volume as 'Quakerish' in style) gives the reasons behind the elder Miss Brooke's choice of dress. Of course these reasons include 'religion', as well as a 'well-bred economy', which she uses to pour scorn on those 'artificial profusions of drapery' and the 'frippery and solitudes of feminine fashion' as part of a lower order of instinct: 'canine', and representative of 'the ambitions of a Huckster's daughter'. However, as soon as this crucial symbolical character delineation is set up it is immediately tested against, what the more frivolously feminine Celia presents as the necessary division of their mother's jewels. Dorothea's initial 'apathy' becomes mixed with 'a strong assumption of superiority in [her] Puritanic toleration,' the contempt of which Celia feels keenly. Notwithstanding, she is deliciously persuaded to choose an item upon opening the cask, by their rich colours and their overt aesthetic appeal,

'How very beautiful these gems are!' said Dorothea, *under a new current of feeling*, as sudden as the gleam. 'It is strange how deeply the colours seem to penetrate one, like scents. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as

³⁹ *Ibid.*, II, 233; Letter to Charles and Cara Bray, *Letters*, I. p.284.

⁴⁰ A popular and decorative fashion style based around the dress of the wife of King Charles I of England, Henrietta Maria (1609-1669), who was his Queen 1625-49. During this time she was usually depicted wearing a tight pearl necklace, low cut bodice, and elaborately puffed sleeves.

spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.' (p.13)

(Emphasis my own)

The significance of her choice of the emerald, and the hollowness of her attempted justification of them as 'spiritual emblems', will be discussed in detail in the relevant section below, but the fact that her morally superior clothing is thrown into such a paradoxical antithesis is best understood in the context of Marian Evans' early Puritanism and subsequent sartorial passions. This '*current of feeling*' I believe to have been within her passionate and complex character all along, and correspondingly in that of her equally complex and passionate creation. Thus her previous superiority over her sister is lost, as the formerly guilt-ridden Celia perceptively observes, 'But Dorothea is not always consistent' (p.15).

It is this 'inconsistency' in the dress and its corresponding morality, or lack of it as the case may be, which I will now address in the remainder of this chapter, with specific analysis of the female characters in *Adam Bede* (1859), *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and *Daniel Deronda* (1874-6). I attempt to establish just how far her novels reveal a delight in, and consciously use sartorial symbolism and verisimilitude, whether for historical, political, or pictorial purposes, and more importantly expand on what I see as a development of the sartorial-moral conflict, which was manifest in her own life.

Though seemingly anti-fashion in her famous essay 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' which details her condemnation of the 'mind and millinery' species of novel with its 'ideal woman in feelings, faculties and flounces', this does not seem to have affected the multitudinous presence of bonnets, shawls, crinolines, and jewellery in her works.⁴¹ Whether ascetic or aesthetic George Eliot the novelist is undoubtedly concerned with the moral-sartorial opposition and its pictorial verisimilitude in her fiction. She was extremely precise about historical specificity, for example, the lavish Italian drama of *Romola* (1863) with its bright, historical detail akin to a Renaissance painting, set in the late fifteenth-century has a wealth of rich detail of the carnivals, head-dresses and costumes, which Anthony Trollope described as 'wonderful in their energy and their accuracy'.⁴² The research for the novel had her finding the formerly faithful London Library inadequate for her purposes, so she applied for a ticket to the British Museum; walking to Bloomsbury to check the last detail on Florentine dress.⁴³ In addition to this was her regular recourse to reference books such as Rev. Charles William King's *Antique Gems: Their Origin, Uses, and Value as Interpretative of Ancient History* (1860) and Frederick W. Fairholt's *Costume in England* (1846) as mentioned in her *Writer's Notebook*.⁴⁴ Appearances may be deceptive and overt concern about them considered vain, but historically, politically, pictorially she used them as markers and symbols in her books with an immense sartorial delight, stating in *Middlemarch*:

⁴¹ George Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' *Westminster Review* (October, 1856), reprinted in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, eds. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) pp.140-63.

⁴² *Letters*, VIII. p.303.

⁴³ George Eliot to Joseph Hunt Langford, 27 March 1861, in which she thanked him for, 'those nice old-fashioned costumes you were so good as to look up for me....I would go to some expense for a good book on medieval costumes...'. *Letters*, III. p.393-4n.

⁴⁴ *George Eliot: A Writer's Notebook 1854-79 and Uncollected Writings*, ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981).

‘How can one describe a man? I can give you an inventory: heavy eyebrows, dark eyes...and – let me see – oh, an exquisite cambric pocket handkerchief’ (*MM*, 112)

In *Adam Bede* the congregation is lovingly detailed by Eliot with intricate sartorial pointers and flanked with natural imagery: the ‘apple-cheeked families’ naturally fit the colourfully ‘bright waistcoats’ and ‘bonnets’ with ‘snow-white-caps’ accorded them, in their ‘best clothes, and their best humour’ they are in complete harmony with the grandiose ecclesiastical surroundings and moral setting (*AB*, 196-7, 202). This vivid pictorialism is an essential part of her famous Realist verisimilitude based upon genre paintings; an idea that is exhaustively and extensively analysed by Hugh Witemeyer in *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* in which he discusses Eliot’s ‘wordpainting’, likening her picturesque style of writing to famous Dutch, Flemish and English genre pictures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁴⁵ However, the intricate external detail of her characters’ sartorial and physiognomic appearances also strongly accords to internal characterisation. Michael Irwin refers to her ‘solidity of specification’ as being a crucial interpretive tool, remarking, ‘until the nineteenth century it remained a tradition that the hero and heroine could be left undescribed, or could be described in idealised language’ but that Eliot develops a kind of ‘identi-kit process’ by which physical features accord with personality traits, intentionally creating antithetical ‘styles’ of women, whereby

⁴⁵ Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (Yale, 1979), see the Introduction and ch.1. p.8.

fashion can be used to 'declare an individuality against minor characters'. In specific reference to Dickens he significantly adds:

...the adjectives about their clothes also describe the law in *Bleak House*: old-fashioned, secretive, unhealthy, sinister, bloodless, emotionless, stealthy, predatory..⁴⁶

This of course also conforms to the Victorian reader's taste for lavish visual description as demonstrated by the popularity of the illustrated novel.

As regards the texts' primary conflicting impulses of clothing, these ideas can be applied in regard to the chiaroscuro of her female characters into a morally-sartorial black and white dichotomy, as is vividly displayed in the pairings of Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel; Dorothea and Celia Brooke, Mary Garth and Rosamond Vincy; and finally in the more imbalanced and ambiguous pairing of Gwendolen Harleth and Mirah Lapidoth. In relation to this 'inconsistency' the next section dealing with *Adam Bede* ultimately seeks to establish and then question the moral chiaroscuro of the female characters with the semantics of their clothing colours accordingly reversed into Puritanical black and Feminine white, and uncover whether this split is as simplistic as it initially appears, or whether there are metaphorical 'shades of grey' between these neatly monochromatic women.

⁴⁶ Michael Irwin, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1979), pp.1, 15, 86-7.

The three novels that I have chosen to examine more closely have been chosen because they exhibit a range of historical years, 1799, 1830s and 1864-5, and are accordingly analysed separately and in the correct chronological order of what I regard as their 'fashion development' towards the contradictory impulses of dress and morality as delineated in the final set of heroines, and in the ambiguous sartorial 'masterpiece' of Gwendolen Harleth.

ADAM BEDE (1859): The Moral Chiaroscuro

Approximately twelve years before the publication of *Adam Bede* the twenty-eight-year-old George Eliot wrote a short moralistic essay disguised as a fairy story, and which was never published. Perhaps this was because of its didactic simplicity, or even more probable was that she saw fit to reincarnate its underlying dichotomous structure within later fictions. 'A Little Fable with a Great Moral' was written in a later notebook which was suitably entitled 'Poetry and Prose, from the Notebook of an Eccentric' and dated by herself as between 4 December 1846 and 19 February 1847.⁴⁷ This period was at the height of her intense friendship with the beautiful Sara Hennell, but as to whether Sara's beauty was part of the catalyst for her writing it, or the various rejections by potential lovers in favour of more aesthetically appealing young women (at least in her opinion) one can only speculate⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ This 'fable' is reproduced in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp.21-22. Hereafter referred to as *Essays*.

⁴⁸ For details of her 'infatuation' with Sara, see Hughes, Ch.4: 'I Fall Not In Love With Everyone: The Rosehill Years 1841-9'.

In the fable she recreates the established biblical dichotomy of Eve/Mary, but translates it into the opposing pagan world with two beautiful hamadryads called Idione and Hieria, who live in a forest by the side of a lake. It is this clear body of water that is described in terms of a 'mirror', and indeed it becomes that traditional symbol of female vanity for Idione who, 'loved to look in the lake because she saw herself there...weaving flowers in her silken hair, and smiling at her own image all day long...'⁴⁹

The focus of attention for Idione is inward; she concentrates only on her own external appearance, and anything that comes between this and her self-obsessed daydreams is swiftly and cruelly dismissed. In this case it is the water-lilies which obscure the surface that are 'torn up' in 'anger'. At the opposite pole is Hieria,

...who cared not to look at herself in the lake; she cared only about watching the heavens as they were reflected in its bosom...the clouds and stars...[and she] didn't mind the water-lilies either.⁵⁰

A moral dichotomy is vividly portrayed: Hieria is the outward-looking heroine, who does not seem to acknowledge herself at all, and thereby lives happily by the lake's self-reflecting waters; this is contrasted with the fate of Idione, who, in growing old becomes 'angry' with the lake for showing her the reality of her appearance,

⁴⁹ *Essays*, p.21.

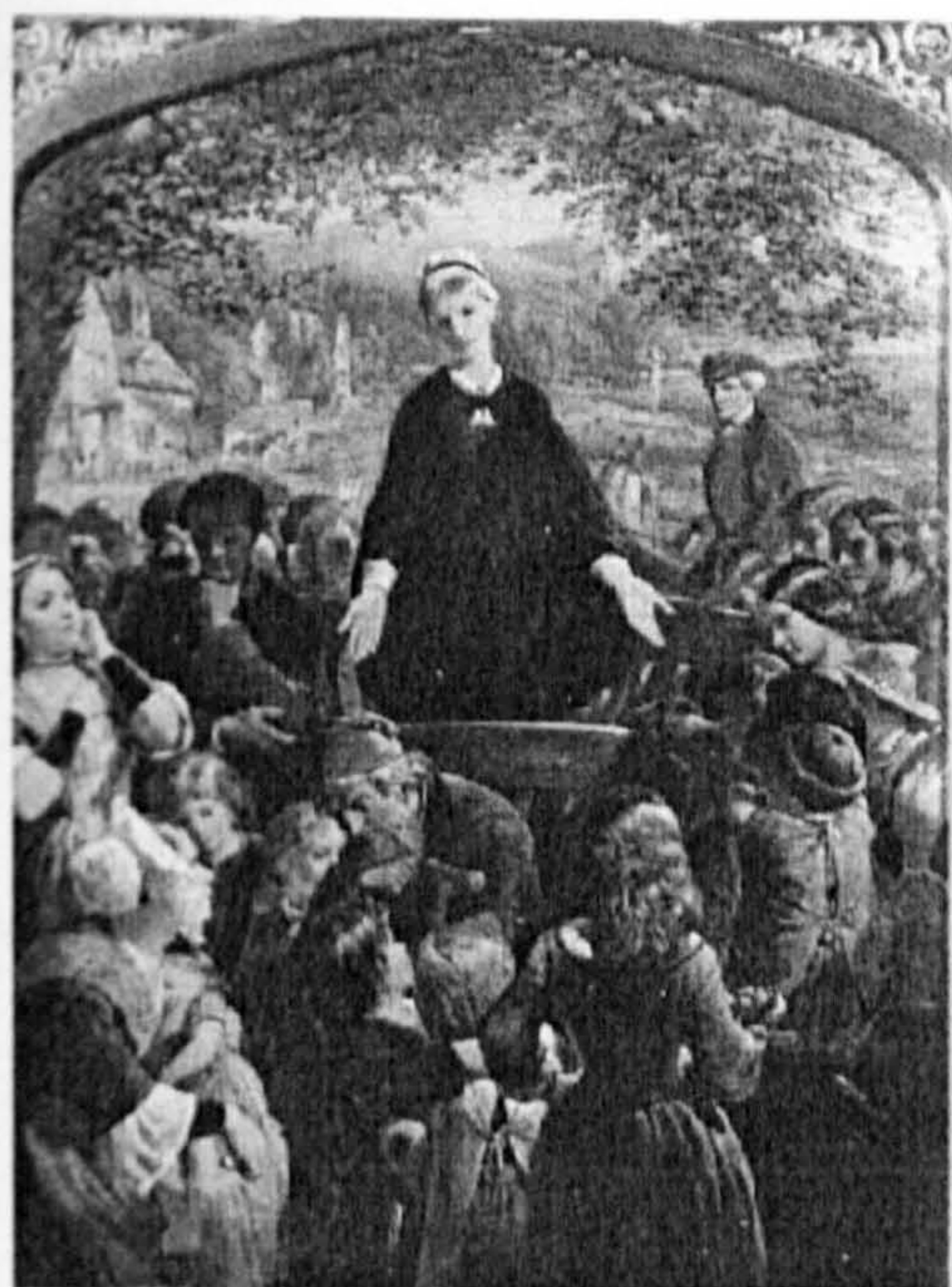
...the lake only went on giving her an uglier and uglier picture of herself, till at last she ran away from it into the hollow of her tree, and sat there lonely and sad till she died.

To Hieria the lake becomes more and more beautiful, until she is reabsorbed fully into nature without realising that she has ever become old. The simple female split in this fable poses questions which will be explored in relation to the two heroines of *Adam Bede*, who appear to reflect this visual-moral antithesis. Idione becomes Hetty Sorrel, the vain female who dresses up in the traditional feminine white and pinks, with aesthetic and gaudy trinkets, and accordingly ignores the reality of her humble situation. Conversely, at the opposite end of this moral-sartorial spectrum is Dinah Morris, the outward-looking, charitable, Methodist preacher, suitably attired in her humble ascetic garb of greys, and blacks, who finally becomes the novel's real heroine by winning the narrative's central focus personified by Adam Bede.

There are many problems inherent in this over-simplified moral-sartorial structure, which I will deal with later in this analysis. It would appear that from the very beginning of the novel these two women are set up visually as part of a didactic sartorial-chiaroscuro of black and white. As has already been established, the usual moral semantics of black and white are reversed, so that the puritan blacks and greys have the moral high ground and the frivolous whites and pinks are immediately aligned with vanity and self-obsession: as related in the previous Brontë chapter with Agnes Grey's, Jane Eyre's, and Lucy Snowe's plain and virtuous styles of dress.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

Set at the close of the eighteenth century the fashions in *Adam Bede* assimilate with those of the romantic era. The intricate pictorialism of the first appearance of the two heroines: Dinah appears first in chapter two, preaching to the Hayslope community; and Hetty follows soon after, in chapter six, at work in the dairy, is explicit in sartorial-moral detail. These two contrasting images impressed Queen Victoria so much that she commissioned two pictures by E.H. Corbould, to illustrate the scenes (see **19a** and **19b** below).



19a and **19b**. Edward H. Corbould, *Dinah Morris Preaching on Hayslope Green* (1861) and *Hetty and Captain Donnithorne in Mrs. Poyser's Dairy* (1861). Her Majesty HRH Queen Elizabeth II's private collection at Buckingham Palace.

The first half of the diptych, 'Dinah Morris Preaching in Hayslope' has her centralised in her black Methodist raiment, which, in actuality is her everyday attire, as she is rightfully raised above the heads of the community on a cart, which acts as a form of pedestal. The white cap which frames her face is distinctly analogous both in the writing and the

picture to a halo, and it is this spiritualization that is further complemented by her white collar; which is almost clerical in relation to the 'black stuff dress' and flowing black cape (absent in the text). Eliot describes Dinah in enough sartorial and physical detail to fully support the visual details that Corbould selects for moral and spiritual emphasis. She is initially described as wearing, 'the quaker-like costume and odd deportment of the female Methodists', with her 'hair...drawn straight back behind the ears, and covered...by a net quaker cap'. Ironically, it is this anti-fashion statement that attracts the women to 'examine' her in the first place and only as a consequence hear her preach. Similarly, the men are attracted by the incongruity of her strange dress and her 'pretty' face, only advancing nearer to hear her when she takes off part of the austere outfit, 'An' there's the pretty preacher-woman! My eye, she's got her bonnet off. I mun go a bit nearer' (*AB*, 24).⁵¹

The dress detracts from the woman, or perhaps this is the desired effect in order for her to dramatically begin her religious oratory, which fills the remainder of the chapter. The crowd gathers, as Eliot's sartorial details culminate:

...she seemed above the middle height of woman, though in reality she did not exceed it – an effect that was due to the slimness of her figure, and the simple line of her black stuff dress. The stranger was struck with surprise...not so much at the feminine delicacy of her appearance, as at the total absence of self-consciousness

⁵¹ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. Stephen Gill (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980, reprinted 1985), p.22, 24, 25. All future references to this text will be to this edition, and will be referred to within this chapter as *AB*.

in her demeanour....[Dinah] seemed as unconscious of her outward appearance as a little boy. (AB, 24)

Like Hieria before her, there is a marked emphasis on her lack of vanity and thereby affectation: Dinah seems to be severed from her body in ethereal sanctity. Amidst the intense physiognomic detail the reader is further informed that, 'She held no book in her ungloved hand'. The lack of any scripture suggests that the impassioned preaching which follows comes from the heart and is very much a part of her character, rather than reading verbatim from standard Methodist tracts, and combined with her exposed hands, signifies an innocent truth. Her metaphorical 'nakedness' and disregard for the shackles of clothing continues through the novel; as if she is trying to go beyond the material confines placed upon her; and as I will later show is more fully developed in the material confines placed upon her as a young woman. In the subsequent chapter Dinah, ...had taken off her little quaker bonnet again, and was holding it in her hands that she might have *freer enjoyment* of the cool evening twilight,' (AB, 35 – emphasis my own).

Later, when consoling the widowed Lisbeth Bede, Dinah enters the Bede home and immediately she 'quietly [takes] off her bonnet' so she can better apply herself to the task in hand. Whilst Lisbeth sees her as 'an angel', Arthur Donnithorne describes her as 'St Catherine in a quaker dress' and Adam as 'a lily', her ungloved hands signify that this beatified image is not all about aesthetical perfection. Lisbeth observes:

[Dinah's] was a much smaller hand than her own, but it was not white and delicate, for Dinah had never worn a glove in her life, and her hand bore the traces of labour from childhood upwards. (*AB*, 110)

It is the absence of sartorial expectations that is important in Dinah's characterisation for it is this lack of vanity and her concern for others which gains her the respect of the parish, as well as firmly rooting her in the working class. Mrs Bede regards her as the proper material for a daughter, precisely because of this lack of interest in materialism which she interprets as '...[she] wouldna spend the lad's wage i' fine clothes an' waste....not like the lasses o' this country-side' (*AB*, 113).

At the end of the novel when Dinah visits her cousin, Hetty Sorrel, in prison and on trial for infanticide, she repeats this disregard for her sartorial shackles:

Dinah mechanically took off her bonnet and shawl...from the habit she had of throwing them off when she preached or prayed, or visited the sick...she laid them down on a chair unthinkingly. (*AB*, 447)

Eliot draws attention to an unconscious, 'mechanical' response which implicitly suggests not only a corresponding lack of vanity, in comparison with Hetty Sorrel and some of the young girls in the local community, but also demonstrates how liberated Dinah feels without such accoutrements: uncovering the truth behind Dinah's initially rigid

puritanical veil. As will later be shown this theme of female emancipation is developed further through the sartorial characterisation of Dorothea Brooke.

The critic John Goode, in his essay 'Adam Bede', neatly sums up this disregarding of the coverings of Methodism within the narrative in favour of the more individual philosophy,

Methodism is brought in only to show how unimportant it is as a social force in a rural community, and ultimately it serves merely as the particular 'clothing' of Dinah's humanitarianism.⁵²

However, though the literal raiment of Methodism initially attracts the community to hear her preach, it also, somewhat destructively, drives away those who are intimidated but would otherwise benefit from Dinah's wisdom and companionship. Its severe austerity alienates those whose small pleasures it silently condemns, and whom she preaches against with hysterical bombast.

In the lead up to this episode there are various descriptions of humble, yet vivid rural attire: the workmen wear, 'paper cap, leather breeches, and dark-blue worsted stockings'; Lisbeth Bede wears, 'a dark-striped linen gown, a red kerchief, and a linen cap'; the country 'lads' wear 'waistcoats' and 'smock frock[s]'; 'old Feyther Taft [is] in his brown worsted night-cap'; and even the babies are detailed as dressed in suitable, 'quilted linen caps' (*AB*, 14, 17, 20). The fabrics are hardwearing and practical to their way of life, yet

⁵² John Goode, 'Adam Bede', *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p19.

Eliot delights in the bright colours they later wear to church in chapter eighteen. Mr Poyser is depicted in technicolor glory, 'in his Sunday suit of drab, with a red and green waistcoat, and a green watch-ribbon having a large cornelian seal attached...a silk handkerchief of yellow attached' which suitably complements the 'ruddy faces and bright waistcoats' seen on entering the church building and completes the colourful country landscape painting (*AB*, 186, 196). However, during 'The Preaching' the contrast with Dinah's puritan asceticism is in the bejewelled aesthetics of young Bessy Cranage:

Chad's Bess was an object of peculiar compassion, because her hair, being turned back under a cap which was set at the top of her head, exposed to view an ornament of which she was much prouder than her red cheeks, namely, a pair of large round earrings with false garnets in them, ornaments condemned not only by Methodists, but by her own cousin and namesake Timothy's Bess, who, with much cousinly feeling, often wished 'them earrings' might come to no good. (*AB*, 22)

The reason for her cousin's disapproval is jealous rivalry as it is immediately related that she possessed a 'handsome set of matronly jewels'. However, the sartorial conflict is one of artifice against nature, with her two red colours competing for emphasis.

Unfortunately, Bessy's 'bonny youth and evident vanity' ignite Dinah's Methodist indignation and patronage, rather than a more natural human compassion which would exhibit a tolerant understanding of an innocent working-class indulgence.

‘Poor child! poor child! he is beseeching you, and you don’t listen to [the saviour]. You think of earrings and fine gowns and caps.... Your cheeks will be shrivelled one day, your hair will be grey, your poor body will be thin and tottering...then you will have to stand before God dressed in your sins, in your evil tempers and vain thoughts.’(AB, 32)

Bess, initially drawn to Dinah by ‘a puzzling speculation as to what pleasure and satisfaction there could be in life to a young woman who wore a cap like Dinah’s’ is like the majority of the crowd for whom the attractions are sartorial, not moral (AB, 30). As if by divine understanding, Dinah goes on to reveal her former self through the third person, distancing herself from former follies, as she had a penchant for ‘lace caps’ in the competitive ‘days of her vanity’ before finding God. On its own this revelation may have had the desired effect, but it is all too swiftly followed by evangelical sermonising,

‘And one day when she put her new cap on and looked in the glass, she saw a bleeding Face crowned with thorns. That face is looking at you now,’ here Dinah pointed to a spot close in front of Bessy. – ‘Ah, tear off those follies....They *are* stinging you – they are poisoning your soul – they are dragging you into a dark bottomless pit , where you will sink for ever, and for ever, and for ever...’ (AB, 32)

Grandiloquent didacticism, echoing the apocalyptic language of the book of Revelation, begets the necessary hysteria from Bessy as she sobs in ‘great terror’ and ‘wrench[es] the

earrings from her ears'. This form of ritual public humiliation is analogous with Wesley's own rules for purging his Methodist flock. At an open 'field preaching' with concert in the early 1790s he informed an assistant, 'Band tickets are to be withheld from members who wear superfluous or showy dress'.⁵³ This was followed by a direction to read his essay (see above) 'Advice with Regard to Dress' (above) in which he admits that he does not 'know the use of' jewels within God's creation, and does not even attempt to see the pleasurable aesthetics of nature.

Dinah's hyperbolic diction merely terrifies Chad's Bess, who goes on to repeat her vain crimes when Dinah later leaves the rural comforts of Loamshire and returns home to bleak, industrialised Stoneyshire, where her Methodism is more effective. The fake gems become poisonous, though it is not explained to Bess why they represent such evils, not merely within Methodist tracts, but in everyday life where they create false aspirations. They are part of those layers of artifice which conceal the natural; ultimately signifying the destructive force of delusions of grandeur at work within the traditional structures of the working-class community.

In this respect Bessy Cranage is used literally and metaphorically to predicate the appearance of Hetty Sorrel. The fake garnet earrings are soon to be replaced by the real thing, with dangerous results, but they also replicate Hetty's attachment to her hidden tawdry gewgaws, worn in guilty privacy. However, the initial picture of Hetty in 'The Dairy', both chapter and diptych is not so very negative.

⁵³ *Letters*, VI. p.324.

Hetty Sorrel is the perfect antithesis to the pale face and black dresses of her older cousin.⁵⁴ Though both are regarded by others as beautiful, and both have biblical names: Dinah and Esther, meaning 'judged' and 'myrtle' respectively, Hetty adopts a more infantile pet name. Her very surname comes from an edible plant, with dark pink petals, and is constantly surrounded with multitudinous images of food, animals, and fertile idylls of the natural world: in Eliot's pictorial depictions she appears to typify the Arcadian shepherdess of pastoral romance. Yet combined with this vanity and love of high fashion, and in her attempts to imitate the rural gentry, incarnate in Lydia Donnithorne and Mrs Irwine it can be seen that she is actually drawn to the status that such clothes represent. Hetty is regularly dressed in colours of middle class femininity (and of her name): pinks and whites, which are deeply impractical for a dairymaid on rural pay.

The sensuous dairy scene has this 'distractingly pretty girl of seventeen' churning butter in the Poysers' dairy, whilst predatorily observed by an admiring Captain Arthur Donnithorne, who absorbs every detail of her person for the reader. Her blushes, set against Dinah's pallor, are 'a deep rose-colour'; her cheeks are 'rose petal[s]'; her eyelashes and hair are 'dark' and 'curled'; her ears are 'shell-like'; and her beauty is variously compared to that of a 'baby', the 'springtide', 'kitten-like', and a 'frisking calf'; all beautiful, natural images (*AB*, 84-5).

⁵⁴ There is only a slight difference in age: Hetty is seventeen and Dinah is nineteen.

The sartorial details complement her natural beauty and are highly effective in adding symbolically to Hetty's characterisation and in conveying Eliot's moral-sartorial message. She stands prettily on 'little pattens': practical, working shoes of the poorer classes at the close of the eighteenth century. Unfashionable, but sensible, they were made of wood and were correspondingly heavy and clumsy. Interestingly, they are exactly what those modest spinsters, Cassandra and Jane Austen wear for their winter walks, though they are gently mocked for an 'eccentric' sartorial style by grander members of their family.⁵⁵ Notwithstanding, Hetty's everyday dress is humbly appropriate to her station, but the reality of it is that she actually looks more beautiful in it, than when she is in her elaborate finery, indeed, in spite of it:

...it is of little use for me to say how lovely was the contour of her pink and white neckerchief, tucked into her low plum-coloured stuff bodice, or how the linen butter-making apron, with its bib, seemed a thing imitated in silk by duchesses, since it fell in charming lines, or how her brown stockings and thick-soled buckled shoes lost all that clumsiness which they must certainly have had when empty of her foot and ankle...

The narrator suggests that description is futile unless you have seen such natural beauty. The richness of the plum bodice relates to Hetty's plump fruitfulness, indeed, she looks pregnant in the painting; the images of a childish sexuality, and the whites and pinks of middle-class femininity, which seem so appropriate to this flushed beauty: unaffected and

⁵⁵ Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen: A Life*, (London: Penguin, 1998) p142.

unadorned. However, as soon as these sartorial and natural images are set up, they collapse under a negative description of affected *naïveté*:

Hetty's was a springtide beauty; it was the beauty of young frisking things, round-limbed, gambolling, circumventing you by a false air of innocence.
(*AB*, 85)

Immediately, the pastoral picture is tarnished, combined with a 'coquettish air' and Mrs Poyser's observation, "'the naughtier the little huzzy behaved, the prettier she looked,'" which upholds Hetty as the 'whitened' vain counterpart of her soberly 'blackened' cousin in the overall moral-chiaroscuro (*AB*, 84-5). Hetty, in her trademark pink and white, is an affected coquette, especially in relation to Captain Donnithorne. Therefore, it is with ominous overtones for this 'relationship' that at the end of this chapter her cousin, the innocent toddler, Totty, lifts her skirt to Arthur and reveals her 'pink pocket' in which he places 'five sixpences' to keep her silent: an action that is repeated along metaphorically cruder lines later in the novel.

The literal appearance of the Donnithornes as the resident Hayslope squirearchy, and their obsequious hangers-on, breeds discontent with the idealised, humble attire of the working classes, and all that this represents. In *Adam Bede* the sartorial choices of the aspiring middle-classes are encouraged by the overt opulence of their feudal superiors. The elderly Mrs Irwine is the prime example of this hierarchical sartorial snobbery, which is in direct contrast to her supporting clergyman son's modest income and his

correspondingly plain black and much worn clothing, with his 'powdered hair' which Eliot informs is, 'a bit of conservatism in costume which tells you he is not a young man.' (AB, 57). ⁵⁶ Though both are from an older generation, and its fading opulence, the aristocratic pretensions of his mother in her lavish attire are profoundly inappropriate:

A beautiful aged brunette, whose rich-toned complexion is well set off by the complex wrappings of pure white cambric and lace about her head and neck⁵⁷.The small brown hand...is laden with pearls, diamonds, and turquoises, and a large black veil is very carefully adjusted over the crown of her cap, and falls in sharp contrast on the white folds about her neck. It must take a long time to dress that old lady in the morning! But it seems a law of nature that she should be drest so: she is clearly one of those children of royalty who have never doubted their right divine, and never met with any one so absurd as to question it. (AB, 57)

Eliot makes a mockingly explicit reference to an assumed hierarchy of appearance and dress, which, in relation to Mrs Irwin comes across, not as a natural or even moral right, but as a dangerous pretension. The white dress of the widow, in her token black cap, is in clear defiance of the expected lifetime mourning for an elderly lady, and thus marks her

⁵⁶ Throughout the eighteenth century powdered wigs were fashionable, until the war with France at the end of the century when the Prime Minister in 1795 introduced a tax on this and other cosmetics in order to aid the military budget. This hastened the decline of the fashion, with only a few nostalgic aristocrats and landed gentry continuing the practice. For details see C. Willett Cunnington and Phyllis Cunnington, *Handbook of English Costume in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957; 2nd rev. ed. 1972), pp.247, 258-9.

⁵⁷ Cambric and lace were expensive fabrics, but also cambric is a kind of fine white linen, originally made at Cambray in Flanders and is associated in contemporary literature with romantic heroines and later, fools, fops and cads: the pragmatic Mrs Delacour in Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801) derides it as, 'the cambrick-handkerchief sensibility,' (Oxford, 1994), p.103.

as a grotesque widow, with undertones of the withered beauty who is now 'mutton dressed as lamb'.⁵⁸ This social status theme is encapsulated by the sartorial snobbery of her friend, Miss Lydia Donnithorne, who, along with her vain brother Arthur, asserts her 'divine right' to wear lavish fabrics, however ill-suited to her figure and dour expression. At Arthur's coming-of-age birthday celebrations:

...old Mrs Irwine, in her damask satin and jewels and black lace, was led out by Arthur....Mr Gawaine brought [staid, formal] Miss Lydia, looking neutral and stiff in an elegant peach-blossom silk... (AB, 272-3)

She further safeguards her 'divine right' by keeping the lower classes in their sartorial place: akin to the sixteenth-century Elizabethan Sumptuary Laws which specified necessary clothing distinctions and for which any transgression was punished.⁵⁹ This is signified by the ugly, heavy, yet tough and practical, 'grogram gown and piece of flannel' which Bessy Cranage wins at the birthday games.⁶⁰ The reckless young squire sympathises,

"Couldn't you find something else for this girl, and save that grim looking

⁵⁸ The first use of this popular euphemism is in Rudyard Kipling's short story 'The Brushwood Boy' in which a young man falls for an older woman, who is described somewhat contemptuously, 'Look at young Davies makin' an ass of himself over mutton-dressed-as-lamb old enough to be his mother!', in *The Day's Work* (1898) ed. Thomas Pinney (OUP, 1987), p.31.

⁵⁹ 'There was...concern that dress should reflect the wearer's class, rank and profession, as it had done in earlier centuries. A series of ten proclamations, or sumptuary legislation was issued by Elizabeth I between 1559 and 1597. These divided society into nine groups....This legislation sought to define exactly what fur, fabric and trimming could be worn by each rank...' These laws were practically unenforceable and had died out by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Ashelford, p.27.

⁶⁰ Grogram was an old name for gros grain: a stout, coarse-grained fabric of silk, mohair and wool. See *Cunnington*, p.432; and flannel was a 'loosely woven woollen fabric' (*O.E.D.*). Both are tough and hard-

gown for one of the older women?"

"I have bought nothing but what is useful and substantial," said Miss Lydia, adjusting her own lace; "I should not think of encouraging a love of finery in young women of that class. I have a scarlet cloak, but that is for the old woman who wins." (*AB*, 276)

Lydia's hypocrisy is evident as she expresses one of the basest moral-dress codes in the novel. It is also important to note also that her reference to a 'scarlet cloak,' which is so inappropriate for an older woman, recurs with more 'appropriate' sartorial semantics at the end of the book.

Though Hetty Sorrel acknowledges Miss Lydia and the ladies in the portrait gallery to be her sartorial role-models, the aristocrat cannot compete in those fruitful, natural colours Hetty so beautifully displays in the dairy scene; unfortunately, birth does not always guarantee that one can carry off high fashion. In the chapter 'Hetty's World,' Eliot explores the moral significance of her 'dress-up' fantasy world and the corresponding sartorial naivete that is only encouraged by guilty secrecy:

...Hetty's dreams were all of luxuries, to sit in a carpeted parlour and always wear white stockings; to have some large beautiful earrings, such as were all the fashion; to have Nottingham lace round the top of her gown, and something to make her handkerchief smell nice, like Miss Lydia Donnithorne's... (*AB*, 100)

wearing, as Eliot proves when she has Bessy giving them away to her aforementioned rival cousin who uses them to make clothes for her son, *AB*, 277.

Influenced by the accoutrements of a position to which she does not belong, her life is vainly spent hoping to recreate her own appearance in an artificial aristocratic mode: a tragic masquerade and façade which is made all the more poignant by her youthful appearance. Analogous to Austen's Lydia Bennet, Hetty Sorrel is dangerously attracted to the scarlet 'red coat' regimentals of an unfit lover.⁶¹ She sees only, 'white hands, a gold chain, occasional regimentals' and detaches the material indicators of gentility from the moral worth of the gentleman they clothe: the vain, dandified Arthur Donnithorne who thus appears to be her fairy-tale prince (*AB*, 97). However, his arrogant delusions are clearly displayed at his party:

...[he] entered in his regimentals....Arthur had put on his uniform to please the tenants, he said, who thought as much of his militia dignity as if it had been an elevation to the premiership. He had not the least objection to gratify them in this way: his uniform was very advantageous to his figure. (*AB*, 283)

Arthur's aristocratic self-image is as important to him as to his sister; his personal vanity (constantly looking in mirrors) equivalent to Hetty's. The couple only look inward and narcissistically calculate the desired effect of their clothed appearance on each other. In reality they live in a childish realm of role-play and masquerade in which they do not appear as they really are. Neither symbols on his uniform, or relation in the narrative reveal just what the young Captain Donnithorne actually did or achieved in the

⁶¹ *Pride and Prejudice*, pp. 25, 206; *Lady Susan/The Watsons/Sandition*, ed., Margaret Drabble (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p.118.

eighteenth-century conflicts with America and France; nor is Hetty's gentlewoman's dress indicative of her true economic status as milkmaid. Each masque is fuelled by the illusions of the other, and in the woodland idyll where they regularly meet, they can both ignore the everyday sartorial indicators which would reveal the precarious reality of their situation:

While Arthur gazed into Hetty's dark beseeching eyes, it made no difference to him what sort of English she spoke; and even if hoops and powder had been in fashion, he would very likely not have been sensible just then that Hetty wanted those signs of high breeding. (*AB*, 131)

The narrator, however, is clearly aware of the lack of sartorial status indicators, as the dangerous fantasy Hetty creates for herself goes beyond the mirrors and polished surfaces that she continually refers to. Her naïve narcissism is not corrected, but is mocked and thereby tolerated, to an extent, by Mrs Poyser, Adam and Dinah: the three people who could effectively save her from herself. Left on her own all she worries about are her 'new rose-coloured ribbons' whilst dreaming of the 'anonymous gentleman...coming nearer in clothes of a beautiful texture' who is her 'Olympian God' in her deluded Bovarystic world (*AB*, 101).

Eliot is careful to reinforce the point that Hetty has no education and places her, uninformed, into the genre of a fake and outdated pastoral romance in which she weeps the 'innocent tears' of an Arcadian rustic 'on her rose-coloured strings' and thus creates



20. William Holman Hunt, *The Hireling Shepherd* (1851).

an image of blameless vulnerability to trigger Arthur's paternalistic sympathies, flatter his ego and rouse an ultimately destructive passion. Significantly, it is the fashion details in this scene which serve as a pointed reminder to the reader of the real chronological setting, as the eve of the nineteenth century, just after hoops and powder: the verisimilitude of a material reality check; a reality only too distinct from the Golden Age fantasy the lovers attempt to exist in. A fantasy which attempts to abnegate all public responsibility through the timeless realm of classical romance, and where true love triumphs despite class barriers, and beautiful shepherdesses are actually princesses in disguise. The crude reality that is depicted in the famous Pre-Raphaelite painting by Holman Hunt above (20).

Hetty privately defies her public image by dressing as what she is not. The crucial diptych scenes of 'The Bed Chamber' (Ch.15) not only serve to further dichotomise the two cousins in the respective moral dress, but serve pictorially to establish the extent of Hetty's dislocation from reality. Like her predecessor, Idione, she sees only surfaces, looking inward only, and relying on two-dimensional reflective surfaces to provide her

personality. As Hetty undresses in front of an ominously tarnished mirror she almost blasphemously ‘performs’ her own cult of worship, in these ‘religiose rites’ she attempts to live out her dreams as every detail is calculated to re-dress her as ‘the picture of a lady in Miss Lydia Donnithorne’s dressing-room’ (*AB*, 149). Flanked by candles, her altar is the mirror, and religious vestments are replaced with a more rustic ‘green cotton’, and yet she and the narrator are aware that the ideal clothing of a true gentlewoman would be of a different colour entirely:

Even the old mottled glass couldn’t help sending back a lovely image, none the less lovely because Hetty’s stays were not of white satin – such as I feel sure heroines must generally wear – but of a dark greenish cotton texture. (*AB*, 149)

During her pretence at being the ideal heroine, Eliot sees fit to qualify and redress her own heroine in a more appropriate fabric and natural colour: one which hints at a more attractive ‘greenness’ or rustic naïveté. In her ritualistic performance Hetty complements the more natural stays with a more grandiose, ‘old black lace scarf’ and ‘a pair of large earrings’ taken from ‘the sacred drawer’ (*AB*, 150, 149). The material details that adorn Hetty’s fantasy are however, immediately put into a realistic context by the narrator who establishes:

It was an old, old scarf, full of rents, but it would make a becoming border round her shoulders, and set off the whiteness of her upper arm. And she would take out the little earrings she had in her ears...and put in those large ones: they

were but coloured glass and gilding; but if you didn't know what they were made of, they looked just as well as what the ladies wore. (*AB*, 150)

As Hetty can only see the appearance of her head and shoulders in the mottled, gilded mirror, by softening candlelight, the full reality of her green stays, complemented by the 'old', well-worn scarf and gimcrack baubles cannot be comprehended as the symbols of a fading gentility and the tarnished unreality of her tragic masquerade. Nonetheless, her sartorial fantasies are powerful enough to override reality in her own mind. Her dreams are catalysed by her belief that Captain Donnithorne will see fit to redress her in 'nice clothes, and thin shoes, and white stockings, perhaps with silk clocks⁶² to them,' which she clearly regards as necessary symbols of love. Gentility too, is measured by material signifiers: 'brocaded silk, with feathers in her hair, and her dress sweeping the ground'. In 'her narrow bit of imagination' she is the prima-donna of every performance as 'in every figure she is the central figure, in fine clothes'. Thus the romance with Captain Donnithorne is displaced by Hetty's 'resplendent toilette', and beside which Mary Burge's 'new print dress' (a reality) pales into insignificance. Though she is admired, it is admiration tainted with envy that she really craves. Idione/Hetty's immoral image is allied to a Miltonic Eve; especially in regard to the beguiling of Adam, and Eliot sympathises in wondering how anyone could, 'believe evil of any pretty woman' (*AB*, 152).

...in her coloured stays and coloured skirt, and the old black lace scarf round her shoulders, and the great glass earrings in her ears.

How pretty the little puss looks in that odd dress! (*AB*, 151)

The petty foibles and bejewelled vanity of Hetty Sorrel are related with mocking and tender affection, and swiftly followed by a detailed description of her beautiful physiognomy. She reverts from the comic grotesque of pantomime to the tragedy of the innocent child living in the English countryside where such egoism cannot survive. Indeed she feels the shame and guilt of one who recognises that her fantasies are illicit, as behind the bolted door, by candlelight, she keeps her sartorial vigil. She is acutely aware of just how her aunt would respond, and therefore 'conceals' the manifestations of her vanity from her, as the dangerous fetish paradoxically thrives on its forbidden nature. Whilst 'strutting about decked in her scarf and earrings,' she has meditated on their symbolism long enough to throw off the garments as soon as she hears a knock at the door and the dreamer is rudely awakened.

The sequential 'uncovering' of Hetty is contrasted to an antithetical, parallel narrative which goes back in time to Dinah's room, juxtaposing the personal choice behind closed doors. This contrast is made more significant by Dinah's own 'undressing' process, in which she divests, and seemingly liberates herself from her shadowy, puritanical confines, to reveal the 'white nightdress' which Hetty craves. The colour and fabric of her undergarments are swept aside by cerebral meditations; indeed her dress is only later revealed in contact with Hetty. Like Hieria she looks beyond the mirror, through the window and towards the outside world, unselfishly considering her cousin as she undresses. It would seem that each time she removes another layer, her concerns for

⁶² An ornamental pattern in silk worked into the stocking. Cunnington, p.41.

Hetty are proportionally intensified, as if they provide a sartorial link to the previous scene. The two halves are finally brought together in 'a strange contrast' though sisterly embrace, as Hetty blushes in her semi-nakedness, whilst Dinah is almost shrouded, 'like a lovely corpse' in a modest 'long white dress'. The ghostly, disembodied image she presents to Hetty sets her even further away from an empathetic confidence, as she is spiritualised by her serene Madonna-like, angelic meditations which draw on biblical tracts and not familial affection. Though Dinah's instinctual actions are soothing and welcoming - brushing Hetty's hair and tying on her nightcap - her words are not. She speaks from the pulpit in her angelic raiment, while Hetty's resistance is set, and a potential companion is lost. Dinah's lack of worldly insight into the potential dangers of Hetty's situation is finally signified by an inexcusable oversight of the large, fake garnet earrings which Hetty has had no time to remove.

Returning home, Dinah is sidelined in the narrative and Hetty continues her limited sartorial-morality. Potential salvation, suggested by her guilt and the character of Dinah, is dismissed as the fantasies intensify and begin to overlap with the public sphere, and their transgressive dangers are revealed. The prime debate in her dreams 'as a lady' is whether she will wear 'a pink dress' or 'a white one', and this decision comes to represent a significant choice within the plot itself.



21. Cotton dress from 1795-1800, with a woven stripe, block printed and pencilled with stems, pink flowers and green leaves.

[She would be] very pretty, with her hair done in a great many different ways, and sometimes in a pink dress, and sometimes in a white one – she didn't know which she liked best... (*AB*, 151)

Hetty's confusion is encapsulated in this dilemma which projects its disorder in reality, as it is chaotically fused in her 'Sunday best' outfit for church. The beautiful amalgamation of the two colours in one outfit is sanctioned by this ritual of public ceremony (**21**):

If ever a girl looked as if she had been made of roses, that girl was Hetty in her Sunday hat and frock. For her hat was trimmed with pink, and her frock had pink

spots sprinkled on a white ground. There was nothing but pink and white around her, except in her dark hair and eyes and her little buckled shoes. (*AB*, 186)

The genteel femininity imagined in her 'dress up' world is condoned by her Aunt Poyser, and the rural analogy to a natural rose is later developed by Adam Bede. Yet she is shielded from the subsequent moralising conversation of Mr and Mrs Poyser upon such young girls, who cause their husbands a lifetime of misery over their 'bits o' gauze ribbin' that are ominously, 'good for nothing when the colour's gone' (*AB*, 190). This sartorial analogy is compounded by the discovery of the 'speckled turkey's nest' by Marty and Tommy before the Poyzers set off to church (*AB*, 192). The speckles recall the pink spots on Hetty's dress, with the metaphor extended with reference to the possibility of the mother 'forsak[ing]' the eggs. It is easy to imagine the turkey and its eggs as accordingly speckled pink and white, which posits that it is Hetty's careless vanity, heralded by her dress, which is inseparable from the later infanticide.⁶³

In the church Hetty's mind is not focused as Dinah's would be, on spiritual matters, but on her own calculated appearance, though she sinks to covetousness when Miss Lydia enters dressed in the most recent fashion,

Hetty liked so much to look at her fashionable little coal-scuttle bonnet, with the wreath of small roses around it...and the lady's-maid's beautiful straw that had once been Miss Lydia's...(*AB*, 198)

The pink-rose imagery is here continued in a more artificial, aristocratic vein, as Hetty seems unaware that her description, by Eliot, is one of natural beauty. The lady's-maid aping her superiors by wearing the hand downs only serves to inspire Hetty to become one: again clothing is the catalyst for her ambitions.

It therefore seems inappropriate that the humble Adam Bede's eyes are attracted to 'that round pink-and-white figure' of the metaphorical country rose, Hetty Sorrel. His adoration, to the point of idolatry, appeases her wounded vanity, from the marked non-attendance of Arthur, and the pink-rose imagery is further intensified by Adam's subsequent visit to the farm when he pictures Hetty in her natural environment,

...She had...more pink and white about her than ever; for she held in her hand the wonderful pink-and-white hot-house plant...(AB, 203-4)

The plant reflects its new owner, both in colour, and its rootless, high-maintenance existence, and recalls an earlier analogy used by Eliot whilst describing Hetty's bed-chamber masquerade,

There are some plants that have hardly any roots: you may tear them from their native nook of rock or wall, and just lay them over your ornamental flower-pot, and they blossom none the worse. (AB, 153)

⁶³ The Beltsville White Turkey (one of three British breeds) is 'a small, quick maturing' bird, weighing on average 10-15lb, is pink and white, and so are its eggs. *Book of the British Countryside* (London: Drive,

Thus the friendless Hetty, isolated by her dreams of pink-and-white, corresponds to the pink-and-white pot plant she holds. The delicate hot-house plant so innocently given to her, personifies the rootless-orphan who does not belong and has only shallow depth. The combination of the natural motifs which organically develop from Hetty's costume: the bird, the rose and the pot plant, describe her personality and future actions; which are directly linked to her love of finery. The former 'plums' and 'roses' that were used to describe Hetty's natural beauty are hereby replaced by the more contrived and artificial pink-and-white hues of a middle-class femininity, and which serve ultimately to portend the disastrous results which follow the deliberate displacement of the natural rural order.

Adam continues this natural clothing imagery into an actual choice between differing colours of roses. It is as if Eliot cannot let go of these natural indicators of a rural innocence implicit in Hetty's appearance. Adam, the would-be-lover, is literally surrounded by rose-trees at Hall Farm, and the symbolical significance of his actions is evident:

[He] stopped to pluck one, looked as if they grew wild; they were huddled together in bushy masses, now flaunting with wide open petals, almost all of them of the streaked pink-and-white kind, which doubtless dated from the union of the houses of York and Lancaster. Adam was wise enough to choose a compact Provence rose that peeped out half-smothered by its flaunting scentless neighbours...(AB, 219)

The hybrid red and white roses appears to symbolise familial loyalty and the union of the two old established houses, a visual code which is to become highly appropriate for the Bedes and the Poyzers. However, this is not a reflection of the union of Hetty and Adam, for in choosing the simpler, purer, plain pink Provence rose to present to Hetty, Adam rejects the sartorial delusions represented by the flaunting and artificial crossbreeds; essentially, flowers who do not know their place: personified by Hetty Sorrel. He seeks to rescue the physically smaller, plainer, more modest, yet sweeter smelling flower that is actually incarnate in the novel's true heroine, Dinah Morris.

‘See! I stole the prettiest, but I didna mean to keep it myself. I think these as are all pink, and have got a finer sort o’ green leaves, are prettier than the striped uns, don’t you?’

He set down the basket, and took the rose from his button hole.

‘It smells very sweet,’ he said; ‘those striped uns have no smell. Stick it in your frock...It’ ud be a pity to let it fade.’ (*AB*, 223)

At this point the reader is aware just where Hetty's heart, or rather sartorial day-dreams reside, and that she is not as plain, sweet and innocent as Adam would like his rose to be. Hetty in full costume is the impure two-tone rose, recalling the ‘streak’d gillyvors/Which some call natures bastards’ and consequently do not belong in the ‘rustic garden’ in

Shakespeare's romance, *The Winter's Tale* (1623).⁶⁴ Yet Hetty's non-verbal playful acceptance of the rose, placing it in her hair, incurs only Adam's anger, not admiration:

'If a woman's young and pretty, I think you can see her looks all the better for her being plain dressed. Why, Dinah Morris looks very nice, for all she wears such a plain cap and gown. It seems to me as a woman's face doesna want flowers; it's almost like a flower itself. I'm sure yours is.' (AB, 224)

The romantic ending of the novel is hereby suggested, as the sartorial-moral triumph of Dinah is directly heralded. Though it is claimed that George Henry Lewes suggested the pairing of Dinah and Adam was to the detriment of the novel, it seems to have been at the very root of the tale all along, if not directly signified by the flower imagery.⁶⁵ Adam's didacticism is immediately qualified as he acknowledges Hetty's opinion that Dinah's puritanical uniform is deliberately unbecoming:

'I daresay it's a very ugly cap, and I used to think when I saw her here, as it was nonsense for her to dress different t'other people; but I never rightly noticed her till she came to see my mother last week, and then I thought the cap seemed to fit her face somehow as th' acorn-cup fits th' acorn, and I shouldn't like to see her so well without it.' (AB, 224)

⁶⁴ The line is spoken by a true romance heroine, Perdita, during the famous art and nature debate with King Polixenes, in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (1606) ed. J. H. P. Pafford (London: Methuen, 1993), IV. iv. 82-3.

The image of Dinah Morris haunts the Bede brothers in her absence by providing a necessary contrast with the frivolities of the world of *The Chase*. Thus her clothing is interpreted by both as indicative of a compassionate, unselfish and spiritual nature. However, this spiritual significance is wasted on Hetty, for Dinah herself is not present to humanise the morality symbolised by her dress and cap. This is confirmed in her subsequent sartorial parody of Dinah in response to Adam's idolisation of her image. The incongruity of the transformation is somewhat undermined by the fact that Hetty is more becoming in Dinah's clothing, but the hyperbolic reaction of Mrs Poyser only confirms the 'dress-up' as a form of sacrilege.

...that strange appearance of Hetty, which had startled her aunt. The little minx had found a black gown of her aunt's, and pinned it close round her neck to look like Dinah's, had made her hair as flat as she could, and had tied on one of Dinah's high-crowned borderless net-caps....

'Adam said he liked Dinah's cap and gown better nor my clothes,' said Hetty, sitting down demurely. 'He says folks look better in ugly clothes.' (AB, 229)

Though Hetty suits the clothes, as Adam immediately qualifies, she is not encouraged to adopt or emulate the style, as from her very entrance the sartorial connotations are profane. Mrs Poyser breaks a jug in shock, and her 'terror' at 'the apparition' or 'ghost a-walking' in the house is equally extreme, and the natural response of laughter by the boys and Mr Poyser is quickly dismissed. Metaphorically the outfit does not 'fit' the wearer and this incongruity is immediately fixed by Mrs Poyser,

⁶⁵ Hughes, p.201.

‘I’d sooner cry nor laugh at the sight o’ that poor thing’s cap; and there’s them as
‘ud be better if they could make theirselves like her I’more ways nor putting on
her cap. (AB, 229)

Hetty’s nature is all too swiftly dismissed by the superiority of Dinah’s sartorial-morality, the nature of which she is not allowed to comprehend, and yet in reality it is just as much of a fashion statement as her own garb. Various critics have interpreted this ‘dress up’ as a final debasement of Hetty’s character, recalling the puritanical solemnity of her aunt as she orders the removal of the garments. However, as John Goode perceptively suggests: it is just as much of a judgement on the ponderous morality of the Hayslope world, as it is upon Hetty.⁶⁶

The introduction of Hetty’s fake coloured-glass earrings almost certainly continues the implications of the initial introduction of Bessy Cranage’s fake garnets. The dangerous aesthetics are extended and developed, as the former more innocent symbols of childish role-play are discarded and ominously replaced with the real thing. Before going to the birthday feast, Hetty returns to her ‘old speckled glass’ adorned with portentous sartorial signifiers,

...for at the dance this evening she was not to wear any neckerchief, and she had been busy yesterday with her spotted pink-and-white frock, that she might make the sleeves either long or short at will. She was dressed now just as she was to be

in the evening, with a tucker made of 'real' lace, which her aunt had lent her for this unparalleled occasion, but with no ornaments besides; she had even taken out her small round earrings which she wore every day. (AB, 250)

Disregarding Adam's 'plain' advice she reverts to her usual mix of colour, as the fantasy is realised. The beginning of the chapter is saturated with clothing details as Hetty first appears innocent in her rustic attire, however, this affectionate portrait of her immediately changes with the disclosure of the secret 'drawer' full of 'private treasures'. The new jewellery is something that is forbidden and clandestine:

...so much more precious than the old ones that these are thrust into the corner. Hetty would not care to put the large coloured glass earrings into her ears now; for see! she has got a beautiful pair of gold and pearls and garnet, lying snugly in a pretty little box lined with white satin. (AB, 250)

Are they symbols of romance or poisoned gems symbolising a fallen nature? Joseph Wiesenfarth states in his essay 'Antique Gems from Romola to Daniel Deronda',

In [Adam Bede], before dressing her characters in the fashion peculiar to the turn of the century, [Eliot] read and took notes from Fairholt's *Costume in England*. From hose to headgear Hetty Sorrel attempts to be a fashionable lady ...she even buys a pair of large earrings, which were all the rage in 1799...so that when the

⁶⁶ Hardy, p28.

novelist designed a moral motif related to jewellery she made sure first of all, that she had the correct design for the earrings themselves.⁶⁷

Wiesenfarth makes explicit the moral significance of such precious gems, for the acceptance of a 'gift' by a young woman implies a moral transaction (see Richardson's *Pamela*), and the reader knows that it cannot be a simple pecuniary exchange, for the inherent 'red-ness' of the fake garnets codes them for danger: they have already been interpreted by Dinah as a form of moral poison.

[Hetty is] a woman spinning in young ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, a rancorous poisoned garment, changing all at once her fluttering, trivial butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish. (*AB*, 251)

Hetty's costume transforms her from a state of naïve ignorance to one of calculated knowledge; and a clear signal of intent from Arthur Donnithorne, the gift giver.

A final voyeuristic look into Hetty's autoerotic world posits the earrings as the ultimate object of desire, and not the giver. She smiles at them, caresses them and presses them to her lips, and only eventually fastening them in her ears for one brief, illicit moment of pleasure. The actions accorded these passionate red gems is intensely erotic and

⁶⁷ Essay in *George Eliot: A Centenary Tribute*, ed. Gordon S. Haight and Rosemary T. Van Arsdel (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982), p55

completely bypasses the ingenuity of her initial wish to have them, as expressed to Arthur as 'the prettiest bit of childishness' (*AB*, 251).

In acknowledging that she cannot wear them in public she exhibits an adult knowledge and recognises the moral disorder that they represent to herself and within the rural community. However, she chooses to wear the other gift he has given her, a locket: a traditional romantic signifier, complete with locks of their hair entwined within it.⁶⁸ It would seem that Hetty does not fully appreciate its significance as compared with the more aesthetic and fashionable earrings. The locket is worn 'hidden in her bosom' and attached to a more rustic necklace made of 'dark brown berries' and thus it is further invested with sexual symbolism; she conceals a signifier of her illicit passion under the external garments, just as she later attempts to do with her 'hidden dread' (Ch.35). This locket does not just represent her 'love of finery', but 'another passion; only a little less strong'. Initially, Hetty is artlessly described:

...Her long sleeves, her new white gauze neckerchief, and her straw hat trimmed with white to-day instead of the pink, which had become rather faded in the July sun. (*AB*, 252)

Albeit she is always ready to transform this costume into an evening dress by shedding excess fabric, and this carefully planned 'striptease' alongside the 'fading pink' and not-

⁶⁸ Significant in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) ed. James Kinsley (O.U.P., 1990) where both sisters acknowledge the significance of wearing a lock of a beloved's hair: Marianne foolishly gives hers to Willoughby, which others interpret as a sign that they will marry (p.51); and Elinor eventually deduces that

quite-so-white straw hat are subtle sartorial signifiers of Hetty's fate. John Goode suggests that there is a dangerous form of social transgression implicit in Eliot's jewellery motifs,

The public liberality - that goes with order is undermined by a private liberality – signified by the 'locket and earrings' that will disrupt that order.⁶⁹

The locket literally and dramatically breaches 'public order' later that same day. At the moment of its uncovering it is thoroughly detailed, but not by the narrator or the flippant Hetty Sorrel, but by the only other person for whom it could hold significance, Adam Bede, who seems to fully comprehend its chaotic moral symbolism. Correspondingly, the rustic brown berries are just too fragile to support the locket's weighty significance and the delicate balance breaks; spilling beads over the floor and thus disclosing the clandestine affair to the astute observer:

The locket leaped out from her frock, and the next moment the string was broken, and Hetty, helpless, saw beads and locket scattered wide on the floor.

"My locket, my locket," she said, in a loud frightened whisper to Adam; "never mind the beads." (*AB*, 286)

The beads, as symbols of her former rural innocence, are swept aside and ignored as the narrative focus is principally on the detail and contents of the locket,

the ring Edward Ferrars wears is made of the hair of her rival, Lucy Steele, to whom he is secretly engaged (pp.84-5). Perhaps most importantly, both relationships are unfulfilled.

Adam had already seen where the locket fell, for it had attracted his glance as it leaped out of her frock....and as Adam picked it up, he saw the glass with the dark and light locks of hair under it. It had fallen side upwards, so the glass was not broken. He turned it over on his hand, and saw the enamelled gold back. 'It isn't hurt,' he said...(AB, 286-7)

Personifying the locket, Adam suggests that emotions are attributable to it, as a traditional symbol of the human heart. Unfortunately, his initial assumptions are correct, although he immediately attempts to override them with an innocent explanation. Just as Dinah originally missed the significance of Hetty's earrings because her head was in the clouds, Adam's paternalistic ego similarly causes him to miss the final sartorial clue which might have saved her from herself.

In ascetical contrast to this bejewelled heroine, the detailed aesthetics of 'The Dance' chapter are punctured by the image of the absent Dinah Morris, as conjured up by Seth Bede. This goes beyond a mere comparison with Hetty, and provides an acerbic critique of the disorderly hedonism exhibited by the rural community. The aristocratic finery and social disruption indicated by the locket, are thus extended with didactic force: Arthur in his regimentals which are purely for display; the equally languid men in their 'lacquered boots' smiling with double meaning; and the women in their 'low dresses and large skirts' who with their 'scanning glances explor[e] costumes'. Beneath the glossy, idyllic surface lie petty rivalries and the ponderous morality of a supercilious landed gentry who

⁶⁹ Hardy, pp.22-3.

poison the very fabric of the neighbourhood. Dinah's ethereal image stands in opposition to this fading way of life. Dressed resplendently in her puritan raiment and attendant iconography, she provides a dramatic chiaroscuro:

[She] had never been more constantly with him than in this scene, where everything was so unlike her. He saw her all the more vividly after looking at the thoughtless faces and gay-coloured dresses of the young women – just as one feels the beauty and the greatness of the pictured Madonna the more, when it has been for a moment screened from us by a vulgar head in a bonnet. (*AB*, 281)

Dinah Morris becomes a disembodied signifier of morality and an ascetic ideology to those who can interpret the code, but she is physically absent from those who need her guidance. Hetty's fate is finally concealed under clothing as she is repeatedly juxtaposed with someone whom she cannot possibly imitate, she can only become the fallen, 'scarlet' woman of nineteenth-century melodrama.

Hetty's tragic destiny is implicitly signified by a simple, but poignant, gesture. The material motif is a pink handkerchief which she had formerly given to Arthur and it is centralised during his meeting with Adam after the discovery of the affair. Though the degree to which Hetty has fallen is not known at this point, it is certainly signalled with this traditional romantic symbol:

It has been often noted that until Hetty's pregnancy is obvious, one of the few oblique signs of her seduction is the fate of her pink silk handkerchief.⁷⁰

Though the reckless Arthur affects to 'play the part' of the carefree country gentleman, with his white hands, cravat, and waistcoat that make up his 'evening dress of fine cloth and fine linen' Adam sees straight through this carefully groomed image and interprets the sartorial codes correctly. Yet after they fight Arthur still tries to conceal the full extent of their relationship:

At last he found a slight thing, which first he put in his pocket, and then, on a second thought, took it out again and thrust it deep down into a waste-paper basket. It was a woman's little pink silk handkerchief... (AB, 306)

The insensitive possessor becomes the careless disregarder as the former pink-and-white dresses of Hetty Sorrel are reduced to a small disposable object. The moral connotations of the waste-basket are weighty, as the colours of her ideal 'grand lady' are discarded by the person who encouraged them.

His dropping of the handkerchief metaphorically signifies the start of Hetty's 'quest' or 'journey' as indicated by the subsequent chapter headings. While she remains in Hayslope her time is limited by her previous actions, and it is notable that her fertility, or rather pregnancy, increases proportionally with her natural beauty, and inversely with

⁷⁰ W. J. Harvey, *The Art of George Eliot* (London,: Chatto & Windus, 1960), p.233. Hereafter referred to as 'W. J. Harvey'.

regard to her clothed appearance. Immediately prior to the disillusionment of Arthur's letter she regards her situation as salvageable, dismissing all realities for the comfort of well-dressed illusions:

...an elegantly clad coquette alone in her boudoir. For if a country beauty in clumsy shoes be only shallow-hearted enough, it is astonishing how closely her mental processes may resemble those of a lady in society and crinoline, who applies her refined intellect to the problem of committing indiscretions without compromising herself. (*AB*, 321)

The milkmaid in her pattens, dateable to the mid to late eighteenth century, is directly correlated to the authorial present by the introduction of the crinoline, which was popular for several decades from the 1850s.⁷¹ The analogy is direct, in linking incongruous dates, it continues the fashion thread as an underlying motif, but most importantly it emphasises the continual obsession with high fashions as an ongoing problem within the female sphere; posited as dangerously destructive in the desires it creates and the dreams of grandeur it fuels based on envy, rivalry and greed. High fashion sets superficial ambitions for those who are drawn into its competitive world, and creates an artificial femininity: the wider the skirt, the narrower the intellect.

From this point in the narrative Hetty's final metamorphosis begins, from bejewelled romantic into something resembling Dinah's ascetical realism. She starts to look beyond

⁷¹ The crinoline was patented by Charles Frederick Worth in 1856. Ashelford, p.218.

herself with a resultant apathy toward dress and material possessions, which are no longer glowing emblems of a future hope, but the now tarnished symbols of a delusional past.

...There lay the earrings and the locket – the signs of her short happiness – the signs of the life-long dreariness that was to follow it. Looking at the trinkets which she had once eyed and fingered so fondly as the earnest of her future paradise of finery...(AB, 334)

As the narrative returns to the bed-chamber, Hetty returns to her place by the mirror, only this time there is no performance as her previous masquerades are replaced by sartorial practicality. Undressing ‘languidly’, with her face ‘blanched’ and ‘marble’, Hetty is drained of the blushes of her passionate youth and accordingly does not reach for the threadbare black lace shawl, but ‘a warm cloak from her clothes-press, wrapped it round her, and sat as if she were thinking of nothing but getting warm’ (AB, 333). Though her room is scattered with trinkets and a new dress for the fair, her mind recalls the forthcoming wedding to Adam, with its attendant trousseau: the ‘new frock’, the ‘silk gown’ and ‘a great many clothes at once’, and yet, ‘These things were all flat and dreary to her now...’ (AB, 335).

In the scenes immediately prior to her bitter November journey she wears humble working clothes and modest cap with genuine humility, as her sartorial expression almost assimilates Dinah’s. Although her radiant beauty acts as a mask for the secret she is now

concealing Eliot sees it as a form of disguise which seeks to fool the casual observer and in a moment of Feuerbachian philosophy she somewhat bitterly muses:

Beauty has an expression beyond and far above the one woman's soul that it clothes....The noblest nature sees the most of this *impersonal* expression in beauty...and for this reason, the noblest nature is often the most blinded to the character of the one woman's soul that the beauty clothes. Whence, I fear, the tragedy of human life is likely to continue for a long time to come... (*AB*, 354)

The Victorian woman writer's personal sentiments on the nature of beauty and appearance gain strength from this point onwards, as Hetty conceals the imperfections which have been allowed to flourish under an aesthetic veneer: this is the true tragedy of *Adam Bede*.

Ironically, Hetty's tragic beauty increases in inverse proportion to her decreasing concern for outward appearances. However, the less-childlike expression in Hetty's eyes, new 'luxuriant womanliness', and increased beauty, though noticed by the Poysers and her fiancé only seem to compound their happiness as they see them as signifying a growing maturity. The true nature of their meaning is disclosed for the reader in chapter thirty-five, 'The Hidden Dread', in which Hetty adopts an ominous 'red cloak and warm bonnet' for her proposed journey to visit her cousin (*AB*, 365). The more dominant red replaces the younger, feminine pink with ominous allusions; in literature this is depicted in the sartorial typification of the 'scarlet woman', in which the cloak is not only practical

for travel, but indicates a clandestine love affair and hidden secrets.⁷² This vivid symbol, chosen by Eliot, is highlighted during the moments of crisis in her journey and is strikingly heralded against the darkness in which she reaches the latter stages.⁷³ Swathed in the infamous shade of red worn by an earlier literary namesake, the adulteress Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) she is stereotyped by the clothing she wears as the classic 'fallen woman' of Victorian fiction, destined only for death.

References to the past abound as the old Hetty who 'env[ied] Mary Burge a new ribbon,' and had 'her pride in her one best gown and bonnet' begins to seem more naïve than greedy: her dreams baited by the fashionable excesses of the leisured class. The past tantalisingly haunts her in the form of shimmering dresses and glittering ornaments which now only serve as a torture to her present state. The final meaning of the jewellery is suitably base and mercantile, with the sentimental illusions formerly accorded them cheapened as their value becomes a wholly economic means of survival. In this motif Hetty imitates the first anti-heroine of English literature, in Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722). In it clothing and jewellery are detached from emotion or memory and exist only for Moll as capitalist verisimilitude. Dress and accessories are merely the by-products of romance which serve only as a means to an end; as Moll's initial ambitions of being a 'gentlewoman' are brutally exposed as a quixotic delusion. The narrative's realistic moral lesson is thus that along with lavish attire, sentiment and romance are the luxury of the

⁷² In a research paper for my M.Litt. dissertation I studied clothing in Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4) in which the beautiful heroine, Harriet Byron, is kidnapped from a masquerade ball by the wicked Sir Hargrave Pollexfen, who immediately conceals her in his 'scarlet Capuchin' for the flight, and which he describes as 'his web'. In three vols. (OUP, 1972), vol.1, p.165.

⁷³ A memorable 'red coat' that is strikingly offset against a background chiaroscuro of a black and white film appears as a poignant marker in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (Universal, 1993). It is used to a different purpose, but reveals the dramatic power of this colour when used for emphasis.

upper classes.⁷⁴ Conversely, W. J. Harvey describes the jewellery in *Adam Bede* as ‘a material index of Hetty’s dwindling dreams and hopes,’ which are later made significant in contrast to their initial meaning, he states, ‘The hard facts of life overtake the emblems of romance’.⁷⁵

The former sartorial indicators of Hetty’s ambitions are neglected and transformed into a mere necessity as she covers up an increasing physical shame. However, it is with tragic irony that her now ‘hurried dressing’ is careless enough to reveal her slovenly state to all who look upon her, and her lavish collection of jewellery is also deeply inadequate in providing the one symbolical ring which would have averted knowing eyes. The landlady who takes her in at Windsor looks immediately to her ‘fallen’ curls, ‘red cloak’ and ‘discarded bonnet’ to establish a the moral picture, though she admits that initially she ‘looks like a respectable country girl’ (*AB* 377-8). Although the labourer who witnesses her just before abandoning her baby states that he thought she was a ‘beggar-woman, only for her good clothes’ (*AB*, 435).

The incongruity of the ‘neatly dressed’ country girl of her appearance the next day and the ‘beautiful things’ (earrings and locket) she hopes to sell, further narrate the secrets of her past to the landlady, whose assumptions of a ‘fine young officer’ corrupting and alluring her with such gifts are correct. The irony is that although the landlady sees the jewels for what they are she still wants to possess them, as she is almost hypnotised by

⁷⁴ Indeed the first ‘gentlewoman’ she sees dressed in finery, and whom she hopes to imitate, is actually a prostitute. Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722), (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994), p.14.

⁷⁵ W. J. Harvey, p.233.

their aesthetic appeal. The poisonous infection spreads as she starts to visualise them in her ears and around her neck, whilst pondering on the resultant envy of the grocer's wife; all springing with 'remarkable vividness to her rapid imagination' (AB, 384). The jewels continue their charmed existence, beguiling each possessor with similar delusions.

The 'sad beauty' of Hetty is not related in sartorial terms again, it is reliant on a remembered contrast with now absent materials, and her former 'self-conscious' actions in front of the mirror are now re-delineated with a fierce, 'Medusa-face, with the passionate, passionless lips, drained of love and hope'. As she kisses her bare arms she recalls only the sexuality of her narcissistic dress-up days, and she becomes metaphorically naked and vulnerable: the action is merely an affirmation of existence (AB, 386, 389). Hetty sheds her jewellery and basket of clothes with no thought of wearing them again as she is externally transformed, and soon to be internal.

As Goode insightfully suggests, 'Hetty is the deceptive appearance behind which is the reality of Dinah'.⁷⁶ The false guise of this heroine is one which masks the reality of Dinah as the novel's true heroine. Their moral-sartorial juxtaposition is exemplified, and the end result parodied, during Hetty's mock charade of dressing as the absent Dinah (above): a style rejected by Mrs Poyser and Adam. However, the two 'heroines' are united again in the prison scene, when the importance of their relative roles within the plot is reversed, as their two 'faces had become indistinct': Dinah adopts the warmer passions of her cousin; whilst Hetty's reconstruction is manifest in the deathly pallor and

⁷⁶ Hardy, p.32.

corpse-like whiteness that was formerly associated with her cousin (*AB*, 448-9). All that remains is Dinah's inner conversion of Hetty which is implicit in her confession.

'The two pale faces' in their respective dress are no longer polarised, sartorial shackles are literally discarded, and the cousins are fused by familial ties. Dinah divests Hetty of her former sinful sartorial-morality, with the clothing metaphors shrouded in the language of eschatology. Her ascetical puritan rhetoric calls for a spiritual striptease, '...Cast it off....Cast it off now, Hetty – now: confess the wickedness you have done...' (*AB*, 450-1). The motif continues as her speech now addresses God, as she pleads for her guises to be dropped, 'She is clothed round with thick darkness: the fetters of her sin are upon her...'.

Hetty's sins are adorned with clothing metaphors, just as her life was caged by those sartorial fetters which constructed a false and destructive illusion of herself. Even her newborn baby's 'comfortable clothes' prove inadequate to their job and they condemn Hetty two-fold: firstly as an identifying factor; and secondly by being ineffectual against the external elements as the small, cold body is eventually discovered to have been unprotected by a mother's love (*AB*, 434). Hetty, for all her layers cannot effectively conceal the grim reality of her situation and as she confesses her sin, she 'casts off' her guilt and finally acknowledges the inadequacy of appearances, '...O, it cried so, Dinah – *I couldn't cover it quite up...*' (*AB*, 454).

Though Hetty Sorrel is salvaged: morally by her confession, and literally by Arthur's late-won release, she is never made visible to the reader again, as her false femininity is rejected (as was the handkerchief) and more conventionally replaced by Dinah's moral paragon. Yet, her former image is poignantly recalled by Arthur's repentant retrieval of the pink silk handkerchief from the waste paper basket as a metaphorical token of Hetty, and a badge of his shame and guilt. Though the text does not specify where he keeps it, it could be assumed that he returns it to his pocket as a symbolical burden which will be permanently worn about his person as a kind of penance; for although he retrieves this mnemonic emblem from the depths it is too late for the 'fallen woman' of nineteenth-century literature.

Accordingly, the pink-and-white naïvety of the text is lost, just as the innocent romance of an English Arcadian idyll incarnate in the village of Hayslope is to be brutally stripped away and replaced by the realistic signifiers of a new age: an age in which the ascetic, puritannical, and practical 'greys' and 'blacks' of industrialised Stoneyshire, as worn by such as the angelic Dinah Morris, will triumph. The final section of the novel sees this black austerity willingly adopted by the residents of Hall Farm; albeit as a badge of family shame and not, as yet, Hetty's death. The mourning is social, not literal: a theme that Eliot continues with great personal poignancy in Mrs Bulstrode in *Middlemarch*. The reader is informed that the Poysers' mourning wear is still in effect eighteen months after the event and at the dawn of a new century: as a new era for the English countryside and its residents takes hold, the past is appropriately mourned. The adoption of this uniform

overlaps with the raiments of Dinah's Puritanism and this analogy is emphasised through the familial similarities:

...Mrs Poyser too has on a black gown, which seems to heighten the family likeness between her and Dinah. In other respects there is little outward change now discernible in our old friends...(AB, 475)

This 'little outward change' signifies much in the context of a moral-sartorial reading, as the influence of one cousin conquered the beguiling influence of the other. This transformation is reiterated in Hetty's prototype, Bessy Cranage, who has also adopted the dress of a Hierian disciple 'in her neatest cap and frock' which are the external signifiers of her 'new ways' (AB, 533, 477). The victory over frivolity and vanity is won as Dinah replaces Hetty in regard to Adam. The new heroine's 'slight form in the black dress,' 'grey eyes,' and armed in her rigid quaker-style, 'bonnet' which protect her from her own passions are discarded in a new, highly sentimentalised diptych: that of Mrs Bede and the soon-to-be Mrs Bede engaged in reading aloud from religious texts, which Adam lovingly draws for the viewer (AB, 487). Dinah's 'lily face' is substituted with the flushed 'petal of a monthly rose' in true sensibility-heroine style, but which is careful never to be a more coquettish 'blush' (AB, 480). As Adam remarks with dress-making overtones, 'She's cut out o'different stuff from most women...'.

The penultimate image of Dinah is a slight concession to her new fate as bride, as she eschews the traditional feminine colours of matrimony: pinks, whites and other pastel

shades appropriate to the turn of the century. She allows her aunt to present her with a suitable wedding dress, though Eliot makes a point of stating that she was ‘not in black’ that morning. With the superstitions of the Poysers, and inappropriate nature of black for such a ceremony, the colour and style is one that Eliot will use again to clothe another heroine, Dorothea Brooke, though for disparate reasons. The wedding dress is almost comic, though touchingly fitting for a former preacher:

...made all of grey, though in the usual Quaker form, for on this point Dinah would not give way. So the lily face looked out with sweet gravity from under a grey Quaker bonnet (AB, 534)

The Poysers are also allowed to come out of mourning attired in ‘new clothes’ appropriate to the occasion, but which are no longer described. Indeed, the only other sartorial detail allowed is in the Epilogue in which Dinah is delineated in her usual black dress and white cap, only ‘fuller’ in her matronly figure. Significantly, the final detail is given to a reformed Arthur Donnithorne who has been given a more practical present of a pocket watch by Dinah. As time goes forever forward it attempts to replace the bejewelled aesthetics of the ideologically idealistic eighteenth century with the darker facts of topographical capitalisation and the beginnings of Victorian industrialisation. The Hierian heroine has neatly displaced her Idionian counterpart in an all too easy sartorial-moral transition, which survives to be questioned in the more ambiguous figure of *Middlemarch*’s Dorothea Brooke.

MIDDLEMARCH (1871-2): Shades of Grey

Consider whether red cloth and epaulets have never had an influence of that sort.

Our passions do not live apart in locked chambers, but, dressed in their small wardrobe of notions...(MM, 164)

In the vein of *Adam Bede* George Eliot firmly roots *Middlemarch* in a chronological time-scheme and place: 1829 and the early 30s, pre-Reform Bill, middle-England. This time-frame is however within the majority of her readers' memory and scope as she establishes an historical, political and psychological landscape dressed in appropriately contemporary ideologies and costumes. Clothing is a crucial factor in this novel to establish background as well as externally signifying the more internal machinations of the individual. Surfaces are woven to create the intricate web of the novel's complex plot and characterisations: whether it is the feminine accomplishments of the ever-sewing Rosamond Vincy; the 'slight upward angle[d]...hat-brim' of Fred Vincy's crooked horse-dealer, which helps him evade suspicion; or the ominous 'suit of black and a crape hat-band' worn by Mr Bulstrode's nemesis, Raffles (MM, 227, 514). The beginnings of the Industrial Age are duly heralded, not only by the puritanical men in black (the majority of the working and middle-class men in the novel are adorned in this sombre suit of nineteenth-century masculinity) but also in the very real business of those 'dark Satanic Mills' of mass industry represented by Mr Vincy's successful manufacturing business.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ William Blake, from *Milton* (1804-8), commonly known as 'Jerusalem'. In *Selected Poems* (London: Orion, 1993), p.132.

A foreboding of the changing face of the social landscape is always implicit, as Mrs Cadwallader remarks,

[Mr Vincy is] one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshitt. That is how his family look so fair and sleek.
(*MM*, 323)

It is one where the produce is defective and sub-standard, as supplied by the amoral Bulstrode whose,

...ability was directed to economy in the raw material, as in the case of the dyes which rotted Mr Vincy's silk. (*MM*, 609)

Both he and his wife dress with a paradoxical lavish-asceticism to denote their Methodist faith, and yet also embellished with the pioneering fruits of their commercial success. Meanwhile, the social fabric of the traditional rural life literally rots away, for societal changes are, as always, at the expense of at least one sector of the existing community.

In an age of newly emergent 'dark-blue' liberalism and radical cultural change Eliot paints an often comical contrast with the feudal parochialism of the past, incarnate in one of the few gentlemen in the novel who do not wear black, Mr Brooke. When standing for local election he is publicly mocked and caricatured in his 'buff-coloured waistcoat': his 'light-hearted' or rather ignorant manifesto is literally manifest in his choice of costume

(MM, 495). More visual markers of social unrest and change are displayed in the conflicting sartorial semantics of those working men and farmers in ‘smock-frocks’ who threaten and chase ‘the coated men’ from the railway company off their land. Throughout the scene Eliot reduces the characterisation of the men to the status of their garments; repeatedly referring to them as ‘men in coats’ and ‘smock-frocks’: essentially they are the faceless everymen from both sides of the argument for economic expansion, men who go beyond the microcosmic level to represent the larger issues for the body politic (MM, 548)

In the foreground of the novel, however, are those individual fashion statements which Eliot appears to delight in: the anti-fashion rebels; the frivolous facades of the social butterflies; and the hypocritical guises of those with secrets to conceal. All make their appearance in the historical costume drama that is *Middlemarch*, and all are revelatory about their wearer: both in the adjectives used to qualify the overall description, as well as the choice of style and its individual significance; even though initially the narrator



22. Various styles of crinoline from 30s, 40s and 50s

disclaims, '...so much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissues which make a sort of blazonry or clock-face for it' (MM, 9-10). This *sort of blazonry* is overt in the text and has intricate meanings, especially for the women of the late eighteen-twenties and early thirties who lived at a time of bombastic excess in fashion in both the generous proportioning and the décor of the dresses. Replacing the draped simplicity of the classical styles of the century's first two decades, this period in fashion was termed the 'Age of Romance' or 'The Biedermeier Style', with the clothing encapsulating the sentimental and gothic spirit of the age, and yet also heavily influenced by Paris.⁷⁸ It was characterised by ballooning sleeves, which broadened the shoulder-line, and these incorporated dozens of different styles including: the Gigot (and Demi-Gigot); the Imbecile; Mameluke; Donna-Maria; the Medici; the Sultan; the Caroline; the Cavalier; and the Amadis. The widening of the skirt also produced an increasingly overwhelming silhouette, masses of pleated fabric is accordingly over-laden with ribbons, knots and lace (the like of which Rosamond Vincy makes and wears) and finished off with a suitable ornamental trim. The popular practice of tight-lacing served furthermore to exaggerate the triangular contrasts above and below the waist, and helped construct the 'triple triangle' structure which completed the well-dressed female form.⁷⁹ The icing on the cake was of course the gravity-defying 'giraffe' hairstyles, with additional ringlets and Parisian curls, and equally flamboyant, broad hats: thus constructing the final triangle in the sequence which was balanced on a disproportionately tiny neck. A dazzling array of fabric colours, floral designs and accessories, and coloured ribbons, swathed in lavish fur

⁷⁸ For a comprehensive account of this fashion period see: Cunnington, ch.III. and ch.IV on the 1820s and 30s respectively; Mila Contini, *Fashion: From Ancient Egypt to the Present Day* (London: Paul Hamlyn, 1965), pp.217-260; Herbenová Kybalová, and others, *The Pictorial Encyclopedia of Fashion*, (Hamlyn, 1968), pp.261-270; Ashelford, ch.5.

wraps and capes all served to make the woman of fashion look like ‘the perfect picture of Gothic Romance’ and was highly reminiscent of a ‘May Queen’.⁸⁰ The style completely discarded the relative freedom of the former Greek model and became increasingly ‘passively sentimental’ by the mid-thirties: fully anticipating the disabling structures of the Victorian ‘feminine fashions’ of the mid to late-nineteenth century. Even formerly ‘masculine’ styled garb, such as riding habits was ‘feminised’ with the addition of cambric frills, gigot sleeves, large collars, with chemisette, thus halting the freedoms of a previously more active style. This is possibly another reason why the more puritanical Dorothea Brooke announces she is giving up the pleasures of riding in the opening chapters of the novel, as well as reinforcing her self-denying ascetical nature; whereas the more aesthetic Rosamond Vincy continues with her riding, even in the face of her fateful pregnancy. Immediately, the divides between the two sets of opposing women are enforced, with Dorothea and Mary Garth seemingly on one side of the moral- chiaroscuro and Rosamond and Celia Brooke on the more orthodox feminine side. However, Celia Brooke, with her fashionably large collar ‘Henrietta-Marie’ style, and a ‘shade of coquetry in [her dress] arrangements’, as the typical ‘pink and white nullifidan’⁸¹ is really only positioned as such in contrast with the extremely ‘plain garments’ of her sister (p.12, 7, 36,7). Similarly, the humble ‘tempered plainness’ of the ‘brown patch’ that is Mary Garth, even in her stylish ‘lavender Gingham’ dress is really only dowdy when held up against the ‘infantile fairness’ of the stylish Rosamond Vincy, as is emphasised in the scene where both stand together in front of a mirror (p.110-11, 402) (see 22 above and 23a and 23b below).

⁷⁹ Cunnington, p.74.

⁸⁰ Cunnington, p.105.



The extremities and incongruities of the heroine of *Middlemarch* are addressed in the very first chapter of the novel, in which Dorothea's puritanical sartorial manifesto is made explicit; although in comparison with the severity and didacticism which surround descriptions of the similarly dressed Dinah Morris, there are hints of a gentle, mocking

23a and **b**. Two fashion plates of the 30's: (left) Gigot sleeves gave outdoor dresses an entirely new silhouette, 1834; (right) Party dress for young girls, 1831.

authorial irony about the nature of Miss Brooke's asceticism. The costume choices consciously made by the heroine in this chapter are not only important in their immediacy, but are crucial in establishing the foundations of Dorothea's highly paradoxical nature, and also ominously suggest the mistakes she is about to make: thus they shape both her own and the novel's destiny. Moving up the social scale of heroine, Eliot has moved from the working-class foundations of the 'Methodist black-grey dress' of Dinah, through to the upper-middle-class 'quakerish grey' pretensions of Dorothea. However, the 'shades of grey' in the latter's characterisation are acknowledged and defined by both the heroine and narrator:

Miss Brooke's plain dressing was due to **mixed conditions**....The pride of **being ladies** had something to do with it: the Brooke connexions, though not

⁸¹ A sceptic, having no religious faith.

aristocratic, were unquestionably 'good:'...there was even an ancestor discernible as a **Puritan** gentleman who served under Cromwell, but afterwards conformed....Young women of such birth...naturally regarded frippery as the ambition of a huckster's daughter. Then there was **well-bred economy**, which in those days made show in dress the first item to be deducted from, when any margin was required for expenses more distinctive of rank. Such reasons would have been enough to account for plain dress, quite apart from **religious feeling**....She could not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences, with a keen interest in guimp and artificial profusions of drapery. (emphasis my own, pp.7-8)

Thus the doctrine is laid out, though not entirely baring all just yet. The multitudinous reasons suggest uncertainty in their very diversity, as well as the obvious later 'conformity' of one ancestor, suggesting that the Brooke principles may not be so deeply rooted, or at least comprise a veneer behind which lies a more unpredictable nature. The essence of Dorothea's dress seems to lie in its very contradiction with the aforementioned, stereotypical feminine dress of the day; indeed she appears to relish the anti-fashion statement her moral uniform makes in much the same way that the young Marian Evans did, though with different physiological prompts, as Dorothea is variously described as having 'that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress' (p.7). Whatever the reasoning behind the style, the colour grey suggests not only a literal lightening of the severity of Dinah's unwaveringly dark Methodism, but also has other semantic and symbolical connotations:

[Grey] was a further un-coloured colour the Victorians valued. It was a virtuous colour, associated in Christian use with the faithful conjugality of doves....And in women's wear the grey dress was clearly a precious item.⁸² (see also Jane Eyre's one best dress Chapter One)

The dangers inherent in the developing polarised spheres of gender of nineteenth-century society were suggested in the contemporary reviews of the novel, with especial focus on the role-models provided by the major female characters, and the choice between the pairings clearly did not make commentators happy, as one male reviewer in the *Saturday Review* put it,

We must say that if our young ladies, repelled by the faint and "neutral" virtues of Celia on the one hand, and the powerfully drawn worldly Rosamond on the other, take to be Dorotheas, with a vow to dress differently from other women...the world will be a less comfortable world without being a better one. (Dec 7, 1872)

The uniqueness of the heroine-type 'Dodo' (extinct by the late seventeenth-century) and her neophyte ideology, manifest in dress, was accordingly seen as socially threatening in its aggressive defiance of the more frivolous 'norm'.

Thus Dorothea's peculiar type of anti-fashion sits uncomfortably with the shifting attitudes manifest in contemporary dress: her sleeves are described as 'bare of style' and

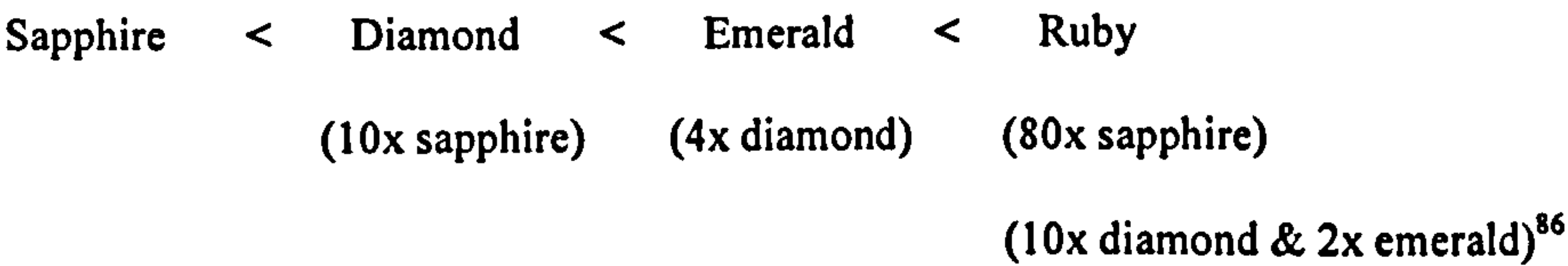
are strikingly similar to those of previous centuries occupied by the 'Italian painters' who depicted the 'Blessed Virgin' so. The vivid pictorialism of the heroine as a reactionary anti-type is further qualified in the following description of her in 'bonnet and shawl' on a walk in the woods, though moderated with a hint of suppressed internal passion:

...the colour rose in her cheeks, and her straw-bonnet (which our contemporaries might look at with conjectural curiosity as at an obsolete form of basket) fell a little backward. She would perhaps be hardly characterised enough if it were omitted that she wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind so as to expose the outline of her head in a daring manner, at a time when public feeling required the meagreness of nature to be dissimulated by tall barricades of frizzed curls and bows, never surpassed by any great race except the Feejeean. This was a trait of Miss Brooke's asceticism. (*MM*, 26)

The marking of the narrative in history is overt, as is Dorothea's multi-levelled reaction against the feminine stereotypes of the day in her greater assimilation with nature. It is her ascetic 'nature' which is not portrayed as entirely natural, especially when it is subsequently juxtaposed with her physiognomy, and the 'Buts' become apparent, 'But there was nothing of an ascetic's expression in her bright full eyes...' (*MM*, 26-7). As Celia has also pointed out earlier and when provoked by the 'strong assumption of superiority in [Dorothea's] Puritanic' attitude whilst dividing up their mamma's jewellery, 'But Dorothea is not always consistent' (*MM*, 15).

⁸² W. J. Harvey, p.212.

Unlike Dinah before her, but recalling her creator, Dorothea’s inconsistent puritanism is discernible in her ambiguous reaction to, and treatment of, the family jewels which Celia is so eager to divide up. As John Harvey submits, she is ‘damaged by her asceticism’, and her ‘rationalisation’ of the episode is even viewed as ‘unhealthy’ by W. J. Harvey as the puritan climate of contemporary England imprisons (both literally and metaphorically in relation to clothing and accoutrements) an energetic, passionate, beautiful and vigorously intelligent young woman.⁸³ Her initial rejection of the jewels is arrogant in its assumptions, as she declares, ‘we should never wear them, you know’, though Celia shrewdly attempts to suggest that ‘necklaces are quite usual now....Surely there are women in heaven now who wore jewels’ and the reasoned argument is made plain to her austere sister (*MM*, 12). Eliot’s attention to jewellery and the value of the stones is well noted in Joseph Wisenfarth’s essay which cites her research material as King’s *Antique Gems: Their Origin, Uses, and Value as Interpretative of Ancient History* (1860) and John Ayrton Paris’ *Pharmacologia* (1843) which she later used as research materials for the jewellery in the historical drama *Romola* (1862-3) and for *Daniel Deronda*.⁸⁴ Wisenfarth remarks that she deftly ‘...turn[s] [the jewels] into patterns of fiction’, which is the result of using these two fascinating tomes on the historical and mythical significance of such items.⁸⁵



⁸³ *Men in Black*, p.213; W. J. Harvey, p.192.
⁸⁴ Hardy, pp.55-63.
⁸⁵ Hardy, p.55.
⁸⁶ A diagrammatic guide interpreted from Eliot’s notes in the *Writer’s Notebook 1854-1879*, ed. Joseph Wiesenfarth (University Press of Virginia, 1981), pp.79. The relative values are in brackets beneath.

In her *Writer's Notebook* she lists the relative value of the gems in Renaissance history, and accordingly for the present. Most interestingly, the emerald that Dorothea selects is second only in value to the ruby (see diagram above).

As Dorothea is beguiled by the innate beauty of the stones, she remembers that she can only value them if she attaches a spiritual significance: an beautiful explanation that the prosaic Puritanism of John Wesley overlooks as he questions the nature of gems in his tract on 'Methodist Dress' in *Works*:

But what then are gold and precious stones for? Why have they a place in creation? I do not know the use of them...⁸⁷

Dorothea, however, immediately justifies her obvious sensorial attraction, fascination and innate love of deep, rich colours with a revelatory meditative monologue, which reveals her own limitations and immaturity:

"How very beautiful these gems are" said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam. "It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scents. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as

⁸⁷ Wesley's *Works*, Vol.XI. p472.

spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St John.⁸⁸ They look like fragments of heaven. I think the emerald is more beautiful than any of them.” (*MM*, 13)

The internal contradictions of the sensual heroine are implicit, as her reaction to the jewels is immediate and only really qualified for her conscience by spiritual significance as a secondary afterthought. Alongside the aforementioned reasons for her choice of clothing, namely, status and economics, it would appear that for Dorothea Brooke sensuality and aesthetics eclipse religious fervour. The initial blanching of the heroine’s sexuality, literally represented by the colour grey, is unnatural and potentially destructive. Curiously, she rejects the ‘pearl cross with five brilliants in it’ as ‘a trinket’ though surely this would be the more fitting ‘spiritual emblem’ as well as having a humbler comparative value; and she selects a ring made of a ‘fine emerald with diamonds’ that gleams more brilliantly. In reality the residual image of Dorothea decked out in emeralds at the end of the chapter is a slightly grotesque one, which would not have been the case had she chosen the cross or the modest amethysts. The pearls: a traditional symbol of purity; and the diamonds which comprise the Christian crucifix are rejected for the dazzling splendour of an emerald ring and matching bracelet, and which she still needs to justify:

⁸⁸ In the vision of ‘The New Jerusalem’ in Revelation 18. 9-22, which is described as shining ‘like a precious stone, like a jasper, clear as crystal,’ and with, ‘The wall was made of jasper, and the city itself was made of pure gold, as clear as glass/ The foundation-stones of the city wall were adorned with all kinds of precious stones. The first foundation-stone was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald/ the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh yellow quartz, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chalcedony the eleventh turquoise, the twelfth amethyst/ The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each gate was made from a single pearl. The street of the city was of pure gold, transparent as glass’.

“They are lovely,” said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her finely-turned finger and wrist, and holding them towards the window on a level with her eyes. All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy. (*MM*, 13-14)

The sartorial-moral battle raging inside is made all the more profound by the symbolical significance of the emerald as defined by Ayrton Paris’ book. It is a peculiarly apt choice for Dorothea because from classical times it was believed to be a cure for myopia: antiquity’s greatest gossip, Pliny, tells us that Nero ‘used to view the combats of gladiators in the arena through an Emerald, “smaragdo spectabat”’ because they ‘refresh the wearied eye’.⁸⁹ Though this professed short-sightedness may cause her to fall over Sir James Chettam’s offered gift of the ‘Maltese dog’ so that she can cautiously excuse herself and reject it; but also, more dangerously, it limits her inner vision with regard to the severe ‘iron-grey’ characteristics of Mr Casaubon (*MM*, 30, 16). However, her self-contained and repressed sensual reverie with regard to the jewels is directly reiterated with regard to her feelings about Will Ladislaw later in the novel, and accordingly the condition of her myopia is an acute episode which is refreshed by her acceptance of the jewellery and all it denotes about her injurious asceticism. The forceful ‘flood of her young passion’ which erupts as she decides in a flash to marry Ladislaw is analogous to the strong ‘current of feeling’ passing through her after she has perversely resolved not to take the emeralds, overriding all restraint of natural passions. The sunlight strikes them and creates a tempting vision; comparable to the way Will is perpetually surrounded by images of brightness, so that she eventually takes what she thought she could not have

(MM, 798, 13). The 'little fountains of colour' representing Dorothea's 'inward fire' are set up in the opening chapter as a potential that will ultimately triumph over the dull greys of her repressive and false asceticism with its biblical uniform of a 'hair shirt'. (MM, 14, 59).

It is interesting therefore that Eliot chooses to parallel her heroine with St Teresa of Avila who is traditionally described with similar terms to Dorothea; as having fire and flame burning within her. St Teresa especially displays these passionate traits in the various artistic representations of her across the centuries, namely those by Bernini and Crashaw. In Bernini's sculpture of *Santa Teresa in Estasi* (1651) displayed at the Cornaro Chapel in the S. Maria della Vittoria in Rome (which Dorothea and Eliot visit)⁹⁰ caused controversy because of its sexualised and extremely fleshy depiction of the neophyte '...some accus[ed] Bernini [of] 'pulling a pure virgin down to earth and making her into a prostrated, prostituted Venus'.⁹¹ As can be seen from 24 below, her eyes are half closed, lips are parted, the head is rolled back and to the left, and the voluminous folds of her dress frame her face and ecstatic expression, as allied with her scandalously bare feet with their tightly curled toes. Confusion reigned over whether she was excited, erotic or in ethereal rapture; certainly she appears to be a victim of a secular cupid's arrow rather than that of a sublime Christian divinity, even though her nun's garments make her body all but disappear:

⁸⁹ John Ayrton Paris, *Pharmacologia*, (London, Samuel Highley, 9th edn., 1843), p.34.

⁹⁰ Eliot went to Rome twice, the first time was in Holy Week, March 1860 and again in April 1869, Haight, pp.323-5, p.415.

⁹¹ Robert T. Petersson, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bernini, and Crashaw* (London, 1970), p.45.



24. Bernini, *St Teresa and the Seraph*, 1651 (S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome).

The somewhat regular folds of her rumpled habit apparently result from her inner vibrancy...[his] handling of the drapery became more abstract and symbolic as time went on.⁹²

She was also similarly depicted by the Catholic poet Richard Crashaw (1612/13-49) whose 'Hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Saint Teresa' celebrates the 'bliss' of martyrdom using characteristic baroque imagery such as doves, hearts, darts and extravagant conceits. The 'poetry of fire' encapsulates her devotion and passion as a great flame which burns up to annihilate all life's desires, and the pleasure and pain of such a realisation stems from the 'fire-tipped golden dart' which repeatedly penetrates her throughout the verse. Her hyper-sexualised body is tempered by burning and stabbing

⁹² Petersson, p.72.

pain 'And close in his embraces keep/Those delicious wounds, that weep/'.⁹³ The uncomfortable conflict of the sexualised and sanctified St Theresa is analogous to the conflicts within Dorothea who is portrayed as her devotee. This antagonistic theme is further compounded by the kind of young ladies who joined the Carmelite Order of nuns she founded in 1562. The second convent, St Joseph's, was notoriously relaxed, as Petersson puts it:

[the convent] was not unlike a residence for young ladies of good breeding; some of the sisters were known to decorate their private oratories to personal taste, to use jewellery and perfume, to remodel their habits according to the fashion.⁹⁴

Ultimately, there is a latent paradox in the comparison, in which the struggles of the material world and flesh coincide, or rather coexist within the congregation. The analogy is a destabilising one, which constructs the neophyte's dress and attitudes of the heroine in a state of constant flux: a battle between inner secular sensibilities and outer social constraints. The extremes of the characterisation and dress of Dinah Morris are thus modified and lightened in the very human and flawed character of Dorothea Brooke.

The power of this opening scene as symbolic is explored by Barbara Hardy in 'The Scene as Image' who describes it as calmly revealing, claiming that 'The Dividing of the Jewels' would have been the best title for the chapter,

⁹³ In *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, eds., Alexander W. Allison and Herbert Barrows et al (London: Norton, 3rd edition, 1983), pp.327-330, ll.107-8.

⁹⁴ Petersson, p.23.

This is George Eliot's 'dramatic use of scenery' often carefully rationalised by the general explanation which makes the visual association appear as the natural act of the character's mind.⁹⁵

Additionally, in chapter one of Marx's *Das Kapital* (1867), which Eliot had read, he states:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.

Consequently, George Eliot's most trivially functioning objects, in this case clothing and accessories, turn out to be highly complex. These items, in the later novels especially become more specialised, segregated and heightened in their presentation of properties used to direct and anticipate action. There is a complex web of expressive things, and at one extreme are the symbolic plot levers like Dorothea's ring or later Gwendolen Harleth's jewels and at the other are the little details, the finer fabrics or coverings of character.

Where Dorothea has emeralds, Rosamond Vincy, who is often portrayed as her foil or alter-ego, has amethysts. From the beginning of the novel they are both viewed through male eyes and relatively compared: the morality and fate of the male describer in

question ultimately rests on his desired choice at that particular time. Thus Mr Chichely's critical appraisal of Dorothea in her 'silver-grey dress' and neatly 'coiled' hair at her engagement party is weighed against the consideration of the preferred Miss Vincy:

... 'not my style of woman: I like a woman who lays herself out a little more to please us. There should be a little filigree about a woman – something of the coquette'. (*MM*, 87)

Polarities are drawn, and are further compounded by Dr. Lydgate's unfitting choice of the worldly Rosamond as wife, when the philanthropic Miss Brooke would have been infinitely more appropriate. Subscribing to Veblen's theory of middle-class conspicuous consumption both he and Casaubon desire a woman to adore and 'adorn' their lives; Tertius Lydgate wants a mythic mistress or Io, not a loyal or rebellious Antigone or Ariadne:

...a maiden apparently guiled by attractive merchandise, was the reverse of Miss Brooke, and in this respect bore more resemblance to Rosamond Vincy, who had excellent taste in costume, with that nymph-like figure and pure blandness which gave the largest range to choice in the flow and colour of drapery. (*MM*, 94)

His Idione, however, is ironically incongruous with his own personal taste:

⁹⁵ Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot* (Althone Press, 1963), ch. IX, p.189.

Lydgate believed himself to be careless about his dress, and despised a man who calculated the effects of his costume; it seemed to him a matter of course that he had an abundance of fresh garments – such things were naturally ordered in sheaves. (*MM*, p.579)

At this time an overt interest in fashion would be seen as a sign of effeminacy in men, though paradoxically they prefer those allegedly superficial traits to be present in their choice of woman; and thus Lydgate remains an old-fashioned man arrayed in black ‘short-waisted coats’ and other fashions ‘which have not yet recurred’ and inextricably bound for life to a woman who is the prized product and ‘flower of Mrs Lemon’s’ academy for young ladies (*MM*, 141).

Throughout the novel (and Davies’ television adaptation) Rosamond is shown in a range of dresses, colours and styles: a living mannequin for the ideal Victorian woman. She is resplendent in her ‘riding habit’ which appears as part of a powerful sexual courtship display, complete with ‘riding whip’ which Lydgate has at first and then later she symbolically reclaims. She wears high fashion: a charming ‘quilling inside her bonnet’; ‘cambric underclothing’ fit for the typical romantic heroine; ‘pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect...[with a] large [hand] embroidered collar’; ‘cherry-coloured dress with swansdown trimming about the throat’; and ‘drapery of transparent faintly tinted muslin’. Rosamond also superficially chooses Lydgate because he has ‘...solid white hands –and -...an exquisite cambric handkerchief’ (*MM*, 292, 339, 457, 584, 112).⁹⁶

⁹⁶ In Andrew Davies’ television adaptation of *Middlemarch* (1998 transmitted 12/1/94 – 16/2/94) Rosamond, played by Trevyn McDowell, is dressed in various versions of typical feminine costumes of

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar remark that:

Significantly, moreover, she is always either literally or figuratively sewing: when she does not actually have lacing, netting or tatting in her hands, she plaits her hair, embroiders her linens, and engages her petticoats to be thickened.⁹⁷

They see the continual sewing as a sign of her acceptance of her role as a female, and in this respect she contrasts markedly with the majority of Eliot's heroines, who must struggle with their distaste for what they view as a decidedly compensatory art. Even Dorothea cannot find felicity in the care of her soul over embroidery in her own boudoir (*MM*, 28). This becomes a leitmotif throughout a novel laden with sewing metaphors; as Eliot spins the fabric of opinion in a complex web-like narrative, even though they also represent the 'fetters' of contemporary womanhood, her 'fictional fabric is a kind of tapestry that fully illustrates the etymological roots of the Latin *texere*, to weave'.⁹⁸

Returning however to Rosamond's characterisation, she is initially seen in the company of the plain, dark, rough-haired Mary Garth, and they are accordingly contrasted side-by-side in front of a 'toilette table mirror', and Rosamond's 'infantine fairness' throws Mary's plainness into the shadow of a 'brown patch': just as Ginevra Fanshawe is

the day. The first time she appears in a floral red and purple print dress with huge puffed sleeves and pearl drop earrings, then she appears similarly in a pale pink dress; white; pale blue silk and jewels; green and white floral print; pale peach and cream; red satin dress (Dorothea wears a burgundy, darker shade); dark purple satin; lilac; pale dusky rose; emerald satin; and a subdued violet-grey at the end.

⁹⁷ Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, 1984), p.517.

⁹⁸ *Madwoman*, pp.525-6.

magnificent beside Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, and Maggie Tulliver's quiet prettiness is eclipsed by the side of Lucy Deane in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), (pp.110-11). Mary is thus destined for the solitary fate of a governess, but Rosamond brutally reassures her that 'No one thinks of your appearance, you are so sensible and useful...Beauty is of little consequence in reality', although she plays her costumed part seamlessly:

...rising to reach her hat...so that her flower-like head on its white stem was seen in perfection above her riding-habit....(Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her *physique*: she even acted her own character , and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own.) (*MM*, 115)

She causes Dr. Lydgate to fall in love with her, arrayed in her 'garment seeming to be made out of the fairest blue sky' which is in actuality a romantic façade. She continually manipulates people to do things for her; such as commissioning Mary Garth to make part of her 'wedding-clothes' whilst Lydgate protests that they cannot afford much marital extravagance (*MM*, 348, 394).

Although Rosamond Vincy appears to be Dorothea's Idione or 'foil' there are shades of grey about this pairing that were not formerly evident in the Dinah-Hetty, black and white antithesis of *Adam Bede*.⁹⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, and Tess Cosslett see them as having

⁹⁹ Lloyd Fernando, 'George Eliot: "Emotional Intellect" in a Widening Ethic,' *New Women in the Late Victorian Novel*, (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p.44.

the capacity to become each other, and as exchanging certain characteristics by the end of the novel:

Like two queens, what these women share is their potential for becoming each other, and it is this recognition of this potential that defines the heroism of sisterhood with patriarchy.¹⁰⁰

And:

...far from being irreconcilable opposites, these two types merge and exchange their characteristics: either an independent heroine comes to recognise her own sexuality through her contact with a 'fallen' woman, or the 'fallen' woman is reclaimed for respectability by her 'pure' sister.¹⁰¹

Their apparent opposition is only really provided for by the men in the novel, and is discarded by both women in the course of their three significant meetings in the second half of the narrative, and in which their clothing and morality are compared and contrasted.

Regardless of this imposed diametrical confrontation, Dorothea's moral uniform is redefined in Rome, after there has been no discernible description of her wedding-dress

¹⁰⁰ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Yale University Press, 1984), p.517.



25. Juliet Aubrey as the seemingly austere Dorothea Brooke on honeymoon in Rome, in Andrew Davies' award-winning adaptation of *Middlemarch* (1994).

or trousseau; only the famous description of her austere honeymoon outfit (25):

...a breathing, blooming girl, whose form, not shamed by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish grey drapery; her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair. (*MM*, 186)

A statuesque Dorothea is likened to both Antigone and Ariadne in her beauty, by the painter and voyeur, Naumann, who calls her 'a fine bit of antithesis', for although she is dressed 'as a nun' she wears a wedding band, and Eliot clearly sees her as, 'a Christian Antigone – a sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion' (*MM*, 187-8). At this juncture in the plot both the shackles of her marriage and those of the ascetic costume of her self-denying ideology seal her into a kind of living death, although her inner passions can only be contained to a limited extent. This is subtly manifest in her attitude to her own dress, as in Rome she starts to feel stifled by '... the oppressive masquerade of ages,

¹⁰¹ Tess Cosslett, *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction* (London: Harvester, 1988),

in which her own life too seemed to become a masque with enigmatical costumes' (*MM*, 190). Her response to this confinement is subtly manifest in the details of her dress: in 'throwing back' her cloak and 'pushing back' the narrowed blinkers of her poke bonnet. This yearning for liberation can be perceived in the first few chapters where she 'threw off her mantle and bonnet' upon entering Tipton Grange; but these small gestures accumulate after Rome, culminating into a powerful sartorial metaphor for liberation (*MM*, 37). When Dr. Lydgate visits with bad news in vol.III. ch.xxx, even though the clothing itself is not actually described, she behaves toward it with all the spontaneity and informality of her character. Upon returning from a walk with Celia she is described as 'glowing' from the fresh air and ushers Lydgate into the library, at first leaving her outdoor wear on, but then 'throwing off her bonnet and gloves with an instinctive discarding of formality' especially in deference to the gravity of their ensuing conversation (*MM*, 285). After receiving news of her husband's delicate condition she rises and further 'unclasp[s] her cloak and throwing it off as if it stifled her' (*MM*, 287). Though the gesture is expressive of her salient passionate feelings, it is also perfectly in keeping with her apparent disregard for appearances, conventions, propriety and vanity, and she ultimately wins Lydgate over with her simple style and character. This almost violent attitude to her clothing bespeaks a latent desire to break free from the confines of nineteenth-century female clothing: to breathe, to be free: an attempt to return to the bare essentials and fundamental truths.

Dorothea's relaxed style of dress includes her choice of a:

...plain dress of some thin woollen-white material, without a single ornament on her besides her wedding ring, as if she were under a vow to be different from all other women. (*MM*, 359)

Her sartorial beliefs are akin to a novice's 'vow' as her ascetic uniform becomes an anti-fashion statement, though of course it lacks the 'pearl cross' for a complete symbolical view of her newly 'celibate' married life. Although her dressy emeralds have not yet come to light, Dorothea is adorned in white, the colour of purity and acceptable femininity for the first time, proving that she is no prudish Dinah Morris, and this dress is successfully continued into her first meeting with Mrs Lydgate. Rosamond initially claims that she does not envy or understand the 'plain dress' of 'the aristocracy', though she is jealous of everything else about them, and yet her jealousy of Mrs Casaubon increases after she first meets her. The sartorial-morality is thus drawn:

Let those who know, tell us exactly what stuff it was that Dorothea wore in those days of mild autumn – that thin white woollen stuff soft to the touch and soft to the eye. It always seemed to have been lately washed, and to smell of the sweet hedges - was always in the shape of a pelisse with sleeves hanging out of the fashion....her simply parted hair and candid eyes in the large round poke which was then the fate of woman, seemed no more odd as a head-dress than the gold trencher we call a halo. (*MM*, 426)¹⁰²

Sensuous purity meets pure sensuality, and yet Rosamond recognises the 'country divinity' in such garb and expression, as opposed to the parochial 'Middlemarch morality' which those such as herself put on with their dressy display:

Rosamond's infantine blondness and wondrous crown of hair-plaits, with her pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion, a large embroidered collar which it was to be hoped all beholders would know the price of, her small hands duly set off with rings, and that controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity. (*MM*, 426-7)

However, Dorothea is not practical enough to know such material value, and the 'contrast' which Eliot constructs and acknowledges as 'striking to a calm observer' is swiftly destroyed by the surprise inclusion of Will Ladislaw. The accoutrements of the 'angelic woman' are combined with heroic myth: Dorothea's simple, unfashionable clothing associates her with purity, nature and sensuousness; whereas Rosamond is merely expensive and fashionable, associating her with artifice and the trivial social pretension of the 'huckster's daughter'.

In the event of her widowhood, Dorothea's lightened clothing harks back to darkness, abstinence and restriction as she is seen to 'play the tragedy queen' with a consciousness

¹⁰² Popular throughout the nineteenth-century the poke bonnet consisted of 'the brim of an open *evasé* shape at the top and close at the sides; the border lined with shirred or pleated velvet or satin; no cap or interior trimming with it'. *Cunnington*, p.305.

of role and costume that usually belongs to the quintessential Middlemarch actress, Rosamond Lydgate. Eliot describes her regal, but melancholic raiment thus:



26a. A widow, in the first stage of mourning, c1865.



26b. 'Mrs Howes in deep mourning', c1860-70.

The widow's cap of those times made an oval frame for the face, and had a crown standing up; the dress was an experiment in the utmost laying on of crape; but this heavy solemnity of clothing made her face look all the younger, with its recovered bloom... (*MM*, 532)

However, it is subsequently claimed that 'she looks handsomer than ever in her mourning' and thus the inconsistency between external and internal is re-established (*MM*, 529). The grimness of the attire is remarked upon with comical, narratorial significance when Will Ladislaw is deterred from falling at her feet earlier by this powerful sartorial barrier, 'He used to say that the horrible hue and surface of her crape

dress was most likely the sufficient controlling force (*MM*, 535)'.¹⁰³ See 26a and 26b above for examples of period mourning. This flash forward to their future seals the fate of the lovers and confirms the ending of the novel, though the narrative desire is hereby maintained through the power of the unravelling process and not by the now established final outcome. Comparing her heroine to Dido and Zenobia, legendary widows who committed suicide and became a slave respectively, Eliot sets an extreme self-abnegating standard for Dorothea's sense of loss. Yet it becomes clear that this mourned loss is not for her husband, but for Will Ladislaw who appears beguiled by Rosamond Lydgate: Dorothea's mourning is therefore a sexual one, for all her 'happiness was dead' (*MM*, 539). She plays the part of the widow in her chains of the black, crape weeds with such extremity she causes those around her to become uncomfortable:

...the heat was enough to make Celia in her white muslin and light curls reflect with pity on what Dodo must feel in her black dress and close cap....

"Dear Dodo, do throw off that cap. I am sure your dress must make you feel ill....I must see you without it; it makes us all warm," said Celia throwing down her fan, and going to Dorothea. (*MM*, 539)

¹⁰³ Among other uses black was acknowledged as a symbol of mourning: 'For deep mourning the intensity of black is increased by giving the material a lustreless surface so that it reflects no light; this was admirably served by crape and similar fabrics.....Half mourning, of materials with a black pinstripe or black and white, are fairly common'. *Cunnington*, p.17. 'The etiquette of mourning was an incredibly complicated issue throughout the Victorian period, and many women turned to magazine editors for advice about what they should be wearing and for how long....The contents of a widow's wardrobe were carefully regulated according to three periods of mourning. The first and most intense, period, also called 'deep mourning', lasted twelve months and a day....When indoors the widow wore a white crape cap with streamers down the back, and outdoors she wore a black crape bonnet trimmed with long crape veils. No part of the mourning dress could shine or gleam....After two years a widow could wear half-mourning and the length of this third period lasted from six months to a lifetime depending on the choice of the

Celia encourages Dorothea to do as she has always done in her attitude to her clothing: to throw off her manacles and release her passionate spirit. However, Dorothea's dark prison is self-imposed 'a sort of shell' that she has become 'used to' which can be only partially removed with force, and only fully removed much later with self-willed transformation.

It was a pretty picture to see this little lady in white muslin unfastening the widow's cap from her more majestic sister, and tossing it on to a chair....the coils and braids of dark-brown hair had been set free. (*MM*, 539-40)

Though not yet a year and a day, Dorothea is to be semi-liberated from the slavery of her false mourning, as she is seen to be slowly '[taking] off her gloves and bonnet' whilst resting against a statue in Lowick's entrance-hall. Will sees her and remarks that her face 'looked just as it did...in Rome; for her widow's cap, fixed in her bonnet, had gone off with it': thus both in her dress and life she has seemingly come full circle, still trapped by her puritanical beliefs. Dorothea's mental shackles are manifest in her sartorial confines, for though she 'threw back the heavy 'weepers'' she cannot acknowledge a future and is still suffering from acute myopia.¹⁰⁴

At this point in the text, Dorothea's mourning is inversely paralleled by Mrs Bulstrode, the Methodist sister of Mr Vincy who is married to the soon-to-be shamed banker, Nicholas Bulstrode. Her frivolity in dress, though she professes an austere religion, has been formerly established by Eliot as 'conciliating piety and worldliness at once' with a

individual. She could now wear the fashions of the day, but made up in special half-mourning colours which included shades of grey and soft mauves'. Ashelford, pp.237-240.

consciousness of the morality of 'filthy rags' paradoxically adorned with 'the best damask'; this is further acknowledged by the Middlemarch community who recognise that she is 'showy' and that 'her religion [never] made any difference in her dress' (*MM*, 732-3). When meeting her niece for an advisory lecture 'She was herself handsomely dressed, but she noticed with a little more regret than usual that Rosamond ...was almost as expensively equipped,' and she almost forgets her moral purpose for the visit by covetously desiring Rosamond's fashionable bonnet 'quilling'; for both herself and her 'pink-ribboned' sister-in-law 'ha[ve] the same preference in silks, [and] patterns for underclothing' (*MM*, 266, 292, 290). The moral-sartorial inconsistency between the external and internal is highly reminiscent of Dorothea Brooke, and the mirroring is fully inverted and re-dressed in the second half of the novel. As the knowledge of her husband's crime comes to light accompanied by his subsequent communal shaming she chooses permanently to wear the darker raiment of a symbolical mourning:

...she prepared herself [to go down to him] by some little acts which might seem mere folly to a hard onlooker; they were her way of expressing to all spectators visible or invisible that she had begun a new life in which she embraced humiliation. She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet-cap, which made her look suddenly like an early Methodist. (*MM*, 739-40)

¹⁰⁴ The long black crape veils of a widow.

Re-dressing in a more appropriate sartorial-morality she is choosing to embark upon a new life, and in displaying a public badge of social shame her exile from the community is confirmed: the symbolical power of the ritual of the female toilette is established as she completes one half of a necessary transformation.

The time is now right for Dorothea's reversal of her ascetic initiation, spurred on by the jealous humiliation catalysed by her second meeting with the flirtatious Rosamond with Ladislaw, Mrs Casaubon decides to fully re-establish her passionate sexuality, and returning to Lowick she violently casts off her widow's weeds, she declares, "Tantripp....I am not ill....I want you to bring me my new dress; and most likely, I shall want my new bonnet to-day" (*MM*, 776). As she is well into her 'second year' of mourning Tantripp the maid is 'thankful...to see [her] with a couple o'pounds' worth less of crape', and as the narrator philosophically adds:

...the tradition that fresh garments belonged to all initiation, haunting her mind, made her grasp after even that slight outward help towards calm resolve. (*MM*, 777)

Usually indifferent to dress, Dorothea puts on the lighter shades of half-mourning which clearly echoes Mrs Bulstrode's earlier act. The two women behave with a consciousness of a larger tradition, for what they feel is strengthened by an external symbol, a public display of their acts of renewal and change, as both sacramental scenes establish their moral resemblance even though their clothing is in diametric opposition.

Rosamond is affected by Dorothea's surprise appearance on a mission for Dr. Lydgate. His dishevelled wife almost appears beyond salvation as her 'bonnet [is] hanging back', and yet she too undergoes a painful realisation and subsequent transformation as she accordingly 'unt[ies] her hanging bonnet and [lies] it down with her shawl' after Dorothea has left in haste. She begins to 'los[e] the sense of her identity' as her frivolous fantasy world 'collapse[s]' and the neglect of externals becomes evident as she 'thr[ows] herself on the bed with her clothes on', languidly retreating to her boudoir, from which she apathetically re-dresses herself for her third and final confrontation with Dorothea (*MM*, 767). As Lydgate remarks prior to the event 'Dorothea's looks, which were as much changed as Rosamond's'. (*MM*, 778). Tess Cosslett notes:

Rosamond's self-consciousness and social awareness is transferred to Dorothea, - who loses some of her innocence in regard to Will....[She] both acts out Dorothea's suppressed desire, and functions as a scapegoat to protect [her] purity....Dorothea saves Rosamond from adultery, as Rosamond rescues Dorothea from her sterile mourning.¹⁰⁵

In their third meeting Dorothea is freed from the prison of Spartan egoism that entraps characters like Casaubon and Mr Bulstrode, and is shown to be sisterly and motherly in her unrestrained warmth shown to Rosamond, 'Dorothea, who had taken off her gloves, from an impulse which she could never resist when she wanted a sense of freedom, came forward' (*MM*, 780). Rosamond is 'wrap[ped]' in the sartorial comforts of a white 'soft

shawl' and is suitably dressed to look 'like the lovely ghost of herself' as correspondingly her old outlook on life dies and she awakes to a painful self-knowledge of a world beyond herself. Finally she 'withdr[aws] the handkerchief with which she had been hiding her face' which directly reiterates Dorothea's previous unreserved action with her gloves: both women appear as positive images of naturalness, not affectation (*MM*, 779, 783).

Dorothea's heroic self-suppression in this scene has her reclaim her destiny. She is seen to be 'busy in her boudoir' where she is revived and restored by the power of the female toilette as she 'felt a glow of pleasure' and can immediately summon her innately passionate and defiant courage in order to marry Will (*MM*, 805). Transforming herself, or rather re-asserting her true self by renouncing all that has gone before, she cries to him with a sense of romantic idealism:

"We could live quite well on my own fortune – it is too much – I want so little – no new clothes – and I will learn what everything costs."



27. Rufus Sewell (Ladislaw) and Juliet Aubrey (Dorothea – in grey) in Davies' *Middlemarch* (1994).

¹⁰⁵ Cosslett, pp.95-6.

Her quiet, 'unhistoric act' is faithfully recorded by Eliot, and she is transfigured to the status of a public, literary icon (*MM*, 822). To conclude therefore, it can be said that in *Middlemarch* the former dichotomous extremities of Idione and Hieria are allowed to be mutually beneficial. Idione has most successfully moderated the extremes of Hieria into a more flawed and human moral heroine, though it seems harder to permanently establish the reverse, and this is an issue that is tackled in the analysis of Gwendolen Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* below.

With overt feminist sartorialism Eliot concludes *Middlemarch* with a radical polemic spoken through the mouth of a child. Letty Garth, the younger sister of Mary, is an intelligent mouthpiece for her creator in the debate with her brother Ben, who '...contend[ed] that it was clear that girls were good for less than boys, else they would not be always in petticoats...' (*MM*, 817). The young male mind dangerously reiterates the anti-feminist diatribes of Horace Walpole and Mr Robson in Brontë's *Agnes Grey* as he reduces the power and characters of women to their feminine garments as in 'the petticoat government'. Letty, who like the young Marian Evans 'argued much from books' insightfully replies '...that God made coats of skins for both Adam and Eve alike – also it occurred to her that in the East the men too wore petticoats' (*Ibid.*).

It is interesting to realise that this biblical argument was the foundation of those of the American feminist, Amelia Jenks Bloomer, who first promoted the idea of an emancipated style of women's dress in her radical bifurcated 'Bloomer' costume which

consisted of dress and pantaloons for women as early as the 1850s in the USA. Though the outfit was not a success, as it was jeered at and ridiculed to the point of its renunciation, she provided a catalyst for the late-nineteenth century's Rational Dress Society (1880) which promoted a liberated style of dress for women based on 'considerations of health, comfort and beauty' and allowed under the influential rise of sport and exercise for women, especially the after the invention of the bicycle.¹⁰⁶ Her reasoned rationalisation of the biblical debate was profoundly influential:

In the early years of the 1850s...Mrs Bloomer defended with wit the costume she had invented. When a Reverend Mr Talmadge quoted Moses from the pulpit as the authority who had forbidden women to wear men's clothes, her comment was that the first fashion was set by Adam and Eve when they assumed fig-leaves, and no-where was it stated that while Adam's were bifurcated Eve's were not. The second fashion, she went on, was set by God himself when he clothed them both in skins; but there was no indication that there had been any difference in design between the two.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Kirkpatrick MacMillan (1812-1878), a blacksmith from Dumfriesshire, Scotland, invented the first bicycle with foot pedals in the 1830 to 1840s, but he never patented it and his idea did not catch on locally. A French father-and-son team of carriage-makers, Pierre and Ernest Michaux, invented an improved bicycle in the 1860s. Many early bicycles (called velocipedes, meaning 'fast foot', or, more descriptively, 'bone shakers') had huge front wheels. Early tyres were wooden, so metal tyres were an improvement, and solid rubber tyres were added later. A chain with sprockets was added to the bicycle in the 1880s and this was called the 'safety bicycle'. Air-filled tires were also added in the 1880s when it became a hugely popular pastime with both sexes, accordingly, appropriate bifurcated garments for women needed to be worn as they could not sit side-saddle as on a horse.

¹⁰⁷ Ashelford, pp.236-7. See also Stella Mary Newton, *Health, Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the Nineteenth Century* (London: J. Murray, 1974), chapter 1, 'Women with Views', pp.3-4.

With similar sardonic humour, Eliot anticipates the changes that were to come in women's clothing from around the 1890s, and although Dorothea cannot be heralded as a 'New Woman' she certainly provides a prototype: a woman who rejects fashion to an extent, but who, most importantly, throws off the more restrictive items of dress as occasion merits. The theme of the Victorian woman straining in her sartorial shackles is continued and developed in her final, great novel, *Daniel Deronda*.

DANIEL DERONDA (1874-6): Toxic Dresses and Poisoned Diamonds

The Nereid in sea-green robes and silver ornaments, with a pale sea-green feather fastened in silver falling backward over her green hat and light-brown hair, was Gwendolen Harleth. (*DD*, 7)

Such is Eliot's introduction to her final heroine, symbolically attired in her '*ensemble du serpent*' and made morally-sartorially visible to the reader through the penetrating eyes of the hero, Daniel Deronda. In the casino at Leubronn she is characterised by both her immediate environment and costume. She is in turn compared to Keats' *Lamia*: a serpent, a sylph, a goddess of luck, and a Nereid within the first chapter.¹⁰⁸ With her 'taper fingers' elegantly enveloped in gloves of 'pale-grey' she craves and solicits the attention accorded her by her strikingly fashionable beauty, even as those about her derisively debate its nature and quality:



28a. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Astarte Syriaca* (1877).



28b. Edward Burne-Jones, *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874).

‘Yes; she has got herself up as a sort of serpent now, all green and silver, and winds her neck about a little more than usual.’

‘...Do you think her pretty, Mr Vandernoodt?’

‘Very. A man might risk hanging for her....Woman was tempted by a serpent: why not a man?’

‘She is certainly very graceful. But she wants a tinge of colour in her cheeks: it is a sort of Lamia beauty she has.’

‘....For my part I think her odious,’ said the dowager. ‘It is wonderful what unpleasant girls get into vogue.’ (*DD*, 7-8)

Immediately she is associated with evil, pallor, poison and death in conventional *femme fatale* style, though she is only ascribed this role by those who merely observe the

¹⁰⁸ Nereid: ‘Sea-deities, daughters of Nereus and Doris, and granddaughters of Oceanus....The nereids lived at the bottom of the sea, seated on golden thrones....They were all very beautiful and they spent their

superficial surfaces. A comparison with Keats' *Lamia* (1820) demonstrates how these negative attributes are made overt in her appearance:

She was a Gordian shape of dazzling hue,
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;
...And full of silver moons, that, as she breathed,
Dissolved, or brighter shone....
She seem'd at once, some penanced lady elf,
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self....
Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!
She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete....
....Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;
...So that, in moments few, she was undrest
Of all her sapphires, greens and amethyst,
....for she was a maid
More beautiful than ever twisted braid,
Or sigh'd, or blushed, or on spring-flowered lea
Spread a green kirtle to the minstrelsy... (*Lamia*, ll.47-60, 158-162, 185-188)

Lamia is another serpentine-woman, who is beguiled and betrayed by men, and eventually dies because of their possessive love. As befitting a mystic-sorceress she is attired in green, the Celtic colour of the supernatural, as demonstrated in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1375?) and the early tales of the Arthurian Legend. Beguiling,

time spinning, weaving and singing'. Grimal, p.292.

sensual 'green-ladies' also frequently appear in Pre-Raphaelite art depicting such unearthly temptresses as Morgana Le Fay in Burne-Jones' *The Beguiling of Merlin* (1874) and Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca* (1877) which is described by one art critic as, 'another sinister sea-green portrait of [Jane Morris'] based on the Syrian Aphrodite. See 28a and 28b above.¹⁰⁹

The sea-green she wears can further be linked to Gwendolen's symbolical name, which is that of the ancient Celtic moon goddess, whose name in Welsh literally means 'white circle' with the power to turn tides, and is even more significant considering the fate of her future husband.¹¹⁰ The sea-moon-goddess traditionally signifies the chastity of the controlling deities of Diana-Artemis, the analogy with whom is made explicit during the archery tournament and in her passionate love of the hunt or chase. She is constantly adorned in the cold colours of the goddess who is equally vain, haughty, proud, powerful and yet frostily virginal. Tall and imposing, Eliot monumentalises her heroine within the opening pages, combining physiognomy and dress, just as she has done with Dorothea Brooke, Romola and Maggie Tulliver who are composed on a similarly statuesque scale.

However, it is significant that the green dress as highlighted by the sartorially astute Eliot as the staple of Gwendolen Harleth's wardrobe is precisely at the time when aniline dyes were patented in the late fifties by William Henry Perkin. The first was a brilliant purple, and the next was a dangerously toxic green.

¹⁰⁹ Timothy Hilton, *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p.187.

¹¹⁰ *First Names*, p.164.



29a and **29b**. By 1865 the crinoline had begun to shrink, and by the late sixties the skirt is flat in front, with all the fullness taken to the back where it has lengthened into a train. The brilliant colours were improved by the new chemical dyes. Boldness of colour was matched by aggressive styles of trimming. Right, a photograph of a green day dress of figured silk, with Pagoda sleeves, c.1855-60, worn by a member of the Senhouse family of Netherhall, Maryport. Courtesy of Tullie House Museum, Carlisle.

In the 'sixties purple, mauve, and the bright purplish-pink or fuchsia shades named Magenta and Solferino... were all the rage. Another chemical dye was a vivid emerald green containing arsenite of copper. This was abandoned by Parisians in the early 'sixties following a report in the *Union Médicale* of the illness of a young woman who went to a ball in a green dress and was poisoned.¹¹¹ A Berlin physician testified that no less than 60 grams – the amount found in a single dress - was enough to kill thirty people if administered in doses.¹¹² Though these incidents were common knowledge at the time, the danger was soon forgotten, however, and emerald green as well as brilliant purples and pinks, and 'azuline' blue of a garishness never seen today, were undoubtedly still the most popular shades (see **29a** and **29b** below).¹¹³

¹¹¹ Augustin Challamel, *The History of Fashion in France*, trans. Mrs. Frances Cashel Hoey and Mr. John Lillie (London: Sampson Low & Co., 1882), p.32.

¹¹² *The Queen*, September 1861.

¹¹³ Alison Gernsheim, *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey*, (London, 1963), p.54.

Daniel Deronda is chronologically set specifically, just over ten years prior to publication, between October 1864 and October 1866 which is coincidentally the exact time that these events occurred. The toxic nature of Gwendolen's dresses and by extension her character is intimated by the contemporary sartorial time-frame, which has a poisonous garment for its apparently venomous heroine. However, the medicinal uses of arsenic detailed in Paris' *Pharmacologia* sheds even more light on the true nature of Gwendolen's 'greenness':

[Arsenic] has sacred, strong acrimonious properties...[and was] employed in the rites of sacrifice....[It] works by entering the circulation [affecting] the Heart, Brain, and Alimentary canal....It affects life by rendering the heart insensible to blood.¹¹⁴

This would explain Gwendolen's oft described pallor and her apparent inability to love: a numbness of the heart caused by vanity and narcissism. She exhibits all the symptoms of someone being poisoned by arsenic, without actually dying, but living a death-in-life with Grandcourt later in the novel. Yet her serpentine qualities could also be tempered by this substance, based on the classical belief that:

'All poisonous substances possess a powerful and mutual elective attraction for each other.' An amulet of arsenic [was worn] over the heart to preserve against infection during the plague. Angelus Sala in *Magnes Arsenicalis* stated that it will

¹¹⁴ *Pharmacologia*, pp. 66, 225-230.

not only defend the body from the infectious poison, but will draw out the venom from an infected person.¹¹⁵

This would explain Grandcourt's destructive attraction to her, but it also subtly alludes to the dangers of the noxious 1860s society that Eliot attempts to portray. The casino of the first chapter is adorned with cannibalistic imagery pertaining to the corrupting nature of the endemic capitalist ideology, as cultural, human and spiritual values are consumed by materialism. Though class barriers are falling, as is suggested by the diversity of the players, the gambling hall is a metaphorical hell, based upon Eliot's own first hand account of a casino in Kursaal, Germany:

The saddest thing to be witnessed is the play of Miss Leigh, Byron's grand-niece, who is only 26 years old, and is completely in the grasp of this mean, money-raking demon. It made me cry to see her fresh face among the hags and brutally stupid men around her.¹¹⁶

Here the germ of the novel was conceived, with Gwendolen placed vulnerably in the midst of the 'demons':

The white bejewelled fingers of an English countess were very near touching a bony, yellow, crab-like hand stretching a bare wrist to clutch a heap of coin....And where else would her ladyship have graciously consented to sit by

¹¹⁵ *Pharmacologia*, p.46.

¹¹⁶ Letter to John Blackwood, 4 October 1872, *Letters*, Vol.V, p.314.

that dry-lipped feminine figure prematurely old, withered after short bloom like her artificial flowers, holding a shabby velvet reticule before her....An old bewigged woman with eyeglasses pinching her nose....A man with the air of an emaciated beau or worn-out libertine, who looked at life through one eyeglass....There was a certain uniform negativeness of expression which had the effect of a mask...(DD, 4-5)

The 'death mask' expressions should serve as warning to Gwendolen, who is distinct from the hellish throng surrounding her through attire and gestures, but yet living with the threat that they could engulf her at any second. In Brian Swann's essay 'Eyes in the Mirror' he notes the prevalence of eye-glasses in this sequence and beyond, claiming that they act as 'symbolic warnings' and also hint at a narrowness of vision which emphasises Gwendolen's own purblindness' much in the same vein as Dorothea's myopia. Her narcissism limits her vision as 'She was apt to think rather of those who saw her than those whom she could not see' (DD, 177).¹¹⁷ This 'egotistic myopia' not only links her with Dorothea, but Idione, Hetty and Rosamond, and of course 'narcissism, in Eliot, is moral death'.¹¹⁸ Albeit, the power of the eyes is swiftly reinforced by the presence of the hero whose moralistic 'evil eye' meets the 'dynamic quality' of her own, and she cannot ignore or forget it (DD, 6). It is he, through Eliot, who opens up the question 'Was she beautiful or not beautiful?' in the very first line of the novel, which continues as an ongoing debate about her moral beauty throughout the book. Swann also notably adds

¹¹⁷ Brian Swann, 'Eyes in the Mirror: Imagery and Symbolism in *Daniel Deronda*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 23 (1968-69), pp.434-445, p.435-37.

¹¹⁸ Henry Alley, 'George Eliot and the Ambiguity of Murder,' *Studies in the Novel* 25 (Spring 1993), pp.59-75, p.60.

that *Daniel Deronda* is Eliot's 'most didactic' novel, and one which is paradoxically both 'realistic, yet poetically symbolic'.¹¹⁹

Gwendolen's vanity is immediately highlighted upon returning to her room, like Idione, Hetty and Rosamond before her she is beguiled by her own reflection:

She stood motionless for a few minutes, then tossed off her hat and automatically looked at the glass. The coils of her smooth light brown hair were still in order perfect enough for a ballroom....and other nights she might have looked lingeringly at herself for pleasure (surely an allowable indulgence). (*DD*, 11)

Like Hetty she 'leaned forward and kissed the cold glass which looked so warm' (*DD*, 13). The ritual reverie is, however, paused briefly due to financial demands upon her and a letter of bad news from home, so that she decides to pawn an exotic 'Etruscan necklace which she happened not to have been wearing since her arrival'. The first bejewelled motif and plot device is introduced, though it is later discovered that it had been 'made out of [her] dear father's chain'. Just as she is forced to sell her possessions and embark upon a career as a governess, she decides that above all her other jewellery she will keep it, protesting: 'Don't sell the necklace, mamma,'...she added, a new feeling having come over her about the rescue of it which had formerly been so offensive' (*DD*, 233).

Unlike Austen's Fanny Price, Gwendolen Harleth has not yet learned to attach sentimental value to her jewellery, other than obvious material worth, and so she begins

¹¹⁹ Swann, p.434.

to learn the importance of those subjective traces of memory that are imbued upon an object, and finds its subsequent moral significance for herself: figuratively it becomes her 'rosary'. However, this value has nothing to do with it previously belonging to her dead father, of which fact she is aware as she pawns it in Leubronn. It displaces the past as it becomes a reminder of her tumultuous present and of the spiritual value of Daniel

Deronda:

...the superior size and quality of the three central turquoises in the necklace she offered [the broker]. They had belonged to a chain once her father's; but she had never known her father; and the necklace was in all respects the ornament she could conveniently part with...(DD, 13)

Her debts at this point are not manifest in her dress or demeanour, as she maintains her elegant façade in the face of reality:

...with her usual floating movement, every line in her figure and drapery falling in gentle curves attractive to all eyes except those which discerned in them too close a resemblance to the serpent, and objected to the revival of serpent worship...(DD, 13)

In this respect Daniel is cast as an Apollonius, discerning the evil or poison within Lamia's attractiveness. Though most men admire her beauty, he calls it into question by retrieving her necklace and shamefully returning it to her, romantically wrapped in a

‘cambric handkerchief’, with her amorality brought to the fore by his gracious action. It is worth noting at this point that Eliot changed the wording of the manuscript from the more material ‘repurchased’ to the more spiritual ‘redeemed’ and so choosing a verb with moral connotations in connection with the necklace and its redeemer, and this is an indication of what is to come.¹²⁰ The Rev. Charles William King adds to the subtle significance of Gwendolen’s retention of the necklace as he states that ‘Turquoise is useful for riders. As long as one wears it his horse will not tire, nor throw him. It is also good for the eyes and averts accidents’.¹²¹ The irony of this is implicit, with Gwendolen, though an esteemed horsewoman, being presented as dangerously myopic just like the young and naïve Miss Brooke.

The narrative returns to the past and sees Gwendolen returning home to Offendene, ‘having passed two years at a showy school’. As she plays her favourite role of ‘princess in exile’ she is juxtaposed with the declining fortunes of her mother and sisters whose struggles are indicated by their ‘shabby’ black mourning garments (*DD*, 17). This denotes that the vulnerable female family’s material efforts are all invested in putting a well-dressed Gwendolen out to tender for a rich husband, as her Uncle Gascoigne prosaically states:

¹²⁰ Footnote 14 to *DD*.

¹²¹ Rev. Charles William King, *Antique Gems: Their Origin, Uses, and Value as Interpreters of Ancient History; and as illustrative of Ancient Art: with hints to Gem Collectors*. (London: John Murray, 1860), p.427.

...it would have been mere folly...to have recommended that Gwendolen should wear a gown as shabby as Griselda's in order that a marquis might fall in love with her...(DD, 30)¹²²

He thereby encourages her as the village's new debutante, an art object, designed and adorned to please men, even though she claims that she cannot feel love and does not desire 'domestic fetters'. He takes it upon himself to continually remind her, and his own wife and daughter, of their market value, as he remarks, 'And remember what you ladies cost in toilette now' (DD, 28).

However, Gwendolen's inherent vanity is further indulged and encouraged by her mother, Mrs Davilow, who retreats to the waspish 'black and yellow bedroom' with her daughter so that they can groom and preen each other with close mutual dependence, her mother flatters, 'That is a becoming glass, Gwendolen; or is it the black and gold colour that sets you off?' (DD, 21). It is clear that the flesh and blood reality of Gwendolen is rejected, firstly, for the preferred reflection in the mirror, and secondly, as defined primarily by her 'gift-wrapping' or rather, clothes. Her hair is brushed soothingly by her mother as she dreams of being St. Cecilia, and other mythical and literary roles which are not fully understood by her, and are only represented in two-dimensions: defined by superficialities such as posturing and dress, and not by intrinsic meaning.

¹²² The source of the story of Griselda, synonymous with patience and fortitude, is Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Day 10, Tale 10, treated by Chaucer in 'The Clerk's Tale', *The Canterbury Tales* (1387).

Although Gwendolen appears to love self-display and costumed role-play she is all too often, like Dorothea, depicted as chaffing at her physical restraints:

She had thrown off her hat and gloves....While the submissive and sad Jocosa [the governess] took out the one comb which fastened the coil of her hair, and then shook out the mass till it fell in a smooth light-brown stream...

And later, after riding,

Gwendolen...seeming to be roused to the consciousness of her physical self, took off her gloves and then her hat, that the breeze might blow on her head. (*DD*, 116)

Yet these small, desired freedoms are all too often re-dressed on the suggestion of and for the attention of men. Upon her initial introduction into the neighbourhood at a ball at Quetcham Hall she is '...visible at first as a slim figure floating along in her white drapery...'. She masquerades herself as an affluent middle-class lady, in the cold, leisured-class, non-colour of femininity. It is therefore ironic that the real heiress, Miss Arrowpoint is described as 'unfortunately also dressed in white' as it is to poor effect next to the radiance of the disinherited Miss Harleth. Recalling the gaming table in Leubronn, Mrs Arrowpoint speaks of Gwendolen with a touch of the 'green-eyed monster' as she remarks that, 'she is not really so handsome, if you examine her features', only to more rightly conclude that, 'this girl is double and satirical' (*DD*, 35, 43).

[Gwendolen] rejoiced to feel herself exceptional; but her horizon was that of genteel romance where the heroine's soul poured out in her journal is full of vague power, originality, and general rebellion, while her life moves strictly in the sphere of fashion; and if she wanders into a swamp, the pathos lies partly, so to speak, in her having on her satin shoes. (*DD*, 43)

Like Hetty Sorrel, Gwendolen limits herself to fictional parameters and she sees only roles and reflections, not reality. As the heroine of a fantasy romance she is not original but a disillusioned stereotype who seeks a life that her choices will not actually bring her. Consequently, happiness and the self-contentment which comes from self-knowledge is perpetually ignored or denied. When taking part in the *tableaux vivant* at Offendene for a small audience she transforms herself into an art object, a two-dimensional image only.¹²³ Though comically we are informed prior to the event that she wants:

...to employ...Miss Merry [the governess], and the maid who was understood to wait on all the ladies, in helping to arrange various dramatic costumes which Gwendolen pleased herself with having in readiness for some future occasions of acting in charades or theatrical pieces...

¹²³ 'The year 1815 was, indeed, about the end of the vogue for attitudes, though the form entered into amateur theatricals, along with the charade and *tableaux vivant*. A. Dwight Culler, 'Monodrama and the Dramatic Monologue', *PMLA*, Vol.90 (1975), p.375. He cites its use in *Daniel Deronda*, and also in Goethe's *Proserpina: A Monodrama* (trans., 1798), and Tennyson's *Maud, or the Madness* (1855).

The wardrobe of the social butterfly is always at hand, and the statuesque figure of Gwendolen is transformed into the living statue of Shakespeare's Hermione in the *dénouement* of *The Winter's Tale* (1606), and this is presented as the culmination of her ambition of being worshipped and adored. Edith Wharton's debt to Eliot for this scene, and the characterisation of her heroine can not be denied. Lily Bart, is another 'deposed princess moving tranquilly into exile' and is also presented at her peak as Reynolds's *Mrs Lloyd* in a *tableaux vivant*.¹²⁴ Like her literary predecessor she is defined as merchandise, restrained by her clothing, and viewed mainly through male eyes:

[Lawrence Selden] had a confused sense that [Lily] must have cost a great deal to make, that a great many dull and ugly people must, in some mysterious way, have been sacrificed to produce her....She was so evidently the victim of the civilisation which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate. (*The House of Mirth*, 5, 7)

In her preparation for the costume and attitude Lily claims to have a 'vivid plastic sense, hitherto nurtured on no higher food than dressmaking and upholstery' just as the astute musician Herr Klesmer dramatically remarks upon seeing Gwendolen's set piece, 'A magnificent bit of *plastik* that!' (*HOM*, 124. *DD*, 49). As a two-dimensional art object Lily is ironically at her most 'real', to herself and Selden:

...the unanimous 'Oh!' of the spectators was a tribute, not to the brushwork of Reynolds's 'Mrs Lloyd' but to the flesh and blood loveliness of Lily Bart....[she]

¹²⁴ Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* (1905), ed. Victoria Glendinning (London, 1996), p.208.

had yielded to the truer instinct of trusting to her unassisted beauty, and she had purposely chosen a picture without distracting accessories of dress or surroundings. Her pale draperies...served only to relieve the long dryad-like curves...(*HOM*, 127)

Divested of the coverings of costume 'the real Lily' is true to herself, though she is still frozen in time and attitude stylistically (*HOM*, 128). However, Gwendolen's Hermione is invested with dress, but divested of meaning and context (30). Richly enigmatic and neatly emblematic, this scene serves only to place Gwendolen's statue in a context of death, not resurrection and reconciliation.



30. Johann Zoffany, *Miss Farren as Hermione in 'The Winter's Tale'* (1780).

The parts are thus delegated, with the part of Paulina to be played by Miss Merry, the governess, who as Rex Gascoigne cruelly puts it is 'like a modern spinster', and he himself is in the role of Leontes, who through artistic licence is at liberty to 'kneel and

kiss the hem of [Gwendolen's] garment' just as he metaphorically does in his real role of the humbly dejected suitor (DD, 47-8). Attired in her splendid 'Greek dress' Gwendolen is transformed, not just into a beautiful art object, but into 'a statue into which the soul of fear had entered' as a wooden panel falls open mid-performance to reveal a painting of a 'dead face and fleeing figure' (DD, 49). Ominously, she now falls from her formerly imagined, powerful position of idol, onto her own knees and cowers in 'terror'.

This vulnerability is immediately inverted by the following entrance of Gwendolen in her Amazonian riding habit. Ongoing debate from the eighteenth century onwards linked sex with riding, and correspondingly the riding habit with a dominant, androgynous and even masculine woman. Considering the nature of the outfit there is much evidence for the case; as Alison Mathews puts it, in her recent article on the ambiguity of the riding ensemble and its significance for the wearer: [It was a] paradoxical garment – a fashionable anti-fashion statement, masculine and feminine, practical, yet alluring. While on horseback, the fair equestrian shunned the lace, frill, and furbelows worn by her pedestrian sisters....Lean, understated, and almost masculine simplicity...¹²⁵

Accordingly, Eliot describes Gwendolen in her fashionable array,

Gwendolen was in her highest spirits, and Rex thought that she had never looked so lovely before: her figure, her long white throat, and the curves of her

¹²⁵ Alison Mathews, 'Elegant Amazons: Victorian Riding Habits and the Fashionable Horsewoman', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, No.1, 2002, p.179.

THOMAS & SONS' RIDING HABITS

ARE UNRIVALLED FOR
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Mrs. POWER O'DONOGHUE (the most modern authority on female equitation) writes:—

‘Bino, — I have received the riding habit, which pleases me extremely in every particular. Indeed, I have never had one so satisfactory in all points. . . . I may add that the two dresses you made me is a beautiful fit, and is wearing excellently. Yours truly, (Signed) MAMIE POWER O'DONOGHUE.

CONTRIBUTING THE ABOVE.

Miss G. — is delighted with her perfectly cut and perfectly fitting habit. She is not at all surprised at Mrs. Power O'Donoghue's strong recommendation of Messrs. Thomas, and is just going to write and thank her for it. — *Lyndhurst, June 24, 1887.*

THOMAS & SONS, Tailors and Habit Makers,
32, BROOK STREET, NEW BOND STREET, W.



31a. An advertisement for fashionable Riding Habits, 1869.

31b. Lady's Riding Habit, mid-sixties.

cheek and chin were always set off to perfection by the compact simplicity of her riding dress.’ (DD, 55)

As the first female ‘sports costume’ it paved the way for other athletic and liberating garments like the ‘bicycling suit’ in which style and practicality were combined to positive effect for the women’s movement and the Rational Dress Society. It launched a fashion for more gender-neutral, utilitarian garments, leading up to the fashionably androgynous tailored suit of the nineteen-thirties and beyond. By 1885 a German Riding Manual depicted bifurcated trousers worn with a skirt, which was an even more ambiguous gender combination. Indeed, in France the side-saddle riding habit was called ‘*costume amazone*, and the female rider dubbed herself an *Amazone*’.¹²⁶ Such was the powerful sexuality of the wearer of the garment that male critics reacted with a mixture of fear and venomous derision, just as did Richard Steele in *The Spectator* earlier that same century (see **31a** and **31b** above):



32. Gwendolen (Romola Garai) in green riding habit with Grandcourt (Hugh Bonneville) in Andrew Davies' recent adaptation of *Daniel Deronda* (Nov-Dec 2002).

This brazen, almost cross-dressing finds a linguistic parallel in the eighteenth-century word 'titup', which expressed the equation between horses and hussies....originat[ing] from the echoing sound of a swiftly-running horse's hoofbeats, but soon came to mean an aggressive woman or minx.¹²⁷

It is also possible that Gwendolen wears a rifle-green riding habit made from the popular, contemporary aniline dyes, as this was a colour worn by fairer women, along with the traditional blacks, navys, greys and browns (see **32** above). It is here we discover her Diana-like chastity and disgust for the opposite sex 'with a sort of physical repulsion, to being directly made love to' (*DD*, 57). Though she still partakes in the chase of the moon-goddess and huntress after whom she is named, and is accordingly described as having 'a certain fierceness of maidenhood about her', on horseback she is designated 'as secure as an immortal goddess' (*DD*, 57, 59). She is later also androgynously referred to as playing Rosalind, Shakespeare's famous cross-dressing heroine in *As You Like It* (1599), (*DD*, 127). However, at this point her neglected turquoises and green dresses, though protecting her from a fall, do not ward off the powerful dangerous poison

¹²⁶ Mathews, p.180.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Mathews, pp.180-1.

incarnate in Mallinger Grandcourt. As she rides with him it is debatable as to who holds the whip and therefore the sexual power, unlike Rex whom Gwendolen rode with and then rejected:

Gwendolen, clad in riding dress, with her hat laid aside, clad also in the repute of being chosen by Mr Grandcourt, was naturally the centre of observation. (*DD*, 112)

At the beginning of the outing she is presented, on top of a knoll, as statuesque in her power:

She was perfectly silent, holding up the folds of her robe like a statue, and giving a harder grasp to the handle of her whip, which she had snatched up automatically with her hat when they had set off. (*DD*, 113)

Linking herself to an ornamental plant, as Hetty Sorrel also does, she complains of her passive, dull, 'green' status, whilst lightly whipping a rhododendron bush. Significantly, she concludes 'that is the reason why some [women] have got poisonous' (*DD*, 113). The poison she refers to is not just from the dyes of her ornamental dressing: the arsenic which works first by shutting down her heart; but it also refers to the sheltered 'greenness' of women's lives in the nineteenth century. As Gwendolen metaphorically strains at the reins of a precarious social status she loses her composure and control when she drops her 'gold-handled whip', and though she recovers it 'triumphantly' as 'she was

beforehand with him in rescuing the whip' Grandcourt makes an aggressive attempt to gain it nonetheless (*DD*, 114).

Her power over men at this point in the novel is at its height, as she brutally rejects Rex Gascoigne, whilst dressed in a symbolical raiment of black:

Miss Gwendolen simple as she stood there, in her black silk, cut square about the round white pillar of her throat, a black band fastening her hair which streamed backward in smooth silky abundance. (*DD*, 65)

Ever theatrical, the goddess of chastity reigns supreme as she 'seemed more queenly than usual' in her 'awful majesty' (*DD*, 65). She attempts this sombre style a few chapters later with Grandcourt's proposal, stating:

I shall not wear any ornaments, and I shall put on my black silk. Black is the only colour to wear when one is going to refuse an offer. (*DD*, 251)

Ultimately, she loses her powerful 'priestess' status when she accepts him with full knowledge of his past. Her use of black here is analogous to Mrs Bulstrode's atypical adoption of it for social disgrace, yet Gwendolen's reasoning is, however, much more complex. In it she appears to be the perfect amalgamation of Dorothea Brooke and Rosamond Vincy: she is pretty, though her prettiness has a bitterness to it; worldly; vivacious and daring; but still virginal, almost frigid; and like Dorothea she is initially

glad to marry a cold man. Even more than Dorothea she is an ice-maiden, markedly white and chilling to the touch. Her colour, when first presented is sea-green: she strikes onlookers as a Nereid, silvery and serpentine, a creature from cold waters. Though more provocative and daring than the grey-Dorothea, she moves in markedly colder colours. Thus her choice of mourning attire when confronted with love does not appear anachronistic, but entirely fitting for a woman who as a heroine merges the boundaries between sex and death, love and hate, and outward superficiality and psychological reality.

The climax of this powerfully ambiguous vision is her appearance at the Archery Club at Brackenshaw Park:

The discussion of the dress that Gwendolen was to wear at the Archery Meeting was a relevant topic, however; and when it had been decided that as a touch of colour on her white cashmere, nothing, for her complexion was comparable to pale green – a feather which she was tying in her hat before the looking-glass having settled the question...(*DD*, 78-79) (33)

Attired as the huntress, she declares of the unseen Mr Grandcourt, 'My arrow will pierce him before he has time for thought' and the empowering phallic imagery is overt (*DD*, 79).



33. Gwendolen (Garai) at the archery tournament (anomalous in ‘red’?).



34. An Archery group, c.1868.

The Archery Hall’s arcade is compared to ‘a white temple’ as Gwendolen is seen as ‘Calypso among her nymphs’ and the mythological analogy is apparent from the outset, as Diana is traditionally depicted with bow and arrows. However, it is also made clear that the female voyeurs are not willing followers:

The young maidens... were considering which of those sweetly-dressed ladies they would choose to be.... Probably the form these rural souls would most have striven for as a tabernacle was some other than Gwendolen’s – one with more

pink in her cheeks and hair of the most fashionable yellow; but among the male judges in the ranks immediately surrounding her there was usual unanimity in pronouncing her the finest girl present. (*DD*, 84) (34)

Although living up to her name, the plain heiress, Catherine Arrowpoint, is pronounced the best archeress, and Juliet Fenn ‘a girl as middling as a mid-day market in everything but her archery and her plainness’ wins the tournament, Gwendolen’s precision for hitting the gold three times in a row wins her ‘a special gold star to be worn on the breast’, and this is rather appropriate for a moon-goddess attired mainly in white (*DD*, 89). Miss Harleth thereby remains ‘the central object of that pretty picture’ as Miss Arrowpoint’s choice of a ‘gold-coloured dress’ is dissected by herself and Grandcourt:

[Grandcourt] ‘Too splendid, don’t you think?’

[Gwendolen] ‘Well, perhaps a little too symbolical – too much like the figure of Wealth in an allegory.’ (*DD*, 87)

The dramatic irony of this statement becomes apparent when Catherine elopes with the musician, Herr Klesmer, against her family’s wishes and sacrifices all for love.

Gwendolen’s cruelty to Rex in rejecting him suitably affects her recently ‘outed’ cousin Anna who vehemently declares, ‘I should have done with going out, and gloves, and crinoline...’, and just as another female strains at the restrictions of nineteenth-century clothing the sartorially aware Eliot summarises:

I like to mark the time, and connect the course of the individual lives with the historic stream, for all classes of thinkers. This was the period when the broadening of gauge in crinolines seemed to demand an agitation for the general enlargement of churches, ball-rooms, and vehicles. (*DD*, 74)

After the archery when Gwendolen steps out at the subsequent ball at the Park, Eliot is just as astute in her detail:

[Her arms] were bare now: it was the fashion to dance in the archery dress, throwing off the jacket; and the simplicity of her white cashmere with its border of pale green set off her form to the utmost. A thin line of gold around her neck, and the gold star on her breast, were her only ornaments. Her smooth soft hair piled up into a grand crown made a clear line about her brow. (*DD*, 96)

The soft cashmere Gwendolen wears is an indicator of high status as it was ‘woven on hand looms from one of several grades of hair from two or more species of Asian Goat’ and they were valuable and rare.¹²⁸ Her subsequent sartorial snobbery, akin to a personal Sumptuary Law, is manifest in her aversion to dancing with Mr Clintock, declaring, ‘I hate woollen cloth touching me’ (*DD*, 96). Her antipathy to Mr Lush, Grandcourt’s constant companion, is also in evidence as she goes to leave and demands her

¹²⁸ Suzanne Daly, ‘Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no.1. (2002), p.246.



35. From an English fashion magazine, 1864.
The ball-dresses have imposing crinolines with trains.

‘burnous’:¹²⁹

No sooner had she reached it, than Mr Lush was there, and had the burnous in his and: to annoy this supercilious young lady...and, holding up the garment close to Gwendolen, he said, ‘Pray, permit me?’ But she, wheeling away from him as if he had been a muddy hound, glided on to the ottoman.

Grandcourt takes control and wraps her in the garment, to which she dangerously ‘submit[s] very gracefully’ (*DD*, 102).

The introduction of Lydia Glasher, Grandcourt’s former mistress, who was to be his wife, at this juncture in the narrative is further ominous for Gwendolen. With Grandcourt on the threshold of proposing to her, her mirror-image, or rather that which she could become, appears to warn her away. Lydia is an equally ‘impressive’ woman whose ‘figure was slim and sufficiently tall’ and ‘her dress was soberly correct’, which suggests

¹²⁹ A mantle with a hood which was very fashionable at this time. Cunningham, p.209.

pseudo-mourning attire, symbolical of her social ostracism and fallen status (*DD*, 121).

The chapter in which she meets Gwendolen in the green arbour is heralded by prophetic lines of verse, most probably composed by Eliot herself as the authority is not cited:

I will not clothe myself in wreck – wear gems
Sawed from cramped finger-bones of women drowned;
Feel chilly vaporous hands of ireful ghosts
Clutching my necklace; trick my maiden breast
With orphans' heritage. Let your dead love
Marry its dead.

One can easily imagine the meeting of Gwendolen, attired in her white and green archery dress, casually arranging her scarf 'across her shoulders Scotch fashion' with this sombrely-dressed woman who 'must once have been exceedingly handsome' as she explains her past with Grandcourt and accordingly her present claim upon him (*DD*, 129, 127). Confused, the narrative returns to the gaming table at Leubronn in *media res* and has just succeeded in providing the reasons for Gwendolen's desperation to win and her dramatic flight to the continent, where she is accordingly described by Sir Hugo Mallinger as 'a perfect Diana' regardless of her apparent amorality (*DD*, 136).

Gwendolen Harleth is now temporarily pushed aside to make way for the entrance of another heroine: her possible moral-sartorial counterpart in the form of the diminutive and modest Mirah Lapidoth. As Grandcourt is the representative of the masculine

Victorian establishment so Mirah functions, like Lucy Deane in *The Mill on the Floss*, as the repository of the traditional feminine virtues of lovingness, submissiveness and forgiveness. However, in this novel, thankfully, she is not accorded an equal heroine status to Gwendolen Harleth as she is suitably marginalised in her petite beatification. Similarly though, she is first presented to the reader from the gaze of Daniel Deronda, described with a disturbing ‘childlike beauty’ and:

...a low slim figure, with most delicate little face, her dark curls pushed behind her ears under a black hat, a long woollen cloak over her shoulders....[A] poorly-dressed, melancholy[ic] wom[a]n....an onyx cameo: the brown-black drapery, the white face with small features...(DD, 159-60)

As she attempts to commit suicide there is an analogy with Mary Wollstonecraft that extends to her clothing only:

[She] hid her hat among the willows, and immediately took off her woollen cloak. Presently she seated herself and deliberately dipped the cloak in the water, holding it there a little while....By this time Deronda felt sure that she meant to wrap the cloak round her as a drowning-shroud...(DD, 161)

Similarly, Wollstonecraft famously attempted to drown herself a century earlier by thoroughly saturating her clothes before she jumped into the Thames in order to assist the process by weighing her down, as is detailed by Claire Tomalin in the biography:

It was a busy bridge, but she dodged from bay to bay in the darkness until she felt her clothes were completely soaked in rain. Then she climbed on to the railing, a flimsy structure of two wooden bars, not difficult even for a woman in cumbersome clothes to get over, and jumped.¹³⁰

Eliot meticulously records in a letter on 7 July 1871; the time she was writing *Daniel Deronda*:

...[just] as Mary Wollstonecraft did, wetted [her] garments well in the rain hoping to sink better when they plunged. [Wollstonecraft] tells how it occurred to her as she was walking in this damp shroud...¹³¹

The technique is the same, but the women are definitely not. Throughout the novel Mirah Lapidoth is detailed in the same manner as Dinah Morris and an early Dorothea Brooke as wearing the garments of religious 'Jewish' asceticism, though she eventually graduates from an initial poor, shabby black dress into the smart black of the middle-class lady by the close of the novel. Various described as small, childlike, and with 'delicate feet' which are almost seen as too small to 'sustain what is above them', it is as if Eliot, one third of the way through her novel is desperate to redress the unequal balance now in favour of Gwendolen's morally ambiguous heroine and her theatrical style of dress.

¹³⁰ Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974, rev. 1992), p.235. Interestingly, this is also exactly how Virginia Woolf killed herself in the River Ouse on 28 March 1941, as is discussed in Chapter Three.

¹³¹ George Eliot in a letter to Emanuel Deutsch, *Letters*, vol.V, p.160-1.

Mirah is placed under the protection of the Calvinist Meyrick family, whose women are always dressed in black or grey:

...[Mrs Meyrick wears] a quakerish net cap...her black dress, almost like a priest's cassock with its row of buttons, suited a neat figure hardly five feet high....The daughters were to match the mother....Everything about them was compact, from the firm coils of their hair *à la chinoise*,¹³² to their grey skirts in puritan nonconformity with fashion, which at that time would have demanded that four feminine circumferences should fill all the free space in the front parlour.
(DD, 167)

Their 'quakerish neatness' affects the way they treat and dress Mirah, who is regarded as a doll they can dress, and is referred to as 'Queen Budoor'¹³³ to Deronda's 'Prince Camaralzaman', 'pretty Jewess', 'petite ange', 'as a nun' 'Scott's Rebecca' and as 'the perfect cameo'. She is accordingly dressed in:

...Mab's black dress, her dark hair curling in fresh fibrils...[Mab was proud of the effect] produced by a tiny pair of felt slippers which she had rushed out to buy because there were no shoes in the house small enough for Mirah, whose borrowed dress ceased about her ankles and displayed cheap clothing that

¹³² In Chinese fashion.

¹³³ Queen Budoor and Prince Camaralzaman feature in *The Thousand Nights and One Night* (*The Arabian Nights* – a new translation from the Arabic by Edward William Lane appeared in 1865 with beautiful engravings by William Harvey) the story runs for about 160 nights. The Prince eventually marries Queen Budoor, thus completing the Meyrick girls' imaginative romance about Deronda.

moulding itself on her feet an adornment as choice as the sheaths of buds. The farthing buckles were bijoux. (*DD*, 178)

It seems possible that beside those overly small slippers belonging to Cinderella, the Chinese Manchu women's slippers would also fit this Eliotian model of perfect femininity, as she sits to sew and embroider regularly with the Meyrick sisters. Princess Halm-Eberstein, Daniel's estranged mother, later warns of the constrictions of her type, '...this is the Jewish woman; this is what you must be [restrained]...else [a woman's heart] must be pressed small, like Chinese feet...' (*DD*, 541).

As a former actress, Mirah professes that she has 'no notion of being anybody other than herself' and always went on stage in her 'plain dress' (*DD*, 181, 418). She is accordingly adorned in religious metaphors by Daniel who sees 'Her voice, her accent, her looks – all the sweet purity that clothed her as with a consecrating garment...' (*DD*, 176).

However, she is more like Gwendolen in her attitude to dress than would be first supposed. A debate about acquiring her a new dress for a concert in which she is to sing is revealing: Hans Meyrick tries to convince her that she should wear a smart 'black silk dress' and chastises her for playing 'the role of the poor Jewess'; but Mirah argues that she wants to wear her humbler 'black merino' with 'some white gloves and some new *bottines*'¹³⁴ and passively puts 'out her little foot, clad in the famous felt slippers' rather than putting it down (*DD*, 418-9). It is interesting therefore that the austere Mirah, just

¹³⁴ Ankle boots.

like her 'antithesis', Gwendolen Harleth, is acutely aware of the signals she sends out to the audience in her choice of garments:

'This would be a very good stage dress for me...in a part where I was to come on as a poor Jewess and sing to fashionable Christians.' (*DD*, 418)

She manipulates her style and its effect on her viewers accordingly, as Hans also recognises the powerful contrast this dress would make as she 'would stand out well among the fashionable chiffons' though he sees it as 'a little too theatrical'. Although she claims not to play parts and wants to be perceived as her true self, Mirah's anti-fashion statement is just as much of a sartorial manifesto and histrionic display as that of her Christian counterparts, including Gwendolen, and she even allows herself to be manipulated into wearing the silk dress by the Meyricks who claim it is what Deronda would want.

Returning to the 'real' heroine of the novel, who is threatened with the fate of a governess, and thus would have to give up her claim to green dresses and costume jewellery, but with the moral exception of the turquoise necklace, Gwendolen relents and decides to marry Grandcourt endowed with full knowledge of his past indiscretions. Destined for a life without ornamentation she states that she is 'going to take the veil' as she weeps her devalued status in the patriarchal society, and Eliot gently reminds the reader that 'Her griefs were feminine' (*DD*, 233, 235). A revelatory moment of her

insecurity comes as she is dressed in the required raiment of the governess standing before the mirror:

Dressed in black without a single ornament, and with the warm whiteness of her skin set off between the light-brown coronet of hair and her square cut bodice, she might have tempted an artist to try again the Roman trick of a statue in black, white and tawny marble...She thought, 'I am beautiful' – not exultingly, but with grave decision. Being beautiful was after all the condition on which she most needed external testimony. (*DD*, 214)

Like the tragic hamadryad Idione, she exists only in the reassurance of her external beauty. Her mirror-image is Lydia Glasher, the woman whom she could have become, or may still become: the faded society beauty and now the dignified fallen woman, waiting for her lover to return:

Her head, which, in spite of emaciation, had an ineffaceable beauty in the fine profile, crisp curves of hair, and clearly-marked eyebrows, rose impressively above her bronze-coloured silk and velvet, and the gold necklace which Grandcourt had first clasped around her neck years ago. Not that she had any pleasure in her toilet; her chief thought on seeing herself in the glass was 'How changed!' (*DD*, 290)

Through her engagement she becomes the temporary keeper of the Mallinger diamonds, which must now be returned to their legally rightful wearer, Grandcourt's new bride; though their morally rightful wearer is debatable. The diamonds are originally accordingly described:

[Lydia's] person suited diamonds and made them look as if they were worth some of the money given for them. These particular diamonds were not mountains of light – they were mere peas and haricots for the ears, neck, and hair; but they were worth some thousands. (*DD*, 289)

The symbolical, medicinal and mythical value of these stones can be seen when read in context with King's *Antique Gems*:

Diamond has the virtue of resisting all poisons, yet if taken inwardly is itself a deadly poison....It baffles magic arts, dispels vain fears, and gives success in law suits....It renders the wearer bold and virtuous.¹³⁵

In respect to the all-consuming Gwendolen the stones become poisonous and are delivered to her on her wedding night containing all the bitter venom of their morally rightful owner. They are as lethal as the sorceress Medea's gift to Creüsa on the night of her wedding to Jason, who promised to marry Medea, an analogy to which reference is later made by Mr Vandernoodt (*DD*, 371):

[Jason] banished Medea but she obtained a day's delay, which she spent preparing her revenge. She dipped a dress in poison, together with ornaments and jewels. She had these delivered to Creüsa; when Creüsa put them on she was encircled by a mysterious fire...¹³⁶

Similarly, a parcel arrives in Gwendolen's 'faint-green satin surroundings' on her wedding night accompanied by a note:

'These diamonds, which were once given with ardent love to Lydia Glasher, she passes on to you. You have broken your word to her, that you might possess what was hers....The willing wrong you have done me will be your curse.' (DD, 302-3)

'Spell-bound', 'petrified white' with terror and 'caught up in the great draught of flame' she drops them on the floor as 'she was feeling ill', as the narrator qualifies with sartorial authority that 'Truly here were poisoned gems, and the poison had entered into this poor young creature' (DD, 303). Not only are Gwendolen's green dresses toxic, but now the wrongly reclaimed jewels are too. Jewels as the houses of spirits, feeling and memory are used to great effect in Eliot's dramatic poem *The Spanish Gypsy* (1868) in which the beautiful Fedalma is about to be married to Duke Silva, whom she loves but feels trapped and stifled by. On the night before the wedding, he adorns her in all the jewels she will inherit as his wife, but instead of rejoicing she feels only a sad empathy with the gemstones:

¹³⁵ *Antique Gems*, p.419.

‘Their prisoned souls are throbbing like my own...[and] ache from their intenseness, yearn to burst the wall, poor, poor gems!’ (Book One)

Gwendolen’s illegitimate jewellery represents both the chosen regal artifice and indirectly the humble honesty of her character; for her capacity for moral growth is signified and enforced by the reintroduction of the turquoise necklace. Although submissively she ‘yield[s] up her hat and mantle’ and is vehemently instructed by Grandcourt to wear the diamonds, she chooses daringly to defy him by incorporating the ‘redeemed’, symbolical turquoise stones into her outfit at the ball. Conscious of and uncomfortable with the ‘transforming process’ she is undergoing in becoming Grandcourt’s wife she no longer kisses her ‘fortunate image’ in the mirror. Initially she comes down dressed for the ball, without the diamonds:

...dressed in white, with only a streak of gold, and a pendant of emeralds, which Grandcourt had given her, round her neck, and little emerald stars in her ears.
(*DD*, 365)

Gwendolen Grandcourt is metaphorically trying to be true to her former self; attired in green gemstones and chaste feminine colours. She claims in vain that the diamonds do not suit her, she is forced by him to wear them as a passive and adorned object for his display, and he fastens them round her neck like a strangling choker, with his cold,

¹³⁶ Pierre Grimal, *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. Stephen Kershaw, trans. A. R. Maxwell-Hyslop (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991) p.260.

deathly hands. He asks with the tone of a command, 'What makes you so cold?'...when {Grandcourt] had fastened the last earring. 'Pray put plenty of furs on. I hate to see a woman come into a room looking frozen' (*DD*, 366).

Ironically, the brilliants suit her 'perfectly' but regardless of this she turns to her own, unique bejewelled religion as indicated by the turquoises:

Without the aid of sacred ceremony and costume, her feelings had turned [Deronda], only a few years older than herself, into a priest. (*DD*, 369)

The turquoises stand outside the classical myth of poisonous destruction that is suggested by the diamonds. They are linked to salvation and redemption and they suggest a promised land, the values of which Gwendolen can aspire to:

[the turquoise necklace] stands for a hidden capacity, present in everyone, for relying on qualities of greater permanence to cope with individual human faithlessness (one's own or another's) as much as with the obstinacy of withered social norms.¹³⁷

The Etruscan necklace is Gwendolen's spiritual rosary, her physical link to Deronda and a better future, and she wears it in penitential remembrance of her humbling by Deronda at Leubronn. She wraps it crudely (though with the unity of a holy trinity) 'thrice round her wrist' as a bracelet, and though it mars her regal façade it also metaphorically

counters the poisonous power of the diamonds: providing a powerful moral-sartorial contrast (*DD*, 377). Ready for meeting Daniel again:

Gwendolen was wrapped in the lightest, softest of white woollen burnouses, under which her hands were hidden. While [Deronda] was gone she had drawn on her glove, which was fastened with a lace ruffle, and when she put her hand up to take the glass...[the necklace-bracelet], which in its triple winding adapted itself clumsily to her wrist, was necessarily conspicuous. Grandcourt saw it, and saw it was attracting Deronda's notice. (*DD*, 380)

The signals and significance to the hero, though not immediately obvious to Grandcourt, are a powerful enough gesture to warrant his attention as he commands her to take off 'that hideous thing' (*DD*, 381). Refusing, she returns to her room as he follows and rebukes her for making a purely visual 'spectacle of [her] self' (*DD*, 384). Gwendolen is subsequently reduced to mere ornamental commodity in her newly-wed status as 'She sat in her splendid attire, like a white image of helplessness, and he seemed to gratify himself with looking at her' (*DD*, 384). Without knowing the full story of the diamonds, Deronda, meeting Gwendolen in the library, prophetically comments, 'That is the bitterest of all – to wear the yoke of our own wrong-doing'.

The wrongful Mrs Mallinger Grandcourt must thereby wear the chains of penance about her and throughout the remainder of her marriage or life: for in choosing the diamonds over the turquoises she has submitted to a cruel fate, though in stubbornly refusing to take

¹³⁷ Fernando, p.58.

off the turquoises she indicates an instinctual refusal to surrender her potential for moral growth, even in a world of growing objectification and materialism. Under Deronda's tutelage she learns to look inward, and even forward to further self-knowledge and maturity, although the extent to which this is completely achieved is ambiguously open-ended. As to how far the poison of the diamonds has worked its way inside her circulation depends on her capacity to fight it and survive, though this cannot fully happen whilst Grandcourt is still alive. At the concert at the Klesmers' in Park Lane she is doubly dosed and doused, but 'magnificent in her pale green velvet and poisoned diamonds...' (*DD*, 475).

Depicted again in marked contrast to the humble Jewish singer, Mirah, attired in her modest black silk, makes Gwendolen for the first time feel that 'she was one of the ordinary crowd in silk and gems' (*DD*, 476). Though seen as a 'Vandyke duchess of a beauty' by Hans Meyrick, she is rejected by Daniel for Mirah, and alternately pitied by both of them in her sartorial splendour:

It was like a new kind of strange-experience to [Mirah] to be close to genuine grand ladies with genuine brilliants and complexions, and they impressed her vaguely as coming out of some unknown drama, in which their parts perhaps got more tragic as they went on. (*DD*, 478)

Gwendolen's tragic costume drama is evident to the reader, yet still she maintains her bejewelled façade for London's glittering *beau monde* and she conceals 'her hidden

wound' with 'silk and gems' (DD, 482). Such is her increasing pain and love for Deronda that she cannot even flirt with her fan as is *de rigeur*, but instead she looks, not at him, but at the 'handle of the fan which she held closed': the cold, serpentine beauty of the coquette is transformed into the modesty of a warm, inner beauty (DD, 481). The new garments of her dawning spirituality are accordingly depicted as '...suddenly from out the grey sombre morning there came a stream of sunshine, wrapping her in warmth and light where she sat in stony stillness' (DD, 503).



36. Gwendolen (Garai – again an anomaly in red) reluctantly dances with Grandcourt (Bonneville).

Even as Grandcourt threatens to consume his ornamental possession, and thus literally encapsulate the essence of Veblen's economic theory of conspicuous consumption, she fights inwardly against the current and maintains the minutiae of her elaborate façade: the Amazonian rider moves from a pleasant anticipation of mounting to the uncomfortable realisation of being mounted, and she redresses herself in her 'riding dress' to ride out with her domineering husband:

She rang the bell for the maid, and went with the usual care through her change of toilet...she would let him see in effect the very opposite of what he intended....She rejected a handkerchief on which her maid had by mistake put the wrong scent – a scent that Grandcourt once objected to...Gwendolen would not have liked to be an object of disgust to this husband whom she hated....And still Mrs Grandcourt was outwardly in the same place, presenting herself as she was expected to do in the accustomed scenes, with the accustomed grace, beauty, and costume. (*DD*, 515-8)

Her precise role-play puts him metaphorically on ‘the wrong scent’ as he attempts to treat her with the same aggressive contempt as he does his dogs and horses.

However, internally, supported by external props, she attempts to change and she gathers her mythical powers to summon Deronda dressed ‘...rather queenly in her air as she stood in her white lace and green leaves...’ (*DD*, 519). Attired as a woodland goddess, she tries to ‘compel him to do what she pleased’ though not without some calculated costume changes. In an attempt to be de-sexed and chaste she uses the colour black in a similar manner to the Poysers in their social shame, and Mrs Bulstrode’s pseudo-mourning for her husband’s crime, and even perhaps in imitation of her counterpart, Mirah, though the anticipated sombre and serious effect is unconsciously undermined by her beauty:

...a long mirror reflected her in her black dress, chosen in the early morning with a half-admitted reference to this hour. But above this black dress her head on its

white pillar of a neck showed to advantage. Some consciousness of this made her turn hastily and hurry to the boudoir, where again there was a glass, but also, tossed over a chair, a large piece of black lace which she snatched and tied over the crown of her hair so as completely to conceal her neck, and leave only her face looking out from the black frame....[a] manifest contempt of appearance...(DD, 520)

As Daniel's neophyte she asks for advice on how to change, not just in her dress, but her life, but is so pained by his physical withdrawal from her that she 'was hurting herself with the jewels that glittered on her tightly-clasped fingers pressed against her heart'. This bejewelled self-flagellation wards off the poisonous toxins at their core, as she looks to all intents and purposes 'like a nun' framed in her black habit' and Daniel tragically regards her as he leaves 'with a look of sorrow such as he might have bent on the last struggle of life in a beloved object'.

The formerly powerful moon-goddess' strength wanes, as the Princess Halm-Eberstein, Daniel's mother relates her torturous life and his real roots to him. With underlying significance for Gwendolen's weakening position, she declares, 'When a woman's will is strong as the man's who wants to govern her, half her strength must be concealment' (DD, 542).

At sea in Grandcourt's yacht, the former goddess of the tides, surrounded by mirrors 'behold[s] the glory of the sea and sky' and is weary of life:

...what odious familiarities they had, what smirks, what modes of flourishing
their handkerchiefs, what costume, what lavender-water, what bulging
eyes....(DD, 574)

As Grandcourt's 'Madonna Pia' she has be bought and is owned by he who put the ring
upon her finger (DD, 572):

'Remember me, who am La Pia, then.

Siena made me and Maremma 'unmade: .

He who knows who had ringed me with his jewel, when

The vows of marriage we together said.¹³⁸

Like Dante's lost souls who die violent deaths and live in *Purgatorio*, Gwendolen lives
her death-in-life appropriately shrouded as '[she] lay looking very white amidst her white
drapery' (DD, 578).

Internally she thaws as 'there was a change in her like that of a glacier after sunset', but
she is still 'declared to be like a statue' to superficial observers (DD, 581, 583). Returning
to her yacht-prison as the moon-tide controller, she appears to conjure the storm that is
'the devil's own work' and which kills Grandcourt, but she emerges from the wreckage
that is her marriage weak and frail:

¹³⁸ Dante Alighieri, *Divina Comedia*, trans. Mark Musa (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 'Purgatorio', v.
133-6, p.222.

Gwendolen half raising herself on her hands, by her own effort, under the heavy covering of tarpaulin and pea-jackets – pale as one of the sheeted dead, shivering, with wet hair streaming, and a wild amazed consciousness in her eyes...her wet clothes clinging about her limbs, and adding to the impediment of her weakness. (DD, 587)

Until Deronda has been to see her she refuses to take off the heavy clothes: a weighty visible penance of which he is aware. She remains the untouchable goddess, with choked, or rather poisoned, emotions, who outwardly appears in her heavenly raiment:

She was seated with a white shawl wrapped round her...her long hair was gathered up and coiled carefully, and, through all, the blue stars in her ears had kept their place. (DD, 590)

He concludes that she is definitely beautiful to him now and thus answers his initial question as Gwendolen is ethereally ‘sheathed’ in her white shawl, and looking ‘like the unhappy ghost’ of her former self. She asks him if he recognises her, to which he responds mournfully, ‘Yes....The outside change is not great’ (DD, 600).

Though the last book of Eliot’s novel attempts to replace Gwendolen with Mirah, the change of heroines does not sit comfortably and has distinct resonance with George Henry Lewes’ suggested change to the ending of *Adam Bede*, by ending the life of its

most vibrant female character. Sacrificed for the model of Victorian femininity, Gwendolen's literary life ends as Mirah takes up 'the bridal veil' to marry Daniel under 'the velvet canopy' of Jewish tradition (*DD*, 693). Gwendolen is allowed to re-emerge in the *dénouement* of the novel only when she has been subdued by a 'tragic transformation':

Gwendolen was come in, looking changed, not only by her mourning dress, but by a more satisfied quietude of expression. (*DD*, 656)

Armed with the mantra, 'I shall live. I shall be better' it would appear that the toxins have been warded off and she is allowed to live, though is effectively damaged goods (*DD*, 692). Attired for life in the outfit of mourning, all jewels cast aside except her wedding ring, she is visually arresting. As a morally-sartorial heroine Gwendolen Harleth is an ambiguous amalgamation of her predecessors, but as a piece of literary portraiture she is, in the words of Henry James 'a masterpiece'.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Henry James, 'Daniel Deronda: A Conversation', in *George Eliot: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. George R. Creeger (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p.166.



Chapter Three

A Woolf in Sheep’s Clothing:

The Sartorial Fabrications of Virginia Woolf

Complex Clothes and the ‘Clothes Complex’

No woman ever cared less about her appearance...

(‘Virginia Woolf: Lady Oxford’s Tribute’ *The Times*, 9 April 1941)¹

I’m a failure as a writer. I’m out of fashion: old: shan’t do any better: have no headpiece... (Virginia Woolf, *Diary*, 8 April 1920, ‘10 minutes to 11am’)

Maternal and Paternal Inheritance

In her profoundly painful autobiographical essay ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (1940) written one year prior to her dramatic suicide Virginia Woolf describes the aesthetic visual importance of her first memories and also relates two influential incidents in her early years which contributed to her lifelong neuroses, fragile self-perception, and dysmorphic attitude to her own body and personal appearance, and all of which involve dominant details of dress. However, the sartorial recollections are used for strikingly different purposes in relation to her personal and literary ontology:²

I begin : the first memory.

This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother’s dress;...and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very

¹ *The Times*, 9 April 1941, p.7. Adeline Virginia Woolf (nee Stephen) committed suicide on 28 March 1941 aged 59 by walking into the nearby River Ouse in a fur coat whose pockets were laden with rocks. Her body was found three weeks later on 18 April 1941. The act is highly reminiscent of both Mary Wollstonecraft’s famous attempt, and of Mirah Lapidoth the heroine of George Eliot’s final novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

² ‘A Sketch of the Past’ in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, (Sussex University Press/Chatto and Windus, 1976), pp.64-137. In reference to Woolf herself: when called Virginia Stephen I am alluding to her maiden years 1882-1912, until she marries Leonard Woolf; and hereafter she is called Virginia Woolf until her death in 1941. In general the preferred deference will be to her married/authorial name.

close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones...³

A few pages later she recollects and elaborates upon this 'ecstatic' image or memory, increasing its personal significance:

My first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to me as I pressed my cheek against it. Then I see her in her white dressing gown on the balcony; and the passion flower with the purple star on its petals.⁴

Artistic and personal rapture, akin to spiritual reverence merge, as do art (the dress itself) and nature (the flowers and her mother) with the maternal encapsulated in the floral dress:

Flower patterns, especially seem to stand for femininity; and they come in as many varieties as the women who wear them. The blooms may be tiny and delicate or huge and bold to suit a range of female charm from Little Nell to Carmen.⁵

Thus the early influence of a feminine aesthetics, vibrantly represented here through clothing, combines vivid colours, touch and memory: dress is a synaesthetic delight, chronological marker and mnemonic catalyst, and it is this cornucopia of functions which translate into her fiction. Clothing references, metaphors, and magical sartorial

³ *MOB*, p.64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.81.

transformations adorn her writings, indeed they are often woven into the very fabric of the narrative: knitting together, sewing up, and embroidering the prose with the profound realisation of the importance of the connection of everyday objects, be they shoes, socks, shawls, green dresses, tweed suits, with the people who own, wear or see them; and these images are indelibly rooted in the maternal.

The ethereal vision of Julia Stephen resplendent in her white dressing gown, is uplifted to great heights both literally and by nostalgic recollection as she personifies the idealised ‘Angel in the House’ of the Victorian age. Her literary counterpart Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) is also suitably adorned as a Demeter-style maternal-earth goddess posthumously crossing the fields of Elysium with a ‘wreath of white flowers’ encircling her head. These recalled pictures of Julia are also reminiscent of the sentimentalised Victorian portrait of the young Mrs Rose Pargiter dressed in ‘white muslin holding a basket of flowers on her lap smil[ing] down at [the future generations]’ which persistently haunts the collective familial memory of *The Years* (1937).⁶ The image of Virginia Woolf’s beautiful and elegant Victorian mother pervades her fiction as something to be both revered and feared, but always connected to a positive sense of aesthetics: colourful and well-dressed if sometimes eccentrically so. Julia Jackson (Virginia’s mother) was the daughter of one of the famously handsome Pattle sisters of aristocratic French descent and with lavish colonial connections. Consequently it seems that whenever Virginia needs to recall her mother she is always associated with clothing and beautiful objects, as if she was nothing more than an ornamental bauble herself, ‘...her square-tipped hands with their rings

⁵ Lurie, p.210.

⁶ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, ed. Stella McNichol, with notes by Hermione Lee, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p.196; Woolf, Virginia, *The Years*, ed. Hermione Lee, (OUP, 1992), p.36. All subsequent references to these texts will be to these editions.

and silver bracelets, rubbed swiftly together or raised in gesticulation as she spoke'.⁷

This hypnotic, romantic and artistic power over the young Virginia Stephen is particularly evident:

She had three rings; a diamond ring, an emerald ring, and an opal ring. My eyes used to fix themselves upon the lights in the opal as it moved across the page of the lesson book when she taught us, and I was glad that she left it to me (I gave it to Leonard). Also I hear the tinkle of her bracelets, made of twisted silver...as she went about the house; especially as she came up at night to see if we were asleep, holding a candle shaded...⁸

The unification of images here combines the sartorially linked themes that recur in her writing: creativity (the textbook), the maternal (security and fecundity) and the actual physical sensuality of the clothing/jewellery itself (aesthetic sensibility). This quotation further recalls Mrs Ramsay as she allows her children the treat of 'choos[ing] the jewellery she was to wear' for parties, and Virginia's excitement is relayed through Rose Ramsay who deliciously procrastinates; toying gently with each precious item in turn, as if part of her mother and not merely a frivolous adornment:⁹

She let Rose, particularly take up this and that, and hold her jewels against the black dress, for this little ceremony of choosing jewels, which was gone through every night, was what Rose liked best, she knew. (*TTL*, 89)

⁷ Stella Duckworth, *Diary*, 1893, quoted in Lee, p.82.

⁸ *MOB*, pp.80-1.

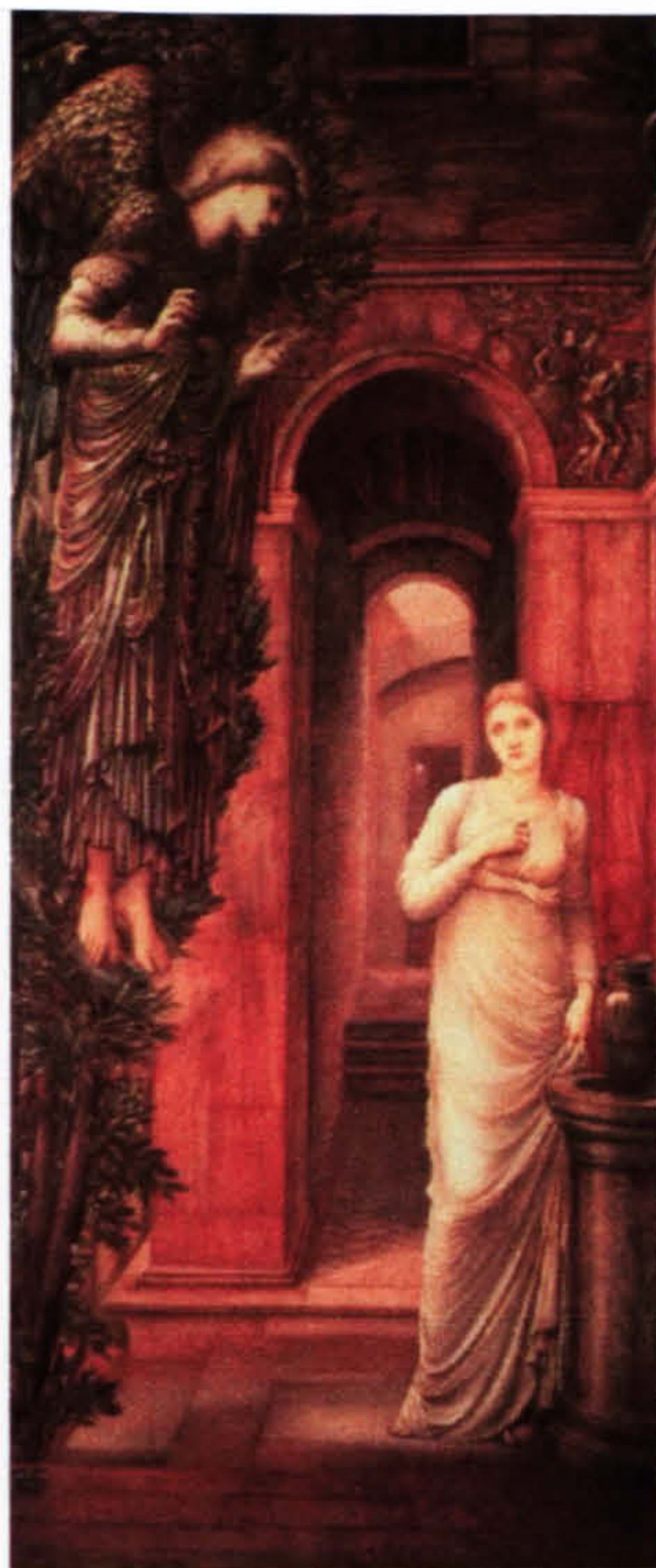
⁹ *MOB*, p.95.

These ‘snatched moments’ of sartorial ritual were ‘soothing’ and ‘exciting’ to the young Virginia Stephen, and decidedly dissimilar from the puritan defences of Dorothea Brooke as she reluctantly chooses pieces of her mother’s jewellery with her sister Celia in the opening scene of *Middlemarch* (1871-2). Woolf appears to see no need to condemn these feminine pleasures and recurrently uses them as positive images in her writing, as a crucial part of her aesthete’s soul.

The reader of Woolf’s diaries and letters does not so much hear Julia as see her. Somewhat muted, her power is through gesture, objects, the romanticised image of aesthetic creativity and Victorian motherhood. This is overt in the Burne-Jones’ Pre-Raphaelite painting the *Annunciation* (1879) in which he depicts her as the young Virgin, and as this model for divine maternity she holds one hand to her breasts, one to her frail draperies, and with her smooth helmet of parted hair and huge eyes she is presided over by an angel (37). Julia Stephen is even beatified by her second husband the famous Victorian man of letters, Sir Leslie Stephen, for all his agnosticism, in the *Mausoleum Book* written after her death, where she is continually referred to as ‘saint’, though this idolisation of women was a wholly secular manifestation of his positivist Humanism which adopted Raphael’s *Madonna di San Sisto* as a common symbol of Humanity.¹⁰ Virginia further compounded this religiose vision by referring to her as, ‘...the most beautiful Madonna and at the same time the most complete woman of the world’.¹¹

¹⁰ See T. R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (CUP, 1986), pp.144-6.

¹¹ *Diary*, 4 May 1928, III. p.183.



37. Edward Burne Jones' *Annunciation* (1879).

Virginia and Vanessa Stephen (later Bell) inherited this ethereal beauty from their mother; throughout their lives they wore similar clothes and clothing styles and their image of fragile femininity was oft remarked upon by those who saw them, and posited in sharp contrast to their fierce 'androgynous' intellect: 'In their white dresses and large hats, with parasols in their hands, their beauty literally took one's breath away'.¹² Clive Bell (Vanessa's husband) evokes his romanticised vision of 'Virginia the Virgin' suitably adorned with sartorial symbolism, '...with soft deep eyes and in their depth the last secrets of things.... You wore a white muslin dress and floating over it a long white ghost-like cloak'.¹³

Like her mother she is all too often immortalised by mystical and ethereal

¹² Leonard Woolf, *Papers*, University of Sussex, pp.182-3.

¹³ Clive Bell to Virginia Stephen, 14 Feb 1909, *Monks House Papers*, Sussex.



38a. *Virginia Woolf* by G. C. Beresford (1903).



38b. *Julia Jackson* by Julia Margaret Cameron, her famous aunt (1865-6).

memories and accordingly draped in feminine sartorial aesthetics (**38a** and **38b**): her likeness can still be seen on the mosaic floor in the foyer of the National Gallery in London, holding a pen and wearing a toga amid a gathering of gods, goddesses and muses. Virginia Woolf the writer is generally described as having been beautiful, but mostly in the style of her niece, Angelica Bell's retrospective description:

Virginia...was shy and awkward, often silent, or, if in the mood to talk, would leap into fantasy and folly and terrify the innocent and unprepared. This combination of limpid beauty and demon's tongue proved fatal to those too timid to respond.¹⁴

Cecil Beaton, to her horror and indignation, included her in his compendium of famous (and of course attractive) women *The Book of Beauty* (1930) and rather perceptively remarks:

Mrs Virginia Woolf is one of the most gravely distinguished-looking women I have ever seen....She has all the chaste and sombre beauty of village school-mistresses, housekeepers and nuns, and one cannot imagine her being powdered and painted....so sensitively nervous and with the poignant beauty of the lady in the faded photograph in the oval frame.....Her fine skin is parchment-coloured....Her lank hair and aristocratic wrists are of a supreme delicacy, and one imagines her spending eternities of dreamy leisure sewing and gazing out of the window. She wears cameo brooches and cotton gloves, and hatpins, and exudes an atmosphere of musk and old lace and the rustle and scratch of stiff ivy-coloured taffeta, but her old-fashioned dowdiness is but a conscious and literary game of pretence, for she is alertly contemporary...¹⁵



39. *Virginia Woolf* by Maurice Beck for *Vogue*, in her mother's dress (1926)

¹⁴ *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs, Commentary and Criticism*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum, (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p.174. Hereafter referred to as *Bloomsbury*.

¹⁵ Cecil Beaton, *The Book of Beauty*, (London: Duckworth, 1930), p.37. A furious Virginia immediately wrote 'A Protest' to *The Times* (who rejected it) and then to the *Nation and Athenæum* which claimed that she was made 'victim' of a 'highly disagreeable' form of book-making, especially being included without her consent: but was this a literary or personal objection? 'Letters', *Nation*, 29 Nov, 20 Dec 1930.

If Virginia knew the power of her appearance she certainly did not care to acknowledge it, but the ultimate accolade must have been a photo-shoot for her inclusion in the women's fashion magazine *Vogue* in 1926 at the behest of its then editor the socialite Dorothy Todd (39). In the recent biography by Hermione Lee she is described as, 'looking ravishing in her mother's dress' which is the same 'lace-edged dress' worn to one of Vanessa's parties at Gordon Square in January 1923: a literal and fitting sartorial tribute to her maternal aesthetic heritage.¹⁶

This inheritance was made literal when after Julia's unexpected death in 1895 Woolf was bequeathed, 'an opal ring to Virginia...[and] Irish lace' and though the opal ring eventually became a tie-pin for Leonard she kept items of her mother's clothing to adorn herself.¹⁷ It would also seem that Woolf inherited a love of dressing-up and socialising from Julia Jackson and the Pattle Sisters; whether it was for private tableaux and theatricals at Hyde Park Gate as a child, or later at Charleston, her sister's country retreat. Woolf liked to perform for an audience; the most notorious public example of this was 'The Dreadnought Hoax' on 7 February 1910 which saw her (and other members of the Stephen family) dressed up daringly, with Virginia as the Abyssinian 'Prince Mendax' for which she was labelled, 'a common woman of the town' by the Navy for cross-dressing and thereby transgressing established

¹⁶ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, (London, Chatto and Windus, 1996), p.470, p.466; Woolf, Virginia, 'A Bloomsbury Party' pp.23-4, *Bloomsbury*, 'I was wearing my mother's laces, looked at X's Jerboa face in the old looking glass...' p.24. However, Woolf was criticised for appearing and writing a series of articles for the new fashion magazine; the American essayist Logan Pearsall Smith lamented he was 'grieved to see Bloomsbury descend from the heights and scatter its pearls in Mayfair,' (LPS to VW, 26 January 1925, Monk's House Papers, Sussex) to which Woolf contemptuously retorted, '...it's your fault if you conform to the stays and the petticoats', VW to LPS, 28 January 1925, *Letters*, II. 1527, p.157.

¹⁷ 'Julia Stephen's Will' as quoted in Lee, pp.47-8.

gender-boundaries. She was: ‘...blackened up, with a moustache, flowing robes and a turban...[and] the most complete sets of nigger lips’.¹⁸

This penchant for the sartorially dramatic saw her transformed at various parties and masquerades: as Cleopatra at the Botanical Gardens, ‘in long flowing robes with her hair down, she looked more like Isolde,’ certainly Lady Ottoline Morrell, one of their party, was ‘disappointed’ with the incongruity of such a costume and character for Virginia, criticising, ‘[Cleopatra] whose qualities, as I imagined then, were just those that Virginia did not possess’.¹⁹ However, there was nonetheless something of the exhibitionist, if not the vibrant artist, in her and Vanessa’s choice of costume for a Post-Impressionist Ball in 1911. Despite protesting to her friend Molly McCarthy, ‘I have to dress up again as a South-Sea savage....It’s an awful bore’, once dressed in brightly coloured materials she seems to rejoice in the titillating and ‘indecent’ details, of their primitive adornments,²⁰

...made for natives in Africa with which we draped ourselves...we wore brilliant flowers and beads, we browned our legs and arms and had very little on beneath our draperies.²¹

Apparent disparity of the costume with her character certainly does not appear to stop her choosing to dress up throughout her life, primarily as key female historical and literary characters: the transvestite Viola, ‘half dressed’ for a *Twelfth Night* Party

¹⁸ *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Nigel Nicolson, in six volumes (London: Hogarth, 1975), VW to Ethel Smith, 6 Oct 1932, V, 2640, p.109; Lee, p.283.

¹⁹ Lee, p.238., *Ottoline Morrell: The Early Memoirs*, ed. Robert Gathorne-Hardy, (London: Faber, 1964) pp.178-81.

²⁰, AVS to Molly McCarthy, *Letters* I. 559 [March 1911], p.455.

²¹ Quoted in Lee, p.291.

hosted by Maynard Keynes at Gordon Square in 1923²²; and also as Queen Victoria in a costume that would be reused in the historical pageant in *Between the Acts* (1941) in which key female figures in history dominate the scenes and which she herself wore to her niece's 14th birthday party in 1933. She added, 'I like masks...I like the disorientation they give to my feelings'.²³ Virginia Woolf exalts the unsettling power of sartorial transformation in both her life and her fiction, especially in *Orlando* (1928) and her final novel *Between the Acts* (1941) in which theatrical masquerade and transvestism are the central polemical themes. With the help of her maternal legacy she seems to recognise and celebrate clothing's subversive power: its ability to create a 'world upside down' and thus provide a medium for female emancipation; and also its ability to provide a temporary escape from herself, as well as paying tribute to its multitudinous sensual and aesthetical values.²⁴

If these were Woolf's sartorial social strengths then she also recognised their salience and the ultimate contradiction with her nature as a whole:

There is, I suppose a very different side in us; my social side, [father's] intellectual side. This social side is very genuine in me. Nor do I think it reprehensible. *It is a piece of jewellery I inherit from my mother* – a joy in laughter, something that is stimulated, not selfish wholly or vainly, by contact with my friends. And then ideas leap in me.²⁵ (Italics my own)

²² *Diary*, 6 January 1923, III, p.3.

²³ *Diary*, 3 January 1933, IV, p.139.

²⁴ Terry Castle, *Civilisation and Masquerade: The Carnavalesque in the Eighteenth Century Culture and Fiction*, (Stanford University Press, 1986). Especially chapters 1, 2 and 3 on the nature of masquerade and dressing up as a social travesty.

²⁵ *Diary*, Thursday 28 June 1923, II, p.250.

Self-aware, Woolf realises the dichotomy within herself in relation to clothing and society: it is split between her mother's aristocratic aesthetic sense and her father's almost rigid spartan asceticism. Like her literary foremothers Jane Austen, George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë whose frivolous passions were curtailed by filial duties, the dominance of the Victorian patriarch was manifest in sartorial restraint and a hatred of conspicuous consumption. Those temporary instances of social confidence exhibited in her love of costume: her ability to put on her maternal 'grandfather's airs' and not be intimidated in a London clothing store when she had no purse and thus got off without paying for the materials; and her fierce sartorial support for a friend who was criticised for her dress at a party, are countered by the almost puritanical restraint of her paternal inheritance.²⁶

Sir Leslie Stephen was the stereotypical patriarch of the Victorian family; sending his sons to university whilst 'the daughters of educated men' were left to their own intellectual devices, but were expected to conform to the daily household duties and social visits that were part of the female timetable. Recumbent in his old rocking chair wearing a fez, his feet in the air, retreating to his upstairs study, he provided the 'brain of the house'.²⁷ The fez is a particularly symbolic sartorial signifier that is also used in Woolf's fiction to adorn the head of another Victorian patriarch, Colonel Pargiter in *The Years*, and who is described by his eldest daughter Eleanor in, '...a red smoking-cap with an absurd tassel' even as her own life as a woman is restricted by his very existence (TY, 44). This type of indoor headgear is, '[A] red hat of felt, popular in the

²⁶ The friend was Molly MacCarthy, who had been criticised for her dress at a party, Virginia the artist reassured and retorted, 'I thought it [the dress] a mixture of snowdrop and viper: a green viper...v. effective and chaste....So don't go and change it. Don't be downed by those pert misses'. *Letters*, 22nd Nov 1924, 1513, p.143.

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Leslie Stephen', 28 Nov 1932, *The Times*, in *Collected Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf, 4 vols. (London: Chatto and Windus, 1966-7), IV, p.76.

near East....A gentleman's fez has a black or blue tassel,' and is especially apt for the man whose household is run according to the notion of separate spheres; as the ladies of the house were ritually excluded from certain rooms for the men's after-dinner conversation, drink and smoke.²⁸ The Colonel and Sir Leslie thus embody the exclusivity of the gentleman's club, both socially and privately.

Sir Leslie's sartorial asceticism is deftly summed up in Virginia's recollection of his persistent wearing of a 'grey tweed coat': the literal fabric of the nineteenth-century country gent; and also by what she describes, perhaps metaphorically, as, 'my father's clergyman's collar'.²⁹ Dressed with the reverence of a biblical patriarch his accessories become the literary relics of a bygone age in her fiction. Woolf mocks the deification of the Victorian man of letters in her second novel *Night and Day* (1919) where the heroine, Katherine Hilberry (based on Vanessa) is a slave to her famous grandfather's memory as a writer and poet, and daily helps her mother to compose his biography at the expense of her own life-story and passions. Both mother and daughter are even sidelined to the importance of her grandfather's slippers when an American visitor treats them as sacred relics,

'What! His very own slippers!' Laying aside the manuscript, she hastily grasped the old shoes, and remained for a moment dumb in contemplation of them.³⁰

²⁸ Kybalová, pp.362-3.

²⁹ Sir Leslie (1832-1904) was educated at Eton and Trinity Hall, Cambridge, where he became a tutor, having taken orders. From his family he inherited a strong tradition of Evangelicalism and muscular Christianity...Stephen's reading of J. S. Mill, Comte, and Kant inclined him to scepticism, and by 1865 he had abandoned all belief in even the broadest of Broad Church doctrine. So his dog-collar was almost certainly a relic from the past.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, intro. Jo Shapcott and Angelica Garnett (London: Random House, 2000), p.303. All subsequent references will be to this edition.

This touch of bathetic amusement is underscored with a touch of resentment and sadness, as chained to his memory and the canonical reverence for male writers. Katherine/Woolf finds her own passion curtailed by the demands and duties of the daughter in the Victorian household. It is only when Woolf is freed by the death of her father in 1904 that she can fully pursue her writing career and suitably replace the dominance of the Victorian male writer and critic with the relics of her literary foremothers. On a literary pilgrimage to the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth eight months after her father's death she notes how she felt a (similar?) veneration for the immortality of the clothing left behind by the writer Charlotte Brontë as she clearly associates the person with their sartorial belongings:

...But the most touching case – so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze - is that which contains the little personal relics, the dresses and shoes of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. Her shoes and thin muslin dress have outlived her.³¹

Considering the relics of her father: the fez, tweed suit and clergyman's collar as symbols of female repression she excavates the delicate personal and artistic adornments of her literary foremothers and upholds them in her fiction.

³¹ *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, ed. Michèle Barrett (London: The Women's Press, 1979), p.123.

The puritanical 'quakerish greys' of the Brontës and Eliot, and of Virginia's own clothing complexities are fully realised in the austere Stephen side of the family, as Woolf recalls her 'Quaker Aunt' Milly.³² Caroline Emilia Stephen in her humble 'grey alpaca' becomes a dominant image and early influence in the memoirs. As the author of the philanthropic *Quaker Strongholds* (1891) she becomes a presiding literary influence for two reasons: her intellectualism in spite of her Victorian upbringing; and her famous £2,500 gross legacy to Virginia, which was made legendary as the crucial, 'five hundred pounds a year and a room of one's own,' which would enable the 'daughters of educated men' to become fully independent in *A Room of One's Own* (1928).³³ 'The Quaker' or 'nun' as she is repeatedly called was perhaps not such a conformist to the Stephen self-control and female duty as she initially appears as 'a woman in a grey habit' and in her chosen 'nunnery of one'.³⁴ Dressed as the quintessential Victorian spinster she is used as a model for philosophical old Lucy Swithin in *Between the Acts* who constantly plays with her crucifix as a comforting strategy, but yet acknowledges it as a relic of a bygone age, recalling the confines of the age of the crinoline with wistful remembrance, but also a distanced and critical freedom. Though Quentin Bell in his biography of his aunt concludes that Virginia's dutiful visits to Aunt Milly were 'a dreadful bore' there seems to be something of a quiet reverence in her memoirs and letters for this marginalised Victorian stereotype, who almost certainly defied the expectations of her brother and his male descendants in leaving her legacy primarily to her niece,

³² *Letters*, AVS to Madge Vaughan [July 1906], I. 275, p.229.

³³ Virginia Stephen, 'Caroline Emilia Stephen', *Guardian*, 21 April 1909, in *Essays*, I, PP.267-9.

³⁴ Lee, p.67.

...she now sits in her garden surrounded with roses, in voluminous shawls and draperies, and accumulates and pours forth wisdom upon all subjects...she is a kind of modern prophetess.³⁵

Stephen's asceticism is equally blended with the eccentric artist, and in a family tree dominated by important literary figures such as William Thackeray and Sir Leslie Stephen, the women seem to subvert and re-direct the creative influence. The dislike of conspicuous consumption assumed by Julia Jackson Duckworth Stephen upon her second marriage saw her adopt a pared down grace, and combined with her husband's puritanical attire the family came across as looking quite bohemian to friends and neighbours. This eclectic mix and vacillation between spartan austerity and ladylike elegance continued throughout the life of Virginia Woolf. However, her distorted views on her own personal appearance, neurotic self-loathing, or rather 'Body Dysmorphia',³⁶ was physically expressed, not only in her anorexia, but also in what she herself refers to as 'my clothes complex'. This was almost certainly triggered by

³⁵ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols. (Hogarth Press, 1972), I. p. 113. *Letters*, AVS to Madge Vaughan [July 1906], I. 275, p.229.

³⁶ 'Body Dysmorphic Disorder' is a relatively recent medical and psychological term for a concept which involves the recognition of the patient's distorted self-perception. It includes anorexia nervosa, as well as more extreme cases of self-loathing to the point of amputation of bodily parts, and seems to fit with the 'looking-glass shame' as detailed by Woolf, carried onto her adult life in self-loathing and seeing herself as 'ugly'. The earliest description of BDD was by Enrico Morselli, a nineteenth-century physician who wrote: 'The dysmorphic patient is really miserable: in the middle of his daily routines, everywhere and at any time, he is caught by the doubt of deformity'. According to *The New Oxford Textbook of Psychiatry*, 'half of all sufferers are women and the condition usually starts in adolescence. People with the condition usually dislike their skin, hair and nose and have no insight into their preoccupation. More than 90% will obsessively check, groom and camouflage their appearance.... One third will attempt suicide. Some people will also have eating disorders, depression, be phobic about social situations, and many will never fully recover,' ed. Michael Gelder, Juan J Lopez-Ibor and Nancy Andreason, 2. vols. (OUP, 2000), I, p.342. Certainly it supports and qualifies the fact that she loathed her appearance, believing herself to be ugly regardless of testimony to the contrary. For a detailed account of Woolf's continuing mental health problems see: DeSalvo, Louise, *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on her Life and Work* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), pp.108-11 for the 'looking-glass shame'; 'Virginia Woolf's Psychiatric History' website at: <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/malcolmi/vwframe.htm> and Thomas Caramagno's *Flight of the Mind: Virginia Woolf's Art and Manic-Depressive Psychosis*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

her sexual abuse at the hands of her two step-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth.³⁷

The Greek Slave Years

Vanessa Bell recalled little Virginia, or 'Beauty' as the family called her as 'a very rosy, chubby baby...dressed in velvet and lace ruffles,' yet a nervous, apprehensive and intensely responsive child, '...so nervous of crossing the road and so furtive of being looked at'.³⁸ This physical self-consciousness later manifested itself in her *anorexia nervosa*³⁹, mental breakdowns and intense self-loathing at various stages through her life. It was related to what she eventually referred to as her 'looking glass shame' or 'clothes complex' and even 'hat horror', where corporeal and sartorial fears became indissoluble or indeed manifest through each other. Initially she seems confused as to where this contradictory self-image comes from, especially when her maternal inheritance is so obvious,

There was a small looking glass in the hall at Talland House....By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it. But why was this so?....I am almost inclined to think

³⁷ *Diary*, 9 May 1926, III, p.81.

³⁸ Vanessa Bell, *Notes on Virginia's Childhood*, ed. Richard Schaubeck (New York: Frank Hallman, 1974), p.7; Violet Dickinson to Vanessa Bell, 16th June 1942 [Tate Gallery].

³⁹ 'A disorder characterised by a prolonged refusal to eat, resulting in emaciation, amenorrhoea, *emotional disturbance concerning body image*....The condition is seen primarily in adolescents, predominantly in girls, and is usually associated with emotional stress or conflict, such as anxiety, irritation, anger, and fear.' *Mosby's Medical, Nursing and Allied Health Dictionary*, eds. Lois E. Anderson and Walter D. Glanze. Fourth Edition ed. Kenneth H. Anderson (Missouri: Moseby, 1994), p.94.

that I inherited a streak of the puritan, of the Clapham Sect.⁴⁰ At any rate, *the looking-glass shame* has lasted all my life, long after the tomboy phase was over. I cannot now powder my nose in public.⁴¹ *Everything to do with dress – to be fitted, to come into a room wearing a new dress – still frightens me; at least makes me shy, self-conscious, uncomfortable....* Yet femininity was strong in our family. We were famous for our beauty – my mother's beauty, Stella's beauty, gave me as early as I can remember, pride and pleasure. What then gave me this feeling of shame, unless I inherited some opposite instinct? My father was Spartan, ascetic, puritanical...⁴² (Italics my own)

Woolf then appears to conclude these deliberations with two deeply painful accounts of abuse at the hands of her step-brothers from her mother's first marriage, and both dominant memories are highly visualised instances of both sexual and mental abuse involving violent intrusion into, and forced removal of clothing,

I must have been ashamed or afraid of my own body. Another memory, also of the hall, may help to explain this. There was a slab outside the dining room door for standing dishes upon. Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto this, and as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hands going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower...⁴³

⁴⁰ In marrying Jane Catherine Venn, her paternal grandfather James Stephen allied himself with the very heart of the Clapham Sect.

⁴¹ Like the vain and superficial Mrs Manresa in *Between the Acts* who cannot see past her own reality, and like the thoroughly modern Peggy Pargiter in *The Years* who applies her make up as the older generation, represented by her aunt Eleanor Pargiter, watch in awe.

⁴² *MOB*, pp.67-8

In this one instance Virginia Stephen was reduced to the ultimate female commodity with the added associations of food and clothing, and combined with the hall mirror's reflection of consumable self her adult neuroses involving appearance seem predictable. Lee comments in the *Biography* that this incident almost certainly 'froze Virginia Stephen's sexuality and ignited her madness'.⁴⁴

Juxtaposing the former 'ecstatic rapture' of the early maternal sartorial memories with what she tellingly calls her 'looking-glass shame' and 'clothes complex' the split is realised, which on a more negative side sees her dress and appearance come under the control of others, mainly men, and the materials are accordingly corrupted or defiled with her individuality obliterated. Indeed this incident follows through as the logical conclusion to her presumed 'streak of the puritan' by which she cannot recognise her own beauty and thus cannot dress herself. The abuse seems to trigger a form of BDD which manifests itself literally and metaphorically through clothing.

If Gerald instigated Virginia's sexual abuse and destroyed her developing self-image, then it was his older brother George who extended its mental (and allegedly sexual) abuses in her later life, during what she and Vanessa referred to as the 'Greek Slave Years'.⁴⁵ After the successive deaths of her mother (1895), step-sister, Stella Duckworth (1897) and eventually father (1904) and two nervous breakdowns the beautiful Stephen sisters were ready for their 'coming out' as debutantes as was their expected filial duty within the lavish and decadent fabric of patriarchal Edwardian high society. This consisted of the whirl of calling cards, polite conversation, morning visits, shopping, and dressing at least twice a day, primarily for their display on the

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp.68-9.

⁴⁴ Lee, p.126.

marriage market. A typical routine of daily duties and its expected sartorial changes is remembered by Virginia:

[Vanessa's and my] clothes would not be much different. She wore a blue painting smock. I perhaps a blouse and skirt....Forty years ago she was rather tidier, rather better dressed than I. The change would come in the afternoon. About 4.30 Victorian society exerted its pressure. Then we must be 'in'. For at 5 father must be given his tea. And we must be better dressed and tidier, for Mrs Green was coming; Mrs H. Ward was coming... We would have to sit at that table, either she or I, decently dressed, having nothing better to do, ready to talk.⁴⁶

The critic Jane Marcus' famous description of Virginia Woolf as 'a guerrilla fighter in Victorian skirts' battling with the social mores of an era which had created her, is further adapted by Sue Roe who suggests that she was often held back by its nurturing influence from 'full frontal guerrilla warfare' which is metaphorically represented by the cage of the 'crinoline' and is a fascinating way of seeing her internal Victorian/Modernist conflict.⁴⁷

After Julia's death their social initiation was left in the capable hands of their step-sister Stella Duckworth who vied for a restrained 'clothing allowance' of forty pounds per annum for each sister from Sir Leslie. The rebellious Virginia excitedly fantasised about spending on books after making thrifty sartorial savings,

⁴⁵ *MOB*, p.106.

⁴⁶ *MOB*, p.128.

Think of the joy of making a pair of boots last a month longer and buying for ourselves books at a 2nd hand bookstall!⁴⁸

It is clear from this innocent expression of personal choice that for young women at the turn of the century dress, clothing and the timely demands of the debutante life were placed at odds with, or certainly at the expense of books and education.

Throughout the daily course there is a required transformation from the artist sisters in their practical, liberating dress into evening attire for social duties which not only made them into consumable goods, but also consumed the space and time for their creative passions. However, Stella's untimely death meant that a replacement escort for their exhibition on the stages of the early twentieth-century *Beau Monde* was left in the care of her worldly brother George, and this was to have serious consequences for Virginia's already fragile self-image.

The figure of George Duckworth is one of the Victorian repressor mixed with the refinement of the Edwardian socialite: slightly dandyish and plainly aware of his role in his sister's 'coming out'. Virginia describes him in stiff, formal terms, and akin to Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* (1847) he is buttoned up and darkly domineering, an almost phallic figure:

⁴⁷ Jane Marcus, 'Thinking back through our Mothers', *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1981), p.1; Roe, Sue, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice* (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1990), p.171.

⁴⁸ *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (London: Hogarth, 1990), 30 March 1897, p.62.

...he too would button on his frock coat and give his top hat a promise with the velvet glove and disappear – smart and debonair, in his ribbed socks and very small well polished shoes, to the treasury.

This image of ‘velvet-gloved pressure’ seems apt for the snobbish and bullying George who manipulated and coerced the sisters to be escorted about town; overseeing details of dress and appearance especially, for of course in the climate of Thorstein Veblen’s ‘conspicuous consumption’ the women of the family were seen primarily as adornable objects and marketable products that were visible testimonies of their patriarch’s ability to pay, consume and decorate according to his own tastes. He was rich and they were not, and thus his power and love of display included parading his beautiful half-sisters on his arm in public, mainly to reflect well upon himself. He also obsessively controlled them by showering them with the kind of expensive gifts usually expected of suitors, namely jewellery and clothes. The pressure on them was to appear presentable at all costs, even on their slightly increased, but still meagre budget of fifty pounds a year. Every party was seen as ‘an examination, a test: a matter of the greatest importance’ as the young Virginia Stephen strained against the limiting confines of ‘duty’. The language used to describe their daily routine suggests that a woman’s life was a essentially a prison.⁴⁹

It was when the lights came up in the evening that society came into force.

During daylight one could wear overalls; work.....But in the evening society had all its own way. At 7.30 we went upstairs to dress. However cold or foggy it might be, we slipped off our day clothes and stood shivering in front of

⁴⁹ *MOB*, p.135.

washing basins...for we had to come into the drawing room at 8 o'clock in evening dress: arms and neck bare. Dress and hairdoing became far more important than pictures and Greek. I would stand in front of George's Chippendale glass trying to make myself not only tidy but presentable. On an allowance of fifty pounds it was difficult...⁵⁰

Long gone are the earlier naïve plans to make this only income extend to increasing her intellectual capabilities; all is reduced to the corporeal. George Duckworth extended his patriarchal control to extremes of mental and sexual abuse, and these particular memories of their social exposure on the marriage market of late-imperial England are merged with the language of ritual abuse and humiliation. Nights ended with George helping her to undress, or entering the bedroom after she was undressed and fondling her.⁵¹ Thus inexplicably painful memories of the parties attended are suddenly given a more sinister interpretation. One such intense recollection of his fanatical control is the notorious 'green dress' incident, dramatically detailed in 'A Sketch of the Past' and which was a defining moment in her formative years. An almost confident, theatrical entrance is cruelly, anti-climactically crushed under the judgmental male scopophilic gaze:

The house dress therefore might be, as on this particular night, made of green stuff bought erratically at a furniture shop – Story's – because it was cheaper than dress stuff; also more adventurous. Down I came: in my green evening dress; all the lights were up in the drawing-room; and there was George, in his black tie and evening jacket, in the chair by the fire. *He fixed on me that*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.129-30

⁵¹ *A Passionate Apprentice*, 1903, p.171.

extraordinary observant [illegible] gaze with which he always inspected clothes. He looked me up and down as if [I] were a horse turned into the ring. Then a sullen look came over him; a look in which one traced *not merely aesthetic disapproval; but something that went deeper; morally, socially, he scented some kind of insurrection; of defiance of social standards.* I was condemned...conscious of those criticisms; and conscious too of fear, of shame and of despair – “Go and tear it up”, he said at last...⁵² (Italics my own)

By disastrously trying to save some of her clothing-allowance the sartorial act becomes symbolic of female intellectual rebellion; a defiance of the patriarchal consumptive standard; and a theme that was to feature strongly in *A Room*, but which also holds within it the theme of sartorial transgression and ambiguity that was to recur in the transvestism of *Orlando*, the theatrical metamorphoses of *Between the Acts*, and also the recurring power of female creativity as associated with the colour green. Susan M. Squiers comments on the episode,

So simple an act as choosing fabric for one's dress may be a form of insurrection worthy of the Society of Outsiders....Duckworth's intuition was correct of course: Woolf's adventurous green dress defied the standards of fashion, which dictated what women should wear and how they should behave.⁵³

Regretfully Virginia was later to assert, ‘And, to my discredit, I never wore that dress if George was at home’: the Marcus-styled ‘guerrilla’ in her ‘Victorian skirts’ seems

⁵² *MOB.*, p130.

to have found it easier to attempt to conform to the patriarchal demands placed upon her, just as she claims that she would not have written her novels had Sir Leslie lived. The 'green dress incident' is not the only clothing-episode which confirms George as the oppressor, as Woolf compounds it with another that is just as disturbing:

I went up to my room, took off my beautiful white satin dress, and unfastened the three pink carnations...In a confused whirlpool of sensation I stood slipping off my petticoats, withdrew my long white gloves, and hung my white silk stockings over the back of my chair....Then, creaking stealthily, the door opened; treading gingerly, someone entered. 'Who?' I cried. 'Don't be frightened', George whispered. 'And don't turn on the light, oh beloved. Beloved –' and he flung himself on my bed, and took me in his arms.⁵⁴

It becomes clear that for the young Virginia Stephen dressing, undressing, abuse and shame were inextricably linked in her consciousness.

The 'Society of Outsiders' is a fitting term for how Vanessa and Virginia felt in the dazzle and display of the glittering Edwardian *Beau Monde*. Made speechless not only in sartorial expression, but also in their dazzling artistic and intellectual capacities, they seemed to encapsulate the approved model of passive femininity. The wartime artist Sir William Rothenstein evokes them much as others at this time would, as 'two graceful girls sitting silently all in white' desperately trying to make a success of their public outings, and though both sisters were revered as strikingly beautiful they were very often described as looking uncomfortable and ill-at-ease with the contemporary

⁵³ Susan M. Squiers, *Virginia Woolf and London: The Sexual Politics of the City* (University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p.152.

social mores.⁵⁵ High Society was viewed by them as a deeply distressing costumed performance overseen by the male eye: a 'Victorian game of manners'; 'a code', a kind of circus spectacle with George as the ringleader or 'acrobat' making them 'jump through hoops', and one in which they lacked individual power.⁵⁶ Virginia Stephen wrote despondently, though perhaps with a secret air of triumph, to a female friend in the late summer of 1901 which followed their official exposure as promoted by George, 'The truth of it is...we are failures'.⁵⁷ This is even more of a surprise considering that it was a relatively quiet year for debutantes as Queen Victoria had died the previous January and the whole of London, 'an amazing sight,' was officially in deep mourning.⁵⁸

For Virginia Woolf fears of sartorial-social failure and dependence upon others' judgement on how she looked continued beyond the 'observant gaze' of George, and were transferred to other men in her life, mainly her brother-in-law Clive Bell, but also to Vanessa herself, who on various occasions and events was expected to choose her sister's wardrobe and help her to dress. On a trip to Greece Nessa busied herself in organising elegant and yet practical travel outfits for herself and Virginia: 'grey felt hats, white linen suits and white boots, and...green-lined white parasols'.⁵⁹ As Hermione Lee interprets in her biography,

[Virginia] was volatile, absent-minded, awkward, and bad at looking after herself. Her new glasses...would get twisted, she was very bad at shopping for

⁵⁴ '22 Hyde Park Gate' in *MOB*, p.155.

⁵⁵ William Rothenstein, *Men & Memories: A History of the Arts, 1872—1922* (University of Missouri Press, 1978), p.41.

⁵⁶ *MOB*, p.132.

⁵⁷ VS to Emma Vaughan, 8 Aug 1901, *Letters*, I. 37, p.43.

⁵⁸ Leonore Davidoff, *The Best Circles* (London: Cresset, 1986), p.56.

clothes, she couldn't fasten her own dress or put up her own hair...she forgot sponges and combs on her travels. If on holiday a bird 'performed'...on her straw hat and she spilt ink on her skirt, this was typical.⁶⁰

Her niece, Angelica Bell adds in her recollection of 'Virginia and Vanessa' that 'It was true that Virginia could not bring herself to mend her clothes and preferred to pin up her silk rags with a gold brooch'.⁶¹ Describing her own look as 'magnificently eccentric' seems to suggest she made an effort to achieve a particular style, yet she was regressively childlike in her need to be petted and groomed by others.⁶² There is one obsessive image of her with Vanessa which sees her as almost jealous, manipulative and needy, as she would 'finger [Vanessa's] amethyst beads and enumerate with each the name of a friend or relative whose place in Vanessa's affections would rouse her jealousy'.⁶³ Though this was a chosen intimacy one cannot help feeling that her sartorial dependencies in general were the results of the half-brothers' abuses. Criticism of her appearance by Clive Bell seems to have caused her further pain, only adding to her distorted self-image rather than helping; whether indeed Bell meant it as light-hearted banter, he regularly flirted with the idea of her as a 'virginal ice maiden' in which he fantasised and constantly disembodied her intellect with layers of chaste ethereality.⁶⁴ 'Why do I always feel self-conscious when I write to you?' she questioned him in their correspondence in which his influence extended to them making gossipy sartorial snipes at shared friends.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Quentin Bell, I. p.107.

⁶⁰ Lee, pp.221-2.

⁶¹ *Bloomsbury*, p.175.

⁶² VS to VB, Christmas Day 1910, *Letters*, I., 546, p.442.

⁶³ Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1983) p.13.

⁶⁴ Clive Bell married Vanessa Stephen at St Pancras Register Office on 7 February 1907, to Virginia's evident distress.

⁶⁵ VS to CB, 31? Dec 1909, *Letters* I, 515, p.418. Of her soon-to-be sister-in-law Karin Costelloe she sniped, 'My God! What colours you are responsible for! Karin's clothes almost wrenched my eyes

However much she admired him he was the person who could most embarrass her about her clothes and her looks, for example, he was the one who tactlessly recommended that she get a dressmaker, of his choosing of course, though with the help of the fashionable Mary Hutchinson. After this another came on the recommendation of Dorothy Todd, but these seem only to have had a further dysmorphic effect; the emphasis was on trying make her appear 'normal': 'Clive says that Mary Hutchinson has a dressmaker who will make me look like other people'.⁶⁶

As the sisters' new escort about town, Clive Bell relished his influence over them. Yet his bullying criticisms continued into married life, as Virginia relays a sensitive incident in her *Diary* during an informal gathering at 46 Gordon Square when he mocked her hat and Leonard Woolf 'got silent':

This is the last day of June & finds me in a black despair because Clive laughed at my new hat...I sank into the depths of gloom....Oh dear I was wearing the hat without thinking whether it was good or bad; and [the party] was all very flashy and easy....& there was Nessa tripping along in the dark, in her quiet black hat.....and we were all sitting round talking that Clive suddenly said, or bawled rather, what an astonishing hat you're wearing! Then he asked where I got it. I pretended a mystery, tried to change the talk, was not allowed, & they pulled me down between them, like a hare; I never felt more humiliated. Clive said did Mary choose it? No. [Dorothy] Todd said Vita [Sackville-West]. And the dress? Todd of course: after that I was forced to go

from my sockets – a skirt barred with reds & yellows of the vilest kind, and a pea green blouse on top, with a gaudy handkerchief on her head, supposed to be the very boldest taste.' VW to VB, *Letters* II, 778, 16 Aug 1916, p.111.

⁶⁶ VW to Roger Fry, 21 Oct 1921, *Letters*, II. 1196, p.485.

on as if nothing terrible had happened; but it was very forced & queer & humiliating.⁶⁷

Though Virginia had her own dressmaker she knew she would never be fashionable, and defended herself by making jokes at her own expense; such as to her friend Lady Robert Cecil in which she said that she did not have a skirt that was appropriate for communicating with the aristocracy,

(I would send her [Lady Gwendolen Cecil] my love, but I reflect that my clothes are wholly unsuitable for that.) One of these days, when I have bought a new skirt, I shall ask her to tea.⁶⁸

High Society meant dressing up and sartorial pressures were everywhere in the social whirls of Bloomsbury and the London Literati. In May 1918 she describes the ‘horror’ of buying a hat, adding extra pain to the comment from Clive, and of her fear at the disparaging female faces watching outside the shop window, ‘as senseless as playing cards; with tongues like adders’. The ordinary city street or social event could become a potential nightmare for her as the ‘clothing complex’ takes hold and the resultant dysmorphia creates a climate of paranoia.⁶⁹

I’m sitting on the edge of a party playing Bridge – very cold, dismal, faced with the appalling problem of buying some clothes. Nessa has sold me a hat for 10/6 – but who will sell me a skirt...⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *Diary*, 31 June 1926, III. p.91.

⁶⁸ VW to Lady Robert Cecil, 12 Nov 1922, *Letters*, II. 1320, p.585.

⁶⁹ *Diary*, 6 May 1918, I. p.149.

⁷⁰ VW to Lady Robert Cecil, 12 Nov 1922, *Letters*, II. 1320, p.585.

Choosing and appearing in new clothes made Virginia Woolf rigid with fear and embarrassment, whether because of the store-girls themselves, or something deeper inside her psyche as she states, ‘I went to buy clothes today and was struck by my own ugliness’.⁷¹

Even when she was publicly receiving an accolade for her writing ‘*The Femina-Vie Heureuse*’ from Hugh Walpole, hailed as ‘the woman of the hour’, and dressed modestly in black, she still woke up in the middle of the following night in a state of high anxiety with ‘the horror’ of ‘having looked ugly in cheap clothes’ (40).⁷²



40. A nervous Woolf receiving the ‘*The Femina-Vie Heureuse*’ from Hugh Walpole in 1928.

Yet she could also be strangely insouciant about how she wore them and a running joke between her closest friends and family included the time she describes with candour: ‘In the street my grey knickers came off,’ certainly an undignified appearance for any famous lady writer and yet it also suggests a child-like lack of

⁷¹ *Diary*, 21 March 1927, III. p.133.

⁷² *The Times* 3 May 1928; *Diary*, 4 May 1928, III, p.183.

inhibition.⁷³ Jokes about her hairpins dropping into the soup at Sibyl Colefax's lunch party suggested a Freudian contempt, as well as nervousness, for a world in which hairpins mattered.⁷⁴ However, this seems to be a further example of a damage-limiting defensive strategy; namely to get in there before others did.

Perhaps the most poignant manifestation of Woolf's 'clothes complex' in her works is in the short story 'The New Dress' (1925) an extension of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and one in which Woolf declared that she would investigate 'frock consciousness'.⁷⁵ In it she adopts the guise of Mabel Waring (a sartorial pun?) who is a guest at Clarissa's party and is coincidentally wearing a dress based upon one of her mother's from the previous century, and which has been meticulously designed from a 'Paris fashion book of the time of the Empire' with the help of her dressmaker (*TND*, 170). The similarities are overt when considered next to Virginia's espousal of her mother's lace dress. However, this dress is described negatively from the very start,

...pale yellow, idiotically old-fashioned silk dress with its long skirt and its high sleeves and its waist and all the things that looked so charming in the fashion book, but not on her, not among these ordinary people. She felt like a dressmaker's dummy standing there for people to stick pins into. (*TND*, 171)

Though the dress seems idiosyncratically beautiful, with the optimistic associations of the colour yellow, perhaps made paler because sunny confidence has waned, the language of the narrative is that of painful inadequacy, self-loathing, humiliation,

⁷³ *Diary*, 9 January 1918, I. pp.103-4.

⁷⁴ Kirsty McLeod, *A Passion for Friendship: Sibyl Colefax and her Circle* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), p.84; see Sigmund Freud's *Jokes and the Unconscious*.

acute self-consciousness and imprisonment within the confines of the dress and party. Persistent use of words such as, 'dissatisfaction', 'chastised', 'inadequacy', 'horror', 'dowdy, decrepit, horribly dingy', 'shame', 'humiliation and agony' and 'disconnected' only serve to compound the lexicon of abhorrence and self-abnegation; with vices such as 'vanity' 'envy and spite' attributed mainly to 'her odious, weak, vacillating character' of her own accord (*TND* 174). Unfortunately, Mabel Waring concludes early that her sartorial choice is a failure, and she strives to survive the apparently critical glances and gazes of the fashionable crowd, violently depicted, 'as if spears were thrown at her yellow dress from all sides'. Though much of this is the product of her paranoia, she persists in imagining their collective thoughts, 'What's Mabel wearing? What a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress', but her fears are fully vocalised in her encounter, with 'malice itself' in the form of Charles Burt (Clive Bell?) who loudly exclaims, 'Mabel's got a new dress!' to the whole room just as she is beginning to relax (*TND*, 170, 173). Significantly, mirrors are a constant feature throughout as Mabel stands near 'the scrolloping looking glass' obsessively agonising about her dress and appearance: it judges and tortures her with a distorted image as she, like Woolf is the textbook body dysmorphic:

...[Mabel] went straight to the far end of the room, to a shaded corner where a looking-glass hung and looked. No! It was not *right*....But she dared not look in the glass. She could not face the horror....She faced herself straight in the glass; she pecked at her left shoulder; she issued out into the room....all the time she could see little bits of her yellow dress in the round looking-glass.

(*TND*, 170-4)

⁷⁵ *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (Hogarth, 1985, revised 1989), pp.70-77. hereafter referred to as *TND*; *Diary III*, 27 April 1925, p.12.

The fragmented self, reduced to a mere 'yellow button' by the mirror's critical reflection, causes her to leave the party early in a state of agony and shame (*TND*, 176). However, the mirror's distortions are paradoxically juxtaposed with her initial feelings of satisfied elation in the relative privacy of her dressmaker's workroom:

...yet when Miss Milan put the glass in her hand, and she looked at herself with the dress on, finished, an extraordinary bliss shot through her heart. Suffused with light, she sprang into existence....what she had dreamed of herself was there - a beautiful woman. (*TND*, 172)

Though she seems appropriately illuminated by the colour and uplifted by the magic of sartorial transformation her optimistic feelings are ominously paralleled with a recollection of Miss Milan, 'pulling the cover over the canary cage,' which suggests Mabel is trapped within the sartorial expectations of her society: a helpless, pale-yellow, caged bird. Albeit, the critic T. E. Apter interprets this tale as a punishment for Mabel's 'puffed up vanity' and dresses her in the condemnatory language that she uses against herself. Perceptively but didactically she concludes (*TND* 170),

Mabel Waring in 'The New Dress' believes she has protected herself from such painful inferiority to others' wealth and fashion by choosing a quaint, inexpensive but becoming dress – a belief which deserts her as she stands in the cloak room...seeking reassurance, she makes herself ridiculous....Vanity is not a sin which is punishable; it is punishment itself, leading one through a hell of false constructions and inevitable downfalls....The sister of vanity is of

course envy, which also works against the self, infecting and distorting the vision which is crucial to identity.⁷⁶

Mabel's sartorial-psychosis can now perhaps be sympathetically understood in the context of Woolf's own 'clothes complex' and the circumstances which created it. Rather than seeing it as a mere self-indulgent, female crime whereby the maxim, 'men are vain of their brains and women of their clothes,' creates a 'sin' that is judged and castigated, in this piece vanity becomes a superficial cover for the fact that these women care too much about what other people think of them.⁷⁷ Accordingly rivalry with other women is depicted as Mabel holds herself up to the usual paragon of femininity incarnate in Rose Shaw, 'dressed in the height of fashion,' in her 'lovely, clinging green with a ruffle of swansdown' (*TND*, 171, 175). Just as Woolf laments,

I had no hat. Bought one for 7/11 3/4 at a shop in Oxford Street: green felt: the wrong coloured ribbon: all a flop like a pancake in mid air.

Even I thought I looked odd. But I wanted to see what happens among real women if one of them looks like a pancake in mid air. In came the dashing vermeil-tinctured red-stopper-bottle- looking Mrs. Edwin Montague. She started. She positively deplored me. Then hid a smile. Looked again. Thought Ah what a tragedy!.... You see, women can't hold out against this kind of flagrant disavowal of all womanliness.

They open their arms as to a flayed bird in a blast: whereas, the Mary's [Hutchinson] of this world, with every feather in place, are pecked,

⁷⁶ T. E. Apter, 'Self-Defence and Self-Knowledge: The Function of Vanity and Friendship in Virginia Woolf,' in *Virginia Woolf: A Centenary Perspective*, ed. Eric Warner (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), pp.89-90.

⁷⁷ Woolf confiding in her niece, Angelica Bell, 11th March 1940, as quoted in Lee, p.733.

stoned, often die, every feather stained with blood - at the bottom of the cage.⁷⁸

Mabel's ultimate self-defence is her fantasy of being 'absolutely transformed', not into a paragon of high fashion, with its multitudinous choices and idiosyncratic expressions, but into the ultimate model of female self-effacement: 'She would wear a uniform; she would be called Sister Somebody; she would never give a thought to clothes again' (*TND*, 176). Egalitarian, but anonymous, she is divested of the trappings of feminine sexuality. Unable to see herself as she really is she is forced to leave the party suitably swathed in familiar layers of defensive protection as she exits with the story's closing line, 'And [she] wrapped herself, round and round and round, in the Chinese cloak she had worn these twenty years' (*TND*, 177).

Paying sufficient homage to their maternal inheritance, exotic, bohemian and highly original in their dress, both Mabel Waring and Virginia Woolf seek comfort in self-concealment at moments of crisis. The young Virginia Stephen unsettled during the final stages of Stella's fatal illness in 1897 is lovingly wrapped in 'Stella's fur cape', its associations of warmth, protection and sensuality clearly soothe an otherwise painful recollection, or perhaps she even associated it with self-abnegation, illness and death.⁷⁹ This sartorial theme can perhaps be carried further, to the very end of her life, as she walks into the River Ouse to commit suicide, afraid of another nervous breakdown, and swathed in her familiar 'fur coat' whose pocket contained a large stone. An unnecessary comfort? A defensive strategy? Or perhaps even symbolic, as

⁷⁸ *Diary*, 24 March 1926, III. p.69.

⁷⁹ *A Passionate Apprentice*, July-Dec, 1897, pp.115-34.

her abused and delicate body was discovered adorned in the ultimate sartorial burden.⁸⁰

'The Roaring Twenties' and the famous woman writer:

If anything made this 'clothing complex' more bearable it was the indulgent support of her husband, Leonard Woolf, whom she married in 1912,⁸¹ and who hated the inane party-going of the London society, preferring the retreat to Hogarth House and the peaceful, undemanding countryside of Richmond.⁸² Here she could go about, as she preferred, 'in my own clothes, & at my own hours'.⁸³ Often she was seen walking by the neighbours who describe her as an eccentric, solitary figure, shabbily dressed and talking to herself as a bit 'do-lally-tap'.⁸⁴ Yet throughout her life she persisted in allowing people to influence and even dictate how she should look, dress and appear. However, it was her sapphist relationship with the beautiful, worldly and fashionable Vita Sackville-West in the 1920s that seems to have given the necessary boost in confidence to her sartorial eccentricities. Virginia jubilantly idolises her as the 'perfect lady...dressed in ringed yellow jersey, & large hat, & had a dressing case all full of silver & nightgowns wrapped in tissue'.⁸⁵ Sackville-West encouraged her, as was the fashion, to get her hair shingled which was a daring new shorter hair style.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ As mentioned in *Diary*, 20 Oct 1940, and in Lee, p.764.

⁸¹ Leonard Sidney Woolf, aged thirty one, Bachelor of Independent Means, and Adeline Virginia Stephen, age thirty, Spinster (rank and profession left blank) took place at 12.15 on Saturday 10 August 1912 in St Pancras Town Hall, in the middle of a thunderstorm.

⁸² The move to Hogarth House, Paradise Road, Richmond was posited as a rest cure for Virginia by Leonard and her doctors and she resided there from 1915-1924 until she demanded a return to her 'social side' in the whirl of the capital: 52 Tavistock Square, Bloomsbury. They also bought Monk's House in Rodmell, Surrey in the Summer of 1919 and kept this country option throughout their marriage, retreating there in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War.

⁸³ *Diary*, 29 Oct 1922, II., p.241.

⁸⁴ See Dirk Bogarde, *A Postilion Struck by Lightning* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988) for a version of his Sussex childhood encounters with a tall, thin lady, 'with a long woolly, and fairish hair which looked rather wispy, as if she had just washed it', pp.112-4.

⁸⁵ *Diary*, 15 Sept 1924, II. p.313.

⁸⁶ 'Shingled' *OED*, 'cut (a woman's hair) in a short tapering style at the back, with all ends exposed'. Vita with regretful humour wrote, 'I think I preferred the dropping hairpins, that cheerful little cascade

This coincided with a time of transformation in Woolf's career as her position of power and respect on the London scene escalated from the beginning of the 1920s reaching a height after the publications of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *Orlando* in 1928. In addition to this she was fast becoming a glamorous literary figure or literary role model to be photographed by the leading artists of the day. Not only did Vita shower her with gifts, but Virginia was urged by her new lover to splash out her newly-earned riches and treat herself to such items as a moleskin coat (in which she became Vita's petted 'mole') or on trips to Spain and France. Their regular shopping trips became a positive, self-affirming and romantic feature of their relationship.⁸⁷

The adventurous styles of the roaring twenties were about female emancipation, sexuality, Bloomsbury, and aesthetics inspired by developments in the Arts. New fashion directives such as *Vogue* pointed to shorter, straighter skirts, feathers and fringes, backless evening dresses in metallic colours, capes and cloches, bobbed or shingled hair, jerseys, and elegant underwear, of a more masculine, if not androgynous look, and Vita Sackville-West encapsulated contemporary aristocratic chic. Realising she 'love[s] women' too, Virginia is hypnotised by another powerful image of a woman she loves/ed and who repeatedly haunts her fecund creative vision. Again the prime trigger is clothing:

I like her & being with her, & the splendour – she shines in the grocer's shop
in Sevenoaks with a candle lit radiance, stalking on legs like beech trees, pink

that used to tinkle onto your plate'. *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf*, Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska, eds. (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 11 March 1927, p.205.

⁸⁷ VW to VSW, 22 Nov 1927, *Letters*, III. 1837, p.440.

glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung. That is the secret of her glamour, I suppose.⁸⁸

The sartorial vision of the chameleon-like Vita continued and transformed her into the hero/heroine of what her son, Nigel Nicholson rightly describes as, 'the longest and most charming love-letter in literature' in the cross-dressing fantasy, *Orlando*.⁸⁹

Conversely, with a wise and indulgent affection Vita also describes Virginia's odd pastiche of clothing, falling in love not despite it, but because it seems to encapsulate her bohemian character:

[Virginia] is utterly unaffected: there are no outward adornments – she dresses quite atrociously. At first you think she is plain; then a sort of spiritual beauty imposes itself on you, and you find a fascination in watching her. She was smarter last night; that is to say the woollen orange stockings were replaced by yellow silk ones, but she still wore the pumps....I have quite lost my heart.⁹⁰

Later, after an evening at the new Stravinsky ballet at the Haymarket, Woolf's outlandish dress sense eclipses even that of the 'ostrich-feathered' George Eliot. Vita describes her outfit with gentle humorous reference to her infantile inability to dress herself,

It was very odd indeed, orange and black, with a hat to match – a sort of top-hat made of straw with two orange feathers like Mercury's wings – but

⁸⁸ *Diary*, 21 Dec 1925, III. pp.51-2.

⁸⁹ Nigel Nicholson, *Portrait of a Marriage: Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicholson* (Birkenhead: Willmer Bros, 1973), p.201. Vita frequently cross-dressed, and openly had lesbian and homosexual friends and flings whilst being a married society hostess to an important British diplomat, and mother.

although odd it was curiously becoming, and pleased Virginia because there could be absolutely no doubt as to which was the front and which the back.⁹¹

Perhaps it is this very hat that is later, rather disparagingly described by the new editor of *Vogue*, Madge Garland:

...this beautiful and distinguished woman wearing what could only be described as...an upturned wastepaper basket on her head.⁹²

There seems to be a carefree, impish sense of humour about her dress in later years that was not seen, or not allowed, during the formalities of the 'Greek Slave years' as Woolf relishes her individual fame, status and its monetary rewards. Like George Eliot before her she seems to take a perverse delight in the creative power of clothing, embraced with an aplomb that almost transgresses into masquerade. Albeit, the origins of her bohemianism are plainly in evidence before Vita, Leonard and financial security, as she describes to Vanessa on Christmas Day 1910,

The eccentricity of our appearance is magnificent. Adrian's hair flows like a crazy poet's; then we bought him a harvest hat for a shilling, a strawberry roan colour, suited for an August afternoon. I wear a bright purple cloak, over my red dress, with a smart black toque.⁹³

⁹⁰ VSW to Harold Nicolson, 19 Dec 1922, *Ibid.*, p.200.

⁹¹ VSW to HN, 26 [misdated 16] June 1926, *Vita and Harold: The letters of Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson*, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1992), p.147. Hereafter referred to as *V&H.*

⁹² *Interviews and Recollections*, pp.208-9.

⁹³ VS to VB, Christmas Day 1910, *Letters*, I., 546, p.442. Purple and red; the traditional colours of 'creativity' and 'sexual passion' both respectively and combined are vividly highlighted: definitely not an ensemble for the shrinking sartorial violet, Lurie, pp.201-2; pp193-4. A toque was, 'a close fitting hat without a brim for evening wear', around since the Renaissance when 'artists preferred a romantic

Vivid and bold, with artistic and timeless accessories, Virginia appears to delight in her own avant-garde sense of style, moreover, this instance was not in the privacy of her own home but whilst staying at a public house in Sussex. Her quintessential Bloomsbury style⁹⁴ was successfully honed in her more mature years in the spotlight, with a mixture of the aforementioned influences and an innate sense of elegance. As she realises that she can now go beyond the patriarchal limits of her former clothing allowance anything seems possible,

But I am shelving the dress problem on these principles. I am having cheap day clothes; & a good dress from Brooke...as I only have to write & stir myself, to make, I wager, quite £50 extra in the year for my own extravagances. No longer shall I let a coat for £3 floor me in the middle of the night, or be afraid to lunch out because "I've no clothes".⁹⁵

velvet toque [or]...beret' and essentially it liberated the woman to see the world about her (unlike the blinkered poke bonnet) whilst also having a touch of the exotic about it, and could be 'covered in veils or feathers', *Cunnington*, p.54; Contini, pp.246-7.

⁹⁴ Bloomsbury style evolved out of the 'Aesthetic Movement' of 1870-80 led by William Morris which was triggered by revulsion to what they saw as ugly machine made products of the Industrial Revolution (a precursor to this was the 'Rational Dress Movement' of the 1850s). This ranged from a distaste felt for the ugliness of false veneers to the crudeness of aniline dyes and the over working of Victorian imagery. Aesthetic dress may also have been a revulsion to the over use of the sewing machine which allowed excessive embellishment of dresses simply because it could achieve over trimming more easily. Further influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite painters who idealized medieval life and whose women appeared to wear no corsetry, this freedom and naturalness was admired by the Aesthetes. Aesthetic dress was a protest against the contemporary fashion for bustles in various forms and restrictive corsets. Only a very small section of the community ever wore it initially, but it did spread to middle class intellectuals, to artistic and literary people. Aesthetic dress, influenced by Arthur Liberty from 1875 was made of wool or exotic Liberty silk or velvet fabrics. The style was cut looser and was unstructured in the style of medieval or Renaissance garments with larger sleeves, and was relatively unrestricted when compared with figure hugging fashion garments of the era. Loose-waisted corset-free women were considered to have loose morals and it did not help that many of the Aesthetic women were thought slightly Bohemian and beyond the normal social conventions and morals of the time. Bloomsbury adopted this freer style and made it more elegant and acceptable.

⁹⁵ *Diary*, 30 Sept 1926, p.113.

Embracing a new-found sense of indulgence she achieves an accompanying self-confidence or positive vanity, and she allows sartorial sensuality to take hold. Mary Hutchinson was approached to try to bring her up to date with the post-war fashion for make-up and perfume, and with an infectious sense of humour Virginia replies,

Don't you smell me? I am like a civet. L[eonard] detests me. I think myself too, too, too lovely. Yes: you've entirely altered my life, & given a new channel for my vanity to flow in. As you may have guessed, that inexplicable and most detestable prudery which for 10 years led me to make sanitary towels out of Kapok⁹⁶ down rather than buy them, has always prevented me from saying to a powdered shop girl 'I too am a woman...I want powder too.

Tom's [T. S. Eliot's] dining tomorrow, and I shall be very curious to observe whether rouge on the lips, quickens his marmoreal heart.⁹⁷

The self-supporting, independent woman writer evolves her own sense of style in later life (or maybe she starts to fit her own stereotype) and is eventually lauded by one young lady whilst doing the Cambridge Lectures in 1928 as having encapsulated the look of the 'distinguished writer'. The words of her feminist essay are sadly pushed into the background as her appearance is strikingly at the forefront:

[Mrs Woolf] wore a bright blue polo-necked jersey, which seemed to accentuate her height; she made a striking figure, quite coming up to my expectations of what a distinguished writer should look like.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ An exotic natural downy fibre, harvested in the rainforest and soft to the touch. Usually used for pillow stuffing! <http://www.whitelotus.net>

⁹⁷ VW to Mary Hutchinson, 15 Feb 1924, *Letters*, VI., 1442a, p.505.

Statuesque, slender and modestly androgynous Woolf embodies, or perhaps creates, the image of the woman writer which her literary foremothers could not.

Unfortunately, the 'old girl' goes on to admit, 'her appearance made a much more lasting impression on me than anything she said', and perhaps this is the danger: eclipsing your intellectual work with your image, especially as an attractive woman. Getting the balance right is crucial, and the balance appears to be adopting a careless disregard, or modesty, whilst still appearing inimitably elegant. As the contemporary British novelist, the graceful and picturesque Cynthia Stockley summed it up, 'Women who write should . . . dress well'.⁹⁹ Expectations were therefore high.

The contemporary man of letters William Plomer sums up the success of Virginia Woolf's more confident appearance:

...her clothes did [not] suggest a concern with fashion or any effort to defy it. She knew, as people used to say, how to wear her clothes, which were neither simple nor complicated. She was not given to wearing ornaments.¹⁰⁰

Though he does initially describe her as a young debutante,

...in an agony of shyness, she drove alone at night in a cab...to a ball at one of the great London houses, wearing no jewellery except a modest string of pearls (but they were *real* pearls).¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ *Hayseed to Harvest: Memories of Katherine Cox and Hayes Court School*, ed. Roma Goyder (Colchester: Fletcher and Fletcher, 1985), p.80.

⁹⁹ Cynthia Stockley, *The Queen: The Lady's Newspaper and Court Chronicle*, 21st Nov 1925, p.42.

Unlike the Brontës and Eliot she did not morally or financially reject the foibles of fashion outright with the adoption of an anti-fashion 'uniform', although early on she is clearly tempted to opt out of the competition and 'retire into a dove colour & old lavender, with a lace collar, and lawn wristlets,' in response to the somewhat gaudy post-impressionist styles of the 1910s, but she determinedly resists the stereotype with distinction.¹⁰² Woolf was never sombrely 'plain and quakerish' like her literary foremothers yet there is clearly an element of elegant restraint and modesty. Descriptions of her abound, lauding her paradoxically simple aesthetic-austerity. Hugh Walpole artistically portrays her as Jane Rose, the heroine of his novel *Hans Frost* (1929),

[She] looked like the wife of a Pre-Raphaelite painter, her dark hair brushed back in waves, her grey dress cut in simple fashion, her thin pale face quiet and remote...¹⁰³

T. S. Eliot's friend, Emily Hale, described her upon their first meeting,

...a very tall slender woman, dressed in a dark non-descript dress, over which was worn a short dark velvet coat. The simple dark clothes set off to

¹⁰⁰ William Plomer, unpublished article c.1969 and quoted in Peter Alexander, *William Plomer* (OUP, 1989), p.50.

¹⁰¹ 'Evenings in Tavistock Square', *Bloomsbury*, p.299

¹⁰² VW to VB, 16 Aug 1916, *Letters*, II. 778, p.111.

¹⁰³ Hugh Walpole, *Hans Frost* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1929), p.567. Perhaps copying Walpole humorously Virginia remarked in her *Diary* for that same year, 'I feel rather like the wife of a Pre-Raphaelite painter...who sits in a simple grey dress looking v. odd...' 18 Sept 1929, IV. 2069, p.89.

advantage the small head carrying a wealth of greying hair...simply...in a great Rossetti-like coil at the nape of a very long slender neck.¹⁰⁴

Isaiah Berlin, the philosopher, remembers her wearing a wonderful red dress in the 1930s at a dinner party in Oxford. However, her distant cousin, Mary Fisher was at the same party, but she remembered her wearing a wonderful green dress. Woolf was a discriminating social chameleon and a regular favourite on the fashionable London circuit during the roaring twenties. Even when on holiday in Greece her friend Roger Fry describes her as wearing an enigmatic, ‘kind of silk hood’ which made her look, ‘incredibly lovely and more distinguished than the Goddesses’.¹⁰⁵

The feminist artist Victoria Ocampo adds to the cumulative authorial image,

Virginia, tall and slender, wearing a silk blouse whose blues and grays (was it Scottish silk?) harmonised admirably with the silver of her hair. Virginia, made even more slender by a very long, black velvet skirt.¹⁰⁶

And still romanticising the last sighting of her in 1941:

Virginia, very thin, in black, without powder, without rouge, without jewellery: infinitely lovely, the stamp of all her dreams printed on her face.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Emily Hale to Ruth George, 6 Dec 1935, Dennison Library, Scripps College, Claremont. Quoted in Lee, p.571. Woolf memorably described the uptight Eliot who, ‘...came to dinner in a four piece suit,’ but who also was ‘wearing make up’, *Diary*, 8 Aug 1928, III. p.188; *Diary*, 27 Sept 1922, II. P.204. But she was in ‘horror & revulsion’ about his wife, Vivian who she claimed made her, ‘almost vomit, so scented, so powdered, so egotistic, so morbid,’ *Diary*, 21 June 1924, II, p.304.

¹⁰⁵ Roger Fry to Helen Anrep, 4 May 1932, *Letters of Roger Fry*, ed. Denys Sutton (London: Chatto, 1972), II. p.670.

¹⁰⁶ Doris Meyer, *Victoria Ocampo* (University of Texas Press, 1979, 1990), p.124.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.240.

The famous photographs (41 a, b, c left to right, below) of her taken by Lenare in 1929 (a); Man Ray in 1934 (b); and Gisèle Freund in 1939 (c): hair shining and smoothly centre-parted, elegantly dressed, and often poised with a cigarette in its holder have become part of her iconic legend, as she exudes the sophisticated calm of the confident intellectual aesthete and is ironically transformed into a role model for feminists, students and writers alike.



41a, 41b, 41c. Famous photographic portraits of Virginia Woolf.

During her ‘Vogue years’ Virginia Woolf even considered writing a book for the Hogarth Press on ‘dress’, perhaps planning something similar to what her nephew, Quentin Bell, was later to do in *On Human Finery* (1947). However, the design was to be short-lived, though one which gripped her imagination with excitable vision,

Should it be prefaced by an account of a great dress show – of the Clients – mannequins – and frocks – and the buying of a frock?¹⁰⁸

This fascinating idea never materialised in this form, and yet dress and fashion are topics that recur with increasing regularity in imagery, diatribes and themes in both her novels and essays. There was certainly no need to make the subject factual and clinical as for her it becomes a source of creativity, sensuality, symbolism, aestheticism and a basis for a polemical feminist and political discourse that was the foundation of her great seminal essays *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*.

A Room of One's Own (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938): Who's

Afraid of...

Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'.¹⁰⁹

The fact that both sexes have a very marked though dissimilar love of dress seems to have escaped the notice of the dominant sex owing largely it must be supposed to the hypnotic power of dominance. (3Gs, 373)

Disguised as Mary Beton, Mary Seton, or Mary Carmichael, Woolf makes acerbic mocking attacks on the stereotype that women are the vain sex and re-dresses the balance; if not actually outweighing the dominant male desire, for which women merely serve,

¹⁰⁸ VW to Mary Hutchinson, 18 April 1923, *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Joanne Trautmann Banks (London: Hogarth, 1989), 1380a, p.162.

...all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.

The privately dressed female is just another male pecuniary addiction like 'cocaine' (*AROO*, 45). Women function on the whole, as in Veblen's social critique, as angelically passive patterns who, '[put] into evidence [their] household's ability to pay,' whether it is the father, brother or eventually becoming, 'the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger' (*AROO*, 56).¹¹⁰ Fashion is beautiful and necessary to obtain a husband, but it also functions as a tool and trap, both financially and mentally. In the end it is men who pay for, sanction, and are ultimately seduced by the aesthetic image of feminine dress. An example of these sartorial expectations for women is the tragic image of the married Lady Dudley in the nineteenth century, 'sitting in diamonds among the midges of a Scottish moor,' and poignantly symbolising the cruelty of a husband who gave her everything 'except responsibility': she is a passive possession, no more, and the clothes are the chief ornament,

He insisted upon his wife's wearing full dress, even at the remotest shooting lodge in the Highlands; he loaded her with gorgeous jewels. (*AROO*, 83)

The wife here is merely an elaborate extension of masculine vanity, liberated from him only by death she succeeds to run his estates with due 'competence'. Reversing the conventional order of expectation Woolf turns her lupine vitriol onto the 'pomp and ceremony' of the male public sphere in *Three Guineas* whereby she exposes the

¹⁰⁹ Woolf Virginia: *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. Morag Shiach (OUP, 1992), p.96. All future references will be made to this edition, either as *AROO* or *3Gs*.

¹¹⁰ Veblen, p.179.

façades, the problems, and the hypocrisy of the modern belligerent society on the eve of war. In a comprehensive list she exclaims in direct address,

Your clothes in the first place make us gape with astonishment. How many, how splendid, how extremely ornate they are – the clothes worn by the educated man in his public capacity! Now you dress in violet; a jewelled crucifix swings on your breast, now your shoulders are covered with lace; now furred with ermine; now sitting with many linked chains set with precious stones. Now you wear wigs upon your heads; rows of graduated curls....Now your hats are boat-shaped, or cocked; now they mount in canes of black fur; now they are made of brass and scuttle-shaped; now plumes of red, now of blue hair surmount them. Sometimes gowns cover your legs; sometimes gaiters. Tabards embroidered with lions and unicorns swing from your shoulders; metal objects cut in star shapes glitter and twinkle upon your breasts. Ribbons of all colours – blue, purple, crimson – cross from shoulder to shoulder. After the comparative simplicity of your dress at home, the splendour of your public attire is dazzling. (3Gs, 177)

The uniforms of all varieties of patriarchal power are mocked and then radically blamed as a precursor to jealousy, fear, and violence. Even ecclesiasts such as St Paul are rationally derided for stating that women should be modestly ‘veiled when praying’ rather than admit that he finds female hair sexually distracting: blaming the woman and not himself. The military are criticised for their lavish sartorial ceremonies and egotistical ‘advertisement function’ of their uniforms, medals and ribbons, whose symbolism is inclusively insular and is akin to the ‘barbar[ous]...rites

of savages'.¹¹¹ Inextricably connecting 'dress and war' she polemically argues that the primary function of the 'red and the gold, the brass and the feathers' is,

...to impress the beholder with the majesty of the military office, partly in order through their vanity to induce young men to become soldiers....by dressing differently, or by adding titles before, or letters after their names are acts that rouse competition and jealousy – emotions which...have their share in encouraging war. (3Gs, 180-1)

Personal adornments of distinction ultimately serve, 'to constrict, to stereotype and to destroy' (3Gs, 321). The accompanying pompous and 'displeasing spectacle' of male 'symbolic sartorial splendour' is easily extended to the stuffy academics whom Woolf observes in the opening of *A Room* as she wanders around Cambridge seeing men dressed in 'cap and gown; some had tufts of fur on their shoulders,' whilst they are visually juxtaposed with those rare female scholars, such as Jane Harrison who merely wears a, 'shabby dress,' and thus women are excluded not only from the library, but also publicly elaborate masculine traditions (*AROO*, 10, 21).¹¹²

Judges, admirals, generals, heralds, lifeguards, peers, beefeaters, and mayors are all included in the all-encompassing diatribe against visual hypocrisy and 'singularity of appearance' (3Gs, 373). The law adorned in its 'scarlet robe, an ermine cape, and a vast wig of artificial curls,' is dramatised in *The Years*, which extends and narrativises the argument of *Three Guineas* by describing men in an array of sanctioned symbolic

¹¹¹ I Corinthians 11: 4-15.

¹¹² Jane Harrison (1850 –1928), classical scholar and anthropologist.

costumes through half a century. Eleanor Pargiter amusedly observes her educated brother, Morris, adopting his 'solemn' role in the courtroom ritual,

Men in wigs and gowns were getting up and sitting down....One of the barristers in the front row turned his head. It was Morris; but how odd he looked in his yellow wig!...there was something ceremonial about it all. From where she sat she could see his face in profile; the wig squared his forehead, and gave him a framed look, like a picture. (*TY*, 104-5)

Pompous and absurd, yet this male expense (educational and sartorial) is at the literal expense of the lives of 'the daughters of educated men'; a serious feminist concern which is depicted in the novel through the foibles of the head of the patriarchal household, Colonel Pargiter in his 'closely buttoned coat'; the Oxbridge old men with their 'black gowns billowing'; the 'man in gold lace' at the party who talks only of 'power'; and the anonymous city men in 'neat striped suits and bowler hats' who all seek to marginalise women in the public sphere, thus privately restricting their role to the passive 'Angel of the House' (*3Gs*, 157; *TY*, 6, 72, 133, 219). Sinisterly, Hitler and his henchmen are described in similar terms in Woolf's *Diary* with, 'hoods & masks, like little boys dressed up': suggesting a system of competitiveness in contemporary public life that is linked to tyranny and totalitarianism.¹¹³

The theme of female emancipation from the patriarchal home with its 'creeds, its laws, its clothes,' is directly addressed in *A Room and Three Guineas* (*3Gs*, 176). Furthermore, the aforementioned image of the young Virginia Stephen excitedly

¹¹³ *Diary*, 2 July 1934, IV., p.223.

planning to spend her meagre clothing budget on educational books takes on a new relevance as it becomes an allegory for the enforced limitations of the female sphere, one in which dress and not intellect is the crucial commodifying factor.

Whilst the dreaming spires of Oxford symbolise for fathers, brothers and husbands the boundlessness of academic ambition, to the daughters, sisters and wives they appear, 'like petticoats with holes in them' (3Gs, 157). On their 'pin money' of '£50 a year with which to buy clothes' they are visibly peripheral to the requirements of 'Arthur's Education Fund' (3Gs, 157). Woolf goes on to compare the limited allowance of several notable women who, 'dressed as well as could be managed upon a clothing allowance of from £40 to £100 a year' (3Gs, 205). The upper-middle class Sophia Jex-Blake, who was to become a famous doctor, had an allowance of '£30 to £40 annually; Lady Lascelles 'about £100 in 1860'; and Elizabeth Barrett (to be Browning) was granted 'from Forty to forty-five pounds...every three months, the income tax being first deducted' as compared to the generous allowances made for their brothers at University (3Gs, see note 31, 380).¹¹⁴ This nineteenth-century oppression is carried into the 1930s with the second begging letter of *Three Guineas* asking for donations of any 'cast-off clothing' that would be of help to those newly professional women who are 'shabbily dressed' and paid little, 'from the public funds for their public services' and of course this is starkly contrasted to their male counterparts who wear 'their gowns, wigs and ribbons' (3Gs, 210-11; 235; 241).

Even the lauded Dames of *Debrett's* Empire elaborately mark their engendered subservience which is symbolically reflected in the badge of the garter, which is,

¹¹⁴ These were all unmarried women; married women were not allowed to own property until the passing of the Married Women's Property Act in 1870.

...a cross patonce, enamelled pearl, fimbriated or surmounted by a gold medallion with a representation of Britannia seated within a circle...the ribbon in [the Dame's] case is only two inches and one quarter in breadth; whereas the ribbon of the knight is three inches and three quarters in breadth. The stars also differ in size. The motto, however, is the same for both sexes...(3Gs, note 20, 388)

A seemingly pedantic detail metaphorically metamorphoses in her argument into an overt symbol of female intellectual oppression, and nowhere is this exhibited more keenly than in the patriarchally dominated canon of literature. Whilst some middle-class angels were 'powdering their noses' other potentially artistic and intelligent women scraped by under the heavy demands made in the name of 'duty' (*AROO*, 26).

Continuing the motif of St Paul, the anonymity of the woman writer has been successfully 'veiled', whether by pseudonyms (Bell, Eliot and Sand) or their absence or exclusion from the literary canon (*AROO*, 65). Sixteen-year-old Judith Shakespeare, the fictitious sister of William, attempts to read and write but is told only to, 'mend the stockings,' and is bribed into marriage by sartorial gifts from her father: 'a chain of beads or a fine petticoat,' the chain symbolical of the slavery of the matrimonial yoke for women, and her creative potential is left unacknowledged (*AROO*, 61). Similarly, Woolf spotlights the role of the Victorian daughter as confined to time-consuming tasks such as, 'making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags,'¹¹⁵ and then she immediately

¹¹⁵ Originally quoted in *Jane Eyre*, p.141.

highlights the accepted limitations of the life of Charlotte Brontë, ‘stagnate in the parsonage mending stockings when she wanted to wander free over the world’ (*AROO*, 90; 95). It is interesting to see just how often this knitting/sewing motif recurs in her fiction, and for what reason. Ultimately, the heroines of her novels are ‘creators’ or in James Naremore’s term ‘unifiers’.¹¹⁶ Whether the fecund beneficence of Mrs Ramsay who perpetually knits the ‘reddish-brown stocking’; Mrs Dalloway defending herself against Peter Walsh by mending her ‘mermaid-green party dress’; Maggie Pargiter independently creating her own dress from the beautiful fabric of ‘silk green, with blue rays on it,’ at her sewing machine in *The Years*; the artistic director Miss La Trobe cleverly constructing an illusion of history and historical costumes from a bricolage of everyday materials; the liberated working woman, Mary Datchet’s love of darning in *Night and Day*; or even Orlando’s ongoing manuscript of ‘The Oak Tree’ which is likened to, ‘a piece of darning most conscientiously carried out,’ as its creative birth (from Orlando as a woman) sees the laborious work delivered from her now uncorseted bosom, ‘the upper part of her dress burst open, and out upon the table fell ‘The Oak Tree,’ a poem’ (*TTL*, 8; *MD*, 40-57; *TY*, 162; *O*, 226, 267).

Clothing in the Novels

Writing, creating and clothing coexist in the works of Virginia Woolf,

What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ James Naremore, *The World without a Self* (Yale University Press, 1973), p.245.

¹¹⁷ *A Writer’s Diary*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth, 1965) Easter Sunday, 20 April 1919, p.13.

Woolf becomes a self-conscious mythical Penelope weaving meaning into her work, but yet positively utilising the symbolism, descriptive aesthetics and metaphors of female dress: she has a vivid ‘plastic sense’ and ‘aesthetic soul’.¹¹⁸ Women’s writing, like the feminine sartorial, is a creative, almost craft-like constructive process, and though she cites intellectual ‘androgyny’ as the prime goal for all writers in *A Room* it would seem that in all of her novels the costume of triumph and liberation is undeniably part of the feminine aesthetic, but with the ability to transgress at will (*AROO*, 128). This is almost certainly what the feminist Joan Riviere meant as a conscious utilisation of the disguises of femininity in her groundbreaking essay ‘Womanliness as a Masquerade’ (1929), which sees gender as a social performance through dress and body style.¹¹⁹ However, Woolf admits that she is still held in check by her maternal legacy, as the ‘angel’ watches over her shoulder whilst she is writing, as the Victorian mother or editor stops behind her in rustling skirts as she begins to review a book by a famous man, always reminding her to be charming, tender and polite. It would seem that the gilded cage of the crinoline has its own psychological restrictions.¹²⁰

Rejecting as ‘childish photograph[y]’ the ‘button and glove’ verisimilitude of the Victorian and Edwardian novelists in her essay ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’ (1924) she seeks to redesign this literal materialist version of realism for ‘an equivalence, not imitation’; a scientific modernity where objects, colours and physical sensations express the life of the mind.¹²¹ Thus her feminist literary goal via the contemporary

¹¹⁸ *Diary*, I, 30 September 1919, p.168.

¹¹⁹ First published in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 10, 1929, and is reproduced in *Formations of Fantasy*, pp.35–44.

¹²⁰ ‘Professions for Women’ (1931) in *Women and Writing*.

¹²¹ Essay in *Collected Essays*, II, pp106–9. Quotation, Roger Fry after the first Post-Impressionism exhibition in December 1910.

writer, Mary Carmichael, in *A Room* is suitably enlightened with sartorial metaphors, and has to disregard 'Milton's bogey' and other male-created gender stereotypes (*AROO*, 149),

...the courtesan, the harlot and the lady with the pug dog. There they still sit in the rough and ready-made clothes that the male writer has had perforce to clap upon their shoulders. But Mary Carmichael will have out her scissors and fit them close to every hollow and angle...[but she] will still be encumbered with that self-consciousness in the presence of 'sin' which is the legacy of our sexual barbarity. She will still wear the shoddy old fetters of class on her feet. (*AROO*, 115)

These 'dusty velvet' worlds are re-dressed with the everyday objects of the ever-changing female sphere. Sartorial features become almost metaphysical, transgressing the former limitations of 'observational realism' to include a magical sensuality, akin to synaesthesia,

...Above all you must illuminate your soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generousities, and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness, and what is your relation to the everchanging and turning world of gloves and shoes and stuffs swaying up and down among the faint scents that come through the chemists' bottles down arcades of dress material....For in imagination I had gone into a shop;...it was hung, astonishingly beautifully, with coloured ribbons....it is a sight that would lend

itself to the pen as fittingly as any snowy peak or rocky gorge in the Andes.

(*AROO*, 117)

Thus her modern writing style finds significant equivalence in the everyday woman's life. Allowing, as she says, 'a generous margin for symbolism,' she passionately combines her vivid pictorial impressions with her other senses (*AROO*, 139). As was hinted to Violet Dickinson in an early letter of 1906, her natural technique is that of synaesthetic perception,

I have been having a debauch of music & hearing certain notes to which I could be wed – pure simple notes – smooth from all passion & frailty, & flawless as gems. That means so much to me, & so little to you! Now do you know that sound has shape & colour & texture as well?¹²²

Woolf called herself, 'a literary painter' and her artist sister Vanessa described her as, 'a poet in colour', which plainly identifies her writing with the synaesthetic art of the Post-Impressionists, especially the *Blaue Reiter* group led by Wassily Kandinsky.¹²³ This artistic movement experimented with colour and shape and their resultant effects, as Kandinsky famously declared in 'The Effect of Color' (1911),

Generally speaking, color directly influences the soul. Color is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is

¹²² VS to VD, 16 Dec 1906, *Letters I*. pp.263-4.

¹²³ *Diary*, 25 Nov 1933; Quoted in: Caws, Mary Ann, *Women of Bloomsbury: Virginia, Vanessa and Carrington* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.35.

the hand that plays, touching one key or another purposefully to cause vibrations in the soul.¹²⁴

The psychological effects of recurrent colours in Woolf's novels will later be made apparent, with greens, blues and browns dominating a vibrant array of fashions, and all three colours are those of nature's creative simplicity. Her short piece 'Blue and Green' (1921) is an abstract colour sketch which links the colours to the natural world and female deities: 'a pool of green' and 'spray[ing] a fringe of blue beads', 'faint blue with the veils of madonnas'; she creates painterly effects with words, just as the artist Lily Briscoe triumphantly completes her picture saturated 'with all its greens and blues' of Mrs Ramsay as a seemingly abstract, 'triangular purple shape', as her own creative interpretation of her memory (*TTL*, 225, 58-9).¹²⁵ In her search for a suitable form, perception, light, shape and colour become her materials. Her vivid 'plastic sense' especially in her use of clothing anticipates what the French formalist Charles Mauron wrote in 'The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature' (1926) that painters, and by extension, writers, use colour primarily to establish 'psychological volumes'.¹²⁶

If the 'Greek Slave Years' compounded her neuroses then they also paradoxically fired her imagination: reminiscent of the observant wallflower, Jane Austen, yet with a dash of the Wildean satire, Woolf retained a kind of fascinated dislike for decadent high society. On one of many theatrical outings Vita noted that whilst pushing through the fashionable audience Virginia was, 'getting drunk on the crowd as you

¹²⁴ Quoted in Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World: The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Ohio State University Press, 1986), ch.4 'Art', p.59.

¹²⁵ *The Complete Shorter Fiction*, p.142.

¹²⁶ *Diary I*, 168, Sept 15 1919.

and I do on champagne', immediately alluding to her fiction, inspired by the lavish visuals with '...groups of well-dressed people talking, and it was all very like *Mrs Dalloway*'.¹²⁷ Woolf even described her debutante years with a similar aestheticism, 'like some French Painting,' unwillingly immersed, like George Eliot, with a mixture of 'detachment and desire', and in *Jacob's Room* (1922) she adds, 'The amusing thing about a party is to watch the people coming and going'.¹²⁸ Dress aside, or perhaps utilised as part of the social guise, what Woolf liked was the way parties force people to suppress their true emotions and become 'heroically trivial'.¹²⁹ She further admits in 'A Sketch' that although each party seemed to be a trial, she is secretly thrilled by the spectacle,

All the same there was the excitement of clothes, of lights, of society, in short; and the queerness, the strangeness of being alone, on my own, for a moment with some complete stranger: he in white waistcoat and gloves, I in white satin and gloves...there was a thrill in the unreality.¹³⁰

An unreality it indeed became as the sartorial appearances of her beautiful heroines are minutely detailed in her fiction. There was certainly no need for a specific book on dress, as her theories regarding it are overt in *A Room* and *Three Guineas*; and material aestheticism and its chronological implications for gender and literature are woven into the very fabric of her work. To her the writing process for women is analogous to a craft; like embroidery (the frivolous everyday details); darning (repairing scenes or episodes); knitting and sewing (unifying the strands of the plot);

¹²⁷ VSW to HN, 1 July 1926, *V&H*, pp.151-2.

¹²⁸ *Passionate Apprentice*, 1903, p.171; *Jacob's Room*, ed. Sue Roe (Harmondsworth,: Penguin, 1992), p.72.

¹²⁹ Lee, p.153.

and dressing (their artistic covers by Vanessa Bell) and characters are relayed through their choice of clothing. As Alex Zwerdling comments,

[Woolf] attempts to “internalise” and make external description illuminate psychic process.¹³¹

This is not the ‘trivial’ material reality that the Edwardian novelists portrayed as ‘the fabric of things’ for Woolf is extremely self-conscious of the effects she is creating with words and objects. In ‘An Unwritten Novel’ (1921) she deliberately prohibits herself from creating an elaborate descriptive setting for the characters, especially when tempted to detail ‘ornaments, curtains, [a] trefoil china plate’, however, she leaves in the details of clothing.¹³² Her final call to action at the end of *Three Guineas* marks her as a radical aesthete,

....dispense with pageantry not from any puritanical dislike of beauty. On the contrary, it will be one of their [daughters of educated men’s] aims to increase private beauty; the beauty of spring, summer, autumn; the beauty of flowers, silks, clothes...(3Gs, 321)

Dress is exultantly allied with the seasonal adornments of mother nature and cyclical time, and this is how it often recurs in her art: a metaphysical magical transformation.

¹³⁰ *MOB*, pp.134-5.

¹³¹ Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.18.

¹³² *Collected Essays*, I. p.332.

From the year of her birth in 1882 until her death in 1941 the life and works of Virginia Woolf encompass the decades of the most radical changes in women's status and clothing beyond any of her literary foremothers. From the constraints of the Victorian Angel with her stays, corsets and crinolines, through to the Grecian 'S-shaped' curves of the 'New Woman', to the restrictive frills and flounces of the feminine Edwardian lady, which evolved regardless of suffragette protest into the aptly named 'hobble skirt' fashions of 1910; onto the muted restraint of the war years that were all too swiftly followed by rising hemlines and the flapper-style of the roaring twenties; on towards the thrifty but elegant sophistication of the thirties, and finally the asceticism of the second world war years. This was liberally punctuated with the prehistory of the bifurcated 'Bloomer Costume' from 1851, the Dress Reform Movement; assisted by the invention of the bicycle in 1894; the Pre-Raphaelite or artistic woman's dress with its exotic Liberty fabrics; and of course Jazz age androgyny and transvestism.

Though curtailed during her debutante years, it was during the 1920s party-going years of fame and wealth that she finally achieved, and perhaps helped create, the quintessential Bloomsbury-Woolfian style. Fashions became less formal and linked to the emancipatory ideas of the women's movement: with the corset more or less discarded the decade before, rising hemlines saw the daring liberation of women's legs, and a more 'masculine' look became popular with flattened breasts and hips, and bobbed hair. Undergarments changed to suit the new fashions: the loose-fitting chemise or camisole, paired with bloomers were employed in place of the corset. The 1920s also saw the emergence of three major women's fashion magazines: *Vogue*, *The Queen*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. *Vogue* was first published in 1892, but its up-to-date

fashion information did not have a marked impact on women's desires for fashionable garments until the 20s, providing mass exposure for popular styles. Cosmetics queens Elizabeth Arden and Helena Rubenstein sought to popularise make-up and skin care. This was combined with the haute couture allure of Gabrielle 'Coco Chanel' who exerted great influence during the decade by appealing to the practical woman through her use of uncomplicated ensembles like the timeless simplicity of the 'little black dress' accessorised with scarves and inexpensive jewellery, and topped off with a 'healthy suntan' she became a byword for chic style; and finally the dazzle of Hollywood and its new motion pictures all helped to create new directions of inspiration.

Look for the woman in the dress. If there is no woman, there is no dress.

(Gabrielle 'Coco' Chanel, 1883-1971)

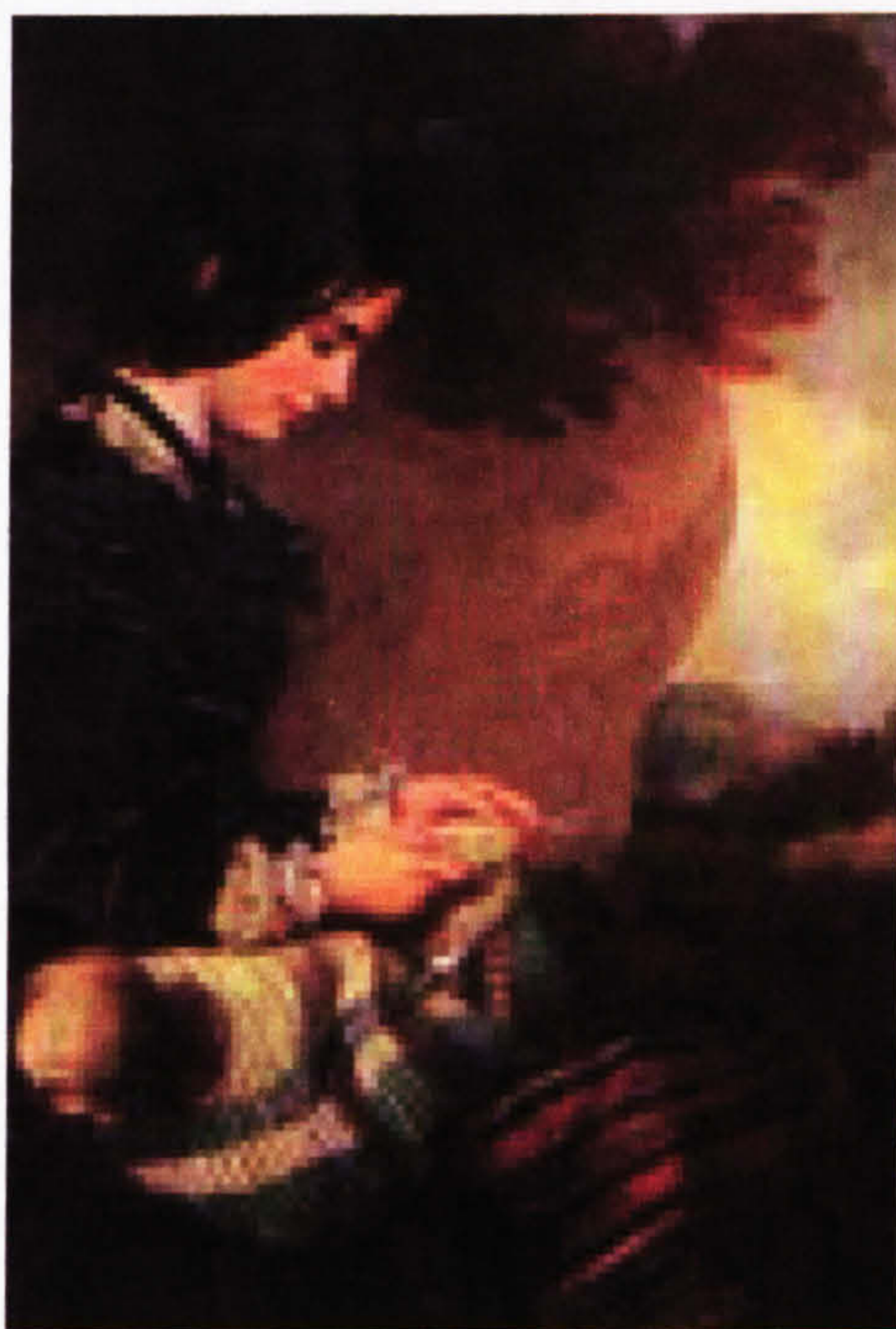
These years of immense gender and sartorial transformation are painstakingly recorded in the writings of Virginia Woolf. The remainder of this chapter is split into two sections, each containing three novels which share similar sartorial themes. The first group are those narratives initially defined by sartorial symbolism, and expose the conflict of the 'unifying' women who are torn between the female duties of the remembered past and the present desire for artistic and creative freedom, these include *Night and Day*, *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*. The second group consists of *The Years*, *Orlando*, and *Between the Acts* the mature works which analyse the relationship between clothing and gender, but also consider costume and chronology; a theme which goes beyond using them as a mere historical marker, but sees the past as a matter of textures (horse-hair or velvet), changing light and colour,

and not through prominent events or dominant figures of the age. Virginia Woolf the aesthete creates vivid literary picture books with characters suspended in a series of tableaux: a colourful fictional pageant of the ordinary and familiar.

Night and Day (1919), Mrs Dalloway (1925) To the Lighthouse (1927):

Female Unifiers and Creative Harmony: Sewing, Knitting and

Darning



42. 'Mary Isabella Grant' by Sir Francis Grant (c.1854).

The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. (*O*, 179)

Between 1919 and 1928 Virginia Woolf's writing career took off. It started with the relative success of *The Voyage Out* (1915) and was swiftly followed by five other novels, culminating in the hugely popular *Orlando* (1928). The primary linking factor of the three earlier novels selected in this chapter is that they all provide an implicit social critique: both of class and gender relations. Two of the above are classic 'city novels', although domesticity is central; and the other is a domestic set up in a holiday retreat on the remote Isle of Skye. Of *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf declared, 'I want to criticise the social system, and show it at work, at its most intense' which echoes the 'fascinated dislike' she felt as voyeur on the glittering London party circuit during the Greek Slave years.¹³³ To the early twentieth-century woman the 'governing class[es]', as Peter Walsh calls them, represent elegance, composure, and a form of rigid self-control bordering on the oppressive in a defiant continuation of both Victorian and Edwardian legacies despite of pre and post-wartime social upheaval. Expectations for daughters, wives and mothers like Katherine Hilberry, Elizabeth and Clarissa Dalloway, and the significantly nameless Mrs Ramsay are placed beneath the guise or mask of 'duty' under which they become the model 'angel of the house', social butterfly, or perfect hostess and mother, though often this is at the expense of their true self. Creativity, passion and individuality are artfully and repressively concealed beneath the clothing of such genderised types or masks, which Woolf the writer allows us to perceive and see beyond. Virginia Woolf replaces former nineteenth-century Christian idolatry of the Madonna and angel figures with pagan mythic figures and secular literary allusions, and so re-dresses them more appropriately with regard to post-Darwinian, post-suffrage emancipation. These three novels initially appear to rely upon polarised examples of, not only masculine and feminine, but of

¹³³ *Diary*, 19 June 1923, II. p.248.

the women themselves, in a similar vein to the traditional moral-sartorial dichotomies followed by the Brontës and Eliot. However, this is merely a necessary façade, as Woolf attempts to destroy the schisms she regards as the root of the gender problem. As the feminist critic Toril Moi suggests:

Virginia Woolf...understands that the goal of the feminist struggle must be precisely to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity.¹³⁴

As a modern writer she seeks to transcend this limiting structure through transvestism and forms of androgyny, which are subtly invoked in the characterisations and sartorial signifiers of Katherine Hilberry, Lily Briscoe, Elizabeth Dalloway, Mrs Ramsay, and later more overtly in Lord/Lady Orlando, Miss La Trobe, Kitty Lasswade and Sara Pargiter. As the traditional gender dichotomies are deconstructed, so are the assumed female 'pairings' which are not set in opposition, but in connection, as complementary to each other. Woolf's non-essentialist language and its concepts are further influenced by Freudian thought and the rise of psychoanalysis as a legitimate tool to examine the nature and nurture of individual subject. The world Woolf singles out for her attack is one in which women are reduced and restricted by male-created types, and which presents them as objects rather than subjects.

This theme is implicit in her frequent descriptions of men who persist in 'fiddling' or 'fidgiting' with a significant sartorial symbol or accessory, often at the neglect of the true female subject. In 'the classic city novel' *Night and Day* the patriarchal Mr

¹³⁴ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985, reprinted 1987), p.13.

Hilberry keeps his daughter and wife immured in the house haunted by the Victorian 'rustle of skirts' and the dominant spirit of the Victorian male writer, whilst he departs for work in the public sphere (*N&D*, 138).¹³⁵ He is one of Woolf's compulsive male fiddlers, perpetually toying with significant objects whilst Katherine talks expressively of her reading knowledge: 'He played constantly with a little green stone attached to his watch chain...' (*N&D*, 4). This comforting habit recurs at other significant points in the novel: after ringing the dinner-bell by which he summons his daughter and expects her to change outfits, he again begins 'toy[ing] with the little green stone attached to his watch chain' with a 'superficial gaze'; and later as Katherine is required to play the piano for him, and demonstrate her accomplishments and show she is marriageable, he 'turn[s] his little green stone' abstractly (*N&D*, 87, 401-3). What is essentially a trivial object displaces the immediate subject, and he metaphorically plays with time; even though his daughter clearly cannot, as her time and freedoms are consistently sacrificed to filial duties which require her to dress for dinner and visits, and thus boost her saleability on the marriage market. Her fiancé, the foppish and 'scrupulously well-dressed' William Rodney, also concerns himself mainly with details of his appearance, at least when he is not attempting to control hers (*N&D*, 43). When Katherine first visits him in his apartment, we learn how he has changed:

Three times that afternoon he had dressed himself in a tail coat, and three times he had discarded it for an old dressing-gown; three times he had placed his pearl tie-pin in position, and three times he had removed it again.
(*N&D*, 126)

¹³⁵ Squiers, p.72.

All this is to create a deceptive 'appearance of ease', just as he later toys with the pearl on his tie, whilst contemplating an affair with Katherine's accomplished, feminine cousin, Cassandra Ottoway. As he flirts with the naïve girl he 'draw[s] his feet together and press[es] his fingertips upon an imaginary...malacca cane' which further suggests that he finds his sexual dominance in this relationship more satisfying than that with the wayward and rebellious Katherine, whom he cannot re-dress in his own sartorial style (*N&D*, 336).

Peter Walsh in *Mrs Dalloway* takes the idea of the fidgeting male to a new symbolical level. Even as Clarissa Dalloway strolls down Bond Street as a seemingly empowered consumer she sees male 'shopkeepers...fidgeting in their windows with their paste and diamonds' (*MD*, 4). The truth is that she is the consumed, in her constricted domestic world where she is at the behest of men, and constantly suppressing her true feelings by wearing the socially acceptable guises and masks. Thus when her former lover Peter Walsh dressed in 'the same checked suit', intrudes upon her party preparations, with unapologetic disdain, she must mask her true feelings whatever they may be. She sits patiently and mends her faded and torn 'sea-green dress'; this quiet contemplation is discarded as she vainly attempts to hide the beautiful dress 'like a virgin protecting her chastity' (*MD*, 43). Throughout the conversation Peter Walsh 'stealthily finger[s] his pocket knife' and ominously 'tilt[s] his penknife towards her green dress' as he psychologically unsettles her with the potential phallic power of destruction (*MD*, 44-57).

Eric Warner regards this item, not as a worn down masculine symbol, 'but a [compulsive] tool with which to pare down his perceptions, to preen his identity, and to defend himself against others' views'; in other words, the pocket knife is part of a distinctive form of male vanity, and perhaps a weakness in the reliance.¹³⁶ However, his singular acquisitive focus could also be said to encapsulate Woolf's rejection of the 'materialist' old male literary canon, or rather those:

...obsessive observers who cannot keep their eyes off the object and who thus manage to ignore the perceiving subject.¹³⁷

Peter Walsh regards women as fetishist objects, as he desperately tries to re-collect the pieces of his former love through 'her cloak, her gloves, her opera-glasses' only to desperately discover that he cannot recall their past (*MD*, 51). In his self-assumed role of 'Prince Charming' he immediately transfers his obsession to another young woman on the street, whom he attempts to follow like a infatuated stalker, breaking her down to a series of objects: 'white gloves', 'long cloak' and 'the red carnation' she wears on her smart 'black' outfit (*MD*, 57-8). The woman disappears into the distance as he continues to play with his pocket-knife, standing significantly by 'Nelson's Column':

...ahead of him, her cloak, her gloves, her shoulders, combining with the fringes and laces and the feather boas in the windows to make the spirit of finery and whimsy... (*MD*, 58)

¹³⁶ Warner, p.88.

¹³⁷ Zwerdling, p.15.

As Mrs Walsh, Clarissa would have become the ultimate passive, aesthetic acquisition, never to be left alone and certainly not an active individual, but a subordinate, consumable object. The phallogentric universe would have prevailed and dominated her just as it does to the passive image of the colonised, colonial girl 'all in white' whose photo he obsessively carries round, when in actuality she belongs to someone else (*MD*, 169).

In *To the Lighthouse* Mrs Ramsay is presented as the adored and adorned object of affection, like her real-life progenitor, Julia Stephen. Though she is the locus of the creativity and the central unifier of the novel; knitting the unfinished brown stocking, she is sidelined to male fantasies of her as 'goddess', 'like a queen' and 'Queen Victoria', practically she wears an eclectic, eccentric, and sometimes androgynous mix of clothing to go about her wifely and maternal duties:

She clapped a deer-stalker's hat on her head; she ran across the lawn in galoshes to snatch a child from mischief. (*TTL*, 35)

The traditional male patriarch, such as the aspiring academic Charles Tansley worries obsessively about his socks, tie ('did one like his tie?') and cheap 'flannel trousers'; he is further emasculated by losing his umbrella just as Mrs Ramsay holds her 'black parasol very erect' (*TTL*, 12, 14, 98). As Mrs Ramsay is worn to death by constant mending and replacing of her eight children's 'daily wear of shoes and stockings' her husband is blind to her daily devotion and concern with objects and feelings (*TTL*, 27). As a married academic he does not have to bother himself with trivial salient

details and for him the brown stocking is only a splodge of colour to his inattentive gaze 'noticing [only] something red, something brown' (*TTL*, 74).

This is further evident in his neglect of his clothing and person, from the 'boot laces untied...frayed tie to his half-buttoned waistcoat' after his wife's death (*TTL*, 167).

However, it is left to the creative artist Lily Briscoe to point out that his boots were 'remarkable' and she exclaims 'what beautiful boots' to his surprised delight. He begins to recognise and praise their intricate and skilful workmanship, in a way that he never recognised with his wife, even though he recognises their potential disabling power 'to cripple and torture the human foot' which resonates with reference to the Chinese-slipper torture inflicted on women to obtain the perfect tiny feet (*TTL*, 168).

He childishly challenges Lily to tie his boot laces for him, even though his wife thought herself not good enough for the task, but he pushes her away to do the job himself. This action and awareness appears to return him to earth and to his immediate and painful domestic situation, from which he can emerge as a competent leader and father-figure, and to complete the novel's tying/knitting metaphor of unification which was left cruelly open ended upon his wife's death (*TTL*, 167-8).

Before and after her death Mrs Ramsay as fecund creator eternally weaves herself into 'a web of active relationships', she is said to have 'tangled one's perceptions in a golden mesh' and is subsequently woven into the collective memory for all time (*TTL*, 59):

...[this] ball of memories unwound by Mrs McNab [in 'Time Passes'] is set against the less delicate knots in 'The Lighthouse' that bind the family

together under Mr Ramsay, like the [crude but strong] knots tied and untied by Macalister's boy.¹³⁸

The foundations for friendship and familial bonds have been set in place and it is up to her successors to metaphorically keep the ball rolling.

Clothing and accessories for the majority of men in the novels are inextricably linked with destruction, obsession and violence. Reflecting the military focus of *Three Guineas* uniforms become symbols of patriarchal despotism, competition, envy and inequality. *The Years* has the greatest number of uniforms spanning half a century of social change: barristers, colonels, businessmen and soldiers, as Sara tellingly envisions her cousin North '[sitting] in his mud-coloured uniform, with his switch between his legs' which conjures up an image of sanctioned male violence (*TY*, 272). *Between the Acts* is also imbued with violent images and incidents, especially as it is set on the eve of war in June 1939. Male dress is overtly linked to violence, even in the sentimental recollections of the bygone Victorian age with the men with their 'red handkerchiefs' or rather 'garotters' as they were known; a term which literally means 'cut throats' (*BtA*, 95). The old-school male, Giles Oliver, now city broker, comes to the country dressed 'like a cricketer, in flannels, wearing a blue coat with brass buttons; though he was enraged' an ensemble which personifies the traditional English gentleman (*BtA*, 8). Perpetually he is full of anger and only has contempt for his wife, Isa, which he conceals as best he can whilst pursuing the man-eating Mrs Manresa who is adorned with 'emeralds and rubies' (*BtA*, 119). He symbolically stubs his 'light tennis shoe' on some wood as he kicks a chair, and further dwells

¹³⁸ Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Methuen, 1977), p.133.

deliciously on the blood's stark contrast to the whiteness, and its 'stickiness' (*BtA*, 61). This violent hyper-masculine image is combined with his Aunt Lucy's vivid picturing of a reported violent rape in which 'one of the troopers removed part of her clothing, and she screamed...'. (*BtA*, 15). This places Woolf's men in a dangerous position of power, with aggressive, misogynist overtones; their clothing is accordingly ego-boosting, phallic and potentially destructive, which is vastly disparate to that of the women whose sartorial attitudes exemplify creativity, artistic ability, emancipation and triumph.

In marked opposition are those women who patiently weave the very fabric of the narrative together: they unify, create or inspire creation just like a secular Mother Nature:

...nature...has further complicated her task and added to our confusion by providing not only a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us – a piece of a policeman's trousers lying cheek by jowl with Queen Alexandra's wedding veil – but have contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither.
(*O*, 75)

Woolf sees her writing as a craft, describing the writing of her *Diary* as 'rather loose knit' (see above). She is also partial to a bit of frivolous embroidery herself as she eclectically sewed 'a rose, a black lace fan, a box of matches, and four playing cards, on a mauve canvas'; she obviously saw the value of quiet unobtrusive contemplation

and aesthetic creation.¹³⁹ With memory and nature as dominant themes in her fiction, the plot strands are woven together and presided over by goddess-like, self-sacrificing heroines. As nature gives just a *single thread* it is left to wives, mothers and daughters to elaborate upon a theme, and embroider the life-enhancing, creative and aesthetic detail onto the narrow limitations set by the patriarchal homestead; and with *memory as the seamstress* there is the whimsical maiden who exercises her craft by unifying lives whilst creating a web-like narrative that has both depth and design. Woolf celebrates and sanctifies age old female skills by according them a valuable status and multiple purposes. Where history has sidelined such artistic creation to the realm of the frivolous, unproductive and insignificant, Woolf rescues it as both a metaphorical and literal theme. In *Three Guineas* she recommends setting up a college for ‘poor ladies’ which will teach such harmonious ‘little arts’ as talk, dress and cookery in the pursuit of a pacifist utopian society (3Gs 200). In *A Room* she talked of the need for a female literary dressmaker whose ‘scissors [are] needed’ to attack the ‘dusty velvet’ of the patriarchal legacy and re-dress the gender stereotypes anew; whilst deriding the man-made bias against such topics (*AROO*, 115-6): ‘Speaking crudely; football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’ (*AROO*, 96). This analogy extends naturally from life to art: namely, the creative processes that have been dominated by men at the sacrifice of innate female fecundity and talent.

Much has been written on Mrs Ramsay as the personification of a Gaia-Demeter like earth mother in both appearance and purpose. Though her freedoms are limited by her demanding role as wife and mother she inspires, creates and unifies even beyond her

¹³⁹ The design was based on one by her sister, Vanessa Bell, who was one of the creative leaders of the Bloomsbury artistic style and décor. VSW to HN, *V&H*, p.146.

existence. She is immediately bound to her knitting as she creates stockings for the lighthouse-keeper's crippled son. The stocking, though never seen to be finished, takes up most of her time as its description varies between 'reddish brown', 'a heather mixture' and 'hairy' although it is consistently delineated as a natural colour and texture, akin to that of the earth (43). As she knits Mrs Ramsay eloquently muses her creator's material philosophy:

It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things...felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one...(TTL, 70)



43. 'Knitting a Stocking' by Sir Francis Grant (1874).

The chore soothes her, frustrates her, and yet is a source of powerful energy at the same time:

Mrs Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely...seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray, looking at the same time animated and alive as if all her energies were being fused into a force, burning and illuminating (quietly though she sat, taking up her stocking again)....She laughed, she knitted...standing between her knees, very stiff, James felt all her strength flaring up to be drunk...(TTL, 42-3)

A powerful goddess-like fecundity issues forth as she weaves together those lives around her like an old style, self-sacrificing, angel of the house, modelled on Julia Stephen, and is, with the help of the artist spinster Lily Briscoe, re-interpreted for a modern generation. As she sits contentedly knitting in silence Mr Ramsay is clearly uncomfortable with her composure and is desperate for interaction as he 'swings the compass on his watch chain to and fro' bullishly insisting that the stocking is not the right length and that she will not finish it on time (TTL, 133). In conclusion, the knitting of the brown stocking is not only a profound symbol of the crude limitations of the feminine role, but it also provides a literal marker of the passage of time and the creation of memory, as Sue Roe puts it:

The narrative weaves and repairs and knits and unpicks the memory and desire...[just as] Mrs Ramsay turns to the knitting of her stocking: one way of marking the progress of the narrative through time.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Sue Roe, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice* (London: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1990), p.64.

With the author and subject allied and unified by female creativity, the men are suitably sidelined in their fiddling, patriarchal roles. Like Mr Hilberry, Mr Ramsay can literally play with time, but also direction and place - as symbolised by the compass, whilst the goddess-like Mrs Ramsay can only sit and knit like a dutiful Penelope.

The independent, hard-working feminist, Mary Datchet in *Night and Day* who is initially described as 'well-proportioned and dressed becomingly' looks older than her twenty-five years due to earning her own living. Though she is not duty-bound to dress for the evening, like her literary opposite Katherine Hilberry, she nonetheless enjoys the aesthetic transformation process, which is enlightened by the liberty of individual choice:

Mary felt a lightness of spirit came to her, as if she had put off the stout stuff of her working hours and slipped over her entire being some vesture of thin, bright silk. (*N&D*, 39)

As the hostess of the ensuing literary soiree she waits patiently for her intelligent guests to arrive as she delights in darning:

She pulled a basket containing balls of differently coloured wool and a pair of stockings which needed darning towards her, and began to set her fingers to work, while her mind, reflecting on the lassitude of her body, went on perversely...and she pictured herself laying aside her knitting and walking out

on to the down....As she ran the needle in and out of the wool, she thought of various stages in her own life. (*N&D*, 40-1)

Colourful and creative; yet practical and soothing, the darning occupies her body in a repetitive action whilst her mind escapes and wanders beyond the woollen ball and chain, as her meditations are woven into the very fabric of her life.

When disturbed in her skilful reverie by Ralph Denham, her secret, unrequited love, she uses the work as a defensive cover for her feelings by ‘taking up her stocking again’ just as he sees fit to wonder at her being ‘the only woman in London who darns her own stockings’ (*N&D*, 41, 42). Denham does not see the practical necessity of it for a strong woman who makes sacrifices for her own intellectual passions and freedom, and though he posits the combination of ‘books and stockings’ as being odd, the overall impression is of unrealistic and snobbish pretensions overriding any sense of the realistic everyday struggle for working women. Later he goads her with an unconvincing marriage proposal when he asks, ‘“Well Mary – ’ inviting her to take up the thread of thought where he had dropped it’ but she soon realises that she would rather return to her solitary darning than construct a life-long tapestry with him (*N&D*, 215). Correspondingly, Mrs Hilberry ‘knit[s] scarves’ intermittently, her freedoms curtailed just as her female ancestresses were before her (*N&D*, 96). An old photograph of Janie Mannering ‘a white-haired dame, whose satin robes seemed strung with pearls’ appears to be the very image of the perfect colonial wife and hostess, but her creative skills are made overt: ‘she could do anything with her hands – they all could – make a cottage or embroider a petticoat’ though the creative legacy of such women is denied and forgotten (*N&D*, 107).

Although it is often hard to tell if Woolf meant to portray these perpetually sewing women as a bound to a restrictive feminine duty, Mary's life is refreshingly far from the ideal conventional life, and this 'woman's' work she does is done with 'singular grace and felicity' as she finds a sense of pride in a job well done, 'she held it out and looked at it approvingly' (*N&D*, 42). Even as she brings and binds the young artists together in her small house, she continues to listen, think and weave. She later is seen enjoying such daily tasks as lacing up her boots, for she can cherish all that she has earned and worked hard for. A tactile and sensual person, she continues to deploy her sewing at times of internal turbulence and crisis. As Ralph confronts her with his passionate love for Katherine, Mary can only listen in agony and disguise it by 'reach[ing] her hand for her work-basket, and [taking] out her sewing and thread[ing] a needle', and during his outpouring she stoically goes on 'sewing in silence' (*N&D*, 373-4). Meanwhile the upper-middle-class Katherine, trapped by the expectations of the patriarchal household and social convention is bound to write her grandfather's memoirs and only has free time at night when she can 'spin the fabric of her thoughts until she tired' even as she 'dress[es] up an image of love' that is ultimately denied to Mary (*N&D*, 97). Although Katherine Hilberry appears to be the heroine of the tale, it is the self-sacrificing, self-denying Mary Datchet who heartbreakingly lets them know of each other's affection, and thus is the true heroine of the novel; triumphing as the 'mistress of her own destiny...fit to be adorned with the dignity of silver chains and glowing brooches' (*N&D*, 428).

Correspondingly, the dutiful wife, mother and society hostess Clarissa Dalloway finds that she is sacrificing or stifling her true self by the adopting of her expected feminine role, and rarely has time or money for herself:

That she held herself well was true; and had nice hands and feet; and dressed well, considering that she spent little. (*MD*, 11)

Each hour of the day requires another task, visit or duty, as the rich tapestry of her mind swims with 'girls in transparent muslins' who are lured and hypnotised by shopkeepers with their colourful displays of 'paste and diamonds' and their 'shoes and gloves', which for her hold more than mere superficial value:

...pausing for a moment at the window of a glove shop where, before the War, you could buy almost perfect gloves. And her old Uncle William used to say a lady is known by her shoes and her gloves....Gloves and shoes; she had a passion for gloves; but her own daughter, her Elizabeth, cared not a straw for either of them. (*MD*, 11-2)

The quotation alludes to more than accessories, and establishes layers of generations; juxtaposing the future with the conventions of the past, whilst acknowledging the War as the great catalyst for social change, especially for gender relations. Is Clarissa so very old-fashioned and out of touch with the new world before her? As she walks along the old male-dominated parts of the capital she admits that she feels herself to be 'odd' and so very 'invisible'; even at home she is immured and isolated in the 'tomb' of the attic, and feels 'like a nun' in her sensual denial and limitations: 'This

body she wore...with all its capacities, seemed nothing – nothing at all’: she must acknowledge her own desires and corporeality (*MD*, 11).

Just as the working-class Rezia Smith makes hats to survive and keep her mind occupied with regard to her traumatised husband Septimus, Mrs Dalloway occupies herself with a similar task, and contemplates quietly whilst mending her favourite ‘mermaid dress’ with unconscious creative and aesthetic sensuality:

Her evening dresses hung in the cupboard. Clarissa, plunging her hand into the softness, gently detached the green dress....She had torn it. Someone had trod on the skirt....By artificial light the green shone, but lost its colour now in the sun. She would mend it. Her maids had too much to do. She would wear it tonight. She would take her silks, her scissors, her –what was it? – her thimble, of course. (*MD*, 40)

Intent on its resurrection, she assembles herself into a resolute ‘diamond shape’ and wistfully contemplates the past. The dress itself is one of the last made by Sally Parker, whom Clarissa reveres as ‘a real artist’ and whose designs are multi-functional as well as ornamental. Clarissa follows this ancestral pattern as she sews:

Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them very lightly to the belt. (*MD*, 43)

Disturbed in her creative contemplation by her ex-lover, Peter Walsh, she moves quickly as she makes 'to hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity' which recalls the frantic desperation of the female writer, namely Jane Austen, who covered her 'manuscripts with a piece of blotting paper' in an act of ladylike modesty, afraid of the world's discovery of female creative genius (*MD*, 43; *AROO*, 86-7).

A 'battle' of wills commences between the two as Peter assumes that she is 'too cold...sewing, with her scissors': and he becomes the uninformed, superficial judge who does not perceive this as merely a calm facade which is socially appropriated; an external mask which conceals inner turmoil and a sense of dislocation (*MD*, 47). As he violently gestures his pen-knife towards her green dress:

...taking up her needle, summoned, like a Queen whose guards have fallen asleep and left her unprotected....[he] charged her cheeks with colour; made her look very young; very pink; very bright-eyed as she sat with her dress upon her knee, and her needle held to the end of the green silk, trembling a little. (*MD*, 48-9)

These are the small signs of her unrest, even as she realises that she is no longer in love with him. It is in this healed and non-toxic green dress (see the *Daniel Deronda* section in Chapter Two) that she will be seen to triumph at her own party, as she sets herself apart from the recent fashions:

Girls wore straight frocks, perfectly tight, with skirts, well above the ankles. It was not becoming [Clarissa] thought....everyone was unreal in one way; much more real in another. It was, she thought, partly their clothes... (*MD*, 186-7)

Starring on her self-created social stage, her dress seems unique though traditional as she dazzles in her costume whilst escorting the gaudily clad Mayor of London officially rigged up in his 'gold lace':

...prancing, sparkling, with the stateliness of her grey hair. She wore ear-rings, and a silver-green mermaid's dress. Lolloping on the waves and braiding her tresses she seemed, having that gift still; to be; to exist...[with] the air of a creature floating in its element. (*MD*, 190-1)



44. Vanessa Redgrave resplendent as Clarissa Dalloway at the party, with John Standing (Richard Dalloway) in Marleen Gorris' film adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway* (1997).

Self-aware and confident the mythical Clarissa wears a dress created by a female artist, mended by her creative self (44). As Sue Roe phrases it:

In *Mrs Dalloway* social vacuousness and frigidity is countered by an alternative vision of Clarissa scintillating in her mermaid-green dress.¹⁴¹

Yet this will be a muted victory for two reasons: firstly, the reported suicide of her counterpart, Septimus Smith, stuns her as ‘the party’s splendour fell to the floor, so strange it was to come alone in her finery’ and the social mask drops off to reveal the naked and lonely truth of her existence (*MD*, 201). Secondly, she is rightfully displaced by her daughter, who makes her grand debut as the very picture of femininity ‘like a lily’ and is officially sanctioned by the patriarch (*MD*, 211):

...who is that lovely girl? And suddenly [Richard Dalloway] realised that it was his Elizabeth, and he had not recognised her, she looked so lovely in her pink frock! (*MD*, 212)

The modern girl who hated gloves appears to have conformed; though this could be a placating social gesture, she is ostensibly proud of her father’s delight, and Clarissa is only briefly glanced at by him again.

The other notable sewer, creator and repairer is Maggie Pargiter in *The Years* who diligently makes her own dress on the sewing machine for an evening party, as the death of her father has left her and her sister Sara poorer, though markedly more independent. Though her androgynous, lesbian cousin Rose mocks what she regards as a servile feminine task, saying disparagingly, ‘I could never make my own clothes’ she carries on creating her triumphant dress from a Liberty-style of fabric ‘silk, green,

¹⁴¹ Roe, p.126.

with blue rays on it' whilst talking to both women (TY, 162). The fabric of freedom, combined with the motif of a peacock coloured green dress, is highly apt for the disadvantaged young woman who is about to meet her perfect lover and future husband; a chance denied her older cousin, Eleanor.

It is hard to decide outright whether these feminine duties are a bind, a defensive strategy or a creative outlet leading to a form of triumph. The answer may well be found in Woolf's final book *Between the Acts* in which costumes, their composition and creation, dominate the plot. In the narrative outfits are constructed by the female artist and director of the chronological pageant, Miss La Trobe, whose assemblage of everyday items and pastiche of historical costumes demonstrate a triumph of the everyday, whilst also recognising the transcendence and universality of human nature.

As Miss La Trobe philosophically remarks:

Dressing up: That's the great thing, dressing up....D'you think people change?

Their clothes, of course...But I meant ourselves...Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father's old top hat...But ourselves – do we change?

(Ellipses in the text. *BtA*, 73-4)

Fecund and female Nature who is incarnate in many of Woolf's heroines, clearly goes beyond the uniforms of all ages and provides a common thread of humanity: a creative unity, to which the bricolage of assembled historical clothing provides merely a façade and disguise. Consequently, female creation is not a bind, but a creative, sensual and highly aesthetical output.

If the creation or repair of the clothing is slightly ambiguous then the role of dress is split into both an educated recognition of its restrictions, but also its potential freedoms: transformative and physical. For example, the yearning for freedom of Katherine Hilberry, who is confined in the doll's house of middle-class filial expectation, sees her move slowly towards an emancipation which is finally achieved in her union with the liberal artisan Ralph Denham. Her desire for liberty and self-expression is reflected, not just in her 'choice' of dress, but in its constant bid for movement:

...the breeze...lifted her hat for a second, and she drew out a pin and stuck it in again....Ah, if only her hat would blow off, and leave her altogether dishevelled... (*N&D*, 84)

Her hands, unlike Cassandra's, are 'bare of glove' as she 'held her gloves in her left hand' and 'looked rather absent-minded, and swung her gloves to and fro' and tellingly 'drew off her gloves, and crossed her legs with a gesture that was rather masculine in its ease': thus she appears without feminine pretension (if not androgynous) as she expresses her frustration at the trappings of both gender and class (*N&D*, 84, 219, 257, 125). Like her literary predecessors Dorothea Brooke and Dinah Morris there is a refreshing naturalness about her, combined with an unconscious, environmentally orchestrated (the gentle wind) longing to release herself from the shackles of her sartorial duty:

The wind was blowing her crimson scarf across her face; the wind had already loosened her hair...everything about her seemed rapid, fragmentary, and full of a kind of racing speed. (*N&D*, 222)

Even her controlling fiancé, William Rodney, 'could not see her come into a room without a sense of the flowing of robes, of the flowering of blossoms, of the purple waves of the sea' (*N&D*, 225). Nature, fecundity and liberty are constantly combined and symbolised in her clothed appearance. Happily clothed by Nature she unknowingly wears 'beech-leaves attached to her dress' which recalls Mrs Ramsay's nature goddess (*N&D*, 233).

As a daughter and fiancée she is expected, as was the young Virginia Stephen, to change for dinner and the usual round of social visits. She is constantly harassed to change her dress, and craves the valuable free-time that her father so casually plays with (see above). When first introduced she is home at a social gathering attired ambiguously in a dress 'of some quiet colour, with old yellow-tinted lace for ornament'. It becomes clear that as a strong individual she dominates the dress, and is not at the mercy of elaborate attire. Though this seems to be acceptable, Mrs Hilberry, as Mr Hilberry ominously plays with his watch-chain, still requests that she 'must change her dress (though she's wearing a very pretty one)' (*N&D*, 13). Even later, for a private dinner with her parents, she must 'enter in her light evening dress' albeit rushed from her encounter with Denham, and as Mr Hilberry again plays with his watch-chain to magnanimously decide, 'I don't mind her being late when the result is so charming' (*N&D*, 87).

Thus constrained for her own time, Katherine is remarked upon by Cassandra as dressing for an evening social dinner with 'extreme speed' as she attempts to create her own life beyond domestic restrictions, and as she swiftly 'envelop[s] herself in the blue dress' to be patriarchally approved by Mr Hilberry and William Rodney as 'beautiful and dressed with the greatest distinction' (*N&D*, 334-5). Thus Rodney continues the patriarchal expectations into their engagement as he attempts to control her choice of clothes and style of dress, by choosing what she should wear for a country vacation as though she were a doll. Dangerously, he is angered by the misplacement of a box of their luggage which contains the 'clothes specially chosen by him' as he vainly tries to control character through superficial appearance (*N&D*, 183).

Katherine is eventually displaced in Rodney's affections by her more feminine debutante cousin Cassandra Ottoway:

It was generally felt that, given a year or two of experience, introduced to good dressmakers, and preserved from bad influence, [Cassandra] would be an acquisition. (*N&D*, 351)

Realising that the well-dressed 'white-waist coated' foppish and controlling Rodney is not what she wants in life she dramatically leaves the party on foot for Mary's humble abode though 'incongruous[ly]' dressed in her 'blue silk & the pearl sewn shoes' that impede her movement, and she makes a near escape from being someone's 'acquisition' to being able to uncover her true feelings for the 'unfashionabl[y]' dressed Ralph Denham (*N&D*, 335, 342, 355). It is highly appropriate that when she

is leaving her father's house near the end of the novel she is dressed in liberal 'outdoor things' and Rodney objects: 'But she can't -...not without any gloves...in her hand!' (*N&D*, 420). Her desire for freedom is further manifest in 'the aching muscles of her right hand' which are subconsciously 'crushing her gloves' (*N&D*, 425). Finally, on the arm of Ralph Denham, she closes the door of the patriarchal doll's house or gilded cage with its 'gold-rimmed windows' and is fully liberated and most appropriately 'dressed for walking' (*N&D*, 477).

The women who seem to be trapped by clothes and convention in Woolf's novels, make a bid for freedom, with varying degrees of success. Elizabeth Dalloway, rejecting the gloves that her mother so respects and desires, pursues her own path through London aboard an omnibus. Initially she appears to be running free, dressed in a modern 'fawn-coloured coat' and is described exotically as the opposite of her mother, being 'dark' with 'chinese eyes in a pale face' (*MD*, 149, 134). However, she must still shop for 'petticoats', accompanied by her odious, spinster teacher Miss Doris Kilman: who is always dressed, not in governess-grey, but in an appropriately sickly 'green mackintosh coat' with her envious green 'gooseberry eyes' coveting and desiring her young ward (*MD*, 12, 137). During Miss Dalloway's adventure through the modern parts of the capital dressed in 'her very well-cut clothes' she recognises that 'the compliments were beginning' and vehemently declares that she does not care about 'her clothes'; nonetheless, she immediately realises that her time and space are curtailed and that 'she must go home. She must dress for dinner' (*MD*, 147-9). The final appearance of her at the party in her 'pink dress' sees her accepted into the homosocial market place, to which she feels a conformative sense of personal pride.

Another not-so-rebellious sartorial dissenter is Kitty Malone (later Lady Lasswade) in *The Years*, whose statuesque, androgynous bodily-frame means that the delicate feminine satin slippers she wears never fit, but pinch and cripple. Dressed throughout in ultra-feminine, upper-class raiments such as her debutante 'white satin dress'; and later immured in 'a cloud of white muslin' with a 'basket of roses' for her romanticised portrait; and her elaborate and absurdly inappropriate 'silver evening dress' worn to a suffrage meeting whilst constrained by her public duty at the opera house she seems to be the ultimate well-bred socialite (*TY*, 58, 244, 169). However, Alice Fox remarks that there is:

...an incongru[ity] in her appearance that matches the ineffectiveness and vagueness of her aristocratic desire to do some good for women at the suffragettes' group.¹⁴²

Lady Lasswade begins to acknowledge the absurdity of such an ornate appearance:

[Kitty saw] men and women in full evening dress....They looked uncomfortable and self conscious...with their high piled hair and their evening cloaks; with their button-holes and their waistcoats in the glare of the afternoon sun. The ladies tripped uncomfortably on their high-heeled shoes, now and then they put their hands to their heads. (*TY*, 172)

¹⁴² Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (OUP, 1990), p.148.

This is especially in such vivid contrast to the working class people ‘in their ordinary working clothes’ (*TY*, 173). She further recognises her own fate encapsulated in another lady at a party dressing to leave on the stairs:

...she was robing herself. Now she was accepting her cloak with a violet sash on it; now her furs. A bag dangled from her wrist. She was hung about with chains, her fingers were knobbed with rings. Her sharp stone-coloured face, riddled with lines and wrinkled into creases, looked out from its soft nest of fur and laces. (*TY*, 253)

In her gilded cage of social expectations she strains at her sartorial trappings and engendered captivity. With chilling echoes of Mary Wollstonecraft’s objection to the ‘cramped chinese bands’ and shoes of a disabled feminine ideal, the imposing and strong-willed Kitty is constantly seen to be kicking off her shoes and other sartorial shackles in a symbolical bid for freedom and comfort:

...she kicked off her shoes. That was the worst of being so large – shoes were always too tight; white satin shoes in particular. Then she began to unhook her dress. It was difficult; there were so many hooks and all at the back; but at last the white satin dress was off... (*TY*, 58)

Later after a ball she disrobes:

Slip[s] rings from her fingers...unhooked her dress; slipped it dexterously to her feet....Kitty sat down at her dressing-table and kicked off her shoes. Satin shoes were always too tight. (TY, 254)

She transforms herself into 'another person' to escape to her lover in the country, dressed in her 'tweed travelling suit' (TY, 255). She is later re-introduced to us via Peggy's eyes at the family reunion, but the reader glimpses only a 'wisp of muslin on the floor; and two large feet, in tight shoes, so that the bunions showed' so that the reader recognises the character first, though her name and face remain temporarily anonymous (TY, 372). Immediately she gives advice to her cousin's husband, Patrick, who complains about his uncomfortable shoes, declaring defiantly 'Tight are they?...Kick 'em off' to be able to dance in bare feet (382). For all her apparent conformity into the tiny slippers of the petit feminine ideal Kitty still wishes to debunk the ornate facades of the high-class *beau monde*, wishing she could 'fleece [the competitive party guests] of their clothes, of their jewels, of their intrigues, of their gossip' (TY, 247). Like Katherine Hilberry before her she is also continually 'slapping [down] her gloves' or taking them off and hiding them when they make her feel socially uncomfortable such as in the humble lecturer Mr Robson's house in Oxford (TY, 170):

She gave one brief look at Mrs Robson and then began to pull off her gloves secretly, swiftly, under the cover of the table-cloth....the meal was over. She began to fish around under the table for her gloves.

'These them?' said Jo, picking them up off the floor. She took them and crumpled them up in her hand. (TY, 66)

Kitty Lasswade hates her sartorial accoutrements for their distinctiveness and what they represent: embarrassed and humiliated, she is desperate to fit in with this warm, liberal family and asks herself, 'Would they still accept her in spite of her hat and her gloves?' (TY, 71). She refuses an umbrella for her escape to gain an education at the hands of the 'clothes hating' academic Miss Craddock, and she wears an ornate, yet deeply symbolical dress, described by her cousins Martin, Sara, Eleanor and North as 'clothed in starlight; with green in her hair' (TY, 179). The green is constantly referred to (four times) as being 'something shining in her hair' and is in reality ornate 'beetles' wings'; which highlight not only her sense of having clipped wings in a gilded cage, but also suggest an ancient shaman talisman valued for their aesthetic, but spiritual qualities (TY, 179).¹⁴³ However, it would seem that for all Lady Lasswade's tendencies toward female emancipation and sartorial rebellion she is still fashionably disabled by convention and tradition.

The shining 'green' of the beetles' wings is part of a final theme for women in Woolf's fiction, in that green and blue, but especially green are the colours of aesthetic fecundity and creative freedom: where these colours dominate there is always a positive sense of Nature: light and dark; seasonal change; and night and day. Katherine Hilberry swathed in 'beech leaves' and natural colours has her clothes

¹⁴³ Beetles' wings 'as ornaments used by traditional cultures are not purely for decorative appeal; they possess an auspicious nature believed to increase the bearer's strength. Therefore, as often as possible, edible objects are used as ornaments, especially if they have additional aesthetic qualities and shamanic symbolism. This is the case for some metallic or horned beetles. Bright, metallic colors evoke images of the sun and luminous sky; horns symbolize rising upward, especially if their bearers can fly. They crept into use in Western civilization through the Art Nouveau jewelry of the 1900s which was richly adorned with beetles and other insects. Perhaps the scarabs and other beetles still occasionally used as ornaments are ultimately remnants of these old faiths, which can be traced back to the Egyptians and Paleolithic shamans', Yves Cambefort, 'Beetles as Religious Symbols', *BugBios: Cultural Entomology- Insects in Human Culture*, second issue, (Feb' 1994).

liberally wind-swept. Similarly, in *Mrs Dalloway* the dominant triumphant female colour is green. As Elaine Showalter suggests in her introductory notes to the novel:

...parallels between the sexual and natural cycles are reinforced by the colour of women's attire, almost always green as if it were a kind of leafing or natural exfoliation of the female body. (*MD*, xxxi)

Elizabeth Dalloway is 'like a hyacinth, sheathed in glossy green'; at the party, the debutante Nancy Blow is 'dressed at great expense' and looks as if 'her body had merely put forth, of its own accord, a green frill' (*MD*, 195). Septimus fantasises about his former teacher Miss Isabel Pole in a green dress, and sees his wife Rezia as a 'flowering tree'; and even Miss Kilman wears a green macintosh. However, it is used by Clarissa especially as she is entranced not only by the 'lovely old sea-green brooches' at the jewellers, but her favourite dress is the 'silver-green mermaid's dress' in which she shines at her party. The power of the colour is further emphasised through implicit references to the welcoming 'green lights' of the Dalloway home, and even with reference to the human divine as Clarissa visualises 'the depths of that leaf-encumbered forest, the soul' (*MD*, 32, 13).

So why green? Alison Lurie in *The Language of Clothes* considers the significance of the colour in a section entitled 'Outlaws, Fairies and Irishmen' and qualifies it with reference to Woolf's writing:

...the hue of grass, trees and all growing things....Green releases us into the freedom of the wilderness and the forest....Because it is the color of

vegetation, green has ancient and powerful connections with fertility and growth. It is the hue traditionally associated with magic and supernatural.....To wear green often implies a connection with the powers of nature or the life force. In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Mrs Ramsay [sic], who is presented as a kind of secular nature goddess, wears a green shawl with which she covers the boar's skull that stands in the book for Death.¹⁴⁴

Indeed, as Mrs Ramsay plays hostess and serves the glorious, two-day cooking *Boeuf en Daube* at her Dionysian feast, she descends the stairs to her adoring minions 'like some queen' and draped for extra warmth in her green shawl (*TTL*, 90). It is this green shawl which later recurs as her memory metonym. The self-sacrificing act of placing it over the frightening skull in the children's bedroom, has her shivering in the 'chill night air' in the section immediately prior to her death (*TTL*, 125). Her eternal haunting of the text is implied not only in the unfinished stocking but also by the gentle 'swaying to and fro' of the shawl as the housekeeper, Mrs McNab ponders on the nature of the family who have long since deserted the holiday house (*TTL*, 142, 144):

What people had shed and left – a pair of shoes, a shooting cap, some faded skirts and coats in wardrobes – these alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how they were once filled and animated, how once hands were busy with hooks and buttons; how the looking-glass had once held a face. (*TTL*, 141)

¹⁴⁴ Lurie, p.200.

The clothing, especially the ghostly green shawl provides a tangible marker of the past, memory and character, almost as if the shell of a person is left behind in the move onto another time and place. Mrs Ramsay is eternally re-membered in the very 'fabric' of nature; in the rippling fathomless waters (*TTL*, 197):

...where in the green light a change came over one's entire mind and one's body shone half-transparent enveloped in a green cloak. (*TTL*, 198)

As Lily Briscoe captures her essence on canvas she recalls her to the mind's eye: 'she in her green shawl, he with his tie flying' and even 'in the chair, flick[ing] her needles to and fro, knitt[ing] her reddish-brown stocking' from Olympian heights (*TTL*, 217-8). The union of the female artist, mother and hence creativity, with greenery is an important link to make especially when considering that Woolf herself wrote in 'green ink' for it was her 'favourite colour'; and accordingly Monk's House in Sussex (National Trust) was decorated, with the expert help of Vanessa and Duncan Grant in 'a glory of green'; and as the new tenants of the house happily remarked in a recent interview, 'Virginia loved green-painted furniture...and so do I'.¹⁴⁵ However, it is the overt link between the writing process and the semantics of the colour green that is most crucially continued and concluded in *Orlando*, see below.

Noticeably, not one of the men in Woolf's novels is seen to be wearing green, with the possible exception of Mr Hilberry's emerald with which he toys: embellishing a marker of male time and not the natural female re-generative cycle on which his existence depends. The only male character with direct recourse to the colour is the

playwright, critic and man of letters, Nick Greene in *Orlando*. However, the misspelling only serves to suggest his mis-perceptions on the subject of literature, and ultimately accentuates the patriarchal canon's failure to capture the magical and natural connotations of 'green-ness' in both life and art.

This Natural theme has the surrounding environment also dressed up; personified and arrayed in the seasonal cycles of growth, death and rebirth. Lincoln, noted for its 'greenery', and the city of London are respectively referred to as 'the fabric of England' and feminised:

...the London day was just beginning. Like a woman who had slipped off her print dress and white apron to array herself in blue and pearls, the day changed, put off stuff, took gauze, changed to evening, and with the same sigh of exhilaration that a woman breathes, tumbling petticoats on the floor (*MD*, 177)

The sartorial representation continues into the crowded city street 'with its pendant necklace of lamps' which add to the magical metamorphosis and an aesthetic sense of decoration. Beyond the city 'the sea and sky looked all one fabric, and in *Orlando* it is the Oak Tree: both a poem and tree that provide stability, but also an organic growth throughout the novel (*TTL*, 197). The developing poem is carried about 'in the bosom of his cloak' and later when she is transformed into a woman it bursts forth from its formerly corseted confines when 'some hook or button fastening the upper part of her dress burst open' to give birth to the poem (*O*, 120, 267). In *Between the Acts* there is

¹⁴⁵ Maggie Alderson, 'Need to Know Green', *The Times*, Saturday 7 June 2003, 'Weekend' supplement, p.9; Helen Chislett, 'Doing it by the Book' an interview with Caroline and Jonathan

the recognition of common humanity that links us and goes beyond mere external dressings, like the base of Nature's cycle constantly adopting the new foliage of a different season:

Summer and winter, autumn and spring return...All passes but we, all changes...but we remain forever the same. (*BtA*, 84)

Thus women as personifications are inextricably linked to the natural cycle, and dress is the salient superficial covering which changes with each passing season or fashion. Woolf is almost pagan in her natural and sartorial beliefs: with green dominant and the cycle of life being revered as the eternal feminine, as is the druidic and quintessentially English symbol of the Oak Tree. As Mrs Ramsay swathed in her natural green shawl knits the earthen-coloured stocking, Katherine Hilberry is beautifully dressed in beech leaves and the gentle wind, and the Lady Orlando has 'patterns of fig-leaves upon her light burnous' as she sits in the shade, so Woolf's women are re-dressed as pagan nature goddesses presiding over life, fecundity and aesthetic creation; even as literature, nature and art are masterfully unified in Woolf's own creative process.

Orlando (1928), The Years (1936) and Between the Acts (1941): Her-Story, Transvestism, Masquerade and 'Green-(e)-ness'

'The Victorians' Mrs Swithin mused. 'I don't believe...that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently.' (*BtA*, 104)

The philosophical Lucy Swithin in Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, reiterates her creator's ontology that the people in the past are merely 'us' dressed up in historical costumes, and such as those in Miss La Trobe's pageant: universal humanity, whatever the gender, is essentially boundless and timeless. All three of these later works encompass several ages or carry over different generations, whether it is in the form of: a familial saga measuring half a century of immense change; an individual 'his-her-story' spanning six centuries; or viewed as an historical pageant which encapsulates and personifies several, significant historical ages - the overt theatrics of which only serve to further emphasise both the unreality of 'costume' and the artificiality of man-made time. Similarly, they all end in the present day of Woolf's writing, be it 1928, 1934, or 1940 respectively, with homage paid to the freer contemporary sartorial styles, especially for women. The novels specifically emphasise those epochs of a woman's reign, the powerful matriarchal ancestresses, Elizabeth I, Anne, and Victoria feature heavily; for example in 1851 Orlando spies a symbolical mound of clothes, a sartorial cornucopia which highlights an important act in the human drama, and where very soon a famous statue of Queen Victoria will stand:

Draped about a vast cross of fretted and floriated gold were widow's weeds and bridal veils; hooked on to other excrescences were crystal palaces, bassinets, military helmets, memorial wreaths, trousers, whiskers...on the right side by a female figure clothed in flowing white; on the left by a portly gentleman wearing a frock-coat and sponge-bag trousers. (*O*, p.222)

The 'monument' to her-story encapsulates the Victorian obsession with marriage and death, clothing being essential to each, as well as the genderised chiaroscuro of the black and white notion of separate spheres.

Alternately, Woolf also stresses the natural, goddess-like, female connection to seasonal, cyclical time in which clothing is ideally presented as a necessarily organic, creative progression towards a literal freedom of movement as demanded by the Rational Dress Society (RDS), and which directly reflects the evolving liberalism of the women's suffrage campaign.¹⁴⁶ James Naremore posits that in her writings 'history is presented as a kind of fashion' and it is this seemingly superficial motif that Woolf deepens to correspond with her recurrent themes; beautifully connected by punning on the semantic link between fashions and seasons.¹⁴⁷ As the nature of fashion is such that it must be constantly making itself obsolete, it is the ultimate symbol of commercial consumerism and 'conspicuous waste' in that it is forever changing, and expires within the natural life of the product purchased. Inspired by the growing cult of fashion magazines in the nineteenth century affluent young ladies religiously kept up with the latest trends, and were expected to change at least three times a day. Since the twentieth century the evolution of catwalk fashions is now so rapid, even though individual changes per day are not as frequent, that it now shifts at least four times a year; as clothing theoretician Elizabeth Wilson remarks, 'fashion in

¹⁴⁶ The RDS was pre-empted by an 1868 meeting in Stuttgart of the Council of German Women, the transcript of which was reproduced in the final quarter of *Women's Weekly* in the same year - perhaps not coincidentally, the year the crinoline was finally abandoned. They put forward a motion for a 'reform in dress' and encouraged women to resist the 'tyranny and vagaries of fashion....To hold aloof from garments and articles of toilet that are injurious to health', *Women's Weekly*, November 1868, p.47. Alerted to the moral and physical dangers of nineteenth-century fashions the RDS was formed after the International Health Exhibition of 1884 to establish and promote amongst other sartorial rules: a maximum weight of underclothing as 7lbs (discounting shoes); lighter materials; no corset (only bodice of a firm material); and a divided skirt for ease of movement, nicknamed 'survival' or 'Wilson' (wide legs) or 'Haberton' (narrow legs) after its president, Dr. Wilson, a.k.a. Viscountess Haberton. See Newton, pp.115-117.

¹⁴⁷ Naremore, p.194.

a sense *is* change'.¹⁴⁸ Designers and buyer refer to what is 'in vogue this season', and it is no coincidence that Woolf explicitly links its terminology to the ever-turning seasonal cycles of her novels. In *The Years* the seasonal pun is markedly evident at the start of each changing year, with fashions immediately placed alongside descriptions of the weather and fluctuating moods of national change: conjoined in a new form of pathetic-sartorial-fallacy.

The Years commences on a rainy spring day in 1880, swathed in 'clouds of blue and purple' and suitably adorned with 'umbrellas' of fashionable ladies in 'many coloured dresses wearing bustles' who peruse the new department stores' range of 'flounced dresses'; clearly indicative of the season of the 'Watteau Toilette' with its restrictive 's-shaped' silhouette' or 'Grecian bend', still firmly entrenched in the female constraints of the Victorian age (*TY*, 3).¹⁴⁹ It concludes in the modern present arrayed as if 'a thin veil of gauze hung over it' with summer flowers in the cottage gardens described as 'pink like cotton dresses' for in this optimistic time women are allowed to wear what they choose; freer, exotic, non-constraining materials and make up bespeaking a recent and continuing liberation (*TY*, 290). The course of the novel is a gradual evolution towards this emancipatory state, which sees fashions turn with seasons: the turbulent Autumn of 1891 has 'the wind bl[o]w a hat off; there lifted a veil high above a woman's head', which echoes the wind of political and social change as the RDS and the suffragettes gained valuable ground. Equally, the hot midsummer of 1907 shows Edwardian women and men returning to the oppressive

¹⁴⁸ *Adorned in Dreams*, p.3. Emphasis my own.

¹⁴⁹ The Watteau Toilette: Recognised from 1868 onwards as 'a style more and more the modes of Louis XV period....By the middle of the year the pannier dress, worn with a *bustle* and without a crinoline becomes a feature. The elaborate fichu, of the Louis XVI period, is also noticeable. In a word, all traces of the classical style have vanished and curves especially at the back dominate' and produce a 'Grecian bend' or 'S' shaped figure. It continued until 1890s, becoming most distinctive in the late 70s and the early 80s known as 'the bustle era'; although aesthetic or Pre-Raphaelite/Liberty dresses existed as an

roles of 'ladies with high head dresses and gentlemen in white waistcoats', corseted in the stifling evening heat; the 1908 March wind 'scrap[es]' and 'scourg[es]' as it 'tweaked up skirts' and even blows the colour out of 'a solid ruby' in a shop window with purgative force; the spring of 1910 describes 'dresses flow[ing]' more naturally; and the powdery white dressing of snow in the winter of 1913 is suitably accompanied with portraits of hats, buttoned boots, bonnets and mantles. The final fertile spring of pre-war 1914, ironically, has the shop windows cheerfully arrayed in 'summer dresses; charming confections of green and gauze' and 'gay ladies in pale dresses' abound; whereas the cold, frosty winter and autumn mist of the air-raids in 1917 and 1918 respectively reveal a depletion of clothing references in response to an expected wartime austerity; Eleanor and her family are swaddled in 'quilts and dressing- gowns' for warmth (*TY*, 86, 124, 140, 153, 214). Consequently everything, even mood, is given a season, for in the modern urban landscape natural changes in canopy and climate are impressively replaced by a visual cornucopia of perennial shop window displays with their ever-changing cuts and colours - visually defined by annual seasons of fashion. The final transition is made from a framed idealisation of stereotypical Victorian femininity, namely of the girl in 'white muslin holding a basket of flowers' (Mrs Rose Pargiter - whose surname means 'whitewashed'), an image which physically recurs throughout the saga as a literal reminder of how women were expected to be and dress: the memory of her 'stiff pink frock' being Rose Pargiter's torturous touchstone for her feminism (*TY*, 10, 151, 396). This is finally usurped by Woolf's thoroughly modern vision of the 1934 Pargiter family party with its generations of women wearing the dynamic and outlandish styles of fully-liberated women and where, for example, a now worldly and sophisticated

alternative for the more enlightened woman. It was finally replaced by the elegant flounces of the Edwardian age by the start of the new century. Cunningham, p.230, 331.

Eleanor Pargiter is repeatedly referred to as ‘extraordinarily handsome’ in ‘those clothes’: a powerfully ‘flowing...red-gold Arab cloak with a silver veil over her hair’: an exotic present to herself from her travels in Bengal (*TY*, 352, 310).

The transition from the female styles and status of the oppressive Victorian and Edwardian ages and pre-war to that of the liberated modern woman of the 1920s, 30s and 40s is a phenomenal leap and is addressed in all three novels. In *Mrs Dalloway* it is the sentimental Peter Walsh, voyeur and fetishist, who acknowledges the great ‘changes’ in the London streets. He sums up the new post-war style:

There was a freshness about them; even the poorest dressed better than five years ago surely; and to his eye the fashions had never been so becoming; the long black cloaks; the slimness; the elegance; and then the delicious and apparently universal habit of paint....there was design, art, everywhere...
(*MD*, 78)

This positive, aesthetic appraisal of a freer style that directly reflects the growing political and social liberties for women, is further emphasised by Eleanor at the end of *The Years* as she observes that her nieces’ generation are unrestrained by the formal etiquette, sartorial rules and familial duties that she formerly lived by, repeating, ‘Don’t people wear pretty clothes nowadays?’ (*TY*, 318, 319):

‘Yes, I see what you mean about painting – making up...you do look nice. You look lit up. I like it on young people. Not for myself. I should feel bedizened – bedizzened?’ (*TY*, 327)

This self-assumption is most likely due to her inherited nineteenth-century associations of make-up with actresses and prostitutes, as well as her now mature

years; for Eleanor Pargiter in 1880 was almost jealous of these vivid liberties as worn by the daughter of one of her 'poor visits', Mrs Levy, who happily works for a tailor:

'[Lily] came in covered with pearls and things. They do love finery – Jews,....She's extraordinarily handsome,' said Eleanor, thinking of the red cheeks and the white pearls. (*TY*, 30)

These striking changes in women's fashion and appearance, at the expense of the constraining corset, bustle and crinoline, are heartily welcomed and acknowledged as a positive aesthetic progression, even by such seeming traditionalists as Lucy Swithin in *Between the Acts*, whose dress is that of a maiden aunt denied her true expression, and whose life was originally lived at the expense of familial and feminine duties. She wears and continually fingers her glimmering crucifix as a sign of her former allegiances, but it also suggests a lifelong burden that she must carry:

...like any other old lady with a high nose, thin cheeks, a ring on her finger and the usual trappings of rather shabby but gallant old age, which included in her case a cross gleaming gold on her breast....[and in her] shabby garden shoes....knobbed shoes, as if she had claws corned like a canary's, and black stockings wrinkled over the ankles....If she wore pearls, pearls they were.

(*BtA*, 9, 15, 19)

Lucy is of a different time, rather like the fussily dressed portraits of Pointz Hall, who have become part of the décor in their 'yellow brocade' and 'powdered face[s]' and so the 'ancestress' is acknowledged as a part of everyday life (*BtA*, 7). As Lucy points out, however, the nature of humanity is universal, and though she delights in the modernity of a new age with its carnivalesque scenes before her and treats Miss La Trobe's pageant as an optimistic affirmation of human unity, she also stresses that

humanity is in fact timeless and clothes-less: a naked truth. Indeed the very historicity of the costumes on stage is immediately undermined by their slapstick pastiche of such everyday salient items as a 'dish-cloth' for an exotic head-dress as well as other decidedly unglamorous markers of social status and power: although it is noted that it 'looked much richer than real silk', (*BtA*, 41). Queen Anne (Mabel Hopkins) is resplendent in a 'grey satin robe (a bedspread)' which is directly undercut by Woolf's parenthetical addition (*BtA*, 75). The 'imitation pearls' are juxtaposed with Lucy's real ones, and across the grass are strewn 'Cardboard crowns, swords made of silver paper, turbans that were sixpenny dish cloths' so that the unreality, artificiality and restraints of historical costume, and thus history, are foregrounded even when off-stage: 'Each still acted the unacted part conferred upon them by their clothes'; as set in the naturalness of the countryside with its naked reality and universal humanity (*BtA*, 40, 116). After a giant mirror has been reflected upon the audience as the grand finale, the Reverend Streatfield concludes, 'We act different parts; but are the same' and the novel closes as the metaphorical 'curtain' rises upon real life (*BtA*, 114, 130).

Lucy Swithin, however, radically denounces the burgeoning consumer culture and colonial exploitation of those traders who sold cheap 'glass beads' to those 'savages who wished most oddly – for were they not beautiful naked? – to dress and live like the English?' (*BtA*, 30). Even though her symbolical cross-pendant 'weighs her down' she attempts to discard the shackles of the Victorian age: metaphorically she has freed her mind, if not her body – which constantly toys with an ideology from the past. She remarks of the Victorian part of the play she observes that 'it all looks black', and its sombre psychological restraints are recognised; equally, Mrs Rogers (Queen Victoria) is bound up in convention (*BtA*, 91):

Mrs Rogers stood grotesque in her black stockings. Miss La Trobe pulled the voluminous flounces of the Victorian age over her head. She tied the tapes.
(*BtA*, 92)

The physical costume provokes a memory flashback in Mrs Swithin and the older ladies who recognise its constricting style as encapsulating an age ruled by conventions of dress, status, gender and religion; in marked contrast to the sub-plots of the present day:

‘I remember....Ellen, in cap and apron, whistling in the street....Men with red handkerchiefs. Garotters, did they call them? You couldn’t walk – O dear me, no – home from the play....d’you remember the feel of white gloves?....And the crinolines! And the stays!....We wore, I suppose, a great many petticoats then. Unhygienic? I dare say...Well, look at my daughter....Forty, but slim as a wand. (*BtA*, 95)

Historical clothing is bound to an immediate multi-sensory perception: touch, smell, taste; as well as societal ideologies. This is a synaesthetic memory haunting all three novels, as the characters recall previous eras which are symbolised, and almost personified, primarily by accessories and dress. Orlando recalls the Renaissance in a similar way:

What made the [remembering] process still longer was that it was profusely illustrated with pictures, as that of old Queen Elizabeth, laid on her tapestry coach in rose-coloured brocade with an ivory snuff box in her hand and a gold-hilted sword by her side, but with scents – she was strongly perfumed – and with sounds. (*O*, 97)

England's Virgin Queen appears in a combination of masculine and feminine accoutrements; the perfect embodiment of the liberating androgyny Orlando will later continue, both in his transformation into a 'woman' and finally into the more ambiguous fashions of the modern day, 'a pair of whipcord breeches and leather jacket....short hair': what Isa Oliver regards as the fashionably contemporary 'Sapphic' look (*O*, 301, 303; *BtA*, 12). Historical and traditional 'heteronormative' notions of gender are debunked with the help of clothing, and this is especially true of *Orlando* as the trans-gendered protagonist (based on Vita Sackville-West) follows the changing fashions through the ages: from Elizabeth to the present day. With recourse to four centuries of past s/he denies differences between one epoch and another, the continuation of his/her family his-her-story is unified through an immortal personification of heroic androgyny: the ultimate human unity. It rejects prescriptive, essentialist notions of gender, recognising that individual choice is more important. Traditional periodic date-markers are substituted with images of dress, and its colours, smells, textures and sounds suffuse the fantastical narrative. As Rachel Bowlby observes in her introduction to the text:

...characterisation [is achieved] by appearances and the environment of daily life: the food, the interiors, the faces, the clothes. Here, too, the narrative is both mocking a certain kind of reduction of cultural history to visual tableaux... (*O*, xxxi)

Time is marked by clothing, '...in a very few years, Orlando had worn down the nap of his velvet...' as it literally erodes externals and evolves fashions, even as the individual subject remains constant. (*O*, 108). As the ultimate intellectual 'love letter' to Vita, Orlando enjoys aspects of her chameleon-like character, but also Virginia, as

benign creator, is so enamoured with her new literary 'doll' that she clearly has fun with those seemingly frivolous historical details. As Nigel Nicolson acutely perceives:

...she explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the centuries, tosses her from one sex to the other, plays with her, dresses her in furs, lace and emeralds, teases her, flirts with her, drops a veil of mist around her...¹⁵⁰

Accordingly, in the character of Orlando, Vita's acknowledged love of 'cross-dressing' is exaggerated to an exalted state of androgyny.

Orlando, as a man, first appears to the reader in 1586 during the reign of Elizabeth I as the young son of a noble family; although we immediately learn that this is a fairly recent patrimonial elevation, for there is sartorial allusion to one of his ancestors who 'had worn a smock and carried milkpails' which gives their nouveau nobility a working class, arable past (*O*, 27). The elevated status is appropriately reflected in their lavish attire: a crest (an oak tree) and lavish jewellery; as the intricate conditions of the Queen's Sumptuary Laws are maintained:

He tossed his stockings to one side of the room, his jerkin¹⁵¹ to the other....He thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias... (*O*, 20) (see 45 below)

Though time and status are delineated by clothing, gender is not, in fact it is rendered ambiguous by the contemporary initial fashions. On the first page Woolf acknowledges her seemingly androgynous protagonist with, 'He – for there could be no doubt of his sex though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it...' and

¹⁵⁰ Nicolson, p.201.

¹⁵¹ Jerkin: 'The modern equivalent of a suit jacket...left open to display doublet, shirt and codpiece', Bronwyn Cosgrave, *Costume and Fashion: A Complete History* (London: Hamlyn, 2000), p.128.

there is an immediate contrast of action - the masculine horse-play, slicing at the head of a Moor - with the passively effete style of his dress (*O*, 13).

This sartorial-effeminacy is countered by the masculine appearance of the decaying Queen : ingeniously played in Sally Potter's award-winning adaptation of the novel, by camp, cross-dressing 'queen', Quentin Crisp, whose own personal sartorial and sexual transgressions are woven into the narrative, clearly going beyond the boundaries of the heteronormative code, as well as the film itself. An equally discerning choice of casting has the famously androgynous-looking actress Tilda Swinton playing the emasculated Orlando, as the gay pop singer Jimmy Sommerville sings in an unearthly 'high falsetto voice' in the banqueting hall as part of the Court entertainment.¹⁵² Notions of set gender roles are at once violated and transgressed, and Queen Elizabeth



45. Tilda Swinton as the Elizabethan Lord Orlando in Sally Potter's adaptation of *Orlando* (1992).

¹⁵² Sally Potter (dir), *Orlando* (1992); and (scr)eenplay, *Orlando* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994) – all further references to this text will be to (*SPO*, scene: page). *SPO*, 3: 4.

becomes a grotesque parody of womanhood, almost like a modern drag-queen, and which is acknowledged by her bombastic costume, mask-like face and incongruous yellowing hands (see 46 below).



46. Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I with the young Orlando (Tilda Swinton).

Her decrepit frame is surrounded by the smell of ‘camphor’ which is reminiscent to the young Orlando of ‘some old cabinet at home where his mother’s furs were stored’ and she is so solidly encrusted with lavish gems and brocades that it would seem only her clothing supports and symbolises a majesterial power now waning, as she ‘sit[s] bolt upright in her stiff brocades by the fire’: the fragility of the Queen’s femininity, offset by her overt masculine authority (*O*, 25). When she lovingly gives him her emerald ring it is in a kind of pseudo-marriage ceremony; the ornate jewellery is symbolical of his elevated ‘chains of office’, but she sensually bestows the Order of the Garter whilst caressing his attractively slender legs. Orlando is sartorially confirmed into a new status and pledges to her an eternal vow, made magically explicit in Potter’s interpretation: ‘Do not fade. Do not wither Do not *grow old*’ (*SPO*, 6: 9). Potter, with deference to the ideas of Woolf, consistently foregrounds the costumes in her drama, using close-up shots of key ‘changes’ to reveal the intricacies

of the dress dialectic. In interview she talks of Woolf's attempts in her diaries to 'exteriorise consciousness' upon which characterisation hinges:

...images rather than abstract literary monologues to describe the secret machinery of the mind in such a way that the outer world – with its weather, costume and surfaces of all kinds becomes an expression of inner complexity.
(*SPO*, introduction, ix)

Thus we not only have more complex diegetic layers of costume and gender within the film itself, but the acknowledgement that Orlando's ambiguous clothing suggests a more complex human nature that requires an inner balance of the nurtured oppositional forces of masculinity and femininity, even whilst suggesting a necessary sartorial transcendence of such limiting categories. After adopting a liberating disguise of a pirate in an 'old grey cloak' to hide the 'twinkl[ing] garter' and other sartorial indicators of his noble status in order to play away from home, further androgyny is suggested when the now fashionably melancholic Jacobean Orlando arrayed 'all in black' falls in love with the Muscovite princess, Sasha. (*O*, 30). The court of King James on the frozen River Thames is visually personified as 'a nodding mass of lace and ceremony' with its ornate 'beards and ruffs' and 'plumes of ostrich feathers' pandering to the increasing whims of human vanity, and ladies are bombastically 'rigged up like... maypole[s]' as both sexes in England display a profoundly hyper-feminised appearance (*O*, 38, 34, 39). However, it is the arrival of the Russian Ambassadorial party with their overtly carnal 'great beards and fur hats' and exotic 'sables' which capture Lord Orlando's imagination and heart even though he is warned 'that the women in Muscovy wear beards and the men are covered in fur

from the waist down' (*O*, 46). Indeed, this patriotic fear of the 'other' or 'foreigner' initially appears to be justified:

...a figure, which, whether a boy's or a woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex... (*O*, 36)

Though 'it' is soon discovered to be the beautiful Princess Sasha, her apparent 'transvestism', highly sexual nature, and masculine associations continue: she skates well, like a man; and acts less like the affected English ladies of court with their 'handkerchiefs' and multitudinous layers of 'petticoats' which prevent them from being highly active. Conversely, Sasha is elegant and vital in her sensual 'oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish fur' as well as otherworldly and exotic; just as the Turks in Constantinople are portrayed as sartorially liberated a century later (*O*, 36). Foreign dress, or rather the Bloomer-esque 'Russian trousers' and 'cloak and trousers, booted like a man' allow her to have a liberated mind and body, and she is not constrained by the fixed notions of gender that reign supreme in the English court. Correspondingly, Orlando loses her love when he possessively tries to contain her free spirit with his misogynist fits of jealousy, so that 'his jewel' 'like an emerald' slips off the ring which 'was so lustrous [but] shines no more' (*O*, 70, 57, 48, 45, 69). His melancholic grief and solitude are amplified by his Hamlet-style attire, by which the 'crimson velvet' of a former world of his naiveté 'turns to dust' (*O*, 68-9).



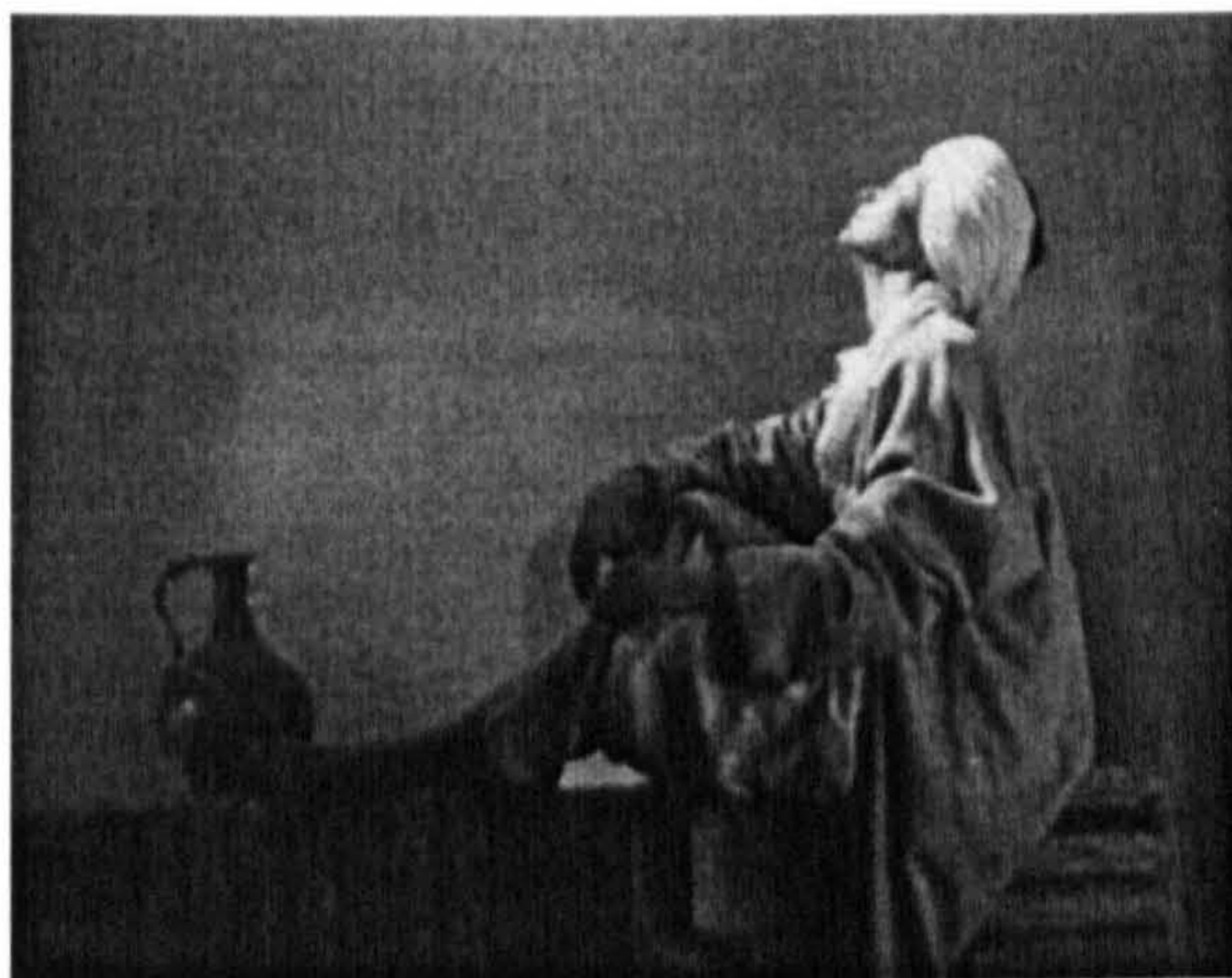
47. Mrs Colonel Amelia Bloomer in the radical bifurcated garment she promoted and which was named in her honour.

The thematic interlude of the ‘Archduchess’ Harriet (Harry) in transvestite disguise swiftly progresses to Orlando’s promotion to English Ambassador to Constantinople, where his biggest ‘sartorial’ change yet is about to take place, which has more to do with destroying the heteronormative assumed concepts of ‘gender’ than a historical re-dressing. In both the text and film interpretation this metamorphosis is inextricably linked to the foreign ‘otherness’ of the Turkish capital; a place of ‘liberal’ clothing, whose loose, light, bifurcated style of dress inspired Amelia Bloomer’s radical feminist costume of the 1850s (47).¹⁵³ Although ultimately, the ‘Bloomer Costume’ was not a success, here it is allowed to precipitate a necessary ‘change in Orlando herself’ as ‘he’ is transmuted into a ‘she’ – at the very least externally. In Potter’s film the Orlando of 1700 is ‘dressed elaborately...and wearing a long dark curly wig’ and soon after ‘in full ambassadorial costume’ and ceremoniously paraded through the hot

¹⁵³ In 1851 Mrs. Amelia Bloomer promoted in her temperance magazine, *The Lily*, Elizabeth Smith Miller’s bifurcated outfit, named after herself and as advocated by the dedicated feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton. It consisted of ‘full turkish trousers gathered at the ankles, and a short overskirt coming just below the knees. [Giving] greater freedom of movement, with no diminution of modesty’. It was a failure as women who wore the costume were charged with accusations of ‘trying to become men’, being unattractive in it; as well as being publicly vilified and even thrown stones at! Ironically, it was primarily designed for comfort, but also to look ‘romantic’ rather than masculine. On March 12 1859 *Ballou’s* commented that ‘Bloomerism was dead except for a few strong-minded females in rural

narrow streets of Constantinople, looking deeply incongruous in his cumbersome ‘national’ costume as the native passers-by ‘stop, stare, point and then burst out laughing at Orlando’s appearance’ which is in marked contrast to their elegantly ‘robed and turbaned figures’ (*SPO*, 31: 29; 32: 30; 33: 31). When Orlando eventually opens his formerly parochial, English-Colonial mind and chooses to adopt the freer native costume of ‘loose outer garments’ and sensuously ‘pulls off his wig’, presumably at first for highly practical reasons, essentially he is stripping himself of the artificiality, status and fixed gender notions of his former sartorial allegiances.

As Orlando relaxes in the steam room he is described by Woolf as ‘wrapped in fine cloths; handsome, turbaned, and barefoot’, which is in marked visual juxtaposition to Archduke Harry who enters ‘heavily overdressed in dusty formal clothes’, and who immediately queries his gender with the inquisition, “‘The *Lord* Orlando?’ even before the narrative’s actual ‘change’ (see **48** below), (*SPO*, 37: 34; 38: 35).



48. ‘ORLANDO sits wrapped in towels in the steam, his head wrapped in a turban, his feet dangling in the water’ (*SPO*, 38, p.34).

areas’. Robert E. Riegel, ‘Women’s Clothes and Women’s Rights’, *American Quarterly*, 1963, vol. 15, no. 3., pp.391-2; see also Newton, chapter 1, ‘Women with Views’, pp.4-23.

In Potter's film the combination of steam and androgynous drapery obscures even to the camera the usual dichotomous boundaries of heteronormative gender division. Similarly, in Woolf's novel the 'veil dance' of the three Graces 'cover Orlando with their draperies' and seek the 'truth' of his/her inner nature with their guises, just as the 'muslins...billow' round the bedchamber in the film, to further obscure and add an element of sartorial-magic to the process. The reborn Lady Orlando matter-of-factly observes to the mirror/camera: 'Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex' (*O*, 131-2; *SPO*, 45: 40).

However, the gender-swap in this place and point in the narrative does not yet make a difference to external interpretation by others, for example, when she joins the band of gypsies cross-dressed in 'turkish coat and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex' they do not judge and treat her any differently; eventually, to them class becomes the issue. Orlando's now androgynous character is further suggested in the combination of masculine and feminine principles draped about her person: 'a pair of pistols in her belt' and 'several strings of emeralds and pearls' wound about her person; which both serve as protection and financial security. (*O*, 134-35).

Albeit, this genderless utopia cannot last as Lady Orlando returns to England and its nurtured notions of polarised gender. Until now, as influenced by her 'turkish trousers', she has scarcely given her sex a second thought; it is only when she invests in the wardrobe of a 'young Englishwoman' that she is literally reminded of the restrictions of her now subservient, passive femininity.



49. 'The atmosphere is sensual, private, as ORLANDO discovers the hidden world of female clothing.' (*SPO*, 48, p.41) .

At this important plot juncture Potter cuts straight from the open expanse of the desert with Orlando in liberal black robes, but suggestive of mourning, to an extreme close up shot of Orlando in her lady's boudoir being laboriously strait-laced into a corset. Holding the ultimate accoutrement of feminine vanity, the mirror, she 'winc[es] with pain' and is clearly uncomfortable with her initiation into what Potter sardonically calls 'the hidden world of female clothing' (see 49 above), (*SPO*, 48-49, pp.41-42). Noticeably, there is no dialogue or monologue in this or the following scene, which follows the Lady Orlando, now in a white dress with a vast crinoline, as she cautiously negotiates a meandering path through furniture in the Long Gallery which is itself adorned in large white dust-covers. The wide-angle-lens shot of the room demonstrates the ridiculous impracticality of such a costume, and also the suddenness of the switch from black to white as the separate spheres of the socially indoctrinated gender divide are made overt. Orlando, in her gleaming white, seems to become part of the furniture as her outline is subsumed by the white fabric of the dust-sheets: no longer an active individual, she is an art object, and decoration for the eighteenth-century home.

Similarly, Woolf further stresses the importance of this superficial sartorial shift on Orlando, and gender is presented as a literal and metaphorical fabrication. Weighing up the ‘penalties and the privileges’ of her transformation aboard the ship home to England she uncovers the impracticality of her new attire:

‘...these skirts are plaguey things to have about one’s heels. Yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy)¹⁵⁴ is the loveliest in the world....Could I however leap overboard and swim in clothes like these?’ (*O*, 147-8)

Her disability is compounded by another required female ‘adornment’: that of chastity, described as ‘their jewel, their centre-piece’. Frustrated by this passive requirement of female heroism (see Richardson’s *Pamela: or Virtue Rewarded* 1740-1) she actively stamps her foot; inadvertently revealing her legs, thus causing a distracted sailor to nearly fall to his death from his observational post on the mast. The dangers and difficulties of being a woman are wittily revealed to both the reader, and Orlando, who as a man had formerly demanded that women be ‘chaste, scented and exquisitely apparelled’: as the demands of the historically dominant sex are revisited on the offender.

The sartorial punishment further entails domestic confinement; or rather the timely demands of the toilette, that Woolf herself so lamented in her journals and letters:

‘There’s the hairdressing,’ she thought, ‘that alone will take an hour of my morning; there’s looking in the looking-glass, another hour; there’s staying and lacing; there’s changing from silk to lace and from lace to paduasoy; there’s being chaste year in year out...’ (*O*, 152)

¹⁵⁴ A strong corded gros grain fabric – popular with both sexes in the eighteenth-century, Ashelford, p.119.

A bombastic diatribe, perhaps, but one that excuses the long delay in the completion of her poem 'The Oak Tree', condemned to be carried round for the next two-hundred years inside her corseted bosom. Fundamentally, Orlando is the same person who lopped off heads and cavorted with the opposite sex; only now 'she' is constrained by the outer perceptions other people now have of her. Literally repressed, restricted and influenced in 'her' actions by 'her' clothing, she is also 'clothed with poverty and ignorance, which are the dark garments of the female sex' and thus for all Woolf's initial protestations that Orlando is the ultimate androgynous-minded individual, the powerful magic of clothes holds sway over the wardrobe of the mind: clothing becomes inseparable from identity (*O*, 153).

There is a latent sensuality to the sartorial metamorphosis which Orlando appears to enjoy, as she 'Praise[s] God!' that she is now a woman and can conversely revel in the luxury of being 'lapped like a lily in folds of [flowered] paduasoy' and 'the pleasure of being rescued' heavily laden in saturated splendour in the water wearing her 'blue jacket' (*O*, 154-6). She also, somewhat paradoxically considering the sartorial passivity, delights in the powerful hold 'to refuse and to yield' that her sumptuous dress and highly contrived feminine appearance gives her over those men who are 'the slave[s] of the frailest chit in petticoats' and ultimately to their own ideals of passive, ornamental womanhood (*O*, 152).¹⁵⁵

Historically, the lavish masquerade of eighteenth-century London is exquisitely detailed through sartorial display and lavish window-dressings of a newly commercial, mercantile society:

¹⁵⁵ Even the sailors are reduced by the highly symbolical power of their clothing.



50. 'ORLANDO, who has been sitting alone playing with her fan...appears to be confused about what is expected of her...' (*SPO*, 51, p.45).

Ladies in flowered silk (she put the Captain's glass to her eye) walked on raised footpaths. Citizens in brodered coats took snuff at street corners under lamp-posts. She caught sight of a variety of painted signs swinging in the breeze...of the tobacco, of the stuff, of the silk, of the gold, of the silver ware, of the gloves, of the perfumes, and of the thousand other articles which were sold within. (*O*, 159)

Orlando becomes a multi-sensual voyeur of the new aesthetic delights, however, this rising capitalist consumer society also helps to construct her as an ornately costumed-consumable product rather than as an all-powerful patriarchal purchaser.

The former 'Archduchess Harriet' can now drop 'his' disguise, literally in the fender, and transform himself into a more predatory 'Archduke Harry', and subjects the Lady Orlando, 'the pink, the pearl, the perfection of her sex', to his forceful, unwanted advances in order to ensure that she gains a somewhat diluted continuation of the privileged status which she freely enjoyed as a man. When she is subsequently dismissed as an ornamental bauble by Pope, Addison and Swift, Orlando lays down her pen in order to fully play the femininely-costumed part in life (see 50 below):

...she went into her bedroom, stood in front of her mirror and arranged her pearls around her neck. Then since pearls do not show to advantage against a morning gown of sprigged cotton, she changed to dove grey taffeta; thence to one of peach blossom; thence to a wine-coloured brocade. Perhaps a dash of powder was needed, and if her hair were disposed – so – about her brow, it might become her. Then she slipped her feet into pointed slippers, and drew an emerald ring upon her finger. ‘Now,’ she said when she was ready and lit the silver sconces on either side of the mirror. (*O*, 177)

The elaborate ritual consumes her former self in an almost idolatrous, narcissistic vanity. Woolf’s style of writing: semi-colons and dashes, allows the reader to comprehend the lengthy sartorial deliberations and timely stages of ‘feminine’ construction, which physically separate men from women, beyond the simple biological facts. Albeit, Woolf professes that:

Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex. (*O*, 180)

However, mental autonomy also appears to have been overridden by the physical processes and the sartorial details:

...there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true. She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person. (*O*, 179)

Thus Woolf makes her initial supposition that an apparently superficial costume change is actually extremely powerful at controlling our own and others' perceptions of our 'gender':

The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say much to do with it.

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely keeping us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us....there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. (*O*, 179-80)

By directly and overtly contradicting herself within a few pages, dismissing the common-sense anthropological reasons for dress in favour of the creation of a more illogical social code, she vacillates, along with her protagonist, between a sartorial autonomy and sartorial authority: never quite seeming to make up her authorial and supposedly 'androgynous' mind. Nevertheless, the reference to the powerful symbols of 'the sword and the fan' in the ensuing pages suggests that her sartorial indecision is historically specific, for these two accessories, diametrically personifying male and female; masculine and feminine, do not continue far beyond the confines of the nineteenth century:

The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders.... Had they worn the same clothes, it is possible their outlook might have been the same....No education was complete for either sex which did not include...the management of the sword and the fan. (*O*, 180, 186)

The literal objects are highly symbolic, suggesting that a man may look the world full in the face, hand on hilt; but a 'lady' must make sidelong glances at it, just as their vision was later hampered by the introduction of the poke bonnet in the early-nineteenth century: her outlook on the world sufficiently narrow and parochial.

Active and passive, practical and ornamental, sartorial distinctions are made, and the pressure to conform is both physical and mental. As Rachel Bowlby perceives:

Orlando's playful dress up masks a set of serious questions about the significance or determinability of sexual difference, such as the nature of history or of a coherent life.¹⁵⁶

Accordingly, after centuries of near coherence the sexes are violently torn assunder most vividly by the historical-sartorial gender divide of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and their narratorial transformative coincidence is set alongside Orlando's metamorphosis into a woman. Occasionally relishing her newly found aesthetical sensuality, Orlando is also highly debilitated by the external confines of her new gender; throwing off her clothing and 'pitching one stocking across the room' in frustration, she tries desperately to develop 'The Oak Tree' poem in her mind, though her restless agitation is visually apparent (*O*, 188):

She would untie a lace, pace the room a score of times, untie another lace, stop, and pace the room again. (*O*, 184)

Her only escape from this strait-jacket of genderised social conformity is total sartorial rebellion: masquerading as a man in all 'her' former glory:

¹⁵⁶ Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p.59.

She chose a black velvet suit richly trimmed with Venetian lace. It was a little out of fashion, indeed, but fitted her to perfection and dressed in it she looked the very figure of a noble lord. She took a turn or two before the mirror to make sure that her petticoats had not lost her the freedom of her legs, and then let herself secretly out of the door. (*O*, 205-6)

Coincidentally, the eighteenth century was also an era of sartorial lies and guises, in the publicly acceptable form of the masquerade ball that was hosted at the capital's many pleasure gardens, such as Ranelagh and Vauxhall. Viewed by moralists and antitheatricalists as havens of immorality which violated the essentialist view of a fixed social 'identity' (class, gender and religion) and as occasions of immorality and debauchery, they also afforded many women a relative degree of freedom, hitherto unknown. They could dress variously as priests, nuns, Amazonian women, highwaymen, and harlequins, all colourfully depicted in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), as well as the contemporary vogue for wearing the liberating 'turkish' dress of the orient; crossing the boundaries of the socially established norms and exceeding the narrow parameters of their highly limited domestic roles. It became a 'ritual of rebellion' which could potentially have powerful sociological consequences, an issue that is alluded to in Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), when the heroine, Miss Milner, defies the expressed wishes of her fiancé in order to go to a masked ball as an ironically lascivious interpretation of Diana. Terry Castle discusses the importance of this topsy-turvy, 'world upside-down' and temporary dystopia/utopia (depending on your viewpoint) in *Civilisation and Masquerade*:

Much of the fear of the masquerade generated throughout the century is related to the belief that it encouraged female sexual freedom, and beyond

that, female emancipation generally....Many anti-masquerade writers made an elision between prostitutes and ostensibly 'respectable' women at masquerades...¹⁵⁷

It therefore seems ironic that the first thing Orlando does when dressed as a man of fashion is to go a brothel, accompanying a 'cloaked' and 'rouged' woman of the night, who is self-consciously and bombastically attired in ultra-feminine dress with the socially expected, 'plaintive appealing ways', adopted in order to gratify the vanity of male clients (*O*, 208). This need for costumes and disguises can be said to have its origins in personal issues from the colourful life of Orlando's creator, for Woolf found a form of temporary release and escape from her distorted body image (BDD), painful neuroses and the 'clothes complex' which so haunted her consciousness by wearing various, aforementioned, fantastical 'dress-ups' and disguises. Also, her much beloved character-model, the sensual, sapphist, socialite chameleon Vita Sackville-West, greatly enjoyed cross-dressing, loving to shock high society by strolling around the capital dressed as a man called Julian.¹⁵⁸ All three women find a kind of sensual or erotic pleasure in the types of clothing or costume in which a 'deceitful' transgression of the rigid boundaries of a prescribed 'social identity' can take place, and thus allowing themselves a degree of sartorial freedom, and for 'Lady' Orlando closeted in the gender-confines of the eighteenth-century this is a necessary venture for individual growth and accordingly that of his/her poem.

Unveiling him/herself Orlando recognises that the prostitutes are also in a mode of disguise, as all have 'some ring or handkerchief in her pocket which stood her in lieu of pedigree': an accessory symbolical of their true identities as 'the daughters of

¹⁵⁷ Castle, p.88-9, p.33.

earls', for their noble patronym has been denied them in the name of male vanity and lust, and as a consequence of their inevitable occupations as the ultimate masculine accessory (*O*, 209).

Orlando's now 'frequent' vacillation between one 'sex' and the other, with the support of clothing, affords her happiness and liberty, allowing access both to the private woman's realm and the public sphere of masculinity: the ultimate noninterventionist transvestism:

...spending her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender among her books....She would take a turn in the garden and clip the nut trees – for which knee breeches were convenient; then she would change into a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman; and so back again to town, where she would don a snuff coloured gown like a lawyer's and visit the courts. (*O*, 211-2)

This early sampler of a late twentieth-century sartorial egalitarianism and potential utopia relies on the regular and natural oscillation between male and female, based on an indefinable 'gender' dictated by inner mood and natural desires. Orlando dresses in accordance with what 'she' feels 'he/she' is from the internal by toying with preconceived notions of the external, and exists from day to day and hour to hour, so that disguise is no longer lies but an innate sartorial truth. Alas, history dictates that Orlando's all too brief spell of gender transcendence and rebellious sexual masquerading cannot last. The costume restrictions of the nineteenth century with the equally dark, damp, 'ivy-covered', and claustrophobic environment which had determined the ideology of 'separate spheres' for gender by the high-Victorian period

¹⁵⁸ The first time was in 1918, when she walked around Mayfair dressed as 'Julian' with Violet

surprise Orlando unexpectedly, and accordingly catapult 'her' backwards in terms of sartorial freedoms (*O*, 218).

Whilst dressed as a man in 'shirt and breeches' Orlando senses and then perceives, in the everyday clothing around her, the ideological shift in the currently contemporary Victorian attitudes: the patriarchal lineage of the 'Houses of the brothers Adam' dominates as 'beards were grown; trousers were fastened tight under the instep' and gentlemen ominously balance their phallic 'gold-mounted canes between their knees' (*O*, 213, 216-7, 275). The clothing, reflecting the society, is all about patriarchal authority, constriction and almost suffocates the women under metaphorical layers of ivy, but also literal petticoats and darkness. Suddenly Orlando is profoundly conscious of her sex in a way she never was before, 'blushing' at her publicly androgynous appearance, which must now be discarded in order to be acceptable and conformable to the sartorial gender chiaroscuro of black (male) and white (female) with all the semantic connotations.

In Potter's interpretation of this historical shift, Lady Orlando enters a maze in her beautifully decorated, pale blue, but visually cheerful eighteenth-century clothes, but emerges in 'a dark green Victorian jacket and crinoline' with 'heavy skirts' which is suitably paralleled by the weather suddenly changing from sunshine to an oppressive misty gloom: another ingenious piece of sartorial fallacy (see 51a and 51b below), (*SPO*, 53, p.49).



51a and 51b. ‘...the pale sunlight is gradually replaced by the damp swirling mist of the Victorian era. ORLANDO’S clothing also changes – from her pale decorated eighteenth-century clothes and wig, to a dark-green Victorian jacket and crinoline.’ (*SPO*, 53, p.49).

Woolf’s character, however, bears the full weight of the burden of being a nineteenth-century woman for a longer than Potter’s brief filmic sojourn. As Orlando dresses uncomfortably in ‘3 or 4 red flannel petticoats, though the month was August’, surrounded by women wearing ‘golden crucifix[es] heav[ing] on [their] bosoms’, dark widows, and married couples symbolised by the powerfully persuasive symbol of the ‘jaundiced yellow’ wedding bands, the sartorial mood becomes one of disease, confinement, loss and secrecy. Modesty and chastity reign supreme as women’s bodies are deleted so that even their clothing cannot be spoken of without a blush or tears:

‘...the Queen, bless her, is wearing a what’d’you call it, a _____,’ the good woman hesitated and blushed. ‘A crinoline¹⁵⁹,’ Orlando helped her out with it

¹⁵⁹ Crinoline, in its original context (*crin* from the French for ‘fabric stiffened with horsehair’) was the cumbersome stiffened petticoats of flannel and cotton of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth-centuries. The cage crinoline, however, was patented by Charles Frederick Worth in 1856, (though it was around before this ceremonial dating) and reigned supreme from the early fifties to the late sixties. However, Woolf here appears anachronistic in her detail of Queen Victoria wearing one; in fact, along with

(for the word had reached Blackfriars). Mrs Bartholomew nodded. The tears were already running down her cheeks, but as she wept she smiled....Were they not all of them weak women? Wearing crinolines the better to conceal the fact; the great fact; the only fact [childbirth]... (*O*, 224)

The 'dirty' clothing terminology artfully conceals the supposed shame of women's body, whilst painfully emphasising the waspish waist and maternal bosom; in turn this ironically conceals the requisite marital duty of pregnancy, but also that of illegitimate childbirth. Negated and chastised Orlando must conform, and buys the required 'black bombazine' of modesty and a metaphorical form of perpetual mourning. Thinking of buying a crinoline, Woolf adds humorously: '(here she blushed)' and what can be viewed as a virtuous contagion spreads alongside those diseased wedding bands, infecting the formerly liberal and androgynous Orlando with a false feminine veneer of modesty, passivity and socialised subjugation to the opposite gender 'unequally' and unnaturally for 'the crinoline [is] being blushed before the husband' (*O*, 225). The influences of heightened female sensibility and sentimentality now also cause her to 'quiver' when observing 'the second finger of the left hand' where they see 'only' the emerald ring given by Elizabeth: a sharp reminder of the carefree 'single male' identity of her past and its relative freedoms, in direct contrast to the complex motivation and power-play which lurk behind the deceptively 'simple' wedding bands of the nineteenth century:

It now seemed to her that the whole world was ringed with gold. She went in to dinner. Wedding rings abounded. She went to church. Wedding rings were

Florence Nightingale (who objected on the grounds of safety and hygiene) she was a vociferous opponent and certainly never wore one: 'the account of daily accidents arising from the wearing of the indelicate, expensive, and dangerous, and hideous article called Crinoline' (Queen Victoria, Letter *To the Ladies of England*, 1 August 1863) quoted in Adburgham, p.93.

everywhere. She drove out. Gold or pinchbeck,¹⁶⁰ thin, thick, plain, smooth, they glowed dully on every hand. Rings filled the jewellers' shops, not the flashing pastes and diamonds of Orlando's recollection, but simple bands without a stone in them.¹⁶¹ (*O*, 230-1)

In these rings, a complexity of ideas meets unembellished 'simplicity' even as the oxymoronic, '*glowed dully*' adds an distinct air of uncertainty, for literally and metaphorically all that glitters is *not necessarily* gold; indeed, if 'pinchbeck' is used as an adjective in this context, rather than a noun, verbatim, it means 'a sham'.¹⁶² This deeply engendered marital spectacle is a false paradise, or certainly not all that it initially seems to be, and yet the 'Lady' Orlando's indoctrination is stronger than could be expected and she falls, prostrate to the ground 'like a nun offering herself as a bride of Christ' paradoxically wishing to be a bride, and eventually buys herself 'one of those ugly bands' in anticipation of an inculcated conformity (*SPO*, 54, p.51; *O*, 232). Immured at the window of her now gloomy boudoir she is correspondingly:

...dragged down by the weight of the crinoline she had submissively adopted. It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. Her skirts collected damp leaves. The plumed hat tossed on the

¹⁶⁰ Pinchbeck: 'an alloy of copper and zinc used as imitation gold in cheap jewellery'. (*OED*)

¹⁶¹ The tradition of the wedding ring is saturated in masculine myth and male dominance, for only women wore them until the mid-twentieth-century: 'Prometheus is attributed with being the first maker of a ring...Adam advised Cain to use one when marrying his wife....it served a dual purpose; it was a down payment and a sign that a contract had been made and that the woman concerned was no longer for sale' and a visible demonstration of his conquest. The left hand was chosen because in story and myth 'it symbolizes the subjugation of womankind. The right hand is masculine; man is the master. The left hand is feminine; woman is man's slave'. Brian Murphy, *The World of Weddings* (London: Paddington, 1978), pp.42-46.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

breeze. The thin shoes were quickly soaked and mud-caked. Her muscles lost their pliancy... (*O*, 233-4)

The muscles being those of both her body and mind, for she is denied the central haven and muse of her original creativity: nature and the fresh, green outdoors (symbolised by the good 'green' of the Oak Tree). The heavy spirit of the age, abridged in the clothing, causes her to require someone to 'lean upon' and even request a porter with 'one tap of her ladylike 'gloved hand' to open her own garden gate so that she can await the arrival of her bombastically heroic, but very temporary soul-mate, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine Esq. (*O*, 235).



52. Orlando c1992 in Potter's modern day interpretation.

Ultimately, whether the Lady Orlando completes 'The Oak Tree: A Poem' in 'the present day' of 1928 because she is a woman, or because her modern and highly 'androgynous' clothing instantly allows her a creative freedom she never had before only remains to be considered. The argument for the latter: a balanced combination of the male and female mind, which Woolf so lauded as comprising the finest kind of writer in *A Room of One's Own* is certainly manifest in Orlando's contemporary

‘trouser suit’. Sally Potter observes in her equivalent final section, entitled ‘BIRTH’, but set in 1992:

ORLANDO: (*Voiceover*) She – for there can be no doubt about her sex....is tall and slim, with the slightly androgynous appearance that many females of the time aspire to. (*SPO*, 63, p.61.)

Dressed variously in white shirt, leather trousers, and then leather jacket, flying helmet and goggles on the motorbike and sidecar Swinton cuts a trendy ‘female’, but not ‘feminine’ figure, in other words ‘Orlando’s’ individuality and creativity have won through, and ‘she’ has completed the prize-winning poem (52).

Woolf, similarly, adorns her doll-like creation in the garments of the colourfully-liberal present day; appropriate to the androgynous styles of the 20s:

...Orlando change[d] her skirt for a pair of whipcord breeches¹⁶³ and leather jacket...ravished with the beauty of movement....she brushed her short hair with King James’ silver brushes... (*O*, 301-303)

Crucially, the sartorial constraints of the Victorian and Edwardian age have loosened, and the dull monochromes of an equally sombre society give way to a shorter:

...braided skirt and a pair of tight scarlet trousers crossed the grass within a few steps of [Orlando]....violets, oranges, reds, and blues broke through the interstices of the leaves and sparkled in the emerald on her finger. (*O*, 272)

The poem can now ‘burst open’ from the formerly corsetted, ‘upper part of her dress’, leaving ‘a bare place in her breast where she had been used to carry it’ so that she can

¹⁶³ Whipcord: ‘Cord made of tightly twisted strands; twilled fabric with prominent ridges’, *OED*.

literally and metaphorically 'deliver' it to her publisher (*O*, 267, 268-9). In the novel's closing pages it is posited that Orlando only feels comfortable with her new situation, or rather 'sane', because of the 'pearl necklace' worn around her neck, similar to Virginia Woolf's own one; appropriately inherited from her mother. It is these same pearls which are subsequently described as 'glow[ing] like the eggs of some vast moon spider...burnt like a phosphorescent flare in the darkness' as if her creative powers are inextricably linked to her female fecundity (*O*, 313). The gestation imagery is overt, for she has already given birth to a son (interestingly enough, it is a daughter in Potter's version) and the feminine creative cycle will go on, as manifest in The Oak Tree, with its egg-like pearls, or rather acorns, providing the ripe seeds for the hatching of new ideas.

This natural fecundity motif is further developed in the lively 'green' sparkle of life contained in the emerald ring; which she now, as a woman, fully understands the complexities of. In considering the colour green and the female aesthetic vision associated with it, I would thereby opt for the former, which has Orlando the woman as being the more powerful unifying force of the two. Virginia Woolf establishes in her juvenilia - '...sound melts into colour, and colour calls out for words' - the full, and almost mystical, synaesthetic perception which belongs primarily to the women in her fiction, and which is especially true of *Orlando*.¹⁶⁴ As a man 'he' was surrounded by all the positive creative forces of women dressed, or connected within green; namely his mother in the first three pages, who is described as 'a very beautiful lady in green walking out to feed the peacocks' (*O*, 15). He then desperately, but all too literally and rationally, attempts to capture this maternal, natural fecundity on paper:

¹⁶⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Books and Portraits*, ed. Mary Lyon (Hogarth, 1977), p.22.

He was describing, as all young poets are for ever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself, which happens to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course, he could write no more.

Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy....The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre. (*O*, 16-17)

Yet he misses the most powerful maternal inheritance of them all, and all too casually adopts the great matriarch's extraordinary gift of the life-giving emerald ring just before her death. He is failing to balance the twin gender perspectives on life; only achieving the elusive 'green sparkle' or rather, gem of wisdom, when he becomes a woman and thereby can complete the whole paean to nature evident in *The Oak Tree*.¹⁶⁵ Rather than appreciate, accept and absorb the magnificence of Mother Nature (as she is personified by Woolf in her women characters) and as the positive female influence over the boy Orlando disappears (his mother, Elizabeth, and Sasha) they are swiftly and ominously replaced by the fake Renaissance poet and later Victorian critic, Nicholas Greene, which in itself is a clever lexical corruption of the reality of nature. He therefore embodies exactly what Woolf is trying to criticise and correct concerning the true reflective and multi-sensory value of great literature, that is not

¹⁶⁵ The English Oak is notable in that it suggests a patriotic heritage, timelessness and the mythic symbolism which often underpins Woolf's work as a whole: not forgetting its obvious 'green-ness'. It furthermore emphasises her delight in all things androgynous (up to a point) in that it bears male flowers which hang in catkins (early in the year), but these soon wither and die after shedding their pollen, to be replaced by the female flowers which open alongside the first leaves, but as less conspicuous, bud-shaped catkins. The backbone of the English maritime fleet; it also provided the beamed support, panelling and staircases for countless English homes, pews and pulpits for churches, and wine casks and beer barrels for merchants, especially from the Renaissance onwards. Indigenous, practical and creative, it shelters and feeds whole ecosystems (over 600 different species complete or have part of their life-cycle on it), growing slowly and steadily (the oldest is approximately 800 years old). It is also legendary (Charles I's shelter) and mythic, as the oak tree is one of the most powerful of all the pagan symbols (singularly for Druids) as it represents life, fertility and sacrifice. Information is

merely visual or cerebral: both in the literal text printed on the page or in its descriptive verisimilitude.

Significantly, Greene re-enters when Orlando is a woman and about to 'deliver' her manuscript, and after three-hundred-years he is now the quintessential 'respectable' male critic wearing his 'gold pince-nez'; which are presumably just as narrow as his former creative vision as poet (*O*, 267). However, it is Orlando's 'greener' vision which wins her a glittering literary accolade, as well as establishing her forthcoming literal and literary fecundity. Metaphorically speaking, an acorn has now been dropped from which a new tree, generation or even a branch of literature will flourish, belonging to women just as equally as it previously did to men. Former sartorial and creative constraints have been lifted and the new, transgressive 'transvestite' powers fully facilitate a necessarily 'androgynous' creative vision, although whether as the critic James Naremore believes, all this has been done at the expense of the masculine principle is open to individual interpretation.¹⁶⁶ Certainly, the wealth of female clothing details and positive colour connections suggests to me that this is a predominantly feminine vision of aesthetic creativity.

When Virginia Woolf considered the traditional 'English unaesthetic eye' in the famously prophetic essay 'On Cinema', she also excitedly perceives the medium's pictorial potential for storytelling:

taken from the *Book of the British Countryside*, pp.316-7; www.oldknobbley.com/intro.htm. And the invariably modest pagans at www.druidry.org.

¹⁶⁶ Naremore posits that although Woolf believed the masculine and feminine worlds in theory ought to equally 'coexist' she is mostly 'attracted to the passive, dreamy expectations which she repeatedly associated with femininity' and concludes, 'one of her major weaknesses is that she was never quite able to synthesise them', *The World Without a Self*, pp.217-8.

All the famous novels of the world with their well known characters and their famous scenes only asked to be put on the films.¹⁶⁷

However, when Woolf viewed Edmund Goulding's *Love* in 1927, the silent screen version of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* starring Greta Garbo in the title role and which was provided with an alternative happy ending for those viewers who requested it, she soon realised the intellectual shortcomings of pure cinema. For her, the pictorial vision of the directors did not coexist with the internal vision of the author, and disappointed she lamented, with what would very soon become the age old argument for the weakness of any small or silver screen adaptations of literary fiction:

That is no more Anna Karenina [on the screen] than it is Queen Victoria! For the brain knows Anna almost entirely by the inside of her mind – her charm, her passion, her despair, whereas all the emphasis is now laid upon her teeth, her pearls and her velvet.¹⁶⁸

Indeed, later modern film critics would see it as a triumph of style over substance:

For screen purposes it's enough that both are of the aristocracy, which permits Garbo long, stately gowns and Gilbert¹⁶⁹ a series of uniforms that would make a buck private out of the student prince.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'On Cinema' in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, in 4 vols. (Hogarth, 1994), vol. IV (1925-28), pp. 348-354; p.349.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.350.

¹⁶⁹ Vronsky was played by John Gilbert. *The Student Prince* (1927) directed by Ernst Lubitsch was M-G-M Studio's concurrent production which meant that both lavish costumes and sets were sacrificed to the former.

Yet, ironically, this materialisation of feelings and the workings of the inner mind is exactly what she attempts to achieve in fiction; John Batchelor observes of *To the Lighthouse*:

[There are] items which are clearly used symbolically as well as contributing to the work's realist density...the brown stocking, the green shawl...¹⁷¹

So what exactly would Virginia Woolf have made of her novels being adapted for the screen? There is Sally Potter's inspired interpretation of *Orlando* (1992) and Marleen Gorris' *Mrs Dalloway* (1997); but perhaps most intriguing would have been her view of the recent Oscar-winning *The Hours* (2002), Stephen Daldry's direction of Michael Cunningham's tribute to Woolf and her writings which is a visual feast of dress, colour and performativity: including an analysis of the author's life. What she would have made of the fuss over Nicole Kidman's dowdy wig and prosthetic nose, or rather 'patrician beak', as it was affectionately known, one can only guess. (See 53a and 53b. below). However, the award-winning Daldry ingeniously also uses sartorial motifs and other small accessories as indicators of character. An initially worried Cunningham noted on set:

...what brought [Kidman] to Woolf's essence was learning to roll her own cigarettes, as Woolf had done, combined with a modest white handkerchief the costume designer had put in the pocket of her dress. Somehow these two

¹⁷⁰ *The Variety Movie Guide*, ed. Derek Elley (London: Hamlyn, 1995), p.539.

¹⁷¹ John Batchelor, *Virginia Woolf: The Major Novels* (CUP, 1991), p.99.

minor elements, the cowboyish cigarettes and the wan little hankie, produced the friction from which she could begin.¹⁷² (see 54 below)



53a and 53b. An Oscar-Winning Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf in Stephen Daldry's *The Hours* (2002).

The androgynous mind of the ideal writer, according to Woolf in *A Room*, is neatly summed up in two simple, incongruous details which affect the actress in the performance and help her to capture Woolf's eclectic Bloomsbury style.



54. A caricature sketch of Virginia Woolf¹⁷³

¹⁷² Michael Cunningham, 'Woolf in Hollywood Clothing' *The Sunday Telegraph*, Review: Arts, 26 January 2003, p.5.

¹⁷³ This excellent sketch appears on the University of North Kentucky's 'English Department' website, <http://www.nku.edu/~engmaj/woolf.htm>

Thus the question tantalisingly lingers: why does Woolf appear to object so strongly to lavish detail on screen and in the Edwardian writers she attacks in 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown' when she herself was a famous aesthete, celebrating the ordinary salient details of everyday life? However, as I have attempted to show in this chapter, the clothing complex' of her life, is indeed a 'complexity of clothing' in her writing, and she combines that paradox by creating a form of sartorial transcendence.

Conclusion

The Novel as ‘Costumed Drama’

Clothing should not be allowed to dissolve or deteriorate into a detail.¹

According to Barthes' semiotic philosophy, nothing is inert and everything has signification. Certainly then, the semantics of clothing, including colour, pattern and style, which goes back to colour symbolism of antiquity and the heraldry of the middle ages, can realistically be considered within the novel genre.² Fundamentally, this is what this thesis has attempted to suggest through close analysis of the literary texts, considering both the historical context, and relevant details from the authorial lives in question.

An exploration of the ways in which clothing serves both to articulate and to subvert identity is currently in vogue among scholars of the humanities.³

This observation humorously puns being fashionably 'in vogue' with the 'recent trends' of the literary world, 'changing its mind' about the nature and use of dress within the narrative. Formerly, clothing was considered either as a 'static' or 'frivolous' item of verisimilitude, however, in drama, theatrical costume has undoubtedly always played a significant part in the on-stage ambience, contributing to both the overall dramatic effect and characterisation. When of Hamlet, the ultimate literary 'man in black', it is observed, 'The apparel oft proclaims the man', Shakespeare seems to be acknowledging a broader sartorial tradition on the Renaissance stage, in which the cut and colour of the actors' costumes often permitted

¹ Roland Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p.8.

² For a fascinating overview of colour signification and symbolism since antiquity see Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Color* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

diacritical readings of the psychological state of the characters.⁴ As a generic predecessor to the novel, why not then merge the role of the ‘wardrobe consultant’ with that of an omniscient author who can consciously choose to adorn their characters in a distinctive manner or fashionable mode, and by which they can equally be interpreted? Consequently, by the time the highly popular, late-twentieth-century ‘Costume Drama’ film genre grips a nation with its heaving Empire-line bosoms and wet shirts, the concept of ‘costumed drama’ is already established in the novels chosen for visual adaptation. The idea of an off-stage, authorial-dress consultant in the narrative form allows clothing to go beyond mere verisimilitude, and even transcend the purely figurative approach to sartorial signification, especially when viewed in the relevant socio-political, and historical contexts.

In this sense the novel as costumed drama is reinforced by the theories of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, whereby the context, culture and author regain much of the importance lost during the era of New Criticism. Albeit, this is not done at the expense of the reader’s own ‘subjective’ interpretation of the historical references to dress, especially as seen from the comfortable vantage point of a western world indulging in the expendable whims of high fashion:

Fashion is a form of ugliness so intolerable that we have to alter it every six months.⁵

³ Julia Prest, Oxford, in an academic review of ‘Jessica Munns and Penny Richards (eds.) *The Clothes that Wear Us: Essays on Dressing and Transgressing in Eighteenth-Century Culture*’, *The Review of English Studies*, 51 (2000) p.650.

⁴ *Hamlet*, I.iii.72.

⁵ *Oscar Wilde*, found at <http://www.quoteserver.ca/robots/458.html>.

Bearing in mind Oscar Wilde's opinion, contemporary society insists that clothing should be seasonally disposable. Indeed, fashion today is ever more of an embodiment of the ideology of 'conspicuous consumption', or perhaps more resonantly 'conspicuous waste'. The fickle social mores of 'The Catwalk' dissonantly epitomise the expendable values of modern consumer society, from which it is almost impossible to escape.

Accordingly, if clothing in the novel can reach a new level of signification, then its importance for on-screen interpretations and in the field of fine art for dating and verification is also starting to be appreciated. For example, the suspected portrait of a young Jane Austen by eighteenth-century genre painter Ozias Humphry, was recently authenticated by dress, which was then traced back to a subtle change in a relative's will inventory because of an entail (55).⁶



55. Jane Austen by Ozias Humphrey (1788).



56. The first Hollywood adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), starring Greer Garson as Elizabeth Bennet (near left) amongst the five Bennet sisters also in anachronistic crinolines!

⁶ Jack Malvern, 'My Dear, it's a Matter of Dress Sense and Sensibility', *The Times*, 'News', Saturday 18 October 2003, p.3. See also the choice of illustration alongside Fay Weldon's article, 'Austen: The Teen Queen' in *The Daily Telegraph*, 'Books', Saturday, 1 August, 2003, pp.1-2.

Christie's art expert, Conal MacFarlane, aided by clothing historians and the owners of the world's largest costume collection, Lillian and Ted Williams; as well as leading Austen expert Marilyn Butler, helped to authenticate the portrait. This contradicted previous art historians who claimed that the iridescent, white muslin dress 'she' was wearing could not have existed before 1805 and therefore it could not possibly be Austen:

In this portrait, we [Lillian and Ted Williams] note the fullness of the dress with substantial distribution of its fabric around the bodice, rather than trained in the rear in the Empire style. Furthermore, the gauze gathered around the neckline...is consistent with late-18th-century garniture.⁷

The shoes and the parasol, also available at the time, are further elaborated on by Butler:

There was a big fad for green umbrellas around 1788, at the time the portrait was painted. This reference does seem to be an emphatic memory [in 'Sanditon' when she details a couple's wish to buy their child an umbrella of this type].⁸

With the literary-sartorial backup the portrait's 'similarity' to the various written descriptions of Jane Austen is even more acute.

⁷ *Ibid.*, *The Times*, p.3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

Yet sartorial anachronisms do occur, especially on-screen where historical and literary inaccuracies are sanctioned in television dramas and lavish Hollywood productions.

The famous Robert Z. Leonard version of *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) – one of the most popular choices for adaptation on stage and screen – depicted Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier in a somewhat ‘frilly’ view of merry ‘olde’ Regency England, with the Bennet sisters resplendent in their mid-Victorian crinolines (see 56 above).⁹

Even Andrew Davies, now the BBC and ITV’s most successful ‘costume drama’ writer and director, occasionally chooses to stray from the literary-sartorial path, although this could be regarded as his own directorial interpretation of how the characters *should* appear. Mr Darcy’s wet shirt aside, in Davies’ recent adaptation of *Daniel Deronda* (2002), Gwendolen Harleth (Romola Garai) dispenses with her green wardrobe in favour of scarlet: a slightly moralistic view perhaps? Or merely an example of justifiable attention seeking?



57a and b. Fanny Price (Frances O'Connor) has a costumed-personality change in Patricia Rozema's modern adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (1999): from virginal white to vampish red when united with Edmund (Jonny Lee Miller).

Nevertheless, modern film versions now painstakingly try to get it right, both *Middlemarch* (1994) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) were on the whole sartorially accurate, and also symbolically significant. The extra-textual detailing of the ‘amber crosses’ worn by the two older Bennet sisters in the Davies version, not only recalls the one lovingly worn by Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* (1814), but is also an exact replica of the one given to Jane by her own sister, Cassandra Austen. Equally, in Patricia Rozema’s feminist, post-colonial version of *Mansfield Park* (1999) there is an uncomfortable camera close-up on the elaborate gold chain being placed on Fanny (Frances O’Connor) by the scheming Mary Crawford (Embeth Davidtz). As the necklace is deviously donated by her frivolous brother, Henry Crawford, Rozema highlights that this is both literally and metaphorically an uneasy choker around Fanny’s delicate neck that attempts to yoke her to a marriage offer she eventually refuses. Passionately, Rozema also transforms Fanny’s virginal ‘white muslin’ coming-out dress, which is such a feature of the novel, into a vibrant red by the ardent, closing scenes of the film; though this is certainly not mentioned in the text (see 57a and b above). Accordingly, literary characterisations become ever more three-dimensional, or rather appear as the literary characters would to the reader’s ‘inward eye’, and notably this aesthetic appeal is a significant, somewhat ‘superficial’ marker of the relative successes of the various costume dramas on the small and silver screens.

As I have endeavoured to reveal in the course of this thesis, certain novels are truly ‘textillic texts’ in which meaning is dexterously woven into the very fabric of the narrative. The historicity of the text, or rather the textuality of history, alongside the

⁹ Suzanne H. Fairless, ‘Understanding Austenmania’, unpublished research paper for M.Litt. (Percy Building, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, Easter 1999), p.5.

literary, cultural and psychological are fashioned into the very textures of the novel itself, which necessitates a multi-disciplinary approach. Prest describes this technique as one which:

...happily transcends traditional boundaries between academic disciplines, uniting scholars from different backgrounds in a common interest in the creation of and reading of identity through sartorial practice.¹⁰

When applied specifically to literature the semantics of clothing can accordingly help to better understand the ‘identities’ of both the characters and their creators, explaining, for instance, just why both Anne and Charlotte Brontë dress their governess-heroines in almost obsessively neat, modestly black dresses, but also what this means historically, psychologically, and socio-politically. Their sombre outfits are highly symbolical of the heroine’s enforced alienation from the sensual pleasures of the *beau monde*, and yet the authors appear to allow them an almost Cinderella-style sartorial triumph in the novels’ closing pages. Thus they re-dress the requirements of the traditional literary heroine, placating their own personal desires in the process.

George Eliot takes the equally sombre ‘quakerish–grey drapery’ of her heroines and uses it to disguise the ‘aesthetic’ desires repressed beneath the ‘ascetic’ veneer of self-control. Although Eliot initially appears to simply juxtapose her imposing heroines with their vain, frivolous counterparts, she actually attempts to blur the boundaries between these potentially monochromatic stereotypes, with the heroine ultimately

¹⁰ Prest, p.650.

benefiting from interaction with her presumed opposite and vice versa, culminating in the evolution of her final literary 'masterpiece' of a 'heroine'. Combined with her vivid and literary pictorialism, George Eliot 'word-paints' a nineteenth-century world dominated by conflicting passions and longings, that are both manifest and thwarted by her heroines' attire.

Finally, Virginia Woolf makes her visibly profound philosophical costume changes directly accord with early-twentieth-century socio-political ideas concerning women. In aspiring to a seditious ideal of gender transcendence, she utilises transvestism and almost 'magical' clothing in order to better illustrate her notion of the ultimate, androgynous creative mind, but with an overt sartorial gusto which she sadly could not exhibit in her own life.

All four women writers dress their heroines in such a way as to provide an insightful analysis into characterisation, theme, plot, and socio-political history. By metaphorically 'ripping off' the stereotypical 'bodices' of the previous 'fashionably feminine' literary stereotypes (the paragon of virtue and the coquette) they defiantly re-dress their heroines, but also more importantly use clothing to help exteriorise, deny and deliberately misrepresent internal consciousness. Thus, they are essentially freeing those women who were so trivialised by patriarchal society because of their interest in dress, both on the page and in actuality. For example, those Eves, Pandoras, Liliths and Marys are according to Tseëlon 'portrayed as disguising behind false decoration, using [their] beauty and finery as a vehicle to dazzle men to their destruction', and this can be said to include the duplicitous Pamela/Shamelas,

Belindas, Molls/Roxanas, Estellas, Madam Bovarys and Anna Kareninas of the literary world too.¹¹

However, this is also a progressive thesis in that it metaphorically and literally swaps the initial black and white sartorial chiaroscuro for the glorious possibilities of Technicolor; bursts through the constraints of the oppressive nineteenth-century corset embracing the aesthetic Liberty gowns of the early twentieth century; and also moves forward from Brontë to Eliot and Woolf chronicling the rise of the feminist movement, as related to dress. Women's clothing is therefore presented as evolving from essentialist and fixed Black and White gender notions to the socio-political liberation of the 'woman writer' in her Chanel trouser suit or Bloomsbury artisan dress with a touch of the exotic, and sexually liberated Flapper styles. The effacing shadow-greys of Brontëan woman are weakened; reversed by Eliot whose ambitious 'greens' are reserved for a heroine for which the world is not yet ready. This toxic 'green' is then rescued by Woolf, as she dismantles feminine repression, as symbolised by nineteenth-century bustles and crinolines, and replaces them with an androgynous transvestism by which her unifying, creative women can reach a form of sartorial transcendence and possible gender utopia.

Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë, Marian Evans and Virginia Woolf, as women, attempted to liberate, not only literary womanhood from their 'corseted' confines, but also themselves. As 'literary ladies' appearing upon the social stage, all four women were uncomfortably, often painfully, self-conscious of their own appearance, especially amongst the fashionable *beau monde* or in the inquisitive, competitive

¹¹ Tseëlon, p.12.

literary-social scene. It is this compound of the personal, historical and theoretical, applied to the narratorial, which fully animates the clothing minutiae and transforms it into a deeply personal 'fashion statement'.

For example, it is acknowledged that two of these women writers were 'plain' - as judged by their own standards and those of the day - and although the final Bloomsbury lady was delicately beautiful and sophisticated, even she, tragically, did not have confidence in herself. This is perhaps not so very hard to understand considering that there are always going to be judgemental voyeurs like Gerald Duckworth, Clive Bell, Edmund Gosse, John Chapman, Eliza Lynn, and Emily Tennyson on the scene who seek to condemn those who do not live up to their own perception of how an intelligent, middle-class lady should look and dress. In London, Charlotte Brontë, in her 'high-made, country garments' felt even plainer than when in Haworth, especially when contrasted with those 'elegant, young ladies in full dress' going to glittering city social events.¹² Furthermore, her overt social discomfort was only compounded when surrounded by people who would re-tell their anecdotes of first meeting her, relating their surprise at her dowdy appearance: focusing on the dress rather than the woman. Sadly, her friend and publisher George Smith sensitively observed of this painful self-consciousness:

...I believe that she would have given all her genius and her fame to have been beautiful. Perhaps few women ever existed more anxious to be pretty than she, or more angrily conscious of the circumstance that she was *not* pretty.¹³

¹² Charlotte Brontë to Mary Taylor, 4 Sept 1848, Gaskell, p.251.

Yet his reference to those *few women* subsequently continues with another female novelist, Marian Evans, who, at the height of her literary fame as George Eliot confidently learnt to disregard what others thought of her and wear what she liked. Albeit, the literary critic and Victorian man of letters, Edmund Gosse, scathingly saw fit to refer to this highly educated woman as both ‘pathetic and provincial’ when focusing on her eccentric clothing style and appearance (see p.153). To use his own description of her back on himself, this inappropriately personal remark seems to be more than a little ‘incongruous’, if not hinting of professional jealousy. Accordingly, it is a rather satisfying form of poetic justice that Virginia Woolf later deprecatingly described him as ‘that little dapper grocer’ after meeting him at a lecture on poetry at the Royal Society of Literature in the Autumn of 1926; and also used him as the model for her other parochially-minded man of letters, Nick Greene, in *Orlando*.¹⁴ Perhaps it was a deliberate sartorial vengeance in the name of her literary ancestress? What these authors needed were people such as Elizabeth Gaskell, George Henry Lewes, Harriet Martineau and Henry James who looked beyond whatever the ‘shortcomings’ of their appearances into the deeply creative minds and fiery passions of the women contained within.

Combine these profoundly complex personal concerns with the repressed desires inherent in ‘Mrs Rochester’s’ torn wedding veil; M. Paul’s jealous interpretation of Lucy’s ‘scarlet’ dress; Gwendolen’s much envied, but equally poisonous green attire, which eventually gives way to the vibrant green shawls and garments of those fertile, creative, and almost otherworldly Woolfian women: to create a balanced portrait of

¹³ George Smith, *A Memoir: with some pages of Autobiography* (1902, privately circulated), as cited in Barker, p.559.

¹⁴ *Diary*, 30 October 1926, III, p.117.

the authors where the incarnation of personal desires as manifest in dressing your heroine becomes even more visibly heightened with meaning.

Considering the direction of modern fashion and also the current contemporary restrictions on both men and women in the form of dieting trends, as well as the continual pressure of intangibly beautiful images in the media which are presented as ‘the norm’, but are simply delusional aspirations, then we have not, as a society, actually ‘changed’ (specific clothing styles aside) much since the first fashion magazine appeared in the closing decades of the eighteenth century. In a twentieth century that began with women in corsets and long skirts and ended up accepting bifurcated clothing for women and the wearing of mini-skirts: are we actually changing attitudes? Certainly now, men can be just as vain of their appearance as women, as shown by the rising popularity of men’s lifestyle magazines such as *Esquire*, *GQ* and even *FHM*. However, the supermodel Sophie Dahl, who was initially commended for displaying a realistic body shape on The Catwalk (an average size 14 in clothing), has, since the start of the twenty-first century ‘shrunk herself’ a few clothing sizes smaller, and ironically befitting her literary appearance as the tiny, doll-like child heroine in her grandfather’s *BFG* (1982). Waif-like, boyish-woman, and girlish-man dominate glossy magazines, propaganda for another disposable feature of a modern consumer-led society; where people are all too easily consumed by unrealistic images and ideals.

So do we need to be further liberated? Perhaps along more Woolfian lines of a sartorial utopia where anything can be worn to express the individuality of the inner self: not for the judgement of the world beyond it. In rebelling against a ‘feminine

sartorial ideal' (if indeed there is such a thing) these women writers variously re-dressed themselves and their heroines in whatever aesthetic or ascetic model they choose. Essentially, when the sartorial semantics of the outer man perfectly accord with the inner then the 'utopian' model is ready for life. There are even wistful hints in the writings of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf of an atavistic desire to run naked like savages: implied in the opening scenes of *Villette*, the closing scenes of *Middlemarch*, and by Lucy Swithin in *Between the Acts*, but which can only be metaphorical when considering the chilly perils of the British climate.

Although sartorial symbolism regularly changes in the world of fashion, the engendered and sexual message fundamentally remains the same: namely, that a 'feminine' appearance indicates a member of the female sex and a 'masculine' one usually indicates a male, and only by transvestism, masquerade and shifting cultural associations can this be transformed. In history, women have been traditionally allied with clothing and the vanity of appearances, something that can be both simultaneously constricting and empowering. This thesis, by starting with a form of sartorial repression culminates in a potential display of creative power which a wealth of textiles and the cultivation of aesthetics can sometimes give. If women are traditionally well-versed in the rhetoric of clothing and its importance as a communicator of status, sexuality, and gender roles then the study of sartorial semantics in women's literature needs to be reconsidered. The Brontë sisters, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf were not afraid to allow their clothing details to become more than the purely 'frivolous distinction' that Jane Austen considered it to be, but begin to acknowledge it as something vital.¹⁵ As these women were constantly

¹⁵ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Henry Ehrenpreis (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 'Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction, and excessive solicitude about it often destroys its own aim', p.92.

surrounded by such aesthetic artefacts which were a necessary part of their domestic spheres, then they could adapt them to create a whole new world of meaning. Consequently, in all of these novels the heroine's dress can be seen as supplemental to a kind of feminist discourse, for at those times when women could often be denied the power of public speaking, their (forbidden) desires are etched onto their body in a form of elegant, eloquent stigmata. Walpole's metaphorical 'hyenas' (feminist writers) in 'scarlet' petticoats reveal a passionately daring 'something' concealed beneath the required 'layers' of a modestly feminine appearance, and ultimately transmit the shrouded secrets of her-story. Analogous with the efforts of the cunningly dexterous Penelope, and reminiscent of our foremothers who intimately knew the loom rather than the page, they weave a cornucopia of meaning into their novels in order not only to allow their heroines to triumph, but also to gain a better understanding of other women and themselves. By 'reading into clothing' we can celebrate and perhaps better understand those women who consumed and were consumed by notions of female vanity: but also create a liberating 'textillic text' revealing just enough of the daring red petticoat beneath a modest veneer of respectability.



58. 'Mrs Markham, 1857' by Francis Grant.

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