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Fashion and Dress Culture

Sarah Parker

Introduction

Fashion, dress, shopping and consumption: even in the context of 21st century capitalism, many of these words still carry negative connotations of shallowness, triviality and greed. There is something not just ephemeral, but dangerous, about fashion; the person who follows fashion becomes its 'victim'. This victim, more often than not, is figured as female, as dress and fashion are intertwined with pejorative notions of femininity as frivolous, superficial and fickle. Many of these associations were very much in formation, or acquiring new significance during the 19th century, as a new mass culture of shopping and consumption rapidly developed, in which women were the dominant consumers and producers. Factories produced affordable garments to ever-increasing demand, while in major European cities, dressmakers became celebrated couturiers, designing made-to-measure garments for wealthy clientele and using live models to display their creations. Meanwhile, fierce debate raged about whether these beauty ideals were physically healthy or aesthetically pleasing. In response, alternative dress reform movements, such as the Rational Dress Society and the Aesthetic dress movement, intensified towards the end of the 19th century.

Throughout the 19th century, dress was a battleground on which a number of key debates were fought and contested. But whilst fashion and art historians have long been interested in this period, literary studies has tended to overlook dress – perhaps due to the residual notion that such concerns are not sufficiently profound or serious topics. Fortunately, in the last 10 years, there has been a noticeable increase in critical work that focuses on the important role of fashion and dress in 19th-century literature and culture. Such work moves beyond viewing dress as merely a metaphor or symbolic device, subordinate to the plot (for example, enabling an author to tell the reader something about their characters) – and instead approaches dress as a cultural phenomenon worthy of attention in its own right. This new direction in scholarship has been facilitated by the increased focus on material culture, objects and 'thing theory' in 19th-century studies more broadly.¹

In this article, I aim to give a general survey of the most significant critical works on fashion and dress culture in 19th-century literature published during the last 10 years (2003-2013). I will identify the key trends in this area of scholarship, including work on 19th-century shopping and consumption, the development of the fashion industry; the significance of specific figures such as the 'shopgirl' and the needlewoman; and alternative dress/reform movements. As Clair Hughes notes in her foundational study *Dressed in Fiction* (Berg Publishers, 2005) by delving deeper into the historical, cultural and sociological history of clothes, we can

discover that clothes in 19th-century literature are very much ‘clothes in action’ (Hughes 185).

Shop ‘til you Drop: Shopping, Consumption and the Shopgirl

As recent television dramas *Mr Selfridge* and *The Paradise* have demonstrated, Britain’s modern shopping culture has its roots in the 19th century. The latter BBC drama, based on Émile Zola’s 1883 novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The Ladies’ Paradise*), is itself a fictional account of what is widely believed to be one of the world’s first department stores: *Le Bon Marché* in Paris.² Founded in 1838, the store expanded into a Department store in 1850. Offering a wide variety of items and services within one building, such stores were monuments to the new culture of modern consumerism, in which women played a fundamental role as both producers and patrons, beautifying both their household and themselves as emblems of conspicuous consumption.

In *Come Buy, Come Buy, Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women’s Writing* (Ohio University Press, 2008), Krista Lysack examines 19th-century women’s developing relationship to cultures of consumption. Lysack argues that during the 19th century, shopping reflected ‘anxieties over the integrity of middle-class women’s bodies and the ways in which their shopping excursions outside the bounds of domesticity might affect the solvency of the bourgeois household and the economic health of the nation’ (Lysack 5-6). Women’s shopping activities also embodied general concerns about female ‘appetites’ and movement in the public sphere. Lysack argues that the fact that Victorian women were themselves viewed as circulating commodities within capitalism has led historians and literary critics to read their relationship to consumer goods as inherently vexed. Surveying a range of texts including Lady Audley’s *Secret* (1862), *Middlemarch* (1871), Michael Field’s poetic volume *Sight and Song* (1892) and the Suffragist newspaper *Votes for Women*, Lysack contends that shopping, far from simply representing women’s enslavement within capitalistic systems, can also represent a more positive form of agency for women – manifested in pleasurable pursuits such as connoisseurship and collecting, and shopping as an urban leisure activity.

The subversive potential of women’s shopping is certainly borne out in Susan Hiner’s study *Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth Century France* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010). Hiner turns the spotlight onto specific accessories, including shawls, parasols and fans, arguing that such objects function as ‘polyvalent cultural marker[s]’ in 19th century French literature (Hiner 2) – particularly as markers of economic status, social mobility, virtue and erotic power. For example, the handbag or *réticule* becomes a symbol of women’s power of consumption, making ‘visible a relationship with money that propriety dictated was the sphere of men, not women’ (Hiner 183). As Hiner demonstrates, these seemingly trivial accessories perform a subtly destabilizing

role in relation to modernity: these objects are ‘wielded’ as markers of a certain economic status, but they can also be used to disrupt the social order. Appearing in texts by Balzac, Flaubert and Zola, such accessories ‘accomplish ideological work imperceptibly’ (Hiner 1) – by overlooking them, we might miss important messages about gender, social status and modernity at work in these texts.

While Lysack and Hiner’s studies consider women primarily as shoppers and consumers, Lise Shapiro Sanders’s *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure and the London Shopgirl* (Ohio State University Press, 2006) turns the focus onto women as shop workers. Considering the figure of the ‘shopgirl’ in terms of both historical fact and as a cultural construction, Sanders explores the production of this female figure that came to personify concerns about women in the public sphere, particularly during the late 19th century, when women were increasingly occupying the workplace and public arena as employees and an independent consumers in their own right. With reference to both literary texts and historical sources, Sanders demonstrates how the figure of the shopgirl ‘organized a number late-Victorian middle-class anxieties over sexuality, morality, and class position’ (Sanders 21), often in the process eliding differences between actual shop workers and overlooking their lived experiences. In novels such as George Gissing’s *The Odd Women* (1893), short stories (such as Katherine Mansfield’s 1908 ‘The Tiredness of Rosabel’) and plays and music hall performances, the shopgirl mediates the fantasies of consumers and functions as an object of desire herself, populating the Romance fictions of the period in narratives of seduction or upward social mobility. As a counterpoint to these fictions, Sanders also draws on historical and cultural documents to examine the realities of employment as a late-19th century shop assistant.

The increased availability and affordability of fashionable garments towards the end of the 19th century, coupled with the disturbingly ambiguous presence of the shopgirl, led to worries about the potential for class emulation via dress. Rosy Aindow explores such fears across a range of literary texts in her study *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* (Ashgate, 2010). Looking at both periodicals and novels by Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell and Gissing, Aindow interrogates the ways in which literature responded to the emergence of the fashion industry at end of the century, arguing that fashionable dress is linked to class anxieties as mass-produced fashion meant that a wider variety of people could engage with fashion for the first time. Such anxieties, as we have seen, were often expressed through the cultural discourses surrounding fashion workers. Aindow includes a final chapter on shopgirls and needlewomen in 19th-century literature. For behind the façade of the Victorian dress shop lurked the darker realities of the needlewoman – a figure who haunts the 19th-century text.

Material Girls: Needlewomen, Sewing, Crafts and Women's Work

Like the shopgirl, the figure of the needlewoman was frequently used to mobilise and embody social and economic issues surrounding fashion, garment production, the industrial revolution and the position of women during the 19th century. Beth Harris's edited essay collection *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Ashgate, 2005) provides a comprehensive survey of the various constructions and utilisations of this figure, from her appearance in fiction by Charles Dickens and Margaret Oliphant, to historically-rooted studies of needlewomen in various contexts, including the United States and Paris, and in relation to emigration and protective legislation.

The book is organised into two sections: 'Reading Out', which contains essays focusing of literary and artistic constructions of the needlewoman, and 'Writing In', containing examinations of real-life needlewomen, whose accounts often contrast with and complicate those fictional narratives through which they were made culturally visible. For example, although the needlewoman was depicted primarily as a tragic victim – Harris cites Thomas Hood's poem 'The Song of the Shirt' (1843) as 'the most widely known image of the seamstress-as-victim in this decade' (8) – several essays in the collection attest to the fact that employment as a needlewoman could also be an enabling path to financial self-sufficiency. For example, Susan Ingalls Lewis looks at self-employed needlewomen in Albany, New York, some of whom ran their own small businesses, whilst others engaged in home-based labour. Nicola Pullin examines London's dressmakers and milliners, further complicating the dominant image of the exploited needlewoman by introducing these largely overlooked middle-class businesswomen.

Patricia Zakreski's monograph *Representing Female Artistic Labour, 1848-1890: Refining Work for the Middle-Class Woman* (Ashgate, 2006) in many ways continues the project initiated by Harris's collection. Zakreski's study seeks to redefine our understanding of women's relationship to paid work during the 19th century, by revealing the ways in which women's labour in both domestic settings and the workplace challenged and redefined the 'separate spheres' ideology. Zakreski argues that by elevating the labour of the woman worker, such as the needlewoman, into the realms of art and creativity, Victorian commentators sought to 'refine' work for middle-class women. In other words, reconfiguring such labour as creative activity removed the taint of associations with the market, trade and fiscal concerns. Zakreski focuses on the professions of sewing, art, writing and acting – forging links between women's craftwork and artistic labour, and exploring the ways in which working women sought to reconcile the pressures of the public realm with the demands of the domestic sphere.

In both Zakreski's study and Harris's collection, writing and sewing become analogous crafts for creative Victorian women. For example, Jacqueline Chambers points up the parallels between 'stitching and thinking' in her chapter in Harris's volume, arguing that needlework functions as a useful metaphor for 19th-century

American women writers. Christine Bayles Kortsch explores these possibilities further in *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles and Activism* (Ashgate, 2009). Kortsch's introductory chapter theorises the parallels between 'writing in fabric' and 'working in print', arguing that the majority of 19th century women were trained to be 'dually literate in two languages – the language of cloth and the language of print' (Kortsch 4). Whether they were 'reading' and interpreting clothes, 'writing' with a needle (quite literally, in the case of the sewing samplers which aimed to teach basic literacy to young girls) or dressing their literary heroines in novels and short fiction, Kortsch suggests that sewing and writing were intrinsically linked, and both were utilised as an important form of expression by 19th-century women. Thus, as in Zakreski's study, the distinction between 'high' art and 'low' labour unravels, as Kortsch reveals how Victorian women would have viewed the embroidery of a dress and the composing of a sonnet as comparable activities.

Kortsch's study places particular emphasis of the latter half of the 19th century (1870-1900), examining the responses of women writers to key debates within dress culture and fashion, including arguments regarding the corset, dress reform, garment production (i.e. the status of the seamstress) and labour conditions. Engaging with fictional texts by earlier authors such as Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, Kortsch then turns to the work of later writers such as Olive Schreiner, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Margaret Oliphant, Sarah Grand and Gertrude Dix, arguing that for New Women writers, issues surrounding fashion were extremely pertinent, as reforms in dress became linked to the political revolutionizing of women's role and position in society. These concerns were expressed through the various dress reform movements that were active towards the end of the 19th century – including the Rational Dress movement that sought to eradicate a Victorian staple – the corset – and the Aesthetic Dress movement, which aimed to turn clothing into art.

The Art of Dress: Healthy, Rational and Aesthetic Dress Reform Movements

The corset was perhaps the most controversial item in the 19th-century closet. Mid and late

19th-century debates about dress and fashion tended to coalesce around this item, as corsets were laced increasingly tightly in the 1870 s, due to the fashion for narrowed skirts and bustles (as opposed to the earlier crinoline), meaning that stays must be laced ever more closely in order to achieve the fashionable, small-waisted silhouette.³ This resulted in a number of well-documented health complications for women, including breathing difficulties and damage to the internal organs. Dress reformers argued that this fashionable 'ideal' was in reality both ugly and dangerous, and a new beauty ideal needed to be introduced. This alternative beauty ideal was often based on classical statuary; an 'antique' waist,

such as that seen on the Venus de Milo, being viewed as a more ‘natural’ shape for 19th-century women.

Of course, these Healthy or Rational Dress movements were by no means uniform in either their aims or their organisation. Patricia A. Cunningham’s study *Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health and Art* (Kent State University Press, 2003) provides a comprehensive introduction to the different manifestations of dress reform movements across England, America and Europe, exercised, as the title suggests, by a variety of concerns related to politics, health, hygiene and aesthetics. Cunningham’s richly illustrated study also features a chapter on another highly controversial garment. In ‘Trousers: The Rational Alternative to Skirts’, Cunningham surveys the range of ‘bifurcated’ garments, split skirts or knickerbockers promoted by 19th-century dress reformers, and documents the (usually adverse) reactions to those who wore these garments (such as the American reformers Elizabeth Smith Miller and Elizabeth Cady Stanton).

But the Healthy and Rational Dress movement was just one aspect of dress reform in the late 19th century. Another motivation for dress reform, as mentioned above, was primarily aesthetic. Members of the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements, for example, felt that the fashionable dress of their day was unappealing to the eye and worked against the natural contours of the body, creating a jarring or distorting effect on the figure. Members of such Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic circles advocated instead a return to garments that were flowed, draped and ruched elegantly over the human form. In reimagining the dress of their day, they were inspired by the costume of past eras, such as the Ancient Greek chiton or toga, or the medieval smock dress with puffed, leg-of-mutton sleeves. Such dresses can be seen in paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Lord Frederic Leighton.

In 2011, the Victoria and Albert Museum showcased stunning examples of aesthetic dress at ‘The Cult of Beauty’ exhibition. These gowns were typically sold by either Liberty’s of Regent Street or Morris and Co., founded by the Pre-Raphaelite artist, designer and poet William Morris (both stores opened in 1875).⁴ The exhibition book, *The Cult of Beauty: The Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900* (Eds. Stephen Calloway and Lynn Ferderle Orr, V&A Publishing, 2011) is a particularly useful introduction to the Aesthetic movement and contains chapters on ‘Aesthetic Textiles’ and ‘Women’s Dress’. Aesthetic dress for women married artistic and political concerns, embodying and advertising women’s allegiance to radical artistic circles such as the Pre-Raphaelite group or the Aesthetic movement. In *Dressed as in a Painting: Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2013), Kimberley Wahl outlines the origins and motivations underlying artistic dress, before turning to look at the specific examples of James McNeill Whistler and the Grosvenor Gallery, an important ‘climate and context’ for artistic dressing. Though female aesthetic dress was often represented through paintings by male artists, Wahl places women at the centre of her study, demonstrating how Aesthetic dress

signified for many women, a mode of self-expression and creativity, and was an important manifestation of their involvement in the wider Aesthetic movement.

Wahl's book is actually part of a larger series from University of New Hampshire Press entitled 'Becoming Modern/Reading Dress' (a sub-series of 'Becoming Modern: New Nineteenth-Century Studies'). Another title in the series, the essay collection *Cultures of Femininity in Modern Fashion* (Eds. Ilya Parkins and Elizabeth M. Sheehan, 2011) makes an important contribution to all of the issues I have set out regarding fashion and dress culture, with wide-ranging chapters focussing on Sapphic architecture, the tea gown, the interwar second-hand clothing trade, nursing uniforms and issues of race and fashion. As Parkins and Sheehan's volume proves, fashion played an undeniably central role in shaping both modernity and female identity. The sheer diversity of this collection I think points to the future avenues of research into dress cultures and modernity.

Conclusion

In this article, I have aimed to give a general sense of the current debates surrounding 19th-century fashion and dress culture. As I hope I have shown, this area of research is opening up in a number of engaging ways, proving that fashion is by no means a shallow or trivial topic, but carries a number of revealing cultural resonances in the 19th century. In this final section, I will suggest a few areas in which critical research could be productively expanded. Whilst a considerable amount of work focuses on dress, work on jewellery has been slightly less abundant – with the notable exceptions of Charlotte Gere and Judy Rudoe's *Jewellery in the Age of Queen Victoria: A Mirror to the World* (British Museum Press, 2010), which aims to read the 19th century through its jewellery, and Jean Arnold's *Victorian Jewelry, Identity and the Novel* (Ashgate, 2011), which looks at the role and significance of jewellery in novels by Thackeray, Collins, Eliot and Trollope.⁵

Another potentially fruitful area for new scholarship is that of male dress. Though there are several chapters dedicated to Oscar Wilde's style of Aesthetic dress, there seems to be a dearth of work on more conventional or mainstream modes of dress for men during the 19th century as a whole. Perhaps this is due to the fact that, for the bulk of the century, such matters were not seen as central concerns for men as they were for women. Nonetheless, this should not deter us from interrogating the significance of male dress and self-fashioning. Again, some work in this area has already begun: Brent Shannon's *The Cut of His Coat: Men, Dress, and Consumer Culture in Britain, 1860-1914* (Ohio University Press, 2006) examines how Victorian men's participation in consumer culture redefined masculinity in the late-19th century; Ruth Livesey looks at Edward Carpenter and George Bernard Shaw's fixation with Jaeger woollens in her monograph *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880-1914* (Oxford

University Press, 2007) and, more recently, Clare Rose examined the Making, Selling and Wearing Boys' Clothing in Late Victorian England (Ashgate, 2010).

Another area that may benefit from expansion is that of working-class dress. Many of the studies mentioned above deal with high fashion, or at least aspirational modes of dress aimed at middle-class consumers. Fortunately, the excellent series *Clothing, Society and Culture in Nineteenth Century England* edited by Clare Rose, Katrina Honeyman and Vivienne Richmond (Pickering and Chatto, 2010) recognises the increased scholarly interest in dress, and provides a number of useful source materials about dress-making, prices, advertising, dress reform, and working-class dress. The series is divided into three volumes: *Buying and Selling Clothes*; *Abuses and Reforms* and *Working-Class Dress* – which deals, among other things, with needlework teaching, ready-made clothes, clothing charities and servants' dress.

An increasing number of studies are dedicated to examining the significance of clothing in the works of a single author. Notable examples include Simon Gatrell's *Thomas Hardy Writing Dress* (Peter Lang, 2011), Katherine Joslin, *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* (2009) and Daneen Wardrop, *Emily Dickinson and the Labor of Clothing* (2009) – the final two come from the University of New Hampshire Series mentioned above. However, with the exception of the latter study, scholarship tends to focus on novelists rather than poets. The significance of dress within the novel now seems to be acknowledged, but less work has been undertaken on dress within poetry. This, however, is in the process of being rectified. Most recently, Ana Parejo Vellido and I have both published work on the importance of dress culture within the lives and work of the fin-de-siècle poets Michael Field (Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper). More work on fashion and poetry – both in terms of what poets themselves wore, the symbolism of dress within poetry, and the linking of poetic form with craft techniques – would certainly be welcome.

Taking work on 19th-century dress culture as a whole, two dominant trends seem to be emerging: firstly, studies that bring a social and cultural history of dress into dialogue with literature; secondly, studies that view fabric, craft and needlework as a metaphor for writing itself. This latter trend in turn interrogates and unsettles fixed notions of authorship or 'artistry' and exposes the gendered basis for such bias in the 19th century. Looking forward to the next 10 years of work in this area, Talia Schaffer's *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford University Press, 2011) gives some indication of where the new materialist turn might lead us. Schaffer's notion of the 'craft paradigm' provides a valuable tool for re-viewing 19th-century novels as handicraft objects, setting literature firmly within the contexts of industrialization, economics and material culture, with readings informed by the theoretical perspectives of 'thing theory'. Deborah Wynne's forthcoming work on textile manufacture in literature and contemporary costume drama also points to exciting new directions in this area of scholarship.

I hope this article has demonstrated the exciting diversity of work in dress and fashion of the 19th century. That such topics are still relevant within the literary world today has recently been demonstrated by newspaper articles, such as The Guardian's 'From bustiers to swishy trousers: how important is clothing in literature?' [<http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/sep/09/clothing-in-literature-margaret-atwood>]. This article was instigated by Margaret Atwood, who recently said she spent considerable amounts of time researching clothing for her novels. Elsewhere, Atwood's comments provoked the Los Angeles Times to ask 'Are ladies of literature secret clotheshorses?' [<http://www.latimes.com/books/jacketcopy/la-et-jc-ladies-literature-clotheshorses-20130910,0,2184443.story>] – again, invoking the presumption that literature and fashion are mutually exclusive concerns. The title implies that an intellectual woman should be 'guilty' of her interest in fashion, as it reveals her to be, in reality, just another vapid 'clotheshorse'. Thankfully, contemporary women writers and artists are shortly to be overturning such presumptions, via a new book project entitled *Women in Clothes*. Edited by Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits and Leanne Shapton, *Women in Clothes* will feature interviews with wide range of artists and writers, as well as 'crowd-sourced' contributions garnered from their website [www.womeninclothes.com]. Aiming to 'explore the range of motives that inform how women present themselves, and what style means', hopefully this book, along with the rich contributions of the academic work cited above, will go some way to revealing how the questions and issues that engaged 19th-century readers and writers are still felt and experienced today.

Notes

¹ This 'materialist turn' was recently discussed at the 'Victorian Things' conference at Oxford Brookes in September 2012.

² The first department store in the world was in fact Bainbridge's in Newcastle, which opened in 1838 and became a Department store in 1849. It is now a John Lewis store.

3

For a general history of the corset, see Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (Yale University Press, 2003).

4

One of the most iconic women to wear such aesthetic gowns was Jane Morris, the wife of William Morris and the lover of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. For a recent study of Jane Morris, see Wendy Parkins, *Jane Morris: The Burden of History* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

5 Claire Phillips also contributes a short section on aesthetic jewellery to *The Cult of Beauty*.

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