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In this dissertation I argue that by using, adhering to, or subverting cultural conventions and tacit sumptuary laws, heroines of English domestic novels take advantage of society's scopic nature, exploiting the gaze in order to control and author their own identity, achieving agency and subjectivity through self-fashioning. The connection between dress and domesticity is most visible in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Domesticity—the ideology that idealized and promoted the home as the center of happiness and society (yet also separated from society)—defined the middle-class woman of this era. Domesticity is often discussed in terms of a highly surveilled space, and the ideal woman exists within that space. However, domestic novels often focus on women who do not fit in that space. Marginalized figures who are excluded from the ideal domestic scene for a variety of reasons—class, occupation, or suspect family ties—must find alternative means of accessing a secure social position. This alternative is often dress—they wear the clothes to secure the identity. The novels that I examine in this dissertation—Richardson's *Pamela*, Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Brontë's *Villette*, and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*—all describe heroines who are marginalized and use dress to manipulate their identity.

I argue that dress is a crucial component of language and performance, and agency is achieved through what I call sartorial literacy. In this paradigm, the gaze is part of a mutually discursive act, in which the female performer authors a text in clothing that is read by her audience or viewer; the heroine must have an understanding of the identity

that the costume will communicate and how it will be read. This often leads to a paradox in which a heroine may appear to make herself an object of the gaze, to conform to social convention, but in doing so, may be subverting those conventions by achieving personal desire.

FASHIONING FEMININITIES: SARTORIAL LITERACY IN ENGLISH DOMESTIC FICTION, 1740-1853

by

Stephanie Robinson Womick

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Approved by

____
Committee Chair

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To my parents, who taught me to chase after knowledge, and to my husband, who has joined me in the pursuit.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

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Date of Final Oral Examination

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

LIST OF FIGURES vi

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. THE POOR HONEST DRESS: THE MALE FASHION EDITOR IN SAMUEL RICHARDSON'S *PAMELA* 18

III. THE CLOSE BONNET: SARTORIAL ORDER AND SUBJECTIVITY IN JANE AUSTEN'S *MANSFIELD PARK* 50

IV. THE CLOAK AND HOOD OF HODDEN GRAY: DRESS AND DISGUISE IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *VILLETTE* 88

V. THE GREEN SILK PURSE AND LITTLE RAWDON'S SHIRT: FASHIONABLE PROPS OF DOMESTICITY IN WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY'S *VANITY FAIR* 127

VI. CONCLUSION 164

BIBLIOGRAPHY 172

LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1. Dawe, Phillip. *Soaping Linen*. after Henry Robert Morland. *A Lady's Maid Soaping Linen*. 1769. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London 24

Figure 2. Highmore Joseph. *Pamela and Mr. B in the Summer House*. 1743-44. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge 27

Figure 3. after Vigee-Lebrun, E.L. *Marie-Antoinette*. 1783. Wolfsgarten Castle, Germany 59

Figure 4. *London Fashions for July*. *Lady's Monthly Museum, or, Polite repository of amusement and instruction* 17 (1814): 52 *British Periodicals*. *ProQuest*. Web. 68

Figure 5. Geefs, Fanny. *La vie d'une femme*. 1842. 102

Figure 6. Dulac, Edmund. *Paulina Sitting at Mrs. Bretton's Feet*. 1905. © The Brontë Society 105

Figure 7. Redgrave, Richard. *The Governess*, 1844. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London 110

Figure 8. Cruikshank, George. *A Bazaar*. 1816. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London 132

Figure 9. Thackeray, W.M.. *Virtue Rewarded; A Booth at Vanity Fair*. 1861. Image scanned by Gerald Ajam. *The Victorian Web* 134

Figure 10. Thackeray, W.M. *Becky's Second Appearance in the Character of Clytemnestra*. 1861. Image scanned by Gerald Ajam. *The Victorian Web* 151

Figure 11. Thackeray, W.M.. Untitled. 1861. Image scanned by Gerald Ajam. *The Victorian Web*....................158

Figure 12. Witherington, William Frederick. *The Hop Garland*. 1834. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London 164

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> Clothes make the man: naked people have little or no influence on society. ~Mark Twain

> It is an interesting question how far men would retain their relative rank if they were divested of their clothes. ~Henry David Thoreau

> Know, first, who you are; and then adorn yourself accordingly. ~Epictetus

Literary scholars seem to have taken at face value Jane Austen's dictum: "Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction."[1] Although popular culture embraces fashion as a compelling topic, fashion in fiction has been left largely unexplored as a means of considering approaches to identity, agency, and historical context. Taking Austen's statement as ironic—she does, after all, spend a great deal of time discussing her heroines' muslins and jackonets—I argue in this dissertation that she and other nineteenth-century novelists prove fashion to be anything but frivolous.

While scholarship on dress history is abundant, with writers like Anne Buck and Penelope Byrde making significant contributions to studies of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fashion, few literary critics have chosen to explore the connections between dress and text. Among those who have made forays into this subject, Jennie Batchelor's work in *Dress, Distress, and Desire: Clothing the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* most clearly demarcates the ties between dress as cultural fetish, signifier of

self, and means of communication within society. Other critics who make connections between dress and literature include Catherine Spooner and Sara T. Berenstein, both of whom consider the meaning of clothing in Brontë's *Villette*. Spooner's work is an interdisciplinary study of the gothic, and her brief intervention on the subject of Lucy Snowe and fashion is helpful in complicating the relationship between Lucy's clothed body and her subjective self. Bernstein's article, "'In This Same Gown of Shadow': Functions of Fashion in *Villette*," draws on Spooner's work, but her purpose is to examine the relationship, not merely of body and dress, but of fashion and the novel. She argues that dress and text function as complementary narratives.

While discussions of literary dress have been limited, they are part of a broader critical conversation that is often labeled "material culture." This critical lens is "concerned with interactions between subjects and objects and the meanings these interactions generate," as Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan explain in the Introduction to *Women and Material Culture, 1660-1830*. In this approach to literature, critics examine the relationship between characters and their possessions, the minutiae of bourgeois eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life. For example, in his chapter "Longing for Sleeve Buttons," Andrew H. Miller argues that a Victorian obsession with things (clothes among them) results in a curious relationship in which individuals do not own things so much as they are owned by them. Objects objectify their owners, serving not as tools but as markers of status and are only valuable insofar as they are exchangeable, pointing to the commodification of the individual. As Erin Mackie warns, the individual who defined "his or her sexual, social, and ethical identity through the selection of goods risked a kind

of psychic colonization by the commodity" (47). This attitude is prevalent among those critics who discuss cultural products and their connection to the individual and their society.

Thus, there is a small discussion on dress in literature within the context of a larger discussion of material culture in literature. My dissertation offers another aspect to the discussion. While I acknowledge the objectifying nature of material objects, my study of dress reverses the balance of power by arguing that this objectification may, ironically, be a means of granting subjectivity.[2] Throughout this dissertation, I use the term subjectivity to refer to the position of socially-recognizable desiring individual as opposed to the powerless position of object. I argue that this position is "achievable" in that characters employ strategies to assert an individual identity and pursue personal desires in the face of an objectifying impulse on the part of their society. To support this argument, I expand on the ideas that Batchelor, Spooner, and Bernstein have contributed to the study of dress and literature by articulating a theoretical framework in which objectifying fashion may be a means of gaining subjectivity for female characters who are in marginalized positions within eighteenth- and nineteenth century society.

Feminist scholars have laid a firm groundwork for discussions of power, identity, and subjectivity, and I draw on the theories they have developed in order to articulate my position. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is, of course, vital to a discussion of figures who potentially author identity through their performance of dress. Butler argues that gender (or identity) is not a fixed, preexisting category, but rather a category created by social norms and reinforced by the individual who performs that

category. In other words, one is not one's gender, one does one's gender. In "Critically Queer," Butler argues that

> the misapprehension of gender performativity is this: that gender is a choice, or that gender is a role, or that gender is a construction that one puts on, as one puts on clothing in the morning, that there is a 'one' who is prior to this gender, a one who goes to the wardrobe of gender and decides with deliberation which gender it will *be* today. (21) (emphasis mine).

She argues that we cannot become our gender because gender categories always exist before subjects, and, in fact, gender undoes our subjectivity: "Or does it turn out that the 'I' who ought to be bearing its gender is undone by being a gender, that gender is always coming from a source that is elsewhere and directed toward something that is beyond me, constituted in a sociality that I do not fully author?" (*Undoing Gender* 16).

Like Butler's, my work does not focus solely on gender and sexuality as identity markers.[3] Rather, I investigate a variety of categories—class, occupation, types of femininity—that are located within a specific cultural narrative. I argue that these categories may be a choice, a role, a construction that is "put on, as one puts on clothing in the morning"—almost literally. Although I agree with Butler that these categories are "outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author" (*Undoing Gender* 1), I am interesting in examining how an individual in her performance or iteration of that category may own, and therefore author, the socially recognizable subject position that the performance implies. In this dissertation, I argue that when characters successfully claim and manipulate social categories, they are able to create an identity

that might otherwise have been unavailable to them. In other words, authoring or performing one's identity through dress is a means of achieving agency.

Paradoxically, dressing to achieve agency may appear to be objectifying. How can a female character perform and dress for a socially-constructed version of femininity without becoming a mere stereotype, a powerless object of the gaze? Here, I rely on a concept developed by Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which is Not One*.[4] In discussing feminine subordination, she contrasts two approaches to socially-constructed feminine ideals. The first she calls masquerade: a woman acts out "an alienated or false version of femininity" that is based on male desire that objectifies her and undermines her subjectivity (220). I argue that masquerade is based on a lack of agency—the woman who enacts this version of femininity is either unaware of its oppressive nature or she is in some way powerless to do otherwise.

The second approach that Irigaray describes is mimicry:

> An interim strategy for dealing with the realm of discourse (where the speaking subject is posited as masculine), in which the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within this discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her. (220)

My dissertation articulates a theory of performance that demonstrates how dress is part of an act in which the female "deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her," although the act does not always expose her exploitation (unless it is to the reader).

Butler also argues for a similarly paradoxical methodology of social change by claiming that it is the very construction of gender that opens up the possibility of agency:

> The critical task is, rather, to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm the local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that constitute identity and, therefore, present the immanent possibility of contesting them. (*Gender Trouble* 201)

She identifies drag as a possible location "to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (203). Butler's "radical proliferation," like Irigaray's "deliberate assumption," undoes gender categories by exposing them. While recognizing in literature moments in which these acts of proliferation and assumption work to destabilize identity categories, I do not argue that they are performed for the purpose of exposing exploitation and enacting social change. Instead, the female character is consciously subverting the rules of her society in order to achieve greater personal freedom. While such performances interrogate the nature of identity categories, I argue that individual characters are able to achieve agency and power by consciously manipulating the markers of identity that are specific to their cultural position, not by exposing and undermining the very nature of gender and class categories. Instead, it is this deliberate act of self-objectification that, paradoxically, grants subjectivity.

While Butler's and Irigaray's work does not extensively deal with dress, I see the use of clothing as the most convenient and accessible way for novelists to represent female characters authoring an identity for themselves. Roland Barthes' *The Fashion System* points out the similarities between fashion and language, and, drawing on this comparison, I argue that dress is a medium in which meaning is created. Success, however, depends on correctly reading the social/sexual context of dress, so that the

dress/text is correctly read by viewers, and the gaze of others is controlled. Work concerning the gaze by critics such as Laura Mulvey will be essential to my reading of these novels, as each heroine recognizes her situation as object of the gaze, representing, as Mulvey terms it, "to-be-looked-at-ness." When each character recognizes that this gaze may be subverted and reversed, agency and power are within reach. Each character's success lies in her ability to look at her society and attain a degree of social literacy that will enable her effectively to author the text of her appearance, therefore maintaining control of the manner in which she is made the object of the gaze. While Mulvey argues that women are the object of the gaze, demeaned and restricted by the masculine observer, I contend that by becoming observers as well, women are able to perform their identity in such a way that their position as object is, at least in part, on their own terms. Similarly, Mulvey's later work in *Fetishism and Curiosity* locates the fetish within both Freudian and Marxist frameworks, positioning the female object as psychoanalytic phantasmagoria and economic commodity. My reading returns power to these female characters who, to various extents, control their commodification and fetishization.

The novels that I will use in this examination include Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, and William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Each of these novels is an example of domestic fiction, as defined by Nancy Armstrong in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*: the domestic arena is the center of interest, and a middle-class female character achieves power "over British culture through her dominance over all those objects and practices we associate

with private life" (Armstrong 3). In each text, the heroine's struggle is within the domestic realm, dealing with the marriage market and the sexual contract. In each novel, however, the protagonist is also socially unstable: marginalized figures like Fanny Price and Lucy Snowe, whose social standings are at times inscrutable, or the socially mobile like Pamela and Becky Sharp, who exchange one class for another. In each case, class is tied to the sexual contract, and my examination will explore how this connection affects the character's attempts to create agency and identity for themselves. Additionally, this series of novels shows a progression in the agency and methods of the heroines, ranging from Pamela Andrews's naive attempts to claim identity through dress, to Fanny Price's silent refusal to be categorized through dress and social custom, to Lucy Snowe's more consciously subversive voyeurism, and finally to Becky Sharp's satiric manipulations of society. The study will be bookended by *Pamela*, a conduct book disguised as a novel, and *Vanity Fair*, a satire of society that at times masquerades as conduct book, a neat reversal within the space of a century.

Although my dissertation primarily focuses on the empowering uses of clothing in authoring an identity, I begin the study with an account of a failure. The first chapter, "The Poor Honest Dress: The Male Fashion Editor in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*," focuses on the title character's attempts to fashion an identity both through the letters she writes, which make up the ostensible text of the work, and through her clothing. *Pamela* is an important starting point for this dissertation because it most clearly illustrates the concept of sartorial literacy; although Pamela realizes that she must establish a firm identity and that this will be most easily achieved through dress, her attempts are failures.

Because she is unfamiliar with her own culture's common social and sartorial narratives, her attempts at creating an identity are bungled and misread. For this reason, she is ultimately unable to claim the power that comes from authoring identity, and falls victim to the controlling influence exerted both by Mr. B and even Richardson himself, Pamela's ostensible "editor."

Pamela, the story of a lady's maid who eventually becomes the wife of her rakish master, is largely concerned with class and status, and Pamela's identity through dress is largely reflected in her class identity. Richardson's work may be read as a progressive novel, one that imagines a society in which class boundaries are easily crossed. His character's virtue is rewarded with her marriage into the aristocracy. Pamela's agency as an upper-class woman is questionable, however, when readers consider the exploitation of both her wardrobe and her narrative by the male editors, Mr. B and Richardson himself.

The identities that Pamela attempts to author through her writing and through her costume intersect when she sews her letters into her petticoat, becoming literally dressed in text. Nancy Armstrong identifies the moment that Mr. B threatens to strip Pamela to find the letters as the most erotic in the book, the moment when Pamela's body has been transformed into language. I read the scene differently, focusing on Pamela's momentary success in finding a medium in which her identity may no longer be misrepresented. I conclude that while Pamela's authorship in both dress and text allow her to imagine herself as outside the gendered and classed hierarchy of eighteenth-century power struggles, she ultimately loses that agency. With her marriage to Mr. B, she once again

becomes fixed in that hierarchy, and her authorship becomes subject to her husband, who both editorializes her story to reflect his own chosen image and identity and orders her wardrobe to reflect her new status. Just as Richardson is ostensibly editing the letters that Pamela wrote to create the text of the novel, Mr. B edits her identity through her wardrobe and her narrative, firmly fixing it within a conventional model of eighteenth-century society.

Like Pamela, Jane Austen's Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* is a marginalized individual in a precarious social position who chooses virtue as her primary identity marker. Although not the victim of attempted rape, Fanny's dilemma still centers on the sexual exchange and the necessity of fashioning a legible identity through clothing. Fanny, however, has a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of sartorial literacy, and ultimately succeeds where Pamela fails because she is able to author and claim an identity that corresponds to contemporary social narratives. In Fanny's case, she achieves this by both embracing and redefining the concept of propriety. In this chapter, "The Close Bonnet: Sartorial Order and Subjectivity in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*," I focus on dress as a marker of boundaries within the highly ordered world of Mansfield Park, a fictional microcosm of early nineteenth-century society. Fanny's ambiguous social position, together with her "quiet" wardrobe, enables her to attain agency and a position of power. Unlike Pamela, Fanny is sartorially literate and uses this literacy to enact a performance of propriety that allows her to overcome a tenuous and liminal position in the wealthy Bertram family.

My reading of Fanny counters typical critical views, which condemn her as weak and priggish. On the contrary, I argue that Fanny is considerably more rebellious than her high-spirited canonical sisters, Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse. Fanny is faced with two diverging methodologies of order: the first, promoted by the authoritarian Sir Thomas, is one of enforced order, designed to keep both the slaves on his plantations and his daughters at home in proper submission.[5] The other methodology, practiced most clearly by the Crawfords, is one that refuses to recognize boundaries of any kind. They acquiesce to surface propriety only and are ruled primarily by personal desire. Fanny resists both of these understandings of order and insists on a third way. She embraces boundaries, both social and personal. She will uphold patriarchal right, but not at the expense of her freedom to marry for love. Fanny's methodology, the one upheld by the narrative as best and most appropriate, is both median and middle class.

Because of her liminal position in society and in her family and because of her intentions to resist the controlling influences of the Bertrams and the Crawfords, Fanny's sartorial choices are extremely important. She has no true social position, educated above her birth, but not the equal of her adoptive family, so she, ironically, has more freedom to choose her place within the social hierarchy, and the clothes she wears are her signal to communicate this position. Thus, it is Fanny's own choice to take on the dress and position of middle-class propriety. By embracing this propriety, Fanny also gains the advantage of social invisibility. Her costume is unremarkable and "quiet," and this allows her the additional freedom to watch and observe the others, a crucial component in her successful ability to read both moral behavior and sartorial context. As I read the

novel in terms of dress and identity, Fanny and Austen are shown to be doing something quite complex—paradoxically rebelling by embracing propriety.

In my third chapter, "The Cloak and Hood of Hodden Gray: Dress and Disguise in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," my focus shifts from a character who embraces boundaries to one who manipulates boundaries. In Brontë's novel, issues of readership are paramount, and the text chronicles various methods of narration and reading. Lucy Snowe's unreliable narrative voice in *Villette* is often considered by critics to be a means of creating identity by evading the confines of class, gender, or genre. Alternative narratives in the text, however, provide equal means of evading the boundaries designated by Victorian society. I argue that Lucy creates a parallel narrative in her clothing, authoring a text that allows her to remain uncategorized and therefore unconfined. In order to author this disguising wardrobe, Lucy must be an adept reader of both dress and character, and while she focuses on and judges the other characters in the novel as a means of hiding within her own narrative, she also demonstrates the details that allow her to author her own sartorial subjectivity. While much critical energy has been expended on deciphering the perplexing narrative in *Villette*, my examination of the alternative narrative offered by the use of dress illuminates Brontë's nuanced psychological text that explores the conventional categories of Victorian femininity and strategies for circumventing them.

Like Fanny, Lucy is also concerned with boundaries, or, more specifically, with categories. *Villette* catalogs, though Lucy's eyes, various types of femininity within the Victorian social landscape and represents the boundaries of these categories through

dress. Thus, Lucy's position as voyeur in a Foucauldian paradigm of surveillance empowers her to place the people she encounters into their proper categories while remaining outside the margins of those categories herself because of the way in which she uses dress to perform her own identity. This allows for the paradox of subjectivity via objectification: although dressing to be seen might categorize one as an object (the object of the gaze, at least) authoring that text in dress allows for subjectivity. This is most easily accomplished because dress is at once a firmly fixed and extremely fluid medium, a paradox enabled by the strict categorization within the Victorian sartorial hierarchy.

I will focus on episodes in which dress is analyzed, especially in relation to ways in which it forms femininity. Lucy, as the first person narrator, often describes and sometimes judges the costumes of other women, such as Polly or Ginevra, and I will examine and compare these two as different readings of femininity. Even more important, however, are episodes in which Lucy considers her own costume and uses it to create and assert identity and agency. Ultimately, the novel may be read as the heroine's attempts to fashion her own identity through her appearance in a world of watchers, making a paradoxical bid for subjectivity via objectivity and pursuing autonomy sartorially as well as socially.

Each chapter in this dissertation represents characters of increasing sartorial literacy and sophistication, and in the final chapter, "The Green Silk Purse and Little Rawdon's Shirt: Fashionable Props of Domesticity in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*," I examine a character whose sartorial sensibility is represented as almost

pure performance. Thackeray presents the paradigm of Vanity Fair as both a marketplace and a stage. By juxtaposing commodity and performance, his satire makes clear the connection between the two for women on the marriage market in Victorian society. Dress, then, becomes an ideally situated motif to explore these two arenas, as a dress is both a marketable item for exchange and a crucial prop in a performance.

Despite the background of the Napoleonic war, the novel is truly centered on the domestic realm, and it is marriage and domesticity that are the forefront for Thackeray's exploration. Thus, by consciously performing and subverting those markers of ideal domesticity, a woman could use them to her own benefit, as Becky does, employing those female accomplishments as a small arsenal in her plans to seduce, entrap, and manipulate. In this paradigm, fashion is a mere prop used to create a domestic tableau. The irony is that Amelia is ostensibly closer to the Victorian conventional ideal, but her abilities to employ the arts she has received through her education pale in comparison with Becky's, and Becky is clearly not the "Angel in the House." Thus, in Irigaray's terms, Amelia may be read as enacting masquerade; she is being exploited by her own investment in a system that fixes her as male desire situates her. Becky, on the other hand, performs mimicry; she exploits male desire as a tool of manipulation.

I argue that by inverting these characters and characteristics, Thackeray is reimagining female dress, domesticity, and accomplishments as elements in a performance that allow for female power and subjectivity, despite the fact that he approves of neither figure—after all, his is a novel without a hero (or a heroine). This subversion, however, is only possible when the woman in question recognizes the value

of these skills in the sexual exchange. In effect, those markers of female virtue may be used as tools of seduction. This performance is set off by the notion of performance in the novel as a whole: the Becky puppet and Amelia doll are already set upon the stage of Vanity Fair, and this domestic performance is one facet of that theatrical paradigm.

The conclusion explores possible implications of this dissertation. First, situating discussions of these novels in the sartorial framework enables a more nuanced and textured understanding of the historical context, which, in turn, lends itself to a more resonant reading of the texts. Secondly, I examine well-established feminist theories of agency and identity from a new angle, reimagining possible power-relations by privileging an often-derided "feminine" obsession—dress. My argument makes clear that this "frivolous distinction" can be a powerful tool for achieving agency when it is coupled with discernment and literacy—an understanding of contextualized social narratives. Finally, my work considers the complexities of representation—the novel is a representation of the self-representation of characters. These mirrored paradigms are threaded through by the issue of dress, which forms a type of historical semiotics allowing authors to imbue instances of fashion in the novel with personally symbolic and also culturally resonant meaning.

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[1] *Northanger Abbey*, pg. 52

[2] Throughout this dissertation, I use the term subjectivity to refer to the position of socially-recognizable desiring individual as opposed to the powerless position of object. I argue that this position is "achievable" in that characters employ strategies to assert an

individual identity and pursue personal desires in the face of an objectifying impulse on the part of their society.

[3] Butler argues that gender is socially constructed and that in order to be "recognized" by society and thus be "socially viable," individuals must submit to coercive norms. If you do not want to be recognized by a certain set of norms, then you must escape those norms. This can be problematic: "I may feel that without some recognizability I cannot live. But I may also feel that the terms by which I am recognized make life unlivable" (4). Butler applies this mostly to issues of transgender, transsex, and intersex—individuals that may not be "recognized" by social norms, unless they conform to certain conditions—surgery, submission to pathologizing diagnoses, etc. Solutions are also complicated—"choosing" one's gender or sex is problematic because the choice is made from among norms that are already pre-existing—one is dependent on the "outside" for support of the identity that they claim. Thus, the most important aspect of queer theory is the opposition to "unwanted legislation of identity"—identity markers are not prerequisites for political participation (7).

[4] Clearly, there are difficulties in juxtaposing Butler's theories with Irigaray's. Butler denies the existence of categories such as feminine or masculine except as social markers created by adherence to oppressive and exclusionary juridical powers. On the other hand, Irigaray seems to indicate that there is a "real" version of femininity, if masquerade involves performing an "alienated or false version of femininity."

[5] The narrative clearly condemns this method as ineffectual: there are suggestions of a slave uprising on Sir Thomas's Antiguan plantations, and both Maria and Julia Bertram make rebellious and, to varying degrees, disastrous choices at the end of the novel.

CHAPTER II

THE POOR HONEST DRESS: THE MALE FASHION EDITOR IN SAMUEL RICHARDSON'S *PAMELA*

Critics have long hailed Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding as the fathers of the novel, and Richardson's novel *Pamela* is certainly the first novel to create a "media event," spawning parodies, spin-offs, fans, and marketable commodities (*Pamela*-themed playing cards, anyone?). However, despite the originality of the text, *Pamela* did not entirely spring, Athena-like, from the head of Richardson/Zeus. As William Warner and John Richetti have pointed out, Richardson was reimagining, rewriting, and reforming the popular amatory fiction that both shocked and intrigued audiences in the early eighteenth century. More separates amatory fiction by writers like Eliza Haywood and the novels of Samuel Richardson than mere morality; as Richetti argues, the difference in the representation of the social realm and of characters as individuals in a socio-historical context marks the strongest contrast between the two modes of fiction (84). While a character like Haywood's Fantomina is almost outside any social referent, a featureless body that masquerades in the guise of a variety of essentialist stereotypical roles[6], Pamela is defined by her place in society, and she makes self-conscious attempts to represent herself as a subjective individual. By articulating this distinction, Richetti attempts to answer Warner's question: "If from a later historical vantage point it is clear that 1740 is when the novel in Britain begins to be a cultural icon worth fighting to define, why does this particular cultural struggle begin then and there?" (176). I agree with Richetti that the

novel begins here because this is the moment at which the individual becomes more important than the type.[7] I would extend the argument by focusing on how Richardson uses dress to represent ways in which an individual might attempt to establish subjectivity. I would also argue, however, that these attempts by his heroine, Pamela, are not entirely successful.

The convergence of the novel, individual subjectivity, and dress is a topic explored in a number of contexts in the eighteenth century. In March of 1737, an article in the *London Magazine* suggested that “Dress should be properly adapted to the Person, as in Writing, the Style must by suited to the Subject” (129). This argument draws a clear connection between the written text and the covered body: both convey to the reader or viewer a sense of a self-formed identity. As the passage indicates, however, both dress and writing are adaptable; they are malleable and mutable mediums. This line of reasoning seems to anticipate current theories of identity. Judith Butler, for example, argues that gender as an identity category is not essential, not an internal feature of the self, but is actually something anticipated and produced through certain bodily actions—like dressing. In Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, the connection between Pamela’s clothes and her letters, the ostensible text of the novel, reveals the author’s concern for how Pamela articulates her sense of self. If, as Butler maintains, the body is a blank page on which individuals inscribe cultural values, then dress is the language of that inscription. Pamela attempts to fashion a representation of herself both in dress and in writing. Despite a brief moment of success, the male editors ultimately control both of these

media. While Richardson's position of editor is both well-established by the text and well-examined by critics, Mr. B's role as fashion and textual critic deserves illumination.

In this chapter, I will examine Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* as an early example of a novel in which dress marks identity and subjectivity. *Pamela* is an important place to begin this study of sartorial literacy because she most clearly demonstrates the high stakes involved—her social position is most vulnerable and her success most dependent on a highly nuanced understanding of cultural narratives imbedded in clothing. Pamela uses her wardrobe to create agency and a sense of self in the face of her employer's unwanted sexual advances, but, unlike the heroines I will examine later in this dissertation, Pamela's character is unique in that she ultimately fails to maintain that agency and self-authored identity. Although she yearns for her "poor honest dress" as a means of protection against her employer's attempted seduction and successful abduction, Pamela lacks the sartorial sophistication to put such an item to the use that she intends (25). I argue that Pamela fails in her aims because she cannot correctly read the social context of her wardrobe. To support this claim, I will examine the historical context of the novel concerning fashion and its role as a discursive identity marker. I will demonstrate that although Pamela initially claims an identity for herself through clothing and her narrative, that identity is soon commandeered by Mr. B, who ruthlessly edits both her wardrobe and her story, fixing her within a tightly constrained social hierarchy.

Many critics have remarked favorably on the manner in which Pamela is able to assert herself through her writing. Nancy Armstrong, notably, reads Richardson's work in *Pamela* as a challenge to the social order (121). By promoting the voice of a lower-

class servant, Richardson is critiquing class-conscious boundaries that would have prohibited the marriage between Pamela and her master, Mr. B. Drawing on Armstrong's work in untangling the relationship between gender and politics in the domestic novel, many critics have examined how dress functions in the work. Both Tassie Gwilliam and Jennie Batchelor explore Pamela's attempts to produce an authentic self through dress. Gwilliam focuses on the ways Pamela is accused of or is actually reproducing feminine duplicity in the novel. She finds Pamela's manipulation of dress to be empowering. If Pamela is able to disguise or duplicate herself through dress, then she has agency. Batchelor, on the other hand, argues that Richardson attempts to display Pamela's moral goodness through dress with less than successful results. As Batchelor puts it, "Given the prior, and almost uniformly damning, contexts in which Pamela's dress could be read, the novel's constructions of a mode of sartorial self-expression that transcends class distinctions in order to articulate the moral seems doomed to failure" (36). Although Batchelor's text is based on Pope's lines from his *Essay on Criticism*—"*True Wit* is *Nature* to Advantage drest,/What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Exprest*"—she sees Pamela's attempts to define herself through dress as flawed owing to Pamela's inability to be "exprest" through clothing (II. 297-300).

Despite differences in their opinions on the success of the undertaking, most critics who discuss *Pamela* and the issue of dress agree that Pamela's clothes serve as an attempt at self-identification. What is left largely unexamined, however, is the trajectory the story takes. Armstrong's assessment of *Pamela* is accurate: Richardson is being radical. He allows a lower-class servant heroine a voice that competes with that of her

high-born master. He does not maintain that challenge throughout the text, however. Richardson first allows Pamela to attempt to articulate her sense of self through the use of dress. Proving herself through clothes, however, is a difficult task because that medium is one of spectacle and is carefully monitored and controlled by the class structure.

Then, Pamela attempts self-assertion through her letters. This has the happy success that Armstrong and other critics notice; Pamela maintains her values, reforms her rakish master, and effects a cross-class shift that would have boggled the contemporary mind. In a way, Pamela's writing allows her to become a universal figure, transcending class distinctions. This universality, however, is short-lived. What optimistic critics fail to consider is the manner in which Mr. B takes control of Pamela's avenues of expression, possessing her letters and taking it upon himself to disseminate her story. He orders the style of her dress as a representation of her newly achieved class status as his wife. While Pamela's attempts at fashioning her own identity through dress and writing may have briefly achieved her universality and classlessness, Richardson and Mr. B work to re-inscribe her within a system that is both static and reifying.

Dress as Text in the Historical Context

Dress in the novel serves as a text—one that is to be both written and read. Within eighteenth-century society, dress functioned as an indicator of a person's status, place within society, and, often, their occupation. Fashion theorists such as Roland Barthes compare such elements of dress to a language, which is performed by one person to be read or interpreted by another. The notion of language and performance is tied to the theories of gender developed by Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. In my expansion of

their work, I argue that manipulating dress is a means of achieving power over how identity is perceived. Thus, reading dress is a reciprocal act. The individual must be literate in the culturally specific language of clothing in order to author a text in dress that will be correctly read by those around her. Pamela's failure ultimately to achieve agency over her dress, her story, and her identity is owing to her inability to correctly read the sartorial climate and therefore author a text that is correctly interpreted by her readers.

Batchelor sees Pamela's inability to be correctly read by her viewers as evidence that the act itself is futile, calling it a "fantasy of Pamela's—and by extension any woman's—[to] attempt to manipulate 'the critical materials and signs of costume'" (37). I argue that it is not that dress cannot be used to manipulate (or, put more positively, assert) identity and subjectivity. The reason that Pamela fails is that she cannot correctly read the "materials and signs" and therefore cannot be correctly read. Her texts are illegible.

This difficulty is understandable, as dress is an ambiguous medium. Contemporaries of Richardson, especially conduct book writers, believed strongly in maintaining the distinctions of classes through clothing. Some, however, had taken liberties with the rules. Daniel Defoe complained in *Everybody's Business is Nobody's Business* that

> It is a hard matter now to know the mistress from the maid by their dress, nay very often the Maid shall be the finer of the two. Our woollen Manufacture suffers much by this, for nothing but Silks and Sattins will go down with our Kitchen Wenches: to support which intollerablle [sic] Pride, they have insensibly raised their Wages to such a Height, as was ever known in any Age or Nation but this. (Defoe 4)

Figure 1. Dawe, Phillip. *Soaping Linen*. after Henry Robert Morland. *A Lady's Maid Soaping Linen*. 1769. © The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

Defoe's condemnation of dressing above class has both moral and economic implications—clearly, the domestic woolen industry would go bust with the servant class sporting foreign-made silks and satins. He indicates even more explicitly in *The Great Law of Subordination Consider'd*[8] that even the seemingly minor infraction of maids dressing more richly than their mistresses is but a symptom of more wide-spread perversion, where "Order is inverted, Subordination ceases, and the World seems to stand with the Bottom upward" (17).[9] According to Anne Buck in *Dress in Eighteenth Century England*, a gown, particularly of printed cotton such as the one pictured in a print of

Henry Robert Morland's *A Lady's Maid Soaping Linen* (see figure 1), that might serve as a simple morning dress for a woman of the gentry could also be the best dress of her maid (113).[10]

Richardson's own position in the dress and class debate is fraught. In his 1734 *The Apprentice's Vade Mecum*, a text written "to prevent or reform [depravities] in the Servant," Richardson argues that "Pride in dress [is] one of the epidemick Evils of the present Age, immers'd from the Highest to the Lowest in Luxury and Sensuality [which] has inverted all Order, and destroy'd all Distinction" (v, 31). In 1755, Richardson wrote, "Dress suited to degree, or fashion, gives a high instance of prudence," a piece of advice for his *A Collection of the Moral and Instructive Sentiments* apparently gleaned from *Pamela* (21). It seems strange that the author of *Pamela*, so critically celebrated for his "progressive" narrative in which a servant girl transcends the social order, could have harbored such conservative sentiments. I argue that he allows Pamela to "invert all Order, and destroy all Distinction" because, for Richardson, the moral statement he was making superseded the class consideration. Richardson does not see the luxurious clothes that Pamela wears as the means by which she ascends the class hierarchy, but rather as part of the reward for her virtue. She rises in elevation because she has been so virtuous, and, of course, she must maintain the social distinctions of dress once she has entered a new circle. In an article simply titled "Pamela's Clothes," Cary McIntosh makes the case for the importance of the social context of dress in *Pamela* by comparing the novel with Richardson's later works. In both *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, clothes are mentioned, but not with the frequency and implicit symbolism of *Pamela*.

McIntosh argues that this is because the characters in those later texts have already arrived socially (83). Clothes cannot be as important in their narratives because they are socially static; in *Pamela*, clothing resonates with social ascension.

Other writers made a connection between dressing above one's class and sexual immorality, as evidenced by contributions to *The Lady's Magazine*, such as "One of the leading Causes of Prostitution, The Dress of Servant Girls above their Station" (qtd. in Batchelor 8). However, as evidenced in the "tricking scene" in *Pamela* and in contemporaneous works by authors such as Eliza Haywood, dressing down is as sexually connotative as dressing up. In fact, any foray into the symbolically coded dress of a class other than one's own is fraught with subversive and sexual implications. Dress, then, has two main contexts to be presented and interpreted – the social and the sexual[11].

Pamela's Attempts at Sartorial Subjectivity

Within the social context, dress serves as an indicator of one's class status and perhaps provides a means of escaping, or at least appearing to escape, a lower social standing. In *Pamela*, dress at first seems a means to rise in class status. The gifts that Mr. B makes Pamela early in the novel might appear to a naïve interpreter as a foreshadowing of Pamela's ascension to the upper ranks. However, the cast-off clothes of her former mistress only serve to entangle Pamela in a delicate web of sexual and social connotation. With Mr. B's first gift, Pamela recognizes only the monetary meaning of the clothes. She lists the items with an eye to their value: "a suit of my old Lady's Cloaths, and a half a Dozen of her Shifts, and Six fine Handkerchiefs, and three of her cambrick aprons, and four Holland ones: the cloaths are fine silks, and too rich and too good for me, to be sure"

(Richardson 18). While Pamela is not overly surprised by Mr. B's gift, it is clear that she does not intend to use them in the manner that he suggests. Her own self-effacing comment that the clothes are "too rich and too good for me" indicates her awareness of the tacit sumptuary laws of the eighteenth century and her unwillingness to rebel against those dictates. It must be recognized, however, that Pamela is already wearing clothes of quite rich material, although fitting for a lady's maid. In the illustration by Joseph Highmore, Pamela is clearly wearing a silk dress while resisting Mr. B's advances in the summer house (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Highmore, Joseph. *Pamela and Mr. B in the Summer House*. 1743-44. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Pamela continues in her letter to her parents: "I wish it was no affront to him to make money of them, and send it to you: it would do me more good," despite the fact that

Mr. B told her "these, Pamela, are for you; have them made fit for you, when your mourning is laid by, and wear 'em for your good mistresses sake" (18). Pamela is most concerned with the literal monetary value of the clothes, which she may sell, rather than the symbolic exchange Mr. B apparently sees in the gift. According to Batchelor, servants were often made presents of their master's or mistress's cast off clothing. The clothing, however, was given with the expectation that through various alterations it would be made appropriate to be worn by someone of the lower classes (Batchelor 22-23). Selling such gifts was a common practice in the eighteenth century. Also common, however, was wearing the clothes unaltered, as Defoe alluded to in his account.[12] Pamela is clearly aware of the social ramifications of various types of dress and is economically savvy enough to contemplate selling the items.

Pamela obviously understands the social aspect of dress and seeks to operate within that context. Mr. B reads her text, however, in a sexual context, which Pamela is unable to interpret. Pamela's naïveté, and perhaps her resolve, begins to break down in the following letter, in which she recounts Mr. B's next gift of clothing:

> Two suits of fine flanders lac'd Headclothes, three Pair of fine Silk Shoes, two hardly the worse, and just fit for me; for my old Lady had a very little Foot; and several Ribbands and Topknots of all Colours, and four Pair of fine white Cotton Stockens, and three Pair of fine Silk ones; and two Pair of rich Stays, and a Pair of rich Silver Buckles in one Pair of the Shoes. (19)

Here the extravagance of the gift far exceeds that of the first, and Pamela's attitude has subtly changed in both her gratitude and intentions for the items. Even in listing the clothes, her desire to keep the items is clear as she mentions that the shoes just fit her and

are hardly the worse for wear. She repeatedly calls the items “fine,” which could refer to their delicacy, but more likely allude to their value and luxury. Obviously, these are tempting items for a servant girl.

Despite the tempting nature of the clothes, though, she registers some warning at the sight of the stockings because she recounts to her parents:

> I was quite astonish’d, and unable to speak for a while; but yet I was inwardly ashamed to take the Stockens; for Mrs. Jervis was not there: If she had, it would have been nothing. I believe I received them very awkwardly; for he smil’d at my Awkwardness; and said, Don’t blush, Pamela; Dost think I don’t know pretty Maids wear Shoes and Stockens? (19)

Pamela’s slow realization that more is being exchanged in this gift is contrasted with the smug knowingness of her employer. The very items that make up the gift signal the intent of the giver.[13] The gift of the “stockens” alarms Pamela and makes her cognizant that Mrs. Jervis is absent; her presence may have authorized the gift of such an intimate article of clothing, but her absence only serves to highlight the suspicious nature of the exchange.

Later, however, Mrs. Jervis allays Pamela’s fears, building her hopes by supposing that Mr. B intends to “fit [her] in dress for a waiting-maid’s place on his sister lady Daver’s own person” (19), a move that would certainly benefit Pamela and move her along the social strata at a reasonable pace. Dress, in Mrs. Jervis’s hypothesis, indicates mobility. However, the narrative later clarifies Mr. B’s true intentions. The dresses and items he gives Pamela signal his desire to dress her as his mistress. In the contract that he proposes to Pamela while she is his prisoner in Lincolnshire, one point is of particular

note: he promises her "I will, besides, order Patterns to be sent you for chusing four complete Suits of Cloaths, that, you may appear with Reputation, as if you was my Wife" (190). Mr. B recognizes, as Pamela begins to also, that clothes are not the means to true social mobility, but only serve to give the appearance of such. They cannot make her Mr. B's wife; they can only give her the appearance of being such. In this light, the clothes that tempt Pamela early in the novel, insinuating hope for a rise in her station, prove false, and are only a means of degrading her morally while promoting merely her social appearance.

Clearly, more is at stake in Pamela's change of dress than she at first comprehended. The difficulty is that Pamela's clothes serve as a type of text in the narrative. While historically, dress in the period was read as an indicator of status, once Pamela begins to hybridize and experiment with that text, she opens herself up to being misread. Dress indicates not only social standing, here, but also a sexual exchange, a meaning that Pamela is slow to comprehend. The fine clothes that Mr. B gives her and those that he offers to her as part of her life as his mistress are sexually connotative; they are payment for services expected to be rendered. Pamela, however, does not immediately recognize his reading of the clothes, although her unease at the stockings and stays gives evidence that she is beginning to comprehend their import.

Pamela, however, is the last to catch on. A gift of such intimate items is so clearly a sexual overture in eighteenth-century society that Pamela's apparent cluelessness is both mocked and disbelieved in the firestorm of parodies that follow the novel's publication. In Eliza Haywood's *Anti-Pamela*, the consciously duplicitous

Syrena at first refuses a gift of stockings ("white with pink clocks" (61) which share a sartorial sensibility with Pamela's "ordinary blue hose that make a smartish appearance, with white clocks" (77)). This refusal, however, has nothing to do with shy misgivings and everything to do with further enflaming the lust of Vardine by *appearing* innocent and virtuous. Haywood's text is clearly implying that Pamela is doing the same—merely using "feign'd innocence" in order to attract. Interestingly, despite Syrena's superior worldly understanding of sartorial messages, she is the one deceived in her initial encounter. Vardine is, afterall, a lowly lieutenant, and Syrena experiences regret: "I am a little vex'd tho' now, that I did not take the Stockings, for as there is nothing to be done with him, t'would have been clear Gains; but I did not know then, *his fine Cloaths deceiv'd me*; and methinks I am sorry he has not an estate" (69, emphasis mine). Although *Anti-Pamela* is a handbook on how a woman can (and perhaps, in some cases, must) use whatever means necessary to deceive potential lovers, it also provides an interesting example of a man doing the same.[14]

The suspicions that Richardson's contemporaries harbor about Pamela's intentions and understanding underscore her sartorial illiteracy and illustrate the intricate web in which she has ensnared herself, rendering herself temporarily sartorially immobile, just as she will soon be literally immobilized as Mr. B's prisoner.[15] Her figurative paralysis is represented in the fact that while she may not rise socially through dress, neither can she descend. Soon after Mr. B has made his dishonorable intentions known, Pamela attempts to retroactively claim a social position through dress. Anticipating a return to her parents, Pamela purchases and sews clothes that are more

befitting that station in life. Completing her costume, she describes her appearance before the mirror:

> There I trick'd myself up as well as I could in my new Garb, and put on my round-ear'd ordinary cap; but with a green Knot however, and my homespun Gown and Petticoat, and plain-leather Shoes; but yet they are what they call Spanish Leather, and my ordinary Hose, ordinary I mean to what I have been lately used to; tho' I shall think good Yarn may do very well for every Day, when I come Home. A plain Muslin Tucker I put on, and my black Silk Necklace, instead of the French Necklace my Lady gave me, and put the Earrings out of my Ears; and when I was quite 'quip'd, I took my straw Hat in my Hand, with its two blue Strings, and look'd about me in the Glass, as proud as anything. – To say Truth, I never lik'd myself so well in my Life. (55)

Although Pamela intends to paint a picture of rusticity, her qualifiers are significant. Her clothing is plain enough, being of rough homespun and muslin; however, she interjects "but with a green Knot," and but with Spanish leather shoes, and but with plain hose, which are superior to the yarn hose she will need to wear at home.[16] Despite her intentions of recreating her lower-class self, Pamela has only managed a type of hybridity, combining the peasant and the lady's maid.

Gwilliam argues that this scene represents a point of power for Pamela. She asserts that Pamela is "making a claim for self-definition and self-representation….she can define her clothing's use rather than being defined by it" (32-33). While this certainly constitutes an attempt at "self-definition," the text Pamela has authored in her dress is unsuccessful in articulating her self because it cannot be interpreted by her viewers: both Mrs. Jervis and Mr. B fail to recognize Pamela in her new clothes. The synthesized costume has a particularly strange effect on Mr. B. At first willfully mistaking her for a sister, he makes advances upon her, saying, "I would not be so free

with your Sister [Pamela], you may believe; but I must kiss *you*" (56). Later, after Pamela has repulsed him once again, he berates her: "Who is it you put your Tricks upon? I was resolved never to honour your unworthiness, said he, with so much notice again; and so you must disguise yourself, to attract me, and yet pretend, like an Hypocrite as you are—" (57).[17] While she wishes her costume to be read in one way, she cannot control the interpretation her viewers give it.

Pamela is attempting to extricate herself from the tangled sexual exchange brought about by the gifts of clothing, but she only ensnares herself farther. In buying and creating her own clothes, in a fashion that she thinks befits her, she is attempting to recreate and reclaim herself. She tries to explain to Mr. B that she is not her sister, but "Pamela, her own self" (56). In rebuttal to Mr. B's accusations of disguise, she claims, "I have been in disguise ever since my good lady, your mother, took me from my poor parents" (57). Pamela's viewers miserably misinterpret her attempts at reclaiming herself. Mr. B reads her new costume as yet another facet in the sexual exchange; the change in garments reads as a change in Pamela's attitude toward his libidinous suggestions. William Warner suggests a connection between disguise and desire: because Pamela's costume is read as disguise, this provokes curiosity in the viewer to know what is beneath the disguise, and this curiosity translates into "fascination, anger, or desire," and "Pamela's disguise provokes all three in Mr. B" (197). Apparently, Mr. B believes the lower classes to be more easily deflowered than women from the upper classes, and Pamela as country maiden might be more easily persuaded than Pamela the lady's maid. In this light, Pamela's dress does achieve part of its purpose: it does signal

her desire to be read as peasant. However, the sexual connotations it invokes are beyond her recognition. While she read her muslin and homespun as a moral stance, Mr. B reads them as a sexual advance.

The trope of the easily-seduced country maid was already part of the literary consciousness by 1740. Eliza Haywood's 1725 *Fantomina*, for example, introduced a sexually curious aristocratic girl who maintains a relationship with a faithless lover by entering into a series of disguises, including that of Celia, a country chamber maid.[18] As Celia, she invokes a type of pastoral innocence that is, nonetheless, easy and yielding. Clearly, there is already a genre established, and Fantomina has only to insert her new identity into the narrative. As a woman of high birth, she is quite familiar with the archetype of the yielding chamber maid, and she exploits Beauplaisir's expectation of an easy conquest, performing the part of the rude country girl that has already been suggested by her round eared cap, short petticoat, and little jacket. Indeed, that costume makes her doubly available, not only in terms of status, but in the more obvious matter of physical access, for Beauplaisir is able to catch "her by the pretty Leg, which the Shortness of her Petticoat did not in the least oppose" (235). So sexualized is the figure of the country maid, that even her costume is seen as colluding with her seduction.

With this cultural narrative possibly in mind, Mr. B's insistence that Pamela's country costume is provocative seems more reasonable. Even her protestations of innocence and virtue may be taken for mere formulaic preludes to a willing seduction. The prevalence of this stereotype might explain the vehemence of the anti-Pamelists, Richardson's contemporaries (including not only Eliza Haywood but also Richardson's

arch-rival Henry Fielding[19]) who spoofed and parodied *Pamela*, turning the much-abused innocent into a scheming hussy. These writers imagined a Pamela who uses the country costume not as a means of protesting her innocence, but as a way of seducing her master. In Fielding's *Shamela*, Mrs. Jervis (in collusion with the wanton Shamela), writes to Mrs. Andrews (also in on the "sham"), "Miss Sham…desired me to acquaint you with the Success of her Strategem, which was to dress herself in the plain Neatness of a Farmer's Daughter, for she wore the Cloaths of my late Mistress, and to be introduced by me as a Stranger to her Master" (320). While Shamela may be aware of the sexual connotations of both a change in costume and the costume of a country maiden, Pamela is sartorially illiterate and unaware. What she sees as evidence of her virtue, others see as an invitation to sully that virtue.

This confusion reveals the problem with clothing in the novel: dress is an ambiguous text, prone to misinterpretation by both author and reader. Pamela's attempts to authorize herself through dress go awry due to the lack of insight on the part of the viewer and also because she has a scant knowledge of the connotative resonance of her medium. While dress was certainly a vehicle for indicating social standing in the eighteenth century, in the text of *Pamela*, it is also a signal of the sexual exchange.

Pamela herself calls attention to her sartorial illiteracy.[20] When Mr. B asks for her opinion of his "Birth-day Suit" since she is "so neat and nice in [her] own Dress," she laments in an aside "Alas! For me, I didn't know I was!" and can only claim, "I am no Judge…but I think they look very fine" (68). Although Pamela's critics use this as evidence of her improper interest in fine clothes (and she does linger over the "Gold

Lace"), her claims to ignorance are even more revealing. In attempting to assert her own identity by making her country dress, Pamela was dealing with an unfamiliar language. Mr. B, still striving to unravel the mystery of that costume, presses Pamela for explanations. She incredulously replies, "it is no Matter what such a one as I wears!" clearly indicating that although she planned to assert an identity through dress, she is not entirely convinced that that route is even profitable. She further contradicts her earlier attempts at presenting herself as virtuous maiden by her dress when she rails at Mr. B during yet another sexual advance. "Let me ask you, Sir," she cries, "if you think this becomes your fine Cloaths! and a Master's Station?" (68-69). Although Pamela meant her humble country garb to represent a moral position, here she interprets clothing in exactly the opposite way. She invokes Mr. B's elegant and rich clothing as a reminder of virtue, implying that moral behavior is native to the wealthy. Pamela's contradictions and her lack of conviction clearly indicate that she cannot navigate the interchange between reader and writer, viewer and wearer.[21]

Pamela's Attempts at Literary Subjectivity

This disconnect between the writer and reader changes when Pamela literally transforms her dress into a text. Throughout the novel, readers recognize that the book before them is ostensibly Pamela's letters, and Pamela must often write about the physicality of her writing: when she can find time to write, how to procure paper, where to hide what she has written. In this way, her letters serve a double purpose by acting as her voice and by becoming a physical representation of her self. Her letters work in a way similar to the way she means dress to function, and those around her tend to regard

her writing in either a social or a sexual context. The same concern for class standing that rendered Pamela's clothing textually resonant makes her letters suspect. Despite Mr. B's eagerness to read Pamela's physical body as a text, he is at first dismissive of her letters: "Why, Pamela, you write a very pretty Hand, and spell tolerably too" (12). The sense of wonder here is not for the content of Pamela's letters, but that she can write at all, although he cannot be unaware of her literacy since he knows she reads romances. However, her lower-class station leads potential readers to see her writing as trifling; her "scribbling" is referred to either dismissively or scathingly throughout the novel.

Later, in Mr. B's desire to possess Pamela, he eroticizes her papers, viewing them in a sexual context. Mr. B's attempts to possess the letters later in the novel soon come to parallel his attempts to possess her body. Nancy Armstrong sees a connection between Pamela's writing and her body. She contends that the only "genuinely erotic" moment in the novel is the point where Mr. B takes over Pamela's letters, threatening to find them on her body: "Now, said he, it is my opinion they are about you; and I never undrest a Girl in my Life; but I will now begin to strip my pretty Pamela; and hope I shall not go far before I find them" (235). For Armstrong, Pamela's physical body has been replaced with a body of words, emotion, and language: it has been replaced with her letters, and this allows for the representation of an authentic self (Armstrong 120-121).

Pamela's body has not only been figuratively transformed into words, however; her dress has literally been changed into text as she has sewn her letters into her petticoat. While Pamela's attempts to manipulate the expression of herself through dress are difficult and often fruitless, by inscribing her self and intentions onto dress, she cannot be

misinterpreted. By transforming an ambiguous culturally dictated medium into a self-authored one, Pamela is claiming the right to "dress" herself and address others, and she demands that she be read correctly. While Pamela's unread (unravished) letters act for Mr. B within social and sexual contexts, once read, they are clear indications of Pamela's self, and as such, are transforming. Reading Pamela's letters directly leads to Mr. B's reformation. From the very first, Pamela's accounts of her sorrows touch Mr. B as her verbal pleading never did: "O my dear girl! You have touch'd me sensibly with your mournful relation, and your sweet Reflections upon it. I should truly have been very miserable, had it taken Effect. I see you have been us'd too roughly; and it is a Mercy you stood Proof in that fatal Moment" (241). Mr. B's behavior changes from this point on, and it is clearly the direct effect of reading Pamela's text. Her attempts to define and present herself through the text of dress are futile in comparison with the revelatory and articulating nature of her words.

In this way, Richardson's novel is radical, breaking down class boundaries and shifting importance away from the spectacle of cultural sumptuary distinctions and toward the authentic word of the individual. Pamela transcends class and becomes a universal figure. The hybridity created by her attempts to express herself through dress is not reproduced in her writing. The self that her letters represent is outside of class considerations. She does write about her station; she acknowledges that she is humble and poor. But her insistence of her own worth in spite of her master's machinations is a clear rejection of the class structure that bound her.

This shift, however, is soon undermined. While Pamela's triumph may be read as a move on Richardson's part away from class values and towards a more universal understanding of the individual, the text does not end with Mr. B's reformation. Mr. B as husband seeks to cover that which he would have uncovered as seducer. While the first half of the novel entails Mr. B's ceaseless pursuit of Pamela, both her sexualized body and her body of writing, the second half constitutes almost a reversal. While he wishes both to ravish Pamela and to read her letters, an act of uncovering and understanding, after he possesses both, he seeks to edit, to cover, and to control.

Although Mr. B does not stop Pamela's writing, he does become her main audience, the filter through which all her work passes. After first divulging her letters, Pamela immediately recognizes that the content of her writing will undergo a substantial change. She complains to Mr. B that, "but now you *will* see what I write, I will find some other way to employ my Time: For I can neither write so free, nor with any Face, what must be for your Perusal, and not for those I intended to divert with my melancholy Stories" (240). Pamela's assertion that she can no longer write so freely is clearly important. If her writing is to be considered the generation of her self-representation, then the force that would censor her ability to write truthfully is a very serious block. Additionally, she writes that she could not write with any "face." While this remark refers to a feeling of confidence, it is also a striking reference to the connection between her writing and her physical self. The shadow of Mr. B's perusal of her letters not only limits Pamela's writing, but, in a way, symbolically signifies a limitation on her physical representation.

As Pamela's writing may no longer be taken as a straightforward representation of her authentic written self, her wardrobe again becomes a matter of some concern. In making the leap from servant to her master's wife, Pamela will have to navigate the world of fashion distinction once again. Ominously, Mr. B takes on the task of directing Pamela's dress and is thus in the position of directing her self-representation. Under his guidance, Pamela's dress is chosen so that it best benefits him. In one episode, he instructs her to dress so that her story is enhanced before his friends. Upon mentioning the impending visit of some neighbors, Mr. B directs Pamela, "pray, be only dress'd as you are; for, as they know your Condition, and I have told them the Story of your present Dress, and how you came by it, one of the young Ladies begs it as a Favour, that they may see you just as you are" (272). Despite Mr. B's assertions that he wishes Pamela to be represented "just as she is," the fact that he has been telling her stories raises some alarms. Pamela is no longer speaking for herself, and her story is no longer her exclusive property. Mr. B has appropriated her narrative and the execution of it. Likewise, he is dictating that her dress match the story that he has told, thereby asserting his authority and reinforcing his authorial control. Pamela is no longer in control of her text or her dress. Pamela's seducer turned husband takes on the role of editing her text, not unlike the way in which Richardson is ostensibly acting as her literary editor.

Even more alarming is Pamela's complicity in this authorial intrusion; she tells Lady Darnford, who had requested the country costume, "I am much oblig'd to your Ladyship…that your kind Prescription was so agreeable to my Choice." The Lady Darnford naively replies: "Why, said she, *was* it your Choice then? – I am glad of that"

(286). What Pamela presumably means to say is that the country garb would be her choice if she had a choice. Lady Darnford's question seems to subtly interrogate Pamela's ability to choose for herself any longer. Mr. B has asserted that right; he now has the control of both the representation of Pamela's text and story and of her dress with all its social and sexual contexts. In this case, it pleases him to present Pamela as "[his] pretty Rustick" (284), exploiting her lower-class status in order to please his guests and, presumably, to display his own magnanimity.

Once Pamela is his wife, however, Mr. B again asserts his control of her physical representation to reinstate her class status. Four days after their marriage, Mr. B favors Pamela with the following injunction:

> I shall expect of you always to be dress'd by dinner-time….and whoever I bring home with me to my Table, you will be in Readiness to receive them…and besides, you will convince me, that you think yourself obliged to appear as graceful to your husband, as you would to Persons less familiar to your Sight. (368)

Mr. B is largely concerned with how Pamela will appear to others in his class. While he can parade Pamela about before their marriage as a rustic, after their marriage she must appear to be worthy of him. For this reason, Mr. B dictates the manner of her dress in order to establish Pamela's new class position. Although Pamela ostensibly has the power to choose her own clothing, her narrative reveals that Mr. B has a large hand in deciding her wardrobe. She writes that she has been choosing patterns, but because she thought everything too good for her, "he was so kind, to pick out Six of the richest, for me to chuse three Suits out of," and "he made me also chuse some very fine Laces and

Linen" (470). Clearly, Mr. B is doing the choosing and Pamela is the mere mannequin.[22] He even chooses her bridal gown, a dress "white flower'd with Gold most richly," (470) which is similar to the gown in which she was actually married, "a rich white Sattin Night-gown, that had been [her] good Lady's" (342). In *Dressed in Fiction*, Clair Hughes writes that "a bride before 1753 still needed public acknowledgement of her status [Pamela's wedding was private], and Pamela's first appearance as Mr. B's wife is in fact at church" (160). In the very first moment of her official new identity, Pamela is dressed according to Mr. B's taste.

Mr. B's sudden interest in fashion once again fixes Pamela within the social strata, reversing her brief moment of classlessness. By the end of the novel, Pamela is thoroughly re-entrenched within the social order. Although her position is substantially higher than it was at the beginning of the novel, it is no less mutable, and it is just as controlled, edited, and censored as her previous station was. Although Pamela subtly questions Mr.B's edicts, especially in her annotations to his list of rules, she will not defy him and has instead committed herself to following his rules of conduct. She tells her parents, "Yet, after all, you'll see I have not the easiest Task in the World. But I know my own Intentions, that I shall not willfully err; and so fear the less" (451). Pamela is fully cognizant of Mr. B's authority and is complicit in his editorship.

While Richardson's novel is noteworthy for imagining a context in which a servant girl has the right to self-expression and social mobility, his work in *Pamela* is just as conservative and reifying as the conduct books that the second half of his novel imitates. While the novel is ostensibly written by Pamela's own hand, the narrative

begins to show the break-down in her agency as Mr. B gradually gains more authority in her self-expression, which parallels the way Richardson is apparently acting as Pamela's editor. If Pamela were ever in disguise it is certainly at the end of the novel. While she masquerades as a self-possessed woman, it is clear that she has no more agency at the end of the novel as the higher-class wife of Mr. B than she did as his lower-class servant. Although Richardson allows her a brief moment of classless universality, Pamela is ultimately an edited woman.

Ironically, despite the controlling force he exerts over his heroine, Richardson was a welcomed influence on a number of women writers including Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, Frances Burney, and Jane Austen. Austen identified Richardson as her favorite writer, and was particularly fond of his novel *Sir Charles Grandison*, reading it so frequently that "all that was ever said or done in the cedar parlor, was familiar to her; and the wedding days of Lady L. and Lady G. were as well remembered as if they had been living friends" (Austen-Leigh 71). However, readers may find it rather difficult to trace Richardson's heavy, sentimental, humorless (or, if humorous, rather unintentionally so) style in Austen's light, ironic wit. Rather, Richardson's influence on Austen is discernable in "characters, situations, narrative tensions, and a consuming fascination with inner life" (Stabler 45). And, I would argue, his influence is most strongly felt in her transformations of those characters and situations, rendering them purposefully comical at times, but maintaining the underlying seriousness of the tension. Mr. Collins's smug confidence in attempting to force, not his body, but his matrimonial inclinations on

Elizabeth, despite her protests, can be read as a clever reworking of the scenes of attempted seduction between Mr. B and Pamela. He insists,

> though I am far from accusing you of cruelty at present, because I know it to be the established custom of your sex to reject a man on the first application, and perhaps you have even now said as much to encourage my suit as would be consistent with the true delicacy of the female character (139)

—a remarkable interpretation of Elizabeth's refusal, not unlike Mr. B's insistence on determining Pamela's rustic costume to be an invitation to seduction. However, this humorous reworking of Richardson's sexual dynamic is not entirely for comic effect. Despite Mr. Collins's repulsive ineffectiveness, he also is a reminder to Lizzy of her precarious economic status:

> To fortune I am perfectly indifferent, and shall make no demand of that nature on your father, since I am well aware that it could not be complied with; and that one thousand pounds in the four per cents, which will not be yours til after your mother's decease, is all that you may ever be entitled to. (137-138)

Although Austen has transformed Richardson's sentimental melodrama into a moment of comedy, the serious economic and social realities facing women remain the same.

Although there has been a number of critical comparisons between *Sir Charles Grandison* and Austen's novels, I find that echoes of *Pamela* may also be found, particularly in what has been termed Austen's most moral novel, *Mansfield Park*. Both novels are largely concerned with proper conduct in young women, both investigate the serious consequences of unrestrained and undiscriminating sexual passion, and both center on young women who have been separated from parents to be placed in homes that

far exceed the status to which they were born. However, I argue that the most intriguing similarity between the two novels is that in each, the heroines attempt to create a subjective identity through the use of clothing. More important than this similarity, though, is the difference in each heroine's success. While Pamela is ultimately stripped (and redressed) of her self-authored identity by her editor and husband, Austen imagines a different outcome for her sartorially-conscious Fanny Price.

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[6] I would argue that Fantomina's masquerade may also be interpreted as a means of achieving agency. By paradoxically representing herself as object, Fantomina establishes herself as subject – by acting as a series of essentialist stereotypes (naïve country maid, grieving widow, and mysterious aristocrat) Fantomina is able to pursue her own desires, namely the deluded Beauplaisir. However, I agree with Richetti that *Fantomina* does not quite provide "a sense of the protagonist's role in the history of the settings," while *Pamela* includes not just a "representation of a world, but an expression of an individual within it" (86-87). Fantomina sacrifices being an individual in order to achieve her desires, while Pamela fails to achieve true agency, even if she does manage to become an individual.

[7] Other scholars, of course, likewise maintain that the distinguishing feature of the novel is the appearance of the individual. These critics of eighteenth-century fiction include Ian Watt, J. Paul Hunter, and Nancy Armstrong, who argues that the modern individual is a woman, as represented in domestic fiction like *Pamela*.

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[8] Defoe's text is tellingly subtitled *Or, The Insolence and Unsufferable Behavior of Servants in England duly inquir'd into*, leaving little doubt in the reader as to the target of his consideration.

[9] Defoe goes so far as to suggest that servants should wear a badge, indicating their occupation and allegiance to a master. This would eliminate social confusion, rendering clothing even more rigidly symbolic (291).

[10] Morland's painting and its companion, *A Laundry Maid Ironing* is the subject of some speculation. Some critics believe that the models were actually famous society beauties, posing as maids, further underscoring the elision between mistress and maid though dress in the period. The portraits have also been linked to *Pamela*. An exhibition text at the Holburne Museum of Art in Bath, England includes the following commentary: "Subtly lit and mildly erotic, the ambivalence of Morland's images finds a literary parallel in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* of 1740" (http://www.holburne.org/muse/search/item.cfm?MuseumNumber=1978.1)

[11] For more on dress, sex, and society see Carey McIntosh, "Pamela's Clothes."

[12] Caryn Chaden argues in "Pamela's Identity Sewn into Clothes" that mistresses would have required that their female servants wear the clothes without considerable alteration. A maid who appears well-dressed reflects highly upon the wealth and status of the mistress (110).

[13] Patricia Brückmann points out that the extravagance of the stockings is remarkable in itself. Although stockings would be a mass-consumption article by the end

of the century, in Pamela's day, few maid-servants could claim to own so many and of such rich material (203).

[14] This is symbolically rendered by Vardine's Snuff-box, which Syrena covets and connives to get, assuming it is made of gold, when it is actually "Pinchbeck's metal"—a false gold (78).

[15] This immobility is represented by the removal of her shoes once she is imprisoned in Mr. B's Lincolnshire home (114). Without her shoes, apparently, Pamela is unable to even leave the house.

[16] Brückmann estimates that Pamela has spent one pound fifteen and one, or about a half of her year's wages on her country garb, a figure that would belie the intended poverty the costume was meant to convey (206).

[17] Mr. B's use of the word "tricks" here is intriguing, given that Pamela had described putting on the costume as "I trick'd myself up." While Pamela's usage refers to putting on her clothes, Mr. B's use is more ambiguous, but undoubtedly refers to what he takes to be the duplicitous and deceiving nature of Pamela's country garb.

[18] "Celia's" further interactions with her assumed seducer also provide further damning evidence of Pamela's ignorance. She knows not to refuse the money he offers her, recognizing that this is all part of the narrative that she has so carefully orchestrated. Instead, she has the opportunity to laugh at him with "an humble Curtsy, and a well counterfeited Show of surprise and Joy;" her cry of "'O Law, Sir! what must I do for all this?'" is thick with irony: Fantomina/Celia knows quite well what she must do, and has

done it with astonishing ability (235). Thus, Pamela's acceptance of Mr. B's gifts are part of the plot of seduction that he can easily see, but Pamela cannot discern.

[19] In addition to *Shamela*, Fielding also parodied *Pamela* in his novel *Joseph Andrews*, which recounts the adventures of Pamela's supposed brother Joseph. Interestingly, in this novel, Fielding uses changes in dress to reflect Joseph's changing social status. Dismissed from Lady Booby's service, where his good looks are enhanced by "the most perfect Neatness in his Dress" (33), he is stripped of his livery, but clothes are lent to him by a fellow servant, which are later stolen from him and he is left naked in a ditch. He subsequently borrows a coat from a postillion boy and a shirt from an hostler, these articles being denied him from the higher status riders in the carriage and inn-keeper, allowing Fielding to make a satirical stab at the selfishness of the wealthy. Fielding, however, is no radical. Joseph later borrows much more luxurious items: "a blue Coat and Breeches, with a Gold Edging, and a red Waistcoat with the same" (254). Fielding seems to mock his character, calling him "Mr. Joseph, he having as good a Title to that Appellation as many others, I mean that incontested one of good Clothes" (257). However, as the end of the novel reveals, Joseph does indeed deserve that title, not because of his good character (as the narrator has been satirically implying throughout the novel) and not because of his good clothes, but because he is actually the son of Mr. Wilson. Despite Fieldings attacks on the general unethical behavior of the upper-classes, he is actually rather conservative and rewards his hero with the realization of good birth.

[20] In Richardson's continuation of *Pamela*, Pamela, dressed as a Quaker, attends a masquerade. In defending her presence there, she claims that she attends "merely out of

Curiosity to look into the Minds of both Sexes; which I read in their Dresses" (81). This defense is unconvincing, given Pamela's earlier demonstrated illiteracy in reading dress, and is rather ridiculous, as Batchelor indicates, "when voiced by the grotesque masquerading body of a pregnant Quaker" (45).

[21] However, Pamela's sartorial illiteracy should not be mistaken for sartorial ignorance. Patricia Brückmann has argued in her article, "Clothes of Pamela's Own: Shopping at B— Hall," that Pamela "shows herself able to become the mistress of the hall, not only because she is verbally adept, but also because she has the practical talents necessary for such a place and has been formed in the essentials of choice and taste" (202). Pamela clearly knows what looks good, and she appreciates fine clothes. As Brückmann indicates, Pamela has been well-educated by her former mistress. However, she has not been instructed in what the clothes mean.

[22] This scene is similar to one in *Jane Eyre*. Mr. Rochester intends to clothe his governess-turned-bride in satin and lace. Along with Rochester's ostensible desire of demonstrating his affection, his wish to dress Jane in satins is also a desire to assimilate her into his class. Jane, however, recognizes that by accepting such items, she would not only be transmuting her class, enabling her to pass as an upper-class woman, she would also be denying her self. Her insistence on Rochester's acceptance of her own plain dress becomes a voice for his acceptance of her self.

CHAPTER III

THE CLOSE BONNET: SARTORIAL ORDER AND SUBJECTIVITY IN JANE AUSTEN'S *MANSFIELD PARK*

> What gown and what head-dress she should wear on the occasion became her chief concern. She cannot be justified in it. Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction, and excessive solicitude about it often destroys its own aim. ~Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*

Fanny Price, the heroine of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, elicits strikingly similar responses both from her fellow characters and from literary critics: puzzlement and dismissal. Mary Crawford voices this reaction to Fanny early in the narrative: "Pray, is she out, or is she not?—I am puzzled.—She dined at the parsonage, with the rest of you, which seemed like being *out*; and yet she says so little, that I can hardly suppose she *is*" (39). Although an interesting multi-vocal debate on contemporary social customs ensues, Mary boils down her definition: girls not out wear the same sort of "quiet" dress, marked by a "close bonnet," do not go out, and do not dine away from home. Satisfied on all these points, Mary confirms, "Miss Price is *not* out," and is ready to think no more of mousy Fanny (41).

Critics, too, have been puzzled by the dolorous contrast between Fanny and Austen's other witty heroines. Why did Austen turn "her back on the health and high spirits of her previous novel and gave her blessing instead to a heroine beleaguered, retiring, and militantly dour" (Johnson 94) ? This unfavorable comparison has led to a type of critical dismissal of the "quiet and in some ways uninteresting" heroine of

Austen's third published work, typified by the above epithet in the first edition of *The Cambridge Guide to English Literature* (qtd. in Potter 611). Fanny seems a failure on all sides—the social unequal of her family and neighbors, and unequal in wit and spirits to her canonical sisters, Elizabeth and Emma.

Contrary to the confused and dismissive attitudes toward Fanny Price, I argue that Fanny is actually one of Austen's strongest characters in terms of will and desire. She faces the steepest obstacles and makes the fewest blunders. For Austen's quietest character, she makes the most powerful statement. She maintains her rights as an individual on two fronts: she will look where she chooses and love whom she desires. Ironically, Fanny's freedom is based on her understanding and acceptance of limitations.

Mansfield Park is a novel about boundaries—social, sexual, and sartorial; and Jane Austen plays with that theme, binding her characters in both physical landscapes and class consciousness. Fanny Price has no clear social position—her boundaries are indistinct, and she is often relegated to the margins of her community, precisely because no one seems to know where to place her, despite Mrs. Norris's frequent admonitions that Fanny remember her "proper sphere" (172). So far from "putting herself forward," as her aunt Norris fears, Fanny is intensely conscious of determining and maintaining her proper place in society. Unlike the other young female characters in the novel, the privileged Maria and Julia Bertram and the elegant Mary Crawford, Fanny makes use of the power of propriety and embraces the attendant boundaries. In seeking to remain safely bounded by her social borders, Fanny recognizes the importance of dress, including the close bonnet, in presenting herself as a proper subject.

The desire for propriety is equally a desire for order, and the issue at stake in the novel is about the type of order that is most proper, which understanding of boundaries and limits is most desirable. Two disparate perspectives are represented in the narrative. Sir Thomas's cold patriarchy is a methodology based on economy and empire that attempts to enforce order, both on his Caribbean plantations and in his English home. The Crawfords represent a different understanding of order: they see boundaries only as objects to be overrun. Henry Crawford's interest in Fanny is at first enflamed only because she seems to represent a limit to his ability to conquer feminine hearts, and he will not be happy until that limit has stretched and broken. Mary also refuses to recognize boundaries and is concerned with surface propriety only. Her inability to call Henry and Maria's adultery anything other than folly finally informs Edmund that she knows no bounds when it comes to personal gratification.

Fanny represents a third way—a methodology of order that respects the patriarchal authority, the pride of empire, and the necessity of tranquil domesticity, but also insists on sexual subjectivity—the ability to choose and hold out for personal desire and romantic marriage. Fanny, in fact, embodies a very middle-class kind of order and propriety based on humility, service, piety, and love. She recognizes and appreciates boundaries. As Stuart Tave has pointed out in *Some Words of Jane Austen*, Austen herself defined her work in terms of limitations: those two inch bits of ivory, a fine brush, and little effect after much labor. Austen is not disparaging her work; on the contrary, the limits provide challenge, and there is much to be done in small spaces. To attempt to break out of one's limitations, "to refuse, to break these conditions, is to refuse life,

though it may seem freedom" (7). Fanny, then, is nearly unique among Austen's heroines. While Emma and Elizabeth must learn limits, Fanny already appreciates hers. The crux of her story is not her *bildungsroman*, it is the courage she displays in defending her borders.

Fanny also recognizes the reciprocal relationships between the gaze, fashion, and order. She must be looked at, but as long as she is properly dressed and her behavior is equally proper, she becomes unremarkable and is able to achieve a type of invisibility. Thus she is free to gaze back, and, since she has received a thorough moral education from her cousin Edmund, her judgment of what she sees is nearly infallible. Fanny must pursue propriety, however, not only because it frees her and falls in line with her personality and education, but because it is her means of social survival. In her essay "Hypocrisy and the Novel II: A Modest Question about *Mansfield Park*," Jenny Davidson makes the case that Fanny's intense reserve and timidity, manifestations of her propriety, are the result of her social position. Because she is dependent, she must appear diffident and acquiescent in order to maintain her tenuous place in the Bertram household. Because Fanny has no distinct social position, she is both a perceived danger and in danger.[23] To stake a claim in society and indicate her belongingness, Fanny practices propriety. In this chapter, I will show how Fanny is able to use dress as a marker of propriety and identity and to use that identity to achieve agency and subjectivity, despite attempts to objectify and commodify her as an item on the marriage market. Unlike the exploited Pamela, Fanny is successful because she is able to choose and achieve both identity and desire.

The idea of a courageous and successful Fanny is hardly a common critical interpretation. Middle-class morality, propriety, and order are hardly the typical accoutrements of strong female characters. When Jane Austen wrote that she was going to take a heroine that nobody but herself would much like, she was writing about Emma Woodhouse, not Fanny Price. Given, however, the scorn of critics, she may as well have been talking about the mousy heroine of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny has been marked out as Austen's most moral character, and (consequently?) some critics have also found her to be the most boring. Objections are made against her timidity, her weakness, her lack of wit and spirit. In short, she is not Emma Woodhouse. As June Sturrock indicates in her introduction to the Broadview edition, "Fanny Price has been described as priggish, lifeless, unattractive, and censorious, and contrasted unfavorably with Austen's other heroines" (12). Clearly, Austen was taking a risk in producing such a timid heroine.

Few critics recognize Fanny as possessing any type of power because power is usually equated with volume and force. Strong, powerful characters overthrow their oppressors and overturn the status quo. Fanny does none of these things. She remains quiet, humble, and obsessed with propriety throughout the novel. Not only does she not overstep her bounds, she is determined to make those boundaries even more distinct. Fanny's social placement is ambiguous, and she recognizes that her best chance of success and happiness is to claim a "proper sphere" and stay there. Fanny's "good girl" image has been admired by at least one critic, though. In her article, "In Defense of Dullness, or Why Fanny Price is My Favorite Heroine," Dawn Potter characterizes Fanny's "goodness" as, paradoxically, a form of selfishness:[24] "a minute interest in one's

own behavior, thoughts, and reactions" (613). Her apparently paralyzing self-consciousness is actually a keen self-awareness that guides her away from not only moral missteps, but social ones as well. Potter further identifies the connection between self-knowledge and the recognition of desire. While Elizabeth Bennett actively dislikes her future husband through most of *Pride and Prejudice* and Emma Woodhouse ignores Mr. Knightley as a bullying older-brother type though most of *Emma*, and each heroine falls for someone who is decidedly the wrong man in the course of her *bildungsroman*, Fanny is intensely aware of both Edmund's virtues and flaws, and she "deliberately" falls and resolutely remains in love with him. Fanny's commitment to propriety has enabled her to know herself and to identify her proper match, and she remains confident in her right to desire Edmund. As Mary Poovey argues, "Austen's goal is to make propriety and romantic desire absolutely congruent" (214). Fanny is able to achieve her desire not in spite of her dedication to propriety, but because of it.

Duty, Dress, and Historical Drama

Fanny's idea of proper behavior can be compared to a number of contemporary texts. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century society produced a wealth of informational resources designed to help young women understand and maintain strict propriety. The ubiquitous conduct book was available to instruct middle- and upper-class girls in every conceivable area of behavior. Such texts were apparently necessary because each social act in Regency society was a potentially fraught one. The upper-class business of coming out, for example, was a necessary rite of passage that propriety demanded, but was also a dangerous enterprise in itself. Reverend Thomas Gisborne, a

contemporary of Jane Austen, devotes a whole chapter to “On the Mode of Introducing Young Women into Society” in his work *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*. Here, Gisborne makes clear the dangers inherent in placing women within the gaze of society. The shock of passing from obscurity and invisibility to visibility and inclusion may be morally dangerous:

> Pains are taken, as it were, to contrive, that when the dazzled stranger shall step from the nursery and the lecture-room, she shall plunge at once into a flood of vanity and dissipation. Mewed up from every prying gaze, taught to believe that her first appearance is the subject of universal expectation, tutored to beware, above all things of tarnishing her attractions by *mauvaise honte*, stimulated with desire to outshine her equals in age and rank, she burns with impatience for the hour of displaying her perfections; till at length she is launched, in the pride of ornament, on some occasion of festivity… (93)

Coming out, and the conduct prescribed for such an operation, was based largely on the importance of visibility, and the young woman as the object of the gaze.[25] The terms here are clearly those of spectacle: the previously hidden young woman is soon burst upon the scene in full display, a scene that Gisborne terms “the public stage of life” (92).

Despite the clearly public and visible nature of such social arrangements, women had to maintain a delicate balance between display and reserve, openness and mystery. According to Jenny Davidson’s short history of morals and manners, women had been instructed “to cultivate an unreadable quality in their relations with men and with society at large” (11). By Austen’s time, manners and reserve were almost inseparable, at least for women.[26] Thus, cultural wisdom maintained that women need to be trained in modesty and manners, and conduct literature anthologized the minute details of this training.

The most suitable way, then, of performing both visible display and polite reserve was through dress. Although eighteenth-century male moralists, such as Gisborne, warned against excessive attention to dress, which might necessarily monopolize the attention that should, of course, be placed on creating comfort for the family, other conduct book writers felt dress and virtue to be connected. The anonymous female author of *The Mirror of the Graces; or. The English Lady's Costume* instructed her audience in 1811 that "virtue ought to wear an inviting aspect" and "the fairness of the body is the sign of the mind's purity" (15, 17). This reciprocal relationship between virtue and dress by which a virtuous mind requires attractive clothing and attractive clothing indicates a virtuous wearer would make it easy for a young woman to both display herself as marriageable commodity and to maintain a polite reserve while letting her dress speak for her character. In fact, since the conduct writer insists that fine taste in apparel is the companion of pure morals, dressing well becomes a duty for any virtuous woman (19).[27]

In addition to conveying a sense of the wearer's moral purity, dress in this period was rich with political, social, and economic connotations that were continually shifting. In Jane Austen's lifetime, fashion underwent a momentous change. At the time of her birth in 1775, French court fashion held sway: ornate costumes of silk and velvet, high-heeled shoes, and elaborate powdered wigs were *de rigueur* for elegant men and women alike. The female silhouette was delineated by exaggerated hoop skirts and padding around the hips. Such fashions became so hyperbolic that literary wits Addison and Steele felt the need to indict the hoop skirt on charges of excess (Tatler Number 116). By

the time *Mansfield Park* was published in 1814, simplicity was the fashionable by-word. Gone were hoops and the more constrictive corsets, wigs and pumps, and hairstyles that involved menageries or fully-rigged replicas of ships. Instead, style was embodied by an echo of classical sensibility—softly draped fabric for women and a clean-limbed silhouette for men, who began to wear the precursor of the modern suit.

The dynamic change that occurred in four decades can be mapped onto a number of historical events. First, the French Revolution and the principles of *liberté, égalité,* and *fraternité* made the excessive fashions of French nobility seem distasteful, if not downright dangerous. Instead, working class clothes were adopted by many in France, and *sans culottes* became both a political statement and a fashion statement. The tide changed, and instead of the English imitating the French, the French began imitating the English, adopting what they called the *robe à la anglaise*, a round, bell-shaped skirt without hoops (Nigro 50-52). Additionally, changes in eighteenth-century trade and manufacturing began to affect what was worn. In an effort to protect British woollen interests, the government prohibited or heavily embargoed many newly-available materials, including Indian cotton[28] and silks, rendering these items immediately coveted and fashionable. Unable to convince the British that they really wanted to wear wool,[29] many manufacturers gave up and began to produce the cotton and muslin fabrics themselves. These materials were much more cheaply made and easy to care for, due to improved cotton spinning technology, and as fashion historian Anne Buck reveals, "By the end of the century the wearing of printed cottons, and even white cambric muslin, had brought fashionable women's dress and the dress of women of the common people closer

than ever in fabric and form" (200). Though it had been a controversial sartorial choice when Marie Antionette wore it in a portrait attributed to Vigée-Lebrun exhibited in 1783, muslin had achieved nearly universal approbation on both the continent and in England two decades later (see figure 3).

Figure 3. after Vigee-Lebrun, E.-L. *Marie-Antoinette*. 1783. Wolfsgarten Castle, Germany.

It is in this highly charged context that Fanny must make her choices in clothing, picking out an identity among the various political, economic, and social implications, and living up to the moral duty outlined in the conduct literature of the time.

This is a moral duty that, like all other moral duties, Fanny Price takes very seriously. While Austen's narrator may ironically call dress a "frivolous distinction" in connection to Catherine Moreland, there is no similar teasing of Fanny on the same score. Dress is a serious matter for the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny, however, has even less room for error than the typical reader of conduct manuals because, while dress may indicate virtue, it also, and even more volubly, indicates class. The social ambiguity surrounding Fanny is pervasive. She is not a Bertram, though she lives with them and is educated with them. Neither is she a Price, as that residence and education have alienated her from her immediate family. At Mansfield Park, she is treated as not quite a servant and not quite a daughter. Thus, Fanny is left to a liminal space, an intermediary position that is exposed quite clearly in Mary's question of outness. Fanny's uncertain social position and indefinite familial status allow Austen to play with the borders of visibility, spectacle, and propriety.

When Mary asks "is she out, or is she not," she is touching on a question that is multi-layered and far more complex that she would at first believe. Fanny's social position is both the beginning of the issue and also the crux. By existing outside the typical social framework, Fanny is a dangerous thing in Regency culture: she cannot be pinned down, marked out, and therefore, controlled. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh makes a similar point when she remarks on Fanny's unconventional behavior. Since Fanny does not fit into the typical pattern of either her parents' station or her cousin's status, she is defying cultural norms concerning female propriety, while upholding a moral code that goes beyond mere mannerisms (132). As Edmund points out at the beginning of the

novel about Fanny, “She has the age and sense of a woman” (39), indicating an alternative value system, in opposition to the wealth and status-based model that Miss Crawford favors. This reply, in response to Mary’s question about Fanny’s outness, reveals a different criterion of judgment. Fanny does not fit the pattern of either high- or low-born Regency female and therefore must be read differently. Because her position is indeterminate, Fanny employs the values of propriety and moral conduct to fashion her own identity, most visibly demonstrated through her concern for dress.

This interest in fashion was a wide-spread diagnostic in the Regency period. Both Mary Crawford and Tom Bertram indicate that appearance is the most pertinent issue in determining the social standing of a young woman, particularly whether she is “out.” Mary, taking on the role of tutor, instructs her audience: “A girl not out has always the same sort of dress; a close bonnet looks very demure, and never says a word” (39). Such an admission would indicate that a girl who is not out is rendered invisible, marked by her clothing, and not only must she remain silent in company, but even her bonnet reinforces her quiet.[30] Appearance plays such a role in the anecdote of Tom and Miss Augusta. While politeness would have dictated that Tom must acknowledge the elder Miss Snyed and ignore Miss Augusta, Tom has the difficult task of distinguishing between the two: in response to Mary’s explanation that such niceties in fashion are not always observed, he exclaims, “Yes, that is very inconvenient indeed…. It leads one astray; one does not know what to do. The close bonnet and demure air you describe so well (and nothing was ever juster,) tell one what is expected…” (78). Obviously, Tom needs clearly legible signs to navigate society. To justify his faux pas, he can only

complain, “They looked just the same; both well dressed, with veils and parasols like other girls…” (78). For Mary and Tom, coming out is a worldly concern, one based on dress and appearance.

Dress, then, is an easily manipulated marker of status in Regency society. While the rules surrounding fashion for young women were designed to make clear the rules of social engagement, such rules were easily bent and broken. Nevertheless, this society still largely depended on such markers to judge the position of young women. Jacqueline Reid-Walsh would not, perhaps, have made a distinction between Gisborne’s concerns for modesty and vanity and those of Tom and Mary. In her article on Fanny’s position at Mansfield Park, she draws a comparison between dress and morality: “It would appear, then, that dress was perceived to be the outmost sign or signal of a woman’s manners, which in turn were only a reflection of her morals or ‘first principles’” (134). While this society ostensibly required modesty of all women, distinctions were made, distinctions which revealed not only social standing, but moral rightness as well.

Such emphasis on appearance and visibility, however, often occluded the second aspect of being out: audibility. While issues of morality are bound up in the business of coming out, the voice which would voice that morality is unheard. The two females in Tom’s anecdotes each demonstrate difficulties that arise around the issue, as both of their stories are significant because of their audibility. Miss Anderson goes through an alarming transformation upon her coming out, changing rapidly from a silent sphinx who could not muster a civil word to a talker who “stared [Tom] out of countenance” (40). Such impropriety pales, however, in comparison to that of Miss Augusta Snyed, who

being not out, is gauche enough to be "perfectly easy in her manners, and as ready to talk as to listen" when Tom attaches himself to her (41). The corresponding commentary provided by Mary and Edmund concludes that such girls have been ill-managed and poorly educated. Edmund sermonizes: "The error is plain enough. Such girls are ill-brought up. They are given wrong notions from the beginning. They are always acting upon motives of vanity – and there is no more real modesty in their behavior *before* they appear in public than afterwards" (40). Edmund's assertions echo those of the Reverend Gisborne; both men make a connection between education and the behavior of young women, and both stress that dress and manners must match social circumstances.

Early in Fanny's history, dress becomes an important marker of class distinction, especially between herself and her two female cousins. Upon her introduction to Mansfield Park, the ten-year-old is greeted by cousins who "take a full survey of her face and her frock in easy indifference" and "could not but hold her cheap on finding that she had but two sashes" (10-11). Even before her arrival, Mrs. Norris determines that she should be placed in the little white attic, a location largely attractive because of its proximity to the housemaids, "who could either of them help dress her you know [this to Lady Bertram], and take care of her clothes, for I suppose you would not think it fair to expect Ellis to wait on her as well as the others" (8). Lady Bertram evidently did not think it fair for Ellis, and so one of the many early trials Fanny endures is that "the maid-servants sneered at her clothes" (12). Clothing, and the care of clothing, thus, is shown to be an even more important marker of status than education. There is no objection to the same woman teaching both Fanny and her cousins ("it will be just the same to Miss

Lee,[31] whether she has three girls to teach, or only two —there can be no difference") but the same woman may not dress them (8). The valuing of an uneducated and lower-class but skilled lady's maid above an educated, accomplished governess reveals, perhaps, a curious truth about women in the Regency work-force: governesses were plenty, but a good lady's maid was to be respected if she were to be retained. According to Victorian records, the two were paid equivalent wages, clearly indicating that the ostensibly higher status of the governess was no privilege. This economic reality has particular resonance in discussions of Fanny Price—she already inhabits a liminal space similar to a governess, and if marriage prospects did not appear, she might have joined Jane Fairfax[32] in the Austenian purgatory of governess work.

While Mrs. Norris is determined that Fanny should remember her place, and Sir Thomas is concerned that Fanny remember that "she is not a *Miss Bertram*," Fanny is left to attempt to determine who she is and what is her place (9). Even the very simple act of appearing at dinner at the Parsonage is a cause for some consternation for Fanny. Her acceptance of the invitation to dinner must be approved by no less than three people, beginning with Edmund: "This was so new an attention, so perfectly new a circumstance in the events of Fanny's life, that she was all surprise and embarrassment; and while stammering out her great obligation, and her—'but she did not suppose it would be in her power,' was looking at Edmund for his opinion and help" (168-169). Edmund's "opinion and help" are the proper sources for Fanny. His position as male relative lends him authority, his position as clergy-to-be gravity, and his own personal opinions of conduct, which resemble in most respects those of eighteenth-century conduct book writers, mark

him as the person best suited to guide Fanny through any issue of social propriety. Fanny, however, is so exacting that even with his "decided open advice that the invitation should be accepted," she "would not venture, even on his encouragement, to such a flight of audacious independence" (169). Fanny must first receive the approval of her aunt and especially her uncle's "opinion as to the *propriety* of the invitation's being accepted or not" (170). Fanny has some fears that while awaiting his decision that, if denied, she would "not be able to appear properly submissive and indifferent," but she is ultimately rewarded with the highest approbation Sir Thomas can offer: "Fanny was perfectly right in giving only a conditional answer. She appears to feel as she ought. But as I conclude that she must wish to go, since all young people like to be together, I can see no reason why she should be denied the indulgence" (170-171). Fanny has secured not only permission to go to dinner, but also her uncle's praise—she has acted and felt properly.

Such timid meekness, such relish for patriarchal approbation hardly seems empowering, and it is little wonder that Fanny has earned the scorn of modern critics. Fanny, however, is not such a weakling as might be supposed. She does want to go, a desire that she is able to communicate to Edmund immediately with "half a look, and half a sentence" (169). Her concern is that she will be unable to *appear* submissive and indifferent if uncle rejects her request—not that she will be unable to *be* submissive and indifferent. Fanny is not trying to squelch her desires or wishes, merely to bring the appearances of those desires into a proper frame so that her tenuous position in the household will not be endangered and so that her desires stand a better chance of being

actualized. She understands her family and recognizes that proper behavior is more likely to be rewarded than open insistence on gratification.

Proper behavior extends to dress, as well. Invitation approved, Fanny's concern naturally turns to what she shall wear. In this case, she must direct herself, as "she had neither sympathy nor assistance from those who ought to have entered into her feelings and directed her taste" (171). While dress is a crucial marker of propriety and identity, Fanny is left to her own devices to determine what she should wear. By directing her own costume, she is fashioning her own subjectivity, establishing her own place in the social realm. Fanny is still concerned, however, with the propriety of her decisions, and so again, seeks Edmund's approval when he asks her what she is wearing: "The new dress that my uncle was so good as to give me on my cousin's marriage. I hope it is not too fine; but I thought I ought to wear it as soon as I could, and that I might not have such another opportunity all the winter. I hope you do not think me too fine" (174). Here, this short speech reveals the many criteria of Fanny's choice in dress: the season is considered, future opportunities of wear before the weather changes, the honor of being invited out requiring a degree of finery, but the ordinariness of a mere dinner invitation forbearing too much glamour, and her desire to please her uncle by wearing the dress he gave her are all taken into account. Most of all, she wants Edmund's approval; her speech is bookended by worry that she is "too fine," but her final appeal is that *he* would not think her too fine, and therefore improper.

Again, Edmund takes on the role of conduct authority. His decree that "A woman can never be too fine while she is all in white" has the generalizing effect of a conduct

book edict. He particularizes on Fanny, continuing with "No, I see no finery about you; nothing but what is perfectly proper. Your gown seems very pretty. I like these glossy spots" (174).[33] Both Edmund and Fanny appear to have exceptional contemporary taste. According to Penelope Byrd, an expert in Regency dress, "White gowns were soon to become the symbol of elegance, refinement and propriety" and "white was the most fashionable colour at this period" (65), a fact expressed in numerous fashion plates (see figure 4).

Edmund deeming Fanny "perfectly proper" in white is significant because white was not merely fashionable, but also a factor in tacit Regency sumptuary laws. At Southerton, Mrs. Norris relishes the gossip she collects, along with her cream cheese and heath, from the estate's housekeeper, who relates that "she has turned away two housemaids for wearing white gowns" (84). Echoes of Daniel Defoe's lament that "It is a hard matter now to know the mistress from the maid by their dress" may be heard here (Defoe 4). Practical considerations would have prevented housemaids from wearing white (white muslin could be difficult to keep clean) and so it became a symbol of the genteel leisure class. At the time, white muslin was becoming more affordable, enabling serving girls to purchase the coveted material, but wearing it was likely to be perceived as dressing above their class and result in punishment (Stabler 402). Thus, Edmund approving of Fanny in a white dress and deeming it "perfectly proper" is significant and helps to establish Fanny's social position and identity within the realm she has marked out for herself.

Figure 4. ***London Fashions for July*. *Lady's Monthly Museum, or, Polite repository of amusement and instruction* 17 (1814): 52. *British Periodicals*. *ProQuest*. Web.**

Like Pamela's, Fanny's identity may be mapped onto the clothes that she wears. Unlike Pamela, who fails to consider how her audience might misinterpret her costume, however, Fanny is hyper-vigilant in acquiring the commendation of her audience.

Edmund, however suitable a source, is not the only one to whom Fanny appeals for advice. When Sir Thomas's return and sudden notice of Fanny instigates the ball that is to be given in her honor, the sartorial stakes are raised: for a young woman, this would be one of the most visually-coded moments, barring presentation at court. Her audience will be enlarged considerably, and her appearance will necessarily be the object of scrutiny and discussion. Realizing this, Fanny decides to appeal to the inmates of the Parsonage, and Miss Crawford's opinion is sought on "how she should be dressed" (199). Her choice in advisor is based on Miss Crawford's "acknowledged taste" and the hope that such taste would "certainly bear her blameless" (201). Fanny has perhaps come to this conclusion because Mary has dressed her before. On one of Fanny's early visits to the parsonage, she is caught in a rainstorm, and the narrative mentions that Mary "provid[ed] her with dry clothes" (161). This seems a minor moment in the course of the novel, but it is interestingly expanded in Patricia Rozema's 1999 film adaptation. Whatever the flaws of this version,[34] this scene provides interesting insight into Mary Crawford and the dangers of wearing someone else's clothes. A dripping Fanny, stripped to her chemise and corset is evaluated by Mary in a moment that is both erotic and tense. Mary is clearly sizing up her competition, and without the clothes that convey her identity, Fanny is vulnerable—she is both physically and emotionally manipulated by Mary. However, Mary is still considered the fashion expert, so the Fanny of the novel appeals to her advice. To Fanny, a sartorial faux pas would not be merely embarrassing, but a serious infraction—again, dress is a duty to Fanny, and her security and identity are wrapped up in maintaining each point of propriety.

The point in question is not merely what dress to wear, but what jewelry. William has brought Fanny an amber cross from Sicily,[35] but she has no chain on which to hang it. William's enterprising employment as sailor has provided Fanny with her only bit of finery, but his limited funds have not provided the means to actually wear it. Her quandary then is one of propriety—she must gain access to a chain in order to legitimate her amber cross and make it proper at the ball so that it will be "allowable at such a time, in the midst of all the rich ornaments which she supposed all the other young ladies would appear in" (199). Fanny's dilemma in which "she did not know how either to wear the cross, or to refrain from wearing it" illustrates her liminal, in-between status, and Fanny is faced with the need to both appear properly dressed for the rich society she has been placed in and to consider the feelings of her beloved brother who might be mortified if she does not wear his cross.

Fanny is presented with two possible solutions to her dilemma. The first is the kind gift of Miss Crawford, who offers her the choice of an "old necklace" (202). In making this choice, Fanny again must choose between propriety and kindness. She senses that Mary is subtly urging her toward one necklace in particular, and "though Fanny would have preferred a longer and a plainer chain as more adapted for her purpose, she hoped in fixing on this, to be chusing what Miss Crawford least wished to keep" (202). A longer and plainer chain would be more proper for her purposes, but Fanny chooses the one that she believes Mary would miss the least. In choosing kindness over propriety in this case, Fanny has mired herself further in sartorial confusion, for she finds that she has been trapped. Although accepting the gift of a female friend would not be

improper, impropriety is forced on Fanny when Miss Crawford reveals that "You must think of Henry, for it was his choice in the first place. He gave it to me, and with the necklace I make over to you all the duty of remembering the original giver." When Fanny protests the gift, Mary proposes three motives:

> 'Do you think Henry will claim the necklace as mine, and fancy you did not come honestly by it?—or are you imagining he would be too much flattered by seeing round your lovely throat an ornament which his money purchased…—or perhaps' —looking archly—'you suspect a confederacy between us, and that what I am doing is with his knowledge and at his desire?' (203)

Each proposed motive reveals the various aspects of impropriety facing Fanny. The first insinuates that by wearing the necklace she would be dressing above her class, an act associated with dishonesty—she will be stealing rank. The second and third indicate that, like Pamela, Fanny is entangled in a delicate web of sexual connotation. Henry's money purchased the necklace, as Mary phrases it, indicating that, by extension, the neck that wears it similarly belongs to him. If Fanny recognizes that it is by Henry's desire that she wears the necklace, then she becomes complicit in this sexual contract.

Fortunately, Fanny is once again rescued by Edmund who has purchased a chain to be worn with her cross. Fanny's raptures over the chain clearly indicate the inclination of her own desires: "this is the very thing, precisely what I wished for! this is the only ornament I have ever had a desire to possess. It will exactly suit my cross. They must and shall be worn together" (205). Fanny's desire for the chain is clearly connected to her desire for Edmund, a match that she sees as perfect and appropriate—Edmund's

simple chain fits William's amber cross, legitimating it and elevating it to ballroom status. Edmund is not only Fanny's desire, but her chosen means of social stability.

Being Looked At and Being Heard

Fanny's social stability, thus, comes down to the act of being looked at and found appropriate. While Fanny experiences a good deal of anxiety over the propriety of her appearance, she is similarly distressed to find herself the object of any scrutiny. A crucial turning point in the novel occurs when Sir Thomas returns from Antigua. Fanny is greeted by her uncle with "But where is Fanny?—Why do I not see my little Fanny?" (139). The formerly invisible Fanny Price is suddenly made visible with her uncle's question. This immediate change disallows Fanny the ability to calmly observe herself: she "knew not how to feel, nor where to look" (139), which is in contrast to the typically self-aware Fanny—self-scrutiny and scrutiny by others are not compatible. Fanny finds a great deal of discomfort at being the object of the gaze, a discomfort that Edmund tries to allay: "You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.—You must try not to mind growing up into a pretty woman" (154-155). This prospect is daunting to Fanny because such notice possibly threatens her social stability. Her security depends upon propriety, and that propriety, she hopes, renders her unremarkable and therefore invisible. She clings desperately to the "close bonnet," clothing whose loudest statement is that of the propriety of the wearer. However, paradoxically, her social stability is equally dependent on her ability to make a good marriage—a project that will necessarily involve being seen. Fanny's prettiness, the neatness of her dress—her appearance, in short—all contribute to the likelihood of her making an agreeable

marriage that will ensure social stability. Thus, Fanny must navigate terrain in which she is invisible, except when she must be seen; and, when she is seen, she must be perceived in the appropriate light.

Despite the importance of this perception, she cannot completely control the reading that a viewer will give to her costume. Like Pamela, Fanny encounters a man who willfully sexualizes a dress that is meant to convey propriety. In comparing Fanny's appearance last autumn to that on the night of her dining at the Parsonage, Henry Crawford claims, "She was then merely a quiet, modest, not plain looking girl, but she is now absolutely pretty" (179). The pragmatic Mary recognizes this transformation has more to do with Fanny's costume than anything else: "She has got a new gown, and you never saw her so well dressed before….I am sure it may all be resolved into a better style of dress and your having nobody else to look at" (180). Neither Henry nor Mary quite recognizes that Fanny's costume is accompanied by her voice. Neither dreams that mousy Fanny harbors opinions about each that are not flattering, that she objects to them both on matters of morality and propriety. Fanny reaches a juncture at which allowing her clothes to speak for her is not enough, and she must voice her position as well. When Crawford mentions the "unlucky return" of Sir Thomas, which put an end to the company's play acting, Fanny may no longer content herself with "silent indignation," and responds to Crawford "with a firmer tone than usual, 'As far as *I* am concerned, sir, I would not have delayed his return for a day. My uncle disapproved it all so entirely when he did arrive, that in my opinion, everything had gone quite far enough'" (176-177). While Fanny's point is one that reinforces attention to propriety, duty, and moral

obligation, she also calls attention to *her* own opinion, as far as *she* is concerned, with a decidedly un-timid tone: "She had never spoken so much at once to him in her life before, and never so angrily to any one." She asserts a subjectivity that quells even rakish Henry Crawford, who admits, "I believe you are right. It was more pleasant than prudent. We were getting too noisy" (177). Fanny, whose appearance has been so concerned with maintaining each aspect of propriety, finally asserts a voice that promotes propriety as well, one that goes beyond mere social forms.

Fanny's piercing moral commentary is largely the product of her marginalized social position. She is ignored and invisible to most of the company, an invisibility she carefully cultivates in her propriety of dress. However, this position allows her a better opportunity of observing those around her. During the play-acting episode, Fanny refuses to take part in the performance, but is a more than willing spectator. This position as unseen observer allows her access into the intentions, motivations, and short-comings of the assembled party: "Fanny looked on and listened, not unamused to observe the selfishness which, more or less disguised, seemed to govern them all, and wondering how it would end" (104). Fanny is not fooled by any disguises put on by the others and can discern their true characters. She is particularly alarmed by the flirtation taken up between Maria and Crawford, and again, sees through the pretense: "Maria she also thought acted well—too well… Mr. Crawford was considerably the best actor of all" (129). Fanny's position as observer allows her to recognize that despite the appearance of politeness and the masquerade of staged romance, Maria and Crawford are able to act so well because they are not truly acting at all.

Fanny's ability to observe the dangers of departures from propriety is not limited to the home theatre. From her confined situation on the bench at Sotherton, Fanny warns Maria against an unconventional and indecorous route: "'You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram,' she cried, 'you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes—you will tear your gown—you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go" (79). Of course, Fanny's warning takes on a moral implication given the outcome of the novel; Maria certainly does slip in her pursuit of Henry Crawford. Fanny, stationary, confined, and marginalized, may take on the role of observer. She also attempts, however, to take on the role of moral guide. Through her invisible and largely inaudible situation, she is granted greater access to the visibility and audibility of others.[36] Her concern for Maria's gown and Maria's propriety are almost superimposed – a tear in her cousin's dress would be a visible emblem of her sexual indecency, like Pope's Belinda who might "stain her honor, or her new brocade" (Canto II, line 107). Maria demonstrates her blindness in this crucial moment through her flippant reply: "Thank you, my dear Fanny, but I and my gown are alive and well, and so good bye" (79). For Maria, even her gown seems to feel alive, so enlivened is she by her escape from the iron bars of propriety.

Unlike Maria, who acts in order to act out her desires and takes action to escape her fetters, Fanny refuses to behave outside the bounds of carefully ordered propriety. When Tom nearly commands Fanny to take the part of Cottager's wife in the play, Fanny out right refuses: "Indeed you must excuse me. I could not act for any thing if you were to give me the world. No, indeed, I cannot act" (115). Although Fanny's refusal is

prompted by her repudiation of the inappropriate project, she also refuses to perform in the play because it would compromise her performance in the family. She already thoroughly inhabits the role of the "proper woman" which requires its own lines and costumes. Tom's suggestion of "a brown gown, and a white apron, and a mob cap" will not do for her either. Fanny has determined where both her moral and sartorial lines are drawn and will not cross them.[37] She maintains this position even when Edmund, her advisor and guide in proper conduct concludes that he must act himself. In a significant role reversal, Edmund finds himself seeking Fanny's approval of his conduct: "Give me your approbation, then, Fanny. I am not comfortable without it" (122). Fanny's adherence to propriety has given her voice and opinion weight with the one most important to her.

The costumes for the play signify a dramatic interaction that is carried out beneath the surface of the play. While the novel is the medium of the middle class, the play was still the provenance of an earlier social structure that was more concerned with the extremes of the spectrum. The play is peopled with Counts and Barons (and those who will be revealed as the sons of barons) as well as butlers and cottagers. The only two costumes discussed are those of Cottager's wife, which Fanny rejects out of hand, and that of Count Cassel, played by the stupid Mr. Rushworth. Rushworth's vanity (and short-sightedness) are revealed in his pre-occupation with his clothes: he "liked the idea of his finery very well, though affecting to despise it, and was too much engaged with what his own appearance would be, to think of the others, or draw any of those conclusions, or feel any of that displeasure, which Maria had been half prepared for"

(109). Rushworth is so consumed with his costume that he doesn't realize that he has been given the least desirable part and that his fiancée has arranged things in order to play a very physically affectionate mother to another man. Just as Rushworth's real status and wealth give him possession of an estate that he cannot control (gates are locked, fiancées are disappearing on the grounds), his aristocratic status in the play gives him a fancy wardrobe ("a blue dress, and a pink satin cloak, and afterwards…another fine fancy suit by way of a shooting dress") but not the means of securing his future wife's respect (109). By refusing to take part in the play, Fanny is rejecting both the servile dowdiness of the peasantry and the vain and ineffective excesses of the aristocracy. Her own dress represents middle-class prudence and morality, which will stand in contrast with both the filthy squalor of her parents' Portsmouth home and the patriarchal tyranny of Sir Thomas.

Her refusal to act in the play, thus, is a mere dress-rehearsal for the epic defiance toward her uncle. Sir Thomas's return to Mansfield initiated Fanny's visibility: he takes notice of her, purchases the dress which both Edmund and Henry Crawford heartily approve, and orders the ball that is to mark her coming out into society. Sir Thomas's interactions with Fanny all result in her increased visibility, and Sir Thomas is not unhappy with what he sees. At the ball, "Her neatness and propriety of her dress was all that he would allow himself to commend in her presence, but upon her leaving the room again soon afterwards, he spoke of her beauty with very decided praise" (213). So high is his opinion of her, in fact, that Sir Thomas believes her capable of surmounting social barriers that would otherwise have been inconceivable—the marriage of a poor seaman's daughter to a man of considerable independent fortune—and his basis for this belief is

very similar to Richardson's belief in Pamela's desserts in her social ascension: virtue. Fanny is "peculiarly free from willfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit,[38] which prevails so much in modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offense" (249). Sir Thomas wishes to display Fanny's qualities, both of nature and appearance, before Crawford; at the end of the ball, Sir Thomas sends Fanny away to bed, not thinking merely of her health and fatigue, but also "he might mean to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness" (220). When his interview with Fanny concerning Crawford's proposal results in tears, he thinks better of sending Fanny down to Crawford: "when he looked at his niece, and saw the state of feature and complexion which her crying had brought her into, he thought there might be much lost as gained by an immediate interview" (250). In other words, Fanny's value might be diminished if her looks are impaired. In *Bardic Nationalism*, Katie Trumpener argues that in Antigua Sir Thomas experienced a moral re-education concerning slavery, and on his return home he replaces an "indifferent paternalism with a more active and egalitarian conception of fatherhood" (177). Whatever his views on slavery in his Caribbean plantations, Sir Thomas's notions of fatherhood hardly seem softened by any abolitionist tendencies. In fact, Edward Said's massively influential reading of *Mansfield Park* includes a comparison of the house-cleaning Sir Thomas enacts upon his return when he finds his rooms turned into a theatre, ("Not only is this a Crusoe setting things in order: it is also an early Protestant eliminating all traces of frivolous behavior") with his mission to fix whatever was amiss on his Antiguan plantation. Said argues that "Austen here

synchronizes domestic with international authority, making it plain that the values associated with such higher things as ordination, law, and *propriety* must be grounded firmly in actual rule over and possession of territory" (87, my emphasis). While Fanny may have gloried in Sir Thomas's earlier praise of her propriety, she here experiences a significant rift from the patriarchal, colonizer version of propriety. For her, propriety is grounded, not in possession of territory, but in a balance between social convention and personal desire. Fanny is clearly a commodity[39] that Sir Thomas wants to sell on the marriage market, regardless of her own desires and actually regardless of his earlier commitment to the social conventions prohibiting marriages of different classes.

Fanny is able to effect a type of defiant propriety that belies her timid, mousy reputation, based on a method of order and boundaries that the novel upholds. She simultaneously asserts her right to desire and marry the man of her choosing and scrupulously maintains all aspects of proper behavior. In the end, it is her propriety, especially in contrast with the behavior of Maria, Julia, and Mary, that wins her Sir Thomas's affection and his eagerness for the match between Edmund and Fanny: "Sick of ambitious and mercenary connections, prizing more and more the sterling good of principle and temper, and chiefly anxious to bind by the strongest securities all that remained to him of domestic felicity," Sir Thomas joyfully assents to Edmund's application (370). Of course, he still views Fanny as a commodity: "having realised a great acquisition in the promise of Fanny for a daughter," and "Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted" (371). His sense of satisfaction is no doubt increased in the sense that Fanny is an asset that he has invested in and sees a return on: "His charitable

kindness had been rearing a prime comfort for himself. His liberality had a rich repayment, and the general goodness of his intentions by her, deserved it" (371).

Ultimately, Fanny's attempts to create and maintain her own subjectivity, demonstrated through proper dress, proper behavior, and proper opinion, succeeds because she gains the respect of those she respects—notably Edmund and Sir Thomas. Certainly, this could be seen as a dubious achievement—she has followed the mandates of a patriarchal society and won the approbation of the domestic patriarchs. However, she also achieves her own desires—autonomy, the ability to observe, social stability, and love. Edmund and Fanny remove to Mansfield Parsonage, and Fanny is released from the "painful sensation of restraint [and] alarm" that had accompanied her position as marginalized, uncategorized niece. Instead, she takes on the position of observer and judge once more, finding "everything perfect in her eyes," indicating not only contentment, but agency. She is once again free to look, having carefully navigated the dilemma of "being looked at." It is clear that sister Susan has learned from Fanny's success: on her way to take Fanny's place at Mansfield Park, she is able to indulge in "smiles…unseen" by sitting "screened by her bonnet" (350). The close bonnet that never says a word, so scorned by Mary Crawford, has earned its wearer both a sartorial and social victory.

Although Susan is clearly "the new Fanny," she and her close bonnet function very differently from her timid older sister. Although it takes Fanny eight years to overcome sensations of "restraint and alarm," and to feel a sense of ownership at Mansfield, Susan is much more forward:

> She was established at Mansfield, with every appearance of equal permanency. Her more fearless disposition and happier nerves made every thing easy to her there.—With quickness in understanding the tempers of those she had to deal with, and no natural timidity to restrain any consequent wishes, she was soon welcome, and useful to all. (371)

Susan's fearlessness and especially her "quickness in understanding the tempers of those she had to deal with," aligns her less with her sister Fanny and more with the heroine of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette*. Lucy Snowe uses a figurative cloak and hood of hodden gray, rather than Fanny and Susan's literal close bonnet to screen her own countenance and motives while examining those of others. Her ability to surveill those around her and make swift, penetrating judgments enables her, like Susan, to access greater freedom and power.

Ironically, Charlotte Brontë famously rejected Austen's work, writing in a letter to W.S. Williams that

> the passions are perfectly unknown to her: she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood... what sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study: but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, what is the unseen seat of Life and the sentient target of death—this Miss Austen ignores… (qtd. in Fraser 363-364)

Despite Brontë's dislike of Austen's quiet restraint and her apparently passionless females, I see that both Brontë and Austen have characters who employ similar methods.[40] It is unclear whether Brontë read *Mansfield Park* (the above critique was based on *Emma*, and she wrote a similarly dismissive review of *Pride and Prejudice* to George Lewes), but if she disapproves of Emma and Elizabeth, she might have found

room to sympathize with Fanny and Susan; they may not be members of the "stormy Sisterhood," but they at least wear the uniform.

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[23] Sir Thomas, in particular, recognizes the dangers of Fanny's uncategorized social standing. When contemplating the adoption of his niece, he worries about "his own four children—of his own two sons—of cousins in love" (5). Even at the tender age of ten, Fanny is a sexual threat because an attachment between herself and her cousin would upset the social balance of wealth marrying wealth.

[24] Potter contrasts Fanny's private and peculiar selfishness with the more standard forms of selfishness practiced, but rarely recognized, in Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse who tend toward over-confidence in their own wit and judgment and who must be schooled in their imperfections before they are allowed to make happy matches with men who, ironically, tend toward over-confidence and selfishness themselves (613).

[25] In her article "Pains and Pleasures of the Automaton: Frances Burney's Mechanics of Coming Out," Julie Park makes clear the comparison between these young women and machines who took part in a whirling social gear.

[26] The early nineteenth-century understanding of polite female behavior was grounded in a history of suspicion about women. Joseph Swetnam, a seventeenth-century writer, painted a particularly chilling image of woman as ravenous, inconstant, and cruel (Poovey 4). Contemporary opinion held that women were naturally weak and given to inappropriate and insatiable desires, so social structures such as the church sought to train women to be modest and chaste, to be proper. However, as the eighteenth century progressed, the definition of a proper lady changed from one who does not act on her

desires to one who does not desire. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, a proper lady was cold and passive, and she expressed this propriety through polite reserve. With a radically different stance (although one with the same objective as their seventeenth-century predecessors), nineteenth-century moralists considered women to be naturally modest and reserved (Poovey 15). Fanny is a challenge to Swetnam's concept of propriety negating desire, as Fanny proves the two to be congruent.

[27] This allegory is, of course, not without problems. Hannah More's 1782 poem "Sensibility" takes on the famous epithet from Richardson's *Clarissa*: "what are words but the body and dress of thought." More's criticism: "These lovely marks may be counterfeit" (qtd. in Batchelor 2).

[28] These new materials were implicated in Britain's spreading imperial projects—cotton grown in colonized India or on West Indian plantations was being sent back to England, and, as George E. Boulukos insists in "The Politics of Silence: *Mansfield Park* and the Amelioration of Slavery," slavery was openly discussed and written about in the early nineteenth-century; those fashionable belles must have realized where their muslin came from.

[29] There were many attempts to revive the woolen industry, including the Stuff Balls. Fashionable people in manufacturing areas such as Lincolnshire went to balls where all the guests wore stuff wool clothes in the same color. Apparently these were more well-intentioned than effective; in 1791, Lady Banks wrote, "I can't say much for

the Manufacture, but it was certainly a charming good Meeting. Lady Brownlow is to be our Patroness next year" (qtd. in Buck 194).

[30] Mary's belief that the close bonnet "never says a word" indicates her inability to read such a garment as a marker of the wearer's propriety. Of course, the clothing of the quiet young woman is communicating identity as much as any fine gown that Miss Crawford may wear. Ironically, Tom's explanation that the close bonnet and quiet air tell one "what is to be expected" indicates that, whatever else he may lack in sartorial literacy, he at least recognizes that such garments are communicating a clear message.

[31] Governesses, like Miss Lee, experienced a social marginalization similar to Fanny's own. Interestingly, Fanny is urged to take the part of Cottager's Wife, which was to be played by the governess at Ecclesford, indicating similar status and importance in the casting of such performances.

[32] Jane Fairfax a bit melodramatically compares the governess profession with the slave trade in Austen's *Emma*, and is saved from this fate only by marriage to Frank Churchill. Jane, like Fanny, is a pretty girl, socially buoyed by higher class associations, indicating that beauty might overcome some social differences. Even Harriet Smith, the natural daughter of *somebody*, marries a respectable farmer (though not, of course, the clergyman or landed gentry) through her good looks and easy manners.

[33] This must have been quite an elegant gown. Not only was it fashionably white and almost certainly muslin, but the "glossy spots" Edmund refers to would have been decorative embroidery or a woven pattern. According to Byrd, "Muslin gowns were

frequently embroidered in white or woven with a gold or silver thread for evening or Court dress" (67).

[34] Rozema's film is not a faithful adaptation of the novel. Most strikingly, Fanny Price in the movie bears no resemblance to her literary incarnation. In fact, she is a spunky, Hollywood version of Jane Austen herself, penning witty letters and even taking the credit for *The History of England* "by a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant historian," which Austen herself completed when she was sixteen. The inability of a film-maker to represent Fanny as she appears in the novel speaks to the continued distaste of critics. Shy morality apparently does not lend itself to interesting movie-making.

[35] Jane Austen's sailor brother bought "gold chains and topaz crosses" for sister Cassandra and herself with his prize money, possibly serving as inspiration for William's gift to Fanny (Byrd 51).

[36] Fanny's marginalized presence is similar to that of Jane Eyre. Jane too is allowed to occupy an unnoticed corner from which she may observe the party which Mr. Rochester has brought to Thornfield. Like Fanny, she is largely unnoticed, and therefore may turn a speculative gaze on the company (see chapters 17-20). Interestingly, Mary Crawford is not unlike Blanche Ingram; both are dark, sparkling beauties who prove rivals for the heroines and are ultimately judged as shallow, title-hungry, and inappropriate.

[37] Significantly, the role that Tom would have Fanny take is at cross-purposes to her desire to maintain social stability. As Cottager's wife, a part that none of the other young women wish to take, Fanny would be acting out the part of a social inferior to the

aristocratic parts taken by the others. As Mr. Yates points out, it was the part to be given to the governess at Ecclesford as "the most trivial, paltry, insignificant part; the merest common-place—not a tolerable speech in the whole" (106). Tom further demeans the part to Fanny when he explains "it is a nothing of a part, a mere nothing, not above half a dozen speeches altogether, and it will not much signify if nobody hears a word you say, so you may be as creepmouse as you like, but we must have you to look at" (115). This would be a reversal of Fanny's purposes—to be looked at and not heard, when she desires more to be properly invisible, but her voice taken seriously.

[38] Sir Thomas is, of course, mistaken, both in his judgment of Fanny's "independence of spirit" and just what that phrase might mean. While both Sir Thomas and modern critics are correct in believing Fanny unlike the spirited and independent Emma and Elizabeth, for whom things turn out well, and Lydia and Maria, for whom things do not turn out so well, they are mistaken in believing that Fanny will not exercise her will as an individual.

[39] This is not, however, to promote a definitive comparison between Fanny and a slave on a sugar cane plantation. Clearly, Fanny as a middle-class English woman has a good deal of inherent agency. In fact, in many ways Fanny could be contributing to the colonial process—her costume is the product of empire: the muslin dress she wears is likely made of cotton produced in India, her amber cross necklace is purchased by her sea-faring brother in Sicily, and if he brings her a shawl when he brings one for his aunt Bertram (who believes she will have two shawls and "any thing else that is worth having" (239)), that, too, will be from the East Indies. Although Fanny represents a middle-class

English morality, her sartorial identity is also enmeshed in Sir Thomas's colonial impulses.

[40] Fanny Price and Lucy Snowe also share a similar internal struggle – a conflict between passion and reason. Fanny struggles with her love for Edmund: "It was her intention, as she felt it to be her duty, to try to overcome all that was excessive, all that bordered on selfishness in her affection for Edmund…. To think of him as Miss Crawford might be justified in thinking, would in her be insanity…. She would endeavor to be rational" (207). Lucy struggles with her feelings for Graham, entertaining an internal dialogue between her passionate self and Reason: "'But if I feel, may I never express?' 'Never!' declared Reason" (229). Although Fanny's passion seems colder, distanced by the narrative voice, the two heroines are clearly dealing in similar dilemmas with not unequal feeling.

CHAPTER IV

THE CLOAK AND HOOD OF HODDEN GRAY: DRESS AND DISGUISE IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S *VILLETTE*

What though on hamely fare we dine,
Wear hodden grey, an' a that;
Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;
A Man's a Man for a' that
~Robert Burns, "Song: For a' that and a' that"

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—
~Emily Dickinson

Upon arriving at the Rue Fossette, Lucy Snowe, heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, is faced with two searches. First, she is subjected to M. Paul's physiognomic study; then, Madame Beck covertly searches her belongings. This paired investigation demonstrates the narrative's fascination with the comparison of the internal and external; and, further, the idea that the external may reveal the internal. Both the physiognomic investigation and the study of her wardrobe are attempts to read Lucy's character in the external signs of her face and her dress. Johann Kasper Lavater, an eighteenth-century proponent of physiognomy, defined physiognomy as "the science or knowledge of the correspondence between the external and internal man, the visible superficies and the invisible contents" (19). He and other adherents of physiognomy believed that the features of the body directly correspond to features of the mind or character.[41] Thus, when Madame Beck directs M. Paul to "read that countenance," she is proposing that he

literally read Lucy as though she were a book. Despite Lavater's apparent confidence that the face may be as clearly read as a book, Paul's reading of Lucy is ambivalent—he cannot determine if good or evil will predominate. Although Paul later proves to be keenly aware of Lucy's inner-thoughts and personality, this moment of inscrutability in an ostensibly legible text provides a precedent for the novel.

The study of physiognomy and the related science of phrenology were Victorian fascinations, and the desire to glean knowledge from visible signs leaked into other categories. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, whose scathing review of *Jane Eyre* questioned the author's taste in fashion,[42] wrote in a short treatise on "The Art of Dress" that "dress becomes a sort of symbolical language—a kind of personal glossary—a species of body phrenology, the study of which it would be madness to neglect" (375). However, when Madame Beck attempts this type of study, assuming, like Lady Eastlake, that Lucy's dress will be a "personal glossary," a key to the enigmatic Lucy's identity, it too proves to be as ambiguous as M. Paul's physiognomic reading. Although Lucy affirms, "Madame had…scrutinized all I had, and I believe she esteemed herself cognizant of much that I was," Madame Beck is still stumped by Lucy's past. Lucy quite understands why Madame would make such an investigation: "I divined her motive for this proceeding, vis., the wish to form from the garments a judgment respecting the wearer, her station, means, neatness, &c." (69). Like reading physiognomy, reading dress is an attempt to determine inner qualities through outward signs; and like a study of physiognomy, the results of such a sartorial reading may be ambiguous.

Although Lucy both understands and condemns this surveillance ("The ends were not bad, but the means hardly fair or justifiable"), she herself, and the narrative through her, uses the same diagnostic for determining the characters of all those she encounters (69). Lucy is an adept reader: she studies both countenances and wardrobes, and she judges with what mete she is judged. When M. Paul reads her physiognomy for Madame Beck, she is reading his: "The little man fixed on me his spectacles. A resolute compression of the lips, and gathering of the brow, seemed to say he meant to see through me, and that a veil would be no veil for him" (66). Lucy also returns the scrutinizing gaze that Madame Beck uses on her wardrobe: "her dark silk dress fitted her as a French sempstress alone can make a dress fit; she looked well, though a little bourgeoise: as bourgeoise, indeed, she was" (71-72). *Villette* is filled with examples of both types of readings, and the narrative seems to approve both methods of judging character. However, there is a significant difference in the two types of surveillance. Physiognomy is based on the body—something beyond the control of the individual. The individual's dress, however, is largely at her own discretion—she may not choose her face, but she does choose what she will wear.

Lucy and her narrative are largely interested in how an individual chooses an identity by choosing a dress. Lucy makes a study of her friends, colleagues, and students, though she does not stoop to Madame Beck's outright espionage. Rather, Lucy relies on those things the wearer makes most plain; she looks at their deliberate statement to the scopic world as evidence of their desire to be perceived. Of course, this intentionality complicates the premise of surveillance, which is to determine truth about a character—

because clothing is chosen, it may be used to deceive. That very deception, however, may be revealing—the tension between body and dress, between unalterable truth and possible artifice (as the narrative might have it), provides a space for authoring an identity. This is what Lucy does: she reads the identities of others in their clothing, and manipulates her own identity through her dress. As a result, moments of reading in the novel become fraught—Lucy reads, but is not read. She authors an illegible text, or, more accurately, she appears to proffer one text while concealing another.[43] Lucy's duplicitous purpose is, of course, complicated by the fact that she is *our* narrator as well. If her face and dress are not open books, neither, ironically, is her narrative. She creates a text here that deceives, confounds, and patronizes, implicating the reader in her creation-through-concealment paradox of identity.

Lucy's intentional obscurity has been the subject of much critical energy. Most critics agree that Lucy's narrative unreliability is designed to subvert some category: however, few critics can agree on what it is she is trying to subvert. In Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Lucy's narrative ambiguity is seen as a strategy to combat the oppressive nature of the patriarchal structure that punishes women who would take up the masculine task of authorship. Tony Tanner in "Substance and Shadow: Reading Reality in *Villette*" argues that it is "bourgeois boundaries" that Lucy is trying to escape. Nancy Rabinowitz favors Gilbert and Gubar's feminist stance, but argues that Lucy's unreliable narrative is really an "attempt to escape the conventional dictates of the realist form" (Nestor 8). Lucy is certainly struggling against confinement: but, is it class, gender, genre, or something else that confines her?

While most critics focus on the literal narrative and its implications for subversion, few consider the parallel narrative written in clothing. While Lucy's costume is superficially conventional, there are details in the narrative that indicate the she is using this medium as well as the narrative subversively. She is well aware of how dress may signify allegiance with social categories such as types and classes of femininity or even gender identification, and she uses this knowledge to avoid aligning herself with these categories and becoming a scopic object. Ultimately, the novel may be read as the heroine's attempts to fashion her own identity through her appearance in a world of watchers, making a bid for subjectivity by standing in between object categories, and pursuing autonomy sartorially as well as socially and financially. As a character who speaks but little, even to her readers, Lucy relies heavily on visible signifiers to communicate herself, and those signifiers parallel the techniques she uses in relaying her narrative.

If Lucy's identity is a mystery, the narrative also presents problems to the reader. As Tim Dolin enumerates in the introduction to the Oxford edition, the novel "appears to lack unity and coherence" and uses "radically different kinds of language, punctuating its 'plain tale' (pg. 65) with dense rhetorical interludes." Further, Brontë's text "mixes different genres and modes of expression, shifting between realism, with its overt concerns for plausibility and causation, and Gothic romance, with its concern for sensational emotional effects" (xviii). Lucy as narrator is notably frustrating—she withholds information and teases and patronizes the reader. These challenges to the reader are not mistakes, however. After a period of difficulty in the late 40s and early 50s, in which she dealt with the grief of her siblings' deaths and the burden of her public

identity as the author of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë wrote that she was ready to write "the plain truth" (*Life and Letters* iii. 31). The "plain truth," however, clearly does not match with typical definitions. Just as Lucy uses dress to both reveal and obscure an identity she has created herself, Brontë manipulates the conventions of fiction to write a novel that lays bare not "the naked facts and circumstances," but "the actual suffering and experience," as George Lewes distinguishes between them in his review of *Jane Eyre* (691). In the same vein as Emily Dickinson's poem, Brontë will "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," obscuring her narrative and manipulating the conventions of fiction to craft a story that allows her to both reveal and conceal.

In this chapter, I will examine Lucy's strategies to avoid confinement by social or sartorial convention, as well as the evasive strategies employed in the narrative. Unlike Pamela, Lucy is an adept reader, and unlike Fanny, she is thoroughly confident in both her reading and authorship. She is not so much concerned with social propriety as she is with remaining unfettered. Like Fanny, she seeks invisibility and an unmolested position as voyeur, but her methods differ—she works in duplicity and misdirection, using subtle elements of her costume to represent her break with convention. Like both Pamela and Fanny, however, her goal is to achieve subjectivity, to author and create her own identity, and to escape the confines of a strictly structured society.

This study will necessarily depend on historical detail. While Lucy's role as narrator has been discussed from a variety of angles, placing her story and her sartorial choices within a historicized context allows for a more nuanced understanding of her strategies. By examining the text in conjunction with contemporary concepts of gender

roles, ideologies of femininity, and the attendant conventions of dress, we can see more clearly the ways in which Lucy is resisting and manipulating her social order. Ultimately, despite the unconventional nature of narrator and narrative, Lucy's story provides a piercing interrogation of Victorian society as well as an example of how that society may be effectively defied through the power of dress.

Dangerous Dressing

Although Lucy uses dress to escape the confines of society, Victorian society also placed conventions on dress. These boundaries allow clothing to communicate with the viewer. Thus, Madame has good reason to examine Lucy's clothes in order to determine her "station, means, and neatness." Clothing, especially in the hierarchically coded Victorian era, reveals much through the culture's tacit sumptuary laws, which indicated that those "dressing above their station" are inherently guilty. The narrative makes a fine example of this in the person of Mrs. Sweeny, the nursery-governess. Almost immediately after Madame Beck has searched her wardrobe, Lucy turns her own eye on the dress of her predecessor. She first comments on the impossibility of determining Mrs. Sweeny's station. Although the woman claims to have been in the employment of a marquis, Lucy shrewdly surmises that "she might possibly have been hanger-on, nurse, fosterer, or washer-woman, in some Irish family" (70).[44] However, the truly damning evidence against Mrs. Sweeny is her wardrobe, consisting of expensive silk gowns that do not fit and were "apparently made for other proportions than those they now adorned"; real lace caps; and a real cashmere shawl, which is certainly sullied when it swaddles Mrs. Sweeny's "broad shoulders" (70). The juxtaposition of the repeatedly "real" articles

of clothing and the apparently unaristocratic lineaments of Mrs. Sweeny is more than enough to rouse the doubts of Lucy Snowe, who suggests that the woman had "by some means or other…acquired and now held in possession, a wardrobe of rather suspicious splendor" (70). The means obviously suggested are theft or payment for some unmentionable favor, and the message is unmistakable: Mrs. Sweeny has transgressed an unwritten dress-code by possessing clothing not in keeping with her social station, and Lucy is able to divine this transgression because she can read both character and costume. The tension in this case between lower-class body and higher-class clothing is a dead giveaway that Mrs. Sweeny is using her wardrobe to deceive her employer and community. Interestingly, Brontë (or at least, Lucy) seems to agree with Lady Eastlake that the upper and lower classes must observe distinctions in dress. She writes in "Art of Dress," "How is it possible that the same form of garment which is adapted to the rich and delicate materials, and the slight figure of the woman who lives at ease, should suit the rough textures and clumsy make of the woman who lives by labour!" (386-7). Both Brontë and Eastlake, in a rare moment of agreement, are invested in essentializing class differences. For Eastlake, however, the primary transgression is that a lower-class woman may attempt to pass for an upper-class woman, expressing "ungodly discontent" by attempting to overcome social boundaries ("*Vanity Fair*—and *Jane Eyre*" 93).[45] Brontë, on the other hand, seems more concerned with the immoral behavior that dressing above one's class would indicate.

Similarly, the possibility of exchanging dress for favors is what drives Lucy to reprove Ginevra Fanshawe, who appears before her in gay and gaudy costume because

"*somebody*, far from grudging one a present, was quite delighted at the idea of being permitted to offer some trifle" (154). Rather than take Ginevra's rather romantic and imperious view on Graham/Isidore's gifts, Lucy sees the subtext, and in a prim, school-teacherly way informs Ginevra that "it stands to reason that by accepting his presents you give him to understand he will one day receive an equivalent, in your regard" (155). In other words, Ginevra may have to earn her ornaments, or, worse yet, those who see her will suspect she has already made a down-payment. The exchange of clothing between unmarried man and unmarried woman is a sexual exchange, at least implicitly or symbolically. Equally problematic, middle-class sensibility frowned on showy displays of wealth in young women, equating it with immodesty. The *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* frequently repeated the virtues of young women dressing simply, as that would make them all the more attractive to potential husbands. In fact, "The excessive expense of an extravagant toilet intimidates men and prevents them thinking seriously of an establishment which offers nothing for the future but the shameful waste of means" (qtd. in Byrde, *Nineteenth-Century Fashion* 118). Middle-class modesty coupled with middle-class frugality prompts Lucy to advise Ginevra to not only protect her reputation but her marriage prospects as well.

Clearly, clothing can say much about a character's social or sexual status, as well as the status to which they may aspire. Clothing categorizes, sorting wearers into various class designations, genders, occupations, and other identifications. Despite the rigidity such categories imply, these categories are easily transmuted. The perception of identity can be changed as easily as a set of clothing. This is, of course, most easily accomplished

in a society that has a structured set of sartorial expectations for each social group.[46] Only because the boundaries surrounding and separating each rank are so rigid are they so easily permeable. There is an ever greater chance of passing, assuming the disguise of some class or gender or occupation or category other than your own, when the trappings of that category are so easily appropriated and when geographic mobility is increasingly possible.

On the surface, it is odd that Lucy is such an expert in the various ways social categories may be transgressed. The novel, where it tells the reader anything about Lucy, seems to emphasize the rather narrow circle of her existence, so her experience with such subversions of cultural rules must be limited. The reader must assume, however, that she has gained her knowledge through watching, as Lucy is a committed voyeur. Ruth Robbins has examined the issue of looking in *Villette*. In an article called "How Do I Look? *Villette* and Looking Different(ly)," Robbins draws on Laura Mulvey's work in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to chart the distinctive meanings in the word "looking." Looking, according to both Robbins and Mulvey, has two meanings. First, it can be a question of appearance: how do I look? Second, it can refer to how one does looking, how does one perform the gaze? These two meanings use the single term to refer to both sides of the gaze: the object who is looked upon and the subject who does the looking. Lucy's position within this looker/ looked at binary is interesting. Clearly, she is one who looks, watching others in a society that does not approve of women watchers. She is also, however, someone who is looked at. Robbins is dismissive of the idea of Lucy as an object of the gaze because she claims that since Lucy is not

conventionally pretty, she has little value as an object of desire. M. Paul, she says, is the only one who looks at Lucy in this way (218). While it may be true that Lucy is not the conventional object of the gaze or of desire, I believe that Robbins's article short-changes Lucy's manipulation of her status as object. Her argument implies that Lucy is not objectified merely because her looks are not to the taste of most of her fellows. I argue that Lucy avoids becoming an object because she is directly involved in controlling how she is looked at. Lucy controls how she looks in both meanings of the term.

Lucy is a natural watcher, but with her move to Villette, she becomes embroiled in a culture of looking. *Villette* is a novel steeped in surveillance, set in a Foucauldian paradigm in which characters observe and, of course, discipline each other. Madame Beck is the most flagrant spy, conducting the Pensionnat de Demoiselles as a type of panopticon, in which she watches, and the inmates (students and teachers) know they are being watched. But of course, as in the panopticon, the director is being watched as well, and Lucy takes up the position of voyeur, observing her employer, and gaining some agency from the fact that she comes to know and understand Madame Beck.

While Foucault's theory of the panopticon can easily be applied to the Rue Fossette—it is an institution where the mechanisms of power are run on such centralized methods of surveillance and control—Lucy presents an interesting application of the idea of panopticism. As an individual, she has no need or desire to watch others in order to maintain an institution. She does use surveillance, however, to maintain her own agency and autonomy by reversing the relationship between inmate and director. One of the uses that Foucault imagines for the panopticon is as a type of menagerie in which a naturalist

may “draw up differences: among patients, to observe the symptoms of each individual… it makes it possible to observe the performances…to map aptitudes, to assess characters, to draw up rigorous classifications…” (203). This type of examining and sorting is what Lucy resists when exercised by others, but which she practices on others herself. Looking allows Lucy to recognize the categories that she must evade if she desires to maintain her subjectivity.

Lucy’s penchant for looking might be considered a type of reading, a social literacy. Because she prefers to look and observe, she has made a careful study of her companions and knows them, and this knowledge allows her the ability to sort and categorize and judge them. The reverse of this, however, is also true. In seeking to be outside of the gaze, Lucy remains largely unknown to others. Very few, with the possible exception of M. Paul, know her. She remains mysterious to her friends and colleagues and is well aware of their opinions. To Ginevra she is a “second Diogenes,” to M. de Bassompierre she is missish prude, and to Graham she is only “quiet Lucy,” “a creature inoffensive as a shadow.” It is only M. Paul who fails to see any shadowy quality and to whom she is “an obtrusive ray” (333-334).

Rarely do any of the other characters realize that Lucy may be more than they have determined. Awed by her acquaintance with the de Bassompierres, Ginevra asks, “Who are you, Miss Snowe?” To this bald question, she adds:

> You used to call yourself a nursery-governess; when you first came here you really had the care of the children in this house: I have seen you carry little Georgette in your arms, like a bonne—few governesses would have condescended so far—and now Madame Beck treats you with more courtesy than the Parisienne,

> St. Pierre; and that proud chit, my cousin [Polly], makes you her bosom friend! (307-308)

Ginevra is flummoxed because she cannot categorize Lucy into a social niche; she tries—nursery-governess? Teacher? But each attempt is confounded by some new and unexpected facet of Lucy's character, which is only revealed with the utmost discretion. Lucy is delighted with Ginevra's inquiry: "Wonderful!.... Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in disguise. Pity I don't look the character" (308). Lucy's revelation that she is in disguise escapes Ginevra's notice—she knows that Lucy is not literally disguised (and she knows those kinds of disguises, given her lover de Hamal's masquerade as the nun), and she is unable to consider the possibility that a disguise may be simple manipulation of social convention. So Lucy's retraction ("Pity I don't look the character") is unneeded—but it is typical. The conversation exemplifies Lucy's modus operandi—reveal, then conceal, leaving her companion none the wiser.

The short-sightedness of others gives Lucy a great power. She is able to work out and express her own subjectivity. Much as she shuns the scrutiny of others, she cannot entirely escape becoming an object of the gaze. Because she is such an adept reader, however, she is able to use those skills and her understanding of the social categories to author her own identity, and to gain her own subjectivity. Judith Butler's theory of gender performance asserts that gender is constructed, something one "does" rather than something one "is." I argue that Lucy is able to construct her own identity, to "do" or author herself, rather than have it constructed for her by her culture. However, in order to do this self-construction, she must use the culturally significant medium of dress, the text

that she authors. Here, the term text goes beyond typical linguistic signifiers. Dress is a language without words, but one that clearly communicates meaning to others who share the same understanding of that language. Using this non-verbal text in conjunction with her performance, she constructs an identity that evades objectification by resisting identification with major social categories. Rather, Lucy stands between categories, inhabiting new spaces and authoring her own identity and subjectivity.

Unlike Mrs. Sweeney and Ginevra, Lucy does not attempt to use dress to pass from one social category into another. Rather, *Villette* describes a character who defies and resists these categories. Throughout the novel, Lucy seems most to desire to remain liminal, to be on the margin. She uses clothing to establish an in-betweeness, between stereotypes of femininity and between categories of gender. In doing so, she maintains a type of power and agency only available to her because she remains on the margins.

Fashions of Femininity

Lucy is especially interested in looking at different types of femininity, types which she avoids conforming to altogether. This love of looking is expressed in her assessments not only of her colleagues, friends, and students, but even of artistic representations of women. Lucy prefers to control what she is looking at and regulates her gaze at her own discretion. Her self-confident gaze is clearly demonstrated in the encounter with M. Paul in the art gallery. Although the pious Paul would turn her observations toward scenes of religious femininity, Lucy reserves the right to make her own judgments. Scholars have determined that the images that Lucy describes are based on a triptych by Fanny Geefs called "La vie d'une femme,"[47] (see figure 5). Calling these

figures of proper femininity the four “Anges,” Lucy rejects these conventional representations of the stages of womanhood: the Jeune Fille, in her prim dress is “a most villanous little precocious she-hypocrite,” the Mairée is “plastered” and “exasperating,” the Jeune Mère is “disconsolate” and “unwholesome” (the baby is “clayey and puffy”). Interestingly, Lucy has almost no contemptuous adjectives for the Veuve—she is merely “a black woman, holding by the hand a black little girl” (201-202).[48] While these images of femininity are particularly Catholic and religious in nature, they could as easily correspond to British Victorian notions of proper and pure womanhood. Lucy’s distaste for them is vehement—she names them “grim and gray as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities!” (202).

Figure 5. Geefs, Fanny. *La Vie d'une Femme*. 1842.

Such a passionate response seems disproportionate, but it clearly indicates the categories against which Lucy is striving. M. Paul would have her study these images and emulate them, conform her behavior and identity to them, but Lucy retains the right to direct her own identity. She does not, however, resist this representation by imitating its opposite.

She compares the four Anges to the image that had first captured her attention in the gallery—that of Cleopatra. Although she spends considerably more words in describing the indolent Egyptian queen than in describing the Anges, her tone of distaste is just as strong. Cleopatra's enormous bulk, her half-reclining pose, and lack of employment all earn her Lucy's scorn. Her clothing is deemed insufficient: "She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material…she managed to make inefficient raiment" (200). Here a prudish, Puritan ethic seems foremost in forming Lucy's opinion—she judges the represented woman as excessive, lazy, lacking modesty and frugality: in fact, for not having the very things that the four Anges have in abundance. Neither image of womanhood is pleasing to Lucy because both are extremes, representing the polarized ideology of femininity associated with the nineteenth century—the Madonna/whore binary that allowed women either to be pure, chaste, cold, and virtuous or seductive, fallen, and damned. Lucy wants to be assigned to neither category, and in authoring her own identity, she stands between the categories, ensuring that she cannot be as flatly represented as these oil on canvas images.[49]

The narrative does not limit itself to artistic representations of feminine binaries. In the figures of Paulina Home de Bassompierre and Ginevra Fanshawe, Lucy has

copious material for observing the dichotomy. Joan Quarm, in analyzing the triangulation among Polly, Ginevra, and Lucy, assumed a biographical connection. In her article, she argues that "Paulina Home, Countess de Bassompierre is what [Charlotte Brontë] would have liked to be. Ginevra Fanshawe is what she observed and despised and rejected. Lucy Snowe, loving and unloved, is herself revisited" (1). While the case for biographical connections between Brontë and her characters is strongest in *Villette*,[50] these connections are not necessary to appreciate the way in which each of the three characters represents a different facet of nineteenth-century femininity. Polly and Ginevra can each be assigned to one end of the binary, and their choice in dress aids in sorting them into these categories. Even as a child, Polly's dress is the image of womanliness and domestic propriety: she wears "a black frock and tiny braided apron (to pinafores she had an aversion)" (13). Pinafores were commonly worn by girls, rather than grown women, and such an aversion underscores Polly's desire to be seen as a woman, accompanied by the grown up domestic acts she insists on performing: pouring her father's tea, hemming handkerchiefs.[51] In Edmund Dulac's illustration from the 1905 edition, Polly is pictured as a prim, tiny child, seated at the feet of Mrs. Bretton, who is pictured hand-sewing yellow gingham (see figure 6). Polly is shown looking at a large picture book, with toys scattered about her. Apparently, Dulac failed to recognize that Polly hated pinafores as she is shown wearing one, in black, over a white print dress. However, his illustration further insists on infantilizing Polly: instead of hemming handkerchiefs, taking part in the womanly sewing that Mrs. Bretton is demonstrating, she is shown with more child-like occupations.[52]

Figure 6. Dulac, Edmund. *Paulina Sitting at Mrs. Bretton's Feet*. 1905. © The Brontë Society.

In the novel, however, everything about her suggests neatness and womanliness. The first morning she spends at Bretton, in the face of her father's eminent departure, she insists on dressing herself, but worries that she is not neat and engages help in making her sash straight and her hair smooth. Later in their acquaintance, Lucy helps Polly undress after she has sustained an accident and remarks on the neatness of her appointments:

> I was not in a sufficiently collected mood to note with separate distinctness every detail of the attire I removed, but I received a general impression of refinement, delicacy, and perfect personal cultivation; which, in a period of afterthought, offered in my reflections a singular contrast to notes retained of Miss Ginevra Fanshawe's appointments. (263)

Lucy purposely draws the reader's attention to a comparison between Polly and Ginevra in terms of their personal neatness in dress, clearly using that detail to make a statement about something far more significant than each girl's tidiness.

Here, neatness in dress is linked to a kind of moral or domestic neatness, in turn linked to ideas of purity and propriety. Polly's emphasis on neatness also contrasts with the description Lucy gave of the slovenliness surrounding Cleopatra:

> for the wretched untidiness surrounding her, there could be no excuse. Pots and pans—perhaps I ought to say vases and goblets—were rolled here and there on the foreground; a perfect rubbish of flowers was mixed amongst them, and an absurd and disorderly mass of curtain upholstery smothered the couch and cumbered the floor. (200)

Lucy's strange renaming of vases and goblets as pots and pans seems to be accentuating the domestic nature of these signs. Cleopatra's inability to fashion a suitable dress out of twenty-seven yards of drapery is linked to her lack of proper concern for domestic tidiness, just as Polly's attention to the straightness of her sash and smoothness of her hair is linked to an overall sense of domestic decorum and womanly propriety.

Ginevra Fanshawe, upon Lucy's first glimpse of her, seems equally a devotee of sartorial propriety. With a hint of approval, Lucy notes her costume on their first meeting: "her simple print dress, untrimmed straw-bonnet, and large shawl, gracefully worn, formed a costume plain to Quakerism" (53). Even more encouraging is her

apparent contempt for showy displays of raiment: “she looked with a little sour air of disdain at the flaunting silks and velvets” (53). Once both Lucy and the reader come to know Ginevra better, however, these mysteries are illuminated. Ginevra can only dress as well as she is provided for, and she disdains most those things she is denied (such as Graham). What seems at first to be modesty and restraint are merely circumstantial. Ginevra loses no time in supplementing her wardrobe on Graham’s dime. The spoils of this conquest are added to her existing wardrobe and the effect is to mark her. At a concert, she appears with other women of similar rank and age, who appear with beautiful simplicity:

> Here were no jewels, no head-dresses, no velvet pile or silken sheen: purity, simplicity, and aërial grace reigned in that virgin band. Young heads simply braided, and fair forms…robed in white, of pale rose, or placid blue, suggested thoughts of heaven and angels. (214)

Although Lucy has rather sharp commentary on the healthy eating habits and lax scholarship of these angels, they contrast favorably with Ginevra, whose loose hair and gleaming and glinting wrists are signs and tokens of a moral laxity, to complement her own intellectual laxity.

While the narrative draws categories around both Polly and Ginevra,[53] aligning them with the polarities of Victorian femininity, Lucy attempts to navigate femininity in such a way that she stands between categories, therefore avoiding being objectified and categorized and, ultimately, seen. For someone who pays such scrupulous attention to the costumes of everyone else (she even notes the trim waist, dress, and cap of the chambermaid and the “parsonic-looking, black-coated, white-neckclothed waiter” who

serve her in her brief stay at London), she tells the reader very little of her own costume (46). The same chambermaid and waiter are clearly confused by Lucy's costume: "I believe at first they thought I was a servant; but in a little while, changed their minds, and hovered in a doubtful state between patronage and politeness" (46). Lucy seems to take delight in confusing not only those around her, but the reader as well. Like so much of the information in *Villette*, Lucy reveals very little about herself, preferring to dwell on the appearance and behaviors of others, while leaving the readers to read between the lines of the narrative to deduce her own character. One of the first mentions Lucy makes of her dress is actually a reflection on how someone else might view it, when she assumes that Ginevra's sneer might be aimed at her "homely mourning habit" (53). She does not say for whom she mourns. Again, she tells the reader that Madame Beck has searched her wardrobe, but she does not tell what Madame finds. Dress, however, soon comes to represent Lucy's attempts to steer through the contemporary social categories and to remain an unseen watcher in a scopic society. She at last describes in detail a costume of her choosing and why she chose it. For the fête, Lucy claims not to have the courage to wear the "transparent white" donned by students and teachers alike, so she takes action: "I sought through a dozen shops till I lit upon a crape-like material of purple-gray—the colour, in short, of dun mist, lying on a moor in bloom" (131). In contrast to the "diaphanous and snowy mass" worn by the others, Lucy feels like "a mere shadowy spot on a field of light" (131). By choosing the gray dress, Lucy both hides, shadowlike, and stands out because she appears in such stark contrast to the other women around her. Although Lucy claims that she chooses the garment because she doesn't

have the courage to dress in the white, there is likely a more subversive reason. Lucy has used clothing before to describe her temperament and also her strategy:

> I had a staid manner of my own which ere now had been as good to me as cloak and hood of hodden gray; since under its favour I had been able to achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in some minds stamped me as a dreamer and zealot. (44)

The muted, dowdy covering of hodden grey[54] doesn't describe a shade of grade, but a coarsely woven cloth associated with the peasants who made it and with both soldiers and hunters who appreciated its camouflaging qualities. For Lucy, it is associated with a sedate temperament, and would at first glance seem to indicate a cautious character. On the contrary: both a decorous manner and a subdued wardrobe allow Lucy to commit acts that would earn her censure had she been bolder in both behavior and costume. Because Lucy does not dress or behave in conventional ways, she cannot be assigned to conventional categories and therefore is allowed greater freedom. She moves at her own discretion, chooses her own occupation, and makes her own way in the world.

Lucy's penchant for dark and shadowy dresses is more than symbolic, however. The repeated references to her mourning habit are allusions to the Victorian social conventions surrounding grief and bereavement. Lucy has clearly lost someone quite close to her. According to conduct manuals, strict rules insisted that mourning be observed for a length of time based on the degree of relation. For a husband, eighteen months to two years was customary, during which time the widow would make a series of adjustments, from full mourning, comprising black matte fabrics, particularly crape, bombazine, and parmatta with white collars and cuffs, black caps and veils, to lesser

mourning, after the first year, when shiny materials such as satin and silk, along with velvet, were again permitted, as well as jet jewelry. Richard Redgrave's 1844 "The Governess," depicts a woman of approximately Lucy's station wearing mourning (see figure 7). As was typical for the time, the stark black is unrelieved except by her white collar, or tippet.

Figure 7. Redgrave, Richard. *The Governess*. 1844. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The last stage, called half-mourning, comprised lighter colors such as greys and purples. Although widows mourned the longest,[55] those who lost parents and siblings mourned for at least a year, and there were even rules about how long a woman might mourn her grown and married daughter's parents-in-law (six weeks) (Byrde, *Nineteenth-Century Fashion* 158). Lucy has a curious preference for mourning clothes, particularly those of half-mourning, a preference strongly represented in her choice for the fête, from

the “crape-like” material to the “purple-grey” color. This in-between state that Lucy clings to symbolically solidifies her liminal position. In the Victorian era, the widow was a romanticized figure, apparently all the more attractive for her black garments—a widow’s cap was thought to be particularly becoming (Byrde, *Nineteenth –Century Fashion* 157). In fact, the widow was such a fetishized figure that women who weren’t technically widows could feel the burden of living up to the type. When Emily Tennyson, sister to the poet, became engaged again eight years after the death of her fiancée Arthur Hallam, Jane Brookfield, Hallams’ cousin, wrote:

> Only conceive, Emily Tennyson (I really can hardly even now believe it) Emily Tennyson is actually going to be married—and to whom after such a man as Arthur Hallam…. I feel so distressed about this, really it quite *hurts* me, I had such a romantic admiration for her, looked at her with such pity, and now my feeling about her is bouleverséd. (qtd. in Flanders 385)

So strong was the Victorian feeling toward the image of the widow that poor Emily Tennyson was expected to become some type of eternal widow-bride, sacred to the memory of the departed, a type of living memorial to correspond to Lord Tennyson’s poetic “In Memoriam.”

Lucy is clearly playing at the borders of a potent cultural image when she invokes the costume of the widow. However, she is also clearly associated with another powerful cultural emblem: that of the spinster. In an article that examines the effect of the illustrations Edmund Dulac produced for a 1905 edition of *Villette*, Sandra Hagan illuminates the figure of the spinster and her value in Victorian society. While the widow was fetishized, the spinster was reviled. If the widow was all the more attractive for her

bereavement, the spinster was ugly—a condition that was both the cause and the effect of being "left on the shelf." According to the Victorian Richard Carlile, "[Women] who have never had sexual commerce begin to droop when about twenty-five years of age…[;] an absorbing process goes on, their forms degenerate, their features sink, and the peculiar character of the old maid becomes apparent" (qtd in Hagan 172). Carlile makes clear that spinsters had no value in a society that prizes women for their worth in the sexual exchange; virginity is valuable because it represents the possibility of exchange, and wife/motherhood is valuable because it represents private property. The spinster is not a commodity at all. Hagan claims that Lucy "affords readers the opportunity, then, to view the spinster in a more flattering light" (172).[56] I believe that by cultivating the mythos of both widow and spinster, Lucy is standing between categories, claiming the authority of the widow and the invisibility of the spinster, but allowing herself to be controlled by neither image.

Lucy does not remain completely unnoticed, however. M. Paul, who first administers a physiognomic evaluation, continues to watch, not only her face, but also her changes in dress. He reproaches her for appearing in a scarlet gown. The reader can only assume that M. Paul's "lunettes" were damaged before Lucy ever came near them, for the dress was pink, as Lucy asserts in her defense. Clearly, the color is not just shocking (enough to confuse M. Paul), but somehow not in keeping with Lucy's character. This she would admit herself. Her godmother arranges the dress, and Lucy's initial reaction is to reject it: "'That is not for me,' I said hurriedly, feeling that I would almost as soon clothe myself in the costume of a Chinese lady of rank" (207). The color

is so far out of keeping with Lucy's usual wardrobe that even the very pale color and simplicity of design are not enough to keep her from feeling that the dress is an exotic costume. Despite her godmother's insistence, Lucy still has her doubts: "I thought that I should not: I thought no human face should avail to put me into it. A pink dress! I knew it not. It knew not me. I had not proved it" (207). For Lucy, such a costume denies her the possibility of remaining unseen, unnoticed, a shadow in "folds of grave, dark majesty" (208). The sense of exoticism surrounding the pink dress also signals Lucy's refusal to become a commodity on the marriage market. Young, unmarried women in the nineteenth century wore light colors, especially white, but also pastels such as pink, to signal their availability (Byrde, *Nineteenth-Century Fashion* 116). Lucy rejects the role of aging debutante and would prefer to remain hidden in her half-mourning, carefully skirting the reifying categories of widow, spinster, and virgin. Instead, in the pink dress she is so visible that she even notices herself. In the mirror of the concert hall, Lucy, for a moment, glimpses herself without recognition. Here is a reverse of Lacan's mirror stage. Instead of gaining subjectivity within the mirror, Lucy sees herself objectively, and the result is displeasing: "No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret; it was not flattering, yet, after all, I ought to be thankful: it might have been worse" (210). Only when Lucy has allowed others to have their way and dress her does she allow herself to be objectified and therefore susceptible to observation and categorization. Lucy's social autonomy is dependent on her sartorial autonomy.

Lucy must not only avoid objectification within categories of feminine stereotypes, but also within broader gender categories. Ironically, while M. Paul objects

to Lucy's pink dress for being too bold, too scandalous, he would have her displayed far more prominently—and in drag—when he persuades her to take a part in the play he is directing. Such an exhibition goes against Lucy's modus operandi of quiet, reclusive voyeurism, but she agrees to take the part. She balks, however, at the suggested costume, and especially at Zélie St. Pierre's declared intention of dressing her:

> 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. M. Paul might storm, might rage: I would keep my own dress. (138)

In this instance, Lucy stands firm against outside encroachments on her sartorial identity and autonomy. Here, the category is an issue of gender. Lucy does not choose to be dressed completely in the costume of a man. As is typical for Lucy, she does not choose to explain why she so resents and resists the suggestion of a foray into cross-dressing: she merely insists that it will not suit. However, neither does she insist on retaining her own feminine costume completely. Instead, she combines the two: "Retaining my woman's garb without the slightest retrenchment, I merely assumed in addition, a little vest, a collar, a cravat, and a paletôt of small dimensions" (139). For Lucy, who uses her dress as a means of asserting her own subjectivity and retaining her agency, she will not discard it for another. Because her subjectivity is bound up in standing between categories, however, assuming some elements of another category is acceptable. Instead of passing,[57] as M. Paul and St Pierre insist she must attempt to do, she merely moves into the space between the two categories, becoming not so much a hybrid as a marker of margins: by dressing as both man and woman, Lucy becomes neither, rather than both,

thereby retaining her ability to escape categorization, but to categorize others. Thus, even while on the stage, performing a part and acting as a spectacle, Lucy is able to act her role while observing her fellow-actors and the members of the audience.

Although Lucy's refusal to dress in drag could be seen as mere missish prudery, it is actually a sign of her determination to retain her subjectivity. She insists: "it must be arranged in my own way: nobody must meddle; the things must not be forced upon me. Just let me dress myself" (139). Lucy's demand reveals her goal, not just in regards to clothing, but how she wishes to live: she welcomes no interference—she wants to arrange things herself, to steer her own course and make her own way.

Both the pink dress and the mix-and-match costume for the play represent moments of tension in Lucy's sartorial life. Catherine Spooner in *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* argues that these moments "afford her intense anxiety, primarily because they draw attention to her when she would rather be overlooked, but also because they seem to cause a disjunction between internal and external, to suggest that she is something she is not" (56). I believe that careful distinctions must be made here. Lucy certainly does not want to appear to be something that she is not in the sense that Mrs. Sweeny or de Hamal do: she does not want to appear as a man, when she is a woman; she does not want to appear to be a comfortably middle-class debutante when she is actually a marginalized, conventionally unattractive school teacher. These internal qualities are not to be masked by external dressing. There are inner qualities, however, that Lucy very much intends to hide—the disjunction between internal and external is crucial to her own sanity and survival: these are the things that she hides, both in the way she dresses and in her

narrative—her passion, her rebellion, and her desire to throw off the constraints of society. These she hides beneath that cloak and hood of hodden gray. Sarah T. Bernstein argues that recognition is Lucy's central goal. I disagree. Of course, Lucy would like to be recognized, to be seen. She comes to realize that Graham does not see her. M. Paul does recognize her, sees her as an obtrusive ray. But, ultimately, Lucy realizes that recognition is dangerous. Although tempted by passion, reason rules: "'But if I feel, may I never express?' 'Never!' declared Reason" (229). To express, to be seen and recognized, would be the destruction of the disguise that Lucy has carefully maintained, the disguise that allows her to "achieve with impunity, and even approbation, deeds that if attempted with an excited and unsettled air, would in some minds stamped me as a dreamer and zealot" (44). Paradoxically, the only way that Lucy may write an authentic identity is through concealment of that identity.

This self-determination of identity through clothing is also exercised through Lucy's relation of the narrative. If she is authoring her own identity through her clothing, then the narrative is a reflection of that authoring. The way Lucy tells her story parallels the way she dresses. Much of her story is shadowed, unrevealed. For a first person narrator, Lucy is strangely concerned with what information she extends to the reader. Numerous examples abound: she recognizes Graham as Dr. John, but does not inform the reader; she never directly tells the reader her feelings toward Graham; she never divulges her family background or the nature of their downfall; and, ultimately, she teases the reader with M. Paul's final fate.

In each of these instances, Lucy seems to be doing with the narrative what she has been doing with her costume throughout the novel: she is erasing any alignment between herself and recognizable social categories. She elides her past, erasing her referents. Without them, she cannot be assigned a definite back-story. Instead, she suggests to the reader, rather smugly, a complacent picture of happiness, while undermining it with her tone of contempt: "Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbor still as glass" (35). Lucy extends the maritime image to indicate that some wreck in her life indeed occurred: "For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared; we cast with our own hands the tackling of the ship…. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished" (35). As tragic as the story is, what little there is of it, it is this, as much as Lucy's cloak and hood of hodden gray, that allows her to commit undetected those "deeds that…would in some minds have stamped [her] as a dreamer and zealot" (44). She is not tied to any family, position, or category—at least none that she shares with the reader—and so is free to move as she wishes.

Interestingly, it is the same scene of a storm-tossed ship that ends the narrative. The reader, along with Lucy, is awaiting the return of M. Paul by ship. Lucy's narrative becomes uncharacteristically frantic: "That storm roared frenzied for seven days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks....Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said….Trouble no quiet, kind heart….Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life" (495-496). The image that obscures Lucy's past, equally clouds her future. Instead of the frank narrator that one might expect, Lucy deviously diverts her

readers, suggesting to them what they would like to think about her, and then leaving it to them to do so, while also leaving little doubt that the opposite is more likely. In this manner, however, she escapes categorization, avoids becoming the scrutinized inmate of the panopticon, and instead maintains her autonomy from her society and even from her reader. She ends the narrative, looking toward a future that is as unmarked as her past. Clearly, she will continue to wear the hodden gray, creating her own identity, and shunning the typical social categories that would bind her to socially constructed groups.

Lucy, silent, shrinking, retiring Lucy, tenaciously reserves the right to both dress herself and narrate herself, determined to satisfy neither her viewers nor her readers. Instead, she maintains her own agency through constructing an identity that stands between social categories, avoiding aligning herself with either stereotypes of femininity or with gender roles. By inhabiting these marginal spaces, Lucy is able to remain largely unobserved, but observing; an objectified viewer in a society that views women as objects; uncategorized, but categorizing.

It is this uncategorizability that makes Lucy's character so alarming to critics such as Lady Eastlake—she objects to Jane Eyre's perceived murmuring against the social hierarchy, and would no doubt have been horrified at Lucy's sartorial anarchy. Interestingly (confusingly), as much as Eastlake despises Jane Eyre, she seems to admire the ultimate governess turned social-climber, William Thackeray's Becky Sharp of *Vanity Fair*. In her review of both *Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre*, Eastlake points out the similarities between the two protagonists, many characteristics that Lucy shares: they are governess/teachers, they fall in love with their masters (or master's son). They lack

conventional beauty, but have "an elfish kind of nature, with which they divine the secrets of other hearts, and conceal those of their own" (83). Eastlake, however, reads *Vanity Fair* as a more realistic novel, and therefore superior to *Jane Eyre*; she either has a very low opinion of her society or she refuses to read the novel as satirical, as she claims that "we almost long for a little exaggeration and improbability to relieve us of that sense of dead truthfulness which weighs down our hearts" (83). She is taken in by Becky, acknowledging that she has her faults, but ready to forgive or overlook them all:

> Upon the whole, we are not afraid to own that we rather enjoy her ignis fatuus course, dragging the weak and the vain and the selfish, through mud and mire, after her, and acting all parts, from the modest rushlight to the gracious star, just as it suits her. Clever little imp that she is! What exquisite tact she shows!—what unflagging good humour!—what ready self-possession! (85)

Lady Eastlake seems to be made of a piece with Lady Crawley—more than ready to applaud Becky's wit and spirit, but one wonders how she would have liked her for a niece.

Despite Eastlake's polarized view of Brontë's heroine and Thackeray's, the two authors shared a mutual admiration—Thackeray called *Jane Eyre* a "masterwork of a great genius" (Thackeray, *Roundabout Papers* 258), and she regarded him so highly that she dedicated the second edition of *Jane Eyre* to him.[58] There are similarities to be drawn between the works, beyond those that Eastlake outlines. In both *Vanity Fair* and *Villette*, the heroines, finding themselves in marginalized roles in society, manipulate their appearance in order to achieve subjectivity. They differ, however, in their methods. Whereas Lucy intends to subvert class markers by standing between them, Becky

parodies those markers, fully inhabiting each role ("from modest rushlight to the gracious star" as Eastlake sees it) as the consummate actress. Becky's performance extends on and expands even Lucy's sophisticated level of sartorial literacy, and her green silk purse is not like the defensive garments worn by the previous heroines—she does not hide behind a close bonnet or cloak and hood of hodden gray. Rather, her garments are part of her arsenal, her props in her performance of domestic femininity.

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[41] Brontë herself was interested in both physiognomy and phrenology and in 1851 had her own bumps read by a Dr. Browne, an experience that she described as "a sort of miracle—*like*—*like*—*like* as the very life itself" (*Letters III*, 258).

[42] Eastlake argued that the author of *Jane Eyre* could not have been a woman because "no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane's ladies assume—Miss Ingram coming down, irresistible 'in a *morning* robe of sky-blue crape, a gauze azure scarf twisted in her hair!!' No lady, we understand, when suddenly roused in the night, would think of hurrying on '*a frock*.' They have garments more convenient for such occasions, and more becoming too" (94). For more on the Eastlake review and Brontë's response, see "Dress Codes: Fashioning Taste in Eastlake and Brontë" by LuAnn McCracken Fletcher.

[43] Brenda Silver explains this sense of doubled narration by positing that Lucy addresses two readers: the first is an antagonistic, conventional (and male) reader to whom Lucy addresses such notes as: "I will permit the reader to picture me as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbor still as glass," a situation in which "a great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives" (35). Lucy acknowledges

this reader's expectations and sarcastically concedes to them. Her second reader, however, whom Silver imagines as sympathetic, rebellious, and female, is one in whom Lucy may confide, even if it is merely through a concealed, between-the-lines acknowledgement in her narrative.

[44] The narrative's contempt for this Irishness is hardly concealed, especially as Mrs. Sweeny tried to pass herself off as an "English lady in reduced circumstances" (70). Irishness is also conflated with low-class Englishness, as Mrs. Sweeny has "a smothered brogue, overlaid with mincing cockney inflections" (70). This disdain for the Irish and their representation as low-class domestics is largely reflective of Victorian attitudes, but somewhat curious as Brontë herself is of a fairly recent Irish extraction.

[45] Eastlake claims that *Jane Eyre* is "pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition" because "there is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment" (93). Eastlake sees class distinctions as not only immutable but divinely ordained.

[46] And, of course, transmuting class through dress works more easily in an urban setting where relative anonymity provides a certain degree of freedom. The same would not be as easily done in a small village.

[47] Geefs's triptych was displayed in Brussels in 1842, the first year that Brontë spent in that city as a pupil in the Hegers's Pensionnat.

[48] Although Lucy's inscrutability makes it difficult to assume why she would withhold her thoughts on the "Veuve," it may be that Lucy has more respect for the

figure of the widow, as the widow has historically been seen as a female category of more autonomy than her married or single counterparts.

[49] The performance of Vashti represents yet another artistic representation of femininity, but unlike the Anges or Cleopatra, Lucy is enthralled by this performance. Vashti represents everything that Lucy feels but her reason will not let her express: "Suffering had struck that stage empress…she stood locked in struggle, rigid in resistance." Interestingly, she "stood, not dressed, but draped in pale antique folds…" (258). Lucy uses her clothing to help repress the burning passion and resistance that the Vashti performs; Vashti, of course, is pure expression, and so is "not dressed" at all, is not masked and disguised in sartorial performance. Ironically, Vashti is the Persian queen who refuses to appear at her husband's summons. King Ahasuerus is enraged and seeks a new queen, the Jewish Esther. Vashti is historically figured as a proto-feminist icon, resisting male authority. She is also an apt representation of Lucy who refuses to appear at the summons of others.

[50] Of course, there are some biographical connections between Brontë and *Villette*; many critics see the novel as a type of autobiography of her time in Brussels when she fell in love with her teacher, Constantin Heger. However, I argue that the factual parallels matter less than the representation of emotional complexity and the strategies that Brontë and Lucy employ for overcoming the constraints of society. Thus, *Villette* becomes not so much a love letter to Heger as an exorcism of an affection which would have bound her.

[51] Diverging but equally compelling interpretations of the handkerchief hemming have been developed. Sarah T. Bernstein's article, "'In this Same Gown of Shadow': Functions of Fashion in *Villette*," explains the handkerchief, spotted with blood from Polly's pricked fingers, as recalling "the totem of the consumptive, the handkerchief spattered with blood from her infected lungs" (161). She sees both Polly and Lucy as embodying a popular nineteenth-century archetype of the TB-prone woman, a figure who, according to Susan Sontag, "haunted nineteenth-century imagination" and "was an amalgam of two different fantasies: someone both passionate and repressed" (162). Thus, the spotted handkerchief comes to represent a figure being consumed, both by disease and by latent passion. Contrarily, Tim Dolin, in his introduction to the Oxford edition, sees the bloody handkerchief as meaning to represent the "genteel married woman, 'silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly'" that Polly would like to be, but actually suggesting "the suffering needlewoman, a symbolic figure for the mid-Victorians of the woman on the verge of prostitution" (xxiv). I believe that both of these readings are interesting because they show the persistent collusion of the domestic with the sexual and corporeal in the Victorian mind.

[52] This is not the only illustration of Polly that conforms more to the artist's desire than to the text. In his illustration of the fainting Paulina being helped out of the theatre, Lucy is thrust into the background while an eroticized image of Paulina takes center stage. Clearly, Dulac was more concerned with picturing women and children in stereotypical, conventional postures, than in faithful renderings of the spirit of Brontë's text.

[53] This is not to say that Polly and Ginevra are mere types and nothing more; nor are they extreme examples: each one has qualifying qualities that prevents either from being a mere allegorical representation.

[54] Hodden gray, a coarse cloth of undyed wool, is a tartan worn by the London Scottish Regiment. Their first commander, Lt. Col. Lord Elcho, approved the adoption of the hodden gray because it circumvented interclan strife, and also because “A soldier is a man hunter. As a deer stalker chooses the least visible of colours, so ought a soldier to be clad” (www.londonscottishreg.org). This brings Lucy’s choice of the hodden gray into focus. Lucy, too, is a type of man hunter, a watcher of man-kind, and like a deer stalker, she too chooses colors to make herself least visible, the better to observe her quarry.
It is possible that Lucy is thinking of Robert Burn’s lines in “Song: For a’ that and a’ that”: "What though on hamely fare we dine,/ Wear hodden grey, an' a that;/ Gie fools their silks, and knaves their wine;/ A Man's a Man for a' that" (116). She seems to share his opinion about fools and silks; and she references him later when she comments on the “giftie” she receives in seeing herself as others do (210).

[55] Queen Victoria famously mourned Prince Albert, who died in 1861, for the rest of her life, wearing her widow’s mourning until her own death forty years later. She is often credited with stimulating the obsession with mourning costume, although she was no doubt assisted by conduct books and fashion magazines that added yet another layer to proper sartorial behavior. To eschew proper mourning was looked down on, although it was certainly desirable from an economic standpoint. The provision of an entire family’s

mourning wardrobe was a costly enterprise, and many poorer Victorians went into debt to do so (Byrde, *Nineteenth-Century Fashion* 156-157).

[56] Hagan's article goes on to claim that Dulac's illustrations fail to sympathize with the narrative's intentions. Dulac reads against Lucy's narrative; he has the "sunny imagination" she patronizes in the narrative—her attempts to critique the male gaze by contrasting the image of Ginevra with her manner is thwarted because Ginevra is never illustrated. Her attempts to express sexual desire are disallowed because Graham is never illustrated. Polly is illustrated as a sensual, erotic figure, and Lucy herself is always cast in shadow (she will do this to herself, but won't suffer it from others) and is drawn as pretty. The last image shows her and M. Paul as though they live happily ever after. Dulac won't allow the spinster to triumph and instead recasts the narrative in a romantic light.

[57] There is a character, however, who passes, not only for the other gender but also another state of being. De Hamal's performance as the ghost of the nun provides a counterbalance to Lucy's combined costume. In passing, de Hamal's identity is completely obscured, and although his purpose is to escape detection, the costume bets on being seen. The appearance of the nun/ghost/lover has interesting implications for identity. These seem to be possible identities for Lucy and she is haunted by all three, representing religious sterility, social isolation, and the fulfillment of desire. When de Hamal finally tires of the masquerade, the habit is left on Lucy's bed, and Lucy at first mistakes it for another apparition until she recognizes that it is only the clothes. The note

left reads, "The nun of the attic bequeaths to Lucy Snowe her wardrobe," representing possibilities that Lucy may or may not embrace (470).

[58] Some contemporary readers familiar with Thackeray's personal life read too much into the dedication. The isolated Brontë could have no idea that Thackeray's own wife had gone mad, but London gossip attributed Thackeray as the inspiration for Mr. Rochester (Fraser 285).

CHAPTER V

THE GREEN SILK PURSE AND LITTLE RAWDON'S SHIRT: FASHIONABLE PROPS OF DOMESTICITY IN WILLIAM MAKEPEACE THACKERAY'S *VANITY FAIR*

In a letter to his wife, William Thackeray consoled her hurt feelings: "When I said you were frivolous I meant no harm, all women are so I think from their education, and I want my wife to be better than all women…" Thackeray then went on to explain the product of this frivolous education: "a woman who occupies herself all day with her house and servants is frivolous, ditto she who does nothing but poonah-painting and piano forte, also the woman who piddles about prayer-meetings and teaches Sunday schools" (qtd. in Clarke 88). Thackeray's letter to his wife is a gentle indictment of the Victorian deployment of conventional ideals of femininity. His novel *Vanity Fair*, written a decade after his marriage to the nineteen-year-old Isabella Shawe,[59] is a far more biting and complex satire of the same. While the novel exposes and reviles a number of Victorian (and, indeed, universally human) foibles, from the stingy avarice of the rich to the vanity of pretend military men, his broadest prosecution is of middle-class domestic femininity.

The novel provides two central female characters to represent and interrogate this ideal domesticity. Amelia and Becky could easily be reduced to types—the good woman and the bad, the Madonna and whore, the bore and the adventurer. The novel, however, refuses to represent them as a mere binary. Rather, they indicate two different methods

of approaching the onus of domesticity, each with its own successes and failures, rewards and punishments.

By consciously performing and subverting markers of ideal domesticity, Becky uses them to her own benefit, employing female accomplishments and postures as a small arsenal in her plans to seduce, entrap, and manipulate. Becky's power to perform domesticity for subversive ends renders her both dangerous and fascinating. Her abilities allow her to cross lines of authority, granting her the power to make her own way in the world, a power that was not conventionally granted to women at the time, and it allows her to cross social borders; as Mrs. Sedley quips in Mina Nair's film adaptation of the novel, "I thought her a mere social climber, but now I see she's a mountaineer." It is Becky's shocking mobility that makes her both dangerous and compelling, as well as the fact that she is using society's very rules and conventions to perforate its boundaries.

The irony is that Amelia is ostensibly closer to the Victorian conventional ideal, but her abilities to employ the arts she has received through her education pale in comparison with Becky's. By inverting these characters and characteristics, Thackeray is reimagining female education, domesticity, and accomplishments as elements of both performance and exchange that allow for female power and subjectivity. This subversion is only possible, however, when the woman in question recognizes the value of her performance of the ideal within the sexual exchange in Vanity Fair.

In prosecuting the "frivolity" of femininity as manifested through Victorian education and gender ideals, Thackeray uses that "frivolous distinction" to demonstrate a parallel in the strategies and understanding of the two female characters. Becky and

Amelia use dress in different ways, their sartorial performances corresponding to their domestic performances. Both of these performances have implications within the satirical universe of Vanity Fair, which is both marketplace and stage.

In this chapter, I will investigate the resulting implications for domestic ideals, feminine performance, and sartorial codes in the novel. While critics have thoroughly explored Thackeray's critique of middle-class consumerism and the troubling gender relations represented in the novel, my argument focuses on the intersection of these indictments by looking at how he uses dress to represent differing approaches to Victorian conventions. In exposing the calculated deployment of domestic sexuality as performed by Becky and the naïve domestic and sartorial illiteracy demonstrated by Amelia, Thackeray's novel condemns both extreme versions of contemporary gender ideals of middle-class femininity. In this condemnation, he makes room for understanding the sources of these skewed self-representations—a punishing marriage market system, no sanctioned outlets for female agency, and a gap in female education that eliminates a humanizing understanding of love.

The Marketplace and the Stage

The world that William Makepeace Thackeray calls Vanity Fair is both a stage and a marketplace, and the action and characters of the novel may be interpreted in terms of performance and props or commodities and exchange. On the marketplace side, critics like Andrew H. Miller detail the ways Thackeray satirizes a culture obsessed with owning objects in hopes that their social position will rise with the quality of items they possess. Miller sees this "longing for sleeve buttons" as a testimony to the "instability of all social

categories, including those of gender and class." He argues that in *Vanity Fair*, human relationships become subservient to things;[60] perhaps most frightening of all, "distinctions among objects and people become uncertain" (17). On the side of performance, Maria DiBattista has written about the use of charades and theatricality within the novel to reveal subversive ideas, "to present history as an extended sequence of performances ('puppet shows') enacting a moral so dark that to illuminate it fully might be politically or spiritually perilous" (828). DiBattista argues that the performances constitute a coded message to the audience, revealing the author's attitudes toward his characters, toward women, and toward society in general.

While Thackeray's shifting emphasis on Vanity Fair as marketplace or as stage allows him to skillfully complicate his satire, the novel also provides an interesting intersection of the two. Among the objects and commodities that are catalogued in the novel, items of dress are perhaps the most frequent and the most symbolically laden. These items shift ownership up and down the social scale, are tokens of love (or, often, emotions less noble), and causes of envy. Just as important as their role as portable goods, however, clothes are also important props on the stage, allowing the puppets and dolls that the narrator manipulates to act their parts convincingly (or not, as the case may require). Thus, Thackeray makes clothing central to the work of the novel, where it acts as both prop and commodity in the deployment of domestic femininity.

The novel bookends two parallel scenes. It begins by showing the reader Vanity Fair as a stage in "Before the Curtain":

> The Becky puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints, and lively on the wire: the Amelia Doll, though it has a smaller circle of admirers, has yet been carved and dressed with the greatest care by the artist: the Dobbin figure, though apparently clumsy, yet dances in a very amusing and natural manner….and please to remark the richly dressed figure of the Wicked Nobleman, on which no expense has been spared, and which Old Nick will fetch away at the end of this singular performance. (xvi)

In this paradigm, the novel is envisioned as a performance in which the characters play out the story, their movements more or less manipulated by the unseen (or partially seen) hand of the narrator (manager? artist? The terms used to describe the driving force behind this work become quite convoluted). Here Becky is imagined as "uncommonly flexible" and Amelia as a passive doll, whose appearance is of the most concern—she has been carefully dressed. Dobbin, here, gets equal billing and is pronounced "natural,"[61] a most unusual term considering that this entire episode is describing the artificiality of the characters and their stories. The Wicked Nobleman, also known as Lord Steyne, makes an appearance in this short prelude, and the narrator here seems to heap the entirety of blame upon his head, promising that he will get what he deserves when he is fetched away by the devil himself. The appearance of Lord Steyne seems to alleviate Becky of any culpability, since she is his greatest victim (if the reader cares to disregard his wife and daughters-in-law, and if they can also forget that Becky was attempting to make him her own victim when her plan backfired). Interestingly, the narrator has provided the reader with a neat method of reading the novel before the first chapter ever begins.

This opening contrasts with the end of the novel, briefly in the text itself, but expanded upon in the illustration that Thackeray provided. The narrative draws to a close with a final scene depicting Becky selling wares at a bazaar. According to Gary R. Dyer,

English readers would have had strong and conflicting feelings about the scene of the bazaar. Introduced in 1816 by John Trotter, the first English bazaars were warehouses in which owners rented out booths to respectable, middle-class women, who were often widows of the Napoleonic Wars, so they could sell items they had made. Although every effort was made to enshrine the whole affair with irreproachable respectability, the combination of women openly selling goods in a public marketplace (and all the implications of prostitution this carried) and the exoticism implied by calling them bazaars, rendered the markets suspect, a possible site of feminine corruption and sexual impropriety. In an 1816 print titled *A Bazaar*, George Cruikshank captured what was popularly imagined as the true trade at the bazaars (see figure 8).

Figure 8. Cruikshank, George. *A Bazaar*. 1816. ©The Trustees of the British Museum, London.

In the far right corner, a woman behind a booth displays a good deal of leg as well as some hand-made ware while telling an indecently seated dandy, "admire this Article you shall have it uncommonly cheap," to which another man adds, "I dare say, for I'm sure

it’s second hand, & common enough.” Other figures plan an assignation and coolly pass billet-doux under the covers of a book titled *Innocent Adultery*.

In the 1820s, bazaars were appropriated by evangelical organizations as charitable events to raise money for a good cause. Despite (or perhaps because of) the union of commerce and faith, however, bazaars or fancy fairs were still seen as a site of female display and sexual exchange, and novelists like Dickens write of them in *Sketches by Boz*[62] as places where

> Aspiring young ladies, who read flaming accounts of some ‘fancy fair in high life,’ suddenly grow desperately charitable; visions of admiration and matrimony float before their eyes…and the aforesaid young ladies, from mere charity, exhibit themselves for three days, from twelve to four, for the small charge of one shilling per head. (92)

It is into this sexually charged market with its thin veneer of respectability that Becky is cast in a final illustration from the novel:

> She [Becky] is always having stalls at Fancy Fairs for the benefit of these helpless beings. Emmy, her children, and the Colonel, coming to London sometime back, found themselves suddenly before her at one of these fairs. She cast down her eyes demurely and smiled as they started away from her; Emmy skurrying off on the arm of George (now grown a dashing young gentleman), and the Colonel seizing up his little Janey, of whom he is fonder than of anything in the world… (808-809)

In the drawing taken from this scene, the dynamics of the exchange are more pronounced, or, at least, more visible (see figure 9). Becky is not merely at the fair, but is actually behind a booth, apparently selling her wares. These wares are rather indistinct, but seem to consist of a series of pictures, at least one of which shows a female figure; a small doll

propped in the corner, reminding the reader of the Amelia Doll that both the narrator and Becky have manipulated; and a few vague textiles draped over the front of the booth.

Figure 9. Thackeray, W.M.. *Virtue Rewarded; A Booth at Vanity Fair*. 1861. Image scanned by Gerald Ajam. *The Victorian Web*.

Thus, the items that Becky is selling form a triumvirate of female representation, performance, and dress. Perhaps representing their attitudes toward Becky and her goods, both Dobbin and George are facing the beguiling Becky, while Amelia has turned her back on her former friend, and a curious little Janey looks up at her father while fingering one of the items Becky has displayed. Thackeray entitled this illustration *Virtue rewarded; A booth at Vanity Fair*, which, rather than illuminating the meaning of

the scene, might only further obscure it. Whose virtue has been rewarded and how?[63] If it is Amelia's virtue which has been rewarded, the reader might believe that the reward is the happy family she has acquired and the secure conventionally approved status as Victorian wife and mother; and yet, her husband and son look not at her, but at the mischievous Becky. If it is Becky who has been rewarded with the apparent freedom and monetary gain of the market, then what is the virtue that she is being rewarded for? Of course, given the nature of the novel, the title to the piece is both satiric and ironic, indicating that there is neither virtue nor reward to be found in Vanity Fair.

In whatever manner the caption to this piece might be read, it is clear that Thackeray has imagined Vanity Fair not only as a stage, but also as a marketplace. In *Corrupt Relations*, Richard Barickman, Susan McDonald, and Myra Stark make clear what that marketplace is trading:

> That Vanity Fair is primarily a place where sexual wares are sold—either openly as Old Osborne attempts to do in his lust to secure the money of Miss Swartz or more subtly as Becky does on her various intrigues—becomes abundantly clear in the novel. The pursuit of money, place, security, power always comes down in the novel's development of plot and theme, to fundamental sexual issues. (173)

If Vanity Fair is a marketplace, it is in the market of sex.[64]

The illustration of Becky's booth then seems to be a literal drawing of the type of sexual exchange that Nancy Armstrong discusses in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. In this paradigm, women gain power by exchanging political authority for domestic license. In effect, they exchange the sexual body for power (Armstrong 41). However, Armstrong does not consider that this power is primarily derived from performance. The domestic is

certainly about power, but its power is the result of manipulating the conventions of domestic discourse before a receptive audience. By imagining domesticity as sexual exchange and as performance, the novel neatly intersects the stage of Vanity Fair with the market of Vanity Fair. Both are arenas of display and spectatorship, and both reflect with carnivalesque exaggeration the state of Thackeray's own society.

Dress as Prop, Dress as Commodity

If Thackeray's project examines dress as a means of illustrating the problems with the enactment of ideal Victorian femininity via domesticity, then, in a perhaps smaller, but more piercing way, it also illustrates problems with ideal Victorian masculinity. The uncontested clothes-horse of the novel is Joseph Sedley. Throughout the novel, Thackeray uses items of dress as a kind of short-hand for characters. Each new character, no matter how minor, is often introduced in tandem with an item from his or her wardrobe. Characters or the narrator may remark that the coachman has "a new red waist-coat," George almost knocks down a "gentleman in top-boots" at Vauxhall, a party catastrophe seven years before is remembered as being caused by an unfortunate Mrs. Flamingo's "crimson silk gown" (1, 58, 46). More important characters are often associated with a particular item of dress that is incessantly repeated and remarked upon. For Jos, it is his hessian boots. The first description of Jos is unforgiving:

> A very stout puffy man, in buckskins and hessian boots with several immense neckcloths that rose almost to his nose, with a red striped waistcoat and an apple green coat with steel buttons almost as large as crown pieces (it was the morning costume of a dandy or blood of those days). (18)

The narrative makes clear that Jos is meant to be a ridiculous figure; despite his dedication to fashion:

> He never was well-dressed: but he took the hugest pains to adorn his big person: and passed many hours daily in that occupation. His valet made a fortune out of his wardrobe. His toilet-table was covered with as many pomatums and essences as ever were employed by an old beauty: he had tried, in order to give himself a waist, every girth, stay, and waist-band then invented. Like most fat men he would have his clothes made too tight and took care they should be of the most brilliant colours and youthful cut. (19)

The excessive time spent on fashion, the employment of stays and girdles, and the attention to cut and color mark Jos as effeminate, an opinion echoed by the other characters. When George Osborne recounts cutting the tassels off Joseph's boots as a child, the disfigurement of Jos's identifying clothing reads almost as a type of castration. Jos attempts to forge a masculine identity by donning the clothing of dandies and bloods, in the style of Beau Brummell, but this attempt backfires, and he is read as effeminate. Critics have extended this concept of the effeminate Jos in several articles. Joseph Litvak names him a "sadly obtuse style queen" in an article that evaluates his role as a homophobic stereotype of the fashionable male consumer, which masks anxieties about sexuality as anxieties about class (224). Sarah Rose Cole expands on this theme, arguing that Thackeray often deploys male characters like Jos who defy Victorian middle-class ideals of masculinity due to a (feminine) obsession with their own appearance. In fact, these bourgeois dandies are "generally in pursuit of an admiring gaze—often a male [aristocratic, she will later add] gaze—that will validate their own fantasies of a Brummell-like physical perfection and social ascent" (138). The consensus implies that

Thackeray uses Jos to represent the disfigurement that clothes-consciousness may have on the middle-class male, rendering him effeminate, possibly homosexual, with a sad case of lust for (both to be seen by and to become a member of) the aristocracy.

In seeking to cultivate a more masculine appearance, Jos makes an almost deadly mistake. He certainly recognizes that clothes are commodities, and he also recognizes their importance as props. With the increasing military ardor surrounding the ensuing Napoleonic Wars, the civilian ex-collector of Boggley wollah begins to cultivate a more martial air in his dress. He "ceased shaving his upper lip" in order to nurture a soldierly mustache, and "made his appearance in a braided frock-coat and duck trowsers, with a foraging cap ornamented with a smart gold band." So successful is his attempt at creating a new identity by his dress that "folks mistook him for a great personage, a commissary-general, or a government courier at the very least" (271-272). Although Jos is delighted to be mistaken for a military-man when there is no danger, he regrets his martial air at the rumors of Wellington's defeat.[65] Heeding his valet's warning that "Milor had better not wear that military coat…the Frenchmen have sworn not to give quarter to a single British soldier" (305), Joseph makes haste in shedding his soldierly attire:

> Isidor swept off the mustachios in no time with the razor, and…. Jos selected a plain black coat and waistcoat from his stock, and put on a large white neckcloth, and a plain beaver. If he could have got a shovel-hat he would have worn it. As it was, you would have fancied he was a flourishing, large parson of the Church of England. (318)

The narrative mocks Jos's cowardly use of dress, affecting a military style when it will earn him admiration and rejecting it when it might get him killed. The incident serves, however, to clearly illustrate the importance of clothing in fashioning identity, even a false identity. Jos seeks to enact ideal Victorian masculinity by appearing as a soldier. It is as easy as changing his coat.

While Joseph's character is Thackeray's vehicle for exploring ideal masculinity, he uses both Amelia and Becky extensively to explore ideal femininity, particularly as it is aligned with middle-class domesticity. The ways in which they each dress are keys to understanding how each recognizes the performance and exchange implicit in domestic ideology. Amelia is described repeatedly as "natural." She is artless. She doesn't know what she is doing. Like Pamela a century earlier, she verges on sartorial illiteracy. Rather than considering the ways in which her dress may constitute her identity, ascertaining that she is properly dressed is the extent of her clothes-consciousness. She is, of course, interested in clothes, just as Pamela is. In describing the newly married Mrs. Osborne, the narrator declares: "Nor was Mrs. Amelia at all above the pleasure of shopping, and bargaining, and seeing and buying pretty things. (Would any man, the most philosophic, give twopence for a woman who was?)" (263). With the rhetorical question tacked on at the end, Thackeray's narrator ironically suggests that pleasure in shopping is a normal, even desirable, quality in a woman—or, perhaps just unavoidable.[66] And although Amelia delights in "pretty things" she does not consider what those pretty things may mean. A pleasure in shopping and an understanding of proper dress are likely

all any comfortable middle-class woman need possess. Thackeray, however, is not interested in leaving his characters comfortable.

Amelia's sartorial innocence is starkly contrasted with Becky's purposeful manipulation of her appearance. Early in the novel, both characters appear similarly dressed. Amelia appears in "a white muslin frock prepared for conquest at Vauxhall, singing like a lark, and as fresh as a rose" (47). The aggressive "conquest" typifies the satirical language that Thackeray uses to describe the movements of Amelia—she later, for example, "invades the low countries." Rather than painting her as bold and warrior-like, the diction has the opposite effect: it becomes a foil to highlight Amelia's excessively passive behavior. As it is, if she had known that Captain Dobbin was waiting in the room she entered, she would "never have been so bold as to come singing into the room" (48). Nevertheless, this is the moment of her triumph—Dobbin is won over. Not only did Amelia not purposely attract Dobbin, but she remains completely unaware of his attraction for years. The layers of naïveté build a thick cocoon around Amelia—she is practicing a form of charming naïveté that she has been taught from her infancy, but she is also too naïve to recognize it as naïveté. The act becomes indistinguishable from the reality.

Becky on the other hand, wears nothing that is not meant to attract and manipulate. On her first night with the Sedleys, "she was dressed in white, with bare shoulders as white as snow—the picture of gentle unprotected innocence, and humble virgin simplicity" (22).[67] Thackeray's description emphasizes the *appearance* of innocence and virginity that Becky's costume displays, an emphasis that is not necessary

with the description of Amelia. Just as Thackeray uses aggressive language to highlight Amelia's non-aggressive nature, Thackeray stresses the purity of Becky's appearance, which, to the reader, reveals her lack of purity. In fact, the line immediately following this description of Becky describes her scheme: "'I must be very quiet,' thought Rebecca, 'and very much interested about India'" (22). Her plans for seducing Jos revolve around her ability to appear innocent and virginal, to appear quietly submissive, but also admiringly interested. Her intentional manipulation of her appearance and behavior indicate that she is, in fact, none of these things. Becky and Amelia appear in nearly the same dress—white muslin, which was exactly proper and fashionable at the time. However, each wears it with a difference—Amelia with unconscious, artless charm, Becky with bigger plans and ambitions.

If Amelia fails to recognize dress as a prop on the stage of Vanity Fair, she also fails to recognize it as a commodity, particularly in the domestic/marriage market of sexual exchange. In fact, Amelia is rather bewildered by the sexual exchange altogether. Finding herself married, she cannot help but compare her new existence to that previous one. On a visit to her parents' house:

> She looked at the little white bed, which had been hers a few days before, and thought she would like to sleep in it that night, and wake, as formerly, with her mother smiling over her in the morning. Then she thought with terror of the great funereal damask pavilion in the vast and dingy state bed-room, which was awaiting her at the grand hotel in Cavendish Square. (262)

Her love for George notwithstanding, Amelia's desire for her virginal white bed and her terror at the dark, damask marriage bed clearly indicates her discomfort in the sexual

exchange. Hers has been a sentimental education, and marriage is merely the idealized union of love. She does not see it as an exchange of rights and powers and goods that Nancy Armstrong has described.

Becky, on the other hand, is entirely conscious of the market in which she is purveyor, consumer, and commodity. She recognizes that within her society, marriage is the only stable means of upward social mobility for a woman. Lacking the financial backing and present doting family that Amelia possesses, Becky's opportunities and understanding are quite different. Bound as an articled pupil at Miss Pinkerton's by her dissipated, indebted, and dying father, Becky is immediately separated from the other petted darlings of the school by her menial servitude. But Becky is nothing, if not aspiring, and so

> She determined at any rate to get free from the prison in which she found herself, and now began to act for herself, and for the first time to make connected plans for the future. She took advantage, therefore, of the means of study the place offered her; and as she was already a musician and linguist, she speedily went through the little course of study which was considered necessary for ladies in those days. (14)

Becky's ostensible purpose in gleaning these subjects is to put them to use as a governess. This is the request (demand) that she makes of Miss Pinkerton: "Get me a situation—we hate each other, and I am ready to go" (21). Rebecca's true intentions are soon apparent. She intends by all means possible to secure a husband and therefore safety before she ever has to do anything so tiresome as become a governess. She makes an early and aborted attempt at matrimonial ensnarement while still at Miss Pinkerton's. The young Reverend Mr. Crisp is struck by Becky's piercing glance. The interception of

their affair causes not only "a great flutter in the breast of Miss Pinkerton," but apparently a great flutter in the Chiswickean sense of propriety (12). The infatuated Mr. Crisp is hauled off by his mamma, and Becky is named "an eagle in the Chiswick dovecot" (12). This early and brief example is quite enough to reveal a number of precedents that the book will follow, namely how Becky intends to improve her situation and how she will be received—with admiration by the men (her victims) and suspicion by the women (her rivals). Becky is dangerous, not merely because she targets infatuated young men. Her danger lies in her ability to use the rules of domesticity to seduce in order to move up in social class.

Even as Becky understands that she is dealing in a market of sexual exchange, she also recognizes that dress is a primary currency in that trade. The more pretty clothes she owns, the more attention she may attract. The more attention she attracts, the more pretty clothes she is likely to be given. Dress is both Becky's reward and her tool. In "The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse," Mariana Valverde explains that this was also the understanding of Victorian prostitution. The "love of finery" was often cited by doctors and "social purity" proponents as a main cause for a woman becoming a prostitute. Since contemporary scientific thought ruled out the possibility that women were likely to experience sexual passion, new explanations for prostitution needed to be developed; the old line of voracious female lust was out of date. Dr. William Acton, a specialist in reproductive and sexual disorders, first popularized the notion of female passionlessness and the role of dress in prostitution. He wrote:

> If I seek to number the operative causes [of female prostitution] other than passion of the woman, I am met on the very threshold of the task by vanity, vanity, and then vanity—for what but this are love of dress and admiration, and what sacrifices will not tens of thousands of the uneducated make to gain these? (qtd. in Valverde 175)

Valverde's account goes on to describe the Victorian taxonomies of prostitution—various classes based on the value of the clothes worn, from the highest class French prostitutes whose undergarments were even of the finest material, to the lower-scale girls who might be made to pawn their dresses, as a worker might have to pawn his tools.

Because Becky's clothing is both an inducement to her activities and the tools she uses, the narrative aligns her with contemporary ideas of prostitution, although Becky is clever ("educated"?) enough, to sanctify her bartering in matrimony (initially, that is). Having secured Rawdon Crawley, Becky can boldly accept the gifts he sends: "As for shawls, kid gloves, silk stockings, gold French watches, bracelets and perfumery, he sent them in with the profusion of blind love and unbounded credit" (162). However, it is not merely her husband from whom Rebecca accepts gifts. From the General of Rawdon's company, she receives "many very handsome presents in the shape of cashmere shawls bought at the auction of a bankrupt French general's lady, and numerous tributes from the jewellers' shops, all of which betokened her admirer's taste and wealth" (298). She receives watches not only from the General, but also from George Osborne: "a little bijou marked Leroy, with a chain and cover charmingly set with turquoises, and another signed Breguet, which was covered with pearls, and yet scarcely bigger than a half-crown" (298). As often happens in Vanity Fair, Becky's largesse, with its brand-consciousness,

comes at the expense of another woman; in this case, the "bankrupt French general's lady" whose goods are auctioned off, and Amelia, who "had no watch" (299). George's attention and gift to Becky while neglecting his wife reinforces the sexual exchange at work; he is clearly attempting to start an affair with his wife's friend the night of the ball, and this watch is the opening bid.

In a scene that tellingly parallels, almost parodies, one from *Pamela*, Becky renders her dress and her goods literally one. While Jos is feverishly shaving his mustachios in advance of a possible defeat of English troops, Becky is making her own preparations, doing "a little needlework for her own advantage; she stitched away the major part of her trinkets, bills, and bank-notes about her person, and so prepared, was ready for any event—to fly if she thought fit, or to stay and welcome the conqueror, were he Englishman or Frenchman" (324). Pamela's most precious goods were her letters, a stand-in for her self-authored identity and, therefore, agency. She sews her letters into her petticoat, rendering her dress and self one as a sort of defense against the ravishment of both body and soul threatened by Mr. B. Becky, on the other hand, values not her own identity, which is a merely contrived performance, but the little pile of Mammon she has accumulated. In sewing her wealth into her skirts, Becky is not defending herself against threats to body and soul, but daydreaming of, perhaps, a self-directed ravishment that would lead to her "becoming a duchess and Madame la Maréchale" if things went badly for the English troops (324). Becky's domestic act of sewing neatly weaves together the loose threads of performance, commodity, and sexuality.

Domestic Performances and Homely Goods

The ways in which each heroine handles sartorial performance parallels the ways in which she will handle domestic performance. While "the domestic" is often considered in terms of space, for women who are outside of or insecure of their place within that space, alternative avenues to the security of middle-class domesticity may be navigated by seeing the domestic as a type of performance that they may enact. Thus, the skills that are taught as part of the "frivolous" feminine education, although intended to serve a *space*, are actually well-adapted to a *performance*. These accomplishments are ornamental, designed to display either the female in question as performer in music or dancing, or as a producer of the ornamental with her embroidery and needle-work, all of which underscores the spectacle-driven view of the woman in Victorian society as the object of the male gaze. Although Amelia and Becky are taught embroidery and music with an eye toward then becoming useful wives, the largely ornamental element of these tasks underscores the extent of their possibilities. These talents are most useful in helping them act a part that will help then advance socially. Becky clearly recognizes this. She is, after all, an actress and the daughter of an actress, used to small cons and petty flatteries, which save her from duns and ingratiates her with powerful allies. Domesticity and accomplishments are mere additions to Becky's already burgeoning repertoire of useful illusions.

Amelia, alas, does not possess Becky's worldly outlook, largely from never having needed it. Thackeray at first seems to admire his simple Miss Sedley, setting her up at one point as the natural heroine of the novel, "for the very reason that she was the

best-natured of all" (11). Miss Pinkerton also seems taken with Amelia's good qualities, as in her letter, she at first praises Amelia for things that she certainly did not learn from Miss Pinkerton. Her industry and obedience and sweetness of temper were, it may be presumed, already a feature of Amelia's character before she joined Miss Pinkerton's academy.

Amelia, in contrast to Becky, does not recognize that her accomplishments and domestic acts entail any acting at all. Amelia seems to have a simple faith in her education, earnestly believing that she has been taught valuable skills that will serve her and her future family well. The most obvious, and sad, example of this misguided belief is her fruitless attempts to earn some income by her talents. Having become quite poor and desperate not to lose her son, Amelia considers her marketable skills: "Can she give lessons in anything? Paint card-racks? Do fine work? She finds that women are working hard and better than she can, for twopence a day" (491). Amelia, however, makes her attempt. She "buys a couple of begilt Britstol boards at the fancy stationer's and paints her very best upon them – a shepherd with a red waistcoat on one, and a pink face smiling in the midst of a pencil landscape – a shepherdess on the other, crossing a little bridge, with a little dog nicely shaded" and "she writes out a little card in her neatest hand…; in which the public is informed that 'A Lady who has some time at her disposal, wishes to undertake the education of some little girls, whom she would instruct in English, in French, in Geography, in History, and in music…" (491-492). Of course, her efforts are all in vain. The shop-owners to whom she peddles her screens sneer at her work, and she finds she has merely lost money on the materials. The cards advertising

her educational qualifications grow dusty on shop shelves. No one, it seems, believes Amelia's performance, including Amelia herself. Amelia, in fact, is not performing. Performance, the kind of staged act that the novel sets up in the very beginning of the work, requires a type of self-aware recognition that distances the performer from what she is performing. Amelia can see no distance, and she is charmingly and frustratingly unself-aware. Amelia's faith in her education and skills is tantamount to a faith in the rules and conventions of domesticity. She takes the discourse literally and her education at face value; Amelia is acting within Armstrong's paradigm in which she believes that she has made a fair exchange of her political power for domestic power. What she fails to realize is that power is not gained by following the rules but by subverting them.

Becky, of course, would realize that you only paint screens if you intend to give them to some rich gentleman who will be so touched by your humble arts that he will agree to pay your debts, and you only agree to teach young children if you may take aim at marrying their papa or older brother. Amelia, unlike Becky, fails to see the sexual exchange inherent in acts of domesticity and accomplishment. Amelia, unfortunately, believes in the intrinsic value of her talents, poor though they are, while Becky understands that they are only valuable in so far as they may flatter someone powerful enough to provide assistance. Becky performs domesticity, whereas Amelia only enacts it, caught within its own rules and conventions. Becky skewers those conventions by performing them with a self-consciousness of her own performance. She takes the rules of the Armstrongian paradigm and turns them in on themselves. Amelia is trying to be a domestic heroine in a realist novel; Becky takes advantage of the use of performance and

exaggeration within the rules of convention, just as the satirical novel manipulates the rules of realism. Amelia seems to survive the novel by sheer luck.

Becky does not need to rely on luck, as she has both talent and awareness on her side. Just as her sartorial performance allowed her to manipulate the perception of her identity, so too does her domestic performance. Interestingly, Becky's performances intersect, the sartorial becoming a prop for the domestic in her plans to conquer the class structure. Amelia's brother Joseph Sedley is, if not Becky's first conquest, her last recorded one. And the ammunition she uses are the very skills that she learned at Miss Pinkerton's, those skills that were designed to render respectable young women spotless young wives. Rebecca's green silk purse merits a chapter title in the novel, as it proves to be nearly the undoing of Jos Sedley. It is during the process of knitting the green silk purse that Becky and Jos first broach the subject of marriage, and of course, "When two unmarried persons get together and talk upon such delicate subjects as the present, a great deal of confidence and intimacy is presently established between them" (31). Becky's skeins are not aimed merely at facilitating such conversational goals, however. Before long, "Mr. Joseph Sedley, of the East India Company's service, was actually seated tête-à-tête with a young lady and looking at her with a most killing expression; his arms outstretched before her in an imploring attitude, and his hands bound in a web of green silk, which she was unwinding" (36). Jos finds himself bound in a web of Becky's making, representing a trap far more sinister than that of green silk. He is to be enchanted by her domesticity, awed by her industry, and compelled, because already positioned in the proper posture, to propose marriage on the spot. The telling symbolism

of the empty purse need hardly be mentioned. Becky no doubt hopes that Jos will not only take her purse, but fill it up for her as well. Poor Becky, lucky Jos, he does not…at least at first.

This scheme is not the only example of Becky putting her needlework to good use and combining sartorial and domestic performances. Passing from her part of blushing maiden, she takes up the part of doting mother with similar recourse to needles. Becky finds that she can render herself charming and maternal by hemming little Rawdon's shirt: "Whenever Mrs. Rawdon wished to be particularly humble and virtuous, this little shirt used to come out of her work-box. It had got to be too small for Rawdon long before it was finished" (441). Becky clearly understands that the needlework she was taught at Miss Pinkerton's had far more use than that prescribed. While to such paragons of female education it no doubt represented industry and artistic taste, Becky recognizes that stitchery may seduce. It is the appearance of the domestic that Becky's admirers find charming, not the actual process or product. It is a useful prop in the part Becky chooses to act.

Both of these instances rely on Becky realizing that in performing domesticity she is making herself an object for the male gaze. Performance is a two-fold relationship, and the performer must recognize that she is performing *for* someone who will watch her and ultimately objectify her. Becky considers long and hard the picture that she will make for various male eyes. For Lord Steyne, she always takes considerable pains:

> Whenever the dear girl expected his Lordship, her toilette was prepared, her hair in perfect order, her *mouchoirs*, aprons, scarfs, little morocco slippers, and other

female gimcracks arranged, and she seated herself in some artless and agreeable posture ready to receive him. (561)

Becky draws about herself the accoutrements of domestic and sartorial femininity, careful to consider the tableau she is affecting.

Figure 10. Thackeray, W.M.. *Becky's Second Appearance in the Character of Clytemnestra*. 1861. Image scanned by Gerald Ajam. *The Victorian Web*.

This domestic image, of course, is counterbalanced by the actual tableau she takes part in where she performs the part of Clytemnestra.[68] At a fête sponsored by the Crawleys and attended by Lord Steyne and other worthies, characters effect an air of Oriental exoticism—an Eastern traveler with his costumes and black attendants lending

authenticity to the proceedings. Becky's performance of the husband-slaying Clytemnestra crowns the charades, shocks the audience, and garners her admiration. This performance is, ironically, more true to her character than the other performances that she acts out; as Lord Steyne mutters, "By—, she'd do it too," and as an illustration at the end of the novel suggests, pictured above, she does do it. No reluctant murderess she, in both charade and illustration, Becky is the forceful agent, snatching the dagger from a faltering Ægisthus in the charade and grinning maliciously from behind the curtain in the illustration. Just as Amelia is cocooned in layers of naïveté, Becky is swathed in layers of performance: a scheming social climber disguised as respectable wife and mother acting out the part of tragic heroine-murderess.

Becky's ultimate undoing is that Lord Steyne recognizes her as a performer, and he calls her out on her little pretenses. When Becky explains her delay by saying she was in the kitchen making a pudding (an eminently domestic, though entirely fabricated, act) Steyne indicates that he is not fooled and already knows the truth: "'You silly little fibster! I heard you in your room overhead, where I have no doubt you were putting a little rouge on" (480). If Becky is willingly objectifying herself and pandering to the male gaze, her undoing is the fact that Steyne not only recognizes this, but actively encourages it. Barickman argues that Lord Steyne is sadistic in his treatment of his wife and daughters-in-law (179). His sadism might also extend to the pleasure that he derives from objectifying Becky, controlling her with his gaze. The two must eventually come to a contest because they cannot both gain power from the same act. Becky gains power

over men by objectifying herself, and Steyne gains power over women by objectifying them. The object of Becky cannot empower them both for long.

Becky demonstrates that, if the male gaze can be controlled by the female object, then her performance is a risky, but empowering maneuver, and perhaps the only way that domestic performance can be successful in Vanity Fair. Becky's productive performance seems to be in stark contrast to that of other females in the novel, such as Miss Osborne. Jane Osborne's domesticity is an empty one, a domesticity perverted from the purposes of the educational system; she may not, cannot marry, and so her domestic efforts, her displays of accomplishment are lost on her father. She is without an audience, and ultimately without the gaze to manipulate. The novel describes her sad existence:

> She had to get up of black winter's mornings to make breakfast for her scowling old father….At half-past nine he rose and went to the City, and she was almost free till dinner-time, to make visitations in the kitchen, and to scold the servants: to drive abroad and descend upon the tradesmen…to leave her card and her papa's at the great glum respectable houses of their City friends; or to sit alone in the large drawing-room, expecting visitors; and working at a huge piece of worsted by the fire, on the sofa, hard by the great Iphigenia clock, which ticked and tolled with mournful loudness in the dreary room. (497)

The mention of the Iphigenia clock, described early in the novel as a "Chronometer which was surmounted by a cheerful brass group of the sacrifice of Iphigenia," is a perhaps not so veiled symbol of what Miss Osborne's life has become: a daughter's sacrifice for the father's pride, a sacrifice ironically undervalued by those who "cheerfully" carry it out (129). Clearly, Miss Osborne's life is a lonely one, and her domestic efforts are but empty formalities. The narrator describes this drawing-room in

which she sits working the endless piece of worsted: two facing mirrors combined with a dreary light cause the scene to be multiplied, "fading away in endless perspectives, and this apartment of Miss Osborne's seemed to be the centre of a system of drawing-rooms" (427).[69] Even her attempts at music are dreary; upon uncovering her piano, the few notes she plays "sounded with a mournful sadness, startling the dismal echoes of the house" (427). With each description the narrator further underscores the fundamental truth of Miss Osborne's life: she is alone, caught in an endless system that merely reflects and echoes and continually multiplies the dreary solitude of her existence.

Thus, the real difference between Becky and Jane Osborne is an issue of performance. It matters little that Becky has secured a husband and Jane has not because the husband is merely the socially approved audience for the domesticity. Becky's work reveals the perfomative quality of female education, accomplishment, and domesticity. Miss Osborne's failure is not because she has failed to acquire the necessary qualities, but because she has no one to perform them on. There is no one to appreciate her playing, no child to thrust her worsted upon (or, better yet, for Jane to hem shirts for), and her father's self-absorption and constant absence renders him no fit audience for her household management. Because she cannot perform for an audience, her domestic accomplishment is impotent and ultimately void. She has no one to watch her.

Amelia, on the other hand, is in a curious position. Certainly, she is watched. Dobbin devotes his life to the image of Amelia Sedley, from cherishing the memory of her coming singing into the room to the picture he has pasted to the inside of his desk because it looks like her (actually, it only looks like her to him). Each of these

representations, however, only underscores that Amelia is a mere image. She refuses to (or does not realize she could) perform in the way that Becky does, and so she is rendered passive, almost as lifeless as the doll she is described as in the preface to the novel. When she does act, she is merely enacting the conventions of domesticity, the Angel in the House role that she had so long been taught and so earnestly believes in. For all of this effort, however, she might as well not even have acted at all. Mark Spilka remarks that, despite Amelia's important role in the novel, she hardly seems present for most of it (202). While much of the narrative is devoted to describing Becky's actions and words and character, precious little is said about Amelia. Often, words seem to fail the narrator himself, and he must appeal to reader's imagination to supply his deficiencies because often she is "quite impossible to describe in print" (266). The result is that Amelia is often rendered through indirect discourse, and the reader has reports of what effect she has on other characters, rather than seeing those actions which produce the effect. For example, upon her admission to the regiment:

> It became quite the fashion, indeed among all the honest young fellows of the —th, to adore and admire Mrs Osborne. Her simple, artless behavior, and modest kindness of demeanour, won all their unsophisticated hearts; all which simplicity and sweetness are quite impossible to describe in print. But who has not beheld these among women, and recognized the presence of all sorts of qualities in them, even though they say no more to you than that they are engaged to dance the next quadrille, or that it is very hot weather? (303-304)

It may well be that it is not that Amelia is impossible to describe in print, but that there is nothing really to describe. Her interactions with the other characters follow the same pattern of propriety that any reader would have been familiar with, indeed that Thackeray

expects them to be familiar with—“but who has not beheld these among women?” If successful manipulation of the rules and conventions of domesticity require that a woman gain an audience for her performance, Amelia has failed because no one is watching her, not even the narrator, not even the reader. Not even, apparently, her husband and son, who in the final drawing of the novel, depicting the small family encountering Becky at the fair, have turned their eyes on the indomitable Miss Sharp.

Domestic Satire and Epic Realism

Vanity Fair is, of course, satire, and as such, it operates quite differently from the realist novels that abound in studies of the nineteenth century and that theorists such as Nancy Armstrong focus on. The domestic is generally considered the realm of realism, but in *Vanity Fair*, it is scrutinized with the same satiric eye as the rest of Victorian society. The very genre of satire is such that it exposes corruption and abuse by exaggeration. Here, *Vanity Fair* appropriates the conventions of realism and its discourse and image of domesticity and the domestic woman in order to show the dangers of female education and how it may be abused. Becky and Amelia become examples, and extreme examples at that, of the ways in which women perform and are taught to perform within society. *Vanity Fair* carefully charts how both Becky and Amelia perform in the dramatic discourse of domesticity and presents them as two examples of mismanaged power.

This very use of exaggeration makes the dangers that the novel exposes seem ludicrous at first. Thackeray goes to great lengths to display early in the novel exactly what is being scrutinized in female education. The two main female characters begin their

foray into Vanity Fair upon leaving their place of learning for the past several years, Miss Pinkerton's Academy. Thackeray makes clear the type of education received at Miss Pinkerton's. In a letter (a billet, if you please) to Amelia's parents, Miss Pinkerton claims:

> Those virtues which characterize the young English gentlewoman…will not be found wanting in the amiable Miss Sedley, whose *industry* and *obedience* have endeared her to her instructors, and whose delightful sweetness of temper has charmed her…companions. In music, in dancing, in orthography, in every variety of embroidery and needle-work, she will be found to have realized her friends' *fondest wishes*. (3)

The accomplishments listed are the evidence of Amelia's education. These skills were taught in order to make the young woman a suitable object of marriage. This method of becoming marriageable could be seen as a welcome change from previous models. Armstrong notes that prior to the eighteenth century, a woman's marriage value was primarily based on aristocratic criteria, and merit was meted according to birth and wealth. With changing cultural values, however, emphasis began to be placed on accomplishments and behavior, and now "neither birth nor the accoutrements of title and status accurately represented the individual; only the more subtle nuances of behavior indicated what one was really worth" (Armstrong 4). Of course, such worth could still be commodified and thus, female education came into place in order to teach young women skills that would render them a good match. This is certainly a decidedly more democratic and hopeful model of merit, as Armstrong demonstrates, but it is still, to an extent, exclusionary. Rather than ratifying all classes of young women, such a change mostly promoted the middle classes, those right below the gentry with their titles and

country houses, who had enough money for a genteel education. Domestic accomplishments were the outward manifestations of a woman whose family's financial situation allowed her to obtain the means of proving that she is an eligible person who has attained the qualities of the good wife, and these qualities also served as an indicator of membership in the middle class.

As the narrative aims at a satirical exposure of middle-class Victorian domesticity, clothing becomes a vehicle through which that satire is manifested. While according to the narrator's voice, the work is to be read as a historical account of Regency England ("While the present century was in its teens" (1)), *Vanity Fair* is clearly a satire of Victorian England. Thackeray's narrator slips in his artifice of historicity in a footnote. When, in the narrative, a spencer (a short jacket with tall sleeves and a high neck popular in the Regency period) is mentioned, Thackeray makes a note:

> It was the author's intention, faithful to history, to depict all the characters of this tale in their proper costumes, as they wore them at the commencement of the century. But when I remember the appearance of people in those days, and that an officer and lady were actually habited like this—

Figure 11. Thackeray, W.M. Untitled. 1861. Image scanned by Gerald Ajam. *The Victorian Web*.

> I have not the heart to disfigure my heroes and heroines by costumes so hideous; and have, on the contrary, engaged a model of rank dressed according to the present fashion. (63-64)

Thackeray not only takes an opportunity to make a joke at the expense of those old-fashioned Georgians with their ridiculous hats. His note and illustrations provide an alternative reading of the text. Although his words depict a Regency setting, his satire is aimed at his own contemporary society—the setting he has drawn and the characters he has clothed. This double knowledge, doubled representation of both the Regency narrative and the Victorian depiction mirrors the double nature of the text, which is simultaneously a realist novel and a satire.

Similarly, both Becky and Amelia have realist qualities, though they are both satirical representation of the dangers of Victorian female accomplishment, education, and domesticity. Becky is dangerous because she is all performance. She is an actress and manipulator who sacrifices even herself to the male gaze in order to permeate the class boundaries that seek to bind her. She is fascinating and mesmerizing and a symptom of a corrupt society. Amelia, on the other hand, is dangerous because she represents the true believer who does not realize she is performing a part. By clinging too closely to the ideals of her society, Amelia allows herself to be taken advantage of but without any gain on her part. She, too, is a symptom of her society. Amelia and Becky are not the binary that has been so often imagined in critical commentary of the good woman and the bad, the Madonna and the whore. They are merely opposite extremes on

a continuum of self-awareness, and both extremes are unsettling reminders of the products of a stifling education.

Thackeray's admonishment to his wife on the score of education, then, seems unreliable. He describes the domestic tasks that are recommended to women by their education, their poonah-painting and Sunday schools, and calls them frivolous. And yet his novel is clearly a much broader commentary on how female education and domesticity have dangerous consequences. A previous letter to his wife might make his meaning clear, however: "I want you to be … a wise and affectionate woman, as you will be, dearest Puss, if you will but *love* enough" (qtd. in Clarke 88). Neither Becky nor Amelia love correctly, Becky loving no one at all in favor of self-promotion, Amelia loving blindly a false image. At the risk of reducing Amelia and Becky to a binary once more, I would suggest that Thackeray has endowed each of his heroines with one half of an ideal. Becky possesses cleverness, but without compassion, and Amelia possesses affection without any self-awareness. The union of these two qualities, Thackeray's letter seems to suggest, lies in learning how to love correctly and enough, something that contemporary female education did not teach. The narrative's exposure of female education echoes this indictment, highlighting how performative the domestic may be in nature, how easily it may be used to manipulate within a sexual context, the frivolity of taking it at face value, and the foolishness of not recognizing the strings by which we are held up on the stage of Vanity Fair.

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[59] Isabella was already in poor health and would experience a complete mental break-down in another four years, a deterioration that Peter Shillingsburg contributes to

the death of the Thackerays' daughter Jane and subsequent birth of daughter Minnie, "compounded by [Isabella's] feelings of worthlessness as mother, wife, and housekeeper and by neglect from Thackeray" (42).   Thackeray, in the meantime, found that taking on a crushing workload was the only way to keep his family solvent. Despite Thackeray's distaste for conventional models of Victorian domestic femininity, it is partly due to the pressure of the conventions that his wife suffers from depression and eventual insanity.

[60] According to Miller, Thackeray had an ambiguous relationship to commodities—both fearing the dehumanizing work that such passionate desire for them may inspire, but yet revealing his own desire for them in the intense interest that he shows.

[61] "Natural" is a complex term in this novel; when applied to male characters, especially Dobbin, it is high praise indeed. When applied, as it frequently is, to Amelia, there is a tone of condescension, indicating that her naturalness is less conscious virtue than mere naïveté.

[62] The illustrations for the 1850 edition of *Sketches by Boz* were done by George Cruikshank.

[63] This title for the drawing could be an allusion to the subtitle of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*. This could indicate a curious parallel between Pamela and Becky, who rises in fortune because she does anything but remain chaste and impassive to attempts to seduce her. She, in fact, is more akin to Mr. B in the role of seducer, although she has decidedly more luck than he.

[64] Barickman et al also point out that, despite the many mentions of money and monetary gain in the novel, the primary commodity being traded is not money on the Exchange, but sex (173).

[65] Thackeray's narrator does not make the same mistake as Jos. Rather, he declares:

> We do not claim to rank among the military novelists. Our place is with the non-combatants. When the decks are cleared for action we go below and wait meekly. We should only be in the way of manoeuvers that the gallant fellows are performing overhead. We shall go no farther with the —th than to the city gate: and leaving Major O'Dowd to his duty, come back to the Major's wife, and the ladies and the baggage. (293)

While this passage reveals a contrast to Jos's presumptuous appropriation of military attire, it also indicates the direction of the narrative's interest—with the women and the baggage, underscoring the novel's domestic and sartorial inclinations.

[66] In a letter to his future wife making their engagement official, Thackeray writes, "so, dearest, make the little shifts ready, and the pretty night caps; and we will in a few few months, go & hear Bishop Luscombe read, and be married, and have children, & be happy every after, as they are in the Story books" (Letters, 22, 14-15 April 1836). It is difficult not to read irony into Thackeray's sweet, if patronizing lines that seem to imply that marriage, for women, is mostly a matter of securing "pretty, little" things to wear.

[67] This costume is a favorite of Becky's. Some time later, after her marriage, she is described in almost exactly the same terms: "She had put on the neatest and freshest white frock imaginable, and with bare shoulders and a little necklace, and a light blue

sash, she looked the image of youthful innocence and girlish happiness" (243). The same costume that served Becky before her marriage is useful after it as well, highlighting the power of the image of youth and innocence in that society and the ease with which it is imitated.

[68] In "The Triumph of Clytemnestra: The Charades of *Vanity Fair*," Maria Di Battista catalogs Becky's charades and suggests that they are linked to Thackeray's "own extensive critique of the attitudes toward women and children in the bourgeois, jingoistic, mercantile culture of the nineteenth-century England" (827). By connecting each of the classic figures Becky acts out, DiBattista is able to imagine her as more than an opportunistic social climber, but as a manipulative, ravishing murderess (Clytemnestra), a ravished victim (Philomele), and a victim of her own imprudent contact with the scorching and annihilating upper-classes (Semele). While the impulse to complicate Becky's character and avoid refining her to a two-dimensional stereotype is appropriate, the desire to see her as more sinned against than sinning is a bit too optimistic.

[69] This image of multiplied perspectives of a system of drawing rooms is a nice metaphor for the structure of the novel, which moves the scene of the action from one drawing room in one social class to another drawing room in another class. In each one, the same repetitious statements and acts and pretenses are made, fading away in mirrored instances.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In the early 1820s, a woman named Fanny Jarvis sewed a set of pockets. Almost nothing is known of Fanny Jarvis. Her pockets, now housed in the Gallery of Costume at Platt Hall in Manchester, England, seem fairly unremarkable. They are of plain white cotton dimity, narrow at the top and curving out to a wider, rounder bottom. They are tie-on pockets, meant to be worn beneath dresses that would have had slits in the sides to allow access to the contents of the pockets. They are similar to any number of plain cotton tie-on pockets that were made and worn in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Figure 12. Witherington, William Frederick. *The Hop Garland*. 1834. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

William Frederick Witherington's *The Hop Garland* depicts a child wearing a typical tie-on pocket, although, unusually, on the outside of her dress (see figure 12).

When these plain pockets are examined in light of contemporary cultural trends and ideologies, however, a narrative emerges, along with a better understanding of who Fanny Jarvis might have been. As Barbara Burman and Jonathan White, authors of the article "Fanny's Pockets: Cotton, Consumption, and Domestic Economy, 1780-1850," explain, each detail of these pockets has a particular historical value. Their very plainness, for example, marks them as products of the nineteenth century, when there began to be a trend away from the fantastically embroidered pockets of the eighteenth century, which had for many years formed part of a young girl's domestic education—her first sampler.

Even more significantly, Fanny's choice of white cotton embeds her pockets in a particular domestic ideology. Cotton was valued for its ease of care and its ability to retain its original whiteness, and an obsession with whiteness is seen as symptomatic of the middle class's desire for demonstrating "higher moral seriousness than earlier fashions" (39). A growing abundance of household and body linen in white cotton allowed for a conflation of cleanliness, respectability, and morality. Other middle-class virtues are demonstrated in the physicality of the pockets—likely handmade, they represent a domestic frugality that spurned the woman who employed a dressmaker when she could make such items more economically herself. Fanny Jarvis's identity as devotee of middle-class domestic economy is insinuated by her pockets. The careful workmanship implies a skilled hand and quality tools, the neatly reinforced corners

reveal a dutiful attention to detail, and the marking on each pocket—her name, the date, and a numbering system—indicates an orderly and organized personality. Although no written record of Fanny Jarvis's identity survives, her pockets provide an enlightening glimpse of her life and times—a potential narrative of who she was and when she lived.

My dissertation seeks to do for Pamela's honest dress, Fanny's close bonnet, Lucy's cloak and hood of hodden gray, and Becky's green silk purse what historians have done for Fanny Jarvis's pockets: I examine them in light of their contemporary culture and posit them as alternative narratives of their owners.[70] My research has investigated the sartorial literacy of the various authors and their characters—how well they understand the cultural narratives surrounding their dress choices—but I believe that our own sartorial literacy as literary scholars is just as important. If we examine the narrative arc of the text while ignoring the sartorial text, we are getting only half the story—those seemingly frivolous details provide a wealth of knowledge about the narrative the author wants to tell.

While examining eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels in the context of dress, I have argued that characters use their sartorial literacy—correctly reading social and cultural narratives concerning dress—in order to author their identity and achieve agency. I have demonstrated that power may, paradoxically, be achieved through dress, a medium that is often considered frivolous and objectifying. It is my hope that this study will add depth and texture to our understanding of the historical context of these novels, a new facet to feminist scholarship, and, ultimately, a richer understanding of the representation of representation in the novel.

Richardson, Austen, Brontë, and Thackeray were all writing in a particular place and time, and their works are situated by that place and time. While this includes the obviously important historical events—wars, monarchs, discoveries, literary innovations, and so on—the tangible details of everyday life matter as well, and perhaps more. In the domestic novel, the world is "out there," and if Austen alludes to the important historical moment of the abolition movement in Sir Thomas's sugar plantations, the reader recognizes that the novel is more interested in what Fanny will do about her jewelry for the ball. If the narrative places the focus on such matter, should we literary scholars not do likewise?[71] It is my contention that understanding these material aspects of the novel will help us to gain greater insight into the broader issues—Fanny's jewelry becomes a way of understanding her position in the marriage market under the patriarchal Sir Thomas who rules both his home and his plantations with an authoritarian order.

Dress is a potent place to explore both history and literature. In *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature*, the editors begin their introduction to "The Age of Romanticism" with an overview of dress history, from the rigid and elaborate costumes prior to the French Revolution to the corsets and hoop skirts of the early Victorians. They write,

> As the combination of freedom and militarism expressed in Romantic fashions suggests, the fifty years between the French Revolution and the reign of Queen Victoria were neither historically simple nor culturally straightforward. Despite its seeming cohesiveness and unity, the Romantic period was a complex nexus of revolution and conservatism, of bold iconoclasm and hidebound conventionality. (2)

Dress becomes a way into the complex historical context, standing as both a handy metaphor for the changes experienced within a period of time and as a historical event in itself.

I also interact with feminist theories that have been long- and well-established, and my study addresses potential applications of these theories. Luce Irigaray, Laura Mulvey, and Judith Butler have written foundational texts, and I have incorporated some of their concepts into my work: primarily Irigaray's "mimicry" and "masquerade," Mulvey's "to-be-looked-at-ness" and Butler's theories of gender performativity. Their contributions to feminist and gender studies serve as a framework for the theory of dress, performance, and identity that I wish to articulate.

Mulvey's work posits the female as the object of the gaze, and my study expands on her work by articulating the potentially positive effects of manipulating this object position. As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, objectification may, ironically, be a means of gaining subjectivity. Also, in this paradigm, women are not only "to-be-looked-at," but do the looking as well—their route to subjectivity via objectification is dependent on their sartorial and social literacy, which can only be attained through watching and understanding their culture.

Irigaray's concepts of mimicry and masquerade are fascinating, and, I argue, the clearest application of the idea of "deliberately" assuming the feminine role assigned by society is through dress. By combining Irigaray's theories of gendered discourse with Barthes' theories of fashion as discourse, I look at a potential application for Irigaray's subversive agenda. Similarly, I look at a specific application of Judith Butler's theories

of gender performativity. Dress is clearly a key prop in the performance of any identity, and my work explores this medium as a potential example of what Butler calls "radical proliferation," seeking to manipulate gender norms through a socially-constructed form.

Finally, my research examines the issue of the representation of self-representation in the novel. The image of the mirrored mirrors vanishing into an unending perspective from *Vanity Fair* is an apt metaphor for this concept. The novel is itself a form of representation—it represents the author's perspective, his or her cultural moment, and the characters he or she has created. Within that mirror's frame, we see the characters manipulating their own self-representation within their fictional world. Dress is the link that ties these worlds, mirrors, and representations together. Clothing functions as a type of historical semiotics—it is a series of signs that communicate meaning on a variety of levels.

The characters themselves imbue their sartorial choices with semiotic meaning—Pamela intends her rustic dress to symbolize her virtue, Fanny sees her white sprigged dress as a signifier of propriety, Lucy means her purple-gray dress as a rejection of attempts to categorize her, and Becky uses her white muslin to represent an assumed innocence. Superimposed on these personal symbols, their clothing communicates meaning within their world and the author's world, based on cultural narratives—thus, Mr. B reads Pamela's dress, not according to her personal semiotics, but based on contemporary cultural narratives that labeled disguise as seduction and country maidens as easy targets. The white dresses that both Fanny Price and Becky Sharp wear indicate the same thing to their cultures—white represents wholesome (and clean) middle-class

virginity. Lucy's refusal to wear white also confronts the same cultural assumptions—Lucy does not consider herself up for sale on the marriage market, so her virgin whiteness need not be displayed.

Finally, the reader must contend with the novel itself as a type of clothing. Authors have made deliberate choices about how to represent their narratives, how to dress them in such a way as to communicate meaning to the reader. Their use of dress as a parallel semiotic narrative creates a more nuanced representation of their stories, their characters, and the culture which they represent and, at times, resist. These novels then are the inverse of Pamela's letters sewn into her dress; they have dresses sewn into text—in both cases, both narratives are dependent on each other to represent the full scope of the novel.

Items of dress in the novel represent far more than an author's momentary and frivolous deviation into the world of fashion—these material items represent a way of looking at representation in the novel, and often function as a parallel narrative. Although considered by many to be a "frivolous distinction," I believe that dress is empowering. When coupled with self-awareness and social literacy, dress is a powerful means of creating identity. Marginalized characters often have a limited voice—dress is a means of communicating their agency in a way that cannot be ignored or trivialized. Like Fanny Jarvis's pockets, their items of clothing, when read rightly, offer a means of reading the character herself.

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[70] Interestingly, Barbara Burman and Jonathan White, though working from the opposite side of the history/literature divide, similarly argue for a greater collaboration

between the two disciplines. In fact, they use Anna Maria Hall's novel, *Grandmamma's Pockets* to inform their understanding of pockets in nineteenth-century culture. They close their article with a claim for the interdependence of historical object and literary text:

> Without the close attention to their material properties, we would not have seen beneath the everyday plainness of either Fanny's dimity pockets or understood the full cultural labour of Hall's 'marcella' pockets. Without sensitive analysis of the novel's inner workings, we might not have seen the full range of meanings that could be carried by tie-on pockets. (47)

[71] Some critics, of course, do take this very approach. In a 2001 special edition of *Critical* Inquiry, edited by Bill Brown, critics consider the subject of "thing theory"—how things become fetishes and cultural fixations. I argue that clothes act as things, operating not as mere objects, but as culturally valued items.

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