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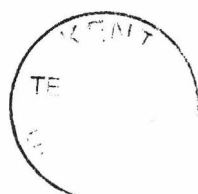
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CLOTHING THE BODY:
REPRESENTING FEMININITY IN VICTORIAN
NARRATIVES OF SELFHOOD

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT AT CANTERBURY
IN THE SUBJECT OF ENGLISH LITERATURE
FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By
Tara Puri
2010



Abstract

This thesis looks at the women who inhabit Victorian literature, focusing on the ways in which they are represented as well as the way in which they choose to represent themselves. I argue that this self-definition takes place consciously, and that Victorian heroines often choose to display their selfhood through sartorial austerity. Through resisting the inclusion in a scopic economy where worth is judged by appearance, these women make their choice of clothing a highly expressive medium for registering a critique of reading subjectivity through appearance, and the critique of a society where women's bodies are constant loci of scrutiny. But it is also a choice that reveals their unease with their own sexuality, their struggles with their desires, as well as their attempts to exert control over their bodies. They instead manage to create a private space within a public mode of expression, a space from which to resist societal pressures.

The dressing room then becomes a significant site for the creation of female identity, as well as a certain kind of feminine intimacy. A room privileged as uniquely feminine, it provides the privacy for female friendships. Also central to this self-creation is the mirror, a fraught terrain where contemporary anxieties about women are relocated. But in numerous novels, this is not just a site for vanity and duplication of identity, but also for self-reflection. The thesis concludes with an examination of the literary representation of hair, its polysemic meanings, and its autonomous expressive quality. The writers focused on are Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Thomas Hardy, Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Robert Browning. The paintings of the Pre-Raphaelites Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt also provide a double narrative to these literary representations.

Acknowledgements

I have accrued many big and small debts over the years spent in writing, thinking about and fighting with this thesis, and it is difficult to list them all. A special thanks is due to Rod Edmond for his interest and his comments on the various incarnations that this thesis has been through. This would never have been possible without the time, encouragement and patience that he has continued to offer. I also thank Professor Malcolm Andrews and Dr Sarah Moss for their suggestions at my upgrade panel. I am grateful as well to the Overseas Research Award that enabled me to come to the University of Kent in the first place.

My parents have been generous with their support, especially when I was least sure of where this was going. My mother proofread most of my writing with an enthusiasm that I could not have imagined and I thank her in particular. Over the course of the last three years spent at Canterbury, I have made many friends and without the humour, distractions, and fictive worlds they brought to me the writing of this thesis would have been a much duller affair. So I thank Sabrina Panëels, Patrick Craston, Srivas Chennu, Poul Henriksen, Damian Dimmich, Kat Johnson, Ed Suvanaphen, Ipshita Ghose, and Tobias Kliem. I thank also Charles Devellennes, Alex Christoyannopoulos and Fanny Forest for our many conversations and shared laughter. As Oscar Wilde put it, ‘a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at’.

My most stubborn questioner, one of my most thoughtful readers, Benoît Dillet has all my appreciation. I would have been lost without his excellent formatting skills and his uncanny ability to bring me tea at exactly the right moment.

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Introduction

The Victorian novel is dominated by heroines. Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot write novels that are driven by the impulses of their heroines, the narrative not just shaping them but being shaped by their irrepressible presence. Heroines feature in the poems of Alfred Tennyson, Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti. They obsess the imposing canvases of Pre-Raphaelite painters with their indelibly sensual bodies, the heavy fabrics that drape them and the magnificent hair that crowns them. These women are also the heroines of my thesis. In these pages, I want to examine their lives and follow the course of their choices in the narratives they inhabit, reflecting upon the sexual and social dynamics they reveal. These are women who come alive in the realist novels that revel in the appearance of things and bodies, but they are also women who occupy narrative crevices that allow psychological insight of a deeper, more unexpected kind. They are often women who fight their bodies, winning for themselves a more interior and private space for self-reflection, but it is a struggle that leaves a recognisable trace on their physiognomy and their story. My analysis then is based on close readings of such tracings, focusing on a series of interlinked themes - dress, dressing rooms, mirrors and hair. I see the five chapters that make up this thesis as concentric locations that give a range of shifting perspectives on the same subject, the woman becoming the cynosure of a moving critical view that follows the scrutiny that she is the object of within the text.

Though I began this thesis with looking at the conventions of heroine representation and how these were related to a larger social and cultural project, the possibility for variation and modification they possess soon became obvious. While there are fictional women who are approached with narrative seriousness by the author, there are also women, especially in the sensational novels of the 1860s, whose very presence in the novel makes the descriptive strategies for representing women problematic. These narratives frequently lay bare the arbitrariness

of these norms through a combination of parody and a more pressing refusal to comply with them. An extraordinary episode takes place in Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860) when Walter Hartright, the novel's hero, meets Marian Halcombe. This is a moment of first impressions and I want to quote fully Hartright's thoughts as he looks upon the unknown lady standing darkly against the window:

I looked from the table to the window farthest from me, and saw a lady standing at it, with her back turned towards me. The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude. Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat; her head set on her shoulders with an easy, pliant firmness; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays. She had not heard my entrance into the room; and I allowed myself the luxury of admiring her for a few moments, before I moved one of the chairs near me, as the least embarrassing means of attracting her attention. She turned towards me immediately. The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window – and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps – and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer – and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!¹

This is a passage that self-consciously posits itself as a response to Victorian representational norms. Hartright's initial description creates an assumption of beauty, 'a flutter of expectation' that is mimicked by the reader but as Marian moves closer, coming into light, the promise of her figure is belied by the swarthiness of her complexion, the masculine cast of her features, her low forehead, and most distinctively, her moustache. Marian, with all the resourcefulness of her character and her intelligence, cannot possibly be the heroine of the novel. It is her pale, diminutive cousin Laura Fairlie whom Hartright falls in love with and whose evanescent presence pervades the novel. But even as Collins places the blonde woman as his heroine, and the dark haired Marian as her faithful friend, it is Marian who is the main protagonist of the novel, its most engaging character. However, this scene is also significant for other reasons. It presents a conflation of the elements that feature in my argument: the textual focus on the body of

¹Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860), ed. Julian Symons, London: Penguin, 1985, p. 58.

the woman, images of women at windows and mirrors, and an appraisal that is based entirely on a scopic economy. The remark on corsets also makes obvious a physical valuation that is usually more subdued.²

So even though these conventions, bolstered by conduct manuals and women's magazines that gave guidance to their middle class readership on how to dress themselves with fashionable propriety, suggest the possibility of reading appearance, the novels themselves are more complex than that. While giving rise to similar readings, they simultaneously challenge from within the notion of reading clothes, as well as other aspects of outward appearance, as a language. There are numerous misreadings that mislead characters and readers, and this apparently ordinary activity becomes a fraught territory that needs to be carefully mediated. It is interesting to note then that seeing clothes, and especially fashion, as a language with its own closed and arbitrary system of meanings has been a predominant trend in early studies of fashion theory. Roland Barthes used a linguistic and semiological approach in looking at fashion in *The Fashion System*. What Barthes set out here was a method, a system of inquiry based on a structural analysis. It is from this point that he turned to women's clothing in contemporary fashion magazines in order to create what he calls 'a system of meaning'.³ Though he admits that he is not looking at 'real' fashion but 'written', or described, fashion, Barthes' investigation is based on a reconstitution of the linguistic model. Predicated on the assumption of the irrationality of fashion, Barthes presents a sophisticated, but perhaps too tightly organised analysis that becomes a pattern for fashion theorists like Alison Lurie. Lurie unproblematically sees clothes as a non-verbal system of communication made up of its own particular vocabulary that is expressive of hidden, mostly unconscious aspects of the psyche, a position fortified by psychoanalysis.⁴ However, what seems to be missing most obviously here, as well as in earlier Marxist studies that saw fashion as a barometer of conspicuous consumption,⁵ is the visual and tactile appeal of

²This is something that Collins plays with later in the novel as well, deriving amusement from a scene where Marian heroically climbs out of her window onto a precarious ledge so as to overhear the sinister plans made between Count Fosco and Sir Percival. But in order to do this, a change in dress is imperative; the silk dress and the cumbersome underclothing that takes up the room of three men are exchanged for a dark flannel petticoat and a black travelling cloak that will allow her to pass through the narrowest of spaces.

³Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (1967), trans. Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1990, p. x.

⁴Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992; an early influential book that presented a psychological perspective on the study of clothing was J.C. Flugel's *The Psychology of Clothes*, London: Hogarth Press, 1930.

⁵See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*

clothing, the pleasure it purveys and the possibility of *actively* framing the self in a certain meaning, or complex of meanings.

Anne Hollander compares clothing to other kinds of visual art, noting how it can produce an 'inner echo of visual memory and unconscious fantasy'.⁶ Dress, its cut, its colour and its fabric, are all resonant of other visual moments and are linked not just to a closed sartorial circuit but also to forms of art and to an intimate, secret imaginary. This idea of clothes, and hair, as generating the possibilities of an emotional expressivity that is deeply linked with the aesthetic pleasure they give, their 'sparks of visual delight',⁷ lies at the crux of my argument. My thesis starts with the clothes that the heroines of Brontë, Gaskell and Eliot choose for themselves, and this leads me to a series of moments within this process of self-fabrication. In dressing their bodies they are constructing for themselves a highly individuated selfhood, but it is a notion of self that comes into being in relation to other women in the novel, to their own mirror images, and to the potential of expressing an intensely private identity and its desires through the body and its gestures. In reading these novels, I have then been influenced by art criticism almost as much as literary criticism for it allowed me to develop a perspective that was sensitive to the visuality of Victorian literature. It is for this reason that I often turn to Pre-Raphaelite paintings when examining Victorian heroines, for their vividness is often a result of a creative investment in making word portraits that echo the painted women of the time.

There is a tangled knot of issues linked with these women that I will attempt to unravel. Amongst these is the difficulty of creating an inward space that is unimpeded by the obsessive social scrutiny that these novels are replete with. This is a problematic that lies along the axis of the visual and the verbal; to create a visual self suggests an inevitably public presence, while also being central to a physical self-recognition and self-acceptance for the women themselves. Paintings then are intriguing counterpoints in these narratives, sometimes occurring within them to present contrasting visions while sometimes existing at a more implicit level, evoked in the detailed descriptions that dot these novels. Speaking about the difficulties faced by writers, Hélène Cixous elaborates on the seductive nature of the painter's skill. In a freely moving rhapsody, she romanticises the act of painting in comparison to the act of writing which must always rely on words

(1899), New York: Book-of-the-Month Club, 1918.

⁶ Anne Hollander, *Feeding the Eye: Essays*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1999, p. 106.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

that have already been used, words that always stay on the surface of the page:

This is our problem as writers. We who must paint with brushes all sticky with words. We who must swim in language as if it were pure and transparent, though it is troubled by phrases already heard a thousand times. We who must clear a new path with each thought through thickets of clichés. We who are threatened at every metaphor, as I am at this moment, with false steps and false words.⁸

Cixous' passionate, mellifluous words read like a troubled manifesto. She suggests that the writer has an almost visceral urge to write, and to write in a way that is her own. It is a compulsion keenly resonant of Jane Eyre's urgent need to speak, for speak she must. For Cixous words can be accomplices, traitors and allies; 'We have to make use of them, spy on them, we should be able to purify them'.⁹ Words then function like the female body of Victorian literature, the body that can betray the self or can befriend it. It is this uncertain territory between words, visuality and physicality that these women, and their writers, need to negotiate. While most of these heroines need to learn to come to terms with their physical selves and their visual presence in the course of the novel, they frequently seek a privacy that lies outside that visual realm. Though they may be physically palpable in the text, or evocatively realised in painterly vignettes, they try to find an enclave of interiority in words in preference to the publicity that lives in appearance. In this process of self-fabrication, therefore, we see these women not as static entities, but as undergoing a quiet metamorphosis that expresses itself in their gestures, their hair, their dress.

The idea of metamorphosis is an enigmatic, elliptical one. It is suggestive of not just a transformation or reshaping, but also a sense of process. This indefinable, slippery notion of becoming is central to the writers I examine. But this sense of change, of slipping from one self to another, of continually creating and modulating one's selfhood, is as crucial to the process of writing itself as to the representation of Victorian heroines. Gilles Deleuze emphasises the inseparability of writing from becoming: 'in writing, one becomes-woman, becomes-animal or vegetable, becomes-molecule to the point of becoming-imperceptible'.¹⁰ For

⁸Hélène Cixous, 'The Last Painting or the Portrait of God' (1986), in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Clive Cazeaux, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, p. 588.

⁹Ibid., p. 595.

¹⁰Gilles Deleuze, 'Literature and Life', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco, London and New York: Verso, 1998, p. 1.

Deleuze, this sense of becoming contains within it ‘a component of flight that escapes its own formalization’.¹¹ The self that is constantly in a state of becoming cannot be pinned into one category, for in the interminable moments of becoming it is always fluid, never still enough to be contained within a definition. Recalling Proust’s words with which he begins his book, Deleuze goes on to argue that literature opens up ‘a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language nor a rediscovered patois, but a becoming-other of language, a minorization of this major language, a delirium that carries it off, a witch’s line that escapes the dominant system’.¹² This becoming then presents itself as a space that makes possible an inversion of the inside and the outside, the known and the unknown, and generates a kind of foreignness within the familiar. In the interstices and intervals of language something new can take shape that can resist the used formulations of conventional representational strategies. The paradigm of restraint and rebellion that presents itself in innumerable Victorian novels, gives way to a space that is the other of these binaries, though not exterior to them. It is these interludes that allow for the kind of vividness that is so apparent in Pre-Raphaelite paintings but has a more muted life in the domestic narratives that are the setting of my thesis.

My thesis begins with an analysis of the sartorial choices of Victorian heroines and Chapter 1 focuses on the novels of Charlotte Brontë. Beginning with mapping the debates that surround the corset in studies of fashion history, it moves onto the signifying potential associated with dress in the contemporary journals and household manuals of the period. This emphasis on the power of dress in creating personal, socially readable narratives of self is the background against which Brontë’s unusual heroines, Lucy Snowe, Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone make their decisions of sartorial austerity. The consistently assumed simplicity of their attire reveals itself to be not just a signifier of a sexual and emotional repression but also an act that enables them to create a hidden, private self that is vividly alive precisely because of that austerity. In sublimating a visually appealing physical self, they attempt to extricate themselves from a scopic economy where a woman’s worth is evaluated on the basis of her appearance. However, this ascetic enactment is attended by sensitised, anorectic bodies, as well as an inability to take pleasure in the visual and tactile appeal of clothing. These three

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid., p. 5. Deleuze’s book begins with the epigraph, ‘Great books are written in a kind of foreign language’, from Proust’s *Contre Sainte-Beuve*.

women challenge the notion that clothes, and therefore the body, could provide accurate insights into the person. Even though all three choose sartorial austerity, each of them fabricates and modulates it differently. What is evident though is that it is only by recognising the public unreadability of these women that we can understand their psyches.

Chapter 2 expands on the same notion of austerity as display and looks at George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and *Ruth*. While Charlotte Brontë's heroines turned away from the realm of the visual, creating thin, ascetic bodies, Gaskell and Eliot present heroines with a stronger visual presence. These are full bodied though slender women whose desires and desirability are linked to their decidedly simple clothes. However this simplicity has a different valence here, for these are women who possess an inherent and irrepressible sexual allure. As the boundaries between restraint and display become increasingly blurred, this sartorial choice reveals itself to be a mode of maintaining control over bodies and lives that seem to verge on an alarming anarchy. In instructing their bodies in the frugal desires and attire of Quakerish simplicity, these heroines are seeking a space from which to resist societal pressures, balancing the demands of decorum with the needs of an independent selfhood. Thus a private space is created in a very public mode of articulation by extending the area between the sartorially acceptable and unacceptable.

This kind of devotion to dress, established as a feminine duty by social commentators like Mrs Oliphant, demanded the space of a dressing room and the attendance of a lady's maid. The dressing room then becomes a significant site for the creation of female identity, as well as a certain kind of feminine intimacy. In a society where female intimacy was difficult to sustain in the face of continual surveillance, the private boudoir or dressing room was one of the few spaces privileged as uniquely female, and Chapter 3 argues that literary representations of the relationship between the maid and mistress exhibit moments of touching tenderness. This intense closeness interestingly acts as a paradigm for other relationships between women who are socially more equal. The dynamics as well as the terminology of the maid-mistress relationship are replicated in filial relations and between close friends, the act of dressing the other itself becoming the juncture where intimacy arises. In this Chapter, I analyse Eliot's *Felix Holt*, Brontë's *Shirley*, and Gaskell's *North and South*, 'The Grey Woman', and *Wives and Daughters*. It is Gaskell's texts that fold back this space of close familiarity upon itself and show it to be productive of moments of a dangerously heightened

intimacy. The dressing table, and the mirror in particular, becomes a fraught terrain where the contemporary unease about women and the anxieties about duplication of identity, female vanity, narcissistic self-obsession and auto-eroticism can be relocated.

The next chapter develops this argument, interrogating the realm of the mirror and the associated ideas of mirrored selves and others that are also doubles for the self. Chapter 4 begins with looking at the theme of narcissism in Victorian literature, at the sin of vanity that the other woman, the foil for the real heroine, is frequently ascribed. Close readings of Eliot's *Adam Bede* and *Felix Holt* provide examples of such women in the characters of Hetty Sorrell and Gwendolen Harleth, both women who are entirely absorbed in self-admiration. They occupy spaces crowded with mirrors that seem to endlessly produce reflections of them, entrapping them within various versions of their selves. Significantly, these mirror images are often compared to, or framed in the manner of painterly depictions where the modelled women are envisaged by an outward gaze. In this mirroring then, they internalise the spectator, themselves becoming the appreciative observer they pose for in preparation for the real one. Hetty's representation as the archetypal Narcissus is relatively simple however in comparison to Gwendolen, the intricately rendered protagonist of *Daniel Deronda*, who undergoes a transformation in the novel as she begins to realise the extent of this entrapment within visual selves. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* is another novel that is crowded with mirror moments that place its heroine not only at the centre of this self-replication but also in relation to multiplying consumerist impulses.

The argument then turns towards Brontë's *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, whose heroines resist being framed by mirrors just as they resist the possibility of constructing a visual self. They view physicality with a kind of revulsion, choosing instead a quieter inward life. However, mirrors do occupy a strange, elusive space in these novels, and disclose the paradoxical anxiety of non-reflection and hyper-reflexivity that Victorian literature is replete with. For both Lucy Snowe and Jane Eyre the mirror offers not a superficial reflection of their appearance, but an enigmatic and transgured knowledge of the self, though in completely different ways. Many of the episodes that I focus on invoke or echo the myths of not only Narcissus but also of Medusa, both stories that play on the idea of a gaze so powerful that it has the ability to hypnotise. Medusa however is a woman who was punished for the threat her intense beauty personified, a beauty that derived from her lustrous hair. It is this feature, so distinctively feminine, so deeply evocative, that forms

the core of my final chapter.

Chapter 5 examines the literary representations of hair in a period that seems fascinated with reading women's hair, extricating its meaning and using it as a synecdoche for the psyche. Considering the ideal of the golden-haired woman, I look at the beautifully blonde and docile Lucys and Lauras that populate Victorian texts, turning finally towards *Lady Audley's Secret*. It is this novel that most explicitly lays bare the problematics of misreading through its duplicitous heroine who subverts the very domesticity and femininity that make her attractive by too closely mimicking and parodying its ideal, revealing it to be empty, a mere masquerade. The clue that discloses the secret at the heart of the novel is tellingly that same abundant, shining hair that had enabled her shifts in identity in the first place. It is in the yawning gap between the idealised blonde woman and the associated natural goodness she is supposed to possess that Braddon arranges her mystery, making the possibility of interpreting the self through an exteriority that appeared natural and transparent impossible. By foregrounding Lady Audley's impersonation of the proper feminine the novel harnesses the anxiety that that ideal of femininity is perhaps only a form of acting.

This overvaluation of hair makes it an almost autonomous property, and the image of the lock of hair as a medium of exchange surfaces repeatedly in Victorian literature. As a *memento mori* and as a sentimental keepsake, it is already suffused with emotional signification. The letters exchanged between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the poems of the two, as well as those of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti reproduce these highly charged associations between the lock of hair and its value as a marketable commodity, its obvious sexual connotations, and its symbolic worth. The cutting of the lock then is a traumatic moment of the mutilation of the self or of sexual defilement. I end with a discussion of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, pulling together the strands of the argument through an analysis of Aurora's energetic, angry hair.

Ovid says in the opening line of *Metamorphoses* that his purpose is 'to tell of bodies which have been transformed into shapes of a different kind'.¹³ My intention is on a scale more subdued, as muted as the desires of Brontë's heroines. I do want to tell a story, and it is a story of metamorphosis, but one that takes place at a slow, subliminal pace that lies in shadows, spare bodies, narrative interstices, the ordinary lattice-work of female friendships, and the fluidity of meaning

¹³ *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955, p. 29.

that hair embodies. The heroine's body and her bodily acts of self formation are the sites of my curiosity, and this textual inquiry. My approach has been one of close reading, looking into the domestic interiority of the text and its women from different angles, attempting to capture that moment of 'becoming-woman' that Deleuze speaks of so lyrically. In these seemingly stable narratives, I attempt a textual unpicking, a careful unravelling, that will fold back this seamlessness to reveal something quite different. I think that this difference is also a newness, a presence and a language that turns against itself from within and in doing so reveals buried desires and concealed resistance.

Chapter 1

Austerity as Display I

[I]n this same gown of shadow, I felt at home and at ease; an advantage I should not have enjoyed in anything more brilliant or striking.¹

When Lucy Snowe makes this declaration in the midst of the frenetic preparations for Madam Beck's fête, she is offering an emphatic statement of the self, a statement made through her body and the way in which she chooses to clothe it. Despite all the connotations of luminescence that her name suggests, Lucy is an exceptionally reticent heroine and narrator. However, it is her startlingly plain, melancholy dresses that manifest her inner self and its complex maneuverings and negotiations with the pressures of public appearance. But Lucy is not alone in this choice of sartorial austerity, for a number of Victorian heroines choose, more often than not as an overt and deliberate measure, to dress in a style that is antithetical to the accepted etiquette of clothing as a display of familial status. Being emblematic of the ideal of comforting domesticity and their husband's or father's ability to finance that ideal, women were the ones who most visibly had to carry the mantle of correct appearance. These heroines then, though not entirely disregarding the rules of Victorian sartorial convention, are certainly creating spaces for themselves within it, inserting their personal life experience into a conspicuously public mode of articulation, in order to express some measure of individuality.

The body was a highly visible, and more significantly, a *readable* cultural symbol in the Victorian period with its signifying ability vitally linked to the clothes that adorned it. It is this juncture between the body, its clothes and

¹Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), ed. Tony Tanner, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987, p. 200. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

the self that will be the focus of this chapter. Clothes have often been employed in literary metaphors - words as the clothing of thought, clothes as a masking of the 'real and so on. Tennyson succinctly deploys the quiet grief contained in the idea of widow's weeds, bringing together the expressivity of both clothes and words, when he writes: 'In words, like weeds, I'll wrap me o'er,/ Like coarsest clothes against the cold'.² But in the realist Victorian novel clothes become even more pertinent, offering a useful descriptive device that is pivotal to the creation of a believable, legible character. The awareness of clothing as something that has potential for both restriction of identity as well as expression of it permeates much of Victorian writing, with numerous novels visiblising the construction of a coherent selfhood through clothing. The ascetic sartorial body, the one fashioned with much effort and deliberation, is what I will be looking at, while exploring the gaps that it exists in and the various, often contradictory, meanings it can possess.

The symbolic function of dress in communicating ideas about the social role of the wearer was not a new notion, but it had gained an extraordinary degree of importance in the age. A writer in the *Quarterly Review* of 1847 warned: '[D]ress 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'.³ It dauntlessly goes on to add that to those who are 'proficient in the science, every woman walks about with a placard on which her leading qualities are advertised'.⁴ Connected with the idea of decipherable signs that had specific meanings, dress was not just a frivolous pursuit but had been transformed into a serious occupation, for the wrong shade of colour or texture of fabric could end in a social mishap.

Over the span of the Victorian period women's clothing was not the homogeneous, unchanging entity that it is often assumed to be. But though the Victorian decades saw the rise and fall of numerous fashions, almost every one of them made unimpeded movement impossible. Be it the innumerable petticoats, the provocative corset, the bustle, the cage-like crinoline, the high-heeled, tiny shoes or the tight tapering sleeves, women found themselves transfixed into a pattern of acquiscent domesticity. One of the constants of Victorian fashion was a tight fit around

² Alfred Tennyson, *In Memoriam, A.H.H.* (1833 - 1849; 1850), in *Tennyson's Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1999, stanza 5, ll. 9 - 10.

³'Art of Dress', *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 79, No. 158 (1847), p. 375. This was an anonymously published review of three contemporary books on the history of fashion and dress, but it very quickly enlarged itself to become a part mocking, part serious digression on the importance of dressing well, not just by instinct but in self-interest.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 375 - 376.

the midriff, with the waist encased in boned stays, reshaped into a more pleasing diminutive circle, and the legs swathed in voluminous skirts. This juxtaposition of undulating, flowing fabric that converged into a minuscule, stiffened waist that then gave way to an exposed chest and shoulders contributed to a highly sexualised display of a body that was supposed to have sublimated its physicality. As Hollander points out, '[f]or many centuries women's clothes combined a great deal of traditional modesty in the form of long gowns and veiled hair, with a few grams of allure in the form of restrained décolletage, a mixture reflecting the view that women don't really have sexual fantasies; they cannily lend themselves to those that men have about them'.⁵ So while women were draped in yards of fabric, it was arranged to spread and gather in ways that heightened the visibility of those parts of the body that were cast as erogenous in the Victorian period.

One of the dominant, and most obviously provocative, debates in Victorian fashion studies centres around the corset. Much of the argument can be summed up in the dialogue between Helene E. Roberts and David Kunzle.⁶ Roberts sees the Victorian woman as the 'exquisite slave', a victim figure who was conned into the corset by the pressures of patriarchy. She argues that the corset was worn by the majority of women of the time, all of whom suffered some degree of physical pain, discomfort or fatigue because of it, so as to seem marriageable, presentable, and endowed with proper self-control. Kunzle, on the contrary, distinguishes between corseting and tight-lacing, arguing that the latter was the realm of fetishists who enjoyed its masochistic tendencies, and the lower middle classes with aspirations of upward mobility. Moreover, he asserts that the feminists whom Roberts hails as harbingers of liberating change, were in fact not as progressive as one may think, for they were led by the ideas of a maternal, desexualised, 'natural' woman in the vein of Rousseau, and denounced the sexualised figure of the wasp-waisted tight-lacer.

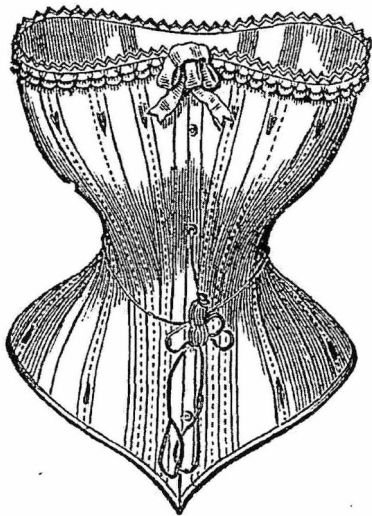
Kunzle presents a daring heterodox history of the corset where it becomes an expression of social and sexual revolt, though in the process he does understate its

⁵ Anne Hollander, *Feeding the Eye: Essays*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999, p. 170.

⁶ Helene E. Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman', *Signs*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring, 1977); David Kunzle, 'Dress Reform as Anti-Feminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts's 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman'', *Signs*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring, 1977); Roberts, 'Reply to David Kunzle's 'Dress Reform as Anti-Feminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts's 'The Exquisite Slave'', *Signs*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring, 1977); Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism: Corsets, Tight-lacing and Other Forms of Body Sculpture*, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, 2004.

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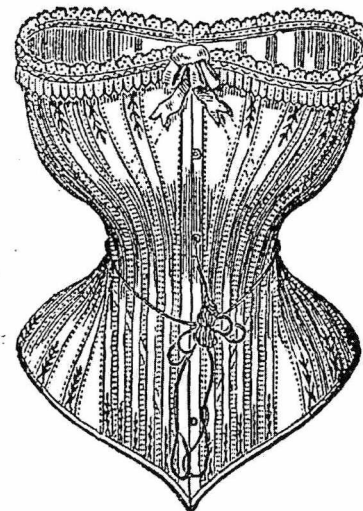
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real physical danger. The corset in the nineteenth century too provoked enormous hostility, exciting attention and anger from sources as disparate as clergymen, doctors, and housewives.⁷ It was accused of threatening the woman's natural body and her maternal health, but the more dangerous threat perhaps was the sexuality that it emphasised while also displaying a self-inflicted sexual pain. Though Roberts argues that clothing oneself in such immobilising attire was a way of disciplining the body and it was exactly this capacity for self-denial and self-restraint that was equated with virtue, at the same time (as Kunzle points out), the sight of discomfort voluntarily endured for the sake of a certain appearance, was even more sexually appealing than the semblance of a corresponding moral restraint. By thrusting the bosom and the hips into prominence, the corset exaggerated every secondary sexual characteristic, thereby lending female fashions to ridicule, mockery, and open attacks.⁸

Even Victorian advocates of the power of dress in creating personal, socially readable narratives of self, realise the sensuality of pain willingly sustained. Mrs Margaret Oliphant - novelist, literary critic, biographer, historical writer, and the author of *Dress* (1878) - having charted the history of English clothing, remarks that the fashion of the moment has led to the 'painful spectacle of the whole female race more or less tied into narrow bags'.⁹ Though she argues that the element that keeps a costume from being beautiful is its inconvenience, she allows

⁷The seemingly benign *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* became the vortex of an escalating controversy in 1868 and 1869 when it began to publish readers' correspondence on tight-lacing, a correspondence that was often accused of being entirely fictional by rival journals because of its fetishistic tenor. This exchange incidentally modulated into a vociferous discussion on the merits of flogging for girls towards the middle of 1869.

Tight-lacers were also savagely censured by the supposedly disinterested medical practitioners who wrote for *The Lancet*, comparing the practice to Chinese foot-binding and other barbaric, oriental practices. The furore however is best epitomised in its 1869 report:

TIGHT-LACING.—Dr. Lankester held an inquest at Camden Town on Friday on the body of Clara Smart, aged nineteen, who had dropped down dead in the street. She was very tightly laced, and the medical evidence showed that death was the result of effusion of blood on the brain, caused by fatty degeneration of the heart, accelerated by compression of the chest, induced by tight-lacing. The jury returned a verdict in accordance with this evidence. (*The Lancet*, October 2, 1869, p. 488.)

⁸*Punch*, like *The Lancet* but with the authority of stringent social satire rather than medical advice, launched a sustained campaign against tight-lacing, ridiculing and caricaturing it, and thereby denoting it as the province of the ignorant and the vulgar. Started in 1841, after its early radical phase, it steadily became a 'respectable' publication. Mr Punch, the name under which the anonymous articles were published, kept a moralistic eye on Victorian bourgeoisie culture, taking a special interest in satirising the more extravagant of women's fashions.

⁹Mrs Margaret Oliphant, *Dress*, London: Macmillan and Co., 1878, p. 73.

SANSFLECTUM CRINOLINES.

THE POMPADOUR CRINOLINE,
WITHOUT STEEL.

(REGISTERED).

This Crinoline, made entirely without steel, is by far the most graceful Jupon ever introduced, and, when on the figure, falls into such a variety of graceful forms that the dress is compelled to take an elegant negligence, and to assume those deep and rich folds in which artists so much delight.

Price 25s. & 30s.

THE REGISTERED
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SYMMETRICAL
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THE GEMMA, OR
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THE NEW SHAPE.

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25 "	-	-	-	-	15s. 6d.
30 "	-	-	-	-	18s. 6d.

2½ and 3 yards round.

Just published,

Full Descriptions of the Eight
Varieties of Crinolines in-
vented and Manufactured by
Addley Bourne.

With Drawings and Observations
on the kind of Jupon which ought
to be adopted by any Lady, each
variety being applicable to some
idiosyncrasy of the figure; with
Remarks on the Change of Taste,
and Advice in choosing that descrip-
tion which would improve each par-
ticular style of figure to the greatest
extent.—Post free.

ADDLEY BOURNE,
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Figure 2: Advertisement for 'Sansflectum Crinolines', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (July 1866).

that such a tight-fitted dress (though divorced from its original of the 'fishwife' dress that was both aesthetic and useful) does no 'real harm',¹⁰ even though it has all the appearance of harm. Its danger then lies not in the threat of actual physical injury but in the semblance of injury that itself is presented as appealing:

It was artfully contrived to look like the instrument of torture which it was not in reality. Such is the case, we must add, with most dresses

¹⁰Ibid., p. 92.

of the period of which so much evil has been said. They do not really, except in very extreme cases, confine the limbs. Women do not naturally stride or run races, and for all ordinary exercise there is no restraint; but the dress is elaborately framed to look as if such restraint did exist. Every effort has been made to attain this appearance. It is a delusion; but what does that matter? If it was real the garment would be much more dangerous, but at the same time more excusable. The fact that all the appearance of evil is attained, without any reality of evil, proclaims the triumph of as perverse a piece of ingenuity as ever was imagined since the world began.¹¹

The dress then, with all its masquerade of control, is just the skilled dressmaker's conjuring trick. Like the corset, what is perhaps even more troubling than actual discomfort, as Oliphant cannily declares, is the cleverly crafted deception of discomfort. It is a similar kind of argument that finds its way into Oliphant's review of Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), and makes her view Susan as more dangerous than the fleshly Arabella. While Arabella is inexhaustibly willing to gratify Jude, Susan 'hold[s] him on the tiptoe of expectation, with a pretended reserve which is almost more indecent still'.¹² Outraged at having to see her as the woman who signifies purity in the novel, Oliphant accuses Susan of 'mak[ing] virtue vicious',¹³ by keeping the physical facts of the relationship within constant prominence by insistently denying them, much like the contemporary fashion for apparent immobility.

It is this paradoxical crux of sex and self-control that lies at the unconscious centre of the decision of sartorial asceticism made by heroines like Lucy Snowe. This curious and disturbing mix of the spiritual and the sexual that women's clothing in general was supposed to communicate seems to be a constant undercurrent to all the fictive women who are examined in this chapter. Agreeing in part with Roberts, Kunzle concedes that although waist confinement and décolletage were the primary sexualising devices of female clothing, the binding also served 'the Christian ascetic, body-and-self-denying ideal'¹⁴ of the Victorian age. The middle class woman was to be seen as a highly spiritual being, the moral locus of the home as well as society as a whole, and to conform to that ideal, women were expected to downplay every aspect of their physicality (including their sexuality and their appetite), for it threatened the halo of the pure Victorian woman. An

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Mrs Margaret Oliphant, 'The Anti-Marriage League', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, No. 159 (1896), p. 139.

¹³Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁴Kunzle, 'Dress Reform as Anti-Feminism', p. 579.

excessive adherence to fashion then brought this very dangerous inflection to bear upon the reputation of the said woman. Consequently, the choice of simplicity is not necessarily a subversive choice, but rather a definitive decision against seeming worldly.

In many ways then the remark by the anonymous observer of the *Quarterly Review* seems to imply an intriguing conflation of the body and its clothes, where the clothes themselves come to stand in for the body. Commenting on Hardy from a slightly different perspective, Casey Finch makes the same argument: '[...] at the end of the Victorian era the female body and its clothes ha[d] become, not exactly exchangeable objects, but metaphors of sorts for one another'.¹⁵ It is no longer the body that shapes the clothes but the clothes that make the body. Personal exteriority, which is represented by clothing, then becomes articulated as a condition of transparency and naturalness that grants knowledge about the psychological interiority that that body holds. Finch goes on to state that '[s]pecifically, what emerges in late nineteenth-century England is a new sartorial iconology that collapses the age-old dialectic between the body and its clothes. [...] now a new body is constituted that seems to violate the distinction between a naked and a clothed condition, between a private "truth" and a publicly acceptable presentability'.¹⁶ This new body is necessarily typified as an ascetically dressed, often anorectic, body that by its very presence reveals a desire for non-presence at a public, visually appraised, level. It is a sensitised body that desires an illegible private emotional and intellectual latitude.

Shadow gowns, slender bodies and austerity as resistance

This hidden, secretive psyche is central to Lucy Snowe's narrative and her choice of clothing, for it is there that she can shape a recess for herself that lies outside these binaries. Pushing against the limits imposed by appearance, she is stretching the meanings associated with sartorial particularities, giving their signifying ability the pliability and elasticity of cloth itself. So with an uncompromising persistence she adheres to the familiar 'gown of shadow' even on the occasion when all around her surrender to the best skills of the *coiffeurs* and the *tailleuses*. The day of Madame Beck's fête is looked forward to with much anticipation, marked with the usual bustle and noise of festivity but even in the midst of this activity, Lucy

¹⁵Casey Finch, "'Hooked and Buttoned Together': Victorian Underwear and Representations of the Female Body', *Victorian Studies* 34, (Spring, 1991), p. 338.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 339.

spends her time in solitary inward meditation, having taken refuge in the garden. Isolated in a cocoon of her own companionship, she stands on the margins of the community of women allied in their sartorial arrangements, a self-elected observer:

[T]he dormitory became the scene of ablutions, arrayings and bedizenings curiously elaborate. To me it was, and ever must be an enigma, how they contrived to spend so much time in doing so little. The operation seemed close, intricate, prolonged: the result simple. A clear white muslin dress, a blue sash (the Virgin's colours), a pair of white, or straw-colour kid gloves – such was the gala uniform, to the assumption whereof that houseful of teachers and pupils devoted three mortal hours. [...]

In beholding this diaphanous and snowy mass, I well remember feeling myself to be a mere shadowy spot on a field of light; the courage was not in me to put on a transparent white dress. (199 - 200)

Lucy's willing withdrawal from this closed realm of femininity and fashion is telling. She sees the careful concern expended over the dressing up as a curious 'enigma' from which she is forever divorced because of her own distance from the superficial affairs of appearance. In choosing her dun coloured dress, she is then acting on an impulse directly opposed to the one driving the 'diaphanous and snowy mass': all her effort is concentrated on making the least of her looks, depleting her physical body into a shadow. Retreating from the bright and dazzling world of these youthful, full-figured girls who attempt to draw eyes by the very elegant simplicity of their attire, she wants to fix her position as a detached outsider. She refuses to don the Virgin's colours, refusing too their connotations of untainted, passive femininity, while also acutely aware of the meaninglessness of those superficial associations; the students of the pensionnat are hardly virginal. Wealthy, facile and voluptuously charming, they are motivated by the self-interest that the writer of the 'Art of Dress' had advocated as the primary reason for women to be concerned about their clothing. Taking care to exclude herself from the marketable arena of the gaze which would position her as the feminine object of attention, Lucy locates herself as a shadowy observer. Almost a flâneur, Lucy exists in a liminality made available to her once she is outside this visual economy where value is decided by the worth of one's appearance. It is precisely this liminality that would then offer her a selfhood that is fuller, and more developed than the one offered to her in the limelight of bright appearances and curled hair: it is an inward movement towards a selfhood unimpeded by sartorial

demands and a polished veneer; it is a turning towards an intellectual self and an identity based on psychological exploration.

Submerged within this decision of austerity is the misogynistic idea of the false and distracting nature of fashion, and the duplicity of women's clothes in particular. Female dress, with its sinuous frills, undulating excesses of cloth, and unnecessary frou-frou that required extended lengths of time and assistance to arrange, was, by an easy slip, equated with female life itself: equally labyrinthine in its petty concerns and useless enterprises. Seen as a trivial, unreflective, endlessly repetitive business, Lucy seeks a more stimulating life. Ginevra Fanshawe, with her beauty, rich clothing, and compromised lack of straightforwardness is the other from whom Lucy turns away in disgust. However, her own appearance is not the result of a taken-for-granted preference, arising out of unconscious disposition, but is as deliberate a choice as the gala uniform.

In preparation for the event Lucy does go shopping, taking unconscious pleasure in the experience. She takes her time deciding, conscious of the warm weather and her partiality for subdued hues:

[S]omething thin I must wear – the weather and rooms being too hot to give substantial fabrics sufferance, so I had 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.[...] I had no flowers, no jewel to relieve it; and, what was more, I had no natural rose of complexion. (200)

The cloth she chooses has a tactile appeal and the colour itself has a certain quiet beauty that she finds attractive. This is one of the times in the novel where Lucy keenly feels the lack of personal charm that she usually sets at defiance, for this is an occasion where beauty must shine, and the deficiency of it has no place. However, it is in the shadow gown that her uneasy mind is most at ease. At the same time, it is delicately suggestive, for the dun mist shrouds a moor in bloom, an idea that intimately evokes the open uncultivated heath with its wild flowers and unassuming beauty. It is a metaphor that is closely linked to the rich inner life secreted behind a reserved exterior that Lucy aspires to, and is equally a hidden signifier of her hesitantly emerging sexuality that will be more fully revealed later in the novel. It is then a choice carefully made in relation to the regularised and codified display of the body specific to nineteenth century culture, and to her own taste.

Though Lucy shuns the company of her fellow teachers and refuses the kind of femininity posited by the buxom Labassecourien contours, she is still adamant

about her own femininity. Her criticism of the accepted versions of feminine beauty and grace, as well as the sartorial surveillance that coded and decoded every colour and every flounce, runs parallel with the attempt to create a different, more inward, model of femininity. Even as she wants to extricate herself from the paraphernalia of pleated skirts, feathered hats, intricate underwear, and their attendant whisper of moral and intellectual unwholesomeness, Lucy understands that by reducing her dress to the bare minimum of functionality she can refashion it to reflect her own personality. 'Clothing is itself malleable, like language and art, infinitely adaptable to alterations in form that change its meaning; but getting free of clothes altogether is impossible. One must simply get into a different costume'.¹⁷ This different costume for Lucy is that which turns her into a shadow, making her fade into an alcove of personal space in the midst of a public event. However, what Lucy only half-realises is that this process can be a source of pleasure as well. Negating the joy she feels in dressing herself in a gown of her own choosing, as in the later incident of the pink dress, she constructs the sartorial decision as a conflicted matrix of individuality and assertion, bleaching it of its possibility for delight.

The day of the fête provides another occasion for Lucy to formulate an articulation of her identity through her clothes. Her insistent and singular sense of femininity comes across more fully in the cross-dressing required of her for the unexpected male part she is to perform in the play. Her adamant refusal to change her shadow gown for a man's apparel arouses exclamations of disbelief from the other teachers. But in the face of all the domineering feminine opposition, she steadfastly maintains:

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. (208)

It is an aversion that no one except M. Paul seems to find interesting, and with his nod of approval she makes for herself a pastiche costume. She carefully chooses certain items of clothing from those laid out before her – a little vest, a collar, a cravat, and a paletôt of small dimensions – that she assumes over her own 'woman's garb without the slightest retrenchment' (209). She insists on having no help, on arranging the costume in her own way, 'nobody must meddle' (208). She then collectedly loosens her hair out of its braids, arranging it closely, and

¹⁷Hollander, *Feeding the Eye*, p. 12.

emerges from the dressing room with a hat and gloves in her hands, her cursorily assumed masculinity completed. In rejecting the male costume, Lucy is refusing to be desexed, to have the partly obscured 'moor in bloom' completely blotted out. However faint her sexuality and her attractions may be, she is unwilling to renounce them. But it is an incident that also reveals a closeted, subversive sense of humour that is completed when she retorts to Mademoiselle St Pierre's sneer by saying that 'if she were not a lady and I a gentleman, I should feel disposed to call her out' (209). It is as if by adopting the symbolic tokens of male attire, she is able to behave with a candour that she would be averse to in her usual mien.

In seemingly antagonistic opposition to the purple-gray gown is the pink dress mentioned earlier. While the shadow dress was suggestive of an oblique disclosure of a sexual self, though concealed and unrecognised, the pink dress has a sexual tension that is too daunting for Lucy. This is a gift Lucy receives from her godmother, Mrs Bretton, who after inspecting her wardrobe insists on following her own taste in choosing a dress for her. The result is a gown that by Lucy's own confession 'was made with extreme simplicity, guiltless of flounce or furbelow' (284), but despite that, her real horror comes across in her first reaction: 'I would almost as soon clothe myself in the costume of a Chinese lady of rank' (283). Yet dressed she is in that disconcerting dress so at odds with her previous choice, for a grand concert:

Without any force at all, I found myself led and influenced by another's will, unconsulted, unpersuaded, quietly over-ruled. In short the pink dress went on, softened by some drapery of black lace. I was pronounced to be *en grande tenue*, and requested to look in the glass. I did so with some fear and trembling; with more fear and trembling, I turned away. (283 - 284)

It is unusual that Lucy finds herself pliantly 'led and influenced', and this surprising lack of will is presumably related to the fact that she is accompanying Dr Graham. Afraid of the picture she would make, she is only reconciled to the woman who looks out at her from the mirror when she finds no ridicule in the eyes of those who see her. Enjoying an uncharacteristic, temporary flush of pleasure she is ushered by the mother and son to the evening's entertainment. The natural rose of complexion that she had missed earlier is now raised by an almost feverish pitch of excitement. For a night she is not the shadowy outsider but almost like Ginevra, a typical young leisured lady, dressed in her most fashionable gown. What is memorable however are the terms in which she describes her response to

donning the dress; the 'fear and trembling' suggest a highly disturbed emotional state. The sense of an involuntary bodily experience that leaves her quivering with nervousness as well as an anticipation of pleasure is palpable. Her uncontrollable anxiety is associated with her new, more visible public appearance as well as the delicate sexual expressivity of the fabric. The dress itself takes on an erotic materiality as the pink cloth and black lace envelop her body with an overt sexual appeal, and the act of putting on the dress unexpectedly becomes akin to an act of self-seduction.

So far in the novel Lucy had steadfastly refused to create a visually attractive self, choosing a modest, retiring outward appearance that hid an exuberant inner life. But for the first time she is presented with the possibility of contiguous selves of rich psychological interiority and appealing physical exteriority. The simple pink dress then serves to sexualise her body in a way that Lucy is highly uncomfortable with, seducing her into giving up her reserve. Even as she hopes that Graham does not think that she had been 'decking [her]self out to draw attention' (284), and is reassured by his kind smile and satisfied nod, her overdeveloped sense of shame in drawing attention to herself is symptomatic of her severe refusal to assert her body over or even as equal to her mind. Echoing Rochester's sultan-like smile that will make Jane so upset, Graham's assenting nod soothes Lucy's burning embarrassment and suggests his own sense of self-approval.

This trip to the opera is one of the few episodes in the novel where Lucy's emotional, passionate side is granted free play. The entire night has a hallucinatory, enchanted quality about it and the opera house itself is described in distinctly sensual terms: a majestic staircase 'deeply and softly carpeted with crimson', leading to doors whose panels were also 'crimson clothed', which rolled back with some unknown 'magic' to reveal a grand hall, corniced, fluted, covered in burnished gold and alabaster white (285). '[W]herever drapery hung, wherever carpets were spread, or cushions placed, the sole colour employed was deep crimson' (285). In Brontë's symbolic lexicon, crimson and its allied shades are allusive of hidden, repressed desire or rage that will inevitably break to the surface. It is no wonder that Lucy's return home brings her relief, and she takes off the pink dress and the lace mantle 'with happier feelings than [she] had experienced in putting them on' (304).

This first outing is followed by a second one to the opera, when Graham unexpectedly asks Lucy to join him in place of his mother. In search of her mist coloured crape she rushes to the garret where the dress had been relegated from

the communal wardrobe by some ordering hand. But as she unlocks the door to the solitary, sepulchral room where she has withdrawn in the past to gain some moments of privacy, she realises that it is not as dark as it should have been. There shone a single light, that lit up the deep alcove with the scarlet curtain drawn over it, and then before her eyes, it silently retreated and vanished, leaving the alcove with its curtain in darkness. Snatching her dress that hung mercifully near the entrance, she rushes down the stairs locking the haunting presence of the nun behind the attic door. The possibility of the apparition that she almost glimpses is suggestive of the coming presence of the actress she will see on stage, and the emotions that the performance will unlock. The repression signified by the nun is displaced onto the almost manic figure of Vashti, by whose explosive acting she is completely mesmerised.

Having bribed Rosine, the portress, to fasten the hooks and eyes of her dress and smooth the plaits of hair that her own trembling hands could not, she is bundled into the carriage and transported to the theatre, full of anticipation for the renowned actress. In the woman who had been called plain by many men she finds a revelation:

I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. [...]
 To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked, worried down, torn in shreds. Scarcely a substance herself, she grapples to conflict with abstractions [...]
 Wicked, perhaps, she is, but also she is strong; and her strength has conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace, and bound both at her side, captives peerlessly fair, and docile as fair. (339 - 340)

Vashti's disturbed, neurotic strength is reminiscent of Lucy's own closely repressed hysteria that threatens to eclipse the centre of calm she seeks. This description of Vashti paradoxically reads both like the theoretical type that draws Lucy - a physically 'insubstantial' woman with an emotional intensity that leaves beauty wanting - as well as a catalogue of the manic passions that she tries to suppress. Lucy's desire for invisibility is akin to what she finds fascinating in Vashti - 'scarcely a substance', the actress encompasses a psychological strength that is obscured by her frail body. Climactically, the performance is cut short at its crescendo when the hushed, expectant audience is greeted by a lick of flame and the smell of smoke. The cathartic release of Lucy's volatile emotions is palpably materialised in the fire and disorder that lead to the meeting of Dr Graham and

Pauline. This is what decisively signals the end of the nebulous romantic hopes that Lucy had of him.

In the entire episode of the opera there is a very strong sexual undercurrent that reaches the surface in moments like the trembling dressing up, the magnetism of Vashti's acting that draws Lucy into its orbit, and the final burst of fire. Another heightened moment is when, intrigued about Graham's response to the actress, she begins to observe him: a little curious, sometimes revolted, and always cool, he has none of the warmth of Lucy's reaction. On directly asking him what he thought, she receives an answer emphatically critical and callous, for 'he judged her as a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment' (342). Dismissing Vashti as a prostitute, an easy and unoriginal equation of the woman who performs on stage and the woman available for male consumption, he brings to Lucy's rapturous absorption a taint of coarseness. Even if it were not for the meeting with Pauline, this in itself would have indicated the lack of sympathy between the two, for the night that leaves 'a deep-red cross' (342) in Lucy's life, has none of the same associations for him.

As Lucy and Graham repass the theatre after leaving Pauline and her father at their hotel, they find it as still and silent as Lucy's hopes of happiness with Graham. The fire now lay 'extinct and forgotten' (347), and the next day's newspaper explained it as having been caused by some loose drapery on which a spark had fallen, 'which had blazed up and been quenched in a moment' (347). Even as this episode of emotional outburst lies quenched along with Lucy's incipient love, the episode of the pink dress is revived by M. Paul and his censoring eye. Having seen her at the concert, he further heightens her initial mortification by making disparaging comments about her 'scarlet' clothing, making her flare up into a passion once again:

[...] M. Paul [...] would dare my anger for the sake of my good, and would venture to refer to a change he had noticed in my dress. He was free to confess that when he first knew me [...] I satisfied him on this point: the gravity, the austere simplicity, obvious in this particular, were such as to inspire the highest hopes for my best interests. What fatal influence had impelled me lately to introduce flowers under the brim of my bonnet, to wear "des cols brodés," and even to appear on one occasion in a *scarlet gown* he might indeed conjecture, but, for the present, would not openly declare. (419)

Stung into retaliating, Lucy interrupts: "'Scarlet, Monsieur Paul? It was not scarlet! It was pink, and pale pink, too; and further subdued by black lace'" (419).

The imputation of the opprobrium is not lost upon her, and she fights back the innuendo of the scarlet woman with spirit. His response is that of nonchalance, for “[p]ink, or scarlet, yellow or crimson, pea-green or sky-blue; it was all one: these were all flaunting, giddy colours” (419). M. Paul’s rebuking lecture challenges both Lucy’s temper and her wit, and so her choice of dress becomes the means by which the strange courtship progresses, the wooing done in words of indignation and reproach in equal measure.

Lucy’s clothing is then not just a signifier of a generalised feminine repression but also an active medium by which she herself suppresses all disturbing psycho-sexual emotions. Various incidents throughout the novel serve to emphasise the way in which she has carefully chosen her clothes, however unostentatious they may be. So self-conscious is she about her projected self-image, that even a dress worn to please a dear friend becomes cause for much embarrassment, for it is at odds with the personality she has created for herself. In fact, the unassuming quality of her dresses is as carefully thought out as the fashionable elegance of Ginevra Fanshaw’s.

Paradoxically for Lucy, this suppression is precisely the way in which she develops a selfhood that is unimpeded by the demands of any other relationship. So strong is her desire for independence, that often translates into invisibility, a Vashti-like insubstantiality, that she covets a psychological privacy unhampered even by the ties of friendship - she withdraws from both Mrs Bretton and Pauline, the two women who hold the promise of an equal attachment. Part of the reason that she is discomfited by what M. Paul scathingly labels the scarlet dress, is that it is a gift of an extremely personal nature. Her severity of dress then is not just a symptom of her self-imposed repression but also a manifestation of her desire for that repression, which is only an extreme form of privacy.

What horrifies her about M. Paul’s upbraiding is not the harsh terms of censorship he uses but the fact that for once there was someone, a man, who had noticed her enough to be overwhelmed. For once she had not been admonished for her extreme sobriety, scolded for her melancholy or described as, as Graham does, ‘quiet Lucy Snowe’, an ‘inoffensive shadow’ (403). As Lucy puts it to herself:

Such are your own and your friends’ impressions; and behold! there starts up a little man, differing diametrically from all these, roundly charging you with being too airy and cheery – too volatile and versatile – too flowery and coloury. This harsh little man – this pitiless censor – gathers up all your poor scattered sins of vanity, your luckless chiffon of rose-colour, your small fringe of a wreath, your small scrap of ribbon,

your silly bit of lace, and calls you to account for the lot, and for each item. You are well habituated to be passed by as a shadow in Life's sunshine: it is a new thing to see one testily lifting his hand to screen his eyes, because you tease him with an obtrusive ray. (421)

It is this confession that points towards the change in Lucy and her affections, as well as the realisation that the shadow that she had so far embraced may be as confining as it is liberating.

Another earlier Brontë heroine who enacts a similar story of austerity with the attendant refusal to take pleasure in the visual and tactile appeal of clothing is Jane Eyre. Jane, like Lucy, chooses to dress plainly and this choice of simplicity takes on an extraordinary defiance when Rochester tries to get her to exchange her sensible gowns for half-a-dozen boldly coloured ones: 'With anxiety I watched his eye rove over the gay stores'.¹⁸ Having become engaged to Rochester, she is now taken on a shopping trip for her trousseau, a 'business' that she finds 'harassing' rather than pleasurable (300). As Lysack puts it, 'the governess proves an unwilling and resistant shopper',¹⁹ and in imagery analogous to Lucy's who compares her pink gown to a Chinese lady's costume, Jane tells her intended husband and present employer in no indefinite terms that 'he might as well buy me a gold gown and a silver bonnet at once: I should certainly never venture to wear his choice' (301). Also, the subtext of Jane's apprehension is the suggestion of vulgar showiness and public availability that the word 'gay' hints at, for it was often a common euphemism for prostitute in the nineteenth century (much like the 'scarlet woman' that upsets Lucy). And so, bristling with irritation and anger, she persuades Rochester to accept her choice of more muted dresses, bringing the number down to two and settling on 'a sober black satin and pearl-grey silk' (301).

But the shopping excursion continues out of the silk warehouse into a jeweler's shop. Leisurely, in the face of her obvious annoyance, Rochester continues to regale her with purchases that she finds increasingly degrading to accept, and the tussle over clothes and trinkets leaves her feeling 'feverish and fagged' (301). She finds this deluge of gifts, the idea of being paraded in clothing of Rochester's choosing, paid for out of his pocketbook, unbearably threatening to her hard-acquired autonomy. Reflecting upon the possibility of even a small financial independence, Jane thinks: 'I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr Rochester, or sitting

¹⁸Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847), ed. Michael Mason, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, p. 300. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

¹⁹Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008, p. 1.

like a second Danae with the golden shower falling daily round me' (301). Feeling momentarily relieved by this thought, she seeks to meet his eye, but noticing his complacent sultan-like smile, she once again rebels against the man she herself refers to as her master and her lover. Jane's constant use of the term 'master' refers less to Rochester's position as her employer and more to his ability to teach her something new about herself, to make her aware of spheres of feeling within her so far hidden even to herself. Seeing through the facade of prim austerity, he makes her quicken in response to him physically, emotionally and intellectually. However, this shopping expedition recasts their relationship in an unequal mode that leaves Jane in the role of the receiver with nothing to give in return; the material articles with which she is being adorned reworking an undercurrent of possessiveness into the relationship that she is continually trying to equalise.

Jane once again tries to regain her sense of independence by threatening to be married in the same lilac gingham she was wearing, leaving him the grey silk for a dressing gown and the black satin for infinite waistcoats. His chuckling rejoinder that he would not 'exchange this one little English girl for the grand Turk's whole seraglio, gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!' (301) only go on to provoke her further. Bitten by the eastern allusion, and the patriarchal terms of possession it obviously suggests, she tells him that he may fill up his harem as he chooses but she would not be a part of it, instead she would turn missionary 'to preach liberty' to the enslaved, 'stir up mutiny' amongst his inmates (302).

Rochester's desire to dress up Jane in finery chosen by him arises as much from a need to symbolise her belonging to him as from his belief that she is not 'naturally austere' (157). He had earlier remarked to her, "[t]he Lowood restraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs" (157 - 158). This hidden side of her nature is what he desires to bring out when he tries to buy her 'a rich silk of the most brilliant amethyst dye, and a superb pink satin' (300). But against all entreaties and demands, Jane refuses to be dolled up and resolutely defies his will. Her adamant denial of his claims upon her as her future husband are a fiery affirmation of her self-sufficiency in the face of his stifling proprietorship. So uncomfortable is she with the idea of female dependence that is concomitant with marriage that she is categorically unwilling to put herself in that relation to him before she absolutely has to. As she puts it herself:

"I will not be your English Céline Varens. I shall continue to act as Adèle's governess: by that I shall earn my board and lodging, and

thirty pounds a year besides. I'll furnish my own wardrobe out of that money [...]" (302)

Even though, or perhaps because, she is in love with Rochester to the point that he had become '[her] whole world; and more than the world: almost [her] hope of heaven' (307), she is discomfited by the loss of identity that her coming marriage will entail. Lysack points out that while Rochester is the object of Jane's own libidinal interests, he is also a force that she must carefully manage precisely because he is so seductive. This episode then most clearly lays out marriage as an economic affair, and as a state that will necessarily demand a renouncing of female autonomy. Lysack's book opens with this scene and she examines it in detail: 'Shopping at Millcote is not merely an anecdotal moment in the novel, a momentary diversion from the main interests of the plot, but a significant scene wherein the material nature of sexual politics is staged'.²⁰ Fashion in this instance is shown to be male-authored, and marriage to be a variation of the same economic exchange where women are cast as commodities. She continues: 'In the face of Rochester's insistence, the novel's protofeminist heroine seems to garner her agency through forms of renunciation; his apparent generosity is that which Jane must refuse. Rochester's aggressive attentions cast shopping as a scene of temptation, as this dangerously enticing figure threatens to subsume Jane in his vision of what she should desire'.²¹ This menacing masculinity is recast in the grotesque goblins of Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (first published in 1862), who taunt and tempt Lizzie and Laura with their continuous chant of 'Come buy, come buy'.²² Monstrous, malformed and animalistic, their market cry does lure Laura who, like Jeanie of the cautionary tale, is enticed by the luscious goblin fruit, that functions as an obvious sexual signifier, for it offers 'joys brides hope to have' (l. 315).

Jane's austere self-fashioning, like Lucy's, has the desired effect of focusing

²⁰Ibid., p. 2.

²¹Ibid., Lysack deploys this incident to focus her attention on the way in which the woman shopper was being constructed in the Victorian period, and in that sense, Jane's 'cautious negotiation of the commercial sphere is emblematic of the vexed condition of the woman shopper who goes to market only to risk becoming an object of exchange herself' (p. 2). She argues that the episode anticipates the way in which shopping was becoming figured as an overwhelmingly female pursuit by the 1860s, and how it could lend itself to association with both idleness and compulsion, that could then be managed through careful self-regulation.

²²Christina Rossetti, *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (1862), in *The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, Vol. 1, ed. R. W. Crump, Barton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979, l. 4, l. 19, l. 31 etc. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

attention on her intelligence rather than her appearance, for they both believe themselves to be plain women of superior intellect. By refusing to dress in a manner that will make her a participant in that economic market place where women's marriageability and worth are noted through their appearance, she is making a stand for an intellectual, psychological depth. She disassociates herself from the desires that Rochester purveys, forming for herself a discrete personal space where her own desires will be articulated in terms very different from the ones he is offering. However, there are moments where this rational, linear narrative is disrupted by an unexpected manic energy, something I will look at later in the chapter.

The social and economic contexts from which this choice arises are more overtly worked out in Jane's autobiography. Exiled to the Lowood Orphan Asylum, an institution whose guiding principle was to mortify the students in the 'worldly sentiment of pride' (43) for their spiritual edification, it is hardly surprising that Jane's manner of dress is bleak, to say the least. The grim physical structure of the school is as claustrophobic as the tenets on which it is run. The endless passages, the narrow compartments, the bare rooms, and the enclosed garden replicate in stone the joyless and forbidding religiosity that preaches physical and emotional privation. The clearly demarcated 'charity-children' (60) are fed meagre, sickening meals, clothed uniformly in dull, brown stuff frocks, and impressed into a systematically enforced austerity that subdues their bodies and prepares them for a life of servitude.

Growing into adulthood, Jane leaves the school, equipped with an education and a fondness for study, to go into service as a governess. A 'new servitude' (99) to be sure, but at least an occupation that would provide a change of scene. It is this idea of appearing as a reliable, respectable person who could be entrusted with the care of children that also has a part to play in her choice of clothing. Roberts argues that due to greater economic, social and educational opportunities, women's dress and image were undergoing a change in the mid-Victorian period.²³ The new public school mistresses, for example, in contrast to the finishing school mistresses of the earlier part of the century, encouraged serious pursuit of learning in their pupils and equated this with plainness of dress and rejection of ornament. A plain and austere style of dress, therefore, indicated seriousness and professionalism in the school-mistress and the student alike. Lucy Snowe the teacher and Jane Eyre the governess then dress simply, and in doing so create a

²³Roberts, 'The Exquisite Slave', p. 567.

professional identity that allows them some measure of financial freedom as well as physical mobility, and both cling to that selfhood in the two novels.

The austerity that was once forced upon her as a recipient of charity is now adopted and transformed by Jane into a personalised choice. She wears it as a badge of her poverty, without any sense of shame. But at the same time, it is a manner of dress that shows her as she is, thereby also highlighting her best asset: her mind. Even though she chooses not to draw attention to her appearance, it is a choice that makes its own sartorial demands. Jane may not be as beautiful as Blanche Ingram but she is aware of outward impressions and does labour over the effect her appearance makes. Arriving at her new position at Thornfield, she prepares herself to descend from her room to meet her pupil and the housekeeper:

I rose; I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous to be neat. It was not my habit to be disregarding of appearance, or careless of the impression I made: on the contrary, I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit. I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer [...] I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked [...] However, when I had brushed my hair very smooth, and put on my black frock – which, Quaker-like as it was, at least had the merit of fitting to a nicety – and adjusted my clean white tucker, I thought I should do respectably enough to appear before Mrs Fairfax. (113 - 114)

Jane's choice of terminology is interesting, for in calling attention to her Quakerish austerity, she is also implying a similarly austere, spare body. Clothing then confronts us with 'the semiotic order of fetishism itself'²⁴ where a present object operates as a synecdoche for an absent whole; in the case of *Jane Eyre*, the simple dress functions as synecdoche for the sparse body, and its absent physicality. But at the same time, it is a physicality that enters the text unobtrusively: discreetly as Lucy's 'moor in bloom', or clothed in Jane's dress that fits 'to a nicety'. Even as Jane tries to dress in a manner that sublimates the body, making it conform to the desexed, unthreatening body of the governess, it will assert itself, and not entirely unconsciously, displaying its sexual appeal through the display of its trim slenderness.

Jane's body and her voice have been threatened throughout the novel, at Gateshead, at Lowood, even by Rochester at Thornfield and inevitably she has a

²⁴I borrow this phrase from Finch, "Hooked and Buttoned Together", p. 347.

problematic, conflictual relationship with that body and its sexuality. Her childish assertion '*/s/peak* I must' (45) haunts all her utterances as well as the silences in the novel, and is symptomatic of her negotiation with the physicality that has been endangered by hunger, by enclosure, and by her own desire to transcend her appearance and construct a selfhood that is entirely intellectual. Not surprisingly, Jane looks upon Blanche Ingram with a curious mix of jealousy and disdain. It is Blanche's fashionable attire, her Junoesque proportions, and their combined calculated effect upon men that become a focus of her attention, as well as the basis of her moral judgment. She is also equally, though perhaps more condescendingly, repelled by Adèle's excessive infatuation with fine clothes and her 'redundancy of hair falling in curls to her waist' (116). She clearly draws a connection between the love of finery, a kind of moral degeneracy and intellectual atrophy, and *not* being English. It is Jane and Lucy's Englishness, as well as their undemonstrative Protestantism, that sets them apart from the foreignness of Blanche's exotic looks, the French frivolity of Adèle and her mother, the darkly demonic Bertha, and the Labassecourien women given to excess.

The truth of the body then resides in austerity, in its paradoxical connections with dressing and non-dressing. So even as Jane sets herself aside from women like Blanche Ingram and Céline Varens who associate themselves organically with their clothes, attaching an almost fetishistic importance to dressing, she herself has to perform her non-dressing through an act of austere dressing. This apparent turning away from worldly objects and material ambitions but at the same time 'engaging in a parallel and paradoxical obsession with austerity in clothing reveals the real, disturbing fissures in the concept of the self, challenging the assumed wholeness and continuity of identity'.²⁵ It is in the face of this very material threat of personal disorder that seeks to overwhelm any immediate sense of identity and to gain control over the too militant emotions of a fluctuating body that both Lucy and Jane turn to clothes.

This 'fluctuating body' and its anxieties are manifested in the narrative disruptions that take place in Jane's own childhood by her irrepressible anger, and in her more restrained adulthood are transposed onto the figure of Bertha. The absent Bertha is first introduced into the text through her disembodied, mirthless, Medusa laugh. Like Cixous's ideal woman writer who ruptures the male dominated literary sphere and the male authored text by writing herself into a

²⁵Athena Vrettos, 'From Neurosis to Narrative: The Private Life of the Nerves in *Villette* and *Daniel Deronda*', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (Summer, 1990), p. 562.

'female-sexed'²⁶ text, Bertha becomes the source of a tremendous, feverish energy that undermines the logic of *Jane Eyre*. The novel's balance becomes skewed and the rational, tempered Jane herself is undercut in a series of episodes where the child Jane's initial anger, that has been controlled by the grown-up Jane, is resurrected in the figure of Rochester's mad imprisoned wife. Cixous, in her feminist manifesto for a new kind of female writing, urges the woman writer: 'Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth'.²⁷ It is Jane's restrained body and its sexuality that find a mirror in Bertha's madness and then become the medium through which the unconscious rhythm and discordant currents of the novel are discovered.

This ominous threat of loss is again expressed in a poignant sartorial image where Jane feels that the wedding raiment of the as yet non-existent Mrs Rochester had already displaced her black stuff Lowood frock and straw bonnet, 'usurped' (308) her portmanteau. Having constructed a selfhood in the face of circumstances that attempted to erase all individuality, she finds it difficult to make, even mentally, the transition to being a married woman and thenceforth her husband's possession, and the public signifier of his wealth. Her sense of disconnection with the 'strange, wraith-like apparel' in her closet that gave out 'a most ghostly shimmer' (308) is the warning that she is refusing to believe in, but one that has its most disruptive and nightmarish manifestation in the midnight appearance of Bertha. She is the 'vampyre' (317) who appears in the dark of the night, shredding to bits with violent force the bridal 'vapoury veil' (308), made of elegant costly lace, covered in numerous, tiny pearls, that had been so lavishly given by Rochester. The fact that Jane has to don the modest veil, 'a square of unembroidered blonde' (314), that she herself had made, seems a presentiment of the coming necessity for her to soon take back her own identity in full, reverting to her old self, with its known ways.

Once Bertha's real identity as Rochester's lawful wife is known, Jane has no other option but to retreat. In his tormented passion Rochester asks her to live with him in a place which bears no recollection of or associations with Thornfield and its closeted inmate, but Jane, though seduced by the idea, is self-possessed enough to realise that by becoming his mistress, she would irrevocably lose her integrity, becoming a successor to Céline, Giacinta, and Clara. In a tragic parody

²⁶Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (Summer, 1976), p. 877.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 880.

of the wedding vows that the disclosure of Rochester's bigamous secret had stalled, Rochester asks Jane to promise "I will be yours, Mr Rochester". Jane replies:

"Mr Rochester, I will *not* be yours."
 [...] "Jane, do you mean to go one way in the world, and to let me go another?"
 "I do."
 "Jane" (bending towards and embracing me), "do you mean it now?"
 "I do."
 "And now?" softly kissing my forehead and cheek.
 "I do – " extricating myself from restraint rapidly and completely.
 (355)

For Jane, in spite of her collected, distant answers, this decision to leave Rochester comes after a struggle. To become his mistress would mean to give in to a sexualised body and reject the intellectual, psychological self that she had tried so hard to construct. It is a 'duty' (354) she owes herself, and for even considering the other option, for almost letting herself be seduced by Rochester's charisma, she punishes herself bodily. It is her material body that becomes the site on which she performs her ritualised chastisement, starving it, thinning it, and taming it.

In expecting Jane to give up on her hard-earned individuality and integrity, Rochester shows his purblind incomprehension of her desire for a freedom based on equality. Even though he sees through many of her postures and attitudes to the privation, resilience and strength that had called them up, he approaches the abstemious core of her identity as an enigma: "Now for the hitch in Jane's character [...] The reel of silk has run smoothly enough so far; but I always knew there would come a knot and a puzzle: here it is" (340). Not surprisingly, their much anticipated marriage only takes place when the vicissitudes of fate have equalised their relationship materially as well as emotionally. After her near fatal starvation in the wilderness of the moors and the refused marriage proposal from St John, the icon of self-abnegation in the novel, she seems more equipped to understand the needs of her own body. Recognising the potential for romantic and erotic fulfilment that Rochester holds for her, and confident in her new found financial independence, she returns to find him maimed and blinded, dependent on her. It is then that Jane finally informs us in the climactic denouement: 'Reader, I married him' (498).

Dress, illness and occupation

Both *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* see the emergence of an anorectic, sensitised body that is inordinately responsive to and indicative of internal conflicts. It displays a physicality that is alarmingly fragile and vulnerable. Caroline Helstone, one of the two central protagonists of Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), is another spare heroine who makes her protest entirely through her body. Caroline's rebellion is more muted, taking on the actual form of disease that arises from her unease with the narrowness of women's action. The complaint against this impossibility of action registers itself on her sartorial body and its increasing emaciation and long, lingering illness.

Unlike Jane and Lucy, Caroline is not plain but has a subdued, conventional kind of beauty to which the reader is introduced early in the novel:

To her had not been denied the gift of beauty; it was not absolutely necessary to know her in order to like her; she was fair enough to please, even at the first view. Her shape suited her age; it was girlish, light, and pliant; every curve was neat, every limb proportionate: her face was expressive and gentle; her eyes were handsome, and gifted at times with a winning beam that stole into the heart, with a language that spoke softly to the affections. Her mouth was very pretty; she had a delicate skin, and a fine flow of brown hair, which she knew how to arrange with taste; curls became her, and she possessed them in picturesque profusion. Her style of dress announced taste in the wearer; very unobtrusive in fashion, far from costly in material, but suitable in colour to the fair complexion with which it contrasted, and in make to the slight form which it draped. Her present winter garb was of merino, the same soft shade of brown as her hair; the little collar round her neck lay over a pink ribbon, and was fastened with a pink knot: she wore no other decoration.²⁸

Such descriptions of Caroline, as a young, vulnerable girl in diaphanous muslin gowns and a shower of curls about her shoulders, abound in *Shirley*. Her simple, unadorned style does not seem to be a thought out, deliberately acted upon choice, and is in accordance with an approved modesty of manner and attire. She is constructed as a heroine who is typical, non-threatening, and prettily inconspicuous. Her slight form draped in a demure merino or fresh white muslin is far from obtrusive. Even when dressed for the occasion of the Whitsuntide festivities,

²⁸Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849), ed. Andrew and Judith Hook, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, p. 102. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

she forms a picture 'not bright enough to dazzle, but fair enough to interest; not brilliantly striking, but very delicately pleasing; a picture in which sweetness of tint, purity of air, and grace of mien, atoned for the absence of rich colouring and magnificent contour' (291). The regalia of the 'transparent white dress' (*Villette*, 200) that Lucy had rejected for shadows and mists is the costume that Caroline is defined by. Looking at the colour white in feminine dress, Hollander observes that it derives much of its power 'not just from the desire to enact a refusal, as black clothing does, or from an insistent purity that rejects the corrupting touch of colour, but rather from the lust to take on colour that white projects - perhaps even the lust to be marked with blackness, the pale yearning of the unwritten page'.²⁹ This remark provides an interesting point of entry into Caroline's psyche: though she seems to be entirely normative, her character unfolds to reveal a depth that her outward conformity does not provide for.

The fact that her simplicity of appearance is not meditated, and appears to be a direct expression of her innate personality is exactly what is at the heart of Caroline's charm. She does not seem to be actively thinking about her own clothing although she is almost obsessive about that of others. Even as she spends time and effort playing lady's maid to her new-found mother, Mrs Pryor, and her much admired friend Shirley, she is never shown to be contemplating her own dress. Neither do her mother or Shirley take notice of her clothing. Shirley, Caroline's complementary other, further intensifies the effect of her austerity by presenting a contrast in her rich, heavy gowns of brilliant hues that mimic the colours of exotic birds.

But this unthinking observance of sartorial rules slowly discloses itself to be a signifier of an emotionally repressed inner life and a materially circumscribed existence. That her docility hides something stronger and more demanding is intimated by her cousin Hortense to whom she goes for lessons in French and sewing: "There is about her an occasional something - a reserve, I think - which I do not quite like, because it is not sufficiently girlish and submissive; and there are glimpses of an unsettled hurry in her nature, which put me out. [...] In time, I doubt not, I shall make her uniformly sedate and decorous, without being unaccountably pensive" (95). What Hortense labels as 'unaccountably pensive' in her nature is deeply connected with Caroline's acute dissatisfaction with the avenues for action open to her as a woman of limited means, and her increasing despondency at not having any meaningful activity in which to engage her intellectual

²⁹Hollander, *Feeding the Eye*, pp. 140 - 141.

and physical energy.

A powerfully expressive symbol of her malaise is the needlework by which Hortense seeks to improve her young cousin. 'She by no means thought it waste of time to devote unnumbered hours to fine embroidery, sight-destroying lace-work, marvellous netting and knitting, and, above all, to most elaborate stocking-mending' (107). Skilful with her needle, she is shocked and pained at Caroline's profound ignorance of this most essential of attainments, what she considers one of the first 'duties of woman'.³⁰ Consequently, '[i]t was another of Caroline's troubles to be condemned to learn this foreign style of darning, which was done stitch by stitch so as exactly to imitate the fabric of the stocking itself' (107). This wearisome toil becomes an eloquent metaphor for the interminable insignificance of Caroline's days. Many afternoons were thus devoted to sewing, and Hortense lost no time in summoning up for Caroline 'a hopeless pair of hose, of which the heels were entirely gone [...] [T]his task had been commenced two years ago, and Caroline had the stockings in her work-bag yet. She did a few rows everyday, by way of penance for the expiation of her sins: they were a grievous burden to her; she would much have liked to put them in the fire' (107 - 108).³¹

It is the only occupation that Caroline finds herself pushed into, bending over the blinding task till her eyes and fingers are as exhausted as her spirit. Every time that she tries to raise herself to something more stimulating than this ceaseless, mechanical, trivial business she is repeatedly put down, and every attempt at independence is turned into an admonition against unladylike behaviour. Perhaps

³⁰This is an echo of Sarah Stickney Ellis's approbation for the woman who spends a large portion of her day in 'the useful labour of the needle'. But even Ellis admits that this is a task that most requires a break in its monotony. Indeed, she suggests that since the 'art of conversation' is one of the most important of feminine accomplishments, she should take the silence imposed on her by a moody male presence and her own needlework to indulge in 'secret trains of thought and feeling' from which to derive amusing conversational material even as she industriously plies her busy needle. Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits*, Edition 11, London: Fisher, Son & Co., 1839, p. 121, 117.

³¹An inordinately large number of Victorian heroines engage in various forms of needlework - embroidery, plain sewing, worsted work, knitting, netting, lace-making. An occupation closely linked to femininity, it functions as a powerful symbol and instrument of women's circumscribed lives, and less frequently as a subversive act that allows women the silence for private meditation, or a creative means of expression, as even Ellis inadvertently suggests. See Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1984; Elaine Freedgood, "'Fine Fingers': Victorian Handmade Lace and Utopian Consumption', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Summer, 2003); Stephanie Rudgard-Redsell, "'The Business of her Life": Representing the Practice of Needlework in Nineteenth Century Literature and Art', unpublished PhD thesis, held at the Templeman Library, University of Kent, 2007; Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2009.

the most humiliating response comes from her uncle and guardian, Mr Helstone, on her return home from the Moore cottage: “[S]tick to the needle – learn shirt-making and gown-making and pie-crust-making, and you’ll be a clever woman some day” (122). With that narrow advice she retires to her bedroom, solitary and silent. Enclosed in her small room, the door bolted, dressing gown assumed, and her hair loosened, she allows her eighteen-year-old self to indulge in romantic visions of a future with Robert, the marriage becoming her only hope of personal fulfilment and worthwhile occupation.

As the plot of the novel unravels, the embittered, misogynistic Mr Helstone puts an end to the easy relations between his household and that of the Moores. With the arrival of the vivacious and strikingly beautiful Shirley, Caroline feels her tenuous hold on Robert’s affections slipping away till she finally comes to the realisation that the possibility of her ending her life as an old maid, a version of the same female sterility that the nun represents in *Villette*, was increasingly probable. Though the nun is stranger, touching on something deeper and not entirely explainable in Lucy’s psyche, the old maids in *Shirley*, one benevolent and the other bitter, become the figures to whom Caroline looks for direction, their socially incongruous presence leading to the extended meditations on feminine occupation and usefulness that the novel so concerns itself with. Having always imagined herself to be growing up to fulfil the usual role of wife and mother, Caroline now realises that she had never given thought to any other alternative. Stricken by this new awareness and perceiving her misguided simplicity, her unfounded belief in her ‘ordinary destiny’ (190), she asks herself: “‘What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?’” (190)

This is the question that she believes all unmarried women are faced with, and constantly endeavouring to solve. It is this riddle that Caroline puzzles over, pulling at it and obsessively contemplating it, till she is wearied by the lack of any answer. Sinking deeper into depression, she begins to look upon the austere and kindly Miss Ainley, as her model. Trying to reconcile herself to a life of lonely spinsterhood, her bland clothing comes to stand in for a desire to suppress her natural, ‘womanly’ longings for family life. At first she refuses to believe in the morality of a life lived in service of others: “‘Does virtue lie in abnegation of self? I do not believe it’” (190). But failing to find a fitting business in which to occupy herself, she begins the paring down of her life to a minimal simplicity that finds an echo in the whittling of her body into a skeleton of its former self. Slender to begin with, the disappointment in love brings with it

a lingering psychological malaise that sees her becoming thinner and paler by the day. But this increasing melancholy is accompanied with a strengthening of her ideas about the dire necessity of finding productive activity for women outside the marital sphere. Discussing the possibility of a fruitful existence with Shirley, and countering the accusation that it would make women 'masculine, coarse, unwomanly, she speaks out earnestly, and with an unmistakable shade of bitterness against a society that judges women by their appearance:

"And what does it signify, whether unmarried and never-to-be-married women are unattractive and inelegant, or not? – provided only they are decent, decorous, and neat, it is enough. The utmost which ought to be required of old maids, in the way of appearance, is that they should not absolutely offend men's eyes as they pass them in the street; for the rest, they should be allowed, without too much scorn, to be as absorbed, grave, plain-looking, and plain-dressed as they please."
(235)

And this is exactly the advice that she herself takes to heart, dressing herself in sobriety and pale muslin. However, it is not just men who demand a certain attention to appearance from women, but women themselves are as censorious of what they perceive to be sartorial offences. While Miss Ainely is the charitable, patient, and useful old maid, Miss Mann is the old maid turned acidic and rancorous by the life she has been dealt. Cantankerous even on the day of the school feast, she disapproves of the 'lively look' of Caroline's plain white dress, for: 'the everyday garb of brown stuff or grey gingham, and the everyday air of melancholy, suited the solitary spinster better' (308). Displeased with the young girl, she refuses to know her on that day.

This idea of obligation to others and oneself in terms of dressing with befitting modesty comes up repeatedly not just in Caroline's thoughts but also in conduct manuals of the period. Dinah Mulock Craik, well known as a novelist, an essayist, a travel writer and a poet, was the writer of a series of articles that were compiled and published in 1858 as *A Woman's Thoughts about Women*. Addressing the same audience of middle class women that Ellis's *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1839) and Mrs Beeton's popular *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861)³² were aimed at, Craik speaks confidently in her own voice, and stands apart in her commonsensical but independent-minded

³²Married to Samuel Beeton, the founder of the hugely successful *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (started in 1852), Isabella Beeton was almost certainly a contributor to the periodical that included paper dress patterns, fashion plates, needlework designs, numerous recipes, historical and botanical essays as well as a problems section known as 'Cupid's Letter Bag' - and later

opinions. Talking to single women like herself, she insists on self-reliance and a pride in their work as well as a sisterly solidarity. But in spite of the emotional support and actual material advice she offers, she too counsels women to dress with care. Declining youth or the absence of someone particular for whom the dressing is intended are no reasons for untidiness or an outdated costume, and as she bluntly puts it:

[I]s it not our duty - considering the great number of uncomely people there are in the world - to lessen it by each of us making herself as little uncomely as she can? [...] Neatness invariable; hues carefully harmonised, and as time advances, subsiding into a general unity of tone, softening and darkening in colour, until black, white, and grey alone remain, as the suitable garb for old age: these things are every woman's bounden duty to observe as long as she lives.³³

For Craik as well then, the body and its clothes become interchangeable entities, not just metaphors for each other but absolutely synonymous. Clothing too is sensitive to the passage of time that marks itself legibly on the body, and like the ageing body she expects its dress to also fade into the more subdued hues of grey. The self-interest that anonymous writer in the *Quarterly Review* had posited as the reason for dressing carefully now subsides into the idea of feminine 'duty'. All of women's work is directly reducible to what is categorised as their duty - dressing with taste and modesty, keeping their hands busy with sewing shirts and embroidering trifles, and managing the domestic affairs of their household.

The ideas of appropriate clothing and needle-work come together in a highly visual portrayal when Caroline takes on the sewing of a dress for herself. Though she is repulsed by the enforced sewing of the drawing room, with its needless labour, and even more incensed by the 'Jew-basket', an 'awful incubus' (134), she does return to her needle and thread, taming her febrile thoughts by the mechanical motion of her fingers. Keeping to her own apartment, appearing only at mealtimes, where she barely eats, from behind the closed doors of her room, she

lent itself to the corset controversy (see footnote 7). It was soon after her marriage that Isabella launched into a massive project for producing a manual for newly wed women that explained the supervisory duties of mistresses, their manners and menus, and the management of domestic help, invalids and children. First appearing in print in 24 monthly parts between 1859 and 1861 as offshoot of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, it was published as a single volume in October 1861. Mrs Beeton, *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1859 - 1861), ed. Nicola Humble, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

³³Dinah Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* (1858), in *Christina Rossetti: 'Maude' and Dinah Mulock Craik: 'On Sisterhoods' and 'A Woman's Thoughts About Women'*, ed. Elaine Showalter, London: Pickering & Chatto, 1993, pp. 206 - 207.

busies herself in making a replacement for her winter merino. Hunched over the cloth, 'she plied her needle continuously, ceaselessly; but her brain worked faster than her fingers. Again, and more intensely than ever, she desired a fixed occupation, – no matter how onerous, how irksome' (244). Desperate for a vocation that would give her some measure of hope that would lift her out of her tedious, monotonous days.

Her head laboured to frame projects as diligently as her hands to plait and stitch the thin texture of the muslin summer dress spread on the little white couch at the foot of which she sat. Now and then, while thus doubly occupied, a tear would fill her eyes and fall on her busy hands; but this sign of emotion was rare and quickly effaced: the sharp pang passed, the dimness cleared from her vision; she would re-thread her needle, re-arrange tuck and trimming, and work on. (244)

Despite this determined submersion of herself in such sanctioned feminine drudgery, her efforts bring neither health of body nor peace of mind, and she daily grows more wasted, joyless and wan: 'the mind's soil and its treasures were freezing gradually to barren stagnation' (199). Without her uncle noticing, the rose in her complexion had faded and her flesh wasted, leaving her 'drooping, colourless, and thin' (203). Her consumptive appearance, her slow decline, her diminished appetite and her unhappiness were attributed by the other young women of the neighbourhood to what they euphemistically called 'disappointment'. This Caroline understood partly through instinct and partly through observation, and accordingly she regulated her conduct, 'keeping her pale face and wasted figure as much out of sight as she could' (206). Isolating herself from the little transactions of everyday life, she retreats into complete seclusion, detached even from Shirley whom she believes to have replaced her in Robert's estimate.

But this withdrawal is paralleled by a 'spectacularisation of the starving body',³⁴ for it is through this physical denial that Caroline presents herself as both desiring and desirable, her own presence in the novel heightened as her body diminishes. This withdrawal is not entirely dissimilar to that of Lucy's, and the idea of 'shadow' recurs in Brontë's writing not as feebleness but as a potency that goes unseen.³⁵ Caroline's illness then becomes an extension of the same arc that began with her austere clothing and her imposed sewing. It is the appropriate

³⁴This is a phrase that Caterina Albano uses in her essay that looks at early modern cases of self-starvation, exploring the framing of the starving body as a cultural product. Caterina Albano, 'Questioning Starvation', *Women's Writing*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (July, 2001).

³⁵Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, London: Vintage, 1995, p. 4.

culmination of the complaint she registers in favour of greater license for work and thought. Paradoxically, in themselves all these elements are symbolic of the ideal domestic woman as well as symptomatic of her repression, but being taken to their logical extreme, they become the signs of a self-enclosing protest that women like Caroline carry and exhibit on their bodies. Brontë, through her three heroines manages to construct a map of the female soul, cramped by social conventions but struggling to free itself and reach a physical and psychological landscape that promises limitless freedom. It is an interior expanse that aims to reach beyond its social seclusion but at the same time is decidedly private.

What Helena Michie terms the 'aesthetics of deprivation' prevalent in the Victorian period is what forces appetite to be hidden behind closed doors, making eating a private activity and 'abstemiousness a public avowal of femininity'.³⁶ Many Victorian heroines go through a typical period of illness like that of Caroline's, slowly fading into decline, before they admit their love for the hero, the illness itself becoming the expression of a fear of sexuality and the social convention of denying it. This illness then was a last gasp for power, a desperate attempt to retain control over their bodies. The first sign of the illness - a refusal to eat - is the symptom of a predictable malady that can only end in death or marriage. It is the latter that concludes Caroline's decline. As Michie argues, the delicate woman who does not assert her physical needs serves to recuperate the Fall and to re-establish lost innocence. Mythologically, her role is to refuse the apple and to keep her mouth firmly shut to temptation, as Lizzie does triumphantly manage to do in Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, thereby saving her sister from the fatal decline. But Brontë's use of this illness is more ambiguous than Michie assumes. She turns it upon itself, giving it the eloquent protest of Caroline's clothing. This protest takes place not just at the narrative level but is inherent in Caroline's own musings and her heart-felt conversations with Shirley, Mrs Pryor, and even her housemaid Fanny. The starving body also presents itself as a self-contained body, and becomes a symbol of resistance, grief, isolation and self-consumption. The fasting and wasting are then analogous to the austere clothing: they represent

³⁶Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 20; For more on the relationship between sexuality, female hunger, self-starvation and disease see Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001; Rod Edmond, *Affairs of the Hearth: Victorian Poetry and Domestic Narrative*, London: Routledge, 1988.

not an annunciation of desire but an alternative form of desire, and as such become tormented attempts at self-definition. Asceticism transforms the body into a site of denial but also into a site of resistance. Self-starvation is not just about depleting the body but also about experiencing physicality.

Caroline's near-death decline is part of the same pattern of 'venture and collapse'³⁷ that characterises *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*. The acute constriction of mental space and the virtual burial in the Helstone house is what leads to the physical breakdown. Her abject, abandoned desires haunt her choice of clothing, her lonely hours of sewing, and her illness. While Lucy and Jane's reserved demeanour explode the artifice of feminine passivity and tameness, Caroline's protracted illness (like Jane's dramatic collapse, and Lucy's feverish crisis) shows the studiously contained suffering that lies behind that facade so precariously maintained. The unseen spaces of her mind are articulated fluently through her silence, and private feeling becomes the point from which public restraint is critiqued. Caroline's apparent submission veils a seething revolt, her gossamer muslin dress and her needle becoming the signifiers of the circumscribed nature of female life and the most conspicuous symbols of the simmering resentment against it.

Clothing then begins to function not just as a synecdoche of a sensitised body, but also that of a nervous body. These sartorial negotiations are performed around the dilemma of undisplayed, or rather undisplayable, bodies that contain a self at unease with its sexuality. Finch argues that in the Victorian period, the anorectic body was placed at the very centre of the sexual imagination. 'As a semiotic field, the female anatomy had been inverted, a new and elusive form of erotics had replaced a belly-centred sexuality'.³⁸ In paintings as well the ample woman with her 'reproductively charged belly' of the previous centuries had been exchanged for a markedly different form. The fashionable female form contradictorily combined a small girlish waist with the features of a more mature sexuality. The erotic zones had shifted considerably and the new *objets du désir* possessed exaggerated breasts, thighs, and posteriors, but a pre-adolescent midriff. Interestingly, this was a change that was largely related to the appearance and use of the corset which by making a public visual display of private underwear violated previous distinctions between a private and public body. The Brontë heroines are ambiguously sexed, for while they possess the fashionably approved slender body, it does not have

³⁷Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 51.

³⁸Finch, "Hooked and Buttoned Together", p. 343.

the accoutrements of a more developed sexuality. Moreover, it is a slenderness maintained through physical and emotional fasting; their sexuality, physicality and appetites are hidden away behind a problematic, awkwardly *unreadable* slim body. The notion that clothes, and by extension the body, were supposed to provide accurate insights into motives and information about morals is consistently dismantled in the three novels. And even though the three heroines choose sartorial austerity, each of them fabricates and modulates it differently. Lucy in her shadow dress, Jane in her neat gown that shows her body to a nicety and Caroline in her diaphanous, white muslin are all following an ideal of simplicity but one that is highly individuated. It is only by recognising the unreadability of these women, intentional or not, that we can learn something about their desires.

Chapter 2

Austerity as Display II

Who has not felt the beauty of a woman's arm? – the unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently lessening curves down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness.¹

This is a narratorial digression brought about by the almost hypnotic power that Maggie Tulliver's beautiful, curvaceous arm exerts on the infatuated Stephen Guest, her cousin's fiancé. Subtly enthralled into a heady sensual intoxication, the intensity of the moment dissolves into confusion and anger as Stephen impulsively showers her arm with ardent kisses. Interestingly, Maggie is no excessively sexualised Cleopatra, the likes of whom Lucy Snowe had dismissed in *Villette*, but a heroine desperately straining towards a sartorial and moral austerity.

While the austerity that Brontë's heroines enact is one that is expressed through spare bodies, uncluttered by the physical signifiers of sexuality even though struggling with incipient desire, both George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell manipulate that austerity to reflect and respond to an obvious, irrepressible sexual selfhood. The interplay between the verbal and the visual is the fraught terrain for Brontë, and all her heroines show a marked predilection for the former. It is in the space provided by words that articulation and individuation become possible, without the loss of privacy, or the safety and liberty shadows provide. On the contrary, Gaskell and Eliot, who will be my focus in this chapter, create women with a more visual presence, whose desires and desirability are inextricably bound with a choice of clothing that is also decidedly plain. Brontë's hesitantly sexed

¹George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), ed. Gordon S. Haight, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 441. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

heroines are here countered by the full bodied, though slender waisted, heroines that are in greater harmony with the pictorial strategies of painting women in the period. These are graceful, shapely, feminine women who possess an inherent sexuality that they struggle to understand, contain and come to terms with. Unlike the heroines of the previous chapter who devise a shadow space, marginal to the visual realm of women and their fashions, these women are voluptuously displayed within the text. They are not secreted away in the crevices of public life, the underside of social surfaces that is the liminality inhabited by Brontë's female flâneurs, but are active participants of that life, the focal points of all attention.

This exhibitionism would seem to be the apparent opposite of austerity but is in fact an effect of that self-consciously donned sartorial asceticism. What sexualises these women are their restrained, Junoesque bodies that are rendered even more appealing by the accompanying unconsciousness of the desire they induce. The pleasingly plain clothes with their sense of graceful artlessness create a markedly distinct body that cannot be overlooked. Anne Hollander has argued that the 'unique power of the clothed figure in art derives from the fact [that] among human beings absolute nudity is not the natural state, but rather one of two constantly polarized states'.² What makes the painted nude so evocative is its relation to the clothed figure, and Hollander persuasively shows how the nude in art did not only follow its own conventions arising from an idealising impulse but also, more significantly, the current ideals of the clothed body. It is the ideal clothed image that constantly shaped the form of the female body in nude art, imbining it with an emphatic erotic content. So too in the nineteenth century, the unclothed body that was represented was one that had acquired a small waisted, high breasted firmness imparted by the pressure of an invisible corset. Nineteenth century English painters, looking back to other historical periods, even after much

²Anne Hollander, 'The Clothed Image: Picture and Performance', *New Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Spring 1971), p. 478. Hollander departs here from art historians like Kenneth Clark who trace back the conventions of nude painting to ideas of the perfect human form deriving from ancient Greek art. Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956. Lynda Nead also responds to Clark's work, particularly to his categorisation of the 'nude' as the other of the 'naked', a movement that marks the idealisation of the actual, a weaning out of the sensual and a turning of the unclothed body into an aesthetically purified body. This formulation for Nead is in line with the binary oppositions that dominate western philosophical history where the two terms of any pairing are isolated and mutually exclusive. It is frustration with this idea of the female nude as containing and regulating the female body that leads her to search for 'the diverse ways in which women's bodies are represented and to promote new bodily images and identities'. Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992. p. 16.

research into clothing, presented women who though wearing medieval gowns continue to show a body with a smooth, defined waist and the correspondingly ample hips and bosom that a corset bestowed. John Everett Millais' Pre-Raphaelite rendering of the Shakespearean heroine Mariana, rewritten by Tennyson into a poem, manifestly realises the contemporary ideal of the clothed body, in spite of its gesture towards a past historical time.

Stately bodies, sensual asceticism

Mariana (1851) was first displayed at the Royal Academy with the following lines from Tennyson's poem included in the catalogue:

She only said, "My life is dreary,
He cometh not," she said;
She said, "I am aweary, aweary,
I would that I were dead!"

In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Mariana is a character living a lonely life in a moated grange after being rejected by her lover, with whom she continues to be in love. Though within the play the two are reunited, neither Millais' painting nor Tennyson's poem, whose haunting refrain finally changes in the last stanza to 'She wept, "I am aweary, aweary,/ Oh God, that I were dead"',³ gesture towards that ending, which is bleakly rendered anyway. Tennyson captures the desolation and the isolated melancholy of Mariana and it is this elegiac quality that Millais draws upon for his rendition.⁴ The painted Mariana stands above her unfinished embroidery, her hands placed on her hips, stretching her back. Enclosed by a dark patterned wall and a medieval stained glass window, wedged between her work table and her seat, she offers an image of feminine confinement, of frustrated sexuality and an enervated body. The barred windows only let in the fallen leaves that echo the patterns of her needlework and the motif of the wallpaper, and the thick foliage outside blocks out any open vistas. The scattered leaves as well as the mouse scuttling behind her, give the sense of a disheveled, barren loneliness

³ Alfred Tennyson, 'Mariana' (1830), in *Tennyson's Poetry*, ed. Robert W. Hill, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1999, ll. 83 - 84.

⁴ Lynne Pearce gives a wonderfully detailed critique of *Mariana*, looking at the poem and the painting in relation to each other. She argues that it is 'through lilting refrains and tactile fabrics that both texts effectively smother the cries of their heartbroken maiden'. Lynne Pearce, *Woman / Image / Text: Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature*, New York, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 60. Pearce also examines Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848 - 1849) and William Holman Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott* (1886 - 1905), paintings that I return to in Chapter 5.



Figure 3: John Everett Millais, *Mariana* (1850 - 1851).

that is replicated in Mariana's pale, drawn face and her aching, straining body. The image of needlework that came up repeatedly in Brontë's *Shirley*, and was examined in the last chapter, is connected again with a thwarted feminine sexuality and domestic drudgery.

Millais' painting shows a space of femininity that is also a space of repression. The religious stained glass icons and the sombre altar with candles and incense visible in the dark background hint at a scriptural order, while the intricate embroidery reveals the all too obvious doctrine of feminine domesticity. The story told is that of time whiled away in wait for an unforthcoming male presence. The stagnant atmosphere of the painting, the clash between the murky colours of the room and the vivid blue of Mariana's dress, the still, silent air and the flexing body, cohere to produce a logic of female exclusion. Similar to Caroline in her self-enforced inward exile, Mariana's discarded needlework and her wan face are emblematic of her confined life and severely limited opportunities. But unlike Caroline, Millais' painting does not show a whittled down physicality but a substantial, full-figured body that is further accentuated by its unusual pose.

It is Mariana's body that holds the centre of the painting, dominating the composition through the rich intensity of her clothing and compelling the viewer's eye to follow the arch that her tired body forms. It is both her palpable corporeality as well as her attitude of world-weariness that finds an equivalent in Eliot's heroine in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Maggie Tulliver, though following an austerity of dress that is as severe as any of the other women looked at in the previous chapter, possesses an erotic appeal that is unmistakable and additionally portrayed in highly visual terms. Like Mariana, she possesses a real physicality that reflects her bodily exhaustion as much as her struggles to contain a troubling sensuality. Her body, though slender and clothed in simply made dresses, is one that holds a definite aura of an instinctive sexuality that is being repressed by a self-imposed religious edict. Eliot's heroine then noticeably stands out from the tiny women who inhabit Brontë's novels.⁵ Helena Michie argues that Maggie's unusual 'bigness attests to an inner rebellion against normative femininity',⁶ and even Maggie herself explicitly casts her own difference from canonical heroines in strictly physical terms.

In the manner usual to Victorian conventions of heroine representation where

⁵This is also true of Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, who makes similar sartorial decisions and has proportions considerably larger than the spare Lucy Snowe, Jane Eyre and Caroline Helstone.

⁶Helena Michie, *Flesh made Word: Female Figures and Womens Bodies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, p. 27.

women were often cast as cousins or sisters, becoming foils for each other, and frequently performing an uneasy sisterhood tainted by rivalry, Maggie too is pitted against her dainty, blonde cousin Lucy. As children, Lucy with her golden curls in straight rows, her delicate pale skin, and her pretty, voluminous, lacy frocks is the antithesis to Maggie's uncontrollable masses of dark hair, her brown skin that makes her look like a 'mulatter' (13), and her dislike of anything uncomfortably frilly or of a whiteness that is bound to show up dirt most glaringly. Alternately described as a 'Bedlam creatur' (13) by her mother, and '[t]oo 'cute for a woman' (12) by her indulgent father, Maggie is the troublesome one and the Lucy the placid angel. Constructed as a pair of opposing characters from the start, their childish jealousies do however give way to a better developed mutual fondness. The passage through a troubled adolescence finds them in the naivety of young adulthood, sharing a sisterly camaraderie in the stable domesticity provided by Lucy's father's wealth. However, this seemingly calm surface is rippled by Maggie's emerging, threatening sexuality and the fascination it holds for both Stephen Guest, Lucy's fiancé, and Philip Wakem, Maggie's crippled childhood companion and the son of the man who brought about her father's downfall.

Even before the final act of betrayal and loss of control, Maggie's relationship with Lucy is infected by a deeply buried resentfulness of her golden haired loveliness and her luck, further complicated by a desire to reciprocate Lucy's genuine affection. In one of her walks with Philip Wakem in the tellingly titled *Red Deeps*, Maggie's submerged childish anger at the figure of the idealised blonde woman resurfaces in her critique of the book Philip had lent her. She declares that she did not finish the novel:

"As soon as I came to the blond-haired young lady reading in the park, I shut it up, and determined to read no further.[...] I'm determined to read no more books where the blond-haired women carry away all the happiness. I should begin to have a prejudice against them. If you could give me some story, now, where the dark woman triumphs, it would restore the balance. I want to avenge Rebecca and Flora MacIvor and Minna, and all the rest of the dark unhappy ones." (332)

What comes across in this passage is not just a latent discontent with the social significance of appearance, but a simmering rage at the analogous version of feminine beauty endorsed by literary conventions as well. Maggie's outspoken critique reveals a desire, both hers and Eliot's, to rewrite narratives where the colour of a woman's hair, or her unusual appearance no longer presages her destiny. But the passage anticipates as well the way in which Maggie's rewriting of the course of

her life-narrative is bound to be tragic, for her possibility of happiness is already tainted by the inevitability of her destiny, foretold by her dark hair, her sudden temper and her generous spirit. As Eliot herself puts it, 'the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history' (385).

But Maggie, with all the idealism in her nature, is talking in generalities, and Philip is the one who particularises that abstract good fortune of blonde woman into Lucy with uncanny portentousness:

"Well, perhaps you will avenge the dark women in your own person, and carry away all the love from your cousin Lucy. She is sure to have some handsome young man of St. Ogg's at her feet now: and you have only to shine upon him – your fair little cousin will be quite quenched in your beams." (332)

Horried at the thought, and taking the remark as a rebuke to her vanity, she argues that she never could rival her cousin: in her old gowns she could never stand up to Lucy 'who knows and does all sorts of charming things, and is ten times prettier' (333) than her. In this unconsciously made rationalisation that bases itself on the effect of clothing in producing beauty, Maggie reveals how little she thinks of her own appearance, naively believing that by having forsaken the mirror and fashionable attire she has managed to remove herself from the visual appraisal that guides women's public interaction. She quickly retracts her admission and claims to have spoken half in jest, though confessing that it was always the unhappy, forsaken ones who received all her sympathy. But the impetuously made remark, what she calls her 'nonsense', is more revealing than she would like to believe. Her anger at her physicality was more evident in her childish fits of rage than in her adult restraint but the ferocity with which she enforces that self-discipline is poignant in itself.⁷ In this refusal to comply with feminine stereotypes, Maggie chooses to perform an act of non-being and non-dressing through an intellectual, physical and sartorial asceticism which however becomes increasingly difficult to maintain as it clashes with both her sexual desires and her evident, full-bodied desirability.

Just as Millais had challenged Victorian etiquette of 'high art', by presenting a woman who was censured as being ill-complexioned, inadequately handsome, and eccentrically red haired, Eliot challenges Victorian literary protocol by creating a woman who stands head and shoulders above the legions of tiny blonde women

⁷Her childhood act of cutting off her hair and the violence she enacts on her doll are moments of self-mutilation that I will look at in more detail in Chapter 5.

that usually populate the novels of the period. Millais' painting was scorned also for presenting a woman who was stretched into an ungraceful, unladylike posture supposedly showing the absence of refined taste in the painter. Maggie too is repeatedly shown in postures that amplify the bodily energy she is constantly at pains to contain. As Michie points out, eventually she is 'cut down to size by forces far larger and more powerful than [her]; patriarchy, destiny, and the conventions of the Victorian novel all converge to reshape [her] and to rechannel [her] bigness'.⁸ But it is only this ending that can be the logical conclusion of the narrative; the violence with which the Floss sweeps her away suggests once again how large, and threatening Maggie's potential was. Auerbach too argues that the flood that 'justifies Maggie's life and destroys it is her only adequate consummation, because only through an upheaval of this magnitude can she attain, not merely her brother's love, but the intensity she craves from existence and cannot find there'.⁹

Susan Casteras concludes her argument on the relationship between the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and Victorian canons of beauty by asserting that the Pre-Raphaelites 'broke through certain barriers of form and style, reinventing the insipidness of contemporary beauty and substituting a more uncompromising, unsentimental - if extravagantly personal - vision. Excess replaced restraint, and immoderation of face and pose brought abuse and galvanizing controversy as well as revitalization in English art'.¹⁰ What I am then contending is that this iconoclastic reinvention of the representational norms of feminine beauty was taking place within the covers of the Victorian novel as well, in conjunction with the change in visual presentation. This would explain to some degree the physicality with which these women are rendered, as well as the authorial commitment to their intense visual portrayal.

The reworking of this relationship between an inward language and an outward visibility takes place in the choice of sartorial austerity. The austerity that Maggie adopts and adheres to is hard acquired, and donned through an uncompromising regime of self-denial and abstinence. As her pastoral childhood, dotted by the usual distresses of intermittent disagreements with her brother Tom, jealousy for Lucy, and scoldings from her mother, suddenly gives way to an adolescence fraught

⁸Michie, *Flesh made Word*, p. 27.

⁹Nina Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Sep., 1975), pp. 152 - 153.

¹⁰Susan P. Casteras, 'Pre-Raphaelite Challenges to Victorian Canons of Beauty', *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Winter, 1992), p. 32.

with economic hardship and family strife, she is thrown off balance. The familial crisis ends in a frugal home life where her family are so consumed with their own personal sorrows that Maggie finds herself abruptly thrust into an inhospitable adult world. Her mother's loss of the material signifiers of her existence - the carefully collected china and linen, the lovingly maintained furniture - leaves her a distraught, unhappy woman; the unexpected impoverishment turns her disappointed brother into a working man; and her father, her only ally in moments of trouble, grows bitter, cynical and old. Finding no guidance from those she thought she could depend on, Maggie wanders aimlessly through Tom's old schoolbooks looking for lessons that will help her live her life:

And so the poor child, with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery, began to nibble at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge, filling her vacant hours with Latin, geometry, and the forms of the syllogism [...]. For a week or so she went on resolutely enough, though with an occasional sinking of heart, as if she had set out towards the Promised Land alone, and found it a thirsty, trackless, uncertain journey. (287)

The search for a philosophy to lead her life in accordance with, and a productive labour to fill her days are what she seeks with all the passion in her nature. But as Auerbach points out, '[i]nstead of opening a window into spaciousness and coherence, Maggie's books become a mirror reflecting her own dark impulses'.¹¹ Though I disagree with Auerbach's formulation of Maggie as a demonic figure whose violent love inadvertently destroys everyone she comes in contact with, the idea of books that turn into mirrors is an enigmatic formulation that plays with the same spatial tension between the interior and the exterior that is evident in *Mariana*. The books, instead of opening new vistas that would satisfy her 'soul's hunger', complete Maggie's philosophical isolation that sees her sinking into a kind of despondency that seems to affect very many of Eliot's heroines - intelligent, passionate, perceptive women in a world where a woman's vocation was limited to the domestic. It is through the metaphor of appetite, coupled with Biblical references, that Eliot links this need for a calling to age-old notions of femininity and the ways in which it functions on an oscillating axis of excess and abstemiousness. This recurring alternation of surfeit and self-denial forms the crux of numerous Victorian narratives, most obviously Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* where the two aspects are equally split between Laura and Lizzie.

¹¹Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger', p. 160.

Eliot creates Maggie as an eager, yearning novice, led by urges greater than her understanding, by a heart that is larger than the constraints put on it by the social structures of a narrow, inward looking, rural community and the equally meagre religious doctrine she follows. She is defined by a need for approval and love, by a 'hunger of the heart' that is as tenacious as 'that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world' (38 - 39). And so, lonely and pining for meaning, 'poor Maggie's highly-strung, hungry nature' (385) leads her to the books she thinks will provide her nourishment. But the 'thirsty' intellectual journey into them leaves her unable to partake of 'the tree of knowledge' in spite of all her avidity. In a dexterous reversal of meaning, Eliot makes a pungent critique of the kind of education meted out to women, for this Victorian Eve cannot taste of the forbidden fruit even though it is within reach. The schooling for young women was concentrated on the acquirement of 'accomplishments', and what Eliot elsewhere calls a 'toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies',¹² without any encouragement of real intellectual stimulus or desire for knowledge. And where there was an innate desire for learning, they did not possess the tools with which to discover the kernel that lay hidden in scholarly books written by great men, finding no access into the 'thick-rinded fruit'. Lost and still yearning, Maggie comes to believe that 'it was part of the hardship of her life that there was laid upon her the burthen of larger wants than others seemed to feel - that she had to endure this wide hopeless yearning for that something, whatever it was, that was greatest and best on this earth' (288).

The bigness of her body is akin to Maggie's larger than life hunger for knowledge, that becomes an almost visceral need that will not be satiated by anything other than an opposite excess - fasting. By denying her mind the sustaining nourishment of extensive reading that Philip tries to inculcate and encourage, and her body the physical exercise that the walks in the Red Deeps provide, she adopts a religiously appropriate view that sees denial as a means of purification and cleansing. Eating, and hunger, are markers of sensuality and sin, the markers of humanity's fallen nature, so conversely the repression of sexual desire and the enactment of spiritual purity are both located in not just a refrain from excess, but the very denial of appetite. Since Maggie's hunger is plainly associated with the original sin, with the eroticism and power of eating and speaking, Eliot is then

¹²George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871 - 1872), ed. Rosemary Ashton, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003, p. 86.

rewriting the myth of the fall to suggest that such male authored knowledge was not attainable anyway. It is inevitable then that Maggie should take to the 'little, old, clumsy book' (289) by Thomas à Kempis with such fervour. Not finding the 'Promised Land', incomprehensible in its enclosed authorship and implied readership, she turns to the sterile asceticism that has been the conventional approach of female saints. In some senses then she is not dissimilar to the ladylike anorexic that Silver talks about, for she chooses to adopt an ideology that places the possibility of her happiness in her own hands by vigorously limiting the needs of a demanding body.¹³

As she reads the words that counsel a life of absolute submission to the point of utter self-abnegation, Maggie is seduced by a powerful religious ideology that offers the route to a meaningful earthly life by looking towards the life beyond. Following the faded ink marks that some long forgotten hand had made at certain passages, she feels a 'strange thrill of awe', and is stirred into life as if by the strain of some 'solemn music' (289). She who had 'rebelled against her lot' (287) in yearning for an active role in life, takes to an ideology based on complete passivity and resignation, but with a zeal that is as emotional and spirited as that with which she had approached the earlier pedagogic texts. The moment of this revelation, this secret of how to live her life, is described with an ecstatic intensity that seems almost sensual, for music for Maggie is associated with an overwhelming, disobedient desire. This ideal of self-discipline offers a compelling strategy for keeping things, ideas and bodies in their place, a method by which the unruly self could be contained. Like the anorectic, this passionately pursued self-effacement is the only medium by which she can exert control over her life and her body, for it allowed her a 'conquest [...] by means entirely within her own soul' (290).

The pride and impetuosity with which Maggie throws herself onto the path of renunciation is outwardly displayed in 'her own ascetic wish to have no personal adornment' (294). Even though she submits to her mother's wish to plait her abundant jet-black locks into a coronet according to the fashion of the times, she resolutely refuses to look at herself in the mirror.¹⁴ But in rebelling against the norm of dress as well as the behaviour accepted and expected of young women,

¹³Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

¹⁴There is one exceptional scene where Maggie does catch sight of herself in Lucy's cheval glass and momentarily forgets herself in 'the sense of her own beauty' (436), which I will come back to in Chapter 4.

Maggie inadvertently adopts an age-old ideal of submissiveness that makes her even more attractive. Her mother marvels at how her 'contrairy' (294) child is now 'so backward to assert her own will' (294), and it is the added loveliness of this 'new inward life' (293) that attracts both Philip Wakem and Stephen Guest to her, while her unusual demeanour renders her irresistibly mysterious. Her retreat into an isolated austerity that is meant to make her less conspicuous is exactly what renders her presence so visually exuberant. This strange mixture of an imposed submissiveness and a natural spiritedness, the combination of outward silence and an unmistakable inner spark impels her into the centre of the visual economy of the novel, and the imaginative structures of those around her. Even as it makes her more appealing, this austerity, instead of being an end to her rebellion, becomes another form of resistance against the expectations imposed upon her: she becomes actively passive, refusing to behave in the way her brother, a figure of forbidding paternal authority, demands of her.

But unlike the Brontë heroines who refuse to articulate their desires and yet are anxious about not getting what they wish for, Maggie always gets what she wishes for. This wish-fulfilment is no surprise given that Maggie is an exceptionally beautiful woman, and the novel is replete with her physical presence as the gaze of the reader, along with that of the other characters, is made to linger on her body: the 'tall, dark-eyed nymph' (376), with her 'fine throat' (373), her 'large round arm[s]' (383), and her 'long black hair' (385). Her submission to a nun-like simplicity and her simultaneous subversion of the given mode of dress and mien only serve to enhance that beauty. Her thick masses of lustrous hair now twisted into a 'queenly' (294) summit bestow an unusual grace to her and even in her old, faded gowns she draws admiring attention. As Lucy teasingly remarks, 'I can't think what witchery it is in you, Maggie, that makes you look best in shabby clothes' (372). It is Lucy who first realises the strange appropriateness of Maggie's unusual appearance, and the way it serves to heighten her natural looks. One of the episodes that sees Maggie shining over her cousin in her decidedly plain black brocade is the evening dance at Park House where Maggie is invited along with Lucy. Though Lucy is the acknowledged queen of the occasion, 'her pretty slimness set off by an abundant dress of white crape' (439), it is Maggie who sets the women gossiping and the men admiring with her eyes and cheeks possessed of the fire of youth, and 'her simple black dress, with its bit of black lace, [...] like the dim setting of a jewel' (439). Even at Lucy's party where Maggie was launched into the upper echelons of St Ogg's society under her aegis, she had become the

focus of much attention and was on the way to becoming 'an object of some envy', as the narrator archly puts it: 'several young ladies went home intending to have short sleeves with black lace, and to plait their hair in a broad coronet [...]' (399 - 400).

What makes Maggie such a disturbingly conflicted figure is that she combines in her body both the threatening *femme fatale*, and the comforting influence of a tender femininity. The Park House party sees Maggie struggle between the persuasions of an erotic self and the dictates of asceticism, but this is only one of the moments that forms the pulsating parable of Maggie's life. Her physical reality takes on the form of a religious narrative but it is a narrative that she finds hard to maintain interpretive control over. Examining her dual position, Margaret Homans argues that it is precisely her excessive sexuality that makes her a signifier of middle-class values: '[...] *The Mill on the Floss* [...] turns the heroine's trembling, vibrating sexuality into the chief source of her identification as simultaneously middle-class and class-transcendent'.¹⁵ Maggie's sexuality is naturalised through the accentuated relationship between sexuality and nature (interestingly, it is precisely this relationship that Auerbach reads into in positing Maggie as a demonic, all-consuming, destructive heroine), and commodified through her placement within Lucy's richly furnished rooms. Homans argues that even though Maggie envelopes herself in her poverty and refuses to forget her past, that very gesture enhances the beauty that makes her the ornament to middle class masculinity. The fact that she's never shown at the menial work of school-teaching but in the luxury of Lucy's apartments where she learns the leanings of her own desires, brings her closer to the middle class ideal of femininity. And finally at the charity bazaar, she joins the other women on display along with their exorbitantly priced needlepoint, becoming the object to be consumed.

Though this reading provides an insight into the workings of class in the novel, Maggie's is a more layered character that takes on an autonomy and expressivity within the framework of the text, and cannot be compassed entirely in Homans' argument. The very examples that Homans employs to argue for Maggie's construction as the rising middle class heroine can equally be read as her resistance to that encapsulation. Her location in Lucy's beautiful rooms and at the charity bazaar is not as unproblematic as Homans suggests for the emblem of Maggie's outsider status, her plain sewing, is constantly placed at the centre of these scenes.

¹⁵Margaret Homans, 'Dinah's Blush, Maggie's Arm: Class, Gender, and Sexuality in George Eliot's Early Novels', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Winter, 1993), p. 168.

Indeed, she resists both the naturalisation and the commodification of her body, and it is the *frisson* of these divergent pressures that makes Maggie's austere dressed body the focus of attention. Even as she subdues the insistent desires of her emergent sexuality by her ascetic non-dressing and her refusal to look into mirrors, it repeatedly comes up to the surface in episodes like the Park House party, where her voluptuous arms become the focus of narrative attention as well as Stephen's consuming gaze.

Time and again, in the novel, Maggie's arms act as a synecdoche for her sexualised body.¹⁶ Shocked by the shabbiness of her clothes and foreseeing an invitation to the Park House, Mrs Tulliver, Mrs Pullet and Lucy enter with enthusiasm the subject of what could suitably be altered for Maggie from the superfluities of Mrs Pullet's wardrobe. This sartorial adjustment proves to be a challenge for Maggie is bigger than her aunt, who finds her broadness across the shoulders very 'ill-convenient' (383): "[H]er arms are beyond everything," added Mrs Pullet, sorrowfully, as she lifted Maggie's large round arm. "She'd never get my sleeves on" (383). But Lucy recognises the allure of her arm and is the one who suggests the short lace sleeves that will show them off. Her mother too thinks them 'a pretty shape' (383) though she mourns her brown skin. It is these shapely arms that become symbolic of Maggie's repressed desire and her obvious desirability. Visible to all at the party, Maggie's Junoesque arms headily draw Stephen to her, and the fetishising narrative comment with which I begin this chapter expresses his desire with a palpable sense of yearning. The 'unspeakable suggestions of tenderness' that the arm evokes, give the moment its unbearable poignancy. Rendered incapable of putting a sentence together, in one mad instant Stephen breaks the spell, arousing Maggie's fury and throwing her back into her self-contained austerity.

Even on other occasions in the novel, Maggie's full arms and her hands are a constant highlight of her relationship with Stephen, as well as with Philip who often takes her hand in the Red Deeps where she allows him to hold it in quiet companionship, and out of pity for him. But with Stephen there is an uneasy sexual charge as they frequently take up and drop each others' arms. Also increasingly, her hands and her arms that she often clasps impetuously become linked with the physical energy that she is constantly trying to repress, as well as the strength they're capable of; something that is revealed in her desire to

¹⁶Along with her hair, which I discuss in Chapter 5.

become a rower.¹⁷ It is this possibility for manual labour that is constantly underplayed in the novel, because it threatens the middle class underpinnings of Maggie's desirability. She is not only sexually threatening, but her ardent physicality also suggests a strength that needs to be concealed in order to keep the idea of the placid middle class woman intact. Under this pressure, the intimations of a fiery sexuality and physical strength appear in fleeting interstices of authorised license, and are not as entirely co-opted into middle class values as Homans argues. Maggie's restless, hurried walks in the Red Deeps are then symptomatic of the unnerving self-control that she keeps over herself, as well as an outlet for that excess energy that is suggestively seen in sexual terms. It is no wonder then that these daily walks lead to the compromising encounters with Philip.

In comparison to Brontë's heroines, Maggie's asceticism is more unnatural and laborious, arising from a too hastily assumed religious ideology that promises hope in the next world rather than this, though the issue for all these women characters is how to live in this world. Maggie's simplicity of dress is a wilfully chosen martyrdom which is conspicuously exhibited in worn gowns, mended shawls and old-fashioned bonnets. Like Caroline in *Shirley*, Maggie too spends her time sewing, an activity closely related to her choice of austerity, and the attempt to control the restless energy of her hands by the measured moves of the needle. Homans' remark that because the 'narrative represents her interiority so compellingly, Maggie's fall into school-teaching poverty and her temporary rise, as Lucy Deane's guest, into lace and luxury seem [...] external to her characterization',¹⁸ simplifies the way in which the narrative of interwoven desires functions. Though the novel does not follow Maggie out into the class room, it is through the act of sewing that her situation is made obvious, for sewing in the nineteenth century has a host of multifarious, frequently contradictory meanings.

Maggie's undertaking of plain sewing has as much to do with self-mortification as with an active determination to contribute to the family's savings: 'Plain sewing was the only thing I could get money by; so I was obliged to do try and do it well' (378). Her confession to Stephen of the real need for her plain sewing, much to the blushing embarrassment of Lucy, displays the act of needlework as a class signifier, rather than a signifier of unassertive womanhood.¹⁹ But this sewing is

¹⁷It is interesting how differently Caroline's hands in *Shirley* are portrayed: 'her habit was to wring her hands very nervously' (131), 'her small white hands sadly maltreated each other' (132), 'the small, wasted hand lying nerveless on the sick girl's breast' (403).

¹⁸Homans, 'Dinah's Blush, Maggie's Arm', p. 171.

¹⁹I diverge here from Homans who sees Maggie's needlework only as part of her charm and

also in line with her new found asceticism; though in her childhood she had rejected needlework as foolish labour, she takes to it at the same time that she decides to relinquish the mirror. She diligently sets herself to work 'with her well-plied needle, making shirts and other complicated stitchings, falsely called "plain"' (293), and like her old clothes, this too inversely becomes a frame in which her beauty shines. Apparently calm, she seems the picture of femininity, and 'notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, [there] shone out in her face with a tender soft light that mingled itself as added loveliness with the gradually enriched colour and outline of her blossoming youth' (294). It is this again that attracts Stephen, giving her the piquancy of unfamiliarity, for her quiet plain seams, her poverty, and her dark beauty make her entirely unlike his affianced Lucy or his condescending sisters whose days are tangled in fancy work and worsted flowers. But Maggie's plain sewing is elegant and beautiful, as unassuming as her person. It is this link between the body and the needle that Michie draws on when she remarks, '[t]he seams into which Victorian heroines channel their desire become seams or scars in the text; while leisure-class sewers try to make both bodies and stitches invisible, seams, however dainty, mark the tissue of the novel and produce a trace of the heroine's physical presence'.²⁰ And so, as Stephen sings, along with Lucy and Philip, knowingly releasing Maggie's inappropriate passion for music, Maggie stitches on resolutely, angrily. '[B]orne along by a wave too strong for her', she refuses to betray herself and seizing her work, goes on 'making false stitches and pricking her fingers with much perseverance' (418).

The drops of blood that dot her seams are resonant of a struggling sexuality, of the inevitable connection between femininity, physicality and pain. 'The Sleeping Beauty' plays with the same themes, and versions of the story with differing emphases were prevalent in the Victorian imaginary. A fairy tale about a beautiful princess who is cursed with an enchanted death-like sleep, after pricking her finger on a spindle, she can only be reawakened by the kiss of true love. In fact, this myth was to haunt the Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones for decades as he set out to paint a hallucinatory vision of languorous bodies paused in sleep, in

a way in which the novel both acknowledges and evades her poverty. Made uncomfortable by Maggie's poverty, distant as it may seem in the plush Deane household, Lucy does try to co-opt Maggie's sewing into middle-class mores by terming it exquisite, and insisting that it was as deserving of admiration as the 'fancy work' of other women, and worthy of being displayed in the charity bazaar. But Maggie resists this effort at appropriation into docile middle class domesticity, just as she refuses Tom's insistence on her dependence upon his male authority. It is her pride, like that of *Jane Eyre*, that makes her attractive.

²⁰Michie, *Flesh made Word*, p. 42.



Figure 4: Edward Burne-Jones, *The Legend of the Briar Rose: The Garden Court* (1870 - 1895).



Figure 5: Edward Burne-Jones, *The Legend of the Briar Rose: The Rose Bower* (1870 - 1895).

profusely detailed scenes held together by the intertwining branches of the briar rose. Andrea Wolk Rager argues that in his series *The Legend of the Briar Rose* (1870 - 1895), Burne-Jones sought to create a liminal space from which to reflect upon the world, rather than a contented sleepy stasis.²¹ This set of paintings plays on the folkloric themes of the long-awaited cursed child, the spinning wheel and the inescapability of fate, the questing hero, and 'the possibility of reawakening that which has long lain dormant'.²² The sleeping princess of one painting is complemented by the weaving woman of the other, whose somnolent body is draped over the loom as she reaches out for the shuttle. The mythologically potent image of the weaving woman is associated both with the craft of the artist as well as the Fates who wove the fabric of life. But it is the suspended femininity that links itself to Maggie at this hypnotic moment. The suppressed sexuality of the dense canvas, the heightened colours, the indolence of the voluptuous bodies, and overgrown, arching fecundity of the rose briar are all directed towards the moment of awakening which remains unrepresented. The drop of blood that had activated the spell for the princess is symptomatic of Maggie's bodily self-denial, and the wave of music she so tenaciously resists emblematic of the repressed passion that will finally sweep her away with the flooding Floss.

While Caroline had been 'needled' into submission by Hortense and axioms of feminine behaviour, Maggie turns to simple gowns and plain sewing to contain and carefully align her own desires. Caroline is smothered in cloth by Hortense's nagging: loaded under the stockings to be darned and pressurised by the Belgian woman to wear a fichu that would cover the sensuality of her neck and shoulders, and the long, heavy apron that would signal her domesticity, she struggles to free herself from these suffocating trappings and find something simpler. But Maggie chooses for herself her asceticism, the austere dresses shaping her body and her impulses into a model of containment. Dresses, threads and needles come up repeatedly in metaphors of Victorian self-formation. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's heroine Aurora Leigh makes this analogy between the body, its clothes and needlework explicit when she talks about her aunt's education that 'prick[s] me to a pattern with her pin,/ Fibre from fibre'.²³ Like Rochester who compares the enigma of Jane's resistant determination to a knot in a silk spool that will

²¹Andrea Wolk Rager, "'Smite this Sleeping World Awake': Edward Burne-Jones and *The Legend of the Briar Rose*", *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Spring, 2009).

²²Ibid., p. 444.

²³Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), ed. Margaret Reynolds, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1996, First Book, ll. 381 - 382.

not be unraveled,²⁴ Aurora compares her own schooling to the pattern of a dress, picked out by the point of a pin, reducing her physical body to a specimen needing to be pricked into place. All of these women then try to use the same metaphors of needle and thread that bind them to a placid, unvaried domesticity, to fashion a self that is more individuated, more distinct.

Matters of taste

Margaret Hale, Gaskell's heroine in *North and South* (1855), is also austere in the way she dresses, without the usual feminine frou-frou of her cousin Edith and Aunt Shaw who provide the comparative points of orientation to Margaret's sartorial choices. Unconventional in her independence, she fully comes into her own towards the end of the novel when she takes her financial affairs into her own hands, and finds herself a vocation that is meaningful, gaining with it a physical mobility that she doesn't constantly have to account for to a paternal authority. Like Maggie, she is tall, full-figured, and far from plain, but unlike any of the other women looked at so far, Margaret's sartorial simplicity does not denote a rebellion or a repression but rather it is a choice that is meant to display her innate dignified grace, the absence of feminine fripperies, and an independent mind. All of these qualities combine to fabricate a spectacularly dignified, handsome and intelligent middle class woman.

In the first chapter itself Margaret is distinguished from her cousin Edith, who has the same kind of pretty, kittenish charm as Lucy Deane. The novel begins with Margaret ruminating about her cousin as she lies on the sofa, 'a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls',²⁵ taking a peaceful, after-dinner nap while in the room next door there proceeds an earnest, frequently envious, discussion of Edith's trousseau. Mrs Shaw and the ladies who had been invited to a farewell dinner before the approaching marriage call upon Margaret to model for the Indian shawls that are to be part of Edith's trousseau. She is physically introduced into the text, a strikingly attractive young woman:

[...] Margaret's tall, finely made figure, in the black silk dress that she was wearing as mourning for some distant relative of her father's, set off the long beautiful folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith. Margaret stood right under the chandelier, quite

²⁴Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 340.

²⁵Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1855), ed. Angus Easson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 5. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

silent and passive, while her aunt adjusted the draperies. Occasionally, as she was turned round, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and smiled at her own appearance there – the familiar features in the usual garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour – enjoying it much as a child would do, with a quiet pleased smile on her lips. (9)

This is an unusual scene where Margaret delights in being dressed up, luxuriating in the 'spicy Eastern smell' (9) of the shawls and their soft, multi-hued fabric. Her body is described in terms very different from the Brontë heroines, and she physically inhabits the space of the drawing room, the cynosure of the admiring attention of the women, and appraising herself fleetingly in the mirror.

This is quite an extraordinary episode for many reasons; not only is it one where Margaret enjoys the feminine business of dress and finery that she usually mocks, condemns or dismisses, but it is also made all the more resonant by its focus on the Indian shawls. Acted out against the background of mourning clothes worn for a dead, distant relative who is never mentioned again, this is a licit moment of innocent vanity that is permissible partly because the sumptuous, expensive shawls are not her own and partly because of their exotic and alien nature. Indian shawls figure in quite a different way than other items of clothing in most nineteenth century literature; as Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble assert, '[t]he Indian shawl is too important a garment to be merely frivolous, it echoes the strength and passion of the woman that wears it'.²⁶ It is also a garment that 'betokens female power and agency',²⁷ and it is no coincidence that it is the defining sartorial item of Mme. Beck's wardrobe, bestowing her with authority, or that it is the article that Mrs Gibson in *Wives and Daughters* (1864 - 1866) most values. As a flowing piece of fabric, it is evocative of the loose drapery of classical forms, which is meant to reveal the body, its movements and its contours, suggesting elegance, sexual allure, power and austerity all at once.²⁸ But in the nineteenth century, it had further cultural associations as an expensive, luxurious artefact imported from colonial India, or brought home by returning brothers and husbands. Indeed it is the deceased General Shaw who had given these to his wife, who in turn passes them to her daughter. But the tiny Edith, unable to carry

²⁶ Kimberley Reynolds and Nicola Humble, *Victorian Heroines: Representations of Femininity in Nineteenth Century Literature and Art*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 60.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ On drapery see Anne Hollander, *Seeing Through Clothes*, New York: Viking Press, 1978.

the actual weight and the length of the fabric or the expectations of majesty it created, is swamped in it. Writing to Margaret from Corfu after her wedding, Edith describes herself at a picnic, trying vainly to wear her Indian shawl but: "I was like mamma's little dog Tiny with an elephant's trappings on; smothered, hidden, killed with my finery; so I made it into a capital carpet for us all to sit down upon" (235).

This luxuriantly described moment where austere Margaret is turned into an unlikely mannequin is akin, I think, to what Homi Bhabha terms the 'unhomely moment'.²⁹ This self-consciously awkward formulation is something that captures for him 'the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place' (141). It is a moment when the known world suddenly transforms into another world, a moment related to 'the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence'.³⁰ In *North and South* then, this episode exists almost as an interlude, an interstice where vestiges of a concealed colonial present leave their traces. This moment of deep absorption in the heady aroma and the plush sensuousness of the Indian shawls, transforms the plainly dressed Margaret into a stately Eastern princess and the closed walls of the sheltered home open up to a world of colonial connotations. 'In a feverish stillness, the intimate recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting'.³¹

As the shawls enter Gaskell's text, and the Victorian parlour, they bring a host of meanings that leave reverberations through the novel. As Bhabha's above remark makes clear, the cultural echoes of this moment dismantle and reorganise the boundaries between the private and the public, the psychic and the social. But what also makes the shawl so fascinating is that it functions at once as exotic foreign artefact as well as the marker of a proper middle class English womanhood, and it is this hybrid identity that gives it its mystique. Seen as timeless, their designs based on the patterns of an unchanging Eastern aesthetic, and their fineness created on a handloom by weaving together wool of the most delicate kind, shawls were effectively dehistoricised and relocated outside a market

²⁹Homi Bhabha, 'The World and the Home', *Social Text*, No. 31/32, Third World and Post-Colonial Issues (1992).

³⁰Ibid., p. 144.

³¹Ibid., p. 141.

driven economy. By the time Gaskell writes her novel, Indian shawls were being replicated in mechanised English mills and those that continued to be produced in India were losing their quality and variety because of the excessive demands of a growing European market.³² But the shawls that adorn Margaret are stately garments, inherited heirlooms rather than easily purchasable commodities, and the fact that they are not Margaret's own patrimony hints at Margaret as their true inheritor instead of the diminutive Edith.

The spell of the scene is broken by the entrance of Mr Henry Lennox, and interrupted in their sartorial rapture, the women draw back 'half-ashamed of their feminine interest in dress' (9). Margaret alone stands in the centre of the room, still the shawl-bearer, 'with a bright, amused face, as if sure of his sympathy in her sense of the ludicrousness at being thus surprised' (9), confident in the knowledge that he would set her aside from others of her sex, aligning her with the 'masculine' qualities of good sense and intelligence. Instead of acknowledging the pleasure she felt, and allowing herself a moment of female camaraderie, she sees this incident in the same light as Henry Lennox - 'ladies' business' (10) in which she had participated to indulge her aunt. In this dismissal she is not very different from the heroines examined in this chapter and the last, but her austere clothing is a measure of her good taste and good breeding, and her body displays a full, self-possessed sensuality that the others lack, and that Maggie desperately struggles with.

A shawl features again the first time that Margaret meets Thornton, who is taken aback both by her dignified appearance and her plain clothing. Entirely unlike the women he was accustomed to, she neither fits the stereotype of the awkward country clergyman's daughter nor that of the well brought up shy young girl.

Her dress was very plain: a close straw bonnet of the best material and shape, trimmed with white ribbon; a dark silk gown, without any trimming or flounce; a large Indian shawl, which hung about her in long heavy folds, and which she wore as an empress wears her drapery.
(61 - 62)

³²Suzanne Daly's essay on the various ways in which the Indian shawl enters into and functions within the Victorian novel provides an excellent account of the history of the textile, as well as its myriad connotations. Suzanne Daly, 'Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2002). Also see Nupur Chaudhuri's 'Shawls, Jewelry, Curry, and Rice in Victorian Britain', in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992.

‘[S]imple, straight, unabashed’ (62), his entrance calls up no blush on her ivory complexion, but renders him speechless. It is her body that becomes the locus of textual attention and is described in considerable detail: ‘the short curled upper lip, the round, massive up-turned chin, the manner of carrying her head, her movements, full of a soft feminine defiance, [that] gave strangers the impression of haughtiness’ (62) mesmerise Thornton, and give him the same impression of polite disdain. And still his gaze, as well as that of the reader, is drawn to ‘her round white flexile throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure’, her full lips that move so slightly that there is no break in the cold serene look of her face, and her eyes brimming with a ‘soft gloom’ meet his with ‘quiet maiden freedom’ (62).

In another episode, much like Maggie’s, Margaret’s arms too become a highly eroticised synecdoche for her statuesque body. Invited for tea at his teacher’s residence, that most ladylike of all meals,³³ Thornton cannot take his eyes off the drama played out between Margaret’s hands and her truant bracelet as she pours out the tea:

She stood by the tea-table in a light-coloured muslin gown, which had a good deal of pink about it. She looked as if she was not attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups, among which her round ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless, daintiness. She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr Thornton watched the re-placing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening – the fall. He could almost have exclaimed – ‘There it goes, again!’ (79)

Fascinated again by Margaret’s tasteful elegance, the suggestions of her habitual care which makes the room comfortable and homely, and the ‘proud air of an unwilling slave’ (79) with which she hands him his cup of tea, Thornton’s consuming gaze follows her every movement, lingering on her arms. The sole focus of his attention, her arms, her wrists, her hands and her fingers which serve as sugar-tongs in the playful pantomime she enacts with her father thinking herself unobserved, are all fetishistically gathered by his quiet watchfulness. That the

³³Michie, *Flesh made Word*, p. 15. In *Lady Audley’s Secret*, it is this meal that the narrator comments on, eulogising and parodying it in the same turn: ‘Surely a pretty woman never looks prettier than when making tea. The most feminine and most domestic of all occupations imparts a magic harmony to her every movement, a witchery to her every glance. [...] At the tea-table she reigns omnipotent, unapproachable’. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1861 - 1862), ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998, p. 222.

tea ceremony provides the occasion of this sensual display of arms and graceful dexterity of fingers for Margaret, and the discreet commodification of the same to Thornton is not exceptional for by the mid-nineteenth century tea was seen as an essentially feminine beverage and the tea-table the domain of the woman. This scene then signifies the tea-table as a space where women could flaunt the elegance of their hands and their equipage as well as a site of domestic felicity, enacting a tableau of Englishness, tradition, and a shared sense of community.

Julie Fromer sheds light on the ways in which tea was transformed from an exotic luxury consumed primarily by men in public coffeehouses to a necessity of everyday life, a quotidian beverage, enjoyed by both men and women in the private, domestic space of the home.³⁴ She argues that in the nineteenth century, it became an icon of English domesticity, becoming associated with privacy, intimacy, and the nuclear family. Her analysis of the significance of tea in *North and South* shows how liminal spaces are opened up and a sense of community achieved.³⁵ In this particular scene, by providing a 'shared cultural experience that soothes differences,' the tea-table 'unravels the binaries of masculine and feminine, public and private,'³⁶ allowing Margaret Hale and John Thornton to discuss class conflict in the domestic sphere. This shared homely moment domesticates the tensions between the North and the South that the novel centres around, making the conflict one of misunderstanding, like the one between Thornton and Margaret. Even though the episode ends with disagreement, it becomes firmly embedded in the narrative of their courtship.

Paradoxically, this domestic tea pouring ritual also becomes another 'unhomely moment' where the colonial background makes inroads into the present Victorian home. While being an exotic imported luxury, tea had become an irreplaceable necessity of English everyday life and in its position as 'a necessary luxury', it collapses the geographical distance between colony and colonizer, bringing the foreign empire into the English drawing room. The rituals of the tea-table then have a similar purpose as the Indian shawl in domesticating the Empire, transforming it into an extension of Britain, and imperialism itself into a daily necessity

³⁴Julie Fromer, *A Necessary Luxury: Tea in Victorian England*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008.

³⁵Fromer explains her notion of 'liminal (or threshold) rituals' by looking towards Victor Turner's anthropological model: 'In Turner's model, liminal rituals help to build community, or *communitas*, by temporarily revoking the structured elements of society and allowing for more intimate connections to form between individuals'. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 126.

of English life. It also subsumes the larger idea of the boundary between the public and the private that Gaskell addresses throughout the novel. The public here enters the private, not as threat but as difference, becoming domesticated and naturalised. Though Fahnestock examines the conflict between Margaret's will and her amatory desires,³⁷ this conflict carries none of the desperation of Maggie's decisions, and Margaret remains a supremely confident heroine at this point in the novel. The pride that had made Maggie so attractive is here enhanced by a majestic self-assurance that makes Margaret's transitions between the public and the private beyond reproach to the reader.

The mesmerising taper arms that had played out the tantalising game between the soft flesh and the tightening bracelet make their presence felt at the Thornton party. The allure of Margaret's ivory hands is what leads Thornton to remember this as the first time their hands meet, though she is perfectly unconscious of it. It is in greeting her that he shakes her hand, his gaze seeking out and following her around for the rest of the night. Struck again by her 'great beauty' (161), he notices her elegant attire and though he has never seen her in such before, it fits her with a grace that makes it entirely natural to her. Once more his lingering attention lists her bodily attractions: 'the curving lines of [her] red lips, just parted in [...] interest', 'the glossy raven hair', 'the smooth ivory tip of the shoulder', 'the round white arms, and taper hands, laid lightly across each other' (161 - 162).

It is the individuality expressed in Margaret's plainness of dress, that in turn foregrounds her impressive good looks, which make her the object of curiosity amongst the guests, raising queries about the 'fine distinguished-looking girl' who was 'so quiet, so stately, and so beautiful' (165). The austerity of dress, constantly defined and redefined through comparisons with Edith and now Fanny Thornton, finds an echo in her minimal, purposeful gestures. This unusual combination of openness and majestic restraint is what makes Mr Bell, the elderly Oxford Don, as susceptible to her charms as the dashing Mr Lennox and the earthy, dynamic Mr Thornton. What is evident in Margaret's brand of austerity is that it functions as a signifier of a specific class that has enough taste, and perhaps inherited wealth now run out, not to have to prove their status through an obvious, opulent

³⁷Jeanne Fahnestock examines the popularity of the heroine of irregular features in mid-Victorian novels, and signalling the significance of physiognomy, claims that the physiognomical message of Margaret's strong chin is that she is firm willed and amorous. Jeanne Fahnestock, 'The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3 (Spring, 1981).

sartorial display. Though in many ways she is a thoughtfully independent heroine, her sartorial choice reflects the same 'taste' that Patmore asks of his Angel in the House:

[...] she who in her dress reveals
A fine and modest taste, displays
More loveliness than she conceals.³⁸

Certain kinds of textiles too, not just the garments cut, shaped and stitched out of them, possess obvious class connotations. Milton, the fictive northern cotton manufacturing town, to which the Hales move had gained its reputation and prosperity from its cotton mills. Based on Manchester where Gaskell spent most of her married life, its inhabitants revolve around an economy dominated by the mills and their masters. Fustian, the fabric that Higgins as well as other mill workers are dressed in, is so intrinsically associated with the working classes that, as Elaine Freedgood points out, in the nineteenth century, the term 'fustian jackets' had become a metonym for labouring class men.³⁹ Originally a coarse, thick, durable fabric with a thick linen warp and a thinner cotton weft, with change in technology it came to be made entirely with cotton, and was renamed calico. Calico in its Indian form was a luxury import but in its British incarnation it became a low-priced, mass-produced, utilitarian textile,⁴⁰ not very different from the Kashmir shawls that were reincarnated in England as the cheaper, immensely popular paisley shawls. Freedgood tells a selective story of calico in her analysis of Gaskell's earlier novel *Mary Barton* (1848), focusing on it as a 'disruption' that unravels the ideology of domesticity that the novel tries to build up. Compelling as Freedgood's project is, I disagree that the entrance of the discordant history of calico - its colonial underpinnings, its transformation into an English fabric at the cost of the impoverished Indian workers, and the mill-hands who weave it, wear it and are made sick by it - overturns entirely the stable domesticity that forms the heart of the novel.

Though not going into historical and cultural details of the textile that Freedgood charts, I do think that it holds a host of meanings in its name and its history that add another layer to the subjective story of *North and South*. Fustian, cotton and calico spin a narrative of industrial relations, class conflict and social problems

³⁸Coventry Patmore, 'The Angel in the House' (1854), in *The Poems of Coventry Patmore*, ed. Frederick Page, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949, Book I, Canto IV.

³⁹Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel*, Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 55 - 56.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 57.

in the novel, intertwined with the colonial narrative woven by the shawls and tea that mark out Margaret's class affiliation. It is what the mill 'hands' wear. It is the carding and fluffing of cotton that makes Bessy ill; filling the air with its fine dust, winding around the lungs, and leading to her wasting body, her incessant coughing and spitting up of blood. It is this material, both in its fuzzy raw form and as the smooth spun textile, that Margaret encounters on entering the northern town: '[E]very van, every waggon and truck, bore cotton, either in the raw shape in bags, or the woven shape in bales of calico. People thronged the footpaths, most of them well-dressed as regarded the material, but with a slovenly looseness which struck Margaret as different from the shabby, threadbare smartness of a similar class in London' (59). Mill work, and indeed cheap cotton itself, are associated with a moral laxity for the women who produce and wear it. The 'looseness' that disturbs Margaret is exactly what Mrs Hale is anxious about in the family's shift to Milton. One of her chief objections is that they would be living in the midst of factories and 'factory people', for 'who on earth' she asks indignantly, 'wears cotton that can afford linen?' (46). Margaret's assurance that they would have little to do with 'cotton-spinners' (46) is not much help in assuaging her mother's distaste for industrial Milton and its people. The stiff, sculpted form that the corset gave was the aesthetic ideal for feminine respectability and cotton had a slack and flexibility that gave it associations of untidiness and carelessness.

On the Milton streets Margaret finds the easy, abandoned behaviour of the women threatening:

They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station. The tones of their unrestrained voices, and their carelessness of all common rules of street politeness, frightened Margaret a little at first. The girls, with their rough, but not unfriendly freedom, would comment on her dress, even touch her shawl or gown to ascertain the exact material; nay, once or twice she was asked questions relative to some article which they particularly admired. There was such a simple reliance on her womanly sympathy with their love of dress, and on her kindness, that she gladly replied to these inquiries, as soon as she understood them; and half smiled back at their remarks. (71)

The usual association between public appearance, freedom of movement, and sexual impropriety is questioned in *North and South* through Margaret's excursions into Milton. The conventional boundaries between private and public that were challenged through the silent, understated encroachments of the foreign and the

colonial into the stable English household are again unsettled by Margaret's walks in the industrial town and the friendship with Bessie that it engenders. Though the factory girls play up to their stereotype of a brash joviality and a 'love of dress', they also are part of a class that still possesses a sense of community. Margaret, as the middle class outsider, is made even more emphatically their other, standing apart as she does in her class stability, her austere clothing and restrained dignity. But Margaret teaches herself to make the disconnection between character and clothes, between an absence of 'womanly' restraint and an actual promiscuity, reaching to sever the conventional metonymic connection between the outward and the inward. However, this disconnection is only true for the working women whom Margaret begins to slowly feel compassionate towards, and not for Margaret herself who even till the end is intrinsically identified with her plain, elegant clothing. In some sense then she seems to occupy a moral plane above them, one where the outside and the inside are perfectly aligned, her inner motivations as readable as her body and the textile that covers it. The suggestion is that Margaret has an innate honesty that must shine through, and an integrity that makes her the quintessential middle class heroine.

Gaskell's earlier novel *Mary Barton*, set in Manchester amongst a community of mill workers, made the same link between women workers and their proclivity for finery along with its attendant suggestions of moral and sexual transgression. While in *North and South*, this easy equation between dress and morals is interrogated, however unevenly, in *Mary Barton* the 'love of dress' is explicitly shown to be the cause of Aunt Esther's fall from working class respectability. Led astray by her love of showy clothes, her descent into prostitution is clearly linked to her work at the mill by her brother-in-law, Mary's father:

"That's the worst of factory work for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves any how. My Mary shall never work in a factory, that I'm determined on. You see Esther spent her money in dress, thinking to set off her pretty face; and got to come home so late at night, that at last I told her my mind [...] 'Esther, I see what you'll end at with your artificials, and your fly-away veils, and stopping out when honest women are in their beds; you'll be a street-walker, Esther [...]'." ⁴¹

This bracketing together of fashion and the fallen woman is the subtextual narrative of a number of Victorian novels, but what complicates this straightforward

⁴¹Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (1848), ed. Edgar Wright, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 6.

chronicle of finery to fall is the changeable definition of that finery. It is indeed 'finery' that Margaret dons herself in before the Thornton party, but on her it becomes queenly elegance partly through the winning combination of class, beauty and wit, and partly because of her honesty that makes her see that finery as both superfluous and ridiculous.

Margaret is the embodiment of a new, middle-class womanhood, the possessor of a confident, self-assured domesticity that can traverse the public realm and negotiate with it. The unhomely moments and the disruption that the novel is replete with are part of this project of engagement and negotiation. Barbarah Leah Harman writes that Gaskell's representation of Margaret's dilemma reveals her 'serious interest in refashioning the meaning of female publicity and reconceiving the relations between private and public life'.⁴² Margaret does enter the public realm, interact with its industrial poor, before returning to her fireside, but this trajectory does not portray a feminising or domesticating of the public; the domesticating impulse is restricted to the colonial commodities. The two problematic moments for Margaret are the episode where she uses her body to shield Thornton from the stones of the striking workers, and the lie she tells in order to conceal her brother; both making her vulnerable to public misreadings. In opening up this space for critical misinterpretation of the middle class heroine, Gaskell abandons the vision of the woman as a purifying and life-sustaining source, and considers instead 'what happens when a woman enters an unreconstructed and unpurified public realm: she is penetrated by it and initiated into it, where penetration consists in physical violation and initiation consists in enduring public exposure and in suffering the shame of an implied promiscuity'.⁴³ But while Harman sees public space as promiscuous space in *North and South*, and entry into it as inevitably compromising, it is the subtle layered histories of objects that provide a different reading. The exotic shawls, the quotidian brew, and the bales of calico suggest an awareness of the ways in which the outside is consistently and necessarily a part of the inside, and in following out the intricate patterns of their ingress, one can perhaps find an analogical pattern for entering the public realm in a manner that is as encompassing. Indeed it is domestic values that provide a recipe for better industrial relations in the plan of communal dining that Thornton devises

⁴²Barbara Leah Harman, 'In Promiscuous Company: Female Public Appearance in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Spring, 1988), p. 373.

⁴³Ibid.

for his men. The tolerance and humour that surface with the introduction of eating together turn the workplace into a model of domestic harmony and paternal productivity, the dining table significantly becoming the locus that holds master and men together.

Reading the repentant body

There is visible in both these novels, the simultaneous stability and instability of dress in signifying a decipherable class and morality. While the desire to dress finely is linked with frivolousness and vacuity at best, and vice and a dishonest upward mobility at worst, in George Eliot's *Esther Lyon*, simplicity of dress itself takes on all of these diverging connotations, becoming at once the signifier of a tasteful elegance as well as a self-consciously adopted aesthetic that is seen as fashionably upper class. *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866) tells the story of Esther, the adopted daughter of a minor country parson, and her pretensions to grandeur. Flattering herself as the epitome of aristocratic grace and judge of all that is ladylike, the austerity that seems to come so naturally to Margaret, is something that Esther aspires towards as the height of fashion. Her French education, her sojourn as a governess and the admiration that her friends bestow upon her further encourage her inclination for luxury. In her father's parish Esther is completely out of place, finding the rustic simplicity of the people, their homely mannerisms and unsophisticated clothing unsuited to her interest and her taste. What Eliot bares to criticism is the paradoxical way in which this idea of taste is consciously arrogated and constantly cultivated as something natural and instinctive.

In one of her conversations with Felix, Esther declares "[a] real fine-lady does not wear clothes that flare in people's eyes, or use importunate scents, or make a noise as she moves: she is something refined, and graceful, and charming, and never obtrusive".⁴⁴ While on the one hand, Esther is obsessed with being a 'real lady', her attempts to be the authentic article are themselves manufactured, and the inventory of qualities she affects seem to parody those provided by practical conduct books aimed at young middle class girls. Hers is a bricolage austerity created out of an arbitrary assortment of ideas about what sets apart a genuine lady from a pretender. Superficial, cosmetic notions derived from school-girl fancies, sentimental novels, and romantic ideas of chivalry make up her entirely

⁴⁴George Eliot, *Felix Holt, The Radical* (1866), ed. Peter Coveney, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977, p. 153. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

one-dimensional selfhood that exhausts itself in its obsession with the outward. Much to her chagrin, Felix's contemptuous reply takes no account of her meticulous self-fashioning or the points of beauty she anatomises in fetishistic detail: "A fine-lady is a squirrel-headed thing, with small airs and small notions, about as applicable to the business of life as a pair of tweezers to the clearing of a forest" (153).

Undeterred by this scornful criticism, Esther continues to believe that fate had somehow played a cruel joke on her by thus limiting her ambition through the accident of birth. She studiously makes herself fit into the catalogue that she's manufactured for recognising the real lady, where every gesture and every aspect of her attire could be read and interpreted. Unlike the Brontë heroines who shy away from an appearance that is too easily readable, Esther deliberately attends to the creation of a perfectly readable body. By this assiduous inculcation she hopes to reveal herself as instinctively ladylike, more refined than most born to the title:

[S]he was alive to the finest shades of manner, to the nicest distinctions of tone and accent; she had a little code of her own about scents and colours, textures and behaviour, by which she secretly condemned or sanctioned all things and persons. And she was well satisfied with herself for her fastidious taste, never doubting that hers was the highest standard. She was proud that the best-born and handsomest girls at school had always said that she might be taken for a born lady. Her own pretty instep, clad in a silk stocking, her little heel, just rising from a kid slipper, her irreproachable nails and delicate wrist, were the objects of delighted consciousness to her [...]. (159)

The only people who are able to attain Esther's approval and esteem are Mrs Transome, who was ever elegant, even in her old black gown darned at the elbows, and her son Harold Transome, who notices her every coy gesture including the curved instep she takes great pride in. It is to display her body to best advantage that Esther pursues netting, for it shows off the delicate arch of her instep and the elegance of her hands. Thinking of Felix's curt dismissal of her ideas, she fantasises about someone who would 'admire her hands and feet, and delight in looking at their beauty, and long, yet not dare, to kiss them' (264). The only man who comes close to this vague image is Harold who looks upon Esther with an admiring surprise she wholly approves of. Kneeling on one knee, he holds up her silken netting-stirrup for her to put her foot through in a scene she misreads as one of chivalry and homage, but one that forebodes the way in which she will get

messily entangled in the affairs of a man who sees women as nothing more than 'slight things' to be indulged in in the 'intervals of business' (266).

This strange, almost contradictory coquettishness that is displayed through a fastidiously cultivated austerity needs to be shed before Esther can become the true heroine of the novel, a suitable partner for Felix. She has to be humbled, made to forget this constant attempt towards exhibition, and become more suited to 'the business of life', in order for the readers to recognise her natural beauty. It is only once that she has cast off her false austerity and assumed an authentic simplicity that she can be recuperated into the moral framework of the novel. Reincarnated into a stately, imposing woman who becomes newly unconscious of the attention she receives, she gains the respect of not just Felix, her harshest and most callous censor, but also of the narrator, the reader, and the other characters in the novel.

Towards the end of the novel, called into the witness-box, surrounded by strangers, she stands redeemed: 'There was no blush on her face: she stood, divested of all personal considerations whether of vanity or shyness' (572). Like Margaret in her unblushing purity, Esther is transformed into the lady she aspires to be only after having learnt the shallowness of her earlier convictions. Once she discards the artificiality of her fashionable austerity and her impracticable ideals, those whom she had once admired are revealed to her in their true light: Mrs Transome's life is as threadbare as her much-mended gowns, and Harold's expensive clothing, his majestic ruby ring and his gloves always of the right colour no different from her own former empty inventory of perfect taste. The novel's conclusion sees her placed at her father's hearth as the domestic icon, no longer spending her hours in netting and preening but leaving her curls natural and humbly engaged in stitching, 'her fingers mov[ing] nimbly' (600).

What is singularly interesting about this metamorphosis is that Esther's style of clothing remains constant while its austerity itself takes on different meanings. Starting out as the deliberately assumed signifier of an aristocratic taste, it slowly morphs into a kind of simplicity that is more natural and innate, suggestive of Margaret Hale's easy, confident modesty. And like Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, Esther's transformation is represented through her sewing, the needle becoming the symbol of her recuperation into productive domesticity. It is the needle that Dinah Mulock Craik eulogises in her guide to domesticity when she writes: 'Who amongst us has not a great reverence for that little dainty tool; such a wonderful brightener and consoler; our weapon of defence against slothfulness,

weariness, and sad thoughts; our thrifty helper in poverty, our pleasant friend at all times?'⁴⁵ Though Eliot parodies the counsel given to young girls prioritising appearance and the gathering of 'accomplishments', she herself continues to rely on images of womanhood that are equally unoriginal, at least in *Felix Holt*. While Maggie's choices of clothing and stitching were patterned by her awkward sexuality and her stubborn austerity, Esther is too easily criticised and categorised; the very real desire for social mobility and the confused sexuality underpinning her sartorial choices remain uncharted.

Another nimble fingered Victorian heroine is Elizabeth Gaskell's Ruth Hilton. Like Esther, whose plain dresses become emblematic of her transformation from fashionable austerity to modest simplicity, Ruth stitches her own homely, ascetic dresses that make visible her repentance, creating an unmistakable reading of her remorse through her body. In the eponymous novel, Ruth is the hardworking, exquisitely beautiful dressmaker's apprentice who makes her living through the skill of her needle, her profession already linking her with characters like Aunt Esther in *Mary Barton* and the mill girls in *North and South* who are predisposed to lapses of morality. The sempstress and the factory girl are symbolic of the Victorian working class woman, as well as an unregulated female sexuality but, as Lynn Alexander points out, the sempstress also became a unique symbol in social protest writing designed to stir up compassion for the working classes.⁴⁶ Though the woman who made her living through her needle was seen as tainted because she had sold for a monetary price the activity that was central to her position as a good mother, wife and domestic manager, at the same time, because sewing was allied with images of domestic economy and traditional feminine roles, it removed the labour of the sempstress from the matrix of industrial relations and placed it within the general condition of women.

What made the figure of the distressed needlewoman so culturally significant was the fact that she embodied larger questions regarding the position of single women, the possibility and productivity of their work, and the managing of their sexuality. All of these are issues that the heroines I have examined in this chapter and the last, confront with a desperate urgency. Gaskell here sets out to recuperate the fallen woman in the person of the poor sempstress, contemplating the ways in which needlework and clothing, the two crucial ways through which Victorian

⁴⁵Dinah Mulock Craik, *A Woman's Thoughts About Women* (1858), p. 98.

⁴⁶Lynn Alexander, 'Creating a Symbol: The Seamstress in Victorian Literature', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring, 1999).

women create their selfhood, entwine in her with exceptional clarity. *Ruth* (1853) charts the life of a young orphan who is apprenticed by her guardian to a milliner, uprooted from the stable and familiar joys of the country and transplanted in the alienating, unscrupulous, dirty city. While none of the other women examined in this chapter are shown at menial labour, Gaskell places Ruth in the dingy workroom shared by more than a dozen girls, 'stitching away as if for very life'.⁴⁷ Gaskell follows the patterns set by the literature of social reform that compared the work of the poor milliner to slavery because of its exceptionally long hours, low wages, and unhealthy working and living conditions. As Helen Rogers points out, these contemporary social investigations were 'interlaced with powerful cultural narratives about the nature of the single woman worker',⁴⁸ and seeing her as vulnerable and powerless, their stories had the ring of cautionary tales. *Ruth* too reads like one of these 'emotive narratives of sexual danger'⁴⁹ that Rogers analyses, making the fictional heroine's body the site of various debates about women.

Exhausted by long hours spent bending over elaborately rendered ball gowns meant for other women, at the first opportunity Ruth reaches for the window, 'press[ing] against it as a bird presses against the bars of its cage' (4). Like Millais' Marina whose yearning gaze is directed out of the barred windows of her room, Ruth dreams about walking out of the confined workroom as she 'presse[s] her hot forehead against the cold glass, and strain[s] her aching eyes in gazing out on the lovely sky of a winter's night' (5). But it is the open expanses she seeks that lead to her dramatic meeting with the immensely attractive and wealthy Henry Bellingham whom she innocently falls in love with. Seduced and abandoned, she becomes the fallen heroine who is rescued from the even greater sin of suicide by the kindly, hunch-backed, almost feminine, dissenting minister Thurston Benson. It is Ruth's parentless state, her innate childlike purity, and her isolating, exploitative occupation that make her susceptible to the advances of the duplicitous Bellingham. Gaskell builds a sensitive argument for the rehabilitation of Ruth, giving an elaborate explanation of the causes for her fall. Unlike *Mary Barton*, where Aunt Esther's fall is linked directly to her social ambition and love of fine clothes, Ruth is deliberately distanced from any such motives; her seduction is the

⁴⁷Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853), ed. Alan Shelston, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 3. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

⁴⁸Helen Rogers, "'The Good Are Not Always Powerful, Nor The Powerful Always Good': The Politics of Women's Needlework in Mid-Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Summer, 1997), p. 591.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

result of her sexual naivety and the absence of any social or familial guardianship rather than her immorality.

Mariana Valverde analyses the connection between fashion and loss of virtue, and sees it as an important element in the gender classification of vice in the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ She argues that though the love of finery was seen as endemic to the entire female sex, the connection between it and social fall was largely class specific. Vain, middle class women may have been criticised by moralists, but it was only the working class woman who was in danger of having to take to the streets for the sake of a few ribbons. This was the kind of argument deployed to maintain a separation of the public sphere and the private sphere on the one hand, and to account for the increase in prostitution on the other. Rather than look at socially and culturally endemic causes, it was easier to transfer the burden of blame to the morality of the working class woman who had voluntarily left the protection of her home. It is this account that Gaskell attempts to dismantle. Ruth, though forced outside the safe ambit of domesticity, is not the giddy, licentious street-walker that even her employer takes her to be, but a motherless girl attracted by what she believes to be true love, and made vulnerable by her unawareness of her own beauty.

In *North and South* Margaret's confident middle class selfhood arises from her successful negotiation of the impediments of public life and the attendant possibility of misrepresentation, and it is Ruth's inability to transcend this divide that leads to her fall. Though the city is mapped in terms of a debilitating estrangement, the site of Ruth's seduction is an Eden-like haven where Bellingham weaves water-lilies into her hair, with 'the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy' (74). Recurrently associated with flowers, Ruth's link with a full-blown, unconsciously sensual nature that reveals itself in bud-laden stems of fox-gloves, sprays of jessamine and climbing roses is explicitly made. Even at their first meeting, Bellingham offers Ruth a camellia that she treasures for its perfect beauty. At the ball where he first lays eyes on her, as she repairs his dance partner's gown, '[a] kneeling figure, that, habited in black up to the throat, with the noble head bent down to the occupation in which she was engaged', she contrasts starkly with the flippant, 'artificial' girl she was serving (15). Presenting Ruth with the flower in return for her help, his gaze turns to her with piqued interest even as he danced away: '[H]e recognised the tall, slight figure, and the rich auburn hair

⁵⁰Marianna Valverde, 'The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth Century Social Discourse', *Victorian Studies*, No. 32 (Winter, 1989).

of the girl in black; and then his eye sought for the camellia. It was there, snowy white in her bosom. And he danced on more gaily than ever' (17).

Throughout the text, Ruth is presented in almost painterly vignettes that highlight the delicate, other-worldly beauty of her face and her finely shaped figure. But this ethereal quality that attracts Bellingham goes along with a complete insensibility of the desire she evokes. The seduction scene is marked by Ruth's dreamlike, pliant state where she seems to be unable to connect the moment with its impact.⁵¹ The passivity that enfolds her derives from her childlike inability to construct her own identity and her unconsciousness of her body: 'She knew that she was beautiful; but that seemed abstract, and removed from herself' (74). It is only after she has been discarded by the false Bellingham, and adopted by the Bensons that Ruth begins to garner a more mature sense of self and exhibits that transformation in her sartorial choices.

Ruth enters the Benson household as a distant widowed, pregnant cousin, a fabrication that fails to fool the devoted house-keeper, Sally. It is Sally who, utterly condemnatory of Ruth and mindful of her employers' reputation, cuts off her luxuriant hair, startling her into her new persona and its demands. This is the first action that marks the beginning of the repentance that she will display on her own body. In a bizarre echo of the moment of seduction that sees Ruth in her white dress, her disordered hair and the crown of heavy white flowers around her head, Sally walks up to Ruth with her formidable pair of scissors as she stands in her 'long, soft, white dressing-gown, with all her luxuriant brown hair hanging dishevelled down her figure' (144). And like that earlier moment, Ruth shows no 'sign of rebellion', remaining meekly 'silent and still' as her hair is shorn to the shortness of a boy's (145). Sally's actions arise out of her refusal to see the Bensons 'disgraced by anyone's fine long curls' (145), and in keeping with the story of widowhood, hands Ruth 'two widow's caps of commonest make and coarsest texture' (144). But Ruth's absence of anger and her 'dignified submission' (145) disarm Sally entirely.

This aggressive act of ritualised chastisement begins Ruth's process of penance, which she conspicuously manifests in her appearance:

⁵¹This scene is comparable to Tess's seduction in the woods as she lies half-asleep, weary and unable to resist Alec's advances. But this moment is preceded by an ambivalent, threatening incident where Alec feeds strawberries to a reluctant Tess, filling her basket when she can eat no more. Like Ruth, she moves in a dream-like trance as he overwhelms her with full-blown roses: 'roses at her breasts; roses in her hat; roses and strawberries in her basket to the brim'. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), ed. Michael Irwin, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000, p. 36.

She asked Sally to buy her [...] the coarsest linen, the homeliest dark blue print, and similar materials; on which she set busily to work to make clothes for herself; and as they were made, she put them on; and as she put them on, she gave a grace to each, which such homely material and simple shaping had never had before. Then the fine linen and delicate soft white muslin, which she had chosen in preference to more expensive articles of dress when Mr Bellingham had given her *carte blanche* in London, were cut into small garments, most daintily stitched and made ready for the little creature, for whom in its white purity of soul nothing could be too precious. (158 - 59)

The former finery that had adorned Ruth in her days spent with Bellingham is now cut up, reshaped and stitched afresh into baby clothes. The fine linen and delicate muslin are signifiers of a past life that she regrets and in making for herself a new identity, those clothes must be pared down, much like her excessive hair, into small pieces that can be patched together to clothe her newborn son. The refashioning of old dresses along with the old self, and the fabricating of a new, more sombre apparel complete Ruth's spiritual transformation. But this attire, though meant by Ruth as a renunciation of the worldly, and the adoption of a simple, religious life spent in the sublimation of her ego in the service of others, only heightens the sublime beauty of her aspect that had first attracted Bellingham. Mr Bradshaw, tyrannical champion of public morality, approves of this 'extreme simplicity and coarseness of attire' as a proof of 'stiff, hard economy' (159), and the villagers as a pathetic display of her grief over her husband's demise. The Bensons alone have the privileged knowledge to see and appreciate it for what it really is.

The nineteenth century saw the emergence, along with charity schools of the *Jane Eyre* kind, a number of 'penitentiaries' for unmarried mothers that were supported by public contributions. These, much in the manner of Lowood, had uniforms for the 'female penitents' made of the coarsest material, and in the simplest style, that not only marked them apart from respectable women, but also worked as a sartorial extension of their repentance and desire for rehabilitation. Susan Mumm explains:

Penitentiaries were intended as transformative institutions, where female outcasts of many kinds could be changed into 'honest' women, a conversion which incorporated both a spiritual change from sinner to penitent, and an equally important social shift from dissolute and deviant female to respectable woman. The penitentiary, despite its penal overtones, was a therapeutic community which was not experienced as

unbearably punitive.⁵²

It is just such a healing refuge that the Bensons provide, and Ruth takes to it with a desire for atonement. Her sartorial asceticism then becomes readable as a culturally decipherable code for her inner change and her awareness of her new social position, as well as a manner of private expression. By taking control of her visual self, she is finally able to transcend her previous silence, for this new visibility is articulated in a vocabulary that is highly legible.

Ruth is a novel that highlights women's difficulty in breaking the silence imposed on them, of articulating resistance. Ruth is unable to break out of the passivity expected of her even as she is seduced by Bellingham, turning into a painterly image of a mutely attractive woman. As a sempstress, she functions as a symbol of feminine economic and sexual vulnerability but without actually finding a personal voice with which to articulate her discontent. It is only once she becomes a mother, repentant of the moral lapse that labels her son illegitimate, that she begins to search for a way in which she can make herself visible. Though retreating to a sartorial expressivity that is neither entirely original nor individual, she does manage to give it a poignancy that is heartfelt. Like Caroline Helstone, she takes to the stitching of her own dresses, turning her milliner's skill to herself, and creating for herself an attire of austerity.

While the Brontë heroines created a selfhood articulated in the privacy afforded by their sartorial austerity, Eliot and Gaskell's women are propelled into the visual heart of the narrative through the same choice. By a paradoxical inversion, austerity itself becomes a kind of display, and for several of these women the setting for that something which is considered key to understanding their character: a certain type of moral and intellectual integrity. In the process of self-construction, the seemingly apparent binary between display and restraint becomes increasingly blurred, and the latter itself becomes more visible because of its very marginality. Different though the meanings behind their sartorial choices may be, these Victorian heroines are all trying to impose an uncompromising order upon lives that seem to be on the verge of alarming anarchy. Much like the anorexia that disables Caroline Helstone, this asceticism of clothing is equally a mode of maintaining control over their bodies, and therefore their lives - a control that was highly difficult in a society where women's bodies were constant loci of scrutiny.

⁵²Susan Mumm, "Not Worse than Other Girls": The Convent-Based Rehabilitation of Fallen Women in Victorian Britain', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 29, No. 3 (Spring, 1996), p. 527.

In instructing their bodies in the frugal desires and attire of Quakerish simplicity, these heroines are creating a space from which to resist societal pressures, balancing the demands of decorum with the needs of an independent selfhood.

Looking at actual Quakerish dress in the nineteenth century, Suzanne Keen argues that it becomes available to Victorian novelists as a sartorial sign of a tamer kind of reforming impulse. According to her, Quaker-like clothing signifies not only neatness, serious-mindedness and modesty, but also alerts readers to the characters' erotic impulses by drawing attention to the desiring bodies within, as well as to their reforming motivations by imitating the dress of actual Quakeresses who acted in the public sphere in the Victorian period. Interestingly, these real life women usually assisted in the improvement of women's prisons and penitentiaries, that also set aside repentant inmates from the sinful, impenitent ones by clothing them in suitably demure uniforms. This attire then suggests a social consciousness, gives respectability to the crossing of class boundaries, and presents a body 'that may be moved by the spirit to speak, to travel outside the domestic sphere, and to act on feelings of desire'.⁵³ But then she goes on to argue that while the Quakerish outfit serves 'both as a passport outside the walls of home, and as a license to speak up, it also guarantees that the character wearing it will end up an angel of the hearth, delighted and delighting in the private pleasures of marriage'.⁵⁴ Though the associations of Quakerish simplicity that Keen delineates are suggested in the clothing of Maggie and Ruth to some extent, and in that of Jane Eyre who uses the term consciously to describe her own plainness, the anxiously embraced austerity also gestures towards a psychological and emotional turmoil that is not addressed by Keen. Especially the argument that the threat these women pose is subsumed in marriage and the fulfilment of their erotic potential, presents an incomplete picture of their inner landscapes. They are not just the temporarily outspoken possessors of 'a body destined for domesticity',⁵⁵ but also of bodies that are highly unstable, and beginning to find meaning through the construction of a sartorial identity.

Though these women do not observe the rules of fashion, they don't exactly flout those of decorum either; instead, they carve out a space within existing fashion norms, extending the area between the acceptable and the unacceptable, creating personal spaces in a very public mode of articulation. The suggestion

⁵³Suzanne Keen, 'Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestication of Reform in the Victorian Novel', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2002), p. 212.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 215.

seems to be that by giving up all the trivialities of appearance (jewellery, ostentatious gowns and elaborate hairdos) they are seeking to extricate themselves from the material signifiers of a structure that has ritualised the inconsequential, and to find what is truly significant.

Chapter 3

Dress, Undress and Intimacy

[O]ur girls are aware that it is their duty to dress well, and encouraged to bestow a great deal of thought and personal care upon the matter.¹

He had written for someone capable of being my companion at times, and now he was jealous of my free regard for her – angry because I could sometimes laugh at her original tunes and amusing proverbs, while when with him I was too much frightened to smile.²

The easy elision between feminine duty and dress that social commentators like Mrs Oliphant overtly proclaimed and that literary representations often more subtly replicated make the dressing room a significant site for the creation of female identity, as well as a certain kind of feminine intimacy. Encouraged to look upon appropriate appearance as an essential part of their feminine role, by mid-century 'dress' itself was becoming a principal function in life for an increasingly large number of women, with an astonishing amount of time, effort and money spent on it. The act of dressing had been ritualised into an elaborate art, of which a waiting woman was an essential appendage and without whom the process could not be completed. The sartorial protocol that demanded every shade and every flounce to be read as direct insight into private interiority, posited the maid who made up the middle class woman as an aide, advisor and confidante.

In a society where female intimacy was difficult to sustain in the face of continual surveillance, the private boudoir or dressing room was one of the few spaces privileged as uniquely female. Victorian houses were constructed according to

¹Mrs Oliphant, *Dress*, p. 81.

²Elizabeth Gaskell, 'The Grey Woman' (1861), in *Curious, If True: Strange Tales by Mrs Gaskell*, ed. Jenny Uglow, London: Virago, 1995, p. 205.

gendered ideas of private and public spaces, and essential to the domestic ideal was the angelic woman resting at its hearth whose desexed, purified body was both produced by and productive of the perfect home. Though in practice this might have been more complex, with these strict divisions being mitigated by other factors, in theory the Victorian home was associated with an ensconced family life and the female body, which itself was the centre of an enclosed interior. The conceptualisation of the home as the locus of all that was stable, reliable and safe, was intrinsically linked with the feminisation of its physical spaces. Writing about gender as an organising principle in architecture, Lynne Walker states that '[a]lthough the Victorian home was feminised and endlessly depicted as "woman's place," it was nevertheless heavily patriarchal in terms of territory, control and meaning'.³ So even as the woman was assigned the position of the reigning deity of the household, she was essentially created in and contained by the circumscribed spaces of domesticity she was supposed to preside over. In spatial terms, the cultural privileging of the male head of the house translated into the largest proportion of space being allocated to him, and so the public rooms were both the biggest and the most conveniently placed in the house. The women's rooms, on the other hand, were usually placed at the back of the house, or on the side of the garden, away from the street and the obtrusive gaze of strangers. The lady of the house would normally have a separate morning room, a drawing room or a parlour, and a boudoir. While the parlour was the room where the woman of the household displayed herself, as well as her varied accomplishments, and conducted the work of paying and receiving social calls and nurturing the family,⁴ the dressing room was an entirely private space where she could create the self that was to be displayed.⁵

Separated and placed at the rear margins of the house, the dressing room then afforded a temporal and spatial privacy. Though sometimes the dressing room -

³Lynne Walker, 'Home Making: An Architectural Perspective', *Signs*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), p. 826. For the architectural organisation of the Victorian country house, see Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979; Jill Franklin, *The Gentleman's Country House and its Plan*, London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981. For an analysis of the progressing desire for privacy, see Michelle Perrot (ed.), *A History of Private Life*, Vol. 4, Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990.

⁴See Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

⁵This conception of the dressing room is intriguingly divergent from the role it played in the eighteenth century imagination, functioning as a provocative site where women could either act independently and selfishly (early century satire) or as virtuous mothers and wives (in domestic novels later in the period). See Tita Chico, *Designing Women: The Dressing Room in Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture*, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2005.

the mirror, the toilette table, and all its various accoutrements - was incorporated into the bedroom, it continues to function in the same ambit of femininity. In this chapter, I want to explore this space and the experience of secluded intimacy, homospectatorial display,⁶ and genuine friendship it provides. I am suggesting that the time devoted to a lady's toilette between the lady and her maid would then potentially have been one of familiarity and confidences. Janet Horowitz Murray, in her comprehensive documentary of the experiences of Victorian women, asserts that the 'ethic of female comradeship' broke down in relations between women of different classes, and opposing interests of class often proved to be insurmountable obstacles between servants and mistresses.⁷ However, literary representations suggest otherwise, often showing the relationships between maids and their mistress as those of closeness and loyalty. I will be focusing on these in Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* along with Gaskell's *North and South* and 'The Grey Woman' (1861). The second half of my argument draws on this exploration and looks at the way in which both the dynamics as well as the terminology of the maid-mistress relationship are replicated in filial relations and between close friends, the act of dressing the other itself becoming the juncture where intimacy arises.

Maids and mistresses

George Eliot's *Felix Holt*, a story about the politically radical eponymous hero and a community on the brink of social and political change, also operates at a more subdued, personal level in its narrative of an eager, yearning mother and her disillusionment. The story of Mrs Transome's life is told through her relationship with her waiting woman Denner, her only confidante and an essential unit of

⁶Diane Fuss uses the term 'homospectatorial' in talking about the way in which contemporary women's fashion photography and commercial advertising posit eroticised images of the female body for the consumption of female viewers. She argues that 'the entire fashion industry operates as one of the few institutionalized spaces where women can look at other women with cultural impunity. It provides a socially sanctioned structure in which women are encouraged to *consume*, in voyeuristic if not vampiristic fashion, the images of other women, frequently represented in classically exhibitionist and sexually provocative poses'. Diana Fuss, 'Fashion and the Homospectatorial Look', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Identities (Summer, 1992), p. 713. This holds true for nineteenth century fashion plates that were published in women's magazines and for the advertising of corsets in particular, something that Leigh Summers analyses in detail in *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. However, I use 'homospectatorial' more generally to think about the ways in which these women who dress and undress in front of one other relate to each other, taking pleasure in the other's visual appearance.

⁷Janet Horowitz Murray, *Strong-Minded Women: And Other Lost Voices from Nineteenth-Century England*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982, p. 12.

her daily life in spite of her straitened circumstances. In the first chapter itself, the narrator introduces the dignified, proud Mrs Transome along with her long time attendant who had not abandoned her in her old age and declining wealth. Despite their obvious closeness that often translates into intuitively divined though unspoken thoughts, the inequalities of class are written into their relationship and upheld by both:

Notwithstanding her activity and the fewness of her servants, [Mrs Transome] had never dressed herself without aid; nor would that small, neat, exquisitely clean old woman who now presented herself have wished that her labour should be saved at the expense of such a sacrifice on her lady's part. (101)

The complexity and moral ambiguity of Mrs Transome's figure seems to presage Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) in many ways. Not only are both ingrained with a defiant pride and a recklessness brought about by an absolute belief in their luck and their own capabilities, but they also adhere to a morality that is based entirely on convenience. But Mrs Transome is much older than Gwendolen, the youthful mistakes we see Gwendolen work her way through have already been made by the older woman, and are disclosed to us through unvoiced anxieties and memories. The novel then presents a sensitive and subtle chronicle of an ageing woman wracked by disappointment and the possibility of disclosure, trying to negotiate between her dignity and her need to be loved. I will look at how these internal manoeuvrings are often expressed in the dressing room, in the secluded privacy between the mistress and her waiting woman as the former is lovingly dressed, her public face slowly made up for display.

Making clear the class disparity between the two women, Eliot wryly naturalises it into a difference of beauty, where the inferior of the two was to pay homage to the other. But it is in accepting this difference that Denner lays claim to a more rustic, homely kind of speech in which she can be both candid and comforting.

The physical contrast between the tall, eagle-faced, dark-eyed lady, and the little peering waiting woman, who had been round-featured and of pale mealy complexion from her youth up, had doubtless had a strong influence in determining Denner's feeling towards her mistress, which was of that worshipful sort paid to a goddess in ages when it was not thought necessary or likely that a goddess should be very moral. There were different orders of beings - so ran Denner's creed - and she belonged to another order than that to which her mistress

belonged. She had a mind as sharp as a needle, and would have seen through and through the ridiculous pretensions of a born servant who did not submissively accept the rigid fate which had given her born superiors. She would have called such pretensions the wriggings of a worm that tried to walk on its tail. There was a tacit understanding that Denner knew all her mistress's secrets, and her speech was plain and unflattering; yet with wonderful subtlety of instinct she never said anything which Mrs Transome could feel humiliated by, as by a familiarity from a servant who knew too much. Denner identified her own dignity with that of her mistress. (102)

Though Eliot frankly admits this inequality, playing with its terms to make it into a quasi-mystical subordination of one woman to another, the actual lived experience of the domestic servant was usually more brutal and humiliating. As the last chapter mentioned, the image of working class womanhood in nineteenth century England was the sempstress or the mill worker. However, from the mid-century on it was the domestic servants who made up the largest occupational group of working women. Indeed, in the feminised Victorian household, it was women who formed the majority of the indoor residential servants, though often in wealthier households it was men who held the more prestigious positions of upper servants, and domestic service largely tended to be a relationship between women. Although we are given to believe that Denner is one of the highest in the domestic hierarchy, in the reduced circumstances of the family she is not just the lady's maid but also, in another guise, Mrs Hickes, the butler's wife who acted as housekeeper as well as superintendent of the kitchen. The familiarity between her and Mrs Transome is justified by her forty years of service and an inherent belief in the inequalities between women like her and her mistress, at the cost of making invisible the real physical labour she would have daily undertaken.

Leonore Davidoff, in writing about the relationship between the mistress and the servant, emphasises the excessive deference that was demanded of the servant.⁸ While the master provided food, housing and a cash wage, the servant was to reciprocate by being entirely at his disposal, along with an appropriately subservient manner. This respectful deference, that Denner too exhibits when she recognises how not to say something that would seem like 'a familiarity from a servant who knew too much', was further elaborated though ritual: 'Such ritual can easily become an end in itself and does not necessarily imply a belief in or even awareness of the symbolic or mystical properties of those involved, either

⁸Leonore Davidoff, 'Mastered for Life: Servant and Wife in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 7, No. 4 (Summer, 1974), p. 410.

deference givers or receivers'.⁹ Eliot however does recognise this ritual and how easily it can slip into a kind of ceremonial pantomime, taking on the elements of a dramatic performance that elides the differences between the genuine and the performative, the private and the public. In these dressing room scenes between Denner and Mrs Transome, not only are intimate secrets artlessly revealed or intuitively divined, but also the performance of domesticity and motherhood bared. This preoccupation with unearthing the performance of femininity seems to be a consistent subtext in the novel both through the representation of such confidential moments and the dissection of Esther Lyon's theatrical maneuvers in her attempts at ladylike behaviour.

The 'performance of these deference ceremonies'¹⁰ reflected and replicated the Victorian preoccupation with rituals of order and cleanliness. While the relationship between mistress and servant became more intimate and intense in the middle class family, there was a parallel attempt to maintain privacy for the employers. The servants were relegated to the borders of the household, to the attics and the basements, to separate corridors and entrances. Socially, forms of ritualised behaviour like the ceremonial dressing of the mistress separated the employers from the employees to whom certain forms of speech and dress, and even sometimes new names, were consigned. But there was no privacy for the servants and these increasingly degrading polarities became the source of a mounting irritation and resentment. Though novels like Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) gesture towards such simmering tension, this discontent and possible resistance is neatly skirted in the relationship between Denner and Mrs Transome, and the very qualities that make her a good servant are the ones that endear her to her mistress as the trusted confidante.¹¹

It is to Denner that Mrs Transome reveals her apprehensions about her newly returned, 'best-loved boy' (89) who has come back not only a stranger but also unexpectedly callous. It is only in front of Denner that she can let down the armour of an assumed nonchalant strength. The narrative introduces her as a majestic, charismatic woman of between fifty and sixty:

She was a tall, proud-looking woman, with abundant grey hair, dark eyes and eyebrows, and a somewhat eagle-like yet not unfeminine face. Her tight-fitting black dress was much worn; the fine lace of her cuffs

⁹Ibid., p. 412.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Braddon's text of course is complicated by the generic requirements of the sensational novel, and the maid becomes a possible double of the mistress as well as a blackmailer.

and collar, and of the small veil which fell backwards over her high comb, was visibly mended; but rare jewels flashed on her hands, which lay on her folded black-clad arms like finely cut onyx cameos. (86)

Slim and fine-figured, retaining her lightness of step and poise, she is attractive still. The mended clothes juxtaposed with the grace of manner and the bejewelled hands add to her aura. Her hands are not just the bearers of rings that denote inherited wealth but are themselves compared to 'finely cut onyx cameos'. The cameo was an important part of Victorian fashion iconography and like any other piece of jewellery, it had the ability to function as a visual language while also being an article that portends wealth. But most significantly, usually being a portrait in profile that was carved in relief, it represented images of women within everyday life. Jean Arnold explains that '[t]he iconic images on cameos circulated through Victorian culture as a spectacle of everyday fashion, their chiseled heads adorning bracelets, brooches, pendants, necklaces, and earrings'.¹² These then had aesthetic as well as economic implications, and even as the reference to the cameo places Mrs Transome within a particular context, it detaches her from it, making her into the work of art, the focus of the reader's appreciative gaze. The jewellery here works in ways similar to the Indian shawls in *North and South*, bestowing a sense of power and agency to its wearer; yet in comparing the wearer herself to the sculpted profiles that are circumscribed within the precious stones, Eliot is suggesting something more profound. These sculpted images of femininity reflect the ordinary lives of actual women, as narrowly prescribed by representational codes and as passively melancholy. Though Mrs Transome has the wealth to afford these miniature portraits, she herself becomes like one of the women sculpted within such a piece, restrained by norms that demand a resigned passivity.

But this overwhelming sense of powerlessness and distress is habitual to Mrs Transome, something that the more simple worded Denner attributes to her mistress' regal bearing: 'Her mistress's rhetoric and temper belonged to her superior rank, her grand person, and her piercing black eyes' (488). She cannily guesses Mrs Transome's fear about keeping the existence of her bygone *affaire de cœur* concealed, aroused by Harold's striking resemblance to Mr Jermyn, the long-time manager of their estate, and offers advice in her own demotic idiom:

"Well, madam, put a good face on it, and don't seem to be on the look-out for crows, else you'll set the other people watching. [...] let

¹²Jean Arnold, 'Cameo Appearances: The Discourse of Jewelry in *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2002), pp. 269 - 270.

me fasten up your veil a little higher: there's a good deal of pleasure in life for you yet." (103)

And even though it is mostly Mrs Transome who reveals her thoughts to Denner, she does ask her maid about these pleasures:

"What are your pleasures, Denner - besides being a slave to me?" "Oh, there's pleasure in knowing one's not a fool, like half the people one sees about. And managing one's husband is some pleasure; and doing all one's business well." (103)

Again and again the two women return to the question of happiness and how it is constituted for a woman. Mrs Transome with her throbbing, portentous sorrow and Denner with her axiomatic sayings manage to form a dialogue about the problem of a woman's lot, that Eliot keeps coming back to in every novel, that is more honest than what is ever said in drawing rooms. Mrs Transome's final words to herself borrow from the waiting woman's idiomatic vocabulary: 'It is a lucky eel that escapes skinning. The best happiness I shall ever know, will be to escape the worst misery.' (107) And so she goes on, as Eliot's women do, keeping her secrets to herself, 'save in a bitter little speech, or in a deep sigh heard by no one besides Denner' (199).

A considerable amount of textual space is given to such scenes in the novel, and at one of its most crucial junctures, when Harold confronts his mother with the secret of his true paternity, an entire chapter is devoted to the exchange between Denner and Mrs Transome. This is a remarkable moment of an intense emotional breakdown as well as an extraordinary connection between the two women. Having come to dress Mrs Transome, 'a labour of love' (485), Denner walks into the dressing room to find a bizarre scene. Draped in a dressing-gown that fell in thick folds about her, Mrs Transome was seated before her mirror in a room made bright with candles and fire-light. She had 'unfastened her abundant grey hair, which rolled backward in a pale sunless stream over her dark dress' (485), her jewelled hands clasped on her knee, her eyes staring at something beyond the reflection, lost in reverie: '[H]er clear-cut features keeping distinct record of past beauty, she looked like an image faded, dried, and bleached by uncounted suns, rather than a breathing woman who had numbered the years as they passed, and had a consciousness within her which was the slow deposit of those ceaseless rolling years' (485 - 486). The strange motionlessness and the stony reflection startle Denner in spite of her 'ingrained and systematic reserve' (486), the reflection of her slight cry and sudden start breaking the trance. Offering to

help her dress, the devoted Denner is ominously told that the fine clothes were only a 'smart shroud' (486).

One of the most touching moments in the book unfolds between them as Mrs Transome's true feelings are artlessly and bitterly revealed to Denner in the eerily lit dressing room where the former is transformed from 'the dishevelled Hecuba-like woman' to 'the majestic lady in costume' by the 'faithful hand' of the maid (489 - 90). Noticing her efforts, Mrs Transome admits: "I believe you are the creature in the world that loves me best, Denner; yet you will never understand what I suffered. It's of no use telling you [...]" (487), for Denner is of a different mettle than her mistress. As the talk turns to Esther, she becomes a sort of double through whom Mrs Transome comments upon herself and, generally speaking, upon independent women who know their mind:

"A woman's love is always freezing into fear. She wants everything, she is secure of nothing. This girl has a fine spirit – plenty of fire and pride and wit. Men like such captives, as they like horses that champ the bit and paw the ground: they feel more triumph in their mastery. What is the use of a woman's will? – if she tries, she doesn't get it, and she ceases to be loved. God was cruel when he made women."
(488)

The impotent anger is met by Denner's own version of womanhood: "It mayn't be good-luck to be a woman," she said. "But one begins with it from a baby: one gets used to it. And I shouldn't like to be a man – to cough so loud, and stand straddling about on a wet day, and be so wasteful with meat and drink. They're a coarse lot, I think" (488).

Eliot displays a quaint tenderness and candour in this bond that is unmatched by any other relationship in the novel. Though theirs is an unequal employer-employee relationship, it is the only one in which Mrs Transome lays herself bare. In the refuge provided by the ambit of the toilette-table, the mistress is able to strip the mask of impassivity, uncovering her thoughts as she undresses her body, only to be lovingly made up by her devoted maid yet again. Their economic bond perhaps curtails the equality of the friendship, making it lopsided, with the servant providing solace to her mistress without being able to articulate her own concerns. But Denner does feel bound to Mrs Transome, even though she does not reveal herself in the same way. Showing her own deep affection, she ardently says: "I should want to live for your sake, for fear you should have nobody to do for you as I would" (490). The same woman who never initiates speech so as not to be too familiar, takes her mistress' hand as she hands her her gold vinaigrette.

The intensity of the scene concludes with Mrs Transome clasping hard Denner's 'faithful hand' as she agonisingly gives words to the most difficult confidence - her anguished wish that her son, who had long been her only source of hope, had never been born.

These feverishly emotional moments played out between the two women are saturated with significance. The dressing room allows a woman the space to prepare her body to be seen in public while also displaying her in a state of privacy. The presence of the lady's maid is crucial to the intensity of this intimacy, for she is witness to the transformation from the 'Hecuba-like woman' to the 'majestic lady', as well as the agent of that change. Embedded in this story then is a debate about the authenticity of public femininity, as well as 'the degree of spectacularity suitable to the life of a proper domestic woman',¹³ as Chattman puts it in a different context. Eliot is then already suggesting in a manner more subtle than the sensation novelists who will return to this theme with obsessive consistency, that gender itself is a performance and in that sense, Mrs Transome's public inexpressiveness of her anxieties as well as her display of her aristocratically dignified, ageing body are inseparable from a theatrical self-display of the kind that clashes with the ideal of women's self-effacement. But at the same time, this highly visual encounter between Denner and Mrs Transome becomes leached of its visuality, becoming instead intensely, exclusively emotive. Even as we are given a haunting verbal description of Mrs Transome, it is absorbed into a emotionally charged psychological drama played out between the two women, their dialogue giving voice to past secrets, current griefs and prophesied fears. It is as if in the dressing room she can finally function as a desiring, feeling subject.

Like Denner who has been her mistress' companion since the time when that lady was the 'beautiful Miss Lingon' (101) and she herself wasn't yet Mrs Hickes, the household at the centre of Gaskell's *North and South* situates a similar relationship between mistress and maid. Dixon has been Mrs Hale's maid since the days she was known as the pretty Miss Beresford, and 'was devoted to her interests; always considering herself as the good and protecting fairy, whose duty it was to baffle the malignant giant, Mr Hale' (21). It is she who is privy to Mrs Hale's secrets and jealous of her attention, ruling the drawing room and kitchen alike. She seems to be more of a companion to Mrs Hale and a general minder of the family

¹³Lauren Chattman, 'Actresses at Home and on Stage: Spectacular Domesticity and the Victorian Theatrical Novel', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Autumn, 1994), p. 75.

than actually providing any domestic service. As Julie Nash points out, '[l]ike many fictional servants, Dixon embodies a number of humorous contradictions'.¹⁴ She is a servant but it is only her favourite Fredrick, Margaret's disgraced, absent brother, whose room that she regularly dusts, 'touch[ing] no other part of the household work' (20). She considers herself superior to the other domestic servants, as well as Mr Hale, marriage to whom had been her lady's 'affliction and downfall' (21), taking seriously 'her post of body-guard, attend[ing] most faithfully to her mistress' (49). Having moved to Milton, she is the one who has to look for a maid to assist in the household, and the few girls who applied for the position 'were well scolded by Dixon, for thinking that such as they could ever be trusted to work in a gentleman's house' (68). Finally it is Margaret who has to take over the task, and some part of the household work as well, while trying to listen sympathetically to Dixon's perpetual complaints so that she would not carry the 'recital of her sorrows' (75) to her beloved and dependent mistress.

Despite Dixon's grumbling ways, her habit of giving herself airs and being offended by every trifle, Margaret recognises her loyalty, and her mother's utter inability to do without her maid when she resists her father's suggestion of letting her go due to their reduced circumstances. It is she who tries to console Mrs Hale and help her with the packing required for the impending move. Again it is the dressing room that becomes the space where the two women, mistress and maid, come together in their shared sorrow and common remembrances:

Mrs Hale's dressing-room was left untouched to the last; and there she and Dixon were packing up clothes, and interrupting each other every now and then to exclaim at, and turn over with fond regard, some forgotten treasure, in the shape of some relic of the children while they were yet little. They did not make much progress with their work. (52 - 53)

Julie Nash argues that '[n]ineteenth-century British servants, with their intimate knowledge of household affairs, their influence over children, and their own limited personal freedom, became for [...] Gaskell essential characters for examining the tensions produced by social transformation and conflicting values'.¹⁵ The idea of separated spheres of the public and private, and the distance between employers and employees were abiding cultural myths but often ignored in reality; it is these actual ambiguities that Gaskell sets out to examine. Though the family servant,

¹⁴ Julie Nash, *Servants and Paternalism in the Works of Maria Edgeworth and Elizabeth Gaskell*, Hampshire, Burlington: Ashford, 2007, p. 109.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

Dixon is more expressive of her dissatisfaction with the turn of affairs than her mistress, holding Mr Hale responsible for a change in the status quo and the distress it brings to her 'poor mistress' (50).

The relationship between Mrs Hale and Dixon is similar in its intimacy to the one between Mrs Transome and Denner, except Mrs Hale is entirely dependent emotionally and physically on her maid without the dignity of manner that would retain the distance considered proper to the relationship between an employer and an employee. However, this overfamiliarity is challenged by Margaret who not only wants to be to her mother what the maid is, but also comes to replace her mother in Dixon's affections after her death. In the opening chapters, we see even the strong-willed Margaret yielding to Dixon's domestic tyranny as she has her hair 'viciously' brushed by the maid who's been put in a 'pretty temper' for having been interrupted by an unexpected visitor to the house (51). But Margaret has to learn to assert her opinion as well as her position in order to make the distinction between the family members with legitimate claims and dependents with more ambiguous entitlements. While in the industrial plot of the novel the relationship between men and masters is difficult because there is not enough intimacy, the relationship between Dixon and Margaret is problematic because it is too intimate. Though their relationship is characterised by mutual dependence and a recognition of loyalty, it is also marked by a reciprocal distrust, apprehension and resentment.

One of the moments when this undercurrent of tension makes its way to the surface is when Margaret longs to become closer to her mother after their move to Milton. Margaret and her mother's relationship is a conflicted one; Margaret grew up in her aunt's house, and after her return, her longing for maternal comfort and filial intimacy is sadly unfulfilled, for not only is her mother temperamentally very different, but also because her chosen confidante is the maid who has been her long-time companion, rather than her newly arrived daughter. In fact, it is Dixon who holds the secret to her mistress's rapidly declining health and is party to the mysterious consultations in her bedroom, from which she emerges crying and cross. Again, it is she who is preferred over Margaret to attend to Mrs Hale during the doctor's examination, a preference that leaves Margaret jealous and disheartened:

Margaret yearned to re-unite the bond of intimate confidence which had been broken by her long residence at her Aunt Shaw's, and strove by gentle caresses and softened words to creep into the warmest place in her mother's heart. But though she received caresses and fond words

back again, in such profusion as would have gladdened her formerly, yet she felt there was a secret withheld from her. (88)

She has to contend against the maid for the attention and affection of Mrs Hale, but Margaret finally '[triumphs] over all the obstacles that Dixon threw in her way; assuming her rightful position as daughter of the house' (125) by forcing the Doctor, by dint of her determination, to reveal the truth. She pleads with her mother to let her take the waiting woman's place: "I will try and be humble, and learn her ways, if only you will let me do all I can for you. Let me be in the first place, mother – I am greedy of that"' (128). After this entreaty, Mrs Hale does begin to depend upon Margaret, both for comfort and diversion, but this is a dependence that cannot lead to a steadily strengthening mother-daughter relationship for its foreseeable end is Mrs Hale's death. In addressing the relationship between Mrs Hale and Dixon, and Margaret's insistent need to insert herself into it, replacing the maid as her mother's confidante and slipping a measure of reserve into the almost claustrophobic familiarity, Gaskell collapses the false dichotomy of public and private realms, bringing to the fore the conflictual echoes between the mistress and the servant. The habitual intimacy that made Mrs Hale and Dixon so close is what Margaret shrinks from, but in doing so, she dissipates the tension between herself and the maid that had arisen from the competition over Mrs Hale's attention. In asserting this distance Margaret inspires Dixon's respect and her love.

In both *North and South* and *Felix Holt* the mistresses turn to their waiting women instead of their own estranged children who return home in their youth. While Margaret does make efforts to claim her mother's affection and regard, Harold is completely indifferent to his: '[He] had no wish opposed to filial kindness, but his busy thoughts were imperiously determined by habits which had no reference to any woman's feeling; and even if he could have conceived what his mother's feeling was, his mind, after that momentary arrest, would have darted forward on its usual course' (93). The lack of filial intimacy is inevitably compensated by an intimacy between the two mothers and their maids, who provide loyalty without criticism, unlike their own children, implicitly understanding their needs and emotions. In an unsurprising move, both Mrs Hale and Mrs Transome turn to their familiar companions in moments of difficulty and distress. Though the relations between Mrs Transome and Harold continue to deteriorate, following the novel's threat to show the disintegration of a home and private life that is based on self-interest, Margaret does manage to connect with her mother, partly

perhaps due to her rapidly advancing ill health.

Choice of clothing has long been an activity over which women bond with each other, whether they be mistresses and waiting women, mothers and daughters, sisters, or friends, and in *North and South*, Margaret's clothing becomes the focus of her mother's attention, in fact the only activity that can divert her mind from her illness. Mrs Hale's motherly concern finds expression in the desire to see Margaret dressed up. Indeed, the only time that they are able to form a meaningful connection is when Margaret caters to her invalid mother's whim and spends the afternoon modelling various gowns before her, in preparation for the Thornton dinner. Even with all her efforts, it is at this moment, when the focus of their attention is something which, to Margaret, is entirely superficial and insignificant, that their attachment is most touchingly felt. What makes it all the more moving is that now it becomes abundantly clear that this is all they can ever share, and any expectation of a deeper bond will inevitably come to nothing. Her mother's 'unsettled anxiety' over the gowns only amuses Margaret:

She was very much inclined to play some pranks when she was dressed up at such an unusual hour; to make her rich white silk balloon out into a cheese, to retreat backwards from her mother as if she were the queen; but when she found that these freaks of her were regarded as interruptions to the serious business, and as such annoyed her mother, she became grave and sedate. (147)

This instant of harmony and sincerely felt closeness is precisely the point where the split between mother and daughter becomes conspicuously clear. While Margaret is unmindful of such concern for clothing, her mother feels it acutely. The first chapter of the novel that introduced Margaret in all her dignified nonchalance, posing in her cousin's Indian shawls, reveals Mrs Hale's absence at Edith's wedding, an event she refuses to attend because all her husband's 'arguments in favour of a grey satin gown, which was midway between oldness and newness, had proved unavailing' (15). Now that she is finally taking an interest in her daughter, her growing affection exhibits itself in a transference of her own desires and vanities to Margaret, something that Margaret fails to fully understand. However, she does continue to appease her mother and her 'only pleasure now in decking herself out [is] in thinking that her mother would take delight in seeing her dressed' (159).

This 'serious business' that Margaret takes so lightly, to the great annoyance of her mother, is a close echo of the scene discussed in the last chapter where Margaret models the treasured shawls. Meant to display Margaret's regal beauty

and a superiority of mind that refuses to devote all its resources to sartorial issues, it unwittingly also exhibits Margaret's relationship with her aunt. Although she has spent the greater part of her life with Mrs Shaw, this is their most intimate moment that we are made witness to. Being dismissive of the preoccupation with clothing that is characteristic of all the women closest to her - her mother, Edith, Aunt Shaw - and inclined to discount the time spent on it, she is unaware of how significant these moments potentially are. She is unconscious of the attachment this mutual activity helps her to forge not only with her mother, but also with Bessy, who in her illness is 'content to look at Margaret's face, and touch her articles of dress, with a childish admiration of their fineness of texture' (100). In her simple attire, she seems angelic to Bessy, who goes on to say:

"I never knew why folk in the Bible cared for soft raiment afore. But it must be nice to go dressed as yo' do. Its different fro' common. Most fine folk tire my eyes out wi' their colours; but somehow yours rest me." (100)

Bessy childishly associates Margaret's sartorial presence with a kind of soothing divine aura, making yet another affirmation of Margaret's inherent stateliness that exhibits perfect taste even as she turns away from thoughts of dress and display. She is not 'common', exhausting eyes with her bold colours, but almost biblically consoling in her austerity. Even in this odd friendship between a middle class young woman and a former factory girl, clothing and its actual and symbolic significance form a nexus that brings the two together in an unlikely companionship. On hearing of Margaret's invitation to the Thornton dinner, Bessy is as anxious about her making the right kind of sartorial impression as Mrs Hale herself, and dearly wishes to be allowed to come and see her dressed. Indeed, their relationship is bound up with the impact that Margaret's appearance has made upon Bessy to such an extent that she wants to be buried in something belonging to her.

This holds equally true for the connection that Margaret shares with Edith; there is a fondness between them that has grown out of long association rather than a similarity of sensibility. Margaret's former life at Harley Street with her aunt and cousin had been one of thoughtless existence in comparative luxury, with nothing to mar the smooth surface of the never-ending cycle of dinners to be attended and callers received. There were points when Margaret tired of that life, of Edith's constant chatter about dressing and shopping, the endless preparation of her trousseau, and its proud exhibition to all visitors; nevertheless, Margaret's dearest memories of the period are marked by the time that they spent dressing up

together, their 'merry, girlish toilettes' (159) before going out for a *soirée*. This nostalgic remembrance of an almost idyllic time spent in a typically feminine pursuit reveals how important these moments of 'ladies' business' unconsciously are to Margaret, in spite of her condescension.

All the women close to Margaret wish to see her dressed well, fabricating a closeness that arises in moments spent in acts of dressing and undressing, moments that lead to the attachment between Mrs Hale and Dixon that Margaret yearns to recreate. Gaskell's project in the novel then is not only to show the porousness between the public and the private, but also to show the domestic as a permeable setting where maids and mistress are not just bound by the employee - employer configuration but also share a more significant intimacy. The dressing room and the role of the waiting woman are crucial to this formulation showing that feminised space as an enclosed enclave where secrets can be shared, but one that can also give rise to a familiarity that threatens to bring disorder. The Hale household is very different from the Shaw home where the servants really are invisible, existing on the margins of family life, in the way that volumes of household manuals and directives advised. Margaret, returning to live with her aunt notices: 'the very servants lived in an underground world of their own, of which she knew neither the hopes nor the fears; they only seem to start into existence when some want or whim of their master and mistress needed them' (458). But this is not that state of affairs that Gaskell herself seems to advise. As Julie Nash observes, '[i]n one of the work's most important subplots, Gaskell shows the Hale family coming to terms with the role of a maid within the family, and the difficulties of maintaining distinctions between family members and other dependents, a difficulty that she says will be faced by industrial workers as well, but that will result in improved class relations and economic success'.¹⁶

This careful negotiation is similar to the way in which Gaskell views the importance of dress for women. She takes for granted the range of connotations that it necessarily produces in its visuality, focusing instead on how it can become a crucial point of connection between women. Preoccupation with dress in the structured exchange between the waiting woman and her mistress can transform an occupational relationship into one of genuine, gendered exchange. What I am arguing is that this available structure itself becomes adopted by women - mothers and daughters, sisters, friends - as a mode of creating intimate moments. It is not surprising then that Margaret desires to take on Dixon's role towards her mother,

¹⁶Ibid., p. 8.



Figure 6: John Leach, 'Pin Money', *Punch* (July - December 1849).



Figure 7: John Leach, 'Needle Money', *Punch* (July - December 1849).

pleading with her to let her be 'in the first place'.

Even as George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell undertook a serious and layered representation of the dressing room and its attendant alliances, representations of the same in popular journals like the *Punch* and in paintings continued to be rather unidimensional as well as patently misogynistic. Both writers look at the way in which the dressing room was a flexible space, as were the relationships it produced, that allowed for women's autonomous expressivity and a shared companionship, while also being the place where prescribed femininity and the tensions inherent in cross class interaction were played out. This is the paradox that is fundamental to the dressing room. It is precisely this that made it so suspicious a space to the writers of *Punch* who consistently bring it up in the same manner as the satires of the previous century did - a room where women cosmetically created false fronts that duped men. The 1849 caricature by John Leach shows a leisured lady before her dressing table in comparison to the poor sempstress bent over her sewing. The two visions are compared in financial terms with the titles 'Pin Money' and 'Needle Money'. Pin money was the allowance a woman would receive from her husband for spending on her clothing and other personal items, and was suggestive by its very name of money spent on useless decorative trinkets and other inessentials. In keeping with this idea, the tableau to the left presents a dressing table laden with a large mirror and hair brushes, before which sits a young woman having her hair done by her maid. In contrast is the demure milliner busy at her stitching in a room that seems devoid of much comfort. The images then present two different kinds of womanhood, one wasteful and vain, for such are the qualities endorsed by the dressing room, and the other poor and hardworking. It is obvious which set of feminine qualities is being championed here.

The dressing room as a space for female vanity and deceit is present also in a very different kind of picture, Augustus Egg's painting *A Young Lady at her Dressing Table* (1850s). The painting shows a young woman in the foreground, prominent in her glowing white gown against the shadowy surroundings that seem to swallow up the body of the maid dressed in black. Staring reverently into the mirror, festooned in lacy white drapery and an excess of cloth that replicates her frothy dress, she is holding up a white rose to her face, entranced by her own image. On the table before her are the two candles that light up the glass, open jewellery boxes and scattered ornaments, and what seems to be a cascading wave of false hair. This tableau with the candles that illuminate the icon reflected in the mirror is presented as an altar, the whole picture one of false worship because



Figure 8: Augustus Egg, *A Young Woman at her Dressing Table* (1850s).

it is self-worship. Behind the rapt mistress stands her maid, positioned in a margin of the painting, waiting in attendance, her pale face hauntingly prominent against the gloom of the room and the dark austerity of her own dress. The two women are presented as obviously recognisable opposites, one frivolous in her gleaming white dress with its swelling skirt that leaves her white shoulders appealingly bare, with slender wrists encircled by gold bangles, and an abundance of golden ringlets; the other in her buttoned up black gown with its demure white collar, simply combed back black hair, and her drawn face. But the maid's gaze is also directed at the reflection, much like the maid in Leach's caricature, suggesting that it is the creation of that image that is crucial to both women. The heap of clothing in the foreground of the painting, topped with the discarded wreath of flowers is juxtaposed with the busy hands of the girl at the back who seems to be in the middle of folding away some item of clothing. It is a vignette that draws on the dressing room as a space that objectifies women: a space where women are presented as the centre of the spectator's gaze as well as a space where they objectify themselves. It is not the space that Eliot and Gaskell visualised, a room where women have the independence and the comradeship to become their authentic selves, but a dangerous domain that encourages them to be frivolous and wasteful. Its potential as a space for engendering friendship is subsumed in the misogynistic idea that it might be a space where women can develop a frightening independence, manufacturing an attractive face with which to entrap suitors. Though the form of the maid emerges from the shady periphery of the room that focuses on the illuminated mistress, it does so only to show her role in the creation of her mistress' public face and the labour that goes into the maintenance of what Esther Lyon calls a 'real fine-lady' (153).

While on the one hand conventional representational strategies show the dressing room to be associated with the age old feminine failings of vanity, sensuous self-obsession, and frivolousness, Gaskell does it differently in 'The Grey Woman'. Both Augustus Egg and the *Punch* caricaturist present their waiting women as detached employees, whereas Gaskell takes the friendship between the maid and the mistress to a contrary extreme, where the two conspire to escape the cruelty of the master and husband in the disguise of husband and wife themselves. In Egg's painting, the lady at her toilet becomes the bright foil against whom the quiet docility of the waiting woman is revealed. Similarly, in Leach's parody, the leisured woman is presented as vacuously wasting her unearned pin money while the diligent needlewoman, that symbol of Victorian working class womanhood,

plies her trade late into the night in order to make her living. In 'The Grey Woman', the waiting woman is neither the impoverished, socially marginalised woman nor the exploited servant, but rather the closest companion of her mistress. First published in Charles Dickens' journal *All the Year Round*, Jennifer Uglow describes it as a sensational tale that has 'an echo of Bluebeard, of wives entrapped in castles on high cliffs, of sadism, torture, and murder concealed beneath polite exteriors'.¹⁷ It tells the story of Anna Scherer, the beautiful daughter of a miller, who marries a handsome, mysterious and somewhat effeminate young Frenchman, M. de la Tourelle, who owns a chateau in the Vosges mountains to which she departs as his new bride. Gaskell turns away from the idea that safety for a woman lies in being married and brought into the affluent household of her husband. The moment of Anna's establishment as the mistress of the strange, sinister house is also the moment that signifies her imprisonment. Not only is she confined to the apartment that her husband allocates to her, she feels that all the domestic servants were set as spies on her and that she was 'trammelled in a web of observation and unspoken limitation extending over all [her] actions' (212). The exception is Amante, her French waiting woman, who was directed by M. de la Tourelle to always sit in her lady's boudoir, to be always within call.

Retrospectively telling the story in the first person, addressing her now grown up daughter, Anna remembers how her husband reproached her for having become 'sadly too familiar with [her] Norman waiting-maid' (205). The relationship between the two women proves to be so close, especially after the news of Anna's pregnancy as yet untold to M. de la Tourelle, that it arouses the jealousy of the possessive husband. Anna explains, "'now he was jealous of my free regard for her - angry because I could sometimes laugh at her original tunes and amusing proverbs, while when with him I was too much frightened to smile'" (205). Amante, the name itself carrying the meaning 'lover', becomes Anna's companion, nurse, confidante, and finally saviour. Discovering the secret of her husband's identity, as she clandestinely searches for a letter from her father in his forbidden chamber, Anna is led to safety by Amante. The pregnant mistress, now threatened by the knowledge of her husband's leadership of a gang of robbers and murderers, is helped to safety by her resourceful, fearless maid.

Masquerading herself as a man, Amante cuts her hair to a masculine shortness, clips her eyebrows, and alters her voice and the shape of her face by 'cutting up old corks into pieces such as would go into her cheeks' (229). Turning next to Anna,

¹⁷Jennifer Uglow, Introduction to *Curious, If True*, p. xii.

she thickens her figure with old clothes and the two take to the road recast as a traveling pedlar and his wife. With increasing insecurity, the mistress is taught to intensify her disguise by staining her face, blackening her teeth, dying her hair, and taking on an older, more disheveled appearance. As Eve Lynch points out, the irretrievable fall of the mistress is suggested in a remarkable moment when she deliberately disfigures her features, signalling the permanence of her disguise when she breaks a front tooth for a more authentic effect.¹⁸ The relationship between the two women then features 'a stinging indictment of patriarchal power and its failure to protect the vulnerable,'¹⁹ as well as the subversive and volatile possibilities of their intimacy.

Looking at the narrative as a nineteenth century literary revision of 'Bluebeard', Rose Lovell-Smith notes how such retellings by women writers allowed the peripheral female characters to come into their own.²⁰ In 'The Grey Woman', Amante is not just the helper of her mistress, but reenacts a more nurturing relationship with her in their guise as a married couple, creating an unconventional narrative. In putting on this act, she steps outside her gender and class roles thus questioning the ideology of Victorian domesticity and its signs of a supposedly stable sexuality. In order to remain true to themselves, the two women have to disguise themselves and in Anna's case it becomes a permanent, self-inflicted disfiguration. The aesthetics of the dressing room are inverted in these scenes of painful defacement. Amante becomes her mistress' companion not by dressing her in finery but in disintegrating every signifier of her beauty. Beginning with the concealment of Anna's slim figure and the discolouration of her face that Amante undertakes, the disguise becomes irreversible when Anna breaks her tooth voluntarily and when her hair turns prematurely grey. Survival is only possible either through socially approved self-effacement or through this impersonation that transgresses class and gender norms, both finally bracketed together as inverse sides of the same idea of female theatricality.

Lynch's conclusion that women can never really escape the 'master plot', and that 'true recognition is not possible in a patriarchal, hierarchical domestic economy that forces the woman to slip outside of her self into a deviant space,'²¹ is

¹⁸Eve M. Lynch, 'Out of Place: The Masquerade of Servitude in Victorian Literature', *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 31, No. 1, (1996), p. 101.

¹⁹Julie Nash, p. 67.

²⁰Rose Lovell-Smith, 'Anti-Housewives and Ogres' Housekeepers: The Roles of Bluebeard's Female Helper', *Folklore*, Vol. 113, No. 2 (Oct., 2002).

²¹Lynch, 'Out of Place', p. 103.

highly pessimistic. In spite of the bleak, unhappy ending, the transgressive potential of this tale cannot be overlooked. It presents a cross-dressing maid, who rescues her pregnant mistress from her murderous husband, setting up an alternate familial structure with her where she maintains her 'wife' through her work as a tailor. In its emphasis on female bonding and women's independence, it makes a sensational departure 'from images of the centrality of the happy home and the finality of the happy marriage'.²²

Imitating intimacy: 'It is my turn to attend to her [...] I am her waiting-woman'

The obsessive detailing of the boundaries of the domestic structure that insisted on the demarcation of the maid and the mistress reveal that these roles and identifications were really quite fragile. Women like Amante, Denner and Dixon splinter these attenuated distinctions, revealing the vulnerability of class (even gender) lines, while articulating as well as responding to the Victorian anxiety about the correct 'place' of the servant. What is interesting then is that many Victorian heroines choose to borrow the visible signs of servitude when approaching their friends, sisters or mothers, insisting and yearning to be their waiting-women so as to be able to fully express their affection. It is this impersonation that is part of Esther's emotional maturation in *Felix Holt*, where she takes on the duties of Denner as Margaret had jealously appropriated those of her mother's waiting woman. After the confrontation with Harold, at the edge of a nervous breakdown, it is Esther who soothes Mrs Transome with her gentle manner. She entreats the older woman: "Do let me go to your room with you, and let me undress you, and let me tend upon you [...] it will be a very great thing to me. I shall seem to have a mother again" (598). This suggestion of the daughter as maid finds an interesting and unusual articulation in Esther's relationship with her father, to whom she shows her love by undertaking to 'correct his toilette', a trifling act that is one of the most audible signs of her transformation, given the fact that in the past 'she had not liked even to touch his cloth garments' (290).

At the other end of the spectrum from Esther is Caroline Helstone, the shy, considerate heroine of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, through whom the sartorial theme of the novel is developed. Clothing has long been a way by which novelists elaborate upon and unfold the personal vagaries of temperament, as well as bring characters into juxtaposition with each other. However, in this novel, the pair of

²²Lovell-Smith, 'Anti-Housewives and Ogres' Housekeepers', p. 204.

equally significant female protagonists, Caroline and Shirley, do not merely act as a foil for each other, but rather their friendship becomes a medium through which Brontë conveys the peculiarly feminine meanings associated with the ritual of dress and undress. In the course of the novel, Caroline repeatedly takes on the role of the 'lady's maid' in her various relationships with other women; Hortense Moore, Shirley Keeldar, and Mrs Pryor all undergo Caroline's keen ministrations.

In Brontë's *Shirley*, all the women characters enter the novel through a sartorial description, and cousin Hortense is no exception. Her peculiar dressing habits, her refusal to adopt English fashions and her adherence to Belgian mores, are part of her stubborn, humorous foreignness. Her morning costume consists of a stuff petticoat and a striped cotton camisole, with her hair twisted up in curl-papers that make her head resemble that of a Gorgon, and as the narrator observes, 'there was something in her whole appearance one felt inclined to be half provoked with, and half amused at' (92). She is the older woman whom Caroline visits for companionship as well as sewing and French lessons, but their moment of closeness arises out of the efforts made by Caroline to dress Hortense rather than their teacher-pupil relationship. This sartorial relationship is an early hint that alerts the reader to the way in which Caroline tries to display her affection to other women. She has to coax her governess-cousin upstairs to dress, a manoeuvre that required careful management, and the change of clothing takes place in comical pantomime:

To have hinted that the jupon, camisole, and curl-papers were odious objects, or indeed other than quite meritorious points, would have been a felony. Any premature attempt to urge their disappearance was therefore unwise, and would be likely to issue in the persevering wear of them during the whole day. Carefully avoiding rocks and quicksands, however, the pupil, on pretence of requiring a change of scene, contrived to get the teacher aloft; and, once in the bedroom, she persuaded her that it was not worth while returning thither, and that she might as well make her toilet now [...]' (106).

While listening to Hortense's solemn homily against the frivolities of fashion, 'Caroline denuded her of her camisole, invested her with a decent gown, arranged her collar, hair, etc, and made her quite presentable' (106). However, after all these efforts at presentability, Hortense insists on putting the final touches herself, which consisted in donning a large 'servant-like black apron' that spoiled the effect of Caroline's work. But this voluminous apron is crucial to Hortense's self-construction as a good housewife, properly aware of her domestic duties. Indeed,

it is one of the items of clothing that she presents her younger cousin to profit by, a gift that results in their only serious quarrel. Though starting off as a relationship that holds potential for intimacy, the familiarity between the women quickly reveals itself to be one that is severely damaging to Caroline's selfhood, tugged and prodded by Hortense's overbearing moralisations on proper feminine occupation and appearance.

Shirley is an exploration of women's selfhood as it negotiates with the pressures of social expectations. One of the ways in which these negotiations are opened up is by looking at the significance of female friendship. The friendship that does not come to fruition with Hortense, is transplanted to Shirley, the eponymous heroine who only enters the novel ten chapters into it. It is through the relationship between Shirley and Caroline that Brontë evokes the fulfilment a woman can find in a close relationship with another woman, and how this bond might offer 'the solution to the problem of how to survive emotionally as an unmarried woman in Victorian society'.²³ Shirley is the apparent opposite of Caroline in appearance and in feeling. The myriad descriptions of Caroline as the young, delicate girl in pale, diaphanous muslin gowns, her brown hair falling in an abundance of curls over her dainty shoulders is in striking variance to Shirley's self-professed 'masculine manners', enveloped in the ample and shining folds of her silk dress - 'an attire simply fashioned, but almost splendid from the shifting brightness of its dye' (252). Difference then becomes minutely but manifestly written into the folds of a dress, the line of a figure and the changeable colour of cloth. But Shirley's bright garment 'of tints deep and changing as the hue on a pheasant's neck' (252) is not more eloquent than Caroline's demure brown merino gown or her pure white muslin dress, colourless except for the pale azure sash. The rich, flamboyant elegance suited to Shirley's dark, extravagant beauty does not arouse condescension or contempt, either narratorial or in any of the characters. It is equally upheld alongside Caroline's conventional, non-threatening, and prettily inconspicuous choice of dress. Their opposing descriptions as 'a graceful pencil-sketch compared with a vivid painting' (252) are equally alluring, though in completely different but complementary ways. Yet it is this initial difference that signals the ambiguities that will later arise in their relationship. It is also this contrast played out between the self-effacing Caroline and the striking Shirley that enables us to turn a curious, unhurried gaze at the body of a woman who

²³Linda C. Hunt, 'Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in *Shirley* and *Villette*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1982), p. 55.

spends much of the novel trying to whittle it down into a shadow; a way that allows Brontë to present a heroine who is both repressed and desirable.

Helena Michie posits the idea of sororophobia in thinking about the representation of sisters in Victorian literature, a notion that I think can be extended to include close friendships between women as well. She argues that 'sororophobia is about negotiation; it attempts to describe the negotiation of sameness and difference, identity and separation, between women of the same generation, and is meant to encompass both the desire for and the recoil from identification with other women. Sororophobia is not so much a single entity as it is a matrix against and through which women work out - or fail to work out - their differences'.²⁴ She insists that the expression of hostility among women is a factor that contemporary feminists must take into account, for they need to create the rhetorical and political room in which anger, difference, and mistrust between women can be articulated. These negative and ambivalent feelings add 'a dimension of dignity and choice to friendships between and among women'.²⁵ She also emphasises that though sisters often compete with and replace each other, this should not blind us to the fact that 'within the protective idiom of sisterhood, women could express anger and sexuality in a way unavailable to them in the context of other relations, certainly including those with men'.²⁶ This is of crucial importance to any study of female-female relations; that fictional representations of intense friendships or sisterly relations could offer a permissible place and vocabulary for expressing feelings and behaviours that would perhaps be otherwise seen as unfeminine, and subsequently unnatural. But inversely, as moments of intense unity, they could also provide a means of displaying and containing passion that would usually have no other avenue of expression.

An unusually muted heroine, Caroline choses to adopt the role of the lady's maid to express some measure of her fondness. As Caroline and Shirley's friendship grows, so does their sartorial intimacy - they choose each others' clothing, dress together (and on one occasion undress), and occasionally dress each other. The pattern exhibited in Caroline's association with Hortense Moore repeats itself in her relationship with both Shirley, her closest friend, and Mrs Pryor, her newly found mother. On the morning of the Whitsuntide festivities, with unexpected vivacity, having been dressed in a simple gown by the dexterous hands of her own

²⁴Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 9 - 10.

²⁵Ibid., p. 21.

²⁶Ibid.

maid Fanny, Caroline makes her way across sequestered fields and hidden lanes to Fieldhead. In the nature imagery that is reminiscent of Shirley and Caroline's walk through Nunnely Common, the narrative follows the hurrying, tripping steps of Caroline:

She glided quickly under the green hedges and across the greener leas. There was no dust – no moisture – to soil the hem of her stainless garment, or to damp her slender sandal: after the late rains all was clean, and under the present glowing sun all was dry: she walked fearlessly, then, on daisy and turf, and through thick plantations; she reached Fieldhead, and penetrated to Miss Keeldar's dressing-room. (292)

This closeness to a benign, feminine nature recalls the forest excursion the two plan as they stand overlooking Nunnwood, a trip that significantly never takes place. “To penetrate into Nunnwood, Miss Keeldar, is to go far back into the dim days of eld” (220), says Caroline before she describes the dell that lies at its heart: “a deep, hollow cup, lined with turf as green and short as the sod of this common: the very oldest of the trees, gnarled mighty oaks, crowd about the brink of this dell: in the bottom lie the ruins of a nunnery” (221).²⁷ The nunnery here signifies a mythic past of closer ties between women and a matriarchal order very different from the ghostly presence of the nun in *Villette*. Through this sensual imagery of a pre-lapsarian eden, protectively enfolded and secreted by the natural world, the two women seem to be fantasising about a female community far from the disruptive presence of men.²⁸ It is a place that Caroline is familiar with, and promises to show her friend all the ‘untrodden glades, carpeted with strange mosses’, insisting that she could ‘guide’ her (221). This is not the yearning for a ‘sexless state’,²⁹ as Carolyn Oulton reads it. Rather, the vaginal imagery of the description assumes the possibility of personal and sensual openness that is available to women within this community where their privacy is not encroached upon by the demands of a more insistent masculinity.

²⁷This description is reminiscent of Eliot's descriptions of the Red Deeps in *The Mill on the Floss* where Maggie goes for her solitary walks. It is a secluded spot where old fir trees grow high and the earth is broken into mounds and hollows left behind by an abandoned quarry, with grassy paths that lead to meadows of wild hyacinths and dog-roses: ‘a pleasure she loved so well, that sometimes, in her ardours of renunciation, she thought she ought to deny herself the frequent indulgence in it’ (299).

²⁸This feminised natural community is similar to the one Lizzie and Laura share in the *Goblin Market* before the arrival of the goblin men.

²⁹Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature*, Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate, 2007, p. 76.

However, Caroline does use a more assertive formulation when she talks of ‘penetrat[ing] into Nunnwood’, and when she ‘penetrate[s]’ her way into Shirley’s dressing room with a self-possession not usual to her. Intent on having Shirley attend the Whitsuntide festivities with her, Caroline wastes no words in trying to persuade her but taking away the book she was engrossed in, ‘with her own hands, commenced the business of disrobing and re-robing her’ (292). Unwilling to ‘talk, laugh and linger’, Caroline ‘persevered in dressing her as fast as fingers could fasten strings or insert pins [and] as she united a final row of hooks and eyes, she found leisure to chide her, saying, she was very naughty to be so unpunctual [...]’ (292). This pretty tableau of friendship ends in a spectacular reiteration of their difference and their unity as they run out hand in hand, laughing as they went, ‘looking very much like a snow-white dove and gem-tinted bird-of-paradise joined in social flight’ (293).

Another such dressing room scene takes place a few chapters later on the morning after the disturbance at the mill. Having spent the night at the Rectory, they wake up together, dressing themselves before the same mirror. Caroline ‘dressed herself, as usual, carefully, trying so to arrange her hair and attire that nothing of the forlornness she felt at heart should be visible externally’ (342). As they get ready, they talk of the impression men have of women, a conversation punctuated by a pause as Shirley looks into the glass, ‘training her naturally waved hair into curls, by twining it round her fingers’ (343), and Caroline fastens her dress and clasps her girdle. In between these calm lulls where the two are busy in arranging their appearance, Shirley soliloquises upon how men misapprehend women and their motives. She observes that “‘their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel”’ (343), that their heroines are as artificial as the roses in her best bonnet. This oft-quoted phrase is at the heart of the novel, and expresses with a pithy linguistic economy one of its dominant concerns. However, it is often used in a de-contextualised manner, and needs to be inserted back into the scene in which it occurs in order to read its full significance. This remark is made on ‘the morning after’, awakening after a night of intimacy and then having to face the world. It arises in the course of a typically feminine occupation in the engagement of which Shirley and Caroline give words to half formed thoughts that are surprisingly perceptive, but could never be aired in public. It seems as if in this fleeting instant of intimacy and relaxation, when they are no longer functioning as cultural signifiers of femininity but as subjects in their own right, they can finally voice their unmediated thoughts, or their anxieties as Mrs Transome does.

Even as Caroline interrupts Shirley, “Shirley, you chatter so, I can’t fasten you: be still”, she continues, “‘authors’ heroines are almost as good as authoress’s heroes”’ (343). But Shirley is adamant that “‘women read men more truly than men read women”’ (343) and finally the girlish chatter, wound around the ordinary details of the toilette, dies down as they descend for breakfast.

Unsurprisingly, these are frequently the moments where confessions are made, confidences shared, matters of the heart discussed, and thereby friendships cemented. Indeed, it is during another act of undressing that Shirley tells Caroline of Robert Moore’s proposal, as Caroline later informs Robert. He teasingly asks her what they discussed when they ‘curled [their] hair together’, and she retorts that they talked the whole night through “‘about things we never thoroughly discussed before, intimate friends as we have been: but you hardly expect I should tell you?”’ (558 - 559). Caroline, the shy, reticent one becomes less so in the privacy and the autonomy that these shared dressing room moments provide. Even though their fantasy excursion to Nunnwood or the imagined sea-voyage do not materialise, the space provided by the ambit of the dressing table becomes their *locus amoenus*.³⁰

The final mark of their friendship is the fact that it is Caroline who superintends the ‘millinery preparations’ at Shirley’s wedding, and chooses the bride’s veil and dress ‘without much reference to the bride’s opinion’ (591). This is a significant redefinition of their relationship. There seems to have been an equalisation, a final remodelling that makes them both better fitted to marriage - an equalisation that involves the neutralisation of Shirley and a strengthening of Caroline. Caroline, in spite of her sartorial initiative, is a painfully self-conscious and retiring heroine, but the end of the novel shows her confidently taking charge. On the other hand, Shirley, having withstood all societal disapproval of the ‘masculine’ way in which she chooses to manage her life and property, and familial opposition

³⁰In Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* the dressing table becomes a similar locus of intimacy. Lucy and Maggie’s closest moment takes place as they undress for the night (in a chapter aptly titled ‘Confidential Moments’), baring their hearts as they bare their bodies. Enclosed in that instant of shared privacy, Lucy’s coyness reveals her deep feelings for her suitor and Maggie, in exchange, discloses her former friendship with Philip Wakem. Tess Cosslett draws attention to the ‘symmetrical contrast’ that this bedroom scene forms with an earlier scene, in the girls’ childhood, in Aunt Pullet’s bedroom with Mrs Tulliver, where they were allowed to participate in ‘the feminine mysteries of the Bonnet’. She observes that the ‘comic triviality of the two older women’s interaction over the Bonnet contrasts with the seriousness and intensity of Maggie and Lucy’s confidences’. Tess Cosslett, *Woman to Woman: Female Friendship in Victorian Fiction*, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988, p. 32.

to her stubborn wish to secure a husband of her own choice, becomes almost inert in her inability to take even the slightest decisions regarding her forthcoming marriage. However, this passivity itself may be seen as a form of resistance to her prospective role as a wife, an idea substantiated by the fact that she continually tries to defer the date of the wedding. Her future as a married woman leaves her 'vanquished and restricted', and it is Louis alone who can 'make amends for the lost privilege of liberty' (592). Contradictorily, we are told that a year from this date Shirley reveals that she had only partly yielded to her own inclination: 'Louis [...] would never have learned to rule, if she had not ceased to govern: the incapacity of the sovereign had developed the powers of the premier' (592).

Reynolds and Humble read this eventual surrender of all obvious signs of masculinity and independence as part of a pattern that emerges in the literary treatment of women during the sexually potent period between puberty and the realisation of full womanhood as wives and mothers. Before becoming the conventional wives of conventional men, they are often allowed a 'period of misrule and inversion'.³¹ Female friendships then, were not an end in themselves, but helped the Victorian girl through a difficult transition into adulthood. Female friendship was important, for it provided a healthy focus for a girl's excessive energy and passion that might otherwise turn into a depressive decline. It was even 'a useful means of displaying a susceptible and responsive nature to potential suitors, without the danger of compromising restrictive feminine codes of behaviour'.³² As Gorham says, '[g]irls' friendships, it was believed, should foster the feminine qualities of empathy and expressiveness, and should develop the capacity for sustained intimacy'.³³ Both Sarah Stickney Ellis in *The Women of England* and Dinah Mulock Craik in *A Woman's Thoughts about Women* affirm the importance of female friends. Ellis calls upon woman to learn how to be a considerate friend for intimate friendships 'may teach her some useful lesson, or raise her estimate of her fellow-creatures',³⁴ while Craik has a chapter entitled 'Female Friendships' where she explores the various kinds of friendships possible to women, their difference from men's friendships and the possibility of friendship between the sexes. She surmises that lasting friendship consists of an attachment where a difference similar to the difference between the sexes can be traced in the two friends, for otherwise

³¹ Reynolds and Humble, *Victorian Heroines*, p. 23.

³² Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature*, p. 9.

³³ Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982, p. 113.

³⁴ Ellis, *The Women of England*, p. 94.

‘mutual feminine weaknesses acting and reacting upon one another, would most likely narrow the sympathies and deteriorate the character of both’.³⁵

Unexpected however is her analysis of friendship as a love relationship:

Probably there are few women who have not had some friendship, as delicious and as passionate as first love. It may not last – it seldom does; but at the time it is one of the purest, most self-forgetful and self-denying attachments that the human heart can experience: with many the nearest approximation to that feeling called love – I mean love in its highest form, apart from all selfishness and sensuousness – which in all their after-life they will ever know. This girlish friendship, however fleeting in its character, and romantic, even silly, in its manifestations, let us take heed how we make light of, lest we be mocking at things more sacred than we are aware. (136)

Craik visualises a romantic friendship that does not exclude physical intimacy, though it does not have the sexual undertones that contemporary critics might bring to it. Her affirmation of the love and sustenance such a relationship could provide brings up the possibility of a deep female companionship that could be a substitute for marriage. As Craik’s words show, it was not just women writers like Brontë who were probing the potency of a close female friend as an alternative to male suitors. Though Oulton reads *Shirley* as ultimately conservative, for all competition between friendship and family ties is neatly resolved by having the friends marry the two brothers, creating a ‘seamless transition from platonic to familial relations’,³⁶ I see Brontë posing a serious challenge to the relevance of marriage to women. *Shirley* alternates between these two meanings of female friendship, exploring it as a preparation for marriage as well as an alternative to husbands. Though it is discourse of the kind that Reynolds and Humble analyse that forms a discernible thread running through Caroline and Shirley’s friendship, there are other moments that question this stable text. The ‘seamless transition’ that Oulton notices is not so neat, for it is almost derailed by Robert’s mercenary proposal to Shirley, by Caroline’s near fatal decline, and by Shirley’s constant postponement of her wedding date. The fact that the novel is curiously uneven in the focus that it places upon the two women protagonists, and the marriage plot is pulled into the story again only towards the very end, and, as the chapter title suggests, is only the ‘winding up’ (587), is suggestive. These are not just the ‘trials of love’ that are usual to most romances but pose threats of a more serious nature

³⁵Craik, *A Woman’s Thoughts about Women*, p. 141.

³⁶Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature*, p. 75.

that could destabilise the idea of female friendship as an essential phase in the move towards maturity and marriage, and the desirability of that marriage itself. The men in the novel are provokingly unsatisfactory in their relationships with the two women, and these odd moments of genuine feminine union fundamentally challenge the necessity of such unfulfilling coupling.

Caroline's play at lady's maid, that pulled her attachment to Shirley into a more intimate orbit, extends into her relationship with her mother as well. She herself happily tells Robert, 'it is my turn to attend to her; and I do attend to her: I am her waiting-woman, as well as her child: I like [...] making dresses and sewing for her' (557). Caroline's illness is as much a symptom of her 'mother-ache' as of unrequited love; it is, after all, not the appearance of the hero but the sudden revelation of her mother that marks the turning point towards recovery. Once she has been reunited with her much longed for mother, she can finally become healthy again and also begin to find pleasure in that highly recommended feminine occupation of sewing. Throughout the novel, Caroline is shown to be sewing, at first presided over by Hortense and much against her desire, and later in moments of deep despondency in an attempt to make herself properly useful, and resign herself to the dreaded fate of becoming an old maid. As I argue in Chapter 1, this uniquely feminine drudgery is another focal point in the book, and is combined with that other particularly feminine occupation of dress as Caroline takes on the project of making herself one. At this point, the two activities that form the crux of a middle class woman's everyday life, and were much debated public issues with a multitude of cultural, moral and class connotations, come together in a striking image as she sits plaiting and stitching the thin texture of the summer muslin. This moment is reminiscent of Mrs Transome's life in which a little daily embroidery had been a constant element, an activity that the narrator poignantly describes as 'that soothing occupation of taking stitches to produce what neither she nor any one else wanted, [which was] the resource of many a well-born and unhappy woman' (176). The Victorian preoccupation with needlework and dress is drawn out by Eliot when she remarks how in spite of her sadness, Mrs Transome continues to act the part of the hostess, performing her toilette and her embroidery everyday, for 'these things were to be done whether one were happy or miserable' (495). However, this useless toil becomes a source of joy for Caroline once she transfers her attentions to her mother, wanting to sew her dresses. Interestingly, even towards the beginning of the novel, thankful to Sarah, the Moores' housemaid, for telling her of Robert's arrival, Caroline expresses her

gratitude by offering to cut the gown with which the former had been busy.

For Caroline, a naturally reticent and inarticulate heroine, this obvious and often expressed concern with other people's dress becomes a way of showing her affection and regard. The act of dressing together, and more specifically the act of dressing others, becomes one of great intimacy, a moment of female camaraderie. In fact, it becomes a primary form of communication rather than just a channel of communication. Sharon Marcus, in exploring the realm of female friendship in Victorian England, examines the extravagant language of love that was often used by women while talking of, and to their friends. 'Love' was used interchangeably with weaker expressions such as 'like' or 'fond of', and women regularly spoke the language of physical attraction to describe their relations with their women friends.³⁷ But Caroline with her habitual shyness does not avail of this socially acceptable repertoire of words. Instead, she uses a more subtle sartorial vocabulary to express emotion.

Claustrophobic familiarity and the problems of privacy

While Caroline appropriates for herself the position of her mother's waiting woman, it is one that Mrs Gibson tries to impose on Molly, her stepdaughter. In *Wives and Daughters* (1864 - 1866), Elizabeth Gaskell returns to her concerns with women: the drama of their everyday lives, the minutiae of their relationships, and their attempts at self definition. The domestic narrative and its feminine focus reveal once again the way in which women's relationships often use clothing as a medium of negotiation, of expressing affection and hostility. Like Mrs Hale in *North and South*, Mrs Gibson too finds pleasure in seeing her daughter and stepdaughter well-dressed according to the norms dictated by contemporary fashion, but this pleasure is not an unambiguous sign of maternal solicitude. She is one of the few women in the novel whom Gaskell treats with much irony and even greater ridicule. Mrs Hyacinth Kirkpatrick, who becomes Mrs Gibson by marrying Molly's father, is portrayed as a superficial, hollow woman who delights in the compliments her daughters receive because she sees them as the reflected approval of her own good sense and impeccable taste. But the rivalry and antagonism that Michie sees as inherent in fictional representations of sisterly relations in the nineteenth century are overtly present in this mother-daughter relationship.

Mrs Gibson's much professed maternal instinct stoops to pettiness when she

³⁷ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007, p. 54 - 55.

feels the disagreeableness of having Cynthia present at her second wedding, 'to have her young daughter flashing out her beauty by the side of the faded bride, her mother'.³⁸ She feels equally resentful when either Molly or Cynthia are bestowed any attention or favour she believes to be rightly her due, and it is for this reason that Lady Harriet's fondness for Molly and Mr Kirkpatrick's invitation to Cynthia are both seen in the light of encroachments upon her rights. The narrator's cutting observation towards the beginning of the novel on how things 'slipped off the smooth surface of Mrs Kirkpatrick's mirror-like mind without leaving any impression' (168), haunts the reader's evaluation of her character. With its suggestions of egoistic insensitivity, slippery deceitfulness, and archetypal female vanity, the simile captures the essence of her personality. Not only is she so self-absorbed as to view her daughters as social rivals, she is also envious of any mutual closeness they might share.

Cynthia's letters to Molly during her stay in London are jealously regarded by Mrs Gibson, resentful of not having accompanied her, and equally annoyed that the correspondence might contain some details of current fashion of which she was being unjustly deprived. This obsession with clothes forms the subject of most of her conversations with Cynthia and Molly, and these are the only times she displays an animated interest in her daughters. The lending or holding back of items of clothing is the action that marks her pleasure and displeasure. Her favours are offered in sartorial terms, and her admonishments are similarly focused on matters of appearance. With Molly, it is the promise of the loan of her prized scarlet Indian shawl that she tries to use as her tool of negotiation. And at another point, when Molly stubbornly refuses to heed her wishes, unwilling to go to the soirée she has planned, predictably the promised gift of an old gown is revoked in favour of Cynthia.

Though consistently critical of her, Gaskell does show Mrs Gibson as possessing the intention to be a good mother to the motherless Molly, but even the acting out of this resolution proves misguided. As soon as she returns from the honeymoon, her first requirement, articulated in a charmingly deceptive manner, is for Molly to be her 'little maid' and help her arrange a few things, for she is worn out by the day's journey (208). The role that Esther had slipped into unconsciously, and that Caroline assumes as an expressive medium for communicating her immense

³⁸Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (1864 - 1866), ed. Frank Glover Smith, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976, p. 156. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

attachment to her mother, is one that Mrs Gibson presses upon Molly, who is neither entirely comfortable nor familiar with her new mother. Having had no time to grow into the role that Margaret covets in *North and South*, and already awkward in the changed dynamics of her suddenly enlarged family, Molly is forced to perform an intimacy that does not come naturally to her. But having professed her superior maternal instincts in general, and her deep affection for Molly in particular, to all who would care to listen, Mrs Gibson is only too eager to burden Molly with the same, demanding from her the attentions of a daughter. It is the Miss Brownings and Mrs Hamley, all of whom act as substitute mothers for Molly, who are more genuine in their lively interest in Molly's appearance than her stepmother. Indeed, it was Mrs Hamley who had helped Molly pick out her clothing for her first meeting with her future stepmother, desiring her to make 'a favourable impression' (160). Advising Molly on the plain white muslin, 'anything but that horrid plaid silk' (160) she silently thinks, she sends her off for the Towers looking a little old-fashioned and quaint but thoroughly ladylike. Again, it is with decided pleasure, a feeling that is obviously mutual, that Molly has a private dressing-up in her bridesmaid's gown for the Miss Brownings' benefit.

The relationship between Cynthia and her mother is equally, if not more, fraught. The very many failings of Cynthia are blamed upon her mother's careless upbringing, and Cynthia herself holds her responsible for her own inability to be more truthful like Molly. But she is her mother's 'little maid' more than Molly can ever be, for with regard to dress:

Cynthia soon showed that she was her mother's own daughter in the manner in which she could use her deft and nimble fingers. She was a capital workwoman; and, unlike Molly, who excelled in plain sewing, but had no notion of dress-making and millinery; she could repeat the patterns she had only seen in passing along the streets of Boulogne, with one or two pretty rapid movements of her hands as she turned and twisted the ribbons and gauze her mother furnished her with. So she refurbished Mrs Gibson's wardrobe; doing it all in a sort of contemptuous manner, the source of which Molly could not quite make out. (255 - 256)

This 'contemptuous manner' is a constant current that flows under the surface of their seemingly conventional relationship, threatening to disrupt it at any given moment. One such moment of crisis arrives when Cynthia cannot and will not account for the way in which she has spent the money that would otherwise have been used for renewing her wardrobe before going to London, but this too is

conveniently brushed under the carpet as 'the genius for millinery and dress, inherent in both mother and daughter, soon settled a great many knotty points of contrivance and taste' (476). But this talent seems to be a double-edged quality; there is an obvious admiration for Cynthia's skill and dexterity with the needle, her sharp and observant mind and her inventiveness, all of which she puts to use in replenishing not only her own, but also Molly and her mother's wardrobes. However, as the previous chapter argued, the activity of needlework was saturated with significance in nineteenth century discourse about women, and professional milliners were frequently viewed with suspicion, signalling working womanhood, and associated both with an unfair oppression as well as a degrading licentiousness. Cynthia's extraordinary skill then seems to be tainted by a kind of negative inflection. The current debates surrounding millinery coupled with the age-old idea that saw dress as disguise, a mask that hides the true self, puts this sartorial agility in conformity with Cynthia's ambiguous characterisation. The smooth talking, secretive Cynthia manufactures elaborate lies just as easily as she conjures up exquisite articles out of old clothes and bits and pieces of ribbon. Meanwhile, Molly with her plain sewing and her unaffected disregard of fashion is the opposite of her stepsister.

Despite this irreconcilable difference, Cynthia, though held up to censure, is not completely condemned and discarded. In terms of appearance too, Molly and Cynthia are placed as a pair of contrasting opposites, much like Caroline and Shirley, though their relationship is not regarded with the same sense of complementarity. Cynthia was generally dressed with a 'careless grace' (comparable to Shirley's 'artless grace'), and Molly, who was 'delicate neatness itself', used sometimes to wonder 'how Cynthia's tumbled gowns, tossed away so untidily, had the art of looking so well, and falling in such graceful folds' (277). Molly marvels with childlike innocence how the pale lilac muslin gown, worn many times before, had looked unfit to wear again till Cynthia put it on. Then 'the limpness became softness, and the very creases took the lines of beauty. Molly in a daintily clean pink muslin, did not look half so elegantly dressed as Cynthia' (277). This notion of inherent grace that shines through without any attempt at display, common to both Cynthia and Shirley, seems to suggest an independence of mind that manifests itself in a disregard of the etiquette of dress that would demand a neat perfection, an unassuming, shy youthfulness, something that both Molly and Caroline possess. The self-assuredness of both women is what gives them the elegance that their companions so enviously admire. But this aesthetic carelessness

is also a redolent signifier of their potent, somnolent sexuality, one that is never fully realised in Shirley, but one that flares threateningly in Cynthia.

The latent dissonance that was sensed between Shirley and Caroline is more overtly discernible in the relationship between the sisters in *Wives and Daughters*. The sororophobic tensions that Michie had outlined are more evident here, where Cynthia unwittingly becomes Molly's romantic rival. But this friction develops over the novel, for at her arrival, the impression that Cynthia makes on Molly is one of unmitigated admiration: 'Molly fell in love with her, so to speak, on the instant' (253). Cynthia too reacts with uncharacteristic honesty, impulsively taking Molly's hands and looking her intently in the face she declares: "I think I shall like you. I am so glad! I was afraid I should not" (253). Their initial attachment is based on these first impressions. Cynthia perceives Molly's genuine goodness, integrity and loyalty, and shows her own fondness for her in the only way she knows how: by putting her best skill to Molly's disposal. We are told how she was restless till she had attacked Molly's dress, after she had remodelled her mother's, a task undertaken out of non-negotiable filial obligation that was querulously demanded rather than freely given. Again, before they leave for the Easter charity ball, where they were to be 'brought out', Cynthia took the utmost pains in dressing Molly, 'leaving the clever housemaid to her mother's exclusive service, who was more worried about her attire than her daughters'.

Molly looked upon the ceremony of dressing for a first ball as rather a serious ceremony; certainly as an anxious proceeding. Cynthia was almost as anxious as herself; only Molly wanted her appearance to be correct and unnoticed; and Cynthia was desirous of setting off Molly's rather peculiar charms - her cream-coloured skin, her profusion of curly black hair, her beautiful long-shaped eyes, with their shy, loving expression. Cynthia took up so much time in dressing Molly to her mind, that she herself had to perform her toilet in a hurry. Molly, ready dressed, sate [sic] on a low chair in Cynthia's room, watching the pretty creature's rapid movements, as she stood in her petticoat before the glass, doing up her hair, with quick certainty of effect. (320)

It is in this intimate setting that Molly reveals her insecurity when she wistfully, almost unconsciously vocalises her desire to be pretty. Surprised, Cynthia checks herself before replying with her kindly meant worldly wisdom that Molly does not understand: "The French girls would tell you, to believe that you were pretty would make you so" (320). But this moment marks the crescendo of their friendship, for no other conversation between them produces any feeling other than an

insistent and blind loyalty on Molly's part, and a gratitude followed by a desire to flee on Cynthia's.

It is again by the side of the toilette-table, in front of the mirror that Molly hears the news of Cynthia's engagement to Roger, and a full account of her feelings. As she catches the reflection of their faces in the glass, 'her own, red-eyed, pale, with lips dyed with blackberry juice, her curls tangled, her bonnet pulled awry, her gown torn' and Cynthia's 'brightness and bloom, and her trim elegance of dress', she feels a keen and strange sense of disappointment (422). Bewilderment at hearing of the engagement is only aggravated to deep sadness when she sees the two contrasting faces in the mirror and thinks "Oh! It is no wonder!" (422). This sense of loss intensifies into anger as she realises the shallowness of Cynthia's love for Roger, and comes closer to acknowledging her own sentiments for him when Cynthia jokingly retorts to her annoyance with, "Why Molly! [...] One might think you cared for him yourself" (422). They take leave of each other with mutual dissatisfaction masked only by the outward form of a sisterly kiss. The sexual rivalry between them embitters their sisterhood, with their prolonged proximity turning from intensely felt affection to an equally intense feeling of claustrophobia. Even as their meetings before the mirror continue, the dressing room still remaining the site of their shared secrets, those secrets themselves are spoken reluctantly and both battle the desire to escape from the presence of the other.

The most important secret at the core of the novel's plot is revealed in Cynthia's bedroom, after dinner, when Molly goes to her in her nightgown and finds her sitting still dressed. Grudgingly, Cynthia makes a full confession of her relationship with Mr Preston, the revelation made only because she had promised Molly the complete history of her relationship with him. Although it is Cynthia who assures Molly that she would reveal all once they come up after dinner, free again of claims on their time and person, she guiltily disappears into her room leaving Molly waiting in her own. It is finally Molly who goes to Cynthia, only to find her utterly unresponsive, enveloped in a kind of daze. And it is Molly again who makes yet another effort to half cajole, half demand the key to the mystery. Cynthia does finally disclose the truth, binding Molly to secrecy, and thereby also revealing to her a part of herself she most desired to keep hidden.

Not unsurprisingly, this is a disturbing tête-à-tête for both, though it is Molly who is more distressed by it than Cynthia. No longer joined in a moment of tenderness, Molly stands in Cynthia's bedroom, her company unwanted by her stepsister

who sits staring at her image in the looking-glass, her dress still untouched. The privacy afforded by the toilette-table is no longer an enclave of feminine intimacy but transformed into an involuntary, closeted connection. When the revelations do come, Molly finds them taxing her emotional strength and psychological composure not only by the demand they make on her sympathy, but also because she is more fully alive to their repercussions upon those whom she loves than Cynthia. Cynthia, on the contrary, is discomposed by these scenes since they reveal her flaws to one whose approval she wishes to win, while also making apparent her inability to acknowledge her mistakes and rebuild her friendship with Molly on honest grounds. Unlike Caroline and Shirley, for whom such moments are liberating in the space that they offer for the unfolding of an unimpeded subjectivity, Molly and Cynthia find themselves entangled in webs of secrecy. The possibility of a relationship on the lines of Caroline and Shirley is presented in the novel itself in the instance of the Browning sisters - a sample of their intimacy given in Miss Phoebe's confession 'in the confidence of curling-time', that 'the only man who could ever bring her to think of matrimony was Mr Gibson' (178). This moment most fully recognises the difference between Molly and Cynthia as sexual difference, 'that is, the difference between the fallen and the unfallen, the sexual and the pure woman. The capacious trope of sisterhood allows for the possibility of sexual fall and for the reinstatement of the fallen woman within the family'.³⁹ As Michie makes clear, sisterhood often operates as a literary framework in which one sister can fall and then recover her path through the intervention of the other sister, finally getting reintegrated within the family through marriage. Molly then works within this convention of the protective sister who goes out to recuperate her frailer sister, but this recuperation too proves dangerous to her own reputation. Almost marred by the shadow of the same mistake, Molly finally emerges doubly pure, reinstated as the real heroine of the novel, with the hero restored to her.

However, the retrieval does not translate into the restoration of an uncomplicated intimacy. Cynthia's impending marriage to Mr Henderson and Molly's engagement to Roger Hamley see the threatening sexuality of Cynthia absorbed into domesticity, but the relations between the two women remain complicated. In the excitement over the preparations for Cynthia's wedding they gingerly resume the former tenor of their relationship with Cynthia attending to Molly's clothes, instructing her about what to wear with what, and rejoicing over the

³⁹Michie, *Sororophobia*, p. 17 - 18.

pretty smartness of her garments. And as the moment of parting drew closer, both 'Molly and Cynthia spoke about dress as if it was the very object of their lives; for each dreaded the introduction of more serious topics' (668). By the end of the novel, though they part on amicable terms, there is a complete breakdown of any truly heartfelt intimacy between Molly and Cynthia. For them the talk of dress displaces the need for any real conversation based on the articulation of real sentiments. The consequential ('serious topics') and the superfluous ('dress') occupy two disparate realms and it is only through the latter that they can have any meaningful connection. Once more, this is in marked difference from *Shirley* where the serious and the sartorial circulate in a seamless continuum - the two friends comb their hair, choose their gowns, and help each other dress while talking in an uninterrupted flow about the riot at the mill, what they think of men and the illusions that men have about women. The relationship between Cynthia and Molly finally exists on the same plane as Margaret's relation with her mother in *North and South*. In spite of a desire for honest companionship, the full potential of both the relationships, though falling disappointingly short of expectation, is met in this connection over clothing. Instead of becoming a way by which greater intimacy may be achieved, and a deeper and truer friendship may be shared, it remains at the level at which Shirley and Caroline begin. Nevertheless, it is an attachment that would never have been possible, given their disparity of temperament, without the affairs of 'ladies' business'.

Wives and Daughters, tellingly subtitled 'An Everyday Story', attempts to be just that: a story that reveals the 'trivial' concerns of women. Often dismissed as too 'feminine' and 'limited', it goes unnoticed that it is these very qualities that make it so fascinating a study, for it examines, with amusement and understanding, the self-contained sphere in which women lead their entire lives, and how these spaces have the potential to be transformed by the women who inhabit them. Clothing and metaphors of clothing permeate the novel in a way that gives a palpable sense of the nature of women's lived experience. It is then only fitting that the last line of this book, that was left incomplete by the death of its author, should be Mrs Gibson asking Molly at nightfall, after they finish talking about Cynthia's impending first visit as a married lady and the sartorial novelties she'll bring, "[...] now cover me up close, and let me go to sleep, and dream about my dear Cynthia and my new shawl!" (705).

The compulsive attention to sartorial detail in literature on feminine propriety,

in women's magazines as well as in the lives of Victorian middle class women inevitably translates into fictional relationships where clothing becomes a key issue of concern. This chapter then explored how dress was a medium by which women not only judged each other in public but also bonded with each other in private, the dressing room becoming the space where thoughts not permissible elsewhere could be articulated to chosen confidantes - the waiting woman, the cousin, the friend. The concern with clothing thus becomes, in many instances, a manner of displaying affection and strengthening relationships that needs to be taken into account while looking at the restrictions and limitations placed by prevalent sartorial codes. Sometimes those codes were resisted, but more often than not, women worked within them, widening the gap between the expected and the lived, finding interstices of privacy that gave them the ability to form intimacies and discover a less inhibited selfhood.

But the idea of intimacy and friendship as something that the preserve of the dressing room made available can also be transformed into an extreme claustrophobia. The boudoir and the role of the lady's maid are inevitable sites of exaggerated, conflictual meaning. I began this chapter by looking at the way in which maids and mistresses could transcend their class differences by forming an attachment based on their shared femininity, something that gets adopted by women in more equal relations when they choose to enact the role of the waiting woman. I want to end this chapter by suggesting that just as the sisterly relationship contains within it seeds of rivalry and competition, antagonism and sexual hostility, the waiting woman too can morph from attendant to antagonist. Just as the boundaries between the maid and the mistress in the feminised domain of the Victorian home were more brittle than was advocated, so too in that newly female realm, 'the mistress daily faced her double in the governess, the nurse, the housekeeper, and the chambermaid',⁴⁰ and most prominently in her own private maid. It is this anxiety that is brought to the surface in the excessive idiom of the sensation novel, most vividly perhaps in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, in which the Lady of the title not only constantly, consummately multiplies and reproduces new identities, but her maid too becomes part of the same generative economy. In a series of interlinked speculations made in the novel, that I will examine in closer detail in the following chapters, the body of Lady Audley is troublingly conflated with that of her maid, and the dressing room itself becomes a space that creates as well as reveals her treachery.

⁴⁰Lynch, 'Out of Place', p. 96.

The anxieties that novels like *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters* associated with the dangerously heightened familiarity that the dressing room could provide are crystallised in Braddon's narrative. The flexibility of this space as one that allowed for both the formation of an autonomous interiority and personalised attachments as well as the creation of a duplicitous public face and conspiratorial connections is what makes it so interesting to Victorian writers, for it is a recurring trope in domestic novels as well as more sensational fiction. Related to, and yet distinct from, the associated ideas of duplication of identity, female vanity, narcissistic self-obsession and auto-eroticism, the dressing table becomes a fraught space where contemporary unease about women can be transposed, explored, and resolved.

Chapter 4

Mirroring the Self

[L]ooking-glasses, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer, multiplied my lady's image, and in that image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber.¹

[S]he caught sight of her face in the glass; it was reddened now, and wet with tears; it was almost like a companion that she might complain to – that would pity her.²

The process of constructing an ascetic sartorial identity, that the first two chapters examined, is one that takes place in relation to other women inhabiting the novel, who make different choices. The austere Victorian heroine, more often than not, is then posited against a correspondingly adorned woman - her opposite in beauty, dress and behaviour. These supplementary characters are crucial to the self-fashioning of the heroine, for even when clearly not acting as the central protagonists, they add to the density of meaning, making the formulations and articulations of the heroine more complex, more conflictual than they may appear. Narcissism is one of the recurring themes in Victorian literature, with innumerable scenes set around the looking-glass and the toilette-table. Such encounters between the two women often take place within the dressing room, like in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* where Molly and Cynthia stand side by side reflected by the same mirror. Vanity is a sin that the 'other' woman, the foil for the real heroine, is regularly guilty of, and the mirror unavoidably becomes the location where that pride is played out. These characters often seem to be

¹Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor, London: Penguin, 1998, p. 291. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

²George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. Stephen Gill, London: Penguin Books, 1980, p. 379. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

informed by a greater creative investment than the better, more virtuous heroine, and then necessarily become focal points for the text, suffused with a contained signification that calls for a closer appraisal.

Moreover, given the nineteenth century's ambiguous attitude to female sexuality, the mirror becomes the symbolic object upon which those ambivalent opinions can be displaced. Following the literary tradition of Milton's pre-lapsarian Eve who almost missed the chance of meeting Adam because she was so mesmerised by her own reflection in a pool of water, the mirror has been effectively designated the province of the feminine where vanity holds sway.³ On the one hand, it is a surface that replicates the visual self accurately and, on the other, that reflection is not identical with the self. However, it does frequently lend itself to psychological depths that seem contradictory to its very actuality as a reflector of outward realities. It is these gaps that are increasingly explored by a number of Victorian writers, and their women characters are imbued with an acute awareness of the placements and displacements that the mirror engenders.

As the previous chapters formulate, Victorian women were largely assessed on their external appearance and were constantly reminded of it by various manuals, conduct books, women's magazines, and the social conventions they were to abide by. Women's identities were then dependent upon a highly visual and material exteriority, and the way in which women respond and relate to their mirror images can provide some insight into how processes of self-recognition and self-creation function in nineteenth century literature. In this chapter I will be looking at women who objectify themselves through the precise authority of the mirror, women who refuse to subject themselves to the tyranny of beauty that it imposes, and women who challenge its superficial reflectivity and find in it a psychological echo of a truer, unseen self. The looking-glass then becomes something beyond a passive reflector of images. The reflected image itself becomes involved in the act of looking, and the mirrored gaze challenges, questions and lays bare a different reality for the woman looking in.

Addicted to self-admiration: women and narcissism

Hetty Sorrell in George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) is the archetypal self-absorbed, narcissistic woman to whom Dinah preaches cautionary warnings in her outdoor

³Margaret Ezell, 'Looking Glass Histories', *The Journal of British Studies*, No. 43 (2004). Ezell refers to this scene as based on the model of Narcissus, the quintessential self-obsessed individual. Examining seventeenth century English literature, she emphasises the importance of the role of the mirror in 'the narratives of self and of the individual in history' (322).

sermons. The young woman against whom Dinah lashes out with pity and outrage at the beginning of the novel is an early prototype for Hetty, and the recipient of her diatribe against feminine frippery. She intends for her the bizarre parable of the maid who thought only of lace caps instead of a clean soul, and “one day when she put her new cap on and looked in the glass, she saw a bleeding Face crowned with thorns. That face is looking at you now [...] Ah, tear off those follies! cast them away from you, as if they were stinging adders” (75). In this macabre image of a ghoulish Christ who occupies the mirror to which the woman turns in self-admiration, the much desired adornments are revealed as the serpentine guiles of sin. The attractive maid metamorphoses into a Medusa (a frequently recurring trope in Victorian literature), her beauty mutated into a horrific, self-torturous spectre of punishment. This scene opens the reader to the appropriate way in which Hetty’s frivolity is to be regarded, and gives a premature intimation of her misfortune.

Hetty is introduced into the novel in a series of vignettes that make amply clear her penchant for mirrors. Even when put to polish the furniture by her aunt, she ‘often took the opportunity [...] of looking at the pleasing reflection of herself in those polished surfaces, for the oak-table was usually turned up like a screen, and was more for ornament than for use; and she could see herself sometimes in the great round pewter dishes that were ranged on the shelves above the long deal dinner-table, or in the hobs of the grate, which always shone like jasper’ (117). As every surface returns affirmation of her earthy, full-figured charm, Hetty becomes addicted to reflections. Eliot spends an extended section on her preenings, trenchantly revealing her sensual and self-loving nature. The looking-glass that colonises her meagerly furnished room, the one in which she delights in glimpses of herself, is the object of her many ministrations and her quasi-religious fervour. It is described as a mysterious artefact, almost animate in its qualities, and as capricious as Hetty herself:

A queer old looking-glass! Hetty got into an ill temper with it almost every time she dressed. It had been considered a handsome glass in its day [...]: it had a great deal of tarnished gilding about it; it had a firm mahogany base well supplied with drawers, which opened with a decided jerk, and sent the contents leaping out from the farthest corners, without giving you the trouble of reaching them; above all, it had a brass candle socket on each side, which would give it an aristocratic air to the very last. But Hetty objected to it because it had numerous dim blotches sprinkled over the mirror, which no rubbing would remove [...] But devout worshippers never allow inconveniences

to prevent them from performing their religious rites, and Hetty this evening was more bent on her peculiar form of worship than usual.
(194 - 95)

Evocative of the original mythical Narcissus who falls in love with his own image, Hetty's self-idolisation at the altar of her mirror comprises of ritualised acts belonging to a clandestine pagan ceremony - she sits majestically before the ancient mirror, lighting secretly bought wax candles in its sockets, and extracting a small, unblemished, red-framed looking-glass, from her chest, lets down her hair. This tableau is reminiscent of Augustus Egg's painting *A Young Lady at her Dressing Table*, that I looked at in the last chapter, where the young lady of the title gazes reverently at her reflection. But the way in which the mirror is framed and contained in this scene also provides another history running alongside the one that Hetty is constructing. An old aristocratic artefact that can no longer show a clear reflection or hold the petty treasures that its drawers might be entrusted with, it also frames Hetty's image in its own narrative. This is the narrative of an upper-class nobility that Hetty tries to embed herself into, but as the dappled mirror presages, it will only be a stained, incomplete story.

Smiling at her reflection, turning this way and that, combing the 'dark hyacinthine curves' (195) of her rippling hair, Hetty tries to enact the portrait of a lady that she had seen in a dressing room at the manor. As she compares herself to real and imagined rivals, catapulting herself into a fantasised future of opulent mansions, rich clothing and easy leisure, she externalises her admiring gaze onto the figure of Arthur Donnithorne: '[T]here was an invisible spectator whose eyes rested on her like morning on the flowers. His soft voice was saying over and over again those pretty things she had heard in the wood [...]. The vainest woman is never thoroughly conscious of her own beauty till she is loved by the man who sets her own passion vibrating in return' (195). The urbane and immensely attractive Donnithorne, heir to The Chase, bestows his attentions on the alluring dairy-maid only as harmless amusement in the dull countryside, but he becomes the idol who replaces Hetty's vague spectator. It is in the mottled mirror that she is more real to herself than when she goes around the dairy occupied in her tedious chores, and it is in the space between her real and her specular selves she creates a romance more elevated than the one Arthur intends to carry out.

And so she struts about, bedecking herself with trinkets extracted from her 'sacred drawer' (196), and enthralled by her reflection that, filtered through her naive day-dreams, changed her old, black lace scarf, full of rents, and her coloured

glass and gilding earrings into brocaded silk and real gold. The flecked glass is not enough to freeze her optimism, and even when she ominously breaks the little glass, she is too occupied in her vision to notice anything amiss. However, Eliot ironically comments on this frivolity as a childish naivety rather than a womanly vanity. She points out that it is easy to assume a symmetry between Hetty's soft, round flexibility, free from all angles, and a pliancy of character. It is this assumption of childlike innocence that makes her vanities bewitching and her playful glances kittenish. Using the same floral language that she later employs in *Middlemarch* (1871 - 1872) with greater eloquence and subtlety in exploring the sexual politics of Rosamond and Lydgate's marriage, Eliot conjectures about the thoughts of the man who would marry Hetty: 'Nature has written out his bride's character for him in those exquisite lines of cheek and lip and chin, in those eyelids delicate as petals, in those long lashes curled like the stamen of a flower, in the dark liquid depths of those wonderful eyes' (198).

Eliot goes on to talk about the inevitable psychological meaning that humans attach to physical appearance, and propounds the theory of nature as an articulate agency, sagely pronouncing: 'Nature has her language, and she is not unvarnished; but we don't know all the intricacies of her syntax just yet, and in a hasty reading we may happen to extract the very opposite of her real meaning. Long dark eyelashes, now: what can be more exquisite? I find it impossible not to expect some depth of soul behind a deep grey eye with a long dark eyelash, in spite of an experience which has shown me that they may go along with deceit, speculation, and stupidity' (198 - 199). With this swift, economical stroke, Hetty's character is laid bare in the starkest, most ungenerous of terms. There being 'no direct correlation between eyelashes and morals' (199), Hetty necessarily has to play all flippant eyelashes to Dinah's unalloyed morals. Her 'narrow bit of imagination' (199) is just enough to make her the central figure in fine clothes of every mental picture, inviting the applause and envy of all, while allowing no room for any feeling for her companions, her young cousins, pet animals, or even any cherished memories of her own childhood. The floral qualities that were earlier used to hint at Hetty's sexual allure now define her near vegetal lack of thought and feeling - she is the beautiful ornamental bloom that is best displayed in the confines of a grand house.

Even her seduction has an undercurrent that puts her own nature at blame to some extent. She feels no qualms as she tries on the earrings that she had gleefully accepted from Arthur Donnithorne. Gold, pearl and garnet, she delights

in putting them on in the privacy of her bedchamber:

[P]erhaps water-nixies, and such lovely things without souls, have these little round holes in their ears by nature, ready to hang jewels in. And Hetty must be one of them: it is too painful to think that she is a woman, with a woman's destiny before her - a woman spinning in young ignorance a light web of folly and vain hopes which may one day close round her and press upon her, a rancorous poisoned garment, changing all at once her fluttering, trivial butterfly sensations into a life of deep human anguish. (295)

Reduced to a soulless creature outside all moral compunctions, she must live through her 'woman's destiny' before she can emerge as a fully fledged character in her own right. What this woman's destiny may be is clear - a life of hardship and heartache, at the end of which she will have to learn to tread the middle ground between the fulfilment and repression of desire if she is to be a successful heroine. In her later novels (I look at *Daniel Deronda* further in this chapter) Eliot becomes more nuanced in her portrayals of vain women, acquiring a less moralistic narrative voice. Both Rosamond in *Middlemarch* and Gwendolen in *Daniel Deronda* are of the same type as Hetty, but there exists a nicety to their depictions that is almost wholly absent from *Adam Bede* - their self-delusions are audibly linked to their education, and their self-love is as much a product of the network of social conventions they occupy as their clothing, their gestures and their taste.

In *Adam Bede* however, the psychology of vanity is given no social dimension, and rather than being rationalised as something that is bolstered by certain cultural norms, it is discarded to the realm of the irrational. Hetty's vanity is a self-feeding thing, it thrives almost entirely on her own admiration instead of finding a referent in the impressions produced on others. Hers is 'the psychology of a canary bird' (294), and she finds all the pleasure she needs in contemplating the lines of her own beauty that the old speckled mirror throws up. Her 'love of finery' is really what dooms her to the life she leads after the moment of her seduction, not the fact of having been seduced.⁴

⁴Mariana Valverde, 'The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth Century Social Discourse', *Victorian Studies* 32 (1989). Examining the 'finery-to-fall' narrative that often structures literature in the nineteenth century, Valverde argues that '[t]he simultaneous stability and instability of dress as a social and moral signifier' (172) creates the anxiety that leads working class women's desire to dress in the manner of their social superiors to be read as something that will eventually result in prostitution.

Even Arthur tries to resist the temptation posed by Hetty's milkmaidish, baby-like softness and goes to the parson, Mr Irwine to confess all. Mr Irwine in turn compares love to a disease that can be avoided by distance, and then, interestingly, using the image of a mirror, says that change of air and the remembrance of unpleasant circumstances provide a 'smoked glass through which you may look at the resplendent fair one and discern her true outline' (217). Curiously, it is the blurred glass that allows the 'true' nature of the sweetheart to become visible, a more genuine reflection of her uncluttered by the temptations of feminine wiles that entrap men like Arthur.

However, Arthur does go ahead with his seduction of Hetty, the language of the temptation so worded as to suggest that it is Hetty's own naive sybaritic nature that makes it harder for him to attend to higher morals. Having accomplished this, he quickly makes his way out of Hayslope leaving behind an epistolary dismissal. It is at the moment that she reads Arthur's letter that Hetty changes from being a child, with a child's pain, to being a woman, with a deeper sadness. It is precisely at this point of transformation into a being with higher level of intellect and feeling than a canary, that she is able to distance herself from her image in the mirror. As she catches sight of the reflection of a blanched face in the dim old glass, reddened and wet with tears, 'it was almost like a companion that she might complain to - that would pity her' (379). The 'depth of soul' (198) that Eliot suggests to be missing in Hetty is paradoxically revealed through the looking-glass. Though her face still has its rounded, pouting charm, it is tempered with a hard look in her long-lashed eyes: 'all love and belief in love departed from it - the sadder for its beauty, like that wondrous Medusa-face, with the passionate, passionless lips' (430). Again, it is Medusa who is evoked, but this time she is not an image of female monstrosity but of womanly tragedy. Many elements of the myth, despite the ambiguity caused by the differing versions, suggest the tragic nature of the tale: admired for her beauty and her lustrous hair, Medusa offended Athena who then changed her locks into hissing serpents, thereby rendering her appearance so terrifying that no one could look upon her without being petrified into stone. In a sense then there is a link between Narcissus and Medusa for they are both myths that play upon the idea of a gaze so powerful that it has the ability to hypnotise.

Jenijoy La Belle has analysed the way in which women relate to their images in mirrors and the way in which mirrors form a 'historical nexus of female identity and questions of dichotomy between self and reflected image, between spirit and

flesh, and between psychological presence and physical body'.⁵ In those moments of crises when the female characters are most concerned with their identities, or thrown back upon their own resources with no one but their sole selves to apply to, they 'turn with remarkable frequency to the contemplation of their images in the glass. Such literary events suggest that often, for a woman, the mirror is an important tool not just for beholding the self or for seeing how the world views her as a physical object, but also for analysing and even creating the self in its self-representations to itself'.⁶

Gwendolen Harleth has a similar revelatory juncture brought about by a letter from her mother that shatters her implicit confidence that her destiny was to be one of opulent ease. She too turns to the mirror in this moment of uncertainty, unable to connect with the reflected image: 'She stood motionless for a few minutes, then [...] automatically looked in the glass. The coils of her smooth light-brown hair were still in order perfect enough for a ball-room; and as on other nights, Gwendolen might have looked lingeringly at herself for pleasure (surely an allowable indulgence); but now she took no conscious note of her reflected beauty, and simply stared right before her as if she had been jarred by a hateful sound and was waiting for any sign of its cause'.⁷ Both Hetty and Gwendolen's isolation is fluently articulated in this moment of disconnection, their bewilderment given a vivid expression in this image of self-dissociation. This disunity between a discrete interior self and an exterior reflection is the clear indication of a psychological disorientation. Again, Eliot provides sharp insight into Gwendolen's narcissism, similar to Hetty's but more evolved as the conscious vanity of a sophisticated woman. Eliot's portrayal of Gwendolen, coming almost twenty years after the creation of Hetty Sorrell, is of a markedly different tone - less moralising, less sermonising, and with a greater ironic distance. The wry bracketed aside is typical of her later writing. Just as Hetty places herself in front of her freckled glass, baring her shoulders and spreading her hair, trying to mimic the painting of the lady, so too do we encounter Gwendolen at several points in the novel, positioning herself as the centre of a tableau about to be set in paint. Both

⁵Jenijoy La Belle, 'Mutiny Against the Mirror: *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* (1985), *Pacific Coast Philology*, Vol. 20, No. 1/2, p. 53. The arguments presented in this essay are further developed in her subsequently published book *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), ed. Graham Handley, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 11. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

women find a resonance in the mirror that allows it to become more than just a reflector of their exteriority - it becomes a medium of self-representation, and more significantly, a catalyst for self-creation.

However, Gwendolen's momentary incapacity for self-admiration recedes when, after having packed all her paraphernalia and equipped in a travelling dress, she sits down to while away time:

And happening to be seated sideways before the long strip of mirror between her two windows she turned to look at herself, leaning her elbow on the back of the chair in an attitude that might have been chosen for her portrait. It is possible to have a strong self-love without any self-satisfaction, rather with a self-discontent which is the more intense because one's own little core of egoistic sensibility is a supreme care; but Gwendolen knew nothing of such inward strife. She had a *naïve* delight in her fortunate self, which any but the harshest saintliness will have some indulgence for in a girl who had every day seen a pleasant reflection of that self in her friends' flattery as well as in the looking-glass. And even in this beginning of troubles, while for lack of anything else to do she sat gazing at her image in the growing light, her face gathered a complacency gradual as the cheerfulness of the morning. Her beautiful lips curled into a more and more decided smile, till at last she took off her hat, leaned forward and kissed the cold glass which had looked so warm. (12 - 13)

Gwendolen's first brush with trouble leaves her unchanged, indifferent to everything except her own appearance. Her gaze is constantly riveted by her own mirror-images, and the fact that she chooses the mirror over the windows that frame it reveals the extent of her preoccupation with her own self, emotionally as well as physically. So enveloped is she in the pleasure that her own reflection arouses in her that the cold mirror itself takes on a fleshly warmth. In this scene of complete self-absorption, Gwendolen's vanity is revealed as a deeply sensual entity. Hers is the narcissism of sexuality, an egotism that arises out of her awareness of her own sexual appeal and a delight in that knowledge. She does not require the presence of a spectator in order to feel that elation, she herself is her enchanted audience. The kissing of her specular self is unmistakably auto-erotic, and Gwendolen's sense of self-rapture that pervades the text is the assertion of the titillating gratification she discovers in the sight of her own body.

Back home with her mother and sisters, on entering the house of her childhood, and being shown the yellow and black bedroom that she was to share with her mother, 'her first movement was to go to the tall mirror between the windows,

which reflected herself and the room completely, while her mamma sat down and also looked at the reflection' (21). Once more Gwendolen settles on the mirror over the windows, facing it as she brushes back the stream of her hair, with both her own and her mother's eyes commanded by it. She ignores her mother's rhetorical wondering aside of whether it was a 'becoming glass' or if it was the black and gold of the room that set her off, and goes on to speculate that she would make a good St Cecilia except for her upturned, happy nose. At these various moments of self-contemplation, Gwendolen plays out a drama where she is both actor and spectator, both the muse and the work of art - a double act that is only possible in front of the mirror. Sabine Melchior-Bonnet observes that the mirror shares, with the art of painting, an emphasis on the worth of the image, resemblance, and simulation, all of which are intertwined with the theme of looking at one's self. Her own study of the mirror then takes into account examples from the visual arts of the periods she goes on to look at. Novelistically, it is interesting that it is the painter's skill that is called upon to describe most vividly the scene that is enacted before the mirror.⁸

And yet again Gwendolen returns to the same pose as the artist's muse when she needs to uplift her self-esteem. Having rejected Grandcourt and feeling miserable with her lot, waiting for Klesmer to arrive so that she could consult him about becoming an actress, her thoughts turn to Klesmer's admiration for her when she had appeared in the Roman garb of Hermione. As she collects her thoughts, while her hands gather up the volumes of music from around the room and lay them on the piano, she catches a reflection of her movements in a glass panel, and is diverted by the contemplation of it: 'Dressed in black without a single ornament, and with the warm whiteness of her skin set off between her light-brown coronet of hair and her square-cut bodice, she might have tempted an artist to try again the Roman trick of a statue in black, white, and tawny marble. Seeing her image slowly advancing, she thought, "I *am* beautiful" - not exultingly, but with grave decision' (214). Now that she no longer thrives on her own admiration, she requires external testimony to fully realise her beauty, the perfection of her upturned nose and the form of her neck and chin. Like Hetty's vague spectator, Gwendolen too searches for the observer before whom she can

⁸Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, trans. Katherine H. Jewett, Routledge, 2001, p. 3. The book traces the history of the mirror, starting from the earliest techniques of mirror making, to the philosophic, moral and psychological associations that have developed around it. Though primarily examining French society, literature, and painting, her analysis can be insightfully employed here.

flourish, one who materialises in the physical form of Mallinger Grandcourt, the husband she finally accepts despite the initial refusal. However, it is being married to him, an observer so keen as to only believe in appearances, that she becomes entirely alienated from her looking-glass.

Grandcourt seems the likely male counterpart to Gwendolen, as she is presented in the early sections of the novel. Enslaved to appearance and ornament, he is a man addicted to social surfaces. He is always enveloped in a properly respectable veneer, and would put up with 'nothing less than the best in outward equipment, wife included' (348). This obsession with maintaining social facades is not something that he alone observes, but rather something that he brutally demands of his wife as well. His descriptions are all suggestive of a reptilian quality, of a serpentine cunning that displays itself in his desire for absolute, unquestioned mastery in the marriage. One of the most striking scenes of their married life is when Grandcourt forces Gwendolen to wear the diamonds that he gives her as a wedding gift, inherited by the wife from the mistress. In his sotto voce manner, he makes his imperious demand, giving Gwendolen no option of answering in the negative, displaying a scrupulously controlled aggression. It is in this muted, ominous scene that one gets a sense of Grandcourt's sadistic disposition. Even though he never exercises any physical violence upon Gwendolen in the foreground of the novel, there is an overwhelming sense of his ruthlessness and cruelty that forbids Gwendolen from any rebellion:

That white hand of his which was touching his whisker was capable, [Gwendolen] fancied, of clinging round her neck and threatening to throttle her; for her fear of him, mingling with the vague foreboding of some retributive calamity which hung about her life, had reached a superstitious point. (366)

It is this power that Gwendolen recognises and understands: "He delights in making the dogs and horses quail: that is half his pleasure in calling them his [...] It will come to be so with me; and I shall quail. What else is there for me?" (366). This domination is made even more sinister because there lurks in the power Grandcourt commands, a hint of sexual perversity. His humiliation of Gwendolen had taken on an obviously sexual aspect with her unwilling donning of the diamonds that had been in possession of his mistress, Mrs Lydia Glasher, who had then passed them on to Gwendolen as a venomous curse of marital unhappiness. The 'poisoned gems' (303) that fall in a cascade from her fingers, scatter like shards of broken glass, fragmenting her into multiple images: 'She

could not see the reflections of herself then: they were like so many women petrified white' (303), and bring on a fit of hysteria. But they do go on to adorn her neck, her ears, her hair, in spite of all her resistance. Significantly, it is Grandcourt himself who fastens the diamond studded choker around her neck with his own hands.

Being the cynosure of all eyes as the radiant bride at the new year's eve ball, glittering in a profusion of diamonds, provides her with no pleasure. We are told that if a magic mirror had showed her this scene a year previously, she would have felt a pleasurable triumph, but is now surprised at her lack of joy. Even though the setting in which she had envisioned herself has concretised, the dynamics of the relationship in which she considered herself to have the upper hand has changed dramatically. Conscious of 'an uneasy, transforming process – all the old nature shaken to its depths, its hopes spoiled, its pleasures perturbed, but still showing wholeness and strength in the will to reassert itself' (362), she no longer feels inclined to kiss her image in the mirror (195, 363). Just as poor Hetty finds a companion peering out of the mirror, so too does Gwendolen look at herself, 'not in admiration, but in a sad kind of companionship' (369), as she turns towards Daniel Deronda, finding in him a spiritual guide. Interestingly, in her interactions with him she tries to submerge her appearance rather than bring it into relief. While in her relationship with Grandcourt she exists exclusively at the level of surface, appearances being all-important, her increasing familiarity and dependence on Daniel parallels her movement inwards.

Before the secretly arranged meeting with Daniel in her husband's absence, uneasy and agitated, she paces the room like a trapped animal, 'walk[ing] about the large drawing-room like an imprisoned dumb creature, not recognising herself in the glass panels, not noting any object around her in the painted gilded prison' (504). This image of confinement is made even more powerful and evocative of her state of mind by the way in which it is multiplied on the very walls that enclose her, her mirrored figure proliferated and fragmented to a claustrophobic height. This sense of entrapment within reflections of her own person, reflections that had at one point given her great self-delight, is intensified as she sails in the Mediterranean sea with Grandcourt. This is his means of punishing her for her rebellious spirit, for her rendezvous with Daniel, and for her evident disdain for himself. In close proximity to no one but her husband, Gwendolen's quarantine is complete. Her luxurious cabin fitted to perfection, smelling of delicious cedar, hung with silk, covered in soft cushions, and paradoxically expanded with mirrors

becomes her cloister. Surrounded by an expanse of sea with no land in sight, and sequestered within quarters whose mirrors rather than tempting her to narcissism reproduce and reduce her to a sum of manifold fractured pieces, she feels absolutely Grandcourt's despotism. Gwendolen thoroughly realises on the 'plank-island of a yacht' (573) how fully she had sold herself to Grandcourt in return for the maintenance of her mother, and he made her feel like one of his possessions, 'look[ing] at Gwendolen with his narrow, immovable gaze, as if she were part of the complete yacht; while she, conscious of being looked at, was exerting her ingenuity not to meet his eyes' (575).

Helena Michie in her study on Victorian honeymoons remarks that honeymoons in fiction function as a powerful metonymy for marital breakdown given that 'the wedding journey came to represent a geographical and psychological site for the transformation from single to married subject, a time and place for the shifting of bodily and geographic coordinates against maps and expectations'.⁹ It was supposed to accomplish the 'difficult cultural work of sexual reorientation: for women, from a female body indicatively singular, virginal, and asexual to a body perhaps desiring and legibly sexual'.¹⁰ She goes on to show that this gendered nominal transformation was often figured as a rebirth or, with only a slight shift in valence, as a death. The associated loss of self that Michie is gesturing towards is what comes to the fore in Gwendolen's soured wedding trip.

Multiplied in mirrors

Hetty and Gwendolen are both women who occupy spaces crowded with mirrors that seem to endlessly produce reflections of them, entrapping them within various versions of their selves. Significantly, these mirror images are often compared to, or framed in the manner of painterly depictions where the modelled women are envisaged by an outward gaze. In mirroring themselves then, they internalise the spectator, themselves becoming the appreciative observer they posture for in preparation for the real one. Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley* too is placed within a lavish boudoir that is cocooned with mirrors. Phoebe, her maid, describes the room to her suitor, boasting of its splendour: "you should see my lady's rooms - all pictures and gilding, and great looking-glasses that

⁹Helena Michie, 'Victorian Honeymoons: Sexual Reorientations and the "Sights" of Europe', *Victorian Studies* Vol. 43, No. 2 (2001), p. 234. Michie expands her argument in her later book *Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

stretch from the ceiling to the floor”’ (31). The descriptions of the physical spaces that she inhabits are at least as crucial as descriptions of the woman herself. Not only is she insulated in cold likenesses of herself, but she is also enclosed within the extravagant paraphernalia of a decadent lifestyle. Her private rooms are suffocatingly teeming with things, all of which have connotations far beyond their own materiality, all of them commenting on her self-indulgent, flagrant nature.

When George Talboys and Robert Audley enter her dressing room through the secret passage, they step into a glittering other-world:

The atmosphere of the room was almost oppressive from the rich odours of perfumes in bottles whose gold stoppers had not been replaced. A bunch of hothouse flowers was withering upon a tiny writing-table. Two or three handsome dresses lay in a heap upon the ground, and the open doors of a wardrobe revealed the treasures within. Jewellery, ivory-backed hair-brushes, and exquisite china were scattered here and there about the apartment (70).

This synthetic artificiality of Lady Audley’s room is strikingly different from anything in Eliot, as is the disheveled sensuality of this description. The dressing room, an intensely private feminine space, here becomes an undisguised metonym for Lady Audley’s body, relating it tangibly to a voracious consumerist appetite. This indiscriminate jumble of used objects and useless luxury is multiplied in the mirrors that Phoebe had talked of, multiplying also its threatening implications of a festering, indisciplined sexuality.

Associated with light, mirrors lit up dark rooms, lightened thick walls, simulated window frames, and resembled precious jewellery in their elegant gem-encrusted frames. As Melchior-Bonnet argues, they invaded household decor and transformed furniture throughout the eighteenth century, and by the beginning of the nineteenth, were indispensable as household items - they gave light to surfaces, even replacing paintings and tapestries to a large extent. By the nineteenth century, the full-length mirror had acquired the status of a commonplace item, its frame becoming more subdued, and blending into the home’s interior decor. The cheval glass and the pier glass had become democratised, and amongst the usual furniture, the mirrored armoire reigned supreme, ‘an emblem of affluence and prosperity [...] Its solid mass spread light throughout a room, doubling bourgeois opulence’.¹¹ Ultimately mirrors conquered urban interiors because they offered what such places lacked most - space. But at the same time, this space was just

¹¹Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 94.

an illusion, a reflective, virtual world. Also, the visual effect thus produced altered the equilibrium between empty and full spaces. Nineteenth century writers seem to be acutely aware of the anxieties that this 'glassworld' could potentially reveal, and so the mirrors that enclose Hetty and Lady Audley are distinctly the mirrors of an earlier period, mirrors that were renowned for their frames and borders, that strikingly isolate and imprison the reflections that they create.

In another scene much later in the novel, this descriptive strain is further explored: 'My lady's fairy-like embroideries of lace and muslin, rainbow-hued silks, and delicately-tinted wools littered the luxurious apartment; while the looking-glasses, cunningly placed at angles and opposite corners by an artistic upholsterer, multiplied my lady's image, and in that image reflected the most beautiful object in the enchanted chamber' (291). In this gilded setting, Lady Audley herself has become the crowning piece of art amidst the long catalogue of other items. Once more it is the painterly image that is invoked to render a graphic quality to the portrait:

If Mr. Holman Hunt could have peeped into the pretty boudoir, I think the picture would have been photographed upon his brain to be reproduced by-and-by upon a bishop's half-length for the glorification of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. My lady in that half-recumbent attitude, with her elbow resting on one knee, and her perfect chin supported by her hand, the rich folds of drapery falling away in long undulating lines from the exquisite outline of her figure, and the luminous rose-colored firelight enveloping her in a soft haze, only broken by the golden glitter of her yellow hair. Beautiful in herself, but made bewilderingly beautiful by the gorgeous surroundings which adorn the shrine of her loveliness. Drinking-cups of gold and ivory, chiseled by Benvenuto Cellini; cabinets of buhl and porcelain, bearing the cipher of Austrian Marie-Antoinette, amid devices of rosebuds and true lovers' knots, birds and butterflies, cupidons and shepherdesses, goddesses, courtiers, cottagers and milkmaids; statuettes of Parian marble and biscuit china; gilded baskets of hothouse flowers; fantastical caskets of Indian filagree-work; fragile teacups of turquoise china, adorned by medallion miniatures of Louis the Great and Louis the Well-beloved, Louise de la Vallière, and Jeanne Marie du Barry; cabinet pictures and gilded mirrors, shimmering satin and diaphanous lace; all that gold can buy or art devise had been gathered together for the beautification of this quiet chamber in which my lady sat listening to the moaning of the shrill March wind and the flapping of the ivy leaves against the casements, and looking into the red chasms in the burning coals. (291 - 292)

Again, the apartment is described in phraseology that is deeply sexual and the space as such seems to be at the core of Lady Audley's being. Stretched out amongst all the exotic luxury that surrounds her, she becomes one with the commodities. In fact, the room reads like the vast Parisian department stores that Melchior-Bonnet refers to in her book. The glitter of reflected lights and the sumptuous display of a miscellany of objects provokes associations of shop windows and the tactile, sensual desire they produce. The wide manufacture of glass and mirrors in the nineteenth century had led to the creation of a shopping paradise where 'merchandise was multiplied by mirrored reflections so as to incite desire'.¹² It is this sense of an unending array of objects, all proliferated by the glass that decorates the room, that Braddon seems to be evoking.

Along with mirrors that seductively multiplied the displayed object as well as the desire for it, plate glass windows were also crucial to the development of the department store.¹³ Isobel Armstrong argues that the transparent pane of glass, as both medium and barrier, creates an aura of glamour and duplicity. But in the arena of the marketplace, '[t]he commercialized window offers public access to spectacle and display and a fantasmatic vicarious ownership of its contents'.¹⁴ This idea then suggests a greater agency for the woman for she is not only the object on display but is herself cast in a spectatorial, actively consumerist role where the act of looking itself is constructed as a pleasure. However, the department store not only provided a new visual spectacle of merchandise, it also proffered a tactile experience, providing an unprecedented proximity to the goods. It is perhaps Lady Audley's undisguised desire for luxury, her promiscuous melange of things, her overt and intimate identification with them, and her adept understanding of

¹²Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 98.

¹³For more on department stores, see William R. Leach, 'Transformations in a Culture of Consumption: Women and Department Stores, 1890 - 1925', *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 71, No. 2 (Sep., 1984); Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008; Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

¹⁴Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830 - 1880*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. p. 7. In Wilkie Collins' *Armada*, when making inquiries about the whereabouts of the beautiful, red-headed Lydia Gwilt, clues lead Allan and his lawyer friend to a strange building where she had been dropped off by a coach driver. Questioning him, they find it is the shock that the establishment's shop windows have nothing to display that makes the site memorable to the man, giving it a mysterious, threatening air. The shop windows were crucial advertisement for they formed the most immediate external appeal, so by having empty display cases, a void behind the glamour of glass, the indication is towards the practice of some suspicious trade. There is something dishonest about the use of an iconography of desire without content.

'the erotics of multiple reflection'¹⁵ that makes her such a potent sexual threat. It is these qualities that link the public space of the department store and the private space of Lady Audley's boudoir, the superfluity of objects becoming the most obvious clue to the secrecy that it conceals. Her self-adornment, self-mirroring, and ornamented interiors are however not a symptom of her lack of control, but on the contrary, they are signs of her economic manipulation and class ambition that threaten to upset the status quo, while also scandalously laying bare the ideologies they rest upon. Lucy's hyper-femininity that imprints every mirrored surface and every overstuffed room is then just a masquerade, a careful production, that she herself recognises in her own comparison to Phoebe, as well as in the ease with which she can find a woman to play her as she ostensibly lies on her deathbed. The existence of these lookalikes indicates her questionable authenticity, and the proliferated mirrorings of Lady Audley only heighten the sense of a secret at the core of her identity; the simplicity of the real vanishing before the multiplicity of the artificial. The more images and reflections there are, the more deeply buried the secret will be. Such scrutiny only makes the invisible retreat further behind layers of bourgeois domesticity. As Melchoir-Bonnet puts it in another context, '[t]he mirror will always be haunted by what is not found there'.¹⁶

The figure of Lady Audley in fact embodies a complex knot of contemporary anxieties about femininity. The sensation novel was increasingly being talked of as an addictive, narcotic substance, particularly corruptive of feminine morals and domestic stability. Published in 1863, a year after the appearance of *Lady Audley's Secret*, Henry Mansel's essay 'Sensation Novels' accused sensation writers of 'supply[ing] the cravings of a diseased appetite'.¹⁷ As Lysack argues, 'by midcentury, the popular, periodical, and medical press had begun identifying, classifying, and pathologizing new shopping disorders that ranged from idle browsing [...] to outright shoplifting or kleptomania', and as a result, the bourgeois interior became a space where 'the compulsive desires of the disorderly shopper and her serial relationship to commodities were rearranging social relations and the relations

¹⁵Ibid., p. 100.

¹⁶Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 273.

¹⁷Henry Mansel, 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 113, No. 226 (April 1863), p. 483. This is a review of 24 recent sensation novels including Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* and *Aurora Floyd*, and Wilkie Collins' *No Name*. Mansel sees Braddon as an author of real power 'who is capable of better things than drawing highly-coloured portraits of beautiful fiends and fast young ladies burdened with superfluous husbands' (241). Though his argument characterises this kind of literature as a disease, as a grotesque idol, a delusion and a folly, seeing his own role as that of the protesting preacher, his examination of these novels hints at the same covert readerly pleasure that he is at pains to dismiss and label improper.

of objects to the self'.¹⁸ Lady Audley's exaggerated Pre-Raphaelite portrait and unsettling accumulation of things are then a 'textual kleptomania' that attests to the extent of the acquired, artificial nature of her femininity. What then lies at the centre of the menace she epitomises is the more generalised idea that 'the fictive self produced through consumer disorders points to the constructedness of gender and class and how neither is formed prior to the operations of commodity exchange'.¹⁹ In registering these 'rogue desires' of the compulsive shopper and her 'serial consumption', Lady Audley's characterisation offers the possibility for the production of new forms of 'mobile identities and pleasures'.²⁰

Her narcissism takes on a demonic, heathen aspect and her almost malign power derives specifically from the mirror where she first discovered her beauty and began to see it as a 'right divine, a boundless possession' (293). The looking-glass becomes the site upon which the allegorical duel between good and evil is performed, taking on the easy manichaeism of a medieval morality play. But the insatiable appetite that she was accused of is not the absence of discipline, but its correlative. 'Organized around poles of compulsion and restraint, Victorian middle-class femininity has often been characterised as [...] a system of oppositions that circulate and exchange in a regulatory fashion'.²¹ Lady Audley then is no exception, and the moment of narcissistic self-realisation is also the originary moment of a strategy of social ambition, for this is the juncture when 'the three demons of Vanity, Selfishness, and Ambition had joined hands and said, "This woman is our slave; let us see what she will become under our guidance"' (294). All her 'frivolous, feminine sins' (293) are traced to this and it seems obvious that she should surround herself with the objects from which her power derives, constituting and magnifying that central self while also inevitably and inescapably getting trapped within those self created illusions. So in spite of all the agency she possesses, she eventually loses mastery over those very goods that had helped her form her subjectivity, and though she greedily tries to secrete as many items as possible amongst her silken dresses and fine linen on leaving Audley Court, falling from textual to literal kleptomania, all she is left with are cheap counterfeits.

Banished to a remote sanatorium in a forgotten Belgian city, Lady Audley's trappings of gold give way to gaudy imitations. Her new apartments are a poor mimic of her stately rooms, dismal, dreary, lit by a single candle:

¹⁸Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy*, p. 46.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 47.

²⁰Ibid., p. 48.

²¹Ibid., p. 4.

This solitary flame, pale and ghostlike in itself, was multiplied by paler phantoms of its ghostliness, which glimmered everywhere about the rooms; in the shadowy depths of the polished floors and wainscot, or the window-panes, in the looking-glasses, or in those great expanses of glimmering something which adorned the rooms, and which my lady mistook for costly mirrors, but which were in reality wretched mockeries of burnished tin. (382)

The carefully hidden seams of gender fabrication are unravelled as the drama played out in the mirrored surfaces shows her angelic femininity to be a theatrical construct. The mirrors themselves give way to tin, suggesting that the exposure has made the mirror powerless as well as the sense that she no longer possesses the ability to recreate that ideal.

The centrality of mirrors to self-fabrication is played out even in the fashion



(a) 'The Fashions', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (January 1868). (b) 'The Fashions', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (January 1871).

Figure 9: Fashion plates from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1868 & 1871).

plates of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. Each issue of the magazine intended for middle class women included several articles on current fashion, new

hair styles, and dress patterns. There was also a coloured fashion plate that accompanied every edition, and was marketed as the unique feature of the magazine. Most of these pictures figured two women and a young girl, adorned in different clothes suited to different occasions - a ball gown, a walking outfit, a visiting dress. In two of these fashion plates, one from 1868 and one from 1871, this group of young women are placed around large, ornately framed mirrors. In the 1868 image, one of the women gazes reverently into the mirror over the mantelpiece, her hands clasped at her breasts, with an aura of self-admiration that echoes that of the young lady in Egg's painting. In the 1871 print, all three figures are arranged in front of a full length mirror, with one of the women bending over the little girl, tidying her crown of flowers. But an even more intriguing image is a fashion plate from 1873. In this picture, the two women are represented not against the background of a fashionable interior but in a millinery shop, where they are in the middle of making a purchase. With the salesgirl leaning over the table, the opulent display of ribboned hats, the framed mirror at the back, and the look of pleasurable awe on the face of the woman on the right as she feels the lilac trimming of a dainty, feathered piece, the air is that of a luxurious, languid femininity. The women then are not just presenting the fashions of the day for the consumption of the readers of the magazine, but they themselves are consumers of the same objects that they purvey. This fashion plate then is emblematic of the complex relations between the painted and the reflected image, femininity, and consumerism that are crucial to *Lady Audley's Secret*.

So persistent is this mirror compulsion that when a looking-glass cannot be found by Mrs Durbeyfield in Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), she improvises by converting a window into one:

As the looking-glass was only large enough to reflect a very small portion of Tess's person at one time, Mrs Durbeyfield hung a black cloak outside the casement, and so made a large reflector of the panes, as it is the wont of bedecking cottagers to do.²²

This is the domestic scene that precedes the departure of Tess to The Chase, the home of the d'Urbervilles whom the Durbeyfield family mistakenly believe to be their rich relations. Summoned by a note supposedly written by the invalid Mrs d'Urberville, Mrs Durbeyfield tries to dress up Tess befittingly in a show

²²Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), ed. Michael Irwin, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2000. p. 41. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.



Figure 10: 'The Fashions', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (January 1873).

of misplaced motherly pride. The makeshift mirror here gives utterance to the poverty of the family, their status as humble country people rather than a middle class urban family, who cannot afford the pier glasses that reflect Gwendolen and Lady Audley in all their glory. But this scene condenses and accentuates the relationship between mirrors and windows that the other novels gesture towards. While mirrors suggest entrapment within inscribed versions of femininity, within selves that are all appearance and no depth, windows offer fantasies of hope and escape. To be enclosed behind a window pane suggests interiority and privacy, but at the same time the outward gaze conveys a desire for and a claim to the space that lies beyond its limits. Talking about what she terms the 'hiatus of the window', Armstrong writes: 'Always the source of anxiety, it is *the* disputed space of the century. The lyrical moment of the gaze from the window discloses contrary states'.²³ Looking at some of these 'window moments', she sees the window as a textual aperture, an inlet into real and imagined space. The window-mirror then is a doubly hermeneutic space in this incident: '[b]ecause the panes are both a window and a mirror, they suggest that Tess is embarking on a double journey into the world and into herself'.²⁴ Glass being both avenue and obstacle, it offers the misleading possibility of making an unbroken transit from the interior to the exterior, from the self to what lies outside of it. But at the same time, as looking-glass, it offers the idea of the self as object, subject to limits.

Washing Tess's hair and arranging it such that it made her seem more woman than the child she really was, Hardy uses the same painterly idiom for Mrs Durbeyfield that seems to run through these mirror moments. As she completes her ministrations, '[h]er mother's pride in the girl's appearance led her to step back, like a painter from his easel, and survey her work as a whole' (41). Mrs Durbeyfield is truly pleased when she sees Alec d'Urberville come to fetch Tess in a spruce gig. But suddenly feeling despondent once she's alone, she tells her husband that this opportunity was a good chance for Tess if she played her trump card right.

"What's her trump card? Her d'Urberville blood, you mean?"

"No, stupid; her face - as 'twas mine." (44)

Interestingly, Tess is the only one who seems to be absolutely unaware of her appeal. Angel, Alec, and all the other men who encounter Tess are struck by her appearance so much so that nearly all the misfortune that befalls her is repeatedly blamed on her own looks. Taking cue from Alec who attributes his desire for her

²³Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 7.

²⁴La Belle, *Herself Beheld*, p. 7.

as being provoked by her voluptuous beauty, she herself begins to curse her face, a process of self-chastisement that ends in a disturbing scene of self-mutilation that prefigures her eventual fate. Like Gaskell's Ruth who is also a young innocent, unaware of her charms, and seduced by a rich, worldly-wise young man, Tess is never fully able to come to terms with her own physicality. They form the other end of the spectrum that began with Hetty, Gwendolen and Lady Audley. Women who are unable to realise the significance of their own beauty need to learn the importance of mirrors just as the women who are transfixed by their looking-glass need to look beyond them. Both are equally unable to embody their full potential and thus fail as heroines whose careers chart an unproblematic upward progress, although Ruth is exceptionally redeemed by the novel's conclusion.

Resisting the looking-glass; inward reflections

Brontë's *Villette* (1853) and *Jane Eyre* (1847) too centre around heroines whose identities are shaped by a series of such mirror moments. *Villette's* Lucy Snowe is constructed as a heroine who steadily refuses to be framed by any mirrors, resisting thus the possibility of constructing a visual self. This turning away is troubling because she refuses to allow the possibility of contiguous selves of psychological interiority and physical exteriority. She instead views physicality with a kind of corporeal disgust that manifests itself in her attitude to Ginevra's open, self-congratulatory narcissism and her revulsion at the sight of Cleopatra's flagrant sexuality. Visiting a picture gallery, she finds herself in front of a painting that was obviously considered the queen of the collection:

It represented a woman, considerably larger, I thought, than the life. [...] She was, indeed, extremely well fed: very much butcher's meat - to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids - must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh. She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed round her; she appeared in hearty health, strong enough to do the work of two plain cooks; she could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of abundance of material - seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery - she managed to make inefficient raiment. Then, 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. On referring to the catalogue, I found that this notable production bore name 'Cleopatra'.²⁵

What Lucy finds most offensive about Cleopatra is her Junoesque, full figured body and the disarranged, chaotic condition of her room. This 'wretched untidiness' is comparable to the 'elegant disorder' (70) of Lady Audley's dressing room, rehearsing the same long-standing link between messy interiors, excessive ornament, and voracious female desire, in this case peculiarly gastronomic. Featured in a semi-domestic setting, Cleopatra is synonymous with the disorderly sensation heroine and her disruptive, passionate impulses. However, equally repulsive to Lucy is the opposite stereotype of the angel of the house, whose similarly synthetic character resides at the heart of the home. This is the model that M. Paul Emanuel seems to advocate when he leads her to a set of four pictures painted in a remarkably 'flat, dead, pale and formal' style (277). Having discovered Lucy in the presence of the 'huge, dark-complexioned, gypsy-queen' (276), he ungraciously ushers her to these tableaux more suitable to a woman's gaze. These are formed of a young girl at a church door (ungenerously labelled by Lucy to be 'a most villanous [sic] little precocious she-hypocrite' (277)), a veiled bride kneeling at a prie-dieux, a youthful mother with a baby, and a widow in deep mourning with a little girl. Lucy's conclusion is definitive:

All these four 'Anges' were grim and grey as burglars, and cold and vapid as ghosts. What women to live with! insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities! As bad in their way as the indolent gypsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers. (278)

The ideal that Lucy then aims for is that of an intellectual, psychologically complex woman, formed entirely out of non-visual resources, distinct from both the sensual and the angelic model, both of which rely on an iconography of visual signifiers. The paintings she chooses to look at in preference to the heavy bodied Cleopatra and the ghostly angels are delicately coloured still life paintings that personify her own desire for stillness and interiority. Lucy's self-identity is constructed through a negotiation between women whose types are represented by Ginevra and Paulina. She disdains Ginevra as entirely fleshly and uncerebral, representative of an indolent, over-ripe corpulence. While she herself is bent on

²⁵Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Tony Tanner, London: Penguin Books, 1979. pp. 275 - 276. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

paring herself to the very minimum, reaching the essence of herself, Ginevra is the physical manifestation of all that Lucy has to deny herself in order to achieve that level of self-determination. She physically starves herself as she gives morsels of her food to Ginevra, simultaneously bountiful and disgusted.

Paulina, on the other hand, is the child-woman/ woman-child who is forever grown-up and womanly, and yet always childishly asexual. Mute, modest and decorous, little Polly is as physically diminutive as Ginevra and Cleopatra are large. Emotionally and intellectually underdeveloped, she too comes under Lucy's critical scrutiny, though in terms less harsh. Even as a child, when Lucy first meets her, Paulina is a gem of domesticity, in the manner of the 'anges', 'never kindling once to originality' (81) when alone, but waking up to a sense of her responsibility with the entrance of a man who would need her feminine attentions. Then she would busy herself in preparing tea, arranging favorite treats, making soothing conversation, before retiring to a corner seat with her work box and her doll millinery. The drawing room is Paulina's place of retreat - 'in which calm and decorated apartment she was fond of being alone, and where she could be implicitly trusted, for she fingered nothing, or rather soiled nothing she fingered' (87). This presents an obvious contrast to Cleopatra's threatening disorder, but it is also in opposition to Lucy's self-sufficiency, a private retreat into the self that she consciously and consistently creates through the novel.

These oppositional characters and painted others act as doubles that are as important to her self-formation as her mirrorings. Mirrors, in fact, occupy a strange, elusive space in *Villette*, and disclose the paradoxical anxiety of non-reflection and hyper-reflexivity that Victorian literature is replete with. The looking-glass is put to different uses by the women in the novel - Ginevra uses it with narcissistic purpose to make Lucy admire her beauty and loathe her own plainness; Madame Beck uses her little oval mirror, cleverly placed in a window recess, to spy on the those walking in the garden of her 'Pensionnat de Demoiselles'; and for Lucy it generates 'the poetics of remembrance'.²⁶

A pivotal scene of recognition and transformation lies at the heart of the novel. Following her spiritual exhaustion and bodily collapse after her confession to a Catholic priest, Lucy awakes in 'an unknown room in an unknown house' (238). 'A gilded mirror filled up the space between two windows, curtained amply with blue damask. In this mirror I saw myself laid, not in bed, but on a sofa. I looked spectral; my eyes larger and more hollow, my hair darker than was

²⁶Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 239.

natural, by contrast with my thin and ashen face' (238). As Lucy begins to look around, the spectral self gives way to an even more disconcerting spectral space. The furniture, the worked covers of the foot-stools and the chairs, the miniatures on the mantelpiece, the relics of a diminutive tea-service, and the elaborate pencil drawings by a school-girl all take on an unsettling familiarity. In her febrile imagination, all these objects seem to possess a ghostly reality, and the rediscovered past of Bretton begins to congeal before her: 'ten years ago shone reflected in that mirror' (241). Even as Lucy recognises her own self in the mirror, there is an acute disconnection because the articles reflected within it belong to a different temporality. The mirror lulls her into another parallel spatial and temporal dimension, that leads to more entangled dramas of identification and alienation. As Carlisle argues, '[t]o return to the past, as Lucy literally does here, is to journey into a world that is spectral because it is dead, a world that calls into question the stability and substantiality of one's identity'.²⁷

Having got over this primal confrontation with a past identity, Lucy begins to enjoy the asylum that the relocated bedroom at La Terrasse provides. In its second appearance, the bedroom mirror shows a 'lyrical, submarine space of retreat and reverie':²⁸

My calm little room seemed somehow like a cave in the sea. There was no colour about it, except that white and pale green, suggestive of foam and deep water; the blanched cornice was adorned with shell-shaped ornaments, and there were white mouldings like dolphins in the ceiling-angles. Even that one touch of colour visible in the red satin pincushion bore affinity to coral; even that dark, shining glass might have mirrored a mermaid. When I closed my eyes, I heard a gale, subsiding at last, bearing upon the house-front like a settling swell upon a rock-base. I heard it drawn and withdrawn far, far off, like a tide retiring from a shore of the upper world - a world so high above that the rush of its largest waves, the dash of its fiercest breakers, could sound down in this submarine home, only like murmurs and a lullaby. (255)

This mythic, dream-like place is where she begins to take possession of her unconscious, and carve out an original identity outside the ocular selves that she turns away from. The room is an echo of the incident at the art gallery where, after tiring of Cleopatra and before being steered to the 'anges', she moves to the

²⁷Janice Carlisle, 'The Face in the Mirror: *Villette* and the conventions of autobiography', *ELH*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (1979), p. 267.

²⁸Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 239.

modest paintings of fugitive still life: wild flowers, fruits, wood-nests, and 'casketing eggs that looked like pearls seen through clear green sea-water' (276). It is in this underwater imagery that Lucy uncovers and expands her interiority. The mirror is no longer the province of the 'spectral' self, but 'figures as a magical encounter with plenitude and experience remade'.²⁹ However, the eloquent language of this passage is itself a warning against the seductive and potentially dangerous powers of memory. Carlisle argues that '[l]ike other Victorian descriptions of the past, this passage is an image of a withdrawal that is also a regression. In the womblike 'submarine home' of memory, one is protected from the storms of adult experience; there the sound of conflict is magically transformed into a lullaby'.³⁰ But conversely, Armstrong contends that the healing oceanic lullaby 'recognizes the regressive comfort and protection of the self-consciously dressed and feminized room [...]. Yet it is also the matrix of the imagination, transforming the habitat of a middle-class bedroom and the 'exhibits' of the domestic interior [...] into oneiric objects'.³¹ So, elusive and temporary though it may be, the reflected room that the mirror makes visible provides Lucy with the security in which she can discover a small vision of hope.

Foucault in talking about utopias and heterotopias locates the mirror in a heavily potent zone between the two. While utopias are unreal places, perfected inversions of present societies, heterotopias are real places - they are 'counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites [...] are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.³² The mirror is then a 'mixed, joint experience':

The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed towards me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come

²⁹Ibid., p. 239.

³⁰Carlisle, 'The Face in the Mirror', p. 268.

³¹Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 240.

³²Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces' (1967), trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, p. 24.

back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.³³

It is within this heterotopic mirrorscape that Lucy manages to find the wholeness and stable selfhood that she had been in search of. She inhabits the placeless utopia of the underwater cave, seeing herself in the mirrored space rather than in the actual room, seemingly having crossed the boundary of the mirror and stepped into its catoptric territory. In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), this is exactly what happens. Wondering about the 'Looking-glass House' that lies on the other side of the mirror hanging in the drawing room, over the fireplace, Alice speculates about what would happen were she to go through it. And as she speaks out loud to her kitten, the glass turns 'soft like gauze'³⁴ and she finds herself being drawn through it into a world where everything is the same, only going the other way. Melchoir-Bonnet discusses Foucault's idea of heterotopia with reference to Carroll's Alice novels, an exploration that is as relevant in the context of *Villette's* optic interstices. 'The dream of crossing through the mirror responds to a need for being reborn on the other side. It makes the fascinating hope of reconciling inside and outside, of living definitively on the side of fantasy, or the imaginary, [...] free from the weight of the real and the pressures of guilt. Another logic, the logic of dreams and desires, free of mimetic rivalry, dictates this "other" side. But the crossover is also transgression, [...] a route that is no longer marked by the boundaries of the real'.³⁵

Apart from being a constructive heterotopia that helps Lucy achieve a new insight into her own circumstances, and thus come to a realisation of her own desires, it is also a labyrinthine space that rejects linguistic communication and threatens the ability to distinguish fantasy and reality, bordering on an incipient insanity. And, as Carlisle indicates, the subterranean self-creation does give way to the self-castigating vigilance over fantasy that forms Lucy's private persona. She witnesses the fracture with her reflection when she catches a glimpse of herself

³³Ibid.

³⁴Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass* (1871), in *The Annotated Alice*, illus. John Tenniel, ed. Martin Gardner, rev. ed., Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 181.

³⁵Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 262.

in the mirror at the theatre, in the new pink dress: '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' (286). However, this balanced response is a measure of her psychic and emotional development. Having gone through the therapeutic retreat into her submerged self and found there some kernel of strength, she is momentarily competent to deal with the shock of sudden mirrorings.

A third encounter with the Bretton/ La Terrasse looking-glass takes place when Lucy is called by her godmother to spend the day after a long interlude in which she had had her drugged, hallucinatory, midnight trance - a heightened emotional state that had been prefigured in Vashti's explosive performance at the concert hall. Wanting to set her disordered hair straight and remove her shawl, she returns to what she now calls 'my own little sea-green room' (357), finding it lit by candles and a bright fire:

[A] tall waxlight stood on each side the great looking-glass; but between the candles, and before the glass, appeared something dressing itself - an airy, fairy thing - small, slight, white - a winter spirit. (357)

At this moment of returning hope, Lucy is utterly deprived of her reflection, replaced by a new vision. Whatever hopes she may have had of Graham are conclusively ended by the appearance of Paulina, who had once before displaced her in the Bretton family, and the mirror now rehearses the earlier moment of exclusion. It is no longer the utopia or the heterotopia where she could find an illusory, lost, undamaged selfhood. The Bretton household reveals itself as a place of concealed violence rather than guardianship and protection. Armstrong points out that the 'introduction of the Bretton interior occurs at the windowless centre of the novel - all its windows are shrouded and protected from the outside. It is the still "container" in a novel that is structured round the to and fro of outings, trips, walks, visits, entertainment, leisure events. A hyperactive scopic life - the look, the glance, the glimpse, the covert stare, the secret survey, the casual gaze, a libido of the eye, is at work in this promenading public world and an accompanying dialectic between the window and the mirror. The Bretton household, on the other hand, produces an enclosed and alienated gaze'.³⁶ Though it seems to present the 'stillness' that Lucy requires to rest her feverish imagination, and to gather her thoughts, she realises that it is more a space of sterility, than nurture. It is a place for preserving things, a domestic exhibition of displaced artefacts from an embalmed past.

³⁶Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 243.

The gilded mirror, the carpet of flowing arabesque, the wallpaper with an 'endless garland of azure forget-me-nots [that] ran mazed and bewildered amongst myriad gold leaves and tendrils' (238), and the scroll-couch present a scene of 'display, pattern, and texture whose subtext is a perverse double body'.³⁷ The deceptive setting of sanctuary turns out to be the zone where the contest between the specular and the speculative will be fought out. The discovery then is not just of a stable self, but a split self that will constantly clamour to break the sane facade. Dwelling on the curtained, covered, embroidered, ruffled, and upholstered veneer of the furniture, Lucy's wandering gaze on her first awakening 'intimate[s] something hidden behind or below the surface'.³⁸ Lucy Snowe's icy reticence involves a repression of memory and the mirror scenes then are a resurfacing of the submerged impulses that the household objects are secretly gesturing towards. Lucy's associations, doublings and identifications are the distinguishing characteristics of a narrative which constantly mirrors back the images of a suppressed emotional life, for 'the sin in *Villette* is not desire, but the repression of desire'.³⁹

Encountering specular selves

Whittling out this independent, individualistic femininity, with a correspondingly spare body, is the project of Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as well, but in this novel the heroine is less ambiguously successful. Jane's process of self-actualisation is heavily dependent on her attempts to carve out her own personal space, and recover a primeval union with nature. At the beginning of the novel, trying to hide from her aunt and her cousins, she retreats into a cosy enclave formed in the space between the folds of a scarlet curtain and the 'clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day' (14). It is thus 'shrined in double retirement' (14) that she finds some element of comfort. But the moment the glass turns reflective, forcing her to confront her own image, she is utterly unable to connect the reflection with her self.

Jane's first encounter with her mirror image has the same feverish, hallucinatory quality of Lucy's drugged stroll that precedes the displacement of her image by that of the 'airy, fairy' Paulina. Locked in the red room as punishment for her childish mutiny against her aunt and cousins (a curious inversion of her red hide-away), she is dwarfed by her surroundings: 'to my right hand there was the high,

³⁷Ibid., p. 245.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Carlisle, 'The Face in the Mirror', p. 284.

dark wardrobe, with subdued, broken reflections varying the gloss of its panels; to my left were the muffled windows; a great looking-glass between them repeated the vacant majesty of the bed and room' (21). Exploring her jail, she inadvertently crosses the looking-glass and her 'fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit' (21). Letting her imagination get carried away, she thinks of her reflection as the phantoms - half fairy, half imp - that inhabit her bedtime stories, and begins to fantasise about her uncle coming back from the grave to wreak retribution. The combination of the fascinating, dimly gleaming, mirror and a mysterious beam of light lead her to a hysterical panic attack.

In her chapter on liberating mirror moments in fiction, Jennijoy La Belle enthusiastically co-opts Jane as a 'mutineer against the mirror', one of the 'revolutionaries who rebel against the mirror as a primary tool of self-realization'.⁴⁰ She argues that Jane's inability to recognise herself as a child presages the later encounter with Bertha, and contends that '[b]y her primitive, even animal-like, sense of the otherness of her own image, Jane has taken a step, however unconscious, towards a radical freedom'.⁴¹ But this seems to be a willful misreading of the childhood scene - a nightmarish episode that leaves her in a fit of hysteria can hardly be seen as a joyous, emancipatory occasion. Rather, it is symptomatic of her fractured, fragile sense of self that cannot fathom its own external presence. As Gilbert and Gubar point out, her name is suggestive (as indeed are the names of other Brontë characters like the frigid Lucy Snowe, and the domesticated Paulina Home) - poor, plain, and little, Jane Eyre 'is invisible as air, the heir to nothing, secretly choking with ire'.⁴² Jane's sense of her physicality then reflects this inhibited self-consciousness, and her journey to complete selfhood and fulfilling love necessitates a coming to terms with her body and her appearance.

A mirror, after all, is not just an impassable, solidified surface, nor is it just a world of utopias and heterotopias. As the earlier analyses of Hetty, Gwendolen, and Lady Audley suggest, it is also 'a sort of chamber, a mysterious enclosure

⁴⁰La Belle, *Herself Beheld*, p. 137.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. p. 342.

in which images of the self are trapped,⁴³ and this idea seems to be present in *Jane Eyre*, at least to the adult narrator. The older, speaking Jane recognises the double imprisonment that she went through in the red room as a child. Gilbert and Gubar go on to argue that such narratives of imprisonment contain within them visions of escape, and the alternatives that recurrently haunt this text are escape through flight and escape through starvation. In the red room however, a third one presents itself - 'escape through madness'.⁴⁴ This view of the mirror as releasing a self that borders on the insane then seems to be a habitual trope that Brontë uses to open up the repressed female psyche to examination.

Migrating from Gateshead to Lowood, Jane finally arrives at Thornfield in her transition from girlhood to womanhood. Occupying the socially ambivalent position of a governess, it is in the rambling, stultifying mansion, surrounded by the moors that had been the site of her first meeting with Mr Rochester (a gothic episode where he takes her to be an otherworldly, elfin spirit), that she has to struggle once again to make that critical link between self and image. Crucially, her surroundings are pivotal to this search for self-reliance. Having managed to escape from suffocating, oppressive houses, she finds herself in an imposing old manor-house, with sturdy battlements, labyrinthine corridors leading to locked doors, 'mighty old thorn trees, strong, knotty, and broad as oaks' (114) and quiet hills embracing it in seclusion. It is this isolation that deceptively makes Jane think of it as a place of retirement and repose. But the tour that Mrs Fairfax gives of the uninhabited upper third storey suggests to Jane's mind a place of legends and ghost hauntings, and gives an inkling of the secret that lies buried beneath the layers of untouched dust. The rooms are dark and low, with an 'air of antiquity' (121), the 'imperfect light entering by their narrow casements' showing furniture discarded over the generations, chests with 'strange carvings of palm branches and cherubs' heads', stools with 'apparent traces of half-effaced embroidery', enclosed and shaded by 'wrought old English hangings crusted with thick work, portraying effigies of strange flowers, and stranger birds, and strangest human beings' (121). It is in this 'shrine of memory' (121) that she first hears that curious laugh - 'distinct, formal, mirthless' - that woke 'an echo in every lonely chamber' (122) though it originates in one.

Gilbert and Gubar posit that Victorian novels are densely populated with

⁴³Ibid., p. 340 - 341.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 341.

'maddened doubles function[ing] as social surrogates for docile selves',⁴⁵ and Bertha is the most potent of these doubles that Jane has to deal with. But before that climactic confrontation that takes place in the mirror, Jane has to deal with a less problematic double, and interestingly, the site of this initial assignation is formed at the intersection of the mirror and the painting. The rival here is Blanche Ingram. Feeling herself respond emotionally to her employer, and jealous of Blanche his supposed fiancée, Jane forces herself to look into a mirror and paint a faithful picture of herself. She then herself becomes her severest judge, the merciless spectator before whom she must lay out her little store of earthly charms. Talking to herself she says:

Listen, then, Jane Eyre, to your sentence: to-morrow, place the glass before you, and draw in chalk your own picture, faithfully; without softening one defect: omit no harsh line, smooth away no displeasing irregularity; write under it, "Portrait of a Governess, disconnected, poor, and plain."

Afterwards, take a piece of smooth ivory [...] mix your freshest, finest, clearest tints; choose your most delicate camel-hair pencils; delineate carefully the loveliest face you can imagine; paint it in your softest shades and sweetest hues, according to the description given by Mrs Fairfax of Blanche Ingram: remember the raven ringlets, the oriental eye;[...] portray faithfully the attire, ærial lace and glistening satin, graceful scarf and golden rose: call it "Blanche, an accomplished lady of rank." (183 - 184)

However, despite this reprimand to herself, she does go on to fall in love with Rochester, and he with her. Their love and the hope of wedded happiness makes her change her opinion of herself, finding for herself some measure of beauty in his adoration: 'I looked at my face in the glass, and felt it was no longer plain: there was hope in its aspect and life in its colour' (289). Having learned to see herself impartially in the mirror, emotionally detached from her mirror image, Jane forgets the hard acquired lesson when she falls in love with Rochester, forgetting too the plainness of her appearance.

It is at this moment of exceptional optimism that Jane's first visual encounter with Bertha takes place. Rochester's maddened, imprisoned, secret wife enters Jane's chamber in the middle of the night, and in a scene reminiscent of the oneiric imagery of the red room, she tears Jane's bridal veil in two. Describing her nightmarish vision to Rochester, the portrait developed is of an almost inhuman creature, Jane's very opposite in appearance:

⁴⁵Ibid., p. ix.

"[T]all and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back. I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight; but whether gown, sheet, or shroud, I cannot tell."

"[...] presently she took my veil from its place; she held it up, gazed at it long, and then she threw it over her own head, and turned to the mirror. At that moment I saw the reflection of the visage and features quite distinctly in the dark oblong glass." (317)

Bertha's dismorphic reflection in the garb of a bride, is a ghastly distortion of Jane's own self. 'It was a discoloured face - it was a savage face. [...] the lips were swelled and dark; the brow furrowed; the black eye-brows widely raised over the blood-shot eyes' (317). As the wedding draws closer, Jane's process of disassociation intensifies, and when she tries to think of her married self, all she sees is an unknown future lived by an unknown self arrayed in the expensive dresses chosen by Rochester against her entreaties. In this frightening series of bifurcations - Jane Eyre the governess splitting off from Jane Rochester the wife, the child Jane splitting off from the adult Jane, and the image of Jane weirdly separating from the body of Jane - it is hardly surprising to find a more menacing spectre, a 'vampyre' (317), sliding into Jane's room to rend and trample the wedding veil that is Rochester's gift to his future wife. Bertha acts both as reminder of that original self that is being subsumed by Rochester's overwhelming charisma, and as a cathartic release of Jane's long-repressed desires. Much like Vashti who becomes the other through whom Lucy's emotional agitation is dispersed, Bertha becomes the literalisation of Jane's psyche, surfacing every time that Jane feels her sense of self threatened. She is, in some sense then, Jane's 'truest and darkest double'.⁴⁶ However, this dismorphic self is so terrifying because its grotesque presence obliterates Jane's own reflection from the mirror.

This idea of the mirrored self who is the other also makes its way into the fashion plates of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, that I have discussed earlier. In these images, the two women often face each other, almost in the manner of mirror reflections. Standing face to face, their dress, gestures, posture and even physical features seem to be close echoes of each other, and as they reproduce consumerist desires in their audience, they seem to be reproducing themselves. There is no uniqueness, only simulation and the women seem to look at each other only to find distortions of their own selves. While Jane looks into the mirror to find the monstrous Bertha looking back at her, these pictures are closer to the scenes between Lady Audley and her maid Phoebe, where both look into

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 360.

the mirror at the toilette-table to find their own selves reflected in the visage of the other. In a strange elision, the self becomes the other and the other becomes the self. In the encounters between these women that are represented as icons of fashion, there seems to be a suggestion of the sororophobia that Michie outlines, a simultaneous expression of similarity and rivalry.



(a) 'The Practical Dress Instructor', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (November 1852). (b) 'The Practical Dress Instructor', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (October 1852).

Figure 11: Fashion plates from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1852).

This monstrous self/ other idea is what is played upon in Mary Elizabeth Coleridge's 'The Other Side of a Mirror' (1896) where the encounter with the specular self leads to a shocking and jarring emotional revelation. Here the mirror presents a split, an otherness that is eventually recognised as self and in this sense then, the glass becomes a form of schizophrenia. The looking-glass in this poem also takes on a more medieval inflection as a tool of divination, disclosing a subconscious self not recognised by the conscious mind: 'I sat before my glass one day,/ And conjured up a vision bare'.⁴⁷ The poem begins with a kind of

⁴⁷Valentine Cunningham, ed., *The Victorians: An Anthology of Poetry and Poetics*, Oxford:



(a) 'The Fashions', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (January 1877). (b) 'The January Fashions', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (January 1871).

Figure 12: Fashion plates from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (1871 & 1877)

manic, anarchic energy, which loses itself in a deformed image seething with silent agony. As it progresses, the woman enumerates the physiognomy of the image in language that makes the schism between the self and the reflection clear. Her identity is irreparably fragmentary, composed as it is of dismembered, disowned features: the face is 'bereft of loveliness' (l. 8), the hair forms a 'thorny aureole/ Of hard unsanctified distress' (ll. 11 - 12), her lips are 'parted lines of red,/ [...] the hideous wound/ In silence and secret bled' (ll. 14 - 16), her 'lurid eyes' (l. 19) are 'mad because [life's] hope was gone' (l. 21). In the last stanza, she cries out to her reflection: 'Shade of a shadow in the glass,/ O set the crystal surface free!' (ll. 25 - 26), with the poem ending is the stunned whisper of recognition: 'I am she!' (l. 30). The plea for freedom from the tyranny of the mirror is the plea of an enraged prisoner, a woman held captive by the power it holds. But this wish

Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p. 1003, ll. 1 - 2. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

for escape is fraught with dangers, and is bound to end in a fate as tragic as Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott', whose turning away from the mirror to the window leads to the curse that ends in her death. The breaking of the mirror, synonymous with the scattering of Gwendolen's casket of shimmering diamonds, signifies a loss of origin, a sense of vacillating identities, phantasms of being engulfed, of grasping sinuous spaces, and fears of powerlessness and dismemberment.

These anxieties are equally evident in Jane's forgetfulness in observing herself in a bride's apparel on the day of her wedding. Reminded by the maid of the odd lapse, she turns to the glass: 'I saw a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger' (321). This scene is eerily evocative of the childhood terror in the red room as well as the image of Bertha in the original wedding veil. The failure of self-recognition symbolises the failure to maintain an unfaltering self, and a balance of cautious restraint in the face of exacerbating concerns. The series of disconnections and the fact that she has to resort to her own hand-stitched veil presage Jane's flight. In order to retrieve a stable identity, she has to withdraw into her former self, call upon her former resources and forge a closer relationship with the openness that unalloyed nature offers before she can return to Rochester. The claustrophobic catoptric space of Thornfield Hall gives way to a sustaining, nurturing natural world that will heal her enough to enable a restorative, though painful, synthesis of the opposing impulses that the jealous rival represents.

While Jennijoy La Belle reads *Jane Eyre* as an unproblematic, optimistic vision of an 'expanding self-consciousness free from the mirror', as a revolt that generates the means of 'desynonymizing female madness and female freedom', and sees Jane triumphant, having converted the red-room experience 'from a sign of incipient madness into a prophesy of liberation,'⁴⁸ I construe the novel as working in more complex, ambiguous ways. It does not exist outside the poles of renunciation and narcissism that form the centripetal configuration presented by the mirror. Rather, Brontë is trying to find a way in which the only escape from it doesn't have to be through madness, and so she constitutes for Jane an identity based on an unbiased assessment of her physicality that doesn't bind her or reduce her to just that. Another problem with La Belle's analysis is that she sees the mirror as a substitute for men, and in doing so she reduces its significance. This notion is based on a simplistic view of Victorian patriarchy and the way in which it interacts with the prevailing conceptions of female beauty and fashion, and presumes that

⁴⁸La Belle, *Herself Beheld*, p. 140 - 141.

women do not look at other women or dress in order to be looked upon by their own sex.

Having said that, Jane does emerge as a more unambiguously triumphant heroine than Lucy; an ironic measure of her success being the fact that she becomes the wife of a blind Rochester, who necessarily must perceive her in non-visual terms. However, the novel ends not with the punishment of Rochester but with the hope of his returning sight, and the prospect that he has been re-educated, re-cultured to perceive femininity outside purely visual terms. Jane's explosive escape that ends in the burning down of Thornfield, the death of Bertha, and the physical deformity of Rochester is formulated as the correct decision - it is what gives her the room for visual and intellectual realignment that leads to the strengthening of her independent spirit, as well as providing her a new source of optical pleasure in the natural environment. Her return to Rochester is marked by a new dynamics. Jane is no longer the dependent governess, but an independent woman with an inheritance. With her returning self-confidence, she has an appetite again, as well as a life unfettered by closed interiors and eerie mirrors. In her domestic world, there are no such reflecting framed spaces isolating and imprisoning her disconnected image; if they do exist, it is in a parenthesis to the world she has made for herself.

Brontë's heroines, more than the others, seem to be grappling with the enigmatic doubts that the mirror produces. Part of its troubling quality lies in the fact that even though it is the reflector of the objects before it, it does not duplicate reality exactly. In the mirror, directions are interchanged, and the right becomes the left. Melchoir-Bonnet calls the looking-glass a disturbing object because it 'poses questions about image and resemblance; it returns an image that closely relates to, yet differs from, the reflected object itself. [...] At the same time both present and elsewhere, the perceived image has an unsettling ubiquity and depth, located at an uncertain distance. Looking into a mirror, an image for the most part seems to appear behind a solid screen, so that the observer may wonder if he is seeing the surface of the mirror or looking through it. The reflection creates the sensation of an ethereal world looming behind the mirror, inviting the eye to cross through it. Like a prism, the mirror can disrupt the field of vision because it hides as much as it shows'.⁴⁹

⁴⁹Melchoir-Bonnet, *The Mirror*, p. 101 - 102.

To put the conscious self in order and maintain its stability, both Jane and Lucy need to allow themselves to be led into a world of echoes and analogies that lie at the centre of the invisible subconscious before they can reach the visible conscious. Calling to mind catoptromancy, or divination by mirrors, which discloses (like dreams) that which escapes the visible, their most transformative moments have been those that bear a resemblance to something like insanity, something that borders on the margins of reason, calling upon fantasmic, oneiric language. The mirror then offers not just a reflection of superficial appearance, but an enigmatic and transfigured knowledge of self. It is a place of inversion from which the strangeness of an unknown face emerges, thus acting as an anamorphic vantage point into the self. But the looking is invested with numerous implications of Narcissus as well as Eve. In Christian allegories of sin, the mirror is a tool of the devil, the paraphernalia of witches, and '[a]s an instrument of both simulation and lust, [it] fed illusions of the mind and cupidity of the flesh'.⁵⁰ The woman who contemplates herself in the mirror does so with a gaze already infected, always guilty of and divided by the forbidden passions that counter everyday repressions.

The dialectic of female self-conception then is often signalled not by intense identification with the mirror image but by a rupture of that relationship. This failure to identify the self with its reflection has dimensions beyond the traumatic. For some fictive women, this alienation represents a desire, rather than a chasm, the longing for a means of self-definition substantially outside the visual world of the looking-glass. Frequently such women are unable to define any alternative to the mirror; the longing remains strongly felt but undirected - this is the case with Lucy and the novel's ending is rife with ambiguity because of the deeply fissured nature of selfhood. In this sense Brontë's women are very different from Eliot's. Eliot traces in these scenes a tragedy of self-consciousness - how agonisingly difficult it is for a woman such as Gwendolen to break away from defining herself through the mirror. These are not acts of successful liberation, but form the wrenching process of maturation that is the lot of most women. Those women who identify absolutely with the mirror are the ones who frequently find themselves endangered, while at the other extreme, those who fail in the formulation of that symbiotic link are the ones with an unsettled sense of self. This 'wilderness of disjointed relations among self, mirror, and world' present innumerable variant confrontations that are 'symptomatic of, and become synecdoches for, profoundly

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 187.

disorganized selves'.⁵¹

Isobel Armstrong posits a persuasive argument in her book about the nineteenth century as an era of public glass, where '[t]he gleam and luster of glass surfaces, reflecting and refracting the world, created a new glass consciousness and a language of transparency'.⁵² The glass panel, the mirror, and the lens combined and recombined to create a new semantics of glass, a scopic culture, and the possibility of a new world mediated by glass where Victorian modernities could play themselves out. However, it is also an object that penetrated the bourgeois home to become an important, enduring feature in its decor. Though it was increasingly used in public spaces like the department store and the coffee houses, it continued to belong to the closed spaces of intimacy, necessary to the discovery of the self, though bringing along new inflections from the public world.

⁵¹La Belle, *Herself Beheld*, p. 113.

⁵²Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, p. 1.

Chapter 5

Eloquent Hair and Excessive Meaning

To the eye of a man viewing it from behind, the nut-brown hair was a wonder and a mystery. Under the black beaver hat, surmounted by its tuft of black feathers, the long locks, braided and twisted and coiled like the rushes of a basket, composed a rare, if somewhat barbaric, example of ingenious art. One could understand such weavings and coilings being wrought to last intact for a year, or even a calendar month but that they should be all demolished regularly at bedtime, after a single day of permanence, seemed a reckless waste of successful fabrication.¹

The disorganised selves that were revealed in the disconnection played out between mirrors and the images they reflected, are also explored through the descriptions of women's hair in Victorian literature. It is this feature, so distinctively feminine, that I will be looking at in this chapter, engaging with the range of meanings it evokes while also linking it with attempts of self-fabrication that have been the continuing concern of the past pages.

Thomas Hardy's short story 'The Son's Veto' (1891) opens on an intriguing note with this sumptuous, seductive description of a woman's hair, evoking not just its beauty but also the labour that it demands. In Hardy's narrative, Sophy Twycott is a simple country girl who marries the much older vicar instead of her sweetheart, the gardener at the vicarage, and from then on leads a life that

¹Thomas Hardy, 'The Son's Veto' (1891), in *Life's Little Ironies* (1894), ed. Alan Manford, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 33. Hardy's story first appeared in the *Illustrated London News* Christmas number, in December 1891 and was then included in his collection of short stories *Life's Little Ironies*. All references will be to this latter edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

leaves her enough leisure in which to devise her 'cunning tress-weavings' (33). She passes fourteen years of her married life in being educated by her husband in the prerequisites of a lady and 'wast[ing] hours in braiding her beautiful hair' (38). Not surprisingly, she whiles away the long days of the subsequent years in widow's weeds, waiting for her son's visits, and later his permission to allow her to remarry, by 'weaving and coiling [her] nut-brown hair' (39). This Penelope-like metaphor in which the unending weaving and unweaving of the burial shroud is exchanged for an eternal plaiting, braiding, looping and entwining of hair parallels not just the monotony of Sophy's domestic life, the abject triviality of her actions, but also displays with a peculiarly palpable intensity the preoccupation of Victorian writers with hair.

Much of Victorian realism relies on detailed descriptions of outward appearances, the physiognomies of the characters being intrinsically linked to their 'real' inner selves, read as the externally interpretable signs of a private, perhaps subconscious, self. A woman's hair then becomes a text that explains her, possibly even more so than her dress or her gestures, which may be trained. While all clothing, whether intentionally or not, is an unmistakable kind of display, hair is a more nebulous category that exists in a liminal zone between the body natural and the body social. Since it is an extension of the body itself, it exudes a more organic sense of the true workings of a personality, but at the same time, it is a pliant, manageable feature that may be moulded into a chosen pattern. It functions as a kind of 'natural display' that is somehow more honest in what it reveals, and therefore more difficult to control, as well as to decipher correctly.

This fascination with 'reading' women's hair - unravelling its meaning, mining its symbolic value, using it as an extended metaphor for their inner motivations and as a synecdoche for their psyche - is evident in the kind of attention it receives in Victorian writing. Elisabeth G. Gitter, exploring the power of women's hair in the Victorian imagination, notes that '[t]here is scarcely a female character in Victorian fiction whose hair is not described at least perfunctorily, and often a woman's hair is described repeatedly and in considerable detail. The brown neatly combed heads of the virtuous governesses and industrious wives; the tangled, disorderly hair of sexually and emotionally volatile women like Hetty Sorrell and Catherine Earnshaw; the artfully arranged curls of the girl-women like Dora Spenslow Copperfield and Isabella Linton are all familiar, even conventional, elements in Victorian character description'.² These generous portrayals of blonde,

²Elisabeth G. Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', *PMLA*,

dark, auburn women, with curls, plaits or bands of straight hair become permeated with an abundance of meaning that goes beyond the descriptive fact to become crucial elements in reading not just the woman herself, but also various aspects of the novelistic world. Even as hair is impressed into a carefully created form, every stray curl that escapes from the tight coiffure, or every curl that is assiduously smoothened into it, taps into an expressive economy that is located outside the mere representation. It becomes a poignant point of insight into the internal mechanism of the character, which may run against the grain in which she is depicted by the writer, or seen by those who surround her.

In novels where these descriptions are in excess of the demands of realism, hair takes on its own semantic realm, moving from being a psychological and emotional landscape to something animate. It actively claims possession to a life of its own, becoming independent and energetic, at times aggressive, erotic and wild, at times potently, austere, elegant. This infusion of power and signification into hair further betrays it as something of a cultural obsession of the period - an obsession that finds its most curious manifestation in the hair jewellery that was so popular at the time. This was the jewellery of sentiment, and was particularly important in completing the mourning attire of the Victorian woman; the importance of feeling, the gentle pervasive nostalgia for the past, the devotion to the family, all finding expression in the highly regarded pieces. Brooches, pendants, necklaces, rings and watch-fobs were fashioned out of locks of hair of friends and family members, thereby tangibly supplementing the symbolic allusions of the relic by the corporeal presence of the fine strands. These were made professionally by hairworkers who advertised their services in popular magazines, touting the exquisiteness of their hair work, while also drawing upon the emotional component of the item.³ Even so, young women were often encouraged to learn the art of weaving and knotting hair into intricately designed *memento mori*, so as to make the article even more personalised, and to exclude the chance of being tricked by a dishonest jeweller into purchasing a stranger's lock of hair encased and enshrined into a thing of value, instead of that of the dear departed. In keeping with the whole attitude of displaying grief in a conspicuous ritual paradoxically codified as tasteful understatement, the designs of memorial hair jewellery were often elaborately funereal: weeping willows bending over a tomb being a particularly popular one.

Vol. 99, No. 5. (Oct., 1984), p. 941.

³John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, London: Studio Vista, 1971, p. 66 - 67.



Figure 13: Advertisement for 'Beetham's Capillary Hair Fluid', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (December 1876).

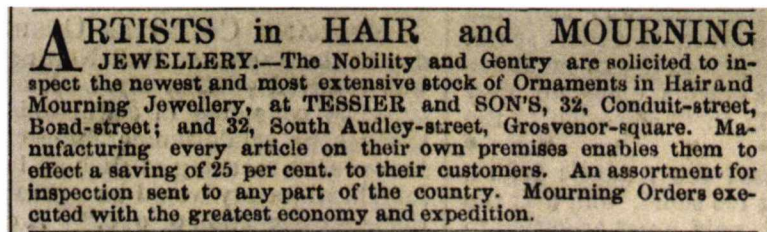


Figure 14: Advertisement for 'The Court Hair Destroyer', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (December 1874).

'[L]ittle blonde angel-head': the blonde women of Victorian fiction

Even as the middle class woman sat placidly by the fireplace twisting and threading strands of hair into wistful keepsakes, her own hair, a shining halo of golden ringlets, mythologised her as the ideal of domestic beauty. Numerous Victorian novels and poems are dotted with these golden-haired women, who glide from page to page, conferring dimpled smiles and good-natured offices, enchanting everyone with their radiant aureole. George Eliot's Lucy Deane in *The Mill on the Floss* is one such 'pretty child' with a 'row o' curls round her head, an' not a hair out o' place' (13). She is the one on whom Mrs Tulliver bestows admiring, covetous looks, constantly comparing her to her own dark-haired daughter, who is urged to emulate her cousin's decorous, winning ways. It is no wonder that the initial relationship between Lucy and Maggie is coloured by envy. But Maggie's juvenile jealousy is mingled with a fascination with the doll-like creature, so unlike herself in her self-possessed contentment, blonde curls and 'natty completeness' (61). 'Maggie always looked at Lucy with delight' (61) and it is this 'pleasure of having Lucy to look at' (85) that constitutes part of the promise of a good day at Garum Firs, their aunt's estate. In fact, it is this pleasure of looking at Lucy that draws both Mrs Tulliver and Maggie, amongst others, to her. Her beauty is constructed purely on the basis of an external gaze, reducing her to a play thing, a doll, who is there to be admired.

As they become young women, the tenor of Maggie and Lucy's relationship deepens into a more heartfelt attachment, where Lucy is part patron and part confidante. However, in spite of this change, Maggie continues to exhibit the same early fascination for Lucy's 'little blonde angel-head' (244), absent-mindedly playing with her hair, 'holding up one of Lucy's long curls that the sunshine might shine through it' (371), even as they make plans for social occasions and exchange girlish secrets. Lucy's much recommended beauty is consistently framed by the gaze of an onlooker, Maggie's lingering interest in her contrasting blonde charm being a part of this formulation where Lucy is always and forever available to be gazed upon, perpetually part of tableaux that posit her as open to visual scrutiny. When Maggie's own transformation into an austere young woman takes place, it is her abundant hair that becomes the locus of her beauty, morphing from the unmanageable mane of her childhood into pliable tresses that her mother can comb into elaborate hairstyles. It is the feature that gives her a regal air in spite of her plain dresses, and makes her the object of others' admiring gaze, in emulation of and finally eclipsing Lucy herself.

While Maggie resists this reorganisation where she becomes the object of others' gaze, only momentarily enjoying it on the occasion of the Park House party, Lucy is never presented outside of such a configuration. It is one such tableau at which the reader is introduced to Stephen Guest, Lucy's nonchalant, insouciant fiancé at whom she shakes her perfect ringlets, raises her soft hazel eyes, smiles playfully, and holds out her shell-pink palm, demanding her scissors with which he has entrapped his fingers. We are told by the narrator in a sardonic aside that Stephen Guest wanted a wife who was 'accomplished, gentle, affectionate, and not stupid' and finding Lucy to have all of these qualifications, he was 'not surprised to find himself in love with her' (370). However, clothed as she is in her blonde conventionality, Lucy does show some spirit when she comes to meet Maggie after she has become an outcast in the St Oggs community, forgiving her and recognising her strength of character in giving up Stephen. In an earlier scene, Maggie had made an impassioned protest before Philip Wakem against the fair-complexioned women of fiction who carry away the hero's love, with him prophetically predicting the conflict between the two cousins, both of whose destinies are sealed by the blondness of one and the darkness of another. Eliot rejects this idea, playing with it and laying it open in all its arbitrary logic. Even though the novel concludes with the same conventional pattern where the blonde woman triumphs over her darker counterpart, the representation of Maggie and Lucy challenges these easily

categorised notions of femininity.

Another Lucy who inhabits the same ideal of womanhood is the devoted cousin of Aurora Floyd, one of Braddon's tempestuous bigamous heroines, the infamous 'Cleopatra in crinoline'.⁴ In *Aurora Floyd* (1862 - 1863), Lucy Floyd is the pastel, passive other to the dazzlingly bright Aurora. She develops from 'a fair-faced, blue-eyed, rosy-lipped, golden-haired little girl' (21) into a graceful, reticent young woman who, in the same vein as the preceding Lucy, is the very ideal that Talbot Bulstrode seeks:

[S]ome gentle and feminine creature crowned with an aureole of pale auburn hair; some timid soul with downcast eyes, fringed with golden-tinted lashes; some shrinking being, as pale and prim as the medieval saints in his pre-Raphaelite engravings, spotless as her own white robes, excelling in all womanly graces and accomplishments, but only exhibiting them in the narrow circle of a home. (40)

She is the perfect foil to Aurora, her appearance and demeanour becoming the yardstick of the accepted and approved model of Victorian femininity, which Talbot interestingly associates with the emaciated, austere medieval saints depicted in Pre-Raphaelite works.⁵ It is these otherworldly, fragile beings that attract Talbot whose own rooms are decorated by the Pre-Raphaelite prints of 'grim saints and angular angels' (38). Lucy is then the perfect model for one kind of Pre-Raphaelite painting, with its fidelity to nature, its careful perception and rendition of every single feature, and its meticulous reproduction of every single strand of golden hair. But beside this pale painted heroine, the radiant Aurora is even more dramatically realised, as even her own uncle thinks: 'oh, how tame, how cold, how weak, beside that Egyptian goddess, that Assyrian queen, with the flashing eyes and the serpentine coils of purple-black hair!' (217). It is the imperious mien, the 'unfeminine tastes and mysterious propensities' (49) of black-eyed Aurora, with her queenly coronet of 'dead black' (48) plaits, that makes her so alluring. And it is under the intoxication of having been chosen by such a woman that Talbot overlooks Lucy, for after all, '[t]here are so many Lucys but so few Auroras; and

⁴Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Aurora Floyd* (1862 - 1863), ed. P. D. Edwards, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 33. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

⁵Much has been written about the relationship between Victorian heroines and food. In the Victorian imaginary, a delicate appetite is linked with femininity, even virginity, apart from having a class connotation. Bodily weakness and pallor, therefore, are the typical symptoms that a refined heroine exhibits, when she contemplates marriage and its attendant sexual duties for the first time. See Chapter 1, footnote 36.

while you never could be critical with the one, you were merciless in your scrutiny of the other' (48). Braddon draws upon the convention of the blonde angel and the dark haired temptress in order to build up Aurora's mysterious attraction, to throw a dark shadow upon the enigma of her secret, and to heighten the tension at the crux of the novel, but she does this with a deliberation of manner, piquantly playing with these binaries, that are held up to a gentle mockery, as well as a more serious scrutiny.

Lucy however does become Talbot's wife, the one he comes to after having burnt himself in his intense and volatile engagement with Aurora, requiring 'a consoler for his declining days' (160). And in spite of being the one he settles for rather than his grand passion, they do have a successful marriage, with Lucy feeling blessed at being wedded to her long-revered idol and Talbot self-approving for having chosen the right woman to bear his centuries old family name. Lucy is the most undemonstrative of women, expressing a range of emotions in quickly passing blushes, timid nods of the head, a flushed neck and fluttering eyelashes, but it is her golden bower of hair that is constant in its demonstration of her unquestionable virtue. Every time that Talbot is led to make a complimentary remark towards Lucy, it is when he is caught unawares by the brightness of her golden hair which revels in open air and sunshine, like in the episode in the lane where he unexpectedly proposes to her, rather than in the shadowy candlelight of after dinner drawing-rooms where Aurora reigns. In these constant comparisons to the angelic purity of Pre-Raphaelite heroines, to fresh outdoor spaces, and to clear luminousness, Lucy is revealed as wholesome and maidenly. Her beauty is organic and natural, unlike Aurora's whose darkness has something mythical and monstrous about it.

These descriptions of Lucy are reminiscent of two early Pre-Raphaelite paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848 - 1849) and *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849 - 1850). *The Girlhood of Virgin Mary* has the young, golden-haired Mary as a diligent embroiderer, supervised by her mother. Her sampler-like work is suggestive of the importance of needlework and discipline in the education of women, while the fact that she is embroidering the lily from life gives the occupation a greater creativity. The painting is crowded with symbols like the straight white lily, the palm frond on the floor, the vines that are reaching into the interior of this scene of domesticity as Joseph outside binds them to their trellis. But what I want to focus on is the image of Mary, who was posed for by his sister Christina Rossetti. This young girl is presented as a symbol of domesticity,



Figure 15: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* (1848 - 1849).

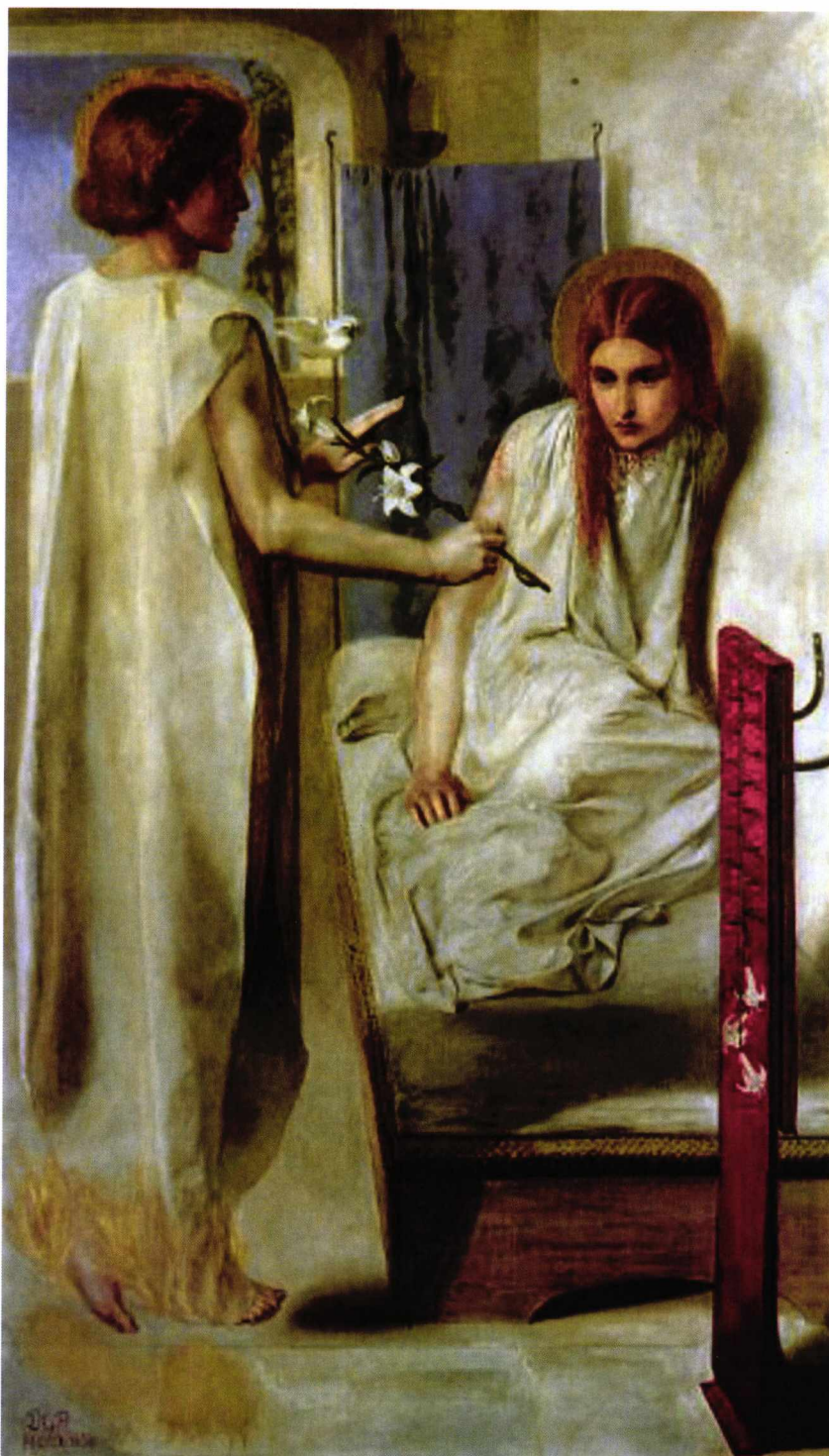


Figure 16: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Ecce Ancilla Domini!* (1849 - 1850).

the halo above her head denoting not just her holiness but also the sacredness of the woman who is properly educated to her domestic role. Her blonde hair that glimmers like spun gold, hangs straight down her back mimicking the upright lily before her and emphasising her own erect posture. Her austere clothing and lack of ornament stress her pale, virginal femininity, her busy hands and downcast eyes revealing her calm domesticity. Her spare body enveloped in the gentle drapes of her dress seems to personify the 'angular angel' of Talbot's fantasy. Accompanying the painting were two sonnets by Dante Rossetti that provided commentary on the representation. The lines, 'Her gifts were simpleness of intellect/ And supreme patience', embody that highly prized domestic femininity, plainly linking feminine spirituality to the home.

Rossetti's other painting, a successor to the previous one, presents the scene of annunciation. Mary, entirely in white in her bed seems to shrink from the vision before her. The lily is repeated again, both in the hands of the angel Gabriel who has come to announce the news, as well as in the completed embroidery that stands in the front corner of the painting. A highly symbolic painting, it depicts an unusual iconography with Mary as a delicate, young girl who does not seem to be prepared for this announcement. Her hesitant, retreating posture and her downward glance add to the fragility of the image. The fine golden strands of her hair fall straight down, framing her pale, peaked face. The luminous hair seems to be a second aureole inside the dense halo that hangs behind her. Indeed this painting seems to be a visualisation of Talbot's virtuous woman, with her spotless white robe, drooping eyes, and pale skin; the narrowness of the painted room suggestive of the narrow domesticity that he believes appropriate for the display of womanly qualities.

This fascination with a gold and ivory tinted femininity finds an echo in the ambiguously represented heroine of Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860). Laura Farlie appears as a watered down version of the Lucys and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's luminous Mary. Walter Hartright, the novel's narrator and Laura's future husband, describes her towards the beginning of the novel: '[A] light, youthful figure, clothed in a simple muslin dress [...] Her hair is of so faint and pale a brown – not flaxen, and yet almost as light; not golden, and yet almost as glossy – that it nearly melts, here and there, into the shadow of the hat'.⁶ This imprecisely

⁶Wilkie Collins, *The Woman in White* (1860), ed. Julian Symons, London: Penguin, 1985, pp. 74 - 75. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

described hair, not quite brown yet not golden, so faint, so light, and so glossy, presents a woman who is fragile, unearthly, almost vapourous. Just like her undefinable hair that melts into the shadows of her hat, Laura too disappears into the shadows of the novel, tucked away behind a false name in a mental asylum. It is interesting that Hartright relies upon a water-colour drawing that he had made of Laura at an earlier date to develop this description, as though she were too insubstantial in her physicality to be sustained by memory alone. Though he admits her to be no breath-taking beauty, he roundly emphasises the thoughtful tenderness of her eyes, without which her blemishes would be as noticeable as in the face of any other woman. He accentuates the fact that it is Laura's inner truthfulness that imparts a charming loveliness to her face, the less than perfect nose, the over-refined receding chin and the lips subject to a slight nervous contraction being subsumed by the 'the light of a purer and a better world' (75). Her beauty has not the radiance of Lucy Deane and Lucy Floyd, but her almost flaxen hair and light complexion diffuse an aura of ethereality over her, making her more of an angel than a flesh and blood woman.

It is then no surprise that it is the wispy, diaphanous Laura, already mutated into a spectral being, who loses her identity. Her corporeality is downplayed to such an extent that even the dotting gaze of her besotted lover cannot find her body a responsive site to settle on, and as the novel moves on, even her minimal kernel of selfhood is reduced to a mirage. The entire novel is structured around this loss of identity and it is the narrator and the faithful, and inevitably masculine, cousin Marian Halcombe who doggedly try to discover the secret behind it and to restore Laura to her rightful place. However, Laura herself is never involved in this process of detection and restitution in any manner whatsoever. She is absolutely passive, frozen into the watered image that Hartright cherishes, her childlike naivety, otherworldly artlessness and the trouble she has been through rendering her incapable of any exertion, intellectual or physical.

All of these fair-haired women seem to be representative of an ideal of femininity that demanded a certain kind of physiognomy, and a particular set of accomplishments and mental attitudes, but, most importantly, a childish innocence - a desexualised, unthreatening, domesticated quality. Elisabeth G. Gitter argues that there has been a long literary tradition of golden haired ladies that gained greater momentum in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Women's hair had always been a western preoccupation and had been ascribed complex

meanings, both magical and symbolic, but this became even more obviously pertinent in this period. This fixation with the placid femininity that golden hair was supposed to indicate turned blondness itself into a valuable quality, coveted for itself. The angelic blondes like Lucy Deane, Lucy Floyd and Laura Fairlie, who had had their sexuality defused and their energy channelled into marital blissfulness could then be transformed into sexualised, powerful women who were aware of their own power. It is this pivotal link between the sexual allure of the blonde heroine and her ability to trade on it that is explored in Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and luxuriated in in Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*.

Golden hair as a symbol of inner purity then gives way to the idea that it could act as a mask falsely implying an innate spirituality, a quality that could be manipulatively emphasised by a woman who had learned the marketability of her locks. Rosamond Vincy, the acknowledged belle of *Middlemarch*, recognises the worth of her 'infantile fairness, neither flaxen nor yellow'⁷ and deftly, putting her most charming feminine wiles to use, employs it in finding herself a husband who lives up to her romantic requirements. The fact of her blondness is central to the way in which she is portrayed in the novel, as well as to her own psychological mechanism. We are repeatedly told that she has that style of 'pure blondness which gave the largest range to choice in the flow and colour of drapery' (96), that 'few children in *Middlemarch* looked blond by the side of Rosamond' (112), that Lydgate forgets himself in looking at her, 'so immaculately blond, as if the petals of some gigantic flower had just opened and disclosed her; and yet with this infantile blondness showing so much ready, self-possessed grace' (159). An obvious part of her charm is the sense of childlikeness that her fine gold hair suggests, and even after the loss of their baby and after Lydgate's discovery of Rosamond's stubborn temperament, he is still touched by her 'untarnished beauty which touches us in spring-time and infancy and all sweet freshness' (593).

However, what gives Rosamond's beauty a dangerous inflection is the way in which her childlikeness cohabits with a portentous sexuality behind that fair, guileless face; indeed, what makes this simultaneity of a blooming sexuality and childish innocence even more disturbing is the fact that that very childishness is sexualised. The image of the voluptuous unfolding flower, with its gigantic unfurling leaves, carries with it a surging erotic charge that makes Rosamond an

⁷George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871 - 1872), ed. Rosemary Ashton, London: Penguin, 1994, p. 112. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

unmistakably seductive figure. Her 'immaculately' blonde head and the 'untarnished' nature of her beauty are what tantalise Lydgate with their suggestions of virginal perfection and physical allure. There is a combination of sexual maturity and childlike naivety in both her psyche and her body that Lydgate finds himself yielding to. He is, in spite of his ambitions for radical reform and his past experience in love affairs, what the narrator wryly calls 'the doomed man of that date' (268), who finds women having the proper combination of 'correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness' irresistible (268). Rosamond is exactly the prototype of that imaginary femininity, with an appropriate veneer of mystery and propriety, as well as the undercurrent of a latent sensuality. Even though she is castigated in the novel for her superficiality and her mindless deceitfulness, she is as much a part of the manipulative mechanism of domestic femininity as Lydgate, merely 'a sylph caught young and educated at Miss Lemon's' (160).

Eliot is awkward in her rendering of sexual politics between men and women, the narrative voice speaking from a distance whenever the erotic underpinnings of a relationship are described. But in her exploration of Lydgate and Rosamond's marriage she finds a subtle, yet highly efficient way of expressing Lydgate's gravitational attraction towards Rosamond despite her passive-aggressive behaviour: her golden hair becomes not just the site where her vanity is given its fullest expression, but also where the tensions of their winding relationship are made manifest. Rosamond's endless embroidering, netting, tatting and stitching that suggest a false sense of serenity are in line with her labyrinthine braids, the 'wondrous hair-plaits' (160) within which she manages to trap Lydgate, eventually leading him to become a fashionable physician who alternated between London and a continental bathing place instead of a country doctor exploring new medical practices, reforming old ideas, and making discoveries in the study of anatomy. Not long after the wedding he wakes up from his daydreams about his young bride. She is not 'that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband's mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone' (583). Her infantile tresses that were to shelter him from the commotion of the outside world, becoming the haven to which he retired at the end of every day, become instead the snares that trap him in a dismal marriage. This metaphorical entrapment becomes evident in a scene that occurs at a critical moment in their marriage. As Lydgate tries to get over his anger and hurt at Rosamond's obstinacy

at having gone riding in her pregnant condition, contrary to his medical advice, he reaches an emotional impasse that he feels unable to overcome. Upset at having her dismiss his concern without much thought, he is angry and confused. It is at this point where he seems to be seeking assurance that Rosamond calls him over to the toilette-table to help her fasten up her plaits, theatrically throwing down her arms with a sigh:

Lydgate had often fastened the plaits before, being among the deftest of men with his large finely-formed fingers. He swept up the soft festoons of plaits and fastened in the tall comb (to such uses do men come!); and what could he do then but kiss the exquisite nape which was shown in all its delicate curves? (585)

Rosamond is acutely aware of her charm, the effect of her blonde beauty and the sexual appeal of her body. It is a quietly powerful episode that lays out Rosamond's sexual and emotional manipulations and Lydgate's helplessness before her will.

In the face of her imperturbable loveliness and unresponsive indifference, it is Lydgate who learns to oppose her less and less, occasionally letting slip a bitter speech that was never allowed to be forgotten. It is in one such incident that he had called her his basil plant, explaining that 'basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains' (835). Keats' poem 'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil', was based on Boccaccio's fourteenth century tale of Isabella and her lover Lorenzo who is murdered by her brothers. It was this poem that inspired the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt's *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1866 - 1868), and the painting echoes the same idea about a destructive female sexuality that Lydgate seems to be hinting at. Hunt paints Isabella draped around the altar-like table upon which the funereal pot of basil containing her murdered lover's severed head rests. As she cradles the plant in her arms, she comes across as a strangely sensual figure dressed in a translucent, clinging white dress that accentuates every undulation of her body. She mourns over the shrine that she has made to her lover's memory, watering the healthy looking basil with her tears. What adds to this bizarre eroticisation of grief is the way in which her hair hangs over the majolica pot: Isabella's long, dark tresses not only wrap themselves around the pot of basil but actually intermingle with the soil, nourishing the plant that breeds there, merging with the roots that feed on the remains of her dead lover. This disquieting image of union again hints at the sexual implications suggested by a woman's hair, while also revealing anxiety about the sinister and



Figure 17: William Holman Hunt, *Isabella and the Pot of Basil* (1866 - 1868).

morbid nature of that sexuality.

Disorderly hair and chaotic domesticity⁸

This infantilising, sexualising element is evident in *Lady Audley's Secret* as well, where another case of blatant misreading occurs. *Lady Audley's Secret* was among the first sensation novels, along with Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White*, and was part of a new genre that quickly claimed mass appeal as well as an equal amount of castigation in the popular press. Though its various writers had their own special brand of structural and stylistic particularities, it was, more generally speaking, a hybrid form that was firmly rooted in the contemporary domestic realism of Victorian literature, while also borrowing freely from an earlier tradition of Gothic romance. 'Sensation' was not just a psychological category that elicited a nervous, emotional response, but also a moral category that gestured towards a cultural crisis most overtly embodied in its transgressive women. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* converges the seemingly antonymous qualities of both genres in the figure of a threatening anti-heroine who subverted the very domesticity and its attendant femininity that made her alluring in the first place.

The story centres around a beautiful bigamous murderess, and the narrative focuses repeatedly and eloquently on descriptions of her person. Interpreted as signs of a private, interior self, exterior detail is as important as patent psychological insight and it is no wonder that Lady Audley's personality is rendered through depictions of her clothing, her gestures, her hair. Tapping into the stir caused by sensation fiction itself, the novel was a commercial success though it met with much criticism for its supposed lack of morality and its intent to shock the readers rather than to appeal to them. Numerous critics compared it to an addictive, narcotic substance that created a form of mania in its readers, a large number of whom happened to be young women whose inexperience made them prey to its corruptible influence.⁹ But what made *Lady Audley's Secret* different was that, as Showalter argues, it was not only 'a virtual manifesto of female sensationalism, but also a witty inversion of Victorian sentimental and domestic conventions'.¹⁰

⁸This section of my chapter that explores the meanings attendant on Lady Audley's hair has appeared as 'Lady Audley's Duplicitous Hair' in *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*, Issue 6 (Jul., 2009).

⁹This is an idea that Braddon herself explored in the later novel *The Doctor's Wife*, where the heroine is an enthusiastic acolyte of sensation novels and a firm believer in the truth of the fictions it purveys. Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Doctor's Wife* (1864), ed. Lyn Pykett, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

¹⁰Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to*

In Braddon's novels gender roles are often unbalanced, the women usually taking over the properties of the Byronic hero, and therefore the shock of this novel is not the act of bigamy itself, but the fact that the 'bigamist is no longer Rochester, but the demure little governess'.¹¹

Apart from the usual objections that its publication aroused, Mrs Oliphant found an additional element of discomfort with the novel. In her 1867 review of Braddon's works she upbraided the writer on making hair 'one of the leading properties in fiction. The facility with which it flows over shoulders and bosoms in its owner's vicinity is quite extraordinary. [...] What need has woman for a soul when she has upon her head a mass of wavy gold?'¹² Mrs Oliphant had perceptively recognised the prominence and symbolic authority of Lucy Audley's golden hair in the novel, and the unexpected way in which the mystery of the novel hinges on it. Mrs Helen Talboys' suspicious transformation into Miss Lucy Graham, who then goes on to become Lady Audley, is finally given away by the magnificence of her golden hair. Her every appearance in the novel is marked by a description where her hair is the focal point, pregnant with proliferating meaning. Her locks are described as 'the most wonderful curls in the world – soft and feathery, always floating away from her face, and making a pale halo round her head when the sunlight shone through them'.¹³ The phrases used are redolent of radiance and innocence – for instance, 'sunshiny ringlets' (32), 'gold-shot, flaxen curls' (66), that 'flashed hither and thither like wandering gleams of sunshine' (125). It is her untouched beauty that makes her, at least outwardly, the ideal of the Victorian domestic angel, uncontaminated by the outside world, offering her husband the joys of the eden-like, virginal space that is her body.

The childish innocence that her infantile hair and her petite body swathed in heavy fabric suggest extends into a puerile fascination with expensive trinkets, jewels and laces, rich clothing and Russian sable furs, gorgeous furniture and luxurious rooms, satin shoes, ivory-backed hair-brushes, and perfume bottles. The ancient, grey interior of Audley Court is renovated and refurbished into an opulent palace for the young bride of Sir Michael Audley, and in it she 'seemed as happy as a child surrounded by new and costly toys' (55). In her jejune exuberance

Lessing, London: Virago, 1982, p. 164.

¹¹Ibid., p. 165.

¹²Margaret Oliphant, 'Novels', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, No. 102 (Sep. 1867), p. 269.

¹³Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, ed. Jenny Bourne Taylor, London: Penguin Classics, 1998, p. 13. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

over all things expensive and magnificent, she is as much a worldly woman who hedonistically, selfishly pursues her own pleasure - a reading that never occurs to anyone except Alicia, so mesmerised are they by her infantile blondness. Indeed Alicia's is an unusually corrective voice within the novel, that stands apart from the rest of the characters who are easily enchanted by Lucy's seemingly artless smiles and flaxen curls. It is hardly surprising that Sir Michael, a man in his forties who had never before known a grand passion, falls in love with her instantaneously. He could resist her as much as he could resist his destiny, for her melting blue eyes, slender throat, drooping head and 'wealth of showering flaxen curls' (12) act as a powerful spell.

The Victorian preoccupation with hair becomes even more acute and conspicuous in the sensation novel. Indeed, the sensation novelists were striking at the very foundation of Victorian conventions of physiognomy and its link with morality by disconnecting the golden haired woman and her angelic femininity. By this overt stylistic technique they proceeded to suggest that 'no external sign could possibly capture modern womanhood, which was unfathomable, resisting unconditional univocal definition or "reading"'. The representation of women's hair thus facilitated the authors' engagement in a debate which challenged traditional social and literary conventions, and explored new definitions of the feminine, the heroine, and the novel'.¹⁴ In *Lady Audley's Secret*, in being both a vivid signifier of the approved version of Victorian femininity as well as a threatening female sexuality, Lucy's golden hair releases itself from formatted stereotypes and becomes in itself something more fluid and potent: a cipher for a self that is hidden behind these various impersonations. It then, I argue, moves beyond the culturally ascribed codes associated with it, and becomes a highly expressive medium of voicing individuality.

Elisabeth Gitter asserts that this cultural fixation with the golden haired woman took on an even richer symbolism in the nineteenth century because it most fully embodied the Victorian preoccupation with both wealth and female sexuality. Though this is largely true, hair in general, irrespective of colour, was becoming a highly complex site where cultural and sexual anxieties about women could be displaced. It was not just the golden hair that was significant, as Gitter

¹⁴Galia Ofek, 'Sensational Hair: Gender, Genre, and Fetishism in the Sensational Decade', *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina, Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2006, p. 103.

argues, but rather women's hair itself which had evolved into a intensely articulate and emotive attribute. Though the fair-haired women who inhabit Victorian fiction seem to be representative of an ideal femininity, the value-laden charge of blondness, and its auxiliary features meant that blondness became desirable for itself alone. It then had the potential to transform its possessor into a sexually powerful woman who was conscious of her beauty and how to use it to her own advantage. This was the other extreme of the angelic blonde, whose sexuality was muted and directed only towards marriage.

The idea of the dazzlingly blonde 'Angel in the House' that the Victorian woman is typically associated with, becomes less and less helpful as a basis for evaluation. The highly disturbing compound of the untainted, childlike but sexualised blonde female makes this formulation of the coherent, domesticated woman highly suspect. While she stays within the realm of the acceptable in social and moral terms in the characters of Lucy Deane, Lucy Floyd and Laura Fairlie, she transgresses the fine line into the dangerous, sexually aware woman who lures men through the promise of her erotic charms, leading them to their doom with Rosamond Vincy, and even more overtly so with Lady Audley. Both these women are made doubly dangerous by their appreciation of the power of their burnished hair, and they deftly manipulate it in their ambition for social ascent. Hair then emerges as a powerful force even outside of the blonde women who support it, disengaging itself from the connotations it derives from its colour, to become a force of its own: intensely eloquent, sexually charged, and commercially viable.

This new kind of heroine, or rather anti-heroine, inverted the stereotype of the domestic novel and expressed female rage, frustration and sexual energy, as well as a gender hostility that often erupted in violence towards men. Wicked women have usually been brunettes, not blonde, simpering creatures that charmed all with their dimpled smiles and bright blue eyes. But there is a secret that Lady Audley's golden beauty conceals and whose existence is hinted at by those same overflowing ringlets that typify her as the household angel. Though the exotic and remote settings of Gothic fiction here give way to the upper-class, aristocratic home of Sir Michael Audley, the links between the two are kept alive in the strangely medieval architecture of the mansion which is then transformed into a modern mirrored paradise that reflects every luxury that offsets the new bride. And though the overtly supernatural devices of horror stories are abandoned by Braddon, the new locus of mystery and suspicion is Lady Audley's body itself. The sense of the uncanny is achieved by focusing on her redolent golden hair,

which becomes the signifier of that something unsettling yet indescribable that lurks behind the veneer of the apparently stable home. The private, enclosed space of the family becomes the site of mystery that will result in the peeling away of the layers of secrets that the mistress of the house has built up, revealing her beauty to be a masquerade without meaning.

In employing a descriptive technique that revolves around an excessive detailing of Lucy's appearance and an overaccentuation of her embodiment of the feminine ideal, the novel has the effect of making Lucy the cynosure of the reader's attention, just as she is the centre of all attention and drama in the novelistic world. Constituted as an object of scrutiny, she is made into a spectacle at the textual, as well as the narrative level. Not the passive child-bride she appears to be, Lucy manipulates her appearance to hide an intelligent, grasping hunger for upward mobility behind what Alicia contemptuously terms 'a blue-eyed wax-doll' charm, an 'ideal of beauty [that] was to be found in a toy-shop' (262). In this thoughtless remark, Alicia is closer to the truth than she thinks, for she likens her stepmother to an artificial, synthetic commodity. But though Lucy appears to be ornamental, frivolous, and therefore benign, she in fact forms the greatest threat to bourgeois culture in the novel by too closely mimicking and thus parodying its ideal, revealing it to be an empty icon. It is a replicable idol that can be produced and reproduced inexhaustibly in its various versions - the unsullied orphan, the respectable yet vulnerable governess, the complacent wife - by an actress as consummate and driven as Lucy herself. In the novel, it is the innumerable repetitions of flowing hair that link all her performances and postures, for it is 'Lucy's most serialized accessory and perhaps the novel's most persistent token of her hyperfemininity'.¹⁵

As the novel progresses through a series of *mise en abyme* disclosures, the secret that is at the centre of Lady Audley becomes further obscured. The plot thickens, twisting and looping at every point like her own sinuous curls, till it leads us back to Lady Audley. In spite of all her cunning, carefully cloaked in infantile blondness, her secret is uncovered by Robert Audley, her nephew by marriage. He plays the role of the idiosyncratic detective who first falls for Lady Audley's charms, only to be disenchanted as she is revealed to be a 'poor unhappy little golden-haired sinner' (250). In a climactic scene that lays bare a concealed aspect of her personality, Robert and George Talboys, her first husband, are shown the

¹⁵Krysta Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2008, p. 65.

way of penetrating into Lady Audley's locked private rooms. The entry to this inner sanctum is shown by Alicia, her stepdaughter, after a query by Robert Audley: "Isn't there a secret passage, or an old oak chest, or something of that kind, somewhere about the place, Alicia?"' (69). This entire episode of the hidden passageway and the first real clue to Lady Audley's identity is a clear parody of Gothic conventions. As the two men delve into an inky, subterranean secret corridor, full of unexpected bends and turns, they seem to be mining into the dark passages of Lady Audley's mind and body. They finally emerge into her voluptuous, untidy boudoir where they find a painting of her, commissioned by the infatuated Sir Michael and painted by a meticulous Pre-Raphaelite. It is this portrait, described with particular detail, that reveals the sinister truth behind her angelic features, showing Lucy to be less luminescent and more Lucifer, the fallen angel:

No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have painted, hair by hair, those feathery masses of ringlets with every glimmer of gold, and every shadow of pale brown. No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid lightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait.

It was so like and yet so unlike; it was as if you had burned strange-coloured fires before my lady's face, and by their influence brought out new lines and new expressions never seen in it before. The perfection of feature, the brilliancy of colouring, were there; but I suppose the painter had copied quaint medieval monstrosities until his brain had grown bewildered, for my lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend. (72)

This painting that is so like and unlike Lucy lays claim to a semantic realm of its own: it captures the defining essence of the woman, recognising the various layers of identity which envelope her, and in the process of this recognition becomes a text against which her body needs to be read. Every single painted feature becomes a dysmorphic reflection of the living woman that then turns out to be a truer likeness. As every strand of hair takes on a life of its own, becoming invested with an independent energy, it takes over the entire Pre-Raphaelite work of art, its undulating curves replicating the paintings' typically ornate frames. It then dwarfs the woman at the centre of the piece, becoming a framing device itself, a setting in which to read the woman.



Figure 18: William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott* (1889 - 1892).

William Holman Hunt's *The Lady of Shalott* (1889 - 1892) is one such painting, and it captures the moment when the said lady, in the midst of her frenzied weaving, catches a glimpse of Lancelot in her mirror, thereby bringing the curse upon herself. In this Pre-Raphaelite rendition of Tennyson's poem, an elaborate unconcealed symbolism is combined with the poetic themes to create a powerful image. The Lady of Shalott's hair floods and dominates the upper half of the composition, duplicating the effect of the manic weaving in the lower half. The swirling spider-like threads loop and whirl around her figure, entrapping her in a web of her own making, while her swirling hair blazes up into an equally uncontrollable vortex. She is at once the beautiful enchantress trapped in her own artifice, and the skilful weaver who has fatally lost control of her creation. This breath-taking image of a woman twisting away from the threads that ensnare her, her hair crowning her glowing beauty, exemplifies the ambiguity that a strong, erotic woman held for the Victorian imagination.

Pre-Raphaelite paintings seem eloquent in the way in which they depict women as larger than life emblems of a hallowed feminine complaisance or as icons of female power and sexuality. A style that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, it shocked the public and the artistic establishment by its 'sensational' realism. Its almost photographic attention to every detail, its exaggerated naturalism bordering on the grotesque, its conflation of physiognomic accuracy and symbolic meaning, turned the 'self-conscious use of particular aesthetic conventions into an intricate debate on looking and knowing'.¹⁶ It is on looking at this intensely suggestive painting of Lucy that Robert begins to fathom the secret shadow of her concealed identity, something that Alicia intuits, much like her dogs and horses who sense that there is something not quite right with Lady Audley. It is also this scene where Talboys recognises his dead wife in the face of the new mistress of Audley Court, and begins to comprehend the extent of her deceit.

Both Michie and Gitter look at the models of Pre-Raphaelite paintings as obvious symbols of feminine authority and erotic energy, who derive their transcendent vitality partly through their magic hair. The Pre-Raphaelite painting that holds the secrets of Lady Audley's body and identity is itself the icon of Victorian female sexuality, and as such, it articulates and elaborates the paradoxes of Victorian representation. This image of the golden-haired goddess, at once emblematic of the idealised woman and at the same time disconnected from her, then expresses most fully the shifting and equivocal attitudes to the power

¹⁶Jenny Bourne Taylor, ed., Introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. xxii.

and worth of female sexuality. Michie looks at this ambivalence, elaborating it on the body of the painted woman: 'On the one hand flamboyantly sexual, on the other, cloaked - even smothered - in layers of clothing, figuration and myth, Pre-Raphaelite paintings become at once the code of codes and the key to their unraveling'.¹⁷ It is the portrait of Lady Audley that distills, codifies and projects her essence onto the painted body of the Pre-Raphaelite model, with all her representational implications and insinuations, and these in turn contrive to provide the fundamental clue to the truth of her character, and in doing so participate in the debate about the self that is central to the novel.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1864 - 1873) seems to be an incarnation of Lady Audley herself, the 'amber-haired syren' (280). Rossetti's model embodies the same ambivalence, playing out the tension between an alluring sensuality and a troubling culpability. She is the ultimate *femme fatale* with voluptuous coral-red lips, enticing half-closed eyes, thick lustrous hair, and a curvaceous figure. As she narcissistically gazes at herself in the mirror, the viewer is invited to look at her - not only does the woman commodify her beauty, she too is a commodity that is available to the public gaze. Poised with her fingers combing her flowing hair, laying bare the wide expanse of her neck and chest, she is evocative of the mermaids who sit on rocks combing their long hair. It is such a mermaid that Lydgate, 'the doomed man of that date' (268), had fantasised about, but as Gitter points out he is not versed in mermaid lore - these are the duplicitous enchantresses who lead wandering mariners to their death. This lush display of hair embodies an obvious sexual exhibition, with the manifest suggestion that the abundance of hair is directly proportional to the potency of the sexual invitation.

Whether the woman was combing the fibres of flax for her weaving and spinning, or untangling her flaxen hair, she was always in the act of creating a web, always trapped in the image of Penelope - both the virtuous wife and the cunning woman. Accompanying the painting *Lady Lilith* was a sonnet, 'Body's Beauty' (1868), with Lilith as Adam's first wife, whose 'enchanted hair was the first gold'.¹⁸ She could deceive even before the serpent appeared and as she sat contemplating herself, drawing 'men to watch the bright web she can weave' (l. 7), she put her spell on one so that it 'left his straight neck bent/ And round his heart one strangling golden hair' (ll. 13 - 14). In this image, Lilith becomes a strange compound

¹⁷Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*, p. 123.

¹⁸Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 'Body's Beauty' (1868), in *Dante Gabriel Rossetti: Collected Writings*, ed. Jan Marsh, London: Dent, 1999, p. 314, l. 4. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.



Figure 19: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith* (1864 - 1873).

of Penelope and Medusa: one consigns her to the double faced fate of loyal wife and duplicitous woman, and the other to that of a vengeful, emasculating fury.

The Medusa is a frequently recurring trope in Victorian literature and forms a compelling image that combines the idea of female monstrosity with womanly tragedy. Though critics like Bram Dijkstra insist on the horrific, mutated, and Gorgon-like aspect of Medusa and see her as a misogynistic figure used repeatedly, pre-dominantly by men, in paintings and literature of the late Victorian period, she is also the indisputable signifier of a disfigured beauty, a self-torturous spectre of punishment.¹⁹ Many elements of the myth actually suggest a more tragic reading. As I mentioned in the last chapter, Medusa's beautiful hair is turned into coiling, hissing serpents by Athena in punishment of an offence that varies with the differing versions of the myth. Medusa then is a spectre of punishment, transformed into a monster in order to humiliate her pride in her beauty, and forever trapped in a horrifying body that punishes everyone who looks upon it. The snakes that circle her head, the 'stinging adders' (75) that Dinah Morris warns against, reach for her own flesh rather than anyone else's.

However, it is the kind of monstrous Medusa that Dijkstra talks about that is evoked in a critical passage in *Lady Audley's Secret*. Though the novel has had a varied publishing history, the text has remained largely consistent but for three substantial revisions.²⁰ In the chapter entitled 'Troubled Dreams', the account of Robert Audley's dreams was more explicit in the *Sixpenny Magazine* version but removed from all subsequent editions. It is one of these deleted passages that I want to examine here. In disturbed sleep, the terrifying image of Lucy as Medusa resurfaces in Robert's subconscious, providing another intuitive, spectral clue to her identity. In the manner of Gothic tales, *Lady Audley's Secret* too depends on a kind of knowledge that seems to emerge from the supernatural, finding utterance in portraits and dreams. So it is in Robert's dream that the 'feathery masses of ringlets' that the Pre-Raphaelite painter had rendered with such precision are mutated into Medusa-like serpentine locks:

[H]e was walking in the black shadows of this long avenue, with Lady Audley hanging on his arm, when [she] suddenly [...] wound her slender arms around him, crying out that it was the day of judgment, and that all wicked secrets must now be told. Looking at her as she shrieked

¹⁹Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

²⁰Natalie M. Houston, ed., Introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret*, Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2003, p. 34.

this in his ear, he saw that her face had grown ghastly white, and that her beautiful golden ringlets were changing into serpents, and slowly creeping down her fair neck.²¹

This dream is as disquieting as the oneiric episode of the portrait. In both, Lady Audley's hair becomes a bizarre metaphor for the duplicity that hides behind surface realities, the seemingly stable familial and feminine identities. The serpentine flexibility of Lucy's hair and its sinuous, meandering grasp on Robert's masculinity and even his physical person becomes equated with Medusa's venomous weapons.

The allure of Lucy's radiant beauty and her luminous hair is only a trap that is given away by this configuration where her delicate complexion becomes 'ghastly white' and her golden hair itself metamorphoses into slender serpents. Dijkstra remarks that by using the symbol of the snake, with its associated ideas of cunning and perversity, writers could be 'somewhat less graphic and yet satisfyingly symbolic'.²² For him this serpentine feminine bestiality is an image of what he calls 'idols of perversity', and closely linked to the idea of the *vagina dentata*: a jawed, alarmingly aggressive, predatory female sexuality. The dry, ruined well into which Lucy pushes George Talboys, attempting to murder him and keep her secret to herself, could be seen as a variation, or rather a concrete materialisation, of the *vagina dentate*. Situated at the end of the lime-walk in the garden, suggestively, the well is reached through a winding path, neglected and half-choked with weeds. The 'unheeded decay among the tangled masses of briery underwood' and the 'patch of rank grass' (270), that surround the forgotten well become extended metaphors for Lucy's sexual depravity and her moral barrenness.

Deceived, cuckolded and seriously injured, Talboys is barely able to escape with his life and climbs out of the swallowing well covered in 'green damp and muck, [...] scratched and cut to pieces' (414). The entrapping well with its cover of briar bushes becomes another synecdoche, almost like her boudoir into which the two men had earlier made their way, for Lady Audley's body itself but here it takes on an added aggressive violence. Extending the metaphor of her hair and her body then, the voluptuousness of the hair becomes increasingly, though only furtively, suggestive of pubic hair and its imputations of a vigorous though rank sexuality.²³ The connection between the display of overflowing, luxuriant hair and

²¹Ibid.

²²Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, p. 308.

²³Puri, 'Lady Audley's Duplicitous Hair'. I am indebted to the anonymous reader of *The Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* who suggested these connections between the Medusa image, the *Vagina Dentata*, and the dry, abandoned well that entraps George Talboys.

an explicit sexual invitation that both the literary portrait of Lady Audley and the painted image of Lilith explore and exploit, here takes on a more grotesque aspect as the scene of the crime that is central to the novel takes on a surreptitious sexual charge, mapping the act on a terrain that reads like Lucy's bodily topography.

It is through the construction of this hypnotically beautiful, sunny haired protagonist that Braddon enters the contemporary dialogue about the prevailing notions of feminine identity, its need for negotiation and redefinition, its association with material consumption and Victorian commodity culture, as well as its deployment as a fraught site where all conflictual cultural and gender complexities could be played out. She wittily uses the stock images of femininity that trade in the symbolic and actual value of blonde hair - the binaries of the angel and the *femme fatale* - but in doing so emphasises the pliability and plasticity of that hair, thereby revealing the constructed nature of those representations, and of gender itself. The same gold could at one time become the glowing aureole over the devoted wife, while at another time it could become a web or a trap that would ensnare gullible, enchanted men, giving the golden hair the potentiality for denoting both saintliness and sexual enticement.

It is in the yawning gap between the idealised blonde woman and the associated natural goodness she is supposed to possess that Braddon arranges her mystery, making the possibility of interpreting the self through an exteriority that was natural and transparent impossible. This necessary disjunction between the real and the superficial is what she harnesses, making her heroine a compelling figure, engendering as well as entrapped in the illusion of her magical hair. Even as Lady Audley personifies the angelic wife viewed by Robert Audley at the beginning of their acquaintance, sitting with her Berlin-wool work in the embrasure of a window, 'her fair face, surrounded by its bright aureole of hazy, golden hair' (122), a narratorial remark punctures the scene of domestic perfection. Her needlework is the 'embroidery which the Penelopes of ten or twelve years ago were very fond of exercising their ingenuity upon' (122). In Homeric myth, Penelope was the faithful wife of Odysseus, who kept her suitors away during her husband's absence by weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, which she cunningly unraveled every night. She is then also a weaver of fictions, fabricator of untruth. By metaphorical extension, Lady Audley then is not only creating the myth of the ideal, golden-haired wife, but also believing in it and living it, but as the weaving of lies gets more dense, so the domestic myth becomes a snare in which she will be trapped.

Brantlinger argues that most sensation novels confined their startling disclosures to the family circle, but since the family itself was the touchstone of bourgeois values and morality, the effect of these 'voyeuristic, primal scene revelations'²⁴ was highly subversive. So the loving relations on which the household was balanced were exposed as being based on a forged respectability that concealed bigamists, adulterers, murderesses, vampires, imposters, and all varieties of criminal behaviour. They subverted the conventions of realist fiction and the truths it creates about familial and domestic life by using it in a modified form: these writers 'import[ed] romantic elements back into contemporary settings, reinvesting the ordinary with mystery (albeit only of the secular, criminal variety), and undoing narrative omniscience to let in kinds of knowledge that realistic fiction had often excluded'.²⁵ *Lady Audley's Secret* is insistent in showing truth and reality to be hidden entities, buried and concealed behind hollow facades that can only be penetrated by trusting the intuitive signals. It is then not surprising that it is in a portrait, in a dream, and in Lady's Audley's own hair that the clues to the mystery are embedded.

The narrative thread slowly unwinds itself to reveal that behind Lucy Graham, the docile governess, lurks Helen Talboys, bigamist and suspected murderess. But the secret of the title is hidden behind yet another layer, and in a surprising twist, it is disclosed that behind Helen Talboys lies Helen Maldon - a woman with a self-confessed legacy of insanity. All these identities are subsumed under the name and facade of Lady Audley, who then herself is 'finally, and chillingly, hidden away under the invented, arbitrary name of 'Madam Taylor''.²⁶ This last fictitious name is the only one that is not made up by her, but is bestowed rather by the Audley heir, Robert, in his desire to protect the centuries old name of the family and to keep her from spending the end of her days in a prison. But even then, the name is suggestive of Lucy's extraordinary inventiveness, her ability to self-fashion endlessly.

From the very beginning Lucy is presented as an innate actress, intuitively acting to perfection all her roles, and as Taylor points out, in the process she undercuts the distinction between the natural and the artificial.²⁷ What connects and perpetuates her different roles are her acts of consumption and she slips from

²⁴Patrick Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" About the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (1982), pp. 26 - 27.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶Taylor, Introduction to *Lady Audley's Secret*, p. xv.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. xix - xx.

one role to another with increasing ease, led by her heightening consumerist aspirations. So the threat of Lucy's multiple performances lies not just in the gender relations that she destabilises but also in the class barriers that she transgresses. A deserted wife, the mother of a young child, and burdened with an alcoholic father, she poses as an orphan to get the post of a governess. It is in this position that she is asked by Sir Michael to be the mistress of Audley Court. What makes this proposal thinkable is her respectability as the governess to an honourable family, her refined manners coupled with her golden beauty, and the absence of a sordid, working class background. Her hair then works as a contrivance that helps her create the identity of compliant, good-natured, young woman who has seen life's hardships without being marred by them.

By foregrounding Lady Audley's impersonation of the proper feminine the novel harnesses the anxiety that that ideal of femininity is perhaps only a form of acting. The naturalness and rapidity with which Lucy moves from one role to another is part of the debate about identity, its stability, its potential for loss and duplication, that is a major concern of the sensation novel. Another aspect of the same concern shows itself in the idea of the *doppelgänger*, or motifs of doubling that often appear in Gothic tales. So, ministering to Lucy's cosmetic needs and starring in the role of the female confidante, is Phoebe, her washed-out maid who bears an uncanny resemblance to her mistress. This is a likeness that both maid and mistress notice, and Lucy even goes on to remark:

"[Y]ou are like me, and your features are very nice; it is only color that you want. My hair is pale yellow shot with gold, and yours is drab; my eyebrows and eyelashes are dark brown, and yours are almost - I scarcely like to say it, but they're almost white, my dear Phoebe; your complexion is sallow, and mine is pink and rosy. Why, with a bottle of hair-dye, such as we see advertised in the papers, and a pot of rouge, you'd be as good-looking as I, any day, Phoebe." (60)

With the appropriate make-up then the working-class girl could as easily transform into Lady Audley; a transformation that would replicate poor Helen Maldon's transformation into Helen Talboys, who morphs into Helen Graham, who is then in a final fairy-tale twist asked to become Lady Audley.

But what makes Lucy so different from the various other look-alikes that surround her is that she seems to have a 'colour', an authenticity that they lack. Her resemblance to Phoebe and to Matilda Plowson, the unfortunate woman who substituted her in the grave, is one that makes her hair look particularly bright. Phoebe's colourlessness, and her washed-out, faded complexion and Matilda's

lank, sunless hair are no match for the vital energy of Lucy's appearance. However, what is even more threatening than these numerous doubles is the suggestion that perhaps Lucy is not the original, genuine article. Being an artificial, cleverly constructed idol, she is only one of the duplicates. As Lyn Pykett points out, the novel 'raises the spectre that femininity itself is duplicitous, and that it involves deception and dissembling'.²⁸

The real Lucy is lost in the proliferating versions of herself that she creates, but as each layer of identity is peeled away to reveal what lies beneath, it is the golden hair that links every assumed personality together. The very first clue in the novel falls in the hands of Phoebe and her fiancé, Luke, as they wander through Lucy's private rooms in the early pages of the novel, in a chapter called 'Hidden Relics'. Looking into one of her jewellery caskets, Luke pushes open a secret drawer, lined with purple velvet and containing 'neither gold nor gems; only a baby's little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby's head' (34). Though not knowing the particulars of that infantile curl, it is a discovery that Phoebe shrewdly recognises the value of and is a secret that she hoards for a later date, something that might be useful in negotiating the price of a public house for Luke in exchange for silence. Though this is a strand of the narrative that remains unresolved, it does suggest the crucial role that hair of that uncommon glittering hue would play in the novel.

The second clue is also a lock of hair, but it is a specious keepsake given to Talboys by the landlady of the cottage where the supposed Helen Maldon had breathed her last. It is a long tress of hair wrapped in silver paper that she had cut off as the young woman lay in her coffin. Even in that moment of sorrow, Talboys' response hints at the cruel substitution: "Yes," he murmured; "this is the dear hair that I have kissed so often when her head lay upon my shoulder. But it always had a rippling wave in it then, and now it seems smooth and straight" (45). And he leaves the landlady's explanation that it changed in illness uncontested. This second memento returns to reveal Lady Audley's fraud, along with its genuine counterpart that is found by Robert Audley as he is looking through his friend's books. Looking for a piece of writing, or a fragment of letter that might prove to be useful in his detective pursuit, he comes across 'a bright ring of golden hair, of that glittering hue which is so rarely seen except upon the head of a child -

²⁸Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 90 - 91.

a sunny lock, which curled as naturally as the tendril of a vine; and was very opposite in texture, if not different in hue, to the soft, smooth tress which the landlady at Ventnor had given to George Talboys after his wife's death' (160).

All of these facts come together towards the end of the novel and form the denouement of Lady Audley's secret. As the seams of gender fabrication are unraveled thread by thread, it is made clear that the secret that hides at the heart of the novel is that Lady Audley is neither insane nor criminally inclined but rather that she is a consummate actress, successfully acting out desires for social and financial mobility. Lynn Voskuil points out that what outraged early critics was not the mere fact of Lady Audley's theatricality but its mode: 'that she has exposed Victorian femininity as an act is less alarming than the way in which she plays it'.²⁹ Her tool in the quest for the gold that the position of the mistress of Audley Court holds out is literally her golden hair. Its presence is vital to her success and the novel reads almost like a manual that exposes how it can be manipulated to attract a suitable husband. By her own confession, Helen/Lucy/Lady Audley had first begun to look upon her blonde loveliness as 'a right divine, a boundless possession which was to be a set-off against all girlish shortcomings, a counter-balance of every youthful sin' (293). And even in her distress she never forgets the beauty that she can use to her advantage, always being alive to the importance of outward effect. In her moment of utmost crisis, threatened by exposure and on the brink of a breakdown, having twined her fingers in her loose amber curls, her 'mute despair' gives way to 'the unyielding dominion of beauty [...] and she released the poor tangled glitter of ringlets, leaving them to make a halo round her head in the dim firelight' (294), still undeniably angelic in appearance if not in reality.

The Medusa-like serpentine locks and their accompanying sexual threat have been reduced to pathetic, powerless disorder. The same image has been inverted and it here has the suggestion of a tragic feminine destiny, a wasted beauty, and a self-inflicted pain that Dijkstra's analysis leaves no room for. When she is entombed in the remote sanatorium, far in a forgotten Belgian city, which is to be her home for the rest of her life she finally surrenders herself to an anguished despondency, refusing to repent:

"[...] I cannot! Has my beauty brought me to this? [...] She plucked at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her

²⁹Lynn M. Voskuil, 'Acts of Madness: Lady Audley and the Meanings of Victorian Femininity', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, (Autumn 2001), p. 615.

head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair; that beautiful nimbus of yellow light that had contrasted so exquisitely with the melting azure of her eyes. She hated herself and her beauty.” (384)

But in spite of this eventual conclusion to Lady Audley’s adventurous life, she continues to be the proper lady. As the narrator notes at the moment she confesses her crime: ‘All mental distress is, with some show of reason, associated in our minds with loose, disordered garments, and disheveled hair, and an appearance in every way reverse of my lady’s’ (333). By not employing these conventional signifiers Braddon is once again emphasising the arbitrary logic on which they are based and therefore making visible the ease with which someone with the appearance and intelligence of Lady Audley could insert herself into the role of the accepted upper middle class Victorian woman. Having recognised the value of her hair, she had traded on her infantile beauty to bigamously marry into a title, thereby creating a transfer of meaning - her hair no longer being a sign of inward purity, but infused by greed, ambition, and a murderous cruelty. Hair enters the realm of commerce by becoming so infused with signification, and at her most virtuous, the woman would save it to spend in the marriage market, purchasing herself wedded bliss in return for her good management. In her more menacing incarnation, the hair and its value would either be thoughtlessly squandered or be deceptively used to create a web for sexual entrapment. But as Gitter points out, ‘[w]hether she is purchasing domestic happiness or vicious profit, [...] in using her hair the woman compromises its value as an emblem of sublimity’.³⁰

‘You have much gold upon your head’: valuing the lock of hair

The image of the lock of hair as a medium of exchange is one that surfaces repeatedly in Victorian literature, and the granting of it is suffused with signification. Hair as symbolic of both virginity and its loss is evident in the highly suggestive vocabulary of the correspondence between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the days of their courtship. The idea of hair as intrinsically invaluable in itself, something that could be replaced by no counterfeit, is redolent of the kind of feeling that powered the popularity of hair jewellery. In a sexually charged, expectant letter Robert Browning daringly, yet hesitatingly, writes: ‘Give me, dearest beyond expression, what I have always dared to think I would ask you for ... one day! [...] give me so much of you – all precious that you are

³⁰Gitter, ‘The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination’, p. 946.

– as may be given in a lock of your hair’.³¹ And as her reply suggests, this is a very serious and intimate request and her response is couched in a language that gestures towards the erotic undercurrent of the demand:

I never gave away what you ask me to give you, to a human being,
except my nearest relatives & once or twice or thrice to female friends,
... never, though reproached for it, – and it is just three weeks since
I said last to an asker that I was “too great prude for such a thing”!
it was best to anticipate the accusation! – And prude or not, I could
not – I never could – *something* would not let me.³²

However, as pertinent as the sexual undertone of this epistolary exchange, is the importance that both place on the preciousness of the lock itself. On receiving the much coveted tress, Robert Browning writes, ‘I was happy, so happy before! But I am happier and richer now – My love – [...] I will live and die with your beautiful ring, your beloved hair – comforting me, blessing me’.³³ This intensity of feeling that the lock of hair commands is translated into Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s sonnets as well, where the poetess-speaker gives in to the lover’s plea for a lock of her hair, with as much hesitation as the woman herself.

In Sonnet XVIII, ‘I never gave a lock of hair away...’, the speaker says to her lover that she never gave a lock of her hair to anyone except him. She is no longer in her youth, and her hair ‘no longer bounds to [her] foot’s glee’,³⁴ neither does it find itself adorned by roses or myrtle. It now shades pale cheeks marked by tears, and she had thought that it would only be taken by ‘funeral-shears’ (l. 11), but since love has unexpectedly come first, she will cut a curl and give it to her dearest. It is a curl so far untouched, and so on having it, he will ‘[find] pure, from all those years,/ The kiss my mother left here when she died’ (ll. 13 - 14). This poem then bestows the yearning passion of the woman onto the lock of hair, making it a symbol not just of her love but also her chastity. What makes it so valuable to both the lovers is the fact that it has never before been given away, that it is still ‘pure’. The image of the mother’s kiss endows the hair with an untouched, childlike innocence that suggests that this is the speaker’s

³¹Elvan Kintner, ed., *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 1845 - 1846, Vol. 1, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969, p. 288.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 289 - 290.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 300.

³⁴Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Sonnet XVIII, *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850), in *The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p. 20, l. 6. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

first love and the experience of a continued sorrow gestures towards how precious this lately found love is. This asking for and giving away of a lock of hair then becomes a crucial part of courtship rituals, a playing out of sexual desires through a language that is entirely licit. The negotiation for this precious gift is part of the sexual politics of the relationship, and the eventual surrender of the woman also becomes a signifier of her sexual capitulation, laying out the final dynamics of the relationship.

The attitude of the Brownings towards the coveted curl is replicated in Tennyson's 'The Ringlet' (1864), which opens as reverent paean to a golden ringlet. It begins by the speaker begging his beloved for a lock of her hair that looks 'so golden-gay'.³⁵ To know that the curl will remain untouched by the breath of time is what makes it so highly prized: 'then shall I know it is all true gold' (l. 7). In a series of extended metaphors, the enduring gold of the curl becomes synonymous with the permanence of the beloved's love. The 'true gold' is the emblem of their eternal fidelity to each other and representative of the innocence of the woman. However, by the end of the poem he discovers the gold to be counterfeit, a mere imitation, a 'golden lie' (l. 44), for she who pledged constancy with it is now 'bought and sold,/ Sold, sold' (ll. 33 - 34). Having learnt his lesson in the art of (mis)reading the worth of gold, he consigns the precious curl to flames: 'Burn, you glossy heretic, burn,/ Burn, burn' (ll. 53 - 54). The sexual tone of the poem as the lover castigates his beloved for her fickleness cannot be mistaken. Her fidelity has been bought by a higher bidder in a marital bargain where the beauty that her hair bestowed upon her person made her more highly valued. It is ironic that it is that very gold which was prized by her lover that has made her saleable; the wealth of her hair that the speaker had so eulogised, wanting to 'kiss it night and day' (l. 4), has now merely found a new admirer and owner. However, the idea of the lock of hair as central to the negotiation of a marital contract is implied in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnet XIX, 'The soul's Rialto hath its merchandise...', as well. The commercial language in which the exchange of the lovers' locks is chronicled makes apparent the economic undercurrents of a love relationship: 'The soul's Rialto hath its merchandize;/ I barter curl for curl upon that mart'.³⁶

³⁵ Alfred Tennyson, 'The Ringlet' (1864), in *The Poems of Tennyson*, Vol. 2, ed. Christopher Ricks, Harlow: Longman, 1987, pp. 687 - 688, l. 2. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

³⁶ Barrett Browning, Sonnet XIX, in *The Complete Poetical Works of Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, p. 21, ll. 1 - 2.

This conflation of gold hair and gold coins is particularly obvious in Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market* (1862). When golden-headed, sweet-toothed Laura longs for the goblin fruit and bemoans her pennilessness, the scurrying, cunning goblins suggest an exchange:

"You have much gold upon your head," [...]
 "Buy from us with a golden curl."
 She clipped a precious golden lock,
 She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,
 Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red [...].³⁷

That this transaction is sexual is obvious, and in squandering the currency of her golden hair for the forbidden pleasures offered by the goblin men, '[s]he never tasted such before' (l.132), she surrenders her innocence. By indulging in illicit pleasures, Laura finds herself cut off from the ordinary joys she had shared with her sister, and inevitably she begins to fall into a decline:

Her hair grew thin and gray;
 She dwindled, as the fair full moon doth turn
 To swift decay, and burn
 Her fire away. (l. 276 - 280)

She remembers the parable of Jeanie that Lizzie had alluded to earlier in the poem - Jeanie who was now in her grave instead of being a bride, for she took the goblin gifts seeking 'joys brides hope to have' (l. 314). However, this is a poem of redemption, and Laura regains her 'gleaming locks' (l. 540) and a chance at marriage and motherhood through the sacrifice of 'white and golden Lizzie' (l. 408). Laura lies somewhere between the extremes of the virtuous golden-haired damsel and the siren with her ensnaring, gleaming hair. She is the innocent who falls because of her naive curiosity, and learning from her fall, is miraculously saved by her loving sister. Though corrupted by the dangerous juices of the goblin fruit, '[s]weeter than honey from the rock' (l. 129), she is rescued from the fate that befell poor Jeanie, and she once again gains the lustre of her locks. Since the phrase 'gold hair' is not just a synonym for blonde hair, but is really a symbol of something priceless and powerful, it was for the Victorians, Gitter maintains, 'the obvious and ideal vehicle for expressing their notorious - and ambivalent - fascination both with money and with female sexual power'.³⁸ This more generalised preoccupation

³⁷*The Complete Poems of Christina Rossetti*, Vol. 1, ed. R. W. Crump, Barton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979, l. 123 - 128. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

³⁸Gitter, 'The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination', p. 936.

with the desire for but fear of the corrupting influence of wealth, as well as the more nebulous though powerful horror of female sexuality, that is pervasive in the Victorian imaginary is replicated in complex ways in these poems.

The sense of revulsion and betrayal that Tennyson's speaker feels at realising that the gold hair by which he had set such store was not a symbol of truthfulness, but a valuable commodity for his beloved to negotiate with, becomes heightened when placed against the Brownings' correspondence. This idea of hair as having a base monetary aspect is given a morbid and grotesque turn in Browning's 'Gold Hair: A Story of Pornic' (1864). The poem recounts the life of a beautiful, young girl with fair skin, a slight build, and an abundance of gold hair:

Hair, such a wonder of flax and floss,
Freshness and fragrance – floods of it, too!
Gold, did I say? Nay, gold's mere dross [...].³⁹

This delicate, otherworldly girl asks as her deathbed request to not have her profusion of burnished hair disturbed, and indeed her hair covers her entirely, clothing her in a wealth of fine gold:

[It] curled around her brow, like a crown,
And coiled beside her cheeks, like a cap,
And calmed about her neck – ay, down
To her breast, pressed flat, without a gap
I' the gold, it reached her gown. (l. 41 - 45)

As the years go by, the legend of her saintly life increases, gaining strength from the fame of her yellow hair that shone like a halo about her head, until a time comes when the church's floor is taken out for repair, and the village urchins begin to dig underneath for buried jewels. Instead of finding the expected armour or adornment, they find 'a mint of money' (l. 99), cold coins secreted beneath the heaps of golden hair. In this strikingly macabre image the aureole of piety is revealed to be a bower of crass materialism and an inhuman greed. While glossy headed Laura had rendered herself unmarriageable by thoughtlessly spending her most precious asset for a momentary delight, the girl from Pornic hoards the wealth of her golden hair ('she knew her gold hair's worth', l. 70), corrupting it

³⁹Robert Browning, 'Gold Hair: A Story of Pornic' (1864), in *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*, Vol. VI, eds. John C. Berkey, Allan C. Dooley, Susan E. Dooley, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1996, pp. 193 - 200, l. 16 - 18.

by making it a site of concealment. In this poem then the symbolic value and the economic value of hair conflate in a bizarre image.⁴⁰

This seemingly peculiar equation, however, grows out of a specific context: golden hair had increasingly gained its overtones of a corrupted materiality and unwomanly greed from the public debate on what was known as the 'Woman Question'. The New Woman was emerging and making her claim on the public sphere, to a right to higher education, to her own property, to suffrage, and to a certain economic and physical freedom. In 1857, the Divorce Act was passed and the bill to amend the Married Woman's Property law was presented to parliament in the same year. Though allowing for a wife to divorce her husband, the real ambition of the Divorce Act was to maintain the sanctity of the home, and to this effect, while a husband could divorce his wife for adultery, that adultery had to be aggravated by something that threatened the familial home (like incest, or the intrusion of the mistress into the marital home) for the wife to be granted a divorce. This double standard was inherently problematic because though according to Christian ethics, adultery in either partner was equally condemnable, due to reasons of inheritance and class purity the chastity of the woman was of greater consequence. The woman's sexuality, its channeling into a marital economy or its threatening potential in adulterous acts, was then placed at the centre of public discussions of marriage. On the other hand, the bill regarding the Married Woman's Property law attempted to amend the contemporary situation that passed the control of and income from a woman's property into the hands of her husband. It was he who had absolute control over all her property, including her personal effects like jewellery, and she could pass them on only with his consent for the husband had the power to overrule his wife's bequests.

Both of these acts called into question traditional familial structures and challenged them from a position that was chiefly financial. Discussions of women's issues and female sexuality were then crucially linked to debates about their inheritance and property rights.⁴¹ This economic implication easily translated into

⁴⁰This poem is reminiscent of the equally bizarre tale that is the staple of most Pre-Raphaelite histories. In 1862 Dante Gabriel Rossetti buried his wife Lizzie Siddal, his former model who was remarkable for the unconventional features, heavy lidded eyes and wealth of golden hair that Rossetti rendered again and again in his paintings. Distraught at her death, Rossetti enclosed his notebook of poems in her coffin, only to regret it and seven years later an order for exhumation was applied for so that he could retrieve his poems. The legend goes that Lizzie Siddal's hair had continued to grow even after death and when the coffin was opened it was found to be filled with her coppery hair, as bright in death as in life.

⁴¹In examining the representations of women in Victorian art, Lynda Nead argues that '[t]he divorce bill brought the issue of adultery to the forefront of public representations of female

BEAUTIFUL HAIR!
BEETHAM'S CAPILLARY HAIR FLUID.

Warranted free from lead and all poisonous ingredients. It effectually arrests falling off and greyness. In cases of baldness, or where the hair has fallen in patches, it stimulates the dormant bulbs or roots, causing an abundant growth of new hair. It imparts a rich gloss to hair of all shades, and keeps it in any desired form during exercise. Bottles, 2s. 6d., 4s. 6d., 7s. 6d. (equal to four small), 11s. (to six small).

WHEN HAIR IS GREY,
BEETHAM'S INDELIBLE HAIR EXTRACT,

Harmless and refreshing, free from grease and dye, is warranted to restore hair, however grey, to its original colour and beauty, without staining the skin. It cleanses the head from dandruff or scurf, strengthens and thickens the hair, rendering it soft and silky. It is superior to anything ever introduced. Beware of spurious imitations. Bottles 3s. and 5s. 6d.

Mr. Beetham has devoted upwards of thirty years to the study of the hair, and his preparations are admired and recommended by many hundreds of families. Ask your Chemist or Perfumer to procure them for you.

Proprietors—**M. BEETHAM & Co., Dispensing Chemists, 7, PROMENADE VILLAS, CHELTENHAM.**
 Sold by SANGER, 150 and 252, Oxford-street, London; and most Chemists and Perfumers.

Rough, Red, Freckled, and Brown Skin rendered
beautifully White and Soft by
BEETHAM'S EXTRACT OF
Glycerine and Cucumber.

Warranted free from Lead and all Poisons.

Its use elicits a natural and healthy bloom, effectually removes chaps, redness, and roughness occasioned by exposure to the sun, cold winds, frost, hard water, sea bathing, and other causes. When applied after visiting heated apartments, or exposure to the sun, its delightful and refreshing properties will prove a great luxury; and all susceptibility to freckles, tan, pimples, &c., will be removed. Many hundreds of ladies have assured the Proprietors that its efficacy in preserving the skin and rendering it delightfully soft and white is unerring. A single trial will convince the most sceptical. Bottles, 1s., 1s. 9d., 2s. 6d., and 4s. 6d. (equal to six small).

Tourists will hail it as a valuable appendage, as it allays all unpleasantness arising from bites or stings of insects, and if a little be rubbed upon the body at bed-time, it will prove a safeguard against their attacks.

Children suffer much in winter from roughness of the skin and chaps; its application will prove very soothing.

Figure 20: Advertisement for 'Beetham's Capillary Hair Fluid', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (December 1876).

BEAUTIFUL HAIR.
THE CHEAPEST HOUSE AND THE LARGEST STOCK OF REAL HAIR.
THE FASHIONABLE COIL PLAIT, 30s. THE COIL TWIST, 3s. in. long, 21s. THE CORONET PLAIT, 8s. 6d.
 Our 10s. 6d. and 21s. Tails of Real Hair cannot be surpassed for length and quality. Real Hair Stems, for plaiting the Hair, 1s. each.
All other Hair Work equally Cheap (by post to all parts), and exchanged if not approved. The above in return for P.O. Order.
ESTIMATES FOR EVERY KIND OF HAIR WORK GIVEN.
IMPORTANT! False Hair when Faded restored to its Original or any Colour, 2s. 6d. per ounce. Send Hair with Pattern. Also Ladies' own Hair and Combs made up, 3s. 6d. per ounce. Artistic Hairwork, Rings, Brooches, Bracelets, Guards, &c. &c., made to order. I beg to assure my customers that the SAME HAIR SENT shall be USED. **ESTIMATES AND DESIGNS GIVEN.**
BLACK OR BROWN HAIR DYE, instantaneous, harmless, perfect, permanent, does not stain the skin. Sent for 2s. 9d.
SUPERFLUOUS HAIR.—OLVER'S DEPILOTORY removes hair from face, arms, &c., without the least harm to the skin. Sent for 2s. 9d.
J. OLVER, HAIR MERCHANT AND WIG MAKER, 76, BOROUGH, LONDON.

Figure 21: Advertisement for fake hair, *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (January 1876).

the gold that was women's hair, and was already present in the discourse on sexuality that often took place through that obvious symbol of femininity. This gold hair then transformed the woman who possessed it into the ultimate commodity while also making her, in a perverse twist, intensely powerful as the mistress of that which was so highly estimated. This symbolic appraisal of hair also has a direct link to the actual economic value that it was endowed with, adding another layer to the cultural and political matrix that fetishised it. The manifold implications surrounding women's hair were compounded by the premium placed on it

sexuality'. The agitation for improved rights made a clear distinction between the woman as victim of her adulterous husband and the woman as adulterer: 'Woman as victim could be accommodated within the code of sexual respectability but woman as offender transgressed that code and was defined as sexually deviant'. It is this high visibility of the sexually deviant woman that leads to paintings like Augustus Eggs' iconic triptych *Past and Present* (1858). Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality: Representations of Women in Victorian Britain*, Oxford, New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988, p. 56.

= The Toilette.

TO REMOVE FRECKLES.—Dissolve, in half an ounce of lemon-juice, one ounce of Venice soap, and add a quarter of an ounce each of oil of bitter almonds, and deliquated oil of tartar. Place this mixture in the sun till it acquires the consistency of ointment. When in this state add three drops of the oil of rhodium, and keep it for use. Apply it to the face or hands in the manner following: Wash the parts at night with elder-flower water, then anoint with the ointment. In the morning cleanse the skin from its oily adhesion by washing it copiously in rose-water.

TO EXTRACT ESSENCES FROM FLOWERS.—Procure a quantity of the petals of any flowers which have an agreeable fragrance, card thin layers of cotton, which dip into the finest Florence or Lucca oil, sprinkle a small quantity of fine salt on the flowers, and lay a layer of cotton and one of flowers alternately, until an earthen vessel or wide-mouthed glass bottle is full. Tie the top close with a bladder, then lay the vessel in a south aspect to the heat of the sun, and in fifteen days, when uncovered, a fragrant oil may be squeezed away from the whole mass, quite equal to the highly-valued otto of roses.

TO PROMOTE THE GROWTH OF THE HAIR.—Take of eau de cologne, two ounces; tincture of cantharides, two drachms; oil of rosemary, oil of lavender, of each ten drops.

HOW TO MAKE ROSE WATER.—Take two pounds of rose-leaves, place them on a napkin tied round the edges of a basin filled with hot water, and put a dish of cold water upon the leaves; keep the bottom water hot, and change the water at top as soon as it begins to grow warm. By this kind of distillation you will extract a great quantity of the essential oil of the roses, by a process which cannot be expensive, and will prove very beneficial.

POMATUM.—Melt in a water bath half a pound of the best lard, take it off the fire and add half a pint of rose water, stir it continually with a clean piece of wood or ivory, made in the form of a spatula or knife, until it is cold, then drain off the superfluous water that swims on the surface, add a few drops of the otto of roses, or any other scent you please. In order to prevent its turning rancid, add a table-spoonful of spirits of wine.

TO REMOVE SUPERFLUOUS HAIR.—Lime, two ounces; carbonate of potash, four ounces; charcoal powder, two drams. Make up into a paste with warm water, and apply to the part, which must be previously shaved close. When completely dry, wash it off with warm water.

TO CLEAN KID GLOVES.—Draw the gloves on the hands, and then freely wash them in turpentine until perfectly clean. Then blow into them and pin them on a line to dry. The air will dissipate any smell the turpentine may leave. Should this, however, not prove to be the case, a drop or two of oil of lemon in a little water, rubbed lightly over the gloves, will effectually destroy it.

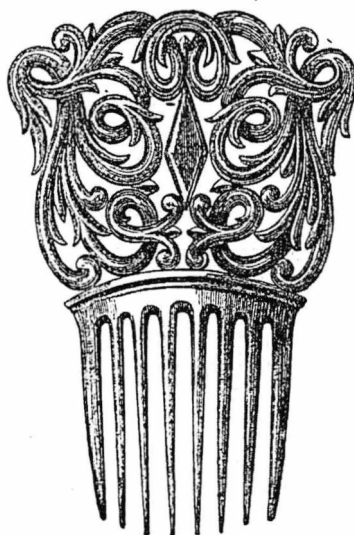
Figure 22: 'The Toilette', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (August 1852)

JOHN HASSALL

Would request particular attention to his

**TORTOISESHELL
DRESS COMBS.**

While they are made only of the Richest Tortoiseshell, and with the most artistic skill, the Designs are chosen with special reference to the Comb as an ornament and to the Material of which it is made.



JOHN HASSALL,
COMB MANUFACTURER,
64, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

Figure 23: Advertisement for the 'Tortoiseshell Dress Comb', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (July 1874).

THE COURT HAIR DESTROYER.

—This newly-discovered and **ONLY EFFECTUAL** Remedy, **COMPLETELY** removes Superfluous Hair from the face, neck, arms, &c. It is both certain and harmless in use, effecting its purpose without the least pain or inconvenience to the skin, and, unlike all other remedies, leaves no cause for further trouble or anxiety. Price 3s. 6d. ; post free, 3s. 10d., in stamps or P.O. order, of the Inventor J. LEON, 19, Porteus-road, St. Mary's-square, London, W.

Figure 24: Advertisement for 'The Court Hair Destroyer', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (December 1874).

by a culture where the dictates of fashion made it a highly coveted commodity. Long hair was admired and envied, and hairstyles were increasingly so gigantic and elaborate that hair itself was in much demand. Fake hair was a necessity for recreating the voguish hairstyles of the day, and by the late 1850s, the supplying of artificial hair had become a major industry, with hair from France, Germany and Italy being the most desirable. Paris was the major hair market of the world, and it was reported in 1862 that about a hundred tonnes of hair was bought in the Paris market alone. Hair was then imported in large quantities into England by wig-makers to meet the market for fake hair that the new styles had generated. This requirement was fulfilled by young women suffering from poverty or as a regular occupation where women grew their hair to be sheared for paltry sums and then sold for huge profits by the hair merchants.⁴²

It is for this reason that poor lost Florence has the very hair on her head threatened by the large pair of scissors that Mrs Brown wields, in Dickens' *Dombey and Son* (1848). Florence is the much neglected older child of Mr Dombey, who is not worth his while, not being the heir that his business could pass onto: '[S]uch a child was merely a piece of base coin that couldn't be invested - a bad Boy - nothing more'.⁴³ The worth of the daughter is then already formulated in overtly monetary terms that rate her as financially unrewarding. This initial erroneous devaluation almost becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy when Mrs Brown, who 'finds' Florence after she is separated from her companions and promptly robs her of her clothes and shoes, catches a glimpse of her luxuriant hair, and gets into 'an unaccountable state of excitement' (72). After having taken all that she could off Florence's person that was of any monetary value, she presumably coveted her hair so as to sell it. She only manages to contain herself, and not act on the greed that is the driving force of all her actions, because of the memory of her own daughter. However, this attack on Florence is constructed in ambiguous terms that almost suggest a sexual attack, reminiscent of the goblins attacking Laura in the *Goblin Market*,

⁴²Richard Corson, *Fashions in Hair: The First Five Thousand Years*, Hairdressers' Technical Council, 1966, Chapter 12. The cutting of hair in most Victorian novels is shown as a remarkably traumatic experience and the wearing of false hair as an act of grievous feminine duplicity. In Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, Marty South is cajoled and seduced by the village barber into selling the wealth of her hair to be made into the fake braided locks that will adorn Mrs Charmond's head and draw Winterborne to her. Marty's eventual decision to cut her hair arises out of poverty, but also out of disappointment in love, and signifies a kind of loss of innocence and hope. Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders* (1887), ed. J. Gibson, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.

⁴³Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (1848), ed. Valerie Purton, London: Dent, 1997, p. 5. All references will be to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text hereafter.

with 'Good Mrs Brown' hovering over her head, 'ruffling her curls with a furious pleasure', and Florence 'offer[ing] no resistance or entreaty' (73).

Escaping her grotesque tormentor unscathed, Florence makes her way to the wharf, asking for directions to her father's firm, and comes across Walter, one of his young employees and her own future husband. It is now that her luck in not having her hair sheared stands her in good stead. Dressed as she is in beggars' rags and disintegrating shoes too big for her feet, it is her hair that discloses her true identity as Florence Dombey, in true Dickensian fairytale fashion. Explaining her escapade, she bursts into tears and with that 'her hair came tumbling down about her face: moving to speechless admiration and commiseration, young Walter' (76), revealing her as the true princess disguised in tatters. Having evaded the inclinations of Mrs Brown, Florence comes away intact, with every curl still flourishing, her innocence unharmed. Galia Ofek looks at this scene, and more generally speaking Dickens' characterisation of his heroines, in relation to the myth of Rapunzel, another Grimms' fairy tale that had inscribed itself into the Victorian imaginary. But Mrs Brown is as reminiscent of the old witch who imprisoned Rapunzel and cut off her long tresses as more real dangers, for the scene is 'evocative of child-prostitution, [and] exposes the ugly aspects of hair fetishism'.⁴⁴ Ofek goes on to argue that this paradigm of the victimised golden-haired Rapunzel is central to Dickens, and is the opposite of the Medusa figure that presents the other model of femininity in his novels: 'While Rapunzel represents the bright, ideal version of femininity and the aesthetic vision of patriarchy, the witch or Medusa is its darkest and most horrifying vision, or representation, of female power and its dangers'.⁴⁵ It is just such a Medusa-like woman that Edith, the second Mrs Dombey and Florence's stepmother, turns into towards the end of the novel. Instead of allowing herself to cry and be consoled by Florence, Edith chooses to keep her anger and enact an estrangement with Florence, whom she has come to love. In this scene of emotional intensity, as she separates herself from Florence, her gaze continues to be fixed upon Mr Dombey as if she could strike him dead. This image is not simply one of a threatening female power, but also of a righteous though vengeful fury. It is her unforgiving anger that makes Edith so different from Florence, but even Florence comes perilously close to being despoiled.

The cutting of hair is clearly posited as a traumatic experience, that would

⁴⁴Galia Ofek, "'Tie Her Up by the Hair': Dickens's Retelling of the Medusa and Rapunzel Myths", *Dickens Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Sep. 2003), p. 185.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 194.

have been damaging to Florence's identity and removed her from the conjugal cycle as a desirable commodity. It is exactly such an experience that the girls at the Lowood School, a charitable institution for the benefit of orphans, have to undergo at the express command of Mr Brocklehurst, the director of the establishment in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. This incident is formed as a ritual chastisement aimed to suppress all individuality and all sexuality. By his edict to cut off all top-knots, Mr Brocklehurst intends to reaffirm his own authority as the supreme patriarch, displaying his ability to inculcate a proper humility, to rouse shame, and to remove the girls from the sexual economy by a physically inflicted asexualisation. Unlike Florence Dombey or Lizzie in the *Goblin Market* for whom the cutting of hair means a fall from grace, a fall from a state of sexual purity, this shearing of hair is meant to prevent the girls from ever entering into sexual maturity, into an awareness and acceptance of their emergent sexuality, and therefore remaining perpetually asexual. These 'charity-children' are meant to exhibit no troubling sexual characteristics, growing into their roles as future school-teachers and governesses, mute witnesses to rather than participants in the courtship and marital rituals which were the regularised channels for the performance of sexuality.

In Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853) too, following the discussion in Chapter 2, the namesake of the novel goes through a similar ritualised chastisement, but unlike Jane who resents it, she meekly receives it as the penance for her past mistakes. Ruth's inevitable seduction at the hands of Bellingham takes place in a strangely arcadian setting where her hair is one of the central features upon which the sexual charge of the situation is displaced. As they stroll out of the city streets on their walk, they enter a shady grove that leads down into an unexpected descent, steering them deeper into the wood. The tellingly secretive locale is evocative of the original sin, and the descriptions of the place intensify the sexual mood of the episode. They reach the lowest plane, where a 'green gloom reigned' (74), and located in the centre of this is a circular pool, overshadowed by trees, and mirroring the patch of sky overhead. Bellingham sits her down and comes back with an armful of lilies:

[H]e took off her bonnet, without speaking, and began to place his flowers in her hair. She was quite still while he arranged her coronet, looking up in his face with loving eyes, with a peaceful composure. She knew that he was pleased from his manner, which had the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy, and she did not think twice of his occupation. It was pleasant to forget everything except his pleasure.
(74)

Once her masses of rich auburn hair are decked by the lilies, he asks her to look at herself in the pool, and once again like Eve, Ruth looks at her reflection and cannot help 'seeing her own loveliness; it gave her a sense of satisfaction for an instant, as the sight of any other beautiful object would have done, but she never thought of associating it with herself. She knew that she was beautiful; but that seemed abstract, and removed from herself' (74). The fact that she does not recognise the value of her beauty is what makes her fall prey to Bellingham's manoeuvres, leaving her bereft of any power to negotiate. She does not realise that the only thing that Bellingham cares for is her beauty, taking pride in it the way he would in any other possession. As she stands by the trees, the 'great heavy white flowers drooped on either side of her beautiful head, and if her brown hair was a little disordered, the very disorder only seemed to add a grace' (74 - 75), the only thing he recognises and responds to in her is her loveliness, taking more pleasure in it than in her attempts to please him with a myriad of small endeavours. She is the innocent who is made precious by the shine of her golden hair, but unable to recognise her own worth, is ensnared in the web that it creates for her.

Abandoned by Bellingham and assimilated by the Bensons into their own household as a widowed relative, Ruth finds some hope of redemption in her unborn child. Sally, their long time housemaid, cannily understands the situation, and fiercely protective of her employers' reputation, insists that it was necessary to 'clip off that bonny brown hair that was fitter for a bride in lawful matrimony than for such as her' (147 - 148). Refusing to see the household 'disgraced by anyone's fine long curls' (145), Sally enters Ruth's bedroom as she stands in the middle of it dressed for the night, her long luxuriant hair hanging down her back in disheveled waves, mute and unknowing as a sacrificial lamb. Handing over to her two widows' caps 'of commonest make and coarsest texture' (144) Sally demands to 'crop' (145) Ruth's hair, who half intimidated and half broken-spirited raises no resistance:

Sally produced the formidable pair of scissors that always hung at her side, and began to cut in a merciless manner. She expected some remonstrance or some opposition, and had a torrent of words ready to flow forth at the least sign of rebellion; but Ruth was still and silent, with meekly-bowed head, under the strange hands that were shearing her beautiful hair into the clipped shortness of a boy's. Long before she had finished, Sally had some slight misgivings as to the fancied necessity of her task; but it was too late, for half the curls were gone, and the rest must now come off. (145)

Ruth's meek passivity touches Sally, and in spite of her outwardly fearsome aspect, she carried away the discarded curls, and 'could not find it in her heart to throw such lovely chestnut tresses away, so she folded them up carefully in paper, and placed them in a safe corner of her drawer' (146).

Not only does Ruth inscribe upon her body the penance she feels, thereby trying to erase her own history, she is also desexualised by the cutting of the very hair that had been so instrumental in her seduction. The story comes full circle when Ruth nurses back Bellingham from an attack of typhus, fatally contracting it herself. Her atonement is fully realised in the devoted selflessness she shows to her tormentor, leaving his bedside only as he begins to regain his health and come out of his delirium. Their last meeting ends with a surreal recognition as Bellingham holds her gaze and murmurs, "'Where are the water-lilies? Where are the lilies in her hair?'" (446).

It is a comparable castigation that Tess in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (1891) subjects herself to. Having run away from home, feeling shamed by her past and continually harassed by the unwelcome, and sometimes threatening, attentions of strangers on the road, she feels her beauty, and the thick rope of dark hair that hangs down her back to be a terrible burden, and is 'resolved to run no further risks from her appearance' (245). She finds her way into a thicket, and conceals her hair, shrouding it with a handkerchief, 'covering her chin and half her cheeks and temples, as if she were suffering from toothache' (245). And then in a disturbing scene of self-mutilation, she takes out her little scissors and 'mercilessly nip[s] her eyebrows off, and thus insured against aggressive admiration she went on her uneven way' (245). But in trying to take control over the interpretations that her appearance gives rise to, she is still unable to protect herself against the comments that it generates. As her new look meets with remarks more mocking than complimentary, she dissolves into tears 'for very pity of herself' (245), crying out plaintively that now she was destined to be ugly.

It is that very 'thick cable of twisted dark hair hanging straight down her back to her waist' (83) which she hides under her peasants scarf, putting it out of view, and thereby devaluing her looks and trying to extricate herself from her own marketability, which was undone and put on display in all its overflowing glory by her mother when she was sent off as the family's emissary to their supposed relatives. It is her mother who prepares her, washing her hair thoroughly, leaving it twice as abundant, before tying it with a broad pink ribbon. Even though her simple-minded mother does not mean any harm, and merely wishes to put her

daughter forward in the best light possible, it is this overt display of her tresses, suggestive of her sexual availability and a latent sensual nature, that draws Alex to her. Recurrently in the novel, Alex claims it is her appearance that provokes a responsive desire in him, taking the onus of the responsibility for her seduction off his own shoulders, much like we are told later that she 'seduces casual attention' (78) by seeming never to be courting it. Like Ruth, she is unmindful of the value of her appearance, oblivious of the observation it prompts, as well as unrecognising of her own sensuality, and thereby unconscious of the sexual signals she conveys by the exhibition of her hair. Through her seduction, her pregnancy, and the death of her illegitimate child, she is rudely initiated into the world of sexual realpolitik, from which she tries to withdraw by her act of self-mutilation.

It is a similar scene of self-mutilation that links Tess to Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, though Maggie's impulsive act is done in a fit of childish anger. Her hair, for most of the novel, acts as a signifier of her spontaneity, her passionate nature, her hunger for love and approval, as well as being a marker of her difference from docile beings like Lucy. Even as a child, her hair appears central to her character and every description of her focuses on this distinctive feature. Her hair is the bane of her existence, constantly making her mother fretful and attracting her mournful looks. She has too much hair, all with an energy independent of her control, which will not curl no matter what is done to it, to the eternal regret of her mother. But it is also this feature that is crucial to Maggie's own identity and sense of self, this which gives her her distinct character. She goes about everywhere pushing back her heavy hair out of her expressive eyes, shaking it away like a Shetland pony, getting it crowned with a fine white powder in her excursions in the mill, and as Mrs Tulliver ruefully complains, "' 'ull sit down on the floor i' the sunshine an' plait her hair an' sing to herself like a Bedlam creatur' '" (13). It is this constant familial attention to her hair, and the way in which all criticism of her becomes focused upon it that leads her to take literally her father's thoughtless remark that it should be cut short.

On the occasion of a family gathering where Maggie's hair once again becomes a topic of contention on which the sisterly rivalry between Mrs Tulliver, Mrs Pullet, Mrs Deane, and Mrs Glegg is played out, Maggie sneaks into her mother's room with Tom, and taking out a large pair of scissors, 'seiz[es] her front locks and cut[s] them straight across the middle of her forehead' (63). Before Tom can remonstrate, 'Snip! went the great scissors again' (64), and excited by her own daring, she asks him to finish the rest:

The black locks were so thick – nothing could be more tempting to a lad who had already tasted the forbidden pleasure of cutting the pony's mane. I speak to those who know the satisfaction of making a pair of scissors meet through a duly resisting mass of hair. One delicious grinding snip, and then another and another, and the hinder-locks fell heavily on the floor, and Maggie stood cropped in a jagged, uneven manner, but with a sense of clearness and freedom, as if she had emerged from a wood into the open plain. (64)

This self-mutilation is strangely reminiscent of the tortures that Maggie inflicts upon her doll in the attic, 'a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes' (28). The once red cheeked doll had been defaced by nails that were driven into its head by fierce childish strokes of anger, ground and beaten against the rough brick of the chimneys, suffering vicariously the crises in Maggie's young life. This time Maggie's body itself becomes the site on which her conflicting emotions of self-loathing and an irrepressible desire to please are enacted. Though there is a sense of forbidden pleasure in this secretly enacted rebellion, a sense also of the childish delight that the pure act of cutting hair produces, it soon turns to regret. In her attempt to get free of her hair that seemed to be strangling her by dominating all the attention she received, and to reaffirm her identity, she is left as miserable as Tess. As Tom makes the last snip, he declares her to be a 'queer thing' (64), the idiot whom everybody would laugh at. It is then that she finally sees the wider implications: 'She had thought beforehand chiefly of her own deliverance from her teasing hair and teasing remarks about it, and something also of the triumph she should have over her mother and her aunts by this very decided course of action: she didn't want her hair to look pretty, – that was out of the question – she only wanted people to think her a clever little girl, and not to find fault with her' (64). It is not surprising then that the passionately adopted asceticism of her youth manifests itself in her hair. Her troublesome hair is soothed and smoothened by the hands of her mother into beautiful coronets that adorn her in her poverty of dress, the 'resisting mass' finally vanquished. '[P]oor Maggie's phiz, which Nature seemed to have moulded and coloured with the most decided intention' (33) turns out to be easily mouldable after all, becoming emblematic of her attempts to fashion herself into a socially acceptable woman who would be able to win affection without criticism.

The arc this chapter makes from Lucy Deane to Maggie Tulliver, moves from the reading of hair as a passive signifier of a demure femininity, a manipulable

feature that hides female duplicity, to something through which self-creation can be enacted. Eliot seems to be very conscious of the varied readings of a woman's hair, a consciousness that is also visible in Gaskell's novels. The sensational novels of Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Braddon tease out the more sinister suggestions of women's hair and its connotative possibilities, and in doing so, they disclose the high chance for misreadings in a society that is based on correct readings of appearance. And while Pykett claims that Braddon's descriptive excesses typified her 'habitual fetishization of woman's hair',⁴⁶ it really displays Braddon's incisive understanding of a society that had fetishised hair in fashion, trade, artistic and literary representations, and even in mourning convention. Lady Audley's sensational hair, with all its Gothic overtones of stealth and deceit, becomes a metonym for the crux of anxieties about the New Woman of the period. It is a cipher for the erotic and commercial overvaluation of hair, but it is also a subversive element that finds its way into the new sensational aesthetics and becomes a prominent focus of narrative pleasure in the text.

It is such a moment of narrative pleasure I want to examine as I conclude this chapter. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is a proto-feminist poem that follows the pattern of its heroine's life, mapping her dreams and poetic aspirations, her anxieties about love and selfhood. Clear about its own intention of revealing an independent, intelligent heroine, it takes a long and serious look at the kind of education meted out to Aurora as a woman. Having been orphaned, Aurora is brought up by her English aunt, a prim and disciplined lady who insisted upon complete obedience, a compliance that articulates itself in strikingly physical terms:

[...] I only thought
Of lying quiet there where I was thrown
Like sea-weed on the rocks, and suffering her
To prick me to a pattern with her pin,
Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,
And dry out from my drowned anatomy
The last sea-salt left in me.
So it was.
I broke the copious curls upon my head
In braids, because she liked smooth-ordered hair.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine*, p. 98.

⁴⁷Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1856), ed. Margaret Reynolds, New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1996, First Book, ll. 378 - 386.

These lines spoken by Aurora strongly reveal the pain and the aggression latent in this creation of the pattern woman. Taking images from dressmaking, she speaks of being pricked into the appropriate shape, the needle becoming the instrument with which her youthful innocence is attacked. Like an anatomical exhibit, she is laid out for scrutiny, the fullness of her nature dried up by constant observation. The needle turns into the pin that holds her in place for inspection. And the final metaphor for her disciplining education is the smoothing of her hair, but even this is an image that is marked by rupture and pain; Aurora 'broke the copious curls' on her head into rows of braids because her aunt liked 'smooth-ordered hair'. Order then becomes the ideology which keeps women in check, and in this case subdues Aurora's vitality and individuality.

This abundant hair links Aurora to Marian Erle in the poem, for she too is described through her hair:

The hair, too, ran its opulence of curls
 [...] Too much hair perhaps
 (I'll name a fault here) for so small a head,
 Which seemed to droop on that side and on this,
 As a full-blown rose uneasy with its weight,
 Though not a wind should trouble it. (Third Book, ll. 813 - 819)

Hair then becomes a metaphor in the poem for the way in which the woman is treated in Victorian society, and Marian's heavy hair that makes her droop her head like a 'full-blown rose' is an image of blossoming sexuality that needs little to stir it into existence. A lush flower, with its petals wide open in a moment of maturity before they drop away, the image is a sensual and overt evocation of a sexuality that is natural and abundant. This is an erotic moment in the poem and is suggestive of the way in which Marian will be associated with the body, but at the same time it is not an association that will be seen in narrow moral terms. When her own mother tries to sell her to the highest bidder, it is again her hair that becomes the signifying feature in her commodification into a sexual object.

Aurora's hair however, with her growing independence and self-confidence, is what I want to focus on in my conclusion. Unlike most of the heroines that I examine in this chapter, Aurora's hair manages to become more than just a signifier of her dependent situation, transcending this emblematic position to achieve a greater autonomy and expressivity. It takes on an energy that Maggie Tulliver and Jane Eyre never allowed their own tresses to achieve, while avoiding the sinister implications of Lady Audley's excessively energetic hair. At a crucial moment

in the story, Aurora returns to her home after her interview with Lady Waldemar, seething with rage. Back in the privacy of her own space, she is able to 'breathe large' (Fifth Book, l. 1037) again:

[...] I drop my cloak,
 Unclass my girdle, loose the band that ties
 My hair ... now could I but unloose my soul!
 We are sepulchred alive in this close world,
 And want more room. (Fifth Book, ll. 1037 - 1040)

Her desire for open spaces and unencumbered thoughts is transmuted into her hair as well as her surroundings. She constantly searches for her own personal space, rejecting her aunt's house that Romney offers to her as her marital home, taking on a perambulatory life in that quest for a room of her own. And as she thinks of her meeting with the spiteful woman, she thinks of how women prick other women with delicate needles "[n]eath nails, 'neath eyelids, in your nostrils' (Fifth Book, l.1048), and human creatures are expected to bear the torture that animals would roar at.

As Aurora thinks more deeply of the relationships between men and women, between Lady Waldemar and Romney, envisioning them as man and wife, she feels increasingly angry. Frustrated by her fury and still unconscious of her love for him, it is her profusion of hair that becomes the medium which conveys that vexation, intuiting her yearning for him:

My loose long hair began to burn and creep,
 Alive to the very ends, about my knees:
 I swept it backward as the wind sweeps flame,
 With the passion of my hands. Ah, Romney laughed
 One day ... (how full the memories came up!)
 "— Your Florence fire-flies live on in your hair,"
 He said, "it gleams so." Well, I wrung them out,
 My fire-flies; made a knot as hard as life,
 Of those loose, soft, impracticable curls,
 And then sate down and thought [...] (Fifth Book, ll. 1126 - 1135)

Aurora's animate hair turns the image of the Medusa with her hissing, spitting, serpentine curls into a more beautiful, lyrical and yet active image of power. Her hair 'burn[s] and creep[s]' like Lady Audley's hair in Robert's dream, but it is quickened by fireflies - delicate, luminous, sensual. It is a rhapsodic image of womanhood, self-sufficient and beautiful in her justified anger, that Barrett Browning presents here. And as Aurora wrings out the fireflies from her hair,

wringing out girlhood fantasies of love, she twists her flowing hair into a 'knot as hard as life' and sits down to think. It is this act of thinking that is at the core of *Aurora Leigh*, and it is precisely this act of self-definition that is central to Aurora and to every physical description of her. Indeed, it is this thoughtfulness that transforms her 'copious curls' into hair that burns with the brightness of fireflies.

There is a multiplicity of interpretation and anxiety that women's hair in Victorian literature generates, some simplified homogenous readings and others more complex, and contradictory. Even though the idea of the angel of the house is one that reveals itself to be completely unidimensional, and finally too superficial to present any real insight into literary representations of women, it is an unmissable signpost on the way to discovering more evasive meanings. The reason then that I want to end with a reading of *Aurora Leigh* is because it is a text that reveals and revels in the irreconcilable meanings of women's hair, alive to its beauty, its pliability and its pain.

Conclusion

In his essay on Maurice Blanchot's work, Michel Foucault meditates on the notion of the outside using the image of the siren among others. Foucault's sirens are related to the myth of Eurydice, the woman who turns to nothingness, returning to the shadows the instant one turns to look at her. But sirens, the enticing half-women half-birds of Greek mythology who lured unwary sailors to their death by the hypnotic beauty of their song, for Foucault reveal the principle of attraction, bringing together the interconnections between concealment, withdrawal and allure:

The Sirens are the elusive and forbidden form of the alluring voice. They are nothing but song. Only a silvery wake in the sea, the hollow of a wave, a cave in the rocks, the whiteness of the beach – what are they in their very being if not a pure appeal, if not the mirthful void of listening, if not attentiveness, if not an invitation to pause? Their music is the opposite of the hymn: no presence shimmers in their immortal words; only the promise of a future song accompanies their melody. What makes them seductive is less what they make it possible to hear than what sparkles in the remoteness of their words, the future of what they say. Their fascination is due not to their current song, but to what it promises to be.⁴⁸

I turn to Foucault because his account provides a compelling double narrative to the stories of the women that I have looked at so far. Acting as a lens, it gives an intriguing insight into the fascination with the other woman in these novels - the sirens and the Cleopatras. The myths of mermaids, of Medusa and of Narcissus, of simultaneous beauty and danger, haunt Victorian literature, and the self-formation of all its heroines takes place against at least one such other.

The siren then, as Foucault explains it, is so alluring not only because she is evasive and forbidden but because she holds the potential of a future song,

⁴⁸Michel Foucault, 'Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside' (1963), in *Foucault/ Blanchot*, trans. Brian Massumi, New York: Zone Books, 1987, p. 41 - 42.

'an invitation to pause'. And it is against such an intense temptation that the heroine must create her selfhood, resisting the seduction of such a presence. The siren's song is absolute purity in its unalloyed evanescence, its sexuality, and its impermissibility, and the heroine has to rebel against this melody in order to be herself, removed from the economy of such mythification. The 'one' whom Foucault refers to in opposition to the siren replicates the position of these women:

[O]ne must refuse to hear this song so pure – so pure that it says nothing more than its own devouring withdrawal – that one must plug one's ears, pass it by as if one were deaf, in order to live and thus begin to sing. Or, rather, in order for the narrative that will never die to be born, one must listen but remain at the mast, wrists and ankles tied; one must vanquish all desire by a trick that does violence to itself; one must experience all suffering by remaining at the threshold of the alluring abyss; one must finally find oneself beyond song, as if one had crossed death while still alive only to restore it in a second language.⁴⁹

These words evoke a rich, heavily charged story, much like the delicately veined, inwardly profuse narratives of Brontë, Eliot and Gaskell. Their good women have to learn to come to terms with their own desires but it is a compromise that is reached only after a suffering that is a result of the repression of the desiring self. They have to learn to embody the liminal space of uncertainty and indecision between them and the 'alluring abyss' represented by the glamorous, seductive women who offset them.

The search for self then has to necessarily come into conflict with this obstacle before it can transcend it, reaching a kind of 'second language'. For Brontë's Lucy Snowe, whom I looked at in the first chapter, this is a language that lies beyond visuality. It is a language that transcends the expressivity of words and finds a shelter that is also the 'open expanse of silence': 'For in the form of the experience, silence is the immeasurable, inaudible, primal breath from which all manifest discourse issues; or, speech is a reign with the power to hold itself in silent suspense'.⁵⁰ The power of words is most potently embodied in wordlessness for it contains within itself the possibility of bringing forth numerous, unimagined utterances. Lucy's silence then is so intensely threatening to both the characters that inhabit *Villette* and to the reader precisely because of this illimitable potentiality. It is indeed symptomatic of her psycho-sexual uneasiness but it is also a space for privacy, independence, and strength.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 42.

⁵⁰Ibid., p. 53.

What is different though in Foucault's analysis is that for him the sirens posit an outside, a space that lies beyond worldly materiality. However, Victorian sirens are earthly, carnal creatures that are bound up with consumerist desires, sexual charm, and issues of proper femininity. I would replace these Foucauldian sirens with the heroine in this space of the outside; to turn *away* from the voice of the sirens is 'not simply to abandon the world and the distraction of appearance; it is suddenly to feel grow within oneself a desert at the other end of which (but this immeasurable distance is also as thin as a line) gleams a language without an assignable subject, a godless law, a personal pronoun without a person, an eyeless and expressionless face, an other that is the same'.⁵¹ It is in such resistance to language itself and to the song of the siren who disappears as soon as one turns to face her that the hope of creating something new lies. The interlude presented by this refusal is where the self can find an interiority that is fragile as well as expansive, as meagre as a line and as wide as a desert. But this desert is not an arid, barren place, and in its quiet promise is reminiscent of Lucy's shadow gown the colour of a moor in bloom, her preference for ephemeral still life paintings, and her dream-like experience in La Terasse as she comes to consciousness. It is here that a new language, a new self, and a new perspective can be enacted. Perhaps this is a heterotopia that resides in the space of language and diminishes the oppositions of self and other, past and present just as the mirror in the underwater room in La Terrace does for Lucy.

In the writing of this thesis I have realised that like the representations of the women that I examine, I too have had to negotiate between the binaries of inside and outside, pleasure and conformity, secrecy and openness, the authentic self and the type. It was the simultaneous existence of such seemingly contradictory categories that roused my initial interest, for the thoughts of this thesis were sparked by the fleeting remark of Hobsbawm on the costume of the Victorian bourgeois woman, 'an extraordinary combination of temptation and prohibition'.⁵² A prolonged, not particularly ordered reading made it obvious that as much as these binaries are inescapably pervasive in this literature, there are also moments in the text where these divisions fold back upon themselves and become imperceptible. The difference between these oppositions then is not a stable one but is a changeable entity. It is just such a fluidity that is evident in Aurora Leigh's self-expression that takes place through an evocation of a Medusa-like figure but

⁵¹Ibid., p. 48.

⁵²Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848 - 1875*, New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 235.

resolves itself into an image of feminine strength and its beauty.

I have also discovered that a lot more work can be done even with the novels that have maintained a high degree of regard since their publication. What needs to be found though is a reconfiguration that will bring unexpected texts into relation with each other, generating a new conversation with a different point of focus and a different direction. Debates about the body have become increasingly influential and even women's dress is becoming an important area of study not just for dress historians but also for fashion and cultural theorists, no longer seen as something trivial and degraded as Anne Hollander and Elizabeth Wilson have pointed out in their own studies. But even with all this academic interest, the notions of women's bodies, their clothes and their private spaces have not found a collective history. My project focused on such a history as told through literary narratives. The writing and analogous paintings I have examined in this thesis reveal that the heroine occupied a crucial presence in the Victorian imaginary as a source of a deep-seated anxiety regarding notions of domesticity, femininity and sexuality. But at the same time, her representation also suggests something more than this matrix of insecurity: as the central protagonist of innumerable texts she emerges as a desiring, resisting, thinking individual and the process of her self-creation occurs as a series of pivotal moments within the narrative. While most of the novels that I consider could easily be fitted into the category of 'domestic novels', they are more than that for their concerns are much larger than just domesticity. These are novels that concern themselves with the creation of an independent femininity, that sometimes challenges and sometimes works within the norms placed by religion, tradition and social convention. The label of 'sensation novel' is equally anomalous for these texts seem to be braiding the same thematic strands but in a setting that is more exaggerated and melodramatic. Genre is indeed a significant factor in literary studies, but in chronicling the self-formation of the Victorian woman, I have followed her indiscriminately into novels, poems and paintings. While I have sought to maintain a regard for differing representational strategies in different forms of writing, my focus has been the woman at their centre.

I examine the cautious negotiations of these women, the angels and sirens and all those who struggle to make something else between these amplified, fetishised oppositions. What gives these fictional representations a greater intensity is the fact that they are not simply reflecting the given femininity, gender politics and domestic ideology but are indeed crucial in constituting them. A woman like

Lucy Snowe then is not just mirroring the hardships of the single woman who has to find a way to respectably earn her own sustenance, but is creating a new kind of woman who is indeed self-sustaining, but also uninterested in the material and scopie economy of contemporary society. Lady Audley too is not merely a manifestation of Victorian anxieties about women but herself reproduces them, while also revealing the rationale behind them. While the former Lucy directs all her energies towards the shaping of a space that is entirely private and exclusively her own, the latter Lucy makes clear the impossibility of the separation of the public and the private. Lucy Audley's private activities are concentrated towards making a public appearance, and inversely, the falsity of that appearance can only be proven through an examination of her private spaces and private self.

While it has been tempting to read all of these women as defiant in some way or the other, a more attuned reading makes this more difficult. Foucault's sirens suggest a manner of reading into the polysemic meanings that surround these varied representations, but at the same time, I have tried not to reinforce these divisions between the heroine and her other. Though these distinctions are often overtly made within the text, my intention was not just to see the apparent difference of these women but also their equally inescapable significance. In these close readings, my hope was to make these texts new, just as the disconnections and pauses within them bring about moments of autonomy, novel realisations and recognitions.

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