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'A Sufficiency of Clothing': Dress and Domesticity in Victorian Britain

KAREN SAYER

As Caroline Jackson-Houlston has implied, for the Victorians 'superfluous' and 'deficient' dress stood at opposite ends of a social, moral and cultural continuum determined by class. Where bodily concerns, physical frailties, the effects of exertion, shaped what was written on the dress of the poor, commentaries on aesthetics and style were reserved for the dress of the rich. This distinction between 'high' and 'low' dress was policed. It was simply not done for the poor, especially poor women, to waste their money on what was called 'finery' and 'what was or was not finery depended', as Mariana Valverde says, 'on the socio-economic and moral status of the wearer'.¹

For the élite, being dressed appropriately was an accomplishment that in and of itself signified rationality, respectability, humility and 'good breeding'. Hence the following from *Enquire Within Upon Everything* in 1894:

Too much attention cannot be paid to the arrangements of the toilet. A man is often judged by his appearance, and seldom incorrectly. A neat exterior, equally free from extravagance and poverty, almost always proclaims a right-minded man. To dress appropriately, and with good taste, is to respect yourself and others. A gentleman walking, should always wear gloves, this being one of the characteristics of good breeding. Fine linen, and a good hat, gloves and boots, are evidences of the highest taste in dress.²

In this way, self-help manuals and guides suggested that the aspirational and idealized dress of the rich should be associated with Art and the Public Taste. Dressing well was something that was treated as an expression of the individual's originality even if it had to be learnt.

The dress of the poor was conversely treated as more down to earth, and required to be that much more honest.³ W. B. Tegetmeier, author of *A Manual of Domestic Economy*, an educational text aimed at working-class girls, explained in 1880 for instance that:

In a mere pecuniary point of view, it is economical to wear sufficient clothing to keep the body comfortably warm in cold weather, as otherwise a much larger portion of food is necessary to keep up the natural temperature. It may be stated as an important rule, that all persons should be so clothed as not to feel habitually chilly. No person who is constantly complaining of cold can be in good health.⁴

Working-class dress was therefore seen as something quite ordinary: homespun and commonplace in its associations, economical, durable and, most importantly of all, functional in terms of practicality and physical health. Where the aspirant middle class were advised to avoid disharmony, extravagance and excess, the working-class girl was taught the economy of dressing pragmatically according to need. Location, season and climate determined this need:

The use of clothing differs in different regions; in the tropics it is mainly employed to screen the skin from the intense heat of the sun's rays and at the same to permit a free circulation of air, and the escape of perspiration, which is always passing off from the skin; hence we find the Eastern nations using thin, light and loose garments, which answers these requirements . . . In our changeable climate, great care should be taken to clothe the body effectually: for, when the skin is chilled, the blood is determined in increased and injurious quantity to the internal organs, causing colds and inflammations; and even if these serious evils do not occur, the proper action of the skin is prevented, perspiration checked, and ill-health results.⁵

Yet, it can seem that in the nineteenth century being dressed efficiently, being covered by a sufficiency of clothing and having paid attention to 'the proper action of the skin' and the 'free circulation of air', was understood to be inextricably linked to the maintenance of good health and physical fitness, almost regardless of class. Some writers argued that the rich as well as the poor would do well to consider the effects that their clothes had on their health. Andrew Combe, MD, made the following statement about the physiological impact of dress, aimed at an educated well-to-do audience. The 'proper regulation of the clothing demands more attention than is generally bestowed on it', he asserted,

I have known many youths, of both sexes, . . . go habitually about in winter with a dress light and airy enough for summer. They thought it manly and becoming to do so; but those who were not very strongly constituted suffered a severe penalty for their folly. The necessary effect of a deficient circulation in the skin is . . . to throw a disproportionate mass of blood inwards; and when this occurs, insufficient clothing perpetuates the evil, internal disease is generated, and health is perhaps irrecoverably lost before any apprehension of danger is felt.⁶

Such an assessment, influenced more by scientific positivism than aesthetics, became the stock in trade of Victorian writers on dress. None the less, as will be shown, differences of class still remained. For the rich the sufficiency or deficiency of clothing was articulated via concerns about health damaged by fashion, for the poor the focus remained on health damaged by work and privation. Determined by the expectation that Nature was inferior to Culture, though physiology was seen to underlie all modes of dress, only the élite was permitted an eye to the external beauty and form of dress. Drawing on this sort of work, it is my intention in this article to focus on the dress of the poor as constructed in nineteenth century texts on household management or medical matters and parliamentary reports, with particular reference to working class women as makers as well as wearers of dress.

POOR WOMEN AND DRESS: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

Ann Romines uses quilts to demonstrate the dual aspect of women's stitching and sewing. 'Quilts' she says,

which were central texts of women's culture in the nineteenth century, illustrate [the] doubleness in domestic ritual. Highly valued as evidence of their maker's capacity to follow the rules of fine sewing, they were equally prized for originality of design and execution within the conventionalized limits of the craft. They were usually pieced together by one woman, often in private; the piecing was fitted into the rhythms of her everyday life. But quilting — the assembling and decorative stitching of the layers — was usually a communal project, center of an often-storied ritual occasion. The finished quilt, expressing the controlling vision of one woman given depth and elaboration by the stitches of many others, might be praised in its maker's name and treasured throughout and beyond her lifetime. But it was seldom signed; . . . Almost every quilt

'A Sufficiency of Clothing'

is a fabric of contingency and choice, individual will and communal support, representing many hours of repetitive work. As such it is both a product and an emblem of domestic ritual.⁷

The same can be said of dress. As recent theoretical work in cultural studies on fashion, dress and the body has shown, dress can be seen as text. As a result, the body is always in a sense 'clothed' in convention.⁸ Because of the intimate relationship between body and dress, dress helps determine perceptions of the body and vice versa. Hence Suleiman argues that the 'cultural significance of the female body is not only (not even first and foremost) that of a flesh-and-blood-entity, but that of a *symbolic construct*. Everything we know about the body . . . exists for us in some form of discourse; and discourse, whether verbal or visual, fictive or historical or speculative, is never unmediated, never free of interpretation, never innocent'.⁹

In other words, no system of representation, text or image is transparent. And, in order to recognize the intimate connection that exists in the West between the female body and dress, or more specifically in this case the link between the poor female body and dress, we need to treat that body as being at least in part a social or cultural construct. In the case of the Victorians, as will be seen, that body was represented as being dangerous, potentially transgressive and wild. At the same time, flesh-and-blood working-class women participated in making dress, caring for dress, cleaning dress, not just dressing. It is therefore equally important to remember that in 'chasing dirt . . . [and] tidying we are . . . positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea'.¹⁰ Romines makes a similar case for nineteenth-century housework, noting 'A woman who achieved faculty and made effective ritual of her housekeeping was taking on godlike status, as she pushed back confusion daily, to create her own domestic sphere'.¹¹ An aspect of housework, the domestic manufacture and maintenance of dress by poor women, was consequently a practice that simultaneously contributed to the production of a well ordered house and marked out the territory of the well ordered working-class body.

And we should be clear that among the poor, adult women *did* have to devote much of their time to clothing production and care in the Victorian period. Sewing and laundering were tasks that had always been allotted to women, but the amount of time a woman spent stitching and washing rose as cotton replaced linen and wool, and as new standards of cleanliness spread.¹² Because of the increasing availability of manufactured fabrics, all classes gradually came to expect that they might own more clothes. So, though factory-made cloth replaced the need to spin and weave, simple mending, the painstaking fabrication of clothes, and laundering remained significant household tasks. For many poor women this was labour which often, ironically enough, had to be fitted in around stitching and washing for the better-off. Laundresses were the fourth largest group of employed women in 1841.¹³ We might therefore reasonably see Victorian items of clothing as women's texts emblematic of domestic ritual, visible signs of the rhythms and complexities of domestic life, as fluid objects, made and remade, handed-down, turned and turned again according to need.

Yet, the language and meanings of dress belong to a wider set of interlocking discourses, histories and practices. As the quote from Tegetmeier makes clear, for example, a married working-class woman's ability to regulate her family's dress might save or cost them hard cash, an important issue against the backdrop of constrained

budgets.¹⁴ Tegetmeier himself was primarily concerned with the betterment of poor girls. As he explains in his preface, *A Manual of Domestic Economy* was written for 'the use of female students in Training Institutions, and . . . the elder classes in girls' schools . . . [It] has been used in most of the large female schools where industrial instruction has been given'. Not only was this kind of text used widely in educating girls to look after themselves and their families, it was also seen as the key to training up skilled servants. Such training was seen to be of benefit to the girls who could then sell their labour at a higher rate. 'With regard to its use in industrial schools', the author cites the '*Report of the Commissioners appointed to Investigate the Education in Mining Districts*', which in 'speaking of Messrs. Baird's school at Gartsherrie', states:

That the girls, in three months, can be taught plain cooking, washing, and cleaning, enough to prepare them for service, or to make them useful to their mothers at home. They are all instructed in Tegetmeier's '*Domestic Economy*' at school, so that their minds have been directed to many useful principles. On going to service after such a course, a girl would probably get £1 more wages for the first half-year's service.¹⁵

It is therefore quite telling that Tegetmeier stresses the necessity of wearing ample clothing in order that less additional food might be required in cold weather. Here the physiological economy of dress comes into focus while the management of dress is in part expressed through the language of self-help and framed by the concept of useful knowledge. Very similar, if more informal, advice can be found in texts such as the *Sunlight Year Book*, aimed at a respectable working-class audience. As well as offering a considerable amount of advice on doing the laundry, in 1898 it stressed that there 'are two objects to be aimed at in dress, . . . adornment . . . [and] the preservation of the natural heat of the body and its defence from the variations of climate and weather [which] should come first'. It goes on, 'the art of dressing well really lies in simplicity, with adaptations to figure and to circumstances in life. Many dresses and articles of clothing may be made at home, the great point being to get good patterns and good measurements to accurately suit the size and figure . . . The point is to make up your mind to be self-reliant and do things yourself, without being mean or stingy'.¹⁶

Though the aesthetics of dress in this instance are described, the physical necessity of dressing to preserve health still comes first. As a text aimed at an aspirational audience, the aesthetic advice is then circumscribed by the place of the reader in such a way as to link the art of simplicity with the skill of sewing. In suggesting that the seamstress therefore make up her mind to be 'self-reliant' and avoid stinginess and meanness, the *Sunlight Year Book* takes on a moral tone. Adornment in working-class dress in this instance was about fitness for purpose, honesty and the attempt to improve. In order to preserve their and their families' physical well being, gain a decent wage and maintain their integrity, it was therefore imperative that working-class girls learn how to sew.

Not knowing how to sew, it appears, ought to cause a girl deep shame. In one cautionary tale, the Revd T. H. Walker set out his recipe for an ideal domestic life. In it a Mrs Fletcher explains how, by the age of 14, she had not yet learned any homekeeping skills — primarily because her mother had hoped school learning would enable her to become 'a lady' — let alone sewing.

'Please ma'am,' I ventured to ask, 'is there any harm in netting and crochetting?'
'certainly not,' was the reply; 'but why do you ask?'

'A Sufficiency of Clothing'

'because ma'am, Mrs Symonds told me it was a vile thing I had been allowed to spend my time in that way.'

'Can you darn a stocking neatly?' inquired Mrs Mortimer. I blushed and stammered out something about sewing it up.

'Oh, that is sad!' This was said with a grave look, and an emphatic shake of the head. 'But you can make a shirt, I suppose?'

I had always been taught to speak the truth, however much it might make against myself, and therefore, humbling as it was, I was obliged to own that I could not.

'Worse still! But you must at least have been taught to hem, fell, and stitch?'

These questions quite overpowered me. I trembled like a leaf; at length a gush of tears came to my relief. After some hesitation I replied, 'My schoolmistress tried to teach me, but I could never please her, and as I did not like sewing, my mother would not have me troubled with it.'

'You will now see the reason why Mrs Symonds spoke as she did about your crocheting. Such employment is all very well as an amusement, or to fill up a vacant hour, but ought never to take the place of things which are of daily and indispensable use. I really pity you, poor child! Here you are, cast upon the world; yet as ignorant as a baby of everything of a domestic nature. You can neither darn a stocking, nor make a shirt.'¹⁷

Of all her failings, it is the girl's inability to stitch that Walker chooses to stress, while the girl's physical demeanour and reaction, coupled with the fact that her failings are then summarized at the end of the conversation, emphasizes its representative character. The girl's station and her sex are outlined by her control of the needle.

Texts like Walker's, Combe's, Tegetmeier's, *The Sunlight Yearbook* or *Enquire Within*, which describe the care of clothes or the best materials to use in their construction, clearly drew on the dominant moral, economic and scientific¹⁸ languages of their day. These in turn fed into the nascent, late Victorian domestic science movement, which came to reject earlier more organic/ritualized notions of housework based on tradition and continuity in favour of an emergent understanding of housework as expert knowledge acquired by the housewife as rational individual.¹⁹ Other forms of representation, however, helped maintain an older understanding of housework. Clothes maintenance for instance, commonly formed a subject for Victorian genre artists. As Nick Green and Frank Mort suggest, '[v]isual representations have played a significant part in the construction and regulation of certain visual codes or genres . . . and the rules and norms governing painting in the nineteenth century are bound up with the power/knowledge relations addressing sexuality'.²⁰ Take for example Thomas Wade's *A Stitch in Time* (c. 1868), Joseph Clark's *The Chimney Corner* (1878) and *The Labourer's Welcome* (n.d.); Pierre Edouard Frere's *Washing Day* (1878) and George Smith's *Here's Granny* (n.d.).²¹ Each represents a housewife sewing or washing. They are content, the homes they inhabit are simple but happy. These nostalgic images, which stressed the traditions of housework as centred on community and family, can be read as idealizing the housewife's role within separate spheres ideology, as intersecting with the rural idyll and conforming to the desire to see the poor as hardworking and content.

Direct charitable giving reinforced the message that women stitched while men worked. In 1841, Sarah Miles, a spinster aged 60 who had taken no relief, knitted 230 oz of yarn and about 45 pairs of stockings and received a charitable prize of £1, this display of paternalism helping to ensure conformity to the ideals specified in and realized by the large sum of money expended. Miles was given her prize by the Norfolk-based Docking Union Association for Promoting and Rewarding Good Conduct and Encouraging Habits of Industry and Frugality Amongst Servants, Labourers, and

Cottagers. This organization had awards not only for knitting, but also shirt-making, quilting, housekeeping and child rearing. To men it gave prizes for hedging, ditching, ploughing and long service.²²

The Docking Union was far from a unique case. Many of the agricultural societies that had been established in the late eighteenth century experienced a resurgence in the 1840s. These societies were diverse, their membership usually included farmers, the local gentry, and clergymen, and sometimes labourers. Working at the national right down to the local level, encompassing groups that were originally scientific in origin, interested in improvements in agriculture, plus village clubs and friendly societies, by the 1840s they were playing a major part in the structure of village life. They organized dances and meetings as well as charitable help, and most of them gave out annual prizes. By giving out these rewards, they helped drive forward many of the philanthropic, moral and social causes of the day. Most prizes being designed to chivvy the poor into adhering to the correct forms of loyalty, deference and labour, according to sex, the gifts were presented at shows or dinners, to ensure a public performance of the organizations' high-minded principles and to get the message across.²³ In this case Miles' prize was for paid work undertaken at home, but, indicative of independence, industriousness and self-help, her outwork was rewarded as an aspect of (unpaid) domesticity. This was woman's work, well done. The correct ordering, supervision and maintenance of dress by poor women like Miles helped mark out womanhood as distinct from manhood, and acted as a clear sign of a woman's (housewife's) respectability — especially her diligence and thrift.

Conversely, a poor woman's failure to adhere to the proper standard of dressing, to make do and mend or arrange her clothes in such a way as to subscribe to 'decency', would result in the loss of that respectability and suggestions of transgression. To take just one example, an 1867 government report on women's and children's employment in agriculture noted that, 'mixed [agricultural] gangs are . . . objected to on the grounds of indecency. In the case of females, their dress as it is often worn or as arranged to avoid the wet, and the stooping nature of the work are said to involve a certain amount of exposure, which excites the notice of the other sex, and leads to indecent remarks'. The reporter went on, because of 'long absence and distance from home . . . in an open country, with no place of retirement within reach . . . escape from observation is hopeless . . . what is commonly thought decency must be sacrificed'.²⁴ In other words, they had to hitch up their skirts to relieve themselves publicly in the fields. In part because of this kind of transgression, transgression that is of the moral codes of the day in relation to dressing across the boundaries of 'vice/virtue, cleanliness/filth, animality/civilization',²⁵ women's field work was thought unacceptable. But this perception of the significance of dress was not confined to the official urban middle-class observer. In his evidence to the same report, John Townsend, a parish clerk and labourer, said of one Tom Richardson's family that because his wife was a field worker his 'girls [could be seen] all running about with their highlows all undone and their things flying about this way and that'. This he took to be suggestive of their lack of self-control.²⁶ Poor women's sewing, as well as their dressing, was ultimately productive not simply of the clothing itself, or even of their own 'decency', but also of the reputations of those who wore the results of their work.

'A Sufficiency of Clothing'

The Victorian language of dress was the binary language of purity and danger and as such 'the laws of nature [were] dragged in to sanction the moral code', while the fear of transgression helped distinguish rich from poor and maintained the social order.²⁷ Within these texts and those such as Walker's, loose dress was clearly taken to equate with loose morality.²⁸ Similarly the ragged garments of the indigent carried a different set of connotations to those of the neatly patched, clean clothes of the poor-but-honest labourer. Raggedness, which came to replace images of contentedness in the work of artists like Gainsborough and Morland during the late eighteenth century, was used to turn the poor into objects of pity, as John Barrell has argued. Indeed, Stubbs' paintings are unusual for the period in the extreme neatness of his subjects; the men's clothes are clean and unpatched, the women's garments seem to belong to a superior class.²⁹ Christiana Payne and Steven King take up these themes elsewhere in this volume, but in the end, working-class women were judged on the maintenance of their own and their families' dress because, though as items of clothing their garments were undoubtedly the subject of women's work and as such emblematic of domestic ritual, as texts they were primarily markers of class and propriety and as such subject to comment.

DRESS, DOMESTICITY AND THE BODY

For the Victorians, then, dress contained the body within the bounds of propriety. The dress of the poor at its simplest was fabricated to privatize/hide from public scrutiny the body of the poor. As a mask, clothing ensured that the body surface could not be seen, that a distance was established between subject and object, watcher and watched. Meanwhile, as a boundary, it ensured that the body could not act as a source of moral decay. Dress established a hierarchy of propriety by domesticating the body, and in clothing its nakedness dress played an active part in defining that body, both constructing the flesh as polluting and simultaneously containing or holding it back. At the same time, the body that could be glimpsed through disordered/frayed/ragged clothing came to be automatically treated as fluid, sexualized, dangerously unconfined. Because the naked body was the site of transgression and consequently of fear, when it came to Victorian representations of dress, neatness — suggestive of sobriety, chastity, industry and honest toil (or fixity, docility and order) — was preferred. As Christiana Payne also points out in her article, images of exposure, shabbiness, or dirt took on connotations of profligacy, incontinence, illegality, and drink. The supposed (im)morality of the (un)deserving poor was consequently signified and re-presented in and through their (dis)orderly dress. The moral meanings of working-class dress were read back to its actual, physical condition and their compliance.

At the same time, the delicacy of touch required of the seamstress stood in for a woman's innate domesticity; in having soft delicate hands, she literally embodied her respectability. The (soft) feminine and (roughened) masculine hand stood in direct opposition to each other, metonyms within separate spheres ideology. Hence, even in Northumberland, where women field workers as will be seen were generally represented positively as strong capable women, the moral match of their social superiors, it was observed that 'if they are somewhat deficient in needlework, this may be accounted for by the roughness of a hand accustomed to hard out-of-door labour'.³⁰ Because

domesticity — characterized as inherently un-laborious — was embedded within the physiology of womanhood, engaging in ‘men’s work’ inevitably re-trained a woman’s body so that it became misshapen and could no longer proficiently perform a feminine role. There was little sense here that a hand accustomed to household labour might also become somewhat hardened. A recursive argument was at work wherein the body, dress and the maintenance of clothing became inextricably linked.³¹

As we have seen, because orderly dressing for the poor meant dressing rationally and efficiently according to physiological and economic need, the discourse of dress came to intersect the discourses of medicine, philanthropy and self-help. But, because dressing was linked inextricably to the economy of the body, it could also be linked to the subject’s place, and thereby determine/naturalize that position. As Valverde notes, ‘dress distinctions within the women of one household . . . indicated not only degrees of virtue or vice but also degrees of leisure or labour’.³² The same logic can be seen in Tegetmeier. He takes on board the assumption that there is a physiological link between health, clothing, perspiration and the necessary stimulation of the skin, and on this basis recommends flannel as the best material to wear next to the skin, given a changeable climate.³³ In this case ‘position’ or ‘place’ do not just relate to class or sex, but also actual location. In some instances this led to the expectation that habits of dress, determined by work and location, could reshape the body and subsequently that of the children it produced.

In the 1867 Northumberland report on women’s and children’s work in agriculture, Joseph Henley suggests that a poor woman’s dress in part determined the appropriateness or otherwise of her taking outdoor labour. By 1867 women — ‘bondagers’,³⁴ wives, daughters and single women who lived alone — did a variety of work in the county. They cleaned the land of stones; weeded most crops and hoed turnips; turned hay, bound corn and gleaned; dug, cut and cleaned turnips when they were harvested. In the winter they also did barn work with the newly introduced threshing and winnowing machines. They filled dung carts, turned muck heaps and manured the land. Some drove carts and harrowed the fields and some of them also pitched and loaded corn and hay. A bondager could earn £12 10s. 0d. a year, or even £15 to £17 a year if she were lucky, while payments in kind were meant to cover her keep for the labourer she hired with. The dress of these regular women labourers, based in the north of the county, was, Henley believed, well suited to their work. It fitted them easily so as not to restrict their free movement, and being ‘made of strong materials defies all weathers’. Typically they would wear a:

pair of stout boots, a very short thick woollen petticoat, warm stockings, a jacket etc; over all a washing pinafore with sleeves (called a slip), which preserves the dress from dirt. Their faces are protected by a shade or ‘ugly’ of divers colours. Thus equipped they present a great contrast to the draggled appearance of the women who only work in the fields occasionally, wearing some thin gown, with perhaps the addition of the husband’s coat or boots.³⁵

For Henley, their efficient and practical dressing became representative of the whole system; a system of which Adam Smith, he later suggests, would have been proud.³⁶ Significantly, it was also a system which made the women of northern Northumberland exceptions to the rule that field work (as Dickens put it) ‘converts girls into demons’.³⁷ In fact, in Henley’s eyes those women accustomed to agricultural labour, who could be spotted because they dressed in such a way as to facilitate their work and beat the

'A Sufficiency of Clothing'

weather, of all poor woman were the strongest, fittest and healthiest. Though the weather itself may have caused the occasional illness, he believed that 'the very appearance of the habitual workers [was] sufficient to prove the healthiness of their mode of life'. Indeed, they were, he found, 'tenfold less affected by female complaints' than the local townswomen. As a result 'field work fits them to be good bearers of children, and the strength of the population is kept up by them'.³⁸ As a result, it 'tends to rear a fine race of women, who make the best wives for labourers and are invaluable in a national point of view as producing a fine population'.³⁹

As in Tegetmeier's writing, the dress of poor women is linked to political economy and self-help, and thus to the women's station and work. But, in this case the conclusions drawn also encompass the condition of the poor as the stock of a civilized nation. This interest in the physical state of the poor, and of poor women's capacity to bear children for the nation drew heavily on Darwin. In Henley this is a little obscure, but the link between habits of dressing, physiology and race is clearer in Combe. When it comes to dress, much:

depends on the natural constitution, and much on habit; and the effects of habit may even, it appears, in some degree become hereditary. Thus Mr Darwin mentions that at a harbour of Tierra del Fuego, 'a woman who was suckling a recently-born child came one day alongside the vessel, and remained there, out of mere curiosity, whilst the sleet fell and thawed on her naked bosom, and on the skin of the naked baby.' But the effect of such exposure is to produce a hideous race, stunted in their growth, which, 'one can hardly make oneself believe are fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world.' The rule is therefore not to dress in an invariable way in all cases, but to put on clothing in kind and quantity *sufficient in the individual case to protect the body effectually from an abiding sensation of cold, however slight*.⁴⁰

Here, Combe argues that general habits of dress do not simply temporarily discipline or contain, but actually alter the body, in this case distorting it over the generations and shaping a whole race into a dehumanized form. Darwin provides an 'authenticating narrative' for Combe, who thereby corroborates his theory by drawing on positivist and reductionist science.⁴¹ The dress of the poor was therefore treated by Victorian science not simply as indicative of class because it was determined by internal bodily processes, such as responses to exertion, but also (in response to weather and location) as affecting those processes. Given Darwin, behavioural differences such as dressing against the cold ultimately determined physiological, and, therefore, racial differences. Drawing on Darwin, the dress of the poor, especially poor women therefore directly affected the strength of the nation.

Given Combe's medical training and interest in phrenology, we should not be surprised that he lays such stress on the physical. Yet, the idea that dress is so integral to the body that it is not only dictated by the body's needs and location, but might also determine that body's health and consequently its reproductive strength, *did* become significant within official advice and educational literatures on the dress of the poor.

CONCLUSION

Today's commentators insist that dress is not understandable without the body, that the body brings meaning(s) to dress, and that dress, equally, operates on the body.⁴² As Roland Barthes argues, 'it is not possible to conceive a garment without the body . . . the empty garment, without head and without limbs . . . is death, not the body's neutral

absence, but the body decapitated, mutilated'.⁴³ Body and dress are and always have been, they argue, in dialogue with each other. But the Victorians, by emphasizing that working-class dress/the dress of 'others' was determined solely by the biological, by the needs of the body, its location, exertions or response, ensured that the dress of the poor came to be interpreted in their time as inherently and solely 'natural': organic, animalistic, inferior, yet normalized, fixed, homely.

What made the élite different from the poor, or what at least marked out their difference, was that though all classes had to wear dress appropriate to their constitution and geographic location, and though it was better to avoid harming the body if possible, only the 'civilized' well-to-do managed to 'rise above' its needs to considerations of toilet, elegance and taste. Where the poor might feel the domestic discomforts of insufficiency, the rich were taught to be publicly embarrassed by inappropriate excess. Where the morality of working-class dress was therefore physical, the élite had a more aesthetic or 'sartorial conscience',⁴⁴ which moved rapidly away from physical to social propriety.

It is here that dress of the poor takes on the role of a bodily marker, which alongside other bodily markers constructs the social, cultural and racial identity of those wearing it as self/other. Dress worked with the poor body as a sign. In dynamic relationship with the poor body, it belonged to the performance of identity; in and through discourse, with the poor body, dress actively produced distinctions of gender, class and race, or more particularly fitness for purpose. Dress was a rhetorical device in the Victorian period, taken as a marker of 'humanity'.⁴⁵ Frayed seams/the disarray/the absence of dress suggested transgression and a failure of the boundary of culture/nature, a boundary that was meant to exist between human and animal, civilized and savage.

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- ⁹ S. R. Suleiman ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 2.
- ¹⁰ M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 2.
- ¹¹ Romines, *Home*, p. 10.
- ¹² R. Swartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), pp. 64–65.
- ¹³ B. S. Anderson and J. P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*, II (London: Penguin, 1990), 133, 262–63.

'A Sufficiency of Clothing'

¹⁴ L. A. Tilly and J. W. Scott, *Women, Work and Family* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 136–39.

¹⁵ Tegetmeier, *Manual*, preface.

¹⁶ *Sunlight Year Book* (1898), pp. 300–01.

¹⁷ Revd T. H. Walker, *Good Servants, Good Wives and Happy Homes* (London: S. W. Partridge, 6th edn, c. 1888), pp. 26–27.

¹⁸ For a discussion on the relationship of science to the construction of the animal and female body, see Lynda Birke, 'Exploring the Boundaries: Feminism, Animals and Science', in C. J. Adams and J. Donovan eds, *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995).

¹⁹ See Romines, *Home Plot*, p. 53.

²⁰ N. Green and F. Mort, 'Visual Representation and Cultural Politics', *Block*, 7 (1982), 65.

²¹ Thomas Wade (1828–91), *A Stitch in Time* (c. 1868, oil on panel, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston); Joseph Clark (1834–1912), *The Chimney Corner* (1878, oil, Christopher Wood Gallery), and *The Labourer's Welcome* (n.d., oil, Sheffield Art Galleries); Pierre Edouard Frere (1819–86), *Washing Day* (1878, oil, Fine Art Photographic Library); George Smith (1829–1901), *Here's Granny* (n.d., oil, Christopher Wood Gallery). The painting by Wade is illustrated in C. Payne, *Rustic Simplicity: Scenes of Cottage Life in Nineteenth-Century British Art* (Nottingham: Djanogly Art Gallery and Lund Humphries, 1998), cat. 41. The other paintings are illustrated in C. Wood, *Paradise Lost: Paintings of English Country Life and Landscapes, 1850–1914* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1988), illus. 116, 117, 120 and 137.

²² Norfolk Record Office, SO17/1 488x, 'Docking Union Association, posters and minutes, 1841'.

²³ A. Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England, a Social History 1850–1925* (London: Longman, 1991), pp. 78–81.

²⁴ *Reports from the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture, PP*, 1867–70, Norfolk, p. 77.

²⁵ Green and Mort, 'Visual', p. 65.

²⁶ 1867 Report, p. 199.

²⁷ Douglas, *Purity*, pp. 3–4.

²⁸ See F. Barret-Ducrocq, *Love in the Time of Victoria* (London, 1991).

²⁹ J. Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English painting 1730–1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 16, 25–29.

³⁰ Report 1867, Northumberland, p. 58.

³¹ Meanwhile, men's clothes signified the prerogatives of masculinity, as can be seen in caricatures of radical women, often represented as wearing trousers. Anderson and Zinsser, *A History*, p. 146.

³² Valverde, 'Love', p. 183.

³³ Tegetmeier, *Manual*, pp. 106–07.

³⁴ A woman hired to fulfil the labour duties owed to landlords by labourers in tied cottages.

³⁵ Report 1867, Northumberland, p. 54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

³⁷ *All the Year Round*, December 1866–June 1867, p. 588.

³⁸ Report, 1867, Northumberland, p. 54.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁴⁰ Combe, *Principles*, p. 58.

⁴¹ See Birke, 'Exploring', p. 39.

⁴² Entwistle, *The Fashioned*, pp. 7–11.

⁴³ Barthes, p. 107.

⁴⁴ Entwistle, *The Fashioned*, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Birke, 'Exploring', pp. 37–38.