

21 February 2021

On Victorian Dress and Gender Nonconformity

In Victorian England, social restrictions — specifically for women — were abundant. Few are strangers to the idea of a Victorian woman's exposed ankle being a scandalous sight, and the classic floor-length hoop skirt that most upper-class individuals donned is a staple of the period. Such trends, however, were much more than just ways of dressing; the societal norms under which these women operated forced them to reject the possibility of creating a livable life for themselves, instead making them subservient to the law and to the men around them. Any deviance from this norm was frowned upon so strongly that it could often lead to social shunning by those who sought to conform, and literature from this period began to reflect such restrictions. Victorian rules regarding women's clothing are highly representative of Judith Butler's application of queer theory to the role of performativity in diminishing a livable life, as is evidenced by the male dependence these restrictions forced upon women and the difficulty that came with attempting to deconstruct gender at this time. Additionally, such restrictive, conformative clothing made gender expression outside of the norm immensely challenging (and strikingly uncommon), as can be seen in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*.

One unspoken societal rule was omnipresent throughout the Victorian era: the concept of modest dress, both in public and in the home. Social codes during this period generally emulated "a certain narrow-mindedness" which "ruled both fashion and etiquette" in every sense of the phrase (FragranceX). Women were expected to be covered from head to toe for most social

situations; large hats, long sleeves, and gloves were pillars of a Victorian ensemble. For members of the upper class, an array of several different dresses were to be worn throughout the day based on the social situation in which women found themselves, but no matter the circumstances, each one maintained an unwavering degree of modesty. Different outfits were worn for day-to-day errands than were worn for dinner parties, but both put hardly any bare skin on display, even in the summer heat. Women were “forced to adhere to rigid rules about their appearance,” and for this reason, “fashion tended to center around what was considered proper behavior” under the Victorian gaze (FragranceX). Etiquette was a large part of English culture during this period, and all women of respectable class were expected to abide by the social codes that had been put in place around them. Women of lower classes, too, were held to this standard, but to a lesser degree; although they wore much simpler garments than their richer counterparts, they still sported long sleeves and donned shawls to cover their shoulders. There were some practical aspects to such clothing, such as protection from the elements (especially for lower-class women in the workforce). Overall, however, Victorian dress was meant to conceal as much of a woman’s body as possible. The implications of such a code extend much further than simply covering up for modesty’s sake — the repercussions of both adhering to and attempting to break away from these norms reached a great number of women and even arise in the modern day.

A prime example of this type of clothing leading to social restrictions and precognition presents itself in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White*, namely through the character of Marian Halcombe. When narrator Walter first lays eyes on Marian, he sees her only from behind and

takes several moments to admire her figure. He notes that she is “tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat... her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man... was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays” (First Epoch, Part I, Chapter VI). Stays were a Victorian garment similar to corsets which supported the back and accentuated the waist, and while Marian does not sport one here, Walter’s attention is immediately drawn to her feminine figure because he subconsciously expects it to be made more appealing by a culturally relevant piece of clothing. He is pleased to see that she is attractive to him without wearing stays at all, but his baseline of understanding women in this era leads him to anticipate one being there to enhance her feminine features. Once Walter looks upon her face, however, he is overcome by the way her “complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache” that he finds unseemly on a woman; additionally, he notes that she has “a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair,” all of which make for a much harsher countenance than her body suggests (Collins, First Epoch, Part I, Chapter VI). Here, Marian immediately deviates from what both Walter and the audience expect to see based on what her clothing and body imply; she rejects traditional femininity on as much of a physical level as she can without social repercussions, sporting an unshaven upper lip and harsh, strong features that Walter finds startling (and, potentially, threatening). His outright repulsion upon seeing her face is likely derived from the fact that he feels somewhat cheated; when he saw what seemed to be a perfectly proper Victorian figure from behind, he expected the woman attached to it to be just as ladylike and attractive. Marian, however, actively pushes back

against this exact preconception through both her looks and her actions, countering the typical model of the ideal Victorian woman within the first few paragraphs of the reader being introduced to her.

Marian's physical image was certainly not an image of gender nonconformity pulled solely from Collins's imagination; Victorian customs had a highly prevalent effect on women of all classes and backgrounds in relation to the livability of their lives, and as such, it is more than likely that he might have seen someone like Marian on the streets of London. Queer theorist Judith Butler weighs in on the concept of perception in relation to gender, claiming that "gender is a kind of doing, an incessant activity performed" in day to day life; therefore, she says, "it is only through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings" (Butler 3). In essence, she states that a person must constantly assume a sort of act for the people around them in order to construct their lives and be seen as fully realized individuals by others. Marian must perform in front of her peers in such a way; she introduces herself to Walter with a pleasant voice and a practiced handshake that clearly denotes her careful understanding of social expectations. When she is alone, however, she essentially breaks character; she stops trying to mask or pass as traditionally feminine, instead climbing onto rooftops to eavesdrop on men she does not trust and quietly fighting back against them whenever she can. Marian performs when she must for her own social acceptance and safety; it is only when she is alone that she can truly begin to make a life that is livable for herself.

Similarly, one of the core points upon which Butler focuses is the ways in which public performances for one another help individuals to comply with the unspoken social codes to which they are expected to adhere. Each person, she claims, is “constituted by norms and dependent on them”, and this concept is definitely visible in Victorian women’s dress (Butler 5). Such restrictive clothing did more than just keep women from creating an individual, livable life for themselves; it also forced them to rely on men for nearly every aspect of their day-to-day existence. Victorian activist Caroline Norton highlighted the extent to which this mode of dress “deprive[s]... [women] of all freedom of breadth and motion,” leading to a forced sense of subservience as a result of how men “must help her up stairs and down, in the carriage and out, on the horse, up the hill, over the ditch and fence, and thus teach her the poetry of dependence” (Carlson). Male power was an inescapable part of the Victorian woman’s life; their clothing was so restrictive on a physical level, they were liable to faint (or even fail to squeeze their skirts through a tight space) without men’s assistance in any task that required more movement than walking from one location to another. Women relied on men both in public and in private just to help them move around, which reinforced their sense of being bound inescapably to submission in a man’s presence. Most women during this period did not even marry for love; once they were wed, they found themselves to be more so their husbands’ possessions than their partners, while simultaneously not being allowed to keep any of their property, wealth, or belongings to themselves. Such aggressively modest clothing denotes the way women were required to

perform in front of men during this period, as well as how this performativity contributed to their perception of a rigid gender binary to which they seemingly had no choice but to conform.

The latter half of the Victorian era, however, saw rise to a movement toward clothing reform, turning wide hoop skirts into slimmer pieces with bustles at the back. While still maintaining a high degree of modesty in most daily wear, these new articles of clothing made movement through doorways and narrow passages substantially easier. Some women took these reforms a step further, donning men's slacks in an effort to dress how they wanted, rather than how society dictated they should. Wearing pants during this era was essentially an effort to deconstruct gender and cast aside the performativity that comes along with wearing a floor-length skirt. A woman in pants, however, was a shocking sight to many; Norton observed an acquaintance who did so, as well as the reactions she garnered, and transcribed the results. Norton found that this woman's "eccentricities prevented [her] friends from inviting her" anywhere due to the fact "that she dressed differently from other ladies; wearing... a short dress with trowsers, and her hair cropped like a man's; and altogether affected masculine singularities which astonished and repelled persons who had the usual habits of society" (Norton). This individual's friends did not want to be seen with her solely because she attempted to shake some of the performativity she had been forced to don all her life, pursuing gender nonconformity in a period where such a thing was practically unheard of. In Butler's eyes, reactions like this occur because the rest of society is bound to the norms under which they are used to living; she states that "those deemed illegible, unrecognizable, or impossible" by society are unable to fit within

the socially constructed box of normalcy and are therefore rejected from it altogether (Butler 14). It is notable that, under this assumption, performativity was essentially required in order to make life livable socially, but at the same time, it prevented people from crafting livable lives for themselves individually. Marian, of course, is a prime example of a victim to these societal norms, expected to wear form-fitting corsets and dresses despite her masculine features and distinctly non-feminine personality. Conformity during this era was non-negotiable, and anyone who attempted to deconstruct gender roles on their own was pushed to the outskirts of society for breaking the unspoken societal codes of the time period.

In today's society, social restrictions and forced performativity can still be seen across the globe. It is far from uncommon for people to feel pressured to dress in a binary fashion; transgender individuals in particular are often expected to dress strictly in line with what society expects to see from the gender with which they identify, but plenty of trans men, women, and non-binary folks find expression through dressing more androgynously or as a different gender, while cisgender men are applauded for wearing makeup or skirts. In this way, Victorian dress code and people's reactions to it are still prevalent today, albeit in a slightly different manner than was seen in the nineteenth century. It is imperative, however, that individuals push the boundaries of what is considered normal in the name of change and progress toward a more livable life for folks of all genders. Marian Halcombe does this by allowing her personality to shine through the clothing she is expected to wear and refusing to conform to traditional femininity in her actions. By casting aside performativity and instead living authentically in this

way, society as a whole can live out the future that rebellious Victorian women could not: one in which anyone can wear whatever they like without being ostracized for pushing back against the norm — or better yet, one in which that norm is shattered entirely to make way for something new.

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