Material evidence 
the significance of fabrics in the writings of Elizabeth Gaskell

Ford, Amanda

Awarding institution: 
King’s College London

The copyright of this thesis rests with the author and no quotation from it or information derived from it may be published without proper acknowledgement.

END USER LICENCE AGREEMENT

Unless another licence is stated on the immediately following page this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence. https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

You are free to copy, distribute and transmit the work

Under the following conditions:

• Attribution: You must attribute the work in the manner specified by the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work).
• Non Commercial: You may not use this work for commercial purposes.
• No Derivative Works - You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

Any of these conditions can be waived if you receive permission from the author. Your fair dealings and other rights are in no way affected by the above.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact librarypure@kcl.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Abstract
Within Elizabeth Gaskell’s writings there is a profusion of references to a cultural materiality that encompasses cloths and different types of fabric, stuffs, calicoes, chintzes and fine-point lace. Such fabrics, I argue are not merely the motifs of the Realist genre. Instead, Gaskell’s nuanced allusions of textile fabrics reveal a complex polysemy. A metonymic scrutiny of the tropes exposes the dramatic structural and socio-economic upheaval that was generated by industrialization, the urbanization diaspora and the widening sphere of imperial possession. With unprecedented population mobility and the evolution of Manchester as the first industrial city, the Cottonopolis that clothed the world in the mid-nineteenth century, not only does the material evidence testify to the technological and production innovations evolving diachronically for the period, but they also signify the means by which Gaskell responds to the sense of a larger epistemological crisis permeating society as contemporaries feared there had been a seismic rupture from the past. Gaskell’s manipulation of the materiality is very firmly rooted in the quotidian of women’s domestic and provincial life within the growing ranks of the middle classes. Small textile allusions, such as Hoyle’s purple print, reflect the vicissitudes of regional women’s lives, and particularly articulate the construction of status and female identity within the confines of the evolving domestic ideology. Small embellishments and dress modifications can depict social discernment, an interiority of display, pleasure and sexual awakening. They reveal a cultural sensibility and a layered ‘structure of feeling’, in Raymond William’s words. Indeed, Gaskell’s utilization of fabrics motifs reflects a haptic imagination, formed by the immanent skills bourgeois women possessed in their fabric and sewing
experiences. I also assert that the tactility of fabric in its intimate relationship with the
body from cradle to grave has affective agency; its ability to stimulate the senses and
provoke an emotional response that stirs the feelings and is a catalyst to the revival of
memory. Chapter one examines that most historic fabric wool, whereby technological
developments and fabled élite fabrics from the periphery of empire coalesce into a
quintessential English identity by the 1850s. Chapter two explores the cotton textile
revolution and how affordable, colourful calico prints facilitated a democratisation of
fashion. The fabrics of mourning and memory are the focus in chapter three, particularly
examining the increasing commodification of funeral practices, and the gendered
burden of mourning. Chapter four investigates the intriguing fabric, lace. Eighteenth
century lace ruffles, and machine net curtains in the 1850s industrial heartland, trace the
dissemination of an élite fabric into the domestic space. The final two chapters focus
upon the iridescent materiality of silk, that becomes a pertinent metaphor
for Gaskell’s narrative prose in her final novel. Chapter five traces women’s silk attire
from such populux accessories, as handkerchiefs and ribbons in Sylvia’s Lovers to bolts
of figured silk and satins in Cranford and Wives and Daughters, as silk becomes the
fabric of social distinction. Chapter six places Wives and Daughters in the cosmopolitan
context of Paris, and the influence of the French novel. Gaskell’s textile aesthetic is as
pertinent for literary research and scrutiny as Honorè de Balzac’s development of a
material cultural form in his opus, La Comedie humaine.
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................. 3  
Table of Contents ................................................................................................................................. 5  
Table of Figures .................................................................................................................................... 7  
Abbreviations ...................................................................................................................................... 9  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................................... 10  

**INTRODUCTION** ............................................................................................................................... 11  

1. Gaskell’s Life in Cottonopolis: The Poetics of Textiles and Humble Life ........................................... 17  
2. The Material Turn and Sensory, Affect Theories .............................................................................. 28  
3. Quintessentially English: Women’s Self-fashioning and Social Distinction ..................................... 43  
4. Political Textiles ................................................................................................................................ 52  
5. Literary Representation of Textiles .................................................................................................... 57  
6. Chapter Summary .............................................................................................................................. 63  

**Chapter One: ‘Women’s chops and changes’: Stuff, Woollens and Kashmir Shawls** .................. 66  
1.1. Stuff and Merinos ......................................................................................................................... 70  
1.2. A New Fabric .............................................................................................................................. 83  
1.3. Scarlet Cloaks in Sylvia’s Lovers .................................................................................................. 87  
1.4. Kashmir and Paisley Shawls ....................................................................................................... 93  

**Chapter Two: Cottons, Calicoes and ‘Atrocious Prints’** ............................................................... 117  
2.1. Dress Prints: ‘Parsley-Leaf and ‘Hoyle’s Print’ ........................................................................ 125  
2.2. Cranford and The Great Exhibition: A Tasteful Debate ............................................................ 141  
2.3. Refashioning Fashion: ‘The Women in White’ .......................................................................... 154  

**Chapter Three: Grave Concerns: The Fabrics of Loss and Mourning in Mary Barton** .............. 173  
3.1. Threads of Feeling: The Fabrics of Mourning ........................................................................... 178  
3.2. A Deadly Triumvirate: Cotton, Opium and China ................................................................. 196  
3.3. The Cloths of Memory .............................................................................................................. 203  

**Chapter Four: Ruffles, Old point and Net Curtains** ....................................................................... 217  
4.1. Ruffles and Old Point ................................................................................................................. 223  
4.2. Honiton and Machine-Made Lace ............................................................................................... 247
4.3. Wedding Belles........................................................................................................259

Chapter Five: Silks and Showiness...............................................................266
5.1. Figured and Shot Silks....................................................................................271
5.2. Sylvia’s Lovers: The Age of Silk.................................................................276
5.3. Wives and Daughters: Entente Cordiale?..................................................286

Chapter Six: ‘Every iota from Paris!’: The Silken Weave of Wives
and Daughters.................................................................308
6.1. Silky Skeins....................................................................................................310
6.2. Evolutionary Science and Social Change..................................................312
6.3. The French Influence....................................................................................318
6.4. Wives and Daughters and French Realism................................................329

Conclusion: Material Twists and Surface Depth.............................................351

Bibliography........................................................................................................359
# Table of figures

| FIGURE 1 | Shawl Attired Women Visitors at The 1851 Great Exhibition, 1851 © VAM | 49 |
| FIGURE 2 | Mobberley Cloak, Cheshire 1800-1820, Manchester Art Gallery | 88 |
| FIGURE 3 | “Closing Of The Exhibition: Amazon Putting On Her Bonnet And Shawl.” Punch, 1851©Victorianweb | 95 |
| FIGURE 4 | English Shawl With 'Buta' Design, 1825-35 © VAM | 103 |
| FIGURE 5 | Mme Riviére, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres(1806), Louvre, Paris | 109 |
| FIGURE 6 | Eighteenth-century Chintz, Coromandel Coast India © VAM | 119 |
| FIGURE 7 | Blue Indigo Calico Print c.1795-1810, Jane Austen Museum, Bath | 127 |
| FIGURE 8 | Hoyle's Purple Print,1830s Pattern book, Manchester School of Art | 131 |
| FIGURE 9 | Sprigged muslin (jamdani), Hyderabad, c.1850 © VAM | 139 |
| FIGURE 10 | False Principle 16: 'Festoons', ©VAM | 151 |
| FIGURE 11 | The Three Graces In A High Wind, James Gillray (1810) | 163 |
| FIGURE 12 | White Muslin Dress Dated 1851© VAM | 165 |
| FIGURE 13 | ‘Ruffles’ on the sleeve of Queen Charlotte, Thomas Gainsborough, 1781, Royal Collections | 223 |
| FIGURE 14 | Hannah Lumb by C.A. Duval, Manchester University Library | 238 |
| FIGURE 15 | Portrait Of Empress Eugénie, Franz Xaver Winterhalter,1857, Hillwood | 241 |
| FIGURE 16 | Queen Adelaide, Sir William Beechey, c.1831-National Portrait Gallery | 250 |
| FIGURE 17 | Winkford, Proctor & Co Figured Silk, 1851© VAM | 274 |
| FIGURE 18 | The Silk Trophy at The Great Exhibition © Alamy.com | 298 |
ABBREVIATIONS

References to Gaskell’s works are to the Oxford World’s Classics editions where possible. The following abbreviations are used.


Cranford, ed. by Elizabeth Porges Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) CF


Mary Barton, ed.by Shirley Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) MB


North and South, ed.by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) NS


Sylvia’s Lovers, ed.by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) SL

Wives and Daughters, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) WD

The Letters of Mrs Gaskell, J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard, eds. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) Letters


The Gaskell Society Journal GSJ
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the advice, support and sagacious wisdom of Professor Clare Pettitt. She is an inspiration, and I will always be thankful for her unstinting and pragmatic support, particularly when the going got tough. I would also like to thank my second supervisor Professor Janet Floyd who has provided constant support, wit and erudite perceptions. Thank you to the English department and particularly the nineteenth-century work-in-progress meetings.

Thank you to the Gaskell Society, an endless font of knowledge, and especially to Dr Frances Twinn.

To Alex, Eric and Anna who helped me through difficult times.

Thank you to my wonderful, supportive family - my husband Nick, and sons, James and Laurence.
**Introduction**

‘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’

Elizabeth Gaskell’s writings, her novels and short stories, and her many letters to family and friends, bristle with vibrant allusions to women’s material culture. From words of maternal wisdom scribbled to her daughters concerning appropriate attire, to the silks, prints, muslins and old-point lace of her creative imagination, this thesis seeks to explore the significance of Gaskell’s representation of fabric. The unwitting social *faux pas* of green merino; the vulgarity of dark-blue silk; the unseemly rustling of mourning silk; all coalesce in the rich cultural exchange between Gaskell’s quotidian life and her literary aesthetics.

But why focus solely upon Gaskell and fabrics, and not extend the thesis to other prominent women writers, such as her great friend, Charlotte Brontë or George Eliot or Harriet Martineau? From detailed scrutiny of her letters and writings, it quickly becomes apparent how deeply Gaskell’s life was embedded not only geographically but emotionally in the textile districts of Manchester, and the environs of Lancashire and Cheshire, the power houses of the textile industrial revolution. Gaskell was ‘emotionally’ embedded in textiles and material culture, by her everyday life, interspersing writing on the dining room table, with her maternal duties to her four

---

1Mill girls meeting Margaret Hale. Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.71. Subsequent references will be cited in the text following the abbreviation NS.
daughters and wife to an Unitarian church minister, giving as much priority to the
making of flannel petticoats, the matching of ribbons, and organising sewing schools, as
she did to her literary aesthetic. Her gimlet eyes miss nothing and indeed inform her art.
Admonishing her daughter on the inappropriate wearing of a merino gown and noting a
servant’s garish attire, she witnesses the unfolding material narrative of provincial
women’s lives cutting across social and familial divides. A frightful silk bonnet and
lavish lace adornment of social acquaintances are all equally commented upon in
withering terms. It is an innate language and literacy that flows freely into her writings,
which because of her maternal responsibilities and sensibilities as a religious role model
in a teeming new industrial city, separates Gaskell’s writings from the counterparts
referenced earlier.

This thesis argues therefore, that the material allusions in Gaskell’s work, the
indigo gowns, plaid shawls and figured silks, are not merely the ‘reality effect’ of
formal realism; instead it demonstrates that these material ‘things’ partake in a complex,
evolving dynamic which illuminates the changing relationship between women and
their fabric ‘things’ during a period of great socio-economic change in the mid-
nineteenth century. As Elaine Freedgood suggests, ‘hidden relations accumulate and
abide in the words that name things, whether or not we know them fully, consciously,
avowedly, or at all’. Industrialisation, urbanisation and improved transport links

2 'L’effet du réel' was the title of an essay published by Roland Barthes in Communications in
1968, republished in Roland Barthes, The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley
3 Elaine Freedgood, The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel (London:
reorganized many women’s lives in metropolitan centres in an unprecedented manner. They also reorganized women’s dress over the course of the century, as some textiles became cheaper while new fabrics, as well as hybrid combinations, offered increasingly more sartorial choice. It is through the material quotidnian, often humble in origin, such as scraps of lace and ribbon, that Gaskell registers the polysemic nature of these changes in women’s lives. As Jenny Uglow succinctly declares, ‘a world can be evoked through a wardrobe’, thereby articulating a construction of a female gendered identity that indeed became predicated on international trade flows from across the world, and from the far-flung reaches of Empire.4

Adopting a cross-disciplinary approach, and using both close reading and historicist literary criticism, this thesis aims to restore the social and cultural contexts of Gaskell’s writings about textiles and fabrics. As I am working within the nineteenth century, my thesis focuses on textiles deriving from natural sources. This is animal protein in the case of wool from the sheep fleece or goat hair, and silk thread from the silkworm cocoon. Cotton derives from the cellulosic vegetable fibres of the ‘genus Gossypium’ (OED).5 Lace in the nineteenth century was produced from the thread of cotton, linen and silk. I make this point about ‘natural sources’, as a counter-distinction to the man-made synthetic fibres that began to be produced in the twentieth century from developments in the chemical industry.6 The natural fabrics could only be grown in

5 Linen thread is made from the fibres of the flax plant.  
certain climes and conditions, making the sourcing of the raw materials an essential element in the production process. Thus, the Lancashire mills’ virtual monopolistic dependency on the supply of long-stapled South Sea cotton from the Confederate States of Southern America resulted in the 1860s Cotton Famine, as the American Civil War and blockade of the Southern ports effectively stopped exports of the crop. By contrast, demand for fine merino wool led to the creation of vast sheep ranches in Botany Bay, in the British colony of New South Wales because such sheep could not thrive in England’s harsher climes. From two seemingly unrelated examples, I have learnt, as my research has progressed, how the bold categorization of textiles is reductive and problematic. In addition, the naming of ‘textiles’, either collectively or disaggregated into types is also challenging. As National Trust textile conservationist, Pamela Clabburn asserts, ‘the most difficult problem of all is knowing what is meant by the name of a fabric’; she elaborates with a description of the textile ‘fustian’, which is:

generally taken to mean a fabric woven as twill with a linen warp and a cotton weft, but it could also have a wool weft. Apparently it could be smooth or napped; the word could include other fabrics, or be a generic name for a whole range; and it could be applied to such varied articles as blankets, bed curtains, petticoats and waistcoats.7

In addition to such diverse permutations, the assumption that a ‘fabric’s’ price may be a guide to quality also proves problematic, not only because of the unreliability of real, inflation-adjusted prices, but also owing to the different measurements for fabric. For instance, ‘in England up to the nineteenth century fabrics could be measured by the yard

A further obstacle is the ambiguous distinction between the uncut ‘yardage’ or ‘ell’ of cloth needed to make the item of dress, and the actual finished wearable item itself. ‘[C]onfusion comes from the habit of referring to both […] as a ‘gown’. Moreover, the provenance of a fabric is a slippery domain. ‘Calico’ is a cotton cloth originally imported to England from India from the seventeenth century. Manchester cotton, meanwhile, was actually a cotton/linen mixture more commonly described as ‘fustian’, as above. It was only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, with the technological developments of Richard Arkwright’s water-frame, that English manufactured cotton, made from both a cotton warp and weft was described as calico. In addition, there are innumerable hybrid fabrics created from the different yarn combinations from the warp and weft, never forgetting the myriad applications of diverse printing and finishing techniques. Gaskell’s writings consequently demonstrate the dynamic and rapidly evolving nature of technological change in textile fabrication and the transformations of landscapes and metropolitan space. In Sylvia’s Lovers, Sylvia and her mother engage in the traditional home craft, hand-spinning flax and wool, even as developments in the cotton industry were proceeding apace.

---

8 Clabburn, p.239. Pam Inder describes in detail the different widths citing the Dressmakers’ Chart and Cutting Guide, 1888-9: ‘Suitings, tweeds and heavy woolens were the widest (hence the term ‘broadcloth’) and could come in 38-, 54- and occasionally 60-inch widths; alpaca, cashmere and some fine woolens could be 40 inches wide; serge was sometimes as wide as 32 inches. No other fabrics came in anything wider than 30 inches, and silks, “fancy materials like broché, pekins, [and] crepe de chines … [were] all very narrow, less than 27 inches.” Pam Inder, The Rag Trade: The People Who Made Our Clothes (Stroud: Amberley, 2017), p.16.
From Lancashire, the West Riding, Nottingham to Spitalfields and the Silk Road, an invaluable resource throughout this contextual journey has been *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, volumes I and II (2003), edited by David Jenkins. It is a compendium that charts the development of textile production and consumption over 3000 years, revealing the sheer diversity and complexity of the panoply term “textiles” and the attendant cost-benefit ramifications upon the development of civilization and the environment.\(^\text{10}\)

Notwithstanding all these difficulties of nomenclature, this thesis will demonstrate how Gaskell’s writings display a finely differentiated and deft application of fabric knowledge to reveal subtle nuances and transitions in her protagonists’ circumstances while reflecting changes in the wider socio-economic environment. The poly-semantic nature of her textile allusions quietly articulates a sophisticated engagement with contemporary discourses relating to aesthetics, issues of taste, science, international relations and the widening reaches of empire, notwithstanding an ongoing articulation of the ‘woman question’.

For ease of navigation round the inter-disciplinary methodology employed, I have divided this introduction into six further sections. First, I examine Gaskell’s lived life in the textile hub of Northern England, and I show how her immersion in this new industrial city and familial responsibilities informed her art. I then explore the methodology of a

close metonymic and historicist reading of fabrics. I extend Elaine Freedgood’s mode of analysis in *The Idea in Things* by considering the sensory nature of textiles and the affective responses they stimulate and rekindle. Discussion then turns to the problematic nature of women’s self-fashioning and gender identity during a period of unprecedented socio-economic flux. This leads usefully to a consideration of the political dimensions of textiles, both in the private and public sphere. The penultimate section places my thesis in the academic field of criticism revolving round ‘literary textiles’ in the nineteenth century. This seems a rather barren space, perhaps because of the inherent depth and ontology bias against female-gendered material culture that has perpetuated for too long, particularly in relation to dress and fashion. I conclude with an overview of my six chapters.

**Elizabeth Gaskell’s Life in Cottonopolis: The Poetics of Textiles and Humble Life**

Do you know anything of Milton, Miss Hale? Have you seen any of our factories? Our magnificent warehouses?¹¹

I draw heavily upon the biographical details and analysis of Gaskell’s life by Winifred Gérin in *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (1976), Angus Easson, *Elizabeth Gaskell* (1979) and Jenny Uglow, *A Habit of Stories* (1993).¹² All of them note that Gaskell’s fiction is

¹¹ *NS* p.98. The speaker is Mrs. Thornton, the mother of mill-owner John Thornton.

firmed embedded in the quotidian realities of everyday women’s life; its ‘realist mode’ imbricated in its ‘very rootedness, domestically and regionally’.\(^\text{13}\) After her marriage in 1832, Gaskell resided in Manchester, which by the mid-nineteenth century had become ‘an unrivalled centre of textile production in Britain’; an industrial powerhouse that earned the soubriquet ‘Cottonopolis’, and was indeed worthy of the matriarchal boasts of Mrs Thornton in *North and South* (1855).\(^\text{14}\)

Gaskell’s formative years were mainly spent with her Aunt Lumb, in the small country town of Knutsford in Cheshire. In a letter in May 1838, Gaskell remembers ‘the little, clean, kindly town where […] I was brought up’.\(^\text{15}\) Knutsford was sufficiently close to the metropolitan cotton heartland of Manchester, just as the fictional town Cranford is to Drumble in Gaskell’s novella, *Cranford* (1853). Whilst seemingly ‘genteel’, a country town that forms the inspiration behind the town of Hollingford in *Wives and Daughters*, Knutsford was actually ‘semi-industrial’; John Chapple asserts there was a ‘great deal of cotton-spinning and weaving done in private

\(^{13}\) Billington, “Rooted”, p.159. Gérin writes that Gaskell’s ‘life and art were more completely integrated’ [Gérin, p.x]. Uglow describes Gaskell’s writing as ‘a language born of her own experience and that of other women’ (Uglow, p.116); Shirley Foster notes how Gaskell recognized ‘the complex imbrication of personal experience and creative work’, Shirley Foster, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p.2.


\(^{15}\) *Letters*, p.15.
houses’. In addition, some silk weaving work at Knutsford was brought in from Macclesfield, a town twenty miles away, a major centre for silk production that was known as the western end of the Silk Road. In the eighteenth century, Knutsford had its own silk throwster factory, but it suffered from the competition of its neighbouring larger rival. The memory remained in the buildings, however, and in the appellation ‘Silk Mill Street’, a part of Knutsford that bore ‘a considerable resemblance to industrial areas of Cheshire and Lancashire’.17

At a further distance north from Manchester is the West Riding of Yorkshire, an area that expanded its wool and worsted production into the nineteenth century. Renowned for its expertise in wool dyeing and finishing, this region supplies Foster’s drapery shop in the East Riding town of Monkhaven in Sylvia’s Lovers (1863). By the mid nineteenth century the area’s successful manufactured worsted production was reflected in the expansion of such towns as Keighley, close to the Brontës’ home in Haworth that Gaskell describes in The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857).18

During her married life, 1832-65 Gaskell resided in three different houses within the Manchester area, the town she described as ‘dear old dull ugly smoky grimy grey’.19 As wife to a Unitarian second minister, her first house, No 14 Dover Street off the Oxford Road, was a ‘corner house of a row of nine new houses let at a rental of £33

16 Daniel and Samuel Lysons (1810) cited in Chapple, Early Years, p.130  
17 Chapple, Early Years, p.131.  
19 Letters, p.489.
a year’ in the Ardwick district; in Mary Barton, Miss Simmonds dressmaker’s establishment is situated ‘in a respectable little street leading off Ardwick Green’. Beyond lay ‘[t]he slums of Miles Platting and Ancoats, where the cotton operatives lived in the back-to-back terrace houses and courts’; Gaskell visited families there as part of her duties as a minister’s wife. William Gaskell in 1838 gave lectures to the poor weavers of Miles Platting on ‘The Poets and Poetry of Humble Life’; a theme that the married couple pursued jointly in a poem published in Blackwood’s Magazine in January 1837, ‘Sketches Among the Poor’. Foreshadowing her future writings, in 1838 Gaskell comments upon the art inherent within the ‘Poetry of Humble Life’, ‘In short, the beauty and poetry of many of the common things and daily events of life in its humblest aspect does not seem to me sufficiently appreciated’. She was to rectify that shortcoming in her first novel.

With a growing family of their own and a rising income, in 1842, the Gaskells moved to slightly larger accommodation, a semi-detached house at 121 Upper Rumford St, then finally to Plymouth Grove in 1850. The latter was a large,
substantial, detached villa on the outskirts of Manchester with ‘pleasanter and greener
surroundings, always a little beyond the smoke-barrier of the manufacturing areas of the
town’. Her outward migration away from the industrial centre, towards the south east
of the city mirrored that of the wealthy mill owners.

It is perhaps difficult to perceive today how the development of Manchester
in this period was deemed to be an extraordinary spectacle, which took the rest of
Britain and indeed foreign travellers by surprise. It was the first industrial conurbation
in the world. Benjamin Disraeli portentously proclaimed in the novel Coningsby (1844),
‘The Age of Ruins is past. Have you seen Manchester?’ ‘Seeing Manchester’ gestures
to the advent of industrial tourism, whereby visitors gawped at such spectacles as a mile
of calico being printed in an hour. In her letters Gaskell plans trips for friends and
associates showcasing the industrial achievement of her home city. In November 1849
she writes to Eliza Fox, ‘[t]omorrow I meant to have dragged you through mills and
manufactures without end, by way of getting one’s duty done to Manchester [and]
Oldham’. With dimorphic imagery, however, the ‘French diplomat and social
commentator’ Alexis de Tocqueville, probably best summarizes the ‘paradox’ of

\[\text{References}\]

25 Benjamin Disraeli, Coningsby [1844], (London: Routledge, Warne and Routledge, 1863),
p.86. Manchester was only formally designated a city in 1853. Historian, Asa Biggs describes it
as the ‘shock city of the age’, Asa Briggs, Victorian Cities (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990),
p.96. Douglas Farnie writes from ‘a thitherto backward and peripheral region’ emerged ‘a new
complex of economic activity’ that saw Manchester self-style itself as the ‘second city of the
Empire’ by the mid 1840s, D.A. Farnie, The English Cotton Industry and the World Market
‘by 40.4% in the decade 1811-1821 and by a further 60% between 1831 and 1851, at which
point it stabilised’, John Burnett cited in Lambert, p.43.
26 Letters, p.87.
Manchester’s extraordinary emergence: ‘From this filthy sewer […] pure gold flows.’ It highlights the dichotomy between the disease-ridden courts and cellars of the mill workers, and the rising industrial edifices; sentiments summed up by Mr Bell in *North and South*, ‘Ugh! Cotton, and speculations, and smoke, well-cleaned and well-cared-for machinery, and unwashed and neglected hands.’ (*NS* 352). Pejorative imagery such as ‘filthy sewer’, ‘unwashed’ and ‘smoke’ articulates how Gaskell’s embodied life in Cottonopolis was an assault upon the senses; vivid depictions she deploys in her industrial texts. John Thornton’s mill reverberates with ‘the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine’ (*NS* 111); the women in ‘Berry Street’ in the Ancoats district toss ‘household slops of *every* description into the gutter’; and ‘[h]eaps of ashes’ are gingerly side-stepped by knowing passers-by in the putrid streets (*MB* 58). Gaskell, herself is ‘elbowed’ daily ‘in the busy streets’ (*MB* 3). It is a sensory, cornucopian macrocosm of teeming Manchester life that serves as an apposite trope for this thesis’s microcosmic focus – namely textiles and their inherent properties. My thesis is innovative because it highlights and scrutinizes the sensory qualities of different fabrics to restore their cultural context to modern readers. Who is

28 ‘Heaps of ashes’ is a euphemism for excrement (‘notes’ in *MB* 421). James Kay-Shuttleworth, physician to the Ardwick and Ancoats Dispensary, vividly describes the squalor of the district in his 1832 public health report, ‘The houses are ill-sought, often ill ventilated, unprovided with privies, and, in consequence the streets which are narrow, unpaved, and worn into deep ruts become the common receptacles of mud, refuse, and disgusting ordure.’ Some inhabitants kept a pig in their living quarters. James Kay-Shuttleworth, *The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester* [1832], (London: Frank Cass, 1970), p.27.
now aware of the tactile and olfactory qualities of ‘mossy’ and unevenly woven Indian muslin with its clinging, spicy aroma, or indeed the itchiness of ‘stuff’ when worn close to the skin? I extend this sensory methodology further by analysing the affective nature of fabrics—how materials can stimulate the senses and produce somatic responses that stir the imaginations and feelings, in addition to reviving age-old memories. I examine this sensory process, and its phenomenological coalescence with subjectivity, in the material turn section.

William Gaskell’s Cross Street Chapel was at the heart of Manchester life, the worshipping place for many of its foremost citizens. As the wife of an eminent Unitarian minister, Gaskell’s familial and friendship networks radiated concentrically, encompassing such major Manchester industrialists and innovators as the Gregs of Quarry Bank Cotton Mill; the chemical pioneers in calico printing, the philanthropic Schwabes, who created an industrial village at Rhodes; the Potter brothers, Edmund and Sidney who were also calico printers; and the Cheshire silk manufacturer, Henry Winkworth. Richard Cobden (1804-65), the political free trade activist and co-leader of the Manchester School that lobbied successfully for the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846, was also a close associate.²⁹

Gaskell’s Unitarian beliefs and ‘sympathetic life’ extended to helping the economically impoverished and marginalised sections of the labouring population.³⁰

²⁹ The Gaskells were also friends with ‘James Nasmyth, inventor of the steam hammer and one of the more kindhearted manufacturers’. Gary Messenger claims that John Thornton in NS is ‘modelled upon James Nasmyth’, Gary S. Messinger, Manchester in the Victorian Age (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 102 and 105.
³⁰Letters, p.695.
With her daughters, Gaskell was actively involved in the sewing clubs established for the unemployed factory women during the cotton famine of 1862-3, and throughout her life she supported the cause of ‘fallen’ seamstresses, publicising their plight in the novel *Ruth* (1853). She also provided pragmatic assistance to a young seamstress called Pasley after her seduction by a surgeon, highlighting her plight to Charles Dickens before arranging transportation to the Cape to prevent her probable descent into a life of prostitution in Manchester.\(^{31}\) Thus, at first hand, Gaskell had witnessed the hardships of other women’s lives, experiences that informed ‘The Poetry of Humble Life’.

The two collected editions of Gaskell’s letters, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell* edited by J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (1997) and *Further Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, edited by John Chapple and Alan Shelston (2000) are an invaluable resource for Gaskell scholars hoping to restore the historical and cultural context to Gaskell’s writings. They provide an insight into how Gaskell’s engagement with her material and domestic world is closely assimilated into her literary aesthetic. In a letter to an unknown, aspiring writer in 1862, she proffers advice specifically linking ordinary women’s daily domestic work and the field of art:

> always [have] some kind of sewing ready arranged to your hand, so that you can take it up at any odd minute and do a few stitches […] making the various household arts into real studies (& there is plenty of poetry and association about them – remember how the Greek princesses in Homer washed the clothes etc. […] You would perhaps find a little book called The Finchley Manual of Needlework of real use to you in sewing; it gives patterns and directions.\(^{32}\)

\(^{31}\) For a fuller description of seamstress, Pasley’s plight see Uglow, p.246.

Gaskell pragmatically suggests that mundane sewing tasks, a ubiquitous daily ritual for a woman of her class, have an aesthetic appeal of their own, and that combined with having ‘lived an active & sympathetic life’ as a ‘wife and mother’ enriches a writer’s skill.\textsuperscript{33} Her practical sewing tips reveal Gaskell’s own quotidian immersion in fabrics and threads. More often, her letters are a stream of consciousness in which the ‘hidden world of Art’ is part and parcel of the everyday: the ‘daily small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares’.\textsuperscript{34} In the biography of her friend Charlotte Brontë, amongst the litany of daily domesticity, she equates artistic work to a religious vocation, alluding to the parable of Luke 19. 20-27:

\begin{quote}
a woman’s principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual […] And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. She must not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others. \textit{(LCB 272)}
\end{quote}

Gaskell, with the simple household linen motif, the ‘napkin’, conflates the prosaic with the sublime; an assertion of a quietly revolutionary stance – valuing a woman’s talents as equal to those of men- with an equivalent duty to serve others.\textsuperscript{35} In both instances, the advice to the aspirant female writer and the reference to Brontë’s literary aesthetic, Gaskell alludes to a ‘needle-and pen-trope that has figured in discussions of female

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{33} Letters, p.695.
\textsuperscript{34} Chapple, \textit{A Portrait} p.127.
\textsuperscript{35} Thank you to Clare Pettitt for the ‘revolutionary’ interpretation of Gaskell’s allusion to the parable of St Luke.
authorship since at least the Renaissance’. A written “text” and “textile” fabrics also share the same etymology from the Latin verb ‘texêre’ meaning to weave. Gaskell’s biblical citation and the ‘association of women’s proper work with a metonymic needle-spindle, distaff or spinning wheel – belongs to a tradition of textile tropology’ dating from The Old Testament. It found resonances in the mid-nineteenth century, when the prevailing domestic ideology synonymously fused women’s needlework with middle-class femininity and virtuosity in the private sphere. In this era, to use a frequently

37 King, p.80. The rich language of textile production is ‘seamlessly’ evident in fiction texts and commonplace language; to spin a yarn; the plot unravels; to lose the thread etc...
cited assertion about the ubiquity of sewing, ‘one of the greatest silences about women’s lives was undoubtedly filled with needlework’. Whereas the text-textile symbiosis is an area rich in recent feminist scholarship, the above examples reveal the complex and poly-semantic relationship that Gaskell perceived between a woman’s domestic duties and her art. In her world neither is prioritized to the detriment of the other. Indeed, it is possible to claim that as Gaskell blurs the traditional dichotomy between her aesthetic and home duties, she is a “foremother” of a female literary tradition, in which women’s daily work and life are inseparable from their art. On the 19th June 1855, she writes to her eldest daughter, Marianne announcing a literary coup, which is then undercut by an urgent request for the whereabouts of a set of ribbons, ‘Did I tell you that Mr Brontë has asked me to write a life of his daughter, & that I have consented. […] Did you take your lilac ribbons that went with your LILAC MUSLIN DRESS to London with you? Gaskell’s stream of consciousness, her increasingly vexed domestic concerns with her daughter’s accessories and appearance, carries as much weight as the biography she is to write of her late friend. Both share the space of her ordinary engaged life: art and ribbons are equally as worthy of attention.

The Material Turn and Sensory, Affect Theories

‘I could na’ help seeing in that drawer some little child's clothes, all strewed wi' lavender, and lying by 'em a little whip an' a broken rattle’.

While many feminist critics, such as Hilary Schor and Patsy Stoneman, have focused upon the topical realism of Gaskell’s social-spatial world of provincial domesticity, my thesis tracks the development of women’s material skills and knowledge within the growing ranks of the middle class further back, from the latter half of the eighteenth century through to the third quarter of the nineteenth century. I focus upon women’s interaction with such fabrics as stuff and cloth, cottons, lace and silks. My thesis investigates the ways in which mid nineteenth-century allusions to a fabric lexicon may now escape the sensibilities of twenty-first century readers. Bill Brown has pointed to how objects are used ‘to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organise our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies’.

42 (MB 106).
current readers access the feelings and sentiments of a previous age to bridge the temporal and cultural gap? Deborah Lutz proffers a very plausible response to this conundrum, ‘has the object, the story, the poem been enlivened by embodied tactility? Does representation remain tethered to the body and its materials?’ My thesis thus embraces the sensory domain of ‘affect theory’ to highlight the physical and sensory properties that many Victorian fabrics such as ‘stuff’ and mourning crape possessed.

The affective aspect of cloth, with its intimate relationship with the body provokes sensory responses. Jules David Prown, ‘a founding figure in the field of material culture’, argues that studying material objects through our senses allow us to “make affective contact” with ‘the culture that produced a given object in a way that our invariably prejudiced intellects render impossible’. The thorny nature of what constitutes ‘affect/ affective’ needs clarification. It is an unconscious and involuntary somatic response, which is distinct from emotions and feelings, although there is often a slippage between the three terms. Kate Flint suggests that affect:


46 Jules David Prown cited in Joanna Lackey, “‘I use the woman's figure naturally’; Figuring Women’s Work in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh’, Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies, 8.3 (Winter 2012) [no pages].
is that which it is hard to put a name to, recognizable when one knows that one is having some kind of somatic reaction as a result of one’s contact with something outside of oneself, but that whatever is happening is not necessarily taking place at a conscious level.\footnote{Kate Flint, ‘Feeling, Affect, Melancholy, Loss: Millais’s \textit{Autumn Leaves} and the Siege of Sebastopol’, \textit{19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century}, 23 (2016),1-27 (p.3).}

The response stirs feelings and sensations in us, perhaps difficult to express verbally, especially if the reader cannot identify with the particular structure of feeling stimulated by objects unknown to them. A good example of this is the Victorian fetishism of hair jewellery, objects that commodified the epoch’s grief, sentimentality and mourning practices. In \textit{Cranford}, the denizens wear brooches, worked in hair from deceased relatives ‘small picture-frames with mausoleums and weeping-willows neatly executed inside’.

\footnote{Elizabeth Gaskell, \textit{Cranford} \textit{ed}.by Elizabeth Porges Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.73 Subsequent references will be cited in the text following the abbreviation \textit{CF}.} Lutz explains that in the 1840s, making hair jewellery and embroidering with human hair were fashionable leisure pursuits particularly for cherishing the memories and character of those dearly departed; hair compositions could be classified as something rather more than an object - a quasi-object, or object plus a surplus, imbued

\begin{quote}

William Cohen comments upon the ‘loosely defined area of affect studies’ that ‘can appear both forbidding and vague’. He cites science historian, Ruth Leys’s critique of many contemporary theorists as a useful definition: ‘that the affects must be viewed as independent of, and […] prior to, ideology — that is, prior to intentions, meanings, reasons, and beliefs — because they are non-signifying, autonomic processes that take place below the threshold of conscious awareness and meaning. For the theorists in question, affects are ‘inhuman,’ ‘pre-subjective,’ ‘visceral’ forces and intensities that influence our thinking and judgments but are separate from these’, William A. Cohen, ‘Arborealities; The Tactile Ecology of Hardy’s \textit{Woodlanders}’, \textit{19 - Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century}, (2014), 1-19 (pp.3-4). In 2007, Vanessa Agnew notes the existence of an ‘affective turn’. She defines the turn as ‘historical representation characterized by conjectural interpretations of the past, the collapsing of temporalities and an emphasis on affect, individual experience and daily life rather than historical events, structures and processes’, Vanessa Agnew, 'History’s Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and its Work in the Present', \textit{Rethinking History}, 11.3 (2007), 299-312. (p.299). Jane Bennett paraphrasing Baruch Spinoza sees ‘affect’ as referring ‘broadly to the capacity of any body for activity and responsiveness’, Jane Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xii.

\end{quote}
with human essence; ‘a part of some beloved body’, synonymous with a ‘relic’. They may stimulate a private act of remembrance such as Lady Ludlow, who mourns for deceased relatives by touching ‘ticketed’, ‘locks of hair’ stored in a drawer. It serves to demonstrate that people can be understood as ‘material beings in a world of things’ and that the early Victorians, before the onset of a full-throttle commodity culture, still possessed a different perspective on the dichotomy between subjects and objects than that prevalent in states of advanced capitalism. Freedgood comments upon a ‘subject-object hybridity’ and indeed to Lady Ludlow the hair not only stirs memories of deceased family, but as a body relic, it is an uncanny conflation of the living and the dead; a form of ‘animism’ perhaps.

Whilst Henry Cole, commissioner for the 1851 Great Exhibition, predicted at its opening, ‘[t]here can be no doubt that the Exhibition will give rise to many new


52 Elaine Freedgood, ‘What Objects Know: Circulation, Omniscience and the Comedy of Dispossession in Victorian It-Narratives’, Journal of Victorian Culture, Vol. 15. 1 April 2010, 83–100 (p.90). The thesis writer confirms that touching Victorian hair jewellery is a rather uncanny experience, evoking a sense of disquiet and revulsion that is difficult to articulate. Bennett cites W. J. T. Mitchell explanation of the “uncanny” in “things”. ‘Things […] [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other […] when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls ‘a metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up towards our superficial knowledge”’, Bennett, p.2.
relations between *men and things*, the paradoxical displays of hair jewellery at the exhibition juxtaposed with manufactured wares can be interpreted as representing a ‘epistemological crisis’, indicative of the tension between older spiritual values and knowledge vying with a welter of mass-produced goods. The gender bias of Cole’s pronouncement plays against Gaskell’s first ‘Cranford Paper’, published after the Exhibition in December 1851, in which she clears a space for those on the margins of the newly industrial society and metropolis, to reflect upon ‘women and things’. The endless recycling of women’s material culture within *Cranford*, and the steadfast trumpeting of sartorial obsolescence is a negation of the consumerist ethos emergent within the Crystal Palace.

Tactility is inherent to Gaskell’s realist aesthetic so this thesis will focus particularly upon the ‘haptic sense’ and women’s embodied experiences with fabrics. Hilary Davidson has shown how the haptic and sensual properties of clothing and materials offer a mode of ‘tactile comprehension’ by which identity can be self-


54 My italics.

55 It is necessary to distinguish between the terms ‘tactile’ and ‘haptic’ as there is a great deal of slippage and interchangeability. ‘Touch’ is ‘[t]he act of experience of skin-meets-world’; ‘tactile’ is ‘[o]f the touch; appealing to the touch; a person with an appetite for touch’; ‘haptic’ is ‘[a] sense modality combining touch, kinesthesis, proprioception and the vestibular sense. A term applied to literature or film describing and/or evoking that sense modality’, Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 185 and 187. ‘Haptic’ evokes a three dimensional spatial and cognitive perception, that stirs affective responses. This is endemic to the ‘haptic’ engagement with textiles that I identify in Gaskell’s writings. Recent literary criticism, however, coalesces such perception as a ‘tactile imagination’. So, for the purposes of this thesis I employ the term ‘tactile’. See below for the critical development of the ‘textile imagination’ field.
fashioned. Davidson says ‘[it] is no coincidence that the feel of a textile is called the ‘hand’’. I assert therefore, that Gaskell’s writings illuminate a ‘tactile imagination’ based upon a gendered and embodied commonplace experience of fabrics and material possessions. As in the poignancy of Lady Ludlow’s grief, ‘touch’ is a common trope in Gaskell’s novels: the mill girls touch and appraise Margaret Hale’s attire in North and South; Mary Smith holds up the folds of a lilac silk from the spring fashions display in Cranford; and in Ruth, Miss Benson feels the fine cambric-muslin sent to Ruth by Mr Bradshaw for her baby’s layette. All these acts of material tactility demonstrate an inherent and gendered knowledge, generated by the somatic memory of previous encounters with fabrics that foster context and give significance to the present.

Jonathan Crary asserts that the advent of modernity in the nineteenth century led to an age of spectacle, whereby the visual sense was increasingly prioritized


57 As Heather Tilley elaborates: ‘The term ‘tactile imagination’ is itself drawn from nineteenth-century aesthetic discourse, with the art critic Bernard Berenson first using the term in his 1896 study of Florentine painters. Drawing on contemporary psychological discourse which stated that sight alone cannot give an accurate sense of the third dimension, Berenson argues that ‘the essential in the art of painting is somehow to stimulate our consciousness of tactile values, so that the picture shall have at least as much power as the object represented, to appeal to our tactile imagination’, Heather Tilley, ‘Introduction: The Victorian Tactile Imagination’, 19 Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century, (2014), 2-17 (para. 7).

over touch.\textsuperscript{59} Inherent within this was a decided gender bias. Women’s domestic tasks were linked with the ‘supposedly lower, feminine senses of touch, taste and smell, rather than with the “higher” “masculine” senses of sight and hearing.’\textsuperscript{60} However, according to classical theories, the sense of ‘touch’, was held to be the fundamental sense that served the whole body’.\textsuperscript{61} Twentieth-century phenomenologist and philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty also believes that it is the sense of touch, which is

\textsuperscript{59}Jonathan Crary, \textit{Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century} (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990), p.19. In his comprehensive study of French dress in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Daniel Roche notes the onset of a consumer revolution in the latter quarter of the eighteenth century ‘[a]n enhanced tactile and ocular sensibility with the choice of less coarse textiles and the vogue for lighter fabrics’. Daniel Roche, \textit{The Culture of Clothing: dress and fashion in the ’ancien régime’} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.147. The ‘new consumer tastes of the eighteenth century’ had, as Maxine Berg observes, ‘three aspects: the senses, novelty and imitation’ that generated changing systems of taste. ‘Taste addresses the world of the senses’ that influences consumers’ behaviour. Concomitant to this, economic and social theorists ‘debated the meaning of luxury’ and ‘the problems of separating these from necessaries.’ Indeed, the Enlightenment philosopher and economist David Hume believed that luxury was ‘a refinement in the gratification of the senses’ that gave a spur to commerce via the growing consumerism of the middling ranks of society, Maxine Berg, \textit{Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 31, 33 and 249.


\textsuperscript{61} Abbie Garrington invokes Aristotle’s ‘hierarchy of the senses’ to explain the polemic nature of the ‘touch’ sense’. In \textit{De Anima} (c.350 BC), Aristotle assigns touch to the ‘lowest position, a base sense […] a scaffold on which the other senses are built’. Base here is not a pejorative description but rather relates to its ‘fundamental’ status in ‘involving the largest expanse of physical receptors.’ ‘As the philosopher expresses it, “tangible objects we perceive not by any action upon us of the medium, but concurrently with it”’ (citing Aristotle 1907: 101). Garrington then elaborates further, using the translated caption from Frans Floris’s allegorical painting \textit{Touch} (1561) “the sense of Touch is spread out over the entire body, and therefore it is also its organ” (citing Benthien 2002). Edith Wyschogrod concurs with Floris’s claim, stating that ‘the whole body is the tactile field. The body […] is the primordial ground of existence as incarnate’ (citing Wyschogrod 1981), Garrington, pp. 18-19. To summarize, it is ‘Aristotle’s notion of the skin as the medium of the fundamental sense of touch’, Garrington, p.24. For a discussion of Virginia Woolf and the tactile experience of her memory perception of clothes and textiles see Carolyn Abbs, ‘Writing the Subject: Virginia Woolf and Clothes’, \textit{COLLOQUY text theory Critique},11 2006, 209-225.
the most crucial to human experience: how the subject negotiates the proximate world of objects through a previous lived-in-body experience, which he describes as “the habit body”. Christine Bayles Kortsch suggests that nineteenth-century women exercised literacy in ‘dress culture’ in their ability to construct, regulate and interpret garments, different fabrics and household textiles. Their competencies covered the unpicking and turning breadth of material; the knowledge and practices of fabric cleansing, preservation and recycling, as well as an appreciation of cloths’ economic and social value. This dress literacy is arguably a function of women’s ‘embodied’ perception of cloth as from an early age (as young as two or three years old) most girls were instructed in the skills of plain sewing of household items and basic garments; this instruction was then extended into fancy sewing and handicraft skills-the development

of the ‘habit body’. Fancy work was increasingly the means by which middle-class women signified their leisured status within the domestic space. Research in 2017 revealed that handiwork skills, honed by constant practice from an early age, have been shown to engender physiological changes; for instance, ‘dressmaking improves its practitioners’ stereoscopic vision, making them measurably better able to gauge distance.’ Perhaps, also in the Victorian townscape, stereoscopic vision was a useful means of scrutinizing sartorial transgressions. Gaskell’s writings abound with such acute observations, particularly in her letters where the exchange of details on needlework and dress culture, whilst fostering familial and friendship connections, also act as a mediated transmission of changing fashion trends and social differentiation. Gaskell’s skills were formed from early childhood; Winifred Gérin observes that part of Gaskell’s initial education in Knutsford would have involved not only ‘Mrs Chapone’s Letters on the Improvement of the Mind’, but ‘plenty of sewing and stitching’; indeed in 1851 Gaskell writes that she will send her daughter, Marianne to school with ‘a famous stock of plain-work’.

However, from the latter years of the nineteenth century onwards with the ever-accelerating march towards a commodity culture, Deborah Lutz asserts that there was a gradual ‘fading of material embodiment’. This is reflected in the nuanced nature of

---

65 Hedges explains that “plain sewing” was ‘such stiches as the basic running stitch, the “over-and-over” or over-sewing stich, the back stitch and the hem stitch- necessary for the seaming and hemming of clothes, for making quilts and household linen, and the basis also for the fancy and ornamental sewing that might occupy a woman’s leisure time’, Hedges, ‘Essay’, p.16.
68 Lutz, Relics of Death, p.8.
women’s domestic occupation signified in novels after Gaskell’s death in 1865. Thus, in
the 1876 novel, *Phoebe Junior* by Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897), the eponymous
protagonist, a vicar’s daughter on a visit to her grandmother, brings no ‘work to beguile
the long evening’. 69 While Talia Schaffer reads the ‘work’ as referring to the absence of
‘handicrafts’, I interpret it as a shift of emphasis in young women’s customary sewing
duties by 1876; a contradistinction to the industrious stitching women reflected across
Gaskell’s writings, even in her final work, *Wives and Daughters*. 70 Whilst, I concur with
Schaffer’s further statement that Oliphant’s novel exhibits the ‘new consumer ethos that
ushers in modernity’, I argue that such a trend is not necessarily ‘new’; a consumer
ethos is prevalent in differing degrees across Gaskell’s opus, and indeed not unique to
the nineteenth century. 71 Foster’s drapery store in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, set in the 1790s,

70 Schaffer, p.146. Although the setting of *Wives and Daughters* is the 1820s, I argue that there
is slippage in the chronology between the time-of-writing and the retrospective setting.
71 Schaffer, p.146. As Woodruff Smith observes ‘[s]tudies of English and American households
before the eighteenth century have revealed that most families (except for the very richest)
possessed relatively little in the way of durable goods’. However, by the late eighteenth and
eyearly nineteenth century ‘a veritable revolution has occurred’ in that ‘[t]he number, the variety,
and the value of household objects have increased sevenfold’, Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption
and the Making of Respectability 1600-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p.181. For the
history of shopping and changing consumption patterns see Evelyn S. Welch, *Shopping in the
Renaissance: Consumer Cultures in Italy 1400-1600* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press,
*Markets and Manufacture in Early Industrial Europe*, ed. by Maxine Berg (London: Routledge,
1990); Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England*
England; The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption*, ed.by Frank Trentmann
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Beverley Lemire, *Global Trade and the
Transformations of Consumer Cultures: The Material World Remade, c.1500-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018). For eighteenth-century consumption and
the fascination with miniature and small-scale material culture, see Melinda Alliker Rabb,
*Miniature and the English Imagination: Literature, Cognition, and Small-Scale Culture, 1650-
1765* (New York; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
stocks silk handkerchiefs, ribbons and smuggled lace, highly coveted by the local community. Lutz’s ‘fading of material embodiment’ then is a gradual trajectory gaining real momentum in the Edwardian era. While the sewing machine or “The Iron Seamstress” was a commonplace status symbol demonstrating middle-class prosperity in the 1870s, the advent of ready-made clothes mass-produced in factories, was still some decades away.\textsuperscript{72} The ‘New Women’ of the 1890s, stepping away from the confining domestic ideology of earlier decades, may not have acquired such an embodied sense of fabric, clothing and handicrafts as their mothers. Nevertheless, sewing competency and wardrobe upkeep skills were still de rigueur practices for middle-income women.\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{72} Ledbetter, pp.110-11, ‘The Young Ladies’ Journal supplied its readers with ‘a decorative rug pattern to accentuate the machine’s role as a beautiful object in the domestic parlour […] the rug pattern is for hand embroidery’. Household Words in 1854 printed an article titled “The Iron Seamstress” praising the invention of ‘Boston Machinist Elias Howe. It was prohibitively priced at $300 (Ledbetter p.111). For more on the development of the sewing machine in America, particularly Singer’s ‘New Family’ sewing machine see David A. Hounshell, From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984).

\textsuperscript{73} Gaskell uses the pejorative aspect of ready-made clothes as a simile for Mrs. Gibson’s ill-conceived and platitudinous speech ‘but her words were always like ready-made clothes, and never fitted individual thoughts’, Wives and Daughters, ed.by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press,2008) p.321. Subsequent references will be cited in the text following the abbreviation WD. Hedges asserts that ‘well into the 1890s women’s dresses with their complicated architecture of tight bodices, […] had to be made at home’, often by a professional dressmaker, Hedges, ‘Essay’, p.38.
Fabrics also articulate an important and complex relationship with time. In Cranford, Gaskell uses the history of Miss Pole’s muslin dress as a measurement for elapsed time, commencing with Peter’s disappearance after his cross-dressing prank:

Peter had last been heard of in India, “or that neighbourhood”; and that this scanty intelligence […] had reached Cranford in the year when Miss Pole had bought her India muslin gown, long since worn out (we washed it and mended it, and traced its decline and fall into a window-blind, before we could go on). (CF 111)

The muslin gown provokes an association of previously hidden memories. Within its many restorations, the blind carries the weight of biography, place and emotional feeling spanning two generations. The passage of time is thus negotiated through the object’s many modifications of function, whilst the spatial connotations of ‘India muslin’ serve to collapse the great distance between the English provincial town and the colonial outpost of Peter’s sojourns. Thus, cloth can simultaneously offer surface, meaning and depth: a means of transcending spatial and temporal boundaries. Cloth with its imprints of the body, the fibres imbued with bodily fluids and scents ‘stir both conscious and unconscious memory’ acting as a repository of the past rekindling it into the present, but in a way which is complex and layered, not merely a linear process of

---

74 Amanda Vickery, in her study of prosperous, eighteenth-century lady, Elizabeth Shackleton, comments upon ‘the sheer diversity of meanings it was possible to attach to possessions […] since objects accrued different connotations according to use and context’ during this period, Vickery, p.192.

75 Angus Easson stresses how the experience of objects is subjective. ‘If […] [the] detail is an affirmation of truth, it is also an exploration and a commentary upon the pattern and peculiarity of lives: of how one individual from the same class or even the same family differs from another. Expectations, customs, manners, habits, desire, pride, love, jealousy can all be ‘in’ objects, though the thing itself is lifeless’, ‘The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell’, GSJ, 1990, 4, 64-78 (p.71).
time’s continuous flow.\textsuperscript{76} Across Gaskell’s texts, there are constant illustrations of this process, particularly acts of fabric transmission to not only reaffirm kinship and remembrance, but also in deeds of mutual sympathy. In \textit{Cranford}, fugitive Peter sends a ‘large, soft, white Indian shawl’ to his mother (\textit{CF} 58); Gaskell packs off her own merino dress to Marianne at boarding school; and the bereaved mother in Brummagem donates cherished baby clothes to Joeb Leth’s orphaned grandchild (\textit{MB} 107). It is an affective chain. As Stallybrass suggests, ‘[a] network of cloth can trace the connection of love across the boundaries of absence, of death, because cloth is able to carry the absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal material value’.\textsuperscript{77} And, as Pamela Johnson notes, ‘the symbolic link between memory and cloth is an ancient one’ as the Greek goddess of memory was Mnemosyne, ‘traditionally depicted beneath heavy drapery, symbolizing that which is to be recovered, memory as desire’.\textsuperscript{78} Women have been traditionally viewed as the ‘Keepers’ of memory during a period of cultural anxiety’.\textsuperscript{79} Many bourgeois nineteenth-century women possessed the lexicon of fabric and fashions as commonplace knowledge, which, although it might now be lost to the sensibilities of twenty-first century readers, enabled cloth and its affective qualities to

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Textures of Memory: The Poetics of Cloth} (Nottingham: Angel Row Gallery, 1999), p.2.
\textsuperscript{79} Goggin and Tobin, p.10.
act as a form of storage for memory, even as contemporaries feared that there was now a ‘new and disorientating opacity of the past’. As Johnson observes:

We remember via association with images or objects which, for us, potently accumulate, often via sense impressions [and] memories [...] an object recalled or rediscovered is a powerful stimulus, releasing memory; thoughts and images open up in a simultaneous rush, a layered, not a linear narrative.

As Freud articulates, ‘dream-content’ is not based on notions of absolute truth but desire, each dream image is ‘a [condensed] pictographic script’, which if fully explored symbolically, may access more complex ‘dream-thoughts’ and ‘associations’, resurfacing an emotional truth of subjectivity. In such a way cloth is a repository of condensed, historical content, a trigger to unleash hidden dream-thoughts and emotional truths. Emotive truth recollection and ‘sense impressions’ is also a pertinent way to evaluate Gaskell’s narrative style. Describing the form in Wives and Daughters, W. A. Craik praises ‘the representation of the fluidity and intermixture of the fabric of experience, in which the present is composed of sense-impression, present emotions, and all the call up of impressions, thoughts and emotions of the past.’ Sensory data is coded into fabrics, much of which may be lost to latter-day readers. It takes a herculean historical effort to recover such auditory and olfactory qualities as the onomatopoeic froufrou sweep of the vast 1850s

80 Terdiman, p.24.
81 Johnson, p.7
crinoline silk skirts, or the purgatorial aroma of wet gummed crepe, the deep-mourning fabric worn by middle-class women. Craik’s material allusion to the collective noun ‘fabric’, to encompass affect/emotion/feelings in a layered time frame, is an abridgment of my own argument that Gaskell’s writing is peculiarly sourced from her sensory and haptic imagination. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick sums up similar sentiments in her book’s title ‘Touching Feeling’ to remind us of the close link between the act of touching to affective responses and the stirring of memories. As she elaborates ‘touching’ and ‘feeling’ are both ‘irreducibly phenomenological’ and involve a ‘conceptual realm’ not shaped ‘by […] commonsensical dualities of subject versus object’.

Thus, Gaskell’s utilization of a female gendered, embodied perception of material knowledge occurred during a period that was becoming increasingly focused on the professionalization of knowledge, particularly knowledge mediated visually and through text. It represents her lived life in the textile manufacturing environs of Manchester and the quotidian conflation of her narrative technique and embodied experience with the material world. During a period of unprecedented socio-economic change, an epoch John Ruskin believed had experienced a dramatic rupture from the organic continuum of the past, cloth possesses an affective agency that stirs emotions and also memories. Close attention to textiles in Gaskell’s work revitalizes their complex temporal and polysemic meanings.

---

85 Sedgwick, p21.
Quintessentially English: Women’s Self-Fashioning and Social Distinction

‘Don’t call Shifts Chemises’\textsuperscript{86}

Although Rachel Worth asserted in 1998 that ‘Gaskell’s novels are extremely enlightening for the historian of dress, particularly for the delineation of class as constructed through specific styles of dress and specific fabrics’, Alan Shelston complained in 2010 that the existing scholarship on Gaskell ‘has not really got to that side of her that can be related to the Victorian susceptibility to shifts of social class, and of cultural self-definition’.\textsuperscript{87} I concur and therefore argue, that the fabric and cloth tropes across Gaskell’s opus are one means by which she enunciates the complex and nuanced aspect of provincial women’s gender identity, and that this is inextricably linked with concepts of social distinction.

At this point, the term ‘provincial’ needs to be probed further. As Josephine McDonagh observes, ‘the term ‘provincial’ has meanings and associations that are complex and that change over time’. In the mid-nineteenth century, it was ‘derived less from topography than from print’ culture.\textsuperscript{88} In such a sense ‘provincial’ represents a physical distance from the metropolitan centre rather than a pejorative sense of the backwoods. Indeed, McDonagh argues that provinciality in the mid 1850s was more ‘closely aligned to modes of contemporary cosmopolitanism than we might now

\textsuperscript{86} Letters, p.181
\textsuperscript{88} Josephine McDonagh, ‘Rethinking Provincialism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Victorian Studies, 55.3, Spring 2013, 399-424 (p.399).
Thus, this thesis examines closely the evolving provincial scenes of such localised communities as Hollingford, Cranford and Eccleston, and women’s gendered response to a period of great social and economic upheaval. In no sense is ‘provincial’ viewed through a depreciatory lens.

In addition, whereas Worth and Shelston seem to take the term ‘class’ as axiomatic, arguably it also needs further explanation. Gaskell’s work makes it clear that ‘class’ cannot be seen as a ‘self-evident concept [...] but, rather as a conceptual hurdle of its own’. The awareness of ‘class’ is historically associated with Britain in the nineteenth century and Karl Marx’s theory that a capitalist-industrial society will generate a ‘class struggle’ over the means of production. Mary Poovey, however, argues that ‘class’ and the social body in class analysis developed naturally from the eighteenth century’s exploration of the ‘emergent notion of objectivity scientific rationality’ and the ‘emergence of classificatory thinking’. Therefore, the term ‘class’ articulates a gradual, transformative trajectory in contradistinction to Marx’s male-gendered thesis that precluded ‘female labour’. This process is verified within Gaskell’s writings as the language of social taxonomy becomes more elastic as Britain moves to a secondary economy. A feudal ordering of ‘rank’ based on religious and political associations, discernible in the eighteenth-century contexts of ‘My Lady Ludlow’ and Cranford,

89 McDonagh, p.415.
91 Mary Poovey, ‘The Social Construction of “Class”: Towards a History of Classificatory Thinking’ in Dimock and Gilmore, pp. 15-56 (pp.17-19). Berg notes the ‘growth of the middling classes’ in eighteenth-century England, a group that ‘grew from one in seven [...] to one in four or five in the early nineteenth century’, Berg, Luxury and Pleasure, p.212.
accedes to Lady Cumnor’s ruminations on ‘station’ and ‘class’ in Gaskell’s final novel. Provoked by the silk attire worn by her erstwhile governess Clare, Lady Cumnor articulates a view of class distinction that echoes a continual refrain in the etiquette books of the 1840s:

I was only speaking of the folly of people dressing above their station. […] [T]he fashions of my grandmother’s days, when every class had a sort of costume of its own, —and servants did not ape tradespeople, nor tradespeople professional men. (WD 566)

The ‘costume’ bears the vestiges of the obsolete Sumptuary Laws of the early-modern period that stipulated the appropriate clothing for each ‘rank’ in society. In Cranford, Miss Matty’s status is described as her ‘rank’ befitting a vicar’s daughter. Before the Industrial Revolution, rank was patrilineal, and women were ascribed rank based upon patriarchal kinship. During the early nineteenth century, the term ‘class’, in its socio-economic sense, and ‘rank and order’ were interchangeable but increasingly the latter was viewed as ‘partisan, then archaic, and finally obsolescent’ as rigid social boundaries buckled with the expanding industrial sectors. In addition, the government’s attempt to ‘standardize and tabulate social and political data’ led to the 1851 census delineating people’s occupations into classes and sub-classes. This arguably formalised the definition of class. Lady Cumnor’s deliberations on ‘class’ therefore, form part of a

---

93 Clare Pettitt, Serial Forms: The Unfinished Project of Modernity 1815-1848 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p.177. Anna Clark argues that the ‘concept of the middle class was decisively enshrined in the 1832 Reform Act, which enfranchised middle-class men [as propertied male householders] and excluded the working class’. The term “working class” was not a recognized formal entity then, but ‘[by] the 1820s and 1830s contemporaries began to refer to “the working class” or “the working classes”’, Anna Clark, The Struggle for the Breeches, p.7 and p.177.
contemporary discourse on ‘class’, identity and its authenticity. For instance, Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), develops the heraldic metaphor of families to explain the sustained hegemony of prominent dynasties, ‘all true classification is genealogical’.  

Charles Darwin’s ‘evolutionary’ thesis and Poovey’s scientific rationality resonate within *Wives and Daughters*. The archaic Tory squirearchy represented by Squire Hamley ‘struggle[s] for existence’ in an era of scientific and technological advancement. Beset with debts and an infirm heir, the Squire cedes power to the up-and-coming Whigs of Cumnor Towers. Thus, the Cumnors’ versatility and proficiency in the developing intellectual, and socio-political milieu reveals their adaptability for survival in a new economic order. This charts a rather androcentric process, however. For too long ‘class’ has been analysed ‘without sexual specificity’, therefore this thesis explores how women were instrumental in cultivating and disseminating sartorial and status distinctions within their own home and communities. As the century progressed, these womanly communities and the development of a quintessential English identity, were propagated by the expanding print and periodical culture. Davidoff and Hall’s proposition about the ‘gendered nature of class formation’ is important to my thinking,

\*\*\*

95 Darwin, p.49. D’Albertis argues that the novel chronicles ‘a struggle for existence – both against competitors and against environmental forces’, p.141.
96 Davidoff and Hall, p.30.
as is Kortsch’s notion that women’s dual literacy in print and fabrics gave them ‘the language to govern and control that community’; a means of regulating anxiety regarding inter-class social differentiation. 98 So, while Cranford parodies the increasingly complex and rapidly evolving rules of social etiquette, nonetheless such ‘discursive practices constitute knowledge’ and ensured ‘a middle-class hegemony in mid-Victorian England’. 99

John Elster constructs a more ‘flexible empirical sense of class’, defining class as a group of people forming membership because they possess the same or similar ‘endowments’; the latter term embracing elements like ‘capital’ and the group’s ‘know-how’. 100 Many of the Cranford women, for instance, are members of the ‘rentier’ class, identified by Marx, but their society does become more inclusive: a reflection of the elasticity and mobility of social stratification within provincial female gendered communities. The Cranford ladies’ ‘know-how’ is sufficient to rescue Miss Matty from financial ruin and potential social calamity. Such ‘know-how’ is analogous to Pierre Bourdieu’s phrase ‘cultural capital’, namely the knowledge, skills or expectations that secure particular class-based privileges and are transmitted inter generationally. 101 Jane Schneider isolates Bourdieu’s subtler ‘practice theory’, whereby ‘society's many groups

are shown to articulate and deploy their own criteria for achieving distinction, having grown up in a particular habitus, learned in …[an] embodied way particular customs and dispositions... [These] arbiters of taste, armed with insiders’ expertise amplify the resulting differences’; Miss Matty’s status is thus preserved.102

In nineteenth-century Britain, women’s embodied knowledge and manipulation of material culture and social arrangements was an instrumental deployment of class power. As etiquette writer, Sarah Ellis, recognized ‘[s]ociety is to the [wives and] daughters of a family, what business is to the son’.103 This was encapsulated in the microcosm of the female domestic space. The indomitable Mrs Thornton’s pristine drawing room in North and South, with its emphasis on ornament to the exclusion of comfort is the theatre of status theatre. Mid-Victorian patriarchs, such as John Thornton, depended on female relatives to ‘perform the ideological work of managing the class question and displaying the signs of the family’s status’.104

103 Langland, p.291.
An archetypal construction of femininity also became encapsulated and displayed in parlours across England, and upon women’s very bodies. Material culture comprising Indian textiles and designs was an integral component of domestic adornment by the 1840s. Gaskell’s chintz covered sofa, the cheap Paisley shawls that copied the luxuriant Kashmir, are synecdoche of a quintessential English, female-gendered national identity. Deborah Wynne uses the term ‘biographical objects’ to explain how women’s property ownership of material culture was ‘intimately bound up in an individual’s life so that they function[ed] as integral parts of a person’s identity’.

Shawl wearing was such an exemplar. In the print of the ‘Interior of Great Exhibition’

---

in figure 1, the female visitors make a formidable *tableau vivant* of womanly propriety, as almost all are draped in shawls.

Likewise, the shawl is a common motif across Gaskell’s writings. Mill girls wear plaid shawls in the industrial novels; the Universal Store in Cranford stocks Paisley shawls; and expensive India shawls are part of Edith Shaw’s trousseau in *North and South*. Edith’s shawls articulate the transmission process whereby an Indian cultural symbol, traditionally worn by Indian men, is absorbed into the élite domestic space of a London drawing room to trickle further afield to the parlours of Hollingford, Milton North and Plymouth Grove.\(^{106}\) As Suzanne Daly notes, ‘[s]ome of these items, and particularly textiles, led a double life, functioning at once as exotic foreign artifacts and as markers of proper Englishness’.\(^{107}\) The Kashmir shawl and its many imitators was a ‘icon’ of Victorian commodity culture representing an exemplary construction of English femininity and respectability, promoted by middle-class periodicals. The Press in the mid-nineteenth century was promoting a vision and ideology embodied in the monarchy and imperial expansion to an imagined community. The developing print technologies of colour reproduction made fashion plates more available to larger

\(^{106}\) The etymology of ‘shawl’ is ‘C17: from Urdu and Persia, probably from *Shāllāt*, a town in India (*OED*).

numbers of people by the mid-century, and sumptuous prints became the mirror in which the middle classes reflected themselves.

Gaskell’s writings thus articulate the complex intersection of femininity and domestic ideology with the nebulous and shifting status signifiers from the mid eighteenth century through to 1865. From the elaborate lace ruffles originating from George III’s reign in ‘My Lady Ludlow’ to Mrs Gibson’s desire for ‘figured silk’ in the closing paragraphs of Wives and Daughters, the writings reflect women’s evolving engagement with a material culture, to self-fashion and formulate identity and social distinction (WD 683). The industrialization of the textile industry resulted in a ‘democratization of fashion’ by the mid nineteenth century. Greater numbers of female consumers, even those of more limited means, were able to adorn themselves in fabrics, previously the sartorial preserve of the élite. Aided by the press ‘a whole new vocabulary of fashion and textile terms [and] a new world of luxury’ was inaugurated. This coalesces into anxiety about women’s external appearance that resonates throughout the century. Hence Lady Cumnor’s outraged hauteur at a former governess’s silk gown, ‘aping’ the aristocratic mode of dress. ‘The greater sheen and glowing

colours of silk’ had become a visible signifier of sartorial elegance and distinction in the status theatre.¹¹⁰

Political Textiles

The ‘terrible years of 1839, 1840 and 1841’¹¹¹

At the start of my research project, I was uncertain how the intended study should be negotiated in an academic context. The centrality of textiles to the Industrial Revolution, and role in the exponential propulsion of global trade was unquestionable, but as fabric articulates the covering of the body, this led to the nebulous and vexed field of dress, clothing, and fashion.¹¹² In time, I recognized I was betraying my own feminist credentials, in my categorization of the latter field as intrinsically superficial and even trivial. My valorisation was skewed by an internalised androcentric bias that Virginia Woolf riled against in her 1929 seminal text *A Room of One’s Own* ‘[y]et it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are ‘important’; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes ‘trivial’’.¹¹³ I had also, in the words of social anthropologist Daniel Miller, a ‘depth’ bias:

we imagine that there is a real or true self which lies deep within us. On the surface is found the clothing which may represent us and may reveal a truth

---

¹¹¹ MB, p. 82.
about ourselves, but it may also lie. It is as though if we peeled off the outer layers, we would finally get to the real self within.114

My doubts had derived from a Eurocentric, social construction that denigrated such surfaces as clothes as superficial, and particularly marginalized and derided its female gendered consumers.115 As Efrat Tseëlón asserts women have historically been defined as trivial, superficial, vain and even evil because of their associations with the vanities of dress by discourses ranging from theology to fashion.116 This cultural construct also has an inherent androcentric prejudice that was underscored by the gendered bifurcation of dress by the mid-nineteenth century. Increasingly, middle-income men adopted the tailored severity of black attire, denoting industry, entrepreneurship as well as gravitas.117 Contrary to Darwin’s evolutionary theories, which accords mating success to the visual display of males, paradoxically it was middle-class women’s attire that signified sexuality, but at the same time virtue; the receptacle of the domestic ideology.118 By the 1850s, women’s appearance in skirts of ever-voluminous proportions was a gendered spectacle of Victorian vicarious consumption and male proprietorship, even as critics derided feminine frivolity and

115 Miller argues that in cultures such as Trinidad the opposite view to the orthodoxy prevails, ‘it is entirely obvious that truth resides on the surface where other people can easily see it and attest to it, while lies are to be found in the hidden recesses deep within. [To them] a person’s real being, then, is also on the surface, and evident’, Miller, p.20.
117 For the sartorial change to ‘black’ in men’s clothes in the nineteenth century see John Harvey, Men in Black (Reaktion Books, 1995).
ostentation. In such a manner, the ability of clothing and bodily adornment to reflect and project the zeitgeist of the Victorian domestic ideology is expressed succinctly by Terence Turner’s phrase the ‘social skin’. It is a semiotic system, ‘transmitting signs of status, age, ethnicity and aspiration’ within a given cultural context.

My focus upon the fabrics draping nineteenth-century women acknowledges the problematic distinctions between fashion, dress and the sociological distinction of the ‘dressed body’. The latter as ‘embodied activity’ is culturally constructed and constrained. Thomas Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus (1833-34) is now viewed as an early treatise on the semiotic significance of clothes as powerful social symbols for the formation and projection of identity. ‘Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and body it forth. Hence Clothes, as despicable as we think them, are so unspeakably significant’. Carlyle proposes a mode of hermeneutics, which stresses the layered aspects of meaning within an object or material, and how this may relate to the polarities of ‘the literal and the allegorical, the prosaic and the sublime’. Whereas Carlyle’s text is rather oblique, nevertheless his elevation of the importance of

---

119 This alludes to Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption; see Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisured Class (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
120 Terence Turner cited in Lemire, Global Trade, p. 88.
vestments coinciding with an era of such profound socio-economic and cultural shift ensures his cultural critique is highly pertinent.\(^{125}\)

Thus, throughout my research, I have been constantly surprised by the centrality of textiles to the socio-cultural, economic and political life of the nation. The nature of sartorial distinction and vicissitudes of fashion trends in textile use and display is a barometer of oscillating societal pressures and transmutations. As Carlyle succinctly summarizes, ‘Society is founded upon cloth’.\(^{126}\) Indeed, synonymous with the actions of The Three Fates, the balance of life and death may sometimes hang upon a thread. In ‘My Lady Ludlow’ desperate French aristocrats flee the revolution with old lace as ‘portable valuables’ (MLL 188). Such ‘valuables’ were symbolic of the excesses and dissipation of the ancien régime of the Bourbon dynasty that was mythically toppled by an item of dress. Marie-Antoinette’s adoption of a simple muslin shift, the gaulle simultaneously subverted the royal mystique of monarchy and heaped ruin upon the prestigious silk industry of Lyon. War and death ensued.\(^{127}\)

Throughout the eighteenth century the silk industry was generally an industry favoured by the government because of its élite consumers. Peter Linebaugh describes this century as ‘The Age of Silk’; ‘it was the fabric of power and class command’.\(^{128}\) Consequently the silk weavers were a very vociferous pressure group that is alluded to

---

\(^{125}\) William Keenan asserts that Carlyle’s ‘seminal text […] Sartor Resartus inaugurated the field of dress studies by giving the subject of clothes its first sustained scrutiny’, Keenan, p.2.

\(^{126}\) Carlyle, p. 41.

\(^{127}\) Marie Antoinette wears the gaulle in the portrait, Le reine en gaulle, painted by Madame Vigée Le Brun in 1783.

in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, ‘Silk weavers has been petitioning Ministers t' make a law’ (*SL* p.50). Their strident militancy conjoined with the powerful wool industry were instrumental in passing the 1721 Calico Acts, which prohibited the further import of the brightly coloured Indian cottons and calicoes by the English East India Company. Will Farrell argues that such textile embargoes ‘were part of a mercantilist policy designed to shield domestic textile manufacturers’; a strategy that was slowly reversed in the nineteenth century, as the increasingly powerful cotton lobby demanded access to new markets and free trade.\(^{129}\) It was no coincidence that the battle for Free Trade was fought and won in Manchester, one of its most vocal advocates being Gaskell’s close associate, Richard Cobden.\(^{130}\) The politics of indigenous home production in other textile industries, beleaguered by cotton’s dominance, became a potent and sensitive propaganda tool mapped upon the gendered royal body. Both Queen Adelaide and Queen Victoria instituted ‘buy British’ campaigns in their respective choices of Spitalfields’ silk and Honiton lace.

If the eighteenth century was ‘the age of silk’ then the nineteenth century was indisputably the age of cotton. Lancashire cotton was the global commodity that clothed the world. The power of the cotton lords is reflected in the setting of *Mary Barton*. This was a period of great political and social unrest locally and nationally. Britain was at war with China (1839-42), a dirty war fought over free trade and profits from the


\(^{130}\) The Free Trade Hall opened in Manchester in 1853 and ‘named to commemorate the Anti-Corn Law struggle’, Messinger, pp.118-9.
distribution of the drug opium. Under a tripartite trade system, opium cultivated in India was smuggled illegally into China to finance England’s trade deficit with the Imperial Empire. John Barton’s drug dependency represents not only the opium abuse rife in urban areas, but also suggests parallels with the oppressive and cruel British policy in China resulting in similarly debilitating addiction across that country.

**Literary Representation of Textiles**

‘He heard her cry; it cut through doors, and still air, and great bales of woollen stuff.’

Surprisingly, there are not as many academic studies of the literary representation of fabrics and dress in the nineteenth century as may be supposed: Clair Hughes, *Henry James and The Art of Dress* (2001) and *Dressed in Fiction* (2006); Christine B. Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (2009); Simon Gatrell, *Thomas Hardy: Writing Dress* (2011) and more recently *Fashion and Material Culture in Victorian Fiction and Periodicals* (2019) ed. by Janine Hatter and Nickianne Moody. And apart from a few exceptions, there has been little

---

131 SL, p.380.
emphasis in literary criticism on the textiles from which clothes are fashioned. Freedgood’s post-colonial reading of the Barton’s checked curtains in *Mary Barton* offered a ground breaking analysis, releasing the metonymic associations of the quotidian material of calico and, although I counter some of her assertions in chapter two, I have been inspired by her methodology. I extend her rigour by also thinking

---


133 Deborah Wynne examines the West Riding textile environs where the Brontë siblings were raised. In a discussion of *Shirley*, she examines the representation of woollen masters and Charlotte Brontë’s ‘critique of the taboo against educated women entering careers in trades and manufacturing’, Deborah Wynne, ‘Charlotte Brontë and the Politics of Cloth: The ‘vile rumbling mills’ of Yorkshire’, *Brontë Studies*, 43.1, January 2018, 89-99 (p.89). Carolyn Ferguson examines the textiles imagery to be found in some of the novels of Gaskell, the Brontë’s sisters and George Eliot. Such fabrics include calico, Kashmir shawls and woollen/cotton quilts. She explores Mary Barton’s day dress of ‘Hoyle’s purple’, arguing that such topical detail ‘gave contemporary readers a recognizable picture of Mary’, Carolyn Ferguson, ‘A Weave of Words: Fabric Print and Pattern in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing’, in *Fashion and Material Culture in Victorian Fiction and Periodicals*, ed. by Janine Hatter and Nickianne Moody (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2019), pp. 67-85.
about the sensory aspects of material culture and their affective properties. At first reading, Madeleine Seys’ 2018 book, *Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature: Double Threads* appears to adopt my approach, specifically, in its use of the ‘materiality of sartorial description in Victorian popular literature and its self-conscious interest in its history and means of production to explore the function of dress within a narrative’.134

Seys investigates the historical and cultural contexts of such fabrics as, ‘white muslin, silk and velvet, the Paisley shawl and tweed and wool’ for literature of the period 1860 and 1900, with particular emphasis on sensation fiction. Whilst the analysis is detailed, and particularly illuminating on ‘sartorial symbolism within the narrative structures and sign systems’ of the novel, her arguments are somewhat disjointed.135 Particularly, Seys isolates the historical and cultural origins of silk textiles and the paisley shawl, for instance, without embedding them securely in references from the primary literary texts. By doing this she affirms the ‘material evidence’ as a *prima facie* commodity rather than as the loci of complex and dynamically evolving subject-object relationships. Thus, Sey’s thesis seems to rest on the objects’ symbolism and metaphorical purposes rather than on a reading of objects as ‘critical cultural archives’ to quote Freedgood.136 In Sey’s bibliography there is also an absence of such seminal texts as Bill Brown’s *A Sense of Things* (2003) and Elaine Freedgood’s *The Ideas in Things* (2006).

136 Freedgood, p.1.
Indeed, Freedgood suggests that a metaphorical and allegorical interpretation of a text should be delayed until the process of ‘strong metonymic readings’ has been pursued; acquired in such painstaking fashion like the fastidious ‘knowledge of a collector’.\textsuperscript{137} This is the method I pursue. Thus, in chapter five, my metaphorical readings of Cynthia’s ‘tumbled muslin gowns’ in \textit{Wives and Daughters} is informed by detailed metonymic research into the nature of Anglo/Indian muslin production from the late eighteenth century to the mid nineteenth century. The changing symbolism of muslin attire over this period is striking – the diaphanous and erotic allure of the early1800s transfigures into a signifier of pure maidenhood by the 1850s, a function of the domestic discourses of respectability and cleanliness. Mass-produced, English muslin became commonplace and its nomenclature entered into the vernacular of popular culture as slang for coitus. ‘Tumbled’ and ‘soiled’ muslin thus gesticulates obliquely to female transgression and sexual frailty.\textsuperscript{138} Is this, I conjecture, the unsayable of Cynthia’s French experiences and her ‘clandestine intercourse’ with the land agent Mr Preston (WD 542)?\textsuperscript{139} My thesis thus recovers the contemporary and sophisticated knowledge of cloth and dress culture that writers, such as Gaskell, assumed her metropolitan female readership possessed.

\textsuperscript{137} Freedgood, p.4.
\textsuperscript{138} As Judith Flanders succinctly observes ‘dirt and untidiness are standard Victorian tropes to indicate something very wrong morally’, Judith Flanders, 'Interiors', in \textit{George Eliot in Context}, pp. 160-167 (p.160).
\textsuperscript{139} Mr Gibson charges Molly with ‘keeping up a clandestine intercourse with Mr Preston’ (WD 542).
While Kortsch focuses upon the dress culture featured in ‘New Woman’ and fin de siècle texts, her allusions to womanly well-versed material skills are pertinent to my thesis:

In her work bag, the ideal woman reader carried not only shears and a needle, but something more invisible, less tangible - a sophisticated knowledge of the social significance of clothing and of the etiquette surrounding even the simplest of garments.\textsuperscript{140}

In such a manner women novelists used ‘costume and coiffeur [as] a convenient way of establishing time-settings and quietly intimating the character of their women’ as it was manifested by their conformity with, or detachment from, the styles of their day’; a sartorial semiotic system to the cognizant reader.\textsuperscript{141} However, George Eliot in a scathing critique ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ (1856) attacks the mind-and-millinery genre of the day; scribbling females are the ‘species’ penning ‘the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic’.\textsuperscript{142} Was this the ‘chick lit’ of the day perhaps? She praises Gaskell, however, along with Harriet Martineau and Currer Bell for their ‘moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence—patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer’s art’. In the context of this thesis, Gaskell’s nuanced exposition of ‘millinery’, to use Eliot’s term, informed by her embodied tactile imagination of fabrics and dress, underscores the subtle composition of her protagonists’ evolving circumstances and

\textsuperscript{140} Kortsch, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{141} Altick, p.302.
moral development, symbiotically articulating continuous societal unease with the nature of authenticity and social definition.

My thesis thus adopts an inter-disciplinary approach that unearths the complex, layered and polysemic facets of material snippets. Gaskell’s snippets are not the “useless details” of the kind that Roland Barthes describes in his essay ‘The Reality Effect’ that depict ordinariness and the unremarkable.\(^{143}\) Instead, I argue that Gaskell adeptly employs fabrics and fashions to chart socio-economic, industrial and technological change between the long eighteenth century and 1865. She engages a gendered, embodied perception of material knowledge during a period, which was increasingly focused upon the professionalization of knowledge particularly through the focus upon the visual sense and text-based learning. Through the availability of an increasing array of fabrics, more women were able to assert sartorial choice and consciously fashion their subjectivity, to register their feelings, beliefs and desires albeit scrutinized by the panoptic gaze of others. By also asserting the sensory and affective properties of cloth, tethered intimately to the body, this thesis restores aspects of mid-Victorian women’s evolving sensibilities to their material culture, illuminating a fresh perspective for latter-day readers.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1, ‘Stuff, Woollens, and Kasmir shawls’, explores Gaskell’s nuanced placement of woollen fabrics such as ‘stuff’, ‘merino’, ‘worsted’, ‘duffel’ and ‘Kashmir’. Her female characters’ handling of woollen fabrics reveals a complex palimpsest of meaning in gendered, political and class terms that charts the transformation of Britain from a primary agrarian economy in the eighteenth century with its woollen cottage industry trade, to an industrial powerhouse by the mid-nineteenth century.

Chapter 2, ‘Cottons, Calicoes and “Atrocious Prints”’ explores the metonymic associations of Manchester calico and muslins from the stance of female consumers. In particular, it investigates the calico prints that became very popular from the 1820s and the enduring popularity of the white muslin dress. This chapter examines the agency that such fabrics afforded their female wearers. Did they spawn a fashion revolution and a democratization of dress, as even poorer women moved beyond mere subsistence attire to a more tasteful appearance?

Chapter 3, ‘Grave Concerns’, explores the fabrics and practices of grieving for the mid-nineteenth century. It articulates women’s intimate relationship with their cloth possessions and reveals how fabrics are recycled, refashioned and re-used in an affective economy of mourning and remembrance. This chapter also examines the complex tripartite relationship between English cotton goods, Indian-grown opium and the highly coveted silks and wares from Imperial China; toxic trading connections that prompted the Opium War that underpins the narrative of Mary Barton.

Chapter 4, ‘Ruffles, Old Point and Net Curtains’, scrutinizes the intriguing representation of lace. Indeed, the very property of lace – its paradoxical ability to
reveal as it simultaneously conceals is a pertinent metaphor for its nuanced resonances within Gaskell’s texts. The waxing and waning of ‘old English point’ ruffles in the historical tale ‘My Lady Ludlow’ and lace collars carefully patched in Cranford are succeeded by the matriarchal display of net curtains in North and South. A familiar pattern again, of a previously élite fabric democratized and disseminated into a symbol of modernity for the newly prosperous classes.

Chapter 5, ‘Silks and Showiness’, disaggregates the idea of ‘silk’ and reveals Gaskell’s subtle placement of the motif. From discrete allusions to Spitalfield silk-workers, silk buttons and handkerchiefs, in Sylvia’s Lovers to the ribbons and gauze sashaying Wives and Daughters, the novels comment obliquely upon the production, distribution and consumption of this fêted fabric.

Both chapters 4 and 5 are quite historicist in nature, as befitting the dramatically changing dynamics of these two fabrics from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. Gaskell’s minute references to silk buttons, and lace embroidery of the ancien regime undertaken for Episcopal purposes, need to be placed in full cultural context to enable present day readers to understand the changing nuances of Gaskell’s references.

Chapter 6, ‘Silken Weave’, examines the prose and narrative style of Wives and Daughters. I concur with critics, such as Henry James, that narratologically the novel is Gaskell’s most sophisticated text. However, my analysis adopts innovative elements to support my thesis: specifically, how the properties of silk serve as an apt metaphor for Gaskell’s writing skill. The three-dimensional, luminescent feature of silk is apposite for the novel’s heteroglossic ‘decentralized’ narrative voice. It captures the myriad voices of a provincial Warwickshire town while also interweaving intertextual
references to a vibrant cosmopolitan milieu. As Gaskell wrote a large proportion of the novel in Paris, *Wives and Daughters* needs to be reconsidered as a novel articulating and responding to European cultural and political debates. Thus, this chapter connects the novel into the developing genre of French realism, and in particular the material cultural aesthetic of Honoré de Balzac. As Balzac in his opus, *La Comedie humaine*, establishes a new language of material culture to represent the growing bourgeoisie class of Paris, Gaskell sartorial allusions are equally pertinent and topical, signifying simultaneously the tensions and adaptability of the evolving provincial milieu.

The opening chapter of this thesis equally resonates with Britain’s enmeshed relationship with France in its discussion of Gaskell’s historical novel, *Sylvia’s Lovers* (1863) set against the bitter conflict of the Napoleonic Wars. The stuffs, cloaks and shawls of this chapter articulate women’s changing engagement with Britain’s most traditional fabric – wool. The trajectory of the allusions, from the eponymous heroine’s scarlet cloak and stuff gown in *Sylvia’s Lovers* to a merino gown in the industrial novel, *Mary Barton*, prove to be potent and highly visual sensory motifs that introduce and encapsulate the innovative cross-disciplinary nature of this thesis.
Chapter One
‘Women’s chops and changes’: Stuff, Woollens and Kasmir Shawls

‘Helen had set her heart upon an Indian shawl, but really when I found what an extravagant price was asked, I was obliged to refuse her.’

Introduction
A juxtaposition of two scenes in which two of Gaskell’s heroines make sartorial choices introduces what is at stake for Gaskell in her textile writing. Sylvia Robson (Sylvia’s Lovers, 1863) is a farmer’s daughter, whose homestead farm nestles close to the whaling town of Monkshaven, in the North East of England during the period of the Napoleonic wars c. 1796 to 1800. Scroll forward to the 1830s, and Mary Barton (Mary Barton, 1848), is a weaver’s daughter dwelling in the cramped tenements, home to the cotton workers employed in the mills of Manchester. This was the first industrial city of the world. Seemingly worlds and a generation apart, together the young girls share a common feeling if not predicament, an experience familiar to many of us. Both Sylvia and Mary deliberate carefully over their clothing choices. The torment of what to wear! Coquettish Sylvia, hoping that her prospective lover, ebullient specksioneer Charley Kinraid, will visit in the evening, foregoes her day-farming attire of ‘working dress’ and makes ‘herself smart in her stuff gown’ (SL 98). Mary Barton, meanwhile, invited to a humble tea party in Alice Wilson’s lowly cellar, is late in her eagerness to make a

1 Elizabeth Gaskell, Sylvia’s Lovers, ed. by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.87. Further references to this edition are given in quotations in the text following the abbreviation SL.
2 Elizabeth Gaskell, North and South, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 7. Further references to this edition are given in quotations in the text following the abbreviation NS.
‘grand’ entrance and ‘impression’; finally, the choice is made - ‘she put on her pretty new blue merino’.³

The contradistinction between the girls’ selections - ‘stuff’ versus ‘merino’ - is intriguing, not least because, although these are both classified under the category of wool and they are both fabrics with varying degrees within the reach of lower-income consumers, their means of production and final appearance are very different. Both derive from the woolly coat of the sheep, namely the fleece, which is, an ‘organic compound composed of keratin, an animal protein […]’; [that] has many tiny overlapping scales, all of which point in the same direction’.⁴ The density of these scales, give a crimp to the fibres, known as staples, which determines whether the staples are long or short. A short staple of approximately 3-4 inches long produces a fine wool fabric. Mary Barton’s ‘merino’ dress is an example of this finer wool cloth, whereas Sylvia’s ‘stuff’ gown is made from longer staples and is a coarser worsted fabric, with a different handle and nap.⁵

___________________________

³ Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton, ed. by Shirley Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 30. Further references to this edition are given in quotations in the text following. the abbreviation MB
⁵ J. De L. Mann, The Cloth Industry in the West of England: From 1640-1880 (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1987). p.256. De L. Mann elaborates: ‘at least up to 1825, wool was divided into short wool suitable for carding and long wool used for combing. The epithets ‘fine’ and ‘coarse’ were applied to these two categories, and generally speaking, the shorter the staple (or length of the hair) the finer the wool will be. It will also contain more serrations to the inch [that] gives it its felting properties’. A fine wool cloth was known as ‘broadcloth’, made from ‘short carded wool, felted by the filling mill, and finished by raising and shearing the nap to give a smooth surface, in which warp and weft were so completely united to give a smooth surface that neither could be distinguished’. The name broadcloth derived from the material’s width, ‘from 54 to 63 inches wide, which needed two weavers to the loom’, De L. Mann, p.xi. In Ruth, the stern and
This chapter, therefore, explores the significance of Gaskell’s deployment of different ‘woollen’ motifs; fabrics that include ‘stuff’, ‘merino’, ‘worsteds’ and ‘kashmir’. As indicated in the introduction, disaggregating the panoply of “wool” will reveal many different fabrics. Each textile yarn has its own unique biography, revealing the historical, cultural and economic contexts of its making and wearing. Much of the cultural significance of these different fabrics has been lost. The thesis starts with wool because of the foundational place that wool holds in Britain’s cultural and economic history. Beverly Lemire perceives wool as integral to the nation’s historical construction of its very identity. She posits that by the seventeenth century the very nature of Englishness was enshrined in wool cloth, ‘the product of English sheep and domestic industry’.

For instance, up until 1814 all English subjects were required to be ‘buried in wool’. The ‘golden fleece’ and the present-day ceremonial ‘Woolsack’, within the House of Lords, denote the importance of the wool industry in the early modern period, albeit with a possible androcentric bias that ‘blended ideals of masculinity with patriotism’. Thus the woollen fabrics worn and used across Gaskell’s texts should be viewed against this historical legacy. They are not merely an example of Barthes’ ‘insignificant notation’, but reveal a complex palimpsest of meaning, apposite for intractable businessman Mr Bradshaw wears ‘finest broadcloth’ to attend church, Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*, ed. by Angus Easson (London: Penguin, 2004), p.129. Further references to this edition are given in quotations in the text following the abbreviation RU.


Gaskell’s material imagination as she portrays her female protagonists’ negotiation with the vicissitudes of socio-economic change, in their engagement and manipulation of wool fabrics.

This chapter first investigates the ‘stuff’ and ‘merino’ motifs featured in *Sylvia’s Lovers* and *Mary Barton*. It discusses how the seemingly small motif of ‘stuff’ negotiates the temporal distance between the novel’s date of production and the historical specificity of its setting. The contradistinction between ‘stuff’ and ‘merino’ serves metonymically to chart Britain’s transition, from a primary agrarian economy with its proto-industrial woollen industry, based upon the traditional ‘putting out’ system in the late eighteenth century, to manufacturing centres such as the West Riding by the mid-nineteenth century. This section expands to examine the new hybrid woollen fabrics such as *mousseline de laine*, created from the 1830s onwards as a means of utilizing cheaper cotton yarn. Such lighter, less expensive fabrics enabled more women even on limited means, to exercise a fashion choice while simultaneously underscoring contemporary societal anxieties about the nature of authenticity, distinction and taste.

The final section will then interrogate the trajectory of women’s wear, from the distinctive red woollen cloaks worn in the eighteenth century, sported by protagonist Sylvia Robson in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, to the Kashmir and Paisley shawls featured across Gaskell’s narratives which were to become the ubiquitous clothing accessory of choice for ordinary women by the mid-nineteenth century. Endorsed by Queen Victoria and emulated as a symbol of domestic propriety, the custom of shawl wearing that prevailed until the 1870s denoted a specific concept of female gendered respectability and domesticity. The plaid shawls of female mill workers in *Mary Barton*, Margaret Hale’s
regal adornment in *North and South*, and Mrs Gibson’s red Indian shawl in *Wives and Daughters*, shows a gendered kaleidoscope of wear. From Cottonopolis to the village of Cranford, and the provincial town of Hollingford, the Kashmir shawl and cheaper British copies diachronically registers the means by which oriental textiles and artifacts, from remote colonial outposts, were refashioned into the metropolitan domestic space and directly onto women’s very bodies.

**Stuff and Merinos**

Today, ‘stuff’ is a commonplace term with miscellaneous meanings. The *OED* places its etymology from the French word *estoffe* meaning ‘material’ evoking an earlier definition, which would have been more familiar to Victorian readers. The term ‘stuff’ features heavily in Gaskell’s historical novel, *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Gaskell, writing the novel between the years 1859 and 1862, set her narrative at a period two generations removed, creating a sense of the yawning distance between the events of 1862 Victorian England and the period of the late eighteenth-century war with revolutionary France, whilst simultaneously revealing the similarity of seemingly disparate communities and circumstances. Gaskell wrote against the backdrop of the Civil War in America. When the novel was published in February 1863, the questioning of the legitimacy of impressment proved to be particularly topical. In March 1863 the Confederate Government of the southern states authorized the impressment of African/American
slaves to boost its army capacity.\(^9\) In *Sylvia’s Lovers*, the press gangs forcibly impress the Monkshaven whaling men into the service of the England’s naval fleet in its maritime battles against the French.

As a consequence of the Civil War, Gaskell and her daughters worked tirelessly to relieve the suffering of starving cotton workers in Manchester, as the American raw cotton embargo on the southern ports stopped the flow of cotton to the Lancashire Mills. The historical narrative of *Sylvia’s Lovers* similarly echoes the same war-torn theme as the crippling consequences of the Napoleonic conflict reverberate, ‘[s]till the cruel famine cut sharp enough to penetrate all hearts’ (SL 483).\(^10\) Whereas this reaffirms Gaskell’s belief that she had written her ‘saddest story’, ‘cut sharp’ is also a pertinent metaphor for a novel with a draper’s shop placed at its centre.\(^11\) Foster’s drapery stocks and cuts lengths off ‘great bales of woollen stuff’ (SL 380) and ‘great bales of red flannel’ (SL 446).

In the novel William Coulson, partner of Foster’s drapery shop unloads such a stock delivery, ‘bales of winter goods supplied to them from the West Riding’ (SL 420). Although ‘stuff’ is not specifically mentioned here, the provenance ‘West Riding’ of

\(^9\) Mary DeCredico, ‘Confederate Impressment during the Civil War’, *The Encyclopedia of Virginia*<https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Confederate_Impressment_During_the_Civil_War#start_entry> [access: 22 August 2017].


Yorkshire, alerts the knowledgeable reader to the nature of the material. From the mid-eighteenth century, the West Riding was an expanding centre for ‘stuff’ production. Stuff was otherwise commonly known as worsted cloth, the latter name deriving from the Norfolk village of ‘Worstead’ where skilled immigrant weavers from Flanders had settled in the reign of Henry I. East Anglia and West England had previously dominated the production of ‘stuff’ in the middle ages, but by the eighteenth century, the West Riding was manufacturing the ‘bulk production of cheaper worsted lines’.

The agrarian experiments of Robert Bakewell (1725-1795) in sheep breeding in Leicester produced a heavier animal to provide mutton for the nutritional needs of the expanding population; its longer, coarser wool, heavier in weight provided the raw fleeces for worsted production in the West Riding; the breed was also exported to the emerging ranches in Australia. Worsted cloth became known as ‘stuff’ to distinguish it from ‘cloth’, which was woollen fabric; worsted’s ‘warp and weft were made from combed wool’. The yarn used to make the worsted ‘stuff’ could only come from sheep with ‘really long wool (long staple)’ reared in such ‘lush, green pastures’ as the West

---

As George Taylor explains, long wool is generally coarser than short, with less notched fibres, which enables them to be separated by combing. The fibres end up lying parallel end to end, which removes the ‘natural crimp of the wool’ and this ‘forms a very tight, hard yarn when spun’, as opposed to the ‘open, fluffy yarn’ produced from the short wool sheep. Longer stapled fibres are coarser and less liable to break.

‘Worsted stuff’ encompasses a range of fabrics that differed in ‘the ‘lustre’ of their surface, or to the ‘softness’ of their ‘handle’’. Thus worsted stuff, of different grades and qualities, were variously named as “Camblets”, “Calamanco”, “Tammies”, “Serge” and “Shalloon”.

In addition, during the seventeenth century, the worsted yarn was combined with other yarns, such as linen to make fabrics such as linsey-woolsey; this had a warp of linen thread and the weft of worsted. It was a warm, sturdy fabric often made up into petticoats. Sylvia, as a farmer’s daughter, wears it as part of her ‘working-dress’ (SL 98). The fact that Sylvia is so relieved that she had ‘doffed her bed-gown and linsey-woolsey petticoat’ before Charlie Kinraid’s surprise visit, suggests ‘linsey-woolsey’ was a coarse, hard wearing fabric, fitting for daily and arduous farm chores, but unattractive in appearance (SL 98). Instead, coquettish Sylvia feels she had ‘made

---

16 Oakes. Daniel Robson, Sylvia’s father keeps sheep pasturing on the moors (SL p.94). ‘[E]ither the scanty food, or their goat-like agility, kept them in a lean condition that did not promise much for the butcher, nor yet was their wool of a quality fine enough to make them profitable in that way to their owners’ (SL 3). In the wool-loft, the Robsons keep ‘fleeces reserved for the home-spinning’ (SL 47).
18 Oakes.
20 Taylor, pp.14-17.
herself smart in her stuff gown’ bearing a similarity to another flirtatious heroine from a contemporary novel with an analogous pre-industrial setting of 1799 (SL 98). Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede* (1859) looks lovely in a ‘pink-and-white neckerchief, tucked into her low plum-coloured stuff bodice’.21

With the awareness that stuff came in a variety of qualities, it becomes apparent at this point that novelists such as Gaskell and George Eliot use a lexicon of cloth to register ‘order and change’ to the emergent middle classes of their readership.22 As discussed in this thesis’s introduction, Kortsch posits that Victorian women would have been familiar with such a detailed range of fabrics and she describes such knowledge as an inherent ‘dress culture’ skill.23 Victorian women were expected to ‘exercise literacy’ in ‘interpreting cloth and household textiles’ as well as in the purchasing and construction thereof.24 This, she argues ‘was specifically gendered as a type of feminine knowledge’ and was spread via an imagined community of women readers with the development and expansion of the periodical press as the nineteenth century progressed.

Thus, to a fabric-conscious 1860s readership, the symbolism of Sylvia’s ‘smart stuff gown’ would have underscored the distance and difference of women’s lives two generations earlier. Gaskell, herself, in ‘My Lady Ludlow’ (1858) perhaps provides an additional means to decipher the ‘stuff’ motif. The novella is set in the early 1800s,

23 Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate 2009), p.4.
24 Kortsh, p.4.
again against the backdrop of the Napoleonic war. Aristocratic Lady Ludlow, reigning over an anachronistic fiefdom, deliberately ‘restrict[s]’ her penniless gentlewomen ‘in certain indulgences in dress’, which would be more suitable to their ‘higher rank’ (MLL 146), and dresses them instead in ‘drab- coloured stuff gowns’ (MLL 151). While this suggests modesty and humility, to a Victorian middle-class readership, skilled in the brightly coloured yarns of Berlin fancy work and draped in the brilliance and freshness of cotton prints and silks, ‘stuff’ would have evoked the coarseness and dullness of a homespun fabric. The writer Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra ‘both had stuff gowns for morning and daywear from at least 1798 to 1813, though the Repository of Arts had pronounced stuff gowns “completely vulgar” in 1809’.25

In August 1823, Elizabeth Gaskell’s cousin, Bessy Holland writes about the hasty endeavours to replace a damaged dress. Her penurious sisters, Lucy and Anne Holland buy ‘a cheap cottage stuff’ in Liverpool’.26 The ‘cottage’ description certainly is indicative of the nature of the fabric's proto-industrial, homespun production in the eighteenth century. Also, to a knowing 1860s reader there would be a sensory perception of the fabric’s coarseness and its inclination to itchiness when worn close to the skin.27 Visually the fabric was unappealing, typically produced in dark muted colours. Across Gaskell’s novels the stuff colours are described variously as ‘grey’,

26 Chapple, The Early Years, p.296.
‘brown’ and ‘dark’. Another olfactory sensory perception is evoked by the knowledge that woollen fabrics were difficult to wash and so often became soiled and dirty: the clothes of ‘The Great Unwashed’. Indeed, as historian John Styles argues ‘camblet and stuff’ were the clothes of poorer people in the eighteenth century. By examining evidence from that century’s criminal trials for clothes theft from plebeian owners, he ascertains that silk gowns had the highest valuation, whilst stuff and linen gowns were the least valued; this is confirmed in a four-week period in York 1777-78, when pawnbroker, George Fettes pledged on average 4s. 5d. for a silk gown but only 2s. 5d. for a worsted, stuff gown. This classification of ‘stuff’ as an inferior fabric may have also been a legacy from the Tudor sumptuary laws, which attempted to legislate on the appropriate clothing for each rank in society. Thus, a sumptuary law of James I enacted that ‘servants shall have no silk on their cloaths […] and shall wear only cloth, fustians, canvas, and stuffs’. Whilst the sumptuary laws proved difficult to enforce, vestiges of the pejorative classification remained. In 1725, Daniel Defoe urged that female servants’ apparel should be ‘a Jacket and Petticoat of good Yard-wide stuff’.

Further evidence detailing the wearing of ‘stuff’ is seen in the contemporary album of Barbara Johnson. She was from a middling-income clerical family, from the

30 Styles, p.346.
32 Wigston Smith, p.113.
parish of Olney, Buckinghamshire, and for a large part of her life lived in Northamptonshire on a modest income; from 1749 - 1823 she compiled a scrapbook containing 121 samples of fabrics she had purchased for gowns.33 The vast majority is silk, and only eleven swatches are wool. Of these, the ‘stuff’ fabrics, in the mid-1750s, were mainly used as mourning gowns as a 1756 description indicates, ‘a black stuff short sack mourning for my father- 14 yards- a shilling a yard’.34 By January 1799, however, Johnson’s mourning gowns for her brother are ‘dark calicoe’, three and ninepence a yard and ‘black taffaty’ priced at three guineas.35 It is thus apparent that to wealthier classes, the texture and drabness of stuff with its homespun connotations was unappealing, and indeed by the 1800s had become increasingly associated with rustic simplicity. The eminent, social historian, G.M. Trevelyan quotes from a 1782 pamphlet, ‘As for the ladies, they wear scarcely anything now but cotton, calicoes, muslin, or silks, and think no more of woollen stuffs than we think of an old almanac’.36

Stuff is the attire of the Benson’s forthright servant in Ruth, and the narrative voice comments drily that it is ‘the peculiar, old-fashioned costume of the county’ (RU 114). Stuff was also the fabric of choice for female servants unless they were aping the sartorial standards of their employers. Thus, an 1824 instruction manual, similar to Defoe a century earlier, advised servants to dress plainly in ‘a stuff gown, or a dark-

35 Album, p.41 © VAM Collections.
coloured cotton one, and a stuff petticoat’. The durability and utilitarian nature of such ‘stuff’ ensured its practicality for hard, physical labour. It was the prescriptive uniform that clothed many young girls in institutions. Thus the girls from the infamous Lowood school in Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) are ‘uniformly dressed in brown stuff frocks of quaint fashion’, whilst the female scholars in the Brussels ‘Pensionnat de demoiselles’ wear ‘dark stuff gown[s]’ in *The Professor* (1845-46). With their use of such deprecatory adjectives as ‘peculiar’, ‘old-fashioned and ‘quaint’, both Gaskell and Brontë place emphasis on the fabric’s status, as a signifier of outmodedness allied with the insinuation of institutionalization.

It is with such connotations that farmers’ daughters, Sylvia and Molly in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, abandon the homestead attire of ‘linsey-woolsey’ and ‘stuff’ for silk gowns; a visual elevation of their new marital status, as the wives of prosperous, provincial men-in-trade. It is quite noticeable at this juncture, that they do not possess cotton gowns. The tail end of the eighteenth century marked the cusp of the cotton textile Industrial Revolution, and in such a remote north-eastern community, woollen manufacture was the dominant cottage industry. As will be discussed in the next chapter, certain cotton fabrics were at this stage as expensive as some of the cheaper silks, and silk was the signifier of leisure and social distinction.

---

By the time frame of *Mary Barton*, however, (1839-1842) it is cotton fabrics that provide both lower and middle-income consumers with lighter, brighter and colourful prints. The growth of the cotton industry will be covered in much greater detail in the next chapter, but suffice to say, it is paradoxical that the novel’s protagonist, living in the cotton manufacturing centre of the world, when selecting her ‘statement’ dress, opts for a pretty woollen ‘merino’. There are many different types of merino, but certainly in the early modern period it described exceptionally fine-quality, shorthaired wool originating from Spain, where a Spanish farmer had crossed Tarentine sheep with a ‘white, wool bearing sheep’. Some of these sheep were exported to Saxony, producing another fine wool, which eventually was made into the soft Berlin wool worked by the *nouveau-riche* daughters in *Cranford* by the mid-nineteenth century. Darby gives a more detailed explanation of the qualities of the merino wool:

> The fibre is very fine and of medium staple, varying between two and four inches. It contains more serratures [sic] or scales to the inch than other varieties and this, together with its fineness, makes it especially valuable for the production of fine fabrics.

Costume historian, Cecil Willet Cunnington asserts that in 1843, certainly within the narrative time of *Mary Barton*, merino was priced at 2 / 9 a yard, even more expensive than striped silks at 1 / 3 ½. Thus, it was an extremely stylish fabric;

---

40 Kathryn Ledbetter explains that Berlin wool was ‘soft, fine wools collected and dyed in Berlin, the centre of the dyeing industry’, Kathryn Ledbetter, *Victorian Needlework* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012), p.106.
41 Darby, p.29.
Cunnington comments that in the years 1844 and 1846 merinos are fashionable and required morning dress material in the wardrobes of middle-income women.\textsuperscript{43} With all this evidence to hand therefore, it does seem quite extraordinary that Gaskell clothes Mary Barton, her seamstress apprentice, in a relatively expensive, merino-woollen gown in order to attend a tea party, in a humble cellar in Cottonopolis. It is further proof of the giddy and socially aspirant behaviour of the hapless, motherless milliner:

Three years of independence of action (since her mother's death such a time had now elapsed) had little inclined her to submit to rules as to hours and associates, to regulate her dress by a mistress's ideas of propriety […] [S]he had early determined that her beauty should make her a lady; the rank she coveted […] A dressmaker's apprentice must (or so Mary thought) be always dressed with a certain regard to appearances; must never soil her hands, and need never redden or dirty her face with hard labour. (MB 25-6)

So, Mary Barton, in her sartorial choices is emulating the dress codes of the middle-class ladies, she yearns to become.\textsuperscript{44} The narrative voice is quite scathing about such wayward and inappropriate aspirations; she is unable ‘to regulate her dress by a mistress’s idea of propriety’ (MB 25). While cognizant of her beauty and in her long deliberations over her dress choice, Mary is guilty of the sin of vanity and moral transgression. According to the prevailing ideology of respectability her imitative

\textsuperscript{43} Cunnington, p.142 and p.144.
\textsuperscript{44} In Charlotte Brontë’s novel Shirley (1849), set during the latter part of the Napoleonic wars 1811-12, Caroline Helstone, wears merino regularly, particularly in winter ‘[h]er style of dress announced taste in the wearer; very unobtrusive in fashion, far from costly in material […] Her present garb was of merino, the same soft shade of brown as her hair’. In a later scene she wears merino on a visit to take tea ‘her graceful merino dress and delicate collar all trim and spotless’, Charlotte Brontë, Shirley, ed.by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 64, 501 and 202. Deborah Wynne describes Caroline Helstone as ‘the most fashion-conscious […] of Charlotte Brontë’s heroines’, Deborah Wynne, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s Frock and Shirley’s Queer Textiles’ in Literary Bric-a-Brac and the Victorians, ed.by Jonathon Shears and Jen Harrison (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp.147-162 (p.160).
selection does not accord her a higher status but rather signals a lower-class wantonness. In a paradoxical manner, whereas ‘upper-class women’s clothing represented their innate moral superiority […] the same styles in lower-class women signified their innate moral depravity’; as Deborah Logan succinctly summarizes it was ‘a double standard that questions the efficacy of clothing alone to construct a moral identity’ resulting in ‘the period’s obsession with regulating working-class vanity’.45 Whereas Mary Barton seemingly imitates the dress of her social superiors, she lacks the ‘innate moral superiority’ to discern the finer distinctions of her fabric choice, which a contemporary metropolitan reader would readily distinguish.

An anecdote in a letter from Gaskell to one of her daughters reveals that codes of etiquette were complex and dynamic: mired in subtly evolving permutations. In May 1851, Gaskell sends her own ‘green merino’ to her eldest daughter, Marianne; the gown had not been worn since the beginning of winter, ‘which you may as well wear out’.46 Later on in May she scribbles another letter, admonishing Marianne for her choice of gown at a social gathering:

I was a little bit sorry to hear you were wearing your merino in an evening that night when Tottie drank tea with you. Either you are getting into the dirty slovenly habit of not changing your gown in the day-time, or you are short of gowns to wear a merino to tea? 47

47 Letters, p.155. Whilst in *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone wears merino for tea ceremonies c.1814, by 1851, Gaskell’s admonishments to her daughter suggest the etiquette has changed.
Gaskell’s disapproving caustic response to ‘wear a merino to tea’ shows the minefield of decorum that the newly emergent, middle classes evolved by the mid-nineteenth century, whereby the socially inept unknowingly revealed their unfamiliarity with the ‘status theatre’ of society. As Leonore Davidoff elaborates:

Although the system of etiquette was highly formalized, its details were constantly changing. These subtle shifts of fashionably correct behaviour were used to mark the knowledgeable insider from the outsider.

It is a similar vein to the satirical liturgy of ladies’ visiting rules, parodied in Cranford, but certainly reveals that Mary Barton in her ill-informed dress choice, at a humble tea ceremony performs a social faux pas revealing her own frailties as a motherless young woman. While the merino may be her best dress, the imitation of a passé middle-class practice reveals her perilous social alienation. Wealthy mill-owner’s son Harry Carson exploits such an unwitting display of vulnerability and naivety of sartorial norms. Esther’s own sad history and demise prophesizes Mary’s potential fate.

However, in this female Bildungsroman, Mary Barton’s growth to maturity and attainment of moral worth is revealed when she eschews her previous dress fripperies, in her appearance as a witness in the murder trial of Jem Wilson. Sharp-tongued, fellow milliner Sally Leadbitter, is eager to volunteer her assistance for Mary’s upcoming court appearance:

“What gown are you going in, Mary?”
“Oh, I don't know and don't care,” exclaimed Mary, sick and weary of her visitor.

---

49 Davidoff, p.45.
“Well, then! take my advice, and go in that blue merino. It's old to be sure, and a bit worn at elbows, but folk won't notice that, and th' colour suits you. Now mind, Mary. And I'll lend you my black-watered scarf […]

“No, don't!” said Mary; “thank you, but I don't want it.” (MB 267)

The ‘blue merino’ that was ‘pretty’ and ‘new’ for gracing the cellar party, is now ‘old’ and ‘worn at [the] elbow’. It is a trope for the passage of time, and the transformation within Mary herself, as she undertakes a perilous quest to secure evidence for Jem Wilson’s acquittal. The ‘blue merino’ aged and ‘worn’ becomes a metaphor for Mary’s journey to self-discovery as she acquires a newly attained gravitas and quiet dignity. Her forbearance now mirrors that of her long-suffering friend, Margaret Jenkins, who loses her sight, partly from straining her eyes sewing black mourning gowns. Margaret, who has a beautiful voice, is invited to sing at a concert. For this debut performance she is unable to accept Mary Barton’s belated offer of ‘a pretty pink gingham’ and instead chooses “my merino, as was turned last winter” (MB 92). Her renovated, older dress for a public recital underscores a quiet self-assurance and demeanour. In a similar vein, Mary’s rejection of Sally Leadbitter’s ‘black-watered scarf’ is a moment of epiphany; she has finally learnt the erroneous nature of her earlier belief that ‘a dressmaker’s apprentice must […] be always dressed with a certain regard to appearances’ (MB 26); ahead of the trial she now disavows her erstwhile girlish yearnings that predisposed her to always make an ‘impression’ (MB 30).

A New Fabric
There is the possibility that owing to taxonomic difficulties in discerning different grades of fabric, that the ‘merino’ dresses might also represent a new ‘hybrid’ cloth, which used a cotton warp. This new fabric was manufactured to take advantage of the
significantly cheaper cotton fibre, compared to the more expensive all-wool yarn. One such ‘new’ fabric was mousseline de laine, featured in Cranford when the narrator Mary Smith searches amongst the new silks displayed in the draper’s shop, for a match for ‘a grey and black mousseline-de-laine that wanted a new breadth’.\(^5^0\) As Darby explains, mousseline de laine was a ‘fine, light, plain-woven worsted fabric of open texture’ derived from the French ‘wool muslin’.\(^5^1\) Invented by Jourdain in Troixvilles, France in 1826, it was either made from ‘fine, clear worsted yarns or with a cotton warp and fine worsted filling’.\(^5^2\) Mary Smith’s mousseline-de-laine is a duo-tone ‘grey and black’, which may signify that it was printed and dyed. Certainly, its fine quality, which the narrator requires to match with silk, is indicative of the popularity of the new hybrid fabrics produced from the 1820s, which became known as mixed worsteds. In the 1820s wool was comparatively expensive. As David Seward observes, between 1825 and 1830 although ‘prices in general fell some 25 per cent and cotton by 50 per cent[…] wool prices fell only slightly’.\(^5^3\) This, stimulated manufacturers to experiment with other raw materials, which was made possible, not only by the cheapness of the cotton warp, but also by the growth of sheep production on large agricultural stations in

\(^{50}\) Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford*, ed. by Elizabeth Porges Watson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.31. Further references to this edition are given in quotations in the text following the abbreviation *CF*.


\(^{52}\) Darby, p.102.

Britain’s colonial outpost, Australia; this included the highly prized merino wool variety. Overseas wool production increased exponentially. ‘By 1830 Australia was exporting two million lbs. of wool to Britain and by 1849 this had risen to 49 million lbs.’\(^{54}\) Thus, at the mid-nineteenth century mark, the prosperity of the West Riding was dependent on the Antipodean supply chain. Hallet and Johnston assert that ‘Bradford’s insatiable appetite for fine woollen fibres is said to have built and maintained Australia’s colonial economy’.\(^{55}\) While in the earlier and eighteenth centuries, English woollen cloth production had originated from domestically reared sheep or imports from Europe, by the mid-nineteenth century, Yorkshire’s woollen dominance was dependent on the raw fleeces of Australian merino flocks. Not surprisingly, as Darby notes, English ‘yarns spun from Australian merino wool are commonly known as Botany yarns’, named after the first English colony in Australia.\(^{56}\) The spread of merino wool is the product of a process of migration to such settler colonies as Australia, Canada and New Zealand: this diaspora reached its peak period in the 1850s. In 1835, a Bradford newspaper reported a considerable demand for “fabrics of a new description […] of varied, rich and elegant patterns”.\(^{57}\) Indeed, Bradford became the centre of production for the spinning and weaving of the cheaper, mixed-worsted cloths. Gaskell comments upon the area’s specialism in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*:

> The number of inhabitants and the importance of Keighley have been very greatly increased during the last twenty years, owing to the rapidly extended

\(^{54}\) Seward, p.45. Seward notes that ‘by the 1860s imports of [raw]wool overtook home production’.
\(^{55}\) Hallet and Johnson, p.64.
\(^{56}\) Darby, p.62.
\(^{57}\) Jenkins and Ponting, p.134.
markets for worsted manufactures, a branch of industry that mainly employs the factory population of this part of Yorkshire, which has Bradford for its centre and metropolis.\(^{58}\)

France, however, maintained the ascendancy for the manufacture of fine all-wool merinos and *mousseline de laines*. Similar to the acknowledged French superiority in woven silks, which will be explored in detail in chapter five, the Bradford worsted manufacturers conceded the dominance of French expertise in fine worsteds and woollens. Titus Salt, chairman of the Bradford Chamber of commerce in a speech in July 1856 lauded the French achievement:

> goods which by their intrinsic beauty of texture and dye, leave every competition hopelessly in the rear. The prices these goods are sold at are such that we have long since abandoned their manufacture; [...] The merinos and de laines, together with some mixed fabrics, as shown in the Paris Exhibition of 1855, or displayed in the shops of Paris, meet the demand of the wealthier classes of society, not only in France but throughout the world.\(^ {59}\)

The new worsteds were another way in which even women of lower incomes could enjoy fabrics, which simulated the showy appearance of finer all-wool cloths. Thus, Mary Smith’s purchase of a breadth of *mousseline- de-laine* is indicative of lower-income women’s growing ability to embrace the new fabrics, a function of manufacturing innovation and colonial sourcing. Its French etymology, moreover, afforded another signifier of discernment and good taste, gesturing to the superiority of French woollen production in all-wool cloth.

---


\(^{59}\) James, p.526.
From merino wool a complex nexus of interdependent industrial and socio-economic connections for the mid-nineteenth century can be revealed: it is a truly transnational fabric. Women’s evolving preferences for lighter and showier fabrics prompted the development of new cotton-worsted fabrics, which led to Bradford’s predominance in the industry, predicated on cheap cotton from the American Southern states and golden fleeces from the rapidly expanding sheep stations of New South Wales; the latter increasingly populated by English migrants. The historic wool tradition based upon the stuffs and the broadcloths of early modern England in Norwich and the West Country were subsumed by the might of the advancing industrial hinterlands of Lancashire and Yorkshire. By the mid-nineteenth century the Tudor Rose of Henry VII in broadcloth and stuffs had transmuted into a global textile phenomenon, founded on Lancashire cotton and Yorkshire worsted.

Scarlet Cloaks in Sylvia’s Lovers
Gaskell’s historical novel, *Sylvia’s Lovers*, is set in Monkhaven, a whaling town in the bleak North East, and probably based on Whitby. At the beginning of the novel, a piece of clothing startlingly encapsulates a sense of a temporal and topographic distance from the date of the novel’s inception. It is symbolic of Sylvia’s first transition towards womanhood:

She was going to choose her first cloak, not to have an old one of her mother’s, that had gone down through two sisters, dyed for the fourth time […] but to buy a bran-new duffle cloak all for herself, with not even an elder authority to curb her as to price. (*SL* 11)
Whereas the repetition of the possessive pronoun channels Sylvia’s self-absorbed inner voice, the background presence of a maternal ‘elder authority’ serves as a pertinent contradistinction to Mary Barton’s motherless sartorial choices. Sylvia’s eagerly anticipated choice, and the deliberations about its colour with fellow farmer’s daughter Molly, is a rite of passage announcing her progression towards womanhood. The lavishness of the Robson’s largesse is in stark contrast to her friend Molly, who can never even hope to be the recipient of a pass-me-down cloak. As John Styles notes, cloaks were costly items in the eighteenth century and highly coveted, for instance ‘in both Yorkshire and London, half of the stolen cloaks were made from woollen cloth, predominantly red’. With such awareness of the cloak’s visual allure and status as an economic signifier, the reader can better understand Sylvia’s sartorial dilemma: ‘Sylvia, with unconscious art, soon brought the conversation round to the fresh consideration of the respective merits of gray and scarlet’ (SL 11). In fact, the gray is the natural state of the un-dyed duffle cloth and is cheaper than the scarlet; hence Sylvia, in her purchase in Foster’s Drapers shop, will sacrifice an extra yard of the scarlet duffle as an appeasement to her mother, whom she knows prefers the practical gray. Jenkins and Ponting describe duffel as a ‘thick woollen cloth raised on both

Figure 2: Red Cloak, Mobberley, Cheshire, 1820, Manchester Art Gallery

60 Styles, p.42.
sides’, the name deriving from the Belgium town, *Duffel (OED)* where it was originally made.\(^{61}\) As it is a woollen cloth it would have been made from short-staple wool and in a final finishing process would have been fulled; this was the process whereby the cloth was thickened and shrunk in water to ensure its weather-proof qualities.\(^{62}\) Samuel Bamford (1788-1872), an English radical and writer from Lancashire who was well known to William and Elizabeth Gaskell, remembered the vibrancy of his mother’s cloak, ‘[a]n ample crimson or scarlet cloak of the finest wool, being double milled and of an intense dye’.\(^{63}\) The ‘scarlet’ of Sylvia’s chosen duffle, which will ‘stand a deal of wear’, is indeed the reason why the brightly coloured cloth commanded a premium (SL 26). The dye was probably derived from the madder plant, which Gaskell in ‘French Life’ describes as ‘a dirty brown powder- the roots ground down’, commonly known as ‘Turkey Red’; it was the colour of the brilliant, if infamous ‘redcoats’ worn by the British Army in the eighteenth century.\(^{64}\) As a Turkish monopoly regulated the long and complicated process of extracting the dye, it was prohibitively expensive. The brightness of the cloak is evidenced by Bamford’s descriptions and by a preserved cloak

\(^{61}\) Jenkins and Ponting, p.338.  
from Mobberley in Cheshire, a village close to Gaskell’s early childhood home in Knutsford (Figure 2).  

However, while the scarlet cloak was a popular garment it was increasingly seen as country wear and in London was not considered ‘genteel’.  

From the 1800s, in fashionable society, the hooded cloak was progressively replaced by the ‘shaped pelisse’ (usually in silk). A female gendered, sartorial bifurcation developed that, according to Anne Buck, was a measure of ‘social division expressed in a complete difference in garment, both in form and fabric’; the cloak maintained its popularity until the 1830s in country circles. In 1817 Jane Austen gave her maid, Sally a ‘new red cloak which adds much to her happiness’. Metropolitan readers in 1863 would have recognized the red cloak trope as a signifier of rural femininity from their grandmothers’ era. However, with its long cultural folk tradition, the cloak also gestures to the analogous fairy story, ‘Sylvia carried the basket, and looked like little Red Riding Hood’ (SL 87). The first literary representation of this tale stretches back to ‘Le Petit Chaperon Rouge’ published in a collection by Charles Perrault in 1697. While the tale has morphed into many different versions across the centuries, it maintains its moral

65 Buck, p.100. In Adam Bede, Hetty Sorrel is 18 years old and from a country family in Warwickshire. The setting is 1799, similar to Sylvia’s Lovers. She too wears a ‘red cloak’, Eliot p.327.  
66 Styles, p.42.  
67 Buck, p.100.  
68 Jane Austen, Letters cited in Buck, p.100.  
didactic. Little Red Riding Hood, straying from the designated path in the woods and meeting wolf, is widely read as a parable of female promiscuity.

From the Middle Ages, the colour red had pejorative connotations, being associated with the devil, prostitutes and sex. As Catherine Orenstein asserts, the colour red in the folk story symbolizes Red Riding Hood’s sin and foreshadows her eventual fate. Perhaps this seems a rather harsh forewarning of Sylvia’s destiny; nevertheless as Gaskell described the novel as ‘the saddest story I ever wrote’, it is apposite to reflect upon the scarlet cloaking of the eponymous heroine. It certainly signifies Sylvia’s awakening sexuality and she is indubitably aware of the potency of its visual allure, ‘I chose the red; it’s so much gayer, and folk can see me the farther off’ (SL 42). As preparation for her visit to her injured lover, specksioneer Charley Kinraid at Moss Brow Farm, she ‘dressed in her new red cloak and hood, her face peeping out of the folds of the latter, bright and blushing’ (SL 87). The ‘blushing’ and brightness, modestly revealed by the cloak’s folds, only serve to underscore her sensuality and comeliness. The redness of the cloth and her blush can be read together as symbols of fertility and her raging desire for Kinraid, encapsulated in her dreams and her ‘obsession with his element, the sea’.

Marion Shaw claims that within the novel the sin of sexual transgression, the ‘idea of inadvertent adultery is a ghostly presence’ citing the

---

70 St Clair, p.136.
72 Cited in Uglow, p.499.
passing of the contentious Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which raised the possibility of divorce for ordinary people:

This created a conflict with established laws on the indissolubility of marriage. Now it was possible for a woman or a man to contact a legal second marriage whilst still sacramentally married to a first spouse.\textsuperscript{74}

When Kinraid returns from his long absence, he questions the legitimacy of her betrothal to Philip “your marriage is no marriage. You were tricked into it. You are my wife, not his” (\textit{SL} 382). The inference being that Sylvia after her troth to Kinraid, is bigamously married to Philip and has therefore unwittingly committed adultery.

The intertextual references to the Red Riding Hood folktale enable a more nuanced representation of Sylvia’s awakening sexuality. The scarlet’s vibrancy is a visible signifier of menstruation and girls’ transition towards womanhood. It represents lifeblood, at a time when blood was shed indiscriminately in the French Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic wars. And of course, the novel’s inception occurred during the American Civil War. To a metropolitan readership, the red cloak represents, in Marion Shaw’s words, ‘the half-familiar, the half-strange’ - a bygone world sixty years earlier, but which haunts the present.\textsuperscript{75} The warp of the present is seemingly interwoven with the weft of the past, concurrently as the stain of blood, war and famine is a shared inter-generational experience. The red cloak becomes an object of her cousin Philips’ fetishism and solipsism, as he directs her to be effaced and clothed in non-descript

\textsuperscript{74} Shaw, p.45. Shaw writes that ‘Gaskell had already broached this idea in ‘The Manchester Marriage’. It would also become the theme of \textit{Lady Audley’s Secret} (1862) by Mary Braddon.
\textsuperscript{75} Professor Marion Shaw, ‘Lecture to Gaskell Society’, South East Branch, Francis Holland School, London SW1, 7 May 2016.
“gray” (SL 25). ‘Gray’ the colour of *canis lupus* is apposite for the ‘predatory nature of Philip’s desire’, for Sylvia is his idol, and ‘Philip’s Idol’ was an alternative title for the novel. Like the wolf in the folktale, Philip’s gaze metaphorically consumes his cousin:

[S]he heard a soft, low whistle, and, looking round unconsciously, there was her lover and affianced husband, leaning on the gate, and gazing into the field with passionate eyes, devouring the fair face and figure of her, his future wife. […] Again, that long, cooing whistle. “Sylvie!” (SL 326)

In this passage, the malevolent and menacing undertone of the intertextual tale is pervasive. Commanding her with a creature’s mating call, Philip further asserts his sexual potency and possession, by the moniker he adopts, ‘Sylvie’, the infantilized diminutive of her name.

**Kashmir and Paisley Shawls**  
On Sylvia’s night walk to Moss Brow, to visit her injured lover, Kinraid, Mrs Robson is disapproving of her daughter’s choice of outer attire:

> “Thou should'st na' ha' put on thy new cloak for a night walk to Moss Brow,” said Bell, shaking her head.  
> “Shall I go take it off, and put on my shawl?” asked Sylvia, a little dolefully.  
> “Na, na, come along! a'm noane goin' for t' wait o' women's chops and changes.” (SL 87)

Whilst Sylvia’s suggestion is over-ruled by her brusque father protesting against “women’s chops and changes”, the latter phrase is an apt description for the process whereby a new style of apparel, the shawl, was to become the ubiquitous article of women’s wear for three quarters of the nineteenth century. Despite Sylvia’s fashion penchant for her cloak, the shawl in its different guises and provenances evolved as the

---

76 The phrase the ‘predatory nature of Philip’s desire’ is from Marion Shaw, p.44.
gendered signifier of womanly taste and respectability. Symbolic indeed of women’s own interiority. This section, therefore, examines the rise and fall of the shawl in all its forms.

In 1830s Manchester, in Mary Barton, fallen factory girl Esther, abandons the tawdry finery of her pitiful trade, in order to visit her niece. From the pawn shop she acquires the humble attire of a respectable ‘mechanic’s wife’ namely:

a printed gown, a plaid shawl, dirty and rather worn to be sure, but which had a sort of sanctity to the eyes of the streetwalker as being the appropriate garb of that happy class to which she could never, never more belong. (MB 230)

The ‘plaid shawl’ and ‘printed gown’ is a visual signifier of her familial and societal ostracism from reputable society. Casting off the flimsy barège, a light silky shawl that clung to a woman’s form, she dons another woman’s clothes; the ‘wrinkles’ and creases ‘record the body that had [previously] inhabited the garment. They memorize the interaction, the mutual constitution of person and thing’.77 It is a physical depiction of the gulf of her transgressed descent and despair. The commonplace, plaid shawl, demonstrates its ubiquity by the 1830s and 1840s, as attire for respectable poor women. As Lemire notes, the changeover in female outdoor apparel from cloaks to shawls was complete by the early nineteenth century, ‘[i]n the 1816 records of a Sheffield pawnbroker there is ample evidence that shawls replace red cloaks as the everyday covering of ordinary women’.78 The shawl became integral to an English construction of

77 Peter Stallybrass, ‘Marx’s Coat’ in Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces, ed.by Patricia Spyer (New York, London: Routledge, 1998), pp.183-207 (p.196). Peter Stallybrass explains that ‘[i]n the language of nineteenth-century clothes-makers and repairers, the wrinkles in the elbows of a jacket or a sleeve were called “memories”’.
femininity by the mid 1850s, embraced by a community of women from Queen Victoria, Elizabeth Gaskell and her daughters and ordinary women across the land. In May 1861 Gaskell recounts a visit to Manchester’s shawl and mantle emporium, Moore & Butterworth, choosing shawls for her daughters. ‘[S]ilk barège scarf shawls, 35s-grenadine shawls ditto- (like E. Marslands) cashmeres embroidered 3 guineas- I inclined to the barèges much; but we left it to you to choose’.79

The ‘gay-coloured barège shawl’ is the finery choice of Esther, when she is plying her dubious trade (MB 121), a visual signifier of her moral cross-dressing. The shawl in all its guises is a commonplace, yet nuanced motif across Gaskell’s writings, from factory girls with plaid shawls in North and South and Mary Barton to protagonists Margaret Hale’s and Mrs Gibson’s Indian shawls.

*Punch* periodical caricatured the shawl’s universality in a cartoon celebrating the end of the 1851 Great Exhibition (Figure 3). One of the most popular exhibits throughout the staging of the spectacle, had been that of a statue the Fighting Amazonian (1842) depicting an Amazon warrior, being attacked by a lioness, by the German sculptor,

---

79 *Letters*, p.652.
August Kiss. The statue showed the Amazon, about to kill the lioness with its spear. At the close of the Exhibition, *Punch* used this image of the Amazon as a caricature, “Closing of the Exhibition: Amazon Putting on her Bonnet and Shawl” in which the caption reads, ‘*Amazon (to Greek Slave)*. “Well, my dear! I’m very glad it’s over. It’s very hard work keeping in one attitude for five months together, isn’t it?”’

The domestication and return to a quotidian existence by the savage other, is parodied by the swathes of the statue’s shawls. Although her feet are naked, the shawl’s folds and the respectable poke bonnet hide her body. The Amazon woman is returning home, as if she has just completed an errand.

Two months later, after the close of the Great Exhibition, Gaskell began her serialization of ‘The Cranford Papers’ in Charles Dickens’s periodical *Household Words* on 13 December 1851. Who can doubt then that the first paper, entitled ‘Our Society at Cranford’ with its memorable opening sentence, ‘In the first place, Cranford is in possession of the Amazons; all the holders of houses above a certain rent are women’ (*CF* 3), was not a creative response to the bizarre spectacle of the Great Exhibition? The aged spinsters and widows that inhabit the small town of Cranford are inexplicably linked to the legendary fearless, female warriors of the Amazon tribe.

---


81 Davidson notes the application of the nomenclature, “Amazons” to women wearing riding habits: “[t]he language of Classicism named women “Amazons” or “Dianas” in what was their most active and therefore masculinized dress”, Davidson, p.157. Gaskell continues the equine trope in describing Miss Jenkyn’s mourning attire, ‘the little black silk bonnet […] and in that hybrid bonnet, half-helmet, half-jockey cap, did Miss Jenkyns attend Captain Brown’s funeral’ (*CF* 19-20).
Consequently, I read the Cranford ladies’ eclectic possessions and their penchant for Indian shawls, muslins and silks in the context of the Great Exhibition, particularly in the dazzling spectacle of exotic and oriental textiles and artifacts displayed at the Indian Court within the Crystal Palace. While the Exhibition will be covered in detail in the next chapter, the Indian Court reveals the extent to which Indian textiles and design were becoming integral to women’s consumption patterns and the formation of a quintessentially feminine English identity by the mid-century.

The Indian display was the public’s first encounter with such a vast array of objects from the Indian subcontinent and it was transfixed; there was even a Howdah given to the Queen as a gift from Nawab Nazim of Bengal. Exiled French political economist, Jerome Adolph Blanqui was ‘tantalized by the Indian Collection’ and was ‘compelled to return to gaze at its holdings repeatedly’. 82 It was a lavish display of the colonial possessions from the East Indies and the Indian Archipelago organized by the English East India Company whose pre-eminence in the region was now beginning to be questioned. The Company believed that the exhibition could showcase ‘the riches of Britain’s empire in the East’, even as historian Paul Greenhalgh asserts, the intention was simultaneously to “glorify and domesticate” the subcontinent by displaying its material culture in Hyde Park’. 83 Greenhalgh’s point concerning the domestication of the Indian subcontinent is pertinent, particularly in light of the Punch caricature. The

83 Paul Greenhalgh cited in Kriegel, p.150.
Amazonian statue adopts a particular form of dress accessory, the shawl, an overriding signifier of English domesticity by 1851, but whose origins were mired in a legacy of conquest and appropriation in the Indian subcontinent.

Certainly, the text of *Cranford* abounds with Indian and Oriental artifacts, which resonate with their place and means of production. The chintzes, muslins and shawls juxtaposed with the ladies’ tea parties convey a distinctly female gendered English identity based upon the trade practices endemic within imperial expansion. The tea itself is also an imperial commodity. Wayward son, Peter is the conduit by which some of the Indian products enter into the domestic world of Cranford. As a proxy for his absent self, he sends home to his mother an item which she has always yearned for but never possessed ‘a large, soft, white Indian shawl, with just a little narrow border all round; just what my mother would have liked’; as the old Rector sorrowfully admits, ‘It is just such a shawl as she wished for when she was married, and her mother did not give it her’ (*CF* 58). The timescale of these events - 1774 (the marriage date) to Peter’s gift, one year after his disappearance, *circa* 1796 - articulates the shawl’s exclusivity and desirability, inaccessible on a Rector’s income. The shawl Peter sends is most probably manufactured in Kashmir, hand woven from the fine pashmina wool of the ‘domesticated *Capra hircus* goat from Tibet’.\(^8\) White shawls were the most common and relatively inexpensive, and as then Indian indigenous production had not yet been exposed to competition from British mass manufacture, as it would be in the later

nineteenth century. Plain shawls were more quickly produced than the patterned varieties. The latter’s’ decorative aspects took up to eighteen months to produce and were consequently prohibitively expensive. The Kashmiri weaving technique was unique, producing exquisite, reversible shawls that could not be replicated in Western production as Naheed Jafri and Sherry Rehman elaborate:

In the *kani* or twill-tapestry technique used by Kashmiri weavers, the weft threads formed the pattern as well as the structure of the fabric and, unlike European shawls, did not have to run the full length. This made the better class of Kashmiri shawl invariably lighter as well as finer than any European shawl.  

Highly prized for their aesthetic qualities, the ‘very perfect things of their kind’, the Kashmir shawl was a signifier of economic status and exclusivity: the appurtenances of choice for European royalty and nobility (*NS* 10). Napoléon Bonaparte’s first wife, the Empress Joséphine, doyenne of French fashion, possessed over one hundred of these shawls. In 1805, the *Journal of Paris* stated, ‘the elegance of a woman can be equated with the quality of her shawl, or rather of its price’. In 1810, a genuine Kashmir shawl cost ‘between seventy and one hundred pounds, its ‘extravagant price’ circulating as a proof of wealth until the 1870s. As a gauge to a real price comparison, in 1861 Gaskell was viewing ‘embroidered cashmere’ shawls, undoubtedly not the genuine article,

---

85 Jafri and Rehman, pp.20-21. ‘The first reversible shawl produced at Paisley in 1865 was a huge flop’, p.21.
87 Jafri and Rehman, p.330.
priced at three guineas apiece. In *North and South*, Margaret Hale’s first lover, the urbane lawyer, Henry Lennox dismisses the shawls as ‘ladies’ business’ but acknowledges their pecuniary status, ‘[t]heir prices are very perfect things, too’ (*NS* 10). As ‘ladies’ business’, the shawl was deemed to be a vital component of women’s *trousseaux* in Britain and France, and frequently passed down as valuable heirlooms, such as those Edith receives as a lavish wedding gift, from her mother in *North and South*. This was a female-gendered, personal property transfer of ‘moveable goods’ that could evade the patriarchal control of women’s assets upon marriage.\(^{89}\) In such a way the shawl is removed from the corrupting ‘cash nexus, or the realm of commodification’ and is elevated as a coveted textile treasure.\(^{90}\) Alison Lundie notes that four shawls belonging to Gaskell have been ‘passed down through the family line to her descendants’ today.\(^{91}\)

Such ‘moveable goods’ also gesticulate towards the complex and evolving cultural constructs underlying such textile possessions and how they are utilized in a myriad of social and familial enacted performances. Mrs Gibson’s highly-prized,

---


\(^{91}\) Alison Lundie, ‘Elizabeth Gaskell and Shawls: Creative Artistry and Identity’, *The Gaskell Society Newsletter*, 56 (Autumn 2013) 6-12 (p.6). Lundie comments upon the shawls’ ‘intricate and variegated patterns and blending of colours’ (p.9).
scarlet Indian shawl in *Wives and Daughters* is the physical conduit whereby she ostentatiously exhibits the largesse and the sincerity of her love for step-daughter, Molly to the sharp-eyed Hollingford folk, ‘her bedroom is furnished just like Cynthia’s; and I let her wear my red shawl whenever she likes, she might have it oftener if she would’.92 The textile treasure, as a signifier of exclusivity and status, is the material means by which Mrs Gibson can appear be the devoted stepmother. Edith’s trousseau in *North and South* consisting of ‘all the beautiful Indian shawls and scarfs’ that her father, General Shaw has given to her mother shows the transmission mechanism whereby exotic, oriental objects were absorbed into the female domestic space of the Imperial metropolis (*NS* 7). As Suzanne Daly notes, ‘[s]ome of these items, and particularly textiles, led a double life, functioning at once as exotic foreign artifacts and as markers of proper Englishness’.93 General Shaw’s gifts mirror the practices of Warren Hastings and Lord Clive of India, who after imperial conquests, sent gifts of the spoils to their female dependents back home; an act which was replicated by the ex-patriot community during their careers in the colonial satellites.94 Colonial commodities, whilst seen as

93 Daly, p.237. As Tara Puri argues, ‘It is evident that one of the consequences of the empire was to Indianise its English subjects, thereby making them more cosmopolitan and making the English home a monument to imperial Britain’s success in the global system of commodity production, distribution, and consumption’, Tara Puri ‘Indian Objects, English Body: Utopian Yearnings in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 22:1 (2017) 1-23 (p.2).
94 A similar transmission process occurred in France. ‘When Napoléon returned from Egypt, the generals and officers who had served under him brought back mementoes of the Orient. Among these were Kashmir shawls which they wore wrapped around their waists as belts, and which had been plundered from the Mamelukes, the soldiers of the Egyptian army’, Frank Ames cited in Hiner, p.77.
exotic foreign artifacts, then became remodelled as things representative of England and its imperium authority. Products, symbolic of the ‘Jewel in the Crown’ assumed a highly desirable aura of their own, when usurped from their indigenous context. Nupur Chaudhuri argues that the memsahibs of British men serving or working in India, whilst refusing to adopt the Indian culture whilst away, freely bartered and sold their Indian possessions on their return to Britain and acted as ‘catalysts in popularizing Indian artifacts’. In a similar vein, sons and brothers returning home from India gave gifts of shawls and other fine textiles to female dependents, which Daly describes as a ‘ritual of casting–off for the returning man- he restores himself to […] Englishness by handing over to the women a garment that was commonly understood to be worn in India by men’. Fully reinstated in the domestic homeland, Daly argues, the man has ‘the amusing possibility of playing at being ‘Oriental’’.

‘Being ‘Oriental’ is performed within the text of Cranford. Peter returns from India to rescue his sister from the taint of trade. With his exaggerated Indian stories and cross-legged pose, Peter is a caricature of the returning English son, home from his Indian travels; his fortune made as an ‘indigo-planter’ (CF 150). He thereby ensures that Miss Matty’s home and status are restored as ‘the empty resounding rooms [are]

95 Maxine Berg citing Edward Said asserts that the exotic qualities of eastern products imported from Asia into Europe was the conduit by which the ‘West transformed the East into a discourse; between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries it prefabricated a construct of the East as the West’s image of the Other. The Other was mysterious, duplicitous and dark, carrying connotations of inner, secret strangeness’ in Maxine Berg, Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.50.
96 Chaudhuri, p.236.
97 Daly, p.248.
98 Daly, p.249.
again furnished up to the very garrets’ (CF 154). Laden with eastern finery, ‘an India muslin gown and a pearl necklace’, Peter triggers off a trickle of commodity modification and re-absorption (CF 149). As the gown is now inappropriate for Miss Matty’s age, it will be saved until Flora Gordon comes of age; fine, white Indian muslin gowns were for many years the appropriate attire for young girls and younger women of the prosperous classes in Britain. This material will be analysed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Consequently, by the mid-nineteenth century, the shawl had become popular outdoor wear for all women. An article ‘Shawls’ in *Household Words*, August 1852, commented, ‘[t]he passion for shawls among all women everywhere is remarkable’. 99 In *North and South*, Edith Shaw’s shawls are the focus of an intimate, female scrutiny that enfolds the margins of colonial India into the Shaw’s prosperous London drawing room, ‘What kind are they? Delhi? With the lovely little borders?’ (NS 7). The little borders certainly reveal the date of the shawl, as late eighteenth-century Indian shawls were frequently plain with narrow decorated borders. As the nineteenth century advanced, borders became broader and more extravagant and could pattern the whole shawl. The province of Delhi is here effectively

reduced to the characteristics of one of its woven shawls. The diminutive ‘lovely little borders’, which may also refer to the use of gold threads in shawls from ‘mid-Mughal Delhi’, are usurped and contained to serve as trope for metropolitan femininity.\textsuperscript{100}

The ‘buta’ or ‘tear-shaped’ design on the Kashmir shawl portraying the ‘growing shoot of the date palm, the “Tree of Life”, or symbol of fertility, reproduction and abundance’ was propagated as a necessary part of a trousseau.\textsuperscript{101} Not only are the shawls seen as an emblem of English womanhood, the ‘buta’ motif, modified into the ‘pinecone’ or the Paisley pattern, was appropriated by textile manufacturers for printed fabrics, as shown in Figure 4.\textsuperscript{102} As Lucy Johnston explains ‘[t]he fusion of buta motifs and quasi-naturalistic floral forms reflects the passion for blending exotic influences with European embellishments’, a further way that women could embrace the mysterious, eastern connotations of the cloth in the domestic sphere, without fear of sacrificing respectability and virtue.\textsuperscript{103} Indeed, with wry hyperbole, \textit{Household Words} tacitly juxtaposes the moral bifurcation of the two cultures; the gift of a shawl in the infidel harems in ‘Cairo and Damascus’ causes as much ‘heartburning’ as the profligate English daughter-of-the-house who squanders all her first quarter’s allowance on a shawl purchase.\textsuperscript{104}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{100} Jafri and Rehman, p.31.
\item \textsuperscript{101} Valerie Reilly cited in Ferguson, pp. 67-85 (pp.78-9).
\item \textsuperscript{103} Johnson, p.104.
\item \textsuperscript{104} [Harriet Martineau], ‘Shawls’ in \textit{Household Words}, Vol. 5, 28/8/1852, pp.552-556, p. 552.
\end{itemize}
Edith’s trousseau gifts metonymically reflect the shawls’ function as a wider medium of gift exchange, a textile treasure, an emollient on the diplomatic stage at the highest level. Kashmir’s new ruler, Ghulab Singh in 1846, as a token of recognition for the supremacy of the British Government had to pledge annually ‘three pairs of Kashmir shawls’ to Queen Victoria; the Queen herself copied the ritual of giving Indian shawls as gifts to visiting luminaries.\textsuperscript{105} With obsequious hyperbole, \textit{Household Words} in the 1852 article signals its approval, eliding the shawl’s mythical, exotic and royal heritage; a transformative aura that ordinary woman could attain by emulation:

For thousands of years have Eastern potentates made presents of shawls to distinguished strangers, together with diamonds and pearls. At this day, when an Eastern prince sends gifts to European sovereigns, there are shawls, to the value of thousands of pounds, [...] just as was done in the days of the Pharaohs, as the paintings on Egyptian tombs show us at this day. And the subjects of sovereigns have as much liking for shawls as any queen.\textsuperscript{106}

The article elaborates that if Kashmir or Indian shawls were too expensive, women on smaller incomes could purchase domestically, mass-produced imitations from such centres as Norwich, Edinburgh and Paisley, priced between one pound to ten pounds. No doubt acquiring the cachet and mystique of the oriental accessory in the process.\textsuperscript{107} Furthermore, the commentary details the various production processes involved in the manufacture of a Paisley shawl, a further illustration of the ‘factory tales’ genre so resonant for this era. It details the initial pattern drawn by a qualified artist from the School of Design to the weaving ‘done by ‘lashing’ or from Jacquard cards’; the final

\textsuperscript{105} Dhar cited in Daly, pp.250-1.
\textsuperscript{106} “Shawls” in \textit{Household Words}, p.552.
\textsuperscript{107} (ibid), p.553.
stage is completed by young girls ‘putting silk fringes upon the printed shawls [...] ‘netting’ the lengths by cross-ties’.

In Cranford, the shawl, which the countryman purchases on market day for ‘about thirty shillings’ in the Universal Store, an event that is the catalyst for Miss Matty’s financial crisis, is most likely to have been manufactured by the above process in ‘Paisley’ (CF 121). It was a means by which, women on smaller incomes could be ‘elegantly dressed with a shawl that appeared to have been made in India’; even though design connoisseur Ralph Wornum claimed it was ‘the manufacture of a spurious article’, compared to the intricacies of Cashmere products, which he lauded as ‘works of Art’. It underscores again how the all-pervasive discourse of ‘taste’ was a pejorative assault on lower-income women’s attire, as ‘taste’ was ‘anti-ethical to the production of imitation shawls’. It further accentuates how realistic copies and imitations threatened the status and authenticity of the original Kashmir shawl, and as a corollary was a source of anxiety to women who viewed their dress as a means of distinction. The disquiet about the nature of authenticity was reflected not only in the possession of the Indian shawls, but in the etiquette underpinning the correct deportment and demeanour required in its wearing, particularly as women’s skirts became more voluminous in the 1840s and 50s. Margaret Hale achieves this pose effortlessly, with regal grace and

---

108 (ibid), pp.554-6.
110 Suchitra Choudhury, ‘It was Imitashon to be Sure’, Textile History, 46(2), Nov. 2015, 189-212 (p.196).
aplomb, in her first meeting with mill owner, John Thornton. ‘Her dress was very plain: [...] 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. (NS 61-2) The dark silk would be a perfect contrast to the rich texture of the Indian shawl, which, according to Naheed and Rehman possessed a ‘sparkling jewel-like quality’ impossible to replicate in factory production.¹¹¹ The syntax of ‘long, heavy folds’ mirrors the qualities of the sensuous ‘soft feel’ texture, languorously evoking ‘the highly attractive manner in which the fabric clung to the contours of the body’.¹¹²

Gaskell, herself describes such ‘folds’ when she waxed lyrically about her friend Mrs Davenport’s wedding trousseau. In a scene that perhaps serves as an antecedent for Margaret modelling the shawls in the opening chapter of North and South, Gaskell portrays the occasion vividly:

> 6 Indian shawls of various kinds, the lowest priced one 90 guineas – one a soft green exquisitely embroidered in pale lilac & gold another a crimson or Indian red ditto in white & gold, another a blue scarf, ends in gold - oh dear! they were so soft and delicate and went into such beautiful folds.¹¹³

We gain a sense of the sheer opulence of the display, as the pile-up of sub clauses climaxes into ‘oh dear’; Gaskell’s language is seemingly inadequate to convey the sheer luxuriance of the fabrics. Indeed, her prose coalesces into a poetic representation of the visual and tactile senses. No wonder then that Mrs Gibson in Wives and Daughters regally deploys her red ‘Indian shawl’ as a textile treasure. As Alison Adburgham

---

¹¹¹ Jafri and Rehman, p.351.  
¹¹² Jafri and Rehman, p.343.  
lyrically elaborates ‘[t]he great Indian Empire had been opened up like Pandora’s box and was spilling over with exquisite treasures, scattering its riches’.\textsuperscript{114}

However, both writers’ descriptions, while redolent of the shawls’ striking visuality and tactility, omit another mystical sensory quality. Their allure was enhanced and mystified by a lingering ‘spicy Eastern smell’; it permeates the Indian shawls, for instance that Margaret Hale brings to her aunt’s perusal (\textit{NS 9}). The particular aroma was much discussed in women’s periodicals such as the \textit{Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine} and \textit{Queen}:\textsuperscript{115}

It is well known that the real India shawl possessed a peculiar and agreeable odour, which was new to European noses as the shawls were to European eyes. This odour pertinaciously clung to the fabric, and a genuine ‘India’ unfailingly advertised it as such by its perfume. The cause of this odour was fully inquired into, and it was found to be given to the shawls by contact with a herb known to the Hindoos as putcha, pat, or patchouly, as it is more commonly called.\textsuperscript{116}

The article again stresses a familiar theme, asserting that the ‘pleasant and agreeable odour’ demonstrates the ‘authenticity’ of the Indian shawl, ‘a genuine India’. In a similar vein to the discussion of Edith shawls with the ‘Delhi? With the lovely borders’, there is a breath-taking, wholesale appropriation of an Indian artifact, refashioned for new English consumers.

However, the metonymic associations of beautiful Kashmir shawls, also resonates with an unseemly, diachronic sub-text of exploitation and appropriation by England in its relationship with her Indian colonies. As Daly relates, Kashmir was sold to

\textsuperscript{115} Puri, p.5.
England’s ‘Sikh ally, Ghulab Singh even though it had never been formally under British control’. Furthermore, the mass-produced cheap imitation shawls from British factories, such as the ‘shawl of about thirty shillings’ value’ (CF 121) sold in the ‘universal shop’ in Cranford (CF 61), eventually subverted the exclusiveness of the Kashmir product, as did the fashion change to bustles. Such factors culminated in the ‘Kashmir famine of 1877-79’ with the starvation of many Kasmir workers; by 1880, the indigenous industry had collapsed.\(^\text{118}\)

The fragrance of the Indian shawl, must have unleashed a powerful affective response, symbiotically linking the female wearer to the aromatic, mythical faraway lands of the unknown Orient. No wonder that John Thornton, in his first meeting with Margaret, is entranced. In a state of enthrallment, he loses his usual authoritative air, ‘she seemed to assume some kind of rule over him at once’, the aura of

\(^\text{117}\) Daly, p.250.
\(^\text{118}\) Daly, p.251. Lévi-Strauss also cites the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) for the decline of the Indian shawl industry. While French cashmere shawls continued to be given as wedding gifts, by the end of the nineteenth century the shawls were used as ‘wall hangings or as a covering for the piano’, Monique Lévi-Strauss, *Cashmere: A French Passion, 1800-1880* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2013).p.81.
an ‘empress’ (NS 62). That these shawls contained an aura of the mysterious and erotic Oriental is redolent to the magical practices from The Tales of the Arabian Nights, particularly as it was perceived that indigenous weavers and dyers might ‘infuse their product with spiritual value’.\textsuperscript{119} It was a conduit by which respectable womanhood in the domestic sphere could simultaneously evoke the fetish allure of an Oriental seraglio; the draped shawl, falling off the shoulders, perhaps gestures to further states of \textit{déshabillé}. It certainly became a conventional iconography in portrait painting for the first half of the nineteenth century as demonstrated in the works of Ingres (figure 5).\textsuperscript{120}

This is invoked by Thornton’s gaze, appropriating the contours of Margaret Hale’s comeliness, ‘her full beauty met his eye’ after she had ‘taken off her shawl and hung it over the back of her chair’ (NS 63). Her languid un-robing is a performative, sensual \textit{vivant tableau}. To possess the panache to wear the shawl as an Empress evokes a fabled trail from the ‘paintings on European tombs’ to the Empresses, Joséphine and Eugénie of France, and Queen Victoria, Empress of India. No doubt it caused great perturbation to mere ordinary women, anxious that their natural good taste should preclude any hapless, involuntary shawl \textit{faux pas}.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{119} Daly, p. 249. \\
\textsuperscript{120} Jafri and Rehman, p.331. Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres (1780-1867) was a renowned portrait painter of early nineteenth-century France. ‘Out of 75 portraits [he] painted between 1809 and 1819, at least 45 show sitters wearing shawls or have shawls draped or placed on a chair nearby’, p.331. I am using the term \textit{déshabillé} in the sense of the definition from the \textit{OED} ‘the state of being only partly or scantily clothed’. In the eighteenth century ‘undress’ or \textit{déshabillé} referred to simpler gowns worn at home in the morning, often with a cap’, Sarah Jane Downing, \textit{Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen} (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2010), p.16.
\end{flushright}
Gaskell comically parodies the problematic nature of shawl drapery and etiquette in *North and South* as Edith Shaw struggles with her trousseau gift:

I tried to wear my great beauty Indian shawl at a pic-nic. [...] 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. (*NS* 235)

Fortunately, the periodical press was alert to their readers’ anxieties in perfecting this difficult art and advises on the correct pose. *Sylvia’s Home Journal* in 1861 wrote, ‘We may add that all shawls should be as much as possible draped upon the woman who wears them, and sustained by the arms being pressed upon the bust’.121 This stiff, mannequin pose, serves as an incongruous contradistinction to the fluid, sensuous qualities of the finest Indian shawls. Art critic and historian Lady Eastlake (1809-1893) in her essay on the ‘Art of Dress’ in 1852 similarly discloses the curious and time-consuming procedure women affected to the act, revealing the topicality of Gaskell’s allusions to such style dilemmas:

If a lady sports a shawl at all, and only very falling shoulders should venture, we should recommend it to be always falling off or putting on, which produces pretty action, or she should wear it up one shoulder and down the other, or in some way drawn irregularly, so as to break the uniformity.122

The shawl article in *Household Words* asserts how Queen Victoria and eminent aristocratic women actively encouraged the British shawl industry by allowing the domestic manufacturers from Norwich and Paisley to copy the prints of their Cashmere shawls; it was ‘from a patriotic desire for the improvement of our English

121 *Sylvia’s Home Journal*, 1861 cited in Adburgham, p.98.
patterns’. This practice underscores a criterion underlying the staging of The Great Exhibition: the notion that British design was inferior on the international stage. This point will be covered in greater detail in the next chapter, but it also significantly reveals the Queen’s role as the conduit of Indian design and artifacts into England, ‘[f]or her, as for many subjects, India gave Britain a symbol of empire’, and facilitated the representation and creation of a female-gendered icon of respectable Englishness and domesticity.

Conclusion

This chapter has tracked innovations in the woollen textiles in women’s wardrobes over the course of two generations. Dreary, utilitarian stuffs and fulled red cloaks, symbolic of a fast-retreating agrarian economy in Sylvia’s Lovers, accede to new lighter accessories and fabrics such as the Paisley and plaid shawls and mousseline de laine in Mary Barton and Cranford respectively. Factory production enables cheaper imitations of the fabled and mythical fabrics of the élite.

This chapter has demonstrated the mechanism by which woollen textiles and fabrics circulated and refashioned in Cranford and North and South transfer the peripheries of Empire into the domestic space. Highly coveted shawls (originally a male-gendered accessory of caste and status) travel from the colonies to be modified and used as a signifier for womanly distinction and taste, creating a quintessential

123 Martineau in Household Words, p.553.
124 Adrienne Munich quoted in Daly, p.251.
English woman’s respectability. The Great Exhibition accelerated this process by creating a dialogue by which an English national identity ‘embodied in the monarchy’ and ‘imperial expansion’ was replicated in the vast array of consumer products from across the empire and the world.125 From then onwards, as Thomas Richards argues, the burgeoning sphere of advertising increasingly embodied a new narrative of consumerism, based upon selling commodities that represented and embodied ‘the ideology of England’.126 The Kashmir shawl and its cheaper imitations fully demonstrate this transmission process; Edith’s shawls and Peter’s gift bounty facilitate a construction of English womanhood that simultaneously uncovers a metonymic trail of some of the unscrupulous commercial and trading practices endemic in the far reaches of England’s empire. Furthermore, Gaskell’s nuanced manipulation of women’s woollen possessions in her quotidian narrative aesthetic, articulates the shifting nature of social and gender identities shaped and destabilized by global economic and political forces.

The next chapter examines cotton textiles, the bedrock of Manchester’s extraordinary emergence as an industrial powerhouse in the nineteenth century. Similar to the Kashmir shawls that stimulated consumer demand, many of Gaskell’s

125 Thomas Richards, The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p.5. Indeed, John Plotz claims that the Victorian novel itself was part of the dialogue of fostering an English ideology as it debated ‘the problem of “staying English” within the wider range’. An Englishman abroad could be secure of his national identity by his possessions not only for their monetary value but imbued with a sentimentality that inalienably represented the owner’s domestic, personal, and national identity. Plotz describes these as ‘portable property’, and indeed novels reaffirm themselves as portable property, ‘things’ evocative of sentimentality and an English ideology. John Plotz, Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p.2.

126 Richards, p.5.
protagonists wear the lighter and brighter chintzes, cottons and muslins that were imported from the Indian sub-continent from the seventeenth century. Import substitution and fledging domestic production in England transform women’s sartorial choices even as it raised perennial questions concerning the authenticity of identity.
Chapter Two
Cottons, Calicoes and ‘Atrocious Prints’

‘Yes! We have got our drawing-room chairs & sofas covered with a new chintz … little rosebuds & carnations on a white ground’¹

Introduction

Sylvia’s Lovers (1863) is set in the 1790s in a small whaling community. Gaskell is particularly careful in this historical novel in her descriptions of domestic minutiae. The ‘patchwork curtains and a coverlet’ stitched by an earlier generation of women grace the ‘best bed-room’ of the Corney’s farmhouse. The quilt juxtaposes different Indian ‘cotton’ fabrics: ‘scraps of costly Indian chintzes and palempours were intermixed with commoner black and red calico in minute hexagons’.² The striking and exotic vibrancy of a chintz oddment ‘like th’eyes in a peacock’s tail’, contrasts markedly with the everyday colour calico (SL 135).³ By the early 1850s, Margaret Hale’s first visit to the industrial heartland of Milton-North (North and South, 1854-5) is a vivid encounter

²Elizabeth Gaskell, Sylvia’s Lovers, ed. by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 135. Further references to this edition are given in quotations in the text following the abbreviation SL. ‘[P]alempours: or palampores are patterned Indian Chintz bed-covers’, (SL 522). ‘Calicoes were used primarily for tablecloths, wall hangings, and window treatments throughout Europe until about the middle of the seventeenth century’, whereupon the wearing of printed calicoes, alongside printed silks became popular, and indeed developed into a ‘calico craze’. This lasted until the middle of the eighteenth century, Woodruff D. Smith, Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800 (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 49-51.
³For more about the patterned hexagons see Carolyn Ferguson, ‘A Weave of Words: Fabric Print and Pattern in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing’, in Fashion and Material Culture in Victorian Fiction and Periodicals, ed. by Janine Hatter and Nickianne Moody (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2019), pp. 67-85. Ferguson reads ‘[t]he peacock’s all-seeing eye [as] a simile that the middle-class Victorian would take as a presentiment of the heroine’s vanity and likely ill luck’, Ferguson, p.75.
with the teeming life-blood of the city, ‘here every van, every waggon and truck, bore cotton, either in the raw shape in bags, or the woven shape in bales of calico’ (NS 59). The stark polarization between these two commentaries: the rural economy versus the bustling manufacturing metropolis; the scraps of expensive imported chintz cotton against quantities of cottons manufactured domestically from raw cotton, is a microcosm of the macro-economic changes that transformed certain regions of Britain and its colonies in this sixty-year time period. This was particularly the case for Manchester, the Lancashire town that became the city where Gaskell’s resided for all her married life. As economic historian Douglas Farnie observes from ‘a thitherto backward and peripheral region’ emerged ‘a new complex of activity’ that saw Manchester self-style itself as the ‘second city of the Empire’ by the mid 1840s.4

The fact that this was a period of immense technological change in the cotton industry is highlighted by the fact that rather confusingly the panoply term ‘cotton’, in different time periods, has described very different production methods and merchandises, the latter also names the raw material ‘cotton-wool’. This chapter sets out to disaggregate cotton into cottons, calicoes, muslins and chintzes, and to contextualize

each one. ‘The costly chintzes and palempours’, described in *Sylvia’s Lovers* were expensive calicos imported from various regions of India, including the seaport of Calicut in South West India by the English East India company from the early seventeenth century. The term calico is the ‘cotton’ fabric, which originated from India’s homespun production, and consisted of a warp and a weft that was made exclusively from cotton yarn. The ‘chintz’ describes a particularly finishing technique for the fabric whereby cloth from ‘West India and Gujarat for instance […] were printed with wooden blocks’ to produce a high quality glazed effect. This was just one finishing technique of many that made Indian cotton textiles highly desired by élite European consumers in the eighteenth century. The cotton’s brightness and print clarity, in addition

---

5 Citing Stuart Robinson, ‘[c]alicoes had been among the first commodities brought by the Portuguese to Europe from Calicut, on the Malabar coast of India, hence the name they gave the textile’, in Woodruff D. Smith, p.49.

to its fastness, was only replicated in England in the cotton revolution towards the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Muslin was another type of pure cotton, Indian cloth, particularly distinguishable by its fineness and transparency. Hand-woven Indian muslins were similarly in vogue in the latter decades of the eighteenth century. Half-a century later by the 1850s, however, fine muslins, as worn by Gaskell’s daughters, became more affordable, mass-produced in the towns of Bolton, Glasgow and Paisley. By then, the ‘calico bales’ described in *North and South*, had become the ubiquitous term for ‘cotton’, which was mass-produced in Manchester and the surrounding region.

More than a century earlier, however, after the imposition of the 1721 Calico Acts, which banned imported Indian cotton/calico, the term, ‘Manchester cotton’, was a completely different fabric comprising a warp thread made of linen and a weft thread made of cotton. Domestic spinning wheels at this time could not produce a cotton yarn strong enough to be the warp thread, so the warp had to be from linen yarn. The fabric produced was commonly known as fustian. This was a heavy, rougher fabric that became the hallmark dress of the Chartists, but which could not replicate the feel, fineness or bright, colourful finish of the prohibited Indian cottons. John Barton and his fellow union delegates wear ‘fustian clothes’, denoting their workingman status when meeting the intractable mill owners. Historian, Maxine Berg asserts that the poor quality of such domestic cloth was the stimulus for the technological advances made in Britain’s spinning industry, particularly as imported calico became prohibitively expensive, second only in price to silk and six times more expensive than wool in the

---

1790s. Thus, it was only with the invention of Richard Arkwright’s water frame (patented in 1769), that an English cotton yarn was produced, which was strong enough to be used as the warp thread. This made it possible for the Manchester region to begin producing pure cottons, including fine muslins, which could rival India’s hand-woven production. Cottons from the Lancashire mills were thenceforth known as calicos to distinguish them from the earlier hybrid thicker ‘cotton’ fabric.

Elaine Freedgood develops a cultural-materialist interpretation of the Manchester cotton industry in Gaskell’s novel, Mary Barton (1848) by scrutinizing the metonymic associations of the ‘blue-and-white check curtains’ that grace the Bartons’ home (the backdrop to their impromptu supper party) (MB 14). Aside from their symbolic representation of the family’s relative domesticity and prosperity, Freedgood asserts that their presence resonate with ‘the destruction of the indigenous [cotton] industry in India’. The latter was instigated by such British Government’s protectionist measures as the Calico Acts, a response to pacify the vociferous silk and woollen home industries. As Hilary Davidson similarly notes ‘[b]etween 1802 and 1819, duties on imports of Indian textiles for the British market were raised nine times.’ Such measures simultaneously aided the technological developments of the Manchester

---

9 Riello, p.211.
cotton industry as it strove to replicate the qualities of Indian cotton prints; consequently by ‘1817-18 exports to India from Manchester and Glasgow of textile-piece goods overtook the reverse trade from Bengal for the first time.’\(^{12}\) Whereas Freedgood is correct in recognizing the changing geographical nature of cotton production for this period, arguably her emphasis on the supply aspects of the evolving British industry fails to acknowledge other significant factors. For instance, she is silent about the properties of Indian short-stapled raw cotton that proved highly unsuitable for English cotton spinning, resulting in the cotton spinners seeking an alternative supply in the form of the long-stapled, South Seas, raw cotton genus from America.

The latter enabled the Lancashire machines to produce a higher quality fibre.\(^{13}\)

In addition, running concurrently with a British Industrial Revolution was the ‘American plantation’ revolution, based upon slavery in the Confederate states of America; this resulted in the price of long-stapled raw cotton becoming significantly lower in the 1840s than it had been a century earlier; it was instigated by the development of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin, which removed the seeds from the raw cotton effectively.\(^{14}\) This invention was primarily responsible for the dramatic fall in the manufacturing costs of calico. As a result, labour intensive, woven, Indian calico became uncompetitive compared to its English rival. As Giorgio Riello confirms


\(^{13}\) Riello, p.254.

‘between 1780 and 1830 the production cost of a yard of calico fell by 83 percent’.\textsuperscript{15} Ultimately, however, the Southern states’ dependency on the abhorrent practice of slavery to harvest the ‘white gold’ crop of raw cotton provoked the ‘political, moral, religious and economic discord’ that led inexorably to the American Civil War, in addition to the ‘cotton famine’ that blighted the Lancashire mill towns.\textsuperscript{16}

Therefore, contrary to Freedgood’s critique of the inherent supply side associations of calico, this chapter seeks to explore the metonymic associations of Manchester calico and muslins from the other side: from the viewpoint of the female consumers of such products. In particular, I shall discuss the calico dress prints that became very popular women’s wear from the 1820s. The development of these prints helps chart the evolving technological and chemical advances of the Industrial Revolution, but this chapter is interested in the consumption of cotton goods. It will seek to explore whether these new fabrics spawned a fashion revolution and a democratization of dress, as even poorer women moved beyond mere subsistence attire.

Against the backdrop of significant socio-economic change, as urbanization and the expansion of the railways caused the dispersion of smaller rural communities, I shall argue that the widespread adoption of cotton was a means by which women asserted their identity under the evolving code of domesticity and respectability, but that this in turn led to heightened social anxiety about women’s appearance as ‘society’ became more socially stratified.

\textsuperscript{15} Riello, p.214. Riello notes that the equivalent fall in muslin production cost was 76%.
\textsuperscript{16} Yafa, p.88.
In addition, this chapter focuses upon the developing discourse of good taste and design, fostered as an essentially male-gendered debate, orchestrated by eminent Art Designers and critics, and endorsed by Prince Albert. They raised concerns about the perceived weakness of Britain’s industrial style and technical expertise vis-à-vis its trading rivals. This debate was the rationale behind the staging of the 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations (The Great Exhibition), a heterotopic spectacle, which left commentators bewildered, and sometimes struggling for superlatives. It was felt that both producers and consumers needed instruction to avoid ‘atrocious’ style choices. I argue that Gaskell’s ‘Cranford Papers’, which began serialization after the closure of The Great Exhibition, are a female-gendered response to the male national discourse of ‘good taste’. Small and quotidian material ‘things’ in the ‘Papers’ represent a complex interleaving of the national taste debate in a perplexed community. The Cranford denizens’ provincial distance and conspicuous parsimony subverts the modernity of a fevered commodity culture, even as it slowly acknowledges, in its own indomitable manner, the encroaching winds-of-change, socio-cultural, industrial and imperial in nature.

The final section of this chapter will discuss the longevity of cotton muslin for women’s sartorial dress circa 1785 to the mid-1850s. The little white muslin dress, whether it was the Indian muslin, draped languorously in the Neo-Classical fashion or the pure white vestment of maidenhood, was an essential of middle-class women’s

wardrobes.Scrolling forward from Miss Pole’s Regency Indian muslin gown to Marianne Gaskell’s tarletane frock, the white muslin is feted as the quintessential dress of the period.

**Dress Prints: ‘Parsley-Leaf’ and ‘Hoyle’s Print’**

In the novel, *Ruth* (1853), set in the mid-1840s, the seduced seamstress Ruth, having been given a new home by the Bensons, relinquishes the fine clothes and jewellery that her former lover, Bellingham has given her:

> She asked Sally to buy [...] 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 [...] gave a grace to each, which such homely material and simple shaping had never had before. (*RU* 133)

The ‘homeliest dark blue print’ alludes to the fabric ‘calico’, by the mid-1840s a low-priced and utilitarian textile, far removed from the exotic Indian calicos so esteemed fifty years earlier; it is Ruth’s sackcloth-and-ashes penance. The abolition of ‘swingeing excise duties’ on printed calicoes in 1831 had dramatically reduced its price allowing the poorest consumers ‘a useful and respectable printed dress for half-a-crown, which before the repeal would have cost nearly four shillings.’\(^{18}\) The ‘dark blue’ signifies that it was printed with the ‘earliest fast or non-fading’ dye of indigo, which from the period 1800-1855 was used for the cheapest cotton prints.\(^{19}\) The prints were simple, small


repetitive designs on a plain navy background, rather like the ‘parsley-leaf’ motif that became the trade-mark design of calico printers ‘Yates and Peels’, which Gaskell mentions in *Sylvia’s Lovers* (*SL* 135). In the Corney’s farmstead, the hexagons of ‘costly Indian chintzes’ on the patchwork predate Yates and Peel’s design imitations (*SL* 135). As early as 1786 printer Robert Peel in Peelford (1750-1830), one of the earliest textile manufacturers of the cotton revolution, was producing attractive printed calicoes for the lower income consumer, with ‘leaves variously disposed, small circles, pippins […] spots, and flower heads of a daisy or buttercup form, which […] stared the beholder full in the face’. In the closing decades of the eighteenth century, for the middling status consumer even on modest means, cotton priced between 4-7 shillings per yard was a cheaper and attractive substitute for silk. Clergyman’s daughter Barbara Johnson purchased seventeen cotton gowns between 1780 and 1800, compared to one woollen gown and six silk. The cottons were variously

---

20 Andrew Sanders gives a useful chronology of the calico printing process: ‘From c. 1752 copper –plates began to supersede wood-blocks, but plate-printing was possible in only one colour at a time, green being produced by printing yellow over blue (though the colour faded with time). A single process for printing ‘solid green’ was only invented in 1809, thus stimulating the introduction of complex patterns involving green tones such as the ‘parsley-leaf’. Printing by mechanical rollers was not general until c.1815’, Andrew Sanders, ‘Explanatory Notes’ in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, pp.516-533 (p.522).
described as blue muslin, gingham, cotton tabby and chintz. The abandonment of the previously ornate Rococo style of dress, leads to the Neo-Classical revival from the 1780s. This was a trend towards simpler and smaller designs that required less yardage to make a dress. The introduction of power loom weaving in the 1830s resulted in ‘print goods’ becoming the ‘staple material for the clothes of working-class women’. It is perhaps quite difficult for a present-day reader to gauge the sense of this changing visual spectacle that print clothing presented.

Contemporary French historian, Jules Michelet (1798-1874) gives an insight, commenting on the vibrancy of the new printed cottons, and their ability to enrich ordinary women’s lives:

It has required the combined efforts of science and art to force rebellious and ungrateful cotton fabric to undergo every day so many brilliant transformations and to spread them everywhere within the reach of the poor. Every woman used

---


23 Clark, p.102.
to wear a blue or black dress that she kept for ten years without washing, for fear it might tear to pieces.\textsuperscript{24} A ‘brilliant transformation’ might describe ‘newly discovered mineral colours’ such as ‘chrome yellow’ that calico printers were using from 1820 to add additional variety to the blue indigo print.\textsuperscript{25} In \textit{Mary Barton}, former slopworker, Margaret wears a ‘blue and yellow print’ as an alternative to her ‘brown stuff gown’ \textit{(MB 188)}. A discerning, female readership in the mid nineteenth century, however, would have recognized the social significance of indigo prints, particularly with the sobriquet ‘homely’ attached as in Ruth’s humble attire. Indigo was perceived to be a dull, old-fashioned material that had already been replaced by equally affordable, daintier, fresh prints.\textsuperscript{26} Even in 1823 on a holiday visit to Barmouth in Wales, Mary Holland, a cousin of Gaskell, bemoans such attire, ‘[m]uch gaiety abroad today, most of the ladies very smart: we cut a shabby figure: but we flatter ourselves that “gentility will out” even through our old blue cotton gowns’.\textsuperscript{27} This is no doubt why Mary Holland affirms her innate refinement to signify her social standing, regardless of her unfortunate attire. Indeed, a draper of the time comments, ‘The common people and servant girls generally wore at that time navy-blue prints, with a small white or yellow spot on them [...] they were usually kept below the

\textsuperscript{25} Greene, p.19.
\textsuperscript{26} Carolyn Ferguson similarly reads the indigo dress as a cheap fabric that ‘places Margaret firmly among the lower classes’, Ferguson, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{27} John Chapple, \textit{Elizabeth Gaskell: The Early Years} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p.301.
counter. Such a utilitarian fabric, with probably a low profit margin, is evidently not worthy of public display.

Another signifier of the indigo print’s lowly status was its adoption as the uniform for recipients of poor relief. Under the ‘influence of Evangelicalism, which regarded social stratification as providential’, clothing provided to Poor Law recipients was merely ‘useful and necessary’. The Liverpool workhouse in 1843 ‘recommended that each adult female be provided with two bedgowns of very stout blue and white spotted printed calico’. Similarly, schools like the one established by the ‘ladies of Cumnor Towers’ in Wives and Daughters (1864-5) frequently clothed their charges in a ‘kind of charity uniform’ comprising ‘blue gowns’ because indigo was the cheapest dye; such schools actually became known as ‘Bluecoat’ schools (WD 4). John Styles comments that this policy of clothing the poor in a distinct colour was a form of stigmatized ‘parish uniform’ analogous to the ‘badging’ of the poor that had only been abolished in 1810. As the indigo dye bled despite its alleged fastness, it bore associations with stains and dirt with all the concomitant societal anxiety thus evoked. Perhaps in the case of Ruth, while her simple ‘dark blue print’ attire is a means of atonement and self-effacement, the indigo dye also symbolizes the stigmatized stain upon her character. It

---

31 John Styles, The Dress of the People (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 274 and 272. Styles terms the practice of imposed uniform or clothing attire as ‘involuntary consumption’ as recipients were often unable to exert preference in their choice of clothes, pp.247-320.
is notable that the Benson’s forthright servant, Sally does not wear indigo, but a ‘bedgown’ of ‘pink print’, perhaps mindful of the ‘Poor Law’ connotations of indigo (RU 114).

The ‘stigmatized stain’ also serves as a pertinent metaphor for the English East India Company and its brutal practices to promote indigo cultivation after its annexation of Bengal in 1757. During this period, indigo was one of the most commercially important natural dyes that the Company exported. ‘By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Bengal indigo became the world’s preeminent blue dye’. The Company gave advances to European entrepreneurs, to set up plantations. One such characterization of the European planter is the wayward fugitive Peter in Cranford who makes his comfortable fortune as an ‘indigo planter’ (CF 150). By playing at the Oriental with his exaggerated Indian stories and cross-legged sitting, he seems an amusing caricature of the prodigal son, as he returns home from his Indian travels to restore Miss Matty’s home and status by his imperial gains ‘the empty resounding rooms again furnished up to the very garrets’ (CF 154). Peter’s spoils are however implicated in the dubious trading practices of the East India Company, particularly in its ‘dispossession of native landholders by European planters’. Peter, as an indigo-plantation owner, is

32 In June 1857, the English East India Company, led by Robert Clive defeated the Nawab of Bengal at the Battle of Plassey, a pivotal victory that effectively sold Bengal and its riches to the East India company. See William Dalrymple, The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company (London: Bloomsbury, 2019). Steven Cohen, ‘Materials and Making’ in The Fabrics of India, ed.by Rosemary Crill (London: V&A Publishing, 2015). The blue dye ‘indigo’ has been produced for at least four thousand years and indeed, the ‘origin of the English word “indigo”’ from Indikin is ‘the Greek name for the Indian sub-continent’, pp.16-77 (p.29).
34 Kumar, p.70.
furthermore stained by the legacy of brutal colonial practices. Although he appears genial and benevolent in the Cranford community, the plantations’ overlords were renowned for the exploitation of the working peasants who responded with rebellions against their ‘slave-like conditions’.35

To reflect further upon the lowly status of the indigo print by the 1840s, it is noteworthy to consider the finer delineations of calico prints as a motif in *Mary Barton*. The spirited and rather flighty eponymous protagonist desires that ‘her beauty should make her a lady’ and so as a ‘dressmaker's apprentice’ she must ‘be always dressed with a certain regard to appearances’ (*MB* 26). Her social aspirations and yearning for respectability, to be above the status of servants and factory girls, is reflected in her attire (the previous chapter noted Mary Barton’s penchant for merino wool when attending a humble tea party). For this same reason, the humble indigo print does not feature in Mary’s daily wear. Instead, Sally Leadbitter, Mary’s fair-weather friend, describes the dressmaker’s ‘every-day gown’ as ‘(Hoyle's print you know, that lilac thing with the high body) she was so fond of’ (*MB* 266). The ‘Hoyle’s print’ represents a further stage of technological advance by the Lancashire calico printers from the indigo-blue print, which both Ruth and slopworker Margaret wear. Textile historian, Philip Sykas asserts

---

35 Cohen, p.31.
that by the 1840s, ‘purple prints had become for the middle-classes a universally acceptable dress material for day wear.’ Messrs. Thomas Hoyle and Sons of Mayfield, Manchester were the leading calico printers for the new dye ‘all-madder purples’, which produced a printed calico ‘superior in brilliancy, fastness and utility for domestic wear’. As opposed to block printing, the cotton was printed by ‘[t]wo-and-three coloured cylinder printing machines’, which could be combined in a variety of ways to produce new and different colour combinations. Joseph Lockett was the finest engraver of rollers that allowed ‘eccentric style patterns’ and a range of differing grounds and motifs. He was commissioned to produce rollers for Thomas Hoyle and the firm patented improvements to their purple print in 1831; ‘[t]he fastness of Hoyle’s colours was a major selling point worldwide’. The innovation of technology, concentrated in the Manchester mills facilitated internal and external economies of scale; the finishing of calico from its original woven grey state, for instance, was situated in factories spread along ‘the banks of the River Medlock, to the southeast of Manchester’. It gradually enabled the mass production of cheap and colourful calico prints, which particularly appealed to a new lower-class consumer who eagerly adopted the bright fabrics and new prints allowing fashion to flourish. Such prints imitated

36 Identifying Printed Textiles, p.40.
38 Greene, p.24.
higher end silks and hand-painted Indian calicos at a fraction of the cost: by 1851 the average calico print-works in Manchester could make 6 pieces of fabric a day equivalent to 168 yards; in contrast two Indian calico artisans, took a fortnight to paint a piece of calico 7.6 yards long.\(^{42}\)

The factory girls in *North and South*, who spurn domestic work, are representative of this new consumer for the printed cottons. A rise in real wages extended their purchasing power, so that by the 1850s ‘the home trade in cotton goods enjoyed a boom’ and first ‘surpassed in value the home trade of the woollen industry’; the statutory introduction of the ‘Saturday half-holiday and the English weekend’ from 1850, further promoted the notion of leisurely dressing, whereby lower status women could insouciantly emulate the appearance of higher-status counterparts.\(^{43}\) If we understand all this social and economic meaning that is wrapped up in Mary Barton’s Hoyle’s print gown, we reach a finer appreciation of Gaskell’s material imagination. Textile historian, Carolyn Ferguson has also recently used fabric metonyms to comment upon Gaskell’s literary representation of ‘Manchester’s textile world’ noting that the writer ‘uses the realities of textile prints and patterns as effective devices to show class, character, humour, practicality and pathos’.\(^{44}\) Within the criterion of ‘class’ distinction, we both concur that lilac and purple hue prints were popular day dress for the women of the middle-class in the 1840s having replaced the commonplace, non-fast indigo. However, Ferguson then merely observes that it ‘gave contemporary readers a

\(^{42}\) Riello, p.181.  
\(^{43}\) Farnie, p.131.  
\(^{44}\) Ferguson, pp. 67-85 (p.82).
recognisable picture of Mary.' I read the Hoyle’s purple with deeper polysemic undertones within the framework of social ideology. As a motherless, power-weaver’s daughter, seamstress Mary Barton’s aspirant choice of dress print is a moral infringement of the subtly evolving domestic code of respectability. Such a transgression, which is akin to the choice of merino for the tea party in the previous chapter, is a violation of the mores of social distinction in replicating the dress of the middle classes. Mary’s flamboyance provokes the predatory attentions of millowner’s son Harry Carson, with all the attendant perils foreshadowed by her aunt Esther’s fate.

Freedgood argues that the production of domestic calico caused poverty and famine in India, as the indigenous handloom weavers, could not compete against the dramatic price reductions of British calicoes; India had to import cloth from Britain by the mid-nineteenth century. It may be argued Freedgood’s claim is rather a simplistic extrapolation from a long and complex interplay of evolving external primary and secondary forces. Indeed, as Riello explains, there was a first cotton revolution, from ‘circa the sixteenth century’ that was ‘centrifugal’ reaching out from the South Indian sea. This contrasts with the British Industrial Revolution and the phenomenal success of the Lancashire cotton industry, originating from small-scale fustian production. This was ‘centripetal’ in its nature and involved various factors of production; these encompassed the importation of raw cotton within the triangular trade.

45 Ferguson, p.70. Ferguson adds ‘[b]y associating “everyday” with lilac/purple fabrics Gaskell explodes the current myth that such fabrics were used solely for half-mourning’ (p.70).
46 Freedgood, p.66.
47 Riello, p.5.
network, and the development of a commercial and financial framework that facilitated these trade flows, all moving to the centre of Cottonopolis.\textsuperscript{48} The areas of Manchester and South Lancashire benefited as well from geographical and indigenous advantages. Riello stresses that this revolution was actually of longer fermentation and owed itself to a unique combination of complementary strands, not least the higher price and poorer quality of Indian calicoes in the eighteenth century, which encouraged the development of import substitutions specifically geared to European tastes. Indeed economic historian, Sanjay Subrahmanyam argues ‘that spinning and weaving in India were already in crisis before the arrival of European textiles’ and perhaps even before the arrival of European traders.\textsuperscript{49} This view, what he terms ‘de-industrialisation before de-industrialisation’ observes that ‘the decline in spinning and weaving on the Coromandel coast was already apparent by the late seventeenth century’, when Indian cottons were losing their competitive edge ‘on Asian and African markets’.\textsuperscript{50}

Thus, the Hoyle’s print calico was just one of the many ‘millions of yards of fabrics’ that the Lancashire mills produced mid-nineteenth century ‘that now literally clothed the world’.\textsuperscript{51} While Freedgood asserts that the British ‘cotton was not by and large produced for a domestic market’, nonetheless by the 1830s the adoption of power loom weaving, enabling cheaply produced cotton, allowed ‘fashion to flourish’ amongst

\textsuperscript{48} Riello, p.7.  
\textsuperscript{49} Subrahmanyam cited in Riello, p.273.  
\textsuperscript{50} Riello, p.273.  
\textsuperscript{51} Riello, p.266.
the lower and middling classes in this period.\textsuperscript{52} Rather than wearing a dress to rags, poorer women were increasingly able to extend their attire beyond mere subsistence levels, enabling a reserve of clothes that functioned as a store-of-value to pledge at the pawnshop when hardship struck. The Hoyle’s cotton with its busy mulled background camouflaged stains and marks and became the commonplace form of attire for middle-income consumers in the mid-1840s. Indeed, a survey of the history of calico printing for the Great Exhibition reveals that the proportion of purple prints displayed far exceeded other colours.\textsuperscript{53} This corresponded with a changing trend in fashionable colours; costume historian Cecil Willet Cunnington notes that by the 1840s in the Gothic style revival, ‘[p]rimary colours were no longer considered good taste; indeed, they were thought to be almost vulgar’.\textsuperscript{54}

Another important factor underlay the popularity of the secondary colours, purple and violet hues, as signified by Molly Gibson’s fabric purchase in \textit{Wives and Daughters}, ‘[s]he bought a lilac print, because it would wash, and be cool and pleasant for the mornings’ (\textit{WD 59}). Unlike earlier attire of stuff gowns and linsey-woolsey petticoats, which became dirt ridden and were difficult to keep clean, the new prints looked bright, fresh and were easier to maintain. As Vivienne Richmond elaborates,

\begin{itemize}
  \item Freedgood, p.74. Riello p.130. Indeed, Beverley Lemire argues that in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, English ‘production in the cotton trade was geared towards diversification, creating additional choice for consumers who were growing more convinced of the desirability of these products.’ Previously, the least affluent British consumer purchased linens and cotton-linen, ‘checked cotton and linens and other inexpensive cotton fabrics’ or resorted to the ‘second-hand trade’, Lemire, \textit{Fashion’s Favourite}, pp. 76-78 and p.87.
  \item Identifying Print Dresses, p.41.
\end{itemize}
within the Victorian code of respectability 'clothing didn’t have to be new, but it did usually have to be clean'. To be judged otherwise, risked opprobrium and the soubriquet ‘slattern’ with the consequent aspersions on an individual’s moral character. The aspect of cleanliness will be expanded upon in the ‘muslin’ section of this chapter.

As Wives and Daughters is set retrospectively in the 1820s and early 1830, Molly’s lilac dress would have been acceptable attire for her status, although Gaskell writing the novel in 1864-65 would have been aware that prints, particularly lilac had now ‘become the habitual morning wear of domestic servants’. Although servants bought their own uniform, the lady-of-the-house nevertheless exerted significant influence on the prescriptions of appropriate wear. This is underscored in Gaskell’s own letter to her eldest daughter Marianne, written in 1865, advising her about an appropriate gift of a dress to a departing servant, ‘About Lizzie […]. Don’t THINK of getting her a silk gown. […] Something from 5s to 10 shillings\ - for a present for her: not more.’

Indeed, Cunnington, has established that from 1840 to 1870, as cotton prints became a cheaper, utilitarian product, wealthier women increasingly wore expensive silks to denote their leisured status, and to distinguish themselves from lower-income, emulative counterparts. This cultural shift, from cottons to silk as well as the

55 Richmond, p.122.
56 Richmond, pp.253-4.
57 Letters p.752.
58 Cunnington, p.19.
properties and representation of silk fabrics for sartorial posturing, will be examined in greater detail in the penultimate chapter.

Gaskell’s letter also reflects the great anxiety that women, in particular, felt about correct dress attire for themselves and their intense scrutiny of other women. This is shown across Gaskell’s texts, from Bessie’s appraisal of Margaret Hale’s print gown ‘at sevenpence a yard’ in *North and South* (*NS* 148) to the Cranford ladies’ acute awareness, that women of their status ought to be wearing silk, but they pretend they prefer the cleanliness of cotton ‘[i]f we wore prints, instead of summer silks, it was because we preferred a washing material’ (*CF* 6). It shows a strictly gendered demarcation of dress based upon the age and status of women and girls, the rules of which were constantly changing to prevent interlopers and *arrivistes*, and the perceived contagion of the imitative underclass from threatening the social order. We hear the sheer incomprehension of the class divide in Mrs. Hale’s pronouncement, ‘but these factory people, who on earth wears cotton that can afford linen?’ pithily encapsulating the symbiotic, yet unstable nature of cloth and sartorial signification (*NS* 46). It is also an illustration of the raising consumption demands of a new class of consumers - financially empowered female millworkers who eschew paid domestic work.

And woe betide the lady, who eschews gravitas for a youthful demeanour, subverting the nebulous norms of class and age, as occurs in Gaskell’s final novel. The whole of Hollingford is eagerly awaiting the arrival of the Duchess of Menteith and her famous diamonds at the ball. Her eventual appearance is met with astonishment.

Accompanied by Lord Cumnor she is a:
middle-aged woman [...] she was dressed almost like a girl—in a sprigged muslin, with natural flowers in her hair, but not a vestige of a jewel or a diamond. Yet it must be the duchess; but what was a duchess without diamonds? — and in a dress which farmer Hodson's daughter might have worn! (WD 304)

The ‘sprigged’ is a fine muslin with raised supplementary weft decoration as indicated in Figure 9. Inappropriately attired in a girlish, figured print, the duchess’ appearance, diminished by the absence of the glittering appurtenances of her wealth and status, becomes an object of ridicule.  

Perhaps, the duchess’s juvenility of dress should be viewed more sympathetically - ‘a symptom of the pathos of the superfluous bourgeois female’, heavily weighted in the population statistics, who was often viewed as an ‘embodiment of imprudence’; as Tamara Wagner asserts, ‘[t]he virgin-white of young girls’ muslin dresses […] marks out both overdressed and underdressed matrons as displaying themselves on false pretences’.  

---


60 Tamara Wagner views ‘Miss Jessie’s juvenility of dress’ in Cranford as ‘a symptom of the pathos of the superfluous bourgeois female’, which was often viewed as an ‘embodiment of imprudence’. Furthermore, she asserts that the ‘condemnation of assumed juvenility in dress […] curiously conflicts with Victorian cults of childhood’. Tamara S. Wagner, ‘Respectably Dressed, or Dressed for Respect: Moral Economies in the Novels of Victorian Women Writers’ in Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature, ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Cindy Carlson (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), pp. 209-229 (pp.210-212).
Inversely, for a lower-class woman to exhibit a love of finery, appropriating the attire of the elite, was viewed as a sign of moral decline and subversion, substantiated at the extreme end of the continuum by the pariah status of the streetwalker. Thus, when Esther visits Mary Barton in an effort to clear Jem Wilson’s name, to ensure her respectability in a working-class neighbourhood, she ‘assumes the manners and character […] of a mechanic’s wife’ by changing her garb from the gaudy silks of her disreputable trade to ‘a printed gown’ (MB 230). In such a way Gaskell’s creative imagination, in the careful placing of motifs such as ‘print gowns’ reflects the cultural context belying such quotidian attire. It reveals a specifically female gendered, dress language, seemingly subtle and unobtrusive, which is nevertheless orchestrated by women, as an assessment of status with the means to manipulate and control others. Foucault uses the term ‘docile bodies’, whereby in modern society, power ‘circulate[s] through progressively finer channels, gaining access to individuals themselves, to their bodies, their gestures and all their daily actions’. In effect, the wearing of a print gown and its colour-coded associations reveals the intricate ways by which women policed themselves and each other, simultaneously scrutinizing the social delineations inscribed on to women’s bodies and physiognomies, in the societal flux of the mid-nineteenth century.

In Gaskell’s text also, a shared material culture seems to be a way in which she uses the quotidian of fabrics to communicate so succinctly her protagonists’

---

61 Michel Foucault, cited in Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p.72.
interiority and sensibilities. Therefore, in North and South, mill worker Higgin’s appraisal of John Thornton’s mental anguish during a downturn in the market, is expressed so pertinently by the reference to the basic cheap commodity, which has been the bedrock of the expansion of mill towns like Milton-Northern and the spinning-mill owner’s life. ‘Eh! I reckon I know who'd ha' been sorry for to see our measter sitting so like a piece o' grey calico!’ (NS 421). ‘Grey calico’ was the term for the ‘white or plain unbleached calicoes’, before they are ‘finished’ by the calico printers’ workshops strung along the banks of the River Medlock. Furthermore, ‘grey calico’ was often ‘shipped in the loom state and used for the manufacture of shirting’ in India.\(^{62}\) In both instances the unfinished cotton, final ending unknown, is an apposite simile bleakly painting the uncertain and unpredictable depths of economic and psychological troughs - ‘those periods of bad trade’ and the manufacturer’s inner anguish and woes (NS 421).

Cranford and The Great Exhibition: A Tasteful Debate

The Exhibition fostered a debate about the aesthetic qualities and representation of taste across a bewildering array of products. Whereas the Exhibition trumpeted the mass products of industry, it was felt that British products although price-competitive, were lacking in good design and visual elegance particularly with the drive towards free trade. Against this backdrop, two months after the closure of the Great Exhibitio, Gaskell began her serialization of ‘The Cranford Papers’ in Charles Dickens’s

\(^{62}\) Farnie, p.101.
periodical *Household Words* on 13 December 1851. ‘The Cranford Papers’ nestled within a literary hotchpotch is an integral part of this mid-nineteenth-century style and taste discourse, while also underscoring the era’s concerns with the distinction between subjects and their ‘things’. This section explores the ‘many new relations between [women] and things’ as a perplexed and rather bemused womanly community negotiates socio-economic change and the cyclical financial upheavals of encroaching industrialization.

‘Perplexed’ also describes Gaskell’s own reaction to the Great Exhibition, ‘I went 3 times, & should never care to go again; but then I’m not scientific nor mechanical’. She was not alone. The sheer scale of the venture was encapsulated in an enormous glass conservatory (*Punch* dubbed it the Crystal Palace) built over 18 acres of Hyde Park, that showcased approximately 14 000 exhibits, from across Britain, her colonies and the world. It was a spectacle that left many of its six million visitors searching for analogies. Charlotte Brontë exclaimed that the ‘bewildering’ juxtaposition of displays ‘from diamonds to spinning jennies and printing presses’ was ‘a mighty Vanity Fair.’ The allusion to ‘Vanity Fair’ is pertinent. The allure of worldly goods and ostentatious display, steering pilgrims from the just path, mirrors the views of such critics as Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Gaskell herself. The Great Exhibition at its crux seemed to represent a ‘epistemological crisis’ as Victorian writers worried that a welter of mass-produced goods was subsuming older spiritual and traditional values; it

---

63 *Letters*, p.159. Original emphasis.
was feared that a rush to modernity and standardized commodities risked the loss of an inherent knowledge of craftsmanship and the provenance of goods.  

However, the Great Exhibition and the text of Cranford share one common theme, namely a debate about the qualities that cultivate good taste and how is it discernible in objects and an individual’s possessions, even though they are mass-produced. Design Reform figures such as Henry Cole, Owen Jones and Ralph Wornum believed that ‘British public taste was defective and the visual design of British manufactured goods poor’ and that French goods ‘displayed the most refined examples of conventional taste’. The public lacked the means of discernment in their purchasing choices to sway manufacturers’ designs preferring ‘the vulgar, the gaudy, the ugly even, to the beautiful and perfect’. Artist and art historian Ralph Wornum, who lectured on aesthetics to the government-sponsored design schools, was equally vociferous appealing for ‘objects of a cultivated, refined taste’. Could the latter phrase equally derive from a denizen from Cranford?  

Perhaps, with this reason in mind, the narrator in Cranford nimbly saves Miss Matty from a possible fashion faux pas in the vulgar and gaudy, namely ‘a great Saracen’s-head turban’, which Miss Matty asks Mary Smith to procure her from Mary’s  

---

hometown, the neighbouring Drumble. With a series of deft, diversionary tactics, Mary Smith resists all Miss Matty’s attempts, ‘But for all that, I had rather that she blamed Drumble and me than disfigured herself with a turban’ (CF 82). In fact, turbans were introduced into English fashions in the 1790’s and ‘[t]he Egyptian engagements (1798-1801) helped fuel Regency women’s passion for turbans, from cap size to imposing widths’. As the Cranford ladies only read the court news of St James, they are unaware of fashion trends and advice increasingly disseminated by women’s periodicals, whereby every nuance and novelty of dress is updated, a signifier of social status. By the 1820s, turbans were passé, as Mary Smith intuits, injurious to the wearer’s elegance and ‘taste’. Miss Matty is adamant in her choice, however, deriding the cultural barrenness of industrial Drumble. Drumble is the great commercial town, close to Cranford by railway. Based on the ‘horrid cotton trade’, it's the creative equivalence of Manchester (CF 61). By one small motif, we gain a sense of the denizens’ resistance to the march of progress. They promulgate an alternative interpretation of ‘taste’ from that prevalent in the public domain where ‘taste’ was not just seen as a subjective quality, but a male-centred discussion upon the means of educating the British public to improve aesthetic choices.

69 ‘Saracen’s-head turban’ a name, which in the historic context, simultaneously terrified and thrilled with the sensation of the Oriental other. Thomas Recchio links the turban headdress to the ‘great war in India’, after which Peter is never heard of again (CF 59). He believes the war is an allusion to the ‘Vellore Mutiny of 1806’, when the East India Company, indifferent to Indian religious and caste cultures, tried to replace the sepoys’ turban with an alternative headdress, similar to a hat, Thomas Recchio, Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford: A Publishing History (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 54-5. 70 Davidson notes that the turban also appealed to older women as a means of ‘covering less than youthful locks […] when wigs alone could shift easily out of place’, Davidson, p.234.
Art critic, John Ruskin (1819-1900), was an important contributor to this artistic debate. In *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) he categorized aesthetic principles into seven areas and ‘associated them with moral and spiritual uplift’ with his ‘stress on truth to materials’ and not mere imitation.\(^{71}\) Taste thus became a moral decision, discernible to all. Talia Schaffer wryly comments upon the ethical efficacy of taste, ‘[n]ow selecting wallpaper meant exercising a principled choice between truth and falsehood, of the gravest importance for the soul of the consumer and, indeed the nation’.\(^{72}\) The Cranford ladies believe themselves apart from the commercial world, although paradoxically, their rentier incomes probably derive from patriarchal investments in the railway and textile loan schemes, which enable the denizens to ‘possess a genteel competency, sufficient for tastes that are elegant and refined’ (*CF* 135). Borislav Knezevic claims that the town of Cranford is not only ‘measured in its relationship to the industrial modernization of the North’, but also to ‘the increasing cultural and institutional ascendancy of London’.\(^{73}\) Thus, in their recycling of London news from the *St James’s Chronicle* and in their pursuit of London modes of fashion, ‘Cranford features as an outpost of the state culture of the south’.\(^{74}\) Much of the Cranford phraseology does indeed mirror the discourse of taste and design engendered by the Exhibition. Indeed, the language percolates across the spheres.

---

72 Schaffer, p.53. In a letter, 1\(^{st}\) September 1851, Gaskell indicates she has read *The Seven Lamps of Architecture, Letters*, p.161.
74 Knezevic, p.408.
Thus, contemporary scientist, Robert Hunt, in his *Hand-book to the Great Exhibition*, described in stately terms a calico steam-printing machine operating at the exhibition: ‘[a] system of copper cylinders, mounted in a frame of great elegance’.\(^75\) *The Times* complained about the ‘ostentatious’ and unsightly design of English furniture displayed at the exhibition; they ‘appeal more to the parvenu, who wants to get his house flashily decked out, than the man of elegant tastes or moderate means’.\(^76\) It seems *The Times*, in circumlocutory fashion, is reiterating the Cranford ladies’ constant refrain ‘elegant economy’ versus ‘vulgarily ostentatious’. From the cotton output of Manchester through to the domestic products mass-produced in Birmingham, Sheffield and the Potteries, design leaders advocated that moral worth was integral to ‘good taste’ and should be displayed in the design of all manufactured products. This would enable all people to live a respectable life, following the mores of the middle classes ‘both in commodities and in ideals’.\(^77\) This belief went beyond just the aesthetic appeal of products, however, and reflected an underlying anxiety regarding the construction of identity; mass-manufactured goods enabled a democratization of the consumption of goods previously only available to higher-income groups. This is parodied in *Cranford* when the Misses Barkers refuse to sell aristocratic sanctioned caps to the farmers’ wives (CF 61).

---


\(^77\) Flanders, p.15.
It also reveals the concern permeating round ‘the new culture of the copy’, which made it increasingly difficult to ‘distinguish authenticity’ and the genuine item; this consequently led to ‘a preoccupation with the provenance of goods’. Within Cranford there are many references to the origins of certain treasured possessions linked to certain historical and mythologized places: lace ‘made by the nuns abroad’ (CF 78), ‘Shetland wool’ (CF 9) and Indian shawls and muslins, whereas goods from industrial Drumble are notably either rejected or have to be drastically altered.

Likewise, in a display of xenophobia all things French are viewed with horror and suspicion because of the denizens’ distant memories of the French Revolution and the fears of invasion from Napoléon Bonaparte. However, the Great Exhibition lauded French products:

No country in the world had better learned how to combine fine art, superlative design and sophisticated manufacturing processes. Sèvres porcelain, Gobelins tapestries, Limoges enamels, Parisian bronzes and clocks are among the classes of French production that had even then become bywords for taste and quality.79

Indeed, Queen Victoria chose from the magnificent displays of French silks and fabrics when selecting gifts for her household staff and relatives. In April 1865 after her visit to Mme. Mohl in Paris, Gaskell wrote to her daughter, Marianne divulging the latest style dictates of Parisian fashion, ‘No morning gowns are trimmed at the bottom in Paris. Mme Lamy said she was not trimming any morning gowns\ skirts’.80

78 Waters, p.41.
79 Leapman, locations 2367-71.
80 Letters, p.753.
Perhaps royal approval is behind the volte-face shift of viewpoint by the Cranford ladies on Paris fashions in the later text, 'The Cage at Cranford' (1863). Here the turban headdress reappears again. Mary Smith intends that her surprise Parisian gift to Miss Pole will be ‘an elegant and fashionable head-dress; a kind of cross between a turban and cap’ rather than the ‘newest and most elegant’ cage that arrives.\footnote{Elizabeth Gaskell, ‘The Cage at Cranford’ in \textit{Cranford}, pp.166-175 (pp.166-7). Further references are given after quotations in the text with the abbreviation CCF.} However, Mary and Miss Pole’s \textit{faux pas} and ignorance about the latest fashion fad, the cage or crinoline – ‘iron petticoats all made of hoops’ - is showcased by communal hilarity at their error (CCF 172).\footnote{Rebecca Mitchell explains the purpose of the crinoline ‘[b]uilt upon the industrial innovation of lightweight sprung steel, the wire cage hung from the waist and provided support for the heavy, fully skirts in increased in circumference through the early 1860s. […] [T]he light open cage’ replaced heavy petticoats that had been difficult to wash. \textit{Fashioning the Victorians}, ed.by Rebecca N. Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), p.93.} The Mrs Hoggins and Mrs Fitz-Adams take in a ‘Paris fashion-book’ and see ‘the plates of fashion’ (CCF 174) allowing even the surgeon Hoggins to demonstrate his superior awareness of female fashions, notwithstanding that reliable conveyer of the latest styles, the ‘servant-maiden Fanny’ (CCF 170). Salvaging their pride, however, and in a final flourish of \textit{esprit de corps} and re-cycling, Miss Pole proposes to fashion the iron cage and whalebone into ‘two good comfortable English calashes’ (CCF 175).\footnote{Julia Clarke describes the Cranford ladies’ recycling as ‘repurposing’. The repurposed calash out of the fashionable cage, with its ‘prison-like attributes’ is ‘political; the restrictive nature of the garment is something the ladies find distasteful, and they react accordingly’, Julia Clarke, "A Regular Bewty!": Women Remaking and Remade in Elizabeth Gaskell's \textit{Cranford}, \textit{GSJ}, 33 (2019), 37-50.(p.49).} However, Mary and Miss Pole’s \textit{faux pas} and ignorance about the latest fashion fad, the cage or crinoline – ‘iron petticoats all made of hoops’ - is showcased by communal hilarity at their error (CCF 172).\footnote{Rebecca Mitchell explains the purpose of the crinoline ‘[b]uilt upon the industrial innovation of lightweight sprung steel, the wire cage hung from the waist and provided support for the heavy, fully skirts in increased in circumference through the early 1860s. […] [T]he light open cage’ replaced heavy petticoats that had been difficult to wash. \textit{Fashioning the Victorians}, ed.by Rebecca N. Mitchell (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), p.93.} The Mrs Hoggins and Mrs Fitz-Adams take in a ‘Paris fashion-book’ and see ‘the plates of fashion’ (CCF 174) allowing even the surgeon Hoggins to demonstrate his superior awareness of female fashions, notwithstanding that reliable conveyer of the latest styles, the ‘servant-maiden Fanny’ (CCF 170). Salvaging their pride, however, and in a final flourish of \textit{esprit de corps} and re-cycling, Miss Pole proposes to fashion the iron cage and whalebone into ‘two good comfortable English calashes’ (CCF 175).\footnote{Julia Clarke describes the Cranford ladies’ recycling as ‘repurposing’. The repurposed calash out of the fashionable cage, with its ‘prison-like attributes’ is ‘political; the restrictive nature of the garment is something the ladies find distasteful, and they react accordingly’, Julia Clarke, "A Regular Bewty!": Women Remaking and Remade in Elizabeth Gaskell's \textit{Cranford}, \textit{GSJ}, 33 (2019), 37-50.(p.49).} A ‘calash or \textit{calèche} (c.1770 to 1790 revived; 1820-1839) of French origin, was ‘[a] large folding hood, hooped’ that was ‘[w]orn out of doors to
protect the [fashionable] head-dresses’.\textsuperscript{84} This seems a suitable Anglo-Saxon riposte to a Franco fashion frippery and a repudiation of modernity.\textsuperscript{85} The influence of Parisian fashion and the pervasive allure of French culture, is discussed in the later chapters on silk.

After the success of the Great Exhibition, and in a further attempt to educate the people with the qualities that imbued good taste, Sir Henry Cole organized another display in 1852, which consisted of eighty-seven of the most ‘tasteless’ items from the Great Exhibition; \textit{The Times’} review on 6 September 1852 gave it the hyperbolic nomenclature ‘Chamber of Horrors’ alluding to Madame Tussauds’ grim wax images from the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{86} Cole’s collection was entitled ‘The Gallery of False Principles’; items chosen included the ubiquitous Berlin wool work and ‘fabrics with realistic flowers and animals’.\textsuperscript{87} The Berlin wool, practised by the parvenu daughters in Cranford, and printed fabrics are an example of the ‘imitative arts’: a ‘shared belief that faithful mimesis of another object was the highest achievement in domestic’ handicrafts

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{84} Cecil Willet Cunnington, Phillis Cunnington and Charles Beard, \textit{A Dictionary of English Costume, 900-1900} (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1960), p.34.
\item\textsuperscript{85} Gaskell’s satire on the crinoline craze was a common refrain in the public press also, who warned about the perils of the fashion, namely the possible corruption of the working classes, concealment of unwanted pregnancies, as well as the dangers of ‘hearth-death’. See Emily Faithfull, ‘Crinoline’ in Mitchell, pp.99-102. Harriet Martineau, ‘A New Kind of Wilful Murder’ in Mitchell, pp.103-09. Indeed, to later commentators, the crinoline becomes a metaphor for the excesses of the French zeitgeist. ‘We took the crinoline to be the symbol of the Second Empire in France – of its overblown lies, its hollow and purse-proud impudence’, F. Th. Vischer cited in Walter Benjamin, \textit{The Arcades Project}, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann. trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Belknap Press, 1999), p.70.
\item\textsuperscript{86} Christopher Frayling, \textit{Henry Cole and the Chamber of Horrors} (London: Victoria & Albert Publishing, 2010), p.28.
\item\textsuperscript{87} Schaffer, pp. 51-2.
\end{footnotes}
and design. ‘False Principal 16’ was ‘Festoons’ a high-quality roller-printed chintz, produced by a leading Lancashire printer, chosen for the Great Exhibition by a highly esteemed London furnishing shop (Figure 109. Textile archivists at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) assert that it demonstrates the ‘finest technical skill of British textile printing at the time’. The fine placement of five different colours would have distinguished it from cheaper imitations. Cole, however, recoiled at the fabric’s inharmonious composition ‘imitation of one fabric upon another – ribbon upon chintz; the design of the ribbon composed of direct ‘symmetrical arrangement’’. Instead, Cole and his design counterparts ‘wanted objects to show solid construction and ornaments to be based on conventional forms and to serve the object’s purpose’.

Perhaps, it is with fortuitous insight in May 1851, the month when the Great Exhibition opens, Gaskell seems to offer similar sartorial advice to her daughter, Marianne on the necessity of good design and ‘form’ in the matter of dress: ‘If you have any gowns made in London have them well made; I would rather put the expense into the make than the material; form is always higher than colour etc’.

---

88 V&A Collections, Museum number: T.6-1933.
89 Frayling, p.34.
90 Schaffer, p.52.
Several years later, in 1859 one wonders if Gaskell stuck to her design precepts when she decides to change the chair covers in the drawing room of Plymouth Grove. She writes excitedly to Charles Eliot Norton, ‘Yes! We have got our drawing-room chairs & sofas covered with a new chintz. Such a pretty ones [sic], little rosebuds & carnations on a white ground.’ The provenance of the chintz was not in fact India but a Lancashire print. With its naturalistic design perhaps ‘form’ and ‘function’ had been sacrificed to the needs of domestic comfort and ‘little bits of prettiness’.

Henry Cole’s 1852 exhibition reveals the intellectually elitist and male gendered bifurcation of views on such popular fabrics and furnishings. In *Hard Times* (1854) Charles Dickens satirizes Cole’s campaign against the bad taste of naturalistic design found in the ‘imitative arts’ by the depiction of the government officer who condemns carpets ‘with representations of flowers’. Perhaps this campaign equally

---

92 *Letters*, p.536.
93 At the writer’s visit to Plymouth house, Manchester on 29th August 2019, a guide provided details of the chintz’s provenance.
94 *Letters*, p.536. In this instance ‘little bits of prettiness’ actually refer to ‘two Black Forest brackets [bought] at the fair at Heidelberg’.
explains how Margaret Hale recoils in horror at the ornate decorations in their proposed new home in the suburbs of Milton-Northern, ‘that front room up-stairs, with the atrocious blue and pink paper’ rather than ‘the plainness and simplicity which are of themselves the framework of elegance’ (NS 60-1). Cole and other design leaders, however, championed a discourse that was mirrored in the anxieties expressed in women’s periodicals concerning the formation of good taste, how its display is a reflection of one’s character and authenticity.

The nature and proof of ‘authenticity’ signifies the metropolitan unease with the unprecedented fissure from the small, knowable communities two generations earlier. This is a pervasive theme encapsulated by various contemporary commentators from Honoré de Balzac in his ‘Treatises on Elegance’ to Thomas Carlyle’s fictional musings on the importance of sartorial matters and the eternal quest for ornamentation in Sartor Resartus (1833-34). Just as the popular Amazonian statue at the Great Exhibition was a zinc copy of August Kiss’s bronze, in her light, epigrammatic fashion, Gaskell’s ‘Cranford’ texts comment upon the true values of originality and elegant taste in a small, womanly community that is resisting the winds-of-change. Gaskell too, seems to parody and question the nature of the style discourse, while seemingly aware of her

96 Richard Altick expostulates that Thomas ‘Carlyle’s elaborate structural metaphor in Sartor Resartus of clothing, particularly dandiacal clothing, as the symbol of the rag-husks that fatally obscure and inhibit the vital activity of man’s soul, was part of the permanent furniture of every well-read Victorian mind’, Richard D. Altick, The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p.282.

97 The Art Journal records that a life-size copy of the ‘Amazon’ statue in zinc was an eighth of the price of a bronze replica. Such copies were ‘admirably calculated for gardens in England’, The Art Journal, p.37.
own ambiguous relationship to such matters. In a similar vein to Mary Smith gently steering Miss Matty away from ‘the dazzling fascination of any yellow or scarlet silk’ (CF 116), and turban headdresses, a year after the exhibition, Gaskell is again bombarding daughter Marianne with advice, ‘we all, […] exclaim against dark blue silk, - ‘very common’, ‘very old fashioned,’ […] ‘don’t let it be like the Tagart’s frightful bonnets’’.  

Whereas Gaskell’s comments gesture to the changing nature of fashion, they underscore the significance of subtly changing social distinctions in order to distinguish her middle-class daughter from the hapless or the parvenu, or merely the sartorial choices of lower-income women. Perhaps aggrieved at her servant’s sloth and slowness in domestic tasks, in March 1859 Gaskell rails at her appearance, ‘Caroline has on an atrocious print today, great stripes of crimson, blue & brown’.  

The inharmonious nature of the cotton print and its clashing colours perhaps suggest, that it would have served better as an exhibit for Henry Cole’s ‘Chamber of Horrors’. More revealingly, it indicates that the tenets of the good taste movement, and the rationale behind the staging of the Great Exhibition, had negligible effects upon some producers and consumers alike. To use a Cranford aphorism, the print is ‘vulgarly ostentatious’ but probably gave the wearer great joy (CF 135).

98 Letters, p.213.  
99 Letters, p.546. Novelist Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897) writing about ‘dress’ in 1878 denounces the colour taste of an earlier generation ‘[w]e have learned that wild combinations of two or three colours in one costume are vulgar and in bad taste, and have, more or less, delivered ourselves from bondage in that particular’, Margaret Oliphant, Dress [1878], (London: Macmillan and Co, 1878; repr. [England (?)]: Elibron Classics, 2005), p.81.
Refashioning Fashion: ‘The Women in White’

Across Gaskell’s writings, from her letters to her fictional representations, girls and women share a similar, sartorial style statement in possessing a white muslin dress. On 17th July 1838, while attending a christening, Gaskell describes the hostess’ elegance ‘in a *beautiful* worked white muslin’, and in 1841 she giddily recounts the social decorum of Heidelberg society, ‘I must first tell you of the etiquette of dress. No one under 40 in summer wears anything but muslin, white of course in general’.100 The ‘muslin, white of course’ gesticulates to the pervasive nature of this style of attire, which even managed to transcend socio-economic and cultural divides for much of the period. Its longevity spanned from the late eighteenth-century Georgian England to its Victorian zenith in the 1860s. Clair Hughes affirms the centrality of muslin fabrics in this period, asserting that ‘muslins were to the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries what synthetic fibres were to the mid-twentieth century’; she further declares that a white dress ‘had become almost mandatory formal wear for the Victorian *jeune fille’*.101 The inference from both Gaskell and Hughes’ quotations is not just the muslin fabric per se, but also its very appearance of ‘whiteness’. Thus, this section’s pastiche sub-heading acknowledges the omnipresence of the sartorial style by alluding to Wilkie Collins’ sensational novel *The Woman in White* (1859), whereby the doubling of the protagonists

Anne Catherick and Laura Fairlie facilitates the multifarious and ambiguous symbolism of their ‘white’ muslins. The imagery of ‘whiteness’ will be discussed in greater detail. Like the hues of ‘black’ to be analysed in the ‘material mourning’ chapter, ‘white’ is the shade of self-effacement, increasingly overlaid by paradoxical connotations concerning feminine virtue and sexuality, particularly as the nineteenth century evolved.

At the onset of the Napoleonic Wars, Miss Pole, as a young girl, in Cranford buys her ‘India muslin gown’ (CF 111), while forty years later in the industrial heartland of Manchester, fallen factory girl, Esther finds that her ‘muslin gown, all dragged, and soaking wet up to the very knees’ is ‘unfit to meet the pelting of that pitiless storm’ (MB 121). Rather incongruously, tripping along in a later part of that novel, perhaps serving as a foil to the ‘blasphemous actions’ (MB 354) and monstrosity of the murder plot, there appears a ‘lovely little creature […] daintily decked out in soft, snowy muslin’ as ‘her fairy feet tripped along by her nurse's side’ (MB 355). Such sibilant adjectives ‘soft’ and ‘snowy’, whilst alluding to the quality of purity and whiteness in the fabric, also suggest a preternatural quality of ethereality; this trope is also present in North and South when the wealthy heiress Edith Shaw falls asleep, exhausted with bridal preparations; it is as if ‘Titania had ever been dressed in white muslin’ (NS 5). Titania is the Queen of the fairies in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, seemingly bizarre imagery perhaps for a realist novel that explores the contradistinction of industrial Milton-Northern with the metropolitan centre of Empire in southern
England. Nevertheless it is an apposite allusion, as it points to the intriguing historical, political and cross-cultural origins of the fabric ‘muslin’, from its seemingly mythical origins, to its status as a certain marker of English femininity in the mid-nineteenth century.

Indeed, Edward Baines (1800-1890), a nineteenth-century newspaper editor, in his comprehensive opus, *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain* (1835) wrote lyrically about the qualities of muslins, particularly those originating from India, they ‘might be thought the work of fairies, or of insects, rather than of men’. This mystical allusion captures some of the allure and cachet of a fabric, which is perhaps lost to the sensibilities of twenty-first century readers, who perhaps associate muslin with the swaddling of infants or household cloths, or the flimsy empire line gowns in a TV serialization of a Jane Austen novel. However, Miss Pohl’s ‘India muslin gown’ that is eventually recycled into a window blind, harbours the vestiges of an ancient tradition (*CF 111*). As costume historian Sonia Ashmore elaborates:

> The name ‘muslin’ is accredited to the Venetian merchant and traveller Marco Polo (c.1254-1324), who wrote that the name was derived from a fabric made at Mosul, now in Northern Iraq near the ancient city of Ninevah.

---

102 The full quotation from Shakespeare’s play:
With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine:
There sleeps Titania sometime of the night,
Lull’d in these flowers with dances and delight;


‘Muslin’ was thus the Persian name adopted by the English East Indian Company from the seventeenth century, in its trade with the fine cotton fabrics woven in Bengal. In North India, specifically Bengal, the finest ‘muslins’ were known as ‘mull’ or ‘mulmul’.

Muslin is a fine, open-textured fabric, woven to various degrees of fineness and was valued by its length and number of warp threads compared with its weight; the greater the length and number of threads, and the less the weight of the piece, the higher its price. Miss Pole’s Indian muslin, if its provenance is correct for the time frame, would have most certainly been hand woven. As Ashmore notes, in India ‘muslin was usually woven in lengths, 20 yards by one yard; it was a very labour-intensive procedure taking ‘two men from 10 to 30 days to weave a length, while the very finest muslins could take six months’. As there were ‘more than 100 varieties’ of muslin still being produced in the nineteenth century, it is doubtful whether Miss Pole’s muslin was of the quality that was once ‘woven exclusively for the Mughal Court’ and which swathed Marie-Antoinette (1755-1793) and the Empress Joséphine (1763-1814).

Such muslins were so light and transparent that they seemed endowed with mystical properties. In such a vein, the fourteenth-century Persian poet Amir Khusrau described the finest muslins from Dhaka and Deogiri lyrically, ‘[t]he skin of the moon removed by the executioner-star would not be so sheer […]. A hundred yards can pass through the eye of the needle’.

105 Ashmore, p.16.
107 Ashmore, p.16.
108 Yafa, p.35.
In such figurative language, the cachet of muslin is transmitted across the centuries, variously immortalized with such otherworld nomenclatures as *abrawen* (running water), *shabnam* (evening dew) and ‘woven air’.  

Miss Pole’s Indian gown, worn in her youth, *circa* 1800, possibly to dance ‘*menuets de la cour*’ in the ‘Assembly Room’ at Cranford is probably the ‘relatively simple style of dress known as the *chemise*’ (CF 82). As Ashmore observes ‘Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806) […] is credited with introducing the muslin gown to British fashion after Marie Antoinette sent her a gift of a muslin *chemise* edged with fine lace’. In France, the gown was known as the *Chemise à la Reine* after the Queen. From 1785 to 1820, this fashion was popular across Europe. The simplicity of the muslin gowns with its high waist accentuating a tubular silhouette was a Neo-Classical revival ‘inspired partly by the archaeological discoveries at Pompeii and Herculaneum’; the fineness and softness of muslin ‘made it an ideal medium for evoking the effects of classical sculpture and creating a contemporary interpretation of classical dress’. To reiterate, it is a style of dress immortalized by the numerous media adaptions of Austen’s novels, but perhaps fewer are aware of the political connotations of the simple muslin gown. It was truly revolutionary attire. Marie Antoinette’s adoption of the flimsy, transparent gown for a portrait in 1783 infuriated the French silk industry. The simplicity and elegance of her sartorial choice arguably

109 Ashmore, p.17 and p.32.  
110 Ashmore, p.41.  
111 Ashmore, p.41.  
112 Ashmore, p.60.
de-mystified the sanctity of the monarchy. As Jane Ashelford elaborates, it was ‘[t]he removal of the clear visual distinctions that had formerly existed between the classes’ that undermined the authority of the monarchy.\(^{113}\) As a reaction to the luxuriant silks and velvets worn by the nobility of the ancien régime, the chemise was also an affirmation of the spirit of Republicanism in post-revolutionary France. The Cranford ladies are traumatized by their fears of invasion from the French during the Napoleonic wars, so it is rather ironic that the Franco spirit of liberté and égalité enthuses the construction of the English feminine persona for the turn of the century.

The Cranford ladies reflecting wistfully upon their youth through the medium of Miss Pole’s gown, ‘long since worn out (we washed it and mended it, and traced its decline and fall into a window-blind)’ are notably silent about the gown’s other salient feature: its diaphanous nature (\(\text{CF} \ 111\)). The erotic allure of fine Indian muslin was renowned. The ‘seventeenth-century traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier described muslin as being so sheer that at the Grand Mogul’s seraglio ‘the kings and queens take great pleasure to behold the sultanesses in these shifts and see them dance with nothing else upon them’.\(^{114}\) The sensuality of transparent muslin and its sensual eastern allure is synonymous with the qualities of the Kashmir shawl, discussed in the previous chapter. Thus, muslin gowns and fine shawls are inextricably twinned from the Regency period until the 1860s.

\(^{114}\) Yafa, p.35.
In the previous chapter attention was drawn to the ‘spicy Eastern smell’, which Margaret Hale inhales from her aunt’s Kasmir shawls in North and South (NS 9). This was also a distinctive feature of Indian muslin. The unique aroma of Indian muslins ‘was thought to proceed from spices, and from having been long and closely packed on the voyage from India’.\textsuperscript{115} Again the fabric stimulates the visual, olfactory and haptic senses, and indeed the imagination, reinforcing its luxurious cachet. Narrator, Mary Smith in Cranford describes a similar olfactory process when she lyrically envisages the journey her letter to the Aga Jenkyns will take ‘to the strange wild countries beyond the Ganges!’; ‘[i]t would get tossed about on the sea, and stained with sea-waves perhaps; and be carried among palm-trees, and scented with all tropical fragrance’ (CF, p.127). Thus, the fabric would surely be infused with a heady sense of the otherness and ‘strangeness’ of distant lands. More prosaically, The Bolton Journal and Guardian in an article about the English muslin manufacturer, Thomas Ainsworth (1785-1831) observed, ‘many persons in buying muslin in a shop judged of its being Indian or otherwise, by the smell and the touch’, thus highlighting the sensory appeal of the fabric.\textsuperscript{116} ‘Hand-woven Indian muslin with a slight undulation in its matrices’ produced

\textsuperscript{115} Ashmore, p.38.
\textsuperscript{116} Ashmore, p.38. “Mr Ainsworth’s family frequently heard him say that he employed spices to scent the first muslin he made, imitating as closely as possible, the smell of Indian muslins! British muslins were frequently sent to India to be repacked and were returned to England as Indian muslins!” (quoted from Bolton Journal and Guardian, [n.d] and personal information from Ainsworth family dependents). This ploy to appeal to the olfactory sense, relates to the eighteenth century’s economic and social discourse regarding the nature of ‘luxury’ goods as distinct from ‘necessaries’. The Enlightenment philosopher and economist David Hume believed that luxury was ‘a refinement in the gratification of the senses’ that gave a spur to commerce via the ‘new consumerism of the middling classes’, Berg, Luxury and Pleasure, pp. 31 and 33.
a tactile sensation of softness similar to ‘mossiness’.117 Perhaps this is what Miss Benson is ascertaining when she examines the ‘piece of delicate cambric-muslin’ that Mr Bradshaw sends as a gift to Ruth to prepare her baby’s layette ‘“Very fine muslin indeed,” said Miss Benson, feeling it, and holding it up against the light, with the air of a connoisseur’ (RU 130-31). Chamber’s Cyclopaedia of 1728 describes the fabric’s surface: ‘Musslin, Muslin or Mousseline […] a fine cloth, wholly of Cotton, so call’d for not being even, but having a downy Nap on its Surface resembling Moss, which the French call’d Mousse.’118

The depiction vividly conveys the tactile nature of the cloth; the slight unevenness of its hand-woven surface gave the cloth ‘a vitality’ and ‘charm’ unachievable in industrial production.119 ‘Vitality’, alluding to vivacity is the source of the cloth’s kinaesthetic capacity to stimulate an affective reaction.120 Thus, Miss Matty touching ‘the folds of soft muslin’ round her throat, recalls the days of her youth with the recognition that her brother Peter’s presents, the ‘India muslin gown and a pearl necklace’, are vestiges of a bygone era, which she can only revisit in her memories (CF 149).

Kortsch pens a very vivid picture of what a turn-of-the century dance in an Assembly Room might have resembled, possibly very similar to the memories of Miss Matty, ‘[b]allrooms trembled with thinly-clad, bare-bosomed beauties, all wearing the

117 Davidson, p.271. ‘Mossiness’ is coined by Ashmore, Ashmore, p.8.
118 Ashmore, p.8.
119 Davidson, p.271.
120 Ashmore, p.16.
virginal colour white’.

‘Trembled’ is an apposite verb in this context, not only indicative of an underlying sexual frisson between dancing partners but also certainly evocative of the chill of provincial ballrooms. Indeed, Laura George makes a pertinent argument on this point, asserting that the focus on the Neo-Classical dress of the late-eighteenth century reveals a bias towards a euro-centric reading of the fashion’s associations by its emphasis on the ‘republican ideals of the French Revolution’ and the emulation of an ancient classical world. Instead, she maintains that the very fragility and lightweight nature of muslins were ‘products of the tropics’ and the Neo-Classical revival represented an occidental appropriation of the traditional Indian fabric.

---

121 Kortsch, p.61.
123 George, p.76.
fine muslin empowered turn-of-the-century middle-income women to fashion a style of
dress that to the later Victorians was scandalously underdressed.124

British caricaturist, James Gillray (1756-1815) lampoons the scanty muslin attire
of women in the early nineteenth century in The Three Graces in a High Wind: A Scene
Taken from Nature in Kensington Gardens (1810) seen in figure 11. The thin muslin
clings alluringly to the women’s bodies making the viewer a prurient voyeur. It was even claimed that ‘some women were suspected of dampening their muslin dresses to make them cling more closely’.125 Not surprisingly, English
women suffered for their fashion predilection. By stepping out in little more than their underwear, pneumonia became known as the ‘muslin disease’.126

---

124 George, p.77.
125 Ashmore, p.64.
126 Ashmore, p.64.
Until the third quarter of the eighteenth century, English textile production could not replicate the fine muslins of Dhaka and Bengal. The East India Company was able to control only 40 percent of Indian muslin production. Its price rose by 15 per cent in the 1770s, at the same time its quality deteriorated. It was the advent of Samuel Crompton’s spinning mule in Lancashire that enabled the production of warp and weft yarns fine enough for muslin. Indeed, Maxine Berg asserts that Crompton’s mule became known as the muslin wheel. By 1787, ‘500,000 pieces of muslin were manufactured in Great Britain’ the main centres being Bolton, Glasgow and Paisley. By 1788, fustian manufacturer, Charles Taylor reported to the ‘Board of Trade that calico and muslin production had overtaken that of fustian’. As Douglas Farnie observes the diffusion of Crompton’s mule ‘shattered the monopoly of India in the production of fine fabrics’. That, and Edward Cartwright’s power loom in 1784 was the catalyst for the dramatic fall in the real price of muslin, particularly from the 1820s. In the 1780s, in deflated prices, a piece of muslin equalled 116 shillings; by the 1830s it was 28s. It enabled the dissemination of a previously élite fabric to a wider group of female consumers. By the 1850s, the scanty white Neo-Classical, Indian muslin gown has been reconfigured and refashioned to become the requisite attire for young, adolescent girls about to enter the social milieu, muslin’s ethereality and purity an overt

---

128 2015 Pasold Conference.  
129 Ashmore, p.34.  
130 Ashmore, p.35.  
metaphor of maidenhood. Figure 12 shows the extent of the transformation from Gillray’s depiction.

Similar to many a mother, however, Gaskell in December 1849 worries that her seventeen-year-old daughter, Marianne may be partying too frequently and in not quite the right company:

I am puzzled about MA how far to let her accept the 1001 invitations to dances thronging in – I have attempted to draw a rule that she may go where I go, and no where else, but I am not sure it will do. Meanwhile she is having the debauchery of a white tarlatane frock, which will be very pretty

Costume historian Cunnington describes ‘tarlatan’ as ‘a thin gauze-like muslin, much stiffened’ and which was very fashionable in 1841. By this time, voluminous skirts and copious petticoats presented a demurer silhouette than Gillray’s 1810 illustration of The Three Graces. Gaskell in her short story ‘A Fear for the Future’ comments upon this change of fashion, ‘[a]s for Romance, it has had its day […] just as the thin slippers and

Figure 12; White muslin dress dated 1851. VAM No. T367&A-1988

132 Letters, p.97.
133 Cunnington, pp. 435 and 139.
muslin robes of old times were foolish, fragile, and poetical’. In May 1852 Gaskell has a ‘white muslin frock’ made for Marianne and in her narratives, the white muslin serves as a synecdoche for young daughters from middling class families overtly signalling their purity and virtue to perspective suitors. It is, to reiterate Clair Hughes’s phrase, ‘the mandatory dress’.

However, some varieties of muslin maintained their ‘fragility’ and popularity, despite the prognostications of the narrative voice of the short story, and this gestures to a paradox inherent within the Victorian construction of the virtuous paradigm of young girls. Alongside the purity of infantine, un-awakened sexuality, there are undertones of a covert sensuousness and sexual frailty, which subverts the Victorian ideology of idealized, innocent girlhood. After Ruth’s seduction, Bellingham, whisks her away to London giving her ‘carte blanche’ to choose ‘delicate soft white muslin’ for her dress (RU 133). Indeed, in their lovers’ hideaway in Wales, a prurient and lascivious, male gaze consumes Ruth so ‘[v]ery modest and innocent-looking in her white gown!’ (RU 61). John Harvey summarizes this paradox succinctly, observing that ‘white dresses, beneath their profession of purity, [were] open to a less cold affinity, with white linen and bed-sheets, the boudoir and the bed’. In her fallen state Ruth refashions the ‘soft white muslin […] into small garments […] made ready for the little creature’, the act of

diminution, a gesture of sloughing off and disassociation from her sin (RU 133). It seems that the unique qualities of white muslin, its simultaneous ‘dynamic transparency and opacity’ is a medium to represent the interleaved and evolving complexities of femininity and sexuality constructs.136

Madeleine Seys in her reading of the representation of white muslin in Sensation fiction from the 1860s, also comments upon the multifariousness and ambivalence of the trope, suggesting that it signifies ‘virtue, fidelity, self-effacement […] vulnerability [and] death’.137 ‘Self-effacement’ is a pertinent observation because the colour ‘white’ like ‘black’ is a denial of colour, and was thus often used for death shrouds and mourning attire in the young; in North and South, Edith wears ‘white crape’ in mourning for her uncle (NS 378). Perhaps the point that Seys, however, misses is the extent of the ‘purity’ of the ‘white’ as muslin attire soiled very easily and was difficult to launder. In much of Gaskell’s writings the emphasis is on the cleanliness and freshness of the muslin as well as the care needed to maintain its appearance. As Ashmore notes, ‘muslin implied leisure- and that one had servants to maintain the fragile fabric’.138 In North and South, servant Dixon is in charge of washing Mrs. Hale’s ‘muslins and laces’ (NS 75) even as the mistress bewails, ‘I only know it is impossible to keep the muslin blinds clean here above a week together’ in the smoke and grime of Milton-North (NS 82). In Mrs Thornton’s pristine drawing room, the ‘pure whiteness of

137 Seys, p.32.
138 Ashmore, p.46.
the muslins and netting’ denotes the invisible labour of female domestics to ward off the contaminating dirt from the adjoining factory (NS 112). In *Wives and Daughters*, the impoverished Mrs. Kirkpatrick, before her marriage to Dr Gibson, laments that she cannot afford the dainty ‘muslins and pink ribbons’ to deck a looking-glass because ‘the muslin got dirty’ and would need constant replacement. (*WD* 99).

This commonality of anxiety over the perception of ‘soiled’ muslin and its observation by others, reflects how the institution of washing had adopted a ‘quasi-religious sanction’ dating back from the eighteenth century, ‘especially under the influence of John Wesley’; it formed the basis of the code of respectability, although it represented a considerable drain on pecuniary resources.\(^{139}\) In 1841, on a governess’ salary of £20 per annum, Charlotte Brontë incurred washing expenses of £4, a fifth of her income (*LCB* 159). *The Queen* periodical advised its readers in 1880 to avoid muslins if travelling to India ‘as with the constant washing and the heat, they soon lose their colours and get washed out, and look far from fresh and nice’.\(^{140}\)

The antithesis of cleanliness and freshness, namely dirtiness and stains, carries other allusions - a contravention of the code of respectability and its associative damning slur on sexual reputation.\(^{141}\) Thus, fallen factory girl Esther’s muslin gown is

---

\(^{139}\) Farnie, pp.129-30. In 1846, historian, Jules Michelet asserts the shift towards cleanliness in the population was ‘a great revolution nonetheless. It was a revolution in cleanliness and embellishment of the homes of the poor; underwear, bedding, table linen, and window curtains were now used by whole classes who had not used them since the beginning of the world’, Michelet, *The People* p.44. For neatness and cleanliness in the writings of Jane Austen see Davidson, p.53.

\(^{140}\) *The Queen* [7 August 1880, p.130] cited in Ashmore, p.20.

‘all draggled, and soaking wet up to the very knees’ denoting the pariah status of her ‘doubtful profession’ on the filthy streets (MB 121). Indeed, middle-class observers complained that the “painted dress women […] in dirty white muslin” exerted a ‘pernicious influence on impressionable servant girls’. \(^{142}\) Therefore, it comes as little surprise to discover the ubiquity of muslin attire promoted its coinage as a pejorative female-gendered synonym for women and sexual wantonness. Jill Heydt-Stevenson citing Eric Partridge’s *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* notes that ‘the word ‘muslin’ carried sexual connotations, as in the following definitions: ‘a bit of muslin’ referred to ‘a woman, a girl’; ‘a bit of muslin on the sly’ suggested ‘illicit sexual relations’; *OED*’s first attested usage of “muslin” in this sense occurs in 1823’. \(^{143}\)

Therefore, the symbolism that bifurcates the muslin attire of the stepsisters, Molly and Cynthia in *Wives and Daughters* is worthy of further reflection. Molly’s gown is described in phrases of order and simplicity, ‘delicate neatness’ and ‘daintily clean’, whereas Cynthia’s is portrayed with careless aplomb – ‘her tumbled gowns tossed away so untidily’ (WD 248). As ‘cleanliness and neatness denoted genteel respectability’ muslin, therefore, can be used in the same text as a sign of graceful virginity, or a sign of wanton flirtatiousness. \(^{144}\) In the light of Heydt-Stevenson’s observations, the verb ‘tumbled’ may carry more allusions than just being creased, particularly as blithe aristocrat, Lady Harriet’s well-worn muslin is merely described as

---


\(^{143}\) Jill Heydt-Stevenson cited in Laura George, ‘Austen’s Muslin’, p.94.

\(^{144}\) Davidson, p.96.
‘not in the freshest order’. (p.163) Might the ‘tumbled’ muslin possibly refer to Cynthia’s past life in scandalous France and her relationship with the predatory estate manager, Mr Preston?  

For instance, the *OED* records that colloquially the verb ‘tumble’ refers to coitus. Indeed, on the eve of her father’s marriage to Mrs Kirkpatrick, Molly is shown two miniatures by Mr Preston who comments upon the likeness to Cynthia. It is ‘Mademoiselle de St Quentin, a great beauty at the French Court [and] … Madame du Barri’ (*WD* 161). The latter was better known as the ‘Comtesse du Barry (1743-93), mistress of Louis XV from 1768’ (*WD* 702). Sophia Huang asserts that in this scene Preston may be ‘hint[ing] at his secret engagement to Cynthia, but his identification of a schoolgirl with a courtesan is pointedly malicious’.  

I suggest that perhaps Cynthia’s awakened awareness of her comeliness, an allure and aura that enthrals the men she meets, conceals the secret of a sexual liaison This may also be the source of the barely concealed antipathy between mother and daughter as both have been the objects of Preston’s sexual gaze. Hyacinth Kirkpatrick’s desire to play the performative blushing bride in her second marriage ceremony would have been usurped by her daughter’s charms. Behind the veneer of the code of respectability, and the ensuing silence and shame on any aspersions of sexual impropriety, the gender bias of Eve’s ‘fallen-ness’ permeated the mid-nineteenth century’s domestic and ideological environment.

---

145 Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (1603), iv. v. 62: ‘Quoth she, before you tumbled me, You promised me to wed’, *OED*.

rationale. The purity and upkeep of those fragile muslin gowns may thus covertly signify other frailties and indiscretions underlying the Victorian paradox of idealized maidenhood.

Conclusion
This chapter has restored the economic and technological context underlying Gaskell’s nuanced placement of calico, cotton and muslin motifs. The trajectory from the patchwork hexagons in Sylvia’s Lovers to the massive bales in North and South reveal the startling transformation whereby Gaskell’s hometown became fêted as the Cottonopolis of the world by the mid-nineteenth century. Building from the previous chapter on wools and stuffs, the metonymic associations of printed cottons and particularly ‘Hoyle’s purple’, facilitates fresh insights into the motivations and aspirations of the eponymous heroine, motherless Mary Barton, adorned as her middle-class counterparts in merino and shades of lilac. It underscores the anxiety of appearance and the scrutiny of physiognomic form that is also the rationale underpinning the discourse of good taste, style and authenticity. While the latter was essentially a male-dominated debate, ostensibly to further the competitiveness of

147 Josie Billington describes Cynthia’s as a ‘darker, more complex and troubling character […]. Cynthia has lovers in place of- and really in unacknowledged despair of – fulfilling her real need to be loved without the trappings of sexual attention’. She further describes Cynthia’s psychological flaws from her damaged upbringing, as a ‘black spot’, that Gaskell leaves ‘half-hidden, untouched, undramatically incorporated as a normal part of life’ by her becoming Mrs Henderson. As Billington summarizes ‘Cynthia […] is at once an image and a necessary casualty of Gaskell’s large acceptance of human fallenness’, Josie Billington, 'Introduction', in The Works of Elizabeth Gaskell: Wives and Daughters, vol.10, ed.by Josie Billington (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), pp.vii-xxiv (pp.xii-xiii).
international trade that culminated in the magnificent spectacle of the Great Exhibition, it reveals a coalescence of concerns.

Self-fashioning and the nature of social distinction in an expanding secondary economy, meant that a plethora of manufactured goods enabled the democratization of fashion, to a growing market of consumers. Coincidental to this was alarm that in the rush to modernity, there had been a hiatus from the continuum of the knowable past of their forebears, especially as urbanization created a diaspora from smaller rural communities. This theme carries into the next chapter, which examines the nature of material mourning in Gaskell’s writings.

In a century harrowed by the ubiquity of death and disease, traditional rituals concerning death practices and mourning procedures came under the scrutiny of the public health authorities. Swathed in bombazine, glue-stiffened crepe or rusty black, the Victorian’s commodification of grief was gender prescribed and inscribed.
Chapter Three
Grave Concerns: The Fabrics of Loss and Mourning in *Mary Barton*

‘Even the very check bed-curtains became dear to her under the idea of seeing them no more. If it was so with inanimate objects, if they had such power of exciting regret’¹

Introduction

*Mary Barton* by Elizabeth Gaskell, published in 1848, is a novel haunted by death. Death seeps through the text like the miasma the Victorians feared, as the mortal contagion. Whilst contemporary critic, Maria Edgeworth opined that ‘there are too many deaths in the book’ within the novel, Gaskell herself in the writing of the text was still mourning the loss of her son, three years earlier, and described his death as a ‘never ending sorrow: but which hallows this house’.² Whereas her husband, William Gaskell encouraged his wife to write as a means of assuaging her grief, the text seems interwoven with the warp of Gaskell’s present acceptance of loss and the weft of her past memories of suffering.³ Thus, even the release of former factory girl Esther, after having served her short prison sentence for street-walking, is described in particularly poignant and resonant undertones, ‘[t]he month was over; [...] ‘the first dark days of nothingness’ to the widow and the child-bereaved’ (*MB* 153). ‘Child-bereaved’ is not

¹ (*MB* 339).
only reflective of Gaskell’s and her protagonist’s loss but a sub-text of national suffering for the Victorian period. As Pat Jalland observes, high mortality rates existed across the British population in the nineteenth century that only started to decline after the 1870s; however, rates of infant mortality remained stubbornly high until the 1900s.⁴ Anthony Wohl describes this harrowing period as the ‘massacre of the innocents’ as 100,000 infants were known to have died before their first birthday.⁵ Whereas the text of Mary Barton may serve to act, as a material commemoration of Gaskell’s loss, the ‘nothingness’ inflicted on the child-bereaved was further compounded for women like Esther during this period. Not only can she never claim the dignified address of ‘widow,’ having been deserted by her erstwhile soldier lover but the mourning for her deceased, illegitimate child is undertaken covertly, away from family. Her fall and suffering are aggravated by ostracism from the respectable working-class community.

Gaskell’s novel is thus appositely sub-titled A Tale of Manchester Life because she wanted to convey to an uncomprehending middle-class readership, the ‘tremendous facts of the destitution that surrounded thousands upon thousands in the terrible years 1839, 1840, and 1841’ when exports of Lancashire cotton from the northern mill towns were decimated by the Opium War with China (MB 82). As will be discussed later cotton goods and the opium trade share a complex interrelationship with the burgeoning demands for free trade and the expansion of Empire. John Barton’s eventual descent into drug dependency is also symbolic of the sub-text of opium abuse rife across the

⁵ Wohl quoted in Jalland, p.120.
metropolis, which adds to the toll of deaths, including that of infants. Its metonymic associations radiate to the drug dependent population within China.

Thus, this ‘industrial novel’ is not merely recounting falling cotton revenues and consequent industrial unrest; in conveying the lives of the different classes of Manchester inhabitants, Gaskell wished to represent a sympathetic ‘structure of feeling’ for the strains and struggles of their quotidian existence, ‘I bethought me how deep might be the romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided’ (MB 3). ‘Romance in the lives’ may appear a rather sentimentalized and oblique assessment of a passer-by’s countenance and their imagined lived life, but Gaskell in her portrayal of the working-class protagonists and their trials with death, mourning and grief, achieves this with a sympathetic portrayal of the characters’ relationship to each other, and to their homely possessions. The waxing and waning of their material quotidian world, in particular domestic bric-a-brac, conveys this ‘romance’ and interiority in a diachronic way. Everyday cloth, fabrics and dresses act as a ‘stuff of memory’, preserving the fragments of distant experiences that were particularly pertinent for a migrant population. The diaspora from the rural hinterlands of Buckinghamshire and Westmoreland to the metropolitan, industrial heartland, an exodus that is undertaken by Alice Wilson and her brothers and Ben

---

6 Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* 1780-1950 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), p.119. 7 The etymology of the term ‘bric-a-brac’ occurs within the time frame setting of *Mary Barton*. It is from the French ‘bric-à-brac’ (1825) referring to ‘[m]iscellaneous small objects and ornaments which are typically old or antique but regarded as having little value; knick-knacks’ (*OED*).
Davenport, ultimately severs links to a bygone way of life, which now become ‘such pleasant mysteries for townspeople’ that ‘speaks of other times’ (MB 5).

Cloth allusions also serve as tropes of commemoration and loss, as in their plenitude and penury, they not only mirror the trade cycle and industrial change but reflect the changing fortunes of the protagonists’ lives. The dearth of material goods, even to their gaping absence is significant. In Carolyn Steedman’s view, the absence of a ‘rag rug’ in her remembered inventory of domestic items in the Barton’s family parlour, reflected a ‘shortage, not of the poor, but of the traditional symbols of the poor’. Whilst Paul Johnson notes, ‘[i]n an environment where so many people owned virtually nothing, almost any possession and the display of this’ was a form of social distinction, it is my contention, that in such straitened circumstances, even the most humble scraps of material possessions may also have affective qualities; the scraps act as a talisman evoking emotional responses, the intensity of which may accrue and change over-time as memory consolidates meanings and experiences. An example of the affective agency of ‘things’ is evidenced in the quotation in this chapter’s subtitle; the homely, ‘check bed-curtains’ in the Sturgis home, where Mary Barton recovers from her nervous collapse after the trial of Jem Wilson, have like other ‘inanimate objects […] such power of exciting regret’ (MB 339). As she becomes stronger and is ready to leave Liverpool, the curtains seem resonant with the tender, loving care provided by

---

motherly Mrs Sturgis. The curtains also act as a mnemonic for the ‘blue-and-white check curtains’ in her own mother’s cheerful parlour, before her sudden death in childbirth (MB 14).

This chapter, therefore, discusses the occurrence of material items in Mary Barton, particularly focusing on their representation as commemorative rites for the deceased, and on mourning practices for the bereaved. It will seek to explore how material scraps and small tokens can act as a mnemonic, reviving previously dormant feelings and emotions. Indeed, even the later absence of specific materials can mark a loss in this text. Each historical period will inevitably construct a different register of appropriate emotions and ‘general structure of feeling’. Thus the perceived outpourings of Victorian sentimentality regarding funeral practices, a catharsis to alleviate profuse melancholy, may be more difficult to envisage in a twenty-first-century context, where death has been largely removed from practices within the home. This chapter aims to restore that ‘structure of feeling’ for communities haunted by the predominance of early death.

---

10 Williams, p.119.
Threads of Feeling: The Fabrics of Mourning

Despite Maria Edgeworth’s observation of the novel’s multifarious deaths, there are actually only two funerals portrayed in *Mary Barton*, but both are centred round the correct etiquette of dress for the two grieving widows, Mrs Davenport and Mrs Ogden. As the nineteenth century progressed, rules for the correct procedure for mourning became more formalised and complex but they originated essentially from directives for the correct mourning for royal deaths instituted by the Lord Chamberlain’s office; these were then disseminated by the women’s periodical press to their discerning readers. Thus, Mrs Bell wrote in June 1830 in the *World of Fashion* about the correct attire for mourning the death of George IV:

THE DRESSES will be made of black and white crapes, black bombazines, black gros de Naples, plain black gauzes, black Aerophanes, black printed muslins, with white figured stripes.¹

Correct mourning attire was a signifier of social distinction, and a visible symbol of a family’s connections and social status; white crape was particularly deemed an appropriate fabric for the mourning attire of young girls. In *North and South*, Edith wears ‘white crape’ as remembrance for her uncle (*NS* 378). In general, however, the fabrics mentioned above were prohibitively expensive and beyond the means of most middle and low-income families; dyeing and ‘simply making do had to serve’.² Even Gaskell herself economizes on her mourning for the death of the Duke of Wellington in

---

1852. In a letter to her daughter, Marianne she writes ‘Every body here is going into mourning. I wish you & I could get into my blk silk at once. However I must make my grey look mourning’. The fact that ‘everybody’ feels obliged to go into mourning was seen as ‘showing community solidarity’ and a ‘gesture of inclusion, as well as a form of mannerly condolence’.

As it was considered unlucky to keep crape silk in the house, presumably the writer embellishes her existing ‘grey’ dress with the kind of mourning accessories sold by such flagship funeral emporiums as Jay’s General Mourning house, which opened in 1841 in Regent Street, London. Items which the journalist, Henry Mayhew recalled in a visit as a small boy: ‘collars of white crape, of black crape, of tulle and of muslin, collars dotted with black and edged with black’.

In Cranford, in a similar fashion, Miss Jenkyns ‘sent out for a yard of black crape, and employed herself busily in trimming the little black silk bonnet’ to attend to Captain Brown’s funeral (CF 19). Within Mary Barton, there is only one reference to the wearing of crape and that is from the work of weaver and radical poet, Samuel Bamford (1788-1872):

   God help the poor! Another have I found—
   A bowed and venerable man is he;
   His slouched hat with faded crape is bound (MB 109)

The absence of crape in Mary Barton reveals how it was a élite fabric, the requisite of etiquette mourning for higher status women. Crape was not only expensive but also impractical. According to Lou Taylor, ‘[t]he stiff crimped finish made it difficult to sew

---

3 Letters, p.209.
4 Flanders, loc. 6698.
5 Adburgham, p.66.
because it would stretch and lose its shape’.\(^6\) It spotted in the rain and faded quickly and as crape clothing had to be renewed frequently, its costliness and non-utilitarian function denoted a privileged decorum of mourning.

The very colour ‘black’ and its development as a dye had a changing function over the nineteenth century. Whilst Anne Hollander describes ‘black’ as a paradoxical colour, because it has no colour, its ‘combined symbolic and optical power’ became important in the nineteenth-century’s theatre of bereavement and mourning rituals.\(^7\) Mourning dress, as James Curl elaborates, is ‘associated with a deeply rooted fear of the dead returning’ and thus it was perceived that being swathed in black offered the living invisibility from the dead.\(^8\) Blackness also symbiotically connects the ‘meaningless state’ of the bereaved to the ‘nothingness into which the body of the defunct has passed’.\(^9\) As stated previously, Gaskell herself describes the ‘nothingness’ existence of the recently bereaved widow and mother.

The ‘nothingness’ of black nevertheless was in fact something. There are different shades of black and early in the century the wearing of black was a sign of wealth and social distinction because ‘it was made from blending the darkest indigo with the deepest red madder’, and was therefore the result of a costly procedure.\(^10\) This expense was alleviated by the discovery of logwood dyes that enabled the production of

a shade of velvety black; museum curator, Jessica Regan claims that a ‘true deep style of fast black was very difficult to achieve until the 1860s’. Nevertheless, for much of this period ‘poorer persons’ black hues could range from ‘rusty brown to dark blue’, particularly as their clothes were frequently second hand. Charles Dickens comments upon the attire of the ‘shabby-genteel’ man in an ‘old rusty suit of threadbare black cloth which shines with constant wear’. In *Mary Barton*, seamstress Margaret Jenkins and the eponymous protagonist share mourning sewing for the newly widowed Mrs Ogden, a greengrocer who despite having endured the drunken ways of her husband when alive, now plans a lavish funeral:

"Has he left her much to go upon?" asked Mary, examining the texture of the dress. "This is beautifully fine soft bombazine."
"No, I'm much afeard there's but little, and there's several young children, besides the three Miss Ogdens."
"I should have thought girls like them would ha' made their own gowns," observed Mary.
"So I dare say they do, many a one, but now they seem all so busy getting ready for the funeral; for it's to be quite a grand affair, well-nigh twenty people to breakfast, as one of the little ones told me; [...] Such a smell of ham boiling and fowls roasting while I waited in the kitchen; it seemed more like a wedding nor a funeral. They said she'd spend a matter o' sixty pound on th' burial." (*MB* 44-45)

12 Quoted from *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* in Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.120.
In addition to crape, in the peak of mourning etiquette, newly widowed women wore ‘bombazine’ in addition to a ‘widow’s cap, lawn cuffs [and] collars’. Bombazine was a worsted stuff, originally made from silk or silk and wool, and then later cotton and wool. As Mary Barton comments upon the fabric’s softness and fineness, it is presumably the wool/silk combination, particularly as Mrs Ogden’s other funeral preparations are lavish displays of conspicuous consumption. Comparable to crape, bombazine had a ‘dull non-reflective surface’.

Funeral etiquette directed that any shiny or glossy surface in ‘first’ mourning was ‘vulgar’ and implied a deficiency of sensibility to the deceased; overt mourning displays functioned to capture the authenticity and sincerity of feelings. While Gaskell can wear silk as a general mode of respect for a departed statesman, strict mourning etiquette limited the choice of silk for widows’ attire. In Cranford nouveau-riche Mrs Fitz-Adams is castigated for her glossy attire ‘a well-to-do widow, dressed in rustling black silk, so soon after her husband’s death’ allows the acerbic Miss Jenkyns to declare ‘bombazine would have shown a deeper sense of her loss’ (CF 63). Mrs Fitz-Adams’s overt preening and conspicuously opulent adornment represents a contravention of the prevailing domestic performative ideology for a recently bereaved widow. Upon her husband’s death, the perception held that a widow’s identity and sexuality was now inordinately altered, initiating a period of social

---

14 Flanders, loc.7366.
15 Flanders, loc. 6742-53.
16 Black silk was generally the mode of dress for visiting purposes. Of course, not all silks had a glossy sheen, for instance ‘sarcenet’ was ‘a thin kind of silk textile, plain or twilled’, Cecil Willet Cunnington, English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Dover Publications, 1990), p.435.
isolation, which placed her ‘beyond the marriage market’. Again, it is an illustration of the policing of women’s bodies and manner of dress, to determine the authenticity of identity and in this case genuine feeling.

The epitome of ‘deepest’ bereft feelings for the deceased was enacted in the spiritual and physical conventions and expectations of the prescribed role; women’s personalities were effectively effaced and subsumed in widow’s weeds. Mrs Jenkyn’s reference to ‘deeper’ suggests the practice for visually signifying inconsolable grief, but also alludes to the first period of a widow’s mourning, the ‘deep’ mourning or ‘first’ mourning previously noted. This was a gendered divide to mourning. Women absorbed the burden of mourning for a longer period than men and carried the responsibility of ensuring correct mourning procedure within the home. Whereas, the wearing of crape was de rigueur for wealthier women, the fabric’s properties ensured that mourning was a hair-shirted toll.

Crape was made in a laborious set of stages. It began as plain, undyed silk gauze, which was heated and roller-pressed with a specific etched design to produce the typical ‘crimped effect’; it was soaked in hot liquid, which relaxed and untwisted the fabric threads enhancing the crimped effect. It was then dyed black and highly starched which gave the fabric its matt surface; in addition, it could be sculptured into ‘elaborate frills, adornments’ to accord with fashionable diktats. As the iconic fabric of

17 Jalland, p. 301.
18 After the death of Prince Albert in 1861, Queen Victoria remained in black mourning. She became known as the ‘The Widow at Windsor’. It was also the title of an 1890 poem by Rudyard Kipling.
19 Regan.
bereavement, the firm of Samuel Courtauld & Co ‘built the foundations of their great world-wide business’ upon the manufacture of mourning crape at the factories at Bocking and Halstead, Essex. Consider the poor wearers of crepe, however. Deborah Lutz asserts that the stiffened cloth was ‘a coarse and scratchy textile against the skin’ and describes the wearing experience as a ‘kind of self-flagellation’; in addition, the deep mourning veils worn were dyed with poisonous substances and resulted in ‘respiratory and skin ailments for the frequent wearer’. In hot conditions, the crape released, powerfully unpleasant aromas, described in *David Copperfield* (1849-50) as ‘a breathless smell of warm black crape’. By contrast, men just wore crape bands around their hats and were expected to return to their full duties in the public sphere within six months. They often remarried, unlike the ‘superabundant’ widows in the population. ‘After 1850, there were 14 per cent of men, aged 55–64, widowed, compared with 30 per cent of women.’

In *Mary Barton*, the lavishness of the Ogdens’ mourning dress and the rumoured ‘sixty pound’ funeral perhaps reveals the pressure upon lower income families to conform to an idea of funeral propriety increasingly espoused by the higher echelons of society and public health reformers, such as Edwin Chadwick. In *Cassell’s Household Guide* 1869-71, there were ‘eight classes of funerals offered by a large London

---

23 Flanders, Loc. 6816.
undertaking firm with prices ranging from £3.5s. to £53’, that certainly reveals the extravagance of the Ogdens’ preparations.\(^{24}\) As Ruth Richardson argues, the trend towards more formalised and regulated funerals ‘represented an invasion of commerce into a rite of passage; the substitution of cash for affective and older, more traditional social relations.’\(^{25}\) James Curl observes that during the mid-Victorian period elaborate funeral feasts became a ‘status symbol’ across all classes, but Jalland and Richardson concur that it increasingly became a working class rite, particularly as such conspicuous consumption represented a display of pecuniary status, albeit illusionary in widow Ogden’s case.\(^{26}\) Families might scrimp on the very necessities of life, in order to provide for a ‘decent funeral’, regarded as “one of the principal social opportunities’ of the working class’.\(^{27}\)

Contemporary commentators criticised displays of ‘fecklessness’ amongst groups of people who could least afford it.\(^{28}\) The narrative voice seems to echo such a view with its caustic censure of ‘gorgeous hearses, and nodding plumes, which form the grotesque funeral pomp of respectable people’ (\textit{MB} 71). As Judith Flanders explains, the horses that pulled the hearse were frequently decorated with plumes of feathers. In addition, attendants called ‘featherman […] each carried a tray of black waving plumes’.\(^{29}\) The anthropomorphised ‘nodding plumes’ of feathers are placed in

---

\(^{24}\) Jalland, p.199.  
\(^{26}\) James Curl and Ruth Richardson cited in Jalland, p.223.  
\(^{27}\) Lady Bell cited in Johnson, p.36.  
\(^{28}\) Strange, p.119.  
\(^{29}\) Flanders, loc. 6591.
macabre opposition to the corpse interred within the hearse; a funeral appurtenance assumes centre stage to seemingly signify the reification of grieving practices. Richard Terdiman asserts that the process of reification is a form of amnesia as ‘entities [become] cut off from their own history’ and indeed ‘may create an unprecedented and uncanny field of “hollowed-out” objects, available for investment by any meaning whatsoever’. This is indeed what seems to happen when John Barton, on his Chartist trip to London, describes the bizarre spectacle of aristocratic ladies assembling for admittance to the Queen’s Drawing-room wearing plumes as decorative accessories for a court function:

“Yo've seen th' hearses wi' white plumes, Job?”
Job assented.
“Well, them undertaker folk are driving a pretty trade in London. Well nigh every lady we saw in a carriage had hired one o' them plumes for the day, and had it niddle noddling on her head.” (MB 98)

White plumes, signifying purity and innocence were the traditional accoutrements for a child’s funeral. Fashionable élite women subsume this symbolism for an ostentatious display of courtly regalia and class distinction. In her reading of the funeral practices within *Mary Barton*, Mary Hotz asserts that the London ladies ‘deny the literal physical presence of the corpse as [a] transformative’ means whereby all classes share in a

collective recognition of the inter-class communality of death. Instead, she claims that
the ladies confirm and use the ‘funeral appurtenances to reinforce class hierarchies’.32
However, in this instance I think Hotz fails to appreciate how Barton’s sardonic
interpretation of the ladies’ farcical ‘niddle noddling’ appearance, rather undercuts their
absurd, courtly grandeur.33

Mrs Ogden’s ‘bombazine’ widow’s weeds, in mirroring the higher classes,
may be read as a visible commodification of her grief, which in its conspicuous display
offers succour as she performs the role of the tragically bereaved before her community,
despite her husband’s previous shortcomings. Unfortunately, the fire at Carson’s Mill
curtails the making of all the other mourning dresses:

[T]he two younger Miss Ogdens were in such grief for the loss of their excellent
father, that they were unable to appear before the little circle of sympathising
friends gathered together to comfort the widow, and see the funeral set off.
(MB 55)
As the Ogden girls cannot publicly reify their ‘grief’, they choose absence rather than
social ignominy on their inauspicious mourning attire.

Commodification of ostentatious grief also exerted an exacting toll on legions of
poor women who eked out a subsistence living, stitching against the clock to provide
the funeral apparel at short notice. Margaret and Mary are representative of two
different types of seamstresses working long hours sewing. Margaret, however, is a
slopworker ‘employed as sweated outworkers in the "slop" or "dishonourable trades"

32 Hotz, p.46.
33 Is Gaskell intertextually alluding to the popular ‘it-narrative’ Story of a Feather by Douglas
Jerrold, serialized in Punch in May 1844, whereupon an Ostrich feather attends a young girl’s
funeral and the next day is summoned to the Court of St James?
rather than in the "honourable" private dressmaking establishments.' The iconography of the distressed seamstress became a familiar trope in artistic representation as well as the popular press, prompting parliamentary scrutiny. Richard Dugard Grainger’s Report for the Children’s Employment Commission of 1843 described the “protracted labour” of the dressmakers as tantamount to “slavery”. As Helen Rogers elaborates, the home workers’ working conditions involved long hours bent over work, making ‘sempstresses susceptible to respiratory, digestive, rheumatic, and eye complaints’. Thus, Margaret’s preparation of mourning attire in dim, flickering candlelight becomes injurious to her health, ‘[p]lain work pays so bad, and mourning has been so plentiful this winter, that I were tempted to take in any black work I could; and now I’m suffering from it (MB 47). In fact, Margaret expects to receive little compensation for her kind acts of comfort to the Ogden women and eventually loses her sight over mourning work. This was far from uncommon. The 1842 Report on the Employment of Women recorded numerous accounts ‘of women whose eyesight had been damaged by sewing mourning fabric for long hours in poor light’.

Within the taxonomy of the term, ‘working class’ many subtle, cultural distinctions evolved, denoting differences between the various social strataums, notably

35 Rogers, p.590.
36 Rogers, p.592.
37 Taylor, p.164.
between the ‘respectable poor’ and the ‘rough’ in their bereavement procedures. Such stratification developed in a complex tension between ‘standards of moral behaviour and material display’ in poorer working-class funerals; Elleen Ross asserts that ‘working-class respect’ was not just a ‘filtered-down version of its bourgeois forms, but was a fluid and variable idea’ which was constantly refined, particularly as a political discourse grew on the appropriate sanitary and health implications of the spread of disease and the disposal of the dead.\(^{38}\) With the rapid pace of urbanization, and the hastily erected tenements and cellars for the burgeoning numbers of mill workers, considerable public scrutiny started to be directed at the treatment and preservation of the corpse in the confined domestic spaces of the poor. Traditional practices such as the ‘laying out’ of the dead, which for the middle classes was increasingly commercialised and overseen by firms of undertakers, was managed by women in the poorer areas. John Barton alludes to such practices, when a neighbour appears after the sudden death of his wife in childbirth:

> He heard the sounds above, too, and knew what they meant. He heard the stiff unseasoned drawer, in which his wife kept her clothes, pulled open. He saw the neighbour come down, and blunder about in search of soap and water. He knew well what she wanted, and why she wanted them, but he did not speak, nor offer to help. At last she went, with some kindly meant words (a text of comfort). (MB 20)

In his paroxysm of grief, John Barton is a mute, frozen figure but the narrative voice details his awareness of the routine unfolding upstairs with his wife’s body. The kindly neighbour aided by Mary is undertaking the final dignitaries of washing and laying out

\(^{38}\) Ross quoted in Strange, p.6.
the corpse. Women traditionally undertook this task as a ‘final gesture of intimacy and affection’ to the bereaved and to honour the deceased person.\textsuperscript{39} The body was washed and orifices were plugged, often with herbs, ‘to mask the stench of death’.\textsuperscript{40} Ruth Richardson asserts that the ablution was a form of ‘ritual purification’ and ‘may have signified a lay absolution, a baptism for the next life’, thereby offering eschatological comfort to the bereaved.\textsuperscript{41} The simple use of herbs such as rosemary, to signify ‘fidelity in love and remembrance’, acted, in Richardson’s viewpoint, as ‘emblems of emotion […] permitting mourners to express a reaction to death’.\textsuperscript{42} The hair was brushed and combed, men were shaved and parts of the body straightened; eyelids were closed by pennies placed upon the sockets and the jaw tied by a bandage. The neighbour presumably opens the ‘stiff, unseasoned drawer’ to extract a nightgown to act as Mrs. Barton’s shroud. The shroud was not akin to the traditional winding sheet used to cover corpses, but even in poorer households would had been prepared as an item of ‘funeralia’ many years before hand. The nightgown would have been ‘stitched in white cotton and embroidery’ and might have been accessorized with a pair of white stockings or socks.\textsuperscript{43} The person’s name might also have been ‘knitted into the welt’.\textsuperscript{44} In the novel \textit{Ruth}, the body is further dressed in a ‘wimple- like cap’ (\textit{RU} 369). Such funeralia was often prepared well in advance and was frequently made when a person was

\textsuperscript{39} Strange, p.66.
\textsuperscript{40} Strange, p.71.
\textsuperscript{42} Richardson, p.21.
\textsuperscript{43} Gwen Davies, ‘Stockings prepared for laying out and burial held by museums in the United Kingdom’, \textit{Textile History}, 23.1,1992, 103-112 (p.109).
\textsuperscript{44} Davies, p.110.
deemed to be an adult; sometimes it was made as part of a wedding trousseau and stored for a future date. Indeed, Richardson describes such laying out clothes as the ‘burial trousseau’.\textsuperscript{45} In middling and higher income families a death mask was often made of the deceased. An early biographer of Gaskell, Ellis Chadwick recounts such a procedure after the writer’s sudden death in her new home in Hampshire in 1865; “[a] death masque of the face was taken soon after Mrs Gaskell died, and for a long time it hung in the drawing-room at Plymouth Grove”.\textsuperscript{46} Carolyn Lambert suggests that it reflects ‘the intimate way in which death invaded the home and was integrated into family relationships’ in this period.\textsuperscript{47}

Thus, it may be seen that the minutiae of the laying out process actually achieved several objectives, each with its own polymorphic significance. It was a formal transition of the deceased to the next stage but was also ‘perceived as a form of preserving the visual memory of the dead’.\textsuperscript{48} The body purification rituals enabled the bereft to assimilate the loss of their dearest, knowing that there were now at peace, and helped them to adapt to their newly bereaved status. The neighbour gives comfort and succour to John and Mary Barton which would have been replicated by other neighbours and friends in visiting and viewing the dead body in its peaceful repose. The later process was an essential ‘component of rites associated with death in working-
class districts across Britain’ up until the early twentieth century and was a means by which the local community could provide solidarity and proffer assistance. In *Ruth*, the Bensons’ servant, Sally assumes that Ruth’s erstwhile lover Mr Dunne’s visit to the house is solely with the intention to view the ‘poor dead body’ (*RU* 368). As Mr. Benson explains, ‘It is a very common idea in this town, that it is a gratification to be asked to take a last look at the dead. (*RU* 370). Increasingly, however, as the century progressed public health reformers mounted a vigorous and successful campaign highlighting the sanitary and contagion dangers that arose from the presence of cadavers in the domestic space, particularly in cramped, working-class homes.

John Barton has been fortunate enough to pay regularly into a funeral friendly club, ‘so that money was provided for the burial’ of his wife (*MB* 22). Unfortunately, this is not the case for former factory worker Ben Davenport, who dies of the fever in a putrid, rank infested cellar and must be buried on the town because he is under-insured (*MB* 70). The final ignominious laying to rest of his corpse mirrors the procedure for the disposal of a pauper’s corpse, particularly as a sham tombstone is lifted for the body to be added to all the other ‘pauper bodies’ (*MB* 71). The 1834 New Poor Law introduced the practice of burying paupers into a mass pit. Julie-Marie Strange asserts that the ‘pit’ was the ‘‘ultimate degradation’ for an individual’ and created stigma for the dead family. It signified abject poverty. However, in *Mary Barton* this graveside scene is solemnised and elevated by communal assistance and

49 Strange, p.80.
solidarity, enabling Davenport’s widow to wear the appropriate material mourning to display dignity and gravitas. Mary Barton assists in the preparations:

her old black gown (her best when her mother died) might be sponged, and turned, and lengthened into something like decent mourning for the widow […] So when the funeral day came, Mrs Davenport was neatly arrayed in black, a satisfaction to her poor heart in the midst of her sorrow. (MB 71)

Unlike widow Ogden’s ostentatious displays, this reveals the resourcefulness and support by which lower income women eked out and recycled material possessions, concomitantly giving emotional support. Mary’s own black gown, perhaps made by her mother, is replete with the memories concerning her own mother’s death; it also a signifier of time elapsed. In its reconditioned and altered form, it becomes a further repository of solace and comfort to the widow. As Jessica Regan details, the making and wearing of mourning attire was a process of preserving memory and working through grief. It was a ‘means of keeping mourning of the deceased forefront to the mind’. 51 Mrs Davenport’s quiet dignity at the funeral ‘determined to endure her woe meekly for his sake’, (MB 71) is a visible representation of the Evangelical movement’s tenets, which revitalized the traditional Christian idea of the ‘‘good death’, which required piety and fortitude in the face of suffering’. 52 Cassells Household Guide in 1870 opposed the tendency for poorer class women to attend funerals; in general, more

51 Jessica Regan, ‘Death Becomes Her Exhibition’. The exhibition displayed a wall text quoting from the diary of Catherine Ann Edmonston (1823-75) of North Carolina ‘Have been all this week in a sad task making up my mourning for my dear Papa & today for the first time put it on. The sight of this black dress brings the cause why I wear it more fully to my mind, if possible brings him more vividly before me’ quoted in Lutz, ‘Death Becomes Her’, p.219. 52 Jalland, pp.2-3.
affluent women refrained from the grave ceremony in the belief that they may be overcome with emotion.\textsuperscript{53}

However, Widow Davenport’s presence supports Strange’s proposition that there was a cultural divide between the classes in the ‘external and internal representation of their cultural practices […] surrounding death and bereavement’.\textsuperscript{54} In a near absence of the bare necessities of life, small acts of communality and shared mourning practices could be interpreted as ‘a sign of resourcefulness and commitment to observ[e] the dignity’ of such a pauper’s funeral whereby the solace of the memories will give succour to the later grieving process. Hotz asserts that the burials in the novel, including John Barton’s and Esther’s in an unmarked grave participate in a mid-Victorian discourse on the disposal of a working-class corpse, a problem that had escalated with the rapid expansion of metropolitan centres and the poor living conditions of the industrial workforce. Burial reformers, like Edwin Chadwick sought to expunge the corpse from the working-class space as a possible source of contamination.\textsuperscript{55} At the same time the Anatomy Act ‘initiated a standardized nationwide applicability to all deaths in parish control’ instituting cost savings on all aspects of pauper funerals, which served to further demean the status of the corpse; coffins were flimsy, shrouds scant, and mass burial sites ‘treated with quicklime to hasten speedy re-use’.\textsuperscript{56} A further penumbra of fear surrounded pauper burials. In the same year as the

\textsuperscript{53} Jalland, p221. Queen Victoria did not attend the funeral of Prince Albert and the Gaskell daughters were not present at their mother’s funeral.
\textsuperscript{54} Strange, p.22.
\textsuperscript{55} Hotz, p.15.
\textsuperscript{56} Richardson, p.274.
Great Reform Act was passed, the Anatomical Act came into being. It was a response to the horrors of body snatching and the infamous Burke and Hare case. It meant that a pauper’s corpse, if not claimed by relatives or friends, might be released for dissection to the anatomical schools; such a final violation had been previously reserved for the bodies of convicted murderers.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, Richardson believes that the 1832 Anatomical Act and the New Poor Law of 1834 were inceptive of the ‘cultural gulf’ dividing the social classes - a ‘social and political watershed [that] profoundly influenced working-class death culture’ into the next century.\textsuperscript{58}

Consequently, the distinction between the pauper funeral and a respectable one became an over-riding concern for those on scant incomes culminating in the ‘increasingly commercialized trappings of death’ as a means to ‘assert financial and social position’; ‘a secular last judgment’ perhaps for the preening widow Ogden.\textsuperscript{59} Hotz, meanwhile reads Gaskell’s text as a criticism of the public health reforms because they failed to understand the social and cultural meanings of traditional working class bereavement observances. Gaskell’s quiet representation of these practices therefore, and the refusal to ‘rattl[e] his bones over the stones’ reaffirm familial and communal solidarity, that are affiliated with her Utilitarian beliefs, particularly its emphasis on the

\textsuperscript{57} Richardson, p.175.
\textsuperscript{58} Richardson, p.262.
\textsuperscript{59} Richardson, p.272.
‘importance of the individual in society’ and each person’s participation in the ‘well-being of the community’ (MB 71). 60

A Deadly Triumvirate: Cotton, Opium and China.

The extent of pauper death and high mortality rates, whilst a function of poor living conditions and the spread of infectious diseases, was inflated by another factor: namely the effects of opium addiction prevalent amongst the industrial population. A dependency that gives John Barton ‘his shrunk, fierce, animal look’ (MB 112). ‘Those who are addicted to opium, are entranced and powerless to quit, almost as if seduced by the deadly poison, until they stand like skeletons, their bodily shape totally disfigured and no better than the crippled’. 61 These are not the words from the Health of Towns Commission describing the pitiable health conditions of the urban labouring poor, but those of a Manchu Prince, member of the Imperial Clan Court of the Qing dynasty. He vividly chronicles the endemic opium addiction that similarly afflicted a large proportion of the Chinese population in 1839. Barton’s addiction, China and the cotton industry are inextricably linked within Gaskell’s text because the ‘depression of trade’ (MB 24) within the Manchester cotton mills in the ‘terrible years of 1839, 1840, and 1841’ is the result of Britain’s war with China (1839-42); a war fought over free trade and profits from the distribution of the drug, opium (MB 82).

When John Barton travels to London and witnesses the rejection of the Chartist petition to Parliament in 1839, Manchester merchants successfully petitioned Parliament in September of the same year for ““prompt, vigorous, and decided measures” to resolve the conflict in China’. They warned that the cessation in trade ‘may eventually entail very serious losses on us’. As the previous chapter revealed, the mill owners were heavily dependent upon foreign trade, both for sourcing cheap raw materials and for markets for low-priced cotton goods. Sydney Chapman asserts that the ‘Lancashire production of textile goods outpaced the capacity of domestic and overseas markets to absorb them, especially in the second quarter of the [nineteenth] century’; hence free trade and a search for new markets became the determining economic rationale. Whilst Britain imported from China a high proportion of tea, fine porcelain and silk, China prided itself on its insular nature and had no appetite for the manufactured products of Britain’s industrial revolution. The burgeoning trade deficit with China, however, raised alarms, particularly as it meant an outpouring of silver to finance it from the English East India Company. By the 1820s, an ingenious solution was devised to overcome the deficit, whereby a tripartite flow of trade stemmed the Company’s silver shortfall. Via competition from Lancashire’s mass-produced cotton much of the indigenous hand-made cotton industry of India had been made

uncompetitive. Instead, the opium crop was cultivated in vast quantities in provinces such as Bengal, and the drug was shipped in ever increasing proportions to supply the insatiable appetites of Chinese consumers; even though the Chinese court had prohibited its consumption. From 1805 to 1839 exports of opium to China rose exponentially from approximately 3,000 to 40,000 chests per year (a chest contained approx. 140 pounds of opium). Julia Lovell estimates that between 1828 and 1836 the Chinese economy experienced an outflow of revenue of 38 million dollars, equivalent to a 19% fall in the country’s wealth, because of the opium addiction of its population.

The revenue from this drug smuggling enabled Indian consumers to buy British cottons, as well as financing Britain’s luxury imports of Chinese silks and tea. This lucrative triangular trade came to a sudden end, however, when the Chinese authorities, alarmed about the ‘corrupting effects on a booming drug culture’ on their country, seized and destroyed 20,000 chests of opium from a British merchant ship in May 1839. In the subsequent weeks, the Chinese authorities destroyed approximately 6 to 10 million dollars’ worth of opium. Private British traders, essentially unsanctioned and unruly drug smugglers, who had proliferated since the East India Company lost its monopoly in 1833, were incensed. They orchestrated a high-profile political campaign turning the Chinese ‘injustice’ into a wider defence of free trade and Western civilization that was pitted against an inward and primitive empire. The British Government intervened, sending 22 warships and 27 ships carrying 4 000 infantry men,

65 Lovell, p.2 and p.36.
66 Lovell, p.36.
67 Lovell, p.3.
thereby initiating a war whereby the Chinese incurred fatalities of around 20,000 persons compared to the loss of 69 British men’. 

Thus, the period 1839 until the Treaty of Nanking in August 1842 marks the political and economic backdrop to Mary Barton as markets for cotton dried up because of the war; wages were cut, and unemployment soared. Manchester cotton goods sold in China before the war were estimated to be worth £850,000 for the year 1839.69 Gaskell documents the suffering of the unemployed Barton, driven to extreme measures by the intractable stance of the mill-owners, and his own drug addiction. Liam Corley reads his drug addiction as a metaphor for the damaging human consequences of capitalism’s expansionist economic rationale.70 By gunboat diplomacy, the British government effectively ‘legalised’ British merchant drug smuggling into China and ensured the opening up of the Chinese market for British goods as the peace treaty unlocked five Chinese ports, previously barred to traders. As a further humiliating retribution, the Imperial Court had to pay 21 million dollars as indemnity and cede Hong Kong to the British. It was, as one commentator expressed, ‘the most disgraceful war in our [British] history’.71

When Mary anxiously seeks the whereabouts of Will in Liverpool, to provide evidence for Jem’s acquittal, she sees the teeming Liverpool port where ‘white-sailed ships were gliding with the ensigns of all nations, ‘not ‘braving the battle’, but

68 Lovell, p.243.
70 Corley, pp. 638-9
71 Lovell, p.243.
telling of the distant lands, spicy or frozen, that sent to that mighty mart for their comforts or their luxuries’ (MB 281). ‘Braving the battle’ seems an allusion to the prevailing Chinese war, and indeed it becomes apparent that the kind-hearted seaman’s wife Mrs Sturgis, who nurses Mary Barton in her illness after the trial, has a son ‘bound for China’, suggesting an involvement in the British-Sino conflict (MB 304). However, this far-away war is rather lost by the romanticised vision of ‘gliding’ ships from ‘distant lands’, many no doubt vassals to British rule, supplying consumer comforts to the imperium’s ‘mighty mart’. I read ‘comforts’, therefore, as a euphemism for the import of opium, which until the 1868 Pharmacy Act was liberally eaten and drunk by the British population. In 1839, Parliamentary statistics showed 196,000lbs of opium was imported into England, comprising 1,400 chests.\(^{72}\) It seemed to have been used as a palliative for nearly every medical ailment. Lovell has an exhaustive list:

> It was used against pain, spasms, and insomnia, to induce perspiration and reduce bronchial mucus, for diabetes, for melancholy, for overexcitement, for drunkenness; laudanum mixed with ox-gall served for earache, insanity, hysteria and toothache; with egg yolk, for piles.\(^ {73}\)

Gaskell, herself in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* describes her own sensations after having taken opium experiencing a ‘vivid and exaggerated presence of objects, of which the outlines were indistinct, or lost in golden mist’ (LCB 441). In the biography, Gaskell recalls a conversation with her friend Charlotte Brontë, asking her whether she had ether taken opium ‘as the description given of its effects in ‘Villette’ were so

---


\(^{73}\) Lovell, p.269.
exactly like what I had experienced’ (LCB 441). Brontë replied in the negative but had witnessed at first hand the toil and misery of opium addiction. Earlier in the biography, Gaskell details the suffering and dissipated life of Brontë’s brother, Bramwell who for the last three years of his life was an ‘opium-eater’. Writing poignantly Gaskell recounts his subterfuge and the ensuing mental decline that mirrors the suffering of John Barton:

He took opium, because it made him forget for a time more effectually than drink; and, besides, it was more portable. In procuring it he showed all the cunning of the opium-eater. […] For some time before his death he had attacks of delirium tremens of the most frightful character; he slept in his father’s room, and he would sometimes declare that either he or his father should be dead before the morning. (LCB 226-7)

‘[G]rocer’s catalogues were full of opium-enriched patent potions, listed next to jam and barley-sugar’.74 As noted above, it seemed to have been used as a palliative for nearly every medical ailment, but its consumption in Britain, particularly in the cotton towns also alludes to a darker practice. Infants were administered with narcotic cordials, with such unassuming names as ‘Godfrey’s cordials […] and Mrs Wilkinson’s soothing syrup’, by exhausted mothers or nurses, looking after the children while parents were working long hours in the mills.75 In Mary Barton, when ‘trade is very slack; [and] cottons could find no market’ (MB 56), the impoverished mill workers resort to desperate measures to quell their children’s hunger. ‘Many a penny that would have

74 Lovell, p.269.
75 Margaret Hewitt, Wives & Mothers in Victorian Industry (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), p.141. In the 1882 poem ‘Cottonopolis’, attributed to William Gaskell by Irene Wiltshire (see p.18 of Introduction), the doping practice is lamented: ‘underneath five years of age/ Thousands of infants quit this stage, /And make the death-rate stand so high. /If we demand the reasons why, / One is too clear, they do not share/ Their mother’s natural kindly care, / But while these go to work in mills, / Are subjected to cruel ills, / Drugged with narcotics, and half-fed/ By nurses without heart or head’, William Gaskell, Cottonopolis (India: Pranava Books, [2019 ?]), p. 13.
gone little way enough in oatmeal or potatoes, bought opium to still the hungry little ones, and made them forget their uneasiness in heavy troubled sleep. It was mother’s mercy’ (MB 56-7). One wonders if ‘mother’s mercy’ was the trade name of yet another soothing cordial.

The narcotics were given to babies from about three or four weeks old. The Health of Towns Commission in Ashton-under-Lyme collected evidence from fifteen druggists in the town and ascertained that many infants were given ‘one pennyworth of Godfrey’s, or ½ oz., a day; this would mean […] that the child would be given at least fifty drops of laudanum daily’.76 The drugged infant became progressively unwell, ‘their skin was sallow and wrinkled, their features pinched and shrivelled, and they gradually pined away and died; others perished from diseases of the brain’.77

Thus, the lamentable high death rates for this period, particularly that of infants, is closely intertwined with the mass-produced cotton goods of the mill-towns as well as the quest for free trade and the procurement of new markets, particularly that of China. Some critics, such as Lovell go as far to declare that ‘opium sales in China (produced under British monopoly in India) underwrote much of the British Empire’.78 That maybe a rather strong assertion, but the cultivation of opium and its link with cotton in the triangular trade nexus, surely underscores a narrative of addiction and death that spanned the tenements and cellars of Manchester to the very Imperial city itself.

76 Hewitt, p.143.
77 Hewitt, p.145.
78 Lovell, p.251.
The Cloths of Memory
The relentless march of industrialization with the concomitant urbanization resulted in
the displacement of many people from a traditional rural way of living. In Mary Barton,
Alice Wilson’s movement from Westmoreland and Ben Davenport’s dislocation from
Buckinghamshire mirrors the exodus. John Ruskin in 1849, encapsulated this sense of
rootlessness, and severance from the past in ‘The Lamp of Memory’ from The Seven
Lamps of Architecture, writing ‘the place of the past and future is too much usurped in
our minds by the restless and discounted present […] the ceaseless fever of [modern]
life’79 The ‘ceaseless fever’ is an apposite analogy for the regulation of diurnal time
instigated by the needs of the manufacturers and railway companies, whilst alluding
simultaneously to the unhealthy living conditions of the populace, which enabled
infectious diseases and opium addiction to proliferate. However, Ruskin seems to
suggest that there is a memory crisis as if the present way of life has become dislocated
from the continuum of the past, its knowledge of previous histories and the recent past.
Others echoed his concerns. Gaskell describes the rural farming borders of Manchester
that seem to the urban millworkers such ‘pleasant mysteries’ that ‘speak of other times’
(MB 5).

This section will therefore examine the nature of memory and how the
protagonists seek remembrance of past events and other lives now departed. It will
specifically examine the everyday material artefacts of people’s lives to ascertain how
effectively they serve as a mnemonic and stimulate an affective response. Thus, fallen

79 John Ruskin, ‘Lamp of Memory’ in The Seven Lamps of Architecture (Gutenberg Project),

203
factory girl, Esther’s final moments are poignantly described. ‘She held the locket containing her child’s hair still in her hand, and once or twice she kissed it with a long soft kiss. She cried feebly and sadly as long as she had any strength to cry, and then she died’ (MB 378). Deborah Lutz posits that many Victorians believed that locks of a hair from a deceased person possessed ‘remnants of selfhood’ and enabled a vital connection from the dead to the living. 80 In this sense then, in Esther’s final moments of suffering, clutching the locket restores the memories of her child as if it is the very child herself. ‘For Protestant Victorians, the hair of a loved one, substituted for relics of the saints’, it ‘connected them to heaven, with its blessing of immortality’. 81 In this case, it may serve as a hope of redemption for the outcast, Esther.

The trope of hair is used to rekindle memories in a similar fashion in ‘My Lady Ludlow’, when an aristocratic lady touches locks of hair that have been lovingly preserved and ‘ticketed’:

I don’t think that looking at these made my lady seem so melancholy, as the seeing and touching of the hair did. But, to be sure, the hair was, as it were, a part of some beloved body which she might never touch and caress again. (MLL 170)

In both instances, it is not just the seeing the object itself that evokes the memories, but the act of touching provokes the stimulation of the reminiscences inherent to an embodied experience. Gaskell, who lost her mother as a baby, writes movingly in 1849 to George Hope, a friend of her late mother regarding his gift of her ‘dear mother’s

---

81 Lutz, Loc. 3037-38.
letters […] the only relic of her that I have, and of more value to me than I can express, for I have so often longed for some little thing that had once been hers or touched by her’.  

Indeed, Gaskell likens the letters to a relic, an embodiment of her mother rekindled by the haptic sense. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s phrase ‘touching feeling’ seems apposite here to remind us of the close link between the act of touching to the affective response and the stirring of memories. As she elaborates, ‘touching’ and ‘feeling’ are both ‘irreducibly phenomenological’ and involve a ‘conceptual realm’ not defined ‘by commonsensical dualities of subject versus object’. It serves to demonstrate that people can be understood as ‘material things in a world of things’ and that the Victorians had different perceptions about the dichotomy between subjects and objects than that prevalent under advanced capitalism today. For example, the wearing of hair jewellery was commonplace in the period. An adornment of one person’s body was transformed into an item of jewellery worn by others. Such hair jewellery was frequently given as gifts in remembrance of a deceased person. Only recently a ring containing plaited hair believed to be from Charlotte Brontë has been discovered; the

\[82\] Letters, pp.796-797.
\[84\] Sedgwick, p.21.
ring is inscribed with the date of Brontë’s death. Lutz explains that in the 1840s, the making of hair jewellery and embroidery made from hair were fashionable leisure pursuits; hair was ‘woven and plaited in a manner very similar to lacemaking and was then mounted with gold or gilt fittings’. At the Great Exhibition, popular exhibits included ‘pictures embroidered in hair of Queen Victoria, the Prince of Wales and the Hamburgh Exchange’. It is interesting to conjecture whether such jewellery and embroidery, and indeed textiles woven with human hair, should be classified as an object or rather something more; a quasi-object imbued with a human essence, a part of some beloved body? Whereas human hair is biodegradable, usually within two years, in certain conditions its durability outlasts. Like the textile and hair found in ancient Egyptian pyramids, such vestiges of departed lives are ‘themselves like little tombs, the hair standing in for the corpse’. Within the novella, Cranford, the ladies possess many brooches, commemorating their forebears ‘with mausoleums and weeping-willows mostly executed in hair’ (CF 73).

Both Lutz and Freedgood discuss the early Victorian’s belief in the concept of animism, whereby ‘an invisible fluid permeate[s] the world and allowing bodies and objects to interact even when far apart’; in Freedgood’s words this causes a ‘subject-

---

86 The BBC programme Antiques Roadshow featured a hinged ring containing a ‘plaited hair work’ believed to be from Charlotte Brontë. The ring was inscribed with the date of Brontë’s death, 31st March 1855, Antiques Roadshow, 14 April 2019, series 41, Erddig 2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0762nwb> [access 10/6/2019].
88 Lutz. Loc. 2977-97. ‘Antoni Forrer, who was hairworker by appointment to Queen Victoria, and Lemmonier et Cie of Paris were the most fashionable of the many makers of hair jewellery. They both won Prize medals at the Great Exhibition’, Luthi, pp. 22-24.
89 Lutz, loc.3017-20.
object hybridity’. Personal effects, such as hair ‘could draw the absent donor’s ‘fluid’ creating a link between the living and the dead. It seems a spiritual haunting of material things and as the century progressed became an expression by which ‘a personal trace on an increasingly impersonal world’ was established.

In a similar vein, after the death of Mary’s mother in childbirth, her possessions, symbolic of her neat and proud domesticity are now imbued with her absence. John Barton comes across the ‘unwashed’ tea-things, vestiges of the warm and happy tea party they had held for the Wilsons:

He was reminded of one of the daily little actions, which acquire such power when they have been performed for the last time by one we love. He began to think over his wife’s daily round of duties: and something in the remembrance that these would never more be done by her, touched the source of tears, and he cried aloud. (MB 21)

The unwashed tea-things never to be washed again by Mrs Barton stir Barton’s memories of the quotidian life and duties of his wife and provoke an outpouring of grief. This small tableau vivant is imbued with former experiences and memories.

However, this heimlich manifests into unheimlich as the absence of Mrs Barton

---

91 Lutz, loc. 3044-7.
93 As Angus Easson asserts physical ‘things can carry or hold emotional charge, the very sentiment of feeling, and so partake in and advance the emotional drama’, ‘The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell’, GSJ, 1990, 4, 64-78 (p.72). Peter Stallybrass similarly describes the commodity status of pawned items, ‘to pawn an object is to denude it of memory’ its ‘sentimental value’ is stripped out. He comments upon ‘[t]he extraordinary intimacy of the pawnbroker’s stock and the massive preponderance of clothes’, (p.202).Peter Stallybrass, ‘Marx’s Coat’ in Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces, ed.by Patricia Spyer (New York, London: Routledge, 1998), pp.183-207 (p.195).
precipitates the disintegration of the cosy, domestic space as well as Barton himself. As events spiral out-of-control, Mrs Barton’s ‘things’ are removed:

But by degrees the house was stripped of all its little ornaments. […] And by-and-bye Mary began to part with other superfluities at the pawn-shop. The smart tea-tray and tea-caddy, long and carefully kept, went for bread for her father. (MB 112)

The little ornaments, which Mrs Barton cherished as little comforts, ‘long and carefully kept’ in memory of her, are now relegated as ‘superfluities’ and return back to commodity status when they are pawned for cash, required for the absolute necessities of life and Barton’s opium addiction. The mother’s careful preservation of previously cherished goods that are now forsaken, underscores the beleaguered household’s descent into desperate straits. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things* express this pattern succinctly, to ‘preserve a breakable object from its destiny one must pay at least some attention to it […] Thus a china cup preserved over a generation is a victory of human purpose over chaos.’

The dispersal of Mrs Barton’s things divests the house of her experiences with the objects and their memories of her with them, thereby severing a link with the past. As Peter Stallybrass so poignantly comments, ‘[m]emories were thus inscribed for the poor within objects that were haunted by loss. For the objects were in a constant state of being-about-to disappear’. It is tantamount to an emotional grieving for the deceased and their cherished possessions, notwithstanding underscoring the precariousness of existence.

---

Carolyn Steedman comments upon the absence of a common trope of respectable, working-class life in the Barton household, namely a rag rug. She claims that working-class ‘rags’ had a greater financial value in their sale to the rag merchant, to be recycled into paper, rather than worked into a symbol of contained cosy domesticity. The rug, ‘could not be made in an economy in which such a tiny number of things circulated again and again, among so many people; where scarcity and technological underdevelopment created a shortage, not of the poor, but of the traditional symbols of the poor’. 96 Whereas this is an interesting argument, it seems rather impossible to conjecture that the rag rug’s absence is a sign of absolute penury, especially as the novel’s onset details the Barton family’s relative prosperity, ‘the place seemed almost crammed with furniture (sure sign of good times among the mills)’ (MB 15). In addition to rags being sold to the paper mills, they were also used for intimate bodily functions - menstruation purposes as well as other sanitary uses; as Mrs Barton is due to give birth imminently perhaps the rag rug is foregone for post-partum purposes.

Furthermore, instead of a ‘rag rug’ in the Barton’s home, from ‘the slanting closet under the stairs […] to the fireplace, there was a gay-coloured piece of oil- cloth laid’ (MB 15). Oilcloth was by the nineteenth century a floor cloth, which ‘had been treated with an evaporating oil and painted to make it waterproof’. 97 In the previous

96 Steedman, p.136. Deborah Wynne makes a similar point asserting that ‘many of the urban poor made their living from collecting rags which were processed in paper mills before eventually being made into printed matter, such as newspapers and books’, Deborah Wynne, ‘Textile Recycling in Victorian Literature: An Interview with Deborah Wynne’, EuropeNow, 27, May 7, 2019 [no page no].
century, floor cloth had been hand-made to grace the homes of the wealthy. Industrialization, however, made it ‘more affordable and it appeared in the homes of the middle-class, and, by the end of the century, even the poor’; ‘[p]opular designs were usually imitative of tile, marble or carpet’. Indeed, in *Wives and Daughters* (1864) the Gibsons’ family home is redecorated in honour of the second Mrs Gibson with ‘new oilcloth in the hall’ (*WD* 177). I suggest, that in the context of the novel’s opening, the Bartons’ oil-cloth should be read as a sign of prosperity and modernity providing every ‘aspect of comfort’ in the domestic working class space (*MB* 17) particularly as its ‘gaiety’ adds to the ‘richness of colouring’ of Mrs Barton’s domestic possessions.

Robert Roberts’ book, *The Classic Slum* which chronicles working-class life in Salford during the first quarter on the twentieth century, commented upon the ubiquity of oilcloth by this time in poorer homes, ‘[o]ilcloth was much in demand, even if one could only afford enough to cover a kitchen floor as far as the furniture. More than anything it gave that ‘lived in’ look […]. Most families had a rag hearth rug.’

Rather, than just speculating of the absence of a rag rug in *Mary Barton*, which could merely be the creative choice of the writer, it seems more pertinent to reflect upon the complex oscillating relationship between the protagonists, their ‘things’ and the

---

98 Banham, p.432. Not surprisingly the judges at the Great Exhibition ridiculed such imitation effects.
99 The servants, however, bewail other features of the oil-cloth. It ‘tripped ‘em up, and threw ‘em down, and was cold to the feet, and smelt just abominable’ (*WD* 177). In *Cranford*, Miss Matty’s new shop has a ‘brilliant piece of oil-cloth on which customers were to stand before the table-counter’ (*CF* 142).
100 Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973), pp. 34-35. Roberts also details the cost of the floor furnishings. One cloth hearthrug was 4s. 9d. while 3 ½ x 4 yards of oilcloth was 14s.
apparent absence of such expected things. How things act as a ‘store of value’, as an insurance against straitened times but also accrue different meanings and significance with years passing. Job Legh relates an anecdote about such a stored experience. After the sudden, unexpected death of his daughter in London, Legh and his friend Jennings have to look after his orphaned baby granddaughter. Destitute of food and clothes for the child they seek help from a humble woman in ‘Brummagem’:

and wrapping little naked babby in her apron, she pulled out a key, as were fastened to a black ribbon, and hung down her breast, and unlocked a drawer in th' dresser. I were sorry to be prying, but I could na' help seeing in that drawer some little child's clothes, all strewed wi' lavender, and lying by 'em a little whip an' a broken rattle. I began to have an insight into that woman's heart then. She took out a thing or two, and locked the drawer, and went on dressing babby. (MB 106)

Legh recognises that in his apology for ‘prying’ he is witnessing a personal and poignant moment in the woman’s charitable act. The clothes that she uses have not been consigned as rags but are the cloths of memory, by which she remembers her own deceased child. Each fold and crease of the fabric, imbued with the fragrance of lavender, symbolic of love and devotion, brings past memories of the mother’s intimacy with the child into the present. In its secure sanctuary locked away, the fabrics retain, in John Murra’s words, the ‘inalienable quality of the kept textile treasure’.\(^{101}\) The “treasure” has the talismanic properties of a “reliquary” – a religious object devoted to enshrining the past’ imbued with ‘a special efficacy and agency of its own’; it is analogous to Esther’s locket, the hair tokens of Lady Ludlow as well as the letters of

Gaskell’s mother. Lavender itself is a symbol of preservation, apposite for the memories of the bereaved mother; the plant’s moth-repellent properties maintain the purity of the clothes’ original state and perhaps was a gift from a well-intending friend; in Gaskell’s later novella, Cranford the denizens gather together ‘little bundles of lavender-flowers sent to strew the drawers of some town-dweller’ (CF 17). The smell of lavender also stimulates the olfactory sense acting as an emblem of emotion’, in an analogous way that the herbs are used in the laying out ritual for the dead.

The ceremony of retrieving the clothes via the key on the black ribbon is an act of remembrance and mourning for what has gone, but which will comfort the distress of another baby. It stimulates the foundation of a further memory to give succour in future times to the grieving mother. As Pamela Johnson observes:

We remember via association with images or objects which, for us, potently accumulate, often via sense impressions [and] memories [...] An object recalled or rediscovered is a powerful stimulus, releasing memory; thoughts and images open up in a simultaneous rush, a layered, not a linear narrative. Thus, it is ‘for poor little Johnnie’s sake’ that the woman relinquishes the clothes, and the memories and thoughts stirred evoke an affective poignancy as she quietly ‘wip[es] her eyes wi’ the corner of her apron’ (MB 107). The removal and therefore absence of treasured and cherished ‘things’, demonstrates the simultaneous complex layering of memory and experiences, and how the meaning and significance accrues and alters over time.

\[102\] Floyd, p.54.  
Richard Terdiman has argued that there was a memory crisis in the nineteenth century after the hiatus of the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. A perception emerged that the ‘past had somehow evaded memory, that recollection had ceased to integrate with consciousness. In this memory crisis the very coherence of time and of subjectivity seemed disarticulated’.\textsuperscript{104} He claims that there was an awareness that society had lost its ‘organic connection with the past’ as many small, long-established, ‘knowable communit[ies]’ dispersed into larger urban conurbations, whose diurnal rhythms were now directed by the needs of factory and railway time.\textsuperscript{105} He asserts that consequently commodities, abstracted from their historic means of production, begin to lose their function as a mnemonic process because ‘normally objects have an intimate relation to remembrance’.\textsuperscript{106} It may be possible, however, to consider that the very properties of cloth and women’s traditional embodied experiences in handling, sewing and manipulation, enable a greater retention of its mnemonic qualities even in the flux of the mid-nineteenth century.

As Pamela Johnson notes, ‘[t]he symbolic link between memory and cloth is an ancient one’ as the Greek goddess of memory was Mnemosyne, ‘traditionally depicted between heavy drapery, symbolizing that which is to be recovered, memory as desire’.\textsuperscript{107} Cloth with its intimate relationship with the body can ‘stir both conscious and

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{106} Terdiman pp.12-13.
\item \textsuperscript{107} \textit{Textures of Memory}, p.4.
\end{itemize}
unconscious memory’ and act as a repository of the past rekindling it into the present, but in a way which is complex and layered, not merely a linear process of time’s continuous flow.\textsuperscript{108} Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin observe the nature of ‘women’s role as ‘keepers’ of memory during a period of cultural anxiety’.\textsuperscript{109} From a cultural materialist perspective, this could extend to the way in which many nineteenth-century women had an embodied phenomenological perception of cloth, which although it might be lost to twenty-first century sensibilities, enabled cloth and its affective qualities to act as a store of memory even as contemporaries feared that there was now a ‘new and disorientating opacity of the past’.\textsuperscript{110}

\textbf{Conclusion}
Therefore, analysis of the cloth and fabric possessions within \textit{Mary Barton}, uncover a complex layering of interpretations. In a society experiencing high mortality rates, mourning practices became increasingly formalized, disseminated from court etiquette to even the poorest and most marginalized members of society. Black, in its many variant hues, draped the bereaved across the nineteenth century and commercial fortunes were made from the commodification of grieving practices.

Mourning and remembrance had a gender bias; women bore the greater responsibility for the length and period of respectable organized mourning, the rules of which became more elaborate and complex as it was closely allied with social status. In such a way, it seems axiomatic that the dress and cloth of mourning is emblematic,

\textsuperscript{108} Textures of Memory, p.2.  
\textsuperscript{109} Goggin and Tobin, p.10.  
\textsuperscript{110} Terdiman, p.24.
resonating with significant nuances and undertones. As Gaskell was grieving for son, *Mary Barton* is ‘haunted by the spectres of misery’ both in the warp of present suffering and the weft of sorrowful memories.\(^{111}\) Allusions to textile weaving are an apposite metaphor for memory recall because they emphasize the oscillating process, the complex layering and accrual, and disinvestment of the memory process, engendered by cloth, in stirring affective responses. This is not a linear process. Mary Barton’s recycled mourning dress for widow Davenport and the ‘Brummagem’ mother’s donation of her deceased baby’s clothes are two such instances that reveal women’s intimate relationship with their cloth possessions: so that even its subsequent absence can deliver a particular poignancy to unleash memories.

From such ‘things’ as Esther’s locket to the Sturgis curtains that ‘had such power of exciting regret’, this chapter demonstrates in Bill Brown’s words, why and how objects are used ‘to make meaning, to make or re-make ourselves, to organise our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies’.\(^{112}\) There is also a sense that in the extraordinary momentum of industrialization and urbanization, mid-nineteenth Victorians did not perceive such a sharp dichotomy between people and inanimate objects – rather a world of quasi objects and quasi subjects. Indeed, as this chapter has revealed, Gaskell’s writings demonstrate such hybridity.

\(^{111}\) Maria Edgeworth, p.361.
Goggin and Tobin observe the nature of ‘women’s role as ‘keepers’ of memory during a period of cultural anxiety’. In such a way Gaskell’s allusions to the cloths, dresses and material possessions of her protagonists, reveal how cloth, with its intimate relationship with the body, stirs affective responses, positive stimulants, which release the warp and weft processes of memory. This is not a collective memory response but reveals the unique and personal affective nature of ordinary individuals, their authenticity of feeling, even when the exterior world was changing beyond recognition.

The Cranford ladies’ hair jewellery is closely linked to the scraps of old lace and point work, they proudly display as totemic relics of their ancestors. Lace is the subject of the next chapter. Lace is both old and new: the fabled and fêted material of the ancien régime that factory production from the 1840s transforms into symbols of newly acquired bourgeois wealth and status. And its inimitable facility to reveal as it conceals is used by Gaskell in creative ways, as we shall see.

---

113 Goggin and Tobin, p.10.
Chapter Four
Ruffles, Old Point and Net Curtains

‘She would take a piece of French cambric, and by drawing out some threads, and working in others, it became delicate lace in a very few hours. She did the same by Hollands cloth, and made coarse strong lace’.1

Introduction
‘Old lace’ and ‘point lace’, ‘nets’ and ‘ruffles’: Elizabeth Gaskell’s writings are replete with references to this material, whose etymology is from the Latin term laqueus signifying ‘a noose […] made by looping, twisting, or knitting threads in patterns’ (OED). Nineteenth-century lace historian, Mrs. Fanny Bury Palliser, defined lace as a ‘plain or ornamental network, wrought of fine threads of gold, silver, silk, flax, or cotton interwoven’.2 This explanation suggests the wider cultural and historical framework underlying allusions to lace in Gaskell’s work. The proud, matriarchal possessor of the ancestral lace ruffles in ‘My Lady Ludlow’, as well as the lace ‘window-curtains’ adorning the mill-owner’s house in industrial Milton-North in North and South work as quiet chronotopes for the history of the long nineteenth century. Delving back even further to the accession of George III in 1760, when ‘ruffles’ were a requirement of court attire, to Queen Victoria’s patronage of the English lace-making industry in the mid-nineteenth century, Gaskell’s lace imagery charts the vicissitudes of the lace things that her characters possess and scrutinize in others. That these contexts were by no means stable or consistent in a century that experienced three revolutions in the Western hemisphere (the Industrial transformation in England, the American War of Independence, and the 1789 French Revolution), reminds the reader that lace was a

2 Mrs Bury Palliser, History of Lace (Sampson Low, Son & Marston, 1865), p.22.
commodity, whose value oscillated wildly. This was particularly the case during the French Revolution, when a previously fêted fabric was unceremoniously dumped as unacceptable symbols of the ‘ancien régime’. It was to this period of history that Gaskell turned for the setting of her novella, ‘My Lady Ludlow’(1858).³

It must also be remembered that unlike wool, silk, flax and cotton, lace is not a thread of its own derivation, but as this chapter’s opening quotation indicates, a discrete composition of the three latter yarns, or a hybrid mix. Hence, various factors will be shown to affect the production of lace during this period. These encompass the changing nature of the labour force, the availability of design skills and expertise, as well as uneven technological advances in the respective textile industries.

Elaine Freedman asserts that ‘hidden relations accumulate and abide in the words that name things, whether or not we know them fully, consciously, avowedly, or at all’.⁴ This chapter explores how Gaskell’s use of the lace motif effectively plots a timeline of lace, just as it concomitantly charts the changes and developments in design and modes of production. The origins derive from the early modern period, with proto-production in the domestic cottage industry in England, as well as religious establishments across Europe. By the third quarter of the nineteenth century a high proportion of lace production was by fully mechanized means. This was not a smooth or seamless process, and at times the diverse modes of production co-existed in an uneasy

---

alliance. However, with dramatic industrial reorganization, a trend did emerge - namely a gendered displacement of the original female lace workforce. Indeed, economic historian Pamela Sharpe declares that early ‘lace manufacture is one of the only examples of enduring female-dominated occupational communities in English history’ that was ‘second only to wool in the number of women it employed in the early industrial period’. Consequently, Gaskell’s lace ‘things’, by metonymic association, will be shown to reflect the diverse nature of women’s lace work and its adaptation to the competing pressures of mechanized production. It will also uncover how some women were exploited in the domestic sphere while others went unnoticed as invisible workers repairing and reconstructing old lace. A few women, however, were able to capitalize on periods of high consumer demand for lace, gaining economic agency and independence in the process.

While Sharpe comments upon the gendered displacement of the lace workforce, this coincides with a gendered bifurcation of lace consumption patterns. The next section of this chapter thus considers the ‘lace ruffles’ of the narrator’s mother in ‘My Lady Ludlow’, who although reduced to penurious circumstances, still preens and displays the accoutrements of her ancestral heritage. The story is set during the Napoleonic Wars, *circa* 1802, and the ruffles are signifiers of an accessory that had been commonplace attire for both sexes in the higher echelons of the aristocracy and court fifty years previously. However, for the majority of the nineteenth century,

---

changing patterns of consumption, generated by the growing ranks of the middle class, and the rise of ‘fashion’ propelled by the rapid expansion of a visual and print culture, caused demand for lace products to be exclusively female orientated. Between 1840 and 1860, but especially marked after the Great Exhibition, there was a rush to own lace across all sections of female society: this craze even earned the soubriquet ‘lace mania’. Contemporary writer Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790-1846) in The Wrongs of Women (1844) suggested that the lace ‘market [. . .] numbers among its customers [. . .] every grade of society from the Queen upon the throne to the village bar-maid, who cannot serve beer out to her master’s customers without a bit of edging to her simple cap’.

Tonna’s comments serve to show the female commonality of lace adornment, yet the innocuous phrase ‘a bit of edging’ also gestures to the problematic terminology of lace and its multifariously different types.

Lace disaggregates into amorphous categories that converged and changed over time, in name, derivation and provenance. The combination of such factors added to the mystique, allure and cachet of illustrious lace. Thus, for instance it seems surprising that the lace described by the French term, as Point D’Angleterre was never actually made in England but was a bobbin lace that was smuggled into England from Brussels from the late seventeenth century onwards. This issue of nomenclature and provenance will be addressed in greater detail, but suffice to say, Gaskell’s lace allusions are topical,

---


pertinently participating and commenting upon this female-gendered phenomenon of lace. It represents a shared female language, particularly in her nuanced allusions to the sartorial distinctions of lace from certain regions and different modes of production. The Cranford ladies’ proud display of scraps of fine ‘old lace’, whilst whimsically charming and sentimental, is akin to the ‘ruffles’ trope in ‘My Lady Ludlow’, which date back to the fine aristocratic lace of the mid-eighteenth century. One hundred years later in the mid-nineteenth century, ‘old lace’ is a means whereby women appropriate the laces’ romantic legacy to transmit signs of their lineage, status and taste. The tactility of ‘old lace’ stirs sensory responses as the colour and staining may bear the imprints of previous generations, stimulating an affective response resurrecting faded memories of antecedents. The carefully maintained lace is emblematic of the Cranford ladies’ endeavours to preserve and conserve their heritage; a rather anachronistic defence against the encroaching industrialization of nearby Drumble and the arrival of the newly arrived bourgeois class. To the latter, lace wearing becomes a display of conspicuous consumption and wealth recalling the lavishness of the court of Louis XIV of France, the Sun King.

The second section of this chapter considers the dichotomous nature of lace production reflected in the disparate wares displayed in Section 19 of the Great Exhibition; hand-made articles such as Honiton lace and Brussels Point were juxtaposed with the ultimate symbol of mid-nineteenth century respectability in the middle-class domestic sphere, the lace net curtain. Honiton lace was the choice of Queen Victoria for the lace trimming adorning her wedding gown to her marriage to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha in 1840. It was a politically astute choice, giving royal patronage to
the ailing Devonshire cottage industry. She was in fact following the practices of Queen Adelaide, wife of William IV, the queen revered by the Cranford ladies for her style. Thus, when Miss Betty Barker appears rather flustered in issuing invitations to Miss Matty and herself, the narrator pithily ponders whether the agitation is because ‘she had been writing to Queen Adelaide to ask for a receipt for washing lace’ (CF 62). The washing of ‘old lace’ is an activity where class divisions dissolve in the women’s mutual appreciation of the lace’s aesthetic beauty.

Jean Hemingway explains that ‘[f]ine lace was already seen as an art-form of historical and cultural interest’, a view reinforced by such design critics as Charles Eastlake; in *Hints on Household Taste* (1868) he exhorts lady readers to improve their lacework skills ‘with a careful examination of old specimens to be found at the South Kensington Museum’. It will be argued that just as the Great Exhibition juxtaposed hand-made lace, both antique and modern with machine-made nets produced in the factories of Nottingham, the female gendered and ordered space of the domestic drawing room is a microcosm of this pattern. The encroachment of modern industrial production and its counter-distinction with a mythical and aesthetic, ancestral relic is enacted in that place of matriarchal dominance, Mrs Thornton’s drawing room in *North and South*.

---

Ruffles and Old Point

Lace is deployed as an effective chronotope in ‘My Lady Ludlow’ when the narrator’s mother, although reduced to penurious straits, is determined to demonstrate her ancestral rank:

My mother was always said to have good blood in her veins; and when she wanted to maintain her position with the people she was thrown among,—principally rich democratic manufacturers, all for liberty and the French Revolution,—she would put on a pair of ruffles, trimmed with real old English point, very much darned to be sure,—but which could not be bought new for love or money, as the art of making it was lost years before. These ruffles showed, as she said, that her ancestors had been Somebodies, when the grandfathers of the rich folk, who now looked down upon her, had been Nobodies,—if, indeed, they had any grandfathers at all. (MLL 145)

The ‘ruffles’ are in fact a pair of detachable under-sleeves. Whilst the novella is set in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the presence of the ‘ruffles’ embellished with ‘old English point’, evoke a greater temporal distance; the reader infers they belonged to the narrator, Margaret Dawson’s great grandmother, two generations previously.

Their date of origin is possibly the mid 1750s and 1760s. This would accord with the time frame suggested by editor Charlotte Mitchell in the Pickering & Chatto edition, published in 2005. She posits that Gaskell drew upon the autobiographical writings of the novelist Frances Burney (1752-1840), in D’Arblay, vols. ii-v, for an account of this period (MLL
457). From 1786-1791, Burney was ‘deputy keeper of the robes’ to Queen Charlotte of Mecklenburg (1744-1818) the consort of George III, King of England 1760- 1820.⁹ In the mid-eighteenth century, ruffles were popular accessories for both men and women. Bury Palliser’s detailed nineteenth- century account of *The History of Lace*, published in 1865, asserts that ruffles or *engageantes* ‘introduced in 1688 [in France] continued in vogue till the French Revolution’ and the fashion soon spread to England.¹⁰ As she further elaborates, there was considerable etiquette in the wearing of a ruffle on ladies’ sleeves, in particularly whether they were ‘à deux rangs’ or ‘à trois rangs’.¹¹ Presumably the latter are the poetically named ‘weeping ruffles’ […] often triple-layered, […] diaphanous affairs’, popular from the early 1730s.¹² Lace designs adorning sleeve ruffles closely followed silk designers’ naturalistic patterns with ‘selected typical motifs – like the large, feathery flower heads with spotted centres’.¹³ The ‘Chinoiserie component of the Rococo style was also popular, particularly in the 1740s and 50s, featuring an abundance of ‘Chinoiserie birds, insects, figures and flowers, within a rocaille framework’.¹⁴ The ‘diaphanous’ nature of the ruffle suggests that they

---

¹⁰ Palliser, p.152.
¹¹ Palliser, p.151.
¹⁴ Levey, *A History*, p.69. From the seventeenth century, the burgeoning trade of the East India companies with the East led to ‘an enchantment with China which came to be expressed in a European style, ‘chinoiserie’. These oriental luxury goods- not only porcelain, but silks, calicoes, and lacquerware – derived from Asian consumer cultures, but were quickly adapted to meet the demands of overseas markets in the Middle East, then Europe’, Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.49.
were ‘composed largely of muslin, gauze or net’ and edged with a border lace.\textsuperscript{15} As Anne Kratz observes the \textit{engageantes} could use up to four metres of lace as the frills were:

specially shaped for the purpose, much wider in the centre than on the sides because, to appear elegant they needed to be longer at the back than in the front. To obtain this width… a straight piece of edging could be mounted on a less costly lace, which increased in length at the centre, and would scarcely be seen because of the three or four frills, which would overlap it.\textsuperscript{16}

Thomas Gainsborough’s portrait of \textit{Queen Charlotte} (1781), in figure 13, shows the quantity of lace that would have been needed for the ruffles, as does a description in a contemporary poem, ‘Frizzle your elbows with ruffles sixteen’.\textsuperscript{17} The substitution of other gauzy materials and cheaper laces attests to the exorbitant cost of fine eighteenth century laces, many of the latter being of foreign extraction; a 1748 text \textit{Apology for Mrs T C Philips} priced ‘tripple laced ruffles at £12 per yard’.\textsuperscript{18} For most of the eighteenth century, fine lace was the gilding of the élite; its pristine snowy whiteness signified status, prestige and wealth in both genders. It was the esteemed covetous adornment, particularly apposite for ritualistic stages of the life cycle. As Thomas Wright confirms in \textit{Romance of the Lace Pillow} (1919) ‘people not only liked to be

\begin{quote}
Examples of these are the ‘japanned’ decorative objects described in several of Gaskell’s novels; ‘japanned’ being a ‘glossy varnish finish imitating Japanese lacquer work’ (\textit{MB} 417); in \textit{Cranford} there is a ‘japanned table’ (\textit{CF} 75); in \textit{Wives and Daughters}, the Browning sisters possess a ‘japanned toilette- table’ (\textit{WD} 155); and Mrs Barton proudly displays ‘a bright green japanned tea-tray’ as well as a crimson tea-caddy, also of japan ware’ (\textit{MB} 15).
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{15} Levey, \textit{A History}, p.70.
\textsuperscript{17} Palliser, p.340.
\textsuperscript{18} Palliser, p.330.
married in lace, bedded in lace, and executed in lace, they also liked to be buried in lace’, as opposed to the statutory but unpopular wool shrouds discussed in chapter one.\textsuperscript{19}

In the age of eighteenth-century mercantilism, such demand for expensive foreign laces meant an outpouring of silver. Postlethwait in \textit{Dictionary of Commerce} 1766 exclaimed “Tis but a few years since that England expended upon foreign lace and linen not less than two millions yearly”.\textsuperscript{20} Not surprisingly, such a drain on the national reserves of precious metals led to the government in 1749, placing a prohibition on imports of ‘gold, silver and thread lace manufactured’ in foreign countries.\textsuperscript{21} Despite this the smuggling of “lace an' things” was rife, even condoned by the sanctimonious draper, Philip in \textit{Sylvia’s Lovers} ‘every one did that, only it was considered polite to ignore it,’ even though England was at war with its foremost foe, France at the time (\textit{SL} 43). Wright dramatically relates the subterfuge of the practice, to the extent that lace was smuggled in coffins, in place of a corpse.\textsuperscript{22} In Daniel Defoe’s novel \textit{Moll Flanders} (1722), one of the eponymous protagonist’s self-proclaimed professions is as an ‘artist’, when she steals ‘a parcel of bone lace worth nearly £20’; she also secures ‘£300 worth of Flanders lace’.\textsuperscript{23} Palliser similarly affirms the pervasiveness of smuggling, citing that the newspapers in 1764 were full of ‘accounts of seizures made by the customs’, which included ‘sixteen black- à-la mode cloaks trimmed with lace’.\textsuperscript{24} Such a precise and

\textsuperscript{19} Thomas Wright, \textit{The Romance of the Lace Pillow} (Carlton: Ruth Bean, 1982), p.98.
\textsuperscript{20} Quoted in Palliser, p.330.
\textsuperscript{21} Palliser, p.331.
\textsuperscript{22}Wright, p.95.
\textsuperscript{23} Quoted in Wright, p.94.
\textsuperscript{24} Palliser, p.336.
detailed description is revealing as it mirrors the description of Molly Gibson’s attire when, as a young child, she makes her debut visit to the gala day at Cumnor Towers, ‘she had on a black mode cloak that had been her mother’s; it was trimmed round with rich lace, and looked quaint and old-fashioned on the child’ (WD 10). Was such a grown-up cloak, possibly a possession of Molly’s grandmother, possibly obtained by illicit means, that was then transferred, as a form of portable textile property, to subsequent generations of women?  

Large lace ruffles though began to go out of usage from the 1770s, as fashion moved towards the Neo-Classical phase, although a variant was still used for court dress. ‘[A]rchaic court dresses’ still maintained lace as an essential feature; in February 1795 at the Royal Birthday Ball, the Princess of Wales was adorned in ‘[l]appets of point lace. […] ‘Triple ruffles of point lace’.  

Lady Ludlow, a distant cousin of the narrator’s mother, presumably wore such ruffles in her capacity as ‘maid of honour to Queen Charlotte’, another inter-textual reference to Burney’s memoirs (MLL 151). However, by the end of the eighteenth century, ruffles had decidedly gone out of fashion for men; the ‘rich, democratic manufacturers’ cited in ‘My Lady Ludlow’ are emblematic of the emerging ‘middling class’ and the ‘great masculine renunciation’ in

---

25 In the 1814 novel *Amabel; or, Memoirs of a Woman of Fashion*, vol. 1 by Mrs Elizabeth Hervey, ‘Mrs. Hudson wore at church a French black mode coat, trimmed with a very broad handsome lace […] ‘Lady Basildon’s woman has smuggled over from France a quantity of things which she sells very cheap […] I employed an acquaintance […] to purchase me a cloak.’ Cited in Davidson, p.263
the gendered shift to plain suits.27 The fact that the mother’s ruffles are ‘trimmed with real old English point’ reveal that they are a category of handmade lace called ‘point’.

As Levy explains, the term ‘point’ was initially a French term meaning stitch or ‘needle’ lace, which became a technical term for early needle lace, which evolved from embroidery. Mrs Medlicott, companion to Lady Ludlow, demonstrates such rare and archaic skills acquired from her early education in Germany and, as the narrator asserts, ‘is not known even by name in these days’:

Though a good Protestant, and never missing Guy Faux day at church, she was as skilful at fine work as any nun in a Papist convent. She would take a piece of French cambric, and by drawing out some threads, and working in others, it became delicate lace in a very few hours. (MLL 157)

Mrs Medlicott displays the ‘technique of drawn-thread work’, pulling out threads until a ‘skeletal network of threads had been cut out and removed from the woven ground’.28

As Levey further elaborates ‘[t]his was then oversewn and filled in with detached buttonhole stitches to form a decorative fabric known in England as cutwork, in France as pointe coupé’.29 As the techniques of point lace making evolved, ‘the woven base of cutwork was abandoned and the detached buttonhole stitches were built up on outline threads tacked to a parchment pattern’.30

Point lace differed from ‘pillow’ or ‘bobbin lace’, which was worked from ‘a pattern pinned to a cushion. Multiple bobbins [wound] cotton threads around the needles, forming the lace’. Earlier bobbins were made from bone, hence its other appellation, bone lace. The association of point lace with the highest quality of workmanship gave it a prestige, which as Levey asserts resulted in it being linked to certain high-quality bobbin laces in the late seventeenth-century and ‘in time this misuse spread’. Thus in England, the most common type of lace production was the pillow or bobbin lace, made from flax, work which was particularly ‘suited to the needs of the poor and children’. From the end of the seventeenth century, the settlement of immigrants from Flanders led to the concentration of the English lace industry in the counties of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire; they began to excel in producing the finest bobbin laces, which were described as ‘finest point laces’. Palliser describes the ‘earliest English lace [as] naturally the old Flemish, the pattern wavy and graceful, the ground well executed’. As M. Jourdain explains, ‘Buckinghamshire lace closely copied that of Lille and was known as ‘English Lille’. Whereas ‘Buckingham point became the finest lace produced in England’, continental laces from France, Brussels and Flanders were always deemed to be superior in thread and design.

---

31 Freedgood, p.645.
32 Levey, A History, p.3.
34 Palliser, p.360.
This confusion and appropriation of techniques, names and topography enabled a perpetuation of obfuscation, which engendered a culture of mystery and romance to the lace industry. Thus, *Point d’Angleterre*, which translates, as ‘English Point’ was actually the finest bobbin lace, made in Brussels and smuggled to England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. British flax could not match the extraordinary fineness of the thread of the Brussels lace made in Cambray and Valenciennes in Flanders. Palliser portrays such thread lyrically ‘spun in dark underground rooms, for contact with the dry air causes the thread to break; so fine […] as to escape the sight’.\(^{37}\) Such fine thread was used for the background or *vrai réseau* of the lace and made Brussels lace one of the most expensive laces. As Kraatz explains *vrai réseau* is the ‘generic term for the bars/brides (q,v), or network/ meshes linking the motifs in needle and bobbin laces’.\(^{38}\) In Brussels lace, the production is so complicated that it involved seven other artists working on individual components of the lace pattern, under the supervision of the master pattern maker, a truly aesthetic process which accounts for the lace’s peerless repute.\(^{39}\) At the height of lace mania in 1854, Costume historian, Cecil’Cunnington asserts that prices of Brussels lace squares ranged from ‘13 to 55 guineas’.\(^{40}\)

Its specific associations with legions of royal needlewomen, in addition to the ecclesiastical connection, further elevated the prestige of lacework. Palliser writes that

\(^{37}\) Palliser, p.104.
\(^{38}\) Kraatz, p.189.
\(^{39}\) Palliser, p.107.
\(^{40}\) Cunnington, p.182.
‘Edgitha, Queen of Edward the confessor, was a ‘perfect mistress of her needle’, and Catherine de Medici was ‘an unrivalled needlewoman’. It has become part of folklore that during Katherine of Aragon’s ‘sojourn at Ampthill’ in 1531-3, she taught lace work to local Bedfordshire women.

Within ‘My Lady Ludlow’, the narrator’s description of her mother’s point lace ruffles - a unique possession, that ‘could not be bought new for love or money’ - echoes an anecdote in Cranford (MLL 145). Mrs Forrester responds to Lady Glenmire’s admiration of some lace on her collar, by proudly asserting, ‘Yes […] such lace cannot be got now for either love or money; made by the nuns abroad they tell me. They say they can’t make it now, even there’ (CF 78). Mrs Medicott’s fine lace making skills are similarly compared to those of ‘any nun in a Papist convent’ (MLL 157). From the early modern period, European Catholic convents developed the tradition of hand-made lace for the ‘service of the church’. Palliser records that the Italians claim to have invented point or needle-made lace, and that by 1500 the paintings of Carpaccio and Gentile Bellini are showing that white lace was ‘in general use in the Italian courts at that epoch’. By 1766 Postlethwait is indignantly bemoaning the convents’ seeming monopoly of the trade, revealing the pejorative religious schism that was to persist in England until the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829. ‘As lace in particular is the

41 Palliser, pp. 4-7.
42 Palliser, pp.351-2.
43 Palliser, p.44.
44 Palliser, p.43.
manufacture of nuns, our British ladies may as well endow monasteries as wear Flanders lace, for these Popish nuns are maintained by Protestant contributions’. 45 One notes the misogynistic nature of his barbed attack; even in an epoch when men were still sporting lace cravats and ruffles, it is the women who are portrayed as the profligate sex. The pre-eminence of the convents’ output lasted up to the hiatus caused by the French Revolution in 1789. Up till then, it was the practice for the ‘demi-fashionables’ in London to send their daughters to these convents, ‘Popish’ as they were, in order to secure a fine education in lace making.46

So why does Gaskell, writing Cranford, serialized from 1851-53, and ‘My Lady Ludlow’, serialized in Household Words between 19 June and 25 September 1858, utilize the same phrase emphasizing the rarity of ‘old lace’ whether it is Old English point ruffles or lace scraps to adorn a collar? In both cases, Gaskell pens the refrain that the lace cannot be bought or obtained for ‘love or money’. The vernacular phrase serves to replicate the commonality of female experience, as women exchange news, gossip and proffer advice upon meeting. Levey makes the point that during the lace mania of the mid-nineteenth century, there was much confusion about lace. People were generally ill informed and unskilled in the appearance and properties of fine lace. As she elaborates people, ‘confused real with imitation, antique with modern, while at the same time they invested the subject with a mystique’, which no doubt added to the

45 Dictionary of Commerce quoted in Palliser, p.330. Margaret Doody notes that ‘common English opinion- assigned levity, amorality, and fickleness to “frogs” and “papists”’, Doody, p.23. In Cranford, Mrs Forrester speculates that with the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Bill, the nuns may make the ‘fine old lace’ again (CF 78).

46 Palliser, p.349.
cachet and allure of the genuine article.47 Thus, Gaskell’s carefully placed allusions to lace across her writings are in dialogue with the contemporary fascination with the fabric. She uses the phrase on both occasions to underwrite the authenticity of the lace as old and handmade. The ruffles, collars and scraps of old lace are female-gendered ‘portable’ property; the fungible, tradable properties of lace make it an inter-generational store of wealth. It is a portable commodity that can be exchanged for cash easily and released back into circulation.

It is interesting to reflect how ‘old lace’ is a conduit of sociability. Discussion of its material particularities often occurs at the onset when new acquaintances are introduced and scrutinized. It is a female-gendered form of knowledge, ‘a language through which social identities and bonds of friendship are forged’; Deborah Wynne describes such relationships by the term ‘female homosociality’.48 Thus, in Cranford Mrs Forrester comically relates the ‘cat-swallowing-the-lace’ anecdote to Lady Glenmire, a relative stranger to the ‘circle of her intimate friends’ (CF 78) while Miss Browning shares tips on the subject of the washing of old lace to her impromptu visitor, Lady Harriet in Wives and Daughters (WD 176). In both these cases the owner of the lace is of lower status than their aristocratic counterpart, but the possession of the lace gives them a fillip of grandeur, proof of an older lineage and rank. This is certainly the reason behind the ruffles worn in ‘My Lady Ludlow’ by the narrator’s mother - an act

47 Levey, A History, p.96.
of archaic grandeur and defiance to prove to the *arriviste* manufacturers, that although they possess wealth, they lack the breeding inherent in a noble ancestry. Indeed, the narrator’s pithy phrase, ‘if indeed they had grandfathers at all’ resonates with the stigma of illegitimacy (MLL 145). Despite this mustering of ancestral and obsolete relics, the mother’s attire underscores her marginalization on the periphery of the dramatic socio-industrial and economic flux that occurred in the final quarter of the eighteenth century. The ‘rich democratic manufacturers’ are the business entrepreneurs usurping archaic social stratification by championing ‘liberty and the French Revolution’ (MLL 145).

There is a similar vein in *North and South* whereby the possession of ‘real old lace’ signifies lineage (*NS* 96). However, in this instance it consolidates and reinforces a cognizant female-gendered knowledge and scrutiny that reads and interprets nuanced signs. Thus, in the early part of the novel, an ingrained and pejorative assumption of the South/North class divide is abruptly upturned by an item of fine needlework. Newly located to the industrial heartland of Milton-Northern, Mrs Hale is forced to re-evaluate her opinion of Mrs Thornton’s status when she espies the mill-owner’s mother’s ‘old English point’ (*NS* 96). Mrs Hale is deft in her analysis, later summarizing to Dixon that the lace ‘has not been made for this seventy years, and which cannot be bought’ (*NS* 96). Mrs Hale’s final pronouncement, ‘It must have been an heir-loom, and shows that she had ancestors’ results in a volte-face transformation, as the former vicar’s wife now accords Mrs Thornton ‘something more than the languid exertion to be agreeable to a visitor’ (*NS* 96). While the aged lace ‘heir-loom’ represents an inter-generational transfer of a textile treasure, it is also symbolic of other nuanced signs that observers
such as Mrs Hale can decode.⁴⁹ Peter Stallybrass uses the term ‘network of cloth’ to describe how material heirlooms can powerfully communicate ‘a transmission of wealth, of genealogy […], but also of memory and of the love of mother for daughter’.⁵⁰ Thus Mrs Hale’s reappraisal of the industrial matriarch is founded on shared womanly sympathy and sensibilities with perhaps a modicum of innate southern prejudice and condescension. For the lace heirloom articulates the contemporary fashion and aesthetic appeal for ‘real old lace’, promoted by the periodical press, that transcends social stratification borders.⁵¹ Dating the ‘heir-loom’ locates its origins to c.1770-80, before the turmoil of the French Revolution swept away all vestiges and signifiers of the ancien régime (NS 96). By this stage ‘old laces’ were already in decline because of the dramatic change in design focus, which prompted a phased change in fashion for lace. The earlier, elaborate curves of the Rococo style began to cede ground to the simpler Neo-Classical designs. As Levey observes ‘surface decoration became so unimportant that any diaphanous fabric, woven gauze, silk crepe, muslin, net or lace- would serve’.⁵²

As, already stated, large lace ruffles went out of fashion from the 1770s, and gauzy

---

⁴⁹ Gaskell’s essay ‘The Last Generation in England’ (1849), a precursor to ‘The Cranford Papers’, describes the female gendered transmission of textile wealth ‘[m]ost of these scions of quality had many pounds’ worth of valuable laces descended to them from mothers and grandmothers’, in Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford, pp.159-165(p.161).
⁵⁰ Peter Stallybrass, ‘Worn Worlds: Clothes, Mourning and the Life of Things’, Yale Review, 81,1993, 35-50 (p.46). As Stallybrass elaborates ‘[a] network of cloth can trace the connection of love across the boundaries of absence, of death, because cloth is able to carry the absent body, memory, genealogy, as well as literal material value’, p.45.
⁵¹ Wynne, citing Sharon Marcus, asserts that ‘women’s magazines containing fashion plates […] encouraged women to scrutinise other women, fostering ‘a respectable version of promiscuity for women’, Wynne, p.160.
fabrics were embossed or embroidered with the simplest of motifs such as ‘rows of tiny sprigs of flowers’.\footnote{Levey, \textit{A History}, pp. 69.}

Even if the lace makers could produce simpler designs, ‘this was far more expensive than any woven counterpart, so the market for lace shrank dramatically’.\footnote{Levey, ‘Lace in the Early Modern’, p.595.}

This affected both the bobbin and point lace sectors. The lace-making skills for Buckinghamshire point patterns became obsolete in the latter quarter of the eighteenth century. Heavy, elaborately ornamented lace, such as the real old lace possessed by Mrs Thornton, became unwanted items, stored in grandmothers’ presses as textile treasures for future generations. Palliser observes that custom of ‘storing lace’ was particularly prevalent in rural areas, ‘[o]ld ladies felt a satisfaction in knowing [that] when they died as fine lace would be found in their presses as could be seen in those of their neighbours’ - a final avowal of sartorial status from beyond the grave!\footnote{Palliser, p.360. She relates the lineage of a particular textile treasure. A Mrs Bell gave a sample of her old Newport Pagnell lace, bequeathed to her father in 1780 ‘by an aged relative who had long been in the lace trade’.}

The French Revolution dealt the final death-knell to heavily ornate hand-made laces. Manufacture ceased for almost twelve years and more than thirty different fabrics entirely disappeared. Such laces were seen as signifiers of the \textit{ancien régime} and a degenerate, profligate aristocracy; consequently continental ‘point lace’ experienced ‘the most degrading vicissitudes’.\footnote{Palliser, p.344.} As Palliser laments ‘so thoroughly was the taste for lace at this epoch gone by, that in many families collections of great value were, at the
death of their respective owners handed over as rubbish to the waiting maid”\textsuperscript{57}. Such objects of previous gilded wealth and status become fetishized as an abhorrent profanity. This is mirrored in a scene from ‘My Lady Ludlow’, when desperate French aristocrats flee for their lives to London:

Their diamonds, too, were sold well by my lord’s agents, though the London shops were stocked with jewellery, and such portable valuables, some of rare and curious fashion, which were sold for half their real value by emigrants who could not afford to wait. (MLL 188)

Lace-point ruffles, emblematic of the archaic feudal system that still persists at Lady Ludlow’s country estate, Hanbury Court, may be one of those ‘portable valuables […] of rare and curious fashion’ that was once priceless, but is now without an economic price, after an epoch of seismic cultural and political rupture in France. Palliser’s historical anecdotes confirm the dramatic demise of previous textile treasures. At a fête at Marly in 1679, the Sun King, Louis XIV had given each of his female court guests a robe ‘trimmed with point of the most exquisite texture’.\textsuperscript{58} Palliser’s lamentations to the lace’s fate has an elegiac quality, ‘how long must such a treasure have been hoarded among the heirlooms of these great dames til ’93 dispersed all things, and duchesses, emigrants in London, disposed of their laces ell by ell!’\textsuperscript{59}

\footnotesize
57 Palliser, p.344.
59 Palliser, p.146.
As the novella’s timeframe, 1802-14 embraces the democratization of fashion that the Neo-Classical style symbolized, homage to the ancient democracies of the Classical world, the ornate, ancient lace points cedes to a simpler, lighter mode of attire; a metaphor for the more conciliatory and inclusive governance, Lady Ludlow gradually adopts. The Neo-Classical style of fashion with its tubular silhouette and empire line, that was discussed in the cotton chapter, gradually evolved into a Romantic phrase as waistlines adjusted back to their correct anatomical position. There was consequently increased demand for patterned lace accessories such as collars, bonnets, veils, sleeve ruffles, lappets and handkerchiefs. In figure 14, the pastel portrait miniature of Hannah Lumb (c.1830), Gaskell’s maternal aunt and surrogate mother reflects this trend. The widow’s mobcap and Vandyke ‘dentate border’ of the collar are edged with lace.\(^{60}\) It is secured in place with a large ribbon, a fashion Lady Ludlow regards scathingly, ‘people might as well come down in their night caps’ (MLL 149).

In 1823, Mary Holland, one of Gaskell’s cousins writes about the lace attire of wealthy, fashionable acquaintances, the Miss Rumbolds, ‘Bessy wore her striped muslin, trimmed at the bottom with three heights of flounces;

---

(we were not near enough to discern whether the flounces were Mechlin or Valenciennes lace, but the effect was very good).\textsuperscript{61} Both laces are types of soft bobbin lace noted for their delicacy of appearance. As historian Pamela Sharpe notes, the very nature of lace ‘seemingly ephemeral [and] exotic’, made it ‘exceedingly prone to changes in fashion’.\textsuperscript{62} Valenciennes was ‘the supreme lace of intimate apparel’ and the choice of stylish young women.\textsuperscript{63} In 1852, Gaskell describes the lavish trousseau of her friend Mrs. Davenport whose everyday petticoats are ‘trimmed all round with Valenciennes’.\textsuperscript{64} In the nineteenth century the lace was distinguished by ‘its square, or round, plaited mesh and very white clear patterns’.\textsuperscript{65}

Lace is also distinctive from other fabrics, ‘its open work structure establishes that the holes are as important as the patterns by the threads’.\textsuperscript{66} Consequently, its ability to simultaneously reveal and conceal engenders an emotional response in both the wearer and the viewer. In \textit{Wives and Daughters}, it therefore seems particularly significant that the recently married Mrs Gibson enters her new marital home so swathed in a net veil ‘so securely (and becomingly) fastened down, that it was some time before Mrs Gibson could get her lips clear to greet her new daughter’ (\textit{WD}178).

The veil emphasizes the stepmother’s carefully orchestrated comeliness, whilst

\textsuperscript{61} John Chapple, p.303.
\textsuperscript{62} Sharpe, ‘Lace and Place’ p.299.
\textsuperscript{63} Kraatz, p.118.
\textsuperscript{65}Cunningtons, p.283.
enforcing a physical barrier in her outward demonstration of affections towards her stepdaughter. The veil is a form of self-fashioning that gestures towards the chameleon nature of her shallow and brittle identity. By such a simple motif, Gaskell can arguably articulate a subtle ‘depth of narrative meaning’- the inference of secrets, concealment and deception that are endemic to Mrs Gibson.67

Her daughter Cynthia’s clever millinery skills in replicating French fashions, ‘she turned and twisted the ribbons and gauze her mother furnished her with’ similarly show the narrative sub-layers of the lace ‘gauze’ (WD 227). With barely concealed contempt, Cynthia re-fashions her mother’s headdresses, the gauze indicative of the daughter’s secret; her psychological frailty, a function of childhood neglect and maternal deprivation. Such a rapid execution of ‘crafty’ skills, a transformative art, is an example of the seemingly ‘dangerous creativity of women’, to use Clare Walker Gore’s phrase for the depiction of ‘feminine craft’ in the Victorian novel; not only in the refashioning of the self but in women’s ‘ability to weave lies, entangle men in their meshes or plot against them’.68 Whereas Gore’s overarching statement articulating the pejorative gender bias of Victorian culture could benefit from refinement, it is a pertinent observation to consider regarding Gaskell’s portrayal of Cynthia. To ‘entangle

67 Madeleine Seys discusses the lace motif in the sensationalist novel Lady Audley’s Secret (1862) by Mary Bradden. The eponymous protagonist’s dress ‘white lace layered on white muslin suggests a depth of narrative meaning’ indicative of the character’s ‘multiple and intricately fashioned identities’, Madeleine Seys, Fashion and Narrative in Victorian Popular Literature (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p.49.

men in their meshes’ foreshadows the piscine and naturalist imagery of Roger Hamley as he casts his net for wild life, as he is unwittingly ensnared by Cynthia’s charms. Cynthia’s adept skills in lace and gauze work mirror the growing fascination with lace. In 1847 a contemporary remarked, ‘[l]ace was never so universally worn as at the present time. It may be said to form an integral part of almost every article of female dress’. Gaskell’s writings in the 1850s and 60s reflect this gendered captivation. By this time the trend for lace accessories had escalated into a full-blown lace ‘mania’ that lasted until 1865; the ‘dames du grand monde’, both in France and England’ coveted lace attire and accoutrements.

It is indeed illuminating to consider the attire of Margaret Hale in her first meeting with the mill-owner, John Thornton. She is dressed in ‘a dark silk gown, without any trimming or flounce’ (NS, p.62). The absence of ‘trimming or flounce’ is thus particularly emphasized as anomalous. At the time of the novel’s setting, 1840s to 50s, large voluminous skirts with ruffles trimmed with all manner of ‘passementerie’ and in ‘particular an extensive use of lace’ were commonplace. Indeed by the 1850s

---

69 Cunnington, p.146.
70 Palliser, p.345.
71 Cunnington, p.146. As Margaret Hale is newly arrived from the south of England perhaps, she is following the style precepts of Henry Cole, Charles Eastlake et al. particularly with her complaints concerning ‘vulgarity and commonness’ (NS 65).
Cunnington notes the ‘revival of fashions of Louis XIV’ and an ‘increasing use of lace and trimmings, are especially marked in day dresses, the materials of which are nearly as rich as those for evening wear’.72 Franz Xavier Winterhalter’s portrait of the Empress Eugénie in figure 15 captures the ‘flounces of rather fashionable larger-scale Brussels application lace’.73 Thus, Margaret Hale’s austere day dress and her withering contempt of excessive furnishings is analogous to the style and good taste discourse, even as contemporary commentators noted the ubiquity and extravagance of lace adornment for more modest wardrobes. An account in Household Words describing a visit to a ladies’ Warehouse, Ashstock & Ahrab, Cheapside London, confirms this trend, ‘[w]here our grandmothers were content with a pair of hereditary lace lappets of unknown age, and in their eyes incalculable value, our daughters and wives aspire to whole dresses and curtains.’74 The ‘hereditary lace lappets’ styled in point lace are evocative of the ruffles in ‘My Lady Ludlow’, while the ‘whole dresses’ of lace signifies the bifurcation of lace production that occurs by the mid-nineteenth century. Factory production of net lace was increasingly able to meet the sartorial choices for women on smaller means and the substitution of cotton thread for flax from 1832 facilitated further economies.

Meanwhile the rare ‘old points’ of ‘unknown age’ achieved mythical status particularly as antique lace was perceived as ‘an art-form of historical and cultural

72 Cunnington, p.171.
73 Levey, A History, from figure 417.
74 ‘A Ladies Warehouse’ in Household Words, vol. XII, 27/10/1855, pp.301-305 (p.304). Nineteenth century warehouses differ from the storage structures of today. ‘A ‘warehouse’ was any large retail or wholesale establishment selling commodities – not necessarily made on the premises – cheaply and in quantity: it might sometimes be a distributor for a number of suppliers, more like a store than a shop’, Adburgham (1964) quoted in Davidson, p.182.
interest’.\textsuperscript{75} The voluminous skirts, flounces and berthas necessitated larger, richer patterns that contemporary designers were ill-equipped to meet. As Levey elaborates, the ‘reviving lace industry had found itself, like the silk industry, without any designers trained to cope with large-scale patterns’; designers had to look at the patterns of the seventeenth and eighteenth century for inspiration and techniques, and these ‘antique laces were also adopted for use by the fashionable world’.\textsuperscript{76} Its prohibitively high cost made this lace an ostentatious and highly-coveted symbol of wealth. In the 1820s, Palliser recounts how a yard of Brussels lace \textit{vraié réseau} was priced at £50.16s. During the extravagance of the Second Empire in France (1852-1870), the Empress Eugénie was said to favour lace accessories over jewellery. On a state visit to England by Louis-Napoleon III in April 1855, Queen Victoria notes in her Journal that the ‘Empress looked lovely in a full green dress, trimmed with Brussels lace, a shawl to match, & a white bonnet, — no ornaments whatever’; unsurprisingly Prince ‘Albert admired her toilette extremely’.\textsuperscript{77}

Just as Margaret Hale eschews the flounces and fripperies of dress, she is similarly aghast at the pecuniary display and conversation at the Thornton’s extravagant dinner party, held whilst the mill workers are on strike, ‘Why, they took nouns that were signs of things which gave evidence of wealth, — housekeepers, under-gardeners,

\textsuperscript{75} Hemingway, p.214.  
\textsuperscript{76} Levey, \textit{A History}, p.89.  
\textsuperscript{77} Queen Victoria’s Journals, Vol. 39, 19 April 1855, pp.227-233 (p.229).  
<http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/search/displayItemFromId.do?FormatType=fulltextimg src&QueryType=articles&ItemID=qvj08146&volumType=PSBEA#transcript>, [access 16/4/18].
extent of glass, valuable lace, diamonds, and all such things’ (NS 167). The nouns are in effect a fetishism of the riches of display. One wonders at this juncture whether Gaskell was recalling an incident that occurred in 1852, when her friend, Mrs Davenport displays her wedding trousseau to an admiring group of women. Gaskell is particularly censorious of a Mrs Blore who ‘was in ecstasies at every separate piece of finery’; she writes testily, ‘[s]he left on the Monday, & good go with her! I hope I shall never see her again. Such a testing of everything by money I have never heard in my life.’

Gaskell in a letter also comments on the nature of lace as an object of conspicuous consumption when she remarks upon a Mrs Pender ‘with whom they were to dine [...] had worn [...] £400 of lace at a ball’. In a way Gaskell’s scathing appraisal is a further illustration of the inherent social anxieties belying the regulation of women’s correct dress and behaviour. As in this case, women’s surface appearance and demeanour were under constant scrutiny, and influenced by the dictums from the growing print culture. As Leonore Davidoff comments, ‘[e]very cap, bow, streamer, ruffle, fringe, bustle, glove and other elaboration symbolised some status category for the female wearer’. Likewise, contemporary writer Mrs Sarah Stickney Ellis (1843) is scathing about women being dressed out of their class:

and thus the richest silk, and the finest lace, when inappropriately worn, are beautifully manufactured articles, but nothing more. [...] [T]here is [...] a gross violation of taste, in assuming for the middle classes of society, [...] the same

---

78 Further Letters, p.62.
79 Uglow, p.554.
descriptions of personal ornament as belongs with more propriety to those who enjoy the luxury of giving orders.\textsuperscript{81}

In an inverse way this mirrors Miss Pole’s disappointment in \textit{Cranford} with the inauspicious dress choice of Lady Glenmire, whose name, after all, does appear in Mrs Forrester’s ancestral reference book \textit{Peerage}, ‘My dear! ten pounds would have purchased every stitch she had on- lace and all’\textit{(CF 76)}. Even the lace adornment is unworthy of comment; certainly not being of ‘old point’ that would have excited speculation to its specific origins and history. Perhaps the aristocratic lady is even attired in cheaper, machine-made lace, a conscious display of “conspicuous parsimony”.\textsuperscript{82}

Not surprisingly, lace merchants dealing in antique lace sprang up to meet such a demand for the conspicuous consumption of ‘old’ hand-made lace. Indeed Gaskell in January 1855 asks a friend Mrs Maria James for advice upon where she can seek help for a poor governess friend who has been left a ‘valuable legacy’ of lace; does she know of ‘a good shop to sell old point lace’?\textsuperscript{83} Many of these lace dealers were women, such as Mrs Jane Clarke, whose Manchester shop was close to William Gaskell’s Cross Street Chapel; in addition she had branches in the salubrious areas of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{82} The phrase is used in \textit{The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective}, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).[Kindle e-book highlight 707-8]. An inversion of Veblen’s phrase ‘conspicuous consumption’ perhaps?
\textsuperscript{83} Further Letters, p.120.
\end{flushright}
Regent Street, London and Bold Street, Liverpool.\textsuperscript{84} She also exhibited seven items of hand-made lace in the 1851 Great Exhibition.\textsuperscript{85} Textile historian, Jean Hemingway claims that such lace merchants carefully fostered and cultivated the social exclusivity of their product; ‘Jane Clarke offered open viewings of her antique lace collection, displayed in special show-cases’.\textsuperscript{86} ‘The Manchester Guardian carried the following notice in 1844:

MISS CLARKE of 79, Bold Street, Liverpool, informs the Nobility and Gentry of Manchester and its vicinity that she will have an EXPOSITION of the Finest LACE, of all countries and of all periods, from Wednesday 2\textsuperscript{nd} to Saturday the 5\textsuperscript{th} October.\textsuperscript{87}

One notes the elevated and sycophantic language of the advertisement appealing to the taste of the discerning classes. In a similar manner, Gaskell’s writing utilises this feminine discourse of fine lace gently to reveal and satirize women’s social apprehensions and pretensions for this period. Indeed the exchanges of the Cranford ladies and the Misses Brownings on the difficulties of washing, colouring and starching of old lace, and their sharp scrutiny of other women’s lace ‘things’ seems to mirror the literary ladies, Sydney Lady Morgan (1789-1859) and Lady Stepney (1778-1845), who were the first to take up the lace ‘collecting “mania”’, and who apparently ‘quarrelled

\textsuperscript{84} Hemingway, p. 210. Jane Clarke’s commercial success in lace dealing is not atypical. ‘The historian Hannah Barker has shown that during this period businesswomen were often “central characters in a story of unprecedented social and economic transformation”, particularly in the northern industrial towns and cities’, cited in Deborah Wynne, ‘Charlotte Brontë and the Politics of Cloth: The ‘vile rumbling mills’ of Yorkshire’, \textit{Brontë Studies}, 43.1, January 2018, 89-99 (p.96).
\textsuperscript{85} Hemingway, p.211.
\textsuperscript{86} Hemingway, p. 214.
\textsuperscript{87} Cited in Hemingway, p.214.
weekly on the respective value and richness of their points’. In such a way the noun ‘points’ establishes itself as a signifier of wealth to the cognizant, as Margaret Hale observed from the Thornton’s dinner party; ‘points’ act metonymically for the aesthetics of ‘old lace’.

**Honiton and Machine-Made Lace**
Concurrently, however, with the mania for handmade lace, various changes to stocking frames from the late eighteenth century, meant that mechanized lace production was proceeding, albeit at a slower pace compared to cotton production. In 1823, the expiration of the patent on John Heathcoat’s 1809’s ‘second bobbin machine’ that successfully produced a ‘fine machine-made net by reproducing exactly the twist-net ground of Buckinghamshire bobbin lace’, sparked a ‘bobbin net ‘fever’, resulting in overproduction in the industry concentrated in Nottingham and a slump in the domestic market. This was further exacerbated by ‘Huski son’s Free Trade agreement of 1826, which reduced the duty on imported French silk tulle (net) from 70 per cent to 30 per cent of its value’.

Queen Adelaide, consort of William IV, comes to the aid of the struggling net industry. Widely loved for her modesty and avowal of the virtues of domesticity, the denizens of Cranford are equally in thrall to her style diktats. Turned away from the

---

88 Palliser, p.345.
discerning sumptuary sales practices of Miss Barkers’ ‘select millinery’, they resort to the ‘universal store’ where the proprietor claims his stock is straight from:

(Paris, he said, until he found his customers too patriotic and John Bullish to wear what the Mounseers wore) London; where, as he often told his customers, Queen Adelaide had appeared, only the very week before, in a cap exactly like the one he showed them, trimmed with yellow and blue ribbons, and had been complimented by King William on the becoming nature of her head-dress. (CF 61)

This comic vignette alludes to the financial devastation caused in certain sectors of the English silk and lace industries by the 1826 Act. Queen Adelaide attempts to redress the distress by instigating a ‘Buy British’ campaign after the coronation in 1830, banning French fashions from Court. Thus the rhetoric of the rousing ‘John Bull’ spirit in the Cranford passage, condemning in xenophobic rhetoric the practices of the French ‘Mounseers’, has its resonance in contemporary accounts. The ‘redoubtable Mrs Bell’, a leading London dressmaker in the World of Fashion comments in 1831:

The most honourable and honoured portion of the beau monde have awakened to a just sense of the impropriety of employing the vain and wanton people of foreign lands and, in confirming their patronage to the natives of their own country, have thrown the former into the shade and obscurity which they have long merited, and which for the prosperity and welfare of Great Britain ought to have been done long ago.

The passage contains resonances of a recurring economic theme, namely the import of foreign textiles causing irreparable damage and hardship to indigenous industry. This was the argument of the silk and woollen manufacturers leading to the Calico Acts in the eighteenth century and is the rationale behind Freedgood’s claim that Manchester’s

92 Adburgham, p.33.
factory cotton destroyed the handmade Indian calico industry. Crucially, however, the passage reverberates with the sense that textiles and the choice of consumption possess a crucial ideological element. Thus, personal consumption patterns on a quotidian scale become highly charged political weapons, when consolidated on a national level, particularly with an appeal to patriotism.\textsuperscript{93} It is pertinent to note, that while the passage does not directly disparage the French Nation it appropriates the elegant French term \textit{beau monde} to flatter the élite of English society. This act in itself seems an unwritten acknowledgement that to certain classes of society, the present aura of patriotism would be invariably short-lived, despite royal patronage.

Thus, for Queen Adelaide’s first Drawing room on 24\textsuperscript{th} February 1831, the assembly of the elite ladies of Court was instructed to appear in ‘dresses of English manufacture’.\textsuperscript{94} She herself commissioned ‘white silk point net’ from the manufacturer, ‘Messrs Train & Weston of Nottingham’.\textsuperscript{95} Certainly in a portrait by Sir William Beechey c.1831, the ‘Queen is wearing sleeves of embroidered net or of application lace on machine-made net’; as shown in figure 16, the net is presumably of English manufacture to support the patriotic cause.\textsuperscript{96} Wealthy women outside court protocol however, continued to favour continental laces, particularly the French silk net, tulle. In

\textsuperscript{93} It is a form of political activism represented by the boycotting of textiles and common dress. Such actions were effective in the American War of Independence when British silks were boycotted in favour of homespun silk production. In the early twentieth century, Gandhi was successful in championing hand spun and woven cotton production, \textit{khadi} against British cotton production and colonial rule.
\textsuperscript{94} Mrs Bell quoted in Adburgham, p.33.
\textsuperscript{95} Levey, \textit{A History}, p.87.
\textsuperscript{96} Patricia Wardle, \textit{Victorian Lace} (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1968), p.33.
spring 1831, the height of the ‘Buy British’ campaign, Urling & Co, ‘a prestigious
British and foreign lace warehouse at 224 Regent St’, patronised by the Queen, was
quietly advertising their comprehensive stock of continental laces.97

It was only in 1860 with advancements in the steam-
powered Jacquard loom that ‘machine-made lace
could successfully imitate every form of handmade
lace’.98 In this interim period, machine made netting
was finished off with embroidery, worked by the
nimble fingers of women and children, who became
known as lace-runners. This became ‘embroidered
lace’, a hybrid product, which ‘crossed the divide
from craft to industry’.99 This is probably the mode
of production for the ‘net’ sleeves in the Queen Adelaide portrait.

This may also be the fabric of Miss Duncombe’s gown, which Ruth repairs at the
ball thereby catching the attentions of predatory Bellingham:

Her dress, of some gossamer material, had been looped up by nosegays of
flowers, and one of these had fallen off in the dance, leaving her gown to trail
[…] Presently, her companions returned.
"What was the matter with Miss Duncombe? Did she come here?" asked they.
"Only her lace dress was torn, and I mended it," answered Ruth, quietly. (RU
16-18)

97 Adburgham, pp.35-7.
98 Wardle cited in Elaine Freedgood, "Fine Fingers": Victorian Handmade Lace and Utopian
Consumption, Victorian Studies, 45.4 (2003), 625-647 p.627.
99 Sharpe and Chapman, p.327.
It is extremely unlikely that a full gown of handmade lace would have been worn for a provincial ball. Queen Victoria’s wedding in 1840 was the main impetus underlying the fashion for full lace dresses. The lace on the royal costume was estimated to cost between £1,000 and £1,500. The evolution of white lace as a bridal tradition will be examined later in this section. Machine-made lace net, whilst not as fine was considerably cheaper and is probably the basis of Miss Duncombe’s ball gown. Mechanised net was finished and decorated by the lace-runners, and the material possibly overlayed cotton or satin, being made up in millinery houses similar to Mrs Mason’s establishment in *Ruth*. The metonymic associations reveal a subtext of female-gendered work exploitation, both in the wretched seamstresses who make up the final dress and the manual labours of the lace runners who tamboured or ran the lace patterning on the net which was stretched out on a tambour frame.

William Felkin estimated that there were 150,000 such lace runners in 1831, and that the majority of these women workers were employed in Nottinghamshire and the adjacent counties of Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Lincolnshire. ‘In the 1833 Sadler Commission, Alfred Power called Nottingham lace runners ‘The most skilful, the hardest worked and the worst paid of all operatives connected with the lace trade’; female workers in groups of up to ten worked in private houses, where girls as young as 7 started at ‘‘spotting’ (sewing dots in rows on to the plain ground of fabric for veils or

---

101 Sharpe and Chapman, p.328.
102 Sharpe and Chapman, p.332.
dresses)’ and later moved on to the most advanced skills of ‘running’. As such work was undertaken in private houses, they escaped the 10 hours regulation for children under 13 imposed by the Factory Acts. Agents, usually women, acted as intermediaries. They supplied the materials and threads and sold on the finished products, at the same time taking their commission, which furthered the worker’s penury. In addition, the workers’ wages were affected by the seasonal demand for lace exacerbated by the demands of the social season. ‘In the best season of late spring and early summer, the most skilful workers might earn 7s. to 9s. a week’; in winter this was no more than 5s.

However, by 1861 with the full mechanisation of lace production, the number of hand lace workers had fallen dramatically to below 30,000. The machine-made net industry had employed men for the skilled work of running the heavy looms, but even when they were fully steam powered it was still men who operated the machines. Sonya Rose notes that the machine-made lace industry ‘provides a good example of how employers structured work so that women were excluded as a potential source of skilled labour’.

The delicacy and fragility of the ruffles in ‘My Lady Ludlow’ ‘very much darned to be sure’ demonstrates the imperceptible mending skills of the mother, but also suggests the invisible labour of the original maker of the ‘real old English point’ (MLL 145). Sharpe posits that lace-makers were most commonly young women and children

103 Sharpe and Chapman, p.338.
104 (ibid. p.338)
105 Sharpe and Chapman, p. 341.
106 Rose, quoted in “Fine Fingers”, p.628.
who worked hunched over their task in dark rooms, in case ‘the light spoilt the lace’; this often led to early blindness, so that middle-aged lace-makers were atypical. In addition, rooms were damp and fireless, to keep the thread supple and the lace clean. Unsurprisingly, ‘back and neck pain, consumption and dyspepsia’ were common health problems amongst the workers.

Within the novel *Ruth*, the juxtaposition of two girls, the richly attired lady of leisure with conceited manners, and Ruth, the poor dressmaker endeavouring to serve to her sewing needs at the ball represents an archetypal iconographic pattern, which readers would have recognised as the ‘pampered client and the wretched seamstress’. It guides the reader to a true moral discourse of how gentility should be displayed. As the passage reveals it is Ruth who exhibits the greatest ‘nobility’ of class in her behaviour. Demure and kneeling to her sewing task, the imagery ‘habited in black’ evokes the piety and humility of a nun, reminding the reader of the historic link between the convents and lace stitched for episcopal service (*RU* 17). By contrast, Miss Duncombe is described as ‘child-like’ and her ‘haughty’ manner and brusqueness to social inferiors demonstrates all ‘the vulgarity of wealth’ (*RU* 16-7). As Freedgood comments, from the mid-nineteenth century, in popular literature from Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* (1857) and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871-72) ‘mending lace is morally correct while owning the stuff is morally suspect’. Perhaps the

---

108 Sharpe, p.289.
statement would benefit from qualification, as the provenance of the lace, its means of production and subsequent narrative of possession are all significant and variable? For the middle third of the nineteenth century, there is no doubt that there was a complex continuum of lace from the élite hand-made aesthetic and ancestral lace, to the output of machine-made lace. That they existed at all levels of quality and price, brought ornamentation to women of even the lowest incomes, similar to the impact of the fresh cotton prints from the Manchester mills. The article in ‘The Ladies Warehouse’ from Household Words in October 1855, quoted in the previous section, makes this same point. The writer seems to encapsulate the essence of the lace discourse discernible in Gaskell’s writings. Mechanised production enabled a democratization of a hitherto élite and mythical fabric that in turn induces anxiety as the ‘real’ cannot be discerned from the passable imitations. People, without the inherited ‘lace lappets’ of Lady Ludlow, could acquire them by pecuniary outlay, possibly as subterfuge for spurious ancestors. Mrs Hale, however, does not seem to suspect this of Mrs Thornton, the mill-owner’s mother in North and South in her possession of fine English point.

Indeed, the lace in Mrs Thornton’s drawing-room is a fascinating exposition of a lace ‘dialogue’, and upon close reading reflects a juxtaposition of the old and the new, simultaneously gesturing to the whole nature of the style and design debate resonating in this period.

The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground […]. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting, or knitting. […]

111 ‘A Ladies Warehouse’ in Household Words, vol. XII, 27/10/1855, pp.301-305.
The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere, or of the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort. [....]

At last Mrs. Thornton came in […] her muslins and laces rivalling, not excelling, the pure whiteness of the muslins and netting of the room. (NS 112)

One suspects that critics in the design reform movement would have shuddered at the ‘pink and gold walls’ and the naturalistic carpet: prime exhibits for Henry Cole’s ‘House of Horrors’ that featured in Chapter two. The scene conjures a white, comfortless, domestic space and the incongruity of its presence almost escapes the reader. For the ‘blackened’ and ‘stone-coped house’, is adjacent to John Thornton’s mill, whence forth issues ‘the continual clank of machinery and the long groaning roar of the steam-engine’ (NS 111). What depth of invisible labour is necessary to maintain the pristine, icy cleanliness of the room, against smoke from the industrial inferno?

Each chair and sofa are draped in its ‘own particular veil of netting’, analogous to the many lace accessories women wore as the ‘romantic’ fashion prevailed: the ‘collars, bonnets, veils, sleeves ruffles, lappets, handkerchiefs’.112 Such veils, probably ‘antimacassars’, obscure the body of the furniture.113 Mrs Thornton’s laces, which have

113 H.G. Well recalls details of decorative abundance in the ‘lower-middle-class room of his 1870s childhood, ‘something was hung about or wrapped round or draped over everything’”. Wells cited in Judith Flanders’ ‘Interiors’ in George Eliot in Context, ed.by Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 160-167 (p.166). Constance Classen comments upon the tactility of the Victorian home, ‘[a]lthough explicit fingering might be discouraged as vulgar, there was nonetheless much to handle, much to take in and out, to put on and off, to position and reposition’. Citing Walter Benjamin who ‘attributed the preference of the bourgeoisie for “velvet and plush covers, which preserve the impression of every touch,” to a concern to leave a personal trace on an increasingly impersonal world’. Classen then links this
been previously described as old English point, are the antithesis to the displays of modernity in the room - the ‘netting’ and ‘lace curtains’.

It is easy to skim over the significance of these two later features as merely appurtenances of bourgeois comfort. However, as Levey explains, it was only in 1846 that ‘John Livesey’s curtain-net machine’ was invented, which was to form ‘the basis of the most stable branches of the Nottingham industry’. Effectively, it was the beginning of mass production for large-patterned laces, referred to as the ‘fancy-trade’. Machines making fancy goods were expensive; ‘a Jacquard-controlled Leaver’s machine’ could cost £1000, but economies of scale, generated by the concentration of the industry in steam-powered factories in Nottingham, enabled production to expand exponentially, eventually cutting the cost of the finished goods; by 1861, Nottingham had approximately eighty of such lace factories. The Jury Report of the Great Exhibition described the burgeoning trade in net curtains as ‘an important but an improving department of the lace trade’ that enabled lace to be used for the first time as an affordable furnishing fabric. The ‘Ladies Warehouse’ article makes this same point:

Lace curtains and lace flounced robes in black and white have been rendered a possible luxury within the reach of the middle classes. Five-and-twenty years ago an article (in net) now sold for fourpence, cost forty shillings a-yard.


117 ‘Ladies Warehouse’ in *Household Words*, 27/10/1855, p.304.
To reflect upon this startling development of lace democratization, it is worth recalling the Sun King’s largesse with exquisite point lace at the 1679 Marly fête. By the 1850s lace enters many a prosperous woman’s closet, an integral part of Victorian womanhood and femininity, as intrinsic a feature as the mass-produced Paisley shawl that imitates the illustrious Kashmir shawl. Ordinary women could thus acquire the ‘flounced’ gowns à la Empress Eugénie of France. Unsurprisingly consternation ensued - the real and old hand-made laces were becoming devalued by cheaper mechanized versions. Charles Eastlake in *Hints on Household Taste* criticized the ‘lace trimmings and edgings used for ‘anti-macassars’ and simple articles of household use […] on account of the flimsiness and extravagance of the designs’, urging his lady readers to examine ‘old specimens to be found at the South Kensington Museum’.\(^{118}\)

Old hand-made lace contained flaws in its construction that were considered charming and idiosyncratic, unlike the symmetry and uniformity of mass production. Consequently, Freedgood argues the Victorian middle classes were ‘haunted by the loss of the “human” from the production of commodities and from estimations of their value’, possibly because it seemed to be such a rupture from the past lives of their grandparents.\(^{119}\) For the novel’s setting in the early 1850s, the Thorntons’ drawing room represents the height of modernity, utilizing the new fabrics, products of mechanization. As Levey remarks, heavy Nottingham lace curtains, replaced plain muslin and became the ‘essential feature of a correctly draped window’ for indeed technological

\(^{118}\) Eastlake, p.97. Mrs. Bury Palliser produced a Descriptive Catalogue of Lace and Embroidery for the South Kensington Museum in 1871.  
developments had ensured that being able to have an ‘extent of glass’ was another
signifier of wealth (NS 167).\textsuperscript{120} For it was felt necessary, within the expanding ranks of
the middle classes that ‘visitors should be able to assess a man’s income by the furniture
and fabrics of his house’, as well as the woman’s innate sense of taste in arraying
‘piece[s] of elegance that can be seen and noticed in [the] drawing room’ (WD 99).\textsuperscript{121}
‘Correctly draped’, seems to elevate the window’s status by the personification,
appropriating the language of fashionable dress. Indeed, for the early part of the
nineteenth century ‘[f]ashionable ladies were spoken of as being ‘well draped’ rather
than well dressed’.\textsuperscript{122} It is analogous to the etiquette required for shawl wearing
discussed in the wool chapter, whereby incorrect draping reveals the socially gauche
and the incognizant. It highlights the discourse of style and good taste that increasingly
permeates the domestic space. As Haxell observes wryly, lace curtains become ‘the
much satirized fabric of bourgeois[e] conformity, - prudery and hypocrisy’ for the
Victorian age, much akin to the privet hedge, a liminal space shielding the personal and
private sphere from the external world whilst allowing covert observation.\textsuperscript{123} Is it no
wonder then that in 1915, that doyenne of Modernism, Virginia Woolf mocks Victorian
domestic drapery as a suburban aesthetic atrocity, ‘the rooms inside must be in semi-

\textsuperscript{120} Levey, \textit{A History}, p.96.
\textsuperscript{121} Pamela Claburn, \textit{The National Trust Book of Furnishing Fabrics} (London: Viking, 1988),
p.143.
\textsuperscript{122} Sarah Jane Downing, \textit{Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen} (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2010),
p.47.
\textsuperscript{123} Haxell quoted in Freedgood, “Fine Fingers”, p. 643.
darkness; & I suppose rank with the smell of meat & human beings’ before adding acerbically, ‘I believe that being curtained is a mark of respectability.’

**Wedding Belles**
The preparations for the marriage of Fanny Thornton in *North and South* similarly gesture to a display of Victorian modernity promoted by the young Queen’s wedding. Mr Bell recounts to Margaret Hale, ‘I was surprised to find the old lady falling into the current, and carried away by her daughter’s enthusiasm for orange blossoms and lace’ (*NS* 376). In this practice, the wedding of the mill owner’s sister follows the precepts established by Queen Victoria’s marriage in 1840. As previously stated, the monarch’s dress of home-worked Honiton pillow lace over satin accelerated the trend for brides to wear white at the marriage service. The lace was estimated to cost between £1,000 and £1,500 and was worked in the small village of Beer, approximately ten miles from the Devonshire village of Honiton. It is perhaps doubtful that Fanny Thornton’s dress was such a sum, but certainly the gossips of Milton-North decry the extravagance of the ceremony. After a time of industrial strife and suffering, Dixon relates to Margaret Hale ‘how people thought that Mr Thornton had made too grand a wedding of it, considering

---

126 Lace made in villages in the locality of East Devon became generically known as ‘Honiton’ lace. ‘It is said that the name came about because the lace was sent up to London from the coaching point at Honiton, and the dealers there would ask for the ‘boxes from Honiton’ and so the name stuck’, Pam Inder, ‘Early History’ in *Honiton Lace* (Exeter: Exeter Museums, 1985) [no page no]
he had lost a deal by the strike’ (NS 402). Indeed, at the time of writing the novel, Gaskell may have been aware of a popular satirical genre, contrasting the ‘trappings of fashionable weddings’ with the poverty of the observers outside the church. Thus, the Devonshire lace was an easily recognizable motif in a parody published in The Illustrated London News in 1855; the ‘Panorama of a Fashionable Wedding’ commenced with ‘The Lovely Bride (Smothered in hysterics and Honiton lace)’. Despite Thornton’s financial difficulties, it would have been essential for him to maintain appearances as the evidence from the matriarchal drawing room suggests. Margaret Hale’s aunt, Mrs Shaw notes with distaste ‘the rich ladies’ over-dressed’ appearance in the mill town (NS 363). There is no doubt that hand-made lace would have been a component of this; a conspicuous display of patriarchal wealth such as Mrs Pender’s display of lace and diamonds at a ball Gaskell attended. As Cunnington remarks for the year 1847, ‘Honiton lace, being specially patronised by the Queen was in great favour’. In 1854, a ‘Brussels and Honiton bridal scarf’ was priced at between 7 to 45 guineas. Like Queen Adelaide before her, Queen Victoria’s patronage was to aid the ailing Devonshire industry, beset by continental competition and the

128 Quoted in Ehrman, p.67.
129 Cunnington, p.146.
130 Cunnington, p.182.
development of machine-made net. Fanny Thornton’s ‘orange-blossom’ mirrors the trend started by Queen Victoria. Instead of a ‘velvet robe of state’, the Queen opted for: a white satin court train bordered with sprays of orange-blossom, and in place of a circlet, she wore a deep wreath of artificial orange-blossom with a Honiton lace veil pinned to the back of her head.

As Edwina Ehrain observes, ‘[o]range-blossom was prized for its fragrance and was a symbol of virtue and fertility’, although most brides used artificial wax flowers for the blossom. The virginal purity of the white dress and blossom was copied by brides across the income scale. Gaskell’s description of Charlotte Brontë’s wedding in June 1854 reveals a modest depiction of bridal attire, ‘many old and humble friends were there, seeing her look ‘like a snow-drop’ as they say. Her white dress was white embroidered muslin, with a lace mantle, and white bonnet trimmed with green leaves’ (LCB 450). This certainly shows how women adopted and modified the established fashion to suit personal tastes and financial means, although for a majority of lower-income women, practical, coloured dresses able to be worn on other occasions remained the nuptial norm.

A ‘set of lace’ became a desirable feature of a bride’s trousseau; Charlotte Treadwin, author of *Antique Point and Honiton Lace* (c.1874) detailed that it should

---

131 Palliser notes that Queen Adelaide commissioned ‘a dress to be made of Honiton sprigs, and commanded that the flowers should be copied from nature. The order was executed by Mrs Davey, of Honiton; the skirt was encircled with a wreath of elegantly designed sprigs, the initial of each flower forming the name of her majesty – Amaranth, Daphne, Eglantine, Lilac, Auricula, Ivy, Dahlia, Eglantine’, Palliser, pp.382-3.

132 Ehrman, p.56.

133 Ehrman, p.58.
include ‘a veil, a deep flounce suitable for a skirt with a matching narrow trimming, lappets for evening wear, a pocket handkerchief and a fan leaf’. When, upon marriage, a woman ceded her financial assets to her husband, such portable textile treasures again acted as a store-of-wealth, a form of indemnity against future adversity.

Queen Victoria’s patronage certainly revived the fortunes of the Honiton lace industry, and prompted a resurgence of interest in its production, The Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine in 1859 gives instructions to its female readers to produce their own version of a Honiton lace sleeve stressing the superiority of the hand-made lace over machine manufactured replications:

Up to the present moment, the lightest occupation of a lady’s leisure hours is taken advantage of as an article to be copied by the machinery of the manufacturer, and woven crochet may now be seen in every window. We think this is very complimentary to feminine industry, and a great encouragement, as the original article is always more valuable than any imitation, however good it may be. The ‘woven crochet’ seems an allusion to the commonality of the machine-made net curtain discussed earlier, but which has its origins from women’s sewing in the domestic sphere. The alliterative ‘lightest occupation of a lady’s leisure hours’ is an ‘industry’ comparable if not superior to the manufactured article, elevates female production in the home, without acknowledging legions of the female-gendered work

---

134 Patricia Wardle quoted in Ehrman, p.82.
force producing hand-made lace for meagre sums, which prompted the intervention of royal patronage.\textsuperscript{136}

With the development of mechanized lace production, the Honiton lace makers evolved another skill, ‘that of restoring or remaking old lace’.\textsuperscript{137} The scraps of old lace that the Cranford ladies cherish, ‘the sole relic of better days’, but which perhaps better fit Palliser’s categorization as ‘old rags’, were sent by London dealers to the Devonshire lace-makers for rearrangement (\textit{CF} 78). Palliser details the ‘curious ingenuity’ of the process, ‘[c]arefully cutting out the designs of the old work, they sew them upon a paper pattern of the shape required. The “modes,” or fancy stitches, are dexterously restored, any deficient flower supplied, and the whole joined together on the pillow’.\textsuperscript{138} The finished lace, a hybrid amalgamation of the old and the refashioned was thus turned into ‘[t]he splendid mantles, tunics and flounces’ displayed in the shop-windows of the ‘great lace-dealers of London’.\textsuperscript{139} Indeed, it depicts the life cycle of lace, a fabric that only fifty years earlier, was shunned for its link with the \textit{ancien régime.}

---

\textsuperscript{136} The etymology of ‘manufacture’ has its origins from sixteenth-century France ‘denoting something made by hand’. Only later did it signify the mechanization process- ‘make (something) on a large-scale using machinery’ (\textit{OED}). Tallia Schaffer asserts that ‘[t]he craft paradigm’ represents ‘an ideal solution […] a creative outlet that allowed middle-class women to articulate their relation to the industrial economy in a satisfyingly complex way’, Talia Schaffer, \textit{Novel Craft. Victorian Domestic Handicraft and Nineteenth-Century Fiction} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.4-6.

\textsuperscript{137} Palliser, p.385. ‘Mrs. C. E. Treadwin ran a business in Exeter for the ‘repair and reproduction of laces of all types […] She exhibited widely and was much patronized by royalty’. She exhibited at the 1851 Great Exhibition, the only Devon medalist’, Pam Inder, \textit{The Rag Trade: The People Who Made Our Clothes} (Stroud: Amberley, 2017), pp.16 and 12.

\textsuperscript{138} Palliser, p.385.

\textsuperscript{139} Palliser, p.385.
Conclusion
Consideration of the changing contexts for lace production and consumption for this period reveal how Gaskell’s contemporary readers, well versed in the finer details of Queen Victoria’s Honiton bridal gown, and participants perhaps in the 1850s lace mania, would have interpreted the subtle nuances of the trope. Exquisite examples of the finest needle-lace, prized as an art form to be proudly worn as conspicuous ornamentation and signifiers of an ancestral lineage, reflect the female adornment of the body to transmit signals of status, wealth and power in a society undergoing rapid socio-economic transformation. Just as Gaskell’s readers had a memory of the itchy feel of the worsted cloth ‘stuff’, a communal structure of womanly feeling regarding the sensory and aesthetic properties of lace evolved into a lace euphoria, aided of course by royal patronage. Once again, mechanized production allowed the dissemination of a previously élite fabric, even as mystery and confusion surrounded the origins and provenance of ‘real old lace’.

The lace also acts as a motif, whose metonymic associations detail the changing nature of lace production and consumption for this period, from hand-made lace produced in dank, dim conditions to fully mechanised lace production, operated by a male-gendered workforce. Within this unfolding narrative is the invisible labour of a female-gendered work force, a high proportion being juveniles, their youth exploited to the detriment of their later health.

There is a sense that the romantic associations of lace uphold a royal legacy of chivalry and religious sensibility that has become enshrined in folklore. This should not obscure the fact that lace was a commodity, as much as cotton and wool for this period,
its dramatic cyclical fluctuations heavily associated with certain places and modes of
production and cultural transformations.

Lace, as a fêted fabric, once the drapery of the élite, bears a similarity to
the next chapter’s material focus on silk. Again, with its origins mythically located, the
very soubriquet ‘silk’ resonates with the ancient narrative of civilization concomitant
with the development of trading links and cultural exchange in the trail of the silk road.
From small ‘populuxe’ items such as the silk ribbons and handkerchiefs of Sylvia’s
Lovers in the late eighteenth century, to Mrs Gibson’s five-pound silk gown in Wives
and Daughters, silk adornment and drapery is another means by which the growing
numbers of middle-income women were self-fashioning their status and identity by the
mid nineteenth century.
Chapter Five
Silks and Showiness

‘We all … exclaim against dark blue silk, - ‘very common’, ‘very old fashioned’’

Introduction
Silk crape was used for mourning, as we saw in Chapter Three, but silk was worn in other contexts too in the nineteenth century. This chapter will examine how other silk fabrics are represented across Gaskell’s writings, with specific reference to the novels of Sylvia’s Lovers and to Gaskell’s final unfinished novel, Wives and Daughters.

Significantly, both were written against the backdrop of the American Civil War 1861-65. Sylvia’s Lovers was published in 1863, but the historical location is the revolutionary wars with France in 1795: the novel’s concomitant depiction of famine and penurious hardship, is redolent of the economic and political crisis engendered by the Lancashire cotton famine of 1862-3, a consequence of the American Civil War. In comparison, Wives and Daughters was serialised from August 1864 to January 1866 in The Cornhill Magazine portraying, in Gaskell’s words, ‘country-town life 40 years ago’.  

Whereas these two texts might seem very different in their disparate themes and environments, if we consider the texts together, the allusions to silk fabrics within the novels encompasses the attenuated time period of the long eighteenth century reaching up to Gaskell’s time of writing in the 1860s. Using metonymic associations, it is possible to extrapolate how the novels plot the problematic trajectory of the English silk

1 Letters, p.213
2 Letters, p.731.
industry and as a mirror counterpoint, Anglo-French relations for this period. From references to ‘silk buttons’ and the Spitalfields silk workers in *Sylvia’s Lovers* to a profusion of cheaper silk ribbons and French patterns in *Wives and Daughters*, the texts comment upon an on-going politically charged trade tussle between France and England, and the fashion rivalry between the cities of Paris and London. The allure and lustre of silk, as one of the most luxurious and highly sought-after fabrics, serves as a recurring trope to signify the changing nature of consumption patterns. This overarching time frame shadows the transformation of England’s trading relationships encompassing new markets and the reaches of empire. In this time period, the novels chart the transformation of England’s trading protocols, from the restrictive nature of mercantilist practices during the late seventeenth century, to the championing of Free Trade from the 1820s. It will be further argued that the very nature of the English silk industry (by the 1860s, a geographically dispersed and marginalised force) hastened its demise. The beleaguered silk industry was increasingly powerless against the clarion calls for free trade instituted by the formidable cotton lobby that was relentless in its pursuit of overseas markets.

Simultaneously, the novels articulate the changing cultural context of silk adornment as within the ‘folds of fashion fabrics’ Gaskell again reveals the complex evolution of female social distinction. The silk accessories - handkerchiefs and ribbons worn by women in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, in an isolated eighteenth-century whaling

---

community where smuggling is endemic, seem outmoded in the 1820s setting of *Wives and Daughters*. By this era, breadths of ‘figured silk’ and the conspicuous display of glossy satins is almost commonplace in the small Midlands town of Hollingford. Furthermore, the fabric’s genesis is a discrete signifier of sartorial status and refinement, especially if it originates from Paris. Lady Cumnor, when reading aloud from a letter, even though the subject matter can only be a cause for speculation, stresses the allure of the French capital, ‘[e]very iota from Paris! Every i-o-ta!’ (*WD* 289). In a similar vein in April 1865, during the writing of the novel, Gaskell comments upon the latest style dictums of Parisian dress in a letter to her daughter, Marianne:

> No morning gowns are trimmed at the bottom in Paris. The *only* kind I saw was like a spiked VV *petticoat* of darker silk below; which was done (*I think*) with *lined RIBBON* – (& got dirty directly I should fancy.) Mme Lamy said she was not trimming any *morning gowns\ skirts.*

While Gaskell satirizes the social pretensions of such statements, particularly when uttered by the *arriviste* Mrs. Kirkpatrick in *Wives and Daughters*, nevertheless the silk allusions in her creative opus, comment obliquely upon the social anxieties of dress for female consumers for this period. Thus, this chapter forms an iteration and consolidation of my findings on sartorial demarcation of the earlier chapters. As chapter two demonstrated, the democratisation of cotton led to the visual blurring of traditional, sartorial distinctions of elegance and rank, this chapter therefore charts the female-gendered response to this cultural challenge that resonated upon their very doorstep. Middling-income women, such as those depicted in *Wives and Daughters*, abandon

---

4 *Letters*, p.753.
serviceable cotton prints, opting for silk day gowns instead. In a further display of wealth and a leisured lifestyle, the skirt circumference of such silk gowns increased exponentially, particularly from the 1840s to the 1860s when Gaskell was issuing her regular fashion diktats to her daughters. Furthermore, as the previous chapter described, dresses became increasingly adorned with copious flounces, frills and decorative ornamentation, and as Gaskell’s letter indicates, were difficult to keep clean. Elaine Freedgood argues that the Victorian fascination with ribbons and fringing represented a signifier of societal unease concerning bodily boundaries, which conflates with other societal bodies and the borders of Empire.  

Whereas, the novels’ settings are dated before the onset of the Victorian period, it will be asserted that there is a temporal slippage in the narrative voice of both. Gaskell, certainly within *Wives and Daughters*, articulates a mid-nineteenth century, Victorian sensibility concerning issues of social boundaries, which underlies and replicates her dress dictates to her daughters.

This chapter, therefore, disaggregates the panoply term ‘silk’ to reveal how Gaskell’s subtle placement of the fabric is a creative material motif, reflecting her embodied experience of the fabrics and their cultural and historical specificity. The first section will discuss the unique qualities of silk thread and focus explicitly upon Gaskell’s descriptions of ‘shot’ and ‘figured’ silks. Attention will then turn to the silk trope in *Sylvia’s Lovers*, a text which represents an eighteenth-century sensibility in

---

presenting silk as a prestigious fabric. Through discrete allusions to Spitalfield silk-workers, silk buttons and handkerchiefs, the novel comments obliquely upon the vicissitudes of the production, distribution and consumption of this fêted fabric. The final section argues that the silk motif in *Wives and Daughters* mediates bourgeois women’s anxieties upon the democratization of fashion and sartorial standing in a small provincial town. With a frisson of ribbons and gauze, the novel is topical in reflecting the dissemination of a previously élite fabric. Metonymically, it also articulates the struggles of the indigenous silk industry against the dominant cotton lobby, the latter fierce advocates of free trade.

It will be argued Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s comic veneration of all things French also underscores her disingenuous, narcissistic nature. The novel’s backdrop, *circa* 1820s, heralded the reduction of import duties on imported woven silks from France. Consequently, England’s homegrown silk industry suffered a severe depression as superior French woven silks flooded the market. By 1831, after a long and vociferous protest movement, even the new Queen Adelaide, consort of William IV was promoting the wearing of English silks with a ‘Buy British’ campaign similar to that given to the beleaguered lace workers. Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s embrace of French cosmopolitan dress culture is arguably anachronistic for the spirit of the age, and the prevailing economic climate.

---

Figured and Shot Silks

Silk has a long and mythical history stretching back to its origins in China, nearly seven thousand years ago, and serves to add to the cachet and mystical allure of this beautiful fabric. As Mary Schoeser says, silk’s ‘long history is laden with tales of romance and adventure’ that is particularly associated with ‘royalty and, in particular, with aristocratic women’.  

It seems quite extraordinary that a filament, extruded from the head of a silkworm to make its cocoon, when reeled and degummed of the creature’s original secretions, can be processed into a myriad of fine and twisted yarns. Of all the natural fibres, the silk filament produced by the caterpillar feeding upon the leaves of the mulberry tree ‘is the most receptive to dyes; and because in cross-section it is more triangular than round, its surface, prism like, intensifies the effect of any colour’ so much so that ‘silk appears alive’. Thus, the term ‘silk’ is an overarching description encompassing a variety of woven fabrics, each with its own ‘remarkable lustre and texture’.

It must be stressed, however, that notwithstanding the ‘romance and mythological’ tradition of silks, there is, as Brenda King notes, ‘the lack of a comprehensive history of the English silk industry’. She argues that ‘it is a largely

9 Schoeser, pp.117-8.
10 Coleman, pp.10-12.
neglected area of cultural history’, so my research into Gaskell’s utilization of the silk trope, restores some of the societal significance of this prestigious fabric and its application for provincial, middle-income women in the mid-nineteenth century.\(^\text{12}\) In the time-span of Gaskell’s texts, the English silk trade was a very labour intensive industry requiring ‘complex craft skills’ to turn the different types of silk yarn into cloth, ribbons, trimmings and sewing silks.\(^\text{13}\) Gaskell carefully places a variety of silk cloths, each involving different production and finishing techniques, within her writings.

Thus, towards the close of *Wives and Daughters*, Mrs Gibson longs for a new ‘figured silk’, a sartorial act of conspicuous drapery and rivalry (WD 683), while in *Sylvia Lovers*, shop draper Philip proudly parades his enhanced financial prospects with a gift of ‘shot silk’ for his prospective wife’s wedding dress. Philip’s present with its ‘soft yet brilliant hues’, analogous to the beauty of a pigeon’s plumage, ‘with all the blue and rose-coloured lights gleaming in the morning rays’ is comparable to Gaskell’s own description of an ordered silk (SL 335). ‘I forget the ‘trade’ description of the gown; but the effect is polished steel colour, and I think it is a shot of French Black (blue black) and white’.\(^\text{14}\) A different dye process was required to achieve the shot effect; the warp and weft threads were dyed with contrasting colours, to enable a subtle graduation of contrasting hues.\(^\text{15}\) As Gaskell’s total order cost ‘4£ -16yds at 5s. a yard’ in 1852, it certainly denoted a gown of quality and expense, especially as it needed to be

\(^{12}\) King, p.6.
\(^{13}\) King, p.170.
\(^{14}\) Letters, p.195.
made up by a seamstress.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, in \textit{Sylvia’s Lovers} we gain a sense of the lustre and lavishness of Philip’s silk gift. In a letter to her daughter, Marianne in May 1851, Gaskell states that seamstress Miss Daniels’ ‘charge is somewhere about 25s. a dress’.\textsuperscript{17} As the total cost of Gaskell’s shot gown is approximately £5. 5\textsuperscript{s} it is similar in price to the purchase made by Mrs. Gibson in \textit{Wives and Daughters}. After her marriage she abandons the ‘old black silks’ befitting her former status as a ‘schoolmistress’ (\textit{WD} 296) and attires herself in a ‘very handsome gown’ that had cost ‘five guineas […] reduced from eight!’ and ‘bought […] after the season was over’ (\textit{WD} 566 & 568).\textsuperscript{18} The fact that Mrs. Gibson feels she has to valiantly defend her purchase of the extravagant gown to the aristocratic Lady Cumnor is revealing, particularly as Lady Cumnor asserts:

\begin{center}
I was only speaking of the folly of people dressing above their station. I began by telling Clare of the fashions of my grandmother’s days, when every class had a sort of costume of its own, —and servants did not ape tradespeople, nor tradespeople professional men. (\textit{WD} 566)
\end{center}

Lady Cumnor’s musings again reflect the nature of societal anxiety evoked in the judgment of women’s external appearance. Rising real incomes, led to a perception that lower status women could ‘ape’ the appurtenances and fashions of the growing bourgeoisie, while the middle classes in turn aspired to the aristocratic mode of dress.

\textsuperscript{16} I am grateful to Dr. Francis Twinn for calculating that £4 in 1852 would equate to £562.10 in 2020 prices.
\textsuperscript{17} Letters, p.153.
\textsuperscript{18} Mrs. Gibson’s purchase of the silk certainly seems an example of conspicuous consumption, as five guineas equalled £5 5\textsuperscript{s}. In 1876, a writer named Sylvia was advising her readers on \textit{How to Dress Well on a Shilling a Day} (an annual dress allowance of £18 5\textsuperscript{s}). As Pam Inder elaborates ‘[m]any women- governesses, ladies’ maids, dressmakers […] were expected to dress respectably on a fraction of that sum’, Pam Inder, \textit{The Rag Trade: The People Who Made Our Clothes} (Stroud: Amberley, 2017), p.13. She claims that ‘a silk dress such as a tradesman’s wife might wear to church cost the equivalent of a month’s wages for a village schoolmistress’, Mrs. Gibson’s previous occupation, (p.16).
This will be examined in more detail later, but the wearing of silk was an important corollary in this process as ‘[t]he greater sheen and glowing colours of silk’ became a ‘critical visual distinction’ of class status.\(^{19}\)

Mrs. Gibson’s covetously desires a new gown of ‘figured silk’ at the close of *Wives and Daughters*; such silk involved a particular weaving process. As Brenda King explains ‘figured fabric’ is ‘a textile in which patterning is woven into the cloth rather than painted, printed, dyed or embroidered’.\(^{20}\)

Figured silks have ‘complex patterns, often based on stylised floral motifs’ which, would have required more yardage to allow the pattern repeat.\(^{21}\)

The ‘figured silk’ shown here was exhibited at the Great Exhibition by Winkford, Proctor & Co, a Macclesfield Weaving company in 1851. Even now, the vivid lustre of the silk is apparent, affirming why silk cloth ‘was prized as the most durable of materials for apparel’.\(^{22}\) As Mr Slater, a well-known, nineteenth-century, London silk manufacturer further

---

\(^{19}\) Schoeser, p.118.
\(^{20}\) King, p.xiii.
expounds, ‘a dress would be handed down from mother to daughter, and was preferred by people of limited means to all other fabrics, on account of its economy and respectability of appearance’; another example of the gendered intergenerational transmission of the textile treasure.\textsuperscript{23}

It is interesting to note again, the prevalence of the lilac hue for this period, which again attests to the success of Hoyle’s purple in calico printing mentioned in the chapter two. ‘Winkford’s figured silk’ was part of a display dedicated to 'Fancy silks, as Shot, Figured, Embroidered, &c' in 1851; in 1857 the silk was a permanent exhibit in the South Kensington museum, an exemplar aid for ‘technical instruction and to the ever-changing and increasing wants of trade in this great commercial country’.\textsuperscript{24} This is an important point. Similar to the ongoing debate concerning design in the cotton industry, it was perceived that the British silk industry was ill equipped to compete against superior French designs. This shortcoming will be expanded upon later. Winkford’s exhibit had been produced on a mechanized Jacquard loom. As these were only operational on a piecemeal basis from the early 1830s, perhaps the ‘figured silk’ that Mrs. Gibson covets is the product of a handloom weaver. The journalist Angus Bethune Reach in his tours round the Manchester textile district in 1849 finds in the village of Middleton a ‘shallow, unshorn-lean man […] producing beautiful figured silk’ for a pittance of ‘9d. per yard’; he ‘weave[s] 3 yards a day’.\textsuperscript{25} It indicates the

\textsuperscript{23} Salter-Whiter, p.6.
desperate straits of the silk handloom weavers and the labour-intensive mode of production. For another unnamed silk, the weaver is paid only 4d. a yard.\textsuperscript{26}

\textit{Sylvia’s Lovers: The Age of Silk}
Set against the backdrop of naval impressment for the French revolutionary wars,\textit{ Sylvia’s Lovers} reveals some interesting references to the earlier history of the English silk industry. The novel depicts how its protagonists, from an isolated village in north east England, manage to acquire prohibitively expensive silks and silk accessories, such as the silk ribbons, handkerchiefs and bandanas sold in abundance in the Fosters’ shop. Indeed, the very motif of ribbons is interwoven as a trope in the novel, its centrality in many instances intensifies the plot. There are no fewer than forty references to ribbons, and at crucial dramatic moments they act as ‘talismans of the fabric of presence’ and as an aide-memoire to previous actions.\textsuperscript{27} Thus the ‘ribbon with a little briar-rose pattern running upon it’, aptly symbolic of ‘sweetness and thorns’, that Philip gives to Sylvia as a love token, is found upon the spectioneer, Kinraid’s hat; it is used as proof of the whaler’s assumed death by drowning (SL 134).

The production of silk ribbons belonged to a branch of silk weaving known as the ‘narrow’ weaving; ‘broad’ silk weaving specialized in the wider widths required for furniture and dress fabrics. The narrow branch also included all ‘braids, cords, galloons’ made in single widths and had from the middle ages given employment to vast numbers

\textsuperscript{26} Reach, p.102.
of people.\textsuperscript{28} Until the final quarter of the eighteenth century, the fledgling English cotton industry was secondary in size to this ‘narrow’ branch of the silk industry and indeed whilst Richard Arkwright is often accredited with the creation of the factory system, in actual fact a factory system had been established at least fifty years earlier in the silk industry. This was Roe’s silk button mill established in Macclesfield in 1744. The itinerant tailor Harry Donkin in \textit{Sylvia’s Lovers}, alludes to button manufacture in the English silk industry when he comes to the Robson’s homestead to darn and patch clothes, and espies some metal buttons:

“They're all again these metal buttons,” said he. “Silk weavers has been petitioning Ministers t' make a law to favour silk buttons; and I did hear tell as there were informers goin' about spyin' after metal buttons, and as how they could haul yo' before a justice for wearing on 'em. (SL 50)

The tailor’s reflections represent an astute evaluation of the trials of a particular branch of the narrow trade, namely wooden buttons covered with twisted silk thread. The town of Macclesfield, Cheshire was the centre of this silk button trade in the early eighteenth century, until an act of 1720 declared it ‘an offence to wear buttons made from the same material as the coat’.\textsuperscript{29} Effectively the manufacturers of Birmingham, producing the cheap mass-produced metal buttons that Sylvia’s father favours, crushed Macclesfield’s specialist trade. Out of the ashes, however, the ‘silk town’ of Macclesfield was forced to diversify into other areas of silk production, namely the processes to turn imported raw silk into a thread, which could then be woven. This involved the establishments of

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Macclesfield Heritage is Silk}, Produced by the Members of the Silk Heritage Project, ed.by Mary Hampson (Macclesfield: Macclesfield Borough Council, 1980), p.5.
factories where the raw silk was received by throwsters, wound and cleaned and then thrown or twisted.30 ‘Silk waste from the twisting process […] was woven into narrow fabrics’ like ribbons or small wares, a further diversification.31 The majority of the workforce was female and included young children as young as five.

It is possible therefore to conjecture, that the petitioning ‘silk weavers’ that tailor Donkin refers to, are actually the silk weavers of Macclesfield, as by 1790, owing to the town’s previous silk expertise, ‘skilled handloom weavers of Huguenot descent were brought in great secrecy to the town by the firm of Leigh and Voce’.32 Macclesfield’s woven silk production thereby specialized into handkerchiefs and scarfs and other small squares. By the 1820s silk production had extended into the ‘broad’ nature of production and the town was the ‘leading centre of silk manufacture in the kingdom’.33

Why were the silk weavers ‘petitioning’? Throughout the eighteenth century the silk industry was generally a favoured industry because of the prestigious nature of its élite consumers. Peter Linebaugh describes this century as ‘The Age of Silk’; ‘it was the fabric of power and class command’ especially as a single gown might cost £50.34 In Linebaugh’s words the silk fabric ‘expressed the contrast of class’ and showed the great ‘gulf between Luxury and Necessity’.35 Silk also bears the vestiges of the sumptuary

30 Coleman, p.11. Unlike cotton or wool, the prepared raw silk, as a continuous filament, is never spun.
32 Macclesfield Heritage, p.5.
35 Linebaugh, p.10.
laws of James I, which although never really enforced, stipulated that ‘servants shall have no silk on their cloaths’. Thus the silk weavers formed a vociferous pressure group and along with the woollen industry were instrumental in passing the 1721 Calico Acts, which as chapter two demonstrated, prohibited the import of the popular, brightly coloured, Indian cottons. As the militant silk weavers of Spitalfields, London complained ‘[s]hall the Ingy (meaning East India) Callicoes be wore whilst the Poor Weavers and their families perish?’ Women wearing calico gowns were stripped in the streets, a practice known as ‘calico unrigging’, and ‘vials of aqua fortis’ were thrown over the offending fabric. The silk weavers’ and silk manufacturers’ strident militancy was a feature of the eighteenth century to the extent that in 1760 they secured the total prohibition of foreign woven silks and velvets, and ‘ready-made silk garments and accessories’. As Will Farrell argues, the ‘prohibitions on foreign silks were part of a mercantilist policy designed to shield domestic textile manufacturers’; a strategy that was slowly reversed in the nineteenth century as the increasingly powerful cotton lobby demanded access to new markets.

Furthermore, the ‘petitioning’ silk weavers in Sylvia’s Lovers could have been a response to the changing trend in women’s fashion for the closing decade of the eighteenth century. From 1785, the Neo-Classical revival in women’s dress meant that silk waned in popularity compared to the simplicity and

37 Linebaugh, p.20.
38 Linebaugh, p.20. Aqua fortis is the early scientific, and still the popular, name of Nitric Acid, […] a powerful solvent and corrosive (OED).
transparency of fine muslin and lawn. The decline in demand for silk resulted in the shutdown of 4000 silk handlooms in the London silk district of Spitalfields by 1793.\textsuperscript{40} The fact that, upon her marriage, Sylvia possesses several silk gowns ‘a good dark silk gown-piece in her drawers, as well as the poor dove-coloured’ reflects how the simpler, Neo-Classical, muslin fashion revival from the metropolis was slower to reach remoter communities (\textit{SL} 341). To the social-aspirant and solipsist Philip, only the traditional fabric of the élite will consummate his fetishist possession of his idol, ‘Sylvia installed as his wife, with certainly a silk gown, and possibly a gig at her disposal’ (\textit{SL} 129-30). Sylvia’s beauty is objectified as an adjunct to his febrile daydreams surely as much as the material items that adorn her upon marriage.\textsuperscript{41}

The perilous nature of the English silk industry for the late eighteenth century, is shown by the Foster brothers, who as owners of the draper shop send Philip on a long sea journey to Spitalfields, a district in East London, thereby to investigate the financial position of a manufacturer to whom they have lent money:

\textit{[T]he Fosters had for some time received anonymous letters, warning them, with distinct meaning, though in ambiguous terms, against a certain silk-manufacturer in Spitalfields, with whom they had had straight-forward business dealings for many years; but to whom they had latterly advanced money. The letters hinted at the utter insolvency of this manufacturer. (SL 200)}

The inference is that the Spitalfields’ manufacturer has been supplying silk to the Fosters’ shop for perhaps nearly a generation. The manufacturer was almost certainly a


\textsuperscript{41} For an interesting discussion on Philip’s objectification of Sylvia by material gifting see Sophia P. Huang, ‘Ribbons, Gowns, Cake and Coins: Gifts and Gaskell’s Exploration of Gendered Power Relations in \textit{Sylvia’s Lovers}', \textit{GSJ}, 31 (2017), pp. 55- 70.
descendant of the Huguenot refugees, highly skilled Protestant silk weavers expelled from France after the revocation of the Treaty of Nantes in 1685, who were encouraged by the English government of the day to establish their weaving in Spitalfields, Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. 42 Their fine figured and fancy silks in the ‘broad’ branch of the industry were equal to the silk industries of Lyons and Genoa. 43 However, the silk workers engaged in restrictive practices to maintain their wage premium, resulting in years of militancy and violence against any who challenged their practices. 44 This culminated in the Spitalfields Act of 1773 whereby Middlesex assizes were able to set the wages of the Spitalfields weavers. The ensuing artificially high wages enabled regions with cheaper labour, such as Macclesfield and Middleton, to begin silk production undercutting the Spitalfields’ silks. This combined with the changing fashion produced the Spitalfields’ crisis to which Philip is sent to investigate.

Handkerchiefs or bandanas feature widely in the novel. In the opening scene, to remember all her errands, Sylvia Robson’s friend Molly Corney ties ‘a knot on her pink-spotted handkerchief for each of the various purchases she had to make’ for her mother on her excursion to Monkshaven (SL 11). On the occasion of Kinraid’s visit, a

---

43 Silk manufacturer Frank Warner wrote in 1870 about the Huguenot immigrants: “They turned out large quantities of lustrings,nings of velvets, brocades, damasks, and delicately woven stuffs. English of finest silk in infinite variety and of such excellence Silk as to insure them a ready sale everywhere. From this […] time forward Spitalfields enjoyed a very large share of facture. The trade, which Lyons and Tours had hitherto almost monopolised.” Warner: Loc. 832-40.
44 In 1786, Pitt the Younger negotiated a free trade treaty with France, the Eden Treaty, but which excluded ‘any silk goods other than gauze’. Rose Eden remarked to her husband Eden “I tremble at the very mention of a repeal of our manufacturing silk laws, owing to the dangerous attitude of the Spitalfield operatives”. Hertz, p.722.
purposefully draped handkerchief underscores Sylvia’s demure, but sexually alluring display. ‘A long curl hung down on each side of her neck - her throat rather, for her neck was concealed by a little spotted handkerchief carefully pinned across at the waist of her brown stuff gown’ (SL 98). Not to be confused with the pocket-handkerchief, this ‘handkerchief’ was akin to a neckerchief for women; the male equivalent was the bandana. It became popular for both sexes from the mid-eighteenth century and was originally imported from East India. They were ‘originally of silk, later of cotton having a dark ground commonly of Turkey red or blue with little white or yellow spots’. They were a means by which lower-income people could adorn their dress with a ‘more affordable version of luxury’ and were ‘a more colourful alternative to plain cravats or shawls, often kept for Sunday best’. The handkerchief tied round the neck also functioned as ‘a signal of respectability’. So the adornment adds brightness and gaiety to Sylvia’s otherwise plain and utilitarian worsted dress while displaying the erotic curves of her throat and neat waist to her lover.

The handkerchief is also indicative of the existence of prohibited trading practices for the late eighteenth century, as Monkshaven and the Fosters’ shop are implicated in the handling and sale of smuggled fabrics. Sylvia’s father in his youth had

---

45 Hetty Sorrel, a coquettish, but naive heroine, similar to Sylvia Robson, also displays her comely charms in a ‘pink-and-white neckerchief’, during her dairy duties, watched by admirer, Captain Donnithorne, George Eliot, Adam Bede, ed.by Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.76
47 Farrell, p.280-1.
been a smuggler, and Sylvia taunts Philip with hypocrisy regarding his high moral standards, which simultaneously condone ‘a tale about silks an’ lace an’ things’ (SL 43). Historian, William Farrell, using parliamentary reports’ collected figures on seizures made by the Revenue in the years 1770 and 1780, summarized that the most popular item of smuggled silks seized, greater than all other types of silk, were the East India silk handkerchiefs. Cissie Fairchilds in her study of the fashions in goods in eighteenth-century Paris describes the East Indian handkerchief as a ‘populuxe’ good as the smuggled fabric, with its distinctive patterning created a fashion which spread across the social hierarchy. The East Asian handkerchief had ‘distinctive qualities’, which domestic silk manufactories found hard to replicate. Even though Reach noted that ‘bandanna handkerchiefs’ had been woven since the latter years of the eighteenth centuries in Middleton and Macclesfield, these were described as the lowest ‘greys, a coarse kind of silk stuff’. Indian dyeing, using a combination of ‘hand-printing and tie-dying’ to create ‘deep colours’ with an irregularity of pattern gave each handkerchief an air of singularity; this appealed to consumers keen to add ‘strong colours and patterns to their dress’. As Hilary Davidson notes ‘[a] piece of illicit Indian bandanna could be sold in a finished state for 25s., whereas a British weaver could not compete for under

49 Farrell, p.275. Farrell, furthermore, makes the point that ‘the seizures of calicos and muslins are much higher than the seizures of silks. This indicates that these goods did indeed enter into the home market in significant numbers even after the Calico Acts’.
50 Cissie Fairchilds cited in Farrell, p.280.
51 Farrell, p.282.
52 Reach, p.95.
53 Farrell, pp.282 and 293.
Also, similar to the Kashmir shawls and Indian muslins of the earlier chapters, the East-Indian handkerchiefs had an intrinsic allure, encapsulating the eroticism and mystique of faraway lands. The popularity of the handkerchief extended well into the next century. Even in the industrial heartland of Manchester, one of John Barton’s prized valuables is a ‘gay red-and-yellow silk pocket-handkerchief’; a signifier of the prosperity of the early 1830s that again is a store-of-value to be pawned (*MB* 59). In his tour of the textile districts of the North West in 1849, Reach describes market day in Macclesfield ‘[a] majority of the crowded shops display in their windows richest silks of the gayest patterns - gown-pieces […] and handkerchiefs of all hues and sizes’. This colourful array is redolent of the displays of silk in the Universal Store in *Cranford*.

Perhaps it is the pervasive nature of the contraband trade that also adds to the woes of the Spitalfields’ merchant supplying Fosters’ shop. Sylvia’s pointed remark concerning ‘silks an’ lace an’ things’ alludes to other silk accessories smuggled into England including ‘silk laces, edgings and ribbons’; Farrell ‘confirms the importance of French silks in the category of non-Asian contraband’. These were exclusive and élite fashionable silks originating from such towns as Lyons, for figured broad silks, and the town of St Etienne for ribbons. Whilst woven silk imports had been fully banned by the 1765 act, the lost sales from successfully smuggled silks must have further dented the

---

56 Reach, p.88.
57 Farrell, p.284.
English industry. This practice continued into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The allure and superiority of French silks created a fevered frenzy for the latest novelty of fashion and colour each year, and thus smuggling continued to be rife. Economic historian, Gerald Hertz claims that ‘as late as 1827 only 5 per cent of the silk goods that were registered at French ports as destined for England were notified at British custom houses’.58 Indeed, in what seems like a paradoxical twist, he asserts that Manchester and Spitalfields silk merchants ‘tried to pass off their goods as being smuggled over from France’ to appeal to discerning and fashionable tastes.59 It thus seems an opportune moment to discuss the nature of the silks depicted in Gaskell’s final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, particularly as Gaskell’s narrative juxtaposes an English provincial townscape with cosmopolitan, French cultural and style iconography.

58 Hertz, p.723.
59 Hertz, p.720.
Wives and Daughters: Entente Cordiale?

The narrative of Wives and Daughters positively rustles and swishes with a fabric frisson. From the opening paragraphs describing the large ‘serviceable’ cotton handkerchief (note it is not silk) that covers Molly Gibson’s new bonnet, to her stepmother’s longing for a ‘figured silk’ in the novel’s closing annals - these fabric motifs depict the lives of a middling-income stratum of women, residing in a provincial town circa 1827-30 (WD 1 and 683). It is, as the sub-title suggests, An Everyday Story. Whilst it is unfruitful to read too much of Gaskell’s own biographical details into the narrative, nevertheless as Jenny Uglow observes, ‘Molly is the same age as the author, and this is the real, remembered world of Gaskell’s own childhood’. The story is set in the midlands, probably Warwickshire where Gaskell spent five years at school, but the town of ‘Hollingford is clearly Knutsford and the [aristocratic] Cumnors are based on the Egertons of Tatton Park, who dominated the little town’ of Knutsford.

One of Molly Gibson’s first forays into the adult world is when she is invited to be a companion to the invalid Mrs. Hamley from Hamley Towers and is given ten pounds by her father to buy suitable clothes at Miss Rose, the local dressmaker:

[F]or high-days and holidays—by which was understood afternoons and Sundays—Miss Rose persuaded her to order a gay-coloured, flimsy plaid silk, which she assured her was quite the latest fashion in London, and which Molly thought would please her father’s Scotch blood. But when he saw the scrap which she had brought home as a pattern, he cried out that the plaid belonged to no clan in existence, and that Molly ought to have known this by instinct. It was too late to change it, however, for Miss Rose had promised to cut the dress out as soon as Molly had left her shop. (WD 59-60)

61 Uglow, p.580.
From this amusing account it is evident that Molly, in her naïve and ill-formed fabric selection of ‘the plaid silk’, lacks the basic ‘literacy’ of fabric knowledge and earlier embodied practice, to inform her choice. Hence, she becomes victim to an unscrupulous dressmaker, who seizes the opportunity to offload her unpopular stock. Mrs. Hamley later describes it as ‘a horrid plaid silk’, advising Molly to wear her ‘white muslin’, which whilst a little ‘quaint’ was ‘thoroughly ladylike, if […] old-fashioned’ for her introductory visit to her new stepmother (WD 129). Mrs. Hamley is the surrogate mother whom Molly lacks, and it is apparent that Molly does need a guiding maternal influence, not only to protect her respectability and virtue from predatory males such as Mr Coxe, but also to inform her of the appropriate appearance and manners to negotiate the complex and ever-changing nuances of societal etiquette. Significantly, despite his ‘Scotch blood’, her own father has not conveyed the finer distinctions of plaid to Molly. Indeed, Patsy Stoneman, echoing Coral Lansbury and Patricia Spacks, sees the ‘central, and important, subject matter’ of the novel as ‘the structure of families and the socialisation of girls’.62

A poignant context is revealed by another biographical detail. When she was seventeen, Gaskell received a letter from her brother John Stevenson before he was due to set out to India. In it he ‘blurts out that he had brought her a piece of tartan silk from India-’but Mama thinks you rather young for it yet - there is enough for a gown and she will give it you next winter’ .63 The ‘Mama’ is actually the second Mrs Stevenson, 

Gaskell’s stepmother, purportedly used as a basis for Molly’s stepmother, Mrs. Kirkpatrick, the second Mrs Gibson. In such a way Mrs. Stevenson’s sequestering of the tartan is akin to Mrs Gibson’s self-anointed role as propagator of ‘educational priorities’ and propriety, part of her maternal duty to her new stepdaughter. Stoneman claims that these responsibilities match those from the etiquette manual, ‘The New Female Instructor [1836], the first six chapters of which deal with Dress and Fashion, Behaviour and Manners, Company, Conversation, Visiting and Amusements and Employment of Time’.

Why was the wearing of plaid inappropriate attire for an adolescent girl? Costume historian, Cunnington asserts that plaids were the fashionable patterns in 1829. The Highland fashion gained traction from 1816 when Sir Walter Scott’s (1771-1832) Waverley Novels sparked a fashion for tartan across Europe, and George IV was resplendent in ‘kilt, tartan coat and plaid’ on a state visit to Edinburgh in 1822. Molly’s father’s acerbic assertion that in her pattern choice ‘the plaid belonged to no clan in existence’ is an accurate observation as up to the early nineteenth century there had been no tradition of Highland clans wearing particular setts or patterns. The subsequent ‘tartan frenzy’ of the 1820s and beyond consisted of newly invented and

64 Stoneman, p.114.
65 ibid.
fabricated plaids; its zenith was Queen Victoria’s purchase of Balmoral castle in 1852, whereupon Prince Albert designed a sett known as the ‘Balmoral’.  

Perhaps, the tartan silk, with its ‘gay-coloured flimsy’ appearance represents an overt and conspicuous form of sexual display; a situation that compromises the appearance of an adolescent girl, especially when the prevailing domestic ideology extolled the purity and innocence of young girls; this is epitomized by the white muslin, which Mrs. Hamley feels is more appropriate attire for Molly. Decoding the unsuitability of the ‘flimsy’ and ‘gay-coloured’ silk by close reading of Mary Barton, it is notable that Esther the fallen factory girl wears a ‘gay-coloured barège shawl, closely wrapped round the form’ (MB 121). The barège was a ‘light, silky dress fabric resembling [silk] gauze, though it was actually made from wool’ (OED), which hugs the ‘form’ showing the body contours. As Judith Walkowitz observes, the clothes of the prostitute made them a distinctive visible ‘female sub-culture’ of ‘gay women’ observable by the ‘relative affluence of [their] dress’, albeit made of some ‘cheap and flashy’ material.  

Thus, for a young girl on the cusp of womanhood, her virtuous, un-awakened purity was signified by her dress. Patsy Stoneman argues that the opening chapters of the novel show ‘female adolescence not as an active phase of growth, but as a period of

68 Johnston, p.70.
69 Judith R. Walkowitz, Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 25-6. ‘Cheap and flashy’ are the observations of James Greenwood who examined the ‘parcel of clothing of prostitutes interned in the Westminster House of Correction’.
unconscious waiting, marked by allusion to ‘the ‘Sleeping Beauty’.\textsuperscript{70} It was an age when daughters were idealised as a ‘gentle sunbeam in a happy home, to [a] redeeming angel’.\textsuperscript{71} This romanticised portrayal reached its zenith in lyricism with Henry Longfellow’s poem, ‘Maidenhood’ (1841) which, as Sarah Bilson asserts, was widely quoted in British Victorian fiction and the advice manuals for this period:

Standing, with reluctant feet,  
Where the brook and river meet,  
Womanhood and childhood fleet!  

Gazing, with a timid glance,  
On the brooklet's swift advance,  
On the river's broad expanse! \textsuperscript{72}

The quotation reinforces the idea that childhood was a protracted period, an idyllic state fostered by nature, and that the move towards adulthood was approached with misgivings and doubts. This is not merely on the part of the girls themselves but was perpetuated by parents who overprotected their daughters and ill-educated them for adult life. Like Minister Holman in Cousin Phillis, Mr Gibson infantilises Molly, ‘I want to keep her a child’ but his parenting style, which often could be described as benign neglect, results in Molly blundering unwittingly through a series of societal faux pas (\textit{WD} 32).\textsuperscript{73}

\textsuperscript{70} Stoneman, p.113.  
\textsuperscript{71} Deborah Gorham, \textit{The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal} (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p.49.  
\textsuperscript{73} Pages 293-4 contain an extract from my article ‘The Pinafore…The Childish Garment and Aprons’, \textit{GSJ}, Vol. 25, 2015, 97-108 (p.99-100).
Perhaps replicating the *New Female Instructor*, Mrs. Gibson, in her role of new stepmother, makes it her duty to rescue Molly from such sartorial failings as a ‘flimsy plaid’. As Stoneman observes, ‘[h]er conversations with her own daughter, Cynthia, are almost all about dress’. At a dinner party, her sole validation is that ‘Cynthia and Molly looked their best, which was all the duty Mrs. Gibson absolutely required of them’ (WD 277). The rationale of a pleasing appearance beyond all other traits of character is a facet of the ‘ideology of the pleasing female’. While Mary Wollstonecraft bemoans the life of ‘Englishwomen whose time is spent making caps, bonnets and the whole mischief of trimmings’, it is through these motifs that Gaskell organises the lives of the Gibson women to make a satirical critique of Mrs. Gibson’s social veneer and pretensions. Therefore, Molly becomes immersed in a world of trimmings, ribbons and gauze, but in her matter-of-fact and pragmatic nature, which only extends to the skill of ‘plain sewing’, cannot match Cynthia’s effortless flourishes in dressmaking. ‘She could repeat the fashions 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’ (WD 227).

Gauze and ribbons were a very popular way of embellishing dresses and bonnets in the 1820s. Whilst mechanised techniques were slow to advance in the silk industry, the slow adoption of the Jacquard power loom from 1820 in France and in the late 30s...
in England enabled much ‘showier ribbons to be made at greater speed, even as their width increased from 1 ½ inches in 1815 to 6 ⅔ inches in 1848’.\textsuperscript{77} Gauze, at this time was a ‘transparent open work’ silk achieved by the ‘warps [being] crossed and uncrossed at intervals’ and was used for veiling, similar to the impenetrable veil Mrs. Gibson, as a new bride wears, to greet her new step-daughter ‘but her veil was so securely (and becomingly) fastened down, that it was some time before Mrs. Gibson could get her lips clear to greet her new daughter’ (\textit{WD} 178). It acts as a physical constraint, a metaphor for Molly’s reluctance to embrace her as a mother, as well as Mrs. Gibson’s unease with her maternal status and responsibilities, when she would rather play the role as a new blushing bride. Thus, the gauze and ribbons are a Gothic veiling, a popular fashion from 1829 that conceals the real contours of the female body. This contrasts with the Neo-Classical fashion from 1785 to 1820 whereby the dress was the mere ‘picture frame’ for the body.\textsuperscript{78}

Wider ribbons, which are absent in \textit{Sylvia’s Lovers}, are probably the ‘brilliant broad ribbons’, which the children wear to be presented at dinner at Cumnor Towers (\textit{WD} 18). By the late 1820s ribbons had a width up to 4 inches wide and lengths as much as ‘fifty foot long, would be used to trim a hat’.\textsuperscript{79} As Cunnington elaborates, ‘[b]y the summer of 1829 a woman of fashion was resembling a May Queen, her dress strewn with floral tributes, her hat giddy with coloured ribbons […] the perfect picture of Gothic

\textsuperscript{77} Schoeser, p.107.  
\textsuperscript{78} Cunnington, p.1.  
\textsuperscript{79} Cunnington, p.96.
Romance. This certainly raises the question of the expense of such yards of ribbon, particularly if they are made of silk. Cynthia proudly shows her ribbon purchases to Molly, detailing their cost. It acts as a diversion from the unwanted attentions of her visitor, her erstwhile lover Mr Preston, while also revealing interesting insights into the silk industry.

“This green ribbon was fourteen-pence a yard, this silk three shillings,” and so she went on, forcing herself to speak about these trifles as if they were all the world to her, and she had no attention to throw away on her mother and her mother’s visitor. (WD 236)

By grading the ‘trifles’ of ribbon by cost, probably based on their width and quality, as well as colour, Cynthia demonstrates her nuanced material literacy, as a consumer of fashion. While scornful of the presence of her former lover, nevertheless her agile manipulation of the ribbons enables a voyeuristic spectacle as she demonstrates her refined feminine taste.

From a macrocosmic stance, however, the tableau vignette is a fascinating exposé of international trade agreements. Whilst the silk ribbon is more than 1 ½ times more expensive than the green, a reduction in the duty on imported raw Chinese silk in 1826 from 5s. 6d. to 1d. had produced a dramatic price reduction for certain sorts of ribbons by 1832; Coleman claims that certain ribbons became 30% to 60% cheaper, allowing women such as Cynthia to exercise creative licence in their millinery skills; hence the profusion of ribbons on hats, or as cord and braid to trim and revitalize gowns. As Davidson observes, albeit for a slightly earlier period, cheaper

80 Cunningham, p.75.
81 Coleman, p.67.
‘[h]aberdashery applied in inventive, novel ways was a quick cheap means of achieving freshness and fashion, a significant vehicle for Regency women’s expression of individual taste when investment in a new garment was a large financial outlay’.  

Concomitantly, Acts of Parliament effective in 1826 lifted the prohibition on foreign woven silks that had been in force since 1765. Superior French silks now only incurred an import duty of 30%. This was a seismic shift of political power and emphasis within the British ‘textile industry, allowing growing numbers of middle-class women to increase their consumption of a luxury fabric, which had previously been the preserve of the very wealthy or court society for centuries previously.  

Arguably, the setting of Wives and Daughters, primarily 1827-30, but also extending into the 1830s, explores this shift away from ubiquitous cotton prints to the luxury fabrics of silks, satins and velvets for the middling strata of society, while observing the protagonists’ style and manner of ease with such drapery. Aristocratic Lady Harriet wears her ‘velvets and silks’ effortlessly on her surprise visit to the straitened Browning sisters, as Miss Phoebe relays ‘sitting on our rug, smiling (WD 176). Mrs. Gibson’s wedding dress, however, seems an overwrought spectacle for a second marriage - a ‘pearl grey satin’ that she then wears accessorized with ‘a profusion

of lace’ at the annual charity ball (WD 291). Costume historian, Cunnington describes satin as:

A silk twill of a very glossy appearance on the face and dull at the back. Usually seven out of every eight threads of the warp are visible, whereas in other silk stuffs each half of the warp is raised alternately. Its brilliancy is augmented by dressing. 83

The highly refractory lustre of silk, particularly satin, made it suitable for evening wear during the majority of the nineteenth century because lamps and candles provided illumination until to the 1840s; gas lamps were commonplace until the 1890s ‘in both cases the illumination was much yellower and much dimmer’ than electricity. 84 Satin was a very fashionable fabric. As the last chapter demonstrates, Queen Victoria broke away from the earlier tradition of rich brocades in her choice of wedding dress and wore ‘creamy-white satin court dress embellished with lace’. 85 However, there is a sense that Mrs. Gibson’s choice of ‘pearl-grey satin’ for the annual ball, an ostentatious preening, is rather an affront to the small Hollingford community as Miss Hornblower confides to Miss Browning:

“I remember the time when Mrs. Kirkpatrick wore old black silks […] as became her place as a schoolmistress. […] And now she is in a satin […] It isn’t so long ago since Mrs. Dempster came to consult me as to whether Mrs. Kirkpatrick would be offended, if she sent her a new breadth for her lilac silk-gown, in place of one that had been spoilt […] and she took it and was thankful, for all she’s dressed in pearl-grey satin now!” (WD 296)

83 Cunnington, p.435
84 Cunnington p.13.
Mrs. Gibson flaunts her satin as a sign of her elevated status and greater wealth after her marriage, abandoning her former attire as a way of sloughing off her penurious past. Indeed, she mocks the attire of more humbly dressed ladies, ‘the greater part of the women are dressed in dark silks, really only fit for a morning’ (WD 300), even though the aristocratic Lady Cumnor wears black albeit ‘black velvet’ (WD 304).

Throughout the nineteenth century the black dress, particularly in silk, was ‘regarded as an invaluable standby, denoting respectability without undue pride, and was much used, therefore on ceremonious occasions’. On Gaskell’s first meeting with Charlotte Brontë in August 1851, the latter is described as ‘a little lady in a black silk gown’. It was fashionable dress for ‘visiting or evening toilette’, except for a few years after the hanging of the infamous murderess Marie Manning in ‘The Bermondsey Horror’ in 1849; both at her trial and at her execution she wore a handsome black satin gown’. 

Mrs. Gibson’s ‘pearl-grey satin’ is comparable to Mrs. Hale’s ‘grey satin gown’ in North and South, which in the 1850s setting, she perceives to be ‘midway between oldness and newness’ and therefore prevents her from attending her niece’s smart London wedding (NS 15). She would rather be attired in ‘a silver-grey glacé silk’,

86 In a letter [late December? 1853], Gaskell is scathing about ostentatious displays in women’s eveningwear. To Marianne she writes ‘the Ewarts have been here this morn [sic]—I fancy their dance last night was large, vulgar & overdressed’, Letters, p. 261.
87 Cunnington, p.18.
88 Letters, p.123. In October 1854, Gaskell describes the appearance of Florence Nightingale in ‘black glace silk up to the long round white throat […], & you may get near an idea of her perfect grace & lovely appearance’, Letters p.306.
89 Cunnington, p. 17. John Harvey, pp.174-5. Manning and her husband murdered her lover. Harvey claims that Manning was the source of inspiration for ‘Mlle Hortense, the murderess in Dickens’s novel Bleak House (1852-3).
which is ‘[a] plain silk with a peculiar lustrous quality’ even though Gaskell herself in a letter to Marianne in 1852 rails against glacé silk, ‘Miss Alcock wrote to discommend glacé silk, & recommend what you’ve got’.\(^9\) All these references to a dazzling variety of different silks and colours denote the increasing array of previously luxury silks that were progressively available to furnish middle-income women’s wardrobes, from the mid-1820s to the 1860s. Women’s attire and fabric choice becomes an object of scrutiny, a nuanced signifier of their status. Even the straitened Miss Matty in *Cranford*, before her financial ruin in the bank failure, is able to contemplate what choice of silk she should make from ‘the glossy folds’ that her five sovereigns can buy at the universal store’s Spring display (*CF* 119). Shall it be ‘the sea-green […], maize […] silver gray’ perhaps ‘a lilac with yellow spots’ or ‘a quiet sage-green?’ (*CF* 119 & 121). As Mary Smith attests, revealing her own material literacy, the latter fabric ‘was nevertheless a good silk in its humble way’ (*CF* 121). Perhaps assessing the silk through its feel, its softness would signify that it had been through another stage in its manufacture, namely the gum from the original cocoon would have been boiled off, which certainly was not the procedure for highly twisted crepes. In addition, its lightweight feel is a property of

Women, schooled in material literacy, would know that the fineness of a silk yarn was denoted by its ‘denier’, which was the ‘weight in grams of 9 000 metres of yarn’. The finer the silk, the lower was its denier.

The impressive array of silks in the village shop display in Cranford seems a microscopic parody of a spectacle in the Great Exhibition the previous year, described as the ‘Silk Trophy’ and seen in figure 18. Assembled by ‘D. Keith and Co. of London’s Cheapside. It was a breathtaking spectacle, with swathes of fine Spitalfields silks, damasks and brocades mounted on a tall structure of plate glass’. Its presence was to counter the prevailing view that the opulent display of French silks in the exhibition were superior in design and texture to the English silk manufacturers; a view that

---

91 Coleman, p.12.
Queen Victoria unwittingly endorsed when her selected gifts for the royal household, consisted of French fabrics and Lyon silk.\(^{93}\)

Throughout the majority of the nineteenth century, as has been noted earlier in the chapter two, controversy raged about the superiority of French designs and style. This was likewise the case in the silk industry, and Manchester silk manufacturer Mr J. Chadwick blamed a long depression in the indigenous silk trade on the ‘prevalent prejudice among customers in favour of French silks’ and design, which Gaskell herself reflects in her comments about Parisian fashions in April 1865.\(^{94}\)

After the cessation of the Napoleonic wars, Paris once again asserted itself as the style capital, centre of the *demi-monde*. The French fashions, a branch of which developed into the speciality *haute couture* for the élite from the 1850s, produced fabric patterns, which varied with each season, as they had from the eighteenth century. This was not just in the actual style of a gown, but the pattern and colours of the silks. Lyon for silk fabrics and St Etienne for ribbons provided wealthy consumers with *à la mode* silk ‘novelties’; Alison Adburgham notes that any trimming or item of haberdashery gained ‘an immense aura of elegance if they came from France’.\(^{95}\) By the 1830s the Lyon silk manufacturers came to London twice a year, in spring and autumn, to show the new season patterns and seek orders; ‘an order for twenty to thirty pieces could secure exclusive rights to a pattern’.\(^{96}\) This was a risky time for the silk industry;

\(^{93}\) Leapman, Loc. 2145-51.
\(^{94}\) Quoted in Salter-Whiter, p.45
\(^{96}\) Sykas, p.120.
William Hale, a Spitalfield silk manufacturer reported to a Parliamentary Committee in 1821 that ‘in the months of June and July it cannot be ascertained what colours will be wanted for the winter or what colours will be most fashionable. [...] Till some duchess might make her appearance in Brighton with a new colour just from Paris’. 97 The first deliveries were then made at the end of February for the spring season and end of August for the autumn season. This accords with Miss Matty’s planned silk purchase when ‘the Spring Fashions’ arrived at the universal store (CF 116).

Through published fashion plates and fabric swatches, metropolitan English ladies could follow the developing Parisian trends or alternatively visit the French capital. Thus, in Wives and Daughters, Mrs. Gibson is eager to hear from Cynthia about ‘the autumn fashions before I bought my new bonnet’, and Gaskell herself details the latest Parisian fashions to her daughter in 1865 (WD 682). Gaskell lampoons Mrs. Gibson’s obsession with French design and fashion, particularly as her annoyance at Cynthia’s early homecoming from France empty handed, surpasses any natural motherly affection she should feel:

Mrs. Gibson professed herself shocked to find that Cynthia had but four gowns, when she might have stocked herself so well, and brought over so many useful French patterns, if she had but patiently awaited her mother’s answer to the letter [...] Molly was hurt for Cynthia at all these speeches; she thought they implied that the pleasure which her mother felt in seeing her a fortnight sooner after her two years’ absence was inferior to that which she would have received from a bundle of silver-paper patterns. (WD 226)

Might not Mrs. Gibson’s insular attitude, however, reveal another facet of her character—a woeful ignorance and disregard of societal upheavals beyond her own sphere? By

97 Quoted in Coleman, p.30.
1827, the English silk industry was suffering a severe depression. The slashing of import duties on imported woven silks in 1826, the start of a move to free trade instigated by the ‘new entrepreneurs of the North’, caused a wave of imports of French silks, which whilst increasing the variety available to the fashionable and cost conscious consumer, exerted a devastating toll on the indigenous silk industry.\(^9\) In 1818 French manufacturers imported woven silks to the value of approximately 2 million French Francs into England, by 1832 this figure was nearer to 15 million in value. Consequently, from 1825-1832, the numbers employed in the English silk industry declined dramatically, earnings fell by more than a half as many were working half-time; destitution was widespread and soup kitchens were opened. A special local fund raised £4360 in Macclesfield and a further £3000 was raised from London; the Prince Regent contributed £1000 to the silk weavers’ cause. A ‘Buy British’ campaign was orchestrated for the beleaguered silk industry and in 1830, Queen Adelaide, the consort to William IV ‘announced her attention of banning French fashions from the Court’; Mrs. Bell, a London dressmaker, who published a periodical called World of Fashion, wrote:

For her first Drawing room, fixed for the 24 day of Feb 1831, all the ladies who attend are expected to appear in dresses of British manufacture, and which should also be made up by English dress-makers.

We […] speak of the patriotic partiality of our beloved Sovereign and his royal consort for the arts and manufactures of the nations over which they preside.\(^9\)

\(^9\) Rothstein, p.796. She comments ‘Adam Smith’s theories on free trade impressed the English master manufacturer, who especially hated the Spitalfield Acts’.

\(^9\) Adburgham, p.33.
By April 1831, Queen Adelaide appeared in ‘a very handsome white and silver brocaded dress of Spitalfields [silk] produce’. This trend continued amongst the royals as Queen Victoria’s satin and lace gown was made from silk from Spitalfields, to support the struggling silk workers, and lace from the small village of Honiton to aid the long-suffering lace-makers. Thus, Mrs Gibson’s preoccupation with French silks and style perhaps reinforces the superficiality and pretentiousness of her nature. While she feigns and proclaims her own sentimental sensibilities, the narrative voice acerbically notes, ‘her words were always like readymade clothes, and never fitted individual thoughts’ (WD 321). This pithy observation, employing yet again a fabric trope comparing the ill-fitting and slapdash nature of such attire to Mrs. Gibson’s surface preoccupations, captures the essence of Gaskell’s haptic and material imagination. She similarly warns her daughter, Marianne against the perils of ill-made gowns:

If you have any gowns made in London have them well made; I would rather put the expense into the make than the material: form is always higher than colour &c. I don’t mean that I would ever have you get a poor silk instead of a good one; but I had rather you had a brown Holland, or a print gown made by a good dressmaker, than a silk made by a clumsy, inelegant badly-fitting one.

Gaskell is highlighting the quality and seamstress hours needed to ensure a well-fitting gown, and this criterion usurps any visual appeal that showier fabrics may have. It also reaffirms the pervasive scrutiny of other women’s dress, as the inference is that the writer and women do assess the quality of the workmanship, and the cut of other women’s dress.

100 Adburgham, p.35.
During the writing of *Wives and Daughters*, serialized between 1864-65, the silk industry like the cotton industry suffered from the loss of the lucrative American market because of the Civil War. However, unlike the cotton industry, the silk industry’s woes were compounded by a free trade treaty in 1860, the Cobden/Chevalier treaty with France which removed all import duties on imported French woven silks; in addition, it imposed a 30% levy on English silk exports to France. Consequently, high quality French woven silks flooded the English market; it was the final death knell to the beleaguered industry. The treaty was negotiated by Richard Cobden, erstwhile Manchester calico printer, who was one of the leading players in the abolition of the Corn Laws in 1846 and personally known to Gaskell in her Manchester circle. He believed that free trade with France would mutually benefit both countries and would prevent future military skirmishes, which had obviously been such a pattern of Anglo-French relations for the previous 200 years. Could it be argued that the almighty power of Cottonopolis and its desperate search for more overseas markets was the reason for the treaty and that the small, dispersed nature of the silk industry meant it was an easy sacrifice? The 1851 census reveals the smaller composition of the silk industry; 133,000 British people were employed in the silk industry compared to 527,000 in cotton.\(^{102}\) Certainly comments attributed to Cobden on the lifting of the import duties from France support this thesis ‘[l]et the silk trade perish and go to

countries to which it properly belongs”. Flanagan asserts ‘[t]he Spitalfields’ silk industry was sacrificed in 1860s as part of a government policy which regarded the coarser fabrics of Lancashire and Yorkshire as of first and greater importance’. While the value of cotton textiles into France was 800,000 Francs on average during the years 1847-56, by the period 1857-1866 it was 7.9m francs and by 1867-76 had increased exponentially to 47.2m francs. Not surprisingly, numbers employed in the English silk industry plummeted. By the 1901 census the total employed was only 39,035 people. Emigration was encouraged to Australia, New Zealand and New Jersey. John Ryle a Macclesfield silk manufacturer went to Patterson, New Jersey and initiated the American silk industry there.

Whereas Gaskell laments the state of ‘those Poor fellows, the Silk Weavers’ in 1852, Hilda Kean and Bruce Wheeler argue that the silk workforce had become predominantly female, comprising of many young girls. Certainly in Macclesfield in the 1851 census, 86.7% of girls under 15 were employed in the textile industry, mainly in silk, many of whom were working in domestic locations. Was this a further reason

104 Flanagan, p.23.
105 John Vincent Nye, ‘The Myth of Free-Trade Britain and Fortress France: Tariffs and Trade in the Nineteenth Century’, The Journal of Economic History, vol.51.1 (March 1991), 23-46 (p.43). The source is Table 5, Tableau Décennal du Commerce. Whilst, the figures do not state the country composition of these imports, as Lancashire cottons dominated world trade at this period, it is fair to assume that the exponential growth of French imports of textile cottons was from Britain.
106 Collins, p.17.
107 Letters, p.195.
108 Collins, p.16.
the English silk industry was sacrificed? Was it deemed to be ‘an anachronistic image of a pre-industrial and pre-modern system of production’ as Kean and Wheeler argue, and therefore no longer an appropriate symbol for the Victorian industrial model?\textsuperscript{109}

Conclusion
This chapter has concentrated upon the historical, economic and cultural contexts of the nature of silk production and consumption for the time frame of Gaskell’s novels. It has again revealed how a previously élite fabric of the eighteenth century was becoming a regular component of middling-income women’s wardrobes by the mid nineteenth century. The seemingly abundant supply of lower price silks was aided by the powerful cotton lobby’s pursuit of free trade policies in the male-gendered political public sphere. Prohibitively expensive ‘populuxe’ silk goods, and rolls of satin previously obtained by smuggling in Sylvia’s Lovers, are abundant in the provincial town of Hollingford, and even rolls of sumptuous shades of silk grace the Universal store in Cranford. Again, the graduations and nuances of silk and satin adornment signify the minute vicissitudes of social status and stratification in small womanly communities buffeted by the winds of economic change and political uncertainties.

It would be remiss, however, not to make the observation that the trope of silk pursues another function. It acts as a very appropriate metaphor for Gaskell’s own style of narration in her final, unfinished, but most sophisticated novel. The phrase ‘silken stylistics’ comes repeatedly to mind as an apposite description for the fluidity, ease and

\textsuperscript{109} Kean and Wheeler, p.225.
erudition that Gaskell maintains throughout the unfolding of *Wives and Daughters*. This proposition will be examined in greater detail in the following final chapter.
Chapter Six
‘Every iota from Paris!’: The Silken Weave of *Wives and Daughters*

‘Hollingford will seem very dull to Cynthia, after pretty, gay France’

Introduction

From the novel’s first serialization in *The Cornhill Magazine* from August 1864 to January 1866, critics have applauded the virtuosity of Gaskell’s narrative style in *Wives and Daughters* (*WD*). Henry James in an unsigned review in the *Nation* in February 1866 wrote, ‘[s]o delicately, so elaborately, so artistically, so truthfully, and heartily is the story wrought out’. A century later, Winifred Gérin, Gaskell’s first modern biographer commented in 1976, ‘[n]ever, for all the beauty and sensitivity of her previous writing, had Mrs Gaskell been in such total command of her medium, and the gain in fluidity of style and subtlety of effort is enormous’. All these reviews share a common refrain, emphasizing the ‘fluidity,’ ‘fluency, and ‘naturalness’ of Gaskell’s style. Josie Billington summarizes it succinctly as the ‘seamless fluency of her prose’. Pertinently, Billington uses the fabric allusion ‘seamless’ to describe Gaskell’s narrative technique. In this chapter I extend this material analogy further to suggest that the fineness of the writing encapsulates the very properties of silk itself.

---

1 *WD* 289.
2 *WD* 190.
As we have seen silk is a natural proteinaceous fibre, which because of its prism-like structure is not a flat thread, but instead refracts the light, to enable ‘a visual morphing of colour that creates [a] shimmering array of colours’ when woven: an iridescent display.\textsuperscript{6} The \textit{OED} defines ‘iridescent’ as ‘showing luminous colours that seem to change when seen from different angles’, facets of which are applicable to the multifarious descriptive skills exhibited in Gaskell’s novel. This chapter will examine in detail the different woven strands that silkily interplay to make Gaskell’s novel a cosmopolitan tour de force. I use the French phrase deliberately. The novel’s provincial setting of Hollingford is beguiling, lulling the reader with expectations of a charming foray into a bygone age like the fairy story of yore of the opening pages. Instead, the silk metaphor I employ underscores an interwoven complexity between the country town and the Queen of Cities, a sobriquet for Paris. This is not only in the lauded role of Parisian silks and fashions, but also in the influence of French Realism and the rapidly developing scientific fields of Anglo-French evolutionary theory. Roger Hamley is the pioneering scientist, in the novel, but arguably his minute scientific exploration of detail is mirrored by Gaskell in her particular nuanced placement of material culture, which was similarly developed by Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) in his opus \textit{La Comédie humaine}. I undertake a rigorous scrutiny of Balzac’s innovative prose in \textit{Eugénie Grandet} (1830), a novel Gaskell had read. I argue that Gaskell’s quotidian detail that

\textsuperscript{6} Clive Hallet and Amanda Johnston, \textit{Fabric for Fashion} (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2014), p.120. They compare the silky fibre effect to a close-up of a butterfly’s wing.
charts Molly’s developing consciousness as the essence of the novel, is the narratorial sophistication, inspired by Balzac.

Silky Skeins
Henry Fothergill Chorley, critic and friend to Gaskell, in a review in the *Athenaeum*, compared Gaskell’s writing in *Wives and Daughters* to an earlier literary figure, ‘[t]here has been no such story as this since Miss Austen laid by the pencil with which (as she modestly said) she was used to paint miniatures’. I interpret the comparison to allude to the depiction of womanly communities, and Austen’s sparkling use of the multifaceted narrative voice. Examples of this, in the heteroglossic nature of the narrative voice, abound in *Wives and Daughters*. An early example is Molly’s fashion faux pas, already discussed in the previous chapter.

Miss Rose persuaded her to order a gay-coloured, flimsy plaid silk, which she assured her was quite the latest fashion in London, and which Molly thought would please her father’s Scotch blood. But when he saw the scrap which she had brought home as a pattern, he cried out that the plaid belonged to no clan in existence, and that Molly ought to have known this by instinct. (*WD* 59-60)

The heteroglossia silkily interweaves the voices of Miss Rose, ‘quite the latest fashion’, capturing her servile pretentiousness, with dutiful Molly’s desire to ‘please her father’. Then, there is Mr Gibson’s pithy, pragmatic observation that ‘the plaid belonged to no clan in existence’. In addition, the narrative persona comments in a droll tone about the unsuccessful nature of the shopping venture, comically exposing the gulf between the hapless Molly and the unscrupulous dressmaker.

---

7 ‘Henry Fothergill Chorley, an unsigned review of *Wives and Daughters*, the *Athenaeum*, in Easson, pp.471-3 (p.471).
Billington has conducted extensive research upon the amendments Gaskell made to the original manuscript of *Wives and Daughters* and concludes that the ‘revisions [reveal] a density of possible meanings in place of a single or settled one’. An example of this ‘blurring’ of meaning occurs in the scene when Cynthia arrives home from France, a fortnight earlier than Mrs. Gibson had envisaged and without the French ‘silver-paper’ patterns that the latter had expected (*WD* 226). Gaskell’s revisions to the manuscript reveal the underlying subtle dynamics of the problematic mother-daughter relationship as Cynthia responds to her mother’s grievances with a nonchalance air. The original draft reads, ‘But Cynthia took no apparent notice of the frequent recurrence of these small complaints. Indeed, she received much of what her mother said with complete indifference’.

Gaskell’s later amendment alters Cynthia’s response:

‘Indeed, she received much of what her mother said with a kind of complete indifference’.

This subtle change in the text, that Billington analyses as a ‘reluctance to name things finally and definitively’, suggests that meaning becomes much more arbitrary and indeterminate. As Molly is observing this mother-daughter impasse, there appears to be a three-way possible interpretation. Do the lines suggest ‘a defence for Cynthia or a bafflement to Molly, or both’? Thus, Billington’s rigorous analysis underscores the multifarious, semantic nature of Gaskell’s prose, the stylistic accomplishment of which

---

8 Billington, p.43. ‘The manuscript (now in the John Rylands University, Library of Manchester, MSS 877)’, Billington, p.40.
9 ‘Blurring’ is Billington’s term, p.41.
10 Billington, p.41. (MS, p.334)
11 Billington, p.41.
12 Billington, p.41.
seems analogous to the properties of silk itself; the chameleon sheen of lustrous silk as it swathes the body, catches the light and causes the gleam to refract and undulate in myriad ways.

Evolutionary Science and Social Change
These revisions, highlighting Gaskell’s ‘microscopically careful choices and fine adjustments’, are also applicable to the novel’s scientific protagonist Roger Hamley; articulating a progressive manner of systematic, naturalistic analysis he, like Gaskell ‘detects low patterns of growth and change invisible to the casual eye’; in both instances ‘[f]iction and natural science, [...] share a morality implicit in their methods’.13 The novel, furthermore, consciously explores the advancement and prioritisation of scientific knowledge in a post-Darwinian world.14 Many critics see Roger Hamley’s scientific travels as a re-enactment of Charles Darwin’s 1831 world tour on the Beagle, but this was just part of a greater phenomenon. Hamley’s belief, ‘the idea of science as the key to progress and enlightenment’ was a pervasive belief among the European intellectual class.15 Hence his close observation of the ‘dirty, slimy creatures’ captured

13 Uglow, p.583
in his net is analogous to other scientific pioneers’ work in the mid-nineteenth century
(\textit{WD} 267). For instance, the silk producer Sir Thomas Wardle, keen to improve the
quality of silk filament, closely observed the life patterns of silkworms in Bengal’s
sericulture industry, while French microbiologist, Louis Pasteur investigated diseased
silkworms in South France in 1865. Indeed, Uglow asserts that Gaskell uses the
literature and genre of contemporary science writing ‘as another form of storytelling’.\footnote{\textup{16}}

As the novel’s narrative plot hinges upon the interrelationships of three
different families, the ‘inextricable web of affinities’ of the Gibsons, Hamleys and the
Cumnors, it becomes apparent that the novel articulates important evolutionary
theoretical themes, particularly in the nature of inheritance and succession.\footnote{\textup{17}} In \textit{On the
Origin of Species}, Darwin develops the heraldic metaphor of families to explain the
sustained hegemony of prominent dynasties ‘all true classification is genealogical’.\footnote{\textup{18}} In
\textit{Wives and Daughters}, the old Tory squirearchy represented by Squire Hamley, beset
with debts from an infirm heir, and unable to drain his land, cedes power to the up and
coming Whigs of Cumnor Towers. They prove to be more adaptable in the ‘struggle for
existence’ in an era of scientific and technological advancement.\footnote{\textup{19}}

\footnote{\textup{16}} Uglow, p.583.
\footnote{\textup{17}} Charles Darwin, \textit{On the Origin of Species}, ed.by Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2008), p. 319. In a ‘web of affinity’, Charles Darwin was a distant relative of Gaskell. In
1846, Gaskell’s daughter ‘Meta is to stay with the Charles Darwins at Easter’, Graham Handley,
\textit{An Elizabeth Gaskell Chronology} (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), p.146.
\footnote{\textup{18}} Charles Darwin quoted in Gillian Beer, \textit{Darwin’s Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin,
George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
\footnote{\textup{19}} Darwin, p.49. D’Albertis argues that the novel chronicles ‘a struggle for existence – both
against competitors and against environmental forces’ (p.141).
In addition, the novel’s comedy of manners is effectively an analysis of the nature of sexual attraction and selection in the human species, in its specific habitat, namely a small provincial community; this is forensically observed in microscopic proportions by the narrative voice. Thus, the silk trope is used to heighten Cynthia’s sexual allure by Mrs. Gibson, when she is informed of her daughter’s imminent engagement to the wealthy London lawyer, Mr Henderson, ‘You always look nice, dear; but don’t you think you had better put on that pretty lilac silk?’ (WD 630). While Cynthia rejects her mother’s suggestion, the theme of female dress is a component of the sexual awakening and evolving consciousness of the central protagonist, Molly Gibson. In such a way, the early purchase of the ‘horrid plaid silk’ (WD 129) reveals her ingenuousness and ill-formed perception of her developing comeliness, a marked contrast to the sartorial savoir-faire of other adolescent protagonists, Mary Barton and Sylvia Robson, for instance.

In the novel’s many allusions to the study of ‘creatures’, Molly’s evolving consciousness is as minutely observed as the ‘slimy creatures’ Roger Hamley captures in his net (WD 267). As Jenny Uglow suggests, it is a ‘story of female “wildness and cultivation”, of nature tamed’.20 Thus, in an early encounter with Molly, Lady Harriet observes, ‘I like you; — you are a little wild creature, and I want to tame you’ (WD 165). Whereas, this is suffused with aristocratic hauteur and appropriation, Molly refuses to be patronized or to acquiesce to Lady Harriet’s belittling of her friends, the Misses Brownings. Her rejection may be seen as a repudiation of the taxonomy of social

20 Uglow, p.585.
species. It is thus in the minutiae of the narration of quotidian events that Gaskell shows the physiological development of Molly.

The reader is placed in the middle of Molly’s evolving perception of consciousness as well as her emergent sense of sensibility. Thus, from her observations of Cynthia’s adept millinery skills, the reader monitors Molly’s growing awareness of the psychological damage Cynthia has suffered during her formative childhood years by the actions of her negligent mother:

Cynthia could repeat the fashions 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. (WD 227)

Although Molly professes to understate her incomprehension as to the ‘source’ of Cynthia’s coldness and indifference towards her mother, the tropes of gauze and ribbons which manufacture a garish and immediate display, signifies the true nature of the superficiality of the mother-daughter relationship, bereft of any warmth and emotional depth. Whereas Molly too has lacked a mother, the reader gains a sense that Molly realizes that her brittle, mercenary stepmother treats her daughter merely as an adjunct to her own whims and vanities. This appears to be an inversion of the natural maternal/child role, in that the daughter becomes a ‘handmaiden to her mother’s sexuality’ by redecorating and restoring Mrs. Gibson’s comeliness.\(^{21}\) The frisson of sexual rivalry provokes Cynthia’s contempt, even as Molly senses but cannot articulate its cause.

\(^{21}\) I am grateful for Clare Petitt’s suggestion to comment upon Mrs. Gibson’s sexual display.
The passage also illustrates another element of Gaskell’s style, which Deirdre D’Albertis highlights as the ‘unusually diffuse and decentralized’ narrative voice.\(^{22}\) Here, Molly Gibson takes on ‘many of what are frequently the duties of the narrator, interpreting action, directing response, and providing judgment’.\(^{23}\) W. A. Craik also suggests that Molly’s father and Roger Hamley are also accorded such narrative authority. In such a vein, Molly’s transition to self-awareness is represented by the details of her lived life and her developing sense of judgment. As Henry James writes:

> of what possible concern […] are the clean frocks and the French lessons of little Molly Gibson … [T]hese modest domestic facts … [are] … a means to what the author would probably have called a “realization” of her central idea, i.e., Molly Gibson, a product, to a certain extent, of clean frocks and French lessons, … [Such details] have educated [the reader] to a proper degree of interest in the heroine. He feels that he knows her the better and loves her the more for a certain acquaintance with the *minutiae* of her homely *bourgeois* life.\(^{24}\)

Gaskell uses the quotidian ‘*minutiae*’ of Molly’s ‘*bourgeois*’ life to chart Molly’s progression towards adulthood, physically and psychologically, so that Molly’s developing character is the central focus of the novel. As Billington says ‘these dense involvements of everyday life precisely *constitute* the plot or the subject-matter’.\(^{25}\)

Thus, seemingly inconsequential details, the ‘frocks’ and ‘French lessons’, the multifarious descriptions of breadths of silk, satins and ribbons, facilitate an organic layering of memory and meaning, which stimulate an affective response in the reader

---

\(^{22}\) D’Albertis, p.155.

\(^{23}\) W. A. Craik quoted in D’Albertis, p.155.

\(^{24}\) James, in Easson, p.465.

towards Molly. It is as if the reader has actually spent hours ‘in the flesh as well as the spirit among the scenes’ of Molly’s living experiences.

Thus, *Wives and Daughters*, whilst charting Molly’s steps to maturation, also documents Gaskell’s development of her realist prose in her mature phrase. As she wrote sagaciously to an aspirant author, ‘When you are forty, and if you have a gift for being an authoress, you will write ten times as good a novel as you could do now, just because you will have gone through so much more of the interests of a wife and a mother’. Predicating her everyday experiences in her maternal and spousal roles, as a foundation to her art of writing, supports Henry James’ thesis that Gaskell’s mature prose is ‘so obviously the offspring of her affections, her feelings, her associations […] how much writing was a matter of pure feeling with her’. It is a highly subjective form of realism based upon Gaskell’s ‘individual vision’, a function of her own ‘felt life’. Thus, in the unfolding of Molly’s progress towards womanhood, there are no dramatic moments or epiphanies, but rather a sense of the shifting rhythms and indeterminate patterning of ordinary lives lived, to such an extent that the novel’s unfinished end mirrors this rhythm. ‘Novelistic irresolution or inconclusiveness’ is recognised ‘as a phenomenon of late Victorian realism than that of the period of high realism’.

---

26 Easson, p.463.
28 Easson, p.464.
asserts. Thus, Gaskell’s sophisticated narratology may be viewed as a bridge; a form of proto-modernism. The novel’s primary underlying rationale is the evolving perceptions of the adolescent protagonist, on the cusp of womanhood.

The French Influence

The quasi-feudal community of *Wives and Daughters* is Gaskell’s aesthetic reconfiguration of the provincial town of Knutsford, her childhood home. However, it would be wrong to conclude that this is just a wistful response to a fast-disappearing world. So much of the novel seems to be in symbiotic communion with France and the cosmopolitan centre of Paris. The previous chapter has charted the historical and cultural contexts of Anglo-French relations regarding the silk industry, but *Wives and Daughters* is a novel which abounds in French phrasing and references to French society. Early in the novel, Molly’s appearance is likened to that of a French girl, ‘she has got the black hair and eyelashes, and grey eyes, and colourless complexion which one meets with in some parts of France’; a description that foreshadows the arrival of Aimée, Osborne Hamley’s French Catholic wife from his earlier secretive betrothal (*WD* 20). Cynthia was educated in France and is adept in copying the fashions from ‘the streets of Boulogne’ (*WD* 227). Meanwhile Roger Hamley visits Paris and is in dialogue with the ‘French comparative anatomists’ and receives an invitation to meet the eminent ‘M. Geoffroi St H’ (*WD* 315).  

---

31 This is the renowned zoologist, Étienne Geoffroi Saint- Hilaire (1772-1844). For more see *WD* p.712.
zoological book, ‘Le Règne Animal’ that impresses Lord Hollingford at the charity ball (WD 311). At the same time the celebration of French culture is subverted by the mutterings and suspicion of all things French from the reactionary, ordinary denizens of Hollingford; in their distrust of French ‘heathen dishes after the fashion of the Papists’ (WD 184) and their suspicion of Cynthia, ‘brought up in the country where Robespierre and Bonaparte was born’ (WD 438). This reference to the French revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, still current in the minds of the older Hollingford generations is also a feature of Cranford, where the ladies still recall their fears of a French invasion. It reveals how deep-seated are the traumatic memories of the period 1789 to 1815, which experienced twenty-six years of Anglo-French conflict. Although Britain restored the Bourbon monarchy in 1815, there was still distrust about the legitimacy and stability of Britain’s old foe, particularly when revolutions occurred in July 1830 and 1848.

Paris, during this period, however was transformed becoming ‘the Mecca for people of fashion’ and the place to be seen.32 Honoré de Balzac, the French writer whose treatises on fashion will be discussed later, in a pithy aphorism proclaimed, ‘Anyone who does not frequently visit Paris will never be completely elegant’.33 The nouveau riche English, excluded from royal circles because of their links to trade and commerce, descended on Paris, this ‘queen of capitals’ according to Balzac, where they

could live in old grandeur and be received at court. After the 1830 revolution, Paris became the centre of the rising bourgeois élite, whose elegance, sophistication and good taste in fashion and manners were envied and emulated. Lady Granville, wife of the British ambassador, gave the French sophisticates the soubriquet ‘les élégantes’ with a description that echoes Cynthia Kirkpatrick’s understated charm and style, ‘they have an aplomb, a language, a dress de convenance’. Indeed, costume historian, Aileen Ribeiro comments that ‘a whole new vocabulary of fashion and textile terms [and] a new world of luxury’ was created during this period, extolled and promoted by the periodical press. This culminated in the establishment of haute couture in Paris by Charles Frederick Worth, whose most ‘illustrious and conspicuous customer’ was the Empress Eugénie. Thus, within Wives and Daughters, Lady Cumnor’s exclamation to the Duchess, ‘Every iota from Paris! Every i-o-ta!’ gives a sense of the enduring allure and appeal of Parisian attire (WD 289). This was further publicized by the triumph of tasteful display by the French at the Great Exhibition and in the 1855 Universal Exhibition in Paris. The latter was intended as ‘France’s showcase to the world’ and a ‘microcosm of modern fashion’ and elegant taste.

35 Tombs, p.315.
36 Ribeiro, p.33.
38 Ribeiro, p.45.
The year, 1855, was to prove to be the ‘high point of rapprochement’ for Anglo/French relations; Queen Victoria visited the Paris Exhibition and in the same year hosted a state visit to Windsor for Emperor Napoleon III and the Empress Eugénie.\(^3^9\) In her diaries, Queen Victoria records the extraordinary progress in diplomatic relations by detailing how the Emperor dances with her daughter, Princess Victoria at a state ball, ‘Really to think of a G\(^d\) daughter of George III\(^r\)d, dancing with the nephew of our great enemy, the Emp’ Napoleon now my most firm Ally, in the Waterloo Gallery, — is incredible!’\(^4^0\) This *entente cordiale* culminated in the 1860 free trade Cobden-Chevalier treaty discussed in the previous chapter, which abolished the import duties on French luxury goods and textiles to Britain. The Queen’s visit to Paris was replicated by thousands of English people, including Gaskell herself and the novel’s protagonists Roger Hamley and Cynthia. Gaskell first visited Paris in 1853 and then stayed with Mme Mohl on five other occasions.

Thus, the profusion of French allusions in the novel could be seen as depicting Gaskell’s close knowledge and love of French culture. In 1864, before commencing work on *Wives and Daughters*, she wrote a series of three articles entitled ‘French Life’ in *Fraser’s Magazine* (April to June 1864) based on trips she had undertaken to Paris and Normandy in 1862-63, while researching a book on the seventeenth-century literary

---


\(^4^0\) *Queen Victoria’s Journals*, vol.39, p.218, <http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/search/displayItemFromId.do?FormatType=fulltextimg src=&QueryType=articles&ResultsID=&ItemNumber=1&ItemID=qvj08144&volumeType=PS BEA#transcript> [access 16/4/18].

321
figure, Madame de Sévigné (1626-1696). Jenny Uglow comments that the articles ‘blend the light and inconsequential with real knowledge and sharp judgement’, an assessment that could be equally applied to *Wives and Daughters*, particularly in Gaskell’s nuancing of the material detail of dress.

Indeed, Gaskell wrote a great part of the novel in Paris, staying with her old friend, Madame Mohl, whose informal salons at 121 Rue du Bac, were at the ‘hub of French political and literary life’. This was sparkling company, offering a cross-fertilization of contemporary British and European, Catholic and Protestant intellectual thought. Such eminent attendees included George Sand, Ivan Turgenev, Victor Hugo and Robert and Elizabeth Browning. There is no doubt that Gaskell was easily accepted into this cosmopolitan milieu. As early as 1853, Mme Mohl ‘explained to Elizabeth Reid: I had Mrs. Gaskell to lionise for a fortnight’. In February 1855, Mme Mohl organised a dance in her friend’s honour and Meta Gaskell recounts the fevered preparations, ‘everything is in confusion – the great red cushions of the salon being beaten & shaken till the room is clouded with dust[.] They have been polishing the dining-room-floor, till I anticipate a fall in every waltz’. Later Mme Mohl was to recollect to a Mrs Simpson how Gaskell ‘wrote the greater part of “Wives and

---

42 Uglow, p.568.
43 Uglow, p.347.
44 Uglow, p.348. Valerie Steele explains that the terms “Le Lion” and “lionized” were used to describe the ‘masculine leaders of fashion’, Valerie Steele, *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), p.68.
45 *Letters*, p.332.
Daughters” in the larger salon, standing up before the mantelpiece, which she used as a desk’, presumably the same salon of the dance.\textsuperscript{46}

In March 1865, Gaskell was again in Paris, interspersing the novel’s writing with composing articles for George Smith’s new newspaper, the \textit{Pall Mall Gazette}. Appropriately titled, ‘A Column of Gossip from Paris’, the articles abound with the lively gossiping that Gaskell and her friend Mme Mohl enjoyed together; Uglow notes that they are ‘a blend of bon mots and bon sang’ including references to the antics of ‘the notoriously fast Princess Metternich’.\textsuperscript{47} In a letter March 1865, Gaskell reveals how her writing of \textit{Wives and Daughters} was punctuated by the lively conversation of Mme Mohl, ‘she in dressing gown and curlpapers, very, very amusing […] I’ll give you one or two specimens of Mme Mohl’s witty expressions. Speaking of \textit{men} cooks in great families she calls them ‘tom-cooks’.\textsuperscript{48} In the letter, Gaskell reveals how the grand old statesman Françoise Guizot (1787-1874) had dined with them. No wonder then that this conflation of mundane and whimsical anecdotes from Gaskell’s Paris sojourns seems to permeate the fictional world of Hollingford; the narrative comically predicated upon the concentric flows of rumour and gossip as well as the long-seated suspicion of the French. The sharp tongues of Hollingford view Cynthia’s French upbringing suspiciously. Cynthia’s fashionable appearance may have provoked disquiet as signs of vanity or ‘fast[ness]’; indeed, it was the ‘the dread of being thought fast’ [that]

\textsuperscript{47} Uglow, p.570.
\textsuperscript{48} Letters, p. 750.
prevented many Englishwomen from being well dressed’. It is the source of Cynthia’s reputation as a ‘flirt and a jilt’, rather ‘fast’, in the mode of Princess Metternich perhaps, that threatens to tarnish Molly’s own reputation (WD 572).

Thus, whilst Gaskell’s last novel appears to be an English ‘provincial’ novel, intertextually it reflects cosmopolitan influences. This is important. As raised in the introduction, ‘the term ‘provincial’ has meanings and associations that are complex and that change over time’; in the mid-nineteenth century it was ‘derived less from topography than from print’ culture. In such a sense ‘provincial’ represents a physical distance from the metropolitan centre rather than a pejorative sense of the backwoods. Indeed, McDonagh argues that provinciality in the mid 1850s was more ‘closely aligned to modes of contemporary cosmopolitanism than we might now assume’. Thus, within Hollingford, ‘an exterior world is enfolded into the local scene’ and it is by intertextual allusions that Gaskell creates the hybridity of a small knowing English community and a French milieu. There is a fluency and ease to this portrayal, possibly mirroring the elegant letters of Madame de Sévigné that Gaskell so admired. As a prolific letter-writer de Sévigné chronicled quotidian, familial life juxtaposed with political and semi-public events, including gossip from the court of Louis XIV. In a letter in February 1862

50 Josephine McDonagh, ‘Rethinking Provincialism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Victorian Studies, 55.3, Spring 2013, 399-424 (p.399).
51 McDonagh, p.415.
52 McDonagh, p.409. McDonagh bases her analysis here on the provincial writing of Mary Russell Mitford, Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery, 5 vols.1822-1832.
Gaskell revealed how much de Sévigné’s letters had influenced her, writing that they ‘had been like a well-known friend to me all my life’.\(^{54}\)

The ‘provincialism’ of the town of Hollingford also differs markedly from the ‘provincial’ environment represented in Gaskell’s 1853 novel, *Ruth* and provides evidence for McDonagh’s assertion that the meanings and associations of Victorian ‘provincial’ are ‘complex’. After her seduction and abandonment, Ruth is rescued by the Dissenter minister Benson and his sister and given sanctuary in their home in the town of Eccleston. ‘A low grey cloud was the first sign of Eccleston; it was the smoke of the town hanging over the plain’ (*RU* 463). The ‘smoke of the town’ would suggest that Eccleston is an industrial town, like Milton-Northern in *North and South*, but this is not the case. Benson’s congregation consists of farmers, shopkeepers and ‘one or two families of still higher worldly station’ such as the businessman Bradshaw (*RU* 128). In his notes to the 1998 edition of *Ruth*, Alan Shelston suggests that the fictional town is based upon ‘Macclesfield’, the ‘silk town’ discussed in the previous chapter: ten miles from Gaskell’s childhood town of Knutsford.\(^{55}\) Shelston argues that the ‘provincialism’ represented by the small town of ‘Eccleston’ ‘implies the backward glance […] the implications of rest and release’.\(^{56}\) For this reason, the topography is sensitively located for Ruth’s journey to repentance, and the absence of cosmopolitan intertextuality in the

---

\(^{54}\) *Letters*, p.675.


novel reflects Gaskell’s desire ‘to make both the story and the writing as quiet as I could’.  

Patsy Stoneman has noted other cosmopolitan influences in *Wives and Daughters*, speculating that the title is a ‘sidelong look at *Fathers and Sons*’ written by Ivan Turgenev in 1862 ‘which became known to English literati through the French translation’.  

Both novels share common themes regarding the pursuit of scientific knowledge by younger sons and inter-generational alienation. As Stoneman observes ‘Turgenev had visited Manchester in 1859 and had friends, like the Nightingales, in common with Elizabeth Gaskell’.  

Chapter XXVII of Gaskell’s novel is actually titled ‘Fathers and Sons’. The novel, *Father and Sons*, in its depiction of the nihilistic protagonist, Evgeny Bazarov, adopts a character-centered narrative analogous to Gaskell’s final text.

In addition, Philip Yarrow asserts that ‘French literature influenced some of her works’ and that the ‘influence of George Sand has been suggested’.  

It is certainly known that Gaskell had read Sand’s novel *Mauprat* (1837). Angus Easson, citing contemporary English critics, states the connection between Gaskell and Sand’s writings resided in ‘the power of feeling’ and ‘Romantic inheritance’; in particular ‘the seemingly trivial details of the physical world’ […] tied into an emphatic handling of

---

57 *Letters*, p.225.  
59 Shapiro cited in Stoneman, p.126.  
60 Yarrow, p.30. The ‘George Sands’ influence is a suggestion of A Rubenius.
feeling, of emotion’. Gaskell certainly was in regular communication with the French publisher, Louis Hachette, who arranged for her writings to be translated into French and published. In a letter in October 1855 to Hachette, she laments the unavailability of ‘good modern French publications’ in Manchester and thanks the publisher for ‘advancing me so much of the payment in the shape of books’. Her relationship with her French publisher appears to have been mutually beneficial as she accedes to his request for an account ‘of any works of fiction of remarkable merit, that {have} appear{ed} in England’. Thus, Gaskell compared *Wuthering Heights* to Sand’s novel *Mauprat*, and in her analysis of a work entitled ‘A lost love’; she reveals her familiarity with Honoré de Balzac’s novel, *Eugénie Grandet*. ‘A lost love’, is a very graceful pathetic story, made out of very common every day incidents, but told in a way that reminds one of ‘Eugénie Grandet’.

Yarrow speculates that Gaskell’s short story ‘Cousin Phillis’ (1864) resembles *Eugénie Grandet* (1833) ‘in its main outline’. Certainly it is apparent that Gaskell had read Balzac and indeed discussed the novelist’s work with Charlotte Brontë. Gaskell

61 Easson citing Patricia Thomson (1997) references George Sand’s ‘three pastoral tales’ (*La Petite Fadette; La Mare ou Diable; François Le Champi*). Easson argues that the ‘emphatic handling of, feeling, of emotion’, linked to the particularity of detail, is ‘something new in the Novel’ that separates Gaskell and Sand from ‘an earlier novelist like Jane Austen’. Easson summarizes it as the ‘Romantic release, the delight in the sentiment of feeling’, Angus Easson, ‘The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell’, *GSJ*, 1990, 4, 64-78 (pp.65-68.).

62 *Further Letters of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by John Chapple and Alan Shelston (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p.145. Gaskell further comments ‘There are many Germans in Manchester, so German literature abounds, and is easily to be procured.’

63 *Further Letters*, p.146.

64 Both texts have a young female protagonist. Their first and only love is a flamboyant and sophisticated outsider, who subsequently journeys overseas, and repudiates their love.
writes: ‘I remember the good expression of disgust which Miss Brontë made use of in speaking to me of some of Balzac’s novels: “They leave such a bad taste in my mouth” (LCB 361-2). Brontë had read Illusions Perdues and Modeste Mignon. Vivien Jones notes that even by the 1870s, ‘Balzac’s reputation was not yet firmly established in England, in spite of G.H. Lewes’ efforts in the Westminster Review’ to promote his novels, while George Sand ‘was widely considered socially and morally subversive’.65

There was a general perception that French novels disseminated corruption, particularly the ‘French novel of adultery’ featuring female transgression and sapphism, pervasive leitmotifs in Balzac’s Cousin Bette (1846) and Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1857).66 W. R. Greg (1809-81), a writer and friend of Gaskell, known for his articles on prostitution and the ‘abundant woman’ in the periodical press, also condemned French literature.67 In an 1855 essay in the Edinburgh Review, Greg described modern French literature as ‘diseased to its very core’ that ‘preach[ed] a “tone of sexual morality … ‘lax and low”’.68 The general suspicion about French

67 Uglow, p.313. The problem of the ‘abundant woman’ was highlighted by the gender imbalance in the 1851 census and a public discourse concerning ‘women’s fitness or unfitness for employment’ during the 1840s.
68 Marcus, p.262.
novels can be allied with the sense of Franco-phobia mentioned earlier. However, serious contemporary writers such G.H. Lewis, George Eliot and the Brownings were followers of French fiction. Gaskell’s letters to her French publisher, Louis Hachette, requesting certain French novels as part payment, reveals her detailed knowledge of the genre. On October 22nd 1855, she requests five books including *Les Deux Marguerites* (1845), by Mme. Charles de Reybaud, *Proverbes* (1840) by Alfred de Musset and *Tolla* (1852) by Edmond About.69 About’s work was ‘said to typify the spirit of the second empire’ of Napoleon III; Henry James was to describe About’s *Tolla* as the ‘first, and truly beautiful little novel’.70

**Wives and Daughters and French Realism**
Observation of the social strata in the provincial town of Hollingford certainly mirrors Balzac’s ‘proto-Darwinian classification of social species’ in the remote French town of Saumur, the setting of *Eugénie Grandet*.71 Each novel’s milieu is based upon small communities, which although gaining in economic prosperity remain disciplined by the force of collective scrutiny. Balzac’s writing reflects, ‘the poem of those vicissitudes of bourgeois life that no voice has dreamt of writing about, so much are they denuded of grandeur’.72 However, perhaps the greatest similarity between Balzac’s writing and Gaskell is in their respective treatment of material culture. Both authors take fabrics and

69 *Further Letters*, p.144.
70 *Further Letters*, p.144.
clothes ‘seriously in the modern sociological spirit’, using sartorial detail to reveal aspects of a character’s frailties, vanities and sexuality.\textsuperscript{73} The appearance of clothes, like the adoption of manners is a performative act, which leads to great anxiety over the nature of authenticity and the establishment of identity in an age when social borders seemed porous. This disquiet, a continual theme of previous chapters, is reiterated in \textit{Wives and Daughters} by the regal Lady Cumnor’s pronouncements upon an unwritten sartorial code:

I was only speaking of the folly of people dressing above their station. I began by telling Clare of the fashions of my grandmother’s days, when every class had a sort of costume of its own,—and servants did not ape tradespeople, nor tradespeople professional men. (\textit{WD} 566)

Referring retrospectively to the mid-eighteenth century, Lady Cumnor nostalgically bemoans the loss of rigid codes of dress, demonstrating similarities to Lady Ludlow pronouncements. ‘Costume’ denotes a legacy of sumptuary legislation, or traditional modes of attire unaffected by fashion vagaries. This archaic dress demarcation is of course challenged by the fall of the \textit{ancien régime} in France and the rise of urbanization and fashion democratization in Britain and France, sources of Lady Cumnor’s disquiet. Her consternation regarding the ‘simultaneous stability and instability of dress, as a social and moral signifier’ is again an iterative refrain; Mariana Valverde uses the apposite phrase ‘moral cross-dressing’ or ‘moral masquerades’


Balzac wrote several articles upon the social significance of clothing, satirical guides by which the incognizant could identify the different social ‘tribes’ rapidly evolving in Paris. His 1830 \textit{Treatise on Elegant Living} commented upon the progression of the artistic and intellectual Parisian dandy from the dandyism of the Regency period exemplified by Beau Brummell.\footnote{For further discussion on the role and styling of the ‘Dandy’ see Richard D. Altick, ‘The Way They Looked’ in \textit{The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel} (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), pp.275-338.} It is replete with pithy aphorisms, anecdotes and observations of Parisian life and fashions, and its dictums might well have prevented many a fashion faux pas. Thus Molly in her unfortunate choice of the garish tartan dress might well have been advised by Balzac’s declaration, ‘[a] multiplicity of colours will always be in bad taste.’\footnote{Honoré de Balzac, \textit{Treatise on Elegant Living}, trans. by Napoleon Jeffries (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2010), p.56.} His 1840 essay, ‘La Femme comme il faut’ was a reflection upon the dress and taste of the ‘the proper lady, and the notions of respectability and distinction that both define her and that she refines’; as Daniel Roche elaborates, ‘[t]he dress of the woman who was \textit{comme il faut}, […] became extremely complex, since it had to fill many functions, dictated by the hour, the social situation or circumstances’.\footnote{Hiner, p.4. Daniel Roche, \textit{The Culture of Clothing: Dress and Fashion in the 'ancien régime'} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p.62.}
Gaskell also employs the expression to describe the penurious yet gentile ‘comme il faut’ tea-parties’ staged by the widows and spinsters in ‘The Last Generation in England’. In a similarly amusing anecdote in ‘French Life’, dated Chartres, May 10th 1862, Gaskell, relates how her companions had incurred the wrath of a French landlady by visiting an evening fair. The landlady issues, ‘a sort of grumbling soliloquy to the effect that ladies who knew what was comme il faut would never have gone out so late in the evening in the evening of a jour de fête […] this improper thing’. Is Gaskell recalling this phrase, comme il faut, in her characterization of Mrs. Gibson and her sartorial choices? It certainly echoes in a comic vignette from Wives and Daughters. As a newly married, second wife, Mrs. Gibson is very preoccupied with her choice of dress for the Charity Ball:

Mrs. Gibson was more anxious about her attire than was either of the girls; it had given her occasion for deep thought and not a few sighs. Her deliberation had ended in her wearing her pearl-grey satin wedding-gown, with a profusion of lace, and white and coloured lilacs. (WD 291)

Gaskell’s satirical observation is analogous to a Balzac aphorism concerning the perils of over-dressing by the emergent nouveau riche compared to the natural taste of the true lady. Mrs. Gibson’s dress, inappropriate for the occasion, with its ‘profusion’ and excess of superfluities, affirms her social aspirations and lack of humility and communality. Her anxious premeditations represent ‘a ‘trying too hard’ that is the strict antithesis of the femme comme if fait’, who is always ‘à l’aise dans sa toilette’ (at ease

---

Mrs Gibson is not alone in her fashion faux pas that evening. As chapter two highlighted, the Duchess of Mentieth, a mature lady, is inappropriately attired ‘in a sprigged muslin’ (WD 30). A Balzacian aphorism aptly summarizes that lady’s plight. ‘The slightest impropriety in a costume can relegate an unknown duchess to the lower ranks of society’. ⁸¹ By contrast, the ‘real grand’ Lady Harriet seems to epitomize the femme comme if fait as ‘an earl’s daughter’ (WD 177). On an impromptu visit to the straitened Misses Brownings, she is perfectly poised, as Miss Phoebe confirms, in ‘her velvets and silks, sitting on our rug’ exchanging washing tips for old lace (WD 176).

In Aileen Ribeiro’s words, Balzac’s novels abound with ‘a poetic relish in clothing’, a succinct summary that could equally compass Gaskell’s work. ⁸² Fabrics, colours and styles are all carefully nuanced and act as an interpretative code to the cognizant and sophisticated urban reader. The emerging fashion styles and the construction of elegance by the growing swathes of middling income women was a sign of modernity, but also a means by which mediums of change could be registered, even down to the most seemingly inconsequential detail of a coloured ribbon. Gaskell uses this as a satirical ploy in Wives and Daughters when the newly engaged Cynthia issues fashion rules to Molly for her visit to the new marital home, presumably uttered as an arched coda to her mother’s directives, ‘Only you know you’re to be my first visitor, and if you wear brown ribbons to a green gown, I’ll turn you out of the house!’ (WD 645).

---

⁸⁰ Hiner, p.25.
⁸¹ Balzac, Treatise p.69.
⁸² Ribeiro, p.16.
Whereas ‘brown’ and ‘green’ seems to be in harmony in a natural setting, presumably now they are perceived as being the height of bad taste, possibly based upon the latest scientific complementary colour theories of French chemist, Michel Eugène Chevreul. In the 1830s, etiquette rules dictated that a ‘cold’ colour must never be placed against a ‘warm’ colour. ‘Green’ as a ‘cold’ colour was for summer use and was worn from Easter to Michaelmas, thereafter ‘warm colours’, such as ‘brown’ were adopted.\(^3\) Novelist and travel writer, Fanny Trollope (1779-1863) makes a similar point in her observations on the elegance of Parisian women in her popular book, *Paris and the Parisians* (1836), ‘[h]er ribbons, if they do not match her dress, are sure to accord with it’.\(^4\) ‘Accord’ does seem to suggest that the ribbons complement the dress and are carefully accessorized. Walking in the Gardens of the Tuileries, a space adjacent to the Royal Palace that was renowned for aristocratic display, Trollope comments upon the understated charm of French women engaged in daily life in ‘this showy city’.\(^5\) ‘Showy’ indicates the emphasis placed upon the requisite fashions and manners required for public promenade in Paris whilst alluding to the theatrical nature of such display; a means by which we can interpret the silken fabrics and comedy of manners that proliferate in Gaskell’s final novel.

Henry James valued Balzac’s novels highly, praising them for their power to portray ‘every possible mode of feeling’ and admiring ‘the ‘respect for the liberty’ of

\(^5\) Trollope, p.269.
his characters’. In comparing the characteristics of French and English literature in his critical essays he comments upon the ‘lively aesthetic conscience’ of the French, as opposed to ‘the moral leaven that works most strongly in the English imagination’. A ‘lively aesthetic conscience’ would certainly be a fitting epithet to apply to Gaskell’s final narrative as she skilfully interweaves cosmopolitan influences with her ‘every-day story’ of English provincial life. I argue here that the ‘lively aesthetic conscience’ in Balzac’s 1833 novel, *Eugénie Grandet*, influenced Gaskell’s own material and tactile imagination.

There are some cultural and historical difficulties of reading a source novel originally written in a different language. As a fluent French speaker, Gaskell probably read *Eugénie Grandet* in its original form. My analysis, however, is based upon Marion Ayton Crawford’s 1955 translation of the novel, which Penguin Publishers reprinted in 2004. Whereas the *OED* defines ‘translation’ as ‘the process of translating words or text from one language into another’, the advent and development of the vast field of ‘translation studies’ has meant that the focus on the term’s linguistic specificities has expanded to include ‘a broader investigation of the relationship between the cultural contexts of both source and new texts’. Such texts are therefore part of a trans-

---

87 James quoted in Da Sousa Correa, p.96.
88 Walter Kendrick makes the point that Balzac’s *Eugénie Grandet* was only translated into English in 1859. Walter M. Kendrick, ‘Balzac and British Realism: Mid-Victorian Theories of the Novel’, *Victorian Studies*, vol. 20.1 (1976), 5-24 (p.7).
historical, trans-cultural and trans-linguistic interpretative continuum, where the highly subjective aspect of ‘interpretation’ must be taken into account. A sentence from *Eugénie Grandet* serves to illustrate this hurdle; simply expressed, the eponymous protagonist fetches her hat. In French it is written as ‘Eugénie alla mettre son chapeau de paille cousue, doublé de taffetas rose’.\(^90\) Crawford translates this as ‘Eugénie went to fetch her straw hat lined with rose-coloured silk’.\(^91\) However, a 1990 version by Sylvia Raphael gives the sentence as ‘Eugénie went to put on her stitched straw hat, lined with pink taffata’.\(^92\) Thus, the translations vary in the fine specific detail of the straw hat, which might be stitched, which is almost certainly lined with silk that may be taffeta, and is either rose-coloured or pink. Silk, as chapter five demonstrates, is merely an overarching classification to encapsulate a variety of fabrics and manufactured processes. The silk named ‘taffeta’, however, is ‘a thin glossy silk of a wavy lustre’, very visually appealing and sensuous to the touch, unlike the crimped nature of a silk crepe for instance.\(^93\) Moreover, as Cunnington suggests, the colour ‘rose de Parnasse’, a shade of ‘cyclamen pink’, was first used in 1830, might this demonstrate Balzac’s precise use of modern material culture?\(^94\) The example of ‘the straw hat’ and the


\(^{91}\) Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*, trans. by Marion Ayton Crawford (London: Penguin, 2004), p.100. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text following the abbreviation *EG*.


\(^{94}\) Cunnington, p.440.
‘taffetas rose’ silk lining reveals the meticulousness of Balzac’s writing comparable to ‘a preeminent painter of the Flemish school’.

Eugénie Grandet, is set in the small provincial town of Saumur, on the environs of Paris in the post-revolutionary period, 1819-1833. It relates the story of the miserly and avaricious Grandet, who subjects his wife and daughter, Eugénie, to a harsh regulatory regime of misery and penury. The arrival of her dashing and rather effete cousin Charles, resplendently attired, from fashionable Paris, awakens Eugenie’s own sexual desires placing her in open rebellion against her father’s patriarchal rule.

Eugénie Grandet forms part of a larger collection of ninety-four novels and shorter fictions, entitled La Comédie humaine. In his work, Balzac was heavily influenced by the contemporary zoological debate between Georges Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire on comparative anatomy: the same discussion Gaskell refers to in Wives and Daughters when Roger Hamley visits Paris and is in dialogue with the ‘French comparative anatomists’ (WD 315). In February 1855, during a visit to Mme. Mohl, Gaskell’s daughter Meta recounts how they are due to visit ‘the Geoffroi St, Hilaires’- where I am afraid we shall have to talk zoologically- & be kissed’. Adopting Saint-Hiliare’s physical term ‘milieu’ in ‘Avant-propos’ to La Comédie humaine in

95 Foreign Quarterly (1843) quoted in Kendrick, pp. 11-12. In a critique of Eugénie Grandet that highlights Balzac’s treatment of the eponymous protagonist’s ‘stature, features and dress’ Henry James’ plaudits are analogous to those he bestows upon Gaskell’s portrayal of Molly Gibson, ‘these things are all described only in so far as they bear upon the action, and not in the least for themselves’, James cited in Clair Hughes, Henry James and the Art of Dress (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp.10-11.
97 Letters, p.332.
1842, Balzac stated his ‘ambition to classify human types like species in the animal kingdom’[^98]. It was a desire to ‘provide a taxonomy of society […] elaborated in the world of science’ at a time when post-Revolutionary France was experiencing seismic social and economic upheavals.[^99]

Balzac espoused the view that the revolution had toppled a ‘fallen feudal system’ in exchange for a society based upon the ‘triple aristocracy of money, power and talent’.[^100] This sociological lens on the shifting strata of Parisian society therefore required a different mode of writing, which Harry Levin interprets as a shifted emphasis from ‘manners to morals [and] beyond public events to private lives’ that was predicated less upon the imagination than on a penetrating, omniscient observation of its subjects.[^101] It exults the politics of detail.

This shift in narrative focus may be discerned in Eugénie Grandet’s ‘straw hat lined with rose-coloured silk’. In its specificity of the hat’s features, Balzac’s prose represents a significant transference of emphasis. By actively elevating a material object, Helen Garrett asserts that Balzac ‘is the first [writer] to dress his characters realistically in the fashion of the day’; Balzac’s opus, *La Comédie humaine*, in its historical and cultural specificity actually ‘trace[s] the history of fashion for a period of

[^98]: Watts, p.3.
[^99]: Elisabeth Gerwin, ‘Balzac: A Portrait of the Novelist as Social Historian and Scientist’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Balzac*, pp.11-26 (p.15.)
over forty years.'\(^{102}\) Harry Levin describes this representation as Balzac’s ‘most devastating innovation’ because he ‘attach[es] as much importance to things as to men and women’.\(^{103}\) This is quite a startling assertion, nevertheless as Alison Finch asserts, French realist writings entailing the penetrating scrutiny of the newly emerging and evolving strata of French society represent a material turn ‘from the seventeenth-century novel and less clearly but still markedly from the eighteenth-century novel’.\(^{104}\) Various critics extend this point to the early nineteenth-century English novel. Thus, novelist Margaret Oliphant (1828-1897), commenting upon historical and contemporary dress in 1878, notes the absence of sartorial culture in early nineteenth-century writings, ‘[h]ow little Miss Austen’s heroines […] concern themselves about their dress! They will be neat, but nothing more’.\(^{105}\)

By contrast, Balzac’s novel, *Eugénie Grandet* is full of allusions to a material culture. Not only to costume and fabrics, but references of specific cultural significance,


\(^{103}\) Levin, p.193.


\(^{105}\) Margaret Oliphant, *Dress* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1878), pp.80-1. Hilary Davidson also comments upon the dearth of dress culture in Austen’s novels after *Northanger Abbey* (1803) and *The Watsons* (c.1805-5), Hilary Davidson, *Dress in the Age of Jane Austen: Regency Fashion* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 14. Costume historian Sarah Downing notes that Jane Austen’s protagonists, ‘are characterized by their dress but rarely do they speak of it; unless they are one of Austen’s sillier characters, they maintain the good taste and decorum of the times, which held that it was poor manners to impose conversation about such footling matters’. Sarah Jane Downing, *Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen* (Oxford:Shire Publications, 2010), p.5. Easson also notes ‘Jane Austen is not interested in the particularity of bread and butter or cake because she is not interested in the emotional life of the body, that interaction of the senses, and of the feelings’, Easson, ‘The Sentiment of Feeling’ (p.67).
pre-empting perhaps the celebrity endorsement prevalent in advanced consumer societies. Thus, there are allusions to Balzac’s own tailor ‘Buisson’ (*EG* 70) and the famous watchmaking house of ‘Breguet’ that made ‘the most charming little flat watch’ that Eugénie’s refined cousin Charles wears upon his arrival from Paris (*EG* 109). As watchmakers to the Royal court at Versailles in the eighteenth century, the watch is symbolic of the ostentatious riches of the deposed *ancien régime*, yet in the post-restoration period of 1830s France it is one of those highly coveted ‘articles de Paris’, a visible emblem of pecuniary status for the emergent, commercial, bourgeoisie class. As Levin rather colourfully observes:

> The religion of Louis-Philippe’s charter […] enshrines the money-changers in their temple, the Bourse, and sanctifies a thriving traffic in bodies and souls […] taste is ruled by pecuniary canons. Balzac’s shrewd insight affixes to everything its plainly marked price-tag.  

Thus, the avaricious nature of Eugénie’s father encapsulates this ruthless bourgeois commercial ethos. Grandet’s covetous hoarding of gold, and his speculation in newly issued government bonds, is reflected in the anagram of his name, ‘d’argent’. As a former cooper, he takes advantage of the disposal and dispersal of old aristocratic estates in Napoleon’s First Empire, and ruthlessly outmanoeuvres the business

---

106 In Balzac’s work *Gaudissart II* (1844), the writer lampoons a famous Parisian shawl shop, known as ‘Au Persan’ […] located at 76 Rue de Richelieu’, describing the shawl negotiation between the emporium’s salesman Gaudissart and the female purchaser as ‘the comedy of cashmeres’, Honoré de Balzac, *Gaudissart II*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1475/1475-h/1475-h.htm> [access 3/2/2021]

107 Levin, p.193.

108 Levin, p.192.
community of Saumur. He then pits his wits against the Parisian creditors of his deceased brother’s bankrupt estate.

Cousin’s Charles’s ‘charming’ timepiece meanwhile, whilst indicative of an wealthy and indolent youth, foreshadows the immense wealth he will acquire by slave trading in the East Indies. His ‘traffic in bodies and souls’, to use Levin’s apposite phrase, finances his return to the highly fashionable district of Faubourg Saint-Germaine, ‘at that time the cynosure and goal of high society’ (EG 230). One wonders if Charles’ elegant watch was perhaps an exemplar for Osborne Hamley’s ‘little whipper-snapper of a French watch’ in Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters; the sight of which so enrages his father, Squire Hamley (WD 263). It offers further confirmation of his son’s debts and effete appearance. By contrast the Squire’s ‘old steady, turnip-shaped watch’ resonates with an ancestral lineage (WD 263). Passed down from his father, it is emblematic of the reactionary Tory ‘squirearchy’ (WD 693) of the eighteenth century. The Hamley descent, however, goes back even further in time, existing ‘[e]ver since the Heptarchy’; the family name thus predates the Norman Conquest (WD 39).

The watch’s ‘turnip-shape’ perhaps alludes to the role of ‘Turnip Townsend’, the 2nd Viscount Townsend (1674-1738), who instigated crop rotation in the agricultural revolution. Squire Hamley’s farming methods thus seem outdated as he struggles to maintain his estate in the light of modern scientific practices. In Eugénie Grandet an ‘old turnip of a watch’ similarly appears, ‘a couple of fingers thick, and as clumsy as a Dutch ship’; it is the possession of the provincial magistrate M. Cruchot,
symbolic of his intractable provincial culture that is fiercely resistant to the winds of change from neighbouring Paris (EG 67).

However, contrary to the reader’s expectations, within Eugénie Grandet lavish descriptions of dress, fabrics and ‘Parisian frivolities’ are generally reserved for the male of the species (EG 70). Eugénie’s mother, Mme. Grandet, despite possessing a fortune in her own right never varies her dress, ‘She always wore a gown of greenish levantine silk, which she made last her for nearly a year, a wide white cotton neckerchief, a straw bonnet, and was seldom seen without a black silk apron’. (EG 58) Despite Saumur being close to the luxury silk manufacturing town of Tours, which supplied the royal court of Versailles and Paris with sumptuous silks, Mme Grandet wears ‘levantine silk’ derived from the eastern part of the Mediterranean. Cunnington notes that it was a relatively new silk produced from 1815 described as ‘a twilled sarcenet’ of silk textile - frequently used for outdoor pelisses and mantles’.¹⁰⁹ This suggests it was a heavier, hardwearing-corded silk suitable for practical daywear. The fact that it is ‘greenish’ suggests a rather indeterminate, but ‘cold’ colour, a metaphor for Mme Grandet’s identity, effectively effaced and subsumed by the yoke of servitude in Grandet’s harsh regime; he regulates the traditional female domestic sphere, even to the apportionment of daily rations of butter and sugar. ‘Greenish’, suggestive of sickness also pre-empts the illness that will result in her death. It is a manner of dress and government, which her daughter adopts even after she has inherited Grandet’s vast fortune. On the penultimate page, the narrative voice ponderously intones the other

¹⁰⁹ Cunnington, p.432.
legacy that her father left. Eugénie ‘keeps all the regulations which were in force in her
girlhood. She dresses as her mother did. The house at Saumur, cold, sunless, always
overshadowed by the ramparts and gloomy, is like her life’. (EG 247) Helen Garrett
asserts that Balzac’s description of ordinary dress items ‘correspond to the most
intimate depths of the human soul’.110

Certainly Eugénie’s dress, presumably replicating her mother’s cold ‘greenish
levantine silk’ externalizes the psychological burden of her childhood years and
thwarted love affair. Her unchanging dress can also serve as a metaphor for the old
provincial regime’s resistance to the commercial and social flux of newly emerging
post-revolutionary France. Despite Eugénie’s abhorrence of the appurtenances of
wealth, after the July revolution in 1830, the new aristocracy of Louis Philippe I’s reign,
is ‘based on money than noble birth’ from commercial and industrial capitalism; wealth
is conspicuously and theatrically exhibited.111 Balzac depicts this by sartorially lavish
descriptions of the ‘dandy’ or man of fashion from Paris. In Eugénie Grandet, such
spectacle is represented by the surprise arrival of Cousin Charles, arrayed in a dazzling
display of dress that features a ‘shooting costume’:

He had brought the most elaborate collection of waistcoats, grey, white, black,
beetle-green, shot with gold, spangled, mottled, speckled, double-breasted, with
roll collars and stand-up collars, collars turned back, and collars buttoned up to
the throat with gold buttons. He had a specimen of every variety of tie and
cravat in favour at the moment, [and] two coats designed by Buisson. (EG 70)

110 Garrett, p.50.
111 Garrett, p.35.
Writer, George Moore’s observation that, ‘[t]here is life in Balzac’s hats and neckties’, certainly seems applicable to the narrator’s roll call of adjectives describing the variety of waistcoats Charles owns, the language affirms the writer’s deployment of animalistic detail.\textsuperscript{112} The iridescent nature of ‘beetle-green’ seems to make the waistcoat shimmer with life and is in stark contrast to Mme Grandet’s ‘greenish’ gown.\textsuperscript{113} The detailed avian observations ‘mottled, speckled, double-breasted’ is akin to the luxuriant plumage of preening birds, redolent of the peacock of the species, the startling effects of cousin Charles’ arrival is described in naturalistic terms, ‘his descent upon this gathering, had produced the same effect as […] the introduction of a peacock into some commonplace village farmyard’ (EG 68). It seems an antecedent to Charles Darwin’s thesis of sexual selection expounded in his 1871 seminal book \textit{The Descent of Man}, particularly in regard to the evolvement of secondary sexual characteristics in male birds to attract suitable mates. One of these ‘characteristics’ was ‘ornaments of many kinds’.\textsuperscript{114} Darwin concentrated his discussion on the colour of male avian plumage particularly that which is ‘conspicuous’, but also that which relates to ‘decorative patterning or markings’, which can create ‘(sometimes kinetic) optical effects’.\textsuperscript{115} 

\textsuperscript{112} George Moore (1852-1933) cited in Levin, p.193.
\textsuperscript{113} Perhaps the ‘beetle-green’ waistcoat may actually be decorated with body parts from beetles. The luminescent wing cases of jewel beetles such as \textit{Buprestidae}, wood-boring insects ‘have been utilized in many cultures to embellish clothing and indicate high rank’, Edwina Ehrman, ‘Chapter 2, 1800-1900’ in \textit{Fashioned from Nature}, ed. by Edwina Ehrman (London, V&A Publishing, 2018), pp. 62-105 (p.82).
\textsuperscript{115} Munro, p.258.
Earlier in this section I commented upon the properties of silk and particularly its three-dimensional iridescent sheen. Such a highly visual display of certain silks seems to be akin to Darwin’s discussion of the hummingbirds’ plumage in *Descent* ‘that glinted with an iridescent sheen like ‘burnished metal’.\(^{116}\) In such a manner, Darwin’s theory of sexual selection in the human realm considers ‘interrelated adaptions’, such as dress and self-embellishment, which have evolved as courtship ornaments.\(^{117}\) Charles’ silkwastcoats are therefore a highly potent sexual display that induces Eugénie’s mesmeric enthrallment, leading to an almost immediate subversion of her father’s dictates.

The use of language by evolutionary theorists reveals the overlap between scientists and novelists for this period. As Gillian Beer affirms, ‘in the mid-nineteenth century scientists still shared a common language with other educated readers and writers of their time’; this was a ‘shared discourse not only of ideas but metaphors, myths and narrative patterns’ that could ‘move rapidly and freely to and fro between scientists and non-scientists’.\(^{118}\) This cross-fertilization of terms is evident in the detailed descriptions of Charles’s attire. Charles possesses ‘a specimen of every variety of tie and cravat in favour at the moment’, yet there is a suggestion that he is the

---

\(^{116}\) Munro, p.260. In *Sylvia’s Lovers*, ‘the soft, yet brilliant hues’ of shot silk are compared to the plumage of a dove: ‘The pigeon would sit in one particular place, sunning herself, and puffing out her feathered breast, with all the blue and rose-coloured lights gleaming in the morning rays, cooing softly to herself as she dressed her plumage. Philip fancied that he saw the same colours in a certain piece of shot silk – now in the shop’ (*SL* 335). To liken the visual effects of silk to a bird’s plumage seems a common analogy. Charlotte Brontë in the novel, *Shirley*, describes the ‘shifting brilliance’ of the heroine’s dyed silk dress, the ‘warp and woof being of tints deep and changing as the hue on a pheasant’s neck’, Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed.by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.209-10.

\(^{117}\) Munro, p.256.

‘specimen’, a fashion victim adapting to the vicissitudes of a newly evolving social environment in a perpetual state of flux (EG 70).

The reference to Balzac’s own tailor ‘Buisson’ reiterates the contemporary modernity. Moreover, the overt sexual posturing and display of Charles’ ‘most becoming’ shooting costume, is also suggestive of an effete and fluid sensuality, which is highly feminized, a display analogous to the birds he may shoot. Eugénie envies her cousin ‘his small hands, his complexion, and the freshness and delicacy of his features’ (EG 73). Certainly in this detailed description of the portrait of a dandy, there is a sense that Balzac, by somatic scrutiny, is engaging in a clinical categorization of a social identity, such as the ‘taxonomies being elaborated in the world of science’.\footnote{Gerwin, p.15. In a similar manner, the inhabitants of Saumur scrutinize M. Grandet: ‘His remarks, the clothing he wore, his gestures, the way he blinked his eyes were regarded as signs from an oracle, had been studied by the entire neighbourhood with the care a naturalist gives to the study of the workings of instinct in animals’ (EG 42).} Thus Balzac’s own analysis in his 1830 Treatise on Elegant Living is pertinent, ‘[c]lothes are the most tremendous modification social man has experienced; they influence all existence’.\footnote{Balzac, Treatise, pp. 38-9. Resonances of Sartor Resartus perhaps?} The term ‘modification’ comments upon the performative aspects of dress and links to earlier discussions on the authenticity of identity in the rapidly expanding cityscape. Again, the language resonates with Darwinian theories of adaption and development.

Rereading Wives and Daughters with Balzac’s maxims on dress and fashion in mind brings the novel into a very different focus. The dress and material tropes prevailing in Gaskell’s narrative have echoes of Balzacian undertones. While, this
thesis has dwelt predominantly on female gendered, material evidence, in the light of the ‘dandified’ appearance of Cousin Charles, might it not be a way of assessing the sartorial standards of Cynthia’s new husband, the wealthy lawyer, Mr Walter Henderson? In the closing scene of the novel, upon hearing of the newly married couple’s intention to visit them at Hollingford, Mrs. Gibson insists that both she and Molly should have new gowns. When Molly protests, ‘Cynthia will not notice what I wear’, Mrs. Gibson sharply retorts ‘No! but Walter will. He has such a quick eye for dress’ (WD 682). Mrs. Gibson, always sensitive to other people’s scrutiny, especially from social superiors, cannot be seen as failing in her duties to her stepdaughter’s appearance before her gimlet-eyed son-in-law. Whereas Cynthia has always dressed with careless aplomb, it seems that her husband may be more sartorially discerning: shades of the Parisian dandy perhaps. Possessor of a ‘good private fortune’, Mrs. Gibson speculates that he is only ‘playing at law’ (WD 515). Furthermore, ‘Mr Henderson is so handsome and well-bred, and gets all his gloves from Houbigant!’ (WD 517). Utilizing Balzac’s mode of interposing contemporary real-life details, the reader gains a sense of a character’s lived life, which only affirms Mrs. Gibson’s materialist assessment that he is a gentleman because he patronizes a certain establishment.

The French firm of Houbigant were ‘perfumers and glovers’, founded in 1773, suppliers of perfume to Versailles and other royal courts of Europe and located in the fashionable Faubourg Saint-Honoré in Paris (WD 722). ‘In 1838, the French house was
awarded the license of Perfumer to Her Majesty, Queen Victoria of England’. Again Gaskell uses a reference to élite French cultural life to add further depth to her aesthetic realism. ‘Houbigant’ is synonymous with the elegance and style of the fashionable nineteenth-century Parisian milieu, as the name ‘Dior’ may be in 2021.

The gloves can also be read as a secondary signifier of sexual display similar to Charles’ silk waistcoats in Balzac’s novel. They are man’s adornments analogous to Darwin’s ‘ornaments of many kinds’, a measure of virility and prowess, in addition to the pecuniary display. The Darwinian language of ‘variation’ and sexual attraction of the male species can be similarly discerned in the arresting zoological description of Mr Preston, Walter Henderson’s sexual rival for Cynthia, ‘for he is cruel in his very soul—tigerish, with his beautiful striped skin and relentless heart’ (WD 497). Resonant with undertones of William Blake’s poem ‘The Tyger’ (1794) the ‘conspicuous’ and ‘decorative patterning or markings’ of the aggressive estate manager reveal him as a dangerous and unscrupulous sexual predator. As the comparative anatomist Georges Cuvier, in expounding the ‘unitary laws of animal life’, could envisage a whole creature from a ‘frontal bone’, so the nature of Preston’s true character can be inferred from the beautiful and mesmeric stripes.

122 Richard Altick asserts glove wearing was a means of ‘distinguishing propriety from vulgarity. Disraeli might well have divided his two nations on the basis of who did and who did not wear gloves. The ultra-respectable and rich did, because their position in society excused them from physical toil’, Altick, p.795.
123 Balzac, Treatise, p.44-5.
Conclusion
This comprehensive discussion of Gaskell’s prose style reveals *Wives and Daughters* to be Gaskell’s most sophisticated text narratologically. Her use and nuanced references to a variety of fabrics tell Molly’s story from the opening description of her awaking in a ‘white dimity bed’ and espying her newly made bonnet, which is not ‘a flimsy fabric of gauze and lace’ to her stepmother’s closing line about how she intends to dream about her ‘new shawl’. The silk tropes imbricate in the novel’s cultural and historical specificity and the nature of memory, meaning and loss, signifiers of flux and vicissitudes in the struggles towards modernity.

This chapter gathers in the threads of the previous ones and suggests that rather than reading Gaskell’s interest in the material world as purely ‘descriptive’, it is instead through description that she reveals the palimpsestic relationship between surface and depth, and present and past. The heteroglossic ‘decentralized’ narrative voice enables the myriad voices of a provincial Warwickshire town to be interlaced with a French milieu. The intertextual allusions to a vibrant cosmopolitan milieu, such a feature of *Wives and Daughters*, articulate the complex evolving nature of Anglo-French relations and enable a more nuanced interpretation of Gaskell’s material realism. As Gaskell wrote a large proportion of the novel in the grand salon of the Rue de Bac, resting on Mme Mohl’s mantelpiece, simultaneously composing gossipy articles on French society, *Wives and Daughters* needs to be recast as solely an English provincial novel. It is surely inspired by the innovative sociological realism of Balzac, whose minute
detailing of à la mode material culture chronicles the emergence and struggles for sartorial expression by the expanding bourgeoisie.

As previously discussed, the definition of ‘provincial’ as an overarching categorization for Gaskell’s final novel is rather problematic. Instead, Wives and Daughters surely needs to be judged as a cosmopolitan tour de force as it embraces the innovative developments of French realism. As Juliette Atkinson has observed, French novels were not just ‘passively ‘received’’ in England, but represented a complex process of ‘exchanges and negotiations with French writers and critics’; Gaskell’s final narrative is surely testament to this, and also suggests that she is confidently placing her work as much in a European tradition of the novel as in a British one.

Conclusion

Material Twists and Surface Depths

‘Well, I suppose you are all in the depths of business—ladies' business, I mean. Very different to my business, which is the real true law business. Playing with shawls is very different work to drawing up settlements.’

From tentative strands the final tapestry is complete as I draw together the warp and weft threads of this thesis. Gaskell’s deft and creative weaving of her fictional worlds was so inherently intertwined with the textile hub of the north west of England and her own embodied interaction with fabrics and dress, that it is remarkable that the research area has been so little explored. Perhaps, the lingering and nagging doubts persist that—hush, say it softly—the study of textiles and fabrics inevitably leads to the thorny area of fashion, a frivolous topic, not worthy of pursuit in the rarefied cloisters of academia. Indeed, secretly these were my worries when venturing into the research arena.

In my first months at King’s, I encountered many other new PhD students from across the faculties, embarking upon such laudable research projects as ground-breaking cancer treatments, dementia prevention, and human rights violations, to name but a few. When announcing my project, I definitely felt an outsider, even an imposter. My greatest source of solace and defensive resort, however, was that the V&A had just opened their blockbuster exhibition Savage Beauty showcasing the extraordinary creative genius of designer Alexander McQueen (1969-2010). Running for 21 weeks in 2015, it became the museum’s most attended exhibition, attracting nearly half a million visitors. McQueen’s intricate swathing of bodies, transposing and challenging preconceptions and boundaries to an aesthetic sublime, that often evoked the indescribable, awakened a sense of the viewer’s own self-fashioning and vulnerability,__________________________________________

1NS, p.10
2V&A <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/exhibition-alexander-mcqueen-savage-beauty/video-savage-beauty-in-numbers/> [access 17/12/2020]
imbricated with the kaleidoscope of history. The exhibition links, I believe, to the Sun King, Louis XIV’s succinct aphorism concerning our sartorial skin, ‘Fashion is the mirror of history’ and more pertinently for the nineteenth-century context, contemporary historian Thomas Carlyle’s assertion, ‘Hence clothes, as despicable as we think them, are so unspeakably significant.’

So, allowing some creative slippage between the terms - fabrics, dress, clothes and fashion, this thesis has answered the question, why are fabrics so ‘unspeakably significant’ in Gaskell’s writings? ‘Unspeakably’ suggests ‘not able to be expressed in words’ (OED) or even ‘too bad or horrific to express in words’, which is an apposite analogy to how I initially and incorrectly perceived others to judge my research area. It also beckons us to the way in which fabrics and clothes in literary works have been ignored or under-scrutinized, assumed to be superficial fillers for ‘realism’, when in actual fact by metonymic burrowing and metaphorical interpretation, they reveal a richer and nuanced context.

Gaskell’s own domestic sewing tasks, making up flannel underskirts for her daughters, marking linen and refashioning gowns, underscores how female gendered labour in the domestic sphere has long been undervalued and not included in the hard statistics of economics – “mere ladies’ business”. All women’s labour within the domestic sphere that is not performed by paid employees has no economic value and does not contribute to calculations of the nation’s gross domestic product. Such pecuniary absence thereby both creates and reveals the gross inequality in gender relations. Joanna Rostek affirms this gender imbalance, and suggests that the study of

literature affords ‘invaluable source material’ for locating these facets historically; in particular, women’s writing provides a ‘more inclusive and gender-balanced definition of the [true] economy’. Economist Mukesh Eswaran argues that ‘economic outcomes differ for women and men’ and are directly linked to factors such as gender equality in a household, marriage, fertility and women’s ability to exercise autonomy. Thus across Gaskell’s writings, women’s agency and engagement with their material culture is an uncovering of this other economy refracted through a microcosmic lens.

‘I know nothing of Political Economy or the theories of trade’ Gaskell famously wrote in her preface to *Mary Barton*, as she defers to the male-dominated discourse of economics. Gaskell was being disingenuous, however, as her writings deliberately propose an alternative economics. The Cranford ladies’ ‘elegant economies’ and endless recycling; the lace ruffles and treasured scraps of old lace in ‘My Lady Ludlow’ and *Cranford*; the refashioning of dress in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*; as well as Edith’s portable valuables in the lavish trousseau of Indian shawls- all substantiate the epistemology of an invisible female gendered economy, intangible and unrecognized in the hard facts and statistics of political economy. Gaskell’s writings, I argue, create a proto-feminist political agenda, although the theory took over a century to acquire recognition and legitimacy.

Whilst the term ‘feminist’ was first used in the 1890s, a feminist philosophy of economics only emerged from the late 1960s, and it was only recognized as an

---

important subfield of the discipline in the 1990s. In the development of economics as a discipline Diane Strassmann and Livia Polanyi assert:

Direct voices have seldom been female voices, seldom been voices on the margin, seldom been voices not legitimated by the mainstream of power and control […] until women speak their own thoughts and experiences in their own voices and legitimize their speech by the authority of their own histories and experiences, we will not have a truly feminist economics.7

To reiterate my last phrase, a ‘feminist economic ideology’ lays bare the androcentric bias that underlies the nineteenth century’s ‘political economy’, notwithstanding many contemporary practices. The invisible labour that Gaskell unearths, the exploited and penurious seamstresses, mill girls dying from ingesting cotton fluff, are marginalised voices that are pertinent today in the twenty-first century.

Whereas this thesis has repeatedly used the term the democratization of fashion to explain the nature of mechanised production enabling the disseminating of previously élite fabrics to new consumers, arguably this is the precursor to the current term ‘fast fashion’ meaning ‘trend-driven, low-cost clothing’; Lucy Stiegle argues that the ‘drive to fast fashion began from the moment James Hargreaves […] built the first spinning jenny to spin cotton faster’.8 A century later, the trend towards ready-to-wear clothes was unstoppable. The genie was out of its bottle. By 2019, the Manchester-based online retailer ‘Missguided’ produced a £1 bikini and ‘Boohoo’ sold a £4 bandeau dress. At what human and environmental cost though? Gaskell cites the unparliamentary smoke, the dye filled rivers and the mill workers’ squalid tenements of Miles Platting

---

8 Lucy Stiegle, ‘The UK is at the forefront of fast fashion- and has been ever since 1764’ in The Guardian, 22/6/2019, p.21.
and Ancoats. Now ‘fast fashion’ is predicated on a mainly female-gendered, low-waged workforce in cities such as Manchester, or sourced from developing countries.

It is sobering to discover that Gaskell’s exposure of women’s textile working practices still resonates today. On 24 April 2013, the ‘Rana Plaza complex in Dhaka, Bangladesh collapsed killing 1,134 people, mostly young female garment workers making clothing for western brands.’

Several years later, the situation has changed little. ‘Fast fashion’ has morphed into throwaway fashion as ‘every year UK households send 350,000 tonnes of textiles to be incinerated or to landfill’.

A study by Professor Hammer of the fashion industry in Leicester found ‘appalling working conditions’ still prevalent and ‘average earnings of £3 an hour’.

This is not to suggest that the democratization of fashion and the development of mass production has been wholly negative. One major finding of this thesis has been how the textile revolution produced new possibilities for the self-fashioning of identity. Modernity and technological production swept away the feudal legacy of sumptuary costume. Factory production enabled cheaper imitations of luxury fabrics, previously the sartorial reserve of the wealthy and privileged ranks. Colourful, Indian-inspired shawls, fine muslin, vibrant prints and ornate lace became more widely accessible to women’s wardrobes and windows alike. Jules Michelet (1798-1874) gives an insight, commenting on the vibrancy of the new printed cottons, and their ability to enrich ordinary women’s lives:

Every woman used to wear a blue or black dress that she kept for ten years without washing, for fear it might tear to pieces

---

9 Siegle, p.21.
Gaskell thus expresses women’s self-fashioning and interiority via dress in a very topical and nuanced way, particularly as the rules and etiquette of the simplest items of attire were constantly evolving in the new metropolitan centres and industrial conurbations. Women’s dual literacy, as identified by Christine Bayles Kortsch, informed by the expanding corpus of periodicals, articulates the questionability of legitimate identity in newly anonymised communities. The concern of authenticity and social distinction encapsulated the deep-rooted fears of moral transgressions and class usurpation. Quelle horreurs! Nouveau riche women, with no ancestral lineage, may cannily acquire distinguished forebears by the mere possession of old point lace.

Gaskell’s gimlet-eyed, middle-class female readers, consumers of the periodical press would have read the runes. That presumptuous weaver’s daughter Mary Barton, aspires beyond her status, wearing merino for a tea party and Hoyle’s purple for everyday wear. She would surely be getting her comeuppance and be forced to renounce the frivolities of dress before her bildungsroman was complete.

Gaskell’s writings articulate silent codes. It is a secret, nuanced language to insiders—a shibboleth that this thesis unlocks for the current reader. Consider, the flibbertigibbet Cynthia in Wives and Daughters, emotionally scarred by a self-absorbed, narcissistic mother. As a contrast to neat Molly, Cynthia’s gowns are creased and tumbled, a sign of maternal neglect perhaps but also suggestive of the ‘unsayable’- sexual precociousness. Contemporaneous, knowing readers would have decoded the ‘unspeakable’ of Cynthia’s past.

This thesis is innovative in exploring Gaskell’s tactile imagination that manifests itself in her embodied relationship with fabrics and sewing, a function of her daily life from an early age, similar to other women within her social group. I have investigated...
the sensory aspects of cloth and its ability to stir affective responses, emotions and memories. It now seems axiomatic and befitting that the wrinkles in worn clothes are called memories, when even the absence of previous textile treasures and worn fabrics can cause poignancy and recreate layers of recollection. Lady Ludlow touching locks from deceased relatives, and Esther clutching a locket of her baby’s hair, are a reminder of the fluidity of boundaries between subjects and objects, particularly notable in the mid nineteenth century.

Contemporaries feared that dramatic socio-economic change was causing a dislocation from the diachronic evolution of history, in the rush and fever of modernity. Women are keepers of a cultural collective in their fabric skills, and curators of cloth as a store of value, but also an ancestral lineage. The tactility of cloth links to memory, when male-gendered professional knowledge was focussing on the prioritisation of the ocular sense. When the sensory aspects of the fabrics are restored, present-day readers are able to fully decode Gaskell’s writings. The purgatorial experience of gendered restrictive mourning practices is deepened by the knowledge that wealthier widows were draped in stiff, gummed crepe, which emitted a malodorous aroma when damp. A visual commodification of grief inscribed upon women’s very bodies adding to the mourning burden. Furthermore, the lingering mysterious fragrance from muslin, the tactile soft folds of Kashmir in contrast to the itchy qualities of stuff, returns the pulsating, dynamic context of ordinary women’s dressed lives.

This mode of analysis from material raiment could also be usefully applied to other mid nineteenth-century texts, notably George Eliot’s 1859 novel *Adam Bede*. Set in the closing years of the eighteenth century, the coquettish but naive Hetty Sorrel wears a red cloak, similar to Sylvia Robson in *Sylvia’s Lovers*. Hetty’s working trim is a ‘plum-coloured stuff bodice’ and a neckerchief, but she aspires to the luxury of
‘Nottingham lace’. Intriguingly, the narrator’s speculations about Hetty’s fantasy marriage, adorned in ‘white lace and orange blossoms’ is a sartorial anachronism for the novel’s context, because, as chapter four revealed, Queen Victoria established the style. Hetty’s filigree dream edifice, therefore, poignantly highlights the extent of her delusions and ingenuousness and foreshadows the inevitability of her desperate flight.

The swathing of the body, therefore, is the surface material evidence for the forensic literary scholar to delve deeply and discover an alternative mode of analysis and interpretation. How ironic that what appears to be sartorial surface adornment and ‘women’s business’ in Gaskell’s writings – the flourishes of ribbons, chintz prints and lace scraps - are actually nothing of the sort. By challenging and scrutinizing this rich cultural archive we now appreciate and understand the depth and astuteness of Gaskell’s legacy- not of the ‘mind and millinery’ sort, but as a social anthropologist, adeptly recording the minutiae of the evolving provincial fabric of society.

Bibliography

Anon., ‘The Englishwoman’s Conversazione’, *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* (14 February 1873)


---, 'A Ladies Warehouse', *Household Words*, Vol. XII, (27 October 1855), 301-305

---, *Plain Needlework in all its Branches, The Finchley Manuals of Industry*, No. IV. (London: Joseph Masters, 1852)

---, 'The Work-Table', *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, (Vol. 7 1859)

Abbs, Carolyn, 'Writing the Subject: Virginia Woolf and Clothes', *COLLOQUY*: Text, Theory, Critique, 11 (2006), 209-225


Agnew, Vanessa, 'History’s Affective Turn: Historical Re-enactment and its Work in the Present', *Rethinking History*, 11.3 (2007), 299-312


Ashelford, Jane, 'Colonial Livery' and the Chemise à La Reine, 1779-1784', *Costume*, 52.2 (2018), 217-239


Billington, Josie, Faithful Realism (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2001,)


---'Gaskell's "Rooted" Prose Realism', in Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell, ed. by Lesa Scholl, Emily Morris and Sarina Gruver Moore (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 159-174


Bonaparte, Felicia, The Gypsy-Bachelor of Manchester (Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1992)


Brogden, Anne, 'Clothing Provision by the Liverpool Workhouse', Costume, 36.1 (2002), 50-55

Brontë, Charlotte, Jane Eyre, ed.by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

---, The Professor, ed.by Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

---, Shirley, ed.by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Brown, Bill, 'Thing Theory', Critical Inquiry, 28 (2001), 1-22

Buck, Anne, M., 'Clothes in Fact and Fiction 1825-65', The Costume Society, 17 (1983), 89-104


Carlyle, Thomas, Sartor Resartus, ed.by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)


Chapple, John, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Early Years (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997)

---, Elizabeth Gaskell: A Portrait in Letters (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980)

---, and Arthur Pollard, eds., The Letters of Mrs Gaskell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997)


Chaudhuri, Nupur, 'Shawls, Jewelry, Curry and Rice in Victorian Britain ', in Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance, ed. by Chaudhuri, Nupur; Strobel, Margaret (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 231-246


Choudhury, Suchitra, 'It was Imitashon to be Sure', Textile History, 46 (2) (2015), 189-212


Clark, Hazel, 'The Design and Designing of Lancashire Printed Calicoes during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century ', Textile History, 15.1 (1984), 101-118


Classen, Constance, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2012)

---, 'Feminine Tactics: Crafting an Alternative Aesthetics in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries’ in *The Book of Touch*, ed. by Constance Classen (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 228-239


---, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)


Corfield, Penelope, 'From Rank to Class: Innovation in Georgian England', *History Today*, 37.2 (1987), 36-42


---, *The Perfect Lady* (London: Max Parrish, 1948)


Curl, James, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1972)


D'Albertis, Deirdre, *Dissembling Fictions: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997)

---, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Social Text', in *Icon Critical Guides. Mary Barton, North and South*, ed. by Alison Chapman (Duxford: Icon, 1999)


Daly, Suzanne, 'Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30 (2002), 237-255

---', Spinning Cotton: Domestic and Industrial Novels', *Victorian Studies*, 50 (2008), 272-278


David, Deirdre, 'Imperial Chintz: Domesticity and Empire', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 27 (1999), 569-577


---, 'Reconstructing Jane Austen’s Silk Pelisse, 1812–1814', *Costume*, 49 (2015), 198-223

Davies, Gwen, 'Stockings Prepared for Laying Out and Burial Held by Museums in the United Kingdom', *Textile History*, 23 (1992), 103-112


Debrabant, Mary, 'Birds, Bees and Darwinian Survival Strategies in Wives and Daughters', Gaskell Society Journal, 16 (2002), 14-29

DeCredico, Mary, Confederate Impressment during the Civil War, <https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/Confederate_Impressment_During_the_Civil_War#start_entry> edn, 2017 vols (The Encyclopaedia of Virginia) [access 22/8/2017]

Dejardin, Katherine and Mary Schoeser, French Textiles from 1760 to the Present (London: Laurence King, 1991)

Dickens, Charles, David Copperfield, ed. by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)


Oliver Twist (London: Penguin, 2007)

Sketches by Boz, ed.by Dennis Walder (London: Penguin Classics, 1995)

Dickinson, Helen and Lola Young, ‘Coronavirus offers an Opportunity to remake Fashion Industry’ July 14 2020, The Times.


Disraeli, Benjamin, Coningsby [1863], (Routledge, Warne and Routledge, 1863)

Dodd, George, 'Wallotty Trot', in Household Words, ed. by Charles Dickens, VI vols (5/2/1853), pp. 499-503


Dolin, Tim, "Cranford" and the Victorian Collection', Victorian Studies, 36 (1993), 179-206

Doody, Margaret, Anne, Francis Burney: The Life in the Works (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988)


---, 'The Sentiment of Feeling: Emotions and Objects in Elizabeth Gaskell', *The Gaskell Society Journal*, 4 (1990), 64-78


---, *Silly Novels by Lady Novelists, the Essays of George Eliot*, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28289/28289-h/28289-h.htm#page178 edn, (Gutenberg) [access 25/02/2019]


---, 'Interiors', in *George Eliot in Context*, ed. by Margaret Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 160-167


---, "Fine Fingers": Victorian Handmade Lace and Utopian Consumption', *Victorian Studies*, 45.4 (2003), 625-647

---, 'Fringe', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30 (2002), 257-263


Garrett, Helen, T., 'Clothes and Character: The Function of Dress in Balzac' (unpublished PhD, University of Pennsylvania, 1941)


---, *North and South*, ed.by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

---, Sylvia's Lovers, ed.by Andrew Sanders (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

---, Wives and Daughters, ed.by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Gaskell, William, ‘Cottonopolis’ (India: Pranava Books, [2019?])


Goggin, Maureen Daly and Beth Fowkes Tobin, ed., Women and Things: Gendered Material Strategies (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009)


Gunn, Simon, ‘Translating Bourdieu: Cultural Capital and the English Middle Class in Historical Perspective’, The British Journal of Sociology, 56 (2005), 49-64


Hampson, Mary, ed., Macclesfield Silk Heritage, ed. by Members of the Silk Heritage Project (Macclesfield: Macclesfield Borough Council, 1980)


Harris, Beth, ed., *Famine and Fashion: Needlewomen in the Nineteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005)

Harris, Margaret, ed., *George Eliot in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013)


Hedges, Elaine, 'Essay', in *Hearts and Hands*, ed. by Pat Ferrero, Elaine Hedges and Julie Silber (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1987)


Hemingway, Jean, 'Millinery and Old Lace: Miss Jane Clarke of Regent Street ', *Textile History*, November 43 (2) (2012), 200-222

Henson, Louise, 'History, Science and Social Change: Elizabeth Gaskell’s “evolutionary” Narratives', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 17 (2003), 12-33


---, 'Lust for "Luxe": "Cashmere Fever" in Nineteenth-Century France', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 5 (2005), 76-98


---, *Dressed in Fiction* (Oxford: Berg, 2006)

---, *Henry James and the Art of Dress* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001)

---', Talk about Muslin: Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, *Textile*, 4;2 (2006), 184-197

Hunt, Kerri E., "Nouns that were Signs of Things": Object Lessons in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, *The Gaskell Journal*, (2012), 3-17


Inder, Pam., *Honiton Lace* (Exeter: Exeter Museums, 1985)

---, *The Rag Trade: The People Who made our Clothes* (Stroud: Amberley, 2017)


Jefferies, Janis, Diana Wood Conroy and Hazel Clark (eds), *The Handbook of Textile Culture* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)


Johnson, Pamela, 'Acts of Memory', in *Textures of Memory: The Poetics of Cloth* (Nottingham: Angel Row Gallery, 1999), 4-8


Johnston, Lucy, 'Clothing in Context - Nineteenth-Century Dress and Textiles in the Thomas Hardy Archive', *Costume*, 52.2 (2018), 261-284


Kanwit, John P., '"Mere Outward Appearances"? Household Taste and Social Perception in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Review*, 35 (2009), 190-210


Kendrick, Walter, M., 'Balzac and British Realism: Mid-Victorian Theories of the Novel', *Victorian Studies*, 20.1 (1976), 5-24

King, Brenda M., *Silk and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005)


Knezevic, Borislav, 'An Ethnography of the Provincial: The Social Geography of Gentility in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*', *Victorian Studies*, 41.3 (1998), 405-426


Kortsch, Christine B., *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009)


Kriegel, Laura, 'Narrating the Sub-Continent in 1851: India at the Crystal Palace', in *The Great Exhibition of 1851*, ed. by Louise Purbrick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 146-178


Ledbetter, Kathryn, *Victorian Needlework* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012)


Logan, Thad, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)


Lundie, Alison, 'Elizabeth Gaskell and Shawls: Creative Artistry and Identity', *The Gaskell Society Newsletter*, 56 (2013), 6-12


---, 'The Dead Still among Us: Victorian Secular Relics, Hair Jewelry, and Death Culture', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39 (2011), 127-142


[Martineau, Harriet], 'Shawls' in *Household Words*, vol. v, (28/ 8/1852), 552-556


McDonagh, Josephine, 'Rethinking Provincialism in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Fiction: *Our Village and Villette*, *Victorian Studies*, 55 (2013), 399-424


Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012)


Munro, Jane, "More Like a Work of Art than of Nature’: Darwin, Beauty and Sexual Selection', in *Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science and the Visual Arts*, ed. by Diane Donald and Jane Monro (Yale University Press, 2009), 252-291


Okumura, Sayaka, 'Women Knitting: Domestic Activity, Writing, and Distance in Virginia Woolf's Fiction', *English Studies*, 89 (2008), 166-181

Oliphant, Margaret, *Dress* (London: Macmillan and Co, 1878)

---, *Phoebe Junior* [1877], (London: Virago Press, 2004)

Palliser, Bury, Mrs., *History of Lace* (Sampson Low, Son & Marston, 1865)


---, *Serial Forms: The Unfinished Project of Modernity 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)


Puri, Tara, 'Fabricating Intimacy: Reading the Dressing Room in Victorian Literature', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 41 (2013), 503-525

---, 'Indian Objects, English Body: Utopian Yearnings in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 22 (2017), 1-23


Recchio, Thomas, *Elizabeth Gaskell’s Cranford: A Publishing History* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009)


Rogers, Helen, "The Good are Not always Powerful, nor the Powerful always Good': The Politics of Women's Needlework in Mid-Victorian London', *Victorian Studies*, 40.4 (1997), 589-623


---, 'Silk: The Industrial Revolution and After', in *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, ed. by David Jenkins, vol 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 790-808

Ruskin, John, ‘Lamp of Memory’ in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (Gutenberg Project), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35898/35898-h/35898-h.htm> [access 10/1/2016].


Schaffer, Talia, 'Craft, Authorial Anxiety, and "the Cranford Papers"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 (2005), 221-239


Seys, Madeleine C., "Muslins, Confidences and Illicit Conversations": Fashioning Transgressive Femininities in George Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (1886), in *Fashion and Material Culture in Victorian Fiction and Periodicals*, ed. by Janine Hatter and Nickianne Moody (Brighton: Edward Everett Root, 2019), 191-204


Shaikh, Fariha, 'Temporary Out of Sync: Migration as Fiction and Philanthropy in Gaskell’s Life and Work' in *Place and Progress in the Works of Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Lesa Scholl, Emily Morris and Sarina Gruver Moore (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 83-93


---, ‘Sylvia’s Lovers’, Lecture to Gaskell Society, London (7 May 2016)

Shelston, Alan, 'Where Next in Gaskell Studies', in *Elizabeth Gaskell, Victorian Culture and the Art of Fiction: Essays for the Bicentenary*, ed. by Sandro Jung (Gent: Academia Press, 2010), 1-12


Staniland, Kay and Santina M. Levey, 'Queen Victoria's Wedding Dress and Lace', *Costume*, 17 (1983), 1-32

Steedman, Carolyn, *Dust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001)


---, *Elizabeth Gaskell*, 2nd edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006)


---, ‘The Rise and Fall of the Spinning Jenny: Domestic Mechanisation in Eighteenth-Century Cotton Spinning’, *Textile History*, 51.2 (2021), 1-42


---, *Mourning Dress* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009)


Taylor, George, 'Bradford and the Worsted Manufacture', *Cowen Tracts*, (1898)


Tombs, Robert and Isabella Tombs, That Sweet Enemy (London: Pimlico, 2007)


Trevelyan, G. M., English Social History (London: Longman, 1946)


Trollope, Fanny, Paris and the Parisians (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1985)


Victoria, Queen, Queen Victoria's Journals, <http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/search/displayItemFromId.do?FormatType=full&textingsrc&QueryType=articles&ResultsID=&ItemNumber=1&ItemID=qvj08144&volumeType=r #transcript > vol.39, p.218 [access 16/4/18]

---, Queen Victoria's Journals, <http://www.queenvictoriasjournals.org/search/displayItemFromId.do?FormatType=full&textingsrc&QueryType=articles&ItemID=qvj08146&volumType=PSBEA#transcript, Vol. 39, 19 April 1855 > vol.39, p.229 [access 16/4/18]


Wagner, Tamara S., 'Respectably Dressed, Or Dressed for Respect: Moral Economies in the Novels of Victorian Women Writers', in Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature,
ed. by Cynthia Kuhn and Cynthia Carlson (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), pp. 209-229


Wardle, Patricia, *Victorian Lace* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1968)


Waters, Catherine, *Commodity Culture in Dickens’ Household Words* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008)


Wiltshire, Irene, 'William Gaskell’s Poetry and Poetry Lectures', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 101 (2005), 71-84


---, 'Charlotte Brontë’s Frocks and Shirley’s Queer Textiles', in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians*, ed. by Jonathon Sears and Jen Harrison (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 147-162


---, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010)


Yarrow, Philip, 'Mrs Gaskell and France', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 7 (1993), 16-36


Zutshi, Chitralekha, "'Designed for Eternity": Kashmiri Shawls, Empire, and Cultures of Production and Consumption in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Journal of British Studies*, 48 (2009), 420-440