

‘Her Graceful Drapery, the Soiled Hem’: Victorian Women’s Fashion and Contemporary Anxieties

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In the Victorian era, the clothes worn by white, middle-class women were significant to many social concerns and questions about gendered expectations of women and their changing societal roles in this period. Fashion went beyond personal choice and taste to represent the inner character and morality of the wearer, and by extension, the society in which they lived.¹ External trends and historical contexts shaped the development of fashion, and in turn, Victorians intended to shape their society through fashion. Public responses to changing women’s fashion in Victorian Great Britain, specifically the cage crinoline, the dress reform movements, and the influence of non-Western dress, demonstrate how women’s fashion acted as sites for articulating contemporary anxieties surrounding gender, race, class, and nationality.

The Victorian era intensified strict expectations for women’s social behaviour, described by historians using the ideology of ‘separate spheres.’ In this framework, men were meant to be breadwinners and protectors of their families, working outside of the home in the public sphere, from factories to government, while women remained at home and managed the domestic world in the private sphere.² Gender studies historian Barbara Welter expanded on the Victorian conception of the ideal woman in her seminal article “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” where she outlined the four most important characteristics for a woman to possess as “piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.”³ According to Welter, the ‘true woman’ was not only necessary for the happiness of her home and family, but for stability and order in society.⁴

The historical literature has questioned the universality of separate spheres and ‘the cult of true womanhood.’ Many gender studies historians argue that those frameworks only applied to the white middle- and upper-class people who could afford to have one working adult in the family while simultaneously embodying ‘ideal’ feminine racial qualities.⁵ Indeed, separate spheres was a consciously middle-class ideology to draw new boundaries between the working class, the aristocracy, and the emerging

¹ Ariel Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories* (Berg, 2012), 1.

² Amanda Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *The Historical Journal* 36, no. 2 (1993), 384.

³ Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966), 152.

⁴ Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood,” 152.

⁵ See Donna J. Guy, “True Womanhood in Latin America,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 1 (2002), 170–173; Nancy A. Hewitt, “Taking the True Woman Hostage,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 1 (2002), 156–162; Mary Louise Roberts, “True Womanhood Revisited,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 1 (2002), 150–155.

middle class.⁶ Middle-class proponents of separate spheres and the domestic home sought to create a refuge of stability and security away from the political and social upheavals of the early nineteenth century, where women could supposedly find great personal fulfilment as the moral guardians of their families.⁷ Yet many middle-class women and families did not adhere to those ideals in practice, as argued persuasively by Amanda Vickery's writing on separate spheres as a prescriptive, not descriptive, category.⁸

Though not universal, the ideology of separate spheres and the cult of true womanhood was nonetheless still relevant in Victorians' lives. The beliefs and assumptions of the men and women engaged in discussion of fashion and the debates that emerged alongside each new trend were infused with the rhetoric of separate spheres. When middle-class women consciously pulled away from that ideology, such as with the dress reformers calling for a greater practicality in women's dress rather than treating women solely as domestic ornaments, the ideology of separate spheres continued to inform public reactions against it. Not all middle-class women lived up to the ideals of separate spheres, but the individuals aspiring to or rejecting this ideal existed within its larger framework.

Victorian Fashion and the Separate Spheres

As such, women's fashion also existed within the framework of separate spheres and the cult of true womanhood. Fashion was a highly visible symbol of gender, class, and race; signifying, at a glance, whether a woman lived up to the ideals of femininity, middle-class respectability, and whiteness, or fell short.⁹ Gender, class, and race are socially constructed identities that must be created and recreated over time, shifting in response to new social pressures. For the Victorian middle-class woman, those pressures included a distinctly middle-class identity founded on gendered perceptions of morality, frugality and consumerism.

In the early Victorian era, economic trends emphasized the importance of frugality and thrift in middle-class life, especially for women who rarely had money of their own and instead spent their husbands'.¹⁰ As the economy stabilized and middle-class incomes grew between 1850 and 1870, the emphasis for women's consumption shifted from saving to spending, acquiring the clothing and accessories that signalled their class, access to luxury goods, and their husband's financial support of the family.¹¹ Factors such as rising literacy rates and the reduction of

⁶ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 4.

⁷ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850*, excerpted in *The Victorian Studies Reader*, ed. Kelly Boyd and Rohan McWilliam (Routledge, 2007), 309–311.

⁸ Vickery, "Golden Age to Separate Spheres?" 385–386.

⁹ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 7–8.

¹⁰ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 6.

¹¹ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 6.

newspaper prices, resulting from legislation enacted between the 1850s and 1880s, also led to other media sources such as magazines, periodicals, and fashion publishing, allowing more women to educate themselves on fashionable trends and incorporate them in their own lives.¹²

Britain's consumer culture relied on and recreated visual codes of status, allowing middle-class women to maintain their status through dress. However, this inadvertently intensified anxieties about lower classes fraudulently gaining access to the same status through luxury goods.¹³ Consumerism became more strongly associated with women, especially after the advent of the department store in the 1860s and 1870s that targeted the female demographic, though the public consciousness continued to hold significantly contradictory images of a woman as the guardian of her family's class and respectability through her consumption, and a woman as a threat to her family through her spending.¹⁴ The legal system sought to protect these husbands against their wives' potential power over their finances and thus their weakening of the middle-class family through women's frivolity.¹⁵ For example, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, some men who were brought to court to pay their wives' debts to dressmakers successfully argued they could not be held liable for those debts, despite their wives having no money of their own with which to pay. Women's consumption could place them in an important role within their families or put them at risk of judgement and derision.

As such, fashion reflected not only a woman's class, but her domesticity, and by extension, her morality. Sarah Stickney Ellis, a Victorian writer best known for her etiquette and conduct manuals, such as *Dress and Manners*, wrote that when a person sees a woman dressed in dirty or fraying clothes, "imagination naturally carries the observer to her dressing-room, her private habits, and even to her inner mind, where it is almost impossible to believe that the same want of order and purity does not prevail."¹⁶ For Ellis, dress and morality intertwined; a woman dressed poorly was surely unable to manage her household in a clean and orderly way. By neglecting her appearance, she was assumed to neglect her duties as a proper wife and mother.

Another writer of etiquette manuals, Isabella Beeton, in her very popular *The Book of Household Management*, quoted the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* as saying that no matter how ridiculous a fashion trend

¹² Rebecca N. Mitchell, "Introduction," in *Fashioning the Victorians: A Critical Sourcebook*, ed. Rebecca N. Mitchell (Bloomsbury, 2018), 15.

¹³ Jessica P. Clark, *The Business of Beauty: Gender and the Body in Modern London* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), 6–7.

¹⁴ Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester University Press, 2015), 164–166; Clark, *The Business of Beauty*, 18.

¹⁵ Erika Rappaport, "'A Husband and His Wife's Dresses': Consumer Credit and the Debtor Family in England, 1864–1914," in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective*, ed. Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough (University of California Press, 1996), 164.

¹⁶ Sarah Stickney Ellis, "Dress and Manners," in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 39.

may objectively be, “it will never *look* [emphasis in original] as ridiculous as another, or as any other, which [...] is totally opposite in style to that generally worn.”¹⁷ Beeton acknowledged the importance of following fashion trends for women; even if they were supposed to be frugal, as she advised, they were also expected to keep up with fashion so as to avoid ridicule and social censure. In the Victorian era, when fashionable silhouettes changed frequently from year to year and decade to decade, the failure to follow those trends was highly visible to one’s community.

These writings are, of course, prescriptive rather than descriptive, detailing what women ought to do rather than what they did. As with the ideology of separate spheres, it is doubtful that all middle-class Victorians followed those fashion rules so closely. Yet the popularity of etiquette manuals in the Victorian era speaks to both the lack of that complete adherence and to people’s aspirations of living up to those ideals. If all women were naturally feminine homemakers, they would not need advice on how to meet those standards; if no women were interested in ‘true womanhood,’ there would be no market for etiquette manuals, either. Fashion carried important and varying meanings for women’s character and status, aiding or obstructing social mobility, which became more significant with the advent of the cage crinoline.

Cage Crinoline

Prior to 1856, when the cage crinoline was first patented, women achieved the fashionable silhouette of wide, voluminous skirts, its popularity in response to the more subdued aesthetics of the 1840s,¹⁸ with layers of petticoats, some with fabric stiffened by horsehair.¹⁹ With the cage crinoline, a petticoat made of a steel and tape wire frame, women could wear fashionably wide skirts while maintaining their mobility and comfort.²⁰ New industrial processes meant the production of cage crinolines was efficient and cheap, allowing working-class women to access the fashion alongside middle- and upper-class women.²¹ While the cage crinoline made following fashion trends more accessible and convenient for women, it also brought them under increasing scrutiny from the Victorian public at large.

One of the concerns related to cage crinolines was their bulk, as it was difficult to manoeuvre around a woman in a crinoline on a crowded street or inside a small room.²² The wide circumference of crinolines was a popular target of mockery. In 1856, a cartoon in the satire magazine *Punch* depicted a man wearing a crinoline beneath his overcoat, with a

¹⁷ Isabella Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*, (S.O. Beeton, 1859), www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10136/pg10136-images.html.

¹⁸ Breward, *The Culture of Fashion*, 156–157.

¹⁹ Rebecca N. Mitchell, “Crinolines and Corsets,” in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 93.

²⁰ Mitchell, “Crinolines and Corsets,” 94.

²¹ Breward, *The Culture of Fashion*, 157–160.

²² Mitchell, “Crinolines and Corsets,” 93.

criminal unable to attack him because of the crinoline's bulk; the caption explains the man adopted his wife's fashion to protect himself while walking home at night.²³ This cartoon plays on common frustrations with women in crinolines and the physical space they took up in public.

Safety was also an issue, as the presence of open flame in many Victorian homes could lead to women's dresses accidentally brushing against a fireplace or hearth and catching on fire.²⁴ Anxieties emerged around deaths from crinoline fires could be inflated in historical literature, as there have been no comparative studies made of women's deaths by fire before and after the advent of the cage crinoline. Regardless, women were reportedly killed when their crinolines caught fire, such as Margaret Davey and Emma Musson.²⁵ Many contemporary responses to the crinoline demonstrate the prevalence of social anxieties that went beyond fashion to morality, class, and respectable English womanhood.

Women in crinolines were often derided as frivolous and vain, more worried about their appearance and fashionable status than for the comfort of those around them. In 1863, the writer and dress reformer Emily Faithfull wrote an article on the crinoline; among her critiques was that men, hoping to avoid women in crinolines, would be forced out of their homes, their churches, and the companionship of wives, mothers, and sisters.²⁶ While Faithfull's tone is satirical, her writing illustrates popular conceptions of what women's roles in Victorian society looked like: namely, the keepers of the domestic home and the guardians of men's happiness and morality. The cage crinoline thus became a symbol of the ways in which women might fail to uphold those roles, selfishly focused on themselves rather than nurturing their families. Popular criticisms and debates over the crinoline indicated deeper fears about women's place in society and what might happen if they neglected their domestic duties in favour of fashion.

These concerns, founded in middle-class beliefs about femininity and virtue, also extended to working-class women. As the crinoline was an accessible garment, available to all classes, middle-class writers worried about working-class women's new ability to dress like their 'betters,' and what that meant for their ability to work as domestic servants. In one of her books on household management, Isabella Beeton addressed "cooks and kitchen-maids," saying that "in the kitchen, the modern crinoline is absurd, dangerous, out of place, and extravagant."²⁷ Her advice highlights concerns

²³ Charles Keene, "Mr. Tremble Borrows a Hint from his Wife's Crinoline," cartoon, *Punch*, 1856, Punch Limited.

²⁴ Mitchell, "Crinolines and Corsets," 94.

²⁵ "Death by Fire," *The Times*, February 13, 1863, <https://www.newspapers.com/article/the-times/2561578/>; "Burnt to Death," *The Times*, November 14, 1863, www.newspapers.com/article/the-times/2561633/.

²⁶ Emily Faithfull, "Crinoline," 1863, in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 100.

²⁷ Isabella Beeton, *How to Manage House and Servants and to Make the Most of Your Means*, 2nd ed. (London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler, 1886), 33, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

about the “extravagant” fashion habits in the lives of working-class women. Beeton did clarify that servants should be allowed to wear “a moderate amount of crinoline or [follow] their fancies in fashion, at proper times and in proper places,” yet her writing expressed many of the attitudes surrounding female domestic servants.²⁸

Many middle-class Victorian people believed domestic servants needed to be educated and guided by their mistresses. Beeton advised middle-class women to behave properly so their servants would follow their example, and her recommendation for middle and upper-class women not to allow their servants to wear crinolines demonstrates the belief that women as homemakers could and should hold such moral authority over their servants.²⁹ With the crinoline, that moral guidance was founded on perceived connections between fashionable clothing and immorality, and that domestic servants needed to understand their place in the social hierarchy and separate spheres by focusing on their work in the home rather than their fashion.³⁰

A newspaper article from 1861 discussed the story of a young woman who, unemployed as a domestic servant, applied for relief to get her clothes out of the pawn shop. When the magistrate learned her clothes included a crinoline, he refused to provide any money until the woman agreed not to wear her crinoline at work.³¹ Women who tried to mimic the fashionable dress of the middle-class subverted class boundaries, supposedly bringing themselves and society into ruin.³² For both middle-class and working-class women, the cage crinoline represented the potential for failure in their domestic duties, whether that be as household managers and family caretakers, or as servants. Fashion was blamed for women not meeting the high standards of femininity, taking on multiple meanings as an indicator of class status. The crinoline was persistently connected with working-class women’s frivolity, domestic incompetence, inability to manage their money, and by extension, their inevitable descent into immorality.

The crinoline also gained connotations of nationality, with ideal Englishwomen expected to be frugal and elegant as compared to their European counterparts. The anonymous author of the essay “Women in Italy, in 1862,” examined the behaviour of Italian women as a marker of Italy’s progress towards ‘civilization,’ invoking British superiority in the comparison. The author discussed fashionable Italian women, describing how “over an enormous crinoline falls a rich silk petticoat, sweeping at

²⁸ Beeton, *How to Manage House and Servants*, 34.

²⁹ Beeton, *The Book of Household Management*; Beeton, *How to Manage House and Servants*, 34.

³⁰ Mariana Valverde, “The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Woman in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse,” *Victorian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1989), 168–170.

³¹ “Servants’ Crinolines,” 1861, in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 120.

³² Valverde, “Love of Finery,” 181–182.

every step the dirty streets of Rome,”³³ while also wearing French hats and hairstyles. The author noted these women were not aristocrats but middle-class, and that in the pursuit of fashion, “all family comfort [...] is sacrificed unhesitatingly.”³⁴ Supposedly, rather than finding fulfilment in the domestic realm, Italian women wasted their money on fashionable clothes and dirtied them by travelling outside the private sphere. Whereas writing about Englishwomen’s crinolines carried anxieties about the failures of women to follow their domestic roles, this article, by examining Italian women’s failures to do the same, implicitly placed Englishwomen in a superior position. The Englishwoman was domestic, clean, and modest, whereas the Italian woman was public, dirty, and grand. Women’s fashions acted as extensions of their nation’s strength and ‘civilization,’ at times presaging the downfall of society and at others holding up that society in nationalist contests.

The cage crinoline embodied a wide variety of meanings. It could represent a woman’s ability to follow fashion trends, her frivolous vanity and associated threat of domestic disorder or death, her class and new access to fashionable clothing, or her nationality within the context of Britain’s imperial strength. The debate over the crinoline, a highly visible garment made to symbolize society’s ills, illustrates anxieties over women’s social roles and behaviours reflected through the lens of fashion.

Dress Reform

The cage crinoline contributed to rising concern about the practicality of women’s fashion and the development of dress reform movements among white middle-class women in the Victorian period. As with the cage crinoline, however, dress reform was not only about fashion, but about women’s bodies and places in society. The dress reform movements took on many permutations throughout the Victorian era, but held the same basic principle that women’s fashion was in some way limiting and required correcting.³⁵ Dress reform could be applied to specific garments, such as

³³ Frances Power Cobbe, ed., “Women in Italy, in 1862,” in *Essays on the Pursuits of Women, Also a Paper on Female Education* (London: Emily Faithfull, 1863), 168, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

³⁴ Cobbe, “Women in Italy,” 168.

³⁵ Perhaps the most famous dress reformer was Amelia Bloomer, an American feminist who, in the early 1850s, popularized bloomers, loose trousers worn under a short skirt. Though bloomers were never popular, Bloomer and other women who wore them were widely mocked, and Bloomer herself returned to wearing skirts after the invention of the crinoline. The garment, however, still reflected desires for social change and the rise of dress reform movements in the late nineteenth century. In England, the Rational Dress Society, founded in 1881, took up many of the same issues, concerned about tight-laced corsets, lighter underwear, and ease of movement. The Aesthetic movement of the late nineteenth century, while focused on artistic rather than practical dress, demonstrates another angle through which women’s clothing might be reformed. In the 1890s, bloomers returned as women increasingly adopted the bicycle as a mode of transport, becoming more ubiquitous and fashionable, though many still criticized it as

the cage crinoline or the corset, or to women's fashion as a whole; dress reformers might argue that women's fashion was cumbersome, impractical, unhealthy, merely that it was unattractive and frivolous, or a combination of the above.³⁶

Firmly on the side of the reformers, Florence Pomeroy (Lady Harberton), the president of the Rational Dress Society, argued for more practical and healthy clothing. In 1882, she published an article articulating the need for dress reform, highlighting concerns of damage to women's health stemming from wearing insufficiently warm clothing, or clothing and corsets that were too tight and restricted blood flow and oxygen.³⁷ Yet her reasoning, primarily focused on health, also indicates wider issues related to women's roles in society. Lady Harberton opened her article "stating distinctly that I neither wish to wear men's clothes myself, nor to see other women do so."³⁸ She described her ideal outfit for women, involving split skirts, a type of loose pant leg, below a knee-length overskirt, thus incorporating concerns for women's femininity and modesty with practicality.³⁹ She also argued that dress reform was increasingly important as she states, "women are being gradually allowed to take their place in Society as rational beings,"⁴⁰ demonstrating how fashion played a significant role in conceptions of separate spheres, especially as middle-class women began to leave the private sphere for the public.

Corsets were another part of dress reform, bringing new gendered dimensions to women's health. Worn by most Victorian women, regardless of class, the corset was thought to cause a myriad of injuries and diseases. Valerie Steele's *The Corset: A Cultural History* analyzes the potential consequences of corsetry through a comparison of contemporary reports and modern medical studies. Steele concludes that while wearing a corset will likely reduce lung capacity and cause muscle atrophy in the back and abdomen,⁴¹ anti-corset sentiments often reflected doctors' anxieties over women's bodies and sexuality rather than actual medical fact.⁴²

Women were believed to be naturally weaker than men and prone to hysteria, and many doctors were concerned that corsets might contribute to women's supposed tendency to ill-health or insanity, damage their reproductive systems so that they could not bear children, or physically and morally damage such potential children.⁴³ These worries about women's health took on eugenical overtones, focused on the possibility of creating

unattractive. See: Sarah Levitt, "From Mrs. Bloomer to the Bloomer: The Social Significance of the Nineteenth-Century English Dress Reform Movement," *Textile History* 24, no. 1 (1993), 27–37.

³⁶ Rebecca N. Mitchell, "Dress Reform," in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 61.

³⁷ Florence Pomeroy, Lady Harberton, "Rational Dress Reform," in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 81–82.

³⁸ Harberton, "Rational Dress Reform," 77.

³⁹ Harberton, "Rational Dress Reform," 80.

⁴⁰ Harberton, "Rational Dress Reform," 81.

⁴¹ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (Yale University Press, 2001), 70–71.

⁴² Steele, *The Corset*, 77.

⁴³ Steele, *The Corset*, 76–77.

disabled children who would threaten the health of the nation, that nation being implicitly white and middle-class.⁴⁴ Women's fashion was regarded as dangerous, not only to themselves, but to their place in society as good mothers.

Other dress reformers focused their efforts on restoring a lost femininity, damaged by modernity and specifically connected to English nationalism. In 1868, Eliza Lynn Linton wrote an article called "The Girl of the Period," in which she contrasted the modern fashionable woman with a romanticized "fair young English girl,"⁴⁵ existing only in an idealized past based more on nostalgia than fact. She wrote that the ideal English girl was "something franker than a French woman, more to be trusted than an Italian, as brave as an American but more refined, as domestic as a German and more graceful."⁴⁶ Here, femininity was tied to both gender and nationality; the proper Englishwoman's virtue and morality came not only from her rejection of modern fashions but from her status as English.

For Linton, society was at risk from the abandonment of supposed earlier standards of femininity and womanhood characterized by nurturing their families as guardians of the home. She argued that modern fashionable women, the 'girls of the period,' were "as utterly unlike the old insular ideal as if we had created another nation altogether," and that they had given up all virtues of obedience and domesticity in exchange for fashion.⁴⁷ Recalling the article "Women in Italy, in 1862," and the author's claim that a nation's progress and civilization was directly tied to that nation's women, in Linton's article, the very existence of Great Britain is threatened by women who do not follow expectations for demureness and modesty.

Race was also connected to women's fashion. Linton described (white English) women styling their hair to look "like certain savages in Africa,"⁴⁸ illustrating the emphasis of Victorian standards of femininity on the appearance of whiteness, and by extension, the appearance of being 'civilized.' Linton called for women to return to "the old English ideal, once the most beautiful the most modest, the most essentially womanly in the world."⁴⁹ Beauty was feminine, English, and white, and women who did not fulfill the feminine ideal risked the destruction of their country. Great Britain's expanding colonial power may have exacerbated these concerns, bringing more people in contact with a world beyond their national borders, as did the increasing population of the urban poor and their racialization as a 'savage' threat to the middle class.⁵⁰

Whether dress reformers sought to make women's clothing more practical or more feminine, their activism drew on contemporary anxieties about gender, race, and nationhood, all bound up inextricably in clothing.

⁴⁴ Steele, *The Corset*, 76.

⁴⁵ Eliza Lynn Linton, "The Girl of the Period," in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 65.

⁴⁶ Linton, "The Girl of the Period," 65.

⁴⁷ Linton, "The Girl of the Period," 66.

⁴⁸ Linton, "The Girl of the Period," 66.

⁴⁹ Linton, "The Girl of the Period," 69.

⁵⁰ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 10–12.

In the late nineteenth century, middle-class women began to enter the public sphere in greater numbers; they became New Women, attending university and having professional careers as an alternative to the traditional path of marriage and motherhood. Yet this new access did not change societal expectations to be feminine, or assumptions that they were uniquely susceptible to fashion's harms because of their gender. Some Victorians believed women who dressed in modern fashions could lead to the collapse of society and threaten Great Britain's superiority above women of other nations; they might even risk their status as white by doing so. These fears did not necessarily represent beliefs held by every Victorian, but they do speak to what was at stake in debates over women's fashion.

Non-Western Fashion

Concerns over fashion and nationhood went further than Europe, intertwined within Britain's imperial expansion and connection to non-western trade routes.⁵¹ The consumption and display of non-Western goods and fashions carried multiple meanings, functioning as symbols of Britain's international reach, its access to the exotic, and gender expression in comparison to a perceived 'uncivilized' other.⁵² Those goods, particularly those from or inspired by India and Japan, acted to articulate British beliefs about gender, domesticity, and civilization, within a web of imperial and colonial connections.

Despite initial efforts to sell British textiles to India, on the contrary, Indian textiles became a large market in Britain.⁵³ In particular, the Kashmir shawl, known as a cashmere or Indian shawl during the Victorian era, became representative of Britain's colonial relationship with India. It was a luxury item, conveying status on the wearer, and symbolized Britain's conquest by acting as the 'spoils' brought home by Englishmen to their female family members.⁵⁴ British textile manufacturers attempted to create imitations, or to raise cashmere goats themselves in Britain, to meet the intense popularity and demand for cashmere fabric and the Kashmir shawl. *The Ladies' Hand-book of Haberdashery and Hosiery: A Shopping Manual*, reported that despite these attempts, the wool produced by cashmere goats in England was "not equal to that of their native mountains."⁵⁵ Yet the book also described how "beautiful imitations" of cashmere had been made from "the finest Saxony wool."⁵⁶ These two

⁵¹ Rebecca N. Mitchell, "International Influences and Echoes," in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 203.

⁵² Suzanne Daly, "Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (2002), 237.

⁵³ Daly, "Kashmir Shawls," 237–238.

⁵⁴ Daly, "Kashmir Shawls," 238.

⁵⁵ *The Ladies' Hand-Book of Haberdashery and Hosiery: A Shopping Manual* (London: H. G. Clarke and Co., 1844), 30, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁵⁶ *The Ladies' Hand-Book*, 30.

segments illustrate a tension within Britain's imperial sphere, emphasizing first the exoticism of cashmere as a luxury foreign good, then reasserting Britain's superiority and ability to compete with those goods.

Similarly, *The Ladies' Work-Table Book* included instructions for women to sew their own cashmere shawls.⁵⁷ The book's introduction argued for the importance of women's domestic ability in that "the progress of any nation in morals, civilization, and refinement, is just in proportion to the elevated or degraded position in which woman is placed in society,"⁵⁸ with that elevated position being the caretaker of the middle-class home. By advocating for women to sew their cashmere shawls themselves, the Indian textiles used were thus brought within the scope of British imperial control and within the framework of British domestic femininity.

While Indian garments symbolized the success of British imperialism, Japanese goods brought to Britain without an explicit colonial relationship similarly represented access to the exotic, but also concerns over the superiority of white Englishwomen. In 1884, sparked by a widespread interest in Japanese culture and fashion, an exhibition called the Japanese Village opened for English spectators to learn about the 'authentic' Japanese daily life.⁵⁹ Reported on in *The Ladies' Treasury*, an article about the village devoted a paragraph to describing Japanese women, as beautiful but "not exactly in accordance with English appreciation of such," that they did not have light or red hair like some English and Scottish women, but that they were "graceful and quiet," and were dressed more colourfully than Englishwomen.⁶⁰ The article included a picture of three Japanese girls, allowing an English audience to see their dress and hairstyles.⁶¹

This portrayal of Japanese women highlights the unique position Japan held in English imaginations. Japan was subordinate to Britain in trading agreements, yet rapidly modernizing to compete with Western nations, challenging its perceived state as a preserved traditional culture.⁶² It was seen as an emblem of a romanticized English past, yet also as a backwards country that kept women in an inferior role, "never suffered to share [their husband's] more serious thoughts, or to relieve by participation his anxieties and cares,"⁶³ rather than the companionate marriage held up as the standard by the English middle class.⁶⁴ Japanese women were thus assumed to be completely submissive and domestic, an ideal for Englishwomen to aspire to and an oppressive existence they had broken out of by virtue of their country's superiority.

⁵⁷ *The Ladies' Work-Table Book* (London: H. G. Clarke and Co., 1844), 59, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

⁵⁸ *The Ladies' Work-Table Book*, ix.

⁵⁹ "A Japanese Village in London," in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 215.

⁶⁰ "A Japanese Village in London," 218.

⁶¹ "A Japanese Village in London," 219.

⁶² Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 86.

⁶³ Von Siebold, P. F., quoted in Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 87.

⁶⁴ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 86–87.

Regarding fashion, both the fan and the tea gown, a loose and informal dress worn indoors with close family and friends, stood in for the tensions between Britain and Japan, and their supposed treatment of women. Fans, believed to originate in Japan, were strongly associated with Japanese women and their stereotypical modesty, symbolizing a return to an idealized English womanhood put at risk by the increasing involvement of Englishwomen in politics.⁶⁵ The kimono, while in reality a tight-fitting and physically restrictive garment, appeared to fit loosely and comfortably; it inspired the tea gown, meant as an antidote to the frivolity and impracticality of English women's fashion.⁶⁶ Japanese fashion, from a country thought to represent a form of Britain's own past, thus symbolized a desire to return to that idealized history through clothing.⁶⁷

Fashions did not necessarily have to be produced elsewhere, or inspired by foreign cultures, to represent the exotic, or in contrast, the civilized. Daily accessories like gloves and parasols took on racial connotations. Gloves protected the skin and the white complexions of middle-class women,⁶⁸ and the parasol symbolized British superiority and progress, as parasols or umbrellas were used by most British citizens, where it was restricted to the aristocracy in Asia and Africa.⁶⁹ Conversely, when writers wanted to criticize Great Britain, they bolstered arguments about the supposed backwardness of Victorian fashions by comparing them to non-Western cultural traditions. In an article criticizing the cage crinoline for causing deaths by fire, Harriet Martineau compared the crinoline to the Indian practice of wives immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, writing, "we [English] burn more women in the twelvemonths by slavishness to fashion than the Hindoos [sic] do by their superstition."⁷⁰ In this case, India represented savagery and backwardness, but was also invoked to criticize a perceived backwardness in Britain itself. Connections between fashion in Britain and fashion in non-Western countries thus served a variety of purposes, articulating and managing anxieties over Britain's strength as an imperial nation and its level of civilization as expressed through the treatment and behaviour of its women.

Conclusion

Fashion does not exist independent of the world in which it is designed, manufactured, sold, and worn, but is indelibly influenced by its greater

⁶⁵ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 65, 88.

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Kramer, "'Not So Japan-Easy': The British Reception of Japanese Dress in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Textile History* 44, no. 1 (2013), 14.

⁶⁷ Kramer, "'Not So Japan-Easy,'" 20.

⁶⁸ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 39.

⁶⁹ Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 107.

⁷⁰ Harriet Martineau, "A New Kind of Wilful Murder," in *Fashioning the Victorians*, 107.

context. Ideology shapes clothing and bodies⁷¹ through the intersections of gender, class, race, and nation. In the Victorian era, as illustrated by the cage crinoline, the dress reform movements, and influence from non-Western styles, fashion was a tool to symbolize and manage anxieties over women's femininity and domesticity, their place in a stratified class system, their status as white and English, and what those positions meant for Britain and its society.

⁷¹ Gina Marlene Dorré, "Horses and Corsets: 'Black Beauty,' Dress Reform, and the Fashioning of the Victorian Woman," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (2002), 159.

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