



Men and Angels; Fashion 1830-1860

Geoffrey Squire

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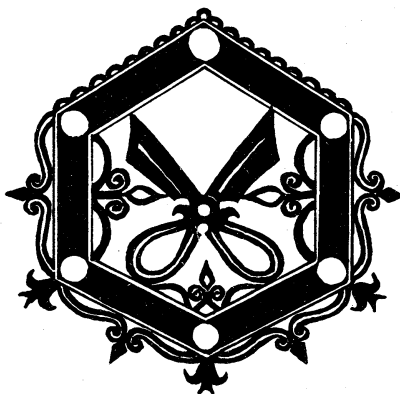
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DAPHNE BULLARD

It is with the deepest regret that we inform readers of the death of Daphne Bullard as the result of a car accident. An obituary notice will appear in Costume 4.

MEN AND ANGELS; FASHION 1830-1860,

by
Geoffrey Squire



Count d'Orsay

Fashion, it seems to me always exists on *two* levels — the level of *actuality* and the level of the *imagination*.

When a fashion is current its actuality is illuminated and given an extra brilliance, a quite impossible lustre, by an imagination perfectly tuned. For a brief moment actuality has a unique appearance which never can be reconstructed. Once that magic moment has passed — that moment when the worlds of appearance and of mental fantasy were in complete accord — the vision fades and the reality is seen *exactly* as it is, with all its shortcomings and with no allowance made. Its real life has gone and can never again be fully restored. True, that after a decade or so of horrifying dowdiness an old fashion can acquire a *new*, but different, lustre — that softer charm which distance always lends, *so unlike* the sparkle of modernity — but it will never ever be seen again *exactly* as it appeared to its time, when minds inflamed by the spirit of their age made vision slightly astigmatic and actuality was seen, not as it was in *fact*, but as it *should* have been.

And so, it seems to me, that however valuable the evidence of those clothes which chance has preserved for us from the past this can provide only half the story. Writing of Beckford's Fonthill Abbey Sir Kenneth Clark says "Scarcely a stone of it remains, but I do not think that is to be deplored. Fonthill always appealed primarily to the imagination, was always an Arabian Night's dream we may be glad that we know Fonthill chiefly through romantic engravings". Now surely this is true of all fashions — for Fonthill was certainly architecture dominated almost exclusively by fashionable 'feeling' in its design. The nearest we can ever get to seeing what people in their day really *did* see is by looking through the eyes of those artists, often minor, who recorded clothes with all that extra illumination of their periods' mental fantasy, and so gave to them that elusive chic, that ultimate smartness, which is seldom in the clothes themselves, or even in the wearers, but almost always in the minds of the beholders. Today, and perhaps for some ten years past, the fashion-photographer too has adopted techniques which result not in the recording of actuality but in the realisation of a vision. Earlier photographs, for all their acquired charm, like surviving dresses, show only what was visibly achieved, and not the full mysterious grace

and attractiveness which was added by their periods' eye.

In addition to the visual records we need too as much as we can get of those mental pictures, those dreams and ideas, which haunted contemporary minds, helping to produce the astigmatic eyes which saw mysteriously transcended, the clothes they looked at.

During the years between 1830 and 1860 men, ideally, were *gentlemen*, and in any event were always quite unmistakably men.

Women were no longer really women. They were at the least ladies, and at the best fairies or angels.

Of course there was nothing particularly new about likening a woman to an angel. The sixteenth century did so constantly. Perhaps there was a slight shift of emphasis in the seventeenth century when Thomas Otway could write "Oh woman! lovely woman! ... Angels were painted fair to look like you," and I think that this gives us the clue. It is not the comparison of women to angels which is so significant for the nineteenth century ideal — but it *is* the nineteenth century idea of the angels to which women were compared that really matters. In the Middle Ages angels were painted, or carved, to look like *angels*. They were always awe-inspiring, and completely devoid of any hint of sexuality. By the Renaissance, when Man had become the measure of all things, angels developed a definite tendency towards masculinity, but during the eighteenth century their androgynous qualities gradually increased, and by the nineteenth century it really had become true that angels were 'painted fair' to look like women. Any real spirituality was gone — angels were earthbound and sentimental. When not vapid they were grave and gracious, kind and understanding, sometimes cross, but seldom wrathful or avenging. Angels in fact had acquired all the qualities of the perfect lady — and ladies, ideally, aspired to being indistinguishable from angels — or men liked to pretend they did. In lighter moments they might instead perhaps be fairies who, somehow or other, had become muddled into a cross between a sprightly, wayward child and a mischievous wood-nymph.

Oh woman! in our hours of ease
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
And variable as the shade
By the light quivering aspen made;
When pain and anguish wring the brow
A ministering angel thou.

So wrote Sir Walter Scott in 'Marmion' in 1808. Before 1830 Scott was fashionable reading for all Europe.

The ideal of the ultra-feminine woman had been a long time forming; growing up out of the sentimentalism of the mid-eighteenth century, via creations like Richardson's 'Pamela', and the slightly later romanticism of Rousseau's Julie in 'La Nouvelle Héloïse' and of Goethe's Lotte, the heroine of 'The Sorrows of Werther'. The full flood of the Romantic Movement

during the early nineteenth century with its passion, and its reviving medievalism and dreams of chivalry, crystallised the whole conception.

She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleam'd upon my sight;
A lovely apparition, sent
To be a moment's ornament;
Her eyes as stars of twilight fair;
Like twilights' too, her dusky hair;
But all things else about her drawn
From May-time and the cheerful dawn;
A dancing shape, an image gay,
To haunt, to startle, and waylay.
I saw her upon nearer view,
A Spirit, yet a Woman too!
Her household motions light and free,
And steps of virgin-liberty;
A countenance in which did meet
Sweet records, promises as sweet;
A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears, and smiles.
And now I see with eye serene
The very pulse of the machine;
A being breathing thoughtful breath,
A traveller between life and death;
The reason firm, the temperate will,
Endurance, foresight, strength and skill;
A perfect Woman, nobly plann'd,
To warn, to comfort, and command;
And yet a Spirit still, and bright
With something of angelic light.

That was Wordsworth in 1804. By 1839 such a picture had changed from an individuals' romantic dream into a popular picture — a smart picture — a fashionable ideal for emulation — and a fashionable ideal requiring a complementary counter-part.

Until the nineteenth century the men had had things mostly their own way. By the 1840's the woman novelist was no longer a rarity, and she was there to provide that counterpart — "Two wax candles stood lighted on the table, and two on the mantelpiece; basking in the light and heat of a superb fire, lay Pilot — Adèle knelt near him. Half reclined on a couch appeared Mr. Rochester, his foot supported by a cushion; he was looking at Adele and the dog. The fire shone full on his face. I knew my traveller, with his broad and jetty eyebrows, his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair.

"I recognised his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, cholera; his grim mouth, chin and jaw — yes, all three were very grim, and no mistake. His shape, now divested of cloak, I perceived harmonized in squareness with his physiognomy. I suppose it was a good figure in

the athletic sense of the term — broad chested and thin-flanked, though neither tall nor graceful.

“Mr. Rochester must have been aware of the entrance of Mrs. Fairfax and myself; but it appeared he was not in the mood to notice us, for he never lifted his head as we approached”.

If Wordsworth's view of Woman was an impossible, masculine idealisation of femininity, too good to be true, then the portrait of Mr. Rochester is surely a feverishly feminine, no-holds-barred, view of masculinity — but the two extremes are needed to keep an even balance.

The aristocratic ideals of the past had allowed that Woman, although inferior in imagination and physical strength, was at least of the same genus as Man, and shared much with him.

For the romantic bourgeois ideals which prevailed throughout Europe by 1830 (the year in which those epitomes of the bourgeois, William the Fourth and Louis-Philippe, came to the thrones of England and France) men and women were at absolute and opposite poles. Like the figures in a Weather-house, a woman was all angelic goodness, sunshine and light, and a man all stormy animal passion and fire — they were separated by the bar into the ends of which they were firmly fixed by popular belief and morality.

The nineteenth century was, of course, as sex-conscious as our own, or indeed as any other; but its inhibited lack of frankness on the subject led to a certain overheated complexity which, seething just below the surface, often gave a distinct eroticism to even quite innocent subjects. Since as always, the ideas and ideals of the time were made manifest in fashionable dress and fashionable behaviour, a thinly veiled eroticism is evident in both.

Between 1830 when the romantic ideal had fully emerged, and 1860 when already it had passed its climax and was beginning to disintegrate, there was a logical development in fashionable figures, which passed gently from a timid, blushing youthfulness, all sheeps'-eyes and breathless calf-love, to complete assurance and unequivocal maturity.

The delicate, dizzy, bottle-shouldered child-bride Dora did not die, but was transformed by the years into the opulently bosomed and commanding Mrs. Proudie, with a mind of her own and undisputed dictator of the social graces; the ardent inexperienced David Copperfield into the massively solid Pater of a large Familias in whom the puritan virtues of the Prince Consort could too easily merge into the sinister sadistics of a Mr. Murdstone or the private violence of Sir Percival Glyde; the dashing elegance of the dandy D'Orsay gradually thickened and coarsened into the 'heavy-swell' of Lord Dundreary.

If the fashion-plate ideal of 1840 was aged between seventeen and twenty this was advanced by 1860 to thirty or to thirty-five.

The naïve frivolities of 1830 gave place to the slender seriousness of the 'forties, which was in its turn transformed into the expansive graciousness of the 'fifties.

We can almost see the ideal aging from year to year, filling-out and gaining confidence as the mid-century approached; becoming wordly and materialistic and seeing its youthful romanticism as nothing but childish nonsense.

To establish this general appearance of a gradual transition from youth to maturity a series of fashion-plates is *most* helpful. While looking at them of course we must remember that we see there the *ideal*, which was achieved in reality by few — but remembering too that a *hint* in the right direction in reality can be transformed into a full statement in the properly attuned mind.

Almost any plate from, say “La Belle Assemblée” of 1829, will show the childish nonsense, all bounce and jollity. Nodding plumes, fluttering ribbons, buoyant sleeves, a feeling of constant skipping movement and of great activity.

The exaggerated size of hats and sleeves give the impression of clothes intended for some grown-up — for an adult. Women look more than a little like small girls in Mama's clothes. The neat, child-like belted waists and ankle-length skirts add to the impression of immaturity. The giggling girl with the fur round the tops of her boots who caused such havoc to Mr. Winkles' heart seems completely epitomised here.

Men too are jaunty — even cocky and swaggering. The throwing open of the coat gives an air of carelessness and irresponsibility. Strong bright colours, and strange contrasts in the top-heavy hats and the shrunken look of pantaloons suggest precocious little boys.

In womens' dress the vast balloon-sleeves lingered on from the 'twenties — pushed to more than a logical conclusion by 1832; but from this point of climax deflation began almost at once. There first developed a marked tendency to allow the fullness of the sleeve to droop towards the elbow, continuing the long line of the shoulder, which was produced by the very low setting-in of the sleeve. At the same time the very open brim of the bonnet had begun to close-in round the face and, although still generously wide, already by 1834 the bounciness of the 'twenties was being subdued.

There seems a general opinion that masculine dress after the very earliest years of the century is so dull that it is not worth mentioning. All attention is concentrated on the very obvious variety of womens' dress, and Mens' clothing is dismissed as uninteresting and uniform.

I think this is just not true. Throughout the whole period, it seems to me, there was considerably more colour and infinitely more variety in forms and types of garment than could be found in the first half of our own century — and during the thirty years we have under review this was most certainly so.

To suggest that men had made a “great renunciation”,

giving up clothes that depended on quite obvious – not to say blatant – ‘sex-appeal’ is ridiculous, as surely the sketch of Count D’Orsay made in about 1834 by Daniel Maclise, clearly shows. Although the composition is built-up from opulent feminine-looking curves its effect is far from effeminate. The breadth across the shoulder given by the great rolling collar and wide revers emphasises the narrowness of waist and hips and concentrates attention on the legs in their ‘invisible inexpressibles, skin-coloured and fitting like a glove’ as Jane Carlyle described them – which hardly sounds an expression of dullness or renunciation. The whole appearance of arrogant swagger is as masculine as any sixteenth century Leicester or Raleigh, whose silhouettes were also composed principally from curves, and the constant mention of sky-blue satin; sky-blue pantaloons; yards of gold-chain; lemon-gloves; diamond-studs; coloured-stones and so on, in every description of D’Orsay does not suggest a retiring ideal. Brummel *may* have felt that no heads should turn when a gentleman passed by – but Brummel’s puritan classical standards were in decline after forty years, and an almost vulgar, certainly romantic, masculine display had returned and was to remain aggressively present at least until the late ‘fifties. Here the effect, with its swagger, its self-confidence and its colour is youthful and light, expressive of brisk, dancing movement.

The accusations of a retiring lack of colour, lack of variety and general dullness can speedily be disproved by such a plate as that from the ‘Wiener Moden’ of 1839, showing an opera-cloak lined with flame-silk and trimmed with violet cord. Even to-day to wear such a cloak would take courage. Admittedly it is ‘foreign’, but Dickens and Disraeli wore such things – though perhaps *that* is no real indication of what the ‘well dressed gentleman’ should wear!

Again, surely nobody who was not masculine could afford to be seen in the scarlet damask ankle-length dressing-gown featured in the ‘Petit Courrier des Dames’ of 1839 – and anybody who *was* must have exuded heady overtones of Oriental potentates who could be refused absolutely nothing. The illustration reminds one of Mr. Murdstone, “a gentleman with beautiful black hair and whiskers whose regular eyebrows and the rich white, and black, and brown of his complexion made him a very handsome man”. The flint-like severity of his behaviour only added to his fascination for the fluttery Mrs. Copperfield. We now have a phrase to cover this – “the man you love to hate.....!”

But such raffish splendour was waning a little by 1840. Masculinity was not to be quite so flashily displayed as it had been lately. Romanticism suggested that the newer, softer feminine ideal required a more serious, less bold approach – still firm but gentler handling was called for – men were not *subdued*, but became *deferential*.

Hems of womens’ skirts had dropped again to floor length by 1837. The bounce was now quite gone – a sensitive fragility was ‘all the go’. The last vestige of the expansive sleeve drooped now about the wrist, or had withered into a few delicate frills or gauging closely encircling the upper-arm. The corset was cut much longer in the waist, and its curves were drawn-out into shallow, sinuous lines which moulded the bust tightly like the calyx of a still-closed flower.

By 1840 the bonnet had drooped quite round the face – and from inside its brim the hair dripped in long forlorn ‘spaniel’ ringlets. The whole silhouette was composed from a series of shallow elliptical curves – the eye follows a line around the head, (where above the ears the ‘Bandolined’ hair is plastered down, looking painted onto a perfect, narrow oval) slides down the drooping shoulders, and then slithers over the gently padded hips into the heavily dragging skirts.

The plump cheeky little girls of the ‘twenties have been transformed into shy, serious adolescents, slender and gazelle like.

An important contribution to the fragile, feminine ideal was surely made by the ballet, for there, in the theatre, Woman had become a fairy indeed. So light she seemed to fly. Exactly when the dancer first rose onto her points appears uncertain – probably during the ‘twenties; encouraged to do so, surely, as much by the developing ideal as by the fact that the foot was given perfect support by the closely fitting but light and flexible, narrow shoe of the day. At any rate with the fame of Taglioni’s “La Sylphide” in 1832, when in her ethereal muslin frock, tiny gauze wings sprouting at her waist, she rose into the air with a coy smile, poised miraculously on one un-blocked toe, to pluck a bird’s nest playfully from a tree, the effect was complete. Lithographs of famous dancers, gliding through air as a ‘Zephir’ or a ‘Dryad’ were popular throughout the ‘thirties, and Chalon’s print of Taglioni as ‘La Sylphide’ published in 1845 provides a marvellous example of the spirit of an age personified. In 1841 ‘Giselle’ had appeared to add another inimitable touch – the wronged woman sent mad by the thoughtless selfish man and turned into a fluttering ‘Willy’ by his heartlessness.

To my mind the 1840’s is one of the dullest decades in the whole history of feminine dress. It is the Woman, not the Man, who seemed to have made a great renunciation. A modest drooping fragility epitomised beings in whom the quivering incompetence of Dora Spenlow was compensated for by the grave and self-effacing comfort offered by Agnes Wickfield, always ready to pick up the pieces. Throughout the period this double image lingered on, the two aspects of the ideal woman, fairy and angel, making repeated Siamese-twin like appearances in the doubled heroines of innumerable novels. As late as 1860 in “The Woman in White” by Wilkie Collins the fay beauty of Laura Fairlie is constantly supported by the

selfless ministering of the ugly Marion Halcombe, who is actually referred to in the closing chapter as “the good angel of our lives”. And I think it is worth remembering that for the literary-minded nineteenth century novels provided an ever present popular image analogous to our television screen, bringing the fashionable ideal into almost every home above the “bread-line”.

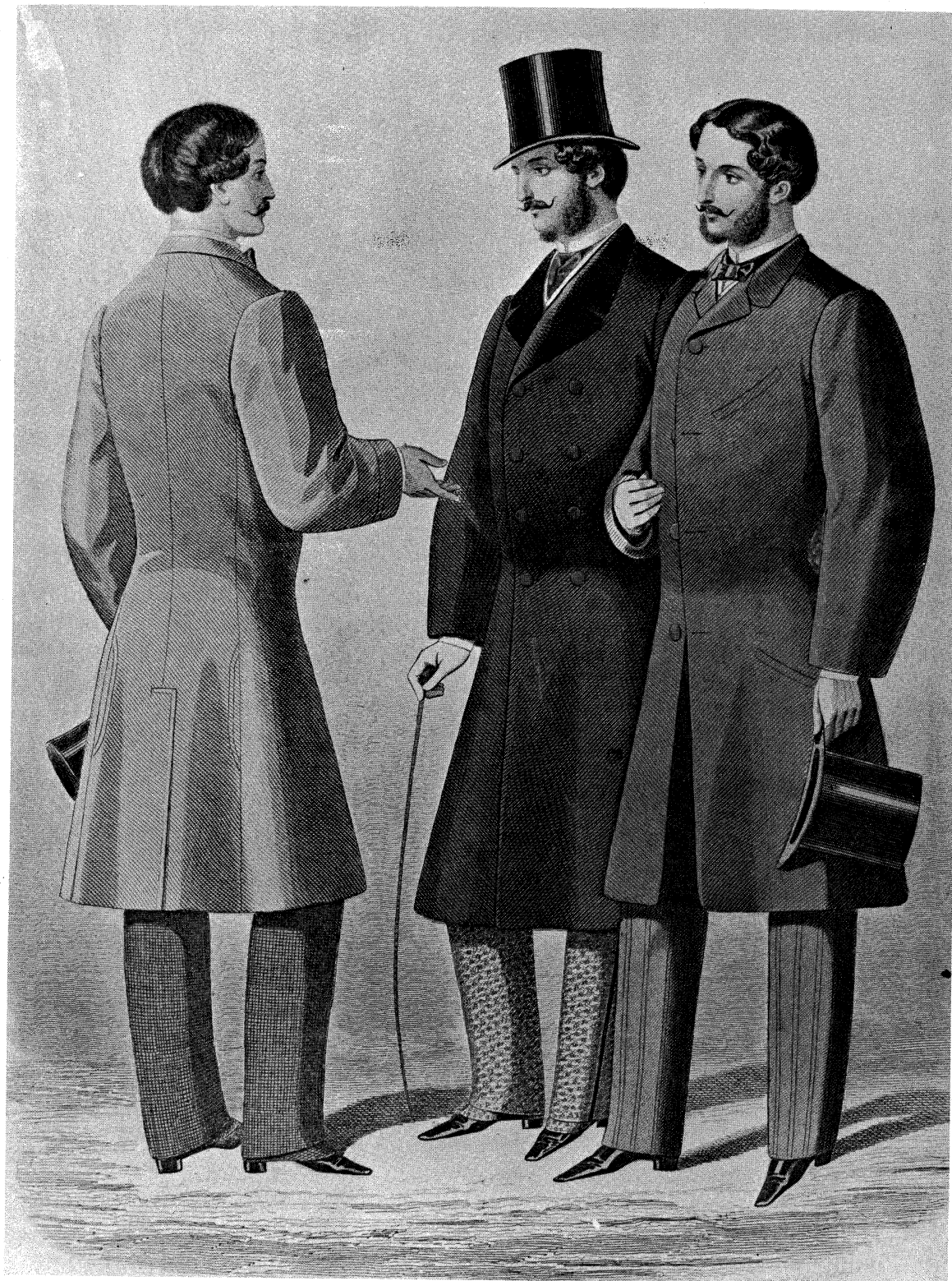
This decade of inspid mediocrity for women was entirely middle-class in outlook. There was nowhere in Europe that prime necessity for dynamic fashion, a really splendid and extravagant court, or some alternative social centre, to set the pace, nor as yet was anybody in the world of dressmaking daring or influential enough to give a lead. Describing the mid 'forties, when his father first arrived in Paris as a modest shop-assistant, M. Jean Worth wrote - “When M. Worth came to Paris it was difficult to believe that the gay city had ever been the centre of a brilliant court. Each lady boasted of a mantle or ‘rotande’, a couple of silk gowns made with a view to hard and prolonged wear, and perhaps a cashmere shawl presented to her on her marriage. The most expensive trimming in those days cost four francs a yard, and in all Paris there was only one dressmaker who provided both materials and facon; in other words everyone but Mme. Rogers’ clients bought their own material and then took it to some little dressmaker to be made-up.”¹ If this was the situation in France it was not likely to be better in England - hardly an atmosphere to encourage invention or emulation!



Petit Courrier des Dames, c.1844.



English Woman's Domestic Magazine, c.1860.



Gazette of Fashion 1859-1860.

By 1844 the angelic feminine ideal was acquiring a rather heavier masculine counter-part. The dashing lightness of D'Orsay was already thickening-up. A dropped waist-line gave a much bigger, more solid-looking torso. The fuller trousers suggested sturdier, less shapely, legs. The bold, highly favoured checked-cloths seem best suited to the race-track or other sporty' masculine pursuits. If there was a double image for the feminine this had its masculine equivalent too – which hovered between a dependable seriousness, the high-principalled leader of the family with a strong arm to cling to; and that other facet, the racketiness of younger sons out on the spree, the allowable sowing of 'wild-oats' which made men so 'different' and able 'to deal with things'. If a woman's place at this time was in the home, and in the home only, many a man had an existence outside it – which like his trousers was 'inexpressible' or 'unmentionable'.

By 1851, however, women too seemed to be maturing. The inspidity of the 'forties was being replaced by a growing opulence and certainty. Those drawn-out shallow curves gradually broadened into a newer, more definite roundness and fullness. The bonnet widened at the sides into a full-circle instead of forming a narrow vertical oval. The hair, still smoothly brushed, was turned under at the sides to stand away from the head at ear-level. Skirts expanded to ever greater width over additional petticoats of horsehair or quilted down, with the extra optical illusion of continuously repeated horizontal trimming added.

By 1856 the trimming of the bodice was more frequently applied in a generous sweep across the bust than running down to emphasise a narrow waist, and a more ample and graciously matronly woman had taken the place of the sickly angelic doll of the 'forties. Perhaps those pretty adolescent wives, being made of far stronger stuff than they pretended had after-all survived the horrors of the marriage-bed and were beginning to reveal the iron hand within the velvet glove. From now on Woman was the dominant sex in the domestic field and as far as social life was concerned. The arbiter of manners and of taste, she made the rules and, by fair means or by foul, saw to it that they were obeyed. A woman no longer drooped hesitantly. Her carriage was upright and she looked you straight in the eye, her vision no longer blinkered by her bonnet which she now wore far back on her chignon.

If the female dress of the 'forties suggests perhaps a wistful Chopin nocturne tremulously played on a solitary piano – then the sixties is the full surge of a Brahmsian orchestra. As women became socially more powerful, so they increased physically in volume, becoming sometimes, quite literally, inflated. By 1860 the skirt had reached its maximum possible size and a woman covered a vast area of ground in all directions. The delicate shot-silks in opalescent colours so favoured by the

serious 'forties gave place to a harsher clarity and brilliance which was appearing too in the paintings of the PreRaphaelite Brotherhood during the 'fifties. We are often told that the garish colours used in dress during the mid-century were due to the invention of aniline dyes – so they were – but surely the onus may well be the other way about – the invention of aniline dyes (which after all did not appear until 1860) was perhaps stimulated by the desire for ever more brilliant colours, a desire growing ever stronger from the late 'forties. In contrast to the hesitancy which had first appeared in dress during the late 'thirties, there is a self-confident, often overpoweringly stupendous vulgarity about dress of the 'fifties which is yet very different from the rather mindless frivolity which had lingered from the 'twenties into the earlier 'thirties. Now the spirit of expansion was in the air. From 1852, when Louis Napoleon Bonaparte had been proclaimed the Emperor Napoleon the third, Europe once more had a focus for fashion – a widely extravagant if parvenu court (which actually, as an economic policy, encouraged competitive display and luxury) set in a city rapidly being rebuilt in the most modern manner. The results of nearly a hundred years of increasing industrialisation were paying-off splendidly too in England. Money made from muck was circulating, if not exactly freely, at least in very large quantities; and this was too the great international Exhibition age. Year after year the nineteenth century was constantly marvelling at its own inventiveness and productivity and putting these on show – and so here were other centres too, attracting thousands, at which one not only saw, but was also seen.

The magnificent matronly grande-dame of the late 'fifties was backed-up by an ever more solid masculinity – solid not only in fact but in appearance. Men seem to have arrived at a well-fed middle-age. The bulky torsos and tubular elephants legs suggesting weight and ponderous movement are clear in every plate of 'The Gazette of Fashion' of this time. The dash and lightness of the 'thirties has been gradually transformed into a firm, heavy dependability, unimaginative but reassuring. The romantic age was dead as far as fashionable appearance was concerned – Materialism was all. Increasingly it seemed to be not really appearance, but comfort which mattered to men. Women were making the rules now, and since the 1840's or before had been hinting to their husbands and telling their sons that it was effeminate and foolish to be interested in clothes, and the men began to believe this. Woman had perhaps spent too long following a step or so behind the masculine lead in everything including fashion. At last the game had played into her hands – her ultra-femininity had won a trick, and the ultra-masculine male had been gently modelled out of compliment. The modelling continued – in 1857 'Tom Brown's School Days' was published, and boys would be expected to be boys, for a

long time to come. As we all well know it has taken very nearly a hundred years for the pendulum of taste to swing back again the other way.

That roughly is the outline of the developing ideal – an outline which now needs filling-in.

The quiet Biedermeier tranquility which helped to foster dreams of romanticism, tinged with a delicate passion never too much uncontrolled, is beautifully caught in pictures like those by the Swiss, J. A. Agasse who worked in London during the 'twenties and 'thirties painting sunny scenes of middle-class life.

Early nineteenth century Denmark too produced a whole school of such inimate painters, including the always delightful Christen Købke, whose picture of a young girl in a summer meadow in 1831² shows that even quite modest people far from the centres of modish life seemed in fact to approximate to the fashionable ideal, even if that ideal was not brought off with a full fashionable panache.

But did *real* women ever achieve anything quite like the fragile bottle-shouldered beauty recommended in the 'forties by the fashion plates, when the best dressed woman in Paris was said to be Marie Duplessis – the real life model for Margurite Gautier, that Lady of the Camelias, who epitomised the golden-hearted tart, and who always behaved and looked modestly like a perfect lady however she earned her keep? Yes! apparently they did and a photograph of three young women taken by Octavius Hill in 1845 proves it.³ Even the large, rather plain girl at the back manages almost to bring it off – and if real women chose, or at least, allowed themselves to be photographed posed in such a clinging cluster surely here is evidence that the novelists' and the fashion-plate ideals were a true part of their age. If art does not always record nature, nature can always be guaranteed to imitate art!

Men too – in spite of the accidents of life, like unfashionable bald heads, measured up pretty well; and the gentleman seated on the right in another photograph by Octavius Hill of 1845 seems quite perfect,⁴ the exact air of alert, not too eager interest of those middle years, between the gay dog of the late 'twenties and the solemn papa, or vulgar swell of the 'fifties.

Another most useful painter of the nineteenth century scene who worked on, right into the 'eighties was the German Adolf Menzell – catching beautifully in his portrait of Clara Schmidt Von Knobelsdorff dated 1848⁵ the angelic timidity, and the delicate, narrow elliptical curves, emphasised by the exact placing of the shawl at the shoulder to allow the eye to glide down into the billowing skirts without a break. Of course not all women in the 'forties could have looked like this in reality all the time, but very many must somehow have made the right impression for a good deal of it. Menzell again, in a study of his sister asleep on a sofa⁶ achieves the whole atmosphere of modest cosiness, and

shows too – usefully – the shape of the padding, which in a more conventional pose gave the necessary roundness to the hips below the ideally willow-wand waist.

Ladies, sketched, once more by Adolf Menzell, at a concert in 1848,⁷ may perhaps just have listened to that most romantic of all concertos, by Schumann, which his wife Clara had played on her Continental tour. Two seem lost in the rapture of the sunny, tripping finale; two eagerly turn to each other to share the excitement – and we are reminded that right in the midst of the fragile, utterly helpless ideal for womenhood there were already stirrings of another quite different one. A brilliant woman pianist – women all over the place writing novels which vied for popularity with any by a man – a dazzling group of feminine dancers, Taglioni, Grissi, Elssler, Cerito, Grahn, who had been stealing *all* the thunder and had reduced the once dominant male role to little more than a porteur! And even further, almost ready to break upon the gaze of an astonished Europe in 1851 was an amazing American lady in Trousers – Mrs. Emelia Jenks Bloomer. No period is ever quite as simple as its ideal would suggest. Another artist sensitive to dress and fashions, and himself a great dandy was the Parisian Gavarni. His early work appeared as fashion plates for 'La Mode' founded by Emile Girardin in 1830, and there for about eight years he contributed some of the most delicate and elegant of all drawings of dress at the height of the romantic period. He was well known in this country as well as in his native France for his book and magazine illustrations too, which were sometimes published as albums. In 1847 he came to England and produced a collection of pictures called 'Gavarni in London', published in 1851. From this series we can see families strolling home through Hyde Park after church on a fine summer Sunday morning. Among a group of shoppers and idlers in Regent Street, he shows the women characteristically bundled-up and looking thoroughly dowdy and modest in comparison to the assurance of the men. Behind the scenes at the ballet he allows us to glimpse that other raffish underside of the nineteenth century, which is always so strongly present in all the writing and the art of the age, even if only by implication – that inexpressible unmentionable masculine half-world, in which women who were *not* ladies played such a prominent part, and a world which women who *were* ladies pretended did not exist. He recorded also the dregs of the nineteenth century society, the dreary massed background from which the fashionable stood out in such contrast.

Ingres, another painter who spans many changes of taste beginning well outside our period, magnificently portrayed the opulent woman emerging in the 'fifties. Notice how the emphasis is here on horizontal rather than on vertical curves, on roundness and on width. The hair turned under, still smooth and close on top stands away at the sides of the face, and more width

still is added by the roses, the ribbons and the lace which, decorating the chignon behind make a kind of oval aureole for the head. There is nothing fragile or angelic about the face of Mme. Moitiesier whom he painted in 1851⁸ and in 1856.⁹ Women were really coming down to earth now to take a fair share in masculine materialism. The trumpets of the Second Empire were already sounding in the distance – and instead of the actual Mme. Moitiesier of Paris this could almost be a picture of the fictional Mrs. Veneering that upstart lady from London. His portrait of Mme. Gonse¹⁰ might illustrate a mature Agnes Wickfield – the calm angelic presence has become the magisterial hostess, mother of a large family and mistress of a larger staff both of whom she rules with a gentle firmness which allows no question as to authority.

Her daughters of course still to some extent conform to the earlier more clinging ideal – as yet they have to, until they too are married! But already by 1853 the man, as we see in Friths picture 'The Proposal',¹¹ has acquired that heavier solidity – that aggressive masterful masculinity which is so different from the ardour of the 'forties. He is quite confident of his acceptance and makes his offer very casually – it is no doubt financially suitable to both parties. Any nonsense about marrying without money would have been quickly nipped in the bud by Papa, and after a tearful farewell in the arbour no more would be heard of that!

Alfred Stevens produced much of his work later than our period, but his portrait of Mrs. Leonard Collman of 1854¹² reminds us that there are at all times overlapping ideals. Some people get stuck, and Mary Ann Collman is well behind the times. She looks sadly back to those days when 'spaniel' ringlets would have seemed less improbable against her, now maturing, face – back to the days when the ideal was not a woman of a 'certain age' but a pretty fragile girl who really could hardly be expected to cope.

Mrs. George Waugh whose portrait was painted as late as 1868 by her son-in-law William Holman Hunt¹³ must have got stuck even harder and earlier – the thick, sausage shaped curls which cluster about her head would have looked, undoubtedly fetching and certainly fashionable when she was a girl in 1830, but seem rather incongruous on a woman of over sixty, while her dress with sleeves still puffed, would strike a note of eccentricity among the sloping shouldered family who must have surrounded her. Curiously the very strange compromise of those sleeves, 1820 above, 1840 below, gives a much *later* look suggesting a rather ill assimilated version of the fashions of the 'ninties, and proof, if it is required, that Chaley's Aunt was not too gross a caricature after all.

Gavarni, besides showing the most elegant of clothes can also be useful about what happens when things really get out of hand, and, however adjusted the eye may be, the reality can no longer be ignored. In his caricatures he is a splendid supplement to our own

George Cruikshank, and, I think rather more compassionate and a far better draughtsman. We all, unfortunately, know that at any time there are many people who will never be successful at fashionable games, however hard they try. It is not their fault. It is their misfortune to have been born too soon, or to wish for the moon, or perhaps just not to realise – or refuse to admit – when they have been beaten by time. An old lady photographed by Octavius Hill in 1845¹⁴ was certainly not stuck in the past, but I think that her judgement had not told her that fashions, essentially suggestive of a fragile youth, do not look well on uncomplimentary maturity, without some adaptation.

One of the slightly less familiar documents for dress in the 'fifties is Gustave Dore's 'La Managerie Parisienne' dating from 1854. From this series of illustrations 'The Lionesses' shows the new generation of bolder more magnificent women, flashing past in a landau – that saucer shaped carriage so admirably suited to the showing off of vast skirts as they froth over the edge.

And here are 'the Lions' too – the heavy swells, sizing-up the 'ladies of the town'. Dore catches the knowing swagger of the men, and the effect of surging movement in the figures of the women quite superbly – and small details, like the Chinoiserie pattern of pagodas on a shawl can be useful. Dore's earlier drawings of the 'forties are very similar in style to those of the English Richard Doyle whose work is familiar from the pages of 'Punch' – and during the 'fifties Doyle provided illustrations to Thackeray's 'The Newcomers' which make an interesting comparison with these French pictures of the same date – as do those of Hablet K. Browne, employed to illustrate the novels of Charles Dickens throughout the period. Dore too visited London – but later – in the 'sixties – when he, like Gavarni before him was fascinated by its squalor and its seamier side, which was indeed very squalid and seamy throughout the whole nineteenth century.

The plate called 'The Noodles' from the 'Menagerie' shows clearly variations of outer garments for men. There is a vast selection of great-coats, pilot-coats, pea-jackets, cloaks, wraps and so-on during the first half of the century which are a complete study in themselves, and even a single illustration like this is surely enough to prove that masculine dress was very far from uniform. The variations may not be as head-turning as those of the women – but they are there.

It is really Constantin Guys who is usually considered to have captured the spirit of the Second Empire to perfection – backed up no doubt by Baudelaire's entitling him 'le peintre de la vie moderne', but personally I feel that this artist, catches the spirit of the age no better than Doré and is far less usefully detailed.

The Lions and the Wolves and the heavy-swells of

the 'fifties spent much of their time and a great deal of their money on ladies like Cora Pearl. The new model for the 'fille-de joie' — the 'grande cocotte' — has gained in assurance as much as has the fashionable ideal. Unlike Marie Duplessis the aim no longer seems to be the appearance of the perfect lady, nevertheless like Duplessis the new model patronised, as such women always had, the most fashionable and expensive dress-makers — and M. Worth had considerable trouble keeping the sheep apart from the goats.

The newer look for men, which evolved slowly through the 'forties and 'fifties was given a final definition when Edward Sothorn played Lord Dundreary in Tom Taylor's "Our American Cousin". From 1860 onwards the whiskers known as 'Piccadilly weepers' were re-christened 'Dundrearies' — and a sawney, casual, throw-away technique 'too tired for words' finally replaced the corseted sprightly look of D'Orsay as a new image for those young men who followed rather than led.

Useful examples are to be found in paintings of the 'fifties, from the top, and if not the bottom, at least a fair way down the trade. William Powell Frith made his first sketches for 'Life at the Seaside' or Ramsgate Sands' in 1851¹⁵ — and the picture was exhibited in 1854. It gives a marvellously detailed description of prosperous middle-class clothing of the mid-century, actually in wear. There is a great assortment of mens' hats from the topper to the boater in its real sailor-like form, and one man, an organ grinder, even wears a hat which must date from the 1790's. Most of the ladies too wear 'uglies', those curious extensions to the brim of the bonnet made on a framework of fine whalebone or cane to protect the face from the sun, which are a direct descendant from the eighteenth century hood called a 'calash'. One glance at this picture, in which every person sitting on a hot beach on a bright morning is swaddled from head to foot, will soon dispel any idea that clothing has anything to do with physical comfort!

Winterhalter — the fashionable painter par excellence for high-society in the 'forties and 'fifties recorded the young Empress Eugenie and her ladies in 1855.¹⁶ She is dressed — apparently unknown to herself — by Charles Frederick Worth.

As yet Worth was still employed at Maison Gagelin, the fashionable silk-merciers of Paris, where he had found employment after his apprenticeship with the firm of Swan and Edgar in London. Allowed now, by 1855, to design dresses, an innovation for which he seems to have been more or less responsible, but a mere employee, he was of course allowed no credit for them; however his son assures us that the dress worn here by the Empress, purchased from Maison Gagelin was actually one of his father's designing. A new era of dress and fashion was opening, but it was not until the very end of our period — in 1860 that M. Worth at last received a summons from Eugenie to

call on her — and the couturier had arrived. At the very end of our period W.M. Egley's "Omnibus Life in London" of 1859¹⁷ gives us a final reminder that fashion was by this date becoming available to an ever increasing public — and was consequently becoming subject to ever increasing hazard. Crinolines did not only froth over the sides of the smart landaus — they were crammed into omnibuses too, and wedged into the middle of large and excited crowds. Those people who do still feel that clothing or costume have something to do with comfort or convenience have obviously never seriously considered getting into an already full, twelve inside, omnibus wearing a steel cage, as the lady in the picture is having to do. It is true that 'Punch' was recording complaints from elderly ladies whose hoops had been all "scrounged-up" and buckled — but the people in Mr. Egley's omnibus seem to be managing quite well — and innumerable equally inconvenient forms of dress were to be got through before the design of the omnibus was radically changed.

No; comfort and convenience have little to do with dress, and certainly nothing at all to do with Fashion.

For Fashion's sake we will all happily cope with difficulties — perhaps even with an extra enjoyable panache.

Fashion is concerned with ideas and ideals, with feeling and with emotion, with aesthetics and appearances — its comfort and convenience are entirely in the mind.

Sometimes it can turn women into angels — and sometimes its strictly for the birds!

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NOTE. All Fashion plates used to illustrate this talk were from 'Petit Courier Des Dames' for the appropriate year unless otherwise stated in the text.