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## (Un)dress and (Dis)empowerment): The Relationship Between Women and Dress from the Cavaliers to the Romantics

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# (UN)DRESS and (DIS)EMPOWERMENT

the relationship between women and dress  
from the Cavaliers to the Romantics



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The most cruel wounds will of course soon heal, and they may still people the world, and dress to please man - all the purposes which certain celebrated writers have allowed that they were created to fulfil. (Wollstonecraft 312)

References to women and their dress continually recur in British literature, especially predominant between the mid-seventeenth century (the Cavaliers) and the early nineteenth century (the Romantics). Clothing, or lack thereof, becomes one means for male authors to write about women. In John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667), Robert Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes" and "Delight in Disorder" (1648), and John Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes" (1819), the authors undress the individuals to render them vulnerable, often weaving eroticism and voyeurism into their examinations. Other works, such as Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock (1714) and Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders (1722), detail the temporary power contained within the manipulation of attire, but reaffirm the patriarchy's ultimate control by reclaiming women's limited influence. Finally, the essays and conduct manuals prevalent in eighteenth century England directly detail the immense importance of dress imposed upon women by the patriarchy. Wetenhall Wilkes' religiously-based A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady (1740) and John Gregory's social view in A Father's Legacy to his Daughters (1774) offer repressive guidelines to women regarding their attire. Set against these numerous "feminine ideals" are Mary Astell's A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest (1694) and Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), essays which uncover various fallacies of the period, including the fashion preoccupation, and call women to nurture their mind rather than their dress. Whether women are dressed or undressed, empowered or disempowered, pious or ornamental, the close link drawn between women and clothing by male authors falsely defines femininity and restricts a woman's value to her physical beauty.

## (UN)DRESS

A woman's highest worth is her physical beauty, repeatedly appearing as the elevated subject of dress-themed literature. Dressed, she is a work of art worthy of admiration; undressed, she becomes vulnerable to man's will. John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667), Robert Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes" and "Delight in Disorder" (1648), and John Keats' "The Eve of St. Agnes" (1819) illustrate the literary links between the individual and clothing. Because Paradise Lost draws heavily from the Bible, Milton naturally depicts both sexes disrobed to detail the universal association between nudity and vulnerability. However, most writers of the period limit their clothing characterizations to women; Herrick and Keats' versions of femininity undercut the female's worth by assigning her to a strictly ornamental realm. In discussing attire, men writers often equate a woman with her clothing and undress her to represent vulnerability, lost innocence, eroticism, voyeurism, and objectification.

\*      \*

In Paradise Lost, John Milton details both man and woman's undress within the Biblical context of humankind's Fall. He draws on a long-standing patriarchal tradition to illustrate that nudity represents more than simple physical undress. Accompanying Adam and Eve's realization of their nudity is the loss of spiritual and emotional innocence. Undress symbolizes the stripping of their graces that God bestowed upon them, previously experienced in the Garden of Eden. As they stand bare before God and await judgment, they are naked in both body and spirit. After the Fall, they are vulnerable and devoid of God's grace and protection.

In Book IX, Milton implements nudity to represent a post-Fallen awakening. He describes their physical nakedness to represent their loss of goodness and innocence:



and each the other viewing,  
Soon found their eyes how opened, and their minds  
How darkened; innocence, that as a veil  
Had shadowed them knowing ill, was gone,  
Just confidence, and native righteousness,  
And Honour from about them, naked left  
To guilty shame he covered, but his robe  
Uncovered more. (Milton IX,1052-1059)

Milton uses a symbolic article of clothing to represent their actual nudity realization. Clothing represents their innocent pre-Fallen state; innocence is a veil that once protected humankind from evils. After the Fall, God removes the protective veil and allows them to experience all evils. In Paradise Lost: Unwin Critical Library, G. K. Hunter contends that

The simple idea of a physical nakedness that is looked at is turned into a psychological nakedness that looks, a stripping away of the innocence in which nakedness was also a veil between their eyes and 'knowing ill'; the physical eyes are opened indeed (as Scripture says) but the mental interpretation of what the eyes see is 'darkened'. (Hunter 29)

Milton parallels physical awareness with mental awareness. Their physical perception of themselves and each other is clouded, as is their spiritual and emotional state. After the Fall, they find themselves "...destitute and bare / Of all their virtue" (Milton IX, 1062-1063). Their realized lack of clothing is the lack of obedience, purity and goodness in the fallen Adam and Eve.

Nudity is now undesirable and dirty. As they discover their bodies, they try to cover themselves:

But let us now, as in bad plight, devise  
What best may for the present serve to hide

The parts of each from other, that seem most  
To shame obnoxious, and unseemliest seen,  
Some tree whose broad smooth leaves together sewed,  
And girded on our loins, may cover round  
Those middle parts, that this new comer, shame,  
That sit not, and reproach us as unclean. (Milton IX, 1091- 1098)

Adam and Eve no longer enjoy innocent virtue or live freely in the Garden of Eden. Whereas nudity was once ignorant freedom, it is now is a knowledgeable embarrassment. Again, Milton ties nudity to shame:

And with what skill they had, together sewed,  
To gird their waist, vain covering if to hide  
Their guilt and dreaded shame; O how unlike  
To that first naked glory. (Milton IX, 1112-1115)

The "first naked glory" is Adam and Eve's pre-Fallen state when they were in harmony with the Garden and God, in contrast with their post-Fallen lustful nudity. They try to hide themselves from God and each other, not yet realizing that their nakedness runs deeper than their clothing.

Milton further parallels physical nakedness to spiritual nakedness in Book X. Their disobedience in eating the Fruit of Knowledge angers God and requires punishment. When God sends his Son to cast judgment, Adam hides: "I heard thee in the garden, and of thy voice / Afraid, being naked, hid myself" (Milton X, 116-117). Milton uses clothing to introduce the exchange between God and His servants; Adam's fear stresses the link between realized nudity and vulnerability. Their acknowledged nudity indicates their disobedience:

That thou art naked, who  
Hath told thee? Hast thou eaten of the tree  
Whereof I gave thee charge thou shouldst not eat? (Milton X, 121-123)

The Son directly questions their disobedience when he asks how they discovered their nakedness. Realized physical nudity indicates the betrayal of God and contains the shame, guilt, and corruption that accompanied humankind's Fall.

The Son covers their bodies with animal skins because he pities the fallen, naked humans. Their spiritual nudity renders them vulnerable to Satan's corruption, so the Son bestows righteousness upon Adam and Eve. They both experience physical and spiritual nakedness, so He covers their bareness with physical and spiritual dress:

As father of his family he clad  
Their nakedness with skins of beasts, or slain,  
Or as the snake with youthful coat repaid;  
And thought not much to clothe his enemies:  
Nor he their outward only with the skins  
Of beasts, but inward nakedness, much more  
Opprobrious, with his robe of righteousness,  
Arraying covered from his Father's sight. (Milton X, 216-223)

The Son clothes them with animal skins and, more importantly, tends to their "inward nakedness" by bestowing righteousness upon them. Milton repeatedly connects clothing with the human condition and spiritual state: in Book IX, innocence is a veil and in Book X, righteousness is a robe. Milton effectively uses clothing and nudity to represent Adam and Eve's new-found vulnerability after disobeying God's will.

\* \*

In "Upon Julia's Clothes," Robert Herrick uses clothing as the means to voyeuristically examine Julia. For the speaker, clothing is as important as the woman, as he primarily concentrates on the fabric's movement:

When as in silks my Julia goes,  
Then, then (me thinks) how sweetly flowes  
That liquefaction of her clothes. (Herrick "Upon" 1-3)

The robe is set into surreal movement as it turns from silk to water, paralleling the poem's flowing form. Certainly, Julia moves as beautifully beneath the silk, but instead the speaker concentrates on the removal of Julia's clothing to enhance the seductive tone. The clothing is removed, leaving the audience with an erotic mental image of an undressed woman in a pool of silks and water.

In the second stanza, Julia is free from her clothing and adorned in water:

Next, when I cast mine eyes and see  
That brave Vibration each way free;  
O how that glittering taketh me! (Herrick "Upon" 4-6)

Herrick ambiguously describes her degree of undress. Some critics, such as Dale B. J. Randall, contend that she is clothed and the silks are wet: "Unfortunately, Herrick's language at the close is somewhat less clear than usual, but the point seems to be that no matter how fair a lady is, obscuring-revealing clothes are the best means to raise the fires within a man," (Randall 16). Randall believes that the actual wet clothing reveals her form and stirs the admirer. However, "free" implies freedom from the silks, therefore the "glittering" is actually Julia's wet, shimmering skin. Further, Herrick floods the poem with movement: movement of her clothes, movement of his eyes upon her, and movement of the glittering water. Thus, it follows that Julia's clothes would also move off her body. The water and nudity, combined with the voyeuristic speaker, turns Julia into a vulnerable sex object. However, the natural images undercut the potential perversion and, instead, enforce the eroticism. For the speaker, Julia's clothing, or lack of, is as enticing as the woman.

Herrick's "Delight in Disorder," on the other hand, dwells on artifice and ornaments. Although the speaker asserts that he prefers disorder to studied art, there is nothing natural within the poem. Perhaps he is searching for the natural elements evident in "Upon Julia's Clothes," but more likely he prefers an unkempt woman. He admits that: "A sweet disorder in the dresse / Kindles in cloathes a wantonnesse:" (Herrick "Delight" 1-2). The woman's disorderly clothes evokes lust in the speaker, while implying that the woman uses tempting dress to fulfill her wantonness as well. The woman is nonexistent, implying her clothes are exchangeable with the person. In discussing her dress, he discusses the woman. Rather than a properly dressed woman, Herrick muses on

A Lawne about the shoulders thrown

Into a fine distraction:

An erring Lace, which here and there

Enthralls the Crimson Stomacher:

A Cuffe neglectfull, and thereby

Ribbands to flow confusedly:

A winning wave (deserving Note)

In the tempestuous petticoat: (Herrick "Delight" 3-10)

The speaker does not call for this disarrayed ornamental dress to free women from their unnecessary adornment, but instead wants it for selfish reasons. An unkempt woman is alluringly vulnerable; loosening her restrictive clothing opens her to examination and seduction. In short, the female is objectified and worthy only of a man's visual satisfaction.

He concludes with the paradoxical relationship between "natural" disarray and studied dress:

A carelesse shooe-string, in whose tye

I see a wilde civility:

Doe more bewitch me, then when Art

Is too precise in every part. (Herrick "Delight" 11-14)

Just as the speaker is enticed by a "sweet disorder" in the beginning of the poem, he observes a "wilde civility" at the end. The "wilde" implies unkempt, while the "civility" refers to the formality of her dress and her high social status. Thus, he calls for a proper woman whose clothes coyly allure and entice. By describing his preference for minor disarray, the speaker alludes to the woman's gradual undressing. He details the small, separate disorders that captivate him; taken collectively, the poem describes a partially undressed woman. In Herrick's poetry, clothing is interchangeable with the female and undress prevails over dress.

\* \*

In "The Eve of St. Agnes," John Keats details Porphyro's voyeuristic pursuit of Madeline. Porphyro conceals himself in Madeline's bed chamber to ensure that she dreams of him; since whomever she dreams of the night before St. Agnes Day is fated to be her husband. Porphyro hides and watches Madeline undress. Her erotic undressing prepares her for the ensuing symbolic sexual act: "There was a painful change, that night expelled / The blisses of her dream so pure and deep," (Keats 300-301). He takes her virginity, moving the woman from innocence to experience. Throughout the poem, clothing characterizes Madeline and her "feminine" position. Keats uses clothing to introduce Madeline on visual terms, foreshadow her loss of innocence, render her vulnerable, and characterize her as an unreal being.

Keats introduces Madeline's physical description and first actions with clothing to emphasize the importance of appearance and visual observation. She is among her family who "At length burst in the argent revelry, / With plume, tiara, and all rich array," (Keats 37-38). He characterizes Madeline with her rich attire, assigning her to the upper class. He describes the clothing rather than the person,

emphasizing the clothing's importance above the individual. Likewise, her first action is observing the clothing of other women:

her maiden eyes divine,  
Fixed on the floor, saw many a sweeping train  
Pass by - she heeded not at all: (Keats 57-59)

Keats subtly links Madeline and Porphyro with visual observations: as Porphyro does in a later passage, Madeline looks at others. Unlike Porphyro, however, Madeline disregards her subject in exchange for her thoughts. Because the heart of the poem centers on clothing and undressing, Keats includes these small details to introduce the ensuing importance of dress and visual observations.

The speaker describes Madeline's clothing and beauty at length. As Porphyro first observes Madeline preparing for bed, she is a celestial vision:

Full on the casement shone the wintry moon,  
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast  
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;  
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together pressed,  
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,  
And on her hair a glory, like a saint. (Keats 217-222).

At this point, Madeline is clothed, innocent and holy; she both acts and looks pure. Keats hints at eroticism, but grounds the stanza in religious imagery. However, the poet quickly moves away from religious innocence to an exploration of the erotic:

Anon his heart revives; her vespers done,  
Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;  
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;  
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees  
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees. (Keats 226-230)

After finishing her prayers, Madeline undresses. Whereas she was once pure and angelic in her fine clothes, she is now unkempt and prey to Porphyro. In Keats and Embarrassment, Christopher Ricks asserts that "the whole impulse and movement of the stanza are devoted to an act of freeing," (Ricks 90). She may be free from her clothing, but she is, more importantly, objectified and valued only for her beauty. Further, her loss of clothing foreshadows her loss of innocence. Whereas she was once virginally angelic, she is now wildly free. Because his concealment symbolically climaxes in the loss of Madeline's virginity, her undressing prepares her for the loss.

Her loss of clothing parallels her loss of control; undressed, Madeline is vulnerable. Porphyro controls the action, willfully concealing himself in Madeline's bedroom: "Stolen to this paradise, and so entranced, / Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress," (Keats 244-245). Because clothing is a reflection of the female, Keats uses her dress to describe Madeline's nudity. In describing her empty clothes instead of the nude woman, Keats again reduces the potential perversion of a concealed voyeur. However, perverse or not, Keats empowers the voyeur and renders Madeline helpless. Madeline is Porphyro's quest and he violates her with unwelcome stares. He holds the privileged position, determining the focus and duration of the concealed observation. Porphyro's voyeurism takes away Madeline's privacy and, symbolically, her virginity. His presumptuous actions deny Madeline of her self-determination, enforcing her vulnerable position.

Keats uses metaphoric clothing to elevate Madeline to unreal female personas. She is first an ideal angel that intoxicates Porphyro:

She seemed a splendid angel, newly dressed,  
Save wings, for Heaven. Porphyro grew faint;  
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint. (Keats 223-225)



Her clothes parallel her virtue, which are both superficial measurements of a woman's worth. Porphyro relishes her freshness, but soon takes her virginity. By association, Keats' use of an angel details the ideal woman: pure, virginal, and decorated. As she undresses, she moves from "innocent girl" to "erotic woman." Keats describes Madeline while undressing as "Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed," (Keats 231). The mermaid offers an erotic version of the ideal female: a bare-chested fantasy for male sailors. Keats conveys the image of a beautiful woman entangled in sea-weed. Ricks asserts that

Yet the sea-weed to me epitomizes the central strength and sanity of Keats's erotic poetry: its creation of a double sense, both within and without the eroticism, so that we both are and are not one of the lovers themselves. The point about a word like sea-weed, and about the thing itself, is that it arouses strong mixed feelings; it is both fascinating in its tactile pungent oddity and yet faintly repellent. (Ricks 91)

Ricks fails to note that, in elevating Madeline to a desirable mythic status, Keats undercuts Madeline's genuine femininity. In an earlier draft of the poem, Keats uses the image of the "Syren of the sea" (Keats Longman notes 468) rather than the mermaid. Both images connote seduction and beauty, however, the mermaid image better suits the poem. The poem relies on visual images, but Sirens hold strong aural associations. Further, the Siren results in death to sailors, whereas a mermaid is harmless and simply for wonder. By choosing the mermaid image over the Siren, Keats exchanges a powerful female image for a decorative representation. By linking dress and undress to elevated female images, Keats portrays an unobtainable ideal imposed on women.

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## (DIS)EMPOWERMENT

Typical of the period and depicted in such works as Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock (1714) and Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders (1722), manipulation of clothing results in female empowerment. Whether the desired end is virtue, money, self-determination or marriage, a woman realizes her physical appearance is the means to reach an empowered end. However, her influence is temporal and exists only in relation to the patriarchy. Since man enjoys society's privileged position, woman obtains power from him. Society may allow a woman power, but only on its terms and for a limited time. As she adorns herself to entice a man, she actually feeds the patriarchy: the woman enjoys temporary power, and the man gains a show-piece. Eventually, the man reclaims her quasi-power, affirming his dominance. A woman can work within the patriarchy, but never conquer it. While Pope and Defoe explore the issue differently, each author illustrates the relationship between a woman's manipulation of dress and her empowerment.

\* \*

While Paradise Lost is the prototypic illustration of the nudity/vulnerability association, The Rape of the Lock (1714) epitomizes the empowerment and subsequent disempowerment of women through physical appearance. In The Rape of the Lock, Pope implements a mock-epic form to satirically depict the actual snipping of Arabella Fermor's lock by Lord Petre (Rousseau 2). Pope explained that he intended the poem to be a truce among the Fermors, Petres, and Carylles, the involved wealthy families:

The stealing of Miss Belle Fermor's hair, was taken too seriously,  
and caused estrangement between the two families, though they  
had lived so long in great friendship before. A common acquaintance  
and well-wisher to both, desired me to write a poem to make jest of  
it, and laugh them together again. (Pope 81)

The original poem of three cantos (The Rape of the Locke 1711) offended the families after publication; they thought that the poem's parallels to the participants were scandalously indecent (Pope 90). In the five cantos version of 1714, Pope implements epic machinery to further distance the poem from the actual event. Pope depicts a world where the adornment of hair and clothing empowers and subsequently disempowers Belinda, the goddess-like representation of Arabella.

Pope's opening characterizations of Belinda as passively sleeping and vainly primping illustrate that a woman's power lies not in her strength, but in her beauty. Just as the traditional epic hero arms himself, the heroine prepares herself for the ensuing battle:

The busy Sylphs surround their darling care,  
These set the head, and those divide the hair,  
Some fold the sleeve, whilst others plain the gown;  
And Betty's prais'd for labours not her own. (Pope I, 145-148)

By introducing Belinda in her toilette, Pope immediately associates the woman with vanity. Aided by the attending Sylphs, which represent "feminine honour, flirtation, courtship, the necessary rivalry of man and woman," (Brower 62) Belinda consciously manipulates her physical appearance to empower herself. The imaginary creatures adorn Belinda, giving the woman mythical beauty for which Betty, her maid, takes credit. Paradoxically, she must be both desirable and unobtainable within high society. Caught in the contradictory role of a coquette, Belinda must dress to attract without encouraging sexual pursuit. According to Kate Beaird Meyers in "Feminist Hermeneutics and Reader Response: The Role of Gender in Reading The Rape of the Lock:"

Belinda had learned well the lessons taught by a male-dominated society. She is vain, lazy, superficial, and artificial. She knows it is

only her outward appearance in which men are interested, and she gains power by making herself as attractive an object as possible.

(Beard Meyers 48)

Because Belinda works within a male sphere, men enforce the importance of appearance. While she manipulates her appearance for empowerment, her actions are directly connected to pleasing a man and, ultimately, finding a suitable husband.

However, Belinda's enjoyment of flirtatious power is temporary. Her beauty bewitches the Baron, prompting him to cut off a tempting lock: "The meeting points the sacred hair dissever / From the fair head, for ever, and for ever!" (Pope III, 153-154). As the entranced Baron cuts off the lock, he disempowers Belinda by symbolically stealing her virginity. As observed by Ellen Pollak in "Rereading The Rape of the Lock: Pope and the Paradox of Female Power:"

And it is not insignificant that the symbolic loss of the Belle's much-coveted virginity is realized in the form of a castration or literal *cutting off* of that bodily part of her associated most strongly with those "masculine" attributes of the coquette -- her power, skill, and pride. (Pollak 432)

Pollock reads the symbolic rape as both a removal of her virginity and of her "masculinity." The lock represents Belinda's empowerment and, as the lock is cut, so is her power. She alludes to the lock as a phallic symbol, which multiplies Belinda's curious position. Since power is rarely associated with women, to hold power, even stemming from appearance, transforms a woman into a man. She adorns the nape of her neck with phallus-shaped locks, only to be "castrated" by the Baron who returns Belinda to her powerless feminine position. However, from the patriarchy's point of view, Belinda invited the attack; she was armed for battle, thus the instigator.

Given that Belinda lives in "the insubstantial quality of the world in which a woman is recognized as woman only by the clothes she wears and the way her hair is dressed," (Krieger 305-306) she retains little dignity or control after being publicly raped of her beauty and, by extension, her virtue. The rape mortifies Belinda, evident as she forgets all proper decorum in her passionate reaction:

Then flash'd the living lightning from her eyes,  
And screams of horror rend th' affrighted skies.  
Not louder shrieks to pitying heav'n are cast,  
When husbands, or when lapdogs breathe their last,  
Or when rich China vessels, fall'n from high,  
In glitt'ring dust, and painted fragments lie! (Pope III, 155-160)

Pope uses china to allude to the lost lock's sexual implications; as the china breaks, so does her virginity. Both Belinda and the actual china are decorated, and both lose their value when broken. Ironically, Belinda is rendered helpless because of her appearance, the asset which first empowered her.

In response to the incident, Clarissa highlights the superficial world of dress and paradox. Earlier in the poem, Clarissa gave the Baron the fatal scissors and now reiterates the poem's moral. She comments on the triviality of the upper class, reducing their lives to dressing and dancing: "Oh! if to dance all night, and dress all day. / Charm'd the small-pox, or chas'd old-age away:" (Pope V, 19-20). Clarissa keenly illustrates high society's superfluity, but the fashionable reject her moralizing. To highlight the absurd importance placed on dress, Pope describes society's reaction to Clarissa with the same articles that she criticizes: "All sides in parties and begin th' attack; / Fans clap, silks rustle and tough whalebones crack;" (Pope V, 39-40). By expressing their reaction in terms of clothing, Pope enforces society's superficial emphasis on appearance. Clarissa represents the only substantial view in the mock-epic, but her wisdom is contemptuously refused.

Thus, the upper class is concerned mainly with dress and decorum. Women live paradoxically in the social realm; they must entice a man, but not over-entice. Belinda, armed and ready for battle, fights and symbolically loses her most valuable commodity: her virginity. She retaliates and demands that the Baron "Restore the Lock!" (Pope V, 103). She actively tries to reclaim her power, but the lock physically and symbolically cannot be restored. Instead it floats towards the Heavens, where "This Lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame, / And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name," (Pope V, 149-150). Kate Beaird Meyers reads the immortalization of the lock as a repressive reminder to women: "Intended to remind women of Belinda's heavenly reprimand, the astro-lock becomes, for the resisting reader, a symbol of the lengths to which the guardians of the phallogentric culture will go to retain control," (Beaird Meyers 49). Therefore, the elevation of her lock is actually an eternal symbol of female powerlessness. Further, its earthly function as a representation of her virginity is lost. Although manipulating her appearance temporarily empowers Belinda, the Baron disempowers her by "raping" her virtue.

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Unlike the works considered thus far, Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders examines a woman beyond her simple physical value. Rather than restrict Moll to an ornamental sphere, Defoe assumes a female voice to depict the social and financial restrictions of eighteenth century women. However, despite his liberated attitudes, Defoe cannot deny the importance that society places on appearance. By assuming numerous disguises, Moll repeatedly contorts the patriarchy's emphasis on appearance to her advantage: "I had dress'd myself up in a very mean Habit, for as I had several Shapes to appear in," (Defoe 185). Thus, the destitute woman manipulates her clothing for financial empowerment, but, ultimately, is apprehended and forced to resume her subordinate role in England's patriarchal

society. Defoe's Moll Flanders illustrates that clothing is a means for women to gain power, but inevitably results in patriarchal disempowerment.

Throughout the novel, Defoe characterizes the protagonist as both a victim and manipulator of the male-dominated society that enforces the importance of a woman's appearance. Moll uses her beauty and charm to marry a number of wealthy (and, unwittingly, not-so-wealthy) husbands in order to improve her status. As she ages, she finds herself in an extremely unfortunate lot: a poor widow beyond marrying years in patriarchal society. Left with no respectable prospects, Moll must defy social norms to ensure her financial security. Ironically, she uses her dress to financially subvert the patriarchy's economic and social stratifications. According to Virginia Ogden Birdsall in Defoe's Perpetual Seekers: A Study of Major Fiction, Moll steals money to survive, not simply because of wanton greed:

Money is not for Moll an end in itself but a means to the end of ease and comfort in the most elemental sense -- a means of achieving a feeling of at-homeness in the world and of freedom from fear. She is an accumulator because money is power and lack of it weakness and vulnerability. (Ogden Birdsall 80)

Ogden Birdsall accurately defines Moll's precarious position in a society structured for wealthy men. Whereas nudity indicates vulnerability in other seventeenth and eighteenth century works, Defoe equates poverty with vulnerability and empowers Moll with clothing to overcome her disadvantage. In order to steal without suspicion, Moll manipulates society's superficial assumptions regarding appearance. She carefully devises her costumes, such as when she steals watches in large crowds: "for you are to observe, that on these Adventures we always went very well Dress'd, and I had very good Cloaths on, and a Gold Watch by my Side, as like a Lady as other Folks" (Defoe 165). By appearing as an upstanding citizen, she

avoids detection. Thus, she works within society's superficial expectations to subvert the law.

Moll's cross-dressing disguise exemplifies her empowerment and subsequent disempowerment through dress. The Governess, Moll's surrogate mother and strong female role model, "...laid a new Contrivance for my going Abroad, and this was to Dress me up in Mens Cloths, and so put me into a new kind of Practise" (Defoe 167). Armed with a male partner, Defoe describes Moll's adventures in terms of her disguise:

I was Tall and Personable, but a little too smooth Fac'd for a Man;  
however as I seldom went Abroad but in the Night, it did well enough;  
but it was a long time before I could behave in my new Cloths: I mean  
as to my Craft; it was impossible to be so Nimble, so Ready, so  
Dexterous at these things, in a Dress so contrary to my Nature;  
(Defoe 167)

Literally, adopting men's dress is an ingenious disguise to enact her criminal "craft" while looking as if she belongs. However, Moll's actions run far deeper than simple farce. At this point, Moll's patriarchal victimization mandates that she adopts a man's dress for personal survival. Since women have no place in society independent of men, she must assume a masculine role. The courts label Moll a victimizer because of her criminal activity; however, because of her disadvantaged class and gender, she is actually a victim of patriarchal society and must steal to survive. As stated in John P. Zomchick's essay "'A Penetration which Nothing Can Deceive': Gender and Juridical Discourse in Some Eighteenth-Century Narratives:"

Moll's change into male clothing coincides with the loss of many of the affective traits one would expect to find in a "respectable" woman...The public sphere, which demands both transvestism and cruelty for survival, corrupts Moll's femininity. (Zomchick 550)



As Zomchick keenly illustrates, Moll's cross-dressing signals her complete change to predatory criminal behavior, traditionally associated with the masculine. Her socially-mandated transformation further illustrates Moll's patriarchal victimization; given no recourse as a woman, Moll literally and figuratively becomes an aggressive man to better provide for herself.

Not only does her male attire allow her to steal, but it also provides her with an alibi. When her male partner is caught, a mob pursues Moll to the Governess' house. Again, Defoe describes her actions in relation to clothing:

they did not immediately knock at the Door, by which I got time to throw off my Disguise, and dress me in my own Cloths; besides, when they came there, my Governess, who had her Tale ready, kept her Door shut, and call'd out to them and told there was no Man came in there; the People affirm'd there did a Man come in there, and swore they would break open the Door. (Defoe 168-169)

Moll transforms from man to woman within the safety of her mother figure's house. Intentionally enacting a radical contrast to the aggressive thief persona, she sits with a child when the Constable arrives: "and there sat I at work with a great litter of things about me, as if I had been at Work all Day, being my self quite undress'd, with only Nightcloaths on my Head, and a loose Morning Gown wrapt about me" (Defoe 169). She sheds her male disguise for an excessively feminine disguise, neither of which is the real Moll. Accompanied with a child and "woman's work" in her bedroom, Moll is a vision of femininity. The bedroom, representing feminine domesticity, starkly contrasts the cruel streets' masculine harshness. Viewed in this light after a thorough search, Moll cannot possibly be accused of being the male thief.

By adopting the standard man's dress and shedding it to avoid detection, Moll foils the patriarchy with its own appearance standards. By concealing her

gender, Moll ensures her anonymity. Her apprehended accomplice, in attempting to name his partner, naturally described a man: "for he gave in my Name who he call'd *Gabriel Spencer*, which was the Name I went by to him, and here appear'd the Wisdom of my concealing my Name and Sex from him, which if he had ever known I had been undone" (Defoe 170). In this case, the role of clothing is intrinsically related to power, both financial gain and, more importantly, personal concealment. She cleverly deceives the Constable and her accomplice, both capable of prosecuting her. According to John Rietz in "Criminal Ms-Representation: Moll Flanders and Female Criminal Biography:"

But on a moment's notice, after about three weeks in drag, she is able to doff this disguise, don her women's attire, and fool a mob of pursuers. Her ability to straddle categories, her protean nature, allows her to escape detection in both legitimate and illegitimate society. Her status at this point is perhaps best suggested in that she says her partner "never knew that I was not a Man," rather than saying he "never knew that I was a Woman." She defines herself negatively, not as belonging inside categories but outside them. (Rietz 193)

Rietz illustrates Moll's position of outsider, however, the impact is greater than simply being able to avoid detection. Moll represents the uncomfortable position in which the unmarried woman finds herself: without a man, a woman has no social identity. While literally subverting the patriarchy, she symbolically illustrates a disadvantaged woman's classification as a social outcast.

Shortly after the cross-dressing adventure, Moll disguises herself as a widow: "I had taken up the Disguise of a Widow's Dress; it was without any real design in view, but only waiting for any thing that might offer, as I often did," (Defoe 188). In an attempt to appear innocent, Moll chooses a character who is defined in relation to men. As she wanders Covent Garden looking for a profitable opportunity, the

Mercer mistakes her for another "widow" who robbed a shop. When questioned, Moll indignantly uses her disguise as an alibi: "but that I was preparing to go over to *America*, where my Husband's Effects lay, and that I was going that Day to buy some Cloaths to put my self into second Mourning," (Defoe 193). Clothing enables Moll to assume another temporary identity in order to subvert society and the law.

Ironically, when the actual thief is apprehended, Moll works within the legal system to prosecute the Mercer for the defamation of her contrived character. She continues playing her role, now appearing as a wealthy widow in the second stage of mourning:

My Attorney gave me Notice to come to this Meeting in good Cloaths, and with some State, that the *Mercer* might see I was something more than I seem'd to be that time they had me: Accordingly I came in a new Suit of second Mourning, according to what I had said at the Justices; I set my self out too, as well as a Widows dress in second Mourning would admit; my Governess, also furnish'd me with a good Pearl Neck-lace, that shut in behind with a Locket of Diamonds, which she had in Pawn; and I had a very good gold Watch by my Side; so that in a Word, I made a very good Figure, (Defoe 195-196)

An elaborate disguise removes all guilt from the "widow." The mourning costume evokes pity from the accusers and court, while the jewels imply wealth. Moll misrepresents herself to profit within the proper legal channels, when, ironically, she was originally in Covent Garden to steal. When claiming her settlement, which consisted of "150 *l.* and a Suit of black silk Cloaths, ...I brought my Governess with me, dress'd like an old Dutchess, and a Gentleman very well dress'd, who we pretended Court'd me," (Defoe 197). Moll takes others into her world of disguise and false identity. Accepting the settlement with two well-dressed people, one being a suitor, casts off any suspicion that she would need to steal. Her disguise's

workability underscores the patriarchy's power. The only powerful women are those that work within gender and class restrictions, even if in disguise. Despite Moll's clever trickery, she still works within the patriarchy. Although she foils the system, she, like all women regardless of status, cannot escape it.

Moll's numerous criminal adventures usually involve disguises, including dressing as a beggar "for this was a Dress that every body was shy, and afraid of," (Defoe 198) and "dress'd myself up fine," (Defoe 200) to steal from shops and children in St. James's Park. In order avoid suspicion, Moll states that "I took up new Figures, and contriv'd to appear in new Shapes every time I went abroad," (Defoe 205). Although she is the master of her trade, she is finally caught stealing lace from private house. Significantly, Moll does not describe her clothing at the adventure's out-set. Possibly because she did not plan the caper, but instead happened upon an open door, Moll appears dressed as her true self. Without the protection of a disguise, she is caught: "two fiery Dragons cou'd not have been more furious than they were; they tore my Cloths, bully'd and roar'd as if they would have murther'd me," (Defoe 213). Significantly, the women catch Moll by her clothing. Whereas clothing once empowered her, the tearing of her clothes represents the stripping of clothing's power. By ripping her outfit, the women symbolically stop Moll's escapades that involve the manipulation of her dress.

Unfortunately for Moll, the law, and by extension the patriarchy, intervenes and reclaims her power. She is taken from the female-dominated world headed by the Governess and prosecuted within male-dominated society. Perhaps gender equality only occurs under the despotic laws of eighteenth century England, insofar as both sexes are eligible for the gallows. According to John Rietz,

Moll's reaffirmation of patriarchal rule comes when she is apprehended and her career is thus brought to an end. In prison, she is reunited with her husband Jemy and is born a second time in

Newgate, this time to a life of legitimacy and under a figure of masculine authority. (Rietz 188)

She is imprisoned, returned to her Lancashire husband and reformed by the minister, all representative of social and religious patriarchal dominance. The minister helps to change Moll's punishment from a hanging order to transportation. Since Moll promises to leave England, the courts allow her to live. Even though the legal system takes away Moll's power to commoditize, they cannot take away her innate cleverness. Moll's position moves from empowerment/disempowerment in relation to the English patriarchy, to limited self-determination in America. She uses her polished scheming to procure her inheritance from her mother, so Jemy and her financial future is secure. Provided for, she no longer needs to steal in disguise.

As concisely stated by Ying-Ying Chien, Moll is "a victim of patriarchal social systems that provide no acceptable channels for [her] immediate needs of self-expression," (Chien 385-A). The patriarchy pervades all stages of Moll's life. Society subjugates Moll for her gender and class, and her disguises subvert these discriminations to overcome her lot. Left with no recourse in a society geared towards men, Moll is forced into criminal activity by the same patriarchal institution that convicts her. She recognizes her volatile position and uses disguises as the empowered means to her financially secure end. As defined by Virginia Ogden Birdsall, "for Moll power is central. And if power resides in knowledge, it also resides in the money that a person of superior wit is able to accumulate," (Ogden Birdsall 79-80). In an attempt to improve her financial standing, Moll illustrates the power contained within the manipulation of clothing. However, the patriarchy eventually intervenes and "reforms" her, affirming the patriarchy's ultimate power.

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## DRESS IN SOCIETY

In addition to the literary depiction of women through their dress, eighteenth century conduct essayists wrote directly about the importance of women's attire. As detailed in Wetenhall Wilkes' A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady (1740) and John Gregory's A Father's Legacy to his Daughters (1774), dress holds immense social value from a male perspective. Growing increasingly discontent with men repressing their intellectual growth and dictating women's appearance, Mary Astell's A Serious Proposal to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest (1694) and Mary Wollstonecraft's Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792) represent the quintessential feminist books. Both writers link dress to the denial of education. Astell and Wollstonecraft call women to disregard their superficial preoccupations, such as pointless self-adornment, and instead pursue knowledge. While men define a woman's clothes as an invaluable asset, women writers view dress as one means that the patriarchy prevents women from attaining their full potential.

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The conduct manual author Wetenhall Wilkes advises women on, among other conservative behaviors, the importance of dress in A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady. He views expressive clothing as artificial and a potential corruption, thus women should dress with complete modesty. For Wilkes, female purity is vital and must be reflected in her clothing:

My present design is to caution you against all levities of dress, carriage, or conversation, that may taint or blemish the purity of the mind...That girl, who endeavours, by the artifice of dress, to attract the admiration, to stir up languishing desires, and to provoke the wanton wishes of her gay beholders, is as guilty of breaking the seventh

commandment, as the woman in the *Gospel*, that was taken in the fact. Therefore, be not industrious to set out the beauty of your person; but, as I said before, let your dress always resemble the plainness and simplicity of your heart. (Wilkes 30)

Wilkes is a religious moralist and patriarchal protector, reasoning that developing a personal fashion leads women towards sin. He acknowledges clothing's power to entice men and advises women to rebuke the desire to manipulate this power. Instead, he wants women to dress plainly, presumably hiding their "feminine appeal." Underlying Wilkes patriarchal instruction is the notion that women's sexuality is powerful, thus feared and in need of suppression. His advice to disregard fashion is not for liberation, but instead for repressive protection.

Like Wilkes, John Gregory advises young women on proper decorum in A Father's Legacy to his Daughters. He approaches the subject with seemingly good intentions, but produces an essay to enforce the feminine fashion preoccupation. Gregory opens the section entitled 'Amusements' with the assertion "[d]ress is an important article in female life. The love of dress is natural to you, and therefore it is proper and reasonable," (Gregory 47). The title 'Amusements' connotes past times and triviality implying that women can conceive no greater thought than self-adornment. He simultaneously generalizes and patronizes women and their behavior, yet he discusses clothing's great importance to the female character.

By addressing the issue of dress, Gregory, by implication, discusses the issue of undress. He wants his daughters "to dress in such a way as to conceal any blemishes, and set off your beauties, if you have any, to the greatest advantage," (Gregory 47). Thus, a woman should manipulate her clothes to her advantage, exercising a practiced and perfected coyness. His point becomes clearer as he asserts that "A fine woman shews her charms to most advantage, when she seems most to conceal them. The finest bloom in nature is not so fine as what imagination



forms," (Gregory 48). A woman should dress to entice a man, hinting at her body beneath her clothing. The presentation of her body is as important as her ornamental clothing, thus a woman should alluringly manipulate her dress. His instruction addresses a woman's exterior adornment while implying that enhancing her body is equally important.

Gregory contends that personal appearance is vital to the female, containing power and implication. From a male perspective, a woman's manner of dress reflects her person: "You will not easily believe how much we consider your dress expressive of your characters. Vanity, levity, slovenliness, folly appear through it. An elegant simplicity is an equal proof of taste and delicacy," (Gregory 48). Simplicity and elegance are essential facets of female attire, reflecting her proper character. Gregory's advice, however, moves a woman towards vanity, rather than away. Paradoxically, he warns against vanity, while expressing the importance of dress. He states that "The most perfect elegance of dress appears always the most easy, and the least studied," (Gregory 47) but offers detailed advice on appearance. Thus, Gregory encourages a woman to project a false image of herself. She secretly must preoccupy herself with fashion, but outwardly appear not to do so. Wilkes' pious advice and Gregory's worldly instruction implement divergent means to reach the common end of offering women repressive guidelines regarding the power contained within clothing.

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As women increasingly grew tired of patriarchal repression and false literary depictions, they began to speak out against the regressive ideologies. An undercurrent of feminism arose that "placed Mary Astell at the start of a tradition that resurfaced at the end of the eighteenth century in Mary Wollstonecraft," (Perry 99). Unhappy with women's secondary position, Mary Astell asserts that women should exchange their frivolous behavior for a real education in A Serious Proposal



to the Ladies, for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest. Given the seventeenth/eighteenth century patriarchal belief that women were not capable of learning, Astell's revolutionary views characterize her as "England's first feminist," (Perry 98).

Astell proposes that women "who are sick of the vanity of the world and its impertinencies" (Astell 14) educate themselves at a Protestant educational convent, which she calls "*Religious Retirement*" (Astell 14). Rather than restructure patriarchal society at large, she emphasizes educating women separately where there "will be no impertinent Visits, no foolish Amours, no idle Amusements to distract our Thoughts and waste our precious time; a very little of which is spent in Dressing, that grand devourer and its concomitants," (Astell 25). Astell wants women to disregard the superficial and instead focus on intellectual and religious education. She repeatedly details the detrimental affects resulting from women paying excessive attention to their dress. She begins her clothing discussion by calling women to

Let us learn to pride our selves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion, and not entertain such a degrading thought of our own *worth*, as to imagine that our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the Eyes of Men. (Astell 3-4)

She believes that dress is insignificant, so she wants women to disregard the frivolity of fashion and develop higher pursuits such as religion.

For Astell, clothing is a pointless preoccupation instilled into women. She carefully removes blame from women and, instead, condemns society:

When a poor Young Lady is taught to value her self on nothing but her Cloaths, and to think she's very fine when well accoutred; When she hears say, that 'tis Wisdom enough for her to know how to dress her

self, that she may become amiable in his eyes, to whom it appertains to be knowing and learned; who can blame her if she lay out her Industry and Money on such Accomplishments, and sometimes extends it farther than her misinformers desire she should? (Astell 11-12)

Middle and upper class women, the primary groups to whom she writes, are preoccupied with their attire because it is all society allows. To stray from social convention makes a woman “unfeminine.” However, Astell disregards these regressive values and instead wants to exchange dress for intelligence. She believes that a woman's obsession with appearance prevents her from pursuing the valid avenues of education and religion. As Ruth Perry writes in The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist:

[s]he wrote as an explainer and defender of her sex, and a participant in the rituals of gender: at the tea table, before the dressing-room glass, adroitly parrying the absurd language of gallantry in the drawing room. She had only scorn for the topsy-turvy values of polite society. (Perry 112)

Astell does not directly condemn women for their behavior, but instead primarily places blame on patriarchal society as reinforced by the middle and upper classes.

Astell links education and dress again when discussing the French influence on English society. She believes that women must stop wasting time dressing, and instead educate themselves:

'Tis strange we shou'd be so forward to imitate their Fashions and Fopperies, and have no regard to what really deserves our Imitation. And why shall it not be thought as genteel to understand *French Philosophy*, as to be accoutred in the *French Mode*? (Astell 20)

She details the futility of following the trivial aspects of French culture, their fine dress, and not their real contributions, their philosophers. Clearly, Astell sparked

controversy regarding her stance on women's education and dress. While she introduced these radical ideas near the end of the seventeenth century, Mary Wollstonecraft reiterated and expanded Astell's basic ideology nearly one hundred years later.

Like Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft strives for improvement of the female condition and refuses to accept the prevalent patriarchal attitude of a woman's devalued worth. In Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Wollstonecraft aggressively proposes a female intellectual and social reformation. As stated by Janet Todd in A Wollstonecraft Anthology, "It is a response both to her experience as a woman and to the prevailing English literary tradition of ridicule and scorn for women," (Todd 84). She advises women to disregard their trivial concerns, such as fashion, and instead expand their minds with "[g]ardening, experimental philosophy, and literature" (Wollstonecraft 170). According to Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd, "Although she provides rational bases for her arguments, they are mainly founded on religion; in Wollstonecraft's views, the degraded situation of women affronts the God who created men and women in his own image," (Ferguson and Todd 67). Wollstonecraft emphasizes education and religion, while condemning frivolity.

Wollstonecraft directly attacks Gregory's blanket assertion from A Father's Legacy to his Daughters, regarding women's innate fashion sense:

He advised them to cultivate a fondness for dress, because a fondness for dress, he asserts, is natural to them. I am unable to comprehend what either he or Rousseau mean when they frequently use this indefinite term. If they told us that in a pre-existent state the soul was fond of dress, I should listen to them with a half-smile, as I often do when I hear a rant about innate elegance. But if he only meant to say that the exercise of the faculties will produce this fondness, I deny it.

It is not natural; but arises, like false ambition in men, from a love of power. (Wollstonecraft 111)

Wollstonecraft passionately asserts that neither scholar adequately proves the theory of women's predisposition towards dressing. She recognizes fashion's falsity and, instead, attributes female dress to the desire for power. As previously illustrated in the (DIS)EMPOWERMENT section, Wollstonecraft observes that dress results in reflexive manipulation. Through social dictation, men manipulate women into self-adornment to visually please themselves. Women realize that men hold the power, and, therefore, dress to satisfy men which gives them limited personal power.

Wollstonecraft recognizes the detrimental aspects of a dress obsession among women. Rather than encourage women to adorn themselves as her male contemporaries do, Wollstonecraft uncovers the dress fallacies enforced by society:

and that she will imitate her mother or aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her, poor innocent babe! is undoubtedly a most natural consequence. For men of the greatest abilities have seldom had sufficient strength to rise above the surrounding atmosphere...In this manner, may the fondness for dress, conspicuous in woman, be easily accounted for, without supposing it the result of a desire to please the sex on which they are dependent.

(Wollstonecraft 128)

In contrast to Gregory and Rousseau's assertion that fashion is an innate female quality, Wollstonecraft believes that society conditions women from youth towards the mindless preoccupation. According to Wollstonecraft, attention to dress is neither natural nor a selfless desire to please men. Instead, women become preoccupied with clothing because they are repeatedly exposed to clothing's importance, equating the dressed up girl to her doll because both are ornamental and "lifeless."

As a girl matures, she moves from dressing up to sewing. A woman's upbringing never strays far from her attire:

Men order their clothes to be made, and have done with the subject; women make their own clothes, necessary or ornamental, and are continually talking about them; and their thoughts follow their hands. It is not indeed the making of necessities that weaken the mind; but the frippery of dress. (Wollstonecraft 170)

Like her predecessor, Wollstonecraft does not condemn women, but instead blames the social importance placed on superficial fashion. She explains that women are involved with clothing at every stage, thus are more concerned with dress than men. She asserts that fashion is simply a showy display, which she encourages women to disregard. Further, dress hides the individual's natural self:

The air of fashion, which many young people are so eager to attain, always strikes me like the studied attitudes of some modern pictures, copied with tasteless servility after the antiques; the soul is left out, and none of the parts are tied together by what may properly be termed character. This varnish of fashion, which seldom sticks very close to sense, may dazzle the weak; but leave nature to itself, and it will seldom disgust the wise....Let things take their natural course, and all will be well. (Wollstonecraft 198-199)

Wollstonecraft believes that dress creates a facade. In effect, Wollstonecraft redefines Gregory and Rousseau's false characterization of a woman's innate tendency towards dress. For Wollstonecraft, the "natural course" is not contrived fashion, but natural presentation regardless of appearance. She romantically equates nature with beauty and renounces fashionable artifice.

Patriarchal society forces women into an ornamental realm and provides little chance to develop their minds. Social conditioning points women towards fashion,

but dress is artificial. Rather than polish their physical appearances, Wollstonecraft calls women to develop their mental capacities. Only through education, thus deflating the value of fashion, can women combat repression. She asserts that

the fondness for dress, so extravagant in females, arises from the same cause - want of cultivation of mind. When men meet they converse about business, politics, or literature; but, says Swift, 'how naturally do women apply their hands to each other's lappets and ruffles'. (Wollstonecraft 310)

Wollstonecraft attempts to remedy female repression, beginning in part by directing women away from their preoccupation with appearance. Astell and Wollstonecraft offer similar views on the necessity of turning women's attention away from physical appearance and towards knowledge. Rather than nurture submission like their male contemporaries, both revolutionaries demand education for women.

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As numerous authors of the period demonstrate, clothing is a means to examine a woman. Because dress is a prevalent facet of female life, clothing often stands equal to the woman in her literary depiction. Milton explores the undressing of both sexes, defining the associations between undress and vulnerability as first realized in the Garden of Eden. Herrick and Keats' depicted undressing takes a different form; accompanying the woman's vulnerability is her objectification. Julia and Madeline move from the poem's subject to its object, as the voyeur fulfills his sexual fantasy. Significantly, both women are unaware of their helpless positions as the speakers erotically explore the prey's sexual worth. Neither Julia nor Madeline enjoy the temporary semblance of power that Pope's *Clarissa* and Defoe's *Moll* procure from the manipulation of appearance. However, all women suffer similar fates of subjugation on the patriarchal spectrum. If the period's conduct manuals are to be taken seriously in hindsight, perhaps had Julia and Madeline adopted

Wilkes' regressive advice on modesty, they would not have "tempted" the speakers. Likewise, had Clarissa or Moll followed Gregory's instruction on keeping the power of dress "in check," they could have attained the patriarchal-dictated feminine ideal instead of try to assert personal control.

Because most published seventeenth and eighteenth century authors were men, women became the subjects of their adoration. Taken cumulatively, the continual presentation of women in relation to clothing restricts the female's value to appearance. Few male authors wrote extensively about a woman's worth stemming from her intelligent conversation or extensive education, provided she was offered these opportunities. Instead, a woman's place in literature parallels her social position; the traditional English female is most valued for her physical attributes. Continual superficial reference to attire prevents women from "rising above the fumes of vanity" (Wollstonecraft 198). Astell and Wollstonecraft recognized the social disparity between men and women and encouraged women to combat their secondary lot with education. From the Cavaliers to the Romantics, English male authors subjugate women by repeatedly limiting female literary depictions to dress and undress.

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