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Viewing and creating female beauty: Victorian fashion illustrations and women's fashion in Charlotte Bronte's *Villette*

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Female beauty in the Victorian era was both a matter of viewing and creating.

Before moving on to a more specialized discussion of Victorian beauty, we must make a few general remarks which will set out the parameter along which any discussion of Victorian beauty must move. These are as follows:

- a) To a considerable extent, the very idea of beauty was associated with femininity (Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, p.102).
- b) Women were urged to be beautiful; without beauty, or at least attention to dress and appearance, they would not be able to secure themselves a husband. Marriage was the primary, if not only, means for a woman to have social success and acceptability.
- c) The question how much concern women should show for beauty was fraught with anxieties for the Victorians. Women were supposed to be inconspicuous and modest. Vanity was a major sin and a moral flaw for women.
- d) Therefore, women had to exhibit proper femininity: an ideal appearance coupled with modesty and correct demeanour.
- e) Proper femininity also meant self-control and self-regulation. And, finally,

- f) The most essential quality in woman was that of the good wife and mother. Girls were trained, from a very young age, for their roles as wives and mothers, and were schooled into efficient household management. They were advised to be dutiful, hard-working, self-effacing, and thrifty.

Furthermore, no discussion of Victorian female beauty is complete without reference to Pre-Raphaelite art. This is because Pre-Raphaelite paintings show a picture of female beauty which is conventional and unconventional at the same time. Also, because some Pre-Raphaelite women models were artists themselves, they act as a means by which beauty becomes both an object and a subject. Beautiful women create art in two ways, considered by Western androcentric culture as antithetical: they are both models for paintings and the creators of beauty themselves.

In Pre-Raphaelite paintings, the depiction of female beauty differed from the saccharine depictions of beauty, which could be found in mainstream Victorian artworks. The Pre-Raphaelites were a group of young artists, whose work was characterised by vivid and brilliant colour, attention to detail, religious seriousness, allusiveness, allegory, medieval symbolism and themes taken from myth, poetry and literature. For example, Dante Garbrielle Rossetti, the founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, loved Arthurian legend; John Everett Millais portrayed Shakespeare's Ophelia, Isabella, from John Keats's poem with the same name, and Tennyson's Mariana; John William Waterhouse depicted Tennyson's Lady of Shalot and John Keats's La Belle Dame Sans Merci. The relationship between Pre-Raphaelite Art and literature was reciprocal, as there were poets we now call Pre-Raphaelite, for they were influenced by the movement – poets like Christina Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddall and Algernon Swinburne (Sean Purchase, p.109-11).

Especially notable is the Pre-Raphaelite's use of the human figure: men and most of the women in their paintings have strong and statuesque bodies, which are clearly and powerfully defined by lines and colour. The women are sensual, with long, intricate hair. Their beauty is striking but they are not always pleasant to look at. Pre-Raphaelites opted for an image of sensual and dangerous female beauty in their paintings. Conservative Victorians were not happy with Pre-Raphaelitism:

however, for the Pre-Raphaelites, beauty was treated as exceptional and a rarity. Women did not have to be conventionally beautiful, so long as they were stunning and attractive. The ideal figure in the Victorian era was petite and soft, with small hands and feet, a slender waist and the overall appearance of a china doll. Upon these standards, famous Pre-Raphaelite models like Jane Morris and Annie Miller could be considered crude and even ugly (Jan Marsh, *Jane and May Morris*, p. 15-16). Rossetti's Lilith in the eponymous painting, is dangerous and sexual, a beautiful witch, a femme fatale, the projection of male fantasies and fears (Griselda Pollock, p. 197-198). Most of Rossetti's women, Griselda Pollock argues, signify woman as visibly different, as the "other" of man (p. 201-202). Only Astarte in *Astarte Syriaca* constitutes, for Pollock, an image of plentiful female beauty, an image of an empowered woman.

Lizzie Siddal, was one of the most famous Pre-Raphaelite models, posed for several Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and became the wife of Dante Gabriele Rossetti. Unlike Jane Morris, Lizzie was delicate; nevertheless, in true Pre-Raphaelite fashion, she was not ideally beautiful, but stunning and with extraordinary eyes and hair-colour. Lizzie was an artist and poet herself, and is a current favourite subject for feminist writers. She is both a creator of beauty, and a beautiful enigma herself. The young women Lizzie drew have a delicacy and sadness about them, which mirror Siddal's own tragic life and early death. Her poems have been described as beautiful, dreamy, and deathly (Purchase, p. 111). Siddal's otherworldly beauty and tragic life and death have given her a mythical status in Pre-Raphaelite scholarship.

To sum up, Pre-Raphaelite beauty seems to function in the following manner:

- a) As difference from conventional forms of beauty and from patriarchal regulations on women. Pre-Raphaelite beauties are sensual and have a sexual appeal.
- b) To an extent, as a means for the objectification of women.
- c) As examples of Victorian anxieties about the nature of women and femininity.

Victorian fashion illustrations operate in a similar manner. This is quite notable, and telling of the overall struggles which went along the definition of

femininity, because these illustrations were used in advertising and aimed to appeal to a general public. Thus, they had to satisfy conservative, mainstream Victorian tastes and notions of propriety. However, they too carried a meaning that was no less subversive. The Victorian era is considered the beginning of consumerist society: industrial production increased, a rise in wealth meant that money could be spent on amenities on a scale not seen before. There were enormous changes in the way people lived; comfort was now available not only to a chosen few (the aristocracy and the royal family) but to a large number of people. After 1846, Britain became increasingly wealthy and prosperous. Victorian Britain was at the centre of capitalism and consumerism (Purchase, p. 28-29). As Judith Flanders has put it, “[b]uying goods, owning goods – even living up to goods – were now virtues. Comfort was a moral good” (p.25-26). The Great Exhibition (of industrial production and manufacturing), held in London in May 1851, introduced the world to the phantasmagoria of commodity culture. After the Exhibition, the commodity occupied centre stage in English public life.

The massive developments in manufacturing and industry had great consequences for book production, the spread of literacy and a great increase in the reading public. With new printing technology and cheap paper, the mass circulation of newspapers and magazines became possible. This meant that, for the first time in history, advertisements could reach and influence a large amount of public.

Fashion illustrations presented the latest fashions and colour trends, and were accompanied by paper patterns and instructions on how to create the clothes in question. This, says Margaret Beetham, was a strategy for negotiating between the female ideals of beauty and femininity, and efficient household management. The fashion plate represented the woman as an object to be looked at, not an actor or self. Yet the article next to the plates instructed women into fashionable dressmaking. The woman could move from one kind of femininity to another. “Moreover, the woman as skilled manager –an actor and subject—could turn *herself* into the woman as desired object. This did not so much solve the contradiction as offer practical strategies for encompassing it” (Beetham, p.78). Fashion, concludes Beetham, “produced the female body as the subject/object of desire” (p.79).

Sharon Marcus has taken this idea further, and indicated that the female self as both a subject and an object exists also in the fashion illustrations. The women depicted in those illustrations, are neither passive nor saccharine: despite the conventional beauty standards to which they adhere, they are also playful, assertive, erotic.

This is an important point, because the intended audience for those fashion illustrations was obviously not the men, but the women. Marcus has argued that, in the context of the conservative, Victorian society, this could mean only one thing: that fashion illustrations were an outlet for women's eroticism and sexuality. They were a means for women to present, to women, an erotic and active self. Victorian fashion made women see themselves as erotic, and were able to admire and enjoy femininity as a spectacle on display (Marcus, p. 117-19). Many fashion illustrations were drawn by women artists, not men. Dominant ideology proclaimed that women were, by nature, asexual, modest, submissive. In the fashion illustrations, women are active, sexual and erotic.

The insistence on the modest nature of woman was almost obsessive in the Victorian era, and took many forms. Advice books, conduct books and beauty manuals expressly told women to be modest in all occasions. Novels promoted the image of the selfless, modest, angelic heroine; medical treatises argued that healthy women were passive, sexually unresponsive and demure. Energy, sexuality, anger were all considered to be signs of illness and depravity. Religious sermons also underlined woman's angelic nature. Paintings (except those of the Pre-Raphaelites) depicted the proper woman as innocent and dependent on the men.

Beautiful women were a special target. According to moralists, it was easy for a beautiful woman to lose her modesty. Beautiful young girls were repeatedly advised not to take pride in their beauty, and not to let it affect their character. Conduct book writers such as Sarah Stickney Ellis and Charlotte Mary Yonge insisted that beauty by itself was the sign of emptiness. Beautiful women who took care of their beauty rarely had character, Stickney Ellis argued. The husbands of those women were often disappointed. Beauty could lead to vanity and destroy the woman. Vanity was considered a mortal sin for women. Thus, the subject of a

woman's beauty was charged with ideas concerning morality and a woman's proper behaviour.

Fashion and clothing carried a similar ideological signification. Clothing was considered capable of revealing a great deal about a woman's character. Plain clothing was supposed to show that a woman possessed the Victorian virtues of modesty, propriety and thrift, while a love of fashion and ornament bespoke of weakness of character and love of self. (This in a society which held that it was unnatural for a woman to show any love of self: proper women were considered incapable of loving themselves. They could only love others). An important distinction was made between so-called "honest dress" and finery. Honest dress was the plain dress we mentioned earlier; "finery" was considered to be dress that was so luxurious as to look unelegant or excessive. Love of finery was a moral flaw in woman, as Mariana Valverde's conclusive study on the discourse surrounding the word "finery" has shown. To begin with, finery was evidence of selfishness: "[a]s soon as self comes in, refinement becomes finery" (Yonge, p. 99). The love of finery was considered to lead to moral and financial decline, and was central in the debates about prostitution. It was a common perception that love of finery was "a chief cause of women's descent into prostitution" (Valverde, p.170). A widely-spread belief was that women ended on the streets in order to finance their expensive dress habits, and fashion was associated with loss of virtue (Valverde, p.170). Of course, this was a falsity held dear and promoted by a patriarchal, androcentric society, which did not want to face up to the truth that the major causes of prostitution were two, namely, (a) poverty, and (b) the sexual double standard, which allowed men a sexual life but treated women that had sexual affairs as sinners and social outcasts.

In short, dominant ideology condemned love of fashion and ornament, while pride in her own beauty was considered a major moral flaw for a woman. At the same time, advertising promoted fashion and care of beauty, while women clearly concerned themselves with both, as it is indicated by sales of clothing, beauty products, accessories and magazines.

Beauty was a virtue, so long it only helped a woman to acquire a husband; so long as it rendered woman a good decorative element in her husband's parlour.

Conversely, beauty was a flaw and led to sin, if it made a woman develop any love of self, and if it made her flirty, or if it made her question the patriarchal female destiny of marriage, obedience and motherhood.

This is the ideological framework with which Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* is in dialogue. On one level, *Villette* reflects ideas about female modesty and clothing. Lucy Snowe, the novel's protagonist and first person narrator, often rejects fancy clothing in favour of plain dress. Though Lucy is amazed at how much more beautiful she looks after a hairdresser has done her hair, she remains faithful to a plain appearance.

Further, Lucy draws a clear distinction between her two pretty friends, Paulina Home and Ginevra Fanshaw. As their surnames indicate, Paulina is "homely", Ginevra is "fun". Paulina is ethereal, child-like, obedient and asexual. She lives for others, and is dependent on the men in her life. In the important scene at Hotel Crecy, where Lucy makes a clear moral distinction between her two friends, Paulina wears a dress of pure white. Ginevra, on the other hand, is sexual, likes to flirt and tease men, she is disobedient and irreverent, and wears a crimson red gown.

It is during the Hotel Crecy episode that Lucy draws a clear demarcation line between angelic Paulina and sexual Ginevra, signalling to the reader that Lucy, as narrator, as well as the men in the novel, all side with Paulina, who is patriarchy's perfect woman. Judgment is passed against female sexuality, in favour of the pure and asexual woman. Fashion in this scene (white versus crimson red) thus summarizes dominant views on women, beauty, and sexuality.

Nevertheless, fashion in the novel as a whole has a more discursive function, and does not simply mirror or confirm dominant, patriarchal, Victorian views.

First, it signifies Lucy's negotiations of identity. Lucy works as an English teacher at a Brussels boarding school, the pensionette owned by Madame Beck. At the school's annual theatrical play, Lucy is given the role of a man, suitor to a flirty female character played by Ginevra. To play, Lucy is asked to wear a male costume. She rejects this, and dons some pieces of a man's wardrobe over her own dress. This scene has been read as Lucy's insistence to exist in a space of her own making. Dress functioning as a "productive means of narrating the self and the body", says Sara T.

Bernstein (p. 150) and as a means of making sense of the relationships between individual and society (p. 151), Lucy's mixture of male and female accoutrements allows her to define herself and "to be simultaneously masculine and feminine, and neither" (p.164).

Second, fashion operates to indicate potential. There is one short point in the novel where Dr John, the man Lucy loved, does pay her some attention, asking her to escort him and his mother to social events such as a ball or the theatre. For one of those evenings out, Lucy dons a pink, silk dress, and a shawl of black lace. This attire has been read by Joan Quarm as a symbolic rendering of Lucy's potential to move up the social ladder by marriage to a well-known doctor and the man she loved. Later, when Lucy realizes that she and Dr John are not compatible, but that she is compatible with a less good-looking and older man, she is shown to wear a pink print dress. The move from pink silk to plain print cloth, says Quarm, shows that Lucy cannot circulate herself as she might choose. When Lucy was Dr John's favoured companion, she wore a pink silk gown and black lace. The change from ambition to smaller hope is indicated when she dons a pink print dress, darkened down by a black scarf. Pink silk and lace were the ultimate social success. Pink print is diminishing of material expectations. It is still too frivolous for M. Paul, Lucy's fiance, who is fearful of losing his serious little Protestant.

Though Quarm is correct to point the connection between fashion and Lucy's social success, it should also be said that Lucy is not passive in her choice of partner, even if this would mean a lowering of expectations. Lucy rejects the idea of marrying the doctor, despite the heartbreak this is giving her. Though Lucy loves Graham, his views on women are not acceptable to her; she appreciates that a marriage to the doctor would stifle her. His views on women are too strict and patriarchal, and Lucy herself admonishes him when he declares that Ginevra is impure and sinful, simply because he saw her flirt with a young man (the young man Ginevra later marries). Though Lucy prefers female purity (Paulina) she is not happy when a powerful man speaks ill of sexual women.

Therefore, Lucy's attitude and that of the novel as a whole towards Ginevra and, by extension, towards female sexuality, is ambiguous. Textual evidence

suggests that Lucy is closer to sexuality, frivolity, eroticism and everything else that Ginevra represents than what she would allow or have us believe. Lucy and Ginevra remain friends, long after Paulina has faded out from the narrative. Also, Ginevra's behaviour towards Lucy is never as demeaning as Paulina's. Paulina is often selfish and hurts Lucy repeatedly. While having an affair with Dr John (whom she eventually marries) Paulina makes Lucy read all of his love letters to her, Paulina, even after she realizes that Lucy has feelings for the doctor herself.

Moreover, Lucy's attitude towards Ginevra is an equal mixture of love and antipathy. There is identification between them in a number of ways: they share a cabin in the boat en route to Villette; it is Ginevra who suggests to Lucy to go seek employment at Mme Beck's school; the two women share food and drink; they often walk together and both favour the plain grey dress to the extent that they are mistaken for each other from afar.

Notably, Lucy describes Ginevra's beauty and dress in moments when the identification between them becomes strong. This is, for instance, when Lucy admires Ginevra for her beauty and freshness; also, after Ginevra's marriage, when the younger woman comes to the school to reaffirm her friendship with Lucy. Most importantly, Lucy describes Ginevra's beauty in the pivotal scene in front of the looking-glass, a scene where the boundary between them becomes blurred, and each becomes a reflection of the other. In front of the looking-glass, contrast produces a moment of friendship, and identity becomes fluid.

Female beauty, love of fashion and fashion itself in Villette is a point of entry into the female world of the text. Like in the fashion illustrations, beauty and dress present this world in a significantly different way than the way dominant ideology presented it. This is by no means a black and white world. It is a world where female identity is not fixed and given by nature, but negotiated through the interrelation between individual disposition and culture.

Rather than rendering woman an object, illustrations underlined her erotic side, in an era where women were encouraged to believe that they did not have an erotic side. Moreover, illustrations (in conjunction with the paper patterns for clothes) allowed women to actively produce the clothes advertised.

Similarly, the themes of female beauty and fashion in *Villette* distort the dominant ideology's view of women. Female beauty and fashion produce a world where:

- Identity is fluid and not set
- Female sexuality is not rejected.
- Female friendship among women different in character is sustained and, in fact, produces a dynamic that examines the narrative in innovative and feministic ways.

An important difference between the fashion illustrations and beauty in Victorian culture, and fashion as reflected in *Villette*, is that *Villette* transforms antithetical roles (woman as both object and subject/actor) and makes woman as object identify with woman as subject, in ways that are ambiguous enough to suggest that the division between the two is artificial, culturally constructed and false.