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FASHIONING AESTHETICISM BY AESTHETICIZING FASHION: WILDE, BEERBOHM, AND THE MALE AESTHETES' SARTORIAL CODES

By Talia Schaffer

> "Strange, that a pair of silk stockings should so upset a nation."
> — Oscar Wilde, quoted in Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde*

TODAY, WE TEND TO ENVISION the male Aesthete as a lanky, long-haired swain outfitted in velveteen pantaloons and clutching an outsize sunflower, an image straight from George du Maurier's *Punch* cartoons or Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience.* Serious scholars of Aestheticism often prefer to resist this parodic image, insisting on the movement's significant philosophical development in Ruskin's and Pater's work.[1] Yet Aesthetic fashion was not just a frivolous side effect of the movement. In fact, Aesthetic fashion was the focus of late-Victorian attention because it so clearly displayed the anxieties, stresses, and formulations of the movement. It was a battlefield for competing voices within Aestheticism; it was a stage whereon the various gender notions of the movement could be displayed; and it functioned as both a critique and a form of art. This article examines the theoretical rationales for Aesthetic fashion, focusing on the paradigmatic figures of Oscar Wilde, Max Beerbohm, and George du Maurier. They demonstrate how Aesthetic men developed new visual codes to reconfigure their fear of feminization, creating a new kind of body which could be read as an essential, unchanging, scholarly, and artistic icon.

Gender concerns shaped Aestheticism as much as its more commonly acknowledged philosophical sources. The male Aesthetes, especially Oscar Wilde, were often condemned for effeminacy, both because they worked in fields traditionally associated with women and because they borrowed elements of women's attire. According to Alan Sinfield, throughout most of the nineteenth century, aristocrats were permitted a range of feminized dress. The costume signified their privileged class position and was not connected to the wearer's gender or sexual allegiance. The conjunction of effeminacy and homosexuality was in fact produced by the visual spectacle of Wilde's trial in 1895, where the effete dandy was proven identical with the "somdomite," as Queensberry called him. Sinfield and Regenia Gagnier concur that the British public felt hostile to Wilde partly

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because he was a middle-class Irish subject who appropriated these upper-class signs, performing a gentility to which he had no right. If effeminacy was a potentially dangerous attempt to reposition one's class standing, however, the risk was offset by something that is harder for us to recognize: there were actually professional benefits to looking like a woman. Effeminacy constituted, in part, male Aesthetes' attempt to signal their continuity with the women whose cultural realm they were claiming.

In the Aesthetes' desire to beautify everyday life, they moved into areas that had historically been associated with women: the decoration of homes and bodies. Male Aesthetes faced the challenge of asserting their authority while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from the women whose advice manuals already dominated the field of domestic arts. This trend started as early as the 1860s, when William Morris and Walter Crane popularized the Arts and Crafts movement by praising craft objects which boasted an antiquarian or exotic provenance — particularly medieval or Asian artifacts — while ignoring the homemade craft items that already dominated Victorian domestic spaces. Thus embroidered tablecloths, wax flowers, and watercolors were relegated to the ranks of mere clutter, trashy and excessive decoration, which had to be removed to make way for crafts with "real" value. Charles Eastlake set up this opposition in his influential decorating manual, *Hints on Household Taste*:

> Knick-knacks were usually banished from the library. By that expression I meant to include the heterogeneous assemblage of modern rubbish which, under the head of 'Dresden china' and various other names, finds its way into the drawing-room or boudoir. But my readers must not therefore suppose that I intended to discourage the collection of really good specimens of art manufacture. The smallest example of rare old porcelain, of ivory carving, of ancient metal-work, of enamels, of Venetian glass, should be acquired whenever possible, and treasured with the greatest care. (Eastlake 134–35)

The Arts and Crafts movement adapted the existing belief in the virtue of handcrafted decorative items, but urged its followers to dispose of women's existing crafts ("heterogeneous rubbish") in order to replace them with pedigreed objects purchased in specialty stores. The new kinds of crafts had a monetary value which could be ascertained by trained connoisseurs and established in the open marketplace, whereas women's amateur handicrafts did not participate in economic exchange but were produced for private familial pleasure. (The exception, of course, was the charity bazaar, but that is precisely why charity bazaars produced so much anxiety: they turned sentimental gift items into commodities.) The Arts and Crafts movement established the pattern that would govern Aestheticism: it claimed authority over traditionally female realms by valuing objects according to the degree of esoteric information a trained reader could extract from them.

This situation could create great tension, for the male Aesthetes were trying to differentiate themselves from women while writing on traditionally feminine subjects for a largely female audience. In their anxiety to construct themselves as professional connoisseurs and to show their mastery over a superior realm of decoration, the male Aesthetes often slipped into real contempt for women. Eastlake argued that women had no natural taste and were too stubborn to learn. Thus Eastlake finds himself in the difficult position of having to demonstrate his superior knowledge without transmitting it to his readers.

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And so he begins *Hints on Household Taste* by asserting that his audience will be offended by the book:

> We may condemn a lady's opinion on politics — criticise her handwriting — correct her pronunciation of Latin, and disparage her favourite author with a chance of escaping displeasure. But if we venture to question her taste — in the most ordinary sense of the word, we are sure to offend. (Eastlake 8–9).

Hints on Household Taste legitimates Eastlake at the expense of the audience for whom it is nominally designed. The "we" of this text is not women plus Eastlake, but rather a community of knowing male connoisseurs, which coheres around its shared recognition of women's ignorance.

Connoisseurship did not always have to be so misogynist, however, Oscar Wilde offered an alternative: why not frankly acknowledge the Aesthetic debt to women's culture, using scholarship to praise women's clothing, hobbies, genres, and styles? Instead of working to differentiate himself from women, as Eastlake did, Wilde constructed himself as a grateful and appreciative inheritor of women's culture. Wilde edited a magazine called *The Woman's World,* in which he publically displayed his fascination with lace, jewels, food, decoration, and fashion. Catharine Ksinan explains that "It is important for critics to attend [to] Wilde's sensitivity to womens issues as editor of *Woman's World.* The magazine may have not, in the end, been the ideal forum for elevating the status of women, but study of the period reveals Wilde's genuine attempts to expose and remove threadbare assumptions about women's natural inferiority" (423). Wilde systematically foregrounded women's intellectual issues, solicited famous contributors, and wrote a column reviewing relevant books. As Laurel Brake astutely points out, Wilde worked to make *The Woman's World* a more serious, useful, high-status text (127–45). In Wilde's hands, connoisseurship became not so much a way to distance himself from women, but rather a way to exalt women's topics to the status of high art. Nowhere was his endorsement of female culture more visible, or more spectacular, than in his attire. Wilde performed this new and improved version of the women's world on his own body.

Wilde's feminized costume not only connected him to women's culture, but also associated him with a strong tradition of women's writing, endowing him with double legitimacy. From the 1870s through the turn of the century, male Aesthetes' writing appeared in the context of popular and/or critically-acclaimed Aesthetic women's literature, including work by "Ouida," "John Oliver Hobbes," "Lucas Malet," Alice Meynell, "George Egerton," Ella Hepworth Dixon, Netta Syrett, Rosamund Marriott Watson, "Michael Field," Jane and Mary Findlater, Ella D'Arcy, "Vernon Lee," Una Ashworth Taylor, and Elizabeth Robins Pennell. Although many of these writers are neglected today, at the *fin de siècle* they seemed to dominate the literary scene. As Ann Ardis notes, "the common perception in the 1890s was that women were taking over the literary world. New publishing houses, new audiences for fiction, new publication formats: all were seen to give women writers, particularly previously unpublished women writers, a distinct advantage in the literary marketplace" (43). Moreover, women participated in all the peculiarly Aesthetic genres, often, in fact, writing in these modes long before the men who would eventually make them famous. John Oliver Hobbes wrote epigrammatic plays, Vernon Lee wrote dialogues about aesthetic philosophy, George Egerton was John Lane's

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prize author, and Alice Meynell wrote essays in a rarified, poetic language. The male Aesthetes might well feel beleaguered by these competitors. Richard Le Gallienne wrote ruefully that "man for the present seems to be at a standstill, if not actually retrograde, and the onward movement of the world [seems] to be embodied in woman" (qtd. in Sykes 398–99). In the Aesthetes' favorite genres, light literature, drawing-room comedies, short stories, poetry, novels, dialogues, or advice manuals, women were strong presences, especially since most of these genres were traditionally seen as minor forms appropriate for women (while men wrote serious history or philosophy).

In both culture and literature, then, the male Aesthetes saw themselves as radical reformist outsiders invading a field which already belonged to women. To justify this behavior, they had to create a visual style which metonymically associated themselves with women while distinctly affirming their superiority. Aesthetic fashion fulfilled this dual function. It borrowed colors, styles, fabrics, and accessories from the women's sphere, but reformulated them in the language of scholarship, insisting that their clothes were readable by trained connoisseurs and containing valuable historical and aesthetic information. In this respect, women's wear was reframed within the male sphere's tradition of public, educational, scholarly discourse. When male Aesthetes cast themselves as trained professionals, they relegated women to the level of mere amateurs who were occupying a province that *properly* belonged to men with expertise. According to the model of contemporary colonialism, women became the ignorant superstitious natives, while men became the Orientalists whose superior information about the local culture — coupled with their natural ascendancy — gave them the right to govern. Eastlake, for instance, clearly borrows from colonialist rhetoric when he depicts women as childish beings who covet any shiny "toy" regardless of its actual value (Eastlake 83, 149).

If connoisseurship had mixed results for women — exalting their fields yet erasing their authority — its effect on late-Victorian men was almost wholly positive. As Jonathan Freedman explains, "Aestheticism's valorizing of aesthetic connoisseurship led to the creation of the profession, both within the academy and without, of the art expert" (54). The creation of the connoisseur was one of the most significant achievements of Aestheticism, for it offered men an alternative mode of identifying themselves and a new kind of career. Harold Perkin has discussed the emergence of a new cadre of white-collar professionals at the end of the nineteenth century, and the art expert fits into this category nicely; the art expert made a living from his specialized training. Men could, for the first time, derive economic and social success from their ability to recognize beauty. But male Aesthetes avoided being dismissed as idle dilettantes by insisting that art required intensive study and operated according to immutable laws, unlike taste or fashion. Again, this self-construction is particularly visible in their sartorial debates.

By following Wilde's dictum that "one should either be a work of art, or wear a work of art," male Aesthetes managed to distance themselves from the problematic realm of fashion ("Phrases" 434). The maintenance of an opposition between art and fashion was central to their project. Art was supposed to be timeless, transcendent, symbolic, and meaningful, while fashion was ephemeral, transitory, frivolous, and meaningless.[2] High art was located securely in the educational public space of the museum, whereas fashion was constantly located in the debased public arenas of the shop or advertisement. The specter of this evanescent movement which operated by its own mysterious laws made the Aesthetes feel anxious. It also worried the Victorians, who frequently personified fashion as

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a tyrant, Dame Fashion, whose arbitrary decrees a trembling population had to obey. This irrationality was associated with women, who were, of course, the fashion slaves, and with women's magazines, which published the tyrant's latest edicts every month. Fashions changed and multiplied uncontrollably. When Victorian writers complained about having to obey the inscrutable edicts of "Dame Fashion," the joke encoded real uneasiness with this illogical and all-pervasive system. Thus Aesthetes set out to reconnect dress with art, bypassing fashion altogether — to ally the decoration of the body with museums, not *modistes.*

The Aesthetic Dress Reform movement is an oddity in the history of fashion. As Elizabeth Aslin points out, the only surviving illustrations of the Aesthetic look are caricatures (145). Indeed, by 1930 E. F. Benson found it necessary to assure his readers that Aesthetic fashions had once really existed:

> It became fashionable in cultured circles to be pensive and willowy. Indeed the aesthetic cult of the eighties was largely derived from the pre-Raphaelites, ladies drooped and were wilted, and clad themselves in Liberty fabrics (useful also for the ties of similarly minded males) and let fall over their eyes a tangle of hair, through which they miserably peered. *Punch,* week by week, was full of them, but they were not an invention of the comic papers, and scarcely an exaggeration: they actually existed in considerable numbers. (223–24)

We do not even know how many women and men actually adopted this characteristic costume. In literature on the history of fashion, it is often treated as an adjunct to the far better known, and much more controversial, Rational Dress Movement (Steele). But to *fin de siècle* readers, the many texts of the Aesthetic Dress movement — caricatures, descriptions, fashion illustrations, beauty guides, and parodies, as well as the garments themselves — were ways of reformulating gender for the twentieth century. Dress reform was so closely associated with the Aesthetic movement that the famous anti-Aesthetic satire of 1894 simply named itself after the Aesthetes' most (in)famous accessory: *The Green Carnation.*

The green carnation was a symbol, meant to confirm the wearer's interest in artifice. It was, as Wilde argued, a whole philosophy of art: "I invented that magnificent flower. . . . The flower is a work of art" (*Pall Mall Gazette* 175). But hostile journalists insisted that the green carnation, like the sunflower and lily, was just the latest fashion. Far from being profoundly meaningful, these accessories were particularly silly. W. S. Gilbert parodied the "work of art" when he wrote in "Patience," of "a sentimental passion of a vegetable fashion" that the "very deep young man" pretended to feel (26). The Aesthetes also worried that fashion — the realm of women's magazines and couture houses — might be the real content of their sartorial innovations. Because Aestheticism was the first high-cultural movement which deliberately utilized popular feminine culture, it could be seen either as safely sublimating mass-market interests into the cloudy heights of elite art, or as poisoning masculine culture with a decoction of femininity. In other words, did Aesthetes succeed in bleaching fashion into art, or did they taint art with the dark stain of fashion?

We see this dynamic playing out in the two generations of Aesthetes. Art historians like M. E. Haweis and Charles Eastlake were inspired by Pre-Raphaelite paintings and published their manuals between 1868 and 1880. They urged readers to model their dress

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upon the costumes depicted in museum-quality paintings, and to incorporate art-historical lessons into their own self-presentation.

By the 1880s, however, Oscar Wilde set a different tone for Aesthetic fashion. He deliberately embraced feminization, offering a radical challenge to Victorian viewers. His fashions constituted visual declarations of Aestheticism's debt to women's culture, yet, at the same time, offered overtly scholarly lessons. Wilde's fashion innovations cunningly mediated between women's culture and men's art theory. He enthusiastically adopted flowers and feathers — but the particular flowers and feathers he chose were items too big to be female accessories. The sunflower, lily and peacock feather therefore distanced their user from the world of feminine frills. If anything, their gaudy excess parodied women's wear; the notion of sticking a few sunflowers in one's hat conjures up an image more laughable than fashionable. Wilde insisted that "the reason we love the lily and the sunflower. . . . is because these two lovely flowers are in England the two most perfect models of design, the most naturally adapted for decorative art" ("English Renaissance" 276). Sunflowers, lilies, and peacock feathers invited yet repudiated feminine associations, teasing the viewer's impetus towards gender categorization, loosening but not liberating men from the constraints of Victorian masculinity.

When Wilde wore lilies, furs, and purple satin, he was implying that men's and women's spheres might be contiguous properties similar enough to contain nearly identical, interchangeable, commodities. When Wilde used dress to embrace a feminine identity, he visually asserted his ability to move in the women's world. But it was a risky gamble, because if he was seen as enjoying women's wear *too* much, he would disturb dress's pretensions to transcendent art. Viewers might suspect that connoisseurship was merely a cover story. On the other hand, Wildeans could use Aesthetic dress to *épater le bourgeois* precisely because the previous generation had imbued dress reform with art's high moral qualities. If accused of dressing effeminately, they could retort that they were imitating a Reynolds or a Lely; art became a respectable cover for their experimentation. As Wilde explained, "the only way to atone for being occasionally a little overdressed is by being always absolutely overeducated" ("Phrases" 434).

By the 1890s, gender-transgressive youths like Alice Comyns Carr, Rosamund Marriott Watson, Oscar Wilde, and T. C. Gotch made the academic Pre-Raphaelite fashions into a daily mode of challenging public display.[3] When female Aesthetes wore dark, straight, unadorned, uncorseted gowns, they looked like men; when male Aesthetes wore flowers, feathers, and jewels, they looked like women. Both groups might say they were only imitating great art, but the visual effect on the average Briton was to confound two centuries' worth of separate-sphere ideology.[4]

Wilde's fashion interests were preeminently antiquarian. He was famous for not only advocating but actually wearing such old-fashioned garments as breeches, a doublet, a cloak, and a wide-brimmed hat, looking more like a Cavalier than a sober Victorian gentleman. His adoption of blues and lavenders, his use of satin and velvet, also recall the great late eighteenth-century fops. (For both Wilde and Beerbohm, Regency style had an enduring fascination.) But Wilde's own writings reveal that he took great liberties with the historical record. His willingness to experiment with his own clothing in public gave Wilde the authority to make definitive pronouncements about men's fashions. "I have myself worn this late eighteenth-century dress many times, both in public and in private, and so may claim to have a very positive right to speak on its comfort and suitability" ("More

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Radical Ideas" 53). In a series of letters to *The Pall Mall Gazette* in 1884, Wilde explained that men's clothing ought to be historically inconsistent. Wilde's experience with knee breeches, doublets, and cloaks led him to believe that "the dress is not one founded on any real principles" ("More Radical Ideas" 54). The breeches were too tight to be worn constantly with any real comfort, he explained. On the other hand, the doublet was easier to don than a coat and waistcoat, and warmer as well.

Wilde was giving practical advice in these recommendations, but he was also updating antiquarian fashions for a Victorian viewer. Eighteenth-century fashions constructed the male body in a way the Victorians would have found quite alien. In this colorful garb, shoulders looked small and sloping, the stomach protruded, legs and arms were slender stalks from which the rich mass of waistcoat and coat grew. A century of suit-wearing had accustomed Victorians to an image of the male body as a tall black pillar, with broad shoulders narrowing to a flat stomach and hips. Wilde used the doublet rather than the waistcoat because the doublet's double rows of buttons made his chest look wide and flat, as the Victorians preferred. The cloak emphasized his height. Breeches divided the leg into two segments, which militated against the smooth, long line to which nineteenth-century viewers were accustomed. Thus Aesthetic fashion, in Wilde's hands, was inspired by history but by no means faithful to it.[5]

Wilde disarmed criticism that his dress was excessively feminine by stressing that his sartorial innovations alluded to significant male predecessors. When Wilde wore his hair in long curls, the viewer's immediate association might have been with women's hair, but Wilde called it his "Neronian coiffure," thereby linking his hairstyle with the Classical knowledge that was mainly available to men. When Wilde adopted jewelery (particularly amethyst tiepins and jeweled pins and rings) he described it as homage to eighteenth century dandies; when he adopted a rakish sky-blue scarf, he alluded to sailors' costume. One example of Wilde's careful costuming can be seen in this record of his outfit in 1882:

> Costume. — A dark purple sack coat, and knee-breeches; black [silk] hose, low shoes with bright buckles; coat lined with lavender satin, a frill of rich lace at the wrists and for tie-ends over a low turn-down collar, hair long, and parted in the middle . . . a circular cavalier cloak over the shoulder. (Ellmann 164)

Wilde used what, to modern readers, seems unmistakeably female conventions: women's materials (satin, silk, lace), women's colors (lavender, purple), and women's styles (long hair, decorative cape). But, to a Victorian viewer, his outfit would have consolidated several different male-associated signifying systems. Knowledgeable viewers would recognize his outfit as the costume of the Apollo Lodge at Oxford, but even those ignorant of such customs would be able to find coherent masculine meaning in the clothing (Ellmann 164). The cape, lace, and long hair allude to the dashing Cavalier lord. The satin coat and shoebuckles refer to Gainsborough and Reynolds portraits. The breeches, stockings, and lace collar would be familiar to his audience from the controversial trend towards historically correct costume in Shakespeare productions (Wilde "Truth"; Lee). Wilde's use of purple cleverly mediates between sobriety and levity; while purple does depart from black, the two colors were closely associated, since purple, black, and white were the colors of mourning costumes. Thus lavender carried the same affect of solemnity as the more conventional black suit. Furthermore, blues and purples were also acceptable colors

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for men's outfits on especially celebratory occasions. In *Dombey and Son,* for instance, the ultra-respectable Mr. Dombey dons a blue coat and lilac waistcoat for his wedding to Edith Granger. Thus Wilde's costume was eccentric but understandable, since it revived already widely disseminated images of men from historical and theatrical vocabularies. It associated him with a tradition of male creativity from the Cavalier poets to Shakespeare.

For the dramatist Wilde, there was no difference between clothing and costume. Clothing was a way of dressing oneself for an audience, not a way of revealing one's inner traits. Wilde did not care who formed his audience, as long as he had one. Around 1886, Wilde, dressed in a brown suit covered with buttons, and his wife, wearing a large feathered picture hat, went for a visit. Wilde recounted, "As we came along the King's Road, a number of rude little boys surrounded and followed us. One boy, after staring at us, said, 'Amlet and Ophelia out for a walk, I suppose!' I answered, 'My little fellow, you are quite right. We are!'" (Ellmann 259). Wilde was delighted to find that his clothing was taken as theatrical costume; far from revealing that its wearer was Wilde, his garb simply revealed that its owner was in disguise. He knew he had succeeded in recoding his costume when even "rude little boys" caught its Shakespearean allusions. As Hamlet, Wilde had achieved his dreams: he had become art. He was perpetually, unchangeably the glass of fashion and the mould of form — the furthest thing imaginable from a mere subject of Dame Fashion's remorseless rules. In Wilde's view, and in the view of the street boys, effeminacy transformed him into a great work of art.

Wilde infused fashion with serious artistic and historical interests. However, fashion attracted him in the first place because it was associated with frivolity, fleeting fads, expense, and meaninglessness. It contradicted the Victorian values of masculine seriousness, durability, thrift, and moral symbolism. To become a spokesperson for fashion, then, was to stand with everything that was not earnest (to use Wilde's favorite term). Fashion was therefore a highly visible way of attacking the humorless form of masculine identity that had become entrenched by the 1890s. By using art to redefine fashion, Wilde managed to do two controversial things: he expanded the male sphere and emphasized the validity of the female sphere.

Not everyone followed Wilde's lead. The other side of male Aesthetic fashion, diametrically opposed to Wilde's practice, was led by Max Beerbohm and popularized by George du Maurier. Max Beerbohm publically identified himself as a dandy in his "Dandies and Dandies" essay. This position did not mean that he was sympathetic to daring costume. In fact, his dandihood made it necessary for Beerbohm to go on record against the gender-transgressive aspect of Wildean Aesthetic costume.

According to the classic model of dandyism, delineated by Ellen Moers, the dandy was feminized by his obsession with fashion, so he compensated by fetishizing masculinity. The dandy masculinizes his interest in dress, assigning it the ideals of restraint and discipline. The dandy refuses to associate dress with pleasurable self-expression, but rather sees it as a semi-military, or semi-monastic, mode of producing an ideal self.[6] As Beerbohm says, "that first aim of modern dandyism [is] the production of the supreme effect through means the least extravagant. . . . [Brummell] was ever most economical, most scrupulous of means." ("Dandies" 2). Beau Brummell did away with the eighteenth-century men's fashion of multicolored, satin, embroidered garments. He regulated the tying of his collar to the inch and reduced the acceptable hues of men's clothing to black and white, introducing an austerity and economy that Beerbohm applauded. The dandy repudiated

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his apparent similarity with women by refiguring the meaning of clothes: not display, but restraint. Indeed, the similarity between the dandy's and the woman's love of fashion often led the dandy to self-defensive misogynist pronouncements. "First, the (male) dandy defines himself by attacking women. Second, so crucial are female characteristics to the dandy's self-creation that he defines himself by embracing women, appropriating their characteristics," Jessica Feldman explains (6). Thus the dandy had to lead the fashion yet stand outside the fashion. To maintain his aura of restraint, he had to be impervious to the changeable rules of fashion associated with feminine flightiness. At the same time, he had to monitor fashion changes, lest he become old-fashioned and dowdy instead of an unapproachable, icy ideal. More passionately concerned about his appearance than any women, the dandy of the nineteenth century had to constantly condemn the women's world.

Max Beerbohm and George du Maurier wanted to retain masculine earnestness, respectability, discipline, serious art, in opposition to feminine frivolity and fashion. They were disturbed by Wildean Aesthetic Dress reformers' tendency to challenge the boundary between these realms. Du Maurier and Beerbohm complained that this anti-fashion art movement was nothing more than the latest fashion, one which exemplified all the silliness, impracticality, and female illogic of fashion itself. By doing so, du Maurier and Beerbohm enacted the classic dandy economy; they borrowed the fashion idea from women, yet condemned it in order to preserve their own masculinity. And they targeted Wilde insistently in satires and caricatures. They responded to Wilde's emphasis on scholarship by reducing him to a mere body, a grotesquely misshapen, feminized, uncontrolled mass, and insisting that this body was the truth of Aestheticism.

Max Beerbohm reduced male dress to a few essentials: buttonhole, shoes, cane, hat. These accessories were chosen with the utmost care, and their divergence from ordinary items was only apparent on close examination. Beerbohm popularized an evening garb just a shade or two off the norm, as an old friend later reminisced: "Was the exquisite coat purple or dark chocolate? The knee breeches I know were black, and I fancy there was a shimmer of moonlight in the hue of the silk stockings" (Hind 40). Beerbohm was testing the limits of perception here, challenging the viewer's eye to catch the subtle rebellions implicit in the apparently stringently correct costume. Whereas Wilde was flamboyant and outrageous, Beerbohm aimed for a smooth shell of elegance around a tiny kernel of nonconformity. A biographer reminisced, "We hear talk of his gleaming white collars, high even for the period, of a claret-coloured dress suit, a tasselled ivory-handled cane and an overcoat of his own design, very long and fastening with one minute button" (Cecil 105). These clothes follow standard male patterns for the period, but everything is stylishly exaggerated — the collars are especially high, the coat fastenings are particularly minimal — so that the viewer's pleasure derives from the play of a unique personality within the strict confines of the uniform.

Beerbohm's self-restraint was accompanied, in typical dandy fashion, by self-protective misogyny, as he tried to maintain the opposition between female flamboyance and male discipline. Throughout Beerbohm's life, he played with the idea of his feminized self. His fear of excess is shown in his many half-joking protestations about how small he is. "My gifts are small," he told a prospective biographer. "Oh, keep [your book] little! — in due proportion to its theme" (Behrman 21). The humor of these statements depends on Beerbohm's ability to maintain an obvious difference between himself and a Victorian

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authoress. The comic self-description as a Victorian woman is actually a strategy for distancing the seriousness of that identification.

In Beerbohm's controversial essay, "A Defence of Cosmetics," he expresses his fear that Aesthetic fashion will succeed in its unspeakable goal of merging the heretofore separate spheres. Complaining about men "who make themselves up, seemingly with an aesthetic purpose," Beerbohm expresses "strong disapproval": "If men are to lie among the rouge-pots, inevitably it will tend to promote that amalgamation of the sexes which is one of the chief planks in the decadent platform and to obtund that piquant contrast between him and her, which is one of the redeeming features of creation" ("Defence" 59). The metaphor of the "rouge-pots" alludes to the "flesh-pots of Egypt," associating rouge with luxury and pleasure, conveying a hidden longing for the forbidden world of feminine fashion. Meanwhile, the modern era has seen women invading male territory. While men "lie" idly, women take "steps": "The invasion of the tennis-courts and of the golf-links, the seizure of the tricycle and of the type-writer, were but steps preliminary in that campaign which is to end with the final victorious occupation of St. Stephen's ("Defence" 51). Beerbohm's military metaphor alludes to the images of female soldiers and Amazons so prevalent in anti-New Women literature, reinscribing the idea that men and women occupy opposing, even hostile, realms.

If cosmetics cause the decline of separate spheres, then, miraculously, cosmetics will also recreate these spheres. Beerbohm brilliantly uses artifice to repair the ravages of artifice. Cosmetics will make women motionless, for bodily activity would dislodge their careful mask. "It is, from the intellectual point of view, quite necessary that a woman should repose. Hers is the resupinate sex" ("Defence" 52). The proper application of cosmetics, too, ought to satisfy women's demands for work. Beerbohm announces that "When the toilet is laden once more with the fulness of its elaboration, we shall hear no more of the proper occupation for women" ("Defence" 55). Moreover, cosmetics will be used to make women beautiful for the eyes of men ("Defence" 59). Women, then, will be reinscribed as nothing more than visual icons, motionless and occupied with the production of their own beauty. It is deliberately ironic that rouge, the sign of a fast woman, is now being touted as the mechanism for producing good women.

The essay's central statement is Beerbohm's dictum that "the sharper the line between [women's] worldly functions and ours, the better" ("Defence" 52). If any sentence in "A Defence" could be said to be unambiguously serious, this is the one. If his idea that cosmetics will enforce proper gender behavior is comically exaggerated, the hope for such a magical policing agent is quite real. His own dandihood depends on it.

Beerbohm later wrote that "Defence" parodied Oscar Wilde, allowing us to read the essay as another of Beerbohm's famous, rather nasty, caricatures of Wilde.[7] As Beerbohm himself said regretfully, "as Oscar became more and more successful. . . . He became arrogant. He felt himself omnipotent, and he became gross not in body only — he did become that — but in his relations with people" (Behrman 85). In his pictures, Beerbohm grossly exaggerated Wilde's fleshy spread, his long hair, his enormous clothes, making Wilde seem like a monster of excess — meant to contrast pointedly with the dapper, small, neat little man in black who was Beerbohm's self-portrait. It is Wilde of whom Beerbohm was really afraid — Wilde, whose eager embrace of the women's world endangered the dandy's necessary separation between the men's and women's spheres — Wilde, whose fearless interest in fashion imperiled those whose self-respect depended on continual

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repudiation of the fashion they followed — Wilde, whose feminist Aestheticism challenged the dandy's misogynist mentality.

George du Maurier's images of Aesthetic dress reveal his own fears regarding the feminization of the movement with which he was sometimes, in spite of himself, identified.[8] Du Maurier had once been a bohemian art student in Paris, where he lived with Whistler. In London he and Wilde met frequently, due to their mutual friendship with Whistler (Ellmann 136). In "A Love-Agony," the Aesthetic male — clearly based on Wilde — wears the drooping, wrinkled drapery associated with Aesthetic females (Figure 3). His bulging chest hints at a breast, and his rounded arms look like a woman's. Indeed, he has a rather more generous figure than the Aesthetic female whom the love-poem limns, with her "spare bosom, where no shadows meet" and "lean strait hip." The white square of chest visible above his draperies evokes and parodies the white triangle of shirtfront du Maurier usually gives his men, for this square neckline is actually associated with du Maurier's society women. And, of course, the male figure poses in a traditionally feminine posture, crowned with flowers. The male in "A Love-Agony" is feminized in every respect, a femaleness which is associated with sloppiness and lack of control over the contours of one's body.

In du Maurier's art, as in Beerbohm's, neatness is prized. In du Maurier's cartoons of society beauties, hair appears to be glued to the head, hands are kept close to the body, everyone sits up straight, costumes fall straight down or in a neat fan shape just behind the wearer. This is most visible in "An Impartial Statement in Black and White," where du

Figure 3. George du Maurier, "A Love-Agony." Woodcut, from *Punch* (June 5, 1880), 254.

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Maurier draws the Aesthetic lady as comic and then as beautiful. To make her beautiful, he shortens her hair, irons her dress, and makes her stand straight. To make the society lady look comic, he gives her messy hair and floating fragments of frills, and exaggerates the wrinkles in her gown. That du Maurier's Aesthetic men have long hair, wide coats, and wrinkled pants, as in "Frustrated Social Ambition" (Figure 4), is a sure sign of their

Figure 4. George du Maurier, "Frustrated Social Ambition." Woodcut, from *Punch* (May 21, 1881), 229.

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unattractiveness in du Maurier's world. His valorization of self-containment and restraint is characteristic of the dandy's point of view.

For du Maurier, Aesthetic men looked like women, and Aesthetic women looked like old women. In "Frustrated Social Ambition," Jellaby Postlethwaite on the right is virtually a mirror image of Mrs. Cimabue Brown on the left. He has her long untidy hair, her weeping face, her downturned mouth, her slouching posture, her bent leg. The only difference between men and women, for du Maurier, was in their clothing (and sometimes not even in that; see "A Love-Agony"). Aesthetic men are identical with Aesthetic women. So it was, perhaps, comforting to be told that they "only exist in *MR. PUNCH'S* vivid imagination" (du Maurier 241).

Comforting, but not true. For Maudle, Jellaby, Postlethwaite, and Mrs. Cimabue Brown were based on living figures in the world of 1890s Aestheticism. The characters' elaborate exchanges give a reality effect far beyond the requirements of the occasional cartoon, as Richard Kelly points out:

> What gives some of Du Maurier's characters a novelistic turn, however, is that he created a set of specific characters who appeared many times over the years. Serial publication was the common form used for fiction during this period. Figures such as Mrs. Cimabue Brown, Jellaby Postlethwaite, Maudle, Mrs. Ponsonby De Tompkyns, and Sir Gorgius Midas became popular attractions that gave a unity to the cartoons in much the same way that the Pickwickians did for the monthly parts of Dickens's picaresque novel. (Kelly 31)

The figures could even appear outside the context of *Punch*; when du Maurier illustrated a novel called *Prudence: A Story of Aesthetic London,* he slipped Mrs. Cimabue Brown into the corner of a drawing of Prudence (opposite 108). The replacement of real Aesthetes by fictional counterparts enabled du Maurier to rewrite the Aesthetic movement in his own comedic terms.

Du Maurier spent his life trying to achieve respectability, repudiating his own past as a bohemian adventurer and his own suspiciously counter-cultural job as an artist. He did not want Wilde to be the public symbol of this Bohemian/artistic/feminine milieu. Thus Jellaby replaces Wilde; the silly fictional adventures of a grotesquely exaggerated Aesthete become the popular story of Aestheticism. And, as E. F. Benson's comment reveals, that is largely what happened; by 1930, *Punch* became the public memory of the movement.

As male Aesthetes incorporated aspects of women's popular culture into their own personas, fashion naturally became a problematic point. Only Wilde was able to enjoy fashion wholeheartedly, perhaps because Wilde's alternative sexual activities already positioned him so far outside the traditional masculine role that he was more interested in challenging than in conforming to the rules of Victorian masculine propriety. Beerbohm and du Maurier were both far more ambivalent about fashion, for both were anxious to hold onto traditionally masculine attributes. The virulence of their attacks on Wilde correspond to their fears that they too would be infected by a rampant effeminacy inadequately recoded as connoisseurship. They insisted on a traditional dandyism that fetishized discipline, reinscribing traditional masculine traits. And they won: their cartoons shaped subsequent generations' views of Aestheticism and helped deter men from wearing lavender breeches for a long, long time. But Wilde's experiment had far-reaching implications. Wilde's clothing in-

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sisted that women's culture had enviable qualities, suggested a viable new way for men to gain a livelihood, and made artistic and scholarly expertise popular. Wilde made a space in the cultural consciousness for a new form of identity. It is hard for us now to recover a culture in which feminized attire was a complex political self-assertion. As Sinfield argues, after Wilde's trial, effeminacy became reduced to a sign of homosexuality. Thus today it is overwhelmingly tempting to incorporate Wilde's insouciant youthful costume into the vast tragic trajectory of his life, to read it as a sign of his most intimate secret and a harbinger of his doom. But if we make the effort to place Wilde's garb back into the antiquarian and feminine registers it really occupied in the 1880s, we can recover a brief utopian moment in which the despised realm of women's fashions became apotheosized into art. As usual, Wilde said it best. When asked how he could walk down the street carrying a lily, Wilde responded, quite rightly, "to have done it was nothing, but to make people think one had done it was a triumph" (Ellmann 135).

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NOTES

I am grateful to the University Press of Virginia for permission to reprint a few paragraphs which appear in my forthcoming book, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England.*

1. Examples include Ian Small and Jonathan Freedman, who views Aesthetic fashion as an anti-commodity movement. In Moers's history of dandyism, she treats Wilde as a bad dandy, since his flamboyance, his self-dramatization, his costuming, all violate the careful restraint of the Beau Brummell model she favors.
2. In describing art as transcendental and fashion as frivolous, I am, of course, representing the perspective of the 1890s, not speaking for myself.
3. Alice Comyns Carr helped popularize the new uncorseted look as the costume designer for actresses Ellen and Marion Terry, and her husband Joseph Comyns Carr owned the "greenery-yallery" Grosvenor Gallery (Carr). Rosamund Marriott Watson, the poet and author of books on interior design and gardening, was a famous Aesthetic beauty (Schaffer, Hughes). T. C. Gotch was an art student who dressed in blue velvet (Macdonald 270).
4. According to Armstrong, the idea of separate gender spheres arose in Puritan tracts of the late seventeenth century (18–20).
5. This history of the changing male body is indebted to Hollander.
6. For an excellent study of the importance of ascetic self-discipline in producing a masculine identity in the nineteenth century, see Adams.
7. In his "Letter to the Editor," Beerbohm wished he had "appended a note to say that the MS. had been picked up not a hundred miles from Tite Street," alluding to Wilde's address at 16 Tite Street (64).
8. See Grossman for an excellent discussion of the complexity and ambivalence of du Maurier's anti-aesthetic satires.

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