



## **‘A Language Spoken Everywhere’: Fashion Studies and English Studies**

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As work in English grows increasingly interdisciplinary, scholars and teachers have been reaching out to engage with material culture studies. And when it comes to material culture, there is nothing more material to that subject than *material*—that is, fabric—for nothing marks, defines, and transmits culture as immediately as clothing. Whatever human beings put on their bodies is a matter of both individual and social significance; how characters (even imaginary ones) are clothed is as crucial and revealing as the actions they take. This is as true in a global as a local context for, in the words of the historian Jean Allman, fashion is ‘a language spoken everywhere’.<sup>1</sup>

How one employs words and phrases and how one dresses—these are matters of conscious selection, and both involve attention to the effect upon an audience. The linguistic stock on which one draws when speaking and writing, like the storehouse of fashion elements, exists already within history and culture, but its meanings are various, and there is much room for individual choice and expression in its use, even though social forces also police and determine those uses. As Robert Ross puts the matter in *Clothing: A Global History* (2008), ‘In many cases, and within certain limits, people decide for themselves what clothes they will wear, which is why wearing clothes (and certainly not wearing them) is almost invariably a political act’,<sup>2</sup> as well as ‘one of the most public ways by which people can announce to their fellows who they are, or at least . . . who they would like to be, or who they would like to be thought to be’.<sup>3</sup> Writers of fiction, in particular, have always attempted to signal the politics and identities of the characters populating their works through descriptions of the clothes that those imagined figures put on their backs, and they have turned to items of attire to offer the reader the sort of information that he or she cannot receive through other narrative devices, such as dialogue.

At the same time, what fashion can and does tell us has become the subject of debates similar to those that have marked the academic study of literary texts, especially over questions of authorial control and the making of meaning. In *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard points out that, ‘Since there are disagreements about the meaning of garments or collections . . . sometimes from the designers themselves, sometimes coming from the wearers of the garments, meaning cannot simply be a product of the designer’s intentions’.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, ‘meaning’ depends upon circumstances of reception or consumption, as well as production, and on those ‘socially sanctioned differences between signs’ that are part of the ‘already existing structure’ of a given culture. What is true of words is, according to Barnard, true of clothing: their ‘meanings are the product of social agreement, they are the product of negotiation between people’.<sup>5</sup> To look at the details of costume within a literary text and to explore their relations to the available styles and modes of a particular moment in time is, therefore, to increase the reader’s comprehension of the ‘social agreement’

that underlies the text, for fashion is, as Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang have suggested, ‘a collective phenomenon’ and a reflection of ‘mass taste’. It has ‘an objective existence apart from any individual’;<sup>6</sup> thus, it can assist the reader in connecting a specific fictional character and a specific text with a broader social environment. That is in itself an important function, particularly when the place where one is engaging in this examination is the classroom, and the audience is a group of students attempting to find their way into an unfamiliar world. Anything that gives them greater access to and knowledge about that world is, of course, pedagogically valuable.

Dress, as Clair Hughes explains, ‘is a visible aspect of history, a material index of social, moral and historical change which helps us understand and imagine historical difference’.<sup>7</sup> It would seem obvious, then, that the study of literature should involve attention to the particulars of dress. Yet this has by no means been a widely accepted notion; instead, as Daniel Miller notes in *Clothing as Material Culture* (2005),

Since it is used as a covering or as a surface, clothing is easily characterized as intrinsically superficial. . . . We struggle with what might be called a depth ontology, a very specific Western idea of being, in which the real person, myself, is somehow deep inside me. . . . This denigration of surfaces has been part of the denigration of clothing and, by extension, of those said to be particularly interested in clothing, often seen as women.<sup>8</sup>

Here, Miller merely reaffirms what Elizabeth Wilson established in her classic work on twentieth-century visual styles, *Adorned in Dreams* (1985): ‘Because fashion is constantly denigrated, the serious study of fashion has had repeatedly to justify itself. Almost every fashion writer, whether journalist or art historian, insists anew on the importance of fashion both as cultural barometer and as expressive art form’.<sup>9</sup>

As Miller’s pronouncement suggests, there has been a gendered dimension to this ‘denigration’, with fashion and women alike consigned to an inferior realm. Because of its ‘intrinsic relationship to the body, which solidly damned it as linked to the base, the sexual and most definitely the “lower pleasures”’, dress has been the subject of ‘historically negative moral associations’; so too have women been linked on the one hand to the threat of seduction and, on the other hand, to an absence of seriousness, to trivial concerns, to vices such as vanity, and to a place on the wrong side of what Fiona Anderson calls the ‘ideological battle between “high culture” and popular culture’.<sup>10</sup> Even now, literature that focuses on women’s relationship to fashion is likely to be dismissed as ‘chick lit’—i.e., a lesser genre, in opposition to what is often called ‘literary fiction’; analyses of Helen Fielding’s novels, for instance, turn up regularly in discussions of ‘chick lit’, but rarely in more general surveys of contemporary literary satire. Similarly, literary criticism has traditionally held itself apart from and above the issue of how and why authors dress their characters as they do, even as faculty members who teach English Studies have deliberately avoided seeming too interested in or knowledgeable about the history and the significance of clothing styles, lest they be identified themselves with the corporeal and the feminine.

There is, nonetheless, a perceptible shift occurring today through the intersection of literary analysis with fashion history and gender criticism, and this new direction in research is valuable to scholars and students alike, both of whom now can benefit from fresh approaches and sources of information. Some of this research is countering the stereotype that associates clothing with a feminine (or an effeminate)

sphere; some of it is considering more deeply the historical linkage of women and fashion and illuminating how Western writers, both male and female, have exploited this association in particular periods. All of it displays a welcome absence of defensiveness, which may signal that the topic of fashion's relationship to literature has indeed attained respectability. In making this claim, I would point to the publication of several recent volumes that have appeared since 2006 and have circulated in both the U. S. and the U.K., indicating that the move toward bringing material analysis to literary studies, by means of attention to dress, is a transatlantic phenomenon.

Brent Shannon's *The Cut of His Coat: Men, Dress, and Consumer Culture in Britain, 1860–1914*,<sup>11</sup> published by Ohio University Press, examines representations of fashion in print—especially in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century novels, though also in turn-of-the-century magazines. Using texts ranging from Oscar Wilde's fantastic *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890–91) to H. G. Wells's naturalistic *Kipps* (1905), Shannon demonstrates how shifting concepts of masculinity announced themselves through men's fashion and through activities associated with men's dress, such as the buying or the tailoring of cloth. Literary depictions of men selecting and wearing garments served as the vehicles for new images of male sexuality and for new definitions of class through self-presentation. Shannon assists his audience throughout in understanding the historically-bound fashion codes that rendered gentlemanly status inseparable from gentlemanly appearance and thus mandated careful observation of masculine dress, not only by the protagonists of British novels, but by the consumers who bought and read fiction.

Other critics, too, have been working increasingly in the field of men's fashion studies and considering the significance of men's attire in literature—most notably Christopher Breward, Head of Research at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Breward has overseen several recent exhibitions and exhibition catalogues for the V&A's costume department that tie British men's styles to works from a wider world of the arts. Among these efforts have been *The Hidden Consumer: Masculinities, Fashion and City Life, 1860–1914* (1999) and, with Geoffrey Aquilina Ross, the forthcoming *The Day of the Peacock: Style for Men, 1963–73* (2010).

The majority of critical studies, however, continue to concentrate on women's relationship to clothing and thus to focus on the ways in which female novelists have dressed their heroines. This is hardly surprising; as Robert Ross has said, 'how women are dressed is a sharper commentary on the world than is the dress of men', for women's bodies and the garments that clothe them usually are weighted with a greater significance, as the visible markers of a given culture's values and sense of identity.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Krista Lysack's *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (2008) confines itself to texts by women authors, analyzing dress in canonical works such as *Jane Eyre* and *Middlemarch*. So, too, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction*, by Christine Bayles Kortsch (2009), explores scenes of dressmaking and dressing in novels by Olive Schreiner, Ella Hepworth Dixon, and others, where 'New Women' figures wear their modernity in and as clothing. Similarly, Katherine Joslin's *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion* (2009) and R. S. Koppen's *Virginia Woolf, Fashion, and Literary Modernity* (2009) make their arguments by focusing on how two important twentieth-century women writers represent the sphere of dress.

Clair Hughes's *Dressed in Fiction* (2006), issued by the Oxford-based publishing firm of Berg in its influential 'Dress, Body, Culture' series, looks briefly at novels by Daniel Defoe and Henry James, but concentrates on women's writings, both

American and British, from Edith Wharton's to Jane Austen's.<sup>13</sup> Like Krista Lysack, Hughes pays close attention to the contrasts in dress among George Eliot's female protagonists in *Middlemarch*, as well as to the seemingly excessive descriptions of costume in M. E. Braddon's prototypical 'sensation novel', *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Hughes's analysis, though, takes into account not only the designs of clothing worn by imaginary characters, but also the historically precise and informative discussions of fabric that pervade their dialogue. Hughes recovers for contemporary readers, for example, the significance of conversations about muslin in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, a woven cotton cloth essential to neo-classical Regency aesthetic ideals and ideals of femininity through its draping properties. This is precisely the sort of significance lost now to an undergraduate audience, without the intervention of Hughes's critical perspective.

Not coincidentally, *Northanger Abbey* is itself a prototype for the genre of the girls' coming-of-age novel, and the female protagonist's decisions about how to form her own value system are set in a social environment—the world of dances and assemblies at Bath Spa—where dress and fashion affect women's success in the marriage market. Given the importance assigned by all cultures to the process of learning and performing femininity and to doing so through dress, it is only to be expected that clothing would figure prominently in this literary genre. Though the research and insights of dress historians are useful pedagogical tools in many literary contexts, they are crucial whenever the subject at hand is coming-of-age fiction and the protagonist is a young woman, for the paths toward maturity along which heroines navigate is so often paved with cloth. This has been true ever since the protagonist of Fanny Burney's *Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) found herself covered in insufficient fabric, as well as in more-than-sufficient embarrassment, when forced to occupy a seat in the gallery at the opera, while clothed in the formal dress better suited to the pit instead. The choices that heroines face as to how to clothe themselves are rarely matters of individual taste alone; they are instead reflections of a time, a place, and a wider social ethos.

When female coming-of-age narratives have, moreover, a multi-cultural aspect, the differing assumptions, expectations, and biases that surround femininity almost invariably express themselves through dress and fabric. In some cases, the nature of these gendered cultural clashes will be plain even to a student audience, as it is, for instance, in Simi Bedford's comic coming-of-age novel, *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (1991). There, the contrast is painfully obvious between what young Remi Foster wears to a relative's wedding in her native Lagos—a gold-threaded pink 'up and down', with its 'figure-hugging bodice' and skirt 'which fitted just as tightly all the way to the ground',<sup>15</sup> to show off the beauty of her Black female body—and the uniform in which a hostile white salesclerk in a London department store encases her, before Remi enrolls in boarding school in England—oversized 'garments as unfamiliar as their names: lisle stockings, woollen vest, liberty bodice', all of them in a colour bearing the outrageously offensive and racist label of 'nigger brown'.<sup>16</sup>

Often, however, the cultural significance of clothing in fiction is less clear-cut and requires some unpacking, especially for undergraduate readers who may be unfamiliar with the particulars of cultural and historical difference. We can see the benefits of an interdisciplinary approach grounded in fashion history by looking closely at a representative text—*Who's Hu?*, Lensey Namioka's 1980 coming-of-age novel set in a post-World-War-II American suburb. Only by exploring the backstory, so to speak, of the Chinese American protagonist's clothing—both her Dior 'New Look'-inspired school wardrobe and the *cheongsam* that she wears, with disastrous

results, to a prom—can scholars and students alike appreciate *materially* this first-person narrative about the *wearing* effects upon a young girl of negotiating cultural and gendered expectations between two worlds in the year 1952.

An instructor embarking upon this analysis might begin by highlighting a quotation from early in the novel—a passage of self-description by Emma Hu, the sixteen-year-old narrator. She is about to leave, somewhat reluctantly, for a date with a young man who, like her, was born in China, but has grown up in a suburb of Boston, Massachusetts:

My clothes for the afternoon were part of a wardrobe I'd revamped with Katey's expert help. [Katey is a popular white, American-born classmate.] The color of my cashmere twin sweater set was a dusty rose, and it complemented my heather tweed skirt. The skirt itself was mid-calf, exactly the proper 'new look' length. My fuzzy white bobby socks were whiter than the Easter bunny, and my suede saddle shoes were tan colored.<sup>17</sup>

The first-person narrator, named Emma Hu, sums up the semiotics of her appearance: 'Of course I looked exactly what I was: a high school kid' (52).

This both is and is not true, though, in the eyes of her date. As the narrator explains, 'Most American college boys wouldn't be caught dead dating a high school girl, but among the Chinese, a girl of fifteen or sixteen was ready not only for dating, but for marriage' (53). In an essay titled 'Looking Good: Feeling Right—Aesthetics of the Self' (2005), Sophie Woodward suggests that 'clothing may be a means by which women are able to externalize their intentions in order to impact the will of others'.<sup>18</sup> If so, then this outfit fails, for it has no impact on the will of the spectator; it is powerless to *fashion* a new cultural definition for its wearer or to represent her as someone uninterested in being marriage *material*. Hence, Emma Hu winds up wasting an afternoon in the company of Winthrop Chang, a junior at MIT, who greets her mother with 'the sort of model salutation a young gentleman would extend to an honoured member of the older generation' (51), but who strikes Emma herself as 'annoying' (52).

By the end of the day, however, she will no longer be wearing the fashionable outfit that, as she believes, signifies 'high school kid'—or, at least, that might have held such a meaning for an audience of white, native-born Americans. Instead, she will be on her way back home arrayed most unfashionably in an assortment of clothes borrowed from strangers. Thanks to a canoeing accident caused by an argument with Winthrop over the appropriateness of interracial relationships, her suede saddle shoes will lie at the bottom of a lake. Her 'new look' skirt—a reference to the style (usually capitalized as 'New Look') that originated with the unveiling of French designer Christian Dior's February 1947 collection in Paris—will have sunk there as well, after she has 'managed to unzip' it and 'let it fall away', having discovered that 'Treading water was hard . . . while wearing a long tweed skirt' (59).

As it turns out, this will be merely the first of two episodes in the novel in which Emma returns home unzipped or stripped, with her clothes lost or ruined. The second occurs following a high school prom, and this time, it is Chinese, rather than Western, fashion that lets her down. Emma's tight *cheongsam* comes to grief during a too-vigorous rumba with Kim, a young Korean-born man who, like Winthrop Chang, ignores the message that she believes her clothes ought to be sending. In this case, it is the warning embodied in the close fit of her brocade dress—that she is equipped only for dancing 'in a well-bred, sedate sort of way' (117), as she has always done at Chinese parties, not for engaging in wildly athletic movement of the sort that occurs at

a white suburban adolescents' event. Strained to their limits by the steps that Emma's partner makes her follow, the seams of her silk *cheongsam* prove unequal to the task. To quote her own description of this disaster: 'Rip, rip . . . the slit shot up to my armpit, and I felt an ominous draft play over my midriff, all the way up to my brassiere' (124).

Fashion, as Jean Allman avers, may indeed be 'a language spoken everywhere'; nonetheless, as Lensey Namioka's novel demonstrates—especially to young female readers, who often turn to the genre of the coming-of-age novel to explore in advance the gendered hazards of maturity—clothing does not always speak effectively on behalf of the wearer, for those around her, especially men, may choose not to listen to its messages in any case. To be heard, a woman will have to find other ways to exercise her voice that do not rely on bodily display alone. As is true, moreover, in many such fictional narratives, clothing can only exhibit versions of femininity that already exist, and these prove inadequate to the complex demands of actual life, particularly in the case of female subjects who must move within and across multiple cultures.

In constructing this novel, Lensey Namioka hopes to engage her audience's knowledge both of fashion history and of the material properties of wool and silk—the absorbency of the first and the fragility of the second—to convey through tangible, even tactile, means that the social roles available to a Chinese American girl in the 1950s who is independent-minded, adventurous and academically gifted are either too burdensome or too flimsy to be of use. Like the New Look tweed circle skirts of post-war Western fashion, these socially prescribed identities will weigh her down and drown her, unless they are cast off; and like the narrowly cut, floor-length cheongsam dress, they will constrict and confine her, then tear apart altogether under pressure. Coming-of-age novels such as *Who's Hu?* encourage readers to look beyond conventional images of gender, when it comes to constructing identities for themselves, and urge women in particular to discover other means of expression and articulation apart from the socially accepted one of dress. Paradoxically, however, these works of fiction teach their anti-materialistic lessons through careful attention to the design and construction of clothing, which they describe in lengthy and even loving detail.

From the perspective of the critic, therefore, to ignore the rhetoric of fashion as an important component in such novels is, in effect, the equivalent of denying that dialogue matters. But those of us who study fiction are rarely trained in traditional English departments to 'read' descriptions of clothing; those of us who study gender are rarely trained by feminist analysis to focus on fashion; and even those of us who study material culture are rarely trained to look closely at the cultural function of cloth in creative work, as opposed to anthropological or sociological texts. Along with our students, we must follow the lead of pioneers such as Brent Shannon, Krista Lysack, Clair Hughes, Christine Bayles Kortsch, and others in learning how literary narratives draw upon the social meanings of the garments they contain.

In the case of Namioka's *Who's Hu*, that means acquainting ourselves with the stories of two kinds of fashion: the Western 'New Look' for women and the Chinese *cheongsam*. First, studying more closely the American 'high school' outfit that Emma Hu wears on her date would bring to light the contradictions inherent in the post-war notions of femininity available to women after the Second World War. The popularity of Christian Dior's New Look was due largely to its celebration of surplus and excess, at least in terms of cloth. As Christopher Breward notes in *The Culture of Fashion* (1995), following the 'material shortages and restrictions' of the war years, the arrival

of the New Look in 1947 allowed women to revel in ‘huge swirling skirts, supported by crinolines or layers of petticoats’.<sup>19</sup> Emma Hu’s white American-born friend Katey, the most popular girl in their middle-class suburban school, is an expert in current trends and a self-appointed stylist. She wears the domesticated version of the Parisian ‘New Look’ herself and tries to outfit her friend in it as well. At the same prom where Emma’s cheongsam comes to grief, Katey and the other white adolescent girls are visions ‘dressed in yards and yards’ of pastel taffeta (119), echoing Anne Hollander’s poetic floral description of the post-war evening gown that forced ‘the elegant head and nude upper body to burst like a flower out of a tight sheath, balanced by the huge bloom of skirt below’.<sup>20</sup>

Although the New Look was, in the words of Aileen Ribeiro, ‘an immensely extravagant style which could take up to twenty-five yards of fabric’, it ‘relied for best effect on a tiny waist which had to be created by a boned wasp-waist corset’;<sup>21</sup> thus, it required a return to Victorian-inspired binding through ‘Confining foundation garments including . . . ‘merry widows’ and waist cinchers’.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as Namioka’s novel illustrates, the breadth and expansiveness represented by the material of the Dior circle skirt is illusory, when it comes to young women’s material possibilities in 1952. Even as the girls who wear this style take up more physical space, they experience ineluctable pressure to make themselves smaller and narrower both intellectually and academically. Emma suffers from feeling like a ‘freak’, because she enjoys ‘presenting the beauty and limpid simplicity of mathematics to people’, while, Katey deliberately fails algebra for, as she explains, it is not ‘okay for an attractive girl . . . to admit she was capable of abstract reasoning’ (15). Both girls respond, whether reluctantly or affirmatively, to the unspoken social pressure to be appealing as potential marriage partners—a pressure that was quite literally bound up with the New Look garment, with its ‘waspie-waist that emphasised the hips. Once again, the maternal aspects of the body were revered, subconsciously mirroring the push to get women back into the roles of wife and mother to raise the post-war generation and nurture the returning troops’.<sup>23</sup>

Opening a window onto the subject of Western fashion history will also enable students to learn that the New Look was, in fact, hotly contested, especially in the United States and Britain, when it first appeared. To some observers, it ‘was anti-feminist. Its echoes of the *Belle Époque*, which Dior himself nostalgically invoked, were seen as not only inappropriate but actually threatening, symbolizing . . . the recreation of the feminine woman as an upper-class luxury object’.<sup>24</sup> There was even a degree of organised resistance: ‘College students protested to the New York Dress Institute’; a small demonstration ‘against the new style’ was initiated by ‘a group of women in Dallas, Texas’; and, of course, the post-war Labour government in Britain debated ‘a decree governing the length of women’s skirts’.<sup>25</sup> But if some women objected to the implications of this New Look, others watched unhappily as a broader phenomenon occurred; in the wake of Dior’s rise, the fashion industry began to marginalise female designers and become a masculine preserve. As Axel Madsen, a biographer of Coco Chanel, records, ‘Between 1920 and 1940, the most influential couture houses had been in the hands of women. . . . Now fashion design belonged increasingly to men’.<sup>26</sup> To know this background to the Western garments that Emma Hu wears is to understand more about why she feels so much like an odd duck—a ‘Mandarin duck’ (16), as she puts the matter wittily—lost in a post-war suburban world that denies and negates her right to the career as a mathematician that she covets.

On the other hand, to ask student audiences to look more carefully, too, at the *cheongsam*, the ‘splashy yellow dress’ that contrasts with the supposedly tasteful pastel ball gowns worn by the American-born white girls at Emma’s prom (119–120), is to gain a fuller appreciation of the ideas of hybridity and multiculturalism subtly endorsed within Namioka’s narrative. As Valerie Steele and John S. Major write, in their essay ‘Five Thousand Years of Chinese Clothing’ (1999), ‘Many westerners believe that traditional Chinese clothing remained “timeless” and “unchanging” over the centuries’, yet Chinese dress has changed greatly.<sup>27</sup> The *cheongsam* (a Cantonese term) is itself the embodiment of modernity, change, and cultural crossings. In both her book-length study, *The Cheongsam* (2000), and her 1999 essay, ‘The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity’—histories of the garment that also goes by the Mandarin name of *qi pao*—Hazel Clark enumerates the variety of influences that quite literally shaped this dress, which, beginning in the 1920s and ‘30s, incorporated Manchu inspiration and Shanghai adaptation and sophistication, while narrowing the lines of its silhouette in response to contact with fashion iconography that circulated through Hollywood film and in Hong Kong print culture.<sup>28</sup> Dior’s New Look may have had its roots in a social climate that ‘reflected an adherence to romantic and nostalgic (some would say reactionary) ideals of femininity.’<sup>29</sup> But the *cheongsam*, as Beverly Jackson informs us, evolved from the masculine ‘scholar’s robe’, which served as the prototype for young women’s school uniforms after the end of the Qing dynasty in 1911, as a new push for social and cultural modernisation through women’s education began.<sup>30</sup> Although the version of the *cheongsam* that the fictional Emma Hu wears to her dance in 1952 both makes a show of and restricts her body—its lines having been dictated, in part, by the influence of Western notions of femininity on Chinese tailoring—it still bears traces of its history as a ‘classless, androgynous’ garment, ‘originally worn by men’, that ‘offered freedom from layers of restricting clothing and thus became a manifestation of growing female emancipation. . . . [It] was both convenient to wear and economical to make, and signified the emergence of the “modern” woman in China’ [ellipses in original].<sup>31</sup>

Thus, Winthrop Chang’s position in the argument with Emma that upsets their canoe and sends them both tumbling into the water is already based on a false premise of cultural purity and preservation of Chinese separateness. As Emma’s supposedly ‘Chinese’ dress shows, the very markers, such as clothing, that signify national and ethnic identity are in reality already mixed and hybrid in character. Readers who know the histories, moreover, of the *cheongsam* and of the post-war New Look skirts and dresses will understand more fully the complexities of Emma’s choices, as she must decide not only how to be a woman, but which kind of woman to be, while working within two systems that offer both new pleasures and old dangers.

But as teachers, we can neither assume that students come to their readings of texts already supplied with this sort of knowledge nor that they have been attuned to seeking it. Clothing, although by definition part of the visual sphere, has for so long occupied a place of invisibility in the academic world that students are likely to pass it by, without considering it as important to their interpretations of literature. Thus, our first task in the classroom will be to shift it from background to foreground. This will mean giving students at least a rudimentary acquaintance with the vocabulary of Fashion Studies, an outline of how dominant styles developed in both Western and non-Western cultures, and some exposure to material *as* material—the domain, of course, of material culture studies. When, for example, undergraduates encounter Jane Austen’s comic dialogue on the subject of muslin in *Northanger Abbey*, it will be helpful not only for them to understand the significance of the cotton trade to the late-



eighteenth-century British imperial economy, but to see and feel muslin itself—to experience at the tactile level how and why such a fragile, insubstantial, and easily soiled fabric could become the vehicle for class-based ideals of femininity, as well as for sexual fears and fantasies around notions of purity and ‘spotlessness’. Learning through touching and handling objects can and should have a more prominent role in the pedagogical process.

As increasing numbers of literary scholars have been discovering, the history, construction, and material of dress is neither a trivial subject nor an irrelevant one. Indeed, it is so meaningful, that it resists containment by disciplinary boundaries. To attend to its lessons is to recognize that fashion is interwoven with the very fabric and purpose of literature, by design.

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Jean Allman, ‘Introduction’, in *Fashioning Africa: Power and the Politics of Dress*, ed. Jean Allman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert Ross, *Clothing: A Global History, Or, The Imperialists’ New Clothes* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), p. 169.
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 171.
- <sup>4</sup> Malcolm Barnard, *Fashion as Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 74.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- <sup>6</sup> Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, ‘The Power of Fashion’, in *The Fashion Reader*, eds. Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 85.
- <sup>7</sup> Clair Hughes, *Dressed in Fiction* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), p. 2.
- <sup>8</sup> Daniel Miller, ‘Introduction’, *Clothing as Material Culture*, eds. Susanne Kuchler and Daniel Miller (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 3.
- <sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London: Virago, and Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p. 47.
- <sup>10</sup> Fiona Anderson, ‘Museums as Fashion Media’, *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*, eds. Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 373–74.
- <sup>11</sup> See Brent Shannon, *The Cut of His Coat: Men, Dress, and Consumer Culture in Britain, 1860–1914* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2006).
- <sup>12</sup> Ross, 168.
- <sup>13</sup> See Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women’s Writing* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008); see also Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women’s Fiction* (Aldershot, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).
- <sup>14</sup> See Clair Hughes.
- <sup>15</sup> Simi Bedford, *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (New York and London: Penguin, 1991), p. 24.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 66–67.
- <sup>17</sup> Lensey Namioka, *Who’s Hu?* (New York: Vanguard, 1980). All subsequent citations appear in the text.
- <sup>18</sup> Sophie Woodward, ‘Looking Good: Feeling Right—Aesthetics of the Self’, *Clothing as Material Culture*, eds. Susanne Kuchler and Daniel Miller (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 37.
- <sup>19</sup> Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 190–91.
- <sup>20</sup> Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits* (NY and Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1995), p. 163.
- <sup>21</sup> Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 161.
- <sup>22</sup> Tiffany Webber-Hanchett, ‘The Modern Era: 1910–1960’, *The Fashion Reader*, eds. Linda Welters and Abby Lillethun (Oxford: Berg, 2007), p. 56.
- <sup>23</sup> Rebecca Arnold, *Fashion, Desire and Anxiety: Image and Morality in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 103.
- <sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, and Lou Taylor, *Through the Looking Glass: A History of Dress from 1860 to the Present Day* (London: BBC Books, 1989), p. 149.
- <sup>25</sup> Lang and Lang, 84.
- <sup>26</sup> Axel Madsen, *Chanel: A Woman of Her Own*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), p. 276.
- <sup>27</sup> Valerie Steele and John S. Major (eds.), ‘Five Thousand Years of Chinese Clothing’, *China Chic: East Meets West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> See Hazel Clark, 'The Cheung Sam: Issues of Fashion and Cultural Identity', *China Chic: East Meets West* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 155–65; see also Hazel Clark, *The Cheongsam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>29</sup> Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 172.

<sup>30</sup> Beverley Jackson, *Shanghai Girl Gets All Dressed Up* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2005), p. 53.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, 9.

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