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The Victorian Fancy Dress Ball, 1870-1900

“To sustain a character for a whole evening is a bore; to have a ready repartee, in keeping with the character, for every passing masker, an impossibility—in short, to be anyone but himself, too much trouble. We have an inward consciousness that this is not our vocation, and so with judgment stay away.”

The Lady's Newspaper and Pictorial Times, on the Englishman's view of masquerade, 1856

(“Masquerading in England”: 161-62)

In the dizzying swirl of a masquerade ball, costumed attendees could defy social and sexual norms, amplifying or revealing desires that were otherwise disallowed in polite society.¹ Scholarly consensus on this point reflects the persuasive influence of Mikhail Bakhtin ([1965] 1985), whose discussion of the carnivalesque—a mode in which masquerade certainly participates—focused on the latitude for inverting social orders that arises in such exception spaces. Certainly the masquerade ball of the eighteenth century, which Terry Castle has so thoughtfully explored, depends on carnivalesque inversion for its meaning and its pleasure. Castle describes the eighteenth-century masquerade as a site to unsettle identity, a “collective meditation on the self and other, and an exploration of their mysterious dialectic,” where costume and disguise were the stuff of “vertiginous existential recombination” and where “the true self remained elusive and inaccessible—illegible” via the “superimposition” of “new bodies” over old ones (1986: 4). Masquerade costume, with the mask itself of paramount importance, thus serves as a tool for the opposition and upending of the self: “costume ideally represented an inversion of one's nature,” Castle writes, and in the “rhetoric of masquerade...the controlling figure was the antithesis” (5). Masquerade costume facilitates the expression of the non-self, or the self consciously othered.

Despite the shared convention of costumes, these masquerades bear little resemblance to

the fancy dress balls of the next century. Whereas the masquerade allowed revellers to explore the antithesis of their social selves, the Victorian fancy dress ball instead offered attendees the chance to represent their own personas or negotiate their social present. This shift is reflected even in the terminology for the event, playing on the multiple connotations of “fancy,” both as the imagined or the imaginary and (in its adjectival form) as the ornamented, a heightened version of ordinary dress.² David Parker articulates the distinction thusly: “Masque and masquerade prefigured the fancy-dress party, but neither allegory—the point of masque—nor disguise to cloak misconduct—the point of masquerade—remained on the menu. At a fancy-dress party you are yourself—dressed up as someone else” (2012: 90). Despite general agreement that this shift from masquerade to fancy dress took place, how and to what end that change occurred remains underexplored.³ In this article, I consider some of the overlapping ways that late Victorian fancy dress allowed participants to negotiate rather than to escape their self-presentation and their milieu: revealing aspects of their character (including, for men, the novelty of sartorial pleasure) by choosing costumes from a prescribed set of identifiable roles and tropes, and by choosing often abstract costumes that directly engaged with issues of their day.

The distinction between playing oneself and playing someone else was not lost on contemporary writers. After a devastating fire at an 1856 Covent Garden masked ball dampened interest in commercially-sponsored costumed events,⁴ a writer in the *Lady's Pictorial* opined that masquerade fundamentally did not suit the national character: while the French might enjoy and excel at masquerade because of their “natural sprightliness and indigenous wit, quickness at repartee, a taste for personation,” “a general dramatic tendency” and “no great nicety on the score of [their] next-door neighbour’s morals,” the Englishman finds “to be any one but himself, too much trouble” (“Masquerading in England,” 1856: 161-62). The sense of an inherent British unwillingness “to be any one but himself” is absent from a good deal of the scholarly discussion of Victorian fancy dress balls, which tends to focus on a few, atypical balls that received the lion’s share of press in their own time and have in turn maintained an outsized presence in

fashion history. Queen Victoria herself was an avid fan of fancy dress, holding three particularly notable events in the mid-century, each of which dictated an historical era from which guests were to choose their costume: the 1842 Plantagenet Ball (*bal masque*), the 1845 Georgian Ball (*bal poudré*), and the 1851 Stuart Ball (Rappaport 2002: 113-114). No expense was spared for these occasions—the bodice of Victoria’s gown for the 1842 ball is said to have been adorned with diamonds worth over £60,000 (Knowles 2009: 34)—and historical accuracy was ostensibly as important as the conspicuous extravagance. The sheer decadence of such spending for a single evening accords with the excesses of 18C masquerade, and the highly prescriptive dress codes seem to suggest that the goal of the balls was to leave behind entirely the trappings of the day. Yet even Victoria’s balls, with their express devotion to authenticity, were bedevilled by telling, thoroughgoing anachronism. Though impeccably made of sumptuous fabric and bespoke lace, for example, Victoria’s dress for the 1851 ball (*see figure 1*) is far more evocative of gowns of her own time, with their dropped shoulders, natural waists, and balloon crinolines, than it is of the long basques common in Charles II’s day. Historical accuracy might have been intended, but the version of the past on display was more often filtered through a powerful present-day lens.

Another touchstone of fancy dress glory was the Duchess of Devonshire’s 1897 fête held in honor of Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee; the event was heralded in its time as the apotheosis of fancy dress outings,⁵ and the indulgent mood was matched by the extraordinary lengths taken to ensure the costumes were documented in their fullest splendour. A privately printed catalogue of the revellers, who had been photographed by James Lauder of the Lafayette Company, complemented extensive media coverage (“Devonshire House Fancy Dress” 1897).⁶ In light of such efforts, the ball remains to this day one of the best documented outings of the period, and a quick glance at the album shows that while some attendees tried to hew closely to historical precedent, many rendered their historical or mythological personage in the sartorial vocabulary they knew best. The Devonshire album thus offers a glimpse into how Victorians understood

history, not a glimpse into the costume of an authentic historical past. Two Cleopatras (*see figures 2 & 3*) appear in common, if contrasting, fin de siècle silhouettes: one tight-laced and the other in an unstructured gown with low slung medieval girdle that would be at home in the widows of Liberty, if some of the pseudo-Egyptian jewellery was jettisoned. This temporal blurring was itself a typically Victorian impulse: the neo-Medievalism of Pre-Raphaelite iconography bled into the Aesthetic and Rational dress movements; the 1870s saw the fleeting popularity of the “Dolly Varden” dress (itself a bowdlerized version of 1780s fashion whose namesake was a character in a 1839 Dickens novel); and—as Laurel Bradley has argued—a popular staging of Goldsmith’s *Olympia* sparked a flurry of interest in an ersatz “Queen Anne” style, a term that “became a catchphrase for advanced taste as applied broadly to architecture, furniture, and clothing,” where resemblance to the historical 1710s was not troubled over (1991: 22).⁷ In late nineteenth-century England, in other words, fashion provided a means of self-reflexive historicization, and fancy dress offered an expansive historical and iconographic range through which Victorians could imagine or reimagine their own time.

The ‘too, too solid’ Titania: Suiting Oneself in Fancy Dress

Fancy dress facilitated self-reflection in other ways as well. Even if Victoria’s balls and the Devonshire ball engaged in a form of fancy dress firmly outside of the reach of the public, they lent a sustained air of respectability to the enterprise, smoothing its expansion and popularity. Again in contrast to eighteenth-century masquerade, which was “universally condemned by contemporary moralists and satirists as a foolish, irrational, and corrupt activity perpetrated by irresponsible people of fashion” (Castle 1986: 2), the late-nineteenth-century fancy dress ball had indeed become an event respectable enough for the most discriminating family.⁸ Far outnumbering commercial balls were those held in honor of birthdays, anniversaries, inaugurations, and as community celebrations or fund raisers; small scale outings that garnered

significant attention in local newspapers, which routinely carried extensive accounts of regional events, including long lists of attendees and their costumes. Concomitant with the spread of fancy dress balls and the expectation that people of all classes might participate in them was the rise of mass production and the department store, which allowed those middle-class revellers greater access to fancy dress goods: this new buying power presented the opportunity to educate the consumer in the proper selection and application of these wares.⁹ Voluminous how-to advice sprang up detailing costume ideas and suggestions, both in the pages of the periodical press and in book-length manuals. By far the most popular of these was Arden Holt's *Fancy Dresses Described*, which went through six editions from 1879 to 1896, each longer and more richly illustrated than the last, and all published under the auspices of department store owners Debenham and Freebody.¹⁰ So strong was the demand for these works that, beginning in 1882, Holt offered a companion book for men's fancy dress; these volumes track some of the trends in fin de siècle fancy dress, as evidenced by local ball lists that regularly documented costumes from Holt's stable of suggestions.

Both the men's and women's versions of the handbook evince a tension between encouraging originality and prescribing a fixed number of options, and Holt lands upon appropriateness of costume choice as the primary site for expression. The designs may be set, but a person must choose one from among the many. He quickly dispatches the idea that the goal of fancy dress is to mimic with historical accuracy the clothes of centuries past: "The dresses worn at Fancy Balls are not very correct in all their details, either nationally or historically, and I have described rather what is best to wear than what the peasants of the several countries and the people who have preceded us veritably wore" (1882: 2).¹¹ A slight variation of the "best to wear" sentiment accompanies the comments in Holt's editions for women, allowing that his work "does not purport to be an authority in the matter of costume, for, as a rule, the historical dresses worn on such occasions are lamentably incorrect" (1880: 1). Far more important than

issues of accuracy are concerns of appropriateness, and not matching one's chosen fancy dress to one's personality or body carries risk. If men are warned to avoid appearing foolish— "People at Fancy Balls often render themselves absolutely ridiculous because they assume characters in every way opposed to their own personality" (1882: 3)—women are offered a fuller admonishment to enhance their comeliness—"It behoves those who really desire to look well to study what is individually becoming to themselves, and then to bring to bear some little care in the carrying out of the dresses they select, if they wish their costumes to be really a success. There are few occasions when a woman has a better opportunity of showing her charms to advantage than at a Fancy Ball" (1880: 9). On the one hand, this advice is based on an abiding commitment to normative notions of desirability as communicated through clothing: the "advantage" to which a woman might exploit fancy dress is to display her body in ways that conform to prevalent notions of beauty. On the other hand, Holt (and his enterprising backers) seems to sanction fancy dress as tool for superseding normative expectations, expressing what could not otherwise be expressed in daily streetwear or even conventional evening attire. A writer in *Bow Bells* echoes Holt's advice nearly verbatim, noting that fancy dress "affords a chance of looking one's very best to those who do not show to advantage in conventional costume" ("Fancy Dresses" 1894: 260). The writer further hones in on the horrors that incongruity between costume and the body of its wearer might entail: "A small, slight, fair, lively woman will look ridiculous as Joan of Arc or the Maid of Saragossa; while a large, stately, calm, dark-browed personage attired as 'Follow' is a monumental folly indeed" (260).

Another common critique of poorly executed fancy dress does not take issue with a person's physical appeal but rather suggests that the character or notion represented by the wearer's costume is somehow out of sync with the personality of the wearer him- or herself. Mrs. Talbot Coke's handwringing in an 1892 issue of *Hearth and Home* begins with a sentiment much like that in *Bow Bells*, but moves the site of concern from the body onto the persona:

Few things, perhaps, need more discrimination, in a small way, than the choice of fancy dress. One has seen a ponderous, florid Helen of Troy, a ‘too, too solid’ Titania, or ‘little Buttercup.’ One has marvelled over a skinny Juno and a ‘Red Riding Hood’ over whose suspiciously golden head some forty summers have passed, and been moved almost to tears at the sight of four variations of poor Marie Stuart the same ball, each more hopelessly ugly than her rival...As a rule, a well-known ‘giggler’ chooses ‘Marie Antoinette’ or ‘Charlotte Corday’ or something else of a dignified and almost tragic style, and a gaunt maiden in a pince nez frolics as Esmeralda. (1892: 748)

Coke objects not simply to the physically unflattering costume, but to a misrecognition of the self, a fundamental misunderstanding of one’s age or appearance. In a sense then, these missteps could be understood as revealing something about their wearers: the “too solid Titania” misjudges her body and Little Red Riding Hood her age, but the “giggler” misjudges her very nature. On a broader scale, C. Willett Cunnington, field-defining historian of nineteenth-century dress, notes that an “escape into fancy dress will not cure a neurosis,” especially an epoch-defining social neurosis like the prudery he himself ascribes to the 1880s ([1936] 2003: 243-44). Still, as Cunnington intimates, fancy dress might be regarded as *one* means of escape, or, to push his logic further, as symptom of the repressed desire that gives rise to the neuroses. In this way, fancy dress—even when it is not in the service of carnivalesque abandon—can lay bare the desires and anxieties that drove the period and the individual. As we will see, both Victorian men and women were subject to these desires and anxieties.

“A Fashion of the Hour”: Modelling Contemporaneity in Fancy Dress

In 1869, a writer in the *Bath Chronicle* bemoaned the fact that English fancy dress ball attendees did not demonstrate the ingenuity that their cross-Atlantic counterparts seemed to muster: “We find nothing at our English Fancy Balls like the eccentric achievement of a young American lady who not long since appeared at a masquerade in Kentucky as the ‘Almighty Dollar,’ her dress

being of white and silver tissue, bordered with bank-notes, and gold coin scattered about her neck and arms and in her hair” (“Fancy Dress Ball” 1869: 8). A few years later the same could not be said, as British ball-goers not only offered their own renditions of money à la mode, they extended their adoption of abstract costumes far beyond. Holt’s *Fancy Dresses Described* included abstract costumes from its earliest editions: “Photography,” “Telegraph,” “Postage,” “The Press,” and “Suez Canal” among them. In 1880, Holt introduced “Money,” a costume in which bank notes were to be printed on the white satin border of the skirt and the tunic was to feature a “purse-shaped pocket and £, s. d. embroidered on it”; the costume did not change through all of Holt’s editions (1880: 56). Perhaps Holt and his British readers were simply adopting the costumes of their more creative American antecedents. More likely is that the drive to increasingly abstract costumes was a natural progression, a result of the broader late Victorian push to self-awareness and reflexivity in fancy dress.

Colleen McQuillen’s study of Russian art students’ fancy dress balls at the fin de siècle offers a useful vocabulary for discussing these kinds of abstract costumes: the “conceptual” and the “synecdochic.” The costumes that “embody concepts or ideas” she terms “conceptual costumes,” while “non-anthropomorphic objects and abstractions chiefly represented by iconic symbols or parts standing for the whole” are labelled “synecdochic” (2012: 34). While she argues that these kinds of costumes developed in turn-of-the-century Russia, similarly abstract fancy dress had already long been in circulation in England and—as the writer in the *Bath Chronicle* noted—in America before that, but her point still holds that via abstraction, these costumes provided “a uniquely dialogic forum in which sartorial semiotics could acquire a social agenda” (35). McQuillen writes that these Russian art students “were creating a new artistic genre, a new expressive medium that occupied a performative space somewhere between visual art and theatre” (42-43). As we will see in English fancy dress balls, costumes were less a self-conscious attempt at developing an artistic avant garde than at rendering contemporary trends in

personal terms, an action that nevertheless activates “sartorial semiotics” that could reflect ongoing social shifts, if not “[acquiring] a social agenda.” Consider that in between the description of the Kentucky costume and Holt’s “Money” costume of 1880, the first of the Married Woman’s Property Acts was passed, fundamentally changing women’s relationship to money by granting them more control over funds they inherited or earned.

A telling example of this pattern is the development of costumes inspired by the paintings of James McNeill Whistler, which mark wearers as having aesthetic knowledge and as alive to current artistic trends, even if their pop-cultural manifestations arrive a few years after Whistler’s originals. The precursors to Whistlerian fancy dress might be seen in some of Holt’s suggestions, starting in the 1882 edition of *Fancy Dresses Described*: “Mist,” a grey tulle affair scattered with diamonds, anthropomorphizes an element that Whistler used to great effect (1882: 95). The 1887 edition adds two kinds of “fog,” a standard “smoke colored” version and a yellow, which is “carried out in deep orange tulle” (1887: 92). Here, the costume’s title is a mere appendage to an outfit which is, outside perhaps of its color and the addition of a tulle scarf, remains perfectly conventional even as it is timely. Two years later, Oscar Wilde would tip his hat to Whistler by arguing that “at present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects” (1891: 40). Not only were people seeing fogs, they were wearing them; as the fog or sunset became a topic of painted representation, it simultaneously became a theme in fancy dress.

What is more, Whistler had by the late 1870s taken to naming his increasingly abstract paintings with musical titles—“Nocturnes,” “Studies,” “Symphonies”—a move that was both a nod to Paterian notions of aesthetic value and a challenge to the Ruskinian tendency to narrativize paintings as part of a moral project. A similar approach was adopted in overtly Whistler-themed costumes, where the “fancy” of the “fancy dress” rested entirely in the title claimed by the wearer. “Nocturne” appears from 1880, where Holt’s description notes that the

choice—labelled “after Whistler”— could be applied to any “stylish evening dress.” “The name,” intones Holt, “is a fashion of the hour, and finds favour with those who do not care for decided fancy costumes” (1882: 13).¹² It was a long hour. While “Study in Pink and Silver (*after Whistler*)” was added to the 1882 (13) edition and dropped thereafter, the “Nocturne” persisted until the 1896 edition. Nor was Whistler-inspired dress confined to women: Holt’s *Gentlemen’s Fancy Dress* also featured a “Nocturne,” which was simply white evening dress, and while the entry dispatches with the “fashion of the hour” disclaimer, something close to its meaning is communicated through the parenthetical in the description: “(*a long way after Whistler*)” (1882: 47). If the (non-)costume might not be immediately discernible to fellow ball attendees, it was often nevertheless readable to the public, as the tag “by Whistler” appeared regularly in the rosters of fancy dress ball attendees.¹³ This approach also gets at the perceived affectation of Whistler’s naming conventions. Ruskin had famously denigrated one of Whistler’s “Nocturnes” as the result of a “pot of paint” being flung at the canvas, and he complained of the artist’s “Cockney impudence” for charging 200 guineas for a work that seemed to Ruskin to be obviously unfinished. These statements provoked a protracted and highly publicized libel trial (Merrill 1992). Depending on one’s view, the title “Nocturne” could be seen (as in Ruskin’s eyes) as an attempt to lend an air of gravitas to a work not warranted by the painting itself, or it could be seen as a compelling example of a genuine artistic innovation. Similarly, the Whistler-influenced “Nocturnes” and “Studies” of Holt’s pages could be (or seem to a viewer to be) a way of passing off a lazy non-costume as something clever, or taken seriously as a popular interpretation of recent developments in the fine art world.

Another kind of abstraction foregrounded contemporaneity more forcefully. Fancy dress presented a way to combine normative or near-normative feminine dress (corseted, décolleté gowns) with symbols or images of male-dominated professions or ideas, reifying still-rigid gender norms. Though, to use McQuillen’s term, these costumes may be considered conceptual, they

achieve their impact via representation as well as through synechdocic symbols or objects. Even as guidebooks and periodicals insist on the importance of self-expression and appropriateness of costume—or perhaps because of it—female ball-goers were encouraged to adopt a costume that depicts trappings of an occupation or a type, rather than adopting the costume *of* that occupation or type. In a sense, these representational costumes break down objects, actions, professions, or positions into their constituent elements. In one telling contrast, Holt’s guides for men and women both include a “Jockey” costume. In the edition for men, the costume description reads, “Top boots, with spurs; satin breeches, jacket and cap of two colours. Whip in hand” (1882: 35). The women’s edition lists, “Short skirt; green overskirt with cards of races printed on it, and bunches of coins between; bodice of red trimmed with gold, green sleeves; green and red jockey cap” (1880: 47). The man is in costume *as* a jockey, then, while the woman is in a costume that represents objects associated with the jockey’s profession. Her short skirt does push the bounds of acceptable every-day dress, but—wearing a dress—no one would mistake her as representing herself as a jockey. Even as the range of costume on offer to women expanded, they retained a strange splintering between representation and impersonation. A rare instance that does not depend on this distinction is the Beefeater (*see figure 4*), as the feminine fancy dress closely mimics the masculine original; but the similarity is possible because the male version features a long skirted tunic over trunk hose, a silhouette that—outside of heritage uniforms like the Yeoman Warders’ and perhaps the kilt—was not associated with men’s Victorian fashion.

Most of the women’s costumes that truck in male themes therefore present no such unified design. One of the more ingenious conceits in Holt’s compendium is the “Lady Stockbroker,” which plays a cagey game with gendered signifiers, and which an 1887 newspaper article referred to—along with the “lady sweep” costume—as “a sign of the times” (“Fancy Ball” 1887: 6):

Short pink silk skirt bordered with white satin, hung with gold coins, and the several kinds of stocks printed upon it; low bodice of pink silk, over it a low polonaise of star-spangled gauze, caught up with roses, the top of the bodice trimmed with gold coins and fringe; gold belt at the waist, gold net on the head with coins; a cornucopia (*sic*) carried in the hand, out of which stocks, money, and roses seem to spring; high-heeled pink shoes, black mittens. (Holt 1880: 83)¹⁴

The short skirt, low bodice, pink silk, and roses are all markers of traditional femininity, but the plentiful articles of finance—stocks printed on the skirt, coins worn in the hair and adorning that low pink bodice—align money with femininity in direct, if inoffensive, ways. As with the women’s jockey costume, the goal is not to suggest that the wearer is pretending at being a stockbroker, but rather playfully to deploy the profession’s icons, stripping them of the much of the meaning that might otherwise inhere.¹⁵ In addition to the feminine appeal of the dress itself, by representing money and a cornucopia of riches, the “Lady Stockbroker” and “Jockey” have adorned their bodies with objects desired by men, undercutting any threat they pose to traditional gender roles.¹⁶ To be sure, costume choices could create disquiet by calling into question who was meant to be attracted to whom. A cartoon from *Judy* (see figure 5) mines that anxiety for humor, as the M.C. of a fancy dress ball tells a young woman dressed as a page, “You see you have assumed a male character so of course you can only dance with ladies” (“Recollections” 1884: 145). The jockey and lady stockbroker neither project nor provoke such ambivalence.

Synecdochic costumes could gesture toward aspects of women’s lives that were circumscribed; they often did so through more pronounced abstraction than the object-based representations of costumes with profession themes, such the jockey or stockbroker. The “Express” is one such costume: “Trained skirt of steel-colored satin, edged and bound with black velvet, showing a series of rails in steel braid; skirt stiff at back, the hem edged with a row

of movable wheels. The front of the skirt in black velvet, striped downwards; steel-colored cuirass; miniature steam engine in the flowing hair, grey feathers issuing from the funnel; wheeled skates for shoes” (Holt 1882: 53). As a wearable costume, “Express” would seem to fail completely. The “stiff” skirt with cuirass, the dramatic (and, one might presume, heavy) train in the hair, the roller skates; these things combine to pose physical hazard on every level. In representing the “Express” in a dress that precludes free and easy movement, Holt’s suggestion unknowingly exposes the tensions underlying the self-revelation encouraged for fancy dressers. Perhaps Cunnington was onto something when he described the 1880s fad for wearing hats and jewellery adorned with all manner of animal and industrial miniatures: writing about the woman who might wear “a pair of railway engines from the lobes of her ears,” he wondered, “Did she, in her subconscious mind, yearn to be just a little—fast?” ([1936] 2003: 252). The “Express” wearer might crave mobility or speed and the “Lady Stockbroker” might long to control her own finances; the costumes may serve as symptoms of these potentially-repressed desires and (/or) as a playful way of broaching these issues while maintaining the wearer’s plausible deniability.

Other attempts at contemporaneity are more credibly wearable, based on or in conversation with current fashions. “Fin de Siècle” is a “green dress with low bodice, a high white hat such as men wear, eye glass, and a masculine coat over the low bodice, cigar in hand.” (Holt 1896: 94). Here, the period itself is signified by the blurring of masculine and feminine. The low bodice of the dress ensures that conventional markers of femininity, and feminine desirability, are sustained, even as the “masculine overcoat” literally covers those markers. The addition hyperbolically stereotypical accessories also helps: the cigar pushes the costume beyond the bounds of contemporary trends, where the (ostensibly feminised) cigarette—expressly *not* the masculine cigar—had become a standard marker of the New Woman. The needle is thread ever more carefully in the costume actually called “The New Woman,” where the “fancy” of fancy dress must be obvious enough to be read as distinct from street wear. No one would mistake a tulle-swathed woman for “mist,” but one might mistake a woman wearing New Woman clothes

for a New Woman, so theatrical elements—to borrow Anne Hollander’s terminology (1993: 250)—are emphasized to preclude such confusion. Added in 1896, Lillian Young’s illustration for Holt’s volume (*see figure 6*) shows a “New Woman” costume that abstracts and displays markers of New Womanhood in the detached manner that the “Lady Stockbroker” displays the tools of that trade (Holt 1896: 181). The textual description is relatively unusual in Holt’s volume, adopting a third-person voice that makes it useful to quote in its entirety:

She wears a cloth tailor-made gown, and her bicycle is pourtrayed [*sic*] in front of it, together with the *Sporting Times* and her golf club; she carries her betting book and her latch-key at her side, her gun is slung across her shoulder, and her pretty Tam o’Shanter is surmounted by a bicycle lamp. She has gaiters to her patent leather shoes, and is armed at all points for conquest. (Holt 1896: 180)

The basis of this “New Woman” costume is not a significant departure from the actual, easily identifiable dress with leg-of-mutton sleeves and waistcoat worn by New Women of the day, and the props—the golf club, hunting rifle, and bicycle—highlight stereotypical and frequently satirized New Woman elements. Thus, what is perhaps the most readable marker of New Womanhood, the bicycle, is rendered *on* the custom-made gown, and the bicycle lamp is affixed to the hat, the prettiness of which is (according to the written description) ruined by the addition. Neither adornment would be part of any real-world version of the costume.¹⁷

Even if the “New Woman” costume might be free from explicit commentary, representing simply the ephemera of a trendy figure, Holt’s written description suggests a sharper critique, acknowledging that the costume’s props invoke ongoing debates about the role of women in education, society, and even the hunting ground. Noting that the wearer is armed with “her rifle,” Holt’s possessive pronoun suggests that she owns it, though it is unclear if that phrasing (or the following line that she is “armed for conquest”) is intended to be read as sarcasm or not. Women’s hunting, along with bicycle riding, was a regular topic for criticism. A

Punch cartoon of 1894 (see figure 7) offers a typical example, poking fun at the unmarried woman hunter whose enthusiasm for the hunt is matched by her ineptitude: asked by the Vicar's Wife if she "has had good sport," Miss Goldenberg replies "Oh, rippin'! I only shot one rabbit, but I managed to injure quite a dozen more!" ("A New Woman" 1894: 111). Miss Goldenberg is dangerous, woefully inaccurate with her rifle, but she is also deluded about her relative skill; a threat in one sense, and no threat at all in another. Similarly, the "New Woman" fancy dress might empower its wearer, "armed for conquest" both literal and figurative, but as she remains cloaked in layers of fantasy and re-representation, any threat is diluted.

"The chance for once of looking picturesque": Male Pleasure and Fancy Dress

In Holt's manuals for men, there is no analogue to women's representational costumes—none in which male street dress is adorned with markers of typically feminine occupations or objects. The very act of wearing fancy dress was, perhaps, regarded as far enough a move in that direction, as the popularity of fancy balls was regularly attributed to men's desire to participate in the varieties and pleasures of fashion afforded women. In an 1879 article occasioned by the publication of Holt's first edition of *Fancy Dresses Described*, the *Saturday Review* opened its discussion by arguing that balls "probably owe their existence to the vanity of men and to the hideousness of men's modern dress.... What men would like is manifest enough; they would like to vie with women in colours and stuffs, in velvet and silk and cloth of gold" ("Fancy Balls" 1879: 75). According to contemporary reports, being able to indulge in dress for pleasure's sake alone was perhaps freeing, but it also opened men's dress to the attendant anxieties and pressures of women's fashion. Common day wear for men was uniform and uniformly covered. Unless one went far afield of the norm (as in Aesthetic dress), there was safety in this anonymous and uniform dress, which could act as a kind of camouflage. Moving away from that uniformity posed the risk of choosing a costume that did not flatter. Certainly a preponderance

of comic treatments show this incongruity (*see figure 8*), as fancy dress exposed men to a kind of criticism of their appearance that—as we have seen—was equally a concern for women (“Opening” 1894: 1). Still, the desire proved greater than the risk.

In one of the regular features of the comic *Judy*, “Notes on a Fancy Dress Ball” (*see figure 9*), an older man ridiculously got up as an “Incroyable” articulates his interest in fancy dress to a ravishing woman dressed as “Night”: “Y’know, to me the charm of these fancy balls is that we men have the chance for once of looking picturesque, as well as you ladies” (1887: 155). The comic is subtitled, “Showing the depths of grotesque degradation to which reasoning Man can sink,” but it is unclear what exactly is the source of the “grotesque degradation”: the absurdity of the man’s belief that he looks “picturesque”; his desire to look picturesque; or his sense of unfairness. Despite such incredulity and derision, it appears that men did leverage the costume ball to exhibit their creativity and, what is more, that this expression was understood in its time as a levelling gesture, a movement toward gender parity as opposed to difference. A writer in the women’s journal *Hearth and Home* was wistful in 1892, noting with a sigh that “superior ingenuity in the costumes was shown by the men” at a Covent Garden ball. “Well, after all,” the writer continued, “we have usurped the sphere of man very considerably this century, so if he in his turn invades our kingdom of dress and puts us to the rout, I suspect we must not complain” (“Some Fancy” 1892: 32). To describe men’s creative costuming as an “invasion” is of course overselling the point, but because the fancy dress ball allowed for a kind of expression missing in men’s street wear, and because that space was understood as part of the social fabric and not as a discrete event isolated from it, these mediations of agency resonated beyond the walls of the civic hall or ballroom.

Despite the possibilities for fancy dress to be leveraged to test the boundaries of acceptability, even stretching the line between what could and what could not be worn, it bears remembering that such latitude was ultimately limited, circumscribed by mores and laws that

reinforced conservatism. That the Victorian fancy dress ball was *not* a site for sexual experimentation is clear from the fact that men were still being rounded up and arrested for cross-dressing when it seemed (to onlookers or the police) that their attire was adopted to facilitate or prompt homosexual activity. That is to say, arrests were being made of men dressed as women at events that were not—or were ruled not to be—authentic fancy dress occasions. It is clear that costume balls could be cited as easy cover for illicit activities, and police accounts of raids are not uncommon: drunkenness, gambling, prostitution, and cross dressing among the more frequently cited offenses.¹⁸ Still, Victorian fancy dress balls were predicated on the idea that clothing far outside of the bounds of normal wear could be deployed with skill and with pleasure to reveal something meaningful about the nature of its wearer. The public and the law might still have balked at the prescient notion that the fluidity of clothing as a signifier of gender was perhaps indicative of the fluidity of gender itself, but there are nevertheless signs that fancy dress could accommodate greater flexibility within sanctioned platforms. By 1896, Holt was listing a series of “half-and-half” costumes, including “Which shall it be: an angel on one side, Diablesse the other,” and “Church and Stage: The figure dressed half in ecclesiastic raiment, the other half as a ballet dancer,” which required the wearer to represent both genders (1896: 122).¹⁹ These kinds of fancy dresses complicated basic cross-dressing, though some iterations of that evergreen theme acceptably persisted. A volume on *Male Character Costumes: A guide to Gentlemen’s* (1885) lists “Rosalind” from *As You Like It* as a potential man’s costume; it is Rosalind in disguise as Ganymede, but “Ganymede” is notably missing from the description. Holt gives his women readers three Rosalind options, including one in which the wearer appears “as a boy in grey doublet, soft velvet hat” (1880: 75). The Shakespearean provenance reminds wearer and viewer alike that the English theater had long depended on the mutability of gender performance and the role of clothing in facilitating that performance. Designs like “Church and Stage” assertively foreground this performative quality even as they call attention to the hypocrisy of splitting off the saint from the sinner, the male from the female entirely. They are prescient costumes,

anticipating serious reconsiderations of gender and morality with a playful wink. But fancy dress for men and for women also addressed the future directly. For women, this included the disappointing “Footwoman of the Future”—the futurity of which seems to be solely her gender, as the rest of the costume is anachronistic, with powdered wig and a tricorne. Also suffering from chronological muddle: the “Future Gentleman of the Period, 1983” was to wear knee breeches and silk stockings with “straw-coloured gloves” and a frilled shirt with “large muslin bow,” on the whole more redolent of the Regency past or the High-Aesthetic present than an imagined future (Holt 1882: 27). With over a century between Holt’s own time and that of his predicted future gentlemen, there was little chance that the costume would require revision in later editions of the book. Other costumes do track contemporary trends more closely: the 1879 edition featured “Graduate, Lady, of the Future” (1879: 35) in cap and gown, but by the 1896 edition, the “future” disclaimer had been shed from the “Academic Dress. Girl graduate” entry (1896: 2).

Granted, the “girl graduate” was still fodder for costume manuals, but as such roles moved increasingly into the mainstream, the novelty—and potential provocativeness—of the costume subsided. Victorian fancy dress balls provided a designated space where broad swaths of society could engage in sartorial expression that expanded the boundaries of convention, even if they did not subvert it entirely; the emphasis on self-revelation, as opposed to antithesis, ensured that the costume rosters of fancy dress balls reflected current social trends and anxieties, tracing evolving ideas of selfhood and sartorial pleasure. Being “anyone but himself” might have been “too much trouble” for the Victorian, but by being himself, the man in fancy dress tells us a great deal about who and what he takes himself to be.

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Image Captions

Figure 1: Queen Victoria's Costume for the Stuart Ball (1851). Royal Collection Trust 74860

Figure 2: Lady Paget as Cleopatra, Duchess of Devonshire Ball. Lafayette & Co, photograph (1897)

Figure 3: Constance Gwladys Robinson (née Herbert), Marchioness of Ripon when Countess de Grey as Cleopatra. Photogravure by Walker & Boutall (1897); National Portrait Gallery Ax41225

Figure 4: Beefeater fancy dress, from *Hearth and Home* 24 November 1898, p. 97

Figure 5: H. Holland, "Recollections of Our Fancy Dress Ball," *Judy* 25 March 1884, p. 145

Figure 6: Lillian Young, “The New Woman,” illustration from Ardern Holt, *Fancy Dresses Described; or, What to Wear at Fancy Dress Balls*, 6th edition (London: Debenham & Freebody, 1896), 181

Figure 7: George du Maurier, “A ‘New Woman,’” *Punch* 8 September 1894, 111.

Figure 8: “Opening of the Fancy-Dress Ball Season: The Male Sex Assuming Characters Quite Unsuitable to Them,” *Funny Folks*, 10 February 1894, p. 1

¹ See, for example, Stevenson and Bennett (1978), Craft-Fairchild (1993), Hollander (1980), and Castle (1986).

² The *OED* offers a third connotation, defining “fancy dress” as “a costume arranged according to the wearer’s fancy”: “fancy” here signifying the predilection, preference, or even whim of the individual. *OED Online* (accessed June 2015).

³ In addition to Parker, see McQuillen (2012) and Jarvis (1982). Cooper and Welters (1995) do explore these issues in relation to three Canadian fancy dress balls, concluding that the balls “exhibited political intent in that they promoted their hosts’ views of the needs of the nascent dominion, and mirrored contemporary perceptions of Canadian national identity.

⁴ For discussion of these events, see Elliot (1986).

⁵ The *Lady’s Realm* declared that “undoubtedly it was one of the great fancy-dress balls of the Victorian Era” (“The Great World,” 1897: 464). The *Freethinker* commented sardonically: “The Duchess of Devonshire’s fancy dress ball was a ‘swell’ affair. One lady’s costume is said to have cost seven hundred guineas. Myriads of people in London, at the same time, would have been glad to get a square meal. And they belong, for the most part, to the *working* classes. Oh yes! England is a highly civilized country, and we do well to jubilate over our magnificent progress.” (“Acid Drops” 1897: 439). More recently, Jarvis writes that “In England, by far the most famous, lavish and well-documented fancy event of this, or indeed any, period was the Devonshire House Ball of 1897” (1982: 38).

⁶ For a comprehensive account of the ball and its context, see Harris, *Narrated in Calm Prose: Photographs from the V&A’s Lafayette Archives*; and Murphy (1984).

⁷ As is suggested in the allusion to blue-and-white china, Bradley argues that the success of this revival across fashions for home and self was aligned with the increasingly popular Aestheticism during the same period. See also Mitchell (2016).

⁸ See Gordon (2006) and Peiss (2001) for discussions of a similar dynamic in the United States.

⁹ See Adburgham (1981).

¹⁰ Debenham's opened as a draper's store in 1778; it expanded and by 1851 was known as Debenham, Son, and Freebody.

¹¹ Holt was also the columnist for the popular magazine *The Queen*.

¹² Holt calls some of the names ("Butler of 19th Century) "one of many comical evasions of fancy costumes"

¹³ e.g. "Mrs Trenchard" appeared as "Harmony in Black and Gold" in 1884 ("Grand Fancy Dress" 1884: 7); and the "Hon. Yarde Buller, 11th Reg." listed his costume as "By Whistler" ("Fancy Dress Ball at Colchester" 1881: 8).

¹⁴ In its review of Holt's first edition, the *Saturday Review* called out this costume for particular attention ("Fancy Balls" 1879: 76).

¹⁵ An opportunity squandered: Holt might have pushed the visual pun further, advocating the adornment of the floral stock [*matthiola incana*] instead of roses.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the feminization of the stock market and the application of seduction as the metaphorical relationship of man to market, see Jones (2007), esp. pages 64-71.

¹⁷ While there is no "Bicycle" costume per se in Holt's book, there is a "Tricycle" costume, which—like the New Woman costume—situates a miniature tricycle on the head and calls for a dress adorned with velvet appliques to represent wheels on either side of the skirt.

¹⁸ The most famous of these often well-publicized cases was the 1880 raid on a Manchester Ball; see Cocks (2014), pages 69-72. For other examples, see "Police Intelligence: Raid on a Soho 'Club': Drunkenness at a Fancy Dress Ball" (1899:8); and "Police Intelligence" (1894: 3).

¹⁹ *Bow Bells* describes a half-man half-woman costume called "La Lune de Miel" as "the most original costume" the writer had seen ("Fancy Dress Balls in Paris" 1891: 47). The first male winner of *Pick-Me-Up's* "Fancy Dress Photo Competition" called his costume "The Masher and the Ballet Girl" (1894: 243). A 1902 issue of *The Sketch* features two half-and-half costumes, including one which is remarkably reminiscent of the cover of a pamphlet sensationalizing the Park and Boulton cross-dressing scandal. See "At Covent Garden," (1902: 495); and Carringer (2013: 136).