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Fashioning Literature

Dressed in Fiction. Clair Hughes. New York: Berg Publishers, 2006. 256 pp.

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<1> In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, the narrator remarks that "Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction, and excessive solicitude about it often destroys its own aim."(1) However, *Dressed in Fiction* begins with the premise that dress in literature performs two important roles that recent critics do not often consider. First, description of dress "contributes to the 'reality effect'" by lending a visual element to the action of the novel, and second, it functions as "a part of a social system of signs" in which white or black clothes symbolize codified values of the author and his or her society (2). Although Hughes is examining a broad time period of over two hundred years, she narrows her focus by choosing authors who deliberately used fashion to better understand the world of their characters. Her thesis, therefore, is "not to prove that dress is the hidden key to all the mysteries of these texts, but to show how an exploration of the author's employment of dress and its accessories can illuminate the structure of that text, its values, its meanings, or its symbolic pattern" (6). Hughes closes the chapter by discussing the ambivalent nature of the wedding dress in fiction, a subject she returns to in the final chapter.

<2> Hughes begins her analysis with Daniel Defoe's *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress* (1724). The high point of Defoe's plot revolves around a Turkish dress, one of a number of costumes that the eponymous heroine dons. Hughes contends that Roxana uses dress to maintain a series of identities. When Roxana is planning to seduce her landlord, she wears a white dress to signify her genteel status. Then, Roxana uses the Turkish dress to attempt to seduce the king himself. Later in the novel, she wants to distance herself from her former debauched lifestyle and dons Quaker dress to indicate her new status as proper lady. The Turkish dress resurfaces, however, when one of Roxana's discarded children appears and threatens to use the dress to unveil Roxana's identity. Analyzing Roxana's parade of costumes, Hughes concludes, "With the various guises that she puts on, Roxana recognizes and mimics the values they represent, believing they can be discarded, like collars, cuffs, and shifts" (17). Hughes will later return to Roxana and her Turkish dress when she discusses Lily of Wharton's novel *The House of Mirth*, noting how both heroines keep their infamous dresses in trunks, thereby playing with the idea of "hidden vice" (155).

<3> Hughes's third chapter focuses on Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818). Although "dress was certainly important in Austen's own life," Hughes explains, "there are few precise descriptions of dress in the novels" (35). Austen often referred to fashion in her letters to Cassandra providing the kind of details which are often absent from the novels. The lively eighteenth-century debate over the appropriateness of novel-reading by young women plays a part in the key plotline of Austen's novel. Catherine, the heroine of the novel, is variously influenced by Mrs. Allen, Henry Tilney, and Isabella Thorpe. Important to Hughes is that these characters reveal their personalities through their remarks about fashion. As Hughes notes, Mrs. Allen's character flaw is that her mind revolves around fashion and little else, and "if Catherine were to be guided by Mrs. Allen she would order her conduct according to its effect on her clothes rather than on her moral standing" (39-40). Isabella's code of conduct is much the same, and it falls to the novel's hero to provide a contrast. When Henry speaks of muslin, an unusual topic for a gentleman, he refers to its economic utility and, thus, demonstrates his denial "that there is some mysterious barrier between male and female concerns" (45).

<4> Hughes next turns to an analysis of men's fashion in William Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1848). Hughes points out that when novelists incorporate details of dress in their works, the focus is generally on women's dress; thus, when a novelist chooses to break with tradition and includes details of masculine dress, it reminds the reader that for both men and women, "dress is a form of consumption, a badge of class, a possible mark of originality and a form of self-creation" (47). The Regency era, the setting of much of the novel, saw a sea-change in men's dress as

fashionable icons such as Beau Brummell set rigorous new standards. When Pen, the novel's hero, first sees his uncle, Major Pendennis, the Major is clothed in the austere style befitting a Regency buck. In subsequent scenes, Thackeray focuses on Pen's attire to emphasize the self-centered nature of his novel's hero. When the Major tries to steer Pen toward a military career, Pen initially favors such a vocation because he is captivated by the colorful uniforms. Hughes astutely notes that a more traditional hero "longs for heroic *action*, whereas Pen longs for heroic *costume*" (52). We see him committing a similar error at Oxbridge, where "Pen has confused education with learning to wear clothes stylishly" (57). George Warrington, who offers a sober contrast to the Major, serves as a steadying influence on Pen, but even he cannot diminish Pen's obsession with appearance. In the end, neither Warrington nor Pen is cast in the heroic mold, leading Hughes to conclude that "Thackeray could contrive no satisfactory compromise between the decorative and the virtuous life" (69).

<5> Hughes then proceeds to compare Wilkie Collins's *Woman in White* (1860) with Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). This chapter is the most problematic in the book, as Hughes spends little time analyzing Collins's text, and much of the summary provided is confusing to the reader. However, Hughes's analysis of Braddon's text is enlightening, especially the connections she makes to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. As Hughes notes, when Lady Audley commissions a portrait of herself, the resulting artwork displays the influence of the Victorian painter Arthur Hughes. Hughes goes on to argue that "it is part of Braddon's scheme to remind the reader of actual Pre-Raphaelite icons of blue-eyed, golden-haired blameless girlhood, an ideal to which Lucy Audley, in life, seems to conform" (78). No matter how murderous her actions are, Lady Audley never breaks the image of the ideal Victorian woman, making her a truly dangerous character. Lady's Audley's dual identity as Madonna/Fallen Woman, therefore, shows Braddon successfully employing "a sensationalist shock-tactic" (89).

<6> In her next chapter, Hughes provides an effective analysis of fashion in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. To provide context for her discussion of Eliot's canonical text, Hughes relates how Eliot provided an excessive account of sartorial details of *Romola*. Interestingly, the financial success of that novel allowed Eliot herself to invest in fashionable clothing for the first time, leading Hughes to conclude that "her sharpened appreciation of dress must have come into play when she began writing *Middlemarch* in 1869" (91). The main goal of much of the chapter is to contrast Dorothea's image with that of the more fashionable Rosamond Vincy. For Rosamond, "Perfection of behavior is to be measured by the etiquette manuals, and perfection of appearance by magazine fashion-plates" (101). Dorothea, however, struggles with how to acquire meaning in her life, a key question for educated Victorian women who had no outlet for their intellectual impulses. Although Dorothea dresses plainly and rejects the conventional fashions of the day, attuning her mind to more elevated pursuits, she clearly has some yearning for the finer things in life as evidenced by her fascination with the emeralds from her mother's jewelry collection, a key passage of the book as Hughes demonstrates. Ultimately, Dorothea is "alert to fashion but not a slave to it" (111). Whereas Rosamond's fashionable obsession will ultimately lead to Lydgate's destruction, Dorothea's dress, unassuming as it is, illustrates her uneasy search for meaning and is "chronologically, even geographically unstable, eluding the attitudes and assumptions of Middlemarch" (112).

<7> The final three chapters of *Dressed in Fiction* analyze the ambiguous nature of the white dress in literary fiction, with the final chapter specifically devoted to the wedding dress. The first of these chapters concerns two stories by Henry James: "The Siege of London" (1883) and "The Author of *Beltraffio*" (1884). Hughes likens the fashion choices of Mrs. Headway, the heroine of "The Siege of London," to weapons, which she uses to attract the attentions of Sir Arthur. Her choice of the white dress, accented with red flowers, indicates that for this character, "purity is an idea lightly, even self-mockingly played on" (132). For the female protagonist of "The Author of *Beltraffio,*" however, purity is a sacred virtue, her rigid belief system leading to the main tragedy of the story. Like Mrs. Headway, Mrs. Ambient also dons the white dress but with a very different significance. Whereas Mrs. Headway plays with the idea of purity and whiteness, "purity to Mrs. Ambient is an ideal for which she is prepared to kill" (132). In a striking concluding statement, which could equally apply to the texts analyzed in the later chapters, Hughes remarks "dress in this fiction is shown to be socially central, but it is also a symbolic system: these garments, so close to the body, also, as James has shown us, articulate the soul—in triumph or torment and, oddly enough, in white" (133).

<8> The second analysis of the white dress involves Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905). As Hughes point outs, a pivotal point in Wharton's novel occurs when Lily requests that an artist,

Paul Morpeth, paint a portrait that mimics an early eighteenth-century portrait, Joshua Reynolds's *Mrs. Lloyd*. Mrs. Lloyd, painted shortly before her wedding, was in her flowing white dress "an idealized icon of female virtue" (149). However, when Lily's portrait is unveiled, the subject clad in a dress of "transparent white muslin," a backlash occurs as "she is perceived as sexually marketing herself" (150). Unable to reinvent herself, Lily resigns herself to death as all avenues to marriage and thus financial security are cut off. Hughes concludes that the white dress, instead of being symbolic of a bridal innocence, becomes representative of another type of white garment: "a shroud waiting for a body" (155).

<9> Hughes's discussion of *The House of Mirth* leads naturally into an analysis of the wedding dress in fiction. Although the chapter is thought-provoking and insightful, Hughes includes so many authors and works that they cloud the focus of her argument. The chapter's thesis is that "wedding dresses are described across the history of the novel, but paradoxically, they do not herald unalloyed bliss; they may not promise 'good luck' at all" (159). With the 1753 Marriage Act, making "church banns and a public ceremony obligatory," the wedding became a ritualized ceremony with its attendant finery, including the modern wedding outfit (160). Samuel Richardson played with the convention of the white wedding dress in his novel *Clarissa*, where "the white wedding dress becomes a shroud: and it is this image of the dress that is dominant in literature hereafter" (161). The chapter analyzes the wedding dress in prominent nineteenth-century novels including Austen's. But Hughes does not elaborate on the reasons for Austen's oft-noted reticence about the details of her heroines' weddings or their wedding finery. Post World War II-era authors such as Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty also decline to describe wedding finery in any detail since, according to Hughes, "detail bodes ill" (176).

<10> Hughes ends her study by observing the stigma that still accompanies an analysis of dress in literature. For academia in general, "love of dress--and by association, a concern for dress in art of literature--is still regularly dismissed as female and frivolous" (184). Hughes defends her subject, however, by claiming that "clothes in fiction are clothes in action" (185). To prove her point, Hughes provides numerous plates and line engravings throughout the text, such as Thackeray's original illustrations to the 1850 edition of *Pendennis*. Ultimately, Hughes's argument is original and insightful, and she provides a balanced account of a topic not often written of in academia. Both costume historians and students of English literature will find her study useful in providing a contextual background to the English novel.

Endnotes

(1)Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Claire Grogan (Toronto, Ont.: Broadview Press, 1996) 92.(^)