

*'Fashion in undress':  
Clothing and Commodity Culture in  
Household Words*

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In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens describes the motley group of 'nondescript messengers, go-betweens, and errand bearers' who congregate outside the Marshalsea prison each morning before the gates open in these terms:

Such threadbare coats and trousers, such fusty gowns and shawls, such squashed hats and bonnets, such boots and shoes, such umbrellas and walking sticks, never were seen in Rag Fair. All of them wore the cast-off clothes of other men and women, were made up of patches and pieces of other people's individuality, and had no sartorial existence of their own proper.<sup>1</sup>

The miscellaneous clothing of the Marshalsea poor is marked by dis-possession in a way that thwarts the establishment of identity. The haphazard combination of patched and misshapen garments produces a scene of undifferentiated poverty. While Mrs Clennam's worsted gloves and widow's dress serve to express her cold and embittered self-hood – 'There was a smell of black dye in the airless room, which the fire had been drawing out of the crape and stuff of the widow's dress for fifteen months' (27) – the marginality of the Marshalsea go-betweens is ironically emphasized by the fact that their clothing is so worn-out as to be beyond resale in the cast-off market. Not only do they lack a coherent ensemble, their garments are imbued with the traces of other lives, and their lack of 'sartorial existence' is a measure of their social occlusion. Dickens's description assumes a continuity between clothing and identity as normative only to call that assumption into question as part of the narrative's social critique.

The idea of 'sartorial existence', or the lack thereof, in *Little Dorrit*, points to the more general function of clothing as a symbolic expression of identity in Victorian culture, as well as to its particular use in the nineteenth-century novel to define fictional character. Dress is a sign

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replete with social meaning and value. As the most famous Victorian clothes-philosopher argues in *Sartor Resartus*, “Society is founded upon Cloth” and Carlyle uses clothing and its fetishism to expose the fabrications of authority in modern social and political institutions.<sup>2</sup> The function of clothing as an expression of selfhood is a relatively recent and distinctively urban development, as theorists such as Richard Sennett have shown. The nineteenth-century expansion and fragmentation of city life produced new anxieties about the definition and interpretation of metropolitan identities. As public behaviour became ‘a matter of observation, of passive participation, of a certain kind of voyeurism’,<sup>3</sup> the need to decode the more nuanced languages of an increasingly homogeneous urban dress found literary expression in the figure of the *flâneur*, that passionate observer of city life. In the crowded metropolitan milieu of strangers, clothing became invested with character, containing subtle markers of social differentiation. Fashion, as Elizabeth Wilson notes, originates ‘in the early capitalist city’,<sup>4</sup> and as Peter Stallybrass reminds us, the example with which Marx begins his analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital* is a coat.<sup>5</sup> Marx tracks the coat and the linen of which it is made back through the transformations of the capitalist marketplace to identify the human labour that was appropriated in its making. Distinguishing between the use-value and the exchange-value of the coat, Marx demonstrates that the latter is created by the ‘congelation’ of human labour – considered in the abstract – that was expended in its making and is therefore embodied in it. ‘In this aspect,’ he argues, ‘the coat is a depository of value, but though worn to a thread, it does not let this fact show through.’<sup>6</sup>

Clothing has long been recognized as a key element used by nineteenth-century novelists to achieve that ‘solidity of specification’ associated by Henry James with narrative realism.<sup>7</sup> More recently, cultural critics have linked the depiction of dress and other consumer goods in Dickens’s novels to the emergence of commodity culture in the nineteenth century. The link is made by Murray Roston, for example, in *Victorian Contexts* (1996), where he argues more generally that the personification of the inanimate in Dickens’s fiction can be linked to the inception of a commodity culture dependent upon the taste of the consumer: Dickens employs the possessions, homes and habiliments of his characters ‘as animated external emblems of their inner being’, ‘seeing within the proprietary selection of goods a method of differentiating character’.<sup>8</sup> What happens, though, when the goods are recycled, when the cultural effect of their ‘proprietary selection’ is complicated by second-hand purchase? In particular, what cultural

significance is evident in the representation of a commodity like second-hand clothing, given the central role of fashion in the definition of identity?

Such questions are prompted by the recurring descriptions of once-worn clothes in *Household Words* – the journal that Dickens edited in the decade following that watershed in the formation of modern commodity culture, the Great Exhibition. *Household Words* was a weekly miscellany, unsigned and costing twopence, founded by Dickens with the aim of ‘instruction’ and ‘entertainment’ of its middle-class readers, as well as helping ‘in the discussion of the most important social questions of the time’.<sup>9</sup> At its height, circulation reached 40,000 copies per week. As Anne Lohrli remarks, it differed from other miscellanies of the period in the ‘greater diversity of subjects discussed’ and in its ‘handling of non-fiction prose’.<sup>10</sup> Dickens filled his journal with articles about various commodities, many of which raise wider questions as to how far society should go in permitting people to buy and sell goods and services, how far the *laissez-faire* market should extend. This essay looks at several articles, principally by George Augustus Sala, where the recurring discussion of dress in general, and second-hand clothing in particular, illustrates a more general preoccupation with the changing relationship between people and things as part of an attempt to come to terms with the development of urban commodity culture at mid century.

One of Dickens’s earliest and best-known pieces on second-hand clothing occurs in his *Sketches* where Boz wanders through the markets in Monmouth Street, among the ‘extensive groves of the illustrious dead’:

We have gone on speculating ... [he writes], until whole rows of coats have started from their pegs, and buttoned up, of their own accord, round the waists of imaginary wearers; lines of trousers have jumped down to meet them; waistcoats have almost burst with anxiety to put themselves on; and half an acre of shoes have suddenly found feet to fit them.<sup>11</sup>

While Boz clearly revels in the invention of stories behind the cast-off garments hanging in the Monmouth Street shops, their identification as the ‘burial-place of the fashions’ also suggests a disturbing relationship between dress and death – an image of the city as necropolis that recurs in Dickens’s later writing. In ‘Railway Dreaming’, for example, he recalls the Paris morgue and its keeper surrounded by pegs and hooks from which hang ‘the clothes of the dead who have been buried without recognition. They mostly have been taken off people who were found in the water, and are swollen (as the people often are) out of

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shape and likeness'.<sup>12</sup> These descriptions also capture the uncanniness of second-hand clothing, its disturbingly liminal quality: cast-off clothes are inanimate things that somehow retain the vestiges of the lives of former wearers. In her study of fashion and modernity, *Adorned in Dreams*, citing the passage from Boz, Elizabeth Wilson asks why 'clothes without a wearer, whether on a second-hand stall, in a glass case, or merely a lover's garments strewn on the floor, can affect us unpleasantly, as if a snake had shed its skin'.<sup>13</sup> She argues that part of the answer to this 'strangeness of dress' is that the body is a cultural organism with limits that are equivocally defined and it cannot be separated from the dress which inscribes it, producing it as a social body: thus 'Clothing marks an [already] unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us'.<sup>14</sup>

Unclear boundaries disturbed the Victorians too, and the preoccupation with dress in general and second-hand clothing in particular, evident in *Household Words*, is an indication of contemporary anxieties about the blurring of divisions between categories and classes conventionally held to be distinct. Other commentators on city life in *Household Words* besides Dickens share his interest in the residue of character that lingers in empty clothing. Sala's journalism shows a similar preoccupation with cast-off garments, and the autonomy they seem to possess, that is bound up with his exploration of the uncertainties of modern urban experience and of what Marx referred to as the 'phantasmagoria' of commodity culture.<sup>15</sup> The ambiguities of clothing as a liminal form, at the interface between the body and the environment, make it a complex constituent of modern subjectivity: as Susan Buck-Morss notes of Walter Benjamin's account of the form of fashion specific to capitalist modernity, 'In fashion, the phantasmagoria of commodities presses closest to the skin'.<sup>16</sup> In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin cites the passages from *Capital* outlining the way in which the social character of the labour that produces commodities is obscured in their exchange value as part of his critique of modernity.<sup>17</sup> Clothing is an exemplary commodity in this regard, hiding the evidence of the producer's labour in its purchase to express the identity of the wearer. But in its cast-off form, clothing poses a challenge to such fetishism by bearing the traces of the lives of former wearers. Second-hand clothing is thus a kind of palimpsest, an emblem for the multi-layered nature of modernity remarked by Benjamin, where the archaic and the new, past and present, exist side by side. Ambiguously marking boundaries that were already unclear, as Wilson suggests, clothing has the potential to destabilize oppositions between the spheres of production and consumption, between ideas of individuality and conformity, between

people and things. Richard Sennett has written of the new principle of 'immanence' that arose in the nineteenth century through which clothing came to be interpreted as a statement about the personality of the wearer.<sup>18</sup> For Sennett, dress is an instance of a more general secularist tendency to invest attributes of intimate personality in material things. The consequence of such an investment was the introduction of 'an element of profound self-doubt into [a society's] cognitive apparatus': 'When belief was governed by the principle of immanence, there broke down distinctions between perceiver and perceived, inside and outside, subject and object'.<sup>19</sup> Such a loss of distinctions is explored in the accounts of cast-off clothes that appear in *Household Words*. While dress is now conventionally understood to be a sign of identity, even when serving as a disguise, the discussion of clothing in the journal suggests the new power of the commodity not simply to express or reflect, but rather to constitute modern subjectivity in ways that complicate and critique the fetishism theorized by Marx.

Such a perception of the changing relationship between people and things is apparent in Sala's account of 'Fashion'. Published as the leader in *Household Words* on 29 October 1853, Sala's article begins by condemning the idolatry of Fashion only to pause and consider the many who

earn their daily bread by making and vending Fashion's elegant trumpery; – gloves, fans, spangles, scents, and bon-bons: how ships, colonies and commerce, are all mixed up in a curious yet congruous elaboration with these fal-lals: how one end of the chain may be my lady's boudoir and its knick-knacks in Belgravia, and the other end a sloppy ship-dock on the hot strand of the Hooghly; how the beginnings of a ball supper, with its artificial flowers, its trifles, its barley-sugar temples, its enamelled baskets and ratafia cakes, were the cheerless garret and the heated cellar.<sup>20</sup>

In reconnecting the production and consumption ends of the chain, Sala attempts to demystify the commodity and expose its origins. But he also celebrates the restless movement of imperial goods, marvelling at the linkage of incongruous sites and the vast distances commodities can travel. While recognizing in Fashionable objects the sweated labour that may be required for their manufacture, as well as the colonial exploitation that may be associated with mercantile trade, Sala's empire of circulating commodities in this piece takes on a vivid, particularized life of its own. He delights in the profusion of objects, reeling off lists of disparate items, and building up alliterative phrases and co-ordinate clauses describing a process of worldwide manufacture and trade that might be extended endlessly. He emphasizes the superficiality of these

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fashionable goods and acknowledges their sign value – 'Fashion is not tangible or palpable' (8:193) he says – which is to be contrasted with the material realities of the 'cheerless garret' and 'heated cellar'. However, although he implies the existence of the producers who inhabit these spaces, his narrative interest lies in the life of the goods themselves, which take precedence over their makers and wearers as part of the objectness of modern material culture. Like the *flâneur*, he relishes the visual experience of such heterogeneity. His account of fashion captures a key cultural shift in the representation of commodities at mid-century, away from a focus on the relations of production to the processes of circulation and consumption.

As commentators like Thomas Richards, Andrew Miller and Regenia Gagnier have noted, the development of commodity culture in the nineteenth-century is distinguished by the way in which objects, once detached from those who made them, come to represent qualities of the consumer, and to acquire a sign-value over and above their use-value.<sup>21</sup> The labour theory of value espoused by the earlier political economists was gradually abandoned in favour of a model of consumer choice. The sign-value of clothing is, however, complicated by its recycling as second-hand goods, simultaneously affirming and disrupting its function as an interpretable expression of identity. Exploring the relationship between identity and attire in 'Fashion', Sala uses the language of theatre to blur the distinction between world and stage, audience and actors, in contemplating the cast-offs to be found in 'Mrs Brummus's' shop. The remnants of 'Fashion's great chalked stage' include

the crimson velvet dresses of duchesses, the lace that queens have worn, our grandmothers' brocaded sacks and hoops and high-heeled shoes, fans, feathers, silk stockings, lace pocket-handkerchiefs, scent-bottles, the Brussels lace veil of the bride, the sable bombazine of the widow, embroidered parasols, black velvet mantles, pink satin slips; ... robes without bodies and bodies without robes, and sleeves without either; the matron's apron and the opera dancer's skirt. Here is Fashion in undress, without its whalebone, crinoline, false hair, paint, and pearl powder; here she is tawdry, tarnished, helpless, inert, dislocated, like Mr Punch's company in the deal box he carries strapped behind his back. (8:194)

The *theatrum mundi* motif exposes the role of fashion in the performance of social identity. Sala acknowledges the function of clothing and adornment in marking distinctions of class and gender, his social classification of garments imitating the 'botanizing on the asphalt' undertaken by the *flâneur*.<sup>22</sup> Like Boz meditating upon the second-hand clothing in Monmouth Street, he constructs typologies from the

garments on display, inferring the duchesses, widows, matrons or opera dancers who once wore them. These cast-offs also signify the compartmentalized lives of their former middle- and upper-class owners: subdivided into life stages, marking rites of passage, or defining the activities which belong to a certain time of day. But while remarking the social types and occasions that may be read from their cast-off clothing, Sala's account reveals the role of these goods in fashioning identity in such a way as to call the nature of subjectivity itself into question. Personifying Fashion, he paradoxically represents second-hand clothing as divested of its former owners: 'Here is Fashion in undress'. As Virginia Woolf later wrote of Orlando's remarkable transformation, '[Clothes] change our view of the world and the world's view of us. [...] There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them'.<sup>23</sup> Rather than serving as an expression of selfhood, as an external sign of their owner's identity and yet another occasion for moral reflection upon the vanity of adornment, the second-hand clothes in Mrs Brummus's shop offer the more radical suggestion that modern subjectivity itself partakes of the nature of clothing – that it is not unified and fixed, but plural and performative – that people and things are mutually constituted.

*Sartor Resartus* satirizes the emptiness of modern institutional authority through Teufelsdröckh's ironic regard for second-hand clothing:

The gladder am I [...] to do reverence to those Shells and outer Husks of the Body, wherein no devilish passion any longer lodges, but only the pure emblem and effigies of Man: I mean, to Empty, or even to Cast Clothes. Nay, is it not to Clothes that most men do reverence: to the fine frogged broadcloth, nowise to the 'straddling animal with bandy legs' which it holds, and makes a Dignitary of? [...] That reverence which cannot act without obstruction and perversion when the Clothes are full, may have free course when they are empty.<sup>24</sup>

Sala shares this clothes-philosophy in his account of a visit to the Musée des Souverains at the Louvre. Noting that 'Mr Carlyle might come hither, and find – not a new philosophy, but fresh materials for its application', he remarks the way in which 'the coronation mantle dangles from a peg, in the long run, even as the masquerade domino, the cast-off uniform, or the threadbare great-coat'.<sup>25</sup> The importance of clothing as a memorializing practice is ironically exposed in these cast-offs that once fulfilled important functions in war or work, but now only signify their desuetude and the mortality of their former wearers. Sala's description of the relics of Napoleon on display emphasizes an inconsistency between the man and the 'secondhand sovereignties' rep-

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resented by his clothes, a disjunction between identity and attire, that works to demystify the heroic history memorialized in the Musée des Souverains. The power of the relic is simultaneously evoked and undercut in Sala's description of Napoleon's coat:

the famous redingote gris - the gray great coat. [...] I don't think, intrinsically, it would fetch more than half a dozen shillings. I am afraid Mr Moses Hart of Holywell Street would not be disposed to give even that amount for it yet here it is beyond price and purchase. It has held the body of the man whose name is blazoned on the ceiling; whose initial, pregnant with will and power, N, is on wall and escutcheon. [...] This common coat of coarse gray duffel hangs in the midst of velvet and silk, gold and silver embroidery, stern, calm and impassable, and throws all their theatrical glories into shadow. (10:512)

Set in the midst of such gorgeous display, the old coat is an uncanny object. Sala's account betrays a tension between emphasis upon its power as a relic of historical import, and a deflating recognition of its secondariness, sordidness and triviality. Preserved in what he describes as 'a palatial Monmouth Street or Holywell Street for the display of second-hand sovereigns' (10:512), the second-hand clothes of Napoleon are like Benjamin's outmoded commodities, obsolete objects that serve to expose the phantasmagoria of mythic history and to demystify the fetishism of the commodity.

Anxieties about the ambiguous relationship between second-hand clothing and identity are also evident in another leader, 'Old Clothes!', where Sala describes the frenetic activity of the Clothes Exchange and details the profusion of 'ostracized garments' jumbled together indiscriminately:

There, pell-mell, cheek by jowl, in as strange juxtaposition, and as strange equality, as corpses in a plague-pit, are the groom's gaiters and my Lord Bishop's splatterdashes; with, save the mark! poor Pat's ill-darned, many-holed brogues, his bell crowned felt hat, his unmistakable blue coat with the brass buttons, high in the collar, short in the waist, long in the tails, and ragged all over. There is no distinction of ranks; no precedence of rank, and rank alone, here.<sup>26</sup>

The second-hand clothing shop is a form of heterotopia – one of those 'other', phantasmagoric spaces described by Foucault that reverse or contest social ordering.<sup>27</sup> Here, clothing still serves to mark types or classifications of gender and class; but as effigies of their former owners, jumbled side by side, these garments effect a promiscuous intermingling in defiance of rank and hierarchy. A similar heterotopic space is found in the lost property office of the railways, where W.H. Wills



describes the hat shelf with its 'heterogeneous jumble of rank, station, character, and indicative morality which that conglomeration of castors presents. Here a dissipated-looking four-and-nine leans its battered side against the prim shovel of a church dignitary; there a highly-polished Parisian upper-crust is smashed under the weight of a carter's slouch.'<sup>28</sup> Such accounts of the contingency of incongruous juxtapositions effected in the city displace the *flâneur's* delight in the suggestive contrast of urban types onto the clothing they once wore. Within the old Clothes Exchange, the dissolution of distinctions is compounded by the multi-ownership of the garments:

There is my lord's coat, bespattered by the golden mud on Fortune's highway; threadbare in the back with much bowing; the embroidery tarnished, the spangles all blackened; a Monmouth Street laced coat. Revivified, coaxed, and tickled into transitory splendour again, it may lend vicarious dignity to some High Chamberlain, or Stick-in-Waiting, at the court of the Emperor Soulouque. There is a scarlet uniform coat, heavily embroidered, which, no doubt, has dazzled many a nursemaid in its day. It will shine at masquerades now; or, perchance, be worn by Mr Belton, of the Theatres Royal; then emigrate, may be, and be the coat of office of the Commander-in-Chief of King Quashiboo's body-guard; or, with the addition of a cocked hat and straps, form the coronation costume of King Quashiboo himself. (5:97)

Rather than serving to define and place the wearer, recycled clothing produces a mixing of social identities. Where Boz regarded the clothes displayed in Monmouth Street as an occasion for storing 'backwards' to recover the lives of their former owners, Sala looks in the other direction, tracing the biography of garments that cross social and geographical divisions with a life of their own. But just as second-hand clothing blurs social distinctions at home, it reinforces other boundaries between colony and metropolis. Sala distinguishes 'three orders of "Old Clothes" as regards the uses to which they may be applied'. Garments not 'good enough to be revived, tricked, polished, teased, re-napped, and sold, either as superior second-hand garments, in second-hand-shop streets, or pawned for as much as they will fetch, and more than they are worth' (5:98) are consigned to the second class, and exported to the margins of the empire. As Margaret Maynard has shown, the effects of British imperialism were felt within the Australian colonial marketing structure as the competition from cheap imports posed difficulties for the expansion of the local clothing industry.<sup>29</sup> Sala's third class of old clothes are 'so miserably dilapidated, so utterly tattered and torn' that they are pulled apart and ground into 'devil's dust' to be re-manufactured as 'broadcloth'. Such recycled clothes may

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secretly effect the most remarkable social conjunctions: 'Who shall say that the Marquis of Camberwell's footmen – those cocked-hatted, bouquetted, silk-stockinged Titans – may not have, in their gorgeous costume, a considerable spice of Patrick the bog-trotter's ragged breeches, and Luke the Labourer's fustian jacket?' (5:98). Similarly, in 'Saint Crispin', George Dodd describes the work of the so-called 'Translator' or 'clobberer,' who works with a 'store of pieces, derived from the uppers and unders of boots and shoes which have passed through a process of dissection, after perhaps a long career of service in a higher walk in life', and recycles them 'to run a yet further career' in an altogether different guise.<sup>30</sup>

As Sennett notes, black broadcloth became the regulation street wear of middle- and upper-class men by the 1840s, and the increasing homogeneity of appearance was 'the beginning of a *style* of dressing in which neutrality – that is, not standing out from others – was the immediate statement'.<sup>31</sup> The mass-production of machine-made clothes afforded the means for men to blend into the crowd, but also enjoined a new concern to decode appearances by looking for clues in the small details of costume. In 'Rag-Fair in Paris', Dudley Costello remarks the uniformity evident in the discreet ready-to-wear street-dress of the professional man – 'Clifford Street or the Rue de Choiseul turn out very nearly the same sort of made-up man'<sup>32</sup> – and Sala satirises the homogeneity of modern dress in 'Where Are They?' – an article concerned with the people advertised for in the Personal columns of the newspapers:

A chief cause for our distressing uncertainty as to where the people we are in search of are to be found, lies in the disagreeable uniformity of costume prevalent in the present day[....] [M]ay I ask how we are to tell any one man from another [...] by his dress alone. Really, what with the moustache movement, the detective police, the cheap clothing establishments, the shirt-collar mania [...] nobody knows who or what anybody else is.<sup>33</sup>

As Sennett remarks, such anxieties about reading appearances, about making sense of the street, also entail a desire to avoid detection, to control the revelation of personality through self-fashioning: 'beyond all mystification produced by the machine, the very belief that appearance is an index of character would prompt people to make themselves nondescript in order to be as mysterious, as little vulnerable, as possible'.<sup>34</sup> He attributes these contradictory impulses – scrutiny of the appearances of others while avoiding attention oneself – to the way in which 'the new ideas of immanent personality mesh with the mass production of appearances in public'. Thus 'does a black broadcloth

suit come to seem a “social hieroglyphic,” to use Marx’s phrase’.<sup>35</sup> Sala’s account gestures towards this connection between the mystification of the mass-produced commodity and of urban identity. But while he pokes fun at such fetishism, comically lamenting the conformity of fashion and implying the possibilities for disguise and social mobility it enables, Sala also goes beyond acknowledging the function of clothing in expressing or concealing an underlying identity to explore the role of dress in both marking and throwing into question the boundaries of the self.

For Sala, garments do not merely cover, but inscribe the body, producing a complex subjectivity that is multi-layered like clothing. In ‘Our Doubles,’ he elaborates a theory of ‘corporeal duality’ as he dwells upon ‘the properties we all have, more or less, of casting our skin – of being one man abroad and another at home, one character for the foot-lights and another for the greenroom’.<sup>36</sup> But this duality is to be found not only in the distinction between public and private life. We are ‘all gifted’ with a capacity for playing one part ‘simultaneously with the other’: ‘Everybody, so it seems to me, can be, and is somebody else’ (5:388). Nor is this duality ‘always hypocritical’: ‘A great many wear double skins unconsciously,’ he argues; ‘Such is the schoolmaster who has a cricket-loving, child-petting, laughter-exciting, joke-cracking skin for inmost covering, but is swathed without in parchment bands of authority and stern words.’ Such too, is the beadle: ‘The fat man knows himself inwardly, and is notoriously at home a ninny, yet, awake to the responsibility of a cocked hat and staff and gold laced coat, frowns himself into the semblance of the most austere of beadles’ (5:389). Like Carlyle, Sala plays upon the double meaning of ‘habit’ as both clothing and behaviour, remarking the tailorization of identity. For example, ‘[h]abit gives a double cuticle to Mr John Trett (of the firm of Tare and Trett) of the city of London, ship-broker’, for while ‘one Mr Trett is a morose despot, with a fierce whisker, a malevolent white neckcloth, and an evil eye’, the other, who lives at Dalston, is surprisingly discovered to be ‘something more than an amateur on the violincello, although Giuseppe Pizzicato, from Genoa, was last week brought to Guildhall, at the complaint of Mr Trett’s double, charged with outraging the tranquillity of Copperbottom Court, Threadneedle Street, where the ship-brokers have their offices, by the performance of airs from Don Giovanni on the hurdy-gurdy’ (5:390).

Although clothes in general and uniforms in particular make the man, however, they are an inherently ambiguous signifier. The acute temporality of fashion means that identity is always haunted by belatedness. In ‘Mars a la Mode’, prompted by contemporary calls for

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reform of the costume of the British army, Sala provides a satiric survey of the history of military fashion, selecting the Duke of Wellington as a particularly noteworthy illustration of the unstable relation between identity and attire:

[I]n his first ensigny he must have worn hair-powder and a pigtail, a cocked hat as large as a beadle's, silver bell-pull epaulettes, tights like a rope-dancer, and ankle-jacks not unlike those of a dustman. The Duke of Wellington in a pigtail and ankle-jacks! Can you reconcile that regulation costume of the subaltern in the Thirty-third Foot with the hessian boots and roll-collar of Talavera: the gray frock, glazed hat, white neckcloth and boots named after himself, of Waterloo: the rich field-marshal's uniform, covered with orders, of the snowy-headed old patriarch who smiles upon the baby Prince, in Winterhalter's picture.<sup>37</sup>

The 'boots named after himself' assert the intimate connection between clothing and identity. But the vicissitudes of military fashion render the Duke a comic mixture of disparate parts – part beadle, rope-dancer and dustman – as time is frozen in the museum-like collection of his uniforms. Sala's account collapses historical differences across time within the space of the present in a way that demystifies the aura surrounding the hero's image and suggests the illusion of 'panoptical time' that Anne McClintock has associated with British imperialism.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, the account of Wellington's outmoded regalia is rather like Dickens's description of the bizarre costume of King Obi, in his essay for the *Examiner* on the failed Niger Expedition, as a harlequinade decked out in the cast-off clothing left behind by earlier imperial explorers.<sup>39</sup> The absurd amalgamation highlights the arbitrariness and transience of fashions' dictates as they are manifested in military costume.

The social benefits of uniformity in dress were outlined by Dickens elsewhere in *Household Words* in his account of Urania Cottage, the 'Home for Homeless Women' he established with Angela Burdett Coutts in 1847. As Phillippe Perrot argues, clothing is a powerful element of social regulation, inducing the individual 'to merge with the group, participate in its rituals and ceremonies, share its norms and values, properly occupy his or her position, and correctly act his or her role'.<sup>40</sup> Dickens's awareness of the function of uniform as a disciplinary technology is evident in the clothing that was assigned to the inmates of Urania Cottage. While the dresses he chose for them were to be 'as cheerful in appearance as they reasonably could be – at the same time very neat and modest', Dickens emphasizes the role of this particular clothing in furthering the project of reform:<sup>41</sup>

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They make and mend their own clothes, but do not keep them. [...] Formerly, when a girl accepted for admission had clothes of her own to wear, she was allowed to be admitted in them, and they were put by for her; though within the Institution she always wore the clothing it provides. It was found, however, that a girl with a hankering after old companions rather relied on these reserved clothes, and that she put them on with an air, if she went away or were dismissed. They now invariably come, therefore, in clothes belonging to the Home, and bring no other clothing with them.<sup>42</sup>

In making and mending 'their' clothes, the Urania Cottage inmates were to learn the skills of domestic economy that would prepare them to become wives of emigrants in the colonies. But of course they were not 'their' clothes, the slippage in the pronoun revealing the difference between making and wearing, as opposed to owning, garments: the borrowed clothes were designed to help (re)form the subjects who wore them. As Amanda Anderson has noted, there is 'a disturbing similarity' between the practices adopted in Urania Cottage and the structure of Victorian prostitution: the dress policy resembled the way in which brothel keepers were able to retain control over their employees by providing and owning their clothing.<sup>43</sup> This practice was described by urban investigators, like Henry Mayhew and James Greenwood, as 'dress-lodging', and Greenwood emphasizes the miserable plight of its practitioners:

They are bound hand and foot to the harpies who are their keepers. They are worse off than the female slaves on a nigger-plantation, for they at least may claim as their own the rags they wear. [...] But these slaves of the London pavement may boast of neither soul nor body, nor the gaudy skirts and laces and ribbons with which they are festooned. They belong utterly and entirely to the devil in human shape who owns the den that the wretched harlot learns to call her 'home'.<sup>44</sup>

As Greenwood's account suggests, the dress-lodger is alienated from the clothing she wears not only by a lack of ownership, but by enslavement to the keeper who rents her the garments. Such finery is a badge of occupation that subsumes the selfhood of the wearer in her degraded work as a streetwalker. Dress-lodging thus represents a peculiar form of second-hand clothing, simultaneously affirming and denying the intimate relationship between the wearer and her attire. The identity of the dress-lodger is paradoxically established through her alienation from the very clothes by which she procures her livelihood and which advertize her fallen state. While the Urania Cottage inmates were not required to rent their clothes, as Dickens's article indicates, their lack of ownership and surrender of personal choice in the garments they

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wore were part of a disciplinary strategy designed to regulate their behaviour. Like the dress-lodgers, the identity of these women was to be (re)formed through clothes they made and wore but could not own, as if the possession or 'proprietary selection' of apparel (to go back to Roston's terms) enables a relationship between identity and dress that might shore up an intractable and recalcitrant self.

Dickens's use of clothing in the Urania Cottage project thus suggests a role for dress in the constitution of modern subjectivity that goes beyond the expressive value it was conventionally understood to possess. Withholding the opportunity for 'proprietary selection' or ownership that might enable the Victorian consumer in the marketplace to fashion a self, his account suggests the power of clothing to form or reform subjectivity. Sala's acute consciousness of the role of clothing in the performance of social identity leads to an understanding of the ways in which dress is not so much an expression, as an embodiment, of the selfhood of the wearer, a selfhood that partakes of the paradoxes of fashion with its conflicting impulses towards individuality and conformity, change and continuity, past and future, in the nineteenth-century urban context. Clothes fashion identity as part of an interchange between people and things: an interchange that leaves its disturbing traces in second-hand garments, challenging the fetishism of the commodity noted by Marx and exposing the principle of immanence theorized by Sennett. Studying 'Fashion in undress', *Household Words* inverts conventional relationships between clothing and identity to reveal an ambivalence about the growing importance of commodities in imagining the modern self.

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**Endnotes**

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2. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor, *World's Classics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 41.
3. Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 27.
4. Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, Revised edn (London: Tauris, 2003), 9.
5. Peter Stallybrass, 'Marx's Coat', in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (London: Routledge, 1998), 183-207.
6. Karl Marx, *Capital: An Abridged Edition*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995; reprint, 1995), 26.
7. Henry James, 'The Art of Fiction', in *The House of Fiction*, ed. Leon Edel (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1957), 33.
8. Murray Roston, *Victorian Contexts: Literature and the Visual Arts* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 83, 77.

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9. Anne Lohrli, 'Household Words' a Weekly Journal 1850-1859 Conducted by Charles Dickens, *Table of Contents, List of Contributors and Their Contributions Based on the 'Household Words' Office Book* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973), 4.
10. Lohrli, 23.
11. Charles Dickens, 'Meditations in Monmouth Street', in *Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers 1837-39*, ed. Michael Slater, *Dent Uniform Edition of Dickens' Journalism* (London: Dent, 1994), 78.
12. [Charles Dickens], 'Railway Dreaming', *Household Words*, 10 May 1856, 13:388.
13. Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, 3.
14. Wilson, 2.
15. Known as one of Dickens's 'young men,' Sala shared many of his mentor's experiences, tastes and social sympathies, although, as Peter Edwards notes, as a 'struggling young writer' he 'identified more with Pendennis than with David Copperfield'. P.D. Edwards, *Dickens's 'Young Men': George Augustus Sala, Edmund Yates and the World of Victorian Journalism*, ed. Vincent Newey and Joanne Shattock, *The Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 1. While he was well-equipped to furnish articles for *Household Words* in the journal's characteristic 'imaginative' style, his voice is distinguished by a cosmopolitanism, a polyglot delight in the eccentricities of language and a 'streetiness' that derive from his early days in Paris and his later Bohemianism. He had an abiding interest in clothing and fashion, devoting the penultimate chapter of his memoir, *Things I have Seen and People I have Known* (1894), to 'Costumes of my Infancy'.
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17. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 181-2.
18. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 164.
19. Sennett, 169.
20. [George Augustus Sala], 'Fashion', *Household Words*, 29 October 1853, 8:194.
21. See Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990). Andrew Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
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24. Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, 182.
25. [George Augustus Sala], 'Second-Hand Sovereigns', *Household Words*, 13 January 1855, 10:516.
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32. [Dudley Costello], 'Rag-Fair in Paris', *Household Words*, 25 November 1854, 10:344.
33. [George Augustus Sala], 'Where Are They?' *Household Words*, 1 April 1854, 9:152-3.
34. Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, 169.
35. Sennett, 164.
36. [George Augustus Sala], 'Our Doubles', *Household Words*, 10 July 1852, 5:388.
37. [George Augustus Sala], 'Mars a La Mode', *Household Words*, 14 October 1854, 10:194-5.
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