



**Threads of Identity: Fashion, Finery, and Performance  
in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Wilkie Collins's *No Name***

**Emma Butler-Way**

**Abstract**

As Polonius tells his son in *Hamlet*, “the apparel oft proclaims the man” (I.iii.72). This article takes this idea and re-situates it within the sartorial and cultural contexts of the mid-nineteenth century in order to examine the construction and performance of identity in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862). This article draws, in particular, on Mariana Valverde's 1989 examination of what she terms the “ideology of finery” – a distinctly class-based notion that plays on anxieties that surrounded the blurring of class lines as fashion became increasingly democratized as the Victorian era progressed. This article argues that the use of “finery” as a pejorative term throughout *East Lynne* has an intrinsic effect upon how the contemporary readers' responses to Barbara Hare and Isabel Carlyle were shaped. This idea of “finery” also appears in *No Name*, as Magdalen Vanstone's scepticism and cynicism regarding sartorially-defined class distinctions is contrasted with her maid Louisa's horror at the prospect of wearing a silk gown. Ultimately, this article examines how fashion – the manipulation thereof, its class-based connotations, and its ability to shape character – is inherent to the narratives of *East Lynne* and *No Name*.

**Keywords**

finery; sensation fiction; identity; performance; fashion; dress; class; sartorial signification; Ellen Wood; Wilkie Collins

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## **Threads of Identity: Fashion, Finery, and Performance in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* and Wilkie Collins's *No Name***

**Emma Butler-Way**

### **Introduction**

In an article published anonymously in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Margaret Oliphant declares that:

Since the first garment of all, clothes have been knowledge, influence, and expression, and house and home to the wearer. They have taught him his first conscious idea; they were his first link with this outer scene; they first made him realise that he was a personage in the world of vaguely apprehended forms, of which his unpractised senses partially informed him. A life without clothes, ... would, we verily believe, be a life without thought.

(1865: 425)

The exploration of this connection between dress and the self is one that has, over the last couple of decades, become a well-established corner of Victorian literary studies, with critics assessing “the human-fabric interactions within novels” to explore contexts that “modern readers are barely conscious of” (Ferguson 2019: 68). This relationship between dress, self, and text can be seen as a subsidiary narrative thread in itself, particularly in sensation fiction, lending weight to, or sometimes undermining, what the main narrative reveals. As Mrs H. R. Haweis put it in *The Art of Beauty* (1878), “dress bears the same relation to the body as speech does to the brain; therefore, dress may be called the speech of the body” (17), and it is this relationship that is of particular interest, here. Clair Hughes suggests in *Dressed in Fiction* that there is a deliberate nature to how authors use dress in fiction, and that “an exploration of the author’s employment of dress ... can illuminate the structure of [a] text, its values, its meanings or its symbolic pattern” (2006: 6). Indeed, in her monograph examining fashion in Victorian popular literature, Madeleine C. Seys argues that “dress identifies the heroine and sets her on a narrative trajectory; yet it also provides the means for her to refashion herself and her story” (2019: 1). Dress in Victorian literature, then, has a dual purpose: to situate the heroine within her story, but also to enable her an element of agency within the material parameters of her

character. This latter point is of particular interest in relation to Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Wilkie Collins's *No Name* (1862); the four main characters discussed in this article (Isabel Carlyle, Barbara Hare, and Afy Halijohn from *East Lynne*; and Magdalen Vanstone from *No Name*) all rely on dress to negotiate, or renegotiate, their positions within their narratives. Each character maintains a distinctly performative mode when it comes to their dress. Judith Butler's ideas of performativity are an important foundation here, particularly the idea that "the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment" ([1988] 2004: 900, original emphasis).

Bearing this in mind, this article will examine the function of female dress within *East Lynne* and *No Name*, with the key area of exploration being the notion that class is defined, and performed, through sartorial indicators and the manipulation of the ever-increasing instability therein. Particularly relevant for this discussion is what Mariana Valverde has termed "the ideology of finery" (1989: 186), which is a distinctly class-based notion that plays on the anxieties surrounding the blurring of class lines that followed the fashion's democratisation in the wake of industrialisation. Though Valverde highlights early on in her article that her focus will not be upon upper- and middle-class women, she does nonetheless make a number of statements that are applicable to my discussion of *East Lynne*'s Barbara. Valverde argues that "finery in the pejorative sense meant the type of female dress that signified or brought about moral ruin" (1989: 168-70). Throughout *East Lynne*, the term "finery" is used in conjunction with descriptions of Barbara and, later, Afy, a maid who disappeared under a cloud of scandal, only to return as a lady's maid, and dressed in rich clothing. This repeated use of the term "finery" throughout the novel – with regards to Barbara – works subliminally to create conflict between Isabel and Barbara for the reader: while Isabel's actions may have been reprehensible to some members of the contemporary readership, the continued reminders that Barbara is a lover of finery works to whittle away at any goodwill the reader might have held for her. Interestingly, however, the only character who can be seen to undergo moral ruin is Lady Isabel Carlyle. No accusations of finery are made against the upper-class lady who married into the middle class, and whose pre-fall sartorial descriptions linger on splendour and opulence; and yet, through her affair with Francis Levison, Isabel is the character who follows the path that Valverde argues was the one designated to the lover of finery. Despite her moral ruin, Isabel was favoured over Barbara by some contemporary reviews. This apparent inconsistency is due, in my view, to the terminology of the narrative, rather than to the broader narrative trajectories of the two characters.

Fashion is dealt with in a slightly different manner in Collins's *No Name*, with Magdalen utilising its power of signification to slip between various roles and social positions as she fabricates multiple identities throughout the novel in the hope of regaining her inheritance that was lost due to a legal loophole. Finery is never explicitly referred to, as it is in *East Lynne*, but its negative connotations are apparent towards the end of the novel when Magdalen takes on her final disguise: the protagonist shows scepticism and cynicism regarding sartorially-defined class, while the maid Louisa, with whom Magdalen intends to exchange identities, expresses an abject horror at the prospect of dressing in a silk gown. Rosy Aindow has argued that "clothing invests people with status and therefore articulates social hierarchies ... what we see and react to is clothing, and it is via these clothes that we come to understand the status of those who are wearing them" (2010: 5). As I will show, however, both Wood and Collins use this inherent human relationship with dress to challenge the reliability of such sartorial markers.

A key catalyst for the erosion of the typical sartorial markers of class delineation was the continued development of the British textile industry during the Industrial Revolution (c.1750–1840). As the nineteenth century progressed, a variety of different materials became

more readily available and financially accessible (Crane 2000: 4). With this increase in home-produced materials, rather than relying so much on imports, fashion began to be democratized as costs shrank and the fashions of the wealthy were able to be replicated by those of fewer means. Philippe Perrot, in his book *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, discusses French fashion after the fall of the *ancien régime* in France. He states that prior to the French Revolution:

“sumptuary laws” and “vestimentary ordinances” were continually issued in Europe. They were instruments of political, social, economic regulation. For the aristocracy they were protectionist measures; and more important, they kept social ranks visible and proclaimed the nobles’ monopoly of luxury that distinguished them from rising classes. By codifying cut, materials, and colours, aristocratic clothing guaranteed the exclusivity of vestimentary marks of power. Brocades, linings, furs, feathers, lace, gold and silver trimming, and expensive dyes intensified the brilliance of clothes and proclaimed one’s right to wear them.

(Perrot 1994: 15)

The idea that the richness and cut of an item of clothing demonstrated the wearer’s right to it is of particular interest with regards to *East Lynne* and *No Name*, due to the various attitudes demonstrated in the narratives. While official sumptuary laws had not been in place in Britain since 1604 (Freudenberger 1963: 37), and Britain did not have the same social contexts as Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary France, dress remained an important signifier of class status, albeit a somewhat weakening one. As Valverde suggests:

different ranks of servants could be marked according to their dress, and servants in general could, through their dress, serve to represent the social status of their employers. This project was hampered by the increasing ease with which women left domestic service for factory work or other more independent occupations, in which women could wear whatever clothes they wanted – at least in the evenings and on Sundays.

(1989: 182)

Working-class women were no longer restricted to service, which was just one part of the threat to strict sartorial delineations of social signification; that they could afford, and wear, a wider range of materials was another, and perhaps the more pertinent. The lower classes became harder to identify through their dress alone, which led to an unease in the higher classes as the visual signifiers of their superiority were fading away. Perrot suggests that “because clothing oneself is an act of differentiation, it is essentially an act of signification”; these acts of signification are affirmed “according to a code guaranteed and perpetuated by society and its institutions” (1994: 8). Furthermore, the developing Victorian consumer culture enabled “women to engage in self-construction – and therefore self-definition”, with this agency also making the “ideological line separating morally dubious female figures from ideally virtuous ones” increasingly fragile (Talairach-Vielmas 2005: 57, 61). Victorian society upheld modes of signification which had been associated with a previous era by re-packaging the fundamental aspects of it to appeal to a modern, industrial-capitalist society. However, as the middle class grew in influence and number, sartorial signification arguably became less a matter of the aristocracy showcasing their superiority than the middle class distancing themselves from their closely-related social inferiors.

Looking at the impact of sartorial superiority upon individuals, Violet Greville states in her 1893 article “Victims of Vanity” that women “dress at, for, and against, one another” (71). Dressing was thus more than merely covering the body or a signifier of class: it was a competition between women, fought with the aim of winning such prizes as admiration, or a husband. This concept of competitive dressing, laced with vanity, is a particularly useful

angle from which to approach *East Lynne*, and the characters of Barbara and Isabel. From this perspective it is clear that, while the competition is undoubtedly underpinned by patriarchal ideals, it is perpetuated by female activity. Contrastingly, in her examination of Victorian fashion plates, Sharon Marcus suggests that “the woman who looked at fashion plates saw the image of a woman who like herself was looking at a fashionable woman. Fashion imagery made women into spectacles, but spectacles with the power to inspect, admire and evaluate one another” (2003: 15). According to Marcus’s modern interpretation of the material culture of the mid-nineteenth century, competition is only a minor part of the whole experience, if there at all; while the female body, and dress, is indeed commercialised in fashion plates and used to advertise the current fashions, the imagery created a supportive atmosphere, rather than the one of cut-throat competition which Greville suggests is at the heart of female (sartorial) beauty, its maintenance, and its cultural impact. Marcus’s idea of a supportive environment is challenged in both *East Lynne* and *No Name*; in the former, the narrative encourages division and competition between Barbara and Isabel, such as Greville describes in her article, and in the latter a deep sartorial scepticism renders Magdalen unable to acknowledge the significant anxieties of her maid with regards to the proposed exchange of dresses.

### **Foolish Finery and Competitive Dressing in *East Lynne***

In Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, Lady Isabel Carlyle uses fashion to place herself above the woman whom she perceives to be her romantic competitor: Barbara Hare. Discussing Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), Casey Sloan argues that fashion is a distinctly female subculture and language from which men are automatically excluded (2016: 809), despite the significant reliance on a male narrative to interpret the sartorial communications from the female characters. Throughout *East Lynne*, clothing is shown to be a mode of communication between women of all classes in the text, while the men seem to remain broadly oblivious. Therefore, Sloan’s argument of a distinctly female subculture and language is perhaps more applicable to *East Lynne* than to *The Woman in White*, where the male narrator is meticulous, if not necessarily accurate, in his readings of women’s dresses. While Cornelia Carlyle, a brusque and masculine matriarch-like character, and sister-in-law to Isabel, often draws attention to, and judges women on, their dress, the narrator also consistently draws attention to women’s dress both as a signifier of their underlying character and as a method of non-verbal communication between the female characters. For example, when she is made to feel unwelcome by Cornelia, and haunted by a paranoia about the relationship between her husband and Barbara, Isabel turns to dress to emphasise her higher status:

She wore a costly black lace dress its low body and sleeves trimmed with white lace as costly: and ornaments of jet. She looked inexpressively beautiful, and Barbara turned from her with a feeling of sickening jealousy; from her beauty, from her attire, even from the fine, soft handkerchief, which displayed the badge of her rank – the coronet of an earl’s daughter. Barbara looked well too: she was in a light blue silk robe, and her pretty cheeks were damask with her mind’s excitement. On her neck she wore the gold chain given to her by Mr Carlyle – she had not discarded that.

(Wood [1861] 2008: 158-9)

The various emphases on the costly nature of Isabel’s dress, the embellishments, and the material are shown to have a visceral effect on Barbara in their confirmation of Isabel’s superiority. This response from Barbara, and the subsequent – albeit less magnificent – description of her, highlights the sartorial disparity between the two, and their respective

consciousness of it. Importantly, this passage is directly preceded by Isabel's maid Joyce informing her that Barbara had been in love with Carlyle, after which:

a hot flush passed over the brow of Lady Isabel; a sensation very like jealousy flew to her heart. No woman likes to hear that another woman either is or has been attached to her husband: a doubt always arises whether the feeling may not have been reciprocated.

(158)

Isabel's decision to dress in order to intimidate Barbara is clearly motivated by this revelation; she is proving to all who see her that she is superior to Barbara, facilitated by her costly and splendid dress. Elizabeth Steere suggests that the "language of the theatre" is used throughout the novel (2011: 57), and that each character has a distinctly performative side to them. It is clear in the above quotation that both Isabel and Barbara are utilising the material agency they have available to them as women to perform their roles: Isabel, as the lady who married into a lower class and is struggling to assert her authority within both her household and her marriage, compensating by dressing to intimidate and showing her superior lineage through the handkerchief and the jet ornaments; and Barbara, as the unknowingly-jilted lover, displaying a token of affection like a talisman against her rival (who is unaware of its origins). Isabel's jet ornaments can be read in two ways: paired with the black lace of her dress, they are most likely tokens of her mourning for her father; yet, they can also be read as mourning ornaments for her previous life, which she gave up when she married below her original station, and the loss of which she begins to feel keenly as Cornelia continues to usurp her position in the household. Although Sloan's argument of a female subculture is pertinent to this reading of Isabel's and Barbara's behaviour, and is demonstrated through it, it still remains problematic: the narrative clearly pits Isabel and Barbara against each other but, besides performing these material shows to each other, they are also performing them to Archibald Carlyle. If it is true that the novel provides no discernible evidence that Carlyle is reached on a conscious level by these performances, it can certainly be argued that Isabel and Barbara are trying to communicate with Carlyle through their clothes and ornaments. By dressing up to her pre-marriage station in a dress that is "theatrical in [its] effect" (Seys 2019: 45), Isabel is showing her superiority to Barbara, and her worth as a partner. Interestingly, however, it is only after her marriage to Carlyle – with the exception of her rich gown for her piano-tuner's concert – that Isabel is described as dressing in rich and costly gowns. Seys argues that this is to foreshadow her upcoming fall (2019: 45). I would argue, however, that it is only once Isabel is married that she becomes insecure in her identity, and so she takes advantage of sartorial signification to lend her confidence. Unlike Isabel, Barbara is confident in her own identity and proves to Carlyle that she is constant – a trait that Carlyle is later anxious to have in a wife following Isabel's affair and their subsequent divorce.

The above scene substantiates Greville's statements about competition between women through the medium of dress. Isabel is not just demonstrating her role as Carlyle's wife, but also her superior class (by birth). It is interesting to note that, in the same year that *East Lynne* was published, the hugely popular *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861) was first published in book form after initially appearing as a series of articles. Amidst discussions of household affairs, descriptions of recipes, and so on, Beeton deals with dress, stating that "our good wife sets up a sail to the keel of her husband's estate; and, if of high parentage, she doth not so remember what she is by birth that she forgets what she is by match" ([1861] 2008: 11). It can be argued that Isabel is now dressing above her station, as, while she retains her title as the daughter of an earl, she has married down into the middle classes. Her reliance on silk garments to cement her new identity can be seen to be at odds with that very aim. Seys suggests

that when “[d]ressed in silk, Victorian heroines reject the ideal of the Angel in the House” (2019: 28). The remainder of the novel seems to validate this view. Isabel does indeed reject the role of middle-class wife, whereas Barbara does not. Though Barbara is described at various points as wearing silk, such descriptions avoid the spectacle made by Isabel in the aforementioned episode. This lack of emphasis might appear to be at odds with the frequent reminders that Barbara is a lover of finery (discussed below). Yet, if we consider Seys’s idea that silk is a rejection of the Angel in the House ideal, we might conclude that the lack of attention given to Barbara’s silks in comparison to Isabel’s is a sign of Barbara’s ease in her role: she is meant to play a wifely middle-class role, and is comfortable in it, whereas Isabel is constantly in a state of discomfort as she tries to fit the Angelic ideal, and her conspicuous silks indicate her rejection of it. Not only does the narrative avoid associating Barbara with these connotations of rejection, despite her silk dress; it also suggests that she counters the material opulence and sartorial superiority displayed by Isabel in the scene above by wearing a simple item of jewellery. While Isabel is unaware of the necklace’s origin, Barbara is firm in her convictions to out-dress her competitor and, in wearing that specific ornament, she reveals her eagerness to establish a communication with Carlyle, rather than Isabel.

As mentioned above, some Victorian reviewers favoured Isabel over Barbara. This preference is evident in a review appeared in *The Literary Gazette* in 1861 which confesses that:

of the two wives our sympathies rather go with the first. When we leave the married life of Isabel for that of Barbara, we feel that we have left a rarer, sweeter, deeper nature for one that is comparatively vulgar and uninteresting.

(“East Lynne” 1861: 371)

This lack of sympathy for Barbara is triggered in the narrative by repeated references to her vanity and love of finery. Valverde states that the use of the term “finery” often “connoted moral flaws on the part of the wearer” (1983: 168) and “‘love of dress’ is ... linked to vanity and idleness, that is, to specifically female vices” (178). This can be associated with the way in which Cornelia deridingly describes Barbara as, for example, a “vain little minx” (Wood [1861] 2008: 63), “a vain little idiot” (64) and “as vain as she is high” (373). In examining *East Lynne* in relation to Eliza Lynn Linton’s *Girl of the Period* series, which differentiates the traditional English girl from the new garish girl who flouts tradition, Kara Tennant highlights that “in its detailed accounts of the wearing, display, and interpretation of female dress, the novel implicitly instructs the reader how to recognise and interpret sartorial cues, and also provides an intriguing reflection upon female morality” (2011: 116-17). Certainly, Isabel overdresses at times in the text but, although she is blamed by her father for dressing to “please [her] vanity” (Wood [1861] 2008: 76) for her piano-tuner’s concert near the start of the novel, she is, due to her class, never described as dressing in finery. Barbara, by contrast, is frequently described as such. As opposed to her rival, Isabel’s clothing is never an indicator of her morality despite her undeniable flaws. Considering the relevance given to fashion and its imagery in the novel, we could thus argue that the narrative does not necessarily condemn Isabel’s actions, using sartorial cues and material distinctions of class to “redeem” her instead (Tennant 2011: 115).

Another aspect worthy of notice is the fact that Barbara’s love of fine clothes and dressing is a cause of conflict between her and her father, Justice Hare. At one point in the narrative, Barbara has no appetite; while the reader is aware that this is the consequence of her having seen the man who committed the murder of which her brother was accused, her father, unaware of this and unwilling to even speak of his son, declares that her loss of appetite is “through the finery she has been buying ... her head is stuffed up with it” (Wood [1861] 2008: 189). Justice Hare’s comment reflects a critique found in many Victorian writings, which highlighted the addictive and all-consuming nature of fashion (a key example of this being

Luke Limner's *Madre Nature Versus the Moloch of Fashion* from 1874). An earlier scene confirms this critique. In reporting the disagreement between Justice Hare and his daughter, Cornelia tells Carlyle that "Barbara has been laying in a stock of finery; the Justice caught sight of it as it came home, and Barbara suffered. Serve her right, the vain little minx" (Wood [1861] 2008: 63). Interestingly, this is not the only time in which Cornelia highlights Barbara's vanity referring to her as a minx. A similar comment is made in response to Carlyle when he informs Cornelia that Barbara will become his second wife (373). Connotations of the word "minx" include flirtatiousness, wantonness, and lewdness. While it would be a stretch to suggest that Barbara is either lewd or wanton, there are circumstances in the novel that make it clear why Cornelia might describe her as such. Not only does Barbara's intense interest in fashion suggest a questionable moral character to Cornelia; the latter also objects to Barbara's frequent late-night walks with Carlyle, interpreting them as acts that violate Victorian morality – even though the reader is aware that they are not lovers.

Besides offering evidence of Cornelia's persecutory attitude to Barbara, *East Lynne* lays stress on servants and their dressing outside of their station, which are largely represented through Cornelia's reactions. Cornelia dismisses servants from her brother's employ for "decking themselves out in buff mousseline-de-laine dresses on a Saturday morning, and fine caps garnished with peach" (143). This quotation bears witness to the anxiety over the sartorial erosion of class signification mentioned by Valverde. Afy Hallijohn, while not a servant at East Lynne, is one of the characters who causes Cornelia's particular consternation, providing "a fictional or imaginative account of the breakdown of the visual distinctions between women of different social classes" (Tennant 2011: 117). Before the main events of the novel occur, Afy commits what appears as a disreputable act as she leaves the area on the very night of her father's murder, supposedly together with the suspect, Barbara's brother. Afy returns four years later, "fashionable, bold, and unrepentant" (Wood [1861] 2008: 117), after finding employment as a lady's maid. Her reappearance on the scene provokes an unfavourable reaction in Cornelia, who makes a harsh comment on Afy's dressing:

In a gay summer's dress, fine and sparkling, with a coquettish little bonnet, trimmed with pink, shaded by one of those nondescript articles at present called veils, sailed Afy Hallijohn, conceited and foolish and good-looking as ever.  
'...the brazen bellweather!' [said Cornelia]. ... 'What credible servant would flaunt about in such a dress and bonnet as that? – with that flimsy gauze thing over her face! It's ... disreputable ...'  
(381)

Cornelia is constantly shown to be against frivolity, and in favour of practicality and conservatism in both dress and character. She has no qualms about insulting or belittling those whom she deems to be acting out of their proper place in society, including Isabel, the sister-in-law she relentlessly illtreats. Afy's dress reveals the "fragility and instability" of known class and moral signifiers (Tennant 2011: 117), and it is this visual representation of social disorder that fuels Cornelia's reaction to her. Cornelia's reaction to Afy is largely based on the fact that while Afy remains a servant – or, better an upper servant as lady's maid – she is dressing above her station and thus disrupting what was considered the natural class order. This classist attitude is directly linked to the "ideology of finery," and the anxiety raised by Victorians' growing inability to ascertain someone's class from their dress alone. Valverde's comment that "what was or was not finery depended on the socioeconomic and moral status of the wearer" (1989: 170) can be fruitfully applied to the analysis of Afy's characterisation. For the most part, the term "finery" was used when a person was dressing above their station (especially if the dresses were cheaper imitations of richer dresses). By wearing the "nondescript" veil, which is apparently serving no purpose but to suggest her social elevation, Afy is associated with what



Thorstein Veblen termed “conspicuous leisure” ([1899] 2007: 114) – a condition usually reserved for the leisured, non-working classes, which she seems to enjoy despite being a servant. In ways similar to Barbara, Afy is described as wearing finery, and the detailed descriptions of her clothing imply that her garments do not necessarily mirror her socioeconomic standing as a lady’s maid. Though it can be argued that her fine clothes could be cast-offs from her employer, the fact that she wears them indicates a violation of class borders. To put it in Valverde’s words, “the same dress could be considered elegant and proper on a lady, but showy and dishonest on her maid” (1989: 168). While Afy’s economic status has improved since she left East Lynne, in Cornelia’s eyes the young woman’s social status as a (scandal-prone) servant remains the same: her already dubious moral status is enhanced by her frivolity, and Cornelia declares her “a vain, ill-conducted hussy, given to nothing but finery and folly” (Wood [1861] 2008: 352).

Afy clearly enjoys dressing finely, and understands the power of doing so. Towards the end of the novel, when she is going to break off her engagement with Mr Jiffin, a shopkeeper with whom she had frequently flirted, she dresses extravagantly, wearing:

a mauve silk dress with eighteen flounces, and about eighteen hundred steel buttons that glittered your sight away; a “Zouave” jacket, worked with gold; a black start hat with no visible brim perched on the top of her skull, garnished in front with what court milliners were pleased to term a “plume de coq,” but which, by its size and height, might have passed for a “coq” himself, while a white ostrich feather was carried round and did duty behind, and a spangled hair-net hung down to her waist. Gloriously grand was Afy that day.

(601)

Despite the fact that Afy’s class is technically similar to Jiffin’s, she purposefully dresses up her status here to add justification to her breaking off the engagement. What the quotation offers is a description of excess; eighteen flounces highlight the leisurely nature of her dress, and while eighteen hundred buttons might be hyperbole, they emphasise the lack of practicality in Afy’s way of dressing. Considering that Cornelia reacts “grimly” to one of East Lynne’s servants, Marvel, when she has five flounces in her dress (142), Afy’s wearing a dress with eighteen flounces highlights the extravagance of her garment. Moreover, Afy’s hat fulfils no practical function but to demonstrate wealth, as its excessively large feathers are proof of a purely aesthetic choice. If Afy’s moral status has been in question since she disappeared, people’s reactions towards her dress, on her return, are not only evidence of a widespread lack of sympathy towards her, but also confirm people’s assumptions about her questionable morality.

These negative connotations of Afy’s dresses are anticipated in earlier scenes of the novel, like the one in which Isabel tells Joyce, her maid and Afy’s sister, that she does not wish for Joyce to be “fine like Marvel” (154). Joyce replies that she shall “never be fine,” while the narrator remarks that “Joyce believed that she had cause to shudder at finery” (154). These examples confirm the negative connotations attached to finery in the text. The picture that is thus conveyed is in line with Valverde’s interpretation of “cheap” clothing and ornamentation in relation to class:

Finery in this pejorative sense meant clothes that were too showy, clothes that looked elegant or striking but were in some unspecified way cheap, if only because the woman wearing them was herself a cheap imitation of upper-class womanhood.

(1989: 168)

There is no denying that the term “finery” is used throughout *East Lynne* with pejorative overtones. Both Afy and Barbara are mocked and derided by Cornelia for their dress choices; they are ostensibly socially inferior to the materials and cuts they chose, and consequently fail to play the roles of predominantly positive characters. Barbara’s clear love of “finery” enables the reader to favour Isabel over her, whether consciously or otherwise, as evidenced by the above-mentioned review. Moreover, we should consider that a reviewer for *The Christian Remembrancer*, while condemning Isabel, nonetheless refers explicitly to Barbara’s “vulgar finery” which jars with her intention “to be an English lady” (1863: 217). It can be argued that Wood uses these sartorial references to encourage the reader to sympathise with the adulterer rather than the faithful lover. Dressing, class, and morality are similarly intertwined in the characterisation of Afy. By the time Afy is brought into the narrative, the reader has already gone through many passages in which lower-class fine dressing is ridiculed or described unfavourably. All together, these passages indicate that Wood manipulates the language of fashion and uses it to create new intersections between class distinctions and morality, which are meant to influence her readership’s interpretation of the novel’s characters.

The *Blackwood’s* article quoted at the beginning suggests that, while a love of dress and smart dressing in the lower classes are often considered vanity, they are also signs of ambition ([Oliphant] 1865: 428). Indeed, the narrative of *East Lynne* not only criticises Barbara’s and Afy’s love of fine clothes; it also attaches negative connotations to their ambitions for a better life. Barbara wants to leave her home, and Afy aspires to be more than what she is destined to be by birth. From this perspective, it can be argued that fashion and dress are not only used to raise questions about the two women’s morality, but they also unveil their aspirations to upward social mobility. Of course, these aspirations are not viewed favourably by Wood who, in the main, held conservative views of the Victorian social structure. Such a reading explains why Barbara’s and Afy’s ways of dressing make them objects of ridicule and judgement. Tatiana Kontou and Kara Tennant suggest that “it was not necessarily improper to be fashionable but, rather, to be *ridiculous*. The fear of ridicule is present in much Victorian dress discourse” (2023: 3). Though there is no overt “fear of ridicule” in *East Lynne*, the descriptions of Barbara’s and Afy’s clothing suggest that there is a fine line between being fashionable and ridiculous, which to some extent offers a counterbalance to the freedom of movement and the class mobility the two characters acquire. Barbara eventually leaves her home and marries the man of her choice; Afy moves about West Lynne with a freedom and independence that seems excessive for a lady’s maid, but serves her well. These changes might be viewed as proof of their social success; yet, the narrative’s overall tone is one of conformity which casts the two women’s mobility in an unfavourable light. Unlike other sensation novelists who concoct wasting illnesses to force their unconventional heroines to conform (e.g., Collins in *The Woman in White* and *No Name*, or Rhoda Broughton in *Not Wisely, But Too Well*), Wood adopts a more subtle approach to limit women’s moral and social transgressions. *East Lynne’s* most transgressive character, Isabel, dies, though not before reaching some sort of redemption. Afy and Barbara are punished in a more subtle way: their sartorial preferences are weaponised against them and used to stigmatise their social violations in the eyes of contemporary readers. Their punishment for non-conformity is implied by the ridicule directed at them. Instead of telling a triumphant rags-to-riches story that sees the middle- and working-class women earn their richer clothes, Wood derides the ambitions of upwardly mobile women as vanity, and prevents the reader from feeling sympathy for such characters.

## Fabricating Identity in *No Name*

If fashion is a mode of competition and vehicle for social judgement in *East Lynne*, dressing in *No Name* is distinctly performative. That is not to say that dress is not performative in *East Lynne* too, but with the exception of Isabel's transformation into Madame Vine after the train crash, dress is mostly used to highlight a character's existing identity. The reverse is true of *No Name* in which dress becomes a vehicle for mimicking existing identities and fabricating entirely new ones. Christine Bayles Kortsch refers to the "dual literacy" of Victorian women, suggesting that "literacy in dress culture, like literacy in English, required the ability to do two things: to read and write in the given language" (2009: 7). This dual literacy is demonstrated throughout *East Lynne*, though perhaps with more emphasis on the reading, rather than the writing, in the language of dress; Magdalen's actions in *No Name*, however, aptly highlight her fluency in both tenets. In the course of the narration, Magdalen Vanstone is meticulous in choosing what to wear, at one point even having new dresses made up for her. At the start of her daring venture to recover her inheritance, she spends some time on the stage and acquires a number of costumes which she utilises later on. While there are a number of scenes in which the reader is shown Magdalen either choosing what to wear, or dressing herself and layering each garment as she develops a new character, I wish to draw attention to two scenes in particular. In the first, scene, Magdalen, who is hatching a plot to marry the heir to her inheritance, Noel Vanstone, poses as Miss Bygrave and attempts to seduce the young man. In order to reach this objective, she needs to wear the right dress:

She went to the wardrobe and took down from the pegs two bright, delicate muslin dresses, which had been made for summer wear at Combe-Raven a year since, and which had been of too little value to be worth selling when she parted with her other possessions. After placing these dresses side by side on the bed, she looked into the wardrobe once more. It only contained one other summer dress – the plain alpaca gown which she had worn during her memorable interview with Noel Vanstone and Mrs. Lecount. This she left in its place, resolving not to wear it – less from any dread that the housekeeper might recognise a pattern too quiet to be noticed, and too common to be remembered, than from the conviction that it was neither gay enough nor becoming enough for her purpose. After taking a plain white muslin scarf, a pair of light grey kid gloves, and a garden-hat of Tuscan straw, from the drawers of the wardrobe, she locked it, and put the key carefully in her pocket.

Instead of at once proceeding to dress herself, she sat idly looking at the two muslin gowns; careless which she wore, and yet inconsistently hesitating which to choose. "What does it matter!" she said to herself, with a reckless laugh; "I am equally worthless in my own estimation, whichever I put on."

(Collins [1862] 2004: 291)

A number of phrases in this passage turn dress into a signifier of worth. The delicate muslin dresses are comparatively new, and they are legacies of Magdalen's former life. Despite this personal value, they are of a low monetary value and indicate how starkly different Magdalen's fortunes are now, when compared to the start of the novel. The delicacy of the material comes to represent the fragility of her social status and identity, and Magdalen shows herself to be conscious of this symbolism in the second paragraph. It is interesting that, despite her need for a disguise, she chooses to wear one of her own dresses for the transgressive occasion. Even though she is pretending to be someone else, the solidity of her false identity is undermined by this very decision to wear an old item of clothing. When she disguises herself in the alpaca gown to meet with Noel and his housekeeper, Mrs Lecount, disguised as her governess,

Magdalen is meticulous in her performance, using make-up and padded clothing to change her appearance; suspicious of her behaviour, however, Mrs Lecount cuts a piece of material from Magdalen's dress (237), and later uses it to prove her deception (239). By using one of her own gowns, rather than a new one, Magdalen is not able to wholly separate her new identity from her old one and, despite her acting skills, she fails to embody the character she would like to play. This failure is in contrast with her successful acting on the stage under the guidance of Captain Wragge, her distant relation and accomplice. As an actor, she used to wear the dress of a character made up by herself and Wragge. When trying to deceive Noel, however, the lines which differentiate her false identities from her own self become as delicate as the muslin she dresses in. In *East Lynne*, Isabel's transformation into Madame Vine is a success; although some people notice some passing resemblance to her former self, these similarities are not enough to undermine the strength of her disguise. This impersonation is successful because the clothes Isabel wears as Madame Vine did not belong to Lady Isabel Carlyle. Unlike her, Magdalen wears her own former dresses to become Miss Bygrave and is thus unable to present this new character with a strong enough conviction to fool the sceptical Mrs. Lecount.

The second scene I wish to draw attention to is one in which the discussion of dress is less about Magdalen's disguise, and more about the social implications of it – the scene of her impersonation of a maid, which ties into the previous interpretations of finery. Whereas most of Magdalen's disguises are created by herself or with the help of Captain Wragge, her final disguise as Louisa the maid requires the assistance of the real and faithful Louisa. Magdalen's own dresses would not work for this final disguise, and so Louisa is charged with making up a new gown for her. Importantly, Magdalen is not the only one who will undergo a transformation – Louisa herself will be playing the role of mistress:

“You are quick and clever at your needle. Can you make me the sort of gown which it is proper for a servant to wear – and can you alter one of my best silk dresses, so as to make it fit yourself – in a week's time?” [asked Magdalen]

...

“I shall be found out, ma'am,” interposed Louisa, trembling at the prospect before her. “I am not a lady.”

“And I am,” said Magdalen, bitterly. “Shall I tell you what a lady is? A lady is a woman who wears a silk gown, and has a sense of her own importance. I shall put the gown on your back, and the sense in your head ...”

(503)

The quotation reveals Louisa's consciousness of the symbolism of dress, especially as a class signifier. By arguing that she would be “found out” as an imposter while wearing one of Magdalen's silks, Louisa is implying that, as a member of the lower classes, she has no business wearing a rich silk. Being unaccustomed to such a dress, she would not be able to assimilate herself into such a role, no matter how briefly. I discussed above that, while legally British society had moved away from sumptuary laws, the cultural psyche had not necessarily evolved accordingly. While I have discussed anxieties from the middle and upper classes about the lower classes infiltrating their ranks, I have not discussed the other side. Louisa clearly feels some anxiety about pretending to be a lady due to inherited notions of sartorial inferiority that is supposed to reflect an innate social inferiority; to Louisa, a dress is not simply a covering, as it is to Magdalen: it is the sartorial manifestation of her social status. Cecil Willett Cunnington has examined women's clothing in the nineteenth century in some detail, and highlights an important social change:

During [the nineteenth century] the term “lady” became progressively more and more generous in its embrace, so that ultimately it denoted not only an inheritance but an acquired status, even including some who earned their living. But always it implied a special attitude of the mind, of which correct conduct was the outward expression. This was largely symbolised by her costume, the study of which, therefore, becomes ... a guide to her mentality.

([1937] 1990: 1)

This statement echoes significantly with what Magdalen tells Louisa, in that being a lady is not necessarily determined by the class into which a woman is born, but by what is in her head and how she chooses to present herself. What Cunningham’s statement fails to acknowledge, however, is the derogatory narrative of finery which at the time accompanied this increasing fluidity of class definitions. Louisa’s initial unwillingness to dress in the silk, when placed alongside arguments about finery, would likely have spoken in her favour for contemporary readers. In a similar way to Joyce in *East Lynne*, as discussed above, Louisa’s aversion to dressing outside of her station proves her worthiness (to those who believe in defined class lines and the born superiority of higher classes) as she has no desire to socially better herself and endanger the existing social hierarchy.

Furthermore, this passage shows that Magdalen’s actions of slipping through various class boundaries has given her an intense cynicism in coping with a social order dictated by dress. Kontou and Tennant, who examine this scene, argue that:

the dress makes the “lady” visible, while the use of language and comportment breathe life into the part. Consequently, class becomes embodied in accoutrements and etiquette. The narrative urges us to conclude that if “dress” acts as an instantaneous sign of one’s social position, then it is a sign that can easily be made manifest.

(2023: 1)

Class, then, is material, not inherent; once a character is conscious of the flexibility of the sartorial signification of class, then they can manipulate it, as Magdalen does. Having lived so long carefully curating her dress choices to present a persona that is not officially her own, Magdalen has become intimately aware of how the ingrained attitudes left over from the old sumptuary laws are ultimately nothing but a cultural fabrication, a widely accepted fact that in truth has no real meaning. Possessing this knowledge, Magdalen has manipulated these laws of fashion to the extent that she has broken free from the inherent deceit at the heart of fashion and realised that identity is not in the dress, but in the self; having been born into a higher class, and forced to live in a lower, she can recognise that class distinction is a case of sartorial signification.

Let me return to Magdalen’s specification that Louisa should alter “one of [her] best silk dresses.” As discussed above, silk dresses in Victorian popular fiction can be seen as a sartorial manifestation of the heroine’s rejection of the ideal Angel in the House (Seys 2019: 28). Although Magdalen rejects the ideal, she does so in this scene through rejecting, rather than adopting, her silk dress. Seys later argues that:

Silk, then, poses questions about the gap between appearances and reality, surface and depth, veiling and unveiling, and signifier and signified. Its fascination as a symbolic object in fashion, art and literature lies in its intricate interweaving of these characteristics and influences.

(2019: 69)

In rejecting her silk dress, and asking that it be re-formed for another body, Magdalen embraces its various symbolic traits, yet she rejects them for herself. Magdalen grew up in a

socioeconomic position that negated the possibility of being anxious in rich dress as this dress was perceived as her natural right. For this reason, despite her cynicism, Magdalen is unable to understand Louisa's trepidation. Even though Magdalen appropriates the dress of the lower classes in various situations, she is unable to appropriate the mentality that accompanies that dress, because of her social status by birth. To Magdalen, dress is nothing more than a costume that she uses to play a part rather than to embody a truth; to Louisa, it is a signifier of station and personal identity.

## Conclusion

“Dress ought to express individual character; but also – and in our present compact, organised, social state, more distinctly – his citizenship and community with the great fabric of society” ([Oliphant] 1865: 430). *East Lynne* and *No Name* explore these two facets of dress and highlight the close relationship between a dress, its wearer, and “the great fabric of society.” In *East Lynne* both the narrative voice and the prominence of Cornelia Carlyle's voice ensure that the reader is almost constantly reminded of how dress delineates class; morals are ascribed to garments and their materials, and an almost visceral response to characters such as Barbara Hare and Afy Halijohn is encouraged through the continued use of a disparaging language. Class mobility – in either direction – is discouraged, and derided. In *No Name*, however, social mobility is neither encouraged nor discouraged: the concept of social class as defined through dress is entirely rejected through the actions performed by Magdalen. The aforementioned scene between Magdalen and Louisa highlights how deeply sartorial class boundaries influence the social psyche, but it also proves that social class is a psychological construct: if the concept of class-through-dress can be rejected, equally questionable is the concept of a natural order which is supposed to keep people within their social spheres. Both novels demonstrate how dress can be used to create new identities and move through the class system. Both novels, moreover, condemn the class mobility of their female characters. Yet, whereas *East Lynne* actively discourages and derides such mobility, *No Name* also highlights the ease with which dress can be used to reject the very social parameters that dress – arbitrarily – defines.

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