QUAKER DRESS, SEXUALITY, AND THE DOMESTICATION OF REFORM IN THE VICTORIAN NOVEL

By Suzanne Keen

WHY ARE JANE EYRE AND DOROTHEA BROOKE clad by their creators in “Quakerish” garb? The oppositional plainness and simplicity of Quakerish heroines have often been read as signs of classlessness and sexlessness. Plain and simple clothing seems, to both Victorian and contemporary eyes, part of the package of reticence, reserve, and repression associated with the evangelical wing of nineteenth-century dissenting sects. The typical sociological view of the function of dress within conservative religious groups holds that “strict dress codes are enforced because dress is considered symbolic of religiosity. Hence dress becomes a symbol of social control as it controls the external body” (Arthur 1). The control of female sexuality and the restraint of desire would seem to be the core function of modest clothing. Then the plain dress of some of the liveliest heroines of Victorian fiction presents a puzzle that can be solved only by recuperating the meaning of that clothing for Victorians. As fashion historian Anne Hollander points out, nineteenth-century novels testify to the way that clothes “always correctly express character” (Feeding the Eye 12), but the meaning of particular articles of clothing or styles can slip away. Accurately reading the characters of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot thus requires careful interpretation of their dress, in this case reversing the conventional reading of their plain, modest, and simple style. This essay argues that Quakerish clothing expresses both a promise of spirited sexuality and an admonition about the class-crossing potential of the respectable female contained within it.

Recovering the coded libidinal and social references inhering in the costumes of actual Quakeresses illuminates the complicated cultural meaning of Victorian heroines dressed in Quakerish clothes. Contrary to the common understanding, Quakeresses in their distinctive clothing signified an instantly recognizable middle-class piety and demureness that was simultaneously coded as sexually attractive. The neat, form-fitting, relatively unadorned garb figured forth not sexlessness, but marriageability, and not classlessness, but respectability. In Repression in Victorian Fiction, John Kucich has persuasively described the repressing mechanisms by which Victorians eroticized “self-negation” to emphasize libidinal depth and complication beneath surfaces (16). Kucich’s description of “libidinal self-negation” can easily be applied to Quakers’ own under-
standing of the meaning of their dress as “a force that binds individuals together, and ... an emblem of the emotional and moral power of oppositional groups” (24). Yet the contested meaning of their clothing to the very small number of Victorian Quakers tells only part of the story of the more complex cultural valences invoked by Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope.

Recovering the meaning of Quakeresses’ clothing in Victorian novels rewards attention to the wider cultural sphere in which those representations appear. Although visual images of Quakeresses can be found in portraits, this essay focuses on what Roland Barthes calls “written clothing,” that description which translates real clothing, three dimensional garb, into verbal form. As semioticians of fashion remind us, written clothing represents a set of signs already embedded in a representational web referring to external (social) and internal (psychological) conditions. In Kaja Silverman’s formulation from “Fragments of a Fashionable Discourse,” clothing “draws the body so that it can be culturally seen, and articulates it as a meaningful form... clothing is a necessary condition of subjectivity — that in articulating the body, it simultaneously articulates the psyche” (145, 147). By recovering what Victorian novelists render legible about their heroines’ personalities, demeanor, social status, and sexuality by dressing them in Quaker style, the student of written clothing also retrieves evidence of some of Victorian culture’s acute anxieties about, and wishes for, women. As I will argue, Quakerish dress signifies marriageability and the promise of sexual fulfillment; respectability and reassurance about class boundary-crossing; reforming tendencies; social consciousness; and a body that may be moved by the spirit to speak, to travel outside the domestic sphere, and to act on feelings of desire.

To interpret the cultural and psychological meanings articulated by the Quakerish garb of Victorian heroines, one must first be persuaded that Quakeresses and their clothing did, for Victorians, carry the meanings that I suggest. To support my claims, I draw not only on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary representations of Quakeresses and heroines in Quaker dress, but on fashions for dress and fancy dress, and on contemporary assessments of Quakerism in journals and books. The debate within the Society of Friends about the revision of their peculiarities of language and costume contributes an ironic wrinkle to the story of the meaning of Quakerish dress, for after 1860 Quakers were no longer required to observe their distinguishing mode of dress and speech. By that time, however, the image of the Quakeress already possessed an enduring complex of meanings for Victorians. While real Friends with some reluctance abandoned the symbolic clothing that conveyed so much meaning quietly, Victorian novelists clothed their heroines in Quakerish garb in order to send a complicated set of signals. Influenced both by eighteenth-century traditions and by nineteenth-century views of activist ladies working in the public sphere, the idea of Quaker-like clothing becomes available to Victorian novelists as a sign of a tamer kind of reforming impulse. The unruly energy of the woman in Quakerish dress can be funneled back into the domestic sphere by means of the fulfillment of its erotic potential.

The erotic significations of Quakerish dress arise from an image of the Quakeress preserved in a traditional costume for masquerading, popular throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Samuel Richardson records and perhaps stimulates this vogue in the second part of *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (1741). As Pamela’s experience at a masquerade demonstrates, the overtly modest clothing of the costume Quakeress calls
attention to the married or marriageable body within. Noticeably plain clothes also accrue an additional layer of meaning in the early Victorian period, through the fame of a celebrity activist. The garb made famous by the Quaker matron Elizabeth Gurney Fry (1780–1845) comes to signify the class-crossing potential of evangelical philanthropy, particularly the reform of criminal women by respectable members of their own sex. Rejecting girlish vanities and assuming plain garb, Mrs. Fry becomes for Victorians the model for reforming ladies in the public sphere.

Beyond the tiny world of actual Victorian Friends (not all of whom wore plain clothes), the association of specific simplifications in dress with both Mrs. Fry and the dress-up masquerade Quakeress made a potent combination. Victorian novelists used Quakerish garb’s symbolic rejection of current fashions to dramatize the differences of their heroines from their real and imaginary peers. George Eliot and Charlotte Brontë dress as Quakeresses the heroines who will make class transitions or alliances across class boundaries. Further, the encoded sexual attractiveness of their Quakerish clothing helps to resolve the challenges posed by reforming speech and Quaker-like convictions by promising to fulfill the destinies of Dorothea Brooke, Jane Eyre, and Dinah Morris in marriage. It has been observed before that in Jane Eyre (1847), Adam Bede (1859), and Middlemarch (1871–72), marriage interferes with the philanthropic, reforming activities or impulses of heroines, who cease all but the most private, domestic reforms. This has seemed inappropriate or disappointing to some readers, who have hoped for more for Jane or Dinah or Dorothea. Yet if the Quakerish outfit serves both as a passport outside the walls of home, and as a license to speak up, it also guarantees that the character wearing it will end up an angel of the hearth, delighted and delighting in the private pleasures of marriage. The use of Quakerish clothing by Victorian novelists confirms Kucich’s insight that “eroticized repression” systematically deflects “desire away from any relationship to collective identity” (24). The creators of Dinah Morris, Dorothea Brooke, and Jane Eyre never flirt with converting their characters into true Quakeresses: Quakerish dress itself licenses them to speak up, to travel, to reform, to desire, and to find fulfillment in marriage.

In Eliot’s Adam Bede, for instance, the preaching female Methodist Dinah Morris wears a “quaker cap” that enhances her face. Daunted but enticed by the attractive Dinah, the men think of marriage, wondering “how Seth had the pluck to think of courting her” (25; ch. 2). Although Adam (not Seth) Bede marries Dinah, Eliot neither sets her character apart for a life of perpetual virginity, nor allows her to continue refusing her suitors’ proposals. Instead, Dinah’s Quakerish clothing marks the beginning and end of a proper courtship plot that Eliot juxtaposes with Hetty Sorrel’s seduction and betrayal. Eliot establishes the signs of Hetty’s vulnerability with Dinah’s first appearance, in “The Preaching.” In its central scene, the quaker-like costume and odd deportment of female Methodists challenge the women of the village to reconsider their personal ornamentation; while preaching, Dinah singles out Chad’s Bess, who wears a gaudy pair of earrings, for public remonstration. If Dinah’s first success lies in harassing Bessy until she tears off her earrings, Dinah’s more important work Eliot reserves for the reform of Hetty, whose taste for ornaments leads to crimes of a deeper dye. Dinah’s Quakerish exhortations to plainness and her Quaker-like prison-visiting and reform of a female criminal dovetail with her own marriage plot, in which she takes the place that cannot be occupied by the fallen Hetty.
Eliot emphasizes the role that Dinah’s clothes play in this crossing of plots in chapter 20, “Adam Visits the Hall Farm,” in which Hetty dresses up like Dinah. Hetty’s theatrical response to Adam’s remarks about plain clothing draws attention to the way that simple dress can be extraordinarily attention getting. The scene in which Hetty dons Dinah’s Quaker-like cap contrasts not sexiness and sexlessness, but two different kinds of attractiveness. Eliot conspicuously attaches Adam’s preferences in women’s clothing to his expression, in the same scene, of his ambition to rise from the artisan class to the rank of the employers. Thus Eliot connects her retelling of one kind of story — new members of the middling ranks arrive by way of respectable nonconformity — with another story about the proper outward expression of female sexual attractiveness. This belongs not only to Hetty’s unruly plot, but also to Dinah’s reward in marriage. Eliot marks Dinah’s matrimony with a spasm of Quakerishness:

[the bride] was not in black this morning; for her aunt Poyser would by no means allow such a risk of incurring bad luck, and had herself made a present of the wedding dress, made all of grey, though in the usual Quaker form, for on this point Dinah could not give way. So the lily face looked out with sweet gravity from under a grey Quaker bonnet, neither smiling nor blushing. (534; ch. 55)

The quiet and impassive demeanor of the woman in the Quaker bonnet strongly contrasts with the preaching Dinah who earlier authorizes and signifies her outspokenness by wearing Quakerish headgear. Married to Adam, Dinah will preach no more. Although in history the Wesleyan Conference and not marriage would prevent a woman like Dinah from continuing to preach, Eliot makes the decision a matter of choosing domesticity. Eliot celebrates Dinah’s conversion into a plump, motherly angel of the hearth whose last words address not a crowd, but her husband: “Come in, Adam, and rest; it has been a hard day for thee” (539; Epilogue). The novel thus ends with Dinah’s intimate, Quakerish, “plain speech” turn of phrase, gesturing towards the domestic interior and marriage bed at the heart of Adam Bede’s prospering timber-yard. Eliot associates the transformation of a skilled laborer into a middle-class “master-man” (230; ch. 20) with the fertility of the plainly dressed wife and mother she makes, for Adam, out of the preaching, reforming Dinah. Adam Bede reassures its readers that the sort of country people who will move upward into the middle class can be recognized, at the outset, by their appropriately sober clothing. Those like Hetty, who vainly hope to snare the squire’s son, are conveniently marked with gaudy or inappropriate jewelry. Yet Dinah’s Quaker cap, from first to last scene of the novel, underlines the sexual fulfillment marriage with her will offer: moving up in the world does not require that Adam sacrifice a form of gratification sanctioned by and associated with the middle-class family.

The Quakerish dress of Victorian heroines like Dinah signifies not only neatness, serious-mindedness, and modesty, but alerts readers to the characters’ erotic impulses, by drawing attention to the desiring bodies within, and to their reforming motivations, by imitating the dress of Quakeresses who acted in the public sphere. Brontë, Eliot, and Trollope manipulate the association of Quaker dress with the erotic potentiality of the women who wear it, while calling upon a second, socially-charged association derived from the reformer Mrs. Fry. Quakerish dress in Victorian novels identifies characters that move, or threaten to move, outside of the customary place of women of their class. The
channeling of fictional heroines’ energies into lives of marriage and motherhood, in which the “growing good of the world” depends on “unhistoric acts” (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 896; Finale), contrasts sharply with Mrs. Elizabeth Fry’s relinquishment of domestic duties for the sake of her public philanthropic work. This evocation of and subsequent departure from the reforming meaning of Quakerishness is resolved by its other valence, erotic promise. Thus Quaker clothing promises a subduing and restraining of the public actions of philanthropy into more personal, private, and domestic reforms. In Victorian fiction, Quakerish dress emphasizes stillness, silence, and the wearer’s interiority (though she may temporarily speak and act) and paradoxically presents the garb of freedom and outspokenness on a body destined for domesticity (or, in the case of Trollope’s Marion Fay, for an early death).

**Fancy Dress Quakeresses**

*Brontë and Eliot encourage* their readers to see that Jane Eyre, Dinah Morris, and Dorothea Brooke deliberately set themselves apart from other women by assuming Quakerish garb. As a signifier of difference, Quaker dress announces seriousness (as opposed to frivolity) and emphasizes the female body as an object of the male gaze. While Quakeresses sometimes seem scarcely human — Mary Howitt describes them as “images in marble” (1: 263) and Charles Lamb thinks of troops of angels — they belong in the world where their distinctive dress signifies their unusual religious practices, their dedication to philanthropy, and the domestic virtues. Lamb’s interpretation of Quaker clothing emphasizes its surplus of signification to an onlooker: “The very garments of a Quaker seem incapable of receiving a soil, and cleanliness in them to be something more than the absence of its contrary. Every Quakeress is a lily; and when they come up in bands to their Whitsun-conferences, whitening the easterly streets of the metropolis, from all parts of the United Kingdom, they show like troops of the Shining Ones” (48). Here two traditional figures for chastity dovetail, though chastity in a Spenserian allegorical sense does not necessarily imply an absence of promissory sexuality. Nonetheless, the dominant anti-sensualism of Victorian culture, so often associated with dissenting protestant sects, would lead us to assume that the dress of a Quakeress would evoke admiration or curiosity rather than desire. However, the fancy-dress Quakeress manipulates the outward signs of modesty and chastity for a context in which reversals of meaning rule: the masquerade.

All of the six editions of Victorian commercial costumer Ardern Holt’s *Fancy Dresses Described* recommend outfitting as a Quakeress in a

Grey satin dress, touching the ground; short-waisted high bodice, open at the throat, with leg-of-mutton sleeves to wrist, and turn-back muslin cuffs; a plain hemmed muslin kerchief, neatly folded inside; a bonnet of the same satin as the dress, with a soft crown and stiff cardboard front; a plaited cap beneath, or a fine cambric cap, without the bonnet.8

No hair, ankle, or foot shows on the woman wearing this outfit; only the throat, face, and hands display bare skin. Perhaps only the costume nun is more completely covered, since her throat must also disappear. The well-known tradition of bawdy tales featuring wayward nuns attests to the erotic potential of a woman in a habit: a costumed Quakeress stimulates a similar response. To theorists and historians of costume such as Phillipe
Perrot, clothing ambivalently draws attention to covered body parts: “It reveals as it veils, and showcases the sexually charged body parts it conceals. . . . The very modesty for which it vouches suggests the fascination of what it covers” (12). This is not merely a twentieth-century insight: in Fictions of Modesty, Ruth Yeazell reiterates an observation often made by Victorians such as Westermarck, Darwin, and Spencer, that “one of the paradoxes of modesty is that the clothed body entices more than the naked one” (47). By this logic, practically the entire body of the scrupulously concealed woman inside the Quakeresses’ clothing becomes an erogenous zone. Out of the bared throat of the costume Quakeress emerges the most stimulating part of the performance, however. Anticipating the most striking trait of Dorothea Brooke, a masquerade Quakeress has a voice.

The first important literary appearance of a costume Quakeress, in Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, dramatizes spirited speech. Richardson sets the standard for later costume Quakeresses by emphasizing the discreet clothing that covers but does not conceal Pamela’s heavily pregnant body. The primness of Quaker garb suits the modest Pamela and provides a costume that can suitably contain (not hide) her obvious pregnancy (4: 94–95). Mr. B. chooses the costume for her, but Pamela finds it appropriate, for the figure of the Quakeress embodies a doubleness that is not duplicitous. No unwelcome contradiction or mixed message arises from the sight of a pregnant body clothed modestly, while appearing as a widow or a nun would certainly elicit ribaldry far beyond the few impolite remarks she endures. As Terry Castle notices in Masquerade and Civilization, many characters at the ball remark on Pamela’s pregnancy (160). Her state draws comments such as the disguised Countess’s flirtation with Mr. B.: “That fair Quaker yonder is the Wit of the Assemblee: Her Eyes seem always directed to thy Motions: And her Person shews some Intimacies have passed with somebody: Is it with thee?” (Richardson 4: 210). The costume of a Quakeress accommodates pregnancy and suggests the presence, somewhere, of a husband, albeit a susceptible one.

Castle’s interpretation of Pamela’s disguise emphasizes the contradictory meaning of Quaker costume on a pregnant body: “her costume both belies her sexualized nature and highlights it, creating an effect of visual oxymoron” (160). While the spectacle of advanced pregnancy indeed literalizes the carnivalesque double body, the garb of a Quakeress highlights the erotic nature within and presents not a contradiction, but a promise. For a maiden to wear the disguise of a Quakeress is perhaps even more risqué than for a matron, since the outward primness and plainness advertises the body on the inside. The Quakers’ terminology of “Inward Light” and the movement of the Spirit “within” emphasizes the sensations and actions occurring inside the body; their own way of describing spiritual matters lends itself to a worldly, fleshly interpretation. One of Pamela’s interlocutors subjects her to what appears to be a standard bit of jesting along these lines, asking “art thou come hither, Friend, to make thy Light shine before Men or Women?” (Richardson 4: 98). The garb of a Quakeress is flirtatious by implication, since it symbolizes an inward spiritedness that projects itself outwards, beyond the plain covering, referring back to the flesh within.

Pamela’s response to this challenge from a lady in a fantastic parti-colored habit underlines the appropriateness of her Quaker costume. Failing to anticipate the imputation of flirtatiousness Quaker garb calls up, she thoroughly inhabits the role and regards her pregnancy as no impediment. She intends not to flirt with men or preach to women, but “to look into the Minds of both Sexes, which I read in their Dresses” (4: 98). Turnabout
is fair play, however, and others focus on the body under the dress. When an “egregious beauish Appearance” accosts Pamela with the rude remark, “I hope, Friend, thou art prepared with a Father for the Light within thee?” he draws on the available stock of well-known Quaker terms in order to make a rather lame joke (4. 96). He has already insulted the costume Widow in a similar fashion, so his “barefac’d” allusion to the sexual nature of the Quakeress can be understood as a reference to a cliche — Quaker women, like widows, are experienced, not virginal. Pamela’s unconscious satire on the whole assembly draws everyone’s attention because she speaks in character (her objection to masquerades lies in the failure of others to act the parts they have assumed). Since Quaker women notoriously share the responsibility of ministry with men, the voice of the masquerade Quakeress is a vital part of her costume. Pamela’s success at the masquerade she detests depends on her ability to give little sermons and to respond wittily to others’ jests. Among the many debts that Charlotte Brontë owes to Richardson’s Pamela is Jane Eyre’s style of making direct, debunking, critical and plainspoken responses to Rochester’s remarks. As we will see, Jane Eyre not only dresses like a Quakeress, but she talks back like one.

Twenty years after Pamela’s debut as a costume Quakeress, young Fanny Burney, rather than feeling the burden of making spirited responses to potential interlocutors, fears the outfit will ensure a boring time at the masquerade. Burney’s comment reveals how predictable dressing up as a Quakeress has become: “I could think of no Character which I liked much, and could obtain; as to Nuns, Quakers, &c. (which I was much advised to) I cannot help thinking there is a gravity & extreme reserve required to support them, which would have made me necessarily so dull & stupid that I could not have met with much entertainment” (Burney 1: 98). However, Burney’s shyness at the party reveals her worries about having to act reserved in a different light: she has in fact misunderstood the convention of the costume. Luckily, a loquacious nun rescues her from social awkwardness by making Burney the object of raillery and exhortations, thus giving her a chance to act her part properly. Despite the fictional Pamela’s disapproval, actual masqueraders who dressed in outfits of the pious religious were clearly required to perform with improvisational gusto. The reported verbal performances at fancy dress balls emphasize the popular view of the paradoxical nature of Quaker behavior: as silent worshippers who spoke only when the Spirit moved them, costume Quakers and especially Quakeresses were expected to signify silence while they held forth. This part of the performance might even be reviewed in the popular press: in an account of Mrs. Cornelys’ masquerade at Carlisle House in 1770, the correspondent for Town and Country Magazine notes “many rich and many characteristic figures were to be found here. Among the most droll were, a preaching female Quaker, tolerably well sustained” (qtd. in Ribeiro 69). A lady dressed as a Quakeress assumed a role for performance.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century representations of costume Quakeresses and their real-world counterparts evoked contradictory meanings simultaneously: silent and yet spirited in speech, chaste and yet inspiring thoughts of sexuality. Throughout the Victorian period, plain Quaker clothing works as a double sign of demureness and passion, containing and covering a figure while clearly revealing its contours. Quakeresses emblematize nubile chastity rather than the perpetual virginity of nuns. Just as Quaker men are associated with trade, Quaker women are associated with husbands, children, and conjugal sexuality. A contemporary anecdote suggests the salacious Victorian image of
Quakeresses: a famous female preacher is "asked by a gentleman if the 'spirit' had ever inspired her with the thoughts of marriage, 'No, friend,' says she, 'but the flesh often has.'" The presence of this anecdote in the miscellaneous offerings of late-Victorian pornographic magazines the Pearl and the Boudoir emphasizes the erotic nature of the Quakeress — a woman moved by the spirit to speak plainly of the body.10 A second anecdote further emphasizes the flesh of the Quakeress:

A Papist and a Quaker travelling through a plain where a cross was erected, the Papist very devoutly bowed to it, which so inflamed the zeal of the honest Quaker, that he told the Papist with much indignation, "He might as well bow to the gallows, because they were both made of wood." To which the Papist replied, "Why, then, in way of salute, may not you as well kiss your wife's arse as well as her mouth, seeing that they are both made of the same material." (Boudoir 63)

The lips of the Quakeress in this anecdote and her voice in the former assert the presence of a sexual body under her dress. Not the forbidden body of the nun under the habit, but the desiring flesh of a nubile woman lies beneath the modest garb of the Quakeress. The addition of reforming characteristics to the Victorian image of the Quakeress (already latent in the image of Quakerish Pamela) depended upon a single illustrious individual, Mrs. Elizabeth Fry.

The Famous Mrs. Fry

Celebrated causes such as abolitionism and evangelical reforms made the Society of Friends, represented in Britain by Elizabeth Fry and John Bright, more prominent in the nineteenth century. In addition to the clichés about plain clothes and speech, Victorians would have known some of what follows about Quakers. Founded in England in the seventeenth century by George Fox (1624–1691), the Society of Friends was (and is) a radical pacifist Protestant sect with roots in the period of the English revolution. Their quaint-sounding thees and thous, and their practice of keeping hats on indoors derive from George Fox's determination to make no sign of obeisance to any man, including the monarch. Since they understand the spiritual life in entirely inward terms, they do not employ sacraments or other outward forms in worship. The doctrine of the Inward Light justifies Quakers' speech as the prompting of the Spirit. As any member may be "moved by the Spirit" to witness, all members at meeting for worship are potential ministers. Quaker women preached or spoke in meeting from the early days; in the early Victorian period, far more women ministers were recorded by their monthly meetings than men (Isichei 94). In the eighteenth century, Quakers developed the style of primarily silent worship and plain living that characterizes them in the popular imagination. They grew prosperous as tradesmen, bankers, and merchants, but the fervor of early Quakerism turned in the eighteenth century into more rigid practices and the sect became quietist theologically, and by extension, politically. In the nineteenth century, membership shrank until the 1860s, when the automatic disownment of Friends who married non-Quakers ceased. Their numbers grew only modestly towards the end of the Victorian period. Quakers' eschewing of sacraments (including baptism), their silent worship, and their extremely close-knit, well-to-do communities made conversion to membership in the Society of Friends as unusual as it was difficult
to achieve. Their insular communities meant that a typical Victorian would be unlikely to know any of only 16,000 Friends intimately.\footnote{11}

In the Victorian period, Quakers' views became better known through their activism in political and philanthropic reform. Between 1813, when she first visited the women prisoners in Newgate, and her death in 1845, Elizabeth Gurney Fry was the most famous Quaker in Great Britain. Her work with women prisoners in jails and on transportation ships, with the insane, the homeless, with those imprisoned on hulks, and with juvenile offenders made her an instantly recognizable icon of nineteenth-century philanthropic reform. In her distinctive plain clothes, Fry became the type of the saintly female reformer for Victorians, though her public work in fact ceased soon after Victoria ascended the throne. Harriet Beecher Stowe's representation in Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) of American Friends resisting the Fugitive Slave Law kept the idea of the philanthropic and rebellious Quaker woman fresh after Fry's death in 1845. As a result of Fry's fame, reforming and evangelizing speech became particularly associated with Quaker garb (even for non-Quakers, like the Methodist Dinah, in Adam Bede). Fry's image appeared in Christmas annuals, like Sarah Stickney Ellis's Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book, alongside portraits of royalty, military heroes, and public men, and her dress became the traditional outfit of plain Quaker women for half a century (Ellis facing page 49) (Figure 37). In 1901 the Quaker fashion-writer Amelia Mott Gummere refers to Elizabeth Fry's clothing as the model for "the beautiful gowns of our stately grandmothers" and as the dress "fixed in the public mind as the type of woman's Quaker costume" (177). The image and not the reality matters most here, for although Fry's clothes looked plain, simple, and sober, they were always made out of the best fabrics: the "Quaker shawl of brown silk that she wore as a famous prison reformer was lined with ermine" (Rose 35). More important than her actual clothing was the impact of Fry's bringing Quakerly discipline of dress to unruly members of the troubled society outside the Society of Friends.

When Fry first visited the women of Newgate in 1813, she found members of her own sex living in disorder. Thieves and prostitutes commingled in noisy, filthy, and irregularly heated quarters. In 1816 she commenced regular prison visiting and went on to form schools for juvenile delinquents, to reform lunatic asylums, and to establish homeless shelters. Fry's imposition of order on the chaotic women's prison relied upon the self-supervision of the group. Her first step, after reading Scripture aloud, was to get the women prisoners to establish their own rules for conduct. Fry urged the separation of female prisoners from men and the replacement of wardens with matrons, preferably widows who possessed "superior knowledge of the world and of life" (29). She emphasized the importance of having women supervise female prisoners, in part because she took a lively interest in pious women's usefulness, but also to prevent the abuse and further corruption of the female prisoners by male guards.

Fry's committee, the British Ladies' Society, began its work by making clothing for the naked and ill-clad children who were housed with their mothers in the prison. Clothing also became the most noticeable device by which Fry imposed order on the prisoners. Once tried and untried prisoners were separated from one another, Fry divided the prostitutes from "modest" women. Among the convicts, women who had committed crimes "of no deep moral dye" (Fry 34–37) were marked and rewarded with somewhat better clothing. Although Quaker women do not wear a uniform, the prison-dress regularized by Fry imitates the idealized costume of Quakeresses:
A regular prison dress for the tried prisoners, female as well as male, will be found an important aid to the purposes of prison discipline. It ought to be perfectly plain and simple, in some way distinguished from their usual apparel, and in the case of women, of such material as may be easily washed. Some advantage will also arise from distinguishing the
respective classes from each other, by some variety in the prison-dress — the dress of the prisoners in each class being of course a uniform.

Ear-rings, curled hair, and all sorts of finery and superfluity of dress, in tried female prisoners, must be absolutely forbidden; and the caps worn by them must be close, plain, and not of a transparent material. (60–61)

In its positive attributes as well as its prohibitions, Fry’s prescription for prison-dress adopts the standards of Quakers for plainness, difference from fashionable clothes, comfort, and decency. Fry’s discipline is also compassionate: her insistence on fires for the prisoners reminds us that the first purpose of the prison-dress is to keep the women warm, clean, and free of disease (62). The assumption of plain dress signified discipline to Fry in part because of her own conversion from a “gay” to a “plain” Friend. (As a girl Elizabeth Gurney wore scarlet boots with purple laces to meeting; as a woman Fry became the image of plain-clad benevolent lady at charitable work in the world.) The conversion of a personal style into an institutional uniform confirms fashion historian Diana Crane’s insight that uniforms ironically “reinforced social class differences at a time when changes in other types of clothing were beginning to diminish them” (239). With Fry herself modeling the outfit, Quakerish dress comes to mean the reform, through philanthropy, of women of a criminal class by a society of plain ladies.

Disciplinary Dress in the Society of Friends

BY THE LAST QUARTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, when the standard Quakeress’s garb was available in costume-shops like Debenham and Freebody’s, unfortunate women and girls in charitable institutions or prisons and costumed ladies at masquerade balls were virtually the only ones left wearing the formulaic Quaker outfit. As actual Quakers’ distinctive dress became less common and then disappeared, its donning by non-Quakers continued to convey erotically and socially charged meanings. As we have seen, ordinary Victorian Quakers did not control the meaning of their garb for the culture around them, no more than nineteenth-century Judaism determined the entire significance of representations of the Jewess. How, then, did Victorians see members of the Society of Friends?

An 1852 essay in the Westminster Review demonstrates how the popular image of Quakers was conditioned by their clothing. W. E. Forster’s article “The Early Quakers and Quakerism” provides a series of magic-lantern images:

Let us imagine a Quaker . . . and the chances are, we shall see no definite picture, but a series of dissolving views; at one time a sleek portly personage cased in the best of broadcloth, his eyes peeping slily out from under his beaver, his stiff upper lip frowning down on a snow-white neckcloth, a heavy dragoon armed to the teeth for the field of bargain making. At another time a wild dreamy-eyed fanatic, testifying against the priest in his “steeple-house,” and refusing “hat honour” to the “creature,” even though he be the judge on his bench or the Queen on the throne; now an Elizabeth Fry chanting forth words of comfortable counsel to haggard Magdalens and staring prisoners. . . . Or, if we be a protectionist squire trampling down our hereditary clods, likelier still the image flitting before our fancy will be a John Bright, hounding on the canaille to an inroad on our broad acres. Which then, is the true Quaker, the real Simon Pure? (593–94)
Despite Forster’s admiration for the “slave emancipation, prison reforms, Irish famine relief funds, and other effective philanthropies” (593) accomplished by Quakers, his fascination with members of the sect is rooted in their odd clothing and the reaction it elicits:

Nor will the eccentricity of the Quaker’s dress and address have been without its effect on our estimate of his character . . . . very likely we have in our memories the indignant scorn with which in our schooldays we used to view those queer-dressed strange-talking little Friends, with their stumpy hats and strait collars and demure gait, and how if our papas and mammas brought us up too properly to allow us to fling barley at them and cry “Quack, quack,” we more than half envied those that did. (595)

Like the Amish or Hasidic Jews in our day, nineteenth-century Quakers employed what fashion historian Elizabeth Wilson calls “oppositional fashion,” a practice expressing “the dissent or distinctive ideas of a group” (184). By setting themselves apart from their worldly contemporaries, Quakers invested their distinctive speech and dress with symbolic values vigorously debated within the Society of Friends. That debate, revolving around issues of internal discipline and outward reputation, contributes to our understanding of the complicated and contested meaning of Quaker garb for Victorian Quakers.

Within the Society of Friends, plain dress had always possessed a disciplinary function. George Fox warned against ornaments and changes in dress indicating awareness of worldly fashions. In the nineteenth century, Friends still followed Fox’s interpretation of Scripture, which emphasized the injury to the mind incurred by a lustful eye stimulated by decorations, particularly those worn by women. Encoding Friends’ responsibilities to perpetuate their plain style of Christianity, the Fourth Query inquires, “Do friends endeavour by example and precept to train up their children, servants, and those under our care . . . in plainness of speech, behaviour, and apparel?” (London Yearly Meeting 1834, 217). The Fourth Query articulates not only Quaker tradition, but also shows Friends’ corporate effort to ensure the continuation of practices that set them apart from other Christians.

A sympathetic early nineteenth-century account of Quakerism by Thomas Clarkson conveys the state of Fox’s views on the verge of the Victorian period. Both men and women wore plain dress and members could not dress themselves “preposterously” without “coming under the authority of friendly and wholesome admonition” (Clarkson 1: 270). Quakers used their principle of plain dress (always allowing for decency and comfort) to regulate the behavior of the younger generation:

any such deviation in their youth is considered to show, in some measure, a deviation from simplicity of heart. It bespeaks the beginning of an unstable mind. It shows there must have been some improper motive for the change. Hence it argues a weakness in the deviating persons, and points them out as objects to be strengthened by wholesome admonition. (Clarkson 1: 285)

Unchecked changes like these would not only signify the youths’ susceptibility to the “despotism” of fashion, but would lead to worldliness and ultimate disownment. In a parental logic similar to that of Reefer Madness, Friends observed that among their
Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestication of Reform

reprobate young people “the commencement of a long process in irregularity may often be traced to a deviation from the simplicity of their dress” (Clarkson 1: 286). Plain dress was an extremely effective device of social control to impose on young people, for a Quaker youth could not appear at a race, a cock-fight, or a public house without attracting attention: “His clothes would betray him” (Clarkson 1: 287). Further, deviance from plain dress implied degeneracy and dissipation. It was a small step from a bright buckle to marrying out of meeting. Ironically, the same world that Quakers sought to avoid by their dress, they relied upon to police their young people. Clarkson observes, “the dress, . . . by distinguishing the members of the Society, and making them known as such to the world, makes the world overseers, as it were, of their moral conduct” (1: 286). This had a paradoxically liberating effect for Quaker women. Less likely to require supervision by the world, Quakeresses gained more freedom in the world, safely traveling as ministers and practicing charity outside the home.

Quaker women moving in public stood out from their contemporaries. Thomas DeQuincy registers both the attractiveness and the prophylactic powers of Quaker women’s dress when he comments:

In a nation eminent for personal purity, and where it should seem beforehand impossible for any woman to create a pre-eminence for herself in that respect; so it is, however, that the female Quaker, by her dress, seems even purer than other women, and consecrated to a service of purity; earthly soil or taint, even the sullying breath of mortality, seems as if kept aloof from her person — forcibly held in repulsion by some protecting sanctity. This transcendent purity, and a nun-like gentleness, self-respect, and sequestration from the world — these are all that her peculiarity of dress expresses; and surely this “all” is quite enough to win every man’s favourable feelings towards her, and something even like homage. (148)

The clothing that Quaker women wore, or were imagined to wear, always signified the presence of a woman who could be preternaturally still and silent, and keep aloof from worldly concerns, but who could also travel and speak in public, if the Spirit moved her. The “service to purity” DeQuincy reads in Quaker women’s clothing has a practical counterpart in the benevolent charity work that enabled Quaker women to move more freely in the world than non-Quaker women, and to command the “homage” of non-Quaker men. The reprinting of DeQuincy’s comment in an 1855 issue of the Ladies Companion, and Monthly Magazine, a journal devoted in significant part to the dissemination of Paris fashions, suggests the existence of an alternative style in dress, one that was also less expensive to maintain (“Honeycomb” 109). One can imagine that the Victorian women who read ladies’ magazines might have enjoyed looking at the pictures of impractical fancy dresses, while actually wearing simpler styles, also sanctioned by the same magazine.

By the time this 1855 fashion magazine endorses Quaker style by reprinting DeQuincey’s comment, actual Friends were getting ready to abandon their “peculiarities” in dress. Comparison of the Victorian editions of the Books of Discipline reveals the official (consensual) alterations in the Fourth Query, while the articles and correspondence in the Friend, the evangelical Quaker journal,13 reveal the lineaments of the controversy. In 1849 the Society of Friends’ Book of Discipline emphasized the importance of their distinctive
dress and plain speech by revising the order of the phrases in the Fourth Query,14 and by reasserting the full testimony that plainness gives “against the flattery, pride, and untruth, which had, and still have, so largely insinuated themselves into the established customs, and the changing fashions of the world” (London Yearly Meeting 1849, 378). By this time, correspondents in the Friend had begun to raise objections to the observance of peculiarities for their own sake. Quakers worried that young Friends adopted one style for the world and another for going to meeting. Despite editorial warnings about the triviality of the issue, the Friend printed a young woman’s argument in favor of plainness in dress in 1848, suggesting that the practice already needed defending. Mary Fletcher wrote that plainness rebuked pride and worldliness, aided in meekness, and saved time and money. She added that she had more fun doing for others than dressing up; to practical minded objectors, she averred that God would help her out in the marriage market (185).

In the 1850s, when Harriet Beecher Stowe’s depiction of the benevolent Hallidays in her bestseller Uncle Tom’s Cabin reinforced the association of goodness and Quaker dress, English Quakers considered seriously for the first time abandoning the dress that, in Stowe’s words, “showed at once the community to which [they] belonged” (215; ch. 13). Outwardly visible signs cut both ways, however. In his 1843 The Kingdom of Christ, F. D. Maurice had written that a man of the world would be struck “that though [Quakers] have none of these indications, they have others which seem to him not less outward and visible. They have no fixed form of prayer, but they have a fixed form of dress; they have rejected sacraments, but they retain a particular kind of language” (72). Stung by this attack on the hypocrisy of maintaining outwardly visible peculiarities (while claiming to eschew outward signs) and suspicious of the quietist emphasis on a spiritual inheritance that might be seen as inhering in outward practices, evangelical Quakers worried that plain dress ought not to become a test of Christian principle. Quakers also fretted that the Society would fall apart without the peculiarities (Friends at this time were very concerned about shrinking membership). While some Friends felt that plain speech and dress impeded the success of their peace testimony, others strenuously defended the usefulness of looking different from everyone else. One 1853 correspondent in the Friend argued not only that plain dress made card-players abashed, oath-swearers silent, Quaker youths reluctant to go to the playhouse, and Quakeresses safe in the streets, but that North American Indians seeking peace and fugitive slaves fleeing the bloodhounds relied upon recognizable Quaker garb for their very lives (“A Convinced Friend’s View of Dress” 129). Not coincidentally, American Quakers took significantly longer to abandon the distinctive dress that bespoke their honored abolitionist principles.15

In 1857, Birmingham philanthropist and radical Joseph Sturge proposed to make the peculiarities optional, and controversy raged in the correspondence columns of the Friend. After much breast-beating about hypocrisy and hair tearing about wayward young people, Victorian Friends agreed that the spirit of Christianity mattered more than adherence to an antiquated standard of dress and speech. In 1860, they revised the Fourth Query to read, “Are friends careful to maintain a religious life and conversation, consistent with our Christian profession; and do those who have children or others under their care endeavour, by example and precept, to train them up in accordance therewith?” (London Yearly Meeting 1861, 183). All references to plain speech and dress vanished.16 This change was not achieved without a struggle, since Friends then and now await the consensus to which they believe the Spirit will lead them, but an 1862 wrap-up on “Early Principles and
Modern Practices” of dress admits that convenient though it is to be instantly recognizable as a Friend, to “sit quiet in the dress of a Friend” is an easier, but more chilling mode of declaring our creed, than by earnest words offered to the wayfarers of daily life” ([W. C. W.] 22). Evangelicalism, far from endorsing the prim, plain clothing of Quaker tradition, actually motivated Victorian Friends to abandon their peculiarities of dress.

The Quakerish Clothing of Victorian Heroines

In novels, references to clothing encode information about attractiveness and unattractiveness; success and failure; social status and self-image. Victorian novelistic representation also lingers on details of dress in order to communicate erotic information to knowing readers. In the words of fashion historian Anne Hollander, fashion that “plays on the dialectic of dress and body. . . . is in itself erotically expressive, whether or not it emphasizes sex” (Seeing 85). This is not an exclusively post-Freudian insight. As Sir Walter Scott has it, violation of sumptuary rules in his imaginary medieval past of Ivanhoe (1820) resembles “a quaker beauty of the present day, who, while she retains the garb and costume of her sect, continues to give to its simplicity, by the choice of materials and the mode of disposing them, a certain air of coquettish attraction, savouring but too much of the vanities of the world” (35; ch. 2). Anthony Trollope’s novel Marion Fay (1881–82) embodies the erotic expressiveness of Quaker dress, through formulaic allusions to its attractiveness to men. In the novel, an aristocratic young gentleman, Lord Hampstead, falls in love with Marion Fay, a lovely middle-class Quakeress (Figure 38). Trollope represents Marion’s charms in a detailed description of her clothing: “The close brown bonnet and the little cap, and the well-made brown silk dress, and the brown gloves on her little hands, together made, to his eyes, as pleasing a female attire as a girl could well wear. Could it have been by accident that the graces of her form were so excellently shown?” (118; ch. 15). The possibility of Marion’s manipulation of Quaker dress to her advantage occurs not only to a skeptical neighbor who “can see when a girl has made herself up for some special occasion” (116; ch. 15), but to the narrator, who remarks satirically that “It had to be supposed that she, as a Quaker, was indifferent to outward female garniture. It was the theory of a Quaker that she should be so” (118; ch. 15). The irony here does double duty, as Trollope invokes both the young woman’s interest in “female garniture” against her “theoretical” Quaker beliefs, and also the observing man’s pleasure in viewing the Quakeress’s self-suppressing but attractive style of dress. Jealousy and suspicion of Marion reach a fever pitch when Lord Hampstead proposes marriage, for the threat of the Pamela plot retains its force when the heroine in question is an actual middle-class Quakeress. However, Trollope intends no ascent to higher rank for the Quakeress who reforms the hearts of her upper-class detractors by saying “no.” Conveniently, Marion falls fatally ill.

Marion rejects Hampstead — whom she loves — on the grounds that her consumption will only bring him grief. The dying Quakeress wonders aloud what made the Lord fall in love with her — “The beauty of your brow and eyes, — the softness of your woman’s voice?” suggests her friend, “Nay,” says Marion Fay, acutely diagnosing the Victorian obsession with her type, “I think it was my Quaker dress” (202; ch. 25). Thus Trollope invokes and preserves the erotic promise of Quaker dress, though by the time Marion Fay was published, the sight of an actual Quakeress in her characteristic dress would have been

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Figure 38. William Small, "'You will give me your hand, Marion.' She gave it to him, and he covered it with kisses." Illustration from Anthony Trollope, Marion Fay, in Graphic (18 February 1882), 161.
extremely uncommon in the British Isles. A decade earlier, the Westminster Review considered the Society of Friends for the second time in twenty-five years, lamenting the passing of Quakers, whose “distinguishing customs and peculiarities could not survive in the atmosphere of the nineteenth century” (“Quakerism” 318). The 1875 article regrets “that a Quakeress may now be a very good Quakeress under a pile of lace and jewelry” (“Quakerism” 321) and refers to the sect as extinct. Trollope’s 1881–82 rendering of the dying Quakeress in her irresistible clothing represents the vanishing old-fashioned Quaker in another eroticized figure, the virginal consumptive. The Quakeress’s clothing still attracts, but the woman inside the outfit effects reform only by shaming the aristocrats who unjustly suspect her of tuft hunting. Marion Fay’s class-crossing marriage plot is defused by Trollope’s nostalgic commemoration of the traditional erotic meaning of Quakerish dress.

In Middlemarch, Eliot divides the traits of Quakerishness between Will Ladislaw and Dorothea Brooke, justifying in advance Dorothea’s downward mobility in her union with Ladislaw. Though Dorothea makes her first appearances in austere clothing, the strongest erotic associations with Quakerishness are delayed until Dorothea’s and Will Ladislaw’s plots cross in Rome. In the beginning of the novel, meanings of self-differentiation, social class, and a penchant for reform all inhere in Dorothea’s Quakerish style. Eliot dresses Dorothea Brooke in plain clothes that throw her virginal beauty into relief (7; ch. 1). At the start of “Miss Brooke,” Dorothea’s dress matches her austere religion, in which she takes pleasure in giving things up. Her simple clothing suggests self-consciousness, the narrator later divulges: Dorothea is “under a vow to be different from all other women” (363; ch. 37), although Eliot makes it clear that the more worldly sister Celia wears “scarcely more trimmings” (7; ch. 1). Dorothea’s plain dress also makes obvious her respectable, “though not exactly aristocratic” background as a member of an old county family:

Young women of such birth, living in a quiet country-house, and attending a village church hardly larger than a parlour, naturally regarded frippery as the ambition of a huckster’s daughter. Then there was well-bred economy, which in those days made show in dress the first item to be deducted from, when any margin was required for expenses more distinctive of rank. (7; ch. 1)

While Celia consolidates a county alliance at the appropriate social level by marrying Sir James Chettam, Dorothea fulfills her desire to be different, in Middlemarch terms, by downward mobility: “she was spoken of to a younger generation as a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin — young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born” (837–38; Finale). As in Adam Bede, Eliot associates her Quakerish heroine with reforming impulses (Dorothea plans to build model cottages for tenants), but steers her from a public to a personal expression of that desire. Dorothea’s contribution to the “growing good of the world” will express itself not in public reforms, but through private, domestic “unhistoric acts” carried out for the benefit of family and friends (838; Finale). Dorothea ends up not building better cottages, but diffusely reforming those in her domestic circle. In order to effect this conclusion, Eliot weds Dorothea to
a man who removes her from Middlemarch to a “hidden life” where the “fine issues” of her “finely-touched spirit” will not be “widely visible” (838; Finale).

Dorothea’s clothing plays an important part in this story, for Eliot uses Quakerishness to highlight Dorothea’s marriageable self and to establish the rightness, in spiritual and erotic terms, of her union with Will Ladislaw. The first step in this process occurs when Eliot frames the nubile Dorothea in Quaker grey after her marriage with Casaubon. In chapter 19 in “Old and Young,” Eliot returns to Dorothea’s story by depicting the approach of Will Ladislaw and his friend the German painter Naumann upon a pensive girl who stands near a voluptuous marble statue (the Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra). Next to this near nakedness they see Dorothea,

a breathing blooming girl, whose form, not shamed by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish grey drapery; her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair. (189; ch. 19)

In this scene the painter Naumann reads “a fine bit of antithesis” that works less perfectly than he wishes because Dorothea is not a nun:

There lies antique beauty, not corpse-like even in death, but arrested in the complete contentment of its sensuous perfection: and here stands beauty in its breathing life, with the consciousness of Christian centuries in its bosom. But she should be dressed as a nun; I think she looks almost what you call a Quaker; I would dress her as a nun in my picture. However, she is married! (189; ch. 19)

The irony the reader comes to appreciate in Naumann’s distinction between the nun and the married Quakerish woman lies in this fact — although Dorothea may indeed represent “sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion,” at this moment on her honeymoon she is probably still a virgin, due to Casaubon’s implied impotence.

Whether we join with the detractors or defenders of Will Ladislaw, Eliot clearly invests in him an erotic charge that will fulfill Dorothea after her release from marriage by the desiccated Casaubon’s death. The first hint of attraction on her part occurs when Ladislaw visits her apartment in Rome. To Dorothea’s consciousness Eliot attributes this observation of Ladislaw’s glowing smile: “it was a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes” (205; ch. 21). The phraseology of “inward light” comes straight out of the language of Quaker spirituality. Eliot reverses the typical pattern of male onlooker appreciating Quakerish woman in this intense scene of unrestricted mutual gazing, and emphasizes the desire that even the most austerecl clad woman may feel. To Quakerish Dorothea, trapped in the enclosed basin of her marital voyage, this “gush of inward light” proves irresistible.

We have already seen how Dinah’s Quakerish clothing in Adam Bede connects in different ways to her preaching, to her reform of wayward women (Bessy and Hetty), to Adam’s rise in social status, and to her own marriageable self. Dorothea’s role in Middlemarch recapitulates many of Dinah’s traits, but Dorothea’s Quakerishness is ultimately more psychological than social. Though Dinah helps Adam rise and Dorothea is felt to
descend, the Quakerish dress worn by both women ameliorates the changes in status by deflecting attention away from disturbances in class rank to the private satisfactions implied by marriage with Quaker-like women of uncharted libidinal depths.

Since Quakers were invariably middle-class and often well-to-do (bankruptcy being a cause for disgrace and disownment), Quakerish dress announces aspirations to respectability, especially when donned by a borderline case such as Jane Eyre. As Valerie Steele observes in *Fashion and Eroticism*, “the element of gentility or respectability was part of a woman's sexual arsenal” (133). Charlotte Brontë deliberately exploits this paradox, emphasizing Jane Eyre’s body and her sexuality by having her comment on her respectable, modest clothing. The Quakerishness of Jane Eyre bespeaks her self-consciousness about her appearance. She refers in no-nonsense fashion to her clothing, in scenes of self-examination, as “Quaker-like” (99; v. 1, ch. 11) or as her “usual Quaker trim” (130; v. 1, ch. 14). At first Quakerishness allows Jane to place herself in class terms, for her Quaker-like black frock allows her to appear in a respectable guise before the eyes of Mrs. Fairfax. Unornamented, clean, neat, and plain, Jane’s dress claims respectability and a certain distance from the servants. Strangely, it also indicates Jane’s ultimate acceptance of the hypocritical Reverend Brocklehurst’s precept that girls of Jane Eyre’s dependent situation should be taught to “clothe themselves with shamefacedness and sobriety, not with braided hair and costly apparel” (65; v. 1, ch. 7). If Brocklehurst’s establishment teaches Jane Eyre one of Elizabeth Fry’s disciplinary lessons, the young inmate of Lowood School also learns that the guise of respectability will ease her way as she negotiates the tricky social terrain of governessing. In this sense, Quakerish clothes induce amnesia about the wearer’s background, for who is to say whether the modest, lady-like garb clothes a resident of a country estate, an inmate of Lowood School, or of Fry’s reformed Newgate Prison? Superficial respectability levels these distinctions.

As a signifier of class, Jane’s clothes do their job. When Rochester meets her for the first time, on the road outside Thornfield, he says, “You are not a servant at the hall, of course” (115; v. 1, ch. 12), running his eye over her dress. Jane looks like a lady, if not a fashionably dressed one. This is a vital element of self-presentation in a potentially discomforting situation; for a governess, plainness and neatness are first and foremost intended to indicate her respectability to other women (99; v. 1, ch. 11). Yet Jane also conveys that she is not “disregardful of the impression” her plainly clad body makes. She wishes “to please as much as [her] want of beauty would permit” (99; v. 1, ch. 11). In other words, her neat, form-fitting dress draws attention to the nice little body that makes up for her unbeautiful face, without interfering with the impression of middle-class respectability. Even when Jane appears to be on the verge of a rise in the world (through marriage to Rochester, her employer), she rejects his plan to dress her up. Jane rebukes him with words that correct his vision of her class as well as her personal style (261; v. 2, ch. 9). Fleeing Rochester after his immoral designs are revealed, Jane discovers that her clothes make her an unsuccessful beggar, arousing suspicion rather than charity. In the Rivers’ household where she finds sanctuary, however, the clothes Jane removes assert her respectability to the ladies who have taken her in.

While Jane’s Quaker-like black frock signifies her social respectability, it also mitigates her insecurity about her looks by “fitting to a nicety”: “I desired to be tall, stately, and finely developed in figure; I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked. And why had I these aspirations and these regrets?
It would be difficult to say: I could not then distinctly say it to myself; yet I had a reason, and a logical, natural reason, too” (99; v. 1, ch. 11). The reason is a nascent consciousness of desire. Robert James Merrett interprets Jane’s references to her Quaker-like clothing as “deprecating” her appearance and suggesting a tendency towards self-mortification (4). On the contrary, Jane’s references to her clothing emphasize those aspects of her person with which she has reason to be satisfied. The close-fitting neatness of her “usual Quaker trim” displays Jane’s figure and symbolizes her unflappable personality: “there was nothing to retouch — all being too close and plain, braided locks included, to admit of disarrangement” (130; v. 1, ch. 14). After Rochester kisses her, Jane alters her dress without changing her style: “I took a plain but clean and light summer dress from my drawer and put it on: it seemed no attire had ever so well become me; because none had I ever worn in so blissful a mood” (260; v. 2, ch. 9). The bliss of the body inside the clothing makes any plain clean garment becoming.

As does Eliot’s Adam Bede, Jane Eyre contrasts alternative versions of attractiveness. Blanche Ingram and Adele wear clothing more overtly demonstrative of the desire to attract men’s attention, but Jane’s disapproval of gaudier fashions does not mean that she dislikes her own appearance. When Rochester makes Jane his fiancée, she struggles against his intention to dress her up like a doll. At the silk warehouse Rochester wants half-a-dozen dresses made; Jane insists on two. He picks the colors — amethyst and pink, but she barters him back to her regular Quaker-like hues, “sober black satin and pearl-grey silk.” When Jane Eyre enjoins Rochester to come back to earth and abandon his fantasy of dressing her up in diamond chains, bracelets and rings, she demands, “Don’t address me as if I were a beauty: I am your plain, Quakerish governess” (261; v. 2, ch. 9). By contrasting her style with that of a jewel-bedecked beauty, Jane emphasizes the alternative standard of attractiveness evidently felt by Rochester in the first place. The attempt to control Rochester’s gaze by reference to one of the meanings of her plain — not beautiful — clothing not so covertly reminds him of its other valences: a Quakerish woman is a good, outspoken, and physical person. Jane Eyre’s rebuke redirects Rochester’s attention from her face to the body contained in Quakerish clothing.

In the midst of their argument about clothes, Rochester exclaims that he would not trade “this one little English girl for the grand Turk’s whole seraglio” (271; v. 2, ch. 9). When Jane protests Rochester’s (metaphorically) polygamous desires, we find the figure of the reforming Elizabeth Fry written over an allusion to the Arabian Nights. (At this point Jane is innocent of Rochester’s bigamous designs.) Jane responds, “I’ll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio ... so don’t consider me an equivalent for one” (271; v. 2, ch. 9). Should Rochester prefer to purchase sexual slaves, Jane takes a Quakerish stance, both abolitionist and prison-reformer:

‘I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved — your Harem inmates amongst the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny; and you ... shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands: nor will I, for one, consent to cut your bonds till you have signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred.’ (272; v. 2, ch. 9)

Of course, when Jane realizes the truth about Rochester’s real prisoner, the madwoman in the attic, she does not preach liberty to Bertha Mason, nor does she feel sisterly
solidarity. The misunderstood jailer Grace Poole (whom Jane unjustly describes as possessing the hypocritical "demureness of a Quakeress" [157; v. 2, ch. 1]) is the novel's closest substitute for an Elizabeth Fry. In this novel the prisoner is not reformed — Bertha burns the jail down. The Quakerish governness who takes her place finds fulfillment not in missionary work with St. John Rivers, but in marriage to Rochester, the madwoman's reformed warden. Again the pattern asserts itself: temporarily associated with reformist impulses until their class-crossing plots come to crisis points, Quaker-clad heroines are rewarded with sexual fulfillment, motherhood, and the satisfactions of the domestic sphere.

Neither Dorothea Brooke nor Jane Eyre is a "real" Quakeress. Brontë and Eliot adopt the signs of what cultural critic Fred Davis calls "minority group disidentification" (180) not to communicate theological positions, but to manipulate their readers' association of Quakerishness with class-boundary crossing, the potential of women to effect reform, and a respectable kind of erotic promise. In Fashion, Culture and Identity, Davis hypothesizes that "even diluted borrowings of minority group and subculture antifashions by mainstream social groups can help further a democratization of social relations" (182), a utopian view borne out by the leveling love-plots of both Middlemarch and Jane Eyre. Quakerish dress can ease the way towards alliances across class boundaries, at least for already respectable characters. The erotic meanings of Quaker-like clothing underscores what Valerie Steele, in Fashion and Eroticism, argues about the "so-called Victorian or respectable sexual ideology." It existed more as a "prescriptive ideal" than as a practice reflected in the dress of the Victorian woman, whose "clothing proclaimed that she was a sexually attractive woman" (100-01).

Jane Eyre, like actual Victorian women, knows that a woman does not have to be dressed like a fashion plate to appear attractive to men. The Ladies Pocket Magazine opines in 1833 under the headline "Simplicity in Dress,"

This is, like modesty of manners, the husband of grace. Gorgeous ornaments distract the imagination of the observer; and the wearer, like the silk-worm, is hid amid her own magnificence. But a decent garb, adjusted to the elegant contour of the human form, concealing those beauties that would obtrusively force themselves upon our observation, and harmonizing with a virtuous mind — this is the dress which, combined with a modest demeanour, is more attractive than the cestus of Venus. (19)

A virtuous woman may dress in a way that emphasizes the "elegant contours" of her form, focusing the imagination of her observer on her covered body; she may even appear "more attractive" than the opulently dressed. That the disciplinary functions and underlying eroticism of clothing can coexist and reinforce one another is amply demonstrated in the Victorian novel.

Victorian fictional worlds, notoriously constrained in the frankness of their representation, use their readers' habit of fleshing out rich contexts from descriptive details to call up the social and sexual associations of something so apparently innocuous as clothing. As John Kucich argues, a restrained surface often suggests psychological depth. The Victorian novel does not lack depth, of course; it permits access to the imagined consciousnesses of fictional characters, through either the first person of Jane Eyre, or through the combination of psychonarration and narrated monologue typically employed in third-
person novels such as *Middlemarch*. Both strategies enhance the effect of psychological realism of character, even in novels driven by romance plots. Yet brief references to surface appearances convey vital social, contextual, and behavioral information to the reader familiar with the nineteenth-century meaning of Quakerish garb. Brontë, Eliot, and Trollope need only to invoke this clothing in order to call upon a set of well-known ideas about the sexuality and unruliness of the paradoxically plain Quakeress. Restrained Quakerish clothing on the outside of characters only enhances the impression of libidinal depth, even as it provides in an economical code the instructions for dressing, and placing, a reforming female character in the mind’s eye and in the domestic sphere. We miss Victorian novelists’ broad hints if we read Quakerish clothing as signifying the lack of class status, and the absence or denial of sexual feelings.

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NOTES

1. See, for instance, Federico 31.
2. For a summary of this view, see Adams 127. See also Steele, who traces the origins of the myth of Victorian prudery. Steele attributes to middle-class evangelicalism a “tone of increased sexual, social, and sartorial repressiveness” (100). Maynard’s 1984 bibliographic essay makes an excellent starting point for the study of this topic before and after Foucault.
3. It is not the purpose of this essay to mention all or even most of the nineteenth-century representations of Quakers, but I owe thanks to those who helped me discover many more fictional Quakers than I discuss in these pages: Elizabeth Bolton, Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, Ian Duncan, Lisa First, Elizabeth Fowler, Abigail Rishin, John Rogers, Katherine Rowe, Donald Smith, Paula Smith, Herbert Tucker, and to all the correspondents on the VICTORIA listserv who replied to my query. Thanks also to Linda Peterson for her suggestions about an early draft. Thanks to John Blackburn for his assistance in preparing the illustrations for this essay.
4. See Lee-Whitman.
5. In contrast, Aunt Samuel (Eliot’s original for Dinah) leaves off her vehement preaching only when old age and delicate health prevent her “exhorting and remonstrating in season and out of season” (“George Eliot’s History of Adam Bede,” *Adam Bede*, Appendix I, 586).
6. See Adams 131–32. Adams notes that marriage is “the one arena in which sexual activity is not merely licensed but encouraged — a fact stressed more obliquely in the large families that populate so much Victorian fiction” (132).
7. The historian Isichei observes that “the ministry offered a magical escape, for an able woman, from the narrow confines of domesticity. It enabled her to speak in public, and travel abroad, with the approval, indeed the deference, of her co-religionists. Their families often suffered in consequence — it is probably no coincidence that most of the children of famous ministers, such as Anna Brathwaite and Elizabeth Fry, grew up permanently estranged from Quakerism” (95).
8. 1st and 2nd editions, 71; 3rd and 4th editions, 117; 5th edition, 189; 6th edition, 212. When eighteenth-century masqueraders dressed up as Quakeresses, they employed formulaic costumes whose conventions diverged from the dress of actual Friends. Real and imitation Quakeresses kept pace with changes in fashion through the nineteenth century. They simply looked plainer (Gummere 220). The Victorian costume Quakeress invariably wears grey or black, although these colors were not the only appropriate hues for actual Quaker garb. The
Quaker poetess Mary Howitt reports that her mother's dresses were “of a dark colour, mostly some shade of brown” (1: 68) and describes herself, in girlhood, in her “unusually plain Quaker garb,” as “no better to look at than a little brown chrysalis” (1: 81). An inveterate observer of women, Anthony Trollope gets it right when he describes Marion Fay's Quaker garb in his 1881-82 novel of that title — she dresses not in grey, but in brown silk. The grey favored by Jane Eyre is on its way in by 1821, when Howitt was married in her first silk gown: “a very pretty dove-colour — with bonnet of the same material, and a soft white silk shawl” (Howitt 1: 113) The typical outfit of grey with white collar and bonnet described by the costumer Ardern Holt does not become fixed until the nineteenth century. The outline (or silhouette) of Quakeresses' clothing also changed with the times. In the first fifteen years of the nineteenth century, when fashion dictated classical garments of the thinnest, body-revealing muslin, Quaker women appeared more modest in their body-concealing clothes (Gummere 165–85). By the mid-nineteenth century, Quaker women's dress was relatively more form fitting than some of the most extravagant distensions of the fashionable female form made possible by crinolines, hoop skirts, and bustles. The woman's body beneath Quaker garb then shows relatively more natural contours, as Jane Eyre's pride in her clothing’s “fitting to a nicety” hints (Brontë 99).

9. Elizabeth Fry, the most prominent Quakeress of the period, often carried out her work in prisons, on convict ships, abroad on the continent and in committees while visibly pregnant.

10. The version quoted appears in the Boudoir, where the remark is attributed to Mrs. Drummond (64). See the similar anecdote in the Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading 9 (March 1880) 310. The Pearl names John Bright, the English Quaker Prime Minister, as the interlocutor.

11. For a concise modern history of Quakerism, see Punshon. Isichei discusses membership figures on pages 111–43.

12. Unlike most other Christians, Quakers do not have a creed, but they answer in quarterly meetings a set of Queries concerning faith and practice. (Queries of particular relevance to Victorian Quakers included those regarding opposition to paying church-rates, bearing arms, smuggling, and slavery.) The Queries appear in the London Yearly Meeting’s Books of Discipline; because the titles vary by edition, I refer to this series of texts by their everyday name. (1802 Book of Discipline 143); compare women’s Third Query (1802 Book of Discipline 145).

13. The evangelical journal the Friend represented the more activist wing of Victorian Quakerism. In it, agitation for change is sympathetically recorded. The full run of the Victorian numbers of the journal was consulted for this article.

14. “Do Friends endeavour by example and precept to train up their children, servants, and those under their care, in a religious life and conversation; in plainness of speech, behaviour, and apparel; and in other respects consistently with our Christian profession?” (London Yearly Meeting 1849, 380). The corresponding Women’s query did not change from 1834’s wording (London Yearly Meeting 1849, 382).

15. The meaning of Quaker dress in nineteenth-century American literature differs from its meaning in English literature, in part because Nathaniel Hawthorne uses Quakers to represent the victims of the colonial Puritans' persecution. In Hawthorne's story “The Gentle Boy,” the persecuted Quaker woman's ragged clothing underlines her role as a prophet in the wilderness.

16. Although clearly vestigial in this edition, the women’s Queries retain phrasing that might still be interpreted as referring to apparel (London Yearly Meeting 1861, 186). In 1875, the Sixth Query addresses both male and female Friends on avoiding conformity to the world (London Yearly Meeting 1875, 227–32).

17. See Irwin 86–106.
18. As fashion historian Crane argues, clothing permitted nineteenth-century people with a way to claim social status “in societies where small gradations in social status were taken seriously” (238). Victorian Quakers were firmly associated with business success, honesty, and respectability. See Walvin. Quakers’ public image remained “middle-class” even though additions to the membership of the Society of Friends almost always came from the working-class. Access to Quaker schools helped the children of artisans blend in. See Isichei 129–32, 172–73.

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