# Dobbin's Corduroys: Sartorial Display and Modes of Masculinities in William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*[1]

With the decline of what Carlyle calls "the old ideal of Manhood" based on rank ("Characteristics" 927), early Victorians feel the need to refashion a new ideal of masculinity to "fit a middle-class rather than an aristocratic context" (Ray 13). This ideal manifests itself in a variety of discourses, and one major forum is the early Victorian debate on the gentleman as opposed to the dandy, a debate William Thackeray vigorously participates in. This debate recasts the gentleman as bourgeois and morally earnest[2], and constructs Victorian ideal manhood as epitomized by the bourgeois values of productive work, inner moral truth and undemonstrative self-discipline. Crucially in this debate, clothes play a key role, as this manly ideal is particularly linked with an avoidance of surface display and a proclaimed indifference to or even rejection of fashion and clothes, in stark opposition to the clothes-obsessed, decadent and superficial aristocratic dandy. Clothes and surface display are thus set up as the polar opposite to inner moral virtue, mirroring the fundamental class differences between the two male types. This debate significantly impacts on the way the Victorians perceive themselves and the aristocratic Regent era they have succeeded.[3] It also has ramifications that extend beyond Victorian normative masculinity into the area of male fashion, reflected particularly in the idea of the Great Male Renunciation. Fashion historians who subscribe to this idea argue that mainstream male fashion has since experienced a dramatic change, and forsaken display and fashionable consumption in favor of the sober, dark suit as the universal male uniform of restraint and discipline (Flugel 111).

In *Vanity Fair*[4], a novel serialized in 20 monthly parts between January 1847 and July 1848 at the same time that Thackeray joins forces with William Magin and Thomas Carlyle to attack the "clothes-wearing" dandy in the pages of *Fraser*'s, Thackeray satirizes the sartorial vanity of the dandiacal Jos Sedley and preaches the need for true manliness in the figure of the morally virtuous but distinctly unfashionable Major Dobbin. Yet the novel, set in the early nineteenth century

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[1] William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (New York: Grolier, 1969). Further references are to this edition and cited parenthetically in the text as *VF*.

[2] The term gentleman is both exclusive and elastic as it suggests an elevated ancestral origin but also a certain moral character. This moral dimension makes the gentleman interrelated to but also separable from the aristocrat, and this elasticity helps the aspiring Victorian middle class to appropriate the term and redefine it to suit their own needs. See Gilmour 4.

[3] This attitude only began to change by the 1890s, when a new form of aesthetic dandyism arose to reject bourgeois utilitarianism and sought a revival of Regency values of elegance, pleasure and the art of the pose. See Moers 287-88.

[4] The novel's original sub-title, when published in monthly installments in 1847, was not the present "A Novel without a Hero," but "Pen and Pencil Sketches of Society" (13), suggesting its links to the silver-fork genre. See Pollard 13. Also Kendra 191.

Regency period but meant for the bourgeois audience of Thackeray's 1840s contemporaries (Copeland 19), also reveals that what is set up as Regent flashiness and sartorial excess is often as much true of the Victorian practice of male fashion and consuming, and that the cautionary rhetoric of prescriptive writings and normative discourses may reflect more of an ideal than fact. Dandyism is to be rejected because clothes as artifice are all but the sum of the dandy's identity, but gentlemanly manhood that prides itself on natural inner truth and indifference to clothes is also revealed to be a construction where clothes and visual display actually play a crucial role. Dobbin may be set up as the natural gentleman, but his evolution toward ideal manhood unveils the existence of a certain strict, though understated sartorial code that needs arduous training and learning, with deviation or failure stigmatized and made glaringly conspicuous. The Great Male Renunciation is thus less about the male rejection of fashion but more about the great male institutionalization of the bourgeois code of dress. In other words, dress and clothes not just make the dandy, but also crucially articulate what constitutes normative bourgeois manhood as a key technology of self-fashioning.

**Dress and Its Links to Masculinity**

Fashion and clothes have traditionally been linked to surface and the artificial as opposed to depth and the natural, but recent scholarship has argued that clothing should be viewed as integral, rather than external to self and identity, and that the subject is not only articulated through dress, but dress also articulates and constructs the subject (Warwick and Cavallaro 133).[5] In this sense, fashion and clothes are no longer just secondary to a more authentic self or body, nor are they passively mirroring or an over-determined result of social change or personal identity. Rather, fashion also plays a role of active construction, and both self and fashion are enabled and produced by their mutual interaction and inter-shaping.

By choosing what to wear and how to wear, the self is located in a historicized discourse which prescribes norms and conventions on the practices of a presumably docile body. Fashion and clothing are thus a crucial means of inserting the self into social discourse, and by interpellating, taming and reforming the self, subjects it to power. At the same time, clothes also shape and articulate the self which is only produced and achieves its interiority through its insertion in clothes as a Foucauldian

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[5] Past studies of fashion tend to distinguish it from dress/clothes, with the former viewed mostly as a theoretical system and a sociological phenomenon or linked to *haute couture* in a way that is far removed from the daily, subjective or experiential dimension of wearing clothes or dresses. Current scholarship tends to broaden the scope of fashion. This study acknowledges that while not all clothing is fashion, clothes and fashion are highly inter-connected.

technology of self and governance. The self is far from a natural, pre-given or pure self but is always already a clothed self, saturated and participating in the discourse and techniques of fashion, constructing and also constructed by its sartorial display. As is succinctly pointed out by Elizabeth Craik, fashion is thus a technical device or a "face" which positively constructs or articulates an identity rather than disguising it (4).

In historical practice, fashion and sartorial display have assumed critical social significance and often appeared as a form of control and hierarchization. The Stuart court, for instance, resorted to sumptuary laws to institute a hierarchy in dress that explicitly spelt out who could wear what and punished transgressions as crimes (Kuchta 34-35). That dress has to be regulated stems largely from the fact that dress as appearance and image is perceived as a key indicator of status and position, or as Veblen writes, as "an indication of our pecuniary standing to all observers at first glance" (167). This social and symbolic role of clothes has become particularly important with the advent of modernity and industrialization, when societies become more mobile and appearance and display increasingly replace land ownership as key indicators of status and identity (Gun 157).

By the early Victorian period, this increasing importance of appearance and sartorial display is at tension with a rising gender discourse that perceives the need to regulate male masculinity and particularly to tame and translate male physical energy into productive work (Sussman 3). This new "utilitarian" masculinity, to use a phrase by Anne Hollander (87), would better reflect the bourgeois values of industry and useful work and moves away from an aristocratic model of male physicality and visual display that focuses on leisure and pleasure.[6] Such a new conception of masculinity is also reinforced by the increasing influence of the Victorian gender ideology of the separate spheres, which links men with the serious public world of production and industry while relegating consumption and leisure to women and deviant men like dandies. This has important ramifications for the Victorian perceptions of clothes. Clothes and display, traditionally emphasized for their function to reveal status and position,[7] are further gendered so that pursuit of clothes is equated with effeminacy and suppression of display with productive masculinity.

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[6] Sussman writes that early Victorians are preoccupied with introducing the bourgeois values of work and Christian discipline into the ideal of masculinity, which calls on men to seek a "psychic armor" to control the inchoate, sexualized male energy and transform that into productivity, useful work and self-discipline (19). Also see Adams 4. In the area of male attire, this could also translate into a disapproval over outfits that sexualize the male body, and an advocacy of somberness and intentional invisibility which the ubiquitous dark suit seems to exemplify.

[7] The Stuart court, for instance, set down a series of Sumptuary Law in the sixteenth century decreeing that strict sartorial codes of texture and style, with deviation punishable by law, should be followed by people of different social ranks so that clothes accurately reflect status. Silk, gold and imported wool were to be worn only by the aristocrats, while cloth and plain decoration were the domain of "servingmen, yeomen taking wages" and "husbandmen." See Kuchta 35-37.

These issues are crucially reflected in the early Victorian gentleman/dandy debate, which revolves around Magin's *Fraser's Magazine* where Thackeray and later Thomas Carlyle were constant contributors. Together they launched a three-year-long burlesque, satire and vitriolic attack of the dandy, initially prompted by a response to a popular "silver-fork" dandy novel *Pelham*; *or, The Adventures of a Gentleman* (1828) by Bulwer-Lytton. The "silver-fork" dandy novel of the 1820s is a genre of social emulation targeting a rising middle class by offering meticulous details of the day-to-day living and fashionable clothes of the aristocrats. It was greatly popular in the 1820 and again in the 1840s, at a time when the post-Napoleonic-war English society saw increasing prosperity and shifting social stratification brought by the rise of an urban commodity culture. Dandyism as an obsession with elegant clothes and manners, first gaining prominence in early nineteenth century Regent court and pioneered by the archetypal dandy Beau Brummell, was experiencing a revival at that time with the renewed pursuit of luxury and "fashionable levity" by the well-to-do sector (Rosa 6). As is pointed out by Bulwer-Lytton, fashion and clothes allow the "more mediocre classes" a hope to "outstep the boundaries of fortune and be quasi-aristocrats themselves" (qtd. Gilmour 53). In *Pelham*, Bulwer-Lytton devotes a complete chapter to clothes and tailors, and quotes from a character in a Restoration comedy of manners --"A complete gentleman, according to Sir Fopling, ought to dress well, dance well, fence well, have a genius for love letters, and an agreeable voice for a chamber" (68).

This preoccupation with clothes becomes the butt of attack by the *Fraser's* circle. Maginn responded by calling the dandy a "false" and "tailor-made" gentleman who is only good at "swaggering" and "strutting," and passionately urged for a "true," "natural" gentleman as a moral alternative (514). Thomas Carlyle soon joined in by satirizing Bulwer's dandy and setting out a clothes philosophy in *Sartor Resartus*, which appeared in *Fraser's* in 1833 and 1834. Attacking the clothes-obsessed dandy whose "trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of clothes" as detrimental to the moral health and greatness of the whole nation (*Sartor* 205), Carlyle calls for the renunciation of sumptuous clothes and for the superiority of the inner soul over the exterior.[8] But it is Thackeray that both in his journalistic and fictional writings provides the most detailed redefinition of the gentleman/dandy divide while also making clothes the key symbol of that divide. In a number of writings contributed to *Fraser's* before the publication of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray sets the tone for mainstream Victorian opinions by attacking the Regents as basically aristocratic, decadent and

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[8] See Ellen Moers' definitive study of the dandy, p. 181. Max Beerbohm, the late 19th century aesthete and dandy, questioned Carlyle's qualifications to formulate a clothes philosophy as he "obviously dressed so very badly" himself (qtd. in Carter 11). Carter, however, argues that Carlyle is not against clothes per se but instead urges for an authentic correspondence between exterior and soul (11).

represented by the vain dandy, and celebrating the Victorians as dominantly bourgeois, industrious and represented by the morally earnest gentleman.[9] In his *The Four Georges*, he equates the dandiacal Prince Regent, whose worst folly is his fondness for clothes, to an empty, vain nothingness beneath a heap of flashy, extravagant clothes:

> I try and take him to pieces, and find silk stockings, paddings, stays, a coat with frogs and a fur collar, a star and blue ribbons, a pocket handkerchief prodigiously scented, one of Truefitt's best nutty-brown wigs reeking with oil, a set of teeth and a huge black stock, underwaistcoats, more underwaistcoats, and then nothing.   (388)

Thackeray then writes what is to become the classic Victorian idea of gentlemanly manhood:

> Which is the noble character for after ages to admire; --yon fribble dancing in lace and spangles, or yonder hero who sheathes his sword after a life of spotless honor …? Which of these is the true gentleman? What is it to be a gentleman? Is it to have lofty aims, to lead a pure life, to keep your honor virgin; to have the esteem of your fellow-citizens, and the love of your fireside; to bear good fortune meekly; to suffer evil with constancy; and through evil or good to maintain truth always? Show me the happy man whose life exhibits these qualities, and him we will salute as a gentleman, *whatever his rank may be* …. (emphasis added)

This passage constructs a contrast between fundamentally opposing forms of masculinity. On top of the moral connotations already established by Magin and Carlyle, Thackeray valorizes true masculinity as based on the bourgeois values of work and useful purpose, and derides the dandies for a decorative, frivolous form of masculinity based on surface display and an aesthetization of useless leisure. In his 1841 "Men and Coats" for *Fraser's*, Thackeray further evokes the gender dimension of fashion by criticizing Bulwer's dandy novels for their bloated, flowery and almost effeminate style. Bulwer is accused of wearing his dandy clothes, the "large-flowered damask dressing-gown" and" morocco slippers" when writing his novels. Without the dressing gown, there would be "no great, long, strealing tails of periods, no staring peonies and hollyhocks of illustrations, no flaring cords and tassels of episodes…" If Bulwer had donned the simple, dark jacket, he would have written in a more honest, simple and masculine style, for only "a man IN A JACKET is a man" (601).

Here in his earnest to denounce dandiacal clothes, Thackeray actually risks reinforcing the importance of clothes/surface, not the inner core or lack of, in

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[9] This attitude only began to change by the 1890s, when a new form of aesthetic dandyism arose to reject bourgeois utilitarianism and sought a revival of Regency values of elegance, pleasure and the art of the pose. See Moers 287-88.

determining the man. Both the man and his literary work, hence his intellect/mind, are emasculated and degraded when he puts on the flowery dandy clothes, but boosted and enabled when he changes into the simple dark jacket. Gentlemanly manhood is thus not natural, inborn or inherent but highly performative, produced with a change of clothes and completely at jeopardy by a damask gown. Nor does it rest on a disdain or rejection of outer display but articulated and constructed primarily by surface clothes, however simple and understated these may be. If clothes now decide the man, this would suggest that the gentleman is likewise predicated upon a visual mechanism of performance and spectacle, and that behind this surface there is actually no essential core. The difference between the gentleman and the dandy is not one of surface and depth, nor of the artificial and the natural, but rather of different types of surface and artifice, and different types of clothes.

**Dobbin's Corduroys and Sartorial Training**

By passionately declaring that only a man in a simple jacket is a man, Thackeray inadvertently acknowledges the threat clothes could pose to both the gender and class identity of the ideal gentleman, while also denying their importance, their visibility or dependence on the visual register. This contradiction highlights the very conflicted nature of the Victorian discourse on normative masculinity and clothes. At the same time that ideal manhood is stressed to be residing on natural inner virtue, it is also seen as dependent on a recognizable code of outer attire. This paradox is evidenced in the many conduct books and etiquette literature for gentlemanly attire that have become popular in the Victorian age.[10] These writings both stress the need to look natural, artless and indifferent to appearance but also urge on the reader the importance of proper dressing and the need for arduous efforts and learning in order to master the art.

In *Vanity Fair* and particularly the character of the ideal gentleman Major Dobbin, Thackeray lays bare his own ambivalences and the highly problematic nature of his journalistic message. In a textual scene of fashionable elegance, material opulence and "carnivals of consumption" (Lindner 564), Major Dobbin stands out with his distinct unfashionability and clumsiness. Awkward, ungainly, and with rather ridiculously large hands and feet, Dobbin is an unconventional hero, but his personal clumsiness seems to be "to the point" (Gilmour 70), as it highlights a model of natural

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[10] Shannon quotes from various nineteenth-century conduct books on gentlemanliness which strongly warn the male reader of how easily one could step over the narrow line of proper dressing into offensive conspicuousness, whereby one is either mistaken for a dandy, or worse yet, a tailor's assistant. A quiet coat supported by a tie of neutral tint, a black hat and a shirt of small pattern and quiet color should be the ideal, and these must be "of the best quality, well-made, and suitable to his rank and position" (28-40).

inner virtue that is predicated, to Thackeray, upon a negation of surface, artifice and fashion. This is particularly seen in the following passage:

> Which of us can point out many such in his circle – men whose aims are generous, whose truth is constant, and not only constant in its kind, but elevated in its degree; whose want of meanness makes them simple: who can look the world honestly in the face with an equal manly sympathy for the great and the small? We all know a hundred whose coats are very well made, and a score who have excellent manners, and one or two happy beings who are what they call, in the inner circles, and have shot into the very centre and bull's eye of the fashion; but of gentlemen how many? Let us take a little scrap of paper and each make out his list.
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> My friend the Major I write, without any doubt, in mine. He had very long legs, a yellow face, and a slight lisp, which at first was rather ridiculous. But his thoughts were just, his brains were fairly good, his life was honest and pure, and his heart warm and humble. He certainly had very large hands and feet, which the two George Osbornes used to caricature and laugh at; and their jeer and laughter perhaps led poor little Emmy astray as to his worth. But have we not all been misled about our heroes, and changed our opinions a hundred times?   (*VF* 987)

The last sentence particularly reveals Thackeray's edifying purposes in constructing the character of Dobbin. Yet although Dobbin's physical unattractiveness and even deformity is intended to cast into greater relief his inner virtue and modest simplicity, this paper argues that clothes and sartorial attention, rather than to be negated and rejected as the opposite of Dobbin's ideal manhood, is a crucial though much downplayed and repressed ingredient, a part that has been made invisible but actually revolves around an intricate code and requires arduous training and learning. Reflected in the evolution of William Dobbin as the ideal gentleman, this arduous learning process also reveals the constructed or performative nature of the gentleman and undermines its touted inborn naturalness.

*Vanity Fair* devotes much space to Dobbin's kind deeds, his bravery in war and colonial service, his moral steadfastness toward Amelia's family throughout their misfortune, his generosity to his friends and particularly George Osborne, and his unwavering devotion and love to Amelia. The novel's devotion to his inner worth and good deeds is as much conspicuous as its reticence about his outer attire and clothes. In a novel that dazzles with meticulous details of the fashionable clothes and glittering lifestyle of the dandiacal Jos and George, this reticence over Dobbin is of course to underline his inner virtue. After Dobbin joins the army he mostly appears in his

military attire, a "hideous military frogged coat" (*VF* 64) and an old dark cloak, the one he finally wraps Amelia in when she agrees to accept his love (*VF* 1091). In his civilian wear Dobbin is described as wearing "a blue frock-coat, with a brown face and a grizzled head" (900), and several pages later "a blue frock-coat and white duck trousers" (*VF* 920), very likely the same clothes subdued in tone and color. Overall Dobbin's clothes are mostly invisible or seldom change, as they fail to arouse any attention or comment.

However, this invisibility does not mean that clothes are not important at all to the image of Dobbin, or that inner morality alone would have been sufficient to secure his claim to true gentlemanliness. Rather, it could actually mean that Dobbin has finally mastered the code of gentlemanly attire so that he is no longer conspicuous and thus invisible. In Dobbin's earlier life as an adolescent before he matures into this gentlemanly soldier, clothes have not always been that invisible but have instead stood out and mattered significantly. Dobbin went to school with George at a snobbish institution for bourgeois boys, but unlike many of the pupils who could lay surer claims to gentility, Dobbin's father was still at that time a grocer, and paid for his son's tuition in goods and not money by sending cartloads of retail commodities every week to the school, under a system that was then called "mutual principles" (*VF* 56). For this Dobbin was ruthlessly mocked and despised by the other boys, who regarded their own merchant families as socially superior and retail grocers as "shameful and infamous," "meriting the contempt and scorn of all real gentlemen" (*VF* 57). Nicknamed as Heigh-ho Dobbin, Gee-ho Dobbin or "Figs" by everyone and "almost at the bottom of the school," Dobbin was slow at study and unable to master Latin, but his clumsiness and plebian humbleness is particularly articulated by his clothes.

He "stood there—almost at the bottom of the school—in his scraggy corduroys and jacket, through the seams of which his great big bones were bursting—as the representative of so many pounds of tea, candles, sugar, mottled-soap, plums, and other commodities" (*VF* 56). The image of the adolescent Dobbin is dominated by his scraggy, "tight" corduroy clothes (*VF* 58), a salience seized upon by the other boys as they targeted those corduroys and sewed them up to tease Dobbin, "tight as they [already] were" (*VF* 58). The ill-fitting corduroys are unfashionable and lowly both in fabric and design at a time when gentlemen only wear silk or wool, and their tightness suggests a residual family thriftiness over children's clothes which Dobbin's grocer father has still not grown out of despite his increasing prosperity. In these years in Dobbin's life, his clothes constitute a dominant part of what he is, by pointing most conspicuously to his plebian background and his gaping distance from the genteel gentleman.

This episode in the novel may reflect Thackeray's unhappiness with the vanity of

his middle-class characters and his disapproval of their snobbish ideas of what constitutes the true gentleman. Yet the conspicuousness of Dobbin's corduroys also suggests that these become conspicuous and attract derision because they deviate from and fail to observe an implied sartorial code, a code that is generally accepted as gentlemanly and normative. This code does not necessarily mean the flashy, sumptuous fashion of the dandy, but a more subdued yet still indisputably genteel code that at the first look distinguishes the gentleman from the lower classes. In this sense, Dobbin's adolescent corduroys do not stand for his polar opposition from the ostentatious dandy nor for his role as the paradigmatic gentleman of inner virtue and simple attire, as seems to be implied by Thackeray. Instead, they stand for Dobbin's then gaping distance from that very role.

This is rather important because in a novel that purportedly polarizes the gentleman against the dandy, there is also the other implied figure of the less than gentlemanly plebian whose distance from normative bourgeois masculinity is not marked by a lack of inner virtue but by his failure to master the intricate code of gentlemanly attire. Dobbin's inner virtue has already been in abundant display in his adolescence. He has a "generous and manly disposition" (*VF* 67), and is always kind to young George, even if George is the boy who first detects the links between Dobbin and the weekly grocery cart that sends supplies to the school and starts the school teasing. When Dobbin cries out that George's father is also just a merchant, George proudly declares that his father is a gentleman and keeps his own carriage, snubbing Dobbin immeasurably by implying that Dobbin's is not because he keeps a grocer's cart (*VF* 57). But Dobbin still comes to George's aid by fighting and beating the head boy who bullies George, because he nurtures a simple code of honor and a desire to shield the weak and the young. Dobbin's moral virtue has therefore always been his distinguishing quality and always been with him unchanged. What is lacking at this stage is polish and gentility, a lack most loudly articulated by his tight corduroys.

This is further seen when by Dobbin's mature years he is no longer dogged by such mockery and derision. His manners are still clumsy, and the Osbornes still deride him behind his back for his lack of personal beauty, but his clothes, though far from fashionable, are at least appropriate and no longer become a topic of open contempt or even much notice. The elevation from a grocer's son to a gentleman is, for Dobbin, aided by his graduation from public school, his joining of the army as a commissioned officer and his family's rapid rise in prosperity and social standing. His father the grocer shoots to the ranks of City Alderman and keeps a large house in a fashionable London square with daughters considered most eligible for their large dowries. But in this evolutionary road toward the gentlemanly ideal, what has most visibly changed

about Dobbin himself is this metamorphosis from sartorial conspicuousness to invisibility as he disappears behind a standard façade of respectable dress norm. This is a change that is only visible and apparent upon hindsight and by contrast, and by the loss of a previous obtrusive, coarse visibility.

This to some extent problematizes Thackeray's ideas on clothes and ideal manhood, for Dobbin's case shows that rather than anti-fashion or anti-display, the paradigmatic bourgeois man is crucially constructed by the right kinds of clothes and the right type of sartorial display. This sartorial art may steer clear of the flashy dandiacal code most hotly objected to by Thackeray and his circles, but it remains nevertheless a distinct type of display and a distinct visual mechanism, with specific provisions for propriety. Ideal masculinity is far from natural or rests on inner virtue alone, but remains a construction and performance where clothes and display function as a key technology of self-fashioning. The gentleman's rejection of sartorial ostentatiousness should never be equated with sartorial carelessness or ignorance. Instead it is a specific sartorial display that denies its nature as display, and disguises its own visibility by turning it into an institution and a norm against which all deviations (women or dandies or lower classes) are made flashy and thus visible. In Dobbin's case, it is the right clothes that articulates and constructs Dobbin's changed status as the ideal gentleman. Only when the sartorial reform is complete is he finally established as the model, his normative masculinity fully fashioned.

That Dobbin's earlier sartorial failure is made so painfully obvious also suggests the efforts that have to be put in to follow and learn that invisible code. This in turn reveals that rather than being natural or inborn, gentlemanly manhood has to be arduously learned and cultivated. Seen in this light, *Vanity Fair* is not just a novel that preaches inner virtue against superficial vanity, but also one that implies, in a roundabout way, the need to update one's clothes and to learn the art of proper dressing in order to reach that gentlemanly ideal. This would again point to the novel's links to the silver-fork dandy novel, a genre with a professed aim to genteelize and educate an aspiring middle class audience in clothes and manners, though in the case of *Vanity Fair* this complicity is often camouflaged by a rhetoric of satire and denouncement.

**Dandies and Swells**

Fashion historians (Foster, Kuchta, Steele) have traditionally subscribed to the idea of the Great Male Renunciation, first postulated by the psychologist John Carl Flugel in 1930, which claims that the Victorian debate over the gentleman helps bring about a dramatic change in mainstream, respectable male fashion that still resonates today

(Flugel 111). This idea claims that while eighteenth century fashion makes not much distinction between male and female clothes, with men wearing rich lace, bright colors and elaborately embroidered and padded coats, by the nineteenth century a clear line of demarcation is drawn in mainstream discourse that urges men to forsake display and relegate to women the task of status-indicating display of sumptuousness and luxury (Hollander 64-5). Yet the story of Dobbin shows that Victorian ideal masculinity is less about the great male renunciation of dress and display than about the great male codification of bourgeois dress, an institutionalization of a dress code with distinct gender and class connotations. This by itself points to the importance of clothes and the wide impact a definitive sartorial code of respectable masculinity has on the general male population.

Recent fashion scholarship has also claimed that the history of Victorian male fashion is anything but a scene of unchanging somberness, and that male fashion consumption is actually a significant socio-cultural force integral to an understanding of nineteenth century urban life.[11] In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, the dandiacal figures of Jos and George, "bearded creatures" who are "as vain as a girl," "as eager for praise," "as finikin over their toilettes," "as proud of their personal advantages," and "as conscious of their powers of fascination as any coquette in the world" (*VF* 19), are supposedly of the Regent era, but Thackeray actually dresses them in the fashion style of the 1840s. The laughable excesses of Jos, for instance, turn out to be shared by Thackeray's own early Victorian bourgeois contemporaries. The novel's very first mention of Jos highlights his dandiacal appearance:

> A very stout, puffy man, in buckskins and Hessian boots, with several immense neckcloths, that rose almost to his nose, with a red-striped waistcoat and an apple-green coat with steel buttons almost as large as crown pieces (it was the morning costume of a dandy or blood of those days), was reading the paper by the fire when the two girls entered, and bounced off his armchair, and blushed excessively, and hid his entire face almost in his neck-cloths at this apparition.   (*VF* 25)

This scene takes place at the beginning of the novel when Becky, fresh out of school, is staying with Jos's sister Amelia at the Sedleys' house before embarking on her way to Sir Pitt's house as a governess. Jos spends a fortune in clothes and personal

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[11] Breward studies various professional periodicals of the tailoring trade, the shops and retailers, as well as popular London magazines and literary works of the Victorian period to uncover a picture of pleasurable male consumption and fashion pursuit, albeit in a discreet manner. Shannon also points out that male fashion throughout the nineteenth-century undergoes rapid changes in styles and cuts, evidenced in the greater variety of color brought by the invention of aniline dyes in 1859, the different patterns of stripes and checks used, the changes in trouser cuts signaled by the popularity of the peg-top trousers in the late 1850s and again in the 1890s, and the use of different waistcoats, corsets and undergarments. All suggests that men were vigorously invited to display their masculinity through fashion.

grooming, drives his horses in the Park, dines at the most fashionable taverns, frequents the theatres attired "laboriously in tights and a cocked hat" (*VF* 30), and in general follows the lifestyle of a fashionable Regency dandy.

But Jos's fashion style of "red-striped waistcoat," "apple-green great-coat," "crown"-like steel buttons and "fine frilled shirts" that "flaunted gorgeously out of his variegated waistcoats" (*VF* 466) is actually miles away from that of the historical Regency dandy. Thackeray writes that Jos's fashion follows the style of "a dandy or blood of those days" (*VF* 25), and Jos also flatters himself that he and the archetypal Regency dandy Beau Brummels are "the leading bucks of the day" (*VF* 30). But the discreetly elegant Brummell is known for his dark frock coats over white linen and white waistcoats, and for his rejection of flashy colors and complicated, effeminate "muffs, velvets, ruffles, gold lace and perfumed powder" that has been "the usual appendages of male attire" throughout the eighteenth century (Tuite 147).[12] As the dictator of Regency male fashion from 1800 to 1813, he may be fastidious over his clothes, as he is known to spend hours every morning on his toilette and a huge sum on "country washing," so his linens are spotlessly white and his cravat without a single crease (Kelly 100). But he detests ostentatiousness and avoids vulgar display, for he is quoted to have said --"[i]f John Bull turns round to look after you, you are not well-dressed but either too tight or too fashionable" (qtd. in Lambert 60). This motto certainly suggests a very different sartorial code from that of Jos, whose pursuit of the loudest and the flashiest is seen in the following passage:

> He never was well dressed; but he took huge pains to adorn his big person, and passed many hours daily in this occupation. His valet made a fortune out of his wardrobe; his toilet-table was covered with as many pomatums and essences as ever were employed by an old beauty…Like most fat men, he would have his clothes made too tight, and took care they should be of the most brilliant colors and youthful cut…. He was as vain as a girl. (*VF* 31)

This reference to "an old beauty" and girlish vanity certainly feminizes Jos and underlines the emasculating narcissistic display of a conventionally constructed Regency dandy. But it turns out that Jos's style is actually reflective of popular male fashion in Thackeray's own time in the 1830s and 1840s, when it abandoned Brummell's elegant style and reverted back to gaudy patterns and conspicuous designs. Jos's "immense cravats," his waistcoats "of a crimson satin, embroidered with gold butterflies," or "of a black and red velvet tartan with white stripes and a

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[12] Brummell's rejection of flashiness and cult of simple elegance is not to be, however, confused with mere sobriety or with the later bourgeois uniform of the dark, somber suit. Brummell's elegance is cool, deliberate, achieved with hours of grooming and above all reflects a devotion to surface and style that rejects any need to be earnest, practical or useful.

rolling collar" (*VF* 751), is echoed in the real fashion trends at the time of Thackeray's writing. The "Whole Art of Dress" (1830) reports, for instance, that the waistcoat "has become very gay latterly, the richest and most brilliant colored velvets and silks," while cloth waistcoats "are never seen worn by any but a few professional men" (qtd. in Lambert 66). In a study of nineteenth century male fashion, Miles Lambert points out that male dress after the Napoleonic wars and particularly in the 1840s became increasingly flashy and exaggerated, with neckcloths ever higher and more severely stiff, chests padded, waists pinched with stays, and waistcoats made of exotic, rich fabrics and in striking color combinations. This situation is exacerbated by the increasing number of middle class "gents," "swells" or "fast men" strutting down the streets, whose imitation of the aristocratic dandy is vulgarized by their predilection for the "gayest fast colors and the more the merrier," as one 1848 *Punch* article "Model Fast Man" puts it. The article goes on to write about this middle-class impersonation of the dandy, with his "white hat," "chess-board pattern" trousers, and "enormous gooseberry shirt pin"—"You know him at one by his being the noisiest, the most conspicuous person wherever he is. His dress too, never fails to attract public notice. He is unhappy if not seen—he is miserable if not heard" (Ibid).

This exposes the very middle class nature of Jos's dandyism. Swells, gents and fast men are nineteen century terms for middle-class or lower-middle-class men who are able to make use of the increasing expansion of commodity culture, and in the case of the gents and the fast men, the ever proliferating mass-produced clothing, to stage an imitation of fashionable gentility in style if not in substance (Bailey 108). Peter Bailey writes that the term swell originally refers to early nineteen century fashionably dressed upper-class men, but has shifted in its usage by the 1830s to refer specifically to middle-class upstarts, while the term gents applies to lower-middle-class clerks or apprentices further down the social echelon. Both swells and gents appeared in great numbers on London streets in the 1830s and 1840s and were much mocked at for their sham gentility, outrageous clothes and "fast" vulgar manners (Bailey 108-109).[13] In Jos's case, though Thackeray refers to him as a Regency dandy, the solidly middle-class son of a London broker is obviously more a swell than a real dandy, and the rowdy fashion he displays, coupled with a laughable fastidious sumptuousness, speaks more of Thackeray's own time when gents or swells have taken on an increasingly ubiquitous presence.

Here the interesting question is why Thackeray insists on calling this style the typical dandy fashion of the early Regent years. Thackeray could not have been ignorant of Brummell's dress style for he read and reviewed William Jesse's *Life of*

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[13] Clair Hughes also writes that the swell would be familiar to a *Punch*-reading audience of the 1850s, as the dandy's leisured middle-class imitator who nevertheless vulgarizes the dandy's look with loud colors and fancy, eccentric cuts. Swells thus lack the dandy's *ton*. See Hughes, pp. 36, 53.

*George Brummell* (1844) for the *Morning Chronicle* in the same year. Admittedly this review focuses primarily on Brummell's perceived moral emptiness and impudence, and accuses him of being a "heartless" "swindler," "glutton," and "liar," yet this urge to construct a generally ludicrous image of fastidiousness, wastefulness and triviality could not have blinded Thackeray to Brummell's sartorial details, for he notes with mockery that Brummell's only claim to greatness is the invention of the starched white cravat ("Review" 36).

In a footnote to the first edition of *Vanity Fair*, for which he personally draws the illustrations, Thackeray writes that he chooses 1848 fashion because Regent fashion is simply too ugly --"when I remember the appearance of people in those days and that an officer and a lady were actually habited like this—I have not the heart to *disfigure* my heroes and heroines by costumes so hideous and have on the contrary engaged a mode of rank dressed according to the present fashion" (emphasis original; qtd. in Lambert 63). Yet why would Thackeray risk the charge of historical inaccuracy by switching to the seemingly more tolerable (to him) fashion of his own time if his purpose is, at least in Jos's case, to attack and ridicule it? Critics like Juliet McMaster have argued that Thackeray's novels are riddled with historical inaccuracies and that despite this he still manages to reproduce "the feel of a past age" (McMaster 313), yet the question still remains over whether indeed the more hideous (to Thackeray) Regent style would have better served his purpose of generally denigrating the decadent Regent era if he is to champion the morally superior Victorian age he and his readers find themselves in. If Jos, dressed in the Victorian fashion of the 1840s, is an object of ridicule and despise, wouldn't that offend the Victorian audience Thackeray is writing for?

This sartorial anachronism indicates that despite the Regency setting of *Vanity Fair* and despite Thackeray's attacks of the Regency dandy, his real target is closer to his own time and his real purpose seems to criticize and educate his contemporary Victorian audience, though in a roundabout way. Far from being the industrious, simple and disciplined bourgeois model Thackeray celebrates in his journalistic writings, Thackeray's Victorian public is actually busy with clumsy adulation of aristocratic ways and is as much guilty of the supposedly dandiacal vanity and flashiness. They seek not the construction of their own distinct class identity but what Sarah Rose Cole calls the approving look from aristocracy that validates their performances at social climbing (138). In Jos's case, his attempt to rise above his middle-class roots and fashion a more elevated identity through dandiacal clothes and conspicuous consumption speaks of a wider aspiration shared by many middle class characters populating *Vanity Fair*, as well as the middle class public reading the novel. It is this "lordolatry" by the middle class that has alarmed Thackeray into a flurry of

preaching for purposes of education and rectification (*Book of Snobs* 14). For this he popularizes the term "snob," not to refer to, as in modern usage, upper-class arrogance toward the lower classes but to mean, quite the opposite, the flashy gentility and vanity of an aspiring and imitating middle class (Cole 139). In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray projects this excessive vanity onto the Regency dandy, but by dressing Jos in the early Victorian style of his own time, Thackeray intends his criticism to target his own contemporary bourgeois public and their sartorial "snobbery."

**Conclusion**:

This paper's discussion of Dobbin's and Jos's sartorial experiences has established that clothes and display play a key role in articulating modes of masculinity in Thackeray's novel. Dobbin's sartorial evolution unveils the performative nature of Victorian paradigmatic masculinity and its reliance on clothes and display as a key technology of self-fashioning. It also casts in doubt the binary oppositions, much insisted on in Thackeray's journalistic writings, between superficial clothes and inner core, or the natural and the artificial. In Jos's case, Thackeray's novel reveals that the normative early Victorian discourse on bourgeois masculinity may be less a reality than an ideal, less something that is already true than something he would urge the middle class to follow and work toward. Early Victorian times particularly harbor a variety of competing forms of masculinity as a result of accelerating industrialization and shifting social stratification (Sussman 9), and clothes and fashion, instead of being insignificant or dispensable to a more authentic self, importantly articulate these modes of masculinity and insert them into social discourse.

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**Abstract:**

Early Victorian debate on the gentleman/dandy divide, in which William Thackeray vigorously participates, constructs ideal Victorian masculinity as represented by the bourgeois values of productive work, inner moral truth and undemonstrative self-discipline. Crucially in this debate, clothes play a key role, as this manly ideal is particularly linked with an avoidance of surface display and a proclaimed indifference to or even rejection of fashion and clothes, in stark opposition to the clothes-obsessed, decadent and superficial aristocratic dandy. Clothes and surface display are thus set up as the polar opposite to inner moral virtue, mirroring the fundamental class differences between the two male types. This paper argues that in *Vanity Fair*'s portrayal of the morally virtuous but distinctly unfashionable Major Dobbin, as well as the dandiacal Jos Sedley, Thackeray actually reveals ambivalences and contradictions that problematize his own journalistic message. Dress and clothes not just make the dandy, but also crucially articulate what constitutes normative bourgeois manhood as a key technology of self-fashioning.

**Keywords**:   *Vanity Fair*    male fashion    Victorian masculinity