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Victorian Faddishness: The Dolly Varden from Dickens to *Patience*

Rebecca N. Mitchell*[©]

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the origins and nature of the fad through a case study of the ‘Dolly Varden’ dress. The gown originated in the 1770s as a ‘polonaise’ among continental aristocracy, and experienced a minor revival in the 1840s when Dolly Varden, a character in Charles Dickens’s novel *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) was depicted wearing it. But it did not become a fad until the 1870s, after a Dickens-owned painting of the character was sold and the gown re-entered the public eye. Having shed its historical or literary connections, the gown was revived again in Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera *Patience* (1881), a well-known send-up of Aesthetic foibles. Often overlooked is the fact that dairy maid Patience – who figures in the opera as a counterpoint to the lovesick maidens wearing high Aesthetic garb – wears a Dolly Varden gown, as faddish as any Aesthetic gown, only slightly outdated. The Aesthetic afterlife of the dress demonstrates the mutability of Victorian fads and the gleeful ignorance of antecedents that typifies fad culture. Facilitated by the material and commercial innovations of the period and fuelled by an insistent presentism, fads are – this article argues – a truly Victorian phenomenon.

KEYWORDS: fad, Dolly Varden, Aestheticism, Dickens, *Patience*

‘Fad’ is, appropriately, a word without a history, a Victorian term adopted by the Victorians to describe consumerist and cultural crazes made possible by uniquely Victorian industries. Even the definitive repository of the English language offers only the scantest insight into the term’s provenance or usage. ‘Etymology unknown’, the *OED* reports in its original 1894 entry on the word, a gloss which is unchanged today. If the etymological provenance is murky, the definition of the word remains even more confounding, if not outright wrong: ‘A crotchety rule of action; a peculiar notion as the right way of doing something; a pet project, *esp.* of social or political reform, to which exaggerated importance is attributed; in a wider sense, a crotchet, hobby, “craze”’. Emphasizing stubbornness of ideation, the ‘crotchety rule’ to which is ascribed ‘exaggerated importance’, the definition seems almost directly at odds with the prevailing use of the term from its earliest appearances.¹ Rather than a peculiar, stubborn notion, ‘fads’ were from the start marked by oddity, impermanence, or flightiness. The ephemerality of the fad is captured only in the final word of the entry, ‘craze’, yet this meaning quickly predominated its usage, and by the early 1880s, frequent mentions of ‘fads’ in the popular press used the term to mean a passing fashion or behaviour, often falling outside of accepted norms, and seemingly adopted by whim as opposed to ardent belief.

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¹ The *OED* lists the first appearance of the noun form of ‘fad’ in 1834, but this highly atypical usage appears in a letter dated 1834 that was only published in a biography of Bishop James Fraser in 1887. Widespread use was not established until the late 1870s.

Given this timing, it is no wonder that some of the earliest consistent applications of the word were to the trappings of Aestheticism, which reached its zenith in the early 1880s. *Fin-de-siècle* newspaper reports on ‘Aesthetic fads’ mention colours (e.g. ‘sad sage green’ and ‘terra cotta’),² objects (e.g. stationery, peacock feathers),³ actions (e.g. eating ices from a lily, wearing knee breeches),⁴ and individual representatives (e.g. Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley),⁵ to name just a few examples. The roots of some of these fads can be traced historically or geographically, instantiating as they do the recuperation of a fashion from an earlier time (e.g. the knee breeches, which revive Regency styles) or an exotic place (e.g. the peacock feathers, signifying the near or far East), as opposed to a *sui generis* eruption, as numerous scholars have productively shown.⁶ But more than denoting an engagement with the past, the emergence of fad culture is indicative of the advances of the moment in manufacture, industry, publication, retail, and art that made the material signifiers of Aestheticism, as well as the dissemination of those signifiers, possible. Focusing on the intention, motivation, and precedent behind some of these markers of Aestheticism can obscure some of the other salient aspects of Victorian fad culture that they typify: the brio of invention and adoption, the wilful rejection of historical antecedents, and a gleeful presentism.

To explore those qualities and illuminate the origin story of the fad, I turn to a familiar send-up of Aesthetic foibles as a case study, Gilbert and Sullivan’s comic opera *Patience* (1881). *Patience* is illustrative because it skewers the objects of Aestheticism at their most faddish,⁷ but also because it also harnesses another, overlooked, apparently non-Aesthetic fad that may tell an equally compelling story about the development of fad culture: titular character Patience, a

² In a widely reprinted comic poem, a wife wearing a dress in this shade remarks to her husband, ‘Here’s the last aesthetic “fad”’, to which he replies ‘with wild interjection, / “Bless me, dear, you must be mad”’. [Anon.], ‘The Battle of the Styles’, *Aberdeen Press and Journal* (15 December 1880), p. 7. The *Birmingham Mail*’s review of *The Colonel* notes ‘terra cotta’ and ‘faded sage green’ as ‘aesthetic colours’, part of the play’s catalogue of ‘aesthetic fad’ objects and characters. [Anon.], ‘The Colonel’, *Birmingham Mail* (24 May 1881), p. 2.

³ ‘It looks a small matter, but even the stationery used by this woman was suggestive of wealth and luxurious comfort. It was of the highest quality of handmade note, thick, ribbed, and of the antique patters with frayed uncut edges, the latest freak of the aesthetic fad.’ [Anon.], ‘Recollections of “Mrs Gordon Baillie” by One who Has Met Her’, *Peterhead Sentinel* (6 March 1888), p. 4. For peacock feathers, see e.g. ‘The Colonel’, *Birmingham Mail*, p. 2.

⁴ ‘The latest fad necessary to the happiness of aesthetic creatures is to use the beautiful Arum lily instead of a glass for ices!’ Muriel Cleve, ‘An Aesthetic Fad’, *Leamington Spa Courier* (4 April 1891), p. 3. For knee breeches, see e.g. [Anon.], ‘Society and Fashions’, *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer* (25 May 1883), p. 7, which lists ‘red plush breeches, silk stockings, low shoes, and dress coats faced with amber silk’ as the height of ‘aesthetic taste’ and notes the ‘latest fad’ of the Rational Dress Society ‘is to try and abolish the top hat for gentlemen’.

⁵ Many such mentions are unflattering or imply the passing of the fad. On Wilde’s 1883 UK lecture tour, papers reported that he ‘seems to have discarded many of his aesthetic fads’, referring to his costume and props (e.g. ‘Mr Oscar Wilde at Weybridge’, *Surrey Advertiser* (22 December 1883), p. 8). And on John Lane’s declaring Beardsley to be ‘the modern Hogarth’, one critic noted ‘The decadent fad can’t long stand such satire as that’ ([Anon.], ‘Literature, Art, Music’, *Glasgow Evening News* (16 May 1895), p. 8).

⁶ On transnational and transhistorical influences on the Aesthetic and Decadent movements, see for example Stefano Evangelista, *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009); Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence, and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2010); *Decadence and Literature*, ed. Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), esp. ‘Part I: Origins’; or Grace Lavery, *Quaint, Exquisite: Victorian Aesthetics and the Idea of Japan* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

⁷ For example, a review of *Billee Taylor* referred to *Patience* as ‘[laughing] out the latest social fad’ ([Anon.], ‘Billee Taylor’, *Birmingham Mail* (16 August 1881), p. 2.) and a *Glasgow Herald* review of *Patience* – focussed on ‘Aestheticism, our latest social “fad”’, – noted that its popularity would soon wane, ‘mainly because its subject is a “fad,” will disappear when the clever pencil of [George] Du Maurier seeks pastures new’ ([Anon.], ‘The Theatres’, *Glasgow Herald* (6 September 1881), p. 4).

dairy maid, wears a version of a 'Dolly Varden' dress. The garment has a history of fitful public airings, a kind of recurrent ephemerality, beginning in 1770s France and revived in Charles Dickens's historical novel *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), both times without sparking widespread take up. Only when the garment resurfaced again in the decade after Dickens's death were the material contexts ripe for it to become a craze, and by that point its historical accretions had only limited signification, its appeal arising in part from a resistance to, rather than a longing for, 'its place of origin', to use Susan Stewart's formulation.⁸ And for Savoy Opera audiences in 1881, Patience's garb would have seemed as dated as that of her competitors for male affection: the lovesick maidens who wear high Aesthetic gowns, equally faddish and of only a slightly less recent vintage. Though within the opera Patience's dress represented a contrast from stereotypical Aesthetic fashion, as the styles from the stage moved into the popular imaginary, even the opera's contextual cues were abandoned, and popular, mass-produced imagery conflated Patience's gown with Aesthetic dress, further demonstrating the mutability of the fad. This article explores the pre-fad history of the Dolly Varden, before visiting it within the context of *Patience* as well as its unexpected Aesthetic afterlife. While some recent discussions of Aestheticism suggest that its transnational and transhistorical borrowings were persistently specific, attending carefully to nuance, I argue that the Victorian invention of the fad should be seen as an insistent presentist phenomenon.

1. DRESS PATTERNS: ON THE ORIGINS OF THE DOLLY VARDEN

Before the Dolly Varden dress was known as the 'Dolly Varden', it was a *polonaise* gown, a tightly bodiced overdress with a decorative overskirt cinched up to reveal an underskirt. Initially in vogue in continental Europe from the 1770s, the style was encouraged by a moment of aesthetic and literary interest in relative simplicity and the pastoral (one version was termed the *polonaise à la Jean-Jacques*, a nod to Rousseau's enlightenment ideals;⁹ see Figure 1). Though the polonaise had no connection to Poland beyond the French penchant for adopting foreign names, it did represent a different kind of appropriation: the gown was an aristocratic rendering of a workable peasant style. If the milkmaid's or shepherdess's overskirts would be gathered up and their underskirts shortened to keep them from getting dirty, society women could exploit the provocativeness of shorter skirts and suggestive exposure of the curtained overskirt under the guise of sylvan innocence. That said, like the more severe panniered style of the court dresses that preceded it (see Figure 2), the polonaise emphasized sumptuous, heavily figured fabric, and large quantities of it, the presence of which denoted its owner's wealth. It remained a relatively popular court fashion for around 20 years, until displaced by a radically different style in the revolutionary decades of the end of the eighteenth century, when any aristocratic pretensions to pastoral simplicity were rendered inert by the reality of the protesting masses. The narrow columns of diaphanous muslin 'Empire' gowns favoured during the Regency that supplanted heavy, structured court dress may have been equally divorced from the everyday wear of the labouring classes, but they nevertheless represented a sea change in design.

By the time Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* appeared as the last novel serialized in the Dickens-edited *Master Humphrey's Clock* in 1841, dress silhouettes had taken

⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p. xii.

⁹ See Kendra Van Cleave and Brooke Welborn, 'Very Much the Taste and Various are the Makes', *Dress*, 39 (2013), 1–24.



Figure 1 (left): Robe à la Polonoise (c. 1780), British; public domain image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, #1998.314a, b.

yet another turn, though the period-specific setting seems to have had little impact on the novel's *mise-en-scène*. Described as Charles Dickens's 'least satisfactory', 'least discussed', 'least loved and least read' novel, *Barnaby Rudge* holds few other distinctions among the author's oeuvre.¹⁰ It is one of only two historical novels written by Dickens, the other being *A Tale of Two Cities*, as the anti-papist Gordon Riots of the 1770s serve as the backdrop for events of its second half. Fashion notwithstanding, *Barnaby Rudge*'s relationship to history has formed its central interest for the relatively few critics who have considered it at length.

A clear rift emerges from their analyses, one that underscores broader fad culture. Some suggest that Dickens's presentation of the Gordon Riots served primarily as an analogue to more pressing socio-political exigencies of the time of the novel's composition and publication, namely the Chartist uprisings of the late 1830s. John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson remark

¹⁰ Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens, His Tragedy and Triumph* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 330; Thomas Jackson Rice, *Barnaby Rudge: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York, NY: Garland, 1987) pp. xiii, xv.



Figure 2 (right): Dress with panniers (c. 1760), British; public domain image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, #1996.374a–c.

upon the way Dickens ‘makes his historical romance a tract for the times, relating it to some of the social and political preoccupations of the years of writing.’¹¹ Others, including John Glavin and Patrick Brantlinger, object to such simple equivalences, holding instead that the novel’s historical context must not be read as analogous to Dickens’s contemporary moment – the approach Tom Mole has lately described as ‘punctual historicism’¹² – either because that context bears so little narrative weight or because its representation is so thoroughly disconnected from the realities of the 1770s and the 1830s.¹³ It is a position that was evident from the earliest responses to the novel: Edgar Allan Poe wrote in his review that readers ‘should have looked

¹¹ John E. Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, [1957], 1982), p. 76. For related readings, see Humphrey House, *The Dickens World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941) and Steven Marcus, ‘*Barnaby Rudge*: Sons and Fathers’, in *Dickens*, ed. A. E. Dyson (London: Palgrave, 1965), pp. 82–117.

¹² Tom Mole, *What the Victorians Made of Romanticism: Material Artifacts, Cultural Practices, and Reception History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 21; see esp. Chapter 2.

¹³ Patrick Brantlinger, for example, neatly summarizes the supposed past/present relations engendered by the novel, before dismissing them: ‘The Gordon Riots equal Chartism, Simon Tappertit’s Prentice Knights equals the trade unionism of the 1830s, and the Protestant Association of 1780 equals the Protestant Association of 1839’. ‘Did Dickens Have a Philosophy of History? The Case of *Barnaby Rudge*’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 30 (2001), 59–74 (67). See also John Glavin, ‘Politics and *Barnaby Rudge*: Surrogation, Restoration and Revival’, *Dickens Studies Annual*, 30 (2001), 95–112.

upon the Riots as altogether an afterthought. It is evident that they have no necessary connection with the story'.¹⁴ By the turn of our present century, scholars picked up this idea to counter arguments for *Rudge's* contemporary relevance. Glavin concludes that 'In *Rudge*, writing history, Dickens neither *restores* nor *revives*. . . . Dickens does not bring the past into the present. Nor does he mark the past as the present's other. He retires from the present into a past that never was'.¹⁵ For Glavin, *Rudge's* interest is located in what it – or what Dickens – does not and did not do, and he concludes that, just as the novel failed to speak to Dickens's own time, it offers today's readers little recourse to address the more pressing socio-political concerns of theirs.

It is apposite that a novel with a fast and loose relationship to its historical setting should give rise to a dress fad with a fast and loose relationship to its historical antecedents. The Dolly Varden dress reifies this relationship, serving as a physical instantiation of a careless past-iness. The same brewing turbulence that propelled the polonaise to its sartorial peak in France during the 1770s might have underscored Dolly Varden's appeal for the 1840s audience, but investing her figure with such meaning is complicated by the character's blissful, solipsistic ignorance. Any specific historical context would be hard to trace in the novel's best-known, sustained sketch of the locksmith's daughter:

As to Dolly, there she was again, the very pink and pattern of good looks, in a smart little cherry-coloured mantle, with a hood of the same drawn over her head, and upon the top of that hood, a little straw hat trimmed with cherry-coloured ribbons, and worn the merest trifle on one side—just enough in short to make it the wickedest and most provoking head-dress that ever malicious milliner devised. And not to speak of the manner in which these cherry-coloured decorations brightened her eyes, or vied with her lips, or shed a new bloom on her face, she wore such a cruel little muff, and such a heart-rending pair of shoes.¹⁶

Within the description, there are no markers of period or design. Perhaps the most resonant note of the oft-repeated description is the 'cherry-coloured'-ness of Dolly and her attire. Dolly's 'very pink'-ness, noted in the opening description, develops into something richer and riper. Also notable is the register of danger that underpins her garments: her hat is 'wicked' and 'provoking'; its creator 'malicious'. Her muff is 'cruel' and her shoes are 'heart-rending'.

Dickens thus makes clear that Dolly's 'pattern of good looks' is designed primarily to tantalize, an aspect of her character that is heightened and made readable by her dress. This emphasis is evident in Dickens's frequent use of the term 'coquette' when describing Dolly in the novel.¹⁷ Her coquettishness is ultimately an obstacle to her ability to love: something she must

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, 'Barnaby Rudge', *Graham's Magazine* (February 1842), 20.

¹⁵ Glavin, 'Politics and *Barnaby Rudge*', 111. See also Gordon Spence, 'Introduction', *Barnaby Rudge* by Charles Dickens (London: Penguin, 1973).

¹⁶ Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty*, ed. by John Bowen (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 165–66.

¹⁷ Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, pp. 165–66. When she is glimpsed by Joe Willet on her way to a party, readers learn that she 'struck him quite dumb with her beauty. Never had Dolly looked so handsome as she did then, in all the glow and grace of youth, with all her charms increased a hundredfold by a most becoming dress, by a thousand little coquettish ways which nobody could assume with a better grace' (p. 120). Dolly's heart 'was not a tough one either, though there was a little mist of coquettishness about it, such as sometimes surrounds that sun of life in its morning, and slightly dims its lustre' (p. 170). Or later, readers are told that 'Dolly was a coquette by nature, and a spoil child' (p. 264). And when her heart finally softens towards Joe, whom she eventually goes on to marry, the narrator opines 'Oh how much, and how keenly, the little coquette of five years ago, felt now! She had found her heart at last. Never having known its worth till now, she had never known the worth of his. How priceless it appeared!' (p. 604). On Dolly's eroticism, see also Natalie McKnight, 'The Erotics of *Barnaby Rudge*', *Dickens Studies Annual* (2009), pp. 23–36.



Figure 3: Phiz, 'Dolly Varden', *Four Plates from Barnaby Rudge* (London, Chapman & Hall, 1849).

overcome in order to make good on the promise of her external charms. In the popular reiterations of Dolly's character, these plot-based specifics fade along with any temporal markers, and what tends to prevail is the dazzling charm aligned with her young, flirtatious self. That charm was also allied to her dress, thanks to Dickens's frequent illustrator Hablot K. Brown (known as Phiz), who composed a series of illustrations for the novel in which Dolly's gown was unquestionably a polonaise (see Figure 3), establishing the iconographic vocabulary that would persist, irrespective of its absence from its novelistic origins.

Phiz's illustrations of Dolly seem to have inspired painter William Powell Frith, who was early in his career when *Barnaby Rudge* was published, but had already established himself as particularly adept at literary subjects, painting scenes from Shakespeare, Sterne, and Goldsmith. He later wrote that he turned to Dickens's fiction, 'in the hope of finding material for the exercise of any talent [he] might possess', and it was the historical setting of *Barnaby Rudge* that impressed him, especially Dolly Varden, with her 'cherry-coloured mantle and the hat and pink ribbons'.¹⁸ Having seen an example of Frith's *Rudge*-inspired canvases, Dickens

¹⁸ Quoted in [Anon.], 'Frith's Paintings of "Dolly Varden"', *Dickensian*, 4 (October 1908), 265–66 (265).



Figure 4: W. P. Frith, *Dolly Varden* (c. 1842) oil on canvas, 38.1x34.3cm, private collection.

wrote to the artist in November 1842 and commissioned ‘two little companion pictures, one a Dolly Varden (whom you have so exquisitely done already), the other a Kate Nickleby’.¹⁹ For Dickens (see Figure 4), Frith rendered Dolly peering longingly over her shoulder, ‘casting a coquettish look back at Joe Willett [sic] as she passes on her way through the wood’, as one later article described it.²⁰ The author paid £20 apiece for the paintings and is said to have remarked about Dolly that she was ‘exactly what I meant’.²¹ Though the painting does not emphasize Varden’s polonaise, it came to play an important role in the dress’s explosive popularity some three decades after it was painted.

2. DOLLY IN THE 1870s

In July 1870, a month after Dickens’s death, Frith’s painting of Dolly Varden was sold at Christie’s auction of Dickens’s art collection;²² according to widely re-published accounts, it commanded the highest price of all of the lots at over £1000.²³ But it was less the fact of the

¹⁹ ‘Frith’s Paintings’, 266.

²⁰ [Anon.], ‘The Charles Dickens’s Sale’, *Daily News* (London; 6 July 1870), p. 5.

²¹ Quoted in Vanda Foster, ‘The Dolly Varden’, *Dickensian*, 73 (January 1977), 19. See also W. W. Fenn, ‘Our Living Artists: William Powell Frith’, *The Magazine of Art* (January 1879), 80–83.

²² Vanda Foster’s chronicle of the events that led to the Varden dress fad in ‘The Dolly Varden’ is helpful if brief. Other coverage of the fashion phenomenon can be found in Natalie Ferguson’s blogpost, ‘A Brief History of the Dolly Varden Dress Craze’, *A Frolic Through Time*, 23 August 2008, <<http://zipzipinkspot.blogspot.com/2008/08/brief-history-of-dolly-var-den-dress.html>> [accessed 17 April 2018]. On the Varden’s afterlife as an Australian cake, see Carmel Cedro, ‘Dolly Varden: Sweet Inspiration’, *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2 (2012), 37–46. Most recently, Taeko Sakai revisits the dress in ‘The “Dolly Varden” Polonaise at the Seaside: A Fashion Revival in the early 1870s’, *The Dickensian* (Winter 2018), 252–61.

²³ ‘Frith’s Paintings’ lists the amount as 1300 guineas (266).

sale than the breathless press coverage that helped encourage interest in the Dolly Varden. The sheer volume of newspaper reports mentioning her name in the wake of the 1870 auction well exceeds those on the novel's initial publication.²⁴ What is more, many of the articles returned to the novel's description of Dolly. 'To stand before this picture', one reporter waxed before only slightly misquoting Dickens, 'is to ask with the author of "Barnaby Rudge"—"Was there ever such a plump, roguish, comely, bright-eyed, enticing, bewitching, captivating, maddening little puss in the world as Dolly?"'.²⁵ Widespread press accounts of the auction thrust Dolly into the public imagination as a symbol of highly coveted, alluring, fresh-faced youth, and her attire quickly came to symbolize her desirability. Though beauty and flirtatious charm cannot be easily donned and doffed, the polonaise dress could, and it came to be a handy, purchasable signifier of those qualities.

The auction's timing positioned it among a confluence of developments – industrial, sartorial, and consumerist – that propelled the Dolly Varden dress into a full-blown fad. The bell-shaped cage crinolines of the late 1850s and early 1860s had given way to a more streamlined silhouette, as narrowing skirts shifted volume to behind with the aid of the 'dress improver' and the bustle. Those narrowing lines required stricter corseting than did the cage crinolines of the previous decades, facilitating a return to polonaise-friendly corsets. Chromolithography made colour fashion plates a ready staple in women's magazines, and the patterned overskirts of the polonaise were eye-catching. As Taeko Sakai has recently argued, inexpensively produced printed cottons were increasingly available in the 1860s and 1870s, ultimately making the materials for Dolly Varden dresses widely accessible.²⁶

As with many emerging fashion trends, the polonaise was engaged differently across the class spectrum. Among his 1873 Royal Academy submission, John Everett Millais offered paintings of two women in Dolly Varden gowns: a portrait of Clarissa Bischoffsheim, the wife of a Dutch financier (see Figure 5) and a scene of a girl collecting eggs from a henhouse. Reviewers cited the dresses as indicators of wealth, for the former ('a fashionable *grand dame*, with her mature beauty set off by a sumptuous costume of lace and jewels, dolly varden of the richest brocade, and pink satin jupon')²⁷, or as a sign of 'pure, wholesome English girlhood', for the latter.²⁸ But as the style made its way into middle-class publications, arbiters of fashion commented not on its stateliness or staleness, but on its very newness, its (potentially vulgar) faddishness, which was understood to be necessarily fleeting. In the dress's early days, there seemed to be some concern that the coquettish aspect of Dolly Varden (the Dickens character) would overwhelm the potential charm of a Dolly Varden (the gown). As the *Graphic* opined in June 1871, 'The Watteau chintzes for "Dolly Varden" costumes look very stylish and coquettish, but are certainly not admissible for walking in the London parks or streets. At fashionable watering-places some weeks hence, where eccentricities of female attire are tolerated, and even looked for, they will probably appear and be admired.'²⁹ Advertisers in the same

²⁴ In an admittedly unscientific survey, the British Newspaper Archive turns up 48 entries for 'Dolly Varden' in 1841, the year of the novel's serialization, compared to over 223 in 1870, the year of the auction, and 1400 in 1871.

²⁵ 'Charles Dickens's Sale', p. 5. Dickens's line in the novel ends, 'in all this world, as Dolly!'

²⁶ Sakai, 'The "Dolly Varden" Polonaise', 252–61.

²⁷ [Anon.], 'The Royal Academy Exhibition', *Illustrated London News* (10 May 1873), p. 447.

²⁸ [Anon.], 'Royal Academy of Arts', *Reading Mercury* (10 May 1873), p. 8. Not everyone was charmed by the idealized egg-collector, with the *Examiner's* critic complaining that with the painting of a 'rosy-complexioned, freshly-washed, handsome, well-fed squire's daughter, dressed in a newly-starched or bran-new Dolly Varden costume of a brilliant bed-curtain pattern', Millais '[sunk] to a deplorable depth of inanity and vulgarity'. [Anon.], 'The Royal Academy (First Notice)', *Examiner* (3 May 1873), p. 466.

²⁹ [Anon.], 'Fashions for June', *The Graphic* (3 June 1871), p. 514.



Figure 5: John Everett Millais, *Mrs Bischoffsheim* (1873), oil on canvas, 136 x 91 cm, Tate Britain, photo credit: Tate, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND.

journal were not as conflicted: ‘Dolly Varden Cretonnes’ were, one reports, ‘the novelty of the season.’³⁰ Just a few months later, the *Graphic*’s September fashion column stated that ‘Dolly Varden’ cretonnes were de rigueur for the seaside and country, with no attendant anxiety about their propriety.³¹ That same month the middle-class, mainstream ladies’ magazine *Bow Bells* agreed in its fashion column, noting that the Dolly Varden had ‘taken the lead’ as favoured costume.³² In just a few short months, then, the fashion had become nearly ubiquitous, and almost entirely disconnected from its Dickensian origins, whether of the novel’s 1770s setting, the novel itself, or the auction.³³

³⁰ [Anon.], ‘Dolly Varden Cretonnes’, *The Graphic* (13 May 1871), p. 450.

³¹ [Anon.], ‘Fashions for September’, *The Graphic* (2 September 1871), p. 230.

³² [Anon.], ‘Fashions for September’, *Bow Bells* (30 August 1871), p. 139.

³³ It is worth noting that this argument cuts against the grain of Taeko Saki’s recent piece on the Dolly Varden gown. She writes that, ‘For the public, it was more important to know that the Dolly Varden was inspired by a young, frivolous and loving character with whom two renowned Victorian artists, Dickens and Frith, were closely involved, and that the dress was quite affordable’ (‘The “Dolly Varden” Polonaise’, p. 258). I find scant evidence to support the claim that adopters of the fashion cared much for its historical or novelistic origins.

Despite, or perhaps because of that disconnection, Dolly Vardens speedily proliferated to the point of exhausting a once desirous public, an eventuality that is brought home in an 1871 comic death-by-Dolly-Varden piece. In it, a ‘very sensitive man’ ‘battled manfully with ineffable repugnance to Dolly Varden hats, Dolly Varden boots, Dolly Varden cravats and Dolly Varden cigars’ before reaching his limit when his landlady served him ‘Dolly Varden hash’, after which ‘his mighty heart gave way’ and he was driven to suicide.³⁴ Underscoring the critique is an objection not only to the sheer number of Varden variants, but to the decoupling of the name and its origin. This insistent ignorance of context is precisely what allows the Dolly Varden to succeed as a fad, as becomes clear through its later reappearance in the Aesthetic visual lexicon.

3. DOLLY VARDEN IN *PATIENCE*

By 1881, when W. S. Gilbert, who designed the costumes for his opera, dressed *Patience* in a version of a Dolly Varden, the dress reference would have been familiar to the audience, though not because of its roots in revolutionary France or because of the Dickens novel from which it drew its name (though the visual resonances between the famous Phiz rendering and the publicity stills for the first production of *Patience* are unmistakable; see Figures 3 and 6). Rather, they would have recognized the dress as a now slightly outmoded fashion, a fad that had peaked a few years before only to be supplanted, among the fad-followers, by the Aesthetic dresses of the lovesick maidens who also star in the production. *Patience*, often held up as the ultimate Aesthetic parody,³⁵ might be understood equally as a parody of faddishness itself. The adaptability of its theme is a first point to consider: the original focus was not aesthetes at all, as it was first written to skewer ‘Rival Curates’. Gilbert then substituted foppish aesthetic poets and stalwart Dragoons as competing incarnations of masculinity vying for the affection of women.

Such adaptability of theme is refracted in the opera’s skewering of inconstancy. The insincerity of poet Bunthorne, the initial object of the women’s affection, is laid bare in the middle of the first act in his song ‘Am I alone and unobserved’, when he admits that he is ‘an aesthetic sham’, his ‘air severe / is but a mere / Veneer!’³⁶ Framed as a shameful confession, the song ends with Bunthorne declaring that his adoration of the medieval is ‘affectation, / Born of a morbid love of admiration.’³⁷ Any sense that the Dragoons represent a genuine alternative to such affectation is undercut when they too abandon their primary-colour uniforms to adopt Aesthetic ‘stained-glass attitudes’ in the hopes of regaining the women’s favour. When, in the second act, three Dragoons sing that ‘You can’t get high Aesthetic tastes like trousers, ready made’, the audience knows that both they (and Bunthorne) have done exactly that: bought into a fad wholesale, knowing all the time that declarations of sincerity are simply part of the pose.³⁸ Another often-cited line describes the prototypical aesthete as, ‘A Japanese young Man— / A blue and white young man— / Francesca di Rimini, miminy, piminy, / *Je-ne-sais-quoi* young man.’³⁹ To the extent that this is an indictment of Aesthetic foibles, it focuses

³⁴ [Anon.], ‘Facts and Fancies’, *Ballou’s Monthly Magazine* (August 1871), p. 199.

³⁵ ‘Rather than killing by ridicule’, Lionel Lambourne wrote, *Patience* ‘really put Aestheticism on the map’. *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon, 1996), p. 126.

³⁶ W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *Patience; or, Bunthorne’s Bride!* (London: Pell & Co., 1881), p. 14.

³⁷ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, p. 14.

³⁸ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, pp. 14, 32.

³⁹ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, p. 37. The range implied by the lines is often missed. Grace Lavery, for example, cites the lines and argues that ‘the word “Japanese” projects an indexical force quite in excess of its demonymic usage’, before apparently conflating the ‘Japanese’ of the first line with the Chinese-inflected ‘blue and white’ of the second line. *Quaint, Exquisite*, pp. 60–61.



Figure 6: Cabinet photograph of Leonora Braham as Patience in *Patience*, by Elliott & Fry, c. 1881, original production. Image public domain.

expressly on the smorgasbord approach to cosmopolitanism – the happily indiscriminate mixing of Japanese, Chinese ('blue and white'), medieval Italian ('Francesca de Rimini') and French ('*je ne sais quoi*') that typifies mainstream Aesthetic design. The absence of ideological purity among all fad-followers, both Dragoons and Aesthetes, is affectionately highlighted throughout the play.⁴⁰

A similar mutability is central to Patience's character, satirized as it is by her declarations of object constancy that alternate with a desire for novelty. As most scholarly treatments do not recognize the relative contemporaneity of her dress, Patience's engagement with fads often gets a free pass, her role as a stalwart symbol of stolid, unyielding tradition and the feminine counterpart of the Dragoons taking the focus instead.⁴¹ In a compelling reading of the gender

⁴⁰ I am of course not the first to note this. See Jane Stedman, 'The Genesis of *Patience*', in *W. S. Gilbert: A Century of Scholarship*, ed. J. B. Jones (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1970) and Leslie Bailey, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Their Lives and Times* (London: Penguin, 1973).

⁴¹ Jay Newman, for example, writes, 'In the end, it is the simple, utilitarian virtues of Patience, the dairy maid, that win out. From the start, Patience represents health, normality, common sense, joy, and the gracefulness of simplicity'. 'The Gilbertianism of *Patience*', *Dalhousie Review* (1985), 263–282.

dynamics of the opera, Carolyn Williams contrasts the Aesthetic Maidens, 'who are figures for aestheticism's trendiness, superficiality, and general wrong-headedness' with Patience, whose 'idyllic innocence' is parodied as 'an old-fashioned form of femininity' – a 'stupefied femininity'.⁴² At the heart of *Patience's* depiction of the milkmaid, Williams writes, is a critique of 'one particular strand in the texture of Victorian gender ideology: the expectation that young women remain relatively ignorant of bodily functions, sexual feelings, and strong emotions in order to be perceived as respectably feminine'.⁴³ If her costume is read at all, it is as a symbol of a bygone time of British rural life,⁴⁴ not as a very recently passé style of popular dress.

Once we recognize that Patience is clinging to a relatively recently outmoded fad, some aspects of her character take on a different light. Declaring that she has never been in love, Patience is schooled by the lovesick maidens: Aesthetic Lady Angela informs the dairy maid that love 'is the one unselfish emotion in this whirlpool of grasping greed'. Patience responds eagerly, 'I'll set about it at once. I won't go to bed until I'm head over ears in love with somebody'.⁴⁵ She soon reiterates this commitment to speedy adherence, declaring 'I'll go at once and fall in love with— . . . A stranger!'.⁴⁶ When that stranger turns out to be her childhood crush Grosvenor, Patience rebuffs his declarations of love because of her new commitment to selflessness. Exclaiming to poetic aspirant Grosvenor that he is 'perfection! A source of endless ecstasy to all who know you!', Patience concludes that 'there can be nothing unselfish in loving *you*!' and rejects him.⁴⁷ Her new commitment to an ideal of selfless love overtakes her longstanding adoration of Grosvenor. This conflict of novelty and unwavering loyalty comes to a head in Patience's second-act ballad, 'Love is a Plaintive Song', in which she declares that 'Love that no wrong can cure, / Love that is always new, / That is the love that's pure, / That is the love that's true!'.⁴⁸ Hers is a steadfast commitment to the 'always new', and in the course of two short acts she changes her allegiance from having no lover, to loving Grosvenor, to loving Bunthorne, then back to loving Grosvenor.

4. DOLLY VARDEN'S AESTHETIC AFTERLIVES

Scholars today may regard Patience's character as a sharp contrast to the Aesthetic maidens of the opera, but I have suggested above that she represents only a variation on the faddishness exhibited by the Aesthetes. A willingness to abandon their former personas and attire to adopt the new (even if what is new is itself antiquated) binds nearly all of *Patience's* characters.⁴⁹ Contemporary advertisements demonstrate the ease with which any differences between Patience and the Aesthetic women were quickly conflated, with Patience and her accoutrements brought seamlessly into the Aesthetic fold. Cigarette cards were quick to appear with characters from *Patience*, the dairy maid in a stylized Dolly Varden dress as one of

⁴² Carolyn Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan: Gender, Genre, and Parody* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2011), pp. 152, 153.

⁴³ Williams, *Gilbert and Sullivan*, p. 153.

⁴⁴ Williams does not address Patience's costume explicitly, but notes that the character 'mocks the traditional heroine of pastoral and idyll . . . who represents an earlier, rural way of life, seen from the perspective of later, urban nostalgia' (p. 152).

⁴⁵ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, p. 17.

⁴⁷ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, p. 19.

⁴⁸ Gilbert and Sullivan, *Patience*, p. 30.

⁴⁹ Lady Jane, the only lovesick maiden who retains her Aesthetic garments when the rest abandon them for conventional Victorian attire in the final scenes, is the exception. See Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'Acute Chinamania: Pathologizing Aesthetic Dress', *Fashion Theory*, 14 (2010), 45–64.



Figure 7: Advertising cards (c. 1881–1882) “Wilson & Fenimore,” Jay T. Last Collection of Art & Design: Aesthetic Movement, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

the set, each featuring a different character from the production (see Figure 7). In addition to lines from the opera, Patience’s card features Aesthetic-leaning letterpress, likely added by the advertiser: ‘People are going “Wilde” (not Oscar) over our Aesthetic designs in Wall Papers.’⁵⁰ A similar tack is evident in another card (see Figure 8), which places Patience amidst calla lilies, a typically Aesthetic flower. Patience’s role in the opera is sufficient to affiliate her with the Aesthetic, and as this iconography proliferates, her role as the counter- or anti-aesthete dissipates, and the character and her dress get increasingly assimilated within the movement in popular culture.

That conflation of all Aesthetic markers can be seen in an advertisement for Marie Fontaine’s freckle cream (see Figure 9), which remixes an Oscar Wilde portrait by Sarony with vaguely japoniste decorations, sunflowers, lilies, and a young woman holding a milk pail and wearing an Aesthetic version of a Dolly Varden. Taken together, these objects and iconography are

⁵⁰ Wilson & Fenimore advertising card, Jay T. Last Collection, ‘Aesthetic’ Binder, Huntington Library. Of the six cards, only the Dragoon’s lacks any mention of the Aesthetic.

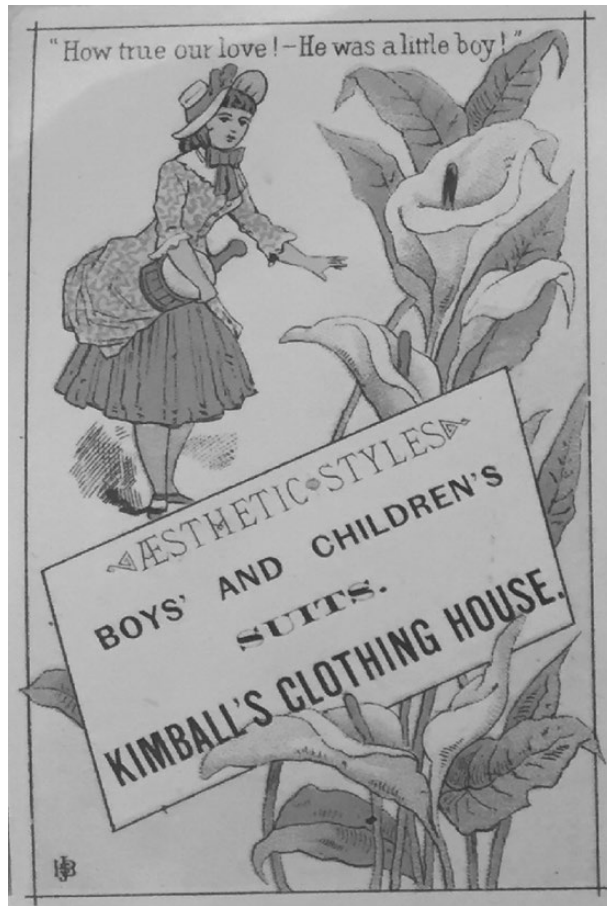


Figure 8: Advertising cards (c. 1881–1882) “Kimball’s Clothing House,” Jay T. Last Collection of Art & Design: Aesthetic Movement, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

clearly intended to communicate the high Aesthetic, the disconnection of the objects from each other and from the product advertised notwithstanding. A British card (see Figure 10) illustrated by Alfred Gray makes a feature of this tangled hodgepodge of signifiers, which itself becomes a marker of Aestheticism at its most faddish: ‘A rapturous damozel, / A Swinburne and Wilde damozel, / A jig-gy and sonnet-y, old-fashioned bonnet-ty, / Walking-conundrum young girl’. The verse’s metre and rhyme clearly play on lines from *Patience*, in particular Bunthorne’s instantly memorable self-description as a ‘Japanese young man,’ quoted above. The illustration recalls the opera in other ways, invoking recognizable iconography – the sunflower, the volumes of verse by Swinburne and Wilde, the very curly hair worn low on the brow that George Du Maurier’s *Punch* cartoons made famous, Aesthetic markers all. The damozel’s rather odd dress might also be considered Aesthetic, or Aesthetic-ish, with its rather odd assortment of anachronistic details, including vaguely medieval proportions – high waist, high neckline – and its weird train. And there is the fact this Swinburne and Wilde ‘young girl’ is *also* an ‘old-fashioned bonnet-ty’ young girl. She wears a dress like that donned by the Aesthetic Lady Jane in *Patience*, but carries the kind of bonnet worn by *Patience*.



Figure 9: Alfred Gray, Advertising Card (c. 1881), image courtesy Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.

I am not suggesting that these slippages are errors, mistakes demonstrating that the illustrators did not fully understand the opera or the purity of the Aestheticism it sent up. Rather, I suggest that these slippages demonstrate that purity of vision is beside the point when styles become fads – this girl is a ‘walking conundrum’, unprocessed and inexplicable, adopting elements of fashion without regard to historical precedent. She is as Aesthetic as she is antiquated, but not in a deeply informed, Pre-Raphaelite inspired, medieval-inflected version of antiquated: she, instead, is ‘bonnet-ty’, much like the mock-Aesthetic poet of *Patience* was ‘Francesca di Rimini, miminy, piminy’. This indifference to, or resistance to, historical context or to the archive that is evident in these advertisements is central to fad culture.



Figure 10: Alfred Gray, Advertising Card (c. 1881), Cadbury Research Library, University of Birmingham.

5. ISH-NESS AND THE VICTORIAN FAD

Such historical agnosticism inheres in the Dolly Varden dress, from well before its late Aesthetic redeployment. The garment instantiates multiple moments of intermittent interest across more than a century: in the 1770s, the 1840s, the 1870s, and finally the fin de siècle. More broadly, the slipperiness of the Dolly Varden calls into question some of the more stable historicist accounts of Victorian material culture. On the one hand, the fictional character's milieu does suggest that her character is situated in a specific, identifiable historical past; on the other hand, the reiterations of Dolly's fashion later in the nineteenth century suggest that the most appealing aspects of her costume necessarily transcend temporal markers. The suggestive charm of the Dolly Varden dress is transposable – if not eternal or endlessly recuperable, it is at least not bound to the eighteenth or mid-nineteenth century. It also sits outside of familiar accounts of narrative or narratological nostalgia.

This is not to say that all fashion or fashions are untethered from history; in fact, the opposite is often true. On a literal level, Victoria herself indulged in a number of historically orientated

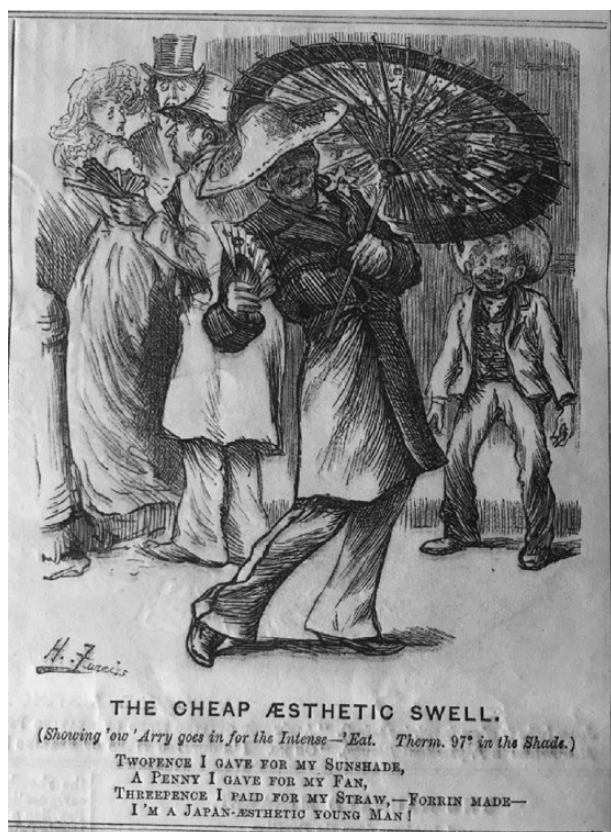


Figure 11: Harry Furniss, 'The Cheap Aesthetic Swell', *Punch*, 30 July 1881, p. 41.

fancy dress balls, for which well-heeled revellers were instructed to conform strictly to the dress of the Plantagenets (1842), Georgians (1845) or the Stuarts (1851).⁵¹ For royals, the effort was often a means of accessing an ancestral or familial past, a kind of personal authenticity that overruled the imprecision in the costumes themselves, which inevitably rendered dress of the thirteenth, early nineteenth, or seventeenth century through a Victorian lens. Aesthetic affiliations – as opposed to familial ones – could also be forged through historically informed dress. Neo-medieval gowns worn by mid-century Pre-Raphaelite stunners provided visual and haptic links to their Renaissance and Arthurian antecedents even as they contributed to progressive rational dress reform movements. And Wilde's knee breeches surely recalled the style and times of his dandy forebear Beau Brummel. Victorians frequently used anachronism in dress, in other words, intentionally and to multiple ends, including insinuating oneself into a lineage of influence, and/or as an avenue of reform.

But, as is evident in the migration of the Dolly Varden from a garment worn by Continental aristocracy to a symbol of pop-culture-based Aestheticism, not all crazes or those who partake in them share such informed motivations. Tenuous connections, if that,

⁵¹ See Helen Rappaport, *Queen Victoria: A Biographical Companion* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC CLIO, 2003), pp. 113–14 and Rebecca N. Mitchell, 'The Victorian Fancy Dress Ball, 1870–1900', *Fashion Theory* (2017), 291–315.

to the past (past-ish-ness), or to a text (literary-ish-ness), or to elitism or exclusivity (posh-ish-ness), or to faraway lands (exotic-ish-ness), or to pressing events of the day (news-ish-ness) often prevail instead. Accuracy is immaterial; all that is necessary is a readable connection to contemporaneity – a fact of the fad that might upset those with nuanced knowledge, but which is central to fads’ accessibility and dissemination. A Harry Furniss *Punch* cartoon illustrates this dynamic. His ‘Cheap Aesthetic Swell’ (July 1881; see Figure 11), features the frequent *Punch* personage of ‘Arry, who is now adopting Aesthetic objects. The caption notes that the image shows ‘ow ‘Arry goes in for the Intense ‘Eat. Therm 97 in the shade’ before four lines of verse: ‘Twopence I gave for my sunshade, / A penny I gave for my fan, / Threepence I paid for my Straw, —Forrin Made— / I’m a Japan-aesthetic young Man!’⁵² Who is the intended target of the cartoon? Perhaps the working class ‘Arry is sending up the pretensions of those such as Wilde and the Aesthetes on Gilbert and Sullivan’s stage, who grant outsized gravity to East Asian objects. Given *Punch*’s readership, the joke is more likely on ‘Arry himself, happily touting his cheap and accessible Aesthetic-ish goods and aping the lines of *Patience* while better dressed, evidently higher-class denizens sneer at him from the background. Understanding Victorian fads requires us to bracket that sneer, that knowing or ironic detachment, and refocus on Harry’s evident pleasure: he, for one, does not notice that they are sneering, or if he does, he seems not to care (or perhaps he even revels in it?). One might imagine that the purchaser of ‘Aesthetic designs in Wall Papers’ or Marie Fontaine’s freckle cream was similarly impervious to the illogic or ahistoricity of an Aesthetic woman wearing a Dolly Varden gown, provided the images were sufficiently Aesthetic-ish. The word ‘fad’ arrived in the 1860s with little discernible history, and Victorian fads themselves follow in kind.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

⁵² Harry Furniss, ‘The Cheap Aesthetic Swell’, *Punch* (30 July 1881), p. 41. For more on the ‘Arry figure, see Patricia Marks, “‘Love, Larks, and Lotion’: A Descriptive Bibliography of E. J. Milliken’s “‘Arry” Poems in *Punch*”, *Victorian Periodicals Review* 26 (1993), 67–78.