

Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England

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The lower levels of 19th-century society have received increasing amounts of attention from historians, and while their clothing is very nearly always mentioned (at least in passing) Vivienne Richmond rightly notes the individual and collective meanings of this clothing are rarely discussed or analysed.⁽¹⁾ It is an omission which, in *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England*, Richmond sets out to remedy and she certainly achieves this. By looking at the practicalities of how the poor acquired, maintained and interpreted their clothing, Richmond demonstrates that ‘material deprivation and visual distinction was a cause of physical discomfort and psychological trauma’ for this ‘sartorial underclass’ (p. 19). Based on Richmond’s doctoral thesis at Goldsmiths, *Clothing the Poor* is an important and welcome addition to the growing body of literature that examines the clothing and clothing cultures of non-elite members of society, making a significant contribution to our understanding of the dress, social and cultural history of 19th-century England.

Accessing information about the lower levels of a past society is typically more difficult than when looking at the social elite, primarily due to a disparity in the number of sources created by these lower social groups. The methodological problems Richmond faces, therefore, are not unique and in her introduction, and indeed throughout the book, Richmond is upfront about the limitations of her source material: the consistent, almost pervasive, influence of ‘improving moralism’ in the written sources such as literature and social commentary is a particular issue, for example, as is the paucity of autobiographies from the 19th-century poor themselves, as well as the fact that the direct voice of the poor in written records is often ‘filtered through socially superior intermediaries’ (p. 15). The sheer volume of material that Richmond has collected, however, from autobiographies, diaries, parliamentary commissions, sermons, magazines, instruction booklets, census returns and institutional records to name just a few, means that the account given is balanced and allows the voice of the poor to come through as much as possible, which is a considerable feat.

Richmond’s definition of ‘poor’, itself the subject of historiographical debate, is a broad one, encompassing those whose income came from ‘earnings, poor relief or charity which, at best, could provide for little more than the minimum quantities of the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter and, at worst, would not extend even to these’ (p. 12). While some may say this is too broad a definition, it enables Richmond to include people who were not only born and remained in poverty, but also those who found themselves at

times impoverished, and at other times better off. The book is built on four themes: the practicalities of clothing; the social and cultural significance of clothing; parish and charity clothing; and the use of institutional uniforms. From the reader's perspective, each chapter is nicely signposted with each concluding section not only drawing on the main themes from the chapter, but also showing how these themes relate to the following section.

Chapter one draws on existing secondary literature, providing a comprehensive overview of the different disciplinary approaches to the poor in 19th-century English society while also charting the shifting social paradigm from predominantly rural to predominantly industrial lifestyles, and outlining the general context in which these people were living and/or working. These changing lifestyles are then linked to clothing, showing how practical and aesthetic developments relate to wider social changes, such as the growing use of trousers over breeches and the rise of ready-made clothing. It would be virtually impossible to have any discussion of dress history without engaging with the debate over the significance of fashion emulation amongst different social groups. In this case Richmond argues that where sartorial choice was possible peer group emulation was more important than elite emulation, a theme which is to recur throughout the book (p. 46). The practicalities of the poor's clothing continue to be covered in chapter two, which examines how households budgeted for clothing, taking into account regional differences while at the same time warning against dependence on income and retail price analysis for understanding the 'quality, quantity and suitability of the poor's clothing' (p. 56). This is an important chapter, which helps the reader to understand approaches and attitudes to budgeting, though the section on flannel and flannelette, while interesting, seems a little incongruous.

Having assessed the ways in which poor people budgeted, or tried to budget, for their clothes, Richmond then looks at the means by which they were acquired. There are some parallels with studies on earlier periods in the coverage of theft as a means of obtaining clothing, which builds on the work of Beverly Lemire and John Styles.⁽²⁾ The pawning of clothes is also significant, but as Richmond points out, an interesting dynamic of the 19th century compared with earlier periods is the changing perception of pawning as the century progressed. Influenced by the improving moralism mentioned above, the suitability and respectability of pawning was increasingly in doubt; while it remained a necessity and a lifeline for many, others judged those who pawned clothing to be inefficient budgeters and thus social and moral failures.

The idea of moral judgement continues in the second section of the book where the next three chapters look at the social and cultural significance of dress in relation to the poor, examining the role clothes played in perceptions of respectability, self-fashioning and semiotics. It is in this section that Richmond's primary research and analysis come to the fore. Chapter four examines the role of women and needlework, including the expectation of an idealized working-class femininity which, as Richmond notes, was often established by those who were neither poor nor working class. Sewing played a key role in these ideals across all social levels: middle- and upper-class women were expected to be able to embroider, while those lower down the social scale were supposed to contribute to their family economy through plain sewing. Richmond charts the increase in state intervention in sewing training, with sewing schools rivalling informal family teaching, and where the focus was on plain sewing. Again moral imperatives had a clear impact, as embroidery among poor women was considered wasteful and decadent (pp. 100–1). Richmond also highlights the importance of the skill required for cutting out cloth in dress making, which is an understudied aspect of the process that determined the quality and finish of the garment no matter how skilled the person was who stitched the pieces together (p. 110). The cutting process also required more space and equipment, quality scissors being a significant investment, and as such, despite the exhortations of the middle and upper classes in various instruction manuals, the poor were at an immediate disadvantage.

In chapter five Richmond tackles the notion of respectability, a term that is loaded with culturally specific, and thus constantly evolving, meaning and significance. Richmond discusses how the poor attempted to maintain a respectable appearance, such as by using aprons to cover petticoats that were more difficult to keep clean, or through the idea of Sunday best as an emblem of industry and thrift (thus relating back to the discussion of the importance of budgeting), and of course, approaches to cleanliness in general. Historical

precedent is taken into account, such as the importance of linen to cleanliness in the 18th-century context and the gradual increase in bodily washing for the wealthy over the 19th century. What is stressed in this chapter, however, is the fact that the ideals of Victorian society were not always practical or possible for the poor. This may seem like an obvious point but Richmond's success is in highlighting this, linking practicalities with social understandings and connecting them to wider trends such as the growth of urbanisation with its increasingly dark, crowded and cramped spaces populated by the poor, and the contrast between this and with the moral cleanliness that society expected (p. 136).

The final chapter in this section, chapter six, looks at the sense of self, drawing on two autobiographies to show how the poor in the 19th century assessed their appearances and used clothing to express individual or collective identities. Richmond also discusses the growth of full-length mirrors and plate glass, which enabled the wealthier sections of the population to examine their whole appearance and create a 'coordinated self-image', thus making the poor, who had less access to these reflective surfaces, seem 'even less tidily dressed' (p. 181). The argument, therefore, is that this disparity in appearances contributed to a sense of embarrassment and shame among the poor (p. 185). This is an intriguing point which raises the issue of the relationship between self-fashioning, space and status and has the potential for further investigation.

The first two themes of the book focus on the 19th-century poor who had at least some level of agency over their clothing and appearance. The third theme, again dealt with in three chapters, looks at situations where the 'sartorial self-determination' of the poor was compromised (p. 186). Chapter seven adds to the historiographical debate over the impact of the Poor Law Amendment Act on clothing provision in the 19th century. Using institutional records and parliamentary papers, Richmond concludes that, contrary to other recent arguments (3), Poor Law provision declined significantly in the early 19th century and that clothing societies, rather than acting as supplements to parish provision, were meant to replace it. Richmond is dealing with an extended time frame compared with other historians but her interpretation of the primary sources is persuasive.

The moral improvement ethos of Victorian society is made evident in these chapters. Chapter eight takes a chronological view of the changing patterns of female assistance in the provision of clothing. It shows the decline in church-related support but an increase in other networks such as Needlework Guilds and Mother's Meetings, a key feature of these being the support of wealthier women, again highlighting the issue mentioned above that much of the information available to us on the lives of the poor is socially filtered. The success of these initiatives, from the perspective of the poor, varied and it is made clear that these institutions, purportedly established to help the poor and needy, often excluded those who needed it most thanks to the increasing focus on self-help (p. 241). The final chapter of this theme focuses on charity schools and household servants, seemingly unconnected entities, but as Richmond demonstrates the schools were often designed to produce female domestic servants and both adopted a form of uniform which supposedly encouraged submissiveness but also had the potential to be sources of discontent. The emulation debate also reappears with Richmond continuing her advocacy of the importance of peer equality, particularly among the servants (p. 258).

The final theme and chapter continues the discussion of the impact of uniforms but focusses on lunatic asylums, workhouses and prisons. Each institution had a system of internal classification that was aided by clothing, with some seeing the use of uniforms increase (prisons) and others seeing it decrease (asylums) over the 19th century. The main point of this chapter is to emphasise the stigmatising potential of clothing within these institutions. Although the relative paucity of direct evidence from the poor is something that Richmond grapples with effectively throughout the book, it is perhaps in this chapter that the dearth of direct experiences is the most frustrating; as Richmond argues, the impact of the combination of incarceration and clothing (uniformed or not) on the inmate's self-awareness and self-respect, must have been considerable.

The issue of control runs through all four of the themes of this book. Social mores, for instance, dictated how people perceived their own appearance and that of others, while institutions literally controlled the clothing that the inmates had on their backs. Furthermore, while we should all be aware that the poor in 19th-century

England were extremely disadvantaged, Richmond succeeds in highlighting this social disparity in a way that is pragmatic and thought-provoking. What Richmond also makes clear is that the poor were not a homogenous group; again this may seem like an obvious point but *Clothing the Poor* is testimony to the fact that there is still much that can be learned about this level of 19th-century society, and that clothing is a highly useful tool for acquiring this knowledge. In short, this book is essential reading for anyone interested in dress history and/or 19th-century society. Alongside the works of Beverly Lemire and John Styles on the 18th century, it shows that the dress, and the lives, of the historical majority are just as worthy of those of the fashionable elite.

Notes

1. Exceptions include: Steven King, 'Reclothing the English poor, 1750–1840', *Textile History*, 33, 1 (2002), 3–8; Peter Jones, 'Clothing the poor in early-nineteenth-century England', *Textile History*, 37, 1 (2006), 17–37.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Beverly Lemire, 'The theft of clothes and popular consumerism in early modern England', *Journal of Social History*, 24, 2 (1990), 255–76; John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jones 'Clothing the poor'.[Back to \(3\)](#)

Vivienne Richmond thanks Dr Tuckett for her careful reading and positive review of *Clothing the Poor*.

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