

Jade Shum

“Something Wicked This Way Comes”: Women, Illness, and Anglo-Indian Orientalism of Late  
19th Century England

Made in 1888, the “Beetle-wing” Dress lives within the collection of acclaimed English actress Ellen Terry, as a quintessential example of Aestheticism, the late 19th century European arts movement. The Aesthetic Movement refers to like-minded writers such as Oscar Wilde and Pre-Raphaelite artists such as Edward Burn-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti—as well as Alice Comyns Carr, the designer of the “Beetle-wing” Dress (Figure 1), and Ellen Terry, the actress of Lady Macbeth (and wearer of said dress) in the (1888-1892) Lyceum Theater’s production of Macbeth. For many of the artists and designers associated with the Aesthetic Movement, their visual and literary fantasies illustrated a romantic vision of a lush natural world in a medieval Anglo-Saxon setting. The women of these worlds were envisioned with long, red locks flowing down their sickly, slender backs, captured at the precipice in which life meets death—a quality which cloud present day recollections of the Western European medieval past and can be observed in Ellen Terry’s depiction of Lady Macbeth.<sup>1</sup>

Although this dress is better-known for its appearance in John Singer Sargent’s portrait of Ellen Terry, it shines as a spectacular example of craftsmanship and a key for understanding the Lyceum Theater’s specific characterization of Lady Macbeth as a late 19th century English production. The dress may have been produced from European workshops and based on the Aesthetic Movement, which also hails from Western Europe, but the embellishments utilize techniques and motifs from Indian origins. Specifically, the use of beetle-wings throughout the dress originates from India as elytra embroidery, in addition to the embroidered cuffs which

---

<sup>1</sup> Two specific examples illustrating this are Ophelia, John Everett Millais, 1851-52, oil painting and *Beata Beatrix*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1864-1870, oil on canvas. Said beautiful red headed women at the precipice of death.

originate from the Indian tradition of Aari. Aari was brought to Western Europe through the Silk Road before the British colonial era and consequently cannot be understated in its shaping of English visual culture.<sup>2</sup> The “Beetle-wing” Dress’s recent and expensive preservation marks its continued importance in English society, yet something through all these years stays unanswered: where is the larger discussion on the Anglo appropriation of Indian dress aesthetics in the same period in which the British Empire is at its ultimate might?

Furthermore, Britain’s colonial subjugation of India causes Indian society and culture to be understood as outliers of Victorian society and normativity. This entanglement is further complicated through the critical lens of Orientalism—which understands the European perspective of an overly simplistic “Orient” which is the “non-civilized” Near East and Asia who are “backwards,” “dangerous,” and “queer;” something to be feared.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the focus of the “Beetle-wing” Dress here is not on the romantic and nostalgic understandings of Anglo-Saxon medieval culture as many have previously done. Rather, it is to take a closer look at the post colonial case study offered by the dress to understand how the usage of racialized tropes extends the pervasive nature of colonial violence; and how this language is not just understood but affirmed by the people of late 19th century England.

#### *Up Close and Personal with The Beetle-Wing Dress*

In the Lyceum Theater from 1888 to 1892, Ellen Terry brought Lady Macbeth to life donning the “Beetle Wing Dress.” The costume was designed by Alice Laura Comyns Carr and sewn by Ada Cort Nettleship. While the dress is more known for its portrayal in John Singer

Sargent’s *Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth* (1889), the dress alone expresses ideas of drama,

---

<sup>2</sup> Aari (also spelled as Ari) was continuously practiced through India through the centuries, however when brought to France who spread it to the rest of Europe through the Silk Road, made slight changes to the technique and called it tambour embroidery.

<sup>3</sup> “Orientalism,” Harvard Divinity School, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/orientalism>.

womanhood, and noble complexities. The costume's interpretation of Medievalist narratives and society by late Victorian England reflected their present anxieties of societal normativity.

Shimmering in the light, the green iridescent beetle-wings weave their way through the dress's emerald mesh overlay. The dress drapes back into a generous train trailing behind her feet, as her arms outstretch like wings with the sleeves billowing down her silhouette. The dress closely fit the contours of her body, accentuated by the large medallion belt at her natural waist and the drop of a rope belt draping to her feet. At her neck is a wide golden collar dripping with small red jewels and finished with a large red gemstone sitting at the base of her throat. A large red velvet cloak shelters her back, decorated with abstract gold embroidery motifs and long yellow cords fastening at the neck which mirror the drape of the rope belt from above.

The "Beetle Wing" Dress juxtaposes different shades of a limited color palette to paradoxically combine the lush, nature of womanhood existing simultaneous to a state of decay and illness. It begins with two layers of smooth forest green lining peeking through the crocheted net of vibrant olive and leafy green yarn, speckled with dark blue and lilac. The varied greens shine and dapple as the wearer moves, shimmering in the light reminiscent of the gleaning of bugs and foliage under the rays of light slipping through the cover of a dense forest. Despite being from nature, the green jeweled shine of the beetle shells alludes to something unnatural, the drawing of insects lured to their deaths—or even the rich coloration signaling to wandering predators of their poisonous existence. And yet, this ornament forever suspends itself in death, the elytra harvested from the corpses of beetles to create an otherworldly allure. Within the dress's shell, the inner lining is hardly revealed except through the open, flowing sleeves. Looking at the cuffs to the sleeve interior exposes a different fabric, being a sickly yellow-green juxtaposing the lush and ornate outer layer. Although the wide cuff of the sleeve is heavily

ornamented with embroidery, it is unable to cover the yellowing chartreuse that creeps out of from the inside of the dress. At the neck is a faded golden high collar dotted with smaller red gems across the outer edge. The tarnished yellow gold emphasizes a sickly, aging quality seen in the lining and cuffs of the dress. In contrast to the decay is the deep red of the huge center gem brooch with surrounding smaller stones speaking to the vitality and passion of the wearer.

Yet the idea of diminishment is established again when looking further down at the waist. The oxidized metal belts sit atop each other at the waist, the lower one connecting to a rope belt of the same sickly yellow and green braided together with a hanging yellow drawstring bag at the hip. Though the associations of passion resurface in the deep red cloak enveloping the wearers back speaks of protection while the deep jewel tones remind the audience of the wearer's status; and accentuated by the abstracted gold embroidered beasts that also resemble ones found in illuminated Medieval manuscripts. Even so, as the light hits the peaks and folds of the protective cloak, the richness of the velvet becomes luminous and faded, as if decay is spreading. In toying with a complex color palette, the "Beetle Wing" Dress illustrates greater anxieties of sickness, decay, and the unnatural on the feminine body in both as a reminder as well as a spiting of the traditional woman's association with plentiful nature.

The complexity of the dress's texture through combining multiple techniques of fiber arts establishes the dress's ability to serve as armor of a warrior and unlike the protection of a nurturing mother. The majority of the dress's texture is an armored web crochet overlay, protecting its smooth inner lining to the point of near invisibility. Like a suit of armor, the bodice of the dress is of tighter knit stitches, shielding the soft underbelly of the wearer as a chest plate would, while the sleeves and skirt flow out in a mesh-like, even stitches to cast out a wide net off the body. Across the entire crocheted overlay is beetle-wing embroidery, entangled closely from

the torso and radiating outward more sparsely across the open web. The jeweled texture, glimmering across the complex weave, illustrates encrusted regality simultaneous to imagery of the corpses of a spider's prey trapped across her web.

Despite the visuals of power and defense, the dress also embodies the identity of the beetles—the hardened shell exterior of embroidery and layers protecting her soft and finite body. Back at the sleeves, the cuffs serve as the protection of the inner yellow-green lining. The cuffs have tambour embroidery using more green-blue elytra, silver sequins, blue and purple beads, and red gems sewn together to form the fruit and foliage between swaying brown beaded branches. These imitations of nature explicitly extend around and protect the opening in which the vulnerable inner lining is revealed. Like the nontraditional armor of the cuffs, the high neck collar made of a smooth, faded golden fabric gathered into a slight ruffle protecting the wearer's neck. Centered at the bottom of the collar is a large red gemstone inlaid in a brass prong setting with small red gems dotting across to resemble a jeweled gold choker. The imitation of wealth seemingly indicates the wearer's physical flaunting of her wealth and power while also being shackled to said riches. Tied beneath the collar is the velvet cloak draped across the shoulders, its rich, dense fabric of deep red with an opulent gold appliqué reinforces the image of material wealth. The density of the weave of the velvet resembles like the fur of a beast like the abstract forms of the appliqué sewn upon it, shielding the wearer's back. Here, decay is less explicitly stated, instead a dichotomy emerging of her vulnerability versus her defensiveness, notably not in the traditional maternal sense, and the reassurance of her wealth—yet ending on her back notes the animalization of her existence pushing against the normative role of wife and womanhood.

The natural curving versus the sharp, geometrical lines throughout the dress illustrates the

femininity of Lady Macbeth while paradoxically isolating her from it in indication of a deviation from her societal expectation as a woman. The dress itself sits closely to the body, emphasizing the natural curving lines of the feminine body across her torso right to the base of her spine where the dress gathers and pools into a train down to her feet. The skirt may gather and spill down in curving lines, but the back of the dress shows a strong, vertical component, no tailoring to create softened shapes besides containing the body. The dramatic length of the sleeves which flare from its close fit around the shoulders, collect at the biceps and drape down the body from clasped arms to create a reversed teardrop shape of a curving line—yet their weight as the wearer's arms come up create straight, stately parallel heights that reinforce her command. This dichotomic nature is again reflected in the belt that sits double on the body, once on

in the traditional maternal sense, and the reassurance of her wealth—yet ending on her back notes the animalization of her existence pushing against the normative role of wife and womanhood.

The natural curving versus the sharp, geometrical lines throughout the dress illustrates the femininity of Lady Macbeth while paradoxically isolating her from it in indication of a deviation from her societal expectation as a woman. The dress itself sits closely to the body, emphasizing the natural curving lines of the feminine body across her torso right to the base of her spine where the dress gathers and pools into a train down to her feet. The skirt may gather and spill down in curving lines, but the back of the dress shows a strong, vertical component, no tailoring to create softened shapes besides containing the body. The dramatic length of the sleeves which flare from its close fit around the shoulders, collect at the biceps and drape down the body from clasped arms to create a reversed teardrop shape of a curving line—yet their weight as the wearer's arms come up create straight, stately parallel heights that reinforce her command. This

dichotomic nature is again reflected in the belt that sits double on the body, once on the natural waist as to accentuate the feminine curve of the body and again, dropped lower, a knot tying it together at the hips which dip into a “Y” shape to cascade down the skirt. This length of rope creates a verticality at the hips, commanding a phallic imagery splitting the emphasis of feminine lines of the body, sitting between the legs at the crotch. Furthermore, combining this central straight line with the verticality of the sleeves forms a trinity of masculine lines down the front of the wearer, commanding the presence of power harkened by Christian divinity. These sharp, masculine lines are reinforced by the boxy verticality of the cloak at the wearer’s shoulders and her back, which protects and contains the wearer. Lady Macbeth is confined by the metal triangular clasps that tie together with rope, creating an additional vertical line by the string that dips down the chest of the wearer, mirroring the rope belt at the hips. The shapes and lines of the costume speak to the oxymoron of the woman in the polarized view within traditional English society, while she is not actually masculinized nor a masculine character in this version of the play, Lady Macbeth is instead understood as a socially unacceptable character and therefore cannot fully reenact womanhood.

The complication of this specific interpretation of Lady Macbeth as informed by this costume, will occur in a later section. While touched on in this formal analysis, the use of Indian embroidery is the focus of the analysis of the dress in understanding the complex ways in which gender, race, and power are constructed within late 19th century Victorian society. As stated in the introduction, these binaries are to be understood as enacted as tools of the colonial empire using the critical framework of Orientalism as to understand how English Society, from the late 1880s to the turn of the 20th century, constructed normativity, which requires contextualization that will be addressed in the following sections.

*Where in the world is the Aesthetic Movement? (Clothes Edition)*

Recalling the romantic, nostalgic, and even fantastical vision of the British Aestheticists, reflects the common qualities of Aesthetic Dress identified through the case study of the “Beetle Wing” Dress. The Aesthetic costume’s ideals can be defined as an outcast on the much more rigid shapes of Britain in the 1880s through 1890s, which required many layers of undergarment support—including the corset, a garment heavily reviled by Aestheticists. Some of the typical features of Aestheticism and costume are the uncorseted form, the long romantic “princess” sleeves, generous train, or even the echo of the splendor of nature with the heavy embroidery and naturalistic color palette which echo in the writings of followers of said movement.

Written in 1885, Oscar Wilde’s “PHILOSOPHY OF DRESS” aligns himself with Aesthetic thought as applied to the fashion of this time. Wilde, like other followers of Aestheticism, pushed for fashion to follow the lead of the natural world for silhouettes, colors, and patterns. Areas of major emphasis include shedding layers of undergarments, particularly the corset, and ornamenting the body with smaller and detailed natural motifs like flora. Aestheticists looked to Medieval Europe, particularly to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, and classical antiquity as inspiration for fashioning the body. However, Aestheticists also extracted from the spheres of their colonial empire—Wilde himself looks to “the shawl--sellers of the Eastern bazaar show to one the fineness of their goods” as reference of the types of fabrics people should use in their fashions.<sup>4</sup> Though Wilde hardly concerns himself with this singular mentioning of the non European source, the Aesthetic movement clearly draws inspiration from colonized peoples and their cultures. Consequently, it deepens the link between the borrowing of the “Oriental” techniques to create the “look” of Aestheticism; the tambour embroidery and

---

<sup>4</sup> Oscar Wilde, “PHILOSOPHY OF DRESS”, *New York Tribune*, 19 April, 1885, <https://www.readingdesign.org/philosophy-of-dress>



beetle-wing applique used in the “Beetle Wing Dress” both originate in India as Aari and elytra embroidery. The Orient is purposefully broad in its generalization of all of the Near East and Asia, and is the representation of the wide-spread “East” as decaying, “backwards”, and plagued with social illness (i.e., polygamy, sodomy, slavery, etc.) as juxtaposed to the so-called modernity experienced in the West.<sup>5</sup>

Cultural Historian Rebecca N. Mitchell dissects how period media frames the adherents of the Aesthetic movement as psychologically ill and as a danger to traditional English values, particularly within the domestic sphere.<sup>6</sup> Mitchell looks at stories and cartoons from humor magazine *Punch* in addition to satirical plays and operas as evidence for the use of Aesthetic fashion as ways to define characters as unstable and improper. This characterization is exemplified in *Patience* (1881) in which characters who participate in the Aesthetic movement are punished and must be corrected through the opera. Those who do not return to proper Victorian society, such as Aesthetic adherent Bunsthorpe and romantic rival to the “proper” eligible bachelors, are punished in the narrative, therefore ending up alone. In contrast, Lady Jane Grey, one of the lead female followers of Aestheticism, is still rewarded with marriage as she is repeatedly deemed nonthreatening throughout the narrative because her looks as a large, older woman prevent her from being defined as an actual Aesthetic woman.<sup>7</sup> Mitchell additionally links illness and societal transgression as illustrated by a slightly older but similar phenomena referred to as *chinamania*. Those satirical depictions were of suffering women completely obsessed with fine china to the point of delusions and visible physical decline in addition to ignore their families.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> “Orientalism,” Harvard Divinity School, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/orientalism>.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, Rebecca N. *Acute Chinamania: Pathologizing Aesthetic Dress*.

<sup>7</sup> Mitchell, Rebecca N. *Acute Chinamania: Pathologizing Aesthetic Dress*.

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell, Rebecca N. *Acute Chinamania: Pathologizing Aesthetic Dress*.

Mitchell's focus on understanding the equation of health and normativity, while clearly outlines the Aesthetic Dress as tied to physical and mental illness, does not address the larger issue of Orientalist themes in both Aestheticism and chinamania used to emphasize social and thereby moral transgression. While Mitchell points to scholarship and period evidence of the Aesthetic movement looking back to classical antiquity and the Medieval English arts, Mitchell does not discuss the effects of colonialism and Orientalism as additional sources of inspiration. While Mitchell's discussion of pathology of social ills offers greater understanding of period reception of Aesthetic Dress, one wonders how colonization and the ramifications of such extraction and violence shaped the Aesthetic Movement as well. By considering British colonialism as a context for Aesthetic dress, perhaps the objectification and curiosity that shaped British thirst for their colonized subjects' artifacts and fears of non-European subjects as they entered British society may have also shaped Victorian British culture.

Dress Historian Veronica Isaac links the involvement of actress Ellen Terry in the Aesthetic Movement through an analysis of her wardrobe (including the Beetle Wing Dress) and personal interactions with other Aestheticists.<sup>9</sup> Specifically Isaac looks at Terry's personal wardrobe, her close circle, and letters illustrating her input with the designing of her costumes. Interestingly, Terry dressed and photographed herself in kimonos, reminiscent to the way women of this time wore elaborate tea gowns in these private spaces—consequently the kimono is made to reflect the Aesthetic tendency to extract and borrow Near Eastern and Asiatic culture.<sup>10</sup> With Isaac only briefly mentioning the Aesthetic movement's interest in non-European cultural artifact and imagery, a larger argument is ignored on the exploration of the intimate self-negotiated through a foreign cultural garment—in this case being Japan and the contention from being

---

<sup>9</sup> Isaac, Veronica. 2012. *The Art of Costume in the Late Nineteenth Century*.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac, Veronica. 2012. *The Art of Costume in the Late Nineteenth Century*.

forced out of isolation by the West, while not exactly the same hierarchal relation as British exploration of their colonized subjects' culture like India and the "Beetle-wing" Dress, a relationship of European women and the "other" is still observed. Furthermore, the lack of dissection on the kimono appropriation as a tea gown (and often worn incorrectly in these archival photographs), is questionable as it was common for women to use kimonos in home photographs as an exotic robe. These stand-ins of Oriental clothing for tea robes are of further interest when observing the trend of the upper echelon using tea robes as a way of sensual, experimental, artistic expression of the self that would be highly inappropriate for the public setting. The Western European play with the regular and formal dress of the "Other" in the application of their artistic traditions and intimate self-fashioning reveal the equivalency of propriety to British visual language; and therefore, understanding the Orient and its references as immoral and degenerative to Western European traditional spaces.

The "Beetle-Wing" Dress is not the lone physical example of the Aesthetic movement in Ellen Terry's repertoire, as another costume from seven years prior at the same Lyceum Theater for the character of Camma in *The Cup* (Figure 2) represents it.<sup>11</sup> Supposedly the dress was to show "the best of Greek sculptures" with an explicit noting of "archaeological" study on classical antiquity life for the general depiction of the production.<sup>12</sup> Yet the dress looks holds very minimal resemblance to other 19th century Anglo interpretations of ancient Greek dress nor in many sculptures from Ancient Greece popular during this period in England. Although it is highly plausible embroidery and other embellishment existed on antiquated robes, in general, women's clothing were a long tunic pinned at both shoulders, with some kind of belt or girdle at

---

<sup>11</sup> "Ellen Terry, Shopping in Byzantium: Decadent Costumes Fit for a 'Temple of Art,'" Staging decadence, August 16, 2022, <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/shopping-in-byzantium>.

<sup>12</sup> "Ellen Terry, Shopping in Byzantium: Decadent Costumes Fit for a 'Temple of Art,'" Staging decadence, August 16, 2022, <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/shopping-in-byzantium>.

the waist that was visible or below the layers, and a cloak around the shoulders (Figures 3-4).<sup>13</sup>

Compared to this established historical wardrobe, Terry's costume is a robe fastened over a singular shoulder with the excess fabric draped her right arm while her left is only covered with the arm of a loose blouse beneath and a stack of thick bangles. Across Terry's flowing one shouldered robe are repetitive abstract floral motifs topped with some kind of sequin or bead embroidered. Terry's Camma costume resembles more strongly to some kind of interpretation of the Indian saree than any sort of Greek Statue (Figure 5).<sup>14</sup> The bangles, the draped single shoulder, decorative outer robe with a blouse underneath closely resembles both portraits and photographs from the late half of the 19th century of Indian women (Fig 5).<sup>15</sup>

*Part 3: Anglo-Indian Understanding in Aesthetic Dress (Colonizer plays dress-up again get your own closet)*

“Lady Macbeth seems an economical housekeeper, and evidently patronises local industries for her husband's clothes and the servants' liveries; but she takes care to do her own shopping in Byzantium”. – Oscar Wilde, 1888.<sup>16</sup>

Oscar Wilde's review lives in infamy regarding the origins of the Beetle-Wing Dress, like his commentary in “PHILSOPHY OF DRESS,” as being from the Near East. As mentioned throughout the last few sections, the beetle-wing and tambour embroidery are both of Indian origin and serve as the main forms of decoration for the costume. Consequently, as the main

---

<sup>13</sup> Bronze statuette of a young woman, late 6th Century BCE, Etruscan, Unknown Artist, Bronze, H. 11 9/16 in. (29.4 cm), 17.190.2066, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/249222> Marble funerary statues of a maiden and a little girl, Greek, Attic, ca. 320 BCE, Late Classical, Unknown Artist, Marble & Pentelic, H. of woman 56 7/8 in. (144.5 cm) H. of girl 40 9/16 in. (103 cm), 44.11.2, .3 <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254508>

<sup>14</sup> Sepia Photograph of Ellen Terry as Camma in “The Cup” (1881), Unknown.

<sup>15</sup> Binodini Dasi playing the role of Sahana in the play Mohini Pratima, from Madras (late 1800s), Unknown

<sup>16</sup> “‘Beetle Wing Dress’ for Lady Macbeth”, National Trust Collections, accessed October 17, 2024, <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1118839.1>.

embellishment and the dress's unique quality which gave it its moniker, the elytra and Aari embroidery in forward analysis should be on the Orientalist critique of Anglo-Indian interactions in Victorian media and visual culture. As the Orient blankets India as exotic, sensual, and in a suspended state of decay and the past, the late 19th century British audience then understands India as a violation to their “civilized” sensibilities. The appropriation of Indian visual motifs becomes an extension of this violation to normativity, a disruption of traditional British society and whose influence must be ousted.

Looking at Terry side by side with portraits of Indian woman in their cultural garb of the same period, the Aesthetic Movement's Orientalizing appropriation is obvious. Despite the constant linking of Byzantine environments and artistic fantasies labeled onto this garment and similar dress by followers of the Aestheticism, there is an intentionality to why India's textile arts are the main embellishments (Figure 7).<sup>17</sup> Aari embroidery, adopted and modified by the French to become known as tambour embroidery does not change its origins nor does it excuse its use from the Orientalist critique.<sup>18</sup> Although this technique was adapted to Western European decorative arts during the Silk Road and before the colonization of India—at the height of the British Empire, the application of an Indian-origin technique to a high-end British costume is understood as an extension of their colonial might within the vast Orient. Furthermore, the use of beetle-wing embroidery is distinctly Anglo-Indian, introduced after British colonization of India as a Indian origin embellishment for Mughal nobles (Figure 8).<sup>19</sup> The English preferred to keep

---

<sup>17</sup> Green cloth with embroidery, detail, Crafts Museum, Delhi, Digital Photograph, Photo taken by Yann (talk) 2012, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Green\\_cloth\\_with\\_embroidery\\_detail\\_Crafts\\_Museum\\_Delhi.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Green_cloth_with_embroidery_detail_Crafts_Museum_Delhi.jpg)

<sup>18</sup> Nikita. 2023. “Aari and Tambour.” *Piecework* 31 (4): 56–59. EBSCOhost.

<sup>19</sup> Sari, 1855 (collected), Unknown Artist, Ahmedabad (made), Length: 267cm & Width: 110cm, Victoria and Albert Museum, 0638(IS). <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O477831/sari-unknown/>.

the entire shape of the wing in contrast to the traditional technique of breaking the wings into small-sequin like pieces, causing elytra to be immediately identified as from the beetle. The “Beetle-wing” Dress, as an expression of colonial might and extraction, existed in the same period as the popularity of the elaborate exotic bird feather hats; and may show the entirety of the bug as a distortion of the traditional craft to express greater exoticism of its origins as well as an increased (literal) animalization of the craft. The fantasy of the colonist then positions itself in the Anglo understanding of Indian culture, the greater “moralizing” and “civilizing” West extracts back into their culture that reflect their misrepresentations of India.

The similar violent upending of India by British colonialism, like the same tear through Middle Eastern and African lands and people by Western Europe and the United States, allows for India’s generalization and distortion to be from Orientalism. Through clothing like the “Beetle-wing” Dress, the reiteration on accounts lacking critical perspective on the techniques used for construction and actual evaluation of inspirational sources in a globalized world cause a ripple into present understandings of India and downplay the legacy of colonialism. Exploring literary narratives, Art Historian Reina Lewis explores harem romances as to understand the larger history of authenticity, authorship, and accuracy—more specifically the constant questioning of who is qualified as Arab enough to write accurate narratives, even if the authors were both women and born in these spaces.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, there is a retrospective debate on the dramatized and embellished narratives that may bend or fully disfigure the truth of life in non-European spaces, specifically here within the private allure of the women-only harems, can

---

<sup>20</sup> Reina Lewis, “Oriental” Femininity as Cultural Commodity: Authorship, Authority, and Authenticity in *Edges of Empire : Orientalism and Visual Culture*, eds. Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts. *New Interventions in Art History* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Pub., 2005), 95-120.

be allowed by the so called “authentic” author.<sup>21</sup> Yet it was the craze by White European women popularizing these stories, as well as many of them partaking in the creation of their own Orientalist fantasies painted as alleged accounts for fame and fortune, that created further distortions of authenticity and accuracy.<sup>22</sup> Applying these same histories and ideas of accuracy, popularization, and authenticity to the dress is one of interest in anchoring Orientalism as it explains the intersection with the female driven workforce of the garments, particularly for the “Beetle-wing” Dress.

The designers, dressmakers, and wearers of the dress from the Aesthetic movement are not without their own narrative silencing—reflected in the majority of scholarship on the Beetle Wing Dress focusing more on Sargent’s painting than the actual people involved with its creation—yet it’s not as if the choices they did make do not reflect a larger societal ideal of the kind of woman they were to demonstrate on stage as this interpretation of Lady Macbeth.<sup>23</sup> Neither Terry, Nettleship, or Comyns-Carr live outside of the context of the British Empire nor Victorian norms no matter their status or praise in the public eye, and were likely aware on the ideas of the Orient they were drawing on to crutch the larger Aesthetic women’s portrayal as the frail, decaying, and in opposition to the proper Victorian woman.

One of the largest ideas surrounding the pathologization of Aesthetic Dress is represented on stage and in illustration utilizes the fashions of Aesthetic Movement observed in this adaptation of Macbeth and other cultural pieces underlined in the previous section by Rebecca N. Mitchell. More specifically, the danger of Aesthetic Dress is framed as a social transgression by

---

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, “‘Oriental’ Femininity as Cultural Commodity: Authorship, Authority, and Authenticity”, 95-120.

<sup>22</sup> Lewis, “‘Oriental’ Femininity as Cultural Commodity: Authorship, Authority, and Authenticity”, 95-120.

<sup>23</sup> This is not meant to be equating the struggle of women of color under colonial subjugation the same to the White, Wealthy British women entangled with the “Beetle-Wing” Dress.

the disruption of the spheres of domesticity, the place of the woman and family, in which they are framed as suffering from literal sickness by lack of morality—parallel to the same ideas social violation forced upon the colonized subject of the vast Orient (specifically India here) due to their lack of British Victorian normativity because they are permanently stuck in a state of decaying history. Any reference to or direct interruptions of proper British life, household, and society as reflected in Orientalist representation including appropriations of such, would “poison” traditional English life.

*Part 4: We have to talk about Lady Macbeth (Women & Empire)*

To fully understand the “Beetle-wing” dress and even the issue of Orientalism and the Aesthetic Movement, the costume understood by its initial purpose of theatre. This dress was one of the costumes for Lady Macbeth, performed and worn by Ellen Terry, who within this period was one of the most famous actors of the United Kingdom and more than well established in her career at this point. In the 1888-1892 production of the Lyceum Theater, this edition of Macbeth observed the 18th century British tradition of removing the scenes of Lady Macbeth’s involvement with the murder of Duncan.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Terry, known for her roles of sweet and vulnerable characters, played her role completely straight, now characterizing Lady Macbeth as a purely vulnerable and devoted character.<sup>25</sup>

Lady Macbeth as a white Scottish character, played by Ellen Terry, a white English actress, demonstrates the access to redemption within late 19th century Victorian media for the corrupted Aesthetic dressed characters. The curing of Aestheticism is understood as

---

<sup>24</sup> McDonald, Russ. *Look to the Lady : Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Judi Dench on the Shakespearean Stage*. Georgia Southern University. Jack N. and Addie D. Averitt Lecture Series: No. 12. University of Georgia Press, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> McDonald, Russ. *Look to the Lady : Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Judi Dench on the Shakespearean Stage*. Georgia Southern University. Jack N. and Addie D. Averitt Lecture Series: No. 12. University of Georgia Press, 2005.



Anglo-Saxon women being allowed to reinhabit their roles by reenacting normativity of traditional womanhood, seen in 1881's *Patience*, or be ousted from society with the suicide of Lady Macbeth. Aesthetic Dress and the "Beetle-wing" dress illustrate to us the greater Orientalist critique, which is that it is something that is identifiable as immoral, degenerate, and a "sickness", however unlike the role of the colonized and the Oriental, it is something that can shed. Aesthetic costume is then used to convey to the audiences in theatre productions, both satirical and tragedies, a great sympathy of the tragic character of the delusional and sickly Aesthetic women. The "Beetle-wing" Dress's Aesthetic features then speak to convey Lady Macbeth's sympathetic nature, her decay, her undying support of her husband, the struggle of her title and the tragedy of her social violation as childless with a husband who breaks from the norm to make an ultimately fatal bid for power.

The associations of Aestheticism with illness, combined with the decay present in Orientalist themes, separate Lady Macbeth from her typical murderess, power-hungry, and masculinized form, and rather played with full sympathy to the audience of her sickness. Like the Oriental woman such as Salome from *Salome* by Oscar Wilde (1893) or even the 20th century "Dragon Lady" trope who are dangerous, cold-hearted, and evil women who visually draw from Orientalist themes of sensuality, degeneracy, a vague and stereotypical cultural image—Lady Macbeth's elytra costume calls the foundations to these Oriental representations to the forefront to illustrate to the audience her fall to the "Eastern" corruption and impure illness. Further exploration on Orientalism as a critical framework to turn of the 19th century British costume could explore the concept of Ornamentalism, the recalling of the presence and body of the "Yellow Woman" through inanimate objects as applied for Indian woman in the use of Indian

embroidery as a stand-in for the decay already represented in Aesthetic women.<sup>26</sup> Contemporary comparisons of British culture and social norms could explore the continuity of colonialism's legacy inverting to the colonizer's sense of being and self, particularly with the 20th century productions done for Macbeth done in the UK with Judy Dench.

### *Figures*



Figure 1 (Front and Back): “Beetle Wing Dress” for Lady Macbeth, designed by Alice Laura Comyns Carr and Ada Cort Nettlehip, 1888. Cotton, silk, lace, beetle-wing cases, glass, and metal. National Trust Collections, Smallhythe Place (The Ellen Terry Collection).

Figure 1.1 (Left, Front): Shum, Jade. Personal photograph, January 8, 2024. Digital photograph on iPhone 13.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, “Ornamentation: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman,” *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (March 2018): 415–46, <https://doi.org/10.1086/696921>.

Figure 1.2 (Right, Back): Brunetti, David. 'Beetle Wing Dress' for Lady Macbeth by Alice Laura Vansittart Comyns Carr (1850 - 1927), 2020. National Trust Images.

<https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1118839.1>.



Figure 2: (Left) Sepia Photograph of Ellen Terry as Camma in "The Cup." 1881. Photograph.

Victoria and Albert Museum. <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/shopping-in-byzantium>.

Figure 3: Bronze statuette of a young woman, late 6th Century BCE, Etruscan. Bronze, H. 11

9/16 in. (29.4 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/249222>.



Figure 4: Marble funerary statues of a maiden and a little girl, Greek, Attic, ca. 320 BCE, Late Classical. Marble & Pentelic, H. of woman 56 7/8 in. (144.5 cm), H. of girl 40 9/16 in. (103 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/254508>



Figure 5 (Left): Fonçeca, John Joseph. *Portrait of a Hindu Woman wearing jewellery*, January 1872, Madras, India. Victoria and Albert Museum.

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O105514/portrait-of-a-hindu-woman-painting-fonceca-john-joseph/portrait-of-a-hindu-woman-painting-fon%C3%A7eca-john-joseph/>.

Figure 6 (Right): *Binodini Dasi playing the role of Sahana in the play Mohini Pratima, from Madras*. Late 1800s. Wikimedia Commons. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wiki>

pedia/commons/7/76/Binodini\_Dasi\_playing\_the\_role\_of\_Sahana\_in\_the\_play\_Mohini\_Pratima.jpg.



Figure 7: Unknown, Ahmedabad, India (made). Sari, 1855 (collected). L. 267cm & W. 110cm.

Victoria and Albert Museum. <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O477831/sari-unknown/>.

Figure 8: Yann (talk). Green cloth with embroidery, detail. 2012. Crafts Museum, Delhi. Digital Photograph. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Green\\_cloth\\_with\\_embroidery,\\_detail,\\_Crafts\\_Museum,\\_Delhi.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Green_cloth_with_embroidery,_detail,_Crafts_Museum,_Delhi.jpg).

## Primary Sources

Carr, Alice Vansittart Strettel. *Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences*. Edited by Eve Adam.

Second edition. Hutchinson & Co., Ltd., 1926. EBSCOhost.

Carr, Alice Comyns. "The Artistic Aspect of Dress." *Magazine of Art* Vol. V (1882): 242-250.

Internet Archive.

CurzonRoad. "ROMEO & JULIET: English Stage Actress Ellen Terry ~ Potion Scene (1911)".

YouTube, October 27, 2023, Archival Recording, 4:07. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QG4ZHx76CWU>.

Shakespeare, William, and Sir Henry Irving. *Macbeth, a tragedy, by William Shakespeare, as arranged for the stage by Henry Irving, and presented at the Lyceum Theatre, 29th December, 1888, with music by Arthur Sullivan* (Nassau Steam Press, 1888), Internet Archive.

"Sullivan and Shakespeare [Lyceum Theatre: Incidental Music to Macbeth]." *The Musical Times* 30, no. 552 (1889): 78–79. EBSCOhost.

Terry, Ellen, Dame, Edith Craig, and Christopher St. John. *Ellen Terry's Memoirs*. B. Blom, 1969.

Terry, Ellen, Dame, and Katharine Cockin. *The Collected Letters of Ellen Terry*. Pickering Masters. Pickering & Chatto, 2010.

Wilde, Oscar. "THE PHILOSOPHY OF DRESS." *New-York Tribune*, April 19, 1885.

ReadingDesign.

## Secondary Sources

Bristow, Joseph, ed. *Wilde Discoveries: Traditions, Histories, Archives*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013. Accessed September 30, 2024. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Calloway, Stephen, Lynn Federle Orr, and Esmé Whittaker. *The Cult of Beauty : The Victorian Avant-Garde 1860-1900*. [U.S. edition]. V&A Publishing, 2011.

Duncan, Sophie, 'Bad Women, Good Wives: Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth', *Shakespeare's Women and the Fin de Siècle*, Oxford English Monographs (Oxford, 2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 Jan. 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198790846.003.0003>, accessed 17 Sept. 2024.

Harvard Divinity School. "Orientalism." Accessed December 19, 2024.  
<https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/faq/orientalism>.

Hirshler, Erica E. 2023. *Fashioned by Sargent*. First Edition. MFA Publications. Isaac, Veronica. "“A Well-Dressed Actress’: Exploring the Theatrical Wardrobe of Ellen Terry.” *Costume: The Journal of the Costume Society* 52, no. 1 (March 2018): 74–96.  
doi:10.3366/cost.2018.0048.

Isaac, Veronica. 2012. "The Art of Costume in the Late Nineteenth Century: Highlights from the Wardrobe of the ‘Painter’s Actress.’" *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 39 (1): 93–111. doi:10.7227/NCTF.39.1.8.

Cheng, Anne Anlin. "Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory for the Yellow Woman." *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 3 (March 2018): 415–46. <https://doi.org/10.1086/696921>.

Jones, Jocelyn Ackforth-, and Mary Roberts. *Edges of Empire : Orientalism and Visual Culture*. New Interventions in Art History. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Pub., 2005. Staging decadence. "Ellen Terry, Shopping in Byzantium: Decadent Costumes Fit for a ‘Temple of Art,’" August 16, 2022. <https://www.stagingdecadence.com/blog/shopping-in-byzantium>.

Isaac, Veronica. "Towards a new methodology for working with historic theatre costume: A

- biographical approach focusing on Ellen Terry's 'Beetlewing Dress'." *Studies in Costume & Performance*, vol. 2, no. 2, Dec. 2017, pp. 115+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/A509321807/AONE?u=mmln\\_w\\_umassamh&sid=bookmarkAONE&xid=06108b1d](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A509321807/AONE?u=mmln_w_umassamh&sid=bookmarkAONE&xid=06108b1d). Accessed 30 Sept. 2024.
- Lewis, Reina. "'Oriental' Femininity as Cultural Commodity: Authorship, Authority, and Authenticity" in *Edges of Empire : Orientalism and Visual Culture*, eds. Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts. *New Interventions in Art History*. Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Pub., 2005.
- Margaret, Maynard. 2024. "'A Dream of Fair Women': Revival Dress and the Formation of Late Victorian Images of Femininity." *Classic and Modern Writings on Fashion*. Accessed September 18. doi:10.5040/9781847887153.v3-0085.
- McDonald, Russ. *Look to the Lady : Sarah Siddons, Ellen Terry, and Judi Dench on the Shakespearean Stage*. Georgia Southern University. Jack N. and Addie D. Averitt Lecture Series: No. 12. University of Georgia Press, 2005.
- Mitchell, Rebecca N. "Acute Chinamania: Pathologizing Aesthetic Dress." *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body, & Culture* 14, no. 1 (March 2010): 45–64.  
doi:10.2752/175174110X12544983515277. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,sso&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.1316079&site=eds-live&scope=site>.
- Nikita. 2023. "Aari and Tambour." *Piecework* 31 (4): 56–59. EBSCOhost. National Trust Collections. "'Beetle Wing Dress' for Lady Macbeth." Accessed October 17, 2024. <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1118839.1>.
- Petrov, Julia A., and Gudrun D. Whitehead, eds. *Fashioning Horror. Dressing to Kill on Screen*



- and in Literature*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020. EBSCOhost.
- Ribeiro, Aileen. *Clothing Art : The Visual Culture of Fashion, 1600-1914*. Yale University Press, 2017.
- Shin, Jooyoung. "Formative Representation of Sensuality in 19th Century Fashion." *Research Journal of Textile & Apparel* 16, no. 4 (November 2012): 59–70. doi:10.1108/RJTA-16-04-2012-B007.
- Tolini, Michelle. "'Beetle Abominations' and Birds on Bonnets: Zoological Fantasy in Late Nineteenth-Century Dress." *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 13. EBSCOhost.
- Wahl, Kimberly. 2015. "Picturing the Material/Manifesting the Visual: Aesthetic Dress in Late Nineteenth-Century British Culture." In *Dress History: New Directions in Theory and Practice*, edited by Charlotte Nicklas and Annebella Pollen, 97–112. London, England: Bloomsbury Academic. EBSCOhost.
- Wahl, Kimberly. *Dressed as in a Painting : Women and British Aestheticism in an Age of Reform*. Becoming Modern / Reading Dress. University of New Hampshire Press, 2013. EBSCOhost.
- Zeleny, Rachael Baitch. 2013. "Painting an Ethos: The Actress, the Angel in the House, and Pre Raphaelite Ellen Terry." *Rhetoric Review* 32 (4): 397–418. doi:10.1080/07350198.2013.828547.