Emma Ferry

"A pair of scissors, and one daring, if trembling, snip -!" Making Mrs. Oliphant's *Dress*

A charge of plagiarism is a very favourite one, and often made. It seems, indeed, to afford a keen pleasure to many people to depreciate a writer by pointing with anxious zeal where he got his finest lines and most powerful effects ([Oliphant], Commentary 164-5).[1]

Introduction:

Devised and edited by the Reverend William John Loftie (1839-1911), the Art at Home Series published by Macmillan & Co. between 1876 and 1883, was a popular collection of domestic advice manuals aimed at a growing lower middle-class readership. The Series eventually encompassed subjects as diverse as *Amateur Theatricals* (1879) and *The Minor Arts* (1880), with some of the best known being the volumes dealing with aspects of interior design and decoration. Elsewhere I have discussed these little books, their female authors, and the late nineteenth century domestic interior.[2] Here, however, I want to focus upon the volume devoted to the subject of *Dress*, written in 1878 by the well-known Scottish novelist, Margaret Oliphant (1828-97).

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[1] This article by Margaret Oliphant was published anonymously as "A Commentary in an Easy Chair". *The Spectator*, 1st February 1890: pp. 164-5.

[2] Emma Ferry, "'Any lady can do this without much trouble…' Class and Gender in *The Dining Room* (1878)". *Interiors: Design Architecture Culture*, 5: 2, July 2014, pp. 141-159; "Writing Home: The Colonial Memories of Lady Barker, 1870-1904". *Biography, Identity and the Modern Interior*, edited by Penny Sparke and Anne Massey, Ashgate, 2013, pp. 53-67; " 'The other Miss Faulkner': Mrs Orrinsmith and the Art at Home Series". *The Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. XXIII, No.3, summer 2011,pp. 47-64; "'information for the ignorant and aid for the advancing' Macmillan's Art at Home Series, 1876-1883". *Design and the Modern Magazine* edited by Jeremy Aynsley and Kate Forde, Manchester University Press, 2007, pp. 134-155; and "'Decorators may be compared to doctors': An Analysis of Rhoda and Agnes Garrett's *Suggestions for House Decoration* (1876)" *Journal of Design History*, 16: 1, spring 2003, pp. 15-33.

In 2016, Oliphant's book was considered in Patricia Zakreski's article "Fashioning the Domestic Novel: Rewriting Narrative Patterns in Margaret Oliphant's *Phoebe, Junior* and *Dress*" for the *Journal of Victorian Culture.* Here, in offering "a different view of the dominant tropes concerning women's writing in the nineteenth century: the relationship between the needle and the pen" (57), Zakreski fixed upon Oliphant's call for "a vigorous pair of scissors" (*Dress* 96). This was a useful device – physical and metaphorical – which allowed Zakreski to argue that in both texts, Oliphant "explored the constructive potential of cutting apart, positing a model of artistry that developed a fundamental connection between form, fashion, and fragmentation" (57). Referring to the work of feminist artists and theorists, particularly Miriam Schapiro and Melissa Meyer's concept of *femmage* (66-69)[3], and quoting from Ellen Gruber Garvey's study of American scrapbooks, *Writing with Scissors* (2013), Zakreski suggests "the power to cut and curate printed material also operated as a type of authorship that 'entailed reshaping and recirculating existing writing'" and argues the act of "Cutting and pasting therefore expresses a particularly female form of art that acknowledges fragmentation as positive creative strategy" (62-63). The purpose of my article is not to dispute Zakreski's interesting conclusion that Oliphant's call for scissors promotes "the possibility of individuals reshaping dresses, artistic works, or novels to their own aesthetic and practical purposes" (73). Instead, in true Oliphantine style, I will borrow her tools of analysis – those scissors – to discuss the making of Mrs. Oliphant's *Dress*. While Zakreski uses this volume from the Art at Home Series to consider the changing narrative structures in Oliphant's domestic realism, my research on *Dress* reveals just as much about the expedient world of nineteenth century print culture and publishing practices as it does about Victorian fiction or fashion. Drawing upon previously unpublished sources from the Macmillan Archive and contemporary reviews, I aim to chart the book's production and

[3] This article was later expanded as a chapter in *Collage: Critical Views,* edited by Katherine Hoffman, UMI Research Press, 1989, pp. 295–315.

reception to reveal the intertextual relationships *Dress* has with many other sources – literary, visual, and sartorial – the materials which Oliphant snipped and stitched together seamlessly to make her book. Without wishing to depreciate Oliphant as a writer by pointing with anxious zeal where she got her finest lines and most powerful effects, the following unpicking and de-construction of *Dress* will identify the texts, those reshaped and recirculated existing [male] writings, from which it was fashioned.

In addition, this article aims to problematize *Dress* as a source for historians of clothing and fashion writing by drawing attention to the challenges of using advice literature as historical evidence. Occupying a position somewhere "between fact and fiction" advice literature is often used as "complementary or additional source material" (Lees-Maffei 1). However, much of my research on advice manuals suggests that these books, like any other texts, are constructed discourses that cannot be used as straightforward historical evidence (Ferry, *Decorators*). Written by upper-middle class authors for lower-middle class readers, rather than revealing what people wore, the fashion advice given in manuals such as *Dress* is not evidence of actual consumption beyond the purchase of the book; very often it is the clothing counselled *against* which offers a glimpse of contemporary sartorial practices. Instead, advice literature should be understood as a distinct literary genre with its own traditions and conventions. It is a complex source more often concerned with the formation of class and gender ideologies than providing practical guidance for their original readers or facts for later historians; indeed these "materials did not simply reflect a 'real' historical subject but helped to produce it through their discursive practices" (Langland 24). Nonetheless, the real value of studying this "ephemeral, market-led form of writing" is that it "reveals so much about the features of a particular historical moment" (Humble xv-xvi). As this article will demonstrate, Oliphant's *Dress* may not provide much in the way of sartorial guidance, but like the other

books in the Art at Home Series, it does articulate a wide range of contemporary anxieties which include "new constructions of class, revised gender roles and relations, regional and national identities, history, economics and the momentous clash between science and religion" (xvi). Highlighting "gender roles" as a major concern of Oliphant's text in which she amusingly critiques both male dandies *and* male designers, this article offers a contribution to existing Oliphant scholarship that will also re-position *Dress* in Victorian fashion history.

Dress and Mrs. Oliphant; Mrs. Oliphant and *Dress* (1878)

The discourse of advice literature is inextricably bound up with the background of the author. Fortunately, the wealth of studies published by Oliphant scholars provides more than enough biographical information and literary history. Once the "Queen of popular fiction" (O'Mealy 64), Margaret Oliphant wrote nearly one hundred novels, more than two dozen biographies and histories, and hundreds of articles published in leading journals including *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Spectator*, and *Macmillan's Magazine*. Having fallen out of favour in the first part of the twentieth century, since the late 1960s, her work has been reconsidered, revaluated, and recovered. Her rehabilitation as an important Victorian novelist has been confirmed by the 25-volume edition of the *Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant* edited by Elisabeth Jay and Joanne Shattock and published by Pickering & Chatto/Routledge (2011-6). This ambitious venture encompasses a wide range of fiction and non-fiction which re-establishes Oliphant's position as a significant nineteenth century female author and as an influential critical commentator.

The place of *Dress* within Oliphant's wider oeuvre is slightly problematic. In a single footnote, Vineta and Robert Colby (1966), who undertook the first serious attempt at a re-

evaluation of her work (O'Mealy 65), suggested the publication of *Dress* indicated a "more than casual interest in fashion" (Colby 258 n14). Describing it as a "chatty volume" they argued it was "nevertheless distinguished from the other works in the series by its graceful writing and its numerous literary references" which included "allusions to *Sartor Resartus* and a chapter on 'Dress in the Poets'" (258 n14). Almost thirty years later, in the concluding paragraphs of her biography of Oliphant, Elisabeth Jay (1995) also noted she "was sufficiently interested in 'dress' to contribute a book on the subject to Macmillan's Art in the Home [sic] series" (304). Jay argued in *Dress* Oliphant developed "the subject's moral aspect and its gender implications, dismissing those who would see it as vanity and rebutting those who see it as trivial and therefore an exclusively feminine preoccupation" (304-5). Beyond these perceptive remarks, however, *Dress* has rarely been considered in detail. Moreover, while several of the Contributing Editors have referred to *Dress*, publishing constraints meant it was not included in the *Selected Works*. Joanne Shattock and Elisabeth Jay, the Series Editors, have explained that originally *Dress* was on a "long list of possibilities", but "fell by the wayside", when Pickering & Chatto agreed to a 25-volume edition rather than the proposed thirty volumes (Shattock). When selecting works for inclusion in the Series, the Editors had to consider groupings of texts and unfortunately, *Dress* did not sit readily with the main categories into which Oliphant's non-fiction (literary criticism, historical and biographical work) had been organized. Both Editors agreed that had the initial proposal for 30-volume series been approved then room might have been found for *Dress*.[4]

[4] *Dress* was also omitted from an earlier collection of Oliphant's work, *The Collected Writings of Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897)* produced on 80 reels microfilm in 1995 by Adam Matthews. Except for *Dress*, this collection includes copies of the first editions of her fiction and the nonfiction collected and published during her lifetime. I am very grateful to Professors Elisabeth Jay and Joanne Shattock, the Series Editors of *The Selected Works of Margaret Oliphant* for explaining the absence of *Dress*

Many Oliphant scholars have explored the theme of 'dress' within her novels, highlighting the ways in which she used clothing as expressions of "female values and emotion" (Jay 304) *and* as social signifiers. For instance, Elizabeth Langland (1995) considered Victorian social semiotics in two novels from Oliphant's Chronicles of Carlingford: *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) and *Phoebe, Junior* (1876) identifying dress as a "discursive practice; a signifier of class which prescribes a whole range of beliefs, behaviours and relationships" (175). Similarly, also focussing upon *Phoebe, Junior,* Talia Schaffer (2000) discussed Oliphant's use of "aesthetic fashions as an important new signifying system" (39). Arlene Young (2005) and Christina Bayles Kortsch (2009) have both discussed Oliphant's later novel, *Kirsteen* (1890), which tells the story of an early-nineteenth century dressmaker, in their respective studies of literature and aspects of nineteenth century dress culture. The latter, as Zakreski also notes, "depicts dressmaking and the constructive work of stitching as a particularly feminine form of professional artistic labour comparable with novel-writing" (57). Besides Zakreski, however, only Elsie B. Michie (2002) has considered Oliphant's *Dress* alongside the theme of dress in her fiction. Quoting at length from *Dress*, Michie argued "Oliphant consistently discusses clothing in political language" and that "the politics of dress runs throughout her novels" (307). Oliphant does indeed comment "Fashion has always been stronger than legislation" and "we are less certain to fight for our liberties than our clothes" (*Dress* 9) though I suspect she is being ironic.

In contrast, given its title, date of publication and ostensible content, Oliphant's *Dress* has been quoted from and mentioned (albeit briefly) in several histories of Victorian dress; especially those which consider late-nineteenth century fashions for Aesthetic and Artistic Dress, the Dress Reform Movement and the influence of so-called South Kensington

Hellenism.[5] *Dress* is discussed by Kimberly Wahl (2013), who, in describing Oliphant as "an active dress reformer" (11) over-states her significance within the discourses of late-nineteenth century Dress Reform.[6] Indeed, Oliphant's reformist reputation appears to be largely based upon the publication of *Dress*, even though within its pages she remarks with typical irony:

> There have been, we believe one or two dress-reformation societies, and many ladies have made strenuous exertions to improve, if not their own, at least the dress of their maids and dependants – a matter so much the more easy that the reformers were not the reformed (64).

Without drawing a distinction between advice and evidence nor between prescription and practice, dress historians tend to use *Dress* as a straightforward historical source; and, at times, it does indeed provide scholars with snippets of information about fashionable garments and the physical constraints of wearing them (Roberts 557-8; Taylor 265). None, however, has questioned the authority of Oliphant to write on this subject nor explained why she came to publish *Dress;* a book which is "somewhat exceptional when placed in the context of her entire oeuvre" (Jay). While Oliphant may have been "fascinated by the contrast between the intransigent materialism of clothes themselves and the subtle gradations of inner feeling they could disguise or reveal" (Jay 305), I would argue it really is *not* false

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[5] For example Alison Gernsheim, *Fashion and Reality 1840-1914*, Faber & Faber, 1963; Helen E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman", *Signs,* 2(3): spring 1977, pp. 554-69; Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: ideals of feminine beauty from the Victorian era to the Jazz Age*, Oxford University Press, 1985; Aileen Ribeiro, *Dress and Morality*, Batsford, 1986; Radu Stern, *Against Fashion: Clothing as Art*, MIT Press, 2003; and Lou Taylor, *Establishing Dress History*, Manchester University Press, 2004.

[6] Interestingly, Stella Mary Newton seminal study, *Health, Art and Reason: Dress Reformers of the Nineteenth Century*, John Murray, 1974, does refer to Oliphant (pp.51-52) but only mentions her novels *At his Gates* (1872) and *Carita* (1877) rather than *Dress.*

modesty which leads her to admit on the first page of *Dress* that: "This high mystery ought to have had an interpreter more sure of her own opinions and possessed of a more elevated creed than I can boast of" (1).[7]

***Dress*: Making**

Rather than evidence of consumption practices, advice literature should be understood to represent the experiences and views of those involved with the production of the advice offered. Fortunately, the making of *Dress* and the other books in Art at Home Series can be traced through correspondence collated in the General Letter Books and other collections of letters held in the Macmillan Archive at the British Library and at the University of Reading.[8] A fascinating manuscript source, they outline the initial plan for the Series, record the commissioning of authors, illustrators, engravers, and bookbinders, and chart the progress of the volumes as they were written, or in some cases remained unwritten. They also provide an insight into the marketing techniques employed, refer to reviews, and indicate the overall success of the venture.

A book on *Dress* was among one of the earliest suggestions made by the Reverend Loftie, the editor of the Series, who in a letter to the publisher Alexander Macmillan, dated March 1876, outlined his plans for an initial eight books which would eventually form part of the Art at

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[7] An acknowledged authority on dress at this time was of course, Mrs Eliza Mary Haweis (1848-98), whose articles on dress for *St Paul's Magazine* (1873); *The Queen* (1878) and *The Art Journal* (1880) were eventually published as *The Art of Beauty* (1878) and *The Art of Dress* (1879). Her books are sometimes mistakenly listed as titles from Macmillan's Art at Home Series and are often considered alongside, or confused with, Oliphant's *Dress*. This is probably because Mrs Haweis' books were included in the 1977-8 Garland Publishing reprint of 'forty-eight of the most important books from "The Æsthetic Movement and the Arts and Crafts Movement" edited by Rodney Shewan and Peter Stansky, as were seven of the original twelve Art at Home Series, including *Dress*. In *The Art of Decoration*, Chatto & Windus, 1881, pp. 336-7, Mrs Haweis is most critical of the Art at Home Series; I suspect sour grapes!

[88] See https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/the-macmillan-archive [accessed 14 August 2022]

Home Series. Typical of both the "critical stance towards change" and the "moral advice" offered by the clergy writing in this genre (Branca 35), Loftie suggested a book with the proposed title *Good Things we Have Lost or Hints from Old English Households*. This would include a chapter on Dress "to show the possibility of combining becoming costume with cheapness and durability, & to advocate a return to the older fashions in having a few things of value, instead of a constant change of fashion in flimsy materials". Later in the same letter he also suggested a separate volume titled "*Dress*" (55075/122-8).

Margaret Oliphant's involvement with the series (and her ambivalence towards the subject) is recorded in a letter to Alexander Macmillan dated October 1877. She wrote:

> I am much amused by the idea of a book on dress – but I fear I have no conscience in the matter and believe in M. Worth as much as Mr. Rossetti … as that I might be too heterodox for you. However, if you are not afraid I think I should be rather entertained by doing it. I suppose there is no hurry – for I certainly could not do it very soon (54919/63).

Hardly the words of an active dress reformer!

After writing to Macmillan again in December 1877 to ask, "when you want that little book about dress you have asked me to write" (Oliphant 54919/67), it appears a January deadline was agreed. At the end of February, however, Oliphant confessed to George Macmillan: "I have been putting it off as I heard from Mr. Loftie … that he was to be beyond the reach of the post for a long time" (54919/75). Consequently, a new deadline of April 1878 was asked for and agreed. George Macmillan reassured her "We shall be quite content if we can have

the Dress book in April. It will be a very good time for publishing" (55405/241). It seems, however, this was an opportunity missed, for at the end of May 1878 George Macmillan, wrote again to chivvy things along: "Do I not remember something being said about "Dress" being ready in April? It is now not much short of June" (55406/108). An abject apology followed: "I am so sorry – the 'Dress' is not ready – What can I say for myself?" Explaining the illness of her younger son had delayed completion of the manuscript, she continued: "I am very ashamed of myself. I have now got all my materials ready and … the work will not take long" (Oliphant 54919/82). A sympathetic George Macmillan replied (55406/145) and later wrote to Loftie to explain the situation; he also suggested the publication of *Dress* should be delayed until October to take advantage of the lucrative Christmas market, adding: "She however, need not be told this" (55406/147). Eventually, on 3rd July 1878, Oliphant sent her manuscript to Macmillan (54919/84) and a receipt in the Letter Books recorded she "Received of Macmillan & Company Publishers the sum of fifty pounds for the copyright of 'Dress'" on 16th August 1878 (54919/90).

The amount Oliphant was paid for her copyright was more than the sum received by many of the other lesser-known authors contributing to the Art at Home Series. In his initial letter to Macmillan, Loftie anticipated differentiated financial arrangements. Indeed, he suggested "A fixed price, of say, £40 to authors, … would perhaps do, but I dare say it would be necessary to offer a large sum to a few whose names are important" (55075/122-128). The correspondence shows Oliphant, a highly successful novelist and reviewer, who supported her family through her writing, asked on at least two occasions "– what am I to have for it?" (54919/67 and 54919/72). In reply, George Lillie Craik (1837-1905), the husband of novelist Dinah Mulock Craik (1826-87) and a partner in the publishing firm, explained the usual arrangement with the other writers of the Art at Home Series was £40 for the copyright.

He wrote "I don't know if you think this would repay you – I don't know what trouble the book would give you but we would not grudge £50 if you thought it might" (55401/734).[9]

Despite her reputation, only a single edition of 3000 copies of *Dress* was issued in Britain in November 1878, but it was one of four volumes in the Art at Home Series to be published in America by Porter & Coates of Philadelphia.[10] She received a similar fee for the American book, largely through negotiations undertaken by Loftie, who wrote to Coates explaining "Mrs. Oliphant will certainly not be satisfied with so small a sum as £20 … Her books are eagerly bought in America & I shall be anxious to know how much I may offer her. I would suggest £50" (55402/371). The American version of *Dress* – identical in every way to the British edition except for outward appearances – was bound in brown cloth rather than an Aesthetic blue-grey. It was decorated with the Art at Home motif designed by Harry Soane, rather than the Macmillan insignia (Fig. 1).

[9] For information about Oliphant's friendship with the Craiks, see George Worth's chapter on 'Margaret Oliphant and *Macmillan's Magazine*' in *Macmillan: a publishing tradition*, edited by Elizabeth James, Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, pp. 83-102.

[10] The four volumes in the Art at Home Series published by Porter and Coates were Agnes & Rhoda Garrett's *Suggestions for House Decoration* (1876), W. J. Loftie's *A Plea for Art in the House* (1876), John Pyke Hullah's *Music in the House* (1877) and Mrs Oliphant's *Dress* (1878). Of the twelve books which eventually comprised Macmillan's Art at Home Series, Margaret Oliphant's volume was among a small group that were only issued once in a single printing of 3000 copies. These were Lady Pollock's *Amateur Theatricals* (1879), C. G. Leland's *The Minor Arts* (1880), and Elizabeth Glaister's *Needlework* (1880). This compares with other, more successful, volumes which were printed twice including 6000 copies of Mrs Orrinsmith's *The Drawing-Room*, (1877) and 5000 copies of both Mrs Loftie's *The Dining Room* (1878) and Lady Barker's *The Bedroom and Boudoir* (1878). 5000 copies of John Hullah's *Music in the House* (1877) were also issued but in four printings. William Loftie's *A Plea for Art in the House* (1876) was printed five times totalling 6000 copies, and there were six printings of Rhoda & Agnes Garrett's *Suggestions for House Decoration* (1876) resulting in 7500 copies. 8000 copies of Andrew Lang's *The Library* (1881) were produced in two printings, and this volume was also issued in a large format edition of 480 copies. The most successful volume in the Art at Home Series was Tristram Ellis's *Sketching from Nature* (1883) which was reprinted six times in three different editions making 11000 copies in total.

Elsewhere, I have discussed the complex way in which three of the books in the Art at Home Series were illustrated by re-using images from the articles on "Beds, Tables, Stools and Candlesticks", written by the American art critic Clarence M. Cook (1828-1900). These first appeared in *Scribner's Illustrated Monthly* between June 1875 and May 1877 and were later collected and published as *The House Beautiful* (1878). Having turned down Cook's proposal to publish his book in London, Macmillan & Co. offered to buy electrotypes of "the very beautiful illustrations" planning to "re-write the text so as to suit it to English requirements" (55402/372). Unfortunately, due to copyright restrictions, the re-use of the images was to prevent their re-publication in the United States (Ferry *information*). Writing to Porter & Coates, Macmillan suggested they might instead "find it possible to take plates of several volumes which are now in preparation" which at that stage included Mrs. Oliphant's book on "Dress" and Lady Pollock's "Private Theatricals" (55405/429).[11]

While the Macmillan Archive reveals *Dress* was illustrated in a relatively straightforward manner, this was still a process which also reshaped and recirculated existing images. Given the emphasis upon "Art" in the Art at Home Series, the inclusion of illustrations was an important consideration and Oliphant had raised this question at the end of December 1877 when she wrote to Macmillan asking "and how about the illustrations of it? I cannot do them myself as I presume the Miss Garretts have done. But I could get them done by a friend Richard R Holmes … Do you pay for this or must I?" (54919/67). Oliphant's friend, Sir Richard Rivington Holmes (1835-1911), was the Queen's Librarian at Windsor Castle and a frequent amateur exhibitor at the Royal Academy, the Grosvenor, and New Galleries (Woods). The correspondence suggests Holmes' illustrations were added to the manuscript at the very last minute. In early July 1878, Oliphant, having sent "the greater part" of her

[11] Lady Pollock's work written in collaboration with her son Walter Herries Pollock was finally titled *Amateur Theatricals* but was not published in the USA.

'dress' book to Macmillan, asked that "the MS to be put in type as soon as possible that the illustrations may be done which I don't see any way of getting in any other manner" (54919/84). Confirming these arrangements with Loftie, Alexander Macmillan commented: "I suppose she means that she cannot get her artist to read her MS. Perhaps her editor may require type before he can edit it" (55406/372). Having also transcribed Oliphant's "excruciatingly illegible hand" (Jay *Editing* 136) during my own research, I think Macmillan was probably correct![12]

Bearing in mind that *Dress* was planned as a book of advice aimed explicitly at "people of moderate or small income" (Loftie 55075/122), the illustrations themselves would have been remarkably unhelpful to any lower-middle class readers anxious for guidance about what to wear. Most of the ten images depict examples of historical dress copied by Holmes from a variety of visual sources. These include the miniature of Christine de Pizan in her study at the beginning of the *Cent balades* (c.1410-14) which was perhaps an oblique reference to Oliphant as a female writer as well as an example of medieval dress; Lucas Horenbout's miniature of Henry VIII (c. 1526); Wenceslas Hollar's engraving of *Mercatoris Londinensis Filia* or the *London Merchant's Daughter* (1643) (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3); and, Dirk Stoop's portrait of Catherine of Braganza (1660). The majority are included, or referred to, by Oliphant in the largest chapter in *Dress* titled "Historical" which discusses fashions from the past, whereas images of current fashions appear in the following chapter titled "What is to be Done?" and in her "Conclusion".

[12] Craik who had been involved in a serious accident that affected his ability to write also had illegible handwriting. When reading the Oliphant-Craik correspondence extreme patience and excellent eyesight are required.

Of only four contemporary images, one, which depicts a fashionable *princesse* dress[13], has been copied directly from an issue of the American magazine *Harper's Bazar (*27 April 1878) (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5). This "elegant full-dress toilette" designed to be worn at receptions is described in minute detail in the journal, which also provided cut paper-patterns for the reader to re-create the garments at home (277). Interestingly, in yet another example of reshaping and recirculating, this image had in turn been copied from a French fashion plate from *La Mode Artistique* depicting No. 220 "Toilette du Diner" par Gustave Janet (Fig. 6).[14] This instance of writing with scissors indicates both the routes taken to disseminate fashion from Parisian design to American journal to British advice manual and the speed at which these this type of Victorian print culture trickled down.

Oliphant's comments about this image also demonstrate how prescriptive advice literature was often critical of contemporary practice. Although generally approving of the *princesse* style, Oliphant described this specific example of the "gown of the present day" as having "drawbacks so marked that we do not wonder at the violence of the animadversions it has called forth" (70). She particularly objected to its close-fitting "narrow bag" of a skirt, swathed between the waist and the ankles with a "winding scarf" or embroidered "bandage" (76), complaining that "the bondage of this dress at times reaches, or is said to reach, the extravagance of preventing movement altogether, so that a lady in full dress can hardly walk, can with difficulty get upstairs, and cannot by any possibility sit down" (70).

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[13] A dress made without a seam at the waist, the bodice and skirt being cut in one and the skirt gored. See Cumming, Valerie. *The Dictionary of Fashion History*, Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 164.

[14] I am very grateful to Julia Petrov for drawing my attention to this image in the Costume History Fashion Plates from the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Libraries. This is available at http://libmma.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15324coll12/id/9913/rec/88 [accessed 14 August 2022]

As someone who famously described herself as a "fat, commonplace little woman" (*Autobiography* 6), Oliphant noted, no doubt with heart-felt experience, that the effect of this close-fitting garment upon "elderly women whose persons are neither slim nor small is proportionately terrible" (*Dress* 70). Throughout *Dress* the problem of suitable styles for older women and those whom she describes as "the dowdy, the dumpy or the ordinary" (4) is a recurring theme. It is perhaps not surprising that a wistful nostalgia for the fashions of her youth can be detected; even for the functional aspects of the much-maligned crinoline, which although "a horror to the eye" offending "every law of beauty and every instinct of grace" nonetheless had "comfort in it" (55). She explained its benefits to her imagined reader: "No-one but a woman knows how her dress twists about her knees, doubles her fatigue, and arrests her locomotive powers. The crinoline reduced this inconvenience to its minimum" (55).[15]

Although Oliphant admits it is much easier "to indicate what is wanting to the comfort and beauty of dress at the present time, than to propose a remedy for those evils" (*Dress* 64), an example of contemporary fashion she did admire for its practicality was discussed and illustrated in her "Conclusion". Signed by Holmes and titled simply "Cowes 1878" (Fig. 7), this image depicts a tailor-made yachting suit probably by either John Redfern & Sons or John Morgan of Ryde on the Isle of Wight, which was transformed "in the 1870s when the Prince and Princess of Wales took up yachting and the local regatta became a fashionable society event attracting international participation" (North 146). It is certainly similar to the examples depicted in *The Queen* and discussed in Susan North's article on "John Redfern & Sons" for *Costume* (2008).[16] It also bears a striking resemblance to the outfit worn by

[15] An albumen *carte de visite* in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London (NPG x8721) dated c. 1860s captures Mrs Oliphant wearing a crinoline. This is available at: https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw127794/Margaret-Oliphant-Wilson-Oliphant [accessed 14 August 2022]

[16] I am very grateful to Dr Susan North for discussing Holmes' illustration.

Alexandra, Princess of Wales in a photograph probably taken on board the Royal Yacht *Osborne* during the Cowes Regatta (RCIN 2106255) (Fig. 8). This annual event in the British social calendar is usually held in the first week in August – between Glorious Goodwood and the Glorious Twelfth – suggesting Holmes produced the image only a month after the manuscript had been submitted.

As fashion advice for contemporary readers *and* as a source for later dress historians, these illustrations offer limited sartorial information. Moreover, at the time they led to criticism, first and foremost from Loftie himself, who in a typically waspish letter to Macmillan in December 1878, objected to the title of the second chapter of Dress titled "Fundamental" ("Anyone would think it related to Trousers") and the poor standard of the illustrations: "I cannot praise the pictures. I am afraid if I had seen them as they came out I should have been inclined to suppress them all. … I hope somebody will remonstrate with Holmes. Altogether I am rather ashamed of the look of the whole volume" (55075/150).[17] What a pity Mrs. Oliphant was not also friends with the Queen's "Principal Painter in Ordinary".[18]

***Dress: Writing with Scissors*?**

While Holmes had clearly copied the illustrations from a range of visual sources, a close reading of Oliphant's text reveals significant sections of *Dress* have also been taken from other literary and sartorial sources; sometimes explicitly, but very often without acknowledgement. Interestingly, all are male-authored texts, which have been carefully cut and curated to make her book. For instance, her second chapter included fulsome praise for,

[17] The term 'Fundamentals' was used to describe trousers and was derived from the word 'fundament' meaning buttocks: I am not sure if Loftie is trying to make a joke.
[18] Despite Loftie's criticism of the images, Holmes was later employed by Oliphant to provide illustrations for her book, *The Makers of Venice: Doges, Conquerors, Painters, and Men of Letters*, Macmillan, 1887.

and a lengthy quote from, the beginning of Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-4), which had been reissued in 1869. Carlyle was Oliphant's "friend and in some respects her intellectual mentor" (Trela 199)[19] and his "Clothes Philosophy" is a seminal text which "inaugurated the field of dress studies by giving the subject of clothes its first sustained systematic scrutiny" (Keenan 2). It is also the source of Oliphant's "scissors" and her daring act of snipping: "every snip of the Scissors has been regulated and prescribed by ever-active Influences, which doubtless to Intelligences of a superior order are neither invisible nor illegible" (Carlyle 28). Interestingly, Carlyle's Scissors belong to a Tailor, who is "not only a Man, but something of a Creator or Divinity" (219), rather than the "very mundane tool, limited in their function and associated with the conventional feminine activity of needlework" (Zakreski 61). Fittingly, Oliphant's volume ends with a quote from another eminent Victorian, John Ruskin, who infamously advised young girls to "Dress as plainly as your parents will allow you" (3).

Oliphant's work as a reviewer doubtless suggested many texts which referred to clothing such as the lengthy extracts from Joseph Addison's amusing comments on eighteenth century frockcoats and periwigs taken from two editions of *The Spectator* (1711), which had previously been included in an article on "Periwigs" published in 1871 by *The Saturday Review* (170-71). Other sources quoted from, rather than cut-and-pasted, included lengthy sections from "The Tyranny of Fashion" by the poet Emily Pfeiffer [E.P.] (1827-90) which

[19] Oliphant was close friends with Jane Welsh Carlyle (1801-66). See Margaret Oliphant, 'Mrs Carlyle', *The Contemporary Review,* 1883, Vol. XLIII, pp. 609–628. Her relationship with the Carlyles is also discussed Judith van Oosterom, in "Unlikely Bedfellows: Thomas Carlyle and Margaret Oliphant as Vulnerable Autobiographers" in *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods*, edited by C. C. Barfoot, Brill, 1999, pp. 247-66

had been published in *The Cornhill Magazine* as late as July 1878.[20] This article advocated the adoption of the Greek Chiton as "ordinary dress" and Oliphant, under the impression that E.P was a man ("he (and we do not suppose there can be any doubt about the pronoun)"), quoted from it at length simply to reject the suggestion with amusing irony: "it would be more possible to disestablish the Church, abolish the House of Lords, and cut the sacred vesture of the British Constitution into little pieces than to translate English garments into Greek" (*Dress* 68).

The third chapter, "Dress in the Poets", is perhaps justifiably (or inevitably), composed of quotations and begins with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c.1340-70); a poem which "sets before us the appearance of his world and contemporaries with a fresh and homely distinctness which teaches us more than volumes of antiquarian researches" (20). Interestingly, Oliphant, whose writing actively constructed Scottish national identity during this period (Finkelstein), also highlights references to dress in the poetry of James I of Scotland (1394-1437) "a poet holding a similar place in the annals of Scotland to that which Chaucer holds in the greater and richer half of our island" (24). Skipping quickly over Shakespeare, who "scarcely says anything about dress" (26), she quotes at length from the *Faerie Queene* (1590), noting Spenser, "loves when he can to introduce a delicate robe" (24). She also includes several of Herrick's beautifully sensual poems from *The Hesperides* (1648) which refer to garments, notably "On Julia's Clothes", before finishing with a stanza on "petticoats" from Pope's *Rape of the Lock* (1712). While Oliphant's biographers approved of these "numerous literary references" (Colby 258 n14), it is unlikely her readers would have found them helpful in selecting suitable garments in 1878. The same is true of her longest and most ironic chapter on "Historical" dress which largely points "out the inconveniences

[20] Zakreski cites "The Tyranny of Fashion" but does not make it clear Oliphant has incorporated Pfeiffer's anonymous article into *Dress*.

and mistakes of costume of the past" (64). Much of this chapter, which critiques the vagaries of fashionable *male* dress over time, has been cut-and-pasted from several "volumes of antiquarian researches" notably J. R. Planché's *History of British Costume* (1834; reprinted in 1874); his two-volume *Cyclopedia of Costume or Dictionary of Dress* (1876-79) and/or F. W. Fairholt's *Costume in England: A History of Dress* (1846; reprinted in 1860). There are many instances of Oliphant writing with scissors using sections from these earlier books. My favourite is the tale of the bran, used by tailors for padding, trickling out of a man's doublet "while the unhappy wearer was making his bow to the company" (36), which Oliphant has taken from Fairholt, who at least notes the original source of this anecdote as John Bulwer's *Artificial Changeling* (1650). Occasionally, rather than writing with scissors, Oliphant describes the illustrations found in both Planché's and Fairholt's works; for example, the "absurd figure" of James I of England "in his padded apparel … his high hat and ruff crowning the erection, his trunks or hose like two huge hams" (37), which both had taken from George Turberville's *Booke of Faulconerie* (1575).[21]

There are also instances of auto-plagiarism or re-shaping her own existing writings. For example, when describing and advocating the folk dress adopted by Fishwives of Newhaven with its "one petticoat folded up over another – 'kilted' as the native wearer would say" (89), Oliphant paraphrases a description of a Scottish character in her early novel *Katie Stewart* (1852) who "has the skirt of her dress folded up, and secured round her waist – 'kilted', as she calls it – exhibiting a considerable stretch of blue woollen petticoat below" (5).

Oliphant's rejection of "classical costume" in her fourth chapter includes amusing remarks made about the figures in Lord Leighton's *Daphnephoria* (1874-6), who were "much

[21] This is available at the British Library, London. See https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-book-of-falconry-or-hawking-by-george-turberville-1575 [accessed 17 August 2022]

hampered with drapery, which has the aspect of a large and loose pinafore, fastened round the neck, and with some difficulty kept down in front, while left a prey to all the winds behind" (32).[22] These comments are close to those first published in June 1876, when Oliphant had anonymously reviewed Leighton's painting for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in which she described figures hampered with "vague and cumbrous pinafores of drapery, which evidently have no back to them or fastening of any kind, but are held painfully on in front as a precaution of decency" (761). While this could be interpreted as a critique of Leighton's work or the popularity of neo-classical subject matter in contemporary painting, Oliphant's primary concern appears to be the worrying possibility of exposure: "a catastrophe always imminent in the pictures of Frost and Etty" (*Dress* 33).

Oliphant's criticism of neo-classical draperies echoes her rejection of E.P.'s suggestions that the chiton be adopted in Britain, when, in her only direct reference to underwear, she observed: "The theorist who goes back to the simplicity of Greek apparel forgets … the necessity in our climate for underclothing" (61).[23] In this particular battle of the styles, Oliphant appears firmly on the side of the Gothic Revival commenting a "woman's gown in its simplicity, fitting closely, but not too tightly to the body, and with long skirts falling to the feet, the original garment of all Northern women, is in itself one of the most reasonable and beautiful dresses that can be imagined" (69). Given her "rejection of Greek models" (Kramer 157) in both fiction and fashion, it might seem rather strange that *Dress* includes an appendix

[22] Leighton's huge painting is on display at the Lady Lever Art Gallery in Liverpool (LL3632). See http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/ladylever/collections/paintings/gallery2/thedaphnephoria.aspx [accessed 14 August 2022] Elizabeth Prettejohn mentions Oliphant's review of *The Daphnephoria* in her chapter "Aestheticising History Painting" in *Frederic Leighton: Antiquity, Renaissance, Modernity*, edited by Tim Barringer and Elizabeth Prettejohn, Yale, 1999, pp. 99-102.

[23] Six years later, in an article 'On Woman's Dress' for the *Pall Mall Gazette* (14 October 1884), Oscar Wilde (drawing on E W Godwin's pamphlet on *Dress* written for the Health Exhibition) suggested when worn with Dr Jaeger's underwear 'some modification of Greek is perfectly applicable for our climate, our country, and our century' (p. 6).

on "Ancient Costume". However, this section was supplied by another anonymous author, as Oliphant notes: "We add, from a pen better qualified to expound the subject than our own, the following remarks upon the dress of the early ages" (*Dress* 99).[24] It may be this addition to *Dress* was included at the suggestion of George A. Macmillan who had visited Greece in 1877 and who was instrumental in founding the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies in 1879.[25]

In his article on "Reading Mrs. Oliphant", George Levine has noted "Oliphant's shameless willingness to make use of the work of other writers" arguing "the borrowings always suggest a self-consciousness about the ways in which her own work is situated and how it signifies in the genre she has adopted" (238). Perhaps self-conscious of these "borrowings", Oliphant anonymously wrote an article for *The Spectator* on "Plagiarism" (1890) in which she asked: "Is it lawful for a writer to take a suggestion from another, to derive the nucleus of a plot or the conception of a character from somebody else's story or poem?" Deciding the answer must be "it is quite lawful", she argued plagiarism would need to "be very barefaced … before I, for one, should be disposed to consider it as a possible or real offence" (Commentary 164-5).

Scholarly studies of nineteenth century copyright legislation and contemporary debates on plagiarism make it clear Mrs. Oliphant was not alone in writing with scissors.[26] Certainly,

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[24]This additional text is similar to information on this subject published in *The Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities*, edited by William Smith, John Murray, 1875, which includes sections on specific garments by James Yates (1789-1871) and the festival of *Daphnephoria* by Leonhard Schmitz (1807-90). See https://archive.org/details/adictionarygree01smitgoog [accessed 14 August 2022]

[25] See http://www.hellenicsociety.org.uk/about-us/ [accessed 14 August 2022]

[26] See Paul K. Saint-Amour's fascinating discussion of the Royal Copyright Commission (1876-78) in his study *The Copywrights: Intellectual Property and the Literary Imagination,* Cornell University Press, 2003 and Joseph Bristow and Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Oscar Wilde's Chatterton: Literary History, Romanticism and the Art of Forgery*, Yale, 2015.

other authors who contributed volumes to the Art at Home Series, also adopted this creative, if not exclusively female, strategy.[27] However, none of the reviews of *Dress*, which appeared in several popular newspapers and journals from December 1878 to the following February, seemed to notice the various, and at times rather barefaced, borrowings within its pages. *The Morning Post* noted "The matter was some years ago treated at great length, with elaboration of detail and splendour of illustration, by Planché. Mrs. Oliphant's little work contains the pith of Planché's volumes and much original matter, the result of her keen observation and appreciation of what is beautiful" (3).

Several reviewers were much less impressed; many wondered why Oliphant had written the book. The *Manchester Guardian* noted "To judge from *Dress*, Mrs. Oliphant though an excellent novel writer, has no notion whatever the nature of a manual" (7). Similarly, *The Examiner* thought "Mrs. Oliphant is capable of better things" and suggested "If we are to have a book on dress, especially artistic dress, let it be one that will teach a lesson, something that appeals to common sense, with practical suggestions for improvements" (1687). A particularly scathing attack on *Dress* came from the anonymous reviewer for *London* who condemned it as "a most perversely disappointing little work". Conceding "Mrs. Oliphant cannot write without writing well and sensibly" it nonetheless decided "she knows nothing whatsoever about her subject and tells us that at considerable length … It consists, in short, of excellent book-making" (571). This is, of course, completely true. The Loftie-Macmillan

[27] Lady Barker, Mrs Orrinsmith and Mrs Loftie were commissioned to write their volumes for the Series around the images from Clarence Cook's articles in Scribner's. Lady Barker's *The Bedroom and Boudoir* (1878) draws heavily (and at times simply paraphrases) Cook's original text as well as recycling her own essays on "The Nursery" and "Bedrooms" for the journal *Evening Hours*. In addition, the final chapter "The Spare Room" had been published two years earlier in the *Saturday Review* as a short article written by Mrs Loftie, author of *The Dining Room* (1878) and wife of the editor of the Art at Home series. Included without attribution in Lady Barker's volume, this article/chapter subsequently re-appeared the following year in Mrs Loftie's collection of articles *Forty-six Social Twitters*; it seems re-tweeting is nothing new!

correspondence indicates Oliphant's commission was, at least partly, explained by her fame as a writer. As Loftie commented in a letter to Macmillan: "Does *Dress* do well? Mrs. Oliphant ought to get a notice of the whole series into the *Times*. I am sure she could" (55075/165).

Dress: A declaration of war against men?

While *The Queen* commented "the chapter on Dress in the Poets raises the slightest suspicion of book-making" (451), the anonymous [female?] reviewer was very positive, quoting at length from the text of *Dress* and reproducing several illustrations. They were especially entertained by Oliphant's attack upon "the stern sex" in retaliation for the scorn "with which they have treated the follies of female attire", describing her "onslaught on the modern fashion of men" as "delicious" (451).

The review quotes this "onslaught" in its entirety: it lists the wide range of outfits worn during a single day by fashionable young men of the wealthier classes; many being worn for specific sporting activities. Oliphant, who had supported two brothers, two sons and a nephew through her writing, was doubtless speaking from personal experience, when she noted: "A young Englishman of the wealthier classes has a dress for every emergency and spends a quite unthought-of amount of time in changing one for the other" (*Dress* 41).

Other reviewers noticed that Oliphant displayed "hardihood in her account of modern male costumes" (Stephens 222). One even described *Dress* as "a declaration of war against men and their costumes, cleverly masked by allusions to feminine attire" (*Examiner* 1657). In *Dress* there are many amusing attacks on male vanity and fashions; both upper and lower-class, modern, and historic: "of all the follies of fine apparel none have been more foolish, and few so cumbersome, as the exclusively masculine" (*Dress* 39). She mocks the sartorial

choices of Punch's recently created 'Arry character as "garments which he supposes to be those of a gentleman" (84)[28] with as much enjoyment as her comments about "an old woodcut in an old book which represents a typical Englishman standing unclothed, with scissors in his hand … and ready to copy whatever extravagance in French or Italian costume might strike his fancy" (39). Titled "I'm naked as I can't settle what to wear", perhaps it is no surprise that Holmes was not asked to copy this image from Andrew Boorde's *The Fyrst Booke of the Introduction of Knowledge* (1542).[29]

As well as male fashions, the fashionable styles inflicted upon women *by* men were also denounced. Early on in *Dress* Oliphant condemned the influence of the anonymous male Artist: "we are very apt to make our young women into a series of costumed models for his pictures – which is delightful no doubt for him, but not so good for the rest of the world" (5). Defending female victims of fashion against accusations of vanity and dismissing the "so often foolish abuse of the male critic" (83), Oliphant is especially disapproving of the British fashion designer, George Frederick Worth (1825-95)[30]. Described as the "high priest of all the mysteries of fashion", he is singled out for censure as the "special man-milliner whose laws the whole feminine portion of the public is supposed to obey servilely. … We were not born under M. Worth's sway. He is not our natural monarch; yet we obey him like slaves" (66).

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[28] Edwin J. Milliken (1839-97) created the caddish cockney character 'Arry for *Punch*, in the mid-1870s. See *The 'Arry Ballads: An Annotated Collection of the Verse Letters by Punch Editor E.J. Milliken*, edited by Patricia Marks, MacFarland & Co., 2006. Oliphant is much kinder to 'Arry's female equivalent ("Mary Jane"), who "can adopt the dress of her social superior with a better grace than 'Arry is capable of showing" (84).

[29] Boorde's *The Fyrst Booke of the Introduction of Knowledge* was reprinted in 1870 for the Early English Text Society by Trübner & Co. The curious reader can view this amusing image (p.116) here: https://archive.org/details/fyrstbokeintrod01boorgoog/page/n123/mode/1up

[30] For detailed information about this "special man milliner" see Diana de Marly, *Worth: Father of Haute Couture*, Elm Tree Books, 1980, and Chantal Trubert-Tolli et al, *The House of Worth 1858-1954:The Birth of Haute Couture*, Thames & Hudson, 2017.

Her solution to free women from this fashion despot and the "intolerable bondage" of tight dresses was that "pair of scissors and one daring, if trembling snip -!" (75); advice applauded by the reviewer for *The Morning Post*, who had witnessed:

> a very terrible church panic in which sixteen persons were killed, and many more, as they were mostly women, would have perished had it not been for the presence of mind of a policeman, who with a penknife actually ripped up the dresses of several poor ladies who had fallen on the staircase in sitting and kneeling postures, and who positively could not rise or stir, and were thus blocking up the only exit from the gallery (3).

If only someone had a pair of scissors! Perhaps it is no surprise this reviewer ardently believed "something ought to be done to annihilate the absurd tight garment fashion" and that "Mrs. Oliphant is quite right in condemning this inartistic, dangerous and most indelicate fashion" (3). The reviewer for *The Examiner*, clearly not a member of the congregation that day, was far less impressed: "fifteen pages – a whole chapter! – headed, 'What is to be done?' may be briefly summed up in two words: use scissors" (1567). This brings us back rather neatly to the concept of *femmage* and the ways in which Mrs. Oliphant used her scissors to make *Dress*. Cutting apart male-authored texts and condemning the influence of male artists and designers, she curates a mocking critique of male fashions: "of all the follies of fine apparel none have been more foolish, and few so cumbersome, as the exclusively masculine" (39).

***Dress:* Conclusion**

In her "Introductory" chapter, Oliphant noted "dress is by no means an unimportant item in human well-being" and remarked although many were perhaps "somewhat ashamed of the importance we attach to it … there are very few indeed who have not at one time or other felt some personal anxiety on the subject" (7). Unfortunately, beyond suggesting moderation and individual adaptation of current styles, the limited advice she offered would have done little to alleviate the anxieties of her intended readers. Indeed, as one of the reviewers pointed out: "Of practical counsel in the book – of indications of rules and principles which guide the becoming in costume, there is nothing and next to nothing of detailed discussion of various articles of dress" (*Manchester Guardian* 7).

So how are we to understand *Dress*? Having stitched together the correspondence held in the Macmillan Letter Books, this article offers insights into commercial publishing practices and Oliphant's professional engagement with the business of writing. Driven more by financial necessity than a desire to reform dress or an ability to offer practical fashion advice, Oliphant stands justly accused of "excellent bookmaking" (*London* 571). Having unpicked the text of *Dress*, however, this article also demonstrates her skill at writing with scissors; cutting apart male-authored texts and stitching them together to create a patchwork of literary, historical, and contemporary fashion quotations. Whether we interpret this as plagiarism or *femmage*, certainly, in its critique of male fashions and at least "one special man-milliner", Oliphant's *Dress* not-so-gently subverts contemporary gender roles. Quite literally a constructed discourse, this volume from the Art at Home Series is a problematic source for the dress historian. Read against the grain, and always with an appreciation of its ironic and subversive content, *Dress* is an intertextual cultural document of the late-Victorian period which reveals "much about the features of [that] particular historical moment" (Humble xv), but it can never be treated as straightforward evidence of how people dressed in the past.

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