9 'Lofty pine and slender vine': living with gender in the middle class

Man is the rugged lofty pine
That frowns on many a wavebeat shore;
Woman the graceful slender vine
Whose curling tendrils round it twine,
And deck its rough bark sweetly o'er. . . .

Anon. from the commonplace book of Mary Young
Walthamstow, Essex 1828

A well ordered, well appointed home went some way to counteract the precariousness of middle-class life. But lack of communal services such as paved roads, water supplies and sanitation, focused attention on personal behaviour. Against existing fatalism, here was an opportunity for individuals and families to mould their own destiny, supported by evangelical habits of self-scrutiny. And every day there were opportunities for comparisons with the vulgar conduct of the ranks below. By mid century, the correct use of a handkerchief could connote both inward grace and social status.[1] The core of this refined behaviour was common to men and women, but in every nuance, observing appropriate gender definitions was crucial to gentility.

Manners and gentility

In the mid 1840s, Robert Bretnall of Witham, born 1775, was in his early 70s, describing himself variously as a miller or a landed gentleman proprietor. In fact his income came from a combination of active farming, rents (mainly from cottages) and an annuity from his trusteeship of a local brewery estate, giving him enough wealth to keep a carriage and man servant. He mixed with the local Witham elite of doctors, solicitors and large farmers and dabbled in Whig politics. He and his wife attended the Anglican church and cultural affairs such as concerts at the Witham Institution. One of his favourite pursuits was outings to London, now accessible by train, to shop or just browse. At age 73, in the Metropolis, he bought velveteen to make himself a shooting jacket and breeches, he bought pipes, shirts, socks and pearl buttons as well as tea and coffee. When he sold shares in the local railway, he went up to town and bought silver plate: a Britannia metal dish cover, a plated liquour stand for £5/10s, luxuries by any definition. On 17 June 1846, he and his wife went up (first class)

to deposit £500 in a City bank and bought a 'gown piece' for her and returned to Witham by a late train, according to his diary, both 'drunk as Lords'.

Other evidence illustrates that Robert and Sarah Bretnall were aware of changed standards of propriety but, at their age, did not always comply. Robert spent much time hunting, eating and drinking in inns, and gossiping at markets, fishing for eels or shooting rats in the barn. His and Sarah's two children were illegitimate, the couple only having married when the younger was 12. Robert's spelling and vocabulary were shaky; he read little beside a newspaper. He showed signs of having a hasty temper, engaging in frequent fights with neighbours over fishing rights and a dung hill. One row had simmered for eighteen years, and when Bretnall was shooting hares in the wood, his enemy appeared flanked by two grown sons, one of whom looked 'black as Hell', whereupon Robert left a 'charm' to do him damage. In 1847, he records shooting a partridge 'altho it was Sunday', and in 1848 in another altercation with a neighbour over a rabbit, 'flew into a most violent passion and made use of a most dreadful expression viz: "God damn your eyes" '. His candid diary reflects the blend of older forms of uncontrolled behaviour and new seriousness:

> June 21, 1846: Before we went to church I walked into my home field and was suddenly taken short before I could get my trouses [*sic*] down. I shit myself most tremendously from shoulder to flank, cleaned myself with some grass as well as I could went to Church with my wife and returned God thanks for all his merciful benefits bestowed on me.[2]

Robert Bretnall was literate, wealthy and keen to adopt the outward trappings of gentility which meant some restraints on his conduct. In practice, the habits of a lifetime were not easily shed, although this did not prevent him from being accepted socially. His social power stemmed from his ownership of property, farming activities, local business and charitable activity as trustee, witness or governor.

Middle-class women had no such power. The minutiae of everyday life, their personal behaviour, dress and language became their arena to judge and be judged. In 1847, the young daughters of a retired army officer expressed scorn at their prospective sister-in-law. Her men folk did not 'dress for dinner' and only two weeks after the wedding she allowed her husband entry to her room when she was dressed only in her stays.[3] These young women, born almost half a century after Bretnall, were the inheritors of gentility, the code coloured by the Christian tint which had touched the late middle age of the Bretnalls. This canon covered every aspect of an individual's life and its enforcement was central to women, both for themselves and in ordering the behaviour of men. Refusing to countenance dirty fingernails, coarse speech, or muddy boots sprawling on the new carpets was the material counterpart of influence, particularly effective when wielded by older women over their young male 'family and friends'. Since boy nature was taken to be dirty and rough, it needed the restraining hand and softening influence of a mother or sister. Girls were presumed naturally clean, dainty and quiet. Much childhood propaganda went into creating these putative natural characteristics which were the hidden texts of dozens

of stories, poems and tracts for early nineteenth-century children, Jane and Ann Taylor's productions included. Bretnall's friend, the doctor Henry Dixon, as a young man had been taken in hand by a local clergyman's widow who groomed the poor farmer's son who up to then had 'no acquaintance or knowledge of the manners of a real gentleman; they were scarce in our rural population'.[4]

Training started in childhood along with the teaching of religion, the Puritan connection between cleanliness and godliness made manifest. This included modesty, keeping the body covered, refusing to directly name its parts and functions, and keeping limbs and voice under control. However, there was some confusion over what was to be so controlled and hidden. For example, breastfeeding was being promoted on both medical and religious grounds, the supreme act of motherhood, yet modesty made its performance indelicate. Suckling in public became increasingly associated with working-class practice. The solution was for a mother to keep herself and her babies within the seclusion of the home wherever possible.

Adult women acted as gatekeepers for admissible behaviour. Their personal failure to maintain standards was doubly grievous, as illustrated in a piece of Essex village street theatre in 1825. During the acrimonious split between an Independent minister and his congregation, the latter accused his most powerful deacon, a wealthy local farmer, of courting popularity with chapel members. The deacon had deliberately walked arm in arm down the village street with the local outcast, 'a woman remarkable above anyone I ever saw at Coggeshall for *filth*, not', he hastened to add, 'that I despise poverty but the most indigent may be neat and clean'. The final clerical insult maintained that the woman was 'half covered in *virmin*' (*sic*), at which the minister apologized to his readers for using such a coarse expression (emphasis in original).[5]

Next to personal cleanliness and modesty, table manners were a test of status, not surprising when so much business as well as social life was transacted over meals. The paraphernalia of the table encouraged higher standards. Wedgwood's mass produced crockery meant separate clean dishes for each type of food, while a Birmingham manufacturer of electroplate extolled the benefits of forks. 'They create a higher degree of taste, refined taste improved manners, improved manners imply a loftier state of moral feelings.' So while profits rolled in, 'the tone of society is improved'.[6] In popular mythology, small farmers often embodied backward vulgarity. In 1816 a local paper reported that an Essex farmer accidentally cut off a gentleman's finger in trying to carve the wing of a fowl, the incident 'occasioned by the eagerness of the company who all had their hands in the dish at the same time'.[7]

Table manners could mark social inclusion. Henry Dixon observed the Witham curate's annual dinner for gentry, professional men and farmers: 'The tenant farmers are a louty lot in such company. I saw one of them slily appropriate an apple and pocket the same. Forks in such company were in jeopardy.' He queried whether the 'experiment' would succeed. 'Neither party were at ease', his medical self excepted.[8] Increased refinement in dining was extended to women leaving the table at the end of the meal when men could then smoke, drink more heavily and discuss topics no

longer suitable for the fair sex – business, politics and worldly (sexual) subjects in a more earthy idiom. This custom was by no means adopted widely before mid century but the standard was set.

One reason for excluding women was the heavy drinking which still went on despite evangelical efforts. Eighteenth-century society had assumed a certain level of hard drinking. In the 1770s a brewer/farmer's wife recorded the launching of a new wherry in their river when a mixed company came to celebrate, starting in the afternoon and 'the Gentlemen staid til past 12 o'clock and were very drunk'.[9] Beer and spirits had been traditionally associated with health, muscular energy and virility and were ubiquitous at a time when water supplies were poor. Contracts were sealed with a drink; ale and spirits flowed in officers' quarters, Oxbridge colleges, local clubs, political dinners and hunting outings. The ability to drink one's neighbour under the table was a sign of masculine prowess, while stout and oysters were popularly believed to be an aphrodisiac (to the benefit of the Colchester oyster trade). It often took the willpower of religious conviction to break through the masculine identification with heavy drinking. Local freemasons and tradesmen's clubs partly owed their success to peer pressure which allowed male conviviality without excess. But the most powerful sanctions were familial. Two Essex brothers, born in the 1780s, deliberately rejected the heavy drinking of their ship's captain father while a 20-year-old banker's son, alight with a conversion experience, proclaimed in 1820: 'This day I wrote to my Father on Drunkeness, he having the day before got very drunk.'[10] Intoxication was doubly castigated in women, both in itself and as leading to uncontrolled, immodest behaviour. Tea, from being regarded as a harmful intoxicant, became a beverage identified with women and afternoon tea gradually a feminine light meal. Women were expected to take the lead in more refined social activities. A retired naval officer who took up farming on the remote marshlands of Essex in the 1800s, felt that genteel women had suffered from a lack of cultivated recreations for the 'convivial meetings of men, either at home or abroad, consisted chiefly in trying whose head was hardest at drinking flip or punch, sitting all the time enveloped in a thick atmosphere of tobacco smoke'.[11]

However it was accomplished, all were agreed that drunkenness in the middle ranks had fallen markedly by the 1840s, further distinguishing them from the loutishness of those below and debauchery above.[12] The use of tobacco was also being curtailed. In particular, chewing tobacco and spitting were denigrated; travellers to the continent noting that there this 'horrible beastly custom' continued unchecked.[13] Middle-class men continued to take snuff (although the associated dirt was making this less popular) and to smoke pipes. But refined women, except in the most remote rural areas, no longer touched tobacco in any form and often banished men's smoking to the kitchen, outhouse or garden.

Robert Bretnall not only occasionally drank to excess, he swore oaths, yet was uneasy when he did so. Another farmer, as a churchwarden and dressed in his Sunday best, would accompany his sisters to church. Yet if on his way he spied blackbirds in his fields, he would shake his fists, wave his arms and shout rude expressions to the embarrassment of his genteel female relatives.[14] Evangelicals, in particular, looked with horror on using

the Lord's name in vain and strong language by women was becoming even less acceptable. Harriet Martineau recalled the 'odd and striking' spinster sisters, born in the eighteenth century, who were friends of her family in Norwich, with their false hair, rouged cheeks and racy language. Once when their carriage door stuck one of them called out in a voice loud enough to be heard in the house, 'My God, I can't get out.'[15] Swearing not only mocked religion, but was associated with backwardness ignorant proverbs and rustic beliefs in charms. Yet men, in their business and sporting life, had to understand more uncouth terms, and too much refinement in language, as in general behaviour, implied a flight from masculinity. They, therefore, had special problems in proving robust manliness within refinement.

Language and speech, like other parts of middle-class culture, were becoming more formal, more differentiated and more careful of gender connotations. A merchant recalled that in his father's mid eighteenth-century generation, men had simple, homey names like Jack, Billy and Jimmy, the women Polly, Molly and Kitty. In his times more pretentious names were becoming popular.[16] A Birmingham woman also noticed that by the 1820s, wives were calling their husbands by their full name or surname.[17] Following Lucinda, the heroine of More's *Coelebs*, women began to develop their own linguistic styles, which stressed refinement and purity but avoided showing excessive learning. The 'strong-minded' daughter of a Birmingham manufacturer who published novels and numerous articles declared in 1788 that she had firmly decided 'never to enter a dispute' since she thought this 'unaimiable in a woman'.[18] Young women were developing their own idiom around symbols of femininity: the 'language of flowers', exchanges of hair to be worn in lockets and brooches, the play with gloves and ribbons.

Changing attitudes to sexuality

Women cultivated the language of friendship and love in which sexual passion had no part. (Thomas Bowdler's expurgated *Family Shakespeare* was published in 1818.) By the early nineteenth century, there had been a gradual shift from the earlier view of women as sexually voracious towards the innocence and passivity of Victorian sensibility. Yet at mid century a nonconformist minister still warned the young country youth to beware becoming embroiled with his master's wife, the older married woman seen as a particular snare. True manhood was not to be gained through sexual adventure but by self-control through religious commitment which was the strongest guard for a young man.[19]

Jacob Unwin, son of an Essex brewer, was just such a youth, apprenticed to a London printer about 1814. On returning from chapel one Sunday evening, he struck up a conversation with a 'very genteel young female' and offered her his arm, this contact being made without introduction of family, friends or chapel membership. His reason for this presumption, he said, was a fear that the young woman was going on 'the road to destruction' as she acknowledged that she disliked church-going. He entreated her to 'seek pardon through the blood of the Lamb', but to no avail. Later he

admitted to his diary that he was 'rather taken with her person; my passions strove within me, and I bless God that I was prevented from offering any liberties to her which I am sure she would have accepted'.[20] It was better to keep young men from sexual knowledge and guard their sensibilities. In 1808, at an inquest on a fire in Chelmsford an older man was substituted for the young unmarried gentleman coroner who would have had to view the 'mutilated remains of two young ladies . . . naked at the time of the fire'.[21]

Yet, at least in the earlier part of the period, the products of sexual irregularities were often accepted, particularly if, as with Bretnall's children, the couple subsequently married. Another Essex farming family accepted that the eldest son's bride was pregnant at marriage.[22] But seduction and adultery, the speciality of the debauched gentry, were severely censured.[23] A special sermon, directed at young men and women, was preached at St Peter's, Colchester's Evangelical church, on the day William Corder was hanged for the seduction and murder of Maria Martin in the notorious Red Barn case, just across the Suffolk border. The vicar, who claimed to have witnessed Corder's repentance in the death cell, stressed how small sins starting with disobedience to parents, unchaste association and prostitution led to Corder's 'horrid paths of wickedness and vice'.[24]

It was the open recognition of sexuality which was suppressed along with other vulgarities. Male sexual passion was to be contained and hidden, women's to be ignored if not denied. As a result, most of the records are silent on such subjects. Only when discussing the poor and ignorant are there hints at an understanding by both men and women. The ex-naval officer and farmer who tried to bring religion and scientific enlightenment to the wilds of the Essex coast, described the visit of an old woman and her daughter who complained that she was accused of being a witch. The villagers alleged that she had teats in her armpits to suckle imps and she begged him to examine her to falsify the stigma. Both he and his family – who were present – laughed at her simple beliefs and he records that the rosy cheeked daughter had 'bewitching powers I thought strong enough to induce an examination if she chose to solicit it'.[25]

On the other hand, the few references to homosexuality were no laughing matter. Emotional warmth between brothers, cousins and male friends was strong, but sexual acts between men were regarded with outraged horror. The same improving farmer was called upon to help family friends when the husband was accused of a homosexual connection. The young wife, with several children, was abandoned by father, brother and friends and feared her husband would be hanged. The farmer hesitated for he felt that if the crime had been robbery or even murder it would have been easier, but such 'infamous' behaviour might soil the reputation of anyone who tried to help.[26]

Female friendships flourished and were freely referred to in passionate terms. They often were formed under religious influence as when a vicar's teenage daughter regarded her pious older friend with 'childlike reverence and loverlike attachment'.[27] There is no way of speculating the exact emotional, much less physical meaning of such relationships. Warm, loving attachments were frequent between siblings, parents and children, proto-

kin and friends. Thus, despite the long period of youthful celibacy, sexuality was firmly directed to procreation within marriage, the high birth rate and short intervals between births indicating its active pursuit.

Mobility and gender

Provincial middle-class culture at this time seemed as much concerned with strengthening ties within the family and controlling women's independent behaviour as with sexuality. Growing constraints on the physical and social mobility of women, especially young girls, is a motif across a range of activities. Into the early nineteenth century, a great deal of enjoyment was still gained through walking, often combined with dropping in to chat with neighbours or relatives. In the countryside, which even in Birmingham was within easy reach, this might be combined with berry picking, gathering mushrooms and other ways of using the products of fields and hedgerows. Meals eaten out of doors were popular and still relatively informal. A day out at the local beauty spots of Hagley or the Leasowes was the equivalent for Birmingham tradesmen of the more affluent and minor gentry's visits to stately homes.[28] For those with access to horses, riding for pleasure and exercise was widespread for both men and women.

Walking and riding as forms of transport were, however, beginning to segregate the sexes. It was assumed that men would learn to ride and the city-bred clerk was somewhat derided as effeminate for not being able to do so. Horses were considerably cheaper and more convenient to hire than wheeled vehicles. Some occupations such as auctioneers, estate agents, doctors and farmers depended on being mobile, mainly on horseback. An Essex agent's success was partly attributed to his capacity to spend whole days in the saddle.[29] But horses and the stables were eminently masculine affairs; buying, selling (and betting) on horses was a central part of masculine culture and women now mainly rode for exercise. One of the reasons why many widows and daughters migrated to town centres and suburbs was the difficulty of obtaining personal transport.

In the eighteenth century, versatile small vehicles were few. A wealthy Birmingham doctor, abroad for his health in 1787, gave approval of his wife's move from Edgbaston Hall to their town house for the winter; the only location 'for women without a carriage is to be found in town'.[30] The next thirty years saw marked improvements in road construction and maintenance and the rapid growth of public stage and mail coach transport, one of the main forces incorporating the middle ranks in a wider culture.[31] It also witnessed the invention and perfecting of a wide range of both open and closed wheeled vehicles, from the humble gig used by farmers to the stately landau and barouche, or the small light self-driven phaeton or Stanhope suitable for ladies. In towns many of these could be hired for short periods or leased on five year contracts (including maintenance), or they could be bought, built to order, ready made or second hand.[32] Coach builders flourished, some establishing substantial businesses such as the Perry family of Witham, with spin offs in such items as upholstery, lamps and special clothing.[33] Livery stables for the hire of riding horses, horse

and vehicle or horses for the family carriage were another growth area, often, as we have seen, connected to pubs and inns.

The difference such mobility made, especially in rural areas, was dramatic. On the Essex coast, it was remarked that whereas in the 1760s there were only eight single horse chaises in the whole parish, by the early 1800s even 'farmers of 200 acres' almost all kept some form of chaise and some even four wheeled carriages.[34] One reason for using these vehicles was to allow women mobility. A Birmingham commentator noted that ladies did not sit outside on public coaches, but a Birmingham banker's daughter felt it was 'infra dig' for ladies to travel in a stage coach at all. Posting, which meant hiring a chaise with a postboy, was expensive, as the same young lady noted, at least 1 shilling and 9 pence per mile with tips and turnpike tolls extra.[35] Riding horseback for serious travel was difficult to arrange and placed modesty in question; it was suitable only for the most backward farmers' wives.

But in higher circles walking could also present problems for women, as Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice* discovered when she arrived with muddy shoes and skirt at her genteel neighbours.[36] Elizabeth Head Cadbury was happy to walk back from the shop in Bull Street to the country house in Edgbaston with her husband at night; later generations would have regarded this as decidedly odd behaviour.[37] The new wife of the Unitarian minister at the New Meeting astonished members of the congregation by walking 4 miles to pay a wedding visit.[38] Women were becoming constrained by canons of respectability which added considerably to the cost of their physical mobility. By the 1830s, the change to more restrictive clothing, layers of heavy petticoats and larger, trailing dress lengths contributed to their containment.[39] The desire to keep a carriage, or at least a chaise of some kind, was not just snobbery but crucial in counteracting isolation.

In addition to difficulties with availability and expense, middle-class young women had to be shielded from possible exposure to the hazards of public travel, including sexual and social advances, by being accompanied by a man or an older woman. It is instructive to compare the practical instructions for travel given to the young son of a Birmingham banker with the timidity of a Colchester girl in her mid-teens, proud of her ability to find a protected upstairs room in the London inn where she was to await her brother.[40] By the 1830s Rebecca Shaen's daughter, although in her 20s, was handed over by her mother to her aunt in London for the journey to Brighton and thus had 'safe conveyance'.[41]

For more distant journeys women's problems did not end with travel. Finding quarters suitable for ladies was often an obstacle, as one of the Galton daughters discovered on a journey from Birmingham to Cheltenham where the only hotel 'respectable for ladies' was of an inferior grade. In Cheltenham,

> They all go into lodgings which makes it much less desirable for us than Leamington, as domestic society is our great object.[42]

For the middle-class women, even more than men, the railroad solved many of these dilemmas, although there were early suspicions of its acceptability

on the same grounds as the stage coach, the public setting open to all. However, with seating divided into classes and 'ladies only' carriages, the railroad did make travel easier even for delicate ladies. The railroad made travel formal, rational, punctual and relatively cheap. As Dr Dixon commented in 1843 when he was able to travel by train with his invalid wife from Witham to London, the punctuality and certainty which the railroad engendered

> will have a very sound influence upon some of the troublesome uncertain people which we meet with. Habits of punctuality are important in all conditions of society and these railroads wait for nobody.[43]

Nevertheless women were mainly still restricted to shorter journeys, part of the general constraints on their physical mobility. Young men were expected to roam, to seek adventure, to go out from as well as return to the home. When the young son of a Suffolk timber merchant was visiting Lowestoft, in the evening he walked by the seashore by moonlight, revelling in being alone to think through his decision whether to enter the church.[44] Henry Crabb Robinson, just free of his attorney's apprenticeship in Colchester, took his small patrimony and set off to walk alone across Germany, where he visited Goethe and initiated his role as interpreter of German romanticism to the English, an unthinkable course of action for a feminine counterpart.[45]

Some earlier generations of young women had a certain freedom, their elders confident about their religious training and social milieu of family and friends. In the early 1800s, the daughters of a Colchester doctor enjoyed sitting on the ruins of the town walls reciting Byron's poetry by moonlight with their friends Jane and Ann Taylor. But solitary ramblings, much less longer journeys, came to be out of the question and girls were increasingly closely guarded.[46] The issue of the desirability of respectable women moving freely about alone focused on concern over unmarried girls. Joseph Gibbins's youngest daughter Martha, who was born in 1798 and brought up in central Birmingham, was walking across the town to school by herself when she was 9 years old. In a letter to her brother William she described the following incident:

> I am become so much of a woman as to go to school by myself. One day, as I was returning from school, a boy was so rude as to offer to *kiss* me, and he called another boy to do the same, so I went into a reputable looking shop and asked the man if he would be so kind as to speak to those boys, for they had been behaving rude to me, and I told him I was Joseph Gibbins' little girl. He came out, sent them away, and I got home without being interrupted again.[47]

It is difficult to imagine the daughters of Edgbaston moving around Birmingham with the freedom of Martha Gibbins; the point of living in the suburb was to try and ensure that such incidents did not take place.

Gender and the social occasion

Accompanied by men, there were still some rural pleasures which women could enjoy. Fishing continued to be a popular pastime and a number of women, from Quakers to worldly Anglicans, mention the pleasures of

fishing in company with brothers, fathers and husbands. However, hunting and shooting remained the central feature of rural life. Foxhunting was the traditional mixing place for the three tiers of the English countryside, for even labourers followed the hunt on foot, and hunting was often claimed to be the social cement which bound the classes together. But hunting was becoming an all-male preserve. By the late eighteenth century the chase was more formal with subscription packs replacing private arrangements, giving women less opportunity to participate. The wildness of the hunt, the 'blooding' with the fox's tail, those elements which made it a 'manly exercise and sport', were inimical to feminine decorum. The costume of pink coat and breeches, evolved from uniforms worn during the war, was not for ladies whose long skirts when perched on a side-saddle were further disincentives to hard riding.

An emphasis on masculine chivalry, the need to protect women through any supposed difficulty and to retain a ceremonious intercourse between the sexes, meant that men felt they would not be able to push ahead when women were in the chase. R. S. Surtees, the great hunting journalist, described hunting as displaying 'all the excitement of war with only half its danger'. He maintained that

> women are as much in their place at the meet watching and cheering the men on as they are out of it tearing across the country

and added that their presence as spectators could help to raise the moral tone.[48] Hunting thus provided an ideal form of male bonding for all classes, the

> strongest preservation of that natural spirit . . . for a life of active energy, independence and freedom . . . and corrective to effeminacy

in the words of a foxhunting MP.[49] Meanwhile, the women, whose men had organized the Suffolk hunt, for example,

> played the harpsichord and the new forte-piano, paid visits to each other, organized balls and made up theatre parties.[50]

The behaviour and presence of women at other public events such as horse racing also came under scrutiny. Racing became more organized, with more regularized rules for types of entry, distances to be run and the provision of prize money. Often races were combined with agricultural shows which provided a more protected environment at which ladies could have appropriate accommodation as with Chelmsford's self-consciously genteel efforts in the 1820s with the Galleywood Races. Farmers' womenfolk might be assigned to a second rank enclosure or a chosen inn where they gathered, between the exclusiveness of the gentry and upper status professional elites and the promiscuousness of rural labourers. Together with town tradesmen, often literally their kin, they were visibly a middle group. Here the clothes, demeanour and accent of their female members were on public display.[51]

A similar development was affecting fairs. The growth of retail shops in the towns and pedlars in the countryside meant that fairs were separating between wholesale business, and those mostly for entertainment. The latter were especially abhorred by evangelicals as when the local rector attacked

Chelmsford Fair as 'an abode of moral darkness', and Essex magistrates joined with Wilberforce's anti-vice campaign to close many local fairs.[52] The refined wife of a Birmingham banker writing to her brother-in-law in 1807 about the Birmingham Fair commented,

> I hear the market is full of shews – wild beast, puppets, dwarfs and giants – besides many other wonders – are now exhibiting themselves to the delight and amazement of all the Country Bumpkins who are come from far and near to see them.[53]

While this attitude was growing among those with pretensions to gentility, there were many who were not averse to gingerbread from the fair, were fascinated by the 'feats of dexterity and magical skill' and would vary select concerts and assemblies with performances such as the 'Great Wizard of the North' who visited the Birmingham Society of Arts in 1840.[54] In the rural areas the attraction of the fair lingered on, too, but was increasingly associated with children and childish things.

The tensions of class and gender alliance are exemplified in traditional Guy Fawkes celebrations. By the end of the eighteenth century, these had been curtailed in the general clamp down on crowd activity. Leadership of the revels had shifted to young men from artisan and trade families, the 'bonfire boys'. Here a cross-class, all-male coalition took a non-political form, although local issues and potentates were often 'guyed'. In Chelmsford and Witham, local gentry and militia officers attempted to control the affair, giving money and supplying the venue. Secrecy maintained by the guy masks allowed clerks and sons of respectable townsfolk to take part, often leaving their seniors to turn a blind eye to the proceedings.[55] What is significant, however, is that whatever the class make-up of the Guy Fawkes crowd, its leadership if not membership, was male. Mixed gatherings could continue but only in a proper domestic setting. Birmingham's serious middle class held private family parties to celebrate the Guy. On 7 November, a young Quaker went to one co-religionist to help make fireworks, on 8 November to another to help make the Guy and on 9 November to the Cadbury's for tea and a bonfire.[56]

Markets, too, were becoming specialized and enclosed; ladies might do their shopping in certain parts only. In the early years of the nineteenth century the place for sheep on Birmingham's market day was the Free Grammar School while the pig market was held at the Old Crown. An old lady recalled that in the 1780s

> all respectable females who traversed the street on market days had to turn into the middle of it to preserve their cleanliness, the footpaths being reserved for the special accommodation of the superior animal to whom the spot was devoted.[57]

Small wonder that the building of the town's Doric Market Hall in 1834 was greeted with pride.

The hunting field, race course, fairground and market were public arenas where all gradations of society might congregate. But the provincial middle class had their own semi-public gatherings. As might be expected the ceremonials connected with the family stood out as occasions for the gathering and reinforcing of kinship and friendship ties. Weddings were marked

by church services and followed, where possible, by a meal, often a breakfast. For example, when Mary Ann Galton was married in Birmingham, the large wedding party was entertained at her grandparents' country home.[58] Some wealthy middle-class families used weddings as an occasion for paternalism, particularly in rural communities. In 1820s Suffolk, the bachelor uncle, head of the family firm, gave a wedding feast for his niece described in the *Bury Gazette*. With church bells ringing and guns firing groaning tables were spread by the river and 500 villagers were welcomed to this 'truly noble sight'. The couple, who breakfasted with a select party of friends, set off for their wedding trip

> amidst the blessing of the poor, to whom this amiable young lady was most dear, for her heart, was 'open as the day to melting charity'.[59]

Funerals were also used to mark the influence of powerful local leaders; clergymen, like John Angell James as we have seen, but also men like William Henry Pattisson, the Witham attorney, at whose death the town's shops all closed. However, most middle-class funerals were occasions for family, friends and co-religionists. Cousins and other family members were urged to send a representative to the ceremony even over quite long distances. These requests were almost always to men, despite their business commitments. Over the period the records suggest that women began to stay away from the burial service and the graveside ritual although they might be present at the meal afterwards. In the 1770s all the family, including the young children, of a wealthy farmer/brewer attended the funeral of the wife's father, but by the 1840s this was much less common.[60] A modest Ipswich draper attended his father's funeral without his wife, although a devoted female servant was there.[61] Female friends or more distant relatives might be present, but not daughters and widows, displaying their grief in public. Robert Bretnall's daughter-in-law's mother did not attend her husband's funeral and diarists made a point of remarking when women in the family *were* there.[62] Women were beginning to be considered too delicate to bear the public rituals of death. If they did go, they were advised to follow the practices of the nobility and gentry and remain in the church while the actual burial was taking place outside.[63] A scene from Mrs Gaskell's *North and South*, published in 1854, confirms that refined women were believed too sensitive to sustain public displays of grief. The strong, although thoroughly feminine, heroine who has sustained her father during her mother's terminal illness pleads to go to the funeral in lieu of his seeking a male friend. Her father answers that,

> 'My dear, women do not generally go'
> 'No' [responds the heroine] 'because they can't control themselves. Women of our class don't go, because they have no power over their emotions, and yet are ashamed of showing them.'[64]

This convention contrasts with the business-like account of the funeral of an Ipswich master baker's mother-in-law. His wife paid £2-2-0d towards the expenses, presumably from money of her own. She and her husband went to the 'funral' together with three other couples from the family, returning to the house-cum-shop,

to take tea and settel the business comfortable . . . agreeball to the wich of all present,

including paying the bills.[65]

Meanwhile, the more genteel were moving away from the bustle of an undifferentiated public even in death. The Dissenting wish not to be buried in Anglican churchyards aggravated a growing concern at the overcrowded and insanitary nature of the churchyards. It was reported of Ipswich, for example, that,

> Several of our graveyards are situated in the midst of thoroughfares, where it is impossible that the last offices for the dead can be performed with that degree of solemnity and impressiveness that is desired.[66]

The ubiquitous John Claudius Loudon was in the forefront of providing a solution to this problem; properly designed cemeteries which would dispose of the dead in such a way that their decomposition would not be injurious to the living. Furthermore, a well designed cemetery ought to improve both moral sentiments and general taste. A cemetery properly kept, he argued,

> might become a school of instruction in architecture, sculpture, landscape gardening, arboriculture, botany, and in those important parts of general gardening, neatness, order and high keeping.[67]

Cemetery companies were established according to joint stock principles. Birmingham boasted three by mid century, one of which was exclusively for Dissenters and one for Anglicans, while smaller towns such as Ipswich made do with one but allotted space for two chapels, one Church of England, the other nonconformist. Those who could afford it could now rely on seclusion from the undifferentiated public in death as well as in life.[68]

Those left behind, too, carried the message of social demarcation. Both men and women wore mourning at the death of kin and friends as a way of recognizing, or denying, important social relationships. Women's dress had always played the major role in mourning ritual and it was women whose clothes and accessories were elaborated into what became the Victorian cult of mourning. The Essex silk manufacturing family of Courtauld built a fortune on the production of black silk crepe, which became the epitome of genteel mourning in women's dress, caps and veils.[69] The period of mourning, at least among the higher ranks, prevented women being seen in public, but was not too burdensome as long as social life was informal with family and friends. But even in the 1820s, Amelia Moilliet wore mourning for her father for two years.[70] Wearing mourning implied withdrawal from the world and became a heavier responsibility for women as the importance of men's public activities grew.

Middle-class men's and women's part in rituals of various kinds and appearances in various places was being plotted and codified according to developing notions of gentility and respectability. Sometimes common masculine interests overrode class divisions; at other times men and women appeared together in class solidarity. Nor should we expect these boundaries to be fixed, or consistent. For example, it should come as no surprise that even wealthy genteel women enjoyed swimming in the privacy of their own

gardens or grounds. Likewise, while lady-like sensibilities may have been too fragile to sustain public display of emotion at funerals, the local records hint that some women enjoyed the drama of public courtrooms and relished a good trial. Of course many men regularly attended court proceedings as magistrates, lawyers, jurymen and spectators witnessing the law being enacted. But the public spectacle of the criminal trial carried a moral message and the mere presence of genteel women might raise the tone of the proceedings. For women admitted to few other forms of public entertainment, the colour and drama must have been irresistible. Among other provincial ladies, Sarah Bretnall, Robert's wife, seems to have made few excursions from Witham and then almost always in his company. On 8 March 1847, however, while her husband and son were fishing, she and her daughter-in-law enjoyed a day's outing at Chelmsford Assizes to hear a murder trial.[71]

Gender as appearance

The everyday appearance of individuals was also transformed by central concerns with status and gender. The change for men was, perhaps, even more striking than for women. From a concern with physical virility or at least its appearance, male selfhood increasingly depended on occupation, and public activity. This was reflected in a dramatic change in men's clothing. By the 1840s, the success of the middle-class challenge to aristocratic leadership was as clear in standard masculine appearance as it was in the repeal of the Corn Laws.[72] Eighteenth-century men's clothes had expressed their position – the leather breeches and paper cap of the artisan, the linen smock of the farm labourer. Aristocracy and gentry sported outfits of ruffles, lace, silk and satin in bright and pastel colours for dress wear. Their heads were powdered, faces rouged and bodies scented, while satin breeches, silk hose and dainty pumps revealed the line of their hips, legs and feet, and hinted at sexual display. Except for sporting clothes, simplicity in colour and line was still associated with Puritanism and only nonconformist sectarians maintained drab dark colours and sober textures. Merchants and professional men followed a version of aristocratic costume modified to their circumstances. A young Birmingham manufacturer, on his first visit to London in the early 1780s, proudly recalled every detail of his outfit. His hair was dressed in a high toupe, handsomely frizzed with open curls and profusely powdered. He wore a light blue coat, white cashmere waistcoat, shirt with deep laced frill and lace ruffles (made by his sister), stock with brilliant stock buckle, white silk stockings and shoes with silver buckles (a prime item of Birmingham manufacture). His hat was a three-square cock, and, young as he was, he had his cane with a gold head, a present from an elder brother.[73]

Men actively engaged in the enterprise would wear working clothes during the week but appear in similar finery on Sunday. An early nineteenth-century farmer retained the smock frock in the country, but on Sundays and for journeys to London wore top boots, knee breeches, a frock coat and beaver hat bought in the Metropolis. It was his wife's task to care for this outfit, carefully kept in a special dresser.[74] By the early

Plate 29 An image of youthful femininity found in the scrapbook of Jane Seabrook, an Essex farmer's daughter, *c.* 1830

nineteenth century the division between working and Sunday clothes was encouraged by the religious revival, but, in general, simplicity in clothing was urged, particularly for men. As John Angell James expostulated, 'cleanness and neatness border upon virtue, as excessive foppery and expensiveness do upon vice. It is unworthy of a female to be inordinately fond of dress, but for a *man* to love finery is despicable indeed'.[75]

Religious conviction on its own would not have been sufficient to effect such alteration without the commitment to productive work. Arthur Young, Suffolk farmer and civil servant, was an Evangelical convert but also adherent of scientific rationality, his days filled with duties for the Board of Agriculture. In a visit to France in 1797, he chafed against donning full masculine dress at midday:

> What is a man good for after his silk breeches and stockings are on, his hat under his arm, and his head *bien pourdre*? Can he botonize in a watered meadow? Can he clamber the rocks to mineralize? Can he farm with the peasant and the ploughman? He is in order for the conversation of ladies which to be sure . . . is an excellent employment; but it is an employment that never relishes better than after a day spent in active toil and animated pursuit.[76]

The change came piecemeal. Swords were transformed into walking sticks, the tax on flour for hair powder during the war accelerated its decline, the drive for clean linen made ruffles and laces prohibitive and they interfered with activity. However, the most contentious change was from breeches and stockings to trousers, a transformation accomplished in about thirty

years. Early in the century, a Suffolk gentleman commented on Wellington's introduction of such garments during the Peninsular campaign as a convenience, which met with resistance from the soldiers. Trousers were also suspect among the elite; his son reported back from Cambridge in 1809 that students appearing in chapel or hall wearing trousers were being marked absent.[77]

The transition began with full length tight fitting pantaloons, that is breeches and stocking in one piece. Pantaloons, like knee breeches, showed off men's limbs and sexual parts, making them conscious of the way they stood. The final change to trousers in the late 1830s and 1840s, disguised all exposure in uniform, shapeless dark serviceable cloth (with disastrous consequences for the hosiery industry). Younger men first adopted the style, widening the gap between old-fashioned and new. An Ipswich draper was in his late 50s in 1838 when he wore trousers for the first time but he 'soon parted from them'.[78] But a wine merchant ten years his junior living now in London regularly wore trousers, only buying knee breeches for his wedding and immediately reselling them to his tailor.[79] The older style continued to be worn for such ceremonial occasions, balls and evening wear. Older men who refused to adopt the new costume appeared increasingly eccentric.

By the 1830s, the only touches of colour that remained were in, for example, the waistcoat, often embroidered by female relatives. High starched collars and gloves gave young men a chance for small vanities, but the effect, promoted as assiduously by Brummell and the Dandies as serious Christians, was restrained. Along with bright or pastel colours, silk and satin became primarily feminine materials, men only being allowed to indulge in velvet for special occasions (Bretnall's shooting jacket) or touches such as the green velvet collar on the wedding coat of a Birmingham manufacturer in 1836.[80] Gradually, other male adornments were stripped down: the wearing of corsets, cosmetics and perfumes was abandoned, jewellery and flowers were reduced and then only for ceremony. Only the utilitarian watch remained, carried in a special trouser pocket attached to a broad silk ribbon – gold for the rich – with seals and insignia of office or society membership displayed on the watch chain.

By the 1850s, the change was almost complete. The interim romantic youthful image, often termed Byronesque, suited to pantaloons and the cravat with locks curling over the collar, had given way to stiff, dark, heavy materials, shapeless nether garments, and narrow black tie. Heavy whiskers, topped by the black 'stove pipe' completed the picture, associated with Victorian patriarchal authority, carrying a strong masculine identity but now devoid of overtly personal sexual attraction. Even radicals who had worn distinctive colours, hats and other marks of their political commitment well into the nineteenth century, began to dress like all middle- and upper-class men in the ubiquitous trousers and coat. The 'gorgeous plumage' of the eighteenth century only remained in ornamental livery of male servants (livery was originally a pledge of aristocratic service) or in the ceremonial dress of the armed services. Social status for men was now expressed in the nuances of the cut and material of the suit, or the quality of the shirt, which could still be expensive. A bank manager turned down promotion on the

grounds that the extra expense in clothes and washing to present a proper appearance would cost more than the rise in salary.[81]

The new masculine image spanned the range from gentry to clerk, their common masculinity overriding occupational differences. As we have seen, boys were kept in petticoats until about age 3 or 4, when they were breeched, often at a family ceremony. From 4 to about 7 they were put in 'skeleton suits' of tight trousers buttoned to a little jacket, a neat costume allowing plenty of movement. Girls remained in petticoats, for centuries a symbol of their continued dependent position.[82]

But in any case changes in women's dress, while significant, were not as dramatic as for men and received less comment in local records. The thin clinging material, vertical lines and loose limbs of the war period gave way in the 1820s to more confined and modest coverings. By mid century with the crinoline, 'knickers' or underclothes were introduced for the first time.[83] A Birmingham woman remembered her girlhood in that period with stiff boned stays which had to be laced every morning from behind. Stays and petticoats had shoulder straps so that it was difficult to raise the arms.[84] The sloping shoulders and tight sleeves, too, made large gestures or heavy work difficult, and dresses buttoned behind so that a woman could not dress herself. Ringlets, soft colours, sandals laced with ribbons, increasingly full skirts, small waists and large bonnets favoured a petite, dainty, almost child-like image and must have been trying to well built active women, but the style was a deliberate foil to the new masculine archetype. Between 1810 and 1820, hanging pockets in women's skirts began to give way to the dainty reticule (or ridicule) carried over a wrist which prevented carrying anything else.[85] Indoors, caps were worn, usually adopted at marriage, although older single women had a version and a widow's status was marked by a special cap.

Provincial outlets for women's fashions were making an impact, as cited in local descriptions of shopping expeditions. The use of 'Flanders babies' (fashion dolls) for display had reached rural Suffolk by the end of the eighteenth century. London styles were reported in detail in local newspapers, often the only item specifically addressed to the 'fair sex'. Haberdashers and milliners regularly offered inspection days for new stock, opportunities taken up by farmers' wives and daughters as well as their urban counterparts. In May 1823, Miss Pitty invited the ladies of Hadleigh in Suffolk to inspect her 'neat and fashionable selection of Millinery, Straw, Leghorn Bonnets, Silks, Satins, Lutestrings, Norwich Crapes, Bombasins, Lustres, Muslin Dresses, Stays, Laces, Edgings, Gloves, Trimmings'.[86] Women now carried the bright colours and luxurious materials. Silk, always costly, and once only worn by the aristocracy, became closely associated with feminine gentility, the silk gown a symbol of affluence but with erotic overtones. Young innocent girls were kept in cottons and muslins for silks belonged to the mature and sexually experienced.

Evangelical spokesmen constantly warned young girls about the lure of dress. A preoccupation with personal adornment is not surprising since it was one of the few arenas for women's creativity and standards of women's dress were important in demonstrating family position. When she was 19, Amy Camps, one of Rev. Marsh's devout parishioners recorded in her New

Year review of her soul how she was beset by vain and foolish thoughts on dress, an anxiety echoed by a Quaker mother about her pride in dressing her children.[87] One of Jane Taylor's didactic tales for girls, significantly entitled 'I Can Do Without It', portrays a 14 year old having to learn how to spend her first dress allowance. At the 'capital hatter's in the town' – a thinly disguised Colchester – there is a tempting display of fashionable beaver hats trimmed with satin, loaded with plumes and most becoming pink satin linings, embossed bands and dangling tassels which 'caught the eye of the fair passenger'. She had to decide how much to lay out on what kind of dress appropriate to her station.[88]

The contrast between the straight lines, practical materials and business-like images of men's clothes and the soft, flowing curved lines, the rich colours and textures, elaborate detail and constricting shape of women's clothes was becoming a powerful part of gender segregation. The connections between beauty, taste and morality going back to Burke and drawn on by practical men like Loudon as well as by poets and novelists, centred on feminine form, appearance and behaviour. Ruggedness of features, a certain disdain for appearances, even brusqueness, were signs of manliness. Perhaps it was underlying doubts about the masculinity of their calling that prompted particular concern with the manly image of the clergy. Samuel Newton, the influential Congregational minister in Witham, had the advantage of being a big man whose irregular features were seen as 'endearing', and implying sincerity as with John Newton, the Evangelical vicar who had inspired Cowper.[89] Such physical presence 'bespoke honest endeavor', the opposite of metropolitan foppishness. Thomas Binney, the bookseller's son, ministering amid the silk and lavenders of a wealthy merchant congregation, according to contemporaries, had a countenance 'from whence determination, resolution and passion have swept away all indications of smoother amenities . . . the importance of possessing a frontish piece of ugliness, of outrements with a view to obtaining command over audiences', and Binney used indignation and scorn to rouse his congregation. His 'noble manliness' was manifested in 'daring independence', in being 'rough and rugged', even moody.[90] The Taylor sisters' friend and co-author, Josiah Conder, described Binney as being particularly 'masculine and impressive' in the pulpit.[91]

The diametrically opposite feminine ideal was symbolized by the wood anemone or rosebud, so often applied to the young queen. Mary Ann Hedge, the Evangelical Colchester writer, summed up the contrasted image in one of her stories where the young woman was 'delicately blooming, with cheeks tinted with a blush, bright as the rosebud which adorned her bosom', while her brother was 'dark and ruddy, of manly stature and evidently of great muscular vigour with a penetrating fire in his eye'.[92] She drove home her point in a handbook for girls which declared that anger, allied to pride, was a 'frightful passion', violent anger in women being almost as disagreeable as drunkenness.[93] Henry Crabb Robinson commented unfavourably on the unladylike and 'hoydenish' conduct of a girl acquaintance seen running in the streets of his native Bury St Edmunds. Robinson was a friend of William Cowper and later the Wordsworths, but he kept a circle of relatives and close friends in Essex and Suffolk. His

writing displays a fear and distaste of independent behaviour in women, expressed by disparaging their attractiveness. Ann Plumtree was a highly educated contemporary of Mary Wollstonecraft who moved in radical circles. Crabb Robinson was shocked when one of her books was recommended to some 'delicately brought up' young friends of his. He had looked it over but never finished it, it was so 'extremely obscene'. He delighted in telling the story of relaying the news of Ann Plumtree's death to Charles Lamb who replied: 'What an ugly ghost she'll make.'[94]

Maintaining firm boundaries between masculine and feminine appearance and behaviour both helped to uphold men's position of dominance and ensure that they would carry out their masculine functions. But these distinctions were also seen as paramount in the struggle against endemic disorder. Emma Cadbury, who had married Thomas Gibbins and lived next door to his Battery Company in Birmingham town centre, witnessed the Chartist demonstration of 1839. The crowd passed in front of their premises and as it was one of the largest houses in the neighbourhood, the Gibbins feared they might be attacked. As the family watched the procession behind closed Venetian blinds, Emma Gibbins was struck most by 'the very coarse hard-featured women'. The demonstration and a strike soon afterwards had a profound effect on her and the family later removed to Edgbaston.[95]

The wealthy farmer's wife with her illegitimate children, her silk gowns and occasional drink too many, the genteel town manufacturer's wife watching the grim Chartist women marching past her house, and even the radical female author's ghost all played their part in the theatre of class and gender.