

“beauty is confined to no people”: The Charitable Aestheticism of Mary Eliza Haweis

British Aestheticism, the intellectual and artistic movement that placed value in beauty over moral, political or practical functions, is often remembered by the telling phrase “art for art’s sake”. But what of the aesthetes who saw that art could be used for the sake of others? Aesthetes, such as Mary Eliza Haweis, who sought to improve the artistic shortcomings of her own middle-class, and to aid the impoverished lower-classes? Haweis has been cited numerously for her role in the early aesthetic movement, with some going so far as to call her [quote] “the most important early aesthetic fashion writer” (Schaffer 108), yet her works remain mostly understudied. Her contribution to the movement is seen as fleeting, or only in the realm of fashion reform, owing to the popularity of her first aesthetic text *The Art of Beauty*, published in 1878. However, Haweis went on to write a string of texts all similarly titled ‘*The Art of...*’, including *Dress, Decoration, and Housekeeping*. Haweis’s intended audience is therefore mostly the female reformer, as she writes chiefly of the ways in which the female reader can use art for the betterment of society.

In *The Art of Dress* Haweis devotes a chapter to “cheap dress”, and attempts to persuade her reader of a thrifty approach to fashion. Indeed, Haweis was committed to inexpensive remedies, earning her a spot in “Punch” in March 1893 titled ‘Home, Cheap Home’, in which they jibe [quote] “Thine be a cot beside a hill, Hums Mrs. Haweis in our ear; Such cots are in the market still, At only thirty pounds a year.” (Punch 123¹) In *The Art of Decoration*, one of Haweis’s texts applauded for her advice on interior design and style, she discusses the “beauty of freedom”, claiming that reform in art will come from the people if they are encouraged to think independently from the dominant schools of art. Lastly, in *The Art of Housekeeping* Haweis writes a short piece on “Domestic servants” and the relationship that should be fostered between the homeowner and her hired help.

These texts all attempt to address an imbalance in class structures that can, in Haweis’s view, be smoothed out and reformed through the civilising influence of beauty in art. This view is seen most fully, not in her most lauded aesthetic texts, but in a little book rarely spoken of: *Rus in Urbe*. Haweis’s only advice manual on gardening, *Rus* has been largely forgotten, but provides a fascinating insight into Haweis’s own class identity and humanitarian impulses. It is a text which speaks most noticeably to Diana Maltz’s study of Missionary Aestheticism, and so it is curious that it is absent from her text *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes*. Maltz distinguishes Haweis, and her husband the Reverend Hugh Reginald Haweis, as key figures in missionary aestheticism, and chooses to focus on their campaign for the opening of museums of Sundays, when Haweis writes [quote] “the busy working man can regularly visit them” (*Decoration* 399). Yet, Haweis’s vast literary career is a treasure trove of just such moments, and so this paper will seek to uncover the other ways in which Haweis contributed to this artistic, and distinctly middle-class, reform movement.

Missionary Aestheticism is described by Maltz as a way for Victorians to [quote] “articulate their ambition for social reform, their belief in duty, their compassion for the impoverished, their revulsion at squalor, and their faith in the beautiful” (Maltz 217²). The most prominent of these notions in Haweis’s writing is, arguably, her revulsion at squalor, with her faith in beauty a close second. Haweis was appalled with the appearance of London, in particular the appearance of the [quote] “crowded slum” (*Rus* 13). Dirty and untidy garden spaces, what Haweis calls [quote] “a mere black hole of rotten slime and all uncleanness” (*Rus* 13) were emblematic of the middle-classes’ laziness, and uncharitable nature. For Haweis, the aesthetic missionary quest was to bring the artistic education of the middle-class to the spaces that existed both as barrier and connector to the poor – gardens. Thus, manifestations of such artistic principles were seen as “remedies for urban degradation” (Maltz 2) certainly by Haweis, as well as her fellow Ruskinian reformers.

Haweis states [quote] “our suburbs, crowded with small houses, each with its would-be “garden,” are positive miracles of slovenliness” (*Rus* 42³). Left uncared for they are wasted, but utilised – transformed through hard-work and attention, they could combat the oppressive smog of London. Thus, every

¹ “Punch, or the London Charivari.” Vol CIV. Bradbury, Agnew & Co: London, 1893. Archive.org. <https://archive.org/details/punchvol104a105lemouoft/page/n7> Accessed 30/12/2019 15:40 PM.

² Maltz, Diana. *British Aestheticism and the Urban Working Classes, 1870-1900: Beauty for the People*. Palgrave Macmillan: Hampshire, 2006. Print.

³ <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001505968>

window-box planted is a means of [quote] “improving the atmosphere as well as the appearance of town!” (*Rus* 13), and even Haweis’s so-called crowded slum receives [quote] “refreshed air from every tree, creeper, and little window plant” (*Rus* 13) that their better-off neighbours introduce. Plants are a means to unite art with aid.

Haweis pays particular attention to the scientific support regarding the benefits of plants, writing at length about the [quote] “balanced action of animal and vegetable life, mutually providing sustenance for one another” (*Rus* 10), in particular the exchange of oxygen and what she terms “carbonic acid” (*Rus* 10), or carbon dioxide. Haweis attempts to appeal to those who may not have any artistic inclinations with such factual evidence, stating [quote] “if you care nothing for beauty, at least remember that plants are sanitary ministers that, once appointed, never neglect their work” (*Rus* 9). This [quote] “wondrous chemistry of Nature” (*Rus* 10) is matched only in importance by the aesthetic appeal of plants, especially flowers. Haweis writes that there are [quote] “no better...materials for beautifying any place than flowers” (*Rus* 48) and lists off a huge number of plants that will grow in London gardens, marking those that she has had personal success with. She assures her reader that even the most [quote] “timorous beginner may trust my asterisks” (*Rus* 25).

By creating beautiful gardens, they, the missionary aesthetes that is, can compete against that most prolific haunt of the working-classes: the public house. Haweis invites the reader to imagine passing by London on the train and looking out over [quote] “half-washed clothes drying, broken barrels...lumber thrown into the waste space” and how much more pleasing it would be to see [quote] “the humble scarlet-runner and the window garden” that “might soon become a vigorous rival to the public-house” (*Rus* 42). It is clear that Haweis believes, what Maltz attributes to Ruskin, that [quote] an “aesthetic education would teach them [*i.e.* “the poor”⁴] discipline” (Maltz 4). Gardens were liminal in their aspect, for they provided a space both *of* and *outside of* the home. They also occupied the physical space between the classes. Haweis highlights the importance of this when she states that [quote] “the classes cannot mix whilst the habits of the poor remain what they are. The fleas in the grass alone forbid that” (*Rus* 8), perhaps also inadvertently highlighting here her own bigotries and possibly undermining her charitable message. The idea of the garden as somehow transformative is ubiquitous, and as Anne Helmreich shows in her 2008 article “Body and Soul: The Conundrum of the Aesthetic Garden” [quote] “the garden was a utopian project” that could “serve both body and soul” with its “soothing, refining influence” (286⁵). In this way, gardening was particularly suited to a certain kind of reformer – women. Indeed, gardening opened up a public space, sanctioned by its closeness to the home, for women to take part in this form of philanthropy, as well as engage with creative processes.

Maltz states that “art-philanthropists rarely failed to see themselves as teachers and guides” (207), and no where is this more evident in Haweis’s writing than in her volumes on beauty and dress. In *Rus in Urbe* Haweis sought to turn aestheticism towards improving the appearance and cleanliness of crowded London, in *The Art of Dress* she attempts to reform the individual’s perceptions of *affordably* good dress. In chapter five of the work, Haweis speaks of “conscious economy” (*Dress*⁶ 49) including economy in bonnets and hats and in colours. She tells the reader how to economise dress, whilst pointing out that the snobbish notion that just because one’s dress is expensive should mean it is good, is false.

This chapter is a vindication for reformers of dress, who Haweis believes people [quote] “set themselves against...because they imagine that in order to dress well you must spend much money” (*Dress* 48). She tells the reader that such a belief is [quote] “an error” (*Dress* 48). Haweis was a leading member of the Rational Dress Society for a number of years, and her rules for dress set out in this text actually predate the organisation, which was founded in 1881. The society listed that they required [quote] “all to be dressed healthily, comfortably, and beautifully” (222⁷). Haweis clearly helped define these aspects of good dress, for they reflect her own [quote] “three rules in dress” (*Dress* 24). These include: [quote] “that it shall not contradict the natural lines of the body, that the proportions of dress shall obey the proportions of the body, that the dress shall reasonably express the character of the wearer” (*Dress* 32). Any dress that does not obey these rules, and which [quote] “impair or contradict the natural line of the

⁴ My own words

⁵ HELMREICH, ANNE. “BODY AND SOUL: THE CONUNDRUM OF THE AESTHETIC GARDEN.” *Garden History*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2008, pp. 273–288. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40649460.

⁶ <https://archive.org/details/kr100000764/page/n51>

⁷ Arbuckle, Joanne & Francesca Sterlacci. *The A to Z of the Fashion Industry*. Plymouth: The Scarecrow Press, 2009. Print.

human frame are to be rejected as ugly, or injurious, or both" (*Dress* 33). Thus, aesthetic values are considered alongside health by Haweis and the society. Items of clothing which would injure health were seen as in dire need of reforming. The society focused upon corsets and crinolines as well as high-heeled shoes as the chief offenders. Dress reform demanded an emancipation from damaging fashions, and dress reformers wrote extensively on the effects of tight-lacing just as Haweis did. Haweis would later write in support of suffrage and specifically married women's rights in much the same way as she did regarding these oppressive garments, with the same vigour. One inevitably led to the other, and finally to her 'novel with a purpose' *A Flame of Fire*. She writes [quote] "we must protest against a machine that, pretending to be a servant is, in fact, a tyrant" (*Dress* 35). Such a statement, with its politically charged language, is not doubt the germination for her later campaigning. Having thus established Haweis's ties to dress reformers, a return to the original point on 'cheap dress' can be made.

Haweis desired to bring the teachings of the Rational Dress Society, which was undoubtedly a middle to upper-class organisation, before a wider audience. Maltz writes that Haweis, [quote] "more than male aesthetes, translated the precepts of aestheticism into particulars and applied them to everyday life" by creating "inexpensive fashion innovations" (128). Haweis advises her readers to make use of [quote] "crafty appliances" to make an old dress appear "sometimes an evening dress and sometimes an afternoon one" (*Dress* 50), thus recycling clothing. She also advises on particular materials which have greater durability, such as [quote] "black velvet lasts longer than coloured" and that "a good satin outlasts three silks and three cheap satins" (*Dress* 53). One of the most effective ways to economise in dress, however, was to simply not follow the fashion. Haweis writes [quote] "fashions are to some extent a trade-chronicle" (*Dress* 41) and through clever and thrifty styling women could deny the milliner profit. A satisfactory consequence of not following fashion was the development of individual taste. Cultivating a unique sense of style was clearly another of Haweis's chief aesthetic aims.

Haweis's contribution to the principle of individuality stems from her work on interior design, in which she articulates how decoration could become a tool for self-expression, and even for liberation. Towards the end of her work *The Art of Decoration*, Haweis devotes a chapter to "the beauty of freedom" (*Decoration*⁸ 361) in which she writes that it is [quote] "the upholsterer's, the penny-a-liner's, the tyro's business to frame laws...it is mine to emancipate you from their ignorant tyranny" (*Decoration* 361). She therefore distinguishes herself from those who sought financial gain, highlighting her as altruistic by contrast, despite the truth that her books were indeed sold for a substantial profit as Haweis was forced to subsidise her husband's income. Haweis disdains the institutions that kept art for the privileged few, and was particularly vocal regarding museums and galleries. Maltz claims that [quote] "the Haweis marriage...embodied the union between the anti-Sabbatarian lobby and aestheticism" (127). Certainly, Hugh Reginald Haweis influenced her thinking. He was already known, many years before their marriage, as one of the [quote] "advocates from the pulpit" (35⁹). His opinions about the Sabbath are quoted in an 1852 article that appears in the *Westminster Review*. He is quoted as saying the following: "it is upon the poor that the burden of the Sabbatical Sunday falls most heavily, and it is their cause I desire to plead" (36). This cause is one that Haweis also pleads in her 'Art of...' texts. In *Decoration* she writes [quote] "the artists themselves...hinder the public...by keeping the best art beyond their reach" and that these artists [quote] "grudge the unfortunate public every pearl...which they scatter" (*Decoration* 371). For Haweis, art has become conceited to the point that it no longer serves any purpose at all. She speaks about the quote "real function" (*Decoration* 372) which is to [quote] "chronicle the best thoughts, aspirations, sympathies of his period". Art then serves another purpose other than aesthetics, it is to document the feeling of the age in which it is created. Haweis argues that by excluding a large portion of the population from engaging with art it becomes impossible to capture the true essence of the age. It can then only become false and bad art. The artist, she calls the [quote] "priest and counsellor in the religion of beauty", his duty is to [quote] "educate his flock" with a gentle approach. This so-called priest of beauty cannot mock the masses, who may not have cultivated their artistic abilities, for [quote] "art is for the people, and the people maintain their priest" (*Decoration* 373).

⁸ <https://archive.org/details/artofdecoration00hawe/page/360>

⁹ *ART. II.-SUNDAY IN ENGLAND*. *Westminster review*, Jan. 1852-Jan. 1914; Jul 1876; 50, 1; *British Periodicals* pg. 29

Haweis warns that if artists continue to hold themselves apart from the public then their art is doomed. Pictures, she states, have already begun not to sell, whereas in contrast everyday items of decoration, the [quote] “numberless necessities of daily life” (*Decoration* 378) were becoming more prominent. Wallpaper, jewellery, cabinets and china will take their place and become truer works of art. By doing without such artists who [quote] “pretend they can do without us!” (*Decoration* 378) Haweis believes that better art can be produced, for the reform must come from below not above.

Haweis rebukes the scornful way in which artists viewed the uneducated classes, who she believed, in the first instance, their art was for. Her attempts to bridge the class divide can be seen in a number of instances, and one of the very last articles she ever produced was one regarding servants, which she was so committed to that she dictated on her death bed, succumbing to her illness just two days later. The article, titled “Servant and Served” speaks to the ways in which the middle and upper-classes were dependent on their servants who were [quote] “indispensable to our comfort” (*Words to Women* 322). An earlier version of this appeared in her 1889 text on household management in the chapter on domestic servants. Haweis believed [quote] “we all serve one another, for no class is independent of the rest” and that they can best serve by placing [quote] “no stigma upon any one kind of service. From the Prince of Wales to the crossing-sweeper” (*Housekeeping*¹⁰ 62). She writes of the respect she has for the servant class, as well as laying out the responsibilities of the mistress of the house, whose duty it is to [quote] “help servants to better themselves” (*Housekeeping* 74).

Art can only be reformed once the way it is perceived is reformed. The middle and upper-classes monopoly on it must be broken, and their knowledge passed to those of the working classes. For Haweis, art could be applied to the items of everyday life such as clothing, and to interior design, as a means to bring aestheticism to the masses.

¹⁰ <https://archive.org/details/b28114887/page/74>