

Maculate Conceptions

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Yet here's a spot. (*Macbeth* v.i.30)

What do spots mean? I want in what follows to consider the signification of and affective response to different kinds of spots, dots, blotches and patches, in a number of different areas of social and cultural history in Western Europe. I will try to account for why it is so odd or difficult to clothe or surround oneself with patterns of spots in clothing, fabric and furnishings, approaching this analysis through reflections on the idiom and appearance of the spotted in nature, religion, story and technology.

The ways of seeing, feeling and reading that I convene here are given encouragement and example by Michel Pastoureau's investigations of motifs of colour and design, especially in his remarkable meditation on the cultural history of stripes. In *The Devil's Cloth*, Pastoureau has traced the evolution of the stripe in clothing, flags and other fabrics and related it to attitudes towards the stripe in nature. Just as striped animals are thought of as cruel, unnatural and even deformed, the stripe when worn becomes the mark of the outcast, or the aberration. Medieval prostitutes were often striped, as were lepers, jugglers and clowns. Medieval devils were also often kitted out in what might seem to us now to be incongruously jazzy stripes. The bar sinister in heraldry signifies the disfigurement of illegitimacy (while also legitimating it). As a semiotic setting apart of that which must be excluded from orderly social life, stripes exercise a disciplinary force too, as is borne out by their use for military uniform and prison clothing. With the unrelenting on-off, black-white binarism of its parallel lines, the stripe is almost a visible allegory of those forms of barely licit existence which live parallel to, but apart from normal social life.¹

For the greater part of human history, during which the understanding of the interior processes of the body has been extremely limited, disease has been understood in terms of its manifestations on the outside of the body. More than any other sign, it has been spots that have signified the onset of disease, whether smallpox, bubonic plague, (named after its characteristic 'bubos'), or any one of the host of scarcely-differentiated 'spotted fevers'. Spots rarely if ever suggest health or vitality. The two apple-red blotches which give a healthy or lubricious glow to cheeks in Donald McGill cartoons are hugely outnumbered by more ominous rubrications and floreations on the skin – the ruddiness of the imminent apoplectic, the consumptive's hectic flush. Irregularly spotted fabrics are ominous not just because they are reminiscent of blemishes on the skin, but also because they are uncomfortable reminders of the ominous markings of other fabrics: the blood in the handkerchief that was a traditional sign of tuberculosis, and the 'spotting', as it is still commonly called, which may presage a miscarriage in early pregnancy. Desdemona's strawberry-spotted handkerchief which leads to such disaster in *Othello* joins together the associations of disease, deception, lust and corruption.

¹ Michel Pastoureau, *The Devil's Cloth: A History of Stripes and Striped Clothing*, trans. Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 13-14, 55-61.

Perhaps the two diseases most commonly associated with the appearance of spots in the medieval world were leprosy and syphilis. Spots became the identifying characteristic in emblematic representations of lepers in the medieval period, even though spots are not necessarily characteristic of the disease after its onset.² Medieval representations of Biblical victims of skin disease such as Job and Namaan (II Kings 5) show them covered in spots, and the heroine in Robert Henryson's *Testament of Cresseid* (c. 1470) who is 'with fleshelie lust sa maculait' after leaving her lover Troilus is blasted with a plague of 'spottis blak' which seem to be leprosy.³ The closeness of the link is indicated by the fact that the common name for measles seems to derive from Middle English adjective *mesel*, or *mesyl*, meaning leprous. *Mesel* is actually a shortening of the Latin *misellus*, the diminutive of *miser*, wretched; when the word measles generated its own adjective in the nineteenth century, it shifted its emphasis, for 'measly' now does not mean full of misery, but rather contemptibly poor.

However, close attention to the detailed instructions and precautions prescribed in Leviticus 13 reveals a striking fact about what the spotted seems to have meant in ancient Judaism. For it is not the extent of disease that seems to decide the degree of uncleanness, but rather the mingling of the pure and the impure. The priest presented with a man who has 'in the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot' must pronounce him unclean, especially when 'the appearance of the plague be deeper than the skin of his flesh' (Lev. 13.2, 3). The spreading or breaking out of spots over the skin is also a sign of leprosy, but only if the spread is not total. Remarkably, in this case, 'if the leprosy break out abroad in the skin and the leprosy cover all the skin of him that hath the plague from his head even to his feet...he shall pronounce him clean that hath the plague: it is all turned white: he is clean' (Lev. 13.12, 13). So, for Old Testament Judaism, it is the degree of motley or mingling that determines uncleanness, not the extent of the disease. To be totally unclean is to be clean. It is for this reason that the book of Leviticus pays such close attention also to the determination of uncleanness in fabrics (Lev.13.47-59) and even in the walls of dwellings (Lev. 14, 33-57). The presence of a greenish or reddish plague 'whether it be in warp, or woof; of linen, or of woollen, whether in a skin, or in anything made of skin' (Lev. 14. 48-9) signifies a leprous despoiling of the integrity of the fabric and is therefore unclean. When it comes to the uncleanness of leprosy (which seems to mean, tautologically, the uncleanness of mixture rather than the disease now called by the name of leprosy), there is no distinction to be made between different kinds of skin. So fabrics can suffer from the malady of spotting, as well as figure it; they can embody the uncleanness of the sign as well as be the sign of the unclean. This feeling will linger long into the later history of fabric and pattern.

Stigma

Spots are like stripes in making evident and emphatic the difference between what is socially approved or included and what is disapproved and outlawed. But the fact that the area of intersection of spots and stripes is so extensive can also disclose some striking differences between them. The point of the stripe is to mark an absolute and

² Saul Nathaniel Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 51.

³ Robert Henryson, *The Poems*, ed. Denton Fox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp. 113, 122.

unconditional boundary between the included and the excluded. Those marked off with the stripe are outlandish, visibly set apart. The stripe images and effects a permanent and absolute altering of their condition. But the horror and dread of the spot is that it invades, supervening upon and coexisting with a previously clear and unspotted countenance. Indeed, one might say, in accord with the Levitical principle of uncleanness, that, where only the corrupt can be striped, *only the pure can be spotted*. It is almost better to be wholly given over to sin or crime than to bear the foul taint of partial corruption. The striped one is a renegade: the spotted one is an apostate. This, perhaps, is why knights like Clitophon in Sidney's *Arcadia* live under the motto of the ermine: 'Rather dead than spotted'.⁴

Much of the symbolism of stripes may rest on the fact that regular stripes are relatively rare in nature. For this reason, stripes will usually suggest some purposeful marking out or setting apart. Through signifying some design, stripes suggest the hand of some artificer, or even an act of self-designation. Spots, on the other hand, are not at all rare in nature (nor, in fact, are streaks and striations, which may approximate to stripes but are importantly distinct from them). So where the stripe is the uniform of the regulated irregular, spots are the oxymoronic sign of the involuntary, the random, the impermanent, the formless. Stripes are formed and exhibited, but spots seem simply to happen. In performing its work of marking off, the stripe always also exhibits itself *as* a marking off, designating its own act of designation, which explains its prominence in forms of identification, flags, banners and uniforms. But the spot is often characterised by a certain ambivalence as to whether it is a determinate mark or not. The stripe marks off a boundary within the language of signs; spots inhabit a more dubious boundary between the signifying and the nonsignifying.

The history of stigmatisation in the West has a close and formative relation to the experience of spots. In Europe this has come to be associated in particular with the enforced stigmatisation of Jews. The compulsory wearing of the yellow star which was 'revived' in Nazi Germany had not in fact been uniformly applied in medieval Europe, and more common than the star in a number of countries was a spot or roundel, which could be red or white as well as yellow (it was known in Germany as '*der gelber Fleck*', the yellow smirch). The increasing discredit of yellow in Europe from the late medieval period onwards probably determined the settling on this colour, but what seemed to matter most was that Jews should wear a colour that clearly contrasted with the predominating colour of their costume.⁵ England was the first country in Europe to implement the recommendations of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that Jews wear a distinctive mark, but Henry III's decree of 1217 called for Jews to wear two bands of white linen, inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Five years later the Council of Oxford changed this requirement, insisting instead that the colour of the badge be different from the colour of the garment to which it is affixed, perhaps in response to attempts by Jews to camouflage their badges by wearing white.⁶ Jews, it seems, must be

⁴ Philip Sidney, *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, 2nd edn (London: John Windet for William Ponsonbie, 1593) Bk 1, p. 33.

⁵ Michel Pastoureau, 'Formes et couleurs du désordre: le jaune avec le vert', *Médiévales*, 4 (1983): 62-73.

⁶ Guido Kisch, 'The Yellow Badge in History', *Historia Judaica*, 19 (1957), p. 104.

marked off in the very motley, or doubling of fabric which Leviticus proscribes (Lev. 19.19), such that even the cleanness of white (the ironic colour of leprosy) could render them unclean. The doubleness regarding the badge of Judaism may derive partly from the Levitician vigilance against the spotting of the skin, which seems to prescribe a heightened, phobic attention to the condition of the skin of the Jews. Jews are made to wear stigmata on their skin as a turning back on them of their own cultural horror at the disfigured or unclean skin. Their enforced maculation makes them stand for the very principle of uncleanness their own religious regulations did so much to establish in Christian Europe.

However, it is a striking fact that such prescription of colours and forms is a feature both of persecuting authorities and of Jewish self-regulation, sometimes acting in close cooperation. The logic of stigma is always that of a mark given to the skin from the outside which is meant to witness or double the skin's own spontaneous auto-inscription. There are times when it seems equally desirable for both persecutor and persecuted, though for opposite reasons, that mingling or assimilation be resisted. One might recall here the fact that the mark of Cain was given by God to the first murderer, not in order to disgrace him, but in order to mark him out as God's and protect him from assault (*Genesis* 4.15). The strange interplay between a mark that wounds and a mark that affords protection, which is also enacted through Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, has been seen again recently. When the Taliban issued a fatwa in May 2001 ordering members of the tiny Hindu minority in Afghanistan to wear a badge of yellow, the justification, actually apparently accepted by at least one Hindu religious leader, was that it would protect Hindus from punishment for infraction of Muslim law.⁷

Motley

One way to make the spotted secure is to geometrize the spots, make spots approximate to line and grid. Another way is to create a category of the spotted. The stripe sets apart the harlot, the heretic, the convict. Since the late medieval period, it has been conventional for the figure of the fool to be thought of as dressed in motley, that apotheosis of the spotted, in which miscellaneity has overwhelmed the ground on which it has arisen, forming a surface made up of shreds and patches, cross-woven, colours flung together as chance and circumstance dictate.⁸ The wearing of motley allows the figure of the fool to inhabit the borderline between nature and culture (fools are 'naturals') intention and accident (is the fool ingenious or ingenuous, deliberately witless, or accidentally wise?). The word 'patch' has also been applied since the late 16th century to a clown, fool or dolt, though 'patching' came to mean not only a harmless kind of fooling, but also a more deceitful or treacherous kind of trickery. 'Patch' was the nickname given to Sexton, Cardinal Wolsey's jester, and the players in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are called 'a crew of patches' (3.ii. 9), a fact of which Bottom reminds us and himself when, after waking, and trying to recall his transformation, he decides that 'man is but a patch'd

⁷ 'Taliban Defends Hindu Badges Plan', *Guardian*, May 24, 2001:
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,3604,495531,00.html>>

⁸ Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (1935: London: Faber and Faber, 1968), pp. 121-4, 334.

foole, if he will offer to say, what me-thought I had' (*MND*, iv.i. 215). This usage has probably dictated the passage of the name across to the innumerable, cutely mischievous pets who have been called 'Patch' and 'Spot'.

However, motley has a more complex history than the familiar image of the parti-coloured jester or the chequered harlequin might suggest. Leslie Hotson suggests in his *Shakespeare's Motley* that Shakespeare and his contemporaries mean something very different from these gaudy pied colours when they use the word 'motley'. He argues that this term names, not a chequered design, but rather a form of cloth, made of closely interwoven threads, and thus exhibiting a rather coarse or even drab appearance. It is for this reason, he argues, that such motley was often named after its predominating shade, usually brown, green or yellow, a fact which is hard to reconcile with the idea of clearly-distinguished and competing colours.⁹ Insisting that '*motley* was not at all a gaudy parti-colour, but an undemonstrative vesture of humility',¹⁰ Hotson aims to mark a gap between the crude antics of traditional clowns and fools and sadder, subtler, less obtrusive kinds of fool, typified by actors like Robert Arnim, for whom Shakespeare began to write in the later 1590s.

In fact, however, there may be a closer equivalence than Hotson allows between what can be called mixed motley and pied motley. In both cases, the distinction between figure and ground that allows the spot to stand out against a continuous surface has given way. In the case of mixed motley, the principle of particulation has, as it were, sunk deep into the fabric. In the case of the more traditional kind of pied motley, which seems to be a formalisation of a costume made up entirely of patches, the principle of particulation has been taken up into a fabric that is all surface. In such a fabric, the abutting of edge against edge does the duty done by the superimposition of pattern upon ground and in which the 'against' has therefore taken the place of the 'upon'. But in both mixed and pied motley, particulation is all there is.

The suspicion of patched or pied colours in medieval Europe was probably because they suggested this abundance of seams or edges. The avoidance of the seam even extended to the dividing of clothes, either at the waist or the crotch, neither of which became common in Europe until after the fifteenth century; it remained uncommon for women even to wear blouses and skirts of different colours until the nineteenth century. Indeed, we still have a sensitivity to 'seaminess' and the seamy side of things, the latter deriving from Emilia's remark to Iago about a malicious gossip 'that turn'd your wit the seamy side without' (*Othello*, IV.ii). Again, there seems to have been a Biblical source for this. The Gospel of John relates that, when Christ was taken down from the cross and his garments divided among the soldiers, it was seen that 'his tunic was without seam [*arafos*, the only appearance of this word in the Greek New testament], woven from top to bottom' (John 19.23). The cathedral of Trier and the parish church of Argenteuil have both claimed possession of this Holy Coat, or *tunica inconsutilis*, from the twelfth century onwards. Indeed, traditions associated with the latter claim that it is identical with the garment worn by Jesus, which was woven by the Virgin Mary, and miraculously grew with him.¹¹

⁹ Leslie Hotson, *Shakespeare's Motley* (1952; New York: Haskell House, 1971), pp. 33-43.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 100.

¹¹ J. N. Rutland, *Von der Verehrung der Reliquien im Allgemeinen und der des heiligen Rockes zu Trier insbesondere* (Berlin, 1844); Gabriel Gerberon, *L'histoire de la robe sans couture de... Jesus*

Although there were a number of mixed fabrics in common use in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was also a survival of the medieval uneasiness about mixing different kinds of fabric in the same garment, which itself derived from the Levitician instruction that ‘neither shall there come upon thee a garment of two kinds of stuff mingled together’ (RSV, Leviticus, 19.19). Indeed, the King James Bible specifies the fabrics themselves, instructing ‘neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee’. One of the commonest of such fabrics was ‘linsey-woolsey’, a term which arose in the late fifteenth century to describe a textile material of mixed wool and flax, and later used to refer to a dress material of coarse wool woven on to a cotton warp. The preacher Henry Smith reported in his *Preparative to Marriage* (1591) that ‘God forbad the people to weare linsey wolsey, because it was a sign of inconstancie’.¹² The term also came to be used to describe any foolish or nonsensical mingling. ‘What linsie wolsy hast thou to speak to us again?’ we hear in Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well* (IV.i. 13). John Taylor uses the term to denounce the work of a contemporary, promising that ‘Such Motley, Medley, Linsy-Woolsey speeches/Would sure have made thee vilify thy breeches’.¹³ The mixing of fabrics also governs John Cleveland’s colourful evocation of the ‘Linsie-Woolsie Vestry-men’ who made up the mixed Parliament of the 1640s: ‘strange *Grottesco* this, the Church and States/(Most divine tick-tack) in a pye-bald crew’.¹⁴

The term ‘motley’ was used throughout the seventeenth century, not just to denote the foolish, but more generally as an image of the disorderly or vacuous. There seems to have been a particularly strong association between empty, vain or pretentious language and the wearing of motley. In 1611, John Davies wrote a poem called ‘Paper’s Complaint’, in which he has his vocal paper protest against the triviality of the events with which chroniclers ‘Do so absurdly sableize my White’, complaining that such frivolity ‘spotteth mee/With Medley of their Mottled Liverie’.¹⁵ The vacuously imitative courtier was often identified as a wearer of motley. ‘Away thou fondling motley humorist’, writes John Donne in his first ‘Satyre’, preferring the ‘constant company’ of the books in his study to the prospect that he might ‘follow headlong, wild uncertaine thee’.¹⁶ Donne fills this picture out in *Satyre III*, which evokes one such crossbred creature, ‘A thing more strange, then on Niles slime, the Sunne/E’er bred, or all which into Noahs Arke came’, whose clothing matches his patched-together speech and ‘Pedants motley tongue’.

Christ, qui est reverée dans l’Eglise du Monastere des Religieux Benedictins d’Argenteüil. Avec un abregé l’histoire de ce monastere (Paris, 1677).

¹² Henry Smith, *A Preparative to Marriage* (London: Thomas Orwin for Thomas Man, 1591), p. 157

¹³ John Taylor, ‘Taylors Revenge: Or, The Rimer William Fennor, Firkt, Ferrited, and Finely Fetcht Over the Coales’, *All The Workes of Iohn Taylor, The Water Poet* (London: for Iames Bolter, 1630), p. 147

¹⁴ John Cleveland, ‘The Mixt Assembly’, *The Character of a London-Diurnall* (London, 1647), p. 29.

¹⁵ John Davies, ‘Papers Complaint, Compild in Ruthfull Rimes’, *The Scourge of Folly...* (London: Edward Allde for R. Redmer, 1611), p. 238

¹⁶ John Donne, ‘Satyre 1’, *Poems* (London: Iohn Marriot, 1633), p. 326.

mere stuff – material witness or just material. The figure of Dissimulation is described in Robert Wilson's 1584 play *Three Ladies of London* as 'having on a farmers long coat, and a cappe, and powle and beard painted motley',²¹ and Edward Guilpin complained in 1598 that 'motley fac'd Dissimulation,/Is crept into our every fashion'.²²

Patching

The increasing affluence, social mobility and migration which helped bring about from the sixteenth century onwards the liberation of fashion from the uniform signification of occupation or degree also made it possible for styles like motley to develop a special kind of allure. One sign of this is the capacity to play with the negativity of motley, most notably in the remarkable fashion for 'patching' that held sway in Europe from the 1590s to at least the 1720s. Like so many fashions, it was believed to have been brought back to England from France. 'What is there in Fraunce to be learnd more than in England?', growled Thomas Nashe in his *Unfortunate Traveller* of 1594. 'I have knowen some that have continued there by the space of half a dozen yeare, and when they come home...Nought else have they profited by their travell, save learnt to... weare a velvet patch on their face, and walke melancholy with their armes folded.'²³ By 1604, Thomas Dekker and John Webster have the character of Judith in their play *Westward Hoe*, resolving that 'when als done, I must follow his counsell, and take a patch, I have had one long ere this, but for disfiguring my face: yet I had noted that a masticke patch upon some womens Temples hath bin the very rheuwme of beauty'.²⁴ The patch was sometimes known as a 'moucheron', or 'little fly' defined by Randle Cotgrave's *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* of 1611 as 'the little blacke patch thats glued by Masticke, &c, on the faces of many'.²⁵ Women would apply dark patches of fabric to their faces, perhaps originally to cover blemishes and pockmarks, but increasingly because of the power to fascinate which they seemed to gather on their own terms. The coyest and most subtle of these would mimic moles, to the explication of which many popular fortune-telling books and pamphlets were devoted during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. But patching could also display the epidemic tendency that we have seen is so frequently associated with spots. Not surprisingly, patching became associated with prostitution and pox.²⁶

²¹ Robert Wilson, *A Right Excellent and Famous Comoedy Called The Three Ladies of London* (London: by Roger Warde, 1584), Act 2, sig Aii^v

²² Edward Guilpin, 'Satyra Prima', *Skialetheia: Or a shadowe of Truth in certaine Epigrams and Satyres*, (London: for Nicholas Ling, 1598) sig C4^r

²³ Thomas Nashe, *The Unfortunate Traveller: Or, The Life of Jack Wilton*, 2nd edn. (London: Thomas Scarlet for Cuthbert Burby, 1594), p. 85

²⁴ Thomas Dekker and John Webster, *West-ward Hoe* (London: for John Hodges et. al., 1607), Act 2.1, sig. C1^r.

²⁵ Randle Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611), sig Hhh5^v.

²⁶ N.F. Lowe, 'Hogarth, Beauty Spots and Sexually-Transmitted Diseases', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15 (1992): 71-9

Thereafter the practice of spotting or patching is regularly denounced in the Puritan literature against the extremes of ostentation in female dress that flourished both before the Civil War and in the Restoration. 'Why Oyles? Waters for Teeth? Why void of Grace?/With spots (like *Rats-Dung*) to blacke patch the face?...Why wrong Heav'ns workmanship, with such hie sin?' demanded Nathaniel Richards in his (vicious) 1630 poem, 'The Vicious Courtier', concluding that 'The painted outside of a tempting Face,/Spotted with Hell, stands sequestred from Grace'.²⁷ A pamphlet of 1665, written in the thick of a serious outbreak of the plague in London, accused those who wore patches of being harbingers of pestilence.²⁸ The most sustained assault upon the patching craze of what it calls 'the spotted Generation' is to be found in a pamphlet entitled *A Wonder of Wonders* of 1662, by 'Miso-Spilus'.²⁹

In his *Anthropometamorphosis, or The Artificial Changeling* of 1650, John Bulwer offers a rather more reasoned consideration of the practice, as part of his review of the curious customs of adornment and bodily modification practised by barbarous peoples across the world:

Our *English Ladies*, who seem to have borrowed many of the Cosmetical conceits from barbarous Nations, are seldome known to be contented with a Face of Gods making...Sometimes they want a Mole to set off their beauty, such as *Venus* had; then it is well if one Black-patch will serve to make their Faces remarkable, for some fill their Visages full of them, varied into all manner of shapes and figures, which is as odious and as senseless an affectation as ever was used by any barbarous Nation in the world.³⁰

Bulwer does his best to try to account for the fascination of the patch. Ladies who patch are mistaken, he says, in their adherence to the principle of intensification by contrast, namely that 'contraries compared and placed neere one another shew their lustre more plainly', such that 'imperfection can make perfect' (156-157). This was a common justification in a period that was as fascinated by contrariety as it professed to be unnerved by it. A song by Henry Bold affirms that 'The choice Grace/Of a Face/ By a

²⁷ Nathaniel Richards, 'The Vicious Courtier', *The Celestiall Publican...* (London: Felix Kyngston for Roger Michell, 1630), sigs. H2^v-H3^r. Patching is also condemned in Thomas Hall's *Comarum Akosmia: the loathesomeness of long haire...with the concurrent judgement of divines both old and new against it. With an appendix against painting, spots, naked breasts, etc* (London: 1654).

²⁸ *The Prophecie of One Of His Maiesties Chaplains, Concerning the Plague, and Black-Patches* (London: for G. Horton, 1665), p. 2.

²⁹ *A Wonder of Wonders: or; a metamorphosis of fair faces voluntarily transformed into foul visages. Or, an invective against black-spotted faces: by a well-wisher to modest matrons and virgins, Miso-Spilus i. qui maculis odit* (London: 'Published by R. Smith, Gent.': J.G. for Richard Royston, 1662), p. 8.

³⁰ John Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis; Man Transform'd; or, The Artificial Changeling. Historically Presented in the mad and cruel Gallantry, Foolish Bravery, ridiculous Beauty, Filthy Fineness, and loathesome Loveliness of most NATIONS, Fashioning & altering their Bodies from the Mould intended by NATURE...* (London: for J. Hardesty, 1650), p. 156. References in my text hereafter.

black Patch, out-set is:/The best Stone,/Fairest she'wn,/Within a foile of Jet is.'³¹ A poem by Robert Heath written in praise of the mole on his mistress's cheek voices similar sentiments:

How fair a Character hath Nature wrot!
And printed on her cheek in black and white!
While this i' th' fairer Copie is no blot,
But a ful period; that the Reader might
The better understand the sence, and know
That here Shee stopt, and could no further go.³²

Bulwer will have none of these arguments of perfection wrought from blemish. A spotted face pleases rather 'because it gives envy satisfaction, which takes pleasure in defects, or by reason it takes away that astonishment, which instead of delighting confounds' (157). Having rejected the explanation of the spot's allure based upon the intensification of beauty, Bulwer then offers an alternative argument based upon the dynamics of viewing in the spectator:

For these Spots in a beautiful Face, adde not grace to a Visage, nor increase delight; they entertain it, because they extinguish, and then renew it. Our natural power is limited to a certain measure; when the continual presence of the delightful object doth exceed, the delight ceases, and coming to the extream of what it can contribute, it delights no longer: He that will renew his pleasure must begin with pain, and go out of the natural state to return into it; Let him look upon the Spots, then return to behold the beauty of the Face. (157)

The argument uses a proto-Freudian model of the economics of sensation. The idea seems to be that, having reached an unsustainable maximum, followed by inevitable diminishment, the pleasure principle may reassert itself in replenished form. The temporary contemplation of the unpleasurable can similarly intensify pleasure. The distinction that Bulwer is attempting to make here is a subtle one. Indeed, there seems little to choose between this argument and the one that he intends to displace. Shifting attention as he does from the object of contemplation to the contemplator serves simply to explain the operations whereby beauty is indeed intensified by contrast. The interest of Bulwer's tangled reasoning lies in the fact that he acknowledges that there is indeed a pleasure in the spotted, a pleasure that seems in some complex way entangled with the apparent baulking of the pleasure principle.

The career of the patch was long, though there are signs that it was also intermittent enough for some of its comebacks to be surprising. Pepys records what seems to have been his first sight of women sporting 'black spots' on 14 May 1660. His account of a conversation with the up-and-coming Lord Sandwich, on October 20th of that year suggests that it was once again becoming the fashion at court: 'he was very merry and did talk very high how he would have a French Cooke and a Master of his Horse, and his

³¹ Henry Bold, 'Song LX: A Round, at the Request of Sir W. B.', in *Poems: Lyrique, Macaronique, Heroique, &c* (London: for Henry Brome, 1664), p. 96.

³² Robert Heath, 'On a Black Mole on Clarastella's Faire Check', *Clarastella: Together With Poems Occasional, Elegies, Epigrams, Satyrs* (London: for Humph. Moseley, 1650), p. 10

lady and child to wear black patches'. A few weeks later, on November 4th, Pepys was writing 'My wife seemed very pretty today, it being the first time I have given her leave to weare a black patch.'³³ A certain suspicion always clung to the patch or spot, which hovered between the conditions of a pastiche and a covering for a real blemish. On 5 May 1668, Pepys records seeing the Lady Castlemayne effecting what seem like running repairs by means of a patch at the theatre: 'she called to one of her women, another that sat by this, for a little patch off her face, and put it into her mouth and wetted it and so clapped it upon her own by the side of her mouth. I suppose she feeling a pimple rising there.'³⁴ Beauty and infirmity were always in close vicinity in the patch. A poem of a few years later mocks its patched subject in these terms:

Why then in plain, 'tis a blot in your Scutchin.
Which we must not a patch, but plaister call,
Not bought at *Change* but beg'd at th' Hospital.
Nor dost thou patch, but botch.

Under these circumstances, it is no longer clear what is foil and what is jewel, as the ground expands to become the figure:

Why dost thou finger 't so? and keep a coil,
To trim a face that is itself a foil.
Indeed I question which the foil wou'd be,
The leporous looks, or rusty taffitie.³⁵

The extent to which the addiction to patching could go is indicated by a story told by the seventeenth-century gentleman scientist Kenelm Digby. He describes a kinswoman of his who was quite unable to show herself in public without a rash of black patches, in the shape of stars and crescents, stuck on her face and neck. When she became pregnant, Digby warned her of the danger of transmitting the marks to the countenance of her child, suggesting that the patches might even coalesce to form one large unsightly blotch. His alarmed kinswoman abandoned her beloved patches, but the effect of brooding on the damage she might already have caused was enough, Digby tells us, to ensure that when her baby was born, it did indeed bear a large dark mark on its forehead.³⁶

Digby's story forms part of the extensive literature from the sixteenth century onwards on the power of mothers to transmit birthmarks to their unborn children as a result of alarm or unrequited longing (birthmarks used to be called 'longing marks' and are still called *envies* in French). He tells this story as part of a proof of the magical sympathies that exist between objects and persons and the possibility of effects at a distance. The fact that

³³ *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 10 Vols (London: Bell and Hyman, 1983), Vol 1 pp. 139, 269, 283.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Vol 9, p. 186.

³⁵ Matthew Stevenson, 'Upon a Rusty Patch on An Iron Face', *Poems, Or A Miscellany of Sonnets, Satyrs, Drollery, Panegyrics, Elegies, etc.* (London: for R. Reynolds and John Lutton, 1673), p. 71

³⁶ Kenelm Digby, *A Late Discourse Made in a Solemn Assembly of Noble and Learned Men at Montpellier in France...Touching the Cure of Wounds By the Power of Sympathy*, trans. R. White (London: for R. Lowndes and T. Davies, 1658), pp. 101-8.

spots could spread not just across a body, but between bodies, as the effect simply of impulse or imagination, makes spots the touch of another in one's most intimate being; spots come *from elsewhere*. The fact that Digby was an atomist, who explained the transmission of such images and marks by means of the fact that bodies are continually giving off impalpable films and species of atoms, which then mingle with other bodies, suggests the apprehension of an infinitesimal spottedness or particulation at the very heart of things.

Pied Beauty

By spotting their flesh with fabric, these ladies (and sometimes gentlemen) were inverting the normal condition of things. The spot seems to be the formal antagonist of woven fabrics, since it represents the puncturing or unravelling of the reciprocally-supporting lines and reticulations that form the structure of the fabric. The spot is the fly, not so much in the ointment, as struggling against the web. Clothing and decorative fabrics have therefore often followed the astrological impulse by generally avoiding the use of irregular spots, or attempted to regularise their spacing and disposition, thus bending the alogic of the spot to the more predictable topography of the line, and restoring the levelness and continuity of the surface which an irregularly-spotted pattern seems to compromise.

The principle governing many apparently spotted patterns is that they should be subtly educated and controlled by lines or stripes, which provide as it were the supporting stave for their dots and quavers – for example in many of the more delicate Laura Ashley wallpapers and fabrics. It is as though it were the principle of weave itself which were being maintained or reasserted through this gridwork. Where spots are not being chivvied in this way into lines and rectangles, they can be neutralised by distance. Questions of scale and magnitude seem to be important here. One must either be brought up close enough to spotted patterns to be able to make out clearly the contours of the rose, the jewel, the eye, the head, of which the spot is formed, or the pattern must be held back from us sufficiently that the eye cannot resolve the busy sizzle of the surface into its separate elements. The latter would seem to be the case, for example, both in *pointilliste* painting, and also in designs like the 'shower-of-hail' overcoat, the descendant of Elizabethan mixed motley. Indeterminate patterns of spots can also be used, somewhat more dubiously, to camouflage, as in kitchen linoleum, or flecked carpet. It will be a long time, one can surmise, before spots gain the reputation for being hygienic that stripes have done, which is why spotted underpants can be worn only as a joke.

The clustering together of small spots not only neutralises the question asked of the surface by the spot, it also conjures from the venomous powers of the spotted a mildly intoxicant effect. Dots can be dizzying (as when one 'sees stars' or gets 'spots before the eyes'), but because of this, they can be frivolous, playful, pleasantly narcotic. This seems to be part of the reason that spots have been associated from the nineteenth century onwards with bedroom fabrics: with pyjamas, bed-hangings, and quilts. Spotted or irregular patterns that mildly disconcert seem to have the effect of dulling attention and thereby encouraging sleep. Anything more definite, or more easily brought into

focus, might constitute an inducement to hallucination or disturbed sleep, suggested Robert Edis in his *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses*.³⁷

And yet, since the curious habit of patching complexions in order to show them more fair took hold in the seventeenth century, the spotted has steadily grown in fascination and prestige. Spots are subject to what Barbara Maria Stafford has called the exoticising tendency apparent in Europe from the end of the Enlightenment onwards, whereby whatever is regarded as strange, disorderly or singular can become aesthetically valued.³⁸ That preference for the fragment over the whole that Nietzsche believed predominated in eras of decadence can be found in the growing tolerance of motley, spottedness and inconstancy in Baudelaire, while a somewhat dangerous delight in spottedness, is to be found in Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, in which a particularly exquisite orchid is described as 'a marvelous spotted thing, as effective as the seven deadly sins'. The love of what is brindled, freckled and streaked is particularly intense in the work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who found many ways to declare the glory of 'dappled things', and of 'All things counter, original, spare, strange;/Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)/With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim'.³⁹

The ambivalence of spottedness is in large degree the expression of human ambivalence about nature. Admiration of nature's variety and abundance can often be expressed in terms of an appreciation of the spotted. Certainly speckledness and spottedness have long been valued by breeders of livestock, and collectors of birds'-eggs, while spotted fawns and speckled trout are signs of natural delicacy and abundance. That this preference has a long lineage is indicated by the story of Jacob's ruse to induce his cattle to give birth to spotted and streaked offspring (*Genesis* 30.30-43). A greyhound with a white spot on its forehead has been regarded as lucky among Welsh racegoers, and a special respect is reserved for dappled horses.⁴⁰ The refrain 'I've lost my spotted cow' in the English folk song 'The Spotted Cow', which indicates the loss of cowherd's maidenhead, suggests the prizing of the spotted. In fact, the preference for spotted or mottled nature may be stronger among humans, or at least those in the West, than in nature itself, for patterns of breeding in the wild tend to produce much more uniformity than among domesticated animals.

The fact that prinked, prickled or freckled patterns became associated with inattention and irresponsibility means that spots have developed markedly childish connotations. More even than to the bedroom, spots nowadays belong to the nursery (or to that outdoor, adult nursery, the beach). All over the world, children learning to read are now beguiled by the adventures of a puppy called, simply, 'Spot'. The well-established link between

³⁷ Robert Edis, *Decoration and Furniture of Town Houses: A Series of Cantor Lectures*, 2nd edn. (London: Kegan Paul and Co., 1881).

³⁸ Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 329-39.

³⁹ Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'Pied Beauty', *Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, 4th edn., ed. W.H. Gardner and N.H. Mackenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 70.

⁴⁰ Philippa Waring, *A Dictionary of Omens and Superstitions* (London: Souvenir Press, 1978), p. 111; Francis Haines *Appaloosa, The Spotted Horse in Art and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963).

childishness and femininity means that spots and dots have much more distinctively female associations than stripes - a banker can wear a striped tie with ease, but a man who comes into the office with a spotted tie still risks being thought of as a fop, an oaf or an exhibitionist. But it is the circus that has done most of the work of quarantining the spot by exaggeration. Clowns, with their lugubriously-maculated eyes, oozing fat teardrops, their great ruby noses, the perfect discs of red worn on their cheeks, the balloon-like circles that bloom over their costumes, are spottedness at once run riot and fixed in place by magnification and geometrisation. Episodes of willing or sanctioned clownishness, like the 'Red Nose days' operated by the British charity Comic Relief, similarly licence a kind of spottedness in order to hold it at bay.

The polka dot represents the most conspicuous triumph of the spot over cultural mistrust - or rather, perhaps, the triumph of that mistrust over the spot. The origins of the name are obscure, but it seems to be the only survivor of the practice of naming products after the craze for the polka which swept across Europe and, more especially, America during the 1870s and 1880s. Polka dots have maintained their position partly as a result of the growing tolerance for, and commodification of childishness or harmless, irresponsible cuteness in the modern world. Brian Hyland's 1960 hit song 'Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini' continued the tradition of making sexuality safe with babytalk. A website currently advertising a range of pretty ribbons and boxes urges its customers 'with a splash of whimsy and a touch of fun, add a sparkle with dainty polka dots'. But the polka-dot defends against the indeterminacy lurking in the spot by its perfect circularity and the clear differentiation it makes between foreground and background. The heyday of the polka dot was during the 1960s, when it multiplied on miniskirts, handbags, shoes, hats and other accessories and hats, sometimes roughed up a little, for example into the 'leopardskin pillbox hat' of which Bob Dylan sang so sneeringly on his *Blonde on Blonde* album. During the 1970s, the polka-dots of mod fashion bred unpredictably with the spirals of hippie typography, the swirling splotches of tie-dyed t-shirts, and ubiquitous faux-Celtic curlicues. Everywhere one looked, straight lines were being coiled over on themselves or flooded with dabs and daubs of colour. For all of the alleged anarchism and dissidence of punk, the challenge of its iconography depended on the reassertion of the disciplinary power of the stripe, the tear, the slash, the bar sinister, the diagonal and the zigzag.

I have said that there is always a kind of premonition in the spotted. The current universality of the image formed of dots, and the fascination with its construction, for example in the printing of t-shirts with fuzzy newspaper-quality images suggests that perhaps the long-established authority of the textile metaphor of the world as network is beginning to be surpassed, in favour of the patchy, pluralised, particoloured mosaic of a world. Michel Serres evokes the knowledge needed to apprehend such a world at the beginning of his *Le Tiers-instruit*, translated as *The Troubadour of Knowledge*. He imagines Harlequin, newly returned from his journey to the moon, denying that there is any difference between it and the earth, but being betrayed by the very form of his cape, which is '[a] motley composite made of pieces, of rags or scraps of every size, in a thousand forms and different colors, of varying ages, from different sources, badly basted, inharmoniously juxtaposed, with no attention paid to proximity, mended according to need, accident, and contingency'.⁴¹ Harlequin responds to the jeers of the

⁴¹ Michel Serres, *The Troubadour of Knowledge*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser and William Paulson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. xiii-xiv.

crowd by removing his cape, only to reveal another, just the same, and then 'another colorfully patterned body stocking spotted like an ocelot', and beneath that, a skin covered in tattoos that reproduce his many coats, maculate and patched.⁴² This world, a world deep as the skin, and as motley, is one in which, as William James put it, 'there is no bedding; it is as if the pieces clung together by their edges, the transitions between them forming their cement'.⁴³ a spotty, turbulent, now-you-see-it, now-you-don't world, that is not so much falling as coming to bits.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. xv.

⁴³ William James. 'A World of Pure Experience', in *Essays on Radical Empiricism* (1912; Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 86.