Fashion's Foes: Dress Reform from 1850-1900

Elizabeth A. Komski
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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FASHION’S FOES:
DRESS REFORM FROM 1850-1900

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A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

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by
Elizabeth A. Komski
2001
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Elizabeth A. Komsiki

Maureen Fitzgerald

Leisa D. Meyer

Barbara Carsen
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the first fifty years of organized dress reform, from 1850 until 1900. Led by a diverse group of reformers, including doctors, health reformers, Spiritualists, members of utopian communities, woman’s rights activists, and clubwomen, these women and men tried to persuade middle- and upper-class women to abandon corsets and adopt lighter, more comfortable dresses in the interests of their own health. The most famous, and notorious, of these reformers were the woman’s rights advocates, who advanced “bloomers” in the early 1850s, an outfit composed of a short skirt and pantaloons.

From 1850 until 1870, dress reformers found some support for clothing that radically altered traditional women’s fashions by shortening their skirts and incorporating pants. The styles proposed after 1870 tended to conform outwardly to traditional fashions, and the rhetoric and motivations of the reformers shifted as well. By the turn of the century, dress reform was increasingly commercialized, and many branches of the movement were increasingly conservative. A careful look at dress reform provides an insight into the changing political environment of late nineteenth-century America. Furthermore, a study of dress reform opens windows into how reformers—both women and men—perceived beauty and fashion.

ELIZABETH A. KOMSKI

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

MAUREEN FITZGERALD

FASHION’S FOES: DRESS REFORM FROM 1850-1900
FASHION’S FOES:

DRESS REFORM FROM 1850-1900
INTRODUCTION

From 1851 until the turn-of-the-century, American men and women expressed a variety of opinions regarding the corset and fashionable dress white middle-class and upper-class women typically wore. Advocates of "dress reform" suggested that women abandon traditional fashions and adopt more comfortable, healthful clothing, although the dress reform advocates certainly did not agree on one alternative to fashion. Activists of the dress reform movement were a manifold lot, pooling their energies into small task forces with unique types of rhetoric and varying agendas. Regular doctors, health reformers, Spiritualists, members of utopian communities, woman's rights activists, and clubwomen made up the ranks of dress reformers. Obviously, this is a diverse crowd, and predictably, regular doctors licensed by the American Medical Association (AMA) addressed dress reform in radically different ways than did Spiritualists or clubwomen. For fifty years, these individuals shared an interest in improving the health of American middle- and upper-class women; however, their motivations and rhetoric were so varied, it is easy to forget they were advocating one cause: the transformation of American women's fashions to improve health and comfort.

I chose to divide this thesis on dress reform into two periods, from 1850-1870 and 1870-1900. The motivations, rhetoric, and alternative costumes proposed by dress reformers differed greatly in these two periods, although each period included disparate reformers with conflicting motivations. Dress reformers in the first period,
1850-1870, usually promoted shortened skirts worn over pantaloons, commonly referred to as “bloomers” by their contemporaries. These reformers included woman’s rights advocates, health reformers, religious zealots, and farmers and factory women. Their chief priorities differed, yet all of these reformers shared an interest in women’s health. Most of the earliest dress reformers saw dress reform as an opportunity to advance women into a position of economic, social, and political equality with men; they believed dress reform could advertise woman’s usefulness. And for many reformers, dress reform was about protecting the morality of women from men’s lusts. They believed that women’s fashions inspired uncontrollable sexual desires in men and argued that a costume that incorporated trousers would be less sexually suggestive and, therefore, more modest. The first generation of dress reformers often used dress to attack gender norms, suggesting that women should not rely solely on societal notions of beauty (or sexual attractiveness) for their self-worth. They taught women that self-worth could come from their work, their maternity, their health, and their religion.

Clubwomen, physical culturists, doctors, health reformers, a small number of woman’s rights advocates, and aesthetes led dress reform between 1870 and 1900. These reformers rarely proposed that women adopt shortened skirts, although a few did. During the second stage of dress reform, reformers concentrated their efforts on lightening women’s undergarments, removing or loosening the corset, and cutting off skirts that trailed on the ground. These reformers shared their predecessors’ interest in women’s health and women’s modesty. However, they did not attempt to use dress reform to campaign for woman’s equality or challenge the gender norms of the late-
nineteenth century. Instead, they reinforced these gender norms, campaigning for dress reform on maternalistic and aesthetic grounds. While earlier reformers challenged gender norms that expected women to remain in the home as mothers and archetypes of fashion, the second generation of reformers supported these roles for women. They were careful to design alternatives to fashion that did not differ too starkly from traditional styles, informing middle- and upper-class women that it was woman's duty to be beautiful. And, unlike their predecessors of the 1850s, female dress reformers rarely wore their reformed clothing in public, preferring to educate women on the need for change before adopting an unusual dress themselves.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, dress reform was diverse: at no time was the movement organized around a single goal or item of clothing, yet there were some consistencies throughout. Dress reformers varied their attacks on fashion, yet they always agreed that the corset and trailing skirts were the most pernicious features of women's clothing. With the obvious exception of the original woman's rights advocates supporting the bloomers, all subsequent dress reformers attempted to distance themselves from the woman's rights advocates and the bloomer costume. While many dress reformers shared the woman's rights advocates' ideology, few wished to associate with a stage of dress reform that was scorned so publicly. Also, most dress reformers were interested in using an attack on fashion to reclaim women's bodies for female self-expression. While the first generation of dress reformers directly attacked fashion as a repressive gender norm, second-stage reformers attacked the fashion industry for imposing an impersonal model on the female body. For half a century, dress reform provided a way for
women to express an individual sense of femininity and a personal conception of beauty.

Finally, all of the dress reformers, from all periods of time, employed anti-fashion propaganda when proposing alternatives to fashion. Many dress reformers viciously attacked traditional fashions and scorned women for consenting to wear those fashions. This propaganda could be highly misogynistic, and it did not always help the reformers’ cause. Anti-fashion alienated many women who wished to make their clothing more comfortable, but did not want to dress in a manner so antithetical to fashion. The dress reformers of the second stage of the movement employed much less anti-fashion propaganda than the reformers of the 1850s and 1860s, although they did not abandon this rhetoric. While reformers still attacked fashion after 1870, they did not conceive of their reform as posing a complete rejection of fashion. After 1870, dress reform proposals were better received than they had been twenty years earlier, perhaps because of the reformers’ ability to present dress reform as a movement aimed at improving fashion rather than as a movement opposed to fashion.

This is just one of many distinctions between the first and second stages of the dress reform movement. The second period of dress reform was distinctly more conservative than the first period. By 1870, dress reform was no longer a movement that challenged gender norms; instead, it worked with gender norms to promote a healthy change in woman’s dress. Before 1870, dress reformers argued that clothing was meant to be practical, an asset in the busy life of a hard-working woman. After 1870, dress reformers argued that one of clothing’s chief roles was to adorn. This fit with the dress reformers’ changing attitudes about women’s role in society.
Increasingly, the reformers accepted woman's role as an object of beauty. In fact, reformers of the 1870-1900 period realized that, for many women, beauty was a useful tool for self-expression, social advancement, and even economic survival. While the first stage of dress reform challenged women's role as an object of beauty directly, the second stage of reformers—more successful with their reforms—taught women how to manipulate gender norms while advancing their health, happiness, and prosperity.

Historians of dress reform participate in a larger debate among feminist historians and historians of sexuality over the role of sexuality in the lives of women. When addressing women's sexuality, nineteenth-century reformers tended to focus only on the danger sexuality posed for women.¹ Nineteenth-century women—particularly middle- and upper-class women—were expected to have less innate sexual desire than men, a concept referred to as "passionlessness."² Dress reformers would argue that their reformed clothing provided women with more "modest" attire that would protect them from predatory male sexual advances, shunning the possibility that "good" women may have wished to seduce men with attractive fashions. Twentieth-century historians often followed the lead of nineteenth-century dress reformers, focusing on only the dangers sexuality posed for women who were

willing to step outside the boundaries of passionlessness.\textsuperscript{3} Or they have painted women's expression of sexuality as akin to the ultimate expression of female power.\textsuperscript{4} The nineteenth-century dress reformer and feminist discussed middle-class women's sexuality in terms of passionlessness and depravity. They could protect their reputations by emotionally and physically disengaging from sexual expression—particularly sex outside of heterosexual marriage. They would also forcefully refuse to associate with women (and sometimes men) who were caught acting upon sexual lusts. Passionlessness required that middle-class women dictate sexual rules to less powerful social groups, particularly working-class women or women of color. Middle-class women who did not adopt passionlessness and engaged, or appeared to engage in sex outside of heterosexual marriage ran the risk of becoming "fallen women."

Historians need to understand that nineteenth-century women navigated a course of both pleasure and danger in forming their own sexuality.\textsuperscript{5} This more complex course informed women's decisions about personal appearance, and therefore their attitudes toward dress reform. While white middle-class women were not limited to choosing between a life of dangerous (and "immoral") pleasure or true passionlessness, this was the dominant discourse women faced in the nineteenth century. Women who engaged in dress reform challenged, in many ways, normative

\textsuperscript{3} Historians such as William Leach paint fashion as a dangerous "seductress," which could corrupt and distract young women from more serious pursuits, like feminism. See William Leach, \textit{True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society}. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980, 213, 244, 254-55.

\textsuperscript{4} David Kunzle and Valerie Steele both argue that expressing sexuality could be completely liberating for women in the nineteenth century. They focus on the opportunities for pleasure that sexuality held for women in nineteenth-century America, to the exclusion of a consideration of potential dangers these women faced.

\textsuperscript{5} Dubois and Gordon, "Ecstasy on the Battlefield"
ideas about sexuality. First of all, by wearing pants, women were directly and
indirectly challenging men’s sexual access to them. Dress reformers believed that
wearing pants gave women a measure of protection from rape. This was both
because pants could impede a rapist from simply throwing up a woman’s skirts in an
attack, and also because dress reformers believed that skirts were designed to seduce
men, but pants did not have this beguiling allure. Dress reformers throughout this
period agreed that their reformed clothing protected women’s “morality.” In other
words, dress reformers connected a reform of clothing with the protection of women
from a threatening male sexuality.

Despite the dress reformers’ assertion that dress reform was more sexually
respectable (or in their words, more moral) than contemporary fashions, their critics
loudly declaimed reformed dress as a sign of the reformers’ depravity. Most
Americans saw women in pants as a symbol of “immorality” and gender instability.
While dress reformers argued (in radically different ways depending on the time
period) that they were redefining “feminine” appearance, the public believed that
dress reform destroyed femininity by encouraging women to look like men. The
underlying presumption here was that a woman who dressed like a man might
expect—and many dress reformers between 1850 and 1870 did expect—male access
to power. Furthermore, women who dressed like men might behave like men
sexually. In other words, they might exhibit aggressive sexual desire and
passionately seek heterosexual, or even more ominously, homosexual relationships.

Critics of dress reform played upon these fears to taint the entire movement as deviant.

Women who wore the shortened dress defied convention to do so; in fact most Americans saw women's open adoption of pants in any form as a defiance of femininity. Nineteenth-century Americans generally tended to categorize any woman wearing pants for any reason as a cross-dresser, assuming that her adoption of "male" clothing indicated deviance or lack of femininity, and perhaps a sexual desire "unnatural" for the passionless woman. Cross-dressers threatened the normative nineteenth-century view of gender: they defied the traditional binary of "male/female." Nineteenth-century Americans were uncertain which category a cross-dresser belonged to, and this uncertainty challenged the nature of the binary itself. Dress reformers adamantly denied that they were dressing as men, reassuring readers that when Amelia Bloomer donned the reformed dress, there was "none of the masculine appearance her enemies sometimes accuse her of." Instead, they viewed reformed dress as a reconstruction of traditional femininity. While the dress reformers of the 1850s were radically challenging gender norms, they did not question the gender binary (female/male) itself.

Most work dealing with the nineteenth-century dress reform movement devotes only a few pages to the unique experiments in fashion that the reformers advocated. Moreover, the only way to approach the history of dress reform is through multiple historical frameworks. A piecemeal dress reform historiography includes

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7 For an extensive discussion of cross-dressing, see Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992. For a discussion on early twentieth century understandings of cross-dressing and lesbianism, see Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian:
works by fashion historians, historians of sexuality, historians of science, or more specifically, health reform, economic historians, social and cultural historians, historians of religion, and feminist historians of the woman’s rights movement. Despite the diversity of frameworks through which dress reform has been viewed, historians generally come back to a few key questions.

First, were the motivations of the dress reformers “feminist”? In other words, were the dress reformers attempting to undercut or reinforce normative gender and sexual expectations of their day? Did the dress reformers attack fashions to recruit women for “nobler” goals, and if so, were these goals contrary to traditional gender norms, or were they synonymous with them? Some historians argue that dress reform was a recruiting mechanism for women’s rights advocates, others argue that dress reform used traditional gender norms, including maternalism, to oppress women. Historians question what role women played in the creation of fashion. Were women passive consumers of styles produced by an industry selling beauty, or were they themselves creating the beauty industry through deliberate fashion choices? Many dress reformers constructed women as victims of a tyrannical fashion industry, downplaying the personal choices these women made in constructing their

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8 The Lily. 4 (December 1852): 99.
9 Helene Roberts, William Leach, Kathleen Torrens, Nancy Isenberg and Jeanette and Robert Lauer argue that dress reformers were “feminists”; although, they disagree on the level of altruism in the dress reformers’ motives. While Helene Roberts portrays dress reformers as radical feminists attempting a noble liberation of women from debilitating clothing, William Leach portrays dress reformers as feminists who feared that fashion would lure women away from the women’s rights movement, and sought to stamp it out. Valerie Steele and David Kunzle argue that dress reformers were antifeminists bent on social control, seeking to manipulate women, particularly working-class women, by crushing their femininity.
10 William Leach argues that women’s rights advocates used dress reform to recruit members, while David Kunzle and Karen Blair argue that maternalism was a primary rhetorical tool to draw women into dress reform.
appearances. Some historians have agreed with these dress reformers, painting fashion as a trickle-down system where elite men and women direct the fashion options of the masses.\footnote{Helene Roberts and Jeanette and Robert Lauer tend to portray women as victims of fashion.} Historians such as Helene Roberts and Jane Donegan have described fashion as a form of “repressive” social and physical control imposed upon women by elites in the fashion industry.\footnote{Helene Roberts, “The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman,” Signs. 2 (1977): 554-569, 555. Jane B. Donegan, Hydropathic Highway to Health: Women and the Water Cure in Antebellum America. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.}

Other historians have argued for an understanding of fashion as a democratic expression, insisting that working- or middle-class women create (or at least manipulate) fashions to define their own sexuality and individuality. In 1977, David Kunzle published an article entitled “Dress Reform as Antifeminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts, ‘The Exquisite Slave...’” and then followed with a book entitled Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight Lacing, and other Forms of Body Sculpture in the West in 1982. Kunzle argues that, after 1870, most dress reformers were male doctors who condemned tight lacing and corsetry (which he defines as lower middle- and working-class fashions) as “unnatural expressions” of sexuality. Kunzle believes that these doctors used their power as experts to impose a middle-class male view of femininity and sexuality upon middle- and working-class women. The doctors feared the “unnatural” sexuality of these women because they realized that “tight-lacing was an expression not of conformity with the ‘fashionable’ (i.e. culturally dominant) role of the socio-sexually passive, maternal woman,” but instead, an expression of “female sexual self-assertion, even emancipation.”\footnote{Kunzle is rare among historians for focusing his analysis on the later years (post-1870) of the dress reform movement. His material comes from English works, but Kunzle includes American dress reform in his sweeping derision of this “conservative” movement. David Kunzle, Fashion and}
doctors interpreted female sexual emancipation as frightening deviance. Kunzle argues that the dress reformers feared the sexuality of the women who did tight lace and hoped "modest" forms of dress would restrain them from drawing unnatural attention to their bodies.

Kunzle used the experts' condemnation of tight lacing to examine fashion's role in the lives of working- and lower-middle-class women, arguing that these women used fashion to express their identity and sexuality. "Tight-lacers were, as a matter of definition, self-conscious women, and this kind of self-consciousness, which imprinted itself upon bodily carriage, movement, and a woman's aura, was considered quite improper." Kunzle implicitly endorses a particular kind of sexual expression—sexual freedom to choose partners and dress "provocatively"—as a symbol of "feminism" for lower- and middle-class women in the nineteenth century.

It is possible that "sexual freedom" was not as liberating as Kunzle implies. He does not analyze why tight lacing was beneficial, or sexually provocative, other than identifying it as rebellion against middle-class male doctors and elitist dress reformers. Kunzle assumes that wearing provocative clothing was liberating for women, regardless of how this form of sexual expression affected women's day-to-day lives.

Valerie Steele reiterated many of David Kunzle's main themes when she wrote Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age (1985). Steele suggests that fashionable dress empowered women, particularly by allowing them to reveal their erotic individuality. Like David Kunzle,
she argues that the dress reformers were “antifeminist” and “puritan.” Steele also recognizes agency in the women who refused to adopt reformed costumes, choosing instead to express their sexuality through fashions.

Most historians have tacitly accepted the dress reformers’ line—that orthodox Victorian fashion was unnatural and unhealthy, and that women’s emancipation went hand-in-hand with the progressive reform of women’s dress. Yet neither statement is accurate. The women’s movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was often hostile to sexual expression. Many modern feminists have also perceived erotic dress and the pursuit of beauty as antithetical to women’s rights. Consequently, liberal historians have remained oblivious to the prejudices, exaggerations, and contradictions inherent in the dress reform literature, which is not so much ‘feminist’ (indeed it is often antifeminist) as it is an expression of puritanism, and specifically of the movement for ‘social purity.’

Like David Kunzle, Steele associates sexual expression with “feminism.” She does not delve deeply into the effects of sexual expression on nineteenth-century women, examining “sexual expression” in fashion purely through twentieth-century understandings of sexuality. She builds her research on the argument that “the Victorians were far less ‘prudish’ or anti-sexual than we had thought,” and that this (intrinsically good development), in turn, reveals that Victorian women who resisted dress reform exerted agency in their daily lives. Like Kunzle, Steele assumes that it was men who opposed women’s “egotistical” interest in fashion and beauty. This suggests that dress reform served as a battleground for a war between the sexes. Steele argues that men defined women’s interest in fashion as egotistical in order to thwart their sexual expression, while women used fashion to express their sexuality and individuality, as they simultaneously seduced men. She argues that dress reform

was a male-led movement of repression, and working- and middle-class women
fought that oppression by wearing ostentatious fashions, tight corsets, and long, heavy
skirts. Like Kunzle, Steele is attempting to develop a framework that acknowledges
nineteenth-century women’s agency, but she does not find that agency within the
dress reform movement itself; instead, she sees agency in resistance to dress reform.

Both Steele and Kunzle fail to offer an explanation for why so many women,
including women’s rights advocates, embraced the dress reform movement.
Furthermore, Kunzle and Steele’s analysis would be more balanced if they explored
how sexually expressive clothing posed dangers for working- and lower-middle-class
women in the nineteenth century. In 1997, Kathleen Torrens’ wrote a more tempered
analysis on early dress reform that suggests that “feminine,” attractive, sexy clothing
provided both a source of strength and a limitation for middle-class women.¹⁵

Beautiful, stylish women were admired, socially mobile, and often financially
rewarded with a good marriage for their fashion sense. But simultaneously, women
felt compelled by social pressures to maintain a feminine appearance, and in the
1850s and 1860s (Torrens’ period of study), this required women to be “frail mentally
and physically,” with “waspish” waists and pale skin. Mid-nineteenth-century ideals
of beauty demanded dependence, submissiveness, and quietude, not to mention
uncomfortable corsets and long, dragging skirts.¹⁶ Torrens allows us to see dress

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¹⁴ Steele also examined dress reform, primarily in England, after 1870, and applies her English
evidence to American dress reform. Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty
¹⁵ Kathleen M. Torrens, “All Dressed Up with No Place to Go: Rhetorical Dimensions of the
Nineteenth-Century Dress Reform Movement,” in *Women’s Studies in Communication.* 20 (fall 1997):
189-210.
¹⁶ Torrens, 191-193.
reform as opening a new avenue of protest for women seeking to challenge—or at
least manipulate—restrictive gender norms.

Despite Kunzle and Steele’s critiques of dress reform, some historians have
recently argued that the movement posed a much-needed challenge to gender norms
that required women to adopt the role of beauty object in society. In *Sex and
Citizenship in Antebellum America* Nancy Isenberg places dress reform in the context
of “visual politics,” which indicates immediately that she assumed dress reform was a
political movement. She suggests that dress reformers of the 1850s wanted to use a
visual representation, or middle-class women’s clothing, to advertise their views on
normative gender roles. By dressing in clothing that incorporated pants (or
pantaloons), the reformers staged a self-conscious presentation of their ideal woman.
They wished to replace feminine modesty with “virtue” and “self-mastery.”17

Isenberg holds that the dress reformers were concerned about representation
of woman’s nature, and wished to recreate the “natural woman” through dress reform.
Isenberg describes dress reformers’ “natural woman” as someone who exhibited
virtue and feared fashion would induce “sins of the flesh.”18 Isenberg believes that
dress reformers were reinventing traditional modesty to provide women with a greater
moral foothold in their battles with antifeminists.19 Women could challenge their
opponents, who claimed that women were relegated to the private sphere because
their fashionable clothing and their fragile bodies prevented them from an active role
in the public. By claiming that traditional fashionable modesty was false-modesty,

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17 Nancy Isenberg, *Sex and Citizenship in Antebellum America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North
18 p. 49
and reclaiming woman’s moral superiority through a virtuous costume, dress reformers were demanding that woman’s body no longer be seen as a male-controlled sexual object. Nancy Isenberg sees dress reformers’ battle with fashion as a reclamation of the female body—for and by females. Women were suggesting that their bodies were their own, and their health, comfort, and virtue should be prioritized over men’s sexual desires.

In 1983, Lois W. Banner wrote *American Beauty*, examining changing notions of beauty during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Banner suggests that, while the first stage of dress reform—led by the woman’s rights advocates in their bloomer costume—was a failure, the second stage of dress reform, led by clubwomen, was successful because the reforms quickly became mainstream fashions. Banner’s study of dress reform is perhaps the most balanced of any analysis of the movement. She is the only historian discussed here who examined both the first and second stage of the movement. Yet, she does not make dress reform central to her study of American beauty ideals. Banner considered dress reform a “feminist” undertaking, as seen from the chapter title concerning the movement: “The Feminist Challenge and Fashion’s Response.” She criticized the earliest dress reformers for so quickly surrendering this important opportunity for a re-creation of woman’s identity. According to Banner, Stanton failed feminists when she “underestimated fashion’s power and failed to realize the extent to which it underlay the entire constellation of discriminations against women. Standards of beauty might change and work for

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19 As we shall see later in this historiography, Isenberg was taking historians Valerie Steele and David Kunzle to task with this analysis.

unmarried women might become respectable, but women continued to define
themselves by their physical appearance and their ability to attract men.”\textsuperscript{21}

Like Kunzle, Steele, and Torrens, Banner acknowledges that fashion was an
instrument of power for many women. But she also perceives fashion as potentially
divisive and dangerous. Banner’s analysis of the second stage of dress reform reflects
her ambiguous outlook on fashion. She portrayed postbellum dress reform as a
movement seeking to make aesthetic and practical improvements in women’s dress.
Because of their aesthetic impulses, reformers allied with the fashion industry. “Any
style, no matter how reformist in origin, can easily be taken over by the commercial
fashion world.”\textsuperscript{22} However, she acknowledges that this second stage of dress reform
was much more successful than earlier attempts. Dress reformers “were an important
part of the broad feminist coalition that existed by the 1890s and offered major
psychological support for women not only to enter the work force or to pursue higher
degrees, but also to wear suits and shirtwaists or to ride bicycles on city streets.” Yet,
despite the “feminism” of this second stage of reformers, Banner links their success to
their ability to compromise their attack on beauty norms. “Even reform dress could
be modified in accordance with the prevailing mode.”\textsuperscript{23}

There is one trend in dress reform historiography that remains disturbingly
consistent. Most historians have marginalized dress reform, neglecting the powerful
implications it had for the constructions of women’s femininity and sexuality, the
creation of a beauty industry, and the development of feminism in late nineteenth-
century America. By examining dress reform only in relation to fashion history,

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 147.
historians tend to ignore the influences of politics in shaping the dress reform movement. The postbellum dress reformers were influenced by the reactions to antebellum reforms. While many historians have touched on these issues, dress reform is spread over fifty years—and the many generalizations made regarding this movement consistently miss the subtle changes that occurred over time and among reformers. It is necessary to revisit this movement with a multidisciplinary approach and examine the motivations and rhetoric of dress reformers in connection to women’s history, fashion history, and social history.

23 Ibid., 150.
1850-1870: RADICAL DRESS REFORM

Fashion has always sparked controversy; designers, dressmakers, and fashionable people intentionally challenge conventions to parade their skill, creativity, wealth, and beauty. By the mid-nineteenth century, woman’s dress had been an issue of debate for hundreds of years. Health and religious reformers had long censured the trailing skirts and corsets commonly worn by upper- and middle-class women. Yet it was not until 1851 that dress reform became a national issue. In the early spring of 1851, three woman’s rights advocates—Amelia Bloomer, Elizabeth Smith Miller, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton—drew reformers into one diffuse movement by donning short skirts over pantaloons (baggy pants). For a period of a few months, the “bloomers” appealed to a broad group of reformers interested in improving women’s dress, including health reformers, women’s rights advocates, religious zealots, farmers, and factory women. Dress reformers across the country agreed that the shortened dress worn by these three woman’s rights advocates was preferred to traditional fashions and gave them their full support. Most dress reformers realized the great potential these three women brought to their cause.

Amelia Bloomer was the editor of an increasingly popular temperance and woman’s rights journal, The Lily. Stanton was already famous for her leadership in the 1848 women’s convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Her husband, Henry Stanton, was a prominent politician and abolitionist. And Elizabeth Smith Miller was the wife of politician Charles Dudley Miller, and the daughter of one of the most notorious reformers of the era, Gerrit Smith.
Dress reformers supported these three woman’s rights advocates because of their shared interest in reforming women’s clothing and their power to advertise the cause. Many dress reformers shared Stanton, Bloomer, and Miller’s interest in woman’s rights; however, the dress reform movement between 1851 and 1870 was intensely diverse in its membership. Most reformers were white, upper- and middle-class women and men from the Northeast, but all of the participants had unique agendas and clothing alternatives. Few dress reformers were involved in the dress reform movement solely out of concern for women’s dress. They saw dress reform as a small part of a broader agenda. Dress provided a unique tool for woman’s rights advocates, religious reformers, and health enthusiasts to advance women’s religious or health concerns. Yet, a few reformers were involved in the movement solely because of their interest in reforming women’s clothing. The dress reformers’ motivations provide categories of analysis through which we can enter this complex cause and examine its membership and effect. It is necessary to remember that, particularly during the first twenty years of dress reform, the motivations of the reformers overlapped and changed regularly. Just about the only thing that united these varied reformers was a shared dislike of the fashions for women in 1851.

Dress reformers shared this dislike with many Americans who would never have considered themselves part of a movement. Some Americans were content to criticize women’s dress without personally working to change the current fashions. The normative ideals of the middle-class dictated women’s “fashion.” Fashionable clothing—in 1851, long skirts over layered petticoats, corsets, and tight bodices—were worn by most middle- and upper-class women. Adopting (or asking your
female family members to adopt) a dress that visibly differed from the fashions of the
day, to forgo a corset or shorten one’s skirts, was an act of daring. Only the dress
reformers proposed alternatives to fashion. These alternatives set them apart from
individuals who were merely anti-fashion. While most upper- and middle-class
women dressed in the current fashions, there were millions of Americans who were
critical of fashion; doctors, religious reformers, woman’s rights advocates, and some
women and men of all classes and races agreed that fashion was pernicious. Much of
the literature written by dress reformers drew on this anti-fashion sentiment. Anti-
fashion could be highly misogynistic and irrational. A poem published in Harper’s
New Monthly Magazine in 1858 made a clear connection between fashion and
prostitution, a connection that was drawn upon by dress reformers regularly in their
own rhetoric.

See that painted spectre,
The vampyre of the streets!
What foul demon wrecked her
Hoard of youthful sweets?
Made a crime of loveliness?
Oh! ‘twas Dress—‘twas Dress!24

Fashion provided a tool for anti-fashion propagandists just as it did for dress
reformers. Misogynists, moralists, and doctors often attacked women—particularly
with suggestions that they were exhibiting a deviant sexuality—by attacking their
fashions.

Ironically, women involved in dress reform challenged anti-fashion attacks by
questioning women’s power in choosing the styles they wore. Anti-fashion literature
typically assumed that women had complete control when designing their clothing.
An anti-fashion advocate and subscriber to Chamber's *Edinburgh Journal* insisted, "The one thing above all which convinces him of the inferiority of the female mind generally to the male, is the submission which women show to every foolish fashion which is dictated to them...." This man assumed women weakly adopted any style proposed by designers without any regard for individuality. Dress reformers, in contrast, acknowledged that many forces were at play in the creation of fashions. Kate Gannett Wells, a subscriber to *The Woman's Journal*, insisted that "most [women dress] for their own self-respect." But Amelia Bloomer argued that men controlled women's fashions: "Women should not dare to make a change in their costume till they have the consent of men—for they claim the right to prescribe for us in the fashion of our dress as well as in all things else." Elizabeth Cady Stanton suggested that women dressed to please men: "The only object of a woman's life is marriage, and the shortest way to a man's favor is through his passions; and woman has studied well all the little arts and mysteries by which she can stimulate him to the pursuit. Every part of a woman's dress has been faithfully conned by some French courtesan to produce this effect." Stanton's comments suggest the suspicion with which the dress reformers regarded the fashion designers and dressmakers. "Fashion" itself was blamed for "dictating" what women wore. Dress reformers often drew upon abolitionist rhetoric to protest the mastery of fashion. Mrs. M. M. Jones, a dress reformer and author,

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Fig. A "The Bloomer Costume," Currier and Ives, (1851). From Lee Hall, *Common Threads: A Parade of American Clothing.*
Fig. B "Amelia Bloomer" from *The Lily*. September 1851.
dramatically described fashion as a tyrant and women as its slaves: “Fashion with its iron fetters enchains her womanhood in the dust...because the links are flower-enwreathed she deems she is not bound.”

Many dress reformers relied on this image of fashion “enslaving” innocent women. Obviously, they could not agree on how much agency women held in the creation of fashions. Women had varying levels of control over their own styles, depending on their creativity and confidence. To some women, fashion was a constant presence, a master that had to be obeyed. Other women saw fashion as an opportunity for self-expression. Dress reformers agreed that women had some agency in choosing their clothing, but their acknowledgement of the social forces that led women to dress fashionably deflected much of the misogyny of anti-fashion propaganda away from women.

Dress reformers did not just disagree on women’s agency in creating fashion, they also disagreed on alternatives to fashion. To the twenty-first-century eye, their alternatives appear remarkably similar. The woman’s rights advocates—or the women and men who fought for economic, social, and especially political equality for women during the second half of the nineteenth century—developed the most notorious alternative, known as the “bloomers.” Amelia Bloomer did not invent this outfit, she merely advertised it in The Lily. Elizabeth Smith Miller adopted a short, full skirt worn over very full trousers. (For two representations of the costume, see figures A and B.) The skirt was held out with a few petticoats, and the waistline was narrowly cut, similarly to fashionable dresses. It was not, however, worn with a corset. Many others claim to be the first to wear the reformed dress, and it is certain

that, while Elizabeth Smith Miller was the first reformer documented as wearing the costume publicly, she was not developing a completely new fashion with her “Turkish” trousers and short skirt.\(^{30}\) She wore this costume to Seneca Falls in the winter of 1851 while visiting her cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Stanton was fascinated by the ease the costume afforded. In her memoirs, she reminisced upon her cousin’s ability to carry a lamp and a baby up the stairs with no fear of tripping. Soon, she too had adopted the new outfit, rejoicing in the comfort of her new dress “like a captive set free.”\(^{31}\)

Amelia Bloomer had recently sparred with the conservative editor of the Seneca County \textit{Courier}, Isaac Fuller, over the issue of woman’s dress. Unwittingly, Fuller had praised women spotted at the World’s Fair in London for wearing an early version of the bloomer costume. Bloomer remarked, “we are so thankful that men are beginning to undo some of the mischief they have done us,” again implying that men controlled the fashion world.\(^{32}\) Soon afterwards, Bloomer met Elizabeth Smith Miller, and joined Stanton and Miller as a dress reformer, adopting the shortened dress herself. She also campaigned vigorously in her journal for women to cut off their trailing skirts and adopt pantaloons. Editors eagerly reported on the bloomers, and the publicity soon spread across the nation. While many editors reported on the costume with scorn, they inadvertently brought it to the attention of more women, who in turn adopted the outfit.

\(^{1865, 8.}\)

\(^{30}\) For a lengthy discussion on the inspiration and origin of the first “bloomer” dress, see Gayle V. Fischer, \textit{Who Wears the Pants? Women, Dress Reform, and Power in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States}. Ph. D. Indiana University, 1995, especially the chapter entitled “Pants in Private.”


\(^{32}\) “Female Attire,” \textit{The Lily}. (February 1851): 13
Many advocates of woman's rights followed Miller, Stanton, and Bloomer's example and adopted the shortened dress. In the *History of Woman Suffrage*, Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage recorded a few of the early dress reformers.

The names of those who wore the Bloomer costume at that early day are Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, Mrs. William Burleigh, Charlotte Beebe Wilbour, Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony….33

This list includes some of the most famous dress reformers of the day. Most of these women were woman’s rights advocates; their interest in dress reform was secondary to their interest in advocating political rights for women. T. S. Arthur, a critic of both dress reform and woman’s rights, made the connection between these two movements. “The ladies who have freed themselves of long heavy skirts, and long tight waists, and substituted the comfortable short dress and trowsers (sic) are those who claim an equality of the sexes--who believe that woman was created equal in intellect to man.” Amelia Bloomer confirmed this connection in *The Lily*, agreeing “This is true….”34

Bloomer and Arthur were certainly not alone in making this connection; nationally, dress reform and woman’s rights were seen as synonymous throughout the early 1850s. Woman’s rights advocates were the most vocal of the dress reformers from 1851 until 1855. They advertised dress reform in *The Lily*—a more prominent publication than the *Water Cure Journal* or *The Sibyl*, the other two journals that supported dress reform during the 1850s. Woman’s rights advocates had the most

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daring and well-known platform with their call for social, political, and economic equality, and they were more threatening than the health reformers or even the religious groups who advocated dress reform. Woman’s rights advocates were challenging gender norms, whereas health reformers were merely attempting to improve national hygiene, and the religious reformers interested in dress reform were rarely even interested in conversion. Finally, woman’s rights advocates typically wore the reformed dress to their conventions, permanently tying dress reform and woman’s rights together in the eyes of the public.

For the woman’s rights advocates the shortened dress was foremost an opportunity for healthier living for women. They also made dress a symbol of woman’s usefulness and personal emancipation from male-imposed conventions. And finally, they made dress reform into a demand that women no longer be regarded as objects for men’s lusts. Some motivations were more powerful for some woman’s rights activists than others, but all dress reformers agreed that the shortened dress was healthier than long skirts.

Amelia Bloomer claimed, “We only wore [the shortened dress] because we found it comfortable, convenient, safe, and tidy—with no thought of introducing a fashion, but with the wish that every woman would throw off the burden of clothes that was dragging her life out.” Bloomer greatly oversimplified the woman’s rights advocates’ motivations; however, she did sum up their most common and basic argument in favor of the reformed clothing. Almost all dress reformers agreed that

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34 “Who Are the Leaders?” The Lily. 8 (June 1851): 45.
35 Dress-reforming religious communities included the Oneida Community, which did not actively recruit converts, and the Mormons and Protestants, who rarely made dress a rhetorical argument for conversion.
the shortened dress provided women with "health, comfort, and convenience."37

Bloomer linked the effort to reform women’s dress with the other "health" concern woman’s rights advocates promoted regularly, the struggle to make men temperate. She suggested in at least one article that men drank because their wives spent their husbands’ money on unhealthy clothing.38 The woman’s rights advocates had close links to temperance and health reform; it was consistent with these connections that they try to improve the health of American women.

Woman’s rights advocates were as concerned with improving women’s image as invaluable citizens as they were with improving their health. They used dress as a rhetorical tool to glorify women’s daily tasks. Stanton wrote to The Lily in 1851 connecting reformed dress to the active, productive lives of mid-nineteenth-century women.

Some say the Turkish costume [another term for reformed dress] is not graceful. Grant it. For parlor dolls, who loll on crimson velvet couches, and study attitudes before tall mirrors—for those who have no part to perform in the great drama in life, for whose heads, hearts and hands, there is no work to do, the drapery is all well; let them hang it on, thick and heavy as they please.… But for us, common place, every day, working characters, who wash and iron, bake and brew, carry water and fat babies up stairs and down, bring potatoes, apples, and pans of milk from the cellar, run our own errands, through mud or snow; shovel paths, and work in the garden; why ‘the drapery’ is quite too much—one might as well work with a ball and chain.39

Stanton is reminding her middle-class readers of both their usefulness and the lack of acknowledgement they received for their labor. Stanton suggests to readers that women were equally important in the maintenance of their families as were men. She

38 “Female Attire," The Lily. 3 (March 1851).
demands comfortable apparel for working women—and she certainly did not just mean working-class women, she was referring more explicitly to middle-class women here. Stanton was demanding a higher level of respect for women and their daily tasks.

Woman’s rights advocates believed that women were physically held back by their dress. Elizabeth Oakes Smith wrote to *The Lily* to connect women’s lost potential to their unhealthy clothing: “Napoleon could never have conquered empires cased in whalebone, nor Milton have written his Paradise Lost in a tight bodice.”40 Other women, such as Julia Archibald Holmes, connected shortened skirts to their capability to perform tasks equally with men. In 1858, Holmes proudly wrote to the dress reform journal, *The Sibyl*, informing readers that she was the first white woman to climb Pike’s Peak, and she did it in “the reform dress.”41

Women’s rights advocates often tied dress reform to their quest for “emancipation” from male rule, which they asserted, was analogous to both slaves’ yearning for freedom, and the desires of American patriots to be liberated from colonial rule. The language they used reflected both abolitionist and revolutionary rhetoric. Amelia Bloomer declared her independence from fashion, insisting, “Never for a moment—notwithstanding the furor we have raised—have we regretted our emancipation from long petticoats or felt a desire to return to their bondage.”42

Stanton also used Revolutionary War rhetoric when she glorified dress reform as a declaration of independence: “Had I counted the cost of the short dress, I would never

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have put it on; on, however, I’ll never take it off, for now it involves a principle of freedom.”

Women were wearing shorter skirts to exclaim to the world that they could assume any clothing they chose—they were free from men’s control when making personal decisions about dress. They connected freedom of dress to the sacred freedoms fought for by American patriots.

Dress reformers were redrawing the boundaries for acceptable feminine garb. While they were more sympathetic to women wearing pants than many of their contemporaries, they were still unwilling to sanction cross-dressing. Dress reformers insisted that cross-dressers wore pants for two reasons. They acknowledged the economic motivations of some working-class women who adopted pants in order to find higher paying employment as men. Mary Warrington sympathetically related the misadventures of “Charlie Linden,” a female-to-male cross-dresser who had “assumed this [masculine] garb from necessity, not from choice” to enter the higher paying male workforce. “As Charlie Linden she could do much, as Annie Linden she could do but little. Why not be Charlie Linden then?” This article suggests that Charlie’s dress did not reflect upon Annie’s sexuality. Nor did Annie really place her gender in any danger, since Mary Warrington unquestioningly refers to Annie as “her” throughout the article. Warrington did not portray Charlie’s garb as threatening because, she argued, the motivations for that garb were purely economic.

The dress reformers were sympathetic to cross-dressers who were driven to wear men’s clothing by poverty. But this compassion dissipated when the cross-

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43 Letter, Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Elizabeth Smith Miller, June 4, 1851. Elizabeth Cady Stanton papers, reel 7, page 86.
44 Mary Warrington, “As a Man She Made a Living,” *The Lily* 8 (November 1856): 138.
dresser showed any danger of wearing men’s clothing for pleasure. Dress reformers scorned this type of cross-dressing as sexual and gender upheaval. Dress reformers argued that these cross-dressers were women “becoming gentlemen.” Sexually, cross-dressers were in danger of stepping outside the norms of passionlessness by wearing masculine dress, since masculinity and sexual passion were synonymous in nineteenth-century America. Dress reformers (along with most of their contemporaries) argued that women wearing “men’s” clothing were in serious danger of becoming “mannish,” in other words, cross-dressers threatened to become aggressive, sexually passionate, and power-hungry. In the *Herald of Health*, a health faddist paper supporting dress reform, the editor raged at a report that Miss Sallie M. Monroe of Chenango County, New York, was wearing “the veritable dress of gentleman.” “We have before heard expressions of alarm lest the dress reformers of the ‘female persuasion’ should carry their measures to the extreme of adopting the entire male attire, and so becoming gentlemen in everything except the item of sex.” Here, the paper chafes at the notion that cross-dressers would be associated with dress reform. Furthermore, the editor explicitly makes the connection between masculine apparel and behavior. For women, wearing masculine attire was the first step along the slippery slope toward “manliness.” The paper finds this report troubling and threatening to dress reformers particularly. “The dress reformers must be defended from injurious imputations, and therefore the truth must be told. *The said* ‘SALLIE’ *is no woman at all, but a veritable man!*”45 The editor could not accept a cross-dressing woman, and instead insisted that only a man would wear men’s clothing. The article frustratingly ends abruptly after exposing “Sallie” as a man, and we

45 “Another Female Gentleman,” *Herald of Health*. (1864). Italics original.
cannot pursue the fascinating story any further. But clearly the dress reformers were uncomfortable with the thought that women would wear “male” clothing for personal pleasure. While economic necessity was an acceptable motive for cross-dressing, masculine self-fashioning and sexual pleasure was not. Dress reformers could wear pants simply because, on a dress reformer, pants were still a sign of femininity. Like women’s rights advocates, dress reformers were attempting to redefine the limits of femininity to include bloomers.

Woman’s rights advocates saw the potential of adopting pantaloons and shortened skirts as a public defiance of convention. S. L. Brown, a dress reformer and woman’s rights advocate from Long Island, wrote to The Lily, challenging readers, “Answer those who can.”

1st. What right has any individual to dictate to me what dress it is proper or right for me to wear?
2nd. Who is the better judge of what is suitable and decent for me to wear, my self or another?
3rd. If society has the right to prescribe what style of dress I shall wear, why not also my beliefs and opinions?
4th. What principle of etiquette or good manners authorizes impertinent, ill-natured remarks on the dress of others?46

Brown suggested that wearing the reformed dress was a statement of independence. Brown praised this independence and the women who dared seek it, implicitly connecting personal sovereignty in dress with a rejection of societal norms and prejudices.

The advocates for woman’s rights connected dress reform to women’s self-respect and “self-sovereignty,” appealing to the nationalist and abolitionist rhetoric. For woman’s rights advocates, dress reform allowed them to entirely redefine their

46 Brown, S. L. “Dress,” The Lily. 7 (July 1854): 111.
femininity, even their humanity. Elizabeth Cady Stanton stressed “the seriousness
and importance” of dress reform. She believed it presented “a great question—a
mighty change.” “The question is now to be, not Rags how do you look? but woman
how do you feel?”

In 1966, when Barbara Welter discussed the “four cardinal
virtues” of the true Victorian woman, “piety, purity, submissiveness, and
domesticity,” she possibly should have included “beauty” as the fifth virtue.

Historically, women have struggled to meet society’s expectations, trying to be
beautiful, slender, fashionable, and young. In the mid-nineteenth century, women
struggled to achieve this high ideal just as earnestly as they do today, although the
specific meaning of “beauty” has changed over the past 150 years. Dress reformers
lamented the beauty ideal unfairly assigned to women alone, and they fought against
the norm by asking women to judge themselves by new standards. Amelia Bloomer
mocked the fashion standards of the day: “Let us have fashion plates in our popular
magazines of active, healthy, sensibly dressed women, in place of the waxen-faced,
wasp-like befrounced and befurbelowed caricatures of women which now appear
there to mislead the weak and disgust the sensible.”

While Bloomer demanded that the ideals of beauty shift to glorify healthy women, Stanton suggested that women
abandon their quest for beauty altogether. “A long, full, flowing skirt certainly hangs
more gracefully than a short one; but does woman crave no higher destiny than to be
a mere frame work on which to hang rich fabrics...?”

47 Stanton “Our Costume,” The Lily. 3 (July 1851): 51.
49 For a discussion of the changing beauty ideals over the past two centuries, see Lois Banner,
50 “Paris Fashions,” The Lily. 7 (August 1, 1854): 109.
Today, many historians mock the dress reform movement as an "ugly" blotch on history. They fail to recognize that the woman’s rights advocates were radically redefining women’s role. Rather than introducing another fashion that would commodify women, they introduced a garment that would allow women to pursue their potential as a person, not as an object. By placing women’s comfort and achievements over her efforts to fit a very narrow definition of beauty, the woman’s movement was attempting a radical redefinition of women’s traditional role.

Woman’s rights advocates used varying rhetorical arguments when trying to persuade Americans to support dress reform. Lydia Jenkins, a dress reformer and woman’s rights advocate, appealed to mothers using a maternalistic argument, making women feel guilty for their selfish devotion to fashions: "The descendents of tight corseting mothers will never become the luminaries and leaders of the world." But this type of rhetoric was unusual in the woman’s rights movement at this time. Most reformers appealed to women’s sense of religion, morality, nationalism, or individuality or some combination of these beliefs. Essentially, Bloomer wished to put a positive outlook on dress reform, reporting far more frequently on dress reform success stories than on the martyrdom endured by reformers. She encouraged readers to write her about the comfort, convenience, and healthfulness of the shortened dress, and she mocked the readers who wrote her stories of defeat.

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53 Jenkins, Lydia A. “Tight Dressing.” *The Lily.* 3 (February 1851): 11, italics are hers.
Bloomer regularly featured articles on the immorality of fashionable dress in her newspaper. One “old doctor” wrote in to decry the “false delicacy” of fashionable clothing. He argued, “woman has two legs... and it is essential to have them as closely and as separately clothed to insure from cold and undue exposure.”

Dress reformers were often criticized for supporting a dress that revealed the outline of women’s legs and ankles. In their defense, all of the dress reformers pointed out that fashionable women regularly revealed their ankles when lifting their skirts to cross muddy roads. They were also highly critical of the immodesty of plunging necklines, and dress reformers rarely wore clothing that revealed their shoulders or necks (although it was not unheard of.) Essentially, dress reformers argued that their dress was more “modest” than fashionable dresses because it closely covered the limbs. Yet supporters of traditional fashions contested this idea of modesty by insisting that women wearing pants were the epitome of immodesty because they were “cross-dressing.”

Shared Protestant rhetoric often surfaced in dress reform literature. “A Bloomerite” from Ohio wrote to the *Water Cure Journal* to inform readers that she had been “baptized into the faith and practice of Bloomerism.” She went on to speak of her “conversion” as if it was a religious decision. Bloomer regularly portrayed dress reform as a religious issue in *The Lily*. She told her readers that fashionable dress abused “Nature’s laws” and “the work which came perfect from HIS hand.”

Bloomer and her fellow woman’s rights advocates also turned to nationalistic and imperialistic arguments to persuade women to adopt the reformed dress. They

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55 Quoted in *The Lily*. 4 (October 1852): 85.
made regular connections between Chinese foot-binding and American corsetry, suggesting that America—as a more “civilized” nation—should prove their civility by abandoning the “barbaric,” body-deforming practices for more healthful pursuits.57 Woman’s rights advocates appealed to Americans’ dislike of aristocracy, dwelling on the superiority of American, homespun common sense—short dresses—to ridiculous, costly French fashions.58 Woman’s rights advocates also drew on women’s desire for personal expression and autonomy in their dress reform rhetoric. Bloomer regularly reassured her readers that dress reformers were not attempting to create a national uniform for women. “We know very little about fashions, and do not wish to set ourselves up as a pattern for others.”59 Stanton reinforced this idea and suggested that it was fashion that required woman to adopt a uniform and forsake their identity. “There is a great tyranny in this idea of an universal dress.”60 By appealing to women’s sense of individuality, the woman’s rights advocates reinforced the idea of dress as a means of expression of self-sovereignty.

Because woman’s rights advocates had the strongest voice in early dress reform, the dress reform platform appeared synonymous to the woman’s rights platform to many outside observers in the 1850s. It came as a serious blow to the dress reform movement, when, in 1854, Elizabeth Cady Stanton abandoned the shortened dress and began persuading her fellow woman’s rights advocates to do

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57 “Fashion a Tyrant Everywhere,” The Lily. 4 (February 1852): 11.
likewise. Most were happy to capitulate, although some, including Amelia Bloomer and Susan B. Anthony, took longer to abandon the costume than others.

Their reasons for abandoning the shortened dress were numerous. Anthony described the trauma of visiting a strange town while wearing the reformed dress:

"Here I am known only as one of the women who ape men—coarse, brutal men!" Few of the dress reformers could endure for long the stigma associated with wearing pants; regardless of the distinctions they were making between their reforms and the behavior of cross-dressers, they were persistently labeled as such by the public. Despite Bloomer's intentions to display only positive reactions in The Lily, even she had to acknowledge the discomfort it caused. "At present, we must admit, the reform dress is quite obnoxious to the public and all who bear testimony in its favor, either by precept or example, must expect to meet with some trials and discouragements; yet it may... be ultimately adopted." Woman's rights advocates did not just abandon the costume because of the public's criticism; many were also dissatisfied with the appearance of the reformed dress. In The History of Woman Suffrage, Stanton, Matilda Joslyn Gage, and Anthony agreed, "We knew the Bloomer costume never could be generally becoming, as it required a perfection of form, limbs, and feet, such as few possessed." Not only was the reformed dress difficult for average-looking

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women to wear, but the dress reformers were convinced that the dress itself was simply ugly. "We who wore it also knew that it was not artistic."64

The chief reason woman's rights advocates gave for their abandonment of dress reform was the attention it diverted from their woman's rights platform. Amelia Bloomer summed up this argument.

We all felt that the dress was drawing attention from what we thought of far greater importance—the question of woman's right to better education, to a wider field of employment, to better remuneration for her labor, and to the ballot for the protection of her rights. In the minds of some people, the short dress and woman's rights were inseparably connected. With us, the dress was but an incident, and we were not willing to sacrifice greater questions to it.65

Few of the dress reformers left behind in the movement respected the woman's rights advocates' decision to doff the shortened dress. The health reformers, particularly Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck, branded the woman's rights advocates "traitors to the cause." Hasbrouck bitterly attacked Lucy Stone, a former dress reformer, for adopting long skirts and long hair when she married Henry Blackwell. "This was a poser; the great champion of woman's independence and freedom of action, yielding this grand principle, the foundation of her wrongs, for the sake of getting and pleasing when got a husband."66 Stone responded quickly, arguing that her dress was not dictated by her husband, but by her higher concern for women's political position. "Her miserable style of dress is a consequence of her present vassalage not its cause. Woman must become ennobled, in the quality of her being. When she is so, and takes her place,

clothed with the dignity which the possession and exercise of her natural human rights give, she will be able, unquestioned, to dictate the style of her dress.\footnote{Stone, “Women Not Ready for Dress Reform,” The Sibyl. 2 (July 1, 1857): 198. Also quoted in Russo and Kramarae, p. 272.}

Gerrit Smith—Elizabeth Smith Miller’s father, woman’s rights advocate, and radical abolitionist—was the most disgruntled dress reformer left behind by the woman’s rights decampment. Stanton discussed his disappointment in *The History of Woman Suffrage*. “I suppose no act of my life ever gave my cousin, Gerrit Smith, such deep sorrow, as my abandonment of the ‘Bloomer costume.’ He felt that women had so little courage and persistence, that for a time he almost despaired of the success of the suffrage movement; of such vital consequence in woman’s mental and physical development did he feel the dress to be.”\footnote{Stanton, from Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds. *History of Woman Suffrage*. 2d ed. Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1889, 1: 471.}

Smith wrote an open letter to Stanton in 1855 to protest her abandonment of dress reform: “I am amazed that the intelligent women engaged in the ‘Woman’s Rights Movement,’ see not the relation between their dress and the oppressive evils which they are striving to throw off.... In the case of woman, the great needed change is in herself.”\footnote{Stanton, from Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds. *History of Woman Suffrage*. 2d ed. Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1889, 1: 471.} Stanton, unsurprisingly, disagreed with Smith, arguing,

A true marriage relation has far more to do with the elevation of woman than the style and cut of her dress. Dress is a matter of taste, of fashion; it is changeable, transient, and may be doffed or donned at the will of the individual; but institutions, supported by laws, can be overturned but by revolution. We have no reason to hope that pantaloons would do more for us than they have done for man himself.\footnote{Stanton, from Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, eds. *History of Woman Suffrage*. 2d ed. Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1889, 1: 471.}

The woman’s rights advocates faced a great deal of difficulty during their withdrawal from dress reform, particularly because they had been among its strongest and loudest
supporters for the first three or four years of the movement. Not all of the woman's rights advocates withdrew from dress reform immediately. Amelia Bloomer wore the reformed dress for about eight years, waiting "until the papers had ceased writing squibs at my expense" to abandon the costume. Overall, while the woman's rights advocates brought dress reform its greatest fame, they were among the least committed reformers of the movement.

Between 1851 and 1870, health reformers consistently advocated and wore reformed dresses, particularly "the American Costume," developed within the water cures. Dress reformers chiefly interested in health were less ideologically united than the woman's rights advocates; there was a divide between radical health reformers involved in vegetarianism, phrenology, or water cures and the "regular" doctors sanctioned by the American Medical Association. An even more prominent divide surfaced between the male doctors and the female doctors and reformers involved in dress reform. Whereas men gave religious, economic, nationalistic, and social reasons for the need for reform of women's dress, women more often argued that it was women's individual health and personal liberty at stake. The alternative clothing advocated by male doctors often just involved cutting off trailing skirts or abandoning the corset, whereas the women health reformers and water cure advocates supported a dress similar to the bloomer costume of the woman's rights advocates.

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69 Ibid, 1: 837.
70 Ibid, 1: 841.
72 Water cures were the nineteenth-century equivalent to health spas. For more information, see Jane B. Donegan, Hydropathic Highway to Health: Women and Water Cure in Antebellum America. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986, xv.
Regular doctors, such as Henry Whitfeld of Kent, England, had been condemning women for their use of corsets and long skirts throughout the century, often relying on anti-fashion propaganda to do so. Whitfeld argued that women committed “the greatest folly in civilized life” when they adopted corsets, or “stays.”

Whitfeld gave religious reasons for the need for reformation of dress:

The strength of the chain is that of the weakest link; and, unless we suppose that God will compromise his laws to the whims and caprices of his creatures, or, in other words, grant a special providence to screen man from the punishment consequent on his offences, it is certain that perfect health, and activity of mind and body, can be the result only of a humble submission and strict obedience to his decrees.7

Whitfeld’s analysis of women’s dress was similar to that presented by the other popular male doctors of the period, including Orson S. Fowler, a leading phrenologist, and George H. Napheys, the author of a health book for women. Fowler compared tight-lacing to intemperance, suggesting that women were hypocrites for condemning men for their drinking when they themselves were destroying the health of the nation. Fowler relied heavily on religious arguments when persuading women to reform their dresses. He questioned women, “Think you that girting the waist can improve the beauty of the works of God?”75 He went on to insist, “Tight-lacing kindles impure feelings, at the same time that it renders their possessor weak minded, so as to be the more easily led away by temptation.”76

Fowler was playing on the nineteenth-century norms of passionlessness, which would

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73 For a discussion of the differences between “regular” doctors and radical health practitioners, see Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts’ Advice to Women. New York: Anchor Books, 1978.
characterize any sexual feelings on the part of women as “impure.” After closely linking corsetry to unsanctioned sexuality, immorality, and irreligion, Fowler added a maternalistic argument to the list of reasons to oppose corsets. “Marry a small waist, and you will be sure to have few mature offspring, and those few thinned out by death.” Fowler harshly denounced women who wore corsets—and in 1848, the year of publication of this denunciation—most upper- and middle-class women did wear corsets as part of their fashionable attire. Notably, Fowler offered women few personal reasons to abandon fashion; his argument was crafted entirely to buttress traditional gender and sexual norms. This leaves the impression that women were not being offered a better road to health and happiness, but were being scolded for their willful persistence in poorly dressing themselves.

George Napheys, the author of a popular health book for women, offered an unusual analysis of woman’s dress, illustrative of the ignorance and apathy with which many doctors regarded woman’s attire. While he argued that tight-lacing was unhealthy, he informed his female readers that “stays or corsets may be used, in a proper manner, during the first five or six months of pregnancy, but after that they should either be laid aside, or worn very loosely.” He devoted a great many pages to the discussion of healthy clothing for children, but he did not discuss women’s dress unless it related to their maternity dress. Napheys, Whitfeld, and Fowler all revealed the lack of concern for women shown by popular male doctors of the period. Their discussion of woman’s dress usually revolved around societal concerns, such as

76 Ibid, p. 12.
77 Ibid p. 12.
Fig. C. "Harriet N. Austin, wearing the American Costume." Water-curist Austin designed this particular reform outfit, she edited the Letter-Box and the Laws of Life, and she was the secretary of the National Dress Reform Association. From Jane Donegan, Hydropathic Highway to Health.
Fig. D “Example of the American Costume Worn at Our Home on the Hillside, Dansville, New York.” Note the dress reformer’s short hair. From Jane Donegan, *Hydropathic Highway to Health.*
fears that women’s skill or health as mothers was being damaged through fashion.
These doctors did not address women’s health or happiness directly; instead, they examined it through the lenses of men’s or children’s welfare.

Female health reformers approached dress reform from an entirely different point of view. They argued that woman’s dress should improve for the sake of women’s health, happiness, or comfort. Most female health reformers included the arguments made by their male counterparts; it was not uncommon for women health reformers to argue that dress reform was a religious or maternal necessity. However, women posed dress reform as an opportunity for all women, and their literature was rarely vituperative. They saw dress reform as a benefit to women’s health, an opportunity for medical education, and a chance for women to exert their independence from men.

The health reformers hoped to separate their movement from that of the woman’s rights advocates, despite the fact that the health reformers, particularly female health reformers, shared many of the motivations of the woman’s rights movement. The female health reformers argued that they were the first to develop a shortened dress. James Caleb Jackson and Harriet Austin—cofounders of the Glen Haven Water Cure, or “Our Home”—worked together to develop the “American Costume,” possibly as early as 1849. Austin wore variations of the costume for almost forty years and argued that it helped cure hundreds of “helpless invalids” who came to her water cure for medical attention.79 The American Costume (see figures C and D) took on different forms at different times; however, it closely resembled the

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“bloomers” worn by the woman’s rights advocates. Austin and Jackson argued that the American Costume was as similar to the “bloomers” as “an elephant is like a rhinoceros,” yet the actual cut and style of the two dresses were very similar.⁸⁰

A short story in the *Water Cure Journal* analyzed the connections between health and dress reform. Clara, the heroine of the story, is a young mother and dress reformer who cures her children of measles through hydropathy. Her father is not pleased with her connection to radical health movements. “Her religion is all humbug, her Phrenology—how ridiculous! Then, woman a physician! And now, she is trying to humbug her neighbors with cold water, for medicine and dietics, which she must carry to such extremes, as to abandon meat….”⁸¹ The author of the story connects dress reform, radical health reform (vegetarianism, hydropathy, phrenology), and women’s increasing power in the medical world. While the father is appalled that his daughter believes women should become physicians, it is something that his daughter, as part of a radical health reform movement, obviously supports. The father hints at the woman’s “humbug” religious beliefs, but does not reveal which particular sect the woman belongs to. This suggests that she may have been a Perfectionist, Spiritualist, or a member of a utopian group, like many other dress reformers.⁸² Not all health reformers were as radical as Clara, but many dress reformers were members of fringe Protestant groups and almost all female health/dress reformers agreed that women had a unique advantage as primary caregivers, and therefore should be recognized as physicians to the family.

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⁸² Religions that advocated dress reform are discussed at greater length in chapter two.
Women used dress reform as an inroad on the medical community. They used popular journals, such as *The Water Cure Journal*, or began their own journals, such as *The Sibyl*, to spread their dress reform propaganda. Many female doctors made dress reform a key issue in their lectures and debates. The American Costume also served as a form of free advertisement, although it often distracted the public from the medical skills of women doctors. Dr. Mary Walker and Dr. Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck won national fame because of their attire, while much less attention was devoted to their medical skills. Finally, female health reformers argued that American women desperately needed education in biology, physiology, and medicine so that they could improve their own dress and that of their children. Essentially, dress reform opened doors for women in the field of medicine.

The women who contributed to health journals such as *The Sibyl* and the *Water Cure Journal* revealed their concern for “the HEALTH, COMFORT, and INDEPENDENCE of woman.” In 1852, the *Water Cure Journal* published a song written by “Lora” glorifying the advantages of wearing a “bloomer” costume.

I love to be a Bloomerite,
For much I hate a waist that’s tight,
I think it no disgrace to me
To wear a dress from whalebones free.
I hate to wear a trailing skirt,
It wipes up so much mud and dirt:
And loosely swings about my feet
And sweeps the side-walk and the street.
Though some may laugh—and others sneer,
When I in a Bloomer dress appear,
And others still, may chance to say,
‘Tis only done to make display;
I will not mind their idle sneer,
Their ridicule I do not fear
For I am happy—I am free—

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And what they say disturbs not me.  
The Miss whom wealth has freely blessed,  
May flirt in Paris fashion dressed,  
Her satins through the street may trail,  
And carry on each hip—a bale  
Of cotton batting, if she please,  
And sacrifice both heaven and ease;  
And make her life a life of pain,  
The perils of fashion's throng to gain,  
And she some brainless fop to please,  
Her waist in fashion's vice may squeeze;  
If she her approbation prize  
Enough to make the sacrifice.  
But I'll not do it, no, not I.  
For health is prized by me too high,  
To be thus idly thrown away.  
Least some, misjudging me, should say.  
I wear it but to make a show;  
For they the reason do not know  
Why I in Bloomer dress appear,  
And bear the frowns and scornful sneer,  
Of those who far too proud may be  
To deign to even speak to me;  
The reason is, I like it well,  
How well—my pen can never tell.  

Lora revealed many of the fears and motivations of the dress reformers through this song. It is important that she referred to her costume as "bloomers," since the public perceived all reformed dresses as being bloomers. Lora defies the public's scorn by using this semi-derogatory name to refer to her clothing. Lora expects that her decision to wear the bloomers will be interpreted as something done "but to make a show." However, she denies this, arguing that she chose to adopt the bloomers for several significant reasons. She dislikes the dirtiness associated with trailing skirts and she appreciates the ease of movement the bloomers afford her. Lora bases her argument for bloomers on health issues, telling us her health is prized "too high" to throw it away for mere public opinion. She is particularly critical of the fashionable
world, commenting on their excessive display of wealth and dismissing the “brainless fops” she’d prefer not to marry. Finally, she makes a point of connecting bloomers to personal emancipation, consistently reminding her audience that she regularly defies convention with her costume. She tells us, “I am happy—I am free—,” highlighting “free” as both a physical and a social condition.

Freedom was a central issue for many female health reformers interested in dress reform, and they too adopted abolitionist rhetoric. “Luna” wrote to The Sibyl criticizing “men’s inconsistency about fashion” in the winter of 1860. She argued that “nine-tenths of those who denounce woman and her follies would prefer that she should remain where she is, a doll, a drudge, a slave, than that she should take an equal position in society with men. Yes, brothers, you are to blame for woman’s ‘fashionable weakness’ as you choose to term it.” Luna blamed men for women’s unhealthy fashions and suggested that men used dress to suppress women in their society, to make them “slaves” and “drudges.” The American costume offered salvation from “slavery.” One dress reformer suggested that women forgo skirts altogether, and just wear trousers. “There is nothing like freedom, and we can have it in almost any community if we but take a steady, straightforward course, earn our own living, and mind our own business. It don’t [sic] hurt people to be a little shocked once in a while.”

Health reformer Dr. Mary Walker was perhaps the most famous, and shocking, dress reformer in the nineteenth century. Walker easily served as a target

for accusations that dress reformers were cross-dressers, although, like other dress reformers, she would have denied this characterization of her behavior. She stunned the nation with her increasingly “masculine” attire—by the last decades of the nineteenth century she had adopted a suit, bow tie, and top hat. Walker served as a military doctor during the Civil War, and wore a short skirt with trousers even after being captured by the Confederacy, which promptly informed her she needed to adopt feminine attire in exchange for her freedom. She refused. In June 1866 Walker was arrested by a policeman in New York City after a small mob gathered to mock her clothing. She took the policeman to court for “improper conduct.” Walker insisted, “I wear this style of dress from the highest, the purest and the noblest principle....” The police commissioner who heard her case agreed, “I consider, Madam, that you have as good a right to wear that clothing as I have to wear mine....” But he did not charge the policeman, arguing that he was “protecting” Walker from the mob. While Walker earned the right to wear her clothing in public, she had to accept protection from men in order to do so.88

For Walker, dress reform was synonymous with freedom and independence from men, making characterizations of her as a “cross-dresser” even easier for her nineteenth-century critics. “Everything that makes woman in any degree independent of man, and, as a consequence, independent of marriage for support, is frowned down by a certain class of individuals.” And she firmly believed that dress reform was opposed solely because it gave women independence from male control, or “protection.” Ironically, she particularly mocked the protection of men, suggesting

that she viewed men with fear and bitterness, and perhaps felt nervous of being raped. “If men were really... ‘the protectors of women,’... they would not attempt to compel women to dress so that the facilities for vice would always be easy, but would sanction a dress that is quite the reverse, and no man would attempt to invade the family circle of his neighbor.”

Walker scorned dresses because they left women sexually vulnerable to men’s advances and put women at the mercy of men’s systems of protection and control.

“Freedom” and “health” were the key words found in most literature by female health/dress reformers. However, many female health reformers combined health and freedom with maternalistic, religious, and social arguments commonly relied upon by male doctors. Mary Jones, the author of Woman’s Dress: Its Moral and Physical Relations, being an Essay Delivered before the World’s Health Convention, belittled women for neglecting their health and their children’s health. She admonished women for sewing fine dresses while “the little souls... under [their] careful guidance... are sent forth from [their] presence to take their first lessons in that great school of evil, the street.”

Jones attacked women for deforming their bodies in opposition to natural law, asking, “Did He design that these bodies of ours, so ‘fearfully and wonderfully made,’ should be thus racked and tortured?”

Finally, Jones suggested that upper- and middle-class women had a social responsibility to their working-class sisters. While the rich women could buy new bonnets, “her less

favored sister, following in her footsteps, must needs plan, and study, and contrive, how by every possible invention she may eke out her slender means so that she may appear as well dressed as her neighbor."92

Clearly, not all female health reformers were interested in dress reform as an expression of woman's rights or "freedom." For health reformers, the shortened dress served as a symbol for everything from maternal duty to woman's independence and comfort. The health reform movement was made up of such a disparate crowd of reformers it was quite easy to introduce several motivations for dress reform. However, the religious reformers interested in dress reform were more consistent in their motivations, at least among each individual sect. Mormon women traveling to Utah in the mid-nineteenth century briefly adopted a reformed costume. Many Protestants encouraged women to adopt healthful and modest dresses, as can be seen from the religious rhetoric employed by health reformers and woman's rights advocates. Finally, dress reform was highly popular among utopian communities, including the New Harmony community and the Oneida community.93

All of these religious reformers supported dress reform as a symbol of morality and as a uniform worn for God. The Oneida community serves as the best example of religious dress reform during the 1850-1870 period. Their community was located east of Syracuse in upstate New York, and it existed between 1848 and 1879. The members were intensely religious Christian Perfectionists and followers of John Humphrey Noyes. The Oneidans' religious beliefs required them to withdraw from

society. They believed that, through communism and religiously motivated social actions, they could achieve a state of perfection, or freedom from sin, during their lives. One of the most notorious of their religiously motivated social actions was the practice of "Complex Marriage," which was basically an experiment in free love. They also experimented with eugenics, contraceptive techniques, and women's rights.94

The women in Oneida were noted for wearing "bloomers" before the costume became famous. In fact, the Oneidans claimed to have designed the first "bloomer" costume. Their costume reportedly originated in 1848—three years before Amelia Bloomer and Elizabeth Smith Miller first wore "bloomers"—after Noyes commented that "women's dress is a standing lie. It proclaims that she is not a two-legged animal, but something like a churn standing on castors!"95 After this inspirational comment three Oneida women took it upon themselves to design what they perceived as a more comfortable, suitable, and realistic costume for their utopian sisters, a costume that would outline woman's natural form rather than disguise it. In the "First Annual Report of the Oneida Association," published on January 1, 1849, they announced, "Some of the leading women in the Association took the liberty to dress themselves in short gowns or frocks, with pantaloons.... The women say they are far more free and comfortable...the men think that it improves their looks; and some insist [that it is] entirely more modest."96 Obviously, for the Oneidans, dress reform meant an improvement of traditional fashion's morality and healthfulness by

accentuating the “real woman” with a limb-defining outfit instead of presenting society with a “standing lie” in a sexually appealing (and therefore immodest) fashionable dress.

The Oneida women continued to wear these shortened skirts and pantaloons until the community dissolved in 1879. Some of the elderly women refrained from adopting the costume; however, it was universally worn (although not necessarily accepted) within the community otherwise. In fact, on March 6, 1865 the Oneida Circular, the community’s daily newspaper, announced that many of the women in the surrounding towns had adopted the costume as well. It is uncertain whether the bloomer originated with Oneidans; however, its members claimed that the idea was “entirely original with them, [as] Bloomerism had not been heard of then.”

The women of Oneida experimented with their hairstyles as well. They found devoting “considerable time to hair-dressing is a degradation and a nuisance” and after extensive discussion on the morality and propriety of wearing short hair, they decided to cut their hair. Typically, society was shocked by their nonconformity. As with dress reformers outside of the utopian movement, short hair was associated with masculinity—for women it was a sign of cross-dressing. On July 7, 1859, the Oneida Circular quoted a visitor as asking if the women were forced to cut their hair or wear calico, an unfashionable material that the community women used for their bloomers. Outsiders, particularly men, called them ugly and sickly looking, while their male peers within the community scolded them for their personal pride and

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97 Worden, Harriet M. Old Mansion House Memories. 10.
vanity.\textsuperscript{100} The women themselves were not entirely pleased with their dress reform, and many women only wore the costume to please the community leaders. Still, others were pleased with the freedom of movement granted by the costume, and all conformed for "practicality's sake," or perhaps because Noyes insisted on reformed dress.\textsuperscript{101}

At times, Oneidans managed to convince themselves that the women's costumes had a favorable effect on outsiders. In the \textit{Circular} on July 13, 1874, the women commented that, because of their communal work effort, it was "no wonder we women of thirty are mistaken for Misses when we are saved from so much care and vexation."\textsuperscript{102} Despite the optimism of the Oneidan women, cynical historians including Maren Carden, discuss the Oneidans' loss of perspective. Carden argued that while the Oneidans believed that "they looked less careworn than other adults" because of their cooperative work habits, actually society believed "that they looked like children because of their short dresses and short hair."\textsuperscript{103} In the nineteenth century, small girls customarily wore their skirts and hair in a similar style to the bloomers and the Oneidans. While these fashions were acceptable in small girls, femininity was constructed in relation to age: women were expected to throw off the vestiges of girlhood in order to be feminine.

Society undeniably provided the harshest critics of these costumes; however, the community itself faced internal challenges, which kept the women at odds with their costumes. Not all of the members were happy with the new styles, and many

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{99} Robertson, 67.
\textsuperscript{100} See my discussion of the Oneida Community in chapter two.
\textsuperscript{101} Foster, Lawrence, 104.
\textsuperscript{102} Robertson, 96.
\end{flushleft}
female members were criticized for having “the dress-spirit,” or personal vanity.  

“Miss E.” was one of many women criticized publicly because “she has a touch of  
vanity.” In the weeks preceding the breakup of the community, Frank Wayland-Smith, a prominent Oneidan, wrote to John Humphrey Noyes to report that young  
women were returning to traditional long skirts. He claimed “that the desire for long  
dresses and long hair had always existed.”

Oneidan women were exhorted to “get rid of effeminacy” and to cultivate  
“manliness and robustness of character.” The women of Oneida were encouraged  
to conform to “a single male standard” and wore bloomers to become more of “a  
female man.” There was an emphasis on women becoming more “masculine”—or  
stronger, healthier, more productive, less frivolous, and more practical—however,  
this was reciprocated by a demand that the men become more “feminine.” Much of  
the criticism of individual males includes exhortations for them to limit their  
masculinity and to increase their “delicacy, affection, amiability—qualities which  
peculiarly belong to the feminine nature.” While Oneidans were attacking  
stereotypical gender qualities in men and women, they continued to object to  
characterizations (by the outside public) of dress reform as cross-dressing. Yet  
Oneidans were closer in motivation to the nineteenth-century construction of the  
cross-dresser than any other dress reformers simply because, unlike all other dress  

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103 Carden, Maren Lockwood. *Oneida: Utopian Community to Modern Corporation*. Baltimore: John  
Hopkins Press, 1969, 70.
104 Klaw, Spencer. *Without Sin: The Life and Death of the Oneida Community*. New York City:  
105 Oneida Community. *Mutual Criticism*. Ed. by Murray Levine and Barbara B. Bunker. Syracuse:  
Syracuse University Press, 1975, 53.
106 Robertson, 130.
107 Klaw, 135.
108 Foster, 232.
reformers aforementioned, they were not challenging the normative definition of femininity, but instead were challenging female members to exchange that “natural” femininity and become more masculine. Furthermore, dress reforming Oneidan women were expected to show passion in their sexual relationships. Without a doubt, nineteenth-century observers would have characterized sexually passionate, masculine women wearing pants and short hair as cross-dressers.

Noyes and the religious leaders did not necessarily have the women’s interests at heart. Many women objected to the efforts of the community to eliminate their femininity. The community also supported the shortened skirt because it encouraged women to contribute to the labor of the community, particularly in early years when the community was barely surviving economically. Oneidan women were expected to work alongside the men in the fields in addition to performing many household chores; a shortened dress was a way of enhancing women’s productivity.

Almost every dress reformer argued that shortened skirts enhanced woman’s activity and “usefulness.” Many women wore reformed dresses as work clothes only, and others wore shortened skirts simply because they were more convenient for their busy, productive lives. According to Stanton, Anthony, and Gage, “many patients at sanitariums, many farmers’ wives, and many young ladies [wore shortened skirts] for skating and gymnastic exercise”. Mrs. N. Whittlesy of Rome, New York, wrote with pride to the Sibyl in 1858: “By wearing the short dress I can do the work for 16 cows, and 18 persons in the family; can walk 7 miles and be none the worse for it. I

109 Oneida Community, Mutual Criticism, 49.
have not any lady friends that can do it with the long dress.” In 1851, *The Lily* reported that an “Agent of one of the [Lowell] Corporations... has offered to furnish a handsome dinner for all the girls employed in the same, who, on or before the approaching fourth of July, shall adopt the Bloomer costume. It is regarded as not only a very becoming, but an extremely convenient and useful dress for them.” Amelia Bloomer approved of this move, saying, “We hail with pleasure the adoption of our costume by the working classes, for it is we who have an active part to perform in the drama of life, that need the free full use of our limbs, and all our vital organs.” Dress reform here was tied directly to economics. The Lowell factory owners believed their female workers would be more productive in a comfortable outfit. While Amelia Bloomer sees this as a distinct advantage for the worker (whom, ironically, she identifies herself with despite her middle-class status), the working-class women who were bribed to don an unpopular costume perhaps did not see this as quite so beneficial.

In 1851 and 1852 Americans everywhere joined in the discussion of “bloomers” and dress reform. The historian Paul Fatout compared the discussion of dress reform to the aftermath of “a major earthquake.” “For months newspapers talked about Bloomerism. Approving, condemning, laughing, raging, sputtering, they worried the subject as feversishly as they discussed abolition, the Fugitive Slave Law, Louis Kossuth, and Jenny Lind.” By the middle of 1851, several months after the dress was first introduced, most Americans generally disapproved of dress reform. In

111 Mrs. N. Whittlesy, *Sibyl* 3 (September 1, 1858): 423. Quoted in Russo, p. 267.
large cities, crowds would harass dress reformers until police came to break them up. The *New-York Daily Tribune* reported one woman was driven to hiding in a shop until “a curious crowd of men and boys, who indulged in audible criticism of the new costume” were dispersed. “The police were obliged to interfere and remove two of the critics to prison.”  

Few women met with mobs such as these, particularly if they lived in more rural settings. Instead, they faced daily prejudice and inconvenience inflicted by their disapproving neighbors. In 1854, *Godey’s Ladies Book* ran a short story about a young girl persuaded to wear a bloomer costume by her father. The young woman meets with little disapproval in her native state of New York, but when she spends a summer in New England, she encounters outright scorn. The author informs us, “We frown on short sleeves; but when those short skirts were seen waving in our streets, when they even floated up the broad aisle on the Sabbath, it would be hard to say whether indignation or horror were the predominant feeling.”

The entire town shuns the young bloomerite, her cousins mistake her for a boy, and she grows ill from her inability to take exercise in public. She herself achieves status of “heroine” because she is not a typical “strong-minded bloomerite” with a woman’s rights agenda, but instead she has “a yielding docility about her.” The plot is resolved when a wise and respectable young professor persuades the girl’s headstrong father into dissolving the promise she had made to wear the bloomers. The young woman happily returns to long skirts and marries the wise professor.  

According to this popular woman’s magazine, redemption for bloomers was only possible if they

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Fig. E "Strong Minded 'Bloomer'" from Harper's New Monthly Magazine 4 (December 1851-May 1852): 286.
renounced trousers, shortened skirts, and woman’s rights, and accepted the authority of a husband.

Cartoons from Harper’s New Monthly Magazine played on the fear that, if bloomers were allowed to prevail, gender roles would be inverted, and women would take men’s place. Figure E depicts a “strong-minded bloomer” scolding her husband, Alfred, for reading “that foolish Novel.” Her demand that he “do something rational” reflects and mocks the gender-defined leisure activities of the nineteenth century. While the wife stands erect, looking competent and bossy in her comical (and misrepresented) bloomer outfit, the man lounges on a chaise with a very insipid expression on his face. The cartoonist assumed that his public would agree that women were lazy, useless creatures who allowed others to wait on them, while men were active and productive, and did not waste time reading “foolish Novels.” Ironically, the “something rational” the bloomer exhorts her husband to do is “play something.” If playing music was the most useful service a woman could provide, men could assert that women were not very useful at all. The cartoonist illustrated the popular perception that “clothing makes the man.” Dress reformers, all of whom are assumed to be woman’s rights advocates, were attempting to reverse the gender order by clothing women in “men’s” trousers. The woman in this cartoon, therefore, assumes the role of the stereotypical husband, while the man assumes the stereotypical wife.

The public also manifested its fear of dress reform as a radical challenge to the gender system through poems and songs. The “Bloomerite Marching Song” was used to harass women who went out alone wearing the bloomers.
Now then, my dear,  
We'll smoke and cheer and drink our lager beer.  
We'll have our latch-keys, stay out late at nights  
And boldly we'll assert our Female Rights,  
While conquered men, our erstwhile tyrant foes  
Shall stay at home and wear our cast-off clothes,  
Nurse babies, scold the servants, get our dinners;  
'Tis all that they are fit for, the wretched sinners!117

This song provides a taste of the public hysteria the dress reformers provoked. Obviously the public was making a direct connection between dress reform and woman's rights. The song suggests that dress reformers saw men as "tyrants" meant to be "conquered." Not only were dress reformers challenging women's traditional fashions, these songwriters suspected that dress reformers hoped to force "conquered" men to wear their "cast-off clothes" and adopt their duties at home. The reputation of the dress reformers was attacked in this short song, as well. They were women who would defy public opinion, staying out late, drinking, smoking, and behaving like "fallen women." Women were endangering their very womanhood, which was based on their morality, submissiveness, and domestic duties, by endorsing the bloomer costume.

The public did not universally disapprove of dress reform. In 1851, the New York Tribune straddled the fence on dress reform. In an article entitled "Bloomerism," an unnamed misogynist insisted, "Unbeaten woman is a Tyrant. The weaker they are the more tyrannical.... While the Masculine mind is confused with sweet odors and sweeter smiles, the grand blow is to be struck and Flora, Bloomer and breeches are to come in triumphant."118 Yet two months earlier, the Tribune had

run several columns full of glowing praise for the dress reformers and their shortened skirts. "The gentlemen editors are, with one or two exceptions, exceedingly taken with the Turkish costume which seems to have appeared nearly simultaneously in the principal inland cities and villages of the Eastern and Western states."\(^{119}\) One editor quoted in the Tribune had high hopes for the dress's success: "It may be sometime first, but we think the innovation will finally succeed."\(^{120}\) The dress reformers met with their greatest support in the first two or three months of the introduction of the bloomers.\(^{121}\) For a short time, newspapers praised the movement. The *Detroit Tribune* reported, "The ladies who have adopted this style of dress claim that it is far preferable to the old cumbersome style: and Editors who have seen it worn, speak in glowing terms of the beauty and effect. Speed the reform, if it will benefit the ladies. What bachelor so ungallant as to object?"\(^{122}\)

This enthusiasm waned quickly, and by the summer of 1851, public attitudes toward dress reform were generally disapproving. However, the dress reformers persisted in their reforms for another fifty years. It would take less than twenty years for the majority of reformers to abandon shortened skirts and trousers, and almost all dress reformers agreed that their best chance for support was a clear distinction between their own reforms and those of the first "bloomerites," the woman's rights advocates. And by 1870, most dress reformers were not just voicing a distinction between their own costume and that of the woman's rights advocates, they were


\(^{120}\) Quoted from the *Newary Mercury*, May 20, 1851, in *New York Tribune*, May 27, 1851.


endorsing a philosophy that in many ways reversed the original goals of the woman’s rights advocates and their dress reforming contemporaries.
1870-1900: CONSERVATIVE DRESS REFORM

Dress reform after 1870 is easily distinguished from the pre-1870 movement. Generally after 1870, reformers were more conservative in their proposals of alternatives to fashion, in their tactics, and in their rhetoric. As in the first two decades of organized dress reform, the reformers themselves were a diverse group of individuals with little in common. The leading dress reformers were still particularly interested in health, women’s rights, and religion; however, they were generally members of mainstream social organizations, as opposed to their predecessors, who were members of radical fringe group reform movements. While the first generation of dress reform was led by woman’s rights advocates, utopian communitarians, and water-cureists, the second generation of dress reform was directed by clubwomen, doctors, and intellectuals. Still it is crucial to remember that, while this conservative trend was the norm in post-1870 dress reform, it was not impossible to find radical women’s rights advocates, health faddists, or Spiritualists walking around in bloomers up to the end of the century.

After 1870, dress reformers generally fit into one of five categories based upon their motivation for promoting a change in dress. Commonly, dress reformers were clubwomen, physical culturists, women’s rights advocates, aesthetes, or religious reformers. As with the first two decades of dress reform, however, there was both overlap and tension between these categories, and many reformers did not
ally themselves to any of these rhetorical standpoints. In the interest of clarifying this complex movement, it is important to place the reformers into context and provide as much background information on them as possible. Therefore, these five categories provide a logical starting point for explaining the dress reformers and their cause.

Most reformers were hesitant to "reform" women's outer dress after the bloomer debacle. These reformers operated under the motto: change nothing that can be seen. The focus of dress reform shifted from the length and style of the skirt, the central issue in the pre-1870 movement, to the undergarments, such as the corset and petticoats. Dress reformers attempted to compromise with normative fashions after 1870, perhaps in an effort to draw more women to their reform, as well as to distance themselves from the radicalism of the previous two decades. Post-1870 reformers were eager to draw attention to their reforms' aesthetic appeal. They made grandiose comparisons between their own styles and those of the ancient Greeks, claiming to be resurrecting "true art" and "natural beauty" in their designs. Despite these claims, the dress reformers after 1870 suffered in creativity compared to their antebellum counterparts. They did not radically challenge normative fashion, refusing to chop off their skirts or incorporate pants, and they modified underclothing only with the assistance of fashionable clothiers. Furthermore, after 1870, dress reformers rarely attacked the gender hierarchy or its effects on women's self-concept and self-presentation. Dress reformers were at their best when redesigning late-nineteenth-century clothing to make it healthier, more comfortable, and—arguably—more stylish in the eyes of their middle- and upper-class audience. Because of their less
ambitious goals, the dress reformers after 1870 found a more popular reception among the public, the media, and the world of fashion.

As with pre-1870 dress reform, attacks on fashion were not perpetrated by dress reformers alone. Both dress reformers and individuals who were merely opposed to fashion wrote articles and books in an attempt to persuade women to abandon their love of dress. However, dress reformers differed from anti-fashion advocates in two main ways. Dress reformers usually offered women an alternative costume, such as reformed undergarments or dresses supported by suspenders. Anti-fashion propagandists rarely proposed improvements; they merely condemned popular clothing and the women who wore it. Dress reformers often blamed “tyrant” fashion for causing women’s subjugation. They interpreted fashion as having great power over society, brainwashing women and men alike. While many dress reformers acknowledged women’s individual choice in adopting fashion, after 1870, they widely shared the belief that fashion was a power too strong for the individual woman to defy. Frances Russell, a noted dress reformer, stated, “I cannot agree with those who say that this is wholly a matter of individual choice, unless we take into consideration the social pressure that is so large an element in deciding one’s ‘choice.’” Anti-fashionists gave little sympathy to women burdened by societal pressures. They interpreted women’s choices in fashion as willful self-destruction, and gave no consideration to the external influences women faced when choosing their personal styles.

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See also Gayle Veronica Fischer, *Who Wears the Pants? Women, Dress Reform, and Power in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century United States*. Ph. D. Indiana University, 1995, especially page 57, for a discussion on the differences between anti-fashion and dress reform in the 1850s and 1860s.

Fig. F "The Mode and the Martyrs" from *Puck* 9 (April 27, 1881): 142.
A good example of anti-fashion literature appeared in the American edition of *Puck* in 1881 (see Figure F). The cartoon, “The Mode and the Martyrs” revealed the misogyny and intolerance of anti-fashion. Unlike dress reform propaganda, this cartoon only suggests the evils of fashion; it provides no alternatives for women seeking to abandon the mode. The central image of the skeleton—fashion personified as death—pulling tightly the strings of a “glove-fitting” corset around the waist of a goose/woman suggests that women willingly bind themselves to death when adopting the mode. Depicting women as geese suggests that fashion did little to hide flaws in women’s appearances. Also, the common corsetry practices of the day, depicted in the upper left hand corner, left women’s bodies distorted into a shape that slightly resembled those of geese: their bosoms being thrust forward, while their posterior was thrown far back. The cartoon shows these corseted geese running to their graves, indicating disdain for women who follow the flock instead of thinking for themselves. Make-up and high heels apparently are equal to the corset in creating martyrs of women, and all of this martyrdom is endured in an attempt “to catch a husband in one season.”

Anti-fashion propaganda often surfaced in dress reform literature despite the key differences between the two groups. Some dress reformers adopted the rhetoric of anti-fashion propaganda, blaming women for their choices in fashion. Furthermore, both dress reformers and anti-fashion propagandists attacked fashion as immoral (because it promiscuously attracted sexual admiration from men and envy from women), unhealthy, impractical, and unaesthetic. While anti-fashion’s misogyny was stronger in most cases, (as evident in the *Puck* cartoon,) there was

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overlap with the dress reform movement, as we shall see throughout this chapter. Many dress reformers revealed their contempt for women, particularly fashionable women, through their propaganda.

Clubwomen tended to shy away from misogynist or anti-fashion statements in their endorsement of dress reform. The clubwomen who participated in the dress reform movement usually resided in larger cities of northeastern and midwestern states, including Chicago, New York, Albany, and Boston. Those involved in dress reform were typically white, Protestant, middle- and upper-class women. Clubs such as the New England Woman’s Club and Sorosis made dress reform part of their agenda. These women rarely placed dress reform at the top of their program. Instead, they made clothing a small part of their multifaceted drive for “municipal housekeeping,” or the general improvement of society. By entering the public realm through reform, clubwomen subtly expanded women’s role in society. However, the clubwomen were careful not to challenge the boundaries of women’s place in society overmuch. Many of the reforms they pursued were specifically connected to domesticity. Dress reform, for instance, was a relatively safe pursuit as long as it was distanced from the controversial woman’s rights issues (political, economic, and social equality for women) it had been connected to in the past. While many clubwomen supported suffrage, they were not willing to storm the political world as women (or as strong-minded bloomers), instead, they usually argued for maternalistic privileges within the traditional gender framework. Clubwomen were

not exactly entering men's spheres of politics or the economy when challenging female fashions. Nor were they proposing radical changes.

In fact, clubwomen summed up their style of dress reform when they counseled women interested in the movement to "attempt no marked alteration in [their] present appearance." They made very conservative changes to outer clothing, if any at all. Women's undergarments were almost always the focus of clubwomen's reform efforts. The clubwomen were particularly interested in corsets, and either attempted to banish them altogether, or at least alter them so they would not deform or damage the internal organs. Their goals, which were to make dress "more healthful, artistic, simple, and serviceable," reveal the connection clubwomen made between beauty and comfort. Clubwomen agreed, "The thrifty woman of every age has the same right to be clothed with dignity and beauty," it was a right of every woman to be beautiful. While the clubwomen continued their predecessors' concerns with women's health, they make a sharp turn from the dress reformers of the antebellum period, who argued that women should not be defined by their appearance. As with most dress reformers after 1870, clubwomen interpreted their reforms as aesthetic improvements.

Clubwomen were among the most active of post-1870 dress reformers. They were particularly successful at introducing their reformed undergarments to the public through various exhibitions, including a widely popular 1874 exhibition of Olivia P.

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127 "The Dress Question," Woman's Journal. 4 (July 26, 1873): 234. This quote is from an article by Harriet Austin, a noted water-curist and dress reformer. She wrote to protest the timidity of the dress reform committee of the New England Woman's Club.


Flynt’s undergarments sponsored by the New England Woman’s Club. The clubwomen also organized dress reform stores, such as that opened by the New England Women’s Club in 1874. The store failed rather miserably, apparently “a hostile elevator boy,” misdirected clients. Furthermore, the nonprofit nature of the store and inferior products doomed the business early on. The exhibition set up by clubwomen for the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893 was much more successful.

Members of the Dress Committee of the National Council of Women agreed to appear individually at the World’s Fair in reform dresses, wishing to familiarize the public with their movement. They hoped to encounter little ridicule, since the Fair would draw crowds from across the world in all sorts of clothing and minimize the unusualness of their own apparel. The clubwomen were a great success, although they had no patterns to supply the crowds of women who desired them. Other dress reformers found success through publications or lecture series, such as the series presented by the New England Woman’s Club, directed by dress reformer Abba Goold Woolson. Woolson gathered prominent female doctors to lecture to packed crowds in New England. These lectures were so successful that Woolson gathered them into a book, which was subsequently published. Many other dress reformers published books or articles in the Woman’s Journal, The Arena, and The Review of Reviews. Clubwomen were successful at introducing their interest in dress reform to the public; however, unlike their predecessors, they did not actually adopt their reforms in an effort at publication. Instead, they discussed them.

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Women's health was the primary concern for clubwomen who took up dress reform. They saw tight lacing and heavy, impractical petticoats as the source of much illness among women and their children. Clubwomen turned to maternalistic arguments when attacking fashion, suggesting that stylish clothing, corsets, and petticoats led to unhealthy mothers and increased miscarriages. They proclaimed it "women's duty" to future generations that they abandon unhealthy clothing and think instead of their children's health. In 1874, the New England Woman's Club reported, "The undoubted ill health of our countrywomen is a national injury and a national disgrace." Interestingly, the dress committee challenged individuals such as Dr. Edward H. Clarke, who argued that women were incapable of education because of physical weakness caused by their reproductive systems. Clubwomen placed the blame for women's frailty instead upon debilitating fashions, and promised to fight to allow women to grow "into strong-bodied, strong-limbed, clear-headed, warm-hearted, rosy, happy women, proud of their womanhood, surrounded by husband and children if they prefer a domestic life." While the New England Woman's Club did not place maternity as the chief goal for all women, they did suggest that current fashions were preventing women from living up to their potential as mothers. This was a powerful argument in a society that placed maternity as the highest aspiration for women.

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133 See Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English For Her Own Good: 150 Years of the Experts' Advice to Women. New York: Anchor Books, 1978, for a discussion of Clarke's book, which they describe as the "great uterine manifesto of the nineteenth century" (127).
In an 1893 article, Frances Russell, the chairman of the Committee on Dress Reform (set up by the National Council of Women in 1891) explicitly used maternalism to draw women to dress reform. Russell stated pointedly, "not a citizen of this republic is born whose physical constitution and cast of mind do not bear the impression of his mother’s previous health and character."

She went on to argue that young girls are punished with unhealthy clothing, while boys are pampered, allowed to run, and grow strong. Essentially, Russell, like her fellow clubwomen, had an ambiguous outlook regarding women’s primary role in society. While her maternalistic argument suggests that she wished to glorify women’s role in the home and nursery, her description of women’s lost potential challenges this notion, suggesting instead that women were physically held back from equality because of their clothing. Russell and the New England Woman’s Club both implied that women had the potential to assume a role equal to men’s in society, but they needed to alter their clothing in order to achieve this.

Clubwomen were ambivalent about their class position as well. Class privilege played a powerful role in dress reform, with many reformers exhorting their fellow clubwomen to set a good example for their “inferiors.” In 1879, Abby W. May, a prominent dress reformer, read a paper before the Association for the Advancement of Women. She argued,

We are our sisters’ keepers. The poor, the weak, and those low down in the scale of comforts and advantages, look up to those more fortunate than they... and strive to imitate them.... But what are the women of our upper classes doing to-day? They are acting not as noble leaders should, but are setting an example of servile following of fashions that are vulgar, and tasteless, and senseless, and extravagant.... I will not try to measure the burden that the fortunate

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women are to-day laying upon their less able sisters by the force of this example.\textsuperscript{136}

Most clubwomen involved in dress reform were upper or middle class. Therefore, dress reform propaganda was generally directed toward women who had enough money to redesign or expand their wardrobe, experiment with reformed corsets and healthier undergarments, and attend lectures or exhibitions where reformed clothing was displayed. One advertisement for a lecture by Annie Jenness Miller, a popular author and dress reformer, described the packed audience as indisputably wealthy: “Nearly every one of the ladies was the wife or daughter of a wealthy man, and the greater part of them were society women.” It was fitting that the crowd was wealthy, since the dresses Jenness Miller displayed (eight in all) included one that was an “exquisitely embroidered black net, combined with pale green brocade,” obviously not an easily affordable costume.\textsuperscript{137}

Nevertheless, dress reformers constantly referred to their poorer sisters, in hopes of improving the example they set for working class women, or in dismay at the extravagance of working-class clothing. The corsets, heavy petticoats, and expensive dresses worn by their servants irritated dress reformers. Annie Jenness Miller, herself a member of the Dress Committee of the National Council of Women, published her scorn for overdressed servants in her most popular book, \textit{Physical Beauty: How to Obtain and How to Preserve It}. Jenness Miller informed her (presumably middle- and upper-class) readers, “It is a duty which each one owes to

\textsuperscript{136} May, Abby W. \textit{Dress. A Paper Read before the Association for the Advancement of Women}. Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, and Co., 1879. p. 7
society, to dress well, and by dressing well, I mean keeping with one's station. I do not regard my cook as well dressed when she wears a satin dress, at seventy-five cents a yard, trimmed with cotton lace, to church and for holidays, and, since she cannot afford to buy a better quality, I do not consider that satin belongs to her position. She is well dressed when she wears a serviceable cotton or woolen fabric only."¹³⁸ It is difficult to ignore the snobbery of the dress reformers, despite their efforts to "help" the working class by lowering the fashion standards through personal adoption of reformed dress. Furthermore, a tone of fear surfaced in Jenness Miller's book. She was concerned that working-class women were using fashion to abandon traditional deference and call for public acknowledgement of equality with their employers.

Annie Jenness Miller brings up another facet of clubwomen's rhetoric with her talk of "duty." Clubwomen had a shared concept of aesthetics when they addressed issues of women's appearance. They agreed that it was essential that women appear beautiful—it was a woman's role in society to adorn—and fashion was meant to enhance that beauty. However, clubwomen agreed that current fashions had failed to provide this service; therefore, it was essential that they improve upon current styles. Clubwomen developed an aesthetic philosophy based on their understanding of "natural" beauty. Frances Steele, a dress reformer and clubwoman from Chicago, argued, "All the world loves beauty. Every woman naturally seeks to be beautiful. It is part of her mental constitution."¹³⁹ Steele connected femininity and beauty, assuming that women everywhere could share an aesthetic sense because of

their gender. Other dress reformers connected their aesthetic philosophy to the past, especially great classical beauties, such as the Venus de Milo and the Venus de Medici. A publication by the Study Committee of the *Chicago Correct Dress Club* "earnestly" recommended "that each member supply herself with a photograph of the Venus de Milo." According to Annie Jenness Miller, "the dress of Greek women was perfect in its noble simplicity."

Classical beauty appealed to late-nineteenth century clubwomen particularly because of its glorification of the voluptuous woman. In her work on American beauty ideals, Lois Banner discusses the shift in postbellum years from the "frail, thin, steel-engraving ideal" to a new beauty idea: "the large-bosomed and -hipped, curvaceous and heavy model of beauty, the 'voluptuous woman.'" Banner describes the importance of the classical Venuses to the voluptuous ideal, particularly in that "they were broad-shouldered, large-waisted, and athletic-looking," qualities that were rarely praised in women by mainstream society before the 1870s. Because of this new voluptuous ideal, dress reformers after 1870 operated under better conditions than their predecessors had. Women who wished to appear tiny needed to wear corsets and gigantic hoop skirts to place their bodies in stark contrast, making them look smaller. After 1870, women were encouraged to look "healthy." For many women, this meant eating their fill, engaging in outdoor exercise, and flaunting any extra pounds they happened to gain. By fitting the late nineteenth-

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144 Ibid, p. 110
century beauty ideal, voluptuous women were expected to be more sexually attractive to men. Certainly, voluptuousness was not a universal beauty ideal, nor did it ever truly replace the steel-engraved, tiny lady. And at no time in the nineteenth century did the woman of fashion abandon her corset. Voluptuousness often required tighter laces, in order to displace some of those extra pounds to the chest and hips. However, dress reformers after 1870 struck a common chord when they praised the Venus de Milo for her “natural” body shape.

Clubwomen’s aesthetic philosophy was based on their experiences in society. For example, the clubwomen assumed that all women were interested in appearing beautiful and stylish, therefore, they insisted that their clothes never stray too far from current fashions. Clubwomen also were active in daily business, whether it was the business of reform, or the actual running of a company. They assumed they shared this quality with all women, and one of their most pressing demands was for the creation of a business suit for women. Annie Jenness Miller revealed the weight of clubwomen’s common prejudices when she described the “perfect business dress for the ordinary climate.” Essentially, she assumed her (upper- and middle-class) audience would live in a northern climate, and would require “a ribbed woolen union garment” worn next to the skin. Southerners were generally excluded from dress reform propaganda.

Clubwomen gathered together in 1891 to form the Committee on Dress out of the National Council of Women. One of the primary responsibilities of this committee was to create and display a dress “suitable for business hours, for

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144 ibid, p. 106-110
shopping, for marketing, housework, walking and other forms of exercise.”\textsuperscript{146} The perception of middle- and upper-class women’s lives had subtly changed since the 1850s. Clubwomen, who were supported by many conservatives, were assuming that women would engage in business outside their homes. Frances Russell sarcastically pointed out the pressing need for a “business dress” among “every woman...who has anything more useful to do in the world than to pose as an ornament of society.”\textsuperscript{147} It was increasingly common, particularly among clubwomen, for dress reform to symbolize the increasing activity in the lives of upper- and middle-class women. Clubwomen agreed that it was a woman’s duty to be “useful,” as a mother, a reformer, a club member, a Christian, or even a professional. They demanded that their clothing also fulfill this function.

Clubwomen may have been the most prominent among dress reformers after 1870; however, they certainly were not the most radical. A small proportion of dress reformers interested in physical culture and health reform advanced a daring dress reform campaign in an effort to change notions about women’s bodies and women’s role in society. However, the physical culturists themselves were quite divided in their perceptions of women’s bodies. Physical culturalists were in some ways descendents of the health reformers; they shared mid-nineteenth century health reformers’ interests in improving the health of the nation. Unlike the health reformers of the mid-nineteenth century, however, the physical culturists generally stuck to AMA-approved tactics, avoiding water cures and fad diets. While all physical

\textsuperscript{146} National Council of Women of the United States. \textit{Report of Committee on Dress.} April 1893.
culturists hoped to increase opportunities for women to exercise, gain strength, and improve their health, there was a clear divide in the motivations of these dress reformers. Most physical culturists advanced maternalism, evolutionary theory, and nativism—all of which were intellectual trends in the field of science in the late-nineteenth century—as the logic for dress reform.\textsuperscript{148} Doctors, such as John Harvey Kellogg, Robert L. Dickinson, Wilberforce Smith, and Arabella Kenealy argued that dress reform was essential to the future of the nation. They demanded that women abandon their unhealthy corsets and long skirts, and adopt exercise for the sake of their children, their race, and their country. These physical culturists pointed to evolutionary theory to argue that women were destroying their own health and the health of their babies by wearing fashionable clothing.

The message of these rather harsh physical culturists was mitigated by another branch of the movement, which demanded exercise and physical well-being for women, not because of their maternal duties, but because of their inherent right to good health. This second branch of physical culturists found their greatest support in the mid-1890s, particularly during the bicycle craze of 1896 and 1897.\textsuperscript{149} During these years, the bicycle became accessible to and popular among upper- and middle-class women, and a brief confusion over proper bicycling attire ensued. Ultimately, a large percentage of female bicyclists wore a bifurcated skirt, and dress reform and physical culture were inevitably linked. In England, a magazine popularized the bicycle craze and adopted a series on “The Philosophy of Knickerbockers” in which

Fig. G "Dr. Dio Lewis's gymnastic clothing for men and women" From Dr. Dio Lewis, *The New Gymnastics for Men, Women, and Children*. Eighth edition, Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1864. (Taken from Gayle Fischer, *Who Wears the Pants?*)
the propriety of women wearing bifurcated skirts was discussed at length. Physical culture seeped into colleges and high schools, many of which adopted physical education programs (see Figure G).

The motives of these two branches of physical culturists were so opposed that it is necessary to examine them separately. The dominant group of physical culturists used paternalism, evolutionary theory, nativism, and imperialism in an effort to frighten women out of fashionable clothing and into reformed dress. When they addressed fashion, their primary concern was to eliminate the corset. They generally had very little to say about contemporary styles and were content to endorse most fashions as long as they did not involve corsets or skirts that trailed on the ground. The efforts of physical culturists to reform American women were often quite patronizing. Dr. Wilberforce Smith, a prominent physiologist, showed some patience for middle and upper-class women who adopted the corset, acknowledging that “they live under the tyranny of a nearly universal custom, and largely under the yoke of the professional dressmaker.... Few of the sex can be expected to have the individuality and courage to resist.” However, his sympathy makes woman into a “victim,” or “a creature more impressionable than strong, and in her worthy role as partner with man, a sweet and feeble dependent.” Smith’s subtle disdain for women is overshadowed by the blunt misogyny of other physical culturists. An Italian doctor reading a paper before a medical association in Rome declared: “that women should willingly subjest

149 For a thorough discussion of this fad, see Sally Sims, “The Bicycle, the Bloomer, and Dress Reform in the 1890s,” in Dress and Popular Culture. Patricia A. Cunningham and Susan Voso Lab, eds., Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1991. pp. 125-145
151 Ibid. p. 202, 326.
(sic) themselves to the filth, to say nothing of the possible dangers of trailing skirts, has long been a wonder to sensible people who are acquainted with bacteriology.”  

John Harvey Kellogg, one of America’s most eminent health reformers, famed developer of the cornflake, and a member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, became very active in the dress reform cause.  

He firmly believed that American women were responsible for their own destruction, and he had very little sympathy regarding the social pressures these women faced daily. In a lecture on the topic of dress, delivered before the Michigan State Medical Society in 1891, Kellogg announced: “I am to undertake to show that certain features of the mode of dress common among civilized American women have been, and are, a prominent factor in producing a widespread and marked physical deterioration among the women of this country.”  

Kellogg’s discussion of “civilized” women reveals that his target audience was white, middle- and upper-class American women, an audience familiar with American imperialism and that generally would agree with him that (especially white, middle- and upper-class) Americans were higher on the evolutionary scale than were foreigners.  

He plays upon the American obsession with evolution by pointing out “the marked difference in physical proportion between the savage and the

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152 “Modern Medicine, Surgery and Sanitation: The Dangers of Trailing Skirts” Current Literature. 29 (October 1900): 433.
153 Kellogg’s involvement in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church has implications for his connection to dress reform. Ellen G. White, spiritual leader of the church, was deeply involved in dress reform for over ten years. This will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter.
civilized woman,” and goes on to compare these “savages” quite favorably to their wealthier sisters in terms of health and strength.\(^ {156}\)

Essentially, most physical culturists blamed women for their choice of clothing. Either they dismissed women as too weak to rebel against fashionable society, or they ignored social pressures altogether and took clubwoman Frances Russell seriously when she stated “the average dress of the average woman pronounces against her the verdict: fickle, frivolous, incompetent!”\(^ {157}\) Physical culturists cajoled, threatened, and frightened women into adopting healthier clothing. They combined evolutionary theory and nativist fears of race suicide to argue that women were slowly destroying the health of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants and permitting other races to outbreed their own.\(^ {158}\) Kellogg fearfully stated, “there has been, in the last ten years, an enormous falling off in the birth-rate...threatening the very existence of the race.” He went on to admonish women for their foolish fashions. “A corset-choked woman knows very well that she is quite unfit, physically, for the rearing of children.”\(^ {159}\)

Arabella Kenealy, a prominent physical culturist and doctor, blamed fashion for the inequality of the sexes. “Woman, then, in impairing her assimilative [digestive] power is impairing her human power. She can never fairly keep up with man, whose assimilative capability, uninjured at all events by stays, is more according to his needs. It may be accepted indeed as fundamental truth that so long

\(^{156}\) Ibid. p.6

\(^{157}\) Russell, Frances E. “Woman’s Dress,” The Arena. (February 1891): 352. Russell’s comments should not be taken out of context, as she later defends women’s decision to adopt stylish attire. She acknowledges the “social martyrdom” dress reformers face when donning unusual clothing. Ibid. p. 356

\(^{158}\) Nativists particularly feared the Irish, both for their continual immigration to northeastern America, and their large, healthy families.
as women wear stays (for women seldom wear stays without lacing them too tightly) our sex can never properly take its place in the world of work.\textsuperscript{160} Kellogg agreed with Kenealy’s logic. He was so impressed by the strength of “uncivilized” women that he suggested that it was only corsets that kept women from developing strength and health equal to that of men. “The profession and the laity...regard women as naturally weaker than men. But that this is not necessarily so, is shown by the constant experience and observation of travelers among uncivilized tribes.”\textsuperscript{161} While Kenealy and Kellogg’s analysis seems optimistic for the millions of weak and unhealthy women wearing corsets, they quickly disavow the possibility of radical improvement. “That a leopard will change his spots or women discard the use of stays in the course of one generation is not to be expected,” mourned Kenealy.\textsuperscript{162}

The physical culturists advancing a maternalistic argument for dress reform saw the answer to women’s “physical decadence” in reformed dress (sans corsets), an increased understanding of the “laws of life” (biology, physical fitness, and nutrition), and increased exercise. They hoped that women would engage in outdoor activities like bicycling, walking, and swimming; attend physiology classes; and adopt a healthy diet. Their radical counterparts shared these ideals, but this small category of physical culturists had an extremely different approach and a different costume. These dress reformers advanced a costume that closely resembled bloomers. However, the skirts were closer fitting and the outfit was often designed to hide the pants worn underneath. These costumes were commonly called knickerbockers or

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{159} Kellogg, p. 4.
  \item \textsuperscript{161} Kellogg p. 28
  \item \textsuperscript{162} Ibid p. 136
\end{itemize}
Fig. H "As they rowed in perfect rhythm." The George Hall stressed his heroine's strength, virility, and power, subverting the traditional romantic ideals. Most importantly, his heroine wore bloomers. From George Hall, *A Study in Bloomers*.
bloomers. These dress reformers were decidedly interested in physical culture, particularly bicycling, although other sports were gaining favor by the end of the century.\textsuperscript{163} This group was made up mostly of female athletes; however, they found some support among doctors and health enthusiasts. Most importantly, these dress reformers used physical culture in an attempt to redefine femininity.

One of the most notable of these individuals was the author of \textit{A Study in Bloomers, or, the Model New Woman}, George Hall. This novel, published in 1895, introduced Grace Thorne, a heroine in bloomers who believed “in a thorough-going equality of the sexes.” She was “strong enough to wrestle with a giant,” and nevertheless remained “a woman as delicate as anybody’s sister dare be.”\textsuperscript{164} Throughout this novel, Thorne revolutionized traditional notions of femininity. She beats her male admirers at sports, she boldly bicycles through town in a pair of bloomers; she speaks in public for equal suffrage, free silver, prohibition, and nativism; and she proposes to her future husband at the end of the book. The author described her as having almost Herculean strength and a “great, warm muscular arm” (see Figure H).\textsuperscript{165} This strikes a strange note in a romance novel, particularly since the hero is a rather delicate pastor who is dwarfed by his love interest in both strength and character. Thorne represents Hall’s ideal “New Woman,” and she fits the role of a dress reformer in many ways. She advances a desire to “live naturally” and improve upon her own health through diet, exercise, and careful attire.\textsuperscript{166} She shared the political views of many—although certainly not all—dress reformers (hence her

\textsuperscript{163} For an example of a physical culturist interested in woman’s welfare, see Ellen Battelle Dietrick, “Male and Female Attire in Various Nations and Ages,” \textit{The Arena}. 10 (August 1894): 353-365.
\textsuperscript{164} Hall, George F. \textit{A Study in Bloomers, or The Model New Woman}. Chicago: American Bible House, 1895. p. 33, 54
interest in equal suffrage, prohibition, and nativism.) Finally, she fit the ideal of a small group of physical culturists who wished to help women redefine their femininity. Thorne tells us "every woman ought to be strong. It is her right, and whatever fashion keeps her down should be stamped out in righteous indignation."\(^{167}\) Thorne was outspoken, proud, brave, and strong. Yet Hall made her the heroine of his novel, and he consistently defined her as "womanly." While he may not have sold his "New Woman" to many nineteenth-century Americans, he did present an alternative vision of femininity.

Despite Hall’s radical interpretation of womanhood, he was unwilling to break away entirely from traditional views. Grace Thorne tells us at the end of the story that "to wed and bring up children is the highest mission of womankind." Hall is unwilling to remove women from the home; however, he does attempt to change their role within the family. Thorne proposes to her husband, and it is clear from their courtship that she is the dominant personality in the relationship. This may be irrelevant when she is relegated to a lifetime in the house, as her husband is free to choose his own profession, yet it is a clear break from the traditional romantic conclusion.

George Hall and his renegade band of physical culturists were not alone in using dress and exercise to challenge traditional femininity. While most women’s rights advocates had decamped from the movement in the mid-1850s, several still placed dress reform high among their priorities. It is important to understand the great blurring of boundaries between all of the categories of dress reformers. While

\(^{165}\) Ibid p. 103
\(^{166}\) Ibid p. 103
some reformers clearly identified themselves as woman's rights advocates, they were heavily involved in other issues, such as physical culture or religion. Therefore, other interests best defined some of the woman's rights advocates. Others, however, were involved in dress reform solely to improve the lot of American women. These dress reformers included radicals such as Tennie C. Claflin and moderates such as Helen G. Ecob (author of *The Well-Dressed Woman*) and B. O. Flower, the editor of *The Arena*.

The radicals were more visible, but they were by far outnumbered. Claflin was only superficially involved in dress reform; her main interests were in working with her sister, Victoria Woodhull, on their philosophy of free love. They argued that marriage was a form of prostitution, which placed women in a position of submission. Claflin and Woodhull agreed that only when women could choose their partners without legal or societal bonds, could they then be equal. Claflin used the issue of dress to attack the gender system and advance free love, claiming sexual autonomy for women. She argued that women were forced to sell their bodies by wearing stylish clothing, "'young ladies' are set up, advertised, and sold to the highest cash bidder." She raged at fashionable women's "hypocritical mock modesty" and called for "*all portions of the body [to be] evenly covered.*" Claflin, like many women's rights advocates of the 1850s, used dress reform to attack a system that demanded women exchange sex for economic security.

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167 Ibid p. 134
169 Ibid p. 133
Tennie C. Claflin received a great deal of attention for her proposals; however, little was done to adopt them. Still, many women agreed that the time had come for extreme measures in the matter of dress. Dress reformers frequently wrote to the leading suffrage journals of the day, *Woman’s Journal* and *The Revolution*. They were rarely taken seriously, but their articles are a testament to a continuing strain of radical dress reform throughout the nineteenth century. In 1868, Frans H. Widstrand wrote to *The Revolution*, declaring “It is cowardice to not wear the neuter dress.” Widstrand went on to dismiss fashions as “not only ridiculous, but shamefully indecent.” His description of a “neuter dress” (which implies that this fashion labeled its wearer as sexless and genderless) and a flattering reference to Dr. Mary Walker reveals that he favored bloomers with a close-fitting skirt, worn in dark colors, the dress advocated by Walker.\(^\text{170}\) Other correspondents also called for immediate action. In the *Woman’s Journal*, one reader wrote in, “Let the writers on Woman’s dress wipe their pens, cork their ink bottles, lock their desks and shorten their dresses. It will do more good in one year than ten years’ writing can effect.”\(^\text{171}\)

Most dress reformers were not so bold. Despite woman’s rights advocates’ historic link to radical dress reform, by the 1870s, most woman’s rights advocates were unwilling to change the outer nature of women’s dress. B. O. Flower and Helen G. Ecob both used dress to challenge women’s traditional role in society, yet neither of these activists insisted on shortening women’s skirts or covering all portions of the body equally. Instead, they called for small changes, particularly the abandonment of corsets and lightening of the petticoats. They preferred to drape clothing across the

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woman’s body rather than tightly fitting it to her limbs. Both Ecob and Flower supported women who adopted bloomers or pants; however, neither dress reformer made these radical garments central.

Flower, the editor of *The Arena*, connected dress to women’s rights in his journal. His tone often resembles that of Gerrit Smith: neither man could understand women’s reluctance to adopt reformed dress, and both men insisted that equality was impossible until women reformed their attire. Flower lectured his readers, “as long as [woman] remained the willing slave of fashion, she would be at a disadvantage in every vocation in life, and what was more, until she had vindicated her moral courage in regard to a problem which vitally affected her health and that of the unborn, she could not demand the supreme right of wife and mother which the dominant sex had denied her through the ages.”

Clearly, Flower’s desire to “liberate” women was mixed with hesitation. He, like many physical culturists and clubwomen, used a maternalistic argument to persuade women to reform their dress. He shared earlier dress reformers’ assumptions that women would respond best to demands that they improve their maternal skills. He joined many other dress reformers in employing Social Darwinism to argue for dress reform: “If girls will persist in ruining their vital organs as they grow up to womanhood, and if women will continue this destructive habit, the race must inevitably deteriorate.” Flower castigated women for their fashions, “Anything which injures the physical body, whether it be licentiousness,

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intemperance, gluttony, or vicious modes of dress, is necessary evil from an ethical point of view.”

Despite Flower’s harsh, insensitive, and pompous tone, he viewed dress reform as an avenue for woman’s rights. “The age of woman is dawning, but not until she is free from the fetters of conventionalism and fashion will she rise to the dignity of her true estate.” His understanding of woman’s “true estate” may not have meshed well with leading woman’s rights advocates; however, he was attempting to knock down barriers that prevented women from enjoying full health, comfortable clothing, and opportunities to exercise. Flower’s harsh tone was easily matched by Helen Ecob’s arguments in *The Well-Dressed Woman* (1892). While Ecob shared Flower’s assurance that “dress is a part of the woman question,” she joined him in manipulating women’s emotions and criticizing the entire sex. She introduced her book to a primarily female audience with a cutting insult: “The intense interest which is beginning to manifest itself on the subject of dress marks an epoch in the social history of woman. It indicates that she is ready to put away childish things and be governed by reason and conscience.”

Ecob shared many assumptions with both Flower and their contemporary dress reformers. She combined maternalism with nationalism, essentially telling young women that they owed it to their country to produce a healthy generation of children. She set up dress reform as a panacea for women’s inequality: “Since physical weakness handicaps woman’s activities, bars the way to higher education,

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174 Ibid p. 419
and hinders the development of many noble traits of character, it follows that an
important step in the attainment of true womanhood lies in the direction of physical
reformation."\textsuperscript{178} Ecob's negative views of women surface throughout her
commentary. She assumed women did not possess "many noble traits of character"
and appears hesitant to support women in higher education unless they abandon the
fashions of the day. Ecob's may have used dress reform to fight for women's rights,
yet she was so critical of her sex it is difficult to categorize her as a woman's rights
advocate. Despite her obvious contempt for women, she did seem to interpret dress
reform as an opportunity for women to advance their position in society.

While Ecob mercilessly attacked women in her dress reform propaganda,
other woman's rights advocates turned their frustration onto the dress reform
movement itself. Olive Logan frequently wrote to \textit{The Revolution} to praise her fellow
woman's rights advocates for their \textit{fashionable} attire. "In my association with the
ladies who are active in the Woman Suffrage movement, it has been my good fortune
to come in contact with none who were not ladies in attire as well as in manners and
in heart." Journalist Grace Greenwood joined her wholeheartedly:

\begin{quote}
I think some authority there should be to exclude or silence persons
unfit to appear before an intelligent and refined audience.... I allude
to certain anomalous creatures, in fearful hybrid costumes, who, a-
thirst for distinction, and not possessing the brain, culture, or moral
force to acquire it, content themselves with a vulgar notoriety, gained
by the defiance of social laws, proprieties, and decencies, by
measureless assumption and vanity, and by idiotic eccentricity of
dress.\textsuperscript{179}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{176} Ecob, Helen Gilbert. \textit{The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application to Dress of
the Laws of Health, Art, and Morals.} New York: Fowler and Wells, 1892. p. 233
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid p. 5
\textsuperscript{178} Ibid p. 5
Fig. I "Aesthetic Dress" Note the loose-fitting, classical cut of these dresses. From Helen Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman*. 
Fig. J "Aesthetic Dress" from Helen Ecob, _The Well-Dressed Woman_.

Aesthetic Dress' from Helen Ecob, *The Well-Dressed Woman.*
These two women were particularly hostile toward dress reform because of their proximity to the movement. Both women wrote in the last months of the 1860s, a decade that witnessed the breakup of the bloomer movement and the vagaries of lone dress reform rebels, notably Dr. Mary Walker and Lydia Sayer Hasbrouck. There was still a great deal of animosity between dress reformers and the woman’s rights camp, which had abandoned dress reform abruptly fifteen years earlier. When these women attacked dress reform, they were referring to the branches of the movement that advocated bloomers.

The aesthetics shared this disdain for bloomers, which they characterized as stubby, ugly costumes. They instead idealized ancient Greece and preferred to clothe women in flowing robes and soft colors. This small group of reformers drew from the ranks of artists and novelists, including Oscar Wilde, William Morris, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts and Crafts movement were both important influences for this British-based group, which combined an interest in dress reform with a stronger interest in developing a new artistic medium from fashion.\(^{180}\) This group did not have an American spokesperson; however, throughout the nation it was incredibly influential stylistically. Almost all of the dress reformers active in the last three decades of the nineteenth century drew from the artistic models of the aesthetics (see Figures I and J).

The aesthetics demanded that women and men both acknowledge the intrinsic value of beauty. This dismantled the agenda of earlier dress

reformers, who used the movement to argue that beauty was inessential and even harmful to women. Americans were accustomed to hearing anti-fashion diatribes in their churches, from their intellectuals, and particularly from the dress reformers of the 1850s and 1860s. For centuries, beauty and fashion had been connected to frivolousness and vanity; these qualities, in turn, were assigned to women, who were much more deeply involved in fashion than were men. Aesthetics insisted that beauty was ultimately a virtue. They connected outer beauty to inner beauty and took away much of the stigma of fashion. The implications for women and dress reform were astounding.

The aesthetic philosophy quickly permeated the dress reform movement. In the second stage of dress reform, everyone from Helen Ecob to George Hall agreed that dress, first and foremost, had to be beautiful. The aesthetics were interested in beautifying all of society—males and females—but often their philosophy was only applied to women. In the first stage of dress reform, the reformers earnestly tried to disconnect the age-old link between women and fashion. In the second stage of the movement, reformers were trying to elevate this link rather than abolish it. While an effort to praise women for their interests in fashion appears to be very enlightened, many dress reformers were not concerned about gender equality. Instead, they were interested in promoting their own reformed clothing lines. Annie Jenness Miller was notoriously good at describing her own fashions as beautiful.

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healthy, and natural. She would remind women of the aesthetic philosophy and subtly suggest, “nature and art may be made to combine,” and they combined best of all in the dresses she was selling. Then she would convince women that her clothing line provided necessary tools for natural, healthy beauty—in fact, necessary tools for self-presentation: “Dress is all-important, because it portrays elevation of character as unmistakably as does the behavior or conversation.”

Religious reformers were, perhaps, more sincerely interested in the character their dress revealed. Religious reformers had been interested in dress for centuries, yet their involvement in reform had peaked during the first stage of dress reform. The Oneidans continued to wear the American Costume (essentially, very plain bloomers) until the late-1870s. Many Spiritualists—individuals who belonged to a growing movement “aimed at proving the immorality of the soul by establishing communication with the spirits of the dead”—also adopted bloomers. The Seventh-Day Adventists also experimented with the bloomer dress, (with a slightly longer skirt) in the 1860s and 1870s. Spiritualists, Seventh-Day Adventists, and Oneidans adopted reform styles in an attempt to remove women from the male sexual gaze. All of these religions interpreted fashion as “immoral” because it encouraged sexual desires in men. These desires were uncontrollable and promiscuous in that they were outside of marriage and occurred without the


Fig. K. "Arrival of a Recruit at the Oneida Community." This cartoon suggests that the Oneida women were lasciviously looking over the new recruit. Furthermore, the women wearing reformed dress are depicted as extremely homely. From John B. Ellis, *Free Love and Its Votaries*. San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft & Co., 1870. (Taken from Gayle Fischer, *Who Wears the Pants?*)
The Dress Reform.

AN APPEAL TO THE PEOPLE IN ITS BEHALF.

BY MRS. E. G. WHITE.

Fig. L "Ellen G. White: The Dress Reform." The Seventh-day Adventist leader tinkered with reformed dress, favoring a particularly "modest" style, devoid of ornamentation and revealing very little of the female wearer's figure. From Gayle Fischer, *Who Wears the Pants?*
knowledge or sanction of the community. The religious dress reformers believed that some modification of the bloomer would eliminate lust from the minds of men, protect women from vanity, and elevate women from the status of mere sexual objects. Ironically, their experiments usually drew notoriety to their female members instead of providing them with a means of modest retirement, although the attire they proposed was unusually plain (see Figures K and L).

Dress reformers relied on religion to provide motivations for women seeking to adopt reformed attire. In an article demanding increased education for women in physiology and anatomy, Anna Morris laments, “people are constantly treating with indignity God’s highest work of art.”\(^ {185} \) Morris and others criticized fashion for distorting the natural form of women’s bodies. Finally, while aesthetics were highly successful in elevating fashion to an art form, some dress reformers still relied on the argument that fashion basely corrupted the minds of men and women.

Whether the motivations of the dress reformers were religious, aesthetic, democratic, or medical all of the dress reformers faced allegations of “Bloomerism.” Generally, the clubwomen and the doctors participating in the physical culture movement were exempt from harsh criticism because of their elevated position in society and the moderate reforms they proposed. However, all dress reformers adamantly distanced themselves from the dress reformers of the 1850s, which they


suggested was little better than cross-dressing. Lady Harberton, the head of the British rational dress movement, began one article with a disclaimer: “Bearing in mind the determination of the world, as far as possible, to misunderstand every new idea presented to it, it may be as well to preface the remarks put down here by stating distinctly that I neither wish to wear men’s clothes myself, nor to see other women do so. ‘Bloomerism’ still lurks in many a memory.” In other words, Lady Harberton was suggesting that women who had adopted the dress reforms of the 1850s were cross-dressing, whereas her own reforms could not be characterized as such because she was not wearing “men’s clothes.”

Dress reformers had good reason to distance themselves from the bloomers. Not only was the first stage of the movement tainted by failure, newspapermen rehashed and ridiculed the concept of women in bloomers whenever they found an opportunity. The *Scientific American* reported on a “Remarkable Scene at a Revival Meeting,” where women, prompted by the revivalist J. F. Frasier, tore off their corsets and built a bonfire of them. In a later edition, *Scientific American* acknowledged that the report “was a fabrication from beginning to end.” However, it provided sensational reading for a public that enjoyed hysterical mocking dress reformers. The *New York Times* joined the attack on dress reform with an article on “that curious disorder peculiar to women, which is vulgarly called ‘dress reform,’ and which is characterized by an abnormal and unconquerable

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187 There is a remarkable similarity between these rumors and the myth of the “bra-burners” of the 1960s. “Remarkable Scene at a Revival Meeting; Discarding the Corset,” *Scientific American*. 65 (September 19, October 10, 1891): 185, 231.
thirst for trousers.”188 The article went on to sum up the stereotypes society held of dress reformers, starting with the assumption that all dress reformers favored women in pants.

As a rule, women are exempt from [dress reform’s] ravages until after they have reached at least the period of middle life, and the greater proportion of its victims are above the age of forty. It was formerly claimed that no woman was in danger of contracting the disease who was well supplied with adipose tissue. This theory, however, has recently been exploded...there are cases on record in which women conspicuous for fatness have suddenly developed the typical craving for trousers. The disease uniformly fastens upon women of exceptional muscular strength, and upon those of extraordinary conversational powers. So well established is this fact, especially among people of our Western States, that when a woman displays unusual vigor in wielding stovelids, or in otherwise convincing her husband of his faults, her acquaintances immediately recognize her as one who may be expected at any moment to clamor for trousers.

The New York Times continued, remarking that the “origin” of dress reform “must be sought in...melancholy” and a “duty to disfigure herself, and thus mortify the flesh.” It concluded by calling dress reform “one of the most painful and terrible diseases to which women are now subject.” With this article, the NY Times revealed the power of the opposition dress reformers faced. Women who supported dress reform were accused of being gabby, skinny, old nags who beat their husbands and were prone to hysteria. Even worse, they were classified as sexually deviant. By attacking dress reformers’ “abnormal thirst for trousers,” critics suggested that they were mannish women, or cross-dressers seeking masculine sexual pleasures.

Even the most dignified clubwoman could not entirely escape this universal condemnation. Articles like this were written to mock the movement, not necessarily oppose it. Publicizing stereotypes, however, was probably more effective in cutting

down the ranks of dress reformers than a direct attack on the movement’s agenda.

Ironically, the *NY Times* ran an article a mere two years later, criticizing women for yet another psychological “disease.” In October, 1878, the newspaper commented, “Clothes are woman’s natural master...the Nemesis of her own creation.”

Obviously, the paper did not suggest women turn to dress reform to throw off this evil master.

Dress reformers were accused of masculinity, insanity, and—perhaps the most effective abuse—ugliness. The New York Times sent a reporter into the Oneida Community to interview its members just before the socialist religious group dissolved. The reporter was favorably impressed by the men of the Community; however, he was shocked at the appearance of the women, who wore modified bloomer costumes. The reporter first encounters a woman, kissing a rose:

> Her face was pale and somewhat haggard, and there were dark shadows beneath the eyes. Her hair was short. She wore a faded calico skirt, cut like a camisole... It descended but a trifle below the knee, terminating in a plain hem. Turkish trousers of faded calico completed the costume. It was a sorry and ridiculous figure, only that little tenderness of kissing the rose lent a species of pathos to the uncomeliest outfit that a woman in full possession of her senses ever put on. ... Numerous other figures with tresses similarly shorn, skirts that suggested camisoles, and Turkish trousers, flitted awkwardly about, but all, with the single exception of a girl of 15 in the composing room, who had a figure like an old-fashioned plum-pudding, carried such wan, pathetic faces as to furnish an argument in advance against Socialism and its practices.

The reporter may have been more inclined to abuse the Oneida women because of their participation in the “Complex Marriage,” a free love system of sexual

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relationships directed by the community’s leader, John Humphrey Noyes. By tarring the women in the community as ugly, the reporter suggested that only a certain type of woman would be drawn to dress reform (and socialism): women who did not care to lose their beauty and femininity. Women who adopted reformed dress knew they were risking the acquisition of a label.

Not all dress reform met with scorn, however. The styles advanced by clubwomen and aesthetes were well received. Furthermore, their propaganda did have some effect upon fashions. “Health corsets” became very popular in the 1890s. Women who wore “knickerbockers” while bicycling during the 1896-1897 were not shunned, although, their fashion choice was still met with some disapproval. It is undeniable that dress reform after 1870 had a great effect on society. Women’s role in the health field expanded greatly during these years. There are many factors explaining this expansion, but dress reform offered female physicians a medium by which to reach their female patients. Furthermore, dress reformers constantly urged young women to study medicine, physiology, and the “laws of life.” Their support may have led many women to pursue a field they had been discouraged from for most of the nineteenth century.

Dress reform allowed women to enter spheres of physical activity that they had been barred from for the entire century. Bicycling became popular in the 1890s; yet, men bicycled for several decades in comfortable clothing before women joined them. Sports and exercise were becoming acceptable activities for women, largely due to the efforts of physical culturists. One of the greatest achievements of the dress

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191 For more on the Oneidans, see Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love: Sex Roles and Sexuality in Victorian Utopias—the Shakers, the Mormons, and the Oneida Community*. Chicago: University of
reformers was their formal challenge to the mid-century glorification of feminine illness. During the era of the steel-engraved lady, it was popular to appear weak, dependent, and unhealthy. Dress reformers led their contemporaries in criticizing this role for women, insisting that health went hand-in-hand with beauty.

Dress reform produced a common cause for women to fight for; it provided women with a platform from which they could express their aesthetic, social, and moral philosophies under the cover of an issue in the traditional woman’s sphere. Many dress reformers used the movement to expand that sphere. By taking a woman’s issue into the public arena, dress reformers opened the arena for debate about woman’s nature. Dress reformers led that debate and they did not always lead it on woman’s behalf. Reformers found many opportunities to criticize or demean women. However, they also found many opportunities to open doors for women that had been shut for centuries. Clubwomen demanded that women have acceptable and comfortable garb for their entrance into the world of business and public service. Physical culturists used dress reform to broaden women’s opportunities for exercise, good health, and physiological education. For the aesthetics, dress reform challenged old prejudices against “womanly” vanity, beauty, and fashion. In contrast, religious organizations used clothing to attack vanity and lust, and remind women of the need for modesty and self-restraint.

Regardless of the intentions of the many dress reformers, they all manipulated women in an effort to help them. The woman’s rights advocates provide a good example of the constant paradox at play in dress reform propaganda. Essentially, these dress reformers criticized and mocked women in an attempt to reform them.

Their literature, which was meant to be strongly persuasive, focuses on the immorality and depravity of women, yet—arguably—it is intended to enlighten and assist women in their struggle to throw off male dominance. Women’s rights advocates were not alone in attacking women. Dress reformers joined anti-fashionists in blaming women for their choice of clothing. All dress reformers manipulated women with arguments based on maternalism, nationalism, nativism, and evolutionary theory in hopes of converting women to their cause. Finally, after 1870, all dress reformers shared the assumption that women wanted to be beautiful. They played upon the idea that beauty was a feminine “duty,” and by doing so, obliterated the original goals of the dress reform movement. In 1851, Elizabeth Cady Stanton led the first wave of dress reformers, pronouncing “The question is now to be, not Rags how do you look? But woman how do you feel?”192 Forty-one years later, Annie Jenness Miller, the woman most responsible for popularizing dress reform, advertised her lectures by stating, “Beauty and health are the birthright of every woman.”193 The movement started out attempting to disconnect women from the beauty ideal; after 1870, dress reformers relied on this connection in their propaganda.

192 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Our Costume,” The Lily. 3 (July 1851): 51.
CONCLUSION

For fifty years, dress reformers doggedly attacked fashions for warping women’s health and self-image. Clearly, dress reformers had an impact on their society, yet they are almost forgotten today. On the threshold of the twenty-first century, the issues the dress reformers grappled with over a century ago have increased resonance. Dress reformers enacted a pitched battle for over half a century against the corset. They insisted that a slender waist was not worth personal discomfort, and a beauty norm must not be prioritized over women’s health. Today, with growing numbers of anorexic and bulimic young women, it is essential that we reevaluate these debates over women’s bodies. While twenty-first century struggles with a repressive beauty norm take a different form than those of the nineteenth century, a look at the pitfalls and rewards of an attack on fashion could steer feminists in the right directions in our own debates over women’s appearances.

Clearly, a wholehearted attack on beauty norms did not address the concerns of most nineteenth-century women. Beauty norms allow for self-fashioning and expression, they can open the door to a type of empowerment, they serve as a creative outlet, and at times they can fulfill emotional needs for women. Yet beauty norms also exercise an unmanageable power over women’s lives. Many feminists would agree that fashion and beauty play a potent and perhaps dangerous role in women’s everyday lives. Historian Lois Banner has argued, “of all the elements of women’s

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Reform Graphics Collection,” part of the Alice Marshall Collection of Women’s History Materials 1880-1891. Penn State Harrisburg, Middletown, PA.
separate culture, the pursuit of beauty has been the most divisive and, ultimately, the most oppressive. In trying to be beautiful, women have been prey to unattractive qualities of narcissism and consumerism. Beauty has also been a powerful force in dampening social discontent.¹⁹⁴ Not only does the pursuit of beauty distract from the pursuit of equality, but beauty ideals are ultimately unattainable for almost all women. The dissatisfaction and self-recrimination that result from unattainable ideals persecute women who can never be as thin, elegantly dressed, perfectly coifed, tall, sophisticated, or beautiful as they feel they should be. Feminists cannot ignore fashion’s role in women’s everyday lives. A careful look at nineteenth-century efforts to dismantle or manipulate fashion’s hold on women might give us insight into ways of dealing with fashion’s power in the twenty-first century. Perhaps we could then look forward to a future when men and women may finally agree that how women feel is more important than how they look.

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VITA

Elizabeth Allison Komski