Dress Reform and the Bloomer

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In the mid-nineteenth century, the ideology of separate “spheres” for men and women dictated the nature of their activities and was both symbolized and reinforced by their clothing. If the saying “clothes make the man” is true, it was doubly so for the Victorian woman. A writer of the time noted, “Fashion says that the chief use of woman is to exhibit dry goods fantastically arranged on her person” (Russell 500). The accuracy of this statement was evident in the extensive wardrobes of middle- and upper-class women of the period. Composed of ornamental, cumbersome, impractical garments, the wearer was rendered largely incapable of participating in public life and relegated to the domestic sphere assigned to women.

Several groups within society recognized the absurdity of women’s fashions and shared a commitment to reforming dress in spite of emphasizing different concerns. Orthodox or allopathic physicians were interested in dress reform due to the health effects of the corset and petticoat and their impact on childbearing, a central responsibility within a woman’s sphere. Practitioners of alternative medicine, including hydrotherapy or the water-cure, emphasized good health as a right of all individuals, including women, and believed that without dress reform, women’s health would continue to be compromised along with their achievements. Feminists, too, acknowledged the health effects of the day’s fashions but also called attention to dress as an impediment to women’s full participation in society and their freedom to choose their own course in life. While each of these interested parties contributed to dress reform at various stages, it was the mainstream feminists, under the leadership of Amelia Bloomer and Elizabeth Cady Stanton who brought dress reform to the attention of society with the introduction of the Bloomer costume. Ironically, it was also these same feminists, including Bloomer and Stanton who, in their promotion of women’s rights, were among the first to abandon wearing the new costume.

In Beyond Her Sphere, Barbara Harris identifies four ideas that formed the “cult of true womanhood” in the nineteenth century. These included, “a sharp dichotomy between the home and the economic world outside that paralleled a sharp contrast between female and male natures, the designation of the home as the female’s only proper sphere, the moral superiority of woman, and the idealization of her function as mother” (33). Together, these interconnected ideas outline the dominant nineteenth-century view of women and provide the foundation upon which their assigned role was built.

As the United States moved from a rural, agrarian society to a nation of industrial, urban centers, Americans felt the anxiety of such a significant change and the weakening of traditional class distinctions (Berg 61). The nature of work altered as the location of employment shifted from the home to places of industry, and wealth, as a source of security in a changing world, was sought to provide identity and to obtain an elevated position in a new hierarchy. Increasingly, the home, identified as women’s sphere, was segregated from what was seen as the capitalistic, base world of the workplace, recognized as the domain of men. Having lost the tranquility of the rural countryside, men sought comfort in their homes, viewing them as havens in which the financial rewards of labor were enjoyed and displayed. Women oversaw as well as participated in this display of affluence. Just as the homes of the wealthy were decorated with “satin and velvet draperies, rich Axminster carpets, marble and inlaid tables, and large looking-glasses, the style in general being Parisian,” so were women adorned in the latest, most extravagant fashions from Paris (Berg 61-62). Both a man’s home and wife served to proclaim his financial success and to elevate his position in society. This relationship between men and women, in which men participated in the public realm for economic gains while women remained in the home, became entrenched within society, reinforced by men’s characterization of women.
The popular view of women held that they were delicate, submissive, of inferior intellect, and prone to nervousness and hysteria. In short, women were believed to require protection and a provider as they were inherently incapable of competing in a man’s world. They were, therefore, most naturally suited to the mentally and physically less taxing duties of the home. This image of women was repeatedly portrayed in magazines and novels including *The True Woman* in which the author wrote that man “may appear upon the stage of public and professional life. . . . But woman, timid, shrinking, retiring was formed for kindlier labor, where delicate sentiment . . . can soften the asperities of life” (Berg 70). Additionally, women were viewed as religious by nature and therefore responsible for the morality of both their families and society. As the keepers of religion and morality, women were charged to maintain their virtue, although it was understood that men, having a more sensual nature than women, would inevitably try to assault it (Welter 155). Women were to uphold moral standards, absolving men of any failings while using their influence to guide them in living a purer life. Likewise, children were believed to inherit traits from their mother, leaving women responsible for their children’s morality and the advancement of a noble society. This notion of women’s moral superiority further reinforced the idea that women were not suited to engage in what was deemed to be the amoral world of business, but instead were to be preserved from its effronteries. In *About Woman, Love and Marriage*, Frederick Saunders told women:

To you is committed the nobler task of moulding the infant mind, giving character to succeeding ages,—to control the stormy passions of man, inspiring him with those sentiments which elevate his nature,—to open to him the truest and purest sources of happiness and prompt him to the love of virtue and religion. A wife, a mother! How sacred and venerable are these names! (226-27)

It was difficult for women to challenge this ideology. To do so was to defy God and nature and to reject what was presented as a sphere of equal importance to that of men’s. In the end, by assigning women characteristics and roles that precluded their participation in men’s activities, society ensured that women would not pose any challenge to men’s position or authority. Further ensuring this were women’s fashions.

The clothing of mid-nineteenth-century America functioned as an “identity kit,” reinforcing society’s distinctions between men and women by symbolizing their natures, roles, and responsibilities (Roberts 555). Thus, men, being serious, active, strong and aggressive, wore clothing that was dark, allowed movement, emphasized broad chests and shoulders and presented sharp, definite lines. Conversely, women, regarded as frivolous, inactive, delicate and submissive, dressed in decorative, light pastel colored clothing which inhibited movement, accentuated tiny waists and sloping shoulders and presented an indefinite silhouette (555). Women who challenged these dress codes were considered to be unnatural, and a perversion of the “true” woman. Yet, simultaneously, women were belittled for succumbing to the dictates of fashion. Their slavish devotion to clothing that compromised their health, mobility, and comfort left men to conclude that this was evidence of women’s inferiority. Addressing the constricting nature of women’s clothing, one observer noted, “She struts or wriggles and minces along in the most ridiculous fashion” (Haller 164). In fact, women’s willingness to wear the prescribed clothing was evidence of their upbringing which trained them to submit to the wishes of men in order to secure their future well-being through marriage. Men desired their wives to be fashionable and women acquiesced. One male correspondent wrote of his appreciation for corsets in a popular women’s magazine. “As a gentleman I admire exceedingly, not only a small, but a well-laced-in waist in a lady, and I believe nine out of ten of us do the same” (Roberts 565). Women responded to such admiration by willingly wearing the garments that both psychologically and physically rendered them subordinate to men.

Corsets, stays, petticoats, bustles, high heels, and crinolines dominated the wardrobes of fashionable women. Such clothing announced to the world that the wearer was a woman of leisure, requiring servants to assist her. Chief among these was the corset. Frequently compared to the binding of Chinese women’s feet, “tight-lacing” was used to achieve a waist size of as little as seventeen or eighteen inches (Roberts 558). At an early age, young girls, even infants, were introduced to corsets (Haller 152). Mothers would have been considered negligent had they not provided such garments, as they were responsible for preparing their daughters to enter fashionable society. It was believed to be better to begin shaping the figure early than to allow the waist to become “clumsy” and more difficult to control later. Moreover, the corset came to be associated with morality and was therefore an indication of a woman’s character. According to one fashion magazine, “The corset is an ever-present monitor indirectly bidding its wearer to exercise self-restraint: it is evidence of a well-disciplined mind and well-regulated feelings.”
Numerous companies produced a wide variety of corsets, each proclaiming their product’s merits. Madame Caplin, a prolific designer, created approximately twenty-three corsets to meet women’s needs throughout their lives. Among these were the Juvenile Hygienic Corset “for young ladies growing too rapidly,” the Self-Regulating Gestation Corset “calculated to answer all the phases of pregnancy,” and the Corporiform for “corpulent ladies” (Haller 152). The corset significantly restricted a woman’s movement, reinforcing her ornamental presence in the home. Likewise, the petticoat, worn five or six at a time, impeded a woman by adding to her frame an additional weight of as much as fifteen pounds (Coale 105). In public, women’s clothing was a nuisance if not a hazard. Wide skirts supported by crinolines produced a circumference sometimes exceeding five yards, making it difficult to navigate stairs and public transportation. Inclement weather resulted in soaked skirts, stockings, and shoes while women routinely “cleaned” the floors of public buildings as well as streets with the hems of their dresses. Chided for the frivolous and impractical nature of their clothing, women were dressed for the role they had been assigned, and they continued to endure the resulting diminishment of their lives and health.

The state of women’s health in the mid-nineteenth century was widely recognized as deplorable. Reformer Catherine Beecher claimed that she could not recall among her “immense circle of friends and acquaintances all over the Union, so many as ten married ladies born in this century and country, who are perfectly sound, healthy, and vigorous” (Berg 114). This state of affairs was largely attributed to the corset and petticoat. The constriction produced by the corset prevented the development and proper functioning of a woman’s organs and was blamed for a myriad of illnesses, including consumption. Both the tight-fitting of the corset and the constant pull of heavy petticoats on a woman’s lower back and stomach were held responsible for the many cases of prolapsed uterii or the falling of the womb. This painful condition was of great concern because of its impact on women’s ability to produce healthy babies. As a result, many physicians were critical of women’s fashions, urging them to modify their dress. Yet, for the majority of society, illness was understood to be part of a fashionable woman’s life. It both proclaimed her frail and delicate nature while it maintained her dependent status.

The combination of the sphere assigned to women, the clothing designed for this sphere and the resulting physical incapacitation and illness, defined the existence of most middle- and upper-class women in mid-nineteenth-century America. It was an elaborate and complex system of beliefs and values adhered to by both men and women in order to maintain the constructs of Victorian society. However, as numerous overlapping reform movements gained momentum, including abolitionism, women began to explore the restraints of their sphere and to ask why they could not use their talents and abilities to participate in a broader spectrum of life. Among those asking such questions were feminists, and at least one answer to the question of what prevented women’s participation was their dress.

In the February 1851 issue of The Lily, a publication “devoted to the interests of women,” editor Amelia Bloomer entered the debate surrounding women’s dress with an article entitled “Female Attire” (13). In her writing, she noted the control men exerted over women’s dress and the tendency for women to acqiesce to the tastes of men. Concurrently, Bloomer was visited by Elizabeth Smith Miller who wore a short skirt and full Turkish trousers which she had adopted out of frustration with the “shackle” of fashionable dress. Two months later, Bloomer announced to her readers that she had donned a short skirt and trousers. The New York Tribune noticed her article and subsequently made her announcement known to its thousands of readers (Bloomer, “Survey” 326). In no time, Amelia Bloomer was notoriously identified with the new costume dubbed by the media the “Bloomer costume,” and the dress reform movement was launched. Through the Bloomer, Victorian society was forced to engage in consideration of women’s rights, including their right to choose their own style of dress, even one that facilitated their movement into the public realm. These were radical notions for the time, threatening the established roles of men and women.

The nature of the threat was summed up in the nineteenth century belief that, “Men will lose their manliness when women lose their womanliness” (Saunders 246-47). Since articles of clothing had been designated as masculine or feminine, to disregard these distinctions was to disregard the relationship between the sexes as it was ordained by God. Dress reformers challenged this belief arguing for a new dress that expressed the “sameness of humanity” (Leach 246). Elizabeth Cady Stanton believed men and women had a “common nature” which should guide the wearing of a common dress. In 1856, she wrote to fellow reformer Gerrit Smith: “Believing as you do in the identity of the sexes, that all the difference we see in tastes, in character, is entirely the result of education—that ‘man is woman and woman
is man”—why keep up these distinctions of dress. Surely, whatever dress is convenient for one sex must be for the other also” (Leach 246-47). For Stanton and other women who adopted the Bloomer, the new costume served to lessen the distinctions of dress. While Amelia Bloomer emphasized individual taste and style in the design of the costume, in general the outfit consisted of a “skirt reaching down to a little below the knee, and not made quite so full as is the present fashion. Underneath this skirt, trousers made moderately full” (Gatley 58). A variety of materials and decorative trim were used to make the Bloomer, depending upon the season, occasion, and wearer’s means. The result was a garment that emphasized both beauty and comfort.

For women who wore the costume, the response was unbridled enthusiasm. Women noted the ease of movement the Bloomer afforded them, their ability to go out in inclement weather and to stay warm in the winter, as well as their newly found independence. As one wearer expressed, “I only wished to tell you how free I feel, how light and comfortable—I am like the uncaged bird, I feel as though I could almost fly” (Selby 131). For others, particularly men, the sight of women in pants provoked intense anger and hostility. Wearsers of the Bloomer were subjected to taunts and jeers in public and were repeatedly ridiculed in songs, cartoons, and editorials. They were accused of immodesty, “aping men,” and of usurping what was rightfully man’s. As the editor of the New York Times wrote:

We regret to see how obstinately our American women are bent on appropriating more than their fair share of Constitutional privileges. Not that the efforts ever amount to anything more than the re-affirmation of certain arrant heresies . . . the propriety of endowing their delicate forms with the apparel, apertunances, and insignia of “manhood.” But there is an obvious tendency to encroach upon masculine manners manifested ever in trifles, which cannot be too severely reprobated or too speedily repressed. (Lauer 582)

The Bloomer then came to symbolize the movement for women’s rights, and the feminists were the most visible wearers of the new dress.

The furoor surrounding the Bloomer initially assisted the feminists’ efforts. Both the media and the public turned out in large numbers to attend conferences and to hear prominent movement leaders including Amelia Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, and Susan B. Anthony speak on the advancement of women’s status. Ultimately, the incessant attention and ridicule attached to the Bloomer caused feminists to return to wearing long dresses. Amelia Bloomer wrote, “We all felt that the dress was drawing attention from what we thought to be 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” (Gatley 113). While some prominent women continued to wear the Bloomer until their death, the dress was never fully accepted within middle- and upper-class society. In spite of women’s knowledge of the health effects and their personal experience with its inconvenience, the majority of women continued to wear the prescribed fashions. However, among the working class, the Bloomer helped to promote change, enabling those performing manual labor to wear garments that facilitated safety and movement.

Although feminists sidelined dress reform, the movement continued throughout the nineteenth century, advocated largely by practitioners of hydropathy and various reform organizations including the National Dress Reform Association and American Free Dress League. In the February 1852 issue of The Water-Cure Journal, a writer examined the impact of dress reform on women’s advancement. “Whether any radical reform will follow immediately upon the agitation of this subject is doubtful; but emancipation must come—it may be slowly—but it must and will come” (43).

In fact, the appearance of the Bloomer and dress reform movement did not result in radical reform. However, they undoubtedly paved the way for significant change. In 1891, at the meeting of the National Council of Women of the United States, a committee was established to consider women’s dress and the need for clothing suitable for business and public activities (Sewall 488-89). While the subject under discussion was reminiscent of that surrounding the Bloomer, the discourse had reached a higher level. Recognizing the advancements made in women’s opportunities for education and work over the prior thirty years, it was now understood that a style of dress was needed to accommodate their new lifestyle. “We are ready for a short dress for business women and others, whose out-of-door duties require all the freedom possible. Public sentiment is very generally ready to concede this” (Miller 496).

No longer new or shocking, dress reform and its message of women’s equality had clearly moved beyond society’s earlier view of them as radical concepts. After decades of pushing against the confines of their limited sphere, women were beginning to see society’s enormous resistance yield to their call for
equal rights. The struggle for women’s emancipation would continue into the twentieth century, but the early feminists’ advocacy of the Bloomer and dress reform courageously set the stage for its achievement.

Works Cited


—. “Female Attire.” The Lily Feb. 1851.


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