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“Bad taste, bad hygiene, and bad morals:” dress reform movements and women’s fight for greater independence during the late 1800s.

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"Bad Taste, Bad Hygiene, and Bad Morals:" Dress Reform Movements and Women's Fight for Greater Independence During the Late 1800s.

The Victorian Age is debated as a time of brilliant growth, beauty, and prosperity for people living in England, which roughly follows the reign of Queen Victoria in the late 1800s. Literary scholar Terry Thompson describes the Victorian Era as "a time that, although far from perfect, offered a much simpler and quieter world, a time of elegant slowness, cultural continuity, and a certain august dignity."[1] While this era is described as a glory age for England, it was also an age of great inequality. During this time, women began their own movements in hopes to gain more freedom. Its influence even stretched all the way to America in a similar era of prosperity called the Gilded Age. There were significant advancements in learning and new societal freedom, like the widespread availability of education and abundance of jobs. However, freedom was not experienced equally by everyone in the public. Women, especially, watched these new freedoms being enjoyed by others simply because they were not listened to in public.

Women at this time were put into a box dictating their behavior and status in both the public and the private sphere. In *Suffer and Be Still,* historian Martha Vicinus describes the "perfect lady" of the Victorian Era as synonymous with the ideal of being a perfect wife.[2] From a young age, girls were brought up with this notion: to be presentable to the public, one had to be a good wife and put their family first. Despite knowing from a young age that they were expected to marry, girls only had limited knowledge of what marriage entailed. It was thought that the knowledge girls needed was either innate or taught by their mother. This supposed instinctive

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[1] Terry W Thompson, "'The Door in the Wall': H. G. Wells's Paean to the Victorian Age," *ANQ* 31, no. 4 (2018): 248.
[2] Martha Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still; Women in the Victorian Age* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), ix.

knowledge was strong family affection and the desire for motherhood.[3] The lack of preparation directly led to the bubble and limitations placed on women, which were to be a homemaker and a wife. Wives were expected to bear children, purchase food and clothes, and provide income, whether directly in lower income households or indirectly through taking care of the children.[4] A woman's life was not her own, but one that was meant to serve her family first.

Vicinus says that a lady in her perfect Victorian form was a mix of "total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth."[5] This depiction of the perfect lady and wife was drawn from lower class women who constituted most of the population. However, it was the upper middle class who began to pave the way for women to step out of the domestic hold that was put on them to become more engaged members of society. This began the new ideal of the "perfect woman" or "new woman."[6] The new woman was described as still pure but able to work, get education if desired, and fight for more political rights.[7] The "new woman" was portrayed differently in the varying classes as class distinctions limited the freedom that was available. Because of this class structure, the ideal Victorian women was mainly the middle and upper class as they had the ability to move towards these ideals. Upper class women also saw this freedom first, as it was more accessible to them than to lower class women, who had no choice but to stay at home. The perfect women became the model and eventual dream for lower class women to strive to. They had to work harder and wait longer to break out of their domesticity. From the outside perspective, this age is praised for the progress that it gave society going into the new century.

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[3] Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still,* ix.
[4] Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still,* ix.
[5] Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still,* ix.
[6] Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still,* ix.
[7] Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still,* ix.

Not everyone was included in this progress, however, especially in a time when immense separation in society occurred. While different classes gained differing freedoms, there was also significant social division of race, ethnicity, and gender. It did not become a more equal distribution of freedom until decades later as women of color were being drowned out by the voices of prominent upper class white women. These women had to work against other women, the values at the time, and their race to gain any improvements in the public sphere. Because of this, white women gained the most benefits and relative power during this period. Even with this change and an influx of women finding their voices, the Victorian values of the period were still held strong by both men and women, furthering the patriarchal system in place. With this system in place, no women, of any race or class, could fully progress and gain freedom.

Eliza Lynn Linton was one of the main women opposing the change happening for women. Linton had been degrading women and the changes they were fighting for since the 1860s. She made her living as the supposed "first woman newspaper writer in England to draw a regular salary."[8] Having such a well-paid job at this time was rare for women, which made Linton even more influential in society. Linton worked as a journalist for both the *Saturday Review* and the *Morning Chronicle.*[9] However, with this influence, she did not empower women but rather berated and attacked them through her writings in newspapers, novels, and magazines. During this time, the *Saturday Review* was known for being "violently anti-feminist," and it employed people like Linton to write pieces that showed these views against women.[10] Linton continued her condemnations of women for years, as she was given the power to do so by men who thought the same way as her.

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[8] Nana Rinehart, "'The Girl of the Period' Controversy," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 13, no. 1/2 (1980): 3.
[9] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 3.
[10] Vicinus, *Suffer and Be Still,* xii.

In one article titled "Women's Rights and Wrongs," Linton condemned women's "loss of modesty, unselfishness, patience, obedience, [and] endurance," all of which she found to be key components of the ideal women.[11] One titled "The Girl of the Period," written in the *Saturday Review* in 1868, quickly became a talking point. The *Saturday Review* picked Linton out specifically to write this article on the conduct of the "modern women" as Linton herself had "earned a reputation for vigorous anti-feminism."[12] Linton published this work under an anonymous title (see figure 1). This article was one of the most well-known and controversial works at the time, as it undermined all the positive, uplifting movements that other women were trying to create. Linton started by describing her ideal woman, who was "a tender mother, an industrious housekeeper… her husband's friend… but never his rival."[13] All of these traits diminished a woman's independence as women were given no autonomy or choice in their lives. They were valued as good wives and mothers, and anything else was seen as unfeminine. Linton went on to explain all the new things that women were doing, going against these long held Victorian beliefs, creating "the Girl of the Period:"

> The girl of the period is a creature who dyes her hair and paints her face, as the first articles of her personal religion; whose sole idea of life is plenty of fun and luxury; and whose dress is the object of such thought and intellect as she possesses… Nothing is too extraordinary and nothing too exaggerated for her vitiated taste… With purity of taste she has lost also that far more precious purity and delicacy of perception, which sometimes mean more than appears on the surface.[14]

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[11] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 3.
[12] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 3.
[13] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 3.
[14] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 4.

Linton believed that these factors were destroying women and the traditional way of life she was trying to preserve. Her main complaint stemmed from the belief that women were becoming too independent, and the "new woman" was rash, immature, and reckless. She also believed that the independence and emancipation women were working towards was ruining every part of what it meant to be a woman. One of her main concerns was that the sanctity of marriage would be ruined. Going through a divorce herself, Linton became jaded about marriage and put the blame on women if their marriage failed. She wrote that "the girl of the period 'does not marry easily. Men are afraid of her; and with reason.'"[15] She credited these new marriage problems to "vulgarity in dress and conduct."[16]

Linton's "Girl of the Period" article became so popular, especially with the upper class, that it was referenced in many more articles to back up these antifeminist views. The phrase G.O.P was even used as an abbreviation for "Girl of the Period."[17] However, businesses began to commercialize this phrase, which became a way for women to take back some of the power that was taken from them. One t-shirt company, in 1868, began putting G.O.P on different clothing and accessories, which were marketed to those "Girls of the Period" that Linton was criticizing.[18] This response was one of the many reactions to her article. Many thought, based on the content of this article, that it was written by a man. One clergyman boldly claimed the article was of his doing. Another high-ranking lady in London claimed she was the author.[19] It was at this point that Linton published her article under her own name in a pamphlet, as the popularity of her work was something she wanted to capitalize on. The reaction to finding out it was a woman writing about this trend was mixed. Some praised her for sticking up for women and doing what

[15] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 4.
[16] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 4.
[17] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 4.
[18] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 4.
[19] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 4.

was right while others hoped she would not be able to write anymore and that her writings would be destroyed. Even with all the criticisms, Linton stuck by what she had written about women, saying, "I neither soften nor retract a line of what I have said."[20] She continued her strong stance against women until her eventual death.

While Linton had a loud voice against women's freedom, other women began to speak up and drown out her voice. One of the main things women sought to change was freedom in their wardrobe. The clothes of the Victorian Era and the Gilded Age were designed to be extremely modest, have absurd proportions, and hide their body, as it was ingrained at the time to be fearful of their body.[21] It was nearly impossible to progress in society under the rigid restrictions women's clothes put on them. Women's bodies were supposed to be hidden and modest, representing the future that lay ahead. As an integral part of their identity, women's wardrobes became a source of increased scrutiny. Fashion was the first notable factor that changed the way women participated in overall outside life. Their rigid clothes during the Victorian era represented their limited choice, strict positions, and lack of influence in society. The main part of the dress was the ever-popular corset.

Corseting was not a new phenomenon for women around the world. Created centuries before, corsets began to emerge as one of the high fashion items to complete a woman's dress. Corsets reached their peak in the 1500s and continued to evolve over time. The word "corset" comes from an old French word meaning "little bodies."[22] It spread from prominent countries in Western Europe, like England and France, to other western countries, influencing the fashion for everyone. Soon, the corset was an everyday fashion item that women were expected to wear. A

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[20] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 5.
[21] Margaret Drabble, *For Queen and Country: Britain in the Victorian Age,* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 23.
[22] Rebecca Gibson, *The Corseted Skeleton: A Bioarcheology of Binding*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 62.

corset was made up of a few integral parts like boning, busk, stays, and laces.[23] There were two fundamental parts that separated a corset from any other garment. A corset would either have a busk, which is a single, skinny piece of fabric that covers up the opening of the corset, or stays that are made up of multiple pieces of fabric.[24] Corsets were also made in a variety of fabrics to accommodate the various situations that women were expected to dress for. The popular fabric options were wool, leather, silk, linen, and cotton. Wool and leather were only used for outer attire as they became too stiff to create the desired figure. Silk and cotton were used close to 50% of the time as they were able to stick and hug around the body.[25] Along with the fabric, corsets also featured steel or whalebones to frame the body (see figure 2). Many women spoke up against the use of these materials, but with little change or evolution. Not until the turn of the twentieth century did women and doctors begin to think about changing the design of a corset. Whichever option a dressmaker chose, the corset was then secured with ribbons to affix it to the body. While there were many different variations, the basic premise of the corset stayed the same. Corsets were there to tighten a woman's core to achieve the look of a skinny waist and sleek lines. Most women wore corsets, as it was the polite and civilized way to dress out in public.[26] Corseting continued to dominate the fashion industry; dominance in the industry is what sparked the fight for more freedom in their wardrobes.

In the following pages, I will cover two dress reform movements that relate to the change in women's fashion and why fashion was an important catalyst to gaining women's independence. These two movements are the Aesthetic Movement, which emerged in the latter years of the Victorian Era, and the Rational Dress Movement, which picked up the Aesthetic

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[23] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 62.
[24] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 62.
[25] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 78.
[26] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 102.

Movement's mission in achieving change in women's wardrobes. Both movements follow the struggles that women had to face to achieve just a fraction of the amount of freedom that others had through their fashion. While other movements like the suffrage and temperance movement coincided with these fashion movements, the change in clothes was an undervalued factor that helped women gain further independence. I will also focus on specific dress options that changed and shifts in the public sphere that allowed for new options to come about. These movements would not have been possible without the strong women who led with their voices and actions. Celia Whitehead, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, and the countless other women who paved the way in the face of adversity furthered these dress reform movements. Without the push for more liberating fashion, the women's independence movements would not have happened as swiftly. The change in women's clothes and fashion movements was a major catalyst in the fight for bodily autonomy and the breakdown of the public and private spheres.

Context

While separated by an ocean, Britain and America shared similar fashion movements, which ultimately strengthened the connection between the two countries in the realm of fashion. Just like the Rational Dress Society and *Women's Hearld of Industry* in America, Britain had similar success with the keep fit movement and the Women's League of Health and Beauty. These movements were dedicated towards the empowerment of women's bodies and their overall health.[27] Up until the end of the 1880s, women were still defined by their clothes and patriarchal values that dictated the separate spheres. As described, the Victorian Era created what many saw fit as an ideal, traditional woman. This traditional woman was seen as a homemaker, an accessory to a man, and someone who was not an independent person in society. All these

[27] Penny Tinkler and Cheryl Lynn Krasnick Warsh, "Feminine Modernity in Interwar Britain and North America: Corsets, Cars, and Cigarettes," *Journal of women's history* 20, no. 3 (2008): 129.

things a woman was supposed to do were based on Victorian morals and principles. Some of the main dress styles during this era were the bustle, hourglass, s-bend, and the empire silhouette.[28] A tight-fitting corset with a long, heavy skirt, adorned with embellishments, dominated a woman's wardrobe. An ideal figure for a woman was to be extremely slim but with wider hips. To highlight this, dresses were made accordingly. Many were made of a top and bottom piece. Even with the changes to dress and more uncorseted options, corsets and heavy skirts were still a big part of women's clothes as the expected dress.

During the 1800s and into the 1900s, women wore corsets to achieve a fashionable figure. There was an understood rule that women needed to cover their bodies in layers of fabric and tight corseting to shop or dine out. The corset was a huge part of the Victorian ideal, highlighting the importance of purity and fashionability for a woman. The rigidness of a corset represented the rigid rules women were expected to follow. Women were seen as a connection to their husband with little sense of individuality apart from them. In line with broader Victorian values, a corset stifled their movement and independence. The corset connected to the bottom piece of the dress, or the bustle. These pieces were integral to tie the look all together, especially the corset. A woman was seen as undressed without a corset and proper accessories. Women wore corsets in all aspects of their lives, including sleeping, playing sports if lucky, and even during pregnancy.[29] It was the main feature that was never missing from their wardrobe, which made it increasingly difficult to change and adapt. At this point, women were widely perceived as nothing apart from their clothes, as clothing made one's identity. This further stifled women's freedom as she could only be seen as someone wearing a dress that a man deemed appropriate.

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[28] Julia Christie-Robin, Belinda T. Orzada, and Dilia López-Gydosh "From Bustles to Bloomers: Exploring the Bicycle's Influence on American Women's Fashion, 1880-1914," *The Journal of American Culture* 35, no 4 (2012): 321.

[29] James F. Lee,"This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," *International Journal of the History of Sport,* no 24 (2007): 1421.

Shu-Chuan Yan confirms these views in an article written about the ideals of Victorian fashion. She quotes an excerpt from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* saying that the purpose of women's dress was to "attract and please."[30] Even though it is unstated, it can be argued that the purpose was not only to "attract and please," but to "attract and please" men specifically.

As women controlled the home, the public sphere was geared and dominated towards men. Fashion was a central way in which the separate spheres were so intertwined in society, as "women wore skirts…men wore trousers…[symbolizing] the mutually exclusive functions men and women were expected to perform."[31] These strict cultural values were the main obstacle for women to compete against for change in their dress. Women had tried to introduce pants into their wardrobes prior to the late 1800's, but nothing came of it. Attempts to change their dresses to pants came with nothing but outrage by the public.[32] Women became an accessory to men being out in public and their clothes were a direct factor in continuing this. Yan uses the cartoon images of Victorian ladies in *Punch,* a British humor magazine, to show this idea of a women as an accessory to a man. She says that "the visual representations of crinoline-clad women in many of the *Punch* cartoons tend to privilege the male gaze and position females as objects of spectacle so as to be modified, decorated, and dissected."[33] With such a focus on the need to be attractive, it took a while for new clothing trends to emerge. It was not only the need to change fashion for comfort, but an entire system of oppression that they needed to overcome. Needing to be always seen as feminine and fashionable, women became "slaves to fashion…within the Victorian" culture.[34] Change slowly began to happen for women's dress through movements and individual

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[30] Shu-Chuan Yan, "(Ad)dressing Women: Fashion and Body Image in Punch, 1850s–1860s," *Women's studies* 43, no. 6 (2014): 754.
[31] Yan, "(Ad)dressing Women," 767.
[32] Lee, "This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," 1421.
[33] Yan, "(Ad)dressing Women," 763.
[34] Yan, "(Ad)dressing Women," 760.

efforts. The disappearance of the Victorian ideals of domesticity slowly faded away with the spread of the Aesthetic movement, and new options began to emerge during this movement.

Corsets and Changes

With the rise of aesthetic dress from the Aesthetic movement, there was still a large population of women that still relied on corsets as part of their wardrobe. Not knowing anything different, women continued to wear these corsets and tight dresses as that was what was offered to them. Corseting was altering women's bodies in unnatural ways, yet the corset remained the staple of their wardrobe. Even with many variations to improve comfort, corsets were still damaging to a woman's body. The main goal of a corset at this time was to contract their body to create a perfect s-curve silhouette, accentuating women's waists. Rebecca Gibson, author of *The Corseted Skelton,* wrote that through all the variations of the corset, the desire remained to create "a smaller, rounder, less natural waist."[35] Corsets became one of the main factors that limited women's place in society as they became increasingly important to women's style and presentation in public (see figure 3). It was not their thoughts or ideas that were talked about, but rather what shape their body was contorted to look like.

The S-curve was one of the most popular corseting trends until a new corset took its place eventually in 1905. This corset made it impossible for mobility as it completely manipulated the body of who was wearing it.[36] The S-curve corset was heavily featured in connection with the Gibson Girl created by Charles Dana Gibson. He manufactured the Gibson Girl in response to these recent changes in corseting and his own observations of fashion. The Gibson Girl gained

[35] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 63.
[36] Jill Fields, "'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900–1930," in *Beauty and Business*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2001), 112.

popularity in the 1890s and continued to gain attention until World War I.[37] Gibson used his wife Irene and other women as models,[38] creating "an archetype of American upper-middle class womanhood, a fashionable ideal."[39] She was mainly shown "wearing shirtwaists and tailor-mades [and] she participated enthusiastically and skillfully in sport."[40] The images of the Gibson Girl showed women that it was possible to participate in sports and step out of the home (see figure 4). While the message behind these images was geared towards promoting women's mobility in the public sphere, the Gibson Girl archetype was a male created "female fantasy that became the standard of beauty for an entire generation and beyond."[41] Because this standard of beauty was male centric, the corset was a main feature of the Gibson Girl. This vision went against everything the Gibson Girl supposedly stood for, as it still left women with limited mobility. While the Gibson Girl promoted athleticism and mobility, the corset did not line up with these ideals. It manipulated the body so much as the s-curve silhouette was unnatural and painful to achieve.[42]

Following the S-curve came the straight front corsets. These new corsets relieved some of the pressure women were under, which was supposed to increase their freedom and mobility. Straight front corsets were designed to start near the hips and go all the way down over the thighs. This was supposed to create a slimmer figure for longer skirts to be worn. The goal with these new corsets was for women to not be in as much pain, but other problems began to arise.

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[37] Joshua Simon and Michael Mamp, "'Nostalgic Elegance': The Enduring Style of the Gibson Girl," *Dress* 47, no. 1 (May 2021): 30.
[38] James Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History,* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 219.
[39] Phyllis G Tortora and Keith Eubank, *Survey of Historic Costume,* (New York: Fairchild Books, 2010), 399.
[40] Harper Franklin, "1890-1899," (2019), https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1890-1899/.
[41] Simon and Mamp, "'Nostalgic Elegance," 76.
[42] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 112.

Instead of restricting movement up top, the legs began to be restricted. It became physically impossible for a woman to bend her knees. The straight-line corset soon became an extension of what was known as the hobble skirt (see figure 5).[43] The hobble skirt was created by prominent fashion designer Paul Poiret in hopes that the corset would soon lose its appeal. However, Poiret's stance had the opposite effect. A tight hemline prevented women from walking properly and limited their mobility just like a corset did. Poiret commented on this fact in his autobiography saying, "yes, I freed the bust, but I shackled the legs."[44] Even with some women wearing this new skirt, a typical corset covering the bust was still a requirement to achieve the ever-popular slim look. Corsets were still a necessary part of their wardrobe, even as new styles were introduced. Women became even more bogged down with these new styles dictated by society, specifically the men of society.

Women also continued to wear corsets as many believed that corseting created a physical dependency that could not be stopped. Gibson quotes this belief, saying "once the body was used to it, going without could be incredibly uncomfortable…even dangerous."[45] It was common to begin to wear corsets at such a young age that it became a part of daily life to wear one. A so-called expert on corsets, sexologist Havelock Ellis, said that women "required corseting because the evolution from 'horizontally to vertically' was more difficult."[46] These beliefs about corseting were so deeply embedded into the daily life of women at the time that it felt impossible to eliminate. Changes to the corset continued to be made, but the garment would not be completely discarded.

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[43] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 113.
[44] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 113.
[45] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 63.
[46] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 112.

Another challenge in the hopes to end corseting was that waist cinching dresses have been worn for over 40,000 years. Because of the longevity of corsets, it was argued that they were "morphologically essential" and "an evolutionary requirement."[47] With these thoughts and Victorian ideals woven throughout popular culture, women had no choice but to succumb to these body-altering garments. The media was no help either in getting rid of the corset. *Corsets & Lingerie,* published in 1921, featured an article by a manager of a corset company. He said that women wore corsets out of fear of their health, sagging bodies, or a shapeless figure.[48] These thoughts did not reflect what most of the women at the time felt about corsets. Not only were they not accurate, but they also furthered the false belief that women needed to be corseted to be considered beautiful and presentable. Corsets were seen as the epitome of femininity. Women were expected to exude femininity and could not do this without the help of the corset. This was just another way that women were forced into altering their bodies. Also, in terms of femininity, a Victorian woman was sexualized by her corset wearing. Women were seen as being submissive and fragile in public, and the corset allowed them to embody these traits.[49] Women became locked into this cycle of attributing their traits of womanhood to the corset and dress they wore. Since women did not want to be thought of as less desirable or less of a woman, they continued to succumb to being crushed, mentally and physically, by a corset.

Corsets were sold everywhere and became one of the cheaper clothing items. Some women had to wear corsets because they could not afford anything else. This trend is why the movement for uncorseted dress took place among the middle and upper class, as they had the financial freedom to have a choice in what they wore. London had a thriving market for corsets

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[47] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 112-113.
[48] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 109.
[49] Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*, (Oxford; Berg: 2001), 122.

during the latter half of the 1800s. The American market sold cheaper corsets while the London market focused more on high end corsets.[50] This allowed many American women to have more independence and to have their own money to support themselves. Not only did some women have the financial freedom, but some also had the ability to create new styles of corsets. As many women at the time created patterns and sewed dresses at home, this homemaking also transferred to new corsets. Women eventually had rights to some of the patents to corsets, which gave them the power to change the corsets as they saw fit.[51] They began to use their domestic knowledge to separate themselves from domesticity. This allowed women to enter the public more freely and break down the long-held barriers of the separate spheres.

With the ability to easily make the appropriate garments to enter the public domain, more and more lower-class women created and sold corsets. They began to sell these at the London market, presenting corsets that could be sold for as much as 250 pounds in today's value.[52] While many women were against the practice of wearing corsets, some still profited off the corsets by selling them to women with no choice but to wear them. These women began to realize that if corsets were going to control their bodies, they may as well profit from them.[53] They began to use the garment that hindered them to better their lives for themselves. This continued until the Aesthetic and sportswear movement garnered more attention. Corsets and the overall look of women's fashion changed as a direct result of women taking charge of their freedom in society.

During the late 1800s, more and more women were given a voice to change their fashion trends. Gibson describes these women's thoughts on corsets as more changes were taking place:

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[50] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton*, 69.
[51] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 67.
[52] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton*, 68.
[53] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 67.

> The ability to lace tighter or looser, the use and reuse of the garments, and the decision to change their decorativeness, all indicate that women both accepted and rejected the bodyscape of the time they were in, acknowledging that fashion was more than just what was available at the moment—that they could exercise their own agency in how they used the corset.[54]

With many voicing their desire to outright lose the corset as a clothing option, tradition kept going despite negative opinions. This led to the creation of an improved corset. There was never an all-out ban on corsets or tightening of the waist, but women began to voice their opinion on limiting the tightness of corsets.[55] Even though there was backlash, corsets were so involved in women's daily lifestyle that they would not go away overnight. Women's health began to be a source of concern, but only to a limited degree. To keep up with the heavy dresses, a tight corset was often perceived as a necessary item. A metaphor, "dressed to kill," was used to describe the dress of affluent women; not because they thought these women were dressed fabulously, but because they were literally dressed in garments that were slowly killing them. It was documented that around six new confirmed diseases came about just from the fashion that women were forced to wear.[56] That figure does not consider the other health and mental stresses that women were under at the time. This sparked a debate on changes that needed to be made to support the health of someone wearing a corset. Even with changes, many women were demanding more uncorseted dress options instead of corset improvements.

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[54] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton,* 88.
[55] Gibson, *The Corseted Skelton*, 110.
[56] Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *What to Wear*, (Boston: J.R. Osgood, 1873), 18.

Uncorseted dress became popular through other groups dedicated to dress reform, like the American Woman Suffrage Association.[57] The American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) was founded in 1869 with the sole agenda to fight for women's right to vote.[58] Its leader, women's rights advocate Lucy Stone, was able to leverage the dress reform movements to gain more attention to the fights for political rights. The AWSA eventually merged with the National Woman Suffrage Organization to form the new National American Woman Suffrage Organization, which would go on to be the main group fighting for woman's rights in the 1890s.[59] Dress reform and woman's suffrage were met with similar apprehension from the public. Because of this concern, many suffragettes were the pioneers in wearing new clothes, creating a new identity for women in their thoughts and their fashion. A fashion historian, Ella Howard writes, "most images outside the movement depicted female participants as masculine, aggressive, and unattractive, while the movement offered images of relatively feminine, calm, and poised suffragettes."[60] These conflicting descriptions of how they were perceived was something that could not be changed as clothes then became a way to "[declare] your political position"[61] and reflect women's new political identity.

Fashion became more than just clothes; it became women's way of fighting for their freedom. Change in fashion "[required] a certain type of society in which to take place."[62] This type of society that they were creating was one in which women could speak their mind and

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[57] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 49.
[58] "American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA)," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, Encyclopædia Britannica Inc, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/topic/American-Woman-Suffrage-Association.
[59] "American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA)."
[60] Ella Howard, "Feminist Writings on Twentieth-Century Design History, 1970-1995: Furniture, Interiors, Fashion," *Studies in the decorative arts* 8, no. 1 (2000): 14.
[61] Howard, "Feminist Writings on Twentieth-Century Design History," 14.
[62] Herbert Blumer, "Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Collective Selection," *Sociological quarterly* 10, no. 3 (1969): 278.

dress freely, without limitations on either. Women began to speak up against the harsh corseting practices in the Aesthetic movement, but not without backlash from many different voices. With an increase of movements and women speaking up, women started to go against societal norms. This was seen in the Aesthetic movement, as women took to wearing uncorseted dresses.

Aesthetic Movement

The Aesthetic movement's influence spans across home decor, art, literature, and fashion. It dominated the latter half of the 1800s, gaining popularity in the 1870s and 1880s as a response to the rise of industrialism, urbanization, and mass production. Aesthetics wanted to create art focused on beauty above all else.[63] They also focused on challenging the gendered stereotypes that filled this period. This led directly to the increased interest in women's fashion. The movement allowed for women passionate about change in clothes to start making change in their wardrobes. Not only were women fighting for change in their fashion options, but they were also fighting to be seen as equal contributors in the public sector. Women who were passionate about the Aesthetic movement saw the change in clothes as a way to seize more autonomy in the public and in their own bodies. Historian Mary W Blanchard characterizes the Aesthetic movement as a reaction against the way the female body was being portrayed. She writes that "the template of the ideal Victorian body followed a gendered separation: the male body… complemented the female form, one bounded by tight corseting and domestic confinement."[64] This expectation that women could only wear elaborate gowns was one of the main problems that the Aesthetic movement sought to address. In comparing men and women, Blanchard uses words like "virile"

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[63] "An Introduction to the Aesthetic Movement." *V&A,* Victoria and Albert Museum, Accessed October 5, 2023, https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/an-introduction-to-the-aesthetic-movement#:~:text=The%20Aesthetic%20Movement%20in%20Britain,%27Art%20for%20Art%27s%20sake.

[64] Mary W Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body: Aesthetic Fashion in Gilded Age America," *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 1 (1995): 21.

and "soldierly" to contrast the power that men held with the power women held. Women were only described in reference to their dress and domesticity, furthering the need for the more relaxed and less rigid gendered dress standard Aesthetics were seeking.

In America, the Aesthetic movement was based on the idea of change and rebirth of a new culture. While the Aesthetic movement was influential to everyone, many aspects were geared towards women. Even though fashion reform was still a new concept and not accepted by the majority, the Aesthetic movement provided a crucial step in the right direction. Women were able to come together and make real changes in the public sphere for one of the first times through limited jobs outside the home and the start of the suffrage movement. Some women utilized their wardrobe and bodies in general to begin to confront their life of domesticity.[65] Many women were still apprehensive to speak up about the domesticity they were forced into. However, a female physician illustrated these women's thoughts by saying "one in vain asks why woman… has not courage adequate to throw off the self-imposed shackles" that domesticity puts women in.[66] Fashion was a direct reflection of the hold domesticity had on women because there was little else for them to contribute in the public sphere. While there had been dress reform movements before, the Aesthetic dress reform movement was one that sparked radical change. The reform separated itself from others in that it focused on women's overall health and independence in society.

Reformers like Elizabeth Cady Stanton made dress reform one of their main focuses to improve the lives of women.[67] Just like art and literature during this era, new fashion was created to not only be sensible, but to be fashionable. Beauty and simplicity were two of the main draws

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[65] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 22.
[66] Jeanette C Lauer and Robert H Lauer, "The Battle of the Sexes Fashion in 19th Century America," *Journal of popular culture.*13, no. 4 (1980): 586.
[67] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 23.

of the new Aesthetic fashion. They wanted the beauty of the dress to reflect the identity of a woman's soul and inner beauty.[68] Highlighting inner beauty and the independence of a woman was a new phenomenon that influenced a woman's self-expression in her everyday life. Within the movement, Aesthetics took great influence from other cultures, like the Ancient Greeks and the Renaissance. They wanted to mimic the beauty of periods of great art and power. Their approach was evident in the styles that rugs, chairs, and dresses were based on, all the way down to the fabrics that were chosen. It was the artistic, eclectic taste that permeated throughout.

As Aesthetic dress began to make its way into consumer culture, it became a way to break through the gender stereotypes that had a hold on society. The new dresses did not make their way fully into the markets until the 1900s, but that did not stop women from procuring these dresses. Most women had to make their dresses by hand with patterns that were sent to them.[69] This was influential as it became more mainstream for women to start broadening their wardrobe with items that did not have a corset and a tight skirt. It still went against what most women were wearing, but the option and choice for something different began to appear in most places. Department stores became a space for women to have a personal choice in their style, as well as a place in the public sphere.[70] Just like the other parts of the Aesthetic movement that valued beauty and choice, fashion followed along. The new Aesthetic fashion relied heavily on efforts by women to become more a part of the popular culture, as these styles ran counter to the belief of what a woman should wear and how a woman should act. Under Victorian ideals, women were supposed to conform to their roles as nothing more than the domestic figure.[71]

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[68] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 23.
[69] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 26.
[70] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 25.
[71] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 25.

Because women were trying to break out of the domestic expectations that entrapped them, many of the clothes that were developed branched from intimate, at-home wear.

Types of Aesthetic Dress

One main dress that got revised during this era was the wrapper dress. The wrapper dress was another version of a typical dressing gown usually only worn indoors.[72] Its distinguishing characteristics were that it was just a one-piece, loose gown (see figure 6). This differed from the popular two-piece, corset ensembles that most women wore to outside events. Looser-fitting dresses conveyed different stereotypes before they entered the mainstream world of fashion. Women were either ridiculed for being scandalous in wearing an intimate garment out in public or seen as unfashionable. Many people at this time associated an uncorseted dress with being sick, pregnant, or elderly. All these factors had negative stereotypes. It was part of the Aesthetic fashion movement to change these thoughts towards a dress that provided clear advantages to women's everyday comfort. The wrapper dress went through many variations to provide both comfort and fashionability. They were typically without a corset, but featured puffed sleeves with Renaissance-inspired details like the fabric, long train, and high neckline.[73] Two of the most popular options that emerged from the wrapper dress were the Mother Hubbard and the tea gown. Because of the lack of shape, these two dresses evoked intimacy and a translation of the private domestic sphere in the public realm. It created a sense of allurement and scandal in dress as women began to express themselves in a purportedly sexual way that was not done previously. Some of the aesthetic dress options became shocking to passersby on the streets as women were "[breaking] the boundaries of conventional propriety by recasting the body as a visible (and

[72] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 25.
[73] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 26.

perhaps immoral) aesthetic icon."[74] However, even though some women were seen as breaking boundaries and respected by other women, there were many that still criticized how women dressed.

Mother Hubbard

The Mother Hubbard dress was a direct by-product of the Aesthetic Movement and the wrapper dress. Just like the Aesthetic Movement, the Mother Hubbard dress "is rarely mentioned in discourses on the evolution of nineteenth-century dress."[75] The Mother Hubbard dress was so revolutionary because it was not worn to fancy balls, dances, and events, like most other dresses for women made at the time.[76] While many women still needed these over the top, fancy dresses, other women needed a more appropriate dress to participate in everyday society now. One of the main features of this dress was that it was not fitted at the waist, allowing for more movement.[77] The dress also featured minor differences based on the individual, like the use of an apron, which would not be possible on a normal evening gown. Other changes were in the fabrics of the dress as "silk and velvet…cambric and muslin" were among the new available choices.[78] With these choices, the dresses became individualized to the person and their lifestyle. The Mother Hubbard "[formed] the primary departure from fashionable dress of the period and [these features became] the main source of the garment's functional character."[79] Figure 7 shows an example of a Mother Hubbard dress on display. These images fully show how loose fitting the dress is as it has no corset or a hoop in the skirt to give it structure.[80] It has a collar with pleats down the front

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[74] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 27.
[75] Sally Helvenston Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress," *Winterthur Portfolio* 48, no 1 (2014): 30.
[76] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 30.
[77] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 30-31.
[78] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 31.
[79] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 31.
[80] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 32.

and back, which are the only distinguishing parts.[81] With few distinguishing characteristics, the dress became very practical for almost every woman. The looseness of the dress "could well accommodate pregnancy," eliminating the need for pregnant women to alter their old gowns.[82] Working with a corset, "one farm woman complained in 1858, 'corsets are so warm and uncomfortable. Even if you don't lace them tight, the whalebones will bend, break, and stick in you.'"[83] The Mother Hubbard finally offered a solution for laboring women that was years in the making.

Fashion historian Sally Helvenston Gray describes the importance of the dress for women and society as a whole:

> Though the Mother Hubbard embodies a class of ordinary dress, it is singular in that no other garment in the nineteenth century possessed such a variety of meanings and functions. Ultimately the Mother Hubbard was associated with women at all stages of life—young girls, expectant mothers, grandmothers. It conveyed a confusing message about sexuality, worn by innocent children on one hand and by prostitutes on the other. Compared to formal fashionable dress of the period, it was a serviceable garment for urban housekeeping as well as rural farm labor. Due to its practicality it was taken up by the promoters of dress reform— not only by health reformers, but Aesthetes as well.[84]

Gray explains the many functions that this dress provided for so many different women, which was a stark contrast to previous dresses. She also uses the Mother Hubbard dress to connect both dress reform movements and other reforms, like campaigns for health and suffrage.

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[81] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 32.
[82] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 41.
[83] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 32.
[84] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 30.

The Mother Hubbard was unique because it became a universal dress for women and children. Since it was a "serviceable garment" and not a lavish dress, it was looked down upon by mainstream society as it did not fit pre-determined views on women's clothes.[85] The Mother Hubbard dress was also a popular option that many prostitutes wore as it was one of the only options that allowed for freedom of the body at the time. Especially since it was also tied to "prostitutes," the dress was not a popular item for high class women to be associated with.[86] According to Blanchard, prostitutes in the 1880s "used their bodies and their dress as a public art form not only to defy the moral implications of domesticity but to assume cultural agency in their society at large."[87] Prostitutes' free way of living was a fundamental source of what bodily autonomy could look like. However, the stigma and anxiety surrounding them discouraged freedom in self-expression. While prostitutes are still looked down upon in some cases, their message for women to break away from domesticity and step into society was at the heart of the Aesthetic Fashion Movement and the Mother Hubbard Dress.

Tea Gowns

The main dress that was sold at the Liberty store in London during the 1880s was the tea gown. These gowns were named after Arthur Lasenby Liberty, who opened the first Liberty shop in 1875 and capitalized on the rise of new decorative arts and clothes from the Aesthetic movement.[88] Apart from tea gowns and other dresses, fabrics and furniture were popular items for sale in Liberty's store (see figure 8). Even just in the name "Liberty," we see that these movements stood for change and progression for women in society. Like the Mother Hubbard, tea gowns were described as "soft dresses, often worn with a loosened corset or without a corset

[85] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 30.
[86] Gray, "Searching for Mother Hubbard," 30.
[87] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 22.
[88] Sarah Nichols, "Arthur Lasenby Liberty: A Mere Adjective?" *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts,* 13 (1989): 78.

at all, meant to be worn at home, perhaps while visiting with female friends."[89] Figure. 9 highlights an image of the tea gown, which, similar to the dresses of the Aesthetic Movement, had medieval and Renaissance influences. These movements were critical steps to the change that occurred in the following decades with fashion and the emergence of independent, working women. Tea gowns themselves went through many different variations and styles starting from when they first appeared on the market. It is first described as a formal, uncorseted dress made from fashionable, elaborate fabrics.[90] The main appeal for women was that it was a comfortable, yet fashionable, option to choose from.

Tea gowns had a relatively short lifespan, only appearing in the 1870s and leaving the market in the 1930s. They evolved from a dressing gown to one that was intended for afternoon activities and relaxation.[91] One of the main variations of the tea gown was the marquise style, which was featured in the *Demorest's,* a popular fashion magazine at the time. These dress features in magazines became a way to spread the news of not only the tea gown, but of other new popular dress styles that could be accessible to other lower or middle-class women.[92] The tea gown was a big step for women as it was accessible and highlighted in London, even if it was disregarded by many. The loose, flowy dress provided an opportunity for women to depart from stiff Victorian dress styles. This new style soon came to dominate the 1880s as it featured a flowy skirt with a tight-fitting bodice to highlight their waist with a narrower skirt.[93] With the tea gown following this style, it became popular almost instantly among women.

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[89] Harper Franklin, "1880-1889," (2019), https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1880-1889/.
[90] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 26.
[91] Marcia Noe, Kaitlin Cottle, and Fendall Fulton, "The Tea Gown in Edith Wharton's *THE OTHER TWO*," (Washington: Routledge, 2016), 260.
[92] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 26.
[93] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 321.

As the name suggests, the tea gown became the dress of choice for women hosting early afternoon events, like a tea party. A few years after the popularity of tea gowns began, they evolved even more. The dressing gown transformed from a dress that was for lounging around at home to one that was an appropriate outfit for public occasions. These new variations featured "complex, creative designs" with new fabrics like lace, silk, and velvet.[94] With increased popularity came increased scandal and criticism. The loose nature of the dress led many to see women as undressed, or even unhygienic. Without a corset holding a woman together, a woman was seen as not dressed appropriately for society. The tea dress was said to have loosened the long held Victorian morals like regulation of the body itself.[95] Women who wore the tea gown were given the opportunity to have self-expression in their dress that was hard to do before. With the influence of the Aesthetic movement, "the tea gown gave women the opportunity to explore the margins of mainstream fashionable dress without an excess of social censure and public scrutiny…" becoming an outlet for self-expression against the traditional values at the time. [96]

For middle class women especially, the tea gown became a favorite option as it allowed them to have choices and independence in what they wore. In the December 1897 issue of *Harper's Bazaar,* one article highlights the options that women had available to them in detail. It starts by saying that "tea gowns are now considered as necessary [for] a well-appointed outfit."[97] The listed descriptions of many different variations of tea gowns are a sharp contrast to what tea gowns originally started out as. One version that women could get for themselves is described as "a graceful gown of white liberty silk and Valenciennes lace, with an over the mantle of robin's

[94] Noe et al., "The Tea Gown in Edith Wharton's *THE OTHER TWO,"* 260.
[95] Noe et al., "The Tea Gown in Edith Wharton's *THE OTHER TWO,"* 260.
[96] Noe et al., "The Tea Gown in Edith Wharton's *THE OTHER TWO,"* 260.
[97] "*TEA GOWNS," Harpers Bazar*, December 4, 1897, 1004.

egg blue surah edged with applique… the over mantle and train hang in loose folds"[98] Of course with the more elaborate fabrics and designs, the price went up as well. The many upgrades allowed for all classes to be able to afford a tea gown as they could get a simpler dress or a fancier one, if desired. As more upgrades were added, it became difficult for many to keep up with the latest fashion designs. However, with the simplicity of the loose dress still in style, the tea gown could still be enjoyed by many.

Other styles included a princess style gown with a tighter waist. This was still considered a tea gown as it was still a loose, corset-less dress. Another advertisement in *Harper's Bazaar* detailed a tea gown that featured a fitted waist, tight sleeves, and lace elbow cuffs, all covered in heavy velvet.[99] While the many options gave women choices, most options still upheld the belief that women had to be fashionable as they went out. It became clear that to wear a garment out in public, it had to be decorated top to bottom to fit the beauty standards of the 1880s-1890s. Tea gowns became a bridge from the old values held in the Victorian era to a more progressive era for women regarding clothes. This style was used as one of the main arguments for the rise in informal dresses for women.[100] During this same period, women started to shift completely from dresses and choose other new fashion choices, which gained traction from the eventual rise of the bicycle and the increasing opportunity for women to participate in leisure activities. The tea gown, while it allowed for more freedom, was just an avenue to the rise in sports and rational clothes for women in the coming years.

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[98] "*TEA GOWNS,"* 1004.
[99] "*TEA GOWNS,"* 1004.
[100] Anne Bissonnette, "Victorian Tea Gowns: A Case of High Fashion Experimentation," *Dress* 44, no. 1 (2018): 3.

Issues with New Dress

With the popularity of these options growing, women continued to experience great criticism from men for wearing these new robed dresses. Even police were going after women expressing themselves through aesthetic dress. In one state, the head of the police station ordered his other officers to "arrest any women 'who were attired in a dress that would [attract] unusual attention or cause a meretricious display.'"[101] This threat shows how hard it was for women to not be judged by what they wore. It continued the trend from the Victorian age that women were nothing more than the clothes on their backs (see figure 10). These arrests continued across America, becoming a way to silence women who wanted to explore their individual style and freedom in society. Many women began to protest these arrests by going out to the stores in loose, uncorseted garments. This started a chain reaction of arrests for many, as they were supposedly seen as nothing more than a prostitute by police, which continued the frustration held by women.[102] In 1884, Louisville resident, Lizzie Brait, was arrested and fined five dollars for wearing a pink Mother Hubbard dress on the street. The police saw this as an act of rebellion against the domesticity that they wanted to enforce upon women. They also feared that if more women wore aesthetic dress like the Mother Hubbard, the movement would continue to spread. These arrests became targeted towards middle class women because they made up most women who began to experiment in fashion.[103] This, in turn, led to more and more middle-class women being arrested just because their dress went against fashion norms. Others also saw the new fashion trends as an attack on a woman's marital and motherly duties, arguing that women had lost their reason in life. However, it was just the opposite: with a new wardrobe, women were able to enjoy freedom apart from the burdens of domesticity they had long been buried under.

[101] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 29.
[102] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 30.
[103] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 31.

While the aesthetic movement centered around urban living in populated cities, women in rural areas participated just as much as other women. It is important to focus on rural US populations, especially since many middle and lower-class women who lived in these places looked at aesthetic dress for their wardrobe. Women relied on patterns and other fabrics, like wool, for these homemade aesthetic pieces.[104] Many of these women made the dresses for themselves primarily for comfort. Increasing the connection between rural middle-class women and urban upper-class women, aesthetic dress continued to become more and more accepted in society. In the 1890's, wearing an aesthetic dress was common and not seen as a shocking choice. With the end of the aesthetic movement, a new wave of dress reform focused even more on women's independence, freedom, and comfort.

Rational Dress Movement

The Rational Dress Movement started in connection with the rise of sportswear and the changes to the corset. The movement became a direct product of women speaking up for changes in fashion that did not hold their body hostage. The first Rational Dress Movement gained traction in 1881 with the prime focus on spreading the divided skirt and other looser style options (see figure 11). [105] One of the biggest movements that made the most significant change to women's fashion was the introduction of the bicycle through the creation of the new Rational Dress Society. Following the Aesthetic Movement, the Rational Dress Society was ridiculed in the press and not accepted by the masses; but that did not stop the progress toward creating clothing options that reflected the new woman they were trying to promote. [106] These looser styles translated to the spread of sportswear and women being invited into a traditional masculine

[104] Blanchard, "Boundaries and the Victorian Body," 35.
[105] Lee, "This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," 1422.
[106] Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History*, 200.

space. Many criticized the need for changing fashion as they did not believe women were meant for anything outside the home. Women were seen as unfit to participate in sports because their body supposedly made it physically impossible to do so. The ideal throughout the world at that time was that "women should not participate in vigorous sport… because of their 'natural' biological limitations."[107] The idea that it was against women's biology and that their bodies were not made for physical activity became the main way to keep women in the domestic phase. If they were still supposed to be in the home, and the majority agreed, it became difficult to change people's perceptions of what a true woman should look and act like. Because of these popular perceptions, some people believed that fashion would never change if new ways of thinking were not accepted.[108] However, those spearheading the Rational Dress Movement continued in the belief that nothing would change if there was no one starting the movement. Even with just a few people to start, rational dress was beginning to spread.

Start of Cycling

With the push of the Rational Dress Society at the turn of the century brought a new freedom for all with the introduction of the bicycle. As an editor for the *New York Tribune* suggested, the bicycle was more influential to society "than all the victories and defeats of Napoleon, [and] the First and Second Punic Wars" combined.[109] The bicycle quickly became a popular and an essential part of everyday life. In the 1860s, biking was a way for many to escape the rise of an industrial and manufactured culture. It soon began to represent the progress of modern life. The word *Bicycle* was first introduced in the 1860s to represent a form of transportation that had two wheels and steering capabilities.[110] The bicycle went through many

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[107] Lee, "This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," 1423.
[108] Lee, "This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," 1423.
[109] Fred C. Kelly, *THE GREAT BICYCLE CRAZE, American Heritage,* Vol 8, (1956).
[110] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 317.

different versions to respond to the demands of customers and its growing popularity. Just one year later, in 1861, the second version of the bicycle was created: the boneshaker. The boneshaker had new pedals on the front with "solid metal wheels and spring-less frame."[111] Customers quickly demanded upgrades to the boneshaker as it became uncomfortable to go long distances on cobblestone or unpaved streets. The 1870s then brought about the velocipede, or the ordinary bike, featuring the same metal frame but with more durable rubber wheels. While this version became practical for going long distances, safety issues began to concern customers. One concern was that because of the bigger wheels, there were a higher number of accidents involving people falling off their bikes after hitting a rock or a bump in the road. Because of these concerns, after the ordinary bicycle came to the United States in 1876, another version was invented in hopes of providing a safer experience.

The "safety bicycle" took a few years before hitting the market in 1885. John Kemp Starley, a developer from England, created the safety bicycle to feature a lower mount with a diamond frame and two wheels of similar size to reduce these injuries. It would go on to be universally owned and loved by customers as it was "smaller, faster, and easier to handle than the Ordinary."[112] There were many variations of the safety bicycle when it first hit the market. Manufacturers were able to fix the weight of the bike as some were over seventy pounds, and to change the tire material in the early 1890s to ones that did not go flat, which provided the biker with more speed. In 1895, during the height of the bicycle's influence on men and women, the bike featured a sleek design weighing around twenty pounds, creating the mass appeal on the bike. With the mass appeal of bikes, rational dress supporters used this popularity to spark fashion changes.

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[111] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 317.
[112] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 317.

For biking to become an activity that everyone could enjoy, fashion needed to change alongside it, specifically for women. During the 1890s when the bicycle was at the height of popularity, most women were still expected to wear corsets and long skirts. These tight-fitting outfits made it nearly impossible to ride a bike comfortably. As fashion was ever changing for women, it was not a surprise that clothes had to adapt to this new lifestyle. Some of the first options for functional clothing featured specific changes to the bike. These changes included shields to protect against wind, rain, and mud to keep women safe from the elements.[113] Other new options were skirts with drawstrings at the bottom, converted bloomer pants that could be made into a skirt, and even a tool to fasten a woman's skirt to the ankle. These small upgrades were just the beginning of dress changes for women. Women were not satisfied with just these changes and were still looking for new clothing options better fitted for cycling and other activities.

Fashion writer Maria Ward produced a handbook for women cyclists in 1896. Ward detailed the essentials that women needed to be able to participate in this newfound cultural movement. Ward wrote that women needed "knickerbockers, shirtwaist, stockings, shoes… or [a] skirt with length decided by individual preference."[114] This claim was just one of many that women were calling for as they pursued dress reform and sought not to be ridiculed in public for wearing this new dress. It was not an option for women to change up their wardrobe, but a necessary upgrade. Unfortunately, it was still not seen that way by most men, the press, and law enforcement. An American woman was arrested in 1895 only because she was wearing sweater and tights. She ended up with a fine of twenty-five dollars, which in 2024 is upwards of $900

[113] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 322.
[114] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 322.

dollars.[115] A woman's efforts to change and evolve came with many harsh realities. Even though sportswear and rational dress was gaining popularity among women and cyclists overall, it was still criticized daily.

Women in Sports

One of the main voices of this reform movement that would not be silent was Frances E. Willard of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. Willard was the president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), the first organization dedicated to women in the United States.[116] Willard was also a prominent suffragist and writer, detailing her experience in promoting and fighting for women's rights. Her organization led to a spark in the Rational Dress Movement as Willard experienced firsthand the need for change in clothes with the rise of sports. At 53, she learned how to ride a bicycle and documented her journey in her 1895 book, *How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle*.[117] Willard was a staunch supporter of cycling, calling it a "harmless pleasure" that could be enjoyed by both men and women.[118] In this book, she criticized the standard dress that women were used to wearing, saying that sensible and rational dress styles would soon be the norm and that "the artistic wardrobe of the rider will make the conventional style of woman's dress absurd to the eye."[119] The WCTU was a major voice in the spread of a new wardrobe for women that allowed for safety and comfort amid the rise of new activities; the organization also helped to shift the perception of women in society more broadly. They wanted to create a new perception of women, one that was tightly connected to the freedom that sportswear brought to both the mind and body (see figure 12).

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[115] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 315.
[116] Lee, "This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," 1423.
[117] Sarah A Gordon, '"Any Desired Length": Negotiating Gender through Sports Clothing, 1870–1925," in *Beauty and Business*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2001), 24.
[118] Frances E. Willard, *A Wheel Within a Wheel How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle, With Some Reflections by the Way*, (Project Gutenberg: 2019), 13.
[119] Gordon, "Any Desired Length," 24.

Not only was the bicycle increasingly available, but there was also a rise in other team-based sports for women. Colleges, specifically, began to institute sports teams for women. This change influenced a small fraction of women as higher education was still reserved mainly for the upper class. The introduction of sports teams became an integral part of the Rational Dress Movement. Having women participate in something that was forever seen as a male activity, wearing clothes traditionally designed for men, became a statement of the change that they so desperately wanted and needed. It was not as popular at first to have women participate in these formal sports, as women were seen as easily exhausted. Formal sports for women were then only popular in women-only colleges. Historian Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz describes this by saying that women had to take up the roles in the school that were mainly done by men, like team sports. These sports included soccer, hockey, and tennis.[120] Without any men, they were able to play into these roles within the college walls. This then translated to spreading the message that women were just as capable as participating in the public sphere as were men (see figure 13). While of course on a smaller scale, relating to sports, these new movements provided the platform to talk about gender inequalities at large. Women began to take the initiative themselves in the Rational Dress Movement by showing that they could change the notion of what it meant to be woman and what clothes needed to be for these new women.

Another main voice of the Rational Dress Movement was Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Phelps made her living as a successful novelist, but she was a powerful dress reformer as well. She was able to find a way to combine both passions of hers to become another advocate for different dress. Phelps began to comment on other works talking about women's fashion, particularly the many harmful cartoons about women's bodies and dress. One cartoon titled the "Bloomer Girls" showed a woman in bloomers doing typical masculine jobs while a man was wearing a skirt,

[120] Lee, "This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," 1422.

taking care of the children, and doing household chores.[121] Phelps, as a proponent for change in fashion, did not enjoy seeing these cartoons making fun of a movement she saw as necessary. She and other women who took dress reform seriously felt threatened by the mockery of their bodies.[122] However, with gender roles so deeply woven into fashion, Phelps knew that rational dress would not be an easy thing to achieve. She described her feelings towards women's dress in her book titled *What to Wear.* In this book, Phelps carefully articulated her strong opinions on women's fashion through her humor and bluntness, describing it at the time as made in "bad taste, bad hygiene, and bad morals."[123] She detailed all the ridiculous expectations a woman had to fulfill to make her body presentable, such as the long hours spent making their dresses and the time it took to put on these clothes. Phelps illustrated her feelings about the need for dress reform by saying that "not one woman in fifty of your acquaintance ever knows, except in her undressed hours, from girlhood to the grave, what it is to fill the lower half of her lungs with air."[124] This shocking commentary provided the basis of what the Rational Dress Society was trying to achieve, which was to allow women to not be confined to their clothing. In the afterthought section of her book, Phelps summarized her demands for the reform of women's dress. She insisted that however loose and comfortable men's clothing was, women's clothing should be the same. In one passage, she stated that new rational dress for women should be "as loose as a man's… As short as my daily avocations require…As simple as I please… and As pretty as is convenient."[125]

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[121] Gordon, "Any Desired Length," 27.
[122] Gordon, "Any Desired Length," 27.
[123] Phelps, *What to Wear*, 6.
[124] Phelps, *What to Wear*, 67.
[125] Phelps, *What to Wear*, 69.

Rational Dress League and the Bicycle Craze

Another branch of the Rational Dress Society was the Rational Dress League. The Rational Dress League picked up where the society left off in creating and advocating for women's freedom in dress, specifically dealing with the changes to fashion connected to the rise of the bicycle. It was created in 1898 with a focus on producing styles specifically for the bike during the bicycle craze.[126] With the disappearance of the bustle that dictated women's dress in the 1880s, looser and more manageable fitted dresses took its place. However, with these longer dresses, it became clear that improvements would be necessary for the safety of women riding. Helena Swanwick wrote about her experiences with her bicycle, saying, "It is an unpleasant experience to be hurled on to stone setts and find that one's skirt has been so tightly wound round the pedal that one cannot get up enough to unwind it."[127] This problem led the Rational Dress League to create a new type of outfit to wear for cycling. This focus was a main departure from the Rational Dress Society.

The bicycle continued to gain popularity in the 1890s and continued its spread of influence for nearly a decade. At the height of the "Bicycle Craze," anyone that could afford to have a bike and was physically able to ride owned a bicycle.[128] It was said that "few corners of… society in the mid and late 1890s remained untouched by cycling." [129] Social and economic changes to both men's and women's social lives followed suit. The bicycle offered both a means of transportation, soon evolving into one of the first mass marketed luxury goods (see figure 14).[130] While bicycling was enjoyed by many, it differed immensely between classes. Significantly, bicycling became very expensive. The best bicycle could be bought for around

[126] David Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," *Victorian Studies* 21, no.1 (1977): 65.
[127] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 63.
[128] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 51.
[129] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 71.
[130] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 53.

thirty pounds in the UK in 1895. [131] A similar bicycle from that time would be worth around 5,000 pounds in 2024. The price alone separated people further into social classes, making it more difficult for those without a bike to participate fully in modern society. However, with time, the bicycle became more popular with the middle classes, as the upper class came to see the bicycle as something "no more than the latest toy of fashion." [132] For the middle class, the bicycle represented a newfound freedom and the ever-changing values in society, especially for women. The bicycle came to represent what the middle class valued in their lives.

Just like most things at this time, bicycling was not as accessible for female riders as it was for a man. For women, the ability to use and enjoy a bike was something that required more work and time to be seen as a normal activity. Women still had to fight against naysayers, who continued to call out women who tried to integrate themselves in the public through the bicycle. Eliza Lynn Linton began to use the bicycle as another way to put down women. Linton called women cyclists "sturdy tramps" who lost "[their] supreme attraction… [a] sweet spirit of allurement." She also claimed that cycling was going to women's heads and making them disrespect their parents and do risky and unnatural things.[133] However, women continued to band together under the bicycle as it became a statement of social standing and an expression of freedom for women. For men, a bicycle was a valuable possession, but it was even more valuable for women in providing freedom and self-expression.[134] An article from the *Lady Cyclist* in 1896 said that women, specifically working class women, craved this new freedom to the point that "some of them rode machines which "deserved rather to be termed old iron than

[131] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 57.
[132] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 58.
[133] Rinehart, *"The Girl of the Period,"* 62.
[134] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 48.

bicycles."[135] Even with limited income, this was one of the first consumer goods that a wide range of classes could consume, starting out as a luxury, but transforming into a necessity for all.[136] This popularity led directly into meaningful fashion changes.

Cycling Fashion

Bloomers and the divided skirt rose in popularity starting in the 1850s, but gained public attention during the bicycle craze. The bloomer became the main, most popular item for women to wear while biking. It served as a symbol of not only the bicycle era, but the feminist movement in general. It was also the oldest invention, coming before the divided skirt, knickerbockers, and the bicycle corset. The bloomer is a full-length pant, pleated near the ankle with a skirt worn at the calf.[137] Even with a pant option, it was still expected of a woman to wear a skirt as well. Named after Amelia Bloomer in the 1850s, there has been speculation on where they originated. Elizabeth Smith Miller is the woman who is credited with bringing the bloomers to America.[138] Gayle Fischer, a dress reform historian, says that the bloomer pants materialized from many different communities at the time, under other names like freedom dress or Turkish trousers.[139] However, Amelia Bloomer and other advocates for rational dress wore these pants in hopes of acceptance in society. She introduced them as the alternative to the heavy English petticoats. However, societal approval never fully came until years later during the bicycle craze.[140]

Advocates for reform in both America and in England were scared to fully commit to the bloomers as they continued to be heavily ridiculed. They feared that no one would want to

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[135] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 51.
[136] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 53.
[137] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 323.
[138] Summers, *Bound to Please,* 145.
[139] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 323.
[140] Lee, "This Club Does Not Play in Fashion's Dress," 1421.

continue to push dress reform and the feminist movement overall. Because of this fear, the bloomer pants largely went away in the 1860s, only returning to popular culture during the bicycle craze. Popular dress reformer Abba Gould-Woolson began to change the way they advocated for bloomers. She began to frame the bloomer as another form of undergarment that could be a departure from the corset. Reformers even began to rename the bloomers "emancipation garments."[141] *The Lily* magazine used the bloomer pants to campaign for women's right to vote due to this newfound advertising strategy.[142] These things contributed to the reemergence of the bloomers and the popularity that came with it. Women began to enjoy the comfort they offered in both the public and private spheres.

Directly from the Rational Dress society came the bicycle suit, which was considered one of the first rational dress options for women at the time (see figure 15). With the popular emergence of bicycling, an outfit designated for riding was a big step for women to have more freedom.[143] The bicycle suit contained a jacket and bloomers, which was one of the biggest shifts in women's clothes at the time.[144] It was shocking to see women in something other than a long skirt, or even a divided skirt. The few women who were adventurous enough to ride with these new rational pants were part of the middle class desperately wanting more freedom from societal norms.[145] However, many women did not just wear bloomers or the bicycle suit but rather wore "a skirt with a deep pleat in the back to allow her to sit on the bicycle" over her bloomers.[146] Another one of the first options was an evolution of the bloomer pants: knickerbockers. The

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[141] Summers, *Bound to Please*, 145-146.
[142] Summers, *Bound to Please*, 145.
[143] Franklin, "1890-1899."
[144] Laver, *Costume and Fashion: A Concise History,* 208; Jayne Shrimpton, *Victorian Fashion,* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2016), 80.
[145] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 65.
[146] Patricia Campbell Warner, *When the Girls Came Out to Play: The Birth of American Sportswear, (*Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 123-125.

knickerbocker costume came out around 1893 in Paris.[147] These pants were specifically popular among lady cyclists for their convenience and fashionability. They could be worn with the bicycle suit top as a new full outfit (see figure 16). Knickerbockers can sometimes be confused with bloomer pants. However, they are different from one another. Knicker pants were more fitted than their bloomer counterparts. The pants featured a button band for fastening that ended right below the knee.[148] Popular cyclist Lillias Campbell Davidson described these new rational dress options as the "exciting question of the hour."[149]

Health Corset

Another by-product of the Rational Dress Movement was a resurgence of the health corset, which was intended to silence the growing fears women had about corseting. While marketed as something new and improved for women, it became clear that it was not any different from corsets years ago. The draw of the health corset was that it made women's lives better, healthier, and happier. Health corsets weren't for fear of a woman's health but rather a fear of women gaining bodily autonomy. With the many new clothing options invented without the need of a corset, opponents of fashion changes worried that corsets, and the control corset had over women, might be a thing of the past. This way of thinking did not stop the spread of health corsets and other rational dress options. The health corset was popular for cyclists as it was supposed to create a more pleasant riding experience. The corsets were made from "lighter and more flexible materials" in an effort to create more comfort for the women. With many new activities arriving for women, like dancing and bicycling, the health corset went through multiple

[147] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 63.
[148] "Definitions of Pants: Bloomers, Knickers, and Trousers," The Vintage Traveler, May 5, 2019.
[149] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 64.

variations and names, including a specific dancing corset and sports corset.[150] However, even with these new lighter materials, it was still made from traditional steel. One newspaper advertisement from August 1911 says that their new sports corset features "unbreakable spiral steels" with the option to remove them only for washing.[151] This ad is indicative of the health corset in general, promoting a change to the corset that was never fully made. The many variations show how dress manufacturers at large refused to depart from the corset even with the popularity of the Rational Dress Movement and the rise of sports. It proves that they were power and money hungry from corset sales they did not want to see fall.[152] Magazines and newspapers began to heavily advertise the health corset and the beneficial change it would bring to women (see figures 17 &18).

Articles began to emerge talking about the positive effects health corsets were bringing, but it became a marketing ploy. One article published in 1888 said that the health corset was deceiving women into thinking they were doing something right by their health, but in turn they were furthering the pain brought on by a corset. These authors concluded by saying that while the corset was an improvement, they had yet to find a woman who was "able to give proper exercise to the lower portion of the chest and the muscles around the waist."[153] This article shows that not much had changed in corseting but the wording and branding. Many knew that with the increasing number of women forgoing corseting all together, the health corset was intended to change their mind.

One piece of work that advocated for the health corset was titled *Save the Women and Children with the Health Corset.* Published earlier, in 1869, Seymour Durst argued that wearing

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[150] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 113.
[151] Norah Waugh, *Corsets and Crinolines,* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1970), 112.
[152] Fields, "Fighting the Corsetless Evil," 113.
[153] "Health Corsets," *Good Health*, vol. 23, no. 11 (Nov. 1888): 413.

the health corset was the key to solving nearly all of women's health problems. The health corset became more attached to sportswear and the bicycle as it claimed to allow for more freedom. Rational Dress Movement reformers argued against Durst's claims that the health corset was an improved option for women. He claimed women would be able to walk and work ten times faster without getting tired.[154] Durst continued by saying that the corset would make women happier, prettier, affectionate, and of course healthier (see figure 19).[155] He then went on to claim that a man would be able to solve the problems in a woman's life by providing them a health corset. This harmful way of thinking sparked activism to help not only women's dress reform movements, but also their fight for independence. Durst firmly believed that this health corset was doing right by girls and women across America by promoting the positive health changes that could arise. He ended his propaganda piece by saying that the only way for a woman to feel healthy and happy was through the health corset.[156] While the health corset did offer some relief to women and allowed more to participate in sports, it was still near impossible to perform these activities in a laced garment. This piece furthers the idea that not much had changed in the improvement of corsets as health corsets were still being used during the sportswear movements at the turn of the twentieth century, after their supposed improvement back in the 1870s. Durst's viewpoints expedited women reformers' efforts to stop wearing corsets all together and look for other rational dress options.

Rise in Leisure Activities

Just as important as the rise of sports and the bicycle was the rise of leisure time outside the home. The Rational Dress Society began to also focus on leisure activities for women at the

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[154] *Save the women and children with the health corset* (New York: Thos. W. Love & Co, 1869), 2.
[155] *Save the women and children with the health corset*, 3.
[156] *Save the women and children with the health corset*, 12.

end of the 1800s. The leisure movement changed the perspective of middle-class women across both America and Britain. This way of thinking led to changes in what was "proper female behavior."[157] The gymnastics costume was another rational option that became more popular for everyday and leisure use (see figure 20). The gymnastics costume started out in the late 1880s as an option for women to wear in schools and colleges. It typically featured a dress that was seven inches from the floor and worn over bloomers. However, the dress soon became very popular and customizable. Some designs had a dress with separate bloomers, or bloomers attached to a shirt with a separate skirt. Others also featured no skirt at all.[158] Because women were participating in more and more leisure and sport activities, it became a necessity to have a fashion item that could be customized to their certain physical needs. The gymnastics suit became popular among the middle class and worn for many new activities for women, like going to the beach, riding their bike, playing tennis or golf, and even just going out for a walk.[159] It became an everyday outfit like women's previously heavily corseted dresses. It allowed for freedom and movement of the body that became acceptable to wear. The suit became so popular that patterns were being sold like never before. These patterns were different from typical patterns at the time, as they could be purchased in specific sizes and had very detailed instructions. This made it easier for women to have a customized, comfortable dress option. Most of these patterns were facilitated by the *Delineator* magazine, which started in 1872. The magazine shifted from mostly selling patterns to becoming a general magazine for women on all things fashion, women's clubs, and sports.[160] They also mainly made patterns for sportswear, which allowed for the masses to attain these new rational looks on a regular basis.

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[157] Gordon, "Any Desired Length," 25.
[158] Gordon, "Any Desired Length," 33.
[159] Gordon, "Any Desired Length," 33.
[160] Gordon, "Any Desired Length," 33.

Difficulties Continue in Women's Fashion

With sports and leisure activities now becoming more prominent for women, other problems began to arise. One problem that women were beginning to have was that many of the patterns for these new types of clothes were hard to come by for lower classes. As women still needed to be seen as fashionable, these new costumes had to show their stylish potential. Comfort and simplicity were not really valued until these new bicycle and leisure outfits emerged. The introduction of new materials like rayon in mass production increased the demand by women to have comfortable options to wear.[161] It was ingrained in Victorian culture that corset and tight-fitting clothes were the only way for women to dress. Wearing loose fitting clothes in public was showing that one had "loose morals" as well.[162]

Another obstacle was the ease and accessibility of these new trends. While the knickerbocker pants provided women another option, they were hard to obtain and were expensive. For a woman of lower status, it was near impossible to get knickerbockers, as these pants were seen as a rare, luxury item to own. Rubinstein writes that it became increasingly hard for British women to buy knickerbockers if they lived outside of London.[163] *Rational Dress Gazette* was created to advertise the new styles that the Rational Dress Society and League promoted. In its first issue, they advertised that the knickerbocker costume alone would be worth 3.10 pounds, which would be worth over 500 pounds in 2024.[164] Unfortunately, this is one of the many reasons why these new, more practical clothing options took so long to spread to every woman. The slow spread of women being seen as a proactive member of society is evidenced in the spread of new clothes.

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[161] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 324.
[162] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 322.
[163] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 63-64.
[164] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 65.

Even with these fashion changes, there were other factors that stopped women from riding bikes. Another big obstacle was overcoming the societal gender roles at the time. After the 1890s and into the turn of the century, the bicycle movement slowed. With the craze dying down, so did the spread of rational dress. A cover from *Vogue* magazine in the late 1890s featured a woman in the typical Victorian style of a tight corset with long skirts. It further proved that comfort and rational dress was not popular enough to overtake the traditional fashionable views of what a woman was supposed to be.[165] It was still very new to see women living their life apart from a man. Rubinstein recounted many women's experiences in trying to join in on the new fad of bike riding:

> In crowded parts of towns women cyclists were met by jeers and hoots and sometimes by caps thrown into their wheels in an attempt to unbalance them. Helena Swanwick, later a prominent suffragist and radical, wrote in her memoirs that while cycling in Manchester and London in the 1890s, she was subjected to the shouts of mill-hands, and cab and bus drivers, who tried to make her fall. On one occasion she was pulled off by her skirt in Notting Hill.[166]

Women were still seen as an extension of the home and going out to socialize or work was still looked down upon in society. While the bicycle was promoted as something new for everyone, it became quite clear that women were not going to be welcomed just like a man was.

Another famous example of women trying to fit in society comes in 1898, when Lady Haberton, a prominent leader in the Rational Dress League and inventor of the divided skirt, tried to enter the Hautboy Hotel coffee room wearing knickerbockers. [167] She was given the choice to use the "common bar parlour, which in a letter… she likened to a pig sty, or to pay for

[165] Christie-Robin et al., "From Bustles to Bloomers," 324.
[166] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 63.
[167] Summers, *Bound to Please*, 77.

a private room."[168] Lady Haberton refused both options as she saw it unfair to not allow her in a public space. As a prominent figure, she took her case to the Cyclists' Touring Club. They brought the landlady of the Hautboy Hotel to the Surrey sessions to solve this dispute. They favored the landlady as they found that she did not refuse service to Lady Haberton. While this encounter can be seen as one pushing the rational dress movement back, it awoke a new era of the movement specifically advocating for women's freedom in society.[169] Lady Haberton became known as one of the trailblazers for women's rights and an advocate "of freedom from the constraints of conventional women's dress."[170] The bike and the new fashion that came along was a way to break down these stereotypes.

Celia Whitehead was another woman who focused on the creation of practical women's dress. Whitehead insisted that it was only natural that women have similar fashion choices to men to make their life more accessible and feasible. In *The Daily Inter Ocean* Sunday paper published in 1887, Celia Whitehead compared how men and women moved in public. She says that women walking in public looked exhausted, dragged down by the weight of their clothing. This was in contrast with how she saw men being able to walk: "Men's feet lift no weight of clothes."[171] Whitehead argued that women's wardrobe was detrimental to their health. She followed in the footsteps of Ameilia Bloomer with the creation of the Bloomer style dress before her. This new loose dress became more popular and gained more traction, especially with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony wearing it in public. Whitehead documented all the things that women no longer had to worry about in this new garment, like walking down the

[168] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 66.
[169] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 66.
[170] Rubinstein, "Cycling in the 1890s," 66.
[171] "Dress Reform," *Daily Inter Ocean*, June 26, 1887, 19.

stairs, staying clean and dry on a rainy day, and finding room to breathe.[172] Even with the practicality and advertisement of the looser dress, the public was still quick to criticize and blame women for their choice of dress.

In 1887, Whitehead posted a similar article with a plea for shorter skirts. These pleas featured a wide variety of topics from hairstyles, shoes, and even undergarments, with the same mission to change the stigma around women's clothes and the role they played in society. These pleas were hidden in newspapers and magazines at the time as it was not an issue that many felt was important to highlight. Celia Whitehead told a story of when she and Susan B Anthony were attempting to go into a post office in New York wearing shorter, looser dresses. They were being taunted by onlookers and eventually had to leave by carriage.[173] She finished her article by stating, "It was so difficult to wear this dress…that we returned sorrowfully to the bondage of our bodies."[174] Even though there was significant progress made every day during this time, the public opinion of most made it difficult for women to be seen as part of society. This was especially true for the lower classes.

Looking Ahead

Women in this time could have never predicted the way fashion would change so quickly. While the movement featured a slow start in the public, acceptance of the changing styles began to rapidly grow alongside the rise of consumerism and manufacturing, culminating in the 1920s and 1930s. This rise in consumerism is what also led to a rise in the sexualization of women through their clothes. Before this shift, women in the late 1800s were still focused on gaining access to the public sphere and changing their wardrobes to allow this shift. One newspaper article from *The Morning News: Sunday* paper in March 1890 reflects multiple

[172] "Dress Reform," 19.
[173] "Dress Reform," 19.
[174] "Dress Reform," 19.

women's views of their hopes and expectations of what women's clothes would be. These were prominent society women, making their living fighting for women's rights as suffragettes or authors. Some of the questions asked were "what, in your opinion, will be the dress of this coming woman?" and "what is your idea of the ideal dress of women?"[175] This was a monumental feature in the newspaper as at this time fashion was still in the beginning stages of transition. One woman interviewed, Alice Stone Blackwell, said that the dress of the coming woman would be one without heavy, long skirts and "the corset will go out as good sense increases."[176] She also foresaw a dress that could be comfortable enough to care for the home, but could also pass as a business dress to wear out. This prediction illustrates the main goal that women were searching for in dress reform: clothes that could adapt with the new woman and the collapse of the separate spheres.

Lucy Stone, another suffragist, stated that she hoped higher education would give women more to think about than the clothes on their backs. She claimed that they would have better things to worry about than their fashion. Specifically, Stone hoped that future dress would be "short light and loose" and "protect the body but leave every muscle free ."[177] These hopes and dreams for future dress would not be achieved in their lifetimes, but would lay the foundation for a better future for women today. Celia Whitehead proclaimed that "the ideal dress has not yet dawned upon our eyes; it must be an evolution…we have just begun to evolve."[178]

With changes to women's lives happening everywhere, forms of media became even more influential than ever before. It became clear that women in both Britain and America wanted the same freedom in society. They pursued this freedom in similar ways through the

[175] "The morning news: Women of the Future," *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, March 02, 1890, 10.
[176] "The morning news: Women of the Future," 10.
[177] "The morning news: Women of the Future," 10.
[178] "The morning news: Women of the Future," 10.

magazines and publications that became easily accessible to many. The two cultures were similar in terms of shopping and what leisure activities were available for women, and in how *Vogue* and the *Delineator* spearheaded the spread of these fashion trends. The countries took influence from each other to create a new transatlantic wardrobe. In one article, the new, more inclusive wardrobe is described as "combining American fashion material with 'local' features, British *Vogue* presented the same stylish face."[179] More and more space in these journals began to be allotted to fashion promotions, like *Ladies Home Journal* and *Vogue,* shown by "the predominantly female readership [that] promised modernity by the advertising and fashion spreads."[180]

Vogue magazines in both countries used similar advertising techniques to target these modern women. One was with cigarettes. As Penny Tinkler explains, "from 1919, cigarette advertisements appeared in British *Vogue* featuring emancipated, modern women asserting their right to smoke. Although women were not overtly targeted in U.S. *Vogue* cigarette adverts of the 1920s, they were addressed in subtle ways."[181] The corset acted as another way for modern women to exert their freedom. For so long, the corset suffocated and stopped a woman's progress forward in society. It had now transformed into a glamorous, iconic piece of clothing. Even though there was a sign that a new age and feeling towards corsets was on the horizon, *Vogue* continued to feature corsets. However, corsets took on a different meaning than the typical Victorian corset that women were trying to distance themselves from. Corsets began to mean lingerie and other undergarments. Corsets began to be "repackaged [as the] unequivocally modern body, [achieving] a high profile in U.S. and British Vogue."[182]

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[179] Tinkler, "Feminine Modernity in Interwar Britain and North America," 115.
[180] Tinkler, "Feminine Modernity in Interwar Britain and North America," 115.
[181] Tinkler, "Feminine Modernity in Interwar Britain and North America," 116.
[182] Tinkler, "Feminine Modernity in Interwar Britain and North America," 121.

Featuring women in corsets in these ads became such a focus that both the US and Britain used them to sell products like cigarettes and cars. Just as during the late 1800s, being seen as fashionable was of the utmost importance. This ideal just shifted to selling goods and using women as the fashionable object. Women were now fighting against their new freedoms, and history was repeating itself with the corset, in a new sexualized way. This cycle of history created a new set of problems for women through this sexualization that women had to fight. This would usher into a new era of women fighting against the sexualization of their clothes and their body as well.

The demand of dress reformers seems simple enough now, but it took years of struggle to gain public acceptance for the simple desires for comfortable, accessible, and practical clothes. Change to fashion only came after relentless effort from the Aesthetic and Rational Dress Movements and the powerful women who led the charge for new clothes. The rise in media attention to clothes documented the new ways that women were taking back their clothes, specifically the corset, in hopes of continuous change. Without the fashion movements in the 1800s and women speaking up when they did, other freedoms for women might not have been realized. The evolution of women's fashion changed the course for women in the new century.

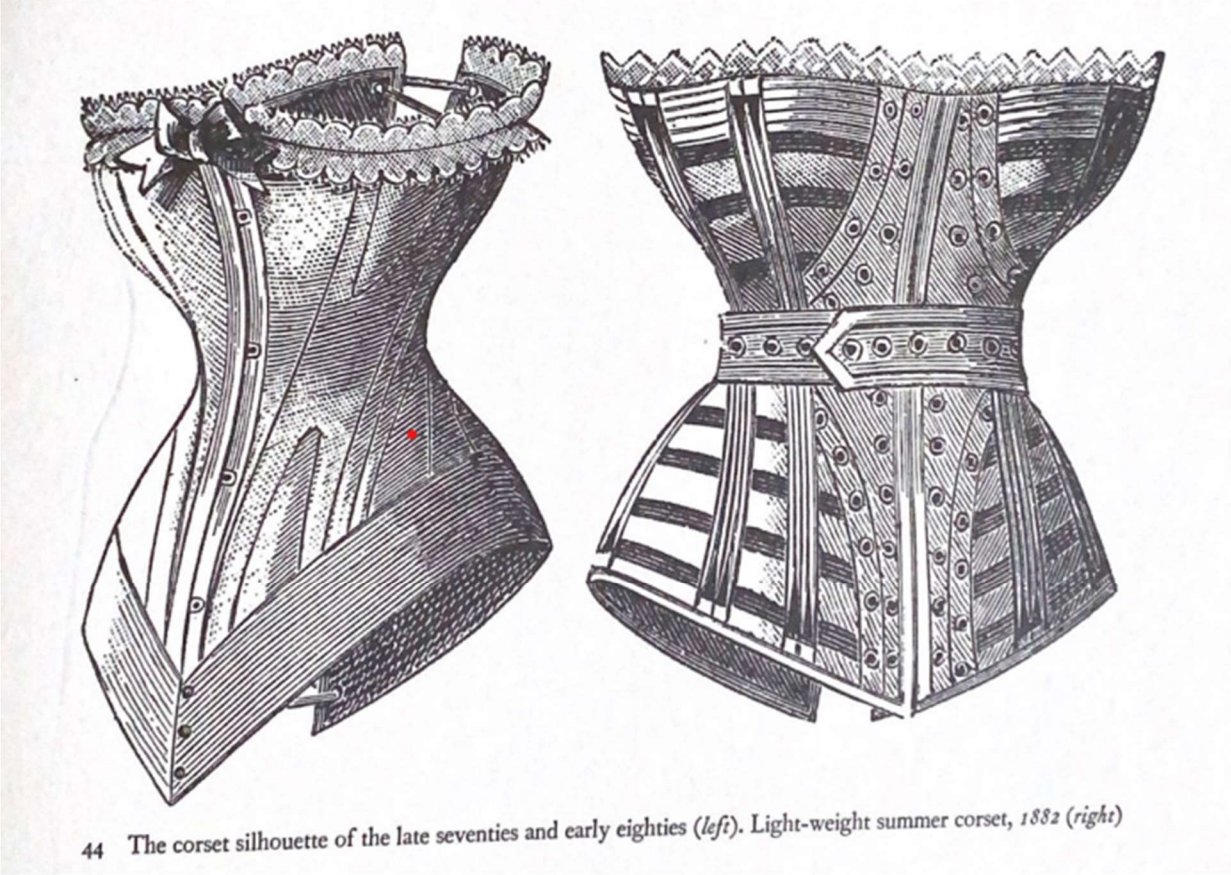
Figures

THE AUTHORESS OF THE "GIRL OF THE PERIOD"

AS IMAGINED BY MATT. MORGAN

Figure 1.

George Somes Layard, *Mrs. Lynn Linton; Her Life, Letters, and Opinions*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1901), 142.



44 The corset silhouette of the late seventies and early eighties (*left*). Light-weight summer corset, *1882* (*right*)

Figure 2.

Norah Waugh, *Corsets and Crinolines,* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1970), 85.

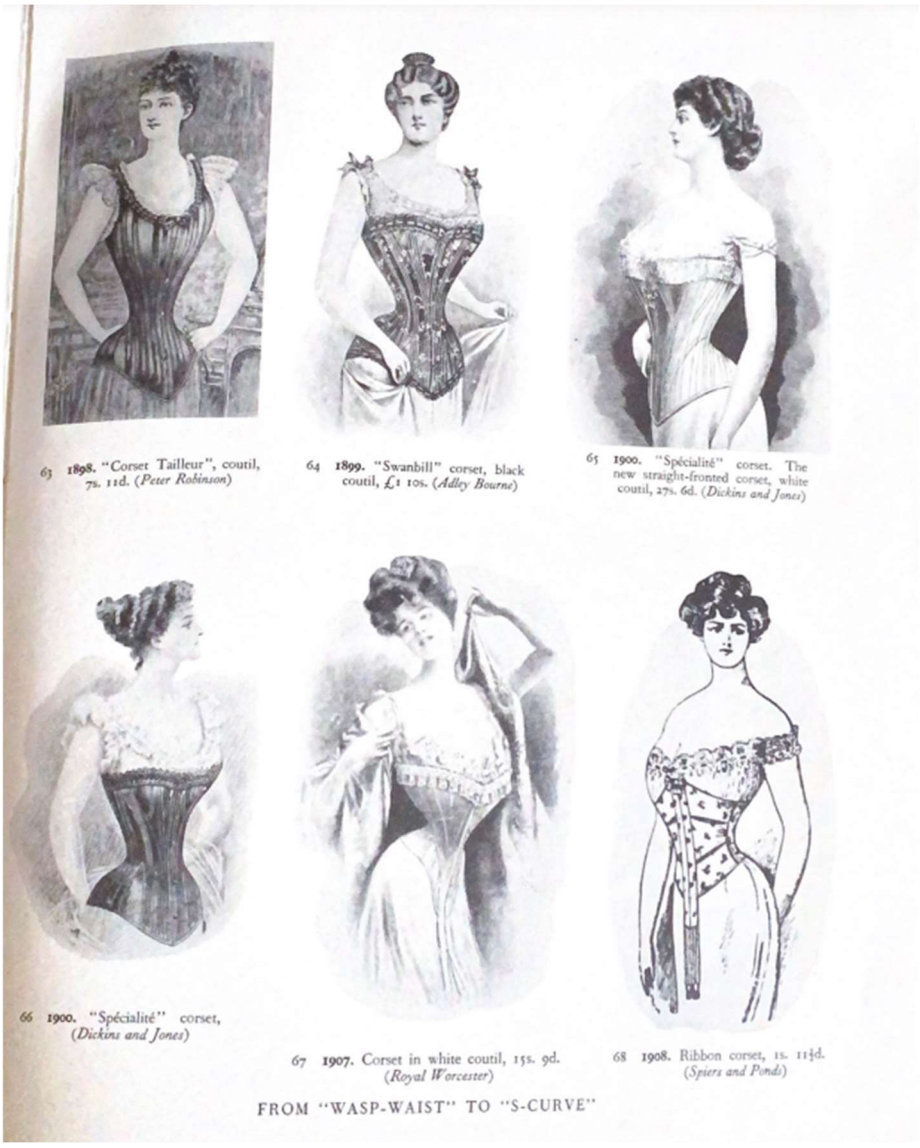


Figure 3.

Norah Waugh, *Corsets and Crinolines,* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1970), 107.

Figure 4.

Harper Franklin, “1890-1899,” Fashion History Timeline, October 11, 2019.

Figure 5.

"Hobble Skirt." Wikipedia, March 11, 2024. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hobble_skirt.

Figure 6.

Rob Schorman, "What to Wear and How to Make It: The Meaning of Clothes in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Dress* 25, no. 1 (1998): 66.

Figure 7.

Sally Helvenston Gray, “Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth Century Dress,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 48, no 1 (2014): 32.

Figure 8.

Sarah Nichols, "Arthur Lasenby Liberty: A Mere Adjective?" *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 13 (1989): 80.

Figure 9.

Harper Franklin, “1880-1889,” Fashion History Timeline, October 11, 2019.

Figure 10.

Anne Bissonnette, “Victorian Tea Gowns: A Case of High Fashion Experimentation,” *Dress* 44, no. 1 (2018): 23.

Figure 11.

Tracy J.R. Collins, "Athletic Fashion, *Punch*, and the Creation of the New Woman," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 43, no. 3 (2010): 320.

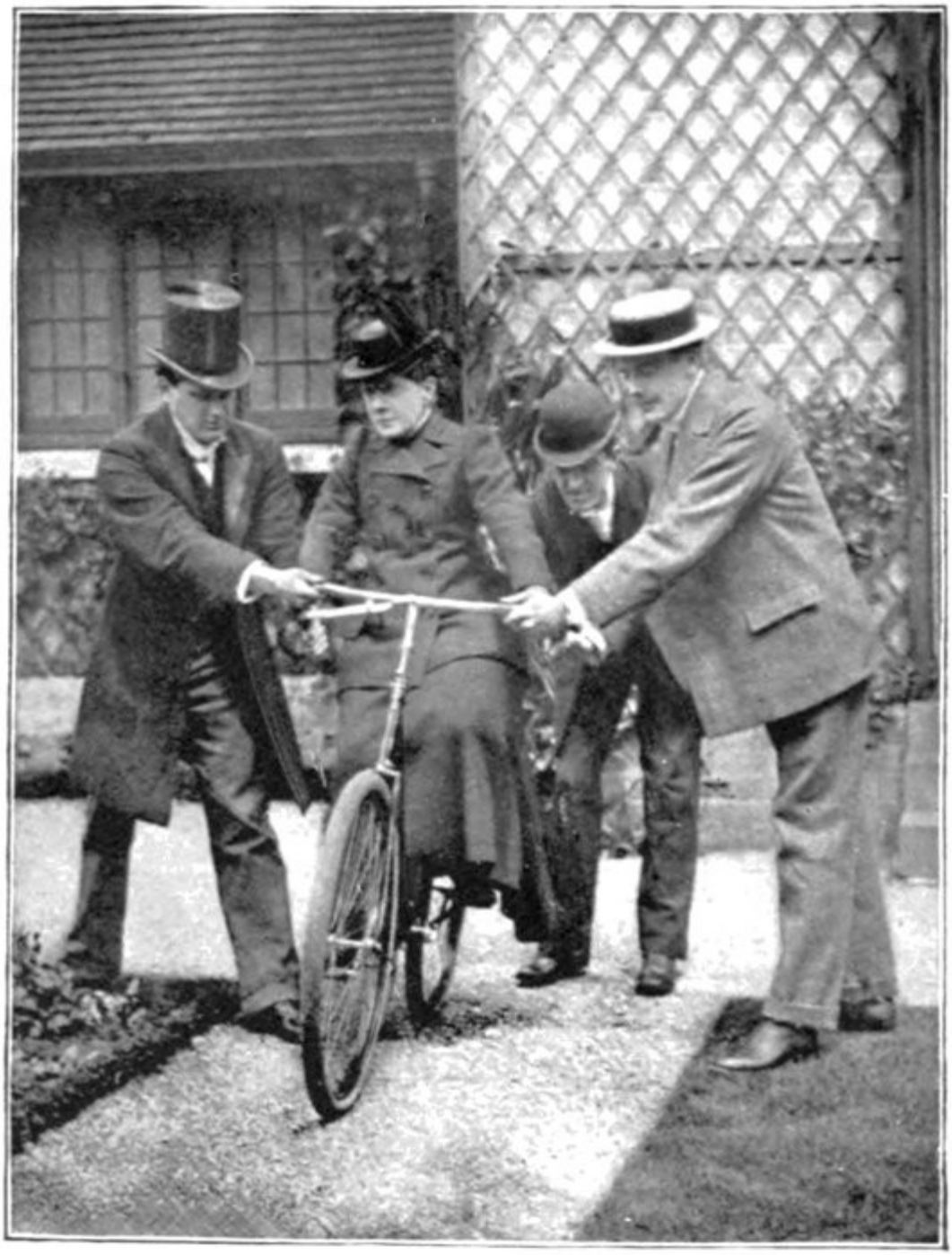


Figure 12.

Willard, Frances E. (Frances Elizabeth). *A Wheel Within a Wheel How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle, With Some Reflections by the Way*. Project Gutenberg, 2019.

Figure 13.

James F. Lee, “This Club Does Not Play in Fashion’s Dress.” 2007. *International Journal of the History of Sport* 24 (11): 1426.

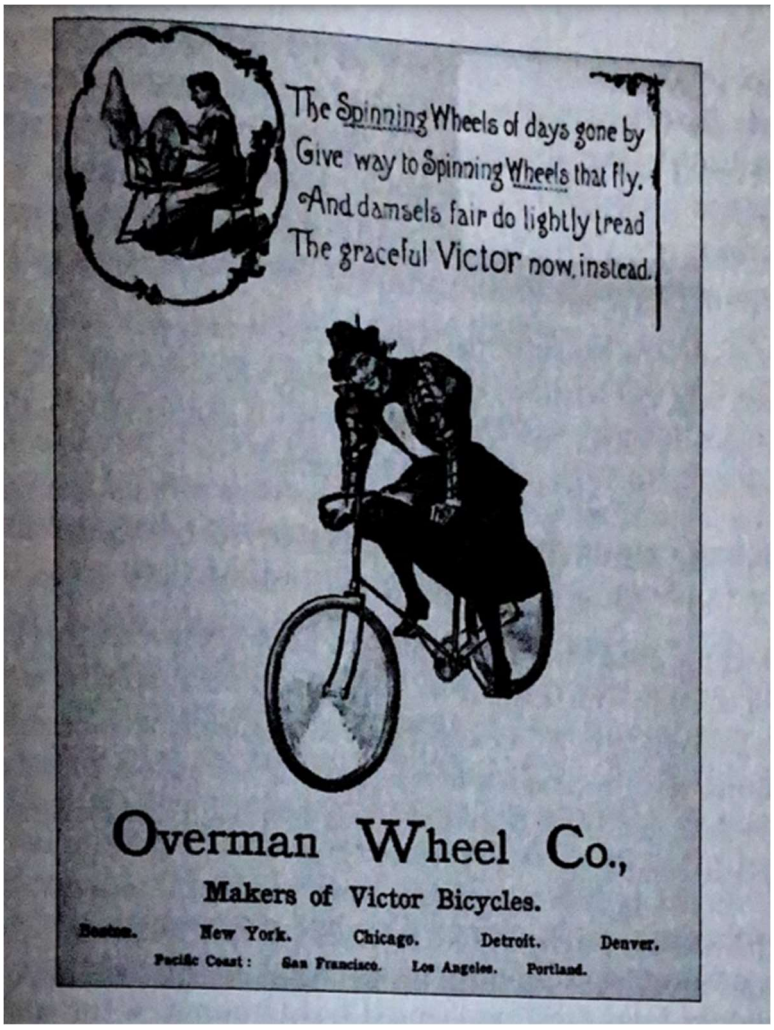


Figure 14.

Sarah A Gordon, '"Any Desired Length": Negotiating Gender through Sports Clothing, 1870–1925," in *Beauty and Business*, ed. Philip Scranton (New York: Routledge, 2001), 37.

Figure 15.

Harper Franklin, “1890-1899,” Fashion History Timeline, October 11, 2019.

Figure 16.

Harper Franklin, “1890-1899,” Fashion History Timeline, October 11, 2019.

Figure 17 & 18.

Save the women and children with the health corset: manufactured by Thos. W. Love & Co.: 243 & 245 Hudson Street, New York City. 1869.

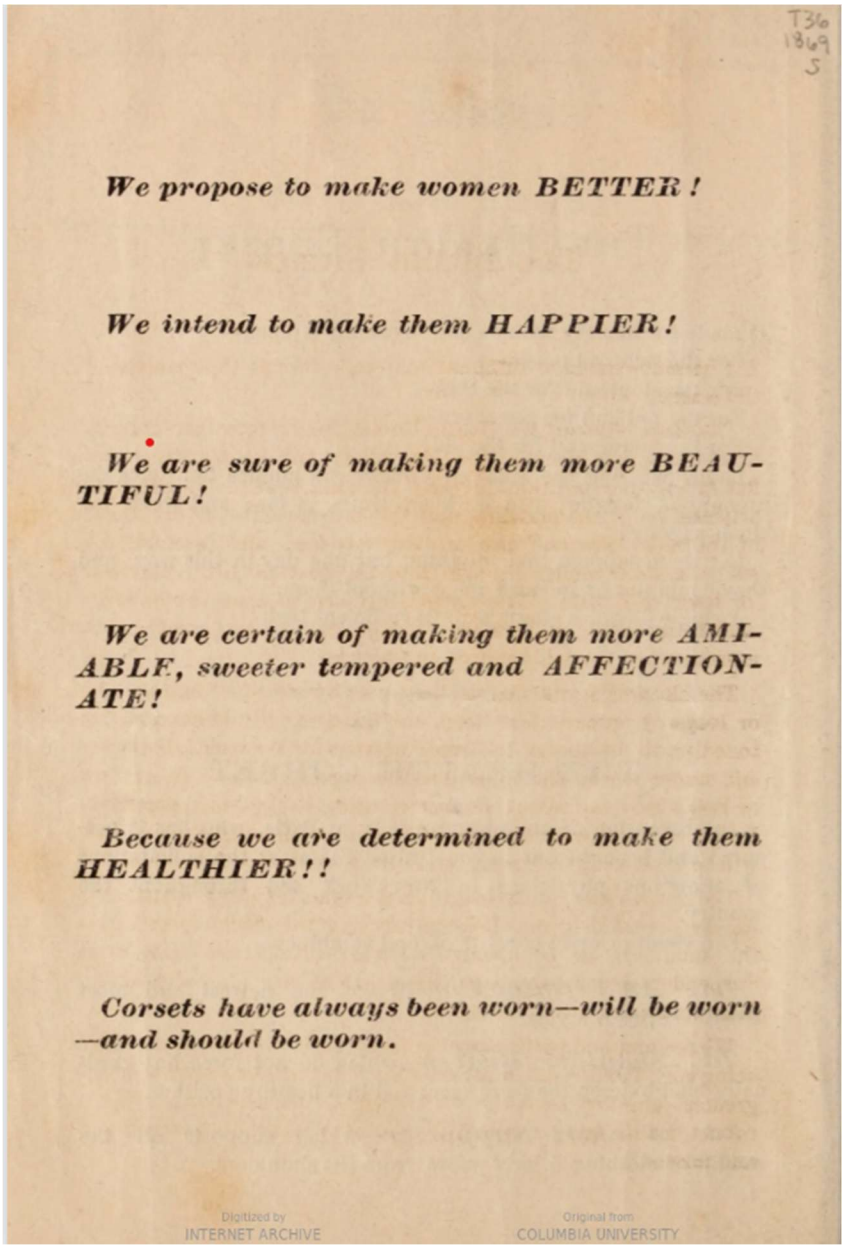


Figure 19.

Save the women and children with the health corset: manufactured by Thos. W. Love & Co.: 243 & 245 Hudson Street, New York City. 1869.

Figure 20.

"Gym Suit: American," Brooklyn Museum Costume Collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of the Brooklyn Museum, 2009; Gift of Mrs. Albert Ogden in memory of Sheldon Stewart, 1964.

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