

Dressing for Freedom and Breaking Down Barriers

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This article originates from extensive research I conducted, which investigated “radical feminist” newspapers in the mid-nineteenth-century women’s rights movements. Two “radical” publications—The Lily: Devoted to the Interests of Woman (1849–1854) and The Woman’s Journal (1870–1917)—were used for critical discourse analysis. Through a cultural history approach, this paper examines the role of women-operated newspapers as platforms for cultural discourse, advocacy, and activism, rejecting the imposed societal norms of the 1850s and 1890s. Closely analyzing articles, letters, announcements, and editorials surrounding dress reform reveals the intent of feminist discourse and how actions were mobilized among the intended audiences, primarily educated women and allies. Ultimately, this study’s culmination underscores the significance of alternative print media in shaping historical narratives of resistance by recovering the voices of radical women who have been overshadowed in mainstream historical accounts. This article in particular highlights the enduring importance of alternative platforms in challenging oppression and advocating for social justice through dress reform.

PART I (1800-1869)

Women’s Dress Reform & Fight for Rights

The 1800s led to the rise of many formalized social movements—one important, yet often misunderstood, was the dress reform movement. In its various iterations, dress reform took place roughly between 1840 and 1920 in the United States, and its main overarching issue was to make clothing “healthier, less cumbersome, and more practical (1).” Despite appearing simplistic and uncomplicated, dress reform encompassed a broad range of issues and movements that included women’s rights and their placement in society (1). Clothing reflected cultural and sex-based expectations, so altering the way women dressed directly challenged these norms. Proposed clothing changes sparked debates and revealed deeper anxieties about gender, power, and identity. As a result, dress reform became a symbolic, literal, and unintentional battleground within the broader struggle for gender reform and the pursuit of greater equality.

Awareness of dress reform emerged as fashion began to increasingly emphasize exaggerated silhouettes, as evident in the expansion of the skirt and sleeves. By the mid-nineteenth century, women’s fashion had returned to an older eighteenth-century style, featuring impractically large, wide skirts and sleeves. These fashionable dresses reinforced and communicated the gender role of women as decorative objects, where upper and middle-class women would be draped in six to eight heavy petticoats, long, dragging skirts, and tight sleeves (2). In the 1820s, women adhering to traditional fashion norms resorted to tightly laced corset stiffened with whalebone or steel to achieve an unnaturally narrow waist (2). Fashion plates reinforcing these norms began to appear around 1827 in popular publications such as *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and

Harper’s New Monthly Magazine (2). These plates provided a visual reference for dressmakers, home sewers, and women themselves to stay up to date with the latest society-driven fashion trends and how to replicate them.

A Controversial Step with the Spark of the “Bloomers” (1851)

With the growing realization of the impracticality of women’s fashion, “reform-minded” individuals began to push back. Among them, Amelia Bloomer was one of the most visible public figures who championed practical alternatives. Her name would become synonymous with the so-called “Bloomer costume,” but her entry into the movement was accidental (3-5). Her influential presence emerged through her groundbreaking newspaper, *The Lily*. Bloomer gave dress reform a place for discussion, using its pages to advocate for physical and symbolic equality.

However, the first recorded American woman to “invent” the fashion style by wearing trousers and a short skirt in public was Elizabeth Miller (6). It was later, when Miller visited Seneca Falls, New York, that she wore the costume for convenience, showcasing it to other women, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer. Bloomer quickly found the “short skirt,” four inches below the knee, and “Turkish trousers,” which gathered at the ankle, to be more practical than the long dresses she had been accustomed to. Quickly, Bloomer adopted the newfound freedom she found, calling it the “reform Dress” (shown in Figure 1) and using her publication, *The Lily*, to promote its liberating effects.

When her name became synonymous with the new fashion style, Bloomer would later clarify that she did not create the costume style and did not intend to take credit for it. She importantly explained that her close association with the Bloomer style was largely due to the



Figure 1. Amelia Bloomer in her “Bloomer Costume” (7).

they displayed and responded to various efforts and movements. In this situation, depending on the newspaper, the printed press, whether radical or mainstream, would respond variously: some praised it, others mocked it, and many offered mixed opinions (7). Nevertheless, the articles for women’s dress reform often appeared under headlines such as “Bloomerism,” “Bloomerites,” and “Bloomer” (7-8).

Despite her strong association with dress reform, it was only one aspect of Bloomer’s life and work (8). The February 1851 edition of *The Lily* is where she first mentioned the women’s rights movement, and months later, in the June 1851 publication, she formally endorsed the new attire (5; 8; 9). In Dexter Bloomer’s biographical account of Amelia Bloomer, he described that as soon as word spread of her adoption of the style, due to her steadily growing and established influence, she received hundreds of letters from women across the country inquiring about the dress and requesting patterns (9). This widespread interest underscored how eager women were to participate in the movement and free themselves from the constraints of impractical, long, and heavy skirts (10). The movement’s growth was particularly evident in the republication of *The Lily*’s article “New Costume,” found in volume eight, number six edition on June 1, 1851 (10). There was a drastic increase in subscriptions when *The Lily* referenced the dress reform movement.

Early Dress Reform and Its Growing Appeal to Social Reformers

On the second page of *The Lily*’s June 1851

publication, Bloomer and her editors strategically, in response to an increase in readership, decided to republish the description of the “new costume” (11). The decision to republish the description of the “new costume” emerged due to a substantial growth of subscribers and the significance of dress reform for *The Lily* and its readership since its first publication in 1849. They wrote:

Our notice of last month that we would furnish *The Lily* from the first of April for 25 cents has created such an unlooked-for demand for it that the numbers for April and May are entirely exhausted. This month, print an extra number of copies and supply subscribers from this time to the close of the year (seven months) for twenty-five cents, and if desired, the numbers for February and March in addition. We re-publish a description of the “new costume” for the benefit of our new subscribers (11).

By reintroducing the details of this outfit for new subscribers, the publication reinforced the idea that women deserved functional and practical clothing. This emphasis on practicality was deeply tied to the broader women’s rights movement, positioning dress reform and the “bloomer pants.” The Bloomers were also referred to as “The American Custom,” as this attire symbolized American values, representing women’s liberation and independence, while emphasizing the necessary physical comfort and well-being of women (11). The new “costumes” were summarized as being cut “about a foot of their former length,” without a bodice or a “very slight one,” and substituted with a “pair of loose trousers” (11). The description of the shorter skirt and loose trousers challenged restrictive women’s fashion norms of the time, which required “dried baleen corsets,” long skirts, and heavy fabrics that limited mobility (12).

Amelia Bloomer emphasized the practicality, comfort, and freedom of movement in women’s reformed clothing, rejecting excessive layers and restrictive bodices (11). She tried to reassure her more moderate readers that the new outfit would remain simple and modest. Bloomer noted that women’s legs would still be covered, aligning with the idea that showing their legs would be too unconventional and improper. It was essential for the reformers to carefully frame their arguments to ensure they appear logical rather than radical. They needed to avoid accusations of extremism or impropriety.

Importantly, dress reform was about comfort and practicality for middle- and working- class women in their daily lives. Traditional women’s fashion, characterized by cumbersome layers and skirts that could weigh up to twenty-five pounds, made walking and performing household tasks difficult (13). The excessive fabric and long skirt displayed wealth and an idealized feminine silhouette, reinforcing

societal expectations of women (13). In contrast, the new outfit offered women a functional and liberating alternative that would not hinder them in performing household duties. By prominently featuring dress reform, *The Lily* responded to its readers' demands and used printed communication to spread information, shape public opinion, and hopefully normalize the changes. The detailed description of the trousers and skirt provided practical guidance for women who might adopt the style, reinforcing that dress reform was theoretical and a tangible change that women could implement in their daily lives. Through this, *The Lily* fostered a sense of community among like-minded readers by encouraging collective action toward social change (13). Amelia Bloomer made sure to emphasize the practicality, comfort, and freedom of movement in women's reformed clothing, rejecting excessive layers and restrictive bodices (13).

Despite bold efforts, the adoption of trousers sparked significant controversy and resistance. The historian Cunningham notes that in the mid-nineteenth century, trousers, traditionally associated with men's attire, challenged deeply ingrained sex-based norms (14). The readers of *The Lily* responded enthusiastically to the new costume and *The Lily's* increased literature on dress reform in their later editions. For the next few years, until major pushback emerged, reform dresses would appear and be discussed nationwide. Women who wore them in public

risked being ridiculed or being mistaken for actresses or prostitutes. Critics exploited fears that the white, American, patriarchal social structure was in jeopardy (13-14). These fears were expressed through a visual culture in mainstream newspapers that often ridiculed the New Woman for stepping outside their "respected" domestic, private sphere (14-15). These attacks on reform dress reinforced the rigid definition of femininity (14). In September 1851, even the British cartoonists at *Punch* ridiculed American women for their adoption of the Bloomer costume. In the cartoon, the artists integrated themes that reflected American women's radical reimagining of their social positions as seen in the "Bloomerism - An American Custom" (15). In the unflattering image (Figure 2), the women wearing the Bloomers were masculinized, and the children were staring and laughing at their improper conduct (17). Along the other side, the "properly dressed" women in long dresses are also passing judgment on the "outlandish" women (15). This cartoon illustrates how closely tied gender and societal norms are to something as simple as clothing. Women who wore bloomers were perceived as improper or unfeminine, ridiculed, and mocked in cartoons that were widely distributed in mainstream print. Through this, society was able to police their actions and restore the status quo (16).

Nevertheless, in response to *The Lily's* initial discussion of dress reform, Amelia Bloomer's advocacy



Figure 2. "BLOOMERISM - AN AMERICAN CUSTOM" (17)

sparked a broader conversation and interest among a large community of middle-class women, who resonated with similar frustrations. In a section of the paper, “Correspondence,” in the June 1851 issue of *The Lily*, a letter on dress reform from New Hope, Pennsylvania, dated May 20, 1851, was featured. The author’s name was not provided, possibly to protect their identity or reflect the sentiments of a like-minded women’s collective. The letter written by an ordinary individual passionately critiqued restrictive, unhealthy women’s fashion and advocated for the adoption of the “new Turkish dress” (18). It conveyed frustration with traditional women’s clothing and anticipation of dress reform. Examining its contents and arguments provided insight into the movement as it was tied to health, personal liberty, and social change.

Throughout the letter, conventional women’s clothing was vehemently denounced. It condemned the “wicked folly of the long bodice” to which women “cannot be in too much haste to dispense entirely” (18). Following this assertion, the letter leads with the medical consequences of traditional dress:

Let such as see beauty and harmony in distorted spines, compressed lungs, enlarged livers, and displacement of the whole abdominal viscera, together with their sure results, sallow complexion, dull, soulless eyes, trembling limbs, a weary soul in a weary frame— let such seek shelter in their miserable dress-prisons (17).

The hidden physical toll these garments took on women’s bodies is being expressed and exposed, showcasing the urgency of reform. As a result, there is a growing awareness of the detrimental health effects of corsets and other restrictive garments (19) (20).

Beyond the physical harm, the reference to women’s fashions as “dress prisons” could also indicate that such attire symbolized the broader societal oppression of women (21). These impractical and elaborate dresses restricted middle- and upper-class women to the domestic sphere, where women could mimic the function of objects to be admired. Women were often appreciated for their physical attractiveness rather than their intrinsic worth as individuals. This was especially relevant for upper-class women, who were not expected to engage in housework but merely oversee it. Their elaborate and long dresses reinforced the idea that their primary role was to be admired rather than actively contribute to public life.

As an alternative to this harmful and restrictive fashion, the letter strongly advocated for the “new Turkish dress,” expressing an eagerness to learn more about it (21). At this time, dress reform was still emerging in the mid-1800s, and the author had only heard of its benefits. The author noted that this “new form prevails among

sensible people” (21-22). This claim suggested that those prioritizing logic and well-being promoted these changes. This advocacy enabled dress reform to connect with and support the broader struggle for women’s autonomy. It did so by sensibly asserting that women should have the right to choose clothing based on practicality and health rather than societal expectations. Unsurprisingly, frustrated women would adopt trousers for comfort and mobility (21).

Resistance and hesitation to this fashion reform would arise as women began to wear trousers in public, disrupting the “natural order” (21). Despite reforms offering clear and necessary advantages, many women hesitated to adopt them, fearing public scrutiny and the stigma of being different (21). In the eyes of social arbiters, this unconventional public image defied sex-based norms and challenged deeply ingrained expectations of femininity. Resistance reflected the difficulty of enacting change in a society where such norms were deeply ingrained (22). Clothing was not an individualistic choice but a political and social statement, hence why reforming the traditional dress challenged societal expectations and pushed the boundaries around women’s autonomy. The Turkish dress became more than just a practical garment; it emerged— intentionally or unintentionally— as a symbol of open-minded thought and personal liberation.

The letter correspondence from New Hope, Pennsylvania, served as a powerful testament to the early struggles the dress reform movement faced. In closing, it stated:

The object of my letter, I wish to know how to make the Turkish dress. Will you write me soon! The season advances, skies grow bluer, forests more luxuriant in greenness and fragrance each advancing day, and who can enjoy these as God designed, with our present cumbersome dress? Yours for the enfranchisement of woman (21; 23).

In particular, these end remarks explicitly connected clothing reform, a seemingly minor aspect of women’s lives, to the broader movement for women’s rights and enfranchisement (24-25). By advocating for comfortable, non-restrictive clothing, the writer reminded the audience that fashion should not be merely an aesthetic aspect but also a matter of health, freedom, and social equality. To support these assertions, advocates of dress reform would associate moral and patriotic qualities with its simplicity, practicality, and modesty (24). The poetic mention of nature in the letter’s conclusion worked to cleverly invoke the idea that abandoning restrictive fashion would allow women to engage more fully with the world around them. This engagement, in turn, represented a metaphorical escape from oppressive constraints, allowing women to be the best versions of themselves. Ultimately, the letter emphasized



Figure 3. "WOMAN'S EMANCIPATION" (August 1851) (26).

the belief that true liberation required both political rights and personal autonomy, including the right to choose one's own attire.

Early Dress Reform and Its Growing Appeal to Social Reformers

When analyzing "feminist" periodicals of the mid-1800s, it is crucial to consider how authors and readers responded to, engaged with, and occasionally challenged the mainstream press. During the 19th century, and as the United States continued to develop, the newspaper became the ideal and vital source of cultural and intellectual exchange. With urbanization and industrialization, Americans no longer got their news through word of mouth and relied on newspapers and publications to help navigate the "expanding" world. Likewise, feminist periodicals reported on national and international events related to the women's rights movement, which either aligned with conventional thought or offered dissenting perspectives. In the 1850s, and in light of the new interest in dress reform, traditional authors, editors, and artists presented women's

suffrage and the associated dress reform movement as a ridiculous threat to established values. A striking example of this appeared in 1851 when *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* reprinted "Woman's Emancipation," an engraving. Originally intended for a British audience to mock Americans, the illustration was reprinted by an American newspaper to ridicule women's rights activists and fashion (21). *Harper's Magazine*, a widely read mainstream publication catering to an educated Northern audience, covered literature, politics, culture, finance, and the arts. It was first published in June 1850 in New York City and edited by Henry Raymond, a noted abolitionist (21). Popular, mainstream publications like *Harper's* utilized pictures and cartoons to mock and discredit the women's rights and dress reform movements.

The "Woman's Emancipation" engraving (Figure 3), published in 1851, showcased six women who had adopted bloomers—a symbol of dress reform—as laughable and unfeminine (26). The women were depicted wearing exaggerated versions of bloomers, with skirts much shorter than those actually worn and a mix of top hats and bonnets. Some women were drawn carrying canes, and one was smoking a cigar—elements meant to suggest an

inappropriate adoption of masculine habits. To the far right, a woman provocatively lifted her pant leg to reveal an ankle, while another to the far left, shows a woman dressed in a bulky overcoat and standing with her hands in her pockets in a relaxed and masculine stance. Meanwhile, the only man in the scene is depicted riding away on horseback, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and holding a whip— a picture of true manhood. His inclusion suggested his departure from an uninhabitable, feminized world. Additionally, the two women in the background are shown linking arms—an image that, in the context of the period, may imply homosexuality or highlight the growing importance of female friendships. All these depictions reinforced the conservative anxieties about gender roles and social change (26).

Accompanying this image was a letter signed by Theodosia Eudoxia Bang, entitled “BEING A LETTER ADDRESSED TO MR. PUNCH, WITH A DRAWING, BY A STRONG-MINDED AMERICAN WOMAN” (27-28). Upon research through historical records, there are no records of Theodosia Eudoxia Bang, which means the name could be a pseudonym. From the article’s signature, the only identifiable information was the Greek letters: ΦΔΚ, which stands for Phi Delta Kappa (27; 29-30). If the name is a pseudonym, this article provides an insight into what British men thought these “strong-minded” American women represented and offers their misguided “viewpoint” to the masses. The letter can be identified as satirical as it is written to “Mr. Punch”—a puppet character from the traditional English puppet show “Punch and Judy” (27; 29). Mr. Punch was an entertaining figure who was often depicted as being mischievous and violent (27; 29).

In the “strong-minded” women’s letter, Theodosia Eudoxia Bang declared that women in the U.S. had emancipated themselves, deviating from prevailing societal expectations for women. Exaggerating the effects of dress reform, the author states that women had “abolished the odious distinction... of man, woman, and child” (27). The radical abolition of gender arises as American political women were actively challenging traditional values, from rigid sex-based norms to heteronormativity. The letter contrasted the rapid progress of women’s rights in the newly founded country with the more conservative conditions in Europe. Dramatically noted, women escaped the “degrading cares of the household” with the help of “American female delivers lectures, edit newspapers, and similar organs of opinion” (27). The author wrote:

With man’s functions, we have asserted our right to his garb, and especially to that part of it which invests the lower extremities. With this great symbol, we have adopted others— the hat, the cigar, the paletot or the round jacket. And it is generally calculated that the dress of the Emancipated American female is quite pretty—

as becoming in all points as it is manly and independent (27).

Bang’s letter positioned the emancipated, “strong-minded” women in a unifying patriotic sentiment and as being distinctly outlandish and American. To grab the attention of the European audience, she concluded by proclaiming that strong-minded women like herself intended to bring these “enlightened” ideas to Europe. The letter purposely signaled the global aspirations of the women’s rights movement (27). The editors and publishers of Harper’s anticipated that readers would mock these women, as even many American traditionalists opposed their cause. This shared opposition arose with the fear that even a single shift in the social hierarchy could threaten the entire social and economic order (31).

Continued Discussion of Early Dress Reform (1850s-1860s)

Despite criticism, conversations around the importance of dress reform persisted. In the August 1, 1852, issue of *The Lily*, an article titled “Dress Reform” featured letters addressed to Amelia Bloomer, reflecting continued public engagement with the topic (32). Bloomer would become well-known, then and now, for “her” promotion and adoption of dress reform style— trousers, loose-fitted pantaloons paired with an overdress (33-34). These correspondences highlighted how societal standards and expectations negatively impacted women’s mental well-being and took a toll on their physical health. Reform advocates argued that adopting more practical clothing, such as trousers, promoted both physical health and independence. These letters, published in *The Lily*, were intended to foster public debate (32). Being broadcast in printed media, the article spread awareness and allowed advocates and critics to weigh in on the new pressing and emerging social issues. These letters helped keep the audience informed while subtly challenging dominant narratives. Readers were encouraged to reconsider societal norms.

In this article, two letters written by Dr. Mary F. Thomas and E.P.B. illustrated how dress reform was not just a matter of fashion—physical appearance—but a crucial issue of women’s health, autonomy, and resistance against restrictive societal norms (32). As a vocal proponent of dress reform, Dr. Thomas was a prominent figure in the medical and women’s rights movements (33). She argued that women must free themselves from the burdensome weight of Parisian fashions, which physically deteriorated their bodies over the years of wearing heavy skirts, often making it impossible to stand upright (32; 35). In her expert view, true liberation required women to “investigate the subject” and adopt clothing that aligned with “reason and

common sense” (32). More than a simple shift in style, she claimed that bloomers were a political issue “too intimately connected with the elevation of women to be neglected” (32). Reinforcing this argument, E.P.B. highlighted the slow but steady adoption of reform dress, particularly among the intellectual class, even as aristocratic circles resisted change (33). E.P.B. contrasted the practicality of well-fitted trousers with the inconvenience and immodesty of skirts that dragged through dirt and filth, framing dress reform as a hygienic and liberating choice (32). By the mid-19th century, dress reform became a battleground for women’s health and autonomy (36). Dr. Thomas and E.P.B. directly challenged the prevailing notion that restrictive beauty standards should dictate women’s fashion. Instead, by highlighting the impractical and oppressive nature of the attire, they revealed its physical and social consequences.

Nevertheless, their ideas were still seen as threatening to ingrained sex-based roles. In the mainstream discourse, critics viewed the bloomer costume as a challenge to the established social order (37). In fact, with the growth of images in periodicals, the public gained a new way to receive news and spread social and political commentary (38). “Strong-minded women” and the bloomer costume were “easy” and “frequent” targets in these comic images (38). Satirical pieces like “The Great Bloomer Prize Fight for the Champions Belt” (1851) mocked and trivialized the movement, reflecting the broader backlash against women who dared to defy convention (39). Artists, editors, and publishers seized upon imposing the “Ugly Suffragette” in cartoons and pictures (40). This tactic highlights how the early women’s movement faced negative stereotypes and ridicule, with “political” women portrayed as unattractive and masculine threats to societal norms, prompting suffragists to counter these images with their own visual campaigns (40).

In the context of social movement, early on, the Bloomerites strongly believed that the costs of continuing to wear the reform dress were greater than the benefits (41). However, with the bloomer costume’s radical design, symbolizing women’s broader liberation, it ultimately failed to gain lasting acceptance. Many women chose not to adopt bloomers as they found them unflattering, radical, and a disturbance (42). According to Dexter Bloomer’s account, Amelia Bloomer herself came to this realization. He explained that women reformers like Amelia abandoned dress reform as it became a distraction rather (42). Backlash towards bloomers overshadowed more pressing issues, such as women’s access to education, employment, and voting rights (43). Other influential figures like Stone, who initially embraced the bloomer style, also reverted to more traditional fashion upon realizing the need to focus on substantive reforms rather than clothing (42). Following one after the other, the Bloomerites had come to realize that more straightforward and simple changes would

have to occur before women would be able to challenge conventional notions of beauty. Reflecting on the decline in support around the dress reform movement, Susan B. Anthony reflected:

I learned the lesson then that to be successful, a person must attempt but one reform. By urging two, both are injured, as the average mind can grasp and assimilate but one idea at a time. I have felt ever since that experience that if I wished my hearers to consider the suffrage question, I must not present the temperance, the religious, the dress, or any other besides, but must confine myself to suffrage (44-45).

Ultimately, reformers suspended dress reform efforts, emphasizing that achieving women’s rights in other realms was more urgent. By 1865, most women had returned to wearing skirts, although they had become more practical and fashionable. The invention of the crinoline—a lightweight wire structure that achieved the desired bell shape without needing multiple petticoats—helped this transition by diminishing the physical effects of traditional women’s dresses (43).

PART II (1869-1900)

Health Concerns & the Adaptation of Dress Reform (1870s-1890s)

In the 1870s, the medical and health field in the United States underwent a significant revolution, with a greater shift towards hygiene and preventive measures (46). This new awareness of the importance of personal health and hygiene impacted the daily lives of Americans. In various newspapers, articles with medical guidelines and informative material were published. Personal hygiene, complemented by elaborate fashion, became a mark of refinement and beauty for the middle and elite (46). One’s clothing style denoted both profession and social class; moreover, women seeking a job found success based on what they wore and their proportions (46). Although the perfect silhouette was impossible for women to achieve, restrictive corsets were heavily advertised as their solution and as a crucial statement of style (46).

With this rise, doctors and reformers began to express their concerns about the harmful nature of the corsets. Health advocates saw women’s health and dress reform as necessary due to the tight laces of the corset, the restrictive undergarments, and the weight of clothing (47). Health reformers were less aggressive and less radical than other social reformers, who had been greatly discouraged in their efforts at dress reform (48). They deemed the corset necessary for a woman’s wardrobe and avoided challenging

the boundaries between femininity and reform (48). However, their moderate approach would ultimately leave the issue unresolved, prompting suffragists to revisit and reassert the need for dress reform as part of their broader fight for equality.

Revival of “Dress Reform” with Beauty is Pain (1870s)

In the 8th Issue of Volume 4 of *The Woman’s Journal*, in its main section, a letter from Lucia E. Blount touched on the subject of “Dress Reform” once again (49). Letters like Blount’s were written to the newspapers in response to previous articles published, indicating that the audience was engaged with the content delivered. Blount wrote from Evansville, Indiana, Feb 7th of 1873 with the “hope somebody [would] write on this subject for the JOURNAL every week, until something practical is set a going—then I shall be ready, with, I hope, hundreds of others, to act” (49). A year later, she launched the city’s first book group—the Ladies Literacy Club, and later, in 1886, established the city’s first suffrage organization. That same May, she hosted a parlor meeting in her home, gathering women “known to be interested” to discuss forming a local suffrage movement (50).

Blount’s ambition and advocacy for dress reform aligned with the movement’s origins in 1851(50). In her letter, Blount revealed the physical toll of traditional women’s clothing, writing that “the usual back-ache, headache, and dragging sense of weariness inevitably follow” from wearing fashionable attire (50). She noted that she adopted a modified version of the “American costume” worn in Dansville, NY, emphasizing that “no one can know the comfort of it until they try it on” (50). Her conviction was clear: women’s health and overall well-being were directly tied to their clothing. Blount firmly asserted that “all other reforms will come easily when women are dressed to keep reasonably healthy,” suggesting that physical liberation was a necessary foundation for broader social and political progress (50).

However, despite the apparent health benefits of dress reform, societal resistance remained strong. Blount acknowledged these obstacles, citing both “husband’s prejudices to overcome” and “the stupidity of many women” as barriers (50). Her frustration reflected a broader struggle within the women’s rights movement—external societal norms and internalized familial expectations hindered progress. Through her advocacy, Blount challenged both men and women to reconsider the impact of fashion on women’s lives. The submission of Blount’s article is perplexing, given that support for bloomers had been rejected, even by Amelia Bloomer, by 1865 (51). One possibility for this re-emergence was the slow spread of information regarding dress reform in the Midwest and Western states. Alternatively, and most likely, Blount, like

other frustrated women, may have sought to revitalize the discussion.

Despite dress reform’s slow progression and the decline of the bloomers, select individuals recognized the health concerns of reforming women’s traditional dress. The dress reform movement first began in 1851, but then faced significant opposition, forcing it to be dropped by some and adapted accordingly by others. Critics claimed that it challenged deeply ingrained societal norms regarding sex-based roles and female appearance. Many critics viewed it as threatening traditional morality and the established social order. They wept over the proposed idea that women lost their “mystery and attractiveness” (52). Detractors moaned that women were “desexing themselves,” which would create “catastrophic results for the American family and hence for all American civilization” (52). Even the reformers’ friends and family were “unhappy” with their dress reform efforts (52). In this way, dress was both an indication of one’s sex-based assignment and a way of limiting that person to their “sex assignment.” In the United States, men were expected to wear pants, coats, and shirts, whereas women wore dresses, skirts, shirtwaists, and other clothing, which identified them as “female.”

Debates Over Dress Reform & Their Reclamation of Health (1870s)

A year later, after Blount’s article, on January 3, 1874, *The Woman’s Journal* published an advertisement for the upcoming Anti-Fashion Convention, scheduled for January 20th and 21st at Plum St. Hall in Vineland, New Jersey (53). This advertisement served as a call to action, urging women to attend the convention to reclaim their equality by contributing to the discussion and taking control of their physical and mental well-being (53-54). According to the description, the event aimed to promote a new, more practical style of dress—referred to as a “Natural System of Dress”—and would, once agreed upon, it would align with women’s roles and responsibilities (53).

At the opening of the advertisement, the organizer expressed concern that women were not engaging in the “pressing demands of the hour,” which they argued contributed to their lowered social status (53). Among these “pressing” issues included the prevailing fashion of dress, which was argued as “destructive to Physical Health, Mental Vigor, and Moral Power” (53). Importantly, the authors also reminded women that they inherently possessed equality but had been unjustly denied it by men. The organizers invited and strongly urged like-minded individuals to gather at the convention to express their thoughts on dress reform and reclaim women’s lost equality. At the convention, they would establish a common standard for reformed women’s attire and explore how dress reform could serve as a crucial step in the broader fight for women’s rights. The signers

at the end of this call to action included Mary E. Tillotson, Susan P. Fowler, Olivia F. Shepard, Lucinda S. Wilcox, M.D., Ellen Dickinson, and A.W.M. Bartlett, M.D. (54).

Notably, Mary Tillotson organized this convention, which would become the country's first "Anti-Fashion Convention." She believed that physical freedom in dress would enable women to become more mentally engaged and socially aware—an idea that many at the time found deeply unsettling (55). In that same year, Tillotson founded the American Free Dress Association, which remained active for three years (56).

Covering the first Anti-Fashion Convention, the *New York Times*—a mainstream public news source—published a report on January 21, 1874, detailing the first day of the "Anti-Fashion Convention" (57). From a mainstream perspective, the article noted that the female reformers planned to launch "a thunderbolt" against fashion retailers such as "A.T. Stewart, Mme. Demarest, Lord & Taylor, and other tempters of female vanity," whom they saw as perpetuating harmful fashion norms (57). Further, in their description, the *New York Times* explained that Vineland, New Jersey, was the only place in New Jersey where such a convention could occur, as it was known for its culture of "free thought and free life" (57). The town was claimed to be home to anti-fashion reformers, Spiritualists, and others who could coexist due to shared tolerance for unconventional ideas (57).

While detailing the convention's events, the article highlighted its logistical challenges, most notably, Vineland's remote location, which made travel difficult. The writer correlated this difficulty to the lack of outside attendees and the turnout of mostly residents. Furthermore, despite a collective desire for reform, the convention struggled to achieve unity. Among the many proposals discussed, the *New York Times* included Olivia F. Shepard's striking and radical resolution: "Resolved, That when the mother puts her girl into petticoats and her boy in trousers, she seals the girl's doom as a slave, and gives the boy a title-deed of ownership which he records and presents against her whenever in the afterlife, she asks for equal rights with him" (57). This bold statement, purposely chosen, captured the reformers' over-the-top and expressive rhetoric. The reformers were portrayed as extreme in their conviction that fashion was central to women's oppression. As the first day ended, trying to dismantle the efforts of these women, the *New York Times* revealed that it would report the following day, as the journalists were eager to see how the conversations would evolve (57).

On January 22, 1874, the *New York Times*, a traditionalist newspaper publication, released an update entitled, "ANTI-FASHION: SECOND DAY'S PROCEEDINGS OF THE VINELAND CONVENTION (57). The article summarized the breadth of discussions as irrelevant, remarking that "to recapitulate all that was said would be impossible and

perfectly useless" (57). The author did acknowledge the sensibility and role Mrs. Duffy played. Mrs. Duffy was elected Chairwoman, described as a symbolic move demonstrating that a prosperous fruit grower and a woman who wore pants could represent the city's sentiments.

Interestingly, the author revealed that the day began with a secret session at Plum Street Hall at 9 a.m., in which men were excluded. The convention then resumed publicly at 10:30 a.m. with the reading of letters (57). One of the session's focal points was the public display of reform dresses. Women who wore reformed attire were invited onto the platform for observation and critique. A resolution was introduced with further deliberation, proposing that participants agree to wear their dresses four inches from the ground, provided that at least twenty-five women would commit to the change (57). Despite the convention's efforts, discussions were found to have led to no definitive outcome, and it was decided that names would be collected after adjournment. The *New York Times* article critically concluded, stating that Vineland's activism had only succeeded in tarnishing its reputation as the movement took place in a town with "free lovers and lunatics" (57). Vineland, New Jersey, was established in 1861 by Charles K. Landis and intentionally located to be a separate community, serving as a cultural mecca that welcomed all newcomers (58). The people of Vineland were very open-minded and allowed to discuss issues such as women's rights and the abolitionist movement (59). The mainstream newspaper's retelling of the event associated the town and the dress reform overall with sentiments of being unnatural, unsupported, and radical.

Seven months after the Anti-Fashion Convention in Vineland, on August 29th, 1874, *The Woman's Journal* published an announcement made by Mary E. Tillotson (60). In the hopes old sentiments would be stirred, the article read that "the American Free Dress Association [would] hold its first Annual Convention at Child's Hall, Painesville, Ohio, September 2d and 3d, 1874" (60). The emergence of a reform costume in the 1850s and 1860s drew ridicule from the mainstream media, which created tension and division between dress reform advocates and the women's suffrage movement (61). The Bloomer costume had become negatively associated with radical causes, complicating efforts to balance the promise of personal transformation with the need to build widespread support for fundamental social change. By the 1870s, a new group dedicated to the cause had revived interest in dress reform (62). Although women's fashion had undergone slight modification, it remained restrictive and unsuitable for physical activity. In response to past criticism and trying to renew enthusiasm for reform, one of these women, Tillotson, promoted the Bloomer as a "science costume," which became central to the newly organized American Free Dress League (62-63).

In her article, Mary Tillotson emphasized that

“able speakers will be in attendance, and the whole subject will be thoroughly and scientifically treated” (64). By highlighting the presence of experts, she positioned dress reform as a serious and scientific issue rather than a matter of personal preference. The movement sought to reform fashion not for aesthetic reasons but for health and practicality. Moreover, Tillotson argued that “the problem of a suitable and hygienic dress depends not only on the well-being of Women but the very existence of the race,” implying that restrictive clothing such as corsets and heavy skirts negatively impacted both women’s health and future generations (64). Women, as bearers of children and caretakers of families, needed to ensure their physical well-being was supported. Therefore, fashion that prioritized aesthetics over function hindered their ability to carry out their domestic responsibilities. Traditional fashion limited their mobility, compressed their bodies, and even affected their reproductive health.

Writing on this first meeting of the American Free Dress League, Historian Patricia A. Cunningham found that the idea for this organization occurred on the last day of an Anti-Fashion Convention held in January of that same year in Vineland, New Jersey, as written about above (65). To show their regard for equality, the organizers elected a man and a woman to share the various offices. In September of 1874, in Painesville, Ohio, members of the *Ohio Press* and the *Northern Ohio Journal* were present for the meeting. Notably, Tillotson’s attire was described as a short dress worn with bloomers (66). One unsympathetic journalist referred to her outfit as “aggressively ugly” (66). Covering the meeting, several reported on its activities, the resolutions offered by Mary Tillotson, the organization’s constitution, and the text of the speech given by Darius Allen (67). However, the press coverage was largely unfavorable, portraying these dress reformers as a “radical group” while admiring the more conservative stance of prominent women’s rights activists such as Stanton, Julia Ward Howe, and Mary Livermore, who did not attend the event (67).

In 1875, *The Woman’s Journal*, Henry B. Blackwell, Lucy Stone’s husband, provided those interested with an important update on the Dress Reform Convention’s stance:

We comply with the request because we desire to see women adopt a mute, healthful, and convenient costume and to discourage extravagance in dress. But we doubt whether the subject will be promoted by public discussions in miscellaneous gatherings of both sexes. Dress reform is a subject that primarily concerns women themselves. For men to discuss in public the question of how women shall dress, or even to be present at such discussions, seems to us as impertinence and more likely to do harm than good (68).

This statement reflected the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA)’s unradical nature of dress reform, as these women sought the adoption of “a mute, healthful, and convenient costume” (68). Ironically, the publisher—a man—was one of five children raised in a strict Calvinist household (69). Henry Blackwell was instilled from an early age with egalitarian beliefs about gender and race. His father’s—Samuel Blackwell’s— involvement in the abolitionist and women’s suffrage movements deeply influenced him, shaping both his values and future activism (70). In 1850, while traveling through Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, Henry Blackwell became a founding member of the Literary Club of Cincinnati—a space for open discussions on literature and contemporary issues (70). He connected with influential figures through the club, including his future wife, Lucy Stone.

Writing urgently and informatively, Blackwell and the AWSA “doubt[ed] whether the subject” could be pursued at that time, as both sexes have lacked coherent public discourse on women’s clothing (68). The stance included the word “impertinence,” suggesting that there was a general discomfort with men engaging in discussions about women’s issues, especially with their historical role in shaping gendered norms (68). The message asserted that this issue entirely “concerns women themselves,” acknowledging that women should have autonomy over their attire (68). Thus, there was a concern that male participation could be intrusive or patronizing, but it also raised the question of whether excluding men from the conversation might hinder broader systemic change. Overall, like many of the articles, this update was published to spread information and moral support on dress reform and to assist those who could not attend.

The Unfinished Journey and the Long Road Ahead (1888-90s)

In 1888, the International Council of Women, which focused on the suffrage movement, met in Washington, D.C. to re-address the issue of dress reform (71). Stanton and Anthony founded the Council to unite suffrage leaders from the United States, Great Britain, and France. They aimed to foster “unity of thought, sympathy, and purpose” while challenging ignorance and injustice (71). By the 1890s, with the formation of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, while suffrage had become the central focus of the women’s rights movement, dress reform and the bicycle emerged as both literal and symbolic markers of women’s independence (72). Suffragists argued that a woman who cycled could visit friends or run errands freely, no longer reliant on men (72). The movement embraced bicycling and its associated clothing as the culmination of the unfinished 1850s dress reform efforts.

In 1891, the International Council of Women

established a subcommittee on dress reform to develop a practical yet stylish “business dress” for women, balancing functionality with aesthetic appeal (73). The Committee identified three ideal garments it recommended women adopt: the Syrian dress, the gymnasium suit, and the American Costume (73). The movement gained wider recognition when the Dress Reform Committee presented its recommendations at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago (73-74). As part of the exposition, the “World’s Congress of Representative Women” was held in the Women’s Pavilion, drawing over 200,000 attendees. During the event, 330 speakers addressed various women’s issues, many wearing the Syrian dress, the gymnasium suit, or the American Costume (74). The dress reform movement was prominently represented by National Council of Women members, who lectured on the health risks of restrictive clothing and advocated for more practical attire.

By 1891, the women’s suffrage movement had undergone a dramatic transformation. Facing persistent setbacks and recognizing that a unified front would be more effective than two separate organizations, the American Woman Suffrage Association (AWSA) and the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) merged to form the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) (75). Amidst broader struggles, Stone remained an outspoken advocate, addressing not only suffrage but also issues like dress reform, despite facing ridicule and disappointment. In *The Woman’s Journal* Vol. 22, No. 34, August 22, 1891, she reframed the conversation around dress reform by calling it “Improvement in Woman’s Dress,” emphasizing its normality, practicality, and impending aesthetics (76).

To emphasize the practicality of her argument, Stone referred to Mrs. Margaret Shaw Ingersoll. Mrs. Ingersoll was a prominent Boston figure who expressed frustration with the impracticality of traditional skirts, especially in inclement weather—an objection likely raised many times before (76). The improvements to women’s dress Stone advocated for would be shorter and “adapted for rainy weather,” hoping it would become “enough of a favorite to be worn in all kinds [of weather]” (76). Stone jokingly claimed that the most contentious aspect of reform would likely be the footwear, as the dress reform efforts maintained the important societal notions of modesty. She suggested that the purpose of women’s clothing be designed to give her an identity, protect her modesty, and enhance her natural God-given beauty rather than to keep up with the latest and most elaborate fashion trends (76).

In addition to functionality, Stone addressed “the courage it will require to use a style of dress not sanctioned by custom.” She stated, “Forty years ago, several women adopted a dress [...] and then gave it up” (76). Here, Stone exposed that past dress reform efforts had partly failed because they neglected beauty’s importance (76). To

improve dress reform and women’s dress conditions, Stone emphasized the need for designs that balanced practicality with elegance (76). Under the cult of true womanhood, beauty, and femininity were so intertwined that they were synonymous (77-78). Even women advocating for suffrage and equality could not escape these expectations, understanding that beauty was central to their identity and social acceptance. After all, if a woman was not beautiful by society’s standards, was she truly a woman? (77-78). While advocating for the right to vote and pushing for legal protections concerning property, labor, and personal autonomy was an uphill battle, these efforts still largely kept women within the confines of their prescribed sex roles, specifically regarding beauty. Challenging beauty norms and stepping outside conventional feminine aesthetics would have been unfathomable to the readers of the 19th century. Beauty was a cultural ideal, deeply embedded into sex-based concepts and often weaponized to keep women in their place and not talk about real issues; if beauty standards were rejected, reformers would have been met with greater resistance. Many feared that if women abandoned societal beauty standards, they would blur the lines between being a man and a woman. Women would become horrid and indistinguishable from men and compete for public power, disrupting long-held ideals of domesticity, gentleness, and decorum (78-80). The real fear was that women gaining rights would lead to them shedding the traits that had defined womanhood for centuries.

On August 22, 1891, Blackwell shocked his audience with his emotionally charged article, “Fashion’s Slaves,” published in *The Woman’s Journal* (81). Understanding his white male privilege and using his activist background, Blackwell actively spoke out against acts of injustice and women’s lack of rights. In his article “Fashion’s Slaves,” Blackwell harshly criticized past women’s fashions, arguing that styles previously deemed acceptable were “evidently grotesque, inconvenient, and obstructive” (81). This opening statement and usage of the term “slaves” evoked sentiments of injustice. In the wake of the Civil War, using the woman-slave analogy, Blackwell attempted to create a community of women united in their efforts to combat the slavery of fashion and the disenfranchisement of women. The woman-slave analogy was used to discuss the adverse effects of fashionable dress on both body and mind (82).

Unlike previous articles on the subject, it can be inferred that Blackwell specifically targeted and singled out the male reader. Early in the article, he wrote: “Let any man not accustomed to physical activity imagine himself surrounded by a hoop skirt, circumscribed by a pall-back, encased by a corset, or surmounted by a bustle, and he will cease to wonder at the prevalent feebleness and ill-health of women” (81). By highlighting men’s inability to comprehend or feel the restrictive nature of women’s fashion, Blackwell challenged their authority to speak and critique women’s

call for dress reform. He argued that it was hypocritical for men to judge women for rejecting restrictive clothing that physically hindered them. Blackwell narrowed in and included all the details the dress caused on the body. Fashion was accused of discouraging “muscular activity,” and “every vital organ was functionally obstructed or mechanically distorted” (81). Fashion’s singular mission was to make the women “beautiful” (81). In its concern only with appearance and the separation of the two sexes, fashion disregarded the most fundamental concerns about women’s health and well-being, exposing its cruelty and impracticality.

To further critique the imposition of traditional fashion and society’s blind adherence to it, Blackwell controversially questioned, “But what is beauty? Not a work of art, but a gift of nature” (81). He suggested that “truly” beautiful women could make any attire doable and acceptable, while those considered “less” attractive were expected to conform to styles that concealed their perceived flaws (81). Appearance, regardless of fashion, determined societal acceptance of women and left women at the hands of their counterparts’ judgment. However, Blackwell contended that the “existing style of women’s dress” was even more degrading because it enforced a uniform standard that masked individual differences (81). He criticized skirts as “an injurious attempt to conceal individual personal deficiencies by shrouding all women in flowing raiment, and by placing unnatural excrescences upon their backs, bosoms, and shoulders” (81). Fashion, he argued, not only physically restricted women but also reinforced oppressive beauty standards that stifled individuality and creativity. Rather than prioritizing practicality or self-expression, milliners and dressmakers capitalized on conventional beauty ideals to manipulate trends for profit.

Boldy, Blackwell asserted that “fashion’s slaves” would be freed at once only when a “rational reformed dress would come to stay” (81). A dominant theme, Blackwell drew on the dramatic connection between fashion and slavery. He dramatically underscored the extent of oppression imposed on women, who were forced to conform to restrictive and impractical clothing (81). As a solution, Blackwell advocated for a shift toward practical and natural clothing that complemented the human form without exaggeration or discomfort. He called for a comparative study of fashion across cultures and historical periods. At both the beginning and end of his work, Blackwell expressed gratitude to Benjamin Orange Flower, editor of the liberal commentary journal *Arena* (81). In the September 1891 issue, Flower devoted thirty pages to chronicling the evolving trends in women’s fashion over the preceding thirty years (81). All of the images of the costumes are “evidently grotesque, inconvenient and obstructive,” that is, until the image of dress reform.¹⁶⁷ Blackwell

praised Flower’s “frank and fearless” commitment to the cause, recognizing his efforts in *Arena* as an inspiration for promoting more functional and sensible attire (81). Praising the outspoken support of Flower’s efforts elevated the movement’s visibility. It serves as a compelling example that might motivate other men to engage with and advocate for dress reform.

In his conclusion, Blackwell shifted the responsibility for dress reform back into the hands of the women. He stated, “Every woman [...] can avoid extremes, and study health and comfort in her own costume” (81). He urged women to reject the extreme fashion trends and make personal choices that prioritized health and comfort, even in the face of ridicule. While this statement was meant to empower women to make better choices, it also implied they were partly to blame if they remained complicit in their oppression.

As a final reflection, dress reform revealed how deeply fashion is intertwined with women’s efforts to claim autonomy, challenge norms, and push change. Women’s fashion represented their suppressed and limited societal place. Hence, “formal” calls for reform around clothing were made while intersecting with other women’s rights-based issues, such as growing concerns around health and personal hygiene. The dress reform movement was heavily influenced by the call for change in women’s roles, which was first articulated in July 1848 at the Seneca Falls Convention in Seneca Falls, New York (83). These women’s primary concern was the right to vote, but they were also interested in protecting women’s rights within marriage, women workers’ rights, and the right to dress as they pleased. Pants—a key aspect in the suffrage movement—continued to appear in various forms and for different purposes until they finally became acceptable—the knickerbockers (84). Similarly, at both the beginning and end of the uphill battle of dress reform were doctors and health professionals who criticized the restrictive, impractical, and unhealthy nature of women’s dress.

CONCLUSION

In the 19th century, the United States rapidly transformed, sparking “radical,” unconventional debates about the role and rights of women. The dominant, traditional ideal was the “Cult of True Womanhood,” emphasizing piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (77). While many middle- and upper-class white women embraced this as natural, others challenged its restrictive norms. Providing a space for conversation towards hostile and restrictive constraints, “radical” women-operated periodicals emerged. *The Lily* and *The Woman’s Journal* aimed to elevate “[the] status and usefulness [of women] to society.” With a “strong-minded” or “radical” viewpoint, they advocated for maximum autonomy and

freedom, leaving little tolerance for compromise. *The Lily's* publication ran and covered the early mid-1800s, from 1849 to 1855, whereas *The Woman's Journal* covered the later 19th century, as it was active from 1870 to 1931. Together, the two women-operated newspapers show the full evolution in the conversation and agenda around women's limited status, rights, agency, and dress reform. To their success, the suffrage press educated an audience of women, created a sense of community, and altered women's private and domestic image.

REFERENCES

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2. Karen J. Kriebel, "From Bloomers to Flappers: The American Women's Dress Reform Movement, 1840-1920" (PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1998), 2-3.
3. Nathaniel Orr, Amelia Bloomer in Her "Bloomer Costume," October 1851, Black and White Photograph, 8 x 10 in. (20.32 x 25.4 cm.)
4. Seneca Falls Historical Society, <https://nyheritage.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16694coll96/id/16/>.
5. Amy Jacobson, "Bloomer, Amelia: Publisher and Advocate for Woman's Rights," Social Welfare History Project, May 17, 2016, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/woman-suffrage/bloomer-amelia/>.
6. Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent State University Press, 2003), 39.
7. Orr, Amelia Bloomer in Her "Bloomer Costume."
8. Dexter C. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, Boston: Arena Publishing Company, 1895, 68.
9. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, 65.
10. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, 66-68.
11. "New Costume," *The Lily: Devoted to the Interest of Women*, vol. 8, no. 6, June 1, 1851, 47. Note: It is important to note that most secondary literature on Amelia Bloomer has been on dress reform. A key example was Bloomer trousers, loose-fitted pantaloons often paired with an overdress.
12. Julia Petrov, "'A Strong-Minded American Lady': Bloomerism in Texts and Images, 1851," *Fashion Theory* 20, no. 4 (August 7, 2016): 14.
13. Marlise Schoeny, "Reforming Fashion, 1850-1914: Politics, Health, and Art - Historic Costume & Textiles Collection," April 14, 2000, <https://costume.osu.edu/2000/04/14/reforming-fashion-1850-1914-politics-health-and-art/>.
14. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 32-33.
15. Laura Ping, *Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses': Women and Dress Reform, 1820-1900*. PhD diss., The Graduate Center, City University of New York, 2018, 271-273.
16. Amy Kesselman, "The 'Freedom Suit': Feminism and Dress Reform in the United States, 1848-1875," *Gender and Society* 5, no. 4 (1991): 502.
17. John Leech, "BLOOMERISM - AN AMERICAN CUSTOM," Punch, September 27, 1851, in *Victorian Era Cartoons from Punch*, accessed April 19, 2025, <http://punch.photoshelter.com>.
18. Kopetzky, Abigail. "Imagery of the American Suffrage Movement: The Strategic Implementation of Traditional Gender Roles." *UCCS Undergraduate Research Journal* 15, no. 2 (2022). <https://www.uccs.edu/urj>.
19. "Correspondence," *The Lily: Devoted to the Interest of Women*, vol. 8, no. 6, June 1, 1851, 47. Note: The "Turkish" dress, with its full, loose pants, was named for the long tradition of similar attire worn by women in the Middle East. It's significant that Amelia Bloomer and other dress reformers adopted this terminology, especially considering that "foreign" styles, particularly from the Middle East, were often viewed as exotic, immoral, or unpatriotic in 19th-century America. This choice of terminology may have both intrigued and alienated audiences, as it framed the movement within a context seen as unconventional or radical. Opponents of the dress reform movement responded to the "Turkish dress" with hostility, harassing women and using political cartoons to stoke fears about gender roles and societal change. On the other hand, as Cunningham noted, Turkish dress also lured and excited some. Fashionable young men and women in Europe would mimic the style and wear similar attire for leisure, masquerade balls, and informal portraits. For further discussion on the political and cultural implications of dress reform: *Reforming Fashion, 1850-1914: Politics, Health, and Art*, Ohio State University Historic Costume & Textiles Collection, accessed April 14, 2000,
20. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 37.
21. "Correspondence," 47.
22. Ping, *Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses'*, 175.
23. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 37.
24. Ping, *Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses'*, 147.
25. Ping, *Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses'*, 264; 300.
26. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 41.
27. "Woman's Emancipation," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1851, The Project Gutenberg, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/38409/38409-h/38409-h.htm#WOMANS_EMANCIPATION
28. Petrov, "'A Strong-Minded American Lady.'" 11-13. Note: On page 11 of "'A Strong-Minded American Lady' [...]" Petrov explored what the editor of Harper Magazine might have found so amusing about an image that was targeted to a British audience to make fun of Americans. She suggests that Henry Raymond was willing to tolerate mild satire that "impinged" on American patriotism if it prompted deeper reflection on women's proper behavior and fashion. At the time, both fashion and the women's rights movement were seen as "the great common folly of the Western world," making them acceptable and even expected targets of critique, even by Americans themselves.
29. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 42.
30. Note: Phi Delta Kappa International, Phi Delta Kappa International, accessed July 29, 2025, <https://phideltakappa.org>. However, not sure if Phi Delta Kappa is the organization to which this newspaper was referring, as the organization was formalized in 1902. The purpose of

- Phi Delta Kappa was to unite hard-working men who sought to give back to their local communities.
31. Petrov, "A Strong-Minded American Lady," *Fashion Theory* 20, no. 4 (August 7, 2016): 14. Note: Petrov noted that the appearance of Bloomerism abroad politicized the issue into something beyond the amusing desire of women for equality and into a danger for American foreign relations. She stated, "If this is how American progress is seen abroad, the cartoon and 'letter' may have said to readers, then we will have none of it."
 32. "Dress Reform," *The Lily: Devoted to the Interest of Women*, vol. 4, no. 8., August 1, 1852.
 33. Molly O'Hagan Hardy, "Cross-Dress and Gender Expression: Re-Considering Amelia Bloomer," *Past Is Present* (blog), September 29, 2017, <https://pastispresent.org/2017/good-sources/cross-dress-and-gender-expression-re-considering-amelia-bloomer/>.
 34. Eloise Seda, "The History of Bloomers," Tatter, August 27, 2022, <https://tatter.org/the-history-of-bloomers/>. Note: Although Amelia Bloomer advocated for dress reform, secondary sources often generalize her efforts and achievements to this one area. As a result, most of the literature on her is centered around dress reform and the "bloomers." Hardy and Seda's work exposed Bloomer's advocacy for gender expression and cross-dressing. Hardy found that the history of bloomers, as a garment, evolved beyond Bloomer's initial advocacy, influencing later movements for women's rights and fashion reform. She stated, "Bloomer appears both masculinized and hyper-feminized all at once."
 35. "Dr. Mary Thomas," Morrisson-Reeves Library, Richmond, Indiana, <https://mrlinfo.org/history/index.htm>. Note: This source also discussed how Dr. Mary Thomas's commitment to women's issues extended beyond her work with the paper—she became the first woman to address the Indiana State Legislature in 1859, where she presented a petition calling for a married women's property law and a woman suffrage amendment to the state constitution. Although the legislature did not take her presentation seriously, her determination remained unshaken. After the Civil War, Dr. Thomas continued her work for suffrage, eventually becoming president of the Indiana Woman Suffrage Association and even serving a one-year term as president of the American Woman Suffrage Association.
 36. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 4, 14. Note: Ping found: "Fashion remained a way for elite women to assert their social power, but for critics it reinforced the notion that women were far too frivolous to participate in politics."
 37. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 70.
 38. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 70-72.
 39. Lauren Hewes, "The Acquisitions Table: The Great Bloomer Prize Fight," *Past Is Present*, November 22, 2016, <https://pastispresent.org>. Note: In The Great Bloomer Prize Fight for the Champions Belt (1851), the image depicts a large figure representing Amelia Bloomer engaged in an illegal bare-knuckle boxing match—a "masculine" arena. She is half-naked and wearing the "bloomer" pants. On Bloomer's left, a second kneeling man holds a bottle of alcohol in one hand while offering Bloomer the "Champion's Belt" with the other. Interestingly, to her right is a crying woman dressed in bloomers. This woman is sitting on the knee of a male figure who seems to be "saving the day" as he signals the need to be put to an end. This man's "heroic action" may reflect the idea that men must "rescue" women from the dangers of stepping out of traditional roles. Unlike other comics or images, this lithograph simultaneously sexualized bloomer wearers while placing them in male situations for entertainment. Images like this were used to contribute to the fear that dress reform would cause chaos and disarray in society, breaking down gender lines. Laura Ping noted that although aware of critics' fear, most reformers avoided any engagement with these derisive illustrations. However, the abolitionist and women's rights advocate Francis D. Gage lashed out in a 1852 letter, as seen published in the February 1, 1852, issue of *The Lily*.
 40. Allison Lange, "From Mannish Radicals to Feminist Heroes: Suffragists in Popular Culture," U.S. National Park Service, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/>.
 41. Kesselman, "The 'Freedom Suit,'" 504.
 42. Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, 70, 77.
 43. Robert E. Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," *American Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1963): 400-401.
 44. Kesselman, "The 'Freedom Suit,'" 504
 45. Kriebel, "From Bloomers to Flappers," 52.
 46. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 172-175.
 47. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 192
 48. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 201.
 49. Lucia E. Blount, "Dress Reform," *The Woman's Journal*, February 22, 1873, 59.
 50. "Lucia Blount," *Evansville Vanderburgh Public Library*, May 5, 2022, <https://www.evpl.org/posts/lucia-blount/>.
 51. Note: The Dress Reformation and the adoption of bloomers, initially a symbol of women's liberation from restrictive fashion, did not have long-lasting success. While the bloomer costume offered comfort and freedom, many women found it "unflattering." In 1865, dress reform re-emerged and returned to a more practical version of the long-length skirts. (These findings and insights can be found in the following sources: Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 39; Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, 70, 77.)
 52. Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," 393.
 53. "Anti-Fashion Convention," *The Woman's Journal*, January 3, 1874, 5.
 54. Note: This advertisement also appeared in *Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly*: "Anti-Fashion Convention," *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly*, January 24, 1874, New York, 14. However, the advertisement being published on January 24th, 1874, is peculiar since it was hosted on January 20th and 21st. Maybe they published to keep their audience aware that such an event was occurring rather than to get them to attend. *Woodhull and Claflin's Weekly* was a radical, woman-run newspaper that became America's most notorious publication during the second half of the 19th century. More information on this newspaper can be found at: "Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly by Victoria Woodhull, Tennie Claflin on James E. Arsenault & Company," James E. Arsenault & Company, <https://www.jamesarsenault.com/pages/books/8489/victoria-woodhull-tennie-claflin/woodhull-claflin-s-weekly>.
 55. "Dress Reform Education," *The Woman's Journal*, Saturday, August 29th, 1874, 278.

56. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 56.
57. "ANTI-FASHION: THE CONVENTION AT VINELAND, N.J.," *New York Times*, January 21, 1874, 5.
58. Patricia A. Martinelli, "History Column: Free Thinkers Once United in Vineland," *Daily Journal*, October 7, 2014, <https://www.thedailyjournal.com/story/news/local/2014/10/07/history-column-free-thinkers-united-vineland/16811399/>.
59. Martinelli, "History Column," October 7, 2014, <https://www.thedailyjournal.com/story/news/local/2014/10/07/history-column-free-thinkers-united-vineland/16811399/>.
60. Mary E. Tillotson, "Dress Reform Convention," *The Woman's Journal*, Saturday, August 29th, 1874, 278.
61. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 44-45.
62. Kesselman, "The 'Freedom Suit,'" 497-503. Note: Attacks on the reform dress clarified the meaning of femininity in nineteenth-century America and refocused women right advocated to focus on key issues. Women's rights leaders reasoned that more basic changes would have to occur before women would be able to challenge conventional notions of beauty. However, they were in complete agreement about which change would be most crucial.
63. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion*, 45. Note: Cunninham revealed that to Tillotson, the words "free" for them meant "freedom of the individual to decide on needs and styles of dress, and fiscal freedom from waiting pressure, restraint and impediment of styles."
64. Tillotson, "Dress Reform Convention," 278.
65. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 45.
66. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 135.
67. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 48.
68. Henry B. Blackwell, "Dress Reform Convention," *The Woman's Journal*, February 20, 1875, 57.
69. "Henry Blackwell, Abolitionist Born," *African American Registry*, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://aaregistry.org/story/henry-blackwell-abolitionist-born/>.
70. Noah Allyn, "Henry Browne Blackwell," *Colorado Encyclopedia*, accessed March 29, 2025, <https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/henry-browne-blackwell>.
71. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 279.
72. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 278.
73. Ping, "Throwing off the 'Draggling Dresses,'" 281.
74. Paul Greenlaugh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World Fairs, 1851-1939* (United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 2017), 181-182.
75. National Archives and Records Administration, "Woman Suffrage and the 19th Amendment," *National Archives*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/woman-suffrage>.
76. Lucy Stone, "Improvement in Woman's Dress," *The Woman's Journal*, August 22, 1891, 270.
77. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 151-174. Note: The idea of beauty and its attachment to what it meant to be a woman was a strategic tool used by critics of women's rights and dress reform. They were able to use this argument to dismantle women's efforts towards gaining greater equality, rights, and freedoms. With dress reform being advocated by many suffragists, the image of the "ugly suffragette" emerged in public discourse. Images of "ugly suffragettes" expose how, due to their "radical" and more liberal-minded ideas, they were portrayed as unattractive and masculine. To deride their movement, this specific imagery showed how they were threats to societal norms and American Values. As a result, suffragists were promoted to counter these images with their own visual campaigns.
78. Allison Lange, "From Mannish Radicals to Feminist Heroes: Suffragists in Popular Culture," *U.S. National Park Service*, accessed March 28, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/from-mannish-radicals-to-feminist-heroes-suffragists-in-popular-culture.htm>
79. Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920*, 43, 155.
80. "Henry Blackwell, Abolitionist Born"
81. Henry Brown Blackwell, "Fashion's Slaves," *The Woman's Journal*, August 22, 1891, 278.
82. Ana Stevenson, "The Woman-Slave Analogy: Rhetorical Foundations in American Culture, 1830-1900 - UQ eSpace" (PhD Thesis, The University of Queensland, 2015), 114, 116.
83. Barbara Arneil, *Politics & Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 3-5.
84. Severson Lopez, "Unlaced," 8, 94-98.



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