Unlaced: The Dress Reform Movement of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

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UNLACED: THE DRESS REFORM MOVEMENT OF THE LATE NINETEENTH AND
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

ANDREA MARIE SEVERSON LOPEZ

Doctoral Program in Borderlands History

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by

Andrea Severson Lopez

2022
Dedication

To Erma Severson “Nana.” Your stories about family history are the reason this dissertation exists. I wish you could be here to read it.
UNLACED: THE DRESS REFORM MOVEMENT OF THE LATE NINETEENTH AND
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

by

ANDREA MARIE SEVERSON LOPEZ, B.A., M.A.

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at El Paso
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Introduction

“Wearing clothing that is extremely tight against your stomach can cause a certain level of gastrointestinal upset…it can push stomach acid back up through the esophagus and cause uncomfortable symptoms of acid reflux.”

For someone who studies dress reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the above quote criticizing women’s clothing is all too familiar. However, this quote does not come from the writings of a nineteenth century dress reformer or the demands of a dress reform club. It is from an online article for Avant Gynecology called “Dangers of Tight Clothing for Women” retrieved in April of 2021. Even a century after the end of the dress reform movement, women’s dress continues to receive scrutiny and similar arguments still circulate on medical websites to those touted by dress reformers a hundred years ago. This study examines the different aspects of dress reform individually with a particular focus on pants and corsets. I argue that dress reform was an important part of women’s shifting roles within society in general. The discourse about what women should wear mirrored the discourse about women’s rights, their involvement in the public sphere, and their roles as wives and mothers.

The late 1800s and early 1900s gave rise to many formalized movements, particularly during the Progressive Era, including women’s rights, temperance, health and, of course, dress reform. This last movement, alternatively known as clothing reform or artistic dress, took place in the United States roughly between 1840 and 1920 and sought to change women’s clothing to make it healthier, less cumbersome, and more practical. On the surface, dress reform appears to be a smaller matter than some of the other social movements of the time such as women’s rights

because of its emphasis on comfort, health, and beauty rather than political influence. However, because of the social connotations that came along with clothing, dress reform encompassed a much broader range of issues than simple aesthetics and did become part of both the social and political discussion of women’s roles in the United States. In many ways, women’s dress reform was about women’s rights. Dress and gender were explicitly linked, meaning that making changes to the established fashion, especially in a time when women’s roles were already undergoing radical changes, became an outlet for the expression of anxieties over gender roles and part of the power struggle that was already going on between the genders due to the women’s movement.

Dress reform in the United States effected the perception of women’s clothing in two opposing ways. On one hand, it added to the criticism of women’s clothing, often placing the blame for any health problems American women suffered on how they dressed. On the other it provided an avenue for women to break down gender barriers by dressing in ways more closely associated with the masculine attire of the day. Though not all dress reformers believed that women should have increased rights, many of them did and they acted upon these desires in their attempts to make women’s clothing healthier and more practical. Understanding both sides of the effect that dress reform had on women is crucial to understanding the nature of dress reform as both an agent of change and an example of policing women within American society.

Though the dress reform movement incorporated many types of clothing, my study focuses mainly on pants and corsets. This is because these two articles of clothing still hold cultural significance today based on the ideas spread by dress reformers: pants for being revolutionary because they allowed women the freedom of movement men enjoyed, and corsets for being outdated “torture devices” linked to feminine repression. In this way, these garments
represent the goals of the dress reform movement. One was an instrument of control that dress reformers wanted to cast off, and the other was representative of the liberation that they wanted to adopt.

The formal dress reform movement grew out of several different intersecting conversations that were taking place in the mid-nineteenth century. The roots of dress reform began with doctors and medical professionals who criticized the restrictive nature of women’s dress, much as the opening quote does modern women’s clothing. A growing concern for health and a search for new methods of improving it through non-traditional means also played a role in spreading dress reform ideology, particularly a form of alternative medicine known as hydropathy, also called the water-cure. Followers of hydropathy believed that they could cure almost anything, with water either applied externally or by drinking it. Another major factor that influenced the dress reform movement was a change in women’s roles due to the birth of the Women’s Movement, which formally began in July of 1848 with the first Women’s Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York. A small group of women abolitionists, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, realized that they themselves did not have the full rights of citizenship they were fighting for on behalf of enslaved people and so they formed their own movement to address the inequality between men and women in the United States. Their main concern was the right to vote, but they were also interested in protecting the rights of women within marriage, the rights of women workers, and the right to dress as they pleased.

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Finally, dress reform designers took an increased interest in classical Greco-Roman art and architecture that influenced and inspired dress reform styles. The Pre-Raphaelite movement started as an art movement in England but grew to encompass literature and dress as it spread across the Atlantic to the United States. Dress reformers who followed this movement promoted a style known as “artistic dress,” which embraced the natural physical form as shown in Greek and Roman statues. The Venus de Milo, for example, became part of the discussion concerning the perfect female form. Followers of artistic dress held it up as a perfect representative of the natural shape of women as opposed to the corseted look that was popular in their time.4

However, while these external forces helped to push dress reform into mainstream culture, it was the distinctive social constructs of United States society that shaped the way that discussion ultimately transpired, particularly regarding colonization and Americanization. To understand the dress reform movement and the reasons behind both its successes and failures, this study specifically looks at the connection between dress and other social constructs such as gender, modesty, respectability, power, and Anglo-American notions of civilization, especially in terms of manifest destiny and westward expansion. For this reason, I will focus specifically on dress reform and its effects in the United States because aspects of American culture, such as American exceptionalism and manifest destiny, interacted with dress reform in unique ways that provide fertile ground for study. Anglo-American dress, including the corset, became part of the colonization process, which complicated the discussion of dress reform. The most important of these social constructs is gender because it encompasses all the other categories and had the most long-lasting effects on the way Americans view dress.

4 I feel inclined to note here that the irony of holding up a sculpted image as being more “natural” than the bodies of actual women seems to have alluded them.
Another important aspect of dress reform is its connection to gender and gender roles. Social expectations in the United States meant that men wore pants, coats, and shirts, while women wore dresses, skirts, shirtwaists, and other clothing specifically linked to their status as female. Dress reformers proposed changes to this status quo, especially in the case of pants for women. In this study, I view gender as a space that Anglo-Americans attempted to define and control. Dress was both an indication of gender and a way of gendering another person. This meant any change to dress that pushed into the realm of the opposite gender (like pants pushed into the masculine) or abandoned a shape associated with femininity (like the feminine hourglass silhouette provided by the corset) could cause concern about “proper” gender norms. This was problematic because the prevalent paradigm of the nineteenth century was “essentialism” in which objects, or in this case people, expressed traits that were an innate part of their existence. Gender essentialism has been used in feminist theory to represent the idea, long since rejected, that masculine and feminine traits are fixed aspects of male and female identity rather than something assigned by the culture in which an individual resides. Modern feminist theory rejects essentialism because of its confining nature, since individuals may or may not express the traits culturally attributed to masculine and feminine identities. However, in the nineteenth century, men and women were still placed in boxes as to how they “should” express gender and clothing was an important way of doing this.

What makes my analysis of dress reform unique is the precise focus on leaders in the movement, their influence, and their effect on cultural perceptions of gender. This is not to ignore the voices of ordinary individuals and less prominent members of the movement, who are equally important, but is an attempt to trace the history of dress reform through its leadership. In this study my goal is to follow the paradigms of dress reform to their earliest occurrence and
look only at sources that gained a wide audience and shaped the discussion of dress reform through their visibility. This narrower focus also helps to slim down the extensive body of literature that mentions dress reform in one way or another, often from sources who might not be trying to engage with the movement at all other than to mention its existence.

**Shifting Styles: A Basic Overview of Popular Fashions 1810-1850**

As previously mentioned, the purpose of the dress reform movement was to convince the average white woman in the United States to change their mode of dress and rid themselves of what reformers argued were harmful elements in clothing. Therefore, before jumping into a discussion on dress reform it is important to present a bit of background on the types of clothing that were popular leading up to the start of the dress reform movement and what specifically dress reformers found objectionable. It is also important to define who exactly the dress reformers were, which organizations and groups were behind the main thrust of the movement.

There were local city and neighborhood groups that dress reformers belonged to, usually women’s clubs, and on a national level they often wrote for and subscribed to dress reform publications such as *The Lily* and *Dress* in the late nineteenth century. In fact, individual dress reformers tended to be a more nebulous group whose strongest sense of cohesion was rooted in the publications listed above and the notable figures who wrote for and owned them. Therefore, when I use the term dress reformers for the purpose of this work, I am referring to people who supported dress reform by subscribing to or writing for these publications as well as doctors who wrote articles for medical journals, and other authors who published books and articles advocating for reform. Obviously, each individual within the movement had their own thoughts, and I will highlight examples of dress reformers who made an impact on the nationwide movement due to their visibility and outspokenness, but the term dress reformers in general
refers to people in American society who supported a shift in women’s fashion to eliminate or revise corset use, get rid of tight clothing (sleeves, waistbands, etc.), eliminate long skirts and, in some cases, introduce pants for women. Most dress reformers generally believed in accomplishing the same basic changes, their primary goal being the eradication of the corset. However, they also called for the elimination of long skirts that dragged on the ground collecting germs, and high collars, which they claimed restricted the movement of the neck. In addition, most reformers felt that women should suspend the weight of their clothing from the shoulders rather than the waist, which had more vital organs and was therefore more vulnerable to pressure.

Though these goals were part of the dress reform movement, dress reformers are most widely remembered for promoting pants and calling for the elimination of the corset. These were really their most important issues and the ones that they fought for the longest. While other tight clothing was also objectionable, the corset was the primary representative of tight clothing and they considered it the most potentially damaging. Similarly, the other important garment promoted by dress reformers was pants. The roots of dress reform as a political movement began with the invention and promotion of a form of pants known as bloomers that went under a shortened skirt and tapered in at the ankle. The initial reaction to these garments was favorable

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but it soon turned to ridicule so strong that many promoters of the style gave up on it all together. However, this did not cause bloomers to disappear completely. Pants continued to show up in various forms and for different purposes until they finally did become acceptable as street wear for women in the form of knickerbockers.  

Dress reform became widespread at a time when fashions were getting more and more exaggerated with excessive fullness in the skirt and in the sleeves. The clothing at the beginning of the 1800s was much less restrictive than that of the mid nineteenth century. Women in the 1810s did not wear restrictive corsets, and their dresses were slender with a high waist as shown in Figure 1. Skirts got wider and rounder moving towards the mid-nineteenth century until women wore large bell-shaped hoops known as crinolines that fell all the way to the floor and stuck far out from their bodies as shown in Figure 0-2. The new styles of the mid 1800s were not so much out of the ordinary, as they were a return to older fashions from the eighteenth century which also had wide skirts and wide sleeves, since women’s clothing throughout western culture was generally quite restrictive. In effect, the early 1800s were really a brief reprieve from the confining nature of women’s clothing, which fashion designers returned to immediately afterwards.

The primary focus of the dress reform movement was the corset, an undergarment alternately referred to as stays or, in some cases,  

![Figure 0-1: Formal Dress 1805 Taschen, The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute: Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century. (Kyoto Fashion Institute) pg. 140](image)

![Figure 0-2: 1865 Crinoline Taschen, The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute: Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century. (Kyoto Fashion Institute) pg. 243](image)

7 Figure 0-1: Formal Dress 1805 Taschen, *The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute: Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century.* (Kyoto Fashion Institute) pg. 140

8 Figure 0-2: 1865 Crinoline Taschen, *The Collection of the Kyoto Costume Institute: Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century.* (Kyoto Fashion Institute) pg. 243
jumps. There were small differences between stays and jumps based on the amount of boning used in these garments, but these differences were so minor that they really made no difference to reformers who treated both garments with equal disdain. This stiff and thickly lined garment developed over hundreds of years in Europe and, later, the United States. Women had worn some form of corset since at least the late 1400s. It began as un-boned fabric wrapped around the torso to cinch the waist. Later it became stiffer and more restrictive and early corsets included a wooden busk down the center front to show off embroidery work on the front of the dress and make the appearance of the bodice as smooth as possible. Dressmakers in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries made some early stays from cloth, but they made others out of metal. These squeezed the body into an X shaped silhouette. The use of corsets as undergarments continued until the early 1800s when the empire waist fashion made them unnecessary. Instead, women replaced traditional stays with less restrictive underclothes. However, with the return to a more fitted style in the mid 1800s, the corset returned as well, and its shape only grew more restrictive as the century wore on due to the popularity of small waists. The corsets of the nineteenth century were made from more pieces of fabric than earlier styles. The more pieces used in constructing a garment, and the more contoured the shaping of these pieces, the closer it can fit to the body. This meant that the nineteenth century corset had more potential to cinch in the waist than earlier corsets.

Dress reformers are also remembered for their attempt to promote pants as a style for women. In fact, the first cohesive dress reform movement formed in support of the bloomer. This at first seemed an elegant solution to some of the problems women faced when wearing long

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wide skirts because it presented women with a way of wearing a shorter dress over visible pants. They were still covered up and still feminine, but the clothing was easier to move in and more appropriate for everyday tasks. However, the close association between the women’s movement and the bloomer movement, changed the perception of Americans towards women who adopted the style, especially since prominent members of the women’s movement including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Lucretia Mott adopted the style. Pants were already considered a masculine garment, and the fact that the lead promoters of visible pants for women were also involved in campaigning for women’s suffrage and women’s rights, played on the fears of traditionalist American society that women were attempting to usurp men’s roles, influence, and social standing. For the most part dress reformers were middle- and upper-class white women as they were the ones with enough social standing to challenge the status quo. This does not mean that there were no dress reformers in the working class or among women of color, but the limits of the social class structure in the United States made it easier for middle- and upper-class women to participate in dress reform clubs and wear dress reform clothing in public.

**Dress Reform in Historical Literature**

Books relating to a variety of topics including historical clothing, the women’s movement, the health movement, and social propriety in the nineteenth century mention the movement. Yet only a handful of works written between 1950 and the present address dress reform specifically. Of those that do, they primarily focus on either the corset or the bloomer and connect these garments to other topics such as fashion evolution. My work draws on this historiography, but it is also unique in that it looks specifically at dress reform as a movement in its own right. I focus mainly on tracing the history of dress reform in the United States from beginning to end with particular focus on pants and corsets. I view this study as part of a broader
discourse about the changing socially accepted roles for women. Like other works, this study emphasizes the importance of clothing for sending a message concerning gender, conformity, sexual “purity,” or even rebellion.

A change in silhouette in the 1950s prompted a resurgence of interest in dress reform. This climate led to the publication of *The Bloomer Girls* by Charles Neilson Gattey in 1967. Gattey gave an accessible and entertaining account of the bloomer movement connecting it specifically to the women’s movement and to popular figures associated with women’s suffrage such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and, of course, Amelia Bloomer. In the latter half of his book, he argued that the early dress reform movement related to the pioneering spirit of American women during the nineteenth century. His book examined the history of the bloomer, connecting it to political and religious beliefs throughout the end of the nineteenth century, particularly women’s rights.\(^\text{11}\)

Gattey limited his scope specifically to the first bloomer movement, whereas a discussion of bloomers only makes up a part of my study. I examine the use of many different forms of pants as well as corsets and the cultural perceptions that surrounded them. However, some of those perceptions were formed by Anglo-American colonization of the frontier and this is where I intersect most with Gattey. Though Gattey’s notion that bloomers were part of the American pioneering spirit are outdated, based more on older paradigms of American exceptionalism and rugged individualism, westward expansion was an important part of American culture in the second half of the 1800s and Gattey shows that it did indeed influence dress reform. When Amelia Bloomer traveled to Council Bluffs in western Iowa to promote women’s rights and dress reform, her journey inspired other women’s rights activists to do so as well, adding an

expansionist component to the movement. This is an important theme in my work as well, though I examine it as a part of the colonization process rather than as reward for American exceptionalism. Gattey claimed that Stanton and other activists “went to the very verge of civilization, wherever two dozen or so voters could be assembled.”\(^\text{12}\) The terminology that Gattey used and the way he discussed dress reform as part of expansion is problematic, describing the frontier as an empty space on the edge of “civilization.” However, this does echo the viewpoints that white Americans had about the west during Bloomer’s time. During her travels, Bloomer had to assure her friend Miss Vaughan from home that she was “not surrounded by hordes of savage Indians and in danger of falling victim to the tomahawk and scalping knife as some people in the East imagined.”\(^\text{13}\) Writing in the 1960s, Gattey did not have the benefit of the same cultural sensitivities of modern historians, but he was accurate in claiming that dress was often used as part of the Americanization process and dress reformers did attempt to spread their messages on the western frontier. My study attempts to recontextualize the work of dress reformers on the frontier from a post-modern perspective. I view dress reform as an aspect of colonization on the frontier as much as it was an instrument of liberation for Anglo Women. Therefore, Gattey’s examination of dress reform on the frontier was the most influential part of his argument in terms of informing my own work.

In the 1970s, some scholars began to consider the continued use of corsets and two authors in particular, Helene E. Roberts and David Kunzle, debated what the use of the garment meant for feminism, particularly in a time when second wave feminism was at its peak. Helene E. Roberts argued that clothing in the nineteenth century defined gender roles, and the continued use of girdles, corsets, and other waist-cinching devices showed a continuation of clothing as a

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 153.
\(^{13}\) Ibid., 143.
means of control over women’s bodies. However, not all scholars of the period agreed with her assessment. Kunzle wrote a response to Roberts’ work in which he examined tight lacing both historically and more recently in the 1970s. He argued that images of the corset had become associated with female power and even male subjugation. He did not dispute the fact that Victorian society used clothing as a means of control, but he believed that the idea of tight lacing enslaved the male population more than the female because it placed women in a position of sexual power. To prove this argument, he pointed to 1970s practices of tight lacing, which were associated with the sexualization of women, and he proposed that this modern idea must have begun somewhere in the original use of the corset.  

Both articles dealt to some extent with the legacy of corsets in the modern context more than my study, which mainly focuses on corsets during the nineteenth century when they were an indispensable part of women’s wardrobes. Roberts and Kunzle were studying corsets through the lens of second wave feminism and comparing corsets contemporary to the 1970s and corsets from the 19th century. Though the objective of these articles was different from mine, their discussion of corsets as representations of gender roles and the debate about whether they represent female oppression was influential to my work. I tend to agree more with Robert’s view of corsets in the nineteenth century than Kunzle’s. However, Kunzle was correct in his argument that the image of corsets has changed over time and did become more sexualized by the 1970s.

In the 1980s, historians were more interested in how both men and women used clothing as a means of enforcing gender conformity. Claudia Brush Kidwell and Valerie Steele examined this question in their work *Men & Women: Dressing the Part* published by the Smithsonian.

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Institute in 1989. This work was intended for a general rather than a scholarly audience, which shows that the public was interested in historic dress. In their work, Kidwell and Steele argue that gender roles were very specific throughout the nineteenth century and “dressing the part,” that is clearly displaying one’s adherence to gender norms through dress, was important for one’s overall acceptance in society. This argument informed my understanding of dress reform as part of an overall system of social expression through clothing which had an effect on how accessible dress reform fashions were to the average American woman in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also explained why it took so long for dress reformers to realize their goals.

What was influential about this work in terms of my study was its emphasis on conformity. Much of the pushback against dress reform came from a desire to maintain the status quo by conforming to social norms and gender roles. It was mainly middle-class white women who had the freedom to get involved with dress reform. Not all women had the privilege in society that allowed them to step outside of the norm in the way that some of these women were, and the backlash many of them received for doing so discouraged other women, especially those who were not white and middle class, from following their example. This same issue is crucial to my study in terms of who was able to participate in dress reform and who was not. Class and race changed the ability of a person to participate. In addition, because of the close alignment between dress reform and the early Women’s Movement, it was white women who were the intended audience for dress reform publications and the ones most likely to engage in the movement.

In the 1990s, historians expanded upon previous works studying clothing reform including other forms of pants that generally do not get as much attention as the bloomer such as rationals (a garment that became popular at the turn of the twentieth century, which looked similar to the bloomer but were used more for the purpose of exercise) and the American Costume, which was also a similar garment to the bloomer but with less voluminous trousers under the skirt. Amy Kesselman’s article for the journal *Gender and Society* published in 1991 argued that, after the disastrous press the bloomer costume received in the mid 1800s, women who wore rationals and other forms of pants tried to disassociate themselves from the bloomer movement, and to depoliticize the garment. I do agree with Kesselman that it became much harder to popularize pants after the backlash against bloomers in the American public. However, I argue that the bloomer was an important stepping-stone towards pants for women, but one that became popular before American society was ready to accept it.

The new millennium offered a variety of books related to gender and clothing and historians in the 2000s covered subjects ranging from corsets to bloomers and even the flapper fashions of the post dress reform era. In 2000, Angela Latham wrote *Posing a Threat* which argued that women’s clothing in the 1920s represented an outward performance in dress and behavior that defined a woman’ ambitions and presented an image of how they wanted others to see them. The book examined 1920s clothing in relation to health, morality, and identity focusing in particular on the flapper style. It is one of the few books that looks specifically at the outcome of dress reform and how American society continued to question the way that women dressed even after the dress reformers achieved their goals.16

This book was relevant to my study because it effectively demonstrated that the themes dress reformers discussed including health, practicality, and modesty, did not disappear with the corset. They continued in various forms, though they were no longer part of an official dress reform movement. Lantham concluded that clothing was a means of performance and self-expression that showed not only who a person was but how they wanted others to see them. This was clearly the case both before and after the fall of the corset and clothing as a method of social performance is a theme throughout my work.

However, some authors such as Gayle Fischer and Leigh Summers continued to focus on the traditional elements of dress reform such as the corset and the bloomer. These authors were some of the most influential to my work. In 2001, Gayle Fisher wrote *Pantaloons and Power*. She argued that because of the gendered meaning attached to clothing, and pants in particular, American society in general viewed women wearing pants as a sign of the breakdown of social roles rather than as a solution to women’s individual sense of discomfort in tight clothing with long skirts and little freedom of movement. Her book looked not only at the history of the bloomer itself but also its development into other styles. Fischer connected pants to both politics and power and examined their role in the way that men and women displayed dominance through clothing, usually by wearing things that were considered more masculine including suits and rationals. Some men and women saw masculine dress as a way of tapping into male power, which is why the idea of women wearing pants and suit dresses was so threatening.17 This is a premise I use throughout my work as well. I argue that, while the simple act of putting on pants or a suit dress did not immediately grant women power, there was a sense that “dressing the part”

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might provide a steppingstone to male power. The opponents of dress reform believed this as well, which is why they fought so actively against it.

Despite some focus on pants, the corset has always been the core garment with which reformers took issue. The same year that Fischer published her work, 2001, Leigh Summers published *Bound to Please* which examined the history of the corset to determine exactly how widespread its use was. She argued that the corset was essential for understanding the nineteenth century woman and addressed misconceptions such as the idea that only wealthy women wore corsets. Instead, she proved that women at all levels of society could afford corsets and that they wore them even when performing hard labor and while pregnant. This book was important to my study because it connected the corset closely to notions of femininity in the nineteenth century and helped explain why it was so difficult for dress reformers to get rid of corsets. I put a lot of focus on the psychological and cultural aspects of dress reform, which on the one hand pushed dress reformers to adopt new styles and on the other, kept society at large from changing overnight. Cultural perceptions of womanhood and the widespread use of corsets are crucial aspects in understanding dress reform and Summers’ book influenced my view in this area.

Valerie Steele, also in 2001, published her work *The Corset: A Cultural History*. This book is designed to relate to a non-academic audience as well as an academic one. Steele pushed back against the popular notion that corsets were dangerous and confining by positioning their use as something that did not necessarily go against liberation or even health. She instead sought to complicate the history of corsetry and show the many meanings it had for wearers and for society as a whole. Some men and women living in the nineteenth century believed that corsets were healthy, others found it comfortable, and still others just enjoyed wearing it as an

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expression of femininity.¹⁹ She did not dispute the fact that dress reformers of the time, particularly doctors, saw corsets as dangerous and restrictive, but whether this was actually the case is much more debatable. She questioned the accuracy of the claims nineteenth century dress reformers made about corsets. The core of my argument is that dress reformers perceived corsets as dangerous and argued against them mainly for health reasons, however I do not spend as much time as Steele does discussing whether or not the specific claims they made were accurate by modern standards.

Steele’s work was refreshing because there is ample evidence that dress reformers exaggerated the dangers of corsets and a work that complicates that image is important in challenging long held perceptions in American society after years of dress reform literature and discussion. In my study, I recognize the role of exaggeration in dress reform, and I appreciate the time that Steele took to separate myth from reality when it comes to the corset. I tend to take her view of corsets as being less dangerous than dress reformers claimed. I do not make it a point to debunk the claims of dress reformers to the same degree as Steele however, because their claims came from influential medical professionals who were using the best medical judgement of the time. This means that whether or not dress reformers were accurate in their perception of corsets by modern standards does not matter so much because their contemporaries accepted these claims as credible. Steele’s work also differs from mine in that she looks more broadly at corsets in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dress reform is a part of her study, but not the main focus. Still, her examination of corsets and their perception within American culture influenced my own understanding of the subject. As I dove into the primary sources, I found that they generally supported her viewpoints as far as the perception of the corset at the time as

dangerous, and her book was especially influential to my work in the areas where we intersected, particularly when it came to exaggeration in dress reform.

*Coyote Nation* written by Pablo Mitchell in 2005, was one of the more influential books to my study when it came to examining bodily comportment as a form of colonization and dress as a means of social control. This book, though not about dress reform specifically, examined the way in which race, gender, and body politics affected those living in the borderlands between 1880 and 1920. Mitchell argued that the human body, and particularly the race and gender of a person’s body, was an important method of classification in New Mexico at the turn of the last century. Although much of the book examined rape cases, marriage, and reproduction, Mitchell also addressed standards of cleanliness, medicine, and appearance through dress and hairstyle. Mitchell’s book was different from the others because it looked at racialization of the body within the United States rather than specifically discussing clothing and it also demonstrated the importance of appearance and conformity in order to gain acceptance in American culture, especially for groups of people who are not white. His ideas influence my understanding of gender as a form of border. I look at pants as a physical manifestation of the border that divided masculinity and femininity, and therefore I attempt to explore this concept through a variety of pants that American women wore both as part of the dress reform movement and outside of it. I also look at the corset as a representation of Anglo-American culture that was often forced on Native American and Mexican-American women or was adopted by minority groups like African American women, to fit in with white society.

My work sits somewhere at the intersection of all these ideas that influenced it, but it also looks much more specifically at dress reform as an official movement. Because my background

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is in borderlands history, I aim to examine gender from that perspective as a space that American society attempted to define and control but that, in reality, was nebulous. This is where I stand apart from other authors in that the idea of gender as a border is what I hope to contribute to this historiography. I examine themes of control and colonization, which is why books like *Coyote Nation* by Pablo Mitchell, were so important. As Mitchell found in his study, clothing was a part of colonization and Americanization, but it was also a measure of how well any individual lived up to the social expectations of American society. This was a difficult enough task for white middle class women to live up to, for minorities and working-class women it was more difficult and, at the same time, more important to help them gain some acceptance into mainstream culture.

**Dress Reform: A Framework for Study**

The first half of the work is dedicated entirely to pants, a garment that dress reformers continued to push for throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and the item of clothing that met with the most resistance from the general public. It is also the garment most linked to women’s rights and increased freedom in the public sphere. Chapter one examines the start of the formal dress reform movement and its first connections to the women’s movement, as well as nineteenth century politics regarding women’s rights and women’s suffrage, by specifically examining the bloomer and its impact. It argues that the dress reform movement began as part of the women’s movement and incorporated women’s clubs and members of the alternative medicine community. Still, the backlash and the inconsistent message from doctors, proponents of alternative medicine, and dress reformers prevented universal adoption of the style especially for those who did not support the women’s movement. Chapter two looks at the continuation of pants as a part of dress reform after the fall of the bloomer. I argue that pants
were a difficult sell to the public because they represented a physical border between the masculine and the feminine and one that women had to dismantle in order to finally normalize pants in American society.

The second half of the dissertation deals exclusively with corsets, which received the most attention from dress reformers over the longest period of time. Dislike of corsets and tight clothing is at the root of dress reform as a formal movement and preceded the invention of the bloomer, though the dress reform movement was not formalized, meaning it did not have any central leadership, until the invention of the bloomer. Chapter three examines the medical roots of reform and the way in which doctors’ concerns made their way into the general public. However, dress reformers tended to be white middle-class women and not everyone had the same privileges as they did. Corsets, though on one hand considered unhealthy symbols of vanity among northern American white women, had a different connotation on the American frontier where they represented “civilization” to Anglo pioneers venturing into new territory fueled by notions of manifest destiny. Dress styles from the Eastern United States were imposed upon people of color living in the West, particularly in Indian Schools. The corset was one of the trappings of a white middle-class lifestyle and represented cultural uniformity on the frontier. Because of this association between the corset and Anglo culture, chapter four argues that reformers worked to change the perception that corsets represented “civilization” and “westernization” to popularize the idea of giving up corsets entirely. Finally, chapter five examines the actual shift in clothing towards dress reform styles through advertisements and magazine articles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Magazines like *Harper’s Bazaar* and *Vogue* represent a real-world metric of dress reformer’s success. Through the appearance of reform clothing in these popular fashion magazines, we as historians can
assess the changes that dress reformers made and how often dress reformers who were also designers were featured in their pages. The ads document the shift from a world where corsets were incredibly common, to a world where they were relatively rare and certainly out of style for the younger generation. It illustrates the final triumph of the movement and vindicates the dress reformers for all their years of hard work.

Throughout the lifespan of the dress reform movement, 1840-1920, dress reformers writing for magazines and health journals sustained several common arguments that I address throughout my study and all five chapters discuss these themes to some extent. For example, doctors and dress reformers often promoted the idea of corsets as unhealthy for various reasons and drew comparisons to styles that altered the body’s shape practiced in cultures that Anglo American society considered “inferior” to them. However, whenever reformers tried to simply appeal to women’s aesthetic tastes, they found that this approach proved problematic because the prevailing fashions of the day ran counter to reformers’ wishes. In terms of nineteenth century fashion, reform styles seemed “outlandish,” while corseted styles appeared “normal.” In the nineteenth century, most women’s social status absolutely depended upon who their husband was, so they faced pressure to dress in conventional styles to attract possible spouses or to keep the ones they had. Looking “abnormal” was out of the question if a woman wanted to attract a decent husband. In addition, since everyone wore corsets including working class women, expectant mothers, and even men at certain times in history, to go without one would leave a woman feeling self-conscious in public.

Chapters 2 and 5 include discussions of events that served as catalysts and aided the reform movement, building on the work that dress reformers had already done. For example,

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21 One such comparison that reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century often made was between corsets and the practice of Chinese foot binding.
some of the most powerful changes came about during World War I. The war years brought both social changes and increased independence for women that affected the type of clothing they wore. The war also influenced reformers’ arguments and, in a way, softened some of their demands. Rather than calling for an absolute end to corsetry, reformers writing during the war focused on telling women how to wear corsets correctly. However, the real impact of World War I on dress reform had to do with the change in women’s roles that it brought about. The desperate climate of war allowed women to take on new responsibilities, which required clothing that was more practical. This increased access to the public sphere was only possible due to wartime necessity. Therefore, women’s increased presence outside of the home did not threaten the status quo, as it would have otherwise. Women became part of the military; they served as munitions workers, nurses, police officers and in several other positions that required either a uniform or at least the type of clothing that allowed movement for work in traditionally male positions. Still this change was only available to women during World War I because of the efforts of reformers. Consciousness of the benefits of dress reform made their way into the designs of clothing that started to appeal to health. This increased when dress reformers got involved in designing and advertising clothing. Women had filled similar roles during the Civil War, but this did not lead to a widespread change in dress because the dress reform movement was still too new. Dress reformers were far better poised to take advantage of this shift after World War I. By the time America got involved in World War I, the corset was already on its way out and pants had already become more acceptable, allowing the necessity of war to change the fashion permanently.

At the end of the Great War, women found that they not only had a great deal more freedom, including the right to vote, but they were also free from the confines of their corsets.
Dress reform was part of the same conversation as women’s rights and this correlation is part of how dress reform mirrored other connected movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The transformation of dress to reflect the demands of dress reformers did not happen right away. It took years of campaigning against the corset and events beyond the reformers’ control such as the First World War to make a difference. In the end, only the attempts reformers made to work with the fashion world made a difference, as they did not achieve their goal until the accepted styles, which up until the 1920s included corsets, changed to a completely different silhouette in which corsets were unnecessary. However, in the end, most reformers felt that the styles of the 1920s conformed well to their standards and there was no doubt that after decades of struggling with popular fashion, reformers had won an important battle as the corsets of society finally came unlaced.
Pants

Dress reformers called for many changes to clothing but the most controversial and therefore the most visible discussion was over pants for women. Pants are a generally practical garment and provide many advantages and yet the gender roles of the nineteenth and twentieth century placed them out of the bounds of traditional femininity. Still, there were women who found ways of wearing them from time to time and earned a lot of attention, often negative attention, for doing so. The use of pants politicized dress reform in the most explicit way and is therefore still the most memorable part of the dress reform movement. Therefore, it only makes sense to begin a discussion of this topic with its most visible and most controversial issue: pants.
Chapter 1: Bloomers – A Controversial Step

One evening in 1851, hundreds of people crowded outside a building in London to see a woman present a peculiar new American fashion. The event started at 8:30, but a large crowd gathered before 7:00. When the doors finally swung open, a stream of people, mostly men, crowded into a space built to hold 1,200 to 1,500 visitors. There they waited for Mrs. C. H. Dexter to appear wearing the bloomer costume, pioneered by an American woman named Amelia Bloomer, controversial because of its incorporation of pants into a woman’s outfit. In the meantime, the crowd made jokes and rude remarks at the expense of women who wore the outlandish style. When Mrs. Dexter failed to appear at the appointed time, they suggested singing the song, “Buffalo Girls Won’t You Come out Tonight.” Mrs. Dexter never revealed herself, disappointing the hostile crowd.\(^{22}\) She knew the ridicule that awaited her and found she could not show herself. To the people gathered to see her, Mrs. Dexter did not represent a revolutionary, but a curiosity, a woman who willingly gave up her own femininity and dared to assume not only masculine clothing but a masculine role. She had crossed one of the invisible social borders in society that kept women out of the male sphere. Mrs. Dexter was an intruder that needed to be pushed out, kept in her place, and ridicule was the weapon of choice. The reason that she represented such a threat was that she, and other women like her including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer, were taking a first step towards freedom not only socially, but in their dress as well.\(^{23}\)

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\(^{23}\) Figure 1-3: The bloomer costume “Bloomers a Fashion Revolution”, Victorian Magazine, (September 9, 2014) http://www.victoriana.com/bloomer-costume/
The bloomer, also known as the short dress or shorts, and sometimes as the “freedom dress” or the American Costume, was a bifurcated garment that fell to the ankles and was worn under a skirt that terminated just below the knee. They were normally quite billowy to disguise the shape of the leg and make the pants seem as skirt-like as possible. The bloomer costume was made in a variety of colors and fabrics fitting the fashion sensibilities of the period. The style as show in figure 1, was invented in the United States by Elizabeth Smith, a cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and activist in the Women’s Movement, which began in Seneca Falls, New York. Amelia Bloomer later popularized the style when she included a picture of herself wearing the garment in her publication *The Lily*. Because of her public display of support for it, this new fashion became widely known as the “bloomer” and from there it made waves in countries around the world. Even though the incident described above did not go well for Mrs. Dexter, *The Argus*, a newspaper in Melbourne Australia reported that Dexter did give a lecture on bloomers at the Literary Institution on John Street in London to a crowded room of both men and women on Monday January 26, 1852. On that night, she wore black satin with a white collar. Her
bloomers were of black silk, full at the top and tight at the ankle. Australian newspapers supported the fashion, arguing that America was ready for change and relating their hopes that England was as well.\textsuperscript{24} Londoners, however, were stunned at the fashion and \textit{Punch} magazine picked up the story in an article by Thomas Snarlyle, who used unflattering terms to describe the bloomers shape and appearance. He stated, “About the six weeks, ever since when this rampant androgynous bloomism first came over from Yankee land. A sort of shemaledress you call bloomism…Trousers tight at ankles and for most part filled; tunic descending with some degree of brevity perhaps to the knees.”\textsuperscript{25} This description shows that Snarlyle’s concern that, even though the dress did not really look masculine, it did not look feminine either. The lack of obvious gender coding through clothing was a concern especially at a time when the Women’s Movement was questioning gender roles. The reaction against bloomers in America was strong enough to drive them out of existence within a decade of their appearance, but the reaction in England, a country that generally supported dress reform in other ways, calling for a return to pre-Raphaelite styles with the Artistic Dress League, was far worse. Meanwhile, the fact that Mrs. Dexter took the garment all the way to England shows the ardent push for bloomers in the 1840s, but it also shows the reason the movement fizzled out, because the reaction against bloomers made the attempt to popularize them unfeasible.

The question is, why did this garment cause such a stir in a time when it was clearly the most sensible fashion for women to wear and received praise from within and outside of the Women’s Movement. By the 1840s dress styles included multiple petticoats, later replaced in the 1850s by crinolines, which was made of an underskirt stiffened with steel or whalebone, but both styles were much more difficult to move in than the bloomer costume. The problem was

\textsuperscript{24} “MORE BLOOMERS IN LONDON.” \textit{Argus (Melbourne, Vic.: 1848 – 1957, January 28, 1852)} 3.
that the push for bloomers occurred before the world was ready for it. The style was mainly promoted by three specific groups: the Women’s Rights movement who only adopted the style for a short time, a disparate group of dress reformers who managed to put together a formal association during the short time that bloomers were in use by women, and supporters of alternative medicine who existed on the fringes of medical science at the time. The style initially came from members of the Women’s Rights Movement such as Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Amelia Bloomer, so its connections there are obvious. The dress reformers differed on what they wanted as far as reform but, for a time between 1856 and 1864, the bloomer united them into the National Dress Reform Association headed by Dr. James C. Jackson of Glen Harbor. The water-cure referred to a fringe movement that believed in the application of cold water to different parts of the body to induce healing. However, they also supported a variety of daily habits and forms of dress to improve health, including the use of bloomers and the elimination of the corset. The Water-Cure Journal included articles promoting the bloomer costume in almost every issue from the time of its invention until long after it had fallen out of favor. Though their cures had a more psychological than physical impact, they were forward thinking in their opinions of women believing that they were the physical and intellectual equals of men and therefore they supported a change in the strict separation of the male and female spheres.26 The fact that these groups were all to some extent outsiders to mainstream society made it less likely to become popular. The bloomer was ahead of its time, the idea that women could, and should, wear some form of pants could not be forgotten so easily, but at the time that the bloomer immersed society was not yet ready to embrace it. Still, bloomers remained in the cultural consciousness long after they fell out of favor allowing for a later

resurgence. Bloomers were a first step towards freedom for women, not only in their social roles but freedom in their dress.

**Bloomers and the Birth of Dress Reform**

The best place to look when considering the invention of the bloomer is the women who lent her name to the garment, Amelia Bloomer herself. Mr. and Mrs. Bloomer lived in Seneca Falls, which was the right place at the right time to get involved in the budding Women’s Movement. Bloomer’s husband, Dexter C. Bloomer, wrote a biography of his wife that included many of her original letters and writings. In this book, he chronicled not only her political involvement but also her famous association with dress reform. Bloomer’s husband acknowledged the troubles that women in the mid-1800s faced and connected them to the common law of England. He called these laws brutal in the way that they merged the identity of the husband and wife and took away the individual agency of the wife in the legal sense. He explained that,

> Without him [the husband], and apart from him, she [the wife] could hold no property, make no contracts, nor even exercise control over her children. If she earned money by whatever means, she could not collect it. Her time and her earnings belonged to her husband; and her children, when above the age of infancy, could be taken from her by will or otherwise and committed to the charge of strangers. On the decease of her husband, the personal property acquired through their joint efforts and industry passed at once to his heirs, through the legal administration of his estate; while the wife was turned off with a bare life estate in one-third of the real property standing in his name at the time of his decease.\(^{27}\)

Bloomer’s writing shows the continuing close link between English law and American law. Because the later was based on the former, they preserved patriarchy in similar ways. In her book, *No Constitutional Right to be Ladies*, Linda K. Kerber discusses the relationship between British patriarchy and the burgeoning American republic. She claims it, “was simultaneously

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patriarchal and antipatriarchal, holding a liberal ideology of individualism in ambivalent tension with the old ideology of patriarchy.” She argued that, while on the one hand the colonists rejected the patriarchal rule of a king, they kept the patriarchal system intact within families and based their laws on the laws of coverture in England. Because of the restrictions on women in Amelia Bloomer’s time, both men and women began to stand up to oppose these laws. The first meeting to discuss the issues women faced took place in Wesleyan Chapel on July 19, 1848, in Seneca Falls. Prominent attendees included Frederick Douglass, Lucretia Mott, whose husband James Mott presided at the event, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a lawyer’s daughter who was already active in the abolitionist movement, having attended abolitionist events on both sides of the Atlantic. However, she would soon become more well-known for her involvement with the Women’s Movement. Bloomer was also in attendance at the event though, at the time, she had only been modestly involved in the Temperance movement and had not thought about women’s rights apart from how the laws of coverture affected her in her own life. Attending the convention made her think more about women’s rights and she became increasingly active in the Women’s Movement thereafter.

Bloomer’s activism quickly led to the idea of publishing a temperance paper. When she first reported this to her husband, he was skeptical about how she would manage to do it, and even admitted to actively discouraging her from it in his biography. Despite his objections, Bloomer became editor of the paper and threw her energy into making it a reality. The result of her efforts was the Lily, which, according to Bloomer, was the first publication devoted entirely to women’s interests and, as far as she was aware, the only paper owned, edited, and published

29 Bloomer, Life and Writing of Amelia Bloomer, 32-35.
by a woman. It included articles from notable members of the women’s movement, including
Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who usually wrote under the pseudonym of “Sunflower.” Because of
this publication, Bloomer became very influential in the Women’s Movement and even
introduced two of the most famous women of the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton,
and Susan B. Anthony, to each other in the Spring of 1850.30

The connection between Bloomers and the women’s movement is important because they
were invented by Elizabeth Smith Miller, who was active in the Women’s Movement and
became famous through their promotion in the Lily. In addition, prominent members of the
Women’s Movement associated with Amelia Bloomer and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were the first
to wear the new style. The real credit for the inventing the bloomer belongs to Elizabeth Smith
Miller, a cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton. She designed the first version of what would later
become known as the bloomer and visited Mrs. Stanton in Seneca Falls wearing the garment.
The only reason that Amelia Bloomer so often gets credit for the style is because she was so
widely seen wearing in the Lily in 1851. By that time, Smith had already been wearing the
costume abroad for several months and both her husband and father approved of the style. Soon
after, Mrs. Stanton took up the new costume as well.

The public notoriety of the bloomer began with an article on dress reform that appeared
in February 1851, after a writer in the Courier, who did not agree with the Women’s Movement,
advocated wearing Turkish style pantaloons (that is wide pants that were tight around the ankles)
and skirts reaching just below the knee instead of the common style. He was the first to publicly
mention that a style like what would later become the bloomer might be beneficial for women.

30 Ibid., 41-46, 65.
He condemned women’s typical fashion as inconvenient, unhealthy, and uncomfortable. In the words of Mrs. Bloomer:

As the editor of the *Courier* was opposed to us on the woman’s rights question, this article of his gave me an opportunity to score him one on having gone so far ahead of us as to advocate our wearing pantaloons, and in my next issue I noticed him and his proposed style in a half-serious, half playful article of some length. He took up the subject again and expressed surprise that I should treat so important a matter with levity. I replied to him more seriously than before, fully endorsing and approving his views on the subject of woman’s costume. So, the whole discussion of bloomers in the *Lily* began as a displaced argument over women’s rights between a proponent and an editor who disagreed with the movement, as each viewed the style differently and used it as a tool to discuss what women’s rights should be regarding dress. The suggestion of pants for women was not initially meant seriously but became so because of the ongoing conflict between the two papers.

The reason that Mrs. Bloomer adopted the short dress was directly because of her discussion with the editor of the *Courier*. She felt that it was important to put her words into actions and announced this to her readers. After publishing a picture of herself wearing the dress, the controversy surrounding this issue increased circulation of the paper from 500 to 4,000 copies per month and forever associated her name with the garment. By her own admission, Bloomer was as surprised as any that her name became attached to the garment saying, “I had no idea of fully adopting the style; no thought of setting a fashion; no thought that my action would create an excitement throughout the civilized world, and give to the style my name and the credit due to Mrs. Miller.” Bloomer did not have full control over the power that she had unleashed by publishing a picture of herself along with an article about the short costume in the *Lily*.

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31 Ibid., 66-67.
Letters poured in from women all over the United States asking about the dress and clamoring for patterns. This demonstrated just how tired women were of wearing the heavy skirts and petticoats popular at the time. As subscriptions to the *Lily* increased into the thousands, it also became more geographically widespread with subscribers across the country and even in parts of Canada.\(^{34}\) After this first article, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote a letter to Elizabeth Smith Miller, who deserves the true credit for inventing the style, at least in the American sense saying, “You will have read the *Lily* before you get this, and seen your claims set up for the glory of having been the first American woman to wear ‘the shorts’ as a constant dress.”\(^{35}\) Despite this, the public display of Bloomer’s picture wearing the shorts meant that she was the first name most people associated with the style and so she got credit for its invention.

Of all the attempts at dress reform, the introduction of bloomers was the most organized and therefore an important starting point for examining dress reform in the United States. There was even a National Dress Reform Association that formed in 1856 and lasted until 1865, who attempted to normalize the use of bloomers by women through periodicals and annual conventions. The National Dress Reform Association was directly connected to the women’s rights movement because they applauded a garment popularized by Amelia Bloomer, a known activist for women’s rights, and invited her to speak at their assembly. However, the movement was never very unified as everyone seemed to have different ideas as to what type of dress was best. The reasons they had for challenging the status quo in terms of clothing varied from health concern to gender equality. This was part of the problem in America, that bloomers were most often popularized by members of the Women’s Rights Movement living in New York. Because

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 68-69.  
\(^{35}\) Letter to Elizabeth Smith Miller in Stanton and Stanton Blatch, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences*, 32.
of this connection, there was much crossover between dress reform in the US and Great Britain in general, and there was some question over whether it really appeared in America first.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton claimed in a letter to Lydia Child written in 1844 that,

The question of reforming our female attire is not new to me. When, for instance, I was in London three of four years ago, I saw much of a person who had known intimately Lady Stanhope, who had died only the year before I was there. She lived for some twenty years in Syria, and used to go about dressed in the costume of an Arabian chieftain. But just what this costume was like, I could not learn.\textsuperscript{36}

Because of the ambiguous history of the style, it was possible to argue that it was not original to the United States and the women’s movement. However, whether a similar style appeared in England first, does not change the fact that Elizabeth Smith came up with the idea for the garment on her own and it was popularized in the United States. The reason for this influence was in part because of the frequent contact between members of the American Women’s Movement, such as Stanton, and the Women’s Movement in Great Britain. The common language shared by reformers in the two countries also meant that books and ideas circulated easily between them. However, the reason that this fashion was considered particularly American was because it came specifically out of the American Women’s Movement and was supported by its members including Amelia Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and others who promoted and wore the style. The bloomer, also known as the short dress, or “shorts,” appeared in an issue of the \textit{Lily}, a magazine published by Amelia Bloomer, created specifically to promote women’s issues in the United States. However, it also became the focus of a National Dress Reform Association, which promoted the style through their publication, \textit{The Sibyl}.

The reception of the style in England was, if anything harsher than the reception of the bloomer in America. One British writer who published a pamphlet entitled \textit{Beware of the

Bloomers! A Warning to the Long Robe in 1851 under the pseudonym of John Ambidexter was so repelled by the style that his book refuting it reads almost like satire, even his pseudonym, which refers to a dishonest lawyer who takes money from both plaintiff and defendant seems to indicate that he was not entirely serious in his arguments. Because he did not use his real name finding information on him is difficult but at least one modern writer, Stieve De Lance of Griffith University believed that he was serious in his claims. Though Ambidexter did not put his real name on his work, he made it clear that he was a lawyer by profession and argued that, since judges and lawyers in England wore robes, skirts were a dignified form of clothing not to be dismissed. He explained, “the members of Great Britain's House of Lords are made of sterner stuff, than to allow their robes to be thus trifled with by a woman.” He made equally strange arguments regarding the elements of society that he believed would be affected if women were to dress as Mrs. Dexter prescribed, asking:

What will become of the artists, if the Bloomers should prevail? Without the draperies, what is to be done with the figures? How in the world, will the painter be able to give a full-length portrait of a lawyer? Unless the lawyer's gown be full length also? If follows then, that the success of the Bloomers will be the ruin of the portrait-painter. His occupation will then be bone; and he must then do, instead of counsellors, dumb animal; and thus, like an eminent R.A., go to the dogs; or turn sign-painter, and so go to the wall.

Since judges’ robes more closely resembled women’s dresses than men’s pants, Dexter’s rejection of the traditional long skirt was also a rejection of the authority of the judge’s robe. By Ambidexter’s logic, there was no other form of dress a judge or lawyer could wear besides a robe and, without the nobility that the robe afforded them, artists would never be able to paint these

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39 Ibid., 7
subjects. Another point Ambidexter made was that without gowns there would be no fashion, causing drapers to go out of business, as though no other form of clothing was possible. Therefore, bloomers would negatively affect both painters and drapers. Whether Ambidexter was serious about these claims or making them satirically, he was not the only one to make such arguments. Another article in *Punch* titled “Progress of Bloomerism,” published in 1851, claimed that “Bloomers talk also of demanding admittance to the Church and the Bar; but probably they would be kept out of these professions by their own objection to the gown.”

Therefore, to undermine the dignity of the dress by wearing bloomers also undermined the dignity of men who wore robes. His wording highlighted fears that bloomers as a threat and implied that Mrs. Dexter, who was set to appear before an English crowd, meant to violently “cut the skirts” of women’s gowns for no real reason that he could determine other than to undermine their femininity. But he also revealed in his warnings the real fear that bloomers provoked, which echoed fears surrounding the woman question in general. He claimed that if Dexter’s “attacks on the feminine gowns be successful, the doom of all others is inevitable sealed, for if the ladies are driven out of their longitudes, depend upon it we shall go too.”

Opponents of the bloomer feared that the short dress would somehow take power and privilege away from men or make masculinity less valuable as some of its privileges became available to women as well. This was really the crux of the matter in that bloomers became a displaced argument over women’s ability to cross over into the public sphere. Gender in the nineteenth century articulated an invisible border between the public and private sphere, one considered masculine, the other feminine. For women, crossing that border held both rewards

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41 Ibid., 4.
and the threat of punishment if they went too far. Judith Butler looks specifically at the performative nature of gender in her books *Gender Troubles* and *Bodies that Matter*. She takes a poststructuralist stance on gender arguing that the terminology used to denote gender, in attempting to define it, also limits its expression. The language of gender is biased toward the patriarchal and heterosexual norms of the culture. She explains that “heterosexual privilege operates in many ways, and the ways in which it operates include naturalizing itself and rendering itself as the original and the norm.”

She makes direct reference to how physical borderlands interact with and are complicated by the non-physical border of gender. She references Gloria Anzaldúa’s description of the border as a cultural and political crossroads, calling it a “nexus” and a “non-space of cultural collision.” This “nexus” is just as applicable to the invisible border that exists between masculinity and femininity. Though what is masculine and what is feminine seems rigid, men and women still crossed it, and one of the more obvious ways that women did this was by adopting a garment so strongly tied with masculinity, which caused the cultural collision that bloomers represented.

Bloomers arose out of the women’s movement in 1851, as a protest against the styles of the time and disappeared because of the ridicule they received over the years. The end of the bloomer did not mean that women stopped wearing pants completely, but the fashion was not widespread and was only adopted by women who were comfortable with crossing the border between masculine and feminine. The questions asked of bloomers centered around gender and gender roles. The way publications such as *Punch* magazine showed this was in their discussion of dress as having real power in relation to gender. After the incident with Mrs. Dexter, *Punch*

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43 Ibid., 84.
claimed “The names of Mr. and Mrs. Dexter are associated with the bloomer costume. Thus, we have Dexter and Dextra, masculine and feminine; but as the dressing question seems to belong indifferently to either gender – that is, to neither in particular, or to the neuter – the wearer ought surely be a Dextrum.”⁴⁴ This quote shows the way in which femininity and masculinity were concentrated in how people dressed. They were expressions as well as supposedly innate characteristics. Since the bloomer costume did not fit the traditional female role, nor did it go far enough to fit the male role, the article in Punch surmised it must be somewhere in the middle.

**Escaping Old Styles**

Pants for women arose primarily as a necessity and an attempt to avoid the cumbersome petticoats of the 1840s. Popular dresses at the time had long skirts flowing from the natural waist, held away from the body by at least 4 petticoats, sometimes as many as eight. Sleeves tended to be wide and set off the shoulder to balance the width of the skirts. Women wore corsets under these dresses to make the waist artificially smaller and create a more drastic contrast between the small waist and the wide sleeves and skirt, making the silhouette of the fully dressed woman form an X-like shape. Critics of women’s dress, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who wrote of it to her son, questioned why women had to wear layers upon layers of petticoats that got in the way of their feet and wide skirts that made everyday tasks difficult, while men wore clothing more practical to their lifestyle.⁴⁵ There was also a question of health, which was a standard concern with women’s clothing. The dresses of the time were difficult to move in and difficult to care for. By those standards, bloomers were more practical. According Thomas W. Lane, who was and associate editor of the Savannah Republican between 1845 and 1865,⁴⁶ wrote

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⁴⁵ Stanton and Stanton Blatch, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences*, 35-36.
a piece for *The Knickerbocker*. “Bloomerism has too often been the talking title of a pretty paragraph, in which the pen of the indicter, content to sparkle and to shine, and satisfied with a brilliant ‘skimming over’ of its theme, has sunk from the dignity of sober reasoning into a piquant trifling and an elegant insouciance.”47 This quote shows us two things: first, that discussions of the bloomer were widespread by 1852, since the author claims to see enough debate about it to constitute “too often” and second, that he himself believed that the style did not warrant such attention. However, despite this dismissal of the topic, Lane went into a lengthy discussion of the garment belying his assertion that the bloomer was unworthy of his interest. The truth is that bloomers were and still are interesting because of the widespread discussion of them during their time and the people who wore them.

In fashion history, the 1840s are considered part of the Romantic Period, which began in the 1810s with simple, column-like dresses that had high waistlines sitting just under the bust. The gowns were usually light-colored garments including delicate floral patterns and simple undergarments. However, as the century wore on, the waistline of these garments started drifting back to the natural waist and the skirts got progressively wider, held out with more and more petticoats. By 1840, the style included wide, heavy skirts supported by petticoats, a waistline at the natural waist, and wide sleeves. Matilda Marian Pullman, who wrote a self-help book for mothers and daughters, pointed out in 1855 that the problem with this style was that the petticoats were heavy and exerted too much pressure on the waist. She argued against allowing the weight of the dress to rest on the hips and prescribed petticoats be held on with straps over the shoulders to prevent having too much weight around the middle of the body. She also argued

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the benefits of exercise, which was hindered by the weight of heavy clothing. Most petticoats were made of inexpensive fabrics such as moreen, a heavy material that, when layered with other petticoats, could weigh up to 14 pounds. Added to this was the weight of the skirt itself, which was usually lined, discouraging women from walking long distances, or going out to get exercise. Some women wore these petticoats for warmth, others did so because they felt they would not look properly dressed without wearing several petticoats. Writers on how to dress properly such as Mrs. A. Adams, who wrote a self-help book for women in 1856 called Hints on Dress for Ladies, argued that no woman should wear more than two petticoats and a pair of drawers under their dress, but women often wore considerably more layers than this.

Even after the bloomer became a viable option women continued to wear these old styles, despite their drawbacks, because conformity was an important component in expressing gender, and wearing something so different from the norm might cause embarrassment in public. According to Alice Stone Blackwell, daughter of Lucy Stone, who also adopted the bloomer style, the decision to wear bloomers was a difficult one, she claimed that “The conventional dress was not only a grievous inconvenience, but a constant drain upon women’s vitality. In the eyes of the public however, the ‘freedom dress’ looked grotesque, and it was an endless source of ridicule.”

However, publications promoting health, such as The Water-Cure Journal, which endorsed hydropathy, or a system of medicine which uses water both internally and externally to cure illnesses. However, the publication, which tens of thousands of subscribers, also promoted other health issues, including Dress Reform. One such article in the journal argued that “the majority of people are convinced that long skirts are cumbersome, unsightly, burdensome, and

48 Matilda Marian Pullman, Maternal Counsels to a Daughter (Darton and Company, 1855) 108.
49 Mrs. A. Adams, Hints on Dress for Ladies (London: Groombridge & Sons, 1856) 36.
filthy things. The difficulty in the way of a change to shorts, is to get a sufficient number of women to brave the first stare the better costume occasions.”51 This demonstrates the dissatisfaction that those who advocated simpler clothing felt with women’s fashions in the 1850s. The writers of *The Water-Cure Journal* clearly favor the bloomer, but their conclusions also line up with other descriptions of women’s dress as shown in Pullman and Adams where there is no similar motive of adopting the short dress.

Thanks to publications like the *Lily* and lecturers such as Mrs. Dexter and Lucy Sone, who also adopted the style, the bloomer’s influence soon spread beyond New York. The bloomer become so widespread across the United States that *The Water-Cure Journal* even published an article about the American Costume in California. Ladies in California adopted this “beautiful” style of dress for its appearance and convenience in the dusty cities of the west. The article discussed some of the prominent locals who wore the shorts including “Mrs. Farnham—a lady well known in the literary circles in the old States, as an elegant writer, and in California as the widow of a man justly respected and universally beloved—adopted this dress sometime since, and ‘astonished the natives’ in Santa Cruz.”52 The journal also lauded the popularity of the style explaining how in 1851 crowds gathered around two unnamed young ladies in California wearing bloomers made of blue satin with lace trimmed sleeves in praise of the dress. No one apparently objected to the look on that occasion, but rather admired it. The article said of the bloomers that there was “nothing in it exceptionable in any manner—nothing in fact, against which a word could be said.”53 However, there must have been some controversy even in California, as the article went on to claim, “we hope the ladies of our city will not be deterred

53 Ibid., 89.
from adopting it on account of the curiosity it naturally excites among the male portion of our citizens. A few days will accustom the eye to the change, and then the ladies will enjoy all the comfort and none of the inconvenience of the new dress.”

In the west, unusual styles were more acceptable for women who often had to work in non-traditional roles as farmhands on their family land. However, wearing more masculine clothing around a ranch was one thing, going out in public wearing pants was something else and was still considered a crossing of gender boundaries.

In the early days of reform between 1851 and 1852, wearers of the short dress said they faced less criticism than they did in later years. Mrs. Stanton wrote to Elizabeth Miller that she and Amelia Bloomer went about wearing the shorts and saw ten ladies wearing the same style of clothing. They attracted much attention in the outfits and men such as William Burleigh, a Unitarian reformer known for writing hymns and poems for journals and as a member of the Temperance society in New York between 1849 and 1855, spoke highly of the shorts, while showing disgust at the long skirts that most women wore. “The dress is now an offense to my eyes…and I cannot help exclaiming to myself whenever I see a woman trailing bedraggled petticoats through the dust.” Mrs. Stanton expected insults based on her dress but was greeted merely with curiosity and even praise by those she met on the streets of New York when she wore the short dress in 1851. In a later letter to Miller, dated October 15-16, 1851, she wrote excitedly of the high praise she received from both the male and female members of her family saying:

Only see how they are coming round. Mama and sister Mag, who are now making me a visit, do not seem to dislike the short dress. Mama even says that when Papa returned

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54 Ibid., 89.  
55 To Elizabeth Smith Miller, Seneca Falls, August 5, 1851, in Stanton and Stanton Blatch, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences*, 32-34.  
56 Ibid., 34.
from here, he was quite pleased with his visit and his daughter, and declared that he never would have noticed the ‘shorts’ if he had not heard so much about them. He thought them “well enough.” I suppose he expected to see me looking just like a man.\textsuperscript{57}

The approval of Stanton’s father was particularly important as she had endeavored throughout her life to make him proud of her.

The bloomer style offered an attractive alternative to traditional dress because it was versatile in different types of weather, allowing greater comfort to the wearer. It could be made from a variety of materials including cloth, morocco, or even moose skin, and could be waterproofed.\textsuperscript{58} Women were very interested in the look of this style, particularly in its early days. Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote of a visit she received from her friend Lizzie Fitz and her Aunt Bell, all of whom admired the costume including the men in their lives such as General Swift, husband of Hortense Swift, a friend of Bloomer who also adopted the style.\textsuperscript{59}

Though Mrs. Bloomer is arguably the most important figure associated with the short dress, she was not the only one invested in helping the fashion become popular. The National Dress Association held a convention in the Reformed Dutch Church in Canastota, New York on Wednesday, January 7\textsuperscript{th}, 1857.\textsuperscript{60} This organization invited Mrs. Bloomer to attend another of their annual meetings in Syracuse, but she wrote a letter to them explaining that she could not, due to the distance and her health. Still, she did wholehearted acknowledge how important she felt their work was. She explained that dress was one of the most widely discussed subjects of the moment and a constant theme of conversation both in the papers of the time and among her acquaintances. She included in her response her belief that “it would be fortunate, indeed, if this

\textsuperscript{57} To Elizabeth Smith Miller, Seneca Falls, October 18, 1851, in Stanton and Stanton Blatch, \textit{Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences}, 37.

\textsuperscript{58} Bloomer, \textit{Life and Writing of Amelia Bloomer}, 74.

\textsuperscript{59} Stanton and Stanton Blatch, \textit{Elizabeth Cady Stanton as Revealed in Her Letters, Diary and Reminiscences}, 31.

\textsuperscript{60} “Report of the Proceedings of the Dress Reform Convention Held at Canastota, NY, Wednesday and Thursday, January 7\textsuperscript{th} and 8\textsuperscript{th}, 1857,” \textit{The Sibyl}, Vol. 1 No. 15, (Middletown, N.Y., February 1, 1857), 1.
discussion should result in securing a reform in all those styles and modes of woman’s dress which are incompatible with good health, refined taste, simplicity, economy, and beauty.”

She refers here to the heavy, cumbersome styles of mainstream fashion and hopes that bringing awareness to the problem and popularizing bloomers as an alternative might have an effect on women’s dress promoting a healthier and simpler style for everyday life.

The National Dress Reform Movement advocated dress reform through their publication, *The Sybil*, and through their annual conventions because they were concerned with the physical development of women and thought that the short dress provided the best foundation for healthy moral and spiritual culture. Dr. James C. Jackson of Glen Harbor, who was a secretary for the National Dress Reform association opened the annual convention of 1857 and, after appointment of officers, read a letter addressed from “Forty Men and Women in Massachusetts,” which explained much of the reason for why, apart from the women’s movement, women’s clothing needed to change. These anonymous forty believed that wearing more appropriate clothing would allow women to better fulfill the duties already associated with their gender, such as being a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and citizen. However, they also advocated for similar goals the Women’s Movement, including equal compensation for their work and better employment opportunities. Yet, despite their kinship with the Women’s Movement, they argued that health was the most important reason for women to change their dress style. They explained, “A simple and healthful dress prevents a great amount of idleness, and this, besides suffering and sorrow, involves great pecuniary loss.”

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Despite its deep connections to the women’s movement, it cannot simply be thought of as a part of that movement because the energy behind the early Dress Reform movement was only partly about women’s rights. It was also about simplicity and morality, in “adorning the body less—the mind more”\(^{64}\) and being able to function better in everyday life. A report from the Proceedings of the Dress Reform Convention even used religion to justify their change in style claiming that a woman “who so arrays herself as to be unfitted to produce for her own support the necessities of life, and therefore becomes dependent on the labor of another, manifestly disobeys God’s law.”\(^{65}\) This implied that dressing in a more appropriate manner was the Christian duty of women.\(^{66}\) Reformers attempted to employ the help of other people in the lives of women to promote dress reform. An article in The Water-Cure Journal implored, “Parents urge upon your daughters the importance of the change; they will not reject parental council. Husbands and brother, encourage your wives and sisters in the reformation, and soon the bloomer costume will be the reigning fashion of the day”\(^{67}\)

Several publications of the day supported the bloomer style. The Sibyl, official publication of the dress reform movement, constantly published articles promoting the bloomer. The National Dress Reform Association applauded the bravery of women who adopted the style. Nettie Linwood, a writer for the association’s official publication The Sybil, specifically mentioned Blanche Howard, who took a public stand by wearing the short dress. Howard as herself a writer who published in The Sybil and received praise by her peers, including Linwood, for being a model reformer, wearing the short dress instead of long skirts and being vocal about her choice to do so. Still, she explained that part of her reason for adopting the bloomer was that

\(^{65}\) Ibid., 1.
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 1.
she enjoyed walking over hills and through forest, where she felt the average clothing of her day was too much of a hindrance. Bloomers, however, made these activities much easier and more comfortable.\textsuperscript{68} Similarly a correspondent of the \textit{Ohio Cultivator} simply called Irene claimed that for her chores, which included milking cows and gardening, the short dress provided a much more convenient alternative to normal skirts. Another unnamed woman from Westville Iowa, mentioned in the 1851 article, claimed that bloomers were not really all that different from the dresses little girls wore, since young girls regularly wore shorter skirts revealing pantaloons underneath until they reached maturity.\textsuperscript{69} In fact, Thomas Snarlyle objected to bloomers on this point because he claimed the made women look like “overgrown schoolgirls” since children in both England and the United states wore similar styles of dress.\textsuperscript{70} Irene, however, believed the more childlike look was a good thing, as little girls had more freedom of movement in their clothing and bloomers allowed that same freedom of movement to carry over into adulthood.\textsuperscript{71} Of this, even Snarlyle had to admit that they did get rid of many objectionable parts of women’s fashion including the corset, which reformers also opposed for health reasons.\textsuperscript{72}

The notion that bloomers provided more freedom of movement was where health and the women’s movement converged regarding bloomers. Mrs. Bloomer herself made the connection between liberty and practical clothing. Boys wore skirts like those of their sisters until they were “breeched” meaning they received their first pair of trousers. At this time, they received a burst of independence, which women similarly felt upon finally wearing a type of clothing that

\textsuperscript{69} \textit{The Water-Cure Journal}, 108, 9.
\textsuperscript{70} Snarlyle, \textit{A Latter-Day Fragment}, 217.
\textsuperscript{71} \textit{The Water-Cure Journal}, 108, 9.
\textsuperscript{72} Snartle, “Bloomerism,” 217.
included some form of pants. Girls, on the other hand, became more restricted upon reaching maturity when they were put into longer skirts. Bloomer continued to wear the style not only because her reputation was so tied to it, but because she found it comfortable, light, and convenient. In fact, she continued to wear it for as long as she published the paper and did not let the ridicule that she later attracted keep her from wearing the style for many years. Similarly, Mrs. Stanton wrote pieces for the *Lily* defending the bloomer, even though she soon faced pressure from her family to lay it aside and return to mainstream clothing. Lucy Stone who wrote for the *Woman’s Journal* also wore bloomers for many years.

The fact that bloomers were healthier and more appropriate to daily life, however, did not change the fact that they looked very different from the traditional dresses women wore. Some women wanted to adopt the bloomer but worried about how they could do so and still be fashionable. *The Sibyl* recognized this dilemma and provided an article explaining how to wear the bloomer in a fashionable way. They described one variation on the style that was a bit more fashionable. One woman’s dress was described as dark, with a decorated skirt coming just below the knee on the sides but hanging the same length of the bloomers in the front and back. The article also added that these bloomers were supported by husbands, brothers, and fathers because of their aesthetic appearance and the fact that they did not expose the legs as much as the typical bloomer.

Still, despite the initial interest and the fact that Dress Reformers attempted to make the bloomer more appealing to both men and women in the United States, few could accept such a radical change. The bloomer provided many positive changes for women who wore it, but it still

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74 Bloomer, *Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer*, 69-70.
challenged a fundamental border between the masculine and feminine, crossing just enough into the masculine to be worrisome. The fact that the bloomer was so tied to the Women’s Movement, and the concern some felt over women wearing pants, led to an eventual backlash.

**The Backlash: Bloomers Under Attack**

While initially there was a good deal of favorable press concerning the bloomer, particularly in magazines devoted to the Women’s Movement or to health such as the *Lily, The Sibyl*, and *The Water-Cure Journal*, the bloomer was a radical change for those who viewed it as masculine, or at the least androgynous. The appearance of the bloomer exasperated the fears already present in society about the roles of women and men, particularly as the Women’s Movement challenged those roles. These blatant fears often took the form of other arguments concerning, propriety, religion, and even appearance.

Traditionalists, particularly concerning clothing, made no secret of why they opposed the bloomer, candidly proclaiming the short dress a danger to society. Thomas W. Lane, who wrote for *The Knickerbocker* claimed that bloomerism was the most dangerous of the “isms” in his day and age. The reason being that it was such a marked change so quickly. He claimed that if skirts had slowly moved up the leg over a period of years rather than becoming short all at once, it might be more acceptable,

but alas! The outer veil and the ‘eleven inner veils’ are all aspiring! All ascending! They have gone up smoothly and lightning-like as the drop-curtain at the Park, and now we await, with fear and trembling, the ‘Excelsior!’ the yet higher in ascent and the shorter in skirt, till at last woman, lovely woman, shorn of her glorious plumage, the silk, the satin, and the challe fobbed of frill, furbelow, and flounce, shall stand confessed! Perfection pantalooned!76

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The first part of the quote is a reference to the skirt and their undergarments, which were shortened suddenly by the bloomer. He is commenting on the speed with which the skirt style changed and shorted and expresses fear that it will go up even further in the future until there is no skirt at all. This he feels would be a sad moment as he feels that women would look plain “shorn of their plumage” if they were deprived of their skirts making the beautiful dress of women plain. Lane feared that bloomers were only a first step away from femininity that would eventually lead women to adopt the actual trousers of men and he clearly associated power with pants. He lamented, “once there, where O man! Is thy Power? Do you not see the bloomer is nothing but an insidious coat and ‘pants’ in disguise? How long, we ray will it take a good pair of shears to make a frock-coat of this little shirt?”77 His point here is that bloomers were too radical a change too quickly and they set the stage for more change in the future. He feared that the slightly masculine look of the bloomer would become fully masculine if it continued and women would simply go about in men’s pants rather than dresses or even the still feminine look of the bloomer. The bloomer challenged traditional notions of gender and led to fear that gender roles in general might break down if the bloomer style continued.

As optimistic as The Sibyl normally was about the new costume, even its editors recognized the rising backlash against the it, releasing an article that showed how the style could be worn more fashionably. While it had originally received near universal praise, heralded by newspapers, lecturers, physicians, and women who wanted to wear more sensible clothing, soon negative voices started to creep into the discussion. Public opinion shifted from approving the style to denouncing it as vulgar and claiming that those who wore it unsexed themselves and usurped the clothing, and thereby the roles, of men. The fact that people involved in the

77 Ibid., 242.
Women’s Rights movements were more likely to adopt the bloomer allowed these fears to increase as women wearing the style attempted not only to step into men’s pants but into his territory of the public sphere. They were crossing the invisible border between masculine and feminine, and this caused a reaction from those who wanted to push them back.\(^78\)

Political cartoons began to appear showing bloomers proposing marriage and filling masculine roles. One cartoon, shown in figure 1-2, depicts women in bloomer costumes, drawn to look very much like men’s suits, smoking cigars and striking masculine poses.\(^79\) Another cartoon (figure 1-3) shows a woman wearing the bloomer costume proposing marriage on one knee to a passive looking man, who responds to her request with the words, “You must really ask Mamma!” In a doorway behind him stands a formidable looking woman, also in the bloomer costume, waiting to give her permission for the match.\(^80\) These cartoons clearly play up the role reversal that men feared the short dress promoted.

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\(^78\) Linwood, “Blanch Howard on the Hopes and Trials of True Woman,” 1.

\(^79\) Figure 1-2: Political cartoon showing women in the bloomer costume (“Socializing in Bloomers” in Yester Year Once More: Life as it was reported back then).

\(^80\) Figure 1-3: Women proposing marriage in bloomers (posted by Amanda Hess, “Olde-Tyme Misogyny Cartoon Corner.”)
Mrs. L. G. Abell, was an author of self-help books for women between 1848 and 1857. In this time, she wrote seven books about proper behavior for women. In her 1851 work, *Woman in her Various Relations*, which was republished in 1855, she worried the bloomer costume jeopardized femininity as well as masculinity, exclaiming,

> Woman, if she is rightly educated, and is what every true-minded female will be, has enough of her own inherent delicacy and modesty to debar her *forever* from dressing in the attire of the opposite sex, or in any other that shall expose her to *vulgar remark*, and give her *unpleasant notoriety*. Besides this, she will find in her Bible a higher motive for refusing it, the positive command of her Maker and her God, forbidding woman to wear garments that pertain to man.\(^81\)

This last statement in this quote comes from Deuteronomy 22:5, which claims “A woman shall not wear man’s clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman’s clothing; for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord your God.”\(^82\) To a modern observer, this reaction appears unfounded, as the garments in question bear no resemblance to male trousers. In addition, the bible never specifies pants as a particularly male garment. In fact, in biblical times, no one wore pants. Yet, because the use of visible pants was restricted by gender, creators of such cartoons and articles felt justified in making this argument. Abell went on to explain that only unrespectable women would feel compelled to dress in this manner and virtuous women would experience, “no other feelings than pity for such perverseness and folly, and shame for those who have so far unsexed themselves as to attire like men!”\(^83\) This states that, by wearing pants, women ceased to be women in some fundamental way.

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\(^{82}\) Duet. 22:5.

\(^{83}\) Ibid., 307.
After the uproar concerning Mrs. Dexter’s visit to London, *Punch* addressed social fears of women gaining too much masculine power with a comedic column about the bloomer called “The Bloomer Ball.” The article claimed, “As the husband, shall the wife be; he will have to wear a gown, if he does not quickly make her put her bloomer short-coats down.”\(^8^4\) This demonstrates one of the more irrational fears, at least by modern standards, that someone had to wear a dress and if the woman did not wear the dress, then the man must. It highlights the fears of the time fueled by the bloomer and the Women’s Movement that if women were becoming more masculine, men would correspondingly become more feminine. Some people, including Thomas Snarlyle, who wrote for *Punch* dismissed the bloomer all together as “no more than dumb, inarticulate clamourings for the Rights of Women.”\(^8^5\) He was not the only one to make this connection and some found the alliance between bloomers and Women’s Rights more dangerous than others. In *Punch* an unnamed author stated outright that trousers went hand in hand with social and political freedom. Therefore, allowing women to slip out of their petticoats and into bloomers emancipated them and made them equal to men. Yet the author of this article, who wrote anonymously, seemed less threatened by this than other authors, and even suggested a compromise between men and women, allowing a certain amount of freedom and political participation for both. He also addressed the question of whether a bloomer could propose marriage, though he seemed unsure as to the answer to this question. The author recognized some form of gender flipping when women wear the bloomer but did not go so far as to say that women who wore the style had the right to propose marriage as political cartoons would have them do.\(^8^6\) This is because pants were so connected with manhood that wearing bloomers

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\(^8^6\) “The Bloomer Convulsion” *Punch*, 189.
implied a usurpation of male roles as well as male dress. So, the type of freedom bloomer
women had was confusing to those who viewed them as transgressors of not only fashion but
gender roles.

The fact that the bloomer was healthy and allowed women more ease of movement was
also looked upon with suspicion by opponents of the style because it allowed them greater
control of their own body and its movements. The author of the *Punch* article “Progress and
Bloomerism” explained that since it was so easy to walk in the short dress, women wearing it
were more likely to walk into inappropriate situations and even into areas thought of as
masculine. He explained “The Bloomer costume facilitating walking very much, it is in
contemplation that young ladies assuming it shall walk into various situations hitherto
appropriated to the harder sex. We understand that a banker has been favoured with a circular,
inviting him to take Bloomer clerks.”87 In another article in the same issue, which interviewed
British citizens who had heard of Mrs. Dexter’s failed exhibition, one interviewee listed only as
“An Indignant Milliner” worried that “With the bloomer costume, I should be sorry to say to
what lengths the lady who wears it, might feel inclined to go to!”88 His sentiments are similar to
those of the former article connecting women’s clothing with their role in society. He worried
that women adopting masculine garments was just the beginning in their quest to usurp other
areas of life traditional reserved for men.

Sometimes opponents of the bloomer stressed these fears under the guise of religion. In
the *Punch* article “The Bloomer Convulsion,” the author questioned whether the bloomer
pardoned “the fault of Eve,” which in the view of nineteenth century Christianity placed women
below men in the family pecking order as a helpmeet. The author dismissed this claim by

88 “Different Views on the Bloomer Costume,” *Punch* Vol. XX (London, 1851) 175.
arguing women should not be bound by laws they had no part in making, but still admitted that there were moral questions associated with the bloomer showing that even leniency towards women in general did not necessarily make a person ready to accept bloomers as appropriate clothing. 89

Amelia Bloomer met with this criticism often and wrote about it. In one such instance she reviewed a sermon given by Rev. Dr. Tulmage, a Presbyterian pastor in the reformed church in America, and a well-known opponent of vice in New York as well as a prominent religious leader and orator. Tulmage who quoted Moses as an authority when he argued that women should not wear men’s attire. Her response was that Adam and Eve, the earliest biblical source for clothing, both made aprons out of fig leaves, with no differences mentioned between the two garments. Neither Adam nor Eve wore pants or skirts. Even the garments made afterwards for Adam and Eve by God Himself were described as the same and not different depending on gender. She argued that there was no real difference in male and female clothing for ancient peoples in Egypt, Babylon, Persia, Romans, Israelites, etc. While this is not entirely true, it is true that no one, male or female, wore pants in these cultures as pants were, and are, a complicated garment to make. Bloomer argued, “With all the history of male and female attire before him, and with so much proof of the similarity in dress, how can Mr. Talmage set up the claim that men have a right to any particular style, and that if women dare to approach that style they break divine law and wrong?” 90 She argued that, while she did not want men and women to dress exactly alike, she did want clothing for women that was more practical, healthy, and comfortable. She was also not above inserting a little humor into her critic. She claimed, “If divine law or vengeance is ever visited upon woman because of the cut of her garments, it will

89 Ibid., 189.
90 Bloomer, Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer, 77-78.
be upon the wearers of the suicidal long, heavy skirts, instead of upon those who have rid
themselves of the grievous burden.”

Modesty was not only considered a religious duty, but a duty owed “civilized” society as
well, which in this case meant western society. The connection between bloomers and the
costumes of the east, which for Americans at the time meant a wide variety of garments
considered exotic, did not make it very appealing to those who felt they needed to protect
western civilization from influence by the supposed “uncivilized” cultures of the world. Thomas
Lane asked in his work “Bloomerism: An Essay,” “Shall the harems of the East set the fashion of
the boudoirs of the West?” This quote connected bloomers to the sexual vices that Americans
assumed were part of eastern harems and thereby undermined the modesty of the garment. He
also claimed that if the bloomer were to replace the fashion of the day, women would regret it
and long for the happy days of the skirt to return.

Another objection to the bloomer, and one that was somewhat expected by reformers,
was that the appearance of the garment would scare potential wearers away. The Water-Cure
Journal held that the main concern surrounding the bloomer was that it hid fewer flaws than a
dress that included a corset and long skirt. They worried that women suffering from scoliosis or
other spinal curvature would not be able to hide their condition without skirts, petticoats, or
corsets. However, the article “The New Costume” argues against this view by claiming that it is
illogical to create fashion that hides the flaws of the few at the expense of the many. As time
went on, such criticisms became harder for wearers of the short dress to ignore.

91 Ibid., 78.
92 Lane, “Bloomerism,” 241.
93 Ibid., 243.
When the backlash against the bloomer first started to fill the newspapers, it bolstered the determination of the women who wore them to be even more adamant about their choice. They took what praise they could and faced criticism bravely. However, the constant barrage of insults wore on them over the years between 1850 and 1857 and led members of the Women’s Movement to question whether the bloomer was helping or distracting from their cause. A shift in fashion from petticoats to hoops, another form of garment that was arguably less restrictive, gave some an excuse to put away the bloomer, even though this new fashion was no less dangerous and received nearly as much criticism as the older style. Amid such public ridicule, the bloomer slowly faded away, becoming a somewhat embarrassing memory in the history of Women’s Rights. However, it was an important moment for dress reform because of its connection to health and because it drew attention to the restrictiveness of women’s clothing on a wide scale. This influenced later attempts to reform women’s clothing.

By 1853, the criticism of bloomers was at least enough to deter women in general from adopting the style. In “An Appeal for the New Costume,” an article in the Water-Cure Journal, the unnamed author lamented the fact that few had adopted the bloomer despite its obvious benefits because women feared the ridicule they would receive if they dared to make that change. The article argued that such criticisms would disappear if only every woman in the United States adopted the shorts. It stated, “Perhaps the first who break the bondage of Fashion may receive an occasional sneer but be not discouraged. Maintain an unshaken firmness of purpose despite derision, and you will soon gain a host of advocates for the cause.”\textsuperscript{95} This article, while possibly correct in its view that the fashion would be unstoppable if everyone wore it, did not address how hard it was for women to gamble their reputations and social standing among their peers on a

\textsuperscript{95} G, I. “An Appeal for the New Costume,” 11.
new fashion. It did not help that *The Water Cure Journal* was known for promoting alternative medicine as was not widely respected among the medical community. *Punch* interviewed locals including a Londoner named Rhoda Edgware, who commented on the appearance of Mrs. Dexter and London, correctly pointed out that it was more difficult for unmarried women to adopt the bloomer than married women, since these women had already landed a husband, which was a significant reason for dressing appropriately for women at that time. Because the laws of coverture in the United States were similar to those in England, marriage was important for women in the nineteenth century both in London because it provided them with social standing, and much pressure was put on young women to find an acceptable husband quickly. Wearing an unusual style, especially one that inspired so much criticism, might turn off potential husbands and limit the options of those in the marriage market. For women already married, however, the only person they had to please with their clothing was their husbands. If a wife had her husband’s approval, or at least his tolerance, she was more able to dress in the shorts than a woman who was still trying to find a husband.\(^{96}\) Even within marriage, however, there were limits as to how women could dress because of the pressure put on them to keep their husbands happy. Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, who wrote a book of manners for women, stated, “A woman who is, either from indolence or indifference, careless about her own personal apparel will not be apt to make her own home pleasant. She must dress for her husband as she would have done for her lover.”\(^{97}\) This demonstrates the importance society placed on clothing in marriage. Dressing appropriately allowed women to keep their husbands happy and, therefore, retain their position.


\(^{97}\) Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, *Manners: Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round*, Boston: Shepard Publishers, 1867, 45.
*The Water-Cure Journal* also highlighted a woman in Westville, Iowa who commented on the criticism of the bloomer. She dismissed those who spoke out against the style as “old fogies” but acknowledged that their opinions were having an impact in that they prevented women from wearing the short dress. She, however, continued to wear the style and praised its comfort and utility. She also challenged other women to adopt it despite the backlash against it stating, “When will American women learn to think and act for themselves? When will they have broken the bonds which foreign fashions have thrown around them, and boldly declare their rights to dress as becomes true women, and in accordance with the laws of health?”

Still, public image is an important part of dress and soon even family members of bloomers begged them to lay the dress aside to avoid the embarrassment of being seen in public with them. Daniel C. Stanton, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s son, wrote a letter to her in 1851 asking her not to visit him if she wore the short dress. In response to a letter he sent her asking her not to visit if she wore the short dress in 1851, she responded that she had nothing else to wear and defended her right to wear the shorts because they allowed her freedom of movement like her son enjoyed in his clothing. She drove this point home by asking him what would happen if a bull were to start chasing them both. His clothes would allow him a better chance to get out of the bull’s path, but she would be weighed down by skirts that would catch and snag on twigs, stumps, and other obstacles. “Now why,” she asked, “do you wish me to wear what is uncomfortable, inconvenient, and many times dangerous? I’ll tell you why. You want me to be like other people. You do not like to have me laughed at.” She admonished him not to care about the opinions of others and held up other men as examples of those who agreed with the

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style, including her cousin Gerrit Smith, who was initially disapproving of the dress, and Theodore Weld, who was the head of her sons’ school. When Elizabeth Smith Miller wrote to ask what she planned to wear in May of 1853, as Miller was considering whether she herself, the first to don the style, should put her shorts aside, Stanton responded that she intended to wear the same dress she did the previous winter: the short dress. She advised, “Stand firm a little longer, dear Liz, and we shall be a respectable majority—respectable and respected. I love what I suffer for, and I have suffered a good deal for this dress.” Again she sang the praises of the dress and pointed out the comfort and convenience it offered. Yet, Miller’s uncertainty shows that the cracks in the bloomers’ resolve were beginning to show.

In a letter to Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton chronicled her first run-in with a hostile crowd while wearing the bloomer costume and called it the severest trial of her life. Word got around town that Stanton had appeared on the streets in the bloomer with her cousin and her name was “hawked about the streets and in public meetings in Seneca Falls, 1851.” It even provoked fighting in these meetings about her dress and her hat. His colleagues discussed whether anyone should vote for a politician if their wife dressed in bloomers. Meanwhile, Stanton was verbally assaulted by children out on the street who sang the song “Heigh! Ho! The carrion crow, Mrs. Stanton all the go; Twenty tailors take the stitches, Mrs. Stanton wears the breeches.” After this experience, Stanton admitted, “had I counted the cost of the short dress, I would never have put it on; on, however, I’ll never take it off, for now it involved a principle of freedom.” She had also received a letter from her brother-in-law who

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100 Ibid., 36.
101 Ibid., 50.
102 Ibid., 29.
103 Ibid., 30.
disapproved of the short dress and this led her to express to Mrs. Miller how tired she was getting of fighting for the shorts and warding off attacks on her dress.104

Nettie Linwood, who was a member of the National Dress Reform Association and wrote for *The Sibyl*, admitted that by 1856 women who had previously worn the bloomer began to set it aside because of the scorn they received. She proclaimed, “Reluctantly they yielded, for it was sore to return to the fetters they had renounced as they fondly hope, forever.”105 These women had made the attempt to change their clothing in a way that would allow them to live their lives more freely, not only in the public sphere but also in their own homes as the new costume allowed them to perform every-day tasks with more ease than the typical women’s clothing of the period. However, the association between the bloomers and rebellion against the status quo led to its decline even among supporters of the fashion.

Because women who wore bloomers had gone so far out of their way, taking criticism from family, friends, and acquaintances to promote they style, they needed to have a good reason for letting it go. One way that Amelia Bloomer herself justified returning to regular dress was that she and others in the Women’s Movement felt that the dress itself was drawing away from the parts of women’s rights that they considered more important, such as the vote and bringing undue negative attention to the movement. In other words, the association between bloomers and the Women’s Rights Movement was not only detrimental to the adoption of bloomers but the adoption of bloomers was detrimental to the Women’s Rights Movement. They felt that fighting for votes and better labor conditions were more important goals than changing the clothing of women. Bloomer underlined the problem when she claimed, “In the minds of some people the short dress and woman’s rights were inseparably connected. With us, the dress was but an

104 Ibid., 31.
incident and we were not willing to sacrifice greater questions to it.” 106 This statement makes it seem as though Dress Reform was not all that important in the first place, and therefore easily set aside to make room for other, more important, goals. The problem with this is, of course, that the adamant defense of the bloomer that these same reformers used in their writings before renouncing the style belies the idea that bloomers were only an incidental and ultimately unimportant part of the Women’s Movement. The National Dress Reform Association advocated wearing bloomers as a moral Christian duty.107 Amelia Bloomer wrote with regret to the National Dress Reform Association of her inability to attend their 1857 conference because of the distance but claimed that Dress Reform was a very important topic.108 Elizabeth Cady Stanton went so far as to say, “if my friends cannot see me in the short dress, they cannot see me at all.”109  

Another reason that many reformers like Bloomer and Stanton cited for changing their dress were changes in mainstream fashion. Wearers of the short dress often cited the many heavy petticoats worn under the long skirts as the reasons for their change of style. Yet, fashion moved beyond the petticoats on its own, adopting the hoop or crinoline, which held the skirts away from the legs as shown in figures 1-4 and 1-5, and allowed for more volume in the skirt without the

106 Bloomer, Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer, 70.
108 Bloomer, Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer, 79.
109 Stanton, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 27.
need for petticoats. It was stiffened by cane, whalebone, wood, or even steel at the seams. Steel soon became the most popular of these materials because of its availability and the fact that it was lightweight. Before the crinoline, women needed to wear as many as seven petticoats made of heavy, thick, starched, fabric. It was not only heavy, but hot, constricting, and uncomfortable. Hoops provided some respite from these issues and kept the skirt far enough away from the legs to make walking easier without the numerous petticoats getting stuck between the legs and around the ankles. William Henry Weeks who wrote for The American Scrap Book and Magazine of United States Literature and served as an agent for this American magazine by printing, publishing, and distributing it in London, marveled in one of his articles at how “steel-clad females and steel-clad steamers come into fashion about the same time.” The hoops of course inspired curiosity as men wondered how they worked and looking at the hoop, if one has not worn it they might wonder how a person might sit down in it. It collapsed easily as one sits because of the fabric holding the hoops of the skirt together. Sitting in such a skirt, however, can be uncomfortable because of the steel hoops you would be forced to sit on and the width of the skirt when seated. This made them, in some ways, less cumbersome than

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111 Dollar Monthly Magazine (Boston: Office American Union, Flag of our Union, and Novelette, 1865), 342.
petticoats because they were cooler, lighter, and easier to control when sitting and standing but they still had their drawbacks.

Still, the hoop was lauded as an overall improvement and Amelia Bloomer herself used its invention as a reason for why she stopped wearing the bloomers. She said that she sometimes shifted back to the long dress to avoid the high winds that would sometimes blow her short skirt over her head, though she continued to wear the shorts in some situations until the invention of the hoop. She found that the crinoline was lighter and easier to wear than petticoats and came with less stigma than the bloomer. Being such a public face for the short dress, her husband asked her to explain in her biography, originally published in 1895, why she abandoned it. This was a question she said she had been asked many times before and she very quickly tired of it. She had worn the short dress for years, until interest in it finally died out, though she doesn’t put an exact year on this, the last mention of her wearing bloomers was in 1859. After his, she tried to distance herself from the garment bearing her name by explaining how she never set out to be a dress reformer and that it was really Mrs. Miller who had invented the style. It’s true that Bloomer’s initial plan was not to reform dress, nor did she invent the style, but her public support of it did put her in the forefront of the Dress Reform movement and she did not refuse the role at the time. She also conceded that while she did believe women would eventually wear something similar, the time was not right for it, since women did not yet have the independence to rebel in such a way. In 1865, she wrote to a friend, “it is very true that I have laid aside the short dress, which I wore for a number of years, and to which the public (not I) gave my name.”115 She was very careful to inform those who asked that it was by her own choice and not at the urging of her husband that she abandoned the garment.116 The pressure to dress in a more

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115 Bloomer, Life and Writings of Amelia Bloomer, 71.
116 Ibid., 71-72.
socially acceptable fashion had weighted on Bloomer for a while. In June of 1857 she wrote to Charlotte A. Joy admitting that most people she encountered by that time thought the short dress obnoxious and that anyone attempting to defend it were constantly discouraged and criticized. At that time, though, she was still hopeful that women would eventually adopt it and still adamant that it was an important part of the Women’s Rights Movement, but also admitted that she was pulling back in her active participation in dress reform.117

Even though hoops did provide some advantages over petticoats, they were, by no means, as practical as bloomers and they too received a fair amount of criticism. Articles of the time were quick to point out the fact that cold air could reach the legs much more easily in a crinoline than it could with petticoats. Some of the strongest reactions, as was the case with the bloomer, came from London where G. Vickers, whose gender is not identified, published a book called The Dangers of Crinoline, Steel Hoops, Etc. It listed the many diseases that supposedly accompanied such a garment including rheumatism, colds, camps, and even consumption. Vickers warned of “many and many an early grave filled with the victim of crinoline!”118 This was a bit of an overreaction, but the hoop had quite a few real problems in that it was bulky and difficult to wear daily. It could also be immodest if one were to bend over, tipping the hoop up from the floor and exposing the legs and ankles underneath.

The main problem with the crinoline was that it allowed skirts to grow wider because, while petticoats could only provide so much fullness, a hoop could be made as large as the wearer wanted. In 1855, The Ladies’ Companion and Monthly Magazine claimed rightly that the larger skirts were making it difficult for women to ride public carriages. If a mother had several daughters, the family took up much more space with all the girls in crinolines than they did in

117 Ibid., 81.
p Petticoats. Those concerned with health argued that hoops were beneficial if they were just large enough to allow ease of movement, beyond that they became as ugly and as inconvenient as any of the petticoats before them. Eliakim Littell, founder of the weekly periodical, The Living Age claimed that a small hoop was a better form of dress than petticoats. He explained that a small hoop, “sets off the dress, gives dignity to the person, and keeps the long and heavy petticoats from clinging inconveniently about the feet.” He explained that the hoops worn by women in by 1862 were ungraceful and much too large to be convenient. They caused problems when sitting at a dinner table where they inconvenienced men as well as women since, with such large skirts, men could not get their legs under the table. In an 1856 article from the United States Magazine, the criticism of the hoop was that it made women look too similar a bell, imparting “neither grace nor elegance.”

People also joked about the empty space under the skirts leaving enough room around the legs for animals and small children to wander under the skirt. A poem that appeared in 1857 in Emerson’s United States Magazine told a funny story about a woman walking along in a hoop when a dog ran under the skirt leaving only its tail sticking out. This caused all who saw the woman to laugh as she walked along. Soon another dog joined the first under her skirt and the two of them had a full out dog fight under the hoop with the woman none the wiser. The poem ends with the lines “Some say she never would have known at all about the fight, had not one dog mistook, and gave her ‘limb’ an awful bite. But since that day, I’ve heard it said, that lady

122 Ibid., 71.
ne’er was seen upon the street, with so much pride—and such a crinoline.”124 While this was a fictional account, embarrassing situations where creatures of one kind or another ran under women’s skirts were difficult to avoid.

In addition, some of the concerns regarding the crinoline’s safety were warranted. There were real dangers associated with wearing hoops that were sometimes worse than those associated with petticoats. Vickers’ arguments of danger were mostly exaggerated, but crinolines did cause actual deaths. In one incident, thousands of women died in a church lit with paraffin oil lamps when a fire broke out. On December 8, 1863, a large group of people gathered at church for a feast day celebration when a display near the altar caught fire. According to one report, the men and women sat in separate parts of the church. This meant that the men, unhindered by their clothing could escape. However, for the women, “the headlong hurry, the fainting, the obstruction of the bell-shaped dresses and the frantic eagerness to gain the street, formed an impenetrable barrier before the two doors.”125 The article state that “Of the 3,000 persons within the pile, but five or six hundred escaped, and most of them wounded, scorched and naked.”126 This seems to indicate that at least some of the women were able to free themselves of their skirts and escape, but the description is unclear as to who these survivors were or whether they were men or women. However, it seems safe to assume that they were women, as a man would have no reason to remove his clothing to escape the building, so the description of naked survivors would not make much sense.127 This shows that, although former Dress Reformers

124 Emerson, “A Chapter on Hoops,” Emerson’s United States Magazine, 216.
126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
such as Amelia Bloomer claimed the have changed their dress thanks to the convenience of the crinoline, bloomers were still the more practical option. They must have known this and, therefore, I assert that they used the crinoline as an excuse to lay aside the bloomer in order to have some reprieve from the criticism the received for wearing it, and not, as they said, because the styles had become more practical.

This was just one incident but wearing hoops in everyday life caused many other strange accidents. One report demonstrated the ease with which women could accidentally set themselves on fire in their own homes while wearing hoops. In Boston, a young woman standing near the chimney caught her crinoline on fire causing her death. The newspaper that reported the incident claimed, “It is hardly necessary for us to inflict upon our lady readers a lesson in Physics, in order to make it perfectly plain to them that the protection of the flames in such a case by the enveloping crinoline must act upon them precisely in the manner of a chimney with a ‘blower’ and drought.” 128 Another such article fervently expounded upon the number of other strange deaths caused by hoops such as crushing and drowning. The newspaper article stated, “It would be a public service if somebody would publish a list of the known casualties from this cause. Besides the deaths by fire, there have been many by crushing under carriage wheels and in machinery, and in narrow spaces where a woman reasonably dressed would be in no danger.” 129 Bloomers were clearly the safer option, and yet they still fell out of fashion because they were too far outside the gender norms for women to wear.

Clearly, bloomers were still the more sensible option, and the dangers and inconveniences of the crinoline left the door open for another attempt at reform in later years.

Amelia Bloomer was right in her judgement that the time for bloomers had not yet come. Though it seemed that opponents of the style had won, the idea that women could, and should, wear some form of pants could not be forgotten so easily. It remained in the cultural consciousness, just waiting for its time to resurface. The bloomer was a first step towards freedom for women, not only in their social roles but freedom in their dress. Bloomers were one of the most important movements for Dress Reform because of their connection to the Women’s Movement and that fact that this was the most formal of the Dress Reform movements in the United States with its own organizations and publications to promote its message. The question was still open as to who would wear the pants in America and men had only won the first round in that battle.
Chapter 2: Crossing the Bifurcated Divide – Pants, Gender, and Borders

Advocates for changing women’s clothing to reflect the needs of health and practicality, more commonly known as dress reformers, had difficulty persuading the public that this change was necessary, in general, but particularly regarding one garment: pants. Fashion was a part of American culture governed by consumerism and was not easily changed by the vocal minority who advocated for it based on either health or social agendas. This was especially true in the case of pants, which were, by far the biggest obstacle when it came to society at large embracing dress reform because of their controversial and gendered nature, even though dress reform magazines, public figures, and even some doctors advocated for them from the 1850s to the 1920s. In this case the term dress reformer refers to anyone connected with the dress reform movement either through social clubs, connection with dress reform journals such as “The Lily” and “Dress,” or who worked actively towards promoting dress reform styles through their writing, or their work as designers, activists, or public figures. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, for example were active in both the women’s rights and dress reform movement.

Pants represented masculinity, which made them the most difficult garment for dress reformers to effectively market to women, because wearing pants, for a woman, was to outright defy the traditional notions of gender. This made pants a firm border between the masculine and feminine, and the experiences of those who did wear pants showed that a large portion of American society viewed them as interlopers; women who wanted to be men. There was a small number of women bold enough to challenge these gender norms despite the backlash they knew they would receive, but for pants to become mainstream, women first had to find reasons for wearing them that were uncontroversial and did not challenge their roles as women.
Appropriating the dress and mannerisms of men was often equated with appropriating masculine privileges or even a desire on the part of the woman wearing pants to be a man. Because of the broader connections between pants and masculinity, dress reform, and particularly pants for women, were part of a larger argument over what place women should occupy in American society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Women attempted to cross the bifurcated divide in different ways and for a variety of reasons. This is partially because dress reform from its very beginnings in the late 1840s became entangled with more controversial movements such as Women’s Suffrage. The idea of crossing gender lines in dress was already controversial in itself, but the alliance of dress reformers with a movement that called for women’s roles in society to change as well, made them appear even more subversive to the established order. To adopt pants in any form women had to either surrender part of their perceived femininity, ally themselves with less controversial movements such as health reform, or deliberately try to change what was acceptable in women’s fashion.

The negative reaction against bloomers described in the last chapter might make one believe that the sight of women wearing pants was unprecedented, however, this was not necessarily the case. Women have been assuming male dress to gain male power throughout most of western history and pants themselves have not always been universally considered a male garment, especially when examining cultures outside of the Anglo US. In fact, the pants that women wore in the US between 1840 and 1915 were based on Asian styles. Another name for the original bloomer was the Turkish trousers because Elizabeth Smith Miller, who was a women’s rights activist and a cousin of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was the first wear these pants after being inspired by the pants worn in the middle east. However, most early dress reformers settled on calling these garments bloomers or the American Costume partially to avoid
scandalous connotations since Americans connected middle eastern women with harems, which were highly sexualized in the Anglo-American imagination. According to historian Gayle Fischer, “Images of Eastern women, however, particularly Arab and Turkish women, conveyed a highly erotic picture to the west.”\textsuperscript{130} However, unlike western trousers, the pants that middle eastern women wore at least had some connection to femininity to a western observer because of their delicate design, and the fact that they were made specifically made for women. This made them more palatable to American women.

Even western culture included examples of women wearing pants on some occasions. Stories of women dressed as men and men dressed as women are common in western literature and mythology. Often, cultural heroes dressed as the opposite sex and received little censure for it by those who recounted their stories. Achilles, hero of the Trojan war, was said to have dressed as a woman in order to hide from Odysseus, since his mother predicted grave disaster for him if he were to fight.\textsuperscript{131} Several of Shakespeare’s heroines including Viola from \textit{Twelfth Night} and Julia from \textit{Two Gentlemen of Verona} adopted a male disguise to comedic effect in his plays.\textsuperscript{132} Joan of Arc, though persecuted during her lifetime, is remembered as a saint for dressing as a man and leading an army into battle. She claimed that she wore male armor to guard against rape for which a skirt offered little protection. Yet, despite persecution in her own time, and execution for heresy by being burned at the stake, she later received praise and renown from others for her valor and her influence. According to Dyan Elliott’s book \textit{Proving Woman}, even Jean Gerson,

who helped prosecute Joan of Arc, acknowledged her popularity claiming that, “the Maid has the faith of the king and his council, creates exultation in the people, increases their piety, and inspires fear in the enemy.\textsuperscript{133} According to a deposition at her trial given by Guillaume Manchon who was the chief notary at the trial, “at that time she was dressed in male clothing, and kept complaining that she could not do without it, fearing that the guards would violate her in the night.”\textsuperscript{134} This account illustrates that pants could serve as a form of protection allowing D’Arc to move more safely in male society at least in some cases.

So, the idea of women dressed as men and men dressed as women was not unheard of, being instead the subject of curiosity and fantasy. In all these cases, the character in question dressed as the opposite gender to gain access to the privileges or protections of that gender, not out of any sense of fashion. For Achilles and the women dressed as men in Shakespeare’s play, the purpose was to hide or go unnoticed and for Joan of Arc it was to protect her “virtue” and command the respect of an army. In all these cases clothing was more a means to an end. They wore masculine garments because of the privileges it gave them whether because they were able to pass as men completely or because they disguised the more feminine features of their bodies allowing them to circumvent the sort of objectification and sexualization of women prevalent in their society.

This is why the idea of stepping outside of gender norms when it came to dress was so controversial, because most people in western culture associated it with stepping out of one’s gender role or attempting to fool others about one’s true identity. Gayle Lavender argued in her 2001 book \textit{Pantaloons and Power} that in the nineteenth century, “Sex-distinctive dress

\textsuperscript{134} Allen Williamson, “The Issue of Joan of Arc’s Cross-dressing” Joan of Arc Archive, retrieved 1/15/21 from http://archive.joan-of-arc.org/Joanofarc_male_clothing.html#testimony
emphasized the physical and social differences between women and men...The increased stereotyping in dress defended the wearers from their fears about uncertain sexual identity, gender identity, and changes in society.”135 In this way, clothing that concretely distinguished between genders and emphasized gender roles, maintained the social order, which was comforting to anyone who wanted to maintain the status quo.

Women who wanted to wear pants also faced an uphill battle after the backlash against the bloomer costume popular in the 1840s, which made it nearly impossible for similar styles to gain any positive attention. The early setback of the dress reform movement thanks to the failure of the bloomer delayed further attempts at normalizing pants for women for decades. Usually, any pants that did appear after the backlash against the bloomer had to prove distinct from the bloomer. This was the case with the American Costume which looked very similar to the bloomer but with less voluminous pants under the skirt. James Caleb Jackson supported the American Costume in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Jackson, who was a believer in alternative medicine such as the water cure and other homeopathic remedies, was also a dress reformer who continued to advocate for pants in the late nineteenth century after the fall of the bloomer. His concern for dress grew out of the fact that he was part of the health movement and his interest in health went beyond clothing. One of his more well-known inventions is granola, now used in cereal, granola bars, and other health foods.136 Jackson claimed that the American Costume was as like the bloomer as “an elephant is like a rhinoceros”137 even though the two styles were almost exactly the same. If anything, the American Costume looked even more masculine, as the trousers were cut much more like male trousers than the bloomers. Still, the practicality of the

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135 Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power*, pg. 3.
style was undeniable and by the early twentieth century American women once again attempted to push the boundaries of clothing norms. However, memories of the bloomers were still vivid in American culture, so the challenge was to make new attempts seem different from earlier ones. Dress reformers interested in reviving pants for women also received support from the Health Movement, which called for increased physical fitness for both men and women. The fact that pants were a practical garment for movement, seemed a logical part of health and exercise.

**Who Wears the Pants?**

One of the early reasons that women used pants to cross the border between the masculine and the feminine was that they sometimes performed tasks typically done by men. Usually those who wore pants for these reasons were individuals bold enough to cross that border for themselves, though they may or may not have advocated for others to do the same. People involved in the women’s movement would use more masculine clothing like suit jackets, feminized versions of men’s hats, shirtwaists, neckties, and masculine fabrics and colors to project a sense of power and authority that was generally associated with masculinity as shown in Figure 2-1.138 Meanwhile, dressing in pants out of necessity for things like ranch work or other

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masculine activities was not necessarily connected to that, or any other, movement. Still, the reasons behind wearing male garments were the same for these women as it was for those who were involved with dress reform: to make clothing more practical and to gain more mobility in male dominated spaces. It was this second reason that a more traditional segment of the population found concerning, but the first reason allowed women to adopt pants even in situations outside of the official dress reform movement. Many of the women who wore pants did so out of necessity rather than to make a political statement.

Three examples in particular represent the different reasons why women chose to wear pants. Loreta Janeta Velazquez (1842-1897) was a female Civil War veteran who wore pants in order to impersonate a man and fight for the South. Martha Jane Cannary (1852-1903), known more commonly as Calamity Jane, became famous in dime store novels and as part of wild west legend partially for her masculine dress and mannerisms. She wore pants for reasons of comfort and practicality. Finally, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919) was a surgeon and Civil War veteran who won the Congressional Medal of Honor for her service during the war. She wore pants because she was interested in furthering the cause of dress reform and succeeding in a male dominated field. These women wore their pants during different times throughout the dress reform movement, Velasquez during the early years of reform in the 1860s, Cannary after the bloomer movement ended in the 1870s, and Mary Walker, who was present throughout the movement but gained the most notoriety in the early twentieth century. Though they adopted pants for different public reasons, these three women all did so for similar personal reasons.

American and European history. Some examples of this is the doublet-inspired bodices of the Elizabethan Era, as well as the Redingote of the Georgian era and the spencer of the Empire Period both of which mimicked the look of a men’s jacket.
They all wanted to appropriate masculine power in some way and wearing pants was their ticket across the gender border into the masculine sphere.

Just at the outset of the Civil War, a young man calling himself Harry T. Buford entered a bar, ordered some sarsaparilla, and proposed a toast “Gentlemen, here’s to the success of our young Confederacy.” The men around him cheered and responded, “We drink that toast every time, young fellow.” It was true that men in bars all over the South were drinking this toast. What is unusual about this occasion was that the young man in question was actually a woman in men’s clothing. Her name was Loreta Janeta Velazquez, and she was one of many known women who disguised themselves as men to fight in the American Civil War. Others who disguised themselves as men included Frances Clayton who fought in the Missouri artillery and Mary Owens from the Pennsylvania regiment. In 1888, Mary Livermore, writing for the US Sanitary Commission, estimated that almost 400 women disguised themselves to serve in the Civil War, though the War Department did not keep track of these numbers since they did not record any women enlisting in

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140 Ibid., 55.
141 Figure 2-2: Loreta Janeta Velazquez/Henry T. Buford, from “Loreta Janeta Velazquez,” American Battlefield Trust retrieved 3/1/21 from https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/loreta-janeta-velazquez
the military. Still, they admitted that there were known cases of women who disguised themselves long enough to go undetected.\textsuperscript{142}

Velazquez claimed a Spanish heritage. Her father came from Cartagena and received his education in Madrid and Paris in Latin, French, German and, later, English. He and his wife moved to Cuba where Loreta Velazquez was born. When she was very young, her father inherited an estate in Texas, so the family moved again. At the time, Texas was still part of Mexico. When the Mexican-American war broke out, her father fought to expel the American “invaders.”\textsuperscript{143} As a child, Velazquez dreamed of being the hero of the stories she heard and was very aware that most of these heroes were men. She grew up, married, and fell into her prescribed gender role, but continued to dream of adventure. The thought of the Confederate cause filled her with excitement to the point that she was determined to leave her husband if he refused to support the Confederacy. Though he agreed, soon this was not enough for Velazquez, who decided she wanted to go with him to fight. In order to appease her, and hopefully discourage her from further talk of following him into battle, Velazquez’ husband helped her dress as a man and took her to a bar. He hoped that seeing how men acted away from female company would discourage her from her plans. Velazquez described feeling odd at first wearing men’s clothing in public, but she soon adjusted and enjoyed the experience, so her husband’s plan had backfired spectacularly.\textsuperscript{144}

Velazquez, as a woman of Spanish descent and a Confederate is, in some ways, the opposite of the mostly northern, middle-class, white women who advocated for dress reform through the women’s movement. She and other women like her who also fought in the Civil War

\textsuperscript{143} Velazquez, \textit{The Woman in Battle}, 40.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 50-54.
used masculine dress as a disguise so that they could do something they would not be able to do as women. They used clothing as a way to cross the gender border and appropriate male power by pretending to be men. This was not really dress reform, since they were only doing it for themselves and not advocating that all women should adopt masculine clothing, but their experience did show the limits of gender norms and that one way to cross these was through adopting a different style of dress. In this case the dress was meant to fool others about their true gender, but it was also the key to Velasquez gaining the freedom that she needed to go fight and fulfil her lifelong dreams of being a hero.145

Velasquez represented a case in which a woman was attempting to pass as a man, however, there were other examples of women who wore pants not to disguise themselves as men or to advocate for other women to dress that way, but simply because it was the most practical style of dress for them. One example of this was Martha Jane Cannary, who most people know as “Calamity Jane”.146 She was advertised on the handbill of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show as “the

145 De Anne Blanton and Lauren M. Cook. They Fought Like Demons: Women Soldiers in the Civil War, pg., 2 and 3.
146 Figure 2-3: “Ambiguous: Clamity Jan in Men;s clothes, 1895; right dressed more formally” in Dominic Sandbrook, “Clamity: The Many Lives of Clamity Jane by Karen R. Jones review – the real heroine of the plains: The unvarnished truth about one of the most fascinating figures of the Old West. Review by Dominic Sandbrook,” The Sunday Times, (Sunday January 26, 2020). https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/calamity-the-many-lives-of-clamity-jane-by-karen-r-jones-review-the-real-heroine-of-the-plains-x0h9ggvkp
famous woman scout of the Wild West! Heroine of a thousand adventures! Terror of evil-doers in the Black Hills! Comrade of Buffalo Bill and the Wild West!” Cannary has become so famous for her propensity to dress like a man and her adventures in the West that many modern observers forget that she followed traditional gender roles more often than not. She usually worked in more feminine roles as a cook and laundress in the way of more “honorable” trades, but also as a dance hall girl and even a prostitute. However, she is most known for working in roles that were not typical of women and when she did, she wore men’s clothing not because she was a dress reformer herself but because it made sense for her to do so.

Cannary existed on the fringes of the border between the masculine and the feminine with one foot on each side of the bifurcated divide, much like the pants that she used as a tool to cross between the two spheres. She adopted male clothing when performing her scouting duties for General Custer, for which she needed to ride a horse, carry a gun, and control the Native American population by forcing them onto reservations and suppressing uprisings. This was not typical work for women and yet she did it. Her exploits earned her notoriety and a place in the legends of the “wild west,” which idealized rugged individualism and manifest destiny, making those who enforced it into cultural heroes. Her style of dress was not so much a statement to others as much as a matter of convenience and practicality. Still, the fact that she regularly crossed the gender border shows that she, like Velazquez, rebelled against traditional roles, whether to obtain the power of masculinity or, at the very least, to have the same freedom of motion. In her memoir, Cannary explained “When I joined Custer, I donned the uniform of a soldier. It was a bit awkward at first, but I soon got to be perfectly at home in men’s clothes.”

In addition to clothing, Calamity Jane was known to adopt other “masculine” habits such as swearing, shooting, and living as an outdoorsman to name a few. According to Michael Rutter, who wrote about Calamity Jane in his book *Upstairs Girls* “She was uncomfortable in all the traditional roles she was asked to play.” Cannary’s personal memoirs do not mention this discomfort; however, her life does indicate that she was unwilling or unable to follow the traditional rules of femininity that nineteenth century society prescribed.

Velasquez and Cannary were not necessarily reformers themselves, but their lives reflected the need for dress reform since pants provided them with the freedom to live outside of traditional femininity. Though there is a difference between these women and dress reformers, since Cannary and Velasquez were not dressing this way to change the roles of all women but only their own roles, their desire to wear pants still came from a similar place to that of reformers. The style was more practical, and it allowed them a certain amount of freedom of movement both in the literal physical sense and within society. In the case of Velasquez, who was trying to convince people she was a man, it offered her social freedoms, such as the ability to go to a bar and share a toast, that were not generally afforded to women.

The appropriation of masculinity was useful for Velasquez but was also used by dress reformers. Amelia Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Smith, and other members of the women’s movement also dressed in a feminine version of pants for the purposes of health, practicality, and the chance to participate more fully in the public sphere. Dress reform was much more of a public movement that endeavored to change the way all women dressed, not just a single individual. Still, the stories of women outside of the dress

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151 Other examples of female heroines of the west include Pearl Hart who often dressed in men’s clothing as well and seemed comfortable in both forms of dress.
reform movement are important for understanding the social landscape into which dress reform was born, as well as the motivations behind it and the social connotations that pants represented.

While Velasquez and Cannary did not consider themselves dress reformers, other women who adopted a masculine style for themselves certainly did. A good example of the way people crossed the gender border and the reactions they received for it was illustrated in the case of Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, who was a controversial figure that attracted a lot of attention for her style of dress. Dr. Mary Edwards Walker served as a surgeon during the Civil War and President Andrew Johnson even awarded her a medal of honor for her service. However, the government took it away in 1917 because she was technically a civilian, having never been a commissioned officer since women were not allowed to serve in the military at the time. Her medal was not reinstated until 1977 under President Carter. Initially, Walker wore the bloomer style until the movement lost popularity. Yet, unlike her contemporaries Amelia Bloomer and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Walker did not go back to wearing the traditional feminine style after the bloomer fell. Instead, she adopted the dress of a man. She faced consequences both for wearing reform dress such as

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the bloomer and, later, for wearing men’s clothing. A New York police officer named Patrick H. Pickett arrested her for “impersonating a man” because she was wearing men’s clothing in public. She secured a release but found herself arrested again on June 11, 1866, this time by an Officer Johnson.\textsuperscript{153} She was also arrested in Kansas City in 1869, and later in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{154}

Dr. Walker wore men’s clothes because she believed they were healthier and more practical and, as was the case with Velasquez and Calamity Jane, they were part of her larger attempt to live a life outside the confines of the traditional female sphere. The skirt was a symbol of the social expectations that held her back from achieving her goals, even stripping her of the medal of honor she won for her service as a physician during the Civil War, specifically because of her social limitations as a nineteenth century woman. In her 1871 book \textit{Hit}, Walker discussed the disenfranchisement of women and the attempt to impose societal restrictions upon them stating, “The great mass of men seem to have thought that a woman stands in intimate relations to human rights as well as themselves, and yet they censure her if she does not assume all, in the sphere that they have marked out – all that the dictators decide to belong to said sphere.”\textsuperscript{155} When speaking on dress she claimed, “the time is coming when every woman will dress in this style, for the advantages are too evident, to be much longer overlooked.”\textsuperscript{156} Her words indicate that Walker found the female sphere confining and unfair compared to the roles of men and thought of clothing in much the same way. Of course, the fact that skirts were uncomfortable and cumbersome played into her decision, but the skirt was also part of an even more cumbersome society that limited her choices and prevented her from gaining the recognition she deserved.

\textsuperscript{153} Harris, \textit{Dr. Mary Walker}, 80.
\textsuperscript{154} Alison Gaines, \textit{Mary Edwards Walker: The Only Female Medal of Honor Recipient} (New York: Cavendish Square, 2018) pg. 117.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 84.
After *The Lily*, the dress reform magazine that Amelia Bloomer ran in the mid-nineteenth century, ended publication in 1856, there were dress reformers who wanted to continue its tradition as a dress reform publication. Dr. Lydia Sayer and her husband John Hasbrouck therefore started publishing *The Sybil: A Review of the Tastes, Errors, and Fashion of Society* in order to keep reform in the public consciousness. Lydia Sayer was a dress reformer who wore the bloomer style and was a supporter of hydropathic medicine. Her husband was an abolitionist who established the *Middletown Whig Press* to promote abolitionist ideas.\(^{157}\) *The Sybil* discussed many issues related to dress reform, including the challenges that female physicians faced, particularly if they advocated for reform clothing.\(^{158}\) Dr. Walker wrote several pieces for *The Sybil*, publishing her first letter in January of 1857 and later becoming a reporter for the publication. She was also involved with the National Dress Reform Association, which promoted the bloomer style and hydropathic medicine. Together with Dr. Sayer Hasbrouck, Walker tried to reignite the bloomer movement through speeches, writing, and by directing a dress reform convention in Washington.\(^{159}\) Women who wore pants in the nineteenth century such as Dr. Walker faced criticism for their dress, and even danger. Reports of attacks on female physicians on call late at night surfaced in the *Gazette*, some of which even ended in murder regardless of whether they were wearing pants. Walker’s style of dress increased her visibility as a target.

The press usually sided against women who wore masculine attire, making them appear ridiculous at best and dangerous at worst. Though the New York newspaper sided with Mary Walker after her arrest, it also discussed her in more negative terms and even sensationalized her

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\(^{158}\) Ibid., 19-20.

\(^{159}\) Harris, *Dr. Mary Walker*, 20, 113.
story in other instances. The Gazette connected her to other scandalous incidents that involved women in pants, even if she had nothing to do with them. In one such instance, there was a woman dressed in masculine clothing present in a bar where a man was murdered, and the Gazette claimed this woman was setting herself up as a “Rival of Dr. Mary Walker.” This was simply due to her dress, not because the two women actually knew each other, which they likely did not. In addition, the Gazette did not claim that the woman in question had any part in the incident in the bar other than simply being present at the time. Her style of dress made her presence notable even if she did not take part in the crime.

The main obstacle that women who dressed in men’s clothing faced was the notion that, by doing so, they rejected their womanhood in an attempt to become men, even if that was not their goal. In this sense, pants served as a physical border that women could not cross without losing their place as women, but they would not find acceptance as men either. The women who did manage to get away with wearing pants were anomalies, protected by their job, their status, or the fame they received because of these things and, as in the case of Walker, that protection was limited at best. This left them in a very nebulous place regarding gender. Some contemporaries of these women accused them of wanting to become men or else viewed them as a “hybrid” of the two genders. In fact, the New York Times criticized Walker’s dress when it claimed, “We must have both men and women, and we must resist any attempt to combine the two sexes in one person, as Dr. Walker has attempted to do.” This criticism was common amongst people with more traditional views who rejected dress reform and the women’s movement. They tended to believe that maleness and femaleness formed a delicate balance and if women crossed into the realm of maleness, men would have to adopt a more feminine nature to

160 Ibid., 170.
161 Harris, Dr. Mary Walker, 162.
compensate. One such opponent to pants for women was Orestes Brownson, a Catholic writer, as well as an activist and preacher who opposed women’s suffrage.\textsuperscript{162} He claimed that the two sexes were simply different and that women were specifically suited to the private sphere as wives and mothers. He explained, “Women are not needed as men; they are needed as women, to do, not what men can do as well as they, but what men cannot do.”\textsuperscript{163} He believed women alone had the necessary qualities for child rearing and that men could not fulfil that role. It was for this reason that Brownson opposed women’s suffrage, not because he believed them incapable of voting. Pants were a physical representation of how, as he believed, women were different from men. He was not alone in making this connection. People on both sides of the dress reform debate understood the social link between pants, masculinity, and power. As Bonnie Z. Goldsmith explained in her book about Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, “Trousers equaled maleness, and maleness equaled independence.”\textsuperscript{164} This was the reason Dr. Walker and others like her chose to wear pants and the reason that people like Brownson were concerned.

The idea that these women somehow wanted to become men, is not limited to the time in which they lived, though that was certainly part of the issue surrounding women wearing masculine garments. When looking at women dressed as men in history, even a modern observer might feel tempted to equate them with transgender people who identify as men today, but this is a difficult comparison to make, and cross dressing is not the same as being transgender, particularly in a historical context. Being male came with a very different power dynamic at the time, so it is difficult to determine whether the women who dressed as men did so because they

\textsuperscript{162} “Orestes Augustus Brownson Papers”, University of Notre Dame Archives, National archives, Retrieved 1/12/21.
\textsuperscript{163} Henry F. Brownson ed., \textit{The Work of Orestes A. Brownson}, vol. xviii (Detroit: Thorndike Nourse, Publisher, 1885. Pg. 391.
felt they identified more with the male gender in the modern sense or because they needed to acquire the power associated with it. Most women who dressed in male clothing, including our three examples, also dressed in traditional women’s clothing at times. In addition, though some historical women by birth did identify as men, there is a clear distinction between women who wore masculine clothing and people who identified as men, which is a much more modern concept that is nearly impossible to place on people living in the past who did not openly identify that way.

In Loreta Janeta Velazquez’s case, her autobiography shows some signs that she did indeed identify with the male gender from a young age. She described Joan of Arc as a favorite heroine and often dreamed of performing similar deeds of valor, fighting like a man for her loved ones and her country.\(^{165}\) She explained:

> I was especially haunted with the idea of being a man; and the more I thought upon the subject, the more I was disposed to murmur at Providence for having created me a woman. While residing with my aunt, it was frequently my habit, after all in the house had retired to bed at night, to dress myself in my cousin's clothes, and to promenade by the hour before the mirror, practicing the gait of a man, and admiring the figure I made in masculine raiment. I wished that I could only trade places with my brother Josea. If I could have done so I would never have been a doctor, but would have marked out for myself a military career, and have disported myself in the gay uniform of an officer.\(^{166}\)

This shows that Velazquez often envisioned herself as a man and felt uncomfortable with her life as a woman. However, whether this was solely related to her gender or whether it also had to do with the options available to men (such as a military career) that were off limits to women, is more difficult to discern. There is an important distinction between these two concepts because Velasquez may or may not have been upset that she was born female if women could easily serve in the military.

\(^{165}\) Velazquez, *The Woman in Battle*, 37.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 42.
Modern writers and historians have taken up the question of examining whether historical figures might have identified as trans in the modern sense if given the opportunity, including Jason Cromwell, a trans man who wrote about the history of trans men and came up with a framework based on a set of questions for how to identify historical figures as trans. These questions included whether or not the individuals in question referred to themselves as men and tried to live as men while keeping their biologically assigned gender a secret even if it meant they lost access to life saving medical care.

While Loreta Janeta Velasquez’s early interest in being a man makes one wonder if she might have permanently identified as one if given the chance, she does not quite fit the standard based on these questions. She referred to herself alternately as male and female in her autobiography. Generally, she referred to herself as female, but she did use masculine terms at times when speaking about her time living as a man. She claimed in her memoir, *The Woman in Battle: The Civil War Narrative of Loreta Janeta Velasquez* that “I was especially bent upon showing them…that I was as good a man as any one of them.” Still, the fact that she specifically referred to herself as a woman in the title of her autobiography appears to negate the idea that she thought of herself as a man in any permanent sense. As to whether she tried to live as a man while concealing her identity, it is clear that she certainly did, but it was specifically for the purpose of fighting in the Civil War. Velasquez knew that the military would reject her if she attempted to fight as a female. She also did not quite fit the last criteria as she did seek medical attention for a wounded arm. She did not go into detail about exactly how an arm wound led to

167 Jason Cromwell, *Transmen & FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders & Sexualities*, (University of Illinois, 1999) pg. 3.
her discovery, but she did explain that, upon seeing the confused expression on her friend’s face while he was examining her wound and his dawning suspicion of her true identity, she confessed to him that she was a woman. Still her early desire to dress in men’s clothing and her aspiration to fight prove, if nothing else, that her decision to join the army dressed as a man was not a sudden notion based on harsh events, but the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. For Velasquez, the only way to live out this reality was to gain access to male power, and the only way to do that was through dressing in male attire. This is because clothing was so closely tied to gender identity and concepts of masculinity and femininity. Though she dressed this way to disguise herself, the goal of appropriating male power was very similar to those of other women that wore pants both inside and outside the dress reform movement.

Calamity Jane’s story similarly does not fit Cromwell’s standard for discerning transgender identity. Cannary claimed that it was not until 1870 when she joined General Custer as a scout at Fort Russell that she donned male attire for the first time and there is no mention of a desire to dress in male clothing early in life, as in Velasquez’s story. Calamity Jane’s experience of wearing men’s clothing, however, was similar to that of Velazquez. Velasquez talked about feeling a bit self-conscious when first wearing men’s clothing but soon she started to enjoy the experience. Similarly, Calamity Jane claimed that wearing clothing was awkward in the beginning, but she eventually became more comfortable with it. However, unlike Velasquez, Calamity Jane did not dress in men’s clothing to hide her identity as a woman. She dressed this way out of necessity and convenience because women’s clothing was cumbersome when performing the traditionally masculine duty of scouting. This necessity, and the atypical place that these women occupied on the fringes not only of western civilization but also of respectable

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170 Ibid., 226.
society, protected them when they similarly lived on the fringes of femininity. Their stories served as curiosities, which is why both women published books about their experiences but were not intended to inspire other women to follow their example. The fact that the line between masculine and feminine roles was so strict explains why these stories were considered interesting curiosities in the first place. Anecdotal examples of women dressing as men were not as dangerous to the prescribed social order as the idea that women would adopt pants on a wider scale, especially when it was so deeply connected with the women’s movement.

Dr. Walker’s aims were different in that she wanted to change not only her own clothing but inspire other women to do the same, which led to more instances of people referring to her as a would-be man than either Velasquez or Cannary. Yet, she did not consider herself a man and she does not meet any of Cromwell’s criteria for assessing whether a historical figure might identify as a trans man. She never referred to herself as a man, never tried to hide the fact that she was a woman, and never refused medical care to hide her gender. Yet, despite this, people in her own time labeled her as a “hybrid male-female.” Her desire to dress in men’s clothing and, more importantly, inspire others to do so, demonstrated to her contemporaries that she had somehow surrendered her femininity. Still, while Walker did adopt men’s dress to fill a traditionally male role, she was not attempting to pass herself off as a man as Velasquez did. However, she was also dealing different circumstances because while serving as a soldier was limited exclusively to men, women had limited access to medical careers, but they were not altogether excluded. Walker did not need to dress as a man or convince anyone that she was a man to practice her craft. Walker dressed in men’s clothing because she found this style more practical, and because she supported the dress reform movement. When asked about it, she explained, “I don’t know why they should be called men’s clothes when they answer just as well
for women.” \(^{171}\) Her main concern was for comfort and health and she genuinely believed that traditional female clothing was unhealthy, as she discussed in detail in her book, devoting an entire chapter to dress reform and healthy dress. In addition, she saw dress as representative of status and even power, claiming that businesswomen should dress for that purpose. \(^{172}\)

In the case of Velasquez, Cannary, and Walker, the desire to dress in men’s clothing for any reason brought accusations that they wanted to be men, whether or not they actually identified that way. This was a method of policing women’s bodies and maintaining the integrity of the bifurcated divide that separated the masculine and the feminine. According to a biography about Walker written by Sharon Harris, “Because Mary chose to dress in pants rather than a skirt, her body became an accepted object of public scrutiny and mockery, with depictions of her as a hybrid male-female.” \(^{173}\) This statement summarized the view of those who opposed dress reform regarding pants. They were concerned about what the pants represented. A rumor about Walker was that she remarried but had an argument over who should “wear the pants in the family” and so she left the marriage. \(^{174}\) Biographer Sharon Harris believes that this was just a joke at Walker’s expense since there is no evidence of a second marriage, but it is telling about the society’s view on pants and what they represented.

Though Velasquez, Cannary, and Walker all dressed in male clothing for personal reasons, they also shared a desire to cross the gender border and adopt a masculine role in some way. For Velasquez, pants were a literal disguise during the Civil War in the 1860s, but for Cannary who worked on the frontier from the 1870s to the 1900s, and Walker who was active in the bloomer movement of the mid 1800s and continued to support reform into the early 1900s,

\(^{171}\) Harris, *Dr. Mary Walker*, 218.
\(^{172}\) Ibid., 218
\(^{173}\) Ibid., 170
\(^{174}\) Ibid., 267
they were simply the most convenient and practical garments to wear for their jobs, which were typically dominated by men. However, pants also allowed all three of these women access to the masculine sphere and, in Walker’s case, she used them to actively expand women’s opportunities. In each instance, the pants these women wore served as examples of the worst fears of traditional society realized; the notion that women wanted to appropriate male power. Still, apart from Walker, it was also mostly limited to individuals who could be more easily overlooked than members of a movement. For those who wore the clothing, it represented another challenge in that a significant number of Americans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed anyone who dressed as a man as wanting to be a man. This meant that clothing also represented gender identity and those who wore men’s clothing risked being viewed as “hybrid male-females”. Therefore, activists like Walker were especially threatening because they advocated not only for themselves but for all women to dress in pants. Such social fears made it more difficult for dress reformers because wearing pants had implications beyond the act itself and those who dared to cross the gender border risked being viewed with suspicion as intruders in a sphere to which they did not belong.

**Blurring the Border and the New Woman**

The transition of women in pants from something unusual that existed on the fringes of femininity to something more mainstream happened gradually and other social movements of the mid to late nineteenth century aided this process. While some supporters of dress reform certainly did argue that women deserved to wear pants in the same way that they deserved to occupy other male spaces, dress reformers were often more successful in destigmatizing pants when they argued for them indirectly. This meant making it clear that it was not for the sake of the pants themselves that women needed to wear them, but for some practical purpose that had
nothing to do with gender. Doing this provided some protection from critics when it came to wearing pants in public. In essence, they tried to de-couple pants from gender and, in doing so, blur the border between the masculine and feminine, meaning they wanted to disentangle and separate the notions of pants as a garment and pants as a representative of masculinity.

The turn of the twentieth century brought forth a new obsession among forward-thinking women in the United States with health, practicality and, of course, increased access to the rights of citizenship. As with the bloomer, pants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became caught up with the “Woman Question,” a part of public discourse during this time period that sought to define or redefine the roles of women in mainstream American society. The styles of pants that became popular at the turn of the twentieth century, which revolved around exercise and physical fitness, posed less of a threat than previous styles like the bloomer because their intended use was so narrow. The fact that women did wear pants for various understandable reasons, such as exercise in a gym, led to a certain amount of normalization when it came to wearing pants, at least for specific purposes, and the alignment of social movements such as the women’s movement and the health movement with physical fitness helped the use of pants to spread. The more acceptable form of pants was not those that women wore every day, but those that women wore to perform particular tasks. At the time, the health movement encouraged exercise for everyone including women and so a form of bloomer that allowed for greater movement became necessary. Originally, most people did not intend for this garment to become the everyday dress of women, but it was a step in the right direction for making pants more acceptable.

Part of the reason that pants became connected to the woman question was due to their association with the Women’s Movement and the emerging stereotype of the “New Woman,”
which referred to a woman who moved about more freely in the public sphere, supported social movements including women’s suffrage, and dressed in a more masculine style, which sometimes included pants for activities like bicycling. The New Woman was instrumental in helping to blur the gender border and making pants more widely acceptable. The Women’s Movement that started in the middle of the nineteenth century was still fighting for basic rights for women at the turn of the twentieth century. Supporters of the Women’s Movement called for greater independence as well as increased involvement in the public sphere. Because of this goal, the New Woman started to adopt a style of dress reminiscent of masculine attire, specifically men’s suits, in an attempt to tap into masculine power. Yet rather than living with one foot on either side of the strict masculine and feminine border, they wanted to blur the border so that these supposedly male elements would become associated with femininity. This would allow them to maintain their feminine identity, while adding some traditionally masculine elements.

With the emergence of the New Woman in the 1890s, came a new style of trousers for women known as “rationals,” to highlight their practicality or, more commonly, “knickerbockers” or “knickers,” to set them apart from the bloomers that had so many negative associations connected to them. Knickerbockers looked much like the bloomer, but women could wear them with or without an overskirt. The association with women’s rights increased the popularity of pants and the New Woman with supporters of the Women’s Movement but made them more difficult to accept for anyone who opposed it. Still, the dress reform movement attracted followers because of its emphasis on health and a more active lifestyle.

Though knickerbockers certainly had their critics, the garment met with less resistance than the bloomer because they had a use other than simple fashion in that they were practical garments for exercise and movement. The difference between this new garment and earlier
versions was its intent, which was situational rather than every day. One of the hallmarks of the New Woman was a more physically active lifestyle and knickerbockers allowed her to achieve this. The fact that such styles became more normalized, especially in terms of health and fitness, also helped pants become less an object of ridicule than they had been in the past. In 1897, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker claimed credit for the style when she stated, “I am the original new woman… I have made it possible for the bicycle girls to wear the abbreviated skirt, and I have prepared the way for the girl in knickerbockers.”

The abbreviated skirt was a shorter skirt over a pair of visible pants and knickerbockers were wide leg pants for women that were gathered in at the top of the shoe or boot. She went on to say “public opinion on the matter of dress reform is changing considerably. I do not meet with the ridicule and persecution which were so common years ago.” Walker believed that it was her efforts in wearing men’s clothing and withstanding the stigma associated with it that allowed the New Woman to wear pants more freely. Though there were other social reason why the new woman became popular including the increased mobility that the bicycle provided and the

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175 Harris, Dr. Mary Walker, 209. And “Dr. Mary Edwards Walker,” Changing the Face of Medicine, retrieved 1/7/21, https://cfmedicine.nlm.nih.gov/physicians/biography_325.html
176 Ibid.
growing popularity of the women’s movement, people like Walker who were willing to adopt reform styles early were partially responsible for the New Woman’s existence.177

By the turn of the twentieth century, women, mostly white and middle class, often participated in sports and it became more acceptable for them to ride astride on a horse, forcing a need for more “rational” garments. The New Woman lifestyle centered on physical fitness, most notably the bicycle, which gave women greater freedom through increased mobility.178 The New Woman and cycling were championed by dress reformers and women’s rights activists alike. Mary Edwards Walker served as an outspoken proponent of women’s rights and supported the more masculine style adopted by the New Woman. Similarly, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote of her support for cycling as a good way to appreciate nature, likening it to attending a church service.179 She also wrote an article for American Wheelman in 1895 in which she claimed that the bicycle would inspire women to be more courageous, increase self-respect, and make them more self-reliant.180 Knickerbockers remained extremely practical for riding bicycles in America and Europe, and when the Lady Cyclist Association in England attempted to ban women who wore them from taking part in their organization in 1897, they received such an outcry that they allowed a rational dress section the following year that was open specifically to women in “rationals.”181

177 Figure 2-5: Woman riding bicycle Katrina Jungnickel, “One needs to be very brace to stand all that”: Cycling, rational dress and the struggle for citizenship in late nineteenth century Britain”, Geoforum, Volume 64, August 2015, pg. 362-371.

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The use of bicycles, though not universal, was widespread throughout American society by the twentieth century. According to Jeremy Withers in his book *Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles* published in 2020, “In the mid 1890s, during the so-called ‘bicycle boom’ the United States – and a good portion of the rest of the world – embraced the bicycle with an almost religious fervor.”\(^\text{182}\) This means that a broad section of the American population owned and used bicycles. In fact, the language here is reminiscent of that which Elizabeth Cady Stanton used when she claimed that riding a bicycle was similar to attending a church service. Publications from the time period also mention that bicycling was incredibly commonplace among the population by the early twentieth century, though white, middle and upper-class women were most able to take advantage of the bicycle.\(^\text{183}\) *Hill’s Practical Reference Library of General Knowledge* published in 1906 stated, “at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, the bicycle was only used for sport or recreation, but by the beginning of the twentieth century it had become a common means of locomotion in everyday business life.”\(^\text{184}\) Withers and the contributing writers of the work go on to state, “Since the manufacture of the bicycle has become so extensive, the price has been lowered until a good machine is within the reach of almost any man.”\(^\text{185}\) This means that bicycles were not necessarily unaffordable for the working classes, but the image of the bicycle girl came from the middle class, mostly because the ones writing about their experiences tended to be connected to the women’s movement and the health

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\(^\text{182}\) Jeremy Withers, *Futuristic Cars and Space Bicycles: Contesting the Road in American Science Fiction* (Liverpool University Press, 2020), pg. 66.
\(^\text{183}\) Hannah S. Ostroff, “How the 19th-century bicycle craze empowered women and changed fashion.” *Smithsonian* (March 17, 2018) retrieved from https://www.si.edu/stories/19th-century-bicycle-craze
\(^\text{185}\) Ibid., 15.
movement, which generally consisted of middle class women with time to get involved in such organizations.

Though it was mostly white women who were able to become active in the bicycle craze, minorities certainly did own and ride bicycles in some instances. Kittie Knox was one example of a woman who became famous for crossing the color barrier as a cyclist. She even won first place in the Malden cycle parade for wearing the most “tasteful and artistic women’s cycling garb.”

Artistic dress generally referred to reform clothing and there is a photograph (shown in figure 2-6) of Knox wearing knickerbockers. The San Francisco Newspaper claimed that her “appearance and dress had been objects of admiration all day.” However, despite the fact that she was a member of the League of American Wheelmen, when she, “walked into the local clubhouse and presented her league card for a credential badge the gentleman in charge refused to recognize the card.” She was also turned away from hotels due to her race and the League of American Wheelmen even changed their policy in 1894, the year after Knox joined making it “whites only” presumably in response to her membership, though they never actually said so and she was allowed to remain a

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186 “Color Line Drawn, Miss Kittie Knox Refused a Badge at the L.A.W Meet” The San Francisco Call (San Francisco, California, 10 July 1895) pg. 2.
187 Figure 2-6: Kittie Knox Adam Tomasi, “Kittie Knox” The West End Museum. Retrieved, 3/23/21 from https://thewestendmuseum.org/article/kittie-knox/
188 Ibid., pg. 2.
member because she joined before the change in policy. Yet, Knox was famous because she was the exception rather than the rule. Few African American and other minority women were part of the bicycle craze, especially after the restrictions that the League of American Wheelmen put in place specifically to keep them out. This policy, which excluded members based on race was not officially changed until 1999.

Around the same time that the bicycle gained popularity among women in the US, so did other physical activities, which led to the rise of the gym suit, particularly for sports such as basketball and gymnastics. These sports became more common as schools across the nation adopted physical education as a requirement, meaning that almost every school age girl needed a gym suit. Historian Patricia Campbell Warner wrote an essay concerning the gym suit in which she discussed the effect of basketball on women’s dress for physical fitness in the early twentieth century. She explained, “this game spelled the end of the old skirted gymnastic dress in schools – it was simply too bulky. Thus, the skirt was finally banished from the gymnasium, bringing a simplification to the outfit. The bloomers shortened and widened to give the appearance of a short skirt, and the separate blouse buttoned onto the bloomer waistband.” She also referenced the support of dress reformers for the garment including Annie Jenness Miller, a prominent dress reformer who sought to create fashionable and practical garments that conformed to the standards of the dress reform movement. Miller mostly subscribed to pre-Raphaelite styles that sought to eliminate the corset, but she also supported any change that made women’s clothing more practical. Campbell Warner quoted Miller in 1888, just prior to the bicycle boom, as saying

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190 Ibid.
women who exercised needed “a regular costume…which will not impede or interfere with the free movements of any member of the body.” Knickerbockers and gym suits fit that standard better than any other garment for women at the time.

Despite the gains that dress reformers achieved thanks to gym suits and the bicycle, there were still those who pushed back against the progress that dress reformers made. While gym suits were not intended for use out in public, women wearing knickerbockers for the purpose of cycling, had to be in public. Therefore, opponents to the style in all the western nations where dress reform took hold, remained vocal about their objections. This was especially true in England where there had been a stronger reaction against the bloomer of the mid-nineteenth century than there was in the US and a stronger reaction against bicycle knickers for women as well. One outspoken critic of pants for women who went by the pseudonym of “Lato” wrote a scathing review of women who wore knickerbockers in his book So Called Skirts or Why Girls Should Not Wear “Rationals” in 1906. He warned against the use of trousers for women and condemned cycling because of its connection to rational dress. Leto claimed, “‘Rationals’ owe their inception to cycling; but for this they could never have sprung into existence.” People who fit the New Woman stereotype often received criticism similar to that which Dr. Mary Walker received in that these women appeared more masculine and were often called “half-man”. Similarly, just as Dr. Walker faced the possibility of arrest for dressing as a man, those wearing knickerbockers in the 1890s risked the same thing even though they were technically wearing clothing designed for women. In the state of New York, for example, police arrested a

192 Ibid., 154.
woman for wearing knickerbockers while riding her bike.¹⁹⁵ This reaction shows that some segments of early twentieth century society were still unwilling to accept women wearing pants publicly despite the increasing popularity of the style among women cyclists.

The bicycle itself was controversial in that women had to ride astride it, whereas they could ride a horse sidesaddle.¹⁹⁶ Despite positive comments about cycling from Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other prominent members of the Women’s Movement, the wider discourse concerning the bicycle was much more critical. Opponents to knickerbockers adopted a strategy similar to that of dress reformers in their denunciation of bicycles, by wrapping their arguments in the language of health. The Literary Digest, for example, discussed the consensus among several articles from prominent magazines which claimed that riding a bicycle could damage a woman’s health. An 1895 article simply called “The Bicycle Face” examined recent discussion among a vocal minority of medical professionals about a phenomenon in which several magazine articles had asserted that cycling caused unattractiveness in women. This discussion had already surfaced in The Springfield Republican, The Christian Intelligencer, The Boston Advertiser, and The Providence Journal. The Literary Digest article claimed that these journals put forth the argument that the concentration and physical strength necessary to maintain one’s balance on the bicycle would result in an unattractive expression known as “bicycle face.” Though women who rode bicycles denied that such a phenomenon existed, critics claimed that riding a bicycle left women looking “usually flushed, but sometimes pale, often with lips more or less drawn, and the beginning of dark shadows under the eyes, and always with an expression of weariness.”¹⁹⁷ Since this claim seems very obviously exaggerated,

¹⁹⁶ Woods, The New Woman, 10.

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it is more likely that there was a deeper fear at play behind it. The bicycle was a device that gave women the ability to move freely around town and encouraged dress that was more practical for the purpose of riding astride. This meant that the bicycle was increasing the popularity of pants and starting to threaten traditional gender norms leading to push-back against the increasing number of women who wore them, even for cycling. Similarly, the bicycle was also receiving criticism for being the instrument through which these traditional norms were being challenged.

While the writers of these articles were not exactly lying, as they probably were concerned about the possibility of bicycle face, there also seems to be some strategy involved here in targeting a woman’s appearance, which was incredibly important at the time. Despite the increased optimism about women’s potential social roles, their actual options were still very limited. Marriage remained of utmost importance for young girls and many women focused on doing whatever was necessary to find a suitable husband. This was not necessarily a simply romantic decision as women’s entire future, and the future of their children, depended on the status of the person they chose to marry. In order to attract and keep a husband, there were certain standards of attractiveness that women needed to maintain. One contemporary, Isabel Mallon who wrote for *The Ladies Home Journal*, claimed that “untidy women, illly dressed women, and women who fail to see the necessity of the home eyes, are the women who do not succeed in keeping people at home, but who drive them out to look for pastures anew.”\(^{198}\)

Though none of this speaks to the physical beauty of the women, it does specifically mention the importance of maintaining proper dress and a neat appearance. This shows that society expected women to dress with the intent of keeping their husbands interested, placing the responsibility for his disinterest or infidelity on the wife and on her clothing. Therefore, attaching a possible

impediment to cycling by claiming it robbed women of their appearance was an effective argument against the practice.

Lato, who remained adamant in his opposition to pants on women, similarly threatened that a woman who wore pants would make themselves unwanted by men, thereby eliminating their opportunity for a place in society. He stated that just because government granted some rights to women:

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\text{does not establish a precedent, nor even a hope that the rest will follow… We will not be unkind enough to attribute this state of things to the ‘rights’ already granted but if these so-called girls do not quickly become scarce, the average man will certainly take that view of the matter and either demand legislation that will set such ‘rights’ aside or decline to be still further weighted at the alter or registry office, by making his marriage a strictly natural one.}^{199}
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In this quote, Lato defended the border between the masculine and the feminine by first stating that men would take away the few rights women had gained by 1906, if they continued wearing knickerbockers. Then, he threatened the institution of marriage itself stating that if women continued to break the rules of femininity and cross the gender border into masculine territory, men would no longer feel obliged to marry them. At the same time, he attacked the honor of these women by implying that a “natural” marriage, or one unrecognized by either the law or a religious institution and implying a purely physical relationship, was the best they could hope to achieve, and all he would assume women in pants would want, if they continued wearing the style.

Lato spelled out the social concern more concretely when he claimed that, “For the greater part of the century, people have been face to face with an unwelcome phenomenon: girls are getting mannish, and yet men are not getting girlish to the same extent.”^{200} This speaks to the delicate balance that Lato and others like him believed existed between the masculine and the

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199 Lato, So Called Skirts, 10.
200 Lato, So Called Skirts, 3.
feminine, as though there was only so much space on the masculine side of the border and, if women appropriated it, the balance would be lost unless men somehow began to migrate to the feminine side of the border to compensate. It is a similar argument to that of Orestes Brown who claimed that women needed to remain feminine, doing what he believed men could not do rather than doing what men could do. Lato pushed back against efforts to blur the gender border because he found even a little manliness in women dangerous and felt that pants, being the primary male garment, could prove the most dangerous of all.

As for the fact that these pantaloons were only worn for athletics he stated, “What has the average girl to do with a gymnasium? Drill and calisthenics can be practiced – and should be – anywhere; while sweeping and scrubbing a floor and dusting out a room.” He explained that these activities were more useful than going to a gym and doing exercises that had no bearing on real life, which for women was limited to the household. Lato actually suggested that it was best for women not to adopt a costume that would tempt them to go to places such as gymnasiums. The fear expressed here is that allowing women to wear clothing that they could work out in would encourage them to do so and therefore further take them away from their duties in the private sphere. Lato serves as an example of the type of opposition women faced when it came to wearing pants and his reaction proves the rule that pants and gender were inextricably linked in the social consciousness. Therefore, rather than crossing the border on an individual basis, blurring the border so that all women could wear pants without subverting the norms of femininity seemed like the more sensible option for women who did not want to disavow their femininity, but wanted a more active lifestyle. Though this reason for wearing pants had less

202 Ibid., 62.
203 Ibid., 62.
gravitas than others. it was for that very reason that it was the most successful. Pursuit of a healthy lifestyle seemed more harmless to the status quo than the idea of wearing pants in order to overturn social constructs that were deeply ingrained in society such as traditional gender roles. That fact that this rather mild approach to dress reform also met with resistance demonstrates why such an approach was necessary in the first place.

The twenty years between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century brought significant gains for dress reform and the standards for female dress became more relaxed overall. Still, the opposition to women stepping not only outside of their skirts but outside of their social roles was one of the main components of the all-important “Woman Question,” which asked what place women should have in society. For those who lived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the idea that clothing would have to become more masculine for women to share in the public sphere did have some truth to it. Traditional women’s clothing greatly limited their movements making it more difficult to perform simple tasks. It was clear to dress reformers that women’s clothing needed to permit at least comparable freedom of movement to clothing worn by men. The fact that women managed to do as much as they did in their clothing says something about their determination and perseverance. As with the bloomer, both supporters and opponents of dress reform found it difficult to separate dress reform from the women’s movement. However, the convergence of both the women’s movement and the health movement prompted a change that allowed pants to become a bit more acceptable in physical education because of their narrow field of use. Though opponents to dress reform did push back against gym suits and pants in public even in the early part of the century, the existence of pants and their usefulness for physical activity still allowed dress reformers to
normalize them for women at least in some cases. It allowed the border between the masculine and the feminine to become less strict when it came to pants as an article of clothing.

**Dare to be Daring**

Though arguing for pants indirectly and making gender norms take a back seat to other issues like health and practicality was a step in the right direction, it was not enough to earn pants universal approval, as Lato and Brownson proved. This is because, though some dress reformers tried to blur the gender border, hoping it would eventually shift away from pants as a physical representation, the fact was that pants remained very much linked to masculinity and male freedoms. This means that in addition to health and practical concerns, making pants more popular for everyday use required individuals with the kind of standing that would provide protection from the worst criticisms of opponents. Women in prominent positions who were brave enough to wear pants in their everyday lives were crucial in expanding the popularity of the garment and normalizing it for the average woman. Most forms of pants that gained popularity, such as the knickerbocker and the gym suit, did so because of practical reasons with the added benefit that they expanded women’s roles in society. The two concepts were intimately connected with each other, and yet there was a difference between wearing certain clothing privately, such as in the gym, or even for the purpose of cycling, and wearing that same clothing in one’s everyday life.

The earliest successful attempts at normalizing pants for public use and making them part of a fashionable style were generally reserved for small groups of wealthy women and women in specific roles that required more practical garments in the first two decades of the twentieth century. These small groups were less likely to receive criticism because of their socio-economic
class or because of the work they did. Still, these uses slowly eroded the stigma associated with pants for women and allowed them to become more common for practical purposes.

At the same time, dress reform designers like Annie Jenness Miller and, later, Paul Poiret, offered more daring options that were designed for everyday use. In other words, rather than making practical clothing that also happened to make a statement, these designers created clothing that made a statement, at least implicitly, with the added benefit of practicality. Their designs were intentional on the part of the designers because they identified themselves as dress reformers and worked to promote dress reform from inside the fashion institutions thereby chipping away at the notion of pants as a border between the masculine and feminine.

Because of the work done by dress reformers from Amelia Bloomer to Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, Americans had become somewhat desensitized towards women in pants, even if pants were not yet fully accepted. This allowed prominent women and women who worked in predominantly male jobs to adopt the style and receive less criticism for it than their forebears had. Wealthy or famous women who wore pants were fashionable and daring and women in traditionally male roles recalled people like Calamity Jane, who by this time was a pop-culture heroine. The groundwork that dress reformers had been laying ever since Amelia Bloomer first popularized pants for women made it possible for those in privileged positions to break down the bifurcated border in the early twentieth century.

The challenge was for fashion designers and American women to make bifurcated garments fashionable and useful. Fortunately for those interested in reform clothing at the turn of the twentieth century, some fashion designers began to create garments that included a form of pants for the more daring client. This was more of a niche market, but it did attempt to normalize and even make fashionable pants as an every-day garment for women in the US at the turn of the
twentieth century. Annie Jenness Miller was one popular designer who was active in promoting dress reform styles. She was born in New Hampshire in 1859 and made a name for herself as a dress reformer and fashion designer in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She specifically followed the ideals of “artistic dress” which favored looser garments with a nod towards Asian and Middle Eastern styles. Artistic dress did away with the hourglass silhouette that was popular in the late nineteenth century and used drapery to cover the midsection of the body so that women could go un-corseted. The drapery was reminiscent of ancient Greco-Roman styles, but it was often made from silks that had patterns from Indian, Chinese, or Arabic silks. Miller lectured on dress in cities all across the US and owned a magazine called *Dress* that promoted physical development and artistic dress in the 1880s and 1890s. A short biography, published in 1893 by Frances Willard and Mary Livermore detailing the contributions of notable American women of the nineteenth century, said of Miller, “all the progressive and reformatory movements of the day appeal to her and have her sympathy and support,” further solidifying the connection between dress reform and other progressive movements of the time.205

Miller believed in the importance of dress and claimed, “A really well-dressed person is a recognized power,” showing that she understood the connection between dress and social status and used it when promoting dress reform styles.206 Miller examined the woman question as well and refuted the idea that women should be so limited in their options. She explained, “I have often wondered what the state of men’s minds would have been, had woman begun a discussion of man’s sphere, based upon the same narrow and illogical deduction, and emphasized by the

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206 Ibid., 178
same egregious self-importance which led to masculine declaration of belief in the necessity for limitation of feminine privileges in the past."\textsuperscript{207}

Miller was a strong proponent of physical fitness for both men and women. She explained in her book \textit{Physical Beauty} that a person who “devotes himself to some intellectual pursuit, must allow his body to have motion also, and practice gymnastics.”\textsuperscript{208} She supported the idea of a bifurcated garment for women in her book, not just for physical fitness but for everyday life, claiming

\begin{quote}
The divided skirt is superior to the ordinary petticoat from every point of view…the divided garment cannot wind about the legs in windy weather, it falls in soft fold around each member so that much less weight suffices for an equal amount of warmth; it is carried forward at each step in walking, and does not hang out behind to get bedraggled and soiled, and the division does away with the muscular resistance from multiplication of petticoats falling directly in front of the instep and knees—above all, the garment is far more modest than a petticoat, under which the legs move without sufficient clothing to form a proper protection in case of accident.\textsuperscript{209}
\end{quote}

To this end, in 1890, Miller included the design for a bifurcated undergarment to replace the petticoats she so despised called leglettes.\textsuperscript{210} However, Miller pushed mainly for pants as a form of undergarment, rather than as a fashion statement in themselves. The New England Women’s

\textsuperscript{207} Miller, \textit{Physical Beauty.}, 240-241.  
\textsuperscript{208} Annie Jenness Miller, \textit{Physical Beauty}, (New York: Charles L. Webster & Co., 1892), pg. 57.  
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., 174-175.  
\textsuperscript{210} Figure 2-7: New England Historical Society, “Annie Jenness Miller Rescues Fashion Victims of the 1890s,” retrieved 11/4/20 https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/annie-jenness-miller-rescues-fashion-victims-1880s/
Club endorsed a similar garment to Miller’s known as the Emancipation Suit. The New England Woman’s Club was an organization dedicated to championing social causes. It was founded in Boston in 1868 as one of the earliest women’s clubs in the United States. The Emancipation Suit that they supported, designed by Susan Taylor Converse, was a set of underwear that included pants. Converse coined the term “emancipations suit” in 1874 while adding improvements to the design of the former union suit, which was also a type of bifurcated underwear. Converse was a designer from Massachusetts and her garment was the first of its kind to receive national attention. Miller’s design pulled elements from this “emancipation suit” and made it popular again as an item for the everyday woman.

Undergarments were a step in the right direction when it came to normalizing pants, but a less visible one. For pants as outerwear to become acceptable, Americans had to get used to seeing them on women. One way that this could happen was through the example of famous actresses on stage who sometimes appeared in pants, and sometimes even in Miller’s leglettes. This helped to further normalize the look in the United States during the last decade of the nineteenth century. Mary Shaw, an actress and activist

Figure 2-8: Mary Shaw

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for women’s rights appeared in several images wearing pants on stage.\textsuperscript{213} English actress Ellen Terry also wore dress reform styles, helping to popularize the dress reform movement.\textsuperscript{214} Similarly, other actresses including Jessie Bartlett Davis, an Opera Singer from Illinois, and Lotta Linthicum, a Broadway actress from New York, were pictured in pants.\textsuperscript{215} The stage was a place where actors both male and female had more leeway as far as crossing gender lines so, when a woman wore pants for the purpose of a stage performance, most of their viewers did not see it as a serious threat. If gender was a border that one might cross, the stage provided a legitimate passport. However, normalizing women in pants did have an effect, especially when a well-known actress wore the clothing of a reformist designer such as Annie Jenness Miller. Because of the visibility of actresses, wearing garments available to the general public like Miller’s leglettes helped to popularize them to their fans.

In addition, the actors and their families were often proponents of dress reform and worked to make pants more acceptable off the stage as well. Mary Shaw’s sister, Mrs. Evelyn Shaw Ingersoll, developed her own form of dress for women to wear in rain or bad weather that included a shortened skirt, and she set about convincing other prominent women from Boston to wear it publicly. She was successful in interesting local women in the outfit because of her famous sister. J. K. Kellogg, who was involved with several social movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and who took some inspiration from James Caleb Jackson when it came to his theories on homeopathy, wrote about Mrs. Shaw Ingersoll’s efforts towards

\textsuperscript{213} Figure 2-8: Figure 14: Mary Shaw, Henry Austin, ed., Gallery of Players from The Illustrated American no. 9 (New York: American, 1896), pg., 8.
\textsuperscript{215} Henry Austin, ed., \textit{Gallery of Players from The Illustrated American} no. 10, (New York: The Illustrated American, 1896), pg., 15, 23.
dress reform in his monthly publication Good Health showing a further connection between homeopathic medicine and dress reform. He claimed “A Boston woman, Mrs. Evelyn Shaw Ingersoll, has originated an outdoor costume for women in stormy weather, which, but its unique blending of attractiveness and convenience, as well as by the wise provisions made whereby to introduce it, promises to meet with a measure of success.” Dress reform had long been connected to alternative medicine such as the water cure, so the association is not surprising, but it does show the way some actors and their families were directly connected to the Dress Reform Movement.

While most attempts at reform by fashion designers were relatively mild, mainly operating within traditional gender norms by mimicking men’s suits but maintaining the traditional skirt, in the late 19th and early 20th century, there was one designer bold enough to challenge these norms in attempting to make pants for women both elegant and acceptable for public use. Paul Poiret was a French fashion designer, but his work was widespread throughout Europe and the United States because people in the fashion world then and now consider France a cultural center for fashion design. In fact, he earned the nickname the “King of Fashion” in The United States, a phrase Poiret borrowed for the title of his own autobiography published in 1931. Not only was he a designer, but he also co-authored a book on dress reform with Florence Hull Winterburn called Principles of Correct Dress. Much like Annie Jenness Miller, he was fascinated by the artistic dress movement and connected his clothing to contemporary works of art that depicted Pre-Raphaelite ideals, which combined older more Grecian styles of dress with Asian looks. The Ballet Russe’s 1910 production of Scheherazade inspired one of his

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more daring designs. He used the silhouette of the day that included a high waist with short overskirt, known as a “lampshade” tunic, and hobble (tight around the ankles and loose around the hips) underskirt, but he replaced the underskirt with a set of harem pants as shown in Figure 2-9. This 1911 design still gave the tapered effect of the hobble skirt but without the restriction on the legs. It included elements designed as cultural references such as the embroidery on the bodice and the beads and applique hanging from the waist.

Poiret’s design started a short fad in which a small group of mostly wealthy women wore harem pants under their skirts. Some real life examples of this appear in figures 2-10 and 2-11. However, according

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to historian Daniel Milford-Cottam in his book Edwardian Fashion, “The harem pants craze was more enthusiastically taken up by satirists and cartoonists than by fashionable women, and the harem pants were unsurprisingly short-lived as a day-to-day garment, though a popular option for fancy-dress balls.”  

Because harem pants were considered fashionable and were worn in public rather than for a practical purpose, they received negative reactions in the press. In Daniel Milford-Cottam’s book, he describes Margaine-Lacroix, a famous designer of women’s dresses, going out in public with a set of harem pants visible beneath a full-length skirt. He also included a political cartoon, shown in Figure 2-12, which not only lampooned the style by comparing it to the look of a child with their underwear falling down, but also implied that the child, seeing this style as acceptable, did not attempt to pull her knickers up.

Nevertheless, fashion designers like Annie Jenness Miller and Paul Poiret attempted to bring reform fashion into mainstream culture and succeeded to varying degrees, though neither was entirely successful in introducing pants in the long term. Their efforts, if nothing else, got American society talking about the possibility of women in pants and further acclimated to the idea. The women who wore pants on the stage and in the highest social circles were able to get away with it because of their privileged positions. While they might have received some

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223 Figure 2-12: Pulled from a 1911 comic postcard by Daniel Milford-Cottam Daniel Milford-Cottam, Edwardian Fashion, (Shire Publications, 2014), Pg., 55.
criticism for this, they were in the kind of positions where even negative publicity was still publicity. Their influence meant that pants, though shocking on women at the time, became more normalized and even desirable because rich and famous women wore them.

However, there were other factors that pushed women towards pants as a viable dress option and they had much to do with the issues of practicality and the need to serve one’s country during wartime, thereby echoing the reasons that women such as Loreta Janeta Velazquez, Calamity Jane, and Dr. Mary Edwards Walker wore pants. Women’s dress in general changed when the United States entered World War I. The military accepted women into their ranks for the first time and therefore military uniforms, once considered masculine, became more common for women. Though military women still wore skirts, the idea of wearing a uniform became common-place and practicality became more important for dress both within the military and outside of it. Similarly, as women stepped into professions once occupied by men, they

Figure 2-13: Women's Wartime Fashion
found their clothing ill-suited to the tasks required, which meant that they sometimes needed to wear pants. This caused a gradual shift to more practical clothing during the war years.

Overalls became a necessary form of work clothing for women in certain professions but for the most part the pants women wore during this time were modified men’s pants. Work pants made specifically for women did not appear until the 1950s. Though service clothing, such as overalls, seemed extreme at first and there were those who denounced such dress as unwomanly, the wartime jobs made them necessary. By this time, Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s daughter, Harriet Stanton Blatch, had become active in the same movements that her mother championed before her, including dress reform beginning in 1902. She continued her activism throughout the war years of 1914-1918 and, when speaking of the war, stated that, “the instant women are carried into a new industry, they bring with them puzzling problems. Where shall we put their coats and picture hats, how shall we cover up their hair… They must have lockers and rest rooms, caps and overalls.” Here, Blatch explained the problems that faced women based on the extremes of the fashion that was considered appropriate for them, which included large hats, long hair, and of course long skirts and coats. She explained that women needed new accommodations in their workplace and equated the necessity of overalls as a work garment with such necessary facilities as locker rooms and restrooms dedicated specifically for women. The purpose of wearing pants during wartime was not necessarily to support a movement; it was because clothing both supported and represented certain activities associated with masculinity.

225 Ibid., 127-128.
including military service and wartime work. Yet such change would not have been possible without the efforts of the dress reform movement.227

Once again, as happened with every form that dress reform took, particularly concerning pants, because of the equation of pants and masculinity and by extension masculine power, those who opposed uniforms and work clothing for women believed that the women wearing them wanted to become just like men. They still viewed pants as a border between the masculine and the feminine, and women as interlopers intruding upon the territory of men. As happened with Dr. Walker and Calamity Jane, some people in early twentieth century society conflated dressing in men’s clothing with wanting to become men, even if the women wearing this style did not identify as male. As historian Angela Woolacott explained, “Women who wore uniforms frequently became the butt of derision by conservative segments of society and, more disconcertingly, their own menfolk.”228 Woolacott went on to describe a situation in which an ambulance driver remembered how her fiancée wrote to her family during the war instructing them to forbid her from wearing a uniform because it would make her more masculine. Others, according to Woolacott, saw the use of uniforms in the war as exaggerations of the importance of women.

Despite this resistance, however, uniforms were acceptable enough during the war that they were required for several different positions from munition plants to women’s organizations.\textsuperscript{229} The organization known as the Woman’s Land Army, which spread across the country, worked in pants. This was a program in which women were brought from cities and towns to work on farmland since most of the men were fighting in the War. Figure 2-14 shows two versions of the uniforms that farm workers, known at the time as “farmerettes” wore.\textsuperscript{230}

The arguments of those who disagreed with new styles did not have the same impact that they had had before the war due to the necessity of wartime work. Because the war demanded work for women, American society was less hostile towards women working in the public sphere, in fact wartime propaganda encouraged it as a patriotic duty. Social barriers tend to break down during wartime and this is what happened with dress during WWI. Women needed to work, the nation needed them to work, and to do that they needed to dress appropriately. This meant that they did not need to fully surrender their femininity in quite the same way that Velazquez, Calamity Jane, and Walker did when they adopted pants for similar reasons. While

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{229} Ibid., 211
\textsuperscript{230} Elaine F. Weiss, “World War I: 100 Years Later” (Smithsonian, 2009), retrieved 1/14/21 from \url{https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/before-roosie-the-riveter-farmerettes-went-to-work-141638628/} and Figure 2-14: “Women in World War I: Women’s Uniforms,” National Museum of American History, retrieved 1/14/21 from \url{https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/object-groups/women-in-wwi/women-s-uniforms}
\end{quote}
there was still some concern about women appearing more masculine, most women could at least do men’s work without being referred to as “hybrid male-females” or “would be” men and the criticism of pants for wartime work was less fervent than it had been in the past. These looks became more commonplace especially since they were backed by decades of women wearing similar styles. Since the bloommer first appeared on the pages of The Lily, dress reformers had worked to make pants accessible to women whether through their own personal use as was the case with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and Mary Edwards Walker, or through their designs for others as with Annie Jenness Miller and Paul Poiret. Because of the groundwork that reformers laid ahead of time, they paved the way for women, in the emergency of war, to finally succeeded in blurring the gender border and claiming pants for their own.

When the dust settled after the war, pants for women were still relatively rare, but those who did wear them drew less public stigma than they did prior to the war and women did continue to wear pants for the specific tasks that required them. In the 1920s, there was a dramatic shift in the perception of pants and fashion magazines took a different approach from earlier endorsements of pants for women that had mostly focused on the knickerbocker for health and fitness. Whereas promoters of pants in the first two decades of the twentieth century tried desperately to prove such garments were not masculine, advertisements for knickerbockers in the 1920s proudly advertised the similarity of their garments to those of men, explaining that tailors constructed female knickers with the same fabrics and using the same attention to detail as they did with men’s trousers. The idea that women’s pants could be similar to men’s was brand new and partially due to the rising popularity of androgynous styles in the 1920s. Ads for these garments stressed that “Clothing for women should be of the same materials as that for men: and the nearer it approaches the latter in the cut of the garments the greater will be the comfort of the
wearer.” This shows that the stigma associated with wearing pants or suits similar to those of men was less severe than it had been, allowing women to occasionally wear these garments, even in public. Part of the change might be because 1920s styles were more androgynous in general with women cutting their hair short and adopting a drop waisted style that hid the curves of the figure rather than accentuate them.

Though women wore pants for various practical reasons prior to this, wearing them down the street without censure was a new freedom that women experienced only in the 1920s, and although the practice remained rare, doing so was no longer a concern so much as a curiosity. When a couple of wealthy women from Chicago made newspapers in 1921 for wearing knickerbockers as they walked down Michigan Avenue, local stores like Hart Schaffner & Marx and the Royal Tailors seized upon the moment to advertise their own knickerbockers to women who might want to emulate what they saw in the news. It further demonstrates the destigmatization of pants that their ads worked, and they soon received orders for knickers from a variety of stores in the Chicago area. An article in a Chicago magazine called Advertising and Selling claimed an ulterior motive in advertising the knickerbocker, stating that the Royal Tailor store wanted, “to get women to come in with their husbands and have a knicker suit made up while their better halves were arranging to get a Royal Tailor men’s suit.” This was not only a clever advertising strategy but it also demonstrated that some men must have felt less threatened by the idea of a woman in pants if they were willing to go with their wives to the store when they got themselves fitted for a knicker suit. While working class women might wear pants for practical purposes and for work, it was still mostly wealthy and middle-class women who were

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231-“Knickers’ for Women” Popular Science (February 1920). 89.
232-“Will Advertising Make Women Wear Knickerbockers? Chicago First Start Campaign to Sell the Knickerbocker Idea and are surprised at Results.” Advertising and Selling, Vol. 30 no, 10, (September 17, 1921), pg. 11.
wearing pants in everyday situations, as having a tailored suit made was not cheap. In addition, as the newspaper article about women wearing pants demonstrates, the phenomenon was still rare enough to be newsworthy, but growing in popularity.

Race also played a role in the acceptability of pants. Especially since race and gender intersected with each other for many Americans. Lynching, for example was an expression of the white populations fears about black male sexuality and their view of white women as “delicate” and in need of protection. Women of color did not command that same respect from white men and white patriarchal society. This limited their ability to test the boundaries of gender norms. Because of this social disparity, and the privilege afforded white women in general, it was mainly white women who could more easily get away with wearing pants publicly. Yet, despite these limits, minorities did sometimes wear pants for practical purposes. In a collection by Minh-Ha T. Pham called “Of Another Fashion” featured in NPR back in 2011, one picture taken in the 1920s displays a Mexican-American woman wearing pants and holding a pistol. This image is reminiscent of earlier portraits of Calamity Jane and the woman in the picture seems to be

Figure 2-15: Woman in Pants

wearing the pants for similar reasons. Still, while pants for the practical purposes or in specific setting were accepted among minorities as well as white women, they were rarely photographed, and minority women rarely used pants for everyday wear. That was a privilege still generally reserved for white women, particularly of the middle and upper class.

The reality of pants is that there was never a time when it was completely unheard of for women to wear them. Most American women did not wear pants on a regular basis, but the practicality of the garment made it necessary in certain instances even apart from the dress reform movement. When it came to dress reform itself, pants became the garment most associated with the movement even though they were far from the only thing that dress reformers promoted and, in reality, reformers spent much more time condemning the corset than they did advocating for pants. However, the most vitriolic responses to dress reform came as a reaction to pants, in any form, but particularly pants for everyday wear. This was because pants, much more than other garments opposed by dress reformers such as the corset or long sweeping skirts with tight shoes and sleeves, represented something beyond the actual garment. There is a reason that the expression “who wears the pants in the family” became part of our everyday vernacular. In the original use of the phrase the word pants was replaced with “breeches” referring to the garment that boys put on when they got old enough to take on some of the responsibilities of manhood. The phrase refers to the person who holds authority within the family as men wore pants and were considered the appropriate head of the household. The idiom goes back to the 1500s when women wore skirts almost exclusively and “equates pants with an authoritative and properly masculine role.”

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women, this idiom remained part of our modern vernacular. Pants represented power and they served as a physical border between the masculine and the feminine. Therefore, the argument over bloomers, knickers, and “harem pants” were part of both literal and metaphorical arguments over who should “wear the pants” in the family.

The other movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly those that concerned women’s roles and the “woman question,” became particularly concerning to traditionalists when they overlapped with dress reform because pants for women exemplified, to them, a physical representation of masculinity and masculine power. Pants were also one of the reasons that women like Calamity Jane and Dr. Mary Edwards Walker gained notoriety, because they lived outside of the traditional gender norms. These women were bold enough to live their lives as they saw fit even though others of their time viewed them as less feminine for doing so and even as “half-man.” The women who wore pants crossed into foreign territory where many viewed them as interlopers. The key to making pants acceptable to women was by finding “safe” means to wear them. This could be due to the social class of the women or the activity they were doing that required pants of some form. One of the “safer” ways to wear pants was for health and physical fitness. The health movement, which led women to adopt knickerbockers for exercise, also helped to break down the notion that pants alone represented male power or at least put forth the idea that women needed just enough of that power to be able to move freely and stay healthy.

Still, making pants acceptable as a garment for women was complicated in that the women wearing pants did face criticism for doing so as well as questions about their legitimacy as women. However, those who wore pants because of their work or who were from higher social classes were somewhat protected because of their status or job, and many received less
criticism than they otherwise would have because of this privileged status. After the fall of the bloomer, other forms of pants for women came in to take its place, some through high end fashion designers, such as Paul Poiret. Their persistence helped pave the way for later generations to wear pants without facing the same censure from their peers. This chipped away at the notion that pants represented a bifurcated border, which divided the masculine and the feminine.

Though everyday use of pants was finally acceptable by the 1920s, they were still relatively rare and did not become the staple garment of women’s wardrobes for several decades. However, the dress reform movement in an official sense ended in the 1920s when they had achieved most of their aims. Fashion continued to evolve afterwards, but it was not because of a national movement to change clothing, but rather as part of the natural process of changing styles and evolving trends. Still, future styles built upon the dress reform looks that became popular in the early twentieth century. It was through the efforts of dress reformers like Elizabeth Smith Miller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, Mary Edwards Walker, Annie Jenness Miller, Paul Poiret, and all those who followed them that these gender boundaries broke down and paved the way for eventual change. When it came to pants for women, dress reformers won an ambiguous victory in the 1920s, normalizing them to, at that point, an unprecedented degree in American society.
Part II: Corsets

Although pants certainly received the most visible press and kicked off the most visible part of the dress reform movement, they were not the main garment associated with dress reform. The roots of the reform movement came out of an opposition to restrictive garments and corsets were the most notable example of this. Doctors warned against the use of corsets long before Amelia Bloomer popularized pants and discourse surrounding corsets survived into the 1920s.
Chapter 3: Beauty is Pain, The Medical Backlash Against Corsets

Much like bloomers, which were a more overt form of resisting typical gender roles, corset use became part of a displaced argument about women’s roles in general. Like the long skirts bloomers sought to replace, corsets were also closely connected to notions of femininity. However, the fact that they did cause health concerns made them a more acceptable topic for dress reformers, who found an ally in the medical community. The earliest criticisms of corset use concerned the question of whether it was healthy to compress the torso in the way that corsets did. Doctors writing as early as the 1830s generally believed that it was not, and similar medical concerns regarding the practice continued through the end of the century. Physician involvement in dress reform was useful in that it gave legitimate support to dress reform attempts outside of the medical community.

Still, with so much support, the question arises why did corset use persist for so long if most of the medical opinion was set against it? The main reason for this was that medical opinions differed, and doctors sometimes blamed the corset for medical issues that were unrelated to its use. This was partially due to medical understandings of the time that were inaccurate by today’s standards and partially because exaggerated or sensationalized claims concerning the dangers of corset use got the attention of the public in a way that more measured arguments did not. The problem with this was that the message from doctors about corsets was inconsistent and confused the public about what the actual dangers of corsets were. In addition, women who wore corsets daily did not experience many of the symptoms described by these doctors and, therefore, found it hard to take criticism against the garment at face value. The initial complaints against the corset for medical reasons did have a profound effect on the dress reform movement, however some of the fantastic claims set up a situation in which the medical
community would argue for years over the same issues before the general public started to take them seriously.

**Doctor’s Orders**

In the span of about 100 years, starting in the 1830s, corsets became the focus of discourse amongst the medical community, reaching its height in the 1870s and 1880s. Though many would consider dress a frivolous part of everyday life, in the nineteenth century women’s fashion became the focus of a backlash from doctors who published their criticisms in reputable medical journals of their day. Corsets had gone out of fashion at the beginning of the nineteenth century but returned around the 1820s with the wasp-waist silhouette, so named because it made the waist so small as to resemble the thorax of an insect. This odd shape added to the criticism from medical professionals who believed, correctly, that the corset could cause myriad problems in women of all ages. However, while the attention corsets attracted from physicians tended to be negative, there was disagreement on what the harmful effects of corsets actually were and on their extent. Corset use did cause breathing problems in women because of the added pressure on the lungs and it could lead to deformations of the ribcage if it was worn through the early teens while young ladies were still growing, though this very much depended on the individual, making it difficult for doctors to standardize these effects. However, they tended to agree on three things in particular: that tight lacing, if not corset use in general, was harmful; that it was part of the folly of female vanity; and that it bore a similarity to Chinese foot binding, a practice of breaking and binding the feet of wealthy Chinese women to keep them unnaturally small. These ideas remained remarkably consistent throughout the century and were the part of their message that had the strongest effect on the dress reform movement.
The early criticism of the corset in the 1830s and 1840s was not as heated as it would become by the end of the century. Still, a vocal minority of practitioners of both mainstream and alternative medicine took issue with the corset in their writings. This sets dress reform concerning the corset apart from the bloomer, which was mainly promoted by more obscure sections of the medical community. The corset was also less controversial because it did not defy traditional gender roles as much. For this reason, the corset was a more prominent part of dress reform in England where, unlike in the United States, the bloomer style never really took hold. In the case of corsets, dress reformers and medical practitioners alike focused more on health-related issues than they did on social issues and gender roles. With the reemergence of the corset, there was some justifiable medical concern, as the corset presented several problems for women who wore them in everyday life. The wasp-waisted style, which attempted to cinch the waist as much as possible to create an hourglass figure often caused symptoms such as compression of the lungs, atrophy of the back muscles, and deformation of the rib cage when worn from a young age. For these reasons, corsets attracted the ire of the medical community.

It is unclear where the initial term “wasp waist” came from, but it was used commonly among doctors and reformers to refer to the unnatural shape of the waist caused by corsets and was much older than the nineteenth century dress reform movement. One of the earliest references to it was from Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1762. In his five-book publication “Emile on Education,” Rousseau condemned corsets as devices that cramped the figure. He claimed, “it is not a pleasant thing to see a woman cut in two like a wasp -- it offends both the eye and the imagination.”²³⁶ This shows that some of the terminology and even some of the concerns held by nineteenth century reformers were inherited from earlier generations.

For a time, traditional corsets went out of fashion, however when they did return in the nineteenth century, older criticisms again began to resurface, and the earliest detractors of the corset were, in fact, men who viewed corset use as a product of vanity, a vice often associated with femininity. Doctor John Coffin was one of the earliest opponents of corset use after their revival in fashion. He was a respected army doctor who served as a surgeon’s mate at West Point in 1795 and later owned The Medical Intelligencer, which was devoted to preventing or curing illness through educating the public and medical community about physical issues. It was first published in Boston in 1823, becoming the Boston Medical Intelligencer in 1826. Then in 1828 Coffin sold the publication to Drs. Warren, Channing, and Ware, who owned the New England Medical Journal, which is still ranked as one of the more prestigious medical journals in America. At the time it was the only weekly medical publication available in the United States.237

In an article from this publication written in 1828, Coffin asserted that corsets were dangerous for women to wear. He claimed they caused the lungs to become engorged and led to diseases, specifically consumption and bronchitis. Coffin also argued that the heart and circulatory system might be affected by corset use.238 Despite the incomplete medical knowledge at the time, some of these claims were accurate. Others were seemingly natural conclusions one might make about the corset that would only later prove false. The idea that corset use caused consumption or bronchitis, for example, may have seemed plausible at the time, though it has been established as false by modern standards. While wearing a corset could not be good for a patient suffering from bronchitis or consumption, bacteria is the cause of these illnesses, a fact

Coffin could not have known because an understanding of germ theory was still several decades away. Still, in the case of a person who had these conditions corset use could exacerbate them, so refraining from corset use would be a healthy step to take.

Another good representative of those doctors who argued against the corset was Dr Charles Caldwell because his argument encapsulates the discourse common for dress reformers throughout the nineteenth century. He was known in the medical community initially through his work practicing medicine in Philadelphia. Later, he began lecturing in 1805, and moved to Transylvania University, at Lexington, Kentucky in 1819. He was also the founder of the University of Louisville, where he remained until 1849. In his writing, he touched on all the arguments that became common in the following decades. He argued that corsets were always laced too tight and could cause damage to a person, that they were no different from the unhealthy practice of Chinese foot binding and other forms of cultural deformation, and that they were a sign of vanity and recklessness on the part of the women who wore them. Even amongst those who supported corsets in general, tight lacing was often condemned and Caldwell, while condemning corset use in general, was especially opposed to the practice of tight lacing. In his 1834 book *Thoughts on Physical Education*, Caldwell claimed that corsets presented serious problems to the liver. His writings also reflected the words of Rousseau in that Caldwell claimed, “Woman was not intended to be turned by artificial means into an insect, with broad square shoulders, and a spindle-waist.”

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240 Ibid., 16, 18, 20, 21. and Dr. Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on Physical Education: Being a Discourse Delivered to a Convention of Teachers in Lexington, Ky., on the 6th and 7th of Nov. 1833* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1834).
241 Dr. Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on Physical Education: Being a Discourse Delivered to a Convention of Teachers in Lexington, Ky., on the 6th and 7th of Nov. 1833* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1834), 122-123.
they allowed the muscles to weaken. The idea that corsets caused atrophy of the back was another major concern regarding the corset and was founded in fact. Even today, people who must wear back braces for various medical conditions are encouraged to take them off occasionally (if they are capable of doing so) in order to avoid muscle atrophy.242

Another early physician to comment on the corset, who was also especially hard on the practice of tight lacing, was Dr. David Meredith Reese, who worked in New York State as a physician and served as publisher for *The American Medical Gazette*. He agreed that corsets were dangerous, but also exaggerated the extent to which they would cause women injury. As with Rousseau, Coffin, and Caldwell, his arguments would dominate discourse on dress reform throughout the rest of the century.243 One of the more powerful points in his argument was a condemnation of vanity that could lead to serious medical consequences. He did this by comparing corset use, and tight lacing in particular, to self-harm and suicide. He explained that his patients justified wearing the garment by claiming that their corsets were no tighter than those of other ladies. Of these, Dr. Reese said, “Thus persisting in their hateful intemperance in dress, they prepared themselves a premature grave. And it is a problem which would puzzle a Jesuit, to prove that suicide is less criminal, when knowingly persisted in by tight lacing, than that which is affected by the halter or a razor.”244 This comparison seems extreme, but Reese was not the only medical professional to compare corsets to suicide. Dr. Coffin made similar comparisons in his work. He discussed the tendency of his patients that wore corsets to faint more often due to their reduced ability to breathe. He said that “Whenever this [fainting] occurs

244 Ibid., 29.
in the presence of an honest matron, acquainted with the mysteries of the modern toilet, she immediately applies herself with scissors, tooth and nail, to the lacings of the corset, and with all the eagerness with which one would cut a rope of suicide.”

The link to suicide is important because it was used, not only to scare the public out of wearing corsets, but to blame ill health on women who wore them and to condemn vanity in women. If a woman were to fall ill with any affliction that could be linked to the corset, regardless of whether the same condition could as easily appear in men, who generally did not wear corsets, doctors had less sympathy for them because they believed that these women brought such illnesses upon themselves through their own actions. The argument that corset use was equivalent to suicide was tenuous at best and the main problem was that most women who wore corsets everyday had not experienced anything close to life threatening by wearing them and therefore did not think of corset use as akin to suicide. However, women who wore corsets were more likely to faint because the corset reduced their lung capacity. With the diaphragm compromised by corset use, women had to rely on secondary respiratory muscles which meant that they could only breathe through their upper chest.

It is not surprising to see women held up as victims of their own desire for fashionable figures because criticism of corset use often touched upon gender, with one of the most important roles for women being that of motherhood. Not surprisingly the dangers doctors believed corsets would cause to women’s ability to conceive and carry a child to term also became the focus of dress reform in the medical community. Anglo women in the United States generally continued to wear corsets during pregnancy throughout the nineteenth century. They could either wear maternity corsets sold in department stores and through catalogs, or they could

modify their usual corsets to accommodate pregnancy by slitting the seams and putting gores, or triangular shaped pieces of fabric, down the sides to make the garment more accommodating to the pregnant body. Understandably, doctors often disapproved of this fashion in any form. The importance placed on motherhood for women made the potential dangers of corsets during pregnancy even more concerning.

Dr. Alva Curtis was one such physician who disapproved of corsets during pregnancy.\textsuperscript{247} He was the founder of the Botanico-Medical College in Columbus, Ohio, Dr. Alva Curtis. He was a protégé of the botanist Samuel Thomson who believed in natural medicines based on herbal remedies, which became particularly popular in the first half of the nineteenth century. This was not mainstream medicine, since Alva Curtis was a follower of hydrotherapy, an outgrowth of natural medicine. Proponents of hydrotherapy were responsible for the \textit{Water-Cure Journal}, one of the strongest supporters of the bloomier.\textsuperscript{248} In a lecture he wrote about midwifery in 1841, Curtis blamed the corset for a variety of complications during childbirth. He also argued that mothers not only endangered the lives of their children by wearing corsets during pregnancy but also by passing on the tradition to their children, since they often encouraged or even required

\textsuperscript{247} Figure 3-1: Dr. Alva Curtis 1797-1881“Dr. Alva Curtis (1797-1881) - Find A Grave Memorial.” Accessed April 25, 2018. https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/35236374/alva-curtis.

their daughters to wear corsets. Part of the problem, according to Curtis, was that corsets prevented growth to “those different degrees of capacity so essential to the safe carriage, nourishment and delivery of a healthy offspring.”249 This meant not only that the woman’s body did not develop properly, but the unborn child might not have room to grow or get adequate nourishment if an expecting mother wore a corset. Despite the unconventional ideas of natural medicine, these arguments about potential dangers during pregnancy were supported by fact and indeed were some of the more obvious problems with the corset. However, Curtis’s status as a member of the natural medicine and hydropathic community meant that his ideas were not mainstream and, while he agreed with mainstream doctors on this issue, the medical community took his work less seriously than that of Caldwell or Coffin.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the call for dress reform included bloomers as a staple, but corsets were still an important part of the movement and bloomer costumes were often designed to work without corsets. This movement attracted dress reformers who were both physicians and activists and who condemned traditional clothing for medical as well as social reasons. In the intervening years, female physicians had become more common and many of these took interest in healthcare that uniquely effected women, the corset among them. One outspoken member of both the medical and activist communities was Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, who received her medical degree from Syracuse

249 Ibid., 17.
Walker was not only a physician, but an active participant in dress reform. She became involved in the movement because she wore the bloomer costume until the 1870s when she began wearing men’s clothing and was even arrested for “impersonating a man,” on several occasions.\textsuperscript{252} In her book \textit{Hit}, written in 1871, she opened with a dedication to “the Practical Dress Reformers.” She referred to them as, “The truest friend of humanity, who have done more for universal elevation of woman in the past dozen years, than all others combined.”\textsuperscript{253} In the book, she dedicated a chapter to dress reform and underlined how important she felt it was to the future of women and society in general. She, like so many others, compared the corset to the practice of Chinese foot binding, claiming, “in China the women compress the feet, but they allow freedom of the chest,”\textsuperscript{254} implying that the corset created a condition worse than that of wealthy Chinese women who bound their feet.

She actually went further and compared every major form of European style dress to a similarly uncomfortable style in another culture, all the while emphasizing how European dress was worse than any of them. She claimed, “In India they wear heavy anklets, but they do not

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\textsuperscript{250} Figure 3-2: “Dr. Mary Walker—The only woman to ever receive the Medal of Honor” Kentucky National Guard, retrieved, 1/23/20 https://kentuckyguard.dodlive.mil/2014/03/07/dr-mary-edwards-walker-the-only-woman-to-ever-receive-the-medal-of-honor/
\textsuperscript{251} Dr. Walker’s Medal of Honor was revoked because she was a civilian and not a commissioned officer. Women, however, were not allowed to serve in the military at the time, which is part of the reason why the medal was restored by President Carter in 1977.
\textsuperscript{253} Mary E. Walker, M.D. \textit{Hit}, (New York: The American News Company, 1871), 5.
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., 62.
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wear long or heavy skirts, injuring women as women, and posterity also. In Kamaschatka they do not tie up their hair, and put weights of false hair on their heads, crazing them with pain or benumbing the whole cranial surface.” Walker branched out like this in her comparisons because she was influenced not only by early physicians of the subject of corsets but by the bloomer movement and publications like the Lily and the Water Cure Journal, which condemned all forms of unhealthy clothing. She was also coming at the question from the perspective of a dress reformer. Though Coffin, Caldwell and other early physicians were opposed to corsets, they were interested primarily in medical health and were not concerned with clothing outside of its effects on the body. Walker, on the other hand, wore the reform styles and advocated for dress reform for both health reasons and personal ones.

Still, on the corset specifically, her complaints were similar to those of Coffin, Caldwell, and the rest when it came to health. She disliked the way that corsets prevented freedom of movement, respiration, circulation, digestion, and the freedom of the muscles, which produced weakness. She claimed that, “the great mass of women have so paralyzed them [the respiratory muscles in the diaphragm], that one not well versed in the science of the human system, would scarcely believe, that, from their present condition, they were ever designed to need the freedom of Dress that is so evident to the physical philosopher.”255 In other words, women had gone so long without using their diaphragm for breathing that they had forgotten they ever could use those muscles.

A few years after Mary Edwards Walker wrote about dress reform in Hit, several female physicians gathered in 1874 in Boston to give a series of lectures on dress reform. Because of their popularity they repeated the lectures in several other nearby cities. In attendance were Dr.

255 Ibid., 74-75.
Mary J. Safford-Blake, Dr. Caroline E. Hastings, Dr. Mercy B. Jackson, Dr. Arvilla B. Haynes, and Abba Goold Woolson who gave lectures on dress reform. Dr. Safford-Blake, like Mary Edwards Walker, had been a physician with the Union during the Civil war and was one of America’s first female gynecologists and an advocate of dress reform. She was the most notable of the women in attendance and was the first woman credited with performing and ovariotomy. By this point, the discourse about dress reform in society at large was at its height and Dr. Safford-Blake commented on this in her lecture, claiming that no one could deny the fact that there was a “growing discontent among women in regard to the clothes they wear.” She also criticized men for their support of dress-reform in words but lack of support when it came to the dress of the women in their lives. She stated, “Men are excellent theorizers upon the absurdities of dress; but when a practical application of their theories is made by their wives, daughters, or sisters, few are found brave enough to stand by and encourage these ladies to wear only such garments as are conducive to health and comfort.” Her main concern with corsets had to do with health and extended to any type of clothing that was too tight or too impractical. Like the earlier doctors, she discussed the way in which corsets displaced internal organs as well as the general impracticality of women’s clothing in regulating a proper body temperature, this in a time when doctors believed that catching a chill could cause serious consequences regarding health. She recommended that there should be a stronger push to appeal to women by advertising the healthiest dress styles at fairs around the country. She also advised that there should be

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258 Ibid., 9.
specialized “doctors of dress” who would focus only on dressing women for both health and fashion.\(^{259}\)

Despite her activism in the dress reform movement, the points that Safford-Blake made about corsets were still strikingly similar to those made by Caldwell, who was purely interested in health. The main difference was that the arguments about dress in the 1870s had become more nuanced and included more problematic garments than corsets alone. They also seemed to condemn women less for their use than her male counterparts, which may be a product of the fact that Safford-Blake was a woman herself. Yet she still built her arguments on the same ideals as Coffin and Caldwell, that corsets were fundamentally unhealthy and that they ultimately made women’s lives more difficult. What the early physicians did manage to achieve was presenting a message that could not only be worked into the popular bloomer movement because of its interest in practicality, but also survive it because its basis was on health and not its challenge to specific gender roles. While gender did play into arguments against the corset, refusing to wear a corset did not make women more masculine in the eyes of contemporary society in the same way that wearing bloomers had.

**Effective Exaggeration**

While dress reformers were quick to absorb the central message of doctors that corsets were generally unhealthy and parroted it often in the 1870s and 1880s, corset use continued into the twentieth century. This brings up the question of why mainstream society was so slow in adjusting to the recommendations of doctors and the dress reform movement. Why, if corsets were condemned almost immediately after they came back into use, did it take a century for them to fall out of fashion? The problem was that, while doctors generally agreed that corsets

\(^{259}\) Ibid., 34.
were dangerous, vain, and mimicked practices like Chinese foot binding, a practice where wealthy Chinese women broke and bound their feet to keep them unnaturally small, they disagreed on most of the details of exactly how corsets effected health used mostly anecdotal evidence to support their points. Their disagreement over the real-life effects of wearing corsets weakened even the legitimate arguments that doctors made about the restrictive nature of corsets in terms of breathing and bone health. Because they did not have the same effect on everyone, doctors disagreed about the severity of the effects caused by corsets or what those effects even were. Adding to this confusion was the fact that physicians sometimes exaggerated the dangers of corsets, which undermined their arguments, since such claims did not correspond to the actual experience of women wearing them.

Twentieth and twenty-first century historians have argued that anecdotal stories and exaggeration to deter women from corset use were common strategies used by dress reformers. Valerie Steel, an historian who has studied corsetry, explained in her 2001 book *Corsets a Cultural History* that most common understandings of corsets were exaggerated because nineteenth century discourse tended to stress negative connotations about corset use to increase the effectiveness of their arguments.\(^{260}\) Doctors who played up the dangerous effects of corsets in their writings were more likely to get attention. These exaggerations were probably not intentionally meant to mislead the public, but corsets became a catchall for any illness that effected women who wore them. Anecdotal stories were more likely to gain attention from the public outside of the medical community because of their sensational nature. At least one medical professional recognized this strategy as early as the 1920s, only a few years after the disappearance of the corset in popular fashion. A physician mentioned in the 1925 *Saturday

\(^{260}\) Steele, *Corsets a Cultural History*, 2.
Evening Post commented, “we doctors will miss [corsets] terribly, for they could be so neatly blamed for every sort of feminine woe, from gallstones to anaemia, from neurasthenia to consumption.” Latham, Posing a Threat, 57. This post corset doctor and eventually historians recognized the inherent exaggerations in the arguments doctors sometimes made against the corset and implied connections in early medical discourse on the topic. It became much easier to see these exaggerations after the fall of the corset but, during the nineteenth century, medical claims were considered much more credible and were talked about enough in medical circles that they became common knowledge. For example, the idea that corsets caused consumption was mentioned by several early physicians including Coffin and Caldwell, even though there is no connection between the use of corsets and the disease. Yet this argument was picked up by later physicians and lay people, as were arguments that corsets were worse than Chinese foot binding.

In addition, dress reform was just a part of a much wider argument about women and what their role should be in society. The assessments made by doctors were influenced by the discourse concerning gender roles and sometimes led them to false or exaggerated conclusions. The biases in American culture, which looked at women as both curators of the closet and protectors of health for their families, made everything about them a target for criticism, including what they wore. This was particularly true during the latter half of the nineteenth century when the “woman question” became a social battle for what role women should play in society. In an article for the North American Review from 1879, Francis Parkman a celebrated nineteenth century historian, explained the woman question by saying, “In what direction are we to look for them [women]? These are questions on which those how have at heart the welfare of women, in other words of all humanity, have differed and will no doubt continue for a long time.
to differ. Let us hope that discussing them, the airs of benign mastery which naturally annoy women will be avoided on one side, and postures of antagonism on both. The two sexes are one, and their interests are the same.” The way that doctors argued about the corset and the language they used echoed these ideas, often labelling women victims of their own vanity or infantilizing them. These ideas were internalized by women and the public in general because they came from the medical professionals of the day.

Though they meant well, prominent voices in therapeutic circles tended to exaggerate these effects or incorrectly trace medical afflictions to the corset when it was not the cause, and often did so as a pointed lesson to women about the consequences of vanity. Beginning in the 1830s, the story of the unwise woman who destroyed her body (and sometimes her family) because of her vain pursuit of beauty became a common cautionary tale. In this way, medical dress reform took on a greater significance in society than simply whether or not women chose to wear corsets. It became more about social attitudes towards, and expectations of women themselves. As the discussion in medical journals intensified, similar criticisms filtered out into the public consciousness. Exaggeration and anecdotal claims were part of the medical discussion from the very beginning. While Coffin was mostly measured in his criticism, some of his claims involved notions that the corset caused unusual deformities in women, which it most likely did not. He made valid claims against the corset, explaining that it could deform the rib cage if worn from a young age, but some of deformities he mentioned in his article went beyond these basic issues. One such conclusion in Dr. Coffin’s 1828 article for the Medical Intelligencer was based on an anecdote he heard from friend and fellow physician Dr. Eberle of Philadelphia.

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Eberle related to Coffin that his patient’s nipple was “so buried in the gland by the pressure of the corset, as it could not be drawn by [her] child.”

This is one of the early examples of the cautionary tale that became common in later decades in which a woman’s ability to care for children was affected by corset use. Unlike the argument that corsets could cause illnesses of the chest like bronchitis and consumption, this exaggeration had a specific connection to women’s role in society. The example he used represented a common notion that women who wore corsets were not just destroying their own bodies, but the family in general. The fact that he linked corset use by the unnamed woman in his story to the health of her child was meant to frighten the general public by showing how its use undermined the traditional fabric of society. This connection was an important part of dress reform whether medical or otherwise because of the inferred connection between women’s gender roles and the health of their families.

Coffin’s story about the deformity of a woman and his belief that it was linked to the corset was a misrepresentation that had its roots in the idea that women’s bodies were intended for nurturing others and that deforming one’s body could threaten the family and, by extension, society in general. The claim that there was any connection between this deformity and the corset was most likely false. Even if there was any connection, it was exceedingly rare, as this is the only mention of such a condition in literature associated with corset use. In either case, Dr. Coffin was convinced enough by Eberle’s findings to use the anecdote as a cautionary tale for his own patients. It fit not only his personal convictions that corsets were dangerous in ways that might not yet be understood, and that women’s vanity in wearing them could cause problems not

just for themselves but for the family. Though this exaggeration and misrepresentation came from a place of concern, using such rare examples as an explanation for the dangers of corsets undermined more legitimate arguments against them. In Coffin’s example, the exaggerated link between corsets and deformities associated with breast feeding obscured the real problems that he presented, that patients who wore corsets were likely to faint more often due to their reduced ability to breathe.

According to Valerie Steele, there is little evidence that corsets had a negative effect on the liver; neither did they deform the back. But some medical dress reformers accused them of both these things in the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{265} Caldwell was one doctor who blamed corsets for crooked spines, a condition referred to as scoliosis. This went against even contemporary views that called for the use of a medical corset as treatment for that very deformity.\textsuperscript{266} Caldwell, like Coffin before him, viewed corsets as a social as well as a medical problem, blaming ill health on female vanity. In one example, Caldwell claimed that a patient of his laced her corset so tight, so she would be known for her small waist, she eventually became hump-backed and died of consumption. In this case Caldwell linked corset use to both scoliosis and consumption in the same example, both of which were exaggerations since corsets cause neither illness. Like Coffin story, this example was used to blame illness on the feminine vice of vanity.\textsuperscript{267}

Caldwell’s assertion that scoliosis and corsets were connected was particularly odd because the one medical condition for which corsets were encouraged as a remedy for centuries, and still are today, was scoliosis. In Renaissance Europe, doctors Ambroise Paré and Adriaan van de Spiegele were the first to develop a form of corset-like back brace for scoliosis, which

\textsuperscript{265} Steele, \textit{The Corset}, 69-76. (The exact arguments from specific doctors will be listed later in the chapter.)

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 112.

\textsuperscript{267} Steele, \textit{Corsets a Cultural History}, 2.
remains the preferred treatment for the condition. Far from causing spinal deformities such as scoliosis, corsets helped prevent further curvature of the spine. One of the first orthopedic corsets for scoliosis was the Hessing corset invented in 1764. Considering that Caldwell was a respected member of the medical community, he was likely aware of this treatment, but thought that the weakness of back muscles when wearing the corset over time could also lead to such a condition.

In Caldwell’s defense, the fact that the corset was both blamed for crooked spines and used to prevent the condition from getting worse was one of the ways that medical opinions differed regarding the garment. This disagreement shows how disconnected certain medical arguments were and why women wearing corsets often found it difficult to know which medical opinion, if any, to believe.

The reason that doctors published such dramatic claims about the corset was that it was easier to get their message out by doing so. Negative views of corsets easily spread beyond the medical community because they were sensational in nature. Such tactics concerned not only women, but men who worried about the health of their wives and daughters, as well as about the health of children born of mothers who wore corsets before and during pregnancy. The point of these connections was to show that corsets undermined family life and women’s roles. The way in which these negative articles spread throughout culture and remained there for years was demonstrated by the 1829 article by an unnamed author called, “CORSETS! CORSETS!” which claimed a young lady had laced her corset so tightly that it was pushing her lungs up into her neck, causing a tumor. Originally published in the Journal of Health, the article was republished only a month later in the Boston Recorder and Religious Telegraph, the Christian Watchman.

and the *Western Luminary*. These were not medical publications but publications of a religious nature, possibly because of the way that it condemned vanity, a point on which religious publications generally agreed with dress reformers. “CORSETS! CORSETS!” reappeared a decade later in the *Family Magazine*, in 1839. This article that was originally intended for a limited audience of medical professionals soon made its way into the public discourse because its shocking content made it more interesting to the public and led to its reprint.

Another problem was that even though Drs. Coffin, Caldwell, Walker, and Safford-Blake tended to focus on corsets as negative, they also disagreed on the extent to which corsets were harmful. One good example of this is Dr. John Godman, a physician who wrote for the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, originally published in 1828, which eventually became *The New England Journal of Medicine*, a mainstream medical journal that is published to this day. He argued against corset use, but did so in a more measured way than Coffin. In an article published in 1829, he claimed that wearing the corset could be safe for some women, but not for others, though he did not elaborate on this point. He did point out that there were very real dangers in corset use, especially for heavier women, but he also claimed “very probably it may be urged that the evils we have indicated are confined to a comparatively small number, and that a much greater proportion of females wear corsets without suffering these inconveniences or injuries.” He also argued that the more educated classes might be able to wear corsets safely.

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272 Ibid., 497-498.
but warned that those of lower classes were in danger of injury because they lacked access to the same education and medical care of the upper classes. He maintained that they were more likely to wear corsets incorrectly or in a way that would cause injury, and that they were less likely to receive proper care if they did injure themselves through corset use. If anything, this statement preserved the corset as a marker of class rather than discouraging it.\textsuperscript{273} By claiming that women could wear corsets safely under the right circumstances, Godman undermined the idea that corsets should be discarded by most, much less all women.

When it came to the advice of doctors, women who wore corsets saw a certain hypocrisy in their harsh warnings when women related to the doctors were known to wear corsets. Dr. Safford-Blake pointed this out when she criticized men for sympathizing with dress reform in theory but not supporting it in practice when it came to the women in their lives. An article by R. L. Lincoln in the \textit{Western Journal of Health}, a medical publication based in Cincinnati, published in 1831 acknowledged this discrepancy claiming, “Physicians have written grave essays against tight lacing, and yet indulge their own children in wearing corsets, or in other words have given them the privilege of distorting their shape and destroying the health in a fashionable way.”\textsuperscript{274}

Divided medical opinion meant that the case against corsets from a medical perspective was weaker and less credible because of the lack of unity. This was what made it difficult to convince the public to get rid of the corsets sooner. The medical advice against corsets was strong enough that it did have an impact, especially when it came to the issues that doctors agreed on, but the actual effect of health driven reform was much slower. It took time for

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., 498.
\textsuperscript{274} L. R. Lincoln, “Suicide from Tight Lacing,” \textit{Western Journal of Health}, vol. 1 no. 7 (Cincinnati, September 1, 1831) 49.
Americans to fully accept what doctors were saying about corsets and for them to demand healthier clothing, particularly when doctors allowed their own family members to wear corsets.

Though the average woman did not typically leave a lasting record of her own thoughts, it is possible to get an idea of what these women felt through the accounts of the doctors to whom they expressed their concerns. Caldwell addressed the claims of his female patients who had defended the corset, though he did not name them. He explained that these patients believed that corset use could be beneficial in supporting the body and helping correct posture. His patients argued that women’s muscles were naturally too weak on their own to carry the weight of their bodies, so they needed extra support.275 The women who Caldwell treated were able to be skeptical of his warnings because they had worn corsets for years, as did every other woman they knew. This made his more alarmist rhetoric seem like an overreaction. At the very least, they probably believed that their use of corsets was a calculated risk and that, if corsets did cause health problems, it was unlikely to happen to them.

The tendency to exaggerate was often adopted by dress reformers as well as doctors. Helen Gilbert Ecob, for example, was generally logical and methodical, but she still undermined the strength of her own assertions by claiming corsets of caused illnesses that they did not. She blamed corsets for nervous and emotional afflictions, general weakness and ill health, sickly appearance, and more serious illnesses like consumption. Many of these problems were afflictions society considered unique to women, especially nervous complaints. In fact, Ecob believed that most forms of illness came from restrictive clothing. Because she was not a doctor it is likely that she truly believed these things. Her claims, moreover, were not far off from those that doctors had made throughout the century and she was likely influenced by these ideas when

275 Dr. Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on Physical Education*, 127.
writing her book. As was the case when doctors exaggerated the effects of corsets, her concerns did not correspond with the experiences of wearing them.

The tendency of doctors and dress reformers to blame the corset for problems it did not cause obscured the fact that corsets could cause some actual harm, particularly to young girls whose skeletons were still developing. Valerie Steele examined the accuracy of contemporary claims concerning women’s health. She explained that x-rays prove some of these concerns correct. Corsets do put pressure on the ribcage and push internal organs out of their natural position. In fact, the results of a 1998 experiment showed that lacing an 1870s style corset so that the waist was three inches smaller than normal did have an impact on lung capacity. In addition, if worn from a young age, corsets could cause deformities of the ribs. Likewise, wearing corsets during pregnancy could cause damage by preventing the abdomen from expanding naturally, thereby contributing to difficult labors and even miscarriage.\textsuperscript{276} In hot weather, it is easy for a woman who is wearing even a mild corset to feel light-headed. A 2015 experiment from Inha University in South Korea showed that corsets lower the heartrate and decrease circulation to the extremities.\textsuperscript{277} In addition, wearing corsets from a young age can cause the weakening of back muscles and force women to increasingly rely on a corset in later years. It would have been uncomfortable for women to stop wearing them. Corsets force a person to sit and stand in a certain way that might feel unnatural depending on the situation. It also provides a structure that allows the back muscles to stay at constant rest, since they do not need to support the body. Therefore, taking the corset off can cause some discomfort to the back as the muscles could atrophy.\textsuperscript{278} These problems are real and, if doctors and reformers had stuck to only the

\textsuperscript{276} Ibid., 69-76.
\textsuperscript{277} Youngjoo Na, “Clothing Pressure and Physiological Responses According to Boning Type of Non-stretchable Corsets”, \textit{Fibers and Polymers}. 16 (2015), 471-478.
\textsuperscript{278} Steele, \textit{The Corset: A Cultural History}, 69-76.
observable effects of corset use, it is possible that the general public might have absorbed their message more quickly.

In the end, exaggeration and misrepresentation hurt the cause of reformers. Most women who wore corsets did not have scoliosis or consumption and these conditions also affected men who did not wear corsets. The arguments medical journals made, that most women who had medical problems with their lungs and backs wore corsets, were not the same thing as saying most women who wore corsets had these conditions. Many corset users either did not believe the journals, based on their own experience, or ignored them and took their chances.

**Beyond the Medical Community**

The dress reform movement, which initially developed in the 1840s and 1850s, stepped in at midcentury to supplement the requests of physicians. Dress reformers were a group of mostly women connected to the women’s movement who wanted to adopt a more practical style of dress and started to coalesce with the emergence of the bloomer. Though it was by no means confined to the women’s movement, dress reform remained important to those interested in women’s rights throughout the rest of the century as evidenced by members of the women’s movement such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Dr. Mary Edwards Walker, and Helen Gilbert Ecob, who were involved in both. Dress reform remained mostly a fringe movement attached to other more prominent movements, but the mid-century bloomer movement was the most cohesive that dress reform had been, or ever would be. After it collapsed, those who had once clung to the bloomer looked to correct other issues concerning dress, including the corset.

Most of the official dress reform organizations formed during the bloomer period, including the National Dress Reform Association, not only promoted bloomers but also
condemned the use of the corset and other tight clothing. In some ways this did bring more attention to the issues with corset use, but the controversy over bloomers overshadowed the message of reform concerning corsets. With the fall of the bloomer, dress reformers became less vocal about their decisions regarding clothing. Elizabeth Cady Stanton claimed that newer styles, which included crinoline skirts, were more conducive to health than older styles, making reform less necessary than it had been.

What dress reform organizations remained after the decline of the bloomer, which were usually local rather than national, became more invested in getting rid of undesirable clothing for health reasons, rather than to grant more freedom to women or to align themselves with the women’s movement, and they drew on the body of criticism amassed by doctors to do it. Still, some reformers like Helen Gilbert Ecob, the wife of a minister and an advocate for healthier dress, and Mary Livermore, a writer dedicated to women’s issues, remained active in both. The American Free Dress League formed in Philadelphia in 1874 and denounced unhealthy or impractical clothing of all kinds, including the corset. As in the medical community, even within the American Free Dress League, there were different opinions on how far dress reform should go. There was a radical wing that included women such as Mary E. Tillotson, who organized the group in 1874, after being arrested once for wearing pants, and a traditional wing that included known reformers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Some wanted to get rid of corsets entirely, while others only wanted to end the practice of tight lacing or bring back the bloomer. There

were more dress reform groups in England, including the Society for Rational Dress, which formed in 1881, and the Healthy and Artistic Dress Union, which grew out of the Pre-Raphaelite art movement of the 1860s and 1870s. These had some influence on American dress reform, but they were distant and so their effect was limited.282 Still, other countries took an interest in each other’s movements particularly among the English-speaking countries. According to an article about a meeting of the American Free Dress League; published by an Australian newspaper, twenty-five delegates attended a meeting in Philadelphia in 1874. The president was Dr. Darius M. Allen, a doctor from South Newberry, Ohio. He shared the presidency of the American Free Dress League with his wife Sofia as a sign of the organization’s dedication to equality between men and women. Many of these women wore the “American Costume,” which, as described in the previous chapter, was another name for the bloomer. Their basis for forming a dress reform group was as follows:

Whereas the fashionable dress of women is unnatural and incompatible with health and exercise, is never likely to be consistent, and would not remain so if it could reach that point; whereas it is inhuman in form, in the infliction of obstacles to locomotion and respiration, thus causing constant waste of vital force; therefore resolved, that as friends of humanity we repudiate fashionable dress, and recommend individual choice in fabrics and forms of clothing; that to obtain true lives and equal opportunity in the pursuit of happiness, to elevate woman above slaveries and pernicious habits, we will reason with her, admonish and entreat her to cease accepting bodily burdens, licentious and murderous inventions, and use her own mind, skill, and taste in forming comfort-favouring, labour-lightening, and life preserving garments.283

While the Australian newspaper quoted above seemed to take a positive view of the meeting, the local American press was not so favorably inclined. American newspapers did admire some of the more conservative women in attendance such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who had become a less controversial figure in the years since she discarded the bloomer. Still, American

newspapers concluded that the more radical wing of the group lacked grace and culture.\textsuperscript{284} The fact that there was a radical wing, and a more conservative wing demonstrates the divided nature of the movement even within an official group devoted to it. However, such divisions are not unusual; in fact, most movements have both a radical and a traditional wing. At their 1876 meeting, a member of the American Free Dress League, Mary E. Tillottson of Vineland, New Jersey, read a statement that called for practical dress for women.\textsuperscript{285} They wanted the elimination of the corset, or at least advocated for a more responsible way of using corsets that did not constrict the body quite so much.

One commonality between those who opposed corsets, regardless of whether they were radical or traditional, was that their arguments reflected those made by medical practitioners and appealed to notions of health as well as women’s rights. After the fall of the bloomer, the corset attracted more attention from dress reformers who sometimes wrote about the medical effects of wearing corsets despite not being doctors themselves. Helen Gilbert Ecob, a passionate supporter of dress reform as well as women’s suffrage, wrote a book called \textit{The Well Dressed Woman} in 1892 specifically addressing medical concerns and the corset. The book was published by Fowler and Wells, a company known for publishing books on phrenology, health, and hygiene, fields associated with alternative medicine and linked to the original bloomer movement. Though Ecob’s work fits into these interests, it still made very similar arguments to those of mainstream physicians going back to the 1830s.\textsuperscript{286} Her responses to arguments supporting the corset show

that some of the accusations against them had not changed much since Caldwell and Reese addressed these same topics decades earlier.

Since Ecob’s work was not in the realm of mainstream medicine and she was not herself a doctor, her work provides insight into what the public thought about how corsets effected the body. The primary explanation for the necessity of corsets had to do with supposed natural female weakness and the notion that corsets added support to women who otherwise would not have enough strength to support themselves. As mentioned previously, the restriction on the lungs caused by corsets forced women to breathe with the upper chest to the point that, as Dr. Walker explained, the general public sometimes thought it was natural for women to breathe only with the upper part of their lungs. Even at the time, Walker argued that this was not the case and was a misconception promoted by the public, not the medical community. Ecob similarly discussed this rumor amongst the general population, who reasoned women naturally breathed from their upper chest because they could not breathe from the abdomen during pregnancy. In her book, Ecob attempted to prove medically that this was not the case and that all humans, whether male or female, naturally drew breath from the abdomen. Her argument focused on the fact that little girls breathed from the abdomen up until they began wearing corsets and women did the same when they took off their corsets to sleep. Finally, she showed that women in the final stages of pregnancy, who could no longer wear corsets, also breathed abdominally. This logic effectively debunked the theory that women could not breathe from the abdomen while pregnant for the general public.287

By the 1880s, there had already been much discussion about dress reform, but the arguments made between Caldwell’s work in 1829 and Ecob’s work in 1892 had changed very little. Ecob’s book was part of a wider body of literature produced by private citizens who were not doctors themselves, but who still promoted the idea that corsets were unhealthy. Early arguments about the benefits of dress reform were such that, by the 1850s, the message of reformers had become more unified as they borrowed each other’s arguments even if they were divided in practice through different local dress reform societies. They tended to be connected more to the dress reform movement or the health movement and held similar opinions to those expressed by Ecob.

Mary A. Livermore exemplified the concerns of laymen regarding medical problems caused by corsets in her work as a women’s suffrage activist and dress reformer from Boston Massachusetts who wrote about women’s issues as well as dress reform.\textsuperscript{288} In her book \textit{What Shall We Do With Our Daughters: Superfluous Women and other Lectures}, she claimed the fashions of the early 1880s were incredibly unhealthy. She explained, “many of our girls are made the victims of disease and weakness for life through the evils of the dress they wear from birth.”\textsuperscript{289} Livermore blamed cage-like corsets for feebleness in women because they hindered their ability to move freely and caused pain. As

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\textsuperscript{289} Mary Ashton Rice Livermore, \textit{What Shall We Do with Our Daughters?: Superfluous Women, and Other Lectures} (New York: Lee and Shepard, 1883), 23-24.
\end{flushright}
far as the supposed beauty of the corset, she argued that most young girls had slender figures that did not need corsets, since wearing one would only give them a stiff appearance. Though not a doctor, her discussion of corsets reflected similar arguments to those promoted by doctors, proving that physicians’ concerns had moved beyond the medical community.

The health arguments against the corset were crucial to the success of the movement because not all dress reformers supported women’s rights. Some traditionalists did not believe women’s roles or appearances should change but did believe that unhealthy clothing undermined their responsibilities as wives and mothers. Therefore, the only truly solid group of reformers in the latter half of the nineteenth century primarily came out of the health movement, which was neutral when it came to women’s place in society. Edith Barnett, who called for a return to the styles of the early nineteenth century purely for health reasons. She explained, “We cannot tell what is a woman’s right place in society, but it is certain that she will never reach it so long as she sacrifices health to fashion, nor conscience and common sense to her love of admiration.”

The 1870s and 1880s marked a time when people began to take clothing reform more seriously. Barnett stated, “It will not be denied that a large and continually increasing number of women are dissatisfied with dress as it is. One need but point to the societies and leagues that have been formed within the last five years, and that have for their object some reform in women’s costume.” Here she acknowledged the increased interest in dress reform through the creation of dress reform groups across the country. However, the difference between this movement and

290 Ibid., 32.
292 Ibid., 71.
293 Barnett, Common-Sense Clothing, ix.
the failed bloomer movement of the previous decades was that it did not necessarily share a
direct connection to the women’s movement.

Traditionalists sometimes opposed corsets on the grounds that they were not conducive to
motherhood and to the role of women as caretakers. Because of the connection between clothing
and health, women were doubly responsible for the health of their household both because they
were the ones in charge of dressing the family in sensible clothing, and because caring for the
sick was considered one of a woman’s duties as manager of the home. A guidebook for women
called *The Domestic Economy* stated this idea succinctly, claiming, “The very main-spring of all
health and comfort in the household [is] the mother.”294 In fact, part of the argument for women
to remain in the private sphere was that the health of her family would suffer if she tried to leave
it. Textbooks for young girls cautioned that, “Numbers of children die annually for the want of a
mother’s care. In such cases, the children are deprived of that care because ‘their mother goes out
to work.’ Numbers more grow up crippled or weakened in body and perverted in mind, for the
want of motherly supervision and restraint.”295 The understanding at the time was that all illness
was preventable and, if a person were ill, either they or someone else, most likely the mother or
wife, was responsible. As a textbook from the period indicated, “We do not mean to say that it is
always our own fault if we are sick and suffering; but it is almost always somebody’s fault.”296
Americans in the nineteenth century believed that if you neglected a cold you could end up with
any number of illnesses such as rheumatism or neuralgia, as well as chest, throat, or lung
inflammatory ailments. Any illnesses of the stomach or other internal organs developed from
improper nutrition or gluttony. Children were more vulnerable to diseases, and dress reformers

295 Ibid., 128.
296 Ibid., 90.
argued that they were especially, “apt to forget that their clothing needs changing with the weather and by undue exposure to sudden cold contract diseases which remain with them through life, and probably hasten their death.”

In all these instances, the authors of these textbooks felt justified in placing the blame on women, who were responsible for providing both healthy food and clothing to the family. In 1841 Catherine Beecher, the sister of acclaimed author Harriet Beecher Stowe and a well-known educator of women, argued in her book *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* that women needed to learn basic medical care to take care of the needs of their family. She expressed these views based on the belief that the responsibility of caring for sick children, husbands, and parents were likely to fall on women and they needed to be prepared.

Reformers focused primarily on the mid-section of the body including corsets, waistbands, and the weight of skirts. In fact, they advised that women suspend all the weight of their clothing from their shoulders. Their reasoning was that “as soon as the waist-bands are made tight enough to keep the skirts from falling off, they are too tight to allow free movement of the muscles in respiration.” This caused concern for reformers because they saw a danger in the way corsets and waistbands might damage the vital internal organs by binding them too tightly. A section of the textbook *Domestic Economy: A Class-Book for Girls* explained, “By these instruments the ribs are squeezed, and contracted, and driven out of natural place. They in their turn have to displace some other part of the body, so the shoulders are forced up, and the digestive organs are impeded.”

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300 *Domestic Economy*, 99.
textbook not only in its criticism of corsets concerning health but also in its comparison of corset use to Chinese foot binding as *Domestic Economy* states, “There is far less injury to the health from wearing iron shoes like the Chinese lady, or rings through the nose like the savage, than in wearing tight stays.”301 In effect, to American society in the latter half of the 1800s, corsets were just one more way women could bring illness upon themselves and their families.

Physicians and laymen within the reform movement were well aware that most women would be reluctant to get rid of corsets. Its advocates knew that many women, accustomed to wearing stays, would feel discomfort when they took them off. However, reformers assured these women that over time their muscles would strengthen, causing this irritation to disappear. A common argument against reform was that God the Creator made women soft beneath the ribs on purpose to allow for the use of a corset. This of course implies that an infallible God would leave room for improvement upon his own design. Yet, due to protests like these, the main message of reformers outside the medical community in the 1870s and 1880s was not necessarily to get rid of the corset all at once, but rather to use restraint in wearing it. After all, many people believed that a slight compression of the torso was advantageous to health. In practice, reformers condemned tight lacing more than they condemned the general habit of wearing corsets. Edith Barnett, in fact, defined what constituted tight lacing when she stated, “Everyone laces too tight who is not smaller with her clothes off than with her clothes on.” In other words, according to Barnett, the measurement of a corseted waist should be the same measurement of the uncorseted waist, otherwise she considered it tight lacing.302

By 1900, some of the claims made by earlier doctors were being tested in a more scientific way. A 1900 article in *The Philadelphia Medical Journal*, a publication written by

301 Ibid., 99.
doctors for doctors that attempted to maintain scientific standards, argued that developmental
failure in children was often due to the use of corsets that impeded women’s muscular
movements. A paper written for this journal by Dr. Thiersch made some rational arguments
against corset use. Thiersch was a doctor practicing medicine in Leipzig, Germany, but his work
was published in the United States had he and was an active voice on professional politics at the
turn of the twentieth century, discussing not only corsets but also medical ethics.\footnote{Gould and Lloyd, 116.} In one of his
medical experiments, he tried to discover the amount of pressure that corsets imposed on the
body. He found that flexible corsets allowed breathing more readily than stiff ones. He also
concluded the pressure of the skirts at the waist caused more serious problems than corsets did
but advised that such pressure could cause permanent injury to the thorax and abdomen and that
“therefore reform in costume is urgently required.”\footnote{Ibid., 641.} This article sent mixed messages to the
reader because it downplayed concerns over the corset by blaming tight skirts instead. Thiersch
believed some corsets were better than others as far as the pressure they imposed, and he
admitted that most women were accustomed to the pressure and therefore could wear corsets
safely. Still, the doctor recommended reform in clothing and warned that, at least for some,
corset use could cause permanent damage.

The arguments against corset use predated the bloomer movement, but also survived it
because they were less controversial and confrontational. Casting off corsets did not mean that
women were casting off femininity in the way that wearing bloomers (often considered a male
garment) was but arguments about the corset still centered around notions of proper femininity.
Arguments about the corset were part of a larger overall social shift in what it meant to be
feminine but approaching it from a medical perspective meant that reformers could side-step
issues like women’s rights, which had become linked with the bloomer. Criticism of corsets
predated the nineteenth century, but it was after the return of the corset that it became a major
part of social discourse in the United States. As early as the 1830s dress reform emerged as a
health issue, long before Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Amelia Bloomer called for healthier
clothing by promoting pants for women. Unlike bloomers, the corset had an ally in the medical
community that provided at least the appearance of neutrality, which allowed their arguments
against the corset to lead to its eventual decline. Since the advice was medical it did not seem
like it carried an ulterior motive to maintain or overturn the status quo when it came to women’s
roles. In fact, physicians may not even be aware of the social biases in their arguments but
maintaining a discussion about women’s roles was effectively what they did. All of this led to a
type of reform that was divided and therefore slow to take hold. Still, the discussion of women’s
clothing is always very gendered, and corset use was linked to feminine weakness and vanity.
The ideas that doctors did agree on were that the corset was dangerous at least in some
circumstances, that it was a form of vanity, and that it was similar to cultural deformities such as
Chinese foot binding, did make their way into the public consciousness and were consistent
enough to cause steady, if slow, change.
Chapter 4: Corset Empire – Corsets and “Civilization” (1830-1915)

Corset use persisted for so long, despite the backlash from dress reformers and the medical community because Anglo-American and European dress styles were linked to European ideals concerning gender, race, and imperialism. Anglo-Americans saw the corset as a part of Anglo dress and a link to “civilization” as they defined it. This made it difficult for dress reform to take hold as women continued to wear corsets even as they migrated west and often imposed corset use upon Native American and Mexican women during the Americanization process. Dress reformers realized this and sought to change the image of the corset from one of civility to one of savagery. They built on criticism already laid against the corset by doctors concerning how it altered the body’s shape and compared this to body alterations performed by cultures they viewed as less “civilized” than they were and argued that the corset, far from being a symbol of “civilization”, was a holdover from “savagery”. This argument supplemented medical advice in changing some of the styles of the day. However, the fact that corset use was so entrenched in notions of race and gender at a time of both imperialism and the woman question meant that it took several decades for dress reformers efforts to truly take effect. Still, when dress finally did begin to change, the new styles reflected Anglo notions of civilization by embracing silhouettes similar to the neoclassical era of the early nineteenth century updated for the twentieth century. These new styles reflected the long-term goal that dress reformers had of bringing back the empire waist of the early nineteenth century.

Trappings of Civilization

Before discussing dress reform further, it is important to address the way in which imperialism acted against the demands of dress reformers and the dynamics of dress in American culture to which reformers had to respond. The connections between corsets and civilization
were amplified in the nineteenth century because of America’s expanding territory. As Anglo-Americans moved further west, they used dress to display their connection to Anglo-American culture, civilization, and femininity. The same scientific spirit that led doctors to decry the corset for medical reasons also appeared in other parts of society including the disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology, which were not concerned with dress reform and often promoted ideas that ran contrary to the demands of dress reformers. Still, developing fields like these influenced dress reformers when crafting their arguments. The earliest proponents of these disciplines tended to view European culture, and by extension white Americans, as dominant to other groups. Clothing, including the corset, was a symbol of this culture.

The reason that the corset was considered so entwined with notions of civilization and modernity had its roots in nineteenth century Sociology and Anthropology and the way Anglo-Americans categorized racial groups. The modern version of these disciplines grew out of the discourse about human nature and society that arose during the enlightenment when European thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote about the nature of mankind from a secular perspective. They based their arguments in human reason rather than in a religious ideology, which transformed the discourse on the nature of mankind. Their efforts formed what became known as Social Contract Theory. Hobbes argued that in a “state of nature” there was no protection of ones rights from other individuals, therefore humanity willingly surrendered a portion of their freedom in exchange for protection from a form of government.305 Locke built on this argument, but claimed that a “state of nature” was not entirely devoid of morality and that humans were born with certain “natural rights” that could not be taken from

Therefore, people could pursue their own interests if those interests did not harm another person. Rousseau looked at this move from a state of nature to a more controlled society as progress. He admitted that this meant giving up some freedoms for mankind but argued inequality and exploitation was a natural part of the process of modernization.  

The application of Social Contract Theory among European and American sociologists led to the categorization of racial groups based on how close to a “state of nature” they supposedly were by European or Anglo-American standards. Usually this meant how closely they followed European practices, including dress. Sociologists believed that there was only one path to modernity and that, Western Europeans and, for the purpose of this topic, Anglo-Americans had found it. In order to judge other cultures, Anthropologists and Sociologists examined how these societies conformed to Anglo social standards and considered material culture as an indicator of “civilization” as they knew it. Material culture became part of the trappings of civilization and included Anglo forms of dress. Whether dress reformers liked it or not, the corset had become part of the trappings of civilization in American society, making their task of convincing the public to abandon popular styles more difficult.

In the nineteenth century, Anthropology and Sociology became more prominent as European empires grew. The spread of these disciplines was a product of imperialism since they were often employed as part of the study of indigenous people under imperial control. New scientific theories were applied to the fields. One of the most groundbreaking of these being the theory of Evolution proposed by Charles Darwin in 1858, with the publication of his book *Origin of Species*. Though his work was only intended for Biological evolution, enthusiasm for the

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theory was such that Sociologists and Anthropologists took the idea much further and attempted to apply it to society in general rather than simply to biological evolution. The renowned sociologist Herbert Spencer coined the phrase “survival of the fittest,” and applied it to all of society. Lewis Henry Morgan, an American Anthropologist, agreed with Spencer’s theory and added to it with his theory of evolutionism in which variations of cultures were expected to pass through specific and constant evolutionary states from “savagery” to “barbarism”, to “civilization”. Their ideology became known as Social Darwinism and is important to understanding much of the thought concerning nineteenth and early twentieth century Sociology. It organized racial and ethnic groups of people along a ladder from “savagery” on the lowest rung to “civilization” on the highest rung. Of course, this philosophy was a western European ideal that placed Great Britain, the most powerful empire in the world at that time, at the top. All other cultures and races fell somewhere underneath on the Social Darwinist scale according to their similarities to, or differences from, British culture. Other western European countries as well as the United States, which took its original identity from the former British citizens who first established the nation, were thought to be on a similar level to Great Britain in terms of civilization. This association between Anglo culture and civilization as defined by Social Darwinism made the material culture that accompanied Anglo life an important part of displaying one’s status within society.

In instances where cultures interacted, the dress of non-European or colonized groups became an amalgamation of European and Indigenous styles, which sometimes included the


corset and sometimes did not. Herbert Spencer himself remarked upon this practice in his *Principles of Sociology* in reference to people of African descent. He viewed adoption of European dress as a form of imitation and concluded that it constituted an attempt by indigenous groups to reach a civilized state by putting on the trappings of civilization, but without a full understanding of what it meant to be civilized, at least according to Europeans. He claimed “Among the partially-civilized races, we find imitativeness a marked trait. Everyone has heard of the ways in which Negroes, when they have opportunities, dress and swagger in grotesque mimicry of the whites.” Clearly he had a negative opinion of this practice and did not see this imitation as successful. Later however, as the notion of evolutionism took hold, the acquisition of Anglo styles of dress was looked at as a natural step towards civilization. In fact, settlers often incorporated western styles as a form of control over indigenous groups, since Anglos were imposing these trappings of “civilization” upon other cultures in an attempt to “improve” them. One example of this was the control of children’s appearance in Indian Schools as part of the Americanization process. In his book, *Coyote Nation: Sexuality, Race, and Conquest in Modernizing New Mexico, 1880-1920*, noted borderlands historian Pablo Mitchell examined the way in which cultural perceptions of race and gender acted upon residents of New Mexico between 1880 and 1920. He argued that human bodies, and particularly the race and gender of a person’s body, was an important method of classification in New Mexico at the turn of the last century. Controlling what people wore and making them closer to western Europeans in

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311 Spencer, *Principles of Sociology*, 83.
appearance was a form of assimilation. Pablo Mitchell viewed material culture as a part of conformity and examined the body in relation to race. Mitchell claimed,

Human bodies (heads and toes; arms and legs; ingestions and secretions; bodily fluids like tears, saliva, and semen; genitals, skin, and hair) provided fundamental racialization... The evaluation and characterization of human bodies and body practices in New Mexico helped define citizenship, structure opportunity, and provide the scaffolding around which new sets of social hierarchies were to be constructed. “Proper” control over one’s body usually meant adopting Anglo-American customs and appearances. Clothing was one of the tools used in Indian Schools to impose Anglo culture, and corsets were part of the typical Anglo ensemble that Native Americans had to adopt.

There is literature from the mid-nineteenth century to support Mitchell’s conclusion and demonstrate that the connection between dress and race went beyond the bounds of New Mexico territory. Sarah J. Hale, editor of Godey’s Ladies Book believed that Native Americans and Mexican Americans living in the west needed to conform to American standards. Material culture such as clothing was an outward sign of conformity. Because of Hale’s visibility as editor of a popular publication that reached women all over the United States, she was able to disseminate her ideas and influence culture directly.

In the years immediately after the Gadsden Purchase, most Mexican American women and Native Americans in that area refrained from wearing corsets, particularly if they were among the lower classes. William Watts Hart Davis, a veteran of the Mexican/American and Civil War, wrote about his exploration of New Mexico where he served as district attorney as well as governor and superintendent of Indian affairs from 1853-1857. He was not a dress

314 Mrs. Sarah J. Hale, Manners: Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round, (Boston: Shepard Publishers, 1867), 39.
reformer, but his observations showed the state of women’s fashion amongst the local population in the borderland during that time and, while not a dress reformer himself, he did seem to appreciate the less cumbersome styles they wore. He explained that peasant women of Mexican decent wore only a chemise (undershirt) and a petticoat made of homespun flannel in bright colors. Much like the medical crusades against the corset by Drs. Coffin, Caldwell, and Reese, this idea of non-Anglo groups refraining from wearing corsets would remain part of the discussion of dress reform into the twentieth century. Such arguments were an important part of the dress reform discussion because they appealed to racist philosophies such as Social Darwinism, Even Davis had a Social Darwinist and evolutionist approach to the inhabitants of New Mexico and believed both the fashion and the education level of New Mexico’s citizens had improved since the United States took over the territory.315

These early connections between dress and culture during a time when Anthropology and Sociology were concerned with ranking cultures according to their level of “civilization” by Anglo standards made them part of the trappings of civilization that defined groups of people. Dress reformers could not ignore this discussion if they wanted to convince people of the merits of discarding corsets. They had to appeal to these new ideas and fit their ideologies within them, especially since they were interested in a medical and scientific approach to corset use. Corsets were essential for Anglo-American women by the mid nineteenth century, yet it was not as though there were no examples of women that did not wear corsets, especially in the west. Despite the widespread use of corsets among Europeans, Anglo settlers in the early days of westward expansion encountered cultures where women did not wear them. However, Anglo-American women continued to wear corsets on the frontier because they connected them to

315 William Watts Hart Davis, El Gringo, Or New Mexico and Her People (Harper & brothers, 185).
“civilization”. They also encouraged other racial and ethnic groups to wear them to bring themselves closer to this ideal. Dress reformers had to reframe the corset as uncivilized to fight against contemporary ideas of proper dress and encourage Anglo women to give up their stays.

As westward expansion continued after the Civil War, corsets became more common among non-Anglo women because of their association with wealth and status. White women moving west also brought their dress with them. Sarah Hale, influential editor of *Godey’s Ladies Book*, praised Anglo styles, including the corset, as a reflection of culture and morality, even if they did not necessarily suit the environment. She claimed that clothing was, “something more than necessity of climate, something better than condition of comfort, something higher than elegance of civilization. Dress is the index of conscience, the evidence of people, and the tendencies of individual character.”316 This statement both addressed the importance of clothing and explained the nature of dress in relation to society, individuality, and the Anglo notion of “civilization”. She asked in one issue of *Godey’s Ladies Book*:

> Are the mothers of men who rule the world found among the loose-robed women, or among the women who dress in closer-fitting apparel?...Can a people who go naked, or only half-covered, be Christian, or ever become Christianized, unless they clothe themselves?...Are not those nations most morally refined in civilization and Christianity where the costume of men and women differs most essentially?317

In this quote, Hale’s reference to “closer fitting apparel” refers to the corset and other tight-fitting clothing. This quote demonstrates the imperial mentality that accompanied western clothing as a civilizing influence. Leigh Summers, a professor of history at the University of New England, examined the corset and its cultural significance in her book *Bound to Please*. She claimed that Anglo women in India may have worn the corset simply because it allowed them to

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317 Ibid., 44.
retain a physical and psychological hold on class identity and gender roles.\textsuperscript{318} This is similar to the way American women seemed to cling to the corset even as they moved west as a marker of civilization and virtue.

Evolutionism led Anglo-Americans in the west, particularly progressive women to believe they could bring the “light of civilization” to other races, since they thought that Europeans had found the one and only path to modernity. They tried to do this by enforcing conformity to Anglo culture. At the border, this meant, in effect, differing definitions of what being “Mexican” meant depending on the class of the individual and their conformity to Anglo American lifestyles. Mexican Americans often tried to take on a mantle of whiteness to increase their social standing and adopting western conventions of dress was one way that they could do that.

The idea that conformity to Anglo-American culture provided some social mobility was the driving force behind different forms of westernization, including Indian schools, which directly controlled what students wore. Teachers at these schools attempted to impress Anglo culture on their students and discourage indigenous culture. Part of the education in Indian schools included “proper” habits of cleanliness but also called for an “acceptable” hair length on men, and Anglo dress.\textsuperscript{319} These photographs from the Ramona Indian School kept in the archives at the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, New York.


\textsuperscript{319} Ibid., 53-56.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
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\caption{Ramona Indian School}
\end{figure}
Mexico show what the students wore. Some photographs show a blend of Native American and European clothing. The two older girls in the back of the picture in figure 4-1, wearing light-colored dresses, show the distinctive form of the corsets that they were wearing, demonstrating a range of styles from uniform conformity to an amalgamation of dress.\textsuperscript{320} It also shows the use of corsets in these schools for older students as part of their transition to western culture. At the Carlisle School, photographs showed students in both Indigenous and Anglo-American garb. The purpose was clearly to show that the Sioux arrived at the school in traditional dress but adopted Anglo-American clothing once inside. The purpose was to highlight their transition from “savagery” to “civilization,” and clothing was a visual representation of that.\textsuperscript{321}

African Americans and Mexican Americans also adopted the popular style when they could, including wearing corsets. The Albuquerque Museum Photographic Archives includes an image of an unidentified African American woman wearing the popular fashion of the day and a tight corset. The portrait is dated to the 1890s at a time when taking a picture was rare, so people would wear their best outfits. Still, the fact that the woman in the picture chose to wear this garment demonstrates that she had access to the popular style of the day.\textsuperscript{322}


\textsuperscript{321} Figure 4-2: John N. Choate, First Sioux Girls – As they came to Carlisle, Photograph, 1879, Dickinson College Archives and Special Collections, http://carisleindian.dickinson.edu/images/sioux-girls-arrive-carlisle-1879

were second class citizens in the US at the time, but they grew up closer to Anglo culture than Native Americans and Mexican Americans. Their Americanization process had already occurred over generations of slavery and direct control by white Americans who decided everything for them, including what they should wear. Though slavery was no longer legal in the United States after the end of the Civil War, other methods of control were still very much in place. Jim Crow laws in the South kept African Americans in as close a state to slavery as possible, and systematic racism in both the North and the South limited their ability to earn money. Still corsets were available to them either for purchase or sometimes handed down from their employers. In fact, African American women had been wearing corsets since before slavery ended in the United States. According to historian Valerie Steele, “not only did free black women wear corsets, but so did some enslaved women, especially if they were young and worked in the household, not the fields.”

Fashionable dress was harder to come by for them but, as was the case with lower class Anglo women, they were able to get a used or inexpensive corsets.

\[323\] Steele, *The Corset*, 49.
\[324\] Steele, *Bound to Please*, 49.
White and black styles of dress were relatively similar in the United States, a fact that people of the time recognized even though African Americans were still considered by white Americans to be on a lower rung of Social Darwinism. During the famous 1893 Supreme Court case *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, Justice Henry Billings Brown argued for segregation based on the Social Darwinist belief that African Americans as a race were “inferior” to Anglos. In doing so he referenced a book by Yale University professor of Sociology William Graham Sumner who argued that dress was a “folkway” or a fundamental belief that a society held in common. According to Brown the second-class citizenship of African Americans in the south was a “folkway” in the same way as proper dress. However, it also implies that there was at least some standard of dress among both groups, because a fundamental difference in dress between African Americans and White Americans in the south would undermine the validity of his argument.

There was more opportunity for African Americans in the western United States, since conventions of systematic racism were not as firmly established and were harder to enforce, but African Americans were still largely disadvantaged throughout the country. Western European clothing was not foreign to African American women in the way it might have been to Native Americans. As the corset became racialized as part of the trappings of civilization, it also became a component in manifest destiny and assimilation of Native Americans and Hispanic peoples into Anglo-American culture. According to historian Anthony Mora in his book *Border Dilemmas*, Anglo-Americans saw Mexicans, particularly Mexican women, as victims of their own culture waiting for white women (and men) to liberate them. This “liberation” came mostly through Americanization as Anglo-Americans spread their own culture and gender roles to these

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indigenous groups. Looking through the early yearbooks for the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts it is clear that, at least among college women, styles in New Mexico had adapted to those of the eastern United States by 1911. One of the more prominent families in the area were the Amadors who moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico from Juarez, Mexico in 1850 and opened a store. Their business grew over the following decades and by 1885 they owned a prominent two-story hotel, which served as a gathering place for the community. Pictures of women in the Amador family show them wearing styles comparable to those in other parts of the United States. The Amador family portrait circa 1900 in Figure 14 shows all 6 of the Amador women wearing corsets under dresses that would not look out of place in other parts of the country. The Amador family represented a success story in which a family from Mexico were able to integrate into American Culture and displayed their affluence through material culture, including their appearance and dress. However, they also demonstrated that dress served as a type of conformity to Anglo standards and to mainstream American culture. They were wealthy, civilized, and well-dressed, which is exactly

327 Merrill S. Egbert et. al., Swastika vol. 4 (New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1910).
328 Roliene Banner, Amador Family Portrait, Amador Family Papers, Collection number 4000. And Figure 4-5: Roliene Banner, “Amador Family,” New Mexico State University Library, New Mexico Digital Collections, retrieved, 5/10/2019, https://nmdigital.unm.edu/digital/collection/nmsulib/id/115/
what would be expected of the most prominent members of any society, including Las Cruces, New Mexico.

The fact that corsets were so closely linked to civilization by Anthropologists and Sociologists presented a problem for dress reformers. European dress represented progress, femininity, and civilization. Wearing corsets was a symbol of one’s place within those social standards. As part of European material culture with imperialistic overtones, corsets were engrained in the propriety and acceptability of women’s dress making it difficult to get rid of them among Anglo-American women. They also became part of the initiation process for those who wished to enter Anglo-American culture or those who were forced to do so. These social constructs acted against the demands of reformers. It meant that if they wanted to change women’s dress in any real and permanent way, they had to change the narrative of what it meant to be civilized.

**Subverting the Stereotype: Savage Corsets (1830-1915)**

The association between corsets and civilization was so strong that it presented a formidable obstacle to dress reform. A vocal minority attempted to subvert this connection between corsets and civilization and instead claimed that their use, in fact, brought Anglo Americans closer to savagery because the corset altered the human form in an unnatural way. Dress reformers compared this body modification to self-imposed body distortions they found in other cultures that Europeans ranked lower than themselves on the Social Darwinist scale including Asia, Africa, and the South Sea Islands. Because both arguments existed at the same time and battled with each other for prominence, there was a lack of consensus on the state of corsets regarding civilization. This disunion frustrated the efforts of dress reformers, especially since the idea of corsets as a part of civilized society was much more prominent.
Discussion regarding the dress of non-European groups was already part of the medical discourse. In fact, Charles Caldwell was one of the earliest reformers to frame his arguments against corsets in terms of race, racial health, and cultural norms. He explained that corset use was like the practice of Chinese foot binding, a process in which wealthy girls in China broke and bound their feet to keep them unnaturally small. \(^{329}\) This argument was echoed by other dress reformers throughout the rest of the century. In general, Caldwell did believe in the notion of Social Darwinism. He viewed other cultures as inferior to Anglos and thought that Native Americans were particularly prone to vice and beyond hope of reform.\(^{330}\) However, he did not connect the corset to civilization. Caldwell’s comparison between Corsets and Chinese foot binding was an effective tool against the notion that corsets represented civilization. If women viewed non-corseted dress as a mark of savagery, there was no hope that they would change their ways. However, Charles Caldwell, and others who borrowed from him, decided to subvert these stereotypes. They switched the idea around and argued that corset use in fact put women closer to savagery. In his medical articles, Caldwell referred to contemporary Anglo ideas of racial superiority. He did this by using examples of western civilization where corset use was not involved and by unfavorably comparing corsets to practices of body transformation in other cultures stating, “It is neither unjust nor extravagant, to say of corsets, that they threaten a degeneracy of the human race…the descendants of tight-corseting mothers will never become the luminaries and leaders of the world. The mothers of Alexander and Hannibal, Caesar and Napoleon, never distorted their persons by such a practice.”\(^{331}\)

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\(^{329}\) Charles Caldwell, M.D., “Thoughts on physical education,” *The Southern Literary Messenger* (Richmond: Thos. W. White, Publisher and Proprietor, 1814), 731.


this argument was to break the link between corsets and Anglo “civilization.” Instead, he associated their use with the opposite to undermine the appeal of corsets to the general public.

Dr. David Meredith Reese, another reformer, was critical of some of the contemporary medical treatments of the nineteenth century, including phrenology. He was well respected in the community, but not always in touch with the mainstream opinions of the day as he was mentioned in the New York Journal of Gynaecology and Obstetrics for his opposition to the establishment of a Woman’s Hospital in New York.\textsuperscript{332} He called the custom of corseting women and girls “barbarous,” which became a common attack on the practice of corseting and tight lacing because it made it seem unsuitable for a “civilized” society. He argued that, “the stays were laid aside and abandoned by our female ancestors in consequence of the obvious mischiefs resulting to health, but our modern ladies have changed the name and shape of the instrument, but they retain all its destructive characteristics.”\textsuperscript{333} Whether or not these earlier corsets were actually laid aside for health reasons is debatable, but the implication was that reverting to them returned Anglo women to an earlier state of civilization. This directly contradicted the opinions of Sarah J. Hale who, as mentioned earlier, argued that the mothers of prominent ruling figures were unlikely to be found outside of those who did wear corsets.

Still, even Hale, at times, criticized corset use. While she was not a dress reformer, she did argue against the vanity of tight lacing, which occurred when a woman laced a corset to an extreme degree and drastically changed the measurement of her waist. Though she did not call for the total elimination of the corset, in the matter of tight lacing she agreed with reformers like Caldwell. For example, \textit{Godey’s Lady’s Book} helped popularize the idea that the deformity


caused by tight lacing could be compared to deformities in other cultures. The example that was used most often was a comparison between the practices of tight lacing and Chinese foot-binding as mentioned above. An 1830 article for *Godey’s Ladies Book* called “The Toilet,” claimed, “the Chinese females cripple their feet; and the Europeans torture their waists into the narrowest possible compass.” Comparisons between foot binding and corsetry became widespread and persisted in the literature until the end of the century. Caldwell’s claim that, “the crippling machinery with which the females of China compress and disfigure their feet and ankles, making the former too small and the latter too thick and clumsy, are innocent to them [corsets]” was ultimately much more persuasive than arguments over whether world leaders were born mostly from corseted or uncorseted women. It was especially convincing because the reason Caldwell believed the corset to be worse than foot binding was because the foot was an extremity to the body, but the ribs and waist housed the vital organs, meaning that corsets, which targeted this part of the body, had more potential to do lasting harm. It was hard for contemporaries to argue that this was not the case. In fact, there is medical evidence to support this claim even today because corsets can impede organ function and can cause bone deformities when applied to girls at a young age while their bones were still soft and malleable.

This argument was so difficult to dispute that even decades later, in the 1880s, 1890s, and early 1900s, it appeared in examinations of the corset. Charles Dudley Warner, an influential writer of novels whose works included *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today* written in collaboration with Mark Twain, restated this argument. So did Edith Barnett, a lecturer to the National Health Society in London who was known for writing about domestic issues and had a book called

336 Ibid., 116-118.
Common-Sense Clothing. Her book was republished in New York and distributed in the United States. Both reformers compared corsetry to Chinese foot binding.337 Eliza Mary King who was originally from New Zealand but promoted dress reform in both England and the United States made similar claims. She mainly promoted greater equality for women, including co-operative housekeeping as well as dress reform. She worked to undermine the idea that corsets were civilized and equated them with practices used by people that Anglo society considered “savage” or “barbarous”. All the above authors pointed to the fact that the exaggerated curve of the waist reflected practices by other cultures in that it too deformed the body.338 Foot binding was the most popular, but not the only, comparison made between the corset and practices of intentional body alterations in other cultures. British scientist George Busk studied South Sea Islanders in 1877 and observed that they bound the heads of young children with heavy rolls of cloth to give their skulls a high, shallow shape with flatness at the back of the head. Mary Steele and Elizabeth Livingston Steele Adams argued that the corset was no different from this type of bodily alteration in their book Beauty of Form and Grace of Vesture, which promoted reform styles in 1894. 339

Warner’s arguments connected any type of ornament to savagery and used examples from other species to show that toning down the tendency to ornament or alter the body proved a closer connection to civilization. He made such a comparison as early as 1885. Following

Spencer’s use of the animal kingdom as a model for human behavior, Warner observed that male birds tended to have brighter and more colorful feathers than female birds. Referring to the brighter plumage of male birds, he claimed, “In the lowest states of undeveloped humanity the same tendency to conspicuous adornment is noticed in the male of the species, and when we rise a little in the savage scale, the red blankets and striking war-paint contrast still with the plain colors of the females of the tribe. Here seems to be a general law founded in nature.” Warner’s argument was that corsets should be discarded along with other forms of ornament to elevate a culture as well as beauty. Yet, he did not call for reform in the same way that Amelia Bloomer, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, or other dress reformers connected to the Women’s Movement had, since he found their particular brand of dress reform masculine in appearance. This went against what he believed were innate qualities of males and females. However, he did take issue with the corset, arguing that it obscured the true form of the woman and suppressed her natural shape. He explained:

I should predict certain failure in any dress-reform that attempts in any degree to make the dress of women like that of men. If relief is needed, it lies entirely in the opposite direction. It lies in greater conformity to the woman’s anatomy and her peculiar functions in our ordained life…Weighting the hips with an intolerable load of skirts, and drawing in the waist so that the figure resembles an hour-glass, must some time be considered as much a violation of the laws of beauty as of health.

Such arguments remained part of the public discourse for the next few decades. In 1915, Eva Olney Farnsworth who followed the artistic dress movement and wrote a book called *The Art and Ethics of Dress*, echoed his sentiments claiming, “Man gradually and in the main has conquered his passion for ornament. Today in all the leading nations of the world he clothes rather than arrays himself…but woman has not conquered the instinct for ornament. She still

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allows it to control her and often to her own great detriment.” This demonstrates how Farnsworth perceived gender. She seemed to agree with Warner that men were less ornamented than women and that women needed to move beyond ornamentation. The implication is that men had matured enough to dress in appropriate and civilized ways, whereas women lacked this maturity because they continued to ornament themselves with impractical clothing. Both Warner and Farnsworth believed that ornament in general was a trait closer to savagery than to civilization as they understood it. Though writing twenty years apart, both argued that women would be more responsible and more highly evolved if they wore clothing that changed the body as little as possible.

Another way that reformers attempted to accommodate mainstream concern that getting rid of the corset would be akin to throwing off the trappings of civilization, was to create a style that was reminiscent of classical culture, which most Anglo Americans considered more admirable than the so-called primitive cultures they saw in their contemporary world. This was often done through the Artistic Dress movement, which started in England in the 1850s but soon became popular in America, gaining most of its popularity in the 1880s and 1890s. Dante Gabriel Rossetti formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848 along with William Holman Hunt and John Everett, they were a collection of artists that attempted to

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resurrect older classic versions of art. Their influence also extended to fashion, particularly amongst the wealthy. Rossetti himself inspired some of the early Pre-Raphaelite fashion through some of his later works that depicted women in unusual and experimental costume. Going against the standard of the day that called for tight fitting clothing, Rossetti depicted his models in drapery. One such image is “Mariana” from 1870 pictured on the right. It included a form of loose-fitting dress based on the aesthetics of the pre-Raphaelites and used drapery to hide the figure. He and his contemporaries in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood drew on medieval, Renaissance, and Eastern fashions (particularly from Japan and China) for inspiration.

For those who followed the example of the Pre-Raphaelites, their main inspiration for the perfect female form was the Venus de Milo and the Venus de Medici. They disliked corsets not only for health reasons, but because they believed, like Warner and Farnsworth, that any form of stays obscured the natural beauty of the woman who was designed to have a thicker waist. This notion spread among people admired the style including Eliza Mary King, who was a member of the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act and established the Women’s International Peace Society. She traveled to the United States where she campaigned for national dress reform based on the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic she had been exposed to while in England and became secretary and later president of the Rational Dress Society. This organization, originally formed in London in 1881, gave a more official center to the Dress Reform movement and incorporated Pre-Raphaelite and medical ideas into their call

342 Figure 4-6: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Mariana, RossettiArchive.org, 1870. http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s213.rap.html
343 Cunningham, Reforming Women’s Fashion, 108.
for more rational dress for women. They were also aware of a similar Dress Reform Movement in the United States. In their newsletter, they referenced Mary Tillotson, an American member of the National Dress Reform Association in the United States, who was such a fervent dress reformer that she had been jailed for wearing pants. The two organizations drew influence from each other and helped spread Pre-Raphaelite ideas about dress to the United States.

For the most part, those who promoted dress reform tended to do so as an offshoot of other movements they were involved in, such as the Women’s Movement or the Health movement, but this was not the case for one of the more prominent followers of Pre-Raphaelite, artistic dress style, Annie Jenness Miller. For Miller, reforming fashion was her primary concern and she understood how mainstream women might reject artistic dress because it was so different from the popular styles. Therefore, she started her own clothing line that catered to the ordinary American woman who was looking for healthy and comfortable clothing, but who did not want to look too unusual. She toured the United States promoting her style based on the Pre-Raphaelite artistic dress. She also edited Dress, the Annie Jenness Miller Magazine to promote what she called “correct dress” because she disliked the term “dress reform.”

She believed there should be a middle ground between the artistic dress styles that were widely considered unattractive by American women and instead called for small changes to

\[\text{Figure 4-6: Corset Substitutes by Annie Jenness Miller}\]

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346 Cunningham, Reforming Women’s Fashion, 69
347 Marion Harland, Talks Upon Practical Subjects, (Warner Brothers Company, 1895), 131.
ordinary dress that would allow a more natural figure. If women had to wear corsets, she promoted specialized models that included less boning. One such corset was called the Equipoise waist where the boning was used only at the waistline. Some of these models are shown in figure 4-7.\textsuperscript{349} Her garments were looser and often used drapery to hide the body but in a more subtle way than other Pre-Raphaelite styles, as shown in figure 4-8.\textsuperscript{350} Because she designed clothing that both pushed the aims of reformers in promoted more relaxed corset substitutes and clothing that looked like mainstream fashion, but with some deliberate nods to Pre-Raphaelite artistic dress, her clothing became a popular solution for women concerned about their health and comfort. She, like Warner and Farnsworth, argued her case by using the Venus de Milo and comparing its measurements to a corseted woman.\textsuperscript{351} Mary Steele, Elizabeth Livingston Steele Adams, and Helen Gilbert Ecob, all prominent dress reformers who mostly focused on the medical problems that corsets caused, were also supporters of artistic dress and referenced Miller in their works.

One commonality amongst calls for artistic dress was reverence for the Venus de Milo or Venus de Medici as the ideal female form. The use of these classical figures as models is telling because there were extant cultures where women did not wear corsets, which could provide

\textsuperscript{349} Figure 4-7: “Annie Jenness Miller Rescues Fashion Victims of the 1890s” New England Historical Society, 2019. http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/annie-jenness-miller-rescues-fashion-victims-1880s/

\textsuperscript{350} Figure 4-8: “Annie Jenness Miller Rescues Fashion Victims of the 1890s” New England Historical Society, 2019. http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/annie-jenness-miller-rescues-fashion-victims-1880s/

\textsuperscript{351} William Henry Flower, Fashion in Deformity: as Illustrated in the Customs of Barbarous & Civilized Races (London: Macmillan and Co., 1881), 81.
examples for dress reformers to emulate. Yet, they did not make diagram comparisons between corseted European women and non-corseted women of other races living in the United States such as Native Americans. The most logical explanation for this is that they did not want to equate the absence of stays with “savagery,” as this would prove counterproductive to their argument. In contrast, Anglo American society highly admired Greco-Roman culture because they saw it as the basis for their own civilization and looked at themselves as the heirs to that legacy. Presenting the Venus de Milo as an alternative instead of a real un-corseted woman from a culture that was lower on the Social Darwinist scale of civilization avoided an unfavorable equivalency between discarding the corset and falling to society’s lower rungs. Instead, it made the much more favorable comparison between artistic dress and the Ancient Greeks, whom European and Anglo-American society considered civilized and visionary.

Annie Jenness Miller had the right idea about how to work dress reform into the average woman’s wardrobe and her work contributed to a shift in acceptable fashion that would eventually lead to the corset’s downfall. Still, the country did not adjust overnight. Her clothing was more popular than other dress reform styles, but it was only the beginning of a transformation in fashion. For those who wanted to wear healthier clothing, Miller’s line provided a more acceptable option, but it did not immediately overtake mainstream fashions in popularity. Ultimately, it did not matter that the above-mentioned proponents of artistic dress considered the Venus de Milo the most beautiful form for a woman, if the fashion industry still considered the hourglass a more fitting model, therefore more significant reform from designers like Miller were necessary. Dress reform fashion still went against the figure considered most attractive in the late nineteenth century and reformers still had work to do to convince the public of the benefits of embracing the supposed “natural” form depicted by these classical statues,
especially when the fashion industry was designed around the corset and the small waist. The contradiction between the demands of health and the demands of fashion remained an issue in slowing down dress reform as a whole, especially when most reform styles remained unfashionable, and even dress reformers admitted that this was a problem. Edith Barnett, who collaborated with Charles Dudley Warner in presenting dress reform to the public admitted that, “It is a pity that many of the champions of useful dress have patronized costumes so gratuitously ugly and have appeared to see some connection between slovenliness and healthful attire.”

From a contemporary perspective, corseted women looked neat and well dressed, while those who did not wear corsets looked sloppy and untidy, which was a problem that designers influenced by the reform movement tried to solve.

The slow progress of dress reform throughout the nineteenth century did not mean that the movement produced no effect. It just took time for the effects of their arguments to sink in among the general public. The corset was very well established as a part of Anglo-American civilization and its status was backed up by the emerging disciplines of Sociology and Anthropology. Corsets were part of the trappings of civilization that represented modernity and as such were often used as a common tool of Americanization. However, slowly but surely, reformers began to change that model by undermining the supposed civility of the corset and comparing it to body deformations among other cultures that were considered lower on the Social Darwinist scale. Reformers spread awareness not only about the dangers of corsets but of their impropriety for a civilized nation. Subverting the notion of corsets as a trapping of civilization was not an easy task for reformers because it meant going against traditional notions of propriety and Anglo culture. However, Annie Jenness Miller and others like her eventually

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started to influence fashion by designing and popularizing healthier styles. Annie Jenness Miller was one of the first successful designers to do this buts she would not be the last.
Chapter 5: Fashionable Reform – Fashion Magazines and the Influence of Dress Reform

(1880-1930)

Up until the end of the nineteenth century, dress reform was mostly a grass roots movement, but by the 1880s, dress reformers’ concerns regarding the corset were starting to become too noticeable for fashion magazines to ignore. Some designers started to cater to people who wanted their clothing reformed, other designers were dress reformers themselves, but most of the fashion industry played into the reform effort, not necessarily because they agreed with the ideas behind it, but because the widespread concern about corset use made it profitable for them to adapt more closely to reform standards.

The clothing styles advertised in fashion magazines of the time serve as a yardstick by which to measure the success of the reform movement because they show a concrete representation of exactly how reform effected mainstream clothing over time. In addition, as magazines started to promote healthier alternatives to traditional corsets, more women adopted them causing a feedback loop that further progressed the movement. For years, dress reformers had warned about the dangers associated with corsets and tight lacing while pre-Raphaelites had pushed for a return to the less restrictive empire waist of the 1810s. Finally, as dress reform ideas became more mainstream, designers started to conform to these standards and women demanded a healthier more comfortable fit. At first the change was small, but at the turn of the twentieth century the influence of the reform movement became more clear and mainstream fashion started to reflect dress reformer and pre-Raphaelite ideology, which was a separate movement that began in art circles, but eventually became allied with dress reform. Between 1880 and 1920, a range of styles appeared in fashion magazines that served as an alternative to clothing that required traditional corsets. While some of these styles needed no corset at all, the most popular
alternative was the health corset, designed to appeal to dress reformers and those who sympathized with them. The popularity of such styles and of health corsets demonstrated that reformers were making progress when it came to changing mainstream clothing, but the fashion industry was reluctant to fully eliminate corsets because they were still making money from them. At first, health corsets were marketed as healthy when, in reality, corset manufacturers were simply trying to profit off the appearance of health. However, the designs for corsets became less restrictive over time and eventually did earn their name as being relatively healthier than their predecessors, pushing the dress reform movement ever closer to its goal.

The catalyst that finally pushed the corset out of mainstream fashion for good was World War I, though such a change would not have been possible if the reform movement had not already made such significant changes to fashion by the 1910s that corset use was already on its way out of fashion. During the war, corsets became more expensive, which discouraged their use, even though magazines had continued to promote them right up to the point when the US joined the war. By that time, styles had evolved to a point where corsets were less important due to so many years of reform and changes in the fashion industry. This made them easier to discard in World War I than in previous conflicts.

Still, while dress reform had successfully eliminated the corset from mainstream fashion by the early 1920s, criticism of the new corset-less styles continued mostly because of the dramatic change in women’s fashion that occurred in that decade. The fact that 1920s fashion not only eliminated the popularity of the corset but turned towards a purposefully more androgynous and less feminine style concerned some traditionalists and confirmed their fears about the outcome of dress reform, a movement that had always held larger implication for the popular concept of femininity. Therefore, critics of the newer style of dress pushed back against the
absence of corsets. In the end, as has always been the case with dress reform, the discussion of corsets was part of a larger conversation about women’s place in American society in the new century and, even without the corset, this discourse continued. The new, more androgynous clothing that became popular in the 1920s, remained a potent outlet for frustration concerning changes in gender roles, particularly as women’s roles changed along with their clothing. Criticizing women’s clothing outlived the dress reform movement because it continued to be a form of control or rebellion when it came to women’s roles.

Advertising Reform

The years of discourse over corset use by doctors and dress reformers eventually made its way into the mainstream magazines that advertised fashion directly to the American public. The change was slow, but by the turn of the twentieth century fashion magazines like Harper’s Bazaar and the Delineator started to use the same arguments found among reform groups and in medical journals to advertise newer, and supposedly healthier, styles that they were trying to sell. Similarly, women’s magazines such as The Ladies Home Journal also promoted new styles with a less drastic curve at the waist in their advertisements and articles. Since corsets were still a mainstay of American culture until the 1920s, these magazines did not advocate for getting rid of them entirely, but they advertised corsets that were less and less restrictive. Still, though it was probably not intentional on the part of these advertisers, they were laying the groundwork to eliminate the corset.

The Delineator and Harper’s Bazaar were important in the evolution of corset design because they were not only fashion magazines but also fashion distributors in the form of both ready to wear and paper patterns, giving them direct access to the closets of their readers. These magazines had different impacts on society. Harper’s Bazaar eventually stopped selling patterns
and focused instead on ready to wear but the Delineator, which first appeared after changing its name from The Metropolitan Monthly in 1873, was designed to sell Butterick patterns as well as being a respected fashion magazine. Butterick was a fashion company founded by Ebenezer Butterick in 1867 who based his business on selling patterns rather than readymade garments. Butterick’s company was one of the first fashion magazines to see the value in paper patterns as part of their publication and was the most widely known for this type of distribution. In fact, Butterick, is a fashion company that still publishes patterns today. Their patterns remain some of the most widely used besides perhaps Simplicity Patterns, a company that did not come into the market until 1927. Both of these magazines had a lasting impact on American fashion and influenced both ready to wear and pattern clothing.

The initial answer to the reform movement by fashion magazines was not that women should give up corsets at all, but rather to blame corset wearers for incorrect use. Of course, they had reason to protect the corset industry because it was a lucrative one for them, so these magazines were unlikely to publish any advertisements or articles that promoted the downfall of the garment. Instead, their arguments took the responsibility away from corset manufacturers and placed it instead on the consumers by telling them that anyone who suffered a complaint was wearing their corset wrong. Instead of condemning corsets, they claimed that wearing corsets that were too small or laced too tightly was the reason for the health concerns that reformers had been arguing about for the past forty years. As early as 1823 Dr. John Coffin, owner of The

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355 Ibid., 194.
argued that corsets caused lung and circulatory problems. Dr. Meredith Reece, Publisher of the *American Gazette*, compared corset use to self-harm and suicide because he believed it was a dangerous practice that women only engaged in for the purposes of vanity. Similarly, Dr. Caldwell, founder of the University of Louisville, tried to warn the public and his patients about the dangers corsets could pose to the internal organs. Fashion magazines, on the other hand, claimed that if corsets did harm people in this way, it was because the wearer chose to lace the corset to an unnaturally small size. Later, as corsets became less restrictive, these same magazines argued such medical issues could be fixed by simply buying a new corset, particularly one that they themselves advertised.

Denial of corsets as dangerous was the oldest tactic magazines used to both recognize the concerns of reformers and doctors as valid but shift the blame away from the corset. *Godey’s Ladies Book*, published an article called “The Toilet” in 1830 that expressed similar concerns to Coffin, Caldwell, and Reece, but claimed it was because women persisted in the practice of tight lacing, rather than corset use in general. Sarah J. Hale, editor of *Godey’s Ladies Book*, also published her own book *Manners: Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round* in 1867, which discussed the evils of tight lacing while exonerating the average corset wearer. Even an 1887 *Delineator* article “Tea-Table Talks” discussed the harmfulness of tight lacing but, while it condemned improper corset use, it did not state that corsets in general were the problem. Instead, it criticized the way some women, particularly women who employed “tight-lacing,” wore

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358 Dr. Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on Physical Education: Being a Discourse Delivered to a Convention of Teachers in Lexington, Ky., on the 6th and 7th of Nov. 1833* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1834), 122-123.
359 Ibid., ix, x, xiii.
them. This more lenient view of corsets persisted for decades because there was no real alternative to wearing a corset for women, but fashion magazines felt the need to address reformers concerns somehow. Therefore, they condemned tight-laced corsets rather than corsets in general to continue selling corsets to the public because that was the popular fashion at the time. This does not mean that there was no progress in the decades since the 1830s, but it shows that there was hesitancy on the part of fashion magazines to accept that corsets might be unhealthy and that these older denials persisted. When they finally started discussing the corset itself as the cause of medical problems, it was only to advertise the superiority of newer corsets as opposed to older ones.

Magazines were clearly aware of the criticism against corsets and were responding to it because their descriptions of improper use of corsets were mostly recycled medical criticisms that had existed for decades. Dr. Coffin claimed that corsets substituted “the pale ensign of disease for ‘the crimson of their lips and their cheeks,” implying a pale and sickly look. Caldwell claimed that the corset caused women to be “constitutionally feeble.” Decades later, the “Tea-Table Talks” article in the Delineator noted an overall sickly appearance among women due to improper corset use. Writers for fashion magazines were not necessarily dress reformers associated with the movement, but their interest in healthier clothing showed that the message of the reformers, and the medical community was, in fact, gaining the attention of clothing designers and distributors. For a while, magazines published both ads for health corsets and criticisms of tight lacing at the same time. The transition from condemning only the practice

362 Coffin, “Injuries from Dress,” 156.
363 Caldwell, Physical Education, 129.
364 “Tea-Table Talks,” The Delineator, pg. 194.
of tight lacing to criticizing older forms of corset was complicated by the fashion landscape in which older corset styles were still popular even as health corsets started to become available. By the 1890s, *The Delineator* was regularly advertising alternative forms of corsets with less boning and less of an hourglass shape, mainly for those who were ill and needed a softer and more pliable undergarment.\(^{365}\) Meanwhile, a variety of articles continued to promote correct use of corsets as imperative to health throughout the decade.\(^{366}\)

As late as 1909, *The Delineator* published its own advice from doctors that supported the moderate use of corsets. This makes sense since *The Delineator* was primarily a fashion magazine and distributor of paper patterns interested in promoting its products. It was in their best interest to defend the corset because they were trying to sell corsets and clothing designed to fit over them to the public. Some of the individual designers that contributed to fashion might have been reformers, but the magazine itself definitely was not. *The Delineator* was simply following the trends to sell fashion to the public. However, because of this, they demonstrated the visibility of the dress reform movement and its success over time. The doctor that they chose to highlight in their 1909 issue was Dr. Charlotte C. West because she supported corset use in general but condemned the way that women often wore them.\(^{367}\) Her initial arguments were similar to those of other doctors going all the way back to Caldwell and Coffin. She claimed that when she was studying medicine, she dissected the body of a young woman with ribs that were overlapped several inches and who had deformities in the internal organs due to corset use. However, she blamed the deformity not on the corset itself, but on the vanity of its wearer saying,


\(^{366}\) *The Delineator*, v.43 No.4 (London and New York: Butterick Publishing Co., 1894), 420.

I did not scorn the innocent piece of wearing apparel by means of which this poor girl had so fearfully mutilated her body; but rather I felt a sickening sense of shame that there had existed an intelligence so perverted as to cripple the highest work of creation, for – what? That she might be squeezed into the sixteen-inch waist!\(^{368}\)

Her argument was that the woman should have known that corsets could be harmful if laced too tightly or worn incorrectly. She also upheld older ideas that women needed support for their bodies. Dr. West claimed that not wearing corsets could cause issues as much as wearing them, because she believed both men and women needed some form of support for their abdomens. She also turned earlier arguments that corsets caused disease and early death on their heads by pointing out that women statistically lived longer than men and, since most women wore corsets, they must not cause too much harm and possibly were the cause for the added longevity that women experienced.\(^{369}\) West’s arguments boiled down to the notion that corsets could be safe and even beneficial when used correctly but that misuse of them, particularly by way of tight lacing, was to blame for the health issues. Therefore, it was the vanity of the wearer in misusing the corset, and not the existence of the corset itself, that was the problem.

Dr. West cited no medical research to prove this claim, but the fact that such a claim was made by a doctor, published in a popular fashion magazine, both gave this claim legitimacy and made them readily accessible to the general public. It is also likely that Dr. West, as a woman, had been wearing corsets herself and therefore understood them in a different way than her male counterparts did, which probably explained her leniency. She was not a dress reformer and was more interested in how to wear corsets safely than she was in getting rid of them. One possibility

\(^{368}\) Ibid., 220.
\(^{369}\) Ibid., 220.
for her more relaxed attitude was that she, like other women of the time, most likely enjoyed the style that corsets provided and did not personally suffer from any injuries connected to it, making it easier for her to dismiss them. This may have allowed her to categorize the injuries she did see related to corsets as the fault of the individual wearer rather than the garment. It is also possible that she simply disagreed with most doctors but, either way, her arguments echoed those made by Dr. Caldwell’s female patients who claimed that their corsets were no tighter than those of other women and so they did not believe it was the corset that was causing the medical problem.370 In other words, both Dr. Caldwell’s patients and Dr. West believed it was improper use of corsets that caused issues rather than corsets in and of themselves.

Early examples of ads that specifically mentioned problems with the corsets themselves and their potential health hazards began to surface in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Since by this time, the public was looking for a way to shift their styles in a healthier direction without sacrificing style, these designs gained popularity and magazines capitalized on them by marketing them as healthier. Between the more fashionable appearance of health corsets and the support they received in fashion magazines and the alternative, which was the elimination of the corset, dress reform finally gained a foothold in mainstream society.

Not only did the appearance of reform clothing show how far dress reform had permeated society, but it also allowed it to spread further because fashion designers started to make it fashionable and appealing. Part of the reason that this style took hold was because of the way companies marketed it, speaking directly to the concerns of dress reformers. Advertisements during the 1880s and 1890s began promoting health-preserving corsets. Ads for these corsets called them more flexible and often described a coiled elastic section in the sides that allowed for

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370 Dr. Charles Caldwell, *Thoughts on Physical Education*, 127
some give. This addressed the concerns of Dr. Coffin and his colleagues in the medical field as well as some concerns over tight lacing. Health corsets appeared to solve some of the problems doctors accused corsets of causing and, even if they were laced tightly, their shape and flexibility still allowed more movement.

Though these new corsets were not overwhelmingly supported by all doctors, there was some support for them within the medical community. *The Massachusetts Eclectic Medical Journal* praised these new corsets arguing that new designs allowed companies to create a healthy corset to act as a shoulder brace and back support. Journals like this legitimized health corsets and justified magazines’ claims that they were healthier. This was good for fashion distributors because the existence of health corsets filled a niche in the market by eliminating the guilt that women felt in wearing a garment widely believed to be unhealthy, but still allowing them to maintain a fashionable figure. Magazines continued to promote corsets as a necessary part of normal female attire, but ads for health corsets showed an attempt to meet the demands of dress reformers as well as sell fashionable clothing.

So, did fashion magazines suddenly realize the dangers of corset use and become a part of the dress reform movement? Well, not exactly. The motivations of fashion magazines were much more related to their own interests. Fashion magazines supported dress reform only when it was beneficial to them in terms of sales. Fashion magazines were aware of the arguments that medical practitioners were making regarding the corset, and they positioned their products as the answer to doctors’ concerns with this supposedly healthier alternative. These corsets were somewhat less restrictive than previous versions, but that did not mean they were perfectly

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372 Alms and Doepke. *Spring and Summer Catalog*, the Amador Collection Ms4ATC Box 1, folder 22, 1889, pg. 39.
healthy or that they were universally accepted by the medical community and the dress reform movement. They were, however, viewed as an improvement, which was all the justification the medical community needed to advertise them as doctor recommended.

Advertisements often generated the appearance of medical approval through the names that they gave their products. Figure 1 shows one of the many advertisements for Ball’s Health Preserving Corset. Some ads even referred to it as Dr. Ball’s Health Corset, giving the consumer an added sense of the health and legitimacy of the corset. Other manufacturers of health corsets similarly added the doctor title, such as Dr. Warner’s Health Corset. In reality, this corset was made by the Warner Brothers Corset Factory or Warnerco, not by a medical professional and it was not endorsed by any actual doctor. Similarly, Ball’s corsets were sold by the Chicago Corset Company and usually advertised as Ball’s corsets but sometimes with the added “doctor” prefix when advertising health corsets. Including the word “doctor” or “Dr.” was a specific reference to the medical community’s concerns and did two things: it appealed to the audience because it gave the impression that some corsets were healthier than others, and it gave the impression, true or otherwise, that some doctors approved of certain corsets, or even developed them. In reality, there was some approval of health corsets from doctors, but not the direct development by doctors that these ads implied. These corsets were slightly healthier than

373 Alms and Doepke, Spring and Summer Catalog, pg., 39.
374 Bloomingdale Bros., Price List Fall and Winter 1881-2, (New York: Bloomingdale Brothers, 1883), 34.
376 Figure 5-1: Eve Shapiro, Gender Circuits: Bodies and Identities in a Technological Age
earlier versions and corset companies were using that angle to sell more of them, but the fashion industry was interested in selling a product, not in dress reform for its own sake. Instead, they reflected what was popular in any given moment. The fact that they started to take the concerns of dress reformers seriously enough to use them as selling points for their products, shows that dress reform was becoming popular in mainstream American culture.

However, as was the case with doctors who exaggerated the dangers of corsets to scare the public out of wearing them, fashion magazines exaggerated the benefits of health corsets to sell more of them. They grasped at any new style that they might be able to market for health reasons. Some of these had some legitimate effects on health, while others did not. Ads featured in magazines during the 1880s made extraordinary claims about the effects of their corsets on health. One corset advertised in an 1886 issue even claimed to contain “steel magnetods” that were supposed to relieve a multitude of symptoms including back pain.377 The accuracy of these claims is questionable, and it is possible that such assertions were used as an advertising ploy based on alternative medicine, particularly electromagnetic therapy.378 Steel magnetods were basically meant to use magnetic power on the internal organs. Their supposed connection to health was based on a theory that magnets and electricity could cure ailments in the body.379 This is still a theory associated with alternative medicine in the United States today but does not have the backing of the mainstream medical community.380 However, ads for such corsets in the late

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378 Ibid., 234, 238
380 Whether or not magnets work for the specific purpose of easing pain while wearing a corset has not been tested, but the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health explicitly stated that “Research studies don’t support the use of static magnets for any form of pain.” National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, “Magnets for Pain,” (December 27, 2017) https://nccih.nih.gov/Health/magnets-for-pain
nineteenth and early twentieth century were not concerned with the accuracy of their claims. They were more concerned with convincing the public that their corsets were healthy. Since they were not doctors themselves, and neither were most of their customers, the idea that steel magnetods could be beneficial seemed reasonable to customers meaning that sellers could make this claim without fear that the average consumer would challenge it.

Advertisers wanted to appeal to women in a variety of ways including health, and their ads reflected that, but they were not the only part of the magazine that started to examine corset use from the standpoint of health. Articles also appeared in these publications commenting on women’s fashion and health. These articles generally took a less hardline view of corset use than did doctors like Coffin, Caldwell, and Reecce, all of whom wanted women to discontinue corset use entirely, believing that even a small amount of pressure could cause damage and in the worst cases could be fatal. Writers for fashion magazines were still trying to advertise corsets to the public so they had a more nuanced view of corsets and safety, believing that some pressure was harmless, possibly even healthy, but that too much pressure could cause damage. Although these were articles and not advertisements for any one specific corset, they were still advocating corset use in general mainly because the Delineator would not publish a scathing review of a product they regularly sold unless they could use it to sell another product like the health corset. These seem logical conclusions based on the source, its goals, its audience, and its articles.

Ads in The Delineator appear to show that the discussion about corsets in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, at least in fashion magazines, was shifting away from a simple defense of corsets in general to methods of avoiding the health problems that could come with wearing them. This means that fashion magazines like the Delineator and Harper’s Bazaar acknowledged that some of the concerns of health reformers were valid. These changes were key
developments inspired by the dress reform movement and fashion magazines gave these changes the platform they needed to spread throughout society. An article, the author of which was not named, appeared in the 1899 issue which explained, “the hour-glass waist is, happily, no longer approved, and there are no signs of its revival.” This commentary shows how dress reform ideas had finally reached mainstream fashion and that this change was well received and promoted by The Delineator. Corset manufacturers were not necessarily reformers, but they wanted to remain competitive, and as the tide shifted more towards reform, they had to offer healthier versions of the corset or risk losing sales.

**Shifting Styles**

It was through magazines like The Delineator that dress reform styles started to permeate American culture. At the turn of the twentieth century, clothing styles started to change more rapidly, especially since the invention of the sewing machine and the accessibility of patterns and ready to wear garments democratized fashion and allowed these silhouette changes to occur both rapidly and inexpensively. Therefore, the late nineteenth to early 20th century saw several shifts in silhouette, each picked up diligently by the fashion magazines. This was part of the reason that magazines were able to offer healthier corsets, as less restrictive corsets aligned more with the newer styles, which were moving away from the hourglass or “wasp waist” shape. Ads for stays with messages similar to those presented in The Delineator showing healthier, softer, and more pliable corsets also appeared in Harper’s Bazaar. One of these ads even bore the tagline “Discard the Inartistic Corset and wear the Figure Mold,” which was a direct reference to the artistic dress movement. The influence of the long struggle by the doctors and reformers

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382 *Harper’s Bazaar*, (vol 51, no. 10-12) 241.
mentioned earlier was beginning to show in the pages of fashion magazines and, slowly, they were beginning to make progress.

Part of the reason for this change in silhouette was thanks to actual dress reformers designing clothes for the general public that was both healthier and fashionable. Two designers in particular, Annie Jenness Miller, a dress reformer and fashion designer who attempted to make reform dress fashionable, and Josephine-Inez Gaches-Sarraute, a doctor and dress reformer that tried to address specific medical concerns involving the corset by redesigning it with health in mind, were responsible for some of the changes to fashion that brought dress reform into the mainstream. Both designers attempted to make reform fashions appealing to the public and developed corsets that were somewhat less restrictive and, therefore, marginally healthier by comparison. They stood for two different styles meant to supplant the corset and with a healthier alternative. Corsets became longer and less tapered in the middle and, to sell this new style to the public, the Delineator suddenly showed great concern over the unhealthy nature of the earlier shape. As this happened, magazines shifted their tactic from arguing that corsets were innocent of any harm to arguing that older versions used to be terrible for health, but newer health corsets were much better.

In the late 1890s and early 1900s, the older wasp waist silhouette shown in Figure 5-2 went out of style, bustles shrunk to the size of a small round pillow and the puffed sleeves of the

Figure 5-2: Wasp Waist or Hourglass Shaped Corset
earlier period got even larger, as shown in figure 5-3.\textsuperscript{383} Due to their shape these became known as leg-o-mutton sleeves. The waist stayed small, but the gentle slope of the skirt and wide look of the sleeves gave the figure more of an X shaped silhouette as opposed to the hourglass look of the previous period.\textsuperscript{384} These styles still retained the small waisted corsets, but it was a period of transition that was causing women to rethink their preexisting standards of beauty and entertain the possibility that the wasp waist might not be the only acceptable silhouette, especially with designers capitalizing on these new styles.

In the early 1900s the X shape transitioned again into a new style.\textsuperscript{385} Such radical shifts were becoming more frequent because women had quick access to fashion magazines, ready to wear clothing, and sewing machines, which allowed them to keep up with the latest styles either through buying the latest fashions or making them with the help of the sewing machine and paper patterns. In this climate, fashion magazines such as Harper’s Bazaar and the Delineator became even more influential because they could provide both, which made them a means of access to these styles for the average American woman.

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5-2.png}
\caption{Figure 5-2: Corset showing the hourglass silhouette. The Kyoto Costume Institute, \textit{Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century}, (Taschen: 2013), pg. 240.}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5-3.png}
\caption{Figure 5-3: X Shaped Silhouette}
\end{figure}

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure5-3.png}
\caption{Figure 5-3: Leg-o-Mutton Sleeves (“19th Century Fashion – Part III” in LiveJournal, http://lamode illustree.livejournal.com/201927.html)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{383} Figure 5-2: Corset showing the hourglass silhouette. The Kyoto Costume Institute, \textit{Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century}, (Taschen: 2013), pg. 240.
\textsuperscript{385} Figure 5-3: Leg-o-Mutton Sleeves (“19th Century Fashion – Part III” in LiveJournal, http://lamode illustree.livejournal.com/201927.html)
The fact that fashion was becoming more democratized meant that styles could change quickly leaving the door open for reformers to effect fashion from the inside, especially as dress reform was being taken more seriously by the public at large. Equipped with sewing machines, paper patterns, and ready to wear, it became much easier to make, remake, or buy clothing inexpensively. This meant that the average woman could acquire or replicated even major shifts in silhouette. It allowed a lot more freedom for clothing designers, leading fashion to shift again, becoming even less rigid in design with lighter and more flowing fabrics as well as a new S-silhouette, overshadowing the earlier X-shaped silhouette. The S-shape came about as a result of the straight-front corset, which was supposed to be healthier than the previous form, and it was actually invented by a doctor and dress reformer.

Two designers in particular took advantage of this newfound freedom, Josephine-Inez Gaches-Sarraute and Annie Jenness Miller. Gaches-Sarraute made was responsible for creating the original straight-front corset. She was a doctor at the Theatre de l’Opera and a dress reformer who had published several papers about the negative health effects associated with corset use in

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386 Figure 5-4: The S-Shaped Silhouette O’Loughlin, R. S., H. F. Montgomery, and Charles Dwyer. The Delineator. (Butterick Publishing Company, 1905). 324

the 1890s. She made similar arguments to those of other doctors claiming that corsets caused serious damage to the bones and the internal organs, but unlike most of her colleagues who wrote primarily for medical journals, Gaches-Sarraute wrote for the general public, particularly with her work *Le Corset* from 1900.\textsuperscript{388} She was also in a position to influence fashion directly since she worked at the Theatre de l’Opera in Paris. Paris was widely considered the fashion capital of the world, therefore, her influence on Parisian fashion elites had a trickle-down effect to the fashion advertised in the United States. Gaches-Sarraute knew that women were unwilling to surrender corsets entirely and so she instead offered an alternative, particularly for those who had medical issues wearing a standard corset. Her efforts gained the attention of the *Revue Mensuelle du Touring Club de France* which was a publication devoted to cycling (a sport popular among women at the time), and it was also discussed in fashion circles.\textsuperscript{389}

The straight-front corset sat lower than previous corsets at the bust which allowed the chest some freedom but pushed the hips back as illustrated in Figure 5-5.\textsuperscript{390} This style emphasized the S-shape by moving the curvature to the back, (the difference between the two looks is shown in Figure 5) leaving the front very flat. The new design supposedly

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{s_shaped_corset.png}
\caption{S Shaped Corset}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{390} Figure 5-5: Stella, *Corsets & Designs Champagne*, “Corset History,” (July 27, 2018) https://www.champagnecorsets.com/history/
compressed the internal organs less, though this was not necessarily the case as it instead moved the pressure from the sides to the lower back. In other words, some of the corset was more flexible, but it was still restrictive at the waist and pressed the hips back creating an unnatural curve at the base of the spine. This look was popular because it mimicked the older silhouette of a bustle, a cage or padded undergarment worn over one’s bottom to increase the fullness of a skirt at the back of the legs, but with little to no actual bustle involved. This meant that advertisements of the period not only popularized the new style, but also the use of appropriate undergarments to bring it to life.

Ads for the straight-front corset often appealed to their audience by claiming to be healthier. For example, one such advertisement in *The Delineator* for “The Sahlin,” claimed that it was different from other corsets because it included no clasps, hooks, laces, or heavy metal parts, though it appears to have had some form of boning.\(^{391}\) The 1906 issue of the *Ladies Home Journal* included a similar ad for the “American Lady Corset,” which, according to the *Ladies Home Journal*, permitted, “no extremes or exaggerations – it is an artistic expression of the best lines of your own figure.”\(^{392}\) This was an early attempt to enhance natural shape rather than remaking the body in the typical X-shape and marked a first step towards accepting the natural shape of women for what it was since, despite the unnatural curve at the lower back, the corset was less narrow at the waist. The straight-front corset was far from perfect, but it was the beginning of what would allow the eventual end to corset use as a rule for all women, and the original design was created by a doctor and dress reformer, making it a direct result of the dress reform movement.


The other influential fashion designer and dress reformer of the period was Annie Jenness Miller who sought to make reform styles more palatable to consumers. Like Gaches-Sarraute, and her work helped to popularize dress reform to the general public. However, Miller went a different direction from Gaches-Sarraute and based the style for her designs on the ideal of pre-Raphaelite dress reform, which called for a return to the empire waist silhouette of the early 1800s. Her gowns were designed for women to wear either without a corset or with a milder corset substitute. Their work made healthier styles palatable and allowed them to enter the mainstream. The popularity of these styles allowed other less restrictive corsets to enter the market as well. In the first decade of the twentieth century fashion magazines and women’s journals marketed corset substitutes such as the “Grecian Bust Girdle,” a stiffened garment that wrapped around the bust and tied at the shoulders similar in function to a modern brazier, which also appealed to the demands of the artistic dress movement because it popularized styles worn in the early 1800s before corsets came back into fashion, as the artistic dress reformers required.393

However, while this was a step in the right direction as far as dress reform was concerned, it did not mean that all of women’s clothing changed to reflect their demands overnight. Ads for health and artistic dress were often interspersed with ads for more traditional corsets, showing that there had not been a full transition from older style corsets to the newer and healthier ones.394 By 1901, corsets had mostly changed in shape and the fashion magazines started to use the criticism of older styles to sell the appeal of new ones. The Delineator included one ad for “The Sahlin,” which was presented as a commentary on the benefits of the Sahlin compared to traditional corsets. The ad even claimed that the German army wore straight-front

394 Ibid., 399.
corsets to enhance both their strength and their figures to emphasize the Sahlin’s benefits to health and posture. The association between the straight-front corset and the military was such that the straight-front corset became known interchangeably as the military form corset. One ad for the F. P. Military Form corset claimed to be the first straight front corset made in America. Such corsets were heralded by The Delineator as “a boon to stout and slim women alike.” A 1905 article in the Delineator, whose author was unnamed, clearly shows the way that magazines were using health to distance themselves from earlier corsets as they condemned the strong curve at the waist of older corsets, which they now admitted compressed the ribs and waist to an uncomfortable degree (especially for those who engaged in tight lacing). These sound very much like the complaints made by early doctors from Dr. Caldwell in the 1830s to Dr. Gaches-Sarraute in the 1890s and 1900s about how the corset effected the rib cage and the internal organs of the body. The difference with the rhetoric published in The Delineator is that the magazine condemned older corsets mostly to sell the public new ones rather than emphasizing the dangers of corsets themselves.

By this time, Dr. Thiersch, a German physician practicing medicine in Leipzig who was an active voice on medical ethics, had performed tests on the restrictions of the corset. He published his results in The Philadelphia Medical Journal in 1900. His findings showed that lighter and more malleable corsets were more medically acceptable because they allowed greater flexibility and reduced the pressure put on the rib cage. This promoted the idea that some corsets were healthier than others and that it was up to the woman wearing the corset to choose a healthy

396 Ibid., 1023.
397 The Delineator, 1905, pg. 724.
398 Caldwell, Thoughts on Physical Education, 116.
one and wear it correctly. His findings gave medical legitimacy to arguments of magazines like *Harper’s Bazaar* and *The Delineator* that newer corset styles could serve as healthy alternatives that had some support from the medical community.

Despite the sudden sensitivity of magazines to the possible dangers of corsets, they did not want women to stop wearing them completely, so they worked towards popularizing corsets that served as compromises to dress reform styles. They continued to express the benefits of corset use in general as long as the corset fit properly. This was similar to the argument that Dr. Thiersch made about light corsets being beneficial. Just as magazines recycled a variety of old arguments as to why outdated forms of corsets were bad for women, they also recycled older ideas about why women should continue wearing some form of corset. Helen Lloyd-Berkeley, a commentator on women’s fashion who wrote exclusively for *The Delineator*, restated the longstanding notion that women needed to wear corsets for back support in a 1911 article about the latest styles among fashionable people in New York. She was not a dress reformer and even recommended stays for use during pregnancy arguing that:

> A maternity corset should be set down as an absolute necessity. A great many women leave their corsets off entirely at this time, but they run a great risk in doing so. It is not only apt to ruin their figure irretrievably, but it is quite likely to do them serious internal injury by discarding the support of a corset just when they need it most.\(^{400}\)

This argument reflected those that had circulated in the days of Charles Caldwell, when defenders of the corset claimed that women were naturally weaker and needed corsets for support. Berkeley-Lloyd’s arguments about female weakness were not just for pregnant women,

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she also advised that young girls wear corsets as soon as possible, claiming, “it is a great deal better to put a corset on a girl a little too soon than to wait until she has injured or strained herself by going without one.” Berkeley-Lloyd used several tactics in her argument for the corset. First, she claimed that older corsets were bad but modern corsets were much improved. Next, she argued that even earlier styles of corset were not as bad as doctors made them out to be. Finally, she employed the argument that women, because of their general weakness, needed the support of a corset to remain healthy and strong. The continued belief amongst Berkeley-Lloyd and other contributors to *The Delineator* that corsets, when used correctly, were benign at worst and beneficial at best slowed reformers’ efforts to get rid of the corset entirely, though they also supported the idea that health was a concern in choosing and wearing a corset.

Ultimately, the acceptance of dress reform styles by mainstream fashion as advertised in *Harper’s Bazaar* and *The Delineator* did make dress reform more accessible to the general public. However, their pragmatic approach to it meant that this influenced happened slowly over several decades. Magazines sold what was popular, which led them to send mixed messages to the public about how safe corsets were and which ones were safe. By the early twentieth century, however, these arguments started to agree more and more that older corsets were the problem. This was meant to sell newer styles to customers but also shifted fashion in a direction more acceptable to dress reformers if only incrementally.

**The Invisible Corset**

The second decade of the twentieth century was marked by more transformations in fashion and style fluctuations started to speed up thanks to increased industrialization. As this happened, fashion magazines became firmly convinced that newer styles were healthy and so,
any time an issue came up concerning the new corset style, they reverted to ideas that individual wearers of the corset, rather than corsets themselves were to blame. They argued that since the new corset were so much better than the old ones, any woman still experiencing health problems while wearing the new style must be wearing it incorrectly. Hence, magazines became obsessed with the fit of corsets, advising women to buy corsets carefully and update their styles often to achieve the best and most modern fit for the garment. They started to argue that the perfect corset should fit to the point that it was invisible, which opened the door for such garments to disappear from fashion entirely. Not only did the silhouette change to the point that corsets became less necessary, but women’s roles changed as well and often required more flexibility of motion and practical clothing. This was particularly true during and after World War I when women stepped into positions previously closed to them. When corsets finally did fall out of fashion in the 1920s, fashion magazines responses to new styles were mixed. On the one hand, they capitalized on selling the new corset free styles to the public, but they also expressed concern that corsets were no longer widely used.

By 1911 and 1912, the type of clothing that women wore began to change again to reflect the ideas of artistic dress, or the return to the empire-waist style of the early 1800s. One of the primary designers responsible for this shift was Paul Poirot who worked in Paris but earned the title “The King of Fashion” in the United States. He followed a trend begun by Sergei Diaghilev who founded the Ballet

![Figure 5-6: 1912 Neo-Empire Waist Silhouette](image)
Russes, which inspired influential fashion designers all over the world. Poirot pulled elements of “Orientalism” into western fashion. He sold his designs to influential members of society and eventually joined the House of Worth, which was one of the premiere design houses in the world through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1903, Poirot started to design clothing that completely eliminated petticoats and later he shifted the waistline to the base of the ribs allowing for a more natural figure.402 In 2004, Jessica Glasscock a research Associate with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, claimed that, “Poirot declared the death of the corset with a new columnar silhouette that was equal parts Orientalism and early nineteenth-century Empire line revival.” These very closely mirrored the goals of the dress reform movement and in particular the artistic dress, or Pre-Raphaelite movement that called for a return to the styles of the early nineteenth century.403

Because of Poiret’s influence, clothing and corsets became even less restrictive at the waist after 1910 as the neo-empire look became popular and deemphasized slimness at the waist as a major part of the style and a more column-like silhouette replaced the hourglass figure of the past. Followers of the artistic dress movement such as Annie Jenness Miller had pushed for this type of reform for the past 30 years, but Poirot made the look popular in a way that it had not been previously, and fashion magazines began to take this new style more seriously and market it in earnest.

The neo-empire look had a waistline slightly lower than the original empire waist, hovering somewhere around the lower ribs as shown in Figure 6. To accommodate the new look,

404 Figure 5-6: Wilhelmina Dragoo, Kingsley, Iowa, (Personal Collection of Andrea Severson, 1912).
corsets became straighter as well as longer, ending below the hips, but despite the increased area that the corset covered, the waists of these corsets were designed to pull the figure in less at the waist. What did become more restrictive were the skirts worn over the corsets, since skirts became very narrow around 1912, restricting the movement of the legs.405

It seems that, with the dawn of a new century, popular fashion designers finally considered some of the arguments in the public discourse of reform, though they continued to design garments for use with a corset. The Delineator noted the change in a 1912 issue of the magazine, which featured an article by Eleanor Chalmers, who often wrote commentary for The Delineator including “Good Taste in Modern Mourning,” “Dressmaking Made Easy,” and “America, A Nation of Dressmakers.”406 Chalmers discussed the ways in which women should and should not wear corsets. She made the claim that medical arguments against the new corset from doctors were less common, stating, “Times have changed since physicians used to launch crusades against the wasp-waisted corset that was responsible for most of the aches and ills the women of twenty-five years ago were heir to.”407 Here, Chalmers referred to the frequent issue taken with corsets by doctors including Coffin, Caldwell, Reese and other likeminded physicians who had written about the negative effects of corsets throughout the nineteenth century. Yet, she also acknowledged in the article that their concerns were, in fact, valid when it came to the older hourglass shaped corsets. However, she argued that the new, less restrictive corsets of 1912 were actually being defended by some doctors explaining, “where the old-time corset hurt a woman by compressing her waist and cramping her vital organs so that they could not perform their

functions properly, the new corset now helps her, giving her the support she needs through the abdomen.408 Much like Helen Lloyd-Berkeley’s article from 1911, in which she argued that corsets could be beneficial to the wearer and that the only harm came when they were worn incorrectly, Chalmer’s article also upheld the idea that women needed some kind of support. This was true in some cases, because the back muscles can atrophy if left in a corset from a young age. Therefore, women who had worn corsets all their life really did feel the need for support.409 However, the article also acknowledged that there were still opponents to even the new, less-restrictive corsets. Chalmers claimed that these critics were biased against the corset simply because of past criticisms. She explained, “There are still a few women in the world who entertain something of the old-time distrust and suspicion of the present corset, instilled into them by the real viciousness of the corsets of the past.”410

Similarly, corsets remained a fashionable and necessary element of women’s clothing even as they became less visible. According to an advertisement for American Lady Corsets, stays were the foundation of a woman’s entire appearance and therefore were necessary for a well-dressed woman since, “if the corset is not right in every detail and if it does not fit perfectly, one’s gown cannot be right and consequently one’s appearance cannot be correct.”411 This shows both the continued reluctance to let go of corsets in general and the emphasis on proper fit. Though popular styles finally included less restrictive corsets thanks to Poirot, people writing for fashion magazines resisted further change. Instead, they defended the popularity of the clothing they were attempting to sell to the public, including the corset. Though these articles reflected

408 Ibid., 341.
409 Steele, The Corset, 71. Here Steele discusses the fact that doctors still put scoliosis patients into medical corset that do help prevent further curvature of the spine but also cause muscle atrophy due to prolonged use.
410 Eleanor Chalmers, 1912, 341.
411 Ibid., 218.

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the influence of the dress reform movement to a point with a more classical silhouette, they still clung to corsets as a major part of women’s fashion. Chalmer’s article is a good example of this in that she acknowledged a change in fashion, but implied that dress reform had gone far enough. She still believed corsets were necessary but felt that the stays of 1912 allowed enough of a compromise between reform and fashion.

Despite this resistance, the corsets of the nineteen teens still succeeded in laying the groundwork to finally eliminate corsets. As corsets got less restrictive, they also became less necessary, since they no longer altered the appearance of the wearer as they had in the days of the wasp-waist. In fact, by 1913 The Delineator published an article by an unnamed author that claimed, “the chief aim of the well-dressed woman is to appear absolutely uncorseted.” If the point was to look as though one was not wearing a corset, then getting rid of corsets entirely was not beyond the realm of possibility and was potentially the next logical step. Regardless of the resistance to change by fashion magazines, the public was finally beginning to recognize the negative effects of the corset and their interest in healthier and less restrictive clothing led to the popularization of the natural figure through a renewed interest in the empire waisted look of the early nineteenth century. Magazines serve as a yardstick for what was popular at the time and what was selling. The fact that more and more reform clothing began to appear on the pages of fashion magazines demonstrates the publics enthusiasm for these products. The point of corsets in 1913 was to make the hips small but leave the upper body mostly free. The new figure was one that had as little difference as possible between the measurements of the bust, waist, and hip, giving women a very strait silhouette. The corset makers of 1913 also attempted to use as little boning in their garments as they could, allowing the figure to keep its shape without the corset

becoming too rigid. Less boning made corsets less restrictive and so they were more comfortable for the wearer and less likely to compress the ribcage.\textsuperscript{413} In 1914, \textit{The Delineator} advertised a corset that was very soft and flexible with less boning. It also did not reach up as high as earlier versions, which made it popular because it offered comfort and ease of movement. The one complaint that \textit{The Delineator} admitted consumers of this corset made was that it lacked support.\textsuperscript{414} Even during this time however, the importance of correct fit was the main concern of sellers as illustrated by \textit{The Corset and Underwear Review}, which was a publication intended for corset retailers that contained ads for stays and information about the market.\textsuperscript{415} This shows that there was an overall attempt by corset manufacturers to make corsets less cumbersome and stressed correct fit in order to maintain the healthy standard that their customers now required from their clothing.

By 1916, a flurry of new trends rapidly changed women’s clothing. Fitting a corset to the exact shape of the body with no compression on any part of the figure had become even more important. Corset makers had abandoned both the exaggerated curves of earlier stays and the “box-like” silhouette of the previous year. These corsets, they argued, kept the figure slender and perfectly straight, but the new corsets fit the figure as exactly as possible without compressing it, thereby showing the natural curve of the waist.\textsuperscript{416} Such corsets, which in effect were designed to be as close to wearing no corset at all as possible, paved the way for the eventual disappearance of the corset all together.

\textsuperscript{413} Ibid., 88.
\textsuperscript{414} “The Figure of youth: The Spring Corset Offers a New Way of Attaining the Slender Silhouette,” \textit{The Delineator}, v.86 (London and New York: Butterick Publishing Co., 1915), 50.
\textsuperscript{415} \textit{The Corset and Underwear Review} (New York: Haire Publishing Co. August 1913) 32.
Hanging on by a Thread

After nearly a century of criticism corsets had changed dramatically and, even though fashion magazines continued to sing the praises of the well fitted corset into the nineteen teens, World War I put pressure on both American women and the fashion market that would change things even further. Much as it did with women’s rights, World War I was the catalyst that sped up the process of dress reform. This does not discount the efforts of reformers, which led culture to the point that corsets could be discarded, any more than the fact that the efforts of women in World War I contributed greatly to their being granted the right to vote immediately afterwards disincreats the decades long struggle by proponents of women’s suffrage in the years leading up to the war. These are both cultural shifts that likely would have happened eventually anyway, World War I just put an end to them earlier. Though Europe entered World War I in 1914, it would be three years before the United States joined the fight and, in the meantime, concern about clothing remained a widely discussed issue. Most of this was in fashion magazines where the writers were arguing about correct style and fit rather than about the healthiness of the garment all together. During the war years, despite clothing becoming looser and freer than it had been in a century, designers still intended women to wear their clothing with some form of stays. According to Mary Brooks Picken, who wrote about popular dress in 1918, “The accuracy and care with which the dresses of today are designed and made absolutely demand correct-fitting corsets.”417 Picken was a well-known expert in dress and design who founded the Women’s Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences in Scranton, Pennsylvania which, among other things focused on dress and design. She was also on the advisory council for women’s clothing

in the National Academy of Sciences National Research Council. Later, in World War II, this group was responsible for designing uniforms for the Women’s Army Corps (WAC).418

Still, while discourse about the virtues of corsets had become more prominent into the nineteen teens, such discussions all but disappeared from fashion magazines during the war years in America. Rationing and wartime changes in both the economy and women’s positions within it also led to changes in the way they dressed. Corsets were subject to rationing because of their use of steel boning. An article in the Delineator called “Corsets and Cannon-Balls” corroborated this claiming:

It seems rather unfair that such a feminine and very innocent bystander as the corset should be made to feel the heavy hand of the European War. Unfortunately, however, the corset is first cousin to the cannon-ball and is intimately related to other belligerent articles. The three things that go into a corset, steel, cotton, and rubber, are the very ones on which the war has placed the greatest premium.419

This shows that rationing was making corsets more expensive and more difficult for women to acquire. The cost of the raw materials used to make corsets, which were also necessary for the war effort, went up. This caused manufacturers to up their prices on the final product. However, the author of the article, who was left unnamed, assured readers that the price would probably return to normal after the war. Cheaper versions of the corset were available, but these had to be made from fewer pieces, which meant that they were not as close fitting to the body as previous versions had been. The Delineator advised against wearing these because cheaper corsets were

inadequate if a woman wanted to “keep [her] figure and [her] youth.” Following this, there were no articles about corsets present in the 1918 or 1919 issues of the Delineator, though ads for corsets continued to fill its pages. The Corset and Underwear Review continued to advertise corsets but also included details regarding the new luxury tax, which did not affect the sale of corsets to retailers but did effect sales from retailers to customers.

Outside of clothing, World War I had a significant impact on American women in general, which would necessarily change their perceptions of gender and gender roles. Clothing has always been tied to gender, and the opinions of reformers for both the corset and the bloomer were added to arguments about what role women should fill in a changing society. Women took an active part in the war, and the services they performed were outside what society considered normal feminine occupations. As Harriot Stanton Blatch, daughter of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, put it, “When men go a-warring, women go to work.” The war heralded a shift in the work force, as women stepped in and filled the gap left by soldiers headed for the front. There was much enthusiasm for this in the Women’s Movement as supporters of women’s rights viewed wartime work as a chance to prove themselves. According to Blatch, “American women have begun to go over the top. They are going up the scaling-ladder and out into All Man’s Land.” This metaphor likened women’s work on the home front to men fighting on the war front. Going “over the top” referred to the action of an army leaving the protection of the trench to gain ground and attack the opposing trench. “All man’s land” was a reference to “no man’s land,” which referred to the space between two enemy trenches which was covered in craters, mud, and barbed wire. It was also in the sights of enemy weapons meaning that it was very unlikely for

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420 Ibid., 76.
anyone to survive crossing, hence the name “no man’s land.” Here, Blatch purposefully implied that the workforce was the opposite of “no-man’s land” in that it was becoming a place where women could thrive. She was also mostly correct in her assessment, as the increased participation of women in the public sphere was not a temporary movement and the social changes taking place proved much more enduring than the wartime jobs. In addition, World War I was the first war in which women could officially serve in the military. In the United States and much of Europe, the armed forces began to recruit women for a variety of positions including nursing, secretarial work, stenography, and other non-combat posts.424

The US Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels allowed females to enlist as yeomen in 1917. His decision was unpopular, but it helped to solve the labor shortage that the war created. Many women saw this as their chance to do something meaningful for the war effort and, within a month, the Navy signed up two hundred women. Some served as “yeomanettes,” others as radio electricians, pharmacists, chemists, draftsmen, accountants, and telephone operators. The Navy paid these women $83.40 per month for living expenses in the absence of available living quarters for women. Later, in 1918, the Marine Corps followed suit and began admitting women as well. However, the Marine recruitment slogan for women was “Free a Man to Fight,” which was similar to the English slogan, “Release a Man for Sea Service.”425 Both these slogans made it clear that women would perform the less traditionally masculine work, mostly behind the lines, to increase the number of men at the front.

Although classic gender roles still existed despite the admission of women into the military, the presence of uniformed women did make an impact both on society and fashion.

Telephone operators for the military, who earned the nickname “hello girls,” served as part of the American Expeditionary Forces in France. Their uniforms, as shown in figure 5-7 resembled those of men in that they included a jacket with a white shirt underneath it. However, they wore full skirts that terminated just above the ankle instead of pants, with plain boots on their feet. The fact that women in uniform became commonplace during the war opened the door to alternative clothing styles for civilian women as well.

Military uniforms had an impact on clothing both in the service and on the home front, as many wartime occupations outside of the military also called for uniforms or at least attire similar to them because the work women did during the war required more practical clothing. Women’s fashion was already moving away from tight lacing before the war to the point that most reformers felt relatively satisfied with their progress. The clothing of the war years and of its immediate aftermath was, in fact, much simpler than it had been in the past. In 1919, delegates from the General Federation of Women’s Clubs passed a resolution favoring simple and modest designs in women’s clothing. The clothing that appeared in magazines during the war was indeed less elaborate and less reliant on corsets than ever before. This demonstrated not only the shift in the styles of the fashion industry, but also the way that dress reform was most

effective whenever it was part of other movements or organizations. The public had mixed reactions to women in uniform wandering the streets and the workplace, but the uniforms that women wore during this period soon set the standard for proper female work attire.\footnote{428 Ibid., 126.}

**Fashion and Freedom**

With the end of World War I, the time of thrift and rationing gave way to extravagance in many cultural areas, including fashion. Dress reformers had been laying the groundwork to eliminate corsets for almost a century and had already achieved many of their goals before the fighting broke out. With the conclusion of the war, they finally received everything they ever asked for in women’s clothing.\footnote{429 Ibid., v.} Corsets all but disappeared in fashionable attire and the drop waisted, more minimalist look, became popular. This meant that, rather than the prominent hourglass figure, women began to minimize the curves of their body as much as possible and wear loose-fitting dresses that hung straight off the shoulders, while the hemline raised to just below the knee.\footnote{430 Figure 5-8: 1920s Fashion Silhouette “1920s Fashion History: The Iconic Women Who Defined It.” Marie Claire, December 18, 2017. http://www.marieclaire.co.uk/fashion/1920s-fashion-icons-who-defined-twenties-style-92566} In short, clothing allowed a lot more freedom of movement and this corresponded with the increased freedoms women experienced when it came to movement within public spaces.

Though advocates for women’s rights and dress reform viewed it as a step forward, such dramatic changes in both dress and gender roles brought about a backlash from traditionalists.
Much as the bloomer became associated with the women’s movement, the looser clothing of the 1920s became part of a conversation about the perceived looser morals that women of the 20s experienced as well. The new primary complaint against women’s clothing concerned the perceived immodesty of twenties styles, which showed a great deal more skin than those of previous periods. Critics of the newer style of dress pushed back against these new designs. Even in the absence of corsets, women’s dress remained a focal point of a discussion over the larger implications of women’s roles within society.

With the adoption of androgenous styles along with the greater freedom women experienced in the 1920s, they once again (as they had when they attempted to adopt some form of trousers) straddled the gender border with one foot in femininity and one foot in masculinity. By dressing this way, women cast off traditional indicators of femininity as they gained greater prominence in the public sphere. As shown in figure 5-9, women began to wear their hair, and their skirts, short. The waistline, which once hovered above the natural waist in the 1910s, dropped to the lower hips, skirts exposed the legs below the knee, and many of the new dresses lacked sleeves. In addition, some 1920s clothing included transparent (see

431 Figure 5-9: Beatrice Preciado and family in Las Cruces, NM circa 1925 from the personal collection of Evangeline Lopez.
through) elements. Simplicity became fashionable and designers of the period, including the famous Gabrielle “Coco” Chanel, helped to bring about this simple and androgynous look. In an article she wrote for *Ladies Home Journal* about swimwear, Chanel cautioned women against extravagance, saying “Don’t wear picture hats or picturesque costumes; their fussiness, their absurdity, inevitably keep their wearers out of the water…Do not attract attention by such vulgar means, but be at your ease, be comfortable, swim and splash.”\(^{433}\) This not only exemplified the period’s preference for simplicity in clothing, but also the increased acceptability of women being themselves in public spaces. Rather than putting on an air of femininity, Chanel encouraged women to take an active part in life, and her designs promoted comfort and practicality. The emphasis on simplicity reflected the demands of dress reformers in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, many of whom saw corsets as vanity and rejected impractical clothing such as skirts with many layers of petticoats beneath them.

Corsets still existed in 1920 and *Harper’s Bazaar, The Delineator, and The Ladies’ Home Journal* continued to advertise for them, but their shape had changed to the point that it was as straight as possible, meant to smooth down a woman’s curves rather than enhance them. Discourse concerning the corset in either fashion magazines or medical journals was less common than it had been before the war. Corsets were still available to those who wanted them, but they were not something considered necessary for all women as they had been in the past.\(^{434}\) Eleanor Chalmers, who defended corsets in an earlier 1913 article for *The Delineator* had not changed her opinion much by 1921. She wrote that the old styles of corset that emphasized a distinct curve at the waist were gone and were referred to in Paris with scorn as “those ancient

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stays.”\textsuperscript{435} However, this did not mean that corsets in general were gone, instead the new corsets were softer, contained fewer bones, and were meant only to keep the figure flat. While she claimed that “the whole figure should be supple and as uncorseted in effect as possible,” she still advised that only younger women with strong muscles could go without corsets. \textsuperscript{436} Chalmers continued to believe that women needed a form of back support at least in later stages of life. Part of the reason that such beliefs persisted was because older women experienced muscle atrophy after prolonged corset use making it uncomfortable to go without some form of stay. The point of wearing a corset, as marketed in the 1920s, was to allow the appearance of being uncorseted, while still receiving the back support upon which older women had come to rely. This also meant that corsets were increasingly associated with older women rather than with the young fashionable generation.

However, by 1922, Chalmers thoughts began to change slightly regarding who could safely go without corsets. She acknowledged the fact that women were increasingly discarding their corsets in her article “Let Go’ is the Law of the New Corset and Corsetless Figure” for the \textit{Delineator}. In this article, she explained that “The great question is whether one should arrive at the new figure through corsets or by going without them. The young girl has settled the question to her own

\begin{figure}[h]
  \centering
  \includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure-10-Corset.png}
  \caption{The Corset}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{435} Eleanor Chalmers, “Matters of Moment to the Well-Dressed Woman” \textit{The Delineator}. XCIX, no. 2 (New York: Butterick Publishing Co., September 1921), 60.
\textsuperscript{436} Ibid., 60.
satisfaction by discarding them altogether.” 437 By this point, not only did Chalmers believe that young women could safely discard corsets, but that slender women were similarly able to do so.438 However, she remained a defender of corsets in general, arguing that older women, particularly weaker ones, needed the support of a real corset.439

Chalmers was not the only defender of the corset that was threatened by the change in style. Another Delineator writer, Evelyn Dodge, argued that the new corset-less styles were causing women of the 1920s to lose their figures. She also complained about the potential harm of riding in cars without corsets, as she believed such practices caused women to become misshapen because their backs would not be strong enough to support their figure. Dodge predicted that the more recent styles that did not include corsets were simply a fad that would soon fade.440

Yet, the decades that followed showed that Dodge was mistaken about corset-less fashion being simply a fad. By 1925, full corsetry, as had been the norm before the war, had not returned, yet concern over the state of women’s clothing did not go away. Most dress reformers and doctors still considered corsets unhealthy and celebrated their downfall. Mary Schenck Woolman, a well-known home economist and professor of domestic science at Columbia University Teachers College who organized and directed the Manhattan Trade School for Girls, claimed that the key to health in clothing was to “wear light, loose, and porous clothes.”441 She

437 Ibid., 41.
439 Ibid., 41.
explained that restrictive clothing could jeopardize the healthy balance of the body. Schenck’s arguments were much like those used in earlier years when corsets were the norm. Such complaints demonstrate that, even after the slow death of the corset, concern persisted that anything tight was dangerous because it impeded circulation. Dress reformers did not stop pushing for healthier clothing into the 1920s and pushed back against tight clothing of any kind.

Meanwhile, though corsets continued to appear in ads, clothing companies were feeling the pinch and finding it more difficult to sell these garments as they fell out of fashion. An article in *The Corset and Underwear Review* that same year wanted to refute claims that corsets were harder to sell at certain times of the year and explained why retailers should consider every month a good month for corset sales, but the fact that such an article was published at all points to desperate attempt to hold on to a fading source of revenue. Another article in the same issue argued against mainstream fashion that called for an exclusion of the corset because it was making it impossible for women to wear clothes in a becoming way saying, “But Paris says you should not wear corsets! The Rue de la Paix was ever a faithless jade who makes sport of her blind devotees.”

This language is similar to that used by dress reformers against the corset as a mandate of Paris fashion but instead it accused Paris of forcing women to abandon their corsets rather than wear them as it had in the nineteenth century. It is important to note, however, that the Gossard Corset Company was behind the writing of this article and they, of course, had an interest in selling their product. Similarly, in the 1921 *Ladies Home Journal*, an article claimed that modern corsets were meant to be healthy and to make the wearer appear uncorseted.

These articles showed that magazines were pushing back against changes in fashion that were...

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moving further away from the corsets, which was not good news for the clothing companies that sold them.

Meanwhile, the reputation of corsets as uncomfortable and dangerous became ever more firmly established in American culture. In fact, the memory of corsets and their perception as being unhealthy remained so prevalent that, as clothing became more form fitting towards the end of the decade than it had been in the early part of the decade, there was some concern as to whether corsets would return. A * Literary Digest article of the period even called these tighter styles in the later 1920s “an unmitigated evil.” Dress Reformers were happy with the looser fashion, believing that it allowed women to stay healthier, and feared a return to tight clothing. As the 1930 * Literary Digest claimed, “many forward looking persons are asking whether the latest fashion of longer skirts, form-fitted dresses and corsets will stop where it is, or whether it will not swing all the way back to the extremes of the gay nineties and the early 1900s.” This demonstrates apprehension that the restrictive figures of the turn of the twentieth century might return and shows how far corsets had fallen out of favor.

However, the elimination of the corset came with a backlash, mostly due to the perceived immodesty of the clothing that replaced it. In the above-mentioned * Literary Digest article, which tried to cover both sides of the issue, concerned men and women alike resurrected comparisons of civilization to savagery. An unnamed university student interviewed for the article claimed, “there is a minimum of clothes and a maximum of cosmetics, head-decorations, fans, and jewelry. It is, indeed, an alarming situation when our twentieth-century debutante comes out

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445 Ibid., 30. The doctors featured in this article liked the shorter skirts and celebrated the fact that as an article by Mrs. B. F. Langworthy in the 1922 yearbook for the Illinois Farmers’ Institute Department of Household Science explained, “We have actually come to the point where we think no more of legs than we do of bare faces, bare arms, or bare hands, and I think it is a pretty healthy thing that we have.” The only concern was that some might view short skirts as immodest.
arrayed like a South Sea Island savage.” Though this quote does not mention corsets or a lack thereof specifically, it does make a statement about the perceived immodesty of 1920s clothing in general. This quote recalls older arguments that had once compared corsets to so-called “savage” practices such as foot binding. The difference is that instead of attacking corsets, as the dress reformers did, this student attacked immodesty in 1920s dress. The student’s concern represents a resurgence of the idea that corsets and long skirts were linked to civilization and that going without brought one closer to savagery. Reverend Tivnan, who was the president of Fordham University and a Jesuit priest in the 1920s, explained:

The common boast is of our civilization and progress, and yet we turn to the dark forest and the dusky, untutored savage, loathsome of habit, for our modern music, dances, and in some measure, dress. If this sort of progress continues, the followers of so-called evolution may well hope to find the long-missing link.  

In other words, Reverend Tivnan believed that society and fashion were moving backwards rather than forwards, away from the “civilized” and into the “savage.” This quote utilized notions of Social Darwinism and the idea that African cultures were somehow below European cultures on the evolutionary scale putting them closer to the “missing link” (the ancestral link between humans and the other great apes). These ideas not only reflected contemporary notions of race but also earlier arguments that invoked Darwin’s theory of evolution to get rid of corsets, only this time it was leveled against women who did not wear corsets. This is the irony of fashion, that the new styles, despite addressing earlier concerns, were still criticized in the same way. It also further demonstrates that the position that there really was no way women could dress that

446 Ibid., 12
447 Ibid., 61.
did not draw criticism from somewhere and reinforces the notion that issues of dress were really
displaced arguments over the proper place for women in society.

However, not everyone agreed that the lack of a corset was immodest, and the *Literary Digest* called it “the most two-sided question of the hour.” The dean of women for Northwestern University, for example, believed that 1920s clothing was better than that of earlier decades and that calls for moral reform were an overreaction. She explained that “at least each generation has thought the succeeding generation worse than anything that has gone before, in manners and morals.” Others interviewed in the article argued that the 1920s generation was better off for being slightly less innocent, as ignorant innocence did not show true modesty. Those who pushed back against critics of 1920s dress believed that the new fashion allowed women the chance to prove their purity rather than attempting to show it through dress.

**Conclusion**

The 1920s were, by no means, the end of public concern about women’s clothing but they did spell the end of the corset in mainstream fashion. Dress reform remained stuck for a long time because it could not convince women to change purely based on health, progress, or even practicality. Yet, in the fashion magazines of the day there is proof that the message of dress reformers was slowly making its way into the mainstream. Once the public felt its influence through fashion magazines, it became easier for the average woman to believe the warnings of doctors and adopt the new reform-based styles that were becoming ever more available to them. Instead of causing overnight change, reformers slowly chipped away at the constructs of women’s dress until even the fashion magazines saw the merit in a transformation.

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449 Ibid., 66.
of silhouette. There were many reasons that the loose clothing of the 1920s came into being, but part of their popularity was due to nearly a century worth of work on the part of dress reformers who opposed the corset and tight clothing. Fashion magazines serve as both an illustration of how mainstream dress reform had become by the turn of the twentieth century, and a window into how it presented itself in popular culture through the dress of ordinary women.

It took nearly a century, but Dress Reform finally did make its way into the mainstream and that was a victory worth celebrating. An article in the 1921 issue of *American Medicine* did just that when it stated, “The men have had their revolution and now the women are having theirs. Like the revolution to which this country owes its independence, it is a rebellion against a foreign tyranny—the tyranny of Paris Fashion.”

Though the styles of the 1920s were not exactly a rebellion against established fashion, as the quote claims, when Paris itself promoted these looks, they were indicative of a victory they achieved over time by slowly spreading their influence into the mainstream. The only concern left for the reform movement was whether it could control the consequences of its victory. The authors, doctors, and reformers mentioned in these pages who argued against unhealthy styles before the war could claim victory in the defeat of the corset. Although the notion that 1920s clothing would lead to the moral downfall of America was a stretch, twenties fashion was only the beginning. Clothing changed drastically throughout the twentieth century, so quickly that we can easily identify every successive decade that followed by the clothing worn. Likewise, throughout the century, there were always those who continued to oppose styles they found inappropriate and unhealthy. Reform in dress was far from over.

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Conclusion

I started this dissertation with a quote from Avant Gynecology which stated: “Wearing clothing that is extremely tight against your stomach can cause a certain level of gastrointestinal upset...it can push stomach acid back up through the esophagus and cause uncomfortable symptoms of acid reflux.”451 Though dress reform as a movement has ended, concern and criticism over the health effects of women’s clothing persists to this day. Just as happened in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, modern popular culture often enumerates the dangers women’s clothing including such items as high heels452, flat soled shoes453, short skirts454, long skirts455, tight pants456, loose pants457—the criticism is endless and endlessly conflicting. As shown throughout this study, scrutiny of feminine dress is not by any means new; it echoes hundreds of years of discussion concerning women’s clothing. The dress reform movement of

452 Allusion to the dangers of high heels can be found in many places but a Bright Side article claims that they lead to back pain, swelling and pain in the legs, hernia, and rounded spine. “9 Pieces of Clothing that are too Dangerous to Wear Every Day” Bright Side, retrieved 4/29/2021, https://brightside.me/inspiration-girls-stuff/9-pieces-of-clothing-that-are-too-dangerous-to-wear-every-day-729560/
453 The same article that condemns high heels also claims that flat shoes cause an uneven load on your feet and prevent shock absorption, leading to a flattening of the actual foot as well as back pain. Ibid.
454 There are numerous instances of women being accused of inviting sexual assault because they chose to wear a short skirt, even though the victim is not responsible for her own sexual assault regardless of what she chooses to wear. In fact, an Exhibit presented at Texas A & M entitled “What Were You Wearing” demonstrates through example that what a woman was wearing has nothing to do with whether she is sexually assaulted. Caitlin Clark, “‘What Were You Wearing?’ Exhibit Explores Sexual Violence Myth,” Texas A & M Today, (November 2019) https://today.tamu.edu/2019/11/19/what-were-you-wearing-exhibit-explores-sexual-violence-myth/
455 While long skirts receive less scrutiny there are some concerns about wearing long skirts for certain activities such as riding a bicycle. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration also answered a question about whether there were safety hazards associated with wearing skirts in restaurant kitchens and claimed that long skirts have a greater potential to catch fire or become caught. They claimed that, while they did not have a specific policy against skirts, they advised that employees to wear protective clothing while working in the kitchen. Thomas Galassi, Director Directorate of Enforcement Programs, “Occupational Safety and Health Administration,” United States Department of Labor, Standard Number: 1910.132, retrieved 4-29-2021. https://www.osha.gov/lawsregs/standardinterpretations/2011-02-23
456 On the list of 9 dangers of clothing are skinny jeans, which the article claims disrupt blood flow leading to varicose veins and cellulite. Bright Side, https://brightside.me/inspiration-girls-stuff/9-pieces-of-clothing-that-are-too-dangerous-to-wear-every-day-729560/
457 Pajama pants also made the list of 9 dangerous articles of clothing because they supposedly cause skin irritation, itch, and yeast infection. Ibid
the nineteenth and early twentieth century was not an isolated phenomenon, but it reflected particular period in time when this conversation came to the forefront of social discourse. The conflicting nature of the criticism is also not new. While dress reformers criticized the popular styles of the day, mainstream society often criticized dress reform clothing, particularly any form of pants that women wore, putting women in the position of choosing between two outcomes that would both bring about judgement from their peers. When looked at from that perspective, it is no wonder that the dress reform movement took nearly a century to reach its conclusion.

One would think that, in a society associated with all kinds of peculiar fashions including bustles, crinolines, corsets, tight shoes, leg-o-mutton sleeves, and hobble skirts, any movement calling for dress that was more practical would come as a relief. The reason behind the slow response to dress reformers’ demands hides in the long, wide skirts and small waists of the time. Dress and gender were inextricably connected, and clothing defined and enforced the borders of femininity. The fact that women wore these uncomfortable garments in the first place demonstrates the power that the fashion industry asserted over them. Much as they might have liked to wear simpler clothes, the demands of reformers proved too much for the average woman attempting to blend into society, so it took years for dress reformers to make any obvious progress on their agenda. In other words, the forces of fashion were too strong for reformers to work against, and the only solution was to work from within popular fashion to change clothing.

458 Padding or a cage attacked to the back of the waist that concentrates the fullness of the skirt to the back of the legs.
459 A stiffened bell-shaped hoop that took the place of petticoats to make the skirt of a dress stand out from the body.
460 An undergarment worn over the upper body stiffened with steel or whale bone that flattened the stomach and gave the wearer an hourglass silhouette.
461 Sleeves that have wide puffs at the top narrowing to become slender and tight around the wrist at the bottom resembling the shape of a leg of mutton.
462 Skirts that narrow to become tight around the ankles forcing the wearer to take small, narrow steps.
slowly over time. Eventually, some of the dress reformers became fashion designers themselves, which finally led to some change.

The dress reform movement has often been overlooked because it took place in the politically charged climate of the late 1800s and early 1900s, when more women stepped into the public and political sphere for issues such as temperance and women’s suffrage. In fact, the dress reform movement itself was so connected to other movements of the period—like women’s suffrage—and alternative medical practices like hydropathy, that it is difficult to separate it from these other movements even in its time. Dress reform became part of the general nation-wide discourse going on within the United States about what place women should take in the changing world. The focus of dress reform was on the debilitating nature of women’s clothing and reformers made the connection between the restrictions of what women wore and the limitations of their role to the domestic sphere. However, the unique thing about the argument of reformers was the way in which it appealed to people on both sides of the women’s suffrage debate when connected to health and practicality. Supporters of dress reform did not need to believe women deserved additional rights, such as the right to vote; some dress reformers, doctors in particular, supported it purely because they believed the standard women’s dress of the day was unhealthy.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, women’s roles changed. They became more politically active and middle-class white women got involved in their communities through women’s clubs. The increased presence of women in the public sphere challenged long held assumptions about women’s “place” in society and caused anxiety within American culture. Dress reform, in the end, was a manifestation of this social anxiety. It was part of the changing role of women, and the reaction against it was part of the backlash against this change. The dress reform movement at the turn of the last century was an attempt by reformers to promote dress for
the purpose of health and practicality, but it also represented an attempt to gain more equal footing with men by having clothing that was at least as unrestricted as men’s clothing. While their intentions were noble and some of the changes they made were empowering, their criticism of women’s clothing also put additional pressure on women and on women’s appearance. The problem that dress reformers had to overcome was their own failure to understand the draw of popular styles and the societal connections intrinsic to clothing. Notions of power, gender, and even imperialism were woven into the seam of everything women wore, whether this clothing was reformist in nature or more mainstream. It was not until dress reformers got involved in changing fashion from the inside, after decades of promoting the style from the sidelines, that the reformers could finally achieve their goals.

When the dress reform movement initially began with Amelia Bloomer and other women’s rights activists, their method of presenting dress reform linked it to the women’s movement. The association between dress reform and women’s rights established it as part of a general push towards modernity in American culture. Wearing bloomers made sense logically because of the restrictive nature of women’s fashion at the time, which included multiple heavy petticoats and wide skirts that made everyday life difficult. The problem was that pants of any kind related to masculinity, making it more taboo for women to adopt a bifurcated garment. In addition, the association between the bloomer movement and the broader women’s movement further cemented their use as an attempt to usurp men’s roles. Anxiety already surrounded women thanks to the “woman question,” through which American society grappled with questions about women’s roles and whether there was some essential quality that made men more suited to public sphere and women more suited to the private sphere. Bloomers became caught up in this discussion which meant that, despite their practicality, Americans were not yet
ready to openly accept pants for women. However, bloomers were important in that they forced
dress reform more actively into the public consciousness and formalized the movement in an
official sense through publications like *The Lily*. Three groups emerged to take ownership of the
dress reform movement: the Women’s Rights movement, women’s clubs, and supporters of
alternative medicine like hydropathy for whom dress reform was simply another form of
alternative medicine.

Though the bloomer itself fell out of popularity in the 1870s, this did not end the attempt
on the part of dress reformers to reestablish some form of pants for women, and it did not stop
American women from wearing pants in instances when it made sense to do so. However,
anyone wearing pants still had to deal with the same issues that bloomer wearers dealt with: the
notion that pants represented masculinity in such a concrete way that they acted as a physical
border between the masculine and the feminine. Both the women who wore pants and those who
opposed women wearing them believed that male clothing bore some connection to male power
and privilege. Gendered dress was part of the social order and going against that challenged the
notions that masculinity and femininity were essential qualities.

Despite the importance of pants (and bloomers in particular) in formalizing the dress
reform movement, the roots of dress reform were already a part of popular culture in the 1820s
and 1830s. The first garment to receive criticism was the corset, which first attracted the ire of
members of the medical community because of concerns that it was unhealthy. Though corsets
were not as controversial a garment as pants in terms of their connection to gender, they were
still part of the conversation about women’s roles and particularly women’s health. In addition,
corsets were still very much connected to femininity and to American society. This meant that
asking women to abandon them all together was still a lot to ask, especially since the conditions
that doctors warned about concerning corsets did not materialize for the average woman. Doctors ultimately undermined their own message by exaggerating the effects of corsets or incorrectly linking them to medical conditions that were unrelated to corset use. It certainly did make women aware of the potential dangers of corsets and cemented the perception of those dangers for future generations so strongly that modern Americans still think of corsets as dangerous in the twenty first century. However, it offered no practical solution for women who were more willing to take the calculated risk of continuing to wear their corsets at least until they had a better option.

Westward expansion and Americanization also played a role in what women wore. On one hand the more rugged terrain of the west and the isolation from Anglo society did allow women like Calamity Jane to wear men’s clothing. However, social “rules” became more rigid when applied to non-white women on the frontier. Anglo American styles of dress became part of the Americanization process, and the corset was one of the trappings of “civilization” that white settlers imposed upon Native Americans. This implied link between corseted styles and “civilization” was an obstacle that dress reformers had to fight against to get the average woman to adopt their styles. It also meant that white women like Calamity Jane had more freedom to go uncorseted than women of color because it did not represent Americanization for them in the same way that it did for minorities.

Dress reform reached its apex at the turn of the twentieth century. Discussion of dress reform were published everywhere: in magazines, journals, books, and presented in speeches. Dress reformers used multiple arguments about the medical drawbacks of women’s dress, supported with the best scientific evidence of the time. This approach appealed not only to those
with progressive viewpoints concerning clothing but traditionalists as well because it did not necessarily attempt to alter women’s position in society.

In this way, dress reformers could develop arguments that both promoted greater freedom for women and maintained the accepted gender roles. Corsets became noticeably less restrictive in this period and fashion magazines focused on explaining the correct way to wear a corset to maintain one’s health and one’s beauty. Meanwhile, knickerbockers, also known as rationals, became popular as activewear for cycling and sports. This further normalized pants in a way that was not as challenging to gender roles as the bloomer had been. It was also around this time that dress reformers began to design clothing that lived up to their ideas of proper dress, and to market them to the general public. A good way to measure the success of dress reform is through its appearance in the fashion magazines of the period. As dress reform became more popular, magazines advertised healthier alternatives to traditional corsets and the overall shape of corsets changed over a period of about twenty years from the 1890s to the 1910s. Health corsets and healthier silhouettes changed the way women wore corsets. Instead of using them to change the shape of the body, they started to look at corsets simply as a means of support that should alter a person’s shape as little as possible.

Dress reformers knew they were gearing up for a war against corsets from the outset, but they had no idea that it would take an actual World War to lower the social inhibitions of their culture enough for real change to occur. Although there was relatively little change in popular styles during the war, the change in women’s roles was much more visible. Women became more active in the public sphere than ever before due to the necessity for their labor that came with wartime mobilization. The war effort made it culturally acceptable for women to cross gender lines and work in traditionally male positions. Wartime necessity also allowed women to
wear styles that did not require a corset, or pants, without attracting the same negative attention as before the war.

Still, the only reason that World War I was a turning point in dress reform was that, by the time it started, women’s clothing was already moving away from the wasp waist style to a much less restrictive silhouette, and corsets were already on their way out of style. The part that women played in the war only added weight to reformers’ argument for more practical clothing and was what finally helped the dress reform movement progress. When the war ended, it became clear that the world would never be the same again. Women’s status and identity had altered, and that change was irreversible. As a reward for their assistance in the war effort, women gained the right to vote and, with it, other freedoms, including a more active role in the public sphere and, most exciting for dress reformers, emancipation from the corset. The freedom and influence which American women gained after the war allowed them to change their social identity and, with it, their clothing.

In the 1920s, over fifty years after the dress reform movement began, it finally concluded, but this was not the end of complaints against women’s clothing. Concerns mounted about the new twenties’ styles, which showed much more skin, and about the future of women’s clothing which was so changeable. Of course, as shown in the introductory quote for this study, every generation has complained about the fashions of its time for one reason or another, and that will probably never change. Despite how fashions have altered in the last hundred years, there will always be people who object to one style or another. Discontent concerning clothing circulates even in modern society, as some still argue that our current clothing is unhealthy. In fact, many of their arguments reflect those used against corsets, particularly concerning tight clothing. An article published in Insider in March of 2017 by Nicole Briese described several
“dangerous” modern fashion trends including high heels and corsets but mainly took issue with
skinny jeans claiming, “They restrict free movement in the areas such as hips and knees,
affecting how we hold our bodies.”463 Another article by Alexandra Sifferlin written for Time
asserted that skinny jeans and belts could cause a variety of health problems including nerve
compression, troubles with digestion and numbness.464 According to one article, “Some favorite
accessories, like waist-cinching belts, can compress delicate nerves in the abdomen or constrain
breathing and deprive heart and brain of needed oxygen.”465 Although these arguments deal with
modern clothing rather than corsets, they bear striking similarities to arguments made against the
corset over a century ago. Just like dress reformers at the turn of the last century, those who
speak out against modern fashions take issue will all tight clothing, including skintight lycra,
spandex, and high heel shoes.466

Once again, most women ignore these complaints because they prefer wearing whatever
style is in fashion, rather than what is best for their health. For most people, feeling at ease in
their clothing is not just about physical comfort but also about feeling good about themselves.
Some women feel that wearing high heel shoes is worth the pain at the end of the day because
they give them added confidence. However, unlike the styles at the turn of the last century, the
fashions of today offer a wide variety of garments that range in silhouette and comfort, allowing
women to choose between comfort, glamour, and everything in between. Modern women can
wear a skirt and high heels one day then jeans and a t-shirt the next, all the while looking

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465 Jane E. Allan “Wardrobe Woes: Hidden Health Hazards of Clothing” ABC News
466 Ibid.
perfectly acceptable in both types of dress. This was an option that women in the late 1800s and early 1900s did not have.

Some modern fashions may also leave us to wonder just how successful the dress reform movement really was in defeating the corset. After all, corsets are not gone, and they probably never will vanish all together. Cinching devices of various sorts still exist in any store that sells lingerie. Anyone who wants to can even get actual steel boned corsets in certain stores, over the internet, or from private sellers. In the end, considering how often trends in fashion repeat themselves, it is unlikely that the corset will ever really disappear. However, with the amount of variety in clothing that modern fashion offers us, it is equally unlikely that this garment will once again become a standard part of women’s everyday wardrobe. Though we cannot guarantee that corsets will never come back into fashion, it is important to remember that, after decades of struggle by the reform movement for less restrictive clothing, women have gained the option not to wear stays. The dress reformers won a long battle with the defeat of the corset, and it seems that, at least for now, women intend to leave their corsets unlaced.
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**Conclusion**


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Vita

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