Robust Health or Submissive Soul:
The Turkish Trouser Dress Reform Movement

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To breathe, or not to breathe; that's the question.
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer,
the stings and arrows of outrageous fashion,
Or to bear the scoffs and ridicule of those
who despise the Bloomer dresses.[1]

The Hamlet parody above appeared in *The Water Cure Journal* on June 15, 1853.This publication, read by thousands of Americans, was one of many publications that originated in the era's reverence for physical wellbeing.[2] The satire highlighted the challenge posed by bloomers for women: would they choose health or respectability?

How is it possible that something as seemingly innocuous as Turkish Trousers, or 'bloomers'[3]—a name popularized by the nineteenth-century activist Amelia Bloomer—jeopardized women's good name and standing? This garment was a half skirt with loose fabric pants gathered at the ankles, much in the tradition of Middle Eastern fashion.[4] During this period, the incorporation of "exotic motifs" into fashion was a way of adding something foreign or rare to familiar fashion.[5] Nineteenth-century Americans swept up by evangelicalism sought to be

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[1] "A Parody," *The Water Cure Journal and Herald of Reforms; Devoted to Physiology, Hydropathy, and the Laws of Life.*(New York: Fowler and Wells, Published, June 15 1853) http://dig.lib.niu.edu/teachers/lesson2-packet1.html (February 19, 2009). See also Ibid, vols. 17 and 18, 1854, Google Books. For more on the *Water Cure Journal* see footnote 2.

[2] According to Regina Markell Morantz, "The popular *Water Cure Journal* boasted it 10,000 subscribers in 1849, the second year of its publication." Regina Markell Morantz. "Making Women Modern: Middle Class Women and Health Reform in 19th Century America," *Journal of Social History* 10, no.4 (1977): 490. (accessed November 5, 2008) For more information on the *Water Cure Journal,* see Amy Kesselman. "The "Freedom Suit": Feminism and Dress Reform in the United States, 1848-1875." *Journal of Social History* 5, no. 4 (1991). 497. (accessed October 8, 2008).

[3] I will be using the term Bloomers and Turkish Trousers interchangeably. Between 1850 and 1853, the *Water Cure Journal* referred to bloomers as the "short dress," "Turkish dress," "the Camille costume," the "American costume" and most frequently "the reform dress." All of these were interchangeable. Amy Kesselman "The "Freedom Suit. " For more on *Water Cure Journal* see foot note six.

[4] Gayle V. Fischer ""Pantalets" and "Turkish Trousers": Designing Freedom in the Mid-Nineteenth Century United States." *Feminist Studies* 23 no.1 (1997),125(accessed October 8, 2008). Fisher writes, "This ankle treatment created a line that began at the hem of the skirt, curved slightly away from the body, and then gently rounded back to the ankle. The gathering or pleats added fullness to each leg…" Kesselman, "The 'Freedom suit,'" 497 wrote, "The new costume, modeled after the dress of Moslem women, met a particular warm reception among practitioners and advocates. . . ."

[5] Fisher, "'Pantalets' and 'Turkish Trousers,'" 116.

closer to biblical times; thus, many connected Turkish Trousers and the Middle East with the Bible.[6]

Nonetheless, Turkish Trousers were controversial. On the one hand, some argued that wearing Turkish Trousers was healthier for women than corsets. They reasoned that the corset and related tight lacing damaged female anatomy.[7] In addition, women's long skirts swept the ground, collecting the unspeakable filth that lay ankle-deep in nineteenth-century streets.[8] In contrast, Turkish Trousers had half skirts that did not sweep the streets and were looser fitting so they did not harm women's anatomy. On the other hand, the dictates of a male-dominated society required women to wear tight corsets and long, heavy skirts, as will be discussed.[9] How women approached this dilemma, and how society evaluated their choices are at the heart of this paper.

The dress reform movement found its greatest support in the Northeastern United States, the birthplace of three interconnected developments: the second Great Awakening, the first Industrial Revolution, and the movement for Health Reform. Calls for dress reform earned scant support among Southern women who continued to favor their large skirts and corsets.[10]

Though this study focuses on the years between 1820 and 1865, it also examines historical sources from the postbellum period. These reveal continuities of social norms for

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[6] Ibid, 123. I am indebted to Robert J. Allison for his suggestion that I explore nineteenth-century Americans views of Islamic culture. On this, see Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008); and Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2006). These articles reveal that Anglo-Americans viewed Islamic people as barbarians and that global confrontation between Islam and Christianity was well-established by this period.

[7] Regina Markell Mortantz. "Making Women Modern," 493.

[8] Robert E Riegel. "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights." *American Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1963) 390, (accessed October 8, 2008).

[9] Riegel argued that "A tightly compressed waist emphasized bust and hips. A low cut bodice and bare arms encouraged male imaginations. Flowing skirts attracted prurient peering as they gave glimpses of white clad ankles…or as they outlined their owner's legs in a stiff breeze, and women's legs were taboo in the nineteenth century." Ibid, 390.

[10] Ibid, 392-393

womanhood and of controversies over dress reform. After 1865, war-weary Americans seeking normalcy re-embraced earlier gender norms and the fashion ideas that upheld them.

This study of Turkish Trousers enters into larger debates about women's lives in the nineteenth century. For example, fashion historians debate over the frequency of tight lacing. Helen E. Roberts has stated that all women tight laced even though they knew the health risks to their organs. David Kunzle has countered that not all women tight laced continually. Rather, they tight laced episodically, based on the activities of their day.[11]

A second debate focuses on the question of how women conducted their lives in the antebellum period. For example, Barbra Welter has concluded that antebellum women primarily occupied the domestic sphere, while Mary Ryan has shown that women participated in the abolitionist movement, women's rights movement, and other political activities. [12] Examination of dress reform reveals the compatibility of these views. Though women inhabited the private sphere of home and family, they also exerted moral authority in the larger society.

Organized into four sections, this paper begins by contextualizing the lives of antebellum women. Specifically, it discusses the importance for women and their families of the first Industrial Revolution, the Second Great Awakening, and related developments in women's education.[13] Section two investigates cultural beliefs about womanhood as captured in historical

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[11] Historians also debate the degree to which women cinched their waists. Helen E. Roberts has argued that it was common for to make her waist eighteen to twenty two inches. David Kunzle concludes otherwise, based on his analysis of dresses in museum exhibits. Helene E Roberts "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman," *Signs* 2, no.3 (1977): 554-569 (accessed September 23, 2008). David Kunzle was quoted in Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1985)

[12] On women's public activities, see Mary P Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990). Contemporaneous statements by Margaret Fuller Ossoli, and Susan B. Anthony also point to women being involved in public spheres. See for example *The Seneca Falls Convention*, 1849.

[13] See Martha H Verbrugge. *Able-Bodied Womanhood : Personal Health and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century Boston* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and *Trade Journal Outlines Technology's Impact Process* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company's History Companion,1864).

documents. Among these are the sermon "Womanhood" by J.H Worchester Jr., the jurisprudence of Sir William Blackstone, and responses to it by Sarah Grimké, a feminist and abolitionist. Also considered is W.K. Brook's medical treatise on the physiological conditions of women. These texts are evidence that contemporary religious, legal, and medical writings upheld and advanced the ideals of true womanhood. A third section addresses the interconnected woman's rights and health movements. Notable proponents of gender equality, including Francis Wright, Susan B. Anthony, and Amelia Bloomer, addressed Dress Reform in very political terms, contending that wearing Turkish Trousers would give women greater range of motion—considered to be a prerequisite to gender equality with men.[14] Similarly, the Health Reform movement extolled the healthy benefits of Turkish Trousers as compared to the risks of wearing a corset. Representative sources include the *Water Cure Journal* and women's correspondence with editors of the publication.[15] Finally, the paper describes mainstream nineteenth century fashion and the reasons that reformers criticized it. Taken together, these discussions show that Dress Reform challenged some but not all requirements of womanhood: purity, submission, domesticity, and piety.

EXPANDING MARKETS FOR TEXTILE AND CLOTHING MANUFACTURES

The growth of American manufactures and related developments transformed antebellum American society. The nation's once powerful land-owning class was losing ground to the growing class of businessmen who monopolized the power and wealth in Northern industrial

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[14] On women's equality, see Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," 390-401.

[15] The *Water Cure Journal*, 17 no. 2 (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1854.) For correspondence see John Harley Warner and Janet A. Tighe, ed. "Domestic Practitioners of Hydropathy in the West Testify to the Faith in the Water Cure, 1854*" Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 135-136. "Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, Pioneer Women Physicians, Extoll the Woman Physician as the "Connecting Link" Between Women's Health Reform and Medical Profession, 1859." *Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 136-140. "Mary Gove Nichols, a Women's Health Reformer, Explains Why She Became a Water-Cure Practitioner, 1829." *Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 129-130.

states. Furthermore, technological innovations in cloth production and transportation strengthened the position of this growing stratum of entrepreneurs. Their increased wealth enabled female family members to delegate domestic work to poorer women working as domestics. As a result, middling and upper-class women enjoyed an increase in leisure time. Owing to these developments, Americans reconsidered the proper role and sphere of women.[16]

According to business historian Michael Zakim, clothiers were the pioneers of American industrialization,[17] as were textile manufacturers. [18] The American clothing market's rise began in 1815, appearing in American seaboard cities after the War of 1812, when Europe reopened for trade. By the mid-1830s, New York was as "busy as a beehive" with men and a woman sewing for the city's clothing houses.[19] However, it was not until the 1850s that the clothing industry appeared in government statistics. When it finally did appear, census worker labeled it a giant industry.[20] The introduction of the sewing machine transformed this business sector. In 1864, a published analysis of American technological innovation reported on the introduction of the machine, noting that no one dared prophesy that changes in the clothing industry would be so immediate and so great.[21] In just ten years, small clothing shops had disappeared almost completely. This same trade journal concluded that "old things are passing away and all things are becoming new."[22]

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[16] Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood* , 9.

[17] Michael Zakim, "A Ready-Made Business: The Birth of the Clothing Industry in America," *The Business History Review*73 no. 1(1999), 63 (accessed April 28, 2008).

[18]Ewen, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen. *Channels of Desire: Mass images and the Shaping of American Consciousness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 91, http://site.ebrary.com/lib/Suffolk/Doc?id=10159390&ppg=4 (accessed June 6, 2008).

[19] Ibid, 85.

[20] Ibid, 66. Congress instructed census marshals to record "the name of each corporation, company, or individual producing articles to the annual value of $500." Ibid.

[21] *Trade Journal Outlines Technology's Impact Process*.

[22] Ibid.

The integration of the new nation's transportation system furthered the growth of textile and clothing manufactures. In the years between 1815 and 1850, Americans constructed elaborate networks of roads, canals, and railroad lines.[23] Industrialist could now gather raw materials from far-flung regions, attract a mobile workforce, and easily distribute their goods. [24] The Transportation Revolution fostered growth of trade on American waterways. With the invention of the steamboat, a trip from New Orleans to St. Louis was reduced from three months to ten days.[25] Furthermore, as the country expanded westward, Americans living on the frontier grew dependent on networks of continental exchange to make an easier life.[26] Historian Sean Wilentz has stated that these developments enabled "western commercial farmers" to live "in accord with the standards of eastern middle-class domesticity."[27] While the previously mentioned developments transformed the Northeastern United State, the Southern economy flourished owing to Northern and European demand for cotton. The South was soon known as the "Cotton Kingdom."[28] Readymade eastern fabrics produced in the Northeast from Southern cotton soon replaced homespun cloth everywhere.

Although the first Industrial Revolution had a modest impact on the conditions of the majority of Americans, it greatly altered the domestic sphere in the Northeastern United States.[29] Middle-class men were increasingly engaged in activities within the public sphere of politics and

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[23] Sean Wilentz, "Society, Politics and the Market Revolution, 1815-1848." *The New American History* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 52.

[24] The improvement of transportation caused the manufactures to have a larger base from where they gathered their raw materials. This caused many Northeastern farmers to outstrip their land, but by 1850, many farmers had reorganized their farms based on a cash crop production system. Though the first Industrial Revolution gave many benefits to Northeastern farmers, these benefits were distributed unevenly. Farmers were growing more dependent on merchants for household items instead of making the goods at home. In 1850, the majority of the nation's population still lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture, and only fourteen percent of the labor force was in manufacturing. See Wilentz, *Society, Politics and the Market Revolution*, 52-54.

[25] Zakim, A *Ready-Made Business*, 74.

[26] Ibid,83.

[27] Wilentz, *Society, Politics, and the Market Revolution*, 56.

[28] Ibid.

[29] On this, see Ibid, 54.

the market. In contrast, middle-class women remained at home and exerted their authority over domestic duties and child raising. These women now played little or no role in manufacturing home goods that their female ancestors had produced routinely.[30] The scholar Martha H. Verbrugge has written that "the [antebellum] urban middle-class was not a self-sufficient unit. . . ." Instead, it grew more dependent on "productive labor outside the home for economic support and on external sources for daily commodities." According to Verbrugge, the resulting redefinition of gender roles increased the distance between the female world of the home and the male world of commerce and politics. [31]

Changing social and economic circumstance altered women's responsibilities in the family and in marriage. Although women's domestic lives had not changed greatly since the eighteenth century—they had always been responsible for overseeing the household and taking care of the health of the family—antebellum technological developments changed how women ran the household. For example, there were now "labor-saving" devices such as the egg-beater and hand-driven washing machine. These not only changed women's daily routine, but may have increased their expenditure of time and energy in the process.[32] Furthermore, families grew smaller. Whereas a colonial wife might have borne seven or eight children, by 1860 the fertility rate among native white women had fallen to five births per woman.[33]

These historical developments freed middling and upper-class women to reevaluate their lives; many drew on the religious ideas of the Second Great Awakening to reframe their roles in society. The Second Great Awakening, which began during the 1820s and continued through the 1840s, fostered the growth of protestant congregations led by Methodists, Baptists, and

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[30] Ibid.
[31] Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood* , 21.
[32] Ibid, 22.
[33] Ibid .

Unitarians throughout New England and the northeast.[34] New religious ideals discredited the idea of predestination and instead encouraged Americans to take salvation into their own hands.[35] Individual faith rather than a wrathful God motivated Americans to improve themselves and the world around them.

Evangelicalism promoted widespread reconsideration of the scope and purposes of women's education. Religious and other commentators argued that women should receive an education in order to raise their children as moral citizens. According to constitutional and women's historian Linda Kerber, women's supposed duty to future citizens was central to what she has termed Republican Motherhood. According to its tenets, mothers should dedicate themselves to the inculcation of civic virtue in her sons. This idea also empowered wives to condemn and correct their husbands' moral and spiritual lapses.[36] Early nineteenth-century commentators, including Judith Sargent Murray, Susannah Rowson, and Benjamin Rush, concurred that the ideal republican woman was self-reliant (within limits), literate, untempted by the frivolities of fashion, and attuned to the political scene though not of it.[37] It followed that women's education should prepare them to be civic tutors.

For a brief moment, the idea of Republican Motherhood opened the door to an increased civic role for women; however, it soon closed. After 1820, Americans reframed women's domestic role in narrower terms. Conceptions of what now was termed "True Womanhood" emphasized women's spiritual responsibilities in the home. In addition, a woman's husband and neighbors expected her to cultivate four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness and

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[34] On the Second Great Awakening, see Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood* ,23. Also see Anne M Boylan "Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century: The Role of Women in Sunday Schools" *Feminist Studies* 4 no. 3(1978): 62-80.

[35] Verbrugge, *Able-Bodied Womanhood*, 23.

[36] Linda Kerber. "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment: An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976), 202.

[37] Kerber, "The Republican Mother, 202. For additional views on Republican Motherhood, see Rosemarie Zagarri. "Moral, Manners, and the Republican Mother," *American Quarterly* 44 no. 2 (1992): 192-215,.

domesticity. Popular opinion had it that women lacking these attributes were disreputable, whereas a woman who embraced them would enjoy happiness and power (of a sort).[38]

The contraction of women's roles after 1820 sparked renewed debate over the purpose and content of their education. Some observers worried that education would distract women from the practice of "housewifery arts."[39] For example, magazine authors of the 19th century stated, "a true woman's education was never 'finished' until she was instructed in the gentle science of homemaking."[40] Conversely, the increasingly popular idea of "Evangelical Womanhood"[41] and the formation of women's literary societies undermined arguments against women's education, as did the era's unbalanced sex ratio. The increasingly disproportionate number of women meant that many remained single until older, or did not marry at all. Even Catherine Beecher, a proponent of domesticity, argued that every girl should have an occupation to protect her from the seductions of a leisurely, unmarried life.[42] Evangelical women echoed Beecher by recommending that single women become Sunday school teachers. Not only was this a moral activity, or so they argued, but it would further a girl's religious education. Young women liked Sunday school teaching because they saw it as a way to influence society, even if indirectly. Some women took their training as Sunday School teachers and used it in public activities such as missionary work, either out west or oversees, and as common school teachers.[43]

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[38] Barbara Welter. """"The Cult of True Womanhood,", ", ": 1820-1860," *American Journal* 18 no. 2(1966): 152.

[39] Ibid, 166.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Anne Boylan describes Evangelical Womanhood as being a combination of the traditional Protestant ideal of the "virtuous woman" with a new evangelical stress on action. It portrayed woman as nurturers, sensitive, pious, more aware than man of injustice, and more capable of providing comfort to those in need. See Boylan, *Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century*, 62-80.

[42] .Ibid, 66.

[43] "Womanhood in the Nineteenth Century," 62-80.

The growth of literary societies also created educational opportunities for women. In the spring of 1805, twenty young women gathered to organize the Boston Gleaning Circle, the first female literary society established in the new republic.[44] When the club began, its members did not select a literary focus. Instead, they schooled themselves in how to be pleasing companions at the tea table or in the salon. As the popularity of these clubs grew, so did their member's claims that education prepared women for participation in national debates.[45] Similarly, the Sigourney Club explored the virtues of women working alongside men in civic affairs. Like women in other clubs, its members discussed social and political issues such as women's rights and the merits of slavery.[46]

Literary club members dedicated themselves to more than the pleasure of reading, taking it as their responsibility to educate other women. Club activities convinced women that they had the same educational potential as men, and that women were entitled to education for its own sake and as a means of self-development. According to this idea, education for women should prepare them for more than maternal service. Lucy Stone reported that women club members learned how to "stand and speak" –a first step toward preparing themselves to exercise influence in their communities, regions, and hopefully, the nation. [47]

IDEALS OF WOMANHOOD

The majority of middle-class women—whether daughter, sister, wife, or mother—viewed education and religious activities as extensions of their domestic role, not as steps toward civic equality. The socialization of girls reflected these attitudes. Most learned how to take care of a

[44] Mary Kelley, " "A More Glorious Revolution": Women's Antebellum Reading Circles and the Pursuit of Public Influence," *The New England Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2003), 167.

[45] Ibid,170.

[46] Ibid,174.

[47] Stone, Lucy to Antoinette Brown Blackwell, May 5, 1892, in *Friends and Sisters* quoted in Mary Kelly "'A More Glorious Revolution,'"196.

household and to cook, sew, and mend. A girl likely to marry well also learned skills needed to be a suitable companion to her husband.[48]

Marriage was the best hope for nineteenth-century white women's financial security. Once a wife, a woman repaid her husband and provider by making a happy home for his family. Consistent with this, most girls received just enough education to converse companionably, but never assertively, with their husbands. According to conventional wisdom, women of the middle-class never raised their voices about controversial issues or the male head of household.[49]

Analysis of the social morés for middle-class women reveals just how severely the domestic ideal bound their lives and bodies, as did the related emphasis on female piety. Religion, said to be a divine gift to women,[50] imposed three duties on women. First, as the spiritual guidepost to their families, women must model piety and raise their children to believe and treasure the values of the church.[51] In the words of Reverend J.H. Worcester Jr., a mother's supreme authority over her children was "the power of purity, of truth, of goodness, of devotion, incarnate in her womanhood, which moulds the character of her sons."[52] Women had a second and comparable duty to serve as the spiritual protector of their husbands. According to Worcester and others, American men were preoccupied by business and politics—at cost to their soul. Women sought to keep their husbands connected to the church and mindful of their spiritual duties. Worcester cautioned women that if they were frivolous and self-indulgent, male kin

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[48] Welter, """"The Cult of True Womanhood,", ", "," 162-163.
[49] Ibid, 159.
[50] Ibid, 162.
[51] Scholars Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg have described mid-nineteenth century Americans as committed to egalitarian democracy and evangelical piety, values that women sought to instill in themselves and their children. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg. "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America," *The Journal of American History*, 60 no. 2 (1973), 339.
[52] J.H. Worchester. *Womanhood: Five Sermons to Young Women* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884), 100.

would follow suit.[53] One can imagine a wife in her broad, fashionable, hoop skirt, with one hand grasping a Bible and the other holding the hand of her husband. Third, women were required to conduct their religious activities in ways that complemented their domestic responsibilities.[54]

According to antebellum commentators, a pious woman was likely to fulfill all other cultural expectations of her. According to these arguments, religion calmed women's desires and fostered submissiveness. It is unsurprising that prescriptive literature of the day cautioned women against education and activism that threatened to draw them away from God and maternal duties. The Reverend J.H Worchester expressed these sentiments in 1884, evidence that these ideas endured throughout the nineteenth century. He wrote, "Yes, weak she may be of arm to wield the sword, but not weak of the spirit to bear the cross."[55]

Like piety, purity was essential to true womanhood. Wisdom had it that a woman who lacked this attribute was unnatural and unfeminine. In women's magazine stories such as *Godey's Lady's Book*, loss of virginity brought madness or death. For example, in the sad tale of "Lucy Dutton," a city slicker robbed Dutton of her innocence by seducing her. Dutton then conceived a child who died. Soon after, Dutton went crazy and died.[56] Clergy also warned women that men were a threat to female virtue. Accordingly, women had a duty to protect their innocence. Lyman Beecher, in his 1812 sermon "A Reformation of Morals Practicable and Indispensible," called men "desperately wicked" and in need of women's moral example. Only then would men remain God-fearing members of society.[57] However, the French observer of U.S. culture, Alexis de Tocqueville, noted that American men placed women's virtues so high

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[53] J.H. Worchester. *Womanhood: Five Sermons to Young Women*,107.

[54] Welter, "" ""The Cult of True Womanhood,", ", ","" 153.

[55] J.H. Worchester. *Womanhood: Five Sermons to Young Women*, 23.

[56]Emily Chudbuck, Alderbrook (Boston, 1847) quoted in Barbra Welter "" ""The Cult of True Womanhood,", ", ": 1820-1860," 156.

[57] Beecher, Lyman. "A Reformation of Morals Practicable and Indispensible," in *Attitudes toward Sex in Antebellum America: A Brief History with Documents*(Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2006), 44-45.

that they must not offend her ears with profane language.[58] Tocqueville concluded that men were committed to preserving women's purity.

Concern for female chastity was so prevalent that many Americans viewed social change as an attack on women's virtue. This led some to discourage women from participating in reform movements of the day. Others such as Lyman Beecher contradicted this view by arguing that women's moral influence was required to save and purify cities. By exerting the power of the Gospel, or so Beecher believed, women could save American society.[59]

Clergy who used the power of the pulpit to encourage female submission usually quoted the passage written by St. Paul in Ephesians. He wrote, "Wives, submit to your husband as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything."[60] Similarly explicit messages instructed women on their proper place within the household.

Submission was perhaps the most stereotypically feminine virtue. According to cultural norms, men were the mover, the doers, and the actors. Equally, women were the passive, submissive responders.[61] In his 1854 lectures on "The Sphere and Duties of Woman," George Burnap wrote that if a woman truly understood her position, "she feels herself weak and timid. She needs a protector."[62] A self-governing woman was, then, grotesque.

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[58]Alexis de Tocqueville. "How Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes." *Democracy in America*, Book 3, ch. XII (1835-1840). http://xroads.virginia.edu/%7EHYPER/DETOC/ch3_12.htm (Accessed September 4, 2008).

[59] Lyman, Beecher, *Resources of the Adversary and Means of Their Destruction*, 46

[60] Ephesians 5.22-24 (New International Version).

[61] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 159.

[62] George Burnap, "Spheres and Duties of Woman." Baltimore: 1854 quoted in Barbra Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 151-174.

The law upheld religious and cultural prescriptions for female submissiveness, as evidenced by Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Law*, first published in 1791 and widely read in the United States.[63] In his discussion of the law of covertures (i.e., the law of the marital relation), Blackstone reasoned that women were not legal persons in their own right. Instead, their husbands represented them. According to Blackstone, the husband and wife became the same legal person.[64] For all practical purposes, a woman's legal existence ceased during marriage because she acted under the protection and cover of her husband. In sum, a woman's status was that of a child; thus, she submitted to her husband's will as a child submits to that of the parent.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed that American women did not object to socially prescribed limitation on their lives. As he saw it women, "attach a sort of pride to the voluntary surrender of their own will and make it their boast to bend themselves to the yoke not to shake it off."[65] Women's consumption of prescriptive literature suggests that there is a germ of truth in de Tocqueville observation. However, and as will be discussed, many women sought to expand and even escape their domestic role.

Later, medical authorities justified gender inequality in different terms, arguing that women were deficient in mind and body. For example, W.K. Brooks, a well-respected American zoologist, explained in 1879 that women, unlike men, were incapable of original thought and abstract reasoning. According to Brooks, this differences explained men's mastery of science,

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[63] Blackstone is important to look at because American lawyers in the early republic relied on Blackstone as the primary and often only source of the common law. Blackstone stated that men and women are one in marriage, however, there were instances when women were separate from their husbands. In those cases, women are inferior to men. Instead of giving a woman a legal trial, the court leaves the wife at the hands of her husband to restrain her, by domestic chastisement, under the same guidelines under which a man could correct his servants or children. For more on Blackstone in America see Greg Bailey. "Blackstone in America: Lectures by An English Lawyer Become The Blueprint for a New Nation's Laws and Leaders." *The Early America Review* 1 no. 4. (1997),

[64] Blackstone, Of Husband and Wife.

[65] Alexis de Tocqueville "How the Americans Understand the Equality of the Sexes."

law, literature, and art. He added, "the female mind is a storehouse filled with the instincts, habits, intuitions, and laws of conduct which have been gained by past experience" [66] As Brooks saw it, women's minds were suited to routine menial tasks and their house work. Accordingly, he concluded that men rightly had authority over women and other, similarly disabled dependents. Consequently, women could not and should not exert themselves beyond the domestic sphere. Brooks concluded that women who aspired to more than domesticity imperiled the race.[67]

Reverend Worcester echoed Brooks, stating that calls for gender equality dishonored the Creator. In his judgment, women were not man's equal but his complement.[68] Earlier, the physician Charles D. Meigs concluded much the same thing in his 1847 *Lecture on Some of the Distinctive Characteristics of the Female*. He stated that a women's "head [was] almost too small for intellect but just big enough for love." This was his response to Mrs. L.H. Sigourney, who had declared that women were different from but equal to men. Meigs laughed off Sigourney's assertion that women could achieve academic greatness.[69]

Nineteenth-century physicians agreed that the male mind was superior to that of a woman because the latter was prisoner to her reproductive system.[70] Specifically, the functioning of women's ovaries controlled their emotions and behavior. In addition, women's reproductive system determined their overall health. Physicians believed that the uterus and the nervous system were interdependent. Thus, if women's nervous system were over-stimulated, their reproductive system could fail. Accordingly, women who engaged in traditionally male activities harmed their central nervous system and reproductive organs, thereby jeopardizing their chance

[66] W.K. Brooks. "The Condition of Women from Zoological Point" *The Popular Science Monthly* (June 1879): 154.

[67]Ibid, 349.

[68] Worcester, *Womanhood*, 11.

[69] Charles D Meigs. "Lecture of Some of the Distinctive Characteristics." Philadelphia: 1847 quoted in Barbra Welter "The Cult of True Womanhood,"159-160.

[70] Smith-Rosenberg and Rosenberg, "The Female Animal," 335.

to bear healthy children. If a woman was to fulfill her destiny to be a mother, she had to stay the passive responder.[71]

Woman's rights activist and abolitionist Sarah Grimké challenged legal and physiological justifications of women's subordination in her essay "Legal Disabilities of Women." Grimké forthrightly concluded that women were slaves to their husbands. She mocked lawmakers who claimed to protect women but, in fact, had stripped women of their legal rights. For example, Grimké argued that the law of coverture made the husband the absolute master of any assets brought to the marriage by the wife. Worse, men could use this income or property as they liked, be it at the alehouse, the gambling table, or in risky business ventures.[72] Grimké also lamented that husbands retained control of women's property even after death. If a woman outlived her husband, she was entitled to a third of the estate. Yet, if a man outlived his wife, he inherited all her properties. Grimké also condemned medical and legal assumptions that women were unfit to manage their own affairs. Grimké concluded that a husband was to his wife as the slave-master was to his slave.[73]

Like Grimké, Margaret Fuller Ossoli rejected the idea that a young girl was only fit for marriage and motherhood. As a result, she criticized female education that focused on teaching girls to keep house, use the needle, and be charming in social settings.[74] Fuller Ossoli insisted that if women were properly educated, they could understand and engage in the pursuits of their future husbands.[75] To deny women a meaningful education was, she argued, tantamount to condemning them to a small and inconsequential life.

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[71] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood,"167-168.
[72] Sarah Grimké, "Letter XII: Legal Disabilities," 1837. http://www.civicsonline.org/library/formatted/texts/grimke.html, 1 (accessed September 10, 2008).
[73] Ibid, 3.
[74] Margaret Fuller Ossoli. *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1845).
[75] Ibid.

Proponents of female submissiveness and domesticity countered that the world of family and home was not a "narrow sphere." In fact, they argued, women enjoyed the respect and power that came being the "highest adornment of civilization."[76] Reverend J.H. Worcester, Jr. wrote his female readers stating that the sphere of home and family was "one which you hold alone. In it you may wield a more than imperial power."[77] Worcester concluded that marriage was the "holiest ordinance" and the family was the "best picture of heaven."[78]

In this social and political environment, health and dress reformers sought to preserve the health and wellbeing of nineteenth-century women. Yes, how would dress reformers reconcile their arguments with expectations that women be pious, pure, and submissive to her husband? Likewise, how would dress reformers respond to medical arguments that women were naturally inferior to men, or to legal doctrine that made men the master of women? Diverse authorities instructed women to be as "gentle as the dove, [and as] modest as the lily of the valley. . . .[79] Could they advocate for dress reform and uphold the requirements of True Womanhood?

LEADING TO THE DRESS REFORM

Two movements paved the way to the Dress Reform: the mobilization for woman's rights and Health Reform. Over a ten-year period, activists in each camp worked separately and together to liberate women from fashionable heavy petticoats and tight corsets. Leaders of the woman's rights movement argued that looser clothing would enable women to undertake activities traditionally reserved for men. Health Reformers argued for a new style of dress that enabled women to live a healthier life. Despite these similarities, leaders of these movements also had divergent goals for Dress Reform.

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[76] Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood,"164.
[77] Worcester, "Womanhood," 18.
[78] Ibid, 15.
[79] Ibid, 22.

Dress Reformers asserted that men's adaptation of clothing to new roles and circumstances should be a lesson to women. Early nineteenth-century men aspired to be (and be seen as) serious, active, strong and aggressive—traits befitting a self-made man.[80] Consequently, they abandoned the aristocratic styles of the eighteenth century in order to pursue a more active life. During the First Industrial Revolution, men chose simpler attire to signal their rectitude. As this suggests, they believed that a secular saintliness was achievable through worldly activity.[81] That is, male worldliness was a social good. Rejecting knee britches and ornate leg hosiery, men instead wore dark colors, suits having sharp definite lines, and looser garments that allowed freer movement. According to fashion historian Stuart Ewen, by the 1830s, men's adoption of black coats and "smokestack" hats was complete in industrial areas.[82] This change in male dress reflected the Jacksonian argument that all men could achieve industrial success regardless of their claims to privilege or capital.[83] Male clothing upheld this idea by masking social and economic disparities among men.

Below may be seen men's appearance before and after their fashion reform. Somber and conservative cuts and colors replaced bright colors and elaborate embroideries.

Picture 1: Eighteenth Century Fashion[84]

Picture 2: Nineteenth Century Fashion[85]

[80] Roberts, *The Exquisite Slave*, 555.
[81] Ewen and Ewen, *Channels of Desire*, 92.
[82] Ibid, 94. However, wealthy plantation owners in the South did not abandon the aristocratic motif. Ibid.
[83] Michael Zakim, "A Ready-Made Business: The Clothing Industry in America," *The Business History Review* 73, no.1 (1999), 89.
[84] http://www.uweb.ucsb.edu/~jmd/Wigs%202.jpg (Accessed March 24, 2009).
[85] http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyccazen/Shorts/Questions/FoordA.jpg (Accessed March 24, 2009).

In 1874, Abba Goold Woolson lectured on women's dress reform, reminding her audience that "men have had their dress-reform. . . ." She argued further that men had cast:

> aside their inconvenient fineries, relics of the day when gentlemen were more ornamental than useful[,] and adopting a suit fitted for business and work, they have forsworn all richness and variety of color and ornament.[86]

Woolson implied that seriousness of purpose must be reflected in one's dress.

Woman's rights activists also laid claim to seriousness of purpose to justify their demands for female citizenship. As was discussed, women gained entrance into the public sphere based on the argument that they were capable of purifying the world beyond the home. By the 1830s, increasing numbers of women argued that they were entitled to legal rights not because they exerted moral authority, but because they were men's equals, and as such, deserving of citizenship.

Today, we are less familiar with Frances Wright than with Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucy Stone, but Wright was an active and forceful spokesperson for women's rights during the 1820s and 1830s. She is most famous for creating the utopian society Nashoba, located outside of Memphis, Tennessee. Wright's blunt discussions of race and sexuality led some to label her a radical. In 1828, while discussing the settlement of Nashoba, she declared, "No woman can forfeit her individual rights or independent existence, and no man assert over her any rights or power whatsoever."[87] Wright's pronouncement anticipated Susan B. Anthony's

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[86] Abba Goold Woolson, ed. *Dress Reform: A Series of Lectures delivered in Boston, On Dress as it Affects the Health of Women* (Boston: Roberts: Brothers, 1874), 155. Woolson described men in the past as making themselves magnificent with scarlet velvets, slashed with gold, with embroidered ruffs, flashing knee buckles, and long powered hair. Ibid, 151.

[87] Frances Wright. "Nashoba, Explanatory Notes &c. Continued," in *Attitudes toward Sex in Antebellum America*, 49.

groundbreaking speech, "The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions," delivered at the 1848 Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York.[88]

In her Declaration, Anthony famously claimed that women's historic disenfranchisement must be remedied by their "immediate admission to all the right and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States."[89] Whereas Reverend J.H. Worcester Jr. would later describe campaigns for gender equality as insult to the Creator, Anthony declared that God conceived of men and women as equals. Moreover, Anthony argued, "the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such."[90] Anthony then inverted gender norms by reasoning that if women were held to a standard of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behavior, so must men. Anthony urged women to learn about the laws that governed them and, equally important, to challenge their present position—first steps to securing the rights they wanted.[91]

Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Bloomer, and other woman's rights activists believed female Dress Reform allowed women to assert themselves and gain equality with men. Anthony outlined this position while arguing that women are "invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise…." Therefore, she continued, "it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man to promote every righteous cause by every righteous means."[92] Anthony obviously thought that women's fashions held them back, as see by her observation: "I can see no business avocation, in which woman in present dress can possibly earn equal waged with men."[93]

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[88] Modern History Sourcebook: The Declaration of Sentiments, Seneca Falls Conference, 1848. http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/senecafalls.html (accessed April 30, 2009).

[89] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Matilda Joslyn Gage, eds. "Declaration of Sentiments and Resolution (1848)." *History of Woman Suffrage*, vol.1. Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1881, 70.

[90] Ibid, 71.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Ibid, 72.

[93] Anthony to G. Smith, December 25 1855, in Gerrit Smith Collection, Syracuse University, quoted in Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," 391.

Dress reformers and other Americans were increasingly interested in and promoters of healthier living. At a time when the Second Great Awakening had legitimated self-help, most Americans believed that physical health was a matter of individual responsibility. This belief empowered the general populace to challenge medical authorities. Physicians were especially vulnerable to having their skills questioned because, more often than not, they were unable to cure common ailments, let alone serious disorders. Orthodox, heroic treatments such as bleeding lost favor as alternative medicine and related reforms grew in popularity during the mid-nineteenth century.[94] Like many of their contemporaries, antebellum Health Reformers believed that they were the keepers of their own health, and, related to this, that "America's physical environment, political institutions, and social ideals were uniquely conducive to health."[95]

Unlike political reform movements, American anxieties over the era's social and political disequilibrium did not drive the Health Reform campaign. Instead, it sprang from an increasing desire on the part of Americans to return to nature and seek out purer ways of living. The well-known health reform Samuel Thomson espoused these ideas. In the early 1800s, Thomson began creating and using botanical remedies in place of conventional treatments such as bloodletting. Thomson not only believed that nature provided the safest and best cures, but he insisted that that ordinary citizens had the right to be their own doctors.[96] Health Reform sprang from nostalgia for pastoral America and egalitarianism.

Popular unorthodox healing practices included homeopathic medicines,[97] the hydropath process (or water cure), and dietary reforms such as vegetarianism. Advocates of these practices

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[94] Verbrugge, *Able Bodied Womanhood*, 24.
[95] Ibid, 4.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Homeopathy is a "'system of medicine employing substances of animal, vegetable or mineral origin" that are given in small doses and in accordance to "'homeopathic pharmacology. . . .'" Its practitioners argue that "'a substance which produces symptoms in a healthy person can cure those symptoms in an ill

merged in a coherent and articulate campaign to save the nation by combating ill health among its citizenry.[98] Nontraditional medicine swept the Northeastern United States because of popular consumption of lectures and advice literature. Boston and New York were important sites of health reform and hosts to numerous organizations.

Health Reformers directed their arguments to the middle class, and especially, to women of that class. As will be argued, these women consumed health reform literature, attended lectures focused on health maintenance, and joined clubs dedicated to preserving women's health.

Proponents of health reform targeted middle-class women for three reasons. First, health reformers believed that women should be educated about their own bodies. The physician Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to graduate from an American medical school, explained why women disliked traditional medical practices. In her view, "the . . . profession at present is far too removed from the life of women . . . it has had little direct effect upon domestic life… . [Because] [p]hysicians are too far removed from women's life; they can criticize but not guide it."[99]

Health reformers had a second reason for recruiting middle-class women; namely, they were responsible for the health of their children. In this historical moment, women were required to teach their children "modern" values and practices. Furthermore, women who mistrusted orthodox practitioners required guidance if they were to solve a bewildering array of

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person.'" Definition of Homeopathic. http://www.healthy.net/public/legal-lg/regulations/homeopathy.htm (accessed April 30, 2009).

[98] Morantz. "Making Women Modern," 490 .

[99] John Harley Warner and Janet A. Tighe, ed. "Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell, Pioneer Women Physicians, Extoll the Woman Physician as the 'Connecting Link" Between Women's Health Reform and Medical Profession, 1859," in *Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health*, 137.

medical problems. Health Reform journals and tracts provided these women with information about changing medical trends and their remedies for garden-variety illnesses.[100]

Proponents of health reform also appealed to middle-class because their increasing leisure made them candidates for medical education. Elizabeth Blackwell declared that if well-educated women were encouraged to join the nursing profession, they would be a valuable influence within the family. Likewise, female practitioners would improve the respectability of nurses. Should a woman train as a nurse and not pursue that occupation, she could better supervise the wellbeing of the family.[101] For this reason, health reformers urged, "let woman be [as] intellectually educated as possible."[102] The Health Reform held out the possibility for women that they could pursue an education while fulfilling their assigned role of caregiver.

Health reformers' regard for conventional gender norms conformed to their advocacy of Christian physiology. Movement leaders found allies among Protestant clergy who encouraged their followers to embrace mental and physical wellbeing. This was in stark contrast to theologians' criticisms of Dress Reform.[103] Improved female health was one thing, but the unsexing of women through fashion reform was quite another, as will be discussed.

The esteemed antebellum physician Elisha Bartlett asserted that human beings were God's most glorious creatures, for he had created them in his image. Therefore, Bartlett urged all Americans (regardless of their circumstances) to "obey" what he described as "the laws of health." By doing so, every man and woman would experience life as God intended it. If they did not follow these laws, Bartlett warned, they sinned against God.[104]

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[100] Mortanz, "Making Women Modern," 491.
[101] Warner, "Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell", 138,
[102] *Practical Educator and Journal of Health in 1847*. Quoted in Morantz "Making Women Modern," 493
[103] Kesselman, "The "Freedom Suit," 501.
[104] Elisha Bartlett. *Obedience to the Laws of Health, a Moral Duty* (Boston: Julius A. Noble, 1838).

Health Reformers recommended various methods of maintaining health, but it was the Water Cure, or Hydropath process, that attracted the largest following. Advocates of this cure were especially encouraging of Dress Reform. In fact, editors of the *Water Cure Journal*—the voice for hydropathists and one of the era's most widely read periodicals—reported on fashion reform in every issue.[105]

Hydropathists believed in the possibility of regenerating American society by perfecting the individual.[106] Health Reformer Mary Gove Nichols reported that she learned about the water cure and its benefits for children by borrowing books from her physician. Once she had children, she bathed them in cold water from birth, as was the practices among hydropathists.[107] She also used coldwater baths to reduce fevers and treat hemorrhages. Another woman, known only as F.A.M.S from Wapello, Iowa, reported that some in her community doubted the water cure. However, with time and patience, she demonstrated its superiority to traditional medicine. She did so in the most graphic way: her boy walked among the living while orthodox doctors had buried theirs.[108] Both these women considered the water cure to be remarkably effective. Health Reformers gravitated to the water cure attending public lectures on the subject, or by reading hydropathic tracts that encouraged experimental medicine.[109]

Because not every water treatment was suitable for home use, patients sought treatment at water cure establishments. By the 1850s, these facilities dotted the New York landscape.[110] Some

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[105] Morantz, "Making Women Modern", 490; and Amy Kesselman. "The "Freedom Suit," 497.

[106] Jane B. Donegan. "Hydropathic Highway to Health," *Women and Water Cure in Antebellum America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 192.

[107] John Harley Warner and Janet A. Tighe, ed. "Mary Gove Nichols, a Women's Health Reformer, Explains Why She Became a Water-Cure Practitioner, 1829," in *Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 129.

[108] John Harley Warner and Janet A. Tighe, ed. "Domestic Practitioners of Hydropathy in the West Testify to the Faith in the Water Cure, 1854,"in *Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 136.

[109] Donegan, "Hydropathic Highway to Health," 191.

[110] Ibid,185.

featured more extreme treatments. One patient Mrs. M.H. Rossiter described her care at the Castile Water-Cure:

> Patients . . . awakened at six o'clock and [were] immediately sent to the bathroom to receive either 'a pail dash or a dripping sheet.' For the former, Rossiter explained, the patient 'stood a little way from the nurse and she threw half of the [warm] water over your chest and limbs, then you turned and the other half was thrown over your back.' A cold dash followed.

Rossiter reminisced that the experience "'almost took your breath away,'" but you felt fine afterward.[111]

Eventually, practitioners of the Water Cure modified their procedures by attending to patients' individual reactions. For example, instead of using cold water, hydropathists began using tepid water. These modifications popularized the Water Cure among a wider audience.[112]

Though the water cure was short lived, hundreds of patients underwent this treatment. There are two explanations for its appeal. First, the ideology of self-help and hygiene emphasized how one lived rather than one's social or economic status. Second, whether Americans lived in urban or rural areas, they could achieve good health.[113] The water cure made good health accessible to all Americans, or so it seemed.

The hydropath movement was especially appealing to women because the treatment was gender neutral. Furthermore, male practitioners of the water cure welcomed women as allies. As women began to speak for Health Reform, including the Water Cure, they put a woman's face on the movement. Women also appreciated being treated as peers by male Health Reformers, who not only educated women about the requirements of health, but encouraged them to exert

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[111] Ibid,187.
[112] Tepid water is a mix of cold water and boiling water.
[113] Donegan, "Hydropathic Highway to Health," 195.

influence beyond the family.[114] Male and female proponents of health reform concurred that they would not achieve all their goals until they reformed women's fashion.

To better appreciate reformers' concerns over women's attire, it is necessary to describe the fashion of the day and its harmful effects on women's lives and bodies. After 1820, and as men's clothes grew simpler (picture three), women's fashion was ever more ornate and fussy (picture four). In the nineteenth-century United States, as in Western Europe, upper- and middle-class women dressed in sharp contrast to male kin.[115] (Compare the women in pictures 3 and 4 to the man in picture 4). Women's clothing displayed their husbands' wealth in two ways. First, dresses were heavily (and expensively) ornamented. Second, wearing a corset and tight lacing was evidence that the wearer did not work. As Helen E. Roberts has explained, women's fashion communicated frivolity, inaction, delicacy, and submissiveness. Furthermore, women's clothing was pastel colored, beribboned, and covered in lace and bows, while the cut of their dresses accentuated their sloping shoulders and silhouettes.[116]

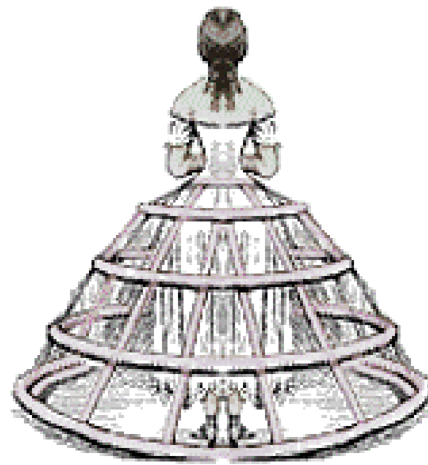
Picture 3[117]

Picture 4[118]

[114] Ibid,194.
[115] Ewen, *Channels of Desire*, 97.
[116] Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave," 555.
[117] http://www.schenz.com/images/ts_costumes/lg1860_wm.jpg (Accessed March 24, 2009). .
[118] http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/9/93/1859-Gazette-Fashions-plate-seabathing-bkd.JPG/250px-1859-Gazette-Fashions-plate-seabathing-bkd.JPG (Accessed March 26, 2009).

Nineteenth-century women's fashion is best known for its overly large skirts and corsets. Dress Reformers targeted both. Women's skirts, including multiple petticoats, could weigh as much as ten to fifteen pounds. Eventually, the lighter crinoline cage (picture 5) replaced heavy petticoats, but dress reformers cautioned that the structure was highly flammable. The *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* of 1867 reported that 3,000 women burned to death annually and another 20,000 were injured because they wore the crinoline.[119]

Picture 5: Crinoline Cage[120]



Dress Reformers also opposed women's long skirts because they swept the street and gathered up dirt as women walked. The weight of women's skirts also drew fire. Abba Goold Woolson mocked women's heavy skirts and implicitly urged women to use common sense when choosing their clothing. She wrote:

> You are weaker than man . . . in physical strength, from lack of exercise in youth, and from an in-door life. Carry, then, about yourself four times as much weight as he; multiply your garments; lengthen your skirts; weigh them down with

[119] *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* 3 no. 3 (1867) quoted in Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave," 557.
[120] http://12thscladiesaux.tripod.com/sitebuildercontent/sitebuilderpictures/dressinglady.gif (Accessed March 26, 2009).

ornament; and gird them all over the shelf of your hips.[121]

Proponents of women's rights and healthier dress were especially critical of the corset. Not only did it harm women's bodies, (see pictures 6 and 7, below), but the corset created the appearance of a well-developed figure with a slender waist. This ideal of feminine beauty explains women's conviction that the corset was an essential fashion purchase.[122]

Fashion historians such as Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen have described the corset as the "lily foot" of nineteenth century American middle-class culture.[123] Like the binding of women's feet, the corset restricted women's mobility and impaired their breathing. In the words of scholar Helen E. Roberts, the corset was "the item that directly and graphically disciplined women to their submissive-masochist role."[124]

The practice of tight lacing entailed more than wearing a corset; it included cinching the waist to twelve to eighteen inches. Roberts has argued that women who wore corsets routinely tight laced. However, fashion historian Valerie Steele has refuted this claim. Building on the scholarship of David Kunzle, Steele has stated, "a woman might lace loosely at home, moderately when she visited friends, and tightly for a ball."[125] This back and forth between scholars is best left for another paper. However, like dress reformers, historians concur that the corset and tight lacing harmed women's health and impeded their movements, thereby contributing to their subordination.

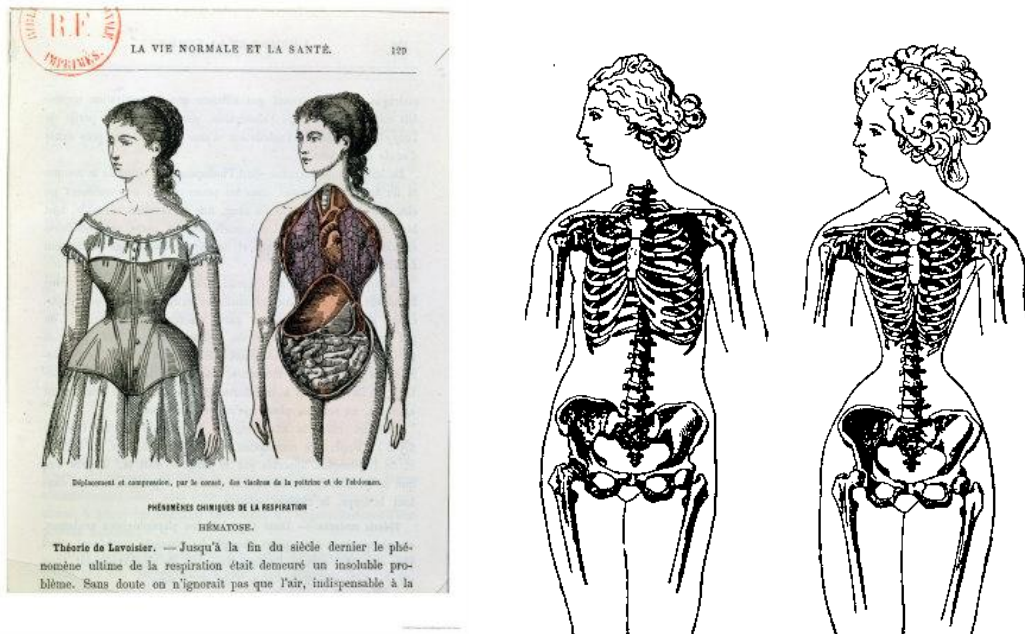
Nineteenth-century Americans seeking to separate women from their corsets faced an uphill battle. Not only was it a requirement of fashion, it signified morality in women. A woman who wore a corset expressed her adherence to prevailing ideals of female beauty and character. If

[121] Woolson, *Dress Reform*, 127.
[122] Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 161.
[123] Stuart, *Channels of Desire*, 99. The "lily foot" was the Chinese practice of binding women's feet. Ibid.
[124] Robert, "The Exquisite Slave," 558.
[125] Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 162.

she did not wear a corset, she risked accusations of impropriety at best and immorality at worst. Moreover, middle- and upper-class men viewed the corset as a marker of women's economic dependency and male affluence. Dress reformers who opposed corset wearing challenged both female submissiveness and the use of women's bodies to communicate male wealth.[126]

Although physicians did not condemn corset wearing, they knew that tight lacing deformed women's bodies. Corsets compressed vital organs in the soft boneless areas of the waist and also displaced the ribs, as pictures 6 and 7 demonstrate.[127]

Pictures 6 and 7: The effects of the corset[128]


LA VIE NORMALE ET LA SANTÉ. 129

Déplacement et compression, par le corset, des viscères de la poitrine et de l'abdomen.

PHÉNOMÈNES CHIMIQUES DE LA RESPIRATION

HÉMATOSE.

Théorie de Lavoisier. — Jusqu'à la fin du siècle dernier le phénomène ultime de la respiration était demeuré un insoluble problème. Sans doute on n'ignorait pas que l'air, indispensable à la

THE DRESS REFORM

The Dress Reform movement encompassed a variety of perspectives, including the idea that American fashions must reflect and sustain civic ideals. For example, many Americans

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[126] Mel Davies. "Corset and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 4 (1982), 622.

[127] Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave," 561,

[128] http://imagecache2.allposters.com/images/BRGPOD/171318.jpg (Accessed March 26, 2008) and http://www.costumes.org/history/18thcent/accessories/underwear/corsetcrush.gif (Accessed March 26, 2008).

called for women's fashion reform as a means of breaking with aristocratic values. Dress Reformers engaged in this particular campaign found an ally in author Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau and other like-minded Americans sought to break free of European influences in every area of life. It is likely that Thoreau would have disagree with fashion historians who theorize that Americans might have accepted Turkish Trousers (picture 8) had the style originated in Paris or London. To the contrary, Thoreau argued that "the head monkey at Paris puts on a traveler's cap, and all the monkeys in America do the same."[129]

It is significant that the Dress Reform movement arose alongside the "American Renaissance." The latter emphasized the importance for the U.S. of defining and defending its values against European influence. For this reason, when Turkish Trousers first appeared in the 1840s, they were nicknamed the "American costume" because there was no style like it in Western Europe. [130] (See picture 8.)

Picture 8: Turkish Trousers, or bloomers[131]

[129] Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New York: Signet Classics, 1999), 19.
[130] See footnote 3 for the different names given Turkish Trousers.
[131] http://www.nps.gov/wori/historyculture/images/Bloomers.jpg (Accessed March 26, 2008).

Most Dress Reformers emphasized the health benefits of fashion reform rather than its conformity with civic ideals. While lecturing on dress reform, Dr. Mercy B. Jackson recommended that clothes be of a material that protected the female body from extremes of temperature. She argued further that a dress should not be so heavy as to fatigue a woman during exercise. Nor should the dress weigh heavily upon the abdomen.[132]According to Jackson, heavy skirts hung from the delicate bones of women's hips and compressed their abdominal muscles, thereby displacing vital organs. Consistent with this, she recommended that the weight of women's apparel be distributed over the shoulders, as in the style of ancient Greeks and Romans. Dr. Jackson also cautioned against tight-fitting clothing that obstructed blood circulation, said to be a source of bodily disturbance among women.[133]

Dress Reformers also urged women to exercise, as did physicians such as Elisha Bartlett who advised, "muscles must be called into frequent and active exercise."[134] During the early nineteenth century, women's exercise consisted of dancing at a ball or taking a stroll in the garden. Their clothing prevented them from doing much more than that. Fashions recommended by Dress Reformers encouraged exercise by freeing women's bodies. The February 1854 issue of the *Water Cure Journal* included a story of a Southern man visiting a water cure establishment in Binghamton, N.Y. When he spied a woman in Turkish Trousers, he asked why she wore them. The doctor in residence said:

> Sir, there are two reason why I request my lady patients to wear them. The first is, in a large majority of those afflicted…. the main cause of their disease is wearing tight, long-waisted dresses. I wish to remove that cause by the use of the more appropriate Bloomer costume, which you see can see cannot readily be

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[132] Mercy B. Jackson, M.D. "Lecture III." in *Dress Reform*, 71.
[133] Ibid, 2.
[134] Elisha Bartlett, M.D. *Obedience to the Law of Health, a Moral Duty,* 8.

> so long-waisted, nor are they so tight. The second reason is, we, as Hydropathists, require our patients to take considerable out-door exercise. How could a lady climb the rugged steep of the mountain, before sunrise, and over wet grass, clothed in one of her long city-fashioned dresses.[135]

As this quote suggests, dress reform held out the promise that women could control their health and change their lives.

Women's rights leaders had long speculated that fashion were a male conspiracy to make women subservient to and dependent on men. According to Susan B. Anthony, nineteenth-century women depended on men for financial support because the law denied women their wages. With legal reform, Anthony argued, women could marry for other than economic reasons and, equally important, they could support themselves.[136] Anthony and other woman's rights activists embraced Turkish trousers because they enabled women to do just that.[137] Implicit in this argument was the idea that women could thrive outside of marriage—an idea that was not lost on critics of Turkish Trousers.

Not all activists wore bloomers for political reasons, but the 'look' soon became a political statement for women activists who wore them. Many of them considered conventional women's fashion, which fostered female passivity, to be a badge of degradation. Over time, Turkish Trousers were indelibly associated with feminism in the public mind.[138]

However, it was not long before commentators criticized Turkish Trousers for deviating from traditional women's dress. Satirical cartoons (picture 9) mocked the costume and hecklers

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[135] "Dress Reform," *The Water Cure Journal*, 17 no. 2, 36.
[136] Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," 391.
[137] Susan B. Anthony and Amelia Bloomer thought that Bloomers or Turkish Trousers gave greater freedom of movement. Ibid.
[138] Kesselman, "The "Freedom Suit," 498.

teased women who dared wear bloomers on the streets. Women activists reluctantly concluded that the social and political costs of wearing Turkish Trousers outweighed the health benefits of this garment.[139]

Picture 9: An example of satirical Cartoon mocking 'Turkish Trousers' or 'Bloomers'[140]

In 1856, leaders of the woman's rights movement concluded that it was prudent to seek reform of women's civil status before challenging contemporary beauty standards. They also worried that popular backlash against Turkish Trousers would lead American audiences to focus more on activists' attire rather than their words. Sadly, one by one, leading activists lengthened their skirts and breathed a collective sigh of relief at being able to move through the world unnoticed and unknown.[141]

While women activists retreated from dress reform, Health Reformers reiterated their commitment to Turkish trousers. However, continuing popular rejection of this style derailed the call for dress reform. Emily Thornwell, author of *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility,*

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[139] Ibid, 500.

[140] In *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (August 1851), cited by Fischer, "Pantalets" and Turkish Trousers", 115. Accessed at http://farm3.static.flickr.com/2077/2215699596_eaf67c9e2a.jpg (Accessed April 29, 2009).

[141] Ibid.

commented on opposition to dress reform, observing, "Motives of Delicacy, as well as regard for health, have been repeatedly urged in vain to enforce the strong necessity of relinquishing such destructive practices."[142] Apparently, American women were prepared to sacrifice their health for respectability.

It may be that Turkish Trousers too close resembled an undergarment usually hidden from view, pantalets (or pantaloons). Scholar Gayle Fisher has explained that versions of the trousers were fashioned after women's pantalets or 'drawers'. Though Turkish Trousers appeared in the late 1840s, Europeans had worn pantalets under dresses since the 1820s. By the 1830s, many American women had followed suit. However, a significant number of female traditionalists objected to pantalets and prohibited their daughters from wearing them.[143]

Despite widespread criticism of Turkish Trousers, a moderate number of women in New England and the Middle states wore them. These were regions where Health Reform had attracted a following. Even women living as far as Colorado and Wyoming had adopted the costume. However, historian Robert Riegel has found that few if any Southern ladies abandoned their flowing skirts.[144]

No matter women's individual reasons for joining the Dress Reform movement, aficionados of Turkish Trousers shared a political identity. As historian Amy Kesselman has explained, "dress reformers saw themselves as participants in a crusade to create an ideal society in which women and men lived in equality with each other, in harmony with nature, and [were]

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[142] Thornwell, Emily. *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility*. (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1857), 118. http://memory.loc.gov/musdi/241/0126.tif (accessed January 6, 2009).

[143] Fischer, "Pantalets" and "Turkish Trousers", 118-120.

[144] Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," 392-393.

blessed by God."[145] As this suggests, Turkish Trousers were much more than a fashion trend, there were a marker of female self-respect and political entitlement.

Given the initially widespread support for Turkish Trousers, one must ask why the style lost favor. Outspoken critics of bloomers included men, conservative women, and guardians of Christianity. Proponents of dress reform responded to each group of adversaries.

Male critics of female dress reform feared that changes in women's attire would make them too free. Throughout the nineteenth century, traditional men echoed W.K. Brooks' contention that autonomous women threatened the civilization. Thus, men disparaged Turkish Trousers, arguing that the garment afforded women freer movement, a traditionally masculine capacity. At stake for these critics was preservation of customary markers of womanhood and manliness.[146]

Male traditionalists also contended that dress reform unsexed not just women, but also men. This view is evident in contemporary satirical cartoons. (See picture 9). If women dressed and acted like men, did it not follow that men would become more feminine? Critics also implied that dress reform imperiled the very structures of American gender roles and family life. Others slyly noted that women who already wore the pants in the family were now advertising their proclivities publicly.[147]

In a parallel argument, conservative women argued that Turkish trousers robbed women of their "mystery and attractiveness when they discarded their flowing robes." Female guardians of American womanhood moaned that female dress reformers undermined women's domestic role and duties, with potentially catastrophic results for the American family.[148]

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[145] Kesselman, "The Freedom Suit", 503.
[146] Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," 391-393.
[147] Ibid, 393.
[148] Ibid, 393.

Religious leaders criticized the Turkish style as blasphemous because it originated in Islamic culture rather than biblical teachings, as dress reformers claimed. In 1874, Abba Goold Woolson pilloried this criticism, pointing out that women in so-called barbaric cultures wore loose, healthful clothing. "But," she added, "cross the boundaries of any civilized and Christian Land and you [will] behold a race of gasping, nervous, and despairing women, who with their compressed ribs, torpid lungs, hobbling feet and bilious stomachs… render themselves and all humanity belonging to them as frail and as uncomfortable as possible."[149]

Although the popularity of Turkish trousers was short-lived, Dress Reform clearly affected American men and women's lives and ideas, their commitment to gender equality aside. This is evident in choices made by women who wore bloomers but did not support the movement for women's rights. They favored this style because it was hygienic and comfortable. However, once the public characterized the wearers of bloomers as female harridans, traditionalists returned this garment to their closets.[150] Unquestionably, many women who appreciated the comforts of Turkish Trousers were unprepared to sacrifice their reputations for physical wellbeing.

Responses to Dress Reform also reveal the depth of nineteenth-century anxieties about changing gender roles. In an era of social, economic, and political disequilibrium, many nineteenth-century men and women viewed the wearing of Turkish Trousers as the opening salvo in a war on American manners.

CHALLENGING THE IDEAL WOMAN THROUGH FASHION

While the Dress Reform movement did not have a lasting impact on women's fashion, its leaders directly challenged the attributes of true women, including piety, submissiveness, and

[149] Woolson, "Lecture V", 132.
[150] Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Right," 394-395.

domesticity. Nineteenth-century conceptions of womanhood were analogous to a brick archway, with piety being the keystone. A challenge to female domesticity or submissiveness was, in turn, a threat to female piety. Dress Reform challenged each of these ideals in turn. However, the proponents of fashion reform did not subvert the requirement that women be chaste. As picture 8 has shown, Turkish trousers upheld the modesty of women by covering them from the neck down. As is discussed below, dress reformers' upholding of female purity ensured that the movement retained support among Americans who otherwise would have rejected its tenets.

As we have seen, prevailing wisdom held that women were the weaker of the sexes—a belief that women's big skirts and corsets reinforced. Woman's rights leaders and health reformers alike understood that healthier fashions would help women to be active rather than passive agents in their lives. However, women who exercised their right to wear loose, practical clothing called into question their willingness to submit to male authority. For these reasons, many construed Dress Reform as a subversion of true women's duties to their fathers, brothers, and husbands.

Most nineteenth-century Americans considered a self-supporting woman to be the antithesis of domesticity. Susan B. Anthony bucked tradition when she called for dress reform, which she described as a precondition for women's economic independence. Her argument was not an implicit attack on the institution of marriage. Rather, Anthony and other like-minded activists conceived of marriage as a joining of peers, not as a means for women to secure their maintenance. Female reformers desired equal footing with male kin as a matter of self-respect and justice. Traditionalists countered that advocacy of dress reform and women's rights had the effect, intended or not, of making gender norms susceptible to wholesale renegotiation. The

majority of nineteenth-century Americans feared the repercussions of increasing female independence.

Dress and health reformers also challenged traditional conceptions of female piety. Custom had it that women’s primary duties were to God and family. Therefore, secular activities that encroached on these obligations were objectionable. Middle-class women who embraced literary clubs and reform activities raised the specter of autonomous females who rejected the authority of man and God. For these reasons, most clergy did not endorse Dress Reform from the pulpit. In the nineteenth century, policies opposed by clergymen were deemed a violation of church teachings.

Clergy may have feared Dress Reform, but the movement’s tenets enabled women to experience God in new ways. Previously, women experienced their faith within the boundaries of their congregations and under the tutelage of clergy. Reformers’ advocacy of exercise and healthier living encouraged women to look for the divine within themselves, among other women, and in the larger world. Inevitably, the Health and Dress Reform movements were controversial precisely because proponents of each asked women to think for themselves, act for themselves, and take a stand for female independence. Opponents of Dress Reform charged its leaders with encouraging women to exercise masculine liberties and to seek fulfillment outside the home and church.

A SAD FATE FOR WOMEN

Though the Dress Reform movement changed the lives of women who participated in it, the campaign did not alter the majority of American women’s lives. The heyday of Turkish Trousers lasted from 1848 and died out in 1856. Even at the peak of its popularity, bloomers

were never a mainstream fashion. By the 1860s, dress reformers had become isolated from both woman's rights activists and hydropathists. With the passage of time, advocates of women's rights remembered Turkish Trousers as a brief and inconsequential development in the struggle for equality of the sexes.[151] Editors at the *Water-Cure Journal* also surmised that the Dress Reform movement had lost steam, as seen by the publication's lack of reporting after 1854 on fashion reform.[152] Abba Goold Woolson took stock of Dress Reform and remarked, "All previous attempts at dress-reform had been failures, because they sought to accomplish an immediate result by ill-considered and inadequate means." The most notable failure was Turkish Trousers, which most considered too radical a change in women's clothing, or so Woolson concluded.[153]

The Civil War was the final blow to the Dress Reform movement. In wartime, Americans had not the time, energy, or resources for reform causes. Instead, they focused on military campaigns for their cause. Moreover, soldiers gone to war romanticized women not as reformers, but as pure and noble beacons for Northern and Southern civilizations. As a result, leaders of the warring states instructed women to maintain the home and adhere to the ideals of true womanhood, for doing so was an act of patriotism. At a time when Americans responded to crisis by reinvigorating the ideals of true womanhood, calls for equality of the sexes found few takers.[154]

A revival of interest in dress reform occurred after the 1870s; however, its proponents emphasized healthier living rather than directly attack women's fashion. Woolson advised her

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[151] Riegel, Women's Clothes and Women's Rights, 393
[152] Kesselman, "The "Freedom Suit," 506.
[153] Abba Goold Woolson, *Dress Reform,* viii. Woolson thought that women did not embrace the trousers because they looked odd. Furthermore, the only way women would abandon fashionable styles for a healthier look was if the latter's restyling was subtle. The Turkish Trouser was far from subtle. Ibid.
[154] Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," 395.

readers that "[w]hat is needed . . . is not to assail Fashion, but to teach Hygiene, - to awaken women to a consciousness of the injuries that follow the wearing of their present garments. . . ." In keeping with this principle, Woolson advised women " to modify . . . [their] tight, heavy, and complicated style of apparel [so] as to increase the strength, ability, and happiness of themselves and of their children."[155]

A sustained dress reform movement took off after 1890 owing to an increase in sports. Tennis, ice-skating, and, most of all, bicycling took hold of the country. Bicycling was especially popular among women because it gave them an unprecedented autonomy. Women wishing to enjoy the mobility afforded by bicycling had to change their dress. More vigorous sports, including basketball, cricket, hockey, and lacrosse, also attracted women.[156] No longer encumbered by earlier ideas about respectable fashion, women gladly wore shorter and lighter skirts, loosened their garments, and retired their corsets for all but the most formal occasions.[157]

Though Dress Reform was a short-lived and often ridiculed, women who wore Turkish Trousers found them liberating. Their daughters and granddaughters would also seek freedom through fashion reform. By 1920, America's 'New had won the vote, served their country in wartime industries, and had shaken off many of the most restrictive ideals of nineteenth-century womanhood. Though fashion reform played a negligible part in feminine emancipation, the expansion of women's rights and roles after 1900 had achieved dress reform at a scale unimagined by earlier feminists.[158]

[155] Ibid, xiv-xv.
[156] Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave," 567.
[157] Ibid, 568.
[158]Riegel, Women's Clothes and Women's Rights, 401

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