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Practical Dress and the Women's Movement

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Women's dress, notably the Bloomer, had a significant influence on the women's movement of the mid-1800s. Created by Amelia Bloomer, the garment resembled loose-fitting pants, allowing the woman to move about in a less-restricted fashion. As it deviated from the traditional styles of Victorian dress, the Bloomer was seen as a more progressive step towards women being less restricted by their established roles in society. However, though the Bloomer was embraced throughout the country, it jeopardized a woman's credibility should she seek to voice her stance on the issue of the women's movement. Despite its practicality and popularity, the Bloomer would come to be renounced by figures such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton as well as affect progressive communities, such as the Oneida, because of its controversial role in the United States.

Traditional styles of dress emblematic of gender roles were reflective of the Victorian era, and typically required women to lug around up to fifteen pounds of clothing, consisting of corsets and petticoats, which greatly restricted their movement. Because this style of dress was so embedded within the standard of feminine beauty, women were considered to be the "bachelor's dream" if they adhered to this standard, as well as reflect-

ed a quality of submissiveness and domesticity within the home.¹ Women were expected to be in the domestic sphere, serving the man, and their clothing clearly reflected that role. Dr. W.E. Coale, a respected physician during the mid-nineteenth century, made the statement that it was the women's clothing of the day that reinforced their societal place in the home. By physically restricting their movement, they were consequentially homebound, and less likely in the long run to move outside of the home to participate in society.²

From the women's perspective, their opinions illustrate the discontentment with their standard uniform of multiple skirts and constricting corsets. Not only was the superfluous clothing a hassle to put on, take off, and travel in, but according to leading medical personnel during that time, the clothing was also believed to have been the cause of declining health of women roughly between the ages of eighteen and the mid-twenties. Dr. Coale commented in the Buffalo Medical Journal on the health issues that were gradually becoming prominent by stating, "We look upon the mischief thus done as no whit less than that effected by tight lacing; but, if anything, greater for it is more slightly done. Friends do not see, and do not understand, the evil at work, and, therefore, can give no warning word. The symptoms themselves commence so gradually, and point so indirectly to the cause, as to excite no alarm in the victim. Exercise, which ought to invigorate, soon fatigues and becomes distasteful. Ascending a flight of stairs, or stooping to lift a comparatively light

1 "The Bachelor's Dream," *The Lady's Gift, Souvenir for all Seasons*, 1849, 37.

2 Coale, W. E., "A Cause of Uterine Displacements," *The Water-Cure Journal* [New York, NY] Nov. 1851.

weight, instantly loads the hips with a burden that can scarcely be borne.” But despite the Victorian style of dress being linked to medical issues, any other form of dress that did not adhere to the Victorian standard shocked society. Though these health consequences were prominent, making the immediate jump into reform dress was not seen as ideal to everyone. In addition, the Victorian style of dress had maintained its foothold as the standard of beauty for centuries, and anything viewed as different was immediately thought of as a deviation from expectation. A multitude of people in society expressed uneasiness towards the subject, “Most women and men seemed incapable of imagining clothing that was not gender specific. There was also eroticism inherent in the idea of women in pants. The language of dress in the nineteenth century made “men’s pants” into charged, even sexualized words. Ironically, euphemisms, such as “inexpressibles,” “unwhisperables,” and “don’t mentions,” which were intended to allow polite society to avoid the suggestion of sex, did just the opposite.”³ Such concepts illustrated the fears felt by the public as well as denoted the deep-seated sexual connotations ingrained within the specific dresses. Because the fear of mentioning the “unmentionable” was so prominent, it explains why a dramatic change from the Victorian style of dress to something more practical, resembling that of men’s clothing and thus denoting sexual connotation, would be such a problem.

Historian Gayle Fischer points out, “Mainstream society did not want women to wear men’s pants. How-

3 Gayle Fischer, “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish trowsers’: Designing freedom in the mid-nineteenth-century United States.” *Feminist Studies* 23, no. 1: 110. MAS Ultra - School Edition, EBSCOhost (accessed April 28, 2013).

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College ever, it is difficult to determine if the general public's resistance to female trousers stemmed more from the fear that women would seize male power or from the fear that pants-clad women would be unabashedly "sexy." Most of the diatribes against reform dress printed for mass circulation stressed the opinion that women would somehow become coarsened, more "male," if they wore bifurcated garments. Only a year after the introduction of the "bloomers," cartoons began to appear that depicted one of the biggest fears about reform clothing—that men would become feminine. Numerous articles and essays charged that if women wore the pants then it would logically follow that men would wear dresses and assume the female characteristic of dependence."⁴

The concept of women potentially assuming the power and authority of that held by a man was a fearful one to the men in society. The women's dress was not only physically restrictive, but symbolically as well. Should women don restrictive clothing, then they would consequentially be restricted in social and political matters as well. But should she not be restricted by clothing and instead take up a more freeing form of dress, then the woman would be able to seize the opportunities without fear of being held back. As those who opposed this possibility came to realize its potential occurrence, the issue of dress reform was seen as a step in the direction of progress.

In 1851, in an attempt to deviate from the standard of Victorian dress, Amelia Bloomer began wearing clothing that consisted of baggy pants with a simple knee-length skirt on top of it. Bloomer would later state, "As soon as it became known that I was wearing the new

4 Ibid.,

dress, letters came pouring in upon me by the hundreds from women all over the country making inquiries about the dress and asking for patterns—showing how ready and anxious women were to throw off the burden of long, heavy skirts.”⁵ As she began to encourage the women around her to take up the more practical form of dress, the style that she donned grew in popularity, and became associated with her name, Bloomer. Amelia Bloomer was fully aware of the connotations surrounding the new and controversial style of dress. After Bloomer attended the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848, she became inspired to act in favor of the women’s movement. As she received encouragement from her husband, Dexter Bloomer, editor and co-owner of the *Seneca Falls County Courtier*, Amelia Bloomer created her own newspaper, *The Lily*, intent on speaking on behalf of those in favor of the women’s movement. She declared, “It is woman that speaks through *The Lily*. It is upon an important subject, too, that she comes before the public to be heard. Intemperance is the great foe to her peace and happiness.”

From 1849 to 1854, Bloomer used her newspaper as a mouthpiece for the endorsement of women’s rights. Bloomer commented on the purpose of the newspaper by stating “*The Lily* was the first paper published devoted to the interests of woman and as far as I know, the first one owned, edited, and published by a woman... It was a needed instrumentality to spread abroad the truth of the new gospel to women, and I could not withhold my

5 “Amelia Bloomer Biography,” Biography: True Story, Last modified 2003, (Accessed April 29, 2013).

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College hand to stay the work I had begun... “⁶ In one such article published in 1851, Bloomer publically assailed the Victorian style of dress, claiming that it was a simply another way that the man intended to keep the woman inferior.⁷ Later historians would write on the subject of her outspoken views impacting women across the nation during the women’s movement, as Bloomer would raise issues such as women’s suffrage, as well as dress reform. With encouragement from Elizabeth Cady Stanton, with whom she had immediately fostered a friendship upon meeting, Bloomer was able to spread awareness of the cause for the women’s movement. Stanton, who would contribute numerous pieces and editorials and thoroughly support Bloomer’s new style of dress, commented on the day that she met Amelia Bloomer, “How well I remember the day! George Thompson and William Lloyd Garrison having announced an anti-slavery meeting in Seneca Falls, Miss Anthony came to attend it. These gentleman were my guests. Walking home after the adjournment, we met Mrs. Bloomer and Miss Anthony, on the corner of the street, waiting to greet us. There she stood, with her good earnest face and genial smile, dressed in gray delaine, hat and all the same color, relieved with pale blue ribbons, the perfection of neatness and sobriety. I liked her thoroughly, and why I did not at once invite her home with me to dinner I do not know... “⁸ Though this may seem insig-

6 Solomon, Martha, *A Voice of Their Own*, “The Women Suffrage Press, 1840-1910”; The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa and London.

7 Amelia Bloomer, “Female Attire,” *The Lily*, Feb 1852.

8 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, *History of Women Suffrage* (Rochester, N.Y.: Charles Mann, 1889), 2: 470.

nificant, it does reflect Stanton's sincere feelings towards her friend, thus denoting the serious circumstances surrounding Stanton's choice to give up the costume of a dear friend.

Though she had never intended to associate the alternative costume with the advancement of women in society, the problems that the Victorian style of dress presented proved to be too severe to ignore. The more practical style of costume fashioned as such: "The freedom costume's soft, curving pantaloons proved to be the most "feminine" of the reform trouser designs. The women's fights leaders gathered the hem of their pants "into a band and buttoned round the ankle," or they created what they thought prettier, a "gathered or plaited up" hem which had been "trimmed to suit the taste of the wearer." 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 and the resulting "look" was one we commonly associate with "harem" pants and seldom imagine men wearing. No matter how "feminine" the costume, the connection between the women's fights agitators and reform dress led critics to denounce it as masculine-or to level charges of licentiousness." Fischer points out that even though there were those that saw a necessity for a dramatic change in dress, "Most of nineteenth-century society, including dress-reforming women, thought male dress superior to female clothing and freely expressed this opinion. Dress reformers, however, wanted to reform female dress for comfortable fit, physical well-being, religious beliefs, women's rights, or work opportunities-not to blur distinctions between the sexes.

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Whether male clothing actually was more comfortable, convenient, or “natural” does not really matter. Trousers represented physical freedom. And some women imagined being freed from societal restraints as well.”⁹ Her entrance onto the stage amongst others, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, both influenced the movement, as well as shaped her own views of the issues at of the time. With the practicality of the new costume supported by the emerging causes for the women’s movement, the Bloomer’s success crossed national boundaries, as well as proved to be widely popular with the women in the United States.

As the Bloomer was widely endorsed by women as a superior style of dress, its renown grew on a national scale. Women across the United States were making public exclamations as to how they felt that they were much less restricted now that they possessed a more practical style of dress. Mary B. Williams publicly announced her preference of the Bloomer as opposed to that of previous traditional styles, and compared and contrasted the two forms of dress in *The Water-Cure Journal*.¹⁰ Williams was not the only one to voice her claim—elitist Lady Chesterfield expressed similar notions towards the new costume, as well as did many other women from different geographic locations. Another, Sarah Selby, declared in *The Water-Cure Journal* that because of the freeing style of dress, she felt like “an un-caged bird!”¹¹ The new practical style of dress proved to catch on nation wide and was

9 Fischer, Gayle V. 1997. “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish trowsers.’

10 Mary B. Williams, “The Bloomer and Weber Dresses: A Glance at Their Respective Merits and Advantages,” *The Water-Cure Journal* [New York, NY] August 1851.

11 Selby, Sarah E. “A Bloomer to Her Sisters.” *The Water-Cure Journal*, June 1853.

endorsed by the Boston Commonwealth as well as those that resided on the west coast of the United States.¹² In a monumental step forward in publicizing the Bloomer even further, the Dress Reform Convention of 1857 was held in New York. Not only was this a public declaration by a multitude of women of the preference of practical dress, but it also illustrated the simultaneous agenda of women's suffrage—as many of those that advocated for simpler dress were also interested in the advancement of women in society.¹³ With dress reform and the call for the woman's right to vote together in the same place, the two agendas reflected the intention to exist symbiotically. Consequentially, this would result in the advocates for women's rights and liberation to fully embrace the Bloomer and the notion of practical dress. By performing this action, women were publically proclaiming that they intended to stake claims outside of the domestic sphere.

Despite the usefulness of the new garments and their practicality, there was much opposition to their popularity by more conservative women and a good portion of men. A multitude of people looked down upon the costume as a joke, and many considered it to be an example of women denouncing their femininity as well as their role in society. Women that took part in dressing “like a man” were seen as a “third sex,” male, or not to have any gender whatsoever.¹⁴ Not only were these women to be thought of in this manner, but some would even go as far

12 “Illustrations of Physiology,” *Water-Cure Journal* [New York, NY] Feb 1852, Vol. XIII No. 2.

13 “Report of the Proceedings of the Dress Reform Convention Held at Canastota, N.Y.,” *The Sibyl*, February 1857.

14 “Woman's Rights,” *American Whig Review*, October 1848: 374-75.

as to proclaim that endorsing the new style of dress was to take on a masculine quality, as well as to undergo accusations of prostitution and licentiousness.¹⁵ The lingering connotations that suggested sexual implications because the Bloomer resembled pants continued to play a role in its perception. Naturally as a result, all that came into contact with it did not take the costume seriously.

Even though the bloomer was widely popular, many men made it clear that they saw it as a complete joke—and took opportunities to openly mock the new style of dress. When Amelia Bloomer visited England in 1851, after her famous dress had established a foothold, a large crowd met her upon her arrival, and received her after much anticipation. As the *New York Times* would later report, the crowd consisted of a large portion of men—outnumbering the women by a margin of five to one, who were namely there to mock her and her costume.¹⁶ Historians reflect that those who opposed the new costume mercilessly aimed to erase it from the public eye: “Antagonists of women’s rights dress reformers expended an enormous amount of energy to get the women back in long dresses. Caricatures of cigar-smoking, trouser-wearing feminists proved to be one of the more popular forms of attack; the image of the masculine feminist became synonymous with the image of the “ugly feminist.” The barrage eventually wore away at the women’s rights advocates’ resolve and contributed to the collapse of dress

15 “A Lecture on Woman’s Dresses,” *The Water-Cure Journal*, August 1851.

16 “Bloomerism in England.” *New York Times*, 17 Oct 1851, Page 4. Web. 9 Mar. 2013.

reform among them.”¹⁷

As a result, because the Bloomer was not always taken seriously, and was increasingly shown in a negative light, those involved in the women’s movement that donned the garment suffered damage to their credibility. Since what they wore was not taken seriously, they were unable to credibly stand with their cause. In accordance with a lack of seriousness, the new costume resembled “Turkish dress,” which was met by the public with particularly negative connotations. Fischer provides the perspectives of a flurry of historians, “Mervat Hatem concluded that Orientalism worked against European women because they considered their situations so much better than Eastern women’s oppression that they were unable to articulate or understand a different form of subjugation-the one under which they lived. Suvendrini Perera observed Western women consciously appropriating Eastern images to use as representations of the oppression of Western women, yet these same women failed to recognize the suffering of Eastern women as significant. Judy Mabro noticed that for centuries Europeans had been fascinated and repelled by their image of what the veil was and what it hid. These scholars focus on written words or the images of veils and harems-which obsessed Western observers-and they pay little attention to Western women in Eastern clothing or adaptations of Eastern styles.”¹⁸

17 Alma Lutz, Susan B. Anthony: Rebel, Crusader, Humanitarian (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), 35; Blackwell, 104-13; Mabel A. Potter, “How Susan B. Anthony Keeps Young,” *Woman’s Home Companion* (September 1904): 46-47; Arlene Fanale, “Susan B. Anthony and Bloomerism” *New Women’s Times*, 15 July-15 Aug. 1975, 6, 10; “Men’s Rights Convention at -,” 268-73.

18 Fischer, Gayle V. 1997. “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish trowsers.’

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The negative connotations expressed by those of the time are indicated by the following: “Lady Mary Wortley Montague, who lived in the Middle East while her husband served as an ambassador, wrote in 1717 of the freedom she enjoyed wearing her pants “here, within the closely-guarded chambers of the harem.” There is a hint of the erotic in her writings, suggesting that women in trousers could not be seen outside protected walls because they might arouse men. In a letter to her sister, Montague insisted that “the first part of my dress is a pair of drawers, very full, that reach to my shoes, and conceal the legs more modestly than your petticoats.””¹⁹ As well as taking on the characteristics of a man’s dress, the costume was also associated with Islam, which encouraged more negative feedback from critics.²⁰ Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony wrote years later on the subject of giving up on the garment by saying, “No sooner did a few brave conscientious women adopt the bifurcated costume, an imitation in part of the Turkish style, that [sic] the press at once turned its guns on” the costume.²¹ Not only was the association with the East an issue, but again, the pantaloons also implied a sexual connotation when worn by women, “The veil and the ferace (a long, loose robe) captivated Western observers more than any other article of Eastern women’s clothing. These articles also suggested eroticism, because they hid the female face and form behind drapery and hinted at the sexual pleasures that could

19 “The Toilette in Turkey,” *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book* 45 (January 1852): 45.

20 Fischer, Gayle V. 1997. “Pantalets’ and Turkish trowsers.’

21 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joselyn Gage, *History of Women Suffrage* (Rochester, N.Y.: Charles Mann, 1889), 2: 470.

be found beneath the flowing cloth.”²² The abandonment of the traditional form of dress was also viewed as a religious conflict. Because it was viewed as a question of morality, the dress was seen to interfere with the foundations of faith, as stated, “In 1853 Mrs. L.G. Abell questioned the morality of women who could give up the dress “civilization and Christianity have so kindly given” them. Abell did not limit her criticism to women dressed in “Eastern” dress but saw women in “male attire” and women wearing “Turkish costume” on the same continuum.”²³ Due to the assault on the garment from multiple entities, those that were associated with the women’s movement did not continue to either encourage it or associate it with their cause. Though Stanton personally favored the garment in lieu of the traditional style of dress, for the sake of the women’s movement, public opinion of the Bloomer left her no option but to revert back to a style of dress that could have been taken seriously.

This decision proved to anger some, particularly Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s cousin and fellow reformer, Gerrit Smith. In his letters to her following the decision, he made attempts to persuade her otherwise. As he emphasized that because the movement sought to free women from restriction, the best place to advocate for change should start with the dress. In one particular letter he claimed, “I admit, that the dress of woman is not the primal cause of her helplessness and degradation. That cause is to be found in the false doctrines and sentiments, of which the dress is the outgrowth and symbol. On the

22 Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 232-33.

23 Fischer, Gayle V. 1997. “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish trowsers.’

other hand however, these doctrines and sentiments would never have become the huge bundle they now are, and they would probably have all languished, and perhaps all expired, but for the dress.”²⁴ Smith was not the only one to demonstrate disappointment in the renouncing of the simpler dress. Members of the progressive Oneida Community would come to question the dedication of the advocates for the movement since they were unable to ignore the criticisms of the public. These sentiments reveal that although the association did not last, the Bloomer still proved to play an impact on the underlying causes of the women’s movement.

As the Bloomer, and similar kinds of dress, proved to be a mark of progressive thinking, the new ideas of where exactly a woman should stand in society emerged. A particularly notable group during this time was the Oneida Community. A religious commune residing in Oneida, New York, the community proved to use the more practical style of dress when it came to the uniform of the woman. While the Oneida Community sought to emphasize the purity of the woman as well as keep her in the assigned gender role, the women’s dress in the community was particularly progressive for the age. Women in the community were encouraged to embrace their gender role, with one of the main goals to maintain a state of innocence at all times. The leader of the Oneida Community, John Humphrey Noyes, informed his followers that in order to keep up a youthful appearance, one had to be sure to maintain their attractiveness. Fischer illus-

24 Gerrit Smith to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 1 Dec. 1855, Gerrit Smith Collection, Syracuse University Library, EBSCOhost (accessed April 28, 2013).

trates, “He pointed out that the “virgin state” had proven to be the most attractive condition for women and recommended that women “find a way to keep [them]selves in a virgin state all the time.”[69] Dressing like children seems a logical way for women to fulfill both criteria-looking young and virginal.”²⁵ In addition to maintaining youthful appearances, women in the Oneida Community served as equal members in their society. Because the women were seen to be an important factor in the fostering of the community’s values, their endorsement of the practical style of dress stemmed from the need for the women to be able to contribute, as well as feel a sense of equality. Known as the “Oneida short dress,” the clothing that the women of the community donned was actually reminiscent of children’s clothing, emphasizing the innocence and purity of the woman. As they donned this simpler dress, they raised the question as to why a garment that was accepted in a child’s younger years would become a symbol of immodesty when she entered into her adolescent years.²⁶ Taking it a step further in order to emphasize the childlike factor, “Women at Oneida augmented the childlike reform dress by cutting their hair, reassured of the propriety of the act by Noyes. He encouraged the women to cut off their hair in the “simple mode of little girls, down in the neck,” and adult Oneida women thus ended up looking like little girls with short dresses

25 Fischer, Gayle V. 1997. “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish trowsers.’

26 Harriet Holton Noyes to Tirzah, 28 Dec. [1881], Oneida Community Collection, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, New York.

The Corinthian: The Journal of Student Research at Georgia College and short hair.”²⁷

According to the Oneida principles, because women were viewed as important for their roles in society, they were seen as equal to men. Though equality was fostered, gender roles remained. It was the man’s responsibility to “take care of her [woman], and see that she is ‘holy and without blame.’”²⁸ Because the women strove to uphold their gender roles, to act against them would associate them with the much louder women’s activist, which they opposed. Consequentially, because the principles of Oneida did not align with those that advocated the women’s movement, the Oneida Community did not wish to be associated with them. However, despite their desire to remain separate from the advocates, the community was nonetheless subject to public criticism for their women’s dress, as pointed out by Fischer, “Whatever the motivation, pantaletted Oneida women experienced the same negative reactions that plagued the women’s rights dress reformers. The community members agreed that the harassment women experienced when wearing the short dress outside the security of the commune had to be dealt with. As a result, whenever Oneida females had to travel in the world, they wore long dresses indistinguishable from those worn by most middle-class women. An exposed bifurcated garment worn by women, no matter what its source or how it was made, angered the public.”²⁹ The resulting criticism that followed the Oneida Commu-

27 “Woman’s Character,” *The Circular*, 14 Jan. 1854, 72; “A Communal Journal,” *The Circular*, 19 Mar. 1863, 12; Constance Noyes Robertson, ed., *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1970), 297-98.

28 “Woman’s Rights,” *The Circular*, 28 Feb. 1856.

29 Fischer, Gayle V. 1997. “‘Pantalets’ and ‘Turkish trowsers.’

nity for the women's use of practical dress was likely to have fostered more resentment towards the women's dress reform advocates, as the community was grouped with them in the eyes of the public simply because they took part in the simpler form of dress.

Though the Oneida Community may have shared in the desire to wear less restrictive clothing, they did not share in the desire to completely abolish the gender roles of women and men. Their progressive thinking on this subject stopped at the clothing. It is, however, notable that while they may not have been as progressive in this area as one might be led to believe, they were much more forward-thinking in other areas. For example, the Oneida Community was known to have taken part in practices known as "complex marriages," in which every man was married to every woman, and vice versa, and the process of "male continence," which was essentially a form of birth control.³⁰ Because the community was in favor of practices such as these, which were arguably just as, if not more, controversial as the dress reform movement, then the question remains as to why they preferred not to be associated with the movement. As the Oneida Community viewed the progression of the women's movement, not only did they express disdain, but they also questioned the commitment of the movement's advocates—as the advocates later reverted back to traditional dress. In addition, though the Oneida Community endorsed the idea of women's equality, they did not approve of the rebelling against gender roles, which was on the agenda of the women's movement. Consequentially, the Oneida

30 Randall Hillebrand, "The Oneida Community," New York History Net, accessed April 28, 2013.

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Community chose not to stand with the women's movement, as it proved to be in conflict with their fundamental values.

Though the goals of dress reform were optimistic in their efforts to promote equality to women, with the Bloomer serving as representation, such efforts proved to be hampered. Despite progressive thinkers that comprised the Oneida Community donning the gender-neutral clothing, the negative feedback provided by the public, as well as the mockery that coincided with the garment led to the ultimate denouncement of the costume by those that advocated the women's movement. Because the negative connotations surrounding the practical style of dress were so serious, even those that had previously shown unabashed endorsement proved to eventually give up of the more practical style of dress. Due to the social standards and gender stereotypes that were ingrained within the foundations of the mid-nineteenth century, the Bloomer was not able to represent the women's movement for an extended period of time.

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