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**Title**

Medical Bloomers and Irrational Rationalists: Pathologising the Woman in Trousers

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**Abstract**

This essay examines the troubling figure of the trouser-wearing woman within the visual field of mid-nineteenth-century medical culture. It explores what happens to the social body when trousers – emblematically associated with male rational thought – are adopted by women, a population deemed to be inherently irrational, characterised by weakness of will and predisposed to nervous malady. Located at the intersection of dress history, gender studies and the history of medicine, it draws on an extensive body of archival materials, including newspapers, periodicals and medical journals and treatises, to anatomise hitherto unexplored connections between trousers and tropes of hysterical contagion, pathological imitation and nervous disorder. The first part of the essay considers the nervous register characterising accounts of ‘rational dress’ and the Bloomer costume in the periodical press and medical journals in the early 1850s, paying particular attention to the reorganisation of gendered categories of ‘rationality’ and ‘irrationality’. The second part of the essay explores the return of bifurcation in the 1870s and 1880s, focusing on the ‘divided skirt’ and notions of nervous mimicry. The essay argues that the woman in trousers not only troubled the distinction between the public and private spheres, but, more disconcertingly, confounded the relationship between the psychic and somatic realms. Moving across and between mid-nineteenth-century identity categories, the trouser-wearing woman posed an intolerable threat to the public nerves.

### **Bio details**

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### **Text of article**

A *New York Times* editorial of May 27 1876 identifies a ‘curious nervous disorder peculiar to women’, of which ‘an abnormal and unconquerable thirst for trousers’ is the most visible symptom.<sup>1</sup> Drawn in the image of the female vampire, the trouser-wearing woman is cast as a peculiarly Gothic figure: her appetite for the forbidden is voracious and she inspires horror in all those who behold her.<sup>2</sup> The editorial proposes that this strange malady, ‘which is vulgarly called “dress reform”’, is not transmitted directly between bodies, but is nonetheless considered to be harmful to those women in whom the desire to don trousers remains otherwise dormant. It is in this respect, it continues, that ‘the disease betrays its near relationship to *hysteria*’.<sup>3</sup> Playing on the precarious distinction between physiological and psychological disturbance, the *New York Times* editorial appropriates the emergent discourse of hysterical contagion to conjure an image of the trouser-clad dress reformer as a pathological subject inclined to nervous excitability and unable to appease her perverse sartorial desires – for no woman of ‘normal state of mind’ would exhibit herself in trousers. By way of treatment, the editorial advocates an ‘experiment of satiating the patient’, who

should be dressed ‘exclusively in trousers’ and confined to a room where the walls, windows and floors are ‘covered with trousers of the brightest patterns’. Her ‘unconquerable thirst’ for trousers thus assuaged, she would be seized by an overwhelming aversion towards the ‘pervading garment’ and ‘beg for the skirts of sanity and the petticoats of her earlier and happier days’.<sup>4</sup> With the vestimentary articulation of her femininity restored, the dress reformer’s appalling hysterical symptoms would be subdued and her threat to the sanitary health of the public body forestalled.

The relationship between gender and mid-nineteenth-century dress reform has been a productive site for scholarly research and analysis. Fashion theorists and dress historians, such as Gayle V. Fischer, Carol Mattingly, Patricia A. Cunningham, Julia Petrov, Ana Stevenson and Don Chapman, amongst others, have explored in fascinating detail the various ways in which the trousered woman troubled the firmly held association between ‘bifurcation’ and ‘masculine dominance in the public sphere’.<sup>5</sup> Attention has also been paid to health reform and sartorial practices, especially in relation to hydropathic medicine; and, more recently, Catherine Mas has explored reform dress as a social and bodily ‘technology’.<sup>6</sup> The present essay intervenes in this history by re-contextualising the vexed figure of the woman in trousers within the visual field of medical culture and, in particular, tropes of nervous disorder. It takes the *New York Times* editorial’s dramatic amplification of the language of health and hygiene, of sanity and the sanitary (both are derived from the Latin *sanus*, meaning healthy), as a starting point for examining the intricate ways in which pathological tropes inflect – or infect – popular responses to ‘rational dress’ in Britain and America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Located at the intersection of dress history, history of medicine and gender studies, it draws on an extensive body of archival materials, including newspapers, periodicals and medical journals and treatises, to anatomise hitherto unexplored connections between trousers and tropes of hysterical contagion, pathological imitation and

nervous disorder.

Athena Vrettos argues in her brilliant study of psychosomatic illness and the ideological inconsistencies of Victorian culture that the Victorian middle classes ‘negotiated their relationship to a changing society’ by ‘converting cultural anxieties into somatic categories of self- and social definition’.<sup>7</sup> By placing trousers in the wider context of nineteenth-century discussions of the nervous body, this essay is concerned with elucidating the complex role played by clothing and practices of dress in at once ordering and unsettling the precarious borderlines of mind and body that informed the ideology of the separate spheres. Referred to repressively in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as ‘inexpressibles’, ‘ineffables’, ‘unmentionables’ and ‘inexplicables’ (amongst other similar terms), trousers inhabit a particularly unstable place in the language of clothing.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as this analysis suggests, far from withholding signification, trousers are peculiarly subject – and resistant – to attempts to fix their meaning. It is this contradiction that renders trousers a pertinent site for exploring the precarious boundaries of nineteenth-century categories of identity and, indeed, the ideological structures of categorical thinking. Thus, this essay asks: What happens to the social body when trousers – an indisputable emblem of male rational thought – are adopted by women, a population deemed to be inherently *irrational*, characterised by weakness of will and predisposed to nervous malady?

The first part of the essay contextualises discussions of ‘rational dress’ in relation to mid-nineteenth-century anti-fashion discourses, dress reform and the appearance of the ‘Bloomer costume’. Foregrounding the nervous register permeating popular accounts of ‘Bloomerism’ in the newspaper and periodical press in the early 1850s, it explores the complex, and often contradictory, reorganisation of categories of ‘rationality’ and ‘irrationality’ marking responses to the reform dress proposed by women’s rights advocates. Turning to contemporaneous discussions of dress reform in *The Lancet* and the *British*

*Medical Journal*, it also examines anxieties about ‘medical Bloomerism’ and the implications of women’s professional infiltration of the medical sphere. The last section of the essay considers the return of bifurcation in the 1870s and 1880s, focusing especially on the ‘divided skirt’ and the threat posed by this duplicitous garment to male visual authority and the perceived health of the public body. This part of the discussion attends in particular to the trope of nervous disorder as ‘a troublesome middle category in the comfortable duality of body and mind’.<sup>9</sup> By re-reading the trousered woman at the intersection of cultural and medical narratives of the gendered body, the essay yields new insights into some of the ways in which trousers, a garment that seemed to contain the fragile seams of gender identity in its very fabric, at once shaped and confounded perceptions of the relationship between the somatic and psychic realms.

### **Hysterical subjects and rational costumes**

The middle of the nineteenth century saw distinct changes in practices of dress, with questions of sexuality and gender finding ‘heightened significance in the context of an increasing delineation of acceptable public and private roles for men and women’.<sup>10</sup> Of particular relevance for this analysis is the way in which mid-nineteenth-century sartorial regimes sharpened the distinction between ideas of male utility and female ornamentation, naturalising the association between women and ‘irrational’ fashionable dress. J.C. Flügel famously proposes in *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930) that, in the aftermath of the French Revolution and with the advances of industrial capitalism, rationally-minded men rejected the frivolities of fashion and adornment for a more sober sartorial code that reflected their ‘devotion to the principles of duty, of renunciation and of self-control’.<sup>11</sup> The extravagancies of men’s Regency dress yielded to darker, plainer colours and more sombre cuts; knee-breeches and silk hoses were displaced by ‘long, loose trousers’.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, as Valerie

Steele describes, 'vivid colors, luxurious fabrics, decoration, and changeability were essentially restricted to women's dress'.<sup>13</sup> The straight lines that characterised women's fashion from the late eighteenth century disappeared with the fall of the Empire waistline and were replaced by an hour-glass shape that exaggerated the distinction between male and female anatomy. Pulling in the waist, and pushing excess flesh up into the bosom and downwards into the lower abdomen, rigid whalebone corsets accentuated the contours of the body, sculpting it into the fashionable shape of the period.<sup>14</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century, there was growing concern from various spheres, including medicine, health reform, women's rights activism, religious teaching and education, about the deleterious effects of long, full skirts, heavy petticoats, heels and corsets on women's bodies and minds. Anti-fashion discourses highlighted the 'irrationality' of fashionable dress, which was not only considered to be frivolous, inconstant and immoral, but also detrimental to women's health. Corsets in particular were held responsible for a catalogue of female ailments and disorders, from nausea and rib damage to uterine displacement and prolapse. Mobilising anxieties about the displaced – or 'wandering' – womb, some physicians considered the corset to be the cause of an array of nervous diseases, including what the American phrenologist Orson S. Fowler diagnosed as 'partial insanity'.<sup>15</sup> Leigh Summers, in her history of the Victorian corset, maintains that 'corsetry was a powerful coercive apparatus in the control of Victorian women', suggesting that it operated as a 'useful device in the creation and maintenance of a refined debilitated femininity, for it policed the waistline and to a greater or lesser extent determined the health or ill health experienced by the body within'.<sup>16</sup>

Steele, however, calls into question the straightforward connection between corsetry and passive, sexually-repressed Victorian femininity by placing anxieties about the harmful effects of corsetry in the broader context of medical orthodoxies about the pathological

female body. In particular, she cautions against an unquestioning acceptance of medical accounts of gynaecological and reproductive disorders that cannot be disaggregated from a wider 'campaign in favor of motherhood' and fears that, 'if women broke away from their traditional domestic sphere, the family and the entire social order would be threatened'.<sup>17</sup> Evidence that corsets were to blame for a wide spectrum of ailments and disorders (from anorexia, anaemia, amenorrhoea and neurasthenia to uterine damage) needs to be interpreted in the context of 'doctors' anxiety about female sexuality, together with a lack of knowledge about the "mysterious" female uterus'.<sup>18</sup> Closely imbricated with mid-nineteenth-century definitions of female sexual identity, medical discourse works as a mode of linguistic corsetry, binding the female body to an analysis of its intrinsic pathology and, thus, by necessity, a model of domestic femininity confined to the private sphere.

For mid-nineteenth-century American women's rights advocates, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Amelia Jenks Bloomer, Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone, amongst others, fashionable dress ensured women's exclusion from public life because it cramped their physical and intellectual aspirations. Bringing into focus the 'irrationality' of fashionable dress, Stanton displaces pathology from the female body to the sartorial regimes of the mid nineteenth century. How, she asks, could women 'ever compete with man for equal place and pay, with garments of such frail fabrics and so cumbrously fashioned' or 'hope to enjoy the same health and vigor with man, so long as the waist is pressed into the smallest compass, pounds of clothing hung on the hips, the limbs cramped with skirts, and with high heels the whole woman thrown out of her true equilibrium'.<sup>19</sup> The weights and constraints of fashionable dress, implies Stanton, make women unsteady and unbalanced. In order to regain their equilibrium, she proposes, women needed a more 'rational costume' – one that would allow them to participate fully as social subjects, free from the physical and psychic impositions of fashionable dress practices.<sup>20</sup>



In the mid nineteenth century, rational dress found its most powerful and provocative expression in the ‘Bloomer Costume’ advocated by Amelia Jenks Bloomer, editor of women’s temperance and abolitionist newspaper *The Lily*, in 1851. The ‘new costume’, as it was first announced, consisted of loose Turkish-style ‘trowsers’ that were gathered at the ankle and worn under a short dress. Permitting women a greater degree of freedom and mobility, the new costume represented a powerful alternative to what Bloomer described in *The Lily*, deploying the charged rhetoric of ‘fashion slavery’, as the ‘everlasting bondage’ of fashionable dress.<sup>21</sup> The story of the Bloomer Costume’s evolution consists of multiple, often tangled, threads.<sup>22</sup> Bloomer had written in defence of the English actress Fanny Kemble ‘parad[ing] the streets’ in ‘coats, vests and pantaloons and all the other paraphernalia of gentlemen’s dress’ two years previously.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most decisive moment in her thinking about dress reform, however, was prompted by the arrival of Elizabeth Smith Miller, Stanton’s cousin and daughter of the reformer and abolitionist Gerrit Smith, in Seneca Falls wearing a costume influenced by the Turkish trousers she had worn while visiting health spas in Europe.<sup>24</sup> The costume was quickly taken up by Stanton and then Bloomer who, in the April 1851 issue of *The Lily*, offered a bold invitation to her readers to ‘behold us now in short dress and trowsers’. Bloomer subsequently published an engraving of herself dressed in the ‘new costume’ in the September 1851 issue of *The Lily*, which was swiftly reprinted in newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic, and positioned her very visibly at the forefront of debates about rational dress (see fig. 1).<sup>25</sup>

The most daring aspect of the Bloomer costume was the inclusion of trousers. Scholars such as Fischer and Einav Rabinovitch-Fox speculate that the decision by women’s rights advocates to incorporate a style of pantaloons worn by Middle Eastern women worked to mitigate associations with male attire. Read in the broader context of mid-nineteenth-century Oriental trends in fashionable dress (for example, shawls and turbans), and Orientalist

constructions of the East as ‘feminine’, ‘irrational’ and ‘exotic’, Turkish trousers ‘symbolized female sensuality and sexuality rather than masculinity and rebellion’.<sup>26</sup> While acknowledging the depoliticising effects of Orientalist stereotypes, Timothy Marr proposes that such ‘conservative factors [...] failed to displace the more subversive connotations of the costume’s symbolic innovations’. He argues instead that the ‘adoption of a Turkish model signaled a deeper and more transgressive form of orientalist liberation for women because it repositioned the harem as a public site of female power rather than a private province of male fantasy’.<sup>27</sup> Although bifurcated apparel had been adopted earlier in the century by women in utopian socialist communities in France and America, practitioners of water-cure therapy, and for gymnastics and calisthenics, the appropriation of trousers as part of a *public* dress practice was considered a travesty of vestimentary codes and an assault on gender hierarchies. When worn by women in a Western context, the meanings attached to Turkish trousers – fraught with myriad, even conflicting, ideological associations – became radically unstable. In turn, the women who adopted them, as Rabinovitch-Fox describes, were marked as ‘masculine, radical and dangerous’.<sup>28</sup> Standing for new types of locomotive and socio-political freedom for white, middle-class women, ‘rational costume’ represented the most troubling challenge to women’s fashionable dress of the nineteenth century because it explicitly wedded dress reform to feminist politics.<sup>29</sup> Yet, as what follows reveals, the rationally dressed woman did not simply raise questions about the places and spaces women were able to inhabit. She also exposed the perviousness of mid-nineteenth-century identity categories – the popular response to which was far from ‘rational’.

### **Bloomer Convulsions**

The unease and intrigue provoked by the public appearance of women in trousers unfolded across the spaces of the street and the printed pages of the popular press with a near hysterical

fervour.<sup>30</sup> The *Illustrated London News* reported on July 19 1851 that the new costume was ‘absorbing much of the attention of the ladies of the northern states of America; and has excited some curiosity on this side of the Atlantic’.<sup>31</sup> The same month, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* expressed its approval of the ‘decided and growing tendency on the part of our countrywomen, to wear the trowsers’:

For some time past indications of an invasion, by the ladies, of men’s peculiar domain in dress [...] have been tangible, but the frowns of Fashion have hitherto kept the revolutionists quiet. Recently, in several places, practical reformers, as bold as Joan d’Arc, have discarded the trailing skirts, and adopted the far more convenient, equally chaste, and more elegant dresses of Oriental women. Some ridicule them; others sneer contemptuously or laugh incredulously, and others commend them for their taste and courage. We are disposed to be placed in the latter category.<sup>32</sup>

This ostensible declaration of admiration for women who ‘wear the trowsers’ is destabilised by a vocabulary of insurrection that betrays an equivocation about the new costume.

Tellingly, the *Harper’s* editorial highlights a double incursion on the part of dress reformers: firstly, of the domain of male dress; and, secondly, of the sartorial provinces of ‘Oriental women’. If the first, more ‘revolutionary’, of these invasions represents an assault on the male sphere of power and public privilege, the second is accepted more readily because it associates changes in women’s dress with the nineteenth-century vogue for Oriental beauty and fashion, as well as the private space of the Turkish harem.<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, beyond the fashion pages of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, the Bloomer costume seemed to be growing legs. In the following months, newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic feverishly documented appearances of women stepping out in Turkish

trousers. The *Illustrated London News*, for instance, reports on the unrest prompted by the spectacle of ‘Bloomers’ congregating in St James’s Park: ‘The new style of dress did not appear to be agreeable to the mob, for the “Bloomers” had scarce made their appearance before they were assailed with an unlimited quantity of coarse jokes from the bystanders’.<sup>34</sup> Echoes of revolution reverberate in the recurrent references to the ‘mob’ and the ‘crowd’ that scatter the pages of British newspapers, signalling a profound unease about the prospect of social and political unrest provoked by the trousered woman’s infiltration of public space. The arrival of the American Bloomer costume – or ‘Bloomerism’ – on British soil is cast as a kind of invasion that poses a particular threat to imperial masculinity and, by implication, the health of the national body. The *Illustrated London News*, for example, announces that ‘[t]he “Bloomer” costume has at last invaded the British Empire’.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, *The Times* reports Bloomer invasions across London: ‘Bloomerism at the Crystal Palace’, ‘Bloomerism in Finsbury’ and ‘Bloomerism in Leicester-Square’.<sup>36</sup> Trousered women appeared to be proliferating across the heart of the Empire like an epidemic.

If the trousered woman was a source of anxiety, she was likewise a site of visual fascination – an idea exemplified by the display of five waxwork models wearing the Bloomer costume as part of Madame Tussaud and Son’s Exhibition in the autumn of 1851.<sup>37</sup> An editorial published in *The Times* on October 8 1851 describes a London Bloomer Committee address at Miss Kelly’s Theatre in Soho, delivered to ‘an eager auditory, assembled in consequence of an announcement [...] that a lecture on the new costume would be delivered by a lady appropriately attired’.<sup>38</sup> Such reports, however, are characterised by a tension between the dress reformer’s purported positioning as a public speaker and her status as a curious spectacle subject to an inquisitorial – and increasingly volatile – male gaze. While the dress reformers at Miss Kelly’s theatre are met with ‘several outbreaks of laughter and discordant noises’, the ‘female lecturer’ scheduled to speak at the Royal British

Institution in Finsbury is unable to make an appearance because of the ‘unusually violent’ mob.<sup>39</sup> In Finsbury, attendees ‘faint’ as they enter the building; and, in Soho, others are ‘convulsed’ with laughter.<sup>40</sup> The very sight of the trousered woman, what she stands *in* and *for*, confounds male visual authority; hysterical symptoms are transferred from the woman in rational costume to the male crowd, which presents here as an irrational and unstable body.

Accounts of the infectious potential of trousers across genders were not limited to the English capital. In November 1851, *The Monmouthshire Merlin* reported that two of ‘the newly-fledged curiosities, called Bloomers’ had arrived in Newport – a city already associated with political insurrection as the site of the Chartist Rising of 1839.<sup>41</sup> Recounting the ‘expressions of approval and disapproval’ that greeted ‘these public-spirited advocates of “the rights of woman”’ in Newport Town Hall, the article describes ‘the peculiarities and qualities’ of the “pettiloons” (*vulgo* trowsers)’ worn by Mrs Wheelock, from America, and Miss Dallen, from Pillgwenlly in Newport.<sup>42</sup> The audience, ‘chiefly composed of male creatures’, had gathered ‘to satisfy that inherent principle derived from Madame Eve – curiosity’. At the close of their lecture, the women cast a ‘long-protracted’ gaze at the audience and fasten their hats. This moment of sartorial fastening, however, finds its inverse reflection in the psychic unfastening of the audience as the women’s gaze is returned to them with unexpected frenzy:

Thereupon, as if to take a nearer inspection, or a last fond look, the greater part of the male audience scrambled over the benches, and drew towards the platform, where they crowded round the Bloomers, with something of the curiosity of aboriginal inhabitants of some island in the remote Pacific, who crowded around the first newcomer they had ever seen, to ascertain what he was like. The scrutiny was as embarrassing to the objects of this curiosity, as pleasing to the inspectors.<sup>43</sup>

The ‘inspecting’ gaze works here to reassert the dress reformers’ status as objects of ‘curiosity’ by reaffirming male visual authority. Nonetheless, at the same time, the editorial performs a strange inversion of hierarchies in its construction of the male crowd as an at once feminine and primitive body, one that exhibits the symptomatic curiosity of both ‘Madame Eve’ and the inquisitive native. Here, once again, it is the pathologised male body that is put on display as spectator is transformed into spectacle. The mutability of the editorial’s hysterical register thus betrays an anxiety about the stability of imperial masculinity as it becomes vulnerable to – or contaminated by – the trousered woman’s invasion, and possible colonisation, of not only the domain of dress, but also of public space. By assuming trousers, the Bloomers infect the category of masculinity with ‘irrationality’ – that is, with the ‘disorder’ of their femininity.

As these examples suggest, the public visibility of women in trousers not only pressurised the ideology of the separate spheres, but also the understanding of rational and autonomous masculinity it at once reinforced and guaranteed. So powerful was the equation of bifurcation and male authority in the popular imagination that the unabashed and unapologetic appropriation of trousers – a visual symbol of male power and privilege – was construed as an infringement of the ‘rights of man’ and a direct assault on masculinity. An editorial on ‘Woman’s Rights’, published on October 18 1851 in the *New York Times*, is unhesitant in its articulation of the nature of this offence:

We regret to see how obstinately our American women are bent on appropriating more than their fair share of Constitutional privileges. Not that the effort ever amounts to anything more than the re-affirmation of certain arrant heresies – such, for instance, as [...] the propriety of induing their delicate forms with the apparel, appurtenances, and

insignia of manhood. But there is an obvious tendency to encroach upon masculine manners, manifested even in trifles, which cannot be too severely rebuked, or too speedily repressed. [...] Anti-masculine agitation must be stayed by some means.<sup>44</sup>

Heretical and unconstitutional, the trouser-wearing woman transgresses both religious and legal boundaries. And thus she must be ‘stayed’. In order to maintain the stability of the sex/gender system, she must be returned to her corsets and petticoats, and to her proper social position. An 1857 article in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* similarly places dress reform in the context of constitutional rights. Grandly declaring ‘the petticoat as an institution older and more sacred than the Magna Charta [sic.]’, it claims that ‘its dominion is coeval with that of true civilization’.<sup>45</sup> Man, it professes, ‘loses the only authority that can effectually tame him when woman loses the delicacy of mind and costume that marks her as his counterpart and not his rival’.<sup>46</sup> Unlike trousers, a symbol of rational thought and political authority, the petticoat externalises and makes legible woman’s mental fragility. Wearing a petticoat is posited as a matter of common sense: as rational as woman’s domestic and moral role as man’s helpmeet; and as foundational an expression of ‘true civilisation’ as the constitutional enshrinement of the ‘rights of man’.

### **Medical Bloomerism**

The connection between woman’s vestimentary practices and ‘delicacy of mind’ underlying the moral and political models of patriarchal governance articulated in the periodical press was likewise the subject of medical reflection in *The Lancet* and the *British Medical Journal*. Offering its deliberations on the Bloomer costume in relation to ‘the health of our female patients’ in October 1851, the *British Medical Journal* conceded that ‘Mrs. BLOOMER and her proselytes have a decided advantage’ in condemning the uncleanliness of the long skirt

(which it describes as ‘a very dirty appendage’). At the same time, however, it insists on the ‘unfitness’ of Bloomers for ‘the peculiar infirmities of the sex’ – namely, ‘the secretions in the female’ that ‘require a different management of dress’.<sup>47</sup> Most troubling for the medical gaze is the ‘unsightliness of the frock and trouser in a state of pregnancy’ – a state in which women’s uterine volatility is deemed to put particular pressure on their already fragile nervous system.<sup>48</sup>

By transferring the question of hygiene from the street to the female body, and from geographic to anatomical space, the *British Medical Journal* absorbs debates about Bloomer costume into mid-nineteenth-century conceptualisations of the permeable and unstable female body. This is a secreting, soiling and potentially contaminating body – a pathological body that must be dressed and redressed according to the ‘opinion of medical men’.<sup>49</sup> Hence, while surmising that there are undoubtedly many women who ‘would like “to wear the breeches”’, the article concludes that

those of them *who have sense enough* to consider the subject properly, will come to the conclusion that the attempt at masculine dress is as unfitted to their bodily weaknesses as are the habits and thought of the male sex to the mental peculiarities of their fairer and better halves.<sup>50</sup>

The woman of good ‘sense’, paradoxically, understands the correlation between her ‘peculiar infirmities’ and her ‘mental peculiarities’ – the former disqualifying her from what Margrit Shildrik describes as ‘the mental self-governance necessary to (rational) moral agency’.<sup>51</sup> The medical encounter staged here might thus be conceived of as ‘a paradigmatic site of male power concerned with the control of a largely feminine irrationality which results not just from the compromised rationality caused by the pain and anxiety of ill health, but is



supposedly rooted in our very natures'.<sup>52</sup> In this reading, then, the 'weaknesses' of the permeable female body become grounds for a medical (and social) interdiction against women 'wearing the breeches' – signifying in this case not only the adoption of trousers, but also, and more significantly, the assumption of male habits of thought.

An 1854 issue of *The Lancet* espouses a similar argument in its deliberations on the Bloomer costume. Acknowledging that 'Mrs. COLONEL BLOOMER [...] had accurately fathomed the influence of dress upon the mind', it resolves, nonetheless, that:

If the \_\_\_\_\_ (our readers must supply the word we are not at liberty to mention) are still worn only by a few of the more daring and determined of their sex, we can only conclude that the petticoat which Mrs. BLOOMER would discard and repudiate as unfitted to be the emblem of government is, in reality, the garment that is the most in harmony with the mental qualities that Nature has implanted in the female sex.<sup>53</sup>

More than a metaphorical correspondence, the relationship between the petticoat and the 'female' mind is rearticulated here as a natural one: the petticoat not only emblematises the 'mental qualities' of the female sex, but is harmonious with them. The article conveys a particular disquiet about the connection between women's denunciation of the petticoat and their educational aspirations – leading to the institution of 'Female Colleges of all kinds' and women's entry into the learned professions, especially medicine, a profession 'ever peculiarly exposed to the inroads of charlatanry'.<sup>54</sup> While not unequivocally opposed to the regeneration of the profession by 'young women of powerful and instructed minds', *The Lancet* uneasily reports on the conferment of the degree of Doctor of Medicine on 'lady-professors' ('we believe they pretermitt the lower grade of BACHELOR') and sightings of 'these lady-dubs, under their proper professional and academical appellations, driving about the enlightened

towns of America in befitting broughams, expounding medical mysteries, giving advice, and taking fees!’.<sup>55</sup> Professionally, geographically and economically mobile, these ‘lady-professors’, *The Lancet* implies, do not simply represent a threat to man’s sartorial territories, but also to his intellectual ‘habits’. They threaten, in other words, to ‘Bloomerise’ medicine.

The sense that trousers pressurised the gendered duality of mind and body was thrown into sharp relief by Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to receive a medical degree in the US in 1849. Blackwell represented what one article (originally published in *Critic* on January 15 1852, and reprinted in the *British Medical Journal* the following month) termed ‘Medical Bloomerism’ – that is, the ‘unwomanly’ enterprise of ‘attending operations’ and ‘exploring cabinets of pathology with scientific gusto’.<sup>56</sup> As this coinage exemplifies, Blackwell’s professional aspirations, which locate her as an active spectator in the medical visual field (viewing both operations and cabinets of pathology), are placed firmly in the context of the ‘Bloomer crusade’. The connection between women’s sartorial (bodily) and professional (intellectual) ambitions is made explicit. Unlike Mary Walker, who graduated with a medical degree in 1855 and was subsequently employed as an assistant surgeon in the Civil War, Blackwell was not known as a trouser-wearer.<sup>57</sup> However, as the article on ‘Medical Bloomerism’ proposes, her ‘political and social creed’ was deemed to be ‘of the ultra-Bloomer or Social school’.<sup>58</sup> Signifying much more than women’s physical movement, ‘bloomers’ take leave from the body and become an abstract symbol of women’s professional, public and intellectual mobility – their emancipation from the ‘stays’ of the domestic sphere and infiltration of the masculine sphere of knowledge-making.

The same article frames anxieties about women’s (trousered) entry into the public sphere in terms of infection and, more specifically, the transmission of infectious ideas across British borders. Citing as its evidence reports from ‘*Punch* and the newspapers’ about the ‘crazy Transatlantic women’ who have been attempting to ‘induce the British fair to assume

half the dress and many of the most arduous duties of the other sex', it proposes that

every woman so withdrawn from the household sphere would create a disastrous void at home; and if it were possible – which, thank God, it is not – for such an insane fashion extensively to prevail, our children would grow up degenerate and untamed – a generation selfish, devilish, and savage.<sup>59</sup>

Here American 'Bloomerism' becomes, in Julia Petrov's words, 'the metaphor for a dangerous and subversive social identity'.<sup>60</sup> Contaminated by the 'insane fashion' and dangerous ideas of her 'crazy' American counterpart, the British trouser-wearer in turn poses a risk to the future of the family and, by implication, the health of the national body.

Woman's place is not in the knowledge-making spaces of the operating theatre or the cabinet of pathology; and thus the medical gaze returns her to her proper place, the home. The firm response to the 'Bloomerisation' of the medical profession is the yet more insistent medicalisation of Bloomerism and regulation of the borders of 'proper' female behaviours.

Just as medical journals draw on the rhetorical strategies of *Punch*, most notably its satirical hyperbole, to strengthen their scientific case for the detrimental effects of the trousered woman's infiltration of masculine spheres on the individual and social body, so too does *Punch* situate its ridicule of the Bloomer costume, and its recalcitrant wearers, in a medical framework. Again, women's trousered dress is connected directly to women's entry into the medical profession. A well-known illustration that appeared in the June 28 1851 issue, and was re-printed in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* two months later, depicts a group of women in various masculinised versions of the Bloomer costume, complete with hats, walking sticks and cigars (fig. 2). The text that appears alongside the illustration purports to be a letter from Theodosia E. Bang of Boston, U.S. Principal of the Homeopathic

Quackery and Collegiate Thomsonian Institute for developing the female mind. The letter declares: ‘We are emancipating ourselves, among other badges of the slavery of feudalism, from the inconvenient dress of the European female. With man’s functions, we have asserted our right to his garb, and especially to that part of it which invests the lower extremities’.<sup>61</sup> Mocking women’s reform dress and the discourse of the ‘strong-minded’ American woman, the *Punch* editorial foregrounds the equation of bifurcation and male power in the popular imagination – emphasised here by the play on ‘invests’ as that which ‘clothes in’ and ‘empowers’. It reveals too a profound concern about the dangers posed to the male orientation of the public sphere by the ‘strong-minded’ woman, whose education and professional emancipation threatens the equilibrium of the social economy.

For haunting depictions of the ‘mannish’, rational woman is the spectre of male effeminacy. What if man’s ‘lower extremities’ were not properly invested? So powerful was the link between vestimentary practices and identity that women’s appropriation of the paraphernalia and postures of masculinity not only represented a shift in style, but also in character – one that threatened to weaken the boundaries between male and female, mind and body, and, in so doing, transform man into a nervous subject. ‘The Bloomer Convulsion’, for example, which appeared in *Punch* in October 1851, takes as its focus the Bloomer lecture at Miss Kelly’s Soho Theatre to offer its satirical reflections on the economic and political implications of ‘the doom of destiny’ that the ladies will have ‘their day’. Of principal concern in this article is the prospect of women’s professional mobility and entry into the workplace.<sup>62</sup> Its seemingly acquiescent tone is dramatically inflected by its title, which makes clear the condition of Bloomerism as a ‘convulsion’ – a violent disturbance and contortion of the (social) body. The illustration appearing alongside the article portrays another ‘strongly-minded female’ in a similarly masculinised Bloomer costume rebuking her husband, who is reclining on a sofa in loose dress: ‘Now, do, pray, Alfred, put down that Foolish Novel, and

do something Rational' (fig. 3).<sup>63</sup> Here, the strength of mind characterising the trousered-woman finds its inverse reflection in her husband's mental frailty. So weak are Alfred's nerves that he has succumbed to the irrational and 'feminine' pastime of reading novels – an activity proscribed for young girls by mid-nineteenth-century physicians and educators because, according to E. J. Tilt, it was deemed 'capable of calling forth emotions of the same morbid description which, when habitually indulged in, exert a disastrous influence on the nervous system'.<sup>64</sup> Read in dialogue with one another, the illustration and text insinuate that the 'strong-minded' woman in trousers does not simply imperil those other women who may be susceptible to her sartorial and political suggestions. Her appropriation of the 'despotic strength of the biforked garment' enfeebles the male character, rendering it weak, passive and vulnerable to the effects of such nefarious habits as novel-reading.<sup>65</sup> By investing her own body with trousers, the 'strong-minded' woman threatens to divest man of his rationality – and, in so doing, send the mind/body distinction into a state of convulsion.

The Bloomer 'convulsion' reverberated through the pages of *Punch*. The periodical's symptomatic obsession with Bloomers – and Bloomer-wearing women – found especially pronounced articulation in 'Bloomeriana: A Dream'. Published on November 8 1851, this oneiric expression of *Punch*'s troubled mind conjures a world in which women race horses, work as police officers and soldiers, have free access to education and hold public offices, while men scrub floors and perform other domestic duties. Anxieties about the material ramifications of women's symbolic empowerment find further expression in a later sequence of illustrations, which appeared in *Punch's Almanack for 1853*, depicting trouser-wearing women in a range of professional roles. In this instance, however, the dream (or nightmare) world of woman's emancipation is redeployed as a remedy for her strong-mindedness. In the accompanying editorial, a 'young wife' reflects on having been 'brought up a strong-minded woman', subsequently pursuing an interest in science at the Royal Institution, and eventually

being ‘cured of [her] notions about the equality of the sexes’.<sup>66</sup> Her recovery from the terrible malady of strong-mindedness is facilitated by a dream in which ‘the relations of the sexes were turned topsy-turvy’.<sup>67</sup> Although women revel at first in men’s social world, the young wife soon realises that women are in fact ‘unfit’ to perform their roles, that their place is in the home and that men and women should inhabit separate spheres. Like those women commended in the *British Medical Journal*’s article on ‘The Bloomer Costume’, the young wife comes to her senses with the realisation that she is not fit to ‘wear the breeches’ and returns to ‘woman’s sphere, the home’, where she is cured of her irrational and wrongheaded aspirations.<sup>68</sup> These examples, drawn from *Punch* and contemporaneous medical discourse, demonstrate that, in the mid-nineteenth-century imagination, mind and body are dynamic symbolic spaces across which the crisis of gender categories is articulated. If trousers were an expression of male rationality and intellectual fortitude, they also stood for the power – and infectious potential – of dangerous ideas about women’s social and professional mobility.

### **Irrational Rationalists**

The public ridicule to which trouser-wearing women were subjected was so intense that, by the mid-1850s, many women’s rights advocates abandoned bloomers and returned to their long skirts. Although bloomers started to disappear from public view, dress reform efforts persisted in the sphere of women’s undergarments. Variations of the bloomer costume also continued to be worn in the ‘semi-private spaces’ of water-cure establishments and sanatoriums where, as Cunningham proposes, their threat was mitigated by an association with female illness.<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, the ‘trouser question’ lurked in the public consciousness. Discussion of women’s rights and the sexual division of labour in the 1870s and 1880s seemed to summon almost involuntarily the spectre of the trousered woman. In February 1879, for example, *The Graphic* published an article, entitled ‘Household Work’, advocating

that daughters should be ‘practically trained to housekeeping’ to ensure the integrity of the English domestic system.<sup>70</sup> It warned that, if not engaged in useful domestic occupation,

the energy of English girls will be perverted into unwomanly channels, and instead of steady, healthy, capable housewives whom it will make an emigrant’s fortune to take with him to Canada or Australia, England will be flooded with Bloomer lecturers and ‘professional’ women, excited, hysterical, unnatural, domestically helpless, and socially repulsive.<sup>71</sup>

Here, then, trouser-wearing women are presented as irrational and disorderly bodies that threaten to submerge the healthy and energetic domesticity of English girls. The metaphors of fluidity – of ‘unwomanly channels’ and ‘floods’ – intimate an anxiety about the social circulation of the volatile female body that is explicitly connected to the sexual division of labour. Sally Shuttleworth, analysing medical discourses of menstruation in the mid-Victorian era, places such anxieties in the context of broader concerns about gender differentiation and the increasing division of labour in an industrial marketplace, which are ‘displaced metonymically onto the individual body’.<sup>72</sup> As Shuttleworth elucidates, gender differentiation played an ideological role by reinforcing notions of male rationality, autonomy and control – and the idea that, unlike women, ‘men were not prey to the forces of the body, the unsteady oscillations of which mirrored the uncertain flux of social circulation’. Woman in turn was positioned as ‘a figure of radical instability’, a pathological subject, whose unruly flows and circulation needed to be contained by the domestic sphere to avoid disrupting the equilibrium of the social economy by throwing it into ‘convulsions’.<sup>73</sup>

Uneasiness about the circulation of the disorderly trousered woman in public space persists in accounts of women wearing divided garments appearing in print media on both

sides of the Atlantic. Here, however, tropes of hysteria and irrationality are couched more fully in the language of ‘hysterical contagion’ and ‘nervous mimicry’ emerging in medical discourse of the 1870s. In 1875, James Paget, a surgeon at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, published his *Clinical Lectures and Essays*, which identified the phenomenon of ‘nervous mimicry’ (or ‘neuromimesis’), a ‘nervous disorder [that] produces an imitation or mimicry of organic local disease’ and to which women were deemed to be most susceptible.<sup>74</sup> The notion of pathological imitation underlying Paget’s theory inflects the register of the 1876 *New York Times* editorial discussed at the beginning of this essay, which presents dress reform as a kind of ‘curious disease’ that might exert pathological effects on the feeble nerves and weak will of women prone to nervous suggestibility. This particular editorial calls on those ‘medical men’ who have successfully identified the ‘symptoms’ of Spiritualism to turn their attention now to the epidemiology of dress reform. Proposing that this strange malady is not passed from body to body, it uses the language of contagion to suggest that if ‘a woman in whom the desire for trousers is latent is brought into the presence of one who has reached that miserable condition in which the patient incessantly calls for the coveted garment, the former will speedily develop the same symptoms as the latter’.<sup>75</sup> The suggested affinities with Spiritualism evoked at the beginning of the editorial reaffirm the presentation of dress reform as a kind of ‘nervous mimicry’ or hysterical contagion. Paget, for example, cites the ‘numerous subjects of mesmerism, spiritualism, and the other supposed forces of which the chief evidence is the power of a strong will over a weak one’<sup>76</sup> as patients of imitated disease; and, in *The Philosophy of Spiritualism and the Pathology and Treatment of Mediomania* (1874), Frederic R. Marvin asserts that Spiritualism is spread ‘not by the reception of morbid particles into the system, but through the tendency to imitate which haunts the nervous system like a ghost, urging it to strange and frantic deeds’.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the *New York Times* editorial situates the supernaturalised dress reformer, with her vampiric desire (her ‘unconquerable thirst’) for



trousers, alongside the Spiritualist in the clinical sphere of pathological imitation. Far from an expression of rational thought or ‘strong-mindedness’, trousers are posited here as a pathological symptom that provides yet more evidence of women’s nervous susceptibility.

In its concern about the potential spread of symptoms – and the manifestation of further instances of trouser wearing amongst the female population – the editorial also reiterates medical assumptions that the instability and irrationality of the female mind made it particularly susceptible to both suggestion and imitation, especially in the context of emerging debates about what Gustave Le Bon would popularise at the end of the century as the ‘contagious power’ of the crowd.<sup>78</sup> Positioning dress reform alongside broader mid-nineteenth-century anxieties about contagious diseases and the need for sanitary reform, the editorial deploys the language of sanitary science in its appeal for physicians to address the Philadelphia sanitary authorities expressing their objections to the planned dress reform convention to be held in the city on medical grounds.<sup>79</sup> It is imperative, it declares, that physicians ‘discourage the assembly of women at dress reform conventions’ to ensure that ‘one of the most painful and terrible diseases to which women are now subject’ is banished from the community altogether.<sup>80</sup> Thus, exploiting medical concerns about the nervous body, the editorial mobilises the vocabulary of epidemiology to warn that it is not simply the ‘feeble nerves’ of the female hysteric that are imperilled by the sartorial and verbal enunciations of rational dress reformers but, and more troublingly, the public nerves.

The trope of the vulnerable ‘public nerves’ recurs in responses to the popularisation of dress reform and the emergence of the ‘divided skirt’, proposed by the Rational Dress Society, founded by Lady Harberton and Mrs E. M. King in England in 1881.<sup>81</sup> Established ‘to promote the adoption, according to individual taste and convenience, of a style of dress based upon considerations of health, comfort and beauty’, the Rational Dress Society was concerned more broadly with the injurious effects of tightly-fitting corsets, high-heeled shoes

and heavy skirts.<sup>82</sup> The ‘divided skirt’, displayed at the Exhibition of the National Health Society in March 1882, consisted of long, loose fabric that covered each leg separately, but which did not make its bifurcation immediately apparent. The garment did, nonetheless, swiftly rouse suspicion because of its propinquity to trousers. During a visit to Canada and the US to lecture on reform dress, King, who founded the more radical Rational Dress Association in 1883 and was known for her ‘startling’ insistence on ‘speaking of her trousers as trousers’ (rather than using the euphemistic appellation ‘divided skirts’), proposed that a dress should be worn over trousers ‘so as not to be too great a shock to the weak nerves of public opinion’.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, the ‘weak nerves’ of public opinion were given voice in both popular and medical publications. Typically unflinching in its satire of ‘rational dress’, *Punch* placed the divided skirt firmly in the lineage of the mentally deleterious Bloomer: ‘Bloomers, it seems, are to startle again; / Skirts be divided, Oh, what an atrocity! / To ‘dual garmenture’ folks must attain’.<sup>84</sup> Exhibiting similar dismay for this development in rational dress, *The Lancet* orotundly declared this ‘unnatural’ garment a ‘monstrosity of fashion’ that ‘approaches the trousers in form and use’. Such attire, it speculates, ‘must be productive of unwomanly ways which are to be deprecated’.<sup>85</sup> Accounts of this sartorial innovation are thus inf(1)ected by disquiet about its equivocality: the divided *skirt* appears to announce its difference from *trousers*; but its atrocity lies in its bifurcation, its surreptitious enunciation of ‘dual garmenture’.

Nervous contemplation of the divided skirt’s dangerous relation to trousers travelled back across the Atlantic. An 1881 editorial in the *New York Times*, for example, suggests that, when ‘the wearer is *perfectly still*’, the divided skirt cannot ‘be distinguished, except by an expert, from an ordinary skirt’ (emphasis added).<sup>86</sup> The true threat here, then, is women’s mobility: as long as women remain ‘perfectly still’ and fixed in their place, there is nothing to

fear. The editorial intimates that the divided skirt is disconcerting, at least in part, because it does not readily declare its bifurcation and thus obfuscates any clear reading of its wearer's identity. Is she a dress reformer? Is she rational or irrational? Most troubling, therefore, is this 'rational' garment's furtive contamination of the 'irrational' sphere of fashionable dress and the minds of young women inclined to nervous suggestion: 'so long as trousers were advocated only by dress reformers, and then upon high moral grounds, there was no danger that sane women would prefer moral grounds to beauty and would yield to dress-reforming arguments'. Once again, it is not only the sanity of women that is at stake in women's appropriation of the divided skirt, which is 'merely a resting-place on the road to trousers'. The editorial announces that '[t]he open and unexpected wearing of trousers by women of hitherto impeached sanity would be an intolerable shock to the public nerves'.<sup>87</sup> The woman in trousers is not simply a risk to herself and to other women vulnerable to pathological imitation. Her (im)perceptible presence poses an incontrovertible threat to the sanity and sanitary health of the social body.

### **Skirting the Issue: conclusions**

A 'symptom', Marjorie Garber proposes, is a way of speaking; it is 'a kind of code, a way in which a body – or a culture – signals something that lies beneath or within'.<sup>88</sup> Inverting the logic of rationality that was the mainstay of dress reform, popular and medical discourses worked hard, in dialogue with one another, to cast the 'strong-minded woman' as a creature of unreason in need of being 'stayed' once again. Time and again, the woman in trousers is presented as an unruly, irrational and potentially contagious body, whose social, political and intellectual mobility threatened the equilibrium of the social economy. However, just as trousers are persistently read as a 'symptom' of the dress reformer's nervous disorder, the insistent pathologisation of the trousered woman can in turn be interpreted as a nervous

expression of mid-nineteenth-century cultural anxieties about the permeability of identity categories. While the public visibility of women wearing bloomers, a garment shot through with conflicting gender and racial associations, pressurises the sovereignty of imperial masculinity, the treacherous divided skirt confounds male visual authority. The woman who has cast off her petticoats to wear trousers – apparel that should clearly bifurcate male and female, rationality and irrationality, mind and body – is a disturbing and dangerous figure.

Writing about mid-nineteenth-century medical rhetoric and the clinical gaze, Vrettos identifies a ‘fear of psychic and somatic permeability, or unstable social and ontological boundaries, that was embodied, variously, in the neuromimetic, the woman doctor, and the crowd’.<sup>89</sup> The trousered woman who, as this essay has argued, moves across and between categories might also be read in these terms. If, as Elizabeth Wilson proposes, clothing ‘marks an unclear boundary ambiguously, and unclear boundaries disturb us’,<sup>90</sup> then nowhere is that boundary marked more ambiguously than in the instance of trousers. ‘It is at the margins between one thing and another’, Wilson suggests, ‘that pollution may leak out. Many social rituals are attempts at containment and separation, devised to prevent the defilement that occurs when matter spills from one place – or category – into another’.<sup>91</sup> It is precisely this movement – or leakage – across categories that is thrown into sharp relief by the woman in trousers. By troubling the intransience of mid-nineteenth-century definitions of imperial masculinity, the woman in trousers throws hierarchical categories – masculinity/femininity, public/private, civilised/primitive, rational/irrational, mind/body – into crisis. Moving from one place to another, she does not simply undo hierarchical categories, but infects categorical thinking. The trouser-wearing woman represents an ‘inexpressible’ rupture in the social fabric – one that cannot be skirted around.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> ‘A Curious Disease’, *New York Times*, May 27, 1876, 6. This research was supported by a British Academy Small Research Grant (SG101420).

<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the editorial echoes the use of vampire images and metaphors in contemporaneous medical discourses of hysteria, especially accounts of menstrual disorders. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 207.

<sup>3</sup> ‘A Curious Disease’, 6.

<sup>4</sup> ‘A Curious Disease’, 6.

<sup>5</sup> Gayle V. Fischer, *Pantaloon and Power: A Nineteenth-Century Dress Reform in the United States* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2001), 4. See also: Carol Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women’s Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth-Century America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002); Patricia A. Cunningham, *Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2003); Julia Petrov, “‘A Strong-Minded American Lady’: Bloomerism in Texts and Images, 1851’, *Fashion Theory* 20, no. 4 (2015): 381-413; Ana Stevenson, “‘Bloomers’ and the British World: Dress Reform in Transatlantic and Antipodean Print Culture, 1851-1950’, *Cultural and Social History* 14, no. 5 (2017): 621-46; and Don Chapman, *Wearing the Trousers: Fashion, Freedom and the Rise of the Modern Woman* (Stroud: Amberley, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Mas, ‘She Wears the Pants: The Reform Dress as Technology in Nineteenth-Century America’, *Technology and Culture* 58, no. 1 (2017): 35-66. For more on hydropathy and the water cure movement, see Cunningham, *Reforming Women’s Fashion*, 48-56.

<sup>7</sup> Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>8</sup> See Eric Partridge, *The Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), 2691 and 5733.

<sup>9</sup> Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 50-1.

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- <sup>10</sup> Christopher Breward, *The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 147.
- <sup>11</sup> J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 113.
- <sup>12</sup> Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals of Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 52.
- <sup>13</sup> Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 52.
- <sup>14</sup> See Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 39.
- <sup>15</sup> Orson. S. Fowler, 'Tight-Lacing or the Evils of Compressing the Organs of Animal Life', in *Intemperance and Tight-Lacing; Founded on the Laws of Life, as Developed by Phrenology and Physiology* (New York: Fowlers and Wells, 1848), 1-16 (14).
- <sup>16</sup> Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 107.
- <sup>17</sup> Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 164; see also Steele, *The Corset*, 76-7.
- <sup>18</sup> Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 167.
- <sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, 'Reminiscences', in *History of Women's Suffrage, Volume 1, 1848-61*, ed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Brownell Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage (Rochester: Ayer Company, 1881), 456-71 (469-70).
- <sup>20</sup> Stanton, 'Reminiscences', 470.
- <sup>21</sup> 'Our Costume', *The Lily*, April 1851, 31. For an incisive discussion of the literary controversies surrounding the dress reform movement's rhetoric of 'fashion slavery', see Ana Stevenson, 'Symbols of Our Slavery: Fashion and the Rhetoric of Dress Reform in Nineteenth-Century American Print Culture', *Lilith: A Feminist History Journal* 20 (2014): 5-20.
- <sup>22</sup> Fischer, whose *Pantaloons and Power* offers one of the most meticulous accounts of its origins, proposes that the Bloomer costume was probably adopted by American feminist dress reformers as the result of a 'series of coincidences'. Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power*, 81.
- <sup>23</sup> 'Mrs Kemble and Her New Costume', *The Lily*, December 1849, 94. For more on Kemble's adoption of 'male attire', see Elizabeth Reitz Mullenix, "'So Unfemininely Masculine": Discourse, True/False Womanhood, and the American Career of Fanny Kemble', *Theatre Survey* 40, no.2 (1999): 27-42.

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<sup>24</sup> See 'Mrs. Miller, Daughter of Gerrit Smith', *The Lily*, July 1851, 55.

<sup>25</sup> 'Our Dress', *The Lily*, April 1851, 30. For more on Bloomer's role in establishing 'the visual image of woman as public speaker', see Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress*, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, '[Re]Fashioning the New Woman: Women's Dress, the Oriental Style, and the Construction of American Feminist Imagery in the 1910s', *Journal of Women's History* 27, no. 2 (2015): 14-36 (17). See also Fischer, *Pantaloons and Power*, 87-91.

<sup>27</sup> Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 285.

<sup>28</sup> Einav Rabinovitch-Fox, '[Re]Fashioning the New Woman', 18.

<sup>29</sup> Pamela E. Klassen suggests that many African American women did not join the nineteenth-century dress reform movement and 'spurned bloomers in part because their hold on respectability was too tenuous, and in part because, for some, such as Sojourner Truth, the short skirts of the dress reform movement evoked memories of the inadequate and embarrassing clothing of slavery. Pamela E. Klassen, 'The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African American Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century', *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 14, no. 1 (2004): 39-82 (50).

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the vital role played by print media in promulgating ideas about the bloomer costume, see Stevenson, "'Bloomers'" and the British World', 621-46.

<sup>31</sup> 'The American Ladies' New Costume', *Illustrated London News*, July 19, 1851, 86.

<sup>32</sup> 'Turkish Costume', *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, July 1851, 288.

<sup>33</sup> This suggestion is heightened by the 'sketch of Oriental Costume' that appears above the editorial as 'a model' for the magazine's 'fair reformers' and emphasises the very characteristics of fashionable dress decried by dress reformers (for example, a corseted waist, heavy petticoats and ornate sleeves). 'Turkish Costume', 288.

<sup>34</sup> 'The Bloomer Costume', *Illustrated London News*, September 20, 1851, 343.

<sup>35</sup> 'The "Bloomer" Costume', *Illustrated London News*, August 23, 1851, 238.

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- <sup>36</sup> ‘Bloomerism at the Crystal Palace’, *The Times*, September 27, 1851, 8; ‘Bloomerism in Finsbury’, *The Times*, September 30, 1851, 8; ‘Bloomerism in Leicester-Square’, *The Times*, November 1, 1851, 8.
- <sup>37</sup> ‘Madame Tussaud’s Exhibition’, *The Times*, December 27, 1851, 3.
- <sup>38</sup> ‘Lecture on Bloomerism’, *The Times*, October 8, 1851, 7.
- <sup>39</sup> ‘Lecture on Bloomerism’, 7; ‘A Bloomer No Martyr’, *Illustrated London News*, October 4, 1851, 403.
- <sup>40</sup> ‘A Bloomer No Martyr’, 403; ‘The “Bloomers” Again’, *Illustrated London News*, October 11, 1851, 443.
- <sup>41</sup> ‘Bloomers in Newport’, *Monmouthshire Merlin*, November 28, 1851, 32. *The Times* draws a specific connection between Chartism and Bloomerism, proposing that ‘England is threatened with two revolutions, the one political, the one social. [...] The Chartist, the Socialist, the extreme Radical, are your true political Bloomers’. ‘London: Thursday, October 23, 1851’, *The Times*, October 23, 1851, 4.
- <sup>42</sup> Welsh contexts for Bloomerism remain underexplored. Stephanie A. Smith, for example, notes that the Bloomer costume spread ‘to Scotland, England, Canada, and Australia – all across the fractured British Empire’, but does not mention Wales. Stephanie A. Smith, ‘Antebellum Politics and Women’s Writing’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Writing*, ed. Dale Bauer and Philip Gould (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 69-101 (78).
- <sup>43</sup> ‘Bloomers in Newport’, 32.
- <sup>44</sup> ‘Woman’s Rights’, *New York Times*, October 18, 1851, 21.
- <sup>45</sup> ‘Our Daughters’, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, December 1857, 72-8 (77).
- <sup>46</sup> ‘Our Daughters’, 77.
- <sup>47</sup> ‘The Bloomer Costume’, *British Medical Journal*, October 29, 1851, 603-4 (603).
- <sup>48</sup> See Janet Oppenheim, *‘Shattered Nerves’: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 188.
- <sup>49</sup> ‘The Bloomer Costume’, 603.
- <sup>50</sup> ‘The Bloomer Costume’, 604; emphasis added.



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<sup>51</sup> Margrit Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries: Feminism, Postmodernism and (Bio)ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997), 27.

<sup>52</sup> Shildrick, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries*, 27.

<sup>53</sup> ‘London: Saturday, September 30, 1854’, *The Lancet*, September 30, 1854, 282-3 (282).

<sup>54</sup> ‘London: Saturday, September 30, 1854’, 282.

<sup>55</sup> ‘London: Saturday, September 30, 1854’, 283.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Bibliographical Record’, *British Medical Journal*, February 3, 1852, 154-74 (165-6n3).

<sup>57</sup> Blackwell also receives specific mention in *The Lancet* article discussed above. For a discussion of Walker’s political and professional use of trousers, see Gayle V. Fischer, ‘A Matter of Wardrobe? Mary Edwards Walker, a Nineteenth-Century American Cross-Dresser’, *Fashion Theory* 2, no. 3 (1998): 245-68; for a discussion of press coverage of Walker and dress reform, see Stevenson, ‘“Bloomers” and the British World’, 632.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Bibliographical Record’, 166n3.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Bibliographical Record’, 166n3.

<sup>60</sup> Petrov, ‘“A Strong-Minded American Lady”’, 396. Petrov is referring to an article that appeared in the *Morning Chronicle* (August 26, 1851), but anxiety about American women’s invasion of ‘the pure and unsullied hearth of British society’ resonates in print media more widely.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Woman’s Emancipation (Being A Letter Addressed to Mr. Punch, With A Drawing, By A Strong-Minded American Woman)’, *Punch*, June 28, 1851, 513.

<sup>62</sup> ‘The Bloomer Convulsion’, *Punch*, October 1851, 189.

<sup>63</sup> For further visual images of the ‘strong-minded’ woman in trousers, see the ‘Bloomers and Rationals’ gallery of Becky Munford, *Women in Trousers: A Visual Archive*, <http://www.womenintrousers.org>.

<sup>64</sup> E.J. Tilt, *On the Preservation of the Health of Women at the Critical Periods of Life* (London: John Churchill, 1851), 40.

<sup>65</sup> ‘The Bloomer Convulsion’, 189.

<sup>66</sup> ‘The Ladies of the Creation; Or, how I was cured of being a strong-minded woman’, *Punch’s Almanack for 1853*, December 23, 1852, x-xii, xiv, xvi, xviii, xx (x).

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<sup>67</sup> ‘The Ladies of the Creation’, xii.

<sup>68</sup> ‘The Ladies of the Creation’, xx.

<sup>69</sup> Cunningham, *Reforming Women’s Fashion*, 43; see also Stevenson, “‘Bloomers’ and the British World’, 622. As Stevenson highlights, the National Dress Reform Association (NDRA), established in the US in 1856, continued to advocate bloomers in the *Sibyl* (629).

<sup>70</sup> ‘Household Work’, *The Graphic*, February 22, 1879, 198.

<sup>71</sup> ‘Household Work’, 198.

<sup>72</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, ‘Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the Mid-Victorian Era’, in *Body Politics: Women and the Discourse of Science*, ed. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (New York: Routledge, 1990), 47-68 (54).

<sup>73</sup> Shuttleworth, ‘Medical Discourse’, 55

<sup>74</sup> James Paget, *Clinical Lectures and Essays* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1875), 172, 187.

<sup>75</sup> ‘A Curious Disease’, 6.

<sup>76</sup> Paget, *Clinical Lectures and Essays*, 181.

<sup>77</sup> Frederic R. Marvin, *The Philosophy of Spiritualism and the Pathology and Treatment of Mediomania: Two Lectures* (New York: Asa K. Butts & Co, 1874), 45-6; qtd in Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>78</sup> Le Bon argues that ‘[i]deas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes’. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, 1895 (New York: Viking, 1960), 126. See also Vrettos, who proposes that ‘speculations about nervous contagion developed in conjunction with late-nineteenth-century crowd theory’. Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 84.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, Edwin Chadwick’s *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (London: W. Clowes and Sons, 1843).

<sup>80</sup> ‘A Curious Disease’, 6.

<sup>81</sup> Lady Harberton, who played an important role in the popularisation of knickerbockers for cycling in the 1890s, famously brought a court case against a hotel landlady who refused to serve her refreshments in the public coffee room because she was dressed in ‘rational costume’. See ‘Lady Harberton and the Hotel-Keeper’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, April 5, 1899, 7. For more on cycling and

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divided garments, see Patricia Marks, *Bicycles, Bangs and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1990).

<sup>82</sup> 'Editorial Note', *Rational Dress Society's Gazette* 1 (1881): 1-2 (1).

<sup>83</sup> 'Trousers for Women', *New York Times*, August 19, 1884, 5.

<sup>84</sup> 'Rational Dress', *Punch*, June 25, 1881, 293.

<sup>85</sup> 'Women's Dress', *The Lancet*, May 26, 1883, 921.

<sup>86</sup> 'Divided Skirts', *New York Times*, October 31, 1881, 4.

<sup>87</sup> 'Divided Skirts', 4.

<sup>88</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Symptoms of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3.

<sup>89</sup> Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 122.

<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, rev. ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 2.

<sup>91</sup> Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 3.