

The Mother Hubbard: An Unconventional Gown

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"The history of men's opposition to women's emancipation is more interesting perhaps than the story of that emancipation itself."

Virginia Woolf

*"(...) Today, woman herself, educated, enterprising, ambitious, has something to say in her own behalf. "Yes", she assents, "woman was made to work, to be looked at, but also to enjoy her own life; living not only for others, but for herself, and most helpful when most true to her own needs". This is the new doctrine which she is preaching to our age. "I exist", she says, "not as wife, not as mother, not as teacher, but, first of all, as woman, with a right to existence for my own sake." Believing this, she makes a new demand upon her attire. She must still work in it, she must still look beautiful in it, but she must also be strong and comfortable and happy in it."*¹

Abba Goold Woolson

¹ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, «Appendix» (p. 183-254)

Introduction

This paper aims to outline the relevance of a peculiar and alternative garment within the American social, geographical, cultural, political and moral context of the last quarter of the 19th century, with particular reference to gender issues. The subject of the research is the Mother Hubbard, a “house gown” that has been little studied overall. Because of its informality, it has been almost ousted from the canon of 19th century costume history, i.e. from scholarly literature and the history of museum exhibitions.

We believe that the Mother Hubbard gown can help us to unravel the complex dynamics that affected the female world of America in those years and, at least in part, to understand the intricate reality of an era characterised by important and profound transformations. Perhaps it is precisely the analysis of informal fashion that allows us to delve deeply into the real and lived daily life of the vast majority of American women, crossing the boundaries of social class, geographical origin (although the Mother Hubbard was predominantly used in the border states, it was actually worn by women in every corner of the United States), age, health condition and cultural and political vocation.

The Mother Hubbard was a controversial outfit.

The distinction that made it more or less acceptable was represented by the context in which it was used: it was praised if worn inside the home, while it was strongly opposed, also through legislation, if worn in the street or in other public contexts. The end of the 19th century, we repeat, was an era characterised by a

profound redefinition of the female role, and therefore of the boundaries within which women moved. In fact, the woman moved more and more from the internal, private dimension, provided by Victorian etiquette, to the external, public one, that had always been held by male gender.

Fashion, for the time a metaphor and metonymy of the female condition, was strongly linked to the process of women's self-assertion. They wanted clothes appropriate to the new role they were claiming, that of independent and active individuals within the community. A garment such as the Mother Hubbard was certainly functional for freedom of movement, thanks to its loose and soft cut. One of the major differences of this garment from formal fashion was the absence of waist restriction, and therefore the possibility of wearing the garment without a corset. The outfit was therefore seen by the Americans as a valid option to the stuffy Victorian fashion: the characteristics mentioned allowed them to move (practically and figuratively) more freely in the working and social context in which they were establishing themselves.

So, women used the robe to feel free. Free to rest in their own homes. Free to work in the countryside of the frontier states without the imposition of a corset and long, heavy skirts. Free to express their adherence to cultural, social and artistic movements that were non-conformist and critical of Victorian society (such as the aesthetic movement), or simply free to be comfortable.

The thesis is structured in four chapters, which are described below in introductory form.

The first chapter aims to outline the general framework of formal women's fashion in the Victorian era and, above all, to examine the demands for renewal suggested by the proponents of the dress reform movement in America. In particular, the key texts of the movement for the liberation of women from the burdens of formal fashion are discussed in detail with extensive quotations. Specific attention is paid to outlining the peculiar cultural, social, religious and patriotic basis from which the movement developed in the United States. In addition, through the very words of the protagonists of dress reform, the physical and social consequences of the use of the most popular garments of the 19th century, especially the corsets, are exposed. Some of the most widespread pathologies among women due to a fashion considered dangerous are described. The dress reform and medical doctors consulted, in fact, define this fashion as a «merciless dictator»².

The second chapter focuses on the aesthetic movement, describing its origins in the Anglo-Saxon artistic milieu, and the concept of alternative women's fashion that it advocated. In exposing the similarities (and differences) between the aesthetic movement and the dress reform movement, Mother Hubbard's role within both is explored.

The third chapter introduces the characteristics of Mother Hubbard and recounts its nebulous origins. The genesis of the Mother Hubbard is explored, detailing how it was transformed from a dress for girls to a dress for adults. It then goes on to enumerate the

² See Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1974, Intro.

different contexts in which women used to wear the Mother Hubbard, an outfit strongly linked to everyday life and used regardless of economic, cultural and working status. Particular attention will be paid to the association of this gown with the world of prostitution, and the contradictory feeling it aroused in the community.

The fourth chapter, finally, is based mainly on the press of the time and highlights the link between the public and symbolic representation of the dress and the entry of women into politics. It focuses on the parable of the first female candidates for the presidency of the United States, on their electoral campaign and on the ensuing public debate in which the garment played a major symbolic role: the Mother Hubbard became the means through which to ridicule women who attempted to move away from the traditional roles established for them and thus to enter the public sphere, which had always been associated with men. In particular, reference is made to the satire and cartoons in the press that contributed to the entrenchment in the community of the association between the candidate Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard gown.

Ample space is devoted to the description of the practice of cross-dressing and its link with the garment. Mention is thus made of all those events that spread from Belva Lockwood's candidacy in 1884 and which saw the participation of men dressed in Mother Hubbard. These gatherings were characterised by a goliardic vein aimed at affirming traditional values and gender roles and ridiculing women who deviated from these.

The second part of the chapter describes the social and legal repression of women who wore Mother Hubbard on the streets. Following mainly articles from the local press in the frontier states of the Far West, it analyses the various cases in which this outfit was outlawed and in which the women who wore it were arrested. It concludes by highlighting the reaction of women who chose to rebel against such measures, and who continued to wear Mother Hubbard and protest against the unjust laws restricting their freedom, even though they were aware of the risk of being socially isolated and even harassed.

This shows how this gown was ideally linked, in the collective imagination, to all those women who chose to challenge the rules of society and make the boundaries and gender roles as fluid and porous as possible.

Chapter I. Dress reform in America. Analysis, history, prerogatives, and relevance to gender issues

§ 1. Women's fashion throughout the 19th century

In 1783, at the *bienal salon* of the Louvre museum in Paris, the French painter Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun exhibited a painting depicting Queen Marie Antoinette in a simple white muslin dress tied at the waist with a large sash (fig. 1). The painting caused so much disappointment that it had to be promptly replaced by another one in which the queen presented herself in a more formal manner.

The scandal was based on the consideration that the dress was unsuitable for the aesthetic representation of a queen (in fact all the "signs" indicating noble status were absent) but above all on the condemnation of the feeling of intimacy and proximity that the dress symbolically suggested.

Yet the «*chemise à la reine*» style, inaugurated by Queen Marie Antoinette, not without further scandal, criticism and harsh satire³, remained in vogue until the 1820s. It consisted of a long, loose-fitting gown, held just below the chest by a large coloured sash. This fashion, which soon spread from the French court to the rest

³Zanetti, V. *A state of Undress: Marie-Antoinette's chemise and the "feminine renunciation" in pre-revolutionary France*, 2015, consulted online on the platform Academia (https://www.academia.edu/30158316/A_State_of_Undress_Marie_Antoinette_s_chemise_and_the_feminine_renunciation_in_pre_revolutionary_France)

of the continent and the western world, allowed women an unprecedented freedom of movement, and represented, as would happen later with aesthetic fashion, an implicit declaration of female autonomy and freedom. The woman's body was finally freed from the various *panniers*, corsets and the redundancy of accessories, and showed itself in its natural form: it is not by chance that one of the major concerns of its detractors was that it would have been a way of dressing too revealing and dangerously similar to that of women who needed to show their bodies for work, namely prostitutes.

As will be discussed in the following chapters of this paper, it is interesting to note that many of the criticisms levelled at the *chemise* fashion launched by Queen Marie Antoinette in late 1700s France coincide with those levelled at the Mother Hubbard garment (which also shares some aesthetic characteristics with the chemise) worn in late 1800s America.

In both cases, what was accused was the woman's desire to subvert the dominant aesthetic norms and thus indicate, by means of a clear stance, the need to change, and at times revolutionize, her role in society.

Women's fashion at the beginning of the 19th century was still influenced by the developments of the late 18th century fashion and was characterised by a simple, flowing cut that accompanied the natural contours of the woman's body without ever distorting it. It is worth noting that the neoclassical influences of the beginning of the century had certainly contributed to the spread of the "*chemise*" fashion - later to become, with some modifications,

the “empire style” - throughout the western world, as far as America, and thus had determined the triumph of women's dresses modelled on classical forms, similar to those of ancient columns. As we move into the century, however, we see how fashion once again undergoes a clear and radical change.

Dress historian and researcher Sally Helvenston traces the change in the position of the waist, which in the middle of the century began to fall back to its natural position, as the turning point from which fashion became less comfortable and more constrictive:

as mid-century approached, the waistline of dresses gradually dropped and settled at the natural body position-somewhat lower in the 1840s, somewhat higher in the 1860s. This provided a breakpoint where a narrow and more compliant position in a woman's frame allowed corsets to cinch in the waist - sometimes to unnatural proportions. Thus the potential for comfort and function decreased as compression of the waistline increased. ⁴

Around the 1840s, therefore, the focus was on the waistline, which was wanted to be smaller and smaller: to give the impression of having the famous *wasp waist* and an hourglass shaped *silhouette*, narrow corsets were used, combined with the cage crinoline to widen the hips. The cage crinoline is a dome-shaped structure

⁴ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, p.31, 2014, 45
Sally Helvenston, retired in 2017, was a professor at Michigan State University in the department of «art, history and design».

invented in the 1850s, made up of concentric circles and placed under skirts to increase their volume (which until then had been achieved either by layering numerous petticoats or, in previous centuries, by using farthingales or *panniers*).⁵ The cage crinoline conferred a certain rigidity to the body and its movements: it was a kind of armour that isolated women from their surroundings, interposing a distance of about an arm's length between them and the objects they had near them. Helvenston cites the lament of a Kansas housewife who, in the *Prairie Farmer* newspaper, reproached her sisters for being greatly hindered in the performance of household chores by the cumbersome volume and length of their skirts (which, moreover, were shaken by the wind in all directions), claiming that they were forced to spend twice as much time on their tasks as would have been necessary for a woman dressed appropriately for the work to be done.⁶ The shape of the cage crinoline, which was also the subject of strong satire in the press, underwent several changes in the following years: initially designed with a dome shape, in the 1860s the garment began to be flattened at the front and enlarged at the back; around 1875, however, it was finally transformed into a protrusion to be placed under the back of the skirt (always very long and with a

⁵ For a more accurate account of the history and characteristics of the garment see Mitchell, R.N. «15 August 1862: The Rise and Fall of the Cage Crinoline» *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net. (http://www.branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=rebecca-n-mitchell-15-august-1862-the-rise-and-fall-of-the-cage-crinoline)

⁶ «An Invention Wanted for Women» *Prairie Farmer*, May 3, 1860, p. 277 in: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45 p.p

train), the so-called bustle or *crinolinette*. In the 1880s this bustle became wider and higher than in the previous decade, and was also generally combined with a corset and a very tight-fitting bodice (see fig. 3). In this period, the emphasis was placed on the lower part of the body: it is not by chance that skirts contained more and more draping and trainings, sometimes very long, an element that did not escape the attention of dress reformers and other contemporary female authors, who did not fail to ironise on the so-called trains, pointing them out as dangerous obstacles to walking or associating them with rags to clean the streets and floors⁷. The century ended with the abandonment of the bustle and drapery and the adoption of a simpler style, in fact skirts were tightly fitted to the hips, and an essential shirt was usually worn over them: the battle for dress reform, greater attention to health and the aesthetic fashion movement had paid off⁸.

§ 2. The long and difficult process of "getting dressed" in the XIX century

For the middle-class American woman of the late 19th century, the act of dressing was a slow and painstaking daily ritual. Because of the many, often heavy, layers of clothing, getting ready to go out in the official fashion was by no means a simple matter, and could

⁷ See: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874; See also: Beecher Ward, H., *The home: how to make and keep it*, Buckeye Publishing, Minneapolis, 1883

⁸ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University, Kent; 2003

often require the help of another person (especially for tying the laces of the corsets).

Generally the average woman began this sort of laborious ritual by putting on stockings that could be made of silk, wool or cotton and that were tied with elastic bandages above the knee. Immediately afterwards they wore drawers (a sort of knickers similar to what today we would call cotton trousers) to be buttoned at the waist and which reached down to the knee, and then a large cotton *chemise* at knee height, a very controversial garment opposed by the proponents of dress reform, as we shall see later.

An alternative to the *chemise* could consist of a hip-length camisole and a short petticoat of cotton, wool or flannel. In both cases, a longer petticoat was added, often in a darker colour. Then the woman could move on to the much-discussed corset: the garment could be made of cotton or silk, and was secured by small flexible strips made of whalebone, placed at regular intervals. The corset served both to make the waist smaller and to give the *silhouette* the desired hourglass shape demanded by the fashion, and to create an adequate fit for the outer garment, which could be laid down without creating folds. Many women adopted the practice of "tight lacing", i.e. tightening the laces of the corset (at the back) as much as possible: this practice, as we shall see later, could cause them various health problems since it would crush the internal organs, causing several serious complications, one of them being difficulty breathing.

A cover was placed over the corset to conceal it from view, especially if sheer clothes were worn. Around the middle of the

century, the cage crinoline, mentioned above, was then placed around the waist; while in the 1880s the bustle was tied around the waist, often made up of coiled threads to be placed at the back under the dress.

Once all the undergarments had been perfectly arranged, the outer garment could finally be made up of two elements: the skirt and the bodice. The skirt was stiffened around the hems and contained elastic cords or bandages around the side seams which were tied behind the legs to ensure that the fullness, created by the bustle, remained at the back. It is not difficult to see how these structures - crinolines and bustles - could be uncomfortable and how they could cause the women who wore them difficulty even in walking properly. The last garment worn was the *bodice*, which in turn could be stiffened and weighted at the seams. Cunningham points out that it was likely that women around this time (circa 1880) were inclined to fix their hair and wear their hats *before* the bodice, as the latter, with its tight sleeves, made it difficult to move their hands freely. Finally, a cloak was worn over the bodice in winter, which, if it contained many decorations, could have considerably increased the weight of the already heavy outfit described. Patricia Cunningham points out that the whole outfit could weigh up to 25 pounds.

Thus, during most of the 19th century, even more than the previous centuries, western women were (literally and symbolically) caged within a system that was then considered as a sort of metonymy and metaphor for them, namely fashion⁹.

⁹ Ibidem.

§ 3. Fashion is woman: Pioneers in the sociological study of fashion and its implications for gender dynamics

As can be seen from the above description of the rapid evolution of women's fashion in the 19th century, upper-middle-class women continued to dress richly, gaudily and flamboyantly, in contrast to what men had been doing for decades. Men's fashion had become increasingly functional and minimalist since the beginning of the industrial revolution, with dark colours and selected accessories, so much so that this phenomenon is referred to as the "great male renunciation". Men had chosen practicality, that is, to wear clothes suited to the needs of the contemporary bourgeoisie and those of the working world, definitively eliminating jewellery, shoes with heels and all other superfluous and extravagant accessories that had so characterised the male style of the nobility in previous centuries.¹⁰ While the reference point for women's fashion remained Paris, from the end of the 18th century the capital of men's fashion of the new bourgeoisie became London. Among the most important features of the new men's fashion: the tailcoat, which became the official uniform of the European and American bourgeoisie, became more and more popular; the colours became progressively darker, the lines essential and austere (well embodied by a garment like the Ulster Coat). Men's fashion,

¹⁰ To learn more about the history and genesis of the "great male renunciation" see: Flugel, C.J, *The Psychology of clothes*, Hogarth Press, London, 1930, and Edwards, T; *fashion in focus. Concepts, Practices and Politics*, Routledge, London, 2011.(it is necessary to underline that for the present work the following Italian edition has been consulted: Edwards, T.; *La moda. Concetti, pratiche, politiche*. Giulio Einaudi Editore; 2012; Torino).

especially in the Victorian era, aesthetically embodied the austere morality of the time, based on formality, conformity, a sense of duty, respect for etiquette and social conventions, as well as the emerging typically bourgeois individualism.

Tim Edwards points out that

by the end of the 19th century these expressions of self-control had evolved to the limits of masochism, with the complete dissociation of men and men's clothing from the world of fashion, itself defined in increasingly feminine terms.¹¹

The differences between men's and women's fashions, the exuberance and eccentricity of women's clothing and, more generally, the evolution of people's relationship with fashion and consumption began to attract the curiosity of a number of 19th century sociologists and scholars, in particular Thorstein Veblen (1857-1929), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) and, later, Georg Simmel (1858-1918). These scholars decided for the first time, albeit from different angles, to use their studies to explore the symbolic meanings of fashion within the social context.

It seems particularly useful, for the purposes of this paper, to recall the sociological theories on women's fashion of Thorstein Veblen and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, coeval scholars who shared an affinity of thought on the subject, even though important differences persist in their approach to the question (suffice it to say

¹¹ Ibidem. P. 62

that Veblen was quite critical of the first feminist wave of which Gilman was one of the leading members).

As is well known, Thorstein Veblen was one of the first scholars to approach the phenomenon of fashion, and to place it in relation to the changes that were taking place in the structure of society at the end of the nineteenth century, a historical moment that saw the emergence of a middle class increasingly oriented towards "conspicuous consumption", a term he coined and which would be successful in the years to come.¹² The dynamics of the new North American capitalist reality and the differences between social classes that this determined were carefully analysed by Veblen, who considered, in his text *The story of the Leisure Class*¹³, the middle class of the time (in particular the North American one) as a social group that was characterised and maintained itself more by its consumption practices than by its productive ones.¹⁴ The author also analysed the concepts of leisure and idleness, emerging in those years, and their close link with the middle class and its consumption practices, often associated with the waste of money. In this context, for Veblen, these dynamics found their ideal terrain of implementation in *haute couture*: consumption linked to high fashion thus became the perfect embodiment of superfluous luxury and superficiality.

¹² Ibidem. See also: Veblen, T.; *The story of the Leisure Class: an economic study of institutions* (1899), The Modern Library, New York; 1934

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Edwards, T; *fashion in focus. Concepts, Practices and Politics*; Routledge; London, 2011

Veblen's theory also considers the desire to dress «fashionably» as a means of asserting one's social status:

what we spend on clothing has over most other methods this advantage, that our clothing is always in evidence and indicates at first glance our financial position to all observers. ¹⁵

This is where, according to the scholar, women came into play. Since men's fashion, as mentioned, had for some time been apparently impoverished and reduced to a practical function, and no longer ostentatious as had been the case in past centuries, women and their bodies caged, and deformed, by eccentric clothes became status symbols that lent themselves well to the exhibition of their husbands' wealth and thus *served* to affirm membership of a given social class. Tim Edwards about Veblen explains:

More importantly, at the center of his analysis of consumer values are the affluent or bourgeois *women* who, in their role as wives, would primarily perform a status maintenance function. (...) Veblen is sensitive to the fact that women are themselves possessed and commodified through the practices of consumption, which they would perform to maintain the status of their male counterparts ¹⁶

From the 1880s onwards, the sociologist, writer, poet and feminist activist Charlotte Perkins Gilman devoted herself in even greater

¹⁵ Veblen, T., *The story of the Leisure Class: an economic study of institutions* (1899), The Modern Library, New York; 1934 p.130

¹⁶ Edwards, T; *Fashion in focus. Concepts, Practices and Politics*, Routledge, London, 2011, p.25

depth to the study of the differences between women's and men's fashions, and of the latent gender meanings that this increasingly marked differentiation implied. Her text *The dress of women: a critical introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of clothing*¹⁷, serialized in 1915 in her feminist magazine *The Forerunner*, followed the activist approach typical of the author and had as its first objective to convince the female public to consider clothing on the basis of its basic usefulness, that is, to warm and protect from the natural elements and possible injuries. Pursuing her historic battle against women's fashion of the time and its excesses, Gilman's analysis extended to the gender dynamics of which that fashion was both a direct consequence, and a cause. According to the author, in fact, the richness and flashiness of women's clothes and accessories (as well as the under-dresses that were used to give the body the desired shape) served two main purposes, both intrinsically linked to each other: that of differentiating the female gender from the male gender (with all that this difference entailed on a social, economic and working level), and that of making women "sexual objects" useful for satisfying male desire. Women therefore dressed to attract a mate and compete with each other for it, men to be free and move around socially and professionally unimpeded. Gilman considered men's fashion, which she likened to a uniform, similar to animal furs used to provide the basic necessities mentioned above, as a model for women to imitate. According to the feminist

¹⁷ Gilman, Perkins C., *The Dress of Women: a Critical Introduction to the Symbolism and Sociology of Clothing*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 2002.

sociologist, women had to radically change their way of dressing, assimilating it to that of men, in order to be considered equal to men and to acquire the same rights: to be considered as real human beings. Gilman called on her readers to renounce individual aesthetic decoration to please the male and to wear neutral clothes similar to uniforms.¹⁸

Patricia Cunningham agrees with the theory that one of the functions of women's fashion and its elaboration was the need to acquire sensuality, and therefore to seek a mate; however, she focuses on another aspect, which makes us read the relationship of 19th century women with fashion in a different way: in fact, while Gilman attributed to them a mere role of "sexual objects", and therefore of passivity, according to Cunningham there was also an aspect linked to female agency, even if very veiled. Being an expert in fashion, and presenting oneself in a socially impeccable manner, offered many women a way of ideally extending the limits imposed by the narrow confines of the home, and in many cases the possibility of embarking on a career in the sector.¹⁹

Being «fashionable», according to Cunningham, also gave women the opportunity to express themselves in first person (and not only as a passive reflection of their husbands - as Veblen and Gilman

¹⁸ See the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition on Georgia O'Koeffe (*Georgia O'Koeffe: Art, Image, Style*) at The Peabody-Essex Museum: Corn, M.W; *Georgia O'Koeffe: Living Modern*; Prestel Publishing; London, 2017. In this catalog Gilman is mentioned as one of the main models of inspiration for Georgia O'Koeffe. Her theories on fashion and feminism had in fact an important influence on O'Keoffe's thinking and on her human and artistic growth.

¹⁹ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003

assert) as belonging to a wealthy social status, and to show themselves consciously, choosing how and when, outside the confines of the home²⁰.

§ 4. *Dress Reformers: The Bloomer Costume*

In the United States, one of the first attempts to propose a viable and comfortable alternative to traditional fashion came through the Bloomer Costume fashion at a time when official fashion was becoming increasingly sophisticated and oppressive at the same time, namely around mid-century.

The Bloomer style was named after activist and journalist Amelia Bloomer (editor of the feminist newspaper *Lily*²¹), who, along with her friend Elisabeth Smith Miller, was one of the first women to officially introduce the style to America. The Bloomer fashion consisted of wearing a pair of baggy Turkish trousers under a wide, knee-length skirt, which was much shorter and more practical than the long, heavy skirts officially designed for women.

This fashion was inspired by the trousers worn by women in some Muslim countries, especially in Turkey, and was not entirely new in the West: since the beginning of the century, both in Europe and America, these particular trousers were known because of stage performances centered on the Islamic world (but many actresses

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ To learn more about *Lily* (published between 1849 and 1858), the first feminist magazine in America, see: Aronson, A. B; «America's First Feminist Magazine: Transforming the Popular to the Political», In: Brake L., Bell B., *Nineteenth-Century Media and the Construction of Identities*. Finkelstein D. (eds), Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2000. (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-62885-8_14)

also wore them outside the theatre), and because they were adopted by very young women who practised sport, especially calisthenics, a physical activity that was becoming increasingly popular among women²².

The social problem began to arise when some women, led by Amelia Bloomer (who had praised the garment in her newspaper *Lily*²³ in 1851 and recommended its use to women readers) decided to wear the Bloomer Costume outside of gymnasiums, schools and the privacy of the home, and especially when they were adults²⁴. Although some of the press were in favour of the new costume, many women were ridiculed and publicly offended for wearing it²⁵. Wearing a garment that parted the legs, typically associated with men's fashions, was so embarrassing to many women that they were reluctant to adopt the new fashion, despite the fact that

²² Calisthenics has its roots in the ancient Greece and is a sport that includes activities such as pulling, bending, running and jumping. In the 19th century, it spread from central Europe to the United States, where it established itself mainly as a women's sport. In this context it was contaminated with other gymnastic traditions, such as artistic gymnastics. Educators such as Catherine Beecher and God Lewis recommended it especially to young urban women, who thanks to this sport could develop a natural physical beauty. Among other things, it was thought that physical activity served to improve "the race". Calisthenics is a sport practiced today all over the world by men and women to increase their strength, endurance and elasticity. For an in-depth look at 19th century women's calisthenics. See: Beecher, C.E, *Physiology and Calisthenics. For schools and families*, Harper&Brothers, New York, 1856. See also: Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003.

²³ « Female attire», *Lily*, Feb.1951, p.2

²⁴ It will be seen later on how many of the criticalities attributed to the Bloomer Costume will recur three decades later with Mother Hubbard's gown.

²⁵ See. Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003. Text consulted in the eBook version

it required the legs to be hidden by a skirt and the style was therefore at least partly in keeping with the morality of the time. Patricia Cunningham explains, with regard to the arguments put forward against this fashion, that the most credible was centred on the gender dynamics implied by the female wearing of trousers:

Perhaps the strongest argument, the one that did most to bring about its demise as a viable alternative to fashionable dress, was the belief that the Bloomer costume was incongruous with the prevailing ideology regarding the role of women. There was a strong gender bias against women wearing trousers, which led to harassment when women wore Bloomers in public. It was not unusual for Bloomer Costume to cause a stir ²⁶.

The author goes on to explain how the satire of the time played with the ambiguity of costume, producing images that portrayed the most deep-seated fears regarding gender issues: The satire had sensed that at the basis of the need to implement a radical costume reform was the need for women to move more freely and change their roles, thus showing how the Bloomer Costume could in fact trigger a reversal of traditional gender roles (many cartoons saw women in trousers taking over classic male jobs and attitudes and vice versa men forced to replace them in the domestic sphere - see. figure 5).

Despite this direct association between the use of the Bloomer Costume and women's rights, feminists reacted ambivalently to the spread of the new fashion: many, after a short period of

²⁶ Ibidem (Chapter II: «Trousers: The rational alternative to skirts»)

enthusiasm, decided to stop wearing trousers (Bloomer herself among them), because they feared that people would pay more attention to the way they dressed than to the content of their arguments, and that women's rights would be put in second place to fashion²⁷.

Some dress reformers also thought that this style was counterproductive because it was too radical and disruptive a change for most American women, who were not mentally prepared to be publicly ridiculed and humiliated, preferring to dress in a socially acceptable way.

Abba Goold Woolson (1838-1921), an essayist and university professor who headed the Boston dress-reform committee of the New England Women's Club, wrote in the introduction to the text *The dress reform*²⁸, which she edited, that the Bloomer fashion was one of the greatest failures in the recent history of attempts to improve women's fashion. According to her, the mistake was that the dress-reform was seen as a quick step, without gradualness, and she asserted that it was an illusion to really believe that the average American woman was willing to sacrifice so much in terms of social honour. The change was too hasty and did not take into account the strength and entrenchment of prejudices. In addition to this, Woolson also explains how it was not an effective reform from the point of view of health:

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874

the improvements it made, though conspicuous and important, were superficial. It simplified the clothing, lessened its weight, and gave freedom to the limbs; but certain pernicious features were retained. So long as the trunk of the body is girded in the middle by bands, with too little clothing above and an excess of it below, so long will the greatest evil of our present dress remain untouched.²⁹

§ 5. *The "Merciless Dictator" and the "Foreign Despot"*

The aforementioned Boston lectures promoted by the New England Women's club in 1874 were focused precisely on exposing the critical issues of contemporary women's fashion and its serious repercussions on women's health. For the occasion, four female medical doctors with different specialisations and experience were invited to present to the female audience a scientific survey of the specific problems linked to the use of fashionable clothes and, above all, underwear. In the introduction, the editor explains the decision to invite female medical doctors:

From a belief that no views would be so intelligent, and no words so effective, as those of experienced female physicians, a number of regularly educated and able members of the medical profession were selected, and urged to speak upon this theme³⁰

She goes on to point out that the topics of the women doctors were of such vital importance that only one lecture, later reported in the final chapter of the collection mentioned above, was reserved for a

²⁹ Ibidem, Intro, P.XI

³⁰ Ibidem, Intro, P. XV

more general analysis focusing on aesthetic and social considerations of fashion and reform.

First of all, in order to fully understand the issue of dress-reform, it must be underlined how, in the specific American context, the latter also takes on a patriotic and nationalistic value for many of its promoters. From the time of the Sun King Louis XIV (1638-1715) all western fashion was completely moulded and influenced by French fashion: Paris was the undisputed capital of women's fashion³¹, and every woman belonging to high society and the middle classes kept up with its developments, from 1700 onwards thanks above all to the diffusion of the new women's fashion magazines³². Well-to-do American women were no exception to this rule, especially in a historical period marked by the birth of *haute couture*, which had revolutionised the fashion industry, giving its products a status increasingly closer to art and creativity. This dependence of American women on rules dictated from overseas, and designed for a social and economic system completely different from the local one, created a lot of nervousness among the promoters of dress-reform. The thoughts of one of the authors of the collection are emblematic in this regard:

³¹ As we have seen, the fashionable capital of the male bourgeoisie from the end of the 18th century became London and no longer Paris.

³² For more on the relationship between magazines and the construction of femininity and gender roles in the 19th century see Nancy Nelson's essay on the journalist Jane Cunningham Croly: Nancy J. Nelson, «Listening to Jane Cunningham Croly's "Talks With Women": Issues of dress and gender in Demorest's Monthly Magazine» *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 18(3), 2000, p. 128-139.

Possessed of ripened judgments and of justly matured opinions, we shall never be content so long as we are ruled in any direction by a merciless dictator. We have long since ceased to pay willing homage to this foreign despot, Fashion; and now, strengthened by the will and voice of many, the protest against her decrees has become so potent that we begin to rejoice in the hope of soon being able to consult our own individual tastes, needs, and conveniences in dress, as in other matters that pertain to our everyday life, without being a target for ridicule or for scorn.³³

The relevance of Abba Goold Woolson's opinion on the subject justifies a broader quotation:

Fashion is too fickle to be a valuable coadjutor in any work. Continual change is necessary to her very existence; and the costumes she imposes, however acceptable and good, can be but the whims and vagaries of an hour. To intrust vital principles to her is to write them upon the sand. (...). She stoops to conquer the American market. At home, in Paris or Berlin, she amuses herself with the invention of ever-fresh absurdities of style; but they are for duchesses and queens, whose daily lives are of little value to the world or to themselves, and who can afford to give their time to the display of costly follies. We are a nation of earnest workers and of plain republicans; yet no absurdities that she conceives for others are absurd enough for us. We bid her send to our shores only her last and wildest conceits (...). If she has delicate fabrics, we wish to wear them in our changeable climate; we require her to lengthen our trains, that we may drag them, on hurried errands,

³³ Safford-Blake, M; «Lecture I» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874

through unswept streets; to load our skirts with ornament, that we may bind them about our feeble frames; and to pinch and plait the slender bodices in which we do housework, tend shop, and lift unruly children. Fashion exclaims, 'Mon Dieu! what glorious creatures these Americans are! They abound in money, and they adore my caprices. I must give them their hearts' desire!' ³⁴

These passages lead us to consider how fashion is closely related to foreign interference. It should be noted that contemporary American national identity was at that time still a process in the making, rooted in the War of Independence from the English motherland, which took place less than a century (between 1775 and 1783) before Woolson's text was published. Being American, or to take up the words of the authors mentioned above, being part of a nation of «plain republicans» and «earnest workers», meant for many people to be free from any kind of cultural influence or interference coming from overseas.³⁵

Fashion was seen by these American authors, committed to changing the mentality of their compatriots in this regard, as an ideological extension of the old colonial slavery, and for this reason became a synonym of "what is foreign": the quoted expressions of the medical doctor Safford-Blake, who defines fashion as a «merciless dictator» and above all a «foreign despot», as well as the various passages in which she speaks of the lifestyle of the nobility

³⁴ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Intro.

³⁵ Safford-Blake, M; «Lecture I» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Intro.

of the old continent with a not too veiled contempt, are enough to confirm this.³⁶

In the first essay of the 1874 collection³⁷ we find, not surprisingly, a criticism of the custom of representing the most iconic and representative women of recent national history in a style far removed from that which they adopted in historical reality:

Lucretia Mott³⁸ would cease to be the treasured picture we carry in memory, were she divested of her simple, unchanging Quaker garb (...) The world, so often blinded to its best interests, at last learns to recognize the worth of the aim, the value of the mind. Externals in time are lost sight of; and the individual is sought after for what she is and does, and not for the value of her diamonds, the rarity of her lace, and the quality of her velvet³⁹

The reference to the Quakers is not accidental, as Protestant ideals, even in their most radical forms, had profoundly marked the birth and development of American history and culture: it is therefore not difficult to imagine how the sophisticated and eccentric French fashions, which were changing so quickly, were ill-suited to the spiritual approach of the many Christian (generally Protestant) women who had set up the American women's clubs, i.e. the organisations of American women who, as well as fighting for women's rights, justice, social equality and fairness and the right of

³⁶ Ibidem.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Lucretia Mott (1793-1880) was an American civil rights activist who worked to combat gender discrimination and abolish slavery for African Americans.

³⁹ Ibidem.

the whole population to access education, were also engaged at the forefront of the dress-reform issue.⁴⁰

Abba Goold Woolson, in her appendix to the text, insists more specifically on the inadequacy of French-style fashion for the lifestyle of most American women based on total devotion to work, also taking the opportunity to reiterate the religious values that were the background to many of the theses concerning dress-reform:

At home, our country-woman suffers the more because she is not content to be useless and indolent in all her fine array. Her energy, her intelligence in other matters, must exercise themselves within her house and without it. With strength impaired, she attempts to live the life of the busy worker in a dress that the merest idler would find burdensome and oppressive. The result is a pain and a weariness that lead inevitably to discomfort and disease; but she has not yet learned that, while discomfort is a sin against herself, disease is a sin against God.⁴¹

⁴⁰ 1. To learn more about the history of the first American Women's Club see: Croly, J.C; *The history of women's club movement in America*; , H. G Allen & co; 1898; New York. See also: <https://www.womenshistory.org/articles/womens-clubs>

2. Moreover, in the same text edited by Abba Goold Woolson (Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874), expressions are often employed that openly highlight the faith of the women involved in the debate over dress, highlighting how the entire battle over dress reform is imbued with values related to the religious sphere.

⁴¹ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Appendix, P. 136

According to the authors involved in the battle over dress-reform, French fashion thus acquired a mainly negative value, becoming almost an abstract entity that forced women living on the other side of the world to submit to its useless and dangerous "whims" that risked ruining their health, as well as their dignity and respectability.⁴² What are repeatedly identified as «absurdities», i.e. the exaggerations of women's fashions of the time, also denounced by Gilman⁴³, are perceived by these authors as alien to the American way of life and to the sober mentality on which the recent Republican history was based. The contempt for the imposition of foreign fashion for almost all the authors involved in the dress-reform cited here, ended up by taking the form of a more general devaluation of fashion in and of itself, and of the whole system that kept it alive. The authors of the text *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*⁴⁴, describe its distorted and, in their opinion, useless functioning as follows:

It is only needful to remember the origin of fashions, to see how unworthy they are of the consideration they receive. They are designed in the interest of manufacturers who wish to create a fresh demand for new goods. The present adequate supply must in some way be made unpopular and useless, that new fabrications may be required⁴⁵

⁴² Term present several times throughout the essays collected in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Appendix, P. 136, and also in: Parker, F.; *Dress and how to improve it*; Chicago legal news Co.; Chicago; 1897.

⁴³ Supra

⁴⁴ Frances Steele, M.; Livingston Steel Adams; E.; *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*; Dodd, Mead and Company; New York, 1892

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 26.

§ 6. "The Race"

It should also be remembered that in the debate on American dress reform at the end of the 19th century, it is not uncommon to find references to «race», and to the social and moral duty of women to dress correctly and not in a way that is harmful to their health. According to many of the dress reformers, one of the perils of the dangerous fashions of their day was that they would impart the physical weakness they had acquired through improper dress to their children⁴⁶, and thus risk damaging American society as a whole. In fact Abba Goold Woolson warns in the first pages of the introduction: «It seemed vital to the physical well-being of the whole nation that such remedies, when devised, should be generally and permanently adopted»⁴⁷; while Safford-Blake in chapter I states: «The physical degeneracy of the mothers will leave its impress upon sons, as well as upon daughters; and in the end the national strength languishes under the weaknesses of inheritance»⁴⁸.

⁴⁶ Today we know that the scientific theory of the inheritance of parental traits in offspring, devised at the beginning of the 19th century by Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) and shared by many naturalists of his time, proved to be unfounded.

⁴⁷ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Intro; P. VII

⁴⁸ Safford-Blake, M; «Lecture I» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, (1-41)

Ms. Haynes, in *Lecture IV*, also addressed the question of the heritability of the health problems experienced by mothers and put it this way:

As now generally worn, the under-dress is weakening the present generation of women; and, from the unvarying laws of nature, the effect must be transmitted to future generations. Mothers will confer upon their offspring a lower and lower vitality (...) in many cases tendencies to disease are inherited, which become active sooner or later; and thus, life is robbed of usefulness and enjoyment. Instead of being self-maintaining and efficient co-workers with their fellows, such children find the burden of physical disability laid upon them; and they drag out a miserable existence, looking forward to a release from their physical weakness (...).⁴⁹

Two decades later, the dress reformer and suffragette Helen Gilbert Ecob (1850-1934), in her book *The well dressed woman: a study in the practical application to dress of the laws of Health, Art and Morals*⁵⁰, insists on the inherent social and not individual importance of dressing according to the hygienic principles that science was outlining, stating that at the basis of the power of a nation there was precisely the physical vigour of its inhabitants. Ecob states: «Health, then, is not only a matter of individual comfort, but a condition indispensable to national prosperity. In a still higher

⁴⁹ Arvilla B. Haynes, «Lecture IV» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, (p. 98-123)

⁵⁰ Gilbert Ecob, H.; *The well dressed woman: a study in the practical application to Dress of the laws of Health, Art and Morals*; Fowler&Wells Co.; New York, 1892

sense, health is closely involved in ethical problems. Hygienic living is moral living»⁵¹ .

§ 7. *Health considerations*

Let us now look specifically at what were the main scientific concerns related to the consequences of the official fashion of the time on women's health.

The technical conclusions of the authors of the essays collected in the text edited by Abba Goold Woolson⁵² converged on some fundamental points, in particular on the following problems caused by the use of the formal clothing most frequently worn by women in America:

1) The non-uniformity of warmth that the garments offered:

That uniformity of temperature is desirable, is readily apparent from the fact that when any portion of the body becomes unduly heated for a prolonged period of time, congestion of the part is liable to follow; and when, on the other hand, a part is exposed to cold, the capillaries become contracted, the blood is thrown within (...)

In woman's dress, from six to ten thicknesses are found, as a rule and not as an exception, to encase the thoracic region, while the lower extremities are covered, more frequently than otherwise, with but one thickness, and that of cotton. (...) it is in these lower parts of the body that heat is most needed, because there the circulation of the blood is

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 9.

⁵² Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874

less active, and an undercurrent of air around them is apt to produce chills⁵³.

The medical doctor Safford-Blake goes on to describe the health problems of many of her patients, which were caused by the lack of uniformity in the clothing of the time. This consideration is linked to another, not only medical-scientific, but also sociological, one. At several points, in fact, many authors explain how the widespread idea that women were characterised by a weak and delicate nature depended not on their intrinsic biological characteristics, but on the dangerousness of the fashion of the time:

We might enumerate the ill results that follow; but these are only links in the long chain of disorders that have won the disgraceful appellation of women's diseases, when they should be termed women's follies. There has been no blunder in the formation of women: there would be harmony of action in each organ, and in the function assigned it, if Nature were not defrauded of her rights from the cradle to the grave⁵⁴.

However, this was generally ignored by doctors, particularly when it came to illnesses in girls, sometimes serious ones:

The causes of all our physical weakness are more assiduously sought for through a generation of grandfathers, than in false hair, kilt plaits, flounces, bustles, and corsets. But this pressure and weight of the daily

⁵³ Safford-Blake, M; «Lecture I» in: Abba Gould Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston, 1874, p. 197

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, P. 21

dress would account for much of the physical prostration and enfeeblement of the women of our time ⁵⁵

The passage goes on to clearly condemn the practice of burdening girls with all the physical oppressions reserved for adults, thus denying them, among other things, the time of freedom and carefreeness:

It is one of the sad reflections in connection with the absurdities and injuries of dress, that children are so early made to suffer by them the weight and pressure of wide sashes, long, full bows, and over-skirts, are as heating and wearying, laid upon little backs, as are the various excrescences with which adult spines are freighted. The old saw, that "beauty unadorned is adorned the most", is never more aptly applied than to childhood. All that tends to rob this early age of its naturalness and simplicity deprives it of its greatest charm. It may be an old-fashioned whim, but it seems to me that the unsullied, unrumped, high-necked apron, and the plain ungarnished calico of former days, made children more attractive than they can ever be when transformed, as they now are, by dictates of the latest fashion-plate, into miniature men and women ⁵⁶.

In the appendix the focus is again on the effects of the significant difference in temperature offered by the fashions of the day: as mentioned in the quote above, the reformers' concern was that the limbs should receive less than half of the heat reserved for the trunk. Many bodices had no sleeves, or if they did, they were short

⁵⁵ Ibidem

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

or light; the same was true of garments designed for the lower part of the body, which were made of light, loose-fitting materials (skirts were long, but made of a light, draughty fabric). Thus, the part of the body from the neck to the waist received excess heat from the many garments worn and layered on top of each other (the corset, the chemise, the petticoat), while the limbs, particularly the lower ones which needed more coverage because of the fact that blood circulation is less active in that area, remained less protected and more vulnerable to draughts. One of the consequences of this temperature difference could result in «a chronic inflammation of the internal organs, - mother of a hundred ills that afflict women»⁵⁷. M.D. Arvilla Haynes also discusses the problems caused by wearing clothing that provides uneven heat, and in particular the phenomenon of congestion. She explains how cold is sedative and how, when applied to the surface of the body, it causes a decrease in vital powers. Cold works on the circulation by contracting the blood vessels and thus directing the blood inwards from the exposed region. But if one part of the body is deprived of the normal amount of blood, another part will receive more than it should: the result is congestion. The organs most susceptible to this are the lungs and the uterine organs, and this is particularly true for girls at puberty (congestion during this period often becomes chronic and can have a serious lifelong health impact).⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Appendix Pag. 196

⁵⁸ Arvilla B. Haynes, «Lecture IV» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874 (p. 98-123)

According to Arvilla Haynes, the primary responsibility for this phenomenon laid in the incorrect use of undergarments, which, among other things, prevented the skin from eliminating toxic substances through its pores and retaining them in the body when not adapted to the current season.

It is important to remember that according to all the medical doctors who took part in the dress reform collection edited by Abba Goold Woolson, one of the garments that together with the corset had to be eliminated permanently from female wardrobes was the chemise. This undergarment in fact favoured the temperature difference between diverse parts of the body, one of the most serious risks that a garment can bring to the well-being of the organism.

The chemise in fact left the neck and arms uncovered, while at the same time providing an excess of warmth in the central (and in itself warmer) part of the body, already oppressed by the weight and tightness of the other garments.⁵⁹

2) The weight pressing on the central part of the body:

The excessive and poorly distributed weight and layering of clothing was certainly one of the main concerns of the dress reformers, who clamoured for a general lightening of clothing. Abba Goold Woolson's consideration in the appendix to the text is interesting (the passage also includes a not too veiled irony in relation to the fact that, if fashion had not changed, women would

⁵⁹ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Appendix; (pp. 183-255)

probably have been condemned to remain in a perpetual sitting position):

The weight of our clothing increases every year; and, if much more is added, women will be compelled to maintain a sitting posture the greater part of the time, in order to render their dress endurable. *Sedet, aeterumque sedebit, infelix Theseus.* Skirts, in their best estate, require considerable cloth; and the greater number of them are made of the heaviest material commonly worn, - viz., cotton cloth, with the addition of trimmings (...) Of course, all the garments worn above the waist hang from the shoulders by necessity; but all the lower garments, as now worn, hang from the hips, and have no connection whatever with any piece above. (...) Our four physicians were unanimous and emphatic in their declarations that the hips should be relieved of all weight; and no physician has been found anywhere to advocate a different view.⁶⁰

The authors agree that clothes that placed all the weight on the hips and abdomen were not recommended, but rather a system that places all the weight on the shoulders, possibly with the use of suspenders. In fact, putting too much weight on the hips could cause displacement of the internal organs in the pelvic region⁶¹.

The custom of the time, as Safford-Blake points out, was for a woman to burden her abdominal region with the weight of up to thirteen or fourteen layers of clothing, consisting of pants, skirts, petticoats, chemises, and especially the double bands attached to skirts (remember also how the weight of the clothing was

⁶⁰ Ibidem

⁶¹ Ibidem.

compounded by the weight of decorations such as braids and folds on the garments). The result of this excessive load on the hips and abdomen was «a displacement of all the internal organs; for you cannot displace one, without in some way interfering with another»⁶².

In her essay, M.D. Safford-Blake talks about the serious health hazards of excess weight on the abdominal region and how she witnessed first-hand the disastrous consequences of the problematic habit on a woman's vital organs. Having witnessed the autopsy of so many women of different ages and social backgrounds, Safford-Blake found that in all cases there were serious anomalies in the arrangement and consistency of the organs. She cites in particular the autopsies she had to attend in Vienna, and the subsequent research she undertook into the relationship between clothing and the *post-mortem* physical condition of women. She then goes on to describe in detail the abnormal condition of the organs in the pelvic-abdominal region of the deceased: in some cases the women's liver was even cut in two and held together by a hardened piece of tissue; in many others some of the ribs overlapped each other or perforated the liver, and in still others the liver often fell below the level of the ribs, instead of maintaining a position parallel to them. The spleen was almost always found to be either enlarged more than normal, or atrophied and adherent to the peritoneal cavity. The vagina was in each case

⁶²Safford-Blake, M; «Lecture I» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, (1-41)

analysed more or less far from a normal position. The result of these problems was great suffering during pregnancy for both mother and child, a marked reduction in life expectancy, and a deterioration in the quality of life due to premature ageing and diminished strength (the author points out that the physical performance of a woman in the conditions described above is nowhere near that of a healthy organism). Safford-Blake also cites the case of an unmarried girl of twenty-two, whose waist was so narrow after death that it could be contained in her hands, and who had all her glandular organs in an atrophied state, a condition caused by the continuous pressure on the nerve centre called the *solar plexus* and on the central glandular organs. The weight on the abdominal region, however, was not only due to the weight of the drawers, the bands, the ropes and the skirts themselves, but also to the corset, as will be seen later.

In order to prevent the pelvic-abdominal region from being overburdened, there was a preference for clothing, particularly underwear, that distributed the weight over the shoulders without overburdening the hips. Interestingly, however, the debate on this evolved over the years, as in 1892 Helen Gilbert Ecob⁶³ argued against placing weight on the shoulders, and proposed the adoption of unique undergarments, such as the famous versions of the «Emancipation Suit» or «Union Suit» (fig.6) made famous largely by the designs created by Annie Jenness Miller (1859-1935),

⁶³ Gilbert Ecob, H.; *The well dressed woman: a study in the practical application to Dress of the laws of Health, Art and Morals*; Fowler&Wells Co.; New York, 1892

professor, dress reformer and editor of the turn of the century alternative fashion magazine *Dress: a monthly magazine*.

3) Condemnation of the corset

The corset was undoubtedly the garment that most symbolized the danger of official and formal fashion in the eyes of the dress reformers. The corset debate was at its height in the second half of the nineteenth century, and all authors, doctors, lecturers, and activists spoke out on the subject. Although most dress reformers condemned the use of the corset outright, there were also those who allowed its use only under certain conditions: some argued that the corset was dangerous to health only if worn according to the practice of tight lacing, or promoted «improved» versions of the garment. The debate was heated in the 1870s, when Abba Goold Woolson stated in the appendix of her text *Dress reform*: «A corset is always bad, whether laced or not» and condemned the superficiality and ignorance of many women who did not want to give up the garment and believed that it was essential to support the body.⁶⁴ The women in favour of the corset, in fact, claimed that its lower portion served both to support the bust in an upright position and to protect the abdomen by acting as a shield, and therefore to prevent the heavy skirts from making them fall to the ground⁶⁵. Woolson responds to these considerations with the irony

⁶⁴ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Appendix; (pp. 183-255)

⁶⁵ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874, Appendix (pp. 183-255)

that characterises all the interventions in the above-mentioned collection, pointing out that it was curious to think that women, unlike men, would not have been able to remain upright without external support:

In short, had no human being been bright enough for the invention of this garment, one- half of God's humanity must have been a hopeless failure. He was able, it appears, to construct man so that he should be equal to the requirements of the life conferred upon him; but woman came forth from his hand wholly incompetent to maintain herself erect, or to discharge the daily duties enjoined upon her. Fortunately, some one of his creatures, seeing the deficiency, succeeded in supplementing his work. Thus one skeleton sufficed for me; but for women it had to be propped up externally by another skeleton strapped about it. Or, in other words, Nature made man, but Nature plus Art made woman: take away Art, and she becomes chaos, - "a shapeless form and void." Does anyone believe that, when the Creator gave to women their forms, he did not also give them the muscles which its proper maintenance would require? ⁶⁶

The author goes on to point out that once the weight of the skirts had been lightened and the weight of the clothing distributed differently, the corset would have lost all reason to exist.

It is worthwhile, now, to dwell on the more purely medical considerations that medical doctors have expressed in reference to the corset. There is no doubt that it was one of the garments responsible for the excessive pressure on the abdomen.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 203

In the preceding paragraph we highlighted the post-mortem physical condition of the organs of women who dressed in the official fashion of the century, and pointed out how an excessive load of weight on the abdominal region could lead to harmful consequences in relation to the morphology and arrangement of the internal organs. Safford-Blake even cited the case of a prominent New York doctor who demonstrated through animal experiments that continuous pressure on the stomach caused premature death⁶⁷.

All the doctors who have examined the problems caused by the infamous female garment, the corset, in this collection of essays have also focused on other fatal consequences of its continuous pressure on this region of the body, namely the malfunctioning of the lungs and thus the inability to receive proper oxygenation of the blood.

Caroline H. Hastings explains (after a long and accurate description of the functioning of the lungs and other organs involved in the respiratory process) how a complete filling of the air cells causes the lung, and therefore the chest cavity, to expand due to a depression of the diaphragm. So, if there is such a strong compression of the ribs and cartilage that they do not work, the consequence will be that the diaphragm becomes almost completely immobilised, the chest cavity becomes too small to allow adequate air in, so some of the blood is not oxygenated, and

⁶⁷ Safford-Blake, M; «Lecture I» in: Abba Gould Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874, (1-41)

more carbon dioxide is trapped in the blood than is necessary⁶⁸. Arvilla Haynes explains in *Lecture IV*⁶⁹ that if the amount of oxygen inhaled is not proportionate to the amount of carbon dioxide removed, the blood becomes carbonised and unfit for nutritional function. This condition of the blood also affects the nervous system, and hence all the other organs: the very action of the heart is impaired, as is the regular contraction of the diaphragm. In addition, because of the compression on the abdomen, the liver is displaced and insists on the space of the other abdominal organs, and finally digestion is impaired because of the impediment placed in the way of the regular contraction of the stomach⁷⁰.

Dr Hastings mentions a typical behaviour of corset wearers, namely to take a deep breath as soon as they are free of the garment, and gives a scientific explanation: throughout the day, more blood tries to enter the blood vessels in the lungs than they can hold (because they are under pressure). When this pressure is lost

the blood, no longer obstructed, rushes into the network of blood-vessels surrounding the air-cells, and instantly there is a call for oxygen to take the place of the carbonic acid contained in it. Involuntarily we answer this call with a deep breath, and a complete filling of the air-cells. In a moment equilibrium is restored; the blood

⁶⁸ Caroline H. Hastings «Lecture II» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874

⁶⁹ Arvilla B. Haynes, «Lecture IV» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874, (pp. 98-123)

⁷⁰ *Ibidem*.

flows into the lungs more steadily, and an easy respiration is then sufficient to supply the demand for oxygen.⁷¹

However, these authors did not limit themselves to scientific considerations, but extended their analysis: another problem was, in fact, to be found in the reduction of the possibility of movement caused by the corset, which in fact prevented women who wore it (as Charlotte Gilman also claimed⁷²), from being equal to men in social and working relationships. The words with which Abba Goold Woolson, in the appendix, compares the fixity caused to the torso by the whalebone contained in the corset to that caused by two iron bars fixed around the same part of the body are emblematic in this regard. Indeed:

The lower cells of the lungs would expand, the bars say, No; the stomach would rise and fall as the heart throbs, the bars say, No; the body would bend backward and forward at the waist in a hundred slight movements, the bars say, No: keep to your line; thus far shalt thou go, and no farther.⁷³

The author goes on to make an interesting comparison to support the thesis that the corset is an instrument of torture and barbarism:

⁷¹ Caroline H. Hastings «Lecture II» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874

⁷² *Supra*

⁷³ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874, Appendix, P. 206

By and by, as intelligence increases, and the practices of ignorance disappear, the compression of the waist now practised by European and American women will be held to be as ridiculous and far more pernicious than the compression of the feet practised by the Chinese. Indeed, our heathen sisters must appear far more sensible than we; for their favorite torture affects only a remote and comparatively unimportant part of the body, while ours is a torture of the trunk at its very centre, where the springs of life are certain to be weakened and diseased.⁷⁴

A little further on, Woolson goes into the aesthetic considerations inherent in this garment. Victorian fashion called for slim, slender figures, and many women wore corsets for the sole purpose of appearing slimmer, but according to the author this only made their *silhouettes* more ridiculous, particularly in the case of older women. The author explains how the corset could only make the figure more disproportionate, as the width of the hips and chest was emphasised by the waist being made thinner. Finally, according to Woolson, mature women looked out of place if they appeared too thin, as a robust physique helped to convey the idea of respectability and security suitable for a more mature age⁷⁵.

Woolson also condemned the fashion of wanting to model the body in the shape of an hourglass. According to her, this shape would be contrary to nature: the corset, therefore, would distort the natural forms of the body. In fact, the author, taking the forms of ancient statues as a model, states that despite the fact that nature provides

⁷⁴ Ibidem, Page 208

⁷⁵ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874, Appendix

for a larger body below the ribs than in the upper part, modern women insisted on reshaping their physicality in an almost opposite way than the natural ideal embodied, according to the dress reformers, by classical models such as the Venus de Milo or Venus de Medici. Paradoxically, however, these same women used to go to the galleries to admire the beauty of classical and Renaissance statues, without ever ceasing to wear the latest fashionable French corset.⁷⁶ Let us limit ourselves for now to this brief mention of the admiration of the proponents of dress reform for classical statuary, since the subject will be adequately explored in the following chapter, in relation above all to aesthetic movement and the relationship between the latter and dress reform.

Towards the end of the century, two decades later, Frances Parker Stuart also focused her attention on the corset in her book *Dress and how to improve it*⁷⁷ and, drawing on her own experience as a woman who had decided to reform her dress, offered some advice to readers.

After describing the abnormal condition of her internal organs caused by the incorrect and continuous use of certain garments («my floating ribs pressing into my liver, my stomach crowded out the roomy home its Creator had given it, and endeavoring to make a place for itself in the room rightly belonging to the lungs and heart, and they in turn interfered with, and protesting as best as

⁷⁶ Ibidem

⁷⁷ Stuart Parker, F.; *Dress and how to improve it*; Chicago legal news Company; Chicago; 1897.

they could, with shortened breath and rapid action»⁷⁸), she described the difficulties she encountered after she stopped wearing the corset overnight. Indeed, once the garment was removed, the sensation, caused by the habit of passivity of the muscles, was that of breaking in two. So, to avoid the muscular anarchy that followed the abandonment of the garment, Parker advised women to gradually remove it, freeing themselves from its steel and bone constraints and slowly regaining the space necessary to breathe properly. She also recommended breathing exercises and gymnastics to be repeated several times a day, which would serve to reactivate adequate elasticity of the trunk muscles, and an improvement in the ability to breathe spontaneously without a corset. Parker warned, however, that the process of muscle reactivation through gymnastics would be long and tiring for any woman used to wearing a corset for years, but would ultimately prove effective and necessary⁷⁹.

⁷⁸ Ibidem, p. 6.

⁷⁹ Ibidem.

Chapter II. Aesthetic movement, nonconformist fashion and the role of women in society

§ 1. Art, nature and beauty: the “aesthetic fashion”

The dress reform movement was not the only one to propose alternatives to formal fashion centered on the idea of constriction and, dare I say it, suffocation of the body. In the second half of the century, in fact, the aesthetic movement spread, which had among its prerogatives precisely that of proposing a new concept of fashion and beauty, far removed from the current one.

The controversial conception of Mother Hubbard within the aesthetic fashion, as well as its similarity to many garments promoted by the aesthetic movement in the Anglo-Saxon world, prompts us to look more closely at the characteristics of aestheticism. In particular, it is necessary to dwell on the characteristics of the fashion promoted by the movement, as well as its connections to the ideals of dress reform.

The aesthetic movement, which reached its peak of popularity in the period under consideration here (between 1870 and 1890), had its roots in England, more precisely in 1848, when three young students from the London Academy of Art, William Holman Hunt (1827-1910), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and John Everett Millais (1829-1896), founded the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The movement was particularly inspired by the theories of John Ruskin (1819-1900), writer, poet and art critic, who believed that art should pursue beauty through adherence to nature. Ruskin's ideas also

formed the basis of the Arts and Craft Movement that flourished between 1880 and 1920. According to Ruskin, clothing and fashion played a prominent role in the works of art:

No good historical painting ever yet existed, or even can exist, where the dress of the people of the time are not beautiful; and had it not been for the lovely and fantastic dressing of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, neither French, nor Florentine, nor Venetian art could have risen to anything like the rank it reached. Still even the best dressing was never the costliest.⁸⁰

The Preraffaelite movement, as its name suggests, was characterised by a strong interest in medieval and 15th century aesthetics, which had to be rendered, especially in terms of clothing, in a realistic manner and in keeping with natural beauty. For this reason, artists made extensive use of historical clothing and refused to reproduce contemporary fashion in their works, which they considered ugly, inappropriate and above all unnatural. The artists chose soft, cascading drapes for the clothes in their works, revealing the shape of the body, like the clothes of the ancient Greeks and Romans, or those in use in the Middle Ages. The rejection of 19th century society, however, did not only include fashion, but extended to the whole way of thinking and above all to morality. The Italian Treccani dictionary, in fact, states: «the conviction that they could give a faithful and non-coarse portrait of contemporary life led the Pre-Raphaelite painters to become

⁸⁰ John Ruskin, «A joy forever», Lecture I. The Discovery and application of art. *A lecture delivered at Manchester*, July 10, 1857. Source: Wikisource. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/A_Joy_For_Ever/Lecture_I

interpreters of Victorian society, capturing the ambiguity of its moral disagreements»⁸¹.

The aesthetic movement brought these concepts to fruition, expanding them to all spheres of art (from architecture to painting to design and fashion) and life, affirming the urgency of changing taste and morality. The quest for naturalness and beauty was therefore paramount, and according to the promoters of aestheticism (in particular Oscar Wilde, but also Walter Peter⁸²), it had to be unrelated to morality. Emblematic in fact was the motto of «art for art's sake» taken from the French writer Théophile Gautier (1811-1872).

The primary inspiration for women who wanted to dress in the so-called “artistic” or “aesthetic” manner were the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite painters, in particular those of Dante Rossetti, who depicted his wife and muse, Elizabeth Siddal (1829-1862), dressed in loose, short-sleeved dresses that allowed free movement without constriction⁸³.

Aesthetic fashion, therefore, was based on a concept of natural beauty, which could only be achieved through a liberation from constraints and therefore the adoption of simple, sober clothes, similar to those of the classical world, which allowed a glimpse of the natural, healthy and pleasant forms of women.

⁸¹ Entry «Preraffaellismo» in *Dizionario Treccani, Enciclopedia Online* (<https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/preraffaellismo/>).

⁸² Oscar Wilde (1854-1900); Walter Horatio Peter (1839-1894)

⁸³ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003.

Art, ideas and aesthetic taste did not take long to reach the shores of the United States, and they did so through a variety of sources, namely through essays and fictions circulated in periodicals, through the authors involved in spreading aestheticism such as the painter and writer Mary Haweis (1848-1898), and through other literary sources.

But the most important reason for the great fame of aesthetic fashion and taste in the United States is linked to the eclectic and eccentric personality of Oscar Wilde⁸⁴, and his very popular tour through the country. Thanks to the lectures he gave during his trip, Wilde was able to bring the general American public closer to aestheticism. Among the topics covered during the lectures and shows of the tour, fashion played a prominent role. In many of his speeches, instances relating to the importance of beauty in dress and the adoption of an aesthetic style were mixed with those relating to the importance of women's health. In particular, in the lecture *Slaves of Fashion* Wilde expressed his dissent towards the «tortures» inflicted by an «unreasonable and monstrous fashion»⁸⁵ in every era. He stated that their continuation and multiplication in an era considered civilised was to be contemplated with sadness. In particular, Wilde condemned the use of tight lacing, which, in his opinion, not only caused unnecessary suffering to women and serious damage to their health, but also had the sole result of

⁸⁴ Oscar Wilde dealt with fashion and other women's issues throughout his life. Suffice it to say that he was editor of the English magazine *The Woman's World* from 1887 to 1890.

⁸⁵ Oscar Wilde, «Slaves of fashion» in art and decoration, Methuen and Company, London, 1920, 206

making the female silhouette ugly: a waist that was too tight made the figure disproportionate, as it only visually amplified the width of the hips and shoulders. In his lecture Wilde mentions some positive trends, such as the return of some Parisian women to the *directoire*⁸⁶ style, but above all the spread of tea-gowns thanks to their use by actresses such as Sarah Bernhardt.

Tea gowns, Mother Hubbard's "relative" house dresses, were semi-fitted and ornate garments worn without a corset. They were considered the most sophisticated of house dresses, and traditionally more appropriate than the wrapper (on which will be said later) for private afternoon receptions. The aesthetic movement and the renewal of taste that it proposed pushed women to use these garments progressively in more public situations, as «the tea gown gave women the opportunity to explore the margins of mainstream fashionable dress without an excess of social censure and public scrutiny»⁸⁷. To confirm Mother Hubbard's role in the aesthetic movement, which we will discuss in more detail in a moment, it can be noted that the garment, albeit in an elegant and perhaps sweetened version, as can be seen in Figure 9, was often portrayed in the press alongside the much publicised tea gowns.

⁸⁶ A style that spread in France at the end of the XVIII century, not different from neoclassical aesthetics. Similar to "aesthetic fashion", this style also involved a return to natural beauty (without the use of constricting garments such as corsets) and was inspired by the aesthetics of the classical world.

⁸⁷ Wahl, Kimberly. «A Domesticated Exoticism: Fashioning Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Tea Gowns» in *Cultures of Femininity in Modern Fashion*, edited by Ilya Parkins and Elizabeth M. Sheehan, 45-70, University Press of New England, Lebanon, 2011.

Tea-gowns, also thanks to their exotic appeal⁸⁸, were especially popular among the wealthier classes, the social sector from which the first women to take an interest in aestheticism came.

§ 2. *The aesthetic counterculture and the reversal of gender roles*

The aesthetic movement, which led to a renewed passion for the whole field of art and design, was characterised as a counterculture aimed at reacting to the urbanisation, industrialisation and morality prevailing in the Victorian era. In her essay,⁸⁹ Mary W. Blanchard argues that in the United States this artistic wave, precisely through its expression in fashion, was functional to a redefinition and a shift in gender boundaries. The Victorian era, in fact, envisaged stereotyped, dichotomous and rigidly defined gender roles. The woman coincided, also symbolically, with the idea of the interior, i.e. family and home space, while the man symbolised what was external, i.e. work, politics and social space. This division of roles was also reflected on the artistic level. Femininity was associated with the minor artistic genres, such as design and interior *decoration*, while masculinity was associated with the major arts, such as painting and sculpture, often carried out in public places. In the work of art, the woman, through her body, became the *object* of the man's gaze, who was therefore both

⁸⁸ It should be noted that the aesthetic movement was inspired by beauty and classical taste as well as by oriental, especially Japanese, taste.

⁸⁹ Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages)

subject and author. The aesthetic movement is placed in this context as an ideal space within which it was possible to redesign one's own being and recover that dimension of individual freedom censored by the social rules of the century. This shift in boundaries was achieved thanks to aesthetic fashion, considered by the followers of the movement as a major art («the elevation of dress to “high” art and the perception of both the producer and the wearer as “artists” in this more formal sense were unique to the aesthetic movement»⁹⁰). The realisation of an aesthetic style of clothing, therefore, placed both the designer who created it and the woman who wore it, adapting it to her own taste, in the position of creatives and artists. The woman came out of the shadow of the house to which she had been relegated. Through the beauty and originality of aesthetic fashion, so disruptive compared to traditional fashion, she became the protagonist of the public sphere, and placed herself in it in a theatrical way, as an individual work of art. Blanchard states, in fact:

Some women used their body and their dress as public art forms not only to defy the moral implications of domesticity but to assume cultural agency in their society at large. By creating herself as both performing public self and individual work of art, the aesthetic woman changed traditional concepts of the female as artistic object to the female as artistic subject⁹¹.

⁹⁰ Ibidem, p. 23

⁹¹ Ibidem, Page 22

The author often returns to the concept of theatrical performance, emphasizing how for aesthetic women society became a stage on which to express their individuality and personality. The aesthetic dress was the means by which to operate this difficult reversal of roles: through fashion, the woman transformed herself into a public work of art, and thus accessed an area until then relegated to men. Moreover, Blanchard states that the reversal of the female role is mirrored by that of the man, whose body, also thanks to the work of authors such as Wilde, became an art object in the aesthetic context. This happened also thanks to the diffusion and acceptance of male homosexuality in the artistic environment.

The concept of fashion (and therefore, as we shall see, also of the body) elevated to the status of a work of art returns in various authors linked to the movement, and especially in the texts of Mary Haweis, which were very popular in America.

In her *The Art of Beauty*⁹², the author repeats many times the term «work of art» in reference to fashion, as opposed to the «simple fashion» of the past. Its function should no longer be to conceal the body, but to express one's personality based on the conviction that «what is true of painting is true also of dress».⁹³ Haweis' text is also relevant because the importance attached to originality is emphasised. The concept of an original fashion, different for everyone, expressing the uniqueness of the taste and personality of the wearer, who becomes an individual and no longer just a

⁹² Haweis, M.E., *The art of beauty*, Chatto&Windus, London, 1883

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 14

member of a group, is interesting because it anticipates contemporary feelings about fashion, which were fully realised a century later. According to Haweis in fact:

But how difficult it is for a woman to be really well dressed, under the existing prejudice that everybody must be dressed like everybody else! (...) It is as absurd to suppose that every variety of short and tall, grave and gay, young and old, must be dressed in one style, as that the same coat must fit every man. How should it be so, whilst nature revels in endless dissimilarity? Why is the woman with taste for colour and form to sacrifice her gift to the others who have it not, and copy, when she is capable of originating ? Why this deadly fear of being conspicuous? Why is one's individuality, so clear within, to be so confused with-out?

And shortly afterwards:

If so, in the name of art and nature both, let us shake off the lethargy which immolates us to a Juggernaut of ignorant opinion, and let us assert our individuality, if we have any, in dress as in other things. ⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Ibidem, p. 16 and 17

§ 3. Aesthetic fashion and dress reform. Meeting points and differences

Beauty, inextricably linked to the concepts of art and nature, was thus at the heart of the movement, and its pursuit is one of the main differences between the aesthetes' approach to fashion and that of the dress reformers of the previous decades (particularly the 1850-1870s), who were more interested in the healthy, practical and functional aspect of clothing. The aesthetes' aim was not to institute a fight against fashion, but to create beauty. In spite of this initial difference in perspective, however, when analysing the texts of the reformers at the end of the century, it is evident how aesthetic ideals were amalgamated with those centered on health, eventually forming a single front in favour of changing women's fashion. The aesthetic movement could, through the pursuit of beauty, really persuade women to abandon corsets and other unhealthy habits without having to resort to male fashion. According to Cunningham, in fact:

Aesthetic dress provided dress reformers with a fresh approach to continue their battle to free women from restrictive dress (...). Supporters of freedom in dress for women viewed the aesthetic styles as acceptable alternatives to restrictive women's fashion⁹⁵.

The influences of aesthetic ideas can be seen in the later texts of the dress reformers. In 1897 Frances Stuart Parker in her *Dress and how*

⁹⁵ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003.

*to improve it*⁹⁶, criticising the unrealistic and unnatural approach of traditional fashion, compares the designer's *forma mentis* to that of the architect: both must base their creations on the peculiarities of the time, place and context. Indeed:

Above all it was insisted that a fashion in dress is as unphilosophical and irrational as a fashion in architecture. The artist and architect strive from their study of principles to adapt their creations to time, place and purpose. This is true of all art and should be doubly so of dress. If the climate, the occasion, and above all, the individual, are taken into consideration, then the garment evolved is always in fashion, because like any work of art, the principles which govern its construction are unvarying.

A few pages later, again referring to the problems of traditional fashion, she takes up the successful metaphor of architecture:

The great trouble with woman's dress aesthetically, is, that it completely ignores the true form of the body, building out and changing the figure without reference to its beauty of outline, much less its functional use. It is as if an architect should draw plans for a house and utterly disregard the land, surroundings, or use to which the building is to be put, simply considering his own caprice, or perverted taste in the matter⁹⁷.

The dress reformers of the 1890s were all influenced by aesthetic art. They also believed that beauty was to be achieved not only by

⁹⁶ Stuart Parker, F.; *Dress and how to improve it*; Chicago legal news Company; Chicago; 1897.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12 and 19.

the grace of clothes, but also by the care of the body. Only a healthy and well-groomed body, in fact, could be truly beautiful, and enhance the qualities of aesthetic clothes.

Indeed:

No clothing, however rich and elegant, can make an ill-shapen, weak, distorted body look beautiful, or even comely. The most artistic dress is worse than lost on a figure lacking poise, as no amount of ornament can atone for bad construction. But, happily, no dress, however poor, can make a well proportioned, healthy body look mean or insignificant.⁹⁸

In the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the aesthetic and dress reform⁹⁹ movement, the culture of exercise had spread among women, who were increasingly eager to enter public life. Since the first half of the century, in urban areas there has been an expansion of gymnasiums, places progressively frequented by women, in which they sought rest from their increasingly sedentary daily activities. In these spaces often formed small communities, often complementary to families in the education of young people. Gymnastics courses, particularly calisthenics, and instruction based on Del Sarte's system, also became widespread in women's schools and universities. The latter practice was an Americanisation of the system of codification of oratorical

⁹⁸ Frances Steele, M.; Livingston Steel Adams; E.; *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*; Dodd, Mead and Company; New York, 1892;

⁹⁹ It is important to note that the relationship between women's sports and dress reform is one of mutual influence. It was also the need to wear less restrictive clothing suitable for sports activities that caused women to become aware of the need for dress reform.

techniques and poses devised by François Del Sarte (1811 -1871) for politicians, actors and orators, and became very popular in the aesthetic sphere, thanks to pedagogues who were convinced that the poses envisaged by the system helped the individual to develop beauty and grace (another term widely used by the followers of aestheticism).

Frances Stuart Parker (1875-1924) was an active member of the Chicago Society for the Promotion of Physical Culture and Correct Dress, a women's club designed to promote a healthy lifestyle, suited to the needs of the "new woman" of the end of the century, and therefore focused on a good diet, comfortable and not bulky clothing and, above all, the practice of sport. In the text cited earlier¹⁰⁰, Parker traces the origins of the Chicago women's club to the activities of the New England Women's Club, founded twenty years earlier, stating, however, that in the last years of the century the Chicago women had added «aesthetic beauty» to the latter's watchwords of «health and comfort»¹⁰¹.

Sport and self-care were intended to bring women as close as possible to the ideal of classical beauty which was widespread in aesthetic circles and among dress reformers, and which represented another bridge between the two movements: «one has to make her own body as nearly as possible like classic models, by exercise, by diet, by every healthful process»¹⁰². The ideal of

¹⁰⁰ Stuart Parker, F.; *Dress and how to improve it*; Chicago legal news Company; Chicago; 1897.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, p. 10

¹⁰² Frances Steele, M.; Livingston Steel Adams; E.; *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*; Dodd, Mead and Company; New York; 1892

supreme beauty was in fact to be found in classical art and ancient sculptures, one of which was the Venus de Milo.

The Venus de Milo was cited by all the authors of dress reform who were inspired by the aesthetic movement and its importance as a physical model and source of inspiration was such that among the rules written in the Calendar of the Chicago women's club was one which suggested that members should possess its image¹⁰³. With regard to the Venus de Milo, the love for classicism and the concept of beauty, the statements made by the authors of the text *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*¹⁰⁴ are emblematic and deserve an extensive mention:

We are fortunate in having examples of the highest types embodied in enduring marble, that there may be no question regarding their essential features. They were the thought of Greece on the subject of feminine beauty, in the period of the highest physical cultivation of the race known to history. They must stand for the ideal woman to the end of time. We can only sit down before them in deep admiration. To their perfection our times can add nothing. They are to be studied, loved, imitated. The statue of the Venus di Milo is a transcendent embodiment of mature feminine beauty. She is peerless. Her grand form is that of a fully developed woman standing before us in serene majesty. Before her, criticism is dumb. Her magnificent womanhood affects us like a strain of exquisite music. She is both great and tender. The Diana of Praxiteles, and the Winged Victory of Samothrace, are

¹⁰³ Stuart Parker, F.; *Dress and how to improve it*; Chicago legal news Company; Chicago; 1897.

¹⁰⁴ Frances Steele, M.; Livingston Steel Adams; E.; *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*; Dodd, Mead and Company; 1892; New York;

other noble forms of Greek thought. The world's best art has wrought this sculpture to typify perfect womanly proportion.¹⁰⁵

On the link between dress reform and aesthetic fashion, it is interesting to note Blanchard¹⁰⁶'s opinion, not found in other authors such as Cunningham¹⁰⁷ or Helvenston¹⁰⁸, according to whom in the 1890's (the period of decline of the aesthetic movement) the substantial difference between the aesthetic movement and dress reform would be found in the different cultural substratum which marks and separates the two movements. While the aesthetic movement would have been a niche subculture marking a moment of rupture and counterculture with respect to the dogmas and society of the time, the dress reform movement would have been part of mass culture and linked to conservative groups often of a religious matrix. These latter establishment groups, according to Blanchard, appropriated aesthetic garments, stripping them of their subversive charge and inserting them into a "ready to wear" market logic. Therefore, according to this interpretation, the 1890s saw the dress reform movement, which had already been going on in America for decades thanks to the support of religious and conservative groups,

¹⁰⁵ Ibidem, p. 57

¹⁰⁶ Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages)

¹⁰⁷ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003;

¹⁰⁸ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45. It is important to underline that in her essay on Mother Hubbard the author dedicates little space to the theme of dress reform.

misappropriate, as often happens in history, the ideas and products of an “alternative” culture that attributed other meanings to them. These ideas and products were in fact originally conceived in open opposition to the dominant culture into which they were forcibly incorporated afterwards. According to the author, it was in this way that aesthetic garments became mainstream, appearing in the press and in boutiques, thus conforming to the bourgeois system, until they became completely normalised through the Del Sarte system and through their use in modern dance¹⁰⁹.

§ 4. Formality and Informality in the Victorian Era

The garment which is the subject of this paper, the Mother Hubbard, is mentioned by several authors in reference to aesthetic fashion¹¹⁰. Cunningham mentions it several times in her study on dress reform and aesthetic fashion.¹¹¹ In particular, in describing one of the main characteristics of the latter, that is the fact that there was no corset and that there were no bands or other adhesions on the waist¹¹², the author explains how there were already house

¹⁰⁹ See: Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages);

¹¹⁰ See: Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages); Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003; and Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

¹¹¹ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003.

¹¹² On the peculiarities of aesthetic fashion in relation to the absence of a tight fit at the waist, considered unnatural because not foreseen by the shape of the

gowns constructed in this way. Dresses such as the Mother Hubbard, Princess style, and Empire style could then fit the aesthetic context.

In addition, as can be seen from Figure 10, Cunningham also indicates how there were more elaborate and fashionable aesthetic outfits that reinterpreted the characteristics of Mother Hubbard and other wrappers, often blending the details of different types of house dress into original aesthetic creations.

The Mother Hubbard garment belongs to the large family of “wrappers”, a term used from the mid-century onwards to describe loose, long, informal clothing for domestic use. It should be remembered that in the Victorian era clothing was subject to a certain prescriptive schematization, so that every occasion required a specific and appropriate outfit: the individual's taste left room for rigid pre-established codes of etiquette, slavishly followed with the intention of demonstrating worthy membership of one's social class. In this respect, the manuals consisting of etiquette advice from the authors of the time, such as Eunice White Beecher's famous texts on home care¹¹³, are eloquent. The term «wrapper» appears several times in the etiquette manual for American ladies and gentlemen by the historian George Rippey Stuart and the

body, see: Frances Steele, M.; Livingston Steel Adams; E.; *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*; Dodd, Mead and Company; 1892; New York

¹¹³ See Beecher, E.W.B; *Motherly talks. The home how to make and keep it*; Buckeye publishing co.; Minneapolis; 1883. Here the term «wrapper» appears in Chapter VII, which explains how to wash clothes properly, referring to the moment when a woman makes herself comfortable and puts on the garment to prepare for her night's rest.

writer and poet Eliza Bisbee Duffey¹¹⁴, and its use shows how clothing was subject to such requirements: «one does not come down in full dress to breakfast, nor wear a wrapper or shooting-jacket to a ceremonious dinner». In Chapter III, dedicated to the use of the morning dress for the home and the street, the term appears again in relation to the appropriateness of the home garment and the limited occasions in which its use could be acceptable: «for breakfasting in public or at the house of another the loose wrapper is inadmissible. A dress with a closely-fitting waist must take its place»¹¹⁵. The authors also advise on the most appropriate way to wear a morning wrapper:

A lady may appear in a wrapper in the morning, but it should be clean and fresh, and supplemented with spotless collar and cuffs, and with a bright knot of ribbon or bunch of flowers at the throat. No jewelry should be worn at this hour of the day save plain rings, brooch and watch and chain. ¹¹⁶

These quotations explain how in the 19th century it was considered unthinkable, but also scandalous, not only to go out in the street wearing a suit of the wrapper family (especially a Mother Hubbard, considered the simplest and most rudimentary), but also to just

¹¹⁴ Duffey, E.B; Stewart, G. R; *The ladies' and gentlemen's etiquette: a complete manual of the manners and dress of American society. Containing forms of letters, invitations, acceptances and regrets. With a copious index*; Porter and Coates; Philadelphia, 1877

¹¹⁵ Ibidem; p. 260 and 265.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, P. 265

show up for breakfast at a friend's house or acquaintance's house dressed like that¹¹⁷. The reasons for this veto lay in the dichotomous division, typical of the 19th century, between formal and informal dress and in the importance given to the former by the concept of adherence and compression of the waist, signs that indicated the need to delimit and discipline the female body in the Victorian age¹¹⁸.

Mary Blanchard actually includes Mother Hubbard as an aesthetic dress, particularly in reference to the social stigma and arrests of women who wore it publicly.¹¹⁹ The author further argues, citing Mother Hubbard, that the aesthetic garment was an «offshoot of the uncorseted wrapper», with added details such as puffy, wide sleeves made of elaborate fabrics and dyed in colours considered “aesthetic”, such as Venetian green, brick red, blue and green, yellow and grey¹²⁰.

Helvenston also, as mentioned, links Mother Hubbard to aesthetic fashion, stating how it was recommended and used by several supporters of the movement, such as Annie Jenness Miller and Francis Willard. The author underlines how the characteristics of Mother Hubbard were very close to aesthetic taste. In fact, elements such as smocking and shirring, together with the characteristic

¹¹⁷ These considerations are helpful in understanding the reasons behind the *querelle* and criticism centred on Mother Hubbard's public employment.

¹¹⁸ On the symbolic and cultural meanings of female physicality in the Victorian era see also: Silver, A. *Victorian Literature and the anorexic body*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006.

¹¹⁹ Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages);

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*

fullness of the garment, were highly sought after and valued in aesthetic circles. Finally, another link between Mother Hubbard and aesthetic fashion is the illustrator Kate Greenaway. The artist used to create, both in her art and in reality, children's clothes with characteristics very similar to Mother Hubbard on the one hand and to aesthetic fashion on the other, all bearing features such as shirring and smocking. Although Greenaway never defined herself as an aesthete, in fact her illustrations were very much appreciated by the movement, and helped to spread its characteristics to the general public, as will be seen more fully in the next chapter.

§ 5. The role of women in society

A further meeting point between the aesthetic movement and dress reform was the urgent need to adapt fashion to the greater female freedom that was gradually emerging in those years. In fact, at that time more and more women were choosing not to conform to the sole role imposed on them as wives and mothers, and to undertake a university course of study, and therefore a career, and to devote their free time to cultivating their minds and caring for their bodies through activities that were once reserved for men, such as getting together in associations or playing sports.

Within the new horizons that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, a primary role was played by women's clubs, which offered American middle-class women the opportunity to discover their vocations and acquire an articulated gender consciousness. The journalist, women's rights activist and dress-

reformer Jane Cunningham Croly¹²¹, known as Jenny June (1829-1901), in her book *The history of the women's club movement in America*¹²², narrates the story of the origin of the first American women's club, Sorosis, and describes the ideological impetus that drove its founders, including herself:

The originator specially disavowed any specific object, asking only for a representative woman's organization based on perfectly equal terms, in which women might acquire methods, learn how to work together for general objects, not for charity or a propaganda (...). It simply felt the stirring of an intense desire that women should come together-all together, not from one church, or one neighborhood, or one walk of life, but from all quarters, and take counsel together, find the cause of failures and separations, of ignorance and wrong-doing, and try to discover better ways, more intelligent methods (...) This was that Sorosis must be, and must remain, a strictly woman's club whatever that might grow to mean; made by women for women, possibly to found an "order" of women, but, in any case, to form a centre of unity, not upon the ground of conviction or philanthropy, but womanhood alone, and desire to know and be helpful. ¹²³

Women were changing, as were their needs within society. Their clothes could not fail to adapt to this epochal change, argued dress-reformers, among others.

¹²¹For more on Jenny June's role within the dress-reform, as well as her contribution to 19th century women's publishing, see: Nancy J. Nelson, «Listening to Jane Cunningham Croly's "Talks With Women": Issues of dress and gender in Demorest's Monthly Magazine» *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, 18(3), 128-139; 2000

¹²² Croly, J.C; *The history of women's club movement in America*, H. G Allen & co; 1898; New York

¹²³ Ibidem. Page 18.

Safford-Blake elaborates on this, pointing out that contemporary women's fashions were repressive towards women and denoted a passive role for ladies in society, and were therefore anachronistic in relation to the changes taking place in gender roles, which around that time were beginning to be, at least in part, more fluid and dynamics. She argues:

Now, health, strength, and energy are exhausted in the friction that results from carrying superfluous burdens, burdens which have been handed down from an age when women were passive instead active members of society. The trailing and décolleté dress of the salon is historically one of the relics of the period of lust, when women were shut out of the kingdom of thought, and were linked with men only in bonds of sensuality. ¹²⁴

The author continues her analysis by underlining a concept that is still highly topical today, namely how society judges a woman's value by her outward appearance and the way she dresses rather than by her inner self, and how this phenomenon denotes the perpetuation of a deep-rooted gender inequality (not only among men, but also in the mentality of women themselves):

When men have higher estimates of women, and women more self-respect, their loveliness will not be determined by bare arms and

¹²⁴ Safford-Blake, M; «Lecture I» in: Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874, (1-41)

shoulders, and by trailing silks, any more than the manliness of man is now by broadcloth he displays ¹²⁵.

§ 6. Hygienic undergarments

According to all the authors mentioned so far, the focus should first of all be on a radical change of underclothing. This was mainly for two reasons: first of all, women, as demonstrated by the already mentioned failure of the "Bloomer Costume" fashion, were quite reluctant to change their way of dressing in a too evident way; in fact, even the most daring women knew that this would expose them to a harsh public stigma, especially in an era, such as the Victorian one, all focused on a social respectability conveyed by the semiotics of the body and its embellishments. The other motivation was of a more practical and scientific order, and resided in the consideration of how the structure of the so-called «invisibles»¹²⁶ could be, due to the characteristics already widely discussed, more dangerous than external clothing for women's health.

Many, therefore, rather than simply condemning the misuse of women's undergarments, began to offer women viable alternatives called «hygienic undergarments».

The so-called «Union Suit» was one of the first garments to be officially listed as a «rational garment», explicitly aimed at reducing the damage caused by the garments normally worn at the

¹²⁵ Ibidem.

¹²⁶ See. Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*; Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003; (Chapt. III «The Invisibles»)

time. The idea behind all «union Suits» was to combine several undergarments into one garment to reduce the weight caused by excess of clothing (mainly by preventing the weight being concentrated on the hips - see Figure 6)

Although the custom of wearing a single garment as an undergarment was probably not entirely unknown as early as the middle of the century, in America the first version of the «union Suit» so defined and advertised as a «hygienic undergarment» dates back to 1868. The invention was registered as «the emancipation union under flannel»: it was a garment combining a knitted flannel shirt and drawers in one piece. From that time onwards, dress reformers, designers and tailoring companies alike were developing new designs to meet the hygiene principles increasingly advocated by activists and doctors. Dr Mary Edwards Walker (1832-1919)¹²⁷, a medical surgeon who was awarded the Medal of Honour in 1865 for her service during the Civil War, developed her own version of the union suit called the «dress reform undersuit»¹²⁸, which, among other things, was intended to discourage attempts at seduction and rape¹²⁹. The doctor was such a strong advocate of dress reform that she was arrested on several occasions for wearing men's suits.

In 1874, the same year it promoted the collection *dress reform: a series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of*

¹²⁷ To find out more about Dr. Walker and her relationship with dress reform: <https://library-blog.syr.edu/scrc/2020/06/09/durable-and-elegant-mary-edwards-walker-and-dress-reform/>

¹²⁸ See Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*; Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003

¹²⁹ «The first Union suit» in *Textile World*, July 29, 1905, 139.

Women,¹³⁰ the New England women's club organised an exhibition of reform garments during which they pledged to give a seal of approval to garments judged to be good for health. One of the garments on display was the «Emancipation Suit» designed by Susan Taylor Converse (1829-1919), a garment containing a corset, corset cover and drawers in one piece. The garment freed the chest from pressure with a gathered section of the bodice, and also had buttons at the waist and hips so that layers of skirts could be suspended without placing them directly on the hips.

The New England Women's Club also promoted their own undergarments and opened a shop in Boston where they were permanently displayed (the idea was soon spread and imitated by entrepreneurs, so that soon several shops dedicated to reform garments started to appear in the most important cities).

The first international exhibition held in the United States, the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876 (officially named the International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine - see fig. 12), was also important in this context.

Artisans, designers, dress reformers and seamstresses converged on the centennial exhibition with their proposals for hygienic undergarments. The aim of their inventions was to improve women's comfort and minimise the health fallout of fashion.

Garments were constructed according to four basic hygienic principles: no binding, uniform temperature, lightness, suspension

¹³⁰ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts, Boston, 1874

from the shoulders¹³¹. The protagonist of the exhibition was Madame Ellen Demorest (1824-1898), who, besides being a very famous designer (in fig. 11 the engraving of her renowned fashion house run together with her husband), was a feminist activist, co-founder of the Sorosis women's club and owner of the progressive women's magazine *Demorest's Monthly Magazine* ¹³². Her corsets, stocking suspenders and skirt suspenders were highly praised by the show's judges for their modernity, usefulness and high degree of excellence in craftsmanship¹³³.

However, it should be emphasised that Ellen Demorest and her collaborators in the *Demorest's Monthly Magazine* did not condemn the use of corsets per se (as the authors of the essays in *Dress reform*¹³⁴ do), but that they believed in their essentiality and importance in many phases of a woman's life: they promoted the use of health corsets through Demorest's design, which they said was consistent with scientific recommendations¹³⁵.

The Philadelphia exhibition certainly marked a turning point in the general public's conception of fashion, as in the following years

¹³¹ See: Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003; (Chapt. III «The Invisibles»).

¹³² To learn more about *Demorest's Monthly magazine's* role in the context of dress-reform see again: Nancy J. Nelson «Listening to Jane Cunningham Croly's "Talks With Women": Issues of dress and gender in *Demorest's Monthly Magazine*» in *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, Vol. 18, 128-139; 2000

¹³³ See: Kidwell, C.; «Paper Partners» in *1876, A centennial exhibition*; Robert C. Post, Washington D.C, 1976.

¹³⁴ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874

¹³⁵ See: Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003; (Chapt. III «The Invisibles»)

undergarment advertisements insisted on the importance of comfort and health. Fashion houses could no longer pretend to ignore the issue of health, and by the 1880s they were forced to take note of the change that had occurred in American middle-class women's awareness of their right to health and comfort.

In those same years, another woman was entering the movement for women's liberation from oppressive fashion, whose theories and textile inventions were taken as a model of inspiration by all proponents of dress reform: Annie Jenness Miller (1859-1935), who, as mentioned, as well as being one of the most important supporters of the battle for dress reform, was a university lecturer and editor of her own magazine focused on Dress reform, namely *Dress a monthly magazine*, active until 1900. In the magazine Jenness-Miller proposed her vision of the change of mentality and habits she hoped for women, based above all on physical activity and on the pursuit of the classical (particularly Greek) aesthetic ideal.

In particular, the magazine released the «Jenness-Miller System of Dress» which included several innovative undergarments designed to replace the more classic drawers, corsets, corset covers, chemises and petticoats¹³⁶. These included: the union suit, the chemilette (a linen and cotton garment that could be worn over the union suit and not did weigh down the body), the leglettes (a divided petticoat in the shape of trousers), the Bosom Support (suitable for more robust women), and the Combination Skirt.¹³⁷

¹³⁶ Ibidem.

¹³⁷ «Our own system», June 1887, p. 65-67; «The model bodice» and «ribbed union suit», Feb. 1888, p. 474; «Leglettes» mar. 1888, p.527 in *Dress, a monthly*

Jenness-Miller's most innovative creation was probably the «leglettes» (see fig. 13), a unique two-part garment (in the shape of trousers) which replaced the several layers of petticoats that had been in use until then. Miller, fearing the criticism and anxiety that a garment that divided the legs and resembled men's trousers might provoke, decided to coin a new term, «leglettes», in an attempt to remove any reference to men's clothing.

According to Miller, the Turkish leglettes, made of surah silk, spared the wearer the weight of petticoats and especially the bands on the stomach and hips. In addition, the leglettes, by wrapping the legs well, could, unlike the petticoats, also better protect against the cold, providing the lower part of the body with even warmth. It was a harmless garment because it was invisible from the outside, and therefore did not risk causing women embarrassing or even dangerous situations, as had happened with the Bloomers fashion.¹³⁸

Let us now entrust the conclusion of this chapter to the significant and very modern words of Abba Goold Woolson, who perfectly describes the feminine (and feminist) revolution that was taking place in the second half of the 19th century in many Western countries. A revolution that have seen many women unite and fight to redesign their social identity, and thus be perceived by the community as free and self-aware persons, and not as extensions of

magazine; See also: Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003.

¹³⁸ «Leglettes» in: *Dress, a monthly magazine*, mar. 1888, p. 527. See also: <http://vintageconnection.net/AJMiller.htm>

the male presences closest to them. Summarising in her reflection the thoughts and feelings of many fellows, the author writes:

(...) today, woman herself, educated, enterprising, ambitious, has something to say in her own behalf. "Yes", she assents, "woman was made to work, to be looked at, but also to enjoy her own life; living not only for others, but for herself, and most helpful when most true to her own needs". This is the new doctrine which she is preaching to our age. "I exist", she says, "not as wife, not as mother, not as teacher, but, first of all, as woman, with a right to existence for my own sake." Believing this, she makes a new demand upon her attire. She must still work in it, she must still look beautiful in it, but she must also be strong and comfortable and happy in it.¹³⁹

¹³⁹ Abba Goold Woolson, L., ed., *Dress-reform: A series of Lectures delivered in Boston on dress as it affects the health of Women*, Roberts; Boston; 1874; «Appendix» (p. 183-254)

Chapter III. The Mother Hubbard: a house gown with multiple uses

§ 1. History and origins of the Mother Hubbard

In the majority of museum exhibitions focusing on the history of fashion and costume, as well as in the literature of the sector, the garments called upon to represent the 19th century are those abundantly described in the first chapter, i.e. those dresses, skirts, petticoats worn with difficulty together with redundant and heavy accessories, which ended up caging the woman's body and limiting her freedom of movement. Yet, even in the century famous for crinolines, corsets and large hats decorated with long feathers, there were more comfortable alternatives. Outside the aesthetic niche, in addition to the bloomers, in fact, there were other dresses that were less conspicuously disruptive to the prerogatives demanded by women's fashion, and yet, in their own way, revolutionary. These clothes were originally designed for the comfort of the home, but thanks to the shift between formal and informal fashion and the innovations suggested by the new artistic currents, they were also worn outside the protection of the domestic environment, not without creating scandal and dissent. The "home dresses" known in America as "wrappers" have hardly survived the test of time, as they were informal garments, considered somewhat predictable and unsuitable for the careful preservation that were given to clothes worn on formal occasions. And yet, they are clothes that were strongly linked to women and their most intimate lives, which can reveal different and alternative

narratives of their daily experiences, reflected in the pages of diaries or letters to friends and relatives (documents that are now essential to reconstructing the history of these garments).

The first references to Mother Hubbard's style appeared in the 1860s, although the term was not yet in use and it was simply referred to as a «yoke-neck wrapper»¹⁴⁰.

The main invariable characteristic of a Mother Hubbard, apart from the absence of a defined waistline, was in fact the square cut of the yoke, a feature which differentiates it from all the house dressing gowns of the previous century (there is no 17th century dressing gown from which the Mother Hubbard is directly descended)¹⁴¹.

The term Mother Hubbard used to indicate this type of home dress would be employed from the 1870s, but especially the 1880s, as evidenced by the personal documents of women (diaries, letters), the most important magazines specialised in women's fashion such as *Harper's Bazar*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Delineator* and the many other local magazines and newspapers (especially linked to the world of work in the frontier states of the west, such as the *Kansas Farmer* and the *Prairie Farmer*, where the Mother Hubbard was used as work suit by many housewives, farmers and labourers).

The origins of the Mother Hubbard are rather nebulous, so much so that the scholar Betty J. Mills, author of an interesting essay on

¹⁴⁰ See Annie G. Hale, Chapter 8, «Women's Apparel: It's Making and Mending»; *New England Farmer*, March 1868, 150-56

¹⁴¹ For a panoramic of informal eighteenth-century fashion in the Anglo-Saxon world see: John Styles; *The dress of the people: everyday fashion in Eighteenth-century England*; New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 2007; cited in: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45
Nineteenth-Century Dress', *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

the clothing of Texas frontier women in the 19th century¹⁴², has declared that she does not know the genesis of the garment and its name, and has hypothesised a connection with the famous series of nursery rhymes of the same name. In 1805, in fact, the first edition of a nursery rhymes¹⁴³ was published, which was destined to be a great success, inspiring imitations, translations and parodies. In fact, the protagonists of these children's books and nursery rhymes were an old lady called Mother Hubbard (the explanation for the choice of the name could be found in the custom of the previous centuries in England of calling the old servants by the term "mother"¹⁴⁴) and her little dog, involved in funny household raids. Costume researcher Sally Halvenston points out, however, that the old lady was portrayed in the illustrations in a typically eighteenth-century dress that is very different from the dress that is the subject of this work. The research carried out by Sally Helvenston on the various editions of the nursery rhymes «Old Mother Hubbard» at the Childhood in Poetry Collection of Florida State University did not reveal any similarities between the illustrations present in the editions of the text ranging from 1844 to 1904 and the Mother Hubbard gown or "yoked dress" popular at the end of the 19th century¹⁴⁵. In all the numerous editions that followed during the century in different parts of the world, the elderly Mother Hubbard

¹⁴² Mills, J.B; *Calico Chronicle: Texas women and their fashions, 1830-1910*; Texas Tech University Press; Lubbock; 1985

¹⁴³ Martin, S.C; *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog*; J. Harris; London; 1805; first edition

¹⁴⁴ See. Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

¹⁴⁵ Ibidem.

was always depicted in a cloak. Moreover, even in later editions, her clothes were often based on an eighteenth-century style similar to the one called “à la polonaise”, consisting of a narrow waist and a wide skirt which gave volume to the lower part of the *silhouette*¹⁴⁶. Sally Helvenston, however, argues that there is an indirect link between the descendants of the cloak worn by the «old Mother Hubbard» of the nursery rhymes (fig. 15) and the turn-of-the-century Mother Hubbard gown¹⁴⁷.

Helvenston outlines a likely path that would explain the decision to call the garment by that name from the 1870s onwards and which has its roots in the world of childhood (childhood would also be the area in which the term is most closely linked to fashionability). In fact, at that time it was not unusual to take inspiration from children's literature to name clothes for boys and girls, and the sources of inspiration included the famous old lady protagonist of the much-loved nursery rhymes. It was in the late 1870s that fashion writers in the United States began to use the term in reference to girls' cloaks and bonnets¹⁴⁸ (Fig. 16). From here, the path to women's dressing gowns becomes more tortuous.

¹⁴⁶ The style “à la polonaise”, in vogue at the end of the 18th century, was characterised by a dress open at the front, the wide outer skirt of which was divided into two parts in the middle to reveal the petticoat underneath. The skirt could be gathered circularly at the top to form large drapes and swags fastened by drawstrings, from which the usually ankle-length petticoat always emerged. The style was usually complemented by high heels, highlighted by the very opening of the robe.

¹⁴⁷ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

¹⁴⁸ See . «Fashions», *Godey's Lady's Book*, 95; no. 569 (November 1877), p. 443. The term also appears several times in reference to children's cloaks in *Harper's Bazar* magazine.

Sally Helvenston traces the use of the shirring to the shift of the Mother Hubbard name from capes to little girls' dresses (Fig. 17). As already pointed out above, at that time shirring was considered a fashionable item, and was also widely used in the aesthetic fashion.

It is no coincidence that the well-known author of nursery rhymes Kate Greenaway (1846-1901) portrayed the use of this sartorial practice in her children's illustrations. Her visual creations, as well as having several similarities with aesthetic fashion, may have contributed with their notoriety to the decision to produce large, flowing smock dresses for girls like the Mother Hubbard, or at least to spread and popularise this style (very different from the traditional children's fashion of the time - fig. 18)¹⁴⁹.

Shirring at the time was employed through the alignment of long parallel seams, arranged to make the weave of the fabric three-dimensional.¹⁵⁰ Regarding the importance of this sartorial practice in the attribution of the term Mother Hubbard to the clothes, therefore, Helvenston states that the similarity between the shirring of cloaks and the shirring of girls' dresses, also soft and loose-fitting, may have led fashion writers in the 1880s to employ the same name for the latter. Initially the yoke of these dresses was entirely shirred, then, for practicality, became flatter and flatter, since «as shirring is not easily washed when stitched closely on a lining or held in shape in any way, mothers sometimes make a plain

¹⁴⁹ See Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

yoke and merely shirr two or three loose rows of the waist below the yoke»¹⁵¹(fig. 18).

But how does one arrive at a woman's gown? The costume historian Helvenston recalls how in the 19th century the habit of deriving clothing for adult women from that for girls was widespread, as the association with the world of childhood was functional to reinforce the gender roles so marked and defined in the Victorian era, and to link the adult woman to an ideal of purity, virtue and innocence typical of childhood.

It all contributed to building «the domestic stereotype of women in the nineteenth century»¹⁵². The Mother Hubbard followed this destiny, transforming itself from a fashionable garment for little girls into a woman's home dress.

§ 2. Cut, style and characteristics of one of the most popular house dresses for women

In November 1881, *Harper's Bazar* magazine officially announced the existence of the new garment in this way:

The new Mother Hubbard wrappers for ladies are shaped precisely like the Mother Hubbard cloaks worn by little girls, with the full

¹⁵¹ *Harper's Bazar* 14, no. 24, June 11; 1881, p. 371

¹⁵² See Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45 (p. 39)

straight breadths of the front and back gathered to a yoke, or else shirred at the neck to form a square yoke¹⁵³.

This quotation leads us to take a closer look at the characteristics of this home dress so widespread among women in every corner of the United States, of every social class, of every age and physical condition and engaged in every activity. The aforementioned scholar Mary Blanchard, in her essay focused on the relevance of aesthetic fashion (with which, as we have seen, the wrappers and the Mother Hubbard have a close relationship) within the redefinition of gender balances in the Victorian age¹⁵⁴, describes the garment as follows: «The Mother Hubbard dress was another popular loose garment (“a round yoke wrapper”) with a yoke of gathered material that fell to the floor (...)»¹⁵⁵; Helvenston, the author who has been most dedicated to the study and investigation of the social and practical function of the garment, points out that the lack of a defined waistline was the first differentiation from the official fashion of the time, and gave the garment its practical function. The author of the Mother Hubbard essay also asserts that although the typical and invariable indicators of the garment were its loose-fitting nature and square yoke, other characteristics could vary according to the fashion of the year or personal taste. Details

¹⁵³ Harper's Bazar 14, no. 47, November 19, 1881, 739 quoted in Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

¹⁵⁴ Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages)

¹⁵⁵ Ibidem

such as sleeves and collars would vary, as would the way the garment was worn. Sometimes the robe was embellished with flounces tied to the lower part of the “skirt” (in the 19th century “skirt” also meant the part of the robe that went down from the yoke to the floor), to break up the monotony of the dress.¹⁵⁶ It is important to underline how the position of Mother Hubbard's square yoke resembles the characteristics of the "Empire style", a fashion that spread from the end of the 18th century to the first decades of the 19th century. The fashion of those years, in fact, as mentioned in the previous chapters, was for a wide, soft and comfortable cut, and straight lines like those of ancient columns, from which it took its inspiration. The resemblance of the Mother Hubbard to the “empire style” dresses can be traced above all in the positioning of the only fit on the upper part of the body, and not on the central one. In both cases, in fact, the waist was left free, without restriction: in the case of the “Empire style”, a belt or sash was placed just below the breast, in the case of the Mother Hubbard the fit was placed even higher, through the yoke placed at chest height (fig. 19).

Some women used belts or added aprons to limit the gown's width. The use of a belt on a Mother Hubbard could make the garment more acceptable. In fact, in many cities, as will be seen later, the law allowed women to wear the controversial robe only if it was contained with a belt. In the city of Pendleton Oregon, for example,

¹⁵⁶ See Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

it was forbidden to wear it without a girdle.¹⁵⁷ The width of the robe could be uncomfortable and prevent free movement, causing women to stumble during their activities. Often women could only feel truly comfortable in garments that represented a middle ground between the tightness caused by official fashion and the excessive width of garments designed for the domestic sphere. Many of them, often those most involved in work as housewives and peasants, made up for the defect of the dress by adding darts at waist level (concealed by the use of a belt), which served to shorten the front of the skirt, while maintaining the length at the back. This made them freer to move around, climb stairs and do household chores¹⁵⁸. However, the impracticality of the garment, particularly for stair climbing, led to a number of women complaining about it and discarding it. Frances Steel, a fashion-conscious dress reformer, does not give a positive description:

Someone asks, "Is not the Mother Hubbard gown good for its oneness and simplicity?" Perhaps so; but its drapery seems to be a curtain hung from a ruffle at the bottom of the yoke, and though apparently shortening the wearer by so much, it is still too long for free movement, especially stooping. Without a girdle, it suggests barrel-like bulk. One sees it on a sultry day with erratic undergear, untidy

¹⁵⁷ *Little Falls Transcript*, September 12, 1884.

¹⁵⁸ It is worth remembering how some wrappers, such as the Princess style, embodied this very compromise through their semi-fitted shape. See Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

surroundings, and general discomfort. Its good qualities are overburdened by unpleasant association.¹⁵⁹

In terms of the materials used, although there were Mother Hubbards made of valuable fabrics such as silk and velvet, on average they were made of gingham, calico and percale, materials that were practical, durable, and resistant to washing and the inconveniences of work. One of the reasons for its popularity, particularly among middle-class women, was the simplicity of its construction. Indeed:

Comparing the cut of the fashionable gowns, the fitted part, the yoke, was easy to construct: it simply had to match the breadth of the wearer's shoulders. To create the volume required to fit over the largest girth of the body, usually the hips, the dressmaker stitched together several straight breadths of fabric that she shirred (or gauged) onto the yoke. This is in contrast to a fitted fashionable bodice that had to be "build" over a lining that had been carefully fitted to the individual wearer¹⁶⁰.

A Mother Hubbard could also be made by women with few sartorial skills, or even by invalids, as suggested by the author of *New England Farmer* Annie Hale¹⁶¹, who, however, writing in the 1860s, does not yet use the name attributed to the garment, but

¹⁵⁹ Frances Steele, M.; Livingston Steel Adams; E.; *Beauty of form and grace of vesture*; Dodd, Mead and Company; 1892; New York

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 45

¹⁶¹ Annie G. Hale, Chapter 8, «Women's apparel: it's making and mending», *New England Farmer*, March 1868, 150-56

speaks generically of an «old-fashioned style» wrapper¹⁶². Finally, the garment was also easy to maintain, easy to wash and iron.

§ 3. From cradle to grave: a garment for life

The Mother Hubbard is perhaps the most eclectic garment of the nineteenth century, used in the most diverse contexts of life, both in public and in private, and favoured over other garments because of its characteristic fullness and lack of compression at the waist. Sources from the personal documents of the women who wore it and from the press of the time suggest the varied nature of the garment, which was identified as much with virtue and innocence as with vice and sin.

The use of the garment, in fact, was not only linked, as one might think, to moments of rest within one's own domestic environment, but was an integral part of the life of all women, from housewives to workers, to prostitutes, to the elderly, whom it accompanied in their various activities, sometimes exposing them to the risk of harassment or even imprisonment. Mother Hubbard occupied a liminal zone in the lives of American women at the end of the 19th century, embodying and symbolising, sometimes simultaneously, the public and the private, appropriateness and transgression, chastity and moral vice. The wide spectrum in which the function of the dress was implemented tells, in fact, many of the gender dynamics of the Victorian era: its acceptance alternated with its rejection by society, and more specifically by men, tracing the

¹⁶²Ibidem.

boundaries within which women were relegated. These boundaries were often broken, or at least redefined, also through an “improper” use of Mother Hubbard, which sometimes, against all rules of etiquette, was transformed into a walking dress, thus exposing the wearer to harassment or arrest, as we shall see more fully in the following chapter. The choice to wear the garment could imply a wide range of motivations, ranging from the activism of the dress reformers to the choice to declare membership of the artistic movement of aestheticism, as well as simple comfort. At the heart of the choice to wear a Mother Hubbard, however, was the desire of women to find an alternative and a refuge from the constraints and conventions of formal dress of the time.

It is the aesthetics of Mother Hubbard itself that suggest and tell us what one of its most common functions was, probably the one for which the dress was intended, that of maternity wear¹⁶³.

Its breadth lent itself well to such a need, and there are many historical indications of its use among pregnant women. Helvenston cites the case of Flora Moorman, a woman who wrote to her sister about her pregnancy in this way: «I am aiming to have a girl and I think it will surely be a twelve-pounder for actually I am outgrowing my Mother Hubbard»¹⁶⁴.

¹⁶³Ibidem

¹⁶⁴ Josephine Moorman Reiley, ed., «I think I will like Kansas»: The letters of Flora Moorman Henston, 1885-1886, *Kansas History* 2 (Summer 1883), p. 71-75 citato in: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, p. 45. The letters are available here: https://www.kshs.org/publicat/history/1983summer_heston.pdf (Kansas Historical Society WebSite)

The garment's link to motherhood is also highlighted by the scholar Cassandra Curry Moon, who points out that the Mother Hubbard was functional for pregnancy because it did not require a corset and was composed of an adequate width placed in front. She also explains how the garments were easily made by the women themselves, or were ordered from tailors based on paper patterns from periodicals.¹⁶⁵ Both Helvenston and Curry Moon also cite the *Delineator* as the periodical that most closely featured examples of Mother Hubbards as suitable maternity garments.

Another widespread use in the middle classes of every state, but particularly in frontier areas, was to use the garment for relaxation. The *Delineator* recommended Mother Hubbard «strongly to every young girl who, on returning from a walk or drive or from an afternoon at the gymnasium will find a pretty garment of this kind the most comfortable lounging gown imaginable»¹⁶⁶.

Helvenston dwells on the concept of the "morning dress", underlining how its meaning changed according to social class (the etiquette manuals not by chance dispensed fashion advice on the basis of social class, in line with the strict Victorian morality): while for the wealthier classes the morning dress consisted of rich and ornate gowns, for the lower and middle classes the garment was used as a work dress. In fact, as we can see from literary and photographic evidence, the Mother Hubbard also took on different

¹⁶⁵ Moon, C. Curry, *Selecting and adapting clothing for pregnancy in the nineteenth century*, Iowa State University, 1995. Retrospective Theses and Dissertations. 16769. <https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/16769> . The M.A. thesis focuses on the fashion followed by pregnant women in the nineteenth century.

¹⁶⁶ *Delineator*, 40, no. 6, December 1892, 586

connotations depending on the social class of the woman wearing it. Although the garment characterised the lives of women of every social class and in every part of the United States, its more sweetened version, often linked to the political self-assertion of the woman who wore it, who belonged to the intellectual elite engaged in dress reform, was dramatically distant from the reality of the women of the "frontier"¹⁶⁷. These women wore the Mother Hubbard as a work dress, without attributing to the garment any other function than practicality (fig. 20). This difference can be seen by comparing descriptions of the garment in national high-fashion magazines such as *Harper's Bazar* or *Delineator* with those included in local newspapers and magazines such as the *Kansas Farmer* or *Prairie Farmer*, or in housewives' magazines, in whose pages women readers engaged in debates and rants about the faults and

¹⁶⁷ The colonisation of the American Far West began at the end of the 18th century and lasted for about a hundred years. It involved the gradual conquest of huge uninhabited spaces, or those inhabited by nomadic tribes of Native Americans, by isolated groups of migrants seeking their fortune. The pioneers generally came from eastern states or European countries. They were single men, but also groups of families who, by undertaking endless and risky journeys in long caravans, laid the foundations of a new type of culture and society, destined to take root and shape contemporary American feeling. According to American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, the concept of the frontier became part of the national patriotic culture, and was associated with American individualism and enterprise. The pioneers, not having to deal with pre-existing orders and hierarchies, were free to devise a new social system based on individual responsibility and self-determination. Turner's theses, however, according to many, did not take proper account of the prevarication and violence that characterised the colonisation of the west. We must not forget, in fact, that the advance towards the Far West was carried out at the expense of the native inhabitants of the territories, the Native Americans, who were deported, subjugated and decimated on several occasions. See Turner, F. J., *The frontier in American history*, Holt&Company, New York, 1920. On the characteristics of the American frontier and female fashion see also: Mills, J.B; *Calico Chronicle: Texas women and their fashions, 1830-1910*; Texas Tech University Press; Lubbock; 1985

virtues of the garment¹⁶⁸. After focusing on a photograph of a prominent woman, Frances Willard, founder of the National Women's Christian Temperance Union and close to the promoters of dress reform, wearing a sophisticated version of Mother Hubbard on the rich parlor of her home, Helvenston says:

It is impossible to know how fully each point in the social stratum was populated with Mother Hubbard dresses - perhaps equal to the distribution of women along the continuum. While idealized versions of the Mother Hubbard appeared in a high fashion magazine like *Harper's Bazar* in the 1880's, the reality of the garment for middle - and lower - class may have been the simple, durable, worn - to extinction Mother Hubbards donned by pioneers, farm women, working-class prostitutes, Pacific Islander, and Native Americans¹⁶⁹.

The Mother Hubbard was widely worn by working women (both indoors and out) living in the newly colonised frontier territories precisely because it offered a more comfortable experience, quite different from the tight-fitting clothes of formal fashion. In particular, «farm women whose lifestyles required vigorous physical labor often relied on the Mother Hubbard as a sturdy and durable work garment»¹⁷⁰. It was mainly the women of the Far West who most frequently wore the farm garment, so much so that they were photographed in it, and frequently mentioned it in their

¹⁶⁸ See «Letters from Virginia», *Kansas Farmer*, August 15, 1883, 6 cited in Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

¹⁶⁹ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45, p. 58.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p 42.

letters and diaries¹⁷¹. One of the advantages of the garment for frontier women was its freshness: thanks to its width, air could enter from under the skirt and thus refresh the tired body of the housewife or rural worker. It was above all these women who often modified the characteristics in the way mentioned above (i.e. by adding darts and belts to shorten the front part) in order to make it even more comfortable for working activities, which required great physical effort and mobility. In fact, as mentioned, the garment was frequently mentioned in local frontier periodicals, such as the *Prairie Farmer* and the *Kansas Farmer*, mainly in the 1880s, indicating that the garment was known and used in these rural communities (fig.21).

Betty Mills mentions the garment in her research *Calico Chronicles* which, as mentioned, traces the history of calico fabric in rural Texan clothing¹⁷². She focuses on the adverse reactions the garment provoked in rural societies when worn in public. She reports on the legend spread by detractors of the garment that Mother Hubbard's voluminous skirt frightened the horses so much that it caused serious accidents¹⁷³. On this grounds, many prominent men and mayors argued that no woman should go around wearing the garment without a belt¹⁷⁴. But we will deal at length with such

¹⁷¹ Ibidem

¹⁷² Mills, J.B; *Calico Chronicle: Texas women and their fashions, 1830-1910*; Texas Tech University Press; Lubbock; 1985. Note that the term "calico" was common in Europe as early as the 1500s to denote a loose-fitting garment worn at home as a dressing gown by men - not women. In fact, the calico was initially produced and imported from Calcutta in India (hence the name) by Portuguese merchants.

¹⁷³ This legend, as will be seen, was spread and retold in several frontier states.

¹⁷⁴ Ibidem.

accusations, which often resulted in actual prosecutions, made by men and the press, in the next chapter.

The fact that many women in rural communities were photographed wearing the Mother Hubbard (Fig.22) suggests that, by choosing to be immortalised in such a garment, many women wanted to defy official etiquette. As we have seen in the Chapter II, this last one, in fact, dictated that it was not appropriate to be seen in public wearing a wrapper. Cunningham, in her research on fashion aesthetics and dress reform¹⁷⁵, also discusses how the choice of the garment was linked to the simplicity of the cut and, above all, to the fact that a wrapper such as the Mother Hubbard could be worn with few undergarments and without a corset (or at least with a slacker corset), thus allowing women to feel comfortable and move freely¹⁷⁶.

Helvenston states how the garment's use characterised the first and last stages of women's lives. The Mother Hubbard was often a dress worn by little girls as they began to grow: its versatility seemed perfectly suited to the transformations typical of childhood. The lack of adherence at the waist allowed the girl's forms to expand without hindrance and without the need to change garments frequently. After mentioning its use by older women, she points out that the garment seemed to encompass every phase of women's lives, from childhood to old age, through pregnancy and illness.

¹⁷⁵ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003;

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem.

According to the author, this is of particular interest, as it marks a clear difference with the function of men's fashion: «It is notable that the Mother Hubbard moved seamlessly from one stage of a woman's life to another (infancy, adolescence, maternity, old age), while garments in men's early lives served as distinctive markers in the rites of passage»¹⁷⁷.

§ 4. "Loose dresses and loose women" ¹⁷⁸

The Mother Hubbard, especially in the local press in the frontier states, was despite itself, and despite the women who wanted to wear it, the protagonist of a wide-ranging and exhausting *querelle*, very often resulting, as will be analysed in detail in the following chapter, in court documents, moral condemnations, satire and even street harassment.

The main reason for so much hatred from men, or at least from many of them, but also from several women fashion writers, towards the garment lay in the sensual and sexual connotation that the use of morning dresses in public suggested. In the 19th century, in fact, the term "undressed" did not indicate the degree of coverage of the body, but the use of clothes designed for the domestic environment. Patricia Cunningham points out that throughout the

¹⁷⁷ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45, p 46

¹⁷⁸ Identical title used in the paragraph by Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45, p 46

century every home-related garment and undergarment had an erotic connotation¹⁷⁹.

Importantly, both Cunningham and Helvenston cite the similarity in the century between the concepts of «loose dress» and «loose morals». Although in this passage Cunningham does not quote Mother Hubbard directly, her conclusions are interesting in this context: «going without underwear in public, especially without a corset, even for health reform, would suggest wontonness or, worse at, that the woman was a prostitute».¹⁸⁰ Helvenston extends the concept to the specific case of Mother Hubbard:

Seeing a woman in a Mother Hubbard provided a rare instance to observe the female body without multiple layers of undergarments and body-shaping devices like the corset. That these occurrences also happened outside the world of prostitution alludes to the general sexual nature of the garment. The dress was provocative based on the male viewers imagination of the accessible body underneath rather than by what the garment actually reveal.¹⁸¹

In fact, although in appearance, especially with contemporary sensibilities, a long, loose-fitting garment such as Mother Hubbard

¹⁷⁹ Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibidem*. On this theme, see also the condemnation of Queen Marie Antoinette and the “*chemise à la reine*” in late eighteenth-century France: Zanetti, V. *A state of Undress: Marie-Antoinette's chemise and the 'feminine renunciation' in pre-revolutionary France*, 2015, consulted online on the *Academia* online platform

(https://www.academia.edu/30158316/A_State_of_Undress_Marie_Antoinette_s_chemise_and_the_feminine_renunciation_in_pre_revolutionary_France).

See also the first chapter of this paper.

¹⁸¹ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45, p 51

may seem very far removed from the concept of sensuality, 19th century men and women felt that the garment had an erotic value because it suggested an idea of intimacy and accessibility that was clearly denied by formal clothing, in which the female body was literally caged and inaccessible¹⁸².

Paradoxically, just when the forms seemed to be hidden from the outside eye, the concept of seduction and sexuality came into play. One of the reasons why women were prohibited from wearing the robe outside the home in several towns or city districts was the fear that “respectable” middle class women could be mistaken for prostitutes, and especially prostitutes from the poorer social classes. It was, in fact, above all, these last, and not the luxury escorts who could afford to dress in a much more sophisticated way, who resorted to the use of Mother Hubbard to attract clients¹⁸³ (fig.23). According to Helvenston, in fact, the robe became a veritable «walking advertisement» for street prostitutes, and symbolised their preparation for the bedroom (moreover, its width could also allow them to consume intercourse directly in the street, since they could stand up without having to undress completely)¹⁸⁴.

¹⁸² «In the nineteenth century the corset acted as an “iron cage” discouraging untoward intimacy and creating a “touch me not” mentality of high morality», Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45, p 51

¹⁸³ For an overview of prostitution in New York City at the end of the 19th century, Sanger, W.W, *History of prostitution: its extent, causes, and effects throughout the world*, New York Medical Press, New York, 1895. See also Mariana Valverde, «the love of finery: fashion and the fallen woman in Nineteenth-century social discourse» in *Fashion: critical and primary sources, the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Peter McNeil, New York and Oxford, 2009, 155-74.

¹⁸⁴ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

The aforementioned equivalence between «loose dress» and «loose woman» took on other meanings within the moral landscape of the late 19th century. The conception of women's fashion was not only schematic, but also dichotomous: the two macro-categories, strictly separated, were formal and informal fashion. Formality implied public presentation and therefore social respectability and necessarily had to include a waist-high fit. One of the reasons why there was so much resentment towards Mother Hubbard when worn outside the home was in fact related to the inappropriateness of a garment that did not provide for any fit. So, for example, in 1887, the journalist Jenny June, the Jane Cunningham Croly already mentioned in the first chapter, despite being a leading exponent of feminism and dress reform, stated in the pages of the *Ladies Home Journal*: «no dress can be considered elegant, which does not clearly outline, and define, the waist. This is distinctly the modern idea, opposed to the *Old Watteau*, and other styles of a by-gone period»¹⁸⁵. The same author expressed herself on Mother Hubbard in unflattering terms, reproaching all the women who used to wear it in the street, calling them «Ignorant women [who] have supposed that what was good for the house was good for the street»¹⁸⁶. Also interesting is the opinion of Sara Josepha Hale, editor of the famous *Godey's Lady's Book*, who, in 1865, in the pages of the periodical asked: «Are the mothers of men who rule the world found among

¹⁸⁵ Jenny June. «Practical dress», *Ladies Home Journal*, April 1887, 11, quoted in Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem*

the loose-robed women, or among women who dress in closer-fitting apparel?»¹⁸⁷.

The concept of “fit” in the 19th century was therefore closely linked to morality as it symbolised an imposed physical restriction designed to nurture a well-disciplined and controlled spirit.

Thus, women who nevertheless chose to wear a Mother Hubbard, either for convenience or as a quasi-political choice (this is especially the case of women close to the aesthetic movement), ran the risk of being mistaken for slovenly women, unconcerned about social respectability, or even as prostitutes. In any case, it is interesting to note how the choice of wearing an apparently innocuous garment risked stigmatising and socially isolating women.

Although the Mother Hubbard was considered by many women to be unattractive and unsuitable for public presentation, it was in fact used in a wide variety of geographical, social and cultural contexts (it was worn in small towns of the frontier regions and in large cities, by housewives and workers as well as upper-middle class ladies, by poorer prostitutes as well as middle class pregnant women, by elderly women as well as young girls). It characterised different facets of women's lives at the end of the 19th century, so much so that it became at the same time, as we have seen, an emblem of innocence and intimacy in the home, of neglect and vice, and above all, and perhaps most interestingly, of the reversal of the

¹⁸⁷ Hale, S.J, «Editor's table: Fashions of dress and their influence», *Godey's Lady's Book* 90, no. 539, April 1865, 370, quoted in Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

gender balance attempted by the adherents of the aesthetic movement.

The Mother Hubbard, unlike many formal fashion garments destined for *haute couture* fleetingness, survived in the homes of American women for many years and beyond. Although the peak of its popularity was in the mid 1880s, the garment continued to be used until the turn of the century and beyond, and to appear in fashion catalogues, such as that of H. O'Neill & Co in 1898¹⁸⁸ (see fig. 19). The multifaceted use that women made of Mother Hubbard had the merit of foreshadowing the informal fashion that was fully developed in the following century, and therefore the overcoming of the boundaries, in the 19th century slavishly followed by the masses, between formal and informal fashion, between adherence and breadth. If by the 1890s the debate about the Mother Hubbard and its appropriateness as an outdoor garment, which (as we shall see) had inflamed the American press in the previous decade, began to wane, from 1900 onwards, the garment lost all connection with fashionability, reverting to a purely practical function: for many years the Mother Hubbard was used in maternity or hospital contexts, or as an appropriate garment for women suffering from obesity. The garment survived for over 70 years: in the late 1950s, references continued to be made to the garment, which was compared to the *chemise* introduced at the time (this too was a revolutionary garment, as its wide, bell-bottomed shape was an

¹⁸⁸ «Fall and Winter 1890-91»; *Fashion Catalogue*; O'Neill and company, New York, 1898, 129

alternative to the hyper-feminine style created by Dior – fig.24).¹⁸⁹ Helvenston recalls how in the 1980s, then, although without reference to the “Mother Hubbard” name, a very similar silhouette style appeared in high fashion, characterised by large widths and roundness¹⁹⁰ (fig. 25-26). Even today, despite the fact that the term Mother Hubbard is no longer linked to fashion, it is not difficult to find in contemporary designs for beachwear or maternity wear, similar characteristics to what was once a controversial garment, as much loved as hated and even, as we shall see, legally ostracised and banned.

¹⁸⁹ «How long will the chemise last?», *Consumer reports*, August 1958, 435.

Quoted in Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45, p 46

¹⁹⁰ Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45, p 46

CHAPTER IV. A controversial garment: emblematic case studies

§ 1. The Mother Hubbard and the first female presidential candidates

When Victoria Woodhull (1838-1927) was the first female presidential candidate in the United States in 1871, only a few states had granted full voting rights to women. This right would not be guaranteed throughout the federation of the United States of America until 1920, thanks to the ratification of the 19th amendment to the Constitution. However, there was nothing theoretically prohibiting a woman from running for president, as Article 2 of the US Constitution stated that:

(...) No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; nor shall any Person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States (...).¹⁹¹

Woodhull announced her candidacy, supported by the Equal Rights Party, in *Woodhull and Claflin's weekly* newspaper, which she and her sister Tennessee Claflin (1844-1923), known as Tennie, published. The nomination caused a nationwide scandal, which was adequately reflected in the newspaper articles and accompanying satirical cartoons. Woodhull and her sister were

¹⁹¹ Excerpt from «Article 2» of the Constitution of the United States of America

hotly debated even before the nomination, as they were deeply revolutionary in relation to the moral establishment of the time. In addition to being committed activists in the suffragette movement, they were the first women brokers on Wall street; they also openly defended, even in the very pages of their newspaper, the practice of free love.

The choice of a woman to present herself as a candidate for the White House inspired much of the press to associate presidential candidates (this was repeated a few years later, as we shall see, in the case of Belva Lockwood) with the context of the circus or carnival. Victoria Woodhull was certainly «a woman before her time in a world that was not ready to receive her», as Barbara Goldsmith says in her biography¹⁹². Her candidature, as suspected, proved to be a failure both because of possible electoral fraud that she denounced, but above all because women were not allowed to vote and few males obviously voted for her; furthermore, she was not yet thirty-five years old, the minimum age required by the Constitution to run for office, as has been said. However, her political activity was certainly functional to the feminist cause. We need only think of her 1870 statement to Congress in which she asserted that women should be given the right to vote because it was enshrined in the Constitution¹⁹³.

¹⁹² Goldsmith, B.; *Other Powers: The age of suffrage, Spiritualism, and the scandalous Victoria Woodhull*; HarperCollins; New York, 1999. On the subject of Woodhull's parable, this article is also interesting, as it shows how there are parallels between the public reactions to her candidacy more than a century ago and those that occurred with Hillary Clinton's candidacy in 2016: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/mrs-satan-or-joan-of-arc-the-story-of-victoria-woodhull/article31199623/>

¹⁹³ «Woodhull memorial», U.S Senate document, 1870-12-21

Victoria Woodhull's personality, lifestyle and ideologies were so disruptive that she appeared to the eyes of her contemporaries, unprepared for her freedom of thought and life, as a sort of devil, so much so that she was nicknamed, also thanks to the press, «Mrs. Satan». The association of the two sisters with the Mother Hubbard (a dress, as we have seen, also used by street prostitutes), is due precisely to the “scandalous” reputation of the two women, and above all to their defence - and practice - of free love. A 1967 biography of the woman by Johanna Johnston reports that Victoria and Tennie Woodhull used, like other women of the time, to wear Mother Hubbard at home, but they also used to wear it when receiving guests.¹⁹⁴ One passage makes clearer the climate of moral condemnation prevalent at the time of Woodhull's candidacy, and thus the stigma that fell on women who chose to wear the Mother Hubbard in public or not entirely private contexts, for example in front of formal guests, as Tennie did:

Tennie C, rejecting hypocrisy, could not compromise with her natural inclinations in any direction. When summer heat steamed in New York, Tennie liked to drift about the house in a loose Mother Hubbard and nothing else. If visitors arrived, she felt it would be only pretence to hurry off to don more conventional dress. As a result, there were occasions when conventional callers found themselves blinking and blushing. A suffragist friend of Victoria's, who had called along with her husband, remonstrated with him after they left, shocked by the

¹⁹⁴ Johnston, J.; *Mrs. Satan; The incredible saga of Victoria C Woodhull*, Putnam, New York, 1967

furtive pats she had seen him giving Tennie. "But, my dear," he replied mildly, "when an attractive young lady who is nearly naked sits on the arm of one's chair and leans over one, what is one to do?"¹⁹⁵

As will be seen, the connection between Woodhull and the Mother Hubbard does not stop with Tennie's descriptions, if one considers that thirteen years later, according to historian Wood, one of the reasons men wore the Mother Hubbard during their protests against the candidate Belva Lockwood was precisely to recall Woodhull's libertine reputation¹⁹⁶.

A more detailed study deserves the case of Belva Lockwood (1830-1917), twice presidential candidate, in 1884 and 1888, and the link attributed to her figure by the press and society at large with Mother Hubbard, given the different socio-cultural connotations involved.¹⁹⁷ Belva Lockwood's candidacy, also in this case promoted by the Equal Rights Party, was more credible than Woodhull's (which is why many sources credit Lockwood as the first official female presidential candidate in US history). Unlike Woodhull, Lockwood was old enough to run and had the appropriate academic qualifications and professional experience as

¹⁹⁵ Ibidem, p. 119.

¹⁹⁶ Wood, S., *The freedom of the streets: Work, citizenship, and sexuality in a Gilded Age city*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2005. The text is useful to deepen the role of women at the end of the 19th century, and in particular the difficult *excursus* of autonomous women without families who moved away from the female ideal of the "home angel". The text describes the life and difficulties of independent women, whether they were prostitutes or freelancers such as doctors and lawyers.

¹⁹⁷ For an in-depth biography of Belva Lockwood, a very important woman of her time and instrumental in the acquisition of many rights for contemporary women, see: Norgren, J., *Belva Lockwood: The woman who would be president*, New York University Press, New York, 2007.

the first female lawyer on the US Supreme Court. The only real obstacle in the presidential race was her gender. Lockwood fought throughout her life to demand equal opportunities for women, both socially, politically and economically. She experienced the discrimination caused by being born a woman, but never resigned herself to the *status quo*. Throughout her life she had to fight hard to obtain what her male colleagues were guaranteed by law. From her law degree to her appointment as the first female member of the Supreme Court bar¹⁹⁸, through her employment as a headmaster and teacher, Lockwood achieved all her deserved successes while having to face and fight obstacles that were the result of prejudice and institutional discrimination against women, who were relegated by society to the usual few stereotypical roles such as mother, housewife or teacher. In fact, despite having completed all her exams in 1873 at the National University School of Law (now George Washington University Law School), her gender was an obstacle even in obtaining her law degree, which she was entitled to. In order to obtain it she had to ask for help from the then President of the United States Ulysses S. Grant.¹⁹⁹ She also had to lobby Congress for a long time to gain access to the bar, an effort that contributed greatly to the passing of the law that, in 1879, allowed all qualified women to practice the profession of lawyer²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁸ Lockwood became the first woman member of the U.S Supreme Court Bar on March 3, 1879

¹⁹⁹ Belva Lockwood addressed a heartfelt letter to the president, explaining that she deserved her degree because she had passed all her examinations and asking him to intervene on behalf of justice. The President immediately granted her request and in September 1873 Lockwood had her degree delivered.

²⁰⁰ In Italy this only happened after the First World War.

From her difficult but successful personal and professional journey, it is clear that Lockwood had all the cards and potential to be a leading politician in the country worthy of being a presidential candidate, and that the definition of "woman of the street" did not even remotely fit her. In her essay²⁰¹ on the link between Belva Lockwood's political career and Mother Hubbard's social function in (re)defining the role and concept of women, Professor of English Literature Patricia Marks of Valdosta State University, an expert on 19th century press satires and caricatures, states:

The irony is that Lockwood was anything but a woman of the streets; rather, she was a strong, intelligent, and courageous character whose difficult early years as the wife of a farmer and sawmill owner prepared her to face the social stigma of becoming lawyer, politician, and spokesperson for women's rights.²⁰²

§ 2. *Press reaction*

Yet, also and above all in the case of Belva Lockwood, the association that appeared repeatedly in the press in those years with Mother Hubbard served to allude precisely to an "ambiguous" sexuality, and therefore to label the candidate as a prostitute, but also indirectly any woman who dared to cross the boundaries of the traditional Victorian *mundus muliebris*. Mother

²⁰¹ Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

²⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 301.

Hubbard, in the political press, became, through the juxtaposition with Lockwood, the emblem of the non-conformist woman who chose to transgress the *status quo* and become an active part of public life. There have been several instances of satirical cartoons appearing in newspapers in which Lockwood was portrayed with a Mother Hubbard, which, it seems, was not even part of her wardrobe (the woman used to present herself in traditional clothes). Almost all of the satirical cartoons on the candidate, even when they did not include the Mother Hubbard, placed particular emphasis on women's fashion, which served to underline the difference between the male and female genders, and therefore the inadequacy of women to hold important positions with their eccentric or ridiculous clothes. References to Mother Hubbard could also be only verbal or indirect, as in *Judge's* cartoon «Mother is the battle over?»²⁰³ which appeared immediately after the elections, in which Lockwood's presence was only evoked through signs hung outside a tailor's shop, reading phrases such as «campaign dresses made over»²⁰⁴.

Only a week earlier the same *Judge* had portrayed a professionally dressed Lockwood, but with a parchment entitled «Treatise on the Mother Hubbard»,²⁰⁵ along with two other candidates: John St. John of the Prohibition Party and Benjamin Butler, of the Greenback party. As can be seen in Figure 28, the three are portrayed in the act of blaming each other for losing the election. The Mother Hubbard

²⁰³ «Your Fault I Was Not Elected», *Judge*, 21 Nov. 1884, p.16.

²⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁰⁵ «Your Fault I Was Not Elected», *Judge*, 15 Nov. 1884, p.16.

in particular appeared in many of the cartoons or newspaper articles comparing a woman's candidacy to the ridicule of a carnival party, or a grotesque and ambiguous circus. In *Life* magazine, for example, a cartoon titled «Atalanta Lockwood and Hippomenes Butler on the Home stretch» showed a cheerful Lockwood a robe halfway between a toga and a Mother Hubbard throwing balls at Benjamin Butler, who was having difficulty picking them up²⁰⁶.

Lockwood was often depicted in these cartoons alongside Benjamin Butler, given his support for women's voting rights, and alongside other women's suffrage activists and Prohibition Party members (whose connection to the feminist cause will be made clear later). These cartoons depicted the mentioned characters mainly in funny and carnival-like contexts. An example of this is the cartoon in *Judge's* centrefold, in which Lockwood is depicted together with Butler, the feminist and abolitionist activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other members of the Prohibition Party, as an actress in a circus show (fig.29)²⁰⁷. A reference to the circus and grotesque context was suggested by the recurring use of the term «spectacle» in reference to women entering into public activities. A *Life* editorial commenting on the election campaign summarised Lockwood's public activity as follows: «Mrs. Lockwood has

²⁰⁶ Charles Jay Taylor, «Atalanta Lockwood and Hippomenes Butler on the Home Stretch» *Life*, 30 Oct. 1884, p. 243 quoted in Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

²⁰⁷«Political Carnival centerfold», *Judge*, 1884. Source: «Two women presidential candidates», Google Arts&Culture (<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/two-women-presidential-candidates/2wLC0jfkqqfsJw>)

presented a spectacle which is degrading to American womanhood (...)).²⁰⁸

Many newspapers also suggested scenarios, somewhere between the catastrophic and the grotesque, in which women might actually become president. The Mother Hubbard gown appeared in some of these cartoons, which endeavoured to imagine a dystopian world in which the gender balance would be upset and women would definitively take power and become the “stronger sex”. The *County Transcript* illustrated a Lockwood in the White House ready to meet a Russian minister with her hair out of place and wearing a «horrid Mother Hubbard»²⁰⁹. Lockwood's association with the famous housecoat was so frequent in the press and elsewhere that it prompted suffragette activist Virginia L. Minor to declare publicly that the candidate's wearing of a Mother Hubbard would not be too out of place in the White House, given the garment's similarity to the uniform of Supreme Court justices.²¹⁰

§ 3. *A curious case of cross-dressing*

One of the most interesting cartoons in this context, which introduces us to the subject of cross-dressing, appeared in the *Frank*

²⁰⁸ «After the battle», *Life*, 23 Nov. 1884, p.273-75. Cited in: Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

²⁰⁹ «Scene at the White House, 1886», *Mower County Transcript* [Michigan] 12 Nov. 1884, p.1. Cited in: *Ibidem*

²¹⁰ «The woman Suffragist's Nomination», *Lexington Weekly Intelligencer* [Kentucky], 13 Sept.1884, p.2. Cited in: *Ibidem*

Illustrated Weekly Newspaper on 1 November 1884²¹¹, shortly before the election (fig.30). The satirical cartoon, by artist John Newton, depicted a group of men marching wearing Mother Hubbard and women's bonnets, alongside signs indicating the Belva Lockwood Club. The cartoon echoed a series of similar demonstrations that had actually taken place during the presidential campaign to ridicule candidate Lockwood. In fact, from 1884 onwards, demonstrations were organised by groups of men who used Mother Hubbard as an icon in support of a «battle of the sexes»²¹² with different and subtle nuances. At the basis of the choice of the men to express their disapproval of the Lockwood candidate by wearing a Mother Hubbard in their demonstrations there were multiple, stratified and complex motivations, linked to the recent entry of women in politics and to the demands they supported. The historian Sharon Wood, citing in particular the demonstration against Belva Lockwood held in Davenport (Iowa) in 1888 (the year of Lockwood's second candidacy), states that the men's choice to wear a Mother Hubbard was linked in particular to its sexual connotation as a dress worn by prostitutes, and that it also served, as already mentioned, to evoke the memory of Woodhull's scandalous reputation²¹³. Woodhull's election campaign was also recalled by the presence of a black man, the former slave Jake

²¹¹ «New Jersey — the humors of political campaign — Parade of the Belva Lockwood Club of the city of Rahway», *Frank Illustrated Weekly Newspaper*, November 1, 1884, 169.

²¹² Term employed about this context by Sally Helvenston in: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

²¹³ Wood, S., *The freedom of the streets: Work, citizenship, and sexuality in a Gilded Age city*, The university of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2005.

Busey, who served to evoke the man Woodhull had proposed as vice-president, Frederick Douglas, an African American man freed from slavery. Such references to the racial dimension could be part of the organisers' vision and thus serve to link racism and sexism. Indeed, in reference to Busey, Wood states:

(...) parade organizers may have intended his presence to boost the carnival element of the parade, signifying the disruption of race hierarchies in the same way that cross-dressing disrupted gender hierarchies (...) ²¹⁴

Wood points out that the anger towards Belva Lockwood, in Iowa but not only, was based on a hostility towards all women who were involved in politics in those years, often becoming protagonists of abolitionist and protectionist demands. The women of the Christian Temperance Union (a movement to which many suffragettes belonged) were in the forefront of efforts to pass laws restricting or prohibiting the sale of alcohol and the operation of gentlemen's clubs²¹⁵ and protecting young girls from prostitution

²¹⁴ Ibidem, Introduction

²¹⁵ In this article of *The Guardian*

(<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/03/women-alcohol-drink-culture-prohibition-temperance>) it is pointed out that women's interest in prohibition was linked not only to religious and moral reasons, but also and above all to practical ones. Women in the prohibition movements recognised that alcohol was a major cause of domestic violence and dangerous behaviour towards women and children, and advocated for its prohibition in order to protect their own safety. The article points out that the feminists' concern was based on real data, still valid today: studies show that the number of alcohol sellers in certain areas is closely related to domestic violence, and that on university campuses 88% of rapists have consumed alcoholic beverages.

by raising the age of consent to sexual intercourse to thirteen.²¹⁶ Suffice it to say that many women served on the national committee of the Prohibition and Home Protection Party²¹⁷: in some years the number of women delegates reached 30%. Moreover, in Iowa itself, J. Ellen Foster, a Republican lawyer, had been instrumental in the campaign that led to the ratification of the state constitution in 1882, and thus to the inclusion of an article on prohibition²¹⁸. It is no coincidence that in Davenport, as well as in other cities and states (e.g. Washington DC), demonstrations were organised by the Democratic Party, precisely to oppose women entering politics by supporting mainly Republican demands, such as prohibition. For many men, therefore, the increasing political activity of women represented a danger in many ways, as it risked depriving them of what they considered essential for their pleasure and leisure, such as the consumption of alcohol and easy access to prostitution.

By focusing their satire on the one woman who dared to run for President, these Davenport men expressed their anger at all women who threatened their refuge in the city by working publicly on behalf of Prohibition ²¹⁹

²¹⁶ In Iowa, the minimum age of consent to intercourse in 1880's was set at 10 years of age. Despite the efforts of prohibitionist women, it was not until 1920 that state law permanently set the minimum age of consent at 16. See Children & Youth in History Website: <https://chnm.gmu.edu/cyh/teaching-modules/230?section=primarysources&source=24>

²¹⁷ According to Sharon Wood, the name of the party was partly coined from the motto of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU): «For God and home and every land». See Wood, S., *The freedom of the streets: Work, citizenship, and sexuality in a Gilded Age city*, The university of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2005.

²¹⁸ Ibidem

²¹⁹ Ibidem

According to Wood, therefore, men's and women's visions of society and politics were, for the most part, polar opposites, and the growing presence of women in national politics caused great hostility, only apparently covered by satire.

The practice of cross-dressing, and thus the use of Mother Hubbard by men, in addition to discrediting women in politics by likening them to the very prostitutes they were trying to protect by trying to raise the minimum age of consent, served to underline, through the element of ridicule, the absurdity of reversing gender roles and adopting behaviours typical of the opposite sex. Cross-dressing therefore served to openly display and emphasise physical and behavioural gender differences:

Cross-dressing can sometimes be a strategy for celebrating androgyny, but in the nineteenth century it more often emphasised the physical appearance of sexual difference. Men who looked ridiculous in women's clothing proved the absurdity of stepping out of place, of becoming men-women-precisely the charge leveled at women who left their 'sphere' to enter politics and public life.²²⁰

The fact that the hostility against Belva Lockwood concealed social, political and cultural reasons that went far beyond her figure and personality, and above all beyond her concrete political proposals, can also be seen in the discrepancy between the public representation with Mother Hubbard made by the press and the

²²⁰ Ibidem

masses and her actual daily style, marked by simplicity and traditionalism. The same press of the time, although often intent on mocking her, sometimes admitted that Lockwood was a woman who behaved very seriously, avoiding any socially inappropriate attitude. A journalist from the *Boston Herald* claimed, in fact, that although Lockwood was often portrayed with the Mother Hubbard, she was in fact a woman who «does not indulge in eccentricities of dress».²²¹ It is also interesting to note that such widespread satirical portrayal of Belva Lockwood had the opposite effect in the long run, serving as *de facto* publicity for the female cause. The newspapers, in fact, were forced to take note of the change that was taking place in society and, although they attributed often ridiculous or negative connotations to the phenomenon of women's emancipation, their cartoons and articles were functional in opening up towards the gradual introduction and diffusion of women's rights in various spheres of the country's social and political life.²²²

In 1884, Belva Lockwood obtained, according to some sources, around 4,000 votes, winning the electoral vote in Indiana and gaining the popular vote in several states. The result is quite surprising, considering that Woodhull had not obtained a single vote and that women did not yet have the right to vote in most

²²¹«Personalities», *Boston Herald*, rpt. *The Independent* (New York), 30 Oct. 1884, p. 8. Cited in: Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15 pp.

²²² Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15

American states. But, as Marks points out, the most interesting and likely figure is the one reported by *Life*, according to which Lockwood would have come fifth, but would have been just as happy if she had been sixth or 94th. In fact, being nominated was in itself a big step forward for women's rights.²²³

Patricia Marks explains how the meaning of cross-dressing and Mother Hubbard-wearing events changed over time as they spread across the country and became increasingly important. The rallies shifted from the political arena, where they served as fierce satire against Belva Lockwood, to the folkloric and festive, becoming more and more occasions for goliardic entertainment in its own right²²⁴. Although a certain political undertone persisted, as can be seen from the demonstration organised by the Democratic Party in Washington, DC, which included a «Belva Lockwood Brigade» with men dressed in Mother Hubbards that attracted a huge crowd²²⁵, the climate became over time, after the elections of 1884, mostly conciliatory and playful (except for a few cases related to local politics, such as the demonstrations in Iowa analysed earlier, where the political element of protest against Belva Lockwood and women in politics continued to be decisive). In many of the demonstrations, such as the one in Mystic, Connecticut²²⁶, the

²²³ «Mrs. Belva Lockwood is fifth», *Life* 23 Oct. 1884, p. 226. Cited in: Ibidem

²²⁴ Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15

²²⁵ «Alexandria», *Evening Critic* (Washington DC), 12 Nov. 1884, p.4

²²⁶ «More on Mystic's Mother Hubbard Parade», *The Portersville Press* (Connecticut), in *Mystic River Historical Society*, Nov-Dec 2009, p. 3. Cited in: Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and

brigades were accompanied by music and drums, and the atmosphere was one of goliardism, although there were also references to Belva Lockwood and the role of women in society. In certain communities, musical traditions based on Mother Hubbard were established, such as the «Mother Hubbard March» of 1885, created by John Phillip Sousa.²²⁷ In these contexts, the song «You'll get there all the same»²²⁸ became popular, of which a verse dwells on the main expectation that women had to fulfil, i.e. marriage. As can be seen, it contains a rather conservative content regarding the emancipation of women:

Tis said Belva Lockwood will fight for woman's rights
But only an old maid in such a cause delights,
The pretty girls merry, make useful, loving wives,
And thus become angels the balance of their lives (...) ²²⁹

Marks points to the fact that «Parades became larger and more inclusive as they morphed from a criticism of unacceptable behavior into a popular national pastime».²³⁰ The link with Belva Lockwood slowly began to fade, and the parades became larger

political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15, P.305

²²⁷ See Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15, P.305

²²⁸ La Paloma, *You'll get there all the same*, Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collections, 1886, John Hopkins Sheridan Libraries (<https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/8906>)

²²⁹ Ibidem

²³⁰ Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15, P.305

and larger, as they did as early as in 1884 in Mystic, Connecticut, but also, later, in Wheeling, West Virginia, in Amsterdam and Troy, NY, and in many other places, especially small towns in the South or in the frontier regions (places where Mother Hubbard was most used by women for their daily activities)²³¹. The *National Police Gazette* tells of frequent gatherings in Massachusetts, where there was a custom of bringing a wagon full of beers, which anyone could join, in which Benjamin Butler was represented with a Mother Hubbard. The custom came about as a result of the comic rumour about the candidate according to which he, in case of victory, would have honored his bet, which consisted in cutting his beard in half and wearing a Mother Hubbard.²³²

By the time Belva stood for re-election in 1888, Mother Hubbard parades had become part of popular folklore, and remained so for decades, if even as late as 1907 a «Mother Hubbard drill» was considered a popular entertainment²³³. Over the years, such demonstrations took on forms quite different from the initial political intentions, moving further and further away from the character of Belva Lockwood. The Mother Hubbard gown was increasingly worn by men at events such as masquerades, sports competitions and galas of various kinds.

Patricia Marks cites several curious cases, such as that of a masked ball held in Ohio, where women wearing a Mother Hubbard were

²³¹ Ibidem

²³² «A novel election bet», *National Police Gazette*, 29 Nov. 1884, p.7 , 8. Cited in: Ibidem

²³³ «W.O.W. Entertainment», *Danison Daily Herald* (Texas), 30 March 1907, p.9. *Portal to Texas History*. Cited in: Ibidem

surprised to see their chaperones dressed in the same way, and noticing that around their manly physiques «hung gaunt, graceless folds of gaudy Mother Hubbards»²³⁴. Or the case of some dances reported by *The Dallas Daily Herald* in which the women «looked like a rosebud from Tennyson's rosebud of girls», while their chaperones wore a robe consisting of a meal sack, decorated with the image of the old Mother Hubbard of nursery rhymes and her dog, and a sunflower, representing Oscar Wilde and the aesthetic movement²³⁵.

A further, unsuspected, circumstance in which Mother Hubbard was used in the context of cross-dressing was in sports, particularly baseball. For example, in Forth Worth, Texas, there was a game in which prominent members of the local society participated on two teams: «The Mother Hubbards» and the «Pullbacks». The players wore not only the Mother Hubbard, but also all the paraphernalia that had been in use since the first demonstrations against Belva Lockwood — wigs, women's caps and other appropriate apparel. The game was held in front of thousands of people, and was described in an ironic and amusing way by the local press.²³⁶

Marks points out, however, that not all such circumstances were appreciated. A match like the one just described, held in San Antonio, also in Texas, triggered less than positive reactions, again reported in the press. A local newspaper claimed that the situation

²³⁴ «Eaton», *The Eaton Democrat* (Ohio), 24 Jan. 1884, p. 3. Cited in: *Ibidem*

²³⁵ «Additional society notes», *Dallas Daily Herald* (Texas), 2 Mar. 1884, p.4. Cited in: *Ibidem*

²³⁶ «A great game», *Forth Worth Gazette*, (Texas) 25 Sept. 1884, p. 8 cited in: *Ibidem*

«proved to be a great disappointment to all the refined audience by very vulgar and indecorous behavior of the young men in the Mother Hubbards». ²³⁷

§ 4. *Legal provisions and arrests of women*

The term «Fashion schizophrenia»²³⁸ is used by Patricia Marks in reference to the fact that in the same years when men used to gather in rallies and participate in socialising events with Mother Hubbard, women who wore it on the streets on a daily basis were subject to stiff penalties, often even resulting in arrest.

In fact, although there were also women who participated without any problems in social events such as parties, games, dances etc. wearing the Mother Hubbard, its functional use in the city streets (especially in some small/medium-sized towns) was strongly stigmatised:

As long as the Mother Hubbard was worn to an event as a costume, it was acceptable; however, while social events continued without pause, across the nation police were arresting women, not men, for appearing publicly in the dress²³⁹.

The scholar goes on to recall how the *Maysville Evening Bulletin* reported thirty arrests in Omaha (Nebraska) and several fines in

²³⁷ «Mother Hubbard Base Ball», *San Antonio Light* (Texas), 1 sept. 1884, p. 1.
Cited in: *Ibidem*

²³⁸ Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15. P.306.

²³⁹ *Ibidem*

Des Moines (Iowa), Kansas City (Missouri) and St Joseph (Missouri), as well as other cities in Iowa, Missouri and Illinois²⁴⁰. The case of the arrests in Omaha must have caused quite a stir, since a journalist from Kimball, a Dakota city, fearing a similar ordinance to that of Omaha, took the trouble to interview the mayor of the city, who answered the questions by stating that «as long as he held his present office no lady in Kimball would be dictated as to what they should wear, or what they should not wear, as long as they wore something — if nothing but a sweet smile»²⁴¹. Interestingly, the article, quoting a passage from the *Omaha Bee*, smugly asserts the fact that high society women used to wear Mother Hubbard during the summer as a matter of course. This confirms, once again, that the dress was used by women of all social classes, and that they did not intend to part with their Mother Hubbards easily:

If this order is strictly enforced some of the leading ladies of this city would doubtless be dragged into unenviable notoriety, as many of them indulge in the luxury of a Mother Hubbard on a hot day, although few of them appear upon the streets in them.²⁴²

The news of the arrests in Omaha, as Helvenston reports, also appeared in the *National Police Gazette*, which reported on the decision of the mayors of Omaha, but also of Kansas City, to ban

²⁴⁰ «The mother Hubbard crusade», *Evening Bulletin* [Kentucky], 28 Aug. 1884, p. 2 Cited in: Ibidem

²⁴¹ «Moral Omaha», *The Kimball Graphic*, Aug. 8, 1884. Source: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*

²⁴² Ibidem. It should be noted that the same remark appeared in the above-mentioned *Ottawa Free Trader*, Aug. 11, 1883, p. 2.

the garment, which was officially described as «indecent and vulgar»²⁴³.

The reason for the prohibition of Mother Hubbard lay once again in its association with prostitution and more generally in the negative judgement (typically Victorian) addressed to the person, especially if it was a woman, who did not respect the social rules that established the proper way to present oneself in public (rules that translated for women primarily into the use of a corset). Helvenston traces precisely in the reference to street prostitution the reason for the strong resentment against the Mother Hubbard gown, and cites a comment that appeared in the *Chicago News* in 1884 (the year of Lockwood's candidacy), which is interesting in explaining the excursus that the garment went through, passing from being a garment suitable for childhood to a symbol of sexual vice:

The Mother Hubbard dress, once popularly supposed to indicate girlshiness and innocence in the wearer, has fallen into legal disfavour, and the police now eye the wearers of that garment with suspicion (...). Thus, this innocent garment has fallen into disfavour. ²⁴⁴

An article in the *Ottawa Free Trader* of 1883 reported:

²⁴³ *National Police Gazette* (US), 44, no. 362 (August 30, 1884), p. 12. In: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

²⁴⁴ «The mother Hubbard in Chicago», *New York Times* [reprinted from the *Chicago news*], October 26, 1884, p. 6

(...) an order given to arrest all women wearing Mother Hubbard dresses. Jennie Green arrested yesterday for appearing upon the streets dressed in a Mother Hubbard. Marshal Cummings' latest order is to effect that any woman found up on the streets dressed in a Mother Hubbard dress be arrested and lodged in jail. The ground for this order is that the dress is improper and it leads to indecent exposure of the person (...). Yesterday a woman named Jennie Green was arrested by Officer Buckley for appearing in the street clad in a Mother Hubbard. She was released upon bail and her case set for Friday forenoon. She has employed counsel and will see whether the marshal or policemen of Omaha have anything to say as to what kind of dress a woman wear and when and where she shall wear it. ²⁴⁵

Some provisions provided a compromise between prohibition and permission to wear the garment. In several cases it was only forbidden if worn «unbelted», as an article in the *Jamestown Weekly Alert* states: «The police of Mattoon, Ill, have issued orders forbidding ladies to wear Mother Hubbard dresses, unbelted, under penalty of arrest».²⁴⁶ In an article that appeared in the *Louisiana Monroe Bulletin*, also in 1884, it is stated that the police had been ordered to «suppress» the aesthetic clothes (of which, as we have remembered, the Mother Hubbard was an important element), for fear of excessive confusion between "respectable" women and prostitutes. The article mentions the arrest of a woman named Lizzie Brait, who was fined five dollars for having appeared «on the street, as the evidence showed, in a Pink Mother Hubbard».

²⁴⁵«Mother Hubbard Hubbub» *Ottawa Free Trader*, August 11, 1883, p. 2..

²⁴⁶ «Farm and household», *Jamestown Weekly alert.*, Sept. 25, 1884. Source: *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85042405/1884-09-25/ed-1/seq-6/>)

In the same article reference was made to the rancour against Mother Hubbard on the part of some more conservative women, defined as «mothers who remember when they were proud to put on a Linsey gown on Sunday morning, and walk to church in a pair of brogan shoes»²⁴⁷. In the same months as Lockwood's campaign, press comedy also took another turn in relation to Mother Hubbard: many articles, in the wake of the legal provisions against the garment, expanded on satirical anecdotes about the characteristics and consequences of its use. One article suggested that the cause of summer storms was the appearance of the garment, which would scare the wind away.²⁴⁸ Another said that if a girl had no garment, she could easily make one by attaching a fly net to three inches of coloured yoke²⁴⁹. One of the most common rumours was that «its voluminous skirt frightened horses, thereby causing serious accidents»²⁵⁰. The argument that the garment frightened the horses and caused accidents was even used in some cases as justification for its prohibition, as happened in Pendleton Oregon, where Mother Hubbard could only be worn with a belt.²⁵¹ An article in the *Emporia Kansas* also reported on the circumstance

²⁴⁷ «An outlawed garment», *Monroe Bulletin* [Louisiana], April 30, 1884, p.4. Reprinted from *Louisville Commercial*. Cited in: Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, 21-50 (30 pages)

²⁴⁸ «Mother Hubbard Hubbub», *Omaha Daily Bee*, July 31, 1884, p.5

²⁴⁹ *Richmond Democrat*, August 16, 1883

²⁵⁰ On this topic see also the already mentioned: Mills, J.B; *Calico Chronicle: Texas women and their fashions, 1830-1910*; Texas Tech University Press; Lubbock; 1985

²⁵¹ *Little Falls Transcript*, Sept. 12, 1884

of a fat woman wearing a Mother Hubbard being accused of chasing away a carriage.²⁵²

Some articles, probably in order to dissuade women from wearing the garment, used fictitious conversations between girlfriends or boyfriends, as in *The Black Range*, a New Mexico newspaper, which reported a young man talking to his girlfriend, who blushed and confided to him that she had read indecent stories about the Mother Hubbard gown in the press and was ashamed to repeat them because they were not yet married.²⁵³

In several cases, the press enjoyed linking the garment to the successful nursery rhyme of the same name²⁵⁴, often manipulating and distorting the verses of the children's book, as happened in this case in a Minnesota newspaper, where it is said that the protagonist of the famous book herself would not have appreciated the garment and its public display²⁵⁵:

...The late innovation
That's shocking the nation
Leaves her arms, like the cupboard, all bare.
Of the Puffy high neck,
There is left not a speck,
And too much is revealed of the fair.
Then gauzy confusion

²⁵² *Emporia Weekly News*, Nov. 22, 1883

²⁵³ «Some Time, Perhaps», *The Black Range*, Oct. 24, 1884

²⁵⁴ Martin, S.C; *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog*; J. Harris; London; 1805; first edition

²⁵⁵ Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

Of lace and illusion

Would shock Mother Hubbard outright ²⁵⁶

Poems that distorted and reinterpreted the rhymes of the Mother Hubbard book in a comic key soon became famous, such as the one that appeared in a Louisville newspaper, which faithfully reproduced the type of rhyme used in the original texts describing the adventures of the old lady Mother Hubbard and her dog, and which probably reproduced the climate that was really felt in those years on the streets of small American towns in the presence of a woman with a Mother Hubbard:

Old Mother Hubbard

She went to her cupboard

In one of her dresses discreet;

But when she went out

A bobby did shout,

"You mustn't wear that on the street". ²⁵⁷

The Mother Hubbard, like other women's clothing throughout history²⁵⁸, was opposed to the point of causing law and order problems and street harassment. In 1884, a journalist from the

²⁵⁶ «The Old Mother Hubbard», *Little Falls Transcript*, [Minnesota], 10 Oct. 1884, p.3. Cited in: Ibidem

²⁵⁷ «Anti-Mother Hubbard crusade», *Louisville Courier-Journal*. Rpt. *New North-West* [Oregon] 13 June 1884, p. 1. Cited in: Ibidem

²⁵⁸ Compare, for example, the history of the fierce opposition against the *guardainfante*, a farthingale used in 17th century Spain. See: Amanda Wunder, *Women's Fashions and Politics in Seventeenth Century Spain: The Rise and Fall of "Guardainfante"*, New York, Renaissance Society of America, 2015.

Carthage Republican newspaper in Missouri admitted, speaking on behalf of the community, that he wished to punish women wearing the Mother Hubbard even with a belt:

We would not strike a woman under any circumstances, but we must acknowledge that when we see a girl wearing one of those horrible garments known as "Mother Hubbard" we feel inclined to give her a belt.²⁵⁹

There were also several cases of street harassment. A Michigan newspaper told of girls in Mother Hubbard being forced to flee from intrusive approaches by cowboys in Fort Collins, Colorado²⁶⁰. In some cases, legal measures were taken as a matter of public policy: in Lake Charles (Louisiana), the case of a woman who was forced to take refuge in a pharmacy to escape harassment by a group of rowdy men led to an anti-Mother Hubbard law. As has often been the case in history, and as is still the case today in some parts of the world, the law did not punish the harassers, but rather restricted women's freedom. Probably seeking a compromise between a complete ban on the garment and its tolerance, the mayor of Lake Charles allowed women to wear Mother Hubbard on private property, at parties, or when accompanied. If walking alone, women, as in other cases in several US cities, were required to wear the robe with a belt²⁶¹.

²⁵⁹ *Carthage Republican* [Missouri] , 1884

²⁶⁰ *Northern Tribune*, Sept. 29, 1883, p. 8

²⁶¹ «War on the Mother Hubbard», *Lake Charles Commercial*, May 15, 1886.

§ 5. *Women's response*

Despite the fact that the press reaction to the custom of wearing Mother Hubbard on the streets was often negative, there was no shortage of cases in which some newspapers sided with women and their freedom, often using an ironic register. The *Daily Bee* of Omaha, for example, ironised the circumstance in which a policeman failed to arrest a burglar because he was too distracted to stop the women wearing the incriminating garment, apologising with these words: «I was so busy arresting women for wearing Mother Hubbards that I had no time to look after ordinary matters».²⁶² There were also ironic poems, such as one that appeared in several newspapers in Duchess County, Virginia, New Mexico and finally in Princeton in the *Popular Speaker*, describing the absurdity of such repressive fury against Mother Hubbard. In the text, after stating «The garment is graceful, no one can deny it — enhancing the charms of the matron and maid», it is assumed that the detractors and legislators who were so committed to outlawing the garment «of multiplied graces they're surely afraid»²⁶³.

In the *Saline County Journal* of Kansas it was said that the Mother Hubbard gown's conformation was not only not scandalous, but in line with what doctors concerned about women's health and the

²⁶² «Peppermint Drops», *Daily Bee* [Omaha], 15 Nov. 1884, p. 2. Cited in: Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

²⁶³ See. Baker, G. Melville, *The popular speaker: comprising fresh selections in poetry and prose*, Lee and Shepard, Boston, 1885.

wearing of proper clothing were advising. Police and local governors were also advised to worry about the scourge of gambling and prostitution rather than women's fashion²⁶⁴. One Montana newspaper openly sided with women's rights, stating that the police should not be allowed to make rules about what should be in fashion, and that women had the full right to wear what they considered to be decent and attractive clothing: if people did not like their style, they could turn away. The article explicitly supported the women's cause, stating: «stand by your rights ladies, and we'll hold your hats»²⁶⁵. Again, an article in the *Lake Charles Commercial*, a newspaper in the state of Louisiana, stated that if they were going to tell women what was fashionable, then in the interests of fairness, they should also arrest men who wore trousers that were too tight, or boys who went barefoot²⁶⁶.

There was no shortage of press reports of rebellion by women. Some women, in addition to continuing to wear Mother Hubbard publicly (as can be seen from the number of arrests reported in the newspapers), decided to unite and support each other in response to threats to their freedom. The *South Kentuckian Semi-weekly*, for example, reported in an article the anger expressed by a local girl during an interview. She stated that she and her friends would continue to wear the unjustly incriminated garment, and that if one of them was arrested, they would fill the courtrooms all dressed in

²⁶⁴ *Saline County Journal*, June 24, 1884

²⁶⁵ *Helena Weekly Herald*, August 28, 1884.

²⁶⁶ «War on the Mother Hubbard», *Lake Charles Commercial*, [Louisiana], May 15, 1886

a Mother Hubbard²⁶⁷. In fact, a few months after this interview, there was an acquittal of several young women arrested for wearing the garment in public.²⁶⁸ Other women decided to wear the incriminating garment to balls and parties, such as the one held at the Capital Hotel in New York, where the sixty women present all wore a Mother Hubbard²⁶⁹. A form of female rebellion could also be found in the custom of organising women's theme parties, where men were not invited and where one could relax among friends in a playful and serene atmosphere²⁷⁰.

All of the scholars cited so far who have dealt with Mother Hubbard have pointed out that the association with prostitution was only partly the cause of men's resentment, sometimes turned into outright hatred, towards the garment. Marks argues that there were social, cultural and political reasons behind the reaction that triggered Mother Hubbard, linked in particular to the then recent (and growing) women's rights movement:

Its [The Mother Hubbard] many social and political implications mirror the early women's rights movement. During the 1884 Lockwood campaign, the moral and political ramifications become conjoined. Since the Mother Hubbard, generally worn "appropriately"

²⁶⁷ «Defense of the Mother Hubbard», *Semi-Weekly South Kentuckian* [Kentucky], 6 May 1884, p. 1

²⁶⁸ «The arrest of certain young women...», *Jamestown Weekly Alert*, [North Dakota], 25 Sept. 1884, p.2. Cited in: Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

²⁶⁹See. Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages)

²⁷⁰ «Mother Hubbard parties », *St. Paul Daily Globe*, Sept. 23, 1888

as a house dress, had been adopted as street wear by prostitutes and more generally women who had stepped outside of their "correct" sphere, any woman - like Lockwood - who chose to break sexual or professional boundaries was "prostituting" herself; consequently, men dressed in Mother Hubbards represented a graphic criticism of progressive women.²⁷¹

Women chose to wear the garment certainly for practicality, but also to express their independence and autonomy of thought.

Precisely in the name of this desire for independence and originality, they were prepared to defy rigid Victorian etiquette and risk not only social isolation but also arrest or prosecution. Helvenston states that publicly wearing a Mother Hubbard could be far more dangerous than wearing a more socially accepted aesthetic tea-gown. Indeed, the latter «faced less public scrutiny and social censure than did Mother Hubbards. Wearing the Mother Hubbard publicly represented a more brazen attempt to resist cultural norms»²⁷².

The concept of cultural resistance is also present, as seen in the previous chapter, in Blanchard's essay on aesthetic fashion and its role in gender dynamics.²⁷³ Blanchard, referring to aesthetic fashion

²⁷¹ Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

²⁷² Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

²⁷³ Blanchard, W.M; «Boundaries and the Victorian body: Aesthetic fashion in gilded age America», *The American historical review*, Vol. 100, No. 1, Feb 1995, pp. 21-50 (30 pages)

of which Mother Hubbard was an integral part, and to women's desire to express their individuality and personality, states:

This acknowledged sense of an individual art form suggests that the adoption of the aesthetic styles was a countercultural move, a significant break from the conventional French fashion commonly associated with Victorian culture (and a counter to historians who stress the conformity and anonymity associated with nineteenth-century women's dress).²⁷⁴

A few lines later, the author mentions the Mother Hubbard as a model “reinvented” by women who followed aesthetic fashion, through whose creativity it was transformed from a home garment designed for maternity or old age, to a “revolutionary” and fashionable dress to be worn in public. A functional dress to break the barriers and prohibitions established by the social and gender rules that society wanted to impose on women.

This resistance became all the more necessary when the first legal provisions prohibiting its use appeared, and women became aware of a “double standard” towards the garment, which could only safely appear on public occasions if worn by men.²⁷⁵ So, in the same time frame, on the one hand women were asserting their autonomy by continuing to wear the garment despite the risk of being arrested, fined or harassed in the streets for it, and on the other hand men were allowed (and encouraged), through the practice of

²⁷⁴ Ibidem

²⁷⁵ Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

cross-dressing, to wear the much despised garment in order to ridicule female emancipation and to gather for parties and goliardic games. In fact, as we have seen in the course of this chapter, focusing on some particular case studies, the use of the dress by men, at first in public demonstrations of protest, then in gatherings and parties with a lighter and more playful atmosphere, was rooted in the conservative male response to women's demands for autonomy and self-determination.

The satirical portrayal of Mother Hubbard, especially through the press, is therefore relevant in reference to the political context, and useful in exploring the link between politics and gender dynamics at the end of the 19th century. As analysed, the garment played a key role in the political representation of the first female candidates for the White House. Given the garment's association with prostitution and neglect, but also with the self-determination of women who chose to wear it outside the home in defiance of the conventions of the time, the Mother Hubbard gown became the emblem of the woman who transgressed and transcended traditional gender boundaries. In fact, a woman involved in politics, becoming a protagonist in public space, was crossing what we have seen to be the spaces, concrete and abstract, thought of and associated with the feminine, namely those of the home, the family and all that was internal. If this stigma was directed at every woman who tried to make her way in professions hitherto relegated to men, such as medicine and law, particular dissent and sarcasm caused women who chose to challenge the *status quo* to the point of running for president of the United States, with the

awareness of becoming protagonists of history and opening up with their example unforeseeable paths, and hitherto unthinkable, for the women of tomorrow.

Conclusions

Through the four chapters in which this work is divided, it has been possible to observe and understand the symbolic, historical and sociological relevance of such a controversial garment as the Mother Hubbard. The thesis proceeds along a double track: that of fashion studies and gender studies. The intersection of the two semantically related disciplinary areas has given rise to a portrait that aims to reveal the other side, generally undervalued, of the female universe of the Victorian era in the United States. In other words, the rebellious and non-conformist side that did not resign itself to the *status quo* and expressed its individuality and self-determination also through "other" fashions, consistent with the freedom it demanded.

We have seen how Mother Hubbard is situated in a liminal position in an era characterised by strong mutations and great contradictions, and eludes any classification. Its history and the cultural contaminations that marked it are useful to better understand the different social and cultural stratifications of a reality such as that of the United States at the end of the 19th century. Through a deductive process that goes from the particular to the general, Mother Hubbard tells many stories of an America in which women were in search of their own identity, and of new spaces and new roles. American women of the Victorian era wanted to exist not only as mothers and wives, but as protagonists of public life and as individuals useful to the growth of the nation. Patriotism and female freedom are inextricably linked in the debate

over dress reform: women felt the urgency to define new boundaries within which to move. They wanted spaces and roles that were different from those offered by a Europe that was perceived as too distant, and they turned to all-American values such as individualism and the importance given to determination, self-denial and work. The authors of the reform texts defined themselves as tireless workers and demanded that fashion should adapt to their reality as increasingly active and independent women. They demanded an alternative fashion to the hegemonic French one, designed for inactive women whose only aim was to become the object of male pleasure, as feminist authors such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman pointed out. Working women were, in fact, the many women farmers who, in the frontier states, yet to be conquered, went to the fields or farms with the Mother Hubbard. Because of its looseness and comfort, they were finally free to move about without unnecessary hindrance.

The Mother Hubbard gown tells a story of emancipation and, at the same time, of women's everyday life. It was worn in the privacy of one's own home as well as in the streets or at parties, and, because of its practicality, it was used by children, the elderly and pregnant or sick women, by working class women, but also by sophisticated and wealthy ladies. It was also worn by prostitutes, who considered it a practical option to attract clients and quickly consummate intercourse. It was worn by women of all social classes, all ages and all parts of the country. It was chosen as an alternative to the restrictions and health hazards of traditional fashion.

Chapter II is entirely devoted to the aesthetic movement and shows how women followers of the new artistic wave adopted Mother Hubbard, albeit through revisions and variations. These women wanted a fashion that suited their natural forms and allowed them to become subjects, no longer objects, of life and art. The movement was characterised by a strong contestation of Victorian morality, and Mother Hubbard (and more generally the aesthetic dress) was one of the means by which a certain reversal of traditional gender roles was experienced.

The controversial robe was worn on the streets of many small and medium-sized towns in the frontier states. Women chose it even when its use could expose them, due to *ad hoc* laws, to the danger of heavy fines and arrests, as well as street harassment.

Mother Hubbard did not please the men, who tried everything to discourage women from wearing it: they resorted to case law, street harassment, public ridicule in the press and even the invention of anecdotes about the assumed danger of the garment.

It has been seen that in the 1880's in America, demonstrations by men wearing Mother Hubbard spread in several cities to mock female emancipation, and to oppose and ridicule one of the most liberated women in the country: the presidential candidate Belva Lockwood. The association of this woman with Mother Hubbard became so frequent and heartfelt that it became a well-known national folkloric pastime.

In those years, the situation became so paradoxical, and an indicator of a cultural and social transformation taking place, that a double standard was established: while men used to gather and

wear Mother Hubbard to mock free women, women who wore it daily on the streets risked arrest.

Perhaps the most interesting fact is to be found in the persecutory emphasis on the garment by individual men, social groups and sometimes entire cities, at the root of which one can recognise fear. That is, the fear of change, of the possible loss of a privilege and a millenary *status quo*. The fear, therefore, of the redefinition of gender roles and boundaries, and the affirmation of the rights of a “new woman”.

The Mother Hubbard gown was hated, despised and banned because it became a symbol of a reversal of the established order.

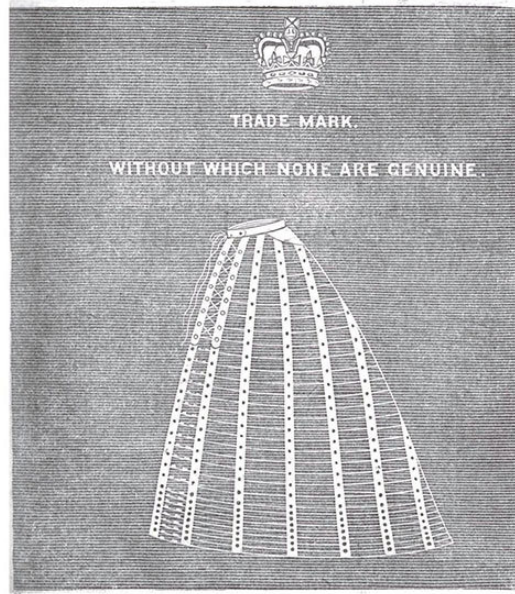
Pictures

CHAPTER I



Figure 1. Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun, *Marie & Antoinette en gaulle'* (1783). Hesse, Private Collection

DESIGNED FOR THE HOME CIRCLE.
THOMSON'S PRIZE MEDAL CRINOLINES,



Of the same quality as supplied to Ladies of the principal European Courts, are sold by the best Drapers everywhere, always stamped "Thomson," with the Crown Trade Mark, thus—



FOR THE BEST,
Ask for THOMSON'S PRIZE MEDAL CRINOLINE.
June, 1866.

Figure 2. Ad for Thomson's Crown Crinoline (1866)



Figure 3. Artist unknown (French). *Journal des Demoiselles*, August 1880. Fashion plate. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art. Source: [MMA Digital Collections](#)

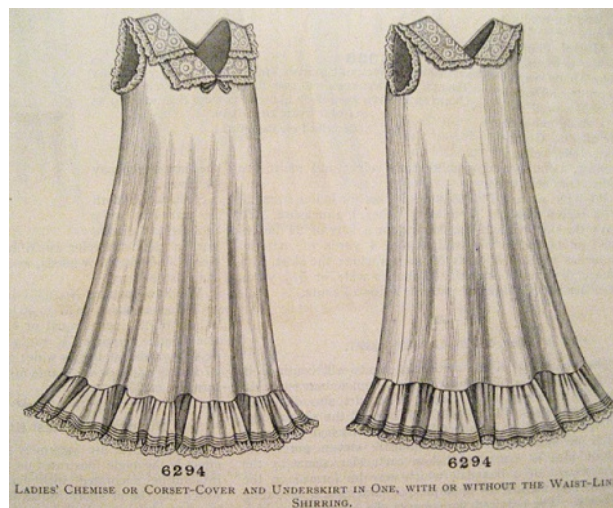


Figure 4. Chemise Pattern appeared in *The Delinator*, October 1902

WOMAN'S EMANCIPATION.
(BRING A LETTER ADDRESSED TO MR. PUNCH, WITH A DRAWING, BY A STRONG-MINDED AMERICAN WOMAN.)



Figure 5. Image from *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August, 1851, 424. Courtesy of Vassar College Library.



Figure 6. «Underwear for women» and Union Suit on The Jenness-Miller Magazine *Dress*, Vol. II, Jan-Feb, probably 1888, Page 181.
 Source: <https://witness2fashion.wordpress.com/2016/08/14/jenness-miller-rational-dress-underwear-for-women/>



Figure 7. The bones of the thorax of an elderly woman, deformed by tight-lacing practice, from the late 19th century. Thorax conserved at the Royal College of Surgeons of England. Object number: RCSPC/02066. Source: http://surgicat.rcseng.ac.uk/Details/collect/40?_ga=2.54670699.1797589702.1612448033-2033805839.1612448033

CHAPTER II



Figure 8. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882), *Roman Widow*, oil on canvas, 1874. Source Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_-_La_viuda_romana_\(D%C3%AAs_Manibus\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_-_La_viuda_romana_(D%C3%AAs_Manibus).jpg)



Figure 9. «New Tea Gowns» showing shirred Mother Hubbard style at left, 1890. From *Woman's World* 3, no. 2, January 1890, 76 (Special Collections Library, University of Michigan Library). Source: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45



Figure 10. Dress created by Alfred Mohrbutter, reminiscent of Mother Hubbard's typical width and square yoke. Source: Cunningham, A.P.; *Reforming Women's Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art*, Kent State University Press, Kent, 2003

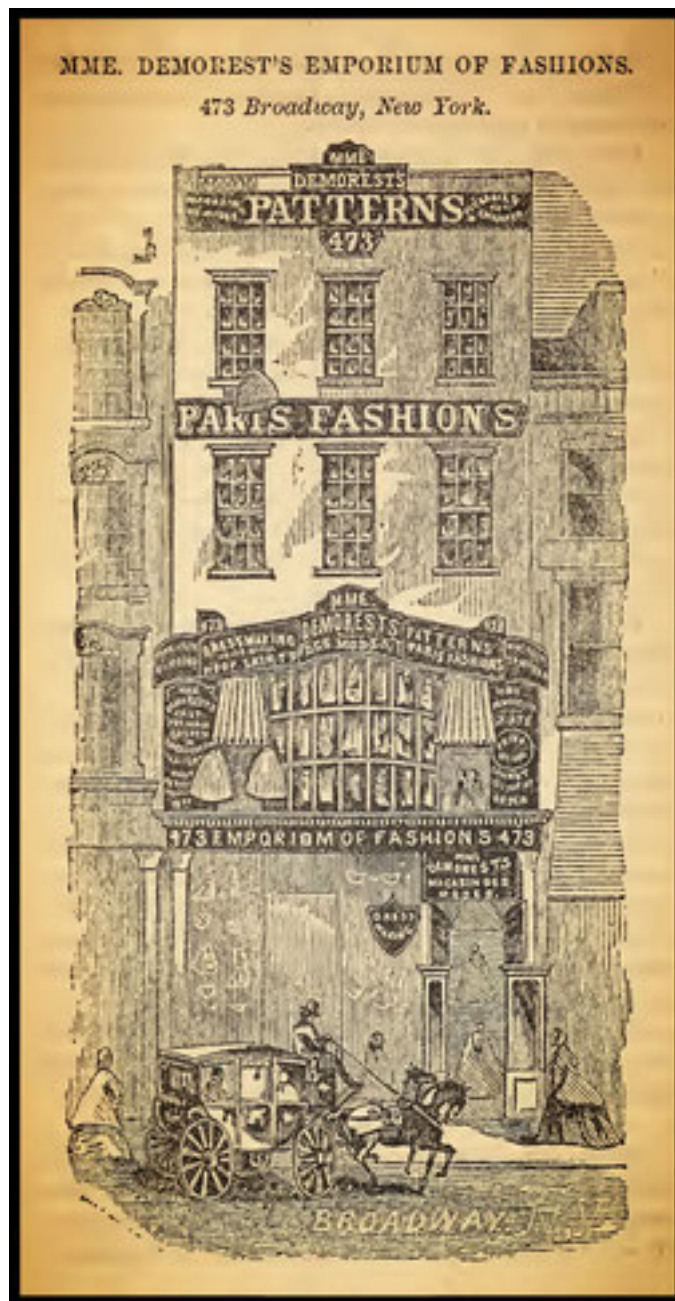


Figure 11. MME Demorets's Emporium of fashion in 473 Broadway, NY (1860)

Source: <https://www.fiddlebase.com/american-machines/demorest-sewing-machine-manufacturing-co/m-me-demorest/>

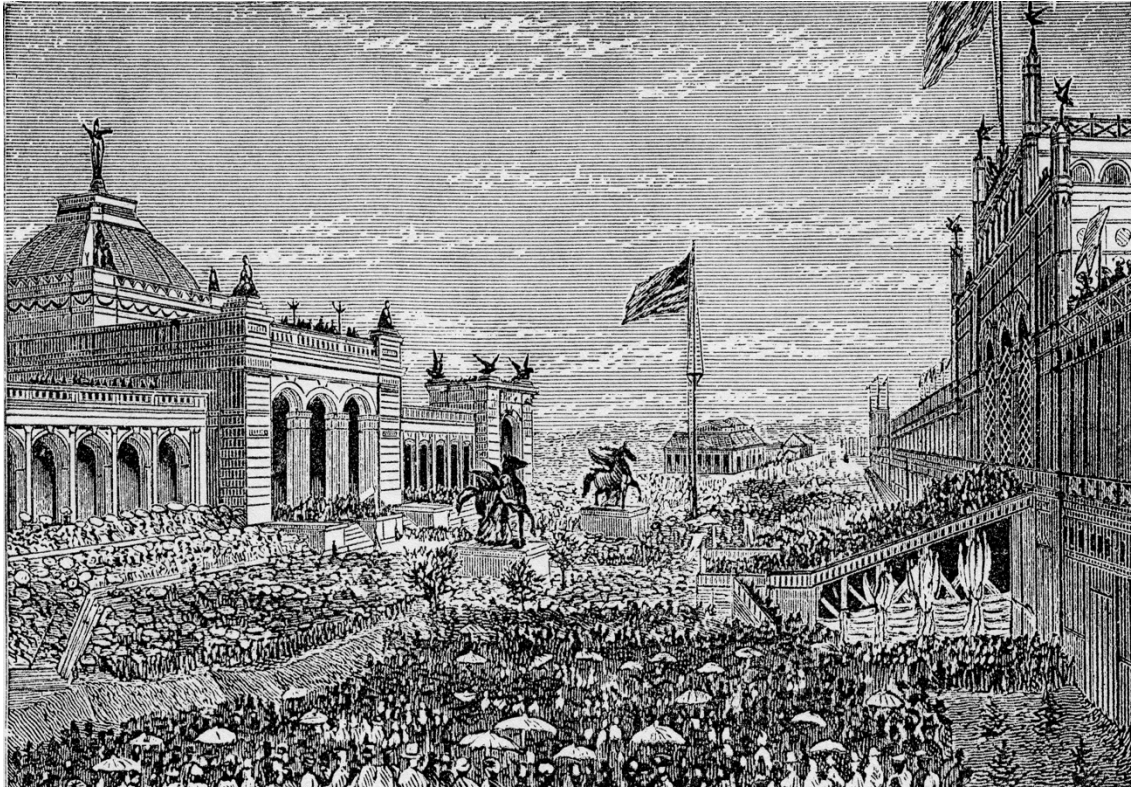


Figure 12. Opening day ceremonies at the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia, PA May 10, 1876. Engraving by James D. McCabe.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Centennial_Exhibition,_Opening_Day.jpg



Figure 13. Jenness-Miller Turkish Leglettes, or divided petticoat, Jan-Feb 1888 *Dress Magazine*, p.182. Source: <https://witness2fashion.wordpress.com/2016/08/14/jenness-miller-rational-dress-underwear-for-women/>

CHAPTER III

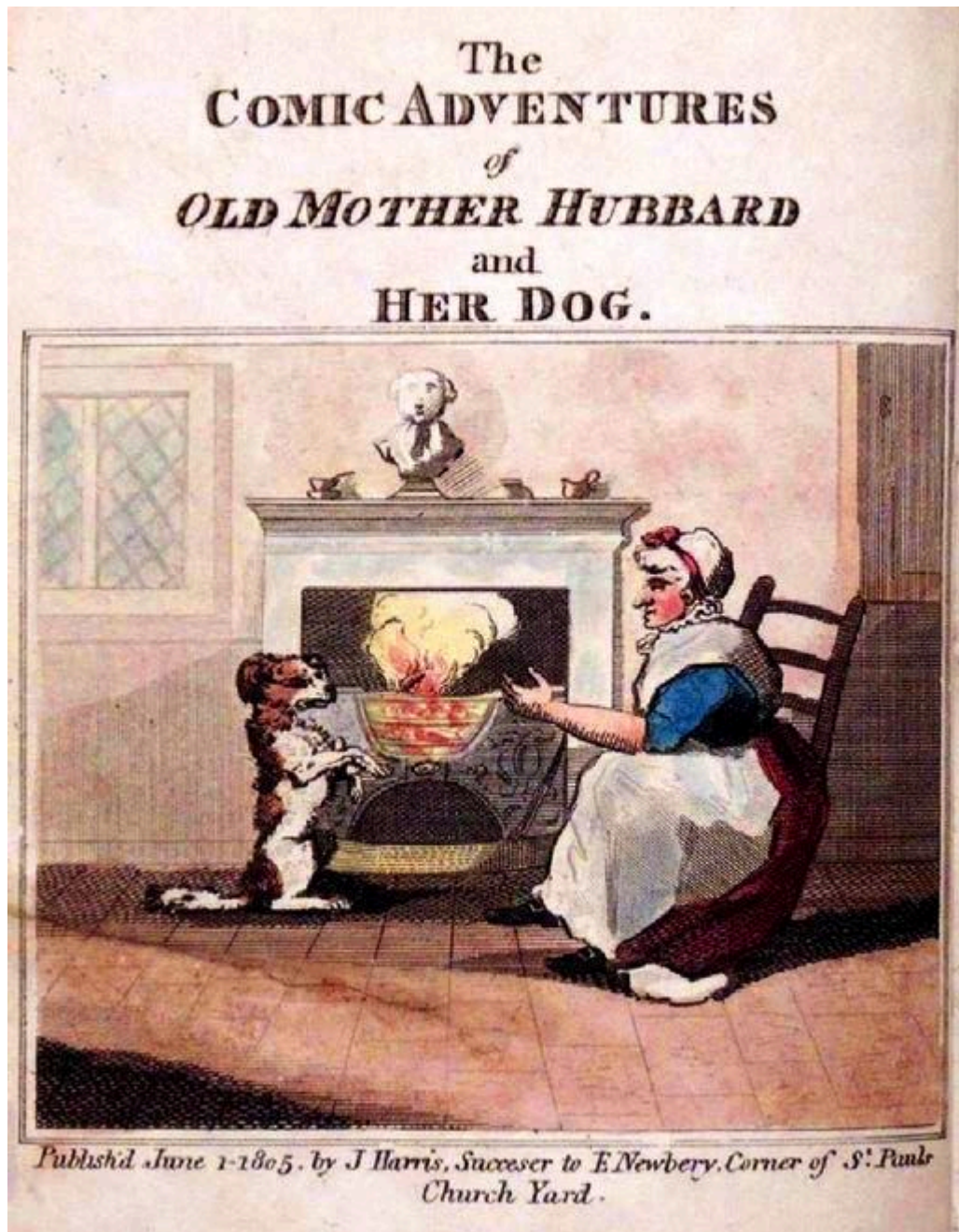


Figure 14. Title page of the first edition of (Martin, S. C), *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog*, published in 1805 by the London firm of J. Harris, 1805.

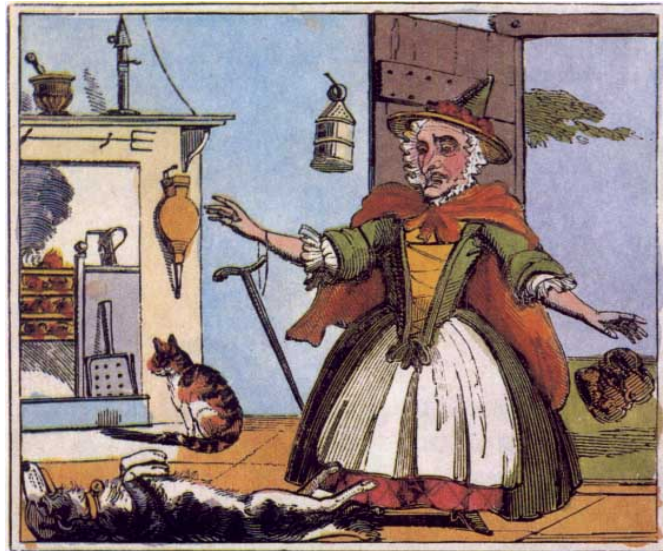


Figure 15. Cloak worn by the Mother Hubbard character in an 1819 edition of *The Comic Adventures of Old Mother Hubbard and Her Dog*. Source: https://konkykru.com/e.hubbard_1.html



Figure 16. «Mother Hubbard cloak for child from 1 to 6 years old», 1881. From *Harper's Bazar* 14, no. 24 (June 11, 1881),p. 381. State of Michigan Library. Source: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45



MOTHER HUBBARD FROCK FOR CHILD FROM
1 TO 6 YEARS OLD.—FRONT AND BACK.
CUT PATTERN, No. 3100; PRICE 15 CENTS.
For pattern and description see Supplement,
No. XII., Figs. 41-44.

Figure 17. «Mother Hubbard frock for child from 1 to 6 years old», 1881. From *Harper's Bazar* 14, no. 25 (June 18, 1881), p. 389. (State of Michigan Library). Source: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45



Figure 18. *The Bubble*, Kate Greenaway (1846-1901). Illustration for a poem of the same title, 1887 c.

Source: The Victorian web. Literature, history, & culture in the age of Victoria, Url:

<https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/greenaway/8.html>

Night Gowns.

Sizes, 13, 14, 15, 16 inches.

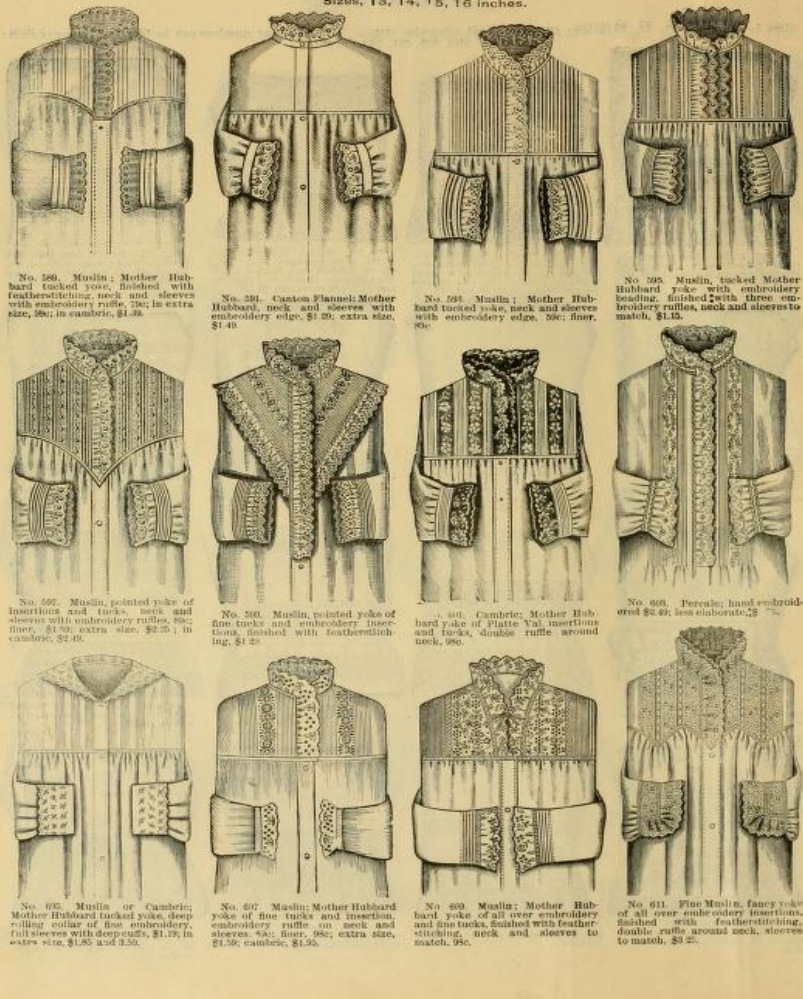


Figure 19. Examples of Mother Hubbard yokes. «Fall and Winter 1890-91»; *Fashion Catalogue*, O'Neill and company, New York, 1890; p. 180



Figure 20. Blue cotton calico Mother Hubbard dress of Elizabeth Hinterleiter Keesacker, a Virginia native who moved to St. Louis in the early 1800s. Source: Missouri History Museum



Figure 21. Mother Hubbard made of white plaid gingham, with Watteau pleats and ruffled bertha and a muslin fitted inner-bodice, 1880s. Sourced from Mills, J.B; *Calico Chronicle: Texas women and their fashions, 1830-1910*; Texas Tech University Press; Lubbock; 1985



Figure 22. Lee Moorhouse, family at Hager Cabin near Bingham Springs, Oregon, ca. 1902-19. (<https://oregondigital.org/sets/lee-moorhouse/oregondigital:df70sv803>)

Source: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45



Figure 23. P.E Larss, Larss and Duclos, Dawson City, prostitutes in Klondike City, Alaska, ca. 1899. P.E Larss Photograph Collection, Alaska State Library). Source: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45

2680

Miss
Size 12
Bust 32

Simplicity Printed Pattern 50c



Figure24. Late 1950's chemise patterns. Cut and shape reminiscent of the Mother Hubbard. Source: Pinterest

<https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/158118636892140319/>

McCALL'S® 3309



LAURA ASHLEY

Figure 25. Outfits from the 1980s proposed by *McCall's* magazine. Their style is reminiscent of some of Mother Hubbard's features.

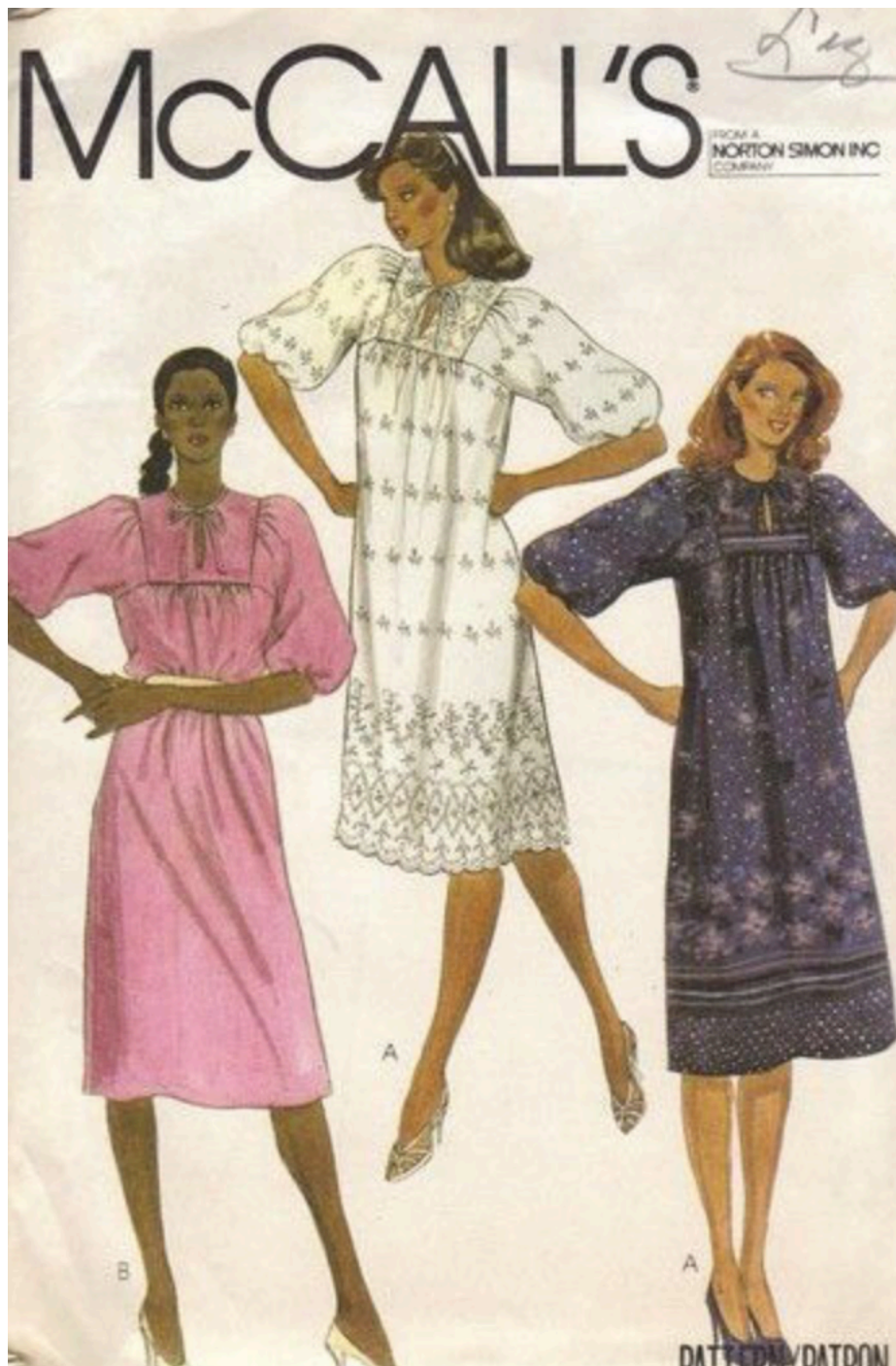


Figure 26. Outfits from the 1980s proposed by *McCall's* magazine. Their style is reminiscent of some of Mother Hubbard's features.

Chapter IV



Figure 27. Thomas Nast, «Woodhull as Satan», *Harper's Weekly* 17 Feb 1872. Source: *Women suffrage Memorabilia* (<https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/women-s-suffrage-memorabilia>).



Figure 28 . «Your Fault I Was Not Elected», *Judge*, 15 Nov. 1884: 16.
Source: Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress:
social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The
journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

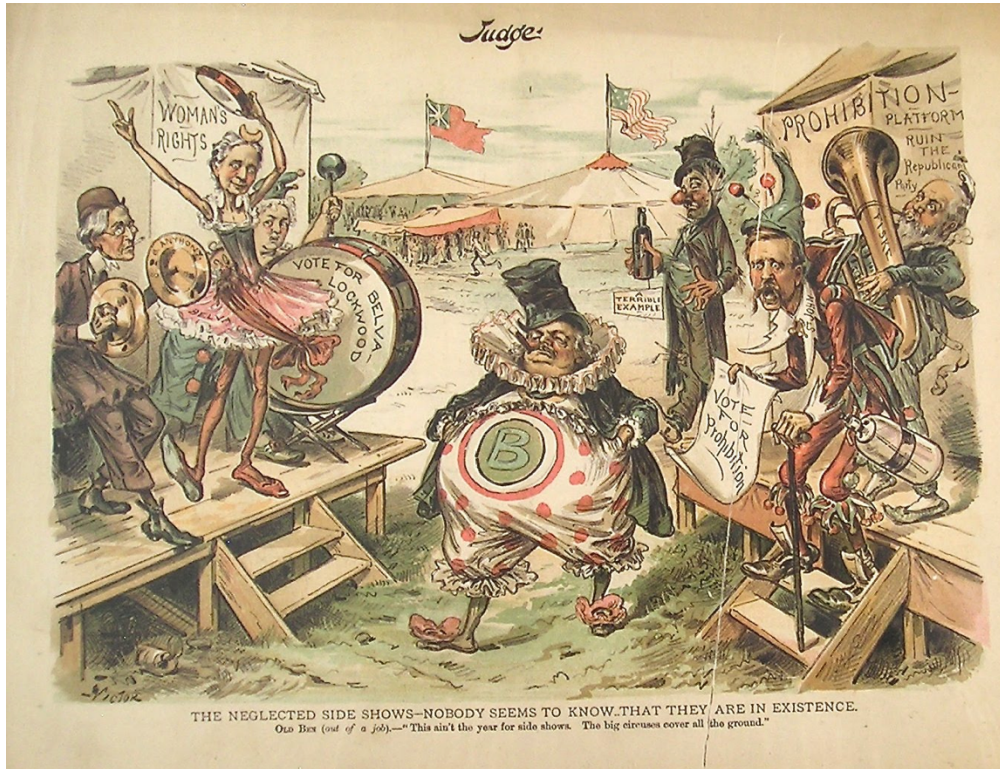


Figure 29. «Political Carnival centerfold», *Judge*, 1884. Source: «Two women presidential candidates», Google Arts&Culture (<https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/two-women-presidential-candidates/2wLC0jfkqqsJw>)



Figure. 30 «New Jersey — the humors of political campaign — Parade of the Belva Lockwood Club of the city of Rahway», *Frank Illustrated Weekly Newspaper*, November 1, 1884, 169. (Newberry Library, Chicago). Source: Helvenston Gray, S. «Searching for

Mother Hubbard: Function and Fashion in Nineteenth-Century Dress», *Winterthur Portfolio*, no. 1, Vol.48, 2014, 45



Figure. 31. «A novel election bet», *National Police Gazette*, 29 Nov. 1884, p.8. Cited in: Marks, P. «Belva Lockwood and the Mother Hubbard dress: social, moral and political overtones in the popular press», *The journal of American culture*, No 3, Vol. 39, Sept.1, 2016, 15.

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