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## Fashion as Freedom - The Bustle and Women of the Late Victorian Era

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## Fashion as Freedom - The Bustle and Women of the Late Victorian Era

### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Tom Fish to this research paper

# FASHION AS FREEDOM – THE BUSTLE AND WOMEN OF THE LATE VICTORIAN ERA

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## ABSTRACT

In contrast to the general bias of Americans, the First- and Second-Bustle periods allowed the women of the time to find freedom through changes in the Victorian fashion. The women of the 19th century were able to achieve freedom through the bustle periods between 1867 and 1889 by gaining freedom of movement more so than through any of the other fashions, first by gaining social and economic benefit through smuggling items in their bustles and finally, through being able to remove the bustle for athletic wear. This research uses primary research sources and contemporary scholarly essays to analyze how these women used fashion for their own freedom, and this research also challenges modern-day views of Victorian fashion and provides better insight for media that portrays this time-period.

**Keywords:** Dress History, Victorian Society, Women's History, Theatre Studies

## Introduction

Between their numerous petticoats, laced corsets, and cage-like bustles, modern audiences often see Victorian women as caricatures defined by their limitations. The clothes they wore and how they presented themselves are boiled down to biproducts of a patriarchal culture, and thus women of this era are not seen as fully independent human beings. By contemporary standards, late Victorian women's garments are found to be drastically overexaggerated, medical hazards, and symbols of their lack of freedom. We see this frequently portrayed in media, a prime example being the ever-popular scene of the young ingénue being tight laced into a corset, seen in classics such as *Gone with the Wind* and modern action/adventures like *Pirates of the Caribbean*. The actresses in these movies frequently discuss the "perils" of wearing historical garments in interviews for

magazines and talk shows as evident from popular articles like *Harper's Bazaar's* "10 Hollywood Actresses on the Torment of Wearing a Corset" (Gordon). The comments made by these actresses helps enforce the concept that Victorian women must have felt the same restrictions and discomfort. In this research, I hope to alter some of those general assumptions so we can begin to see the women of the late Victorian Era as fully developed people, and not two-dimensional figures defined solely by their restrictions. Through analysis of undergarments of the third quarter of the nineteenth century in the northeastern United States, this paper will show how these women had a level of autonomy rarely acknowledged.

My research focuses on the bustle, a wire-frame undergarment meant to accentuate the posterior, worn intermittently between the late 1860s and the 1880s. Although it may seem counterintuitive, the

fashions of the Victorian Era that are the most exaggerated and cumbersome are in fact the least confining. The fashions of the Bustle Period (Tortora and Marcketti 384) were liberating compared to the styles that preceded and followed it. These fashions mirrored the struggle for women's independence and were an avenue for women to pursue their independence and increase their autonomy. Focusing on the northeastern United States, this paper illustrates how women in the late nineteenth century began to claim freedom throughout society with the fashions of the First and Second Bustle Periods. Their newfound liberty was reflected by their daily wear, participation in athletics, and the curious art of smuggling.

### **Fashion and Support Garments of the Late Victorian Era**

The trends of the late Victorian Era stemmed from the ever-popular fashions of France that were the center of the fashion world. A second major influence on the fashions of the Late Victorian Era was the rise of lady's magazines, including *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Harper's Bazar*, which published the latest trends and styles. Fashion plates in these magazines frequently copied or revised French fashions for their US audience, which were then adapted into dresses (Johnson 9). Women's clothing in the latter half of the nineteenth century was characterized by a series of skirt fashions that defined the styles of the era. All of these fashions were supported by a variety of undergarments that gave the proper silhouettes to the skirt. Extant examples from museums across the world, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) and the Victoria & Albert Museum as well as the captioned fashion plates in magazines of the time like *Godey's Ladies Book* and *Harper's Bazaar*, provide a base knowledge of the materials used to make these garments and what they looked like.

The first of these silhouette enhancing undergarments was a cage-like skirt that surrounded the women's lower body. It was made of a series of steel, reed, or whale bone strips that were shaped to support the fashionable silhouette of the time. The strips were connected by cloth tapes that attached to a waistband (Fig. 1).



Figure 1, a Crinoline from 1860

This was called the crinoline, hooped skirts, hoops, or cage crinoline. Although the cages were made to be flexible to fit through doorways and tight spaces, it still required some effort by the wearer. The bustle or *tournure* was the undergarment that joined and then followed the crinoline. It was made in a variety of ways, from padded cloth bum rolls to steel framing (Figs. 2 & 3), but its goal was to provide extra support to create the fashionable bump at the back.



Figure 2, a Bustle from about 1875-78



Figure 3, a Bustle from the 1880s

These two undergarments, the bustle and the crinoline, could be worn in conjunction or separately depending on the desired silhouette (Fig. 4).



Figure 4, A Crinoline with Hoops in the back to Form a Bustle from 1869

Therefore, even though we might call a fashion part of the ‘Bustle Era,’ it could be worn with both a crinoline and a bustle depending on the kind of support the skirt needed. As the bustle came into fashion, the crinolines became narrower on the sides continuing to accentuate the rear while limiting the volume around the front and sides of ladies’ skirts. This made the fashions easier to negotiate in crowded areas and narrow spaces.

The styles that dominated the years around 1855-1868 are grouped together by fashion historians today as the Crinoline Style or Era (Tortora and Marcketti 356). These styles included wide skirts that encircled the entire body (Fig. 5) that transitioned to a more elliptical shape during the 1860s (Fig. 6).



Figure 5, Fashion Plate from 1859



Figure 6, Fashion Plate from 1865

During the 1860s, the first major fashion designer, Charles Frederick Worth, rose in popularity, becoming the favorite dressmaker of Empress Eugenie, the wife of the French emperor Napoleon III. Together, the Empress and Worth established the major fashion trends of the decade until the end of France’s Second Empire with the Franco-Prussian War (Blum 3; Johnson 6-8). Worth became a major influence for the changing skirt shapes, pushing for the elliptical skirt rather than the full, rounded, bell style which kept women surrounded on all sides. Even with the modifications made by Worth in the 1860s, the styles of the Crinoline Era were some of the most exaggerated trends of the century and were often criticized for being cumbersome and difficult to maneuver in (Johnson 13-14).

By 1868, all the volume in the skirt had become gathered to the back, accentuating the bum in what is called the Early Bustle Period which lasted until approximately 1874 (Johnson 14) (Fig. 7).



Figure 7, Fashion Plate from 1873

Originated by Worth, this silhouette was more conducive to ladies’ movement, with less negotiating required to move around in crowds or narrow spaces. In this period, and on through the end of the 1880s, extravagant decoration became standard for upper- and middle-class ladies and served as a form of

class distinction. With the rise of the industrial revolution, ready-made garments were becoming popular among lower-class women, allowing them to achieve the latest silhouettes for cheaper prices. These ready-made items were relatively undecorated, being made in bulk, and thus women of upper classes began heavily decorating their own garments to accentuate high-class status (Johnson 16-17; Tortora and Marcketti 386-387). Another significant influence on the styles of this time was theatre. With the fall of the Second Empire in France and Empress Eugenie along with it, women turned to the theatre for clothing inspiration (Blum 3). This led to a trend for historically-inspired gowns such as the “Dolly Varden,” named after a character in Charles Dickens’ newest book, set in the 1700s, and the “polonaise,” which was based on the skirt style from the 18<sup>th</sup> century of the same name (Blum 3; Johnson 20). The trends seen in this period continued on as skirt volume became narrower following the natural shift from the large skirts of the 1860s to the slightly smaller skirts of the early 70s and finally to the hip hugging styles seen after.

Around 1875, the bustle fell out of fashion, and the skirt tightly hugged the hips, fell straight at the front, and swept out in a long train at the back (Fig. 8).



Figure 8, Fashion Plate from 1878

This period is referred to as the Natural Form Era due to the popular claim of the time that the fashions highlighted the natural shape/form of the body and was a popular style from 1875-1882 (Blum 77). While this fashion eliminated the caged support garments, the tight skirts introduced a new restriction as it clung to the hips and thighs, making leg movements more difficult. The fashion also maintained the weight of the other skirts without having the support garments to distribute it. In a continuation of the trends of early periods, actresses began to be clothed by the most famous designers of the period, including Worth. Lillie Langtry became one of the most popular trend setters after rising in popularity on the stage and as the mistress of the Prince of Wales and future King Edward VII (Johnson 26-27). In this period, we also see increased call for dress reform. Several art and medical movements claim the dangers of these tight and restrictive fashions which hindered women’s movement (Johnson 23-26). While these more extreme movements never seemed to be adopted by the general population, by the early 1880s, we do see another shift in dress.

Around 1883, possibly due to the limited mobility available in Natural Form dresses, the bustle was back, this time creating an almost 90-degree angle at the bum rather than a long slope down as was popular in the early 1870s (Fig. 9).



Figure 9, Fashion Plate from 1885

This is known as the Second Bustle Period which extended from 1883 to the end of the decade (Blum 149). During this era, well-tailored bodices became particularly popular, and men's fashion had a strong influence on women's dress. The "tailor-made suit" was first introduced in this period by designer Jacques Doucet and was a prime example of this influence. The popularity of these masculine styles may be attributed to women's changing roles within society as more and more women joined the work force and expanded their influence beyond the home. As they entered these new social spheres, they adopted some of the trends of the men already present in order to fit in or conform (Johnson 31-33). While these are the broad shifts in styles over this 40-year period, a deeper look into the fashions of the two bustle periods provide specific examples of the freedoms women exerted in their expanding social spheres.

### Fashion as Freedom

**Women Go to Work.** Compared to the surrounding fashions of the Crinoline and Natural Form, the daily wear of the First- and Second-Bustle Periods were significantly more freeing. The bustled dress was first brought into vogue by the renowned fashion house of Charles Worth in the late 1860s (Johnson 31). Originally created by a man, this fashion quickly became beloved by the women of the era. The Crinoline fashion could be very cumbersome, although the cages were flexible and did bend as needed, manipulation of the skirt was still required to walk through doorways or move through crowds. These issues were so prevalent that the fashion was heavily satirized in its own time. "Dressing for the Ball in 1857," a comedic drawing by John Leech originally published in *Punch's Pocket Books*, shows a stiff crinoline being placed cage-like over the wearer, who is surrounded by three helpers,

as she is unable to put the undergarment on by herself (Fig. 10).



Figure 10, *Dressing for the Ball in 1857*

Unlike the crinoline that came before it, the silhouette of the bustle dress was more compact, with its volume centralized to the back of the skirt. The new narrower sides and front were a major improvement when it came to the issue of maneuvering through space. Although by today's standards the bustle fashion might be viewed as more restrictive to the women of the time, it was actually simpler compared to the prior fashion.

Despite the popularity of the style in the mid-1870s, there was a distinct shift in fashion away from the bustle. Around 1876, the bustle seemed to disappear, and skirts became tightfitting around the hips and down their length with only a small flare at the bottom. Although the removal of the bustle might seem freeing, the women and fashion magazines of New York seemed staunchly against the idea. Their argument was that the bustle helped distribute the weight of the skirts, which could be extremely heavy, and kept that weight from being borne directly by the waist and lower back. In *Godey's Lady's Book* one woman wrote,

"What has saved women from the martyrdom of the heavy weight which they formerly carried about upon their

hips [...] Hooped Skirts!” (“Fashion and Crinoline” 277).

The new ‘natural form’ fashion kept all the elaborate decoration and fabric arrangements which created the weight, while removing the object that helped distribute that weight in a comfortable fashion. These women also argued that some amount of caging to support the skirt allowed for ease of walking. With a bustle or crinoline, the hem of the skirt, which reached to the ground, was kept away from the feet, making it less likely that a woman would trip. It is even noted in the *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* that “there are those whose business or inclination induces them to walk much, who insist, and very rationally, that they cannot do without the hoop-skirt” (“The Fashions: Crinoline and Bustles” 4). Undergarments such as the bustle and crinoline were worn by all classes of women, and the tight skirt of the Natural Form Era restricted the freedom of movement for those who had to do work around the house or in the office. While we may think these fashions were only the whim of the rich, the bustle helped women of the lower-class maneuver throughout their daily lives. The Natural Form Era received so much push back that in the mid-1880s the bustle reappeared.

The return of the bustle coincided with a major shift in women’s employment. In the late Victorian Era, there was a sudden wave of young women who were deciding to stay unmarried and work instead. This group of women was typified by the image of the New Woman, who was a symbol and a warning of women’s push for independence (Cruea 198). She asserted herself and sought power and that was reflected in the clothes of the era. The New Woman’s expansion into areas usually reserved for men was shown in the fashions of the Second Bustle Period. The tailored suit of the time was directly

borrowed from men’s fashion and helped these new working women integrate into their new societal position. The fashion of the bustle, versus the previous and surrounding fashion of the Crinoline and Natural Form silhouettes, also awarded some benefit as women maneuvered around workspaces. New jobs in the quickly expanding Industrial Revolution provided opportunities for employment, like working as a secretary. Nursing also became a popular occupation, and the narrow sides of the bustle skirt allowed these women to maneuver through both the cots in a hospital and the desks and machines of a factory office (Cruea 200). Women needed the freedom of movement these bustles allowed to get their new jobs done.

In both the First- and Second-Bustle Periods, we see the fashions and silhouettes as a push back to the styles that preceded them. In the Early Bustle Period, the fashions are a direct response to the exaggerated style of the crinoline era. In the Second Bustle Period, it is a response to the other end of the spectrum, to the tight, limiting fashions of the Natural Form. It is also a signifier of women’s expanding freedoms which she struggles to grow in a patriarchal world.

***The Age of the Athletic Woman.*** Beyond everyday fashions, women sought freedom in their athletic wear. Toward the end of Second Bustle Era, there was a surge in the popularity of sports for women. This was due to two major factors, the increase in schools for young women and the rise of the middle class. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, we see a rise in women’s education with the opening of new schools for girls and a more standardized education system partially due to the large increase in cities during the industrial revolution. As new ways of teaching and learning were being explored most schools were outfitted with some sort of physical education program. This allowed



young girls to participate in athletic activity in a way they were never exposed to before. As these girls grew into women, they carried their newfound love of exercise into their adult life therefore leading to an increase in woman participating in sports (Kiersnowska 91; Parratt 142-143). We also see the rise of female sports tied to the rise of the middle class with the industrial revolution. Here the middle-class idea of leisure led to the idea of increased sporting activity in general, and thus women's activity with it (McCrone, "Playing" 11). This exploration into the realm of sports led to a new freedom in fashion that women had been unable to explore. In *Godey's Lady's Book*, a popular women's magazine of the time, an article entitled "The Athletic Age" expounds on how this new age is one for the "Amazon type," referring to the powerful women warriors of ancient myth. This new type of woman is one who engages in a wide variety of athletic activity (Bon Ton 204). Like the expansion of women into the work force, the New Woman encompassed athletic women who were competitive and energetic (Collins 310). As the tailor-made suit became her uniform in the working world, new and scandalous athletic outfits became her go-to outfit in leisure. Sports like tennis, hiking, fencing, archery, and cycling (a new and intriguing invention) were being explored by women, and with that came an exploration of new fashions.

As the desire for these sports grew, so did the desire to expand on the proper and liberating costume. At the beginning of this "Athletic Age," sporting costumes usually mimicked the popular silhouette of the time but were made with more durable fabric and less ruffles and trimmings (Fig. 11).



Figure 11, a Women's Tennis Dress, 1885

Although fitting with the current fashions, these costumes were not conducive to intense physical activity, and there was soon a new call for fashion reform. In an 1881 article in *Harper's Bazaar*, Major Wingfield, the inventor of modern lawn tennis (Kronenberger 11), writes in to give his thoughts on the matter. He explains that he recently played a game of lawn tennis with a woman whose speed and agility should have allowed her to beat his own skill. However, he solidly defeated her. After musing on the matter, he discovered that the issue was that the young woman was not dressed for tennis, and he was. He then proceeds to describe several different outfits a woman could wear that would allow for ease of movement in tennis, one of which was the split skirt (Fig. 12), the precursor to pants for women (630).



Figure 12, a cycling suit including a split skirt 1896-98

None of the fashions he describes would accommodate a bustle.

As we proceed further into this trend of women athletics, we see these changes being emphasized. Here in the Bustle Period women continue to use clothing to expand on and highlight their burgeoning freedoms, in this instance through athletics. In *Godey's Lady's Book* in 1887, there is an article written by an anonymous lady tennis player entitled "Tennis Dress." In it, we are given a full description of a proper tennis outfit, including a "pair of short riding corsets" and all other necessary undergarments; however, this detailed description does not include a bustle (A Lady Tennis Player 403). A year later, Charles Richards Dodge writes a series of articles entitled "Out-Door Athletics for American Women" for the same publication, with each installment describing an athletic outlet for women. In his article on tricycling, Dodge describes the type of dress that should be worn when cycling and explicitly states "there is no bustle" (210). In 1889, the article "Mask and Foil for Ladies" was published in *Outing*, again promoting the split skirt as appropriate apparel for women's athletics, namely fencing (Clay 23).

As women began to push into the new realm of athletics, they discovered ways to push the boundaries of acceptable fashions. Although a standard undergarment of the time, the bustle seems to be absent in these many descriptions of athletic wear. While the bustle had merit in daily wear due to its relationship with the popular fashions preceding it, athletics were a new realm where pre-established boundaries in dress did not exist. The bustle serves little purpose in this new space where skirt hems are higher and heavy decoration are gone, thus negating the benefits it provided in daily wear. But beyond modifying the existing fashions, athletics was an experimental and exciting space where limits could be pushed, and a

new costume could be created. Therefore, the New Woman made for herself a costume of freedom, the split skirt, which became a symbol for her fight for liberation in all other areas (Collins 310). While the fashions of women's athletic wear emerged in the Bustle Period, the athletic wear's lack of a bustle is the indication of women's expanding freedoms of the time.

**"Smuggled in the Bustle."** Along with daily wear and athletics, one unique realm in which the bustle provided liberation was in criminality and smuggling. During this period, there was a surge of women smuggling goods into New York ports by concealing them in their bustles. These cases were documented frequently by *The New York Times* and other newspapers and occurred so often that the New York custom house started hiring women 'inspectresses' to assist in identifying women smugglers ("The Women Who Smuggle" 18). Often the women who were caught smuggling were milliners and dressmakers trying to bring in fashionable European goods for their wealthy customers (Abdul-Jabbar).

Some cases went to the extreme, smuggling in thousands of dollars' worth of goods.



Figure 13, Satirized depiction of Crinoline Smuggling

One *New York Times* article documented the case of Mrs. Rose Ludvigh, a dressmaker, who was able to smuggle into New York \$10,000 worth of luxurious garments made by the famed fashion house of Charles Worth. She posed as the maid to ‘actress’ Miss Bessie Montour and was able to get copious amounts of clothing passed off as her own, without paying duties because “Miss Bessie was an actress.” Actresses of the time were assumed to need many fine garments for performance and mingling with the upper-class. A few weeks later, Collector Magone was notified that the 13<sup>th</sup> Street dressmaker, Mrs. Rose Ludvigh, was selling Worth dresses that had been smuggled into the country. In the end, several items were confiscated from the homes of both Mrs. Ludvigh and Miss Montour, but by that point several of the smuggled dresses had been sold to women of New York high society (“Smuggling Worth’s Dresses” 8).

This was just one of many documented cases pertaining to the smuggling habits of women coming into America. These incidents of ‘bustle smuggling’ were so well known that when bustles started to go out of fashion, the *New York Times* wrote an article titled “Smuggling Craft,” stating:

Ignorant people fancy that this [lack of smuggling] is due to the energy with which our revenue officers fulfill their duties, but the officers themselves know better. Smuggling decreased just as soon as tight skirts came into fashion, and the rumor that crinoline is to be revived has filled the revenue service with uneasiness and honest importers with alarm. (4)

On both ends of this epidemic of smuggling, one could argue that women benefitted. During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were very few jobs available for women, usually something relating to housework: laundry, sewing, cleaning, or teaching (Cruea 15). This phenomenon of women smuggling items in their bustle created a new job for women, detecting and detaining the women who were smuggling. By 1888, there were twenty women hired as inspectresses for the New York custom house, with half of the inspectresses being unmarried (“The Women Who Smuggle” 18). These new positions provided a source of economic freedom that women were just starting to obtain in this era (Cruea 15).

Freedom was also gained by the women who were doing the smuggling. These women were employed, working class women seeking to better their business and their clientele by bringing in heavily taxed foreign goods. Unlike most working-class women, they were respected by the upper class because they worked closely with them (Abdul-Jabbar). These women were in a unique position of independence for women of the time, owning and running their own businesses and having economic freedom. Their smuggling was a business venture — however illegal—and the fashion of the bustle assisted in maintaining their economic freedom.

## Conclusion

During its time, the bustle was a step toward freedom. As women began seeking liberation in a variety of areas, their clothes began to reflect their newfound advances. Compared to the surrounding fashions, the Bustle Periods provided previously unexperienced liberty. Through daily wear that made movement easier, reforms in athletic wear, and even through smuggling, women found ways to make the bustle work for them. However, the modern world does

not think of it that way. We view these dresses in comparison to female fashion today, but the women wearing them viewed them relative to the fashions of the past. Society has cultivated an idea of the restricted Victorian woman: She faints because her corset is too tight, she cannot sit or stand without help, and she is incapable of independence. This was far from the truth; with these clothes, including the bustles, they not only lived their daily lives but went out and pursued new liberties.

Not only does this argument look to shift cultural assumptions, it also offers a way for theatrical directors, actresses, costume designers, and audiences to rethink their understanding of canonical Victorian plays. This can provide unique insights regarding the social and physical constraints of women, an issue central to so many of the first Modern dramas, from August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* to Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. By understanding how these women felt about and achieved freedom through their clothes, we can begin to depict them in a more accurate light. We can stop relying on these stereotypes of incapable women and portray them as confident, comfortable, and creating the foundations of the freedoms we have today.

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