

## Attitudes to the Bloomer in the 1850s

'The Bloomer Costume', *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, 15 October 1851, pp. 280–1.

Harry Abrahams, *I Want to be a Bloomer* (1851).

Edward Stirling, *A Figure of Fun, or, the Bloomer Costume, an Original Farce in One Act* (London: Fairbrother, 1851).

James Bruton, *The Bloomer Costume or Tunics, Turbans and Trousers* (1852).

Great Tom of Oxford, *I Would Not Have a Bloomer* (c. 1851).

E. Hodges, *I'll be a Bloomer* (c. 1851).

The costume advocated by Amelia Bloomer was cautiously welcomed by British critics, like the anonymous author of the *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* article, who conceded the insanitary effects of long fashionable skirts. The writer also pointed out that the lack of judgement shown by female fashion victims was used to demonstrate female frivolousness, a point that informed the practices of suffrage advocates (see pp. 417–25). However the writer admitted that popular mockery of 'Bloomers' would make wearing them a form of martyrdom.

Popular attitudes, from approbation to ribald mockery, can be seen in this selection of songs and a play, all of which were copyrighted at Stationers' Hall as commercially valuable. *I want to be a Bloomer* was sung by Rebecca Isaacs (1828–77) a performer of popular and classical music who in the 1840s had covered the repertoire of Jenny Lind, notably the role of Marie in Donizetti's *Daughter of the Regiment*.<sup>1</sup> Miss Isaacs's success in this role of a 'vivandière' (female army cook), with its costume of a short dress and trousers, had been recorded in a costumed photograph and coloured print.<sup>2</sup> The composer of *I Want to be a Bloomer*, William Henry Montgomery, had previously published an arrangement of tunes from *Daughter*, so it is likely that his association with Isaacs, and the idea for the song grew out of work on the opera.<sup>3</sup> Both the language and the melody of the song are decorous, and it seems to have been intended for performance by middle-class women; it was arranged as an instrumental fantasia for the piano by Henri Wilhelm in 1852.

The other songs are for very different audiences; *The Bloomer Costume, or Tunics, Turbans and Trousers* by James Bruton ridicules the arguments of dress reformers by associating them with a raucous chorus, and humorous rhymes.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the illustration on the sheet music shows the Bloomer costume worn not by a woman but by a man in drag, possibly Bruton himself. The colloquial language and chorus-based structure of *I'll be a Bloomer* suggest that it was intended for male singers and informal gatherings. This song was issued first in an expensive edition with a coloured image of Mrs Bloomer on the cover, and then in a cheaper version.<sup>5</sup> The author of *I Would Not Have a Bloomer* is anonymous, with a pseudonym taken from the curfew bell that is rung every night at Christchurch College. Its music is by William Henry West, a popular actor who was also a prolific composer of songs in genres ranging from sacred ballads to Kentucky 'minstrel' numbers.<sup>6</sup> This piece covers some of the same objections as *I'll be a Bloomer*, but couched in more middle-class terms.

In *A Figure of Fun*, the servant heroine fears loss of her reputation, her job and her romance when it is known that she has worn the bloomer suit. This comic skit played in the Strand Theatre during October 1851,<sup>7</sup> written by a playwright who adapted many of Dickens's novels for the stage, and composed pieces on topical themes.

#### NOTES:

1. Two volumes of songs from *La Figlia del Reggimento* on sale in 1850 stated on the cover: 'Sung in Italian by Miss Jenny Lind, Sung in English by Miss Rebecca Isaacs'; Bodleian Library John Johnson Collection, Music Titles 5 (20) and 5 (22).
2. Print by Thomas Harrington Wilson, 1850, National Portrait Gallery London NPG D8692; photograph by John Lacy & Co., undated, Victoria & Albert Museum S.138:397–2007.
3. There were 477 works written or composed by Montgomery published between 1843 and 1907.
4. Bruton was a comic singer and writer whose other published works include the topical songs 'Polkomania' (1845), 'Railway Mania' (1846), 'The Comic Theatrical Alphabet' (1845) and 'Father Matthew or Water Waggeries' (1849). He also wrote the farces: *Bathing* (1842); *Cut for Partners* (1845) and *All in Hot Water* (1858) which were published in several editions.
5. Information from Newton, *Health Art and Reason*, pp. 4–5, which also reprints part of the song.
6. There are 244 works by West registered in the British Library between 1819 and 1877.
7. Details from a surviving playbill, London Playbills 10 (43), John Johnson Collection, The Bodleian Library.

## The Bloomer Costume.

SEVERAL spirited ladies of the United States have made their appearance at the head of a movement for the reform of the female dress. A Mrs Bloomer of New York is the literary advocate of the party, and from her it seems likely to take an appellation. Other ladies have begun to act as apostles of the cause, not merely by writing and lecturing, but by exemplifying the new costume on their own persons, appearing as a sign to the people, to use the phrase of Robert Barclay<sup>1</sup> of famous memory, when he walked into the streets of Aberdeen without any dress at all

The Bloomer reformation has not been well received in this country. By association and otherwise, it excites too much merriment to be held in much respect. Accordingly, some of the apostles have been treated in a manner rather martyrly.<sup>2</sup> This is all very natural. First, there is a great standing absurdity which provokes the wrath of all rational minds. Some one starts off in a crusade against it, and goes to the opposite extreme. The public, tolerant of the first error from habit, hoots the second because it is new, failing to observe the good which is at the bottom of it. So it is that our people see women every day defying common sense and good taste by the length of their skirts, and say little about it, but no sooner observe one or two examples of a dress verging a little too far in an opposite direction, than they raise the shout of a permeating ridicule. We say there may be some little extravagance in the Bloomer idea, but it is common sense itself in comparison with the monstrous error and evil which it seeks to correct.

That some reform is wanted all the male part of creation agree. Many of the ladies, too, admit the inconvenience of the long skirts which have been for some years in fashion, though they profess to be unable to break through the rule. Why should not some compromise be entered into? In order to avoid trailing through mud and dust, it is not necessary to dock petticoats and frocks by the knee, or to assume a masculinity in other parts of the attire. Neither is it necessary to connect a rational length of skirt with certain unhappy foolish notions about equal privileges of the sexes, which seems to be one of the mistakes made by the Bloomer party in America.<sup>3</sup> Let there simply be a reduction of the present nuisance, an abbreviation of those trolloping<sup>4</sup> skirts by which even a man walking beside the wearer is not unfrequently defiled. When the hem of the garment

is on the level of the ankle, which once was the case, it answers all the purposes of decorum, and is sufficiently cleanly. A return to that fashion would do away with all objection. Or if one or two inches more be taken off, and the void filled by such trousers as are generally worn by young girls,<sup>5</sup> it might be as well, or better. Such changes might be brought about with little fracas, like any of the ordinary changes of fashion.

If the question is between the present skirts and Bloomerism, then we are Bloomerites; for we would rather consent to error in the right direction than the wrong one.

We have alluded to fashion and its slavery. It is a curious subject, not unworthy of even a philosophic attention. In the late wondrous exhibition<sup>6</sup> of the industrial arts of the civilised world, how many admirable devices were presented for articles of utility and ornament! What an idea did it in its general effect give of the amount of ingenious intellect exercised on such matters! Yet we never see any of the same taste and ingenuity exercised in the fashioning of clothes. Milliners and tailors appear to be the most brainless of / all professions. We scarcely remember to have ever seen a new fashion proceed from them which accorded with true elegance, and which did not tend to deform rather than adorn the human person. At present they make a woman into a bell-shaped object, painful from the sense of its incompleteness – feet being wanting.<sup>7</sup> Always some absurdity reigns conspicuous in their models of form. Each of them will tell you: We cannot help it – it is the fashion. But whence comes the fashion, if not from some of their own empty heads? And how is it that no one of them can help it, but that no one of them has the sense or spirit to devise, set forth, and promote anything better? The tailors are better than the milliners, and do not in general misdress mankind to such an extent as to call for a particular effort of resistance: but the women are treated by their dressmakers in a way which would call for and justify a rebellion. A friend of ours goes so far as to say that the one thing above all which convinces him of the inferiority of the female mind generally to the male, is the submission which women shew to every foolish fashion which is dictated to them, and that helplessness which they profess under its most torturing and tyrannical rules. We would at least say that, if there is folly in a fantastic dissent – such as that of Mrs Bloomer and her friends – there is a far greater self-condemnation of the judgment in adherence to an absurdity which involves filthiness as well as inelegance, like the present long skirts.<sup>8</sup>

I want to be a Bloomer – sung by Miss Rebecca Isaacs,  
poetry by Harry Abrahams,  
music by W H Montgomery 1851

pub d'Almaine & Co, 20 Soho Square, where may be had 'The  
Bloomer Quadrilles' 'Bloomer Polka' and 'Bloomer Schottische'<sup>1</sup>

My hear is very sad Mother,  
I'm weary of my life  
For Mother I'm now eighteen,  
And yet I'm not a wife  
I cannot sleep by night Mother,  
I cannot rest by day  
{For I want to be a Bloomer!  
Let me be a Bloomer, pray (rep)} /

I know I should look quite divine  
In that dear Bloomer dress  
My feet you know are very small  
They could not well be less  
And with those ducks<sup>2</sup> of Trowsers  
And Paletot so gay  
Oh! I should look quite enchanting  
Let me be a Bloomer, pray! (rep) /

I'm sure the girls will all go mad  
Whene'er my dress they see  
For when in the streets I'm walking  
All their beaux<sup>3</sup> will gaze on me  
And then I shall be quite the rage  
At Opera, Ball or Play  
No other form but mine be seen  
Let me be a Bloomer, pray! (rep) /

And then next day in the Papers  
Long Paragraphs so fine!  
Describing ev'ry thing I wore,  
Oh! won't that be divine  
I'm certain then for lovers  
I shall not wait a day  
{They will be dying at my feet  
Let me be a Bloomer, pray!} //

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2. *Lady Harberton*: Florence Wallace Pomeroy, Viscountess Harberton (1843–1911) was the President of the Rational Dress Association from 1883, and one of its most tireless propagandists. See pp. 205–52 and pp. 319–40 in this volume.
3. *nurse ... Worth*: nurses' uniforms in the 1880s were shaped as much by the need to indicate the 'ladylike' status of professionally trained nurses as by practical considerations. Thus some hospital nurses' uniforms incorporated a short train designed to hide the wearer's ankles from view when she bent over. See E. Ewing, *Women In Uniform: Through The Centuries* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1975), p. 45. Charles Frederick Worth (1825–95) was the first of the great couturiers who could dictate what his clients should wear rather than making dresses to their designs. Lady Harberton's attack on him is unexpected, as Worth had exhibited several reformed outfits at the RDA exhibition in 1883, winning a silver medal for one of them. See Cunningham, *Reforming Women's Fashion*, pp. 69–70, pp. 208–9.
4. *Mrs T. Taylor*: it has not been possible to identify this person further.
5. *prune de monsieur*: a soft plum colour.
6. *fullings*: gathered or ruched panels.
7. *Wilson pattern*: this pattern for a divided skirt had two full legs falling in pleats from the hip. Named in honour of Dr George Wilson of Edinburgh, whose *Healthy Life and Healthy Dwellings* (London, 1880) had advocated reformed dress on health grounds. Advertised in the *Rational Dress Society's Gazette* no. 1, 1888, p. 6; see Newton, *Health, Art & Reason*, pp. 96–8, pp. 116–7.
8. *Mrs. Pfeiffer*: Emily Jane Pfeifer (1827–90), poet and essayist; she frequently wore Greek-style reformed dress, which was described with approval in reviews of RDS meetings.
9. *Mrs. Oscar Wilde*: Constance Lloyd (1858–98) married Wilde in 1884 and was the mother of two sons by 1887. She frequently participated in RDS events and her clothing was generally noted with approval by reviewers.

### 'Dressmakers and Dress Reform,' *Aglaiia*

1. *tight skirt ... multiplicity of skirtings*: very narrow skirts, trained day dresses, and layered skirt over-drapes were all recent features of fashionable dress.
2. *dress-fastener*: also called skirt-holders, these were decorative metal clips worn at the waist that could be used to hold up trailing skirts and keep them clean. Many types were patented during the late nineteenth century.
3. *Black stockinette stuff made for riding trousers*: see the discussion of ladies' riding trousers in Volume 1 pp. 213–20.
4. *pulled ... back*: 1880s and 1890s skirts were usually made with all the fullness at the back, controlled by gathers or pleats, so the back sections would be much heavier than the front.

### 'The Bloomer Costume,' *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*

1. *Robert Barclay*: Robert Barclay of Ury (1648–90), an early convert to Quakerism, in 1672 walked through the streets of Aberdeen dressed only in sackcloth as an act of public penance. Barclay lobbied King James II on behalf of the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania, and was absentee Governor of New Jersey from 1682 to his death.
2. *martyrly*: for hostile reactions to women appearing in public in Bloomers, see *The Times*, 20 August 1851 p. 5; 28 August 1851, p. 7.

3. *unhappy foolish notion ... America*: see Introduction, pp. xii–xiii.
4. *trolloping*: loose, slovenly garments, with an implication of moral laxity.
5. *young girls*: the long drawers worn by young girls and women since the 1820s were sometimes called ‘trousers’; *The Workwoman’s Guide, by a Lady* (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1835), p. 50.
6. *wondrous Exhibition: The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations* was held in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, from 1 May to 15 October 1851. It attracted large numbers of visitors of all nations and classes; the *Times* article, ‘Bloomerism at the Crystal Palace’, 27 September 1851, p. 8, reported that three ladies in Bloomers had visited the site in order to spread publicity for a lecture on Bloomerism.
7. *feet being wanting*: this is reminiscent of the arguments against long skirts advanced by J. H. Noyes, founder of the Oneida Community. See Fischer, “Pantalets” and “Turkish Trowsers”, p. 130.
8. *long skirts*: fashionable women’s dresses had been worn relatively short in the 1830s, exposing the ankles.

### *I Want to be a Bloomer*

1. ‘*The Bloomer Quadrilles*’ ‘*Bloomer Polka*’ and ‘*Bloomer Schottische*’: On 17 October 1851 *The Times* advertised these pieces by Montgomery along with the rival works ‘*Bloomers Beware*’ by Frank Eames; ‘*The New Bloomer Polka*’ by J. Blockley; ‘*Mrs Bloomers Own Polka*’, ‘*Mrs Bloomer’s Own Schottische*’, ‘*Mrs Bloomer’s Own Galop*’ ‘*Mrs Bloomer’s Own Waltz*’, and ‘*Mrs Bloomer’s Own Quadrille*’, all by E. Reyloff.
2. *ducks*: a pun on ‘duck’ as a term of endearment like ‘love’ and ‘duck’ as a cotton fabric used for men’s summer trousers.
3. *beaux*: admirers.

### *Stirling, A Figure of Fun, or, the Bloomer Costume*

1. *A Cheap Excursion ... Ladies*: Stirling has over forty works listed in the British Library catalogue between 1837 and 1893. He also published a memoir, *Old Drury Lane: Fifty years’ Recollections of Author, Actor and Manager* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881).
2. Monday September 22nd, 1851: A play called *Bloomerism or the Follies of a Day* was running at the Theatre Royal, Adelphi, London, during October 1851, and there were probably others.
3. *nobby*: superior or upper-class, used facetiously.
4. *pandean pipes*: pan pipes, used by street and fairground musicians.
5. *Notice*: an authentic Bloomer costume seems to have been an attraction in itself, and was specifically mentioned in a newspaper advertisement for Madame Tussaud’s waxwork (*The Times*, 14 April 1852).
6. *panoramas*: painted panoramas, often of recent battles, had been popular visitor attractions in London since 1793, when Robert Barker opened his version in a special building in Leicester Square.
7. *house-breakers*: burglars.
8. wax ... *impression*: a play on words, as seal impressions in wax were used to close letters.
9. *nuffin*: nothing. The phonetic spelling of elements of Nick’s speech indicates a working-class accent.