



THE PUBLIC PANTS: A VISUAL RHETORIC OF GENDERED AND CLASSED IMPERIALISM

PHIL BRATTA

Abstract

Coinciding with the rise of women's reform movements in the mid-nineteenth century United States, discourses and narratives about and around fashion—particularly women who donned pants—circulated via rhetorical images in print culture. Bloomerites and women who wore pants in public often generated an anxiety amidst the U.S. nation, and in turn reactionary rhetoric sought to suppress such dress, voices, and any transcending of ideological gendered spheres. But gender was not the only social concern; in fact, these reactions often stemmed from concerns of marking social class. Editors of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* sought to delimit women's appearance and sustain White middle- and upper-class identity. From an anti-imperialist lens, a semiotic and discourse analysis of two illustrations published in two *Harper's* issues illuminates the intersection of print culture, fashion, class, gender, and U.S. imperialism. This intersection unveils how U.S. media constructed both a gendered and a classed imperial discourse that influenced material consumption and extended an imperial fashion in the United States.

Keywords: *visual rhetoric, material rhetoric, imperialism, gender, class, Harper's New Monthly Magazine*

The Public Pants

Seneca Falls, New York, 1851: Amelia Jenks Bloomer, Elizabeth Smith Miller, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton stepped, though not for the first time, into public donning trousers under their skirts. Their trousers reached down to their ankles, and the three women found the utility of the attire fitting for all their daily activities: gardening, running errands, etc. Their idea derived from Turkish pantaloons, and they “recognized its sensible utility” (Torrens, 1997, p. 189). Controversy and criticism quickly emerged. Critics and reactionaries critiqued the women and their attire, claiming that the clothing did not lend to propriety. They named the clothing after Amelia's married name—Bloomer—and began to ridicule and quell the fashion, hoping other White middle-class women would not embrace it.

Two hundred and ten miles away, the New York City publishing house Harper & Brothers had been publishing *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (hereafter referred to as *Harper's*) for about six months. From its inception in June 1850, *Harper's* targeted a readership of White middle- and upper-class women in the United States. As word spread about women who wore pants, *Harper's* tapped into the reactionary discourses and rhetoric through editorial decisions, hoping to shape a particular U.S. nation. *Harper's*' ambition, according to Victorian historian and women's and gender studies scholar Jennifer Phegley (2004), was to create “a national—rather than a regional—magazine” (p. 64). This ambition coincided with U.S. imperial expansion. Albeit the owners and editors of *Harper's* claimed to publish a non-partisan magazine and only sought to emphasize nationalism over sectionalism (Phegley, 2004, p. 64), *Harper's* often published men's and women's westward travel writings that echoed Manifest Destiny rhetoric. These intentions—a desired national magazine and publication of travel writings—unveiled *Harper's*' nexus and approach to shaping U.S. imperial expansion. In short, *Harper's* contributed to constructing a U.S. imperial nation that consisted of particular ideologies about what the nation ought to be (and value)—White middle- and upper-class men as active disseminators of high culture and moral virtues within political domains and White middle- and upper-class women as cultivators of passive femininity and domesticity within domestic domains. And these ideologies circulated via gendered, racial, and classed materiality and practices, such as dress and taste, as a way to justify usurpation of territory and removal of non-White peoples during the period of U.S. Manifest Destiny. That is, dress and taste functioned as two of the cultural elements of mid-nineteenth century U.S. Manifest Destiny.

In this article, I first use a discourse analysis to detail *Harper's*' historical context in which print culture proliferated in the U.S. and how in this context the transatlantic connection between the U.S. and Britain created a particular paradigm of high

culture for the U.S. Next, I discuss the historical emergence of bloomers and bloomerites, drawing attention to the consequential concerns of both gender and class, although I also touch on racial and nationality concerns as well. This intersectionality of social constructs illuminates the material and visual rhetorics of bloomers and bloomerites within their discursive context. Then, I use a qualitative visual method—semiology—to address *Harper's*' representations of bloomers and bloomerites. By unpacking the visual rhetoric of the images and showing the links to nineteenth-century discourses, I reveal how the periodical functioned for middle-class White women as a conduct book teaching ideological gender and class superiority and desire for conquest through fashion. Finally, I offer some possibilities to consider how material culture—both print and fashion—constructed in a particular historical context a gendered and classed imperialism as the U.S. expanded westward.

Harper's' Contribution to the Construction of U.S. Middle- and Upper-Class Culture

Harper's began its publication run in the mid-nineteenth century, the heyday of print culture in the United States. This print culture emerged in large part from the burgeoning population in U.S. cities, where inexpensively produced information proliferated and circulated for a more heterogeneous population and readership. Cities grew in numbers and size at this time, primarily from rapid industrialization. Consequentially, these industrial cities created new kinds of poverty, dark alleys, and buildings that allowed obstructed perception and visibility of people and places. In these newly developed cultural spaces and conditions, old anxieties magnified, and new ones arose for much of the White U.S. public in the 1840s and 1850s. Prostitution, gambling, rapes, and murders became much more common, and print culture quickly addressed these issues in various ways. The penny press, cheap commercial novels, serialized detective stories, and magazines provided a wider range of socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and gendered peoples in the U.S. with new knowledge about the nation and living spaces, sometimes easing fears and anxieties and other times accentuating them. *Harper's* became one text that facilitated such knowledge both explicitly and implicitly. It, as well as other print materials in the U.S., circulated this knowledge by often juxtaposing lower-class stories and concerns with middle- and upper-class stories and tastes. These tastes often stemmed from transatlantic British culture.

During these decades, U.S. editors and writers, including those at *Harper's*, habitually looked overseas to British print culture in order to fill their pages or to develop ideas for content. *Harper's* was the epitome of such repurposing. Exploring *Harper's*' appropriation of British literature, Phegley (2004) provides a fascinating examination in which she addresses issues of piracy, nationalism, and *Harper's*. Due to the lack of international copyright laws, she posits that *Harper's* extracted specific British literature

from its overseas circulation and incorporated British writing as a way to create a sense of high culture for U.S. citizens. She remarks:

While *Harper's* mimicked the survival techniques used by many American publishing houses in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, its preoccupation with creating a national literary identity out of “pirated” scraps of British periodicals signals a transition from national dependence on British culture to a more patriotic devotion to elevating the status of American literature during the 1850s. (pp. 63-64)

There was a contradiction between U.S. independence from Britain and U.S. appropriation of British material. By pilfering the content and form of British literary examples, *Harper's*' logic was that its readership could internalize those models and strategies for their own high-culture literary production. Additionally, this move had an economic motive, as the publishing house that published *Harper's* also produced British literature, which allowed it to double its profit in serializing. As Phegley also points out, “*Harper's* supported a melding of the forms of realism and sentimentalism” as a way to create what it meant to be a public woman while simultaneously sustaining domestic roles and space (p. 66), which is particularly pertinent to the present study. These public women, or as Phegley asserts, *Harper's*' “women readers—as guardians of the cultural life of the family,” would disseminate refined cultural knowledge and literary taste within the home to their husbands, hoping to enact a tasteful and refined national culture as their husbands entered the public sphere as powerful public figures (p. 74). In other words, women would deliver the virtue and moral fiber found in the private sphere into the public sphere by reading about stories that radiate British realism—with its objective and omniscient narrator—through the lens of a regulated American sentimentalism.

Regulating sentiment had been a recent cultural emergence. Near the end of the eighteenth century, controlling sentiment began in the U.S. nation with the first U.S. novel, William Hill Brown's 1789 *The Power of Sympathy*. While Brown's novel functions, arguably, in its historical moment as didacticism in constructing a nascent U.S. nation's virtue, in the following six decades, the sentimental novel was associated with effeminateness and, more importantly, bad literary taste. Thus, *Harper's* aimed to shift the lens through which the people of the U.S. viewed sentimental novels by appropriating them in a particular way for the purpose of creating a distinct and venerable American literary culture. Phegley (2004) asserts that:

American sentimental fiction was one major literary trend that *Harper's* editors sought to control. Sentimental literature was often characterized in the magazine as a weak and feminine form that would destroy the nation's ability to create its own high literary culture . . . sentimental fiction was characterized not only as inferior form, but as a form that was dangerously appealing to women because it interfered with the development of high literary taste and would, as a result, weaken the nation's potential to produce good literature. (pp. 78-79)

By attempting to fuse both realism and sentimentalism, *Harper's* believed it could cultivate sentimentality into a form of high culture. For example, Phegley draws attention to *Harper's*'s reprinting of Dickens and selected works—"Sonnet to Dickens, Esq."—that provided readers, particularly women, with high-class rationality and emotions. Such appropriations had a dual functioning: on the one hand, to attract women readers; and on the other, to instill in women readers a sense of high culture in hope of creating a national literary body. Hence, *Harper's* functioned as a way for women to learn and identify high culture and disseminate such ideologies to the U.S. public, particularly through their visual presentation.

Just as excerpts from novels and short stories were used as a way for *Harper's*'s editors to define high culture for their audience, so was fashion. At the time of *Harper's*'s inception, fashion and dress reform had been receiving much attention. The dress reform movement, beginning around 1850, developed from concerns about health. These concerns extended to political ideals, which in turn aligned with some dress reformers, as Kathleen Torrens (1999) notes: "[I]ndividual responsibility, self-reliance, education, and civic duty [] governed dress reformers' motives and practices" (p. 80). Torrens (1997) also notes that *The Sibyl*, a contemporary of *Harper's*, advanced dress reform arguments for various reasons: "hygiene, injurious effects from conventional fashion, women's perceived preoccupation with fashion, and women's need for emancipation from restrictive clothing" (p. 191). At the center of many of these dress reforms were women wearing pants and what would eventually be called the "bloomer costume." Women who donned pants and the bloomer outfit became a site of contestation due to ideologies concerning gender, sex, race, class, and nation as well as public and private spaces. It is because dress, as a cultural text, communicates ideas about the nation's genders that *Harper's* could not help but to address fashion and the contemporary discussions about women who wore pants and bloomers.

From the first issue, *Harper's* included the "Fashions for [season or month]" section at the end of every issue, highlighting the latest fashion trends. The "Fashion" series consisted of two pages of illustrious and short commentaries and images in a generally consistent form comprised of two elements. One form was a sketch of two or three women wearing long dresses, flounces, bonnets, hats, and/or caps on the introduction page—often, a book would be present with one of the women, which Phegley (2004) posits as an indication of "the power of print even while focusing on the fashionable middle-class body" (p. 75). Secondly, the following page(s) of the introduction provided smaller illustrations with commentary in a two-column format. Not only did U.S. men and women read articles about the fashions, but images enhanced the rhetoric. As readers experienced the "Fashion" series in *Harper's*, they developed a consciousness and imagining not only of themselves but of others. John Berger resonates here, and his claim seems highly appropriate in this context: "We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves" (1972, p. 9). Thus, with the rise of women's dress reform and *Harper's*'s rhetoric of women who wore pants and bloomers, *Harper's*'s readers gained both a sense of their subjectivity produced by fashion and the desire to construct their nation's fashion identity in line with prevailing

gender roles and middle- and upper-class taste. To illustrate these points, I unpack two particular images published by the magazine that exemplify how *Harper's* contributed to the construction of gendered fashion, gendered consumption, and middle- and upper-class sensibilities in the U.S.

Bloomers, Gendered Spheres, and Class

Before I address the representations of women who wore pants and bloomer-ites in *Harper's*, I discuss how the "bloomer costume" in public connected with the ideology of separate (gendered) spheres. During the mid-nineteenth century of industrialization, Manifest Destiny, and expansive print culture in the U.S., certain women who wore pants made their public appearance. Bloomer, Miller, and Stanton were the most famous examples to stir the nation with their presence both in public and in print. After the public appearance of these women, Bloomer would soon promote and defend the Turkish trousers in her publication *The Lily*. Subsequently, she found much support from dress reformers, prompting many other women to follow suit in donning trousers (Greenberg, 2005).

But as dress reformers set out to redesign fashion for women on the basis of practical utility, they did not want to intentionally create ambiguity with women's gender identity. As Gayle Fischer (1997) notes, "[d]ress reformers . . . wanted to reform female dress for comfortable fit, physical well-being, religious beliefs, women's rights, or work opportunities—not to blur distinctions between the sexes" (p. 113). Unsure how to respond to women donning pants in public, the U.S. White middle and upper classes raised concerns primarily about virtue creation and sustainability and inversion of genders. Fischer remarks, "[O]ne of the biggest fears about reform clothing [was] that men would become feminine . . . if women wore the pants then it would logically follow that men would wear dresses and assume the female characteristic of dependence" (pp. 113-114). In addition to such gendered logic, discourses also materialized concerning a desexing of women. Amy Greenberg (2005) asserts, "[c]ritics mocked the 'bloomer costume' for 'unsexing' women, and they equated bloomers with gender role reversal. Supporters of dress reform reversed the accusation by labeling men who mocked the bloomer unchivalrous" (p. 212). If the U.S. desired to sustain distinctions between the masculine and feminine, the nation needed clear identification of sexed and gendered identities, particularly within public visibility. These accusations and concerns stemmed from and perpetuated logical assumptions that were tightly tied to the ideology of gendered spheres.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the ideology of separate spheres—the public occupied by men and the private occupied by women—had proliferated. As Patricia Cunningham (2003) notes, "[t]he ideology of the century was that women belong in the home, running the household and caring for the children, while men belonged in the public sphere, running the worlds of business, politics, and commerce" (pp. 42-43). But this dichotomy of public/private spheres deteriorated as more White middle-class wom-

en entered and participated in the public sphere in many new ways (e.g., women entered the workforce, politics, and higher education). With more women engaged in public life, social enforcement of political and domestic boundaries attempted to prevent women from participating in public spheres of influence. Within these new boundaries, men occupied the political sphere, and women were bound to the domestic. This reframing of sphere ideology enabled a more detailed examination of virtues by alleviating the pressure to focus on place. In other words, both men and women were expected to perform distinct virtues encapsulated within the boundaries of those spheres, regardless whether those actions took place in public or private. Barbara Welter (1966) argues: “The attributes of True Womanhood, by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife—woman” (p. 152). Both men and women often believed that the virtue of domesticity and these subjectivities of women were located in the domestic sphere, not in the political. When women entered the public realm—on the streets, at church, at schools, in the marketplace, etc.—they were expected to disseminate such virtues in their discourse, behavior, and appearance.

Political/domestic sphere ideology provides an understanding of how women’s actions changed when they wore pants in public. Prior to wearing pants, women in dresses simply could not physically be active in parts of the public and political spheres. Jennifer Nelson (2000) remarks that most dresses were “ornamental, cumbersome, impractical garments” and rendered the wearer “incapable of participating in public life and relegated [them] to the domestic sphere” (p. 21). But once women cast aside these impractical garments and wore pants, they could enter the public and political spheres not only physically but ideologically through their visual presentation. Women participating in public, donning serviceable clothing, then brought subversive fashion from the domestic order into the political order. In the 1850s, such subversion challenged notions of masculinity in the U.S., disrupting the masculine symbolic order. Fischer (1997) contends that “by wearing pants—of any kind—women appropriated male dress, and, by association, male privilege and power” (p. 112). In wearing pants, women and bloomerites confused the ideologies and discourses of “natural” gender presentation and performance. In addition, the domestic virtues—expected to be upheld in the domestic sphere by women—would wither. Men—the logic would go—would have to sustain such virtues, pulling them away from their political roles to lead the nation (which, during this particular time period, entailed westward expansion). As Cunningham (2003) points out, many who ridiculed bloomerites may have feared that “if women did work in the public sphere there would be no one left to manage the home and men would be forced to stay home with the children” (p. 43).

It is unclear whether Bloomer, Miller, and Stanton actually wore the Turkish trousers “because they were different, exotic, and offered freedom of movement” (Fischer, 1997, p. 125). But Bloomer was particularly active in political concerns of the day. As Sarah Levitt (1993) notes, “Amelia Bloomer was one of a group of American women campaigning not only for dress reform, but also for temperance, women’s rights

and the abolition of slavery. She used her costume to attract people to her lectures, who then stayed to hear her views on other issues” (p. 28). Regardless of the three women’s intentions and Bloomer’s activism, it is important to note that the presence of such fashion, in what many considered a masculine public and political sphere, rearranged the discourse of gendered clothing and performance as well as reconceptualized gendered spaces. Dress changed the city and nation. Bloomer, Miller, and Stanton (and others) challenged and disrupted the symbolic masculine sphere.

While gender appears to be the most obvious social construct that women who wore pants challenged and rearranged, class also factored into discussions and contentions. In the nineteenth century and prior to the suffrage and feminist movements in the 1850s, both middle- and working-class White women did wear pants, but at specific times and places: when playing with their children in the home, as undergarments, when traveling, or when working in the home (Smith, 2006). But middle- and working-class White women differed in that the former rarely, if ever, wore pants in public, whereas working-class women frequently wore pants in public. Stephanie Smith (2006) contends that “although a number of women had for many years either worn or adapted trousers for a variety of uses . . . ‘panting’ in public still signified masculinity to the middle class. Exceptions might be made for a variety of reasons, but women in pants were generally considered lower-class, risqué, or shocking” (p. 2). With such a focus on fashion as a way to communicate social class, U.S. periodicals unsurprisingly addressed, often explicitly, proper fashion. Many periodicals frequently opposed dress reform because fashion had the power to eradicate class distinctions. For example, Barbara Welter (1966) recalls a story from *The Ladies’ Wreath* in 1852 that discussed some of the narratives around dress reform and social organizing:

A young lady is represented in dialogue with her “Professor.” The girl expresses admiration for the bloomer costume—it gives freedom of motion, is healthful and attractive. The “Professor” sets her straight. Trousers, he explains, are “only one of the many manifestations of that wild spirit of socialism and agrarian radicalism which is at present so rife in our land.” The young lady recants immediately: “If this dress has any connexion with Fourierism or Socialism, or fanaticism in any shape whatever, I have no disposition to wear it at all . . . no true woman would so far compromise her delicacy as to espouse, however unwittingly, such a cause.” (p. 157)

As White, middle-class women, Bloomer, Miller, and Stanton were expected to appear in public wearing dresses, but by appropriating pants, they disrupted not only gender ideologies, but class ideologies. To understand the link between women wearing pants and class, we have to turn toward public places in lower-class communities. These public places, at least from the view and projection of most middle- and upper-class people, included sex and gender ambiguities, “bad” taste, a sex market (brothels, street prostitution), and hypersexual impulsivity. Cunningham (2003) notes that “[w]omen who wore any form of trousers in public chanced being . . . taken for [a] . . . prostitute”

(pp. 32-33). Or, as Cunningham continues, some “opponents of the Bloomer costume . . . saw it as immoral, since they believed that it was worn by some unsavory individuals. For some it was unpatriotic, because of its foreign (Turkish) origins” (p. 42). Those “unsavory individuals” came to include poor and working-class folks, criminals, the diseased, and persons of color—basically the Other (in contrast with the White middle and upper class as the standard and norm). Mary Ryan (1990) also asserts that “[o]n their excursions into the poor districts of the city [Manhattan], journalists were particularly disturbed by the difficulty of discerning gender boundaries. In slum districts, the sexes appeared to mingle freely and were poorly differentiated from each other in their behavior, their character, and even in their appearance” (pp. 73-74). Middle- and upper-class populations believed that those who wore common or work pants—both men and women—in poor and working-class places indicated an unrefined taste and illogical, even chaotic, differentiations. As women who wore pants in the middle and upper class entered public places, they disrupted the U.S. class system: The Other was entering both the political and domestic spheres. In 1851 in Seneca Falls, bloomerites and the bloomer fashion, as well as the working class, became classified with the racialized Other (Blacks, Native Americans, and foreigners), a foreign threat to the White U.S. middle and upper class.

In order to resist women’s reformist movements, anti-reformers ridiculed and criticized women who donned pants. In fact, these anti-reformers created the word “bloomer” as a way to hinder suffragettes and feminists from exercising any political and cultural power, as well as to suppress any influence outside the movements (Smith, 2006, p. 3). But, in addition to resisting the movements, these anti-reformers also resisted any revolution of the class system. That is, they projected bloomerites as revolutionaries who desired to eradicate social and class structures. As Kathleen Torrens (1997) notes, “[d]ress reform activists sought to modify existing social expectations, not to revolutionize them. Yet they were perceived as dangerous radicals and mannish women who wanted to usurp the social structure” (p. 197). Thus, while the bloomer costume was contentious in 1854 for several reasons, issues of class arose, which were arguably equally significant as issues of gender. Smith (2006) writes, “white, middle-class women who had attempted to wear the garments found the daily grind of being associated with children and the working class or of simply sticking out like a sore (masculine) thumb among their peers too dispiriting and psychologically taxing” (p. 20). Within a matter of a few years, the association of bloomers with lower-class society soon disheartened and deterred many middle-class women from continuing the fashion.

Before the withering of the bloomer outfit, *Harper’s* functioned as part of this anti-reform movement. In the early 1850s, the periodical’s editorial direction opposed women’s reform movements and sustained and promulgated middle- and upper-class taste by publishing reactionary visual rhetoric and discourse around women who wore pants and bloomers. I provide two examples that illuminate such rhetoric and discourse, orientalism and Manifest Destiny.

Orientalism¹ in Fashion

In 1851 and 1852, *Harper’s* published illustrations of women wearing pants and bloomers in one of the aforementioned “Fashions” section, as well as in another section, “A Leaf From Punch.” I first draw attention to “Summer Fashions” in the July 1851 issue. On the following page of the introduction in this issue, an illustration and article appears on the “Turkish Costume” (see Figure 1).

1. Palestinian-American historian and scholar Edward Said (1978) provides numerous definitions and ways of talking about orientalism, all of which are interdependent, but the most pertinent to this study is this: “[O]rientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3). Said differently, orientalism was the West/Occident’s (White European Self) historical practice, study, and domination of the East/Orient (non-White Other), which continues in various ways in our contemporary times. It was/is a Western/European invention and a system of representation that brings the Orient, or “Other,” into Western culture as inferior, backwards, irrational, and un(der) developed. More specifically, orientalism constructs discourses about gender and sexuality: non-White men in the Orient are represented as feminine and weak yet dangerous, lazy, short-tempered, and a threat to Western women; non-White women are depicted as submissive, strikingly exotic, sexual, and promiscuous. Orientalism creates a hierarchical relationship between the Occident and Orient, and the Occidental practices of examining, representing, and describing the Orient reflect less on the Orient and more on how the Occident views itself as situated in the world. As Richard Leppert (2007) remarks, “[T]hey [native people] were represented as living without history, in a timeless, exotic, implicitly old-fashioned present. Racial others, especially people from the Middle East, were consistently feminized in Western consciousness and representation, not least as a means to assert and reassure the Western self as to Western cultural mastery and masculinized political dominance” (p. 68). For more on orientalism, see also Nochlin (1989) and Stevens (1984).

India muslin, open in front, in the body and skirt, so as to show one width of the silk. The body is almost high. A deep ruffianness, scalloped, forms a lapel down the body and the edges of the skirt. The short pagoda sleeves are trimmed with rows of ruffianness. The body and skirt have several rows of narrow ruffianness, three together at intervals, and so arranged as to form undulations. These trimmings are fixed to one insertion; they are not loose, but so fastened as to follow all the motions of the folds of the skirt. The cross bands are ornamented on the body with a silk bow in the middle; on the skirt, with two others placed at the extremities. A bow on each arm holds up the pagoda. The collar is plaited; an embroidered insertion, and three rows of ruffianness, undulated like the trimming of the dress. The under sleeves, of embroidered muslin at the bottom, are straight, and rather loose at the wrist. They have an insertion and three rows of ruffianness.

The sitting figure shows a MORNING COSTUME composed of taffeta and other light materials. An elegant and rather gay style is taffeta of a light gray ground, striped broad, with intervening wreaths of frills. The body three-quarter height at the back. It opens in a large lapel down each side of the skirt, which is trimmed with fringe, of hairs corresponding with the dress. The fringe is continued from the bottom of the lapel down each side of the skirt. Sleeves are funnel shaped, rather more than a half length, and finished with fringe. Cambric chemise, made quite up to the throat, and cambric under-sleeves. Lemon colored silk or drawn bonnet, the brim very open at the sides. The interior is trimmed in cap style with tulle; lemon colored laces or strings.

The figure on the right shows a VIRTUOUS DRESS. The body is à la Louis XV.; demi-long sleeves of the small pagoda form. A pardaonna like a little pelisse; a close fitting body, moderately open on the bosom; bordered with a very rich fancy trimming. Wide sleeves descending to the hand, and terminated with fancy trimming and a rich fringe. The skirt is short behind, but nearly a half length in front, open before, and trimmed round the bottom with three rows of fringe laid on as flounces. Rice straw bonnet; a very small open helm, the interior trimmed with tulle of red and yellow roses and their fringes, and white laces. The exterior of the bonnet is decorated with a wreath of the same flowers, intermixed with this fringe, and light spots of small white flowers and buds.

more agreeable. Rice straw bonnets are very much in vogue this season. The general forms of bonnets have not much changed since our last report.



THE TURKISH COSTUME.

There appears to be a decided and growing tendency on the part of our countrywomen, to wear the trousers. If properly done, we certainly can not object. For some time past indications of an invasion, by the ladies, of man's peculiar domain in dress, incited by the strong minded Miss Walters of the day, have been tangible, but the frowns of Fashion have hitherto kept the revolutionists quiet, and ladies' dresses have every month been increasing in length, until train-bearers are becoming necessary. It is conceded by all that the dresses of prevailing immoderate length, sweeping the ground at every step, are among the silliest follies of Fashion; expressive, inconvenient, and untidy. Recently, in several places, practical reformers, as bold as Joan d'Arc, have discarded the trailing skirts, and adopted the far more convenient, equally chaste, and more elegant dresses of Oriental women. Some ridicule them; others sneer contemptuously or laugh incredulously, and others commend them for their taste and courage. We are disposed to be placed in the latter category; and to show our goodwill, we present, above, a sketch of ORIENTAL COSTUME, as a model for our fair reformers. What can be more elegant and graceful, particularly for young ladies? The style is based upon good taste, and, if the ladies are in earnest, it must prevail. A crusty cynic at our elbow who never believed in progress in any thing, thinks so too; and has just whispered in our ear of women, that

"If she will, she will, you may depend on't,
And if she won't, she won't—so there's an end on't!"



FIG. 2.—BONNETS.

BONNETS continue to be made small and very open in front. Light silks are fashionable. These are covered by rows of white festooned ribbons, as seen in the second illustration of Fig. 2. Others have white lace on the front, over the crown, and upon the crown and curtains, as seen in the other illustration. Florence straw, grass, tulle, crepe, and tulle, are more fashionable and much

The visual image depicts a woman wearing a dress extended to her knees with pants underneath. Her legs and feet emulate a ballerina, suggesting a particular sense of high culture. She slightly bends her back and extends her left arm to the side, suggesting an elegance and passive femininity. These connotations conflate high culture and submissive femininity. It is unclear if the woman is an Anglo-Saxon or a Turk, but looking at the use of shades, the whitest thing in the picture, tellingly, is the woman's face and inner arm, signaling her whiteness. On her forehead is a vertical line beginning from her hairline and extending to the middle of her forehead. The line is clearly not a bindi or a tilaka that some Hindu and other South Asian women wear for spiritual purposes, as a social signification, and/or for aesthetics. The line is possibly part of the headdress. Nevertheless, the woman is still associated with Otherness and cannot have political power in White Western culture because of her weak appearance.

The description that accompanies the image suggests an ideology of White middle- and upper-class respectability and submissive femininity. The first sentence comments on the recently emerging desire of the nation's women "to wear the trousers [sic]." The women are identified as in the reform and rights advocacy movement because of the association with Bloomer, Miller, and Stanton wearing trousers in public. But *Harper's* presents U.S. women with an appropriate rhetoric if women do decide to wear pants. The *Harper's* writer remarks in the second sentence, "If properly done, we certainly can not [sic] object" (emphasis added). What exactly constitutes *proper* here? From the visual rhetoric, *Harper's*' readers might infer that wearing pants requires attention to taste in body postures and mannerisms, which in turn engender submission to the masculine political sphere when in public. This suggests conflation of refined grace of the body and passive femininity.

The writer explicitly addresses the women reformers as well as the particular taste for which wearing pants ought to be appropriated, stating: "[P]ractical reformers, as bold as Joan of Arc, have discarded the trailing skirts, and adopted the far more convenient, equally chaste, and more elegant dresses of Oriental women" ("Fashions for July," 1851, p. 288). Whether chaste denotes modesty, innocence, or sexual inexperience is irrelevant; readers might infer that a conventional domesticity ought to be accompanied by "good" taste. Moreover, the text suggests that wearing pants need not be done with an appearance of dirtiness, female masculinity, sex and gender ambiguity, or bad taste; anything that emulates, echoes, or resembles the lower class ought to be avoided. The writer continues to praise such ambitious reformers, remarking that "some [U.S. citizens] ridicule them [women wearing trousers]; others sneer contemptuously or laugh incredulously, and others commend them for their taste and courage. We are disposed to be placed in the latter category . . . what can be more elegant and graceful, particularly for young ladies? The style is based upon good taste, and if the ladies are in earnest, it must prevail" ("Fashions for July," 1851, p. 288). Phegley's (2004) argument is pertinent in that similar to literary consumption, women may appropriate pants, but in a way that cultivates a form of high taste and femininity. The image description posits that women need to exercise rationality in order to regulate consumption and style, especially any commodity that has the potential to subvert gender, sex, and class.

Figure 1. The Turkish Costume appeared in the article "Fashions for July" in the July 1851 issue of Harper's New Monthly Magazine (p. 288). Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection.

Harper's works to recast wearing pants as feminine, but a certain form of femininity in donning such attire—one that connotes an inferior, submissive orientalism—as a way to sustain the domesticity of women and extirpate women from the realm of politics. On the one hand, *Harper's* allows women to don pants so that they believe that they have cultural power; on the other hand, it suppresses women from political power with the *proper* wearing. Such a domestic discourse of wearing pants functions in correlation with the imperialism of the time. The domesticity of U.S. imperialism in the 1850s—as middle- and upper-class White women seek to define their nation by appropriating foreignness presented in the “Turkish Costume”—is highly controlled by *Harper's*' editors as a way to address the contemporary women's rights movement while simultaneously producing a vision of U.S. high culture and sustaining a hierarchical relationship between men and women. This relationship connects with the political and domestic gendered spheres in that while the “Turkish Costume” editorial works to reinforce the boundaries and virtues of those relationships and spheres, it does not explicitly comment on the fears surrounding the upending of appropriate gendered performance. The fear that women would seize power via their fashion was not as intense as the fear that men would become feminized by women who wore pants. The latter fear was evoked six months after the printing of the “Turkish Costume,” when *Harper's* published the relationship between U.S. men and bloomerites in “A Leaf From Punch.”

Bloomerites in “A Leaf From Punch”

Nearly a year after Amelia Bloomer publicly advocated bloomers and six months after *Harper's* promoted an appropriate “Turkish Costume,” *Harper's* published in its 1852 January issue's “A Leaf From Punch” section a two-scene cartoon (Figure 2). Beginning in 1851, *Harper's* included the “A Leaf From Punch” series, which was typically a two- to six-page collection of selected cartoons and short articles from the British humor magazine *Punch*. This is an example of *Harper's* appropriating print materials from Britain (see Figure 2).

Like the “Turkish Costume” image and description, this two-scene cartoon evokes some interesting ideologies if the image and language are unpacked. In the top drawing, a mustached and sideburned man is seated cross-legged on a chair at a dinner table. The man fixes a stoic gaze on a dinner plate while holding a fork with food on it in front of his face. A bubble caption reads, “You must really ask Mamma!” Kneeling on one knee and holding the man's hand and arm is a woman with a concerned expression. She wears a bloomer outfit with long sleeves, and the caption reads, “A ‘BLOOMER’ (in Leap Year)--‘Say! Oh, say, Dearest, will you be mine.’” In the background on the right side of the image, a bloomer-dressed woman, assuming to be the Mamma the man speaks of, views the man and woman with a shocked expression, spread legs, and raised arms. A dog directs its attention to this appalled Mamma, and in the foreground is a cane and feathered hat. The background also contains books that line the back wall.



Figure 2. “A ‘Bloomer’ (in Leap Year)” (emphasis in original) and “Strong-Minded ‘Bloomer’” appeared in the article “A Leaf From Punch” in the January 1852 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (p. 286). Courtesy of Cornell University Library, Making of America Digital Collection.

The reference to “Leap Year” as well as the words “will you be mine” suggest that the kneeling woman is proposing to this man. The unconventional custom of a woman proposing to a man during a leap year allowed women to assert their agency in marital matters. However, as Katherine Parkin (2012) notes, “[T]his tradition [women proposing marriage] functioned as a form of false empowerment for women by undermining their efforts to control their marital destiny. It served as a safety valve for women’s frustration at being dependent on men and helped ensure that women remained dependent in matters of matrimony” (pp. 85-86). Similar to the anxiety about the inversion of gender roles from the fashion of women wearing pants, marriage proposals signified the eradication of U.S. masculinity and political virtues. Men became the passive receiver; women became the active trespasser. Women performed and penetrated the virtues of the political via their discourse and fashion. Domesticity was projected onto the man.

The bottom drawing in the two-part cartoon shows presumably the same mustached man and woman in their married life. The profile image of the woman portrays her as confident, but stern and uptight. Holding her head high with a tight expression, she stands facing the man with correct posture and shoulders back. She wears bloomers with a petticoat. The man lies back on a couch, closely resembling (and arguably is) a divan, with one leg propped up and the other on the floor. He sports a robe, and his pants appear to be for lounging around the house. Accompanying his relaxed body is an open novel that he has close to his face with his gaze focused on the book’s content. Behind these two figures and the couch is a bookcase with an elegantly designed vase/jug most likely made of porcelain. On the right side of the image are candle wall sconces. The caption’s title is “Strong-minded ‘Bloomer,’” and the woman says, “Now, do, Alfred, put down that foolish Novel, and do something rational. Go and play something. You never practice, now you’re married” (p. 286). Mamma, the dog, cane, and feathered hat do not appear in this drawing.

The phrase “strong-minded ‘bloomer,’” challenges the binary of men as mind/women as body. U.S. and Western ideologies, often based on Cartesian dichotomy of men associated with the mind (reason, rationality, subject) and women with the body (emotions, irrationality, object), create a relationship of power: men and mind as dominant, women and body as subordinate. The bloomerite has become the strong, rational subject of the home; the man has become the weak, emotional body. The woman’s remark suggests that her husband has drifted into irrationality and laziness. Moreover, he has become uncultured, as he only desires to read a novel. In the 1850s, reading had particular functions: On the one hand, there was a moderated and public reading, which rose in texts such as *Harper’s* and other periodicals. On the other hand, there was novel-reading, which was private, unregulated, and feminine. Novel-reading tempts one’s excessiveness, which readers see with the man in the cartoon. He cannot exercise modesty and, similar to the fear of women and sentimental novels producing vulgar taste, becomes engulfed with sentiment. Although it is unclear what exactly “play something” means, readers may assume it refers to music, possibly the piano, or a sport, possibly cricket, or an activity, possibly horse-riding. Whatever the instrument or sport or activity, readers might infer that to “play something” means to cultivate high erudite taste.

The man is supposed to be a creator of high culture. The men of the U.S. should read, but with modesty, and they should learn other high-cultural activities, thus engendering rationality and taste. Yet, this scene evokes the ideology that bloomerites disrupt and invert the construct of the familial spaces, they engender gender ambiguities, they cross and weaken the political and domestic spheres, and they hinder the development of U.S. high culture.

In addition to the commentary on gender, fashion, and dress, the presence of the vase/jug and candle wall sconces communicates the couple’s social class: at least middle, but most likely upper class. The presence of the divan couch also connotes upper class. Although books are present, one being read and referenced, the man’s posture, albeit he may be relaxing, suggests that he has appropriated the passivity evoked in “Turkish Costume.” His presence on a divan couch further emphasizes an orientalism and his being cast as the Other. The woman’s posture evokes the aggressiveness and independence men ought to have according to *Harper’s*. The middle and upper classes need to lead the nation to high culture. When bloomerites behave “mannishly,” the nation deteriorates into low-class taste. If men lack high-class culture, how can they lead the civilized nation into the wilderness? Thus, bloomerites are a type of Other who challenge U.S. imperial political and domestic spheres.

The visual rhetoric in this two-part cartoon evokes numerous ideologies and narratives about gender, dress, performance, and class. Bloomerites confuse gender activities: proposing marriage, reading, rationality, and torpidity. If men accept proposals from bloomerites, they revert to excessive passion and effeminateness. Bloomerites become the “wearing-pants gender” both literally and metaphorically, encroaching on the U.S. and British masculine and patriarchal social order and nation. The connotations of these images underscore the potential threat of the reformist movement and women’s agency, and the reprinting of these cartoons highlights Harper’s derision of and resistance to bloomers.

Dress Heading West

The two examples from 1851 and 1852 exemplify how *Harper’s* functioned, arguably, in three distinct ways. First, Harper’s reinforced the appropriate appearance and performance of womanhood, most obviously because it was a women’s magazine. Second, it functioned as a White middle-class women’s conduct book that attempted to shape, through behavior and tastes, a U.S. high culture. Finally, in its contemporary context, *Harper’s* could have functioned as a prime mediating cultural artifact to articulate culturally imperial dress. The two published examples above coincided with Harper’s connection with U.S. expansionism via the publishing of travel writings. Greenberg (2005) notes that “travelogues became a staple of magazines like the *North American Review* and *Harper’s*” (p. 6). These travel writings were produced by both men and women and across social classes. Although many consider working- and lower-class U.S. society as the epitome of westward travelers, middle- and upper-class individuals

and families also traveled overland and overseas to settle the West. Greenberg remarks that “popular periodicals with no political affiliation, including *Harper’s* New Monthly Magazine and Putnam’s Monthly Magazine, published rabidly expansionistic travelogues to Cuba, Mexico, and Central America with some regularity during the 1850s” (2005, p. 57). Whether expansionists traveled overland or overseas (via the Atlantic coast and Gulf of Mexico into Central America and north to California), their experiences offered them a plethora of opportunities for imagining the U.S. West.

Even though it is not evident whether men and women expansionists saw *Harper’s* publishing of the “Turkish Costume” and the bloomer cartoon in “A Leaf From Punch” or even read *Harper’s* at all in the 1850s on their westward travels, many of the people of the U.S. who did make it out West at least knew about *Harper’s* (as well as the discussions and controversies about women donning pants). As travelers often sent their travel writings to *Harper’s*, the periodical published the writings as a way to further their goal of becoming a national magazine. In addition, *Harper’s* produced a text for a middle-class appeal in order to communicate imperial taste westward. While, Greenberg asserts, “middle-class women from the North who settled the West envisioned their actions as patriotic and understood themselves as agents of American ‘civilization,’ while politicians utilized images of female settlement to promote Manifest Destiny” (2005, p. 201), *Harper’s* used rhetorical images of women to produce a national as well as an imperial domesticity. It, thus, became not only a nationalist artifact but an imperialist one; it contributed to the gendering and classing of Manifest Destiny; and it communicated the ideology of a more refined and more evolved U.S. nation than the non-White nations and non-middle and upper classes, justifying westward expansion.

By reworking a particular form of wearing pants and ridiculing bloomers, *Harper’s* taught women and girls, as well as men and boys, middle- and upper-class taste and gendered ideologies of the political and domestic. Such domestic rhetoric and discourse emerged at the crucial moment and historical conjunction of westward expansion and Manifest Destiny in U.S. history. Amy Kaplan (1998) contends: “Domestic discourse both redresses and reenacts the contradictions of empire through its own double movement to expand female influence beyond the home and the nation while simultaneously contracting woman’s sphere to police domestic boundaries against the threat of foreignness both within and without” (p. 585). As a threatening Other, bloomerites and women who wore pants—whether those who advocated for women’s rights or those who donned pants for various reasons because of their class position—did not fit within a domestic/political sphere narrative or White masculine U.S. expansionism. Hence, *Harper’s* constructed an image of U.S. imperial dress for the new U.S. westward expansion. This image communicated ideologies that encouraged those westbound to create middle- and upper- class sensibilities and virtues as well as sustain gendered spheres in the recently usurped or annexed territories.

Conclusion

In this study, I have contextualized, unpacked, and discussed two illuminating editorials published in a major U.S. print magazine. Clearly, such a small amount of data has its limitations, but the two editorials I highlighted shed light on one of the major mid-nineteenth century concerns during U.S. expansionism: Women who wore pants disrupted both gender and class expectations. Race and ethnicity undoubtedly added another layer to the resistance of White women donning pants. Given that *Harper’s* was widely popular in the mid-nineteenth century U.S. and, in particular, served as a key influence during westward expansion, many people of the U.S. would have consumed such images. The visual rhetoric and discourse of these images most likely would have evoked a particular gendered and classed U.S. nation, with middle- and upper-class women embodying the domestic virtues of elegance, refinement, submissiveness, and passive femininity and middle- and upper-class men enacting the political virtues of asserting independence and creating high culture while doing so with modesty and rationality. Such rhetoric created paradigms for how White U.S. citizens expanded westward, most likely justifying usurping land and displacing or murdering non-White peoples (Native Americans and Mexicans).

This study provides more ways to think about how imperialism functioned in visual culture, creating and sustaining power dynamics that preserve(d) oppressive, hierarchical structures (racist, sexist, and classist). Such structures have and continue to have exploitative relationships. By better understanding the operations of historical imperialism, we can identify more clearly and directly contemporary exploitative relationships as well as develop strategies that might resist current imperial endeavors. One of the strategies for this study was using an anti-imperialist lens to situate circulating ideologies in the mid-nineteenth century among cultural practices and print culture. Another strategy I used was thinking about the intersectionality of identity within the context of U.S. imperialism. Other historical analyses would benefit from these strategies, considering the connections among social constructs—gender, class, race, and nationality—and how these connections support, perpetuate, challenge, and/or resist patriarchal, White supremacy and capitalist ideologies and practices. Other strategies might examine the contemporary visual and material rhetorics that institutions—e.g., mass (electronic) media, education, family, religion, police, the army, law, and government—manage, deploy, and/or dismiss. By interrogating these rhetorics, scholars can illuminate the nuanced contradictions, exploitations, and injustices of empire, particularly as they operate within neocolonial and global contexts.

References

- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of Seeing*. London, England: Penguin.
- Brown, W. H., Mulford, C., & Foster, H. W. (1996). *The power of sympathy*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Cunningham, P. A. (2003). *Reforming women's fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, health, and art*. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.
- Fashions for July. (1851, May). *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 3(14), 287-288. Retrieved from <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moa/index.html>
- Fischer, G. V. (1997). "Pantalets" and "Turkish Trousers": Designing freedom in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. *Feminist Studies* 23(1), 110-140.
- Greenberg, A. (2005). *Manifest manhood and the antebellum American empire*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaplan, A. (1998). Manifest Domesticity. *American Literature* 70(3), 581-606.
- A leaf from Punch. (1852, January). *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 4(20), 285-287. Retrieved from <http://ebooks.library.cornell.edu/m/moa/index.html>
- Leppert, R. (2007). *The nude: The cultural rhetoric of the body in the art of western modernity*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Levitt, S. (1993). From Mrs. Bloomer to the bloomer: The social significance of the nineteenth-century English dress reform movement. *Textile History*, 24(1), 27-37.
- Nelson, J. L. (2000). Dress reform and the bloomer. *Journal of American & Comparative Cultures*, 23(1), 21-25.
- Nochlin, L. (1989). *The politics of vision: Essays on nineteenth-century art and society*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Parkin, K. (2012). "Glittering mockery": Twentieth-century leap year marriage proposals. *Journal of Family History*, 37(1), 85-104.
- Phegley, J. (2004). Literacy piracy, nationalism, and women readers in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 1850-1855. *American Periodicals*, 14(1), 63-90.
- Ryan, M. P. (1990). *Women in public: Between banners and ballots, 1825-1880*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press.
- Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Smith, S. A. (2006). *Household words: Bloomers, suckers, bombshell, scab, nigger, cyber*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Stevens, M. A. (Ed.). (1984). *The Orientalists, Delacroix to Matisse: European painters in North Africa and the Near East*. London, England: Royal Academy of Arts in association with Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- Torrens, K. M. (1997). All dressed up with no place to go: Rhetorical dimensions of the nineteenth century dress reform movement. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 20(2), 189-210.
- Torrens, K. M. (1999). Fashion as argument: Nineteenth-century dress reform. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36, 77-87.
- Welter, B. (1966). The cult of true womanhood: 1820-1860. *American Quarterly*, 18(2), 151-174.

About the Author

Phil Bratta is a Ph.D student in Rhetoric and Writing at Michigan State University. He received his MA in English (focus in Rhetoric and Composition) at University of Florida and BA in Cultural Studies at Columbia College Chicago. His interests are in rhetorics of activism and art, visual rhetorics, embodiment, spatial rhetorics, rhetorical ecologies, and pedagogy. He was Co-Chair (with Malea Powell) of the 2014 Cultural Rhetorics Conference. He has published in *The Journal of American Culture* and *enculturation: journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture*, and he is co-editor for the Cultural Rhetorics special issue in *enculturation: journal of rhetoric, writing, and culture* (forthcoming).

For more information, please visit his website: www.philbratta.com

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Karen Keifer-Boyd and Debbie Smith-Shank, all the VCG reviewers of the article, Jodi Schorb, and Lindsey McLean for their thorough and thoughtful feedback and suggestions.