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Jail Break...Yet Still Shackled? Refraining the 1890s Bloomer Costume

This paper examines how the bloomer costume and its associations with dress reformers of the late nineteenth century were interpreted as a threat to the Victorian social and gender order and how the bloomer costume was subsequently reframed by the commercial manufacturing industry as being conducive to a woman's femininity. To do so I examine periodical documents and images, and a collection of four bicycling scrapbooks. New Women threatened men in ways that the conforming matron abiding by the Cult of True Womanhood never could. Opposition notwithstanding bicycle manufacturers recognized the popularity and potential market for bloomers. The New Woman evolved from being swathed in fashionable dress, to her emancipated yet threatening presence in the bloomer costume, and finally being reframed as a fashionable, feminine version of the bloomer costume. To counter the highly loaded feminist reform movement the bloomer costume was repackaged as conducive to a woman's femininity rather than being compromising.
