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"The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood": The Bicycle's Influence on Women's Freedom and Femininity in the 1890s

Sarah Tkach

"Let me tell you what I think of bicycling," declared suffragist Susan B. Anthony in an 1896 interview in the *New York World*.

"I think it has done more to emancipate women than anything else in the world. I stand and rejoice every time I see a woman ride by on a wheel. It gives woman a feeling of freedom and self-reliance. It makes her feel as if she were independent. The moment she takes her seat she knows she can't get into harm unless she gets off her bicycle, and away she goes, the picture of free, untrammelled womanhood."¹

Since Anthony was in her seventies at the time of the 1890s bicycle craze, she likely did not actually ride the wheel. Even so, in her high-profile interview with Nellie Bly, the famous "girl reporter," the lifelong suffragist and reformer singled out bicycling for its contributions

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 41

to women’s emancipation.² Anthony was well aware that the fleeting happiness of the bicycle did not make up for the otherwise unequal status of women, phrasing her praise as, for example, giving women the *feeling* of independence, rather than true independence, which would only come with the ballot.³ Nonetheless, she welcomed the bicycle because it helped “to make [women] equal with men in work and pleasure” and gave women a taste of what their lives could be like in a truly equal society.⁴

Scholars have studied many aspects of the “bicycle craze” of the 1890s. Scholars have studied the connection between the bicycle and changes in tourism, recreation, and transportation. Historians studying social history have recorded the effects that bicycling had on women’s fashion by increasing the demand for dress reform, the most controversial of which was bloomers.⁵ Historians of medicine have researched the medical history of biking and how the new sport challenged 19th century notions of health and physi-

² Bly became famous for her 1889 trip around the world in seventy-two days, beating the fictional record of Phileas Fogg, Jules Verne’s hero in *Around the World in Eighty Days*, published in 1872. She had fought gender barriers to gain acceptance as a serious journalist in a male-dominated field. See Peter Zheutlin, *Around the World on Two Wheels* (New York: Citadel Press, 2008), 16.

³ Bly, 10.

⁴ Lynn Sherr, *Failure Is Impossible* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 277.

⁵ See David V. Herlihy, *Bicycle* (New Haven: Yale Press, 2004), 267-71. Libby Smith Miller invented the Turkish trouser, later called the bloomer after Amelia Bloomer, which reemerged forty years later with female riders; See Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right* (New York: Oxford Press, 1985), 71.

cality. Many physicians saw the bicycle as an antidote to men's physical denigration due to increasingly sedentary urban lifestyles.⁶ However, they hotly debated the appropriateness of women adopting the sport. This paper uses the research of Ellen Gruber Garvey, David Herlihy, Pryor Dodge, Sarah Hallenbeck, Lisa S. Strange and Robert S. Brown, which explore how women embraced and contested the freedom of the bicycle. Numerous primary source materials have illuminated the significant sense of freedom women experienced through riding the bicycle.⁷

Bicycling was a catalyst for people to reexamine gender norms, expectations, and behavior. While historians have studied many of the bicycle's important implications, they have neglected to look more closely at how it affected the women.⁸ This paper examines how in the 1890s, the bicycle was a means through which changing concepts of women's freedom and femininity were realized. It analyzes the bicycle as

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 43

a symbol of a variety of freedoms, including physical, emotional, spatial, social, religious, and political. Next, the paper considers how these changing freedoms impacted notions of femininity by challenging or supporting Victorian womanhood, or doing a combination.

During the 1890s, an estimated ten million bicycles were in use out of a population close to seventy-six million.⁹ Technology started the trend in the 1880s, as manufacturers shifted from high-wheeler, or “ordinary” bicycle, with one enormous wheel in front and a small wheel in back, to the “safety” bicycle, a technologically superior machine with two equal-sized wheels, pneumatic tires, chain drive technology, and a diamond frame. “Safety bikes” allowed men and women alike to ride with equal ease.¹⁰ Indeed, people commented that bicycling was democratic, open to men and women, rich and poor, urban and rural.¹¹ Despite its eventual widespread popularity, the bicycle was not initially accepted. Though impressed with the tricycle on a trip to England in 1880, writer Emma Moffett Tyng believed that for most Americans, “all the proprieties since Martha Washington forbade” adoption of the bicycle.¹² Aware of the medical and moral debates about women riding on bicycle saddles, manufacturers designed tricycles with full seats. Though more socially acceptable and easier to ride in long skirts, the tricycles’

⁹ Aronson, 309.

¹⁰ Zheutlin, *Around the World*, 27-8.

¹¹ Margery A. Bulger, “American Sportswomen in the 19th Century,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 14.

¹² Emma Moffett Tyng, “Exercise for Women: Bicycles and Tricycles,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 23, no. 32 (9 Aug. 1890): 614, APS Online (accessed 6 Mar. 2011).

"marketing initiatives won limited success" since it was heavier, more wind resistant, and less efficient than a bicycle.¹³

Ten years later, Emma Tyng welcomed the bicycle, as did tens of thousands of other Americans. The price of a new safety bicycle lowered from \$150 to \$100 by the mid-1890s.¹⁴ The price was just low enough to tempt many people, even when "the annual per capita income was about \$1,000."¹⁵ Biking was particularly popular with women. In 1891, the editor of *The Wheel and Cycling Trade Review* claimed women had flocked to cycling "with all the eagerness of a duck to water."¹⁶ The bicycle presented women the opportunity for "independence and freedom."¹⁷

The high wheeler, or "ordinary" bicycle, with one enormous wheel and a small wheel behind it, had specifically masculine connotations. With a few exceptions of already morally suspect female stage performers, only adventurous wealthy young men rode the high wheeler as other people watched and laughed at the fad.¹⁸ With the advent of the safety bike with two equal-sized wheels and a diamond frame, women had the chance to have "an enhanced version of the freedoms that riding a high wheeler had allowed men," and these freedoms challenged existing gender definitions.¹⁹ So even as the safety bike was much more

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 45

equally accessible to both men and women because of its design, it inherited the masculine connotations of the high wheeler. In response, bicycle manufacturers developed a separate, marked variety to assert that “a woman’s mode of riding was available and that riding need not be masculinizing.”²⁰ Manufacturers designed drop-framed bicycles to accommodate women’s skirts, and gave their models female names such as Josephine or Victoria.²¹

In Victorian American society, wealthier white women did not participate in physically strenuous tasks, as doctors considered them fragile and weak, despite the evidence of working-class women regularly laboring away at exhausting tasks. Scholar Hallenbeck explains that common beliefs at the time asserted that men had much more energy than women. Women had, “limited feminine bodily economy,” meaning that their energies “could not be fully restored once depleted through intellectual or physical exertion.”²² Medical literature portrayed women as trapped by their bodies, and the bicycle released women from their entrapment by their bodies’ frailty and weakness. De Koven described the feeling of riding as one in which “the whole body becomes alive, the circulation is increased, indigestion cured, and nerves forgotten.”²³ Female riders gained a new sense of ownership over their own bodies through “the exhilaration of the sense of power over the wheel.”²⁴ Riding was a question of “confidence...will-power, and nerve-control” requiring

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Hallenbeck, 331.

²³ de Koven, “Bicycling for Women,” 393.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

the development of mental poise, character, and self-government.²⁵

Some women drew a direct connection between the mastery of the wheel and confidence that women could carry to all other aspects of her life. The woman rider, de Koven wrote, "will become mistress of herself, as of her wheel, no longer a victim to hysterics, ... a rational, useful being restored to health and sanity."²⁶ De Koven's use of "rational" also suggests a departure from the traditional view of women as irrational beings. Frances Willard, president of the influential Women's Christian Temperance Union, consciously used her position as a public figure to advocate women bicycling. She publicized her glowing account of learning to ride in the 1895 book *A Wheel Within a Wheel*.²⁷ Willard saw the bicycle as giving women the freedom to live their lives more fully. She loved to see "worn-out women" take up bicycling "and find a new lease of health and life thereby."²⁸ Willard hoped others would find "encouragement by [her] example" to embrace physical activity to relieve their ills.²⁹

Cycling paved the way for changing images of womanhood. Dr. Lucy Hall-Brown saw the positive effects of women learning to ride as women gained physical freedom through changing notions of [through

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 47

acceptance of a more athletic] femininity. When women understood the needs of their muscles and started to use them, the “whole being responded with a joy born of its new freedom.”³⁰ Also, cycling “opened the door to...every form of desirable exercise for women.”³¹

Anthony recognized these physical freedoms as supporting a larger mission: women’s emancipation, beginning with emancipation from Victorian constraints. Further, she believed the bicycle offered new freedoms as it gave “women fresh air and exercise.”³² Echoing Anthony, women’s rights advocate Stanton also valued the bicycle’s role in increasing women’s self-reliance. As biographer Elizabeth Griffith writes of Stanton, “women’s absolute self-reliance—physical, emotional, financial, political, intellectual and legal independence” was paramount.³³ Even in her early writings she advocated women developing all their faculties and having a fair chance to prove themselves physically, which they did not have since they did not have men’s freedom.³⁴ Thus, for women the bicycle was a means on their path to full self-development. Stanton viewed the bicycle as “a great blessing to our girls” as it encouraged “self-reliance” and “mechanical ingenuity” when they had to repair their bicycles.³⁵ A

³⁰ Lucy Hall-Brown, “The Wheel as an Aid to Health,” *Harper’s Bazaar* 29, no. 11 (14 Mar. 1896): 231, APS Online (accessed 6 Mar. 2011).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Sherr, 277.

³³ Griffith, 203-4.

³⁴ Roberta A. Park, “All the Freedom of the Boy’ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Nineteenth-Century Architect of Women’s Rights,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 18, no. 1 (2001): 14, Routledge Online (accessed 9 Feb. 2011).

³⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton quoted in Park, 22-3.

prophetic thinker, Stanton's views on bicycling reflect a deeper philosophy about women's place in society than what others described as merely an enjoyable pastime.

Writer and playwright Marguerite Merington commented on the "heavy burden of work...laid on all the sisterhood," which according to class was "to do good, earn bread, or squander leisure."³⁶ The bicycle provided relief from the expectations of daily life so that women of "many callings and conditions love the wheel."³⁷ Merington saw the bike as the means linking women with a broader world when faced with the narrowness of their sphere, declaring that "the sufferer can do no better than flatten her sphere to a circle, mount it, and take to the road."³⁸ The change of scene and exercise could only immensely benefit women. For Hopkins, the wheel was the "strongest influence... to induce [women] to release themselves from their self-imprisonment" and "a godsend to many," lifting women "from inertia of body and stagnation of mind to a higher life physically, mentally, and morally."³⁹ Hopkins connected physical health with mental and emotional health as well as morality. For upper and middle class women who spent most of their lives indoors supervising domestic servants and cultivating an ornamental existence, the bicycle offered a drastic change towards focus on personal accomplishment. De Koven described the joy and pride of learning to ride: "Suddenly you feel that you have it, and presto! you

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 49

are off! The secret is yours, the victor’s crown upon your brow!”⁴⁰

A constrained woman’s body signified compliance with a strict set of moral codes, which contemporary medical opinion supported.⁴¹ Women who abandoned corsets and floor-length skirts signified that they rejected normative aesthetic and moral conventions. Thus, women cyclists risked social scorn when they stepped out of their domestic realm to ride the wheel. However, women’s clothing could not sustain the rigors of cycling, and it caught on wheels, chains, and pedals so often that women sought alternative clothing for when they went riding.

Anthony supported dress reform inspired by the bicycle. Anthony saw the bicycle as a catalyst for freer, more sensible dress for women.⁴² She wanted women to have the freedom to choose “dress to suit the occasion” like men, who could wear pants and then switch to “gowns and caps when on the Judge’s bench” without criticism.⁴³ Stanton as well valued the dress reform and urged women to ignore public criticism and wear what was practical. For Stanton, what was practical was natural, and a woman wearing traditional floor-length dress to ride was “unnatural—like a ‘churn on casters, a pyramid in shape from waist downwards.”⁴⁴ Stanton urged women to “decide for

⁴⁰ de Koven, “Bicycling for Women,” 389.

⁴¹ Dodge, 122.

⁴² Bly, 10.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Shall Women Ride the Bicycle?” *The American Wheelman* [May 1896], quoted in Lisa S. Strange and Robert S. Brown, “The Bicycle, Women’s Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton,” *Women’s Studies* 31, no. 5 (Sept./Oct.

themselves what was feminine and attractive."⁴⁵ Thus, female bicyclists could choose to wear bifurcated skirts, bloomers, or shorter skirts because they could and should have autonomy over their personal comportment. The bicycle enabled a new femininity based on personal choice having more influence than societal pressure.

Emotional freedom was closely tied to physical freedom brought by the bicycle. Writer and bicycle enthusiast Hopkins repeated other writers in her praises of the bicycle's liberating effects for women. She argued that the bicycle "took [women] completely out of themselves, giving rest and a complete change never before experienced."⁴⁶ Women returned from a ride with "new-found hope," "joy," "strength and courage" to vanquish any "petty annoyances and worriments."⁴⁷ The bicycle was the impetus for increased freedom from worry.

As women progressed in learning to ride week to week, wrote Emma Moffett Tyng in *Harper's Bazaar*, they gained an "increase of strength, endurance, and steadiness," along with "the exhilaration, the sense of action and aliveness" from their individual efforts.⁴⁸ These attributes brought more satisfaction than the fleeting gratification of a purchase. Only "courage," "nerve," "confidence, perseverance, and patient practice" could help women reach their goal, not depend-

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 51

ence on men or docility, as societal prescriptions dictated.⁴⁹ Tyng argued that women developed “decision and firmness of character” in the learning to ride.⁵⁰ Prevailing notions of femininity did not advocate for these characteristics associated with physical, mental, and emotional strength. Bicycling placed women squarely in the center of their own lives and experiences, allowing them self-governance over their bodies.

In addition to physical and emotional freedom, the bicycle offered increased mobility for its female riders. One observer wrote that a bicyclist’s “power of movement” increased “from three to fourfold” that of a pedestrian, providing the rider with “the enlarged power of seeing persons and places.”⁵¹ Bicycles allowed women to visit neighboring towns and the countryside, quite an increase in spatial freedom for city dwellers who “except for an occasional railroad trip, rarely left their place of residence.”⁵² While working-class women, including immigrants and ethnic minorities, could not usually afford bicycles, the “metal steed” extended travel to middle class, white American women and men.⁵³ In contrast, earlier in the 19th century, only elites had the means to have horses and carriages that offered the amount of movement now available with the more affordable bicycle.⁵⁴ Middle class women

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Martyn, 939.

⁵² Aronson, 311.

⁵³ The bicycle was commonly compared to the horse and described with equine terms. See Smith, 11-2. “Metal steed” was used by de Koven, “Bicycling for Women,”392.

⁵⁴ Aronson, 311.

particularly embraced the bicycle's freedom of mobility because they lacked it in their lives as homemakers.

Women made up at least one third of the bicycling market in the US.⁵⁵ That such a large portion of riders would rather risk social criticism by cycling than acquiesce back to their indoor domain indicates women's desire for change. Writer Martyn claimed that "the wheel has brought a new freedom, an emancipation from the monotony of household routine and from conventions of dress," explaining why women enjoy cycling "even more than the men."⁵⁶ Martyn continued the freedom metaphor, saying that biking gave women specifically "a novel and unexpected enfranchisement" and a "great emancipation."⁵⁷

Also, the bicycle could help decrease isolation, as it brought "city and country into closer union."⁵⁸ Bicycling increased one's social circle to include "all other families within a radius of ten or even twenty miles."⁵⁹ Social connectedness was particularly valuable for women since their primary tasks, childrearing and housekeeping, took place in isolation from other women. While the bicycle played a key role fostering women's spatial freedom, it also contributed to increased social freedom. The freedom to enter new spaces contributed to increased social freedom.

The bicycle "fundamentally transformed social relations" especially those between men and women.⁶⁰ With greater mobility and freer fashion, women could

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 53

meet men as social equals in ways in which they had not before. Bicycles changed courtship, too, opening the door for more privacy for a couple. In 1896, historian Joseph B. Bishop described how the bicycle altered notions of propriety in socializing. Parents who usually required a chaperone for their daughters when they accompanied young men to the theater had embraced the bicycle and “allow[ed] [their daughters] to go bicycle-riding alone with young men,” considering this outing “perfectly proper.”⁶¹

Some saw the bicycle as creating more equal relationships between men and women, especially in marriage. Writer de Koven believed that bicycling was a worthwhile basis for relationships, and crucial for “developing the independent intercourse of men and women.”⁶² Harry Dacre’s popular 1892 song “Daisy Bell,” also known as “Bicycle Built for Two,” included the line “we will go in tandem as man and wife.”⁶³ Speaking to the beloved Daisy, the man sang, “You’ll take the lead in each trip we take,/ Then if I don’t do well,/ I’ll permit you to use the brake.”⁶⁴ These lyrics suggest a marriage ideal of companionate partnership, where the husband still retained most of the power, but viewed his wife as a capable being, in place of rigid subordination where the husband did not expect to consult his wife or share any interests with her. Though the message was mixed, supporters eagerly

⁶¹ Bishop, 683.

⁶² de Koven, “Bicycling for Women,” 394.

⁶³ Harry Dacre, “Daisy Bell (A Bicycle Built for Two),” 1892, National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences: Kids’ Pages Sing-Along Songs, <http://kids.niehs.nih.gov/lyrics/daisy.htm> (accessed 20 Feb. 2011).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

anticipated the bicycle's positive effects on gender relations.

In addition to offering women more freedom in courtship and marriage, the bicycle also increased the acceptance of mixed gender socializing. Bishop declared, "there is no leveller [sic] like the wheel" and riders "treat the bicycle as the badge of equality among all its possessors."⁶⁵ Further, as many commentators at the time noted, the bicycle "br[ought] all classes together" so that each rider felt "fully the equal of every other" since "a wheel of some kind [wa]s within every one's reach."⁶⁶ Some bicycling clubs, such as the Harlem Wheelmen of New York, even admitted women members.⁶⁷ As white women enjoyed more white-collar employment opportunities like being a social worker or department store clerk, they could use their wages to buy a bicycle. Bicycling was "open to the members of both sexes equally," could be enjoyed as a family pastime, and gave men and women a socially-sanctioned activity to do together.⁶⁸ Men wanted their female relatives to keep them company on rides, so they supported women learning to ride.⁶⁹ Shared activities supported companionate male-female relationships, though it could also reinforce women's traditional role helping and accompanying someone out of duty.

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 55

In addition to freedom to socialize with suitors and husbands, women also gained the freedom to have social bicycle clubs. While countless women’s clubs had formed in the later part of the 19th century, few addressed the need for women’s advancement in physical activity.⁷⁰ In the spring of 1888, Mrs. Harriette H. Mills of Washington D.C. established the first women’s cycling club, and women in other cities soon followed suit.⁷¹ The leaders of these clubs could be strong role models for women riders. For instance, Emma Rummell, captain of the Women’s Wheel and Athletic Club of Buffalo, had “during the past season covered some 2,500 miles, and quite a number of the members have done 2,000.”⁷² Some women even defied social pressure against female athletic competition by competing in bicycle races.⁷³

The bicycle drew people away from Sunday church services, which elicited criticism from the pious, and disagreement among women. Since the responsibility of moral guardianship lay with women, skipping church would have been rather daring. Certainly some women, probably including temperance activist Willard, wanted to maintain Sabbath traditions. For women who supported traditional Christianity, the bicycle was a tool for evangelizing. Women enthusiastically joined the Salvation Army’s bicycle corps to spread the Gospel.⁷⁴ The freedoms offered by the bicycle allowed missionaries to devote more time and

⁷⁰ Welch, 37.

⁷¹ Herlihy, 244.

⁷² “Bicycling,” *Outing*, 46.

⁷³ Herlihy, 205.

⁷⁴ Taylor, 352-9.

energy to evangelizing.⁷⁵ The Salvation Army's use of the bicycle demonstrates how though many religious people had initially considered the bicycle immoral and sinful, others saw in it the freedom to expand their public roles and speak freely about their religion.

Those who disliked traditional Christianity, like Stanton, saw the bicycle as allowing people more freedom in how they wanted to worship and experience the divine. As a transcendentalist, Stanton opposed the dogmatism and structure of the established church, believing that true spiritual fulfillment "lay not in coming to church or studying the Bible, but in communing with nature."⁷⁶ Cycling outdoors gave women the chance to revel in nature's beauty, which was "the true expression of divinity."⁷⁷ Since the bicycle took women out in the "open" and "balmy" air, it offered them a chance to experience spirituality in a very personal way.⁷⁸ Stanton thought that the bicycle supported a freer religion based on egalitarian spiritual principles of "self-reliance" and "commonsense."⁷⁹ In addition to bringing women to a place where they could experience God, cycling also offered women the freedom from preachers who labeled them sinners and a Church that emphasized self-denial, restraint, and women's subordination.⁸⁰ Bicycles facilitated both a rejection of what some women felt was oppressive

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 57

religion, as well as an invitation to explore a deeper spiritual connection with the natural world.

Historian Dodge argues that the bicycle “served as the vehicle for specific political movements organized by and around the issue of women’s rights.”⁸¹ The 1890s saw renewed interest in women’s rights as Americans confronted the challenges of increasing urbanization and industrialization. Women wanted to influence the rapidly changing social and political scene. Most notably, the bicycle represented the political movement for rational dress, but this was not the bicycle’s only political connection. Temperance reformer Willard saw the bicycle as “the greatest agent of the temperance reform” since riding required sobriety.⁸² Suffragists sometimes viewed the surge in cycling’s popularity as helping their cause.

Bicycling became political as cyclists organized to promote their rights and interests, particularly for better roads. For some women, bicycling became a natural bridge to gaining women’s rights. Anthony and Stanton saw a direct connection between the bicycle and woman suffrage. Anthony considered participation in the bicycling community as a natural bridge to gaining women’s rights, as “the bicycle preache[d] the necessity for woman suffrage.”⁸³ When bicyclists demanded special laws creating bike roads, Anthony wrote in a letter to the editor, women could “see that their petitions would be more respected by the law-makers if they had votes.”⁸⁴ Male members of bicycling

⁸¹ Dodge, 133.

⁸² “Miss Willard Hopeful,” 14.

⁸³ Sherr, 277.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

associations like the League of American Wheelmen could see "that they [we]re losing a sources of strength because so many riders of the machine are women."⁸⁵ Thus, the initially non-political bicycle spurred participation in lobbying and consciousness-raising for women about how the vote would benefit them.

The bicycle's numerous freedoms also illicit warnings of accompanying physical and social risks. For instance, when Bishop wrote that "many girls prefer a ride in a bicycle costume in the evening to sitting at home in more elaborate apparel," he described women taking advantage of new freedom of dress, freedom to explore the world beyond the home, and freedom to socialize unchaperoned with others.⁸⁶ On the other hand, one satirical poem from 1896 described a series of young women each with a special pocket in their bloomers for "a flask," a pistol, a poetry collection, "women suffrage speeches," or stock quotations, respectively.⁸⁷ This poem hints of the bloomers' connection to activities forbidden to women: drinking alcohol, firearms, reading, politics, and business.⁸⁸ Partaking in cycling, particularly while wearing bloomers, associated women with masculine activities.

While many supporters of women cycling argued that cycling could be integrated with existing gender roles, and even strengthen femininity by creating more robust mothers, Stanton approached bicycling from a very different angle. As scholars Strange and Brown point out, Stanton rejected the traditional feminine

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 59

sphere and “in effect conceded that cycling might radically alter the role of women in Victorian society and celebrated that very prospect.”⁸⁹ Bicycling would spur the development of androgynous “cardinal virtues” and “inspire women with more courage, self-respect and self-reliance and make the next generation more vigorous of mind and body.”⁹⁰ Stanton transformed the bicycle from a simple leisure activity to a symbol of emancipation.

In a similar tone, the collection of editorials about women bicycling that appeared in an 1895 issue of *The Literary Digest* contained a few voices in agreement that the bicycle was bringing rapid change to gender norms. Wheeling was “undoubtedly revolutionizing habits to which women have been tied,” acknowledged one writer, and “it [ran] counter to immemorial prejudices as to the sphere with which feminine activities should be confined.”⁹¹ The writer then praised the changes in womanhood brought about by the bicycle, saying that it gave women “self-reliance” and helped them overcome “the timidity which used to be considered so appropriate to them as beings who needed the shelter of seclusion and the protection of manly courage.”⁹² The writer recognized and welcomed changes in womanhood brought about by the bicycle. As societal

⁸⁹ Strange and Brown, 622.

⁹⁰ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Era of the Bicycle,” *The American Wheelman* (30 May 1895): 41, quoted in Lisa S. Strange and Robert S. Brown, “The Bicycle, Women’s Rights, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton,” *Women’s Studies* 31, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2002): 619, Academic Search Premier EBSCOhost (accessed 20 Feb. 2011).

⁹¹ “The Revolutionary Bicycle,” *The Literary Digest*, 5 [335].

⁹² Ibid.

norms shifted, ideal femininity shifted, too, so that the ideal woman sought to cultivate new traits like athleticism and abandon older ones like passivity.

Numerous authors urged women to consult doctors before learning to ride. In order to retain their femininity, women were only supposed to ride at a moderate pace. The bent-over-the-handlebars racing position was criticized in men, but for women "bicycle-riding posture could be a significant measure of propriety and sexual innocence."⁹³ Immoderation, leaning over the handlebars, and "scorching" (racing) marked a woman rider as crossing the boundaries of feminine behavior into what was masculine.

Non-medically trained women who wrote about the bicycle's physical benefits challenged the prerogative of the medical establishment over women's bodies. By asserting that through the embodied experience of riding, a woman gained the knowledge to make her own decisions about her body, bicycling advocates challenged the perceived need for outside "experts" to monitor women's bodies.⁹⁴ Advocates urged women to embrace bodily freedom and autonomy and to trust their own experiences with the therapeutic and preventative health benefits of the bicycle. The praise that women lavished on the bicycle created convincing support for bicycling, as well as a strong counterargument to the prevailing notions of women's frailty. Women were not destined to a life of nerves and hysterics due to their gender; rather these were symptoms of physically restricting norms and seden-

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 61

tary lifestyles.⁹⁵ Scholar Hallenbeck concludes that articles supportive of bicycling suggested “the renewability of women’s health through exercise.”⁹⁶

The bicycle figured prominently in Edna C. Jackson’s 1896 short story “A Fin de Cycle Incident,” which illustrates how one young woman negotiates the tension between physical freedom and her fiancé’s notions of appropriate femininity. Protagonist Renie’s conservative fiancé believes no “womanly woman” has use for sports, and explains that he chose Renie over the *fin de siècle* girl and her “mannish posing as an athlete” because he prefers traditional, docile femininity.⁹⁷ However, Renie secretly adores athletics and has started to learn to ride. Torn between her seemingly irreconcilable love for cycling and her love for her fiancé, Renie feels increasingly constrained by the Victorian “pedestal” of womanhood, and turns to exercise for mental and emotional relief.⁹⁸ The story’s climax occurs when Renie races on a bicycle to save her fiancé from some hoboes’ plans to capture and kill him. Her fiancé changes his mind about women riding in bloomers being an “unwomanly exhibition” when Renie claims that she “never could have made it [in time to save his life] with a skirt on!”⁹⁹ The fiancé character thus shows how the bicycle changed social

⁹⁵ See for instance Bisland, 386. See also Willard and Stanton.

⁹⁶ Hallenbeck, 339.

⁹⁷ Edna C. Jackson, “A Fin de Cycle Incident,” *Outing* (June 1896): 192-8, in *The American 1890s*, ed. Susan Harris Smith and Melanie Dawson (Durham, NC: Duke Press, 2000), 293, 292.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 293-4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 298, 302.

perceptions of femininity to include more physical activity and a more companionate marriage, as the couple "spend most delightful hours together, perambulating the country, per cycle."¹⁰⁰ Cycling, initially a hurdle to marital happiness, becomes instead a heroic element, and a personal interest that Renie retains and even shares with her husband in her marriage.

However, many people still saw the bicycle as challenging femininity in undesirable ways. Even Martyn, who praised the bicycle for men and women, noted that "it will be interesting to watch [the wheel's] effects upon social life, which cannot all be good."¹⁰¹ While contemporary historian Bishop wrote that parents saw no objection to letting their daughters bicycle unchaperoned with young men, modern scholar Garvey points out that "when unmarried men and women rode together, cycling threatened chastity and order."¹⁰² Another writer warned parents to exercise caution when allowing their daughters to go riding with men: "young people...stand before a new danger...the temptations are peculiar and come insidiously even when there was at first not a shadow of evil in the mind...a [rest stop] necessitates an abandon that is not always seemly."¹⁰³ The warning suggests that co-ed outings were probably quite popular, possibly for those very reasons.

A 1896 statement issued by the Women's Rescue League demonstrated extreme opposition to the bicycle as liberating, seeing it instead as a threat to women

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 63

and society. League president Charlotte M. Smith alleged that “bicycling by young women ha[d] helped more than any other media to swell the ranks of reckless girls, who finally drift into the standing army of outcast women in the United States.”¹⁰⁴ The sexual arousal supposedly resulting from contact with the bicycle saddle, the change in fashions, and the move to co-ed socializing made the bicycle guilty of fostering prostitution in the eyes of the “highly respectable females” composing League membership.¹⁰⁵ Further, the League claimed that the bicycle was “the devil’s advance agent, morally and physically.”¹⁰⁶ The League’s sharp resistance to the bicycle’s effects on independence seemed to represent a minority view. The periodical *Public Opinion* published responses to the League’s claims, and most asserted that the bicycle had “of course a bad effect in individual instances, but ha[d] be[come] a moral and physical blessing to so many riders.”¹⁰⁷

The bicycle challenged the notion that femininity meant weakness. As discussed previously, the gusto with which women took to the bicycle and their success at riding proved that they could indeed master the physically challenging sport. De Koven wrote that the bicycle was particularly suitable to women.¹⁰⁸ Her idea of femininity was one in which women could conquer their problems with “vapors and nerves,” in other

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 143.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ de Koven, “Bicycling for Women,” 393.

words, a strong femininity, which was a departure from Victorian ideals.¹⁰⁹

WCTU President Willard considered learning to ride a bicycle consistent with traditional femininity.¹¹⁰ A *New York Times* interview described Willard as "delightfully womanly."¹¹¹ Willard showed that cycling complemented traditional femininity and its emphasis on bettering society through means such as temperance work. Also in 1895, the American Bible House published George F. Hall's novel *A Study in Bloomers, or The Model New Woman*, which concerned a young female passionate about cycling and temperance.¹¹² She embraced both the freedom of the cyclist and the virtuous role of the Victorian woman.

Merington also saw the bicycle as supporting existing concepts of femininity. In a special bicycling issue of *Scribner's Magazine*, she claims that cycling "adds joy and vigor to the dowry of the race," suggesting that riding helped women be better mothers.¹¹³ Advertisers also "asserted a direct link between motherhood and riding."¹¹⁴ For instance, an 1896 ad for a Columbia bike shows a mother pushing her toddler along on her women's bike while the child playfully stretches to reach the pedals.¹¹⁵ In this ad, the bicycle is an aid to childrearing. Pointedly, the woman herself is no longer riding, trapped as she is back in maternity. Nonetheless, this maternity suggests a more

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 65

physically active role of the mother in fostering exercise and good health in her children.

Some people also used bicycling to renew the importance placed on women’s reproductive capacities. In the context of increased immigration and sedentary urban lifestyles, white, native-born, middle and upper class Americans feared for the future of the “American race.” Women who did not have many children were forsaking their feminine duties. Bicycling could encourage women to be physically healthy, and therefore more resilient to the strains of childbirth and childrearing. In an 1896 issue of *Harper’s Bazaar*, Dr. Lucy Hall-Brown specifically praised the bicycle’s role in increasing strength and vigor in women, results “which will tell upon the mothers of the race, and make the coming generation longer-lived, clearer-brained, and abler-bodied.”¹¹⁶ The connections to motherhood demonstrate how at the same time that the bicycle symbolized increasing freedoms, it also could reinforce traditional notions of femininity that stressed women as child bearers. By invoking race, Hall-Brown connected personal health to a social obligation to reproduce. According to the evolutionary science of the day, stronger mothers would give birth to stronger children. Sound motherhood, then made the basis of a stable society.

Periodicals and the burgeoning popular press played a key role in supporting women’s access to and use of bicycles. Most early advertisements consisted of much explanatory text, but bicycle advertisements were different in their use of extensive visual space.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Hall-Brown, 231.

¹¹⁷ Garvey, 69

The use of graphics benefitted female riders because it endowed bicycles with a sense of modernity and glamour and showed that riding could be decorous. Advertisements and catalogs with naturalistic drawings, some of which featured unrealistically long skirts for riding, provided "constant visual reassurance that women could ride the bicycle with grace and even modesty."¹¹⁸ Scholar Garvey argues that these portrayals of cycling as an appropriate feminine activity decreased fears about the wheel threatening femininity. Though femininity was changing, it was doing so in a moderated environment.

Some supporters expressed mixed, even contradictory, attitudes towards women and bicycling. In an 1896 *Godey's Magazine* piece, freelance reporter Mary Bisland articulated her belief that the bike had created "a revolution in the thoughts and actions of our worthy female citizen" and was the "actual medium through which the 'new' woman has evolved herself."¹¹⁹ Bisland saw the bicycle as an irreproachable path to female advancement, unlike suffrage and higher education, which "naturally assailed the feminine mind" with doubts about their "efficacy and purity."¹²⁰ Bisland viewed the female rider as "an absolutely free agent and yet a woman still," language that sets autonomy and womanliness at odds.¹²¹ As "a woman still," the female rider was entitled to retain distinctly gendered behavior expectations for courtesy, admiration, chivalry, and other "feminine prerogatives."¹²² With regards

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 67

to dress reform, Bisland also communicated views that simultaneously supported and undermined new concepts of femininity. She happily predicts her belief in the athletic “ideal female of the future” with comments dissuading women from wearing bloomers, which would realistically better enable athleticism and cycling than long dresses.¹²³ Bloomers, she insisted, were “too great a sacrifice for our sex ever to make” and only in skirts could women “maintain at once in the eyes of men their womanliness and their independence.”¹²⁴ Another writer echoed Bisland’s sentiments by declaring in 1895 that a bloomer-wearing cyclist retained her womanliness and “deserve[d] the same respect which is awarded the rest of her sex.”¹²⁵

Bisland’s support of women’s advancement in the vein of “different but equal” seems the best way to understand her divergent views supporting special treatment for women, and yet claiming that on the bicycle, the woman rider was “on absolute equality with any man.”¹²⁶ Bisland’s views show that the bicycle’s myriad effects muddle clear distinctions between supporters and opponents of increased freedom for women. The interpretation of these freedoms depended greatly on the person’s views of what was appropriately feminine, and whether the prevailing views of femininity supported women’s best interests.

Hopkins only embraced change under the guise of tradition. Hopkins rejected the “New Woman” term often associated with the bicycle and instead saw the

¹²³ Ibid, 387.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 388.

¹²⁵ “The Revolutionary Bicycle,” *The Literary Digest* 4 [334].

¹²⁶ Bisland, 386.

changes in femininity as merely an improvement on existing womanhood leading to a "renewed woman." The "New Woman" was "so strident and ungentle" and affected "mannish manners and masculine attire," while the athletic "renewed woman" was both "womanly and admirable."¹²⁷ Hopkins argued that athleticism and time spent riding outdoors benefited women by enhancing their capacity to help others. This renewed woman "possesses strength and sense to carry out her own ambitions, but... never neglects to lend a helping hand to weaker, wearier souls than hers."¹²⁸ The "renewed woman" was one of action for others, which contrasted prior expectations of passivity but continued women's helping and uplifting role.

The frequency with which writers discussing bicycles invoked liberation metaphors demonstrates the wheel's importance to changing concepts of freedom. More than a steel contraption, the bicycle symbolized shifting definitions of femininity and independence for women. The bicycle offered the chance for socially acceptable physical exercise, mental and emotional relief, new places and people to see, alternative ways to experience religion, and an entry into politics. Spatial, social, religious, and political freedoms challenged traditional femininity. In contrast, both supporters and critics reframed the physical and emotional freedoms accessible by the bicycle as supporting a more robust womanhood conducive to childrearing and homemaking. Writers in the popular press helped to mitigate the threatening aspects of female cyclists. By the 1900s, the bicycling craze had

“The Picture of Free, Untrammelled Womanhood” 69

ended, but the freedoms of the bicycle made a lasting impact on women.¹²⁹ As “Merrie Wheeler” Hopkins stated, for many women, the bicycle was “a new and wonderful element... of freedom and joy in living” and a great bearer of “mental and physical emancipation.”¹³⁰

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¹²⁹ For more about the causes and results of the bicycle’s sudden fall from popularity and profit see Herlihy, *Bicycle*, 283-305.

¹³⁰ Hopkins, “How the Bicycle Won its Way Among Women,” 244.