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## Female Cycling and the Discourse of Moral Panic in Late Victorian Britain

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This article discusses the role of cycling in women's emancipation in late Victorian Britain and explores the attitudes of the middle-class public to women's pursuit of this recreational activity. The unique combination of healthy physical exercise, unrestrained mobility and sporting excitement that the bicycle offered elevated cycling into one of the epoch's most popular leisure activities. For women, the bicycle became an important instrument to break away from the constraints of the androcentric paternalistic culture that stereotyped them and cast them in the passive role of the *angel in the house*. The immense popularity of bicycling with middle- and upper-class women and the inevitable changes in patterns of female leisure, clothing and normative behaviour it involved, caused strong reaction from the bourgeois establishment. An analysis of opinions published in the British press at the time reveals a discourse marked by anxiety that cycling might become an avenue for women to claim more independence for themselves and even subvert the established social framework based on power relations and a clear delineation of gender roles.

Keywords: women; cycling; late Victorian period; gender roles; press; prejudice

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## Mujeres, ciclismo y el discurso del pánico moral en la Gran Bretaña victoriana tardía

Este artículo analiza el papel del ciclismo en la emancipación de las mujeres en la Gran Bretaña victoriana tardía y las actitudes del público de clase media hacia el desempeño de esta actividad recreativa por parte de las mujeres. La combinación única de ejercicio

físico saludable, movilidad ilimitada y emoción deportiva que ofrecía la bicicleta convirtió el ciclismo en una de las actividades de ocio más populares de la época. Para las mujeres, la bicicleta se convirtió en un instrumento importante que les permitía romper las limitaciones de la cultura androcéntrica paternalista que las estereotipaba y las encasillaba en el papel pasivo del *ángel del hogar*. La inmensa popularidad de la que gozó pasear en bicicleta entre las mujeres de clase media y alta y los cambios inevitables que ello comportó en los patrones de ocio femenino, vestimenta y comportamiento normativo provocaron una fuerte reacción por parte del *establishment* burgués. El análisis de las opiniones publicadas en la prensa británica del momento pone de manifiesto un discurso marcado por la ansiedad de que el ciclismo pudiese convertirse en una vía para que las mujeres reclamasen más independencia e incluso subvirtiesen el marco social establecido, basado en las relaciones de poder y una clara delimitación de los roles de género.

Palabras clave: mujeres; ciclismo; época victoriana tardía; roles de género; prensa; prejuicio

## I. INTRODUCTION

The role played by sport and recreation in the rise of feminism in Victorian Britain has been elucidated in numerous works written by such renowned scholars as Jennifer Hargreaves ([1987] 2006), Catriona Parratt (1989), James Anthony Mangan (2006a), Kathleen McCrone (2006), Sue Macy (2017), Roger Gilles (2018), Kat Jungnickel (2018), among others. Cycling features in these works as a recreational activity whose impact on the liberation of women from the constraints of nineteenth-century androcentric culture cannot be overestimated. Scholarly discussion of the topic has also been enriched by Patricia Marks's ([1990] 2015) analysis of satires and caricatures in British and American periodicals of the time, which focuses on the tension between the *womanly woman* and the *manly woman*, i.e., the bicycling New Woman. Relatedly, Lena Wånggren (2017) studies the New Woman cyclist that features in late Victorian popular fiction—short stories, plays and novels, including H. G. Wells's "bicycling" novel, *The Wheels of Chance* (1896).

Cycling and its social effects fascinated writers, satirists, cartoonists and journalists in late Victorian and Edwardian Britain, and as such featured in numerous satirical cartoons published in *Punch* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* as well as in the literature of the period. Supposedly, the first novel in which the bicycle appeared was Ben Hayward's *All Else of No Avail*, published in 1888 (Flanders 2007, 458). Among other writers who addressed the issue were George Gissing, Edith Nesbit, Grant Allen, Arthur Conan Doyle, Thomas Hardy and many of the so-called New Woman writers (Wånggren 2017, 67-100). Cycle mania also resulted in a proliferation of guide books, such as F. J. Erskine's *Lady Cycling: What to Wear and How to Ride* ([1897] 2014), and specialist journals addressing the ever-growing number of both male and female bicycle users, including *Wheel Life*, *CTC Gazette*, *Cyclist*, *Wheeling*, *Cycling Budget*, *Cycling*, *Lady Cyclist*, *Wheelwoman*, *Wheelwoman and Society News* and *Cycling World Illustrated*.

This article attempts to add to the discussion on the role of bicycling in raising women's self-awareness by reference to the newspapers of the period, which registered opinions and attitudes of the middle-class public to women's cycling. The choice of newspapers as material for analysis was dictated by the desire to find out to what extent a vigorous debate on various aspects of female cycling carried out in cycling journals penetrated into newspapers aimed not at the cycling enthusiast but at the general middle-class reader living in British provincial towns and cities. Nonetheless, in order to compare the coverage of the topic in the general press with the periodicals specifically addressing female cycling enthusiasts, some references will also be made to *The Girl's Own Paper* and *Wheelwoman*.

A close study of the news reports, editorials and letters sent by readers to local newspapers documents the scale of the initial prejudice against the adoption of cycling by women, a gradual shift in attitudes as it grew in popularity, and also women's perseverance in striving to break free from the constricting conventions of Victorian bourgeois culture. Cycling, like women's other sporting activities in that period, was

culturally mediated. Its progress was retarded by the deep prejudice or even hostility of a large section of the public, who gave credibility to their stance by appealing to scientific theories, medical opinions and moral arguments. In addition, popular Victorian ideologies on the social construction of gender contributed to the climate of moral panic surrounding women's pursuit of "manly" sports and recreations.

## 2. TWO SPHERES: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN

The middle class, which had gained economic and political power through the Industrial Revolution, used its position to become the leading moral and cultural force, shaping ethical norms and cultural standards in nineteenth-century Britain. Respectability was a central value in the moral system espoused by the Victorian bourgeoisie, which comprised a set of rigid codes of behaviour and public conduct (Huggins and Mangan 2004a, x-xi). The body, particularly the female one, was perceived as something that should be concealed from the opposite sex. Any visual or physical contact with naked bodies was considered immoral. Therefore, in respectable families children from an early age were taught to keep their bodies covered (Cook 2012, 488). Baring parts of the body, otherwise hidden under garments, during sporting or recreational pursuits was an act of defiance and could cost a woman her reputation. In middle-class culture, being respectable equalled appearing respectable (Cordery 1995, 37). Consequently, outward manifestations of respectability, such as the propriety of dress and public conduct, were attestations of uprightness and high moral stature.

Victorian society was distinguished by its clear delineation of the social roles attributed to the sexes, manifested in separate codes of normative behaviour, speech, dress and moral profile. The cultural markers of such a perception of gender were the concepts of masculinity and femininity, which became an organising principle of middle-class society. The notion of hegemonic bourgeois masculinity, defined by mental and physical qualities predestining men for public activity, was manifested in physical fitness, a strong work ethic, rationality, resilience and enterprise. On the other hand, womanhood, whose essential attributes were purity, frailty, nurturing capacity, emotionality and docility, was constructed as the complementary Other of the man. As is well known, this paradigm of femininity was often referred to as the *angel in the house*, following Coventry Patmore's immensely popular *The Angel in the House* ([1854] 1891), written as a tribute to the author's "perfect" wife. John Ruskin disseminated this idea of pure womanhood in his highly popular work *Sesame and Lilies* ([1865] 1998) by arguing that woman's moral superiority and intellectual qualities inclined her to be the "helpmate of man" and provide him with "gentle counsel" and "direction," as her "power is for rule, not for battle." The man, encountering daily challenges, tests and perils in his work in the open world, had an obligation to protect "the woman from all this; within his house, as ruled by her" ([1865] 1998, 35-42). Women were believed to be naturally predisposed to be consigned to the domestic and private sphere. Thus,

the idea of the sexes occupying separate spheres was a natural consequence of such a perception of the differences between them (Burstyn 1980, 131; Vickery 1993, 387; Tosh 2005, 331-36; McCrone 2014, 193). Separate spheres did not constitute a spatial category but rather the conceptual ground for the exercise of power relations that produced a hegemonic, paternalistic male-dominated system.

Victorian gender ideology stereotyping men and women into firmly cast social roles relied on philosophical and pseudoscientific theories infiltrating the opinions of medical practitioners and on presenting women as mentally and physically impaired by the demands of their reproductive apparatus and menstruation cycles (Vertinsky 1987, 7). The chief ideologue of the Victorian middle class was Herbert Spencer, whose theory of a finite amount of energy that every human being was born with was used as a compelling argument against women's emancipation. Spencer argued that in the process of evolution women had lost some of their physical energy, because they no longer needed to perform hard physical labour and, what is more, they expended the remaining quota faster than men to sustain their reproductive capacity. This "reproductive sacrifice" (Vertinsky 1987, 15) was the price women had to pay for the preservation of the nation. Maternity became women's "highest function" and obligation to society (Hargreaves [1987] 2006, 131); therefore, they should not engage in any energy-consuming mental or physical activities lest their potential for reproduction should suffer (Vertinsky 1987, 14-16; Mangan 2006a, 138).

Despite the lack of empirical evidence, myths about women's weak physical and mental constitution encouraged scientific and medical circles to proffer cautionary opinions about the debilitating effects of physical or intellectual exertion on their reproductive capacity and advice on the legitimate uses of the female body to enhance that capacity (McCrone 2014, 193-94; Waddington 2004, 414). Prominent medical authorities claimed that menstruation consumed so much energy that it made women "unfit for any great mental or physical labour. They suffer under a languor and depression which disqualify them for thought or action" (*British Medical Journal*, January 2, 1875). What is more, warnings were issued that the pursuit of masculine activities could physiologically unsex women. A belief in the instability of a person's biological sex was supported by scientific discoveries in the 1870s that led to a growing understanding of the role played by chromosomes in sex determination and the conviction that at the foetal stage, human beings showed potential for the development of both male and female features. By the 1880s, the theory of physiological sex reversal had found many exponents among British scientists, who argued that under specific circumstances such as diversion from gender-normative patterns of behaviour or activities, the biological sex of human beings, women in particular, could be reversed (Carstens 2011, 63-65).

Such theories fuelled the discourse on sexual differences, which was intensified in the last three decades of the nineteenth century by the improvements in women's legal and material standing, their educational and professional aspirations as well as the emergence of the New Woman, who contested Victorian conventions of gender. The

term *New Woman*, naming a new social phenomenon observable since the 1880s, was introduced by Sarah Grand in her essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question,” published in 1894, but it was Ouida’s attack on female suffrage and her criticism of Grand’s characterisation of the New Woman which popularised it (Nelson 2000a, 140). From the outset, the renegade New Woman openly defying the conventions of Victorian womanhood was the subject of attacks from the male bourgeois establishment and a ridiculing campaign in the periodical press. In the public discourse she was accredited with often contradictory features that placed her in opposition to the widely admired angel in the house. Averse to the institution of marriage and maternity, sexually licentious, decadent, mannish, asexual and masculinised by education, career ambitions and unfeminine clothing, the New Woman was perceived as a threat to the social fabric of Victorian society (Pykett 1992, 137-42; Ledger 1997, 9-17). Vocal in her claim to enjoy educational, employment and political rights equal to those of men, the New Woman was perceived as a continuator of Mary Wollstonecraft’s early feminist agenda and its later espousal by John Stuart Mill.

The threat to masculine hegemony and prerogatives posed by women’s encroachment into hitherto male-dominated areas produced an atmosphere of social anxiety and moral panic. It was further aggravated by the fears that Britain’s economic and political dominance in the world could be threatened by the decline in fertility (Woods 2000, 18-20). In consequence, sexual polarisation became entrenched, and arguments asserting women’s mental and physical incapacity to perform “manly” activities were used as a defensive response to the ongoing change in women’s status, which was threatening to subvert established social roles and norms (Carstens 2011, 66; Tosh 2005, 337). In sum, the adoption of the bicycle by women caused a strong reaction from the conservative Victorian establishment. Their critical opinion, which, as noted earlier, they supported with religious, moral, medical and scientific arguments, penetrated public discourse on women’s bicycling and was reflected in the tone of the coverage it received in the press. As such, press reports of the period are a testimony to the degree of prejudice with which late Victorian female cyclists had to contend.

### 3. CYCLING AGAINST THE ODDS

Production of the first bicycles began in Britain in 1868 and it quickly developed into a profitable industry fuelled by a rapidly growing market. Continuous technological advances, particularly the introduction of Dunlop’s pneumatic tyres in 1888, and a growing market in cheaper second-hand bicycles (Flanders 2007, 454; Mackintosh and Norcliffe 2007, 157; Reid 2015, 247; Norcliffe 2016, 8) helped transform the bicycle from a costly fashionable sports item to a more universal utilitarian means of transport and recreation—one of the technological marvels of the Victorian era (Rubenstein 1977, 48). The first two decades of cycling had been marked by distinctive social and gender geographies, as the bicycle was not only class-associated

but also, like many other forms of recreation at that time, gender-related, and women were virtually excluded from bicycling. It was only in the late 1880s that women took to cycling in great numbers (Norcliffe 2016, 4-5). Conducive to the progress of female cycling was the inculcation of the ideal of female athleticism in upper- and middle-class students through the programme of sports education adopted in girls' schools and colleges in the 1860s and 1870s (McCrone 2006, 143; Parratt 1989, 142). Having experienced a sense of satisfaction from sporting rivalry and physical wellbeing resulting from active recreation, young women reentering society at the end of their formal education were unwilling to submit to the passive, domesticated model of femininity that Victorian androcentric, patriarchal society tried to impose on them. Therefore, in their leisure pursuits, they sought ways of negotiating a degree of independence from the restraining rules of the Victorian ideology of gender (Tosh 2005, 342). As the ultimate "freedom machine" (Norcliffe 2016, 2), the bicycle offered women the prospect of spatially and temporally unrestrained mobility, as they could ride wherever and whenever they wished. Arguably, cycling, more than any other form of recreation, became a significant contributory factor to the progress of women's emancipation in the late Victorian period. Thus, it is not a coincidence that in newspapers and periodicals of the period, the New Woman—"a condensed symbol of disorder and rebellion" (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, 247) and emancipated womanhood—is often portrayed with or on a bicycle.

A significant number of women developed enthusiasm for moving on their own wheels when the tricycle was launched onto the market in 1877. Although heavy and cumbersome, it offered "the weaker sex" greater safety and stability than the ordinary model. The tricycle was suitable both for young girls and middle-aged matrons, such as Miss Elizabeth Wordsworth, the principal of Lady Margaret Hall, the first women's college at Oxford, who took up tricycling at the age of sixty, convinced of its beneficial health effects (McCrone 2006, 153). Perched on the tricycle's seat, women could pedal slowly down the road, gaining sporting pleasure and a reasonable amount of moderate physical exercise. Indeed, because of its nonstrenuous character, tricycling was accepted as an appropriate form of outdoor recreation for women to such an extent that it was recommended by medical practitioners and by the press: "it is a really delightful exercise, and you can enjoy the scenery to perfection going at the rate of six, seven, and eight miles an hour. There is nothing in the necessary movement of feet to deter ladies from attempting it" (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, August 19, 1878). Its other crucial feature was the fact that female cyclists did not need a special costume as "the pedals do not raise the dress in moving" (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, August 19, 1878), so the activity did not threaten to indecently expose women's legs and was therefore within the bounds of respectability.

Public debate on women's pursuit of cycling was further invigorated by women's adoption of the safety bicycle in the late 1880s, which enabled them to cover longer distances faster and in greater comfort (Anderson 2010, 123-24). By the last decade

of the nineteenth century, cycling had become a real craze among middle- and upper-class women. The spectacle of scores of women on wheels caused the public prejudice against female cycling to slowly wane and give way to gradual acceptance, as confirmed by numerous accounts and press reports from the period: “A woman on a bicycle is now such a common sight about town that people appear to be getting over their prejudice and more than one paper has expressed an opinion that a lady mounted on a bicycle is a more pleasing sight than one on a tricycle” (*Ludlow Advertiser*, August 30, 1890). In her monograph on London parks and gardens, Mrs. Evelyn Cecil (Alicia Amherst) observes that in the summer of 1895 it became “the thing” among ladies to cycle to breakfast to London parks, especially Battersea Park. Female cyclists “flocked there in the early mornings” because it was “away from the traffic that disturbed the beginner” (Cecil 1907, 160). Thus, cycling started to be regarded as an essential social accomplishment among high society ladies, who took to enrolling in cycling classes (McCrone 2014, 180).

The change in attitude towards female cycling was, however, a slow process and was marked by an undercurrent of fear. As noted earlier, various figures of authority cautioned against its detrimental effects on women’s moral constitution, health and reproductive capacity. Such ominous predictions effectively appealed to public sensitivity to these matters. As a novelty, cycling had not yet developed any history of documented bicycle-related injuries and diseases, but established medical journals still presented it as dangerous to female health, particularly during puberty when girls needed all their energy for their reproductive organs to develop appropriately. They warned about chronic diseases and injuries caused by overstrain and riding on bumpy roads, including uterine displacement—incapacitating women for childbearing—hardening of abdominal muscles—which could cause problems during labour—jarring, jolting and spinal shock as well as body deformities, nervous prostration and even sudden death (Vertinsky 1990, 79; McCrone 2014, 179-80). Even around the mid-1890s, when reservations against the adoption of cycling by women seemed to be waning, medical criticism of the activity’s suitability for women was not uncommon. As one renowned representative of the medical profession proclaimed, “cycling renders women awkward in their walk; they gradually come to move with a plunging kind of motion the reverse of graceful” (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, May 29, 1894).

On the other hand, progressive physicians envisaged in the bicycle a worthy alternative to walking, which was then universally recommended to women as a healthy exercise that could contribute to offsetting the adverse effects of a sedentary lifestyle and enhancing their reproductive functions (Vertinsky 1990, 77). Their opinions were put forward not only in medical journals and the popular press, but also in scholarly debates. During one such event, the Newcastle Sanitary Congress in 1896, Dr. E. B. Turner read a paper praising the beneficial effects of cycling on women’s health, supporting his conclusions with medical stories of his female patients “suffering from lassitude, bloodlessness and loss of appetite, who had become well and strong after taking to the wheel” (*Boston Guardian*, September 12, 1896). At the same time,



however, he warned about the possibility of women being unsexed as a consequence of racing and long-distance riding, both of which caused overstraining and were thus a threat to womanhood. Nevertheless, relying on the favourable opinions of a growing number of physicians, British newspapers began to display tentative approval for it as a legitimate pastime for women—a mark of a gradual shift in public attitudes:

Under certain given conditions of health, strength, and above all, prudence, there is [...] no more beneficial exercise than cycling. [...] By a general consensus of opinion it is not advised for growing or undeveloped girlhood. After 18, however, there is no reason why every lady so inclined should not permit herself a share in those “pleasures of the wheel” so highly prized by brother, father, or husband. (*Blackburn Standard*, August 18, 1888)

A decade later, there seemed to be little doubt that cycling was beneficial for women’s physical constitution and health. The *Girl’s Own Paper*, aimed at teenage girls and young women, strongly recommended a daily dose of “an hour’s bicycling” to its readers (February 18, 1899). The journal also quoted professional doctors advocating regular cycling as a cure for such maladies as “delicate chests,” “sleeplessness,” “nervousness,” “anaemia” and “torpidity of the liver” (*Girl’s Own Paper*, March 4, 1899).

Now, no longer discouraged by moral and medical objections and tempted by the sense of freedom and independence that the bicycle promised, women took to cycling in their thousands. From the 1880s they could join male cycling clubs, but many wheelwomen preferred to establish their own groups, which encouraged female bonding and promoted women-only recreations (*Wheelwoman*, October 16, 1897; January 8, 1898; March 19, 1898; April 30, 1898). Unlike previously, when female leisure activities were either restricted to the home or chaperoned visits in respectable leisure amenities, cycling clubs offered wheelwomen a chance to escape from their domestic confinement and plan their own leisure in the company of likeminded females. The clubs organised not only riding outings, but other events whose planning and execution required good management skills. Ladies’ cycling clubs, then, became instrumental in women’s emancipation by providing them with opportunities to prove their entrepreneurial potential and advance their cause (McCrone 2014, 183). For many female cycling aficionados, the social side of cycling was as important as the sporting pleasure it offered. In June 1894, the *Citizen* reported that a meeting of twenty-five women cyclists was held at the Ideal Club in London “in advocacy of the promotion of cycling among women, the formation of a common centre and the extension of a social side of cycling, a London club-house and a country cottage, and dress reform for lady cyclists” (June 20, 1894). Clubs often acquired or rented out-of-town premises to be used by their members for social events, teas or picnics. It is hard to estimate how many ladies’ cycling clubs existed in Britain in the 1890s, but the great popularity of the sport among females is unquestionable. When a cycling club was established at Girton College, Cambridge, in 1894 it became so popular that the number of bicycles

brought to college by its members each term caused a storage problem. Similarly, in Oxford, female students at Lady Margaret Hall promptly organised a cycling club, on which thirty-seven out of the hall's fifty-seven students enrolled (McCrone 2006, 153).

One of the most significant controversies connected with female cycling concerned racing. Moral, medical and aesthetic arguments were garnered against women's participation in bicycle races. Competitive sports were generally regarded as a male preserve. Rivalry, fair struggle and ambition to win constituted the essence of Victorian manliness, developed on the playing fields of boys' schools. They were the obverse of the paternalistic bourgeois ideal of Victorian womanhood. Therefore, women who participated in sporting rivalry were accused of transgressing standards of acceptable female behaviour, encroaching into male territory, aping mannish ways and thus denying their own sexual identity.

Despite such grave objections, some records indicate that women took part in bicycle road races as soon as men began racing (Simpson 2007, 50). In Britain in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, most bicycle races were organised in purpose-built velodromes which could seat large crowds and, following a ban on racing on British public roads imposed by the Cycling Touring Union (CTU), became the premier venues for organising such events (Huggins 2004, 119; Norcliffe 2016, 5). In the last decade of the Victorian period, track racing was both a profitable commercial enterprise and a spectator sport attracting large audiences. Female riders featured routinely at such events, but as an additional attraction to the main event, the men's race (Simpson 2007, 51-52). It appears, then, that women racing on bicycles were initially crowd-pleasers, offering an element of exciting novelty and a voyeuristic spectacle to mostly male audiences (Gilles 2018, 14). At the turn of the century, as the freshness of male bicycle racing wore off and female racing ignited public interest, the owners of racing tracks began to organise ladies' races as events in their own right. It is quite possible that the prime interest of the investors and organisers of such contests was to capitalise on the aura of outrageousness which, despite increasing acceptance of female cycling, still surrounded its competitive form (Simpson 2007, 48). The press of the period, more or less subtly, alluded to the fact that the pecuniary interest of the organisers was their chief motivation and that the artful entrepreneurs cynically exploited female racers. In 1895, *London and Provincial Entr'acte* published a cartoon presenting Mr. Josiah Ritchie, the manager of the Royal Aquarium—London's largest velodrome—riding a bicycle. The caption read: "The Biggest Winner by [*sic*] the Ladies' Bicycle Races at the Aquarium Is Mr. Josiah Ritchie" (7 December). In order to ensure high attendance and consequently considerable profits, the organisers of ladies' races often invited foreign riders and widely advertised the events in the press. So, for instance, on November 16, 1895, the upcoming women's race at the Royal Aquarium was promoted as "unique and likely to bring our best English riders into competition with well-known lady cyclists from France and Belgium" (*Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*).

Due to the scant records, it is difficult to estimate how many women participated in bicycle races or what their social background was. Considering, however, the intensity of social prejudice against women's participation in competitive sports and the damage to a lady's reputation it could cause, it appears rather unlikely that many middle- and upper-class wheelwomen were daring enough to take part. On the other hand, the prospect of considerable financial gain from prize money, ranging from six pounds for a lower place to as much as sixty for the winner, induced talented, less well-off women from the middle- or working class to become professional riders (Simpson 2007, 54). What is more, bicycle and tyre manufacturers and other investors in bicycle races often provided additional prizes, such as jewellery or other valuable objects for the best performing riders. For instance, in the women's international race at the Royal Aquarium in 1895, the extra gifts for the best racers included "a valuable gold watch set with diamonds and pearls, and many other articles of jewellery" (*Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald*, November 16).

Opposition to female racing was widely and often vociferously expressed in the press by morally-motivated commentators, officials of sporting organisations and members of the reading public. For instance, the *Pall Mall Gazette* published an appeal from one of its readers, signed "One Who Respects Women," to ban female races in the Olympian bicycle track since the spectacle was vulgar, utterly unbecoming and degrading to women:

The spectacle of a lot of women [...], careering around any track—hot, perspiring, breathless, with anxious faces, dirty hands, visible bruises, and in more or less (generally more) hideous costumes—is not one which commends itself to those who seek in the "fair sex" evidences of refinement, cultivation and cleanliness. [...] Let women ride bicycles for amusement and pleasure; let them if they will, go in for feats of skill; but Mr. Editor, don't let them race in public, don't let them lower themselves to the position of poor man [...]. Do try to induce them to remember that a woman's mission is to improve the race of men, and not to race for the improvement of bicycles. (January 7, 1896)

Even cycling journals for ladies, like the *Wheelwoman and Society Cycling News*, spurned women's races as "hideous spectacles" (September 26, 1896). Such judgements confirm the intensity of gender stereotypes in Victorian society, boxing men and women in clearly defined roles marked by a set of social prescriptions and proprieties and according women the role of a higher moral authority responsible for setting a good example to society as a whole.

Various cycling organisations also expressed strong opposition to admitting women to bicycle races. The largest of them, the National Cyclists' Union, adopted a resolution forbidding the licensing of women for open or club races, stating that "no races for women riders be permitted at any open or club race meeting held under N.C.U. rules" (*Supplement to the Cheltenham Chronicle*, June 27, 1896). The opinions expressed by the

members of the NCU Council are a testimony to the pervasiveness of the paternalistic angel in the house stereotype in Victorian society and the depth of the prejudice against female racing based on the premise that women were physically and mentally weaker than men. In sum, women's races were proclaimed "injurious, morally, mentally, and physically" and "most disgusting exhibitions" representing the "lowest tastes of mankind" (*Supplement to the Cheltenham Chronicle*, June 27, 1896).

However, in the middle of the last decade of the nineteenth century, the discourse of moral agitation with respect to women's bicycle racing began to intermingle in British newspapers with more favourable attitudes. These unequivocally positive reports on women's bicycle races may indicate the gradual acceptance of women's participation in competitive sport as a legitimate facet of British sporting culture. In November 1895 an international bicycle race between "The Ladies of France and All of England" was organised at the Royal Aquarium track (*London Evening Standard*, November 19, 1895; *Times*, November 21, 1895). The fortnight-long contest was split into two events of six days each, during which eight riders representing England competed against twelve French wheelwomen. The event attracted "daily large crowds of interested spectators" (*St James' Gazette*, November 20, 1895) and achieved a good deal of positive press coverage. The atmosphere was patriotically charged—the spectators clearly sided with the English team, loudly expressing their discontent whenever the French riders broke the rules and cheering enthusiastically when one of the English riders was in the lead (*London Evening Standard*, November 19, 1895; *St James' Gazette*, November 20, 1895). The British press commended the English riders' "perfect mastery of their machines, [...] their powers of endurance [...] [and] their skill," while the French team was accused of "tricky riding," "fouls" and "unsportsmanlike trickiness" (*St James' Gazette*, November 20, 1895). The newspaper-reading public was offered a comprehensive commentary on the progress of the race, spectators' reactions, contestants' riding skills, as well as a full list of the riders' names and positions. The tone was characteristic of sports reports—enthusiastic but factual, with no hint of censure or indignation. Such reports signalled an ongoing change in the perception of women's competitive sports—there must have been a sizeable group among the readers who recognised women's bicycle races as true sporting events, not as lowbrow and morally dubious entertainment.

One of the controversial issues connected with women's pursuit of cycling was the appropriate dress. The use of the bicycle by women, not only as a piece of sporting equipment but also a means of transport, necessitated a change in female fashion. Therefore bicycling—perhaps more than other forms of female recreation—became inextricably connected with the dress reform movement. In the case of other sports that women practised, such as tennis, the sporting costume was worn only for the game and then replaced with socially acceptable ladies' apparel. However, the use of the bicycle as a means of transport meant that the female cyclist would also wear her cycling costume in public, challenging the prevalent notions of femininity and decorum (Gordon 2001, 24-25). This explains why the adoption of a rational style of dress for cycling

women was so contentiously debated, the arguments ranging from health and safety to morality, decency and female attractiveness. The subject, of course, was reflected in the press, pamphlets, satirical cartoons and public lectures.

Women's approach to the question of an appropriate cycling costume varied, but was generally rather cautious. Some rode in skirts with elastic stirrups sewn into the hem to keep them down and prevent an indecent display of the ankles (McCrone 2006, 150). Such a costume, however, posed a safety risk for the cyclist—if the skirt got caught in the spokes, the wheelwoman could fall and be injured. Pioneering cycling women therefore looked for more convenient, but socially acceptable, cycle wear and some even had their most inventive designs patented (Jungnickel 2018). Many women in the 1890s advocated rational clothes for cycling that followed the French fashion. For instance, Miss Bacon, a secretary of the Mowbray House Cycling Association, pleaded at the lecture to the Society of Cyclists in London that “women should be allowed to adopt a dress which should be both safe and comfortable. [...] It will probably be knickerbockers and a tunic” (*Lincolnshire Echo*, February 23, 1894). Such a costume was already so ubiquitous among female cyclists in Paris that it stirred up little or no public interest or indignation. As an English correspondent reported, women dressed in “pseudo-masculine habiliments riding a bicycle excited little attention or no attention, and no comment”—presumably because of their costume's “total lack of beauty”—and when they needed to dismount and make part of their way on foot, they could do so “with impunity” (*Shepton Mallet Journal*, August 31, 1894). The news from France earned derisive commentary in many British newspapers, which contemptuously wrote about the “ridiculous appearance” of the French women cyclists “with their baggy knickers and spindle shanks” while at the same time they praised English female riders, most of whom preferred the “old-fashioned and more graceful manner of raiment.” The editor also extolled those English cyclists who, despite following the French fashion, adhered to modesty and propriety in public and invariably carried with them a bundled-up skirt which they would put on when dismounting their machines (*Advertiser for Somerset*, September 13, 1894). Such a compromise towards the rules of propriety in public proves the powerful hold of the bourgeois moral code on women. They preferred to negotiate social acceptance by making concessions to the canon of respectability, rather than openly defy it by insisting on wearing “offensive” clothing.

Despite an optimistic pronouncement in the *Manchester Guardian* in 1894 that the general adoption of rational cycling dress in Britain was “only a question of time” (October 22), two years later little progress had been made. As the *Leicester Chronicle* noted, “there are still many bicyclists who simply refuse to don bloomers” (June 27, 1896). A more optimistic view, however, was presented in the *Wheelwoman*, which maintained that evolution in women's cycling costume, though gradual, was indeed relentless (June 25, 1898), making knickerbocker-clad ladies in the streets of London in 1898 as “familiar to the eye as policemen,” and accredited the change to “the development of cycles” (May 21, 1898). However, in provincial cities the public

may have been more resentful of the dress revolution because in 1899 the *Leeds Times* reported that the battle for the uniform use of rational cycling dress was “a losing one,” explaining that women were “bound by the tyranny of custom to the hampering, unhealthy and strength-sapping skirt” (February 4). Such press reports confirm how contentious the question of rational cycling costume was. The fact that its adoption progressed relatively slowly, particularly outside the capital, may indicate that some female cyclists were not as adventurous as to risk public disapproval and accusations of immodesty for wearing “unfeminine” clothes.

While to progressive members of British society this revolution in female clothing was little else but a choice for convenience and safety, for its more conservative members the use of masculine rational clothes marked a symbolic overstepping of the boundary between the sexes, a transgression of the established rules of decorum and propriety. As Julie McCormick Weng argues, the public spectacle of female cyclists riding astride their machines in what was considered a masculine posture and wearing men’s clothes alarmed the less progressive members of the public (2016, 53). Such a display of “masculine” attributes by wheelwomen was regarded as an overt subversion of the established gender roles, a departure from the passivity, domestication and motherly calling of the angel in the house. Wheelwomen wearing knickerbockers and tunics were often snubbed and ostracised in public places. One such situation was described by the *Daily Telegraph* and then carried by the local press. It was reported that two young ladies wearing rational costumes were refused dinner by the owner of a country inn in a Surrey village unless they hid their bicycling garments under the skirts she offered to lend them. As the women refused, they “left the inn dinnerless” accompanied by the jeers and condescending smiles of those who witnessed the scene (*Aberdeen Evening Express*, June 8, 1894). Such situations were not uncommon as similar stories were still being reported a few years later (*Wheelwoman*, June 18, 1898; *Times*, April 6, 1899). Women wearing rational clothes were, then, often the target of unceremonious attacks not only by members of the public but also by the establishment press, where they were ridiculed, derided and accused of senselessly aping men and losing their femininity.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Cycling in late Victorian Britain, probably to a greater extent than other sports, offered women an opportunity to break free from the social constraints of Victorian society, become geographically mobile, explore new forms of active recreation unrelated to the prevalent models of respectable female leisure and liberate themselves from the restrictive dress and corset of the time. Competitive, recreational and social aspects of bicycling were instrumental in developing women’s self-knowledge and awareness of their physical capabilities. Although it would be too far-fetched to maintain that the bicycle paved the way to women’s emancipation, it can be inferred that it certainly smoothed it. There is little doubt that cycle mania was conducive to a change in attitude to women’s sport

and made inroads into the stereotyped perception of women as physically weaker than and dependent on men. However, this progress was made in an atmosphere dense with prejudice that was rooted in the bourgeois perception of male and female roles in society.

Information on the attitudes to female cyclists gleaned from regional and local press of the period reveals a public discourse dominated by a paternalistic and judgemental attitude to women, based on dichotomies of right and wrong, moral and immoral, ladylike and unladylike, reputable and disreputable and the like. The moralising tone of many accounts is a testimony to the hegemonic relations in Victorian society resulting from the economic empowerment of middle-class men during the Industrial Revolution and their perceived physical and mental superiority over women. In the public debate on women's cycling, such deeply ingrained attitudes were fortified with moral, social, medical and scientific arguments, which were used to persuade women against involvement in an activity that might lead them to question established gender relations.

The tone of moral panic in the discourse on women's cycling, though strong, was not overwhelming or exclusive of other views. Women's perseverance in bicycling did eventually lead to a change in public opinion and the surfacing of more favourable attitudes. These were presented in the press, often concurrently with negative views, and demonstrated the growing acceptance of women's cycling, both as recreation and as competitive sport. Thus, the debate on women's cycling that engaged social, moral and scientific authorities in the last two decades of the nineteenth century revealed a society in which views on women were being remoulded as the conservative division into two spheres gave way to a more progressive, liberal and inclusive attitude.

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