

## Listening to Jane Cunningham Croly's "Talks With Women": Issues of Gender, Dress, and Reform in Demorest's Monthly Magazine

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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores how popular women's magazines promoted change in women's roles and reform in dress during the nineteenth century. Selected writings about women and dress for Demorest's Monthly Magazine by its editor, Jane Cunningham Croly, are examined. A journalist and women's rights advocate, Croly wrote in support of women's advancement and tied issues of women in society to reform in dress and appearance. A fashion-oriented woman's magazine, Demorest's popularity was comparable to that of other such periodicals of the day, including Godey's Ladies Book.

"Talks With Women," a column written by Croly and published in Demorest's are interpreted for indication of the ways that reform issues were incorporated into the popular press. The framework of gender as a category of analysis within the area of women's history is used for a discussion of the relevance of Croly's writings for contemporary interpretations of dress and gender identity. This discussion is structured around the following themes: (a) women and society, (b) women and fashion, and (c) women, dress, and reform. Croly's perspectives on women and dress were found to be similar to others of her day; however, her ability to make ideas espoused by various reform groups palatable to the audience of a fashion-oriented woman's magazine sets her apart from her contemporaries in the woman's magazine industry.

### **Article:**

*Fashion says that the chief use of woman is to exhibit dry goods fantastically arranged on her person.*

*~Francis E. Russell, 1892*

*It has been well and repeatedly said by popular writers and speakers who reflect the common sense of intelligent people on questions of social structure and function that the position of woman in any community is the most striking index of the level attained by the community, and it might be added, by any given class in the community.*

*~Thorstein Veblen, 1899*

Recent decades have witnessed a keen interest in the relationship between gender and the dressed body. Although it is certainly not a new concept, this interest has been fueled by contemporary exploration into the nature of popular culture, and the use of dress to express values, ideals, and

other fundamental social and cultural constructs throughout the twentieth century. For some contemporary scholars, the political and economic situation of women is directly related to the image of women as constructed and represented within Western paradigms (Benstock & Ferriss, 1994; de Lauretis, 1987; Evans & Thornton, 1989; Gaines & Herzog, 1990; Kuhn, 1994; Wilson, 1985). Such representations have been defined, reinforced, and sometimes even challenged by various visual modes of culture, including artistic expression, film, television, and fashion. In this paper I examine how a nineteenth-century fashion-oriented woman's magazine, Demorest's Monthly Magazine, worked much like such contemporary modes of culture as film and television to employ dress in the construction of gendered identities and appearances.

During the mid-nineteenth century, a myriad of publications directed toward a distinctly female readership would help to shape what is considered today to be the basic formula for the woman's magazine (Endres & Lueck, 1995; White, 1970)<sup>1</sup> The woman's magazine of the nineteenth century, as many such publications today, functioned as a cultural vehicle, one that helped to define roles and expectations of women through a combination of both words and images meant for widespread public consumption. Many women's magazines, and particularly those that were fashion-oriented such as Demorest's, relied on the cycle of change in styles of dress to present the reader with new and exciting modes of appearance on a regular basis. Publications utilized advancements being made in printing technology, especially the mechanically colored fashion plate) By mid-nineteenth century the popular press had indeed proved to be the fastest and most profitable way to work the fashion system.

It was also during the nineteenth century that much attention was being paid to the implications of dress for reinforcing the marginalized social and economic position of women, primarily due to the development of a public forum, albeit a diversified one, for reform in modes of women's dress. This forum frequently took the form of newsletters and periodicals (e.g., *Arena*, *Revolution*, and *The Forerunner*) devoted to a wide array of issues related to women's rights. However, ideas and opinions regarding change in women's dress also appear embedded within women's magazines created to appeal to a more broadly defined female readership. An objective of this paper is to situate the woman's magazine in general, and Demorest's in particular, within this milieu of reform.

The guiding question of this paper is: How are issues of gender explicated through references to women's dress found within this popular fashion-oriented periodical?<sup>2</sup> The text under interpretation consists of selected excerpts from the monthly column entitled "Talks With Women" found in Demorest's and written by the publication's editor, Jane Cunningham Croly. Along with being one of only a handful of female editors, she was also a primary figure in the nineteenth-century push for women's rights. Structured around themes regarding women's experiences found within her column, Croly's writings are examined and interpreted within the

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<sup>1</sup> "Woman's magazine" refers to periodicals that focused on activities deemed part of the woman's domain (Shevelov, 1989) That is, the content of these magazines usually included advice on keeping house, care of clothing, raising children, cooking, and needlework crafts (Endres & Lueck, 1995; White, 1970))

<sup>2</sup> The concept of gender is understood here as both the basis and profound implication of cultural and social interpretations of sex in the biological sense)

context of the period as well as through a contemporary feminist conceptual framework.<sup>3</sup> analysis developed within the discipline of women's history (Scott, 1988), and is used to locate Croly's writings within the context of the broader social changes taking place during her lifetime.

### *Jane Cunningham Croly and Demorest's Monthly Magazine*

Jane Cunningham was born in Leicestershire, England in 1829 (see Figure 1). Her father was a Unitarian preacher who moved the family to New York in 1849 after the community reacted negatively to his progressive religious ideas. Finding a talent in writing as a young woman, Jane embarked on a career in journalism in her early twenties that proved to be extremely successful. She began writing in 1855 under the pen name Jenny June, and was one of the first women to have a syndicated column published in newspapers throughout America (Blair, 1980). From the late 1850s, Croly often contributed to widely read newspapers within the New York area, including the *Sunday Times*, *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, and the *Democratic Review*.

At 27 she married another journalist, David Goodman Croly, and together they had seven children. Jane lectured on journalism at Columbia University's Rutgers Women's College, where she received an honorary doctorate and was the first to hold the prestigious office of Chair of Journalism and Literature. Croly also went on to be the founder of one of the first organized women's clubs in America, Sorosis (1868), and was herself one of the most visible figureheads of the nineteenth-century woman's club movement (Blair, 1980). Although she published numerous books throughout her life, in 1898 she published her final, and perhaps most widely recognized book, the mammoth volume of *The*

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<sup>3</sup> The benefits of integrating aspects of feminist thought with the study of dress have been discussed and explored by a number of contemporary scholars in the discipline of clothing and textiles) Two particular examples of this perspective are Kaiser (1991) and Michelman (1991).



**Figure 1. Jane Cunningham Croly, ca. 1860s.**

History of the Woman's Club Movement in America, an exhaustive state-by-state account of the development of women's clubs during this period.

In 1860, Croly struck up a relationship with Ellen and William Jennings Demorest that would last until her death in 1901 (Martin, 1987). Ellen Demorest, a widely known and respected dressmaker and creator of the first tissue paper dress patterns, became one of Croly's closest friends. Working under the name "Mme. Demorest," Ellen was renowned for transforming Parisian fashion to suit American taste, but was also involved in innovations in "healthful" dress, such as dress suspenders and elevators, as well as corsets made with cord instead of whalebone (Ross, 1963). William Jennings Demorest, Ellen's husband, business partner, and an entrepreneur in his own right, published quarterly fashion journals until 1860, when he combined them into the publication Demorest's Monthly Magazine. This magazine was directed at middle-class female readers and remained in circulation until 1899. Demorest's claim to fame was its special section on fashion developed by Ellen called "Madame Demorest's Monthly Mirror of Fashion," brought to the reader by the groundbreaking use of fashion correspondents located in France and England (Ross, 1963). Demorest's main selling point, however, was the tissue paper dress pattern included in every issue (Ross, 1963).

Croly began as a contributor to the magazine, but soon became the editor and chief staff writer. At its peak in 1899, Demorest's had a circulation of 120,000 at a subscription rate of \$3 a year (Endres & Lueck, 1995, p. 74; Mott, 1957, p. 325). Its popularity was comparable to that of Godey's Ladies Book. It was Croly's vision, however, that kept the magazine of interest to a variety of women, offering information and discussion on a myriad of subjects, including articles that focused on accomplished women of the period. Also included were Croly's own essays, and in particular, her long-running column entitled, "Talks With Women," which examined the

rights and responsibilities of women in American society. Indeed, throughout her life, Croly's writing provided the perfect outlet to air her views on the opportunities that she believed were denied to women.

Remembrances of Croly written by friends and colleagues at her death indicate that she was respected and known as much as a journalist as an accomplished organizer of women (Woman's Press Club, 1904). While a relatively obscure historical figure today, Croly's name was synonymous with ideas of women's potential for achievement in her own day, as the interpretation of her writings will illustrate. Although not alone in her sentiments regarding dress and its role within women's lives, her voice clearly stands out among other editors of women's magazines during this period. Croly's writings, embedded within the pages of a popular fashion-oriented woman's magazine, provide rich historical material for exploring women in history and for examining the place of dress within women's lives during the nineteenth century.

### *Theoretical and Methodological Considerations*

The idea of a "history of women" is not new to the twentieth century; highlighting the efforts and achievements of American women was common among many popular nineteenth-century women's magazines, including *Demorest's*. During the first wave of feminism in America,<sup>4</sup> women prominent in various movements for social reform were concerned with documenting women's contributions to society. Croly's comprehensive history of the women's club movement is one among many extant examples of this nineteenth-century trend. Many such volumes written by and about women have recently been rediscovered by contemporary historians of women's experience, such as Elizabeth Ellet's *Women of the American Revolution* (1848) and the six-volume *History of Women's Suffrage*, written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn from 1881 to 1922.

With the second wave of feminism, beginning roughly during the late 1960s, came the attempt to place women's lives within the larger historical narrative. This involved tracing and piecing together what women were doing during particular historical periods, as well as highlighting oppressive social and economic factors.<sup>5</sup> Evidence of women's lives in history was sought out by feminist historians as a way to include women as part of history as well as to present women as active agents of history (Scott, 1988, p. 18). Re-visioning history became the common goal (Shapiro, 1994). Yet, while such publications have been strongly influential in asserting the right of women to be a part of history-hence the term *her story*-questions were raised about the larger issues involved in understanding who is actually being represented by traditional methods of historical inquiry.<sup>6</sup>

In response to such questions, one contemporary approach takes on a critical bent and deals with the concept of gender as a distinct category of analysis. By this approach, the historian can begin

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<sup>4</sup> This is generally used to refer to the movement during the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century that culminated in the 19th amendment, passed in 1920, which granted women the right to vote.

<sup>5</sup> An example of this is Anderson and Zinsler's (1988), *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe from Prehistory to the Present*.

<sup>6</sup> One of these questions has to do with the use of "women" to refer to an overarching categorization which negates the experiences of groups and individuals not of the white, western, middle- to upper-class experience. Both Scott (1991) and Young (1996) propose alternative means for understanding and including differences in the discussion of women's experiences.

to “;see nothing as fixed, or essential in the manifestations of gender; rather each age, each set of historical circumstances, has produced its own definitions of feminine and masculine”; (Zinsser, 1993, p. 54).<sup>7</sup> In exploring the possibilities of an analytical category of gender, Scott (1988) points out that in any given historical period gender is a critical force in the shaping of both the individual subject and the organization of social reality. Scott proposes that gender, as a signifier of relationships of power, is integral to the process of change in the historical sense.

In the interpretation of Croly’s writing presented here, gender is a category of analysis used to explore how change in dress occurs as part of the fluid and symbiotic relationship with the same social processes used to organize and change social relations. Within the context of a given time period, dress, often relied upon to be an indicator of sexual difference, incorporates other factors, such as sexuality, socioeconomic class, race and ethnicity, to signify and materialize the concept of gender. In turn, dress links the individual to society, as gender is a relational factor, negotiated at the level of both the personal and social. Nineteenth-century women’s magazines, similar to other cultural texts such as films, television sitcoms, comic strips, and animated cartoons (Gaines, 1990; Kaiser, Lennon, & Damhorst, 1991) are tools to illustrate and interpret the ways that gender relies on dress for explication, and in contrast, how expectations of dress and appearance are bound to gender as a social construct. This reflexive relationship between gender and dress is found repeatedly within the pages of Demorest’s, albeit in a subtle way, through Croly’s writing and editorship.

All issues of Demorest’s, and 36 total “Talks With Women” columns were examined for the purposes of this paper. These specific columns were selected because they are located in volumes that contain twelve consecutive columns, that is, one column per issue. “Talks With Women” is examined because it is the primary forum used by Croly to air her opinions within the magazine as a whole, and because it is the most consistent contribution written expressly for the magazine by Croly. The volumes under interpretation indicate the broad range of topics covered by Croly in the column, and these topics closely relate to her activities within the women’s club movement as well as her efforts toward improving women’s opportunities for education and employment. Moreover, the selected volumes are representative of how Croly develops the strength of her voice, and the ways in which her column works in tandem with the goals of the magazine. Both her column and the larger magazine became more devoted to issues of women in society while continuing to focus on fashion in women’s dress.<sup>8</sup>

### *Interpretation*

The interpretation that follows is structured around three themes that surface throughout the texts. The themes are based on Croly’s point of view as presented in “Talks With Women”; and include: (a) the social positioning of women; (b) the role of dress within women’s lives; and (c) specific suggestions for improvement with respect to (a) and (b). Each of the themes highlight how Croly negotiates her own opinions regarding women’s rights and women’s dress with the

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<sup>7</sup> While the term "gender" began to be used in place of "women" it still implied the emphasis on women’s experiences, with the difference between women’s experiences and those of men being implicit in the approach. See Scott (1988) for a discussion of the political implications of both terms for historical inquiry.

<sup>8</sup> The interpretation presented here is based in part on a broader examination of Croly’s writing found within my Master’s Thesis, *Dress, Domains, and Dialectic: The Writings of Jane Cunningham Croly*, (University of Minnesota, 1996).

goals of a magazine that had a stake in perpetuating the fashion cycle, and places her perspective within the broader discussion regarding women, dress, and reform.

### *Women in Society*

Over the past two and a half centuries, magazine publications have become one of the most widely used tools in the dissemination of values, ideas, and expectations with respect to the dressed body (MacDonald, 1995). The origins of contemporary magazines specifically directed at women have been traced as far back as the early eighteenth century with the introduction of essay periodicals, such as the *Lover* and the *Whisperer*. Written expressly for the female reader, these publications developed into what would later be known as the advice column. However, the advice contained within such publications was written primarily by male editors, and it was not until Eliza Haywood's column in the *Female Spectator* (1774-76) that a woman took on the role of advice-giver (Shevelow, 1989). It is also through Haywood's contributions to the *Female Spectator* that one finds the basis of the highly successful woman's magazine formula: seek to cultivate a relationship with readers based on the shared experience of being female (Shevelow, 1989, p. 168). This formula proved to be so successful that Croly and her contemporaries continued to follow it late into the nineteenth century.

Croly centers each "Talks With Women"; column around a different topic or issue related to the place of women in society, but the most common point of interest for her as a professional female journalist is that of women and work. She rarely minces words to get her point across. For example, beginning with one of the earliest "Talks" to appear, Croly argues against popular reasoning that kept women from achieving success in the public work force. As she writes:

Women are not afraid of work; they generally like it, and thousands of weak, delicate wives and widows accomplish everyday more hard incessant labor than could be endured by strong men....Women often do the work of a house, wash cook, iron, sweep, dust, make beds, and then sit and patch and sew until eleven o'clock at night, in a condition of body and mind, which, if a man felt a tithe of it, he would either go to bed and send for a doctor, or commit suicide....The notion that women are destitute of business faculty is about exploded; there are women who give birth to children, bring them up, look after their household, and support their families during the whole time; it is not on record that any man has ever done as much as this. ("Why Are Girls So Anxious to Marry?"; 7/66)<sup>9</sup>

Croly also devotes an entire year of "Talks" columns to her views on women's potential in various professions, including "The Woman in Business"; (2/75), "Women in Politics"; (3/75), "Women as Physicians"; (8/75), and "Women as Ministers"; (11/75). In each such column she states the popular reasoning for excluding women from each type of career and proceeds to present her views on why women are instead quite capable of such vocations.

Throughout "Talks" Croly develops an ongoing argument against the normative perception of the female as the weaker, more vulnerable sex. Although her opinions on this issue are similar to other women leaders of her day, Croly's are written expressly for the reader of a popular woman's magazine. Moreover, when compared to her fellow female editors of women's magazines, Croly clearly stands out as the most vocal. As editor of *Demorest's*, the strength and nature of Croly's words differentiate her from such professional peers as Louisa Knapp Curtis,

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<sup>9</sup> Passages of Croly's writings taken from *Demorest's* are cited by the title of the column referenced and the month and year of publication.



editor of the Ladies' Home Journal (who was hesitant to use her real name in print)<sup>10</sup> and Sarah Josepha Hale of Godey's Ladies Book.

Although Hale, who was one of the more visible of Croly's peers, seeks to open doors for women's education, often including articles of professional women in Godey's, she does so to argue that an educated mother is better able to raise her male children to be virtuous and pious (Woloch, 1984). Croly, on the other hand, believes that women must be educated in order to become capable homemakers and professionals, and to be able to cope with the demands of both roles, as she discusses in such "Talks" as "A Happy Household"; (9/66) and "Women as Housekeepers"; (7/75).<sup>11</sup>; She repeatedly seeks to expand the boundaries of women's experience beyond the four walls of the home—a perspective that is likely founded on her own experiences with reconciling the responsibilities of having a career with those of the home and family. This tension is illustrated in the column entitled, "Women in Journalism"; (12/75) in which she reflects on her life as a professional journalist and the challenges it presents on a daily basis: "I know that in my nearly twenty years of journalistic life, I have not had one entire week of leisure .. The care of a home, and the rearing of children during this time, have been recreations..."; (12/75).

Women's entrance into print culture has been called a visible process of simultaneous enfranchisement and restriction, because widespread instruction for women took the form of the periodical rather than the classroom, while at the same time such periodicals yielded a significant contribution to the connection of the domestic space with femininity. That is, many women's magazines urged the reader to use the information provided within its pages in order to cultivate a "beautiful mind"; (Shevelow, 1989, p. 2). Moreover, by the 1830s, most popular press women's publications had fully embraced a "womanly arts"; focus that would continue throughout the nineteenth century, reaching its climax during the late 1880s and early 1890s with the extremely popular Ladies' Home Journal (Damon-Moore, 1994). In addition, women writers held a third of the market in the 1820s and would fully capture it by mid-century (Woloch, 1984, p. 134). A major selling point of a woman's magazine was the sentimentalist fiction and poetry it contained, most of which written by female authors. The willingness on the part of magazine editors like Croly and Hale to include works by women not only helped to provide a much-needed publishing outlet for these burgeoning writers, but also facilitated the development of a distinctly American literary style during this period (Endres & Lueck, 1995).

Along with the womanly arts focus and sentimentalist literature, as editor of Demorest's, Croly seeks to give the reader reason to achieve personal and economic autonomy. In a passage written later in her life, Croly expresses her opinion on the inequities between women and men through an anecdote indicating where her own views took root.

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<sup>10</sup> The desire to avoid undue attention is further indicated by the following excerpt from a feature on Curtis' accomplishments as a journalist: "Thoroughly domestic in her habits, she does not neglect her own household for business matters. She has, in fact, a strong aversion to being regarded as a business woman, and thinks that every woman's first duty is to her household and family" (Ladies' Home Journal, 2/87, p. 3).

<sup>11</sup> Williams and Nelson (1998) illustrate the connection between the ideas presented about women, home, and work within women's periodicals of the mid-nineteenth century and early home economics curricula. Both Kaiser (1993) and Roach-Higgins (1993) point to the dual focus of training for a career and for advocating a general education for women who may become homemakers within the clothing and textiles discipline during the mid-twentieth century.



Some years ago, I will not say how many, when I was a girl, I went with a party of young people, among whom was one married lady, to an entertainment, which involved a visit at its close to a restaurant where we regaled upon ice-cream. I myself was the guest of the married lady, and not very well known to the gentlemen of the party, and it annoyed me greatly that they were obliged to bear my part of the expenses. 'Don't worry yourself,' said my friend, to whom I imparted my anxiety; 'ice-cream free is all we women get in this country for the sacrifice of our freedom; it is the mess of pottage, the price of our birth-right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; and even the ice-cream free season is soon over for us; take it while you can.' It struck me then, and it has always stuck me since, that it was paying high for what had little real value-in fact might in some cases be positively injurious. The right to live, in the exercise of one's own faculties, and according to one's own conscience is much better. ("The Girl of the Period,"; 9/82)

Croly situates herself as a middle-class, white female within the broader context of social pretexts which insist on the virtues of the feminine while holding women fast within a subordinate social position. Some degree of change in women's roles had occurred from 1875 to 1882 when Croly writes of women's capacity for work. Croly, however, in reflecting on why she dedicated herself to the advancement of women, states that she still believes there are many more changes to be made. She repeatedly argues for changes with respect to women going into business and assuming the role of the professional. The desire for change is at the heart of Croly's arguments, change in women's self-perceptions as much as widespread social change. For Croly, this change would be visible through dress, inasmuch as fashionable excess in dress is, in her opinion, the most obvious indicator of women's social and economic dependence.

### *Women and Fashion*

Barthes's (1983) semiotic analysis of the twentieth century fashion magazine sheds light on the paradox of the relationship between the female reader and dress, which is the experience of the present and the future at once-both what she is and what she could become. Likewise, the nineteenth-century woman's magazine both created and embodied popular culture in such a way as to appeal to the minds of women who were primarily of the middle class. Through the use of fashion plates and extensive written descriptions of the latest in styles of dress, it made the existential possibilities of the magazine reader visible through the fashion cycle, and promoted perpetual change by exploiting women's supposedly natural inclination for socially acceptable modes of dress (Shevelov, 1989).

Magazines also manipulated female desire by promoting new or special products related to dress and appearance. Demorest's touted certain products advertised in its pages, and, like similar publications of its day, advised women about the benefits of such products on their behalf. The following write-up in support of The New Zephyr Bosom Pad is an excellent example of this:

We desire to call the attention of our readers to a novel invention for increasing the apparent size of the bust, which seems to us to combine many desirable features, and to be a decided improvement on the various articles manufactured, and now in use for that purpose. The shape, to begin with, is exceedingly good, neither too large nor too small-then, they are soft, flexible, yielding to the touch, like the natural bosom, and are expanded by inflation with air, and not by spiral springs, or any adjustment which is fixed, and limited in its operation. The 'Zephyr' bosom pads are very pleasant to wear, are durable, and adapted to all seasons. They undoubtedly require but to be known to supersede all others. (March, 1875, p. 106)

The reader of a woman's magazine is often addressed as a consumer, and in this instance, someone who would undoubtedly be interested in products that helped to achieve the most fashionable look in a quick and easy manner.<sup>12</sup>

Although interested in relieving the reader of some of the burden that accompanied a fashionable appearance, the popular press rarely swerved radically off course in their support of products that would alter a woman's appearance. Asserting themselves as the purveyors of appropriate modes and manners, many women's magazines created and promoted a standard of feminine appearance. As oracles of fashion, many publications, including Demorest's, clearly had a stake in continuing the ideology of proper feminine behavior, which included owning a subscription to the right magazine. Hence Demorest's claim to be the "model parlor magazine of America."

Croly's own writings on dress in "Talks" highlight a tension between her views and the context in which she chooses to air them. As editor, her opinions are bound to some degree by the aims of a fashion-oriented woman's magazine, as well as her close friendship with Ellen Demorest. Nevertheless, she makes her opinion on women's eager response to fashion dictates clear. In the February 1866 "Talks" column titled "Linsey-Woolsey," she directs her pen to those women that allow foreign prescriptions for a fashionable appearance to take precedence over reason. She writes:

With all women it has ceased to be a question of whether they have dresses and other garments sufficient for warmth and comfort, but whether they have them in the fashion.... Why we need to wait for such a lesson from the Empress Eugenie, or any royal princess...it is difficult to imagine. In this country, where we have neither state nor ceremony to support, one would suppose ladies would feel free to dress as they please, and would prefer not to be hampered by the servile restrictions which bind the followers of courts. But this is far from being the case.

When viewed alongside Demorest's goal to provide the latest Parisian fashion to its readers, Croly words clearly stand out as she argues that the idea of independence and the freedom she believes accompanies the state of independence should be applied to women's dress as much as to the right to vote or to speak freely. Later in the same column, she again appears to contradict the purpose of the magazine that she herself edits when she writes:

It is the vulgar following of certain modes, the overloading with trimming, because it is the fashion, that we object to; and the setting up of certain oracles to the exclusion of all-independent individual thought or action. ("Linsey-Woolsey," 2/66; emphasis added)

However embedded within the pages of Demorest's Croly's words might be, they often oppose the conflation of female nature with fashion change, and position her against the idea that interest in dressing the body was a characteristic somehow intrinsic to female biology. In taking a stance similar to the moralists of her day, particularly Eliza Farrar (1857) who cautions women against following fashion blindly (believing it injurious to women and to the nation's well-being), Croly proposes that women spend too much time and money keeping up with fashion change. For Croly, women's unquestioning devotion to fashion gives plenty of justification for the continuation of the idea that a woman's nature was as fickle as that of fashion.

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<sup>12</sup> One of Demorest's main competitors, the Ladies' Home Journal, benefited immensely from this reader-as-consumer focus; by 1889 it was funded primarily by sales of advertising space throughout its pages (Damon-Moore, 1994).

Linking dress to the limitations placed on women by society, Croly's attitude regarding the excesses of fashion repeatedly align her with prominent dress reformers of the period, such as Woolson (1874) and Flower (1893). Both reformers and Croly argue that the vicious cycle of fashion only facilitated the perception of women as the weaker sex. Croly takes issue with what she views as the most disparaging perception of women. They are by their very nature consigned to fashion and are therefore doomed to be subject to what is often perceived as an arbitrary system over which they have no control. In a "Talks" column entitled "Is Life Worth Living?"; (7/82) written later in her editorship, she refutes this perspective, and proposes that this falsity is founded on an either/or dichotomy linking the nature of fashion with that of women. She argues that fashion is used to explain why females are given to an externally oriented or superficial focus) She further posits that because fashion is based on arbitrary and unfounded acts of change, as opposed to stability, women are therefore thought naturally more inclined to folly and irrationality. Thus, according to society at large, women are not to be taken seriously. Croly firmly believes this dichotomy to be false, however, she nevertheless admits that women will blindly follow fashion at the risk of being taken seriously, and positions her argument in a manner similar to Woolson (1874). Both argue that until women stop participating in the "folly of fashion"; they will continue to suffer intellectual and social inequality in the public realm. To clarify her position, Croly suggests that women seek to be just fashionable enough, and to avoid further entrenching dominant cultural discourse surrounding the relationship between women and fashion.

Although sympathetic to much of the philosophy regarding reform, Croly's own appearance rarely deviates radically from current fashion. Croly herself is an outspoken public figure who walks a fine line between propriety and radicalism. A respected member of society, she often supports the latest looks in women's fashion through her own appearance, and takes pains to present herself as a woman who cares about looking her best (Ross, 1963; Woman's Press Club, 1904). For Croly, looking one's best involves being attentive to fashionable dress, as expressed in a later portion of the column "Linsey-Woolsey";

Of course, it is just as well to pay a certain regard to fashion, in order to be dressed becomingly, and not to be remarkable; but such attention should be subordinated to common sense, and not allowed to altogether supersede its exercise) (2/66)

On the surface it seems that Croly is talking out of both sides of her mouth on the matter of fashion. But it may be that in light of her feelings on women and fashion her opinions are tempered by the desire to be taken seriously as a professional journalist and founding member of one of New York City's most elite women's clubs. Hence her concern about not appearing remarkable. Croly's discussion of what constitutes an appropriate degree of being fashionable demonstrates a certain degree of class-related bias. Croly is a respected member of New York society, and her disdain of ostentation and excess comes through in the form of advice against appearing too obvious in one's pursuit of a higher social status.

A similar tension reveals itself in the pages of Demorest's when advertisements for Ellen Demorest's shoulder supports and train elevators are juxtaposed with plates and text heralding the new European fashions. Although Demorest as a dressmaker is interested in developing ways to alleviate some of the sartorial burden faced by women, like Croly, Demorest's designs can be

seen as moderate types reform in that such innovations did little to alter the form of everyday dress.<sup>13</sup> When compared to more radical suggestions proposed by hard-line dress reformers, women who wore Demorest's designs were still consigned to being fashionably feminine in a variety of restrictive ways.<sup>14</sup>

Nineteenth-century women's magazines such as Demorest's were cultural vehicles to emphasize and market ideal modes of women's appearance by promoting dress acceptable by and for dominant social groups) In serving this function, these publications situated the relationship between women and dress within the framework of an ideal femininity that mirrored the proscriptions for dress outlined in etiquette manuals. However, some contemporary scholars propose that the woman's magazine of Croly's day served a dual function. While it aimed to define the proper role of women during the period, it also embraced the concept of change through the introduction of "new" products and discussion of relevant social issues (Helventson, 1980; White, 1970).

In Croly's case, the contradictions between being a progressive, outspoken proponent of women's rights and being editor of a fashion-oriented woman's magazine raises the question of how much attention to fashion is too much. Clearly, Croly believes her readers took her seriously on such topics as careers and college for women in part because she is well-but not remarkably-dressed. Likewise, the moderate to conservative treatment of the dress reform topic by Demorest's illustrates how such contradictions surface within the magazine as a whole. It may be that the general topic of social reform was made more accessible, and perhaps even personal, when couched in terms of Victorian middle-class propriety.

### *Women, Dress, and Reform*

A number of people felt reform was needed in women's dress, many of whom voiced their concerns publicly throughout the nineteenth century) Novelists, doctors, and educators sought more rational modes of appearance, and individuals who took the initiative to come up with designs for their own wearing argued that physical comfort should be the driving factor in dressing oneself (Banner, 1983)) By mid-century, the call for reform in dress was put out by individuals and groups whose interests centered around a number of related concerns, including higher education, morality, nationalism, temperance, and asceticism (Fry, 1856; Russell, 1892; Woolson, 1874)) Balancing aesthetics and comfort was a popular focus of reformers, including the Miller sisters, who proposed the Jenness-Miller System of Dress to achieve this goal (Cunningham, 1990)) Throughout the nineteenth century, dress reform was a pertinent issue for trends in physical exercise and health, called for in part by Catherine Beecher in her 1856 publication *Physiology and Calisthenics*. This trend is also found in the loose-fitting dresses designed in 1861 by Dio Lewis for students at his Massachusetts women's seminary (Banner, 1983).

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, *Revolution*, the most progressive of women's rights periodicals, refused to include general advertisements on the grounds that they exploited women, yet its editors acquiesced to include ads for Demorest's store and designs (Banner, 1983, p. 99).

<sup>14</sup> 14For example, in the Appendix to her compilation of lectures entitled *Dress-Reform*, Woolson (1874) provides the reader with suggestions for healthful alterations to garments that would result in noticeable changes in the silhouette. For instance, she advises that no more than three layers should be worn on the lower part of the body, and a light weight hoop, as opposed to the fashionable bustle, should be worn underneath in order to keep the fabric from interfering with movement.

Visionaries imagining the emancipated woman of the future often made sure to present her in comfortable clothing. Flower (1892) argues that serious reform in dress would occur through women's increasing freedom of choice in terms of education, employment, and goals. She writes, "The rapidly broadening sphere of woman, the logic of events, and the ascendancy of reason over conventionality, which grows more marked each day, all point unmistakably to the early adoption of a more healthful, rational, and comfortable dress for woman"; (Symposium II, 1892, p. 642). Similarly, Emily Bruce, a doctor who submitted her opinion on dress reform to *Arena*, links healthy dress to other aspects fundamental to making the most of increased opportunities for women. She writes:

Resting upon a tripod the supports of which are physical culture, careful diet, and correct dress, the American woman may attain to consummate beauty, grace, and strength, which added to her already acquired intellectual preeminence, will place her in a position to give oracular utterances to the entire world. (The rational dress movement, 1893, p. 319)<sup>15</sup>

Many of these visionaries spread their views by lecturing on the topic of dress reform throughout the U.S. and Europe. Entire magazines became devoted to healthful dress and were published throughout the century, including *Sibyl: A Review of the Tastes, Errors, and Fashions of Society*, and the *Jenness Miller Magazine*. Several women's rights publications such as *Una*, *Arena*, and *Revolution* periodically contained articles that discussed the implications of dress reform for alleviating women's social, economic, and political disenfranchisement. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, noted lecturer on feminist issues and author of *Women and Economics* (1898), devoted an entire column of her magazine, *The Forerunner*, to dress reform in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It would seem that reform was on the mind of the majority of American women at this time; however, publications such as these had small circulation when compared to the traditionally-formatted women's magazines of the popular press such as *Demorest's*, making it somewhat difficult to know how much talk of reform reached the middle-class female reader.

Throughout the century, most of the popular women's magazines elected to err on the side of tradition with respect to reform in women's dress. For instance, Hale, the professional mind behind *Godey's Ladies Book*, ran the story of "A Bloomer Among Us"; (1854) which reproaches bloomer wearers and implies that radical reform in women's dress was unnecessary. Yet, there is some indication that the editors of certain women's magazines integrated ideas found in reform circles with the traditional formula aimed at the status quo. For example, Hale, although opposed to the Bloomer costume, felt a certain degree of reform was needed in dress, and thus only included fashion plates depicting styles she deemed elegant and useful (Woloch, 1984, p. 106). *Peterson's*, another widely popular woman's magazine, printed fashion plates in 1851 of the Bloomer costume for evening and walking.

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce's words are reflected in contemporary interpretations of the forces of change that helped bring about lasting reform in women's dress. Wamer's (1986) research on women's dress for sport in the nineteenth century reveals how women's experiences with sporting activity, an opportunity brought about partly by increased access to higher education, necessitated alterations in forms of dress, thus making it more suitable for the body in motion. Experiences that contradicted popular notions of women's lack of potential for physical activity seem to be a key factor in change within women's dress (Simms, 1991), perhaps brought on by a change in women's perceptions of what kind of dress should be appropriate for everyday wear (Keiser, 1975).

Croly's experiences as Demorest's editor form the basis of her point of view on the subject of dress reform. She typically deals with the subject as it relates to her views on the need for women to be gainfully employed. Touching on the subject a number of times throughout 1875, Croly proposes that there were many benefits of education as preparation for successful employment. Moreover, she sees valuable potential for developing less burdensome clothing to be designed for women, by women. She writes:

Awakened intelligence quickens activity to better things....A good education, a knowledge of mathematics, of drawing, is as desirable for the dressmaker as the school teacher. When the majority of women start with this we shall have purer, simpler, and more graceful forms applied to dress, and other industries and arts. ("Women and Work,"; 9/75)

In addition, her experiences as a professional are the basis of her ideas about what kind of dress reform would be most successful. Through such ideas, she indicates her views on how dress plays a crucial role in women's advancement, as is particularly clear in the following excerpt:

If women are to be trained in business, they must be clothed appropriately. They must not depend upon a muff or dress pocket to carry money and papers. Their ordinary outside garment must be durable enough in its character to contain roomy inside pockets like the coat of a man; then they will not be so liable to have their pocket-books lost or stolen. ("Special Qualifications of Women in Business,"; 4/75)<sup>16</sup>

This passage provides an excellent illustration of the symbiotic relationship between dress and gender identity, in that Croly proposes certain alterations to women's dress as both a reflection of change in social roles and as a means to achieve this change.

Throughout "Talks" Croly tends to follow her arguments for women's potential in the workplace with suggestions having to do with the production or care of dress. She complains about the poor quality of the mass-produced clothing of the period, and sees this as an opportunity for women to go into business. She writes:

It is a very short time, comparatively, since women had to put in with the needle every stitch that went to the making of nine-tenths of the clothing worn. Now, the sewing-machine, in the hands of an expert, does it with ten times the rapidity, and renders sewing by hand an apparent waste of time....Thus certain kinds of labor, heretofore regarded as exclusively feminine, are passing out of the hands of women employed in domestic duties at home, and becoming a part of general business... there is nothing to prevent women from taking the leading positions, if they have the requisite pluck, enterprise, knowledge, training, and capacity. ("The Relations of Women to the World Around Them,"; 1/75)

It appears that she is suggesting women reform dress from the inside out, and perhaps even more remarkably, that they make money from the same system that seems to oppress them. Interestingly, Croly rarely speaks of the low pay and limited opportunities for education or training on the part of the women already employed in the industry, or mentions the reality of their economic oppression. Instead, she directs her words to the middle-class women of her day who were raised under the impression that they did not need to work or to know how to manage

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<sup>16</sup> It is compelling that although many changes have occurred in regards to women's dress since Croly's time, the use of handbags as accessories, rather than pockets, continues to prevail to this day.

finances.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Croly appears to be couching her ideas in socioeconomic class assumptions, suggesting that the readers consider going into business or positions of leadership within the apparel industry, rather than doing the skilled labor of cutters and stitchers.

Because many of Croly's readers were also members of women's clubs, it is likely they were exposed to some talk of reform in dress. The notion of healthy, sensible dress was a central concern particularly within women's organizations that espoused multiple foci in terms of women's emancipation. As Newton (1974) points out, "Efforts towards a reform in the design of women's dress were entangled so inextricably in the nineteenth century with organized struggles for the rights of women that the first cannot be properly understood without some understanding of the second"; (p. 59).<sup>18</sup> Yet, even though the connection between women's disenfranchisement and restrictive attire had been argued throughout the century, and although a number of moderate changes had occurred, including the introduction of the hoop skirt and an increasing menswear influence in the design of women's dresses, being fashionably gendered appeared to reign over plain common sense. As Francis E. Russell, dress reformer and chairperson of the Committee on Women's Dress (formed by the National Council of Women) points out, "As one deformity threatens to succeed another, anything that women will persistently wear as 'the correct thing' soon comes to be associated with womanhood in men's minds as to seem the 'womanly' dress"; (1893, p. 70).

Contained within a resolution drawn up by the dress committee of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C. (1891) were suggestions as to the best means to persuade women to go against the dictates of excess and wear rational but fashionable dress. This resolution was presented at the Symposium on Women's Dress in Chicago the following year. In a further attempt, the committee solicited signatures of well-known and respected women, including "Jennie June"; (Croly's best known pseudonym) on a pledge for better dress to be published in the *Arena* (Russell, 1893, p. 76). Although she does not often refer to herself as a dress reformer, Croly supports this cause throughout her life. This commitment is indicated by a letter also published in the *Arena* in which Croly states her opinion on the matter of women's dress reform and argues that a woman's mode of dress should be a choice left to the individual. Croly, then in her early twenties, asserts, "My faith in them [women] makes me believe that if once they think and act for themselves, they will soon think and act right"; (Russell, 1892, p. 333).<sup>19</sup>

Croly's ideas, though similar to others involved in the process of reforming dress for reasons of health, sport, and simplicity, clearly relate to the potential she envisions for women's economic advancement. Although she rarely alludes to herself as a dress reformer per se, as Demorest's editor, Croly attempts to persuade women to choose reason over excess and to reveal how

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<sup>17</sup> It is possible that Croly focused on this particular profile because such women were most likely to be literate and able to afford the luxury of magazine subscriptions, as well as the leisure time to read a publication such as Demorest's.

<sup>18</sup> For example, one of the first women's clubs in the United States, the New England Woman's Club, formed in 1868, established a store where women could purchase "sensible garments" (Blair, 1980, p. 34). At this store, women employees both sold and made the garments, receiving orders from all over the country (Blair, 1980). Also established in 1868, Sorosis, a woman's club founded in New York City by Croly, encouraged lectures on the topic of healthy yet beautiful dress (Ross, 1963).

<sup>19</sup> There is no definite date on this letter, but it appears to be written in support of the dress reform convention of 1852.



changes in dress can work in tandem with changes in gender roles. Like others of her day, Croly is concerned about the disadvantages women face because of their dress, and compares the restrictions imposed by women's dress with the ease of movement and less expense required of men's attire (Symposium I, 1892). What sets her apart from the others, however, is her talent for making ideas espoused by various groups interested in the issue of dress reform palatable to the audience of a fashion-oriented woman's magazine. Croly repeatedly uses her position as Demorest's editor and contributor to impress on the minds of women the need to think rationally about what they wear and the role that dress ultimately plays in the shaping of their lives.

### *Conclusions and Implications*

Dress reform played a fundamental role within the general argument for women's rights in the nineteenth century. But it is difficult to measure just how much the opinions and warnings of reform advocates actually influenced or even caused a change in the popular silhouettes of women's fashion into the twentieth century (Roach & Musa, 1979). Indeed, there were numerous organizations interested in bringing about reform in women's dress throughout the century, including loosely-formed groups advocating particular garments, or fabrics, such as the Woolleners and more formalized groups supporting physical exercise as related to dress, as in the Physical Culture and Correct Dress Society. Using the rhetoric of a journalist and editor, Croly joins in this discussion, combining issues central to a variety of reform circles with her own perspective on women's situation to engage the reader of Demorest's in a broad-based dialogue on the subject of women's dress.

As a commentator on women and reform in society and editor of a popular magazine tailored to women of her day, issues of gender are of high priority to Croly. Concerned with both the social positioning of women and the role of dress within women's lives, she cites specific methods to improve both. By suggesting changes in dress that begin with the dailiness of women's lived experience, Croly positions dress reform as the basis of a promising economic enterprise, one that she believes could alleviate women's physical, intellectual, and financial restrictions. At the same time, Croly's words cannot help but reveal how fashion acts as a double-edged sword within women's lives. That is, the same business that holds the potential for women's independence burdens them with both unrealistic expectations and exploitation. Croly is herself an example of how such tensions and contradictions can play out within a woman's life-she is successful as a professional, but her success rests largely on editing a magazine that publishes idealized images of women and supports a rigid standard of femininity. As the magazine's editor, Croly is in a powerful position. By working both within and outside of the system she wields the power to decide how the magazine can and will determine change.

As an individual, however, the inner conflict between Croly as a professional and Croly as a woman point to a certain degree of ambivalence (Davis, 1994; Michelman, 1998) experienced by Croly. Although Croly seeks to alter the perceptions of women in general, evidence in the form of her own writing points to a tension between what she expects of herself and what she believes society expects from her. In her writings on the relationship between women and dress we see a motivated, intellectually capable woman who is equally concerned about the potential of being deemed unfeminine by the rigid standards of her social peers. Moreover, she presents herself to the readers as advice giver, therefore allowing little opportunity for her to develop a definition of womanhood that expands beyond the white, middle-class experience. As a result, Croly is able to

verbalize the complex issues of merging personal responsibilities with professional goals, but never completely resolves them.

At the root of Croly's experience with ambivalence is her need to reconcile her own professional goals with those of a society in which gender difference is the foundation of social interaction. Although it was a time when reform was becoming part of America's collective social consciousness, her subjectivity undergoes constant re-evaluation depending on her status among peers. In this sense, Croly's dilemma is relevant to the focus of today's fashion oriented women's magazines, which continue to propose and perpetuate ideals of femininity. The primary difference is that today's magazine presents such standards in the context of a society wherein the female as professional is no longer a novelty, but an everyday reality.

Wolf (1991) suggests that though there have been numerous studies pointing to the ways women's magazines act as a reflection of change, few have examined how they participated actively in determining change. It may be that the difficulty in examining this participation lies in the fact that such publications seek to promote a perpetual state of ambivalence. As an emissary of the fashion industry, a fashion-oriented woman's magazine such as *Demorest's* embraces established means of using dress to express gender identity, while simultaneously exacting change to this identity. Defining gender as a category of analysis within the study of Croly's writings provides a means to delve deeper into the processes by which social meanings are assigned to and surface through dress and appearance. As Croly's perspective illustrates, dress works in tandem with gender as a material signifier of relationships of power, not only because it establishes gender as an immediate and recognizable phenomenon, but also because it makes sexual difference tangible on social terms. Yet a gendered identity is not something that is fixed or essential; rather, it relies on the continuous exchange between social relations and the individual for its interpretation. A gendered identity in this sense calls for not only an understanding of sexual difference, but a recognition of how this interpretation comes out of experiences with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class, all of which contribute to our conception of history, itself a fluid process.

In the spirit of reform that characterizes her time, Croly makes her opinions on the need for change public and presents them to the masses through a popular woman's magazine. Croly is both idealistic and practical in her views, and her writings often appear contradictory, in that they give voice to the complexity of Croly's own persona, integrating the directness of a social reform newsletter with the subtlety of a model parlor magazine. Through "Talks With Women," Croly expresses her desire for a widespread reconsideration of established gender roles, in that she imagines a social climate in which women have the requisite knowledge and freedom to exercise their own choices, especially those having to do with dress. Like others of her time, Croly envisions a future in which women are no longer limited to a singular, monolithic definition of femininity, and seeks to enlighten her readers to create change for themselves and consequently for society as a whole.

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