

The Safety Bicycle: The Victorian Woman's Expedition into a New Public Space

by Alyssa Reedy, HTST 303

A gentleman recently bought his wife and two daughters a bicycle apiece. It was not very long before he had occasion to regret his generosity. Returning home late one night he was annoyed to find the house deserted, Mary Jane out and no supper prepared.¹

This excerpt from Katrina Jungnickel's book, *Bikes and Bloomers*, demonstrates the stress and tension that was placed on society with the popularity of the bicycle among women. The nineteenth century saw the emergence of the bicycle craze in tandem with a dress reform movement and the complicated "woman question." Women's nature and role in society were under debate and the "New Woman," Diane Thompson writes, was an ideological threat to a male perceived harmony.² Victorian women were actively seeking change in their lives through legislation and the suffragette movement, challenging ideologies held at that time and in tandem, exploring a wider world outside the home. The "New Woman" in the Victorian age became an explorer in her own urban and rural environment, and the safety bicycle enabled her to access new professions and financial independence. The bicycle facilitated the "New Woman" to be more self-sustainable, more active in her public space and less dependent upon the men around her. This was a fundamental shift in perception of time and space for the Victorian Woman because it hastened the pace to the modern woman today through destabilizing gender stereotypes, creating a new identity and expanding her geography all in a society that was prime for change.

¹ Katrina Jungnickel, *Bikes and Bloomers: Victorian Women Investors and Their Extraordinary Cycle Wear*. (Cambridge, MA: Goldsmiths Press, 2020), 37.

² Diane Thompson, *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

Spurred by the enlightenment ideal of scientific thinking, the mid nineteenth century experienced a restructuring of household harmony regarding law, religion and literature.³ With a revival of biblical criticism, Ben Griffin pointed out that the Bible began to be interpreted by some as a historical resource rather than a set of rules to strictly follow.⁴ This new wave of religious thinking combined with changing laws regarding women's legal identities and advancing medical knowledge, led to the erosion of the Victorian domestic ideology.⁵ Griffin explains that gender stereotypes held at the time were structured as marital unity through male authority.⁶ This authority though, was on unstable ground as women actively sought changes to law. Women were eligible to vote in local elections in 1869 and married women got the right to own property in 1870.⁷ These changes in women's legal and domestic spheres began to threaten masculine stability. With male dominated spaces becoming occupied by women, and with the introduction of the safety bicycle, these fears were further agitated. In previous centuries, arguments that kept women in the domestic sphere, mostly regarding their health, began to be dismantled, Margaret Guroff noted that the switch to scientific thinking led to a transformation of thought. With masses of women cycling, the benefits began to be undeniable, with Guroff asserting that physicians began to accept that what was healthy for one body, would be good for another.⁸ Women riding bicycles and experiencing none of the expected negative effects, mostly centred around reproductive health, was evidence that began to crumble preconceived gender roles.⁹ Sarah Hallenbeck emphasized that the bicycle changed how women viewed themselves and their new found physical

³ Ben Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights*. (1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 38.

⁴ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*, 113,115.

⁵ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*, 113,115.

⁶ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*, 51.

⁷ Griffin, *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain*, 13.

⁸ Margaret Guroff, *The Mechanical Horse, How the Bicycle Reshaped American Life*. (First edition. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016), 49.

⁹ Lena Wanggren: *Gender, Technology and the New Woman*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 67.

capabilities.¹⁰ Doubt regarding gender sowed the seeds for women to actively create a new identity, and the bicycle was central to that change.

In the work of Glen Norcliffe, the bicycle's visibility is emphasized. Riding is done in a public space, compared to other technologies of the nineteenth century like the sewing machine, which was in the domestic sphere.¹¹ The way women chose to present themselves in the public space drastically changed with the bicycle. Women began to create new identities for themselves and the independence they sought out and experienced evolved to include their dress. The Dress Reform Movement of the 1830s was furthered along with the introduction of the safety bicycle. The light frame and pneumatic tires made it the optimal vehicle for a woman to use solo, and so, women actively modified their outfits for the ride and cyclist Francis Willard posed that regarding clothing, "reason [would] gain upon precedent."¹² Women were re-designing their own wardrobe and switching out irrational fashion for rational dress, often at the shock of an agitated public.¹³ Women contributed to the bicycle form itself, acting as a "silent partner" in the development of the bike; many patents were issued to women who had improved the design of the bicycle.¹⁴ A shift in fashion along with items that women brought along with them, created a new heterotopia on their travels. Maria Ward's handbook suggests bringing a lantern for late rides, keeping a small notebook and a compass for noting interests along the way, and maintaining her desired direction.¹⁵ The newly expanded public space that included social activities, further places to travel, and new professions, such as journalism, created a heterotopia for women that resembled one of a man's. The establishment of women's clubs revolving around cycling created new bonds of common

¹⁰ Sarah Hallebeck, *Claiming the Bicycle: Women, Rhetoric, and Technology in the Nineteenth-Century America*. (Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 32.

¹¹ Glen Norcliffe, *Critical Geographies of Cycling: History, Political Economy and Culture*. (London: Routledge, 2016), 4.

¹² Francis Willard: *A Wheel within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle, with Some Reflections by the Way*. (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1895).

¹³ Jungnickel, *Bikes and Bloomers*, 4.

¹⁴ Hallebeck, *Claiming the Bicycle*, 33, 35.

¹⁵ Maria A. Ward, *The Common Sense of Bicycling*. (New York; Paris; Chicago; Washington: Brentano's, 1896), 78.

interest and created a new space for women to interact with one another. The Lady's Cycling Association, established in 1892, and magazines such as the "Lady Cyclist" represented a shift in what women chose to do socially.¹⁶ Previously women's social lives were heavily dictated by domestic life and morality, leaving few acceptable options compared to men. Bicycling was seen as a morally acceptable social outing that could be done alone by women and girls.¹⁷ The bicycle was also affordable, compared to golf or horse riding, expanding the population who could buy one from the rich to the working class, with Guroff stating that the bicycle was the "great leveller."¹⁸ With more women riding bicycles, there was an increase in cycling-related literature. This created a new space of media and camaraderie. Women such as Frances Willard and Maria Ward wrote books about their experiences of learning to ride and their books taught other women how to ride. Women were educating themselves on riding the bicycle, and as Maria Ward writes in her book, women could become "at all times independent."¹⁹

Independence for the Victorian woman, meant that they had the freedom to expand their geography. The previous small space of the home grew farther out and this was especially true in rural areas. Offices, markets, schools, hospitals and shops were suddenly a short pedal away with the bicycle. Norcliffe notes that by 1900, most places had a bicycle shed that was full during the day and empty at night.²⁰ The speed and distance the bicycle gave women both shortened and expanded time for them. Getting to her destination took less time resulting in more time to spend there, also opening the possibility of going to multiple places in a day. Cyclist Maria Ward wrote about cycling, "the country all about soon becomes your domain. Instead of a few squares, you know several towns."²¹ A pioneer of

¹⁶ Wangren, *Gender, Technology and the New Woman*, 65.

¹⁷ Patricia Marks: *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press*. (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1990), 184.

¹⁸ Guroff, *The Mechanical Horse*, 49.

¹⁹ Ward, *The Common Sense of Bicycling*, 4.

²⁰ Norcliffe, *Critical Geographies of Cycling*, 13.

²¹ Ward, *The Common Sense of Bicycling*, 20.

women's distance cycling was Annie Londonderry. Born Annie Cohen Kopchovsky, Londonderry cycled thousands of miles across the globe beginning and ending in Boston with stops in Egypt and France.²² Hallenbeck mentions that there was limited evidence of Londonderry being paid for her journey, concluding her sponsorship may have been used as a guise for her liberation from her domestic life.²³ Author Lena Wanggren explains that women, real and literary, also viewed the bicycle as a means of mental and physical escape.²⁴ On a "steed that never tires" Frances Willard encouraged other women to explore a wider world in a more informal manner.²⁵ The bicycle was compared to the railway in Ward's book, where she concluded that the bike is linked with the rail, driving travel further. Ward wrote that the railway and bicycle required less effort in transportation, but the bicycle had the added benefit of the ability to stop and enjoy moments along the trip.²⁶

"What more delightful than to mount and speed away, the whirr of the wheels, the soft grit of the tire, an occasional chain-clank the only sounds added to the chorus of the morning, as, the pace attained, the road stretches away before you!"²⁷ Written by Maria Ward in 1896, this excerpt is an excellent example of the joy the bicycle brought women. Joy in new fashion, exploration, friendships and the freedom achieved with it. Women had been actively championing for an equal place in male dominated spaces before the Victorian Era and the invention of the safety bicycle. However, the bicycle accelerated the time it took for women to reach that physical and long imagined space. A chain reaction began when women saw their peers cycling and took to the sport as well, and the joy and freedom found with the bicycle was a catalyst that drove change at a much faster pace.

²² Bruce Webber, "Annie Londonderry: A Pioneering Bicyclist's Epic Journey Came to Symbolize Women's Independence." *The New York Times*. November 2019.

²³ Hallenbeck, *Claiming the Bicycle*, xii.

²⁴ Wanggren, *Gender, Technology and the New Woman*, 75.

²⁵ Francis Willard, *A Wheel Within A Wheel*, conclusion.

²⁶ Ward, *The Common Sense of Bicycling*, 19.

²⁷ Ward, *The Common Sense of Bicycling*, 7.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Ward, Maria E. *The Common Sense of Bicycling*. New York; Paris; Chicago; Washington: Brentano's, 1896.

Willard, Frances E. (Frances Elizabeth). *A Wheel Within a Wheel: How I Learned to Ride the Bicycle, with Some Reflections by the Way*. Project Gutenberg, 1895.

Secondary Sources

Griffin, Ben. *The Politics of Gender in Victorian Britain: Masculinity, Political Culture and the Struggle for Women's Rights*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Guroff, Margaret. *The Mechanical Horse: How the Bicycle Reshaped American Life*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2016.

Hallenbeck, Sarah. *Claiming the Bicycle: Women, Rhetoric, and Technology in Nineteenth-Century America*. Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2016.

Jungnickel, Katrina. *Bikes and Bloomers: Victorian Women Investors and Their Extraordinary Cycle Wear*. Cambridge, MA: Goldsmiths Press, 2020.

Marks, Patricia. *Bicycles, Bangs, and Bloomers: The New Woman in the Popular Press*. Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.

Norcliffe, Glen B. *Critical Geographies of Cycling: History, Political Economy and Culture*. London: Routledge, 2016.

Thompson, Nicola Diane. *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Wånggren, Lena. *Gender, Technology and the New Woman*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

Weber, Bruce. "Annie Londonderry: A Pioneering Bicyclist's Epic Journey Came to Symbolize Women's Independence." *The New York Times*, November 2019