

SPORTING GIRLS: EXERCISING GENDER MODES

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The movement to introduce games and exercise into the lives of middle-class girls and women, often associated with the rise of female education, brought about vast changes in the lived bodily experience of women and girls in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Such dramatic changes were contested on many levels, both private and public, and often involved complex negotiations around what could be considered feminine and appropriate. While dominant notions of femininity were contested and challenged by the demands of athleticism, early female sporting pioneers often invoked these same notions in order to defend new sporting pursuits. The idea and practice of discipline, in particular, was a significant factor in making strenuous female exercise acceptable. Because self-control was such a factor in Victorian women's lives, discipline in sport seemed to provide both continuity with dominant understandings of femininity and justification for changes to them. This paper will outline how, despite considerable opposition, the physical lives of numerous women and girls underwent substantial changes through involvement in vigorous exercise. By outlining some of these changes, it is possible to trace ways in which gender modes were altered and contested during this time, thereby revealing aspects of the constructed nature of the gender system. The end of the Victorian era saw the emergence of a new identity: that of the sporting girl.

The case of cycling is perhaps the clearest form of exercise through which to trace changes in gender performance because most of its developments occurred in the public sphere. Cycling provides an obvious focus for issues around female bodily independence, dress and exercise. Women who took up cycling not only had to adjust to its physical demands, but also adapt their cycling practice to the demands of dominant modes of femininity, which they did in a variety of ways. The invention of the Safety Bicycle in 1884 and the adaptation of pneumatic tyres for bicycles in 1887 propelled a cycling craze, and by the 1890s many women had followed men and boys in taking up the sport (Watson and Gray 120). While initially attracting disapproval, it is notable that attitudes to cycling females underwent a rapid change during the 1890s, precipitated partly by its adoption by upper-class women. However, throughout the cycling debate, which featured in every major journal of the day in some form, there was always an assumption, by proponents and opponents alike, that some boundaries should be set for cycling females. Public surveillance of female activity was a given. Titles such as "The Cycling Craze for Ladies" (Linton), "Is Cycling Bad for Women? What a Professor of Gynecology Thinks" (Stead), or many simply entitled "Cycling for Women,"

whether penned by male or female authors, are concerned with restricting the activities of women. The question is not whether women should be restricted; argument is about how much. Medical opinion, initially negative, shifts with the tide of fashion through the 1890s. By 1896 the *Englishwoman's Review* could note, "It is doubtful which has been most rapid, the adoption of cycling by women, or the change of tone respecting it" ("Cycling," 226). Once the idea of cycling for women gained momentum, discussion about its acceptability or otherwise concentrated on policing the ways in which women cycled. This meant that even those in favour of cycling for women placed restrictions on them, restrictions concerned with maintaining a suitable performance of dominant femininity. Gender was classed also; what could be tolerated in working-class women may not be tolerated in others, while upper-class women could sometimes escape the restrictions of middle-class women. Even when cycling was well established, Mrs Lynn Linton complained:

The prettiest woman in the world, and the most graceful in riding, in walking, in dancing, in skating, in reclining, loses all her distinctive charm when "biking." The attitude is constrained, and pedal as well as she may, the action is ungraceful. The skirts alternately flap and fill like the sails of a tacking boat; the eyes are hard and anxious; the face is set; there is not left the faintest remnant of that sweet spirit of allurements which, conscious or unconscious, is woman's supreme attraction. (173)

By the end of the article she concedes that riding in the country is acceptable, though not without dangers, while for country girls who cannot afford other forms of transportation, cycling is a positive benefit "as long as they do not overstrain their pretty bodies nor take a corrupt advantage of their liberty" (177).

One of the cycling activities for women that attracted most disapproval was racing, perceived as a clear misperformance of gender. Doctors advised against it because of its supposed potential to harm the female rider, and by implication her capacity for motherhood: "The majority of women have wisely set their faces against racing and record-breaking. Both are physiological crimes" (Fenton 801). A doctor writing in *The Girl's Own Paper* also hinted that motherhood might be in jeopardy, when he wrote: "Spurting or going at a great pace is not for the fair sex. By doing so even once you may hurt your self so that you will repent of it all your life" (Stables 364). Many commentators, including female cyclists, asserted that "Women cannot sustain the strain of racing" (Erskine 40). Racing was a spectacle, further diminishing its respectability for middle- and upper-class women. Proponents worried that it would provide the opponents of cycling with further ammunition for their criticisms: "racing and unconventional rational dress are sure means of ruining the pastime, and bringing a good exercise into disrepute and disfavour" (Erskine 4-41). For those who promoted cycling for women, negotiating

dominant notions of femininity was foremost in the advice given to prospective cyclists. Dress, manner and style were taken to be the chief signifiers of femininity while cycling, but the physical demands of the sport made it difficult to comply with accepted notions of these. Many female cyclists went to great lengths to conform however. Mrs E. Robins Pennell described the complicated system of hooks and eyes used to shorten and lengthen her skirt so that she could ride without risking it being caught in the wheel and also be able to make it long enough to walk in without attracting unwanted attention (258). She was a serious touring rider, having ridden from Florence to Rome with her husband on a tandem (250). Other costumes consisted of underlying knickerbockers with a skirt over the top, but this arrangement was also fussy and complicated. With this costume, "The great difficulty is of course to get the 'hang' right beside the saddle, and to ensure the fulness [sic] keeping in its proper place" (Hills 282-3). There was also the problem of the skirt: "For keeping the skirt from blowing up, I have found nothing better than to pass the feet through a strap of 1/4-inch elastic" placed in the hem (283-4). Many articles on what women should wear while cycling expressed the view that most women wanted to "try to cycle quietly, as prettily dressed and as little remarked as we can," noting that more radical costumes evoked unwanted attention: "it is very unpleasant to start a style of costume that gives the street boy a chance of airing his wits" (*Woman's Life* 397). However the complications of cycling costumes which were not easy to construct, wear or ride in, led some women to adopt "Rationals."

The Rational Dress Society had been functioning in England since 1881, advocating the abandonment of corsets, bustles, crinolines and weighty underwear in favour of loose comfortable clothing for women, while a movement for dress reform had been in existence since at least the mid-century, with feminists and doctors being its chief supporters. Cycling highlighted the problems inherent in wearing the usual female attire for exercise, especially exercise making use of machinery. Rational cycling costumes, which had become commonplace in France, were a functional alternative, but they were radical when compared to the expected feminine costume (Pennell 261). However, Rationals, as the cycling costume came to be known, were adopted by some souls brave enough to risk the disapproval of the public, exemplified by the aforementioned wit of the street boy. One example of English Rationals consisted of "long-skirted Norfolk jacket, the tails forming a short skirt. Well-fitting, but rather full knickerbockers meet long gaiters, at the knee, which button down and strap over the shoe . . . It can be worn with a skirt; when so worn, in case of rain overtaking the rider, the coat skirt unhooks and forms a neat shoulder cape" (Erskine 34-5). The coat was generally understood to modify the effect of the knickerbockers by partially covering them up, but this did not stop many from viewing them as trousers by another name. Female dress was strongly policed by the public, especially if it was seen to cross the boundary into the masculine. Females cycling in rational dress could attract abuse in the streets, as the following complaint in the socialist *Clarion* shows: "Few would believe how

insulting and coarse the British public could be unless they had ridden through a populated district with a lady wearing Rationals” (Birley 79-80). *Punch* cartoonists found numerous ways to poke fun at Rationals and the gender blurring they occasioned, with jokes such as the following, entitled, “In Dorsetshire”: An elderly man walking with the aid of a stick meets a young female cyclist standing with her bicycle and wearing Rationals. “Fair Cyclist: ‘Is this the way to Wareham, please?’ Native: ‘Yes. Miss, yew seem to me to ha’ got ’em on all right!’” (6 September 1899, 114).

As late as 1899, Lady Harberton was refused entry to the parlour of a Surrey Hotel and directed to the men’s bar because of her cycling dress. When she sued the landlady, Lady Harberton lost the case after failing to convince the jury, or the applauding gallery, that her rational dress was suitable for the parlour (Watson and Gray 136-139). Laura Ormiston Chant, writing in support of women’s entry into vigorous exercise, pointed out the double standard inherent in understandings of female decency and dress, a double standard which revealed the constructed nature of these notions: “while a British jury and landlady may be impressed with the dreadful indecency of the useful rationals worn by a stately Lady Harberton, they may also be able to take as a matter of course the ‘backs and front’ of society in evening dress” (Chant 250). While directions for making or ordering Rationals appeared in books and articles on cycling for women, it was rare to find an author willing to admit to wearing them herself. Usually some form of skirt was advocated, with many writers, such as “Lady Jeune,” condemning Rationals outright:

We have always maintained that women’s participation in sports and outdoor amusements should be limited to those in which they can wear a skirt, and that the sports in which that dress cannot be worn are exclusively the monopoly of men. No one will maintain that a woman was ever intended to wear trousers. (619)

Virtually every writer on cycling has something to say about appearance, dress and cycling style, and female cyclists knew that in cycling they were pushing the boundaries of acceptable behaviour for women. Female cyclists were entreated to “look well” and not to sacrifice “what they are pleased to call comfort to elegance” (Hills 267; Erskine 36). Cycling’s supporters knew that they must be seen to adequately perform some features of dominant femininity in order to be able to misperform others. In her book *Bicycling for Ladies*, Maria Ward wrote: “women and girls bring upon themselves censure from many sources. I have also found that this censure, though almost always deserved, is called forth not so much by what they do as the way they do it” (ix). Most cyclists were willing to conform as much as possible in their dress and style in order to pursue cycling without censure, because as well as the pleasures of physical fitness and outdoor exercise, cycling represented a previously unknown opportunity for independent mobility. This is mentioned less

during the cycling debates than dress or physical exertion, but Mrs Lynn Linton was aware of its significance: “chief of all the dangers attending this new development of feminine freedom is the intoxication which comes with unfettered liberty” (177). Miss Erskine also admitted “A cycling tourist is so completely her own mistress” (64). By conforming to some dominant notions of femininity, female cyclists were enabled to stretch others to include vigorous exercise and a higher level of independent personal mobility. Such changes were not simply established without a great deal of opposition and resistance that continued for some time to come. When male students at Cambridge demonstrated against the admission of women as students in 1897, they symbolised the rejected female student by hanging the effigy of a woman dressed in Rationals astride a bicycle above the crowd. This image was one of the most potent representations of the New Woman who delighted, repelled and fascinated both sexes throughout the 1890s.

While cycling was the most faddish, public and hence noticeable manifestation of women’s and girls’ entry into vigorous exercise, the move to introduce female gymnastics and games was well under way before the bicycle became ubiquitous. From the 1850s onward, sport came to occupy a prime position in British life, especially in its public schooling system. This was justified and promoted through the notion of Muscular Christianity, which has been defined thus:

This doctrine revolves around the basic notion that there is something innately good and godly about brute strength and power, so long as that energy is directed to noble purposes. Physical weakness is unnatural since it is only a manifestation of moral and spiritual inadequacy. It could be overcome by prayer, upright living, discipline and exercise. (Sandiford 35)

Though there were various lone voices of dissent regarding this doctrine, it soon came to dominate education, and was demonstrated by the “stark contrast between the dingy classrooms and the spacious playing fields” of most public schools in the late nineteenth century (Sandiford 49). As a result, “godliness became more and more associated with manliness” as the games ethic progressed (35). Of course, the rise of sport, especially team games, had specific benefits for the expansion of the British Empire, the growth of both being concurrent, a relationship noted by Herbert Spencer, who had promoted games and exercise in *Education* (1861). During the Boer War, however, he asserted that Muscular Christianity had led to “violence, aggressive imperialism and inevitably towards war” (Sandiford 48).

Following the British Endowed Schools Act in 1869, a new kind of girls’ school developed which emulated the curricula and organisation of the large public boys’ schools that promoted the games ethic (Fletcher 14-17; McCrone 59-99). According to Sara Burstall, Head Mistress of Manchester Girls High School, the Royal Commission of 1865-1867, which led to this act, “so completely forgot the

girls that the terms of reference forgot to exclude them" (Burstall *Frances Mary Buss*, 35). After lobbying by female educators, the Commission agreed "to embrace in their survey the education of both sexes alike," the Commissioners being impressed by the "perfect womanliness" of Emily Davies and Frances Mary Buss who addressed them (35-36). By the end of the century, "about 200 new schools were established which differed markedly from the private ladies' academies of the past," with the students tending to be the daughters of business and professional families (McCrone 60).

The fact that games and muscularity were so much a part of the construction of dominant modes of masculinity meant that their introduction in girls' schools would occur under specific circumstances and with particular modifications. Headmistresses in these schools negotiated very carefully the adoption of exercise and games for their female students, answering as they did to Boards of Governors who were usually male. These women had their own commitments to both class and gender codes and often did not possess any great desire to change them. However, they were also dealing with a society in which further education and the opening of the professions were beginning to be real possibilities for women. An imbalance between the numbers of men and women meant that many women could never expect to marry, demanding changes to realities built around ideals of feminine domesticity.

A number of factors contributed to the rise in girls' sport in schools, but I will highlight the key role of discipline and surveillance in stretching and shifting dominant modes of femininity to include vigorous exercise for females. Disciplining the female body was part of the existing apparatus of femininity; because it was a dominant factor in early female school exercise regimes, it helped to make what might otherwise have appeared unseemly acceptable. While discipline was a factor in all schools, it was one of the aspects of physical education that differentiated boys' from girls' exercise. One of the reasons that games were instigated in boys' schools was to direct aggression, which was a problem in many British schools in the mid-nineteenth century and which was assumed to be a natural masculine attribute (Mangan 28-35; Money 66). Whereas boys played games *rather* than underwent physical education, girls' schooling came to include both, though it began with the more controlled disciplines of gymnastics and callisthenics (Hargreaves 57). The emphasis was therefore much more on physical training as opposed to recreation, on bodily control rather than expression.

From the outset boys' and girls' sport in schools were highly gendered activities. It is significant that when girls' schools first introduced exercise that went beyond the crocodile walks, described by Frances Power Cobbe as "dismal" (Fletcher 11), such exercise took the form of organised gymnastics. The "musical gymnastics" of American Dio Lewis paved the way for the Swedish gymnastics of Per Ling. This was achieved largely through the efforts of Madame Bergman-Österberg and graduates of the College she established, first at Hampstead, then at

Dartford, to train Physical Education teachers, but gymnastics would not have been received so readily had it not reinforced notions of the feminine body as a disciplined body. To this end, it was described as scientific and systematic, with the *Englishwoman's Review* reporting the benefits it brought "for the development of the whole body, every muscle and every limb" and noting on the occasion of a demonstration that exercises were performed with "grace and zest" ("The Princess" 368; "Doctors" 257-58). Such characteristics appealed to educators and the system was established as a national one in schools (Hargreaves 64; McCrone 101). Gymnastics not only appealed because its routines had some consistency with dominant notions of femininity, but also because these demonstrations were often performed by working-class girls who presented a perfect show of obedient and disciplined behaviour. As Jennifer Hargreaves has suggested, it was seen by many of its upper-class supporters as "a means of social control which had an ideologically subordinating function" (72). It was introduced to working-class schools well before freer and more recreational forms of exercise were allowed or provided for, assisted by the fact that it required no playing fields. However, not all educators favoured the Swedish system, some dissenters preferring German gymnastics, as Burstall reports: "They believe that the Swedish system is not sufficiently feminine. Their aim for girls is not the development of muscle, they rather seek to give girls an education suited to their needs as women" ("Physical Training," 2). Teachers of Swedish gymnastics found it necessary to stress the feminine credentials of their discipline, as well as its educational advantages: "girls who learn gymnastics are twice as graceful, and learn much more easily than those who do not" (Tait "Old Students' Reports," 44).

There is no discipline without surveillance, and in girls' schools, such surveillance was medicalised, given the new authority of science through the utilisation of anthropometry, and carried out by the staff. Anthropometry was a major tool in the scrutiny of female bodies which occurred in the school system at this time and involved taking countless measurements of the girls' growth, height, weight and overall physical dimensions. Mme Bergman-Österberg reported her interest in this field, which was to become an integral part of College practice:

It is interesting to observe that the scientific measurements of the human body are acquiring more and more importance. In America this importance has long been recognised, but in England very little has been done outside Mr. F. Galton's work. I am just on the point of visiting Paris to observe the latest developments, and whilst there I hope to communicate with M. M. Demeny and Bertillon, whose researches are so well known. (*Report 1896-1898*)

Bergman-Österberg was at pains to stress the fact that she kept up with the latest scientific developments in all areas of college curricula and practice because the discourse of science was part of the justification for female exercise, and Swedish gymnastics in particular. At her Physical Education College she regularly took measurements of the students' height, weight, strength and reaction times (Tait "Hampstead," 9-10). Francis Galton visited the College, and the 1893 Report states that senior students went to his Anthropometrical Laboratory, South Kensington Museum, to be measured twice a year (Tait "Hampstead," 9-10). Mary Tait, College Superintendent, was particularly satisfied that "The Lung Capacity of the students is far above the average" for women, and included a table of average results of these tests (Tait "Hampstead," 10). These students, who went out into schools throughout Britain and beyond, took this practice with them and it became part of the physical education programs they established. Galton himself was a keen proponent of taking anthropometry into the school system. He addressed the London Congress of the Royal Institute for Preventative Medicine in 1905, telling them that

as an interest in anthropometry has arisen and progressed during recent years, it is to be expected that the good sense of school authorities, assisted by the expert knowledge of medical men, anthropologists, and statisticians will gradually introduce improvements in its methods and enlargements of its scope. (93)

The Headmistress of St. Leonard's School, Jane Frances Dove, wrote a widely read piece on "The Cultivation of the Body" in 1898, featuring anthropometric tables showing average height and weight per age. In it she expresses regret that the tables "do not go nearly far enough, the basis upon which they are founded being too narrow, and it is much to be wished that the Anthropometric Society could see its way to organising a series of observations over a much wider area" (Dove 417). Usually the purpose of these measurements would be to discern any deficiencies in growth or balance so that steps might be taken to counteract them. Dove records:

if a girl was found to be persistently idle and inattentive, though apparently in good health, on consulting the weight book it would usually be found that she was underweight for her age, and a cure was easily effected by cutting off some of her work, giving her extra nourishment and more time for exercise in the open air. (Dove 416)

Burstall surveyed nearly fifty girls' schools for her chapter "Medical Inspection" in a 1911 book for school administrators. She found that most schools employed some form of inspection, with one headmistress declaring that "It would be impossible to carry on the school work without it" and most affirming its benefits (Burstall

“Medical Inspection,” 224). Physical education was deeply imbricated in the function of the inspection, and had consequences for its program:

There is always some connexion, direct or indirect, between the gymnasium work and the medical inspection; the gymnasium mistress and the doctor work together according to the various methods of the particular schools, and in most schools remedial exercises are ordered for those whom the inspection proves to require such help. (Burstall “Medical Inspection,” 220)

These medical inspections might be used in a variety of ways, including the following:

In two forms the intellectual work was found one session to be below the proper standard: a study of the cards for the individual girls showed that the average weight was below what it had been in those forms the previous session when the work was good. Inspection of the forms in the gymnasium showed lack of power and co-ordination and quick response. Consultation took place with the head, the numbers of subjects taught and the amount of homework was cut down, more drill lessons were given, letters were sent home asking mothers to send the girls to bed early and see they ate well of simple nourishing food. In a term the work, and the average and the maximum percentage of marks, as well as the pupils’ vigour, rose in a most satisfactory way. (Dove 416)

In another chapter on the Boarding House, other physical functions come under scrutiny, such as bowel movements – “much patience and care is needed to convince a child of the importance of regularity, and to establish good habits in this respect” – and menstruation, though this is never explicitly named:

In some cases strict rules are made forbidding *all* exercise at certain recurrent times. Violent exercise (eg. Matches, gymnastics, long walks) should in all cases be forbidden throughout the period, but it is desirable to interrupt daily routine, and to attract the attention of younger girls, as little as possible. (Robertson 231, 232)

Such measures reflect the level of control exercised by the school mistress and the degree to which the girl’s body was scrutinised. It can be argued that this widespread interest in anthropometry maintained an emphasis on the control of girls’ bodies, a control that had developed throughout the nineteenth century but

which shifted its focus from creating a sexualised, marriageable object to producing a healthy, productive specimen. If anything, the scrutiny was more complete and students were required not only to be self-regulating subjects but were also the objects of their school mistresses' regulation. The physical education teacher occupied the central role in this scrutiny: "The teacher of physical education was part of a powerful coalition of professionals in the educational arena who cooperated in the close surveillance of students' physical performance and well-being" (Atkinson "Feminist," 41). While much of this surveillance had benign outcomes and possibly improved the health and welfare of many girls, at the same time it served to perpetuate an understanding of the female body as excessive and unruly, and in need of control. This excessive body could not be left unmonitored, but must be overseen, checked and watched. Duress, however well intentioned, must be applied. Within these parameters – that disciplining the female body was a given – changes in girls' bodily experience to include vigorous exercise was possible, but only because the parameters were in place.

More serious challenges to gender codes came with the introduction of games to girls' schools and everyday life. Games came, of course, from the model of boys' education, and for some of the same reasons. Dove asserted that "the principles of corporate life" can be learned "no where more completely than . . . in the large organised games, such as cricket, hockey and lacrosse" and that "the supremacy of our country in so many quarters of the globe, are fostered, if not solely developed, by means of games" (402, 398). These games were taken very seriously as well. St. Leonard's, for example, had space for "four cricket matches at the same time; there were also four hockey pitches which were used in the winter term and turned to lacrosse after Christmas," as well as tennis and fives courts (*Bystander* in Green 15). Daily cold baths were also part of the routine and the school had two gym mistresses and two games mistresses to oversee these physical activities (*Bystander* in Green 8, 15). The girls themselves experienced a range of physical sensations, demands, developments and pleasures that had been rare for girls of their class decades earlier:

we had to manage to change and assemble on the lacrosse or hockey field, or on the cricket pitch in summer by two o'clock. To many of us this was the centre, the highlight of the day [. . .] Part of the fun came from the games dress – short tunics and baggy bloomers with tam o'shanter which always fell off. But what freedom, what glory, to scamper about after one ball or another in sun or rain or wind as one of a team, as part of the school, on an equality, I felt, with my brothers at last. (Peck in Atkinson "Fitness," 118)

This experience of non-restrictive clothing was to have, eventually, a lasting impact on dress codes. The Dartford gym tunic, which had been devised by Mary Tait in

1892 when the College was still at Hampstead, was adopted as the official uniform at Mme Bergman-Österberg's Physical Training College at Dartford in 1897 (Cutler). It was "knee length, sleeveless, with three box pleats back and front and a sash-like braid [. . .] usually made of navy-blue serge" (Cutler). This costume, combined with the "liberty bodice" undergarment, worn instead of a corset, made vigorous exercise much easier than alternative costumes, and they were widely adopted in schools in Britain and beyond by 1910 (Cutler).

Where games were played within the privacy of the University College or boarding school, there was little to challenge public notions of femininity (Hargreaves 29-34). It was when girls and women took sport and exercise into the public arena that they were seen to be contesting the male role. The split between private and public meant in practice that the public realm was considered to be an arena chiefly available for masculine pursuits. Hockey is an example of one such sport that encountered considerable opposition when taken outside school and university college grounds. Edith Morley, an early hockey player, commented that "The 'sight of a hockey stick in a girl's hands' was sufficiently unusual 'to subject her to cries of "new woman" from passers-by or bus conductors' in the 1890s" (Dyhouse 204). In 1898 it was deemed necessary to restrict entry to hockey games to ticket holders in an effort to protect the players because "Minor demonstrations against the players – who were regarded as 'unsexed creatures' to be playing at all – were still common occurrences" (Pollard "History," 5). "Roughs and toughs" reportedly sometimes broke up games in the early years (Pollard *AEWHA*, 10). Hockey was a game consisting very largely of running, an activity widely seen as entirely inappropriate for women. Its pioneers were therefore doubly careful not to allow other aspects of the game to bring it into disrepute. Amateurism was important for maintaining not only class standards but also the appearance of appropriate femininity. To ensure this, the All England Women's Hockey Association, founded in 1895 in a tea-shop in Brighton, decreed that clubs "playing for cups or in prize competitions" would be "deemed guilty of misconduct" (Pollard "History," 5). However, if public involvement was limited and especially if sport was not understood to be a "spectacle" and therefore lacking in respectability, it could be pursued with less opposition. This led to the early pattern of "separate sports for men and women" which still dominates world sport today (Hargreaves 30). An application by the women to join the Hockey Association had been rejected by the men's body, a move that also made them determined to run their own game. Dress was the all-important sign of suitable gender performance, and in negotiating dominant dress codes, the earlier players often voted against their own safety in order to preserve feminine styles of dress. For example the women's hockey association initially voted *against* a resolution that "no player shall wear hatpins, or sailor or hard-brim hats" in order to project an image of femininity (Pollard "History," 4).

In 1904 Edith Thompson wrote that those who still considered the "lady-hockey player 'unsexed'" should see a first-class game: "They will probably be much surprised to find that the players are dressed neatly and becomingly, that their skirts are not indecently short, and that they do not shout or knock each other down, and from that day forward they will say little more to discredit the game" (iii). Thompson went to great lengths to advise players to wear ladylike clothing: "Linen collars are now almost universally worn, and although, strictly speaking, they are not very suitable, there is no doubt but that they look very much nicer than anything else" (14). Unlike many sporting pioneers, she went further by insisting that with the new sporting corset designs, "there is really no reason why they should not" wear them (13). In the *Hockey Field*, established in 1901, the issue of stays and skirt lengths was debated for years (Pollard "History," 5). Thompson was sure that "the good esteem in which hockey is now held may be attributed to the wise rule of the various Ladies Hockey Associations, which have shown considerable tact and discretion in dealing with the questions that from time to time have come before them" (v). One question which would not go away was that of skirt length. During 1910 a Dartford student was selected to play county hockey for Kent, and she chose to play in her College tunic. This provoked a storm, as illustrations of the game appeared in the press. One player's fiancé reportedly wrote to her: "Please look at page 874 of the *Sporting and Dramatic*, and you see an awful apparition who plays for Kent. If there is any chance of your wearing kit like that, my foot comes down bang and you have no more hockey" (Pollard *Fifty Years*, 14). This provoked a stream of letters, not only on the question of dress, but also on the "powers and duties of a fiancé" (Pollard, *Fifty Years*, 14). Though it took at least another decade, the gym slip eventually became the official uniform of the association.

However much sporting pioneers might attempt to conform in terms of dress, appearance and style, sporting girls and women could be challenging to dominant notions of gender purely at the level of appearance, even if their sporting activities were not on display. Girls who had come through the sporting school system had a very different physical appearance to girls raised in physical idleness. The development of muscle mass was notable enough to provoke ridicule and even fear. In 1890, *Woman* expressed anxiety in "The Virile Girl," who "has gone headlong into athletics" (11), and later the same year the virulent "Bohemienne," again in *Woman*, complained of "the neuter sex," and "the third sex," implying not only a loss of traditional femininity but also the possibility of lesbianism (1). These articles, though critical, and others, such as "Some Types of Girlhood" in *The Girl's Own Annual*, which acknowledged the muscular girl, indicate the growing presence of sporting females in everyday life (Caulfield 4-6). Changes in the female form were noted also by many cartoonists and commentators, such as the anonymous writer in *Blackwood's* of "Modern Mannish Maidens," who, while not condemning all new forms of exercise for young women, certainly regretted any exercise that affected bodily shape:

One cannot expect all Eve's daughters to be fashioned alike, but there is a type of them one sometimes meets at garden parties that may be known at a glance, – hard, wooden-looking, muscular, from whose figures the softness and roundness which nature usually associates with womanhood seem to have been played out. It is probable that any violent physical exercise of this kind, habitually overdone, may bring the female form to this masculine and uncomely aspect, or at least intensify any tendency that way where it may already exist. Further, we have been told of serious constitutional disturbance having developed itself in young married women from the same cause, overmuch lawn-tennis; but as to this we desire to speak with bated breath. (257)¹

By 1899 however, when Arabella Kenealy attacked the pursuit of female sport in the *Fortnightly Review*, similar complaints did not go unanswered. Enough time had elapsed for sporting females to have gained a greater constituency. The response from Laura Ormiston Chant is relaxed and occasionally scornful, asserting the benefits of sport while reaffirming traditional women's roles as wives and mothers (Chant). Chant is not afraid to raise provocative questions, such as "Who has decided that it is not woman's province to be muscular?" (752). She also hopes that "the 'modern woman' will go on her way, in spite of all the scolding and denunciation the unmodern woman hurls at her from time to time" (754). However, much of the response is reassuring in terms of women's commitment to both heterosexuality and motherhood, concluding "So let us modern women take heart of grace, and go on doing the best we can to develop muscular vigour, along with a sneaking fondness for frills and pleatings, and an openly avowed adhesion to the Eternal Baby, and its father" (754). The fact that so much of the sport debate centred around its benefits or otherwise for motherhood and the race, shows that in their understandings of women's roles, most of sport's proponents had similar values to their opponents, or were not prepared to debate outside these boundaries (Treagus 138-150).

Two of the more notable descriptions by Kenealy were of "tennis grin" and "bicycle face," both of which are supposedly highly unattractive signs of muscle strain and facial concentration (641). However, it is through such objections that we know that facial expressions of muscular activity were entering into the range of the possible for middle- and upper-class women, as they had always been for working-class women. Though Kenealy's objections seem trivial, especially her

¹ Such fears about women with muscle mass persist to this day, with female athletes often having to negotiate the persistent contradictions between athleticism and dominant understandings of femininity through noticeable signifiers of femininity such as dress and make-up or through accepting a sexualised role.

concentration on minute gestures, they are significant because such movements and acts can be seen as the smallest units in the system of signs by which gender is constructed. By reading these units semiotically, and tracing the introduction of new signs into the gender system, it is possible to see how performances of gender are built up, and how they are changed over time. Such a reading also provides an insight into how the lived bodily experience of girls and women changed as they experienced new combinations of muscular demands and movements. A cartoon, "The New Woman: Force of Habit," which featured in *The New Budget* of 1896, concentrates on just such minute gestures. A woman wearing Rationals twitches the frock of her jacket as one might a long gown in order to keep it free of the feet. The movement is incongruous because her current costume does not require such gestures. However, the woman persists with the movement because the material requirements of femininity – wearing a gown – have made such movements routine. It is part of the habitual performance of her gender, a small sign in the grammar of gender performance, a sign made redundant when wearing Rational cycling costume.

Changes in practices of femininity and the resistances these provoked during the formative years of girls' and women's sport and exercise provide a compelling demonstration of the constructed nature of gender. While gender is produced and reproduced through performative repetitions, these are also the means by which the dominant gender modes become vulnerable to change, and where the gendered subject has the opportunity to affect such change: "'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation of that repetition" (Butler *Gender Trouble*, 145). In late-nineteenth-century Britain such variations came to include vigorous exercise for women and girls. Though this exercise involved deviations from norms which were punished in various ways, over time different practices were established because they kept occurring and also because they simultaneously invoked dominant discourses of femininity while reinterpreting them. Such practices can be described as "strategies of subversive repetition" (*Gender Trouble*, 147), which bring variance to dominant gender modes while still actively producing gender. The need to discipline and control the female body was a significant example of a dominant understanding of femininity and accordingly its affirmation was crucial in procuring changes in the lived bodily experience of women and girls. Certainly in the public sphere, negotiations of dominant femininities were delicate and compromised, and norms were slow to change. Compromises, as well as developments, were part of the process by which the sporting girl came to be a part of public life and notions of "the feminine" began to change.

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