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15 August 1862: The Rise and Fall of the Cage Crinoline

Rebecca N. Mitchell

15 August 1862: The Cage Crinoline [At the peak of the cage crinoline fad, a single issue of the *London Evening Standard* includes a report of a young woman's death caused by a crinoline fire and an advertisement touting the monarch-approved Thomson's prize-winning "Crown" model.]

ABSTRACT. First introduced to England by France's Empress Eugénie in the late 1850s, the cage crinoline signaled a new era in fashion, reaching peak popularity (and peak circumference) in the early 1860s. While the garment has often been understood as a symbol of a repressive patriarchal order intent on confining women, contemporary reporting shows that it was regarded instead as a potentially threatening tool of emancipation. It replaced layers of heavy petticoats with a light and flexible alternative, offering women greater mobility and comfort, and the proportions of the skirts obviated the need for tight-laced corsets. What is more, donning crinoline allowed women to assert physical space in the public sphere, their voluminous skirts forcing men to the margins of the sidewalk or the omnibus—at least according to complaints. Perhaps the most pernicious quality of crinoline, though, was its potential to hide things from the male gaze: bad ankles or smuggled goods might be hidden by the cage, but the risk of concealed pregnancy loomed largest. Reports of death by crinoline fire were matched in their fevered pitch by warnings that crinoline sharply increased rates of infanticide. The range of Victorian responses that accrued around the fashion demonstrates that it was not simply a tool for unilateral oppression or reducible to the manifestation of empty, thoughtless vanity.

On 15 August 1862, the *London Evening Standard* ran a slip of an advertisement touting the advantages of Thomson's Crown Crinoline, which had recently received the only medal awarded to crinoline at the 1862 International Exhibition:

PRIZE MEDAL, INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION, 1862—Comfort, Elegance, Economy, and the latest Parisian Style, are ensured by using THOMSON'S Patent CROWN CRINOLINES, worn by her Majesty, the Empress Eugenie, and the Ladies of the principal European Courts.—Sold everywhere.

In sharp contrast, page 2 of the same issue of the *Standard* carried a darkly ominous account: the 18-year-old Sarah Padley died of severe burns after her muslin dress, worn over a cage crinoline, caught alight. Edwin Lankester, the coroner for Central Middlesex and resolute opponent of the fashionable garment, viewed the accident as “one of those numerous distressing casualties from the use of the dangerous crinoline” (“Shocking Crinoline Fatality” 2). Such deaths, he asserted, were “very much more numerous than the public generally supposed”; he held that “if every fatal accident were reported, the public would know of them, and then he felt assured that crinoline ... would soon be abandoned.” The jury for Padley's inquest, “acting upon a suggestion from the Coroner,” thus “returned a verdict of ‘Accidental death through wearing crinoline’” (2). Whether or not Mrs. Padley was wearing a Thomson's crinoline is unknown, but regardless of the manufacture, any claims of “comfort, elegance, economy” and style were, for the coroner and many who shared his view, paltry consolation for the chance of death.

These concurrent accounts of crinoline—one championing its ease, comfort, and vogue, and the other insisting on its danger—are representative of the ambivalent position that the crinoline held in Britain during and since the late 1850s and early 1860s: the crinoline could entrap women or liberate them; render wearers objects beholden to restrictive gender

expectations, or offer them a means to assert agency or rebellion; hide a woman's body, or give a woman the means of hiding secrets of her own. Today, crinoline is often understood in only the negative register, as representing the worst aspects of a restrictive, hegemonic, patriarchal and capitalist Victorian Society. In a review of Patrick O'Malley's 2006 study of the Victorian Gothic, Lesley Higgins sums up this conventional vision of the crinoline as a "quintessential Victorian garment": "Mobile and capacious, it colonized yet disguised the female body, limited physical (and mental) capabilities according to its physical and social demands, was boastful of middle-class largesse and aspiration ... yet made possible by the imperious slaughter of whales, the industrial triumph of steel, and the careful stitching of sweated labor" (422). It is a view that gained traction with Helene Roberts's 1977 study, which presented the crinoline as a garment that "helped mold female behavior to the role of the 'exquisite slave'" and "literally transformed women into caged birds surrounded by hoops of steel" ("Exquisite Slave" 557).¹

Victorians were critical of the crinoline, to be sure, but for reasons that are quite different from those that Higgins lists. This article will briefly discuss the sartorial history of Victorian crinoline before turning to that criticism; in doing so, it offers a more comprehensive review of the reactions to crinoline than those that predominate in nineteenth-century fashion history, challenging the view that the crinoline was regarded in its own time as a tool for securing women's social, domestic, or sexual submission. Rather, these contemporary reports demonstrate that the donning of crinoline was understood as an often defiant act that privileged women's agency and control of their bodies, even to the point of imperiling their own reputations or safety. Crinoline posed multiple threats, in fact, to normative gender roles: women could exploit its concealing properties to hide smuggled goods or pregnancy, and women dressed in crinoline could assert claims to physical space that infringed upon masculine social presence. Recognizing

the potency of these threats helps to explain the persistent mid-century vogue. Neither a folly of women's unabated vanity nor a mechanism of unilateral oppression, crinoline allowed women to carve out a place—literally and figuratively—in the Victorian sartorial landscape.

* * * * *

The Great London Exhibition was held in South Kensington from May through October 1862, on the site of what is now the Natural History Museum. It was originally intended to supersede the Great Exhibition of 1851 in both scale and impact by showcasing cutting-edge innovations in technology and industry within a British setting, but the sudden death of Prince Albert in December 1861 deprived the event of its chief organizer and visionary, and Victoria's ensuing mourning period ensured her absence from the festivities. This exhibition might not have matched 1851 for grandeur or *joie de vivre*, but in one area, at least, the sequel exceeded the original: skirts, their circumferences aided by the introduction of the cage crinoline, loomed significantly larger than their 1851 predecessors. Prizes were announced in mid-July, with Thomson's winning a medal for their "Crown" crinoline model. In a matter of days, advertisements began heralding this news, first in brief ads like that in the *London Evening Standard*, and later in more impressive spreads (see fig. 1).

[Fig. 1: Ad for Thomson's Crown Crinoline, *Crystal Palace Penny Guide*, June 1866. Public domain.]

The industrial and design developments that set Thomson's model apart were novel enough to warrant inclusion in the exhibition, but the structured underskirt itself was no innovation, and the often contradictory objections it provoked were remarkably consistent across its history. Antecedents included the sixteenth-century farthingale and the impossibly large side hoops (*paniers*) that populate portraits of royalty and aristocracy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. A more direct progenitor was the hooped petticoat popularized in the early

1700s; though its structure was composed of whalebone instead of spring steel and its proportions did not quite reach the diameters of the Victorian iteration, the hoop petticoat nevertheless provoked the kind of consternation among its many, vocal critics that would be revived a century and a half later. Among the best known of those critics is Joseph Addison, whose “Trial of the Petticoat” played out with mock seriousness in the pages of *Tatler* in January 1710. Arguments staged in support of the garment were primarily economic: encouraging the production and donning of hoops, the “defense” maintained, would lead to “a prodigious Improvement of the Woollen Trade! and what could not fail to sink the Power of *France* in a few Years” (1). Similar claims were made for the cord-making industry and for whaling in Greenland. Along with these advantages, another ostensible benefit of hooped petticoats—that they “might be of great Use to preserve the Honour of Families” as their “Weight and Unwieldiness” would keep men at bay—was summarily dismissed by Addison’s judge, with a caution against “the great Temptation [the petticoat] might give to Virgins, of acting in Security like married Women, and by that Means give a Check to Matrimony” (1-2). This fear that women would behave inappropriately, confident in their petticoats’ ability to hide the evidence of sexual indiscretion, arises again in the nineteenth century, again challenging the view that the crinoline represented the repression of sexuality. Rather, the crinoline was seen to facilitate forms of behavior proscribed by social rules, a danger that had to be tamped down. To the extent that critics feared that hooped petticoats or crinoline could be used to conceal the pregnant or transgressive body, they also feared that it facilitated the erotic exhibition of the transgressive body. The pendulum-like motion that resulted from the structure hanging from the waist meant that “when worn it swung provocatively from side to side, revealing glimpses of ankles and even

calves” (Steele 114), glimpses that could also be stolen when the wearer lifted her hoop to avoid puddles, to enter or exit a carriage, to climb steps.²

Another objection suggested that massive skirts manifested a woman’s vanity, so it is no surprise that arguments against the fashion adopted flattery as a strategy. Addison, for example, is careful to insist that he is not “an Enemy to the proper Ornaments of the Fair Sex,” only that such adornments should not pervert nature’s own gifts, a test that the hoop cannot pass (“Trial” 2).³ The petticoat on trial is ordered to be cut up, though the summary dismissal of the fashion in the pages of the *Tatler* did not sound an immediate death knell for the hoop. Yet fashion did change, as fashion does, and by the end of the Restoration, women’s dress had undergone a radical revision. Enlightenment thinking, neoclassical design, and the sartorial influence of Josephine combined to usher in the Empire gown, with its high waist, narrow skirt, and simple, Greek-inspired draping displacing the stiff volume of the hoop. The prevailing mode of sexual allure was likewise displaced, with the contours of the body newly visible, no longer rendered mysterious by the floating cage of whalebone. Whether the style signaled an improvement in women’s mobility remains a matter of debate. One Victorian writer remarked that during the Regency, “female fashion was behind the male in ease. The petticoat was so narrow that it was difficult to walk in it. It was, in fact, a pantaloon of one leg for the two legs” (“Monstrosities of Fashion” 82). In any case, from the 1810s the waistline began to descend from directly under the bust, approaching the natural waist by the early 1830s, and slightly dropped by the end of the decade. With this shift of focus, skirts and sleeves widened considerably, to emphasize by comparison the small (corseted) waist. Ever fuller skirts were initially achieved by adding layers of petticoats that were critiqued for being heavy, uncomfortable, unwieldy, and—in the view of many—unhygienic. Skirts nevertheless continued to increase in volume through the 1850s, so

that when the Empress Eugénie introduced the newly patented cage crinoline to England in the mid-1850s, it was seen as an unmistakable, even practical, advance over the multiple petticoats previously required. The same writer who critiqued the Regency dress for being “difficult to walk in” declared only semi-sarcastically that “the crinoline is another word for liberty”: wearing crinoline, “[women] delight in the free and easy. All their ways are unconfined” (“Monstrosities of Fashion” 82). Further contributing to the sense of ease, such width in the skirt rendered the corset far less important because, as fashion historian Christina Walkley notes, “with the wire cage, the skirt became so huge that any waist looked minute in comparison” (713).

Cage crinolines achieved this liberation by providing a light and resilient structure of concentric metal hoops joined with fabric tape. Commercial arguments failed to convince Addison’s judge of petticoats’ value in the *Tatler* but—as would become clear in the nineteenth century—crinoline was poised to make the most of improvements in steel production, and the crinoline and steel industries flourished in tandem. Lucy-Clare Windle writes that “Crinolines were arguably the first industrial fashion, mass-produced in factories and using the latest steel-making techniques” (66), and the scale of that enterprise is clear from contemporary accounts. An 1862 article suggests that Sheffield produced 150 tons of crinoline wire a week, declaring that “already enough crinoline has been manufactured at Sheffield to encircle the globe again and again” (“Crinoline!” 316). Two years later, the *London Journal* printed a notice from a French paper offering the shocking estimate that some 12,000,000 kilograms of steel were “annually used for the fairer portion of the French people” in making crinoline (“Crinoline Bands” 364). The cage-like skeleton was initially proportioned like a pyramid, but the flexibility and resilience of the metal hoops meant that subtle shifts in shape could be accommodated, and continually shifting styles drove the need to purchase new crinoline. A rounder, bell-jar silhouette evolved,

folly, did people ever lay a train of highly combustible matter between their own combustible clothing and a point some six feet off, and carry this inflammable arrangement about with them into the immediate neighborhood of fireplaces and gaslights” (174). In “Another Holocaust to Crinoline” (1864), Lankester—the London coroner—was reported as saying that “in the course of three years as many females have lost their lives in London by fire, chiefly through the use of crinoline, as were sacrificed at Santiago,” the tragic church fire that claimed the lives of some 2000 women. “Will no warning,” the writer asked, “rouse women from the infatuation of wearing these perilous garments without screening their fires?” (305). A similar question was raised in “A New Kind of Wilful Murder” (1863); after enumerating countless accidental deaths due to crinoline and comparing hearth death to suttee (a not infrequent association), the writer wondered, “How many more ... countrywomen must be burnt alive, crushed, disemboweled, or drowned before [reform] is done?” (39). The writers’ sentiments are in accord with their willingness to blame women—and feminine folly—for the perverse persistence of crinoline, but terms such as “suttee,” “holocaust,” and “murder” indicate that there are failures in social expectations or protections that contribute to the state of affairs.⁵

The fevered pitch and ubiquity of accounts of fire-related death have secured its continued centrality in discussions of crinoline, but evidence suggests that reports may have been inflated. Critiquing the shrill denunciations of the fashion, the satirical *Anti-Teapot Review* defended crinoline for its lightness and comfort and inverted the usual argument about hearth death: “antique petticoats caused ladies’ dresses to drag in the mud, were heavier than crinolines, besides being ill-made, cumbersome, and immovable if they caught fire, and they *did* catch fire more than people think, only in those days there were not scores of hungry London newspapers ever ready to chronicle domestic accidents in the dull season” (“Crinose Crisis” 21). Lankester, a

loud if lonely voice, surely helped to feed those hungry London newspapers; he was adept at providing soundbites perfect for wide recirculation, and crinoline was one of his favorite soapboxes. His directive approach is clear even in brief descriptions of the inquests he headed, such as the one for Sarah Padley that opened this article. He was convinced that full-throated denunciation from official quarters, along with pointed press coverage of crinoline incidents, could not fail to convince women to abandon crinoline.

Perhaps in response to the moral outrage underscoring such positions, contrary articles seem to take great relish in extolling, as one piece puts it, the “Virtues of Crinoline.” The *Essex Standard* recounts that two women were saved from drowning thanks to the buoyancy of their cage crinolines (“Lives Saved” 6). Comparing crinolines to parachutes was equally fanciful, if not self-evidently absurd: “Falls from cliffs,” the *Examiner* glossed in 1857, “which have of late been so frequent, are no longer to be feared by ladies provided by fashion with infallible parachutes” (“Virtues of Crinoline” 228). Silly or not, the connection proved durable, and near the end of crinoline’s reign, *Once a Week* confirmed that “in our immediate day more than one female has been saved in falling from cliffs by her crinoline” (“Balloons and Aëronauts” 526). Most often, crinoline was neither imperiling nor saving its wearer’s life, and some publications seemed keen to counter the intense tone of coroners’ reports by dwelling in the overtly comic sides of crinoline. An 1863 *Hereford Times* piece lists a series of fatal accidents caused by crinoline before turning to a “humorous incident” that “shows the comic side of this generally disastrous folly” (“Crinoline Items” 2). A young Scottish lady, “amply be-crinolined” was working in a farm-yard when a piglet found his way under her crinoline, where he “got his snout fixed in the network of the crinoline” and only escaped by ripping away part of the garment (2). Nor was this pig the only animal caught by the cage. In a piece that was widely reprinted, the

Dundee Advertiser published a story that ended less well for the animal: “The other day, as a party of ladies were ascending one of our noted hills, called The Buck, they startled a covey of grouse, one of which took refuge under the crinoline worn by a young lady. This so alarmed the damsel that she fell to the ground, and the bird having been smothered, was afterwards picked up dead” (“Crinoline as Game Net” 3). A hare met a similar fate in Stokesley, though the 1861 report allows a happier result for the humans involved: thanks to the hare’s capture, “a good dinner was thus provided for the farmer’s family” (“A Novel Trap for Hares” 577).

These comic episodes signal a larger truth. If crinoline fires could be blamed on a vanity that overrode even obvious arguments for safety and self-preservation, these lighter stories suggest perfectly logical, even cunning motivations for wearing crinoline, motivations that go beyond blind fealty to fashion or even comfort. Slapstick run-ins with wild animals and crinoline traps may be played for comedy, but other crinoline encounters with game animals were intentional. Honoré Daumier’s 1857 cartoon, “De l’utilité de la crinoline pour frauder l’octroi” (“Usefulness of Crinoline for Defrauding Customs Officers”; see fig. 2) demonstrates with comic verve that the crinoline could be used to hide meat, alcohol, tobacco—goods that would otherwise be subject to duty.

[Fig. 2: Honoré Daumier, “De l’utilité de la crinoline pour frauder l’octroi.” Lithograph on newsprint, 21.4 x 27.1 cm. Published in *Le charivari*, 19 June 1857. Image courtesy of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts. Used with permission.]

As ridiculous as Daumier’s rendering might appear to be, it is not far from the truth. One Toulouse report lists a smuggler hauling “not fewer than twelve partridges” in her crinoline, and turkeys and rabbits are reported elsewhere (“Crinoline Smuggling” 6). British newspapers documented some of those arrests in France, but also tallied similar transgressions on their own soil. In Cornwall, Elizabeth Thomas was charged with concealing a stolen leg of mutton in her

crinoline (“St. Austell” 5); a Miss Kelly of Liverpool managed to smuggle 25 pounds of cotton in hers (“Crinoline and Theft” 3); and Elizabeth Lorinz was caught in London with “5lbs of cigars, 9lb of foreign manufactured tobacco, a quarter of a pound of tea, and half a gallon of Holland gin” within her crinoline (“Extraordinary Delivery” 7).⁶ In each case, crinoline served as the means of perpetuating a deception against a business or the state, denying the business owner or customs officers what was rightfully theirs. A particularly egregious example arises in an anecdote about a woman who, unable to afford a train ticket, was aided by a larger fellow traveler in the same carriage, who “accommodatingly gathered her under her crinoline, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wing” (“Crinoline Incident” 4). The likely apocryphal story nonetheless hints at an even more threatening application for crinoline. Its concealing properties might be deployed to hide that most grievous of transgressions: illegitimate pregnancy.

* * * * *

In March 1865, George Stephen enquired in *Notes and Queries* about the translation of some lines in Italian on a sixteenth-century etching he owned: “Am I right,” he asked, “in translating [the lines as]— ‘Who will my fine new crinnies try! / Come, girls with child, make haste to buy!’” For Stephens, the stakes went beyond accurate transcription. If crinolines were indeed “properly designed to hide pregnancy,” he wondered, “might they not be brought back to their original moderate size, and confined to their original mock-modest object?” (191). Stephens apparently never received a reply to his query about the Italian lines, but his letter demonstrates both the crinoline fatigue of the day and anxiety about the true reason for the vogue. There is no critical or historical agreement about the origin of hooped skirts, but the idea that they grew out of the desire to conceal pregnancy has long held sway. As Erin Mackie has noted, Addison weighed in on this matter. Addressing his concern in *The Spectator*, he wrote that “some crafty

Women” had tricked their partners by wearing hoops, “that they might make them accessory to their own Concealments, and by that means escape the Censure of the World” (1-2). Equally problematic for Addison was a related hoodwink: the leveling aspect of crinoline that “smooths all Distinctions,” making it difficult for the male observer to distinguish between “the Mother [and] the Daughter ... Maids and Matrons, Wives and Widows,” leaving the writer “troubled to see so many well shaped innocent Virgins bloated up, and walking up and down like big-bellied Women” (2).

The Victorian press seems on the whole less occupied than Addison with the possibility that crinoline might mislead or entrap an unsuspecting partner. In one mocking piece in *Household Words*, the writer’s tirade against crinoline is undercut with the caveat that its use had done tremendous good for his “sadly thin, poor” unmarried daughter: “Oh, how plump she is now! Oh, my marriageable young men, how amazingly plump she is now! Long life to the monarchy of Crinoline!” (“Give us Room!” 193). A father’s gleeful anticipation that his daughter might land a husband on the basis of crinoline deception is, on balance, a rather minor concern. Far more destructive was that the eventual outcome a concealed (likely illegitimate) pregnancy might be the death of the child. A perceived increase in infanticide occurring within England, especially in the metropolitan areas, took hold from the late 1850s, culminating in what has been termed a moral panic.⁷ Reasons for this perception are multiple: as George Behlmer notes, the infanticide scare was encouraged by the introduction of the professional coroner, the vast expansion of the periodical press and its concomitant need for sensational copy (a point made in the aforementioned *Anti-Teapot Review* article), and a relatively stable domestic peace that allowed for public attention to be devoted to social issues within England (405-6). It would be fruitful to add to Behlmer’s historical account that this period of infanticide alarm coincides with

the peak popularity of the crinoline. The explicit connection between the dress and the deed was the subject of frequent comment in the press. With the possibility of discovery made more difficult by the obfuscating crinoline, pregnant women could delay decisions or actions until the very point of delivery (“General Assize News” 4).

Coroners reached a similar conclusion: reporting on the increasing cases of infanticide, Lankester—whose invective against the combustible qualities of crinoline gained enormous traction—found the fashion even more pernicious for its ability to conceal pregnancy. In vivid language that was widely reprinted in newspapers across the country, Lankester claimed in 1862 that infanticide had become so common in London that “the police seemed to think no more of finding a dead child than they did of finding a dead cat or a dead dog” (“Infanticide in the Metropolis” 6).⁸ One strategy to combat this state of affairs was for the British public to voice their horror; another was to abolish crinoline, as then “facilities would not be so easily afforded for concealing the condition of females, and when the eyes of other people were upon them, the crime would be avoided in great measure” (“Infanticide and Crinoline” 3).⁹ Three years later, Andrew Wynter turned to a similar theme in his *Fortnightly Review* remonstrance. Insisting that infanticide is predicated on concealment—“for it is the concealment which affords the temptation to make away with the child when born, and whom nobody expects”—he too argues that the eradication of crinoline would lead to a reduction in the crime (609). Dozens of court cases featured testimony of witnesses insisting that they had no idea that the woman in question was pregnant, but with no comparative statistics, it is impossible to make a causal link.¹⁰ In any case, such claims are based not on the perception that one’s clothing reflected one’s interiority or moral character, but rather that clothing could enable thoughts or actions that the wearer would not otherwise conscience. This conclusion—that one could control an offensive behavior by

controlling the clothing that facilitates the behavior—suggests that control itself was of primary importance, and the crinoline merely the manifestation or signifier of its loss.

Infanticide was perhaps the most violent, but certainly not the only impediment that crinoline posed to family life or to masculine control of that life. Fashion historian C. Willett Cunnington wrote that expanding skirts in the 1850s “kept the wearer at arm’s length from contact with the outer world. It was as though she had become petrified into a monument which, however impossible it might seem, continued to expand” (87).

[Fig. 3: Fashion Plate c. 1859, by Pauquet and Gervais, engraved by Hopwood © V&A Museum, Given by the House of Worth. Used with permission.]

For most women, the “outer world” likely included husbands and children.¹¹ Many static fashion plates featured these stalwart members of the Victorian woman’s retinue, but as is clear in an 1859 example (see fig. 3), the monolithic lady depicted would have a difficult time getting hold of her child. A related dynamic is presented in an 1865 *Fun* cartoon (see fig. 4), wherein a crinolined mother is shocked to see her infant daughter in a crinoline nearly as large as her own. The child is held by a nurse (in a skirt markedly less full than that of her infant charge), not by her mother, whose hand rests on her husband’s shoulder. This woman might maintain her connection to her partner, but the crinolines worn by mother and daughter act as a physical—and visual—barrier between them.

[Fig. 4: “Baby in Crinoline,” *Fun* 7 January 1865, 7. Image published with permission of ProQuest. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission.]

If crinoline kept children away, it could also keep men at a distance, and the act of displacing men physically and figuratively is the subject of some of the most sustained satire and strident criticism of the fashion. Writing in *BRANCH*, Lorraine Janzen Kooistra notes that representations of crinoline, “the skirt that took up more public space than a woman had any

right to take,” were used critique the “emerging women’s rights movement.” This sentiment, so common in Victorian critical writing and satire, is far more prevalent, and rendered with much sharper force, than any that inscribes crinoline as a “colonizing” force of women’s bodies or minds. Rather, women and their crinolines were seen as colonizing physical space previously governed and accessed by men. As Walkley puts it, “to the Victorians themselves the crinoline had little of submissiveness, seeming rather a monstrous plot to increase women’s stature and make man seem insignificant” (712).

One can locate examples where crinoline posed a genuine, physical danger to others. One man, for instance, was reportedly crushed to death after falling when trying to cross between two moving boats. The death was ruled accidental, but his widow insisted that the death was due to her husband “attempting to avoid treading on a lady’s dress, which was distended by a crinoline so capacious as to completely block up the gangway” (“A Gentleman Crushed” 3).¹² Most encroachments were more subtle. The enforced movement of the male body to the periphery of a woman’s reach is the source of humor in *Punch*’s depiction of the “Safest Way of Taking a Lady Down to Dinner” (see fig. 5), where the man’s safety is clearly imperiled by the width of his lady’s gown. Such physical displacement reflects a more nebulous sense of social displacement, from which emerges a zero sum game: where there is only limited room in the public sphere, if skirts of ridiculous volume claim more of that space for women, it is at the expense of men.

[Fig. 5: “The Safest Way of Taking a Lady Down to Dinner,” *Punch* 1 October 1864, 140. Image courtesy of Cadbury Research Library: Special Collections, University of Birmingham.]

As Julia Thomas has convincingly shown, *Punch* cartoons were especially adept at depicting men who are, because of crinoline, “literally forced into the margins in a way that women threatened to force them in the public and professional world” (81).¹³ Documenting bitterness on this score was by no means exclusive to *Punch*. It is evident in *Fun*’s “Another Way to Look

at It,” where the male bus passenger is not merely inconvenienced but physically compromised by the woman’s crinoline (see fig. 6). The title subtly suggests that the woman’s perspective selfishly ignores “another” way of looking—that is, the male perspective. A similar sentiment is articulated in a letter to the editor of the *Era* in which the male writer complains that “At home and abroad, in the domestic circle, at the ball, opera, lecture-room, and at church, in the streets and omnibuses, is not every man made perfectly aware (chiefly through contact with his shins) that women as well as ships are *iron-clad*?” (“Crinoline” *Era* 6). Here, the vision of woman as invading warship is unmistakable. These examples, and countless others like them, protest the upstart annexation of space or comfort that had previously been under the control of the male speaker.

[Fig. 6: “Another Way of Looking at It,” *Fun* 3 May 1862, 70. Image published with permission of ProQuest. Further reproduction is prohibited without permission.]

Such complaints focus the question of who or what was ultimately being compromised by the presence of crinoline. On the one hand, it turned the Victorian woman into a murderer, a suicide, a bad mother, a vain and inattentive wife. On the other hand, it granted women space they would not otherwise have had, insistently making manifest the presence of women who might have been overlooked or confined to the domestic sphere; it freed women from the restrictive weight of multiple petticoats and the tight-laced corset; it provided women the means to hide things, from smuggled turkeys to unwanted pregnancies. These applications generated most of the discussion of the fad in its own time, and crinoline came to be regarded as a signifier of staid domesticity only well after its vogue had peaked. By the end of the century, as Rational dress and the mode of the New Woman presented viable alternatives to the narrow skirts and long stays of popular mainstream fashion, the crinoline became—in retrospect—a nostalgic symbol of a simpler time that never was. But from the late 1850s through the mid-1860s,

crinoline represented the leading edge of progress, staking a claim on the physical and social space that had been in front of women all along.

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¹ Roberts’s focus, though, was on the corset, and while her article provoked defences of that garment, her characterization of the crinoline stood more or less unchallenged. See Kunzle “Dress Reform as Antifeminism”; Roberts, “Reply to David Kunzle’s ‘Dress Reform as Antifeminism’”; and Russ, “Comment on Helene E. Roberts’s ‘The Exquisite Slave.’” It is a view that has remained remarkably persistent. Shu-Chuan Yan, for example, writes that “Women make efforts to deform their bodies and minds to fit a supposedly feminine ideal because tiny waists and enormous hoop skirts dominate the mainstream fashion of a fitted body. To make the waist look proportionally smaller, however, a woman creates an unnatural aesthetic that sexualizes her female body in a fetishistic manner of dress” (761-2). Diana Crane also lists the crinoline as an “exceptionally restrictive and ornamental” style (241).

² Jill Fields notes that this aspect of the crinoline “solidified the consensus that drawers had become a compulsory undergarment, worn to protect modesty rather than to encourage eroticism” (28). On the other hand, the introduction of crinoline allowed American dress reformer Amelia Bloomer to pause her campaign advocating split skirts; “according to Bloomer,” Christine Bayles Korstch writes, crinoline “technology had solved the problem of unhygienic, cumbersome petticoats” (63).

³ The publication of the piece was included in a January 1864 perpetual calendar in the *Somerset County Gazette* with the substitution of “Crinoline” for “Petticoat”: the January 5 entry reads “Amusing Trial on Crinoline appeared in the Tatler, No. 116.” (“Perpetual Calendar” 11).

⁴ See, for example, Fiona Macdonald, “Fashion Victims”; and Anne Kingston, “Deadly Victorian Fashions.”

⁵ The comparison to suttee was not unusual, and underlies the dismissal of crinoline as a product or symptom of baseless beliefs, whether motivated by religious faith or empty vanity. See also Kooistra on the connection between representations of crinoline and the 1857 uprising in Cawnpore.

⁶ Additionally: £12,000 worth of jewels in “Foreign Miscellany”.

⁷ Anne-Marie Kilday writes of the “growing moral panic” in the mid-century, and that “the reach and significance of the moral panic over new-born child murder should not be underestimated by historians; its effects were such that infanticide was widely regarded by many to be the greatest social evil of the Victorian era” (119-120), and Nicola Goc refers to the 1860s as the decade of the “maternal panic” (71-95).

⁸ Goc argues that Lankester’s “press personality was inextricably linked to his ability as a primary definer of infanticide news to consistently provide journalists with highly charged quotes on infanticide, especially his statistical data that added scientific authority to his claims” (76).

⁹ This argument was widely reported. In addition to this piece in the *London Evening Standard*, see also, for example, “Infanticide and Crinoline” in the *Belfast Morning News* and *Surrey Comet*; and “Infanticide” in the *Islington Gazette*.

¹⁰ See, for example, “The Romance of Real Life.”

¹¹ Family was, however, not the only group impacted by women’s wearing of crinoline. In her 1859 *Notes on Nursing*, Florence Nightingale bemoans the state of contemporary women’s dress because it is “daily more and more unfitting them for any ‘mission,’ or usefulness at all”. In addition to the unwieldy size and shape of the crinoline, she objects to the sound it makes, which “will do a patient more harm than all of the medicines in the world will do him good”. Nightingale extends her critique beyond the practical matters of the hospital floor in a footnote, in which she implores those who “will be stupid” and continue to wear crinoline at least to “add alum to starch,” which will prevent the crinoline from catching fire. Her critique also slips into the moralizing on behalf of sexual propriety, as she further laments the fact that wearers are inured to “the indecency of their own dress as other people see it,” noting that a woman who “stoops forward” in crinoline “exposes quite as much of her own person to the patient lying in the room as any opera dancer does on the stage” (27). That a woman helping the hospitalized sick might be compared to an opera singer on the stage thanks only to crinoline signals the erotic import of the garment. The *Midland Workman and General Advertiser* ran this excerpt from *Notes on Nursing* under the headline “Florence Nightingale on Crinoline,” making no distinction between the footnoted comments and the main text (3).

¹² For another example, see “Crinoline” *Dublin Evening Mail* 9 April 1864, 2.

¹³ Thomas's comprehensive discussion of *Punch*'s representations of crinoline traces more fully the role of women's emancipation, including the role of crinoline satire in addressing the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (71-103). In her analysis of Addison's eighteenth-century reaction to the hooped petticoat, Erin Mackie shows the degree to which criticism of the garment was related to anxiety surrounding the introduction of credit.

