The Debate Over Women's Clothing:
'Rational' or Lady-like Dress

by Justina Rodrigues

The subject of fashion may seem frivolous to some until we realize that women's dress has always reflected the dynamic changes in society; the exclusive handmade dresses-in a period where animal and human muscles were the only source of power -- gradually gave way to the popularity of "tailor made" clothes as textile factories dotted the landscape of early 19th century northern England. Victorian sartorial elegance in its various modes depicted England's prosperity as the world's economic power. By the 1850s England was undoubtedly the greatest power in Europe; her breakthrough in steam power in 1790 and the subsequent mechanized production of goods made England the envy of the world. While Europe and the rest of the world were still relying on an agrarian economy, Victorian England was experiencing a whole new lifestyle which largely revolved around machines.

The Industrial Revolution in England spawned a prosperous middle-class, numerous and important enough to direct and set the political and socio-economic standard in Victorian England. <1> The power of machines, however, both fascinated and alarmed Victorians; the socio-economic structure of 19th century England was swiftly changing; <2> middle-class families became highly hierarchical as only the husbands went out to work; this gave them more power because they were now sole "breadwinners." Wives remained at home and became ladies of the house in every sense of the word; Victorian upper class women were now idealized (but it was spiritual worship that confined women in the home), and most of them portrayed the Victorian ideal of womanhood: chaste, ornamental women who were society's moral guardians, but still dependent on the goodwill of their devoted male worshippers. <3> Men were generous in showering material luxuries on their womenfolk, for what better proof of wealth and social status was there than well-dressed wives and daughters. <4> Victorian middle-class women and men like everything else they did-took their roles as "ornamental" ladies of the house and chivalrous providers very seriously. Their high-minded seriousness were in part nurtured by Puritan and utilitarian ethics.

The revival of Puritan ethics -- in reaction to the rapid change in society brought by industrialization <5> -- and the influence of utilitarianism on early 19th century England were predominantly a middle-class phenomena; middle-class moral values and work ethics symbolized the Victorian era where self-help, self-denial and moral discipline were predominant Victorian credos; work and serious behavior were earnest concerns; and an obsessive regard for respectability characterized the Victorian middle-class. <6> Consequently, the changing fashions in women's dress became a much debated subject of the social conservatives, dress reformers and feminists alike. The furor centered over what was considered "rational" and "lady-like" dress; and, as women's dress became more ornate and versatile, the debate grew. Defenders and opponents of lady-like dress artfully argued from the moral and health standpoints: the former group claimed that lady-like dress symbolized discipline, respectability, thrift, self-control and beauty; the

latter group argued that lady-like dress was degrading and endangered the health of ladies. <7> The debate was, however, never so heated and controversial as was the argument over the use of corsets and tightlacing which were necessities of lady-like dress. The "trappings" of women's fashion were expensive to a great majority in Victorian England; thus, only the rich upper and middle-classes had the means to indulge. Since the working-class could ill afford the fashions of the time and usually wore cheap and crude imitations of upper-class fashion, <8> we will concentrate here on only how the upper-classes in Victorian society dressed.

Industrial England by mid-19th century made available to middle-class women fashionable clothes of quality which, hitherto, only aristocrats could afford. Technical improvements in textile, and its availability through mass production at a reasonable price had made lady-like dress a middle-class indulgence. <9> The Victorian upper-middle-class -- especially after the 1850s -- were increasingly determined to blend into the English aristocracy and, despite their scorn of aristocratic values, were irresistibly drawn to the privileged status of the highborn. Lady-like dress was worn with conscious seriousness by the nouveau riche that gave middle-class women more control of what was "acknowledged theirs by law and custom." <10> Women by way of varied dress styles could now express a certain degree of individualism, <11> and as the role of ornamental womanhood was the only role that some Victorian middle-class women seriously believed in, dress became an expression of themselves -- a sense of independence as it were: <12> "freedom to have fun, to evade their chaperones, to flirt." <13> By the 1860s, flaunting themselves in fashionable dresses and achieving the tiniest waists with the use of corsets "became their major occupation." <14> For other middle-class women, the versatility of fashion-by the 1890s -- provided them the choice to don lady-like or "rational" dress depending on the occasion. <15>

The phrase, "lady-like dress," refers to what a typical Victorian lady would wear. Women's apparel consisted of such intricacies as laced petticoats, high stiff collars, embroidered underwear, padding, complicated boned lining and interlinings, frills, bows, ribbons, crinolines, bustles (or false "bums"), furbelows, tightlacing and corsets-the last five of which were contraptions to accentuate the hips and bust and where the ubiquitous corsets were used to reduce waistlines to the acceptable 20 inches. <16> Accessories were equally numerous and often overdone; oversized or tiny bonnets were decorated with flowers [Victorians loved rosebuds and these were worn everywhere for it represented innocence; the use of other flowers usually suggested outlandish tastes], <17> furs, veils, feathers, bows and ribbons to name but a few. Although all of these may seem outlandish to modem tastes, such fashion fitted the Victorian image of "elegance and pompous placidity" well. <18> The high-minded seriousness so characteristic of most Victorians equated "cumbersome" dress, the corsets and tightlacing in particular, with the middle-class ethics of self-control and discipline. It is against this backdrop of established Victorian moral codes and values that dress reformers and proponents of lady-like dress engaged in heated debates; (this was, on hindsight, intellectually stimulating, and at times quite hilarious).

The "rational" dress went against the Victorian preoccupation with lady-like dress. In 1851, Mrs. Amelia Bloomer, an American, was the first dress reformer to launch a public effort in trying to change women's dress. Her practical alternatives to lady-like dress were loose tunics worn over ankle-length trousers . <19> The trousers, later known as the "bloomers," "rationals," or knickerbockers, became the butt of jokes in England. <20> Some Victorians were also extremely concerned with the excesses of lady-like dress. These dress reformers' emphasis were on hygiene and practical dressing; they generally called for more loose-cut clothing that would allow easy body movement. Dress reformers, however, argued among themselves over the designs of "rational" dress: some suggested that pressure should be shifted from the waist (discarding crinolines, corsets and bustles) to the shoulders (tunics which hung from the shoulders). <21> At length there was a general consensus to avoid the use of trousers as much as possible. <22> Trousers were "unmentionables" <23> and were shunned by most ladies-until the beginning of the 20th century-who would rather wear divided skirts than be caught in a pair of knickerbockers. <24> The culottes, loose jackets, blouses and knickerbockers were some of the "rational" alternatives to the lady-like dress.

There were many other opposing views among the "rational" dress reformers themselves. They were divided into several camps which either overlapped or were independent groups. The conservatives consisted of medical doctors, anti-feminist and social Darwinists. The feminists were another vocal group; Mrs. Emily M. King was one of the most outspoken leaders of the Rational Dress Society in England, founded in 1881. The other dress reformers, with less popular following, were the Pre-Raphaelites whose appeal for the light and loose Greco-Roman clothes went against Victorian moral sensibilities. William Morris's call "to reform a philistine age by means of the decorative arts" failed to convince Victorians; <25> if anything, it had the reverse effect of confirming the superiority of lady-like dress.

Some of the defenders of lady-like dress based their arguments on the premise of cultural and racial superiority. Against the Pre-Raphaelites, leading lady-like dress defender Mrs. Hugh R. Haweis, argued that the loosely clothed Rubens' women were immodest and the lack of structured underclothes and light drapery material was scandalous. <26> Clearly, these Victorians equated loose dress with loose morals, therefore loose stays gave rise to the phrase "loose morals." Lady-like dress proponents were further convinced that the empire-style dress Greco-Roman influenced-which followed the French Revolution of 1789 indicated a period of "indecency of dress" and "general licentiousness of manners and morals." <27> The abandonment of corsets was connected to moral laxity according to some Victorians.

Corsets, tightlacing, high stiff collars and other "trappings" of lady-like dress also signified discipline and self-denial to some Victorians. It upheld their belief in putting up a courageous appearance while enduring pain; it appealed to the Victorian fastidious neatness and preoccupation for the meticulous. The high stiff collars were symbols of status especially when they were immaculately starched, smoothed and spotlessly white. The collars were usually 8 cm (3 1/4") in height and were usually for day wear, but it left a "high water mark" when the ladies changed into their low neckline evening gowns.

Such was the concern for a perfect stiff collar that an Englishwoman in India, worried about going around with a limp collar, fashioned one with metal rings cut out from food cans, thus holding it upright. <28>

A Victorian writer defended lady-like dress as such:

All slatternliness or meanness of attire marks some intellectual deficiency. Some men of genius have, we suppose, been slovens, but it is not the genius which is represented by his costume, but those defects and disorders in him. which have prevented his genius from doing all it might have done. . . . There is the sense of bracing up for an occasion; to be comfortable and self-forgetting is to be deshabille. <29>

It was the Victorian woman's social duty to look beautiful and respectable. In the midst of such an intense moral climate, Victorian upper-class school girls aged five to ten were urged and sometimes bullied into wearing corsets. It was not only seen as a way of disciplining the child in neatness and decorum, but also of preparing the girls for marriage. The marriage market had become extremely fight by the 1850s and, according to fashion historian Willet Cunnington, a tiny waist and marriage became the two main Victorian female concerns. <30>

Cunnington was not exaggerating, for there were a good number of Victorians who perceived that a tiny waist was the symbol of beauty and femininity; some Englishwomen even saw the corsets as a symbol of "independence." The writer Charles Reade best described this general trend of thought in his novel *A Simpleton*. The heroine proudly refused to discard her corsets when the hero implored her to. She taunted him into courting a submissive "Circassian slave" who never wore corsets or stays and would be willing to answer his every beck and call. <31> Clearly Victorian ladies were very confident about their cultural superiority. Lady-like dress represented, to them, high culture, beauty and discipline. Some would even go to great lengths to endure pain; the "morning pip" like opium would be taken to relieve pain and physical stress and tightlacing; <32> thus, it created the standard Victorian notion of femininity and beauty: an anemic "panting dove." <33>

In the 1840s *Punch* magazine was relentless in its satirical attack on lady-like dress. Each edition devoted some space to debates, with pictorial caricatures, on both lady-like and "rational" dress. Opinions written by readers were often heated and thought provoking which showed that the general texture of Victorian psychological make-up was a fascinating mixture of sexual repression, ethnocentrism, and an ability to laugh at themselves.

There is not a man among us ... not being a born fool ... that does not hate, detest, abominate, and occasionally swear at the sinful suicidal fashion of tightlacing, which is every whit as frightful a personal disfigurement as the squeezed skulls of the Flat-heads, or the crushed feet of the Chinese. <34>

Corsets and tightlacing to some dress reformers were seen as devices that "mutilated" women; not only did these beauty devices reshape the body, they were believed to have caused miscarriages, the birth of inferior babies, illnesses and even licentiousness. "Medical theorists" argued that this made blood become "impure and corrupt," caused "disease to the brain," and inevitably led to "impure feelings." "Weak-minded" ladies were, therefore, easy preys of temptation. <35> The pedestal on which Victorian women were placed had unfortunate consequences: women were perceived as innocent, that is devoid of any "animal feelings like sexual love; her "special nature" made her a trusting, giving and warm person; but her perceived lack of intellect could make her a prey to sexual seduction. Once introduced to the sins of the flesh women's "animal" feelings would be insatiable. <36> Ingrained with such negative traditional views of women, it seemed right that Victorian professionals like Dr. Acton would seriously believe that corset wearing led to masturbation; a late 19th century Victorian medical thesis on sex and the corset was more explicit:

The early wearing of stays is said to cause precocious sexuality. When it is known that a degenerate cult of tight corset wearers exists in England with a journal devoted to their craze between tightlacing and sex hyperaesthesia [heightened feeling] seems to be well established. <37>

Reports of women having ribs extracted so that they could fit into tiny corsets were unfounded since there is no evidence to support the claim. Like any controversial topic of the time, there were exaggerated and false claims to make the situation seem worse than it actually was. <38> Claims of corsets and tightlacing causing abortion is, at best, debatable. Apart from Emile Zola's graphic story from his novel *Tylicka* where a young servant girl who died tragically after the "birth" of the fetus, there is no evidence of Victorians using corsets as a means to abort. <39> Special corsets were made available for expecting mothers; it may be possible that tight corset wearing by some expectant mothers could have led to complications, but it would be prudent of us not to conclude with surety that corsets were the cause of miscarriages. <40>

After 1850 the racial degeneration argument was strongly argued by social Darwinists. They contended that fragile and "wasp" waisted women would generate a debilitated race. Women, as a result, could no longer fulfill their natural, maternal roles because of the pernicious habit of compressing their stomachs. Their histrionics went as far as to suggest that England would be filled with a new inferior race. <41> It was a widely held belief that the coarse working poor were in danger of taking control from the weak middle-classes. <42> Darwinists also argued that "rational" dress made a civilized and intelligent society; they claimed that anthropological studies of primitive cultures proved that "backward" and "barbaric" people wore meaningless ornaments like bangles, bracelets, earrings, and the like. These dress reformers argued that ladies' dress should evolve to the "superior 'rational' men's standard." <43> Mrs. E. M. King, secretary of the Rational Dress Society, was influenced by this trend. In her book entitled *Rational Dress: Dress of Women and Savages* she likened "savages" to fashionable women. <44>

Conservatives and anti-feminists capitalized on the silliness of fashion. The crinolines, bustles, the long trains of skirts and the fish tail look of the 1870s were maligned by conservatives and poked fun at by magazines. A popular riddle at the time went as follows:

Why is a lady always in a state of agitation? Because she is in a bustle behind and a pucker before. <45>

Eliza Lynn Linton, a conservative and anti-feminist, shocked London in her *Saturday Review* article when she called the fashionable middle-class woman a "fast young lady," who was no different from the courtesans. <46> Critics like Linton shared the belief that lady-like dress was "coarse and sensual" and that "low dressing" was unbecoming for gentlewomen. <47> The frivolous intricacies of lady-like dress, as argued by some anti-feminists, proved their mental inferiority; these ladies of high fashion relished in attending parties and balls day and night, and if not would laze in bed for the rest of the day. <48> Anti-feminists, such as Linton, had harsh and uncompromising views of "The Fashionable Woman" and later of the "The New Woman" since they adhered to the age-old notion that women ought to stay within their sphere, keeping the home comfortable for her husband, dutifully bearing children for him, and pleasing society with her limited education that befitted her role in life. <49>

Clearly the and-feminists differed from feminists' opposition to lady-like dress. While feminists essentially objected to the restrictive heavy and tight lady-like fashions and offered "rationals" as alternatives, anti-feminists objected to both types of dress with no helpful suggestions as to what was best. Art historian Kunzle theorized that tightlacing and corsets were opposed by anti-feminists because it was a symbol of protest against childbearing as well as a symbol of self-assertion. He cited Empress Elizabeth of Austria as detesting giving birth so much because it spoiled her slender shape. Her obsession for sports and exercise kept her perpetually slim. The 5 ft. 6 in. empress, mother of three, never weighed more than 120 pounds; and between 1860-1861 her waist measured 16 inches. <50>

Anti-feminists "regarded both the educated and the fashionable lady as misfits." <51> They objected to "rational" dress on the grounds that manly looking clothes was "symbolic of [women's] ambition to enter and subvert his world. <52> Women by the late 1880s were entering into the "men's sphere" at the work place; they were typists and telephone operators in offices, and in hospitals more women became professional nurses. Unconscious, subtle or overt attempts were made to remind women to keep within their sphere. A nurse in an 1870s Middlesex Hospital, in order to make her work easier, hitched up her long train (bustles and cascades of trailing frills which accentuate the lower back was at the height of fashion then) only to have her supervisor say:

I devised this little train, so that when you]can over the bed to attend to your patient, your ankles will be covered and the students will not be able to see them. <53>

These fearful reactions often stemmed from the threat to male superiority as ladies fashion became more versatile toward the end of the 19th century. The popularity of sports in 1890s England made expedient the rise of culottes, shirt blouses and knickerbockers; it allowed women flexibility in matching dresses and, most importantly, freedom of movement. <54> Mass produced clothes and "sports" clothes may have inadvertently caused a "psychological revolution" <55> in which women realized that their role in society was more than one based on their sex. Throughout history the only "respectable and lady-like" role open to women was an early marriage. <56> (As sports was traditionally associated with aristocrats, bicycling and tennis were eagerly engaged in by the middle-classes). Women became more mobile as they could now travel further without their chaperones; some brave ones would put on their knickerbockers when they rode on their bicycles. Some critics who hitherto criticized lady-like dress now decried the "rational" dress. Arabella Kenealy -- corset critic-strongly opposed women's participation in sports. The proper exercise for ladies, she argued, was "the commonplace household chore." <57> Since then sports had always been credited as revolutionizing women's clothing and hence hastening women's emancipation.

It would, however, be altogether too facile to contend that the popularity of sports among middle-class women speeded up the emancipation of women. Feminists since the mid 1860s have assiduously paved the way toward women's rights. The "sports explanation" cannot be quantified; perhaps a more reasonable explanation would be that it "smoothed" the path for radical changes in society and created an environment where changes could be rationalized in a "spirit of conciliation." <58> Women used shirts and loose coats for comfort as well as in enhancing their femininity. <59> Most horsewomen, female bicyclists, golfers, rowers and other female sports enthusiasts of the 1890s continued wearing flowing and heavy skirts; some horsewomen compromised by wearing "an apron skirt so that it will conceal the mounted foot and the practical breeches beneath." <60>

The movement for women's rights was loosely associated with the Rational Dress Society. Feminists agreed with doctors, social Darwinists and conservatives that lady-like dress was unhealthy and implicitly immoral, but differed in their views on restricting women within the boundaries of the home. Prominent feminists who were more concerned with women's rights did not make dress reform their major cause. Indeed, Josephine Butler-by far the most well known Victorian figure of the women's rights movement-was always immaculately lady-like in her dressing. <61> Mrs. Butler, being a product of the Victorian age, although a woman ahead of her times, could have been a believer of the mainstream Victorian notion of respectability in lady-like clothes. On the other hand, like Emily Davis, founder of Girton College, Mrs. Butler was concerned at being stereotyped as one of the "shrieking sisters" -- loud manly looking female activists. <62> Some of the arguments that feminists made were that in order to achieve equality of the sexes, male sexual appetites should be controlled and lady's fashion should be less distinct from man's. Others stressed looking attractive as opposed to looking sexually attractive [an ambiguous directive, one might say]. <63>

The Rational Dress Society did not gain a large following and efforts by dress reformers saw pathetic results. Nineteenth century England was not enthusiastic about the bloomers

nor its follow-up, the divided skirt. Fashion historian Steele contended that "rational" dress was unpopular because it looked ugly. <64> Sports did not force Victorian women to abandon corsets, stays and bustles. Women continued to use corsets well into the 20th century, although these contraptions gradually changed in shape and texture. The average waist size in 1880s England was 23 inches and 30% of all corsets sold were size 14 to 18 inches. <65> Victorian upper-class women had to resist or adapt to social expectations. It would be too rash and hasty of us to characterize them as submissive prudes merely from their social roles and sartorial modes. It would seem that fashion changed at its own pace; the circular path that fashion takes brings about a repetition of itself. <66> The "rationals" did bring a gradual democratization of the classes; "ready-mades" or mass produced clothes gave rise to similar cuts in women's dresses, even if the quality of materials differed. <67> Lady-like dress did not yield to critical ideology but rather prevailed in its own right. Mrs. Eric Pritchard, a firm believer in the "powers" of lady-like dress, expounds its spellbinding charm:

For equality with men, and for the privilege and independence he enjoys infinite opportunities of obtaining all she wants through the service of dress, beauty and the subtleties which have never yet failed-disguising the details of dress and toilet in a mask of mystery. <68>

Whether in "rational" or lady like apparel, the wearer projected an intended image. Victorians were aware that clothes did more than cover and beautify the person. Victorian sage, Thomas Carlyle, in a section of his book *Sartor Resartus*, eloquently contended that clothing symbolized one's unique personality and station in life. He asked with tongue in cheek: "Who can figure a naked Duke of Windlestraw addressing a naked House of Lords?" <69>

Notes

1 L. C. B. Seaman, *Victorian England* (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 169.

2 Ibid.

3 Nancy Fix Anderson, *Woman against Women in Victorian England* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), on status of women in early Victorian England, pp. 23, 35, 55 and 86.

4 Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Random, 1934).

5 Seaman, p. 8.

6 Seaman, p. 6.

7 Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 145158.

8 C. Willet Cunnington, *Englishwomen's Clothing in the 19th Century* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1952), p. 426.

9 Ibid.

10 Cornelius O'Dowd, "Dress," *Blackwoods* 97 (Jan.-June 1865): 426.

11 Cunnington, p. 426.

12 O'Dowd, p. 426.

13 Anderson, p. 118.

14 Ibid.

15 Oskar Fischel & Max Von Boehn, *Modes and Manners of the 19th Century: Vol. 2, 1843-1878* (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1970), p. 128.

16 Willet C. Cunnington, *Why Women Wear Clothes* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), p. 161.

17 Iris Brooke, *A History of English Costume* (New York: Theatre Arts Book, 1972), p. 128.

18 Brooke, p. 158.

19 Steele, p. 145.

20 Phillis Cunnington & Alan Mansfield, *English Costume for Sports & Outdoor Recreation* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1970), p. 241.

21 Fiskel & Von Boehn, p. 128.

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23 Cunnington & Mansfield, p. 241.

24 Cunnington, & Mansfield, p. 244.

25 E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, Ltd., 1955), pp. 84, 12. Cited by Steele, p. 153.

26 Steele, p. 154.

27 Priscilla Roberts, *An Experience of Women: Patterns & Change in 19th Century Europe* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), p. 115, cited by Steele, p. 176.

28 Frederick Pearse, *Modern Dress and Clothing in its relation to Health and Disease* (London, 1882), p. 33. Cited by David Kunzle, p. 153.

29 O'Dowd, p. 431.

30 Cunnington, *Why Women Wear Clothes*, pp. 152-61.

31 Steele, p. 169.

32 David Kunzle, *Fashion & Fetishism* (New Jersey: Rowan & Littlefield, 1982), p. 299.

33 Quote by *Punch*, cited by Kunzle, p. 138.

34 *Punch*, "The Fashionable Suicide," (Sept. 19, 1863), p. 122.

35 Orson S. Fowler, *Intemperance and Tightlacing* (New York, 1846. Manchester: John Heywood [c. 1897]), pp. 33, 36, cited by Steele, p. 166.

36 Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), p. 37

37 Walter Gallichen, *A Textbook on Sex Education* (London, 1918), p. 111, 132, cited by Kunzle, p. 191.

38 Steele, p. 170. Kunzle, p. 9; the latter refutes Germain Greer's contention that lower rib removal was common practice in the Victorian era, in her book *The Female Eunuch* (New York, 1971), pp. 34, 35.

39 Kunzle, pp. 63, 64.

40 Steele, p. 170.

41 Steele, pp. 164, 65.

42 R. L. Dickinson, "The Corset: Questions of Pressure & Displacement," *New York Medical Journal* 46 (1887): 507-516.

43 Steele, p. 160.

44 Steele, p. 148.

45 "Dress & Its Eccentricities,"' *London Society* 10 (Sept., 1867): p. 284.

46 Anderson, p. 160.

47 *London Society*, p. 285.

48 Anderson, p. 120.

49 Anderson, read all pages on women's status in early Victorian England.

50 Kunzle, p. 299.

51 Steele, p. 158.

52 Punch, cited by Kunzle, p. 147.

53 Phillis Cunnington, *Catherine Lucas & Alan Mansfield, Occupational Costume in England: 11th century-1914* (London: A.&C. Black, Ltd., 1969), p. 321.

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56 Ibid.

57 Arabella Kenealy, "The Curse of Corsets," *Nineteenth Century* (1904): pp. 131-137.

58 Cunnington & Mansfield, p. 358.

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60 Cunnington & Mansfield, p. 358.

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62 Anderson, pp. 126, 127.

63 Steele, p. 149.

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69 Sally Mitchell, *Victorian Britain* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1988), p. 172.

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