

THE RISE OF INTEREST IN *Exercise for Women*

AS THE FASCINATION FOR THE ORIENTAL UNDERWENT A CHANGE WITH THE onset of Romanticism, the simplicity in women's dress that had characterized the more carefree and lusty Empire and Regency periods eroded, to be finally lost in the 1820s. With its passing, the concept of freedom of movement in women's clothing disappeared too. Instead, serious corsetry took the place of the emphatic cantilevering of the bosom that had sufficed in the years of the high waist, while new layers of underskirts began to shape the fuller skirts that were to continue to expand in size over the next half century. The new styles of clothing, more physically restraining, more stylized, and decidedly heavier, gave the new ideal woman her quintessential look of constrained and covered modesty. Unlike her mother and grandmother, she was demure and spiritual, a model of gentleness and passivity, virtue and motherhood. She was elevated to her pedestal as the cult of true womanhood flowered. As Geoffrey Squire put it, by 1837, the year Victoria ascended the throne, "men were not to be subdued, but became deferential. . . . The bounce was quite gone, replaced by a sensitive fragility."¹

Throughout the mid-century years, popular literature reinforced the philosophy supporting the cult. Charles Dickens's early novels invariably described the heroines as gentle, passive, lovely, aristocratic in bearing if not birth, and often tragic. Little Dorrit and *David Copperfield's* Dora are classic examples of the sweet, somewhat dull, and decidedly asexual ideal.

Dickens and other authors attached moralistic connotations to the livelier, deeper, and more complex women in the novels of the period: the women of exposed sexuality, such as Lady Dedwood of *Bleak House* and Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, invariably came to a bad end. Stories and articles in the women's magazines that proliferated, notably, in America, the enduring *Godey's Lady's Book*—which debuted, under the leadership of Sarah Josepha Hale, with Queen Victoria in 1837—again and again reiterated the passivity, the nobility of spirit, and the gentility that characterized the cult of true womanhood. Under the watchful, guiding commentary of its editor, generations of women sought the true path of duty and motherhood, women's proper “sphere.”²

As the image of the new ideal of womanhood solidified, mannerisms as well as clothing reflected the change. Women affected an appearance of delicacy, with pale complexion and slightness of figure, encouraged by the new, exquisitely engineered corsetry which now covered the entire midsection from the chest to the lower hips and sharply defined a waist that had been overlooked for decades. Dieting, too, became a fad among young women. A favorite method was to drink vinegar water and to pick at one's food (probably not too difficult to do if the vinegar water went first).³ Tight-lacing led to ailments such as “palpitation, the vapors, and swooning,”⁴ and rendered active movement all but impossible. The look of the 1840s had traveled a long way from the revealing, flirtatious, and overtly sexual clothing of the previous generation. Geoffrey Squire cannot be improved on for capturing “the dullest decade in the history of feminine dress”:

The last vestige of the expansive sleeve hung modestly about the wrist, the upper section above the elbow encircled only by a few delicate frills or close set gauging. The corset was cut much longer in the waist, and its curves were drawn out into shallow, sinuous lines which moulded the bust tightly like the calyx of a still-closed flower. By 1840, the bonnet, its brim much reduced, closed closely round the face in a narrow inverted U. The hair, centrally parted, was plastered down with “Bandoline,” seemingly painted on to the perfect oval of the head, and from ear-level it dripped into long forlorn “spaniel” ringlets. Timidity and helpless resignation were emphasized by the

binding of the arms to the body in a shawl; exactly placed about the points of the shoulders, it muffled the figure and carried the eye down the billowing figure without a break. . . . [T]he gaze slides down the drooping shoulders, then slithers the length of the elongated torso, over the gently padded hips and on to the heavy dragging skirts, which were supported by a burden of innumerable petticoats. The plump, cheeky little girls of the preceding years had been transformed into enervated, shy, serious adolescents, slender and gazelle-like.

It was, according to Squire, an insipid, mediocre, “entirely middle-class epoch. . . . Hardly an atmosphere to encourage invention or emulation.”⁵ Oddly enough, though, perhaps even because the times were so uninspiring, invention and innovation abounded in the 1840s.

An early hint at revolution appeared in *Godey’s* in July 1841. In an article titled “How To Begin,” Sarah Hale wrote about educating daughters and the importance of “physical education . . . for the constitution,” a “department of training children [that] is, in our country, more neglected than any other.” She continues:

We lately met with a little book, written by a physician of Glasgow, Scotland, which contained many sensible observations, as Scotch works usually do. It was entitled—RULES FOR INVIGORATING THE CONSTITUTION. . . .

In the first place, females, from their earliest years, should be allowed those sports and amusements in the open air, so necessary to the proper development of their bodies, and which are now confined entirely to boys. Instead of being compelled to walk demurely with measured steps, like so many matrons, they should be encouraged in running and romping even, at suitable times; and that the motions of their limbs may be unconstrained, their dress should be always loose and easy.

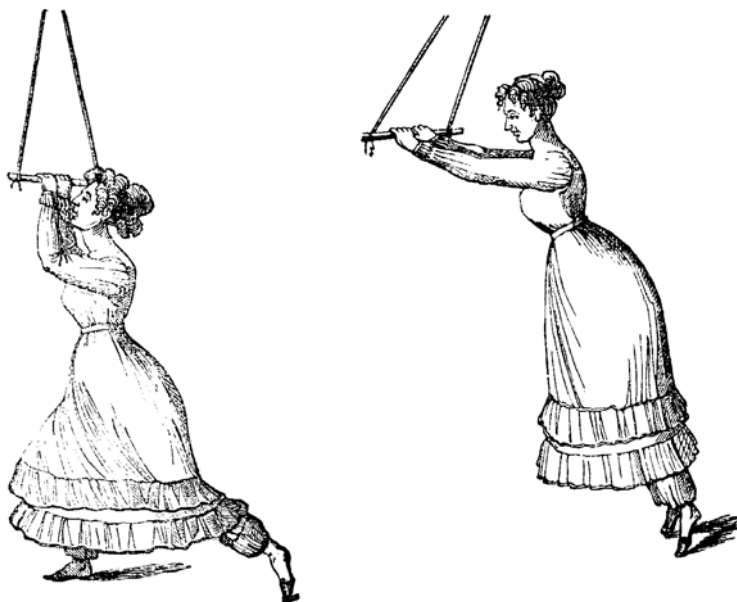
Until girls are fourteen or fifteen years old, they should be allowed to play in the open air at least *six hours* every day, when the season and weather will permit. They should be allowed to run, leap, throw the

ball, and play at battledore, as they please. All these exercises call the different muscles into action, strengthen the limbs, and impart a healthy tone to the different organs; the blood circulates freely, the nervous system is invigorated, and the redundant fluids are driven off by perspiration. The most suitable dress is unquestionably that which is called Turkish, consisting of pantalettes or trowsers, and a short frock (the latter to be brought up sufficiently high on the bosom to prevent the exposure of the shoulders) and the covering of the head should be light and cool—a straw hat answers the purpose very well.⁶

This, ten years before the bloomer.

The unnamed Scottish doctor was a proponent of a growing movement to introduce physical culture to the population at large. (Elizabeth Blackwell, as we saw in Part One, was another.) Although the 1830s and 1840s were perhaps the low point in the history of exercise for women, as early as 1826 a Boston teacher, William Bentley Fowle, had attempted (and failed) to find a precedent for girls to use before introducing a new system of German gymnastics that had been devised for boys only. In making this attempt, he commented with some insight, “It seemed as if the sex had been thought unworthy of an effort to improve their physical powers.” Eleven years later, in 1837, the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* still had cause to chide parents for slighting their daughters’ physical education.⁷ Interestingly, though, an illustration in *Atkinson’s Casket* from 1832 had shown a young woman practicing “female calisthenics,” wearing a costume virtually the same as the one described by the Scottish doctor in 1841.⁸ So even as the sages, medical authorities, and educators were advocating the cause of exercise over a period of a decade or more, it seems that some women had already taken the matter into their own hands. Generally, though, progress came slowly.

In attempting to adapt German exercises for girls, the Boston teacher probably patterned his series on that of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn, one of two early exercise leaders to gain an international following. Jahn’s famous work *Die Deutsche Turnkunst*, published in 1816, was a German nomenclature for exercise, calling it *Turner* rather than using the more accepted “gymnastics,” which had a Greek root. From this, the *Turnverein*, or gym-



Female calisthenics. *Atkinson's Casket*, April 1832, 187. Courtesy of Boston Athenaeum.

nastic societies, grew; the participants and the system both became known as “turners.” The other leader, the Swede, Per Ling, opened the Royal Gymnastics Central Institute of Stockholm in 1814, but it was his son, Hjalmar, who turned the emphasis of gymnastics towards education. Although physical education at first benefited only boys, other teachers gradually adapted the systems for girls, so that when the educator Catharine Beecher visited a Russian seminary at mid-century, she was able on her return to describe in glowing terms the “more than 900 girls from noble families [who] were being trained in Ling’s calisthenics.”⁹ In the United States, German immigrants had brought their *Turner* with them, and practiced them in their own communities. But until Dio Lewis made gymnastics fashionable in America in the 1860s, few educators promoted this form of exercise, and certainly not for girls.

Catharine Beecher had been delighted to see calisthenics for girls performed en masse in Russia, even if it was some twenty years since she had first insisted on them as part of her curriculum in her schools in the United States. Such was her influence and importance in her time that she played

a prominent role in introducing calisthenics as part of girls' education. In order to understand how she accomplished this, it helps to know more about her. Indeed, no account of the history of women's education in the United States can be meaningful without some reference to Catharine Beecher, the eldest of the remarkable Beecher family mentioned in Part One. As noted previously, the Beechers' careers centered on the church from the period of the Second Great Awakening very early in the century, from father Lyman through the sons and sons-in-law. The Beechers were very typically middle class, but gained acceptance at higher levels of society because of their importance in the religious life of the era as well-known orators, preachers, and ministers. Later, the women of the family achieved even greater fame in literary and educational circles.

In the early decades of the century, the church was one of the few avenues by which the middle class could achieve upward mobility, but only men of the family were allowed this entree. It was an ironic point, and one not lost on Catharine, that men were able to gain significant positions at lofty levels through the auspices of the church solely because the women of the republic had come forward by the hundreds of thousands to swell the growing religious movement in what has been called "the feminization of American religion."¹⁰ The church was one of the only acceptable places for social participation outside the home for a middle-class woman. In addition, she might even find a measure of influence there. Her position as supporter of the church and of its clergy had its own merit. Religious activism for women depended, however, on the "implicit bargain between clergymen and women parishioners" that women would avoid seeking leadership roles. "As long as a woman kept her 'proper place,' a tract society pamphlet explained in 1823, she might exert 'almost any degree of influence she pleases.'"¹¹ In other words, the church was regarded as part of "women's sphere." The Second Great Awakening, then, was a mass movement of women led by a select few, all men, all clergy. And of these the Beecher men were among the most prominent.

Catharine Beecher, a determined and competitive spirit brought up by a leader in a family of leaders and seeking a leadership role herself, was aware that her destiny lay apart from the church simply because of the accident of gender. She elected, therefore, to achieve her success in the field of education. Her chosen path led her to found the Hartford Female Seminary in

1824, and to carry her influence to the West, to Cincinnati in 1832. She fervently believed in education for women, understanding perhaps more graphically than many, because of the family of achievers in which she grew up, that for women to attain any kind of equality, they must be educated equally to men. She was very much a product of her generation and family, however, and therefore her view of equality was one of “separate but equal.” Indeed, not only was women’s sphere a concept she accepted, but it became the rallying point of her crusade for women’s education as well. She believed that women should be educated to educate others, and she encouraged the formation of many teacher-training institutions around the country. The subjects that women were to be educated in were all related to women’s sphere. She wanted nothing less than a profession for women that would have equal importance not just to motherhood but to those of men: the ministry, medicine, and the law. She sold her plan by arguing, first, that women were more naturally attuned to children, and second, and perhaps even more telling, that they could work for half a man’s salary or less.¹² It was an argument that few communities could resist.

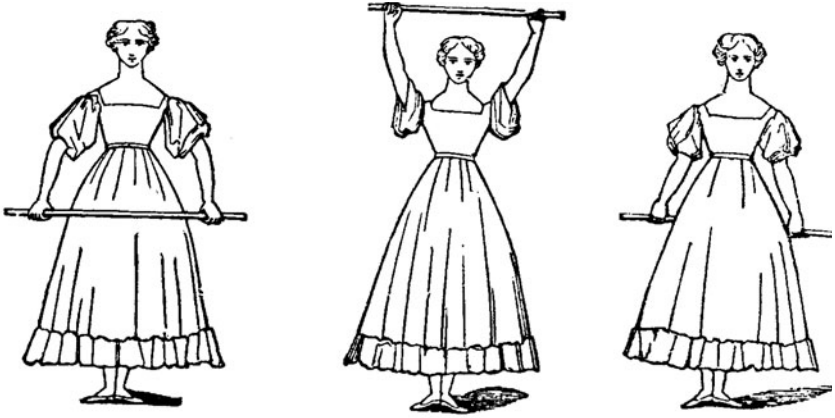
To disseminate her ideas (and also to earn a living), she wrote the monumental guide that was to be used widely over the next forty years and more, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy*, first published in Boston in 1841 and reprinted almost every year until 1856. Subtitled “for the use of young ladies at home and at school,” it was clearly a teaching tool for the young ladies she taught. But its wider success was overwhelming, and it established her as the outstanding authority on all things pertaining to the American home. Katherine Kish Sklar, Beecher’s biographer, refers to the work as the nineteenth-century equivalent to Dr. Benjamin Spock’s *Baby and Child Care* of a century later.¹⁵ In it, Beecher created and defined a new profession for women, the domestic economist. Centered firmly in the home, she was in command of every conceivable aspect of domestic activity. Her orderly approach to home management paved the way for the later educators who transformed it into household science or home economics, a field that, during its century of existence, sought to educate young women in all aspects of family, home, and domestic management while giving them pride in their homemaker roles.¹⁴ The *Treatise*, then, not only defined the role young women would play in the home, bringing to it an aura of professionalism, but also offered practical advice on how to accomplish the multifaceted

aspects of the job. American women, Beecher believed, were united by their dedication to the role.¹⁵ In short, Beecher clearly defined women's sphere and gave it respectability.

Like others of her time, Beecher believed that the fundamental reason for educating girls was to create a nation of strong wives and mothers to raise and educate the next generations of American citizens. "Let the women of the country be made virtuous and intelligent, and the men will certainly be the same," she wrote. "The proper education of a man decides the welfare of an individual; but educate a woman and the interests of a whole family are secured." In spite of her staunch support of the potential power of women in society, however, she was forced to admit that a great difficulty "peculiar to American women, is a delicacy of constitution, which renders them early victims to disease and decay." She blamed this "debility of constitution . . . on the mismanagement of early life."¹⁶ To counteract this poor beginning of a girl's life, she advocated adequate exercise, proper diet and clothing, cleanliness, and fresh air—all, interestingly enough, innovations in her time but still entirely recognizable as necessary in ours. She railed against corsets, asserting that they distorted the body and prevented exercise, and she created her own sets of exercises, even providing illustrations showing how to do them. She published these and her other ideas on promoting good health in *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (1854) and *Physiology and Calisthenics for Schools and Families* (1856). Beecher understood the importance of such early training and healthful endeavor because she herself was a victim of "female invalidism" throughout her adult life. She believed firmly in the virtues of the water cure, a popular form of treatment from the 1840s to the 1880s. As Sklar tells us, during this period "213 water-cure centers emerged to treat a predominantly female clientele, and Catharine Beecher was among their most enthusiastic patrons."¹⁷ It is here, with her books on health and exercise, with her advocacy of the spas, which combined treatment and exercise, and with her calisthenics program "for schools and families," that Beecher becomes of special interest to us. It is particularly significant that she introduced calisthenics for girls as early as the 1830s in her Western Seminary in Cincinnati.¹⁸

The links between Catharine Beecher's calisthenics and a specific exercise dress (such as the bloomer) are tenuous. Her own illustrations from

CHAPTER EIGHT



Correct exercise dress. *The Young Girl's Book of Healthful Amusements and Exercises* (New York: Kiggins and Kellogg, n.d., but probably late 1820s). Thanks to Susan Greene of American Costume Studies.



Illustrated exercises from *Godey's Lady's Book*, 1848, using the same illustrations published some ten to twenty years earlier in *The Young Girl's Book*.

1856 show a sort of amalgam of a dress more like one published in *Godey's* in 1848, which in turn borrowed directly from an even earlier book dating from the late 1820s or 1830.¹⁹ It had a higher-than-natural waist, a bell skirt shortened to above the ankle, and short sleeves that are full and fall as the arms are raised, all characteristic of fashionable dress from the very late 1820s and early 1830s. Significantly, it differs from the earlier model in that the young woman in Beecher's illustration wears pantalettes underneath, more in keeping with the exercise dresses we have already seen, or even the bloomer. But the ties to the bloomer may consist of more than the

little pantalettes lurking beneath the skirt. It seems that Elizabeth Smith Miller (daughter of the temperance and abolitionist reformer Gerrit Smith) visited her cousin Elizabeth Cady Stanton on her return from her honeymoon in Europe, wearing the prototype outfit that she had had made for her travels after seeing similar clothing worn at health spas and retreats for women in Europe. As we saw in Part One, Amelia Bloomer herself stated that both Stanton and Miller wore the costume before she herself did, so this much of the story is true. Documentation is scant, but a number of accounts relate this link between Elizabeth Smith Miller and the European spas. It is clear that these health retreats existed both in Europe and in America, and it is to the ones at home that Catharine Beecher escaped when necessary. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, towards the end of her life, reminisced that the bloomer costume was worn by “many patients in sanatoriums, whose names I cannot recall,” and also by “farmer’s [*sic*] wives, skaters, gymnasts, tourists.”²⁰ And recall the Scottish doctor cited in *Godey’s* who advocated Turkish trousers for young girls for exercise. Although Catharine Beecher does not specifically mention clothing, other than to demand a loosening of corsets, it is interesting to speculate that the same Turkish trousers might have been worn in those female-populated spas in the United States. If we are to believe Elizabeth Cady Stanton, they certainly were. What is clear is that Beecher’s sponsoring of physical exercise must have led to an awareness of a need for suitable clothing. And to judge by her illustrations, the drawers that had become necessary for girls’ underwear answered that need.

Catharine Beecher was only one of many who believed that women’s future role depended greatly on their further education. The early years of the nineteenth century saw the establishment of several schools for young women—mostly “academies” and “seminaries.” Emma Willard’s Troy Seminary for Women, the first endowed school for women, founded in 1821, was an early example. It catered to the “ambitious middle classes” and became a model for teacher-training schools of the future. Although progressive in demanding higher standards and original thought, it still remained well within the expectations of women’s sphere. According to Emma Willard’s sister, Almira Hart Lincoln Phelps, who was also an educator, its main purpose was to turn the students into “better daughters,

wives, and sisters; better qualified for usefulness in every path within the sphere of female exertions.”²¹ Its influence was long-term; unlike Catharine Beecher’s schools, which lasted only a few years, it still exists today as a highly regarded prep school.

Two other women also sought new kinds of schools for young women. Zilpah Grant and Mary Lyon met in 1821, the year the Troy Seminary was founded, at Joseph Emerson’s school in Byfield, Massachusetts, where they were both students. Grant, three years older, mentored Mary Lyon, who adored her and learned from her. Out of their relationship developed a lasting and devoted friendship that would lead first to Grant’s Ipswich Academy and ultimately to Lyon’s Mount Holyoke Seminary, which would influence women’s higher education in this country for the rest of the century and beyond.²² Mary Lyon borrowed ideas from both the Troy Seminary and Ipswich Academy, but went further than either. She wanted more rigorous academic standards that would give women an education equal to those at the colleges for young men. She also wanted—needed—an endowed institution, but after failing to find support in Ipswich, she moved west to a village in the Connecticut River valley, South Hadley, near Amherst, where Joseph Emerson had settled when he took a position at Amherst College. Her goal was to prepare girls for wider social roles (often as teachers or wives of missionaries), but because she was a product of her era, both the methods and the expectations were within the framework of women’s sphere. Echoing Beecher, she declared, “Our future statesmen and rulers, ministers and missionaries must come inevitably under the moulding hand of the female.”²³ Here she found the support she needed, and was able to open Mount Holyoke Seminary in 1837 with a curriculum and student life reflective of its time, a curious amalgam of high academic standards, domestic preparation, and strong piety. She thus provided a prototype for women’s higher education that was emulated over and over throughout the country as schools for women opened. And exercise was important from the beginning.

“Exercise,” Lyon wrote in 1837, “is worth very much more than I anticipated, especially in the winter. The daily work brings one hour of regular exercise coming every day. . . . The exercise is particularly fitted to the constitution of females.”²⁴ The “daily work” that was particularly fitting, it must be said, was domestic work, incorporated into the students’ routine as policy to save the expense of hiring servants in order to cut costs of the

girls' education. As Lyon relates, each student spent at least one hour every day on some chore in the college, whether sweeping, scrubbing, setting and clearing tables, washing dishes, baking, doing the laundry—everything, in fact, but cooking.²⁵ But just in case this activity was not quite enough, the seminary's Book of Duties reminded that "The young ladies are to be required to walk one mile per day until the snow renders it desirable to specify time instead of distance, when three-quarters of an hour is the time required."²⁶

An early student in the school, Lucy T. Goodale, wrote lively and engaging letters home to her family, vividly describing her life there. In 1838 she reported: "The young ladies here are divided into three classes in calisthenics, one for each spaceway. They exercise every evening from half past eight to nine o'clock. This gives them new vigor for study the remaining hour before retiring. In addition to this and running up and down stairs, Miss Lyon wished to have us take a walk every morning before breakfast. So you see she wishes not to have us suffer for want of air and exercise."²⁷ Or from want of things to fill their time. The rising bell rang at 5 AM, and chores as well as the invigorating walk were completed before breakfast, which was at 7:00.

The calisthenics Lucy mentioned were a part of the curriculum from the first year the school opened. Mary Lyon herself wrote out the instructions and gathered them in a small publication, *Calisthenic Exercises*.²⁸ Contemporaries regarded Mount Holyoke as most unusual, even peculiar, in demanding any kind of exercise other than dignified walking. So it is of little surprise in this pious Congregational New England atmosphere, where dancing was anathema, that a strong note of defensiveness colored the admonition in the "Teachers' Book of Duties": "Care should be taken that the exercise does not become like dancing in the impression it makes on observers."²⁹ To counteract any misconception, the school replaced the original Lyon exercises with Dio Lewis's program in 1862. The earlier calisthenics certainly could not have been too strenuous; no doubt they were "fitting to the constitution of females." The school did not even require any special dress for them, nor did it make any suggestion about the removal of stays. But the more regimented curriculum of calisthenics put forth by Lewis brought about a new interest, even a vogue for exercise for both men and women in the 1860s, which lasted well beyond that decade.

The entire question of exercise programs in the United States had been a somewhat hit or miss affair, based on Jahn's German *Turner* format, the Lings' Swedish exercises, or the sets of calisthenics for women such as those devised by Mary Lyon and espoused by Catharine Beecher. All that changed with Dio Lewis and his *New Gymnastics for Men, Women, and Children*, published in 1862.

Dio (short for Diocletian) Lewis became what we would call today the guru of exercise in the 1860s. Indeed, had he lived 150 years later, his personality, drive, and methods might very well have qualified him for the highly paid, highly visible career of a motivational speaker, sideshow snake oil overtones and all, as one story about him suggests. When an early Oberlin College physical education professor, Delphine Hanna, asked him in the 1880s whether there might be a scientific basis for the need for exercise, she was shocked when he shot back: "You don't need a scientific basis. People want to be hum-bugged."⁵⁰ But even as he might have been "humbugging" all along, he, like his descendants today, struck a chord and developed a huge and devoted following.

As he became aware that the various exercise systems developed earlier in the century appealed only to the young, the fit, the muscular, and the male, Lewis began to consider other possibilities as the movement gained momentum at mid-century. He spent eight years on the lecture circuit in the 1850s, later recalling:

During the eight years of lecturing the spare hours were devoted to the invention of a new system of gymnastics. The old, or German gymnastics, the one so common throughout our country, was obviously not adapted to the classes most needing artificial training. Athletic young men, who alone succeeded in the feats of the gymnasium, were already provided for. Boat clubs, ball clubs and other sports furnished them in considerable part with the means of muscular training. But old men, fat men, feeble men, young boys and females of all ages—the class most needing physical training—were not drawn to the old-fashioned gymnasium. The few attempts that had been made to introduce these classes to that institution had uniformly and signally failed. The system itself was wrong.⁵¹

Reading this today, women might bristle at being clumped into the same category as males who were old, fat, feeble, or adolescent. But that would be to lose sight of the fact that Lewis devised a system that would have an even greater impact in this country than the earlier German or Swedish systems, and he automatically included women in the design from the start. However overpowering his showmanship qualities, he was an advocate for women and exercise throughout his career.

After his eight years “on the road,” he introduced his new exercises in Boston in 1860, and in the following year founded there the Normal Institute for Physical Education (the Essex Street Gymnasium), a training school for teachers of “the New System.” It was certainly not the first of its kind ever, as he liked to claim, but it nevertheless was the first of its kind in the United States. With the opening of his school, he became Dr. Lewis, M.D., Professor of Gymnastics. Not surprisingly, the M.D. was honorary (it is not entirely clear from where), but used ever after. The professorship was valid at least in his own school. According to an 1861 article, “Gymnastics,” in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

It would be unpardonable . . . not to speak a good word for the favorite hobby of the day—Dr. Lewis and his system of gymnastics, or, more properly, of calisthenics. Dr. Winship [a contemporary who advocated exercise for building strength by weight lifting] had done all that was needed in some apostleship of severe exercises, and there was wanting some man with a milder hobby, perfectly safe for a lady to drive. . . . [I]t is just what is wanted for multitudes of persons who find or fancy the real gymnasium unsuited to them. It will especially render service to female pupils, so far as they practise it; for the accustomed gymnastic exercises seem never yet to have been rendered attractive to them, on any large scale, and with any permanency.³²

Here we learn a number of things. First, gymnasiums were being built to encourage men’s exercise during this time, but it was thought that women might not feel comfortable coming to them. This may be interpreted from several points of view. The most obvious (to a woman, anyway) would be that, in all likelihood, men had no interest in admitting women

to their gyms, which at this time were few and far between. Later, when gyms were more numerous, schedules were worked out for separate hours for men and women. But in the early 1860s, at the start of the Civil War, such was not yet the case. After the war, when reformers tried to rebuild from the horrors of the previous four years, they stressed the need for exercise to keep men strong, even more so than before the war. It was then that the YMCA branched out into a wider focus. Established in 1844 as an evangelical movement to aid young men in England who were at risk because of the dire conditions brought about by the Industrial Revolution, the Young Men's Christian Association expanded to North America in 1851. Its facilities included gyms and eventually, by the 1880s, swimming pools. The YMCA represents in microcosm the growth of "muscular Christianity," the movement linking exercise and evangelical religion that seems to have played such a large role in nineteenth-century society. It figured prominently even at Mount Holyoke Seminary, as Mary Lyon's admonitions prove. A second interpretation the 1861 article suggests is that women were better off doing their exercise in the privacy of their own homes. Exercise was new to them, it was unattractive, and it was hard to keep at. Why bother going to a gym to do it? When we compare this author's subtly patronizing tone with Dio Lewis's exuberant support of women, we begin to realize just how unusual Lewis was for his time.

Soon after Lewis opened his Normal School, he conducted a school for girls, from 1864 to 1867, in Lexington, Massachusetts; Catharine Beecher was, for a while, one of the lecturers. It burned down after three years, but throughout its short existence some three hundred students enrolled there. The school, like its founder, was unusual, offering a decidedly original curriculum (but, even so, with an echo of Mary Lyon) and attracting students who were perhaps outside the norm. In Lewis's own words:

[The school] drew together a company of bright girls, with delicate constitutions, such girls as could not bear the exclusively mental pressure of the ordinary school. . . . The girls went to bed at half-past eight every evening. They rose early in the morning and went out to walk, which walk was repeated during the day. They ate only twice a day, and of very plain, nourishing food. They took off their corsets. They

exercised twice a day, half an hour, in gymnastics, and danced an hour about three times a week. This was the general course, and upon this regimen they rapidly improved. The gymnastics exercises proved invaluable, but the nine hours in bed, I believe, played a still more important part.⁵³

Girls were measured on entrance and were found to increase in girth and decrease in weight.

Lewis's *New Gymnastics* was reprinted and largely revised in 1868. In it he not only laid out the exercises, he commented on the order of doing them, the value of doing them, and the clothing to be worn while doing them. The illustrations, line drawings or "cuts," depicted both men and women. In describing the costume for exercise, Lewis defined the difference between adapted fashionable dress and real exercise clothing:

Men and boys exercising in an occasional class simply remove the coat and exercise in ordinary dress; but a costume made of flannel, in the style seen in the cuts, is better for regular work.

In the ladies' costume, perfect liberty about the waist and shoulders is *the desideratum*. Many ladies imagine if the skirt be short it constitutes the gymnastic costume. The skirt should be short, but this is of little importance compared with the fit of the dress about the upper half of the body. The belt should be several inches larger than the waist, and the dress about the shoulders very loose. The best waist is a regular Garibaldi, with the seam on the shoulder so short that the armhole seam is drawn up to the top of the shoulder-joint. The stockings should, for cold weather, be thick woollen, and for appearance sake another pair of cotton stockings be worn over them; the shoes strong, with broad soles and low heels.⁵⁴

It is interesting to compare his description of the approved outfit with the illustrations in the book. The skirt was indeed short for the day. But Lewis never mentions the bloomer worn underneath it, clearly visible in most of the cuts. Perhaps these are the "cotton stockings" worn over the



Fig. 2.

Dio Lewis's gymnastic dress, 1862, echoes both the bloomer costume and the bathing dress of the 1850s and 1860s. Dio Lewis, *The New Gymnastics for Men, Women, and Children*, 10th ed. (Boston: Fields, Osgood & Co., 1869).

“thick woollen” ones. And “for appearance sake” is no doubt the period’s modest way of insisting that a woman’s “limbs” remain thoroughly covered, and discreetly unmentioned. The Garibaldi, a fashion staple of the 1860s, as noted earlier, was the perfect answer to the need for a loose, roomy top that would allow the arms to move freely without yanking it out of the skirt waistband.⁵⁵

A photograph from Mount Holyoke College depicting a calisthenics team in 1865 shows Dio Lewis’s influence. Here we see students dressed in exactly the costume he illustrated and described. The skirts are short, falling just below the knee, revealing bloomers below the hem of the skirts; stockings fill the gap between the bloomers and the boot tops. The sleeves are full and gathered from dropped shoulder seams (typical of the 1860s, but unlike Lewis’s suggested higher seam) and are attached to baggy bodices that allow the wearer the necessary room to swing her arms. Waists



Gymnastic team, Mount Holyoke College, 1865. All five wear personalized and probably homemade versions of Dio Lewis's gymnastic dress. Courtesy of Mount Holyoke College Special Collections and Archive.

are loose, gathered, bloused. There is not a hint of the body-hugging clothing that was fashionable at that period, or that would have indicated the presence of corsets underneath. But in no way are the outfits uniform. Each gymnastic dress represented a personal choice of color, individual style within the general guidelines, and trim. Even the fabric seems to have been a personal choice. We learn why this was so, and where at least some of the dresses came from, in a letter Margaret Etta Noble wrote to her parents: "I cut out a waist of a gymnastic dress for one of the girls today and it fitted real nice."³⁶ So popular did the dresses become that they were soon a staple in the fashion magazines that offered patterns, often being described as suitable for either bathing or gymnastics. For example, the varieties of styles and trim can be seen in illustrations from *La Mode Illustrée* of 1871.³⁷ These are for children between the ages of six and twelve, but they fit the description in *The New Gymnastics* perfectly.

Of course, if exercise was now fashionable, one could be sure that *Godey's* would note the trend—especially since it had been an advocate of exercise for decades. But according to *Godey's*, Dio Lewis's dress had taken

on some decidedly non-utilitarian features. One wonders, in fact, just what purposes the dresses would have been put to, or who would be joining the wearer in order to appreciate the luxuriousness of her outfit. In January 1864 *Godey's* described "some very attractive costumes for the always healthful, now popular light parlour gymnastics." The article continues:

One very tasteful dress was of Russian gray Empress cloth, a fine quality trimmed with leaf-green velvet; the depth of velvet at the bottom of the skirt was about eight inches, cut in at the upper edge in two patterns, alternating, which gave style and variety to the skirt, and also to the body and sleeves whenever applied. The edge of the velvet is finished in the tiniest gold braid; then a jet, and then another gold braid, the two last put on in pattern. The body was a plaited [pleated] Garibaldi, with deep yoke pointed in front, and extending to the waist, and finished with cut velvet, and braided to agree with the skirt. The sleeve was in the prevailing mode, without seams inside of the arm, but ingeniously confined to the wrist, and adapted to the costume. Wide Turkish pants of the same completes the dress.

Another pretty costume for a young lady was a "Tartan" plaid skirt, with scarlet trimmings, the upper edge cut in pattern, and braided with narrow black velvet. Waist of black Empress cloth, with scarlet yoke, and a rolling collar; an embroidered linen collar, "Cavalier" style, and black silk tie finished the neck. Full pants in black Empress cloth is worn with this suit.⁵⁸

Clearly, *Godey's* was more interested in the fashionable details of the outfits than in their suitability even for "light parlour gymnastics."

Thus, in spite of Dio Lewis's guidelines for exercise clothing, a uniform dress for gymnastic wear was still very much a thing of the future. But with his suggestions, and given the popularity of the activity, which for women could be done in seclusion at home, the prototype had been introduced, and women who wished to participate enthusiastically embraced it.