

THE DRESS QUESTION

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Mrs. Dr. Mary Walker, on whom has fallen the mantle of Mrs. Bloomer, has had another opportunity for publicly airing her theories on dress, before the Police Commissioners. Mrs. Dr. Walker objects to voluminous skirts. As far down as the waist, she coincides with the taste of her sisters in form of dress, but



Dr. Mary E. Walker

Photograph in the collection of Oswego County Historical Society.

instead of a baloon (sic) of silk or muslin, expanding on either side and trailing on the ground, Mrs. Walker prefers a plain skirt falling just below the knee, and between the hem of that garment and the tops of her gaiters, she displays a pair of loose fitting but neat trousers. The vulgar mind, unaccustomed to this sort of thing makes it inconvenient for Mrs. Dr. Walker to appear in public in New York. Whenever she is seen in the streets a miscellaneous and excitable crowd collects and follows her, causing annoyance, if not to the lady to the traveling public, and danger to the public peace. IT is due to Mrs. Dr. Walker to say that she bears this affliction with the heroism of a martyr; perhaps she rather likes the attention she receives. The crowd is an obvious nuisance, and a policeman finding it impossible to disperse or arrest the mob the other day, adopted the alternative of removing the cause by taking Mrs. Walker to the station house. The lady then brought the case before the Police Commissioners by making a complaint against the official who arrested her. Before the Commissioners yesterday Mrs. Walker gave another exposition of her views on the dress question. She said she wore the dress from a high moral principle, and regarded the current female style of dress as immodest and immoral in its tendency. If fashion could be regulated by simple regard for comfort and convenience, there might be a chance for Mrs. Walker. But such common sense considerations have nothing to do with the question. It is a waste of breath to rail



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against any fashion, however absurd, -modesty, even decency, is sacrificed at the shrine of fashion, witness the tilting hoops now worn. Man's attire must, from the necessity of man's occupation, be regulated with regard to comfort and ease of motion, no such necessity has been recognized in devising the dress of women. Of all reforms ever undertaken, the women's dress reform is the most hopeless. IT has not made the first step of progress, and the reformers who have bravely sought to inculcate their precepts by example, have only met with ridicule. Mrs. Walker, who is a practicing physician, has done good service in the army. She has received the gold medal, and been designated as a brevet Major in the army. She is entitled to every respect as a lady, and to respect for her opinions, whether or not she has a right to appear in public in the dress she has assumed is an open question. As an abstract principle she has a right to dress as she please, provided she does not offend modesty. But there area two regulations which the police are bound to observe- which make Mrs. Walker amenable to interference. There is a law on the Statute book which makes it a misdemeanor for any person to appear in public dressed in the apparel of the opposite sex. The law also directs a policeman to arrest any person whose acts or conduct tends to collect a mob endangering the public peace. According to the popular view, Mrs. Walker's costume is regarded as male attire. Her appearance on the streets brings a crowd around her, obstructing travel and creating an excitement. The police have been censured for interfering with Mrs. Walker, and Commissioner Acton has advised his men to let the lady alone in future, intimating that the lady was able to take care of herself. This would be satisfactory if the lady only was concerned; but the gathering of a mob of gaping idlers whenever Mrs. Walker appears on the street, is a public annoyance, and it is a question whether the public should suffer for the gratification of personal eccentricity.



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Questions from the article:

1. What is the nickname given to Mrs. Dr. Mary Walker?
2. Describe how Mrs. Walker prefers to dress.
3. What happens when Mrs. Walker goes out in public?
4. Why do the police take Mrs. Walker to the police station instead of the harassing crowd?
5. Does the author view Mrs. Walker's style of dress appropriate or inappropriate? How do you know?
6. What determines how a man dresses?
7. Why does the author believe Mrs. Walker should be respected?
8. Explain the laws that were broken by Mrs. Walker.
9. What do the police finally permit Mrs. Walker to do?
10. Why is the way she dresses considered a public annoyance?

Questions for further research and discussion:

1. How long has Dr. Walker dressed with men's trousers?
2. Why does the author identify Dr. Walker as "Mrs. Dr. Walker or Mrs. Walker in the article?
3. Why doesn't the public just leave her alone when she is in public?
4. Why don't the police arrest the public instead of Dr. Walker?
5. Has the author placed any of his own opinion in the article to influence the reader? If so, how? If not, how can you tell?
6. Why does the author describe Dr. Walker's attire as a "costume"?
7. Answer the question posed by the author: should the public "suffer for the gratification of personal eccentricity"? Refer to Dr. Mary Walker in your answer, but give examples from the 21st century as well to defend your answer.