

Kathleen Tillmann

Dr. Lape

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### The Rise of the Two-Sex Model and the Art of Claiming Space

It is no coincidence that the apex of the hoop skirt's popularity occurred in the same century as the gradual adoption of the two-sex model. Hoop skirts may seem frivolous and unwieldy to modern sensibilities; they must have been difficult to sit down in, or even to fit through a standard doorway, and heaven help you if you brushed too closely by the fireplace—it seems unlikely that effective flame retardants were readily available in the 1700s. However, a closer examination of the functionality of the hoop skirt in the context of the age in which it was popular reveals an inherent pragmatism, if not a feminine bid for liberty.

Hoop skirts, supported by a framework, freed a woman's legs from the clinging confines of heavy fabric, affording her a range of motion hitherto unimagined. What a relief it must have been to walk without hindrance, unencumbered by the layers and folds of fabric that would otherwise have dragged at one's limbs. It must have felt particularly glorious in the heat of summer, given that air conditioning hadn't been invented yet, to fully enjoy the sweet circulation of air from the waist down. Perhaps more importantly, hoop skirts concealed a woman's body from the objectifying gaze of man, much to his chagrin. As noted in *Women's Worlds*, Joseph Addison wrote a vociferous complaint to the effect that hoop skirts imitate pregnancy and make it a chore to distinguish the mother/non-breeder from the daughter/breeder (Warhol-Down 311).

Described in these terms, it could be reasonably argued that women are made to seem little more than glorified cattle, and prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this may not have been far from the truth.

Before the adoption of the two-sex model, women were essentially considered to be intrinsically inferior versions of men, as reflected, for example, in biblical creation myths that describe Eve as having been created from one of Adam's ribs. The then dominant ideology, represented by the one-sex model, was based on the work of a Roman physician called Galen, who determined the sexual organs of men and women to be essentially the same, except for the fact that men's were obviously external and women's internal. Galen further judged men to be superior, owing to the ability of their admirably external sex organs to generate more "vital heat" than those of women. Conversely, the emergence of the two-sex model in the eighteenth century recognized female sexual organs as distinctive from male and acknowledged that such organs function differently (227).

It stood to follow that woman is in fact different from man, and women began to identify themselves as members of a distinctive sex with its own set of defining attributes. Sharing characteristics and behaviors with other women, even across the social boundaries that formerly divided them (religion, rank, politics, etc.), members of the "weaker" sex began to develop a sense of camaraderie and a collective identity that were essential pre-cursors to the subsequent evolution of feminism. The hoop skirt, then, was a particularly apt garment, being liberating, protective, and above all *big*. It permitted woman to forsake measured, mincing steps in favor of stronger strides. It allowed her to stake a competing claim over her own body, concealing the state of her physicality from the presumptuous eyes of appraising man. It kept the aforementioned presumptuous man at bay, demarcating an area into which he could not intrude without fear of reprisal. Perhaps most symbolically, the hoop skirt enabled woman to

appropriate physical space in the world, at the same time that she forged a collaborative sense of self.

Living as we do in a modern era in which culturally defined and unrealistic standards of feminine beauty pressure women to lose weight (i.e. to take up less space) and to expose more (i.e. to subject themselves to objectification), an age in which women are not only still divided by religion, but also by nationality, ethnicity, and race as well, an age in which women still struggle to achieve our fair share of social status and equitable compensation, perhaps a revival of the hoop skirt is in order. I daresay that modern woman could do with a dose of substantiation, not to mention a dose of feminine solidarity.

#### Works Cited

Warhol-Down, Robyn. *Women's World: The McGraw-Hill Anthology of Women's Writing in English across the Globe*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. Print.