

Clothing Cultures
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‘Let Prudence Plain-Dress be your companion’: Dress of female preachers during the Second Great Awakening (1790–1865)

ABSTRACT

The Second Great Awakening (1790–1865) created large numbers of new Christian congregants. In order for churches to effectively minister their burgeoning populations, they enlisted the help of women to serve as itinerant preachers. This research analysed the autobiographies of female preachers, period newspaper articles and imagery to better understand the relationship between the sartorial choices and public personas of female preachers. Most did not align themselves with feminist ideologies of the time but rather claimed the will of God as justification. However, these women were highly criticized and therefore sought a balance between their gender and their faith. This was achieved in part through the adoption of a plain style of dress that stood in stark contrast to superfluous fashions of the time. The style of plain dress was modelled after the attire of the Quakers with neutral colours, no embellishments and simple fabrications. Women were told by male preachers, such as John Wesley, that they should dress plainly. Many congregants, as well as female preachers, told stories of extreme conversions where they immediately eschewed their fashionable clothing.

KEYWORDS:

plain dress
Second Great Awakening
evangelical Christianity
gender
conversion
female preachers

1. For John Wesley, see Henry Rack (1989), *Reasonable enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, London: Epworth Press; for George Whitefield, see Harry Stout (1991), *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelism*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans; for Joseph Smith and Robert Matthews, see Johnson and Wilentz (1994), *The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th Century America*, New York: Oxford University Press.
2. Catherine Brekus compiled a list of female preachers in America from 1740 to 1845 which included their denomination and the year they are first mentioned. See Brekus, *Strangers and Pilgrims*, pp. 343–46.

Introduction

The foundations of many denominations of Christianity in the United States were built in part through the work of local and itinerant preachers in the nineteenth century. Male preachers, such as John Wesley, George Whitefield, Joseph Smith and Robert Matthews, are remembered, and their impact on religion and society has been recorded.¹ However, there were also a number of female preachers much less known than their famous male counterparts. These women travelled the country and spoke about God and salvation; however, fewer scholars have studied their impact and contributions.² The role of the female preacher required courage to overcome and ignore the people who did not believe in them, as well as grace and poise to present cultural standards of femininity. This research examined this dichotomy and analysed the sartorial choices of female preachers during the Second Great Awakening (1790–1865).

The Second Great Awakening

The Second Great Awakening had a significant impact on Christian religion in the United States. During this time, the number of people, or congregants, who participated in Christianity expanded. Lum completed extensive research into this time period and noted, 'In just one measure of their reach, the nation had only 668,000 church members (17 percent of the population) in 1776; by 1850 that number stood at 7.8 million (34 percent of the total population)' (2014: 2). Additionally, by 1865, there were almost as many Methodist churches as there were US Post offices (Lum 2014). Therefore, as congregations grew, preachers

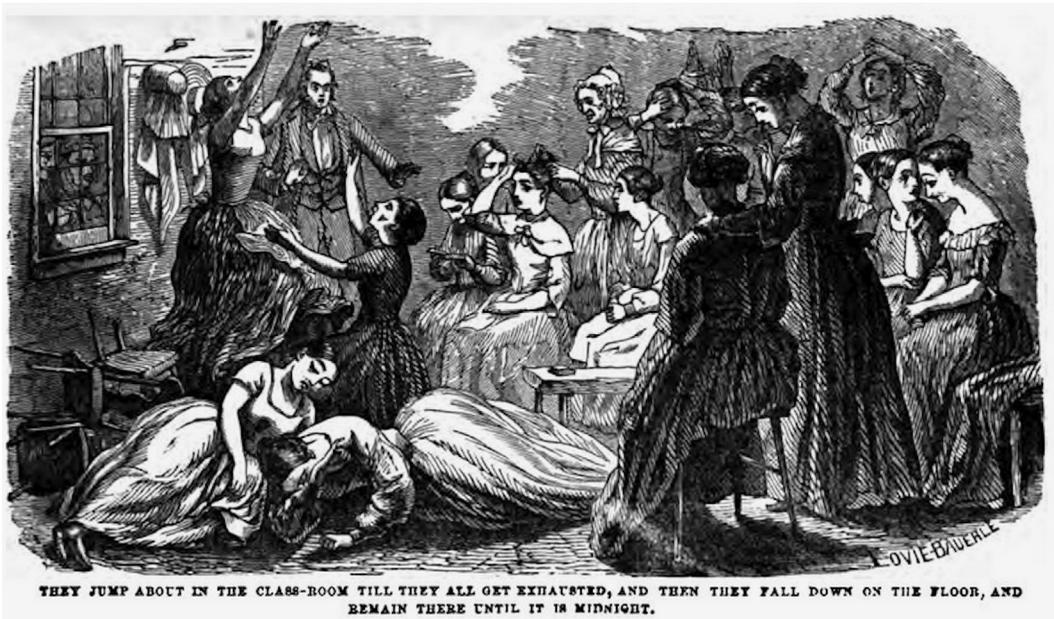


Figure 1: 'They jump about in the classroom till they all get exhausted, and then they fall down on the floor and remain there until it is midnight'. From Anonymous (1858), Brother Mason a Circuit Rider Or Ten Years a Methodist Preacher, Cincinnati, OH: H.M. Rullison, p. 2.



Figure 2: *Camp meeting, central female figures discard bonnets and ribbons during an emotional conversion.* *Camp Meeting*. H. Bridport (1824) Kennedy and Lucas Lithography. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/96510018/>.

turned to their church members to share the responsibility of promoting evangelical Christianity (Noll 2002). Many preachers held camp meetings where people gathered to hear the exhortation of multiple preachers; however, collectively the focus was on conversion (Meyer 2011). Conversion here means that people embraced a new heartfelt and emotional form of Christianity best described as evangelicalism.

Camp meetings utilized more passionate methods of conversion such as those employed by revivalist Charles Finney who did whatever he could, 'from singling out individual congregants by name, to sending them to the notorious "anxious bench," where concerned but unconverted sinners sat in full discomfiting view of the congregation' (Lum 2014: 43). A popular method for inspiring conversion utilized tactics of fear and described hell and the end times, which utilized passages from the *Book of Revelation* (Meyer 2011; Jackson 2007). Lum explained, 'the threat of hell influenced prescriptions for what it meant to be both a good Christian and a good American' (2014: 2). Camp meetings were also associated with congregants falling down, weeping, yelling and jerking; these actions were symbols of successful conversion (Meyer 2011).

Plain dress defined

John Wesley (1703–91) expressed his ideas in printed publications circulated through missionaries. Wesley wrote a sixteen-page pamphlet entitled *Advice to the people called Methodists, in regard to dress*; in it he described the tenets of plain dress. He advised the Methodist people to imitate the Quaker's plainness of dress but with some changes. As seen in Figure 3, the plain dress silhouette was less constructed via undergarments, utilized muted natural colours and was also free of any addition of trims.

Plain dress was described as a method to eliminate the sin of pride and vanity; therefore he did not 'advise [them] to wear a hat of such dimensions, or a coat of a particular form', because these distinctive silhouettes favoured by the Quakers would set them apart (Wesley 1795: 4; H— 1834: 1). Wesley also viewed costly fashionable clothing as being 'destructive of good works' and 'meekness and quietness of spirit' (1795: 6, 8). He explained further:

Buy no velvets, no silks, no fine linen, no superfluities, no mere ornaments though ever so much in fashion. Wear nothing though you have it already, which is of a glaring colour, or which is in any kind gay, glittering, showy; nothing made in the very height of the fashion [...] I do not advise women to wear rings, ear-rings, necklaces, lace, (of whatever kind or colour,) or ruffles [...] give them up, let them drop, throw them away without another word.

(Wesley 1795: 5)

Sartorial advice

Male preachers, such as Sampson Maynard, followed Wesley's example and advised women about what to wear and how to act. Sampson Maynard was a male itinerant preacher, and to help him oversee his congregations he gave several people alliterated nicknames. One such moniker was *Prudence Plain-dress*, and he wrote to women telling them to be like her,

Now, my young sister, let Prudence Plain-dress be your companion [...] young women, professing holiness, ought to dress like the good women of old, not putting on gold ornaments, or costly apparel, but as becometh the holy religion they profess.

(Maynard 1828: 85)

He further compared fashionable women to the 'Babylonish females spoken of by the prophet' and stated that he never offered communion to them. However, if they followed the ways of *Prudence Plain-dress*, they could fulfill the important roles of wife and mother (Maynard 1828; Cott 1977). Peter Cartwright, another itinerant male preacher, explained that these teachings were upheld by all Methodists,

You could know a Methodist preacher by his plain dress as far as you could see him. The members were also plain, very plain in dress. They wore no jewelry, nor were they permitted to wear jewelry, or superfluous ornament, or extravagant dress of any kind.

(1859: 515)



Figure 3: Artist/maker unknown Ensemble for a Quaker Woman: Two Fichus, Bonnet, Cap, Cape, Dress and Shawl American c. 1830 Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Margaret J. Hall in memory of Abigail B. Massey, 1983-175-1a-g Object Rights Type: Public Domain.

3. Necklines were often high, ending with a small collar or ruff at the throat. Sleeve styles included decorations at the shoulder. Different types of sleeves included: Marie sleeves which were tied at intervals with ribbons or bands, demi-gigot sleeves which were full to the elbow then fitted on the forearm, gigot sleeves that were full at the shoulder and then tapered down to the wrist, and imbecile or idiot sleeves were full all the way from the shoulder to the wrist.

Our analysis of imagery and fashion plates from the time period concurred with Maynard and Cartwright. In general, we found that plain dress had a simple silhouette void of trims and embellishments, and utilized muted colours, such as grey and brown. Fashionable attire, on the other hand, was embellished with trims and decorations around the hem of the dresses, and trims were layered upon accessories such as hats. Fashionable attire also had a broader range of colour choices, with vibrant colours such as pink and blue as well as accent colours used on the trims.

Fashions of the empire and romantic periods

The Second Great Awakening coincided with two eras of fashion, the empire and romantic periods. During the empire period, which dominated near the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century, clothing styles were neoclassic and inspired by the fashions of the ancient world (Bissonette and Nash 2015; Barton 1935). The French, under Napoleon's rule worked to, 'remodel the outer face of society by adopting a pseudo-Roman style of dress' (Wilcox 1963: 137). Women's clothing of the empire period is noted for having a high waistline placed directly beneath the bust, light and airy fabrics, low square necklines, and fitted or slightly puffed sleeves (Bradfield 1968).

The romantic period of the early to mid-nineteenth century is characterized by an extreme development of the hourglass silhouette (Bradfield 1968). This was achieved in part by fullness gathered to the back and supported by bum rolls. Necklines typically featured a horizontal focal point, and sleeve styles were very full, especially near the shoulders (Tortora and Marcketti 2015).³ Fashion periodicals labelled ensembles according to periods of a day such as morning, day or evening dress, thus encouraging multiple daily outfit changes (Godey 1840).

Fashion plates in periodicals aimed at women communicated fashion trends that typically originated from Paris (Piola 2014). *Godey's Lady's Book* helped women stay on trend as the style, cut and colour of clothing changed seasonally (Helvenston 1980; Brekke-Aloise 2014). *Godey's Lady's Book* often featured women in elaborate heavily ornamented ensembles that were customary of the time. A common design choice included the use of lace, ribbons, tassels and embroidery for embellishment; Breward noted, 'A sense of the absurd was heightened by outlandish trimmings and accessories' (1995: 145). This description of an 1810 dress explained the extent of embellishment on dresses of the period

A light sky-blue mantle, lined with pale buff, with elastic collar, which is formed with letting-in lace [...] a cape of the same materials crosses the back, which is confined at the bottom of the waist, on the inside, with a pale-blue or buff ribband, tied with a bow in the front; it is entirely trimmed round with narrow edging of lace. A bonnet of straw and pale-blue ribband. With plaiting of lace, worn underneath, tied under the chin; with a yellow rose in the front, and hair in ringlet curls, complete the dress.

(Bell 1810: 293)

Women's popular fashions of the first half of the nineteenth century at first relaxed in ostentation during the empire period but soon returned to an ornamental fashioned female identity by the early 1820s (Edwards 2017). This



Figure 4: A highly ornamental empire period dress. Walking Dress 1818, *La Belle assemblee*, new series, vol. 18, no. 114, (September 1818) from University of Washington Libraries, Fashion Plate Collection COS309.



Figure 5: Fashionable ensembles of the romantic period: horizontal necklines, demi-gigot sleeves, with elaborate trimmings. Afternoon and Evening Dresses, 1827, La Belle assemblée, new series, vol. 6, no. 31, (July 1827) from University of Washington Libraries, Fashion Plate Collection COS409.

idea of woman as object coincided with a private sphere gender role. Sartorial personification of gender expectation included heavy ornamentation, ribbonry and trimming as described above. Women were encouraged to maintain an 'agreeable' or 'ladylike' appearance (Edwards 2017: 80). However, women of the period often received mixed messages regarding appropriate attire. Secular



Figure 6: Photograph © 1825 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. On the left: 1825, American Quaker's dress. Made of silk taffeta, silk sleeve lining, and glazed linen inner bodice. Museum of Fine Arts Boston. On the right: American dress 1825–30. Made of light purple wool, light grey and dark grey silk lining in the bodice, skirt is unlined. Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

fashion prescribed an ornamented approach to dressing, whereas plain dress or aesthetic was also suggested as outward symbols of morality and piety. Therefore, fashioned identity vacillated from idealized femininity and patriarchal wealth or status to religious piety. Plain dress eschewed aesthetic ideas related to femininity and status and instead adopted a pious uniform-like approach to dressing that in the case of female preachers of the Second Great Awakening, attempted to justify a woman's presence in a more public sphere role. This push and pull of gender expectation and outward appearance prompted female preachers of the Second Great Awakening to carefully consider sartorial choice.

Gender and faith

Opinions about what women should do, how they should dress and how they should behave were circulated through outlets such as newspapers, women's magazines, church pamphlets and published sermons. One woman wrote to a newspaper and stated that she did not think women should be placed

'too conspicuously in the foreground of the scene,' she further explained, 'I have been taught, from childhood, to adhere to the retiracy of home as my circle of action and influence, and also that a sought for admiration in a female, always diminishes the effect of her beauty'.

(Angelina 1838: 4)

Another woman, Fanny Fern, a newspaper columnist, wrote this poem expressing how women have an important role in the household but not in public,

Tis Woman's right to call on man/ To treasure and protect,/ Her right to claim at every time his homage and respect,/ Her right to lecture and be heard within domestic walls/ But not her right to speak aloud/ In legislative halls.

(1853: 4)

In contrast, Lydia Sexton, who became a female preacher, wrote about her struggles with this role distinction and stated, 'if I were only a man it would be no hardship to me, nor even a cross, to preach, but rather a pleasure' (1882: 213). She also commented on how engrained gender roles were to her, 'I was so fixed in my ideas and conceptions of my duties and sphere of action by my early training, that my prejudices yielded very stubbornly to my convictions' (Sexton 1882: 209). Once Sexton overcame her thoughts on gender roles, she travelled and preached throughout the northeastern part of the country, but she still encountered others that were fixated on their idea of proper gender roles. A woman from one church came forward while Sexton preached and said, 'they had better put men's clothes on that old fool, or keep her out of the pulpit' (1882: 512).

The Christian faith has often been challenged regarding views on gender. According to Mary Daly, 'If God in "his" heaven is a father ruling "his" people, then it is in the "nature" of things [...] that society be male-dominated', this patriarchal approach to religion perhaps caused a differentiation in how male and female preachers approached their calling (1985: 13). Elizabeth Grammer studied the autobiographies of female preachers and remarked that they could not be compared to their male counterparts. The male itinerant preacher chose 'to eschew the more conventional forms of ministry available to him through the established churches' while the female preacher 'could not, without abandoning her call altogether, have been anything else' (Grammer 2003: 19). For men, the life of an itinerant preacher was usually passed down through the family or it was chosen for them by their parents. Conversely, women overcame stereotypes to claim the authority of God (Cott 1975). They had to inspire people to believe that it was God who spoke through them; they had to claim the power of God where their own power as women was not sufficient (Brekus 1998).

Catherine Brekus defined this as 'biblical feminism', meaning the right to preach was achieved 'on the grounds of scriptural revelation, not natural rights' (Brekus 1998: 390). The female preachers of this time often utilized the argument of divine inspiration to support their authority as preachers. Abigail Mussey felt that God told her to 'go out and hold meetings yourself, and then you can warn sinners and talk as long as, and when you please, and no one will shut the door against you', but after she spoke at a few meetings, she remarked 'I began to think I was preaching, and feared I should be called

the preacher woman; and I thought I could not endure that' (Mussey 1866: 136, 137, original emphasis). Mussey overcame these fears and did preach throughout Nova Scotia and parts of New England; near the end of her career she wrote a poem titled, 'The Female Preacher's Defence' (sic.)

I am a weeping pilgrim,/ bound for fair Beulah's land,/ My Master he
has called me,/To go with sword in hand;/ I promised him I would obey;/
And boldly venture on, / Not fearing to go in the way/Where Christ
my Lord has gone [...] But some may say, 'Frail woman thou,—/ You
had better keep at home,/ And live a quiet, peaceful life,/ No more the
country roam./ I would, dear friend, but God has called, —/ I dare not
disobey, —/ And he has promised me a crown/ That will not fade away.
(1863: 222–23)

Clothing, conversion and gender

Conversions and calls to ministry were often quite intense and for women typically involved a removal of clothing. Lydia Sexton wrote about a woman, Susan Cotterman who upon coming forward to give her hand to the minister

jerked her bonnet from her head – with all her fine fixings of ribbon,
bows, veil, and artificials – —and threw it on the floor and jumped on it
[...] exclaiming 'Jesus has pardoned my sins [...] I have no use for such a
bonnet as that! [...] I can go to Jesus without artificials'.
(1882: 200, 201)

Angelina Grimké along with her sister Sarah chose to stuff an 'assemblage of handsome lace veils, flounces and trimmings, and caps' into a cushion so that no one else would be tempted with their finery; the Grimké sisters eventually chose to leave their faith but continued to wear the plain dress style (Birney 1885: 51–52). Peter Cartwright, a well-known male preacher of the time also wrote about a powerful conversion story in which two young ladies came to hear him preach wearing what he suspected was expensive jewelry, eventually they 'rose to their feet, and gave some very triumphant shouts; and then very deliberately took off their gold chains, earrings, lockets, etc., and handed them to [him] saying, "we have no more use for these idols"' (1859: 77). Cartwright also described another woman as 'the finest dressed lady in the congregation', who altered one of her dresses, 'trimmed it and fixed it tolerably plain' in order to appear 'as she thought she ought to' (1859: 76). Cartwright believed 'fashionable frivolities are all contrary to the humble spirit' (1859: 78).

Another female preacher, Sarah Cooke, attended a camp meeting and observed the work of two women that were dressed plainly. She remarked,

I can see them now. What an unutterable shrinking! Common calico, a
little linen collar, bonnets the plainest that could be made; no bow, no
feather, no lace, no flower! Could I give up all the world and take that line?.
(1896: 38)

Eventually Cooke became a preacher, 'It was a struggle. All had been laid on the altar – husband, dress, reputation, all yielded; everything, with self, a living sacrifice' (1896: 38–39). She understood that her husband, who was

a proud man, might not approve of her new plain appearance, and yet she still chose to adopt a plain-clothes wardrobe. This eschewing of superfluities was described in *Methodist Magazine* in 1808 in a story where a well-dressed woman walked with a man who told her that it is was better to be 'clothed with the righteousness of Christ', she later 'stripped off her finery and gave it away' (G. M. 1808: 80). Both female congregants and preachers adopted plain dress attire; the former utilized it as a symbol of their piety and religious fervour.

Harriet Livermore wrote that once she decided in her heart to accept that she was an awful sinner she threw off her Babylonish dress (Livermore 1884). In the Christian Bible, Babylon is consistently used as a reference to a place of sin, immorality and extravagance. In Revelation 17, the whore of Babylon is 'arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication' (The Bible, Revelation 17: 4).

Female preachers ventured beyond the prescribed roles of their gender and became itinerant preachers during a time when women were still viewed as domestic beings. Yet in order to appear pious, and to remain appropriately submissive, they adopted a plain-clothes appearance that demonstrated their submission even as they resisted gender roles. Some of the female preachers remained single, some of them had husbands and families; some were poor and illiterate while others came from wealthy and prestigious homes (Lee 1849; Livermore 1826; Losee 1877; Sexton 1882; Towle 1833). Their backgrounds were unique but the majority held the same ideas regarding dress; their sartorial choices included clothes of a similar silhouette as what was fashionable, but with less expensive fabrics and no additions of adornment.

Nancy Towle described the difficulty of stepping into a typically male role, while also being held to a female standard of decency,

How powerful must be that charm, to engage and to continue for a succession of years, a female, in such a warfare as this! Of the other sex, though, three fold the natural vigor, whereof to boast, it is seldom expected that they will go, without some suitable mode of conveyance, or without purse and script at hand. Nor is it expected that [...] for the good of souls, that they then, (to appear decent) must make, clean, or repair some article of apparel, for themselves before renewing again the heavy struggle.

(1833: 228)

Their adoption of plain dress also allowed others to see them as more masculine creatures. Jarena Lee, an African American female preacher when speaking one night, 'found some very ill-behaved persons, who talked roughly, and said among other things, "I was not a woman, but a man dressed in female clothes"' (1849: 23). Frances Wright, who chose to cut her hair short and did not seem to adopt the plain dress style, was criticized for her fine attire and called both masculine and unsexed, she was even portrayed as a goose, refer to Figure 7 (Beecher 1836; Anon. 1829). Wright did not choose to align herself with the piety and submissive attitudes deemed appropriate of female preachers. One reporter remarked, 'we are presented with the paradox, that Wright is always wrong' (The Native American 1838a: 3). The same characteristics that were applauded in men were forbidden in women, especially women who

chose to speak publicly. Lyman Beecher, a prominent Presbyterian revivalist, explained,

There is generally, and should be always, in the female character, a softness and delicacy of feeling which shrinks from the notoriety of a public performance [...] next to the loss of conscience and chastity, could not befall the female sex, or the community at large, than to disrobe the female mind of those ornaments of sensibility, and clothe it with the rough texture of masculine fibre [...] whoever has had an opportunity to observe the effect of female exhortation and prayer in public, will be compelled to remark the exchange of softness and delicacy for masculine courage, so desirable in man, so unlovely in woman.

(1828: 90–91)

In 1822, the *Methodist Magazine* wrote about Mrs Hannah Lathrop, a woman who apparently found an acceptable balance between boldness and female expectations, 'She continued to testify the goodness of God and the work of grace in her soul, from time to time, publicly and privately, with great boldness, and evident marks of humility, always consistent with female modesty' (1822: 101).



Figure 7: Caricature of Frances Wright (left) depicted with the head of a goose. On the right, an image of Wright with demi-gigot sleeves and a lace trimmed shawl. Left: James Akin, 'A downright gabbler, or a goose that deserves to be hissed', lithograph with watercolour 1829, retrieved from <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002708975/>. Right: Amos Gilbert, *Memoir of Frances Wright the Pioneer Woman in the cause of human rights*, (Cincinnati, OH: Langley Brothers 1855) p. 1.

4. 25 April 1886, *Wichita Daily Eagle*, Wichita Kansas; 3 February 1857, *Marshall Country Republican*, Plymouth, IN; 22 June 1836, *Boston Morning Post*, Boston, MA; 15 August 1857, *Southern Sentinel*, Plaquemine, LA.

Criticism of female preaching

Public preaching by women was a novel event, and appearances were often announced in newspapers.⁴ However, the majority of society still believed that they should remain in the home and keep silent. Carol Mattingly researched varied female public speakers of the nineteenth century and concluded that effective female orators had to carefully balance gender and authoritative speaking to be accepted by others (2002). This balance was not easily achieved as cultural ideas regarding gender were deeply engrained. In 1763, before female preaching became more commonplace, Samuel Johnson said, ‘a woman’s preaching is like a dog’s walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all’ (Boswell 1823: 116). According to *The North Carolina Standard*, female preachers forgot the role of their sex and should be ‘sent to the insane hospitals to be bound. Meantime the husbands and parents of the modern Amazons, should be arrayed in caps and aprons, and installed in their respective kitchens’ (Anon. 1838b: 3). Lydia Sexton lodged with a family that mistook her husband to be the preacher, conversation ensued regarding female preachers; the father of the household did not think that women should be allowed to preach but rather, ‘she had better stay at home and wash the dishes and take care of the children, where her place is, and not disgrace herself and her family and the church by strolling over the country’ (1882: 395–96).

Conclusions

Female preachers of the Second Great Awakening took on intense travel and speaking schedules. These women claimed the power of a male gendered god, but also defied gender norms every time they spoke publicly. Many members of the early women’s dress reform movement followed their example and adopted the plain dress style (Mattingly 2002).

By the mid-to late-nineteenth century, not as many women were needed to preach. Some regretted their original stance on female preaching and therefore removed these women’s contributions from church records (Brekus 1998). However, these pioneering female preachers of the nineteenth century overcame extreme obstacles to express their faith. Sartorial choice was strategized in an attempt to find a balance between gender, public persona and religious calling.

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