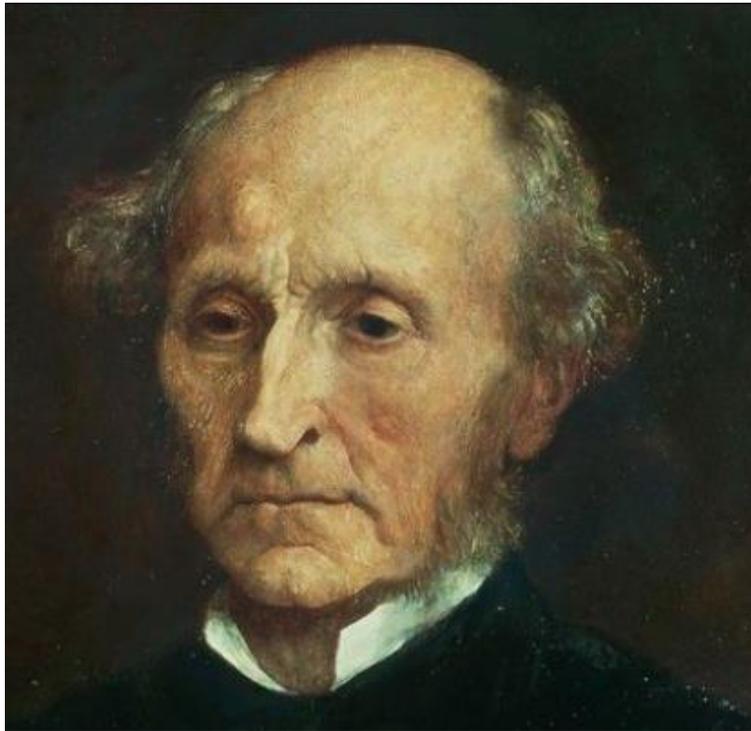


Propriety of the Past

The 1850s were times of great change. John Stuart Mill's essay "*On Liberty*" emerged as one of the most powerful and enduring defenses of individual freedom ever written. Both enemies and advocates of personal freedom have found inconsistencies in Mill's reasoning, but they continue to discuss his views to this day.



John Stuart Mill (May 20, 1806 – May 7, 1873)

Mill wrote about the three forms of tyranny that have, historically, endangered liberty through the ages. The oldest was the tyranny of the one (or the few) over the many. Dictators and their ilk could easily curb spontaneous individualism. The newest form of tyranny, Mill believed, was the tyranny of the many over the one (the majority over the minority). But what if you're in the minority?

The third tyranny, Mill argued, was the tyranny of custom and tradition:

“The despotism of custom is everywhere the standing hindrance to human advancement, being in unceasing antagonism to that disposition to aim at something better than the customary, which is called, according to circumstances, the spirit of liberty, or that of progress or improvement.”

That, of course, appears to be the antithesis of the very essence of propriety, conforming to prevailing customs and proper traditions of polite society. And New Orleans in the 1850s was very proper ... but a little rebellious, too.



View of New Orleans, 1852 lithograph

“The sidewalks were black with people—the balconies trembled under the weight which oppressed them; the gas lamps presented as many figures dangling to them as their prototypes in the French revolution, though their occupants were not so aristocratic”.

What was causing all this commotion on Tchoupitoulas Street? An “elephant,” said a lad with a brogue. An escaped “sea-serpent,” replied another. The *New Orleans Daily Delta* reported the creature to be an “old lady” in Bloomers with “perfectly gray” hair, “hung down her back”. “Because she wears the Bloomers!” they feared, she had come from Massachusetts to impose “Woman's Rights amongst us”.

Bloomers were worn by a few women in the 1850s, but were widely ridiculed in the press (not just in New Orleans). It was not the only clothing style to be criticized.



"The Bloomer Costume", Currier & Ives, 1851

"The Mother of a Family" wrote of her shock to the editors of the *New Orleans Daily Delta* on November 30, 1855. "We must confess," the editors replied, "that the shock which the mother's modesty has received gives us great pain."^[1]_{SEP}

"Messrs. Editors, I have to find fault with one custom in your paper," wrote the aggrieved lady. "I allude to the new style adopted in

advertising of balls, dancing academies, soirees, etc., by inserting a "cut" representing a ballet girl with both lower limbs bare, standing on one toe, while the other limb is at an angle of more than ninety degrees. Such pictures, Messrs. Editors, are calculated to create unpleasant sensations in the breasts of both myself and daughters, and must, of course, be a source of serious annoyance to any lady who has the slightest regard for the rules of propriety. Could you not have petticoats put on the dancing figures, or at least, you might encase their lower limbs in pantalettes. Now, do, Messrs. Editors, try and correct this evil, and relieve the anxieties of a modest woman, who is the mother of a large family of modest daughters."



Women's rights activist Amelia Bloomer (1818 – 1894), wearing the less constrictive clothing style that bears her name - check out the fleur-de-lis pattern

Another offended femme wrote to the "Daily Delta" from her boudoir,

employing the *nom de plume* of Lady Penelope Penfeather (a Sir Walter Scott character described by him as “a well-principled woman, but too thoughtless to let her principles control her humour, therefore not scrupulously nice in her society.”)

“Mr. Editor,” she protested, “I know it is an unthankful, and, I fear, an unprofitable task, that I am taking upon myself, but I have suffered a grievance, and can no longer keep silence on the subject. In fact, I find myself very much in the mood of the young lady, who, being annoyed past endurance, turned to her companion and said “hold me Jane, or I’ll curse.”^[1]

“My vexation is occasioned by the conduct of men who daily congregate at the corners of the streets, and spend hours in gazing out of countenance the ladies who pass up and down before them.”

She went on to complain, “It is on account of these gazers” that along St. Charles street, from Canal to Poydras, scarcely a lady is to be seen during the day”, daring not to venture past those ogling gentlemen.

Lady Penelope’s real gripe was not the notice “due to our charms”. It “would show insensibility in your sex were it not given,” she states. But she did object to the fact that “many of the remarks made on these occasions are repeated to the ladies.”

“Mr. Editor, I am an advocate for woman's rights; and, standing upon these rights, I proclaim that tale-bearing is solely the prerogative of woman. We freely abandon to you all the greater vices, but require, in our turn, that you should not attempt to rob us of this indulgence. Nothing is more despicable, in the eyes of a true woman, than a scandalous man; and should one endeavor to insinuate himself into our company, we will gladly unite with your sex in ostracising the miscreant.”

“Tale-bearing” (defined as idle gossip), an important (yet long forgotten) woman’s right, but as the Four Lads sang about “those ogling gentlemen” a century later:

“Brother, you can’t go to jail for what you’re thinking
Or for the ‘woo’ look in your eye
You’re only standing on the corner
Watching all the girls
Watching all the girls
Watching all the girls

Go by"

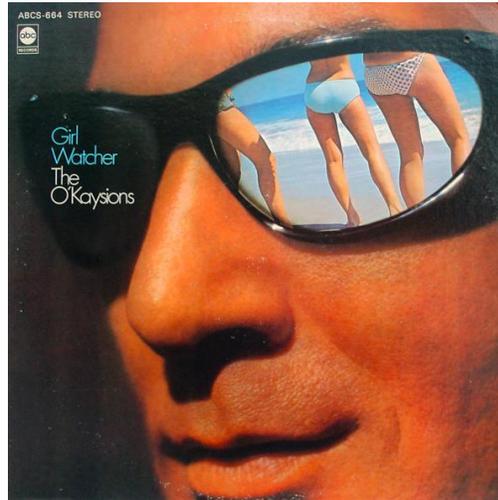


Music To Watch Girls By in the 1950s: *Standing On The Corner*, written by Frank Loesser for the Broadway play, *The Most Happy Fella*

Music To Watch Girls By hit the charts a decade later in 1967 with recordings by Andy Williams, The Bob Crewe Generation and even New Orleans' trumpet great, Al Hirt. The O'Kaysions had a million-selling hit the very next year with *Girl Watcher* (1968).

As for "girl watching," today the rules of propriety appear to have changed. The National Criminal Justice Reference Service has published an article that focuses on "girl watching" as a disputable form of sexual harassment. But answering a reader who longed "for the good old days when a man could chase a woman without fear of ... harassment allegations", Emily Post wrote, "The rules of etiquette have not changed, at least not as relates to the situation you have

described. We never lost the requirement for being friendly, thoughtful, considerate, sincere, or respectful.



Girl Watching record album covers of the 1960s

The essential rule is in her book, *Etiquette in Society, In Business, In Politics and at Home* (first published in 1922):

“Never do anything that is unpleasant to others.”

“After all,” she said, “the purpose of etiquette is to have everyone feel comfortable.”

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
“Propriety of the Past”
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