

## THE CORSET: A CULTURAL HISTORY

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The corset is probably the most controversial garment in the entire history of fashion. Worn by women throughout the Western world from the late Renaissance into the 20th century, it was an essential element of fashionable dress for about 400 years. Yet throughout its history, the corset was widely perceived as an "instrument of torture" and a major cause of ill health and even death. Today the corset is almost universally condemned as having been an instrument of women's oppression. <Fig. 1>



<Fig. 1> Caricature, "Tight Lacing 1777".

But corsetry was not one monolithic, unchanging experience that all unfortunate women experienced before being liberated by feminism. Some women did experience the corset as an assault on the body, but the corset also had many positive connotations social status, self-discipline, artistry, respectability, beauty, youth, and erotic allure. <Fig. 2>

Research across a range of textual, visual, and material sources complicates our understanding of corsetry. Everyone knows the famous scene in *Gone with the Wind* when Scarlett O'Hara is laced into her corset. "Twenty inches! She groaned aloud. That was what having babies did to your figure!... 'See if you can't make it eighteen-and-a-half inches or I can't get into any of my dresses.'" The scene confirms a powerful stereotype that goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century when caricatures portrayed female



<Fig. 2> Eugène Vidal, "Jeune Fille en Corset Rose" (1896).

vanity in precisely this form. John Collet's print, *Tight Lacing, or Fashion Before Ease* (1770-75), is one of the first and most influential examples of this image. But how tightly were stays or corsets really laced? When Collet's print was displayed at Colonial Williamsburg, the curators noted that the image was misleading, since the smallest of the 18th century stays in the Williamsburg collection measured 24 inches (61 cm) around the waist, while the largest measured over 30 inches. In other words, they are not especially small.

It is not accidental that so much of what we think we know about corsets is false or exaggerated. The discourse on fashion has tended to stress its negative connotations. In particular, women have been positioned as the "slaves" or "victims" of fashion. Traditionally, the subtext has been that women were "vain" or "foolish." More recently, it has been argued that women were oppressed by the fashion system, which is usually perceived as an instrument of patriarchy and capitalism. Such an interpretation, however, ignores the fact that adornment and self-fashioning long preceded the rise of capitalism, and applied to men as well as women.

The first true corsets date from sometime in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century when aristocratic women began wearing "whalebone bodies." In other words, their cloth bodices gradually began to incorporate more rigid materials, such as whalebone, horn, and buckram. The style seems to have originated in Spain and/or Italy and spread rapidly to other European countries. In the 16th century and for some time thereafter, corsets or "bodies" were primarily worn by aristocratic women and girls. Queen Elizabeth I of England, for example, purchased "a peire of bodies of sweete lether" from the craftsman William Whittel.

One of the most extraordinary textual accounts of corsetry comes from a manuscript of 1597, which describes how a 14-year-old English girl, the daughter of a gentleman named Mr. Starkie, was allegedly possessed by a devil, which caused her to shout out various sartorial demands, including a prestigious and luxurious pair of bodies: "I will have a fine smock of silk... [and] a French bodie, not of whalebone, for that is not stiff enough but of horne for that will hold it out, it shall come, to keep in my belly. . . My lad I will have a Busk of whalebone, it shall be tyed with two silk points, and I will have a drawn wrought stomacher imbroidered with gold..."

The busk that Miss Starkie coveted was an important component of the corset. To ensure that the wearer maintained an erect posture, a piece of wood, metal, or some other hard material was inserted in a slot down the centre front of the corset, where it was tied in place with ribbons. The stay busk was sometimes decorated with amorous images or phrases.

Men of the ruling class did not wear corsets as such, but with their stiffened doublets and padded codpieces, they also adhered to a model of physical restraint and sartorial display. A polished and disciplined mode of self-presentation was important

for members of the elite, and control over the body was established through a range of social practices, from dancing to dress. For the nobility, stays were supposed to be constricting, because their culture "valorized the norms of stiffness and self-control, defining a social position." By contrast, the bodies of lower-class people "were bent by hardship and toil, or enjoyed a freedom unrestricted by etiquette."

From the beginning, however, many observers believed that corsetry could be painful and dangerously unhealthy. Despite such criticism, corsets were still worn, in Puritan England as in fashionable France. Meanwhile, the terminology of corsetry continued to evolve. The word used in French remained *corps* (body), but by the seventeenth century the preferred term in English was "stays" - which originally meant "support," probably implying that the female body was naturally weak.

Both visual and textual evidence indicates that the erotic appeal of stays was multifaceted. Anyone who has seen more or less authentically costumed films set in the 18th century, such as *Dangerous Liaisons*, knows that the stays of that period not only push the breasts upward and together, but create an illusion of amplitude not to be matched until the advent of the Wonderbra.

Were stays uncomfortable? Comfort is a relative concept, and for many centuries it was not regarded as particularly important. After all, many things were inevitably uncomfortable, from one's teeth to one's clothes.

The French Revolution did not "cause" the demise of stays, which had already begun to fall out of favour before 1789. Revolutionary politics did, of course, play a role in the decline of stays within France itself where "aristocratic" styles were frowned upon. Yet after a brief interregnum around 1800, the boned corset not only reappeared but spread throughout society. We might have expected that, having once loosened their stays, women would never again wear corsets. Yet they did, in greater numbers than ever before. For the next century, boned corsets were an essential component of women's fashion.

In order to be 'decently' dressed, women had to wear corsets. The English especially believed that a strait-laced woman was not loose. Yet Victorian women (and by this, I mean not only women in Great Britain, but also those in France and the United States) were well aware that the corset also functioned as an adjunct to female sexual beauty. By simultaneously constructing an image of irreproachable propriety



<Fig. 3> Numa, "Le Matin" or  
"The Lover as Lady's Maid,"  
1830s.

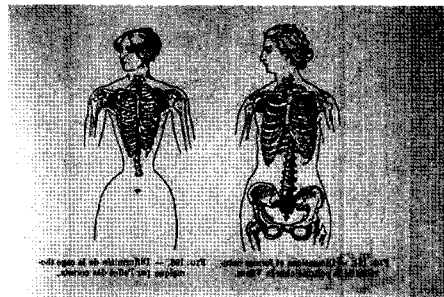
and one of blatant sexual allure, the corset allowed women to articulate sexual subjectivity in a socially acceptable way. <Fig. 3>

The fact that corsets had been a component of elite fashionable dress for centuries gave corsetry the authority of tradition. During the nineteenth century, many aspects of life were rapidly changing, but some traditions, especially those surrounding women, were all the more anxiously retained. Moreover, since most women's socio-economic lives depended on marriage, it was understandable that their mothers and grandmothers should want to maximize both their physical 'beauty' and their reputation for propriety. The corset controversies that raged throughout the nineteenth century were not primarily between absolute opponents and defenders of the corset. All evidence, including the testimony of dress reformers, indicates that the majority of women regarded some kind of corsetry as a necessity.

The triumph of corsetry occurred, not because Victorian women were more oppressed or masochistic than their predecessors, but because the industrial revolution and the democratization of fashion gave more women access to corsets. Women's stubborn adherence to corsetry implies that they believed corsets served some useful function. Most people today tend to think of the corset as a waist-cincher. Certainly, women could and did use corsets to 'improve' a relatively undefined waist-hip ratio, or to suppress a heavy abdomen. It was often said that the real purpose of the corset was to correct, or at least conceal, a variety of physical flaws.

The corset has been blamed for causing dozens of diseases, from cancer to curvature of the spine, deformities of the ribs and displacements of the internal organs, respiratory and circulatory diseases, birth defects, miscarriages, and 'female complaints'. <Fig. 4> How dangerous were corsets? The anti-corset literature was similar in tone and line of argument to diatribes on the terrible effects of masturbation and drinking. Even the orthodox medical literature of the past is often unreliable. Corsets almost certainly did cause or aggravate some health problems, but it is important to be realistic about what those problems were. The historian's attempts to assess medical diagnoses from the past are fraught with difficulties, but from the perspective of modern medicine, corsets were extremely unlikely to have caused most of the diseases for which they were blamed.

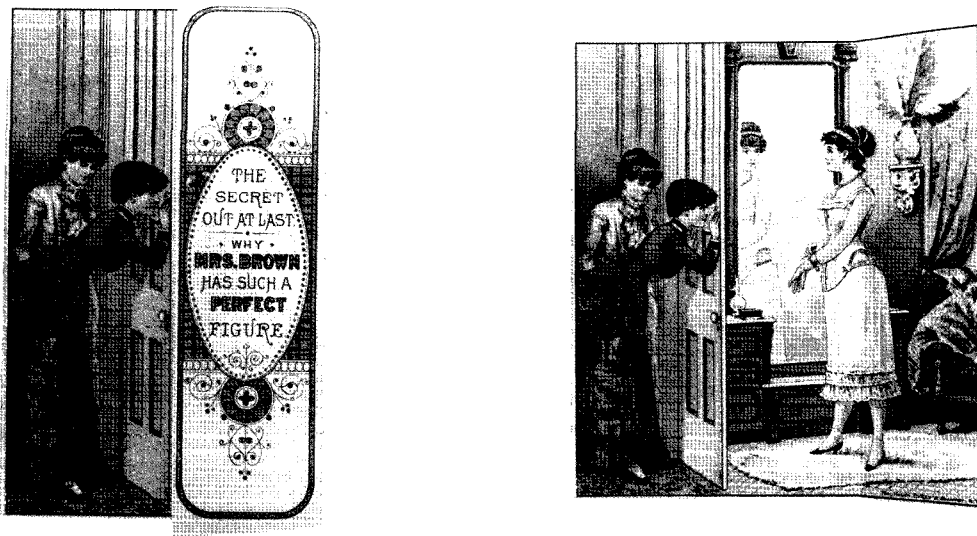
How tightly were corsets really laced? Significantly, there was no agreement



<Fig. 4> 18th century drawing (von Soemmering, 1783) showing the supposed effect of tight-lacing on the skeleton. This drawing was reproduced many times in the anti-corset literature.

about the precise definition of 'tight-lacing'. Women usually denied that they personally tight-laced. It was always someone else, such as an actress or a servant or a foolish young girl, who was accused of being a tight-lacer. This is hardly surprising, since tight-lacers were frequently compared to suicides and infanticides, torturers and murderers. They were bad women, who solicited the lecherous gaze of 'vulgar' men. Specifically, they were bad mothers -- at a time when motherhood was seen as women's sacred duty. A great many young women probably did lace rather tightly on occasion, such as to attend a party requiring clothing that was both formal and fashionable.

There were, however, some people who openly boasted about tight-lacing. The self-proclaimed 'votaries of tight-lacing' emphasized dramatic reductions in waist size through rigorous 'disciplinary' practices. These letters need to be analyzed primarily as sexual fantasies, although they also reveal the existence of sexual subcultures involving fetishism, sadomasochism and transvestism. More importantly, fetishistic tight-lacing should not be confused with ordinary fashionable corsetry. Many women today wear high-heeled shoes, for example, but we recognize that there is a difference between ordinary fashionable shoes and the kind of fetish shoes with seven-inch heels worn by the professional dominatrix.



(A)

(B)

<Fig. 5> "The Secret Out at Last-Why Mrs. Brown Has Such a Perfect Figure," trade card for the Adjustable Duplex Corset (c.1882), shown closed (5a) and open (5b).

In the Victorian era, however, corsetry and tight-lacing were frequently assimilated to 'Fashion' and that, too, was controversial. Medical journals like *The Lancet* not only attacked specific fashions, such as corsets or tight-lacing, but also criticized 'the sex which worships the idol of fashion.' <Fig. 5> Indeed, virtually any criticism of 'Fashion' rapidly segued into a diatribe on women's vanity and stupidity. 'Tight-lacing' became a stand-in for everything that was wrong about women.

But the corset also had admirers. "The satin corset may be the nude of our era," suggested Edouard Manet, whose famous painting *Nana* depicts the actress Henrietta Hauser wearing a pale blue satin corset. But how can *Nana* be described as 'more than nude' when she reveals hardly more flesh than a woman in an evening gown? Why is her corset so erotic? Part of the appeal of the corset clearly derived from its status as underwear, a category of clothing that complicates the traditional paradigm of the naked and the clothed, since a person in underwear is simultaneously dressed and undressed. The sexual charm of the naked body seems to "rub off" on underwear, which then adds an additional excitement all its own. <Fig. 6>

The visual and tactile appeal of fashionable corsets was certainly part of their mystique. As one (male) author put it in 1862, 'A woman in a corset is a lie, a falsehood, a fiction, but for us this fiction is better than the reality.' By the early twentieth century, however, attitudes toward the corseted body were changing. The corset was beginning to be viewed as an orthopedic device for the aging and overweight. It was the beginning of the end for traditional corsetry.



<Fig. 6> Trade card for Thomson's Glove-Fitting Corsets, 1880s.



<Fig. 7> Unidentified advertisement for a straight-front corset, c. 1905.

Historians have usually credited the dress reform and women's rights movements for the disappearance of corsetry. In fact, by the close of the 19th century, "no major dress reform had occurred." <Fig. 7> Changes were occurring below the surface, however, as there was increasingly said to be a "modern type" of beauty, whose "graceful figure [was] developed by all manner of outdoor sports." Ultimately, this change in the physical ideal from an opulent Venus to a slender, athletic Diana would render the corset obsolete. Or would it?

The transition from the whalebone corset to the "muscular corset" took the greater part of the 20th century. Despite a growing emphasis on diet and physical exercise, and notwithstanding the development of more flexible girdles, some type of foundation garment continued to be an integral component of the female wardrobe until well into the 1960s. <Fig. 8>

It was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that there was a noticeable trend away from "control garments" and toward other forms of body-shaping such as diet and exercise. Although these had long played a role in female beauty regimes, they now became central to the body project.

What caused this development? Among the most significant sociocultural phenomena of the era were the hippy subculture and the feminist movement, and it is likely that both contributed to this shift in attitudes toward the body. Not that the average woman was a hippy or a feminist, but certain attitudes associated with both groups spread fairly rapidly through society. Fashion was widely denounced as conformist and artificial, and young people responded to calls for honesty, authenticity, and self-expression in dress. Girdles, especially, but also brassieres, were increasingly perceived as restrictive, uncomfortable, and mendacious. In addition, foundations were criticized on the grounds that they were productive of negative sexual attitudes, although the hippies stressed sexual liberation, while feminists decried sexual commodification.

Even after that, the corset did not so much disappear as become internalized through diet, exercise, and plastic surgery known euphemistically as "body sculpting." Dieting was the main form of body sculpting up through the 1970s, although by the end of the decade both men and women were increasingly being urged to exercise. By the 1980s, men and women also began to "work out" and build visible muscle tone. British *Vogue* informed readers that "The ideal fitness workout combines aerobic



<Fig. 9> Advertisement for Formfit Corset, 1949.

exercise with light weight training," adding, reassuringly, that "working out with light weights will not overdevelop muscles they become leaner and more contoured."

Weight-lifting, hitherto a fringe enthusiasm among male subcultures, began to become popular, especially in America. Soon both men and women were encouraged to invest in their own weight machines. Some advertisements showed men who had "bulked up" and women who had "slimmed down" through regular weight training. One advertisement from 1999 explicitly compared two photographs one of a corseted female torso, the other of a muscular young woman whose bare midriff was toned to perfection by rowing.

As the hard body replaced the boned corset, the corset itself has taken on new roles in fashion. Long exiled from mainstream fashion, the corset (and also the elasticized girdle) continued to exist in the subculture of fetishistic pornography. As fetishists started to come out of the closet in the wake of the sexual liberation movement, young women associated with London's punk and goth subcultures in the early 1970s began to reappropriate the corset as a symbol of rebellion and "sexual perversity."

Adopted by avant-garde fashion designers, such as Vivienne Westwood, herself a punk in the 1970s, the corset began a second life in fashion. Once women no longer felt that they had to wear corsets when the corset, in fact, was stigmatized some women consciously chose to wear them. Now, however, the corset was worn openly as fashionable outerwear, rather than underwear.

Madonna was instrumental in popularizing it, aided and abetted by the French designer Jean-Paul Gaultier. Over the years, the self-styled "material girl" has had a profound influence on fashion, especially with her use of underwear-as-outerwear. "It's hard to keep up with the mercurial Madonna, and, if you buy Gaultier, it's also expensive," observed the *New York Daily News* in 1990, but you can easily find the "basic ingredients with which to approximate her new look." Gaultier, of course, is far from being the only designer to exploit the subversive charisma of the corset. Many other designers have also been inspired by the corset, including Karl Lagerfeld of Chanel, John Galliano of Christian Dior, Tom Ford of Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Versace, and Valentino.

The corset seems to come back into fashion now every two or three years B in 1992, 1994, 1997, 2000, and 2001. As we enter the 21st century, the corset shows no sign of disappearing. Indeed, the corset's traditional symbolism is also still in evidence. In April, 2001, British *Vogue* suggested that "fashion's erogenous zone has shifted... [to] the waist," adding that "men are more drawn to women with a hand-span waist." To achieve this look, new types of corrective corsetry have also proliferated. "This is not your grandmother's girdle," declared *In Style* (December, 2000): "The new body shapers are comfy, seamless and lightweight and some zap off



inches immediately. . . . It's a cinch. Like the corsets of old, these items slim your middle for a Scarlett O'Harasize waistline."

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