

Title: Lacing Identity: Corsets in Mid-Victorian Britain

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Abstract

Shapewear is an important part of creating a fashionable **silhouette** and reflects what society at the time views as beautiful. My thesis will cover corsets in the mid-Victorian period (1850-1879) in Britain. Corsets were carefully constructed undergarments made and mainly worn by women. This thesis claims that corsets were important tools for Victorian women, because they lessened class divisions, were a socially acceptable form of sexual expression, and allowed women control of their image. Using the scholarly work of Valerie Steele, I acknowledge that the corset has been viewed as an object of oppression, but that was due to anti-corset propaganda by Victorian doctors and politicians who sought to control women's bodies and expression of identity. Although corsets were worn by men, toddlers, and pregnant women during

the Victorian era, this thesis focuses on the interaction between women (not currently pregnant) and corsets.

Introduction

Corsets were an essential structural garment for women in Europe during the mid-Victorian century (1850s-1870s). The Victorian poet, Philippe Perrot, expostulated, “on the soft wax of the human body, each society stamps its impress.”¹ Pressing firmly against the body, rounding every curve of a woman’s body, hiding away the breasts and hips in the perfect package, the corset epitomized Perrot’s point. The women who wore corsets faced malice from male authority in a display of patriarchal dominance. This was because wearing and producing corsets had the ability to empower women by expressing individuality and identity. Corsets were attacked in the Victorian media, and women who were too fashionable or not fashionable enough were labeled as moral failures due to vanity. Negative rhetoric surrounded the public view of corsets.² Corsets were more accessible than previous fashion trends, because they were cheap and could be worn by women across the socioeconomic spectrum. Women also used corsets as a tool to reflect the image they wished to show society.

There are limited garments remaining from the 1850s-1870s due to the decay of organic fabrics caused by the passage of time and alterations made to the garments. Many garments were passed down through generations or altered to match the

¹ Fontanel, Béatrice. *Support and Seduction: The History of Corsets and Bras*. New York: Abradale, 2001.7.

² There was a brief period in the early Victorian era where grown men wore corsets, this was a part of the dandy trend. Some young children, boys, and girls would have worn corsets but it was still relatively rare. Corsets were worn mostly by women for a significant portion of history.

changing fashion standards and the body of the new wearer. Garments were usually altered and/or passed down to younger family members for purposes beyond daily wear. Additionally, the corsets that are still in existence are often highly decorative, expensive garments, and do not represent those worn by the larger population of lower to working class women who made simple garments. Most working-class garments were passed down to the point of disrepair or were made of lower quality materials that fell apart.³ In addition, most of the available garments that survive the passage of time tended to be smaller, because smaller corsets have less material to alter and could not be worn by a larger cohort. The abundance of smaller corsets and the lack of larger sizes has perpetuated the myth of how waists were shaped to unrealistic tiny proportions by the wearing of a corset. Corsets were offered at a wide range of sizes and would be padded at the hips and breasts to create an exaggerated image.

Historiography

It's vital to uncover both minor specialized trends and overarching fashion when researching fashion history. The length of time, cost, and regions involved may be used to distinguish between fads and fashion. On the other hand, there are gray areas. Fads are temporary styles that linger for a few months. Fashion trends, on the other hand, refer to a style or characteristic that has been popular for years or decades. Original sources, particularly from fashion journals, medical journals, and essays on the clothing reform movement, were utilized in my research. I looked at corset advertisements, fashion drawings, and corset literature between the 1850s and 1870s from British

³ Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. London: Batsford, 2008. 6.

publications or authors. Various secondary sources and primary sources contradict other assertions while investigating corsets, prompting the historian's utmost caution and critical thought. According to *Bowman's Corsets and Codpieces: A History of Outrageous Fashion from Roman Times to the Modern Era*, wearing a corset made physical labor impossible. According to another source, Steele's *The Corset: A Cultural History*, the corset boosted the body's capacity to do heavy labor. Sexist bias is at the core for many of these discrepancies from unsuspecting historians believing biased Victorian writers set against corsets for perceived attacks on motherhood. Mel Davies, for example, highlights the corset's dangers to a woman's body, suggesting that it might destroy the uterus and cause major health problems based on a handful of Victorian medical journals. Other researchers investigated Davies' assertion that tight lacing caused or contributed to increased infertility during the Victorian era and found faults in his argument. He defends a sexist perspective on the corset. He briefly claims that the corset benefited the masculine figure, but that the same garment was harmful to women. This sends the implication that people with uteruses are weak and fragile which furthers the false dichotomy between men and women on a physiological level.⁴ Davies wrote this work before historians began researching the sexual influences in history.

I looked for publications that talked about corsets in general, but more specifically for ones that included sociological analysis or information about how the garment was made and used throughout the Victorian era. I highlighted facts from the 1850s through the 1870s as I read these works. I'd then look for footnotes in these areas to dig deeper

⁴ Davies, Mel. "Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 4 (1982): 611–41.

into the evidence supporting the claims. Medical analysis of wearing the corset had such a wide range in the literature of perceived positive and negative consequences, so I developed a separate set of notes for discussions regarding tightlacing and medical implications of the corset. Tightlacing is the technique of pulling the laces as tight as possible and squeezing in the natural waist. Modern historians do not pay enough attention to how the corset was worn since it is more sensational to focus on tightlacing. Even while tightlacing was an uncommon practice throughout the mid-Victorian period, it is commonly connected with corsets collectively in scholarly sources. Corset laces may be adjusted on a spectrum of loose to tight to aid the women's goal for her specific activity. A loosely laced corset allows for flexibility and support during intense labor. The current concept of widespread tightlacing was created by males who intended to condemn corsetry while simultaneously undervaluing women's thoughts. In several primary documents Victorian doctors accuse women who wear corsets of being vain and unintelligent for their choice to wear a corset. Even though a direct comparison isn't feasible, historians use modern tightlacers as a proxy for how all women were affected by corsets. A modern woman intensely squeezing her waist does not accurately reflect the effect of a comfortably laced corset on a working-class woman.

Valerie Steele's body of work was highly influential to my research because of her work to reframe the previous understanding of Victorian corsets and the corset's role in sexual and gender identity.⁵ Valerie Steele wrote *The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism*, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, and *Men and Women: Dressing the Part*.

⁵ Whyte, William. *The English Historical Review* 118, no. 478 (2003): 1079–80. 1079.

Steele has written extensively about the corset's democratizing effects and how it was employed by women from all walks of life to meet their demands. Corset advertisements, ladies fainting from corsets, and corsets in marriages were all examined by Steele. Steele critiques earlier historians' use of Victorian medical literature, pointing out how they mirror Victorian doctors' worries about motherhood.⁶ These are based on original sources from the United Kingdom and France. Madame Roxy Caplin's *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body* was what prompted me to read it. Valerie Steele strives to portray the corset in a more positive light, as a tool for self-expression. Steele uses Catherine Jung as evidence in her book *The Corset a Cultural History*. According to Steele, x-rays indicated altered ribs and organs that were attributed to Catherine Jung. Jung was an exceedingly tight-lacer, with a fifteen-inch waist, which was not a common method during the Victorian period.⁷ Steele emphasizes that Jung appears to be in good condition and that the alteration does not appear to be maladaptive. Jung's proportions would have been out of place in the 1850s-1870s, according to primary sources from British corset advertising.⁸ Victorian corsets with fifteen-inch waists are rare. Tightlacing was designed to emphasize the hourglass figure. It was largely worn by wealthy young ladies who wanted to make a statement on

⁶ Prescott, Heather Munro. Review of *The Corset: A Cultural History*. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 57, no. 3 (2002): 363-364. muse.jhu.edu/article/15349.

⁷ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*, 68.

⁸ Ibid.

important occasions, not a daily practice. Tightlacing was not something a Victorian woman would do on a regular basis.⁹

Muriel Barbier and Shazia Boucher of the Department of Art History at the Ecole du Louvre wrote *The Story of Lingerie*, discussing corset advertisements, the aesthetic impact of the corset on the body, and the moral framework that the Victorians held for the corset. *The Story of Lingerie* covers several time periods but does not delve into depth on specific historical context, limiting its use in historical study to overarching themes rather than specific analysis. The book does however examine primary sources on clothing reform from the Victorian era that was useful to my research. The research of young women and corsets was helpful in developing a case for sex and identity. This resource is quite useful for deciphering underpants as iconography in both observation and foreplay.

Leigh Summers wrote *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, body language, and culture are all important factors to consider. Dr. Leigh Summers, the Director of the Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery and Museum, is a historian and author who specializes in fashion, the body, and sexuality in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* delves into the role of women in corset manufacturing, the economic significance of their labor, and the accolades they earned. Leigh Summers talks about how women from all walks of life got their corsets and what that meant for the wearer in their community.

⁹ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 10.

Corset definition

The study of Corsetry is an expansive topic covering stays, corsets, girdles, waspies, bustiers, farthingales, panniers, crinolines, and other shapewear. Shapewear changes the natural silhouette of the body to conform to contemporary fashion standards. The corset (Fig.1) provided the structure needed to achieve the desirable hourglass silhouette that was fashionable in the mid-Victorian period.¹⁰ Corsets emphasized the bust and hips by supporting the breast while smoothing the abdomen to minimize the waist and transferring the weight of the **hoop skirts** and **petticoats**, like an exoskeleton.¹¹ The corset can impose fashion on the natural body; the corset limits the natural sags and rolls of the body and forms the torso into the ideal Victorian form.¹² Corsets were typically **boned** with cotton or silk fabric.¹³ In the Victorian era, boning in corsets was made of whalebone or steel.¹⁴ Whale boning was made of baleen, a comb-like strip in the jaw of some whales used for filtering fish out of water.¹⁵ Metal boning needed **casing** on the ends to prevent ripping or stabbing the fabric.¹⁶ Metal

¹⁰ Fischer, Anette. 2015. *Sewing for Fashion Designers*. London: Laurence King Publishing. 103.

¹¹ "In Les Dessous à travers les âges ("Underwear throughout the ages") , Armand Silvestre describes a "good corset" in the following terms: 'the top must be sufficiently widely cut to support the breasts without crushing them, the armholes should be well-formed; the lining of the fabric should be fine, well-inserted and flexible [...] finally, it should follow the lower body and finish on the hips at a firm point of arrival and follow the natural direction of the woman's side.'"

Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. New York: Parkstone International, 2005. ProQuest Ebook Central. 23.

¹² Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie* 17.

¹³ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 8.

¹⁴ Victorian corset makers were looking for other materials to make corset bones. Mr. Dixon proposed a corset boned with cork. This did not seem to catch on.

Hygiene of Stays. *The Lancet*. Vol. 1. March 23, 1872. 421.

¹⁵ Cynthia Overbeck Bix. 2012. *Petticoats and Frock Coats: Revolution and Victorian-Age Fashions From the 1770s to the 1860s*. Dressing a Nation: The History of U.S. Fashion. Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books. 36.

¹⁶ Fischer, Anette. 2015. *Sewing for Fashion Designers*. London: Laurence King Publishing. 104.

eyelets, or grommets, reinforced the holes in the **lacing** , making corsets possible. It was impossible to make a corset without metal eyelets, because the metal eyelets prevented the fabric from ripping from the necessary tension.¹⁷

The pronounced hourglass figure was not easily achievable for most women without the use of a corset.¹⁸ The hourglass figure is characterized by the shape of the body when the breasts and hips are large and full with a smaller waist with few rolls. The corset was worn over a knee length cotton or linen **chemise**. Hoop skirts and petticoats were worn around the hips over the corset to create the popular silhouette of the bell skirt. The hoop skirt replaced the previous abundance of crinolines and petticoats which led to fewer waistbands enhancing the hourglass silhouette.¹⁹ The initial hoops in hoop skirts were composed of canes of whalebone strips put into the muslin petticoat's casings and were later made of watch spring steel rings fastened to vertical tapes, protected by rubber.²⁰ Hoops made it easier for women to walk, but their skirts became troublesome in shared public spaces such as sidewalks for whoever was near them.²¹

¹⁷ Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*.

¹⁸ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen & Sword History. 2018. 8.

¹⁹ Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. New York, New York: Harper & Row, 1965. 508.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. 93.



Figure 1: Fischer, Anette. 2015. *Sewing for Fashion Designers*. London: Laurence King Publishing. 103.

My Experience Wearing a Corset

I was eight years old when I went to a civil war reenactment. I lost my mind during the Victorian fashion show looking at beautiful gowns, enormous hoops, and charming aprons. I pretended to be a Project Runway judge (a show I had been watching since I was two) as I took in every moment of the historical show. My sister and I are the fifth in a line of women textile artists passed down from grandmother to grandchild. Fashion has connected me to the strength and skill of the women who came before me. From the moment that I saw the show, I found a way to combine my love of fashion and history and I was enthusiastic to learn more. Two years later I competed in the 4-H Ohio state fair for living history as a character I created, the daughter of a union soldier, and presented on Victorian handbags. Interest in fashion history led me to volunteering for the Cincinnati Museum Center Youth program in high school. I had the opportunity to work with replica and real Victorian garments. I dressed as a Victorian Cincinnati in petticoats and bonnet. I read stories of the danger and discomfort of corsets, and rather than dissuade me, they made me wonder why corsets had been regularly worn for decades. I would interrogate the adult worker who was allowed to

wear the corset about how she felt, and all she said was that she made her stand up straight and that she could not put on her shoes.

Around 2020 I discovered women on social media sites wearing corsets instead of bras. The women described experiences like mine and how much better they felt. After that I stumbled into queer women filming sexually expressive videos featuring the corset. This drove my desire to learn more about corsets, because I am a chronically ill dyslexic bisexual woman with PTSD. Women creating art for women is an attempt to develop the female gaze and a female sexual identity outside of men. I see corsets on drag performers and burlesque artists, performing acts of gender and sexual liberation. These shows often feature the removal of the corset to tease the audience and reveal a surprise to the audience. The sexual performance of removing the corset can be found in the modern and Victorian era. There has been a movement for an aesthetic lifestyle such as 'cottage core' mainly adopted by lesbians and other queer people. It is all about returning to vintage and natural spaces in a soft pastoral way. Corsets have been a cornerstone of the aesthetic movement as a way for modern women to emphasize their feminine body while providing support for physical work, either in the garden or in the woods.

I have back pain, sore shoulders, and terrible posture. I definitely fit the stereotype of young gay people sitting in a serpentine position for long periods of time. From a young age, I had large breasts. By the time I was in middle school, the typical clothes stores did not sell bras my size. I hate bras. My favorite moment in the day is when I return home or to my car and can finally remove my uncomfortable and worn

34G bra. I cannot just not wear a bra unless I want to look unprofessional or draw the attention of staring eyes as I jiggle up and down stairs. I have a scar on my chest from chafing and constricting garments and have had bruises on my sides under my arms caused by a brutal strapless bra. I thought there had to be a better option.

As I conducted my research, I read conflicting accounts of what the body could do in a corset and what wearing a corset was like. Some said you cannot bend your back or touch your toes, others said it strengthens the body and was not a significant limit to mobility. Some said you cannot breathe in a corset, and you feel like you are being strangled, others described a weightless support and comfortable protection. I will never be able to understand the real experiences of women living in the Victorian era in a corset, but I can understand what it's like to have a woman's body in a corset. I ordered a c.1860 Julia Corset, size medium sewn to measurements, in natural coutil with a **busk** opening from Period Corsets.²² When the corset finally arrived, I sprinted to my dorm room to put it on.

I hastily unpackaged my corset. It took about four tries before I correctly laced the back. After struggling with clasping the busk I loosely tightened the laces, and I felt the pressure lift off my lower back instantly. I waist trained for a week by wearing it loosely for an hour on the first day in a relaxed position and slowly wore it for longer periods, before attempting to wear it every day. This is so your muscles have time to adjust and do not ache and the corset can form to the body. I was surprised that I could easily touch my toes and move with ease. While walking I noticed I felt taller. I stand at

²² "C. 1860 Julia Corset." Period Corsets. <https://www.periodcorsets.com/corsets/1860-julia-corset>.

a meager five foot one and three-fourths inches, but in the corset, I stand up straighter than I normally do and my height measures to just under 5 foot 3 inches, a dramatic change for me. I need all the height I can get.

It did take some practice to figure out how to get in and out of the corset. The middle clasp gave me special trouble because it was bent inward during shipping. The material is soft and durable, and the steel bones are thin and flexible. The bones on the back are noticeably less flexible than the bones that run up and down the breasts.²³

Normally when I wear a bra, if I stand straight and look down, I cannot see my toes. In a corset when I look down my chin and lips hit my chest. I have fantastic cleavage. I'm a bouncy person, I do little dances when I'm happy. I must try not to unless I want to deal with comments on how my breasts move when I bounce. My breasts do not significantly jiggle in the corset. I don't like it when I am being myself and enjoying life and I am sexualized. I still get comments about my breasts, but they are normally directed at the corset which does not bother me as much. Because I am trying to analyze my body in the corset, I have been overly conscious of my breathing. I can breathe normally. I am just more directly aware of how my body moves.

Since I started wearing the corset, I have noticed that most people look at my chest before my eyes. Most people seem to notice I look different but are not willing to ask what's going on with my chest. My friends were given full approval to analyze how I

²³ It was important to buy a corset with steel bones instead of plastic, as plastic does not give as much support as metal boning and can bend under the heat of the body and potentially break more often than metal boning.

look and move in my corset which led to my friend texting me the line, “sleek. elegant. aerodynamic. unbothered. in your lane. a queen.” I was told by many that I seem taller and that I appear both comfortable and yet regal. The audience of peers would gather around ready to tease while I learned how to bend and move in the corset during the initial adjustment period. The first time wearing around friends they teased as I attempted to lounge in my typical laidback position and totally failed. I stopped slumping and began to sit up straight but proper posture was less of a chore when wearing a corset. My professors who were told about my research commented on the immediate change in my posture and gate. On a trip where I drove to Taco Bell my friends joked that since I got my corset, I had totally lost any fear of death and that I was too confident for my own good. My observers shared the analysis; I appear more comfortable, elegant, and confident. The women in my life that like boobies will not stop hitting on me when I wear my corset.

Queer women have been left out of history and women were subjugated in historical contexts. Modern queer women dressing in vintage fashion is a way of reclaiming the history that left you out.²⁴ Gay women in corsets living their life, in the way that makes them feel free allows them to reclaiming history. They develop a space without fear or judgement. ‘Cottage core’ builds the ethos of nostalgia for a history that never existed, a history inclusive of queer, women, disabled, and people of color.²⁵

²⁴ Men have even participated in the trend in a reinterpretation of dandyism.

²⁵ It is still mostly a Eurocentric beauty standard, but Afro cottage core creators have adopted the aesthetic. *The Paradox of Cottagecore | Rejecting Hustle Culture* 332,070 Views May 1, 2021. Produced by Susannah McCullough. Directed by Dera Minoff. Performed by Alani Waters. Youtube. May 1, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YRI4Kdnl2E&t.0:11>.

Instead of focusing on the modern real and loud tragedies queer women face they can run to the escape of quiet joy.²⁶ Modern women wearing corsets is a tool for reframing history to be liberating.

How to put on a corset

A corset needs to be put on the right way in order to support the body and make it comfortable and safe. I learned quickly that if I rushed a step in this process, I would need to readjust my corset throughout the day. The first step is to put on a tank top or t-shirt in order to absorb sweat and cushion the corset and torso from each other. The cushion prevents circulation restrictions and gives the body necessary wiggle room. You button the busk and make sure the corset is straight. Swoop and scoop the boobs up and into the corset. A large mirror was helpful for the next step, pull the laces, from top to bottom ending by pulling the middle loops in an 'X' across the back and tie a basic knot. If the laces are long, you can tuck the excess into the bottom of the corset.

How corsets were made

Women began leaving the home and entering the workforce in the Victorian era. Many women found employment making corsets in the Victorian era. Initially, women were not allowed to be corsetieres, because it was believed women were too weak "to cut the whalebone, and then to push the strips of whalebone into the canvas (or

²⁶ Unlike lesbian period pieces, we can see two women dressed in pretty corsets and dresses fall in love without the brutal tragic ending queer joy over queer tragedy. Corsets have become a traditional object for that escape. Transcendentalism and the individual running from industrialism is an idea brought from the Victorian era. The industrial revolution that created the corset, is rejected now by wearing the corset. 'Cottage core' is not about rejecting the actual technology but using technology to connect rather than divide.

canvas-like) casing of the garment.”²⁷ That was disproved by women doing the work. Women took over corset making from tailors and specialized in corset construction. They would not sew multiple garments- they had specialized skills of corset production. For example, one corset maker would be in charge of hemming, and another would solely work on boning the corsets. By the mid-Victorian period, corset shops boasted their ability to have only women attendants to help with fittings.²⁸ There were ways for women to make money, but they were all positions connected to and subjugated by the male family members.²⁹ Women could only work with social approval if they were married, or the employment was connected to a male family member. Corset production was a major economic industry. Britain created three million corsets and imported two million corsets from France and Germany in 1868.³⁰ In the early 1860s, corset sales in the British market hit twelve million a year according to Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine in 1864.³¹ Corsets were worn by more women and thus had a large economic impact.

Since the beginning, corset design was mainly dominated by men, but by the 1870s, there were a growing number of women designing corsets. Patents by women were supports, and patents by men were cages. The corset patents created by men were heavily reinforced and broadcast a fear of female sexual freedom. These patents

²⁷ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 22.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Davies, Mel. “Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 619.

³¹ Davies, Mel. “Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 620.

reflect corsets as a means of containment.³² Patents written by women, to the contrary, strove for comfort and flexibility. Women had a significant number of patents from 1850-1900 with an increase in 1860. Corset designers like Madame Roxy Caplin took great care to assess and meet the needs of the feminine body.

Women were featured and celebrated in new ways thanks to work related to the corset in the mid-Victorian period. At international trade exhibitions, women corsetieres were labeled as inventors, designers, or manufacturers in official exhibition catalogues. The catalogue of London's great exhibition of works of industry of all nations: eight women corsetieres in a field of nineteen competitors participate.³³ Women were valued and awarded, such as the 'ladies outfitter of London,' Josephine Sykes, who won awards for her display of corsets at the Philadelphia '30' international exhibition of 1876.³⁴ Recognition at this level was relatively uncommon for women and had significant societal value.

In Britain, corsets were made in bulk sizes that were then tailored to fit the specific buyer.³⁵ Contemporary myths spread saying corsets compressed the waist to seventeen - twenty-two inch waist, when realistically, corset production covered a range of sizes and styles.³⁶ Sizes typically ranged from eighteen - thirty inches at the **true waist**, but there were offered sizes outside of the eighteen - thirty inches range.³⁷ Mass

³² Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 27.

³³ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 30.

³⁴ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 31.

³⁵ America also had premade corsets and France was known for bespoke corsets.

³⁶ Bowman, Karen. *Corsets and Codpieces: A History of Outrageous Fashion, from Roman times to the Modern Era*. 97.

³⁷ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 44.

producing garments was easier, and more women had access to corsets in the 1850s and beyond.³⁸ Sewing garments was made far more efficient by advancements in the industrial revolution. Ranged sizes were the beginning of the evolution from custom clothing to ready-to-wear.³⁹ Corsets could be altered and fitted to give women the ability to change their figure. A woman had the option to push in or pad out, depending on which feature she wished to alter.⁴⁰ Corset prices had a wide range but were still accessible to lower-class women.⁴¹

Working class women were known to buy or make their own corsets. Sometimes their employer would give them a used corset.⁴² Middle class women would pass down corsets to their employees; there were some cases where the upper-class ladies would scold the women who received their old garments.⁴³ They attacked the women for dressing above their station, but this was a poor attempt to redefine the class divides that were breaking down.⁴⁴ There were several texts written to help women sew their own corset. These can be found in independent books or in fashion magazines. Some women preferred to make their own corsets rather than buy one, because it could be created to match their specific preferences.

³⁸ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 36.

³⁹ Fontanel, Béatrice. *Support and Seduction: The History of Corsets and Bras*. 53.

⁴⁰ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 171.

⁴¹ "In 1855, some 10,000 workers in Paris specialized in the production of corsets. In 1861 it was estimated that the number of corsets sold annually in Paris was 1,200,000. The cheapest corsets for workers and peasants' cost from 3 to 20 francs each; by comparison, silk corsets cost from 25 to 60 francs, and some corsets decorated with handmade lace sold for 200 francs."

Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 44.

⁴² Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 10.

⁴³ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 15.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Color is a tool for expression; the social interpretation of color can be used to send a message to the viewer. The color of the fabric of the corset bore great importance to the sexually linked with the user. White was the ideal as pure and proper, especially if the fabric was soft.⁴⁵ Virginity, innocence, and sexual desirability was associated with white. Red was for private bedroom time with the husband. It was only acceptable if the woman was of high moral societal standards as well. In this situation, she could afford to degrade her high standing because of the privileges afforded to her by her status. The color black was not acceptable, because it was seen as low-class and impure, the exact opposite of the color white. Other colors, like yellow, green, or blue, were not common and were only accessible to high class women. Working class and low-class women would usually only access natural colors or brown corsets. This is one way the lower-class was excluded from sexual expression. Lower-class women cannot be carnal red, innocent white, or feminine pink; in the bedroom they can only be brown. Wealthy women could afford deviation because their social power was secured.

Corsets gained popularity as more women entered the workforce. While it was mostly accepted that more women were leaving the home, the corset attracted the fears of uneasy men.⁴⁶ Corsets were seen as an attack of motherhood and the domestic sphere. If women gained autonomy, men's position would be threatened. Corsets were a symbol of control, men needed to control the corset in order to control women. If gained symbolic possession of the corset, then she would own her body and life.

⁴⁵ Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 457.

⁴⁶ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 76.

Women in Britain

Victorian women were meant to be domestic and gentle which reflects maternal standards.⁴⁷ They were also seen as highly moral and self-sacrificing which was used to show how men were supposedly stronger than women. Women were expected to be silent with little to no public expression.⁴⁸ At the time, masculinity was superior to all things feminine, and there was a natural social order dictating the constructs of genders. Women, as equals, in British society was a new feminist idea that was beginning to develop. There was a spreading belief that independent rights would lead to more intimate relationships between men and women specifically intellectually, emotionally, and sexually.⁴⁹ Wife and mother were highly valued roles for women, expected to work for order and duty.⁵⁰ Despite this, women were stereotyped as irrational and innocent. Wives were protected by their husbands, in theory at least and women were dependent on men.⁵¹ The men controlled property, had sole custody of children, and were exclusively capable of legally ending marriages. The wife's body and belongings were all under control of the man.⁵² Women having control was seen as a threat to the unity of the household.⁵³ It was a severely unbalanced power dynamic. After the Married Women's Property Act 1882, married women could own and control property.⁵⁴ During

⁴⁷ Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. "Family Fortunes." *The University of Chicago Press*, 1987. 25.

⁴⁸ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." *Princeton University Press*, 1989. 27.

⁴⁹ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." 48.

⁵⁰ Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. "Family Fortunes." 27.

⁵¹ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." 26.

⁵² Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." 22.

⁵³ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." 46.

⁵⁴ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." 22.

the Mid-Victorian era women could not be autonomous and independent, because they could not control any property.

There were sexual double standards for men and women. If a wife cheated on the husband, he could divorce her, but the opposite cannot be said. It was more socially acceptable for sexual misconduct from men than women.⁵⁵ Parliament was particularly concerned about poor women's sexual activity. Female sexuality was feared because it was viewed as evil and against Christian morality. The push for marriage, property, and divorce reform began in the mid 1850's and continued through the Victorian period. The husband was expected to protect the wife, so the law did little to protect women.⁵⁶ In addition, the laws were mainly created by men and so they were more likely to favor men over women. Eventually the laws changed to protect women across the economic spectrum, but that took considerable time.

Dress Reform Movement

The Victorian dress reform movement (also known as the rational dress movement) of the middle and late Victorian era, proposed, designed, and wore clothing that was more practical and comfortable than the fashion of the time. Dress reformists were mostly middle-class women who participated in the first wave of feminism in the Western world lasting from the 1850s until the 1890s. The movement arose with calls for temperance, women's education, suffrage, and moral purity during the Progressive Era. Dress reform advocated for freedom from the "dictates of fashion," the need to

⁵⁵ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." 40.

⁵⁶ Shanley, Mary Lyndon. "Feminism, Marriage, and the Law in Victorian England." 29.

"adequately cover the limbs as well as the torso," and the promotion of "logical dress." Reformers wanted to popularize smaller and shorter skirts, less **embellishments** on garments, no longer tightlacing, and women's bloomers (Turkish style pants).⁵⁷ The reform of women's undergarments, which could be altered without exposing the user to societal mockery, was the movement's greatest triumph. Dress reformers were also effective in convincing women to wear simpler clothing for physical activities such as biking, swimming and labor.

In response to dress reformers, Eliza Hawcis wrote *The Art of Beauty* in 1878 that reinforced the popular view that the unsupported body was slovenly. Defendants of the corset asserted that it was necessary to have a smooth foundation for the proper appearance of the outer garments. When there was a less significant difference in fashion between the upper- and lower-class in fashion, garments like the corset are the only divider from the lowest of the low. Good fashion and therefore good morals were impossible without the corset.

Changes in shapewear

Fashion and society work together hand in hand. Regency fashion continued to influence the Victorian period, and important elements of Edwardian fashion were created by Victorians. Fashion constantly changes and engages in a cycle of remix and creation reflecting the societal standards of the time. The rise and falls of trends led to bleeding lines that defy hard boundaries. As a new silhouette emerges, it is simplistic

⁵⁷ Riegel, Robert E. "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights." *American Quarterly* 15, no. 3 (1963): 390–401.391.

with Embellishments added once the shape is well established in the public zeitgeist.⁵⁸

The embellishments revive the silhouette till the silhouette evolves into a new shape and the cycle starts anew. Often, the new shape references a previous era like a rebirth of ideas. The nuance in the cycle reflects the latest technologies, changing beauty standards, the creator of the individual garment, who wears the creation, and biological/environmental forces.⁵⁹ The cycle repeats: the new changes in the cycle reflect the immediate context.

The mid-Victorian corset changed with evolving standards and technological inventions and was based on earlier garments. Before the popularization of the corset, stays were the most common shapewear. While both corsets and stays were laced boned garments meant to create a fashionable silhouette, the stay flattened the breasts against the body and corsets lifted the breast. Stays were for a flat and straight silhouette. The expected appearance of women in the Victorian era changed in the early to mid-period. By the 1850's it was desired to have breasts that stick out and up from the chest. The mid-Victorian era had comparatively dramatic proportions for the silhouette. Tiny waists and giant skirts are iconic for the Victorian period. Dramatically small waists were the ideal beauty standards during this time. This was possibly due to the combination of corsets and hoop skirts. A study of portraits and model plates by J. Richardson and A. L. Kroeber measured the proportion of women in art through the

⁵⁸ Blum, Stella. *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harpers Bazar, 1867-1898*. New York: Dover Publications, 1974. Vi.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

decades.⁶⁰ This does not reflect the actual waist sizes of real women, but the created images reflect the ideal beauty standards. People perfect the image they present to the world in photos or paintings, and this is true for Victorians. If perfection for women meant a tiny waist, portraits featured tiny waists.

Ratio of Waistline to Body Height, Averages by Decade, 1751-1930	
Period	Width of Waist
1751-60	12.8%
1761-70	13.2
1771-80	11.9
1781-90	12.3
1791-1800	12.2
1801-10	14.0
1811-20	12.5
1821-30	11.0
18310	10.0
1841-50	8.7
1851-60	8.2
1861-70	8.5
1871-80	9.5
1881-90	8.5
1891-1900	9.0
1901-10	10.3
1911-20	13.3
1921-30	15.1

Note: All measurements were based on a ratio of the total height of figure from "toe to the middle of the mouth."

Table 1: Davies, Mel. "Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 4 (1982): 611–41. 619.

Corsets were for a curved hourglass silhouette. From the 1840s through the rest of the period **flat pleats** and **cartridge pleats** were used to create even more voluminous skirts.⁶¹ In the 1840s **corded** stays with shoulder straps became shorter and were phased out in favor of the archetypal corset.⁶² Waist-constricting strapless corsets

⁶⁰ Davies, Mel. "Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 618.

⁶¹ Bowman, Karen. *Corsets and Codpieces: A History of Outrageous Fashion, from Roman times to the Modern Era*. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2016. 91

⁶² Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 8.

that extended from the bosom to the hip became popular in the 1850s and 1860s.⁶³

Early corsets were laced in the back and a busk made of wood, whale bone, or steel inserted down the center front.⁶⁴ The slot-and-stud fastening for the two-part busk was patented by Joseph Cooper in 1848 and was used in nearly every corset in the following decade.⁶⁵

The explosion of embellished garments was possibly due to the Industrial Revolution amping up fabric production. Inventions, such as the cotton gin, led to an increase in cheaper fabrics being brought to marketplaces. The industrial revolution ramped up fabric production which made the excess of embellishments and large skirts possible.⁶⁶ Even though the corset was not made for public view, it followed fashion trends. If simple dresses were in style, corsets were simplistic. If ruffles or ribbons were popular, they were implemented onto the corset. Embellishments on underwear suggests that the clothes were for the delight of the wearer and not the viewer.

Corsets were not machine stitched before 1851.⁶⁷ In 1846, Elias Howe patented the sewing machine and made a mass producible model by 1855.⁶⁸ Sewing machines were in regular use by 1857 which sped up production and made trimming less laborious and therefore cheaper.⁶⁹ Finishing consumes 90% of the time required to make a garment (hems, trims, and cutting thread ends.) Detail work was much easier

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. Yale University Press, 2011. 43.

⁶⁶ Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. 509.

⁶⁷ Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. 2008.

⁶⁸ Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century* 509.

⁶⁹ Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Pub., 2002. 33.

with a machine because it took significantly less time to sew a garment. New clothes became cheaper leading to women having a larger wardrobe by the 1860s.⁷⁰ Hand sewn garments declined since the invention of the sewing machine. New materials were also used to construct corsets in 1851. A rubber boned corset was exhibited at the Universal Exhibition in London.⁷¹

In the mid- 1850s, necklines for day wear met the base of the neck and evening gowns would reveal the décolletage and the shoulders.⁷² Hoop skirts, originally called the artificial crinoline, were also created and popularized.⁷³ In 1856, the caged crinoline was also popular. The caged crinoline was made of thick cloth tapes holding nine to eighteen steel hoops together.⁷⁴

As the 1860s stitched forward, the front boning phased out for a divided busk of steel which was set with a row of hook and eyes (Fig. 11-12).⁷⁵ Busks were invented in 1829 by Jean-Julien Josselin, but there was a delay in the use of the creation.⁷⁶ The invention meant it was easier for a woman to dress and undress herself rather than asking a maid or family member for aid.⁷⁷ No longer needing assistance to get dressed allowed for independence in dressing and the removal of the corset, because women

⁷⁰ Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 45

⁷¹ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 99.

⁷² Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 35.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Cynthia Overbeck Bix. 2012. *Petticoats and Frock Coats: Revolution and Victorian-Age Fashions From the 1770s to the 1860s*. 37.

⁷⁵ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 8.

⁷⁶ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 43.

⁷⁷ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 8.

needed the help from a partner.⁷⁸ The 1860s were at the height of the hoop skirt trend, when skirts reached the largest circumference dictating a need for corsets capable of supporting the massive skirts. It was common for skirts to be three-five yards around the hem.⁷⁹ Because of the large skirt, the waist looked much smaller by comparison.⁸⁰ Less bulk around the waist meant there was less pressure to tight-lace the corset, because the wearer could appear to have a small waist and be comfortable at the same time.

The 1867 international exhibition in Paris had a huge impact on the global fashion scene. Americans and Europeans alike traveled to France returning with trunks of fine French fashion to spread at home. There was a massive interest in French fashion.⁸¹ Francomania consumed American boutiques. Imported dresses, fabrics, laces, and ribbons flew off the shelves into the hands of women who could not go to Paris themselves. After 1868, skirts became a simple cone shape significantly less voluminous than the previous bell shape.⁸² By the late 1860s, the bustle, sometimes called the 'Parisian bustle' had usurped the crinoline causing a renewed interest in the curve of the hips.⁸³ Fabric was drawn from the front and gathered in the back and constructed with **goring**.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ In the 1850s front button bodices became popular in part due to improvements in button making. Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 35.

⁷⁹ Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 34.

⁸⁰ Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 36.

⁸¹ Blum, Stella. *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harpers Bazar, 1867-1898*. V.

⁸² Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 37.

⁸³ Ibid.

Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 48.

⁸⁴ Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. 516.

Once again new technology supported the changes in fashion. Edwin Izod in 1868 created the steam molding process.⁸⁵ The first step was to create an ideal torso made of metal, shaped to mold the corset to the perfect form. The corset went around the metal torso and was heated to the point the garment would maintain the correct shape. The Queen magazine (started in 1861) wrote, "Izod also claimed that the molded corsets were inspired by Hogarth's theoretical Line of Beauty which he discussed in his treatise Analysis of Beauty (1753)."⁸⁶ There is a cyclical nature in fashion: a century later, the body desired by Hogarth was desired by the Victorians. The steam molding process was consciously made to create the image of the perfect body according to Victorian standards.

There were several changes in fashion during the 1860s, day necklines rose, and the evening neckline changed to a plunging v in the back and front. The chemise, worn under the corset, was tight against the body by adding **darts**.⁸⁷ The corset remained crucial to the desired hourglass silhouette in the 1870s; however, by the mid- 1870s, a longer torso was fashionable, so corsets extended lower on the body and over the hips (Fig. 13-18).⁸⁸ The hourglass silhouette was still desired- just an elongated torso compared to the past decade, and the silhouette was achieved with sleeker skirts with volume in the back rather than all around. This style was known as the cuirass bodice. Corsets currently were tight against the body from the bosom to around the hips

⁸⁵ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 46.

⁸⁶ Wosk, Julie. *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 62.

⁸⁷ Payne, Blanche. *History of Costume, from the Ancient Egyptians to the Twentieth Century*. 519.

⁸⁸ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*.51

resembling armor. The cuirass bodice was very useful in supporting princess dresses. The previous silhouette was bell shaped, and now the silhouette is tubular.

The spoon busk was another invention in the textile arts in 1873.⁸⁹ Spoon busks were better shaped to follow the anatomy of the body and have a snug fit around the waist. Steel bones narrowed at the top and widened down to a pear-shaped bottom.⁹⁰ In addition, suspenders were added to the corset. First appearing in Paris Grande Opera Bouffe rather than using garters or ribbons to hold the stockings, suspenders attached the stockings to the bottom of the corset.⁹¹ The suspenders were deemed far more comfortable than garters and became widely popular. Over time the corset was thrown aside due to changes in what was fashionable and health concerns.⁹² Several patents from the 1870s written by men utilized newly invented 'hardening machines' and hydraulic pressure for durability for corsets made of hide.⁹³

Fashion continued to change. Eventually, women stopped wearing corsets around the 1920s. The abandonment of the corset was likely not due to public outcry or physical harm but from changing beauty standards.⁹⁴ As the corset was cast aside women picked up other structural garments to take its place. Garments are meant to

⁸⁹ This was one of several undergarment inventions from this time. Another invention supported by the corset was elastic suspenders. In 1878, a belt that was worn over the corset that fastened to the tops of stockings. Suspenders also helped to secure the corset. This replaced garters. Garters were going out of fashion because it was believed that the reduced circulation was bad for women's health.

Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 51.

⁹⁰ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 51.

⁹¹ Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 64.

⁹² Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 147.

⁹³ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2001. 28.

⁹⁴ Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 472.

fulfill the current beauty standard and show the current time and culture on the body.⁹⁵

This becomes foundational and literal with undergarments.

Corset example

An example of an 1860 corset is the red and black lasting corset from the Symington Collection at Leicestershire County Council Museum (Fig. 2-5).⁹⁶ The corset is made of cotton and a wooden busk wrapped in either wool or **wash leather** inserted down the center. The corded sides are made from either wool or twine. The materials were not documented, so historians speculate the materials based on other known corsets. The garment was secured by lacing the center back which meant the wearer would need help to get in or out. The lacing allowed for minor adjustments as the body changed. Because of the stitching on the side, the garment appears to have been made to a standard size and then altered to fit and then finished. The alteration is evident by the side back **seams** where the cord slots were sewn, but the cords were not inserted. Red was a sexy color to the Victorians and the added lace where the garment meets the bust further adds to the sex appeal. The sexy black lines from just to the side of the apex of the breast to the point that connects to the middle of the thigh slims the figure

⁹⁵ "Evidence that opinions on the corset were changing within the fashionable world can be found in a fascinating interview with Madame Réjane in *Figaro-Modes* (15 April 1903). The actress was asked about her fashion preferences, such as her favorite couturier. But when the interviewer asked about her favorite corset, she replied: "No need." Another actress, Eve Lavallière, also maintained: "I don't wear corsets." These women appear in their photographs to be corseted. Yet they apparently believed that it was better to seem to have a naturally perfect figure than to admit the necessity of artificial assistance. Over the course of the following decades, the corset did not so much disappear as become transformed, first into girdles, bustiers and brassières; and then —more radically—it became internalized through diet and exercise. The hard body replaced the boned corset."

Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 473.

⁹⁶ Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. 43.

and moves the viewer's eye up and down the body toward the parts of the body that were sexualized by the Victorians.



Figure 2: Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. London: Batsford, 2008.

42.

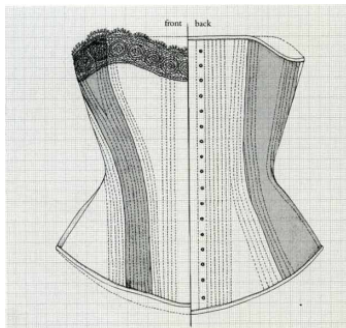


Figure 3: Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. London: Batsford, 2008.

43.

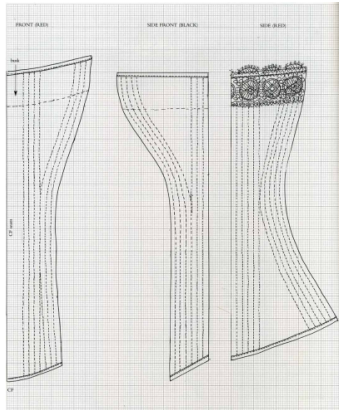


Figure 4: Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. London: Batsford, 2008.

44.

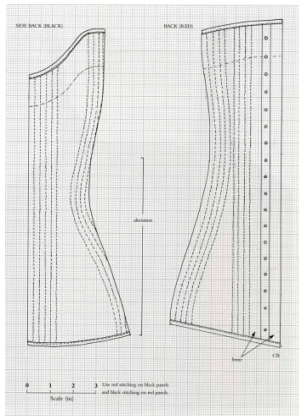


Figure 5: Salen, Jill. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. London: Batsford, 2008.

45

Class in fashion

Fashion was no longer just for the elite. Before the mid-Victorian period, strict class divides were reflected through popular fashion. The silhouette of a peasant woman and the silhouette of a bourgeoisie woman was drastically different as well as the use of different types of fabric color and number of undergarments. Due to changing fashion trends and technological advancements, the markers of class were lessened to the number of embellishments, the quality of fabric, and construction. The sewing machine and the Industrial Revolution made socially elevated fashion accessible and led to the fashion scene being more democratic. Victorian women could all dress in a manner comparable to the high class. Refined fashion was desired by the growing American middle-class, and they looked to the wealthy Europeans for the latest fashion trends.⁹⁷ Popular costume was reflecting the shifting socio-economic and political structure of society by turning fashion away from “aristocratic body” towards a feminine ideal aided by class instead of caused by class.⁹⁸ Corsets signified decency that could be appropriated by women of the laboring class.⁹⁹ In turn, corsets weakened class boundaries and strengthened gender signifiers.¹⁰⁰

The socio-economic status was reflected in corsets by the quality of material and how often garments were replaced or bought new. Wealthy women would have nicer fabrics and higher quality materials like whalebone instead of metal. Wealthy people

⁹⁷ Blum, Stella. *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harper's Bazaar, 1867-1898*. V.

⁹⁸ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. Yale University Press, 2011.36.

⁹⁹ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. Yale University Press, 2011.49.

¹⁰⁰ Especially impoverished white women and enslaved African women were shown in streetwear of petticoats and chemises to emphasize their low social position. During this period, apart from the hem of a petticoat in the 1870s, these garments were meant to only be seen in private when dressing and undressing.

Lynch, Annette, and Strauss, Mitchell D., eds. *Ethnic Dress in the United States: A Cultural Encyclopedia*. Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014. ProQuest Ebook Central.I. 70.

could afford to replace worn garments at a higher rate than the poor. It was more common for the lower class to alter garments repeatedly while the rich discarded garments when it no longer fitted or was showing its age. Generally, working class women needed a greater range of motion, so they did not lace their corset as tight as a stylish wealthy woman.¹⁰¹

Corsets were worn by those who previously might have been excluded from traditional markers of wealth and femininity. Women across the spectrum were lacing into a corset in the Victorian era. Farm workers, servants, or wealthy wives these women chose to wear corsets daily.¹⁰² Corsets were not rigid, and having adjustable laces allowed women the freedom to wear them in different ways. Any woman without a corset was seen as loose and slovenly. A tightly laced corset supported the British Victorian standard of women to be dependent on men due to the limitations on flexibility. Middle- and working-class women performed housework and other labor in corsets as though to elevate themselves and marry wealthy men.¹⁰³ The middle-class was growing in this period which made middle-class women a relevant market for the fashion industry.¹⁰⁴ Middle-class women especially laced on the tighter side to follow the fashion trends and replicate the upper-class status they wished to achieve.

¹⁰¹ Cynthia Overbeck Bix. 2012. *Petticoats and Frock Coats: Revolution and Victorian-Age Fashions From the 1770s to the 1860s*. 35.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Cynthia Overbeck Bix. *Petticoats and Frock Coats: Revolution and Victorian-Age Fashions From the 1770s to the 1860s*. 36.

¹⁰⁴ Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. "Family Fortunes." 19.

As early as 1824, poor sex workers in London wore corsets.¹⁰⁵ Corsets were far more favored by the working-class English than the working-class French. This was possible since France was famous for bespoke corsets while in England and America mass produced corsets were tailored to fit. Making them a cheaper option. “According to one study, 33% of working-class French wives owned corsets in the period between 1850 and 1874.”¹⁰⁶ In the United States, both free and enslaved black women wore corsets in the 1800’s as well. Black women who were enslaved would wear corsets if they worked in the household but not if they work in the fields.¹⁰⁷ British women’s prisons, workhouses, and asylums offered a selective size range of corsets, because the corset was seen as an important part of women’s comfort.¹⁰⁸ Those places did not care for many comforts, so the corset must have been highly valued by women for their expression of humanity. This availability of corsets was fairly common, “George Roberts, who operated a successful warehouse in London, noted in his catalogue produced for distribution at England’s Great Exhibition of 1851, that ‘contracts for schools and charitable institutions’ were promptly filled at wholesale prices.”¹⁰⁹ These corsets were dull brown with no embellishments, closed down the front, and were not designed to be tight-laced.¹¹⁰ The design of the garment reflected low criminal status and sublimated femininity. It was a way for the women, who were stripped of much of their identity, to present themselves in a higher status. Corsets were thought to provide a great value for

¹⁰⁵ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 49.

¹⁰⁶ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 49.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture.16.

¹⁰⁹ Examples of these corsets can be found in The Symington Museum in Leicestershire
Ibid.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

ladies. There is poor evidence to support the belief that women could not move or work in a corset. Corsets were an aid in physical labor due to the extra back support while lifting and repeated bending.¹¹¹ Corset makers were aware of their market. Thus, corsets were specifically advertised as “being both cheap and durable and reminds us that Thorstein Veblen, an American economist, was quite incorrect when he argued that corsets prevented women from working.”¹¹² Additionally, working class women used the corset as a tool to improve her sex appeal without being seen as a scarlet woman and to enable her marry above her station, in the Victorian era.¹¹³ This is especially significant since social barriers between classes were significant divides.¹¹⁴ Corsets helped women transcend these barriers. Tight lacing was just another way for women wearing corsets to send a message.

Many modern audiences believe that corsets were forced on to women against their will and comfort.¹¹⁵ Victorian women were treated as slaves to fashion, masochists, or fools by both Victorian doctors and modern historians.¹¹⁶ Victorian women wore corsets, largely, because it improved their personal beauty and comfort. The choice to wear a corset was based on the wearer’s intended activity or company. If a woman was attending an elegant evening out, a tight corset was appropriate.¹¹⁷ If a woman was

¹¹¹ Cynthia Overbeck Bix. 2012. *Petticoats and Frock Coats: Revolution and Victorian-Age Fashions From the 1770s to the 1860s*. 35.

¹¹² Steele, Valerie. “The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism.” 466.

¹¹³ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 9.

¹¹⁴ Davidoff, Leonore, and Catherine Hall. “Family Fortunes.” 23.

¹¹⁵ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 44.

¹¹⁶ Steele, Valerie. “The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism.” 463.

¹¹⁷ In the second half of the 1870s when dresses became a tighter silhouette the tea gown would gain increasing favor. In previous decades the gown was only for boudoir but over time it was typical to wear a tea gown to breakfast or in the morning with friends and family. This is also why tea gowns had more elaborate designs in the mid to late 1870s.

being physically active, she might wear a corset meant for said activity. For example, in the late 1860s the bathing corset was invented. The Bathing corset was made to be worn beneath a bathing costume to control the bosom and was deemed a “less constrictive means of support popularly known as ‘bathing stays’ soon followed. As one 1877 magazine states: ‘An enterprising firm has just patented some bathing-stays, which French women much appreciate, whether for swimming or merely plunging in the water, for they support the figure without interfering with their ease of movement.’”¹¹⁸ Women were not expected to always wear corsets, and tea gowns were designed to be worn at home without a corset while a lady relaxed.¹¹⁹

Corsets and colonialism

During the Victorian era, British influence and control was spreading around the globe. The explosion of British expansion was beginning, and it would not take off in a big way until later. Middle- and upper-class British women had a role to play in sustaining British imperialism in places like India, Africa, Australia, and the Pacific by bringing corsets through their travel. These women were mainly there to spread the British empire, and the association with corsets for moral control were tools for confirming Evangelical beliefs.¹²⁰ Colonial administrators worried that British women throughout the empire maintained the prestige of British authority by their behavior and demeanor. Corsets assured the British women that they were respectable and moral

Harris, Kristina. *Victorian & Edwardian Fashions for Women, 1840 to 1919*. 65.

¹¹⁸ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 100.

Quote from 41 Cassell's family magazine (1877). London: Cassell Petter & Galpin, p. 626.

¹¹⁹ Mimi, Matthews. *A Victorian Lady's Guide to Fashion and Beauty*. 87.

¹²⁰ Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*. Dress, Body, Culture. 17.

Christians. There were a few corsets designed for tropical heat with perforated gossamer.¹²¹ The English corset company, Dickens and Jones, produced corsets for the British colonies, and their advertisements expostulate the Specialite corset led 'the way all the world over, to women's greatest ambition - a good figure' with a corseted sylph with crown, wings, and petticoats, hovering beside and above Earth with ribbons from her hands going across the empire with women only in corsets.¹²² The imagery sends the strong message that corsets were a tool for the British empire and respectability. The corset in the colonial context became a symbol for British moral control. British men were worried about the respectability and control of British women in the colonial context, and the corset was a tool for maintaining those moral standards abroad.

In 1850, a correspondent reported for the domestic economist that British women in India still wore corsets that were not suited for tropical climates as 'voluntary victims of fashion.'¹²³ While the reporter found it an unbelievable choice, women across Europe wrote in sharing they "conceive the discomfort, in many cases of absolute suffering that (was) undergone by many of their own sex in the east, who clothed themselves as they do in Europe."¹²⁴ These British women did not remove their corsets. Many high- and middle-class ladies thought it was ridiculous to not wear a corset based on the societal standards of Europe during the Mid- 19th century.

Corset advertisements

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Summers, Leigh. *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset. Dress, Body, Culture.*17.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Several advertisements from the time period showcase the concerns of women at the time: fashion advertisements from several manufacturers exhibit the concerns of the buyers, mainly sizing options, comfort, function, color, and cost. Corsets were made to support women performing a variety of tasks. It may surprise modern viewers to see a corset ad featuring a woman playing tennis.¹²⁵ Side to side measurements can be easily adjusted to fit a range of body types, so concern regarding sizing is dependent upon the less flexible length measurement. By the late 1870s, there was emerging emphasis on health concerns due to dramatic media coverage spurred by the tight lacing trend.

Victorian corsets were made to last. In regard to cost, the quality of the garment ensured which corsets were a worthwhile purchase. Corset bones were less likely to break than stay bones. Many corset advertisements offered rewards for broken bones after regular use after less than a year's time to emphasize their confidence that the bones will not snap, bend, or break.¹²⁶ If the garment had aged tremendously, the bones would wear out or rust. Purchased corsets sometimes came with extra bones to replace the old ones, just in case.¹²⁷ Shielding at stress points (hips or abdomen) was advertised as added protection for the body.¹²⁸

Fashion advertisements answer the questions and concerns of the buyers, mainly sizing options, health, function, and cost". Support for function should come

¹²⁵ Warner Bros. *Coraline Corsets*. 2017. Marlborough, Wiltshire: Adam Matthew Digital.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*.73.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

before cost in advertisements. All the advertising makes the same arguments as current brasier advertisements do. Some corset advertising at the back of Victorian fashion magazines contained prose that highlighted the garment's quality and use.¹²⁹ Corsets were viewed as taboo and something to be hidden. Until the 1870's, the images for corset advertisements were corsets floating in a void, like shells with no filling.¹³⁰ They were accompanied with flowers and little baby angels, or putti figures, in romantic spaces. Putti are used to symbolize the heavenly setting a corset could bring as well as love brought by cupids and healthy babies. It was thought that corsets led to unhealthy pregnancies, so the puttis subtly helped assuage that fear. By the 1870's, some women were shown from the waist up in corsets with idealized hair and poses that accentuated the corsets shape, like having the arms up around the head. The women were shown undressing and lounging in a domestic state. They were also shown sleeping or playing with puppies, kittens, or babies.¹³¹ The advertisements reflected the normalized romanticizing and sexualized handling of the corset which marked the beginning of the end for the corset in the cycle of fashion. Corset advertisements placed women in these dream states, because it represented how women believed the corset could positively impact their lives. The corset could mean a better life with an upward moving marriage or preventing the effects of time on the natural body.¹³² Alongside bountiful vegetation, these advertisements stressed fertility and abundance.¹³³

¹²⁹ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 290.

¹³⁰ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 44.

¹³¹ Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 461.

¹³² Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 467.

¹³³ Ibid.

Corset publications

Several fashion magazines from the mid- Victorian era showcased European fashion. Some of these publications include *Godey's Lady's Book*, *Peterson's Magazine*, *Harper's Bazar*, *La Mode Illustree*, *Salon De La Mode*, *Dames Et Des Demoiselles*, *L'art Et La Mode*, *Der Bazar*, *Frank Leslie's Ladies Magazine*, *Harper's Weekly*, and *The Standard Designer*.¹³⁴ Elite Victorian women read these to know how to stay with the fashion trends. They featured articles and fashion prints most popular of the time period.

In Britain, Comics were published in other non-fashion magazines to satirize women's fashion as ridiculous and frivolous. Comics in *Punch Magazine* were a very popular example that would poke fun at skirt size or corsets. An example, of such a comic is the tight-lacing caricature labeled as "Fashionable Suicide."¹³⁵ Images like the one below (Fig. 6) are absurd to push the idea of corsets as an absurd fashion trend.

¹³⁴ "Harper's bazaar-- European fashion for American audience"

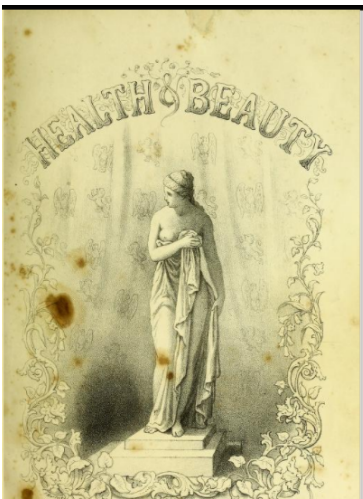
Blum, Stella. *Victorian Fashions and Costumes from Harpers Bazar, 1867-1898*. VI.

¹³⁵ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 67.



Figure 6: Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. Yale University Press, 2011.68.

An important writer about corsets was Madame Roxy Caplin. She was England's most famous and best corsetiere. Madame Roxy Caplin won several awards for her corsetry designs and took the prize medal at the great exhibition of 1851.¹³⁶ She was a doctor's wife who helped her understand the physiological impact of her designs. Caplin designed for the body and not the fashion, and she held both a medical perspective and a woman's perspective on corsetry. Madame Roxy Caplin understood a woman's body and needs unlike male designers. She designed for the specific needs of a woman in every stage of her life- from young woman, to pregnant, to postpartum.¹³⁷ Madame Roxy Caplin wrote several texts on the topic of corsets. She goes into the specific needs of the stages of women's life, infancy, one to twelve, twelve to eighteen, gestation, middle



Please: A History of the Victorian Corset. Dress, Body, Culture. 31.
Please: A History of the Victorian Corset. Dress, Body, Culture. 31.

age, old age, and women with spinal deformities. She wrote a book read by women across Britain, *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*.

Figure 7: Caplin, Roxey Ann. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*. London, 1856. viii.

The first image in Caplin's book depicts Grecian woman dressed in a toga with an unsupported breast on display (Fig. 7). Grecian woman imagery was likely selected, because dress reformers would recall the supposedly simple Roman fashion and reflect on the idea of how Roman women did not need corsets to be moral women.¹³⁸ The references to togas against corsets was shown in the Godey's Lady's Book and magazine in 1869. The writer put corsets and togas in direct opposition. "In the flowing robes of the Vesta, the Juno and Diana, every part is light and graceful."¹³⁹ The idealization of ancient Greek figures due to neoclassicism in the period was a tool for dismissing the corset and modern fashion. The toga was also worn in a time when anatomy and the needs of the body were not as well understood as in the Victorian time. Caplin's book focuses on the function of clothing for the body and not embellishment- health over fashion. Her book mainly discussed how a corset should accommodate the physical needs of different women. Caplin was mindful of the proportions and balance of the body in accordance with the changes a body undergoes throughout one's life.

¹³⁸ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 171.

¹³⁹ Uhle, Chas P., Dr. "Health Department Women's Dress." *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* 78-79 (1869). 282.

Caplin was critical of Victorian medical writing and claimed that “the principal writers upon the subject of corsets have been medical men, who, great as is their knowledge of their part of the question, certainly know nothing of ours; and hence what they have written has been almost entirely without practical utility.”¹⁴⁰ Caplin specifically addresses Dr. Copeland’s medical dictionary and how it stated the medical harm caused by the corset.¹⁴¹ Caplin suggests that, because it is evident that Dr. Copeland does not know where the bones are inserted in the corset or how the garment functions, he can’t really understand the corset in relation to the body. Because Caplin understood how to make corsets and her husband taught her about anatomy, she was better positioned to understand the effects of the corset on the body. Caplin also argued it was more productive to promote medical improvement in a way that society would accept, because no woman was going to give up her corset. The only way to make a healthy corset was for medical men and staymakers to work together to improve the corset and make a corset fit the body rather than the opposite according to Caplin.

Many cultures use fashion to add and change the natural beauty of the body. While many articles in the Victorian period were written to criticize fashion, they never suggested a true alternative or means of improvement. Many moralists, monks, and European writers argue that popular fashion is wrong, but they never say what is right.

¹⁴² The writers criticized what women wear with ease but failed to make a clear

¹⁴⁰ Caplin, Roxey Ann. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*. London, 1856. viii.

¹⁴¹ James Copland (1791–1870) was a well-known Scottish physician and medical writer.

¹⁴² Caplin, Roxey Ann. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*.2.

statement on what should be worn instead. The corset does improve the body, can correct posture and spinal issues, and provides muscles with support.



In order from left to right:

Figure 8: Caplin, Roxey Ann. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*. London, 1856. 2.

Figure 9: Caplin, Roxey Ann. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*. London, 1856. 4.

Figure 10: Caplin, Roxey Ann. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*. London, 1856. 6.

Caplin calls on Mr. Walker's three types of female beauty, “nutritious beauty as Venus, intellectual beauty as Minerva, and locomotive beauty as Diana.”¹⁴³ Minerva (Fig. 8) is represented with a large head and a petite frame. Venus (Fig. 9) is depicted with a larger and longer torso with broad waist and hips. Diana (Fig. 10) is portrayed with a short torso, long and muscular limbs, and a small head. These were considered

¹⁴³ Caplin, Roxey Ann. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*. 3.

the three forms of perfection, and it was wrong to change them, because the forms were already perfect. Therefore, the proportions must be studied and adapt the dress to the perfect body rather than change to a societal definition of beauty.¹⁴⁴ Caplin challenged that these popular statues are the image of beauty, because they are stuck in a curved position. A malformed spine would have to be considered beautiful, even if a person was never able to stand straight.

The triple goddess designates the three types of women allowed in the patriarchy- the maiden or the virgin, the mother, and the old crone. The maiden or the virgin is used for sexual pleasure, the mother is used for birthing and raising children. The old crone is allowed authority over the younger women if she has succeeded in her previous roles of maiden and mother according to patriarchal terms or she is ousted by society and ignored. The triple goddess archetype is uprooted by the wearing of corsets. Motherhood and sexual desirability of the maiden are seen as polar opposites. Motherhood is meant to mean the end of a woman being a virgin and sexually idealized. Within the patriarchy, once a woman has had children her body is a means of production. The corset upsets this balance, because a woman can accentuate her sex appeal with the corset and present a youthful figure. Understanding of the triple goddess can be seen in the Victorian era. Caplin wrote about the Grecian goddesses Venus, Minerva, Diana. Venus is the youthful and sexual Maiden. Minerva is the goddess of wisdom, justice, and victory and has the qualities of the mother. Diana, the

¹⁴⁴ It is worth mentioning that all three goddesses are shown as white, able, relatively skinny, young, and classically feminine and there are many more ways for women to be beautiful.

goddess of wild animals and the hunt, is similar to the old crone because of her wild independence and role in aiding conception and delivery.

Caplin's credibility is based around understanding women in society and the feminine body. According to Caplin, women's bodies differ from men. Women have a lower center of gravity with shorter legs, broad hips, closer knees, and smaller support for the body. Because of these differences, support for the body is essential for the sake of making daily activity like walking easier. The biological difference in the body needs to be accounted for in dress making. Health is beauty- illness is macabre. Caplin refutes the idea that corsets are physically damaging, because if they were, women would have stopped wearing them. When properly fitted and constructed, a corset benefits the body. Corsets allow women to become closer to natural perfection by supporting the weakness of a woman's body.¹⁴⁵ Anyone harmed by corsets is at fault for following temporary fashion and changing nature- these women are the ones guilty of vanity. Sensible women wear a corset that fits the body and is constructed well. Because of their views, women rejected medical advice from men. If women were comfortable and healthy in a corset, what reason would they have to believe the medical man with no understanding of the garment and the differences between man and woman? Caplin is distinctly against tight lacing. because it is ill advised to go against nature, and there are negative consequences to forcing the body to fit the corset instead of focusing on

¹⁴⁵ Caplin, Roxey Ann. Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body. 36.

supporting the needs of the body. Corsets are meant to add to the strength of the body and not to take over the muscle and strength of the natural body.

The fit on corsets was incredibly important both for comfort and style. If the corset was not made for the body, there will be discomfort due to the corset working against the body and the lack of support to the bust. The desired silhouette is not achieved when the corset is ill-fitted. In an advertisement for Thomson's Glove-Fitting Corset published in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (January 1868), it states, "no dress, however well made, can fit properly if the corset does not."¹⁴⁶ The smooth torso and defined figure was not achievable if the corset and the natural body were not unified.

Corset Myths

Myths about corsets have been perpetuated by modern historians being uncritical of bias in primary resources.¹⁴⁷ Many primary documents from the period made claims, especially medical claims, that were not credible. However, the bias has been passed down through time. Uncritical handling of biased advertisements to statements that defy modern logic being treated as fact without consideration of evidence. A common myth about Victorian women and corsetry is that they removed ribs to achieve a slim waist. Surgeries on the abdomen would have been incredibly difficult and risky during the Victorian era. Infection was a deadly factor, and no one would take the risk for simply beauty modification reasons. Most surgeries were on

¹⁴⁶ Waugh, Norah. *Corsets and Crinolines*. New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts, 1991. 105.

¹⁴⁷ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 72.

patients who were close to death anyway, thus the risk was worth taking in those instances. The idea that ribs were removed was caused by sensationalized media that was thoughtlessly repeated by historians.¹⁴⁸ Uncritical historians led to lies being treated as irrefutable truths

Corset Bias

The Victorian era was self-diagnosed with five morals: plagues, corsets, tobacco, gambling, strong drink, and illegal speculation.¹⁴⁹ A type of underwear was compared to disease, addiction, and crime. Men did not force women to wear corsets. In fact, male authority figures, including many doctors, opposed corsetry.¹⁵⁰ As women leaned into extravagant fashion, men in authority tried to pull them down. In the mid- Victorian era, Anglo Saxon anti-corset leagues were formed to promote practical clothing but they mainly advocated against corsets and led corset opposition.¹⁵¹ It was common to read headlines along the lines of an 1871 Metropolitan magazine headline ‘the size of the waist is more important than the size of the brain’.¹⁵² Writing against corsets was about controlling women’s bodies and maintaining tradition.¹⁵³ Women maintaining their youth was a threat to men. Anti-corset writer, J.J. Rousseau, a Genevan philosopher from the previous century, 1700s, said, “I agree that a drooping breast or a swollen belly is very

¹⁴⁸ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 73.

¹⁴⁹ Fontanel, Béatrice. *Support and Seduction: The History of Corsets and Bras*. 53.

¹⁵⁰ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*.35.

¹⁵¹ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 39.

¹⁵² Bowman, Karen. *Corsets and Codpieces: A History of Outrageous Fashion, from Roman times to the Modern Era*. 100.

¹⁵³ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 39.

unattractive in a twenty-year-old, but it is no longer shocking in a thirty-year-old.”¹⁵⁴ It was viewed as unnatural for a woman to maintain her youthful beauty with age.

The corset is an object symbolic in the Madonna whore complex. The corset accentuates the feminine body and insists on a sexual identity. Corsets were a powerful symbol for women, because they were seen as socially acceptable and were not a diminishing factor to a woman's relationship with God. Combined sexual desire and motherhood broke the societal understanding of women's sexuality. By minimizing the waist and accentuating breasts and hips, a woman can match the feminine ideal both sexuality and fecundity.¹⁵⁵ Corsets made a woman's body scream sexual difference by highlighting the sexually dimorphic curves.¹⁵⁶ Even as a woman's body changed from age and multiple pregnancies, the corset allowed a woman to present the curves of a young, fertile, and sexual maiden. Corsets could aid the fantasy of internal youth and beauty.

The Lancet, on April 24, 1869, published an article by Dr. Duffin from King's College Hospital describing deformed kidneys in a young woman.¹⁵⁷ The twenty-six-year-old had double floating kidneys. This condition was when the kidney was higher in the torso than it's supposed to be. Two French doctors found thirty women and five men with the deformity. "Out of 35 observations collected by Dr. Fritz, of Paris, 30 were in females. Floating kidney is most common on the right side. Cruveilhier

¹⁵⁴ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 171.

¹⁵⁵ Wosk, Julie. *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age*. 62.

¹⁵⁶ Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 463.

¹⁵⁷ Duffin, Dr. "King's College Hospital A Case of Floating Kidney." *The Lancet*. Vol 1 (1869). 565.

seems to think that the use of the corset in the female, and men wearing too tight clothes, are the main causes of the displacement.”¹⁵⁸ Doctors theorized the condition was caused by corsets and tight clothes. A year before, the *Lancet* would publish the death of a New York woman from apoplexy of the lungs caused by regular tightlacing.¹⁵⁹

In 1879, *The British Medical Journal* published the preaching of The Rev. H. R. Haweis against tightlacing. He argued against the practice, but he does not denote a difference between tight lacing and corsets as a whole other than that “his ‘riding belt’ ... are much less harmful than the old-fashioned laced stays.”¹⁶⁰ The dress reform movement claimed success because the average waist grew to twenty-five inches, but this reflects the changing beauty standards more than a submission to authority. The reverend Haweis was labeled as understanding leading doctors and preached “‘Death from natural causes!’ Lay no such flattering unction to your sole. ‘Death from rut in the liver and corn on the heart, produced by tight-lacing.’” Many believed that it was a Christian failing to tight-lace, because the practice was viewed as vain and physically damaging. The medical journal published the work of a Christian leader instead of a writer with a medical background because the public debate of corsets and tight lacing were moral in origin and not medical.

Medical publications frequently made comparisons between medical equipment (prosthesis and spinal correctors) and corsets. These medical professionals use the methods and language of the very garment they dismissed as harmful. Medical

¹⁵⁸ Medical News. *The Lancet*. Vol 1 (1868). 675.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ “Tight-Lacing.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 954 (1879): 559–559.

professionals would constrict to the body in the same way as the corset but the effect on the body was supposedly different. Doctors could appropriate the language of corsets in one breath and disavow corsets in the next. The main contributor to the belief that corsets were bad for the health of women was the biased writing by doctors from the period. It is not hard to find stories of young women dying and corsets being to blame. Anytime a young skinny woman died unexpectedly, the doctors searched for deformed organs, and the corset was blamed for the tragedy.¹⁶¹ In 1859, a widely circulated report said, “a young woman, whose thin waist was admired by all her rivals, died two days after the ball... her family decided to find out the cause of her sudden death at such a young age and had an autopsy performed. The findings were rather surprising: the liver had been pierced by three of the girl’s ribs!”¹⁶² This testament was not alone. A newspaper reported in 1859 a twenty-three-year-old Parisian woman had a thirteen-inch waist at a ball and died two days later from her liver being punctured by three ribs after extreme stomach pains. Her autopsy reported that “her stomach was nearly severed in half leaving a canal only as narrow as a raven’s feather.”¹⁶³ Cases like this are known as tightlaced livers. Specimen livers were divided down the middle contributing to tight lacing of corsets. Male deaths were not subjected to nearly as much scrutiny. Doctors treated vanity as a deadly disease caused by corsets. Corsets were the demons affecting women's bodies.

¹⁶¹ Bowman, Karen. *Corsets and Codpieces: A History of Outrageous Fashion, from Roman times to the Modern Era*. 98.

¹⁶² Fontanel, Béatrice. *Support and Seduction: The History of Corsets and Bras*. 53.

¹⁶³ Bowman, Karen. *Corsets and Codpieces: A History of Outrageous Fashion, from Roman times to the Modern Era*. 98.

Doctors from the time claimed corsets caused multiple bodily issues.¹⁶⁴ An incomplete list of illnesses blamed on corsets are:

apoplexy, asthma, chlorosis, consumption, cough, diseases of the kidney, displacement of the bones of the chest, disturbance of the circulation, disturbance of the functions of the diaphragm, dropsy of the belly, epilepsy, fainting, hemorrhoids, hernia of the bladder, hunchback, hysteria, impediment to the action of the lungs, impediments in the action of the heart, inability to suckle in consequence of pressure on the breasts, sagging breasts, inadequate nipples, inclination of the mouth of the uterus towards the sacrum, inflammation of the liver, leucorrhea, loss of appetite, lung abscesses, melancholy, miscarriages, pain in the stomach, premature labor, scirrhus, in the mammary glands, and ultimately cancer, sores on the chest, sterility, swollen feet, ugly children, unhealthy children, want of energy, and weakening of the thorax.¹⁶⁵

Many of these issues affect places on the body that are not covered by the corset or are related to motherhood. Corsets were blamed for maternal troubles. The Parisian, Pierre Boitard, wrote “a very vain woman who delivered only crippled infants because she crippled them in her womb to keep a slim waist” in *Manuel-physiologie De La Bonne Compagnie*.¹⁶⁶ The desire for control over her body was blamed for her dead children. If a woman wanted to look desirable based on societal standards, she ruined her chances of motherhood. The fear that corsets negatively affected fertility still exists in the modern era.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 170.

¹⁶⁵ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 67.

¹⁶⁶ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 76.

¹⁶⁷ Davies, Mel. “Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*.

The argument by Victorian doctors against the corset was disputed by the medical benefits of supporting the abdomen.¹⁶⁸ Doctors still said corsets were harmful, and women still wore corsets.¹⁶⁹ One example of anti-corset text is 'Madre Natura versus the Moloch of Fashion' published in 1874 by the illustrator and Victorian writer, under the pseudonym Luke Limner (real name John Leighton.) He credited corsets for the cause of ninety-seven diseases "according to the testimony of eminent medical men" examples are "Pains in the head...according to Bonnaud" to "sickly and short life... [according to] Camper."¹⁷⁰ Doctors would say women were failing as mothers because of the vain desire to wear a corset.

In 1998, modern tightlacer, Colleen Ruby Gau wore 1870-style corsets laced three inches less than the natural waist measurements. Colleen Ruby Gau was studied with modern medical tools. Her study revealed losing 9% of the lungs' tidal volume as measured by spirometer, with the range from 2% to 29% which diminished lung capacity and is significant in understanding the effect of a tightlaced corset, but not a corset tightened to properly fit.¹⁷¹ When a woman wears a tight corset, the accessory respiratory muscles are used for breathing preventing deep breaths in a similar way to pregnant women and obese people also breathe from the upper- diaphragm.¹⁷² There is little doubt that a tightly laced corset has a considerable effect, but using one corset as representative of all corsets is a gross simplification.

¹⁶⁸ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 171.

¹⁶⁹ Modern doctors recommend corsets as treatment for scoliosis.

¹⁷⁰ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 67.

¹⁷¹ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 69.

¹⁷² Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 70.

Another dramatic association with the corset is fainting women. Most modern readers hear corsets and think of a woman tightly laced to the point they lose their breath and gracefully falling in the arms of a man or on to a chaise lounge or fainting couch. While some reports may directly support the accusation, the handle of events were more about romanticizing feminine weakness.¹⁷³ When a woman faints, she supports the idea that women are weak which was romanticized as swooning. It was perceived that the lady had been squeezed by a man to death. Steele presents the argument for fainting as “the eroticized enactment of feminine ‘death’” even though she personally was unconvinced.¹⁷⁴ The continuous fear and aggression towards the corset steams from women gaining control of their bodies by subtly taking it from the men. Corsets are used as an expression of bodily autonomy. The physical ailments were blamed on corset for vanity and moral failing.

Corsets symbol

Mid Victorian Britain had prudish standards for women’s sexuality. Corsets changed the body to draw attention to the parts of the body most associated with maternity (large bust and rounded hips) and lifted and shaped the torso to hide the signs of a natural body aging and sagging.¹⁷⁵ Corsets were seen as a necessary part of a proper woman’s ensemble. The corset truly makes the phrase ‘straight laced’ literal. The stiff boning was viewed as a signifier of moral fortitude.¹⁷⁶ Some misogynists viewed

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 71.

¹⁷⁵ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 194.

¹⁷⁶ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 215.

the woman's body as weak and in need of support. Doctors, hygienists, and later feminist saw it as unnatural to change the shape of the body and believed it was harmful physically and mentally.¹⁷⁷ In their minds, corsets were erotic and immoral.¹⁷⁸

Corsets, and fashion at large, were an acceptable form of self-expression as long as that expression did not deviate too far from social expectations.¹⁷⁹ Victorian women's fashion was deeply moralized. Women with tiny, corseted waists or large crinolines were accused of being vain. If a woman followed the fashion trends she was labeled as vain and empty.¹⁸⁰ Women who dressed poorly or who didn't lace their corsets very tight were considered morally promiscuous and socially inferior. In 1864, a *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* article stated that it was reasoned that the choice to not wear a corset reflected promiscuous behavior "when the general licentiousness of manners and morals was accompanied by a corresponding indecency of dress."¹⁸¹ This led to a society where women were once again expected to tread a fine line where any decision was met with ridicule. The corset, as well as the decision to wear one and how to wear it, was not immune to the mentality that a woman can be blamed or considered wrong no matter what she does.

The corset (in both the Victorian era and now) is a significant sexual symbol that can put women in either a submissive role or a dominant role. Some scholars and

¹⁷⁷ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 24.

¹⁷⁸ Wosk, Julie. *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age*. 62.

¹⁷⁹ Prescott, Heather Munro. *Review of The Corset: A Cultural History*.

¹⁸⁰ Mitchell, Rebecca. *Fashioning the Victorians: A Critical Sourcebook*. Dress, Body, Culture. 93.

¹⁸¹ Wosk, Julie. *Women and the Machine: Representations from the Spinning Wheel to the Electronic Age*. 63.

corseted women postulate that wearing a corset is a pleasurable and sensual experience.¹⁸² Tight lacing can even be read in a fetishist's lens as a masochistic pushing of physical limits. Though most women did not purposefully use corsets as a fetish object, it is conjecture against the idea that the corset is sexually oppressive. The consensual control of the body can be a sexually liberating practice.

Sexual meaning of corsets

Corsets as a garment and a symbol have different meanings for each viewer and wearer. For women, corsets became a socially acceptable way of expressing sexual individuality. The corset was sexualized for the same reason any underwear is sexualized- it is the last layer before nudity, but it reveals more than what is acceptable for daily life.¹⁸³ It builds excitement in the undressing process and the mystery and reveal is erotic. In the Mid- Victorian era, nudity was more common than in the past. British Victorian idealized Greek statues that showed nude and undressing figures normalizing the sexual stimuli. A woman in a corset and a petticoat was not a public image. Concealment is the key to what is considered intimate and exciting across time. The act of undressing can act as a foreplay.

Typically, sex is preceded by getting naked. It was common for a woman to need help dressing and undressing, especially if the corset did not feature a busk. This means the husband would touch the wife, and stimulating touches built the anticipation, like unwrapping a present. The act of unlacing became publicly sexualized. Unlacing

¹⁸² Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 219.

¹⁸³ Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 451.

transformed into a metaphor for the loss of virginity.¹⁸⁴ The image of unlacing the corset in an erotic context can be seen as far back as the 1830s.¹⁸⁵ The corset maintained the virginal body, and the process of a man removing the garment became highly erotic. The act of 'deflowering' the woman was performed by inserting the laces through the holes of the corset.¹⁸⁶ Even a man removing the hook and eyes on a busk was sexualized.

Corsets are not only a visual stimulus for men's sexual arousal, but also a tactile stimulus for women.¹⁸⁷ The corset became crucial for marital sexual relations during the 1860s. Gustave Droze wrote *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé* (Man, Woman and Baby) with the argument that, "lacing a woman's corset seemed to inspire limitless emotions in a man who could observe the waist contracting and the silhouette taking shape under his own hands. In this way the corset allowed the man to shape a woman as he wished."¹⁸⁸ The sexual contentment, Gustave Droze believed, led to married bliss. For some women, the corset brings more internalized attention to her body with defined curves and edges. Valerie Steele argued, that "wearing a corset means being an adult woman with a sexual role to play in marriage. Some go as far as to say that wearing a corset is extremely pleasurable, and therefore sensual, for a woman."¹⁸⁹ The garment made sex more pleasurable for the woman because of the sense of control. There are theories about the kinky implication of corsets and the physical restriction is a form of Victorian

¹⁸⁴ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 154.

¹⁸⁵ Steele, Valerie. "The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism." 455.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁷ Kidwell, Claudia Brush., and Valerie Steele. *Men and Women: Dressing the Part*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989. 55.

¹⁸⁸ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 219.

¹⁸⁹ Barbier, Muriel, and Boucher, Shazia. *The Story of Lingerie*. 219.

BDSM. Corsets have always been erotic, but the subversive sexual connotation developed later. The connection of eroticism and pain originated from men looking back on history rather than Victorian women.¹⁹⁰

Newspapers during the 1860s vocalize disdain for the expansive Hoopskirt. “One Dundee newspaper reported on 15 august 1862: Crinoline has gone on expanding...till it has reached today’s preposterous dimensions...You may reason with a lady about the expense of the fashion...You may as well talk to a stone.”¹⁹¹ The writer expostulates his reasons for the large skirts mainly the overall impracticality (weight, requires slow motions, and needs large spaces) and how it makes women unapproachable. “How monstrous and indelicate it looks on others; you may point out how uncomfortable it is to walk by her side.”¹⁹² The quote suggests that at least some men were disapproving of the Victorian fashion trends that did not center male pleasure. Men could not get close enough to women to casually touch them. Because hoop skirts were more comfortable due to the corset, the dismissal of the corset would make it easier to grope women.

By wearing a corset, a woman of any background could achieve the societal standard of beauty and represent herself as a sexually empowered woman. The comparison to armor was commonly made. “The English especially believed that a straight-laced woman was not loose. Yet, Victorian women (women in Great Britain, France, and the United States) understood that the corset also functioned as an adjunct

¹⁹⁰ Steele, Valerie. “The Corset: Fashion and Eroticism.” 450.

¹⁹¹ Bowman, Karen. *Corsets and Codpieces: A History of Outrageous Fashion, from Roman times to the Modern Era*. 89.

¹⁹² Ibid.

to female sexual beauty. By simultaneously constructing an image of irreproachable propriety and one of blatant sexual allure, the corset allowed women to articulate sexual subjectivity in a socially acceptable way.”¹⁹³

Conclusion

Corsets provided erotic and societal empowerment for Victorian women. Although shapewear changed significantly from 1850-1870, the significance was unchanging. Victorian women were tightly controlled, and the corset put them in control of their body. Women could express themselves and ignore the moralized hate thrown by authority for personal empowerment. Corsets were a way for British women in the mid-nineteenth century to display their sexual empowerment when they lacked other options. Corset construction was influenced by the Industrial Revolution and other developments in time. Corsets were made cheaper and faster, and corsets met the demands of women from all walks of life. Corsets were worn by women in British colonies to maintain their respectability and to carry on traditional British gender expression. Corset advertisements and publications centered on sexuality and women's experiences about their bodies. Corsets were targeted under the guise of vanity and physical harm, both of which were associated with anxieties of attacks on traditional women's roles. Victorian corset inspired apparel is now used to represent gender and sexual identity in the current period.

¹⁹³ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset a Cultural History*. 35.

I felt comfortable wearing a corset, and I was excited by the choice to wear a corset. Empowerment through fashion is all about freedom of choice. The clothes we wear are a strong way of projecting identity, both now and in the Victorian era. Fashion can be a tool to express identity and support the lifestyle of the wearer. Women should dress in a way that best allows them to feel most themselves and move through the world with ease. Fashion is an often-overlooked form of personal identification. Wearing what you want is a feminist act because it denies patriarchal pressures to conform and places the wearer in a position of power instead of allowing others to dictate what you do with your body. Freedom in fashion is a crucial way to reach bodily autonomy.

Images of corsets

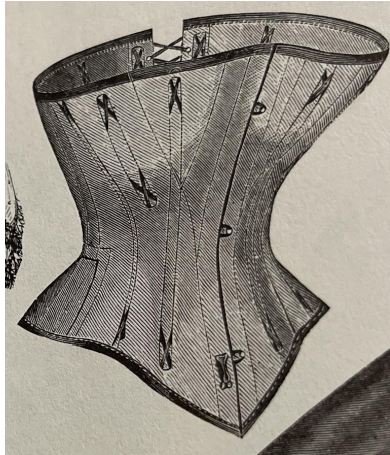


Figure 11: Corset from 1865. Grafton, Carol Belanger. Victorian Fashions A Pictorial Archive. Dover Publication, 1999. 6.

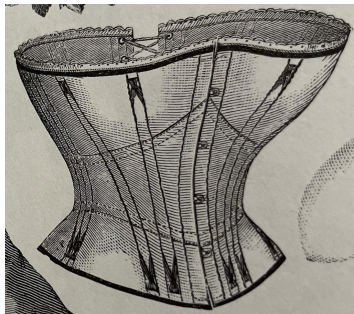


Figure 12: Corset from 1867. Grafton, Carol Belanger. Victorian Fashions A Pictorial Archive. Dover Publication, 1999. 8.

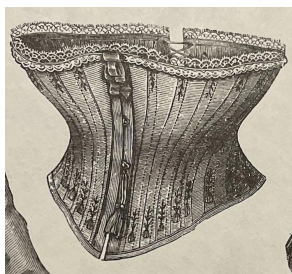


Figure 13: Corset from 1870. Grafton, Carol Belanger. Victorian Fashions A Pictorial Archive. Dover Publication, 1999. 13.

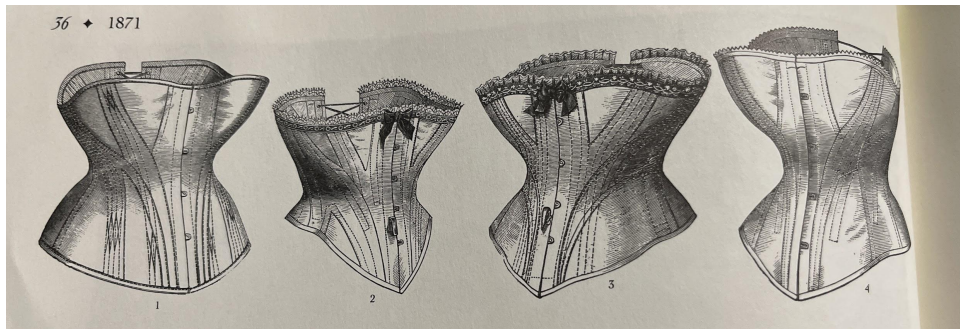


Figure 14: Corsets from 1871. Grafton, Carol Belanger. Victorian Goods and Merchandise 2300 Illustrations. Dover Publication, 1997. 36

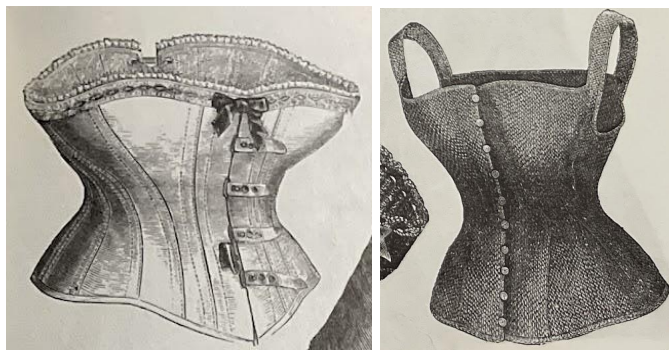


Figure 15: Corset from 1872. Grafton, Carol Belanger. Victorian Fashions A Pictorial Archive. Dover Publication, 1999. 15.

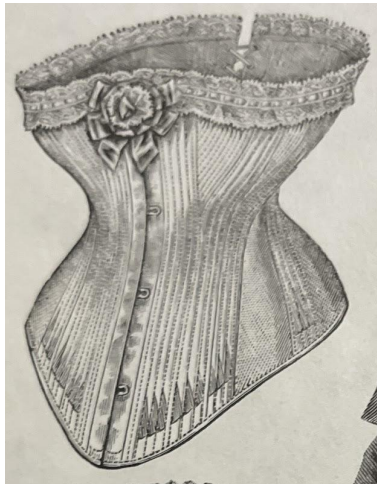


Figure 16: Corset from 1877. Grafton, Carol Belanger. *Victorian Fashions A Pictorial Archive*. Dover Publication, 1999. 20.

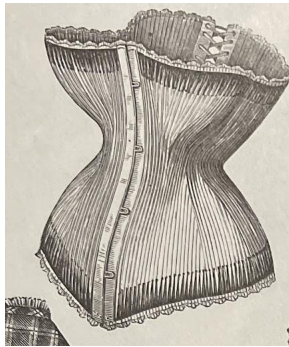


Figure 17: Corset from 1878. Grafton, Carol Belanger. *Victorian Fashions A Pictorial Archive*. Dover Publication, 1999. 21.



Figure 18: Grafton, Carol Belanger. Victorian Goods and Merchandise 2300 Illustrations. Dover Publication, 1997. 104.



Figure 19: Grafton, Carol Belanger. Victorian Goods and Merchandise 2300 Illustrations. Dover Publication, 1997. 105.

Glossary

Bone/Boning- flexible supports sewn into a garment to support the silhouette, historically made of metal or whalebone. The name came from the original whalebones used in corsetry.

Busk- a long flat support (wood, horn, or metal) inserted in the center of corsets or stays made of wood steel, bone, or ivory.

Cartridge pleat- several small, rounded folds together in a tight wave pattern.

Casing- a cover.

Chemise- a knee length cotton or linen undershirt meant to absorb sweat and cushion the corset and torso from each other, prevent circulation restrictions and give the body necessary wiggle room.

Corded- strips of fabric in a cord shape that are more flexible than boning but are not as structured or supportive.

Darts- a sewn fold that shapes a garment, it is folded in an acute angle

Embellishments- Added details or decoration added to a garment for aesthetic purposes.

Eyelets- a small ring of metal around a small hole that has a cord or string threaded through it. Eyelets are one piece of metal while grommets are made of two pieces of metal.

Flat pleat- now also commonly known as knife pleats or accordion pleats, the fabric will lie flat with the under-pleat half that of the over pleat.

Goring- A slash in a skirt filled with a triangular piece of fabric, this adds width to the bottom hem, used to create a flared end, many can be used in one garment.

Hoop skirt- an undergarment, a series of metal hoops worn in a skirt in a bell shape. Could create a voluminous skirt with much less fabric.

Lacing- when a string or ribbon are threaded through a series of holes in a garment to create an adjustable closure.

Petticoat- an under garment, a second skirt worn under another dress or skirt. It was light and loose and was often layered with other undergarments. It provided additional volume and smoothed the seam of other undergarments so they would not show through the outerwear.

Pleat- a fold in the fabric held by stitching at one end near a seam

Seam- a place on the garment where two fabrics are stitched together. Usually, the thread can be seen to show the location of the seam.

Silhouette- the overall shape of the body created by the garment.

True waist- smallest circumference of the torso.

Wash leather- soft leather typically made of sheepskin meant to be absorbent.

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