

Straight-Laced: How the Corset Shaped Turn-of-the-Century English Femininity

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Corsets, as well as the public perception of corsetry, underwent dramatic changes in England in the years between 1885 and 1915; this changing and multi-faceted perception is the subject of this paper. Utilizing primary sources from turn-of-the-century women's magazines and periodicals, this paper discusses the medical, aesthetic, and sexual implications of the corset, and investigates the ways in which English femininity was quite literally shaped by the practice of corsetry.

The image of Vivien Leigh gripping a bedpost in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) as she is violently cinched into a delicately embroidered corset is familiar to generations of audiences around the world. It is a prime example of how the corset has been envisioned as a sort of archaic torture device for women, regardless of time period or national origin. Despite depictions like this however, images of corsetry in popular culture continue to attract a voyeuristic male gaze, sexualizing corsets and the women who wore them. Importantly, both of these views oversimplify the complex nature of corsetry, often disregarding contemporary public perceptions surrounding the practice at the turn of the twentieth century. The corset, as a woman's undergarment, is inherently gendered, and as an intimate article, is easily given sexual connotations.¹ In this regard, it has been unique throughout the history of fashion, for no other garment has so literally shaped the image of femininity and emphasized the differences between the male and female body.² This emphasis was perhaps never more distinct than in the years between 1885 and 1915, as the corset, and the increasingly polarized debates surrounding it, served as a way to define femininity in late Victorian England.

Scholars in the fields of art and fashion history have paid a good deal of attention to the corset and its place in Victorian society. This scholarship largely centers on two subjects: the social aspects of corsetry and the material culture of corsets themselves. Art historians like David Kunzle have examined the expression of sexuality and fetish through the practice of corsetry, and the criticisms that arose as a result of this particularly public form of sexual expression.³ Fashion historians such as Valerie Steele have analyzed the corset and its broader social implications, as well as its development from its earliest forms to the present day.⁴ Fashion historian Lee Summers has focused more specifically on the material culture of the Victorian corset and the ways in which it developed and changed in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁵ Building on this scholarship, this essay examines debates about the corset that arose in English women's magazines from 1885-1915. It investigates how

¹ David Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism: A Social History of the Corset, Tight-Lacing, and Other Forms of Body-Sculpture in the West* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982).

² Valerie Steele. *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

³ Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*.

⁴ Steele, *The Corset*.

⁵ Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (New York: Berg, 2001).

advertisements and media portrayals of corsetry shaped public opinion and fueled debate about the fashioning of women's bodies. At the turn of the century, when industrialization and urbanization allowed for both the increased publication of periodicals as well as increased accessibility to less expensive, mass-produced fashions like corsets, magazines such as *Womanhood*, *The Gentlewoman and Modern Life*, *The London Journal*, and *Bow Bells* provided editorials, advertisements, and articles that were intended to influence public perceptions of corsetry.

My essay analyzes media portrayals of the corset from a variety of perspectives, addressing arguments that were both explicit and implicit in turn-of-the-century publications. I examine the health benefits and risks of corsets with which Victorian women were particularly concerned, and the polarized nature of the arguments both promoting and decrying their health effects. In the same vein, feminine body image was essentially defined by corset styles, which my essay examines by addressing the question of what these "feminine ideals" were which were so sought after, and how they came into prominence. Additionally, I explore how the media addressed the inherent sexuality of such an intimate garment, especially during this period of relative sexual repression. This contrasts the underlying sense of fetishism associated with many corset styles of the time and poses another question: who were the fetishists in this regard, men or women? In this essay, I argue that the practice of corsetry was the defining feature of late Victorian and Edwardian femininity, and contemporary arguments both for and against it characterized English attitudes regarding women's agency and place in society at the turn of the twentieth century.

The arguments surrounding corsets at the turn of the century were varied in the discussion of their effects on women's health, as proponents of the practice declared it a necessity for feminine health, while opponents decried it as unnatural and damaging to women's bodies.⁶ For Victorian society, femininity was biological and therefore centered in the female body and its distinctive functions. As a result, healthy female bodies, or more specifically those bodies which were able to produce and nurture children, were seen as particularly feminine. The corset created an image of a healthy, feminine, childbearing body, while simultaneously providing a degree of necessary support for that body. The function of corsets was not solely to constrict the abdomen or make the waist appear thinner—in a time before the advent of brassieres, support for the breasts was still necessary for comfort, and was mainly found in the form of these whalebone-stiffened garments. The corset compressed and lifted the bosom in such a distinct way that by the late 1890's the "monobosom" came into vogue; as a result, corsets became more structured to support the breasts while still maintaining this hourglass silhouette.⁷ Women's health advocates, corset companies, and early feminists alike presented the necessity of the corset for support of the bust, notably in advertisements, editorials, and advertorials—which combined the two—targeted at women. One particular advertorial, published in the family magazine *Bow Bells* in 1895, begins with the concession that women, at their creation, certainly did not need a corset; nevertheless, "the support of a well-fitting corset or pair of stays is beneficial to the feminine form in many, if not in most, cases."⁸ The noted publisher, dress reformer, and health writer Ada Ballin penned a version of an advertorial in her

⁶ Steele, *The Corset*, 75.

⁷ Susan Brown, *Fashion: The Definitive History of Costume and Style* (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2012), 229.

⁸ Ada S. Ballin, "Stays v. Corset," *Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature and Art for Family Reading*, 1895, 399. Note: This essay utilizes the terms "corset" and "stays" interchangeably, as sources from the turn of the century make little or no distinction between the two.

monthly magazine, *Womanhood*, also promoting the use of the corset as a necessity for the support of the feminine form. She explained her reluctance to join the crusade against the corset, writing, “I consider that if corsets are cut on anatomical principles they are not only free from objection, but beneficial hygienically and artistically.”⁹ The cut of the corset being the deciding factor in her argument reinforced the idea that in the field of women’s health, the main benefit of the corset was to support the figure, rather than constrain it.

The idea that the corset could be beneficial to women was also echoed in Ballin’s 1885 work, *The Science of Dress in Theory and Practice*. Ballin, as a student at University College, London, began her career as a dress reformer and health writer after studying hygiene and public health.¹⁰ Her publication of *Science* garnered attention from newspapers and magazines, and she continued work as a journalist and columnist, writing largely on subjects relating to clothing and children as she fought to draw attention to the ways in which health and clothing were related.¹¹ In *Science*, her chief concern regarding the function of the corset was the necessity that it be made to fit the body, rather than the body forced to fit the corset.¹² She also argued that the corset was entirely unnecessary on women of a slighter build, and should be used chiefly by women who lack a natural definition of figure.¹³

Evidence for corsets’ health benefits was often pseudo-scientific, illustrating their necessity not only as a source of support, but also as a tool for the prevention of diseases such as tuberculosis. Ballin, in her article on corset reform, presented the importance of corsetry in a case study of a young woman on the verge of coming down with “consumption,” who was warned against wearing “the old-fashioned, hard, unyielding corset,” lest her illness progress as a result of her discomfort.¹⁴ Ballin contrasts the science of her example by disputing the erroneous assumption that “women breathe through the upper part of the lungs, while men’s breathing is chiefly abdominal.”¹⁵ This misinformation provides an insight into the ways that Victorians understood public health, while both informing English society and using scientific jargon to sell corsets. Within Ballin’s seemingly journalistic article, the climax of her case study is her consumptive subject’s discovery of the *À La Victoire* corset. It is through this discovery that the subject is able to fulfill the advice of doctors, thus preventing her consumption, while still allowing her adequate support.¹⁶ By linking health to feminine beauty, it was implied that corsets improved women’s health in addition to their supposed purpose of creating a thinner silhouette.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw an increased emphasis on the promotion of physical wellness as well as an increasing number of women entering the realm of sports and recreation—a world that previously catered exclusively to men.¹⁷ Women previously had very few avenues open to them and were even further confined by their wardrobes. Traditional corsets restricted breathing and provided no airflow against the skin, increasing the risk for overheating as a result of exercise. An 1897 advertisement in the *London Journal* describes the problem faced by athletic

⁹ Ada S. Ballin, “Corset Reform,” *Womanhood*, February 1905, 19.

¹⁰ Anne M. Sebba, “Ballin, Ada Sarah (1862–1906)” in Lawrence Goldman, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ada S. Ballin, *The Science of Dress in Theory and Practice* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1885), 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁴ Ballin, “Corset Reform,” 19.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 149.

women long before the invention of the sports bra: “The athletic fad, which is more than a fad, absolutely precludes any thought of a tight corset about the ribs, but does not insist upon no corset at all; on the contrary, demands a boned bodice at least.”¹⁸ With this increased interest in female recreation, the corset industry found a demand for sport corsets, designed with ventilation between the boning and more flexibility for exercise. They were often shorter, allowing for more comfortable movement of the hips, and were made from more breathable fabrics.¹⁹ The advent of this type of corset made actual recreation more accessible to women, allowing for the possibility of a healthier lifestyle. In this way, the corset adapted to the athletic woman and enabled her to improve her health and vitality. Femininity, however, was still a concern; certain types of exercise remained taboo so as to avoid damaging women’s feminine appeal by giving them unsightly, masculine muscles.²⁰ Health was therefore inextricably linked to gender, and ideal femininity attributed to a healthy and vital woman.

The nature of corsets as a device to compress the abdomen inherently carried some negative implications regarding women’s health, especially in light of trends such as tight-lacing. Critics of these trends were numerous, and, unlike those who advocated for corsets under the guise of advertorials, critics of tight-lacing portrayed corsetry as detrimental to women’s health and comfort. This criticism carried the additional fear that tight-lacing could potentially damage the female reproductive system, thus physically damaging a woman’s femininity. An 1887 article in *The Saturday Review* of London introduces an element of philosophy and evolution to the question of tight-lacing. Drawing on the popularity of Darwinian theory, it argues that were women intended to have 13-inch waists, humankind would have evolved to make that a natural and desirable feature for the purpose of attracting men.²¹ As an appeal to logos, this argument is more unusual than the numerous appeals to pathos in editorials, which use vivid description and illustration to reinforce the risks of corsets, more than just their evolutionary frivolity. A survey conducted as part of an 1894 article in *Bow Bells* interviewed a small number of Parisian women in the hope that their attitudes toward corsetry might influence English ladies. The overwhelming conclusion of this article is that though general opinion of the corset was relatively unfavorable, the practice had become too ingrained in the lives of both French and English women to be abandoned at the drop of a hat.²² As a final condemnation of the practice of corsetry, the author supplements the survey by presenting a list of digestive maladies that may result from excessive compression of the abdomen, all of which are markedly unladylike, and presents the ideal of femininity not as a tight-laced corset, but as a corset appropriately formed to the body.²³ This survey vividly illustrates just how ubiquitous corsetry was in English culture, reflecting its importance to Victorian femininity, while grudgingly acknowledging its potential health risks.

The condemnation of tight-lacing because of its medical risks was a common theme throughout discussions of corsets’ practicality. Horror stories warned women away from the evils of this practice, such as one account in *The Playgoer and Society* of a young woman who dropped dead at a dance because her corset prevented blood

¹⁸ “Fashions in Corsets,” *The London Journal, and Weekly Record of Literature, Science, and Art*, May 1897, 9.

¹⁹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 161.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “The Philosophy of Tight-Lacing,” *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, December 17, 1887, 816.

²² Flora, “Health, Beauty, and the Toilet,” *Bow Bells: A Magazine of General Literature and Art for Family Reading*, November 23, 1894, 515.

²³ *Ibid.*

flow.²⁴ This anecdote was accompanied by descriptions of injuries incurred by mothers who insisted on lacing their daughters too tightly, “even when the skin round the waist has been broken... and not only causing them great agony, but inducing wounds that have been very long in healing.”²⁵ Tight-lacing in England was more prevalent, or at least more obvious, than elsewhere, as is evidenced in an 1893 article from Battle Creek, Michigan. This article presented an American point of view on an English story, and although its original source was ambiguous, the story provided a glimpse into the lives of those women for whom tight-lacing was an addiction. The article contained the transcript of an interview with an English corset manufacturer, who apparently took great pride in the claim that her customers were the tightest-lacing in London. Her assistants had waists laced to 14 and 12 inches, respectively, shocking the interviewer, who had never seen a waist so small.²⁶ However, the ages and natural waist circumference of these women are not mentioned, so although they were tight-laced, the extent of the restriction on their bodies is unclear. The article ends by addressing the growing trend of young girls being forced to tight-lace by their schools and mothers, and the troubling increase in the number of girls being put into corsets at younger ages than in years prior.²⁷ Together, these accounts convey a sense that despite the clear health risks of tight-lacing, corsetry—when done in moderation—was a quintessential part of Victorian society, and that its evils lay chiefly in the more extreme styles which could result in health problems and damage to the female body.

The subject of young girls’ corsets greatly concerned Ada Ballin, and she addressed this at length in her writings. In *The Science of Dress in Theory and Practice*, Ballin expresses concern over “baby stays,” a form of pseudo-corset often put on very young girls to give their clothes a more attractive form, and to prepare them for real corsets, somewhat akin to a modern training bra.²⁸ Ballin argues that even these seemingly harmless contraptions could deform children’s bodies by putting unnatural pressure on their growing bone structures. Since Ballin believes that a properly-fitted corset should do no damage, she expresses concern for little girls who lack the curves to hold up a corset and must resort to tightening these “baby stays” to have them stay put. This, she argues, appeared harmless to the mothers who practiced it because they themselves could not feel the pressure being put on their daughters. She adds that such a practice was in fact the gateway to a future of tight-lacing, as it created an obsession with being cinched ever tighter.²⁹ In addition to the problem of baby stays, she presents the argument that even when girls are old enough to dress themselves, allowing them to wear stays without an understanding of how to use them was risky. Many corset styles produced at the turn of the century were made with two openings: one at the back, which closed with adjustable laces, and a second at the front, which closed with a set of buttons or hooks. When dressing and undressing, a woman would not necessarily unlace the entire set of stays, but rather leave the laces tied in place and hook or unhook the front as necessary.³⁰ Ballin asserts that a young girl who adjusts the laces on her stays once may not know to readjust them as she grows, thus putting the same strain and risk of deformity on her growing body as a careless mother would with baby stays.³¹

²⁴ Madge Humphry, “In the Boudoir,” *The Playgoer and Society Illustrated*, February 1912, 177.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Sel., “Tight Lacing in England,” *Good Health*, 1893, 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Ballin, *The Science of Dress Theory*, 104.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Fashion: The Definitive History of Costume and Style*, 229.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

The risk for scoliosis and other skeletal issues posed by corsetry during adulthood is echoed throughout Ballin's work. One of the more well-known aspects of her corset crusade is a pair of illustrations depicting the effects of corsetry on the female bone structure and internal organs (Fig. 1&2). One is a cross-section of a healthy, unconfined female body, while the second is constricted around the waist, with the ribs pressed inward and the organs shifted upward from the region of the waist.³² These visuals provide the simplest understanding of the corset's perceived damage on women's health: as a garment which was capable of inflicting terrible, unseen damage on the body, and thus on the biological center of femininity.

To late Victorian society, a female body capable of creating and maintaining a family represented femininity in its most essential form. Health and femininity went hand in hand. The practice of tight-lacing was acknowledged to cause health problems and possible deformities and was largely viewed as an isolated phenomenon rather than a legitimate trend. Instead, a corset which closely resembled a woman's natural form was seen as ideal, both for health and the maintenance of her femininity. The creation of new corset styles designed to promote women's health reflected the simultaneous desires for beauty and wellness by providing a happy medium between the ingrained cultural practice of corsetry and the desire for women to be free of the painful yoke of their corsets. The debates surrounding the health risks of corsets and

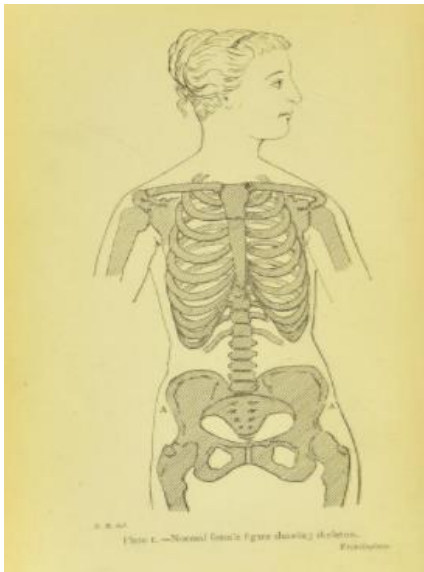


Figure 1

the subsequent solutions serve to characterize Victorian attitudes toward corsetry as both grudgingly accepting of its dangers, while simultaneously eager to use it to further promote the healthy feminine body. Corsetry's contributions to late Victorian female body image were varied, though images of tightly-laced bodies or exaggerated illustrations of corseted women frequently created an unrealistic standard for the bodies of women and girls in the period. Advertisements and fashion illustrations in magazines depicted women with large bosoms and hips thrust back, shaped by their corsets into the S-bend silhouette popular at the turn of the century.³³ Ladies' magazines illustrated women of various body types, all transformed by the magic of a single corset style, while other advertisements presented only the long-waisted, narrow-

female body image were varied, though images of tightly-laced bodies or

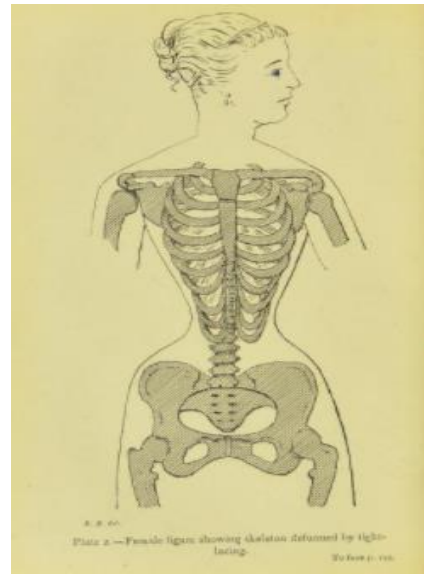


Figure 2

³² Ibid., ii.

³³ *Fashion: The Definitive History of Costume and Style*, 229.

hipped body type considered ideal for women of the 1900's.³⁴ Fashion illustrations promoted the corset as the ideal way to obtain a slim figure, thus encouraging women to mimic the images printed in advertisements and magazines. These images became part of popular culture, presenting an artistic rendering of Victorian and Edwardian femininity that defined beauty while selling the products that allowed women to imitate that beauty.

The "trend" of tight-lacing saw various levels of popularity among women of all classes at the turn of the century. Though by the 1880's doctors and other experts like Ada Ballin widely acknowledged it to be a dangerous practice, women still resorted to it as a means of beautification, and, perhaps more indirectly, to compete for male attention. The Battle Creek article poses the issue of women in competition with each other to achieve the smallest waist, with the corset manufacturer, Mrs. Smith, declaring that "some of the waists my stays encircle would be hard to beat."³⁵ Despite public awe and praise at women who could cinch their waists as small as 12 inches in circumference, tight-lacing was largely viewed as a silly and frivolous practice. Its health risks could not go unacknowledged, and its practitioners were seen as foolish for engaging in a fashion which posed such a detriment to their health as well as their natural beauty.³⁶ The promotion of tight-lacing did not always come from women, nor as a result of a competitive spirit with other women, but in some cases from men desiring to see women held to a particular standard. An account in *The Saturday Review* described an encounter between a woman preaching on the ills of tight-lacing and one of her male detractors. In it, the man balks at the suggestion that women would be more comfortable without their stays. He suggests that "it [was] not for lovely woman to consider her ease, but, at some inconvenience, to convert herself into a thing of beauty, and become at any rate a temporary joy, if not a joy forever."³⁷ This misogynistic position reflects the conundrum between women remaining healthy in their corsets and the desire to appeal to the male gaze and remain "a thing of beauty."

The idea that women lacked physical beauty without a corset was also echoed often in advertisements for corset companies, contrasting the ills of a bad or old corset with the beauty and support granted by a new, well-made one (Fig.3).³⁸ Along the same lines in these advertisements, a badly-made corset was often responsible for marring the illusion and elegance of clothes, no matter how expensive. As one advertisement from 1901 declares, "[a well-made corset] is indispensable to the success of a gown, for an ill-made corset would make even a Paris model gown look dowdy."³⁹ These



Figure 3

³⁴ "The 1910 Corset Crisis." *Woman's Leader and The Common Cause* I, no. 46 (1910): 651.

³⁵ Sel., "Tight Lacing in England."

³⁶ Steele, *The Corset*, 87.

³⁷ "Philosophy of Tight-Lacing," 816.

³⁸ Steele, *The Corset*.

³⁹ "Spring and Summer Fashions Described and Illustrated," *The Gentlewoman and Modern Life*, 1901, 63.

advertisements called on the fear that women would be left behind the trend, while the rest of English femininity adapted to new corset shapes. By providing exaggerated illustrations of beauty's antithesis as being dated and dowdy, advertisers were able to reinforce the idea that "newer" was always more feminine.

By attempting to emulate the images they saw in magazines, women inherently encountered problems in the form of English cultural norms. Ada Ballin addresses this in her book in a contrast between French custom and English custom regarding corsets. She criticizes the vanity of English women, saying, "English ladies pride themselves on being always 'fit to be seen,' and they therefore wear their corsets all day long, and remove them only when they go to bed."⁴⁰ French women, by contrast, wear their stays only when they know they will be "on view," and as a result, are not as compressed for long periods of time as English women, so are not as negatively affected by the pressures of the corset.⁴¹ This problem, to a greater degree, is presented in the Battle Creek article, where the interviewer is shocked to hear that some English ladies fond of tight-lacing wear their corsets to bed in hopes of training their waists.⁴² This reiterates the singular obsession that Victorian women had with corsets, setting the English corsetry trends as being unusually extreme in comparison to those in France and America.

The visibility of dramatic corset styles at the turn of the century, compounded by popular media, women's magazines, and advertisements, created an unrealistic image of the corseted female body. This media specifically created a visual definition of femininity that changed with the particular corset trends of a given period. Despite differing corset forms and shapes, the common thread between these images was the promotion of corsets as a way for women to obtain the most up-to-date and therefore most feminine silhouette. Femininity and female bodies at the turn of the century were measured by the metrics of these advertisements, both by women, who pursued particular standards of beauty and shape, and by men, who viewed corsets as tools for their own gratification.

While Victorian ideas of femininity centered on biological sex and female reproduction, repressive sexual attitudes of the time completely discounted female sexual agency. Femininity, though physical, was seen as passionless, and women were seen as incapable of experiencing sexual gratification. Those women who did exhibit sexual agency or gratification were deemed immoral or degenerate. The practice of



Figure 4

corsetry was imbued with sexual implications, and as a result, turn-of-the-century English sexual attitudes can be understood through discussion of the corset.

⁴⁰ Ballin, *The Science of Dress*, 161

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sel., "Tight Lacing in England."

The emphasis that corsets placed on the erotic aspects of the female form was not unintentional; corsets were used by women as a mode of sexual liberation or expression, but also by men as a means of objectification. The corset, in practical terms, was not even the most intimate of garments in the Victorian woman's wardrobe. This distinction lay with the chemise, a shirt or shift which was worn underneath the corset to protect it from sweat and oils from the body. Corsets were relatively expensive garments which were not easily washed, and in many cases, a woman owned only one or two.⁴³ As a result, the corset was given an important status in the wardrobe of a woman, simply by virtue of its singularity. Misconceptions about the corset, however, or perhaps more accurately, exaggerations, were often the basis of sexualized media aimed at men. Pornography at the turn of the century relied heavily on the corset and the apparently desirable shape it produced.⁴⁴ In many cases, this involved photographing a woman wearing nothing but a low-cut corset, drawing significant attention to the breasts, and the effect of the lacing on the naked body. In addition, the women posing were often asked to raise their arms above their head; this technique lifted the breasts and elongated the torso, creating an illusion of firmness that would be largely disproven were the woman to relax and let the corset be the main support for her bust.⁴⁵ This technique, however, was not solely the brainchild of pornographers looking to sexualize corset-wearing women; it was used by advertisers as well, even in illustration, to create an illusion that a certain brand of corset might provide a greater amount of support and lift for the breasts than another.⁴⁶ Whether by design or by coincidence, sexual attitudes surrounding the practice of corsetry entered into the mainstream. Advertisements portrayed the average corset-wearing woman much in the same way the pornographers did, as women comfortable in their corsets, and aware of the sexual implications of such a garment. Such presentation appealed to women wishing to appear sexually desirable, while simultaneously conveying the idea that beauty, femininity, and sex were inextricably linked through the corset.

The corset afforded women a measure of control over their sex appeal and therefore their own sexuality. Perhaps no trend was more significant in this regard than the practice of tight-lacing. Though not widely practiced, tight-lacing nevertheless attracted attention due to its ability to transform the female body into something altogether unnatural but highly sexualized. Caricatures throughout much of the nineteenth century depicted women with waists so thin that their stays had cut their bodies in half completely, a fate brought on by the desire to lace ever tighter (Fig.4).⁴⁷ This sort of satire was largely due to a repressive, patriarchal view of female sexuality at the turn of the century, an acknowledgement of the sexual expression afforded by the ability of women to tight-lace. Critics of the practice suggested that women gained a sort of pleasure out of it—though whether that pleasure was sexual remains unclear. A reference to any kind of physical pleasure could carry sexual connotations in this period, so the idea that women gained pleasure by being tight-laced implies a measure of sexual liberation.⁴⁸ Even at the time, the idea that the corset was a mode of sexual gratification was linked to those women who tight-laced to the extreme.

The Battle Creek interview presents this point as well, as Mrs. Smith asserts that “I think that some of my customers positively like the sensations produced by

⁴³ Steele, *The Corset*, 44.

⁴⁴ Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*, 133.

⁴⁵ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 201.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 158, 211.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 159.

tight-lacing, or they would never take all the pains they do to get thin.”⁴⁹ A point raised by Kunzle is the idea of the corset as a sort of tool for the sexual gratification of the woman, beyond the merely visual gratification it held for men. The structure of the corset, often with a stiff busk down the front, drew some concern in its increasing prevalence in girls’ fashion in particular, as fears surfaced that it might be used as a method of masturbation.⁵⁰ These fears, combined with societal pressure for girls to wear corsets, characterize the paradox inherent in the desire to both sexualize women and girls, and the simultaneous desire to repress, even demonize, female sexual agency. The placement of corsets on young girls with the intent of shaping them like women also carried rather problematic implications, as the earlier introduction of girls into this women’s realm meant earlier sexualization of them. Though sources from the time make little mention of this specific fact, the observation that girls were being put in corsets at increasingly younger ages crops up in various locations, along with the criticism that young girls being thrust into the world of tight-lacing opened a pathway to addiction.⁵¹

While many arguments in favor of corsets promoted their ability to enhance the female form, the question of aesthetics also appeared in arguments regarding male attraction to the corset. The *Saturday Review* article, “The Philosophy of Tight-Lacing” presents the idea that there is no evolutionary reasoning behind the practice of corsetry. The author introduces the concept of Zeising’s law of proportion, an archaic mathematical theory which in summary says that if an object is divided into two unequal parts, the shorter of the two parts must bear the same proportion to the longer part as the longer part does to the whole.⁵² This theory is applied to the aesthetic of the corset, with the idea that the division of the body at the waist, especially in taller women, perfectly conforms to this particular theory of proportion, thus creating the optimal ratio for an aesthetically pleasing silhouette.⁵³

While the corset pandered to the male gaze through pornography, and thus was fetishized as a way to access the female body, fears of its fetishization by women provide a stark contrast in the ways in which the corset reflected the sexuality of both men and women. A desire to appeal to the male gaze, coupled with a desire to conform to societal standards of beauty, led to the use of the corset for sexual expression at the turn of the century, while female sexuality was simultaneously repressed in the condemnation of trends such as tight-lacing. As a mode of sexual expression, the corset was unique in an era characterized by its apparent sexual conservatism, though the sexuality inherent in the corset was necessary to establishing turn-of-the-century femininity.

The corset has always been undeniably linked with femininity—as a garment designed to shape the female form into its most ideal, it has literally formed the concept of feminine beauty throughout much of history. Perhaps no period is more definitive in the history of the corset, however, than the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. It was in the years between 1885 and 1915 that the shape of the corset underwent a drastic transformation, and English womanhood changed with it, prompted by the mass production of corsets and the increase in fashion publication. Popular media in this period produced a large number of debates surrounding corsetry, particularly regarding its health risks and the implications of sexuality in the trends that cropped up regarding the corset. In my research, it has become clear that Victorian femininity

⁴⁹ Sel., “Tight Lacing in England.”

⁵⁰ Kunzle, *Fashion and Fetishism*, 127.

⁵¹ Ballin, *The Science of Dress*, 104.

⁵² “Philosophy of Tight-Lacing,” 816.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

was shaped by the culture of corsetry and its increased prevalence in English media at the turn of the twentieth century. This particular femininity was connected to health and the maintenance of a healthy appearance, which the corset afforded. Women's perceptions of themselves were quite literally shaped to mimic the illustrations in fashion magazines, and to aspire to an ever-changing idea of beauty. Corsets were inherently sexualized, and as a result, women's sexuality (as well as their reproductive potential and essential femininity) was woven into their undergarments. The feminine form of Victorian England was tied up in the corset. The changes and social movements surrounding corsetry at the turn of the century led to subsequent changes in conceptions of English womanhood and the potential for expression afforded by fashion and the corset.

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