

Corsetry in History and Modern Media

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Everyone has seen a film where someone cruelly forces a heroine to wear a corset. Likely, by the end of the story, she has been freed from the restrictive garment and stands as a powerful feminist icon. But did historical women truly live in misery their entire lives, longing for freedom from the corset? Large swaths of modern media implore us to believe so with their fainting damsels in distress and feminist rage in films. However, modern perceptions of corsets do not represent the lived experience of women in the Victorian era, but rather impose a modern superiority complex over these historical women and use the attacks from the contemporaries of the corset to justify the dismissal of Victorian women. Furthermore, the conflation of corsetry with tightlacing removes any nuance in what the practice meant to historical women.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* describes corsets as “a closely-fitting inner bodice stiffened with whalebone or the like, and fastened by lacing; worn chiefly by women to give shape and support to the figure; stays” (“Corset”). Many historical sources refer to these garments as stays; however, this essay will refer to them as corsets for the sake of clarity. Corsets by this definition function both as a support garment comparable to a modern bra and a shapewear garment such as Spanx. Modern media would have you believe corsetry more resembles the practice of tightlacing, when they are not synonymous. *OED* defines tightlacing as “the practice of wearing tightly-laced stays in order to reduce or preserve the form of the waist” (“Tight-lacing”). Which boning used in the creation of a corset defines its quality and properties. Boning is a semi-rigid material used to strengthen the shape of the garment. Whalebone (actually baleen) was the most commonly used and most expensive material. Unlike cheaper substitutes, whalebone has the useful property of molding into shape when in a warm, slightly damp environment. This meant that a corset, when regularly worn, would mold itself to conform to the wearer's shape and therefore not stab into the wearer's bodice. With this understanding in mind, one can better understand the modern conversations surrounding corsetry.

The modern hatred for the corset becomes particularly apparent in pseudo-historical films. In the beloved, swashbuckling series, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the leading lady, Elizabeth Swann, receives a corset from her father, which he calls “the latest fashion in London,” to which she replies that “women in London must have learnt not to breathe” (Bruckheimer). This depicts corsets to be something forced upon young ladies by men. It also implies that corsets cause women to suffer greatly in the name of fashion. Finally, we can also infer from this exchange that women despise and resent their corsets. Not much later in the film, Elizabeth finds herself unable to speak clearly, as she grows light headed from lack of oxygen, presumably due to her corset. Her discomfort becomes so severe that she faints, falling into the ocean far below. I first encountered corsets in this film, but soon saw many more that detested corsets. In a much more recent film, *Enola Holmes*, Enola, competent younger sister to Sherlock Holmes, receives beratement from her brothers and their educator for not being a proper young lady. Enola refuses to be put in a corset because of its perceived lack of practicality, and rails against her brothers' attempts to “tame” her. Later in the film, she dons a corset as part of a disguise and says to the camera, “The corset: a symbol of

oppression to those who are forced to wear it" (*Enola*). Enola's mother raised her daughter on her own and comes across as a spectacularly feminist icon. The film soon reveals Enola's mother to be a leader in the women's rights movement. Enola admires and emulates her mother throughout the story. In this film, Enola represents modern feminism in a backwards age of oppression and idiocy. If Enola, as the representation of modern feminism, condemns corsets as a symbol of oppression, then that must be the truth. This plays into the narrative that the women of today are more sensible than those of the past, and that our superior, future brains understand how dreadful corsets were. Only later in the movie, when her corset deflects a knife, does Enola concede that a corset might have some value. This encounter poses the dubious notion that the only way for something "feminine" to be empowering is if it helps a woman do something more "masculine" like fighting; therefore, the only power a woman can have comes from rejecting femininity. So were corsets truly the bane of every sensible woman's existence in history, as the media has us believe?

The idea that generations of women would knowingly put up with dangerous, harmful, and painful garments for everyday wear is entirely unrealistic. Historical sources do not support this modern idea. Yet another modern misconception holds that corsets were for the elite women who could afford to be physically hindered for the sake of fashion since they did not do any work, but historians agree this is not the case. Corsets were common, and all classes of women wore them. In fact, they served a very similar function to bras. Corsets also bore the weight of a woman's heavy skirts (Kortsch). A common rumor has persisted since the early days of the United States that a vain, wealthy woman got surgery to remove her lower ribs to make her skinnier and more malleable for the compression of a corset. Chief Curator and Acting Director of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology Valerie Steele and Pediatric Cardiologist Dr. Lynn M. Kutsche agreed after years of research that this never happened. Surgery of this caliber would have been so dangerous it is nearly laughable to believe any doctor of this era would perform such a surgery. Surgery, in general, posed an incredible risk during this time period, due to factors such as infection, blood loss, and lack of anesthesia. Even after scientists discovered anesthesia in the middle of the 19th century, they did not fully understand it, and it remained highly dangerous (Steele). So if not through surgery, how were Victorian women so skinny? They were not.

While women absolutely did "lace down" (reduce waist circumference by lacing tightly), they were also masters of using illusion to alter one's silhouette to give the impression of a smaller waist. Busts and butts were emphasized with clever tailoring, padding, and, depending on the era, bustle cages. These factors alone contribute a great deal to the myth of women's historical waist measurements, but other trends added to the myth, too. One may see photographs today of Victorian ladies and remark on how slim they were, how pronounced their silhouette was, and how perfectly elegant they look. However, these images have been doctored, not by modern use of Adobe Photoshop®, but by historical retouching. Members of Victorian society expected retouching of photographs if they got their portrait taken at a studio. People could also acquire published guides on how to retouch their own photos at home. Nearly all photography of the era reveals retouching. These retouches aligned with very specific societal expectations, which ranged from the removal of blemishes on the skin, the shape and shadows of the neck, the smoothing of the bust and, of course, to the slimming of one's waist into the desired silhouette (Johnson). All of these artful techniques then might create the impression that women did not lace down much at all, but this is not necessarily the case. Instead it was a combination of the two.

So far this essay has discussed corsets only from the perspective of fashion, with the idea that women would suffer the pain of tightlacing solely for the image it presented. However, corset-clad Victorians wrote otherwise in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (*EDM*). *EDM*, a newspaper from the 1800s, endeavored to give women space to discuss feminine interests, issues, and subjects. This newspaper contained a section called “The Englishwoman's Conversazione,” where readers could send in questions to the editor, as well as add their two cents on subjects discussed in last month's issue. In the editions published between 1868 and 1872, an ongoing and passionate discussion on corsetry and tightlacing persisted alongside the other more fleeting discussions. This discussion of corsets by everyday people serves as a fascinating window into how people felt about the practice, and most unique was how men participated in the conversation.

While the newspaper targeted women, it did not exclude men, and the men who wrote in typically fell into three categories: sending in their opinion on the appearance of women who tightlace, widowers seeking advice on how to properly raise their daughters in matters of dress, and, most strikingly, men who enjoyed corseting themselves. After one man wrote in about wearing a corset, more and more men wrote in either asking where a man might acquire a well-made corset or remarking on how he enjoyed his. A reader by the name of R. W. wrote that he had “worn ladies’ stays for the last three or four years, and [found] them very comfortable indeed, and would not go without them” (*EDM* 277). Another man, H. G., remarked how he had an argument with his male friends on the subject of tightlacing and resolved to wear his own tightly laced corset for six weeks without removing it for more than an hour each week. He wrote how in the first two or three weeks he “experienced considerable uneasiness, but [he] found a certain pleasurable feeling in it as well,” and by the end of the six weeks, he “had become so delighted with the sensation and found the support so comfortable” that he continued to wear them indefinitely (*EDM* 224).

Of course, ladies did not leave all of the enjoyment of corsets to men. And a lady called “Perseverance” advises “An Enquirer” how to properly lace a corset so that one may be “astonished how much she can reduce her figure without discomfort or injury” and “experience the pleasure of the tight unyielding grasp of the corset” (*EDM* 328). These insights into the gratification of corsetry are far from the only of their kind in *EDM* and reveal to the modern reader how corsets were not simply a torture device for fashion, but something people who had no societal expectation to partake in chose to do.

If Victorian people felt generally positively about corsets, why does modern media paint an image of fainting spells and oppression? Well, as revealed by the letters sent in to *EDM* by fathers and uncles on the subject of their wards’ corsets, not all tightlacing was self-imposed. “La Gene” wrote to *EDM* about his practice with his nieces. He employed a governess who, upon his request, severely insisted “on the utmost amount of compression that they can bear when [he] wishes them to be their prettiest.” His eldest niece, of seventeen years, after being entreated and coerced into the corset, garnered positive attention enough for her to henceforth aid her maid and governess in their efforts. She even “delight[ed] in the half-pleasure, half-pain, of the intense pressure.” The younger of sixteen, however, had to be “forced to submit” by an unknown process—although, with one of the most common discussions apart from corsetry being corporal punishment and the implementation of birch rods, one can make a solid guess (*EDM* 166).

Despite the possible cruelty of such a process, this pales in comparison to the stories told in the *Toronto Daily Mail*. In this newspaper's "Woman's Kingdom" column, an aunt by the name of "staylace" proudly proclaimed how she significantly reduced her niece's waist. The niece began with a waist of 25 inches, was promptly laced down to 22 inches, and gradually tightened into new corsets until she reached 18 inches in less than a year. The aunt even shared her niece's diary in which the fifteen year old complains of the pain the corset caused her those first few weeks. She lamented how her aunt forbade her to take off the corset at night, preventing her from sleeping much due to the pain. When she cut the laces in rebellion one night that first week, her aunt "punished [her] severely." And when forced into a tighter corset a month later, the fight continued in the same course, with cut laces and severe punishment. The girl's diary does admit that by the end she enjoyed the feeling of tightness and loathed removing them to wash, but still described her aunt as "too horrid cruel" ("Women's"). Another discussion started when "Mother" asked what to do about her daughter taking off her corset at night. One correspondent recommended tying her daughter's hands together with a silk handkerchief. Another submission proposed that every night the mother use a chain and padlock around the girl's waist, as this is what she did for her own daughters ("Women's"). With force like this, one should not be surprised that some girls railed against the practice and continued to detest it into adulthood. While in these columns a few women wrote how they had tried tightlacing and decided to discontinue, most who tried it for themselves continued with it. This, it seems, points towards a pattern that one can easily understand: that something forced upon you is terrible, and something you choose is wonderful. And while that certainly lacks the complexity of the true situation, free choice in the matter should not be disregarded in this discussion.

Still, a disdain for tightly laced corsets remained and has persisted since at least the early 1800s. In the splendidly dark fairytales of the brothers Grimm, the classic tale of Snow White has a few extra murder attempts on the part of the evil queen. After the huntsman fails to kill Snow White, the queen disguises herself as an old peddler woman, tempts Snow White to buy a corset, and offers to lace it for her. The queen "took the lace and tied it around Little Snow White so tightly that she lost her breath and fell down as if dead." Snow White only recovers once the seven dwarfs cut the laces off of her (Grimm and Grimm 174). This fascinating story departs from the discussions in *Toronto Daily Mail* or *EDM*, which seldom reference a lack of air being a concern with tightlacing. It indeed seems far more in keeping with modern conceptions such as in *Enola Holmes* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. So what contemporaries of the corset reflected this distaste?

The true demonization of tightlacing, – which in the modern day has become all corsetry – began with the dress reformers. Dress reformers were not, as one with a modern perspective might suspect, feminists, but rather the opposite. Famous reformers included Napoleon, Renoir, and Rousseau. Rousseau's ideas on the corset "became the kernel of" dress reformers' position. His philosophy around education was to "develop the heart at the expense of sexual maturation," which was endangered by the desire awakened in boys by women who attempted to enhance her physical beauty. Dress reformers used the "'fashion' of tightlacing to damn the sex as a whole" (Kunzle 572). The puritan middle class condemned tightlacing, but so too did general medicine at the time. Doctors heaped threats of diseases on those who tightlaced, ranging from consumption to breast cancer, but with particular focus on diseases relating to maternity (Kunzle). Despite, or perhaps in light of, tightlacing's link to prostitution, critics also blamed tightlacing for the declining birth rate. And doctors quipped that it merely encouraged "survival of the fittest," weeding out air-headed

women. Despite the doctors' baseless claims on the risks of tight-lacing – Kunzle notes that coroners might have falsely claimed a slender woman to have died of tight-lacing, simply to get their name in the paper – the moral puritans might have gotten something right. That being, the language used by tight-lacers in *EDM* do suggest a level of sexualization in the practice. Feminists of the era, however, gave very little credence to the outrage surrounding corsetry. They thought the subject irrelevant at best or silencing women at worst, and that gave the two groups a common enemy: those who would silence them (Kunzle).

Modern fashion may not have departed as far from the era of corsetry as one might initially believe. On two accounts the spirit of corsetry remains in modern consciousness. First, the more literal equivalent: modern shapewear that hugs the stomach and hips to compress and smooth. An article from 2020 compiling a list of quality shapewear products states, “There is something special about feeling secure in your undergarments and knowing that it is there working for you to smooth out any trouble areas” (LaSala and Sales). The language of “trouble areas” is deeply upsetting even when only considered in a modern context. Only a hypocritical society in the same breath would condemn corsets, celebrate women's modern freedom, and espouse shapewear. Our modern denunciation of corsetry comes more from our desire to be technologically and intellectually superior to our ancestors, than by any true preeminence.

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