

Sewing the Seams Between the Woman's Corset and History: How they Mirror One Another

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HUM 104

April 27, 2020

The corset is arguably the most controversial garment in fashion to ever be created. For four hundred years, the corset was an essential part of every woman's wardrobe. In a way, the garment was considered a metaphor for the idea of women's empowerment in the nineteenth century, it provided a solid structure for what shape their body was required to look like, which also molded the way their lives were supposed to be, tied up and restrained. While the corset made a woman look slim, elegant, and powerful, it really made them feel weak, stuck, and beyond uncomfortable on the inside and physically. In this paper, I want to analyze the history of the corset to uncover what qualities deem it revolutionary. I argue that by wearing a corset, women lacked the confidence and ability to achieve any accomplishments in their lives, and it took until the restraints of the corset were removed to gain that sense of empowerment. I will utilize the history of women's rights to portray why women's empowerment stemmed from the interwoven relationship between the woman and her corset.

As time and history advanced, so has the corset and its accompanying social matters. Later in the nineteenth and early into the twentieth century, less women were wearing corsets, which mirrored the advancements of women's rights all over the world. By the time World War I was ending, so was the everyday wear of the corset due to it inhibiting mobility in the workplace, which was a barrier for the upcoming population of working women.<sup>1</sup> However, questions still remain surrounding if the corset was revolutionary due to its characteristic of either being oppressive or a fashion statement. While it kept women in a frozen state, and physically made it difficult to move, it also shaped the women's wardrobe for hundreds of years, and still continues

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<sup>1</sup> Jill Fields, *Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 355-384.

to this day. To explore which characteristic plays more into the revolutionary quality of the corset, the ways in which its role has changed must be analyzed. I will be guided by scholars who not only study the history of fashion, but the history of women's rights, and when they string together the structure and history of the garment and pull it tight, it shows the beauty and flaws of this complex piece of clothing which have shaped so many people and histories.

From the sixteenth century to late into the 1920s, the corset played a major role in the typical women's wardrobe. The corset originated in Italy, and Catherine de Medici brought the garment to France in the 1500s, where the women seemed to embrace and start wearing it frequently. The earliest corsets were made out of metal, which were claimed to correct problem areas, including the spine, and fixing the ever-present problem of slouching.<sup>2</sup> It was a common thought and rumor among men that women needed to wear corsets to hold them up because they were the weaker sex, and that their bodies habitually needed the extra support. Another common misconception among feminist historians argued that corsetry functioned as a coercive apparatus, through which patriarchal society controlled women and exploited their sexuality. While there is obvious reasoning to why these rumors are just false sayings, one cannot help but wonder the true background behind the corset.

The debated garment in question did not gain universal popularity until the nineteenth century, one can see that the shape of the corset seemed to be shown on the women's body in old portraits and paintings of the wealthy.<sup>3</sup> The corset was not readily available for the general public

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<sup>2</sup> Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 1-36.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Smith, *"Market Development, Industrial Development: The Case of the American Corset Trade, 1860-1920"* (Cambridge: The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1991), 91-129.

and the lower classes until after the start of the nineteenth-century, as then it began to be mass produced. That was when it seemed to reach its peak. Everyone had to have a corset, and they were made for all types of women too. Young women, nursing women, elderly women, the corset was for everyone, which came with the push to wear one.<sup>4</sup> As history moved forward, so did the thoughts on the corset. With the demanding need of female workers during the Great Depression and both World Wars, the confining style of the corset became uncomfortable and made mobility inaccessible.<sup>5</sup> This leaves one with the assumption that the corset was not only designed to show off a woman's curves, but also confined women from what they could accomplish compared to their male counterparts, who had the advantage of worldwide favoritism on their side.

Since the beginning of time, rebellious women have crossed dressed as men to accomplish their ambitions. Even before the corset was invented, countless women have proven that taking off the constricting clothing of a woman and dressing more freely as a man grants greater opportunities. Joan of Arc, Mulan, and Deborah Samson, all important historical figures, and all who chose to crossdress as a man, accomplished great things and gained respect for their craft once they abandoned the woman's closet. Isabelle Eberhardt, a writer and explorer in the late nineteenth century, abandoned her corset and dressed like a man to conduct her writing career, signing under the pseudonym, Nicolas Podolinsky, and earned great success. Through foregoing the typical dress of a woman, these women proved that it truly is "a man's world." They knew that they would not get the opportunity to fight, have the opportunity to have a place

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<sup>4</sup> Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, 7.

<sup>5</sup>Fields, 'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': *Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930*, 357.

in the workplace, nor have the opportunity to have their writing be published if they advertised themselves as being a woman. The clothing and outward appearance of these women prevented them from having a life of success. Therefore, they forebode the typical dress of a woman, and they made history.

Scholar Jill Fields investigates more on the history of the corset in her piece, *Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930*. Fields argues that, "The history of the corset's meanings affected women's lives as they struggled to alter the shape of femininity and gender relations."<sup>6</sup> The corset was constraining women at the time to accomplish anything more than just sitting there and appearing to be nothing more than an object, which jarred gender relations for years to come. Clothing is one of the first steps in recognizing a person's appearance as male or female. While women continued to wear corsets, their relationship to the working world continued to stay stagnant and placed them in a place with little to no freedom.

As the corset hit its peak from the time between 1920-1940, it was clear that the younger generation would not choose to accept the corset as their preferred undergarment of choice. It took much persuasion by their mothers and the media for younger girls to wear corsets, and soon they stopped wearing them altogether.<sup>7</sup> This new generation was starting to understand the social limitations that corsets provided for them, so they chose power over looks, and opted out of wearing the slimming device and went to work instead. Women were also finding alternatives to wearing the slimming device. Diet pills and dieting programs became more popular among all women, creating a much healthier lifestyle for themselves, which many doctors approved.<sup>8</sup> Many

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<sup>6</sup> Fields, *'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930*, 357.

<sup>7</sup> Fields, *'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930*, 376.

<sup>8</sup> Fields, *'Fighting the Corsetless Evil': Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930*, 379.

forward thinking physicians believed that the corset constricted the torso, weakening the muscles, compressing the lungs, and interfering with childbirth and digestion.<sup>9</sup> After woman found out the unfortunate side effects that came with wearing the corset, besides how unbearably uncomfortable they were and how it prevented them from daily chores, the garment started to change for the better.

The push to end the common wear of the corset could not have occurred without the women in history who made it possible. Laura Engles Wilder, a world-renowned author, wrote about the horrors that come with the corset in her famous book series, *Little House on the Prairie*, in the 1930s. She writes in her novel, *Little Town on the Prairie*, “Her corsets were a sad affliction to her, from the time she put them on in the morning until she took them off at night,” somewhat warning young girls to never put one on.<sup>10</sup> This was around the time when corsets were starting to be revolted by the young people, presumedly reading and following Wilder’s message. In the 1939 film, *Gone With the Wind*, the famous scene of bachelorette Scarlett O’ Hara being laced up by a corset, remarking on how painful it was, also warned the younger generation off of the corset pains.<sup>11</sup> The movie also showcases what a woman can do without a corset. While O’ Hara has her money and is living in high society, she barely accomplishes anything all day but chatting with fellow suiters. When her family is in poverty after her home is raided during the war, she takes off the corset and uses her able body to work and keep her family alive. These scenes prove how women are much more able bodied without the

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Farrel-Beck and Colleen Gau, *Uplift the Bra in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Laura Engles Wilder, *Little Town on the Prairie* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935).

<sup>11</sup> Victor Flemming, *Gone With the Wind* (January 17, 1940; Atlanta: Selznick, December 15, 1939), Film.

confinement of the corset. Reading about and watching the everyday pains women went through to put on their corset had an impact on its declining popularity and decline in the later 1930s to early 1940s.

In cinema, it is typical to see a woman dressed in a corset as part of her costume. Many modern women have spoken out about this, such as actress Emma Stone, who claimed in an interview for Harper's Bazaar, "For the first month, I couldn't breathe, and I would smell menthol and it would make me think I was in a wide-open space and could breathe for a moment in time. After a month, all my organs shifted—it was gross, and if you don't have to, don't do it!" Feminist Emma Watson even refused to wear a corset on the set of her recent film, *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), wanting to provide a more realistic image to young girls.<sup>12</sup> Hearing a modern woman share such disturbing stories of their experiences with corsets provides more insight on why women wanted to get rid of it as part of their everyday apparel. This just stands to show that if today's women can barely stand to wear a corset for a few scenes, it seems cruel for the women of a hundred years ago to be expected to wear corsets daily.

The struggle for equal rights for women came long before the invention of the corset and have lasted long since the corset stopped its daily appearance on the woman's figure. Women have never had the same opportunities as men have had, and it seems as if the corset was just another invention to keep women away from the equality they deserved. Scholar Kara W. Swanson argues that from the American Civil War to the turn of the twentieth century, was when we saw the most change and push for women's rights, and where we saw a large push and

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<sup>12</sup> Naomi Gordon, "10 Hollywood Actresses on the Torment of Wearing a Corset," Harper's Bazaar, October 30, 2018.

change in women's fashion.<sup>13</sup> The corset was becoming more universally worn during the Civil War, which was right around the time when the Women's Suffrage Movement took place. As women began to have more mobility in their work and realized how the corset held them back, they began to stop wearing them. Kara Swanson continued to take her argument a step further when she claimed: "Areas of intellectual property law, and like the law generally, exist within a gendered set of knowledges about men and women, including what they make and do and how they interact in commercial settings, in domestic settings, in courtrooms, and in intimate relationships."<sup>14</sup> With this statement, Swanson is saying that men and women contain the knowledge of how their gender is supposed to behave in different settings. With the limitations of women's rights in the early nineteenth century, corsets seem to be doing their job by keeping women's acts and minds confined.

That leaves us with the question, is the corset revolutionary? A revolution is an idea that implements a change in the way we live. When designed, no one could have predicted the lasting impact the corset would have on the fashion industry moving forward. From the 1600s to 2020, the harsh brace outlined by a corset has continued to be present in women's fashion, suggesting slim waists and large busts. The most revolutionary thing about the corset is not its silhouette, but the garment's ability to impact the world of fashion for hundreds of years. Society allowed for one contraption to control the female sex for centuries. One piece of clothing has kept women from pursuing careers, having the ability to move, eat, or make a life for themselves. How can one piece of wearable technology have so much power? In the past century, another revolution

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<sup>13</sup> Kara W. Swanson, *Getting a Grip on the Corset: Gender, Sexuality and Patent Law* (New Haven: Yale Journal of Law and Feminism, 2011), 57-117.

<sup>14</sup> Swanson, *Getting a Grip on the Corset: Gender, Sexuality and Patent Law*, 61.



has occurred, changing the outlook on how a woman in a corset is viewed when wearing a corset. While the corset was originally worn to be a garment to exaggerate a woman's figure and keep her meek, those who wear corsets today give off an aura of confidence and control, changing the role of the corset to give women a sense of power.

Today, the woman's corset does not play as large of a role as it did in the nineteenth century. While women do not wear corsets daily, they are popular among those who exercise, such as the Kardashians, and sport them as "waist trainers," shaping the woman's body into that perfect figure while they work out. This only shows that society still idolizes the idea of the perfect body: tiny waist, large hips, and extenuating a woman's curves. The corset of today is not known as an universal, "torture chamber," as Valaire Steele says in her book, *The Corset: A Cultural History*. Instead, it has been reimagined to be more breathable and way less constraining. Today, the role of the corset has changed into a role of power, instead of a role of submissiveness. While women wore corsets in the nineteenth century to show off their curves to the men in their lives, women wear the corset today to feel powerful. The woman of today wears a corset as a powermove- to make herself feel powerful and to prove that a revolutionary garment such as the corset will never go out of style.

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