The Corset as a Lens into the Condition of Womanhood

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The Corset as a Lens into the Condition of Womanhood

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An anti-corset activist by the name of Orson S. Fowlers queries in his 1848 piece *Intemperance and Tightlacing* why women would subjugate themselves to corsetry, "are women so weak or crazy?" He asks "why does woman insist upon perpetuating so painful so self torturing, as well as immoral and injurious a practice" in the name of "self-immolation upon the altar of fashion."[1] In Fowler's perspective, sartorialism made any women innately irrational and inferior. Embedded under the condescending and misogynistic rhetoric lies a valid inquiry: why did all American women wear corsets in the nineteenth century when the garment categorized them as irrational slaves to fashion? The answer lies in the impact of material culture in forming societal practices and gender expectations. While history is often studied through the lens of how events formulated culture, materials themselves were catalysts in altering social constructs. The prime example being the corset.

The corset provides a valuable insight into the lives of women in history. The meaning of corsets has evolved, allowing the garment to become a lens through which historians can study the conditions of womanhood. The political and social climate of the era directly influenced such conditions, as reflected in the cultural meaning of corsets. This garment is often characterized as a painful apparatus that helps subjugate women, but this is a generalization that ignores the multi-layered meanings the tool also acquired. Although corsets are viewed as a modern symbol of empowerment for women, they partook in an arduous journey through a patriarchal society that molded gendered political discourse. Influenced by cultural events, the corset also facilitated

[1] Orson S. Fowler, *Intemperance and Tight-lacing' founded on the laws of life, as Developed by Phrenology and Physiology* (New York, 1848) 14.

the transformation of women's roles. Creating a definitive link between corsets and cultural change can be murky due to lack of insight into the highly privatized daily workings of women's lives. Yet the trends and evolving societal changes can be tracked to determine the influence of the corset. This thesis explores the role of the corset between 1789 to 1861 in the United States, while analyzing major cultural influences from England and France. It is essential to examine how sartorial trends from different countries can become major cultural strongholds in the United States. By analyzing the multi-layered facets of the corset in American women's lives, one can chart the cultural impact it had in molding political discourse around women's civil liberties and function.

Despite the many changes the corset underwent in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, one common variable indicated the shape the corset created on the female form conformed to the ideal body image according to the male gaze. Corsets were tools with which women from the elite, and later from the middle, and eventually the working class could contort their figure in order to meet beauty standards that conformed to patriarchal expectations of womanhood. Such expectations revolved around finding a husband and bearing children. The fight for and against the corset boiled down to women's perceived purpose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Mainstream media established the corset's purpose was to accentuate curves and improve the erotic beauty of the female form, thus insinuating women were merely objects of sexual desire. Ecclesiastical institutions insisted women were symbols of a higher purity, and that the corset was a means to establish a superior morality. Yet patriarchal ideals simultaneously condemned the use of the corset because the garment hindered domestic labor and motherhood. Although the

corset shape evolved depending on male desire of the time, the true transformation of the garment stemmed from women's perceived purpose in society.

It is important to consider the historiographical perspective and methodology behind corsetry to situate this essay's contribution to the narrative. The historical perspective of the corset has been quite controversial. The historiography of the corset already appeared in the early nineteenth century, when scholars viewed the corset as both a medical necessity and a means of achieving societal expectations. In parallel, however, they claimed corset usage in previous centuries was primitive. Such as citing a false claim that Catherine de Medici's 13-inch waist was a "cruel constriction of the past."[2] This perspective changed in the late nineteenth century when dress reform rhetoric began demonizing the use of the corset. Doctors argued the corset caused disease and deformation of the body and encouraged the natural female form in order to promote ideals of motherhood.[3] Beginning in the late 1970s, during second wave feminist scholarship, historians looked back at the corset as a masochistic and oppressive tool wielded against women to force them into a constant position of inferiority. This belief was influenced by the rhetoric of the dress reform era. Thus, historian Helene E. Roberts insisted that the Victorian corset "helped mold female behavior to the role of the 'exquisite slave.'"[4] Although there were many opinions of the corset in the twentieth century, the discourse that the corset was ultimately a patriarchal tool remained the dominant theory.

This ideology shifted in the late 20th and early 21st centuries with some historians concluding corsets were not as oppressive as once believed. David Kunzle challenged the

[2] Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University. Press, 2005), 4.
[3] Carolyn A. Day, *Consumptive Chic: A History of Beauty, Fashion, and Disease* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017) 113.
[4] Helene E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman." *Signs* 2 *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, no. 3 (The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 554-569.

historiographic narrative of the sadistic nature of corsets by surveying them through a lens of fetishism in his work, *Fashion and Fetishism*. Some scholars even noted that men had, at times, denounced the corset's usage, and the garments were enforced in the nineteenth century through female-influenced social cultures. Valerie Steele, author of the seminal *Corsets, A Cultural History*, expands this point of view in her exploration of the garment. She takes into consideration women's social influence on the use of the corset. However, though she is specific in her study of middle-class influence, medical history, and tightlacing, her study is situated primarily within European history, therefore facets risk simplifying the artifacts of the unique course of American sartorial history. This thesis intend to go deeper into a single facet of sartorial culture: how did corsets impact political discourse within American history? Historian Leigh Summers attempts to unravel the nineteenth-century history of the corset in her work *Bound to Please*. She explores different venues of the corset from those Steele identifies, by providing an extensive survey of class, maternity, morbidity and adolescent sexuality to determine the oppression the garment enforced. Although Summers explores the influence of the corset in the private lives of women, even contradicting elements Steele presents, she does not delve into the direct influence of material culture on the condition of womanhood within political spheres. Both of these books surrounding the cultural history of corsets also present a Eurocentric view of the corset. This essay will focus on the cultural purview of the garment in the United States, while contextualizing viewpoints discussing influences from both England and France.

This essay presents the corset as a lens into women's political discourse, and the means by which sartorial culture became a channel to prevent women from obtaining a public voice.

This thesis will also delve into how a staple in fashion came to influence a cultural and political discourse on gender while reinforcing contemporary ideology. The role of the corset is repeatedly paradoxical and represents multiple facets of women's history in terms of class and location. This exploration of the corset between 1789 and 1861 will demonstrate how the corset can be used as a window to understand why women's roles remained restrictive from the French Revolution to the start of the American Civil War. The French Revolution was a catalyst for American fashion, therefore this epoch is an ideal starting point. The Civil War led to deep economic chasms that impacted the fashion and textile industry immensely. This scope will focus up to the Civil war as fashion and female roles would change radically due to warfare. While many historical perspectives revolve around how culture impacted and enforced fashion, this essay intends to investigate the impact corsets had on the conditions of womanhood. By analyzing the corset, we can learn a great deal about women's lives. The evolution of the style, material, and use of the corset helps weave a narrative of women's lives in the nineteenth century. Analyzing the corset as a tool to peer into the lives of women, and surveying how material culture has a direct impact on historical outcomes, is how this research will contribute a unique perspective to the field of US nineteenth-century women's sartorial culture.

The revolt against stays due to neoclassical perspectives on the ideal female form provides a study on how the introduction of the corset impacted and reinforced women's roles in the private sphere. Stays are a boned undergarment, similar to the corset, yet often more structured with a tubular shape, rather than conforming

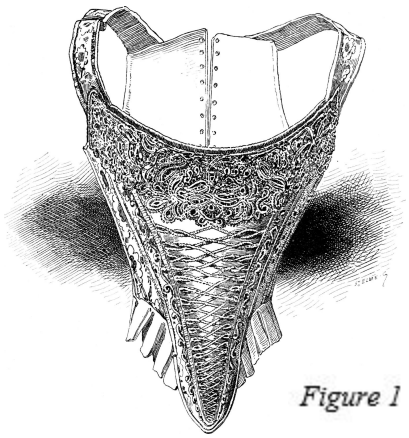

Figure 1

to the natural curves of the body (*Figure 1*).[5] The words 'stay' and 'corset' have been used interchangeably throughout the nineteenth century, but my connotation of the word corset will be used exclusively to describe the styles in the post-neoclassical era.

The corset originated as a symbol of status and wealth in the Italian and French nobility in the late Middle Ages, but did not return as a staple in fashion until decades after the American Revolution. In its place, stays were habitually used throughout the eighteenth century. While many members of the gentry wore dresses with boning built into the bodice, the working class donned mantuas (an overgown worn primarily in the eighteenth century) and stays to mimic high society fashion.[6] The permutation of style through the eighteenth century experienced minor shifts until the revolution. The radical notions of the Revolutionary era drastically transformed sartorial culture. These changes were eerily similar in both the American and French Revolution, despite the different outcomes of the conflicts. Both Revolutions invigorated a focus on neoclassicalism, sequentially creating a societal cult of antiquity, simplicity and the natural form. Jacques-Louis David's *Portrait of Madame Raymond De Verninac* (1780-1827) elucidates the emerging neoclassical sartorial culture (*Figure 2*).[7] Revolutionary interpretations of ancient Greek ideals translated into discourse over fashion and the female form, as a response to the conservative ideologies of monarchies and the fashions of Versailles. Women in both France and America rejected the notions of the pre-Revolutionary era by adapting a Grecian empirical shape to mainstream fashion that was an antithesis to the silhouette of the anterior. Stays became inessential in the creation of the empire silhouette, and were even viewed negatively at times due

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[5] "Corset en brocart d'or [Gold Brocade Corset] (Musée des Arts décoratifs)"; as reproduced in Ernest Leoty, *Le Corset a Travers Les Ages*, 1893.
[6] Marla R. Miller, *The Needle's Eye, Women and Work in Age of Revolution*, (Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 60.
[7] Jacques Louis David, *Madame Raymond De Verninac*, 1798-1799, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

to their relationship with the old regime. Some French women refused to wear stays because they represented the monarchy.[8] Stays became a physical embodiment of the old regime.

Instead of a trend, revolutionary fashion become mandatory in the political discourse of the period. This is especially true in relation to the radical nature of the French Revolution, which is important to explore to contextualize its' impact on American ideology. A means to prove allegiance to the new French republic was through zealous consumption of revolutionary clothing. Most revolutionaries believed women should not dress in national uniform due to their apolitical nature and their confinement to the private sphere. Fear of female involvement of the public sphere echoed in the demonizing of Marie Antoinette. She epitomized "the revolutionaries fear [of what] women would become if they entered the public realm: hideous perversions of female sexuality."[9] The contempt for Marie Antoinette reflected revolutionary ideals of women's place in the private sphere as emblems of superior morality and virtue. Rather than granting women civil liberties, the French Revolution proceeded to strengthen patriarchal control while lessening female autonomous identity.[10] Constrictions of patriarchy would only continue to tighten into the Napoleonic era.

Figure 2

[8] University of Virginia Historical Collections Online Exhibits, *Too Close for Comfort: 500 Years of Corsets*. *Reshaping the Body: Clothing & Cultural Practice* (2007), http://exhibits.hsl.virginia.edu/ (accessed October 2018).
[9] Michelle Perrot, *A History of Private Life. Vol. 4* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1990), 20.
[10] Perrot, 43.

The rhetoric of moral superiority as a means to categorize women's roles was prevalent decades before the French Revolution, in the American Revolution. This narrative dawned before neoclassical fashion was popularized across the Americas. Urban and rural women delved into the titillating, yet simplistic empirical style of dress in order to demonstrate patriotism towards the new nation.[11] Neoclassicism was a means to show solidarity with the revolutionaries in France, yet the sentiment aligned perfectly with the new republic's ideals of liberty. Despite their political zeal transpiring in the form of fashion, American women's civic roles were solely dictated by patriotic ideals of 'republican motherhood.' Conflicting ideologies of women's apolitical nature and the state of the new republic converged to form women's new function as participants of civic culture and a subject of the state.[12] A republican woman's civic duty was to be reasonably educated in order to pass the importance of liberty and equality to her sons.[13] *Godey's Lady book*, a popular ladies magazine, posed the question "How Can an American Woman Serve her Country?" The response was "By early teaching her sons to consider a republic as the best form of government in the world."[14] The key element in the ideal model of a republican woman was motherhood. Women were recognized to yield limited political influence within the private sphere to continue the legacy of republicanism, while still maintaining the moral preeminence tied to female domestic responsibility. Political function, when deemed an extension of the private sphere, allowed perspectives of women to remain apolitical, therefore maintaining their status as beacons of morality and virtue. By tying political purpose to domesticity, American women's roles would be cemented into the private sphere.

[11] Perrot, 43; quoted in Miller, 201.
[12] Linda Kerber, "The Republican Mother: Women and the Enlightenment-An American Perspective," *American Quarterly* 28 *An American Enlightenment*, no. 2 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 188.
[13] Kerber, 202.
[14] Kate Berry, "How Can an American Woman Serve Her Country?" *Godey's Lady's Book* 43 (1851), 363.

Fashion played a vital role in influencing these values. Clothing was a means for revolutionary women to express political opinion without the liberty of having a political voice. Yet the effort was counterproductive, and female participation in fashion was an excuse to bar women from entering the political realm. Any aspect of cultural influence that was under the purview of female control, like sartorial culture, was automatically disassociated with politics. Due to revolutionary dress' connection with women, "anything that might be deemed fashion bespoke an irrational and inconstant mind and a dependent, servile body."[15] The inextricable link between fashion and perceptions of women's roles made any sartorial politics innately apolitical. The introduction of corsets in the early nineteenth century only cemented patriarchal perspectives on women's apolitical nature due to their focus on frivolous accoutrement. The popularization of the corset was a continuation of the domestic and apolitical role of women.

The nineteenth century perspective on the trend of neoclassicism was limited to a vehicle for motherhood or a threat to morality, eerily analogous to later scopes of the corset. The low cut bodice and the sheer white muslin utilized in the gowns' construction created a mystique of naturalism that some interpreted as profligate nudity or adversely, as an emblem of liberty and motherhood. One interpretation in *The Lady's Monthly Museum* in 1802 took a depreciating view describing the trend as "young ladies who were dressed or rather undressed in all the nakedness of the mode."[16] Some of the hostility surrounding the style was rooted in it not being suitable to the local climate conditions. One French doctor went so far in the *Gazette de Santé* as to suggest

[15] Kate Haulman, *The Politics of Fashion in Eighteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 224.
[16] *The Lady's Monthly Museum* (March 1802); quoted in Elizabeth Ewing, *Dress and undress: a History of Women's Underwear* (London: Batsford/Chrysalis, 1978), 52.

that women had become direct "victims of murderous fashion."[17] A similar rhetoric would be used as an objection to corsetry, exemplifying the penchant to categorize female orientated spheres of dress as modes of irrationality and destruction. The thin veil between nudity and neoclassical dress presented an opportunity for corsets to signify a new wave of morality within fashion. An amiable view on neoclassicism from the French magazine *L'Arlequin* described the garment's attributes as accentuating "a woman's bosom, which has duties of maternity."[18] This ideology was rampant in America. Some argued the naturalism of neoclassicalism symbolized ideals of motherhood. Multi-faceted beliefs emerging from the debate on neoclassical dress would lead to continued ambiguity for fashion, specifically corsets.

Figure 3

The neoclassical gowns would always be constructed from white textiles, which were a paradigm for innocence, therefore dismissing the fears of promiscuity. The first appearance of Grecian style gowns were in paintings of children in the 1780s, which were rooted in a call for

[17] E. Claire Page, "Neoclassical Fashion and Gender Identity in France, 1797–1804" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* (accessed October 2018) 2009, 197.
[18] *L'Arlequin*, 42; quoted in Page 197.

naturalism inspired by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*.[19] Neoclassical fashion's inception within children and then later to women's fashion is an integral facet to the viewpoint connecting female spheres and sartorial culture. This connection linked fashion and a childlike nature, strengthening enlightenment rhetoric of female inferiority. This narrative would be strengthened during the nineteenth century. American women were often depicted in flowing Grecian gowns in late eighteenth-century art, reiterating this discourse. A painting by Edward Savage entitled *Liberty in the Form of the goddess of Youth, giving Support to the Bald Eagle* (1796) depicts a young beautiful woman wearing a neoclassical gown, providing a bald eagle with nourishment as a mother might to her child (*Figure 3*).[20] Her innocent nature exemplifies the perspective of womanhood and the perceived roles of women as natural givers. Women's fashion in the post-Revolutionary era became vehicles of liberty and ideals of motherhood, yet the women remained ornamental, childlike and without a political voice. It is essential to contextualize the nature of fashion in the Revolutionary era to unravel the ambiguity that would lead into the cult of corsetry.

The corset represented two affiliate ideas stemming from the new "rigid and impermeable category of identity" created by neoclassicalism.[21] Corsets became the antipode of natural beauty yet the epitome of moral superiority. The new disposition on identity categorized women's roles as mothers, and became essential to the transformation of the new nation.[22] Yet, sartorial Neoclassicalism impressed the veneration of 'Belle Nature', focusing on the natural

[19] Ewing, 54.
[20] Edward Savage, "*Liberty in the Form of the goddess of Youth, giving Support to the Bald Eagle,"* 1796, Philadelphia, Library of Congress.
[21] Page, 209.
[22] Ibid.

beauty of the female form.[23] Francis Blagdon credits neoclassical dress to the latitude women gained to "satisfy all their appetite…[which] qualify them better for maternal office, dictated by nature"[24] The discourse attached natural beauty to the simplistic empire silhouette, therefore the introduction of the corset became the antithetical of beauty and motherhood in some spheres, and would fuel health reforms of the nineteenth century. The corset was a means to demonstrate class, moral authority and motherhood in some circles, yet medical and enlightenment discourse would decry the usage due to the corset's antimony to the natural form. Jacques Donnaud deplored the use of stays since they prevented women from performing their natural maternal functions in his text *The Degradation of the Human Race through the Use of the Whalebone Corset* (1770).[25] Men would paint a rhetoric utilizing medical authority and literature to show the superior minds of men compared to the feeble and foolish minds of women who refused to abandon corsets. This was a means to cast men as the level-headed and rational victims of corsetry.

Interestingly though, while the British followed neoclassical fashion, the style did not have the same connotation as in revolutionary countries. English women adopted the style while still maintaining ideologies of national moral superiority. The

Figure 4

[23] Ibid.
[24] Francis W. Blagdon, *Paris as it was, and is* (London, Balwin, 1803), Letter LVI, Paris, 24 January 1802, www.gutenberg.org/etext8998, (accessed October 2018); quoted in Page, 197.
[25] Jacques Bonnaud, *The Degradation of the Human Race through the Use of the Whalebone Corset* (1770); quoted in Steele, 29.

English equated loose morals with loose dress; therefore, most women wore some form of undergarment resembling a stay, throughout the late eighteenth century. The salience of this cultural construct is evident in the series of paintings *Marriage a la Mode*, specifically Le Bagnio (1743), in which the married woman's immorality and adultery is signified through her lack of stays (*Figure 4*).[26] The intrinsic influence of stays on female morality emerged into the preeminence of the corset upon the construct of womanhood in the nineteenth century that would heavily influence perceptions in the United States.

It is no coincidence that the popularization of corsets entered societal practice in a time where domestic values and a marginalizing view of women were fluctuating. The American Revolution strengthened patriarchal control and fashion rhetoric from the French who reinforced these beliefs. The corset influenced culture by solidifying the new conditions of womanhood, and would continue to stiffen the separation of public and private spheres in the nineteenth century. Moral authority became inextricably linked to the use of corsets, yet the sexuality the corset insinuated due to the curvature of the female body would remain in clandestine spheres until they surfaced to create contention in ideology in the mid-nineteenth century.

Often the epoch between the French Revolution and the heart of industrialization are summarized as a transition to the Victorian era. Yet the Romantic and Sentimental periods are times of remarkable change within sartorial culture and textile production in the United States. As revolutionary fever died down and stability was somewhat restored, the corset shape gradually curved to create an hourglass silhouette, increasing the severity in every passing

[26]William Hogarth, "*Le Bagnio"* (1743), "*Marriage a La Mode"*, series of six paintings (1743-1745) https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/w/william_hogarth,_marriage_a-la.aspx (accessed November 2018); London, UK, National Portrait Gallery.

decade. The "industrious" revolution and cultural attitudes impacted the corset usage, therefore changing of the female condition.[27] The connotation of the corset as a symbol of womanhood had a significant role in positioning women permanently in the private sphere.

The fashion of the Romantic period was reflected in large sleeves, wide shoulders and full skirts. The change has been characterized as a shift in the "feminine ideal from classical goddess to ornamental doll."[28] The new doll look emphasized the importance of a slender figure, that would became a class and racial construct to distinguish the superiority of the middle class. This period saw an emphasis in the narrative of working class inferiority perpetuated though the rising middle class rhetoric. Along with claims that slenderness was an inherently upper-class racial attribute, material evidence was used to demonstrate societal status. When working-class women wore corsets, bustles or upper-class fashion, they would be perceived as humorous. Jane Welsh Carlyle wrote in a letter that "The very servant girls wear bustles; Eliza Miles told me of a maid of theirs went out on Sunday with three kitchen dusters pinned on as a substitute."[29] Working women would navigate inside their financial means in order to mimic the fashion to obtain a respectable appearance. Yet the Bourgeois still used corsets as a literal physical separation from the working class to further emphasis the fundamental differences of working and elite bodies. Middle-class woman became dependent on the use of corsets to demonstrate their elitism.

The new style also put tensions between fashion and function. Despite the restrictions to the body as a result of the silhouette the corset formed, corset sales were on the rise. The rise in

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[27] Miller, 188. The Industrious Revolution reflects the period in the late 18th century to early 19th century where the United States experienced economic change and growth due to a new consumerist mindset.
[28] Day, 113.
[29] James Anthony Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life*, 1795-1835, Volume 1 (Scribner, 1882), 270.

sales among all social classes strengthened enlightenment rhetoric that women's obsession with harmful and restrictive clothing was irrefutable evidence of their irrationality and inferior minds. *A Simpleton* by Charles Reade explores a husband's quest for his wife Rosa to "throw that diabolical machine into the fire," referring to the corset. Yet his wife argues that she needs the garment and suggests her husband "go and marry a circassian slave. They don't wear stays, and they do not wear trousers: she will be unfeminine enough, even for you."[30] This text sheds light on the narrative in popular literature of rational male influence and the feeble mind and weak constitution of women. The passage also shows the significance of the corset as an everyday clothing essential, demonstrating the weight of the garment to maintain femininity and womanhood. Finally it disparages slaves and working-class women who do not wear corsets, placing Rosa in a position of moral superiority.

Fashion trends shifted again in the 1830s, further emphasizing the importance of a slender waist, increasing the gravity of the corset. The Sentimental era featured a softening of mainstream fashion to correspond with ideals of womanhood. The silhouette featured a narrower waist, created by an exaggerated hourglass shape from the corset, and small rounded shoulders. This new silhouette exemplified the values of grace and femininity which defined the Sentimental era.[31] The elevation of femininity in fashion affirmed the core values of womanhood in the United States.

Corsets became a vehicle for the English in the early nineteenth century to demonstrate moral superiority through 'true womanhood'. This ideology would influence American rhetoric on womanhood. Corsets were a physical representation of morality and spiritual leadership in the

[30] Charles Reade, *A Simpleton* (Boston: Dana Este & Co c.1873), 36-37, 43-45; quoted in Steele, 50.
[31] Day, 113.

private sphere. The middle class interpretation of the corset resulted in the absence of the garment in working-class women to insinuate their moral corruption. This is expressed in *Clarissa Harlowe* where the heroine visits a brothel and notes how all the whores are in "shocking dishabille and without stays."[32] Yet working women wore corsets in England more than any other country. One description by Simon Place claims that in 1824, even impoverished prostitutes in London wore corsets.[33] The corset in the cult of domesticity was a means to define social classes and distinguish the growing success of the middle class. The stricter the corset, the more likely the women did not experience the burden of work. Corsets became the epitome of domesticity as they demonstrated the importance of fashion over function. The devaluation of function in fashion is a clear indication not only in the role corsets played in immobilizing women, but the expectations for women to exist solely within the private sphere.

American women of the early nineteenth century experienced a female orientated cult, transcending from the ideologies of the British focusing on the ideal Christian woman. Middle-class women adapted to a social ethic generated from the Second Great Awakening. This American religious wave secured many women constituents since the church gave them a voice through social recognition when they were rejected from political secularism. The ideology of Christian womanhood among the middle class created an elitist view stemming from revolutionary ideals of Republican womanhood. This superior mindset established that women had moral superiority within the home. *Godey's Lady's Book* described the role as "the wife is

[32] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa Harlowe*, (United Kingdom, 1748); quoted in Steele, 26.
[33] Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.

truly the light of the home."[34] The corset became an emblem representing Christian women's superior virtue among other women.

Sarah Hale's etiquette guide, *Manners: Or, Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year round* (1868), preached that dress was a part of "God's word…[therefore] clearly reveal[ing] its high import."[35] Dress was a means for middle-class women to demonstrate their connection to god and moral purity through their middle-class sartorialism. Hale further explains that "dress is the index of conscience, the evidence of our emotional nature."[36] Hale's writing sheds light on Victorian mindset of the connection between corsetry, religious devotion and class distinction. She ponders the question "Are the mothers of men who rule the world found among the *loose-robed* women, or among the women who dress in closer-fitting apparel?"[37] The answer, she believes, lies within biblical lessons on how women should act and dress in order to remain devout and virtuous. The Victorian dogma determines corsets or 'closer-fitting apparel' to align with pious women who produce good and successful sons, while "loose-robed" women remain immoral and incapable of being productive mothers. Corset usage became directly equated with religious devotion, high class heritage and respectable motherhood. Clothing was a means to hold agency and class elitism through moral supremacy within the home. Yet the tighter women pushed to keep power within home through their link with sartorial politics, the more their agency in the public sphere diminished. Paradoxically, corsets were also perceived as the antithesis and a threat to motherhood since many enlightened thinkers believed the purest form

[34] Harvey Green, *The Light of the Home: An Intimate view of the lives of Women in Victorian America* (New York, Pantheon, 1983), 56.
[35] Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, *Manners: Or, Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year round*. (NP, Nabu Press, 2010), 39.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Hale, 44.

of motherhood was through a natural figure. Despite the use of the corset as a weapon wielded to declare elitism, corsets were gradually being popularized for working-class women at this time.

The corset gradually became a foundation for American womanhood in all classes, mirroring the supremacy of morals in English Anglicanism. The fashion trickled down to even free and enslaved black women, especially in domestic duty where emulating civility was required in plantation houses. A rare photograph of slave women in corsets was taken in 1848, demonstrating the corset was a mandatory social expectation for all women (*Figure 5*).[38] Poor women in prisons or mental asylums were not exempt from the cultural expectation, and corsets were purchased in bulk to be distributed to the inmates.[39] The corsets served a purpose to perpetuate cultural standards and idealism even at the lowest class levels. Women of all classes and ethnicity served under the constraints of corsets, barring all women from political spheres. Working women in particular faced hardship as they were expected to uphold domesticity and virtue, while needing to maintain in the public workforce to survive. This led working class women to be characterized as foolish and grisly impersonators of womanhood. Texts and tutorials became available for American women in the 1830s which promoted an economic

Figure 5

[38] Joan L. Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion,* 1840-1900 (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 66.
[39] *FB Smith The People's health* (1830-1910); quoted in Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: a history of the Victorian corset* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

democratization of the garment.[40] The spread of the corset helped mediate some of the negativity around working-class women and their use of the garment; alas, class tensions of the vision of true womanhood persisted. Yet the popularization would not come into full fruition until the mass production of the Industrial Revolution.

The increased adoption of the garment that blurred class distinctions in America can be credited to the nature of the emerging capitalist economy. The United States made an industrious change to accommodate mass consumerism, which was the opposite to the community based artisan labor of the anterior. Outsourcing garment labor allowed women to make a larger income, yet ultimately devaluing women's work. This transformation in women's labor would help redefine women's spheres of power and reshaped women's relationship with the economy and marketplace.[41] Polly L'Hommedieu Lathrop, one of many working women in America, altered local women's clothing until she could make a higher wage manufacturing pre-cut shirts, fit for a national economy.[42] Participating in the industrious economy granted women a position of power within the confines of domesticity, though the price was the downfall of women's economic value. A Christian women was meant to be virtuous, mindful of America's ideologies, but industrious and ascetic.[43] This perception of woman would become equivocal in nature as a virtuous women could not engage with industry. The absence of political identity was strengthened by their standing in the changing economy. With the devaluation of women's labor in public spheres came the corset to cement these values, and push women further into roles of wife and mother. Thorstein Veblen assesses in his work, *Theory of the Leisure Class (*1899), the

[40] Leigh Summers, B*ound to Please: a history of the Victorian corset* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 11.
[41] Miller, 189.
[42] Miller, 196.
[43] Ellen Carol Dubois and Lynn Dumenil, *Through Women's Eyes, Combined Volume: An American History with Documents*, Third Ed. (New York, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012), 188.

purpose of corsets as lowering "the subject's vitality and [render] her permanently and obviously unfit for work."[44] The popularization of the corset further solidified women's separation from the public sphere.

Another purview grew in medical spheres to justify the apolitical nature of women and their inclination towards irrationality. National anxiety grew on the health concerns of corsets and their link to malady and illness, specifically to consumption, due to the steady tightening of the corset. The theory that linked tuberculosis is credited to Dr. John Gregory in 1765 who hypothesized that corsets were the main cause of the disease.[45] This narrative died down during the Revolutionary era, but exploded in greater fervor than the anterior once the garment had been popularized in the nineteenth century. The invention of metal eyelets in 1828 added to the anti-corset argument as women could increase the tightness of their corsets.[46] The paradox lies in that the corset was also credited to the prevention and the cause of consumption.[47] A curved spine was believed to be a provenance for consumption, while a corset could be used to correct the deformity. Ironically, the corset was widely believed to be the primary agent of consumption in the 1830s. An article in Fraser magazine blamed the corset for 31,000 deaths in England due to the "unnatural and injurious practice of tightlacing."[48] Orson S. Fowler argued in *Intemperance and tightlacing* (1848) that tightlacing would incite disease, ultimately " to produce partial insanity and also to excite impure desires."[49] Tightlacing became demonized in many spheres due to the accusation of morbidity and the acute sexuality suggested. Women were

[44] Thorstein Veblen. *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, McMillan, 1899), 167-187.
[45] Veblen, 167-187; quoted in Day, 67.
[46] Jill Salen. *Corsets: Historic Patterns and Techniques*. (Hollywood, CA: Costume & Fashion, 2008), 8.
[47] Summers, 104.
[48] Day. 115.
[49] Fowler, 33.

subject to a predicament: social and religious structures required them to maintain ideals of womanhood through the corset, yet medical ideology deemed any usage insanity and self-inflicted harm. Male narrative placed corsets under the purview of irrationality and a firm justification for segregation from political discourse.

Another vital facet in the developing political discourse on gendered roles in early nineteenth-century America was the perceptions of acceptable female sexuality and morbidity concerning the corset. This was reflected in the literature of Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Bronte. *The Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorian,* stated these period works embodied "lingering lushly orchestrated deaths [that] aroused centres of [masculine] desire."[50] Corsets and their expected causality of consumption, erotiziced the usage. The sexuality revolving around morbidity was exacerbated by societal romanticization of consumption. The iconism surrounding consumption (pale skin and rosy cheeks, slim figure and white luxurious bed sheets) were determined to be an ideal middle-class death when compared to other possible demises.[51] This romanticization for women of the disease paralleled a thin veil of sexual fetishization for women infected with tuberculosis.[52] The intertwining of morbidity and sexuality led to the objectification of the constraints of womanhood. The garment that bound women to an apolitical and immobilized nature in the private sphere, also became a weapon to paint women as undeniably irrational in the eyes of the medical profession, while still catering to male erotic fantasy. Women were dependent on the corset to maintain societal status, morality and a virtuous marriage, yet medical conception deemed the garment as harmful, and characterized the

[50] N. Auerbach, *Private Theatricals: The Lives of the Victorians* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1990), 90-94 quoted in Days, 124.
[51] Days, 124.
[52] Summers, 137.

perpetual use as irrationality of the female sex. The medical assumptions of the corset went hand-in-hand with the ideals of natural beauty. These factors were evidently a means by which the corset and sartorial culture directly restricted women from the public sphere. Ultimately, the purview of acceptable Victorian sexuality was one that accentuated their feminine attributes and curves while perpetuating a virginal aura. Victorian sexuality was based on male fantasies and female subjectation. This would be a central point of contention within gendered political discourse in mid-nineteenth century America.

The ideology of female irrationality was interlaced with fashion rhetoric throughout the nineteenth century. American author, Henry T. Finck wrote a reflection of ideal beauty standards for Victorian women. He ponders "Why do women wear such hideous things as crinolines, bustles and corsets, so university abhorred by men?" In his work he refers to fashion as the "handmaid to ugliness" and concludes that "most women are ugly and ungraceful" ergo using fashion to mask these fallibilities. He continues by asking why "Darwin did not refer to fashion as furnishing a most convincing proof of his theory that men are descended from apelike ancestors," as apes are "blind, silly slavish imitation [which] is also the essence of Fashion" and subsequently womankind. Women dominated sartorial spheres, an established rule in the Victorian era, therefore Finck's assertion that "fashion is a tacit confession of mental inferiority," was directly pointed at women. Finck's misogynistic assessment on female vacuous nature reflected public opinion of proper gender roles. Ignorant women belonged in the private sphere where little decision making was required, while men should occupy public space and monopolize political jurisdiction. This gender dynamic is reflected in Flink's writing that

fashion, specifically corsets, make women obtain "the habits of a sheep."[53] These gender norms would only become more challenging into the Industrial Revolution as the corset became democratized and working women were evermore present in the public sphere.

The heart of the Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century coincided with the heightened evangelical views of true womanhood that would mold gendered expectations and hierarchies. The Industrial Revolution allowed corsets to be constructed efficiently, therefore more economically, allowing the democratization of the garment. Lavish materials necessary in the manufacture of corsets, such as whalebone and ivory, were replaced with steel boning, allowing operating costs to decline significantly.[54] The sewing machine also played a significant role in the accessibility of the garment as the assembling process became expeditious. The final crucial invention from 1830 that allowed the universal socio-economic access to corsets was the steel split-metal busk fastenings used in the front of the garment which allowed women to lace up their corsets independently.[55] The corsets preceding the front busk fastening required assistance to get in and out of the garment, therefore this invention allowed women without servants the unprecedented opportunity to meet social expectations of womanhood independently. New inventions and accessibility of corsetry to the working class blurred class distinctions, forcing middle-class women to source alternative markers of supremacy. While a class war raged to determine proper womanhood, the wide availability of the corset due to mass production made the use mandatory for women to meet social standards. Corsets become mandatory practice for all women in America to prove their worth within the confines and framework of morality. The corset become inextricably associated in the discourse of true

[53] Henry T. Finck, R*omantic Love and Personal Beauty* (New york: Macmillan [1887], 1912), 386-389.
[54] Salen, 8.
[55] Ibid.

womanhood. By uniting all woman with a common duty, the corset became a universal symbol of womanhood. The dimorphic curves the corset formed became an influential metaphor for sexuality from the male perspective.

Yet religious duty was a primary focal point within corset usage for the middle class in the United States, as proper evangelical women followed trends to align with moral obligations. The Protestant revival of the Second Great Awakening designated a "special mission of their sex to uphold the moral standards of society."[56] Therefore corsets had a grounded moral connotation, yet simultaneously remained questionable to the church's demands of maternal duty. On one hand, women wore corsets to maintain moral superiority within the private sphere, yet were chastised for the usage due to the medical concerns of the garment's impact on pregnancy. Women, in the eyes of society, should be the epitome of motherhood and morality, making the implications of the corset contradictory to true womanhood. The continual usage, while making women morally superior, continued the rhetoric of female irrationality and foolishness in body and mind.

Another important layer within the paradoxical dynamic between the church, motherhood and morality, was the demands to upkeep social status. Although women wore corsets to maintain their moral standing within the church and society, the social pressures of sartorial materialism to determine proper womanhood propelled women to perpetuate trends within their own familiar circles to uphold social status. Women were required to wear corsets to keep their middle-class status and moral integrity, while simultaneously condemned for their frivolous nature. As summarized by fashion historian Valerie Steele, "most women's socioeconomic lives

[56] John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, (University of Chicago Press, 2013) 141.

depended on marriage" therefore women relied on corsets as they maximized "both their physical 'beauty' and their reputation of propriety."[57] A question rises to why Victorian women relied so heavily on corsets to define their moral standing in the church. The anxiety of American women to uphold a superior moral character stems from colonial America.

American ancestral devotion to its' religious identity, founded in puritan values, made the societal weight of an ideal pious private life more taxing than their transatlantic counterparts. The puritan origin thesis suffuses the narrative that Americans constructed a theological moral superiority due to their relationship with indigenous Americans. The puritan establishment of America as a clean and pure land to lay down their beliefs as law, budded a superiority complex due to the dichotomy of Native American anti-ecclesiastical beliefs.[58] Puritans viewed themselves as especially pure when comparing themselves to indigenous Americans, creating a lasting dogma of American evangelical exceptionalism. George Bastille argues that puritanical ideologies that hold societal weight in evangelical practice have "been responsible for the attitude that the whole of erotisism is evil."[59] American women, therefore, adhered to the strict mold of womanhood, which specifically demanded the wearing of a corset, yet they were absent of the sexuality frequently ascribed to the garment. The demands of evangelical womanhood with the threat of erotisism rampant in the public domain made expectations strenuous for American women to meet.

This public moral expectation was demanding for the middle class to obtain, but almost impossible for working-class women. This is due to the perceived nature of the public sphere which is seen as dirty, therefore sexualized and immoral, compared to the private sphere which

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[57] Steele, 51.
[58] Katheryn, Lofton. *Sexuality and American Religion*. (American History: Oxford Research Encyclopedia, 2016.) 5.
[59] Ibid.

was characterised as a natural haven for moral sanctity. Working women occupied the public sphere as they needed to work in the industrial economy to survive. Michael Mason, author of *Victorian Sexuality*, acknowledged the public opinion that there was a distinct "connection between [domestic] crowding and sexual license."[60] This automatically associated working women with the uncleanliness and moral depravity associated with the public sphere. Despite the persisting stigma, there was still a "drive to [obtain] working-class sexual responsibility."[61] The closer working women were to occupying the private sphere, the more moral prestige they could obtain. There is a clear correlation between working-class women who work within middle-class homes and corsets. Factory women, sometimes abstained from corset usage due to mobility and comfort concerns, while maids and governesses who worked in middle-class homes always wore a corset.[62] This practice was mandatory in most households so the help would reflect the high standards and morality of the home. Many working-class women strived to uphold a level of morality to meet middle-class expectations, yet the effort was futile in the societal mindset. The corset was a physical distinguisher of moral power. Working-class women thus, had a reputation for moral ambiguity and promiscuous behavior.

The connotation of the corset as symbol of moral purity in the private sphere did not hold merit in the public sphere. The corset held an antithetical meaning, therefore reflecting the unclean reputation of the public sphere. The garment "came to symbolize an erotic intimacy to which even the slightest allusion, even implicit, was considered indecent."[63] As the naked body was too perverse for mainstream media, corsets were used as a substitute to allude to sex in ads,

[60] Mason, 140.
[61] Mason, 139.
[62] Severa, 66.
[63] Perrot, 486.

cartoons and newspapers. The imagery of the corset was standard practice to insinuate sexual activity. Michelle Perrot in her well-known work, *A History of Private Life*, discusses the allure the corset represented in the public sphere: "Unseen items of clothing took on a new sophistication, which heightened the value of nudity and deepened its' mystery."[64] An example of this is evident in a satirical image by Gavarni in the 1840s (*Figure 6*).[65] The image entails a husband trying to untie his wife's corset in the evening. He notes how it is tied differently this evening than when he tied it in the morning. The wife is stoned face and frozen, nervous her husband will realize she is having an affair. Not only was the corset an icon for sex but often focused on the impropriety of women, making them the focus of social backlash against sexual deviance.

Figure 6

A high portion of these images feature working-class women, demonstrating the classist agenda embedded in these images in an attempt to isolate middle class morality. Numa's work, *The lover as a Lady's maid* in the 1830s, features a working-class women putting her corset back on with a man by her side, insinuating that they had sex (*Figure 7*).[66] The painting, *Nicht Eintretten* by Hans Zatzka (1859–1945), has a corseted working-class women, possibly a prostitute, holding a door with a man lurking outside (*Figure 8*).[67] The corset is a clear icon of sexual deviancy in

[64] Perrot, 487.
[65] Gavarni, "*Ah! Par exemple! Volia qui est bizarre!...ce martin j'ai fait un noed a ce lacet-la et ce soir il y a une rosette!"*cartoon, c. 1840s; as reproduced in Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University. Press, 2005), 45.
[66] Numa Bassaget, "*Le Martin*, *The Lover as Lady's maid",* cartoon, 1830s.
[67] Hans Zatzka, "*Nicht Eintretten",* painting 1859–1945.

the painting, and portrays working women in the realm of immorality. As working-class women were methodically targeted as sexually promiscuous in the media, their voices in political discourse became nonexistent. The symbolism of the corset in both the public and private sphere isolated women from participating in political discourse. The paradoxical nature of the erotisism of corsetry in the public and private sphere is immense. This inimical dynamic between public and private perspective of the corset was not limited to media. The sexual connotation of the garment was widespread, even in commercialism.

Figure 7

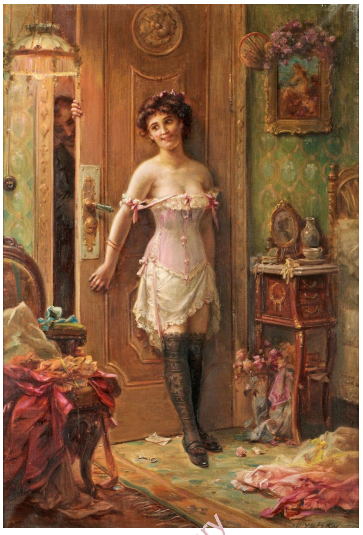

Figure 8

As precisely described by John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman's *Intimate Matters*, "The capitalist economy drew sexuality out of the family and into the marketplace."[68] Women were deemed subject to sexual identity when befitting male will, yet were forced to have a virginal and pure aura in order to maintain societal expectations. Men were socially expected to lust

Figure 9

[68] D'Emilio and Freedman, 138.

after women, yet Victorian female identity was absent of sexual desire. This dynamic is portrayed in Honore Daumier's "*C'est Unique! J'ai pris quatre tailles juste comme celles la dans ma vie*" (1840) [What a coincidence. I used to embrace four waists just like these during my lifetime] (*Figure 9*).[69] Corsets were displayed in shop windows, while antipodally, a corset on a moral woman was hidden away in the private sphere. The French image illustrates this contrast; the man is intrigued at the sexual connotation of the object in public view. Daumier's work also mirrors the cultural standard for men's open sexual identity and women's absence of one to fulfill the Victorian male fantasy. This phenomenon exists in American commercialism as images of women in corsets were common within advertisements and ladies magazines.

Figure 10

United States mid to late-nineteenth century marketing had no shortage of corset advertisements. While erotic corset iconism in the media catered to male viewers, corsetry ads often reflected cultural feminine expectations. In the late-nineteenth century, the United States mass produced corsets, leading to a marketing battle to persuade potential buyers. Advertisements frequently featured babies and cupids to subliminally suggest fertility and health. A trading card from Warner Bros. Corsets, a New York based company, has a cherub tightening a young ladies corset (*Figure 10*).[70] Many Warner Bros. Corsets feature cherubs in

[69] Honore Daumier." *C'est unique! j'ai pris quatre tailles, juste comme celles là dans ma vie; Fifine ma première! Cocotte, cette gueuse de Cocotte! la grande Mimi, et mon épouse là haut dans le coin,"* (Le Charivari, 1840) Museum of Fine Arts Boston.
[70] Warner Bros. Caroline Corsets Trading card, 1880, (Tecumseh, Michigan).

their advertisements. The imagery attempts to distance corsets from the dress reform rhetoric that the garment increases infertility and miscarriages. Advertisements would frequently accentuate the healthy qualities of their corsets. Advertisements never delivered a direct sexual message, yet there is evident sexual subtext embedded within the images. WmH Burns & Co., located in Massachusetts, distributed a trading card with a young pretty woman with a small corseted waist whose arms were draped over her head, and a sultry look in her eyes (*Figure 11*).[71] This image does not have direct sexual connotation, yet one could infer the message of the advertisement as the buyer will be sexually desired by a man in this garment. Another image with questionable sexual connotation is an ad from Warner's Rust-proof corsets (*Figure 12*).[72] The image has a young boy spraying a corset with a hose that some may interpret in a phallic way. This questionable image is one of many with embedded sexual symbolism that slipped undetected through American moral standards.

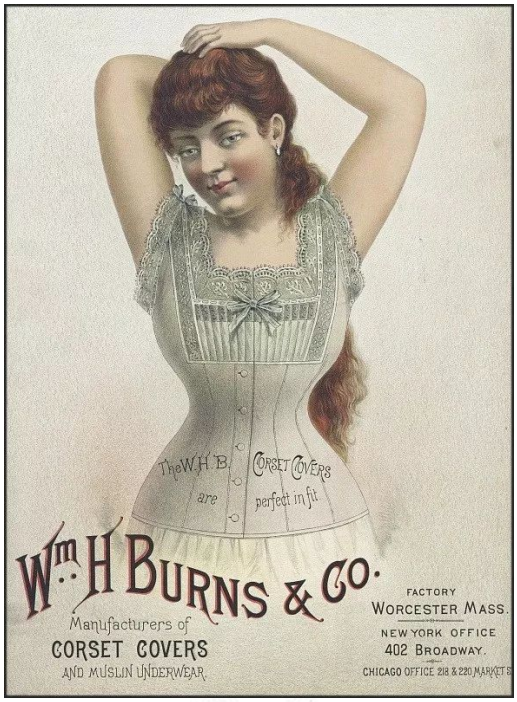

Figure 11

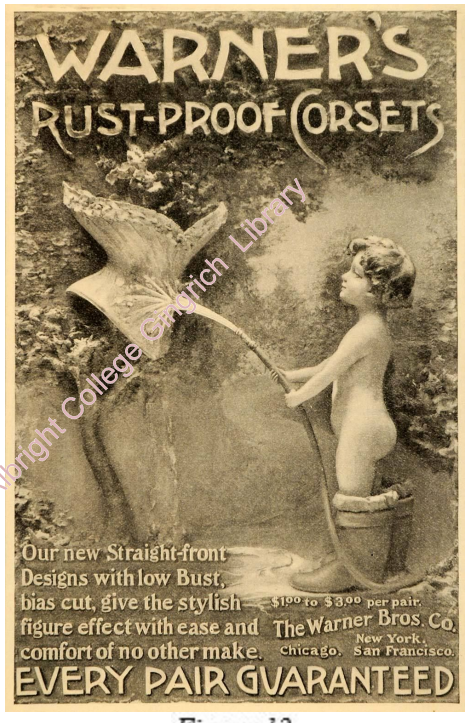

Figure 12

[71] WmH Burns & Co. Corsets Trading Card. (New York City).
[72] Warner's Rust-proof Corsets, 1901, (New York), as reproduced in Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University. Press, 2005), 58.

Another unique advertisement that deserves some examination is Ball's Corsets *Revolution in Corsets* (*Figure 13*).[73] This image is embedded with patriotic symbolism. The image has a women with long flowing hair, reminiscent of styles from the antiquity, wearing a corset and holding a red flag and a sword. She is stepping on inferior corsets as if she has defeated them while women in those inferior corsets flee behind her. The colors red, white and blue are heightened in the image. The iconography of the image is closely paralleled to the painting, *Liberty in the Form of the goddess of Youth giving Support to the Bald Eagle,* which was analyzed previously. Both images feature triumphant and patriotic women stepping on their defeated enemy, with wind blowing majestically. This parallel reveals the persisting importance of the ideology of Republican motherhood as a staple for respectable women. The true and proper woman is not only corseted, she is doing her patriotic duty as a mother and wife.

Figure 13

While there are no shortages of corset advertisements, the photos of elicit connotation in media involving corsets are significantly more abundant in Europe than the United States. This disparity is due to two primary factors, one being the abundance and accessibility of European media of the Victorian era, and the puritan origin thesis as mentioned previously. Although America did not have a wide variety

[73] "*Ball's Corsets Revolution in Corsets"*, Chicago Corset Co. c. 1870–1900, Boston Public Library.

of solicitous corseted images, the corset nonetheless held strong erotic connotations. Potentially more erotic symbolism was insinuated by the garment due to the anxiety of immorality stemming from the strength of evangelical values. Sexually charged photographs have survived. The image of an unknown young woman dressed in just an underskirt, a chemise and a corset, is a rare insight on female sexuality captured by a photographer (figure 14).[74] While her low cut neckline is alluring, the insinuation of the corset leads to the suggestion of sexual deviancy. The corset was evidently a source of sexual excitement for men when they had authoritative control of the usage, yet the entanglement of corsets and female sexuality provided an outlet of feminine expression that threatened male authority and societal norms of female piety.

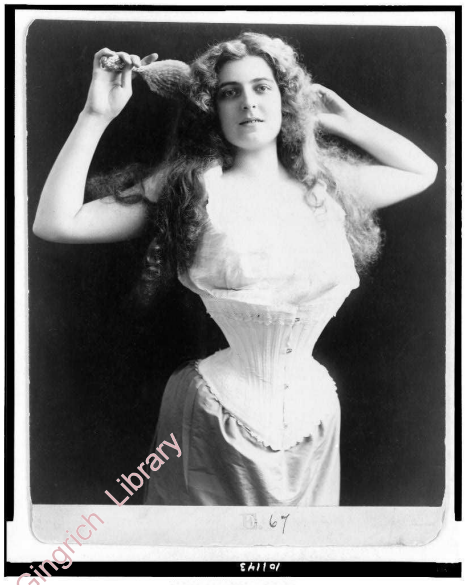

Figure 14

The epitome of feminine erotic beauty was rooted in the drastic curve the corset formed, yet was only acceptable when men were in direct control of female sexuality. Tightlacing, the practice of corseting tightly past comfort or natural curve of the waist, was a means for women to gain sexual agency over their bodies. As pointed out by corset historian Leigh Summers, tightlacing was often synonymous to autonomous female sexuality.[75] Underground fetishistic subcultures had sects for tightlacing. Therefore tightlacing became a similar social crime to masterbation. *The Mother's book* from the 1830s described the practice as "perverted in

[74] Photographer and model unknown, "*Woman Wearing Corset, Brushing her Hair, Half-length portrait, Standing, Facing front,*" 1899, Library of Congress.
[75] Summers, 106.

taste" and even "criminal."[76] While tightlacing was frequently associated with sexual deviancy and fetishism, the culture of the practice was not inextricably linked to sexual drives. Another usage lies within the desire for control over one's body. Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen argue in *Female Fetishism* that fetishism and tightlacing were sexually liberating for women.[77] There is evidence in letters and magazines that women took active pride in the circumference measurement of their small waists.[78] Whether this pride stemmed from vanity or admiration in personal agency is difficult to determine, though both motivations were most likely a factor. This bodily autonomy came at a steep price: societal condemnation.

Figure 15

Anti-corset activists demonized tightlacing and deemed it a perversion of female sexuality. Henry Finck wrote about the horrific "Wasp-waist Mania" that makes women's waists "maltreated and deformed." He argues that "certainly no man can understand" why a women would "mutilate her personal beauty."[79] Popular public imagery reflected this male narrative. *A Correct View of the New Machine for Winding Up the Ladies* (1828) has a woman with a cartoonishly small waist being tightened into her corset through a machine with help from her maid (Figure 15).[80] Her homely appearance and her ostentation characterizes her as the epitome

[76] "*Tight, Dressing- Corsets*," The Mother's Book (August, 1838) 170; quoted in Steele, 87.
[77] Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (New York University Press, 1994), 62; quoted in Steele 91.
[78] Steele, 88.
[79] Finck, 379.
[80] Thomas McLean, "*A correct view of the new machine for winding up the ladies*," c. 1828, Science Museum Group Collection.

of the failure of true womanhood. The machine she is strapped into dehumanized the tightlaced-female form and therefore renounced any semblance of political identity. In another image, Gil Baer's caricature "*Fine taille, horribles details*" [delicate size, horrible details], the woman's husband is pulling his wife's corset tighter and tighter until she snaps in twain (Figure 16).[81] Not only did the corset harm the wearer, but tightlacing was detrimental to the people in proximity. The cultural subtext insinuates that associating with a promiscuous tightlacer would ruin social reputation. The image also solidifies that a woman should not have agency with her body, as she is irrational in her desires. The clear message in this caricature is that the corset can cause death.

Figure 16

The moral price to pay for tightlacers was hefty, especially in the United States. The fight to maintain morality was tense due to the hold of evangelical beliefs on the public. Therefore any interpretation of sexual deviancy in women was treated harsher than in Europe. The United States was a hotbed for dress reformers as they worked to uphold moral standards while working to decrease tightlacing and corset usage due to health concerns. In Boston, a huge center for the

[81] Gil Baer, "*Fine Taille, horribles details*, fig, 209. Serrez! Serrez! And Fig 210. Ser...Crac!!," 1898; as reproduced in Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University. Press, 2005), 107.

dress reform movement, there was noted to be less extreme cases of tightlacing.[82] While tightlacing may have not been as frequent, it was more scrutinized.

Sexual symbolism plagued the corset in the public sphere, leading to working women who had to occupy the space to be directly under social scrutiny. As described by John d'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, "the increased visibility of sexuality in the public sphere disturbed middle-class" women who "had been entrusted with the guardianship of the nation's morals." As a result, middle-class women strived to "retain their authority over sexuality by organizing moral reform and social purity crusades."[83] This crusade worked to middle-class women's advantage as they could situate themselves in a definitive high ground of moral superiority due to their isolation in the sanctity of the private sphere. There was still a decisive struggle between middle-class women and working women due to the democratization of clothing, though the middle class would compensate by spearheading the moral reform movement. Moral reforms was a means to push back immorality and rampant sexuality to regain womanhood. This categorized moral reformers as models of true womanhood, while women who existed in the public sphere as deprived of moral purity. The moral reform movement worked to cleanse the public sphere of impropriety, simultaneously establishing an us vs. them mentality, creating a deep moral divide between the middle and working class.

The definition of womanhood only tightened in the mid-nineteenth century where the contention between morality and sexuality came to a heightened, yet paradoxical standoff. The Victorian era institutionalized corsetry as a fundamental mark of respectability for women of all socio-economic classes. The corset reflected the pious and virtuous nature of the private life,

[82] Steele, 109.
[83] D'Emilio and Freedman, 139.

which gave the wearer moderate agency within a religious context. Yet their political influence fell short from any involvement in the public sphere, as the corset was both disabling in mobility and had represented societal connotations of female irrationality. Corestry, a practice mandatory for every respectable American woman, had an influential role in maintaining the societal separation of the public and private spheres in the mid-nineteenth century. The representation of the corset in the public compared to the private spheres reveals another layer of complexity to the role of sartorial culture on public opinion.

The corset's relationship with the church is quite compelling. While the corset helped maintain the imagery of true womanhood, which incorporated innate spirituality, the garment also worked in opposition with the narrative of women's true purpose of childbearing. Simultaneously, the garment solidified their ethical appearance while casting all women as vain and ignorant of enlightenment thought. This uneasy tightrope of expectations expelled women from any political authority, as their duty as spiritual emblems and mothers as well as their inherent irrationality, isolated them to occupy only the private sphere. Despite the limited power the position held, the luxury of remaining solely in the private sphere became a status symbol, labelling all working women as intrinsically immoral and deviant due to the connotation of the public sphere.

There is a clear linear progression of fashion from the Neoclassical era to the heart of the Victorian era. The Grecian empirical shape was a source of diametrically opposed opinions. Women used the dress as a vehicle for a political voice, but were unequivocally denied due to the perceived apolitical nature of sartorialism. This ultimately pushed women into the private sphere

with the help of the corset. The corset, the antithesis to the dogma of 'belle nature' further expelled women into the private sphere by categorizing them as innately irrational. Yet, the symbolism of the garment as an emblem of respectability propelled the usage. The ideology of Republican womanhood laid the framework for the societal salience of true womanhood. The universal strive for true womanhood created class tensions and conflicting symbolism behind the garment. Fashion has persistently been a highly contentious and paradoxical subject; the corset evidently being the perfect example.

The transformation of the conditions of womanhood can be viewed from the lens of the corset, as the garment changed with societal practices. While the garment paralleled cultural changes, the evidence suggests that material culture worked to influence gendered expectations. It is undeniable to say that the corset had political connotations, as it worked to construct societal expectations and rules. Therefore fashion is inherently political, even if contemporary patriarchal perspective denies clothing political space. This is especially true in the United States where patriotism and evangelical zeal were suffused through sartorial culture. Women are unrelentlessly criticized and judged, as it is the patriarchal method of molding and restricting gender. Therefore any garment that is essential to womanhood, would be just as controversial. As the corset was a constant in women's lives for hundreds of year, there is no one meaning for the garment, as it evolved with American culture.

It would be ignorant to simplify the corset as merely an object of masochistic misogyny that reflected the periods gender discourse. This label ignores the multi-faceted history of the corset and its many connotations. Yet ignoring the role the corset played in solidifying gender expectations would be as equally ridiculous. While the corset did not create the patriarchal

dynamic persisting in American society, the garment nevertheless defined and dichotomized pre-existing gender roles. The corset is obviously not a tool consciously wielded by the patriarchy to suppress women, but the practice was embedded into the culture to further cement patriarchal expectations, as many sartorial objects did. Clothing such as the bustles and shapewear perpetuate feminine expectations for women. The prevalence of the corset can be attributed to the demand for women to maintain status, respectability, and piety; all values that women could have agency within. Though the garment worked to gain autonomy through institutionalized expectations of womanhood, the corset distanced women from gaining control in non-traditionally feminine spaces within the public sphere. The persistence of the practice made the private sphere more inherently feminine and the public sphere more masculine.

The symbolism behind the corset has changed drastically in the past century. In the late nineteenth century, women transformed from the object of sexual desire to possessing their own sexual identity. The modern connotation of the corset has transgressed into the garment being publicly acknowledged as sexually suggestive. Yet this sexualization has been seized by women to reflect modern feminist ideology of female bodily autonomy. As paralleling feminist principles, the modern corset has many connotations depending on the individual wearer's intent. The corset has moved from exclusively an undergarment, to being freely worn in the public sphere as a fashion trend. While women have redefined the corset in the modern era, the garment has been replaced with other material goods that alter beauty to conform to societal standards. While these products are a result from the existing societal expectations of women, material culture influences and cements these pre-existing ideas in the modern world. The definition of the corset is always evolving depending on historiographic perspective. Therefore the garment

has multi-faceted meanings, demonstrating how material culture not only impacts our actions, but our thought processes based on the current culture.

Illustrations

Figure 1: "*Corset en brocart d'or* [Gold Brocade Corset] *(Musée des Arts décoratifs)*"; as reproduced in Leoty, Ernest, *Le Corset a Travers Les Ages*, 1893.

Figure 2: Jacques Louis David, Madame Raymond De Verninac, 1798-1799, Paris, Musée du Louvre.

Figure 3: Edward Savage, "*Liberty in the Form of the goddess of Youth, giving Support to the Bald Eagle"*, 1796, Philadelphia, Library of Congress.

Figure 4: William Hogarth, *"Le Bagnio"*, "*Marriage a La Mode"* 1743, https://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pd/w/william_hogarth,_marriage_a-la.aspx (accessed November 2018); (London, UK), National Portrait Gallery.

Figure 5: Image of unknown Slave Women c. 1840s in Joan L. Severa, *Dressed for the Photographer: Ordinary Americans and Fashion*, 1840-1900 (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 66.

Figure 6: Gavarni, "Ah! Par exemple! *Volia qui est bizarre!...ce martin j'ai fait un noed a ce lacet-la et ce soir il y a une rosette!*" c. 1840s; as reproduced in Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 45.

Figure 7: Numa Bassaget, "*Le Martin"*, *The Lover as Lady's maid,* 1830.

Figure 8: Hans Zatzka, "*Nicht Eintretten"*, 1859–1945.

Figure 9: Honore Daumier." *C'est unique! j'ai pris quatre tailles, juste comme celles là dans ma vie; Fifine ma première! Cocotte, cette gueuse de Cocotte! la grande Mimi, et mon épouse là haut dans le coin*" [What a coincidence. I used to embrace four waists just like these during my lifetime. Fifine, my first! Cocotte, that little devil! The big Mimi! And my wife up there in the corner.], (Le Charivari, 1840) Museum of Fine Arts Boston.

Figure 10: Warner Bros. Caroline Corsets Trading card. (Tecumseh, Michigan).

Figure 11: WmH Burns & Co. Corsets Trading Card. (New York City).

Figure 12: Warner's Rust-proof Corsets, 1901, (New York); as reproduced in Steele, 58.

Figure 13: *Ball's Corsets Revolution in Corsets*, Chicago Corset Co. c. 1870–1900, Boston Public Library.

Figure 14: Photographer and model unknown, "*Woman Wearing Corset, Brushing her Hair, Half-length portrait, Standing, Facing front,*" 1899, Library of Congress.

Figure 15: Thomas McLean, "*A correct view of the new machine for winding up the ladies*," c 1828, Science Museum Group Collection.

Figure 16: Gil Baer, *Fine Taille, horribles details*, fig, 209. Serrez! Serrez! And Fig 210. Ser...Crac!!, 1898; as reproduced in Steele, 107.

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