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UNBEARABLE PRESSURE: CORSETS, MEDICINE, AND ADVERTISING IN THE
MAKING OF THE WHITE FEMALE BODY IN ENGLAND, 1850-1900

By

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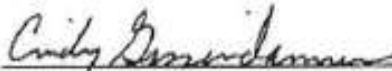
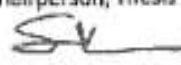
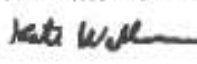

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Abstract

UNBEARABLE PRESSURE: CORSETS, MEDICINE, AND ADVERTISING IN THE
MAKING OF THE WHITE FEMALE BODY IN ENGLAND, 1850-1900

Megan Downey

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which language and material culture controlled women's bodies in such a way as to see white, British women of most socio-economic classes discipline themselves into buying and wearing corsets. I was curious to examine why white British women in the nineteenth-century wore corsets. I was especially interested in the ways in which advertisements and medical discourse influenced this. Through examination of advertisements in the British magazine, *Woman*, as well as numerous articles in *The British Medical Journal* it is possible to discern some of this information. This study concludes by calling to light the legacy left by corsets on twenty-first century women.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Corsets carried with them cultural rhetoric that contributed to the formation of the white female body, usually along the lines of socio-economic class, in the second half of the nineteenth century in Britain. Previous scholarship on corsets has focused on the medical dangers of corsets as well as general clothing practices across socio-economic classes.¹ Industrialization and urbanization are heavily intertwined in conversations about corsets and the social formation of the white female body. Industrialization led to rapid urbanization due to the growth of factories and capitalism. The women examined in this study are white women from various socio-economic classes who lived in urban areas of Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. This study will look at how language and material culture controlled women's bodies so as to discipline women into buying and wearing corsets.

A corset can be defined 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."² Giving shape to the figure is a euphemism for saying that a corset is designed to make a woman's waist smaller. The white female body has been formed across time and geographical location in such a way as to ensure that the female body take up as little space as possible.³ As Sandra Lee Bartkey describes, "the disciplinary

¹ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (2001). Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset*, (Oxford: Berg, 2001). Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Technology: Invention, Innovation, and the Rise of the Machine*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009). Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society in Victorian England*, (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010).

² "Corset," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 1 March 2016, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/42064?rskey=3UycDw&result=1#eid>.

³ Sandra Lee Bartkey, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," 101. Camille Nurka and Bethany Jones, "Labiaplasty, Race and the Colonial Imagination," *Australian Feminist Studies* 28, no. 78 (2013): 437.

project of femininity,” of which corsets played a significant part during the nineteenth-century, “is a ‘set-up.’”⁴ She adds that, “the larger disciplines that construct a ‘feminine’ body out of a female one are by no means race- or class- specific.”⁵

To more fully delve into the significance of corsets, it is first necessary to have definitions of the topics that will be discussed. Rhetoric, industrialization and urbanization, commodity culture, medicine and whiteness are all vital to understanding the particular situation surrounding corsets in the nineteenth century. Simply put, rhetoric is the art of persuasion.⁶ Various rhetorical devices were widely employed to build the social environment of Britain in nineteenth-century persuasion if objections to corsets were to be overcome. Before the American and French Revolutions, there was a common use of “laudatory” rhetoric. This rhetoric was designed in political circles to extol the achievements of a political representative and give praise.⁷ Conversely, following the revolutions of the late eighteenth century, “hortatory” rhetoric became more commonly used to persuade the public to agree with one view over another.⁸

This newly identified rhetorical strategy used emotions to link the audience to the desired persuasive argument.⁹ That is, use of hortatory rhetoric meant women were persuaded to wear corsets because it ensured their positive acceptance in society. Bartkey gives a twentieth-century analogy of this type of social praise when she discusses women wearing makeup. As she describes, women are socially convinced or disciplined into wearing makeup every day to work or while otherwise in public, but women are only

⁴ Bartkey, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” 100.

⁵ Bartkey, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” 101.

⁶ Richard Toye, *Rhetoric: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2.

⁷ Toye, *Rhetoric*, 31.

⁸ Toye, *Rhetoric*, 31.

⁹ Toye, *Rhetoric*, 31.

allowed to wear makeup in one conventional way. A woman who wears makeup in an unconventional way will experience the same social scrutiny as a woman who does not wear makeup at all.¹⁰ It is in this way that rhetoric is used to police white women's bodies and praise appropriate representation.

The increased use of this form of hortatory was important to the social formation of the white female body and was significant in the particular debate surrounding corsets in the second half of the nineteenth century. The white female body, its expression and its meanings, are social constructions. The experience and expression of these women's bodies exist because of and within "cultural systems, both private and public, which themselves have changed over time."¹¹ The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a new concept that women were different from men in every sense but could be complementary rather than inferior.¹²

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the social construction of the white female body can be best understood under the principle of the Angel in the House. First described by Coventry Patmore in the 1854, the Angel in the House became the ideal representation of womanhood. The angel was "leisured, superficially accomplished, [and] busy with the management of servants and the family's social life."¹³ She also "had no contact with money and did not care for sex."¹⁴ While the Angel in the House was first associated with upper-class Victorian women, the ideal became pervasive through all

¹⁰ Bartkey, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," 99.

¹¹ Roy Porter, "History of the Body." *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 208.

¹² Porter, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 221.

¹³ M. Jeanne Peterson, "No Angels in the House: The Victorian Myth and the Paget Women," *The American Historical Review*, 89 no. 3 (1984): 677.

¹⁴ Peterson, *The American Historical Review*, 694.

socio-economic classes.¹⁵ The picture of the Royal Family in the second half of the nineteenth-century helped to put forward the Angel in the House. Queen Victoria “embodies qualities that may be shared by every woman” and as such she was the perfect Angel in the House and became considered the standard against which all women should aspire.¹⁶

The Angel in the House

The poem published by Patmore in 1854 builds the ideal of the Angel in the House. It is within the lines of the poem that the many criteria for the Angel in the House can be discerned.

Canto V

I. The Comparison

Where she succeeds with cloudless brow,

In common and in holy course,

He fails, in spite of prayer and vow

And agonies of faith and force;

Or, if his suit with Heaven prevails

To righteous life, his virtuous deeds

Lack beauty, virtue's badge; she fails

More graciously than he succeeds

Her spirit, compact of gentleness,

If Heaven postpones or grants her pray'r,

Conceives no pride in its success,

¹⁵ Peterson, *The American Historical Review*, 678.

¹⁶ Lori Anne Loeb, *Consuming Angels: Advertising and Victorian Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 90.

And in its failure no despair;
 But his, enamour'd of its hurt,
 Baffled, blasphemes, or, not denied,
 Crows from the dunghill of desert,
 And wags its ugly wings for pride
 He's never young nor ripe; she grows
 More infantine, auroral, mild,
 And still the more she lives and knows
 The lovelier she's express'd a child.¹⁷

The Angel in the House helps to define white women's bodies in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth-century. Additionally, the Angel in the House and the constructed female body draw attention to a discussion of the separate spheres ideology. It was the summation of the life of an Angel in the House that solidified public and private roles. She was desexualized and docile; educated, but not so educated she could not find a husband; she cared for her family; and she submitted to her husband.¹⁸ The Angel in the House ruled the private sphere of home and family, while her husband was in the public sphere of business and work. The ideal of the Angel in the House serves as a representation of "a 'golden age' of family life, an era when men and women had separate roles in the social hierarchy."¹⁹

The public and private spheres intersect with the Angel in the House in many instances. How the home was run, including: the hiring of servants; the rearing of

¹⁷ Coventry Patmore, "The Angel in the House," in *Women's Rights: Struggles and Feminism in Britain c. 1770-1970*, ed. Fiona A. Montgomery (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 46.

¹⁸ Porter, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 221. Peterson, *The American Historical Review*, 689. Peterson, *The American Historical Review*, 706.

¹⁹ Peterson, *The American Historical Review*, 678.

children; the purchase or construction of clothing; and even the conspicuous display of decorative items were all important aspects of the private sphere of the Angel in the House. Despite this, the home was largely a reflection of the work and financial abilities of the husband in the public sphere.²⁰ In the second half of the nineteenth century the private sphere extended beyond the confines of the home with the expansion of the commodity culture and the growth of advertising and shopping.

Urbanization, Industrialization, and the Commodity Culture

The Industrial Revolution caused rapid urbanization starting in the early nineteenth century. The Industrial Revolution changed many things for the Angel in the House; she was no longer expected to be the main producer for her family in terms of food and clothing. Industrialization truly began with the invention of the steam engine and the train locomotive.²¹ Over the course of the nineteenth century, technology expanded exponentially and most notably through the growth of the factory. It was the growth of the factory that contributed to the large volumes of working-class people moving into England's large industrial cities.²² Industrialization and urbanization contributed to both social mobility and large class disparities. This new socio-economic class system was "fairly complex and dynamic" and there were "not one but several 'middle classes' and 'working classes'" that were in flux over the course of the second half of the nineteenth-century.²³

²⁰ Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), x.

²¹ Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 158.

²² Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 9.

²³ Kelley Graham, *"Gone to the Shops": Shopping in Victorian England* (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 4.

These various aspects of Victorian life and society are integral to understanding more fully the rhetoric surrounding corsets in the second half of the nineteenth century. Each subject - rhetoric, medicine, industrialization and urbanization, commodity culture, and whiteness - impacted corsets and the women who wore them in very different ways. Before their relationship to corsets can be fully understood, the larger picture of urban Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century must be drawn.

The Great Exhibition of 1851

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was a pinnacle moment in the social history of industrialization and an important point from which to understand the birth of the commodity culture. This event occurred in 1851, marking the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century. Every aspect of the Great Exhibition spoke to the Industrial Revolution and its impact on British society. Even parts of the name, like “industry” and “all nations,” reflect the importance of changes brought by industrialization.²⁴

The social implications of the Great Exhibition were immense. It was an extremely popular social event open to members of all socio-economic classes. The exhibition halls were set up in such a way that the machines were separated from their final products. This separated, mentally, workers from their work and helped conceal, in a way, the poor conditions of the factory. The “manufactures” section of the Great Exhibition contributed to the proliferation of the commodity culture that took over Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. This section referred to an area of the

²⁴ Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 54. The cost of admission was reflective of the idea that the Great Exhibition was open to members of all socio-economic classes, there was even one day a week that the price of admission was lowered so that even members of the lowest working-classes could attend the Great Exhibition.

exhibition that showed the various items that could be made by the machines with their raw materials.²⁵ Selling of “manufactures” or other items was not allowed at the Great Exhibition.

Industrialization

England was the first nation to become fully industrialized. Many developments in the early nineteenth century led England toward this economic transformation; including: the trafficking of enslaved peoples and expansion of empire; the presence of abundant natural resources domestically and in the colonies; and the lack of domestic conflict on British soil through the nineteenth century.²⁶ The moment in which British industrialization took off can be traced back to the first intercity passenger railway powered by steam that travelled from Liverpool to Manchester in 1830.²⁷ It was a journey of thirty-five miles. After the inaugural journey from coast to interior, invention and industry grew exponentially nationwide. Steam power trains gave way to steam power ships; trains and ships gave way to the telegraph and the standardization of time.²⁸

The factory and the factory system symbolize the Industrial Revolution. It was in the factories that work and the creation of manufactured goods happened. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, work was highly specialized and workers were skilled in one particular craft. Industrialization led to a rapid process by which many jobs became significantly de-skilled and part of the de-skilling process left men in management

²⁵ Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 66.

²⁶ Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 139.

²⁷ Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 2.

²⁸ Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 16.

positions and skilled labor while women and children would be given the dangerous and menial jobs.²⁹

The commodity culture that was created in the second half of the nineteenth-century owes much to the industrialization that built the factories and made the materials fast and cheap; and to the urbanization that densely populated the cities surrounding shops and department stores. The commodity culture had everything to do with socio-economic class. To be more specific, the items in a home or the brand of the foods put on the table became status symbols and would “foster the appearance of the middle-class domestic environment.”³⁰ Industrialization expanded the middle-classes greatly through entrepreneurship and factory ownership. With the increasing numbers of members of the middle-classes, it was necessary to buy more goods to make their new status visible.³¹

Prior to the nineteenth century, it was believed that “taste,” as in the ability to arrange items and adorn a home to clearly display status without being ostentatious, was a quality hereditary to the upper-classes.³² Thanks to the commodity culture born from the Industrial Revolution, however, “taste” was now available to all. Commodity culture fueled by consumer demand is another example of the peculiar position of Britain as the first industrialized country. The commodity culture of the British in the second half of the nineteenth century can be understood through two mediums: advertising and shopping. One did not exist without the other.

²⁹ Sussman, *Victorian Technology*, 35.

³⁰ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 10.

³¹ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 27.

³² Cohen, *Household Gods*, xii.

Shopping

First and foremost buying is different from shopping.³³ Buying, whether with money or by barter, is something that had occurred across classes for hundreds of years. Buying is a matter of necessity. Shopping, on the other hand, involved choices such as that of brand or store.³⁴ While buying was about needs, Victorian shoppers of the second half of the nineteenth century redefined “the idea of ‘need.’”³⁵ This redefinition reflects the new hedonistic ethos embodied by the growing middle-classes. This hedonism can be described as “pursuit of pleasure and especially the satisfaction gained through material objects.”³⁶

Shopping required the shopper to be outside the home and therefore, it could be said that shopping was an activity for the public sphere. However, shopping was perceived as “a feminine task” and therefore, more logically, an extension of the private sphere for a woman to acquire “goods for consumption.”³⁷ A strong reason for this extension of the private sphere has to do with women’s role as producer of food and clothing in the centuries before the Industrial Revolution. But within a short time the role of producer was switched to that of consumer. The things women were responsible for; clothing, food, and the proper adornments related to socio-economic status, did not change, but how women fulfilled the responsibilities associated with these goods did.³⁸ Shopping was a way in which the private sphere was extended and, as such, it was an

³³ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 20.

³⁴ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 27.

³⁵ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 89.

³⁶ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 4.

³⁷ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 12.

³⁸ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 27.

acceptable activity for a woman to participate in without a proper male chaperone. It was viewed as part of her participation in her role as “keeper of home and family.”³⁹

The evolution of the shop and of shopping in the second half of the nineteenth century was a direct result of industrialization and urbanization. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the shop went from being a small, family-owned establishment with tremendous financial risks to the large, corporate-owned department store.⁴⁰

Advertising

As shopping became more common and the department store grew, the advertisement became an important and common part of Victorian life and commodity culture.⁴¹ Prior to the second half of the nineteenth century, advertising was not common and often was viewed as lacking in “taste”.⁴² This view changed as industrialization brought about a revolution in the press and literacy was on the rise. These two facts made the commercial advertisement more common and acceptable.⁴³ Advertising was the medium through which the acquisition of “taste” could be made throughout socio-economic classes. It was important to advertisers to reach women at home and appeal to their nature as the Angel of the House. How women were represented in advertisements was one way of achieving this action. This representation took various forms; women were often displayed as in command rather than passive.⁴⁴ Another common representation of the woman in advertisements was in the form of a Greek goddess. Loeb

³⁹ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 27.

⁴⁰ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 88.

⁴¹ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 5.

⁴² Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 50.

⁴³ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 3.

⁴⁴ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 33.

describes this in non-fashion advertising as a way to promote the importance of the product, soap for example, and leave out “the vagaries of fashion.”⁴⁵

Medicine

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the professionalization of medical practice created both practitioner and patient, with the attendant medical construction of the white female body. Both the Industrial Revolution and urbanization had profound effects on the medical profession. Industrialization and innovation in the nineteenth century brought about many important medical inventions. These include: “the stethoscope, the speculum, the microscope, the ophthalmoscope, the thermometer, the sphygmomanometer,” and “the x-ray machine.”⁴⁶ These new technologies led to the practice of patient diagnosis based on body signals as measured by the new medical instruments, whereas in the past diagnosis was based on patients’ reports of how they felt.⁴⁷

Class was a highly significant factor in healthcare during the second half of the nineteenth century. Most of the first hospitals were opened to help the sick poor, although there were two major pitfalls of early public hospitals for the poor. First, the Anatomy Act of 1832 allowed for the corpses of the poor who died in the hospital to be claimed by the hospital for use in medical schools.⁴⁸ Second, the New Poor Law of 1834 made the conditions of public hospitals so unfavorable as to help discourage the sick poor from seeking medical help.⁴⁹ These two laws created a social situation in which the large

⁴⁵ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 34.

⁴⁶ Mary Wilson Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society in Victorian England* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 5.

⁴⁷ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 12.

⁴⁸ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 16.

⁴⁹ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 26.

population of urban poor would not seek medical help if it was needed, and, in turn, this helped spread disease throughout the growing industrial cities.

Early public hospitals were intended for the poor because those of the middle- and upper- classes could pay for a doctor to come to their home and care for them. It was very much the case for medicine in the nineteenth century that medical care was based on how much you could afford.⁵⁰ If you could afford the best treatment that is what you would receive. If you could not afford to pay for your care, there was a great likelihood you would be dissected by medical students. With the rise of industrialization in the medical field, Victorians of the middle- and upper- classes became “almost obsessed with their own health.”⁵¹ There was a drastic difference in the experience of patients from one socio-economic class to another. With the use of all the new medical inventions, doctors began to create diagnoses largely without any input from the patient.

Many great technological innovations occurred in medicine during the nineteenth-century, one of the most notable being the speculum. With the speculum came the rise of gynecology and the increased policing of women’s bodies. Women were described as a special group of medical subjects due to their ability to reproduce.⁵² On one hand, this was a good thing because the rise of gynecology was able to give more specific care to women and included the tools to conquer all the health risks associated with giving birth such as high levels of infant and maternal mortality. Conversely, women being considered a special set of patients provided ammunition to keep women out of the

⁵⁰ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 28.

⁵¹ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 23.

⁵² Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 150.

medical profession or any other “rigorous intellectual study that might undermine the health of their reproductive organs.”⁵³

Menstruation and ovulation were scientific mysteries throughout the nineteenth century. Even with the discovery of ovulation in 1831, knowledge on the menstrual cycle was scarce.⁵⁴ It was thought that menstruation made women sickly leading to an “ideology of the female body as inherently ‘unwell.’”⁵⁵ No discussion of Victorian medicine and women could be complete without mentioning hysteria. Hysteria was used throughout the nineteenth century to describe an array of maladies that impacted women from irregular menstrual cycles to unhappiness with a husband.⁵⁶ Sexual discourse and the study of sexuality were extensive in the nineteenth century, focusing primarily on disorder and abnormality. Most commonly, sexual discourse linked disorders and abnormalities to hysteria in women or masturbation in men.⁵⁷

Scientific developments on women’s health in the nineteenth century endeavored to lower the mortality rates of infants and new mothers. There were two main causes of maternal death during or as a result of childbirth. The first was called puerperal fever and the second was an ambiguous category called “accidents in childbirth.”⁵⁸ Interestingly, Carpenter does not discuss what type of accidents this may be referring to: something unavoidable or some sort of medical malpractice. Hand-washing is the most effective deterrent for puerperal fever. A study done in the 1840s noted that puerperal fever

⁵³ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 150.

⁵⁴ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 154.

⁵⁵ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 157.

⁵⁶ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 178.

⁵⁷ Porter, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 222.

⁵⁸ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 164.

occurred most often when the doctors present at the birth had come from the autopsy room without washing their hands, as hand-washing was not common procedure.⁵⁹

Medicine in the nineteenth century stood at the center of the social formation and policing of women's bodies. The clearest example of the social formation and policing of women's bodies in Britain in the nineteenth-century is the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866, and 1869. The Contagious Diseases Acts were a series of laws enforced in certain military garrison and other port towns that involved forced medical examination for women believed to be working as prostitutes.⁶⁰ The proposed intent of the Contagious Diseases Acts was to eradicate the spread of syphilis within military regiments. The 1866 amendment of the Contagious Diseases Acts increased police surveillance and ability to enforce the law on women. There was also a strong movement to spread the coverage of the Contagious Diseases Acts to the civilian population of Britain.⁶¹ The Contagious Diseases Acts were in full effect until 1886 when a new Act made it impossible to enforce examination requirements and this rendered the Acts null and void. Shortly after, the Contagious Diseases Acts were repealed entirely in Britain.⁶² Many different players led to the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, including Members of Parliament and feminist groups. As a result of the repeal, "the enterprise of policing bodies quickly foundered."⁶³

The medical community was impactful by contributing numerous theories and procedures concerning sexual discourse and women's health. Ovariectomies and removal

⁵⁹ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 25.

⁶⁰ Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 70.

⁶¹ Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 78.

⁶² Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, 80.

⁶³ Porter, *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, 220.

of the clitoris were for a time commonly practiced procedures to cure maladies associated with hysteria and masturbation.⁶⁴ It was thought that these procedures would cure women of mental troubles associated with their reproductive systems. The twenty-first century practice of cosmetic labiaplasty has its roots in in the medicalization of women's bodies throughout the nineteenth century, especially in Britain's colonies.⁶⁵ This helped contribute to the formation of the white female body.

Whiteness

“The trick of whiteness is in the ubiquity of its visual representations which nonetheless pretend to be representing everything but racial difference.

Whiteness signifies itself everywhere, yet conceals its traces with the privilege of historical amnesia.”⁶⁶

Colonialization and globalization were very impactful on the creation of the white female body in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century. The British Empire spread across the globe and as such, the colonial gaze became important in the formation of race and gender. The colonial gaze, or imagination, can be defined as, “comprising anthropological, medical and photographic accounts of” various non-white or indigenous female bodies that are used to “draw a specific set of conclusions.”⁶⁷

One example of the colonial gaze or imagination that helps to construct whiteness in the nineteenth century is the group of African Women labeled “Hottentot.” This label was derived from the “Hottentot apron,” a term used to describe the vulva of African

⁶⁴ Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 178.

⁶⁵ Nurka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 422.

⁶⁶ Nurka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 436.

⁶⁷ Nurka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 418.

women.⁶⁸ As the quote above describes, the significance of whiteness is in its invisibility. For instance, the imagery of the “Hottentot” body must be deployed to help describe how whiteness is created. To understand whiteness, it must be compared to its “other.”

Conclusion

Historical studies of medical discourse, fashion or commercial advertisements have been the most common venues for research on corsets. The points made by these discourses are all significant separately, but, when they are brought together, they bring a new depth to the conversation. The topics discussed above: rhetoric, industrialization and urbanization, medicine, and whiteness speak to the history of corsets and the social formation of the female body in the second half of the nineteenth-century in that both language and material culture policed women’s bodies and enforced self-discipline by women on themselves.

Nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first century medical sources decry the dangers of corsets, especially tight-lacing. Nonetheless, advertisers and corset manufacturers of the nineteenth century relied on cultural rhetoric to encourage women to wear their products. This cultural rhetoric was built on the ways in which femininity functioned as a social disciplinary power.⁶⁹ The following chapters will explore each of these concepts as they relate to corsets. Chapter Two will focus on the production and marketing of corsets themselves; it will be a rhetorical analysis of nineteenth-century corset advertisements. Chapter Three will examine corsets in relation to the medical community and examine scholarly conversations that discuss the medical implications of

⁶⁸ Nurka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 417.

⁶⁹ Bartkey, “Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” 95.

corsets. If nineteenth-century medical sources discussed the dangers of corsets, then why did so many women continue to wear them throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth? The Final Chapter will synthesize these associated topics and reiterate the creation of corsets as a cultural construction in Britain in the second half of the nineteenth century as well as examine the corset's legacy in the twenty-first century.

Chapter Two

Rhetorical Analysis of Corset Advertisements

What was it about advertisements and the commodity culture of the late nineteenth century that led women of all classes to wear corsets? This chapter will be a visual rhetorical analysis of corset advertisements from the British women's magazine, *Woman*. A visual rhetorical analysis is a way to demonstrate how a text communicates its messages and meanings. This is done by looking at each advertisement to discern its audience, purpose, and context. The advertisements appeared in *Woman* between March of 1890 and June of 1900. By the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, corset advertisements made up twenty-five percent of all clothing advertisements in ladies' magazines.⁷⁰ Through the visual rhetorical analysis of these corset advertisements, it becomes possible to examine the growth of a commodity culture in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century as well as the ways in which rhetoric was seen through the visual image of the corset and was used in this way to control women. As the analysis of the advertisements will show, different aspects of femininity and womanhood are praised based on the socioeconomic status of the women to whom the corset advertisement is directed. Additionally, these advertisements help to show the different disciplinary practices "by which the ideal body of femininity" was constructed.⁷¹

Background

Corset advertisements encountered a very distinct change over time. In the mid-nineteenth century, when corsets were first advertised, these advertisements consisted of

⁷⁰ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 32.

⁷¹ Bartkey, "Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," 100.

simple illustrations of a lone corset.⁷² Significant cultural taboos surrounded the idea of showing a woman in a corset; it was viewed to be inappropriate and indecent. Over the next fifty years, corset advertisements became more elaborate as the power of the advertisement grew. Following the empty corset, there was an expanse of time in which corset advertisements consisted of a corset now filled with a disembodied head and armless torso. This new illustration type did not upset the social taboos in that it was not a full picture of a woman. As the century came to a close, the illustrations in corset advertisements became much more elaborate and included full body illustrations of women in various states of dress.⁷³ There was an extremely intimate and personal nature to be found in many of the advertisements from the very end of the nineteenth century. For instance, the advertisements are usually set in a bedroom or the woman in the illustration has her hair down. These two situations would be considered too personal to show in a magazine if they weren't illustrations.

These illustrations of white women in the magazine, *Woman*, can be juxtaposed with photographs of African and Asian women to show another example of the invisibility and privilege of whiteness. White male anthropologists of the nineteenth century traveled through British colonies in Africa and built a large body of scholarship on the bodies of African women. The colonial gaze, mentioned in Chapter One, helped build the visual expectations of the white, British woman via the photographs taken by anthropologists of African women. White women's bodies, in various states of dress, are

⁷² Summers, *Bound to Please*, 178.

⁷³ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 178.

created as normal in advertising illustrations whereas the black body is seen as abnormal or “disgusting” through photographs.⁷⁴

Industrialization in the early nineteenth-century led to an explosion of technological innovation and invention. All of these inventions, from the steam engine to the camera, had great impact on the lives of the Victorians. One of the most influential innovations of the nineteenth century was advertising.⁷⁵ Advertisements, especially those for corsets, were strongly characterized by extensive brand name differentiation by the end of the nineteenth century.⁷⁶ While the advertisements to be analyzed in this chapter are all from the same magazine, they are representative of a range of corset manufacturers and retailers. The brands include: E. Izod & Son; Thomson’s; Worth et Cie; Young, Carter & Overall; W. Hull King & Son; “Domen” Belts Company; L. Reynolds & Co.; Y&N Diagonal Seam Corsets; and Mme. Katarine. The intended audience for each of these companies was slightly different, though by the close of the nineteenth century, it was common for corset advertisements to be able to appeal to all classes of women.⁷⁷

Woman was a weekly women’s magazine that could be purchased for one penny. Each weekly edition contained a vast amount of information. The magazine contained news and society gossip. It often reported the goings on of Queen Victoria and the Royal Family. Additionally, it contained weekly serials. These serials were weekly installments of a continuing story that could go on for several months. And with the

⁷⁴ Nurka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 419.

⁷⁵ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 36.

⁷⁶ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 32.

⁷⁷ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 175.

growth of the commodity culture in the late-nineteenth century, *Woman* of course, was full of several pages of advertisements.

Corsets were worn by women of almost all classes for most of their lives, from adolescence to old age. Even incarceration in prison or mental institution did not release a woman from her social requirement to wear a corset.⁷⁸ Dozens of corset manufacturers operated in Britain by the end of the nineteenth century. Each corset manufacturing company advertised for their own styles of corsets, but the corsets could be purchased at most stores.

While each corset manufacturer had its own patent for its corsets, the companies tailored their approach to their intended audience. The wide variety of advertisements that can be found in the pages of *Woman* is a clear indication that its readership consisted of women of both working- and middle- or upper-class. This rhetorical analysis will examine corset advertisements directed at working- and middle- or upper-class women as well as those surreptitiously directed at pregnant women of all socio-economic classes.

As a preface to this rhetorical analysis of nineteenth-century corset advertisements, two concepts must first be explained. Many corset advertisements include their prices, but through methods vastly different from how modern British, or even American, prices are shown. As Graham explains it, “the coinage system was based on the penny, but there were also several coins representing fractions of the penny.”⁷⁹ A pound was made of twenty shillings and one shilling was made of twelve pennies, with several other denominations in between.⁸⁰ Graham, for instance, uses the example of the Mad Hatter from *Alice in Wonderland*: the sign on his hat reads “10/6” which means the

⁷⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 15.

⁷⁹ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 12.

⁸⁰ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 12.

hat he is wearing cost ten shillings and sixpence.⁸¹ While paper money existed at the end of the nineteenth century, it was not government-issued and regulated as it is today. Paper money, or bank notes, were made by individual financial institutions. If a shop keeper was given a bank note, he would then have to go to that particular financial institution to obtain the corresponding coinage.⁸²

The categories under which the following advertisements will be analyzed are: those directed at working-class women; those directed at middle- and upper-class women; and those directed at pregnant women. It is important to note that pregnancy was a topic that was kept most secret. In general, Victorian society considered a visibly pregnant body to be something to keep out of sight and almost offensive to be seen.⁸³ Strong cultural taboos surrounded pregnancy and consequently corset manufacturers sought their customers by advertising in a sort of code.⁸⁴ One of the biggest incentives for Victorian women to wear corsets during pregnancy was to help conceal ever-growing abdomens.⁸⁵

Working-Class Women

For the purposes of this study, working-class women are those who, for whatever reason, had to work one or more jobs to support themselves and often a family. These women mostly worked in factories, or were married to men who worked in factories; some even worked in the factories that created the corsets they wore every day. Corsets were important for working-class women in that they provided a space for women to

⁸¹ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 12.

⁸² Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 10.

⁸³ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 37.

⁸⁴ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 41.

⁸⁵ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 41.

adjust their appearance in such a way that they could attempt class mobility, most often through marriage.⁸⁶

In the March 8, 1890 edition of *Woman*, E. Izod & Son placed an advertisement for their patent corsets which were “the best.”⁸⁷ The general layout of the advertisement includes a small picture of a fully-clothed woman performing some sort of housework on the outside of her house. A portion of the advertisement contains writing that boasted about several key aspects of the Izod corset. For instance, the advertising copy highlights information stating that the corset has been manufactured by “a new and special scientific process.”⁸⁸ In another place, the copy reads, “public opinion all over the world unanimous that they are unsurpassed for comfort, style, and durability.”⁸⁹ This advertisement does not include a price list.

The first indication that this advertisement is directed toward working-class women is the illustration of the woman working. E. Izod & Son is depicting the ability of a woman to complete physical work while wearing her corset. As we shall see later, this was not a concern of a middle- or upper-class woman. Another indication of the garment’s intended purchaser was the advertisement’s discussion of “comfort” and “durability.”⁹⁰ Working-class women generally had to spend many hours working in their corsets, so comfort while performing various tasks was an important selling point. Additionally, durability was an extremely important selling point for working-class women when it came to corsets. As the next chapter will discuss, it was very common for the boning in corsets, whether whalebone or metal, to break if the wearer was too

⁸⁶ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 10.

⁸⁷ “Izod’s Patent Corsets.” *Woman* 8 March 1890, 11.

⁸⁸ “Izod’s Patent Corsets,” 11.

⁸⁹ “Izod’s Patent Corsets,” 11.

⁹⁰ “Izod’s Patent Corsets,” 11.

active in her corset, causing injuries from minor bruises and abrasions to puncture wounds.⁹¹ Although the advertisement says that the corset was “prepared by a new and special scientific process,” it does not describe the process that was used.⁹²

An advertisement by the corset manufacturing company, Young, Carter & Overall appeared in the January 4, 1893 edition of *Woman* (Figure 1). This advertisement contains two advertisements for one company, with one being directed toward working-class women and the other being directed at middle- and upper-class women. The “Ycando Good Sense” Corded Corset is described as a “hygienic health” garment.⁹³ Additionally, the garment is described for its durability, emphasizing that the buttons won’t fall off as well as the button holes “will not wear out.”⁹⁴ The illustration that accompanies the advertisement is a picture of a woman with her hair down, shown in just her corset. Finally, at the bottom of the advertisement, appears a list of prices for the corset. To order the corset in white or dove, which was typically a shade of grey, would cost five shillings to five shillings and sixpence; to order it in scarlet would cost five shillings and sixpence.⁹⁵

Similarly to the E. Izod & Son advertisement from three years earlier, this advertisement discusses the durability and longevity of the garment. Significantly, it mentions that the buttons cannot be pulled off.⁹⁶ A statement such as this indicates that the garment will be wearable for an extended period of time, and physical labor will not cause it to become worn out easily. This advertisement contained a table displaying the

⁹¹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 28.

⁹² “Izod’s Patent Corsets,” 11.

⁹³ “Ycando Good Sense’ Corded Corsets,” *Woman*. January 4, 1893, 1.

⁹⁴ “Ycando Good Sense’ Corded Corsets,” 1.

⁹⁵ “Ycando Good Sense’ Corded Corsets,” 1.

⁹⁶ “Ycando Good Sense’ Corded Corsets,” 1.

The L. Reynolds & Co. corset manufacturing company placed an advertisement for their “‘Dermathistic’ Corset” in the January 9, 1895 edition of *Woman* (Figure 2).

The advertisement contains a picture of a young woman with her hair down, shown only in her corset. Also, there is a paragraph sharing the reasons for which a woman should buy this corset. A bolded section reads, “for comfort, elegance and durability.”⁹⁷ Prices are listed and range from four shillings and eleven pence to ten shillings and sixpence.⁹⁸ Comfort and support “without the slightest inconvenience” are also advertised. The “‘Dermathistic’” corset claims to be the “most durable, and therefore the cheapest” corset that can be purchased.⁹⁹

The price range from four shillings to ten shillings makes this brand of corset one of the most inexpensive seen within the pages of *Woman*. There are several instances throughout the advertisement that claim the comfort and durability of the corset. The low price point and the way in which the advertisement stresses the durability of the corset, strongly suggest that this company was directing their advertisement at the poorer women of the working-class. The advertisement claims that the corset is “warranted unbreakable.”¹⁰⁰ This would be appealing to women of the working class because this advertisement claims that for as little as four shillings and eleven pence, a woman could own a corset that will last a very long time and if it doesn’t, it comes under warranty by the L. Reynolds & Co. corset manufacturing company.

⁹⁷ “The ‘Dermathistic’ Corset,” *Woman*, January 9, 1895, 15.

⁹⁸ “The ‘Dermathistic’ Corset,” 15.

⁹⁹ “The ‘Dermathistic’ Corset,” 15.

¹⁰⁰ “The ‘Dermathistic’ Corset,” 15.

A BEAUTIFUL INVENTION.
THE
'DERMATHISTIC' CORSET

SPECIALITE—All Bones and Buds protected by Dr. *Edinger*.



LADIES OF ALL AGES who wear the scientifically constructed Corsets declare them to be the Most Comfortable and Elegant in the market.

FOR COMFORT, ELEGANCE, & DURABILITY.

therefore the Cheaper Made in various Colors and Sizes to suit all tall and short figures, at \$11, 15, 7/11, and 10/6 per pair.

EXPERIENCE DRESSMAKERS they can easily fit bodies to perfection.

REYNOLDS & Co., PORTSMOUTH

BEWARE OF IMITATIONS

Figure 2: The "Dermathistic" Corset

Middle- and Upper-Class Women

Middle- and upper-class Victorian women can be defined as women who did not work and were not expected to do so. These women were usually born into their socio-economic class, although social mobility through marriage was possible. The admonishment that young girls sometimes receive when they hear, “that’s not lady-like” comes from the manners and social expectations of Victorian women of the middle- and upper-classes, as a Lady by nature does not work. Many of the social standards expected of middle- and upper-class Victorian women revolved around corsets. As these women were not expected to perform physical labor, their corsets were generally expected to be rigid and straight. Advertisements for such corsets did not contain mentions of comfort; they mentioned features such as expense or top quality materials.

An advertisement for Thomson’s Glove-Fitting Corset, which appeared in *Woman* on April 12, 1890, shows many key features that advertisements directed at middle- and upper-class women contained. The advertisement presents an illustration of a corset, labeled style “D.”¹⁰¹ Prices range from five shillings for style “G” to ten shillings and sixpence for style “D.”¹⁰² Finally, the advertisement extols the corset’s nine first medals as well as featuring a large crown in the center to symbolize the Royal Warrant.

Even though the prices for the corset in this advertisement are similar to the prices found in advertisements directed toward working-class women, several other aspects of the advertisement signal that the company is addressing middle- and upper-class women. The name of the corset is Thomson’s *Glove-Fitting* Corset (my emphasis). The tag-line that the corset “fits like a glove” describes that the corsets are manufactured by use of a

¹⁰¹ “Thomson’s Glove-Fitting Corset,” *Woman*, April 12, 1890, 16.

¹⁰² “Thomson’s Glove-Fitting Corset,” 16.

steam-molding process which made corsets more rigid and able to be tied tighter.¹⁰³ The more rigid and more tightly tied the corset, the less able the woman wearing it was to do any sort of physical work or movement.

The other significant aspect of this advertisement is its Royal Warrant. A Royal Warrant was a seal or symbol of Queen Victoria or other member of the Royal Family that designated that the product advertised was used by a member of the Royal Family.¹⁰⁴ Two main motives drove an advertiser to include a Royal Warrant in its advertisement. First, it could easily be inferred from the Royal Warrant that if the Queen used a product, it must be a high quality product.¹⁰⁵ Secondly, anyone who could afford the product could “feel like royalty through simple acts of consumption.”¹⁰⁶

To the right of the “Ycando Good Sense” corset advertisement by Young, Carter & Overall in the January 4, 1893 edition of *Woman* was an advertisement for the company’s “‘Duchess’ Corset” (Figure 3). The illustration included in the advertisement is of an empty corset. Prices are listed ranging from ten shillings and sixpence to twenty-one shillings. The corset is said to accomplish an improved outline, and reduce the figure, which then makes “a fashionable and elegant appearance secured.”¹⁰⁷

Like many other advertisements for middle- and upper-class women, the price of The “Duchess” Corset indicates the advertisement’s socio-economic direction. In comparison to the “Ycando Good Sense” corset advertisement, The “Duchess” Corset has a long paragraph describing the values of the garment. The “Duchess” Corset:

¹⁰³ “Thomson’s Glove-Fitting Corset,” 16. Summers, *Bound to Please*, 27.

¹⁰⁴ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 86.

¹⁰⁵ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 86.

¹⁰⁶ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 86.

¹⁰⁷ “The ‘Duchess’ Corset.” *Woman*, January 4, 1893, 1.

“Is constructed on a graceful model for the present style of dress. The shape being permanently retained by a series of narrow whalebones placed diagonally across the front gradually curving in and contracting the Corset at the bottom of the busk, whereby the size of the figure is reduced, the outline improved, a permanent support afforded, and fashionable and elegant appearance secured.”¹⁰⁸



Figure 3: The "Duchess" Corset

¹⁰⁸ “The ‘Duchess’ Corset,” 1.

W. Hull King & Son corset manufacturers placed many advertisements in *Woman* throughout the years, including one from August 16, 1893 (Figure 4). The advertisement contains an illustration of a woman with her hair up who is drawn wearing the company's "Princess May" corset. The price for the "Princess May" corset is ten shillings and sixpence for white and twelve shillings and sixpence for black; nineteen shillings and sixpence for fine coutil and twenty-one shillings for super black Zanella.¹⁰⁹ Other styles of corsets sold by W. Hull King & Son include the "Alexandra" and the "Duchess of Fife" corsets.

The names of the different styles of corsets signify the company's efforts to align itself with upper-class status or aspirations. "Alexandra" refers to Queen Victoria's daughter-in-law, Alexandra, Princess of Wales and "Duchess of Fife" to Alexandra's daughter, Louise, Princess Royal. The "Princess May" referred to the future Queen Mary who was daughter-in-law and sister-in-law to Alexandra and Louise, respectively. The naming of these products creates the same ideas in the heads of consumers that can be found with products that have a Royal Warrant. If a company named its product after a member of the Royal Family, then a consumer would also "feel like royalty through simple acts of consumption."¹¹⁰ The W. Hull King & Son company did not boast a Royal Warrant in its advertisements.

¹⁰⁹ "W. Hull King & Son, High-Class Corsets." *Woman*, August 16, 1893.

¹¹⁰ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 86.

The company's use of naming their products after members of the Royal Family is significant to the Angel in the House ideology. The Queen was the ultimate Angel, and her house was Britain and its colonies. By naming the various corset styles after women in the Royal Family, women could feel that they shared certain qualities and could aspire to the same social grace as the Queen and her female relatives.¹¹¹

W. HULL KING & SON,
Wholesale Manufacturers and Importers of
High-Class Corsets.

These Corsets are made of Materials of the Finest Quality, and for
increasing reputation for a Quarter of a Century.

THE
"PRINCESS MAY" Corset,
Is a graceful Model, long waisted, 1 1/2
inches gap; between the two extremes
of the Empire and deep Corsets.

TRADE MARK
W.H.K.S.
REGISTERED.
also the celebrated
"ALEXANDRA" and
"DUCHESS OF FIFE"
Corsets, warranted real whale-
bone, exceptional value.

White, 10/6. Black, 12/6.

To be obtained of the London Agents
Messrs. STODOLSKY & CO., Tottenham
Court Road, W.; WATERMAN,
HUGHES and SWAN and EDWARDS,
151, Regent Street, W.; Messrs.
CARPENTER, SON and CO., 145, E. and
24, Greenwich Street, E.C.; Messrs.
GREEN & EDWARDS, 10, St. Paul's
St. John's Wood; PETER RICHARD
SON, Oxford Street, W.; and all first
class Drapers and Emporium in the
principal towns of Great Britain and
Ireland.

Ask for the W. H. K. & S. CORSET.
Should there be any difficulty in obtaining them, write to the
address mentioned above.

W.H.K. & S. - Telegraphic Address: "W.H.K. & S."
35, Percy Street, Rathbone Place, London, W.

Figure 4: W. Hull King & Son, High-Class Corsets

¹¹¹ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 90.

A few years later, W. Hull King & Son placed another of many advertisements in the December 9, 1896 edition of *Woman* (Figure 5). This advertisement is different in many ways than the previous advertisement and shows many changes that the W. Hull King & Son corset company went through in three years. This advertisement contains a large illustration of a woman with her hair up wearing the “Sandringham” corset with a very decorative chemise underneath. The advertisement also lists the prices ranging from thirteen shillings and sixpence to twenty-five shillings. The advertisement assures readers that W. Hull King & Son corsets can be obtained at any “first-class” draper or other clothing shop.¹¹² In addition to corset styles named after royal women, the manufacturer added styles named after other famous British women.

Of all the W. Hull King & Son advertisements viewed during this analysis of *Woman*, this one most clearly exemplifies that this corset manufacturer directed their advertisements toward middle- and upper-class Victorian women. Corsets made with “best arctic whalebone” were significantly more expensive than their “B quality” options made of “ordinary bone.”¹¹³ The more expensive or elaborate the boning of the corset is, the less mobility the woman wearing the corset had. This is another example of why this advertisement and the corsets advertised were directed at middle-and upper-class women.

¹¹² “W. Hull King & Son,” *Woman*, December 9, 1896, 4.

¹¹³ “W. Hull King & Son,” 4.

W. HULL KING & SON
 WHOLESALE AND EXPORT ONLY
Stay & Corset Manufacturers.
 35, PERCY STREET, RATHBONE PLACE, LONDON, W.
 Design and Trade Mark Registered



THE "SANDRINGHAM" CORSET
 is laced deep
 Exposure shows the quality of work, and really equal to. Corsets from
 outside the world at a greatly enhanced price.

Fine White Cord, Best Arctic Whalebone	21 -
Black Tangle, Best Arctic Whalebone	25 -
3 quality, White Cord, ordinary Bone	13 6
" Black Tangle, ordinary Bone	16 6

Also see Catalogue
 "ELLEN TERRY," "PATY HIGGINS," "MARY ANDERSON,"
 "DUCHESS OF FIFE," "LORNE," AND "EUGENE" CORSETS.
 ETC.

Ask for
 THE **W.H.K. & S. Corsets.**

To be obtained at all Dress and Drapery and Corsetry stores.



THE "SANDRINGHAM" CORSET

Figure 5: W. Hull King & Son

Women were not simply passive actors who wore corsets because social norms dictated that they do. While many men held patents for corsets, there were also many women who held patents for corsets. Patents for corsets held by women focused on making corsets more comfortable, in contrast to the patents held by men that focused on making corsets more durable despite the fact that the men claimed to be making corsets more comfortable.¹¹⁴ Mme. Katarine is one such example of a woman who held patents for corsets. In the May 2, 1900 edition of *Woman*, a short column describes the perfect corset (Figure 6). The column is written like an editorial but is, in fact, an advertisement for Mme. Katarine's corsets. There is a small picture of a woman with her hair up wearing only her corset. The passage shares the "author's" opinions about Mme. Katarine's corsets and why they are the best for every woman.

Within the passage, many key phrases designate this advertisement as directed toward middle- and upper-class women. It is declared that "only the best bones are used" in Mme. Katarine's corsets.¹¹⁵ The advertisement also states that Mme. Katarine sells her corsets as measured for the woman who is buying the corset. This is a very clear indicator of the socio-economic class to which Mme. Katarine is appealing. Industrialization made mass production of the corset possible and, as such, much more affordable. Made-to-order items were always more expensive and only available to middle- and upper-class women.

¹¹⁴ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 24-27.

¹¹⁵ "A Perfect Corset." *Woman*, May 2, 1900, 19.

“A perfect corset should give support without causing discomfort or imparting rigidity to the figure, and it should not disguise the rounded curves which are the peculiarity of the human form. I have found just the corset I like in the Specialite Corset patented six years ago by the inventor, Mme. Katarine...”¹¹⁶

A Perfect Corset.

A PERFECT corset should give support without causing discomfort or imparting rigidity to the figure, and it should not disguise the rounded curves which are the peculiarity of the human form. I have found just the corset I like in the Specialite Corset patented six years ago by the inventor, Mme. Katarine (9, Lincoln Street, King's Road, Chelsea). The shape is perfect, giving just the right spring to bust and hip, and the waist-line is drawn down to its proper place. Hence Mme. Katarine's corset is invaluable for matronly figures which have run to seed and for growing girls who remain heavy and shapeless of figure. No undue pressure is exercised. Only the best bones are used, and these are arranged to agree with the lovely curves of the human frame in such a manner that they bend and recoil with astonishing elasticity, and never break with the most sudden and violent movements on the part of the corset wearer. Hence, to wear Mme. Katarine's corset means grace and elegance. Stock sizes can be obtained, but, of course, Mme. Katarine professes to make to measure—every figure has its peculiarities. The little sketch gives an imperfect idea of the curves pursued by the side-bones of the corset. The corsets are built in satin, lovely brocades, in silk and cotton mixtures, etc. The more expensive corsets of brocade, silk-lined, are as light as a feather. But all are light, and even in the cheapest Mme. Katarine excludes steel. Everybody who values a good figure should try a pair. Mme. Katarine, a dressmaker of true artistic ability, was driven to invent the corset by her despair at seeing her prettiest “creations” regrettably ruined by an ill-cut, ill-fitting corset. Whoever goes to see her corsets (she has always several orders ready to go out, besides stock-models to show) should make a point of asking to see some of her dainty blouses and tea-jackets, which are as beautifully cut and made as the corsets which have a character all their own.



¹¹⁶ “A Perfect Corset,” 19.

Figure 6: A Perfect Corset

Several weeks later, in the June 27, 1900 edition of *Woman*, Mme. Katarine posted a more traditional advertisement (Figure 7). It contains the same illustration as the previous advertisement. A small area of text reiterates that Mme. Katarine's corsets are made to order and of the highest quality.¹¹⁷ Like the previous advertisement, this advertisement's statements on the production of the corsets as well as the materials used to make them demonstrate the intended audience for the advertisement. Finally, there are no prices listed in Mme. Katarine's corset advertisements. The advertisements found throughout the pages of *Woman* show that women of all socioeconomic classes wore corsets, and it was important to corset manufacturing companies to ensure that their advertisements were seen by their intended audiences.



Figure 7: Mme. Katarine, Figure Specialist

¹¹⁷ "Mme. Katarine, Figure Specialist." *Woman*, June 27, 1900, 23.

Pregnant Women

As previously mentioned, corsets for pregnant women had to be advertised in very covert ways. Even though there were very strong social taboos related to pregnancy, the buying and selling of corsets for pregnant women was very common. Although many companies made “maternity corsets” the patents and physical manifestations of such were very rarely any different from other corsets.¹¹⁸ The health effects of corsets on pregnancy will be fully explored in the next chapter.

The “Domen” Belts Company placed an advertisement for the “Domen” Belt Corset in the January 2, 1895 edition of *Woman* (Figure 8). The advertisement includes an illustration of a woman in a corset holding a hand mirror. Some of the taglines of the advertisement include: “a good figure without tight lacing” and “for corpulence and general support.”¹¹⁹ The advertisement does not include prices.

There are many indications that this advertisement is for a pregnancy corset. The first tagline, “a good figure without tight lacing” indicates that the woman buying this corset would not want to tie her corset too tight as that could possibly cause damage to a fetus. The second tagline, “for corpulence and general support” indicates that a woman might be growing more rotund and require more abdominal support than if she were not pregnant. The “Domen” Belts Company made supportive belts in addition to making corsets. The main purpose of a maternity corset was to conceal a growing stomach. This was done through “straps, buckles, laces and bones” among other things like elastic.¹²⁰ The corset had to help ensure that the “most desirable Victorian female asset” was

¹¹⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 38.

¹¹⁹ “‘Domen’ Belt Corset.” *Woman*, January 2, 1895, 19.

¹²⁰ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 42.

maintained, “The tiny waistline.”¹²¹ The description of the corset as being “for corpulence” is important to the secrecy that was required for advertising maternity corsets. The advertisement could be appealing to a plus-size woman just as easily as it could be appealing to a pregnant woman.



Figure 8: "Domen" Belt Corset

¹²¹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 42.

W. Hull King & Son, like many other companies, delved into the business of maternity corsets. An advertisement from January 16, 1895 has an illustration of a woman with her hair up, in a corset with a decorative chemise underneath (Figure 9). The illustration is followed by a passage describing the style of corset the illustrated woman is wearing: the Madame “Belle Cole” Corset. The advertisement described the corset as being able to reduce “pressure to a minimum” by using an “arrangement of elastic belt and gores.”¹²² The act of describing that there was an elaborate way to lessen pressure to the abdomen exemplifies that the company was familiar with the dangers and discomforts associated with their products. The price is listed at twelve shillings and sixpence.¹²³

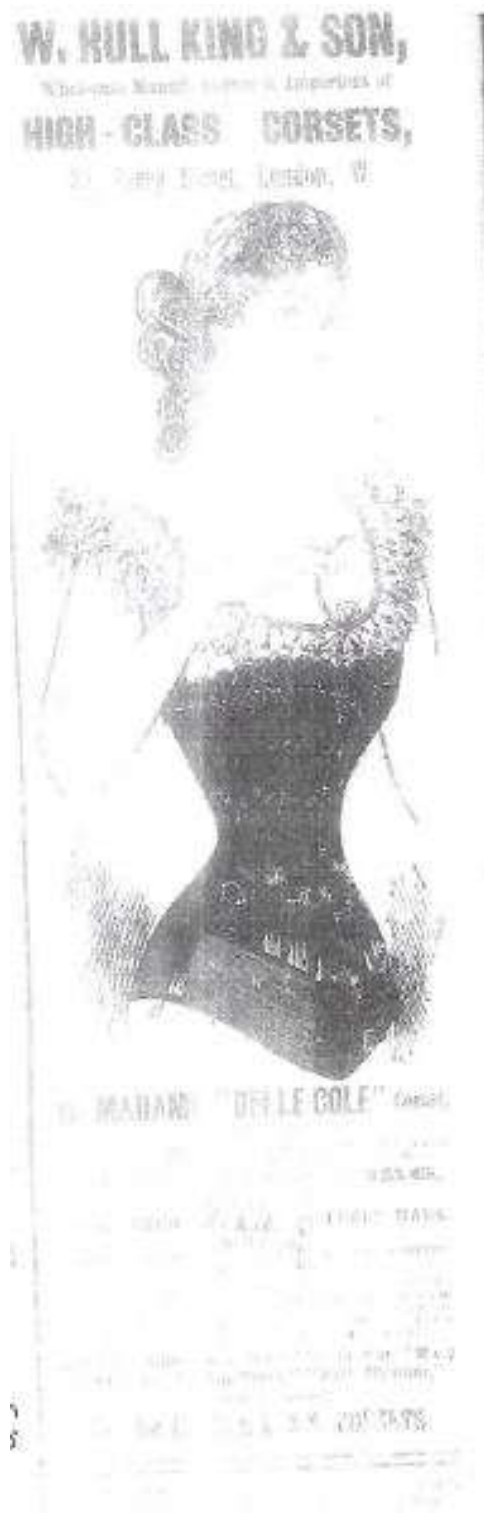
Similarly to the “Domen” Belt Corset, the inclusion of elastic belts and other things that can help support or hold an abdomen in describes a product meant to appeal to a pregnant woman. Additionally, the reducing of pressure would be a significant appeal to a pregnant woman. Using corsetry during pregnancy was a practice held by middle- and upper-class women at least until the close of the nineteenth century but likely into the twentieth.¹²⁴ This advertisement describes that the Madame “Belle Cole” is an excellent choice for “ladies of full figure” which helps ensure that social taboos are not crossed by clearly appealing to pregnant women.¹²⁵

¹²² “The Madame ‘Belle Cole’ Corset.” *Woman*, January 16, 1895, 21.

¹²³ “The Madame ‘Belle Cole’ Corset,” 21.

¹²⁴ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 48.

¹²⁵ “The Madame ‘Belle Cole’ Corset,” 21.



**Figure 9: The Madame "Belle
Cole" Corset**

“No shape but this can please your dainty eye.”¹²⁶ This first line no doubt caught the readers’ attention while they looked at the advertisement for The Y&N Diagonal Seam Corset which appeared in the December 6, 1899 edition of *Woman* (Figure 10). This advertisement includes an illustration of a woman with her hair up, peering off into the distance through a pair of reading glasses, wearing a corset. The advertisement claims the corset, “will not split in the seams nor tear the fabric.”¹²⁷ Prices are listed ranging from four shillings and eleven pence to seven shillings and eleven pence. Testimonials from other ladies’ magazines can be found at the bottom of the advertisement. Finally, the Y&N Diagonal Seam Corsets are winners of three gold medals, including one from the Great Exhibition of 1851.

When categorizing corset advertisements, it can be difficult to ascertain the category to which a particular advertisement should belong. The price range certainly identifies when working-class women are being targeted. The factor that designates this corset advertisement as one directed toward pregnant women is the design of the corset itself. Instead of lacing up the back, as most corsets do, the Y&N Company’s corsets laced up the side. This is significant in the desire to hide a pregnancy because lacing from the back could become more difficult the further along the pregnancy was due to the increased pressure on the abdomen and chest.¹²⁸ Corset lacing along the side, made it easier for the pregnant woman to loosen the corset with greater ease. The award from the Great Exhibition clearly still held great significance forty-eight years after the award had been given. Finally, the advertisement ensures that the corset “will not split in the seams

¹²⁶ “The Y&N Diagonal Seam Corsets,” *Woman*, December 6, 1899, 8.

¹²⁷ “The Y&N Diagonal Seam Corsets,” 8.

¹²⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 49-50.

nor tear in the fabric.”¹²⁹ This implies that there will be a heavy strain put on the corset that other brands of corsets would not be able to support.



"No shape but this can please your dainty eye."—*Shakespeare*

EXQUISITE MODELS. PERFECT FIT. GUARANTEED WEAR

THE Y & N DIAGONAL SEAM CORSETS

"Will not split in the Seams nor tear in the Fabric."

Made in White, Black, and all the Fashionable Colours and Shades, in Italian Cloth, Satin, and Cord.

4/11 5/11 6/11 7/11
per pair and upwards.

Admirably modelled, exquisitely perfect and strong.

"The most comfortable corset ever made."
Pictorial.

"The best make of corsets is the Y & N Diagonal Seam."

Caution:—See that the Trade Mark, "THE Y & N DIAGONAL SEAM," is on every Corset and Box. None other are genuine.

Sold by the principal Drapers and Ladies' Outfitters in the U.K. and in the Colonies.

Figure 10: The Y&N Diagonal Seam Corsets

¹²⁹ "The Y&N Diagonal Seam Corsets," 8.

Conclusion

The Angel in the House was responsible for the purchasing decisions of the household.¹³⁰ This extended from grocery shopping to purchasing corsets. It was the purview of corset advertisers to attempt to manipulate the Angel into purchasing their brand.¹³¹ The prevalence of corset and other advertisements throughout the pages of *Woman* provides insight into the growth of the commodity culture in Britain. Additionally, the Angel in the House was further constructed via this rhetoric of constriction found in advertising, as it was the corset that was the mechanism for this phenomena. In addition to corsets, products advertised ranged from shoes to baby food.

This rhetorical analysis examined corset advertisements from the women's magazine, *Woman* that appeared in the magazine from March of 1890 to June of 1900. After examining the many advertisements placed in the magazines by various corset manufacturing companies, I was able to separate them into three categories: those directed at working-class women; those directed at middle- and upper-class women; and finally those directed at pregnant women. The rhetorical analysis revealed the symbols and codes used by corset manufacturers to reveal who their intended audience was. Regardless of who the woman was, she was praised most for following prescribed social roles, especially as they pertained to corsets. The following chapter will use the same three categories to examine the health effects of corsets on the women who wore them.

¹³⁰ Graham, *Gone to the Shops*, 14.

¹³¹ Loeb, *Consuming Angels*, 34.

Chapter Three

Health Effects of Corsets on Women

This chapter will examine the health effects of corsets on women and how these health effects served to further police, control and form white women's bodies. There is much debate among scholars regarding to what extent corsets affected women's health. Any discussion of women's health holds points of contention, because, as with most aspects of women's history, women are regarded as a separate group, "a deviation from the norm represented by the male" and as such "a distinct creation rather than as a portion of the general race."¹³²

Even within the female population of the British Empire there were vast differences. The medical profession viewed white women in a very different way from how they viewed women in the British colonies such as the "Hottentot" women living in Africa. For instance, many anthropologists debated heavily over whether or not "Hottentot" women were even of the same species as white women. Nurka and Jones describe several nineteenth-century sources that use "animal imagery" to describe African women or even go so far as to assert that they were more closely related to primates such as chimpanzees or orangutans.¹³³

In the last chapter, the question "what was it about advertisements and the commodity culture of the late nineteenth century that led women of all classes to wear corsets?" was addressed. In this chapter, the question switches focus to "why did women wear corsets, even though corsets were so detrimental to their health?" The Angel in the House always wore her corset. By the late-nineteenth century, the cultural dogma was

¹³² Carpenter, *Health, Medicine, and Society*, 149.

¹³³ Nurka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 422.

very much ingrained in every “ordinary Englishwoman” that “the human figure can be improved by artificial devices of compression and distortion” which can go some way to start to explain why women continued to wear corsets after the health effects of such garments had become known.¹³⁴

Tight Lacing

Tight lacing is a topic related to corsets that is just as controversial in modern scholarship as it was to nineteenth-century authors. Commentary on the subject appears in “medical dissertations and magazines; in lectures; tracts and books on clothing, hygiene, physical education, and women; in popular verse and cartoons.”¹³⁵ The definition of tight lacing varied depending on the source but usually refers to women who used corsets to reduce their waist size by four or more inches.¹³⁶

Three scholars who, in particular, are part of the scholarly debate with regard to tight lacing: Kunzle, Steele, and Summers; each have starkly different perspectives on the history of tight lacing, especially given that all three use the same set of primary sources to draw their conclusions regarding tight lacing. Kunzle and Steele both use letters sent in to the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*. These letters, as Kunzle describes them, were “letters from men and women actively addicted to the practice” of tight lacing.¹³⁷ While this section is only interested in looking at the conversation between three twentieth-century scholars on tight lacing, it was still very much a topic of nineteenth-century conversation related to the health effects of corsets on women's

¹³⁴ “Fashionable Deformities.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1113 (1882): 629.

¹³⁵ David Kunzle, “Dress Reform as Antifeminist: A Response to Helene E. Roberts's ‘The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman’” *Signs* 2, no. 3 (1977): 571.

¹³⁶ Valerie Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism: Ideals for Feminine Beauty from the Victorian Era to the Jazz Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 162.

¹³⁷ Kunzle, *Signs*, 572.

bodies. For instance, it was the opinion of a Dr. Hewitt that, “unquestionably tight lacing is one of the causes of ‘forcible downward pressure on the uterus as a whole.’”¹³⁸

Kunzle, Steele, and Summers all make different arguments about the participants, prevalence and purpose of tight-lacing in the late nineteenth-century. A significant point of contention between the three scholars is who tight-laced their corsets. Kunzle very adamantly claims that it was women of the lower-middle-class that practiced habitual tight-lacing and that this was often done as a means of aspiring to a higher socio-economic class.¹³⁹ Steele disagrees with Kunzle in terms of who she claims was practicing tight-lacing. She views middle- and upper-class women as those who tight-laced as part of a “fashionable phenomenon.”¹⁴⁰ Summers disagrees with both Kunzle and Steele and asserts that tight-lacing was practiced by women of all socio-economic classes.¹⁴¹ Kunzle also mentions that there are letters in the collection to *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* in which there are “Victorian males who admitted in public print to tight-lacing and transvestism.”¹⁴² Neither Steele nor Summers repeats this claim or discusses men wearing corsets.

The three scholars continue to disagree about why tight-lacing was practiced. Steele's analysis of corsetry centers on a psychoanalytic framework. This theoretical framework led Steele to her argument that tight-lacing was performed as a fetishist performance that was practiced only by a small portion of the female population.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Graily Hewitt, “The Effect of Tight Lacing In Producing Flexions Of The Uterus.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1359 (1887): 112.

¹³⁹ Kunzle, *Signs*, 573.

¹⁴⁰ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 162.

¹⁴¹ Summers, *Bound to Please* 103.

¹⁴² Kunzle, *Signs*, 573.

¹⁴³ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 162.

Kunzle argues that those who tight-laced did so because they were self-conscious.¹⁴⁴

This correlates with Kunzle's definition of what it meant to tight-lace. As he mentions, "the most useful definition of tight-lacing is not numerical but rather the point at which a waist attracted attention."¹⁴⁵ Summers' analysis concludes that tight-lacing had nothing to do with sexual "perversion" and asserts that the cause of the practice of tight-lacing was directly connected with men.¹⁴⁶

The prevalence and performance of tight-lacing is another major point where the three scholars differed. Kunzle argues that it can be taken as evidence that tight-lacing was not a common practice that it was not expressly endorsed in fashion magazines nor were any prominent upper-class women known to publicly endorse the practice.¹⁴⁷

Summers directly contradicts this by mentioning the abundance of magazine advertisements and fashion plates that showed women with "wasp-waists."¹⁴⁸ Summers' argument is more persuasive after learning about the ways in which advertisers had to use a certain code in their advertisements. Yes, Kunzle may be correct that there are no corset advertisements that expressly stated that the corset had to be tied tightly in order to be laced correctly.¹⁴⁹ But this doesn't mean that the advertisements and illustrations are not clear about their purpose.

Neither Kunzle nor Steele view tight-lacing as a normative practice whereas Summers does. Summers' work is the most recent of the three, and several of the primary sources used by Summers have also been used in this chapter. The letters from

¹⁴⁴ Kunzle, *Signs*, 574.

¹⁴⁵ Kunzle, *Signs*, 574.

¹⁴⁶ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 102-103.

¹⁴⁷ Kunzle, *Signs*, 573.

¹⁴⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 106.

¹⁴⁹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 105.

the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* were not obtained for this chapter. Tight-lacing was most likely a normative practice, but not because of a fetish or insecurity. The technological innovation of the steam-molding process along with the numerous patents that existed for corsets would lead to many types of corsets simply being designed to be tight laced.

The next sections will break down the health effects of corsets and discuss them in terms of: those that most often occurred in working-class women; those that most often occurred in middle- and upper-class women; and the health effects of corsets on pregnant women.

Working-Class Women

A multitude of negative health effects faced working-class women who wore corsets. Some of these effects such as stomach ulcers, fatigue, nausea, constipation, and physical injury were directly related to wearing corsets while working. Other symptoms such as chlorosis and uterine prolapse are probably more related to the nutrition and other socio-economic conditions of the working class exacerbated by wearing corsets.

Stomach Ulcers

Stomach ulcers come up frequently in literature discussing the health effects of corsets on working-class women. Stomach ulcers usually presented with symptoms of “severe pain in the epigastrium” whether related to eating or not.¹⁵⁰ Most sources combine symptoms of stomach ulcers as concurrent with certain other health issues such as anemia and amenorrhea and other contemporary sources find a connection between the

¹⁵⁰ Brinton, William. “Royal Free Hospital. Ulcer of the Stomach, Complicated with Amenorrhea, Treated Successfully.” *Association Medical Journal* 4.158 (1856): 22.

issues.¹⁵¹ Corsets, especially tightly-laced corsets, caused stomach ulcers because of the pressure caused by the corset on the abdomen. This pressure interferes with digestion and once digestion is disordered, ulcers can easily form.¹⁵²

As the previous chapter demonstrated, advertisements for corsets held certain codes that needed to be read to know exactly what the advertisement was saying and to whom it was directed. Contemporary medical journals were also at times in code. One article discussing stomach ulcers in a young woman found that “on examining the abdomen, the greatest intensity of pain was referred to a place in the median line.”¹⁵³ The “median line” to which this doctor is referring, is the area of the body where a corset would be tied most tightly. This description indicates that the health effects incurred by the young women in question are related to corsetry.

Another late nineteenth-century account recalls the death of a young woman who worked as a domestic servant. This case clearly connects the use of a corset with the stomach ulcer, and ultimately death, of this young woman. The first sign of this connection is the difficulty with which the corset was removed after the young woman died.¹⁵⁴ It was concluded that a stomach ulcer caused the young woman’s death, and doctors attributed the stomach ulcer to tight-lacing.¹⁵⁵

Chlorosis

Chlorosis was a collection of symptoms that were described as a disease, a disease which does not exist in the twenty-first century.¹⁵⁶ Some of the symptoms associated

¹⁵¹ Brinton, 23.

¹⁵² “The Evil Effects of the Corset” *The British Medical Journal* 1.2198 (1903): 388.

¹⁵³ Brinton, *Association Medical Journal*, 22.

¹⁵⁴ “Fatal Effects of Tight Lacing” *The Lancet* (1895): 1341.

¹⁵⁵ “Fatal Effects of Tight Lacing,” 1341-1342.

¹⁵⁶ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 111.

with chlorosis included “amenorrhea, syncope and dyspnoea” which can be described as lack of menstruation, fainting, and difficulty breathing, respectively.¹⁵⁷ And it was considered “an unexplained...anemia that afflicted many young women in the late 1800s.”¹⁵⁸ The occurrence of cases of chlorosis continued into the early twentieth-century.¹⁵⁹

Chlorosis was directly related to wearing corsets, especially tightly laced corsets.¹⁶⁰ One of the biggest indicators of this was the fact that chlorosis did not occur in boys or men.¹⁶¹ The condition’s association with anemia brought about the knowledge of its relation to menstruation, as many cases of chlorosis were diagnosed because of amenorrhea.¹⁶² It was noted that in half of all cases of chlorosis, the women experienced irregular menstruation.¹⁶³

Another set of symptoms associated with chlorosis was related to physical activity. This included: “the characteristic pale, puffy face, the shortness of breath on climbing the stairs or other slight exertion, and, in the severer cases, obvious physical signs of cardiac dilatation.”¹⁶⁴ Symptoms such as these support the idea that chlorosis was not just a problem that only plagued women, but a condition which was only experienced by working-class women. The challenges could be so straining on a woman

¹⁵⁷ “Syncope.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. The Oxford English Dictionary, n.d. Web. 28 April 2016. “Dyspnoea.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. The Oxford English Dictionary, n.d. Web. 28 April 2016.

¹⁵⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 111. Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 170-171.

¹⁵⁹ Waterhouse, Rupert & F. Parices Weber. “Diseases Due to Fashion in Clothing.” *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 3370 (1925): 232.

¹⁶⁰ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 111.

¹⁶¹ Weber, F. Parkes. “Two Diseases Due to Fashion in Clothing: Chlorosis and Chronic Erythema of the Legs.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 3360 (1925): 961. “Chlorosis.” *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1908 (1897): 230.

¹⁶² “Chlorosis.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1532 (1890): 1086.

¹⁶³ “Chlorosis,” 1086.

¹⁶⁴ Weber, *The British Medical Journal*, 960.

that she might seek employment as a cook or kitchen helper as a way to avoid the frequent stair climbing that other domestic servants had to navigate.¹⁶⁵

What caused chlorosis to cease from existence is up for debate. It may just be that nutrition in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is better or like many diseases of the past, chlorosis has been subsumed by another disease of another name.¹⁶⁶ The more likely reason for the disappearance of chlorosis is simply that corsets are no longer commonly worn.¹⁶⁷

Uterine Displacement

A prolapsed, or displaced, uterus occurs when the uterus “is forced through, or collapses outside of, the cervix.”¹⁶⁸ For Victorian women, it was very difficult to go out and seek advice on the subject due to the nature of the condition having to do with the reproductive organs.¹⁶⁹ Steele asserts that any stories of uterine displacement, especially those related to corsets and childbirth should be read with caution.¹⁷⁰ Conversely, Summers spends several pages on the subject and concludes that uterine prolapse was primarily caused by corsets as it was common among both married and single women.¹⁷¹

Uterine displacement was another ailment that was common only among working-class women.¹⁷² One nineteenth-century article describes two cases of uterine displacement in great detail. The first example is of a woman who is experiencing a

¹⁶⁵ Weber, *The British Medical Journal*, 960.

¹⁶⁶ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 171.

¹⁶⁷ Weber, *The British Medical Journal*, 961.

¹⁶⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 111.

¹⁶⁹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 112.

¹⁷⁰ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 170.

¹⁷¹ Summers, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 117. Prevalence among both married and single women connotes that single women in the late nineteenth-century would not have experienced repeated child-bearing as most married women had.

¹⁷² Herman, G. Ernest. “On the Pathological Relationships of Uterine Displacements.” *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1483 (1889): 1213.

prolapse of not just the uterus, but also of the bladder.¹⁷³ The second example is of a woman who is experiencing the same symptoms such as pelvic pain and aching but this woman is resigned to bed, whereas the first woman was still able to move freely and work.¹⁷⁴

Other Health Effects Facing Working-Class Women

As if stomach ulcers, chlorosis, and uterine displacement were not bad enough, there were still other medical problems encountered by working-class women as a result of wearing corsets. The tighter a corset was tied, the more difficult physical tasks would become. For some women, they could not “walk more than a few hundred yards without fatigue.”¹⁷⁵ Other stomach ailments were common such as constipation and dyspepsia. One contemporary source claimed that “by the use of corsets the majority of women are permanently deformed as to their skeletons at 24 years of age” when discussing the curvature of the spine.¹⁷⁶ A final problem that working-class women faced with regard to wearing corsets was the very common possibility that a bone or steel in the corset would break and stab the woman in her abdomen or chest.¹⁷⁷

Middle- and Upper-Class Women

There were many similarities between the corset-related ailments that plagued working-class women and middle- and upper-class women in the late nineteenth-century. Disorders, like anemia and disordered digestion caused by the pressure on the abdomen as a result of the tightness of the corset were reported across socio-economic lines.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Herman, *The British Medical Journal*, 1213.

¹⁷⁴ Herman, *The British Medical Journal*, 1213.

¹⁷⁵ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 110.

¹⁷⁶ “The Evil Effects of the Corset,” 388.

¹⁷⁷ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 109.

¹⁷⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 113.

Other common ailments included headaches and “general nervousness.”¹⁷⁹ It was the nature of the Victorian era to consider middle- and upper-class women as less mentally capable and physically weaker than their male counterparts.¹⁸⁰

Before expanding discussion of modern and contemporary findings on the negative health effects of corsets on middle- and upper-class women’s bodies, it is important to recognize the many scholars opposing the idea of the negative health effects of corsets. Steele finds little weight in many claims of negative health effects due to corsets. She asserts that corsets would be unlikely to sever or displace organs and also asserts the impossibility of corsets causing epilepsy or tuberculosis.¹⁸¹ Steele also finds that corsets did not affect the spine for better or worse, and that claims of crushed ribs are largely unauthenticated.¹⁸² In general, Steele finds that most claims of the negative health effects of corsets are unsubstantiated and probably untrue. This idea does not align with nineteenth-century medical sources, many of which appear in this chapter.

Respiratory ailments were common among middle- and upper-class women. This was often attributed to tight lacing and was also frequently associated with heart palpitations and liver problems.¹⁸³ In 1890, Wilberforce Smith conducted a study to compare the respiratory movements of men and women. After the study was completed, he drew two main conclusions. First, it was determined that there was no difference in the breathing movements between men and women when the women studied did not regularly wear a corset.¹⁸⁴ This can be seen below in first chart (Figure 11).¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 109.

¹⁸⁰ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 100.

¹⁸¹ Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 170.

¹⁸² Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 170.

¹⁸³ “Fashionable Deformities,” 629.

¹⁸⁴ Smith, Wilberforce. “On the Alleged Difference Between Male and Female Respiratory Movements.” *The British Medical Journal* 2, no. 1554 (1890): 844.

Conversely, the study showed that women who routinely wore corsets had nearly non-existent breath movements in their mid- and lower-abdomen, as shown in the second chart (Figure 12).¹⁸⁶ This study of respiratory function illuminates the immediate health effects of corsets on the body. Other ailments such as uterine displacement or cracked ribs may not occur until after a corset has been worn for many years.

¹⁸⁵ Smith, *The British Medical Journal*, 844.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, *The British Medical Journal*, 844.

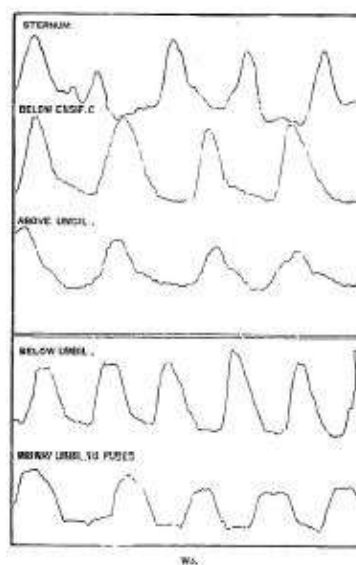


Figure 11: Respiratory Movements of Women Who Didn't Wear Corsets

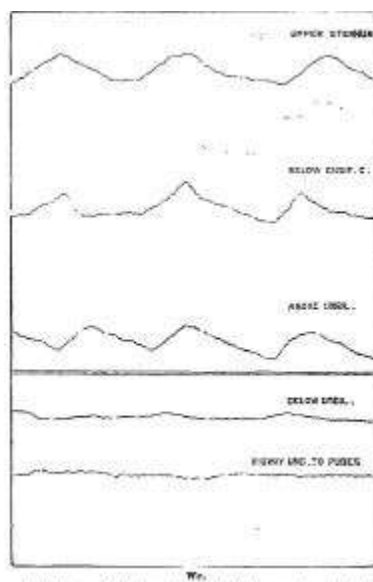


Figure 12: Respiratory Movements of Women Who Wore Corsets

Pregnant Women

Due to the social taboos related to pregnancy in the late nineteenth-century, many women wore corsets through most, if not all, of their pregnancy. As much as pregnancy was a taboo topic of conversation, talking about the dangers of wearing corsets was even more taboo and therefore silenced.¹⁸⁷ Not even dress reformers and physicians, who generally argued that women should not wear corsets, spoke of the particular dangers of wearing corsets while pregnant.¹⁸⁸

Pregnant women held a precarious position in late-nineteenth-century British society. It was up to the Angel in the House to bear and raise children, but not so many children as to spread her husband's income too thin. At the same time, it was necessary to keep a pregnancy hidden in the public sphere.¹⁸⁹ Wearing corsets during pregnancy brought about some different health effects than those that impacted women who were not pregnant. During pregnancy, the uterus is raised from its normal position, and continues to rise in the abdomen as pregnancy continues. This makes the physical pressures exerted on the abdomen by a corset worse.¹⁹⁰

While there were many physicians of the late-nineteenth century that discussed the health effects of corsets on women, the focus of the conversation changed dramatically when the woman wearing the corset was pregnant. These conversations of contemporary physicians were of course few and far between, with discussion being in "the most brief and general of terms."¹⁹¹ Pregnant women who wore corsets were subject

¹⁸⁷ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 38.

¹⁸⁸ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 38.

¹⁸⁹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 39.

¹⁹⁰ Duke, Alexander. "The Advantages of Abdominal Support During Pregnancy" *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 1262 (1885): 482.

¹⁹¹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 50.

to the same ailments as afflicted non-pregnant women but there were also ailments such as toxemia that were particular to pregnant women. According to some nineteenth-century sources, toxemia occurred because of the corset's pressure on the placenta.¹⁹²

Corsets, Contraception, and Abortion

The late nineteenth century was a time in which pregnancy became more and more under the purview of the medical profession. Until the 1880s, it was up to a woman to determine whether or not she was pregnant.¹⁹³ She would make this distinction at the point of quickening, which was the point at which the pregnant woman first felt the fetus move. Until a woman had declared that she had reached the point of quickening in her pregnancy, the fetus held no "legal or medical human status."¹⁹⁴

Two twenty-first century scholars have drawn a connection between women wearing corsets and complications of pregnancy or miscarriage.¹⁹⁵ There has also been scholarly discussion of the eugenic implications of women wearing corsets during pregnancy as exemplified by "mortality rates of illegitimate children" being "extremely high" in the late-nineteenth century.¹⁹⁶ That is to say, if the mortality rate for illegitimate children who are born was extremely high, there is no way to know how many women terminated their pregnancies when they were carrying illegitimate children. Regardless of how many women terminated pregnancies, Summers asserts that it is quite likely that corsets were involved for they "offered a method of contraception that was possibly more

¹⁹² Anthony, *The British Medical Journal*, 994.

¹⁹³ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 51.

¹⁹⁴ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 51.

¹⁹⁵ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 49. Steele, *Fashion and Eroticism*, 170.

¹⁹⁶ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 50. Mel Davies, "Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 4 (1982): 612.

effective than patent nostrums, safer than mechanical abortion, and without the legal and moral repercussions of that operation.”¹⁹⁷

Treatment

To the twenty-first century mind, the clearest solution as to how to alleviate the negative health effects of wearing corsets is for women to not wear corsets. As was mentioned earlier, a common ailment of the late nineteenth-century was chlorosis, which has been described as directly related to corsetry. Treatment of chlorosis often consisted of bed rest, which would alleviate symptoms, but this was not seen as a cure because as soon as the symptoms abated, the woman would begin wearing her corset again and symptoms would return.¹⁹⁸ Chlorosis is an ailment that is no longer found in women today, just as very few women today wear corsets regularly. Recent scholarship claims that the connection between the cessation of ailments with the cessation of wearing a corset was not clearly seen in the late-nineteenth century.¹⁹⁹ To the contrary, several nineteenth-century sources commented on the role of removing the corset to women’s health.²⁰⁰ One nineteenth-century suggestion for how to get women to stop wearing corsets is a logic that would still ring true to twenty-first century minds. According to *The British Medical Journal*, the best way to avoid the negative health effects caused by corsets “would be to educate females to the appreciation of the fact that...the normal waist is the most graceful.”²⁰¹

Sources show that uterine displacement was a common complaint among women, both then and now. Curing or treating uterine displacement often involved the woman in

¹⁹⁷ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 51.

¹⁹⁸ Waterhouse & Weber, *The British Medical Journal*, 232.

¹⁹⁹ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 112.

²⁰⁰ Herman, *The British Medical Journal*, 1213.

²⁰¹ “The Evil Effects of the Corset,” 388.

question wearing a corset with some additional mechanical pieces.²⁰² The pessary device functioned to cure uterine displacement by leveraging the uterus back into place through an assortment of belts, stems, and similar devices.²⁰³

In severe cases, surgical intervention was required to treat ailments brought on by wearing corsets. Stomach ulcers sometimes had to be repaired surgically, if they were discovered before they had caused death. One striking early-twentieth century source discusses a new type of operation to treat a corset-related condition. The patient in question is a woman who is suffering from indigestion and “inactivity of the pylorus.”²⁰⁴ The pylorus is the opening of the stomach which enters the small intestine. The article clearly states that the ailment was a direct and “evil” result of wearing a corset tightly.²⁰⁵

Conclusion

The negative health effects of corsetry were experienced by women of all socio-economic classes. These health effects were also particularly dangerous to pregnant women who wore corsets. The goal of this chapter was to understand why women of the late-nineteenth century wore corsets even though there were so many negative health effects from doing so. The ideology of the Angel in the House can go some way to explain this phenomenon. Additionally, women’s self-disciplining of their bodies, as described by Bartkey, played an influential role.²⁰⁶ It was important to look a certain way for women of the late-nineteenth century. This required ensuring that how a woman dressed and acted were representative of her husband’s social standing or aspired social

²⁰² Summers, *Bound to Please*, 115.

²⁰³ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 113.

²⁰⁴ “Clinic Shows Evil of Tight Corsets.” *New York Times* (New York, NY) 15 November 1913, 6.

²⁰⁵ “Clinic Shows Evil of Tight Corsets,” 6.

²⁰⁶ Bartkey, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” 101.

standing. This is especially true for women of the middle- and upper-classes. Illness and disability were viewed as constant qualities of the Victorian woman, so if the illness or disability was caused by a corset, it was not considered to be more than part of a woman's being.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Summers, *Bound to Please*, 87.

Chapter Four

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the cultural rhetoric surrounding corsets in the late-nineteenth century and endeavored to understand how this rhetoric was employed on women via the Angel in the House ideology and through advertisements to keep women of all socio-economic classes and conditions wearing corsets despite extensive knowledge that showed the negative health effects of the garment. This cultural rhetoric included messages that reinforced praise for women who wore corsets as well as implied sanctions for women who did not comply.

Research Methods and Materials

Literature Review

It was important to explain the particular societal position of Britain in the late-nineteenth century to build a foundation upon which to understand the cultural rhetoric that was implicated upon corsets. The introduction chapter was built through examination of a significant amount of secondary source material. These secondary source materials included information on: the Industrial Revolution; rapid urbanization; changes in shopping and advertising that led to the creation of a commodity culture in Britain; stark changes in medical practice throughout the nineteenth century; and the formation of whiteness through the othering of women in the British colonies.

Advertisements in Woman

The rhetorical analysis performed in Chapter Two uses advertisements found in the British women's magazine, *Woman*. The advertisements analyzed appeared in the magazine from March of 1890 until June of 1900. The magazine was published weekly

and contained several corset advertisements throughout its pages. While there were frequent appearances of corset advertisements, they were representative of a small number of corset manufacturers.

There was a considerable challenge to obtaining corset advertisements for analysis. Some of the difficulty can be attributed to poor archival practices in the last one hundred and twenty years. The advertisements or images of them simply no longer exist. Another challenge was access to those materials that were archived well and are still kept. In most cases this manifested due to lack of access through the University System of Maryland.

The advertisements used in Chapter Two were finally obtained through Inter-Library Loan. There was one university in North America that held the microfilm rolls necessary to complete the rhetorical analysis. It was significant for the research process to use several advertisements from one source over the course of time. This would maintain some continuity when analyzing advertisements over time. The poor quality of the figures in chapter two is due to the difficult nature of using microfilm readers.

The British Medical Journal and Health Effects

Similar to the rhetorical analysis in Chapter Two, only one journal was used when obtaining articles pertaining to the negative health effects of corsets. The time frame of the articles used ranges from 1856 to 1954. Even though the scope of this thesis centers on the late-nineteenth century, the articles which appeared in *The British Medical Journal* in the twentieth century still serve as primary source material. The authors of those articles were physicians commenting on changes in the prevalence of diseases and

conditions in women that are directly related to corsets. All articles from *The British Medical Journal* were obtained through JSTOR.

Main Findings

There were many significant findings discovered during the research of this project. Of these findings, understanding the coded messages produced by the cultural rhetoric of the late nineteenth-century was most illuminating. Advertisements, especially those directed at pregnant women, held the most coded messages. As Chapter Two discusses, these messages had to be specifically coded because it was not socially acceptable to discuss pregnancy. Other coded aspects of advertisements were necessary to know whether an advertisement was directed at a working-class woman or a woman of the middle- and upper-classes.

An early hypothesis going into the research of this thesis was that the medical texts of the late nineteenth century would either condone or remain neutral on the subject of the health effects of corsets on women. I, therefore, found it remarkable that it was so common for medical texts to denounce corsets or explain the extreme negative health effects.

Areas for Future Research

There are many areas for future research regarding the Angel in the Home, corsets, medicine, and the commodity culture. Ideally, an expansion of this thesis would include research on the Angel in the House and her relationship with corsetry on foundations of morality. Morality is a common theme when discussing the British in the nineteenth century. The Angel in the Home, corsets, medicine and the rise of the commodity culture all relate back to a moral cornerstone. Throughout time, in the

context of rhetoric, morality was a matter of “literal uprightness” and “an expression of...masculinity.”²⁰⁸ It would be interesting to explore how morality moved from being an expression of masculinity to an expression of femininity, especially the Angel in the House.

Another possible area for future research would investigate the dress reform movement of the late-nineteenth century and compare the dress practices of dress reformers with those of feminists of the late nineteenth century. Twenty-first century scholars suggest that the two groups had very different motives and tactics within their political movements.

So What?

Why does it matter why women felt compelled to wear corsets over a century ago? Are there lessons to be learned from the ways in which corset manufacturers advertised to women? Are there lessons to be learned from the response of the medical community to the negative health effects of corsets? How is the cultural rhetoric of the late-nineteenth century still completely valid over a decade into the twenty-first century?

Even as this thesis is being written, corsets have made their way back into the imagination. In the last couple years “waist training” devices that are marketed as having the ability to burn fat through compression of the abdomen have become popular on the market. These waist trainers have been made popular through celebrity endorsement, most notably the Kardashian and Jenner women. While these products have been on the market for a couple years now, they are re-entering popular culture due to a group of

²⁰⁸ Toye, *Rhetoric*, 17.

women filing a lawsuit against the manufacturing company because they did not lose weight as the product promised.²⁰⁹

Regardless of celebrity endorsements or pending lawsuits, there is very little difference between the corsets of the late nineteenth-century and waist trainers of today. Although the modern product's biggest claim is that continued wearing of the garment will make fat permanently disappear, it is just not physically possible for that to happen.²¹⁰ Beyond unhappiness pertaining to false advertising, women who are wearing these waist-training garments are experiencing symptoms such as difficulty breathing, poor circulation, indigestion, and acid reflux.²¹¹ All of these are symptoms discussed in Chapter Three by medical professionals of the late nineteenth century. Waist trainers, like corsets, are still disciplining women to take up less space. The marketing tool that convinces women that they can lose weight by wearing a waist trainer is another example of "abundance in a woman's body" being "met with distaste."²¹²

In addition to waist trainers, voluntary cosmetic surgery, especially labiaplasty, has its roots planted firmly in the past. It is the continuation of the colonial gaze or imagination that builds "aesthetic surgery discourse" in the twenty-first century.²¹³ That is to say, that the discourse that built certain vulvar structures, i.e. white, as normative and therefore correct is still the dominant discourse today. Instead of comparing

²⁰⁹ TMZ Staff. "Waist Trainer Lawsuit: Kardashian Girls Love It BUT I'M STILL FAT!!!" *TMZ*. 18 March 2016, <http://www.t TMZ.com/2016/03/18/kardashian-waist-trainer-lawsuit/>.

²¹⁰ Eggert, Jessica. "Waist Trainers are Bullshit and Potentially Dangerous, According to Science." *Science.Mic*, 14 March 2016, <http://mic.com/articles/137789/waist-trainers-are-bullshit-and-potentially-dangerous-according-to-science#.K2jTzkxDG>.

²¹¹ Eggert, Jessica. "Waist Trainers are Bullshit and Potentially Dangerous, According to Science." *Science.Mic*, 14 March 2016, <http://mic.com/articles/137789/waist-trainers-are-bullshit-and-potentially-dangerous-according-to-science#.K2jTzkxDG>.

²¹² Bartkey, "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," 95.

²¹³ Durka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 420.

“deviant” labia to chimpanzees, cosmetic surgeons today use the rhetoric of hygiene and beauty.²¹⁴

The legacy left by corsets in the late-nineteenth century is still extremely evident well into the twenty-first century. Just as in the late-nineteenth century, advertisements today are filled with coded messages which are used to convince women to buy.

Additionally, physicians both then and now, decry the negative health effects of severely constricting the abdomen. Most significantly, then as now, women are wearing the garments with the same hopes of physical change despite reasoning to the contrary that corsets or waist trainers should not be worn. Corsets are not just subjects for fashion or medical history. They maintain a deep connection with body image and show what terrible things women will do to their bodies through self-discipline in a desire to fit ideologies created through cultural rhetoric.

²¹⁴ Durka and Jones, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 420.

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