

The Corset: Constriction or Liberation?

By Amanda Leib

ABSTRACT. This paper posits that the corset itself is not an inherently evil or archaic garment, but one that is enjoyed by many women today, and one that is important to examine for its cultural relevance and implications. Contrary to popular belief, the corset can be a garment of liberation and pleasure for women, if they are educated on its history and given the choice whether to wear one or not. In this study, I analyze feminist critiques of body modifications along with the history of the corset, drawing attention to the juxtaposition between claims that the corset is an instrument of torture invented by the patriarchy versus its merits and historical importance. In finding a middle ground between these points, I acknowledge the health risks of tightlacing, while emphasizing the freedom of choice that is necessary to women's embodiment, liberation, and self-expression.

No article of clothing throughout history better represents the dichotomy of pleasure and danger than the corset. This one item of clothing, which has existed in myriad forms for hundreds of years, has reached a mythological status (Steele, 2011). Urban legends abound concerning the corset, and perhaps the most morbid, dangerous, and fallacious claim is that women of the past resorted to having ribs surgically removed in order to slim their waists even more and better fit their corsets to their bodies (Steele, p. 58, 1996). Emphatically untrue, this falsehood has contributed to the misconception that corsets are torturous vestiges of a bygone era.

At its core, the corset is a structural undergarment. Its primary purpose has always been to shape the body to a desirable form, and used as a base on which to layer

clothing. Its descendants are the bras, girdles, and shapewear of the 20th and 21st Centuries. Examining the corset in the 21st Century requires a multidimensional lens, varying from the historical to the social to the feminist. Most relevant today is the feminist critique of female body modification, which ranges from condemnation to a full embrace (Pitts, 2014).

The corset has been used as a shaping garment in the Western world for more than 400 years. From the Renaissance to the 20th Century, it has been a wardrobe staple spanning socio-economic classes, countries, and cultures (Steele, 2011). In the 21st Century, we tend to view it as an outdated instrument of torture, thankfully tucked away in museums alongside iron maidens and chastity belts. But the history of corsets and their place in our culture today are as relevant and fascinating as ever. More than just a garment of constriction, today's corset can represent liberation for its wearer (Von Teese, 2006). Simultaneously an expression of sexuality, beauty, independence, and control, the corset is more complicated than at first glance, and its pleasure and dangers are intertwined.

There is a direct link between corsets and embodiment. The act of wearing a corset has a different impact depending on the wearer's bodily experience. Being pressured to wear one to be socially acceptable in the 19th Century is different from choosing to wear one in 2016. The corset constrains the body, but is also liberating to those who choose to wear it as a fetish garment. The wearing of a corset objectifies the body, which can be positive or negative depending on the situation. The corseted body is a socially constructed ideal, while still giving the wearer active agency. Through the wearing of a corset, a body can be simultaneously controlled and liberated. In her book *The Corset: A Cultural History*, Valerie Steele (2001) writes:

Far from being just a bourgeois Victorian fashion, the corset originated centuries earlier within aristocratic

court culture and gradually spread throughout society – to working-class women, as well as women of the ruling class. Moreover, women wore different kinds of corsets; they laced their corsets more or less tightly and to different ends. In short, their embodied experience of corsetry varied considerably. (p.1)

Steele also debunks the myth about tightlacing that is so prevalent today: the belief that all women of the Victorian era strove to reduce their waists to 18 inches or less. In reality, the corseted waists of women at the time varied from 18 to 36 inches. Steele also argues that the corset does not represent women's subjugation by the patriarchy, as some men wore corsets as well.

The corset has also been used as a therapeutic tool for back injuries. The artist Frida Kahlo famously wore corsets for most of her life following a streetcar accident, as "her spine was too weak to support itself" (Jamison, p. 1, 2011). For Kahlo, the wearing of a corset meant the difference between life and death. She reclaimed her body and resisted the restriction caused by the corsets by painting her art onto them. Kahlo's corsets represented both pleasure and pain; confined by her condition and battling physical pain, she transcended her bodily agony through her art. Full of images of violence and turbulent emotion, Kahlo's art and her body were forever intertwined, forever interweaving pleasure and pain.

The corset is a piece of clothing that also represents both pleasure and pain. In examining this paradox further, we must recognize that pleasure and pain are linked, and that sometimes pain itself can result in pleasure. To some, the corset lives and breathes eroticism and sensuality. It can represent many things: the ideal female form, control, discipline, sexuality, femininity. A corset can be made out of the most luxurious materials in the world, such as the finest satin, silk, velvet, and lace, fabrics associated with great pleasure. Or it can be constructed from leather, metal, mesh, or latex, materials associated with pain and BDSM. There is a corset for every taste and every desire.

The world-famous burlesque artist, pinup, and fetish model Dita Von Teese addresses the issue of pain versus pleasure in corsetry in her book on the related histories of burlesque and fetishism. She writes:

Though it's never been my goal to have the smallest waist, I love the challenge of tightlacing. I love the extreme feminine curves that result, the sense of discipline I have in wearing it. Best of all, I like taking it off. Sometimes I'll get bruising from my corsets...but it's worth it. Like any good bondage, a tightlaced corset is *not* comfortable in the average person's sense of the word, but it is exhilarating. (Von Teese, 2006, p. 59)

Von Teese finds both the physical bodily constriction and the history of the corset to be erotic. Though she romanticizes the corset, she emphasizes the fetish element. To many corset wearers, the discipline is not a downside but rather what makes the corset so attractive. The feeling of being held, of being restricted, of being forced to sit up straight can be very appealing.

In contrast to the view of corsets as liberation, Leigh Summers (2001) argues in *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* that the wearing of corsets by middle class Victorian women “operated as a multi-functional discursive device, simultaneously offering masculine critics a safe platform to discuss dangerous sexual issues, while ingeniously providing a vehicle to shape and control female sexuality” (p. 3). She focuses on the repression of the Victorian age and the fear of female sexuality that ran rampant. In this way, the control of women's bodies through corsetry was linked to the diagnoses of many women as hysteric if they demonstrated any semblance of sexuality. Today the corset is often viewed as a fetishistic garment, and is used as a vestment representing sexuality. Originally a garment of control and repression, used to minimize and idealize the female form, it now represents the very eroticism of which the Victorians were so terrified.

Though the discourse around the corset has changed, its use as a way to idealize and objectify the female body has not. The ideal body type has changed radically since the 1900s, but a small waist hasn't fallen out of favor. Corsets help achieve a Barbie doll aesthetic that is naturally impossible for the majority of women. The large bust, tiny waist, and full hip look is back in vogue today. The obsession with women's proportions is as alive and well today as it was a hundred years ago.

More extreme in her corsetry than Dita Von Teese is Cathie Jung, the self-described "Corset Queen." Over many years, Jung has reduced her naturally 26" waist to 15" when corseted. Von Teese's waist measures 22" when uncorseted, 16" when corseted (Von Teese, 2006). Jung wears her corset 24 hours a day (unlike Von Teese), and attributes her modification to the urgings of her husband. Though she has made a living out of her extreme tightlacing, the downsides are severe. When asked about the negatives, Jung says:

Of course it's hard to get around and do a lot of normal things...I can't see well or react well. Or you can only sit comfortably in certain chairs. And then there's the social problem. Not everyone understands what we're doing and thinks a small waist is beautiful. And it takes a lot of time. You know, dressing and undressing and taking care of my body. I have skin problems. ("Queen of Hearts")

Jung has taken her tightlacing so far that she has done irreparable damage to her body. Jung's choices lead to the question of how much control women really do have over their bodies in our modern culture.

Understanding the societal control that influences our fashion decisions is vital. We must think critically about our fashion and self-adornment decisions. Do women long for tiny waists because they actually find them attractive, or because they have been so conditioned by our culture that they cannot think otherwise? This is still an important

debate in feminist circles, spanning topics such as breast augmentation, body piercing, and tattoos.

Patricia Gagné and Deanna McGaughey (2014) explore this issue in their essay “Designing Women.” Though their focus is women who go through elective mammoplasty, the same principle can be applied to tightlacing and corsetry. Gagné and McGaughey write that “on one hand, women choose what procedures to have done. On the other, the choices women make are determined by hegemonic cultural norms” (p. 202). Without context, the wearing of a corset is not a feminist reclamation of the body. It is through education that women should choose how to adorn their bodies; with knowledge they are free to make the personal decision of how to present themselves to the world, and the consequences of that decision.

Victoria Pitts (2014) writes in her essay “Reclaiming the Female Body” that radical feminists such as Andrea Dworkin (1994) and Catherine MacKinnon (1997) have argued that “women’s willingness to happily endure pain to shape the body...reflects women’s self-abnegation in patriarchal cultures” (Pitts, p. 278). This quote can certainly be applied to the pain that corsets cause by shaping the body. There are long-term health risks to tightlacing. Bruising and scarring of the skin is common. But Dworkin and Mackinnon miss the choice factor. Their argument implies that women have no free will, no agency to choose to wear a corset still knowing its history and the patriarchal control of beauty. If a woman chooses to wear a corset because it makes her feel powerful, it negates the belief that all beauty practices harm women. In this case, the reclamation of the corset is a positive form of self-objectification. The corset can be embraced as a garment of eroticism, power, and confidence.

To find pleasure in pain is not antifeminist. To enjoy fashion and adornment is not antifeminist. To wear a corset and enjoy the constriction and control it produces is not antifeminist. What is antifeminist is to tell someone that his

or her experience of eroticism and sexuality is wrong. Through self-examination and knowledge we can reach a healthier state of embodiment. In analyzing the corset, we see that although pleasure and pain can be contrasting experiences, they can also be one and the same and irrevocably linked. The corset itself is not liberating; it is in the wearing and the choice that liberation can occur. Some women find power by rejecting cultural beauty norms. Others find beauty in the smallest of places, such as in the perfect, cinched-in waist.

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