HIGH SCHOOL EDITION
Journal of Student Research
Volume 11 Issue 2 (2022)

Dress Reform and Fashion

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ABSTRACT

From the early 1820s through the mid-1850s, a dress reform movement to emancipate women from tight-lacing and corsets became prominent. Living in the prevailing gender hierarchy, male reformers and female authors took different approaches to express their arguments and participate in the public discourse. Although women's clothing may have started as the instrument of misogynistic fetish, it has also become a medium to advocate women's agency when women take control. Society's expectation on how female members should appear remains prevalent in modern days.

Introduction

Corset dress reform was a movement to eradicate women's corsets and tight-lacing between the 1820s and 1850s. Male reformers argued against the garment and created arguments "designed to shame, scare and blame women (O'Hern, 1)," It offered an opportunity for women to take advantage of the historical moment to participate in the public discourse. Fashion in relation to women's everyday experiences remains a controversial topic in contemporary society. No matter what a woman chooses to wear, she still has to confront different opinions based on her fashion choices. To study the corset dress reform in relation to fashion in contemporary society, I will look at a master thesis and analyze different arguments during corset dress reform from men and women. Then, I will discuss the book *Pantaloons and Power*, explaining the background of the 19th-century pantaloon dress reform and connecting this dress reform to women's status in society at that time. Finally, I will use this historical framework to consider

" 'HUGGED AS A VIPER TO THE BOSOM': ANTEBELLUM CORSET REFORM AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY" how this phenomenon continues to be relevant.

By Megan O'Hern's

Megan O'Hern's 2016 Master thesis, "Hugged as a Viper to the Bosom: Corset Reform and the Question of Authority," argues that the already-existing control men had over the public discourse allowed them to dominate public discussions about corsets. Having little influence over women's decision to wear corsets, men posed a challenge to female authority by controlling public discourse on dress reform. The slight improvement in women's agencies during the antebellum period was achieved through their effort in attempting to find a voice in public discourse. Female journalists, activists, and writers did not seek to challenge gender inequality, but rather they made their voices heard by defending their sartorial choices and the right to direct the public conversation over corsets.

The author raises the question, "Are corsets the instrument of misogynistic Victorian fetish which sought to constrict women both literally and figuratively, or are they instead a tool for women to take control of their bodies and proudly display their sexuality?" (O'Hern 1). Initially, I would argue that in the beginning, corset-wearing was an instrument of a misogynistic fetish. Later on, corsets became a tool for women to take control of their bodies and proudly display their sexuality. O'Hern shows that women attempted to use corsets as a tool to take control of their bodies. However, they were not always successful.

Scholars have considered corsets and corset reform as highly gendered and studied them primarily in relation to women's rights movements as breakthroughs in misogynistic restriction. Since the 1990s, a new school of historians has argued that this narrative generalizes women's experiences of wearing corsets. Some women's narratives about how they used corsets opposed male reformers' arguments. Women's writings also reveal why corsets were worn for such a long time.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, corset wearing was a contentious topic. Corset-wearing women and many anti-corset activists, most of whom were white middle-class men, provoked a vituperative debate. These men had access to public discourse. This debate reflected their ambition to reform the country.

"Male anti-corseters commonly published lists of corsets' many inflictions upon a woman's beauty," telling women that men don't like slender waists (O'Hern, 27). "Such warnings were couched in terms of a corset's effect on courtship and the marriage market" (27). The implication of these notions reflects the constriction marriage and the male gaze have on women, saying that "if you continue to wear corsets, men won't like you". Does that make corsets 'a tool. . .to take control of their own bodies and proudly display their sexuality'? This explains why most women would continue to wear corsets in order to protest.

In male-authored corset reform discourse, one concern was that the act of wearing corsets put the American republic at risk by mimicking foreign tastes and values. Corsets were introduced by British aristocracy, thus, its prevailing popularity among Americans was perceived as a latent threat to the United States' future as a sovereign nation. On the other hand, wearing simple, homespun clothes was seen as a sign of support for independence. As a country that had just become independent around 30 years ago, foreign fashion became a sensitive subject of discussion. In addition, women's growing demand for corsets led to the purchase of professionally designed and manufactured corsets, supporting more urban, industrial society that degraded the American homespun tradition.

Anti-corset reformers expanded these notions of its un-Americanness as they related tight lacing to "barbaric" practices in other countries; the most-used comparison was with Chinese foot binding. An implication could be that America is not like the others and 'barbaric' practices are not 'American'.

Language and logic were co-opted by reformers to appeal to women. They made a connection between alcoholism, which frequently afflicted to men, and corset-wearing. The author quotes from an anonymous male author proclaiming that "young women. . .are found so dependent upon their corsets, that they faint whenever they lay them aside" (O'Hern, 29). Sarcastic parodies also appeared: "But, says the drunkard, 'I can't do without my liquor.' So says the girl who dresses too tightly. 'I can't do without my corset'" ("Corsets and Intemperance, religious Intelligencer, 1833", cited in 29).

During the antebellum era, the foreign-born population was rising as a result of increasing immigration; meanwhile, due to the loss of male lives on the battlefield, American birthrates had begun to fall. Consequently, the protection of women became a main subject of discussion. Alarmed male anti-corset reformers argued that corsets and tight lacing harmed the birth rate among native-born women and impacted their ability to nurture their children. The immobility of women due to corsets was perceived as laziness, which contributed to their 'failure of being good mothers'. The reformers argued that there were other economic or social factors that contributed to a drop in the pattern of fertility among the nation, but certainly there exists a strong suggestion of correlation between the corset and fertility rate.

Reformers heavily depended on doctors' knowledge and medical arguments to instill concern about the biological effects of corset-wearing. However, the medical profession had only recently developed during the antebellum period and doctors' authority were regarded skeptically by many Americans, which was damaging to their cause. They frequently invoked the prospect of death to scare women from wearing corsets, such as women dying at a young age due to corset-wearing. As these anti-corset reformers shamed women into abandoning their corsets, they implied corset-wearing was immoral. They suggested that if a woman was wearing a corset, she was irresponsible with her own health and the next generation of American lives, and essentially becomes a threat to the nation's future.

Were these stories of women dying from corset-wearing trustworthy? Why were these male authors so concerned about women's health? Why did corset-wearing matter to them? What were women's responses?

Women were bombarded with frightening stories to dissuade them from wearing corsets. At the time, women were subordinated to men, although Antebellum women's economic experiences shifted drastically with industrialization. Industrialization created a public space for the many women who were employed outside the home in schoolhouses and factories. During the first half of the 19th century, women also participated in 'political' activities that conformed to society's perception as appropriate for their sex: letter writing, petition, and organized social reform. Though still not equitable compared to boys' educational opportunities, those for girls improved rates of female literacy and ushered in prospects for female journalists and novelists.

Female authors used the press to defend their right to continue wearing corsets. Male editors were choosing which articles, usually written by men, to print in the newspaper. Women responded to this by frequently writing letters to the editors. "Letter writing was appropriate behavior for women, and letters to the editor enabled women to contribute to a public conversation without challenging their gendered social role (O'Hern, 35)". There were "codes of conduct" that determined "appropriate" and "inappropriate" behavior.

It was easier to locate women's voices in the pages of magazines. Different from and less-frequently published than newspapers, an amalgam of content created and submitted by readers themselves were contained within. Matching the rapid pace of the broader magazine market, women's magazines published articles and literature specifically for and by women, in which their opinions on the reform were heard. This almost ad-hoc method of compiling magazines became socially acceptable public forums in which women could participate. Yet there were barriers to participation—magazines were more costly than newspapers and could cost roughly the wages of two days skilled labor. Magazines were also limited to a certain echelon of society: literate women.

The author states that, "the majority of women writing about corsets agreed with most male authors that these garments, and particularly the practice of tight lacing, could have disastrous consequences for women and society". Female reformers argued similarly to their male counterparts. Both derided the fashion as foreign and un-American, compared corsets to other "barbaric" foreign practices, and expressed concerns about the medical impact of corsets and tight-lacing,

It might be surprising that female activists were also inclined to use scare tactics just as male reformers did. For example, one wrote, "all [corset-wearing women] grow up more or less weak, and semi-developed in body ("Home Exercise," Gobey's Lady's Book and Magazine 1852, cited in O'Hern, 39)". Moreover, arguments drew attention to female vanity and comparison between tight-lacing and alcoholism, although the language used was much more respectful, such as "…that tight lacing is doing an amount of mischief in our land fully equal to that wrought by alcohol" ("Mary S. Gove, Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy", cited in 40).

Despite the similarities, there were several significant differences in how arguments were made by female and male anti-corset activists. Whilst men and women activists claimed mothers were responsible for daughters' tight-lacing, female authors showed greater empathy. Amongst them, some were racially charged counter claims. Sarah J. Hale questioned, "are the mother of strong races of men who rule the world found among the loose-robed women of Turkey, India or China, or among the women of Great Britain, France, and America, who dress in closer fitting apparel? (cited in O'Hern, 41)" Connecting this argument with others mentioning "barbaric" foreign practices, it is interesting to note both demonstrated strong patriotism and ethnocentrism.

Some turned the tables on male critics of corsetry. One author suggested that young men who had returned to America from their tours of Europe had brought in the current fashion of corsets (43).

The most remarkable difference in the way in which female's arguments on corsets differed from those made by men was that although most female reformers objected to tight-lacing, they regularly emphasized the distinction between the corset as a garment and tight-lacing as a behavior. "For most female authors," O'Hern states, "corsets alone were not the problem. Rather, the problem lay with women's misuse of their corsets by lacing them increasingly tighter" (O'Hern, 44). Men as observers and researchers, despite conducting a lot of studies and analyses, had not truly walked in the women's shoes. This notion thus provided some women with the discursive space to defend the garments themselves. Whether due to tradition or not, many women favored how corsets looked and wanted to keep

them in their closets. Female reformers also took examples of female labor such as embroidery that have procured distortion of the spine apart from corsets.

Women's public discourse on corsets differed from men's in another respect: while men hardly ever discussed specific strategies to fix the problem of tight-lacing and merely criticized the garment, women commonly advocated for better formal education as a remedy. Women activists argued that when women are better educated, they will know what they are doing and develop agency for themselves. The tight-lacing debate often became a medium for female authors to repeatedly challenge the present state of women's education in ways that men did not. For instance, Mrs Merrifield wrote in 1853: "Education is the order of the day, but surely that education must be very superficial and incomplete. . .(cited in O'Hern, 46)".

Gradually, corsets became a sign of rebellion and female power, since it was one of the very few things that they had control over. To illustrate, one way women expressed their claim to authority was by refusing to take off their corsets. As anti-corset reformers grew more insistent, corset-wearing only became more prominent. Some men began to acknowledge the cause was lost.

For women, the challenge posed by male corset reformers was their dominion over the public corset reform discourse. Women asserted that men's lack of lived experience with corsets earned the female sex alone the right to speak on the issue. In spite of all, women did not seek to dismantle the gendered environment; it was apparent at the time that if they tried they would not have been successful. Instead, they defended their clothing choices and asserted their right to participate and manage the public conversation on their corsets.

"Pantaloons and power: a nineteenth-century dress reform in the United States"
by Fischer, Gayle V

Published in 2001, Gayle V. Fischer's *Pantaloons and power: a nineteenth-century dress reform in the United States* addresses the topic of 19th century pantaloon dress reform. Pantaloons dress reformers promoted a dress with a shortened skirt and pantaloons. She first establishes the historical background by explaining perfectionism and utopian societies. Fischer claimed the reformers believed that, "through education and models of good behavior, America would become a perfect society" (Fischer, 10). "The country suffered from numerous social evils that needed to be eradicated," Fischer says, "dueling, crime, and its punishment, the hours and conditions of work, poverty, and vice" (Fischer, 10). Therefore, some middle-class women used their positions as the guardians of morality and virtue in American society to justify their entrance into reform movements with a sense of mission. This later facilitated the pantaloon reform.

The establishment of approximately one hundred utopian communities devoted to political, class, gender, and religious concerns was prompted by the disappointment with America's failure to live up to the expectations promised by the Revolution and republicanism. Dressing in a more perfect manner was part of how people saw themselves as a better society.

The same spirit and enthusiasm influenced the leaders of health reform and alternative medical practices. There was an effort to bridge the gap between health as a religious concern and the shift toward secular science (Fischer, 10). The reform highlighted the individual's relationship to the natural laws established by God. Dr. Mary Gove Nichols emphasized the importance of God in the work of health reform: "the first duty we owe to God, to ourselves, our children, and the world, is to have Health" (cited in 11). While they sought for "nature human bodies", many health and religious reformers drew on literature that condemned the Fall on Eve and linked sin, body, woman, and clothing.

The important position women held in the health reform movement as objects of concern was reflected through the perception that many nineteenth-century women suffered from ill health. But were women as sick as the numerous writings of health reformers, doctors, and others indicated? Historians have grappled with this question and suggested that the assumption that women were unhealthy may have been self-perpetuating. Was this perception a consequence of women being ill or part of the "cause"? Why would the assumption and exaggeration exist? This health reform

stressed the individual's ability to prevent disease and provided women with some measure of autonomy and control over their bodies. It could be liberating for them, but people also measured women's respectability and self-worth based on their health.

As caregivers and maintainers of health, according to Fischer, "women became responsible for not only their own physical well-being but that of their families, and, indirectly, for society's well-being as well" (12). Maintaining a population was and is still vital in the twenty-first century for a country to exist and prosper. Therefore, fertility rates often become the center of concern.

As reformers attempted to standardize the household arts, the domestic sphere gained importance. Meanwhile, this focus on the home as the center for good health reinforced the views about women and their place in society, staying inside the private sphere, because it was believed to be good for women's health. According to Fischer, the ambiguity in (male) reformers' notions is apparent in several places: "health reform stressed self-control as the key to good health, but still made women monitor the health of others" (12) as mothers and wives; reformers "attempted to guide women on the way to good health yet blamed them if they fell ill" (13). "Reformers held women accountable for many of their ailments, charging that women did not get enough exercise, ate the wrong foods, wore inappropriate clothing, and loved fashion too much" (13). This may be an indication of the rooted misogyny in society. Despite coming up with notions that seemed to be just and attempting to help the country to become better, male reformers lacked sympathy to the opposite sex and appeared to be confining them to the private sphere. Men thought that women are vain and made the wrong decisions. Even if it was true that women did not get enough exercise, ate the wrong foods, a lack of proper education could be the culprit. The male reformers rarely discussed solutions that would change the situation.

Comparison

One difference between Fischer's book and O'Hern's thesis is the way they began their writing. O'Hern described a dressing scene in a film in which a wealthy woman is commanding the maid to tighten the corset. The book began with the historical and social background of the corset reform movement. In O'Hern's thesis, she presents and analyzes arguments about corsets from female and male reformers. Therefore, a description of a scene of tight-lacing from a movie set in Civil War-era America can offer a vivid image of what was happening as context for readers to better understand the arguments reformers had made. On the other hand, Fischer's book is about understanding the entire movement, which is why she begins from the very start of the movement and explains why and how it all began. In this case, establishing historical background, such as the rise of perfectionism and an American utopian society, and providing factors that might lead to those causes set up a stronger foundation for the readers.

Another notable difference is the way the two authors present the information. In O'Hern's thesis, she generously includes quotations from magazines, books, and newspapers of that time. For example, she has taken sentences from Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine (1852) on "Home Exercises". In contrast, Fischer focuses on explanation of the theory and concepts behind a social phenomenon or event. To illustrate, she talks about people who were engaged in radical experiments with diet, clothing, and family that were inspired by a belief that all social evils and the weaknesses of human nature could be eliminated. Instead of explaining why authors of the "Home Exercises" magazine wrote their contents, O'Hern analyzes the articles in the magazines to demonstrate the language that reformers used. For Fischer, it is more important to explain why people engaged in those radical experiments than to quote from an article recording the experiments. A discussion of language use in O'Hern's thesis depicted the reformers' distinct way of approaching their notions as different sexes; an explanation of the factors affecting the movement in Fischer's book creates a chain of causes and effect that leads to the occurrence of the movement. A third difference is the perspectives that the two authors wrote from. In O'Hern's thesis, she analyzes and compares male and female reformers' perspectives on the movement. On the other hand, Fischer provides an overall summary and analysis of the Pantaloon dress reform.

O'Hern argues that "Corsets, and women's dress more generally, blended the distinction between public and domestic spaces. Both sexes' sartorial choices communicated social status and character to strangers and friends publicly and privately" (O'Hern, 34). The discussion on corsets straddled between the public and private sphere. In the masculine public realm, men attempted to use their power over the public discourse to assert control over women's clothing. Women, with their own arguments that refused to blame other women and differentiated between corsets and tight-lacing, responded and asserted their own authority. Thus, female and male reformers were not frankly debating about the danger of corsets. Instead, they were engaged in the discussion of separate spheres for the two sexes. This connects to Fischer's argument that "beliefs about how men and women should look were part of a powerful system of values about appropriate female and male behavior. Thus dress reform had less to do with fashionable clothing and more to do with perceptions about woman's place in society, who would determine that place, and how it would be maintained" (Fischer, 17). This may be a reason why clothing is "a tool for women to take control of their own bodies and proudly display their sexuality" for many women.

Discussion

The culture of fashion is a powerful system that women are immediately born into, like breathing the air, and it is a forceful reminder of the way culture sees women. Unconsciously or not, people commonly perceive fashion as a 'female subject'. While fashion spans all genders, the expectation is always that women are the 'fashion icons'. During interviews, the fashion questions are always asked to female celebrities and the plot and character development questions are asked to the men. "Gendered clothing has bolstered the institutionalized separation of the sexes", as Fischer writes in her book.

Although harsh practices like tight-lacing no longer exist in most of modern-day societies, the relationship between fashion and women's position in society is still relevant to every one of us.

To illustrate, a connection can be drawn between school uniforms and female students. Under many schools' uniform policy, girls wear skirts and boys wear pants. Usha Choudhary, founder of Vikalp Sanstha, an Indian feminist organization, once said, "a girl won't run at the top of her speed, because she is afraid that the wind will blow her skirt up. She won't pedal her bicycle fast, because then she'll have to keep one hand off the handle. If a part of her brain is always occupied with minding her skirt, tell me how will she ever do the best that she can?" Skirts become gratuitous barriers that young women must constantly pay attention to, which often distracts them from exploring greater potentials like education. Uniform policy is commonly strictly enforced. Although pants have been an accepted form of clothing for women for decades, female students are still getting detentions for not wearing skirts, potentially perpetuating gender stereotypes that have lasting impacts.

Many female celebrities wear low cut clothing that expose their breasts to promote feminine power, claiming to the public that it is their choice to expose or cover their body with any kind of clothing. Also, many female celebrities wear short shorts and other clothes some would deem revealing. This may be interpreted as resistance by women against having to undergo "the fingertip-length rule" to ensure skirts and dresses aren't "too short or revealing", or to be slut-shamed and called "too distracting" to men. This conventional response sends out the message that girls shall dress "modestly" and to not inflict any distractions to the opposite sex and, ultimately, that girls' comfort and prospects are less valuable than boys'. According to the book *High Heel* by Summer Brennan, high heels in the seventeenth century were seen as seductive and bewitching, and women who wore high heels to 'seduce a man' would be punished as a witch. "Physical suffering is a fact of life that women are expected to assimilate in a way that men are not" (Summer Brennan, 98). Because female pain has been ubiquitous, it is invisible.

Conclusion

As a female adolescent, I am constantly bothered because I still have not found my own style of clothing. When I was younger, my mother used to not focus on her clothing and choose comfort over style, which means wearing joggers and trainers daily. I used to tell her to wear more dresses and accessories and do more makeup because she did not look like a 'woman'. Now that she has changed her style of clothing because of my insistence, she looks more 'feminine', and she sometimes would ask me with delight, "how do I look today?", when she has put on a pretty outfit herself. She would also ask me, "can I wear this to your parent-teacher conference today?" It makes me feel bitter and disappointed about my younger self that I had unconsciously shaped my mom into caring so much about what she wears, when initially, she did not choose fashion and clothing to be a focal point in her life. If she was comfortable wearing joggers and trainers with no make-up, she should have continued to do so. But why would a girl at 10-years-old blame her mother for not being 'feminine' enough? What has influenced the younger me to think that way? What does it say about the society what we are in today? At 5-years-old, I did not care at all about what my mom was wearing. And at 15-years-old, I have to critically think about fashion and women to avoid viewing the world in the way that society has told me concerning 'true womanhood' and fashion.

Women's clothing has always been a point of contention. By studying O'Hern's thesis, I learned how women sought to elevate their voices in the public discourse through the ownership of corsets. From Fischer's book, I learned about women's position in the pantaloon reform movement. Summer Brennan summarizes women's dilemma in her book *High Heel*, which is that "feminine" clothing are seen as not sensible, as in too provocative or unwise; and sensible" clothing are unfeminine, therefore "to be feminine is to be without sense (Summer Brennan, 23)." Similar conclusions can be made about almost all women's clothing: skinny jeans, crop-tops, strap dresses, and so on. These debates about what women should wear and look like and the ever-changing beauty-standards that constantly oppress women has resulted in mental issues such as the lack of self-confidence and esteem, anxiety over their bodies (hence the Body Positivity movement), and self-doubt. In order to move forward, we need to stop the internalization of this shame in women and raise more awareness of the issue in men.

Acknowledgments

I wish to show my enormous appreciation to Lumiere Education, who has provided an excellent research community and introduced me to the field of research in the first place. I could not have finished this project without the support of my mentor, Tessa Nunn, whose professional guidance and encouragement has pushed me through difficult times and helped me become better as a person and as a scholar. I am additionally grateful to Sara Ashbaugh, for helping me improve my English writing skills, and to Maya Novak-Herzog, my former mentor, who introduced me to the realm of feminism at the beginning of this project. Finally, special acknowledgement goes to Prakriti Sharma, who as the incredibly endearing program manager, has been overseeing my progress over the course of several months and coordinating adjustments on plans.

The project would likewise have been impossible without the support of my family. I am extremely lucky to be able to attend my current school, Huili, which provides a bilingual learning environment. I would like to thank Ms. Lana Kulas, who has introduced all students to the Lumiere Research Scholarship and encouraged me along the way, and as always, Mr. Brian Curd, who has never stopped championing me.

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