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Author(s): Helene E. Roberts

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The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman

Helene E. Roberts

To nineteenth-century writers the phrase “clothes make the man” was no empty cliché, but a profound and perceptive truth about the workings of society. For Thomas Carlyle in *Sartor Resartus*, clothes were not mere aesthetic ornament, but emblems of society’s hierarchy and symbols of the spirit. “Man’s earthly interests,” he observes, “are hooked and buttoned together and held up by clothes.”¹ Not only could clothing transform a person’s appearance, it could influence the actions and attitudes of both the wearer and the viewer. As Thackeray demonstrates in his *Paris Sketch Book* of 1840, it is Louis XIV’s dress that transforms a “little lean, shrivelled, paunchy old man, of five feet two” into the magnificent, imposing Sun King. With shrewd insight into the influence of dress, Thackeray notes that Louis’s sartorial splendor both enhanced his own self-image and impressed his viewers.² Garments, in other words, signal to the world the role the wearer may be expected to play and remind the wearer of the responsibilities of that role, its constraints and limitations. That dress acts as a means of communication is a view supported by the *Quarterly Review* of 1847: “Dress becomes a sort of symbolic language—a kind of personal glossary—a species of body phrenology, the study of which it would be madness to neglect,” the magazine warned. Indeed, to those who are “proficient in the science, every woman walks about with a placard on which her leading qualities are advertised.”³ The nineteenth century thus recognized, to use the apt

1. Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1896), pp. 27, 40, 49.

2. William Makepeace Thackeray, “The Paris Sketch Book,” in *Works*, ed. Anne Ritchie (New York: Harper & Row, 1898), 5:256, 259.

3. “Art of Dress,” *Quarterly Review* 79 (1847): 375–76.

phrase of the sociologist Erving Goffman, that dress performed the function of an "identity kit."⁴

Sex roles are one of the obvious definitions made by dress. In societies such as nineteenth-century England and America, which differentiated greatly between the role of men and women, the clothing of the two sexes also diverged widely. The rather minimal differences between the physical anatomy of men and women were enormously exaggerated by clothed bodies. Samuel Butler describes two children looking at a picture of Adam and Eve in an illustrated Bible: "Which is Adam and which is Eve?" asks one child. "I don't know," answers the other, "but I could tell if they had their clothes on."⁵ More than identifying each sex, clothing defined the role of each sex. Men were serious (they wore dark colors and little ornamentation), women were frivolous (they wore light pastel colors, ribbons, lace, and bows); men were active (their clothes allowed them movement), women inactive (their clothes inhibited movement); men were strong (their clothes emphasized broad chests and shoulders), women delicate (their clothing accentuated tiny waists, sloping shoulders, and a softly rounded silhouette); men were aggressive (their clothing had sharp definite lines and a clearly defined silhouette), women were submissive (their silhouette was indefinite, their clothing constricting).

The feminine characteristics that are projected by women's dress—frivolity, delicacy, inactivity, and submissiveness—were embodied in the heroines of literature and praised by writers and journalists. John Keats's ideal woman is like "a milk-white lamb that bleats for man's protection."⁶ Coventry Patmore, in his long and sentimental poem on ideal marriage, *The Angel in the House*, depicts the betrothed woman in abject subservience to her fiancé, her own self and identity eradicated:

A rapture of submission lifts
Her life into celestial rest;
There's nothing left of what she was;
Back to the babe the woman dies,
And all the wisdom that she has
Is to love him for being wise.⁷

Of Amelia, Thackeray writes in *Vanity Fair*: "I think it was her weakness which was her principal charm; a kind of sweet submission and softness,

4. Erving Goffman, *Asylums* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1961), p. 20.

5. Samuel Butler, *Note-Books*, ed. Henry Festing Jones (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1917), p. 243.

6. John Keats, "Imitation of Spenser," in *Poetical Works*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London: Oxford University Press, 1908), p. 23.

7. Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*, 4th ed. (London: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1866), p. 113.

which seemed to appeal to each man she met for his sympathy and protection.”⁸ And Lady Dorothy Nevill, echoing Rousseau, considered “softness, dignity and compliance”⁹ the true role of women.

More than compliance, the willingness to bear suffering, either physical or mental, was intrinsic to the notion of the ideal woman. For Mrs. Ellis, a woman’s “highest duty is so often to suffer and be still.”¹⁰ Thackeray, in *Vanity Fair*, emphasized the appeal of a woman willing to bear mental suffering: “I know few things more affecting than that timorous debasement and self-humiliation of a woman. How she owns that it is she and not the man who is guilty: how she takes all the faults on her side: how she courts in a manner punishment for the wrongs she has not committed, and persists in shielding the real culprit.”¹¹ Although Thackeray’s amiable advisor in “Mr. Brown’s Letters to His Nephew” avows that he himself had a much higher opinion of female capabilities, he describes the model woman to be found in the novels of Scott and other writers as “an exquisite slave.”¹²

This phrase, “exquisite slave,” like “suffer and be still,” “sweet submission,” and “debasement and self-humiliation,” suggests an underlying masochism, that is, the experience of sexual pleasure in being abused. As psychoanalyst Anthony Storr points out, the purpose of abuse is not to inflict pain or to experience it, but to establish relations of dominance and submission. The pain involved is the most convenient and believable sign that one is willing to be truly submissive, that the other will be accorded total dominance.¹³ Havelock Ellis, an observer of Victorian sexual habits, even argues that pain by itself afforded the erotic satisfactions normally associated with the sexual act: “While in men it is possible to trace a tendency to inflict pain on the women they love, it is still easier to trace in women a delight in experiencing physical pain when inflicted by a lover, and an eagerness to accept subjection to his will. Such a tendency is certainly normal.”¹⁴ Normal or not, Victorian women had been taught that submissiveness and pain were related, and that they were women’s lot. From childhood they had read in the Old Testament of the expulsion of Eve from Eden and of the curse: “I will

8. William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1908), pp. 388–89.

9. Lady Dorothy Nevill, *My Own Times* (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), p. 130.

10. Sarah Ellis, *The Daughters of England* (London, 1845), p. 73; as cited in *Suffer and Be Still*, ed. Martha Vicinus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), p. 207.

11. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, p. 501.

12. William Makepeace Thackeray, “Sketches and Travels in London,” in *Works* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1869), 15:274.

13. Anthony Storr, *Sexual Deviation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964), pp. 43–48.

14. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (New York: Random House, 1906), 2, pt. 1: 106; as quoted in Gerald and Caroline Green, *S-M: The Last Taboo* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 23.

greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children and thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee."¹⁵

The clothing of the Victorian woman clearly projected the message of a willingness to conform to the submissive-masochistic pattern, but dress also helped mold female behavior to the role of the "exquisite slave." The sleeves of the late 1830s and 1840s were set so low over the shoulder and so tightly encased the arm that it was virtually impossible to raise the arm to shoulder height or make an aggressive or threatening gesture. Skirts also inhibited movement. "No one but a woman," Mrs. Oliphant wrote in her book on *Dress*, "knows how her dress twists about her knees, doubles her fatigue, and arrests her locomotive powers."¹⁶ In the 1850s the floor-long petticoats that were worn to inflate the floor-sweeping skirt made rapid movement of legs difficult. By the mid-1850s and through most of the 1860s the crinoline, or cage, as it actually was sometimes called, replaced the numerous petticoats. A helpful invention that eliminated the need for numerous heavy petticoats, the crinoline and its complicated paraphernalia also literally transformed women into caged birds surrounded by hoops of steel. The difficulties and inconveniences of moving with a crinoline (its circumference sometimes exceeding five yards) were well documented in cartoons and caricatures. More seriously, the light material of the crinoline posed the very real danger of inflammability. "Take what precautions we may against fire, so long as the hoop is worn, life is never safe," warned the *Illustrated News of the World* in 1863; "all are living under a sentence of death which may occur unexpectedly in the most appalling form."¹⁷ The *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* of 1867 reported 3,000 women were burned to death annually and another 20,000 injured because they wore the crinoline.¹⁸

Despite its hazardous flammability, the crinoline was worn by the majority of women in England, Europe, and America from the mid-1850s until the late 1860s, when it was replaced by the tied-back skirt and train. The new fashion gave ample assurance of immobile submission, a reminder to men of their own superior mobility and to women of the restraint and passivity supposedly inherent in their sex. Mrs. Oliphant, writing in the 1870s, deploras "the painful spectacle of the whole female race more or less tied into narrow bags," but doubts that women will overturn the tyranny of fashion. Women call attention

15. Genesis 3:16 (King James Version). The Revised Standard Version of the same text reads: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing, in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you."

16. Mrs. Margaret Oliphant, *Dress* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coats [1879?]), p. 55.

17. *Illustrated News of the World* (1863); as quoted in Alison Gernsheim, *Fashion and Reality* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 47.

18. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 3 (1867): 102.

to their "bondage," she notes, by a propensity "to embroider our bandages with wreaths of primroses and daffodils." She disapproves of "the stiff lines of embroidery which show where the narrow bag of the skirt is drawn most closely round the confined limbs, or the limbs which appear to be confined whether they are so or not." She describes a skirt with a band of contrasting color below the knees which had "a perplexing air of having been tied round the legs expressly to confine . . . movements." This dress and many others in the 1870s, Margaret Oliphant confides, "was artfully contrived to look like the instrument of torture which it was not in reality."¹⁹

Beyond the incommensurable encumbrances of crinolines and trains, the restraining fetters of tight skirts and sleeves, the item of clothing that directly and graphically disciplined women to their submissive-masochist role was the corset. The wearing of the laced corset was almost universal in England and America throughout the nineteenth century. It was designed to change the configurations of the body to accord more closely with the feminine ideal of the small waist which haunted the period. It exaggerated the differences in male and female anatomy by constricting the waist and enlarging the hips and bust. It also constricted the diaphragm, forcing women to breathe from the upper part of the chest; from this resulted the peculiarly feminine heaving of bosoms so lovingly described in popular novels. The degree of physical debility caused by the corset depended on the tightness to which it was laced. And this varied throughout the century according to the changing proportions of waist size, sleeves, and skirt that defined the fashionable silhouette. The crinoline, for example, being of such large dimensions, tended to dwarf the waist by comparison and required less tight-lacing, while dresses of a straighter cut demanded more to achieve the contrast of a small waist. Styles with short waists placed less reliance on the compression exerted by stays than those with long waists. Moreover, women may have varied the tightness of lacing depending on the social occasion, their age, and marital status.

Historians of costume disagree about the waist size of the tightly laced woman. Some argue that a waist size of seventeen or eighteen inches was not uncommon; others think the size must have been much larger.²⁰ It must be remembered, however, that the body of the Victorian woman appears to have been smaller and narrower than that of today's woman. Photographs of the period do not shed much light on the problem, for they were often touched up to show a smaller waist than the corset could produce. Literary evidence, memoirs, fashion and women's magazines, the writings of doctors and dress reformers, and an amazingly frank correspondence about tight-lacing that appeared be-

19. Oliphant, pp. 73, 76, 90, 92.

20. Gernsheim, p. 70.

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FIG. 1.—Dr. Ball's child corset waist from the *Sears, Roebuck Catalogue*, 1904

tween 1867 and 1874 in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* may exaggerate the extent of tight-lacing. Indeed, these sources may say more about the obsessions of its devotees and its opponents than about actual practice.

Despite the problem of assessing the reliability of sources, it is clear that the female was conditioned from the cradle to the submissive-masochistic role symbolized by the corset. (For example, fig. 1 illustrates one of the many children's corsets sold through Sears, Roebuck's catalogs.) The *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* of September 1872 included a pattern and sketch for a garment called baby's stays, which were not boned but all too often were tied very tightly.²¹ From baby stays the young girl progressed to an unboned, tight-fitting corset which did not provide adequate allowance for growth. A correspondent to *The Queen* describes lacing her daughters into such garments, with slight boning added: "At the age of seven I had them fitted with stays without much bone and a flexible busk, and these were made to meet from top to bottom when laced, and so as not to exercise the least pressure round the chest and beneath the waist, and only a very slight pressure at the waist,

21. Ada A. Ballin, *Health and Beauty in Dress from Infancy to Old Age* (London: A. C. Ballin, n.d.), pp. 103-4.

just enough to show off the figure and give it a roundness.”²² In 1840 Cecilia Ridley describes the first pair of stays for an eleven-year-old girl: “Alice has been afflicted with a pair of stays with bones which cause infinite trouble and dismay to the whole household. However she has a gown made upon them which would astonish you: . . . tight waist, tight sleeves, and a most wax-like fit and when she appears in the said gown she looks most awfully tall.”²³ L. Thompson, a correspondent in the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*, not only recommended putting young girls in stays at an early age, but suggested that it was actually the common practice: “It is seldom that girls are allowed to attain the age of fourteen or fifteen before commencing stays. The great secret is to begin their use as early as possible, and no . . . severe compression will be requisite. It seems absurd to allow the waist to grow large and clumsy, and then to reduce it again to more elegant proportions by means which must at first be more or less productive of inconvenience.”²⁴

Many finishing schools in the eighteenth or in the first half of the nineteenth century introduced young women to the discipline of tight-lacing. Mary Somerville, one of the first women mathematicians, describes in her memoirs her girlhood days in Miss Primrose’s establishment for young ladies: “Although perfectly straight and well made, I was encased in stiff stays, with a steel busk in front; while above my frock, bands drew my shoulders back until the shoulder-blades met. Then a steel rod with a semi-circle, which went under my chin, was clasped to the steel busk in my stays. In this constrained state I and most of the younger girls had to prepare our lessons.”²⁵ The grim regimen of the finishing schools is described in the literature of the period. Girls were made to sit for many successive hours reading or sewing and they inevitably relaxed out of the recommended upright position. Since their muscles were underdeveloped by lack of exercise, the girls began to develop a curvature of the spine and were put in stiffer and stronger stays to correct their slump. At first successful in encouraging better posture, stays ultimately caused a further weakening of muscles which soon rendered the girls totally dependent on their corsets. When Sir John Forbes visited a girls’ finishing school he concluded that only two out of the forty pupils who had been at the school for more than two years had not been made crooked in their spines and pallid, sallow, and listless in their manner.²⁶

22. As quoted in W. B. L., *The Corset and the Crinoline, a Book of Modes and Costumes from Remote Periods to the Present Time* (London: Ward, Lock & Tyler [1868]), pp. 165–68.

23. Viscountess Ridley, ed., *Cecilia; The Life and Letters of Cecilia Ridley, 1819–1845* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1958), p. 38.

24. L. Thompson, *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 3 (1867): 389.

25. Martha Somerville, ed., *Personal Recollections from Early Life to Old Age of Mary Somerville* (London: John Murray, 1873), p. 22.

26. Andrew Combe, *The Principles of Physiology Applied to the Preservation of Health and to the Improvement of Physical and Mental Education*, 15th ed. (Edinburgh: Maclachlan & Stewart, 1860), pp. 91–92.

Correspondents in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* tell of similar or even more extreme experiences. A letter, which started the long discussion of tight-lacing, came from a mother complaining that she had left her "merry, romping girl" in a "large and fashionable boarding school near London" when she went abroad. On her return four years later she saw a "tall pale young lady glide slowly in with measured gait and languidly embrace me"; her absurdly small waist explained her change in demeanor: "She then told me how the most merciless system of tight-lacing was the rule of the establishment, and how she and her forty or fifty fellow-pupils had been daily imprisoned in vices of whalebone drawn tight by the muscular arms of sturdy waiting-maids, till the fashionable standard of tenuity was attained. The torture at first was, she declared, often intolerable; but all entreaties were vain, as no relaxation of the cruel laces was allowed during the day under any pretext except decided illness." The daughter could no longer go without a corset: "Her muscles have been, so to speak, murdered," wrote her mother. Protesting to the lady principal of the school, the mother was told that "no young lady could go into good society with a coarse clumsy waist like a rustic." "Unremitting perseverance and strictness" was necessary, the principal insisted, "owing to the obstinacy of young ladies and the difficulty of making them understand the importance of a good figure."²⁷

Some doctors, but not all, condemned the ill effects of tight-lacing. The results, Dr. Andrew Combe in *The Principles of Physiology* said, are a "fragile and airy form, a sylph-like figure, an interesting paleness occasionally relieved by a touch of carnation. It is an expressive look, softly shaded by melancholy," but, he adds with emphasis, "*most of these indications are precisely those of feeble health.*"²⁸ Indeed, many doctors and dress reformers insisted that tight-lacing caused deformity and compared the practice with Chinese foot binding. Not only did they worry about the compression of vital organs in the soft boneless area of the waist but about the displacement of the ribs as well. They used numerous drawings and diagrams to warn of the physical distortions caused by tight-lacing. An American physician, testing fifty women in 1887, found that the amount of contraction in the waist measured from two and one-half to six inches, and that the amount of pressure exerted by the corset, as measured by a manometer, averaged twenty-one pounds; in one case it measured eighty-eight pounds.²⁹ Luke Limner (the designer John Leighton), in *Madra Natura versus the Moloch of Fashion*, published in 1870, listed over 100 illnesses caused by tight-lacing.³⁰ Not just illness

27. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 3 (1867): 164–65.

28. Combe, pp. 104–5.

29. John S. and Robin M. Haller, *The Physician and Sexuality in Victorian America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), p. 168.

30. Luke Limner [John Leighton], *Madre Natura versus the Moloch of Fashion; a Social Essay* (London: Bradbury, Evans & Co., 1870), pp. 58–59.

but death might be courted by the tight-lacer. "Death Caused by Tight-Lacing," reported the *Cheltenham Free Press* of June 4, 1842, after hearing the results of a post mortem performed on Anne Gray, who had complained of a pain in her side before her death. The Registrar General, in his *Nineteenth Annual Report* of 1857, voiced the most eloquent of official condemnations when he linked the "fatal stays," as he called them, to the high mortality rate in women from consumption: "It is evident physiologically, that air is the pabulum of life, and that the effects of a tight cord round the neck and of tight-lacing only differ in degree . . . for the strangulations are both fatal. To wear tight stays is in many cases to wither, to waste, to die."³¹

More common than these dramatic charges, however, were the constant complaints of the general weakness that it caused. "I often feel languid and disinclined for walking out," confessed a tightly laced correspondent in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*.³² Madame R. A. Caplin, in her book *Women in the Reign of Queen Victoria*, affirmed that "clothing, as it has . . . been constructed, is and has been for long past, the prime cause of debility in the women of Great Britain."³³ D. Edgar Flinn, in *Our Dress and Our Food in Relation to Health*, written in 1886, affirmed that every woman who tight-laced must be regarded as deformed and noted the many illnesses it caused, including a "general sense of languor and fatigue."³⁴ Ada Ballin, in *Health and Beauty in Dress*, also noted the weakness caused by tight-lacing and describes the many women going "through life uncomplaining with a sort of dull, negative suffering, the result of low vitality."³⁵

The nineteenth-century woman could hardly have missed the publicity given to the ill effects of tight-lacing, but it had little effect on its practice. One observer actually claimed that the frequency of tight-lacing became more general as its ill effects became better known, a melancholy fact that suggests the Victorian woman's willingness to be submissive and masochistic.³⁶ The fervent writings of the reformers seemed only to publicize the manner in which the perfect wife could "suffer and be still." Closely related to the low vitality, the fainting fits, and mysterious indispositions that seemed such a frequent occurrence in Victorian women, the corset, along with a lack of exercise and excessively heavy clothing (a dress could easily weigh fifteen pounds), played its part in forming that image of the weak and submissive Victorian wife.

31. *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths, and Marriages in England* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1858 [for the year 1856]), pp. 194–95.

32. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 3 (1867): 334.

33. Madame R. A. Caplin, *Women in the Reign of Queen Victoria* (London: Dean & Son, n.d.), p. 55.

34. D. Edgar Flinn, *Our Dress and Our Food in Relation to Health* (Dublin: M. H. Gill & Son, 1886), p. 23.

35. Ballin, p. 7.

36. C. Willett Cunnington, *English Women's Clothing in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Faber & Faber, 1937), p. 308.

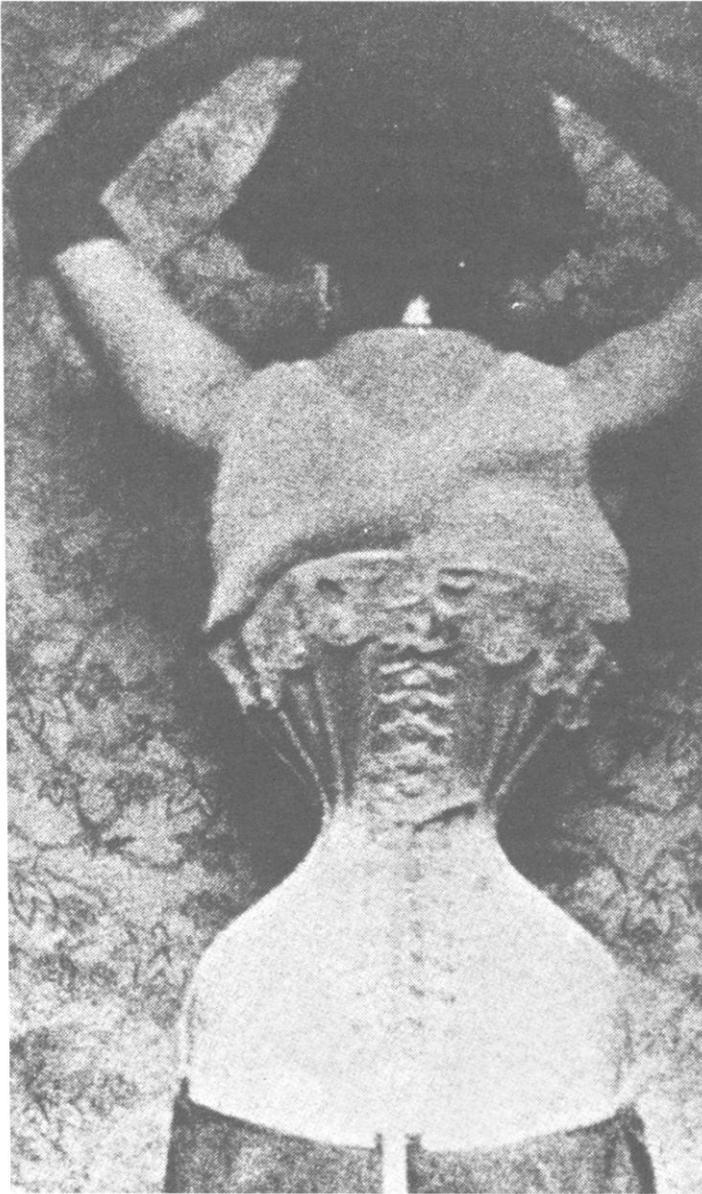


FIG. 2.—An example of extreme tight-lacing. With permission from Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, Massachusetts (from James Laver, *Modesty in Dress*).

Why did nineteenth-century women undergo the pain and inconvenience that their fashionable dress forced upon them? Why did they undergo tortures that Mrs. Ballin asserts would cause a monarch to lose his head were he to inflict them on his subjects?³⁷ In an age when alternatives to marriage for women were grim and good husbands scarce, the pressures to conform to the submissive ideal that men demanded were enormous. Indeed, one woman found her husband “so particularly fond of a small waist” that she adopted the following procedure:

I went and ordered a pair of stays, made very strong and filled with stiff bone, measuring only fourteen inches round the waist. These, with the assistance of my maid, I put on, and managed to lace my waist to eighteen inches. At night I slept in my corset without loosening the lace in the least. The next day my maid got my waist to seventeen inches, and so on, an inch every day, until she got them to meet. I wore them regularly without ever taking them off, having them tightened afresh every day, as the laces might stretch a little. They did not open in front, so that I could not undo them if I had wanted. For the first few days, the pain was very great but as soon as the stays were laced close, and I had worn them so for a few days, I began to care nothing about it, and in a month or so I would not have taken them off on any account. For I quite enjoyed the sensation, and when I let my husband see me in a dress to fit I was amply repaid for my trouble.³⁸

Several of the correspondents of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* tell of a similar regimen designed to reduce “clumsy” waists to a fashionable “tenuity.” The “discipline” is described, the pain but briefly mentioned, the effect fully praised, and the resulting admiration coveted. Figure 2 illustrates the extremes to which tight-lacing might be carried.

The defenders of tight-lacing, and these included some doctors, frequently used the language of sadomasochism; they too speak of “discipline,” “confinement,” “submission,” and “bondage.” They refer to tight-lacing as “training the figure” and to the young girl as “being subjected to this discipline” or of the discipline being “rigidly inflicted and unflinchingly self-imposed.” An aura of cultism surrounds the “advocates of tight-lacing.” They speak of being “addicted” to the practice, “votaries of the corset,” or “a missionary in the cause of tight-lacing.” “Addiction” to the corset could go to absurd lengths. Several correspondents wrote of sleeping in their tightly laced corsets. Dr. Thomas Bull, in his *Hints to Mothers*, which ran through numerous editions in the nineteenth century, found it necessary to advise his expectant mothers to loosen their laces during pregnancy and to remove their corsets when in labor.³⁹ The letters from some of the male correspondents share in

37. Ballin, p. 4.

38. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 4 (1868): 54.

39. Thomas Bull, *Hints to Mothers for the Management of Health during the Period of*

this disposition toward cultism and fetishism. "Some of us are positively absurd in our excessive admiration of this female beauty," confesses one writer. "I am a slave," he adds, "to a little waist." It is not only the smallness of the waist, but the fact of its being laced in tightly that forms its attractions. "Half the charm in a small waist," wrote one man, "comes not in spite of, but on account of, its being tight-laced." Another correspondent acknowledges that "as a gentleman I admire exceedingly, not only a small, but a well-laced-in waist in a lady." He then adds, "and I believe nine out of ten of us do the same."⁴⁰

Wearing corsets also came to be seen as a moral imperative. The uncorseted woman was in danger of being accused of loose morals. As one defender of tight-lacing said: "The corset is an ever-present monitor indirectly bidding its wearer to exercise self-restraint: it is evidence of a well-disciplined mind and well-regulated feelings."⁴¹ The word "strait-laced" still operates to reflect the relationship between corsets and morality. Mrs. Douglas, in the *Gentlewoman's Book of Dress*, though she realized the dangers of tight-lacing, could not bring herself to condemn it. The tight-lacer "is a criminal," she wrote, "but she wears her vice becomingly. . . . The tight-lacer is a person who respects herself and is careful in all departments."⁴²

Conditioning in childhood, physical dependence, the ideal of masochistic submission and discipline, and pride in moral rectitude all combined to encourage the practice of tight-lacing. Feminine narcissism, an interest in personal beauty, and in the courting of admiration provided an additional motivation. As the adage goes, "*Il faut souffrir pour être belle.*" One of the letters from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* provides an example: "To me the sensation of being tightly laced in a pair of elegant, well-made tightly-fitting corsets is superb, and I have never felt any evil to arise therefrom. I rejoice in quite a collection of these much abused objects, in silk, satin, and coutil of every style and colour, and never feel prouder or happier, so far as matters of the toilette are concerned, than when I survey in myself the fascinating undulations of outline that art in this respect affords to nature."⁴³ Concern with appearance was considered an intrinsic part of the feminine nature. "We should doubt," declared the *Quarterly Review* of March 1847, "whether the woman who is indifferent to her own appearance be

Pregnancy, and in the Lying-in-Room, 4th ed. (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longman, 1844), pp. 26–27, 182.

40. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 3 (1867): 502, 558, 614; 4 (1868): 279; 5 (1868): 56, 111–12, 167. David Kunzle, "The Corset as Erotic Alchemy," in *Woman as Sex Object*, ed. Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin (New York: Newsweek, 1972), pp. 90–165.

41. As quoted in C. Willett and Phillis Cunningham, *The History of Underclothes* (London: Michael Joseph, 1951), p. 180.

42. Douglas, *The Gentlewoman's Book of Dress* (London: Henry & Co., n.d.), p. 15.

43. *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, 3d ser. 3 (1867): 223–24.

a woman at all.”⁴⁴ Over thirty years later Mrs. Oliphant echoed the same sentiment: “Our girls are aware,” she wrote, “that it is their duty to dress well, and encouraged to bestow a great deal of thought and personal care upon the matter.”⁴⁵ George Eliot’s Hetty Sorrel in *Adam Bede*, peering at her image in polished tables and pewter dishes, clandestinely buying earrings, secretly lighting candles to gaze at herself in her dressing table mirror, dreaming of the effect on her admirers that a new ribbon will achieve, captures the narcissistic trait. One has only to think of how much it meant to a Victorian girl to attract a good husband to understand the reasons for her narcissistic proclivities. What else could she do, other than concentrate on her appearance?

Women’s preoccupation with appearance also performed the function of displaying the family’s wealth. The *Quarterly Review* of 1847 described just such a function: “. . . The responsibilities of a wife in this department are very serious. In point of fact she dresses for two. . . . Nature has expressly assigned her as the only safe investment for his vanities; and she who wantonly throws them back from their natural course deserves either to see them break out on his own person, or appear in that of another.”⁴⁶ In his *Theory of the Leisure Class*, the late-nineteenth-century sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen observed that it became women’s function, almost their only function, to “put in evidence her economic unit’s ability to pay.” Her place “has come to be that of a means of conspicuously unproductive expenditure.”⁴⁷ Dress thus advertises the wearer’s ability to command that wealth and leisure so necessary to festoon oneself with clothing made from expensive fabrics, designed with exquisite taste, and requiring long hours of another’s labor to create. Indeed, Veblen goes on, conspicuous leisure is proved by the constricting form of garments (the tight skirt or the very wide skirt), high heels, tightly laced corsets, elaborate hair dress, fragile fabrics, delicate colors: all these clearly announce that the wearer cannot possibly do physical labor and needs servants to dress her and maintain her wardrobe.

Veblen’s conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste were at their height in the 1870s and 1880s. As the century progressed, so did a concern with decorative detail—ribbons, bows, ruffles, lace, gaudy colors, flowers, feathers, and use of cosmetics—until dress reached ludicrous extremes of elaboration. The marketing of the sewing machine, which allowed for decorations, once laboriously sewn by hand, to be rapidly made and applied, rendered lavishly decorated clothing a possibility for the middle classes, thus forcing the upper classes to dress even more

44. “Art of Dress,” *Quarterly Review* 79 (1847): 379.

45. Oliphant, p. 81.

46. “Art of Dress,” *Quarterly Review* 79 (1847): 375.

47. Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, n.d.), pp. 130–46.

elaborately and to change fashion more often in order to retain a distinctive class image. And yet, in the late 1880s and 1890s clothing became plainer and more masculine, and some women loosened their stays to engage in more active pursuits of careers and sports. The forces that led women out of the submissive, masochistic, and narcissistic cul-de-sac of ribbons, bows, and tight laces were as numerous as they were complex and can only be briefly touched upon. The dress-reform movement, which had been at work throughout the century, may have finally had some effect. Although they never advocated the rejection of the corset, such groups as The Rational Dress Society protested against tightly laced corsets, narrow-toed shoes, heavily weighted skirts, and more generally against fashionable dress. The dress of the aesthetic movement helped to provide an acceptable alternative to fashionable dress. Actresses like Sarah Bernhardt and Ellen Terry and wives of artists like Janey Morris, Lizzie Siddal Rossetti, Mrs. Walter Crane, and Mrs. Alma-Tadema had refused to wear stays, bustles, or fashionable corseted clothing. They substituted a fluid style of dress with simple lines, based on a vague medieval model, that became something of a fad in more fashionable circles. More importantly, greater social and economic opportunities, more jobs and varied careers, progress in women's emancipation, and accessibility to more education expanded the role of women and therefore changed their image and clothing. The new public school mistresses, for example, in contrast to the finishing school mistresses of the earlier part of the century, encouraged serious pursuit of learning in their pupils and equated this with plainness of dress and rejection of ornament. Both the school mistresses, the students, and teachers at the new Oxbridge women's colleges adopted a plain and austere style of dress to indicate their seriousness and professionalism.⁴⁸

Moreover, the influence of sports in the 1890s was near revolutionary. Some doctors and health experts had exhorted women to exercise all during the Victorian Era, but that exercise was for the most part limited to dancing, walking, riding in carriages, and lifting light dumbbells. Horseback riding (sidesaddle) became fashionable in the 1860s; skating and a decorous form of lawn tennis in the 1870s; and walking, hiking, and touring in the eighties. But it was not until the nineties that women engaged in the more vigorous sports; basketball, rounders, cricket, hockey, lacrosse, and track events were a part of the activities of girls' schools, and swimming, rowing, and sailing were enjoyed when the weather permitted. Two professional elevens of women cricketers played exhibition matches in the 1890s, and in 1895 the British Ladies Football Club played its first match, not without heckling and severe criticism in the press. The periodical *Sylvia's Journal*, in an article on the

48. Joyce Senders Pedersen, "Schoolmistresses and Headmistresses: Elites and Education in Nineteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 15 (1975): 157-59.

North London Collegiate School in 1893, indicated the changes that gymnastics and games in the curriculum had facilitated in dress. "There is advantage in the daily morning exercise besides the absolute rest it gives from brain work, and this is, that every girl is thus compelled to wear a dress loose and light enough for free movement, since it would not be possible for the whole school to change dress for the purpose."⁴⁹

Even a dilettante interest in these sports required modifications in dress. Skirts were made slightly shorter and less full, sleeves less tight, stays were loosened an inch or two. But it was bicycling that proved to be the most popular and the most liberating sport. It gave women an independence of movement both in the use of their limbs and in the ability to transport themselves over distances. Considerable controversy ensued about the proper garment to wear while cycling. Divided skirts were generally acceptable but they did not really free the feet and legs for pedaling nor avoid the danger of flowing material caught in the spokes of the wheel. Knickerbockers, though more functional, gained less approval, as Hugh Nisbet's comment in the *Englishwoman* of June 1896 suggests:

I say that a woman in knickers possesses infinitely less *sex* attraction to a man than a woman does when costumed in skirts. She becomes insignificant in size, and robs herself at once of those subtle points and qualities wherein her vast power and *danger* lie. . . . In earlier days women wore long trailing skirts to differentiate their sex . . . strong men grew weak before it, and bad men became better, or worse, at the sight of the insignia.

The women also, when they are tired as they must be sometimes, with the keen and hungry competition, will sit down with a wearied sigh and wonder what it is they lack, and why life is such a miserable failure, despite all their advanced liberties, pleasures, and advantages over these poor slaves of the past, who only tried to make themselves attractive and their homes comfortable.

Time may answer these doleful and unexpressed queries when they grow dissatisfied with their sex emancipation and man-like costume, with their robust health, open-air exercises and equality of struggle. They require consideration, devotion, support, and home, and these they cannot have, sad as it is to relate, without their skirts.⁵⁰

Notwithstanding these repeated warnings, there were those who were willing to cashier the masochistic, submissive, and narcissistic role of

49. "At the North London Collegiate School," *Sylvia's Journal* (1893); as quoted in Phillis Cunnington and Anne Buck, *Children's Costume in England* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), p. 225.

50. Hugh Nisbet, "Fin de Siècle Dress and Its Effects," *Englishwoman* 3 (1896): 265-68.

women. Mrs. Pennell, in *Ladies in the Field* (1894), was ecstatic about the “delightful sense of independence and power” felt while bicycling in knickers.⁵¹ A bicycle advertisement appealed to its women customers by contrasting the wheel of the past (the spinning wheel) with the wheel of the present (the bicycle) and the long-skirted woman of the past seated dutifully by the hearth with the unencumbered, independent, new woman wheeling into the twentieth century, not wholly emancipated, but liberated from her actual and symbolic encumbrances of long skirts and tight-lacing.

*Fogg Art Museum
Harvard University*

51. Mrs. E. R. Pennell, “Cycling,” in *Ladies in the Field*, ed. Lady Greville (London: Ward & Downey, 1894), p. 264.