Dress Reform as Antifeminism: A Response to Helene E. Roberts's "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman"

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The subject of tight-lacing and corsetry has been the scapegoat of costume history. Otherwise neutral historians have castigated the supposedly widespread fashion of tight-lacing and hailed its demise as a victory for liberty, woman, and social progress. In so doing they have followed the lead of the nineteenth-century dress reformers who were, however, motivated not by libertarian, feminist, or progressive sympathies, but the very opposite.

The enemies of the corset, from Rousseau and Napoleon to Renoir, are generally autocratic males with a low opinion of the female sex and an attachment to the concept of the "natural woman," that is, one dedicated to home and children. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's critique of stays and female fashion became the kernel of the nineteenth-century reformist position: the corset is an abuse of nature, especially maternal nature. Rousseau knew that stays sexualized the body, a function antithetical to an educational system designed to develop the heart at the expense of sexual maturation, which he regarded as dangerous, especially in girls who tended to awaken it in boys. Woman was naturally inferior and subject to man; her physical beauty was threatening to him, and any attempts to enhance it were to be viewed as corrupt and corrupting.1

This attitude was incorporated into the mainstream puritanism of the Victorian middle classes, who demanded of woman not physical weakness and fragility, as Roberts suggests, but the physical and moral endurance to bear the considerable strains of repeated pregnancies, multi-

ple child rearing, household tasks, and male vices. (An upper-middle-
class or aristocratic stereotype stressing physical weakness also existed,
but more as a poetic, literary, and moral construct than a social reality.)

Most dress reformers followed Rousseau’s back-to-nature ethic and
applied his classicist aesthetic principles. They drew up more-or-less
prolix and more-or-less incoherent lists of diseases provoked by the
corset, focusing particularly upon those relating to “sacred” maternity.
The hostility of the most vociferous writers was, as a rule, but one ele-
ment in a puritanical and reactionary social philosophy. The American
Orson Fowler, for instance, wrote two best-sellers, an antisex book called
Amativeness and another called Intemperance and Tight-Lacing. Fowler
accused tight-lacing not only of ruining the health, inducing consump-
tion, and causing sterility (all this was nothing new) but also of “exciting
the organs of Amativeness” and developing a wholly unchristian erotic
sensibility. Fowler thunders in conclusion, “I really do not see how it is
possible for tight-lacers ever to enter the kingdom of heaven. Can
Suicides and Infanticides be Christians?” Fowler’s brand of fanaticism
was typically bred by subjects such as sex, alcohol, and tight-lacing.

Over the last third of the nineteenth century the chorus of opposi-
tion swelled into hysteria. It did so in response to the rise of feminism on
the one hand and the published self-defense of the tight-lacers on the
other (on the actual incidence of the practice, see below). The volume of
writing against the corset and tight-lacing in medical dissertations and
magazines; in lectures; tracts and books on clothing, hygiene, physical
education, and women; in popular verse and cartoons is immeasurable.

The premier newspaper of England, the august Times, angrily
editorialized that “tight-lacing creates more domestic unhappiness than
any other domestic circumstance in life.” The survival or revival of
tight-lacing proved to some of its critics that women lay beyond the reach
of reason. The editor of the Lancet, the most respected medical magazine
in England, waxed satirical: he invited the “fashion-loving women of
England” to try the experiment of compressing the heads of their in-
fants, in the manner of some Indian tribes, “albeit there can be no need
to adopt artificial means for the repression of feminine brains.” Women
were “beyond the reach of reason,” but the “suicide they perpetrate is
beneficial to society: it promotes the ‘survival of the fittest.’ ” Tight-
lacing was viewed as a major symptom of the relapse of civilization into
barbarism in books and articles carrying such portentous titles as The
Great Evil of the Age and “The Curse of Corsets.” The first named is a

35 ff.
5. William Mattieu Williams, Philosophy of Clothing (London: T. Laurie, 1890), pp. 119,
143.
book by Dr. John Ellis, a New Englander who also wrote extensively against free love, alcohol, and socialism. He blamed the declining birth-rate on tight-lacing, as did Émile Zola in one of his sillier novels (Fécondité, 1899), which linked this debased practice of fashion with contraception and abortion. The “Curse of Corsets” article, published in a popular American magazine, is by novelist Arabella Kenealy, who in her attempt to “exorcise a National Evil about which too much cannot be written,” identified tight-lacing as both cause and symptom of the inherited degeneracy of the Anglo-Saxon race, a degeneracy being actively furthered in women by poor nutrition and overeducation, too much sport, and “animality” (i.e., sexuality). Elsewhere Kenealy described the neurasthenic tight-lacer debilitated because she enjoyed too many labor-saving devices and exemption from the proper physical chores, like bending for long hours over the stove.

The reformers made up in moral fury what they lacked in practical experience, empirical knowledge, common sense, and common courtesy. They used the “fashion” of tight-lacing to damn the sex as a whole. It was not, as Roberts states, the uncorseted woman who was “in danger of being accused of loose morals” so much as the tight-laced one, whose practice was, on occasion, darkly linked with prostitution. Among her very few public defenders was the Mrs. Douglas cited by Roberts, who upholds the “morality” of tight-lacing, partly in reaction to the boorishness of the reformers and partly out of respect for the right of the tight-lacers to defend themselves.

They did so in the Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine (henceforth EDM), which alone at the time dared to publish letters from men and women actively addicted to the practice. This considerable body of correspondence, relegated in tiny print to the back of the magazine, infuriated the “heavies” of the press, notably the Times, the Telegraph, Punch, and the Saturday Review in a particularly misogynistic phase, and served to confirm their contention that women were brainless and inferior creatures. The EDM was edited by Samuel Beeton, the brilliant young pioneer of juvenile and popular publishing, whose young wife and coeditor was the Mrs. Beeton of cookery-book fame. Bowing to pressures from his young female readership, in the spirit of fair play, and not averse to a certain sensationalism, he gave voice to the tight-lacing cultists and risked his reputation by condoning some of the most scandalous opinions ever to be printed in a mid-Victorian magazine.

The most remarkable component of the EDM correspondence is not the fact of women declaring their pleasure in submitting to male taste for small waists but the scarcely veiled sexual basis for this submission, which also served, as a male writer quoted by Roberts testifies, to

enslave the male. (Here we have in embryonic form the sadomasochistic, role-switching mechanism upon which much fetishism is based.) Women openly admit to experiencing "delightful," "delicious," and "exquisite sensations," thus defying and in a way justifying the puritanical fury of their opponents. The sensuality of the tight-lacers' language, muted in the EDM correspondence, becomes gradually more explicit in the course of succeeding bodies of correspondence.

Beeton opened the door a chink to the sexual liberation of both sexes. Another remarkable feature which emerges from the fetishist correspondence is the incidence of corset wearing and even tight-lacing among men, sometimes in company with the wife, sometimes alone. It may well be that tight-lacing survives today primarily as a form of male self-subjugation, which some will find a pleasant irony. It may also be that the incidence of male tight-lacing was always important, even when the taboo was at its strongest. The Victorian males who admitted in public print to tight-lacing and transvestism, and even more so those who actually demonstrated it in public on their person, must be accorded their measure of courage, too.

Roberts makes, I believe, two fundamental and interconnected errors which flow from a barely challenged tradition in costume historiography. First, that of treating EDM correspondence as typical of public attitudes when it was clearly not, and second, that of treating tight-lacing as typical of fashion. It was not. There is no instance of a fashion magazine condoning, or a single leader of fashion (aristocrat, serious actress) practicing, tight-lacing; no upper-class woman is known to have descended to what a reformer calls "the very badge of vulgarity." Tight-lacing was largely a lower-middle-class practice, with some adherents in the middle-middle and working (servant, shop girl) classes. Such was the social composition of the at least quarter of a million readers of EDM, many of whom sympathized with, even if they did not indulge in, tight-lacing, regarding the practice and its outspoken defense as an individual female right, despite and perhaps because of the male opprobrium heaped upon it. They were not necessarily adherents of feminism, which was largely an upper-middle-class movement, but it is significant that correspondence on the fetishes overlaps with that on feminist issues (notably the Married Women's Property Bill), which the EDM broadly

8. There is no space here to deal with the vexed question of the authenticity of the correspondence. I believe that on the whole it represents genuine experience and honestly expressed feeling. The most suspect class of letters, recounting enforced tight-lacing (for instance, that cited by Roberts, p. 561), served to provoke correspondence and to slip under an editorial guard hostile to the fetishist viewpoint.

9. Mary Haweis, Dress, Health, and Beauty: A Book for Ladies (London: Ward, Lock & Tyler, 1878), p. 138. There is one most illustrious exception to this rule: the Empress Elizabeth of Austria, who was a political radical, an independent and unmaternal woman, and a most undutiful wife. Naturally slender and athletic, she was notorious as a tight-lacer and famous as an equestrienne.
supported. Tight-lacing and women's rights were recognized to have a common enemy: those who would "impose the Slavery of Silence upon women."

There is reason to suppose that far fewer women actually practiced tight-lacing, by any useful definition of the term (see below), than the dress reformers made out, exaggerating the habit for polemical reasons. They were able to do so partly, at least, because the fetishist correspondence threw a spotlight on the addicted few, as did also, paradoxically, the more masculine, plainer, but contour-stressing fashions of the 1880s.

The question of exactly how few inches constitutes a tight-laced waist is not very relevant to the discussion here. The most useful definition of tight-lacing is not numerical but rather the point at which a waist attracted attention and was known by its perpetrator to do so. Tight-lacers were, as a matter of definition, self-conscious women, and this kind of self-consciousness, which imprinted itself upon body carriage, movement, and a woman's aura, was considered quite improper. Public manifestation of tight-lacing was a conscious act of defiance against established medical and moral authority. We know that it was flaunted also on the sports field. Some tight-laced tennis players claimed to enjoy a practical advantage over their more conventional sisters by shortening their skirts and wearing less clothing altogether. Shocked reformers, as well as the fetishists themselves, testified that tight-lacers tended to wear nothing, except maybe the thinnest of shifts, under the corset and next to the skin, and nothing at all between the corset and the dress. In the dress-reform campaign, on the other hand, the need to wear simply less clothing tended to be lost in argument over how to abolish the corset.

Tight-lacers often claimed to enjoy superior health and to take more than the usual amount of exercise, medical theory to the contrary. The medical tracts cite remarkably few actual case histories based on first-hand personal examinations. Many of the verdicts of death by tight-lacing were, one suspects, passed on slender women who may have died of other causes by a coroner who wanted to get his name in the paper. One unusually honest physician admitted that "tight-lacers do not, as a rule, present themselves for medical inspection." The fetishists themselves frequently warned any woman or girl with a constitutional weakness not to try tight-lacing.

As Roberts notes, there were a few physicians prepared to condone the practice. One, a Dr. Haughton, saw among the advantages accruing to it a decisive deterrent against overeating, which was widely regarded

as a scourge of the Victorian middle class. Another physician, the youthful John George Adami, who later became a famous pathologist, proved at a top-level professional conference in 1888 that the wearing of broad tight belts (and by implication, tight stays) tended to stimulate the flow of blood to the heart and increase energy.

And there was one feminist, at least, who (on this same occasion) defended the corset, “moderately laced”—Lydia Becker, distinguished botanist, friend of Charles Darwin, and editor of Women's Suffrage Journal. She criticized the dress reformers and, without actually endorsing tight-lacing as such, cheerfully laid herself open to the charge of doing so. She spoke “amusingly, though rather disconnectedly, in support of stays and tight-lacing” and concluded with the bizarre exhortation: “Stick to your stays, ladies, and triumph over the other sex.”

Very few serious feminists spent much time denouncing the corset. The majority felt that the whole campaign was at best irrelevant, at worst counterproductive. No important social critics paid any attention to the controversy. Denunciation of the corset was the obsession of small minds.

Let us now examine some fictional reflections of the tight-lacer stereotype. Mrs. Snagsby in Dickens's Bleak House is described as “something too violently compressed about the waist, and with a sharp nose like a sharp autumn evening, inclining to be frosty towards the end. [Rumor held that her mother] did, in her daughter's childhood, moved by too jealous a solicitude that her figure should approach perfection, lace her up every morning with her maternal foot against the bedpost.”

Mrs. Snagsby combined jealousy, avarice, scheming, and a general emotional and behavioral “tightness” with her tightness of waist. She is the domineering wife and altogether the antithesis of Dickens's ideal of young womanhood, which is basically the submissive stereotype linked by Roberts to tight-lacing. Elsewhere, the corset is turned into an anti-erotic device for a premature aging and the symbol of vulgar ambition: thus the daughter of a wealthy and socially climbing industrialist is described as “a premature little woman of thirteen years old, who had already arrived at such a pitch of whalebone and education that she had nothing girlish [i.e., sexually appealing] about her.”


12. Charles Dickens, Bleak House (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1853), p. 90; see also Martin Chuzzlewit (London: Chapman & Hall, 1884), p. 42: “... three spinster daughters, who had so mortified themselves with tight stays, that their tempers were reduced to something less than their waists, and sharp lacing was expressed in their very noses.” In the quotation from Bleak House Dickens specifies the manner of this expression: “frosty,” which represents an interesting variation on the reformers’ stereotype, where tight-lacing caused redness of the extremities and nose, the red nose being the awful stigma of the alcoholic.

Punch, in the course of a prolonged campaign, fantasized the EDM-type addicts as having formed a club (that male preserve) in order to affirm their commitment to painful remedies for their lack of natural attraction and to proclaim their old-spinstersh desperation to catch a husband. This ancient cliché of antifeminist satire stood in contradiction to the newer one of the “Girl of the Period,” a term coined by the novelist Lynn Linton in 1868 and picked up by Punch in order to abuse the new “fast” set of brash young women addicted to provocations such as swearing, chignons, high heels, makeup, and tight-lacing.

Perhaps the most highly elaborated fictional stereotype of the tight-lacer is to be found in Charles Reade’s A Simpleton.14 This novel raises a monument to selfless scientific and humanitarian dedication jeopardized by a vain, foolish, and disobedient wife. With consummate scientific insight, Staines recognizes his adored fiancée’s propensity to spit blood as the product of a secret tight-lacing. Despite her promises to reform, soon after marriage “the simpleton” relapses into her old vice, along with others typically feminine and particularly calculated to ruin her husband’s precarious career. Severely berated, Rosa falls in abject repentance at his feet and bids him kill her. He magnanimously pardons her with the words, “All you ladies are monomaniacs, one might as well talk to a gorilla. . . . A tiny waist [is] as hideous as a Chinese foot, and to the eye of science, far more disgusting.”15 The fault of Rosa, child of a weak father, is her refusal to submit to authority, of which her tight-lacing is a major symptom, an authority doubly binding on her for it is both biological and scientific and includes a husband who has also to act as a father.

“Such a pinch of whalebone and education,” says Dickens in the passage quoted. The juxtaposition may seem bizarre until we see the connection between the feminist demand for higher education and the way conservatives used feminine fashion as the ultimate proof of women’s incapacity for higher thinking. Punch and other arbiters of morality ridiculed women not only for tight-lacing, high heels, and chignons but also simultaneously (and sometimes in the very same breath) for the absurdity of their intellectual aspirations. “The Chignon at Cambridge” was the scoffing headline Punch used to greet the foundation of Girton College. Education was bad for women just as the heavy chignon was—it overheated the brain.

Education was viewed as a major factor contributing to feminine neurasthenia, and, like neurasthenic lacing, it undermined a woman’s marriageability. “Women beware! You are on the brink of destruction. You have hitherto engaged in crushing your waists: now you are attempting to cultivate your minds. Beware!! Science pronounces that the

14. I owe this reference to an earlier draft of Roberts’s article.
woman who studies is lost.”16 “Woman asks for Education, but she usually arrays herself in a style that suggests either the infantile or the idiotic.”17 The “infantile” and “idiotic” related to the concepts of the “savage” and “primitive,” and the new popular anthropology enabled dress reformers (and some anthropologists) to compare tight-lacing with the deformation of primitive tribes and see the Western custom as the aberration of a civilization in decadence or regression. Tight-lacing was “animal,” that is, sexual: “It chains the mind to the realm of animality, when unfettered, it should be unfolding in spiritual strength and glory.”18

What were the motives of the tight-lacer? We may agree with Roberts that typically narcissism underlay the practice. But this narcissism (which Victorians called vanity) was not generally or officially considered a desirable trait in a woman. The woman, especially the middle classes, who engaged in blatantly narcissistic display was apt to be considered a moral and social pariah. Excessively conspicuous waist was (to pun upon and contradict Veblen) the sign of the upstart, the vulgar, the not-yet-leisured classes.

Tight-lacing was practiced by certain lower-middle-class people who exaggerated a historic hallmark of aristocratic form long since abandoned by the aristocracy. It became the cult of individuals and small close-knit groups motivated by highly individualistic and perhaps psychologically diverse factors. Contrary to received opinion, tight-lacers were not following “the dictates of fashion” but responding to a personal and inner compulsion. Tight-lacing was largely voluntary, typically taken up at puberty (but not necessarily retained for long) by fourteen- to sixteen-year-olds, sometimes apparently spontaneously, sometimes at the instigation of or in emulation of a friend;19 sometimes

18. Ibid.
19. Roberts implies in several ways that it was the custom in Victorian times to corset children. While this eighteenth-century practice may have survived in some conservative families, it had largely died out by the Victorian age. No manual known to me suggests that prepuberty children be in any way confined beyond what was required for warmth. For the Victorians the corset was part of the sociosexual initiation of puberty and “coming out,” not a means of protecting growth from the cradle as at the time of Rousseau. Nor is it true that “many” finishing schools encouraged or imposed tight-lacing. The existence of a few such schools, though problematical, is probable. None came to the attention of the government-sponsored Schools Inquiry Commission. Tales of enforced tight-lacing in Victorian schools against the girls’ and parents’ wishes are inherently suspect. It is, on the other hand, certain that many of the severer private schools in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century used posture-training apparatus (which has a function distinct from tight-lacing corsets) such as backboard, collar, and the dancer’s stocks. The instruments cited by Roberts as used on Mary Somerville (born 1780, thus not a Victorian child) are more typical in their severity of Calvinist Scotland, where Somerville was educated, than England.
despite, rather than at the instance of, a parent; and often without a particular male object in view. If she thought of marriage at all, it was not in terms of maternity. Older women, fiancées, and wives also recount how they voluntarily started tight-lacing in order to tighten the sexual bond.

The sadistically inclined, the men who enjoyed the very concept of dominance and bondage, are outweighed by the men and women who abhorred the very idea of forcing corsets on any girl, let alone tight-lacing her. Voluntary participation, "coaxing," constant monitoring of progress, immediate suspension at the first sign of ill health—these are the fetishist's guidelines.

Extreme or dangerous tight-lacing and submission to real pain and great inconvenience have to be viewed in another light. Here there must have been special and pathological circumstances in the family or work environment. While the medical claims of damage caused by tight-lacing were often wildly exaggerated, in a few instances, at least, one cannot doubt that profoundly unhappy women and girls deliberately courted severe injury. There is the case20 of a fifteen-year-old who caused herself real, nonsexual pain ("suffocation, giddiness and anguish") which subsided whenever she removed her corset. The connection must have been as clear to her as it was to the doctor examining her, but she continued to lace and suffer. The psychosomatic syndrome here might be comparable (mutatis mutandis) to extreme slimming diets or anorexia among teenagers today. It is symptomatic of the psychosexual ignorance of Victorian medicine that the physician in the case quoted (which he observed over a period of years) failed to see any cause for psychological investigation into the poor girl's family or working background.

Tight-lacing comes out of pain—the individual pain, and a woman's pain. The pain is not only that of a few sexually needy, unmaternal, or frustrated women who dared to manifest it publicly (the hard-core tight-lacers), but part of the wider pain suffered by women generally at a time when traditional sex roles were for the first time being seriously challenged. Tight-lacing was viewed by reformers, quite correctly, as a drug, like opium (which was also largely used by women); like opium it numbed pain, or else it replaced a psychological pain with a physical inconvenience, easier to bear and better rewarded.

It is not a historical accident that waist confinement was first manifested as a fashion, with its concomitant décolletage,21 in the mid-fourteenth century and that it survived, with decreasing validation, down to World War I. For waist confinement and décolletage are the primary sexualizing devices of Western costume, which arose when peo-

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21. Up to the twentieth century the corset also functioned as brassiere and was the chief agent of uplift and décolletage.
pie first became sexually conscious, and conscious of sexual guilt in a public and social way. They did so both as cause and result of the particularly Christian sexual repression which reached a point of maximum intensity in the Victorian age. Having few means of sexual sublimation in war, work, etc., woman made a dialectical response: she satisfied the Christian ascetic, body- and self-denying ideal in the principle of binding and the sexual, self-expressive instinct in the principle of exposure. By confining the waist in order to throw out the bust, she made the moral principle serve the sexual instinct and vice versa. The embodiment of fading religious practices and sentiments, woman adopted "monastic" macerations of dress; as the embodiment, conversely but equally, of nature, she also denied—satirized—this original spiritual purpose. In vain the preachers threatened women who exposed their breasts with cancer of the breast. In vain the preachers and physicians threatened provocatively corseted women with every anathema, disease, and even death itself. The corset died not because of the reformers' campaign but because other means were found for the sexual and self-expression of women, and men.

The restrictions placed upon women are now no longer of the gross physical kind. "Binding" is practiced by the fashion industry in a covert and psychological rather than overt physical manner. Advertising, fashion magazines, and stores, with the aid of new psychological and social sciences, create a climate in which a woman is made to feel "bound" in order to achieve an illusory self-validation, to buy and keep buying, "improving" herself, competing, denying age.

Nineteenth-century social conservatives saw in the tight-laced corset a sexually expressive device which they castigated as immoral and "unnatural," that is, contrary to the "true" maternal and passive nature of woman. The postwar fashion industry has continuously exploited the old image of corset-as-prison in order to persuade women how much more "free" they are in their new lightweight underwear. The once-repressed sexualization of dress is now the object of massive and relentless commercialization. It is not the sexualization in the past, but its commercialization in the present, which is the obstacle to progress.

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