

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: "HUGGED AS A VIPER TO THE BOSOM":  
ANTEBELLUM CORSET REFORM AND  
THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

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Between 1820 and 1850, an active and robust movement to eradicate women's corsets and the practice of tight-lacing became popular in the press. Primarily male reformers responding to forces of modernization attacked women's corsets in newspapers with a series of arguments designed to shame, scare, and blame women. Female authors, however, challenged male reformers' knowledge of corsets and thus their authority to speak about the garment. Without overtly challenging the prevailing gender hierarchy and through articulation of their own logic about corsets, women instead asserted their own sex's authority to speak publicly about corsets and women's bodies.

“HUGGED AS A VIPER TO THE BOSOM”: ANTEBELLUM CORSET REFORM  
AND THE QUESTION OF AUTHORITY

by

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

There's a certain mythology surrounding corsets in popular culture. Consider Victor Fleming's 1939 film adaptation of Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind*, set in Civil War-era America. In one dressing scene, Scarlett O'Hara, the wealthy, vain, and self-centered southern belle, begged her maid to tighten her corset enough to reduce her twenty-inch waist back to her youthful pre-childbirth eighteen-and-a-half-inches. Scarlett held onto a bedpost and winced in pain with each tug of the laces. "Twenty inches!" she bemoaned, "I've grown as big as Aunt Pitty."<sup>1</sup> Scarlett's maternal twenty-inch waist is as laughable in 2016 as it surely was in 1939. The same year Fleming's movie debuted, a U.S. government survey of over 15,000 American women found that the mean female waist girth, 29.15 inches, far exceeded Scarlett's ideal.<sup>2</sup> Fleming and Mitchell's depiction of corsets as antiquated, ridiculous, and painful devices which young women used to an unhealthy extreme remains alive and well today in popular imagination, even though it has been complicated by a larger discussion about beauty ideals, feminism, and female sexuality. Are corsets the instrument of a 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 own bodies and proudly display their sexuality? In the

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<sup>1</sup> *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Atlanta, GA: Selznick International Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer). This scene can be viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pd6zQrcQ9YE>, accessed Jun. 30, 2016; This clip is also mentioned by Valerie Steele in *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth O'Brien and William C. Shelton, "Women's Measurements for Garment and Pattern Construction," U.S. Department of Agriculture, Works Progress Administration Miscellaneous Publication No. 454 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 45, accessed Jul. 8, 2016, <https://archive.org/stream/womensmeasuremen454obri#page/26/mode/2up>.

midst of a twenty-first-century renaissance in corsets' popularity—usually masquerading as “waist training” or as costumes adorning burlesque performers—these questions about corsets' cultural meanings remain pressing.<sup>3</sup>

Only in the past half-century, however, have historians and sociologists begun to take the study of corsets seriously.<sup>4</sup> Their scholarship, which tends to focus almost exclusively on corsets in the latter half of the nineteenth century, has generally understood that garment as a defining fashion of aristocratic and wealthy women in Victorian Europe and America.<sup>5</sup> Feminist scholars, in particular, have typically described the garment as a “coercive apparatus through which patriarchal society controlled women and exploited their sexuality.”<sup>6</sup> These scholars have thus understood corsets and corset reform as highly gendered and studied them primarily in relation with women's rights movements as activists' symbols of misogynistic restriction. Indeed, feminist historians such as Carol Mattingly and Gayle V. Fischer have noted that women were active participants in these later efforts to eradicate corsets, and have traced the means by which many women were able to use dress reform as a tool for participating in broader political and social debates.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Avital Norman Nathman's recent article, “The Complicated Feminist Ethics of Corsets and Waist Trainers,” *The Establishment* (May 31, 2016), accessed Jun. 30, 2016, <http://www.theestablishment.co/2016/05/31/the-complicated-feminist-ethics-of-corsets-and-waist-trainers/>.

<sup>4</sup> Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 67-85.

<sup>5</sup> There are many reasons which could explain the lack of scholarship on anti-corsets in this earlier time period—chief among them is that anti-corset reform was not a smaller social reform movement compared with the likes of the temperance and anti-slavery movement, but in many outward ways, the anti-corset movement behaved like other reform movements and can easily be overlooked as a small piece within a much larger picture.

<sup>6</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Carol Mattingly, *Appropriate[ing] Dress: Women's Rhetorical Style in Nineteenth-century America* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), 6-7. Gayle V. Fischer, *Pantaloon and Power: A Nineteenth-century Dress Reform in the United States* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2001).

A new school of historians writing since the 1990s have challenged this narrative, arguing that it oversimplified women's actual experiences of wearing corsets. Fashion historian Valerie Steele, author of *The Corset: A Cultural History* (2001), has argued that "by patronizing women of the past as victims of fashion, historians have ignored the reasons why women wore corsets as long as they did."<sup>8</sup> To Steele, the prior generation of feminist literature had worked to reduce corset reform to a set unhelpful dichotomies— "oppression versus liberation" and "fashion versus comfort and health."<sup>9</sup> By ignoring the reasons that women embraced their corsets, feminist scholars unintentionally removed women's agency from their narratives of dress reform. Steele has also noted that the existing literature's almost-exclusive concern with the second half of the nineteenth century has obscured the vitality of corset-wearing habits which pre-dated the American Civil War.

Pre-Civil War efforts at corset reform are more than just prologue to a later period. Instead, this historical blind spot deserves closer investigation. Corset-wearing was hugely controversial in the half century before the Civil War and inspired a vituperative debate between corset-wearing women and a great many anti-corset activists—most of whom were white middle-class men. Unlike female reformers in the latter half of the nineteenth century, antebellum women used the press to defend their right to continue wearing corsets. While upholding the same values of "separate spheres" which denied them political power and restricted their responsibilities to the home, these women simultaneously challenged male reformers' knowledge of corsets, and thus their authority to speak about the garment. In articulating their own

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<sup>8</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 1.

rationales about corsets, women instead asserted their own sex's authority to speak publicly not only about corsets, but about women's bodies and behaviors more broadly.

### *A Brief History of Corsets*

Fashion historian Eleri Lynn defined the corset as “a waist- and torso-shaping garment stiffened with boning and tightened with laces, typically encasing the bust and hips for an hourglass figure.” While the materials and techniques used to make corsets have changed over time, Lynn's broad definition accurately describes corsets across centuries of development.<sup>10</sup> The origin of the corset is difficult to pinpoint with precision. Evidence in classical artwork indicates that Cretan and Grecian women wore corset-like cloth garments wrapped tightly around their torsos.<sup>11</sup> However, fashion historians note that there is little continuity between those very early corset-like fashions and the rigid undergarment Lynn described.<sup>12</sup>

Instead, the modern corset likely emerged in the fifteenth century. That century's fashions prescribed close-fitting clothes for both sexes: tightly-laced dresses for women and snug doublets and tights for men. By the 1550s, Mediterranean women began wearing tight bodices that laced closed, usually in the front. Over the course of the sixteenth century, tailors began inserting stiff “bones,” vertical poles usually made out of whalebone or another rigid material, around the sides of these tight bodices.<sup>13</sup> The busk, the largest of these bones, was typically located at the

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<sup>10</sup> Eleri Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010), 220.

<sup>11</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 2-3.

<sup>12</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 4-5; Beatrice Fontanel, *Support and Seduction: The History of Corsets and Bras*, trans. Willard Wood (New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1997), 49.

<sup>13</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 7.

center of the front panel of the corset, which forced the wearer's posture upright. Sixteenth-century women wore these early corsets, commonly called "whalebone bodies," as bodices that were thus visible to the public eye.

At some point in the 1550s or 1560s, these outer whalebone bodies transformed into "stays," a new garment which women now took to wearing underneath their bodices.<sup>14</sup> The use of these stays soon spread beyond the Mediterranean basin and by 1579 women in France were wearing *corps à la baleine* under their dresses, presumably in an effort to straighten their posture.<sup>15</sup> Elizabethan aristocrats in England also wore stays and Queen Elizabeth I herself had numerous pairs made for her.<sup>16</sup> Due to their high price and physically-restrictive nature, stays were most popular among aristocratic European women and they quickly became a symbol of status and wealth. As a result, servants and others seeking to emulate the upper classes began wearing less costly imitations.<sup>17</sup> By the eighteenth century, most Englishwomen wore some sort of corset regularly; it was even standard for English servant girls to wear stays while at work.<sup>18</sup>

Across the Atlantic, women in the colonies embraced stays and other habits of English aristocrats in an effort to mark themselves and their families as genteel.<sup>19</sup> It was not until the revolutionary era that looser clothing returned to fashion. By the end of the eighteenth century, stays' popularity had begun to plummet both in America

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<sup>14</sup> Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail*, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 6-7.

<sup>16</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 27-28.

<sup>18</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 22-26

<sup>19</sup> In *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992), Richard Bushman explains how, between 1700 and 1850, American men and women of the upper and middle classes emulated the British upper class in manners, customs, and fashion as a way of marking themselves off from lower classes.

and in Europe as women increasingly shirked them in favor of looser fashions. This was in part a response to the tide of anti-aristocratic protests in Britain, America, and France in this period. “The political revolution of the last century was accompanied by a revolution in dress,” an author using the penname ‘A Lady’ explained in 1836. “It banished wigs and buckles, powder and pomatum, stiff stays and full petticoats...”<sup>20</sup> In the 1780s and 1790s, stays began to fall out of favor as citizens in France and America shunned aristocratic fashions and adopted clothes patterned on a more flowing, classical look.<sup>21</sup> By the 1790s, the same commentator observed, “one extreme led to another, and the ladies who had been encased in whalebone, buckram, an abundance of quilted petticoats, stepped forth as Grecian goddesses.”<sup>22</sup>

During the first decade of the nineteenth century, stays once again became a fashionable staple on both sides of the Atlantic. With the re-establishment of the French Empire in 1804, France reassumed its role as western fashion’s trend-setter and quickly returned to a more conservative styles of dress and reinstating corsets as the fashion of the day.<sup>23</sup> The same revolutionary backlash occurred in America, and its impact on female fashions returned the corset to favor.<sup>24</sup> Tailors in New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore designed these new corsets to lift and emphasize the breasts while simultaneously giving a woman’s torso a sleek and “tubular”

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<sup>20</sup> ‘A Lady,’ *The Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston: American Stationers’ Company, 1836), 97.

<sup>21</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 29.

<sup>22</sup> ‘A Lady,’ *The Young Lady’s Friend* (1836), 97.

<sup>23</sup> Fischer, *Pantaloon and Power*, 18; “The Wearing of Corsetts,” *Portsmouth Weekly Magazine*, Jul. 29, 1824, 4;

M.D.C. Crawford and Elizabeth A. Guernsey, *The History of Corsets in Pictures* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1951), 17.

<sup>24</sup> Rosemarie Zagari, *Revolutionary Backlash: Women and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). Zagari explains the conservative reaction to Revolutionary democratic expansion, specifically of political rights for women.

silhouette.<sup>25</sup> This effect was magnified as women began wearing large bell sleeves and bulky crinoline skirts that together made their waists appear smaller and smaller. It was in this period as well that stays received a new name; only after 1800 did the word “corset” become popular.

By 1810, demand for corsets in America had begun to outpace manufacturers’ supplies. A notice published by a corset maker in New York City in that year noted their popularity in a newspaper advertisement: “Mrs. Barber, in order to obviate the difficulty, which many Ladies have justly complained of, in waiting for CORSETTS, has at length accomplished their wishes, in completing an assortment of CORSETTS...”<sup>26</sup> Corsets only grew more popular over the course of the following three decades. Not only did the number of newspaper advertisements selling corsets rise after 1810, the number of corset-makers and sellers increased as well.<sup>27</sup> By 1829, one contemporary proclaimed, albeit in dismay, that “Nearly all the fair females of America” wore corsets.<sup>28</sup>

Rising demand for corsets came primarily from young, wealthy women.<sup>29</sup>

Accounts of the day do not agree on a particular age at which women first started

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<sup>25</sup> Lynn, *Underwear Fashion in Detail*, 84.

<sup>26</sup> “Elegant trimmings, pelises, cloths, &c. &c.,” *Evening Post* (New York), Dec. 15 1810.

<sup>27</sup> William Fry, ed., *The Baltimore Directory for 1810: Containing the Names, Occupations and Residences of the Inhabitants* (Baltimore: G. Dobbin and Murphy, 1810), accessed Apr. 15, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/balimoredirecto1810mull>; *Matchett’s Baltimore Director, or Register of Householders, Corrected up to June, 1842; Containing a List of Streets, Lanes, Alleys, Wharves, &c. And A Variety of Other Useful Information* (Baltimore: R.J. Matchett, 1842), accessed Apr. 15, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/matchettsbalimo1842balt>.

<sup>28</sup> Humanitas, “American Suttees,” *National Philanthropist & Investigator*, Jul. 22, 1829, 2.

<sup>29</sup> Contrary to popular belief, there is little evidence that small children regularly wore corsets, though one advertiser mentioned that “children of 3 years old or upwards,” could wear her corsets “without the least injury to their health.” Another advertisement hocked corsets of “various kinds” with the specific purpose of “remedy[ing] weakness in children...” These advertisers were in the minority and may have simply been making a point about the medical safety of their corsets. See “Mrs. Barber, corset-maker,” *New-York Gazette & General Advertiser* (New York), Dec. 12, 1809; “Ladies Corset Ware House,” *Evening Post* (New York), Jun. 7, 1821.

wearing them, though some evidence indicates that teenage girls started wearing tight corsets as early as eleven years old. More commonly, writers placed the age of first corset-wearing around thirteen or fourteen years old.<sup>30</sup> One etiquette author even suggested that girls aged twelve to twenty-one should begin with training corsets that resembled “nothing more than a cotton jacket...” and were “devoid of all stiffening.”<sup>31</sup>

American women could purchase corsets imported from Europe or they could buy domestically-produced ones made by skilled American artisans. While advertisements for “finished” whalebones for use in ladies’ dresses along with patterns printed in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* indicate that some women did make their corsets at home, they were difficult to make in the home because of the difficulties of working with stiff and coarse fabrics. Consequently, most women turned to professional artisans.<sup>32</sup> Women could visit an artisan’s “corset warehouse” to be fitted in person, or, if they lived in the country, they could send their measurements for a corset to be made and delivered to them.<sup>33</sup> Corset makers, most of whom were female, also oversaw apprentices, which they sometimes advertised for in the papers: “Wanted, by Mrs. Barber five or six respectable young persons to learn the corset, habit and mantua making business. None need apply unless well acquainted with the

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<sup>30</sup> “Corsetts,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 18, 1814; “Tight Dressing,” *Portland Advertiser* (Portland, ME), Apr. 25, 1826; William A. Alcott, *The Young Woman’s Guide to Excellence* (Boston: George W. Light, 1840), 281.

<sup>31</sup> “[From the Encyclopedia Americana] Corset,” *National Gazette and Literary Register* (Philadelphia), May 22, 1830.

<sup>32</sup> Louis Antoine Godey and Sarah Josepha Buell Hale, “Practical Instructions in Stay-Making,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 55 (Philadelphia: Louis A. Godey, 1857), p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> “Ladies Corset Ware House,” *Evening Post* (New York), Jun. 7, 1821.

needle,” one advertisement asked.<sup>34</sup> The artisanal nature of corset-making prevailed until after the Civil War, when women’s clothes became more standardized and could be produced and sold ready-made.<sup>35</sup>

Eighteenth century corsets were nearly impossible to lace on and off alone and instead required the assistance of a servant, making stays inaccessible for many working-class women in that century. Over the first few decades of the nineteenth century, however, the introduction of mass-produced metal eyelets and elastic laces made corsets more durable and thus more affordable and more accessible to a broader swathe of society. New designs for corsets that laced in the front also made the garment easier to take on and off without assistance.<sup>36</sup> As a result of these improvements, as early as 1813, an American writing under the penname “Franklin” observed that corset-wearing was no longer “confined to any particular grade of female society...”<sup>37</sup> Stories of servants wearing corsets started appearing in print as well. In 1825, one described a chamber maid who “wears a busk to be genteel” and “apes the manner of their mistress’ daughter.”<sup>38</sup> Still another made reference to “Dinah, in the kitchen, [who] must have her corset and busk.”<sup>39</sup>

Broader use of the corset in antebellum America was primarily confined to white women of the middling and lower classes. Though stories of black women wearing corsets were not absent in newspapers, they are better examples of minstrelsy than evidence that black women did in fact wear corsets. Most often, reports of black

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<sup>34</sup> “Wanted, by Mrs. Barber,” *Mercantile Advertiser* (New York), Oct. 26, 1813; “Corsets... No. 1,” *Baltimore Patriot and Evening Advisor* (Baltimore), Oct. 23, 1812.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard Smith, “Market Development, Industrial Development: The Case of the American Corset Trade, 1860-1920,” *The Business History Review* 65, no. 1 (1991), 94-95.

<sup>36</sup> Fontanel, *Support and Seduction*, 52.

<sup>37</sup> “Corsets... No. 1,” *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Oct. 23, 1813.

<sup>38</sup> “Evils of Tight Lacing,” *Dutchess Observer* (Poughkeepsie, NY), Apr. 13, 1825.

<sup>39</sup> “Corsets... No. 1,” *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Oct. 23, 1813.

women's deaths, like one from 1839 which told of an unnamed woman who had died in the field after fashioning her own corset by tying a frying pan around her waist, mocked these women's attempts at dressing and behaving like refined white women.<sup>40</sup> Still, some stories of black women dying are published without such a farcical tone. In 1829, for instance, a newspaper reported simply that an autopsy of "a colored woman" who had died while ironing revealed that too-frequent tight-lacing had displaced her liver.<sup>41</sup> Given that white servants may have worn corsets, it would not be surprising to find that black domestic servants did so as well. Adding credence to the idea that some black women may have worn corsets is another contemporary who noted in dismay that, of the nearly six million women in the United States, "all, white, yellow and black wear corsets."<sup>42</sup>

American women dressed with corsets for a variety of reasons. A common justification for wearing them was for the bodily support they provided. Even the earliest English name for a pair of corsets, "stays," meant "support."<sup>43</sup> The defining feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century corsets was their stiffness, which promoted better posture by forcing a woman's torso into a straightened position. Even men who wrote letters to newspapers decrying the use of corsets acknowledged that women wore them primarily to "prevent the wearer from stooping forward, to keep her strait..."<sup>44</sup> Many American mothers also laced their teenage daughters in corsets for the support they provided.

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<sup>40</sup> "Corsets," *Philadelphia Scrap Book & Gallery of Comicalities*, Dec. 7, 1833, 303.

<sup>41</sup> "Sudden Death," *Columbian Centinel* (Boston), Jul. 1, 1829; "Corsets," *Milton Gazette and Roanoke Advertiser* (Milton, NC), Mar. 11, 1824; "Tight lacing," *New-Bedford Mercury* (New Bedford, MA), Jul. 10, 1829.

<sup>42</sup> "The Timber Trade," *Connecticut Herald* (New Haven, CT), Jul. 7, 1835.

<sup>43</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> "For the Columbian," *Columbian* (New York), Aug. 9, 1810.

Corsets also served other functions and were not simply utilitarian undergarments designed to provide support. Contemporaries believed that corsets could help women achieve certain beauty ideals. As early as the seventeenth century, Europeans had highlighted corsets' use in achieving idealized notions of beauty, particularly by helping women appear to have smaller waists. Humorous cartoons published in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England thus poked fun at corseted women as vain matrons engaged in hopeless attempts to regain their youthful figures.<sup>45</sup> In America the notion that corsets would help a young woman keep her youthful and slender frame existed as well.<sup>46</sup> In 1830, one author listed what he called the "legitimate objects" of the corset. They included preventing "the form from too early showing the inroads of time; to guard it from slight inelegances resulting from improper position...; to secure the beauteous proportions of the bust from compression or displacement; and... to display the general contour of the figure..."<sup>47</sup> Likewise, another male author praised the use of corsets because they "make a very great alteration in a ladies figure," while a short story writer described how one corset-wearing young woman entertained "a *new* lover every week" as a result of the garment's physical benefits.<sup>48</sup>

As the latter story suggests, antebellum Americans readily associated corsets with sex and with sexual desire. Fashion historian Valerie Steele reminds twenty-first century readers that illustrations of women in their corsets are intimate illustrations of

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<sup>45</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 24-26.

<sup>46</sup> "Corsets... No. 1," *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Oct. 23, 1813.

<sup>47</sup> "[From the Encyclopedia Americana] Corset," *National Gazette and Literary Register* (Philadelphia), May 22, 1830.

<sup>48</sup> "Full Dress," *Albany Advertiser* (Albany, NY), Nov. 15, 1815; "Philip Puffendorf," *The Reporter* (Brattleboro, VT), Jan. 2, 1816.

women in their underwear. And of course, the way in which corsets revealed and highlighted women's breasts is something of which both men and women were aware. One American commentator noted this effect of the corset: "the bosom [is] made prominent by the compression of the chest."<sup>49</sup> Corsets also signified sexual intimacy. Because a woman could not lace her stays alone, the task could fall to a husband, or perhaps a lover. These associations with the sexual are especially apparent in illustrations which depicted their lacing in ways evocative of sexual intercourse.<sup>50</sup>

Corsets were thus incredibly controversial. In the United States, criticism of corsets emerged from a variety of perspectives and became increasingly vitriolic over time. Of particular concern was tight-lacing, the practice of lacing one's stays to smaller and smaller circumferences to achieve a tighter hourglass figure. Beginning around the 1820s, male and female authors writing in newspapers, magazines, and advice books wrote ever more strongly-worded pleas urging women to cease tight-lacing at the risk of harming their own bodies, those of their children, and ultimately the health of the American Republic. The following chapters examine this discourse.

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<sup>49</sup> Franklin, "Corsets," *Berkshire Star and Farmer's Herald* (Stockbridge, MA), Nov. 25, 1813.

<sup>50</sup> Fashion historians have also suggested darker uses for the corset, citing stories of women who used the undergarment to induce miscarriage. Steele, *The Corset*, 9-10 and 19-20; Mel Davies, "Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 24, no. 4 (October 1982): 611-641.

## Chapter 2: Male-Authored Corset Reform Discourse

With women wearing them more than ever before, especially in new, potentially-dangerous ways, the topic of corsets was almost unavoidable in the early nineteenth-century American press. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, humorous song parodies, poems, and fake news stories riddled with puns made up the bulk of printed tracts about corsets, as they had a century earlier.<sup>51</sup> That lighthearted tone began to fade over the course of the 1810s. In tandem with tight-lacing's growing popularity, printed letters and newspaper articles about corsets grew more targeted and serious as reform-minded men and women, influenced by a broader American reform movement, took up the task of warning readers about the dangers of corsets and tight-lacing. By 1820, these anti-corset reformers, almost all of them male, had begun attacking corsets and the practice of tight-lacing in newspapers, women's magazines, reform journals, and medical journals with a mix of sardonic wit and serious appeals to women's logic and health.

Public concern about corsets was not new in the nineteenth century. Doctors in Europe and America had publicized their worries about stays' impact on women's health repeatedly throughout the 1700s. However, it was the nineteenth-century anti-corset movement's participation within a broader period of reform-mindedness which sets it apart from earlier attempts at reform. Between 1820 and 1850, male and female reformers took up a variety of social causes including temperance, anti-slavery, and prison reform. Influenced by what minister and reformer Thomas Wentworth Higginson called the "sisterhood of reforms," nineteenth-century anti-corset activists

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<sup>51</sup> Steele, *Corsets*, 24-26.

connected their critique of corsets and tight-lacing to a number of social ills they perceived in the world changing rapidly around them.<sup>52</sup>

### Social Context

Historians often ascribe antebellum Americans' growing reform-mindedness to the political and social turmoil which was characteristic of the Jacksonian era.<sup>53</sup> Despite the growing vitriolic nature of electoral politics under the second party system, the anti-corset reform movement is difficult to map onto the political categories of the antebellum era. Both Democratic and Whig papers published anti-corset opinions, and reformers rarely (if ever) couched corset reform in the language of the political contests over federalism, tariffs, or the franchise.<sup>54</sup> Instead, reformers' anti-corset tracts reflected their concern over a number of societal changes, including industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.<sup>55</sup>

Anxiety over these forces is readily apparent in the public discourse on corsets. Industrialization was one of the more obvious and transformative developments of the first half of the nineteenth century. As production moved away from the home, the labor force moved with it, destabilizing the traditional household economy and the gender roles that had accompanied it.<sup>56</sup> Tracts about the harm that corsets and tight-lacing could cause reflected anxiety about these changes. In 1842,

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<sup>52</sup> Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1997), 10.

<sup>53</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945); Seth Rockman, "Jacksonian America," in *American History Now*, Eric Foner and Lisa McGirr, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 52-74.

<sup>54</sup> A survey of the political affiliations of the newspapers which published anti-corset articles does reveal that Whig papers generally published more anti-corset articles (around 47% of the total) than did Democratic papers, which published about 30% of all articles on the subject. The remaining approximately 20% of articles were published in independent, medical, or religious journals.

<sup>55</sup> Walters, *American Reformers*, 10.

<sup>56</sup> Walters, *American Reformers*, 5-6.

for instance, Orson Squire Fowler, a noted phrenologist and one of the more vitriolic of the anti-corset reformers, invoked the image of an older, more traditional economic model in order to chastise women who wore corsets. The corseted woman, Fowler wrote, “strives to please this ruthless, immoral, corrupt class [of industrialists], to the neglect of the industrious, home-spun classes.”<sup>57</sup> For Fowler, and for many other anti-corset reformers, women’s purchase of professionally designed and manufactured corsets supported a newer, more urban and industrial society that had degraded the American homespun tradition.

Careful scrutiny reveals the full extent to which the language of industrialization permeated attacks upon corsets. For example, one unidentified author’s submission to a literary magazine in 1846 derided corsets as “compressing machines,” a phrase which calls to mind the mechanization of the industrializing age.<sup>58</sup> That same author also called corsets “machines” when he recounted a commonly re-printed story of an English woman who had baffled Turkish ladies with her foreign-looking corset while visiting a Turkish bath.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, another anonymous author used similarly industrial language when he called the corset an “engine of torment,” while still another reformer asked his readers to acknowledge the consequences of the “violent and mechanical pressure...” that corsets caused.<sup>60</sup> Writing in a journal of health reform, another author delivered an exasperated plea to corset-wearing women: “let us hear no more of the improvements of this improving

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<sup>57</sup> O.S. Fowler, *Fowler on tight lacing: founded on physiology and phrenology: or, the evils inflicted on mind and body by compressing the organs of animal life, and thereby retarding and enfeebling the vital functions* (New York: O.S. & L.N. Fowler, 1842).

<sup>58</sup> “The Use of the Corset,” *Littell’s Living Age*, Oct. 31, 1846, 203-205.

<sup>59</sup> “The Use of the Corset,” *Littell’s Living Age*, Oct. 31, 1846, 203-205.

<sup>60</sup> “Address to Parents,” *Orange County Gazette* (Goshen, NY), Oct. 19, 1813; “Corsets... No. 1,” *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Oct. 23, 1813.

age.”<sup>61</sup> Corsets were themselves becoming more affordable and accessible to women as a result of industrial improvements in corset materials, not through mechanization. Indeed, the artisanal nature of corset-making prevailed until after the Civil War, and reformers refrained from overtly challenging women’s control over the garment’s production. Neither did reformers use their anti-corset platform to overtly challenge the development of the marketplace or female consumption. Instead, reformers seemed to align corsets with the dangers of other side-effects of industrialization, namely urbanization and demographic change.

Anxiety over urbanization, itself a side-effect of industrialization, is also apparent in anti-corset authors’ writings. The growth of urban centers in the antebellum era caused much angst among American reformers. Nineteenth-century Americans generally believed that cities were unhealthy and caused illness in urban residents.<sup>62</sup> Reform authors thus described corsets as a fashion characteristic of city dwellers, and thereby aligned the dangers of the city with the dangers of corset use. Some authors expressed this understanding by writing about the potential for corsets to spread from the city to the countryside. Speaking about supposed accidental deaths caused by tightly-laced corsets, one author writing under the penname “Cornelius Corset” expressed this concern: “Now if these unpleasant accidents occur in the city, where the ladies are supposed to know how to do things in a proper manner, what will become of our *full grown* country women.”<sup>63</sup> Orson Fowler, the reformer so concerned with the relationship between women’s dress and industrialization, warned

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<sup>61</sup> “Intemperance in Dress,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Oct. 9, 1841, 44.

<sup>62</sup> John R. Betts, “Mind and Body in Early American Thought,” *The Journal of American History* 54, no. 4 (1968): 797.

<sup>63</sup> Cornelius Corsett, “Tight Lacing,” *Weekly Magazine: A Ladie’s Miscellany*, Oct. 30, 1824, 131.

that city men might travel to the countryside and corrupt the innocent women there with gifts of corsets. “Who *can* tell why it is that when a *fashionable* young man, especially a *city dandy*... enters a country village or town,” Fowler wrote, “he sets every feminine heart in a flutter?”<sup>64</sup> In this passage, Fowler claimed that country women only started to wear corsets after these fashionable city dandies arrived. As Fowler’s writing suggests, for some reformers, corsets were symbols of a looser sexual morality that accompanied the anonymity of a mobile, young population who migrated to urban centers and lived among strangers in greater numbers than ever before.

Another anxiety that informed reformers’ anti-corset tracts was an intense worry about the United States’ future as a sovereign nation. Concern over America’s strength and independence was tangible in the early nineteenth century, especially regarding the foreign challenges to American sovereignty made manifest during the War of 1812.<sup>65</sup> During the American Revolution, fashion choices had famously served as an indication of one’s patriotism. Emulating British fashions hinted that an American colonist’s loyalty was misplaced, while wearing simple, homespun cloth had been a sign of support for the cause of independence from Great Britain.<sup>66</sup> While Americans did not frequently connect women’s corset-wearing habits with patriotism, many nevertheless instinctively associated corsets with foreignness.<sup>67</sup> According to one reformer, the “fair daughters of our boasted land... far famed Columbia” and

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<sup>64</sup> Fowler, *Fowler on Tight Lacing*, 13-14.

<sup>65</sup> Regina Markell Morantz, “Making Women Modern: Middle Class Women and Health Reform in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America,” *Journal of Social History* 10, no. 4 (1977): 490.

<sup>66</sup> Linzy A. Brekke, “The ‘Scourge of Fashion’: Political Economy and the Politics of Consumption in the Early Republic,” *Early American Studies* 3, no. 1 (2005), 136.

<sup>67</sup> “Comparison Between French and American Ladies – Tight Lacing,” *Graham Journal of Health and Longevity*, Jul. 6, 1839, 217-219.

their corsets put the American Republic at risk by mimicking foreign tastes and values.<sup>68</sup> Reformers also associated corset-wearing with tyranny and arbitrary government, giving the whims of fashion a political valence.<sup>69</sup> One anti-corset author proclaimed that “there is no tyranny like the tyranny of fashion!”<sup>70</sup> Another asked: “in fact, does not fashion govern the world; and as regards your sex [women], is it not the only sovereign who reigns and governs?”<sup>71</sup> In these ways, male reformers questioned fashionable women’s ability to make logical and rational decisions about their clothing, and thereby perhaps about other questions of even greater political or social importance.

Though dress reformers were typically vague as to how exactly corsets harmed the United States’ security, many wrote emotional and sensational pleas suggesting that corsets spelled grave danger for the country. Of tight-lacing, Orson Fowler warned: “Let this practice be continued, and *nothing* can save us as a nation...” In Fowler’s mind, the abolition of corset-wearing in the new nation would signal American triumph. Fowler continued: “let it be abolished, and our nation will soon stand at the *head of the world* in every desirable quality.”<sup>72</sup> Fowler also associated anti-corset sentiment with patriotism. In an urgent plea against tight-lacing, he wrote: “I appeal to every patriot, to every Christian...”<sup>73</sup> Another anonymous author comparing American women’s dress with that of French women likewise

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<sup>68</sup> “Corsets Versus Health,” *Thomsonian*, Sep. 15, 1838, 46.

<sup>69</sup> Brekke, “The Scourge of Fashion,” 120. Brekke discusses American’s longer tradition of identifying fashion with un-democratic governments.

<sup>70</sup> “Corsets and Lacing --- O, the Curses!” *Thomsonian*, Aug. 15, 1839, 41-42.

<sup>71</sup> “The Use of the Corset,” *Littell’s Living Age*, Oct. 31, 1846, 203-205.

<sup>72</sup> Fowler, *Fowler on Tight Lacing*.

<sup>73</sup> Fowler, *Fowler on Tight Lacing*.

proclaimed of tight-lacing: “if this is not reformed, alas the republic!”<sup>74</sup> In the minds of many reformers concerned about the United States’ viability as a nation, corsets put American sovereignty and democracy at risk.

Anti-corset reformers furthered these notions of un-Americanness when they related tight-lacing to “barbaric” practices around the world. Their favorite comparison was with Chinese foot binding. “I know not which would appear the most ridiculous in the eyes of the other,” one anonymous critic of tight-lacing wrote in 1828, “the wasp-waisted lady of our own country, or the Chinese belle, with a foot no bigger than a Mandarin’s thumb.”<sup>75</sup> Other anti-corset reformers used the example of Hindu “suttee,” the practice whereby widows would throw themselves on their deceased husband’s funeral pyres. Comparing corsets with death by suttee, one reformer wrote that death by corsets “is done in a very different way from conflagration, although vastly more excruciating. It is, however, done in a *fashionable style*...” The same author even alleged that corsets were more damaging than suttee: “A large number, it is computed, die annually in India upon the funeral pile, but then it bears no proportion to the *devotees of fashion in this country*.”<sup>76</sup> In other papers and journals we find reformers comparing tight-lacing to the practice of flattening infants’ heads and to medieval torture.<sup>77</sup> In such ways, reformers sought to draw associations between corsets, violence, and barbarism while also decrying corset-wearing as cultish behavior that was fundamentally un-American.

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<sup>74</sup> A Mother, “Fashionable Suicide,” *Graham Journal of Health & Longevity*, Jul. 6, 1839, 217-219.

<sup>75</sup> N.R. Smith, “Corsets,” *Youth’s Companion*, Sep. 19, 1828, 67. ‘Wasp-waisted’ was a derisive term for women who used corsets to achieve a thinner waist and thus transform her body into one resembling a wasp.

<sup>76</sup> Humanitas, “American Suttees,” *National Philanthropist & Investigator*, Jul. 22, 1829, 2.

<sup>77</sup> “Caldwell on Physical Education. Tight Lacing,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Jun. 10, 1840, 29; “Serious Suggestions to the Ladies,” *Yankee Farmer & News Letter*, Aug. 18, 1838, 261.

These concerns about America's success as a sovereign nation were tied to reformers' anxieties about demographic change in nineteenth-century America. During the antebellum era, American birthrates had begun to fall while the foreign-born population was rising as a result of increasing immigration.<sup>78</sup> Alarmed by these trends, anti-corset reformers argued that corsets and tight-lacing harmed the birth rate among native-born women while also impacting their ability to mother their children. Many reformers thusly described corsets as a tool of infanticide.<sup>79</sup> One man who signed his letters to a popular newspaper as "Franklin," listed five examples of terrible tragedies that could befall corset-wearing women. Of these five stories, two described corset-induced stillbirths and a third told of a woman who could not breastfeed as a result of having worn a corset.<sup>80</sup> Other reformers echoed these claims that corsets harmed women's ability to nurture their children. One anti-corset activist proclaimed of American mothers: "She has travailed in pain, and now she is doomed in pain to rear her offspring also. Those organs [breasts] with which this high function is to be discharged, refuse utterly, in some cases... to perform their office."<sup>81</sup> These ideas were not new. As early as 1805, one author had warned American women that corseted women in London were suffering from "want of nipples" as a result of their corsets' tightness and expressed his concern that this particular defect could be passed down to future generations.<sup>82</sup> In 1810, another writer asked women to "consider that

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<sup>78</sup> Walters, *American Reformers*, 4-5.

<sup>79</sup> Dr. Godman, "Injurious Effects of Tight Lacing," *Medico-Chirurgical Review & Journal of Practical Medicine: New Series*, 1 January 1830, p. 512-517; "Corsets Versus Health," *Thomsonian*, Sep. 15, 1838, 46.

<sup>80</sup> "Untitled," *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Nov. 2, 1813.

<sup>81</sup> "Woman, Hast Thou Not Suffered Enough?," *Graham Journal of Health & Longevity*, Sep. 14, 1839, 301-303.

<sup>82</sup> "Dr. Bucman's Advice to Mothers," *Telegraph and Daily Advertiser* (Baltimore), Apr. 24, 1805.

you were formed for the tender duties of wives, of mothers,” duties he believed were impeded by corsets and tight-lacing.<sup>83</sup>

Subsequent reformers described the ways that corset-wearing women could weaken their children, the future citizens of the United States. “Women constitutionally feeble cannot be the mothers of a vigorous offspring,” wrote one author in a piece in the *Health Journal* in 1840.<sup>84</sup> “The descendants of tight-corseting mothers,” wrote another author that same year, “will never become the luminaries and the leaders of the world.”<sup>85</sup> Reformers’ worries about the physical well-being of the American population were thus intimately tied to concerns about the American birthrate and immigration. One activist forecast a dire fate for Americans as a result of corsets: “...if our Yankee race deteriorates for three generations to come... what shall we become? A miserable race, toothless, eyeless, or at best universally near-sighted, almost lungless—a generation of Lilliputians.”<sup>86</sup> To others, it was already too late. Corsets, wrote Orson Fowler, have “already alarmingly deteriorated our race in both physical and intellectual statue, and unless checked, *will soon* destroy it.”<sup>87</sup> Fowler continued by warning that “this pernicious practice... will kill every fashionable and her child, and leave our square-formed, broad-shouldered, and full-breasted Irish and German women alone for wives and mothers.”<sup>88</sup> Corset reformers were uneasy that the well-being of future American citizens lay in the hands of young women who seemed to ignore logic and instead follow every whim of fashion.

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<sup>83</sup> “For the Columbia,” *Columbian* (New York), Aug. 9, 1810.

<sup>84</sup> “Caldwell on Physical Education. Tight Lacing,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Jun. 10, 1840, 29.

<sup>85</sup> “Tight Lacing,” *Boston True Thomsonian*, Oct. 1, 1840, 35-37.

<sup>86</sup> A Mother, “Fashionable Suicide,” *Graham Journal of Health & Longevity*, Jul. 6, 1839, 217-219.

<sup>87</sup> Fowler, *Fowler on Tight Lacing*.

<sup>88</sup> Fowler, *Fowler on Tight Lacing*.

Indeed, corset reform authors acknowledged the great national responsibility that women had in choosing their clothing, thus making women the target of anti-corset reformers' ire.

### Readership

Because women held such power over the daily use of corsets and the practice of tight-lacing, anti-corset reformers directed their energies to trying to reach and persuade them. Only occasionally did these activists try to mobilize these women's fathers and husbands to intervene.<sup>89</sup> One author urged men to act as role models for the women in their lives: "If the ladies choose to indulge in an injurious fashion, why let them. If each *censo morum* will 'mend' one at home he will have done his duty."<sup>90</sup> Another anti-corset reformer published a letter from the perspective of a father who had apparently forced his teenage daughter to burn her corset in front of him. "I trust my mode of operation will be adopted by every father and guardian," this father concluded, "who has young misses to bring up."<sup>91</sup> While calls to assert paternal authority so directly were rare, several authors urged men more generally to form anti-tight lacing societies akin to those created to support other moral reform issues, like temperance.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> The earlier humorists had their say about men's roles in the anti-corset movement. In a brief article, a man recounts an interaction with his friend about his wife's use of the corset: "my wife has worn it; but, thank God, I have now got her in such a situation she can't wear it," alluding to pregnancy. "How to prevent a woman from wearing the corset," *Vermont Gazette* (Bennington, VT), Nov. 22, 1822.

<sup>90</sup> "Errata, Correspondence, &c.," *Columbian* (New York), Aug. 11 1810.

<sup>91</sup> "Corsets... No. 1," *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Oct. 23, 1813.

<sup>92</sup> "Untitled," *Gloucester Telegraph* (Gloucester, MA), Aug. 8, 1829; "Tight lacing," *New-Bedford Mercury* (New Bedford, MA), Jul. 10 1829; "Communication. Anti-Too-Tight-Lacing Society," *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* (Baltimore), Jul. 14 1829; "Physical Education," *Portsmouth Journal and Rockingham Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), Dec. 21, 1833; "Anti-Corset Societies," *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord, NH), Jun. 15, 1835; "Untitled," *Portland Weekly Advertiser* (Portland, ME), Dec. 7, 1841; "Untitled," *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, Louisiana), Jul. 31, 1842.

These exceptional examples aside, the majority of reformers directed most of their anti-corset appeals towards white women. “Foremost in this work of reform,” explained William A. Alcott, “should be our millions of young women.”<sup>93</sup> Some male writers acknowledged the difficulties that came with advising the opposite sex about their sartorial choices. T.S. Arthur, the author of an etiquette manual for young women, refrained from discussing corsets or tight-lacing directly. Instead he directed readers to Mrs. Farrar’s book on health, acknowledging that, on the subject of corsets and tight-lacing, “we do not feel competent to give any particular directions.”<sup>94</sup>

Other male writers tackled the same problems of authority and expertise by invoking their female friends. An author called Edwin wrote that “I am aware of the opposition which the votaries to this destructive fashion will make to my strictures... I am happy in the belief that I have not a female friend whose resentment will be called up against me on account of these my good intentions towards her sex.”<sup>95</sup> Here, Edwin sought legitimacy for his claims by assuring his female readers that not only did he have friends who were women, but that they would agree with his advice about corsets. Another man writing under the penname “Humanitas” prefaced his diatribe by drawing attention to “my circle of female friends, which I am happy to say is numerous.”<sup>96</sup>

Male activists pointed to their successes with female readers by describing instances when they had successfully persuaded their women to abandon their corsets. One newspaper printed a letter which a mother of three girls, one of whom had died

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<sup>93</sup> Alcott, *The Young Woman’s Guide*, 292.

<sup>94</sup> T.S. Arthur, *Advice to Young Ladies on Their Duties and Conduct in Life* (Boston: Phillips and Sampson, 1848), 91.

<sup>95</sup> Edwin, “Corsetts,” *Winchester Advertiser* (Winchester, KY), Sep. 2 1814.

<sup>96</sup> Humanitas, “American Suttees,” *National Philanthropist & Investigator*, Jul. 22, 1829, 2.

as a result of tight-lacing, allegedly sent to a reformer. The mother described the effect of the reformer's recently-published anti-corset article on her surviving daughters: "The alarm which [their sister's] death occasioned did not, however, induce Julia and Anna to leave [their corsets] off *altogether*... But on seeing your account of the unfortunate *Matilda*, they abandoned their further use altogether."<sup>97</sup> Other male reformers described similar triumphs: "We have received several polite and complimentary letters from 'mothers of families,' thanking us in the most flattering terms for the articles which have appeared in our paper, upon the baneful effects of tight lacing."<sup>98</sup> Such accounts affirm the power that women, specifically mothers, had over fashion and clothing choices within their families and help to explain why so much of this anti-corset advocacy addressed women directly.

### Strategies

Reformers relied on a number of tactics designed to convince, shock, and shame women into abandoning their corsets. Chief among them was the use of medical arguments to instill concern about the biological effects of corset-wearing.<sup>99</sup> Reformers thus argued that corsets were responsible for a broad array of illnesses; prime among them was consumption, a generic term for a variety of lung diseases like tuberculosis. In a satirical poem written by "Mago" in 1815, the poet ridiculed corseted women's lung capacity and warned of consumption: "Then to chant forth their [corsets'] praises, let each Belle endeavour,/ And this be the chorus,

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<sup>97</sup> "Corsetts," *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 18, 1814.

<sup>98</sup> "Untitled," *Evening Post* (New York), Jul. 11, 1829.

<sup>99</sup> Steele, *The Corset*, 68-69.

consumption forever.”<sup>100</sup> Corseted women, the poet joked, could not comfortably sing their corsets’ praises because of their consumption-ridden lungs. As time went on, claims as to the ill-effects of corsets and tight-lacing grew ever more serious and extreme. In 1827, an unnamed author writing an advice column noted the gravity of the health danger corsets posed: “An eminent physician in this country says- ‘that from personal knowledge *nineteen out of twenty cases* of consumption in females originate in *tight lacing*.’”<sup>101</sup> Reformers commonly expressed alarm at the number of young women who supposedly fainted as a result of constriction of their airways. A few anti-corset activists even noted with alarm that “some [women] are compelled to wear their corsets, as part of their night-dress! Even a horizontal posture, does not secure them from a tendency to faint.”<sup>102</sup>

As dangerous as illness of the lungs and fainting could be, they were only a handful of the myriad diseases that authors attributed to corsets and tight-lacing. One anti-corseter writing in the *Poughkeepsie Thompsonian* in 1839 attributed to corsets no fewer than twenty-six different health complications, including headache, giddiness, ear ringing, loss of appetite, heart palpitations, vomiting blood, flatulence, dropsy, melancholy, and hysteria, among many other disorders. Though he was not a doctor, he rested these claims on medical expertise by pointing to “the authority of the most eminent physicians” as his source.<sup>103</sup> Many other writers lacking medical training cited physicians directly or included excerpts from physicians’ own anti-

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<sup>100</sup> Mago, “Corsets,” *Juvenile Port-folio & Literary Miscellany: Devoted to the Instruction & Amusement of Youth*, Mar. 18, 1815, 44.

<sup>101</sup> “An eminent physician,” *Pawtucket Chronicle* (Pawtucket, RI), Nov. 17, 1827.

<sup>102</sup> “Caldwell on Physical Education. Tight Lacing,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Jun. 10, 1840, 29.

<sup>103</sup> “Corsets and Lacing --- O, the Curses!” *Thomsonian*, Aug. 15, 1839, 41-42.

corset tracts to substantiate their claims. Another author simply adopted “Galen”—the ancient Greek physician who authored copious and well-known medical treatises—as a pseudonym to achieve the same effect.<sup>104</sup> Reformers’ reliance upon doctors’ knowledge may have been damaging to their cause; the medical profession was only newly-organized during the antebellum period and many Americans may have regarded doctors’ authority skeptically.<sup>105</sup>

These anti-corset authors also invoked the prospect of death as often as possible by relaying stories of autopsies which revealed misshapen and misplaced organs in women who wore corsets. Cautionary tales, usually of beautiful and promising young ladies (typically unmarried) fainting and dying while corseted abounded. According to an account in one Philadelphia paper in 1811, 20-year-old Lavinia Roulstone of Morristown, Rhode Island, died after her steel-boned corselet (a type of corset) attracted the lightning strike that killed her.<sup>106</sup> Similar articles tied many other women’s deaths to corsets, relaying stories of young women fainting at balls as well as grotesque autopsies that revealed the physical damage done as a result of the deceased’s corset habit.<sup>107</sup> A few authors even attempted to quantify the

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<sup>104</sup> “Corsets, Busks, and Belts, &c.,” *Thomsonian*, Feb. 1, 1840, 132.; “Corsets,” *New England Farmer*, Apr. 26, 1823, 309.

<sup>105</sup> See S.E.D. Shortt, “Physicians, Science, and Status: Issues in the Professionalization of Anglo-American Medicine in the Nineteenth Century,” *Medical History* 27 (1983): 51-68 for more information about the professionalization of the medical field. Shortt notes that by 1830, almost every state had a medical society. The number of medical schools and medical journals rose drastically after 1800, and the American Medical Association was organized in 1847. Reformers seemed to accept physicians’ knowledge without much question, suggesting that doctors may have been more highly regarded after the 1830s than before.

<sup>106</sup> “Mr. Editor,” *Relfs Philadelphia Gazette* (Philadelphia), Oct. 1, 1811; A 20-year old Lavinia Roulston did die after a lighting strike in Morristown, New Jersey, but the point about her corsets may be a reformer’s embellishment (James N. Arnold, *Vital Record of Rhode Island, 1636-1850*, vol. XIV (Providence, R.I.: Narragansett Historical Publishing Company, 1905), 239).

<sup>107</sup> “For the Columbian,” *Columbian* (New York), Aug. 9, 1810; “Corsets,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Aug. 18, 1814; “Tight Lacing,” *The Microcosm and Weekly American* (Providence, RI), May 28, 1831; “Effects of Tight Lacing,” *Newburyport Herald* (Newburyport, MA),

carnage caused by corsets, producing numbers that ranged from 20,000 to “millions” of deaths per year.<sup>108</sup>

Other male anti-corseters tried entirely different tactics, crafting arguments to appeal to women’s perceived vanity. “There is but one way of... convincing the ladies of the absurdity and danger of the practice,” one reforming doctor wrote, “and that is to shew that the use of the corset really spoils their shape, and takes away from their attractions.”<sup>109</sup> Many activists seem to have taken such advice to heart and energetically made the case that corsets could “destroy that bloom of rosy health which nature has so exquisitely tintured [women’s] lovely cheeks.”<sup>110</sup> Male anti-corseters commonly published lists of corsets’ many inflictions upon a woman’s beauty: “grace, ease, elegance, and comfort, are alike immolated...” by fashionable corsets, wrote Charles Caldwell, M.D.<sup>111</sup> Such warnings were couched in terms of a corset’s effect on courtship and the marriage market. Thus an advertisement for an anti-tight-lacing society in Baltimore informed female readers that “if [women] could but witness the sneers, and hear the sarcasms of Gentlemen about their beautiful waists, I am sure they would esteem it rather a misfortune to have an uncommonly

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Nov. 23, 1832; “Untitled,” *New-London Gazette, and General Advertiser* (New London, CT), Feb. 8, 1832; “Sudden Death – Tight Lacing,” *Boston Evening Transcript* (Boston), Jan. 5, 1849.

<sup>108</sup> Humanitas, “American Suttees,” *National Philanthropist & Investigator*, Jul. 22, 1829, 2; “Corsets and Intemperance,” *Religious Intelligencer*, Feb. 16, 1833, 603; “Intemperance in Dress,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Oct. 9, 1841, 44.

<sup>109</sup> “On the Use and Abuse of Corsets,” *Medico-Chirurgical Review & Journal of Practical Medicine: New Series*, Apr. 1, 1842, 167-169.

<sup>110</sup> “For the Columbian,” *Columbian* (New York), Aug. 9, 1810.

<sup>111</sup> “Caldwell on Physical Education. Tight Lacing,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Jun. 10, 1840, 29.

slender waist.”<sup>112</sup> Romantic self-interest, the author hoped, would dissuade young ladies from tight-lacing.

Several male reformers went further still, advancing the view that corset-wearing was a violation against “Nature.” Anti-corseters described the undergarment as an “inveterate, disgusting, pernicious and frightful practice of remodeling nature.”<sup>113</sup> Articulating the concern that tight-lacing was hideously artificial, one author added that “this condition of pressure is in direct violation of the laws of nature.”<sup>114</sup> Numerous colleagues of his even used drawings of the female form to illustrate how corsets could offend Nature’s perfect feminine body. These drawings often compared tight-lacers’ artificial waists with the natural and beautiful waists of Venus de’ Medici and Aphrodite as examples of Nature’s intended bodies.<sup>115</sup>

The influence of the temperance movement was apparent in another commonly-used tactic: the claim that women had become irredeemably dependent upon their corsets.<sup>116</sup> Much of this commentary on the relationship between corsets and drink was humorous. One comedic anecdote reprinted in various newspapers relayed a story about female temperance marchers who proudly held a banner that read “Total abstinence or no husbands.” The editors of one paper suggested that men

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<sup>112</sup> "Communication. Anti-Too-Tight-Lacing Society," *Baltimore Patriot & Mercantile Advertiser* (Baltimore), Jul. 14, 1829.

<sup>113</sup> "Corsets. American Institute of the City of New York," *The Family Magazine, Or, General Abstract of Useful Knowledge* 3, 1843, 114.

<sup>114</sup> "The Use of the Corset," *Littell's Living Age*, Oct. 31, 1846, 203-205.

<sup>115</sup> "On the Use and Abuse of Corsets," *Medico-Chirurgical Review & Journal of Practical Medicine: New Series*, Apr. 1, 1842, 167-169; "Caldwell on Physical Education. Tight Lacing," *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Jun. 10, 1840, 29; "Corsets. American Institute of the City of New York," *The Family Magazine, Or, General Abstract of Useful Knowledge* 3, 1843, 114.

<sup>116</sup> Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 8-9.

should respond by adopting a motto of “Natural forms, or no wives.”<sup>117</sup> The temperance movement, which gained prominence around the same time as the anti-corset movement, often decried men’s dependence on alcohol. More serious reformers also co-opted this language and logic of the temperance movement in an attempt to appeal to women. Hence, one anonymous male author proclaimed that “young women... are found so dependent upon their corsets, that they faint whenever they lay them aside.”<sup>118</sup> Other writers made the connection to alcoholism more explicitly. “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. *I shall drop to pieces without it.*”<sup>119</sup> One writer even alleged that wearing corsets caused women to develop red noses, a stereotypical side-effect of habitual drinking, while another claimed that “the alarming fact that *sixty thousand females* are annually brought to a premature grave in our country by the use of the corset,” outranked intemperance, which “claims only *thirty thousand.*”<sup>120</sup> At the height of the era of reform, calls to prioritize the anti-corset movement over the temperance movement pervaded the papers. “Let us hold our tongues about the trifling sin of intemperance,” wrote one reformer, “while this withering curse [of corsets]... is hugged as a viper to the bosom.”<sup>121</sup> By such means, corset reformers sought to shock fashionable women by comparing their dependence on corsets to an alcoholic’s dependence on liquor.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> “Untitled,” *New England Farmer, & Horticultural Register*, Nov. 3, 1841, 144.

<sup>118</sup> “Corsets and Lacing --- O, the Curses!” *Thomsonian*, Aug. 15, 1839, 42.

<sup>119</sup> “Corsets and Intemperance,” *Religious Intelligencer*, Feb. 16 1833, 603.

<sup>120</sup> “Tight Lacing and Red Noses,” *Bellows Falls Gazette* (Bellows Falls, VT), Feb. 3, 1848; “Physical Education,” *Portsmouth Journal and Rockingham Gazette* (Portsmouth, NH), Dec. 21, 1833.

<sup>121</sup> “Intemperance in Dress,” *Health Journal, & Advocate of Physiological Reform*, Oct. 9, 1841, 44.

<sup>122</sup> It is interesting that the anti-corset reformers do not incorporate the language of the abolition movement in their efforts to eradicate corsets and tight-lacing. The reasons for this are unknown, as many reform movements were linked and had overlapping membership. As discussed, many anti-

Reformers also drew inspiration from the language of religious revivalism, another significant social movement popular among women of the antebellum period. The language of the evangelical movement which swept the nation during the Second Great Awakening influenced most American reforms during the antebellum period and dress reform was no exception. One reformer characterized tight lacing as “a circumvention of the devil, to supply hell with young women.”<sup>123</sup> Another author, writing in the reform-oriented *Graham Journal of Health & Longevity*, argued that the ill-health of corseted women was God’s punishment for their abuse of their bodies: “If mothers, daughters, wives, will persist in that most abominable and murderous practice of “lacing,” now so common in our land, *they must suffer for it*: God will not alter his law, nor remit the penalty.”<sup>124</sup> Orson Fowler offered a similar thought. In an 1842 book devoted to the subject, Fowler declared: “I really do not see how it is possible for tight-lacers ever to enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>125</sup> By such transparent tactics, some anti-corseters attempted to persuade woman to cease wearing tight undergarments by drawing a connection between bodily health and spiritual health.<sup>126</sup>

Many of the anti-corset polemics printed in the newspapers and magazines cited thus far also display one additional characteristic: humor. In a column printed in a Connecticut newspaper, an author compared corset-wearing women to waddling

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corset reformers seemed inclined to support the temperance movement as well as the health reform movement.

<sup>123</sup> "Tight Lacing," *Gloucester Democrat* (Gloucester, MA), Jan. 8, 1836.

<sup>124</sup> "Woman, Hast Thou Not Suffered Enough?," *Graham Journal of Health & Longevity*, Sep. 14, 1839, 301-303.

<sup>125</sup> Fowler, *Fowler on Tight Lacing*.

<sup>126</sup> Morantz, "Making Women Modern," 498.

geese.<sup>127</sup> Similarly, in a parody of a corset advertisement published in a Vermont paper, ‘Philip Puffendorf,’ who called himself a “Professor of Modern Taste and Elegance,” crafted a caricature of corseted women who were vain enough to fast for four or five days and ingest potent laxatives to try to fit into their corsets. ‘Puffendorf’ also related tales of women whose protruding corset bones tripped waiters and sent “hot coffee, boiling tea, cream, toast, cakes &c.” flying through the air.<sup>128</sup> In still another story, a young woman at a party actually exploded because of the tightness of her corsets, showering astonished bystanders with all her make-up accessories, including “cotton, bits of ribbon, tape, cord, silk, calico, corset strings, saw dust, ear drops, finger rings, billet doux, love letters, false curls, and fragments of a hundred other indispensables and unmentionables.”<sup>129</sup>

Female readers were thus bombarded with many arguments and images designed to dissuade them from the continued use of corsets and tight lacing. While most seem to have rejected these attempts of persuasion, as we shall see, some took to the press to refute this critique of corsets and challenge men’s knowledge and authority on the subject.

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<sup>127</sup> "A pleasant Sally," *Times* (Hartford, CT), Apr. 22, 1837.

<sup>128</sup> "Caution to Ladies," *Bangor Weekly Register* (Bangor, ME), Nov. 2, 1816.

<sup>129</sup> "The following may be a hoax," *The Times-Picayune* (New Orleans, LA), Dec. 12, 1840.

## Chapter 3: Female Responses

Contradiction defined American women's lives between 1820 and 1860. On one hand, women remained subordinate legally and socially to men. They experienced a profound disadvantage in regards both to educational and economy opportunity. By the beginning of the antebellum period, any expansions of female duties and responsibilities forged in the briefly democratic wake of the revolution had begun to dissipate. American women lost formal access to positions of power in churches and, more significantly, in formal politics. Simultaneously, however, antebellum women's economic experiences shifted drastically with industrialization, a process which fundamentally altered the hierarchy of the family and created a public space for many women who took jobs outside the home in factories and schoolhouses. During the first half of the nineteenth century, women were able to engage in politics through activities that society perceived as appropriate for their sex: letter writing, petitions, and organized social reform. Opportunities for formal education for girls, though still not equitable with that provided to boys, improved rates of female literacy and ushered in an era of opportunity for female journalists and novelists.<sup>130</sup>

Historian Barbara Welter has famously described the expectations of women's natures and behaviors in early nineteenth-century America as "the Cult of True Womanhood." In Welter's "cult" (a term she uses in all its pejorative connotations), antebellum Americans ascribed four primary characteristics to the idealized woman:

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<sup>130</sup> An excellent overview of women's political, economic, and social situation in New England during the antebellum period is found in Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977).

piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>131</sup> This last characteristic, domesticity, signified “the contrast between the home and the world,” and has been the focus of many historians’ attentions for its role in the development of the notion of separate spheres for men and women.<sup>132</sup> Americans of the time relied upon this ideal of domesticity to define proper female space as being located in the home, leaving public places and activities as distinctly male spaces, the origin of gendered “private” and “public” spheres.

“Separate spheres” is now one of the oldest chestnuts of nineteenth-century American gender history, and in the wake of Welter’s 1996 article, historians have engaged in protracted debate about the practical meaning of this “cult” in antebellum women’s lived experiences. In Welter’s conception of “true womanhood,” men and women created a sort of “separate but equal” framework of gender, in which women assumed great authority in the realms of the home and family. Yet some historians of sex and of gender assert that Welter’s framework is too elastic and that it better reflects theory than practice. Linda Kerber, for one, has noted the “sloppy use” with which historians have used the notion of domesticity and separate spheres to signify many different things all at once. According to Kerber, historians have used the “metaphor of separate spheres... often interchangeably... to [represent] an ideology *imposed* on women, a culture *created* by women, [and] a set of boundaries *expected* to be observed by women.”<sup>133</sup> Likewise, Amy Beth Aronson charged that Welter’s framework of true womanhood “describes woman’s cultural entrapment in a single,

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<sup>131</sup> Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966), 152.

<sup>132</sup> Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 92.

<sup>133</sup> Linda K. Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History,” *The Journal of American History* 75, no. 1 (1988), 17.

debilitating self-image that has been prescribed for her... and that she has imbibed unquestioningly because she presumably lacks the proclivity or perceptiveness to resist.”<sup>134</sup> Historians in Aronson’s camp have labeled prominent women who failed to challenge notions of womanhood as anti-feminist.<sup>135</sup> But in more recent scholarship, historians have generally come to the consensus that the domestic sphere was “socially constructed both *for* and *by* women,” a truism that will be apparent in antebellum women’s discussion of corsets and tight-lacing.<sup>136</sup> This chapter will attempt to situate the significance of men and women’s public discourse about corsets and tight-lacing within this debate about male and female authority in the world of separate spheres.<sup>137</sup>

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 publically and privately. For women, this was particularly true. Female etiquette authors repeatedly emphasized the public-facing, social significance of attire among women: “Dress is a very fair index of a young woman’s neatness, industry, economy, good sense, modesty, and good taste,” the author of *The Young Lady’s Friend* declared.<sup>138</sup> The same author, ‘A Lady,’

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<sup>134</sup> Amy Beth Aronson, *Taking Liberties: Early American Women’s Magazines and Their Readers* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 4.

<sup>135</sup> See Patricia Okker’s defense of Hale in *Our Sister Editors: Sarah J. Hale and the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century American Women Editors* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995).

<sup>136</sup> Kerber, “Separate Spheres,” 18.

<sup>137</sup> It is crucially important to the story of the anti-corset movement to highlight that the notion of separate spheres is best described as a trope, both for nineteenth-century men and women and modern historians. Closer examinations of antebellum men and women’s lives challenge the idea that their world, in reality, parsed out separately defined public and private realms. Historian Rodney Hessinger (*Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn*, 7) reminds us, however, that “in cultural history it is a truism that perception is more important than reality.” In many ways, the public conversation over corsets displays antebellum men and women’s attempts at defining their separate spheres and upholding it in the face of seeming contradiction.

<sup>138</sup> A Lady, *The Young Lady’s Friend*, 117.

continued by cautioning the teenaged readers of her etiquette manual “that they are responsible to their sex, for not bringing literary pursuits into disrepute by neglecting their personal appearance.”<sup>139</sup> For women, the stakes of proper dress were high.

Traditionally, a woman’s dress habits were her own responsibility. Both male and female advice and etiquette writers placed accountability for one’s dress with the woman herself, not with her father or husband. Extant advice books are rife with such proclamations as “to dress with neatness, taste, and propriety, is the duty of every young lady...”<sup>140</sup> Yet, as we have seen, a host of male authors and social activists took a particular interest in women’s use of corsets, in both public and private settings. In these ways then, the anti-corset campaign was in part an attempt to assert greater authority over the female body—and many women did not take kindly to it.

### Locating Female Authors

Finding women’s voices in print between 1820 and 1860 is a more onerous task than simply opening an antebellum newspaper to read what men wanted to write about on any given day. Men dominated the newspaper industry. Male editors chose which articles (usually written by men) to print and women rarely acted as print journalists. However, they did frequently write letters to the editor.<sup>141</sup> 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.<sup>142</sup>

Corset-makers, an occupation primarily comprised of women, also often placed

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<sup>139</sup> A Lady, *The Young Lady’s Friend*, 139.

<sup>140</sup> Arthur, *Advice to Young Ladies*, 93; *The Young Lady’s Own Book* (Philadelphia: Key and Biddle, 1832).

<sup>141</sup> See Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000) for more information on print media and readership estimates.

<sup>142</sup> Aronson, *Taking Liberties*, 83.

advertisements for their goods and services in the papers. Though these advertisements are generally business-oriented, they sometimes contain small pieces of female-authored social commentary about corsets. Female voices can additionally be discerned in the newspapers by careful scrutiny of men's description of the reactions that their attacks on corsets produced among women in their circle.

Women's voices are easier to locate in the pages of magazines. Usually published less-frequently than newspapers, magazines contained an amalgam of content created and submitted by the readers themselves.<sup>143</sup> In 1800, only twelve American magazines existed, but by 1825, the magazine publishing business was booming; editors published over 100 individual magazine titles in the United States that year. Women's magazines, created for and containing many contributions by women, matched the rapid pace of the broader magazine market. W. Gibbons began printing the first woman's magazine, *The Ladies Magazine*, in Philadelphia in 1792. By 1830, over 110 different American women's magazines published articles and literature specifically for and by women.<sup>144</sup> Women could write letters to these magazine editors, but they could also submit their amateur fiction and poetry, clothing patterns, and recipes. This almost ad hoc method of compiling magazines made them, in effect, socially-acceptable public forums in which women could participate.<sup>145</sup> Yet despite this seeming inclusiveness, there were still many barriers to participation for some women outside the middle and upper classes. Magazines were more expensive than newspapers and could cost roughly the equivalent in wages to

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<sup>143</sup> Aronson, *Taking Liberties*, 1-8.

<sup>144</sup> Aronson, *Taking Liberties*, 1-8.

<sup>145</sup> Aronson, *Taking Liberties*, 11.

two or three day's skilled labor. Furthermore, active participation in magazines was limited to a certain echelon of society: women who could read and write.<sup>146</sup>

Advice books and conduct literature together provided a third platform that allowed some antebellum women to join the public discourse on corsets. Both men and women wrote advice literature, which was frequently aimed at youth of both sexes. In her history of American manners, Dallett Hemphill defined the purpose of advice literature as describing “not behavior, but society’s dominant code of behavior.”<sup>147</sup> Conduct literature, usually published as independent monographs, contained guidance for etiquette related to a variety of topics; dress being among the most common. Importantly, these conduct books were the product of antebellum society’s gender anxiety. Hemphill found that advice writers of both sexes “were clearly wrestling with the contradiction between persisting gender inequality and a supposedly democratic society... their advice, especially their newest and most elaborate advice, revolved around gender.”<sup>148</sup> But like magazines, advice literature was not monolithic. Nancy Cott described advice literature as “janus-faced,” simultaneously upholding conservative notions of gender roles while offering women an opportunity to publish.<sup>149</sup>

Despite the many structural obstacles to full female participation in the public corset conversation, many white, middle- and upper-class women succeeded in doing so through newspapers, magazines, and etiquette manuals. As we shall see, female authors wrote about corsets in ways that were often quite similar to their male

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<sup>146</sup> Aronson, *Taking Liberties*, 14.

<sup>147</sup> C. Dallett Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities: A History of Manners in America, 1820-1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>148</sup> Hemphill, *Bowing to Necessities*, 209.

<sup>149</sup> Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 8.

counterparts, but it is the occasional differences that are most revealing. In their responses to male anti-corset reformers and commentators, women asserted their authority over their bodies and corsets. In so doing, female authors insisted on their right to join and even define this public discourse.

### Strategies

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. More often than not, these women expressed their dislike of tight-lacing using similar rationales and rhetoric as their male counterparts. For instance, one common element uniting the sexes is their shared derision of fashion as foreign and un-American. Lydia Huntley Sigourney, a female poet and anti-corset reformer, wrote that “The laws of fashion are often so preposterous, and her dominion so arbitrary, that Reason and Philosophy can have little hope of gaining ground in her empire.”<sup>150</sup> Female authors also compared corsets to other “barbaric” foreign practices, just as men did.<sup>151</sup> Mary S. Gove, an avid health reformer and author of a book on anatomy (which she wrote specifically for a female audience), exclaimed that she was “at a loss to conceive how American women have become thus deeply involved in this absurd and ruinous fashion, a fashion a thousand times more hurtful, and more to be deprecated than that of the Chinese, who compress

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<sup>150</sup> Lydia H. Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies* (Hartford, CT: William Watson, 1835), 41-42.

<sup>151</sup> See also A Mantuamaker, “A Sketch of the History of Female Costume, From the Death of Louis XIV. To our Own Days.— No. 1,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 38 (1849), 40.

the feet of their females.”<sup>152</sup> Like their male counterparts, female authors also expressed concerns about the medical impact of corsets and tight-lacing and just as men did, female reformers relied upon other women’s bodily experience to bolster their claims. One woman included the story of a teenaged girl who was so discontented with her corsets that she proclaimed “I wish bedtime was come, that I might take off these stiff and uncomfortable stays, they pain me so much!” to serve as a model for her readers.<sup>153</sup>

Surprisingly, perhaps, female activists were also just as likely as male reformers to use scare tactics to achieve their objectives. “All grow up more or less weak, and semi-developed in body,” warned the female author of an exercise column. “The muscles shrivel and the bones soften; deformity, as a natural consequence, gradually takes place, first of the spine... then of the chest.”<sup>154</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale, the long-time editor of the women’s magazine *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, stated frankly that “if continued, on the high-pressure system, life will be the sacrifice.”<sup>155</sup> Similarly, Mary S. Gove drew her readers’ attention to the “thousands [who]... go down to a premature grave destroyed by this fashion” and later noted that “So general is the distortion of the female form, and death from this cause, that when I asked a physician in Philadelphia, if he had a female skeleton, distorted by tight lacing, ‘No,’

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<sup>152</sup> Mary S. Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy and Physiology* (Boston: Saxton & Peirce, 1842), 96.

<sup>153</sup> Mrs. Merrifield, “Some Thoughts on Children’s Dress – No. II,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 46-47 (1853), 540.

<sup>154</sup> “Home Exercises,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 44-45 (1852), 169; For additional examples of female authors’ discussions of the damaging health effects of corsets see Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies*, 44; “On the Female Form,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 3 (1831), 350.

<sup>155</sup> The Author of “A Marriage of Convenience,” “Female Rule; or, Scenes in New York,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 26-27 (1843), 191.

said he, ‘we have no need to save them; we can get one when it is wanted, at a week’s notice.’”<sup>156</sup>

Even arguments that drew attention to female vanity found their place in women’s writings. The effect of corsets, wrote one woman published in *Godey’s* in 1831, was that “delicate proportion gives place to either miserable leanness or shapeless fat. The once fair skin assumes a pallid rigidity, or a bloated redness...”<sup>157</sup> Another anonymous female author expressed a sentiment common among male corset reformers: “few circumstances are more injurious to beauty, than the constrained movement, suffused complexion, and labored respiration that betray tight lacing.”<sup>158</sup> Likewise, just as some men claimed that if only women knew that they did not find their waspish waists beautiful, they would stop tight-lacing, a woman opined that “if ladies could hear the remarks made on these small waists by men generally, and especially men of taste, they would never again show themselves till they had loosened their corset-laces and enlarged their belts.”<sup>159</sup> Like their male counterparts, female authors also drew comparisons between tight-lacing and alcoholism. “I hesitate not to say, that tight lacing is doing an amount of mischief in our land,” Mary S. Gove told her female readers, that was “fully equal to that wrought by alcohol.”<sup>160</sup> Like men, women also shamed other members of their sex, especially mothers, who favored corsets. Mary S. Gove urged mothers to “teach their children to regard tight lacing as dishonorable and criminal.”<sup>161</sup> Women could be just as vitriolic as men in

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<sup>156</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 99.

<sup>157</sup> “On the Female Form,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 3 (1831), 350.

<sup>158</sup> Sigourney, *Letters to Young Ladies*, 44.

<sup>159</sup> An American Lady, *The Ladies’ Vase; or Polite Manual for Young Ladies* (Hartford: H.S. Parsons and Co., 1849), 67.

<sup>160</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 103.

<sup>161</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 25.

this pursuit. Gove spared no bitterness when she proclaimed that mothers who dressed their children in tight clothes “thus... commence the work of death from the cradle.”<sup>162</sup>

Despite all these similarities, there were several significant differences in how male and female anti-corset activists made their arguments. The most significant of these divergences involves blame. While both male and female authors placed responsibility for dangerous corset behavior upon women’s shoulders, female authors did not typically describe members of their own sex as culpable perpetrators. Indeed, some female authors came to the defense of mothers of corseted daughters, something male reformers did very infrequently. Mary S. Gove assured her readers that not all mothers were bad: “I have known an ignorant, yet in many respects amiable mother, who made the clothes of her little daughter... so tight... Think ye this mother would willfully murder her child? Far from it.”<sup>163</sup> Sarah J. Hale too came to American mothers’ defense regarding corsets, doing so via a set of racially-charged counter claims. “Are the mothers of the strong races of men who rule the world found among the *loose-robed* women of Turkey, India, or China,” Hale asked, “or among the women of Great Britain, France, and America, who dress in closer fitting apparel?”<sup>164</sup>

Female authors also occasionally took exception to male reformers’ portrayals of corseted women. When a male doctor complained that the “fashion-plates” of women in her magazine glorified unnatural forms, Sarah J. Hale was indignant: “We do not *invent fashions*, nor lead them; we only select and report the newest, the best,

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<sup>162</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 26.

<sup>163</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 26.

<sup>164</sup> The Author of “A Marriage of Convenience,” “Female Rule; or, Scenes in New York,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 26-27 (1843), 191.

and the most becoming.”<sup>165</sup> Hale came to the defense of herself and other female editors by asserting that they should not be held responsible for the behaviors of other women and the fashions of the day. On other occasions female authors described corseted women as innocently unaware of the damage they caused by tight lacing. “A Lady” explained that “few girls are aware of the force they employ when they lace their corsets; the mode of doing it deceives them; it is so easy to gain inch by inch of that treacherous silken cord, that they are not conscious of the effect they are producing.”<sup>166</sup> Mary S. Gove similarly reminded her readers, both male and female, that tight corsets did not necessarily indicate a woman’s character:

It is in vain to say it is the stupid or weak-minded alone, who are victims of this fashion. Women of the finest minds, the deepest and tenderest sympathies, formed to love, to be beloved and to diffuse happiness to those around them and often to thousands, who dwell with intense interest on their productions, go down to a premature grave destroyed by this fashion.<sup>167</sup>

A corseted woman, Gove argued, could be both fashionable and feminine at the same time. A woman writing into a newspaper under the penname ‘Lucilla’ voiced similar outrage that male reformers could blame women for medical problems caused by corsets: “there is hardly a mortal disease, affecting females,” she wrote, “which has not been ascribed to their agency- except the yellow fever.”<sup>168</sup> Female reformers,

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<sup>165</sup> Sarah J. Hale, “Costume Versus Criticism,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 58-59 (1859), 271-272.

<sup>166</sup> A Lady, *The Young Lady’s Friend*, 199.

<sup>167</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 96.

<sup>168</sup> Lucilla, “To Cælebs,” *Saratoga Sentinel* (Saratoga Springs, NY), Dec. 14, 1833.

most of whom were wary of corsets and tight lacing, thus frequently found themselves coming to the defense of the women that used them.

A handful of female writers even turned the tables on male critics of corsetry, and took to the press to blame men for the damage done by tight-lacing. A woman calling herself 'Rosella' wrote a response to a letter printed in a newspaper. In it, she suggested that young men who had returned to America from their tours of Europe had imported the current fashion of corsets. Rosella chastised the male letter writer: "Cruel man! Did you not know that [corsets] were our *dernier resort*; that the busk was, in fact, invented to subdue the hearts of the most obdurate?... Ladies began to discover, that in order to become *fascinating, angelic creatures*, they must dress like My Lady and Mademoiselle."<sup>169</sup> More commonly female authors argued that men who found thin waists beautiful only encouraged young women in their dangerous habits: "So long as gentlemen admire small waists... it is in vain to tell young ladies, that the practice is destructive of health, and that there is no real beauty in the small dimensions at which they are aiming."<sup>170</sup> This was a popular belief, and Mary S. Gove explained the problem: "What avails a woman's reason, or her determination to consult health and comfort, if she is sure of being called a 'dowdy' by the man she admires?"<sup>171</sup> 'A Lady' even suggested a potential remedy: "The taste of the lords of creation must be rectified. And then the evil will correct itself. Let medical men, let painters and sculptors teach young men that all such unnatural compression of the

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<sup>169</sup> Rosella, "Dear Mr. Franklin," *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Nov. 2, 1813.

<sup>170</sup> A Lady, *The Young Lady's Friend*, 198.

<sup>171</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 104.

body is deformity...”<sup>172</sup> According to ‘A Lady,’ men, not women, could rectify the problem of tight lacing by adjusting their ideals of beauty.

The most striking difference in the way in which women’s arguments about corsets differed from those made by men are the occasions on which female authors defended corsets. Even though most female reformers and etiquette writers objected to tight-lacing, they frequently emphasized the distinction between the corset as a garment and tight-lacing as a behavior. For most female authors, corsets alone were not the problem. Rather, the problem lay with women’s misuse of their corsets by lacing them increasingly tighter. Virginia F. Townsend, a woman published in *Godey’s*, thus advised that “stays or corsets, if worn at all, should be fastened... from the bottom instead of the top. They should be amply large, especially across the chest; soft, and without bones or shoulder-straps. The object of lacing them from the bottom instead of the top is, that by the former process there is apt to be pressure of the organs downwards.”<sup>173</sup> Likewise, female reformers took care to consider the age of a woman. Though potentially dangerous for younger girls and teenagers, they argued, corsets were not necessarily inappropriate or harmful for grown women.

Female authors’ differentiation between corsets and tight lacing thus provided some women with the discursive space to defend the garments themselves. In a discussion on clothing, for example, Mary Gove pointed out that “there are many other methods for procuring distortion of the spine [than corsetry]. One is to sit at embroidery. Any steady, trying, sedentary labor may produce distortion...”<sup>174</sup> Even Sarah Hale, typically a supporter of the anti-tight lacing movement, made note that

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<sup>172</sup> A Lady, *The Young Lady’s Friend*, 198.

<sup>173</sup> Virginia F. Townsend, “Lena Grant,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 52-53 (1856), 128.

<sup>174</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 53.

modern corsets were not as dangerous as their predecessors: “The corsets of this age, with here and there a slender slip of whalebone inserted, would not more compare with the thick-ribbed, close-stitched, armor-like stays of our grandmothers and great-grandmothers...”<sup>175</sup> Without directly stating that modern corsets were less damaging, Hale provided her readers with a largely favorable description of the corsets popular with her female contemporaries.

A few female authors even publicly asserted the ways that corsets might be useful and healthful for women. “Rosella” only had favorable things to say about corsets, calling the garment “that charming, delightful, comfortable, indispensable appendage to every fashionable lady’s wardrobe.”<sup>176</sup> That corsets provided bodily support was a popular refrain among female authors. In her “Lectures to Young Ladies,” Almira H. Lincoln Phelps suggested that corsets could prevent “weakness of the stomach” and aid in preventing dropsy, the swelling of the limbs.<sup>177</sup> Likewise, because “the figure of a woman is more delicate than that of man,” Dorithea argued, “inconveniences from side-ache and similar physical debilities are, in a measure, oftentimes prevented or mitigated by [corsets].”<sup>178</sup> One woman even patented a pattern for a corset that could be worn by pregnant women. While describing the purported benefits of this new garment, the inventor noted that the pregnancy corset

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<sup>175</sup> The Author of “A Marriage of Convenience,” “Female Rule; or, Scenes in New York,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 26-27 (1843), 191.

<sup>176</sup> Rosella, “Dear Mr. Franklin,” *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore) Nov. 2, 1813).

<sup>177</sup> Almira H. Lincoln Phelps, “Lectures to Young Ladies,” *New-York Mirror* (New York), Jun. 22, 1833.

<sup>178</sup> Dorithea, “To the Editor of the Aegis,” *National Aegis* (Worcester, MA), Jul. 13, 1842.

would help pregnant women's stomachs grow without developing an umbilical hernia.<sup>179</sup>

Women's public discourse on corsets differed from men's in one further respect: while men rarely discussed specific strategies to fix the problem of tight-lacing, women commonly advocated for better formal education for their sex as a remedy. "I am satisfied that information alone is wanting," Mary S. Gove wrote in her *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*. Were she to be better educated, Gove argued, "she will tremble at the thought of sacrificing herself, for she will know what she is doing."<sup>180</sup> Such assertions were veiled pleas for better education for girls and women.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, female authors often used the tight-lacing debate to repeatedly challenge the present state of women's education in ways that men did not: "Education is the order of the day," Mrs. Merrifield wrote in 1853, "but surely that education must be very superficial and incomplete, of which the study of the economy of the human form, its various beauties, and the wonderful skill with which it was created, form not part."<sup>182</sup> Margaret Coxe foreshadowed those sentiments in a piece from 1839, telling her readers that "too much effeminacy prevails in our modern system of female education..."<sup>183</sup> Such calls for better-quality education for women rarely appear in male reformers' writing.

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<sup>179</sup> "Improvement in the method of manufacturing Corsets to be worn by Females during Pregnancy, or suffering under Umbilical Hernia or abdominal weakness," *American Repertory of Arts, Sciences & Manufactures*, Apr. 1 1841, 231.

<sup>180</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 97.

<sup>181</sup> Though it should be noted that some men, especially doctors, argued for education for women as well, female authors wrote more specifically about the benefits of education in address women's tight-lacing addictions.

<sup>182</sup> Mrs. Merrifield, "Some Thoughts on Children's Dress—No. II," *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine* 46-47 (1853), 540.

<sup>183</sup> Margaret Coxe, *The Young Lady's Companion: In a Series of Letters* (Columbus, OH: I.N. Whiting, 1839), 320.

## Separate Spheres

Despite all of these differences, very few anti-tight-lacing women ever overtly challenged the tropic framework of separate spheres. The women's magazines in which many of these reforming women published were, after all, essential in shaping the "Cult of True Womanhood."<sup>184</sup> Were female writers like Sarah Josepha Hale, who participated in upholding such gendered norms, thus inherently anti-feminist? Arguably, the notion of separate spheres could be empowering to women by providing an arena in which they could participate in serious discourse with men.<sup>185</sup> The notion of true womanhood, domesticity, and separate spheres were malleable ideas which women could alter and change through participation in discourse with men.<sup>186</sup> By engaging in debate with male reformers over how they talked about corsets and about the fairer sex, female writers like Hale seized an opportunity to refine society's treatment of female authority. Amy Aronson, an historian of American magazine culture, argued that it was only by operating within the discourse of separate spheres that women publishing in the press could make alterations to change the discourse, in this case, on corsets and tight-lacing.<sup>187</sup> As Nancy F. Cott has written, the discourse on womanhood's "ambiguity and inconsistency leaves open the possibility for slippage, for resistant interpretations, for shifts, or for seizing of opportunities by individuals, which may reorder power relations."<sup>188</sup> Corsets fell within this ambiguous zone, caught between the masculine public realm and the

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<sup>184</sup> Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," 151.

<sup>185</sup> Okker, *Our Sister Editors*, 58.

<sup>186</sup> Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986), 1068.

<sup>187</sup> Aronson, *Taking Liberties*, 78-79.

<sup>188</sup> Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, xvi.

private female sphere. Thus male and female reformers were not simply arguing about the danger of corsets; they were instead engaged in the process of defining the meaning of separate spheres through a conversation about corsets and about which sex could have authority over that discourse.

One obvious way women expressed their claim to that authority was by refusing to take off their corsets. Male reformers complained frequently that their pleas to women were falling on deaf ears. As early as 1819, “Humanitas” voiced a common frustration that his attempts to reform corseted women went unheeded: “And yet I feel ashamed to reflect how vain it is to speak in this language to the votaries of fashion...”<sup>189</sup> A second male reformer, using some peculiar imagery, also expressed how difficult it was to convince women to stop wearing their corsets. “Pho! There has been enough said upon this subject. None of our *fair* readers believe it. You might as well attempt to put the tail of a live eel into curling paper, as to make them credit it.”<sup>190</sup> A third male voice echoed these complaints about female stubbornness, lamenting that “there has never been, since Don Quixotte fought the windmills, so preposterous a combat as that which modern knights of the quill are waging against these same unoffending things of cloth and whalebone.”<sup>191</sup> Some men acknowledged the cause was lost. “Of this, however, we are confident, that the more we say against [tight-lacing], the more it is admired and followed,” deplored one male reformer surveying the failures of the reform movement.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Humanitas, “A Monitor,” *New-York Columbian* (New York), Jan. 5, 1819.

<sup>190</sup> “Untitled,” *Pawtucket Chronicle* (Pawtucket, RI), Nov. 17, 1827.

<sup>191</sup> Lucilla, “To Cœlebs,” *Saratoga Sentinel* (Saratoga Springs, NY), Dec. 14, 1833.

<sup>192</sup> “Tight Lacing,” *Boston Statesman* (Boston), Jul. 18, 1829.

In retrospect, men's frustrations are not surprising. Remember that female reformers differentiated between the corset as a garment and tight-lacing as a practice, enabling many women to defend corsets. Perhaps in part for that reason, women continued to wear corsets; indeed, as anti-corset reformers grew more insistent, corset-wearing only became more popular. Advertisements for corsets, which were only a handful in the newspapers after 1800, became more numerous between the 1820s and the 1850s. Likewise, the number of women making corsets grew as well, another indication of growing demand. In Baltimore, a city directory from 1810 did not list a single corset maker. By 1842, during the peak of the reform movement, thirteen were listed in the city directory.<sup>193</sup> In Philadelphia the change over time was identical.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> William Fry, ed. *The Baltimore Directory for 1810: Containing the Names, Occupations and Residences of the Inhabitants* (Baltimore: G. Dobbin and Murphy, 1810), accessed Apr. 15, 2015, <https://archive.org/stream/balimoredirecto1810mull>; *Matchett's Baltimore Director, or Register of Householders, Corrected up to June, 1842; Containing a List of Streets, Lanes, Alleys, Wharves, &c. And A Variety of Other Useful Information* (Baltimore: R.J. Matchett, 1842), accessed Apr. 15, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/matchettsbalimo1842balt>.

<sup>194</sup> James Robinson, *The Philadelphia Directory for 1810* (Philadelphia, PA: James Robinson, 1810), accessed Jun. 20, 2016, <https://archive.org/details/philadelphiadire1810phil>; A. McElroy, *McElroy's Philadelphia Directory for 1839* (Philadelphia, PA: A. McElroy, 1839), accessed Jun. 20, 2016, <https://archive.org/stream/mcelroysphiladel100mcel#page/n3/mode/2up>.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

For women, the challenge posed by male corset reformers was not one of physical control over corsets. Men very clearly had little power over whether women wore corsets or not. Instead, the public corset reform discourse, dominated by men, was a challenge to female authority. Because corsets were in an ambiguous place, straddling both public and private space, public discussion about corsets also straddled spheres of both male and female authority. In their numerous articles, letters, and books about the damages of corsets, men attempted to assert their authority over this discussion. Women, by responding with their own arguments which refused to blame women and differentiated between corsets and tight-lacing, asserted their own authority instead.

That women were uncomfortable with the fact that men wrote about corsets is apparent in several male-authored reform articles. Men frequently mentioned how angry they expected female readers would be after reading their anti-corset sentiments. A male author writing as ‘Philo-Philanthropus’ begins his anti-corset tract thusly: “Pardon me, ladies; I do not wish to insult, but to reprehend; I do not wish to offend, but to advise you... Perhaps you will laugh at me when I tell you, and call me an old unfashionable codger...” ‘Philo’ apparently expected that women would be angered by his treatment of corsets.<sup>195</sup> Another pair of reformers joked that they decried corsets only “at the risk of remaining a bachelor for life.”<sup>196</sup> Others expected to be called out publicly for their comments about corsets. A writer calling himself ‘Franklin’ stated defensively that he “deem[ed] it unnecessary to offer any apology

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<sup>195</sup> Philo-Philanthropus, “For the Editor,” *Columbian* (New York), Aug. 9 1810.

<sup>196</sup> “Corsets and Intemperance,” *Religious Intelligencer*, Feb. 16, 1833, 603

for my mode of treating the subject.”<sup>197</sup> He had reason to be defensive. One author, a woman writing under the pseudonym “Susan Staytape,” warned men that she considered “it very impertinent and unbecoming any gentleman to meddle with a ladies corsets, or any other part of her dress.” She continued: “I am determined if they attempt to meddle with my corsets, they shall do it at their peril.”<sup>198</sup>

Occasionally, such discontent inspired female authors to turn the tables on male anti-corseters. One woman drew a direct comparison with male reformers’ tactic of making corseted women appear ridiculous: “But what can be said in excuse for civilized man, when he wears shoes that project half a yard beyond his feet, or exchanges his own locks for an enormous periwig, filled with powder and pomatum...”<sup>199</sup> This author was not alone in calling for men’s clothing to receive similar scrutiny as women’s. “Much has been justly said against tight lacing, as applied to females,” another female writer remarked, “but whoever thought of sounding the alarm to men against a similar practice in respect to their own dress.” She then proceeded to provide a ridiculous example of what that might look like: “As we walk the streets of our city, we see scores of boys, from 12 to 16 years old, with their pants buckled very tightly around their diminutive hips, preventing growth at this rapidly growing age, and the result is, a generation of slim-shanked, narrow-hipped, gaunt waisted, dyspeptic, pale faced, puny apologies for men.”<sup>200</sup> In a similar vein, women sometimes turned other anti-corset arguments back on the men who made them. According to report in the *Daily National Intelligencer* in 1842, “the

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<sup>197</sup> Franklin, “Corsets...No. 1,” *Baltimore Patriot & Evening Advertiser* (Baltimore), Oct. 23, 1813.

<sup>198</sup> Susan Staytape, “For the Weekly Magazine,” *Weekly Magazine: A Ladie’s Miscellany*, Nov. 6, 1824, 133.

<sup>199</sup> A Lady, *The Young Lady’s Friend*, 93.

<sup>200</sup> “Wearing Suspenders,” *Texas State Gazette* (Austin, TX), Oct. 1, 1853.

young men of Lancaster, Pa., recently formed a society for the suppression of tight lacing; whereupon the young ladies turned round and established an association against tippling.”<sup>201</sup> Mimicking male reformers’ strategies allowed women to highlight their discontent with the rising vitriol against their corsets and their sex.<sup>202</sup>

A few female authors critiqued their male counterparts by using their own bodily experience to undermine male assertions about corsets’ danger. One woman, for instance, told her doctor that, as regards accounts of women fainting and dying at balls from their corsets, “Now this is all a humbug... I have known a number of ladies who practiced *fainting*...” but only for attention.<sup>203</sup> This woman challenged her doctor by claiming intimate, privileged knowledge. Some men even joked about women’s critiques. In one parody, a male author aped women’s responses which asserted that their bodily experience should take precedence over men’s lack of such experience. The faux woman in the parody criticized male authors on the basis that “you censure Corsets that you never saw and write of dresses that you never knew,” and in the process subtly challenged reformers’ masculinity and sexual experience.<sup>204</sup> Despite men’s negative reactions to women’s assertions that their lived experience with corsets earned the female sex alone the right to speak about corsets, women pressed on. Mary S. Gove, addressed men’s potential challenges to female authority

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<sup>201</sup> “Tight Lacing and Tippling,” *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), Apr. 20, 1842.

<sup>202</sup> Generally, reformers or social commentators did not critique men’s bodies or fashions with the intensity and frequency with which they attacked modes of female dress. Dandyism was one of the most prominent critiques of some men’s fashions; Dandies were men who dressed uniquely and almost femininely (indeed, dandies were known to wear corsets). Still, Dandyism was likely exaggerated and was never the subject of a reform movement in the way in which women’s corsets were. That women could mock men’s anti-corset pleas in the ways shown above indicates that doing so was uncommon, and thus humorous. See Michael Zakin’s *Ready-Made Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) for a more detailed description of antebellum men and women’s critiques of dandies.

<sup>203</sup> Susan Staytape, “For the Weekly Magazine,” *Weekly Magazine: A Ladie’s Miscellany*, Nov. 6, 1824, 133.

<sup>204</sup> “For the Columbian,” *Columbian* (New York), Aug. 13, 1810.

about corsets and tight lacing: “Certainly, if I cannot speak scientifically upon this subject [tight-lacing], I can at least speak feelingly.”<sup>205</sup> Many women refused to refrain from the public discussion or to take male reformers at their word.

In addition to claiming their own sex’s right to write about corsets, women also challenged men’s. ‘Lucilla’ described male opponents of corsetry as “stupid or envious,” while ‘Dorithea’ called anti-corset articles printed in newspapers “foolish.”<sup>206</sup> One woman lambasted a male reformer as “unfit to write three words upon the subject,” while another called male anti-corset authors “ungallant.”<sup>207</sup> Sarah Josepha Hale, who supported the anti-tight-lacing movement, attacked male reformers by ridiculing a doctor who had written in to *Godey’s* to complain about the magazine’s illustrations of corseted women. The doctor, Hale reported, “has taken the pains to write four full pages, not foolish, fashionable little note pages, but four good, honest foolscap” criticizing the magazine’s pictures of corset-using, crinolined women. Hale was having none of it:

If the Doctor understands human nature, or woman’s nature, he must be aware that no decree of Napoleon the Third, despot though he be, nor command of Alexander autocrat of all the Russians, nor even the opinion of Louis A. Godey, published from his Arm-Chair, would make any lady take off her hoops one day before Fashion had sent out her mandate of suppression.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 102.

<sup>206</sup> Lucilla, “To Cœlebs,” *Saratoga Sentinel* (Saratoga Springs, NY), Dec. 14, 1833); Dorithea, “To the Editor of the Aegis,” *National Aegis* (Worcester, MA), Jul. 13, 1842.

<sup>207</sup> Susan Staytape, “For the Weekly Magazine,” *Weekly Magazine: A Ladie’s Miscellany*, Nov. 6, 1824, 133; “Tight Lacing,” *Boston Statesman* (Boston), Jul. 18, 1829.

<sup>208</sup> Sarah J. Hale, “Costume Versus Criticism,” *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* 58-59 (1859), 271-272.

By questioning the doctor's knowledge of "woman's nature," and a host of men's ability to control women's behavior, Hale was just one of many female authors who challenged men's ability to understand corsets and thus their authority to write about them.

Male authors recognized women's challenges to their authority to write about corsets, but they rarely admitted their wrong-doing. In a column on tight-lacing in a Vermont newspaper in 1835, one male activist simply warned his fellow reformers that "even a glance at the apparatus for compressing the female waist, in a newspaper, has been sure to bring down upon an unoffending editor's head, hard hits about impertinence and the charge that the men don't know half so much about somethings as they think they do."<sup>209</sup> A Dr. Godman, writing in the *Journal of Practical Medicine* in 1830 likewise acknowledged that his female readers would judge him harshly for "meddling officiously with the concerns of the fair sex" when it came to corsets. "Women never fail to punish every encroacher upon their rights and privileges," Godman concluded.<sup>210</sup> Men acknowledged women's claims, but rarely apologized or removed themselves from the corset conversation.

The ideology of separate spheres informed this contentious conversation. Indeed, while most female contributors to this discourse did not seek to dismantle a gendered world which attempted to deny them political and public power, they instead defended their dominion over their clothing choices and their right to participate in and direct the public conversation over their corsets. In some ways, women's advocacy for their corsets and their attempts to define the appropriate

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<sup>209</sup> "Tight Lacing!," *Vermont Phoenix* (Brattleboro, VT), Jun. 12, 1835.

<sup>210</sup> Dr. Godman, "Injurious Effects of Tight Lacing," *Medico-Chirurgical Review & Journal of Practical Medicine: New Series*, Jan. 1, 1830, 512-517.

bounds of men's and women's spaces is an early form of feminism. As Nancy Cott has argued, "the ideology of women's sphere formed a necessary stage in the process of shattering the hierarchy of sex and, more directly, in softening the hierarchical relationship of marriage."<sup>211</sup> As Dr. Godman's mention of "rights and privileges" above implies, a small number of women sought to modify this hierarchy, however slightly, by questioning which sex reserved the right to speak publically about corsets. In 1842, at the height of the reform movement, Mary S. Gove used corsets and tight-lacing to advocate for an increasingly public role for women. "Is there not terror enough in [tight-lacing]," Gove asked, "to send woman out of what is called her *sphere*, if she can by any means draw attention to such tremendous evils?"<sup>212</sup> Shortly after Gove's proclamation, the anti-corset reform movement wound down dramatically. "It is long since the subject has been agitated," one reformer sadly proclaimed in 1846, noting that the "the triumph of the corset [is] only becoming the more assured."<sup>213</sup> Despite men's intransigence, women had seemingly been successful in preserving, and even expanding, the privileges of their "sphere" to include public regulation of corsets and tight-lacing.

The debate over corsets was not the first nor the only time that strong-minded women banded together in the pages of the press to protect their gendered identity and its privileges. Indeed, it is nonetheless indicative of a larger story. The press, especially magazines and advice literature, provided women with a culturally acceptable way to engage in the debate publically while still maintaining their character as respectable women. While the female corset reform movement would not

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<sup>211</sup> Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood*, 20.

<sup>212</sup> Gove, *Lectures to Ladies on Anatomy*, 99.

<sup>213</sup> "The Use of the Corset," *Littell's Living Age*, Oct. 31, 1846, 203-205.

be aligned with a fully-formed women's rights movement for a few decades more, these antebellum women's somewhat-successful attempts to define and limit the public discourse about corsets and tight lacing reminds modern readers of antebellum women's precious, yet too-often overlooked, agency.

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