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Bound to Please: a history of the Victorian corset

Leigh Summers; Berg Press, London & New York, 2001, £42.99 Hbk, ISBN 1 85973 530, £15.99 Pbk, ISBN 1 85973 510 X

Whether loathed as a symbol of women's objectification or adored as a bringer of erotic delirium, the Victorian corset continues to excite interest well beyond the relatively narrow field of academic histories of fashion. *Bound to Please* explores the ambiguity of the Victorian corset in Britain and North America as both a signifier of femininity and an object of material culture – an item which was both decoded for its cultural meanings, and worn on the real, physical bodies of middle- and working-class women and girls.

Summers charts medical, feminist and public debates about corsetry, 'tight-lacing' and dress reform, and explores the symbolic meanings and physical impacts of the corset on childhood, pregnancy and ageing as well as on adult women's (hetero)sexuality. She asks why women in the mid- to late nineteenth century remained so determined to wear the corset – and indeed to train their daughters to wear it – when its physical, psychological and social effects were so deleterious. Her answer to this question takes her through the labyrinthine constructions of Victorian femininity, and through the ways in which binding and constricting one's body could paradoxically offer sexual and social freedoms. Middle-class women, for example, could continue to venture outside of the home until relatively late into their pregnancies by corseting, and thus hiding, their 'indecently' pregnant bellies. As, in Summers' words, a 'lifetime companion' (p. 4) for many Victorian women, the corset simultaneously shaped the literal and metaphorical contours of acceptable femininity, and provided the means by which women could inhabit those contours in everyday life.

One of the books' great strengths is its insistence on the *materiality* of corsets themselves, and of the bodies which wore them. This is a welcome corrective to a certain kind of feminist cultural history which treat discourses of femininity as sets of ideas rather than as physical, material practices. In a key passage, Summers writes:

[Some] discussions of nineteenth-century female complaints [...] have privileged oppressive gender stereotyping as the principle [sic] causative factor in the aetiology of nerve tire and womb ills. To privilege cultural expectations above the physical causes of female complaints is a dangerous theoretical practice. This is because it trivializes or even entirely negates the material reality of pain, and thereby reduces or

even obliterates the reality and history of corset-related suffering which was endured by many North American and British middle-class women (p. 119).

Summers adroitly maps the *dynamic* between cultural expectations and material realities, and in doing so also makes a valuable contribution to long-standing debates in the histories of sexuality, gender, fashion and material culture. Indeed, the book itself embodies the paradoxical status of the Victorian corset as both alluring and horrifying. It describes in detail the external and internal injuries sustained by women's bodies under pressure as high as 80 lbs per square inch, and does not flinch from forthright condemnation of a form of dress which harmed and injured European and American women of all ages and social classes. At the same time its many beautiful illustrations and loving descriptions of the embroidery, lace and delicate stitching which ornamented Victorian corsetry bespeak the corset's continuing aesthetic and erotic appeal.

My main criticism of the book arises from its treatment of working-class women. The first chapter offers a fascinating discussion of the differential sexual and class meanings and practices of corsetry for working- and middle-class women. Summers suggests that for working-class women a tightly laced corset both signified and produced an aspirational body image – a trim 'lady-like' figure – and the hope of an upwardly mobile marriage. She also discusses the ways in which working-class women acquired, made and wore their own corsets for work and leisure, including their involvement as workers in the manufacture of corsets. But the following chapters concentrate exclusively on middle-class women, a shift of focus which Summers acknowledges but does not explain. One of the book's most poignant illustrations is a photograph of hundreds of women workers gazing out from behind the barbed-wire fence of an American corset factory; by the end of the book I felt that those factory women had been abandoned, and I was not sure why. There were also times when I felt that the book neglected theoretical difficulties or complexities. The final chapter on advertising and other visual imagery, for example – the weakest chapter of the book, despite its fascinating source material – presents an unduly static version of the Victorian spectator. Speculation about how Victorian 'lesbians' or 'paedophiles' might have decoded advertising or pornographic images of corsets is not just historiographically suspect; it also elides more profound questions about interpellation, spectatorial ambivalence, and the instability of subject positions, both then and now. Nevertheless, *Bound to Please* is an absorbing and illuminating book, and will be of great interest not just to fashion historians but to all readers interested in the everyday lives of women in Victorian Britain and North America.

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