

# CORSETED LIBERATION

CELINA FOX on 'Fashion and Fetishism'

TIGHT-LACING creates more domestic unhappiness than any other circumstance in life.' So thundered *The Times* on 4 September 1869, in an editorial which likened the practice to Chinese footbinding. The pronouncement was occasioned by a letter published two days earlier defending the corset on the grounds that it was 'not only harmless but often beneficial to health, and extremely pleasant.' Nor was its usage, the correspondent pointed out, by any means confined to the female sex.

David Kunzle's recently published book on 'Fashion and Fetishism' (George Prior £14.95) is full of such piquant revelations. Together, they are bound into a social history of tight-lacing, high heels, exaggerated neckwear and other forms of 'body sculpture.' The author defines fashion as



the culturally dominant mode of dress, as opposed to fetishism, which is the individual or group redirection of the sexual instinct onto an aspect of dress

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tight-lacing was adopted by women in sufficient numbers to blur this distinction. The provocative sexual intent of the phenomenon was overt, constricting the waist to emphasise movement in the hips and bust; the abuse it provoked, unparalleled.

It is usual nowadays to assume that the corset served a wholly repressive function, that it was a symptom and a symbol of female oppression. But Kunzle suggests, on the basis of extensive fieldwork and an impressive array of

documentation, that the pleasure for the wearer was at least as much as for the beholder. Tight-lacing was, he maintains, a symbol of female self-assertion, even emancipation. The attack came from men who feared women's sexuality, believing it subverted a social order which depended in part on passive, maternal women. Through his investigation, he dispels the simplistic myth that tight-lacing was universally harmful and that the forcing of young females into narrow corsets was 'morally and hygienically on a par with the forcing of small boys into narrow chimneys.'

Kunzle traces the antecedents of tight-lacing back to the Minoan belt sported by the ladies of ancient Crete. However, readers hoping for a titillating romp through the centuries may be disappointed by the author's determined sobriety and impeccable references. Whalebone stays as a separate entity came into common usage in the eighteenth century and were much admired by Hogarth, who discovered in their rococo curves, the Line of Beauty. His was a minority taste, drowned by cries of outrage from an increasing number of physicians and philosophers. Both Locke and Rousseau attacked the trussing of children as an unwarranted interference with nature. The contrast drawn by Winckelmann between the natural perfection of the Greeks and the degenerate distortions induced by contemporary fashion encouraged Reynolds to portray his clients in an approximation of classical drapery.

On this issue, both Marie Antoinette and Joseph II rebelled against their mother, Maria Theresa, who regarded the corset as a form of discipline. Marie Antoinette, scandalised the French court with her unrestricted figure during her back-to-nature milkmaid phase. And one of the more memorably futile gestures of Enlightened Despotism was Joseph's edict in the 1780s forbidding the wearing of corsets in public schools to safeguard girls' health and their moral welfare. It did not do any good, even with the threat of police enforcement.

The flimsy fashions of the Revolution gave women a chance to get their breaths back, though many succumbed to fatal chills in the process. But as the nineteenth century advanced, the corset returned with renewed vigour; technical improvements facilitated tight-lacing and the invention of the sewing-machine cheapened and democratised its wear. The 1870s were, Kunzle argues, probably the most fetishistic decade in the history of western costume, small waists being further emphasised by sheath-like skirts and skin-tight bodices.

The ridicule and moral opprobrium mounted. Tight-lacing was placed on a par with alcoholism and atheism. Horror stories warned women about the internal malformation they risked, to the ribs, liver and stomach. It was seen to be the cause of fits, consumption, nymphomania, masturbation, insanity and abortion (both consciously and unconsciously induced).

In England especially, tight-lacing was identified with disagreeable female stereotypes. France had a flourishing tradition of erotic art, which

exploited the voyeuristic possibilities of the lacing and unlacing rituals of the boudoir. But rather than face the sexual implications of the corset, English writers and humorists, notably Dickens and *Punch*, reversed the mould and created frigid 'straight-laced' spinsters, unable to catch men other than by resorting to extremes.

Kunzle relies for much of his evidence in defence of the practice on the anonymous correspondence columns of a number of highly respectable Victorian magazines. The *Queen* and the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, both edited by Samuel Beeton and his wife, Isabella, promoted the fetishist viewpoint in repetitive and compulsive detail. Many readers stressed how, after some initial pain, they had experienced pleasurable and delightful sensations. They preened themselves on the admirers they attracted and the husbands they had won. Who could doubt, 'Perseverance' wrote, the appeal of the graceful undulations of some slightly swaying, tight-laced beauty in Rotten Row?

However, the exact social class of enthusiasts is less than clear. The testimonials of gratitude printed in *Society* magazine acknowledging the services of one Madame Rachel Dowding, Ladies' Tailor, Corsetière and Court Dress-maker, probably came from the demi- rather than the haute-monde. Certainly, towards the end of the century, when mass-produced corsets enabled lower-class working women to adopt tight-lacing and shop assistants vied with one another to achieve thirteen-inch waists, reformers



stigmatised the whole endeavour as vulgar and tasteless.

In the present century, Kunzle concludes, as a fashion and as a social phenomenon, tight-lacing is dead, surviving only in the lives and imaginations of a few individuals. Nevertheless, he resurrects the magazine *London Life* from the inter-war period, to discover fetishist correspondence barely touched by Freudian insights and mass media taboos. The paper had a circulation which extended to the colonies and included features written by its readers under such bizarre titles as 'Girl Ponies of Penang by a Malayan Rubber-Planter.'

The author brings us up to date with zips and leather, the New Look, stiletto heels and boots. But devotion to the corset, despite the passions aroused in its past, has faded for all but royalty, costume drama designers and the editors of colour supplements