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Unless you venture to a specialized corsetiere, you will not find many tight-laced corsets on your next shopping trip. New-age corsets are abundant, although they look different than their Victorian predecessors. Waist-trainers, shapewear, and corset tops all mimic the hourglass shape achieved by the corset without the organ-crushing effects. In many ways, tight-laced corsets are a memory of the past, but their haunting effect on fashion has continued to dictate ideals of the female body.

Corsets served many different aesthetic and functional purposes. Both men and women wore corsets, but the styles typically corresponded to ideals of feminine beauty through their adherence to the hourglass shape. Corsets included structural devices to constrict women's waists such as whalebone, steel, wood, and later, rubber.¹ With the invention of metal eyelets, the backs of corsets were closed with laces. Tight-lacing was used to maintain a smaller waist size by constricting the space around the ribs and organs.² While corsets affected the body physically, their status as an undergarment connected them with female sexuality and beauty. Corsets were believed to be both hypersexual and modest through their dual purpose of creating a sexually appealing figure as well as their containment of the loose body—which signified a loose woman.³ Corsetry provided a sense of control through which women “reclaimed ownership of their bodies and sexuality during times it was considered immoral for a woman to feel

¹ Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 5.

² Steele, 1.

³ Steele, 146.

pleasure.”⁴ The corset posed as a way for women to enact agency over their bodies inside of a patriarchal system in which clothing and the body were conflated to reveal standards of beauty and refinement. Despite this call for agency, corsets have not always been a choice for the wearers. Children as young as two-years-old were dressed in corsets as a preventative against an unshapely body.⁵

Shapewear—consisting of various undergarments—functions by “squeezing the flesh, fat, and muscles to conform or defy ideal body shapes promoted by beauty, fashion, and gender discourses.”⁶ Corsets have the longest history of any shapewear and, even though they have fallen out of fad, they have continued to dominate the styles of contemporary shapewear. As women in the United States gained more social and physical mobility over the course of the twentieth century, the constricting attitude of the corset no longer aligned with a more liberated idea of womanhood.⁷ Women could not clean the house, raise children, or go to work under the physical constrictions of the corset. Many women, however, did not want to give up their hourglass shape. Ulterior methods of body control allowed women to continue to monitor the shape of their body without sacrificing their health and mobility.

The corset did not disappear in the latter half of the twentieth century—it just became “invisible.”⁸ The late 1960’s brought an increased attention towards diet and exercise—with a simultaneous doubling of eating disorders from 1960 to 2001.⁹ Women were expected to replace the constriction of the corset with their own self-discipline, creating a culture of hyperintensity around food and its effect on the female body. If a woman could not achieve the ideal shape

⁴ Maria Zanette and Daiane Scaraboto, *From the corset to Spanx: shapewear as a marketplace icon* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), 188.

⁵ Steele, 12.

⁶ Zanette and Scaraboto, 184.

⁷ Steele, 162.

⁸ Zanette and Scaraboto, 193.

⁹ Jennifer Daw, *Eating disorders on the rise* (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2001).

through restriction, contemporary shapewear helped to mold the hourglass with skin-toned compressive undergarments, also performing a type of invisibility. The brand Spanx became a popular phenomenon in the early 2000's with spandex girdles. While fifteenth century corsets may have mirrored the materials of battle armor, Spanx provided women with "an armor that [protected] their emotional insecurities" such as fat rolls or cellulite.¹⁰

The first time I wore Spanx, I was in middle school. I was excited to girdle my stomach like I had seen my mother do so many times before. It made me feel like a grown-up, as if this was a point of passage necessary for my coming of age. I pulled on a tight dress to attend my first bar mitzvah, and my stomach was smooth against the fabric. Later, when I sat down, the thick lycra band cut into my stomach, and I struggled to breathe over the course of dinner. When I came home, my mother gave me that tired piece of wisdom—*beauty is pain*. Why do women feel the need to undergo physical discomfort in order to control the appearance of their bodies? While Spanx may not pose the same dangers as the corset, its purpose is to corral the body into a smaller, more idealized form at the expense of the wearer's natural shape. Sarah Blakley, the CEO of Spanx, refers to her products as a tool for female "empowerment," implying that women are disempowered by the natural shape of their bodies.¹¹ If shapewear grants women a sense of control over their bodies, who seized that control from them? Must they stop breathing in order to regain it?

When Netflix released a Regency-era show, *Bridgerton*, in December of 2020, online searches for corsets increased by more than 100 percent.¹² I watched *Bridgerton*, and I can admit that I was also tempted to have myself laced into a debutante ballgown, despite the discomfort

¹⁰ Zanette and Scaraboto, 195.

¹¹ Zanette and Scaraboto, 196.

¹² Maude Bass-Kreuger and Elle Timms, *The Corset's Recurring Comeback Goes Further than Bridgerton*, (London: British Vogue, 2021).

shown as the characters are corseted in the show. Why is the appearance of a trim waist so appealing? Like the two-year-old forced into a corset to meld their undeveloped body, have we been trained to want a sixteen-inch waist?

At a thrift store, I find a white, lace corset top with cheap boning and back clasps. It fits my waist perfectly, but it squeezes my back fat, and the chest doesn't sit right, so the tops of the cups stick out slightly. These days, it is so rare that I feel sexy in something so abundantly feminine, but in this corset, I do. I understand the sense of control gained from wearing the corset, but it is through its visibility. Unlike many of the corseted women of history, it is not an undergarment—there is no guise that my body naturally looks like this. I put my cinched waist on full display. If I am going to suffer, you are going to have to see it.