

Loosening Lies: The Debate Around Corsetry

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I choose my topic because I have always been interested in the history of fashion and especially the discourse around the dress reform movement in the 19th century, where I learned about the corsetry controversy. This topic relates to debate because it was heavily discussed in the 19th century and continues in the modern day. The two opposing sides in this debate were women who wanted to continue to wear the corset and men who opposed the corset for aesthetic and medical reasons. This debate evolved in modern history, but now the two sides are people who view it as torture, fetishizing it, or dress historians. The debate around corsetry also relates to diplomacy, which is defined as a group of people working together to achieve change, because in the 1920's, flappers worked together to popularize a fashion that was less restricting. They, the women themselves, decided to not use corsets. During this period, manufactured corsets were very constrictive, so young women decided to give them up, and they worked together to decrease the stigma for not wearing the corset while popularizing a new boyish fashion. These women used informal diplomacy, often at gatherings and parties, to decrease the stigma of not wearing a corset.

To conduct research on this topic, I looked at reputable sites such as JSTOR, Gale power search, and Britannica Encyclopedia. These sources led me to find reputable books published by fashion historians. The books and sources used a mixture of primary and secondary sources that helped me understand all sides of the topic. Many also included modern arguments for and against the corset. I also participated in a zoom workshop led by Janice Formichella, which was sponsored by the New England Historic Society. Formichella's session focused on the dress reform movement of the 19th century, specifically the corset. I synthesized key information found in these sources into one document.

From this document I was able to begin to draft my main points as well as my thesis, which I then strengthened through the revision process. I was able to supplement knowledge that I needed to add on to my paper as well as make sure that all of my information supported my historical argument. My claim is that corsets are now demonized or fetishized, when they were just an undergarment that women wore. After having revised, I edited and had my teacher review my draft. I then continued editing until I was pleased with the content of my paper.

The historical importance of my topic is relevant even if it might seem like a small or frivolous issue. The corset debate has shaped women's fashion in the modern era. It is not just corsets in this argument, but also pants, women's choice in fashion, and the right for women to wear what they want that is encompassed in this discourse. Even though the corset changed over time, and eventually corsets were discarded by women, they never stopped fighting to wear what they wanted.

Corsetry, the use of a garment to change one's figure, is something that lasted for centuries in Europe, with the very first records of it dating back to ancient Crete. The start of corsetry as it is known today began in the 16th century and lasted all the way to the early 20th century. The corset was used to create a silhouette that matched what was perceived as "fashionable" and support what was perceived as "the weaker sex," even though corsetry was not only reserved for women. Today when most people hear "corset," their response is negative; however, this belief is not grounded in historical fact. Neither a misogynistic "torture" garment nor a sexualized piece of clothing, the corset in reality was a common day undergarment for women, one most wanted to continue wearing. Some uneducated males baselessly attacked this garment, resulting in the inaccurate taint which continues today.

Introduction to the Corset

The first records of corsets found in Europe come from the Minoan Civilization in Crete, Greece (Britannica School). These corsets appear to be made of plates of metal and create a small waist while pushing out the bust (Britannica School). Corsets did not reappear in European society until the Middle Ages when they were worn by both men and women. In the 15th century "a pair of bodies" was worn by women (Britannica School). This article of clothing was a bodice which had a paste like substance applied to it which made it stiff (Britannica School). However, the corset as thought of today did not make its appearance until the 16th century (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*).

The corset was used to create a silhouette that matched what was perceived as "fashionable"; the corset was also used to support what was perceived as "the weaker sex" (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). However, corsetry was not only

reserved for women. Dandies and men in the military also wore corsets to achieve a desired look (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*).

Corsetry in European and American Society

Corsets were worn by women of all classes in Europe and in the Americas (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). It was seen as a part of daily life, not just a fashion choice. Even during the Regency era, when silhouettes were very fluid with an empire waist, corsets were still worn by women for both bust support and to lift the bust upwards (Formichella). A woman wearing a corset was seen as a “respectable” woman; to follow social guidelines a woman must be corseted (Formichella). The most influential women who wore the most iconic dresses were all aided by the corset. Annabella Milbanke’s wedding gown, Lady Curzon’s “Durbar” gown, Denise Poiret’s Queen of Sheba costume, Empress Eugenie’s opera bodice, Queen Victoria at the wedding of Princess Royal, Queen Victoria’s wedding dress, Princess Liliuokalani’s coronation gown, Caroline Harrison’s inaugural gown (appendix C), and Mary Todd Lincoln’s inaugural gown all required corsets and are and were iconic garments (Chrisman-Campbell).

Women saw corsets as something that helped keep up their beauty standards (Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*). Roxey A. Chaplin writes in her 1856 book, *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*, “Corsets, properly constructed, not only hide the deficiencies of Nature, but, by giving proper support where it is needed, enable her to correct them, and hence call back the figure to its natural position” (16). Women who wore corsets saw them as something that helped them feel beautiful, as seen by Ms. Chaplin’s description of the corset. As western society kept industrializing, corsets became easier for women to access (Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural*

History). Now more women could achieve the fashionable silhouette without hand sewing, as manufactured corsets became more available for women to buy (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). It is easy to see how ingrained the corset became in western women's lives.

Historical Arguments Against Corsets

Although historical records pre-18th century are sparse, the first evidence of arguments against the corset date back to the 18th century. Then, during the 19th century the corset faced even harder scrutiny from doctors and men. One early surviving document that shows this is Samuel Thomas von Soemmerring's "Comparative Views of Corseted and Uncorseted Females" (appendix A). This image shows the front and back view of a corset, a "normal" female skeleton, a uncorseted female body, a corseted female body, and the front and back view of a corseted ribcage. In creating this image, Mr. Soemmerring is trying to prove and warn that corsets are detrimental to the health of women. This is because, in the image, the corseted views of the female body show deformities such as a curved spine and a compressed ribcage.

Mr. Soemmerring is not the only doctor who was critical of the corset during the 18th and 19th century. Many doctors in the 19th century believed that corsets would cause miscarriage, fainting, shortness of breath, injured ribs and organs, tuberculosis, cancer, asthma, epilepsy, hysteria, and even death (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 2*), (Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*), (Formichella). Even though some doctors disapproved of corsets entirely, some only warned against "tight lacing" (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). However, the information from the 19th century is slightly dubious. One of the best-known accounts of tight lacing, published in *The Englishwoman's Delight*, has a multitude of

evidence that would suggest that it, in fact, describes sexual fantasies instead of truth (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). Described in this piece is how young girls are forced into tight corsets, which was not a common practice; instead, the evidence points to this being part of a fetishizing subculture centered around corsetry as punishment (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*).

It was not just doctors, however, that were staunch opponents to the corset; it was also average men. There are many instances of men (or presumably men) writing articles in newspapers disparaging corsets. One of these articles, taken out in the *Providence Patriot*, tells the story of a young woman who suddenly died at a ball in 1815 because of the tightness of her corset (“Corsets and Busks”). Even though this account is unverified, it shows that many men in the 19th century believed corseting was deadly. However, in 1815 the most fashionable silhouette was the empire waist (Franklin). Additionally, the corsets of this era were much less constricting, making it seem as if this article is simply anti-corset propaganda.

Another example of this misinformation comes, again, from the *Providence Patriot*. This article, however, is a short message to women about how consumption (tuberculosis) can be contracted from wearing a corset (“Multiple News Items”). The writer again used scare tactics to try to persuade women against wearing corsets. Scare tactics are also used in another *Providence Patriot* piece where a woman relates how her daughter developed a tumor from wearing a corset and busk, and subsequently died of it (Elizabeth).

In addition to propaganda, humiliation was often used in the “fight” against corsetry. In *The New Hampshire Statesman*, a Mr. Phil Gaz describes an incident in which the boning of a woman’s corset catches on a tablecloth and spills the contents of the table (Gaz). This article tries to show young ladies that, contrary to what they believe, wearing a corset is actually un-

lady like. And finally, a poem was published in the *Providence Patriot* illustrating how corsets are unbecoming of a woman and unappealing to men (The Trenton True American). The poem seems to dehumanize women wearing corsets by constantly referencing iron, screws, and clamps.

The Female Dress Reform Movement and Clothing Controversy

In the modern day it is believed that dress reformists of the 19th century, women who wanted to change fashion for comfort, took a staunch stance against corsets and stopped wearing them altogether. This is simply not true. Even the strictest of dress reformers still wore some form of corset, like a health corset (Formichella). In fact, some women who are held up to this day as anti-corset activists, such as Margret Tobin Brown and Amelia Bloomer, wore corsets and were not against them (Formichella). Some reformists simply wanted to replace them with health corsets, which were seen as less constricting (Formichella). A woman once even wrote into a newspaper criticizing a doctor's previous entry kvetching the corset, which shows the strong support women had for the corset (Formichella).

In fact, staunch dress reformists wanted to change skirts more than corsets (Formichella). Many women wanted "the bloomers" to come into fashion because of the level of comfort and movement that the bloomer, also called the Turkish trousers, allowed (Formichella). Turkish trousers got their start when a young woman was gardening and wanted to have a substitute for her long skirts because her dress kept getting in the way of her movement. So, she created a split skirt pattern; she loved this so much that she shared it. Eventually, Amelia Bloomer discovered the pattern and started publishing it in her magazine, *The Lily* (Formichella). Many women loved these pants; one even describes the experience as "Like a captive set free from his ball and chain" (Formichella). However, men did not feel the same way as women.

The bloomers were one of the most controversial articles of clothing during the 19th century. Women who wore them in public were harassed, mocked, and ridiculed (Formichella). Cartoons in newspapers made fun of them, diminishing the femineity of women who wore bloomers by showing them smoking and depicting them as “ugly.” A law was even introduced to outlaw the bloomer (Formichella). There was even an instance of a man going to a lawyer because his wife wore bloomers (Formichella). Some of the largest proponents of the bloomers even disavowed them later in life, this included Amelia Bloomer (Formichella).

Another article of clothing that was heavily ridiculed was the crinoline. However, this piece of attire had deadly consequences. The crinoline was used to create the wide shape of dresses during the mid-19th century. The crinoline was heavily criticized by men who thought of it as a public nuisance because of how large it was. There were many a cartoon in this era exaggerating the width of the crinoline. However, this fashion was not just seen as ridiculous, it was deadly. In England alone over 3,000 women died of crinoline fires from 1850-1860 (Formichella). Crinolines were very susceptible to catch fire because they were made of extremely flammable material, horsehair (Formichella). Most women who died of crinoline fires were lower class workers who were exposed to flames on a daily basis (Formichella). It became so bad that Queen Victoria made a statement condemning the crinoline, even though she wore it throughout the mid-19th century.

All of this goes to show how the corset was far from the most controversial or deadliest piece of clothing during the 19th century. Men and doctors mocked women for wearing most anything in this era. An article was even published in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* about how a woman used newspapers to stuff her bustle and was then embarrassed when it

ripped (Formichella). All of women's fashion was up for debate in the 19th century, but the corset is one of the few to survive into the modern era.

The Abandonment of the Corset

As the 19th century ended and the 20th began, manufactured corsets did become more restrictive. The "look" of the Edwardian era was very aggressive with an emphasis on a small waist and a pushed out bust (Formichella). Manufactured corsets of the Edwardian Era created "the Gibson Girl Look" which put emphasis on the body looking like an "S" (Fields). Corsets also began to elongate and cover the front of the thighs, which was extremely restrictive and uncomfortable (appendix B) (Fields). The corset became more restrictive in this era because corset manufacturers wanted to keep control over how women dressed. These manufactures were scared that the rising popularity of the women's rights movement would change how women viewed corsets, so to keep control they made them more restrictive (Fields). However, many women wanted their corsets to be less tight and more comfortable. Even though women did not like this fashion, corset manufactures continued to spread information that women need these types of corsets because when humans evolved, the change from standing horizontally to vertically was hard for women to make (Fields). As the 1920's began more young women stopped using the corset in exchange for the brassier and girdle (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). These women caused quite an upset when they abandoned the corset because many people believed they were giving up long held traditions (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). These women were able to overcome the stigma of not wearing a corset and change western fashion permanently. The Flappers worked together to fight for the fashion they wanted. They advocated for the fashion they wanted and succeeded. If it

were not for these women, it is very possible that corsets still might be in fashion; and the modern debate around corsets may have not happened at all.

Modern Discourse on The Corset

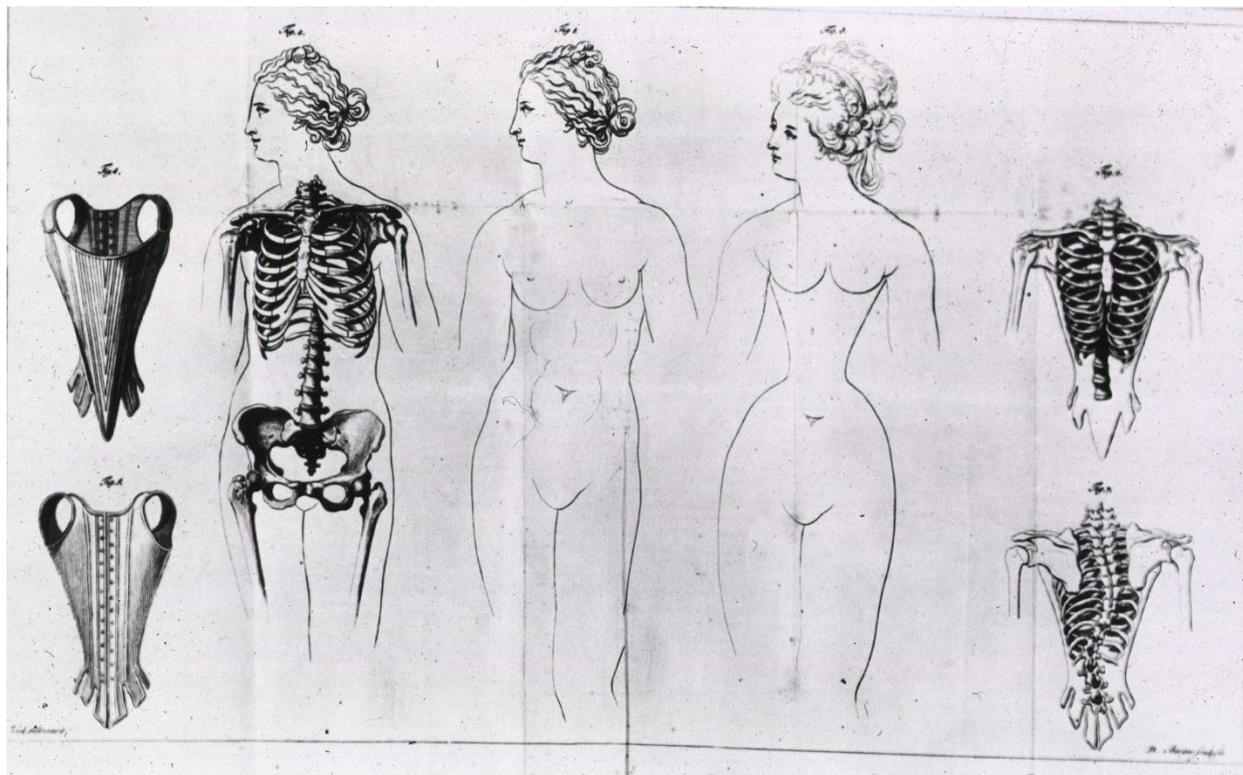
When historians look back on the corset, it is often thought of as a torture device used to oppress women; however, this is not the case (Formichella). Many people point out the iron corsets that were worn by Catherine de Medici's court, yet these corsets were used for orthopedic purposes not for an aesthetic use (Steele, *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*). Many modern historians are also looking at some of the negative effects of the corset. There was a drop in childbirth in the 19th century, and one of the reasons proposed is the increase of "tightlacing" (Davies). One article states that corsets would distort the uterus and affect the rate of conception and also cause a higher rate of miscarriage (Davies). However, corsets cannot be the sole cause of the drop in fertility; there also is a drop of couples trying to conceive children, along with how many women in the era had irregular menstrual cycles (Davies). Even though there is evidence to show some negative effects of corsets, there is still much discourse in the field of fashion history about how negative corsets really were for women's health. There are also historians who only focus on the good of the corset without taking into account some of the negative effects listed above. Corsets are often viewed in the modern era in two extremes: either adored and fetishized or abhorred as torture. In reality they should be viewed as neither of these.

Conclusion

To the average women in history the corset was just an article of clothing. It had purpose as both an aesthetic device and as bust support. Even though most women were in favor of the corset, many men and doctors were against the corset and saw it as something unnatural.

Extreme discourse about the corset started in the 18th and 19th century and continues in the modern era. Misconceptions started by men years ago still resonate in the present day, continuing the propagation of a “lie” about a common garment. The voices of uninformed men still take precedent over the lived realities of women who were neither tortured nor sexualized by the corset. They simply wore a piece of clothing.

Appendix A



(Soemmerring)

The illustration shows what doctors believed a corset did to the body.

Appendix B



(Fields)

A long corset from 1910.

Appendix C



(Chrisman-Campbell)

First Lady Caroline Harrison's inaugural gown, 1886.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

- “Corsets and Busks.” *Providence Patriot, Columbian Phenix*, 9 Dec. 1815, link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3014181247/NCNP?u=nhais_htb1&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=9cf1936d. This article shows how some early New Englanders believed that corsets were deadly and should not be worn. Since this article comes from the early 19th century, the truthfulness of the incident cannot be verified; however, it does offer an excellent view of early New Englanders’ views on corsets, so yes, it is a good source. This source helped me with my project because it shows early opposition against the corset in New England.
- Elizabeth. “Corsets and Busks.” *Providence Patriot, Columbian Phenix*, 10 Sept. 1814, link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3011782693/NCNP?u=nhais_htb1&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=3e557254. The writer of this published letter, Elizabeth, states that her daughter died from cancer caused from wearing a corset and busk. This source cannot be verified; however, it again shows early arguments against the corset, which makes it extremely useful. The source helped me find early arguments against the corset and what these arguments were.
- Gaz, Phil. “Caution to Ladies.” *New Hampshire Statesman*, 29 Aug. 1825, link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3016126355/NCNP?u=nhais_htb1&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=a10e405d. The author, Mr. Gaz, asserts that corsets are unbecoming and can seriously injure or kill young women. The truthfulness of the claims in the article are disputed by modern historians, but his writings show the opinion of many at the times. Because of this it is a good source. The article helped me find reasoning behind the opposition of the corset.
- “Multiple News Items.” *Providence Patriot, Columbian Phenix*, 28 Oct. 1815, link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3011783621/NCNP?u=nhais_htb1&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=b7051044. This news article shows how some citizens and, as the article states, doctors believed that tuberculosis (consumption) was caused by corsets and busks. The medical information in the new article is false. However, it does show how many people in the 19th century thought that corsets caused tuberculosis. This article helped me find arguments against the corset and how medicine was used to argue against the corset.
- Soemmerring, Samuel Thomas von, 1755-1830, author. “[Comparative Views of Corseted and Uncorseted Females].” *JSTOR*, 1793, www.jstor.org/stable/community.28540154. The image shows what doctors believed happened to women who wore corsets during the late 18th century. The author, Samuel Thomas von Soemmerring, was a respected physician who published what he believed as fact. However, many modern medical scientists and fashion historians disagree with the medical thoughts of his time. This image helped me understand how medical professionals viewed corsets during the 18th century.

(Soemmerring, Samuel Thomas von. “[Comparative Views of Corseted and Uncorseted Females].” *JSTOR*, 1793, www.jstor.org/stable/community.28540154.

Soemmerring’s illustration shows how the corset affects the female body. He is trying to warn women away from the corset by showing all of the negative side effects.

Soemmerring was a respected physician of the time; however, the information in the piece is not fully supported by medical professionals in the modern era. This illustration helped me understand the opinions of male medical professionals on the corset from the era of the debate around corsets.

The Trenton True American. “Selected Poetry.” *Providence Patriot, Columbian Phenix*, 26 June 1819, link.gale.com/apps/doc/GT3011784996/NCNP?u=nhais_htb1&sid=bookmark-NCNP&xid=2a9e4da3. This poem humorously explains why men do not like corsets and why women should not wear them. This is a good source to show the opinions of men of corsets. The poem helped me understand how some men viewed corsets during the 19th century.

Secondary Sources:

Britannica School. “Corset.” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 14 July 2016, school.eb.com/levels/high/article/corset/26421.

This article covers the history of the corset. The writing has been reviewed by editors. The Encyclopedia Britannica has been around for over 200 years and is a highly trusted and reputable source of information. Reading this article was able to give me necessary background information on the corset.

Caplin, Roxey A. *Health and Beauty; Or, Corsets and Clothing, Constructed in Accordance with the Physiological Laws of the Human Body*. Kent & Co, 1856.

Ms. Chaplin’s book is an accurate representation of the opinions of a 19th century woman who wanted to continue wearing corsets. She writes about women’s fashion and how the corset is used. I was able to understand how women felt about corsets during the mid-19th century from her writings.

Chrisman-Campbell, Kimberly. *Worn on This Day: The Clothes That Made History*. Running Press, 2019. This book presents iconic outfits throughout history. This is a good source because it cites many other sources and the author, Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, has a PhD in the history of art from the University of Aberdeen. This book helped me find influential outfits in which corsets were necessary for the outfit.

Davies, Mel. “Corsets and Conception: Fashion and Demographic Trends in the Nineteenth Century.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1982, pp. 611–41, www.jstor.org/stable/178431. This article asserts that the dip in fertility during the 19th century was because of corsets and tightlacing. This source appears to be reputable because it was published by the University of Cambridge, peer reviewed, and cites many other sources. However, many other sources have differing information. The article shows arguments from the modern era. Because of this it showed me how arguments against the corset have progressed through the ages.

Fields, Jill. “‘Fighting the Corsetless Evil’: Shaping Corsets and Culture, 1900-1930.” *Journal of Social History*, vol. 33, no. 2, 1999, pp. 355–84, www.jstor.org/stable/3789627. This article focuses on the changes of the use of the corset during 1900-1930. The article is a good source because it contains very detailed information, cites many sources, and was published by Oxford University. This article helped me see the changes in women's undergarments during the turn of the 20th century.

Formichella, Janice. *The Dress Reform Movement: Who, What, When, and Why*. Historic New England. 11 January 2022. Webinar. The key points of the discussion were about the dress reform movement focusing on the debate around corsets. The source is reliable because the speaker, Janice Formichella, has BA degrees in English and Women's Studies from Arizona State University. This source helped me find viewpoints about corsets during the dress reform movement.

Franklin, Harper. “1810-1819 | Fashion History Timeline.” *Fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu*, 1 June 2020, fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1810-1819/. The timeline shows the fashion trends of 1810-1819. The contributors to this timeline are students of art history, as well as professors at Fashion Institute of Technology. Because of this the information provided is historically accurate. The timeline helped me understand the fashion of this period and how the corset was affected by these trends.

Steele, Valerie. *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 1*. Thomson Gale, 2005. The encyclopedia contains information on fashion A-Z; I specifically used it for its information on the corset. Valerie Steele is one of the most respected fashion historians. She is the curator of a museum located at the Fashion Institute of Technology, has a PhD from Yale, and created the first peer reviewed journal about the study of Fashion.

Steele, Valerie. *Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion: Volume 2*. Thomson Gale, 2005. This volume contains information on the clothing and accessories worn by people from all around the globe. The book is reliable because the author, Valerie Steele, is a leading historian in fashion and is a curator of a museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She also has a PhD from Yale. I used this source to gather information on the discourse around corsetry.

Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*. Yale University Press, 2011. Valerie Steele covers the history of the corset in western society and how it has evolved along with western culture. As stated above, Steele has a PhD from Yale and is a museum curator. Her writing helped me understand how the corset changed over time and why.