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**The Neo-Victorian Corset: Two Narrative Approaches to the Constricting Garment in Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) and Laura Purcell's *The Corset* (2018)**

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Abstract:

This article will examine how Sarah Waters and Laura Purcell use the corset as a narrative tool in *Fingersmith* (2002) and *The Corset* (2018), and how placing these texts alongside Victorian writing on the corset influences our understanding of the narratives. In *Fingersmith*, there are many allusions to Maud Lilly practising tight-lacing, having been laced into tight dresses to 'give her the figure of a lady' from a young age. When these tight laces are loosened, there is a suggestion of another Maud almost breaking out from the sartorial restriction. There are two corsets in *The Corset* which are of interest: first, a corset made by the narrator, Ruth, for herself that acts as a physical and emotional support system; second, one that Ruth makes for the daughter of the woman for whom she works. This latter corset is made by Ruth to 'squeeze the evil out' of the daughter; when Ruth is later accused of murder, she considers the corset to be the murder weapon. This article, therefore, considers how Victorian corset narratives, when placed alongside modern scholarship on the Victorian corset influences the twenty-first century reconstruction of the past and its sartorial/somatic imagery.

Key words: corset, tight-lacing, manifestation, repression, periodical, reconstruction, gender, embodiment, historical fiction

What is the corset? A material manifestation of patriarchal control, an enduring symbol of female sexuality and self-expression, or something else entirely? There is no definitive conclusion to be drawn regarding the ‘meaning’ of the corset; it is an ideologically complex garment, with myriad nuances. Though the corset, or something similar, had been an underlying part of Western fashion – particularly women’s fashion – for centuries prior to the Victorian era, the various industrial innovations of the nineteenth century saw structural changes taking place within the garment with each decade. Alongside these developments, various dialogues regarding the corset, its place in society, and its physical and psychological influences upon women, were aired regularly in a variety of books such as Luke Limner’s *Madre Natura versus The Moloch of Fashion* (1874) and E.D.M’s *Figure Training; or Art the Handmaid of Nature* (1881), and periodical publications such as *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, *All the Year Round*, and *The Saturday Review*. Attitudes ranged from passionate defences of the garment to vitriolic attacks against an anthropomorphised and tyrannical Fashion who had laced women into a lifetime of blind servitude. Acknowledging and engaging with the corset discourse enables an approach to Victorian fiction that highlights the use of fashion and allusions to the female body, but also provides fresh insight into neo-Victorian fiction, a genre deeply invested in reinterpreting the Victorian era. This article, therefore, examines the Victorian corset, its role as a symbol, its relationship to the female body and its socio-cultural reception, and crucially, the narrative application of these dialogues and relationships in contemporary neo-Victorian fiction.

In her examination of gloves in neo-Victorian fiction, Danielle Dove suggests that the glove is ‘entrenched within cultural memory as an explicitly Victorian item, [...] [acting] as both a marker of Victorian situatedness and a palpable entity capable of transgressing the temporal, spatial, and sexual boundaries that exist between the Victorian past and contemporary present’ (Dove 225). I would argue that this statement can also be applied to

the corset in neo-Victorian fiction: though not an exclusively Victorian garment, the corset is undeniably and strongly associated with the era, entrenched – as Dove finds the glove is – within cultural memory and modern re-interpretations of the nineteenth century; how we view the Victorian corset shapes our understanding of the Victorian era, even if various nuances of the garment’s Victorian past have faded as the nineteenth century passed from living memory and we thus reshape, rather than recall, that past. The neo-Victorian sub-genre of steampunk, for example, is a key example of this reshaping as it presents the corset as an external, armour-like garment. Though Amy L. Montz takes care to remind us that the Victorian corset was ‘what the bra is to modernity’ (‘Unbinding’ 89), it cannot be denied that it has taken on a post-Victorian life of its own, forged in various dialogues around feminism and patriarchy, liberation and oppression; it is eroticised and vilified even as it is reclaimed and re-standardised in contemporary debates, and this extends to its treatment in contemporary neo-Victorian literature.

A prevalent theme in nineteenth-century debates surrounding the corset is that women were either unwilling, or unable, to accept or acknowledge the adverse health effects of wearing the garment (though it should be pointed out that these adverse effects were largely due to tight-lacing, rather than corset-wearing in general, and it is tight-lacing upon which the majority of these writings focus). An 1868 article from *The Saturday Review* stated that ‘women do not see the ugliness of any fashion’, the pursuit of a wasp-waist was a ‘senseless barbarism’, and that ‘women are such blind slaves to fashion’ (‘The Corset and the Crinoline’ 695-6). In 1851, *Reynolds’s Miscellany of Romance* published an article which highlighted the dangers of busks – rigid panels of steel (previously wood or whalebone) which were inserted down the front of the corset to create an even more rigid structure to the garment – and the ‘evil influences of corsets upon the female system’ (‘Busks’ 392), the ‘female system’ being the part of a woman that made her valuable to society: her reproductive

system. Charles Dickens published a scathing piece on fashion in *All the Year Round* in which the anonymous author declares, ‘Fashion is a tyrant; always has been, and apparently has no intention of ever being anything else; a cruel and oppressive tyrant, delighting in nothing so much as in bodily torture and general inconvenience’ (‘Foolish Fashions’ 65). The author criticises and lambasts girls’ boarding schools, and mothers, for lacing their students and daughters into increasingly tight corsets night and day, thus ‘murder[ing] nature’ (68). Whether or not this accusation is hyperbole is debatable, but it is certainly mirrored in other publications, such as the *Saturday Review*. *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* published an 1846 letter from a French physician who declared in no uncertain terms the formidable power of fashion in society. He argues: ‘In fact, does not *fashion* govern the world; and as regards [the female] sex, is it not the only sovereign who reigns and governs? [...] Reason may raise her voice. But every ear is closed. Reason advises, fashion acts’ (‘Use’ 102, original emphasis). Despite the alleged medical dangers of wearing a (tight-laced) corset, from body deformity to muscle atrophy cited by many both before and after this physician, ‘the torture continues as if this fact were not known [...]. It is the long *habit* of wearing it which deceives most. Without it, they do not seem dressed – as if something was wanting’ (‘Use’ 102, original emphasis). *Reynolds’s Miscellany* published another translation of this letter five years later. On the one hand, the title of the article in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* was ‘The Use of the Corset’, with the following subtitle: ‘translation of a letter to a lady from Dr Reville-Parise’; *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, on the other hand, provided a more direct and damning title preceding a similar subtitle: ‘The Evils of Tight-Lacing’.

Contemporary treatises, though varying in emphasis, often had similar themes: fashion/Fashion as a tyrant; tight-lacing as an ‘evil’; the vast schism between the natural and the ideal figure, and so on. The most common theme, however, is that women, particularly

those who tight-laced, were either blind – wilfully or not – in their submission to Fashion, or irresponsible in their pursuit of it.

In response to the prevalence of negative writing on the corset, Roxey Ann Caplin, a corset inventor and maker, first published *Health and Beauty; or, Corsets and Clothing, constructed in accordance with the physiological laws of the Human Body* (1853), with other editions being released in subsequent years. Caplin declares in her introduction that the corset is a ‘necessary’ part of clothing, and in her response to a medical doctor’s writing against corsetry, Caplin emphasises the emotional and arguably addictive nature of wearing a corset beyond being a vital corrective of posture and figure, as fuelled by social and cultural imperatives: ‘it never seems to have occurred to the Doctor that ladies must and will wear stays, in spite of all the medical men of Europe’ (x). Must, because they provide impeccable posture – while worn – which society demanded; must, because supportive and shaping garments had always existed in women’s clothing in one form or another; must, because if they did not, society would read any number of negative connotations into that unsupported waist. All these implications ultimately support the argument that the corset is a garment imbued with a distinctly ideological nature, with Melis Mulazimoglu Erkal suggesting that corsetry ‘points at the dichotomy between power and restraint ideologically enacted upon the female body. That is why it stands between elegance and repression, empowerment and victimisation’ (109). Indeed, Wendy Dasler Johnson argues that ‘a corset impressed apparently natural virtues upon the shape of a woman’s body, qualities that somehow she lacked without the garment’ (204), which suggests that the enhanced natural form – as Caplin put it – created by the corset also had an effect on the character of a woman (or, if not an inherent effect on her character, then on the perception of her character), concealing, or withholding any undesirable traits that might otherwise be revealed or released. Caplin’s view is that corsets and various other supportive contraptions aid the development of natural

strength, and that without the right support, deformity (and the attendant cultural assumptions of degeneracy) is almost guaranteed. This is where the two sides of the corset debate most strongly oppose each other: those who were pro-corset advocated its corrective and preventative role as a garment; those who opposed the corset railed against its deforming and debilitating characteristics. The middle-ground appears to be that, responsibly laced, the corset causes no harm and is merely supportive and is therefore an acceptable garment, as long as vanity does not pull on the laces to tighten it from functional to fashionable.

Where Caplin focuses on the corset as a garment and a corrective, many other pieces of writing on the corset from the Victorian era tie it closely to society and culture. In 1874, Luke Limner published *Madre Natura versus The Moloch of Fashion: A Social Essay*. In labelling Fashion as ‘a person or thing to which extreme or terrible sacrifices are made; a terrible or remorselessly destructive person or force’ (*OED Online*), Limner makes his stance on the debate surrounding the corset clear, and emphasises the tyrannical nature of Fashion throughout his essay. He goes beyond the scathing attitude directed towards the dedicated followers of Fashion, and attacks Fashion as if it were an anthropomorphised being who had an entire species in its thrall: ‘The Human mind will bow to the tyranny of an ideal, worshipped despot of its own creation, even to the subjection of the body and soul’ (Limner 25). To Limner, the corset is the ‘most unnatural, and sinfully injurious of Fashion’s appliances’ (73); a torturous instrument of a blasphemous and despotic ruler of society. Unlike a number of the pieces referred to above, Limner does not lay the ‘blame’ for the prevalence of the corset solely at the door of women, but at the threshold of society as a whole: its increasing wealth and need for conspicuous consumption, and its distinctly male-oriented bias, are responsible; it is the need to acquire a husband that forces women into garments which they believe increase their attractiveness – as prompted by the rule of Fashion.

E.D.M.'s *Figure Training: or, Art the Handmaid of Nature* was published in 1871, and was subject to some censure in the periodical press; a writer for *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, for example, referred to it as 'palpable puff' in an almost bemused review of the book that was positioned within a longer essay that suggested the corset was a torturous symptom of women's fashion ('The Corset' 178). Significantly, *Figure Training* declares that: 'the laws of modern refinement and fashion [...] demand and insist on refinement of form, and hence it is that elegance and grace of figure are more eagerly aimed at than ever' (17). . There is no written law of 'modern refinement and fashion' which sets out these demands; they are just assumed facts of life which have percolated through society. The focus of (middle- and upper-class) women's fashion was to emphasise and display the shape of the female form, and thus the wearer's femininity, in order to be attractive: 'nature unaided never forms the round, trim, taper waist which a perfectly-fitting and well-laced corset confers, and which a skilful milliner knows so well how to display to the best advantage' (E.D.M. 18). The corset not only emphasised the curvature of the feminine form, but it also demonstrated that which Victorian domestic ideology demanded: 'self-discipline [and] respectability' (Steele 1). Indeed, while arguing against tight-lacing (but, importantly, not corset-wearing as a whole), Violet Greville in 1893 declared that 'every man prefers to see a neat, trim woman' (73). This stance acknowledges that a woman needed to attract a husband, and achieved that – in part – through the presentation of her form; the corset manipulated the female form into something which was believed to be attractive to a man, and which adhered to Victorian domestic ideals of feminine restraint and self-discipline.

While Victorian writing tended towards an either/or approach to corset wearing, modern scholarship's divisions occur in defining the corset's place and meaning in society, and on accounting for the inherently unconscious historical acceptance of the garment. This division is aptly demonstrated in the dialogue between Helene E. Roberts and David Kunzle



in *Signs* in 1977: Roberts's article 'The Exquisite Slave' argues that fashion is a patriarchal tool of oppression with the corset symbolising that control, shaping women into inherently 'submissive-masochist' beings from a young age (559); Kunzle's response argued against that motion, suggesting that tight-lacing was a mode of individualism and female reclamation of the self, while dress reform movements were actually founded in antifeminism and a patriarchal desire for healthy female bodies capable of withstanding the trials of child-bearing and child-rearing (echoing the aforementioned piece in *Reynolds's Miscellany* that referred to the 'female system') (570-71). Roberts replied by suggesting that Kunzle's argument neglected to take into account the cultural necessity of corsetry, and the psychological power of fashion (518-19). I acknowledge that these articles are nearly fifty years old and there has been a great deal of scholarship on the corset since then, but the themes discussed – namely, oppression and freedom – linger in twenty-first-century readings and representations of the garment. Valerie Steele challenges the narrative of oppression and victimisation, stating that 'by patronising the women of the past as the passive "victims" of fashion, historians have long ignored the reasons why so many women were willing to wear corsets for so long' (2); for Steele the corset is not necessarily a patriarchal tool, but rather a tool wielded by women in order to express themselves, for themselves – something that will become particularly apparent in my discussion of Laura Purcell's *The Corset*.

Christine Bayles Kortsch outlines the myriad meanings a corset could convey, highlighting the impossibility of seeing the garment through the binary lenses of oppression and freedom:

Choosing not to wear a corset, depending on the decade and one's class and social circle, identified a woman as a prostitute, dress reformer, aesthete, or feminist. [...] Although tight-lacers were accused of using the corset to arouse impure desires, not wearing a corset could nevertheless lead to charges of sexual promiscuity or moral

laxity. [...] When laced to an ‘appropriate’ size, the corset epitomised gentility; yet, its purpose was to shape and display the female form to the greatest advantage.

(Kortsch 56)

Similar to Johnson’s aforementioned comment that the corset impressed apparently natural virtues upon the female body, Anna Krugovoy Silver draws attention to the cultural myth of the passively angelic woman and how the slender body emblematised this myth and ‘became a sign not simply of the pure body, but of the *regulated* body’ (10, original emphasis).

Similarly, Casey Finch suggests that the corset became a ‘hallmark of virtue’ (343), quoting Bernard Rudofky’s statement that ‘the uncorseted woman reeked of license; an unlaced waist was regarded as a vessel of sin’ (qtd. in Finch 343). In a similar, albeit not sartorial, vein, *The Female Instructor* (1811), a Regency conduct manual, stated that ‘an early habitual restraint is particularly important to the future character of women. A judicious, unrelaxing, but steady and gentle curb, on the temper and the passions, can alone ensure their peace, and establish their principles’ (105). While this is not talking about literal restraint through corsetry, the rhetoric is certainly similar to later writing about the corset; this ‘habitual restraint’ promotes a passive nature far removed from the supposedly dangerous passions which could disturb the peace.

In his response to Roberts, on the other hand, Kunzle argues that the ‘upper-middle-class or aristocratic stereotype stressing physical weakness... [was more] a poetic, literary, and moral construct than a social reality’ (571). Regardless of literary or social reality, then, the corset was arguably the physical manifestation of control over the female form; not necessarily patriarchal control and oppression, but control nonetheless. This control, whatever its ideological source, is multifaceted. In Silver’s argument, the female form is not only constrained by the corset, but the presentation of this constrained form also showed the symbolic control – and regulation – of the woman’s character and sexuality. She further

argues that ‘because fat did in fact symbolise desire, hunger and impulse for the Victorians, slenderness signified the containment of those qualities’ (Silver 10). The slimmer the form, therefore, the more controlled the woman (which suggests by extension that the uncorseted, fuller body signified an unregulated, uncontrolled character and sexuality). If the corset were too tightly laced, however, then the meaning shifted from respectable and admirable levels of restraint and self-control to vanity and unrespectable immodesty. Not only this, but ‘the corset both demonstrates the cultural imperative to be slim and constitutes the method by which women approximated that imperative: throughout the century, women re-shaped their bodies, particularly their waists, to conform to normative standards of beauty’ (Silver 36). This idea of a normative beauty standard further perpetuates the idea of the possibility that the female form could (and should) be controlled, but in this case – the ‘cultural imperative’ – the control is manifested psychologically, rather than physically. Silver’s argument about the slender and regulated body is one that is particularly relevant to the character Maud Lilly in *Fingersmith*.

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn state that the duty of neo-Victorian fiction is to be ‘*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*’ (4, original emphasis). Bearing this in mind, alongside my previous discussion of the myriad nuances of the corset debate, the remainder of the article will consider these acts of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery, and (re)vision as they relate to corset symbolism in Sarah Waters’s *Fingersmith* (2002) and Laura Purcell’s *The Corset* (2018), two novels which engage extensively with the Victorian corset, though in differing ways. Waters leans into the rhetoric of the anti-corset debate, engaging with the narratives of tight-lacing’s adverse effects on the body, while Purcell approaches the garment from a less socially- and medically-charged angle, highlighting instead at the personal satisfaction and

emotional support provided by the corset. Montz makes a particularly useful observation about neo-Victorian fiction's relationship with fashion:

When neo-Victorian literature refuses to assume mere aestheticism for its material objects – that is, refuses to employ them merely for frivolous stylistic period ‘effect’ – and instead repurposes significant fashionable items for technological usefulness and for the protection of female bodies, it presents nineteenth-century middle-class women's clothing as a marriage between form and function. This ‘union’, or perhaps ‘threading’ together emphasises fashion's [...] symbolic power as cultural capital, and its historically subversive and transgressive, as much as restrictive and conventional, properties. (‘Parasols’ 102).

Waters and Purcell's novels highlight this refusal to include fashion for fashion's sake; the corset is used as a piece of cultural capital that bridges the gap between the modern and Victorian ages; like the glove, the corset is entrenched within cultural memory as a sign of Victorianism, and yet, as the remainder of this article will demonstrate, the corset's afterlife in neo-Victorian fiction cannot help but recast, and thus reconstruct, the garment as a hybrid of modern and Victorian sensibilities, as a material representation of Heilmann and Llewellyn's requirements for neo-Victorianism.

The initial narrator of Waters's *Fingersmith* is the lower-class Sue Trinder, the titular ‘fingersmith’, or thief. The reader is made aware that Sue is involved in a long con early in the novel: Sue and the character called Gentleman are going to work together to defraud a young lady, Maud, of her inheritance. Part One of the novel is from Sue's perspective as she pretends to be a lady's maid to Maud, eventually falling in love with her, ending with what initially appears to be a case of mistaken identity, where Sue is admitted to the asylum in Maud's place. The second part of the novel, however, retells the first part from Maud's

perspective, revealing that while Sue thought she was Gentleman's accomplice, she was in fact the unwitting subject of Maud and Gentleman's plot to ensure Maud could escape her uncle's house. The change in identity which is achieved largely through dress and perceptions of the body, is thus revealed to be intentional. The third part of the novel further disrupts what might have appeared resolved with Maud's narrative: that Sue and Maud were swapped soon after birth; Sue Trinder is really Sue Lilly, and Maud Lilly is actually Maud Sucksby, the daughter of Sue's surrogate mother-figure.

At the start of *Fingersmith*, when Sue is being trained to pose as a lady's maid, she is set the task of dressing a chair as if it were a young woman. The entire dressing process is re-enacted, showing the journey from nudity to full coverage. There are arguably two reasons for this particular scene, not including its function as an insight for the twenty-first century reader into a now-unfamiliar dressing routine. First, it shows Susan's lack of familiarity with fashionable dress and the amount of work which has to go into dressing a young lady. Second, it gives a hint about the character of the as-yet unknown Maud: while placing the corset on the chair, Gentleman tells Sue 'she will want you to tie this for her, tight as you like' (Waters 36), which suggests Maud's tight-lacing. As we have yet to meet Maud at this point in the novel, there is little else that can be ascertained from this slight suggestion. It is only once Sue meets Maud that more can be gleaned from her dress. When the two women meet, Sue describes Maud's dress thus: '[t]he skirt – I had never seen such a thing before, on a girl of her age – the skirt was full and short and showed her ankles; and about her waist – that was astonishingly narrow – there was a sash' (66). The 'astonishingly narrow' waist certainly confirms the suspicion of tight-lacing, but the ankle-revealing skirt suggests that there is an innate infantilisation to Maud's dressing habits, which supersedes any other priority in her dress, something which the reader later becomes aware is something specifically curated by her uncle. The narrowness of Maud's waist is referred to repeatedly

throughout Sue's narrative; she describes Maud's corset as being long, 'with a busk of steel', which caused her waist to be 'narrow: the kind of waist the doctors speak against, which gives a girl an illness' (83). As mentioned previously, *Reynolds's Miscellany* published an article in 1851 that took particular aim at the busk, stating: 'the effect of busks is directly the opposite of the muscles of the abdomen, or lower part of the trunk of the body which are intended to support the intestines, without impeding their natural or peristaltic motion' ('Busks' 392). This specific reference to the busk on Waters's part further highlights the rigid external forces that mould Maud into the uncanny, infantilised yet somewhat eroticised figure. Attention is once again drawn to Maud's waist when she gives Sue one of her old dresses, saying that it 'grips tight, but it will give you the figure of a lady' (Waters 102), mirroring what Maud herself was told as she was forced into a tight corset for the first time at the age of ten or eleven (189). Sue, while accepting the gown, rejects the small waist and lets it out, stating 'I wasn't about to do myself an injury for the sake of a sixteen-inch waist' (103), alluding to the various pieces of Victorian writing, and attitudes that have carried over into the twenty-first century concerning the correlation between tight corsets and bodily harm.

Considering that Maud and Sue had been swapped soon after birth and were thus in each other's place the entire time, however, Maud's 'gift', and their later exchange of identity, is actually restoring 'order'. While Sue is never depicted as out of place in her dress, Maud is often presented at odds with her garments, or that her garments are, somehow, not quite right, or even uncanny. There is the short (by Victorian standards) skirt that she wears (unsuitable for a young woman of seventeen), the painfully small waist, and the obsession with wearing pristine gloves. By the end of the novel, it is made clear that Maud is not upper class, but the daughter of a thief and a child farmer. Her first ten years were spent growing up in a 'madhouse', where she was told she was born, hardly a reputable beginning for a lady

(although as the novel progresses, we discover that as the reader and copier of pornographic texts at the behest of her uncle, hers is barely a ‘reputable’ life anyway). Maud’s was a disreputable beginning which had to be repressed. When she reaches the age of ten, having lived an unconventional, uncorseted life, her uncle visits with the intention of ascertaining whether he would adopt her. Displeased with her soft and slouching back, he sends his housekeeper

with a suit of clothes to dress [her] to his fancy. She brings [Maud] boots, wool gloves, a gown of buff – a hateful, girlish gown, cut to the calf, and stiffened from the shoulder to the waist with ribs of bone. She pulls the laces tight and, at [Maud’s] complaints, pulls them tighter. (183)

She is then tight-laced into a different corset at night to force her body into ‘the figure of a lady’. This introduction to ‘fashionable’ dress is extreme and unrelenting – and uncannily similar to events described in nineteenth-century articles, such as the above-mentioned ‘Foolish Fashions’. The author reports that a girl’s figure had been ‘neglected’ while her parents were away, but once her mother returned, the girl was subject to a strict regimen of lacing in which her mother ‘took the unusual plan of making her sleep in her corset’ (67). ‘But soon,’ the author continues, ‘she got accustomed to her corsets, and now is infinitely grateful to her dear mamma, who gave her a wasp’s waist, paralysed her intercostal muscles, and murdered nature’ (68). A sardonic and somewhat hyperbolic account, perhaps, but one which nonetheless highlights the fact that, extreme as some of the cases were reported to be, people such as the girl he writes about grew accustomed to the constriction, and grew to rely upon it. As she grows up, Maud likewise acclimates to her ‘hard-boned gowns, and flinch[es] at the first unloosening of the strings’ (Waters 203). This reaction to the loss of support also mirrors accounts found in nineteenth-century articles which ruminate on the addictive nature of the corset, and which highlight that, after a time, corsets must be worn, as the protracted

wearing of them has caused the relevant and supportive muscles in the back and abdomen to atrophy.

Steele suggests that Victorian attitudes implied that tight-lacers were ‘bad women, who solicited the lecherous gaze of “vulgar” men’ (87); in *Fingersmith*, however, rather than Maud actively soliciting the lechery of her uncle and his peers, Maud is passive in her uncle’s sartorial and somatic construction of her image in order to satisfy his lecherous gaze. Not only is her introduction to corsetry extreme for Maud, but it is also a somewhat extreme interpretation of Victorian childhood corsetry. Children were historically put into corsets, but where in the eighteenth century they wore ‘miniature adult stays’, the Victorian era, with its various technological developments, saw prepubescent girls put into ‘special models designed for immature bodies [....]. Although no longer so physically restrictive, [they] still functioned to prepare girls for certain social roles, including the necessity of conforming to contemporary standards of feminine beauty and propriety’ (Steele 49). That Waters has Maud tightly laced directly into rigidly-boned garments certainly implies an adherence to the more fetishized readings of corsetry, rather than to the more standard ‘preparation’ for certain social roles – especially considering that it is her uncle who demands this sartorial intervention; both infantilised and eroticised, Maud’s figure is in the control, not of the despotic Victorian villain Fashion, but of her fetishist uncle. This recalls the implications of the corset correspondence in the *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* during the late 1860s, which ‘caused a sensation in Victorian England, because of what we now recognise as its sexually fetishistic and sadomasochistic nature’ (Steele 92). It should be noted that the corset correspondence by no means represented the norm in Victorian attitudes, and Steele highlights that the letters’ source(s) are ambiguous, and were likely to have been predominantly written by the *EDM*’s editor, Samuel Beeton (90). Despite the spurious veracity of the correspondence, the attitudes towards tight-lacing and corsetry shown in them,



and their reception, have percolated down into some neo-Victorian approaches to the corset, with the lines between general corsetry and tight-lacing becoming blurred through the prevalence of the sado-/submissive-masochistic and oppressive interpretations in modern literature and culture.

Yet, the intense, and painful, constriction which Maud undergoes with her dresses does more than just demonstrate to the casual reader some of the alleged realities of Victorian womanhood and corsetry: it can be read as the physical manifestation of the repression of Maud's 'true' nature, both as someone raised in an asylum, and as the daughter of the conwoman and baby-farmer Mrs Sucksby. Each time the laces of the gowns and corsets, ribbed to 'correct' her posture and give her the 'figure of a lady', are loosened, the unknown Maud attempts to break out – whether that is Maud Sucksby, Maud Lilly from the asylum, or even Maud Lilly as influenced by her uncle's erotic literature and how he treats her. It is a painful manifestation, and one which is quickly quashed by being re-laced into another garment. With this in mind, therefore, it is not just the muscle atrophy being contained, but also Maud's character – a direct parallel with the implication that a corset was needed so that anything contrary to ideal womanhood was hidden and kept within the body. Despite the strangeness of Maud's short skirts, she is, by all other sartorial indicators, a lady. Each time those indicators are loosened, or removed, another of Maud's identities, hidden from everyone else, tries to break through.

Finch argues that there was an interesting dichotomy at the heart of Victorian fashion, and particularly the corset, that meant that the body was both revealed and hidden through the various lacing practices of the time. She suggests that the 'new pictorial strategies for figuring the body and its clothes themselves came to rely, not on explicit articulations of the female body as a site of (re)production, but on covert representational methods – visual puns, tropes, and uncanny confrontations – that mapped the body as the place where secrets hide'

(Finch 347). If we are to consider Heilmann and Llewellyn's manifesto for neo-Victorian fiction alongside this statement from Finch, then Maud becomes an interesting (re)interpretation and (re)vision of this approach to Victorian fashion and the corset. Our first introduction to the physical idea of Maud is through the visual medium of a chair being dressed; her body is absent, yet the garments that create the Maud-image are present. Maud is represented by the chair, her figure (re)produced through Susan's tight-lacing of the corset. When we meet the physical Maud, it is an uncanny confrontation: nothing in her sartorial presentation quite adds up for Susan in the excruciatingly small waist and the strangely short skirt, in the infantile yet womanly image that stands before her. The body of Maud Lilly, rigidly structured and curated to fit a particular image, is indeed a body where secrets hide; within the Maud-image presented through the external sartorial and somatic structuring lies the repressed Maud Sucksby, the secret that fuels the narrative with fatal consequences.

It is important, at this point, to acknowledge the use of the corset in the neo-Victorian subgenre of steampunk, which takes an alternate-history approach to the Victorian era in which technology advanced far beyond its historical limitations. With this re-writing of history, so, too, is the corset revised and re-written. Worn as an external garment, it becomes a symbol less of oppression than of freedom and protection. Julie Anne Taddeo argues that, '[r]ather than an instrument of torture and disempowerment, the corset enabled women to manipulate and define their own femininity [. . . .]The steampunk corset is an announcement of a woman's place in the public sphere, clad for battle alongside, or against, men and cyborgs' (Taddeo 44-55). Steampunk, therefore, self-consciously fights against the prevailing interpretation that the corset symbolises the systematic oppression of women, not just denying this stance, but literally bringing the garment into the open to showcase its sartorial power for the wearer. The corset in steampunk does not hold in undesirable traits of womanhood, as it was implied the Victorian corset did; rather, it protects the wearer from the

very real threats posed by the society in which she lives. Laura Purcell's *The Corset*, similar to steampunk novels, refigures the garment as a protectionist object, while also offering a scenario where the Victorian narratives of corset-caused damage and death are realised.

*The Corset* is split between two narrators: Dorothea, a wealthy, Catholic heiress with an intense interest in phrenology, who undertakes charitable work by visiting women in prison, where she meets the other narrator, Ruth, who tells her the story of her crimes. Ruth confesses to murdering her employer, convinced that she has done so through her sewing: it is her belief – tempered by a series of what Dorothea is convinced are coincidences – that when she sews, she imbues the thread and material with whichever emotion she is feeling, or whatever thoughts she is thinking. When she has to give her mother stitches after the traumatic birth of her sister, Ruth repeats the mantra ‘*don't look [...] do not see*’ (Purcell 67, original emphasis), and her mother's eyes eventually fail her; Ruth embroiders an angel on her sister's blanket, and within days her sister dies from diphtheria, a disease known as ‘the strangling angel’. After being bullied by the wealthier girls at the school she attends, Ruth repairs her cheap corset, which had been broken by the bullies. Remaking this corset with scraps of material, and strengthening it with twine, literally pouring her blood, sweat and tears into this garment while thinking ‘*strong, strong*’ (Purcell 58, original emphasis). It is then months before she is able to remove the corset after it is first put on; the strength she sewed into it locks it to her body as a physical and emotional support. The novel was published in the United States under the title *The Poison Thread*, placing emphasis on Ruth's sewing, and minimising the ambiguity about Ruth's ‘power’, which is apparent at the end of the novel. What the US edition's title fails to acknowledge, however, is how important Ruth's corset is to both the narrative and to Ruth. That being said, there is another corset in the narrative which is just as important as Ruth's, and that is the corset she believes to have been the murder weapon used against her mistress, Kate Rooker. The eponymous corset, therefore,

could be either the corset Ruth made for herself, or the one, imbued with hatred, that she made for her mistress.

Where *Fingersmith* is replete with gestures towards nineteenth-century dialogues around the corset, *The Corset* has a much more subtle approach. Although it mirrors various dialogues discussed previously regarding the physical and emotional support provided by the corset, rather than the somatic sculpting, it does so without drawing too much attention to them. Ruth's corset becomes a direct representation of the comfort and security that a corset brought to a woman. She makes the corset not to be a fashion piece, or a general undergarment, but a piece of armour: '[t]he mission was simple: remake the corset. Remake myself. [...] I vowed, there and then, to create something as strong as my rage. I would make more than a corset, more than a garment. I'd sew something that no power on earth could break' (Purcell 49-50). Montz argues that a fundamental aspect of the neo-Victorian corset is the act of individualisation: where the character is given the chance to construct their own corset, customising it for their own benefit, it becomes 'a necessary article of clothing [...] that, when augmented in style, in design, or in wearing, becomes a protective cover against the dangers of the world in which she lives' ('Unbinding' 90). The necessity stems not from the structure and support it provides for the outer garments and the associated moral accoutrements, but from the physical protection it gives the protagonist. The corset that Ruth specifically constructs for her individual needs holds her up in times of hardship, and protects her when she needs it, as her 'talisman, [her] secret' (Purcell 73); the corset becomes part of her. After her mother is unable to pay her debts, Ruth essentially becomes an indentured worker to Mrs Metyard, her mother's final debtor and owner of a dress shop. Working at Mrs Metyard's, Ruth, and the other girls there, are subject to various forms of physical abuse, from being thrown into the coal hole to being heavily, and on one occasion, fatally, beaten by Mrs Metyard. After being thrown into the coal hole herself, Ruth is eventually rescued by

the shop's material supplier, Billy Rooker. After this incident, Ruth realises that she has what could pass as friends, and it is then that her corset comes undone for the first time in months, while she is washing herself clean of the coal dust:

The hooks of my corset gave way. For the first time in months, the casing slipped from my body and fell to the floor.

I stood there, naked, staring at it. At myself.

Lines marked my torso where the cording had pressed into the skin. I ought to have been relieved, but I wasn't. My stomach felt odd without its familiar pressure. Exposed. It wasn't a release to be out of the corset's clutches. It was lonely. [...]

Guilt itched at me. Did the corset know? Had it abandoned me because I'd found some friends?

Perhaps that was for the best. Perhaps, I thought, with these people at my side, I didn't need a corset to keep me strong. (Purcell 174-175)

Her corset had supported her, and, importantly, held her in – whether holding in undesirable characteristics, or holding her together, is unclear.

Taddeo and Montz both highlight the relationship between the neo-Victorian corset and the self, and how sartorial (and social) necessity can be adapted for the purposes of protection; this is something that can also be seen in *The Corset*, especially with the above scene. Purcell takes corsetry a step further, however, from protection into weaponry. Ruth is eventually trained in making baleen corsets, and where she had sewn rage into her own corset, she approaches one particular corset she makes with nothing but revenge in mind. Weaponising her skills to take revenge for the murder of her friend Mim, Ruth makes Mrs Metyard's daughter, Kate, a special corset for her wedding. Knowing that Kate's waist has a

circumference of twenty inches, she decides to make the corset smaller: ‘why not make it eighteen? Sixteen? Squeeze the evil out, crush it, until there was nothing left but a tightly wound shroud of my stitches’ (Purcell 277). Ruth incorporates parts of her old corset, ‘spotted with [her] own blood’, and shavings of one of Mim’s possessions into the corset, ‘pushing back against her oppressor in the only way she could, now’ (277). Months later, Ruth believes the corset is fulfilling its purpose as Kate starts wasting away before her eyes, with ‘triumphant collarbones’ and sharp shoulder blades emerging from beneath her skin (330). Kate becomes addicted to wearing the corset even as her health deteriorates; Ruth begins to doubt her plan, revealing ‘I’d been foolish to think it was a weapon. The corset was me: my bitterness, my pain’ (338). It is apparent throughout the novel that corsets are never viewed through a veil of eroticism as they are, to an extent, in *Fingersmith*; instead, they are always functional garments that are inextricably linked to the wearer, and the maker, both emotionally and physically.

Purcell’s engagement with Victorian discourses on the corset focuses on the physicality of the garment itself, the psychological component to wearing one, and the almost symbiotic relationship between a corset and its wearer, rather than the more medical contexts Waters engages with. Purcell does reference tight-lacing prior to Ruth’s construction of Kate’s corset, but even here, it is less an action of sexualisation than an action of self-construction. In the first chapter of Ruth’s narration we are shown a scene in which her original corset is broken by Rosalind:

Hands scuffed at my bodice. Material ripped. ‘You are not a lady. You shouldn’t be wearing these clothes! You belong in the gutter, Butterham. You’re a rat, a beast!’ They hooted. Cold air rushed inside my smock as they exposed my corset, my shift. ‘Look at this,’ Rosalind laughed to a girl behind her. ‘Tight lacing. She’s

trying to be fashionable. You'll never get a good silhouette, Butterham. Not with these corset bones.' (Purcell 14)

Where Sue and Gentleman refer to Maud's tight-lacing as both a matter of vanity, and of medical concern, Maud's own narrative in *Fingersmith* reminds the reader of the physical construction of a 'lady-like figure' through the deployment of boned garments. Victorian writing on the corset fluctuated between the positive and negative connotations of tight-lacing (as shown above), with Violet Greville taking the latter stance and scathingly declaring that tight-lacers linger among 'the people who live on shams—whose whole aim and object it is to pretend to be what they are not, and to throw dust in the eyes of their neighbours' (77). I have discussed above the inherent although largely unconscious concealment and 'sham' concerning Maud, but that deceptive dust can also be seen here, with Ruth. Importantly, however, while Ruth is in some respects 'pretending to be what [she] is not', she is largely doing it for herself, rather than as part of a social-climbing agenda. Ashamed of her relative poverty, Ruth turns to dress – and particularly 'fashionable' corsetry – in an attempt to elevate herself. She is derided for her efforts, and her attempts at tight-lacing fail, largely due to the weak materials that make up her corset. When the fashionable side of corsetry fails her, Ruth casts off all notions of self-presentation, and instead opts for self-preservation. She remakes the corset and remakes both herself and her relationship with fashion; she takes the tool of the fashionable constriction she had previously practiced and (re)discovers its potential as a supportive, protective garment.

Whether a material manifestation of ideological constructs, or a garment that can transcend its reputation – and its semiotic nuances – to function on an individual basis under the sole, unadulterated control of the mind housed in the body of the wearer, the corset remains a site of contention. This article has explored this perennial conflict through two neo-Victorian texts, making use of a variety of Victorian pieces to provide historical context for

the debates occurring in the era in which these texts are set, as well as more recent scholarship on the garment and its literary uses. Waters highlights the corset's reputation as a symbol of oppression, engaging both with the arguments of Victorian medical discourses, and a more psychoanalytical approach with subtexts of repression and manifestation to (re)interpret the Victorian corset for the modern-day reader. Purcell, on the other hand engages more with the side of the corset debate put forward by Caplin: the corset is not merely an undergarment, or physical support, but an emotional support, as well, and Purcell takes this a step further to (re)vision the corset as an almost sentient, yet not necessarily malicious, being. A single garment can be both an oppressor and a liberator, a tool of psychological repression and one of emotional expression; but what the corset cannot be, and perhaps should not be, is distilled into one unequivocal meaning when the many facets of its construction defy absolute definition.

These two approaches to the Victorian corset from Waters and Purcell highlight the multifaceted and enduringly divisive nature of the garment through their literary interventions in the corset debate, creating as they do a hybrid garment constructed from both Victorian and modern cultural sensibilities. Furthermore, *Fingersmith* and *The Corset* demonstrate that while the corset is multifaceted, it also embodies – and constructs – individual identities. Each (re)interpretation of the garment shapes it to a particular character, and narrative, for a particular purpose; Maud and Ruth both wear corsets, but Maud's corset could not exist in Ruth's narrative, nor could Ruth's corset exist in Maud's – nor could they exist in Victorian narratives, due to their culturally hybridised nature. No two corsets are the same, and thus, while the corset as a garment can transcend eras and function within myriad narratives as a representative of Victorianism, individual neo-Victorian corsets, tied as they are to specific identities, cannot. The corset, perhaps more than any other garment, is an ideological battleground where social constructs and individual preference are at war. This article has



shown that, despite this, the image of the corset, entrenched as it is in cultural memory as a symbol of Victorianism, is utilised in neo-Victorian fiction as a narrative tool to convey to the reader meaning beyond the explicit, actively influence the construction of character, and, through a modern lens, offer new insights into the construction of the past.

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