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# **The corset as a fetish object of Victorian England and the crisis of values into the dynamics between class and gender**

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## The corset as a fetish object of Victorian England and the crisis of values into the dynamics between class and gender

### ABSTRACT

This article aims to explore the connections between the corset and fetishism in the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Supported by the perspective of Anne McClintock on *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (2010), in regards to fetish and the class and gender dynamics, this article analyzed the prominence of the corset in the maintenance of Victorian female domestic idleness. The scrutiny suggests the crisis of value conducted by the conflict among public and private spaces, by the connection among male agency, female stagnation and the impossibility of pleasure from female idleness are all embodied in the corset, which converts it into an object of fetishism. The recovery of the writings of Freud, the study of the genealogies of fetishism and the resumption of its etymological origin broadens the meaning of perspectives for the relation between the corset and the nineteenth century-female body, whose silhouette, drawn by corsetry, delimited measuredly its possibilities in its social role.

**Keywords:** corset. Fetishism. Victorian era.



## O corset como objeto-fetiche na Inglaterra Vitoriana e as crises de valores nas dinâmicas entre classe e gênero

### **RESUMO**

*Este artigo busca explorar as relações entre o corset e o fetichismo no século XIX e começo do século XX. Apoiado pela perspectiva de Anne McClintock, em *Couro imperial — Raça, gênero e sexualidade no embate colonial* (2010), sobre o fetiche e as dinâmicas entre classe e gênero, o protagonismo do corset na manutenção da ociosidade doméstica feminina vitoriana é analisado. A investigação sugere que a crise de valor produzida pelo conflito entre os espaços públicos e privados, pela relação entre a agência masculina e a estagnação feminina, bem como a impossibilidade do gozo do ócio feminino, são encarnadas no corset — que se converte em objeto-fetiche. A recuperação dos escritos de Freud, o estudo das genealogias do fetiche e a retomada de sua origem etimológica ampliam as perspectivas de significação para a relação do corset com o corpo feminino oitocentista, cuja silhueta, desenhada pela corseteria, demarcava calculadamente as possibilidades de seu papel social.*

**Palavras-chave:** corset. Fetichismo. Período vitoriano.

## **El corsé como objeto fetiche en la Inglaterra victoriana y la crisis de valores en la dinámica entre clase y género**

### **RESUMEN**

*Este artículo busca explorar la relación entre el corsé y el fetichismo en el siglo XIX y principios del XX. Con el apoyo de la perspectiva de Anne McClintock, en Imperial Leather — Race, género y sexualidad en la lucha colonial (2010), sobre el fetiche y la dinámica entre clase y género, se analiza el papel del corsé en el mantenimiento de la ociosidad doméstica victoriana. La investigación sugiere que la crisis de valor producida por el conflicto entre los espacios públicos y privados, la relación entre la agencia masculina y el estancamiento femenino, así como la imposibilidad de disfrutar del ocio femenino, se encarnan en el corsé, que se convierte en un objeto fetiche. La recuperación de los escritos de Freud, el estudio de las genealogías del fetiche y la reanudación de su origen etimológico amplían las perspectivas de significado para la relación entre el corsé y el cuerpo femenino del siglo XIX, cuya silueta, diseñada por la corsetería, calculó las posibilidades de su papel social.*

**Palabras clave:** corsé. Fetichismo. Inglaterra victoriana.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The corset can be defined as a garment usually structured by layers of fabrics and bonings, tied up to the body by back lacings. Its design has acquired different configurations throughout its existence — with imprecise origin. By restricting gestures and constricting volumes, the corset served as a tool for artificialisms, whose meanings can be identified from a socio-cultural and economic dynamics analysis (dynamics that dictated the rhythm and conducted the plurality of the corsetry configurations along its trajectory).

In the 19th century, the corset was used by women in several social contexts: the access to the garment was facilitated by the industrial processes and segmented publications that precisely demonstrated their domestic manufacturing processes. Technological innovations were implemented in its manufacturing and such efforts made the Victorian corset unique for its unprecedented capacity of constriction.

Such context allowed working class, bourgeois and aristocratic women to have full access to corsetry, setting up a precise definition for the female silhouette of the 19th century. At the peak of its use, the end of the century was the scenario of intense debates on the use of the corset and, among the contenders, there were doctors and dress reformers — consisting of feminists and artists, members of society and authorities. The corset became the target of relentless criticism, generally associated with public health and maternity.

At the same time, the use of the corset is incorporated into an intense production of fetishist literature, published in media vehicles such as *The Englishwoman's Domestic*

*Magazine*. Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather — Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (2010) explores the fetishism genealogy and the dynamics that constitute its formative process through the study of the relationship between empire and colony in the context of the Victorian England. Such mechanism was, in this article, used as a method for the investigation of the antagonistic positions that the corset had occupied all along its nineteenth century trajectory.

It is important that we understand the period in which the article was developed. Despite the solid contact points that there are between the use of the corset in the 19th century and its subsequent journey into present days, such analysis requires a more comprehensive and multifaceted approach, which this article does not intend to encompass.

## 2. FETISHISM GENEALOGIES

In the Victorian England scenario, Anne McClintock is guided by the relations between Empire and Colony to discuss concepts that characterize fetishism. *Imperial Leather* suggests a broader genealogy for fetishism, encompassing dynamics between race, class and gender beyond the domains of Freud's erotic perversions.

According to McClintock, "The Western discourse on fetishism was at least four centuries old before the phallus was single out as its central, organizing principle" (1995, p. 185). The etymology of "fetish" refers to the Portuguese term "feitiço"<sup>1</sup>, associated with magic arts or sorcery. The term was incorporated by the medieval catholic church into its disciplinary decrees of uncontrolled female sexuality and, centuries later, by Sigmund Freud (2007), insolently, in his theory of feminine lack. Meanwhile, fetish was also the term

used by Portuguese explorers “to describe the mysterious amulets and ritual objects favored by African peoples” on the West Coast of the continent (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 186).

The term *Fetish* is defined by the author as a “displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve at a personal level” (1995, p. 184). The fetish was decisive in the emergence of a merchant capitalism economy, in which the shock between the Christian feudal society and the African society based on lineages provoked an unprecedented crisis of values. The impacts of this violent encounter were felt, above all, in the necessary trades, in establishing “reciprocal economic and cultural relations with peoples whose systems of value were radically different” (1995, p. 187). Thus,

Pietz offers as one example the Akan goldweights. In response to the impact on trade of the gold-seeking Europeans, gold dust came to circulate through the Akan economy as a measure and store of value. Yet the Akan also used the goldweights as charms and amulets, worn on the body to bring good fortune and health. Thus two systems of value — European commodity value and indigenous social value — were embodied simultaneously in the same object. (PIETZ in MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 187).

The gold trade was only possible from the equalization of values attributed to the mineral. Although heterogeneous, the values relegated to the same object represented each society. The commercial relationship therefore depends on the resolution of such value conflicts.

In his essay *Le Fetichisme dans L'Amour* of 1887, the French educator and psychologist Alfred Binet displaced the term fetish to the field of sexual perversions — aiming to categorize the libidinal fascination with body parts or inanimate objects. For him, the passion devoted to such



objects was of the same order as the association value to objects considered magical by the “primitive” colonized African tribes.

Freud published in 1927 his renowned study *Fetishism*. Based on clinical cases, he locates the fetishism origin in an attempt to preserve the belief in the mother's penis: “o fetiche é um substituto do pênis da mulher (da mãe) em que o menininho outrora acreditou e que — por razões que nos são familiares — não deseja abandonar” (FREUD, 2007, p. 95). Observing the absence of his mother's penis, the boy feels, in the same blow, the threat of his own castration. As a consequence of an aversion to real female genital organs, an object is therefore elected as a substitute for the mother's penis: “Mas esse interesse sofre também um aumento extraordinário, pois o horror da castração ergueu um monumento a si próprio na criação desse substituto” (FREUD, 2007, p. 95). Such objects may suggest a visual resemblance to the penis or may relate to some object or body parts that are associated with the last impression (on the boy's visual trajectory) prior to the trauma.

Assim, o pé ou o sapato devem sua preferência como fetiche - ou parte dela - à circunstância de o menino inquisitivo espiar os órgãos genitais da mulher a partir de baixo, das pernas para cima; peles e veludo - como por longo tempo se suspeitou - constituem uma fixação da visão dos pêlos púbicos, que deveria ter sido seguida pela ansiada visão do membro feminino; peças de roupa interior, que tão freqüentemente são escolhidas como fetiche, cristalizam o momento de se despir, o último momento em que a mulher ainda podia ser encarada como fálica (FREUD, 2007, p. 96).

In the transference of the mother's penis to an object, the belief that, in fact, the woman had a phallus is maintained and abandoned. The penis substitute represents a commitment to this assumption: “No entanto, por meio do

fetichismo, é possível produzir um objeto que, ao mesmo tempo, é uma aparência posta como aparência e que permite ao sujeito 'agir como se não soubesse estar diante de uma aparência' (SAFATLE, 2006, p. 48). In Freudian argument, the girl has no place in the castration scene that originates the fetish.

In her article *Fetichismo e subjetividade feminina*, Denise Teles Freire Campos (2010) relies on Roudinesco and Plon researchs to highlight that female fetishism does not develops itself through the projection of the mother's penis on a fetish object, but rather through the relationship with a libidinal object (fetishist component) that will become the extension of the mother's body:

O mesmo "componente fetichista" deve ser interrogado no caso das mulheres que se prestam ao prazer dos fetichistas, pois, como assinala Clavreul (1990), pouco importa se esta parceira finja gostar ou apenas se submeta às práticas do perverso, o que está em jogo é o fascínio que este último exerce, de tal modo que a parceira sofra igualmente da lei do fetiche, que substitui a lei da diferença entre os sexos (a ausência de pênis na mãe) como causa do desejo (CAMPOS, 2010, p. 22).

McClintock stresses Schor attributes the fascination of fetishism to the undecidability between the recognition of "castration or its denial" (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 201), but reinforces that it is precisely the commitment to undecidability that produces the fascination for the fetish object. She emphasizes the need to "open the genealogy of fetishism to more theoretically subtle and historically fruitful accounts" (1995, p. 202), far from being being "a universally phallic substitute, the fetish can be any object under the sun" (1995, p. 185). The genealogical rescue of the term proposes an extension of the fetish object beyond phallocentrism: "Em todo fetiche há a insistência no caráter

factício do objeto (que não é estranho à origem portuguesa da palavra: 'feitoço, factício, fetiche') " (SAFATLE, 2006, p. 50).

From a broader perspective, McClintock identifies recurring, though not universal, features to draw a pattern corresponding to the emergence of the fetish and its structural cycle, which presents itself as

the displacement of the contradiction onto an object or person, which becomes the embodiment of the crisis in value; the investment of intense passion (erotic or otherwise) in the fetish object; and the repetitious, often ritualistic recurrence of the fetish object in the scene of personal or historical memory (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 185).

McClintock's structural cycle on fetishism could provide guidance for a fetishistic analysis of the use of the corset in the 19th century and its subsequent and debatable decline. Moreover, her understanding of fetishism beyond the Freudian sexual realm enables a more encompassing reflexive panorama.

### 3. THE CORSET

Corsets consist in garments intended for use on the upper part of the body. Traditionally made in fabric, they may contain one or several layers, usually have a structure made from bonings (internal spiral steels) and are adjusted by back lacings in order to provide a change in the natural silhouette of the human body.

The habit of tying the abdominal region can be identified in several cultures. Artifacts that promoted effects very similar to those of the corset can be observed in the

Goddess of Cretan Serpents (2000 - 1500 B.C.) with her "cintura esguia envolta por um cinto torcido" (KÖHLER, 1993, p. 103). An analysis of the Minoan frescoes shows that their worshippers also displayed artificially slender waists: both men and women have a wide waistband demarcating the region, indicating in particular a strict requirement for body construction (DOYLE, 1997, p. 01).

At the beginning of the 16th century, costumes in England and France were made up of two main components: a bodice and a skirt. Leaving the bodice independent of the skirt allowed a more intense fit and the development of costumes that resembled the male gibbons (type of stiff jacket) already structured (WAUGH, 2004, p. 17).

Since then, the modeling and structure of the corsets have been developed, assuming different configurations, in sync with the current zeitgeist. The functionality of their modeling served to beauty patterns and proper behavior of each period.

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The 17th century aristocratic attitude was prideful and theatrical, evoking the aesthetics of verticality (STEELE, 2001, p. 13), whose demand aimed to produce a haughty posture. To answer this imposition, the corset "consistia em

um grande número de barbatanas colocadas bem juntas e revestidas com tecido de ambos os lados” (KÖHLER, 1993, p. 389), its circumference was conical and its extension encompassed the waist line, where it had an arranged structure to provide volume under the lower skirt, so as to offer an immediate contrast.

In late 18th century France, a more flexible version of the corset was already incorporated into working class clothing. In the French historian Daniel Roche's examination of the Parisian wardrobes, about 63% of the maids, craftswomen, store owners and wives of government employees used corset clothing, as well as 50% of the wage female employees. Within the nobility, 81% of women also adopted the corset (ROCHE, 2007, p. 175).

In the 19th century, the use of the corset became popular among all social classes. The custom of tying girls in bodices (light and lightly structured corsets), which began yet in 18th century, became popular and is the target of extensive debate in medical and moral fields.

It is in the Victorian era that the corsets acquire their most popular configuration, and that remains as a reference in the contemporary imaginary: their more elongated and comprising modeling compresses and highlights the waist line and, in most of the models, extends to the pelvis.

Key technological innovations have produced new possibilities: the popularization of metal eyelets, designed in 1823 (SUMMERS, 2001, p. 13), has made it possible to intensify the pressure adjustment without breaking the holes through which the lace passes. The wide use of the two-piece busk (an artifact that enables frontal closure while providing support to the abdominal region) dates from 1829 (WAUGH, 2004, p. 79) and its introduction provided an unprecedented convenience in dressing.

A Victorian corset therefore produced considerable physical restraint. The bonings placed on its notably curved panels could then, as never before, compress the breast, thorax, pelvis and especially the waist, conforming them to a different configuration. This suited the picture of a sleepy, indisposed woman, tormented by faintings and hysteria, "languishing in ennui; incapable of constancy, decision or stature, the middle-class woman was, until recently, consistently disparaged" (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 160).

The price of a corset could range from \$ 1.00 to \$ 6.00. The large-scale manufacturing allows a massive adhesion to the piece. Examples produced in standard sizes then become available at affordable prices to the working class, and specialized corsetières served the customers looking for more sophisticated materials and custom pieces.

The historian Leigh Summers points out that the corsetry was essential both for building femininity and for building a class identity: "Corsetry was prized by fashion-conscious, middle-class women because it crafted the flesh into class-appropriate contours" (SUMMERS, 2001, p. 10).

The majority of working class women wore corsets as often as middle class women (SUMMERS, 2001, p. 11). Despite the easy access to corsets due to industrialization, many of these women were also able to make their own corsets. In France, married working class women worked in their own homes, performing textile-related tasks: "confectionavam lingerie, espartilhos, luvas, casacos e coletes masculinos, ou fiavam" (CRANE, 2006, p. 106), in addition to being the working-class members of the corsetry industries themselves. Women's publications such as *The Young English Woman*, *The Workwoman's Guide*, and *Harper's Bazaar* routinely published illustrated texts with

detailed information to instruct their home confection (SUMMERS, 2001, p. 11).

#### 4. THE CORSET AND FEMALE WORK

Using the same clothings style as the middle and upper classes had its price, since the clothing of that time was rich in volumes and ornaments, restrictive and appropriate to the idleness of a decorative aristocratic woman (CRANE, 2006, p. 70). At the end of the 18th century, middle and upper class woman no longer had any institutional function; on the contrary, her social condition was that of a domestic ornament, "she lived only to adorn the wordly ambition of her husband" (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p.160). Therefore, the adherence of working class women to the style of the aristocracy demanded great effort. Diane Crane points out that adherence to current fashion

era um meio de participar da comunidade fora do ambiente da casa do patrão e de se sentir parte dela. Roupas da moda eram praticamente a única forma de cultura popular facilmente acessível aos criados da época, e eles as usavam tanto para afirmar a sua identidade pessoal quanto para reivindicar um status social mais alto (2006, p. 125).

Restrictive clothing for middle and upper class women was also used by young people working in factories, although the exposure of large crinolines to industrial machinery posed a real threat to their physical integrity when performing these activities (CRANE, 2006, p. 126). Its use was a hindrance not only for the working class, but also for the middle class.

The image of enjoyment and permanent leisure of middle-class women, as well as their portentous garments

and the abundance of furniture and decorative devices that composed the domestic environment, was essential to the family status displayed by the man. However, the reality of the domestic economy did not correspond to the conditions required to opportunize aristocratic mimesis. In order to ensure a family structure that is suited to the distinction of the middle class and female inertia, it was necessary to employ at least three domestic servants. However, only a small portion of the upper and middle classes could afford such remuneration. The reality is that most English households had only one maid responsible for all the domestic tasks;

apart from the tiny, truly leisured elite - idleness was less a regime of inertia imposed on wilting middle-class wives and daughters than a laborious and time-consuming character role performed by women who wanted membership in the "respectable" class. For most women whose husbands or fathers could not afford enough servants for genuine idleness, domestic work had to be accompanied by the historically unprecedented labor of rendering invisible every sign of that work (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 161-2)

From 1857 onwards, the typical aristocratic women's garment, imitated by other classes, included the use of crinolines: "o termo designava, inicialmente, uma armação feita com crina de cavalo" (KÖHLER, 1993, p. 527). It was a large complex caged-frame, formed by vertical and horizontal stems and, in some cases, covered by padded panels. Its shape and dimensions have changed countless times in the course of this century, even reaching great proportions — to the point where more than ten metres of fabric were required to make the skirts that covered them (KÖHLER, 1993, p. 527). In this way,



qualquer atividade realizada com as crinolinas levava as mulheres à fadiga. Somados ao uso do espartilho, era muito comum elas terem desmaios, falta de ar, inapetência, ficavam sempre pálidas e com aspecto doentio (XIMENES, 2010, p. 62).

Natural pallor was valued and enhanced through makeup, which created dark circles and bluish veins (XIMENES, 2010, p. 62). To erase the signs of wear, caused by housework, the nightly ritual of rubbing one's hands with bacon fat and sleeping with gloves was commonplace (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 162). All the signs that were evident of the women's agency, especially in work related to cleaning the house, kitchen, and childcare, were carefully hidden through an outward appearance that evoked fragility.

## 5. THE CRISIS OF VALUE IN CORSETRY

Especially from the second half of the century onwards, the use of the corset became the focus of debate in the medical field and to those interested in clothing reform and first wave feminists. Feminist writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps protests in 1873.

Off with the corsets!... No, don't give them to Biddy. Never fasten about another woman, in the sacred name of charity, the chains from which you have yourself escaped. Never give away your earrings, when you have acquired a distaste for the wearing of them. Never make presents of the gew-gaws and frippery which your maturing taste discards. What is intrinsically unbecoming or unrighteous is as unbecoming and unrighteous for your cook as for yourself... So burn up the corsets! No, nor do you save the whalebones. You will never need whalebones again. Make a bonfire of the cruel steel that has lorded it over the contents of the abdomen and thorax so many thoughtless years, and heave a sigh of relief; for your "emancipation", I assure you, has

from this moment begun (PHELPS apud STEELE, 2001, p. 60)

The opinions on corset usage by women and girls triggered multiple reactions. This movement initially fomented a search for the reform of the corset and not its abolition, since it was believed that the woman's body was weaker than that of men, and therefore needed support (STEELE, 2001, p. 52).

The same was thought about children: binding them in more malleable and less structured versions of corsets was a guarantee that they would develop with an adequate posture. Even boys, still in the 18th century, were also bound until a certain age (SUMMERS, 2001, p. 63).

Waist reduction was seen as a natural instinct (STEELE, 2001, p. 54) and the body format resulting from its use was essential for the adherence to the fashion at the time, created so that it could not be worn without waist reduction. It is important to note that the corset also served as a bra: in addition to offering support for the breast, some models had padding in order to provide volume and a rounded shape for the breasts (STEELE, 2001, p. 54). Debates on developing healthier structures and modeling for corsets occurred very frequently at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. There was a proliferation of studies and patent claims that sought to develop corsets capable of offering the health preservation.

However, a significant *anti-corset* movement began to take shape through medical literature. This was based on the intersection with reproductive rights and feminist protests that supported a clothing reform in favour of a stronger vitality that would allow parity with men (STEELE, 2001, p. 59). Dress reformers, such as the American feminist Amelia Bloomer, proposed a utilitarian use rather

than decorative to clothing. The process of creating new forms of clothing also involved the artistic class:

Mas já em 1900, parece que o desenhador belga Henry Van der Velde exibira “roupas reformadas” em Kerfeld (sic), centro da indústria têxtil da Alemanha e seus desenhos, que troçavam dos espartilhos, apresentavam cinturas subidas e eram construídos sobre “princípios arquitectónicos” (...) (WILSON, 1985, p. 288).

The painter Gustave Klimt, in partnership with Emilie Flöge — his friend and owner of a Viennese boutique — was motivated by the anti-industrialism of Wiener Werkstätte, creating dresses and other attire with loose and airy features. Klimt was already adept at wearing tunics, dressing in them for their comfort and freedom of movement: “um misto de caftã oriental e traje nô, do teatro tradicional japonês, foi concebida por ele mesmo e simbolizava o retorno a uma vida simples e natural” (BRANDSTÄTTER, 2000, p. 9).

The women's emancipation movement and the dress reform, together with the admonitions of medical articles and the development of the fashion silhouette, progressively led to a reconfiguration of the corset. This reconfiguration took shape with a flat front and curves from the sides towards the back (pieces characteristic of the Edwardian period), ending with the complete flattening of the pelvis and hips (without properly emphasizing the waist) between 1910 and 1920.

The success of Paul Poiret's couturier creations, which promoted a new figure through an elongated silhouette in fluid and comfortable dresses, was the defining element of a new aesthetic, which became a guideline for numerous designers (LAVER, 2005, p. 224). For this new fashion setting, the use of the traditional corset was no longer

necessary. Its presence was replaced by lighter pieces, in elastic and synthetic fibers, such as bra and belts, which have taken on a multitude of shapes (STEELE, 2001, p. 148). This period can be associated with a profound change of the social role of women, who during and after the First World War take on new functions that were outside their scope. (STEELE, 2001, p. 151).

During the same period as traditional corsetry disappeared, diets and exercises became popular: Vogue magazine in 1908 celebrated the slimness of the women who follow fashion "How slim, how graceful, how elegant women look!" (STEELE, 2001, p. 146). Fashion historian Valerie Steele maintains that the corset, its structure, and shape were internalized: "o espartilho nunca desapareceu realmente; foi antes convertido em outros tipos de roupas de baixo e finalmente no corpo moderno bem-exercitado" (SVENDSEN, 2010, p. 93). With the decline of the *corset*, diets, exercises, and later surgical procedures were incorporated to bring back the *corseted figure*, which dictates beauty standards in contemporary Western culture (SVENDSEN, 2010, p. 92).

In 1947, the *couturier* Christian Dior revived the *corset* with the release of his New Look. The wasp waist and wide skirt showed his inspiration in late nineteenth century fashion. He was so successful that his *shape* was responsible for defining 1950s fashion (BRAGA, 2005, p. 95). In the 1980s, designers such as Vivienne Westwood and Jean-Paul Gaultier brought back the use of the *corset*, inserting it in their collections as an external piece rather than lingerie (STEELE, 2001, p. 167). Since then, the *corset* resurfaced in fashion, but this time in a very diverse position, gaining space on the catwalk, in party attire, or is even inserted in

the clothing of urban tribes such as Goths and sadomasochists, evoking a not too distant past.

## 6. CORSET E FETICHISMO

Using the open genealogy proposed by Anne McClintock as a starting point, it is possible to relate the *corset* to the fetishistic dynamics of the Victorian era. Based on the structure proposed by the author, it is possible to contemplate the fascination drawn by the *corset* in the 19th century and its close relationship with the power dynamics in which women were inserted (and which the corset not only served, but also personified and contributed to the maintenance of a fragile figure, resigned, and physically attached to the domestic space).

McClintock structures the fetish into recurring identifiable traits: a pattern that, in addition to Freudian phallogocentric syllogism, can be applied to any object or subject enveloped in a dynamic of power and fascination, enchantment and magic, as his own etymology denounces.

### 6.1 Phase 1: social contradiction experienced on an intensely personal level

The Victorian attire of the upper classes, widely spread and reproduced by all other classes, was composed in its totality of merely ornamental characteristics. Far from being based on anatomical necessities, the theatricality of the garments served only the wardrobe of an inert fragile woman devoted to idleness. For that,

as saias armadas pelas crinolinas eram  
verdadeiramente prodigiosas, ao ponto de

tornar impossível que duas mulheres entrassem juntas em uma sala ou sentassem no mesmo sofá, pois os babados dos vestidos ocupavam todo o espaço (LAVER, 2005, p. 180).

The extensive volume of delicate fabrics, the length of the sleeves, the number of frills, the uncomfortable and oversized crinoline covered with padded layers, the simulation of dark circles and veins through makeup to enhance paleness, and finally the *corset*, all served to corroborate this image.

The inert woman was a central figure in maintaining the limits of domesticity. The cult of domesticity was related to the preservation of tradition that society, characterized by the frenetic pace of its transformations, sought to safeguard. The actor, creator, and discoverer of history man was destined for the public domain. Meanwhile the private domain depended on the preservation and protection of women through immobility. As McClintock comments on and references the British historian Sir Charles Petrie,

It became the sign of a man's importance that he keeps his women-folk on idleness... The practice of female idleness spread through the middle class until work for a woman became misfortune and disgrace (PETRIE apud MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 412).

The argument for the continuity of tradition through women can be endorsed through the role of the mother and grandmother in their clothing choices for the women of the family. Through this familial habit, we can infer that "The cultural weight placed on propriety and respectability made it difficult for women to abandon the corset, even they wanted to" (STEELE, 2001, p. 51).

In this context, domestic work performed by middle-class women, unable to reproduce the genuine idleness of the

upper class, set up an immense social contradiction. Domestic work revealed the inferiority of their class, as well as the inferiority of the man's craft, whose remuneration was insufficient to support idleness. Meanwhile, it dangerously denounced the permanent dependence on unpaid female work for the maintenance of the Victorian economy.

## **6.2 Phase 2: the displacement of the contradiction to an object or person, which becomes the embodiment of the crisis of value**

The political activist Frances E. Russel attributed the restriction of women's perspectives of social advancement to the clothing of her time. "Ridiculous constrictive fashions" (RUSSEL apud SUMMERS, 2001, p. 98), proclaims Russell, who accused fashion of bringing health problems and being proof of women's inferiority (SUMMERS, 2001, p. 98).

Women who transgressed the Victorian boundary between private and public, labor and leisure, paid and unpaid work, became increasingly stigmatized as specimens of *racial* regression. Such women, it was contended, did not inhabit history proper but were prototypes of anachronistic humans: childlike, irrational, regressive, and atavistic, existing in a permanently anterior time within modernity (MCCLINTOCK, 1995, p. 42)

Valerie Steele points out that the English novelist Charles Reade devoted much of his 1873 volume *A Simpleton*, to denigrate the use of *corsets*: "throw that diabolical machine [i.e. corset] into the fire" (READE apud STEELE, 2001, p. 50). Through the feminist voices of the first wave, Victorian medicine, and dress reformers, the *corset* embodied the crisis of value between progress and tradition, the private and the domestic: "Indeed, the corset has been described as

a “quintessentially Victorian” garment, because of its role in creating and policing middle-class femininity” (STEELE, 2001, p. 35).

### **6.3 Phase 3: the intense passion investment (erotic or not) in the fetish object**

Between 1867 and 1874, *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* published more than 150 letters regarding *corsets* and *Tight Lacing*. The intense volume of correspondence forced the magazine to create a supplement dedicated exclusively to this segment (STEELE, 2001, p. 93). *Tight Lacing* is the practice of using emphatically adjusting *corsets* at the waist to provide definitive artificial bodily reductions. Its practice in the Victorian period is surrounded by controversy. Some historians, such as Leigh Summers, maintain that the practice was the rule among women in the 19th century, but evidence says otherwise - fashion historian Valerie Steele maintains that *Tight Lacing* was rarely practiced among Victorian women; however, the practice was widespread among fetishist literature. An intense eroticism surrounded the subject: the image of women and young *tight lacing* martyrs displaying tiny waists as well as men forced to reduce their waistlines through the use of the corset permeated the Victorian imagination and the illustrations in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (EDM).

However, Steele states that the “tiny waist mentioned in sources such as the EDM were by no means typical of Victorian women” (STEELE, 1997, p. 67). The historian corroborates her research by analyzing corset advertisements, in which the size grid was disclosed (she also does this through museum research: for those who



expect proportionally tiny waists, the analysis of such pieces is “disappointing”, quotes Steele).

In addition to erotic passion, Summers quotes fashion historians C. Willet and Phyllis Cunnington to rescue a curious middle-class custom in vogue in 1890: among single women, it was believed that the waist circumference should be maintained with the measure corresponding to the age at which the young woman intended to marry, and for this reason they made great efforts to retain the measure of 21 inches maximum (SUMMERS, 2001, p. 88).

#### **6.4 Phase 4: the repetitive and often ritual recurrence of the fetish object in the scene of personal memory or historical memory**

The crisis of value of the traditional corsetry had its apogee at the beginning of the 20th century. Despite the numerous social movements that proclaimed its extinction, the effective collapse of the piece was promoted by the emergence of a new silhouette in Parisian fashion, proposed by emerging creators of the period. An elongated, young and excessively slender figure is now desired (STEELE, 2001, p. 153). The practice of exercises and adherence to restrictive diets therefore became commonplace. This is what Sevendsen shows, for whom the diet at the end of the Victorian era “foi um fenômeno que se difundiu na classe média e que estava relacionada com a regulação do consumo de alimentos, de tal modo que disso resultasse um corpo idealizado, esbelto” (2010, p. 85).

In parallel with the new habits, new modeling pieces are also introduced, in order to provide reduction of body volumes. They have a different configuration compared to the traditional corsetry: they are made with elastic threads

and have a more malleable structure. They remain an integral component of the female wardrobe until the 60s (STEELE, 2001, p. 143). Much of the medical criticism of the use of the corset was based on the belief that the piece was responsible for incapacitating the woman's body for motherhood, causing complications in childbirth and fetal malformation. Interestingly, after the extinction of the traditional corsetry it was possible to notice a considerable decay in birth rates (STEELE, 2001, p. 138). The responsibility of preserving the *corset* forms through restrictive diets and physical exercise had a profound impact on female habits.

The French novelist fetishist Rétif de la Bretonne proclaims: "The nude female body 'become[s] art by controlling the limits of the form'" (BRETONNE apud STEELE, 2001, p. 137). The recurrence of the fetish object resonated extraordinarily in the configuration of bodies at the turn of the century. The latter, free from the ties of the traditional corsetry, remained conformed, either by garments derived from the corset, or by the surveillance of the limits of the naked body, whose appreciation remained (and remains) conditioned to the similarity of the corset shapes.

## 7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The application of McClintock's pattern, imbued in the functioning of fetishism as a guideline for the study of the trajectory of the corset in the Victorian period, bases hypotheses on the curious path between its apogee and its sunset.

Between the XVI and XIX centuries, in a more or less expressive way, the corset was an indispensable article in women's clothing, with the purpose of conforming the bodies

to the configurations determined by the patterns of behavior and beauty, ideals of each period. In the Victorian era, therefore, its modeling and structure corroborated the archetype of the idle, frail, weak and inert woman whose agency was restricted to the domestic space as a servant for the husband. It is in this period that its use reaches its maximum popularization and becomes part of the wardrobe of women belonging to all social classes.

By examining the interior of the structures of gender and class roles in the eighteenth century, McClintock refutes the authenticity of the enjoyment of female leisure, revealing, therefore, a series of inconsistencies related to the erasure of domestic work and the denial of the importance of women for the maintenance of the Victorian economy. It is precisely in the midst of the effervescence of the crises of Victorian values that the obsession (erotic or not) for the corset is established by means of intense debates about its use, which results in its demonization and consequent decadence. The protagonism of corset in the contradictions imbued in the dynamics between Victorian genders and classes ends up imputing to it the status of fetish object.

Despite this trajectory, evidences of its permanence is found in the conformation of torsos in the 20th and 21st centuries — defined by the imaginary corset that acts through the surveillance of the bodies, instrumented through diets and physical exercises. Although absent, the corset continues to define silhouettes, in accordance with aesthetic and social standards.

## Notas

<sup>1</sup> Portuguese term for “spell”.

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