

“THE ABUSE OF DRESS”: VICTORIAN FASHION & FATPHOBIA

Advice manuals for middle-class women were popular in the nineteenth-century both for the consumer and for the aspiring woman writer. Mary Eliza Haweis began her long literary career by writing articles on fashion and beauty for *St. Paul's Magazine* and similar magazines of the periodical press. Later, these articles were combined and reprinted by Chatto & Windus in expensive bound volumes titled *The Art of Beauty* and *The Art of Dress*.

The hour-glass silhouette synonymous with the Victorian woman is iconic, yet Haweis's manuals criticised this ideal, instead of endorsing it. It is plausible that women who wrote fashion advice seemed to be vapid, as they placed value upon improving outward appearances to the detriment of intellectual progress. Outwardly, even Haweis can be considered as complicit in her own repression. It is she, after all, that writes a set of rules for women to conform to. Yet, underlying this seeming involvement in her own oppression Haweis demonstrated an approach to fashion and beauty which was actually challenging and innovative, if not always in the ways expected or desired. Without directly confronting gender differences Haweis sought to offer an alternative approach to dress that had woman's agency at the centre. By reclaiming fashion as a weapon to be wielded by women, Haweis gifts them back an element of control and power over their own bodies. Recognizing and approving of the ways in which women's bodies were all different and unique is therefore essential.

Haweis writes with a conviction which must have surely stemmed from her own self-confidence in her own abilities. She does not coyly justify her aptitude for this form of writing but speaks with authority from the very first line. Her own sense of identity was

strong, and it is this which she attempts throughout her varied career to get other women to understand.

Haweis's outspokenness and self-assurance was a point of frequently contention between herself and others. Reviews of her works were not usually favourable as she could come across autocratic, even high-handed. For example, *The Art of Beauty* can generally be thought of as Haweis's most traditionally Victorian text, yet it was met with harsher criticism than her more masculine literary pursuits. An article appeared in *The Saturday Review* which disapproved of the text.

The reviewer writes that few will "profit by Mrs. Haweis's advice to lavish the same care on the fascinations of their personal adornment as they now do upon higher things." This review clearly platforms the notion that women were, at this time, resisting participating in their own oppression. However, this reviewer may have missed the mark. Haweis never seeks to term one thing 'high brow' and another 'low brow' – in fact, she works to break down these binaries so that woman could be both beautiful and intelligent. It is a bold opinion to have, especially in an age where more women were beginning to take the view that femininity was fallacious as well as a hindrance.

Instead of seeing fashion writing as trivial, critics have recently begun to consider its application as an alternative form of discourse.

In *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles, and Activism* the author, Kortsch, presents it as a "private language" which speaks directly to women readers, and which is an alternative from the predominant "patriarchal discourse" (4,5). It is also

suggested in this text that women writers, such as Haweis, “validated women’s literacy in dress culture as a form of feminine knowledge, creativity, and power” (2). Thus, fashion is quite an open-ended topic. On one hand it is the very thing by which women are physically bound, yet it also provided a way for women to create their own artistic vision. Instead of using needle or paintbrush, which consigned women to a private space, dress demonstrated liberation. Their art could be seen acting upon the physical body by any and all that came into contact with the wearer. Therefore, by using their own bodies to project their artistic licence these women participated in a practice that can be considered quite radical.

Women’s bodies could become self-governed by treating fashion as a device to showcase their different tastes and styles. Body size and shape is an integral part of this process. It is these differences that Haweis encourages her women readers to develop. Her texts are titled *Art* with a capital A, thus signalling that Haweis is choosing to dignify the experiences of women, instead of taking the opposite view and deriding women for their lack of a loftier goal.

Instead of being an obstruction for women’s emancipation, the study and exploitation of fashion, which she believes is “natural right of every woman” (*Beauty* 3), was a way for women to wrest back control over their physical appearance. However, women, such as Haweis, had only just begun to see this possibility. Fashion was presently in the hands of tradesmen and milliners, whom Haweis insists women must resist. It is after all the female body which suffers from practices like tight-lacing, not salesmen that have decreed it a necessary practice. She recommends that “in every department of art – regardless of derision, censure, and ‘advice’ – we must do as we like” (*Beauty* 224). This last phrase is almost a kind of shibboleth which has been used by feminists as a call to action. To do as one liked

meant to reject what one has been told – instead of obeying a rigid set of principles women are encouraged to act with the freedom to choose. This is Haweis's ultimate goal.

Haweis writes the following in *The Art of Dress*:

“any costumes which impair or contradict the natural lines of the human frame are to be rejected as ugly, or injurious, or both; for they are the abuse of dress, not its proper use”
(*Dress* 33).

The abuse that Haweis speaks of, and which this paper is titled after, is undoubtedly the way in which clothing has become exploited and transformed into a tool of domination. By wearing these “costumes” as Haweis calls them, women are physically impeded from personal and political progress.

There is no other garment of this period so exemplary of this form of control other than the corset.

In her texts Haweis advises against the use of a corset to artificially alter body shape. Tight-lacing the corset, in particular, is the most odious practice. She writes that the corset becomes “a tyrant” which in “aspiring to embrace, hugs like a bear – crushing the ribs, injuring the lungs and heart, the stomach, and many other internal organs” (*Beauty* 48/9). As a symbol of a patriarchal society the corset is aptly described as a tyrant. The garment, she notes, can be useful to women in terms of support, but it has been spoiled and misused. Haweis therefore does not deny “the necessity for some close fitting garment as a support to the body” (*Beauty* 48). The language she uses exemplifies her knowledge as a woman who is used to wearing the garment. She talks about supporting the female form rather than controlling it. The tyrant, she claims, must to be rebelled against if women are to become free to produce Art in beauty and in dress.

Haweis calls the corset a “detestable invention”, noting the contrivance behind the device, and alludes to the threat of death it presents when she terms it “like a coffin” (Beauty 67).

She stresses the damage being inflicted upon the female body in her accompanying illustrations which show the natural position of the organs versus the unnatural position.

Whilst her text could be seen as a trivial contribution to the numerous advice manuals that were in print at this time, the arguments she is making about these injurious practices should not be treated as inconsequential.

The corset physically changed the natural shape of women, and pushed their undesirable fat into the desirable places. The Victorian’s certainly valued plumpness, but it had to conform and not overstep the boundaries into corpulence. The endless barrage of advertisements exemplify the contradictory ways women’s bodies have been talked about, and continue to be discussed today. To be too thin, or too fat, was an extreme that signaled resistance to the status quo. Newspapers of the nineteenth-century must have missed the irony, for example, of featuring the headline “LADIES TOO THIN in the BUST” which goes on to discuss “scientific treatment” to “obtain a good figure” directly above “TO STOUT PEOPLE” which suggests “how to pleasantly and rapidly cure obesity.”

It would not be just to dismiss the pressure women have felt to be plump, from the Victorian age through to modern times when women are expected to have a ‘full figure’. This paper sadly only has space to discuss one of the multitude of unfair beauty ideals imposed upon the female form, however.

More than a century after Haweis's works were written, the corseted body is still one of competing ideals. It facilitates the sexualization and the curbing of the female form. It is chiefly seen now in either a sadomasochistic, or bridal, context.

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Interestingly, it is used therefore to coerce the female body into a different shape when it is expected to be at its most desirable: during the wedding day and during sex. The former typically made in black latex can be held up in stark contrast to the latter satiny white version. It is difficult to ignore the obvious connotations that are so reminiscent of an age which saw women as either wicked or angelic. The Victorian corset is no longer worn everyday by women but nineteenth century stereotypes of women still permeate it. The physical corset has mostly been consigned to the past, but it is possible to argue that the ideology behind it has metamorphosed into a concept, or attitude, that has permeated today's society insidiously. The hour-glass silhouette is still very much an ideal form of female beauty, therefore.

There is no better proof of this than the current debate raging around the fat body and the emergence of the term 'fatphobia'. The Fat Acceptance Movement seeks to change the bias in social attitudes against fat bodies.

Social media has begun to call out these long-held and deep-seated prejudices through the use of hashtags such as #fatgirlscan and #allbodiesaregoodbodies for example. Texts such as Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* from 1978, and more recently Charlotte Cooper's *Fat Activism* from 2016, explore this movement.

Orbach rejects "the limitations of women's role" (14) and "a kind of body fascism, a tyranny of thin and the sense that we should all be one size" (xix). This is a notion that Haweis was

facing down in her texts. The time spent trying to abide by a one-size-fits-all approach to dress drew women's attention away from social progress. The corset may physically impair women, but this ideology was far more damaging. Diet culture forces women to focus upon losing weight and fitting in. By keeping women's bodies and ideals small they are led away from political activism. Haweis recognized the way women were constricted by this, and her solution was to "cultivate the inner and the outer grace together" (Beauty 6).

Her goal was to instill confidence in women through the ways they dressed and styled themselves which women could then carry into other areas of their lives. Thus, she writes: "it is possible to actually open a way for the development of the mental and moral good by smoothing the physical veil which encumbers and distorts it" (Beauty 6).

Haweis's rejection of a universal policy of beauty speaks to the Fat Acceptance Movement. She states that it was incredibly difficult for women to dress well "under the existing prejudice that everybody must be dressed like everybody else!" (Beauty 15), and that it is absurd to expect every variety of woman to dress in one style. She asks "why, if fate has made one grow stouter than it is permitted to be, must she squeeze herself into the tightest of costumes because it is the fashion?" (Beauty 281). She believed that this restriction to one image "simply tends to burlesque" (Beauty 40) women.

Woman, when viewed in this way, are less like people and more like mannequins which supported the latest fashions. On her body the work of men was hung; they were, Haweis suggests, playing willingly or otherwise into the hands of "various tradesmen whose interest is to sell their goods" (Beauty 15). Through reinstating beauty and dress as woman's natural right Haweis attempts to elevate it to a subject worthy of serious study. She breathes life back

into the mannequin, and encourages women to not be worn by their clothes. This concern is picked up by later feminists, suggesting that it remains a prevalent issue. For example, in her novel *Orlando* Virginia Woolf writes “it is clothes that wear us and not we them” which serves to reiterate that women’s relationship with fashion and clothing is continually problematic.

All women, regardless of their body shape, are invited by Haweis to “make a stand in the face of fashion, that bugbear of the sex, and institute a new era!” (*Beauty* 91). This call to arms resonates through the ages to women who continue to suffer from the burden of imitating society’s accepted representation of beauty.