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Bra-burners and Corseted Ladies. The Female Body, Underwear, and Feminism

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1. Introduction

The unmentionables, as pieces of underclothing used to be humorously called, are mentioned more and more frequently within academic discourse. Previously, the study of underwear was seen as too trivial or even frivolous a subject for scientific inquiry,[1] unless one was interested in the history of fabrics or the textile industry. Even historians of fashion tended to focus on the visible garments, especially if they reflected the national character, often ignoring the elaborate designs that made wearing outer clothes possible. Yet, as Christian Dior famously remarked, "Without foundations there can be no fashion."[2] Indeed, the changes in fashion were possible only because underwear allowed for the body to be modified and moulded according to the current beauty standards.[3] As a consequence of that standard, the range of activities in which women were able to participate as well as their public perception were affected. Thus, women's liberation has been intimately connected to fashion.

[1] C. Willet Cunnington, Phillis Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes* (New York: Dover Publications, 1992), 11.

[2] Shelley Tobin, *Inside Out. A Brief History of Underwear* (London: The National Trust, 2000), 3.

[3] Elizabeth Ewing, *Fashion in Underwear: from Babylon to Bikini Briefs* (New York: Dover Publications, 2010), 1.

This text looks at the modifications in women's underwear throughout the history of the Western countries, mainly English-speaking ones, focusing on the twentieth century. It links these changes with class and gender assumptions, as clothes reflected and shaped and continue to do so the cultural expectations towards males and females of various social status. Underwear is linked with the changing attitudes towards human sexuality and what is considered to be its "legitimate" expression. It also reflects what are the "shifting notions of public and private."[4] Finally, changes in attitudes towards the female body and women's garments are connected with feminism.

2. Functions of clothing

Clothing, both visible on the surface and worn underneath, performs several functions. Some of them are practical: they provide protection from the elements or accidental injury, help with hygiene and increase comfort. Yet humans have worn clothing for many more purposes other than mere utility – fashion is also a "conduit for the expression of social identity, political ideas, and aesthetic taste."[5] Garments send information about our wealth and class – many rulers would forbid the members of the lower classes to wear some colours or fabrics, which were reserved for the aristocracy.[6] Religious minorities or harlots were expected to signal their "deviance" through their clothing.[7] Likewise, garments frequently send a message about our worldview. In the seventeenth century, the Royalists' flamboyant attire, wigs and make up identified them immediately against the sombre looks of the Puritans.[8] Tartan was banned after the Jacobite uprisings as a symbol of treachery. Patriotic Polish women wore black during the period of the so-called national mourning after the failure of the January Uprising and the cruel reprisals that came in its wake.[9] Now, second-hand no logo clothes, organic cotton and artificial leather signal a person with strong ecological sympathies, while a burka worn in Western Europe denotes a devout Muslim. In some professions uniforms are required to inform the public that

[4] Edwina Ehrman, *Undressed. A Brief History of Underwear* (London: V& A Publishing, 2015), 9.

[5] Christopher Breward, *Fashion* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 9.

[6] Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat, *Historia stroju*, transl. Krystyna Szeżyńska-Maćkowiak (Warszawa: WAB, 2002), 99; Marianne Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, transl. Nicholas Hills (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 56.

[7] Efran Tseëlon, *The Masque of Femininity. The Presentation of Women in Everyday Life* (London: Sage Publications, 1995), 125.

[8] Ewing, *Fashion in Underwear*, 32–33.

[9] Danuta Radwan, "Znaki ofiary, tęsknoty i cierpliwości w cierpieniu. Biżuteria żałoby narodowej i powstania styczniowego w zbiorach Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa," *Krzysztofory. Zeszyty Naukowe Muzeum Historycznego Miasta Krakowa* 31 (2013): 53–54.

their wearer is a staff member – though there is, of course, no practical need for a psychiatrist to wear a white cloak!

Clothes have also signified gender identification – though probably less so currently than in the previous centuries. In many countries it was forbidden by law to wear clothes of the opposite sex, but it was mainly women wanting to pass for men who were the ones that were punished.[10] The strong association between clothes and gender is reflected in various metonymic expressions, in which a skirt/petticoat signifies a female, while trousers stand for a man.[11] In William Shakespeare's plays or Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* (1722) it is sufficient for a female protagonist to wear trousers to be taken for a male. For a long time, even women's marital status could have been determined by headgear.

Functions of underwear

Underwear, to a certain extent, shares the practical functions of outer garments. It protects the sensitive body parts from dirt or injury. Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat also expresses an opinion that underwear developed to guard women from unwanted sexual advances, when our ancestors shared a cave, and to hide the smell of menstrual blood that could attract predators.[12] Underclothes also isolate the body from the external outfits, usually much coarser and unpleasant when worn next to the skin. For several centuries, they additionally served as a means of keeping personal hygiene. When washing the whole body was seen a health hazard, people who could afford it simply changed their shirts/chemises whenever they felt dirty.[13] Edwina Erhman stresses the rather obvious fact that "linen and (from the nineteenth century) cotton were worn against the skin because they could be laundered at high temperatures,"[14] while most outer garments were never washed – so they had to be protected from the secretions of the body by underwear. Both types of the aforementioned fabrics are also absorbent, which helps to regulate body temperature.[15] However disgusting it appears now, "silk and linen garments next the skin were less liable to harbour lice."[16]

[10] Toussaint-Samat, *Historia stroju*, 349–351.

[11] For example, "a bit of skirt" is a sexy woman, "skirt chaser" is a playboy, and "wear the trousers" means be in control. seventeenth century poets often wrote about the flutter of petticoats to denote female charm, Cunnington, Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 53.

[12] Toussaint-Samat, *Historia stroju*, 34.

[13] Katherine Ashengurg, *Historia brudu*, transl. Aleksandra Górska (Warszawa: Belladona, 2009), 87–107.

[14] Ehrman, *Undressed*, 13.

[15] Tobin, *Inside Out*, 3.

[16] Cunnington, Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 54–55.

Undergarments are worn not only for utilitarian purposes. Their role is also to conceal parts of the body considered intimate and shameful, the exposure of which could be a moral hazard, both for the person involved and the onlookers. Thus, they are connected to historically and geographically changing notions of modesty. Yet from the late Middle Ages onwards underwear predominantly focused on performing a much more important, cultural function – that of smoothing, firming, shaping, or even deforming the female body to achieve a silhouette that was considered attractive. It was meant to give an illusion of what was considered at the time a perfect figure.[17] Despite the obvious differences in male and female anatomy, a dressed human being, especially in loose clothing, does not immediately reveal his or her gender, which is constructed through attire and hairstyle, while undergarments often exaggerate the anatomical differences through lacing or padding some areas. Underwear used to give the body the frame necessary for outer garments at the same time enlarging or revealing the aspects of the figure that were considered titillating: the neck, bosom, waist, hips, buttocks, ankles, bellies or back. Ironically, fashionable clothes have often "ignored the body's actual conformation,"[18] expecting the wearer to augment the body with structural undergarments. As C. Willet and Phyllis Cunnington humorously note, the "female costume has assumed far greater variety of shape than that of the male, and has appeared with almost any outline – except that of a woman."[19]

The final function of underwear is to titillate, offering an interplay between covering and revealing, denying and promising access to intimate body parts. Most people would agree that a "partially clad body is more exciting sexually than the naked body."[20] A visit to a sauna or a nudist resort would probably confirm that opinion. Thus, intimate garments "enhance the physical desirability of the wearer."[21]

3. History of women's underwear and its implications

The development of underwear is related to the social status of women and implications about their "nature." Gender, as a social construct, imposes certain expectations, enhances some behaviours or features of personality, simultaneously suppressing others. In many ways, female fashion reflects beliefs about what it means to be a woman. Gender assumptions coexist with class ones – what is

[17] Anna Drążkowska, *Historia bielizny od XIV do końca XIX wieku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2017), 9.

[18] Elaine Benson, John Esten, *Unmentionables. A Brief History of Underwear* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 40.

[19] Cunnington, Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 15.

[20] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 130.

[21] Tobin, *Inside Out*, 3.

desired in an upper class woman would be inappropriate in a servant or a factory worker. The changes in female fashion are thus connected with women's emancipatory aspirations as "a significant part of women's liberation has been the right of a woman to control her own body and her struggle against the powers that continue to maintain women as aesthetic sex objects."[22]

1.1. Antiquity and the Middle Ages

Most historians of clothing agree that there was relatively little distinction between male and female silhouettes in antiquity (with the exception of Minoan Crete, where the first corset can be seen on the figurines of the so-called Snake Goddess)[23] and the early Middle Ages. Ancient Greeks and Romans draped their clothing, and though some mosaics show girls participating in physical exercises in what we would now call briefs and strapless bras, these undergarments did not shape the body, but rather covered some areas or gave support to the breasts. Strips of cloth were also used in Attica to flatten the bosom, but whether it was done for comfort or to make the breasts smaller may be a subject of dispute.[24] It must also be remembered that the perception of the body, especially the genitals, as shameful, so intrinsic in the Judeo-Christian tradition, was alien to the ancient Greeks and Romans.[25] The Cretan women wore corsets, yet their breasts were "bare, pushed upwards, and outwards."[26]

Likewise, most medieval clothing was long and relatively loose, covering the legs and the torso, without drawing attention to the breasts or the waist.[27] Early Christian art does not differentiate between male and female figures.[28] The fashion that drew attention to anatomy, which started appearing across Europe in the fourteenth century (or a little earlier in countries like France but only for a brief period of time), was criticised by the clergy.[29] In terms of women's attire that practice[30] would

[22] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 13.

[23] Toussaint-Samat, *Historia stroju*, 362. Yet As Elaine Benson and John Esten (*Unmentionables*, 11) observe, "in Minoan Crete […] both men and women had extremely small waists, presumably from wearing a constricting belt from childhood". Thus, we deal with a custom of body modification that is not gendered. It must be duly admitted that in the modern period some men, specially army officers, wore corsets too but this was not a widespread custom, Cunnington, Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 72, 106.

[24] Toussaint-Samat, *Historia stroju*, 363.

[25] *Ibidem*.

[26] Karen W. Bressler, Karoline Newman, Gillian Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie* (London: Quantum Publishing, 2000), 12.

[27] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 56.

[28] Marilyn Yalom, *Historia kobiecych piersi*, transl. from French (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Zielone Drzewo, 2012), 49.

[29] Toussaint-Samat, *Historia stroju*, 330.

[30] Cunnington, Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 33.

involve wrapping the waist to trim it or wearing a bustle accentuating the bosom. Most historians refer here to a drawing of a corseted devil in a twelfth-century manuscript held at the British Museum. The illustration was probably meant to expose the dangers of female sexual allure and to criticise vanity.[31] Yet, as Marilyn Yalom observes, late medieval painting started presenting female breasts in an erotic fashion, albeit under the guise of religious subject matter.[32]

Underwear would consist of a long shirt that could be used for sleeping or working – peasants performing their daily tasks wear underclothes in multiple paintings, probably for comfort of movement and protection of more expensive outer garments. It was also far from fancy, even among the upper classes.[33] Being publicly seen in one's underwear signified humility. Thus, pilgrims or repentant sinners would strip their finery to show their worthlessness,[34] which suggests underwear was not considered erotic.

1.2. Renaissance till Romanticism

Though medieval garments for men and women, especially those of the upper classes, differed, the arrival of more notable gender distinctions is attributed to the changes brought by Renaissance culture, especially humanism. The weakening of the power of the Church as well as growth of trade allowed for greater celebrations of sensuality and the renewed interest in the beauty of the human body.[35] The more practical explanation is the fact that at the time in question people "were learning how to shape clothes and skill in making-up was developing as the medieval local craft guilds became more organised and efficient."[36] Also the invention of buttons allowed for closer fitting clothes to be worn on the torso.[37] Simultaneously, new luxury fabrics were richer in texture, heavier, often patterned or embroidered – their beauty was best exposed when stretched, not falling softly to the ground, and thus the invention of the hooped skirt.[38] The advancement in technology coincided with a shift in mentality, both affecting fashion.

Women's clothing became much more structured and clearly divided in two at the waist area: the top part of the body was emphasised by a close fitting underbodice made of layers of starched linen or later a corset, the lower part by a loose

[31] Ewing, *Fashion in Underwear*, 17–18.
[32] Yalom, *Historia kobiecych piersi*, 68–72.
[33] Cunnington, Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 21.
[34] *Ibidem*, 22.
[35] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 58–59.
[36] Ewing, *Fashion in Underwear*, 20.
[37] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 57.
[38] Ewing, *Fashion in Underwear*, 24–25.

skirt which owed its shaped to many layered petticoats stretched over a farthingale or a bum roll – a wired roll, stuffed with horsehair. According to Elizabeth Ewing, "almost all fashion's developments have centred upon the waist: […] being narrowed, lowered, raised or, for one or two brief periods, obliterated."[39] What was done above or beneath it was usually meant as a contrast to the waist.

In some periods, like the seventeenth century, the breasts would be nearly exposed. In the sixteenth century, they were theoretically covered but the cloth was so thin that the flesh was clearly visible, while its delicate embroidery, sometimes further decorated with pearls, only drew attention to the bulges underneath.[40] In the eighteenth century, the bosom would be flattened and lifted, creating an impression of youthful firmness.

Corsets of various designs, sometimes referred to as stays, were worn from the sixteenth century till the nineteenth.[41] Apart from shaping the body, they were also believed to aid morality, becoming a "metaphor for virtue."[42] They were to help with self-discipline and moderation. Calling promiscuous women "loose" might have originated from this assumption. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth century, other structural undergarments developed: wooden or fishbone hoops, giving shape to the dress, as well as panniers, usually wicker ones, broadening the hips.

Such *la grande toilette*, worn by upper class ladies at formal occasions, was not only uncomfortable for the wearer but also her companions, who could not approach her, as the wide panniers created a distance. On one occasion, the width of the skirts made it impossible for the titled ladies to appear next to one another at Versailles, causing a scandal.[43] Two fashionable women would not be able to share a sofa.[44] Moreover, travelling in such an outfit (which came with a high, powdered white wig), sitting, or even walking through doors was a challenge.[45] Yet "such clothes proclaimed, indeed demanded, an unproductive life and the constant assistance of servants."[46] Many cultures had similar means of stressing personal wealth through impractical clothing or body modifications – deformation of the skull in South America or Africa is an obvious message no objects can be carried on the head, while Chinese foot binding marks the unsuitability of the lotus feet woman for any work or mobility.[47] In the case of a woman it also makes her

[39] *Ibidem*, 20.

[40] Drążkowska, *Historia bielizny*, 65.

[41] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 23.

[42] *Ibidem*.

[43] Boucher, Francois, *Historia mody. Dzieje ubiorów od czasów prehistorycznych do końca XX wieku*, transl. Piotr Wrzosek (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 2003), 266.

[44] *Ibidem*, 24

[45] Drążkowska, *Historia bielizny*, 171–172.

[46] Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), 139.

[47] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 24–25.

rely on men's income.[48] Economic dependence is a way of assuring her devotion and fidelity.

Women who followed fashion were accused of dishonesty as their clothes hid their natural figure. Thus, their allure was entirely artificial, being a result of craft, not nature. It fuelled many satires presenting women as hypocritical, untrustworthy, and vain. As Efran Tseëlon observes, the cultural construction of femininity is based on paradoxes.[49] Women are expected to be graceful, beautiful and have bodily proportions and facial features consistent with the current ideal. Yet those who do not fit the canon are discarded as ugly, while those who try to oblige (through structural garments or make-up) are accused of artifice, lack of authenticity, manipulation, etc. Moreover, "when vanity, artificiality, and extravagance in fashion are condemned, they are not seen as external behaviours, but are given metaphysical meanings."[50] Attractiveness is praised and linked to inner beauty only when it is authentic; yet the natural body seldom, if ever, fits the prescribed ideal.

1.3. Romantic fashion

For a short period, early Romantic fashion brought an unprecedented yet brief liberation of the female body. On the one hand, the Rousseauian ideals of being close to nature were responsible; on the other, the impact of antiquity (or rather its appropriation) was felt. As the aftermath of the French Revolution, the conspicuous display of wealth was badly perceived, and the neoclassical Directoire style, though short-lived, spread across the continent. Alison Lurie nicknames it the "classical chic."[51] Women were expected to be child-like in appearance, playful, highly-spirited and spontaneous, but without conspicuous erotic connotations. Their charm was to be found in their innocence – they no longer wore wigs or make-up. Dresses modelled on Roman tunics were predominantly white, loose fitting, and quite transparent. Since they were worn without much structural foundation, the body was less restricted and its contours visible – much to the shock of the more conservative members of the society.

1.4. Victorian fashion

Romantic ideals were soon replaced by the worship of bourgeois domesticity. Middle-class mentality, best expressed in the Biedermeier style, changed

48 *Ibidem*.
49 Tseëlon, *The Masque of Femininity*, 5.
50 *Ibidem*, 39.
51 Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 91.

the expectations towards women. As Stephen Gundle argues: "As the middle class asserted its influence, its members desired to establish their pre-eminent status and communicate it to their fellow men. One way of doing this was through assertion of virtue and through differentiated gender roles that consigned women to the home."[52] Women were no longer Greek nymphs in see-through muslin tunics but prudish plump matrons covered by layers of clothing – "fashion gradually aged."[53] Some historians estimate upper-class women wore up to "thirteen undergarments weighing as many as ten pounds."[54] The fashionable silhouette suggested child-bearing properties – the illusion of an amble bosom, wide hips and plump buttocks was achieved by contrasting them with a narrow waist. It was meant to suggest fertility and the nourishing abilities of the female. To achieve such a figure, a corset, crinolines, crinolettes, bustles and tournures had to be employed. "Props and scaffolding of whalebone, and steel, tight lacing, hoops, stuffing and pads of horsehair"[55] effectively hid the real woman underneath. Ironically, Victorian fashion, obsessed with modesty, simultaneously exaggerated the very features of the body it covered.

Lurie notices one more symbolic implication of fashionable Victorian dresses – the dropped shoulders. For her they denote submission.[56] Small shoulders imply physical weakness and fragility juxtaposing the traditionally male silhouette of narrow hips and broad shoulders with its female counterpart. Such clothing suggests it is "natural" for men to provide for the family and "natural" for women, at least from the upper classes, to abstain from work. Narrow shoulders would have their come-back in Dior's New Look, for exactly the same symbolic reasons.

Throughout the nineteenth century men's clothes became more and more austere and practical, "made of sturdy, protective fabrics."[57] The phenomenon is often referred to as the "great male renunciation" after the psychoanalyst John Carl Flügel, who first coined the phrase.[58] After all, men were breadwinners and needed to work, which required comfortable, dark clothing. Even a gentleman would have some administrative duties to perform. The wealth was signalled by the quality of the fabric and cut, yet decorations like ruffled cuffs or frilly collars were long discarded. Moreover, man's attractiveness was connected mainly with his income – his looks were of secondary importance so there was no point in drawing attention to them through ostentatious clothing.[59] Women's fashion, on the other hand, underwent frequent changes and became increasingly

[52] Stephen Gundle, *Glamour. A History* (Oxford: OUP, 2008), 8.

[53] Geoffrey Squire, quoted in Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 63.

[54] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 24.

[55] Carol Dyhouse, *Glamour. Women, History, Feminism* (London: Zed Books, 2010), 46.

[56] Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 64.

[57] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 107. It has also hardly changed – looking through catalogues with underclothing for men, one can notice very similar designs.

[58] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 29.

[59] Drążkowska, *Historia bielizny*, 192.

flamboyant. Its excessiveness was to signal women's decorative purposes as they "played a symbolic role for the rich."[60] Men could manifest their wealth in the manner their womenfolk dressed – the more impractical, the better. Women became status symbols as it was obvious they could not undertake any employment in such clothing. "In commercial society […] beauty soon became a business,"[61] and it was female beauty that fetched the highest price.

The class dimension is important here. Before the nineteenth century, extravagant fashion was reserved for aristocracy, and, in a way, was equally impractical for both sexes (though men, due to hunting and horse-riding were given more license when dressing for these activities). The rise of the middle class, with the simultaneous decline of the role of nobility, reached its peak in the nineteenth century. It was obvious that members of the noble families were idle – but women of the middle class, before the nineteenth century, were often far from unproductive, partly from economic necessity, partly due to Protestant suspicion towards sloth. In the Victorian era a middle class male wished "to establish that he can afford a wife or daughter who has no obligation to do menial work" so "he will take pride in seeing her dressed in such a way that his affluence is obvious; clothes that make it hard to move show that the wearer is rich enough not to have to do very much."[62] It was impossible to put on and take off upper class women's clothes without a servant's help, which further stressed the affluence of the wearer. Cunnington and Cunnington observe that "the evidence of social rank and wealth was in itself sufficient for attraction,"[63] surpassing physical harms.

1.5. Dress reform movement and its causes

The fashionable clothing was suitable for a lady of leisure. But not all women who considered themselves gentlewomen could afford such a lifestyle as more and more women started entering the workforce, though in relatively few professions perceived as appropriate for the fairer sex. They required more rational clothing. Moreover, the advancement of technology made long distance travel available and women wearing crinolines or caged petticoats had problems fitting into a train carriage. The invention of the bicycle revolutionised fashion as well.

The first attempt to modify women's clothing in order to allow women greater freedom of movement is usually attributed to Amelia Bloomer (1818–1894). In 1851, this American pioneer invented billowy trousers, worn under a knee length skirt,

[60] Gundle, *Glamour*, 113. On the analysis of the construction of femininity as vehicle for assertion of wealth, see Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899).

[61] Gundle, *Glamour*, 11.

[62] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 23.

[63] Cunnington, Cunnington, *The History of Underclothes*, 135.

in an Oriental manner. Her invention was criticised as a threat to the moral order of the society.[64] Her surname became an eponym for women's underpants, now used in a humorous manner for old fashioned baggy drawers worn by elderly, overweight ladies, but also, as a silly mistake, a blunder. Though the latter may be merely a coincidence, it is a curiously appropriate one. The world was not ready for women wearing trousers, even wide and frilly ones. But when biking became a craze, a version of bloomers became a necessity.[65]

It must also be remembered that tight lacing, apart from being uncomfortable, was a serious health hazard: compressing the ribcage reduced the capacity of the lungs, and displaced and exercised pressure upon inner organs. It was especially dangerous for pregnant women. Curiously enough, the first voices of criticism of corsets, coming from doctors, were not concerned about women's welfare but about their childbearing abilities.[66] Fashion affected the national fertility rates and countries needed citizens, especially future soldiers.

Many mysterious symptoms from which women complained throughout the nineteenth century: dizziness, fatigue, headaches, indigestion, as well as miscarriages they suffered were likely to have been caused by corsets, which "during the 1840s and 1850s were laced tighter than ever,"[67] and by the sheer weight of clothing. Interestingly, a pale, fragile and languid woman was the epitome of a feminine ideal. Her poor appetite and weakness stood for pedigree and virtue, while "robustness was the antithesis of beauty,"[68] signifying low breeding and often suspicious ethnicity.[69]

Multilayer garments, especially cage-like crinolines, were also a safety risk. In windy weather, the basket of the dress could turn upside-down, the woman would fall and was hardly able to get up on her own. Moreover, in the era of fireplaces in most rooms, a spark could ignite a lady's skirt with its quilted petticoats in an instant, while the air trapped under the dress helped the fire to spread.[70]

The so called dress reform movement focused on underwear for medical but also aesthetic, moral and hygienic reasons. Traditional clothes, especially undergarments, were perceived as oversexualised and oppressive to the skin. A German biologist, Gustave Jaeger, promoted wearing woolen underwear to regulate body temperature and perspiration.[71] The Jaeger Sanitary Woollen Company produced

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64 Toussaint-Samat, *Historia stroju*, 354.

65 *Ibidem*, 355.

66 Drążkowska, *Historia bielizny*, 165.

67 Tobin, *Inside Out*, 18. The idea was that a lady's waist should be so small that a man would be able to clasp it in his hands, Drążkowska, *Historia bielizny*, 219.

68 Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 23.

69 For more about the connection between health, gender and beauty, see: Katarzyna Szmigiero, "Deadly Attraction, or Why Culture Glamourises Female Death and Misery," *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* LXV, 2 (2018): 133–196.

70 Tobin, *Inside Out*, 14.

71 Breward, *Fashion*, 67.

comfortable and serviceable but rather unsightly clothing, which became popular among explorers, mountain-climbers and enthusiasts of outdoor adventures. With time, the brand enlarged its offer to include not just long johns but also stylish outer garments made of exotic animal fibres. Yet the society was unwilling to embrace the radical change of women's attire – the reformed dressed this way were seen as unfeminine and ugly and were often caricatured. Few women wanted to wear Jaeger asexual "sanatory combination suits," which looked like gigantic babygrows. Moreover, reformed clothes were associated with the "avant--garde creative minority" and the "progressive urban èlite"[72]. Indeed, they were often designed by artists such as William Morris or Henry van de Velde, and advocated by them.[73]

The change of fashion came not as a result of common sense but necessity. Members of the privileged classes wanted to partake in the pleasures of modern life, such as sports, travelling or visiting department stores or fashionable restaurants. In the first part of the nineteenth century, respectable women hardly ever walked the streets,[74] not to mention dining in public places. Furthermore, the unprecedented opulence of the American industrialists of the Gilded Age changed the attitude to the level of activity of the upper classes.[75] In terms of money, they were much richer than the European aristocracy, yet they wanted to assert their wealth in a more ostentatious manner. They were active in terms of their transcontinental travel, sightseeing and entertaining. Gaston Worth, the son and heir of the first recognised designer who created his own label, Charles Frederick Worth, apparently said that "sometimes Princesses take the omnibus, and go on foot in the street."[76] Many of these new princesses were American heiresses married to titled, yet impoverished noblemen. The Worth fashion house was compared to a restaurant that refused to serve anything but truffles.[77] What if the affluent clients order a fried potato and are willing to pay for it? The task of meeting the new needs of customers, of becoming the metaphorical "potato-frier," was given to Paul Poiret, who was soon to revolutionise fashionable female clothing.[78]

His clothes were elegant in their simplicity, much narrower and reflecting the natural outline of the female body. Poiret is also credited for liberating women from corsets. According to a frequently quoted anecdote, his first corset-free design

[72] *Ibidem*, 66.

[73] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 89–91. G.B. Shaw and Oscar Wilde followed the "wool next to skin" craze.

[74] Gundle, *Glamour*, 79.

[75] *Ibidem*, 109–139.

[76] Breward, *Fashion*, 35.

[77] *Ibidem*.

[78] *Ibidem*.

was meant for his then pregnant wife, Denise Boulet.[79] Yet, as Christopher Breward reminds his readers, quite a few dressmakers had been offering outfits that could be worn without tight lacing at least thirty years ahead of Poiret.[80]

Furthermore, during World War I women started working in factories and hospitals, which caused shortages of maids and house servants.[81] There was not enough domestic staff to help rich ladies dress and undress or wash or iron layers of underclothing. Also, social functions and outings were limited and many families were in mourning, which contributed to paying less attention to traditional notions of sophisticated elegance.[82]

1.6. The Roaring Twenties

Never were the changes in fashion and perception of femininity so drastic as after the Great War. More and more women entered paid employment during the war and wanted to stay in it or were forced to do so as their menfolk died in the trenches; they cut their hair and dresses short, wore obvious make--up, smoked and drank in public, sunbathed and took part in various sports.[83] They were granted the right to vote. "Everything about the appearance of [the] flapper challenges earlier assumptions about the proper behaviour and appearance of the respectable woman."[84] In the 1920s, because of the invention of good quality chemical dyes and artificial silk, coloured underwear became affordable and worn on a regular basis. It was known a few decades earlier but was seldom chosen by respectable women as it "was regarded as a sign of a racy life."[85] Colour underclothes would be worn by manual labourers as it was easier to hide dirt on it; for the same reason, it was often chosen by explorers and travellers.[86] Women who "operated outside the social norms of respectability," such as courtesans used to wear red or black underwear.[87] In Judeo-Christian culture white also stood for purity and innocence, which in underwear were translated into sexual chastity; thus, it continues to be worn by brides.

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[79] Anna Sieradzaka, *Artyści i krawcy. Moda Art Deco* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 1993), 24.

[80] *Ibidem*, 37.

[81] Boucher, *Historia mody*, 395.

[82] *Ibidem*.

[83] Dyhouse, *Glamour*, 18–19

[84] Breward, *Fashion*, 221.

[85] Tobin, *Inside Out*, 30. The tradition that underwear is white is reflected in its name in various Slavonic languages. In Polish, the word *bielizna* comes from *biel* (white). A similar relationship can be found in Russian, Bulgarian, and Lithuanian.

[86] Drążkowska, *Historia bielizny*, 199.

[87] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 87.

The "bright young thing" resembled a preadolescent tomboy or an androgynous naughty child,[88] and she no longer had the pre-war "pouter-pigeon shape."[89] In order to achieve this slender look, women wore underwear that flattened both the bosom and the buttocks.[90] With the development of technology, rubber and elastic were used to achieve such a state. As one cannot achieve much reduction in this manner, however, dieting became popular on a mass scale.[91] For the first time in history, a slender figure was in vogue. Though before the twentyth century women were expected to have tiny waists, their plumpness in other places was welcome. Embonpoint signified health and prosperity in the period of consumptions and frequent malnutrition among the lower classes.[92] Dating from the 1920s the cultural associations with fatness and thinness shifted. The new ideal became "a slim, supple and youthful body, the attainment of which demands that time and money be spent on body care, exercise and the "correct" food"[93]. Being overweight has become not only a lower class marker but suggests absence of self-control and laziness. The lack of the fashionable body gets translated into a moral failure, being inadequate as a person. Despite many studies proving that obesity is often caused by underlying medical conditions and genetic factors, "individualistic Western ideology […] holds individuals responsible for their life outcomes," including their appearance.[94]

The shortening of hems and popularity of swimming and sunbathing also demanded the removal of all now visible "superfluous" bodily hair. This tendency, first involving the shaving of armpits and calves, developed into waxing and, in modern times, permanent laser removal of all bodily hair.[95]

Flappers enjoyed an active lifestyle: swimming, sunbathing, sailing, driving, dancing the tango, the foxtrot or the Charleston in nightclubs, playing golf and tennis. There were female aviators and car racers. Active women demanded comfortable and durable clothing, universal enough to be worn all day. Coco Chanel,

[88] Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 74. Lurie notices that the popular outsized Peter Pan collar as well as Mary Jane shoes, worn in the 1920s, have their roots in children's fashion, *The Language of Clothes*, 75.

[89] Dyhouse, *Glamour*, 18.

[90] Yet they let their waists be of natural size. In 1889 the average waistline was 22 inches, by 1922 it rose to 28. See: Farid Chenoune, *Hidden Underneath. A History of Lingerie* (New York: Assouline, 2005), 44.

[91] Dyhouse, *Glamour*, 48. For more on the history of dieting as well as the cultural implications of eating disorders, see: Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls. The History of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

[92] Sarah Grogan, *Body Image. Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children* (London: Routledge, 2008), 31.

[93] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 29.

[94] Grogan, *Body Image*, 12.

[95] Emma Woolf, *The Ministry of Thin. How Pursuit of Perfection Got out of Control* (Chichester: Summersdale, 2013), 148–153.

inspired by men's tailoring, offered it to those who were willing to pay her prices. She designed "wearable, basic yet elegant costumes"[96]. Her designs became appropriated to fit all budgets and have a proven lifetime. The democratisation of fashion reflected the fluidity of class distinctions. High society became more inclusive, inviting athletes, fashion designers, and film stars into its world.[97] And so did high fashion – wearing casual jerseys, faux pearls, imitation jewelry or perfume containing synthetic ingredients was suddenly chic.

Simplified outer garments required less underwear. The greatest discovery of the period was the bra, which for the first time entered the market on a mass scale. It did not, however, appear *ex nihilo* as ancestors of the bra can be found in ancient stróphion, the medieval bodice or high-waisted Directoire dresses.[98] Various individuals claim the honour of its creation, but what matters more than the name of the individual is the enormous popularity and variety of this far from simple garment. Since its invention, bras have "lifted, enlarged, supported, confined, flattened, revealed, and modestly covered women's breasts" becoming "the most important element in a Western women's wardrobe."[99]

1.7. The 1930s and 40s

The crash of the Stock exchange and the widespread depression put an end to the frivolities of the Jazz Age. "In ages of anxiety, childish high spirits seem frivolous and even callous: seriousness and maturity are in style; manly men and womanly (not girlish) women are admired."[100] The 1930s and 40s witnessed the return to what is seen as the traditional female hourglass shape – more curvaceous and grown-up. The function of the underwear was no longer to flatten but to accentuate and smoothen. The new fashion reflected "reactionary changes in morality and attitudes to life," especially to gender roles.[101] In the times of widespread unemployment, women were expected to leave their jobs, since working female workers were seen as both depriving men of income and neglecting their duties of being wives and mothers.[102] Apart from being a homemaker, keeping oneself beautiful was seen as female duty. Women were warned that losing their good looks and youth may cost them their marriage.[103] It would be a blow not only on a personal level, but would expose them to social ostracism and economic

96 Breward, *Fashion*, 42.
97 Gundle, *Glamour*, 150.
98 Tobin, *Inside Out*, 36.
99 Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 42.
100 Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 77.
101 Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 131.
102 *Ibidem*, 146.
103 Broomber, *Fasting Girls*, 244–245.

insecurity. The same ideology would make its come back in the US of the 1950s, yet in completely reverse economic circumstances.

Representatives of some ideologies claimed they knew how to combat the omnipresent poverty. The depression contributed to the rise of nationalism and fascism, with their narrowly defined gender roles.[104] Female charm was to be based on modesty and gracefulness; ostentation, make-up, and flaunting of one's sex appeal were frowned upon. The body had to be "discreet, decent and concealed."[105]

In the 1930s the different bra sizes were invented.[106] Previously most underwear was hand-made so it would fit the individual for whom it was tailored. With mass production, it was easier to introduce some standard sizing. Instead of having custom-made bras, women needed to fit into a rather limited range of prescribed cup sizes.[107] Many, especially slender women or adolescents, might have felt inadequate and self-conscious.[108] Bras started to enhance the breast through complicated stitching, boning, underwiring and padding.[109]

1.8. The New Look and the conservative 1950s

Wartime and its aftermath was a period of austerity and self-denial, especially in Europe. Clothes were close fitting, to provide warmth, but also not to waste the restricted available fabrics. When Dior presented his 1947 collection, with its conspicuous display of indulgent consumption, the world was shocked by the sudden reemergence of luxury. His vision was not only excessive in terms of costs but also unrealistically nostalgic, if not anachronistic. Madge Garland, an editor at *Vogue*, referred to it as "a last look at a vanishing conception of femininity."[110] Dior designed for women whose only occupation was social functions, not paid employment. The length of the New Look voluminous skirt was longer than anything worn in nearly fifty years – it reached the ankle. The same applies to the close fitting tops, which required a regime of a tight corset, long abandoned. To complete the look, accessorising with gloves and hats was a must. Dior's vision of a woman presented in the Corolla collection, as the New Look was originally called, was aesthetically pleasing – she resembled, on purpose,[111] a flower turned upside down,

[104] Gertrud Lehner, *Historia mody XX wieku*, transl. Małgorzata Mirońska (Kölm: Könemann, 2000), 32.

[105] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 144.

[106] Rebecca Apsan, *The Lingerie Handbook* (New York: Workman Publishing Company, 2006), 186.

[107] Good underwear companies currently offer up to 14 cup sizes to one band measurement.

[108] Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project. An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 110.

[109] Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 45.

[110] Quoted in Dyhouse, *Glamour*, 101.

[111] *Ibidem*, 102. Several of Dior's collection were named after flowers, Breward, *Fashion*, 175.

with her narrow waist and shoulders emphasising her fragility. Breward calls Dior's vision an "orchidaceous version of femininity."[112] It was of a woman in desperate need of strong male protection – both literally and figuratively. Marianne Thesander makes an interesting observation about the New Look fashion. It was, undeniably, feminine as it drew attention to waist and hips. Yet, simultaneously, the sexual attributes were shown in a "strange, affected way, without any kind of sensuality."[113] Dior's woman was aloof and frigid. It was indeed a very theatrical vision of femininity, devoid of spontaneity.

Few women could afford Dior's outfits, not just financially but also practically; yet his designs became adapted – "albeit without the complex and elegant construction that marked the original"[114] – for streetwear all over the Western world. In order to be worn, women needed to put on first the long discarded tight fitting structural garments, such as waist cinchers or waspies. Unfortunately, they made eating impossible – what is the point of a dinner dress if one cannot actually eat?[115] Some women also complained of breathing difficulties.[116] One can abstain from food for a few hours, but not respiration. Other clients of Dior admitted they could not sit and walk with ease.[117] The designer's biographer, Marie-France Pochna, notes that when Dior visited the US, he was met with a hostile reception from women. They complained driving was impossible in his outfits while one stylish woman literally became a fashion victim – the bus door trapped her skirt, dragging her till the next block.[118] For these women, the assault on their mobility, one of the most cherished American values, was a national scandal.

Another famous design popular in the 1950s was the so-called sweater bra, missile or torpedo bra. The characteristic conical stitching as well as "stiffening inserted into the cup point" made the breasts look like bullets.[119] The military associations with its name were not coincidental. The conical bra, in all its artifice, could be seen as yet another Cold War weapon. While women in socialist countries were tractor drivers and factory workers in baggy uniforms, when their children were looked after by strangers in nurseries and kindergartens, American women were sexy domestic playthings, perfect suburban mothers, housewives and hostesses. The sudden focus on the breasts, or "the mammary fixation,"[120] as Joan Jacobs Brumberg called it, is sometimes explained by their being associated with

[112] *Ibidem*, 176.
[113] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 158.
[114] Gundle, *Glamour*, 200.
[115] *Ibidem*.
[116] *Ibidem*, 104.
[117] Marie-France Pochna, *Christian Dior*, transl. Daria Demidowicz-Domanasiewicz (Wrocław: Bukowy Las, 2013), 180.
[118] *Ibidem*, 190–193.
[119] W. Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 45.
[120] Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 108.

nourishment.[121] Younger and younger girls were encouraged to wear a "training bra" – officially to help them develop firm breasts, yet the underlying reasons were purely commercial and patriarchal – to socialise women into "appropriate" manifestations of femininity, expressed through eroticism and consumerism.[122] Apart from signifying sex-appeal, the breasts stood for the opulence and prosperity of the post-war US.

Apart from the bullet bra, America made one more contribution to the engineering of underwear – the cantilevered bra, allegedly designed by Howard Hughes for Jane Russell. As breasts are subject to gravity, Russell lost some of her appeal wearing no bra in a few scenes of the *Outlaw* (1943, released 1946, rereleased in 1950 and 1952).[123] Hughes wanted both: her naked arm to be shown and her heavy breasts to be uplifted, so he invented a strapless contraption. The construction of femininity literally involved construction work "utilising […] aeronautical engineering skills."[124]

The return of body shaping underwear and a distorted figure after World War II could be interpreted as a desperate attempt to turn back the clocks to the nineteenth century, when gender and class still ordered social life, and the male authority was not questioned. After the senseless carnage of World War I, people were desperately seeking forgetfulness in the craze of the Roaring Twenties, and now they looked for an illusion of safety in dated domestic bliss. The New Look also signified the birth on the new era of consumerism, with its "sybaritic wastefulness" and "power of consumption."[125] The Western weapon against the communist ideology was capitalism, with its promises of prosperity, and carefree spending.

1.9. Age of Aquarius and its consequences

When baby-boomers came of age,[126] they were dissatisfied with the mores of their parents: their values, lifestyles and appearance. They wanted to be different and look different:

> The adoption of juvenile styles […] never involves costume alone: rather, the whole existing order of things begins to seem flat, stale and repressive. Invention, experiment, novelty and above all, youth, come into fashion; fashion themselves begins to imitate the costumes of children. […] In putting on such styles, [members of the new

[121] Ewing, *Fashion in Underwear*, 118.

[122] Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 111–114, 118. Nowadays, even female toddlers wear "bikinis."

[123] Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 133.

[124] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 62.

[125] Breward, *Fashion*, 175.

[126] By the mid-sixties, half of the population of the United States was under twenty five, and a third of the population of France was under twenty, Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, 80.

> generation] announce graphically that they refuse to step into their parents' shoes or to resemble them in any way. Instead they prefer to become, or to remain, children.[127]

Baby-boomers rejected the clothes of the previous generation choosing a motley of folk, and ethnic designs. Men's clothes changed drastically, becoming more flamboyant and "feminine."[128] The fashion for miniskirts coincided with the invention of tights, so the belts and suspenders were no longer worn by young women. The free love they preached meant sex stopped being a procreative duty and became a way of experimenting with sensuality and searching for pleasure. Hippy girls discarded underwear that was difficult to put on and take off and often went braless. Those who did not, chose childlike designs. Matching pastel briefs and bras were often colourful and patterned. They resembled clothes for children in their bright hues and joyful floral designs. The best example of this trend is Mary Quant's daisy motif, which looks as if it had been drawn by a three--year old. As seen by Breward, "childlike designs, with their abstract pattern, flat colour, and simple construction, offered many female consumers (and not just the young) genuine relief from the matronly respectability" of the 1950s.[129] They also signalled a radical change in the attitude to sexuality – sex was fun, an easy and innocent activity to pursue in the meadow, not a conjugal duty performed in the suburban bedroom. It must be remembered that the Pill entered the market in the 1960s, so women, for the first time in history, could enjoy sex without fearing an unwanted pregnancy or social ostracism.[130] The scanty underwear of the period announced their readiness for the newly found liberty.

One of the strangest developments in underwear of the period, long discarded, was the nipple bra.[131] It was a bra which had two round button like pieces of cloth attached on top of each cup, so that the wearer could pretend to be braless while actually giving her breasts some support. The irony here cannot go unnoticed – wearing a bra pretending one wears none. There was also the so-called bra-no bra, targeted at women with fuller breasts who wanted the comfort of movement that a bra could offer yet who did not want to wear anything more heavy-duty or conspicuously artificial.[132] Bra-no bra was often nude in colour and see-through. Seamless underwear was also considered chic.[133]

The second wave of feminism went hand in hand with sexual revolution. During a protest against the objectification of women at the Miss America beauty contest

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127 *Ibidem*, 60–61.

128 Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 192.

129 Breward, *Fashion*, 187.

130 Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 8–9.

131 Brie Dyas, "The Nipple Bra is the 1970s most confusing contribution to lingerie history," https://www.huffpost.com/entry/nipple-bra_n_3733547, accessed on 17 July 2024.

132 *Ibidem*, 48.

133 *Ibidem*, 52.

in 1968, demonstrators threw articles they associated with oppression, such as girdles or false lashes, into the Freedom Trash Can.[134] They were to be symbolically burned, yet the can was never set ablaze due to the lack of a suitable fire permit.[135] One woman allegedly threw in her bra. A journalist, erroneously, wrote that the demonstrator set the objects on fire, and the myth was born.[136] The name bra-burner for a radical feminist was coined while Germaine Greer, in *The Female Eunuch* (1970), called bras "a ludicrous invention."[137]

Indeed, many women chose to go braless in the 1960s and 1970s, also on public occasions. For some it was a matter of fashion, for others comfort, for others a way to express their emancipation and feminist sympathies. The three stars of the immensely popular TV detective series, *Charlie's Angels* (1976–1981), were notoriously braless, earning a nickname of the "Jiggle Girls."[138] They were undeniably fulfilled women who were able, at least on the screen, to combine successful professional careers in a job traditionally seen as masculine, with toughness, and carefree sex appeal – a perfect embodiment of all the gains of the second wave feminism.

3.10. Conservatism strikes back – 1980s

In the 1960s and 70s female underwear was practical and rather plain. Many women went without bras or wore the bra-no bra, which offered protection and support but did not shape or lift the breasts. The fashionable woman was to be natural and her body free. As already mentioned, it clearly reflected the liberal attitude to sexuality, made possible by the invention of the Pill and the aftermath of the sexual revolution. The second wave of feminism, trying to liberate women in the public sphere, also contributed to the liberation of the female body from uncomfortable clothing and double moral standards.

Yet the 1980s brought the return to more traditional values and a virulent attack on feminism and its gains. As Lurie observes, it was a period of prosperity in the West, comparable in values to the 1950s.[139] Susan Faludi, in *Backlash* (1991), analyses both the roots of the anti-women's lib movement and its manifestations. Women were sent messages that having feminist sympathies diminishes their chances of marrying and having a family. Feminists were presented as ugly, hairy and mentally unhealthy, unfulfilled women. Women's lib was seen by conservatists

[134] Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once. From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl. The Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), 61.

[135] Andi Zeisler, *Feminism and Pop Culture* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 52.

[136] *Ibidem*, 53.

[137] *Ibidem*, 61.

[138] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 63.

[139] Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, xi–vii.

as a "social experiment that had succeeded at the expense of a healthy society and left men hungry for home-cooked meals, children marooned in front of blaring televisions, and women bitter and love-starved,"[140] while its achievements were "recast as failures by much of the mainstream media."[141] Thus, the "natural" order had to be restored, and women were encouraged to get in touch with their femininity, allegedly denied to them by feminism. Naomi Wolf, in her seminal book *The Beauty Myth* originally published in 1990, carefully analysed how ideologies rooted in biological essentialism tried to convince women that their need to be beautiful is justified by evolution, that it is "inevitable and changeless" since beauty is linked with fertility, so men are programmed to battle for attractive mating partners.[142] She saw in this a virulent misogynist and capitalist strategy – "a political weapon against women's advancement."[143]

After nearly two decades of apparent carelessness, fashion in underwear drastically changed. It became overtly erotic, even raunchy. The first harbingers of change appeared in 1975 in France, when Chantal Thomass launched her first designs.[144] She openly admitted she was inspired by the Pigalle quarter aesthetics, provocative and slutty.[145] Her collections were radically conservative, however paradoxical that sounds. They were chic, lacy and made of luxurious fabrics such as silk or satin. Also the Italian Gruppo La Perla, established in 1954, developed into a company of international reputation during the 1980s, diversifying its products to include luxury fragrances.[146] Victoria's Secret, founded in 1977, is another brand that established itself as a leading name in fashionable underwear during the 1980s and 1990s. Its stock drastically differed from the 1970s mainstream underwear, being much more seductive and conservatively feminine. It was erotic and glamorous but never kinky, very much is tune with the times. The company's once president, Grace Nichols, claims the brand "knows what fits women physically and emotionally."[147] Needless to say, it is a very narrow group of affluent and canonically beautiful women whose only ambition is to look sexy, at all costs – the pun fully intended as their only job is to nurse that look.

In 1994 the first boutique of the British brand Agent Provocateur opened. The company's owner, Joseph Corré, was weaned on rebellion, being a son of Vivien Westwood and Malcolm McLaren.[148] His parents ran the notorious punk boutique

140 Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once*, x.

141 *Ibidem*, 145.

142 Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth. How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage Books, 1991), 12.

143 *Ibidem*, 10.

144 Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 40–41.

145 Chenoune, *Hidden Underneath*, 136.

146 Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 66.

147 *Ibidem*, 116.

148 *Ibidem*, 55.

called SEX, which specialised in "rubber fetish items," "bondage and fetish gear" as well as T-shirts with sexually explicit or anarchist slogans.[149] He knew that nothing sells better than sex and designed daring lingerie in bright colours. His collections resembled underwear previously sold solely in sex shops, yet manufactured of quality fabrics and immaculately sewn, though hardly wearable and sold at exorbitant prizes. The company was a worldwide success as it managed to persuade women that dressing like sex workers would boost their confidence and improve their love lives, or, to use a recently fashionable term, empower them.[150] Scandals connected with the company's commercials, which were seen by many as degrading and banned as a result, only helped to increase the sales. Recently, the brand has come into disrepute for failing to withdraw from Russia after the country's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.[151]

All these brands marketed their products using a strategy well-known in advertising campaigns directed at women – "creating and then addressing female insecurity."[152] The 1960s and 1970s were decades trying to instill in women that it was not necessary to reshape one's body to deserve love. The conservative fashion suggested that in order to be desired, a woman needs to wear uncomfortable and overpriced underwear as otherwise she is unfeminine and unlovable. Underwear had to appeal to heterosexual men; their approval was the main consideration in its choice. Even the range of sizes available at the fashionable brands mentioned above exclude many women. Culture became highly sexualised yet now the commodification of women's bodies was presented as a feminist choice. Indeed, many second wave feminists criticised the double sexual standards that expected women to be "respectable" and express their sexuality within heterosexual marriage aimed at procreation. Yet there is a gap between celebrating female sexuality and the growing acceptance of the porn industry in mainstream culture. Moreover, what passes as sexual liberation usually limits erotic experience to a performance in which women are judged visually, instead of seeing it as an inhibited expression of desire.[153]

The return of ornate, conspicuously erotic underwear, much of which performed a purely seductive function, as in the era of tights there is no practical need for suspender belts and stockings,[154] can be seen as a return to the objectification

[149] Breward, *Fashion*, 189.

[150] On the abuse of the term, see: Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once*, 171–192.

[151] Daniel Boffrey, "Lingerie firm Agent Provocateur under pressure over Moscow franchise stores," The Guardian (13 December 2022), https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/dec/13/lingerie-firm-agent-provocateur-under-pressure-over-moscow-franchise-stores, accessed on 17 May 2024.

[152] Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once*, 8.

[153] Natasha Walker, *Living Dolls. The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010), 108.

[154] Toussaint-Samat (*Historia stroju*, 370) expresses the opinion that women who wear such garments nowadays do it solely for erotic appeal. As Ehrman (*Undressed*, 67) says, "garters became more of a female accessory, largely restricted to boudoir and bridal wear". Some brands produce lingerie for women, yet it is designed for men. It is to please the eye of a heterosexual male and stir his desires. Even the advertisements are often targeted at male viewers, employing the so-called "male

of women. On the other hand, there were voices, also belonging to women, that sexy, even provocative underwear gives them a sense of empowerment. That was the era of the so-called glamazons: powerful women who flaunted their femininity wearing flashy makeup, enormous high heels, clanking jewelry, and bright suits with shoulder pads, often revealing their cleavage.[155] They were professionally successful yet without compromising their sex-appeal. Part of their assertiveness was derived from their appearance. Underneath her power suit, the glamazon was likely to wear a lot of lace, underwired balconette bra, and Brazilian thongs – a confidant businesswoman on the outside, a flirtatious Playboy bunny underneath. It was a "strange and incongruous costume," in Lurie's words.[156] She also notices the horizontal split: the upper part of the body was business-like, clad in an oversized jacket; the lower sexy, dressed in sheer tights, high-heels and miniskirts.

The sexually confident woman of the 1990s, a "dominatrix Amazon of masochistic fantasy,"[157] is the epitome of a lipstick or stiletto feminist, who turns to sex appeal as a way of "exploiting the exploiters."[158] She is unapologetic about her desires and claims the ostentatious display of sexuality does not objectify her. Burlesque, retro-striptease, pole dancing were on the return,[159] no longer limited to seedy areas but lifted to a mainstream art form. Stiletto feminism is, undeniably, a controversial standpoint as it may contribute to the subjugation of women. Basing one's sense of worth on sex appeal does not seem to advance women's emancipation. Moreover, as Andi Zeisler observes, modern capitalist economies feed women with the message that individual choice is the clue to feminism, ignoring the implication of what is actually chosen and how it affects other members of the community.[160] According to her, feminism has been rebranded and it is no longer perceived as a radical political movement fighting the systematic oppression of women but a pop culture commodity, wrapped in "quasi-feminist rhetoric."[161]

At the same time, it must be remembered that the dispute about feminists' attitudes to beauty, fashion and make-up is a multi-faceted one and far from new.[162] Is fashion "damaging and patriarchal or an expressive realm of pleasure"?[163]

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gaze." The French brand Audabe was quite open about it, inventing a slogan "For a man", Chenoune, *Hidden Underneath*, 140. It was on the one hand hilarious as the visual aspect of the ad presented a woman in sensual underwear, yet the words claimed the product was for men's use, which could suggest cross-dressers.

155 Dyhouse, *Glamour*, 172.

156 Lurie, *The Language of Clothes*, x.

157 *Ibidem.*

158 Dyhouse, *Glamour*, 57.

159 Gundle, *Glamour*, 382–383.

160 Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once*, 18.

161 Walker, *Living Dolls*, 5.

162 Compare: Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist. A Philosophial Inquiry* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 222–251.

163 Lucy Delap, *Feminisms. A Global History* (London: Pelican, 2021), 202.

Suffragettes in reformed dresses were often ridiculed and even now conservative journalists covering feminist demonstrations focus more on the looks of the protesters, not their demands. Calling her ugly and unfeminine is an easy way of discrediting a woman and attributing her radicalism to personal frustration. Thus, for instance, Edwardian activists made sure they employed "strategies of hyper-conventionality" in terms of appearance to make their claims less likely to be rebuked.[164]

3.11. Fit is the new beautiful

Much underwear of the 1980s and 1990s was highly sexualised and uncomfortable. Yet, many women would "refuse to wear thongs and push-up bras," just like their ancestors "rejected boned corsets, crinolines and bustles."[165] Instead of focusing on the body's external appearance, they stressed its ability to perform tasks, its endurance and strength. A beautiful female body was now slim in some places and curvy in others – it also needed to be toned, with a clear outline of muscles visible under the fat-free skin. The obsession with the fit body and the urge to tone it with physical activity started in the 1980s and continues till now.

Calvin Klein's underwear, which Breward calls ergonomic, is the epitome of the new 1990s look.[166] Produced in white, black or grey, made of plain cotton with a wide rubber border boldly displaying the designer's name, it was free of any ornamentation. It was also androgynous in character, like most of Klein' unisex designs and fragrances. Curiously enough, his first "jockey shorts for women" appeared in the more frivolous-oriented 1980s to become bestsellers a decade later.[167] The designer was ahead of his times with his vision of sporty femininity. Similarly, the German Triumph International started producing their simple Sloggi line of underpants in 1979, to reach fashion status in the 1990s as customers wanted comfortable close fitting good quality underwear.[168] Their design, logo on the waistband, and limited range of available colours was similar to Klein's straightforward stylistics.

Apart from the unisex underwear, the 1990s witness a renaissance of the push-up bra. Though the brand Wonderbra had been manufacturing this particular model since the 1960s (and the first push-up bra, the Rising Star, was introduced to the market by Fredrick's of Hollywood as early as 1948),[169] it was the 1994 Hello Boys advertising campaign with Eva Herzigová that became a turning point

164 *Ibidem*, 198.
165 Ehrman, *Undressed*, 41.
166 Breward, *Fashion*, 204.
167 Bressler, Newman, Proctor, *A Century of Lingerie*, 65.
168 *Ibidem*, 67.
169 *Ibidem*, 46.

in the company's history.[170] The padded bra not only enlarged and smoothed the breasts, but also claimed "to impart the same cleavage that breast implants offer."[171] The craze for fitness meant that most toned women did not have the full breasts that usually accompany a plumper figure, yet they wanted to feel and look sexy. Wonderbra pushups also looked good under casual clothing, giving the illusion of a round, firm bosom. Yet it was plain, devoid of frills, lace or ribbons. It looked casual and unpretentious, just as the unisex underwear, but gave a spectacular effect.

3. Body positive movement vs. the era of the selfie/belfie

Never before in history have people been exposed to such a narrow range of acceptable body shapes and facial features.[172] Before the spread of mass media, people had little knowledge of the appearance of the unclothed bodies of others, especially members of the higher classes. They were used to the bodies of those around them and, probably, seldom felt inadequate as they did not have to compare their shapes to that of a carefully selected digitally modified image. Moreover, as Mary Pipher observes, in the past most people lived in what she calls "communities of primary relationships," in which "appearance is only one of many dimensions that define people"; yet, in the anonymous urban settings, where most contacts with others are transitory and superficial, "appearance is the only dimension available for the rapid assessment of others[,] [becoming] incredibly important in defining value"[173] Thus, the pressure to fit the culturally acceptable body shape is enormous and the number of people who feel insecure about their looks or develop a full blown body dysmorphic disorder is rapidly growing as most ordinary bodies do not resemble those shown to us as canonical. It must also be remembered that the discrepancy between the culturally appropriate shape and the way real women look has dramatically increased.[174]

Furthermore, garments were less revealing in the past and underwear was able to shape most bodies into forms considered attractive. Yet "fashionable clothing

[170] Ellen Hammett, "«Hello Boys»: How Wonderbra caused global fever and won the bra wars" https://www.marketingweek.com/inside-story-wonderbra-hello-boys/, accessed on 17 July 2024.

[171] Benson, Esten, *Unmentionables*, 51.

[172] Grogan, *Body Image*, 5.

[173] Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia. Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Newy York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 183.

[174] David Haslam, Fiona Haslam, *Fat, Gluttony and Sloth. Obesity in Literature, Art and Medicine* (Liverpool: LUP, 2008), 196; Lisa Appignanesi, *Mad, Bad and Sad. Women and the Mind Doctors* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 379–381. Though leading a sedentary lifestyle and eating processed, calorific food take their toll in the growing numbers of overweight and obese individuals in wealthy countries, the impact of unrealistic media representations of women is hardly helpful in promoting a healthy lifestyle.

has become lighter, briefer and more sheer, and designed to emphasise figures shaped by health and fitness rather than stays and girdles."[175] One can no longer rely on underwear to shape one's body, though spandex trimming underwear is worn on special occasions. While even a few decades ago it was the clothes that stood for wealth, now the body itself becomes the status symbol.

The New Woman of the 1890s participated in outdoor activities such as hiking or biking for pleasure, the flapper started exercising to lose weight, and contemporary women repeat identical exercises innumerable times to alter their shape as if their bodies were clay, not flesh and bone. "In the later twentieth century the focus on the body has, if anything, intensified, with both men and women encouraged to maintain the appearance of toned vitality."[176] A flabby body is synonymous with laziness and lack of control over one's appetite. The standards of what passes as a good enough body have also risen due to the spread of social media, growing exposure to pornography, and the advancement of technology – any digital image can be easily enhanced. As Natasha Walker observes in *Living Dolls* (2010), girls in their early teens "embark on a project of grooming, dieting and shopping that aims to achieve the bleached, waxed, tinted look of […] airbrushed perfection."[177] As Brumberg observes, in the nineteenth century girls aspired to internal perfection reflected in good deeds, now all they want to achieve is a sexy body as it stands for the key to professional success and fulfilling private life.[178] Many historians see the impact of the cinema as a watershed in social attitudes to female beauty;[179] yet, in comparison to the present Instagram and Facebook tsunami, it was a mere ripple. We live in the era of belfies, seemingly casual photographs of shapely buttocks celebrities post on their accounts, which are, in all likelihood, posed and airbrushed. Female value, once again, is limited to females' sex appeal, which is "defined by the terms of the sex industry."[180]

We can observe two contradictory reactions to this situation. One of them is the body positive movement, which draws the public attention to unrealistic and one-dimensional beauty standards as well as the artificiality of many images of women. A good example of that approach can be the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, with its billboards, advertisements and short films.[181] The company teaches people, especially young women, media literacy skills and boosts their self-esteem.

The other consequence of the widespread exposure to perfected bodies is cosmetic surgery.[182] Many individuals attempt to mould their bodies with a strict

175 Tobin, *Inside Out*, 3.
176 Breward, *Fashion*, 163.
177 Walker, *Living Dolls*, 2.
178 Brumberg, *The Body Project*, xxi.
179 Gundle, *Glamour*, 194.
180 Walker, *Living Dolls*, 3.
181 Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once*, 238–247.
182 Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 218.

regime of regular exercise and dieting. Those who cannot wait to see the result or who expect unrealistic results (no exercise will enlarge the breasts or reduce the excess of flabby skin) can resort to a surgeon's help. Medical establishment started labelling some physical features, such as small breasts or wrinkles, as illnesses that should be surgically cured.[183] The term "micromastia" can serve as an example of the medicalisation of small breasts.[184] Aesthetic surgery is becoming more and more common and socially acceptable. Some celebrities are even proud of their surgically carved shapes and admit to their reliance "on the needle and the knife for their transformations."[185] Television makeover programmes enjoy a steady viewership. Yet, as many admit, the medically healthy bodies are operated on because of flaws that are often imaginary or grossly exaggerated, so surgical intervention is more "a form of psychotherapy,"[186] curing the psyche by altering the body. The phenomenon raises questions about medical ethics and the limits of patient's (client's) autonomy.

Again, like in the case of stiletto feminism, some argue that if women choose freely to alter their bodies, it is their right to do so. Yet more perceptible thinkers are aware that women who undergo aesthetic surgeries are still complying with a form of cultural oppression – "they are not really free to make a genuine choice because of patriarchal cultural pressures on them"; so their transformations make them conform "to traditional (male-dominated) ideologies of how women's bodies should look."[187] Girls are indoctrinated into the duty to appear attractive from an early age, while boys are socialised to choose mates conforming to the standard.

4. Conclusions

Elizabeth Ewing claims that "the whole history of underwear during the past forty or fifty years reflects increasingly the social, psychological and economic effects of what can briefly only be described by the rather outworn word emancipation."[188] It also charts all the nuances engrained in feminism and social reactions to its gains, including "women's own attitudes towards femininity and

[183] *Ibidem*, 220.

[184] Grogan, *Body Image*, 69.

[185] Walker, *Living Dolls*, 68. See also Susan Orbach, *Bodies* (New York: Picador, 2009), 104–105.

[186] Sander L. Gilman, *Creating Beauty to Cure the Soul. Race and Psychology in the Shaping of Aesthetic Surgery* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 11.

[187] Grogan, *Body Image*, 72–73. Of course, there are also individuals who subject their bodies to various extreme body modification practices (multiple piercings, extensive tattooing, tongue forking, subderm implants, eye dying, branding and scarification) in order to manifest their rejection of mainstream beauty canons.

[188] Ewing, *Fashion in Underwear*, 99.

their own bodies."[189] Though undoubtedly the story of undergarments is a tale of progress, it is also sad to observe that the external restraints of corsets and cages of crinolines have been internalised and replaced by constant physical vigilance. The "cultural ideas about acceptable [female] body shape have changed radically over the years," while the pressures to conform to it have risen.[190] Apart from wearing shaping undergarments, women exercise, limit their calorie intake, and often resort to cosmetic surgery.

The choice of underwear reflects our identity even more so than the that of the outer garments, which we might choose to fit the social expectations connected with our profession, for instance. It speaks about our values, attitudes to sexuality and our self-worth. To travesty the famous sayings "you are what you eat" or "show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are," this article may finish with an analogous one: "Show me the drawer with your lingerie, and I'll tell you about your dreams, aspirations and opinions."

SUMMARY

The history of the body is inextricably linked with the history of lingerie. Underclothes, apart from performing mundane functions of protecting the body from the elements and coarser layers of clothing, were also designed to shape the figure, especially the female figure, according to the currently fashionable beauty standards. They were to hide and to accentuate suggestively those aspects of the body that were considered titillating.

The purpose of this article is to look at the history of underwear, focusing on its shaping, or even deforming properties, and to analyse the correlation between lingerie, class, and gender roles. Thus, the history of women's undergarments is simultaneously the story of women's liberation. Some types of underwear severely limited the possibility of movement, while others enabled the participation in sports and social life. The decision of what underclothes to wear (or whether to wear them at all) is not a mere matter of aesthetics but a powerful political statement. It is not a coincidence that feminists were labelled, erroneously, bra-burners, while there is also a more controversial variety of the movement, the so-called stiletto feminism. Attitudes to underwear and its "sexiness" often correspond to individual and social attitudes to femininity and gender norms.

[189] Thesander, *The Feminine Ideal*, 8.
[190] Grogan, *Body Image*, 6.