

Codified Complexity: The Corsetry of Jean Paul Gaultier

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The history of corsetry is as complex as the garment's technical construction. The term 'corset' first appeared in 1829; however, European fashion saw similar forms of structured undergarments used to shape the body in popular fashions since the twelfth century. Corsets have existed in many different forms, each specifically tailored to meet the silhouette and style of its particular era and geography. By the nineteenth century, it had become an essential part of women's wardrobe, dominating the popular styles that defined the standard for female respectability. The corset is commonly remembered for its role in Victorian fashions, often understood as a direct physical manifestation of the oppressive beauty standards (and societal roles in an overwhelmingly patriarchal society), physically deforming women into compliance with the hourglass shapes demanded of them. At the turn of the twentieth century, *sans-ventre*, or S-Bend, corsets reshaped the corset's appearance further, popularizing a new silhouette that flattened the stomach, displacing and accentuating the bust and hips. The corset was even central to Christian Dior's redefinition of post-war European couture, providing the essential structure to the cinched silhouette of his 1947 'New Look.'¹ Although its association with the patriarchal oppression of Victorian times caused it to lose popularity with the emergence of female liberation movements in the mid-twentieth century, designers like Christian LaCroix and Vivienne Westwood had already re-incorporated it into their high-fashion designs by the beginning of the 1980s.² The corset has existed across centuries in various forms that are remembered to varying degrees; upper-class women's fashion, masculine military attire, punk fashion, and bondage/fetish enthusiasts are some of the many disparate spheres of dress in which the corset's rigid structure has been embraced. Jean Paul Gaultier is one of many designers who

¹ Coleno, Nadine, Lydia Kamitsis and Bruno Remaury. "Corset." In *Dictionnaire International de La Mode*. Paris: Editions du Regard, 2004.

² Lemahieu, Sophie. "Corsets, Crinolines, and Bustles in Today's Fashions: Drawing Creative Inspiration From the History of Undergarments." Essay. In *Fashioning the Body: An Intimate History of the Silhouette*, edited by Denis Bruna. New York, NY: Published for Bard Graduate Center by Yale University Press, 2015, 244.

has championed the corset on the runway, placing his designs in direct conversation with the many complex, or even contradictory, connotations from its rich history. The corset dress featured in his Haute Couture Spring/Summer 2001 “Des Robes qui se Dérobent” collection (Figure 1) best embodies this attempt to articulate these contradictions at once, collapsing the boundaries between garment and wearer to confine its’ model in conflicting codes of dressed/undressed, modest/immodest, masculine/feminine, and liberated/restrained.

Gaultier’s choice of Sophie Dahl to model the garment on the runway (Figure 2) contextualizes this link between body and accessory. In her book *The Corset: A Cultural History*, fashion historian and curator Valerie Steele challenges a monolithic understanding of the corset by examining the many complex iterations of corsetry throughout time. She notes that due to censorship laws restricting female nudity in art, corsets often acted as “surrogate[s] for the body,” standing in as a representation for the entirety identity of its wearer.³ The corset is a “synecdoche for the woman herself,” a connotation that Gaultier emphasizes in his presentation of his corset dress.⁴ The ensemble consists of a light pink silk corset, made in collaboration with famed corsetière Mr. Pearl, that stretches down to cover the model’s legs, constricting the entire body from the bust down. Even the arms are corseted in matching pink silk, entirely covering the model’s lower body from the front. However, the back of the gown is made up of the corset’s lacings, deliberately loosened and undone to create a pooling train as it exposes the model’s entire backside. While entirely hidden from the front, the model's skin is exposed in the back, peeking through the loose silk ribbons. The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s description for the dress notes that “Sophie Dahl, who wore this design on the runway, was a spectacular vision,

³ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001, 45.

⁴ Ibid., 118.

with her pale skin and blonde hair blending with the powder pink of the corset dress.”⁵ As Dahl’s skin and hair *blend* with the structured dress that covers (and reveals) it, the boundaries between this dress and its wear also become muddled.

The corset is then intrinsically linked to the body — and person — that it covers, creating a paradox of dressing the model in their own skin. In his interview with Thierry-Maxime Lorient for *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, Mr. Pearl emphasizes the corset as a conduit for bodily connection: “Wearing a corset connects you to the body more directly, because you feel it all the time, it becomes part of you.”⁶ Gaultier’s design emphasizes this reciprocal *becoming* that conflates the body and garment, choosing his pale pink palette to give Dahl the appearance of *almost* complete nudity. This is yet another way Gaultier materializes the conflicting connotations of the corset, using the tight skin-like structure to visualize its paradoxical codes of dressed and undressed. Steele emphasizes that “the appeal of the corset clearly derived from its status as underwear, a category of clothing that complicated the traditional paradigm of the naked and the clothes.”⁷ Gaultier’s design seeks to subvert this entire paradigm, inseparably visualizing both ends of the spectrum at once. The dress not only renders this state of *undress* by bringing this underwear to the outside, but the lacing also visually divides the model into two disparate halves of being modestly covered and immodestly exposed. The looseness of the lacing (as if in the process of being undone) only further connotes “the act of undressing, a transition” permanently halted and rendered incomplete by Gaultier’s design.⁸ The dress exemplifies how an item can simultaneously contain paradoxical, even

⁵ “Evening Ensemble.” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/82659>.

⁶ Lorient, Thierry-Maxime, ed. *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*. Montreal, Quebec: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2011, 167.

⁷ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*, 114.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 115.

incompatible, connotations, speaking to the corset's ability to represent a variety of meanings and histories in tandem.

The dress's pale pink shade combined with its rigid boning also connotes a *secondary skin* protecting the skin beneath it, further complicating an attempt to categorize Gaultier's creation within a singular code. Mr. Pearl imagines the corset as a tough outer shell, calling it "more intimate than a dress; it is like a carapace."⁹ The boned garment becomes a rigid exoskeleton that protects the vulnerable, naked body it covers, even as it simultaneously visualizes this vulnerability in its construction. Lorient writes that this understanding of the corset as a protective layer allows the corset to become a symbol of empowered strength: "Far from being an instrument of torture imprisoning women's bodies, the corset now embodies the new power of the female and shapes its counterpoint of the male jacket, the distant progeny of the knight's suit of armor."¹⁰ While its design alludes to the historical connotation of *imprisonment* with its constriction of the body and arms, restricting the model's movement, it subverts this by finding empowerment in restriction. Gaultier's design further articulates the corset as *armor*, transforming it to enwrap the entire body with its protective structure. Even the arms are covered and surrendered to the corset's control.

This irresolvable, simultaneous articulation of the corset as armor and vulnerable skin helps construct the complex codes of femininity within Gaultier's design. The material choice of pale pink satin invokes a color palette associated with traditional conceptualizations of delicate femininity. As the dress calls attention to the body's form and begins to blend with Dahl's skin, it begins to "function as a kind of striptease, arousing sexual curiosity by holding in promise the thrill of exposure," proudly displaying the image of an (almost) nude female form.¹¹ Gaultier's

⁹ Lorient, Thierry-Maxime, ed. *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, 166.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*, 115.

design calls attention to the corset's most recent history in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In her interview with Lorient, Steele notes that the corset's resurgence on countless high-fashion runways, alongside Gaultier's highly publicized collaboration with Madonna for her 1990 *Blonde Ambition* world tour, helped claim the corset as "a sign of women's liberation, of women assuming power, sexual power included, over their own bodies."¹² Madonna emphasizes that Gaultier's corsetry articulated "feminine power" in simultaneity with its "sexual freedom."¹³ The corset becomes powerfully feminine by reveling in the sensuality of the almost naked female form, foregrounding empowered sexuality in its presentation.

Gaultier's corset's parallel connotation of *armor* further complicates this image of femininity, both supporting and contradicting the empowerment offered by the illusion of undressing. By entirely covering and obscuring the front of body, Gaultier places his corsetry in lineage with the corset's history as a fetishist object in sexual subcultures. Steele notes the corset's prominent role in constructing the image of the dominatrix: "The dominatrix wears her corset as armour, its extreme and rigid curvature the ultimate sexual taunt at the slave who may look but not touch"¹⁴ She specifically asserts this connotation of *armor* as she emphasizes the corset as sexually empowering tool, giving complete power and control to its wearer. The dress then finds empowerment both in its display of skin as it does in its denial and covering of it. The corset dress's silhouette is almost modest in its total occlusion of the model's front, denying any glimpse of what lies beneath. As its tight, skin-like form prompts the viewer to imagine the body as naked, the corset effectively enacts this *taunt*, ultimately denying the pleasure of seeing the form it imagines. In "Corsets, Crinolines, and Bustles in Today's Fashions: Drawing Creative Inspiration From the History of Undergarments," Sophie Lemahieu, head of the fashion and

¹² Lorient, Thierry-Maxime, ed. *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk*, 150.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹⁴ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*, 166.

textiles collections at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, writes that Gaultier's corsetry imagines "the possibility for the 'weaker sex' to assume her femininity like a new power. The strong woman is conformed in her position by the corset supporting her; Jean Paul Gaultier 'imposes the image of a woman in full possession of her sexuality'"¹⁵ Gaultier's corset constructs a parallel code of femininity that finds empowerment and strength in dominating both the form and the viewer.

The language used by Lemahieu to describe the empowerment offered by Gaultier's corsetry speaks to Gaultier's simultaneous incorporation of the codes of corsetry's often-forgotten history of fashioning (and constructing) masculinity. Lemahieu's invocation of the corset as a supporting structure meant to imbue its wearer with strength and sexuality directly parallels the language of "physical activity, manly stamina, and sexual virility" mentioned by Alanna McKnight in her analysis of male corsetry advertisements in "Hard and Straight: The Creation of Nineteenth-Century Masculinity through Corsetry."¹⁶ McKnight explores how corsetry was never a strictly female practice, finding popularity in its construction of masculinity through a militaristically rigid silhouette. She emphasizes the specific connotations invoked to involve corsetry in masculine self-fashioning: "Through wearing corsets men were subconsciously turning their entire bodies into phalluses."¹⁷ Steele finds a similar connotation within the practices of female corsetry, arguing that the corset is a "'masculinization' of the female body" through "undeniably serv[ing] to make the torso hard and erect."¹⁸ Gaultier's design finds itself in another paradox of invoking the naked form it obstructs; however, it now

¹⁵ Lemahieu, Sophie. "Corsets, Crinolines, and Bustles in Today's Fashions: Drawing Creative Inspiration From the History of Undergarments," 248-249.

¹⁶ McKnight, Alanna. "'Hard and Straight': The Creation of Nineteenth-Century Masculinity through Corsetry." Essay. In *Crossing Gender Boundaries: Fashion to Create, Disrupt and Transcend*, edited by Andrew Reilly and Ben Barry. Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2020, 41.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Steele, Valerie. *The Corset: A Cultural History*, 138.

connotes a phallic masculinity. It adds a construction of *masculine* strength by transforming the entire body into a rigid and phallic symbol, aided by the dress's nudity-invoking color pallet.

Gaultier's transformation of the body into a masculine sign then clashes with his garment's structure as a dress, a garment traditionally associated with women's fashion. These irresolvable, conflicting codes of masculinity and femininity accentuate the gender ambiguity Gaultier hopes to promote while situating it within the context of corsetry's historical practice. Steele traces corsetry's important role within fetishistic photography, where she notes the prominence of corsetry "associated with the image of the power Phallic Woman, and with the sexual 'perversions' of sadomasochism and transvestism."¹⁹ Gaultier's design links itself to yet another history of representation characterized by ambiguity, articulating a liberation of sexual and gender expression through its restrictive form.²⁰ Lemahieu foregrounds this paradox of liberation/restriction in fetishist corsetry practice: "The suffering [one] endures is in proportion to the self-control [one] acquires. The body at its limit is the height of its eroticization. The silhouette is transcended, almost stylized, but all freedom of movement and activity is violated."²¹ Gaultier's garment only further materializes this inextricable link between polarities of movement by inhibiting the entire body's movement with the corset's structure. The total liberation found in total restriction is only emphasized when Dahl turns around on the runway, revealing an unrestricted (and uncovered) form in tandem with liberated sexuality.

Gaultier's design finds itself trapped within another paradox of expression, tracing its lineage to yet another subsect (and subculture) of corsetry's historical tradition. Using Dahl as a model for his design on the runway, Gaultier allowed his iteration of corsetry to continue its

¹⁹ Ibid., 165.

²⁰ Ibid.,

²¹ Lemahieu, Sophie. "Corsets, Crinolines, and Bustles in Today's Fashions: Drawing Creative Inspiration From the History of Undergarments," 251

historical role in acting as a surrogate and synecdoche of its wearer by visually blending with her skin and hair. As Gaultier's garment dissolves the borders between garment and body, so too are the borders between dressed/undressed and modesty/immodesty. The garment both covers and exposes Dahl's body, all while assuming its pale-pink appearance. Thus, even the front of the garment, which covers all of the model's skin below the neckline, stands to paradoxically reveal the flesh it obscures. This act of reveal — or striptease — is further reinforced into the garment by its undone lacing, constructing an empowered femininity through a fetishistic exhibition of form. However, this skin-like quality also imbues Gaultier's corset with a contrasting conceptualization of *armoring* the body, invoking the corset as a tool of the dominatrix to find feminine strength in the denial and control of viewing what lies beneath. As Gaultier's corset constricts the body in its narrow, rigid structure, it simultaneously draws upon and appropriates male traditions of corsetry that used corsets to construct an image of phallic rigidity and sexual force. Gaultier's corset becomes a layered interplay of these existing codes, extrapolated from corsetry's vast and diverse history in human self-fashioning. Binaries of masculine/feminine, exposed/covered, liberated/restricted, and dressed/undressed are all equally subverted by Gaultier's design. Gaultier's corset ultimately seeks to define its own history, undermining a monolithic view of corsetry as a strictly oppressive tool to understand how restrictive structure can articulate a fluid, uncontainable identity.



Figure 1. Jean Paul Gaultier. *Evening Ensemble*, spring 2001 couture. The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 2. Look 53, Jean Paul Gaultier Spring 2001 Couture. Vogue Runway.

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