The lingering stay: How a changing economy and shifting ideas affected British Corsetry in the Regency Era

To marry "the art in which consist the strength of beauty, the fascination of elegance and the all-conquering power of taste"[1] and that "elegance inseparable from propriety"[2] was the primary aim of the Regency woman. She had to encompass that modesty which was contradictory to the fickleness of dress with an excellent understanding of fashion. The stay is the garment which managed to combine these two ideals, yet with the onslaught of the Enlightenment, could the stay keep its position in the woman's wardrobe?

Despite their demise in the latter years of the 18th century, by 1811 stays had reemerged as a necessity in Regency women's fashion across classes.[3][4] Although for a short time at the very beginning of the century a few young women ceased to wear stays, especially in Paris,[5] this infrequent habit had vanished by 1811 and even the fashion for short stays was only truly fashionable in the first decade of this century[6]. However, the very nature of the garment changed drastically, in a manner which mirrored the transformation of European culture. Most noticeable was the effect of neoclassicism, which was inspired by the Enlightenment; accentuated by the Revolution but truly driven by romanticism [7][8]. By 1800 the movement which had long been imbedded in European architecture and philosophy reached women's fashion and underwear. [9] Another change in the construction of stays was the replacement of boning with cording. Whilst some would argue this was caused by the advances in science and the writings of philosophes which condemned the use of boned stays for health reasons,[10] the Revolution was key in allowing this decline of modesty in fashion. However,

1. A Lady of Distinction, *The Mirror of the Graces,* (London: B. Crosby & Co., 1811) p. iii
2. Ibid p.62
3. Elizabeth Ewing, *Dress and Undress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1978)
4. Tamami Suoh and Miki Iwagami, *Fashion: A History from the 18th to the 20th Century,* (Cologne: Taschen, 2002)
5. Frances Burney, *Journals and Letters,* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001) - written in 1802
6. Elizabeth Ewing, *Dress and Undress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1978)
7. Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)
8. Penelope Byrd, *Nineteenth Century Fashion,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1992)
9. Cassidy Percoco, *Regency Women's Dress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015)
10. Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)

Britain's lack of a religious revolution and a degree of separation from France due to the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars [11][12] prevented Britain ever favouring the near-nudity that was popular in Paris. [13][14] The changing industry and popularisation of cotton also impacted on the construction of stays, which had previously been made of linen canvas. [15][16][17] By examining the effects of these events on corsetry, this essay hopes to highlight the depth of the effects on the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution beyond politics and economics; to show the small impacts that large events can have on half the population. This in turn can reveal the changes in values and priorities within a nation, both subconscious and intentional, and can heighten our understanding of the Regency mindset.

The Neoclassical Silhouette

The changing ideas resulting from the neoclassical movement led to a drastic change in dress shape and thus the design, construction and purpose of stays. Initially the lack of a visible waist and emphasis on the bust in neoclassical fashion meant that the new primary purpose of the stays was to lift and separate the bust, [18] which could be achieved by a pair of short stays. However, in the zealous pursuit of ancient drapery the gathering under the bust disappeared[19] and stomach control became necessary.[20][21][22] Thus, though the freedom offered by the short stays better correlated with the physical freedom encouraged by Enlightenment ideals and the near-nudity of classics, both short and long stays were popular

---

11. Clive Emsley, *British Society and the French Wars, 1793-1815,* (London: Macmillan, 1979)
12. Cassidy Percoco, *Regency Women's Dress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015)
13. John Cawse, *Parisian Ladies in their winter dress for 1800*, (London, S W Fores, 1799)
14. Frances Burney, *Journals and Letters,* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001) - written in 1802
15. Cassidy Percoco, *Regency Women's Dress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015)
16. *English Corset, c. 1815,* cotton sateen, The MET, New York
17. Corset, c.1811, cotton, The MET, New York
18. Cassidy Percoco, *Regency Women's Dress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015) p. 7
19. Ibid p. 9
20. A Lady of Distinction, *The Mirror of the Graces,* (London: B. Crosby & Co., 1811)
21. Elizabeth Ewing, *Dress and Undress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1978)
22. Cassidy Percoco, *Regency Women's Dress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015)

In England by 1806[23] and by the end of the Regency era short stays had vanished. [24] In 'The Mirror of the Graces', a Lady of Distinction writes that stays are "to compress and reduce to the shape desired the natural prominence of the female figure in a state of fruitfulness".[25] This illustrates the paradox which underpinned fashion of this era; using unnatural methods to appear more natural. This desire to appear young and fertile, though not a new sentiment, was very much emphasised by classical artwork, the philosophes' relations of science and reason to female health and conduct books, which, despite falling out of fashion were still used as a source of guidance. Therefore though the silhouette appeared to derive from ideals of the natural body, a delicate figure void of "miserable leanness or shapeless fat" [26] was often achieved through the use of a pair of stays.

It seems that as the decade progressed, fashion moved away from the loose and liberal and slowly became more 'unnatural'. If the new fashion was rooted in a nostalgic hunger for the classics and freedom from the artificial, why did corsetry and fashion return to a more restrictive silhouette with gothic elements by 1820? In a letter from Jane Austen in 1813, she notes "I learnt... to my high amusement, that the stays now are not made to force up the Bosom at all; *that* was a very unbecoming, unnatural fashion".[27] Though one could use this claim to support the view that fashion mirrored the liberal views of the Revolution, the tone of scepticism in Jane Austen's writing, when accompanied by the writings of other contemporaries[28] and stays from period, suggests that along with the constriction of the stomach, the raising of the breasts was their primary function. This assertion is supported in the 'Mirror of the Graces' when the author writes "in eight women out of ten, the hips [are] squeezed into a circumference little more than the waist; and the bosom shoved up to the

---

23. Cassidy Percoco, ***Regency Women's Dress,*** (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015)
24. Elizabeth Ewing, *Dress and Undress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1978)
25. A Lady of Distinction, *The Mirror of the Graces,* (London: B. Crosby & Co., 1811) p.99
26. Ibid p. 37
27. Jane Austen, *Letters,* (written in London, Wednesday 15 September 1813)
28. "*Her bosom, which nature planted at the bottom of her chest, is pushed up by means of wadding and whalebone to a station so near her chin that in a very full subject that feature is sometimes lost between the invading mounds*" The Morning Herald, 1790s, quoted by Sarah Jane Downing

chin."[29] In addition, one can see this trend mocked in countless satirical drawings and rhymes, such as in "Progress of the Toilet - The Stays" by James Gillray (see figure 1).[30] This challenges the view that the natural state exalted by both philosophes and romantics was foundational to fashion, rather than just an initial source of inspiration in the 1790s. This in turn calls into question the depth of Classicism in fashion. Here it is vital to distinguish between the aesthetic and philosophy. Fashion was inspired by the philosophy, which in turn created the neoclassical aesthetic, and it was this that was foundational to fashion in this era, and did not fade until the 1820s.

And so, the emphasis on the bust and the columnar silhouette began with the intention of liberating the body and reflecting the elegant drapery of the classics. However, as this trend was truly rooted in romanticism, not classicism, as time and fashion progressed, the figure did not retain this focus on classical liberty but on the classical aesthetic. The introduction of the gothic elements into dress,[31] symptomatic of this romanticism, furthered the move away from neoclassicism. This change is visible in corsetry through the decline of the liberating short stays and the use of heavier cording and busks in long stays. Busts were pushed higher, whilst stomachs and hips were pulled in tighter. One could argue that the end of revolution in 1799 played a part in the decline of neoclassicism; however, Napoleon's personal infatuation with the classics [32] and the fact that neoclassicism began to diminish a decade after the Coup of Brumaire undermines this view. Instead, I would argue that the foundation of classical fashion was not even neoclassicism, let alone liberty and equality, but romanticism and thus over time the desire to look elegant and youthful superseded the infatuation with natural beauty and freedom.

---

29. A Lady of Distinction, *The Mirror of the Graces,* (London: B. Crosby & Co., 1811) p.96
30. James Gillray, *Progress of the Toilet - The Stays,* (London, 1818)
31. Sarah Jane Downing, *Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen*, (Oxford: Shire Publications Ltd, 2010)
32. T.S. Allen, *This is What Napoleon thought of Caesar* (2018)

The Wrath of the Revolution

The view of the philosophes on 18th century fashion is epitomised in the title of a work by Jacques Bonnaud in 1770: “Dégradation de l'espèce humaine par l'usage des corps a baleine: ouvrage dans lequel on démontre que c'est aller contre les loix de la nature...”[33] Bonnaud was supported in this view by many men in the later half of the 18th century, including the physician Joseph Raulin, who targeted pregnancy stays in “De la conservation des enfants” in 1768,[34] as well as Comte de Buffon.[35] However, the extent of the impact is a source of debate amongst fashion historians; was it these attacks on fashion which caused the change, or was it the sudden change in the political landscape caused by the French Revolution which triggered a desire to change? In Valerie Steele’s 2003 work, ‘The Corset’, she argues that the Enlightenment was a greater factor in causing ‘the demise of stays, which had already begun to fall out of favour before 1789’. [36] However, as Honig points out, it took 30 years for stays to lose their boning, whilst the same writings did have an effect on swaddling and breast-feeding much earlier, implying that it was not for lack of awareness that stays did not change.[37] Although it is arguably impossible to completely distinguish the Enlightenment from the French Revolution, the timing of the changes in corsetry would imply that the French Revolution did play an important role in the development of corsetry, and that revolutionaries such as Jacques Hébert played a role in the changing fashion (In Le Père Duchesne, Hébert calls for “an end to the aristocracy of dress”).[38] In addition, the fact that the most drastic changes in corsetry emanated from and were sometimes isolated in Paris,[39][40] whilst the ideas of the Enlightenment spread across France and Europe, would heavily imply that the Revolution did have a greater impact that Steele suggests.

---

33. “Degradation of the human species by the use of whale bodies: work in which it is shown that it goes against the laws of nature…” Jacques Bonnaud, *Dégradation de l'espèce humaine par l'usage des corps a baleine,* (Paris: De l'Imprimerie de P.Al. Le Prieur, Imprimeur du Roi, 1770)
34. Joseph Raulin, *De la conservation des enfants,* (unknown, 1768)
35. Michelle Honig, *The History Of Corsets Is More Complicated Than You Probably Think,* (2017) <link> [25/06/19]
36. Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)
37. Ibid
38. Ibid
39. Penelope Byrd, *Nineteenth Century Fashion,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1992)
40. Frances Burney, *Journals and Letters,* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001) - written in 1802

Arguably it was not only revolutionary ideas of equality which caused this change but also change in religion. Here again, it is difficult to separate philosophe from revolutionary, but there is undoubtedly a difference between the 'simple' deism presented by men such as Voltaire, and Robespierre's cult of the supreme being and France's subsequent religious terror. Whilst both played a part in the demise of Christianity in France and changes in sexual morality, the severity and thoroughness of religious revolution in Paris meant it had a more definite and universal change in behaviour than the philosophes. While one could argue that this change simply correlates with changes in corsetry, the fact that for hundreds of years stays had been synonymous with modesty and respectability [41] means that causation is more than plausible. Indeed, if one compares France and Britain, where deism had been discussed by men such as Locke but not widely accepted, though both states followed the same fashions and read the same writers, there are differences in their corsetry. According to Steele, "Long heavily-boned stays continued (from 1800) to be worn by many women, especially in England, where they were strongly associated with respectable sexual morality". [42] Meanwhile, on visiting Paris Fanny Burney writes "Stays? Every body has left off even corsets*!"[43] Not only does this source show the differences between French and English corsetry, but the tone of shock supports the view that differing standards of sexual morality and propriety were a cause for the more free and risqué stays.

Despite the change in British Regency corsetry being less extreme than that of the French, there was certainly still a great change in the nature of stays in this period. If Britain was becoming more focused on modesty and morals in this era, why did they adopt a less 'proper' fashion, if indeed a lack of religiosity caused the change in France? The simple reason is that

---

41. Valerie Steele, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)
42. Ibid p.30
43. Frances Burney, *Journals and Letters,* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2001) - written in 1802

*Stays and Corsets were two separate coexisting garments in this period. The earliest written description of corsets is in the 1777 'Dictionnaire des origines' which defines the corset as "a little pair of stays usually made of quilted linen and without bones." p58 They became popular in France in the 1790s

despite political and economic factors, France has led European fashion for over 300 years, directly impacting British design.[44] This can be seen in most of Britain's fashion magazines at the time; for example, the fashion editor of 'La Belle Assemblée' used to import two foreign dresses weekly to study and reproduce in the magazine. Other plates were simply reproductions of earlier French ones.[45] This practice was not limited to 'La Belle Assemblée', with other British magazines such as 'Costume Parisien' consisting almost entirely of reproduced plates. Certain historians such as Percoco would argue that the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars cut Britain off from French fashion in this period, and that Britain became Europe's leader in fashion. [46] However, the previously mentioned examples of the magazines and the very close correlation of designs in the period means that though Britain may indeed have been a few months behind French fashion, it was by no means isolated from it.

And so, to understand how the Enlightenment and the Revolution affected English corsetry, one can examine their effects on the French. The main impact of the philosophes and the Revolution on corsetry was the fact that views on religion changed drastically in Paris, which had a knock-on effect on views on sexual morality and thus modesty in fashion. This allowed for the decrease in boning and the general restrictive nature of 18th century stays. Although the philosophes had advocated this earlier, it was only with the revolutionary change in aesthetic, acceptance of immodesty, and demands for equality and liberty in fashion that reason and science were accepted. This is supported by the timing, location and rapidity of the changes which coincide with the French political and aesthetic revolution as opposed to the gradual introduction of Enlightenment ideas.

---

44. Sarah Jane Stratford, *Why is Paris the Capital of fashion,* (2019) <https://womens-fashion.lovetoknow.com/Why_is_Paris_the_Capital_of_Fashion> [03/07/19]
45. National Portrait Gallery, *La Belle Assemblée or Bell's Court and Fashionable Magazine,* <link> [03/07/19]
46. Cassidy Percoco, ***Regency Women's Dress,*** (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015)

An Industrialised Economy

Finally, the evolving economies of Western Europe, Britain in particular, led to changes in corsetry. The political and ideological revolutions coincided with an increase in the number of mills, development of trade with India and a generation of industrialists who were changing the nature of the textile industry. These changes largely affected corsetry through increasing the popularity of cotton, which became the most popular fabric for stays by 1820.

The landscape of the British textile industry was changing drastically from the 1770s up until the end of the Regency era, primarily due to the inventions of Richard Arkwright and other innovators. Historically, stays as well as other undergarments were made of linen, but developments in the ability to manufacture and process cotton, as well as the growing trade in raw cotton, meant that this was changing.[47] The Water Frame, patented by Sir Richard Arkwright in 1769,[48] allowed for smooth cotton threads with a high twist ratio to be produced *en masse*. This fundamentally changed the European textile market; historically cotton was not strong enough to be used for the warp* and so linen was used. Arkwright's water frame allowed the linen warp to be replaced by a cotton one, thus allowing pure cotton goods to be manufactured for the first time in British history.[49] Although the steam engine, a product of many men's work including Newcomen and James Watt, was only accepted gradually, by 1800 there were reportedly 321 engines at work.[50] Other notable machines include Hargreaves' 'spinning jenny' and Samuel Crompton's 'mule', which was a derivative of the water frame and the spinning jenny. The impact of these inventions can be seen in the of British price of cotton manufacture which fell from nine shillings per pound in 1884 to just one in 1812; cotton was now being produced more quickly, widely and cheaply.[51] Not only were

---

47. Cassidy Percoco, *Regency Women's Dress,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 2015)
48. The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, *Sir Richard Arkwright*, (April 26, 2019) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Arkwright> [July 10, 2019]
49. John Addy, *The Textile Revolution,* (Harlow: Longman Higher Education, 1976)
50. John Addy, *The Textile Revolution,* (Harlow: Longman Higher Education, 1976) p.27
51. Gregory Clarke, *The British Industrial Revolution, 1760-1860,* (2005) <link> [10/07/19]

*The warp is one of the two basic components of woven fabric. During weaving the longitudinal warp threads are held stationary in tension whilst the weft is threaded over and under.

the industrialists inventing new technology but also a new factory system that could produce on a much larger scale. Arkwright and Strutt went to the extent of building residences for the mill workers to ensure a constant hard-working labour force. The numbers of mills and their sizes were growing at a rapid rate in the North, and by 1788 there were 40 spinning mills in South Lancashire alone.[52] Now there was not only the possibility of pure cotton made in Britain, but an abundance of the new fabric which symbolised modernity. Furthermore, its affordability meant that in France it was also fashionably democratic.[53] The fact that much of the cotton, raw and processed, came from India also gave an element of the exotic and oriental, which was becoming increasingly popular in Britain.[54] All these factors meant that in the 1780s and 1790s cotton grew in popularity rapidly, first affecting outerwear and then underwear. Thus, by 1820, the changing textiles industry and Arkwright's inventions caused most stays to be made of a cotton twill or a similar heavy-weight cotton.[55]

Legislation regarding the textile industry and the trade in cotton was vital in allowing this expansion in the market. A pivotal moment in shaping the economy and cotton industry, and thus stays, was the repeal of the Calico Act in 1774. The 1721 Calico Act severely limited the sale of both imported and domestic cotton, in order to protect the declining wool and linen industries.[56] As its repeal would damage these industries, it was necessary for British cotton to be a strong competitor to that of Bengal if the British textiles industry was to survive. Thus in 1774 investment flooded in to support the new cotton mills and the invention of new machinery.[57] Although in the 1770s, stays continued to be made of linen, the impact on fashion is almost immediate, as can been seen in some of the dresses in the V&A.[58]

---

52. John Addy, *The Textile Revolution,* (Harlow: Longman Higher Education, 1976)
53. Sarah Jane Downing, *Fashion in the Time of Jane Austen*, (Oxford: Shire Publications Ltd, 2010)
54. A Lady of Distinction, *The Mirror of the Graces,* (London: B. Crosby & Co., 1811) p. 40
55. Penelope Byrd, *Nineteenth Century Fashion,* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1992)
56. Stephen Broadberry and Bishnupriya Gupta, *Cotton Textiles And The Great Divergence: Lancashire, India And Shifting Competitive Advantage, 1600-1850,* (University of Warwick, 2007), <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/papers/broadberry-gupta.pdf> [11/07/19]
57. Helen Banham, *Repeal of Calico Act 1774,* (2011), <https://www.intriguing-history.com/3092/#> [11/07/19]
58. *Gown, 1770s,* cotton & linen, The V&A, London. Museum number: T.26-2018 (see figure 2 below)

Gradually, as cotton production increased, linen stays were replaced by cotton ones or even stays which contained both textiles.[59] Just as the Calico Act 1721 forced stays to be made mostly of linen at the end of the 18th century, repeal encouraged the work of Arkwright and others, which in turn increased cotton production. This caused stays in the Regency period to be increasingly made of cotton or a combination of linen and cotton.

Britain's role in India had an interesting effect on the British textile industry, and thus British stays. In the 18th century, wages for British labourers were far higher than for their Indian counterparts. Initially, this crippled any hope for British cotton production as cotton had to be produced domestically, using labour-intensive production methods.[60] Broadberry and Gupta argue that it was this which stimulated the search for technology which would reduce labour.[61] Thus the British relationship with the Indian cotton market played a role in causing Arkwright, Hargreaves, Crompton and others to create the inventions which revolutionised the European textile industry and thus fashion. Trade of raw cotton with India also had an impact on Regency corsetry. Despite a shift occurring in competitive advantage as British productivity soared, this did not immediately equate to a shift in the international market nor in British cotton prices; as production increased, so did pressure on the suppliers. As the supply of raw cotton was unable to keep up with British manufacture, the price of raw cotton from India increased in the late 18th and early 19th century.[62] Transport costs further delayed the transition. Thus, though cotton manufacture was becoming more affordable and prolific from the 1780s onwards, it was not until 1810 that the change in prices made it suitable for use in undergarments. Cotton was also made more affordable and therefore popular by the complete lack of tariffs on raw Indian cotton.[63] This contributed to the availability of cotton and its

---

59. *Stays, early 19th century,* Cotton twill, linen plain weave (lining), cotton plain weave tape, linen twill tape, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Accession number: 49.904
60. Stephen Broadberry and Bishnupriya Gupta, *Cotton Textiles And The Great Divergence: Lancashire, India And Shifting Competitive Advantage, 1600-1850,* (University of Warwick, 2007), <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/papers/broadberry-gupta.pdf> [23/07/19]
61. Ibid p. 5
62. Ibid p. 6
63. Paul Bairoch, *Economics and World History: Myths and Paradoxes,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) p. 89

dominance over linen and wool in the 19th century. However this was only a small factor in making cotton affordable; without the new machinery it would have been impossible to compete with India, where workers received just one sixth of the wages of their British counterparts.

It was not only trade in cotton that had an impact on British fashion and textiles. Whilst in the late 18th century the price of processed cotton was plummeting, the cost of flax was doing the opposite. Firstly, the American War of Independence destabilised the market which caused a slight increase in the price of linen after 1774.[64] However, the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars had a greater impact on the trade of flax* and linen; Napoleon's blockade of British trade with Europe restricted access to continental flax which meant that the price of linen drastically increased.[65] Between 1792 and 1802 the price of Baltic flax almost doubled.[66] Prices did stabilise and start to gradually decrease after Napoleon's failed invasion of Russia in 1812, but the linen industry was now unable to compete with cotton.[67] The changes in prices forced the British population to move from the safety of linen stays to cotton ones. It is certainly plausible that the transition from linen to cotton, which had already taken place in women's fashion, was inevitable due to the Industrial Revolution. However the fact that cotton stays only start to appear in the 19th century supports the idea that the decline of linen was key in causing the evolution to happen in this particular period. Thus, whilst the Industrial Revolution was very much necessary in offering a viable alternative to linen, the timing of changes in corsetry would suggest that the rising price of linen was a necessary trigger in causing stays to start being made of cotton in the Regency Era.

---

*flax is the raw material used to manufacture linen

64. Alice Dolan, *The Fabric of Life: Linen and Life Cycle in England, 1678-1810,* (PhD, University of Hertfordshire, 2015)
65. Conrad Gill, *The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925) p.233
66. Alice Dolan, *The Fabric of Life: Linen and Life Cycle in England, 1678-1810,* (PhD, University of Hertfordshire, 2015)
67. Conrad Gill, *The Rise of the Irish Linen Industry,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925) p.233

In conclusion, the economic changes occurring in Britain in the Regency era and shortly before are visible in corsetry through the growing popularity of cotton. The area which had the greatest impact on corsetry was the innovation in the British textiles industry, which made pure cotton garments not only possible but abundant, affordable and fashionable. Whilst low customs duties and profitable trade deals with India helped make British fabric affordable, the new technology was more influential in changing the price and thus popularity of cotton; whilst the price of raw cotton fell by 25% between 1784 and 1812, the price of manufacture fell by almost 90%.[68] One could argue that the fact textile changes to corsetry only became visible 35 years after Arkwright and Hargreaves' inventions suggests they did not have a key impact, but this is not the case. Rather it shows the necessity of evaluating other factors which delayed changes in the late 18th century and triggered the entrance of cotton into corsetry from 1810 onwards. Firstly, new machinery was not immediately introduced by all mill-owners; in 'The Wealth of Nations', published in 1776, Adam Smith 'hardly notices the industry, even though he was writing in Glasgow, an early centre of the cotton industry'.[69] The expensive nature of the machinery and factories meant that investing in the new techniques required substantial capital, which in turn meant that only a few were able to take the risk. This combined with the rise in the price of raw cotton in the late 18th century to further delay change. Transport of raw materials from India, Egypt and America, in comparison to Scotland and Ireland, was relatively expensive and slow which also caused delays.[70] Another possible factor of less importance involved in causing this delay was the fact that the silhouette of the bodice did not change dramatically until the mid-1790s, so the old linen stays could be worn well after the technological changes. Furthermore, as stays are not outwardly visible, the need to use fashionable cotton for stays was not as urgent as for outerwear. The key factor in causing cotton to be used for corsets in specifically the Regency period was the rising price of flax. Napoleon's blockade and Britain's retaliation restricted the Trade of flax across Europe,

---

68. Gregory Clarke, *The British Industrial Revolution, 1760-1860,* (2005)
69. Ibid p. 6
70. Stephen Broadberry and Bishnupriya Gupta, *Cotton Textiles And The Great Divergence: Lancashire, India And Shifting Competitive Advantage, 1600-1850,* (University of Warwick, 2007), <http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/papers/broadberry-gupta.pdf> [23/07/19]

whilst Britain's navy secured trade routes with India. This meant that by 1811, in comparison to linen, cotton was more affordable and available. Thus, though the Industrial Revolution was the main factor in creating an alternative to linen stays, the disruption of the trade of flax coincides with the changes in fashion, implying that this triggered the transition to cotton stays.

Conclusion

There are many layers to the effects of a changing economy and ideological revolution on corsetry. The change in silhouette and form was not a result of neoclassicism or a yearning for liberty, but romanticism. Similarly, contrary to the views of Steele, though the gradual shift of ideas caused by the Enlightenment was necessary to allow for the changes in boning, this was not the primary cause. Rather, the French Revolution and the dechristianisation of France had a greater and more immediate effect on fashion and modesty which led to changes in corsetry which spread to Britain. The presence of both linen and cotton stays in the Regency period and the popularisation of the latter resulted from economic changes, firstly through the British textile industry and secondly the disruption of the linen market by the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The removal of protectionist legislation against cotton and favourable, well-cemented trading terms with India and other colonies were necessary to allow cotton to become more popular than linen, but were not causes of this change.

Louis XIV remarked that, "Fashion is the mirror of History". Fashion is an uncontrollable reactionary force which rejects and repeats itself in parallel with political ideas, changing foreign relations and new philosophies. An examination of fashion and how it can be a reflection of wider societal changes can help understanding our own society and culture. Choices in fabric and design can offer an insight into both the subtle and obvious changes in perspective amongst the majority of the population. Thus, by studying how economics and ideological movements affected historic fashion, we not only gain an insight into the national psyche and the wide-reaching penetration of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution across classes, but it can encourage reflection on our own culture: whilst we like to think fashion is a form of individual self-expression, it is inevitably affected by new political ideas,

scientific theories, foreign affairs and national identity. A study of corsetry in a particular era can prompt the question what was fashion, and what is fashion today?

Figure 1

Figure 2