Day, Carolyn A. "The Agony of Conceit: Clothing and Consumption." *Consumptive Chic: A History of Beauty, Fashion, and Disease*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 101–128. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350009417.ch-008>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 12:33 UTC.

Copyright © Carolyn A. Day 2017. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

CHAPTER 8

THE AGONY OF CONCEIT: CLOTHING AND CONSUMPTION

In the early nineteenth century, enthusiasm for all of the twists and turns of fashion was considered an innate weakness of a woman's character, one outside of her control.¹ Women were fashion victims, not just by choice but due to their physiology, and a slavish devotion to fashion was beyond a woman's power to restrain fully.² *La Belle Assemblée* tackled this issue on numerous occasions, as when it stated, in 1806, that "Some moralists have censured attention to dress; but very unjustly. It is perfectly useless to censure a propensity inherent in the nature of the fair sex."³ This sentiment was reiterated time and again; although, over the course of the nineteenth century the love of fashion was replaced by the love of "variety" in dress as the female weakness—a much more complicated issue. Mrs. William Parkes wrote in 1825,

A woman's wardrobe may be divided into two parts,—the ornamental and the useful. In the first I include all the various articles which are affected by fashion; everything, in fact, of external dress. In these a good economist will avoid a superabundance. She will endeavour to check that feminine weakness—the love of variety, which so frequently displays itself by an ever-varying costume, and will confine the ornamental part of her wardrobe into as narrow bounds as the extent of her general style of living and visiting will permit.⁴

Like nervous sensibility and the predisposition to consumption, a devotion to fashion was yet another biologically determined facet of the nineteenth-century woman. (See Plate 21.) Not surprisingly, then, clothing has played a prominent role in the mythology and rhetoric of tuberculosis, both as prescription against and as originator of the malady. The specifics of how clothing functioned as a causative agent of tuberculosis fluctuated alongside the fashions, as did the admonitions with respect to preventing the sickness.

Too little, too much, too tight, too loose, all of these descriptors were employed at one time or another to decry the pernicious effects of fashion on health. Despite the alterations in style from 1780 to 1850, there was a great deal of continuity in the objections and the most common criticisms related to protection from the elements and the pressures applied by clothing upon the body. It was often argued that contemporary fashions caused tuberculosis by failing to protect their wearers from the vagaries of the English climate or because they pressed upon the lungs and consequently created consumption. There was also a consistent element of imitation of several different physical symptoms of consumption; however, the substance of the complaints against dress and the modes of emulation changed alongside the fashions themselves.

Classical Consumptive and the Dangers of Fashionable Life

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, fashions began to shift radically away from the extravagance and artifice that had marked the earlier portion of the century, turning instead toward a fashioned simplicity.⁵ England felt the influence of the move toward informality and a more "natural" shape by the mid-1780s, with

the introduction of the chemise dress.⁶ Fashion in the last decades of the eighteenth century continued to simplify and there was a movement “towards a more natural, minimalist aesthetic.”⁷ By 1800, the classical lines were firmly established, and a distinctive silhouette identified with French fashionables made a determined assault on England. As neoclassical styles were adopted, waistlines rose and necklines dropped; however, the dresses embraced in England remained more modest than their French counterparts. Beyond an adherence to classical lines, these fashions also reflected the classical attitude that clothing should reveal rather than conceal the beauty of the body it covered. Women’s fashions achieved this aim in a number of ways. One was through the use of thin sheer fabrics, laid over a bare minimum of underclothing, all of which served to emphasize and allude to the bare body. Extensive portions of the anatomy were exposed, including the bosom, back, shoulders, and arms. The legs, however, remained covered, with a hint of their shape given by the clinging nature of the fabric of the skirt. Women’s gowns during this period were constructed of soft, diaphanous, even transparent fabrics (like muslin and gauze), which draped nicely, embracing and revealing the “natural” shape beneath.⁸ One ladies’ magazine detailed the style in 1811: “over this strangely manufactured figure, a scanty petticoat, and as scanty a gown is put. The latter resembles a bolster slip more than a garment; and not content with the closeness of its adherence round the body, it is cut away at the breast and back, to shew the bosom and shoulders naked; and the sleeves are snipped off.”⁹

Figure 8.1 “The Graces in a High Wind” by James Gillray, published by H. Humphrey, May 26, 1810. 1868,0808.7943. ©The Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 8.2 Caricaturizing the “Naked” fashions. “Ladies dress, as it soon will be” by James Gillray, published by Hannah Humphrey, January 20, 1796. J,3.85. ©The Trustees of the British Museum.

While the female silhouette depended upon undergarments, the style of these garments changed. Unsurprisingly, new types of this attire were developed to accommodate the sleek shape, particularly when women's skirts narrowed around 1810. Some innovations included "smooth knitted drawers"¹⁰ and invisible petticoats, which placed "the odious and vulgar article which formerly supplied its [the petticoat's] place, entirely on the shelf."¹¹ In 1807, *La Belle Assemblée* advertised Mrs. Robershaw's "much approved" invisible petticoats, claiming they provided a slimmer silhouette, as they would "add less to size than cambric muslin."¹² In the same year, one gentleman complained of the "undress" made possible by these advances, writing, "As by means of modern invisible petticoats and transparent drapery, there were exposures below as well as above."¹³ Charlotte Burney wrote of her experience with the new fashions in inclement weather, stating "the wind was so intolerable that we dared not walk about . . . lest our light French clothing should give way & no shade be left to our complete perfections."¹⁴ These same problems were satirized by James Gillray in his 1810 "The Graces in a High Wind."

The scanty nature of both dress and undergarments was lamented and lampooned from the very beginning of the neoclassical trend and women were rebuked for their naked fashions, which were thought to have consequences for both health and decency.¹⁵ In 1785, *The European Magazine and London Review* bemoaned the sad state of affairs arguing the "modern habits of fashionable life," particularly female dress meant "that health, ease, and beauty, are hardly to be found to be genuine among the sex." Even worse, "The caprice of fashion . . . hurry the unfortunate fair to sickness or the grave." This was a concern not just for the current generation, but for future ones as well as "there is reason to dread that generations yet unborn will be heirs to the morbid effects of imprudent dress."¹⁶

Figure 8.3 "A Naked Truth or Nipping Frost" (1803), by Charles Williams, published by S. W. Fores. Image: lwlpr10384. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Caricaturists and journalists alike berated women for their dearth of clothing.¹⁷ In a nod to the political climate, as well as to the importance of the constitution in health, *The Times* stated, “If the present fashion of nudity continues its career, the Milliners must give way to the carvers, and the most elegant *fig-leaves* will be all the mode . . . If the fashion for *nakedness* should continue much longer, our healthiest fashionables will be glad to rob Abbé SYEYES’s pigeon-holes of a new Constitution.”¹⁸ Concern over the damage to the “constitution” and the unsuitableness of such fashions in the cold, variable climate of England were often ignored. As one young lady bemoaned in 1792: “Short sleeves are to be worn this winter . . . The stays are all to be cut down, & worn as low . . . I hate short sleeves in winter, but it will very soon become a singularity to wear long ones.”¹⁹

The exposure to cold became one of the most lamented anxieties over the new styles, the result of the large expanse of flesh on display as well as the insufficiency of the thin fabrics called for in neoclassical dress.²⁰ The climate, and the inadequacies of clothing to withstand its fluctuations, reoccurred as themes in both the literature of fashion and in treatises on tuberculosis. In 1799, the *Essay on Pulmonary Consumption* argued that “Our ladies, however, would undoubtedly save themselves some suffering by ceasing to expose themselves, half-undressed, to the fogs and frosts of our island.”²¹ In 1804, according to *The Fashionable World Displayed*, ladies were sure to fall into consumption: with their “limbs . . . stripped, and the bosom laid bare.”²² Caricaturists, social commentators, and medical professionals all took up the author’s complaint. “A Naked Truth or Nipping Frost,” illustrated the problem of fashionable attire, as Miss Dolly paid the price for leaving off her petticoats when Jack Frost “sorely nip’d, and pinch’d, her bare bum.” Unfortunately, the poor girl “Paid Dear for the Fashion, her Folly and Pride/ Went home to her bed and there lingering died.’ The lesson was clear, ‘Ladies, beware lest Jack Frost should obtrude/ Your nakedness cover, he’s apt to be rude.’”²³ These fashions provided ample fodder for satire and even made an appearance in George Coleman’s comedy *The Gentleman* (1806), where he remarked “An English gentlewoman, of the year eighteen hundred, emulates an English oak; which is . . . beautiful, but bare, in the depth of December.”²⁴

Thin fabrics and exposed limbs, backs, and décolletage provided a recipe for disaster when combined with the vagaries of the English weather. As one medical author complained, “The baneful custom, however, of accommodating our dress to the almanack and the fashion, rather than the vicissitudes of the weather, in this inconstant climate, must necessarily be productive of many disagreeable consequences.”²⁵ Pre-eminent among those consequences was consumption. These fashions caused problems when it came to preserving the constitution and thereby preventing tuberculosis. *A Treatise on Medical Police, and on Diet, Regimen* articulated the problem of the constitution, stating “With regard to dress in general, it may be observed, that the very sparing quantity of it used by many of the fair sex . . . is very inexcusable, being highly destructive even to the strongest constitution.”²⁶ John Armstrong also made the tubercular connection clear, complaining that the majority of consumptive cases came particularly from “the insufficient protection which the dress of females affords.”²⁷

The clinging thin gowns of the classical style did not provide the same protection as their predecessors had, and there was also an accompanying reduction in the number of petticoats.²⁸ As *La Belle Assemblée* remarked, “our climate is a terrible enemy to that airy elegant style of dress so well adapted to the light nymph-like figure of our fair country women.”²⁹ Despite the exaggerated reports of caricaturists and social commentators, women garbed in thin neoclassical materials turned to a variety of garments for warmth. To ward off the cold, women could choose from an assortment of fashionable items including enveloping shawls, cloaks, and stoles or more tailored garments like the spencer and the redingote.³⁰ The fashion for the “India shawl” continued long after the waning of neoclassical dress and certainly made an appearance in the evocative description of Eliza Hebert who “was wasted almost to a shadow,—attenuated to nearly ethereal delicacy and transparency. She was dressed in a plain white muslin gown, and lying on an Indian shawl, in which she had been enveloped for the purpose of being brought down from her bedchamber. Her small foot and ankle were concealed

Consumptive Chic

beneath white silk stockings, and satin slippers– through which it might be seen how they were shrunk from the full dimensions of health.”³¹ In this instance the shawl provided warmth and a fashionable frame to the shrunken consumptive body.

The use of these sort of outer coverings remained insufficient however, for medical investigators, particularly for those women who were already exhibiting a constitutional delicacy. Physicians focused their objections to the scanty fashions not on outerwear, but on the adaption of the undergarments to the weather and the absence of fleecy hosiery and flannel. For instance, John Armstrong stated that most phthisical cases occurred “in patients who had been careless about their clothing” and that those who were exempt from the illness owed their continued health “to the constant use of a general covering of flannel or of fleecy hosiery.”³² To this he added the importance of guarding against the fluctuations in temperature, particularly for “females, whose natural delicacy renders them less competent to resist the vicissitudes of the atmosphere.”³³ In these women, maintaining a constancy of temperature, through appropriate clothing, was key.

James Saunders’ *Treatise on Pulmonary Consumption* reiterated the well-established connection between the symptoms of consumption and climate:

Emaciation makes evident progress; cold air, dampness, wet feet, or cold any how applied, produces an uncommon degree of chilliness, attended always with an instantaneous paleness and sharpening of the features ... the face becomes pale ... except that an inconstant redness occasionally enlivens the countenance.³⁴

Wet feet provided yet another link between fashion and tuberculosis and the problem became an important point for comment, as the flowing fashions were often worn with thin shoes or sandals. In 1806, John Reid granted the feet a pivotal role in the disease process of tuberculosis, arguing “by a careful preservation from chill in the feet ... susceptibility to consumption will be considerably diminished.”³⁵ Descriptions of the trends the following year showed a demonstrable lack of concern over the state of the feet remarking, “Muslins are usually worn very clear, and the petticoat so short, as to exhibit the ankle through, which is laced in the sandal style, ornamented with the open-weave stocking.”³⁶

In 1807, in the *Monthly Magazine*, a father expressed his alarm over the effect that the new dress styles would have upon his daughter, who was already exhibiting signs of consumption, but also acknowledged his

Figure 8.4 Early nineteenth-century sandals. Left: Shoes, 1806–1815, E. Pattison (British), Gerson and Judith Leiber Foundation Gift, 2001 (2001.576a, b) ©Metropolitan Museum of Art. Right: Pair of woman’s “Grecian Sandals”, c.1818. England. Council Fund (M.2000.10.2a–c). LACMA Image Library.

failure to get her to dress more appropriately for both the weather and her constitution. She was “far from being strong,” he wrote, “and has at times a little hectic cough.” However, whenever he attempted to intervene in her choice of dress, out of fear for her health, she affected “a liveliness and flow of spirits, and assures me she is better, though I can perceive all the time, that it is a forced effort, merely assumed to prevent me from actually forbidding what she knows I wish her to avoid.”³⁷ Despite these admonitions, fashion seems to have trumped the fear of phthisis. As William Burdon explained in 1820, “Such is the domination of fashion over the female sex, that tho’ the lightness of their dress perpetually exposes them to the attacks of consumption . . . they had rather submit to the chance of these most dreadful calamities, than deviate in a single article from the strictest law of fashion.”³⁸

Inadequate protection was not the only concern, indeed there was even a direct link made between consumption and a prominent component of the neoclassical look—the dress train—which was blamed for causing the disease. (See Plate 22.) In 1806, *La Belle Assemblée* attacked the “enormous length of our fashionable women’s trains.”³⁹ The author stated, “The trains, such as they now are, are hurtful to public salubrity.” How could something as seemingly innocuous as a train be blamed for harming the public good? The answer lay in the enormous clouds of dust created as ladies strolled down the lanes of Green Park and St. James’s. The article addressed the consequences, asking what rendered “the air breathed there so fatal to delicate lungs, and causes so many colds, sore throats, and consumptions? The trains,—the unfortunate trains. The greater part of mankind go there to exhale the pure and uncontaminated air, but return suffocated.” These trains, according to the author, also were a hazard indoors: “In winter, at all our balls, and routs, the evil is increased rather than diminished . . . it is impossible to describe the consequences which must result from a carpet badly brushed, or an ill chalked floor. Sometimes, to oblige the ladies to take up these instruments of death, we have seen mischievous coxcombs set their foot on that part which lay on the ground. The lady, wishing to disengage her train, seizes its undulations, and cautiously shaking it, a cloud of dust arises from its folds, and obliges the unwary coxcomb to retire immediately for fear of suffocation. For pity’s sake, ladies . . . consider the delicacy of our lungs.”⁴⁰

Yet alongside these diatribes over the pathological consequences of these fashions, there was a simultaneous explosion of literature that connected consumption with clothing in a more positive manner. Authors of poetry and fiction also articulated a certain ideal of the beautiful female, one dominated by a model of a languorous, pale, and graceful feminine beauty that was in keeping with certain aspects of consumption.⁴¹ For instance, in 1809 an author in *La Belle Assemblée* provided a description of Juliana, who “possess[ed] the very soul of sensibility.” Her physical appearance was characterized by a pale countenance and willowy conformation, and her dress was evocative of consumption.

Her person is in a great degree the index of her mind; with a pale and interesting countenance is united a figure of sylph-like symmetry . . . It is impossible to produce a more striking contrast than this romantic yet interesting girl . . . the apparent delicacy, and retiring yet graceful simplicity.⁴²

Edward Ball’s melodrama *The Black Robber* provided a similar description of the “sylph-like Julia” as she tumbled into consumption. Julia assumed “an appearance almost celestial . . . But alas! Each succeeding day was far from bringing health to her faded cheek, true the rose’s glow beamed brightly there, but it was only the hectic colouring of consumption.”⁴³

Beyond the silhouette of consumption, marked by “a figure of sylph-like symmetry” and “delicacy,” dress also highlighted certain features of the disease process. One of the most prominent examples was the fashion for displaying the backbones, an affectation that would have heightened the visibility of consumption by accentuating its wing-backed symptom. References to exposed backbones litter the fashion journals of the period. (See Plate 23.) *La Belle Assemblée* referenced this practice in 1806 stating, “The Parisian ladies wear the

back of their gowns lower than ever ... but our English belles have very politically advanced theirs within these last three weeks. Surely the compressed shoulders, and consequently distorted back, must exhibit a most uninteresting spectacle.”⁴⁴ These “compressed shoulders” and “distorted back” were eerily reminiscent of the consumptive form where, as John Reid described, “the clavicles and shoulder-blades are thrust out from their proper position, and made to assume in some measure the form of wings ... just raised from the body and about to expand for flight.”⁴⁵

Fashion continued to emphasize the physical consequences of consumption and, despite repeated complaints, the uncovered back and exposed shoulder blades remained an integral part of female dress for more than a decade. (See Plate 24.) In 1818, *The Lady's Magazine* stated that “many of our would-be-fashionable damsels exhibit themselves as walking deformities, with a hump on their backs ... [and] appear like snails carrying their houses.”⁴⁶ In the same year, *A Picture of the Changes of Fashion* claimed that “The disgusting and frightful fashion of shewing the back bones is disappearing.”⁴⁷ Such an assertion may have been premature as in 1820 *La Belle Assemblée* once again reprimanded the fashionable about the spectacle, stating “I am surprised to see the British ladies ... make so ample a display of bare backs.”⁴⁸ Modish women “stooped to conquer” the social satirist Felix M'Donogh claimed, and he lamented the feminine style for “the fashionable hump upon [the] back.”⁴⁹ His caricature censured the “high shoulders, and often a stoop in walking” accorded as part of the consumptive constitution.⁵⁰ The popularity of this consumptive look led him to complain in 1820 that fashions exhibited “a strange practical paradox of dress and undress, poor, meagre, thin creatures were sewed up in niggardly covering, which set one shivering to look at it; and the chest was so exposed with hollow collar bones, distinct ribs, and ill-covered shoulder-blades, that a surgeon might have studied osteology from these living anatomies.”⁵¹

Figure 8.5 The fashionable hump and prominent shoulder blades reminiscent of the winged-back appearance of consumption. Left: “Evening Full Dress,” *La Belle Assemblée* (London: 1811), Casey Fashion Plate Collection, Los Angeles Public Library. Right: “Parisien Ball Dress 1811,” *La Belle Assemblée* (London: 1811), Casey Fashion Plate Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

However much the styles changed, to remain fashionable, women necessarily needed to do things that not only threatened their health but were actually believed to create tuberculosis. As a result, the preoccupation with climate continued even after the neoclassical style was supplanted. The association between women's fashion and consumption continued to grow in the 1820s and 1830s, and the clothing itself increased in importance in the discussions of causation, to the point of being given primacy in explanations of the disease. As an example, *The Ladies Pocket Magazine* in 1829 stated, "It is not our intention to enter into any general remarks upon the nature of that fatal disease. In very many cases the origin of a consumption is an ordinary cold; and that cold is frequently taken through the want of a proper attention to clothing, particularly in females."⁵² The same sentiment was expressed in *A Practical Manual for the Preservation of Health and of the Prevention of Diseases* (1824), which asserted, "Many patients, especially females, fall into consumptive complaints from the want of attention to this particular."⁵³

The protests against the pernicious effects of certain fashions continued to revolve around a number of the same themes addressed in the preceding decades, including the role played by excessive exposure and inadequate warmth on both the initiation and progress of tuberculosis. For Sir Arthur Clarke "women, according to present fashion, dress warmly, and over the whole of the person in the morning, but strip their shoulders, and adopt light dresses, in the evening. Thus circumstanced, when after the exercise of dancing they rush into draughts of cold air, they frequently lay the foundations of diseases which embitter and shorten existence."⁵⁴ *La Belle Assemblée* also commented on the inadequacy of fashionable clothes in protecting the wearer from the effects of the climate. This insufficiency was due in part, according to an 1827 article, to the refusal of fashionable ladies to ruin the line of a gown by adopting appropriate outerwear when attending evening social events. The lack of warm clothing, it claimed, contributed to the declining health of many a young woman. The mischief occurred when, "at the now chilly hour of nine, they [fashionable ladies] may have quitted their warm dwellings, and have risked the exposure of the susceptible chest, from the fear of deranging the trimmings on their dress."⁵⁵ Fashion writers were joined by medical authors in continuing to link scanty clothing to consumption, as seen in *The Modern Practice of Physic* (1828).

Various causes have indeed been assigned for the increasing prevalence at the present time of this distressing disease in the United Kingdom . . . there is great reason to suspect that the warmth and closeness of our apartments, together with the present scanty, light, and flimsy attire of our modish females, very much increase the liability to this complaint.⁵⁶

The Pocket Medical Guide (1834) similarly maintained, "Sudden changes in temperature produce hurtful effects on the body, under various circumstances. Passing into the open air from a hot and crowded ball-room, is a very common mode in which the exposure takes place. How many coughs and consumptions take their origins in such circumstances!"⁵⁷

Fashion did not function in a vacuum and already in 1823 *The Ladies Monthly Museum* had expanded the issue beyond insufficient clothing, admonishing its reader that "the enjoyment of health, is a duty, inasmuch as on the possession of health depends the proper performance of our various parts in the grand drama of life . . . While conforming to the rules of fashion and of pleasure, health is never allowed to urge its plea."⁵⁸ The journalist went on to complain:

In vain reason argues against the costume that fashion recommends, or the hours that dissipation enjoins. The young and lovely woman of fashion breathes the infected air of crowded rooms night after night, instead of seeking the salutary repose the constitution of their nature requires; and in return sinks

Consumptive Chic

into feverish slumbers during those hours when the inartificial beauty of humbler life, is catching health from the pure air of the young day. This course has consigned thousands to an early grave.⁵⁹

These sorts of criticisms occurred over and over again, seemingly to no avail, as fashionable pursuits were thought to combine with exposure to cold to produce consumption.⁶⁰

Fashionable life was articulated, not just as a cause of consumption, but also as one of the main reasons for the high incidence among the upper and middle classes. *The London Medical Gazette* complained in 1833 that:

[T]he utmost attention should be paid to clothing. A large number of females in this country fall into consumption chiefly through their own fault. The poorer classes cannot dress well, cannot be expected to take that care of themselves that they should, because they have not the means; but the rich and the middle classes do everything they can to fall into consumption.⁶¹

The author criticized, in particular, the insufficient attention to the variability of the environment by women who “will go from the hottest rooms without any thing about their feet; they take little sleep; have party after party every night; and then, at last, fall into a state of consumption: and neither themselves nor their friends will believe that this want of rest, and this extreme excitement, has been the cause of it; but I am quite sure it has.”⁶² Improper raiment continued to play an integral role in the dialogue surrounding consumption.

Consumptive Corsetry and Romantic Fashion

Just as too little clothing could bring about consumption, so could too much, or at least clothing that was too tight. As a result, corsets were the subject of much contention in both the debates surrounding fashion and those involving disease. It was widely believed that certain styles of clothing could harm the wearer either by impeding “the growth and functions of the body from inequalities of pressure, or by occasioning an improper exposure to irregularities in external temperature.” These considerations were extremely important for those with a weak constitution, as mechanical force increased “constitutional sensibility” and led to “a concurrent degree of physical sensibility to the powers of heat and cold.”⁶³ Wearing restrictive clothing, then, could escalate the effects of temperature variation upon the delicate constitution and ease the way for consumption to take hold. The issue of tightness was particularly pertinent with regard to corseting, as the practice was believed to create a tubercular diathesis by applying injurious pressure to the pulmonary system, leading to systemic illness.

The problem of restraint upon the torso had been a running theme during the eighteenth century, when the graceful female body was the product of heavy lacing and the practice was repeatedly condemned as being “in the highest degree prejudicial to health.”⁶⁴ Even early in the eighteenth century, it was accorded a role in the etiology of consumption. Cheyne in discussing the case of Catherine Walpole’s illness (which in the end proved to be consumption), wrote “There is plainly a Depression and falling in on that Side” which he suggested may have resulted from the use of “the Iron-Stays.”⁶⁵ Corsets and their connection to the development of consumption remained a recurring motif in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In his 1757 work on the disease, Benjamin Richardson called corseting “slow suicide”⁶⁶ while in 1765, Dr. John Gregory explicitly linked the wearing of stays to the creation of consumption in women.⁶⁷ These sentiments were articulated by countless other medical and social commentators who saw the practice of corseting as ruining the constitution and producing disease.⁶⁸

There has been a great deal of debate over whether or not women discarded stays at the turn of the century in an effort to achieve the neoclassical silhouette; however, numerous contemporary references suggest they

Figure 8.6 "Progress of the Toilet—The Stays" (1810). Image number: lwlpr12221. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Figure 8.7 Martha Gibbon, Stays for Women and Children, patent number 2457, December 17, 1800. The National Archives, London, UK.

did not.⁶⁹ A number of items aided in the achievement of this figure, including a variety of shorter undergarments (see Plate 25); while caricatures, fashionable literature, and trade cards provide evidence that the long stay was also available for those women requiring extra support.⁷⁰ Most likely, the elongated corset was designed to help in controlling the outmoded bulge and aid in creating a fashionable figure, increasingly marked by thinness.⁷¹ In 1800, Martha Gibbon took out a patent for the *Je Ne Sais Quoi* Stay which purported to slim the middle by preventing “any protuberance of the intestine,”⁷² while an 1806 treatise on consumption bemoaned the “sickly and mis-shapen” form of females, the product of stay wearing, stating that “Very straight lacing and straining for a fine shape . . . hath made many a fine girl spit blood.”⁷³

The chorus of disapproval over the use of corsets grew louder near the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century when the item returned as a universal fixture of fashion. In 1809, John Roberton hoped in vain that the practice would remain absent, remarking:

It is now many years since the barbarous custom of wearing on the body tight laced stays have [sic] been justly laid aside. It would appear, however, in some instances, that they are beginning again to be worn. I sincerely hope, however, that the custom will never be so common as it has been, for by indulging in it much disease was produced. The free expansion of the lungs was prevented . . . shortness of breath followed, and, in many, terminated in consumption.⁷⁴

Roberton's hopes were dashed however, as both English and French journals continued to proclaim the re-ascendency of the corset.⁷⁵ By 1811, slenderness of the female frame was re-established as an integral part of female beauty.⁷⁶ In that same year *Mirror of the Graces* complained “the present mode of bracing . . . in what is called the long stays . . . With the tight pressure of steel and whalebone on the most susceptible parts of the frame . . . are the positive causes of consumptions.”⁷⁷ While *La Belle Assemblée* argued that “the excessive compression” of the corset produced “diseases too frightful to name.”⁷⁸ As styles moved away from the strictly neoclassical toward an ebullient Romantic style, the new fashions placed the emphasis on a progressively thinner waist instead of on the bosom.⁷⁹ Increasingly, the degree to which this slenderness was pursued became a cause for concern, and with it came further complaints over the use of stays as causing disease.

The power of the Romantic Movement, so synonymous with literature and the arts, became noticeable in fashion after 1820. Fashion historians have characteristically assigned the period from 1820 until around 1850 as the Romantic era in dress; however, they frequently break that period into two major epochs. For the purpose of this work, the term Romantic will be used to refer to the period from 1820 to the mid-1830s, and the term sentimental will be used to denote the period dating from around 1836 to 1850. The emphasis on feeling, fierce and exuberant emotion, and the revival of historical themes that characterized Romanticism all influenced clothing styles, particularly in women's fashions, in the earlier period. Elements of historic dress appeared in sleeve styles, neck ruffs, and certain types of embellishment, and fabric colors were often given fanciful designations like “Egyptian Earth” and “dust of ruins.”⁸⁰ The influence of Romanticism was also evident in the effusive trimming that was particularly popular during the 1820s and the first half of the 1830s.⁸¹ This excess decoration was the material manifestation of “the change in the feminine ideal from classical goddess to ornamented doll.”⁸² Aileen Ribeiro has also argued that the conventions of female beauty in the 1830s and 1840s tended toward the “doll-like.”⁸³

Dress remained of vital importance in defining women during the Romantic period. The author of the *Kalogynomia* (1821) argued “the woman who possesses a cultivated taste and a corresponding expression of countenance, will generally be tastefully dressed; and the vulgar woman, with features correspondingly rude, will easily be seen through the inappropriate mask in which her milliner or dress-maker may have invested her.”⁸⁴ By 1825, the new silhouette was firmly established, defined by an increasingly widening skirt and

Consumptive Chic

progressively contracted waist. An ostensibly V-shaped bodice emerged, one with enlarged shoulders, made to appear even more so by expansive collars and rapidly growing sleeves, a trend that would continue until the mid-1830s. Headgear and hairstyles also increased in size and complexity and were elaborately decorated with artificial flowers, feathers, and jewelry.⁸⁵ As the waistline moved downwards toward its natural level, the back of the bodice, which had been rather narrow in the neoclassical presentation, began to flare, becoming ever wider with increasingly exposed décolletage. This alteration threw the upper portion of the torso and the throat into prominence and further heightened the impression of a sloped shoulder, which had emerged as an essential aspect of female attractiveness.⁸⁶ The over-exposed décolleté, regulated in the daytime by the use of fichus and cape-like pelerines, was presented in all its glory during the evening hours. Finally, the sense of smallness at the waist was enhanced by a contrast with the widening skirts and enormous sleeves. On top, the shoulder span also slowly expanded, as the upper portion of the sleeve continued to grow.⁸⁷ The gigot or leg-of-mutton sleeve swelled spectacularly from the shoulder line, narrowing as it moved toward the wrist.⁸⁸ It was

Figure 8.8 Romantic fashions. Dress c.1836 (British) Credit: Irene Lewisohn Bequest, 1966. Accession Number: C.I.66.35.1 ©Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

joined in 1829 by other enormous sleeve designs, including the evocatively named “Imbecile” and the less descriptive Donna Maria and Mameluke, all of which made the upper portion of the arm appear double the size of the waist. All of these fashions helped augment the image of the ethereal, languishing Romantic angel.

This angel, no longer clad in flowing drapery, achieved a look of delicacy and diminutiveness through corsets that were laced ever tighter, aided by a wide belt and buckle that further imprisoned her waist. (See Plate 26.) With the increased attention to the waist, the corset was now calculated to slim the bodylines, rather than artificially alter the natural shape, as its eighteenth-century predecessors had done. Corset dimensions became a hotly contested aspect of the toilet, particularly as the waist was subjected to ever more strenuous tight lacing in an effort to increase the contrast between the constructions both above and below. The extreme hourglass shape, the subject of the 1829 cartoon “Waist and Extravagance,” was also the object of criticism in *The New Monthly Magazine* that same year, which complained that “The finest figure, thus encumbered . . . might be mistaken for two pillow-cases hanging on a stick, so small is the space into which the waist is compressed between these appendages.”⁸⁹

With the focus firmly on the waist, the body increasingly became an object to control through diet, exercise, and most importantly through constraint and physical manipulation. Innovative developments in the corset, in shape and construction, were in line with the renewed emphasis on the small waist. A stiffer but shorter corset developed, one that accentuated the waist while elevating the bust. The new style allowed both the bosom and hips to assume an increasingly rounded shape by virtue of gussets, inserted on both the top and bottom to accommodate these features. The new corset style also often had a wide busk,⁹⁰ encased in a sleeve of some sort in the center front of the corset.⁹¹ The new corset shape diminished the size of the waist by pressing it into a circular rather than kidney shape, while at the same time accentuating the breast and hips. Additionally, the practice of pulling the corset laces extremely tight to further reduce the measurement and exaggerate the effect became increasingly popular. This practice could only be carried so far in the early 1820s, because stitched eyelet holes could only take so much stress before they ripped.⁹² However, in 1828 the invention of metal eyelets, for use in the lacing of corsets, allowed for a considerable reduction in the size of the waist.⁹³

Unease and debate over the practice of tight lacing continued throughout the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s, as the injurious pressure associated with corseting became the primary complaint of those commenting on fashion and one of the main presumed causes of consumption. As the corsets tightened, so too did the link with tuberculosis. As one author lamented, “Yet, to follow the fashion of a smaller waist than Nature has designed the person,—‘The stays of deadly steel, in whose embrace. The tyrant fashion tortures injured grace,’ are resorted to, and females are laced to such a degree of tightness, that if the fashion lasted long their health, if not life, must soon fall sacrifice.”⁹⁴ Undue pressure upon the organs of respiration was thought to result in phthisis, and the new style of corset, along with the practice of tight lacing, became one of the major causes articulated to explain the incidence of consumption in women. Not only did the look remain fashionable, but the waist also continued to diminish in size and in the 1840s would be joined by the torso as an object to be reduced.⁹⁵ In 1842, an article in *Fraser’s Magazine* laid responsibility for the death of 31,090 English women from consumption at the door of the “unnatural and injurious practice of tight lacing.”⁹⁶

Physicians were outraged; caricaturists had yet more fodder for their cartoons; and journalists, social commentators, and even fashion writers decried the use of tightly laced corsets to no avail.⁹⁷ There were countless discussions of the consequences of corseting in both popular and medical literature, and many also included visual aids in the form of anatomical drawings in an effort to drive home the pernicious effects. These diagrams usually contrasted the unhealthy form of the tightly laced woman with the healthy natural form of the body.⁹⁸ Quite a few of these articles called for women to continue their emulation of the ancient Greeks,

Figure 8.9 “Waist and Extravagance” (1829). Image number: lwlpr13285. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Figure 8.10 Romantic era corset. Example of a corset of English origin (c.1825–1835). Museum Number: T.57-1948. ©Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 8.11 A woman is turning a wheel to make the young girl's waist smaller. Etching by W. Heath, c.1830. Wellcome Library, London. Copyrighted work available under Creative Commons Attribution only licence CC BY 4.0 <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

not in dress style as during the neoclassical period, but instead in the beauty of the Grecian form. In 1825, one author exhorted her readers to “follow the example of the elegant Greeks, the ease and beauty of whose forms are so much admired. They put no unnatural straps on their young ladies . . . and the effect was seen in their every limb, and their every motion.”⁹⁹ In 1827, *La Belle Assemblée* echoed these assertions, exclaiming “It is monstrous, and excites only ridicule. Where is the easy well-rounded form, that might defy the chisel of the statuary to equal? Tortured into a waist like that of a wasp, with, apparently, round hips, formed of whalebone!”¹⁰⁰ The purported distortion caused by corseting was a vitally important link to tuberculosis, as “deformities of the chest” were “commonly ranked among the exciting causes of consumption.”¹⁰¹

Despite the volume of writing against the use of the corset, many diatribes on the subject accepted that women were unwilling to give up this crucial part of their wardrobe, upon which everything else rested. Authors acknowledged the difficulty in persuading women to surrender their corsets, but some still hoped to persuade them to prevent the ruination of the succeeding generation. Thus an 1825 article argued “that it would be vain to attempt to dissuade ladies from the use of this pernicious article of dress; but, however much they may disregard themselves, they ought, certainly, to reject for their children, whatever shall be hurtful to them.”¹⁰² Further complicating the issue was a widely held belief that corsets were essential to maintaining not just a slender waist but also a straight spine, for instance the *Art of Beauty* stated: “Unfortunately, the idea that the bodies of girls require support during their growth has, by time and custom, become so firmly rooted in the minds of most mothers, that no persuasion will influence them to give up the practice.”¹⁰³

Figure 8.12 Figures represent the statue of the Venus de Medici, and the natural skeleton is contrasted with the shape of the “modern boarding-school miss” and her remodeled skeleton. *The Penny Magazine of The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* (London: Charles Knight, 1833). 80. L900.b.69.1, Cambridge University Library.

The conundrum of corsets remained a serious issue of not only fashion but also medicine, as the garment was considered both the creator and corrector of deformity.¹⁰⁴ As early as 1801, Charles Pears acknowledged a beneficial role for corsets in the consumptive disease process. He combined the belief in the favorable effects of support with the idea that consumption ceased during pregnancy to assign corsets a role in treating the disease, reasoning:

Phthisis is suspended during pregnancy; probably from the elevation and pressure of the uterus, producing a degree of rest to the lungs . . . If so, it might be beneficially imitated by bandage . . . as well as from the support that is derived from the use of stays thus medically employed with advantage.¹⁰⁵

Additionally, corsets were accorded the power to correct spinal deformity and as such prevent the tuberculosis associated with this condition. There were a variety of patents and devices built upon the corset that claimed to correct the malformations of the spine and chest that could be productive of disease. Inventions including the “Gardner Stays for Support,” patented in 1822, and nearly twenty years later the “Kingdon Apparatus for the Support of the Human Body” were billed as able to correct malformations of the body. These devices, like the corsets themselves, became more complex and tighter over time.

Beyond the promotion of devices, based upon the corset, to correct deformities, there also developed an industry that sought to make safer versions in an effort to deal with the reality of fashion and a society that could not, and would not, do without the corset. Staymakers constructed a variety of garments they claimed would provide the fashionable silhouette without producing consumption, for example, those designed to allow a freer motion of the chest, like John Mills’ “Elastic Stays for Women and Children,” patented in 1815. Mills introduced “a flexible or elastic portion in those parts of the stays best calculated to give relief to the wearer while at the same time preserving that stability and support usually given to the body by the common adoption of whalebone steel and other hard or inflexible materials.”¹⁰⁶ He even developed a pregnancy option. In 1825, *The Art of Beauty* took up the quest for “healthy corsets,” calling for the elastic sorts of garments Mills had patented.

Consumptive Chic

If stays, however, are worn, and it should be done with great caution, we must altogether prohibit the use of whalebone or steel as decidedly injurious. The materials should all be elastic, so as to yield to every movement without compressing any part of the body.¹⁰⁷

Many staymakers answered the call; one of the most famous was Mrs. Bell, the wife to the editor of *La Belle Assemblée*. In 1831, the magazine, understandably, lauded her for utilizing India rubber in her stays.

Mrs. Bell's house has long been unrivalled for the elegance of its corsets, which boast those advantages so rarely united, of strengthening and supporting the frame, and adding singular grace to the shape. A recent discovery enables Mrs. Bell to extend these advantages still farther, by substituting India rubber for elastic wires.¹⁰⁸

Despite these innovations, corsets continued to receive blame from the medical community for causing many cases of consumption and were one of the primary reasons articulated to explain why women were more predisposed to the disease than men.

Figure 8.13 Gardner stays for support. Denny Gardner, "Stays for Supporting the Body," Patented June 13, 1822. Courtesy of The National Archives, London, UK.

Figure 8.14 Richard Kingdon, “Apparatus for the Support of the Human Body,” patented February 25, 1840. Courtesy of The National Archives, London, UK.

Figure 8.15 Elastic stays for women and children (1815). Left: Stays for young growing persons or adults of a sound constitution. Right: Pregnancy stays. John Mills, “Elastic Stays for Women and Children.” Courtesy of The National Archives, London, UK.

Even as corsets were accused of creating disease, they also emulated certain features of tuberculosis. In 1829, “The Pernicious and Often Fatal Effects of the Compression of the Female Waist By the Use of Corsets” tackled the current fashions. The author remarked:

We know that as often as the waist is lengthened to its natural limits, this tendency to abridge its diameter appears . . . Corsets are employed to modify the shape, to render the chest as small below, and as broad above, as possible, and to increase the elevation, fullness, and prominence of the bosom . . . The natural form of the thorax, in short, is just the reverse of the fashionable shape of the waist. The latter is narrow below and wide above; the former is narrow above and wide below.¹⁰⁹

Consumptive Chic

The physical shape imparted by the fashionable corset, the “narrow below and wide above,” emulated the conformation that was the product of tuberculosis. Width at the top was provided by the shoulders and from the widening of the upper back. As Francis Ramadge asserted in 1834, the conformation present during consumption included,

... the projection of the shoulder-blades (which has been noticed as resembling wings) while at the same time the chest is narrowed in its lateral, as well as transverse diameter, in consequence of the increased convexity of the ribs which has a greater inclination downwards, and which thus likewise admits of the nearer approach of the sternum towards the back. On the upper and anterior part of the chest, the intercostal spaces appear widened and depressed, and the belly is at the same time flat and retracted.¹¹⁰

During the 1830s there was yet another shift in fashion that would increase the appearance of imitating consumption, one that began in the latter part of the decade and conformed to the emerging ideas of sentimentalism. These were primarily concerned with three major areas: etiquette, dress, and social ritual.¹¹¹ The shift toward the sentimental style of clothing began during the 1830s and was firmly on track by the end of the decade. The female silhouette was demonstrably changing, and clothing started to lose its Romantic exuberance in favor of a restrained and decorous silhouette. As the bodices simplified and became increasingly close fitting they produced sloping lines that focused down and created a drooping appearance.¹¹²

The Romantic fashions of the 1820s and early 1830s had been distinguished by full sleeves, wide shoulders, and flared skirts. By contrast, the fashions of the 1840s were timorous, diffident, and reserved. Sentimentalism even influenced color choice, favoring browns and dark greens, which combined with the structure of clothing to impart a subdued appearance.¹¹³ The bodice was pulled tight to the body by virtue of heavily laced corseting and by its construction. The pointed waist enhanced the appearance of thinness, while the open décolleté highlighted the rounded shoulders all of which emphasized “the sensitive, graceful and feminine features” of the 1840s woman.¹¹⁴ In sentimental dress, the waist was narrower than it had been in the previous decade and the focus was increasingly on a slimming of the torso as a whole.

Figure 8.16 Example of a sentimental style of corset (c.1840–1850). This front lacing style of corset tilted the hips forward, and compressed the torso and pushed the shoulder blades up enhancing the hunched appearance. Accession Number: 1972.7. Courtesy of the Manchester Art Gallery.

As a result, the corset remained an indispensable and acknowledged component of style and was the essential instrument for achieving the slim lines and long, tight waist called for by fashion.¹¹⁵ *The Magazine of the Beau Monde* complained in 1836 that women had set a new standard for beauty, one marked by a waist that “tapers rapidly below the arms, and is not above two-thirds of the natural girth.”¹¹⁶ Although already established in the 1830s, the new corset style altered again during the 1840s in an effort to accommodate the changing outer layers of female dress.¹¹⁷ The corsets, like the bodices, lengthened in keeping with the emerging sentimental shape and did not appreciably shorten again until the 1860s.¹¹⁸ The consternation over the practice of tight lacing increased with the development of a new style of lacing in 1843, known as *a la paresseuse* or lazy style. This technique allowed a more precise control over the lacing itself, permitting even tighter lacing of the corset at the waist, much to the disgust of various commentators.¹¹⁹

The practice of tight lacing intensified the debates surrounding clothing and consumption, as the fashions were accorded even greater agency in creating tuberculosis. Hence, Esther Copley wrote in 1840:

So preposterous and fantastic are the disguises of the human form which modern fashion has exhibited, that her votaries . . . while individually priding themselves on their elegance and taste, they have very commonly appeared, in the eyes of an indifferent spectator, to be running a race for the acquisition of deformity.¹²⁰

Medical tracts and the writings of moral instructionists were filled with diatribes against the evils of tight lacing and cited it as a cause of pulmonary consumption. Despite voluminous writings against the use of the corset, young women continued to garb themselves in clothing thought to be ruinous to their health, much to the frustration of Dr. Francis Cook who angrily wrote in 1842, “The compression to which the dress of young females subjects the chest, is a most frequent cause of pulmonary disease. It is however, vain to expect, that the

Figure 8.17 Contrast of the “Deformed” corsetted waist versus that of the “Natural” uncorssetted waist. *Health Made Easy for Young People* (London: Darton & Clark, 1845), 56. 8300.e.13. Cambridge University Library.

warning voice of the physician will be listened to in preference to the dictates of fashion.”¹²¹ *Health Made Easy for Young People* (1845) also asserted that consumption would be the inevitable result for those women whose chests were “bound up, ‘to make them look pretty,’ and considered the practice ‘Monstrous!’”¹²² The arguments of physicians notwithstanding, it was acknowledged that, “One of the greatest ideal evils in a figure, in the eye of a young lady of the present day, is that of a thick waist.”¹²³ Nearly a decade later, in 1848, the sentiment remained the same when *Blackwood’s Lady’s Magazine* stated, “The beauty of the female figure consists in being gently serpentine.”¹²⁴ Despite the proliferation of anti-corset works, not only did the practice continue, but sentimental dress as a whole was accorded positive qualities. For example, in 1848 *The World of Fashion* remarked that: “The female attire of the present day is, perhaps, in as satisfactory a state as the advocates of nature and simplicity can desire . . . The dress is one calculated to bring out the natural beauties of the person.”¹²⁵

Tubercular and Tight the Sentimental Way

The sentimental ideal of beauty, took the appearance of the woman as a whole to be an expression of her character, and clothing played a significant role in the fashioning of this character. Designed to showcase the sensibility that shone from the countenance of the early Victorian woman, sentimental dress enhanced rather than detracted from the face. The fashionable woman’s form was slender; her face was pale and free of cosmetics, while her dress was relatively inconspicuous. *The Young Lady’s Friend* in 1837 directly connected dress to the character of its wearer. “Such various qualities of mind are called into action in connexion with dress . . . and the more Christian principles prevail . . . the more truly will dress be an indication of the character.”¹²⁶ Fashion, thus, progressively became a form of moral self-improvement, a way of enhancing one’s personal qualities, or at least displaying them.

The constrictive forms of sentimental dress during the 1840s were not an effort to disguise or distort a woman’s body, although they did; instead the dress was designed to reveal the feelings of the woman who wore it. The overall effect of sentimental dress in the 1840s was one of decorous, modest, and meek passivity, mirroring the prescribed ideal for the Victorian woman. (See Plate 27.) As such, these fashions were historically and culturally specific, demonstrating the influence of the rhetoric of respectability and Christian morality.¹²⁷ During the 1840s the place of feelings and sentiment was elevated, taking precedence over corporeal soundness, as the fashionable woman was increasingly constrained by her clothing. In the ideals laid down by writers like Mrs. Ellis, it was clear what was expected of women: softness, delicacy, weakness, and modesty, combined with a small waist and curving shoulders.¹²⁸ Similarly, in his 1845 work on consumption, Alfred Beaumont Maddock described those possessing the hectic constitution as having “a narrow or pointed chest, high prominent shoulders, long thin neck, and generally slender frame.”¹²⁹ While, Mrs. Merrifield in her *Dress as a Fine Art* acknowledged these features as integral to beauty in the female.¹³⁰ On the whole, the early Victorian woman was less dynamic, in both body and demeanor, than English women had been in the earlier decades of the century, as the emphasis turned toward the articulation of moral character through a graceful demeanor, poses, and attitudes.¹³¹ As one author remarked, “Graceful movement, an unaffected elegance of demeanour, is to the figure what sense and sweetness are to the eyes. It is the soul looking out. It is what a poet has called the ‘thought of the body.’”¹³²

The main effect of this type of costume upon a woman’s deportment was a limitation of movement; furthermore, the shoulders narrowed and dress imparted a drooping appearance, as the body seemed to be pulled downwards.¹³³ The extended bodice was ornamented in a manner that heightened the appearance of length. For instance, the pleated fabric overlays that had been a feature of decoration in the 1830s were being

applied by the 1840s on an exaggerated diagonal, in an effort to highlight and narrow the shoulders and emphasize and elongate the pointed waist.¹³⁴ (See Plates 28 and 29.) The heavy corseting made the upper body appear delicate, thin, and weak, in a manner reminiscent of the consumptive torso. The fashion plates from the period illustrate the changes in female costume and in the overall appearance, showing the hair close to the head, the bonnet drawn close, and the heavy corseting to make the upper torso appear delicate, thin, and weak.¹³⁵ The sentimental image conferred by the new clothing was wilted and almost lifeless, and the overall demeanor was dreamy and tender.¹³⁶

The trend toward delicacy intensified over the decade, with the application of even tighter sleeves, and a consequent narrowing of the shoulder line. As one author asserted, “Delicacy is, indeed, the point of honour in woman . . . A delicate woman, too, will be more loved, as well as more respected, than any other.”¹³⁷ Thus, as Douglas A. Russell has argued, “the ideal for woman had changed in a little over a decade from a gay butterfly to a domesticated doll.”¹³⁸ The bodices simplified and became increasingly close fitting, producing sloping lines that focused downward.¹³⁹ The sentimental woman appeared long and willowy, with a sloping narrow shoulder line and a slender waist. The armhole was now very low off the shoulders and was set with tight fitting sleeves, cut on the cross, which prohibited the wearer from lifting her arm above a right angle.¹⁴⁰ The

Figure 8.18 The stoop-shouldered sentimental style that emulated the consumptive bodily conformation. *The Magazine of the Beau Monde*, Vol. 11 (London: 1842). T434:6.b.6.1-. Cambridge University Library.

drop-shouldered style also forced a round-shouldered conformation and in doing so, emulated the physical silhouette of the consumptive female, by imposing a stooped posture natural in the case of consumption, and one believed to produce the illness.

Sentimental dress also emphasized delicacy and restricted gesture and movement, just as the debilitating effects of the disease did. *Commentaries Principally on Those Diseases of Females Which are Constitutional* made particular mention of the overall demeanor and posture thought to denote the early symptoms of consumption. (See Plate 30.) “There is a degree of feebleness and stooping observed in the gait, very early in the disease; and this remains little augmented.”¹⁴¹ As the illness progressed, “The mode of walking is peculiar, being attended by stooping, weakness and caution.”¹⁴² In 1830, Marshall Hall described those with the illness as having “a peculiar appearance of the countenance, a peculiar mode of walking, and a peculiar attitude and manner in general, all denoting debility and great disease”¹⁴³ Stooping was presented as both the architect and indicator of consumption, and women’s education was one target of blame. *A Physician’s Advice for the Prevention and Cure of Consumption* thus argued:

In connection with the present system of conducting the education of young females in the higher classes, it is right to mention, that an inactive sedentary mode of life appears to dispose to the formation of tubercles, and the recurrence of consumption; first, by debilitating the system in general; and secondly, by the habit of stooping, hurting the lungs in the same manner with malformation of the chest.¹⁴⁴

Similarly, Henry Deshon claimed in 1847, “The sickly school girl, with her pallid countenance and stooping gait, would seem to predict her fate—pulmonary disease.”¹⁴⁵ His *Cold and Consumption* also lamented a young schoolgirl “stooping over her writing desk” as productive of the illness.¹⁴⁶

All of this was seen as a cause of consumption. Women were also considered more susceptible to tuberculosis than men due to their upbringing. A woman’s role in society was articulated as a predetermining factor in the development of the disease. Doctors, such as John Tricker Conquest, expressed their disgust over the type of upbringing guaranteed to bring about illness. In *Letters to a Mother on the Management of Herself and Her Children in Health and Disease* (1848), Conquest wrote:

Nature is turned off as a dunce, and girls must sit up ‘like ladies’ and eat ‘like ladies’; and instead of trundling the hoop, and playing with bat and ball, and shuttlecock, and skipping, they must sacrifice the inestimable blessing of vigorous health to mental acquisitions and (falsely called) ‘lady-like habits.’ That horrid word ‘lady-like,’ haunts the poor girls of the middle and higher classes through years which should be devoted to physical education, and leaves them, at last, the prey of deformity and disease . . . Fashion is the war cry of tyranny.¹⁴⁷

When the idea of illness as character-illuminating is combined with sentimental culture as a whole, it is easy to see how consumption could invade the popular ideals of beauty and fashion.

Over the period from 1780 to 1850 tuberculosis was consistently intertwined with the contemporary discourses on fashion. The focus of the rhetoric tended to be on the role that fashion played in creating the disease. The neoclassical styles that typified the period from 1780 to around 1820 were primarily connected to consumption through its inadequacies in providing protection from the climate. Cold, damp, and even dust particles were believed to find a path to creating tuberculosis through their interaction with female dress. The concern over fashion and climate remained influential over the whole period. As corsets became an increasingly important part of female dress in the 1830s and 1840s it also became the primary focus of the

criticisms as the concern over the pressures applied by the clothing continued to intensify as the fashions became ever tighter. The connections between consumption and clothing throughout the period moved beyond the ability of fashion to cause the disease and also consistently displayed elements of emulation as the fashions, to varying degrees, either highlighted the consequences of tuberculosis or actually imitated the symptoms of the illness.