

## "Modernism's Underwear"

Why is the petticoat a signifier of both sexual titillation *and* sexual shame? Why did men once refer to rule by women as “petticoat government,” a moniker that in so linking private and public exhibits sexism, misogyny, and sexual objectification? Perhaps more so than other apparel, undergarments function as sartorial objects that record and code changes in the sexual objectification of women—both symbolic and material—coincident with modernity and modern identity.

Despite the multiple items and layers of clothing that comprised Victorian and early twentieth-century underclothing for men and women, when modernist writers mentioned undergarments, they were usually referring to women's undergarments, often to the petticoat, which contemporary readers not regard as the most erotic undergarment—that status being reserved for the corset. While more writers than we might expect referred to feminine undergarments like petticoats, corsets, combinations, or drawers in their writing, controversial references to women's underwear occur more often in writing of British modernists. Those writers either closely or loosely associated with the Bloomsbury Group who felt liberated after Lytton Strachey's infamous inquiry about the “semen?” stain on Vanessa Stephen's dress used that anecdote as a gateway to discuss not only to openly discuss sex in mixed company, but also to write about other taboo subjects, such as unmentionables, that were formerly openly unmentionable, especially in the mixed company of young people, during the Victorian period.

Of course, the same undergarment often resonated differently in the work of different writers, whereby, a mention or a glimpse of a petticoat in a modernist work can evoke sexual titillation connected with the male gaze, yet also symbolize femininity or female sexuality; it can also represent shame, gender oppression, or failed consumer identity.<sup>1</sup> My analysis offers insights into the meanings coded in undergarments in relation to the female bodies that wore them, uncovering whether that body was sexually desirable, sexually objectified, humiliated or sexually repressed, or empowered by its reclamation for a fetishized undergarment.

References to women's undergarments, such as the petticoat, performs a liberating function in modernist women's writing, undermining any fetishizing by male contemporaries who, much like consumer capitalism, continue to fetishize them. Recording the seemingly embarrassing experience of losing their drawers, both Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys perform a liberating rejection of Victorian femininity that women's undergarments (drawers, petticoats, corsets, etc.) had come to symbolize. In *The Waste Land*, for example, T.S. Eliot's voyeuristic narrator, Tiresias, describes a typist's undergarments “...drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays, / On the divan are piled (at night her bed) / Stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays” (225-27)<sup>2</sup> before describing their brief fornication. E.M. Forster describes the swishing sound made by Ruth Wilcox's petticoats during her predawn walk in her garden in *Howards End*—a sound he purportedly abhorred because he associated it with femininity. In the same novel, he refers to a controversial corset fetish known as tight-lacing. James Joyce eroticizes Gertie McDowell's petticoat in *Ulysses*, transforming Leopold Bloom's glimpse of flounce and ribbon trim into a peep show like masturbatory fantasy, yet also simultaneously suggesting that a young disabled woman is in control of exhibiting her own sexuality. Virginia Woolf makes numerous references to drawers and petticoats in her diaries, letters and novels, at times these references are in line with her feminist politics and at other times part of her critique of consumer capitalism, such as Doris Kilman's purchase of an outmoded brown petticoat in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Even though undergarments arguably become less taboo for women writers, the commodity fetishism caused by their mass-production and display in the marketplace reinscribes oppressive ideologies of Victorian femininity that mask the sexually repressive histories women's undergarments are symbolic of, repackages those ideologies, sells them to women as fashion.

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<sup>1</sup> Reginald Abbot analyzes the economic significance of Doris Kilman's petticoat in “What Miss Kilman's Petticoat Means: Virginia Woolf, Shopping and Spectacle.” *Modern Fiction Studies*, No. 1 (Spring 1992): 193-216.

<sup>2</sup> Eliot, T.S. *The Waste Land* (Norton Critical Editions). New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.