

Fatness and Fashion: The Creation of the Stout Woman in Popular Women's Magazines  
1900-1925

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HIS 480, Senior Research Seminar

Imagine sitting down and opening the newest issue of *Ladies' Home Journal*, only to read that because of your weight, you are undignified, ungraceful, and that you lack good judgement. An author mockingly remarks that you are the Marie – painfully aware of your own unfortunate size yet oblivious to the fact that your clothes exaggerate your white fleshy arms and ugly neck. You are the antithesis to your “slender sister” Marianne, who can afford to appear in the limelight because of her thin figure. Marianne was born with charm and grace, but you were not.<sup>1</sup> With this knowledge, you then go to your neighborhood department store to purchase an appropriate new evening suit, just to be relegated to the separate section for stout women. You are condescendingly told that even for evening parties, you should stick to dull colors and above all else, you should remain as inconspicuous as possible. While salesclerks might try to be accommodating, they view you as self-loathing, sensitive, and vulnerable. This experience was a reality for fat women in the early half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

Although historians have documented different reasons for the shift, scholars have long agreed that around 1900, the ideal female figure began to transition from a voluptuous figure to a slender one. For both men and women, plumpness remained fashionable at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as a fuller figure signified economic prosperity and good health. But, by the end of the nineteenth century, there was a push against the excesses of previous years, and the ideal female body type began to change. Historian Peter Sterns attributes this shift to women's newfound interest in athleticism, concerns over female sexuality, and new medical ideas that

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<sup>1</sup> Anna K. Kay, “Weight Doesn’t Count if You Choose Your Clothes Wisely,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1924, 45.

<sup>2</sup> In this essay, the term “fat” is not used as a pejorative term. Lauren Downing Peters in, “You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation,” claims that because of the medicalization of the terms “obesity” and “overweight,” members of the fat acceptance movement have made an effort to make “fat” an empowering term. Fat activists encourage the use of “fat” as a neutral descriptor over euphemisms like plump, husky, obese, or overweight.

equated fatness with unhealthiness.<sup>3</sup> Joan Brumberg, on the other hand, points to perhaps a more sinister reason for the increased attention to the female body: as women's external freedom expanded at the beginning of the twentieth century, society pressed for greater internal control of the female body.<sup>4</sup> As women's rights expanded in the twentieth century, regulating one's body became an all-consuming personal project. The thin body also came to represent the American body. In the face of the influx of immigrants, Americans wanted to distinguish themselves, both physically and racially, from "stockier immigrants."<sup>5</sup> Regardless of what historians argue caused the shift, the establishment of slenderness as the epitome of beauty is often cited as culminating in the 1920s, evidenced by the domination of the flapper look. By the 1920s, the fashionable figure and the ideal modern female body was slender, had a small chest, and her body resembled a long, unbroken, and graceful line.

Broadly speaking, scholarly works about the fat body have largely been absent from conventional histories of fashion. Fashion historian Lauren Downing Peters points to two reasons why this may be the case. First, she argues that because stout wear is a subfield of ready-to-wear clothing, it does not fit within the traditional framework of discussing fashion in terms of noteworthy designers. Secondly, Peters contends that the absence of studies about fatness may be a result of scholars' struggle to understand fatness as "anything but an incontrovertible public health hazard."<sup>6</sup> I surmise that this absence is also due to the interdisciplinary nature of fat

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1997), 98.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Fraser, "The Inner Corset: A Brief History of Fat in the United States," in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Sandra Solovay and Esther Rothblum (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Downing Peters, "Stoutwear and the Discourses of Disorder: Constructing the Fat, Female Body in American Fashion in the Age of Standardization, 1915-1930," (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2018), 9.

histories; the topic of stout wear in the United States does not fit neatly into one discipline, but spans across various subfields like food history, fat studies, fashion history, sociology, consumer studies, and gender theory, and as such has struggled to find its place in the historiography.

Nonetheless, studies of fashion and fatness have gained popularity in recent decades. My research fits most cleanly into the emerging discipline, fat studies. Fat studies is an interdisciplinary field marked by an “aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body.”<sup>7</sup> Prior to the advent of fat studies, there was still research on body weight and fat, but it was largely up to the reader to piece together the different topics. For example, Hillel Schwartz’s 1986 book, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat*, is still regarded as one of the first detailed studies of dieting and weight loss in the United States.<sup>8</sup> Schwartz remarks that the American desire to be slim is not simply a result of changing fashions, but instead must be understood as a convergence of topics like science, home economics, political economy, medical technology, and food marketing.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Schwartz set the stage for understanding fatness and slenderness as cultural constructs that current fat studies scholars draw upon today. In the past decade or so, there has

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<sup>7</sup> “Introduction,” in *The Fat Studies Reader*, ed. Sandra Solovay and Esther Rothblum (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 2. The Fat Studies reader importantly outlines the creation of fat studies. The editors explain that the fat pride community, usually called the size acceptance movement, began in the United States in 1969 with the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance. Since then, fat activist groups have compiled resources on self-esteem, fitness, fashion, medical advocacy, and defense from weight discrimination. There is a social justice component at the heart of fat studies – the discipline has the power to contribute momentum to the fat acceptance movement.

<sup>8</sup> Amy Erdman Farrel, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the fat Body in American Culture* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2011), 20.

Other notable examples of early fat histories include Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco. *Bodies out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Kathleen LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004); Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes* (Random House New York, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: Free Press, 1986), 4.

been an increase in the organization and cooperation between disciplines that promote acceptance of the fat body; 2006 is often seen as the “turning point” for fat studies, when there were three national conferences that addressed the new discipline.<sup>10</sup> As a discipline, fat studies draws from the same critical methodology used when approaching negative stereotypes about women, queer people, and racial groups.<sup>11</sup> My research is greatly influenced by fat studies’ practice of examining seemingly neutral attitudes that draw a line between thin and fat, especially when an action or belief is motivated by a desire to “help” a group that falls into the fat category.<sup>12</sup> This framework of understanding has been useful while analyzing popular women’s magazines, which frequently gave fashion advice to stout women that reinforced negative beliefs about fatness under the guise of helping her look more beautiful.

Although fat studies have drastically increased the visibility of fatness and highlighted the historical anti-fat sentiment in the United States, the discipline has been slow to discuss the fashion trends that accompanied these changing notions of beauty. Because of fat studies’ interdisciplinary nature, it is sometimes easy to get lost in the theoretical background and lose sight of the primary sources under analysis. *The Fat Studies Reader* is one of the first comprehensive anthologies that lays out emerging research within the field of fat studies and provides readers with descriptions of the social and historical construction of fatness. While this anthology includes important discussions about fatness within different contexts, it fails to include research specifically on clothing for the fat woman. Laura Fraser’s chapter in *The Fat Studies Reader* traces the origins of the American anti-fat sentiment, pointing to an influx of

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<sup>10</sup> “Introduction,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> “Introduction,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, 3. “Doing” fat history requires that you are willing to examine not just the broader social forces that contribute to weight stigma, but also your own involvement within these structures.

<sup>12</sup> “Introduction,” *The Fat Studies Reader*, 2.

immigrants, changing beliefs about food and food processing, the discovery of the calorie, and an American desire to emulate European ideals of slenderness.<sup>13</sup> While Fraser briefly mentions that the obsession with thinness could also be seen in fashion magazines, she does little to elaborate on the fashion industry's role in promoting slenderness over fatness. Historian Peter Stearns similarly contributes to the growing field of fat studies in his book, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West*. Stearns investigates the history of the struggle against fat and the emergence of the modern dieting culture in both the United States and France. Stearns argues that hostility toward fat females emerged as a response to diminishing gender distinctions in the 1920s.<sup>14</sup> In the chapter where Stearns discusses the regulation of the fat female body between 1920 and 1960, he largely draws on sources like medical journals and parenting magazines, but does not comment extensively on publications that explicitly targeted women. Women's historian Joan Brumberg's work, *The Body Project*, similarly argues that the pressure to obtain a thin figure formed part of a larger cultural "body project" that encouraged women to focus on regulating their bodies so that they would not focus on their "stunning new freedom."<sup>15</sup> Ultimately, fat studies as a discipline is in need of historical analyses of the *dressed* fat body in popular women's media. As a result, my research shifts the focus to magazines and fashion trade journals that were about and for women.

Fashion studies scholarship has also begun to examine the relationship between fatness and dress. Notably, Lauren Downing Peters in her doctoral dissertation, "Stoutwear and the Discourses of Disorder: Constructing the Fat, Female Body in American Fashion in the Age of Standardization, 1915-1930," extends the arguments of historians like Stearns and Brumberg and

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<sup>13</sup> Fraser, "The Inner Corset" 12.

<sup>14</sup> Stearns, *Fat History*, 72.

<sup>15</sup> Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 98.

focuses her analysis on how bodies are made within culture and uses Foucault as a theoretical tool for “understanding how bodies are constructed through dress and through discourse.”<sup>16</sup> More specifically, Foucault laid out the framework for understanding how the body is disciplined through structures of power and discourse. I specifically utilize Foucault’s theory that discourses have the power to create “objects” that are governed by a set of rules. He writes that “these rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, not the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects.”<sup>17</sup> These discourses “form the objects of which they speak.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of stout wear, the mandate for slenderness created objects (stout women) that required manipulation in the form of proper clothing, corseting, and dieting.

Peters frames the emergence of stoutwear within the context of standardized sizing and ready-to-wear clothing. Peters expands her dissertation in her recent article, “Flattering the Figure, Fitting in: The Design Discourses of Stoutwear, 1915-1930,” where she introduces the idea of “figure flattery” as a better way of understanding the relationship between fashion, power, and the fat body. Peters proposes that the notion of “figure flattery” better characterizes the slenderizing discourse promoted by the stoutwear industry.<sup>19</sup> I will likewise argue that in the early part of the twentieth century, the discourse in women’s journals, fashion trade journals, and newspaper articles created a particular vision of the stout woman and the stout body. The stout body that they created was supposed to conform to ideals of slenderness and was shamed if it did

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<sup>16</sup> Peters, “Stoutwear and the Discourses of Disorder,” 7.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, translated from French by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1972), 49.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Lauren Downing Peters, “Flattering the Figure, Fitting in: The Design Discourses of Stoutwear, 1915-1930,” *Fashion Theory* (February 2019), 23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2019.1567059>. Peters defines figure flattery as a compensatory technique that helps individuals who lie outside of or beyond the norm to control their “deviant” flesh to appear appropriately dressed.

not. Like Peters, I go beyond arguing that stoutwear was simply created by the fashion industry to fit larger bodies, but I assert that it employed a “slenderizing” language to transform stout women into looking more like their “slender sisters.” Like many other authors engaging with topics of dress and the body, Peters cites sociologist Joanne Entwistle as providing much of her theoretical framework. Published before the formal establishment of fat studies, Entwistle’s seminal work deals with the ways in which fashion articulates the body – in other words, how dress is an embodied practice.<sup>20</sup> With regard to my research, Entwistle’s work has been influential in establishing that “dress is a matter of morality: dressed inappropriately we are uncomfortable; we feel ourselves open to social condemnation.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, applying Entwistle’s theory of the body to a study of plus-size fashion in the early twentieth century helps to reveal stout women’s position as outsiders of the fashion industry. Stout women’s bodies deviated from the established cultural norm and were consequently viewed by the fashion industry as objects in need of correction and manipulation.

My research aims to utilize the theoretical framework provided by fat studies and the historical methodologies of fashion history. Fat studies importantly investigates the changing relationships women had with their bodies, but many works fail to account for women’s changing relationship with their clothing. On the other hand, fashion histories have traditionally ignored the fat female body. While there is recent scholarship that has successfully merged the two disciplines, my research will contribute to fat studies literature that examines the relationship between the dressed body and the stout body. In addition, I intend to break with recent research regarding fatness and consumerism that takes an ethnographic approach that relies on oral

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<sup>20</sup> Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress and Modern Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body*, 8.

histories and personal interviews.<sup>22</sup> Instead, I will use women's magazines, fashion trade journals, and various news articles as sources that will illuminate the anti-fat sentiment and will trace the language used to describe stout women and stout clothing. By examining popular women's magazines, I hope to answer the following questions: what type of language did advertisements and women's journals use to describe stout women and stout clothing? What kind of fashion advice did stout women receive from women's magazines? And finally, how did these journals describe the stout woman in relation to the slender woman?

My paper will first outline the historical context that contributed to the creation and popularization of stout wear. Women's stout wear, as it was called in the first half of the twentieth century, formed one part of a wave of changing attitudes about health, food, and nutrition, a boom of consumerism, a new language of advertising, and a transforming ideal female body type. Thus, this paper demonstrates that stout wear was popularized in a very precise time period, one that was influenced by a confluence of social and cultural movements that addressed how women's bodies should appear in the public sphere. Secondly, I will argue that the creation of stout wear was motivated by a perceived economic benefit of manufacturing specialized clothing for the stout woman, not out of concern for stout women's lack of clothing options. Within this specific context, the discourse in women's journals like *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Vogue*, fashion trade journals like *Women's Wear Daily*, and newspaper articles created a particular vision of the stout woman and the stout body. Discourse

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<sup>22</sup> For examples of scholarship that take a more personal and ethnographic approach, see: Rachel Colls, "Outsize/Outside: Bodily bigness and the emotional experiences of British women shopping for clothes," *Gender, Place, and Culture* 13, no. 5 (2006) 529-545; Kathleen LeBesco, "Revolution on a Rack: Fatness, Fashion, and Commodification," in *Revoltin' Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 65-73; Lauren Downing Peters, "You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation," *Fashion Theory* 18, no. 1 (2014) 45-72.

in this sense not only encapsulates the type of language used to describe stout woman, but like Foucault, I contend that these discourses were powerful and disciplinary. These discourses placed the fat woman in opposition to grace and thinness and consequently created the “ideal” fat woman; she was expected to follow a certain set of rules and was viewed as an outsider if she did not. Fat was conceptualized as a transient state – it was not to be permanent. The stout woman was to use clothing or dieting to camouflage, manipulate, and transform her fat into something more palatable for the public eye. Ultimately, fashion was not neutral; for stout women, fashion was prescribed as a mechanism to fit into the societal norm of thinness.

Finally, it is important to note that the stout body was a white, middle-class body. In women’s magazines like *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Vogue*, there are nearly no mentions of non-white women. The lack of representation of black bodies in these popular women’s magazines not only reflects the pervasive racist attitudes that existed during this time period, but also indicates that the ideal body slender, white, heterosexual, and American. Peters writes that the stout body was “a body that was deeply embedded within and shaped by conventions and expectations of normative, white femininity—a fact which underscores the fact that fashion, ultimately, is a white discourse, or one which constructs and upholds a white, Anglo-Saxon ideal.”<sup>23</sup> My research focuses on representations of this ideal, but that does not mean that non-white women shared the same bodily experiences as the white stout women that I discuss.

Although the fashion industry in the twenty first century has tried to be more size inclusive, it is nonetheless dominated by images of thin women – a quick glance at any women’s

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<sup>23</sup> Peters, “Stoutwear and the Discourses of Disorder,” 17.

magazine reveals the preference for a smaller figure. When reflecting on the discourse of stout wear throughout the first half of the twentieth century, it is clear that the language used to describe the fat female body has a troubling history. Women's magazines that promote thinness as the beauty standard can be detrimental to female health. One study found that exposure to thin-ideal media images may contribute to the development of eating disorders by causing body dissatisfaction, negative moods, low self-esteem, and eating disorders symptoms among women.<sup>24</sup> Outside of the fashion industry, general weight-based stigma carries its own health issues.

Numerous studies have documented harmful weight-based stereotypes that fat individuals are lazy, weak-willed, unsuccessful, unintelligent, lack self-discipline, have poor willpower, and are noncompliant with weight-loss treatment.<sup>25</sup> Conceptualizations of the fat body that exist today emerged out of the same era that created and popularized stout wear for plus-size women.

Understanding changes in the language of advertising and placing the popularization of stout wear in the context of a boom of consumer products is important to understanding the language used in women's magazines. In the early twentieth century, the increased use of actual images in magazines and advertisements made consumers more conscious of their own external appearance and bodily presentation.<sup>26</sup> Generally, these images portrayed "normality" as slender, bright-eyed, attractive people, while fat figures are portrayed as "glum and downcast: joke figures, survivals from a bygone age."<sup>27</sup> As a result, consumers looked to new products to help them achieve the new bodily ideal. Moreover, there are specific characteristics of magazines in

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<sup>24</sup> Nicole Hawkins, P. Scott Richards, et. al., "The Impact Exposure to the Thin-Ideal Media Image on Women," *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Protection*, 12, 1 (2004): 35.

<sup>25</sup> Rebecca M. Puhl and Chelsea A. Heuer, "Obesity Stigma: Important Considerations for Public Health," *American Journal of Public Health*, 100, 6 (2010): 1023.

<sup>26</sup> Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," in *The American Body in Context*, ed. Jessica R. Johnston (Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 2001), 85.

<sup>27</sup> Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," 90.

particular that make them interesting historical sources. Scholars have generally understood magazines to be carefully designed to meet the perceived need of readers and usually target a narrowly defined section of the population. Feminist scholars have addressed the role that women's magazines have played in perpetuating unattainable standards of beauty and physical perfection, establishing guidelines for heteronormative femininity and domesticity, and in conflating gender with consumerism.<sup>28</sup> These characteristics of women's magazines made them perfect sources for uncovering the bodily standards of the time period and helped to place magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal* as following larger trends in advertising during this time period.

It is no coincidence that the anti-fat language used in women's magazines accompanied larger shifts in conceptualizations of normal body weight and food at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. Although he was not from the United States, Englishman William Banting's writing on weight loss kickstarted the "reducing" craze that swept through the western world.<sup>29</sup> Banting's writings serve as the archetype of how society perceived fat bodies leading up to the twentieth century. Banting published his pamphlet in 1863 in England and set off a dieting craze that contributed to the "demonization of the fat body in Western culture."<sup>30</sup> Banting's regiment outlined methods to reduce corpulence, assuming that all corpulent people needed to (and must want to) reduce their fat. Banting's diet regiment eliminated foods like bread, butter, milk, sugar, beer, and potatoes. Scientists would later discover that Banting's diet

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<sup>28</sup> Brooke Erin Duffy, *Remake, Remodel: Women's Magazines in the Digital Age* (Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 23.

<sup>29</sup> The term "reducing" refers to what we would call dieting or weight loss today.

<sup>30</sup> Joyce L Huff, "A 'Horror of Corpulence' Interrogating Bantingism and Mid-Nineteenth Century Fat-Phobia," in *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco (University of California Press, 2001), 39.

was successful because it cut out foods that were high in calories. Banting was not alone in his fear of corpulence in the mid-nineteenth century. Banting's pamphlet gained immense popularity in the years following its publication, with around 63,000 copies sold across England, Europe, and overseas in the United States. Banting contributed to the social climate that, by around 1900, had transformed the "normal" body type from plump to thin and lean.

The discovery of the calorie in 1894 revolutionized the way that people viewed weight loss, as it became apparent that reducing caloric intake was in some way related to a smaller figure. Scientists discovered vitamins in the 1910s, leading to the creation of the nutritionist, a new kind of specialist that could tell Americans what to eat and how to lose weight.<sup>31</sup> As scientists in the United States gained a better understanding of calories, nutrition, and weight loss, doctors began publishing their own recipe and weight loss books. Many of the popular dieting books were published by doctors who had been previously fat themselves, who pointed to their own weight loss as proof that their method was successful. For example, in 1919 Dr. Lulu Peters Hunt published *Diet and health with key to the calories*, which outlined various weight loss methods. Although Hunt begins by expressing that "physical efficiency is a patriotic duty for men and women alike," her advice solely addresses women.<sup>32</sup> Throughout the book, Peters uses female characters like Jolly Mrs. Sheesasite and Mrs. Tiny Weighaton to represent exasperated women who are unsuccessful at losing weight. Rather than encourage women to maintain a balanced diet, Hunt recommends that fat women should "commit yourself on your honor that you are going to reduce or perish – no joke; you can't tell how near you are to it if you

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<sup>31</sup> Megan J. Elias, *Food in the United States 1890-1945* (California; Colorado; Oxford: Greenwood Press, 2009), 109.

<sup>32</sup> Lulu Hunt Peters, *Diet and health with key to the calories* (The Reilly & Britton Co., 1919), xi. Throughout the book, Hunt equates fatness with being unpatriotic. In her opinion, it is unamerican to hoard food (even on your own body) during times of war.

are much overweight.”<sup>33</sup> According to Dr. Peters, looking slim was more important than maintaining a healthy diet. Likewise, A.B. Johnston’s *Eat and Grow Slender* parallels Hunt’s messages about reducing corpulence. While not as overtly anti-fat, to represent the personality of a person before they read her recipes and weight loss advice, Johnston tells the story of two women who grew fat as a result of their self-indulgence and laziness.<sup>34</sup> Hunt and Peter’s advice books do not explicitly claim a female readership, but almost exclusively target fat women as the audience, indicating that the fat female body was the one in need of manipulation and maintenance. Advice in dieting and weight loss books contributed to the anti-fat sentiment that would also appear in popular women’s magazines.

The emergence of ready to wear clothing and standardized sizing provide an important backdrop to the discourse surrounding stout wear. Before the middle of the eighteenth century, most clothing was custom made or was made within the family by a dressmaker or a tailor. The industrial revolution, the invention of new textile production and garment construction machinery, and the development of mass production methods all provided the conditions for the creation of ready-made clothing. In the 1840s and 1850s, the department store emerged as an outlet for all of this ready-made clothing, providing women with a new space to interact with sizing systems. Early sizing systems, however, still heavily relied on the use of alterations to fit clothing to the body, but by the 1920s and 30s, department stores found the cost of alterations to be too high. Thus, large stores turned to sizing systems that would fit the majority of their customers, which only accommodated smaller and more “normal” figures. It is also important to

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<sup>33</sup> Peters, *Diet and health*, 80.

<sup>34</sup> A.B. Johnston, *Eat and Grow Slender* (New York: R.E. Sherwood, 1916), 6. This is the same message promoted in: Annette Kellerman, *Physical Beauty, How to Keep it* (New York: G. H. Doran Company, 1918). Kellerman paints fat women as indulgent and ultimately proclaims that if you have excess fat, you simply must get rid of it.

note that German clothing production engineers developed grade rules, the formula for creating different sizes based on a single base or core size, in the early 1900s. The engineers had no data on real body shapes, so their resulting formulas were extremely mathematical, calculated, and logical. Moreover, most clothing brands have traditionally used professional fit models, who usually embodied the “ideal” body shape, as the basis for creating the core body shape. As a result of these two factors, customers of larger or smaller sizes would have a harder time finding clothing that would fit their respective body shapes.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, the popular European fashion trends leading up to the 1920s certainly influenced how Americans viewed fatness in comparison to slenderness. French fashion designer Paul Poiret, sometimes called the King of Fashion, led fashion away from the full silhouette of the early 1900s and promoted a long, lean, elegant line.<sup>36</sup> Poiret’s looks set the stage for the flapper look in the United States and his work spread to the United States when he created an American fashion line, *Hotel de Couture*. Even after the flapper look became popularized in the 1920s, Poiret was featured in American women’s magazines like *Harper’s Bazaar*.<sup>37</sup> Other French designers like Directoire and Madame Récamier similarly created styles that emphasized vertical lines and a high waist. Clearly at the beginning of the twentieth century, Parisian haute couture still greatly influenced American fashion. As Europe demanded that women wear clothing suited

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<sup>35</sup> E.A. Gribbin, “Body shape and its influence on apparel size and consumer choice,” in *Designing Apparel for Consumers: The Impact of Body Shape and Size*, ed. Marie-Eve Faust and Serge Carrier (Cambridge: Woodhead Publishing, 2014), 6-21. According to W. Aldrich, the original grading system was originally constructed for menswear and was used later for women’s garments. See: W. Aldrich, “History of sizing systems and ready-to-wear garments,” in *Sizing in Clothing: Developing effective sizing systems for ready-to-wear clothing* (Cambridge, England: Woodhead Publishing Limited, 2007), 42.

<sup>36</sup> Valerie Mendes and Amy de la Haye, *Fashion Since 1900* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2010), 32.

<sup>37</sup> Bonnie English, *A Cultural History of Fashion in the Twentieth Century: From Catwalk to Sidewalk* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 29.

for the slender figure, America followed suit. It would not be until the late twentieth century that the United States stopped looking to Paris and London as the fashion authorities.<sup>38</sup>

### 1. The Creation of Stout Wear and the Stout Woman

In the first few decades of the twentieth century, a woman's ideal body measured at a 36-inch bust, a 24-inch waist, and 36-inch hips, often called the "perfect 36." Fashion expert Grace Margaret Gould of *McClure's Magazine* noted that "the young woman with the 36 bust and the 24 or 26 waist can always be fitted and at a reasonable cost."<sup>39</sup> The stout woman, however, was not so lucky. Albert Malsin, the husband of Lena Bryant of Lane Bryant, famously conducted a research study in an attempt to answer the question: "what is a stout?"<sup>40</sup> *Women's Wear Daily*, a popular fashion trade journal, detailed Malsin's investigation into discovering the true measurements of the stout woman. According to Malsin, the "peculiarities" of the stout figure begin to show at around a 44-inch bust.<sup>41</sup> Malsin goes on to clarify that weight is not the only factor that categorized a woman as stout; he denotes that although a woman might appear stout, she can only be counted as such if the measurements of her body fall outside of the normal proportions used to calculate regulation sizes.

Malsin's study of approximately 4000 American women asserted that it was impossible to make stout garments by the same process of grading that was in use for making regulation clothing. The stout woman's body did not conform to the mathematical and logical grade rules.

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<sup>38</sup> Diana Crane, *Fashion and its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 15.

<sup>39</sup> Grace Margaret Gould, "The Fashionable Figure - and How She Gets It: Described So a Mere Man Can Understand It," *McClure's Magazine*, March 1916, 32.

<sup>40</sup> "Scientific Specialization in Stouts: A Malsin Believes That it is Impossible To Fit All Types of Stouts According to a Single Standard," *Women's Wear*, July 9, 1915, 4. Lane Bryant is a clothing brand that still exists today.

<sup>41</sup> "Scientific Specialization in Stouts," *Women's Wear*, 4.

Her body was irrational, outside of the norm, and in the eyes of clothing manufacturers, in need of rationalization and correction. The fact that stout women required specialized garments is significant in itself. Stout women could not simply wear larger sizes that followed traditional grade rules, but needed their own system, which labeled their bodies as different and unacceptable in some way. To prove his point that normal grade rules would not work for stout women, Malsin recounts that he gave orders to numerous designers to make stout wear by ordinary grade rules, but the “sizes of 50 bust for instance, had the shoulder reaching way down to the upper part of the arm with sleeves fit for an elephant.”<sup>42</sup> Traditional grade rules for “normal” women, according to Malsin, would simply not work for the stout. To account for the different body shapes of women under his research, Malsin ultimately categorized stout women into three different types. Type A stout women had a large bust, but comparatively small hips and abdomen. The type B stout woman was “stout all around,” and the type C woman had a “flat bust and large abdomen and hips, “as often found in those of advanced age.”<sup>43</sup> Malsin’s classification of stout women into three separate categories would still be used as the standard five years later. Like Malsin, a buyer from a Philadelphia retail store described stout women’s bodies as falling into one of three categories. She called the first type of stout woman “old fashioned” and described her as having narrow shoulders, a high stomach, and a short waist.<sup>44</sup> Type two, like Malsin’s type B, was large all over, while type three was dubbed the “stylish stout” who had a large bust and narrow hips.<sup>45</sup> According to the author, this last group of women were the easiest to dress, likely because they most closely resembled the perfect 36.

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<sup>42</sup> “Scientific Specialization in Stouts,” *Women’s Wear*, 4.

<sup>43</sup> “Scientific Specialization in Stouts,” *Women’s Wear*, 4.

<sup>44</sup> “Highly Specialized Shops Beginning to Realize Importance of ‘Stouts,’” *Women’s Wear*, January 29, 1920, 14.

<sup>45</sup> “Highly Specialized Shops Beginning to Realize Importance of ‘Stouts,’” *Women’s Wear*, 14.

Classifying stout women into three categories was not for the benefit of stout women, but I contend that it was instead a result of fashion retailers' move to profit off of a new and what they perceived as a vulnerable customer base. In the eyes of clothing companies and buyers for department stores, stout women and the creation of a stoutwear department had the potential to bring in a lot of money. Beginning in the 1910s, *Women's Wear* began to write that "stouts are becoming of more and more importance with operators of both wholesale and retail houses."<sup>46</sup> Article after article noted the rising need for retailers to provide clothing specific to stout women. Mrs. Rose Townsend, the head of the stout department at Drezwell Co. similarly revealed her concern for profits. She argues that if shops are able to accommodate all three types of stouts, they will be "well on the way toward making stouts the most profitable department in the shop."

<sup>47</sup> In 1916, eight manufacturers from different apparel houses pooled their resources together and created Associated Stylish Stout-Wear Makers, Inc., in order to capitalize on what they viewed as an underdeveloped industry.<sup>48</sup> The conglomerate did not cite stout women's dismal shopping experience as the motive for creating Associated Stylish Stout-Wear Makers, Inc., but stated that they could make a large profit by doing so. Associated Stylish Stout-Wear Makers plainly expressed that they wanted to bring to the "merchants of the country to a realization of the vast importance of the stout woman's profit possibilities."<sup>49</sup>

As justification for the creation of the company, the apparel house repeatedly proclaimed that one third of all women in the country could be classified as stouts. This statistic is scattered throughout other *Women's Wear* articles, with no real indication of where this number came

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<sup>46</sup> "Highly Specialized Shops Beginning to Realize Importance of 'Stouts'," *Women's Wear*, 14.

<sup>47</sup> "Highly Specialized Shops Beginning to Realize Importance of 'Stouts'," *Women's Wear*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> "Apparel Houses Combine to Cater to Stout Women," *Women's Wear*, September 20, 1916, 14.

<sup>49</sup> "Apparel Houses Combine to Cater to Stout Women," 14.

from.<sup>50</sup> It seems likely that the one third statistic originated from Albert Malsin's study on the 4000 or so stout women. Outside of his own personal research, Malsin borrowed figures from a life insurance company, who claimed that 27-30 percent "of grown up women in this country are what can be called 'stouts' with measurements out of proportion."<sup>51</sup> Drawing from this questionable statistic, Associated Stylish Stout-Wear Makers, Inc., touted, "we figure that nearly one-third of all the women in this country are stouts."<sup>52</sup> Similar to Malsin's calculations, the Actuarial Society of America published a report in 1912, which claimed that 47 percent of women were overweight by one pound and that 21 percent of women, about 7,386,960 women, could be categorized as stouts.<sup>53</sup> Somehow, by 1923, *Women's Wear* proclaimed that now, at least 40 per cent of the women in the country were short and stout and needed "stubby stout clothes."<sup>54</sup> *Women's Wear* signaled to fashion retailers, executives, manufacturers, and other members of the fashion industry that there was a large and growing market for stout wear.

Not only were 30 percent of women stout, according to *Women's Wear*, "approximately 90 percent of these women are mothers, and it must be remembered that they are the ones who purchase supplies for the rest of their families."<sup>55</sup> Writers for *Women's Wear* stressed that stout women purchased clothing for the entirety of the family and could therefore bring in substantial profits. This connects back to the notion that shopping was perceived as a gendered activity. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the American middle class underwent expansive

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<sup>50</sup> This statistic also appears in: "Highly Specialized Shops Beginning to Realize Importance of 'Stouts'," *Women's Wear*, 14, which noted that "every third woman who enters a dress shop is a 42 or better."

<sup>51</sup> "Scientific Specialization in Stouts," *Women's Wear*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> "Scientific Specialization in Stouts," *Women's Wear*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> "Only 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>% of Stout Dress Market Supplied by Producers, Survey Shows," *Women's Wear*, April 10, 1924.

<sup>54</sup> "Manufacturer Believes 40% Of Large Women Should Wear 'Stubby Stouts'," *Women's Wear*, May 24, 1923, 9.

<sup>55</sup> "Apparel Houses Combine to Cater to Stout Women," *Women's Wear*, 14.

growth and regrouping: between 1870 and 1910, the number of “white collar” workers multiplied by eight times. The wives of these white collar workers formed a new leisure class, who participated in reform activities, stayed home to manage the home and the family, and heavily participated in the new consumer culture.<sup>56</sup> According to surveys from between 1870 and 1910, women were responsible for 85 percent of the nation’s consumption.<sup>57</sup> Thus, it makes sense that stout wear manufacturers repeatedly discussed how much retailers could make off of stout women’s business; middle class women were at the heart of the consumer economy during this time period. A 1916 *Women’s Wear* publication similarly discussed the association between the motherly figure and the stout figure. The author writes that “the stout women are our mothers, the foundation of our social and business life.”<sup>58</sup> While the author makes this point to emphasize that stout women should be taken care of while shopping, they maintain that ultimately, the specialization of stout wear is profitable for both manufacturers and retailers.<sup>59</sup>

Not only did the store have to carry clothing for the stout woman, they also had to try not to offend her in the process. Writing about stout women from *Women’s Wear* depicts stout

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<sup>56</sup> Lois W. Banner, *Women in Modern America: A Brief History* (Belmont, California: Thomas Learning Inc., 2005), 11.

<sup>57</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> “Lectures to Stout Women,” *Women’s Wear*, October 6, 1916, 11. This also points to the fact that clothing retailers did indeed see fat women as consumers. In “Revolution on a Rack: Fatness, Fashion, and Commodification,” in *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), Kathleen Lebesco argued that it was not until the 1990s in the United States that shops viewed fat women as consumers with any real purchasing power. *Women’s Wear* magazine articles prove that clothing retailers were targeting stout women as customers.

<sup>59</sup> In *Fat History*, Historian Peter Stearns documents the connection between the attack on fat and the attack on motherhood, arguing that the sexy woman was a slender woman, a “visible nonmother,” and that young, middle-aged, and even mature women should not look like they had borne children. Moreover, the link between mothers and stout women can also be found in the creation of Lane Bryant itself. The company’s stout wear department grew out of maternity wear, which by 1923 surpassed maternity as the most profitable department, accounting for more than half of the annual five million dollars in sales. See: “Lane Bryant Malsin,” *Jewish Women’s Archive*, accessed November 2019, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/malsin-lane-bryant>

women as self-loathing, sensitive, and embarrassed about their weight. Authors that describe women in this way do not cite actual accounts of women expressing their feelings on the topic, but instead make their own assumptions about stout women's shopping experiences.

Consequently, a debate began over how to advertise for stout wear and how to interact with stout women. This debate revealed that apparel houses had an extremely monolithic view of stout women and showed that they assigned to her various negative character traits that they associated with fatness. These beliefs reinforced the binary between slenderness and fatness and promoted the idea that fatness was something to be ashamed of. Some stores argued that greater financial success came from having a separate stout wear department, while others argued that it was unwise to segregate stout wear from other apparel.<sup>60</sup> Both factions cited their apparent financial success from their respective department arrangements.

Both arguments were based on the idea that the stout woman enters the store already sensitive about her weight. The author of a *Women's Wear* article titled, "Stout Garments: Maurice Gross on the Possibilities of Stout Trade if Based on Right Foundation – Sensitiveness of Stout Women Easily Overcome," remarks that stout women likely will enter the store with a worried or embarrassed look on her face.<sup>61</sup> To solve this problem, the author proposes the creation of a separate "grey room" for stout women to shop in so that they would not feel sensitive or judged about needing larger sizes. In a similar manner, the author of the article, "Word 'Stout' Taboo in Dep't of 'Larger Sizes' at Wanamaker's" argues that the salesclerks at Wanamaker's approach the stout woman with care, as they are "fully cognizant of the fact that

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<sup>60</sup> "Resident Buyer Reports Success of 'Stout Department' Idea in Harzfeld Store," *Women's Wear*, May 11, 1922, 12.

<sup>61</sup> "Stout Garments: Maurice Gross on the Possibilities of Stout Trade if Based on Right Foundation -- Sensitiveness of Stout Women Easily Overcome," *Women's Wear*, September 2, 1919, 33.

the average stout woman regards her proportions rather delicately and in many cases is extremely sensitive about her size and shape.”<sup>62</sup> It is clear that clothing retailers assumed that the fat female shopper inherently feels self-conscious about her body and consequently implied that she *should* feel ashamed. The language in *Women’s Wear* makes generalizations about the feelings of stout women and creates a singular vision of her disposition. According to this popular fashion trade journal, the issue of stout women presented both an opportunity for large profits and challenges in navigating the sensitive nature of these women.

There was a marked distinction in the shopping experience between the stout and the slender woman, evidenced by the debate over how to properly sell stout clothing. Although clothing retailers seemed to be trying to make the shopping experience more comfortable for fat women, they were inadvertently promoting the idea that a woman should be embarrassed to shop for larger clothing sizes. Moreover, the motive always seemed to circle back to profit. The same author who proposed that a separate grey section would avoid stout women feeling judged by slender women writes that if the retailer can sell stout wear without offending women, “the first year no money would be made, but after that, they would, to use a figure of speech, ‘eat out of your hand.’”<sup>63</sup> The stout woman’s vulnerabilities were to be manipulated so that apparel houses could profit off of the supposedly huge section of the population that needed specialized stout wear.

The writing in *Women’s Wear* forms a part of larger changes in magazines and advertising that targeted women’s supposed insecurities and used these to create a need for consumer products. *Women’s Wear* articles that repeatedly point to the need for increased stout wear

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<sup>62</sup> “Word ‘Stout’ Taboo in Dep’t of ‘Larger Sizes’ at Wanamaker’s,” *Women’s Wear*, October 9, 1917, 23.

<sup>63</sup> “Stout Garments: Maurice Gross on the Possibilities of Stout Trade if Based on Right Foundation,” *Women’s Wear*, 33.

production should be understood as a snapshot of capitalism and the emergence of a “consumer culture” during the interwar period in the United States. Film historian Heather Addison defines consumerism as a “particular kind of degree of consumption; it is a consumption that is based upon perceived (psychological) need rather than actual (physical) need.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, Albert Malsin’s insistence that stout women needed their own type of clothing, one that he and his wife conveniently manufactured themselves, reflects his interest in creating a market to sell a product. Malsin’s language reinforces the idea that stout women supposedly needed to purchase a completely different type of clothing, as traditional grade rules supposedly did not suit their bodies. In a new way than before, manufacturers and retailers fostered and preyed upon female consumers’ fears and insecurities; in other words, if consumers could be convinced to be continually critical of their own bodies, retailers and manufacturers, like those who created stout wear, would stand to benefit.<sup>65</sup> Therefore, if stout wear retailers could advertise their clothing in a way that manipulated stout women into believing that they *needed* stout clothing, these clothing companies stood to make a lot of money. The problem, as seen in some of the *Women’s Wear* articles, is that retailers had to find the right balance between stimulating desire for their product and not offending stout women. Thus, the language used to describe stout women and stout clothing was not unique for the time period but serves as an example of a pervasive and outward anti-fat sentiment.

## 2. Advice to the Stout Woman

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<sup>64</sup> Heather Addison, “Hollywood, Consumer Culture and the Rise of Body Shaping,” in *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, ed. David Desser and Garth S. Jowett, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 4. Similarly, sociologist Mike Featherstone explains that business leaders in the United States in the 1910s and 1920s stimulated new needs, desires, and buying habits to meet the needs of new markets, breaking down traditional Victorian values of abstinence, thrift, and moderation. See: Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture,” in *The American Body in Context*, ed. Jessica R. Johnston (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc.), 81.

<sup>65</sup> Addison, “Hollywood, Consumer Culture, and the Rise of Body Shaping,” 9.

From the time that fashion trade journals announced the existence of such a large segment of the population that needed fashion help, popular women's magazines published advice to the stout woman, outlining exactly what she needed to wear so that she might look, to use the phrasing of the time, more like her "slender sister." The advice given by women's magazines like *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Vogue* reinforces the strict binary between thinness and fatness and reveals a deep anti-fat stigma that existed during this period. Like the authors from fashion trade journals, the discourse in popular women's magazines painted a monolithic view of fat women and created a picture of an ideal stout woman. According to women's magazines, the stout body was a problem that could only be solved through strict adherence to fashion advice and "reducing" techniques when necessary. Using a slenderizing discourse, women's magazines created the ideal stout woman and described her as needing to be inconspicuous, plain, as having a matronly or elderly figure, and aware that certain styles were better left for slender figures. In other words, the ideal stout woman knew the limits of what she could put on her body. The language in the advertisements and advice columns shamed and manipulated fat women into upholding an idealized version of the female body, one that was slender and contained.

Interestingly, corsets began to fall out of fashion in the first part of the twentieth century. The flapper's body was supposed to be naturally thin and free from the restriction of the corset. Beginning in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, dress reformers like Helen Ecob denounced the corset, citing how it "transformed healthy, fleet-footed, energetic young women

into willowy yet listless specimens of femininity.”<sup>66</sup> Reformers frequently drew on the work of Robert L. Dickinson who invented the manometer, a machine that measured the extreme amount of pressure that a corset exerted on a woman’s upper body.<sup>67</sup> In terms of high fashion, Paul Poiret is reputed to be the designer that freed women of the corset by creating tunic dresses that did not

**THE DOWAGER CORSET**

The Best Corset for Stout Figures Ever Produced

The Best-Fitting Most Comfortable and Durable Corset Made

**Style 550**  
Made of extra quality heavy Coutille, with Satteen-stripping.  
WHITE, DRAB or BLACK  
Sizes: 22 to 43 inch



Made also of fine heavy Netting with Satteen strips, for Summer wear, in white only. Same lengths and sizes as the Coutille.

Four Lengths:  
SHORT  
MEDIUM  
LONG  
EXTRA LONG

Retail Prices:  
Sizes 22 to 30, \$2.00  
" 31 to 36, \$2.25  
" 37 to 43, \$2.50

Ask Your Dealer for  
**THE DOWAGER CORSET**

If he can't supply you, send us Money Order, giving size, length and color of corset wanted, and we will deliver it to your address free of expense.

Worcester Corset Company, Worcester, Mass. North Attleboro, Mass., Sept. 16, 1899

Dear Sirs:—I cannot say enough in praise of The Dowager Corset. It stands ALONE in the market to-day as the only corset for stout figures. I have given it a most severe test, and find that after trying almost every corset in the market, The Dowager is the only corset.

I will gladly send reference to any lady in regard to the corset who will write to me.

You can use my name and this testimonial in your catalogue, or on your testimonial sheets, and I will try and induce others to try The Dowager Corset.

(Signed) Mrs. W. H. HAYES, 41 Moran St., North Attleboro, Mass.

Send for Folder of Testimonials from ladies who are wearing this corset, all similar to the above strong indorsement

**ROYAL WORCESTER CORSETS**

Are made in a hundred styles, for all kinds of figures and all classes of trade. Ladies are requested to send for Illustrated Catalogue

require the body to be molded with boned understructures.<sup>68</sup> According to Fashion historian Lauren Downing Peters, the ideal body in the early twentieth century was aerodynamic, free, and unencumbered.<sup>69</sup> The stout body, on the other hand, deviated from the slender norm and needed to be manipulated to appear more slender. While some American women were able to free themselves from the corset, stout women were not allowed to do the same. A 1900 ad for the Dowager Corset claimed that the world agrees that this type of

corset is the “best corset for stout figures ever” and that it is the “best fitting most comfortable

**Figure 1.** Advertisement in *Ladies' Home Journal* for the Dowager Corset

<sup>66</sup> Jenna Weissman Joselit, *A Perfect Fit: Clothes, Character, and the Promise of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2001), 50. Helen Ecob was the author of the popular advice book, *The Well-Dressed Woman: A Study in the Practical Application to Dress of the Laws of Health, Art and Morals*.

<sup>67</sup> Joselit, *A Perfect Fit*, 50. According to Dickinson’s calculations, even the loosest corset approximated that of a twenty-five pound back of flour, causing shallow breathing, irritability, constipation, and a rapid heartbeat.

<sup>68</sup> Cynthia Cooper, “The Victorian and Edwardian Eras: 1860-1910,” in *The Fashion Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2011), 81.

<sup>69</sup> Peters, “Flattering the Figure, Fitting in: The Design Discourses of Stoutwear, 1915-1930,” 8.

and durable corset.”<sup>70</sup> Although the ad describes the corset as extremely comfortable, the drawing of the stout woman’s body shows a different story. The woman gazes contentedly into the distance, seemingly unphased by a corset that realistically would be causing her intense discomfort. Her waist is drawn as incredibly tiny compared to the rest of her body. The ad portrays an unrealistic vision of what the stout woman should look like and implies that all stout women can achieve the slender look, if she only subjects herself to the corset. The Dowager Corset was not advertised for all women, but instead specifically targeted the stout body as the figure that still needed to be slenderized. A 1925 *Ladies’ Home Journal* article similarly argues that one of the most important accessories for a stout woman is a well-fitting corset. The author writes that “but all the camouflaging in the world availeth naught if the wrong size corset is worn... for if it is too small it simply compresses the flesh into one bulging spot.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> “The World’s Verdict on The Dowager Corset,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, January 1900, 42. The word dowager also implies that the body under the corset is an older one, hinting at a connection between the stout body and the elderly, widowed, and matronly shape.

<sup>71</sup> “Camouflage That Too, Too Solid Flesh,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, March 1925, 68.



**Figure 2.** The bottom right textbox reads: "Correct corseting, posture, placement of avoidupois and the right lines in clothes have transformed the three unattractive, dowdy women at bottom of page into the charming and distinguished ones above."

In other words, a stout woman may follow all of the preceding advice about cut, color, and line shape, but if she does not corset herself, none of it matters. The author points to the transformative power of corseting and correct placement of excess flesh; the women drawn at the bottom of the page are "unattractive" and "dowdy," while the women at the top, who have manipulated their fat, are "charming and distinguished." Stout women are shown what they could potentially look like, creating a sense of self consciousness and vulnerability, stimulating a desire to change one's appearance.

Similar to the writing in *Women's Wear*, the language surrounding corseting for stout women fits into larger changes in the nature of advertising in the twentieth century. In part, because women's social and economic worth often depended in some measure upon their appearance, they may have been targeted with greater intensity by advertisements that promoted a more slender look, like the reducing garments or corsets seen in *Ladies' Home Journal*.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, sociologist Mike Featherstone asserts that in the 1920s, advertising "helped to create a world in which individuals are made to become emotionally vulnerable, constantly monitoring themselves for bodily imperfections which could no longer be regarded as natural."<sup>73</sup> According to fashion writers, the extra flesh of a stout woman was wholly undesirable and was even worse if it was seen outside of her clothing. Consequently, advertisements like the one for the Dowager Corset manipulated women's potential insecurities into upholding the slender ideal. As seen in Figure 2, the drawings of the stout women invite the reader to compare herself to the properly dressed stout women at the top and reflect on her own appearance. According to Featherstone, these images of the body make readers more conscious of "the look."<sup>74</sup> In the case of this particular article, stout women are told that their bodies inherently do not satisfy this "look." For this reason, only through extreme body shaping with clothing or corsets could the stout woman look as slender and graceful as the woman who appears in the drawings. A small waist and a restricted figure were essential for the stout woman to gain a flat line – something that her slim sister could do uncorseted.

According to an advertisement for the "Stylish Stout" corsets in *McClure's Magazine*, what a woman wears makes her figure, not her actual weight, alluding to the power of clothing to

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<sup>72</sup> Addison, "Hollywood, Consumer Culture and the Rise of Body Shaping," 14.

<sup>73</sup> Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," 82.

<sup>74</sup> Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," 85.

alter one's appearance. The advertisement boasts that Stylish Stout corsets "give grace and poise and such a slim appearance," making the stout woman the object of the corset's slenderizing effects.<sup>75</sup> The objectification of the fat female body illustrates the disciplinary power of the discourse surrounding stout wear. The stout woman in these advertisements is not the subject, but she is instead the object that is manipulated by the corset. The corset gives the woman grace and poise, traits that she supposedly did not have before. The use of a corset, according to another author of a *Ladies' Home Journal* piece, has the power to bring out the stout woman's personality. The author expresses that "in fact, the woman who has taken on a little flesh will find that correct corseting enables her to express her own personality in the prevailing mode quite as readily as the slender woman."<sup>76</sup> The stout woman must rely on fashion to obtain the same level of grace and beauty of the slender woman. In a nod to French beauty standards, Flora McDonald Thompson, writer at *Harper's Bazaar*, notes that "it is conceded in France that the greatest offense a woman can commit against the beautiful is to be fat."<sup>77</sup> Rather than push back on this idea, McDonald encourages the American stout woman to emulate French fashion by using the corset to "dispose her adipose tissue."<sup>78</sup> According to McDonald, the corset allowed the stout woman to appear as elegant as the Frenchwoman, who understood that corseting was a necessity. Ultimately, the stout body was never inherently acceptable – it was in constant need of concealment and manipulation and corsets were one example of a mechanism to fit into society's expectation that fat and flesh remained hidden.

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<sup>75</sup> "No Woman is Too Stout to be Stylish," *McClure's Magazine*, April 1921, 45.

<sup>76</sup> "To the woman who is no longer slender," *Ladies' Home Journal*, July 1924, 61.

<sup>77</sup> Flora McDonald Thompson, "Fashions for Stout Women," *Harper's Bazaar*, August 1907, 780.

<sup>78</sup> Thompson, "Fashions for Stout Women," *Harper's Bazaar*, 780.

Women's magazines frequently recommended that the stout woman wore dark, dull, and plain clothing, revealing that the fat body was not meant to be obvious or public. Like the corset, the use of dull colors forced attention away from extra flesh and from the stout body as a whole. The language in women's magazines made it clear that this was not only the most aesthetically pleasing option for stout women, but the recommendations expressed (sometimes explicitly) that there were certain styles better left for the slender figure. Again, the binary was reinforced between thin and fat. Anna K. Kay of *Ladies' Home Journal* points out that the trouble with Marie, the stout woman, is that she is too obvious. Kay laments that Marie, thinking that she is beautiful, displays her neck and arms "I regret to say, on the street."<sup>79</sup> Kay goes on to condescendingly remark that Marie, unlike her slender cousin Marianne, cannot afford to be conspicuous and that she must never exaggerate her look. To remedy her too obvious presence, Marie must always simply stick to plain colors, for they are her safest option and have the ability to bring out her charm.<sup>80</sup> Even certain accessories were out of reach for the stout woman. In giving advice to the woman with "too, too solid flesh," an author from *Ladies' Home Journal* mockingly emphasizes that "it is when she attempts to add a bow, a string of beads, another bracelet, or an extra bit of feminine fussiness that she makes a grave mistake."<sup>81</sup> Ostensibly, the feminine fussiness was better left for slender women. There were certain rules that the stout woman was expected to follow and meticulously study and there were select styles that were out of her reach. Most commonly, *Ladies' Home Journal* writers advised the stout woman to always err on the side of simplicity.

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<sup>79</sup> Kay, "Weight Doesn't Count if you Choose Your Clothes Wisely," 45.

<sup>80</sup> Kay, "Weight Count if you Choose Your Clothes Wisely," 56.

<sup>81</sup> "Camouflage That Too, Too Solid Flesh," *Ladies' Home Journal*, 68.

Both authors' language highlights the binary between thinness and fatness – the thin body was allowed to parade around in public with confidence and grace, while the fat body had to study fashion so that she was never as obvious as her slender counterpart. This sentiment is echoed by a 1913 article “Why These Clothes are Good for Stout Women,” that explains stout women's need to stick to plain colors. The author reveals to stout women that the secret to dressing correctly is there must never be an attempt to make oneself obvious in appearance.<sup>82</sup> Simple styles and plain colors, typically dark brown, navy, or black, were essential to the concealment and repression of the stout figure.

Moreover, the language used in these women's magazines created an image of the stout woman as jolly, cheerful, yet unknowing that her lack of fashion sense made her look more stout. The stout woman's charm was never her beauty nor her figure. Only by a careful study of lines and shape and adherence to the rules set out for her may the stout woman's grace appear. Consequently, the stout woman was never naturally as beautiful as her slender sister, but proper clothing offered her a chance to look as graceful and dignified. The author of a 1913 *Ladies' Home Journal* article plainly writes that “stout women can be as well dressed as slender women, with a charm equally as pleasing, though the result can only be obtained by conscientious effort and strict adherence to certain rules.”<sup>83</sup> Again, society subjected the stout body to a strict set of rules that affected how the public viewed her body. Shown in Figure 3, the author's language in “As Stout Women Should and Should Not Dress,” serves as an example of the type of generalizations that many fashion writers made about the stout woman's personality. The author begins by almost sighing and announcing that many people recognize that the fat woman is good

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<sup>82</sup> “Why These Clothes are Good for Stout Women,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, March 1913, 48.

<sup>83</sup> “Why These Clothes are Good for Stout Women,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, 48.

natured, aggressive, and fond of clothes, but complains that the stout woman avoids the task of studying things like the “lines” of clothing.<sup>84</sup> The author exasperatingly points to the stout woman drawn at the right of the article, whose lack of fashion knowledge supposedly makes her look much worse than necessary. This unfortunate woman is “blissfully ignorant of the fact that



Figure 3. Article in *Ladies' Home Journal*, “As Stout Women Should and Should Not Dress.”

she is making a caricature of herself in an attempt to dress in fashion.”<sup>85</sup> Clothing speaks about the body underneath. In the case of the stout woman, when dressed incorrectly, her clothing presented to society that she was lacking in fashion knowledge and oblivious about her outer appearance.

<sup>84</sup> “As Stout Women Should and Should Not Dress,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1907, 39.

<sup>85</sup> “As Stout Women Should and Should Not Dress,” *Ladies' Home Journal*, 39.

But alas, the stout woman can be saved – if only she meticulously studies the proper dress for her figure. The reader is directed to glance at the women drawn at the left of the article. These stout women have mastered the art of conquering their flesh and have appropriately dressed themselves. The stout woman on the right “deludes herself thinking that her arrangement is “pretty, even graceful, not realizing that cross-lines are to be avoided.”<sup>86</sup> When she changes her clothes the woman on the right is “hardly recognizable.”<sup>87</sup> According to this author, she has transformed into a new woman, who unlike her old self, is now pretty and graceful. The rhetoric in *Ladies’ Home Journal* implies that once the stout woman becomes enlightened about proper fashion, it is her duty to alter her appearance. Only after this transformation can the stout woman resemble the graceful slender woman.

Likewise, Margery Wells of the *St. Louis Post* describes the stout woman’s charms as her “chubbiness, her jollity, her health, the good nature of her spirits,” and explains that the stout woman must express these attributes in her clothing.<sup>88</sup> The stout woman’s beauty is not found in her looks. This sentiment is cruelly expressed in a Harper’s Bazaar article, “The Sorrows of the Fat,” which explains that the stout woman may be jolly, pleasant, kind, and sarcastic, “but she must never be romantic. She may inspire friendship, but she will never have men at her feet.”<sup>89</sup> Ultimately, the stout woman could be a happy, ignorant friend, but she could never be the confident, sexy, and beautiful woman that slender women could be.

### 3. The Old, Matronly Figure

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<sup>86</sup> “As Stout Women Should and Should Not Dress,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, October 1907, 39.

<sup>87</sup> “As Stout Women Should and Should Not Dress,” *Ladies’ Home Journal*, October 1907, 39.

<sup>88</sup> Margery Wells, “What the ‘Stout Girl’ Should Wear,” *St. Louis Post*, November 23, 1921, 26.

<sup>89</sup> Edith Bigelow, “Sorrows of the Fat,” *Harper’s Bazaar*, April 3, 1897, 278.

Advice relating to weight, fashion, and age often fell into two categories. On one hand, some women's magazines recognized that the female body sometimes became more stout with age and subsequently prescribed advice for the stout older woman. While this advice seems innocent, they reveal that even as women grew older, they were still expected to strive for the slender look. The mandate for slenderness was apparently not affected by time. Some articles, on the other hand, equated stoutness with a matronly look and invoked this term to describe an outdated body. As a result, fashion writers prescribed slenderizing clothing to stout women to help them regain their youthfulness. In her doctoral thesis, Peters similarly suggests that the term "matronly" represented both a manner of uncorseted dressing and a body that was closely associated with old age.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the language used at the time depicts the stout body as unable to keep up with modernity, in an age that heralded the flapper body as the ideal. In a culture that valued the youthful look, the conceptualization of the stout body as matronly and elderly pushed it even farther to the outside.

*Vogue's* "Fashion: A Guide to Chic for the Stout Older Woman" points to the power of slenderizing clothing to make a stout figure appear younger. Through the use of a woman named Lydia Bulkley as a fictional case study, the author perpetuates the idea that attention to one's figure is important regardless of age. The author reminds the reader that because Lydia is now "twice her former girth, she is twice as careful in her choice and looks as smart as ever in clothes that take pounds from her apparent weight."<sup>91</sup> Only through the skillful use of lines, colors, and textures can the stout older woman regain her lost grace. But, according to this author, the stout woman should never forget that her once beautiful body is a thing of the past.<sup>92</sup> The stout

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<sup>90</sup> Peters, "Stoutwear and the Discourses of Disorder," 199.

<sup>91</sup> "A Guide to Chic for the Stout Older Woman," *Vogue*, April 15, 1924, 78.

<sup>92</sup> "A Guide to Chic for the Stout Older Woman," *Vogue*, 78.

woman's saving grace was her ability to use clothing to alter her body's appearance, but she was simultaneously burdened with the duty of continuously maintaining and camouflaging her stoutness. In her work on plus size fashion and the body, Peters argues that the function of the matronly dress was to offer its wearer comfort and security, rather than a fashionable appearance – the effects were achieved by hiding any visible signs of aging, and by concealing a “decaying” body underneath.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, Ethel Lloyd Patterson writes in *Ladies' Home Journal* that “if a woman forty years or more is fat she nearly always seems at least ten years older,” solidifying the connection between the old body and the stout body. She goes on to write that the stout woman should exercise, diet, and most importantly, use self-control. The stout woman was always expected to change her body, whether it was through clothing or dieting.

An advertisement from *McClure's Magazine* makes the case that losing weight makes stout women look more youthful and more beautiful. The advertisement promotes a weight loss regimen that will enable stout women to wear the new styles, indicating that her weight made her unable to wear them previously. The ad tells the story of one woman's success in reducing her flab and heaviness, which gave her the appearance of youth. This new youthful appearance was important, as “fat people always look older than they really are,” and securing a more normal weight would help her erase the years off of her body.<sup>94</sup> In this example, the case for losing weight had little to do with health. Instead, the push to lose weight was motivated by the fact that slenderness was more aesthetically pleasing because of its connection with youthfulness. *Good Housekeeping* similarly promoted the idea that slender lines gave the stout woman a youthful figure. An advertisement for a weight loss book proclaims that “slender lines and a springing

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<sup>93</sup> Peters, “Discourses of Disorder,” 276.

<sup>94</sup> “Why Stout People Can't Wear New Styles,” *McClure's Magazine*, May 1922, 7.

step make you *feel* and *look* years younger” and goes on to announce that the weight loss booklet written “by a woman, for woman” will help the stout keep her youthful figure.<sup>95</sup> Youthfulness was essential for the slender look and the stout woman was expected to use clothing to turn back the clock on her body.

#### 4. Reducing the Stout Woman

Many women’s fashion magazines that encouraged stout women’s use of clothing to hide and manipulate their fat also published extensive weight loss advice. For some women, it was easy to fake the appearance of slenderness, but for others it was necessary to employ a wide range of devices to follow the cultural mandate for slenderness. Stout women had the double burden of using clothing and dieting to transform their appearance. Reducing tips, exercises, and garments were sometimes published on the same page as fashion advice for the stout woman, bombarding the stout woman with the idea that fatness was something to get rid of – and fast. During this time period, language of reducing, slenderizing, and thinning down were written all over women’s magazines, forming part of the larger rhetoric about weight as a reflection of women’s need to control and remove their fat. Several historians have pointed to the fact that times of rapid social change and disintegrating social boundaries stimulate external and internal control of the physical body.<sup>96</sup> During the 1920s, as opposed to prior years, American women worked outside of the home, increasingly going to colleges and universities, participating in a new sexualized culture of dance halls and movie houses, had greater personal freedoms, and

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<sup>95</sup> Anna Hazelton Delevan, “The Right Way to Reduce Your Weight,” *Good Housekeeping*, October 1922, 86. Italics in the original.

<sup>96</sup> For more information on this argument, see: Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House Inc.).

could finally exercise their right to vote.<sup>97</sup> According to historian Susan Bordo, it is during these times of uncertainty about gender roles that “female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, ‘improvement.’”<sup>98</sup> Despite women’s gains during this time period, political and social conservatism was still strong in the 1920s, which could partly explain the fashion industry’s obsession with controlling the fat female body.<sup>99</sup> While some women were attending speakeasies, shortening their skirts, and binding their breasts, the fashion industry still subjected stout women’s bodies to strict rules. Historian Peter Stearns similarly argues that the frenzy of dieting materials explicitly directed at women became a new gender divide in a period when gender distinctions of other kinds were diminishing.<sup>100</sup> This regulation of and attention to stout women’s bodies serves as one example of the conservative backlash to women’s increased political and social rights and society’s move to reassert control of the female body.

The language in women’s magazines reveals that the stout woman was to blame for her fat figure and was oftentimes as having little self-control. Like clothing, dieting was another way for the stout woman to move closer to society’s vision of normality. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, *Vogue* repeatedly published advertisements for Dr. Walter’s Rubber Garments, Dr. Lawton’s Fat Reducer, and the “Ovida-Sylph” diaphragm reducing belt, the 1920 equivalent of

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<sup>97</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 40.

<sup>98</sup> Susan Bordo expands on this theory and explains that “some writers have argued that female hunger (as a code for female desire) is especially problematized during periods of disruption and change in established gender relations and in the position of women. In such periods (of which our own is arguably one), nightmare images of what Bram Dijkstra has called ‘the consuming woman’ theme proliferate in art and literature (images representing female desire unleashed), while dominant constructions of the female body become more sylphlike—unlike the body of a fully developed woman, more like that of an adolescent or boy (images that might be called female desire unborn).” See: Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 206.

<sup>99</sup> Banner, *Women in Modern America*, 73.

<sup>100</sup> Stearns, *Fat History*, 72.

the waist trainer.<sup>101</sup> Dr. Walter's Rubber Garment came in all shapes so that it could be worn as a brassiere, on the neck and chin, on the ankles, or more commonly as a corset wrapped around the waist.<sup>102</sup> It appears that the rubber garment induced weight loss by using friction to create sweat. Interestingly, the advertisement does not claim to actually help the wearer lose weight, but instead advertises that it eliminates the flesh itself. The interest in reducing the flesh, not fat, demonstrates that the rubber garment's objective was to eliminate the more visible part of the fuller figure. Extra flesh was supposed to be eliminated and hidden from public vision while the stout woman corrected her figure.

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<sup>101</sup> Nina Godlewski, "A doctor and personal trainer reveal the truth about those celebrity-backed waist trainers that dominate Instagram," *Business Insider*, accessed November 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/do-waist-trainers-work-2016-6>. A waist trainer works by squeezing and cinching the waist to make it smaller over time.

<sup>102</sup> "Dr. Walter's Famous Medicated Reducing Rubber Garments," *Vogue*, July 1, 1922, 119.

## Diaphragm Reducing Belt



OVIDA-SYLPH Showing  
Double Reducing Feature

OVIDA-SYLPH Shown  
with Low Corset

Showing Same Figure  
without OVIDA-SYLPH

(Patents Pending)

### "Ovida Sylph"

**The Garment That Makes The Figure**

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Presents</i></p> <p>Bulging Diaphragm Prodding Corset Steels Chafing Corset Tops</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Improves</i></p> <p>Figure and Style Grace and Carriage Health and Comfort</p>
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Above photograph shows convincingly that the "Ovida Sylph" excels even the corset as the promoter of beauty, grace and fashion. It also permits the fleshy woman to wear the extreme fashioned corsets and girdles with the same delightful corset-free effect as her more slender sister.

"Ovida Sylph" is indispensable not only for the full-figured woman, but for every woman who wishes to preserve her youthful figure and good health.

Style No. 2—Made of high quality mercurized surgical elastic and fine quality flesh colored jeans; graduated to 3 inches in back. Sizes range from 24 to 36 inches waist measure taken over corset. Retail Price \$2.00.

If your dealer cannot supply you with Ovida Sylph, write for free descriptive booklet.

**The Ovida Brassiere Co., Inc., 73 Fifth Ave., New York**  
*Manufacturers of Fancy and Elastic Brassieres*



**You  
can reduce**

quickly and safely, without  
drugs or diet or strenuous  
exercise.

*Guaranteed*

## Fat Reducer

Used daily in the privacy of your room, the Reducer will show results within 11 days or money refunded. Convenient and simple—not electrical. Reduces only the parts where you wish to lose. Easily followed instructions enable you to retain your normal weight after the Reducer has eliminated the unhealthful, disfiguring fatty tissue. Without discomfort any stout man or woman can obtain these results, whether 10 or 100 pounds overweight. Dr. Lawton reduced his own weight from 211 to 152 lbs. Send for your Reducer today—only \$5 and remember, it is guaranteed.

**Dr. THOMAS LAWTON**  
120 West 70th St.  
Department 27  
New York

**Figure 4.**  
Dr. Thomas Lawton's "Fat Reducer" (Right)

**Figure 5.** Immediately to the left, "Ovida Sylph Diaphragm Reducing Belt" (Left)

Likewise, seen in Figure 4, Dr. Lawton's Fat Reducer guaranteed the elimination of the "unhealthful, disfiguring fatty tissue."<sup>103</sup> Dr. Lawton's contraption looks like a rubber tool that suctions the fat away. The advertisement, like Dr. Walter's Rubber Garment, emphasizes the visual "disfiguring" aspect of fat, underscoring the aesthetically unpleasing side of the stout woman. Immediately to the left of the advertisement for the Fat Reducer, *Vogue* published another piece on a weight loss tool, the Ovida Sylph Diaphragm Reducing Belt. The garment allows the "fleshy woman to wear the extreme fashioned corsets and girdles with the same delightful-corset free effect as her more slender sister," by acting as some sort of tightening and

<sup>103</sup> "Dr. Lawton's Guaranteed Fat Reducer," *Vogue*, November 1, 1920, 178.

reshaping tool.<sup>104</sup> The reducing belt also promises to give the wearer grace and style. The abundance of advertisements that promoted reducing garments further endorsed the idea that the stout woman's body was an object to manipulate and repackage as something acceptable for society. The use of an actual image of a woman in the reducing belt advertisement (as opposed to a drawing) fits into larger technological changes occurring in the 1920s, which put even more attention onto the fat female body. By the 1920s, both fashion and film had encouraged a "massive unveiling" of the female body, which meant that arms, legs, and the figure were displayed in ways that they had never been before. This new freedom to display the body resulted in demanding beauty and dietary regimens that involved self-discipline and scrutiny of one's own body.<sup>105</sup> Therefore, as stout women entered the public sphere, their bodies were the object of critique from the public, resulting in an increasingly personal struggle with weight.

This public scrutiny could also explain, in part, why advertisements for consumer products related to weight loss dramatically increased during the first half of the twentieth century. Stout bodies became increasingly visible in popular women's media when advertisements began showing pictures of the stout body. Consequently, women's magazines and advertisements advised stout women to alter their appearance with consumer products like clothing and reducing garments. For example, within the first decade of the twentieth century, advertisements came to cover more than half of the pages in *Ladies' Home Journal*.<sup>106</sup> The

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<sup>104</sup> "Ovida Sylph Diaphragm Reducing Belt," *Vogue*, November 1, 1920, 178. Aside from looking extremely uncomfortable in the advertisement, I also question how safe this garment would be to wear. In very small letters, the advertisement notes that the patent is still pending on the reducing belt.

<sup>105</sup> Brumberg, *The Body Project*, 98.

<sup>106</sup> Jennifer Scanlon, "Redefining Thrift: The Ladies' Home Journal and the Modern Woman," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 12, no. 2 (2012): 12.

regulation and manipulation of the stout body was intimately connected with the flourishing American consumerism of the 1920s.

Two doctors from a 1920 Ladies' Home Journal article recommended baths, exercises like trunk circumduction, and deep breathing exercises to reduce. For example, the authors advise stout women to stand with her hands on her hips and "forcibly extend the abdomen as you breathe."<sup>107</sup> Aside from encouraging scientifically questionable exercise and dieting tips, the doctors step out of their area of expertise and discuss fashion, revealing the intimate connection between dieting and the stout body. The authors aptly pronounced that "there is a style of dress which should be worn by the large woman, particularly the style of 1919 of the long-waistline effect, the coat dress, which is becoming and beautiful and gives her an appearance of being at least ten or twenty pounds under her actual weight."<sup>108</sup> Of course, the authors also recommended that the stout woman should invest in a proper corset "to help the general appearance."<sup>109</sup> In the opinion of these doctors, the obese woman must avoid excess fat at all costs through a combination of hot and cold baths and a study of the fashion rules specifically for stout women. Sources outside of women's magazines even noted the connection between stout wear and the wave of reducing diets. The *Indianapolis Star* quotes a prominent dressmaker as saying that stout women should always choose semi-fitted and dark materials, for it is a mistake to do otherwise.<sup>110</sup> The dressmaker not only tells stout women to use clothing to make a "good figure," but he additionally recommends that all stout women visit their local druggist to purchase and mix Marmola, fluid extract Cascara Aromatic, and Syrup Simplex. The combination of these three

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<sup>107</sup> William S. Sadler and Lena K. Sadler, "Why We Get Fat and What to Do About It," *Ladies' Home Journal*, September 1920, 151.

<sup>108</sup> Sadler, "Why We Get Fat and What to Do About It," 152.

<sup>109</sup> Sadler, "Why We Get Fat and What to Do About It," 152.

<sup>110</sup> "What a Stout Woman Should Wear," *Indianapolis Star*, May 14, 1908, 3.



**Figure 6.** The image reads: "'Victory' and 'Hope' might be the names of these two patients of a well-known doctor. 'Victory,' seated at the left, has conquered the world, the flesh, and her figure, while 'Hope,' at the right is planning to do likewise"

ingredients, according to this dressmaker, can drastically improve the appearance of stout women.<sup>111</sup> Although the dressmaker confidently proposes this mixture as a weight loss technique, its safety and efficacy are questionable, as it does not seem to be a patented or tested formula. Women's magazines also reinforced the idea that the stout woman had the duty to correct her flesh. In the eyes of these authors, sitting idly by and letting fat accumulate was unhealthy, but it most importantly detracted from a woman's beauty. Using fictional stories of stout women that now appear slender (either by dieting or through clothing), writers in women's magazines claimed that any stout woman could have the same success as the woman in the article, but only if she followed their advice. To encourage stout women to transform their bodies, *Vogue* often published drawings or images of fat women on one side and slender women

<sup>111</sup> "What a Stout Woman Should Wear," *Indianapolis Star*, 3.

on the other, shown in Figure 6.<sup>112</sup> The stout woman could relate to the stories of women in the article and was able to see herself in the future as the woman who had “conquered her flesh.” Like fashion advice that encouraged stout women to disguise her stout figure, reducing advice forms part of the cultural mandate for slenderness. In women’s journals, stout women were objects that required manipulation, whether that be in the form of clothing or reducing techniques.

### **From Stout Wear, to Plus-size, to Curvy?**

Clearly, stout wear was not just about fashion. The fashion industry created unattainable standards for what the female body should look like, forcing stout women to feel like they had to manipulate their bodies to be viewed as acceptable and beautiful. The language in advertisements and fashion advice articles invited women to continuously critique their own body. The stout woman was subject to an unbelievable number of rules and regulations about her choice of color, fabric, posture, her accessories, and even the way in which she held her neck. The sheer volume of regulations points to society’s desire to monitor the stout body in a way that the slender body was not subject to. The stout woman’s flesh potentially protruded into public space, which the fashion industry considered aesthetically displeasing and inappropriate. Her body was viewed as an object in constant need of manipulation and camouflage – it was never inherently beautiful. Through the study of lines, the stout woman had the chance to bring out her natural charm, which writers often based on her jolly attitude and good nature, but never her physical attractiveness. Through the discourse in women’s magazines, the stout woman was created. The

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<sup>112</sup> “Too Many Pounds Spoil the Silhouette: The Whole Duty of Woman As Seen by To-Day’s Couturiere Is To Devote Herself Exclusively to the Shrinking of Her Shadow,” *Vogue*, January 1, 1921, 42.

ideal stout woman knew her place as the less beautiful woman and used clothing as the principal mechanism of figure control.

Fashion experts urged stout women to stick to plain colors, to hold her head in a particular way so that her double chin did not show, and to leave short skirts and tight-fitting clothing to her slender sisters. Women's fashion magazines and trade journals effectively drew a line between thinness and fatness and aggressively promoted the idea that one was better than the other. Moreover, these magazines and advertisements reflected the power of clothing to display one's identity. According to fashion magazines, clothing was the solution to stout women's aesthetic problems, suggesting that their bodies were problems to begin with. Coursing through these women's magazines was an anti-fat stigma that equated slenderness with elegance and fatness as an issue of health and of beauty. At the same time that women's magazines promoted long, slender lines as the pinnacle of grace, they published extensive advice on how to reduce. Fashion advice during this time period cannot be separated from America's obsession with dieting and weight loss during the beginning of the twentieth century. It is no coincidence that the same issue that published numerous fashion advice columns to stout women also published advertisements for weight reducing rubber corsets. Women's fashion magazines were not immune from the influence of the reducing craze that took hold of the United States in the first part of the twentieth century and felt it necessary to promote dieting along with the study of fashion. To use a term from Peters, these two discourses were underpinned by a "slenderness imperative" which dictated that the stout body aspire toward thinness.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Lauren Downing Peters, "Stoutwear and the Discourses of Disorder," 360.

In the twenty-first century, the discourse surrounding the plus-size body has begun to change, and the term “plus-size” is on its way out as the term “curvy” has started to become more popular. Fat activists have made important strides in combating fat stigma, but weight-based discrimination still persists. Perceived weight bias is actually rising in the United States, as most Americans still see weight as a matter of personal choice and willpower.<sup>114</sup> Large bodies are viewed as undisciplined and lazy, leading to public health issues. Weight stigma increases a child’s risk of being bullied and impairs their experience at school, finding a career, and increases the risk of depression and suicide.<sup>115</sup>

Within the fashion industry, the ideal of slenderness still dominates. Although some clothing brands have tried to be more inclusive, the idealized woman of fashion is not the plus-size woman, who finds herself underrepresented on runways, in magazines, and in the women’s clothing department.<sup>116</sup> Fashion retailers continuously neglect and marginalize fat consumers by relegating plus-size sections to the dark corners of clothing stores and excluding larger women from the pages of high fashion periodicals.<sup>117</sup> When reflecting on the discourse of stout wear throughout the first half of the twentieth century, it becomes clear that the marketing of plus size fashion has a dark history. Women’s magazine writers expected stout bodies to conform to the belief that slenderness was beautiful, were told exactly how to cover their flesh, and were condescendingly informed that their body weight was unacceptable. While women may not have followed every piece of advice, publications from this period nevertheless inform us about popular beliefs about fatness and womanhood. The discourse about stout wear in the 1920s

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<sup>114</sup> Amy Roeder, “The Scarlet F,” *Harvard Public Health*, accessed fall 2019, [https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/magazine/magazine\\_article/the-scarlet-f/](https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/magazine/magazine_article/the-scarlet-f/)

<sup>115</sup> Roeder, “The Scarlet F.”

<sup>116</sup> Peters, “You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation,” 48.

<sup>117</sup> Peters, “You Are What You Wear: How Plus-Size Fashion Figures in Fat Identity Formation,” 45.

is not drastically different than how the fashion industry conceptualizes fatness today. Clothing retailers still advertise slenderizing jeans and high waisted pants that conceal stomach fat. Furthermore, well-known female actresses and performers still struggle to find couture designers to dress them for public events.<sup>118</sup> Anti-fat language has not disappeared, but perhaps has taken on a more subtle tone, pointing to the need for historians, public health scientists, and the general public alike to tackle weight-based prejudice.

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<sup>118</sup> Lauren Schumacker, “13 celebrities who’ve called out designers for refusing to dress them,” published Feb 8, 2019, <https://www.insider.com/celebrities-designers-wont-dress-2019-1>

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