

Unequal footing

A survey of shoes as sex and status symbols by Linda Allison

small for her. Then her mother gave a knife and said: 'Cut the toe off, when thou art queen thou wilt no more need to go on foot.' The maiden cut the toe off, forced the foot into the shoe, swallowed the pain, and went out to the King's son. Then he took her on his horse as his bride and rode away with her. (Grimm Household Tales 1884)

The original uncut version of Cinderella has the prince return the bloody bride, only to ride away with the second sister, less a heel amputated by her ambitious mother. The sister with the maimed foot is in the end exchanged for Cinderella, triumphant by virtue of her small feet.

The function of shoes is protection, but from this fairy tale we begin to suspect that there are other forces afoot shaping our shoes. Indeed, a survey of the history of footwear shows us that the anatomy of shoes has little to do with the human foot.

Shoes have been a means of identifying class and profession; becoming not only a status symbol but also a sexual symbol. Psychoanalytically they symbolise the female genitals (drinking champagne from a lady's shoe). And, with high heel and extended toe, they are simultaneously phallic. The status and sexual symbolism interweave throughout the history of footwear - with

women usually feeling the pinch.

This was not as true in the Fourteenth century when women carried on clothing production before the separation of domestic and industrial life. Women shoemakers were known as sauteresses. At that time it was the man's shoe which started to sprout long and pointed toes which became an unwieldy badge of wealth and leisure. These phallic protruberances culminated in the Fifteenth century with the wearing of 'poulines' or 'crackows' reaching out into points of sometimes more than a yard. In 1420 a law was passed which emphasised the role of the shoe as status symbol; anyone earning less than £40 per annum was forbidden to wear long shoes. Such excesses in dress could only be associated with excesses in character, or so felt the clergy. They appealed to the pope, who responded with an edict prohibiting shoes longer than 11 inches.

By the end of the sixteenth century in England a far more potent symbol of social status for a man was the possession of an inactive wife. Once a man was able to gain status by showing his ability to support a housebound woman of leisure, shoes began to be designed to incapacitate women.

Stilted shoes, which came into vogue during the 1590s, slowed a woman down and simultaneously raised her in the eyes of the world - which of course meant raising her husband as he owned and supported her. The Syrians produced a stilted shoe called a kubkab. Bernard Rudofsky writes in *The Unfashionable Human Body*, 'Their charm lies in their instability, the sight of a woman

walking precariously closely corresponds to a man's image of female helplessness.' The great shoes made their entrance into Europe by way of Venice. They were called chopines, and were worn by noblewomen. Made of wood, sometimes reaching a yard in height, they made motion impossible without the aid of servants.



A Venetian woman wearing chopines (from Pietro Bertelli's *Diversarum Nationum Habitus*)

In England the chopine's antecedents were the clogs or pattens worn by agricultural workers to life the foot out of the mud in the village street. Mrs Haweis in her book *Art of Beauty* of 1878, regretted that Victorian women didn't wear clogs or pattens. In wet weather, she writes, 'there is a general smashedness of head-gear and vagueness of outline to the feet. What can one expect when the 'little mice' are covered up in galoshes? Ah woe to the man who invented that gutta percha penance; why did he not elevate the gentle sex on pattens? Now they must not only descend into the depths, but in addition be swelled to *unnatural* proportions by the hideous galosh, and be *ugly* as well as dirty.' (my italics) By the Nineteenth century small feet for women had become not only desirable but were thought to be natural.

Next morning the prince went to his father, the King, and said to him: 'No one shall be my wife but she whose foot this golden slipper fits.' Then were the two sisters glad, for they had pretty feet. The eldest went with the shoe into her room and wanted to try it on, and her mother stood by. But she could not get her big toe into it, and the shoe was too





Syrian bride
wearing bridal shoes
(*Geographie* 1939)

The small foot syndrome was carried to an appalling extreme in China where footbinding began during the Twelfth century. A steady pressure was applied to the feet of young girls until the bones broke and the heel was forced as closely as possible to the ball of the foot. Women suffered excruciating agony during the process which eventually crippled them and bound them securely to the confines of the home. Footbinding began as an upper class habit in North China and filtered through society until working women were forced to crawl about their work in the fields. Feet in China were considered a more erotic image than breasts and an enormous amount of erotic literature was produced about feet and shoes. A

French physician living in Peking during the Nineteenth century wrote, "The bride's shoe is exhibited before the bridegroom's parents and figures as one of the deciding arguments in determining the price of purchase."

In England, during the Seventeenth century, the severely constricting pointed shoe, providing an illusion of delicate feet, came into fashion for women. From then on women were continuously squeezed out of public life and into shoes which were several sizes too small. This squeeze reached a low point in the buttoned boot of the Nineteenth century. When women started to rebel and to throw off their bonds and loosen their laces Mrs. Haweis exclaimed in horror, "It is one of the most potent objections to the cause of female education, that clever women go in for huge boots and gampian umbrellas, setting at naught many graces essentially womanly and indispensable in women, and the fact, which really has some truth in it, positively damages the cause."

In recent years the high heel has become associated with female footwear but its origins were bi-sexual. In 1470-80 both men and women began to wear high heels. Male heels turned scarlet and grew up to six inches tall at the court of Louis XIV. This fashion came to an abrupt end, at least in France, with the revolution, when any mark of the aristocratic was decidedly suicidal and all men were supposedly on an equal footing.

The symbolic function of high heels is complex. Laura Mulvey provides a brilliant, lucid explanation of high heel fetishism in her article on the painter Allen Jones (*Spare Rib* issue No. 8). She points out that Jones' pictures are projections of male castration fears; "A whip can be simultaneously a



Bound feet of a Chinese woman (*Musee de l'Homme, Paris*)

substitute phallus and an instrument of punishment. Similarly, the high heel, a classical fetishistic image, is both 'a means of discomfort and constriction.' In the language of fetishism and castration fears, "women without a phallus have to undergo punishment by fetish objects ranging from tight shoes and corsetry, through rubber goods to leather and torture."

Bernard Rudofsky tells us the "basis on which foot or shoe fetishism tends to arise, is a fascination with the idea of restraint whether endured, inflicted or merely witnessed or imagined . . . because the restraint of the feet produces a more marked effect than the restraint of the hands." Perhaps this reasoning is partly responsible for the mystique of the seductive walk. Moreover, Rudofsky feels that, "the compulsion to obstruct a woman's walk is far more widespread than one might think."

In Biblical times a Hebrew woman's movements were checked by 'stepping chains'. Her ankles were joined by a short chain effectively hobbling her. As with the dwarfed feet of the Chinese women, their tripping steps became an eroticised image.

Shoe symbolism is never cut and dried; it remains ephemeral and contradictory.

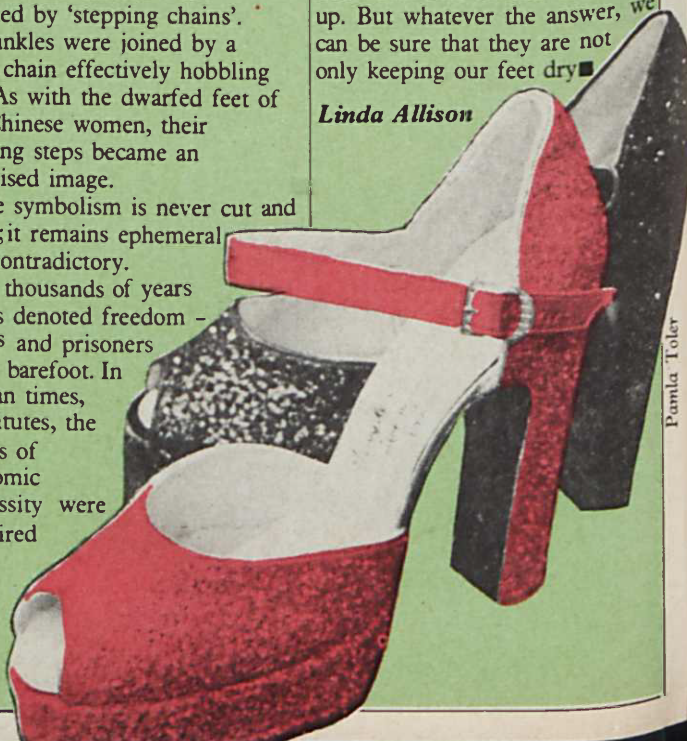
For thousands of years shoes denoted freedom - slaves and prisoners went barefoot. In roman times, prostitutes, the slaves of economic necessity were required

by law to wear open sandals while shoes were reserved for 'chaste' women. For hundreds of years the sight of a woman's bare feet was considered sexually provocative. Even today remnants of this taboo survive - do you remember Ava Gardner in *The Barefoot Contessa*? or even Jane Fonda in *Barefoot in the Park*?

However, where shoes once meant freedom today they imply constraint. We 'kick off our shoes' to indicate freedom and relaxation. For hippies bare feet were a natural part of their philosophy. And now, for all of us, bare feet mean love and peace while Jackboots and bover boots symbolize aggression and regimentation.

But what about wedgies? Are we conspiring in our own downfall? Or is the lack of choice offered to us another manifestation of the male conspiracy? Or, are we tired of being Little Women tripping along on dainty feet? Perhaps platforms are just another indication that women are on the up. But whatever the answer, can be sure that they are not only keeping our feet dry.

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