

Skeletons in the Closet

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Of all the familiar items used to fix things, the wire hanger is among the most invaluable and, in the literal sense, versatile. The primary meaning of fixing is that of binding, arresting, fastening, giving stability or permanence to, or securing from change or decay. This is almost the opposite in tendency from what fixing has come to mean. From the late seventeenth century, fixing started to become unfixed from its primary meaning and started to mean to arrange, adjust or prepare, sometimes in the sense of making something favourable to one's purposes through cheating or covert agreements. From the late nineteenth century, fixing began more and more to mean mending, repairing or restoring, often with the sense of an improvised or temporary action – what came to be called, not always approvingly, a 'quick fix', which we would not assume would result in anything that could be called a 'fixture' or 'fixation'. In language, some of the most mobile and mutating elements are those that are called 'prefixes' and 'suffixes', which, far from fixing the meaning of a word, bend it out of shape. Fixing has become tropological, having to do with reworkings, translations, twists and turns, 'hacks' and adaptations. Wire hangers deserve the epithet applied by Homer to Odysseus in the opening words of the *Odyssey*, *polytropos*, full of winding ways. The value of wire hanger reuse has even been recognised by the Customs Committee of the European Union, which determined in 2011 that any packing material will normally be regarded as coextensive with the goods being transported, except in a case where the material used is clearly suitable for repetitive or alternative use, meaning that wire hangers may be subject to separate declaration and duty ('Garment Hanger Classification' 2011).

So familiar and indispensable have clothes-hangers come to be that it is a surprise to find that clothes were not routinely hung up from anything other than simple hooks very much before the eighteenth century. Daniel Rozensztroch, who has assembled a large collection of clothes hangers, claims that the first recorded hanger dates from the sixteenth century and was probably intended for a military uniform; another example from the following century appears to have been intended for priestly robes (Rozensztroch 2002, 18). But hangers do not seem to have become widespread until the later nineteenth century. Perhaps the need to keep clothes hung up to prevent creasing did not arise when it was not usual outside the aristocracy for anybody without access to servants to own a large number, or wardrobe in the metonymic sense, of clothes. When the word wardrobe was transferred from a specific room to an item of furniture, it seemed often to have referred to a chest or cupboard, in which clothes were folded rather than hung: one seventeenth-century preacher compared the Church to 'the Spiritual Wardrobe, where all Heavenly Robes are laid up' (Alsop 1679, 24-5). The word wardrobe was used interchangeably with 'a press' well into the nineteenth century (for example in the reference to 'a lumbering old wardrobe – or

press as it was called' in Mary Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* of 1864 (Braddon 1998, 112). The first reference to a clothes hanger recorded in print by the Oxford English Dictionary is in Mrs Beeton's *The Young Englishwoman* in 1873, recommending that hangers 'will be found very advantageous for hanging up heavy articles of dress, as winter cloaks, etc.' Even this might very well have referred to the fabric loop sewn into the garment. As late as 1898, the phrase *clothes hanger* was still being used to refer to a line for drying clothes ('A New Clothes Hanger' 1898). Although it seems as though wire hangers may have been commonly available by the 1890s, the earliest use in printed English of the word hanger to refer to the item familiar to us today seems to be as late as 1908: the *Isle of Wight Times and Hampshire Gazette* instructed its readers: 'An important point in lengthening the life of one's clothes is a sufficiency of coat and skirt hangers. Each garment should have a hanger to itself, a fact too often overlooked by those who are careful of their wardrobes, but these useful articles are cheap, and it is false economy to try to do without them' ('The Care of Clothes' 1908).

There is an origin myth for the wire hanger as there is for many simple contrivances: the story is frequently told of one Albert J. Parkhouse, who was employed by the Timberlake Wire and Novelty Company in Jackson, Michigan, who in 1903 responded to a shortage of coat hangers by bending a piece of wire into the required shape (Bellis 2017). In fact versions of hangers using wire were regularly described in the late nineteenth century, especially in the US; one writer suggests that wire hangers became feasible because of technological advances in wire-making that were given impetus by the development of barbed wire to aid in the settlement of the Great Plains (DiBacco 1990). A suit hanger was patented in 1882, which was 'made to conform in shape to the chest and shoulder portion of the body. It is made of sheet metal, with a neck projecting up from it, having at its top a hook, by which the whole is suspended' ('Suit Hanger' 1882). *Scientific American* illustrated a 'wardrobe attachment and garment hanger' in 1886, which looked very like a modern wire hanger, promising that '[t]he wardrobe is so arranged that its available storage capacity is doubled, and any garment hung in it can be readily reached without removing any other garment hung within it'. The painstaking description of how it worked in relation to a rod or rail on the inside of a wardrobe suggests that the arrangement was not familiar ('Wardrobe Attachment and Garment Hanger' 1886).

The adaptability of the wire hanger comes from the fact that it combines rigidity with malleability. In fact, though, the seemingly limitless repurposings of the wire hanger can be reduced to two essential functions: the probe and the support. Straightened-out wire hangers form useful extensions, for poking out lost objects from inaccessible places, clearing blocked drains, rethreading pyjama cords, 'fishing' electrical wires behind walls and through floorboard spaces, dowsing for underground water, and, time was, breaking into locked cars. The use of the wire hanger as a radio or TV aerial may be regarded as an electronic variation on this probe function (it was sometimes factitiously suggested that the width of the hanger matched the wavelength of the signal being sought). The second principal use of the adapted wire hanger is to provide a scaffold or framework for many different uses, such as wreaths, disguised supports

for tall flowers and topiary displays, supports for books or reading devices, giant bubble wands, or, as reported to the *International Journal of Urology*, a hands-free device for holding the endoscope during endourological procedures (Ono and Suzuki 2003). In 1995, W. Angus Wallace, a surgeon on board a flight from Hong Kong to London, performed an emergency chest drain operation on a passenger suffering from a pneumothorax in which he made use of a wire hanger along with a water bottle, sellotape and (for disinfection) a miniature of 5-star brandy (Wallace 1995, 374).

Like many other magically metamorphic objects, the wire hanger has an intimate and interchangeable relationship with the body. The peculiar effectiveness and suggestiveness of the wire hanger surely has to do with the fact that it appears to mimic the structure of the two clavicles or collar bones, which join the human sternum and the shoulder blades. The two clavicles in birds are joined together into one bone, the *furculum*, popularly known since around 1860 as the wishbone, a name which seems to have displaced the earlier term *merrythought*. This may have been in reference to the traditional game, mimicked in the pulling of Christmas crackers, where two people pull at a wishbone until it breaks, with the one left holding the longer piece being thought to be married before the other – married, or, failing that, merry, since the stiffness of the bone also allowed for sexual innuendo, between couples who might ‘help each other to a merrythought’ at dinner. John Aubrey wrote in his *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme* in 1686 that ‘’tis called the merrythought, because when the fowle is opened, dissected, or carv’d, it resembles the pudenda of a woman’ (Aubrey 1881, 92). Comparing visits to a moneylender and a brothel, the fool in Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* suggests a play of stiffness and slump with the word merry: ‘When men come to borrow of your masters, they approach sadly and go away merry, but they enter my mistress’s house merrily and go away sad’ (II.2 99-101; Shakespeare 2008, 213).

Well before metal was thought of as a way of hanging clothes, it was used to provide support and uplift for them while they were being worn, for example in head-dresses and in the supportasse, a framework of wire used to stiffen the high ruffs worn in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The fact that wire took over many of the rigidifying functions performed by animal bones in many cultures may have assisted these anatomical associations. Wire was also a medium for bodily enhancement through the suggestion of engorgement. In July 1786, Abigail Adams, the wife of US Founding Father John Adams, sent what she described as a ‘print of the bosom friends’ to her niece Elizabeth, remarking that it ‘does not greatly exceed some of the most fashionable dames’ and enquiring ‘Pray, does the fashion of merry thoughts, bustles and protuberances prevail with you? I really think the English more ridiculous than the French in this respect’ (Adams 1848, 294). John Wolcot, writing as ‘Peter Pindar’ in his mock-heroic ‘Lousiad’, writes of a simple and unaffected lady that

Pleased from whalebone prisons to escape
She trusts to simple nature for a shape.

Her breast of native plumpness ne'er aspires
To swelling *merry thoughts* of gauze and wires (Wolcott, 1816, l.171)

Before the wire hanger appeared, the steel wire of which it would typically be made was already being used to undergird the fashionably wide skirts of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, in the form of the 'cage crinoline' patented in 1856. This pre-electronic wiring up of the body survives in the art known still to mothers and infant school teachers of twisting wire hangers together to make the framework for fairy wings.

The most wincingly intimate corporeal associations of the wire hanger come from its use to induce illegal abortions, especially in the USA. In 1969, 300,000 protesters marched through Washington DC wearing wire hangers round their necks, carrying signs that read 'Never Again' (Marty 2015). Rebecca Rosen described the wire hanger as 'a tool of last resort, a hack of a household object, conjured out of desperation when nothing else would suffice' (Rosen 2012). There is indeed a barbed cruelty in the beaky sharpness of the wire hanger, and even perhaps the suggestion of strangury in the slipknot coilings that form its throat. A case of suicide by a 61-year old man who had created a double ligature from six wire coat hangers was reported in 2014 (Zorro 2014). Accidents involving coat hangers are common: in 2011, paediatricians published a case report of a 3-year old girl who had fallen on a coat hanger, the hook of which had entered her nostril and lodged in her skull below her left eye (Reinstadler et. al. 2012). An earlier case in 2005 involved a 60-year old Preston woman who had attempted to hit her husband with a coat-hanger during an argument but missed, managing in the process to drive the hook of the hanger into her own nose (Kaushik et. al., 2005, 477). The disfigured protagonist hero of Alan Robert's graphic horror novel *Wire Hangers* (2010) has flesh from which the hooks of wire hangers protrude as a result of a childhood accident.

The violence of the coat-hanger comes to the fore in the most famous scene of *Mommie Dearest*, the 1981 film made of the memoir of the same name first published in 1978 by Joan Crawford's adopted daughter Christina. In this scene, based closely on the account given in the memoir (Crawford 1979, 59), Faye Dunaway as Joan Crawford, face blankly and metallically gleaming with cold cream, is driven into a rage when she discovers a dress hanging on a wire hanger in her daughter's wardrobe. She pulls the garments off the terrified girl's wardrobe rails and eventually begins savagely beating her with a hanger, repeating 'No Wire Hangers!' John Epperson, Joan Crawford impersonator, suggests in a 2006 documentary about the film that Joan Crawford's mother had worked in a dry cleaners at a low point in the family's fortunes, meaning that wire hangers remained for her a skeleton in the closet – a potent reminder and threat of poverty (Bouzereau 2006, 7.56-8.10). Christina Crawford's memoir confirms that, when the family were deserted by their father, her mother did have to take a job in a laundry in Kansas City, with the family living in a single room behind it (Crawford 1979, 69). During her tirade, the hanger comes to stand more generally for the terrifying humiliation of ugliness and mortality:

No... wire... hangers. What's wire hangers doing in this closet when I told you: no wire hangers EVER? I work and work 'till I'm half-dead, and I hear people saying, 'She's getting old'. And what do I get? A daughter who cares as much about the beautiful dresses I give her as she cares about me. What's wire hangers doing in this closet? Answer me. I buy you beautiful dresses, and you treat them like they were some dishrag. You do. Three hundred dollar dress on a wire hanger. We'll see how many you've got if they're hidden somewhere. We'll see... we'll see. Get out of that bed. All of this is coming out. Out. Out. Out. Out. Out. Out. You've got any more? We're going to see how many wire hangers you've got in your closet. Wire hangers, why? Why? Christina, get out of that bed. Get out of that bed. You live in the most beautiful house in Brentwood and you don't care if your clothes are stretched out from wire hangers. And your room looks like some two-dollar-a-week furnished room in some two-bit back street town in Oklahoma.

The popularity of the film, and this scene in particular, especially among gay audiences, makes for an interesting transmogrification of melodramatic menace into camp. The wire hanger here becomes an image of the horror of the untransformed: No Wire Hangers comes to mean, never be content with nature, but refashion yourself at all costs.

A wire hanger exists between two and three dimensions, looking like an anatomy or blueprint of a body, even as it has the capacity to give corporeal dimension and plumpness to the tangled ghost of shirt or skirt. Yet there is always something of the scarecrow or effigy about it, the suggestion of W.B. Yeats's 'tattered coat upon a stick' lurking in its 'mortal dress' (Yeats 1956, 191). Coat-hangers are spectral as well as bodily: another Yeats poem, 'The Apparitions', has the sinister refrain '*Fifteen apparitions have I seen/The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger*' (Yeats 1956, 332).

Wire hangers seem quasi-animate also in their demonic aptness to tangle, when stored in carrier bags in the airing-cupboard for example, like an indignant, clinging nest of maliciously-clawed metallic birds. So tractable one by one when it comes to being persuaded to take some other form, hangers hang together collectively with savage tenacity. They even, as the comedian Dave Allen used to suggest (and unlike teaspoons, the tendency of which is to abscond) seem to breed polyphiloprogenitively when left on their own.

The skeletal function of the wire hanger is retained through many of its transformations, in which it often ends up acting as some kind of support or framework. But in this, the wire hanger inverts the usual relations of hard and soft through which the body tends to be thought. In humans, the hard skeleton provides an invisible, continuous support for the visible and mutable flesh, as in the words given to the 'man of bone' (Housman 1995, 76) in A.E. Housman's 'The Immortal Part':

'Empty vessel, garment cast,
We that wore you long shall last.

– Another night, another day.’
 So my bones within me say. (Housman 1995, 77)

The skeleton is deathly, because it is what endures beyond death, hence the mortuary apprehension of ‘the skull beneath the skin’ (Eliot 1969, 11). The flesh appears to embody the changeability of time, and thus, traditionally, the briefness and fragility of mortal existence. Yet, being mutable, if not ephemeral, a wire hanger seems to offer the image of a skeleton that has all the mutability of flesh. The wire hanger offers an overcoming of the dichotomy in which the matter is spatial, while spirit is temporal, for it is a temporised matter, a soft-hard matter capable both of durability and ductility.

And yet there is a limit to the polymorphous perversity of the wire hanger. For, though it is possible to deform a wire hanger in countless ways, it is almost impossible to reform it exactly, restoring the immaculate condition in which it is first encountered. Once bent, the base of the triangle can never again attain its perfect straightness, nor can the two shoulders ever reacquire their sloping symmetry, or the hook ever quite recapture its primal swan’s-neck curl. Polytropic, wire hangers are also entropic. Open to all the twists and turns of time, they are, like us, their familiars, also subject to the law of irreversibility, able to become anything but themselves again.

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