

**How did stays construct the idea of femininity in the 18th century?**

Throughout the 18th century, stays played a pivotal role in shaping femininity by embodying various aspects of a woman's identity, including her virtue, "sexuality, gender, class, beauty and vanity" Valerie Steele. (2001, pg. 21). The long 18th century witnessed significant shifts in fashion, societal norms, and cultural perceptions. This essay will explore the period between 1680-1810 as it "was around 1680 that stays became separate garments; prior to that, they were treated as one with the outer bodice" Sorge-English, L. (2011, p. 5) and by 1810, the "form of stays changed completely with the design and cut becoming more in keeping with a woman's natural curves" Sorge-English, L. (2011, p. 6)

Stays were worn by men and women in their youth but were primarily associated with the female wardrobe. Women of all classes wore them, and there was a firm "connection between stays and self-image for women from all walks of life" Sorge-English, L. (2011, p. 195). Furthermore, stays functioned as the concealed structure that mediated the female body into a "culturally normative artefact." Sorge-English, L. (2011, p. 195). They established the visual aesthetic of 18th-century female clothing, moulding the body into socially acceptable forms. Therefore, stays were not merely garments but agents of social control, shaping the physical appearance and societal perception of femininity. This essay delves into the multifaceted role of stays during the long 18th century, exploring how they symbolised female virtue and morality and eroticism and seduction, reflecting the complex interplay between societal expectations and individual agency in defining femininity.

As depicted in Figure 1, stays were rigid garments meticulously crafted to shape and support the torso, creating a tight body silhouette that became synonymous with notions of tight morals. ( Steele, 2001) highlights the understanding that stays not only physically controls the body but

also extends their influence to regulate one's physical passions. There was a pervasive belief that the tight-laced structure of stays had a disciplinary effect on a woman's demeanour and conduct, aligning her with societal expectations of virtue.

Artists and scholars of the time recognised the profound symbolism inherent in stays, utilising them as visual markers of a woman's honour and virtue. (Steele, 2001) Notes that various artists employed stays to represent a woman's honour, with the tight-laced silhouette serving as a visual shorthand for adherence to societal norms. For instance, Figure 2 depicts William Hogarth's portrayal of a woman devoid of her stays, a deliberate choice that underscores her perceived dishonour. Hogarth, echoing the sentiments of broader society, subscribed to the belief that one could discern the moral character of individuals through their attire. As (Baumgarten, 2002) asserts, there existed a conviction in understanding "the very minds of the people by their dress," reinforcing the notion that clothing, including the presence or absence of stays, reflected one's inner virtues or vices.

Thus, stays transcended their function as mere garments, assuming a profound cultural significance as symbols of female honour and morality. Through their rigid structure and constricting embrace, stays not only moulded the physical form but also exerted a disciplinary influence on women's behaviour, symbolising their adherence to societal norms. The portrayal of stays in art and literature served as a visual discourse on the virtues and vices inherent in feminine identity, perpetuating ideals of modesty, chastity, and moral rectitude.

Paradoxically, while stays were instrumental in upholding ideals of female virtue, they also served as instruments of eroticism and sensuality. Steele (2001) observes that the shaping effect of stays, particularly in pushing the breasts upward and together, imbued women with a sexual allure. This erotic disposition is evident in Figures 3 and 4, where the process of lacing is

portrayed as a ritualistic and intimate act. Steele (2001) further emphasises this, noting the exposure of underwear and the symbolism of lacing as a surrogate for intercourse. The combination of these elements, along with the accentuation of the bosom, contributes to the erotic charge associated with stays. Thus, while stays constrained the body, they also became conduits for the expression of female sexuality and desire.

However, women from the upper and middling classes had some agency in the design of their stays. They could negotiate directly with staymakers. The predominantly male staymakers influenced female fashion considerably, significantly shaping female identity (Sorge-English, 2011). Stays of this period were described as 'masculine in form,' being linear and angular rather than curvaceous and rounded (Sorge-English, 2011). These 'masculinised' stays reflected the desires of male staymakers rather than women's. However, as women gained more control and became staymakers, the fashion for stays shifted to a curved and soft silhouette, reflecting women's preferences. This transition marked a feminisation of stays, aligning them more closely with women's desires and shaping (Sorge-English, 2011)

The tension between virtue and seduction encapsulates the broader dilemma faced by women in the long 18th century. Hogarth's "The Line of Beauty " in Figure 5 epitomises this struggle, and the line is in constant threat of being off balance, reflecting how femininity is precariously poised between propriety and seduction. The corset, a quintessential symbol of femininity, becomes a site of contention as women navigate the conflicting expectations. The constant threat of losing balance reflects the precarious nature of female identity, caught between the ideals of purity and the realities of desire. In essence, the corset serves as a metaphor for the complexities of womanhood, requiring women to maintain a delicate equilibrium between virtue and allure.

Hogarth meticulously evaluated the aesthetic of various objects, including the corset, based on the direction, shape, and curve of specific lines (Sorge-English, 2011). He coined the "serpentine line" as the most aesthetically pleasing, evident in Figure 5, where a particular stay, the central one, is praised for its precise waving lines (Sorge-English, 2011). It is perfectly balanced. Hogarth believed women's bodies could be reshaped through stays, with specific shapes deemed more attractive (Sorge-English, 2011). The ideal shape of the body, then becomes a choice that is reflective of the woman herself. Women are in constant jeopardy of veering from the Serpentine line,

Annie Richardson further explores Hogarth's perspective, equating the serpentine line with ideal body curves (Sorge-English, 2011). Implying that Hogarth believed that the aesthetics of the female form could be enhanced through the strategic use of stays, and that certain shapes were best, reinforcing societal standards of beauty and femininity (Sorge-English, 2011).

This implication underscores its significance beyond mere functionality. The corset becomes a tool not only for shaping the body but also for shaping perceptions of femininity. Women were tasked with embodying the idealised curves represented by the serpentine line, navigating the fine line between modesty and allure (Sorge-English, 2011). It highlights the complex interplay between societal expectations, bodily autonomy, and individual expression in defining feminine identity during the 18th century.

In conclusion, stays in this period encapsulate the paradoxical nature of femininity, wherein women were simultaneously expected to embody virtue and seduction. Through their rigid structure and symbolic significance, stays became powerful instruments for shaping the era's physical and cultural landscape. However, their dual role as symbols of morality and eroticism underscored the intricate negotiations women undertook in defining their identity. The depiction of stays in art and literature is a testament to the complex interplay between societal

expectations and individual agency. Ultimately, the legacy of stays in the long 18th century is a poignant reminder of the enduring struggle to reconcile conflicting notions of femininity in history and society.

## Images



**Figure 1.** Pair of stays. C.1780s, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 56/2155.  
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O355223/stays/>





**Figure 2.** Hogarth, W. (1732–1734) *A Rake's Progress- III- The Orgy* [Oil on canvas]. Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A\\_Rake%27s\\_Progress#/media/File:William\\_Hogarth\\_-\\_A\\_Rake's\\_Progress\\_-\\_Tavern\\_Scene.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Rake%27s_Progress#/media/File:William_Hogarth_-_A_Rake's_Progress_-_Tavern_Scene.jpg)





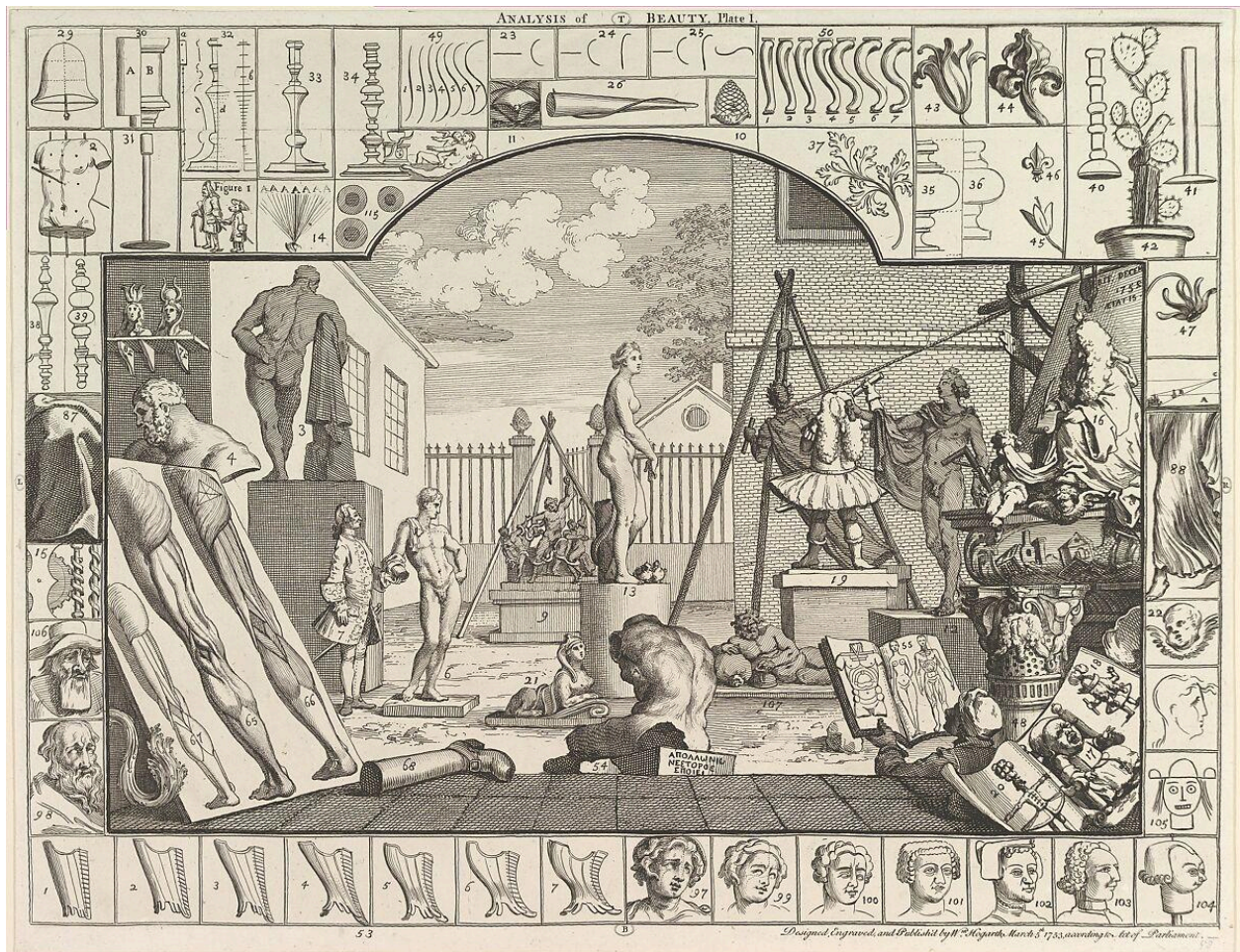
**Figure 3.** Deniel, A. F, (1760-1815) *L'Essai du Corset* [Photogravure engraving]. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
<https://www.vandaimages.com/preview.asp?image=2006AL4373&itemw=4&itemf=0001&itemstep=1&itemx=1>





**Figure 4.** Baudouin, P. A. (1771) *La Toilette* [ Engraving] The Met Museum, New York.  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/835342>





**Figure 5.** Hogarth, W. (1753) *The Analysis of Beauty, Plate 1* [Etching and engraving; third state of three] The Met Museum. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/365314>

## **Bibliography**

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