

INTRODUCTION:

Conjoining Histories

In 1784 Hannah Boardman committed a crime, was arrested and taken into custody while she awaited her trial at the Old Bailey, unable to afford her bail. Upon finding her crying and desolate in the privy of the prison, Elizabeth Leonell, a fellow prisoner, offered to have someone bail her out if Boardman would put up a sum of money. Boardman had only a portion of it on her person, and so Leonell asked her for her stays, obviously to sell. Boardman was torn between wanting her freedom, and wanting not to part with her stays. As she put it, 'How can I go without my stays'? She did decide to part with them eventually, but not trusting that Leonell would give her the money, had her own child sell them for her, and bring her the '... four shillings and sixpence' she received for them. A short time later, Leonell robbed Boardman of the money. She was found guilty, and sentenced to death. Even though Boardman had a child and very much wanted to be released, she thought long and hard about parting with her stays, which were the only thing of value she had with her. They were such an important part of her identity and self-image that she could not imagine her daily life without them.¹

This is just one of many accounts from various primary sources which show the importance of stays to the eighteenth-century woman, and to her sense of self and her respectability. What were stays, what exactly was their significance, and why were they so important? This book goes some way toward answering these questions as it probes the sculpting of the body beautiful through the designing, making, wearing, meaning and effects of stays in eighteenth-century England in general, and London in particular. There is a long history of body shaping through to today when evidence abounds that many of us are not happy with our body shapes. Nutrition, exercise and plastic surgery have become increasingly important in our attempts to change our bodies. Recent trends in body altering are a site of hotly contested debate in modern culture. The desire and efforts expended to transform the natural shape of the female body is anything but a modern phenomenon, with many in the eighteenth century attempting to alter their bodies through the wearing of stays. Placing societal concerns of the present within the experience of the past can provide a valuable context through which to address current bodily discontent.

Worn by females of all classes throughout the life cycle, stays were solidly boned garments which encased the torso in something very much like armour through much of the century, altering the natural body shape in the process. Stays compressed the breasts and waist, flattened the rib cage and shoulder blades, and accommodated the hips only through slashing the side pieces of the stays from hips to waist. Created from as many as five layers of linen and/or wool, and heavily boned with baleen or wood, or stiffened with packthread, and lacing up the back and/or front, stays encompassed the torso and moulded the body into an unnatural cone-like shape which was sculptural in form. The silhouette of the outer layers of clothing was determined, in turn, by the shape of the stays, with the bodice of the gown or jacket fitting snugly on top of them and duplicating the shape lying beneath. As an article of clothing, then, stays played a vital role in establishing the visual aesthetic of eighteenth-century female clothing and the body. Their greater importance, however, lies within a much wider context, which researchers have not yet explored.

This book carries out an in-depth study of stays and their transformation of the female body, an area of research crucial to our understanding of the history of the body. It argues that, through the design and intricate construction of this most intimate garment, staymakers sculpted the female body, changing it from its natural form to one of idealized beauty as established by societal norms. Yet while stays moulded the body into a beautiful shape, at least as perceived by eighteenth-century wearers and onlookers, they compressed and altered the torso in order to do so. The sculpting of the body began shortly after birth: stays were worn by both genders until male children reached the age of between three and four, and by females through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age and even through pregnancy. The wearing of stays was not limited to the middling and upper classes, however, with those from the lower sorts also having the desire for, and access to, stays of varying qualities and materials.² The effects of stays on the body throughout the life cycle have not been explored before, and with current societal interest in body alteration beginning at a very young age, it is both fitting and timely to set this interest within a historical context.

Scholars have also not explored gender implications regarding staymakers and their art. For at least the first eight decades of the eighteenth century it was male staymakers who created stays for women, often meeting with their clients in their homes, taking their measurements, and later returning to fit them in their stays. Their bespoke work is key to our understanding of the unique tradesman/client relationship, but most aspects of this relationship remain elusive.³ Creating stays made-to-measure led to the staymaker becoming familiar with women's bodies at a time when society frowned upon casual physical contact between the sexes. And yet for most of the century females appear to have welcomed the attentions of male staymakers. What exactly was the relationship between these

tradesmen and their clients, two groups who differed not only in gender, but who were also diverse culturally and socio-economically? Understanding this relationship can help to illuminate historical debates on social structure and relations, while going some way toward yielding a portrait of national trends in broader areas of production and consumer life in eighteenth-century Britain.

Male staymakers did not have a monopoly on the trade, though. Throughout the century females had often been employed by male staymakers to painstakingly stitch the narrow channels into which the bones were inserted. The research for this book reveals that during the last two decades of the century females began to design and create stays themselves. This reversal of staymaking gender-roles has not been articulated until now, nor has the effect this had on stays' design and body sculpting. It is important because it was precisely then that major changes in stays' design took place, changes which made accommodation for the natural curves of the female body for the first time. And while some changes were almost certainly brought about for reasons of comfort, this book suggests that other changes were adopted with seduction and eroticism in mind. While notions of sexuality and clothing are a topic of rigorous debate and are openly discussed in modern culture, finding them to have had origins in the eighteenth century merits further exploration.

The staymaker's gender notwithstanding, his or her role in the creation of ready-made stays is also an important part of the process of body-altering since provisioning of stays to many of the middling and lower sorts was precisely through ready-made markets. Identification of ready-made bodices and stomachers early in the eighteenth century paves the way for deeper analysis of the manufacturing process.⁴ Making stays and bodices was a time-consuming and complex process, with the term 'ready-made' implying larger quantities of stays being produced than would be possible on a bespoke basis. However, how and where ready-made bodices, stomachers and stays were produced has not been addressed before now. The role of the staymaker and second-hand stays has not yet been discussed in depth, either.⁵ Stays were procured in many ways – bespoke, ready-made, stolen and second-hand. While literature on consumption of goods in general in the eighteenth century and the culture within which they were consumed is multifarious, discussion of consumption of stays is almost anecdotal.⁶ If we are to understand all facets of the staymaker within the context of both his work and his personal life, including his relations with his clients/customers, his work must be understood in its entirety.

It is not possible to understand the intimate relationship between stays and the body without understanding the material nature and physicality of stays.⁷ Stays' architecture changed throughout the century, directly affecting the ways in which the body was encased and compressed. This, in turn, caused changes in bodily form, in idealized body shape, and in health. While certain architectural

developments in stays occurred when males were the predominant designers of stays, others were the result of females becoming primary staymakers during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. The book conceptualizes this phenomenon as the 'masculinization' and 'feminization' of stays, and explores what this meant for consumers and their bodies. Little is known about how women felt and viewed themselves when wearing stays, and in fact, we understand little about the intimacy of women's lives in general in the eighteenth century.⁸ This book seeks to expose several aspects of that relationship.

Equally important to the understanding of body culture is the architecture of stays worn through the life cycle, and the ways in which stays' design and construction affected bodily shape and health at various times in one's life. To this end, maternity stays which laced up the sides and centre back are analysed, along with stays worn by infants, boys, female children, teenagers and the elderly, and stays designed to prevent and/or correct deformities. Stays' construction also had an impact on bodily health. Those made of packthread or leather affected the body differently than did stays composed of five layers of fabric, paper and paste, and fully boned with baleen, for example. Stays created from sumptuous silks or common linen and wool, stays beautifully stitched or crudely stitched together and boned with different grades of boning also affected the shape and health of the body. Body transformation has not been explained nor understood through material culture analyses before, but just as underwear affects the shape and health of the body now, so, too, did underpinnings of the eighteenth century. Yet one author has suggested that, 'whether they wore them does not much matter from the viewpoint of their health because the corset was essentially innocuous.'⁹ Another writer, though, analysed the views of several eighteenth-century physicians to arrive at his conclusion that for the most part, 'the medical profession, just as was society, was not adverse to the corset.'¹⁰ Even the most recent monograph on corsets making mention of eighteenth-century stays pays little attention to stays and health.¹¹ It is important to understand the effects of stays on the body through the life cycle since, unlike modern foundation garments, stays from the eighteenth century often transformed the body permanently, particularly when begun in infancy.

Additionally, little is actually known about how and by whom stays were created. Scholarship relating to the tailoring trade in Britain has focused mainly on men's clothing, concentrating on the business aspects of the trade.¹² Almost nothing has been said about staymaking, including the artistic and craft endeavours of the trade,¹³ or its social facets.¹⁴ In order to understand the history of the body in a new way, it will be helpful to clearly identify forces-at-play affecting the eighteenth-century female body. The staymaker was one of the most important influences in a woman's life, but in order to understand why this was so, we need to develop a sense of the staymaker's life, both working and personal. This

study situates him in his own environment, detailing how and where his work was carried out, his occupational status, and the physical demands of his/her work, for example. Staymaking was such an important branch of tailoring that it deserves to be considered alongside tailoring as a trade in its own right. As Beverly Lemire suggested in 1997, 'many other aspects of these ubiquitous artisans [tailors] remain to be addressed'.¹⁵ This book responds to that challenge.

Eighteenth-century bodily concerns pertain not only to transformation and health of the body, but also to aesthetics and representation of the body as experienced by both consumers and producers. The way in which body form was idealized is not addressed specifically in current literature. Literary scholars have analysed eighteenth-century textual sources such as pamphlets and novels to tease out general meaning within a cultural context,¹⁶ with art historians and fashion theorists approaching the subject overall from an historical perspective.¹⁷ Analyses of ideas pertaining to body aesthetics and the development of taste in the eighteenth century are incomplete at best. The role of the artisan/producer in the formation of taste in general has been discussed,¹⁸ but the specifics regarding the staymaker as creator are left wanting. As Jennifer Jones has remarked, 'much remains to be learned about the ways in which the new category of taste and the elevation of the artist's genius were understood by more humble members of the social hierarchy, such as artisans working in the clothing trades'.¹⁹ Annie Richardson has discussed Hogarth's view of the serpentine line as being akin to ideal body curves,²⁰ but to date no one has discussed the staymaker's sculpting of the body as a means of attaining the eighteenth-century physical ideal, nor of the seductive and erotic qualities of stays as brought about by staymakers, and encouraged in many ways by consumers. The gaps left in the literature overall highlight the need to take a fresh look at stays, their makers, their consumers and their bodies, all of which are taken up through the writing of this book.

Temporality and Location

The periodization of 1680–1810 has been chosen for the following reasons. Firstly, it was around 1680 that stays became separate garments; prior to that they were treated-as-one with the outer bodice.²¹ Their identity as a foundation garment in its own right can be seen to have begun in the closing decades of the seventeenth century. Secondly, in analysing the role of the staymaking tailor in production and supply of stays for women, it seems fitting to begin with the inception of the tailor creating more intimate garments for his clients. The relationship formed between staymaking tailor and client has multi-layered gender implications and it will be possible to identify and analyse these more concisely and fully, including change over time, if one begins from the onset of the formation of this relationship. Furthermore, there is an abundance of probate

inventories from 1680 up to the 1830s upon which to begin to draw for primary source material. Other sources will be used for the remainder of the century, but making a strong beginning with a source about which much has been written regarding its strengths and weaknesses will be helpful.²² The choice of an end date of 1810 is more pragmatic. For one thing, the form of stays changed completely around this time, with the design and cut becoming more in keeping with a woman's natural curves.²³ Historically, as well, it seems fitting to end here just as neoclassicism drew to a close.²⁴

The study will focus on London in particular, a city which had become a thriving metropolis by 1700 with the area 'from Marylebone to Hackney in the north, [and] from Richmond to Lambeth in the south ... [containing] some 300,000 inhabitants.'²⁵ London was also a city where clothing manufacture was the largest industry in the eighteenth century,²⁶ and where, 'in 1752 it was estimated that within London and Westminster alone there were at least 1,000 Master Tailors and Staymakers with at least 15,000 journeymen.'²⁷ Its importance as a centre of clothing production and consumption should not be underestimated, and since what went on there had consequences for the whole country, London serves well as the geographical focus of this study. However, to some extent it will also investigate those working in the regions. This shift outwards will be undertaken as a comparator, for while staymakers in London undoubtedly operated in certain ways as a result of a specificity of circumstances peculiar to working in the metropolis, those working in the regions faced challenges of their own. Analysing both will enable staymakers to be assessed and understood in the broadest possible context. It will also branch out to France in a limited way. There were certainly differences between the clothing-making trades structure in Britain and France, but when it serves the purposes of the book, analogies will be drawn between the two countries.²⁸ However, the research being presented here is concerned in the main with Britain, and with London in particular.

New Concepts and Methodologies

Sculpting the Body Beautiful approaches the writing of history in a new way. It marries the first-hand, physical study and presentation of artefacts – material culture – with more traditional primary textual sources in order to carry out cultural and historical analyses of production, consumption and health-related areas of inquiry. Its methodology seeks to take an overarching view of its subject matter, moving from analyses of the materiality of stays (material culture studies), to their creation (production and distribution), to their wearing, use, meaning and aesthetic appreciation through the life cycle (consumption). In this way, the book aims to go some way towards realizing the challenge Jonathan White set out when he recommended that historians '... examine the full life

cycles of objects, from their production, distribution, consumption and use to their transmission and their arrival in the present.²⁹

The material culture portion of the study was undertaken during visits to fifteen archival collections in both the UK and USA. I studied the artefacts in depth, photographed them in their entirety and in detail, both inside and out, and did scale drawings of each stays' piece. The book presents photographs, scale drawings and analysis of each artefact, and introduces a chronology of eighteenth-century stays' style and form. Included are stays worn by both genders and by all classes throughout the life cycle. Innovative methods of examining artefacts were employed during the research phase, including the use of X-rays and CT Scans. The artefacts in the book are presented in relation to paintings and engravings as a means of understanding not only how the architectural form of stays related to the human body, but also how stays changed the shape of the body over the course of the eighteenth century. Textual sources drawn upon in the deconstruction of the artefacts include analysis of a staymaker's diary utilized here as a source of trades history for the first time. Richard Viney, Staymaker, kept his diary in 1744, and it is replete with minute detail of designing and creating stays, and personal details about his life and that of his wife through pregnancy and childbirth, and of his clients, business acquaintances and neighbours.³⁰ The methodology employed in this book paves the way for understanding bodily health and aesthetics in a fluid and comprehensive way. It leaves no doubt that staymakers were sculptors who cut and shaped fabric, card, paste and baleen as a means of forming the body to the fashionable ideal.³¹

The book draws upon other sources not commonly used in the writing of social history. Old Bailey trial testimonies are called upon to illuminate various areas of the book,³² including women's views of their clothed and unclothed bodies. Women's own writings, particularly diaries and letters of those from the upper classes, say very little about how they felt about their bodies. Personal accounts of those from the lower sorts and the poor are almost non-existent. Londoners from all walks of life appeared at the Old Bailey as victims, witnesses or as the accused, and their testimonies, although a mediated source, are revelatory about their everyday lives.³³ *The Proceedings* of the Old Bailey, along with other sources, have also helped to identify and locate staymakers in London, a group of tradesmen who, until now, have been illusory. The book places them in their particular locales on the streets of London, and paints a picture of staymakers' shops and workspaces ranging from the large staymaking establishment turning out vast quantities of stays to the lone, master staymaker operating a shop in one room of his home which he shared with other members of his family and apprentices. This source is also used to reveal much about the social and personal lives of staymakers, including their health. Other unusual sources have

been uncovered and called upon, as well, including account books and other Chancery Court documents from 'The Bone Shop', a baleen business owned and run by the Lord Mayor of London and a haberdasher. Sources such as these, used in combination with trade cards and billheads, probate inventories, insurance records, letters and other personal documents, Viney's diary, and material culture and visual analyses, provide the fodder for a book which is multidisciplinary on the one hand, and which leads, on the other hand, to a new way of looking at the history of the female body.

Taking Bodies in Hand: The Chapters

The book begins with the production of stays. Chapter 1 identifies the part staymaking actually played in the tailoring trade, when, where and under what conditions it became a separate trade, the division of labour within the staymaking trade, skilled versus unskilled aspects of the trade, seasonality of the work, and the incidence of female staymakers, or female workers within male-dominated staymaking, including relationships between both genders and change over time. The chapter situates staymakers within the purview of art and production in order to partially complete their image as designers and artisans with distributed production structure, division of labour, a social hierarchy of clientele, and, in many cases, access to considerable finance.

In order to better understand the physical effect stays had on the body, this chapter also carries out a material-cultural analysis of the artefacts. It presents several pairs of stays, tracking their changing design and form chronologically from 1700–1815. It deconstructs the art of stays, and imparts a sense of the expertise and talent required to create one of the most important garments in the eighteenth century. It shows that stays were garments valued highly because of the time and skill it took to create a pair, for the often expensive materials from which they were made, for their aesthetic appeal, because they were highly desired and were necessary as a garment of support. It also investigates their importance as articles of clothing so treasured they were often covered and altered as opposed to being discarded altogether. Analysing the changing architectural elements of stays as laid out in this chapter is a necessary first step in understanding how they transformed the body, and affected bodily health.

Chapter 2 provides a sense of the staymaker him or herself, and answers questions pertaining to his/her life, both working and, to a lesser degree, personal. How prevalent was the staymaking trade in London? What was the difference between bodicemakers and staymakers? Who made stays for the ready-made market? Where did both bespoke and ready-made staymakers carry out their work, and what were their shops like? What was the hierarchical work structure of a staymaker's shop? How difficult was the work, and what can be said of the

working life of a staymaker, including his/her inimitable status, reputation, and place in society? This chapter situates both bespoke and ready-made staymaking within their work environs, viewing them from the perspective of the staymaker him/herself. It discusses the division of labour within the production process, and gender-specific specializations, along with other aspects of this part of the trade. The locations of staymakers' shops are identified here, and plotted out on a 1747 map of London. Imparting a sense of the extensiveness and vitality of the trade, this chapter situates the staymaker firmly at the centre of one of the most important clothing trades in Britain.

Chapter 3 moves to consumption, and examines the wearing of stays throughout the life cycle. It demonstrates that stays were the most important article of clothing to women throughout the life cycle in the eighteenth century. Infants and young children were dressed in stays, including boys, but reasons for this almost certainly belied simply the following of fashion. The same can be said of adolescents, and of women through pregnancy. The chapter investigates factors influencing the wearing of stays during those times in one's life when the body was most vulnerable. It also analyses the material culture of stays designed to be worn at various stages of the life cycle. Artefacts from each category are presented, but this time it is within the context of bodily health. Starting at the conception of life, it presents stays worn during and following pregnancy; by nursing mothers; by infants; young children, including boys; adolescents, including both for fashion and for body correction; and by adults, through the middle years and into old age. Not only are stays featured which clearly belonged to those of the upper classes, but also presented and analysed are those worn by the lower classes and the poor. This chapter presents twelve pairs of stays in total, many of which have never been seen before. Additionally, it shows that while infants, young boys and girls, and to some extent, adolescents, had little control over how they were clothed, the same cannot be said of adult women, pregnant women, nursing mothers and the elderly. Although they all had the wearing of stays in common, the stays they wore almost certainly held different connotations for them at different times in their lives. The meaning attached to a pair of stays, along with the emotional significance stays held for their wearers at various stages of the life cycle, is a major concern of Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 moves the discussion of stays' consumption into the realm of class and gender. Where did the stays come from? How did they reach the members of the public for whom they were made? What factors determined where the stays were distributed, and how was this carried out? How were consumers made aware of what was available, and where it could be found? Who determined what style and kind of stays were worn? What can be said of the gender relations of producers and consumers, and of class structure associated with, and even reflected in, consumption of stays? While it is understood that stays were worn

by all classes, to what degree was this so? This chapter deals sequentially with consumption of stays by the elite, the middle classes, and, finally, by the lower sorts.

The markets for stays' provision for each group were very different, varying from the bespoke stays provided to women on a made-to-measure basis in their homes, to the supply of both bespoke and ready-made stays to middling women through various markets, and to the provision of stays to the lower sorts and the poor through markets such as second-hand, pawn shops, poor relief and theft. The chapter also brings to light two important instruction manuals aimed at charitable institutions, which provide patterns and instructions for making stays for infants and young children in particular. Viney's work transcended all classes, and he made stays both bespoke and ready-made, a phenomenon which is also analysed here. The chapter utilizes a little-known collection of trade cards and billheads, in addition to inventories and account books, in its identification of markets of stays' supply.

Chapter 5 marries together production and consumption to discuss ideas pertinent to aesthetics of body image and representation. It provides answers to questions such as who actually set the tone for fashion in eighteenth-century Britain, what role did staymakers play in this, and were women innocent bystanders or were they active participants? How did the wearing of stays contribute to a woman's identity? And what of her self-image – how was it formed, and what kind of image did she hope to project? What meaning did women ascribe to the term 'beautiful' in the eighteenth century, and how was this related to their clothed bodies? How exactly were stays masculinized and feminized? Who determined the actual shape of stays, and was this shape reflected in the gowns worn over them? What role did the way in which a woman was clothed play in her presentation to the public? It has been revealed that body shape was of grave concern to the public.³⁴ If that was the case, it almost certainly was of private concern to individuals, as well.

This chapter also discusses the seductive and erotic nature of stays. Male staymakers' awareness of the seductive qualities of stays' design is explored, as is the intent of female staymakers late in the century to create stays which enhanced their body curves. It references engravings and paintings in its establishment of how stays were perceived by the public, including consumers, and the degree to which the staymaker was aware of and actively sought to emphasize the seductive and erotic qualities of stays. Chapter 5, then, discusses the gendered design of stays and its implications, ideas pertaining to women's perceptions of body self-image, projection of body representation, and notions of sexuality as connoted by stays, before drawing conclusions to the book as a whole.