Bent out of Shape: The Projection of Male Anxiety onto Busks and Stays in Early Modern Europe

Abstract

An interesting pattern emerges in the Early Modern Era of women taking control of their lives and bodies through the use of material culture, and men being terrified of this fact. Women often lacked agency in a world with ever-changing perceptions of not only femininity, but also of the female form. Clothing was then one of the few ways that these women who lacked power could control their body and their spheres. To those living in the Early Modern Era, clothing held far more meaning than it does in the modern day. The exchange of clothing among women was founded on and fundamental to the connections between them.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was transferred from “masters and mistresses to servants, from aunts to nieces, from sisters and brothers to younger siblings” in a “routine rotation” that was the life of a garment.[[2]](#footnote-2) Men and women alike understood the innate power of clothing in the Early Modern period and its ability to “transnature” the body it was on.[[3]](#footnote-3) Clothing had the power to “mold and shape” women into anything.[[4]](#footnote-4) Because of its transformative nature, for many women clothing was one of the few places where they could exert their control: through purchasing power, shaping their public presentation and—for lower class women—even manufacturing or selling.[[5]](#footnote-5) Busks and stays are one item which was targeted by masculinity in the early modern period because of their connection to both women and sexuality more specifically.

There are numerous accounts of male anxiety surrounding various apparently arbitrary objects, from poking sticks to farthingales to cosmetics to collar ruffs and of course, fundamental to this discussion, busks and stays. Busks and stays are crucial not only to this paper, but to the whole understanding of material culture in the Early Modern Period, because they were, much like their position in dressing, foundational to how people understood and perceived the body. The reason men were so anxious of busks and stays particularly was because of their dual perception as not only objects of female sexuality but also of male desire.[[6]](#footnote-6) The anxiety men projected onto stays and busks was emblematic of the male crisis of masculinity that arose in the changing Early Modern world.[[7]](#footnote-7) For some scholars, anxiety in masculinity is inherent to the patriarchal system and its existence exposes the “fissures and contradictions” necessarily present in a patriarchal society.[[8]](#footnote-8) This anxiety is necessary for the perpetuation of the patriarchal systems into the future; it is built in to defend itself from women potentially gaining power.[[9]](#footnote-9) What is important in this discussion then is not the stays, busks, farthingales, cosmetics, poking sticks or collar ruffs, but rather what the outrage they caused really meant. Perhaps these items were controversial for legitimate reasons, but more likely it was a matter of the need for masculinity to maintain its power over women, and the fear of clothing’s power to “inscribe [itself] upon a person”.[[10]](#footnote-10) As a result then, this essay focuses on stays yes, but they are not the focal point; stays and the busks within them are simply one item which masculinity must target to perpetuate itself. Many men in the Early Modern period were anxious that women could control their public presentation and they projected this anger onto the clothing women wore, including busks and stays because of their innate power. This anxiety took shape in four major ways: concerns of female sexual promiscuity, female corruptibility, status concealment, and confused gender roles.

Often the terms stays and corsets are used interchangeably in the historiography of the 16th to 18th centuries; however, for the purpose of this essay, I will solely be using stays because, presently, corset is more often used to describe the popular body-shaping garment of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Stays—also occasionally referred to as a pair (or “peire”) of bodies—first came into use in the mid to late 16th century among nobility, first in Spain and then spread across Europe.[[11]](#footnote-11) They are a stiff undergarment meant to give structure to not only the body but the heavy petticoats, or farthingales, that royalty and women of the court often wore.[[12]](#footnote-12) Over a few decades, stays percolated down to the lower levels of society, eventually becoming a necessity for all women to wear no matter their class.[[13]](#footnote-13) Busks are a rod of whale bone, wood or steel inserted into the front of a pair of bodies or stays.[[14]](#footnote-14) Much like the stays they were enclosed within, busks began to appear in wardrobes in the 1580s; first they became a mainstay of dress among Spanish royalty and nobility and then later dispersed down to the lower social levels of societies and into other nations.[[15]](#footnote-15) The functional use of both stays and busks was to support the bust, improve posture and give a stiff foundation to the garments worn on top of them.[[16]](#footnote-16) Moreover, the Early Modern period marked a new era of body “discipline” as patriarchal systems, such as the church, scrambled to maintain their control over women and society.[[17]](#footnote-17) These foundation garments like busks, stays and farthingales quickly started to replace women’s “natural” bodies with a more disciplined silhouette, a “constructed” one of whale bone, horn and wood.[[18]](#footnote-18) Busks were widely considered sexual by people in the Early Modern Era and contemporary scholars for two major reasons. First was the position of the busk and its proximity to the “breasts at one end and to the groin” at the other, connecting the two areas most commonly sexualised and fantasised about by men.[[19]](#footnote-19) Second is their existence as an item of courtship often given to women at the beginning of a courtship—or relationship more generally in the case of mistresses.[[20]](#footnote-20) There are multiple examples in contemporary literature and journals of men dreaming of sleeping upon a woman’s busk or being envious of its constant closeness to their lover.[[21]](#footnote-21) Stays more generally are considered sexual based on their position as underwear and their ability to shape women into the form viewed as most sexually attractive.

Femininity and female sexuality are intrinsically linked to clothing and material culture, both in their production and consumption. From birth, girls are taught to embroider, sew or mend, and these girls in British—and more broadly European—history have become women by gaining proficiency in knitting and embroidery.[[22]](#footnote-22) This fact is important because during the Early Modern Era, sexuality—though more specifically female sexuality—was seen as a dangerous force. Consequently, clothing which allowed women to shape their sexuality was dangerous. This is why busks and stays in particular incurred the distaste of the public. Busks alone were especially controversial because they were a hard erect object that women carried with them at all times, essentially giving them the penis they lacked.[[23]](#footnote-23) An important aspect of female sexuality of the time is the belief that men had what women lacked based on the Galenic model in which women possessed inverted penises.[[24]](#footnote-24) This model postulated that women desperately sought a phallus of their own.[[25]](#footnote-25) The dichotomy of sexuality at the time was that men's sexuality was often allowed or ignored, while women’s sexuality was dangerous and condemned.[[26]](#footnote-26) Female sexuality was understood to be “powerful and destructive” which is why there was such a heavy fixation on controlling it.[[27]](#footnote-27) Sexuality is and always has been a source of anxiety in general because it is by nature “anarchic” and something that compels people to forfeit control of themselves.[[28]](#footnote-28) Stays and busks were considered to be an unnecessary and ‘clearly’ sexual adornment to the body by many Early Modern moralists who saw vanity as a largely female sin.[[29]](#footnote-29) Likely, though, this anxiety had little to do with stays actually being a frivolous item and more to do with the fact that it gave women something tangible with which to shape their sexuality. This was dangerous because it afforded women some amount of power in patriarchal systems; therefore, in the Early Modern period, women's sexuality needed to be striclty controlled while men’s “sexual prowess and performance” were “important elements of asserting masculinity” because they perpetuated patriarchal ideals.[[30]](#footnote-30) Women, being the “daughters of Eve” then were particularly dangerous, the perpetrators of the first sin who unleashed it into the world.[[31]](#footnote-31) It was Eve after all who took the fruit from the tree and gave it to Adam, making them aware of their nakedness.[[32]](#footnote-32) Women then were both uniquely susceptible to the corruption of vanity and by extension “narcissism and self-idolatry” and uniquely temptuous to men.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Moreover, in Early Modern Europe, there was a deep fixation on virginity which was linked to this same fear of female corruptibility.[[34]](#footnote-34) Female virginity was central to shaping garments’ connection to women, which meant that people of the Early Modern Era in Europe placed excessive stress on “enclosing women’s bodies” within them.[[35]](#footnote-35) A distinct but connected anxiety regarding immorality among women was the busk’s role in pregnancy. Body-shaping garments not only helped women to shape themselves into the ‘ideal form’ as discussed previously, but they also provided a route for women to conceivably conceal pregnancy.[[36]](#footnote-36) The church was outraged by women potentially being able to hide their sexual deviance by cloaking their pregnancy; this is an anxiety also seen surrounding the farthingale.[[37]](#footnote-37) For many men, this was morally concerning because it allowed women to be sexually promiscuous without the risk of pregnancy.[[38]](#footnote-38) Not only did busks and stays give women control of their bodies, sexuality and provide a solution to pregnancy in concealment but also may have provided a method of abortion.[[39]](#footnote-39) There are multiple accounts in the Early Modern period of women using busks and the tight lacing of stays to cause a miscarrage.[[40]](#footnote-40) In this case, busks and stays even managed to transcend clothes’ ability to aesthetically ‘mold and shape’ the body by literally changing the physicality of the body, making them even more dangerous than other clothing items or objects of female sexuality.

One very common trend in body-shaping garments is male doctors claiming that they were to the detriment of a lady’s health, when really they were worried about feminine corruption.[[41]](#footnote-41) In the case of stays, they claimed women immorally tight-laced themselves into bodices to achieve a “slender” figure desirable at the cost of their health.[[42]](#footnote-42) Not only did stays allegedly misshapen one's bones, but according to many doctors of the time, they could also cause permanent damage to fertility by flattening the area where a baby is meant to grow.[[43]](#footnote-43) Similar claims were made about other body-changing adornments too, like cosmetics, which male doctors assumed would seep into female skin, permanently damaging it or turning them black.[[44]](#footnote-44) And the rumours around stays’ later incarnation, corsets, misshaping and mangling the body were so rampant that many still believe the claims today, nearly 100 years after they stopped being worn. In all three cases, this was really more a church-based fear of the *supposed* innate corruptibility of women and not their actual danger.[[45]](#footnote-45) Clothing was meant for many to show one's inward virtue, and of course then the opposite applied and it could also show one's inner immorality. To wear too frequently indecent, overly ostentatious clothing was to be immoral and showed one's lack of righteousness.[[46]](#footnote-46) Women who fixated too heavily on fashion were often criticised for their vanity and putting aside their “Christian duty” for “ostentatious” shows of wealth.[[47]](#footnote-47) One should not pretend, however, that similar criticisms did not exist surrounding the dress of men, and indeed such criticisms were often leveled for similar reasons; for both men and women, the intention was to uphold the in-place patriarchal systems and reinforce men as the “more rational sex”.[[48]](#footnote-48) Busks and stays in particular received so much attention because they were deeply intimate items, often gifted from a man to his lover. Not only were they worn intimately, but they were something which men would only see in intimate settings thereafter. Busks maintained a strange stasis between the private and public spheres; although gifting them was often a public matter, the inscriptions on them and their existence after which were deeply intimate—often seen only during a woman's undressing.[[49]](#footnote-49) The phallic shape worn on the woman gifted by a man then marked her as property and was a private signal of her perceived lost virtue and corruption.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Another fear often cited by men circa the 16th century is the fact that stays and other body-changing aspects of material culture prevented men from being able to distinguish the difference between rich “ladies” and poor “laundresses”.[[51]](#footnote-51) Although this was not an issue when stays (or at this time pairs of bodies) appeared since they were primarily worn by royalty and nobility, they gradually disseminated down to lower levels of society. Although numerous sumptuary laws attempted to prevent lower class women from taking part in fashion, as stays became more popular, lower income women used them to signal their “advancements in social status”. [[52]](#footnote-52) This of course caused anxieties by blurring the lines of class distinctions. Dress could shape someone into a respectable person or a vain creature, confusing not only the wealthy and poor but the immoral and virtuous.[[53]](#footnote-53) Often the way that women of power maintained their control was to exhibit their wealth in clothing, which meant that the rich but non-social elite (such as merchants and their wives) could achieve the same effect by purchasing clothing or accessories.[[54]](#footnote-54) In this, a separate discussion could be had of the market of ‘semi-luxury’ and ‘cost conscious’ goods which allowed even middle class women to wear finery. Accessories—which I postulate busks and stays are among—were so dangerous in the Early Modern era because they were so “changeable in material form”, easily replaced or traded unlike other garments.[[55]](#footnote-55) Their flexibility allowed those of lower classes to challenge their social position. Status was fundamental to how people understood each other, who they could associate with, and how they should act around others; this made its confusion particularly dangerous in the eyes of moralists and the social elite.[[56]](#footnote-56) Unlike the other aspects of culture, status—ironically the one thing today that is malleable—was immovable; although someone could marry up or gain wealth in business ventures, there would still be many people who refused to see them as equal unless they had been born a gentile woman or man. Not only did women show their status through the means most commonly noted—the size of farthingales, amount or expense of material or accessories—but they could show their good breeding and upbringing through their posture.[[57]](#footnote-57) Stays and busks in the hands of everyday women complicated this however, now even the lowest class women could mimic this good posture with the assistance of a busk.[[58]](#footnote-58) Busks then came to be another ornament to materially improve or conceal one's social standing.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Additionally, busks served to confuse gender in the Early Modern period. At this time, clothing was expected to be “clearly marked by gender”; it served to create the distinction of bodies between sexes.[[60]](#footnote-60) To some scholars, stays existed in part to accentuate gender differences in women by exaggerating form; to other scholars, the stays did the exact opposite, confusing gender presentation.[[61]](#footnote-61) Although it would seem that in Early Modern Europe there was a “divinely ordained basis” for gender, it was actually something highly malleable compared to today.[[62]](#footnote-62) This put gender in a precarious state of order in a constant stasis of defending its position, at once an empty and overflowing category.[[63]](#footnote-63) Empty because it was functionally unfixed, and changeable and overflowing because it was given so much importance in the Early Modern world, and shaped entirely how people viewed one another. Busks “[served] to disrupt the gender order” of Early Modern Europe by giving women the phallic object they inherently lacked, according to the Galenic model.[[64]](#footnote-64) To many men, the phallic shape of the busk made them fear women becoming men through wearing them, as if gaining a penis.[[65]](#footnote-65) The busk also became a fictitious rival for the male lover.[[66]](#footnote-66) A busk, constantly worn on the woman, was a “prosthesis” which was “larger and harder” than their lovers.[[67]](#footnote-67) A somewhat humorous comparison to the busk can be drawn to the poking stick of women, which were “[stigmatized] ...as sexually promiscuous”.[[68]](#footnote-68) Such sticks gained the same anxiety also based on their “phallic morphology”.[[69]](#footnote-69) These objects of femininity in both cases then became a source of anxiety in yet another way, since many men began to fear that women were in some way becoming male. Although this idea is almost preposterous to modern thoughts of gender, in the Early Modern Era, gender—much like race—was something far more malleable. Wearing certain ornaments could, in their perspective, literally—in some cases even legally—transform someone into another gender.[[70]](#footnote-70) There are cases in Early Modern Europe of women marrying other women and using dildos to consummate the marriage. As a result, this act legally made one of the women the husband.[[71]](#footnote-71) This demonstrates the power of material culture to transform the body of its user.[[72]](#footnote-72) One other fear of busks was that it served to give women a “masculine visual effect”, very similarly transforming them in some way into men.[[73]](#footnote-73) Evidently, busks and stays could also be used to challenge gender presentation in the Early Modern period.

Furthermore, the busk is one of the most important aspects in the discussion of female body shaping; although an object gendered feminine, it was an artifact of “male … desire worn on the female body”.[[74]](#footnote-74) This object created to shape female bodies became an object portraying not femininity itself but “sexually possessive masculinity”.[[75]](#footnote-75) When men wrote of the busk, they often “[mythologized] it” as something so intrinsically erotic and linked to the body of women.[[76]](#footnote-76) It is not surprising in the case of the busk, however, that it is so sexualised by men. They came to symbolise a male lover’s “conquest and possession” and his projection of himself onto a woman.[[77]](#footnote-77) To many men, giving a busk was analogous to a “hunting trophy”, marking all of their courted ladies and mistresses as their territory.[[78]](#footnote-78) These busks find, then, another way to exemplify the anxious masculinity of Early Modern Europe, in showing the necessity for men to mark where they have been in a line of conquests—which of course was not the same for women who were often met with shame for this. Here we see the need for men to enforce their sexuality on their female lovers. The act of men impressing their sexuality onto distinctly feminine dress does not exist only in the realm of ‘busks and bodies’ however; in the world of theater, poking sticks were imbued with the same sexual meanings and anxieties as busks were.[[79]](#footnote-79) In both cases, one can see how men saw the need to impress their anxiety and possessiveness onto clothing because they understood the power of it; they saw how it could shape the female form.

There are an interesting number of connections that can be drawn between stays and busks and other body-shaping garments. Busks and stays were one of the few ways women could exert their control in a world where they held comparatively less power than men. Many famous women—like Queen Elizabeth—fully understood the power of clothing to form them into what image they wanted to present.[[80]](#footnote-80) Those in power knew fully that by putting on a certain garment—like the crown and robe of a queen or king at their coronations—symbolically transformed their bodies and status’.[[81]](#footnote-81) Conversely then, those who lacked power understood that clothing could empower them and give them some level of control. Body-shaping garments, stays, and the busks enclosed within them allowed women to shape themselves into the ‘ideal’ form of their century, but more importantly was that they allowed women to transnature their bodies, period. This discussion does not end with busks and stays, but extends to many other garments; farthingales helped women to define their own space, cosmetics allowed women to conceal potentially unsightly tan skin, and accessories signalled one’s virtue or status.[[82]](#footnote-82) All of the women who used these understood not only their ability to functionally change their gender, race or status, but also how they could shape their own power. Perhaps, then, men were right to be anxious since clothing was something nearly impossible to control even through numerous sumptuary laws that struggled to keep up with ever-evolving desires and tastes.[[83]](#footnote-83) While concerns of female sexual promiscuity, female corruptibility, status concealment, and confused gender roles may seem arbitrary and unfounded by today’s standards, clothing truly held power in the Early Modern world. Male anxiety in the Early Modern Era was founded on genuine fears of the malleability of social boundaries that seem so fixed today, and clothing was just the canvas upon which they projected their fears, because clothing was the primary way people could change who they were.

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