The Dichotomy of Intimate Garments: Women’s Stays and Pockets in Georgian Britain

In John Collet’s 1777 satirical print, Tight Lacing, or Fashion before Ease, a woman is seen holding onto a bed poster while her maid, husband, and page boy strain to tighten the lacing on her stays (figure 1). Just below her stays, a large tie-on pocket can be seen hanging from her waist. Stays, the precursor to the corset, were heavily boned bodices made from layers of linen or wool and stiffened with strips of wood or whalebone. They were worn over a linen shift and laced up either in the front or the back. Pockets were large bags, typically measuring between 30 and 40 cm long and were worn tied around the waist. They usually came in pairs (although there are surviving examples of single pockets) and were normally concealed under several layers of clothes, accessed through openings on the outward-facing sides of the pocket and slits cut in the overlaying skirts.

At first glance, stays and pockets seem to share few similarities. Stays had an important role in fashion. They moulded the body into the latest desirable shape and determined the

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silhouette of the clothing over top of them, making it obvious when a woman was wearing them. On the other hand, pockets played no role in body shaping, beauty, or fashion but were utilitarian items where women carried the objects they needed for the day. Despite the apparent differences between these garments, as this paper will demonstrate, when studied in tandem it becomes apparent that stays and pockets served similar symbolic functions in women’s lives throughout the Georgian era (1714-1830).

Both pockets and stays connected women to prevailing notions of domesticity and ideals of femininity, and both were metaphorical and literal spaces where femininity was played out. At the same time, they were also spaces where gender was contested, manipulated, and negotiated. This paper will explore this dichotomy, arguing that stays and pockets were social and cultural tools that women used to adhere to, bend, and challenge notions of gender, making these garments items of both subjection and freedom. An examination of stays and pockets in conjuncture with each other begins to provide a fuller picture of the complicated role women inhabited in the eighteenth century.

The article will open with an overview of the history of stays and pockets and their stylistic evolution. Situating them more broadly within the history of women’s fashion will not only provide important background but will also begin to reveal the relationship between stays, pockets, and the women who wore them. The paper will then move into a discussion about how these garments reflected women’s domestic and public lives, examining how they intrinsically connected women to gender-normative roles, yet also gave women agency from male control. Finally, the study will explore how the privacy of pockets and stays allowed women to

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5 Sorge-English, “‘29 Doz and 11 Best Cutt Bone’,” 31.
manipulate and contest ideas of gender by giving them space to foster their own identities and engage in social and romantic relationships.

Both stays and pockets have received academic attention. Stays have often been included within chronological histories of ladies’ undergarments, such as Norah Waugh’s *Corsets and Crinolines*, which traces how sixteenth century “bodys” transformed into eighteenth century stays, Victorian corsets, and beyond. Stays also appear as part of Elizabeth Ewing’s *Fashion in Underwear* (1971), which looks at the changes in women’s undergarments from 3,000 BC to the twentieth century. More recently, Lynn Sorge-English has examined the connection between whalebone as a commodity and its importance to eighteenth century fashion, particularly to stays. In her monograph, *Stays and Body Image in London: The Staymaking Trade, 1680-1810*, Sorge-English looks at body-shaping and gender through the production, design, and wearing of stays to gain a sense of the meaning and importance of these objects. Unlike Sorge-English, this study will not focus on the production of stays. Instead, it will concentrate on consumers and place stays more broadly into a discussion on eighteenth century gender to uncover what these items meant to the women who wore them.

Whereas stays often feature in the large, sweeping studies of women’s underwear and fashion, pockets are noticeably absent from these texts. Historians’ interest in pockets is still relatively new, with Barbara Burman and Ariane Fennetaux as the leading scholars. In a 2002 article, Burman argued that pockets were gendered items, and through an exploration of how pockets were used, how they were made, and what they contained, she connected pockets to the

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6 Lynn Sorge-English, “‘29 Doz and 11 Best Cutt Bone’”.
domestic economy and women’s domestic duties. Around the same time, Fennetaux similarly linked pockets to women’s domestic economy and used these items to explore concepts of privacy. The work of these scholars has recently culminated in the first full-length monograph on women’s pockets: *The Pocket: A Hidden History of Women’s Lives, 1660-1900*. In this work, Burman and Fennetaux argue that pockets were carriers of meaning, and they use them to explore the complexity of women’s lives. Like these authors, this study is also interested in demonstrating how pockets reveal women’s lives, but it will also build on previous scholarship by situating pockets into a larger context with stays.

The overarching theme, which runs through studies of both stays and pockets, is their gendered connotations. Scholars such as Sorge-English, Bendall, Burman, Fennetaux, as well as historians such as John Styles, have all clearly demonstrated that these items can be used to examine women’s gender roles and expectations. However, despite the shared gendered element between stays and pockets, these items are rarely studied together. Stays and pockets did not exist or function independently of each other. By juxtaposing them, this study will contribute to the historical discussion surrounding these objects and will shed light on how these items worked together. It will begin to form a more comprehensive picture of the role women’s undergarments played in women’s lives.

Pockets and stays can be difficult to locate in primary source records, and historians must rely on scraps found across various sources to gain a sense of the social and cultural significance

8 Burman, “Pocketing the Difference”, 447-469.
of these garments. Surviving pockets and stays in museum collections reveal vital information about the form and function of these objects. This paper will also examine the items associated with pockets and stays, including pocketbooks and busks, an extra interchangeable piece of whalebone, metal, or wood, which slid vertically into a sleeve at the front of the stays to add extra support, keep the belly flat, and ensure that the breasts were high and full.\footnote{Sarah Anne Bendall, “To Write a Distick upon It: Busks and the Language of Courtship and Sexual Desire in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England,” \textit{Gender & History} 26, no. 2 (August 2014): 199, DOI: 10.1111/1468-0424.12066.}

Visual culture such as caricatures is also important to this study. Caricatures were extremely popular and widely circulated in British society.\footnote{Vic Gatrell, \textit{City of Laughter: Sex and Satire in Eighteenth-Century London} (New York: Walker and Company, 2006), 201.} Satirical images were sold in print shops and publicly displayed in publishers’ windows.\footnote{Ibid, 201.} These satires are valuable resources. They are rich in meaning and reflect the fears and anxieties of the society that produced them. Finally, a range of printed materials will also be used, including female manuals and etiquette books. Written by both men and women, this genre was prolific in the eighteenth century and advised women on appropriate behaviour and appearance. Although these works provide an overly idealized form of femininity, they also offer important socio-cultural context in which to discuss women, pockets, and stays.

\textbf{Placing Women: Defining Femininity}

The eighteenth century has traditionally been considered the historical moment when the separate spheres emerged and when women distanced themselves from the masculine public
realm of work, commerce, and politics and retreated into the domestic sphere.\textsuperscript{14} Along with remaining within the home, conduct literature from the period promoted the ideal woman as one that was modest, reserved, demure, docile, virtuous, kind, delicate, and who listened and observed more than she spoke.\textsuperscript{15} In reality, a woman’s place in society was much more complicated, and while domestic duties and the traditional roles of housewife and mother were important in women’s lives, many had responsibilities beyond the confines of the home.

Women across the social hierarchy participated in the public realm through various sociable activities, including shopping, attending balls, visiting assembly halls, and going to the opera and theatre. Many women in the lower and middle ranks of society also worked in the public sphere as traders, merchants, shop owners, street-sellers, servers, and barkeepers. The commonality of women in the public sphere indicates that it was a necessary and normal part of life. Therefore, this paper will work under the notion that women’s participation in (paid) work outside of the home was not a radical departure from expected behaviours. However, this is not to say that there was not social anxiety about the presence of women in the public realm, which as this paper will examine, was constantly contested and controlled. A woman’s position within society was complicated and full of contradictions, and female bodies carried these dichotomies in the form of pockets and stays.

Finally, it is important to note that the terms “domestic” and “private” are not being used synonymously in this paper. Indeed, the home was not an entirely private place during this era,

but one that was quasi-public, as the practice of visiting became increasingly popular over the century, particularly for women.\textsuperscript{16} Rather, privacy will be used to refer to the individualized privacy found in smaller sites within the home and public spheres, where individuals enacted total (or almost total) control and had confidentiality and concealment from others.

\textbf{Change and Continuity: The Evolution of Stays and Pockets}

Women had been wearing boned bodices since the sixteenth century, and by the time Collet published his print in 1777, stays were an established part of everyday dress for the vast majority of women across the social hierarchy.\textsuperscript{17} In the seventeenth century, stays reached the waist but slowly became longer until, by the mid-eighteenth century, they were so long that slits needed to be cut into the bottom to accommodate women’s hips.\textsuperscript{18} The stays at this time flattened the breasts to create a “monobosom” effect and compressed the rib cage and shoulder blades to mould the body into a cone shape (figure 2).\textsuperscript{19} As items of fashion, stays constantly evolved, and the period between 1780 and 1810 saw drastic changes in their form. Stays became softer during this time, were not as heavily boned, and took on a more “feminized form” as they began following the natural curves of women’s bodies, accommodating the hips, bottom, thighs, stomach, and breasts, which were now pushed up and separated.\textsuperscript{20} The changes between the early

\textsuperscript{17} It is difficult to put an exact date as to when women began wearing stays. The sixteenth century bodices women wore were called “bodies,” and were a precursor to the stay. Norah Waugh, \textit{Corsets and Crinolines} (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18. Sorge-English, \textit{Stays and Body Image in London}, 2; Fennetaux, “Women’s Pockets and the Construction of Privacy,” 310.
\textsuperscript{18} Waugh, \textit{Corsets and Crinolines}, 37.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 187, 207-208.
and late Georgian stays are clearly visible when the pair from figure 2 is compared to another, which dates between 1770 and 1790 (figure 3). Although both are equal in length and end around the hips, there is a clear distinction between the amount of boning being used, as the latter pair follows the more natural lines of the female body. Stays changed again in the 1790s when the neoclassical silhouette became fashionable and stays shorted, in correlation with the rising waistlines, so iconic of this style.\textsuperscript{21} A third pair of stays from 1790 further demonstrates the changes in style (figure 4). This pair is dramatically shorter than its predecessors and has even less boning, reflecting the influence of neoclassicism.

Unlike stays, pockets did not experience the same drastic alterations. Rather than reflecting constant change, the historical lives of tie-on pockets reveal continuity in style and use, and at one point, even a rejection of fashion trends. There is no exact start date as to when tie-on pockets originated, but by the Georgian era, they were a vital part of women’s everyday dress.\textsuperscript{22} Although pre-made pockets could be purchased, pockets were traditionally handmade at home.\textsuperscript{23} As a result, while there were trends in the style, design, and decoration of pockets, there were no strict sets of rules, and although similar in their general appearance, all pockets slightly differed from one another. Many surviving pockets are made from white cotton (figure 5), but it was also common for them to be made from coloured or patterned fabric, as a 1740 pair made from yellow quilted silk demonstrates (figure 6). Beyond these materials, they could also be made from canvas, linen, silk, dimity, calico, jean, be a patchwork of different fabrics, or even be knitted.\textsuperscript{24} Pockets were often embroidered, with floral and botanical imagery being a popular

\begin{footnotesize}
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\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 190.
\textsuperscript{22} Burman and Fennetaux, \textit{The Pocket}, 19.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 75-76.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 54-56; Burman and White, “Fanny’s Pockets,” 33l.
\end{footnotesize}
choice (figure 7), but many, such as the ones in the Anne Lambert Collection (figure 5), remained undecorated.

Despite their uniqueness, the general size and shape of pockets remained relatively unchanged throughout the eighteenth century, which almost caused pockets to become a casualty of fashion. Whereas stays continued to be worn during the neoclassical period, taking on a new form to work under the slim-fitting gowns, large, bulky pockets were difficult to wear and ruined the lines of the dresses. During this period, there was a movement in fashion to replace tie-on pockets with small pouches, worn around the wrist, called reticules, but commonly known as “ridicules” due to their small size and lack of functionality. Although highly unfashionable and seen as relics, the convenience of pockets won out over the fashionable reticules, and women continued to use their tie-on pockets throughout the neoclassical era and beyond. The importance of pockets to women’s lives was expressed when one guide advised women to “never sally forth from your own room in the morning without that old-fashioned article of dress, a pocket: discard for ever that modern invention called a ridicule.” Further evidence from Fanny Chapman’s diary demonstrates that women continued to make pockets during this period. In 1810, Chapman made three different pairs of pockets and even lent an acquaintance “a pair of

26 Burman and White, “Fanny’s Pockets,” 37.
pockets for the pattern” the following year. Eventually, pockets returned to fashion in the 1820s when skirts once again became fuller.

The story of stays and pockets is one of change, continuation, fashion, and function. It is important to understand the history of the objects and their long relationship with women and fashion, not only because it provides important context but also because the physical style of these garments can act as a means of accessing and understanding women’s relationships with their clothing, bodies, gender, and sense of self. It is to these ideas we now turn our attention.

**Negotiation of Domestic and Public**

The large size of women’s pockets allowed for a wide variety of items to be carried within them. Scholars have done an excellent job in amalgamating from Old Bailey records, dairies, and newspapers an inventory of objects women commonly had in their pockets. Burman and Jonathan White have listed “coins, bills of exchange, trade tokens… gloves, jewellery, watches, buttons, earrings, mirrors, sewing equipment such as scissors, needles, thimbles, and penknives, as well as eating utensils such as spoons and knives, purses, and letters of testaments.” Meanwhile, Fennetaux has noted that pockets gave rise to a whole genre of ladies’ “pocket accessories,” including pocket snuffboxes, smelling bottles, pocketbooks, and almanacs. Women also carried keys, eyeglasses, and even food in their pockets, as exemplified in a journal entry by Dorothy Wordsworth from December 28, 1801, where she wrote, “William,

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30 Burman and White, “Fanny’s Pockets,” 37.
Mary, and I set off on foot to Keswick. We carried some cold mutton in our pockets.”33 What women carried within their pockets reveals much about their daily lives, where they spent their days, and their responsibilities. The ubiquity of sewing supplies within pockets illustrates women’s domestic duties and closely links them to the home.34 These tools of domesticity were some of the most important items in a woman’s pocket, and the ability for her to keep them on her person throughout the day allowed her to perform routine tasks with increased ease and efficiency. As one contemporary advised, always carry a “purse, a thimble, a pincushion, a pencil, a knife, and a pair of scissors, which will not only be an inexpressible source of comfort and independence, by removing the necessity of borrowing, but will secure the privilege of not lending these indispensable articles.”35 While pockets made it easier to complete traditional female duties within the home, many other items found in pockets indicate that women were active members of the public sphere. Objects, such as opera glasses, fans, and snuffboxes were all accessories of sociability, which could be pulled out of pockets and used across public social arenas, while in the case of Wordsworth, her pockets made it physically easier to leave home and partake in a social activity, as she could pack and bring the items needed for her journey, in this case, food.36

Sitting at the crossroads of public and domestic was the pocketbook. First appearing in the middle of the eighteenth century, pocketbooks were designed to reinforce gender-normative ideas that women were responsible for managing the household economy through responsible

34 Burman and White, “Fanny’s Pockets,” 31; Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 44.
36 Burman and Fennetaux, *The Pocket*, 143.
fiscal practices, commonly known as oeconomy. Although filled with fashion plates, poetry, essays about domestic issues, and instructions on the latest fashionable dances, most of the pages within these volumes were given over to memorandum tables, where users could record spending, expenses, and appointments. However, how these tables were contextualized maintained gendering. Whereas men’s pocketbooks were advertised as helping men in all forms of business, women’s pocketbooks were promoted as aids to oeconomy, and in turn, to the fostering of proper feminine skills and values. The connection between the pocketbook’s economic functions and ideal femininity was made clear in a ladies pocketbook from 1753, which informed women that the volume provided them with the tools to become “admir’d, belov’d and ador’d for your OEconomy and Behaviour” and as a result “render your Character amiable, and your Persons, if possible, more endearing.”

As much as pocketbooks were tools of domesticity, they also were items that aided women in navigating the public arena. Pocketbooks commonly included lists of transportation fees, which were meant, as Stephen Colclough has noted, “to be consulted while on the move.” It was also common for these volumes to include lists of holidays observed by various public offices, including the bank, exchequer, stamp-office, excise office, customhouse, East India

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39 Burman and Fennetaux, The Pocket, 124.
House, and South Sea House.\textsuperscript{42} Furthermore, others, such as \textit{The Ladies Complete Pocket-Book} from 1781, included a list of roads from London to Edinburgh.\textsuperscript{43} The inclusion of these elements within an easy-to-carry guide specifically designed to meet the needs of women indicates that it was not only normal to see women outside of the home, but that participation in the public sphere was vital to their feminine responsibilities. The portability of these items and the information within them gave women the ability to navigate the world beyond the home with relative independence and provided them agency in the public sphere and financial control. This self-reliance gave women authority over their work and distanced them from male influence.

Perhaps the best way to understand the importance of pockets to women’s independence is to look at what happened when the reticule threatened to replace pockets. In an article from the 1818 edition of \textit{La Belle Assemblée}, the following episode was recorded:

\begin{quote}
It is but a very little time back that a very lovely young woman in a blue sating spenser and a pistachio nut-coloured crape skirt was standing under the vestibule of the Theatre Feydeau. Her agitated state and confused appearance caused several persons to surround her, imagining she was in want of something or other, and that were emulous to render her service.— ‘Are you in want of an umbrella, young woman? Is it a coach you are waiting for, Mademoiselle? Will you be pleased, Madam to accept of my arm? Will you favour me by accepting a seat in my cabriolet?— “No gentlemen, I want nothing but a pair of pockets.”— And the little epicure was holding in one hand a basket of peaches, in the other a large bunch of grapes with an enormous green melon under her arm!\textsuperscript{44}

With no pockets to assist her, not only was the lady’s physical movement within public hampered, but she also lost her independence, as she became reliant on the assistance of others,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} \textit{The Ladies Most Elegant and Convenient Pocket Book for the Year 1777} (London: Printed for J. Wheble, 1777), 155-156, Google Books.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{The Ladies Complete Pocket-Book} (Newcastle Upon Tyne: printed by T. Saint, 1781), Eighteenth Century Collections Online.
\textsuperscript{44} T. Hearwell, “An Essay on the Use of Pockets,” \textit{La Belle Assemblée}, November 1818, 219, Nineteenth Century Collections Online.
notably men. It is then of little wonder why many women sacrificed fashion and refused to give up their pockets.

Stays also had a strong symbolic connection to femininity. Feminine virtue and beauty were intrinsically entwined during this period, as demonstrated by Auguste Caron in *The Lady’s Toilette*, “beauty… announces every good female quality, every perfection. A beautiful female enters at her birth into a tacit engagement to be virtuous. If she violates this engagement, beauty becomes a fatal boon”, “the most virtuous women must be the most beautiful.” More than feminine virtue, dress and beauty were also connected to women’s domestic roles as housewives and mothers. As Styles has noted, clothing was widely understood to act as a visual language that could be read, and dress was often used to “define cultural categories like gentility and politeness.” Again, Caron exemplifies this, “young females who neglect their toilette and manifest little concern about dress, indicate in this very particular a disregard of order, a mind but ill adapted to attend to the details of housekeeping, a deficiency in taste, and all the qualities that inspire love: they will be careless in every thing.” Dress and fashion, therefore, acted as a means for women to publicly announce their femininity and their ability to perform their domestic responsibilities. The centrality of stays to ladies’ fashion and beauty meant that they played a particularly vital role in this discussion, as they acted as visual testimony of a woman’s femininity, respectability, and character.

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47 Caron, *The Lady’s Toilette*, 35.
48 Ibid, 211.
The links between stays and femininity are illustrated in caricatures of the era. In the 1780 image, *A Morning Frolic, or the Transmutation of Sexes* (figure 8), Carrington Bowles explores the connection between stays and femininity. In the image, a man sits demurely in a chair, holding a fan and wearing a lady’s bonnet, while a woman wearing a tricorn hat and sword stands over him. With her legs spread and her hands on her hips, she has cast off her stays, which lay discarded on the chair next to her. In this image, stays are more than just an object of fashion; they are a physical embodiment of femininity. Without her stays, the woman in the image not only loses her physical beauty but also her feminine virtue. By removing her stays, she has cast off the traditional notions of passive, demure, and quiet femininity and is challenging gender norms by taking up more physical space and becoming more authoritative. Stays were important cultural signals, and if Bowles’ caricature is any indication, women had the potential to make a strong social statement by choosing not to wear them. Yet, in reality, most women wore stays. Similar to the way pockets continuously linked women to ideas of domesticity and ideal femininity, so too did stays. However, also like pockets, stays facilitated easy navigation of the public realm, as the appearance of respectability they gave to the wearer created opportunities for social mobility.

It is difficult to know what women thought of wearing stays. Their ubiquity across the social hierarchy meant that women said very little about them in personal papers.\(^49\) However, evidence indicates that women desired the fashionable body shape and eagerly sought out stay makers who could give this to them.\(^50\) This want is reflected in staymakers’ trade cards and advertisements. In an advertisement for the staymaker “Mr. Parsons,” a lady decried his skills,

\(^{49}\) Ibid, 191.

\(^{50}\) Sorge-English, “‘29 Doz and 11 Best Cutt Bone’,” 35.
stating that his designs added such “vast additions to a bad shape, [that] he must and can add some beauties to a good one, by making a genteel stay.”\footnote{Francis Grose, \textit{A Guide to Health, Beauty, Riches, and Honour}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (London: Printed for Hooper and Wigstead, 1796), 47, Eighteenth Century Collections Online.} Four years later, a trade card for the staymaker Robert Stevens promised to provide women with “stays in the newest Taste” while J. Girardet’s staymaking business even promised women stays that controlled “any protuberance with ease and great support.”\footnote{“Stevens Stay and Child’s Coat-Maker”, 1800, trade-card, British Museum, Heal,112.31; “To the Ladies,” \textit{E. Johnson's British Gazette and Sunday Monitor}, Advertisements and Notices, June 20, 1802, Burney Newspapers Collection.} The promises made by staymakers reveal the importance women invested in these items, as they desired stays in the newest fashion that would mould their bodies into the desirable shape.

Society’s wealthy women, who could afford to have their stays made bespoke, took them one step further, and used them to pronounce their economic status, as their stays were often made from sumptuous fabrics and were brightly coloured or embroidered.\footnote{Ewing, \textit{Fashion in Underwear}, 40.} An example of fashionable stays can be found in the Anne Lambert Collection (figure 9). Dating from the late eighteenth century, the exterior of the stays is covered in a brightly coloured embroidered floral motif and comes with a matching set of detachable sleeves. Highly decorated stays, such as these, were designed with the intention for them to be seen.\footnote{Waugh, \textit{Corsets and Crinolines}, 45.} Another example is visible in the pair of red stays mentioned earlier (figure 3). Covered in red floral silk damask, they are not nearly as extravagant as the previous pair, but the colour and material indicate that the woman who wore them wanted them to be seen and that she consciously used her stays to display her taste, respectability, politeness, class, and wealth. Women’s desire to wear stays that moulded
their bodies into ideals of beauty reveals a conscious effort not just to adhere to fashion, but to employ their social and gendered significance, to publicly announce their feminine virtues, and in turn, improve their social mobility.

Pockets and stays fulfilled different functions for women within the public sphere, yet together, they can also be seen as working in similar ways. Both reflected and imposed complex and often contradictory roles onto women. Pockets allowed women to physically leave the domestic sphere and participate in public life, aided by the things they carried. Likewise, stays acted as visual and public advertisements of a woman’s economic status, respectability, politeness, and femininity, which made social mobility within the public sphere easier while simultaneously connecting her back to the home.

Privacy and the Negotiation of Femininity

In the eighteenth century, privacy was not always attainable, and the home often offered its occupants few private spaces. In urban centres such as London, it was common for people to live within multi-occupancy homes, and people at every level of society used lockable boxes, drawers, and cabinets to gain some semblance of privacy. For many women, pockets were the only truly private spaces they had. The significance of the pocket as a private space was demonstrated in Chapman’s diaries when her uncle found a lady’s pocket while out for a walk, and “Edmund Bastard came home with him to be a witness to the contents, which were a purse containing three guineas, a half crown, shilling and sixpence, a pocket book which they did not

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open and some receipts, which proved to belong to Lady Anstruther." The presence of the witness was not only security against potentially being charged with theft but also indicates an acute awareness by Cooper and Bastard that they were invading someone’s privacy. The respect accorded to the pocketbook is particularly outstanding as it is notably left unopened, leaving at least some modicum of privacy for the pocket’s owner.

Pockets offered a level of protection from prying eyes and thieves, as women could keep their valuable possessions on their persons at all times. To add extra security to their pockets, women sewed in internal pockets, as exemplified by the pair housed at the Anne Lambert Collection (figure 5), which has a 10cm by 10cm pouch sewn into the right-hand pocket. Women would also “nest” items, placing small objects into larger ones, organizing their pockets and hiding away valuable possessions. The fact that pockets were also usually hidden under layers of skirts provided some measure of security, but this did not mean that women’s belongings were completely safe. Pockets could still fall off, as did Lady Anstruther’s, and they remained susceptible to thieves and pickpockets, who would cut the pocket strings and steal the entire garment.

Despite the potential dangers, women took advantage of this privacy and used pockets not just to protect their valuables but to foster their identities, as the items a woman carried in her pockets can be understood as a microcosm of her individuality. For example, in a passage written by artist Gwen Raverat, she lists the things she carried in her pockets as a child, including

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60 Burman and Fennetaux, The Pocket, 121.
pencils, India-rubbers, a sketch-book, string, nails, horse-chestnuts, sugar, bread and butter, a handkerchief, and a small book of the works of Rembrandt. The prevalence of the art supplies indicates that Raverat’s pockets physically embodied a core aspect of her life and a central part of her personality. The personal items women stored in pockets and the privacy these garments created allowed women to intimately and quietly hone and develop their identities and potentially challenge traditional gender expectations.

Among the various pocket-sized goods women carried were novels. The ability to stow a novel in a pocket reflects something more than the enjoyment of reading. During this era, women’s reading caused great social anxiety, particularly the consumption of novels, which social commentators believed were the lowest and most morally debased form of literature. As one contemporary declared, novels had “so evil a tendency, that not only their [women’s] time is most shamefully wasted, but their morals and manners tainted and warped for the remainder of their lives.” Women’s reading was, therefore, was ideally performed under family supervision, where they could control women in their reading, thinking, and understanding. Despite the concerns and fears surrounding the genre, many women read novels. The ability to secretly carry a novel in one’s pocket and consume it privately was a way for women to shirk the control of family, particularly male family, formulate and cultivate an identity unique to them and their reading, and challenge gender norms. Other pocket accessories even aided women in this. In

63 Burman and Fennetaux, The Pocket, 152.
64 Ibid, 151-152.
Northanger Abbey, the bold and manipulative Isabella Thorpe keeps her list of shocking and “horrid” novels in her pocketbook.\(^{67}\)

The privacy of pockets also offered women opportunities to participate in romantic and sexual relationships. Pockets had strong sexual associations due to their location on the body. They hung around the pelvis and were suggestively shaped like women’s genitalia and had what Burman called “uterine symbolism.”\(^{68}\) It is unlikely that women were unaware of these sexual connotations, as it was a common subject matter in caricature during this period.\(^{69}\) In the 1801 sketch, Caricature Shop, a group of people stand outside a print shop looking at the various prints in the window (figure 10). Vic Gatrell has used this image as evidence of the wide appeal of caricature across age, gender, class, and race.\(^{70}\) Although there is no disputing this, the image also appears to include some sexual undertones. One of the most prominent figures is a woman dressed in a blue and white striped gown, looking at the caricatures with her hand in her pocket. In front of her is a man bent over, intently looking at an image of a naked woman. Although this image is not meant to be erotic, there is no obvious reason for her hand to be in her pocket, and her gesture adds a suggestive tone to the work. An even more explicit example can be seen in Thomas Rowlandson’s A Sudden Squall in Hyde Park from 1791 (figure 11). The image depicts the havoc caused by a sudden storm.\(^{71}\) On the left-hand side, a woman’s dress has been blown aside, revealing her pockets, and a man holding what Fennetaux has called a “phallic lens” stares

\(^{68}\) Burman and White, “Fanny’s Pockets,” 321; Burman, “Pocketing the Difference,” 452.
\(^{69}\) Fennetaux, “Women’s Pockets and the Construction of Privacy,” 319.
\(^{70}\) Gatrell, City of Laughter, 210.
\(^{71}\) Fennetaux, “Women’s Pockets and the Construction of Privacy,” 319.

53 Past Imperfect Vol. XXIII
at the exposed garment.\textsuperscript{72} This image directly connects women’s pockets to their sexuality and genitalia.\textsuperscript{73} Likening women’s clothes to their genitalia demonstrates male anxiety over female independence and was an attempt to regain control and authority.\textsuperscript{74} However, in many ways, women participated in this eroticization and employed it for their own purposes.

During the eighteenth century, physical intimacy during courtship shifted from simple touching towards penetrative sex.\textsuperscript{75} Thus, the eroticism of pockets can be seen as a metaphorical version of sexual intercourse, as women used their pockets to mediate and control men’s access to their bodies.\textsuperscript{76} It was not uncommon for women to stash letters and notes from lovers in these pouches.\textsuperscript{77} Furthermore, a wide range of other love tokens were commonly exchanged as part of the rituals of courtship, including miniature portraits, silhouettes, letters, rings, gloves, garters, perfume bottles, and handkerchiefs.\textsuperscript{78} Interestingly, many of these items given as tokens of affection coincide with the items commonly found in pockets. By putting a letter or gift from a lover into her “uterine” pocket, a woman was not only granting a man metaphorical access to her body, she was also practicing sexual agency in a private and gender-appropriate way.

Stays also offered women the opportunities to privately take part in courtship and voice sexual desire through busks. Much like pockets, stays did not escape from being heavily sexualized.\textsuperscript{79} The erotic and seductive nature of stays is once again prevalent within the visual

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid, 319.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid, 319.  
\textsuperscript{74} Burman and Fennetaux, \textit{The Pocket}, 48.  
\textsuperscript{75} Sally Holloway, \textit{The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions, and Material Culture} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10, DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198823070.003.0001  
\textsuperscript{76} Fennetaux, “Women’s Pockets and the Construction of Privacy,” 321.  
\textsuperscript{77} Burman and White, “Fanny’s Pockets,” 31.  
\textsuperscript{79} Sorge-English, \textit{Stays and Body Image in London}, 205.
satire of the period. A pair of stays features prominently in Hogarth’s works Before and After (figures 12 and 13). In Before, a woman tries to pull away from a lover, but her stays, which are seen on a chair in the foreground, suggests she does not intend to reject the man.\textsuperscript{80} In After, the room is in disarray and the woman clings to the man and appears to be either begging forgiveness or begging her lover not to leave. The stays can still be seen on the chair, revealing her sexual promiscuity.\textsuperscript{81} As Sorge-English had noted, it was not technically necessary to remove stays before sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{82} Thus, the removal of stays in Hogarth’s etching is both a removal of physical restraints and a shedding of female virtue, morals, and chastity.

As Sorge-English suggested, women enjoyed having the respectability of stays, as well as their seductive nature.\textsuperscript{83} Tracing women’s conscious use of stays as seductive and sexual objects is difficult, but it begins to reveal itself through an examination of busks. Unlike pockets and stays, busks do not seem to have been nearly as prevalent within caricature and written materials, but busks were still known to have erotic connotations. Busks slid down a sleeve at the front of the stays. They were inherently sexualized due to their positioning between women’s breasts and because they came to a point just above the groin.\textsuperscript{84} Due to the object’s sexual implications, they became an important part of courtship, as they signalled a man’s affection and sexual interest.\textsuperscript{85} It has been suggested that the practice of giving busks, which began in the sixteenth century, began to die away in the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{86} However, evidence from museum collections indicates

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{80} Ibid, 202.
\bibitem{81} Ibid, 202.
\bibitem{82} Ibid, 203.
\bibitem{83} Ibid, 205.
\bibitem{84} Bendall, “To Write a Distick Upon It,” 199.
\bibitem{85} Ibid, 201, 207.
\bibitem{86} Ibid, 201.
\end{thebibliography}
that buses continued to be given to women as symbols of male affection and sexual interest into
the late Georgian period.

One busk, held at the National Museum of Scotland, shows the care and detail put into
these items (figure 14). Dating between 1670 and 1730, the wooden busk is engraved with
traditional love symbols commonly found on buses from earlier centuries, including a
hand-painted heart pierced by two arrows and the initials “A” and “H.”87 Another busk, held at
the Victoria and Albert Museum, dates from the late eighteenth century (figure 15). It is also
made of wood but is much more intricately carved and has hand-painted images behind pieces of
inset glass. At the top of the busk, the initials “S” and “D” are behind diamond-shaped insets,
while the date, “July ye 20th 1796,” appears lower down on the object. Although the museum
catalogue does not provide any provenance for the piece, the intricate details of the busk indicate
that it was made by skilled artisans and was probably commissioned by an individual who had
some degree of wealth. Interestingly, this busk dates from the period when neoclassical dress was
fashionable, and stays were much shorter and had less boning. Therefore, it is possible that this
busk was simply a gift, not meant to be worn. However, even if it was not used, the meaning of
the item and the message it conveyed remains clear. Accepting and inserting a busk down the
front a pair of stays, similar to keeping a small token or letter in a pocket, was an active and
symbolic decision made by women to let a man close to her body and accept his romantic and
sexual advances.

Together the privacy offered by pockets and stays gave women a wide variety of
opportunities. Through the items carried in their pockets, women could privately form and shape

87 Ibid, 201.
their identities, adhere to and simultaneously challenge gender-normative behaviours. Moreover, while the widespread eroticism of these garments in the popular imagination was an attempt to belittle and subject women to the male sexual gaze, women nonetheless found sexual agency and power in these garments. The intimate nature of pockets and stays allowed women to quietly engage in romance and eroticism in a way that did not outwardly threaten or publicly contest socially acceptable gender roles.

Conclusion

From fashion to function, at first glance, stays and pockets appear to have served two distinct purposes in women’s lives, but upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that both garments were laden with social and cultural meaning and were physical embodiments of the debates and dichotomies that surrounded gender in the eighteenth century. As this paper has demonstrated, these items of dress were tools of subjection and control while at the same time they offered women freedom and the means to bend and challenge notions of gender.

Pockets and stays continuously connected women to the domestic. Pockets were instruments of domestic duties and household management, while the beauty and fashion created by stays acted as signifiers of a woman’s domestic suitability and ability. Pockets and stays indicate the centrality of the home in Georgian women’s lives and identities. However, pockets also increased physical mobility and allowed women to transition from the domestic to the public with ease. While it was common to see women in the public realm, pockets and stays enhanced their freedom of movement within public spaces and allowed them to begin to remove themselves from male control and influence. We see this agency threatened during the
neoclassical era when the reticule began to encroach on the space of the pocket, yet the continued use of pockets during this period demonstrates women’s refusal to lose this independence.

As much as wearing stays was a social expectation women could not escape without risking their social reputation, many desired to conform to the beauty standards stays created. However, in their adherence to society’s beauty standards, women were also practicing a form of agency. By wearing stays, they created social opportunities for themselves, as the garment represented and announced their feminine virtues and morals, which made physical and symbolic social mobility easier.

Women also gained agency through the privacy offered by these garments, and many used them to define and shape their identities and bodies, and in turn, challenge gender-normative behaviours. Society countered this agency through the sexualization of pockets and stays, as this made these garments and the women who wore them the focus of male sexual interest and sexual control. Yet, as much as women were subjected to this sexualization, they also willingly participated in it. The decision to store love tokens in pockets or slide a busk into a pair of stays were conscious ways women granted or denied men metaphorical access to their bodies. The privacy of these garments allowed women to maintain an outward appearance of femininity and virtue while providing them space in which to cast off these very notions.

When studied within the context of each other, the intricate relationship between pockets and stays is revealed, along with their social and cultural value for the women who wore them, and the complicated position women held in Georgian society. Once seen in this way, the
woman, her stays, and her pocket depicted by Collet take on new complex meanings and significance.

Appendix: Images
Figure 2. Pair of stays made from linen and cane, 1730-1750, National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh A.1905.983, accessed July 14, 2021, © National Museums Scotland.


Figure 5. Pair of white cotton pockets, late eighteenth century (50.5 cm x 29 cm), The Anne Lambert Clothing and Textile Collection, Edmonton, 2012.8.1, photograph by Anne Bissonnette© for the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection.

Figure 7. Pair of embroidered cotton pockets, 1770-1780 (330 x 230 mm), Museum of London, London, 35.35/2, accessed July 14, 2021, © copyright Museum of London.
Figure 8. Carrington Bowles, *A Morning Frolic, or the Transmutation of Sexes*, 1780, mezzotint on paper, 352 mm x 252 mm, British Museum, London, 964558001, accessed July 14, 2021, © The Trustees of the British Museum, Creative Commons.
Figure 9. Pair of silk brocade stays with detachable sleeves, late eighteenth century, The Anne Lambert Clothing and Textile Collection, Edmonton, 1974.9. 10.c, Photograph by Anne Bissonnette© for the Anne Lambert Clothing and Textiles Collection.
Figure 10. P. Roberts, *Caricature Shop*, 1801, etching, 26.5 cm x 31.5 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 53.502.5, accessed July 14, 2021, public domain.

Figure 12. William Hogarth, *Before*, 1736, etching, 41.9 cm x 32 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 32.35(144), accessed July 14, 2021, public domain.
Figure 13. William Hogarth, *After*, 1736, etching, 38.8 cm x 32 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 32.35(146), accessed July 14, 2021, public domain.

Artefacts

V&A. Busk. Accession Number T.345-1921.
V&A. Stays. Accession Number T.909-1913.

Images


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