

Undressing Your Heroine

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Please feel free to email me with any questions you might have in the future. Just make sure to put something in the subject line that will clue me in that the message isn't SPAM (like "corset question" or "question about undergarments" or "found conflicting information about X").

Stays were normal: When writing an historical novel of any kind, it is helpful to possess a basic understanding of the clothing (including the undergarments) of the period. It is especially important when writing romance, as there is usually at least one scene in which your characters disrobe. If you judged by much of what is being written (or at least published), you'd think corsets were rare, rather than one of the most common garments for over 400 years. Many people seem to think that corsets are uncomfortable, and that independent, forward thinking women of "insert your time period here" wouldn't have worn them. This always strikes me as a blatant intrusion of modern thought. Women today wear bras and heels, and women from Tudor times on up through the Roaring 20s wore corsets (or some equivalent there of).

The comfort myth: Stays that are made for you, and you alone, are very comfortable. They don't pinch (it's impossible), they don't poke (unless the boning is working its way out), and they don't make it impossible to breathe. During the Regency they weren't even designed to give you a small waist, but to lift and separate the breasts. In fact, until the introduction of the metal grommet (1828) and the 2 part metal busk (1829) tightening your stays enough to dramatically change your figure was nearly impossible (the fabric would have given out first). Stays merely provided the right silhouette.

The rebel without underwear myth: Ladies (the class about which most authors choose to write) would NOT have gone about without their stays anymore than women today would go around without their bras (social strictures being what they were, they would have been far less inclined to have done so). Also, as most of you know, the "bounce" of an unrestrained breast can be downright painful, and breasts did not bounce any less three hundred years ago. Your heroines are not going to feel constrained or put upon by their stays. Quite the contrary, they'd feel naked without them!

Making your clothes "fit": You simply can't look like Lady Jane Grey, Marie Antoinette, the Duchess of Devonshire, or Lady X without wearing a corset. There is simply no way to get your breasts into the right position without them, and your clothes will buckle and wrinkle. If your heroine doesn't wear them, she's going to look extremely frumpy and odd.

Wearing Stays: While stays are not uncomfortable, they do restrict the wearer in ways you may, and may not, expect. If the garment has shoulder straps (and most do), your heroine is going to have a limited range of arm motion. Her elbows may not be able to move past parallel with one another (she could cross her arms, as though angry, but might not be able to tightly hug herself). If she's wearing long-line stays with a busk (think of having a wooden ruler snugly held against you from between your breasts to below your belly button), she's not going to be able to bend freely at the waist, but will do so from the hip. The busk encouraged excellent posture. The rule about a lady's back never touching the back of her chair is essentially superfluous. Lounging is not an option in stays with a busk. Neither is riding, which is why short stays were often worn under habits (or stays with laces over the hips which would be undone for greater flexibility).

Getting them on and off: Now that you know why your heroine would have been wearing stays, let's talk a little about the contraptions themselves. Once you're got your gal in one, how do you get her out? They don't just pop open (not before 1829 anyway), and you can't just "slip" out of one (and they do NOT pull off over the hips, or up and over the head!). Getting in and out was work. Most women required help to get dressed (a sister, maid, etc.). First the lady would don her chemise. Then she would slip her arms into the arm's eye of her stays, and someone else would lace the back of the stays up. Regency (and Georgian) stays did not hook up the front, so the stays can't be loosened and then unhooked and removed. They have to be completely unlaced. And speaking of lacing, during this time they would most likely have been spiral laced (like being sewn shut) not cross laced (like Victorian corsets, which were meant to be cinched in). Another thing to remember: the lace holes would have been hand sewn (no metal grommets yet), or made of bone. Getting the lace through all those tiny holes was not easy. So unless your characters have all night, she's staying laced up.

Special note about Victorian corsets: When figures were being radically reformed, women "trained" their bodies into these shapes, and were used to wearing the corsets from girlhood. It's not at all like one of us attempting to suddenly cinch our waist down to a fashionable 19-inches. This training is imperative. The body slowly adjusts and you can easily trim 4-6 inches without any real pain or work with only a few weeks of nightly training. If you have an exceptionally flexible rib cage (as several of my friends do) you can train down even more. A lifetime of this sort of thing could easily trim 10-14 inches off your waist (though this sort of extreme reshaping takes a toll on internal organs). I've heard that Winona Ryder fractured ribs while making *The Age of Innocence*. I can only image this was the result of some over-zealous corseting. This would not have been a common problem for women of the era, who slowly reshaped their bodies over the course of years.

Sex and the corset: Since I'm busy telling you that your heroines should not only be in corsets, but that if they're going to have any kind of *encounter* at a ball or other social function that they'd be doing it while still laced up (and in all their other undergarments too), I feel compelled to let you in on the dirty little secret of the corset. Any kind of corset (even the un-boned Regency ones) will slightly restrict breathing, and move the "bellows" action from the chest to the belly (think, deep abdominal breathing). Even slight breathing restriction will cause mild auto-erotic asphyxiation, which heightens the sexual response. Sex in a corset is intense! And the tighter the corset, the more intense it is. Any Victorian heroine game enough to try this, is going to be in for a revelation.

Rational Dress, and other corset-less movements: There are a couple of examples during the centuries we are concerned with in which stays were left off. Firstly, during an EXTREMELY short period of time in *Directoire* France (roughly the 1790s). But this fashion trend did not really leave the French shores. Frenchwomen adopted a Grecian ideal, and purportedly abandoned their stays. This style probably didn't make it much out of Paris. An Englishwoman visiting Paris during this period may have joined in, but she would just have certainly put her stays back on before coming home. The Rational Dress movement of the 1850s (which was strongly aligned with the suffragette movement) called for an end to women wearing 10-14 pounds of petticoats in favor of Turkish-style bloomers (as well as an end to corsets). It didn't last. Even the great Amelia Bloomer herself was back in skirts by the end of the decade, having declared that the crinoline made her previous argument moot. In the 1870s there was a movement to reform undergarments, which resulted in the Emancipation Waist (a boneless support garment not all that different in function from the light stays of the Regency). These stuck around for middle class, working women, who needed greater freedom of movement, but were never fashionable, or adopted by the women of the upper class. Mostly the Victorian era underwear reforms will be useful to writers who concentrate on American and Western-set novels, as the movements were American in origin.

TUDOR/ELIZABETHAN (15th – 16th century)

The Pair of Bodies

The term stays and corset both come along later. A pair of bodies from what we traditionally call the “Renaissance” generally have shoulder straps, and end either at the waist or have tabs which go just below the waist (which is more comfortable). They are “boned” with whalebone (which is really not bone at all, but baleen), reeds, or are “corded” with lots of tiny channels holding cord sewn in to provide the necessary stiffness. They were not super tight, and were not designed to pull the waist in, but to flatten and lift the breasts, giving a smooth, tube-like appearance to the torso. There are only two extant examples: one laces up the back and one laces up the front. To get out of either of them though, your dress and other underpinnings had to be removed (and they were spiral laced, not cross laced like a tennis shoe).

The Rest

Under the corset the lady would have worn a shift/chemise of fine linen. Then the corset. On top of it she would have had a Spanish farthingale (cone shaped hoop skirt) and bumroll (a large, padded three-quarter-moon worn tied around the waist to hold out your skirts), or a French “wheel” farthingale (post 1560) and possibly a bumroll (to support the wheel). She would most likely not have worn drawers of any kind. Contrary to what you see at Renaissance Faires, there is no evidence that the women of this era wore bloomers (by the LATE 16th century, bloomers were just being adopted in Italy, it would have taken decades before this reached England). There is documentation for little string-tied bikini-type underpants for women from the “German” duchies, but I haven’t seen documentation of the like for English or Scottish ladies. So if you want underpants, go with the woven bikinis that tie on either side. She would have worn thigh-high stockings, most likely woven, bias cut ones, held up with garters tied above the knee. Knit stockings did exist, and were known to have been worn in Ireland, and a pair of knit silk stockings were an especially treasured gift of Elizabeth I. If your lady has a pair, she’s over the moon about them.

Suggested Viewing: *Lady Jane*, 1553-1554; *Elizabeth R* (BBC miniseries), 1550-1600; *Shakespeare in Love*, c. 1580s (?); *Elizabeth* (HBO miniseries), 1570-1600.

BAROQUE/RESTORATION (17th century)

The Stays

I've read variously that after 1630-40 stays became part of the bodice, only returning in the 1670s as a separate article of clothing, and that stays were worn throughout the period. I would tend to believe the latter. Stays during this period would have either been strapless, or would have had straps that rode over the top the arms (to accommodate the large expanse of shoulder that was shown with the décolletage). I have only ever seen one extant example, and it did indeed have the low straps. In construction they are not that different from those of the early 18th century, being heavily boned, and having a busk down the front.

The Rest

Unfortunately, this period is not very well documented. Very few extant garments survive. Chemises would have been similar to the low-necked ones from the previous century (of cotton or linen, calf-length, with long sleeves). A farthingale, corded petticoat, or multiple petticoats, would have been worn to support the skirts, and knit stockings held up by tied garters would have completed the undergarments. I have seen no documentation to suggest that Italian fashion of bloomers had reached England (or France).

Suggested Viewing: *The Three Musketeers* (1975, Michael York version); *The Fifth Musketeer*; *Catherine the Great* (1995); *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1990 version with Gerard Depardieu); *Restoration*; *Vatal*; *The Lady and the Highwayman*; *Colonel House* (this PBS show gives you a great view of the stays, since the women wear them as outerwear much of the time); *Girl with the Pearl Earring*; *Moll Flanders* (Alex Kingston version); *The Last King*; *Stage Beauty* (really shows the shifts and men's underwear!).

GEORGIAN (18th century)

The Stays

During the Georgian era there was no such thing as a corset. There were jumps and stays. Jumps were un-boned, tightly fitting fabric supports that simply tied shut in the front (they were the kind of thing working women wore). Stays could be half-boned (which is exactly what it sounds like, and would have been worn by the middle and lower classes, as well as the upper-classes for simple daywear), or fully boned (as most surviving examples are). In this period the stays *slightly* pulled in the waist, but were unable to really re-sculpt the body, as the strain on the fabric would have been too much (no metal grommets yet!). These stays lift and flatten the breasts (giving the “babies butt” cleavage effect), and give support for the pannier, which hold out the skirts. The bones are made of whalebone or reed. Most stays have a “busk” of wood or ivory up the front. This item was removable, and was frequently carved or painted (and they were sometimes gifts from lovers or admirers). They mostly laced up the back, and were not easy to get out of (some examples also have laces up the front, but these are for adjusting the fit, not getting in and out of the garment). Most extant examples have shoulder straps, which are designed to pull the shoulders back, giving a very upright carriage. Another thing to note is that they usually just skimmed the top of the nipple, or rode below the nipples. Breasts, for all that they were clearly appreciated, were not fetishized as they were in later periods. A woman exposing her nipples as part of her décolletage was not considered risqué.

The Rest

Under her stays the lady would have worn a shift of fine linen, cotton, or silk. Then the stays. Then the hoops (which could be the small “pocket” variety for regular wear, small day pannier, or the 4’-5’ wide “court” version). In period people referred to a lady’s “hoops” never her “pannier” (which is a Victorian term for these garments). Ladies didn’t wear underpants, pantaloons, bloomers or knickers of any kind. They would have worn knit stockings of cotton or silk, held up with garters tied above the knee. These stockings would have most likely been elaborately “clocked” with embroidery, or knit in colorful stripes (horizontal, not vertical).

Suggested Viewing: *Tom Jones* (Albert Finney or 1997 version), 1740s; *Barry Lyndon* 1750s/1760s; *Aristocrats* 1760-1800; *Dangerous Liaisons*, 1770s; *Ridicule*, 1770s; *Amadeus*, 1780s; *Madness of King George*, 1780s; *Affair of the Necklace*, 1780s; *The Lady and the Duke*, 1780s; *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Richard E. Grant miniseries), 1790s.

REGENCY (extended 1800-1830)

The Stays

Regency stays came in many forms. They were very different from their predecessors. They were not designed to lift the breasts and create cleavage, but to lift and separate the breasts. Stays came in two forms throughout the era: the most common was a longer corset which came down over the hip, and was used to smooth the entire line. These long stays were frequently constructed with little or no boning at all (they're sort of like a fabric girdle). There were also short stays, some of which were rather flimsy wrap-around things that are very close to a modern brassier once on (great example in the Kyoto Costume Institute's collection). The short stays may have had a small pad attached to the back, to "poof" out the back of the dress. Almost all styles during this period had shoulder straps and laced up the back (except for the "wrap" stays). If they were boned, it would have been with whalebone or reed. The longer ones would also usually have had a busk.

The Rest

Under the stays, the lady would have worn a chemise of fine linen, cotton, or silk. Then the stays. During the early "wild" part of this period that would have been it! And they might have dampened even that to make it cling. Later (after the first few years of the 1800s) she might have added a single very fine petticoat (sometimes called an "invisible" petticoat). One thing to note about Regency petticoats: because of the high waist, the petticoat was more like a pinafore. It had shoulder straps, and would have looked remarkably like a shift. Most women during this period did not wear underwear. In the first few years of the century some women wore drawers of flesh colored stockinet that went to just below the knee, but these were by no means a commonly adopted garment. The lack of underwear was a phenomenon so common it was even noted in the political cartoons of the day. Pantalettes (which differ from drawers in that they were meant to show) were considered extremely "fast" when they first appeared around 1806, and were not really accepted until after about 1818-1820. Even then, like drawers, they were crotch-less. Women would have also worn knit stockings of cotton or silk, held up with garters tied or buckled above the knee (just as the women of the Georgian era had). These stockings might also have been striped or clocked.

Suggested Viewing: *Sense and Sensibility* (Emma Thompson version) 1800; *Pride and Prejudice* (Colin Firth version) 1800/1805; *Persuasion* (1995 version) 1805; *Emma* (Beckinsale version) 1810; *Wives and Daughters* 1820s; *Immortal Beloved* 1800-1830; *Vanity Fair* 1800-1830.

VICTORIAN (1830-1900)

The Corset

This period gave life to the corset most people think of when they hear the word. It was heavily boned, had a busk down the front, and laced up the back. It may, or may not, have had shoulder straps. After 1828 it might have had metal grommets, which allowed for it to be tightened much more than previously, and they then began to be used to severely alter the natural figure. The fashionable waist dropped, and got smaller and smaller during this time period (with crinolines and bustles used to accentuate this). In extreme cases (towards the end of the century) some women even had their floating ribs removed to allow their waists to be made even smaller. In 1829 the 2-part metal busk was introduced and by the mid-Victorian era had become nearly ubiquitous. For the first time corsets did not have to be completely unlaced to be removed, only loosened enough for the busk to be popped apart. But do not imagine that these are now an “easy in/easy out” garment. Getting back in was a chore. In the late 1870s and early 1880s the Emancipation Waist has its heyday, mostly among the suffragettes we all love to write about (use it!). There are lots of films to look at, in fact, there are so many films (and fashion changes so much by decade) that you really have to pay attention to exactly when the film is set. What Emma Thompson is wearing in *Impromptu* (1830s) is a far cry from what Angelina Jolie has on in *Original Sin* (1870s). Both great examples, but of totally different undergarments.

The Rest

During the long period which is the reign of Queen Victoria, fashion changes A LOT. There is always going to be some kind of garment under the corset. Early on it will be a shift. Later it might be a camisole and slip, or a “combination” cami-bloomer onesie. Over that will go one or more petticoats (some 10-14 pounds of them by the 1840s!). In 1856 the crinoline (hoop skirt) is invented, and women trade in their heavy petticoats for this lightweight cage of metal, bamboo, or stiffened horse hair. A women might still wear a petticoat or two under the crinoline for warmth. As the century wears on a whole line of different kinds of crinolines (hoops, bustles, and tonnures) come in and out of fashion. Luckily this era is heavily documented, and easily researched. Pantalettes went out early on (certainly by the 1840s) and fell into the purview of little girls. Women will all be wearing crotchless bloomers, and knit stockings of cotton, wool, or silk (oddly enough red and purple were favorite colors!). These were held up with garters tied or buckled above the knee, and than later (post 1878) with suspenders and clips from the corset (like a modern garter belt).

Suggested Viewing: **1830s**, *Oniegin*, *Impromptu*; **1840s**, *Jane Eyre* (BBC 1997 version), *Cousin Bette*; **1850s**, *Angels and Insects*, *The Piano*; **1860s**, *Little Women* (1999 version) *Mrs. Brown*; **1870s**, *Age of Innocence*, *Original Sin*; **1880s**, *Camille Claudel*, *Jude* (1996 version); **1890s**, *Tipping the Velvet*, *Topsy Turvey*.