

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE FAIR SEX

selected from

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by D. S. Campbell, October 2019

The *Scots Magazine* was one of several monthly publications founded in Britain during the early 18th century. Typically for its genre, it reported parliamentary debates, national events, and news from home and abroad. Each edition also carried essays, social notes, letters to the editor and poetry.

The following short articles address "women's issues." At times they are moralising, at others light-hearted:

(1) One presents the health risks posed to women by the fashion of wearing tightly-laced corsets.

(2) The second article discusses women's capability to participate in government. Although slightly farcical, it acknowledges that the curbs on women's role were custom and convention, not any lack of inherent ability or interest. [Progress would come slowly: no less than 175 years were to elapse before the first woman was elected to Westminster.]

(3) Another (more risqué) pretends to censure the incidental exposure of a wearer's legs by the use of hoop-skirts.

(d) The fourth describes how the sight of two young ladies at a window caused a male passer-by to ogle, and relates the misfortune that he suffered. [We learn that, even centuries before mobile phones, distracted pedestrians were already prone to walking into posts.]

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(1) Bad Effects of Strait-Laced Stays (pp.367-368)

from the *Dublin Journal*, Aug. 2, 1743

I am one who has a just and great esteem for the better, as well as the more beautiful part of the human species, the fair sex ; and therefore desire to convey a useful piece of intelligence to them.

It is the custom here, as in *England*, for the women to wear stays : and, from having always been used to the tight and slender waists which these give them, I am not able to endure the loose mishapen dress of foreigners. And yet I could wish there was not a pair of stays in the world : for, not satisfied with an easy slender shape, with which they are naturally blessed, but ever desirous of vying with each other, our women have almost universally fallen into the practice of strait-lacing ; a practice most hurtful to themselves, and hateful to the men.

If this custom be begun early, or in childhood, it never fails to distort the woman, and beget crookedness in the waist, and probably in other parts of the body also. And this, by bending and narrowing the chest, which ought to be left large and open for the victuals to play in, doth so destroy the health, as that no after care is able to restore it ; but the poor creature continues, all her life after, to labour under a broken constitution, and a continued chain of disorders and sicknesses, without resource or remedy. Nor is it for the time less hurtful to those who have taken it up, thro' custom, when they are come to be women.

For, altho' from the bones being new full grown and hard, they cannot make themselves crooked by it ; yet will their strait-lacing, by pressing the waist, and squeezing in the flesh within the ribs, hinder the free breathing of the lungs, interrupt the action of the stomach, and stop the circulation of the blood and juices ; which

must in a little time produce many dangerous disorders. These must soon beget an irregular intermitting pulse, great and frequent giddinesses in the head, and, upon any exercise, violent palpitations of the heart, and what is still worse, a foulness of the stomach, a nauseating of meat, vomitings, wind, gripings, and all the agonies of the worst cholick.

And all this is endured by both of them, not only for no purpose, but to the sure destruction of the very end they aim at : for, were a slender waist to be obtained by this means, as it is certain it never can, it would not advantage them in the opinion of the men. I never knew a man who had any great regard for it. A middling shape, which almost every straight woman has, is what they most esteem; any thing more than this, they neglect or despise. They cannot therefore advantage themselves by this ; but they will be sure to do themselves a great deal of harm. If they be deformed or crooked, I need not tell my fair readers how disagreeable this makes them ; but I must tell them, the men know many of them to be crooked, who think they are taken for very straight women. A crookedness of any great degree can never be hid ; but the men will tell you, they see it plainly in the face, altho' all other appearance of it may be hid in the limbs and body, by cork and iron stays, a high-rumped hoop, and long petticoats. Thus are these poor creatures hurt, or perhaps ruined in their constitutions and in consequence of this, too frequently in their marriages also ; and all this upon a preposterous notion of lacing them into a more gentle and slender shape : A notion so utterly absurd and groundless, that it is a wonder it has not long since been banished from the world. Look upon the men, and there is not one of a thousand that is crooked ; look upon the women of the lower rank, and it is the same thing with them. All are straight and well shaped, where there is no force used, but nature is left to itself. But look upon the women of better degree, and it is quite otherwise with them. Their mothers would have

them well shaped, and so from their infancy have squeezed them up in stiff stays ; and therefore more than the half of them are crooked.

But if the women be not made crooked, yet, as straight-lacing will destroy their health, so will it their beauty also. By squeezing in the waist, it will raise the shoulders, and make them high and broad ; it will bend forwards the head, hump up the back, and give an ugly set to the mouth and countenance, and such an ungentle carriage to the whole person, as must render them very disagreeable. But this is not the worst of it ; it will do them another mischief that is still more odious, and which, out of my great regard for the women, I can hardly tell how to mention. But it is not a thing to be concealed: the men all know it ; and it is necessary the women should be told it ; and no intimacy can enable one to tell it to particulars. It is therefore this, that a STINKING BREATH is always the sure effect of straight-lacing also : for as this must interrupt the circulation of the blood and juices, and so quickly breed a foulness in the stomach ; so must it give a rankness, or a stink, to the breath, answerable to this foulness. And as most of our young Ladies give more or less into this practice, so it is that the most of them have tainted breaths. The greatest part of them, indeed, only in a very little degree, and so as that it cannot be perceived, but upon a near approach, and a very close conversation ; but some of them, thro' an excess in this custom, are tainted to such a height, as that there cannot be a worse stink, and you cannot come near them but you must smell it.

Now, how extremely odious this must make them to the men, altho' none of the aforementioned disagreeablenesses were incurred, is easy to imagine. The face and shape of an angel would not be agreeable to me, were they accompanied with the stink of a house of office ; and a stinking breath is worse than this. It is such an

abominable attendant, that no shape, no features, no complexion or carriage, can make any amends for it ; but the woman that is possessed of it, must be disagreeable, must be hateful. I could give many instances of the sad effects which this has had both upon myself and others ; where, from that love and admiration which the appearance of a beautiful well-dressed woman has begat in my heart, I have, by this, been suddenly thrown down into nauseating and detestation : but one of the most remarkable of them which happened to myself shall suffice.

I was some time since in a company of very agreeable women, and while they were all sitting on one side of the room and talking to each other, I was walking about it and entertaining myself with listening to their chat, and viewing their persons in all the advantages of dress and motion ; when, upon some dispute arising amongst them, they all started up, and I instantly found myself surrounded with a beautiful circle, which I could not look upon without great delight ; when, lo ! turning myself to one that was a noted toast, and whom I thought the prettiest among them, I was saluted with such a whiff of stinking breath as almost knocked me down, and made me instantly shift about to another, but still without any advantage, and so again to a third, till at last I was enveloped in such a general stink, that there was no enduring it, but I was forced violently to break from them, and to get me to a greater distance before I could bear to give an answer to their question. And this had such an unhappy effect upon me, that for some time after I did not see a woman but I imagined she had this stink about her ; and it gave me a disgust to the whole sex in general, that I did not suddenly get rid of ; but to this hour I cannot hear the women stiled by the name of *sweet creatures* without being shocked at the impropriety of the epithet.

Thus have I given a true representation of the effects of strait-lacing; and which I am convinced, every one of the women will experience more or less, to be the case with them, as they give more or less into this practice. My expressions indeed are not very delicate in the latter part of this paper. But I have on purpose chosen these plain and rough words, that I might, if possible, by the odiousness of the thing, frighten [my] fair readers from being guilty of it ; and so preserve them those amiable and delightful creatures that God has made them. I look upon them not only as the most beautiful, but also as the most virtuous, and least fallen part of our creation ; and I esteem them accordingly : but yet, in attempting to reform them, I have not proceeded so much from my regard to the women, as from my love to mankind in general, whose welfare I know to depend upon theirs, and which must increase or lessen in proportion to the good-will and love which the men have for them.—*I am, &c.*

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(2) A Scheme for a Female Government (pp.73-75)

from the *Universal Spectator*, Feb. 19, 1743

Mr Spectator, I have often wondered that the females should be so generally excluded from the publick parts of life, and could never be satisfied that nature intended such a deprivation. What qualities are requisite for any dignity or employment which are not the known characteristics of the fair sex? Are not they handsome enough for soldiers, and genteel enough for [members] of [parliament] ? Have our statesmen more cunning and penetration ? And can the [Right Reverend] boast of more piety ? By the constitution of *England*, women may hold, and have held the highest station on the kingdom, a station that is said to be perfect ;

then is it not absurd that they should be deemed incapable of all inferior and subordinate functions ? and how ridiculous is it to deny them a share in the publick administration, who, in private, *govern our governors*, and teach our senators wisdom !

I would therefore propose, that the female sex may be admitted to their natural rights; and that, after the expiration of the present septennial [parliament], the whole female sex may be rendered politically capable of serving their country both in church and state, and be chosen members of the [house] of [Commons].

I conceive this change in the form of our government not only to be such as justice calls for, but that it will also very much contribute to the usefulness of [c—rt-] politicians : for, as there are place-men, so there should be place-women, who should keep their places and posts according as they had voted or debated. It would be hard if Ladies were to resign their places and honours, and sink into plain housewives again at the end of seven years ; we can hardly expect that they would then exert themselves with that ardour which so extraordinary an occasion would require : but when they consider themselves in a state of probation for their own and the whole sex's future advancement, we may reasonably hope for such an exact conformity to their respective duties, as will crown that period with glory to themselves, and shame to a male [administration].

Besides advancing the Ladies to posts in civil government, I would be for trusting them with military commands. We have had *English* Queens before now at the head of armies. However, I would not chuse, by the word *military*, that our brave and honest *English* seamen should be divested of their employments, who, tho' they may not have been so useful of late years as might have been expected, yet it is well known that they are not to blame for it. But, lest our grave judges should explain the term in an extensive sense,

(and we must allow that the naval is the natural and best military strength of this nation), it may be proper to have a proviso, That the ships of war shall be manned with men only ; otherwise our Spanish prizes may be determined illegal, because the captors were of the wrong gender.

It is a common observation, that if the People of *England* can but keep up forms and appearances, they are not very solicitous about the things themselves : for this reason I would propose, that such females as shall be substituted in the places of the men, may exchange habits with them ; and that every dignity, station and employment may go by the present denomination : for I am aware, that a good many well-meaning people, who may be pleased with this mutation of sex, would nevertheless take great offence at the senate's appearing in *petticoats*, or that it should be read in a foreign gazette, that the [parliament] of *G. Britain* was prorogued for a month by a Lady of the Bedchamber.—Nor is this my only reason for the foregoing regulation ; for, I apprehend a very beneficial effect would arise from cladding the degraded males with the female attire of their successors, and by adding labels, to be worn as shoulder-knots, denoting the preferments which by their corruptions they had forfeited. Thus stigmatized, such of them as had any sense of shame left, would repent in earnest ; and the rest of mankind, who should afterwards think of serving their country in any publick capacity, would know that other qualifications were necessary, besides those required by the [t—t] acts.

I think, *Mr Spectator*, there may be given very good reasons to expect our foreign affairs may be well conducted under a female administration ; but it may be proper to lay down some rules for the choice and regulation of our new *Ambassadors*.—In the first place, I would not only have them clothed like men, but

likewise to have strong features, and brown complexions, that so they may really pass for such. And my view in this is, that the ministers abroad may be as open and undisguised as they used to be ; which I fear they would not, when they perceived a different kind of *politicians*.

In the next place, I would have them understand *Latin*, and the principal foreign languages ; but not to discover that they are so qualified : by means whereof they may, at courts and other publick assemblies, pick up useful hints and intelligence, which may be dropt upon a presumption that some people have no more than their mother-tongue.

And as it is absolutely necessary that their sex should be concealed, I cannot admit of any indulgence, which some would have allowed. I would therefore recommend *maids*, turned of *fifty*, as the properest persons for these employments, and who, as they have not tasted the comforts of wedlock, seem to have the best title to be so promoted. The *widows* of that age may perhaps be offended that I exclude them ; but, should they marry again, and I dare not trust them, it might occasion reports of a worse nature.

I am apprehensive there may now be Ladies who, in effect, hold places, which, for form's sake, are officiated by men : as to these, I think, that if the deputies were not put in by them, and had such ample allowances as to have no occasion to make unjust perquisites, it may be lawful for them to continue in their several places, provided they do the duties in their proper persons.

If these hints, Mr *Stonecastle*, can be of service towards introducing the Ladies into a new ministry ; or, if you will consider my project more at large, you'll oblige one who has long been a subject to *petticoat-government*.

SIMON NOODLE.

P. S. My wife gives her service, and, on this revolution, is in great hopes of being Secretress of State ; if she is, she will remember Mr *Stonecastle*.

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(3) Remarks upon Hoop-Petticoats (p.524)

Nov. 1743

SIR, I hold it necessary, in this age of gallantry, to make some mention of a practice prevalent among the fair sex, which I think not quite so consonant to their native modesty as may be wished. It is, in short, this : They have contrived to make their hoops of so enormous a size, and at the same time so light, that the least shove from a passenger in the street may elevate one side of them to such a degree, that I, for example, who am but low of stature, have nothing to do but make use of my eyes, without any declination of my body, to measure, with the small share of geometry I am master of, the regular proportion of the pretty creatures' legs from the ancles to the knees ; and, if I were a more curious observer, perhaps a little higher. Nay, sometimes, as if they designed their hoops for more effectual nets or traps, notwithstanding the abundance of their other decoys, it is with very great difficulty, that, in passing, I can hinder myself from being carried along in the vortex. — And, alas ! what would become of me then ? But this is not all : for, if by this elevation, of which I am complaining, nothing were to be seen which might invite the wanton fancy of a libertine to wish his eyes were blessed with other still more bewitching objects, the evil might be tolerable : but, as things are at present, the prospect is rendered so tempting by the neat gloss of a white stocking folded

over a well shaped leg, that there is nothing at which the desire of such a wild young fellow can stop, altho' a person of my gravity may be able to survey all these things in their naked essence with the utmost coolness. But it is not every one, Sir, who can claim so much dispassionate philosophy as myself. On the contrary, it was but t'other day I observed a sauntering rakish beau, under pretence of helping a fair one into a coach, and adjusting her petticoats on the seat, delightedly feasting his eye with the form of her leg, and pressing his hand, with a sort of unconscious officiousness, close to her knee in ascending to sit by her. With what dangerous consequences may this be attended ! — Another time, I saw a Lady, in order to avoid the inconvenience her cloaths might receive from a narrow street, walk with them in so sublime a posture, that I, among the rest, might have taken the length of a charming leg, and besides, have determined to a nicety the place where she chose to tie her garter.—I cannot part without informing you, Sir, of another occurrence, to which I was a witness, at a review ; where, planting myself behind an open landau, that I might see the exercise of the sons of *Mars* without being incommoded by the crowd, all my warlike disposition had like (but for the philosophy I hinted I was possessed of) to be changed into the more pleasing one of the wars of *Venus*, who struck me in the eye from a Lady who was mounted on the seat of the landau, in order to behold with more advantage the course of the ceremony. She stood in so very advantageous an attitude, indeed, for my purpose, as she leaned to the left, that I was entertained with more objects than I think fit to communicate, especially as she ascended and descended.—But I find that the description grows too warm, and therefore here I leave off in time, with assuring you, Sir, that I am,

Your constant Reader,

Edw. DAPPER.

P. S. I should have proposed this as a proper subject for the pulpit ; only I reflected on the usage a certain divine met with, (mentioned by a late author), who got the name of *Parson Patch*, as, perhaps, any grave Doctor might, if he dared to discourage such an apparent excitement to vice, among the wags of this age, be stigmatised with that of *Parson Peep-bo*.

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(4) Perils of an Admirer (p.328)

from the *Universal Spectator*, Jul 23, 1743

SIR, I am such an admirer of the fair sex, that I never see a pretty woman but I stand *gaping* at her ; which I allow indeed to be ill manners.—As I was walking along the street the other day, I saw in a window on the other side of the way a charming Lady : I was fixed, I stood all attentive to survey her charms.—During this another charmer joined her : then was I *imag'd* to the ground.—While I was thinking which was the real Goddess of beauty, a damn'd curs'd porter, with a burden on his shoulders, knocked off my hat and wig, and almost broke my head. I was alarmed ; and, after having gathered up my garniture, I cast my eyes towards the window ; and there the two mischievous, hard-hearted devils stood laughing at me, tho' they knew that they were the occasion of my misfortune. I am informed they have occasioned many accidents, by making some Gentlemen run against posts, stumble or jostle against people.

Now, Mr *Spectator*, by your *canaille* I advise all my brother *women-gapers* to look to themselves, and, in the streets, to take heed of their ways, instead of gazing after vanity.—*Your's, &c.*

JOHN STARE

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