

Tatler 116 January 5, 1709 (Addison)

No. 116.

From Tuesday, Jan. 3, to Thursday, Jan. 5, 1709-10.

—Pars minima est ipsa puella sui.

OVID, Rem. Amor. 344.

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Sheer Lane, January 4.

The court being prepared for proceeding on the cause of the petticoat, I gave orders to bring in a criminal who was taken up as she went out of the puppet-show about three nights ago, and was now standing in the street with a great concourse of people about her. Word was brought me, that she had endeavoured twice or thrice to come in, but could not do it by reason of her petticoat, which was too large for the entrance of my house, though I had ordered both the folding-doors to be thrown open for its reception. Upon this, I desired the jury of matrons, who stood at my right hand, to inform themselves of her condition, and know whether there were any private reasons why she might not make her appearance separate from her petticoat. This was managed with great discretion, and had such an effect, that upon the return of the verdict from

the bench
of matrons, I issued out an order forthwith, that the criminal
should be
stripped of her encumbrances, till she became little enough to
enter my
house. I had before given directions for an engine of several
legs, that
could contract or open itself like the top of an umbrella,[10]
in order
to place the petticoat upon it, by which means I might take a
leisurely
survey of it, as it should appear in its proper dimensions.
This was all
done accordingly; and forthwith, upon the closing of the
engine, the
petticoat was brought into court. I then directed the machine
to be set
upon the table, and dilated in such a manner as to show the
garment in
its utmost circumference; but my great hall was too narrow for
the
experiment; for before it was half unfolded, it described so
immoderate
a circle, that the lower part of it brushed upon my face as I
sate in my
chair of judicature. I then inquired for the person that
belonged to the
petticoat; and to my great surprise, was directed to a very
beautiful
young damsel, with so pretty a face and shape, that I bid her
come out
of the crowd, and seated her upon a little crock at my left
hand. "My
pretty maid," said I, "do you own yourself to have been the
inhabitant
of the garment before us?" The girl I found had good sense,
and told me

with a smile, that notwithstanding it was her own petticoat, she should be very glad to see an example made of it; and that she wore it for no other reason, but that she had a mind to look as big and burly as other persons of her quality; that she had kept out of it as long as she could, and till she began to appear little in the eyes of all her acquaintance; that if she laid it aside, people would think she was not made like other women. I always give great allowances to the fair sex upon account of the fashion, and therefore was not displeased with the defence of my pretty criminal. I then ordered the vest which stood before us to be drawn up by a pulley to the top of my great hall, and afterwards to be spread open by the engine it was placed upon, in such a manner, that it formed a very splendid and ample canopy over our heads, and covered the whole court of judicature with a kind of silken rotunda, in its form not unlike the cupola of St. Paul's. I entered upon the whole cause with great satisfaction as I sat under the shadow of it.

The counsel for the petticoat was now called in, and ordered to produce what they had to say against the popular cry which was raised against it. They answered the objections with great strength and solidity of

argument, and expatiated in very florid harangues, which they did not fail to set off and furbelow (if I may be allowed the metaphor) with many periodical sentences and turns of oratory. The chief arguments for their client were taken, first, from the great benefit that might arise to our woollen manufactory from this invention, which was calculated as follows: the common petticoat has not above four yards in the circumference; whereas this over our heads had more in the semi-diameter; so that by allowing it twenty-four yards in the circumference, the five millions of woollen petticoats, which (according to Sir William Petty) supposing what ought to be supposed in a well-governed state, that all petticoats are made of that stuff, would amount to thirty millions of those of the ancient mode. A prodigious improvement of the woollen trade! and what could not fail to sink the power of France in a few years.

To introduce the second argument, they begged leave to read a petition of the ropemakers, wherein it was represented, that the demand for cords, and the price of them, were much risen since this fashion came up. At this, all the company who were present lifted up their eyes into the vault; and I must confess, we did discover many traces of cordage which were interwoven in the stiffening of the drapery.

A third argument was founded upon a petition of the Greenland

trade,
which likewise represented the great consumption of whalebone
which
would be occasioned by the present fashion, and the benefit
which would
thereby accrue to that branch of the British trade.

To conclude, they gently touched upon the weight and
unwieldiness of the
garment, which they insinuated might be of great use to
preserve the
honour of families.

These arguments would have wrought very much upon me (as I
then told the
company in a long and elaborate discourse) had I not
considered the
great and additional expense which such fashions would bring
upon
fathers and husbands; and therefore by no means to be thought
of till
some years after a peace. I further urged, that it would be a
prejudice
to the ladies themselves, who could never expect to have any
money in
the pocket, if they laid out so much on the petticoat. To this
I added,
the great temptation it might give to virgins, of acting in
security
like married women, and by that means give a check to
matrimony, an
institution always encouraged by wise societies.

At the same time, in answer to the several petitions produced
on that
side, I showed one subscribed by the women of several persons
of
quality, humbly setting forth, that since the introduction of

this mode,
their respective ladies had, instead of bestowing on them
their cast
gowns, cut them into shreds, and mixed them with the cordage
and
buckram, to complete the stiffening of their under-petticoats.
For
which, and sundry other reasons, I pronounced the petticoat a
forfeiture: but to show that I did not make that judgment for
the sake
of filthy lucre, I ordered it to be folded up, and sent it as
a present
to a widow gentlewoman, who has five daughters, desiring she
would make
each of them a petticoat out of it, and send me back the
remainder,
which I design to cut into stomachers, caps, facings of my
waistcoat
sleeves, and other garnitures suitable to my age and quality.

I would not be understood, that, while I discard this
monstrous
invention, I am an enemy to the proper ornaments of the fair
sex. On
the contrary, as the hand of nature has poured on them such a
profusion
of charms and graces, and sent them into the world more
amiable and
finished than the rest of her works; so I would have them
bestow upon
themselves all the additional beauties that art can supply
them with,
provided it does not interfere with, disguise, or pervert,
those of
nature.

I consider woman as a beautiful romantic animal, that may be

adorned
with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks.
The lynx
shall cast its skin at her feet to make her a tippet; the
peacock,
parrot, and swan, shall pay contributions to her muff; the sea
shall be
searched for shells, and the rocks for gems; and every part of
nature
furnish out its share towards the embellishment of a creature
that is
the most consummate work of it. All this I shall indulge them
in; but as
for the petticoat I have been speaking of, I neither can, nor
will allow
it.