

The Lady's Dressing Room

By Jonathan Swift

1732

annotated by J. Lynch

Five Hours, (and who can do it less in?)
By haughty *Celia* spent in Dressing;
The Goddess from her Chamber issues,
Arrayed in Lace, Brocades and Tissues.

[Strephon](#), who found the Room was void, [5]
And [Betty](#) otherwise employed;
Stole in, and took a strict Survey,
Of all the Litter as it lay;
Whereof, to make the Matter clear,
An Inventory follows here. [10]

And first a dirty Smock appeared,
Beneath the Arm-pits well besmeared.
Strephon, the Rogue, displayed it wide,
And turned it round on every Side.
On such a Point few Words are best, [15]
And *Strephon* bids us guess the rest;
But swears how damnably the Men lie,
In calling *Celia* sweet and cleanly.
Now listen while he next produces,
The various Combs for various Uses, [20]
Filled up with Dirt so closely fixed,
No Brush could force a way betwixt.
A Paste of Composition rare,
Sweat, Dandruff, Powder, [Lead](#) and Hair;
A Forehead Cloth with Oil upon't [25]
To smooth the Wrinkles on her [Front](#);
Here [Allum Flower](#) to stop the Steams,
Exhaled from sour unsavoury Streams,
There Night-gloves made of [Tripsy's](#) Hide,

Bequeathed by *Tripsy* when she died, [30]
With Puppy Water, Beauty's Help
Distilled from *Tripsy's* darling [Whelp](#);
Here [Gallypots](#) and Vials placed,
Some filled with washes, some with Paste,
Some with [Pomatum](#), Paints and Slops, [35]
And Ointments good for scabby Chops.
[Hard](#) by a filthy Basin stands,
Fouled with the Scouring of her Hands;
The Basin takes whatever comes
The Scrapings of her Teeth and Gums, [40]
A nasty Compound of all Hues,
For here she spits, and here she spews.
But oh! it turned poor *Strephon's* Bowels,
When he beheld and smelt the Towels,
Begummed, bemattered, and beslimed [45]
With Dirt, and Sweat, and Ear-Wax grimed.
No Object *Strephon's* Eye escapes,
Here Petticoats in [frowzy](#) Heaps;
Nor be the Handkerchiefs forgot
All varnished o'er with Snuff and Snot. [50]
The Stockings, why should I expose,
Stained with the Marks of stinking Toes;
Or greasy [Coifs and Pinders](#) reeking,
Which *Celia* slept at least a Week in?
A Pair of Tweezers next he found [55]
To pluck her Brows in Arches round,
Or Hairs that sink the Forehead low,
Or on her Chin like Bristles grow.

The Virtues we must not let pass,
Of *Celia's* magnifying [Glass](#). [60]
When frightened *Strephon* cast his Eye on't
It showed the Visage of a Giant.
A Glass that can to Sight disclose,

The smallest Worm in *Celia's* Nose,
And faithfully direct her Nail [65]
To squeeze it out from Head to Tail;
For catch it nicely by the Head,
It must come out alive or dead.
Why *Strephon* will you tell the rest?
And must you needs describe the Chest? [70]
That careless Wench! no Creature warn her
To move it out from yonder Corner;
But leave it standing full in Sight
For you to exercise your Spite.
In vain, the Workman showed his Wit [75]
With Rings and Hinges counterfeit
To make it seem in this Disguise,
A Cabinet to vulgar Eyes;
For *Strephon* ventured to look in,
Resolved to go thro' thick and thin; [80]
He lifts the Lid, there needs no more,
He smelt it all the Time before.
As from within [Pandora's Box](#),
When *Epimetheus* op'd the Locks,
A sudden universal Crew [85]
Of humane Evils upwards flew;
He still was comforted to find
That *Hope* at last remained behind;
So *Strephon* lifting up the Lid,
To view what in the Chest was hid. [90]
The Vapours flew from out the Vent,
But *Strephon* cautious never meant
The Bottom of the Pan to grope,
And fowl his Hands in Search of *Hope*.
O never may such vile [Machine](#) [95]
Be once in *Celia's* Chamber seen!

O may she better learn to keep
"Those [Secrets of the hoary deep!](#)"
As [Mutton](#) Cutlets, Prime of Meat,
Which tho' with Art you salt and beat, [100]
As Laws of Cookery require,
And toast them at the clearest Fire;
If from adown the hopeful Chops
The Fat upon a Cinder drops,
To stinking Smoke it turns the Flame [105]
Pois'ning the Flesh from whence it came;
And up exhales a greasy Stench,
For which you curse the careless Wench;
So Things, which must not be expressed,
When plumped into the reeking Chest; [110]
Send up an excremental Smell
To taint the Parts from whence they fell.
The Petticoats and Gown perfume,
Which waft a Stink round every Room.
Thus finishing his grand Survey, [115]
Disgusted *Strephon* stole away
Repeating in his amorous Fits,
Oh! *Celia, Celia, Celia* shits!
But Vengeance, Goddess never sleeping
Soon punished *Strephon* for his Peeping; [120]
His foul Imagination links
Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks:
And, if unsav'ry Odours fly,
Conceives a Lady standing by:
All Women his Description fits, [125]
And both Idea's jump like Wits:
By vicious Fancy coupled fast,
And still appearing in Contrast.
I pity wretched *Strephon* blind
To all the Charms of Female Kind; [130]

Should I the Queen of Love refuse,
 Because she rose from stinking Ooze?
 To him that looks behind the Scene,
[Satira's but some pocky Quean](#).
 When *Celia* in her Glory shows, [135]
 If *Strephon* would but stop his Nose;
 (Who now so impiously blasphemes
 Her Ointments, Daubs, and Paints and Creams,
 Her Washes, Slops, and every Clout,
 With which he makes so foul a Rout;) [140]
 He soon would learn to think like me,
 And bless his ravished Sight to see
 Such Order from Confusion sprung,
 Such gaudy Tulips raised from Dung.

Notes

5. The names *Strephon* and *Celia* come from classical pastoral poetry or romance.
6. *Betty* is the generic name for a maidservant.
24. *Lead* was used as a cosmetic to whiten the face.
26. *Front*, "forehead."
27. *Allum flower*, or powdered alum, is used as an antiperspirant.
29. *Tripsy*, a typical name of a lapdog.
32. *Whelp*, "puppy."
33. *Gallypots*, "jars."
35. *Pomatum*, "ointment for the hair."
37. *Hard*, "near."
48. *Frowzy*, "messy."
53. *Coifs and Pinner*s, "night caps."
60. *Glass*, "mirror."

83. *Pandora's Box*: From Greek mythology, this refers to the box that Zeus gave to Pandora. She was told not to open it, but she gave in to curiosity; as she opened it, all the miseries and evils of the world flew out—except one, hope—and that's why we have suffering in the world. She is an Eve figure in Greek mythology. Epimetheus (84) was her husband, created by Zeus. Epimetheus was warned never to accept a gift from the gods, but he did—the box that Pandora opened.

95. *Machine*, "Any complicated piece of workmanship" (Johnson).

98. "*Those Secrets of the hoary deep*": See *Paradise Lost*, 2.890-91: "Before their eyes in sudden view appear/The secrets of the hoary Deep."

99. *Mutton*: Meat from an older, mature sheep. Very rich in flavor, this is less tender and delicate than lamb.

134. *Satira*, the heroine of *The Rival Queens* by Nathaniel Lee; *quean*, "A worthless woman, generally a strumpet" (Johnson). *Pocky* suggests either smallpox or a venereal disease.

**The Reasons that Induced Dr. S. to write a
Poem called "The Lady's Dressing Room"
by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu
1732
annotated by T. Howe**

The [Doctor](#) in a clean starched band,
His golden snuff box in his hand,
With care his diamond ring displays
And artful shows its various rays,
While grade he stalks down ----- street [5]
His dearest Betty ----- to meet.

Long had he waited for this hour,
Nor gained admittance to the [bower](#),
Had joked and punned, and swore and writ,
Tried all his gallantry and wit, [10]
Had told her oft what part he bore
[In Oxford's schemes in days of yore](#),
But bawdy, politics, nor satire
Could move this dull hard hearted creature.
Jenny her maid could taste a rhyme [15]
And, grieved to see him lose his time,
Had kindly whispered in his ear,
"For twice two [pound](#) you enter here;
My lady vows without that sum
It is in vain you write or come." [20]

The destined offering now he brought,
And in a paradise of thought,
With a low bow approached the dame,
Who smiling heard him preach his flame.
His gold she takes (such proofs as these [25]
Convince most unbelieving shes)
And in her trunk rose up to lock it
(Too wise to trust it in her pocket)

And then, returned with blushing grace,
Expects the doctor's warm embrace. [30]

But now this is the proper place
Where morals stare me in the face,
And for the sake of fine expression
I'm forced to make a small digression.
Alas for wretched humankind, [35]
With learning mad, with wisdom blind!
The ox thinks he's for saddle fit
(As long ago friend [Horace](#) writ)
And men their talents still mistaking,
The stutterer fancies his is speaking. [40]
With admiration oft we see
Hard features heightened by toupée,
The [beau](#) affects the politician,
Wit is the [citizen's](#) ambition,
Poor Pope philosophy displays on [45]
With so much rhyme and little reason,
And though he argues ne'er so long
[That all is right](#), his head is wrong.

None strive to know their proper merit
But strain for wisdom, beauty, spirit, [50]
And lose the praise that is their due
While they've th'impossible in view.
So have I seen the injudicious heir
To add one window the whole house impair.

Instinct the hound does better teach, [55]
Who never undertook to preach;
The frightened hare from dogs does run
But not attempts to bear a gun.
Here many noble thoughts occur
But I [prolixity](#) abhor, [60]
And will pursue th'instructive tale
To show the wise in some things fail.

The reverend lover with surprise
 Peeps in her [bubbies](#), and her eyes,
 And kisses both, and tries---and tries. [65]
 The evening in this hellish play,
 Beside his [guineas](#) thrown away,
 Provoked the priest to that degree
 He swore, "The fault is not in me.
 Your damned [close stool](#) so near my nose, [70]
 Your dirty smock, and stinking toes
 Would make a Hercules as tame
 As any beau that you can name."
 The [nymph](#) grown furious roared, "By God
 The blame lies all in [sixty odd](#)," [75]
 And scornful pointing to the door
 Cried, "Fumbler, see my face no more."
 "With all my heart I'll go away,
 But nothing done, I'll nothing pay.
 Give back the money." "How," cried she, [80]
 "Would you palm such a cheat on me!
 For poor four pound to roar and bellow--
 Why sure you want some new [Prunella](#)?"
 "I'll be revenged, you saucy quean"
 (Replies the disappointed Dean) [85]
 "I'll so describe your dressing room
 The very Irish shall not come."
 She answered short, "I'm glad you'll write.
 You'll furnish paper when I shite."

Notes

1. *Doctor*: Jonathan Swift was a Doctor of Divinity; this is an academic/religious university degree. See also lines

63, 68 and 85. The reference to Swift as a "priest" (68) is accurate; Swift was ordained as a priest in the Church of Ireland in 1695.

5. -----: These are deliberate blanks, inserted "for the protection of the innocent," in a manner of speaking. Poets used them instead of spelling out names that would too clearly identify someone in a potentially scandalous manner. Poets will also use these blanks for some obscene words deemed too scandalous to print. Of course, most readers would be able to guess what should appear there, whether from rhyme, meter, or topical knowledge, so the safety such blanks afford is cosmetic.

8. *Bower*: A "bower" is a poetic term for a nest-like enclosure in a tree or some other high place; see Swift's pastoral imagery in the names he gives to his hero and his mistress.

12. *In Oxford's schemes in days of yore*: Swift visited Oxford university in 1691, and received an MA there the following year with the assistance of a friend in a high place, William Temple.

18. *Pound*: See "guineas" at line 67. Both are monetary denominations. A pound is a bit less than a guinea (£1 is 20s; 1gn is 21 shillings). "Twice two pound" is £4, quite an extravagant sum of money in the early 18th century. In 1750, a single penny (240 pennies to a pound, and a pound is just over a dollar today) "would have had more purchasing power than a whole pound in 1998" ([Lambert](#)). About £40/year could keep a small family modestly, the "middling sort" would need around £120, and a "gentleman" couldn't live well under around £400. In the 18th century, clothes were more expensive, comparatively—a complete man's suit of clothes could cost £8, and an orphan's suit of clothes, someone cared

for at the public expense, cost about one and a half pounds ([“Currency, Coinage, and the Cost of Living”](#)).

38: *Horace*: An ancient Roman philosopher and poet, much admired and imitated by the Augustans. The previous lines allude to Horace’s *Epistles*, Book I:14, line 43.

43. *Beau*: A young male lover, typically used to refer to a young man of nice etiquette and dress, not one given to serious thought.

44. *Citizen*: A townsman, a city-dweller, a man of business; this is often used as a derogatory term. A “cit” or “citizen” is not a person, typically, of wit and learning—a philistine.

48: *That all is right*: This is an allusion to Alexander Pope’s, *Essay on Man*, a philosophical poem about the supremely ordered universe; in epistle I, line 1734, we learn that “*all that is, is right.*” This idea would later be satirized by Voltaire in *Candide* (“The best of all possible worlds”).

60. *Prolixity*: Long-windedness.

64. *Bubbies*: Early modern slang, common in the 18th century, for breasts.

67: *Guineas*: See “pounds” at line xx. Both are monetary denominations. A pound is a bit less than a guinea (£1 is 20s; 1gn is 21 shillings). In 1750, a single penny (240 pennies to a pound, and a pound is just over a dollar today) “would have had more purchasing power than a whole pound in 1998” ([Lambert](#)). About £40/year could keep a small family modestly, the “middling sort” would need around £120, and a “gentleman” couldn’t live well under around £400. In the 18th century, clothes were more expensive, comparatively—a complete man’s suit of clothes could cost £8, and an orphan’s suit of clothes, someone cared for at the public expense, cost about one

and a half pounds ([“Currency, Coinage, and the Cost of Living”](#)).

70. *Close-stool*: A chamber pot housed in a discreet box.

74. *Nymph*: Again, a poetic, elegant, pastoral term for a young woman. Here, it’s being used ironically, as many of the names are.

75: *Sixty-odd*: Swift was sixty-four when he wrote “The Lady’s Dressing Room.”

83: *Prunella*: The cloth of parson’s and lawyer’s gowns, as well as the upper parts of women’s shoes from the mid-17th century on. Also, the word suggests a woman’s name. There’s an Italian fairy/folk tale about a woman named Prunella; she was a maiden locked in a tower, much like Rapunzel, who needed to be rescued.