**The plan for today: 1) JA using 2) JA letters/ clothing overall**

**3) Details and timelines**

Jane Austen was born in 1775 and died in 1817. Thus her life covers one of the most fascinating periods in fashion history. Most costume historians frame the changes in fashion during this time in terms of a renewed fascination with classicism, antiquities, Greek and Roman sculpture and classical ideals of freedom and libberty as expressed in the American and French Revolutions. But fashion is often influenced by other, quite practical, factors: in 1774, the year before Austen was born, England lifted restrictions against printing cotton. In 1795, England levied a tax on hair powder.

When we consider Austen’s work, or rather when we visualize it, the clothing is one is one of the first things we think of. Yet Austen’s novels contain few references to clothing. Her characters may be involved in dressing or working on clothing, but there is little discussion of it. This may be due to the fact that clothing, as personal adornment, falls under the proscription against making personal comments about others. Or, as Miss Bates says of Emma: “Must not compliment, I know, that would be rude, but upon my word Miss Woodhouse, you do look…” She does not finish the sentence but we are invited to do so.

However, there are clothing references to be found and, while they may not provide us with a clear picture of what the clothing actually looks like, they do provide us other kinds of information. I’d like to take a few minutes to look at some of these, and how Austen uses them to develop her characters.

While there is little mention of clothing in Lady Susan (written in 1795), *Sense and Sensibility* does contain clothing references and does so in a way that helps delineate Austen’s characters.

The earliest mention is of Lady Middleton’s unruly children who delight in tearing at her clothing, a perfectly brief, yet perfectly expressive statement that immediately tells us how to judge Mrs. Middleton as a mother. The first specific article of clothing mentioned belongs to the gentleman described in this paragraph:

“Marianne herself had **seen less** of his person than the rest, for the confusion which crimsoned over her face,
on his lifting her up, had robbed her of the power of regarding him after their entering the house.
But she had seen **enough** of him to join in all the admiration of the others…
His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn
for the hero of a favourite story;
and in his carrying her into the house
with so little previous formality
there was a rapidity of thought which particularly recommended the action to her. …
His name was good, his residence was in their favourite village, and she had found out that of
all
manly
dresses
a **shooting-jacket** was the most becoming.”

Much later, after Willoughby has left Marianne so forlorn, Elinor and Marianne are out walking, when:

Amongst the **objects** in the scene,
they soon discovered an **animated** one;
it was a man on horseback riding towards them.
In a few minutes they could distinguish him to be a gentleman; and in a moment afterwards Marianne rapturously exclaimed—

' It is he—it is indeed; I know it is!' and was hastening to meet him, when Elinor cried out—

' Indeed, Marianne, I think you are mistaken. It is not Willoughby. The person is not tall enough for him, and has not his air.'

' He has, he has,' cried Marianne, ' I am sure he has. His air, his coat, his horse. I knew how soon he would come.'

Poor Marianne. But how subtle Austen is in these cases, for by framing Marianne’s views of Willoughby in terms of his externals, his **shooting**-jacket, his **coat**, she allows us to understand that Marianne, despite her unfailing belief to the contrary, will never see the true Willoughby.

There are slightly more than a dozen other mentions of clothing in the book, and of these, the honour of who gives utterance to them belongs, overwhelmingly, to one person. (Guess?)

Miss Steele. Miss Nancy Steele, the elder sister.

We first meet her at the Middletons where she and her sister Lucy have come to visit, and are described thus:

“The young ladies arrived. Their appearance was by no means ungenteel or unfashionable; their dress was very smart.”

So again, by describing their appearance, the narrator implies their character. And uses the term “smart,” not elegant, which is an immediate sign from Austen of things to come.

Within a handful of pages, we learn that they delight in discussing Lady Middleton’s choice in gowns, and that Miss Steele has a preference for beau who also dress smart. We take the full measure of her underbred folly some time later:

Nothing escaped [Miss Steele’s] minute observation and general curiosity; she **saw** everything, and **asked** everything; was never easy till she knew the **price** of every part of Marianne's dress; could have guessed the number of her gowns altogether with better judgment than Marianne herself; and was not without hopes of finding out, before they parted, how much her washing cost per week, and how much she had every year to spend upon herself. The impertinence of these kind of scrutinies, moreover, was generally concluded with a compliment, which…was considered by Marianne as the greatest impertinence of all; for after undergoing an examination into the value and make of her gown, the colour of her shoes, and the arrangement of her hair, she was almost sure of being told, that upon ' her word she looked vastly smart, and she dared to say would make a great many conquests.'

After enduring Miss Steele’s report on the Lucy and Edward scandal, Elinor is treated to the redoubtable Miss Steele’s inability to untangle fashion, beaus, and great emotion:

“Good gracious! I have had such a time of it! I never saw Lucy in such a rage in my life. She vowed at first she would never trim me up a new bonnet, nor do anything else for me again, so long as she lived; but now she is quite come to, and we are as good friends as ever. Look, she made me this bow to my hat, and put in the feather last night. There now, you are going to laugh at me too. But why should not I wear pink ribands? I do not care if it is the Doctor's favourite colour. I am sure, for my part, I should never have known he did like it better than any other colour if he had not happened to say so. My cousins have been so plaguing me! I declare, sometimes I do not know which way to look before them.”

For Elinor, who, as a lady, would never comment on such a personal matter, and who Austen never allows to speak of fashion, there is only one response to Miss Steele’s confidences: “Miss Steele had wandered away to a subject on which Elinor had nothing to say.”

Austen uses clothing in a slightly more sophisticated way in Pride and Prejudice. As in Sense and Sensibility, people who are described by their clothing are suspect. Consider how she introduces her characters:

Mr. Bingley: The Bennett sisters caught a glimpse of his blue coat from the window, but we are introduced to him more fully at the assembly ball as: good-looking and gentlemanlike: he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners.

Mr. Darcy: fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien, (and I may as well include the rest: the report, which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a- year.)

Mr. Hurst: merely looks the gentleman

Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley: fine women, with an air of decided fashion.

Mr. Wickham: wanted only regimentals to make him completely charming

This last description seems like an innocuous statement, tossed off without thought, but while we can assume that Wickham “changes his coat” literally when joining the army, it is only later that we learn that this change is also a way for him to leave behind his past debt and ill repute, and appear to change his coat, figuratively, for his stay in Middleton.

Fashion as an indicator of “weak minds and bad manners”[[1]](#endnote--1) is carried into Pride and Prejudice. Here a distinction must be made between evidencing an interest in fashion or clothing by shopping, sewing, or trimming a bonnet, and speaking of fashion. So, while the genteel Jane and Elizabeth Bennet, and their Aunt Mrs Gardiner, are described as producing clothing or dressing, it is left to Mrs. Bennet, Lydia Bennet, and the Bingley sisters to betray their natural failings through their clothing speech.

Mrs. Bennet shows her preferences early on. Cut short by Mr. Bennet from describing who danced with whom at the assembly ball she quickly attempts to rhapsodize over the lace on Mrs. Hurst’s gown.

Wedding clothes, representing as they do her maternal success, figure largely in Mrs. Bennet’s mind. Jane’s prospect of happiness with Mr. Bingley is inextricably linked, in Mrs. Bennet’s mind, to such tangibles as carriages and wedding-clothes. The subsequent defection of both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Collins sends her into a depression. The Gardiners come to visit, which is some consolation, but it is difficult to say whether it is the comfort of her sister-in-law’s presence or her sister-in-law’s news of London’s latest fashion of long sleeves that pleases Mrs. Bennet the most.

If Mrs. Bennet’s obsession with fashion indicates her weak mind, it is Lydia who betrays her silliness, her folly, and ultimately her poor character. Yes, she is young, with head filled with regimentals and dancing. Buying a new bonnet then castigating it as ugly and declaring the intention to “pull it apart” seems harmless enough, but when, in the middle of the letter declaring her elopement, she talks about a tear in her gown, we know she is lost to all claims of being a gentlewoman.

 Austen provides a wonderful example of economy in one of my favorite scenes in the book. She conspires with her characters to use fashion both as a way for those characters to betray their own failings, and to move the plot forward. This scene occurs after Elizabeth has walked to Netherfield to nurse Jane.

When dinner was over, [Elizabeth] returned directly to Jane, and Miss Bingley began abusing her as soon as she was out of the room. Her manners were pronounced to be very bad indeed,—a mixture of pride and impertinence : she had no conversation, no style, no taste, no beauty. Mrs. Hurst thought the same, and added,—

' She has nothing, in short, to recommend her, but being an excellent walker. I shall never forget her appearance this morning. She really looked almost wild.'

' She did indeed, Louisa. I could hardly keep my countenance. Very nonsensical to come at all! Why must she be scampering about the country, because her sister had a cold? Her hair so untidy, so blowzy I'

' Yes, and her petticoat; I hope you saw her petticoat, six inches deep in mud, I am absolutely certain, and the gown which had been let down to hide it not doing its office.'

So, in this short scene, we have a striking image of the clothing of the day and we have the measure of the Bingley sisters.

We hope that Austen followed her own advice about good manners and did not spend her time making personal comments about their appearance to her acquaintances. However, we are grateful that she saw no reason not to discuss clothing in very practical ways in her letters. These letters are peppered with specific clothing details. Combined with images from paintings, miniatures, fashion plates or even extant garments, we can get a sense of what people in England and France wore during the period covered by her life.

Byrde, Penelope. 1999. *Jane Austen fashion : fashion and needlework in the works of Jane Austen*. Ludlow: Excellent Press.

1. (Byrde 1999) [↑](#endnote-ref--1)