Achieving an "Air of Decided Fashion": How Austen's Ladies Adapted the Latest from London

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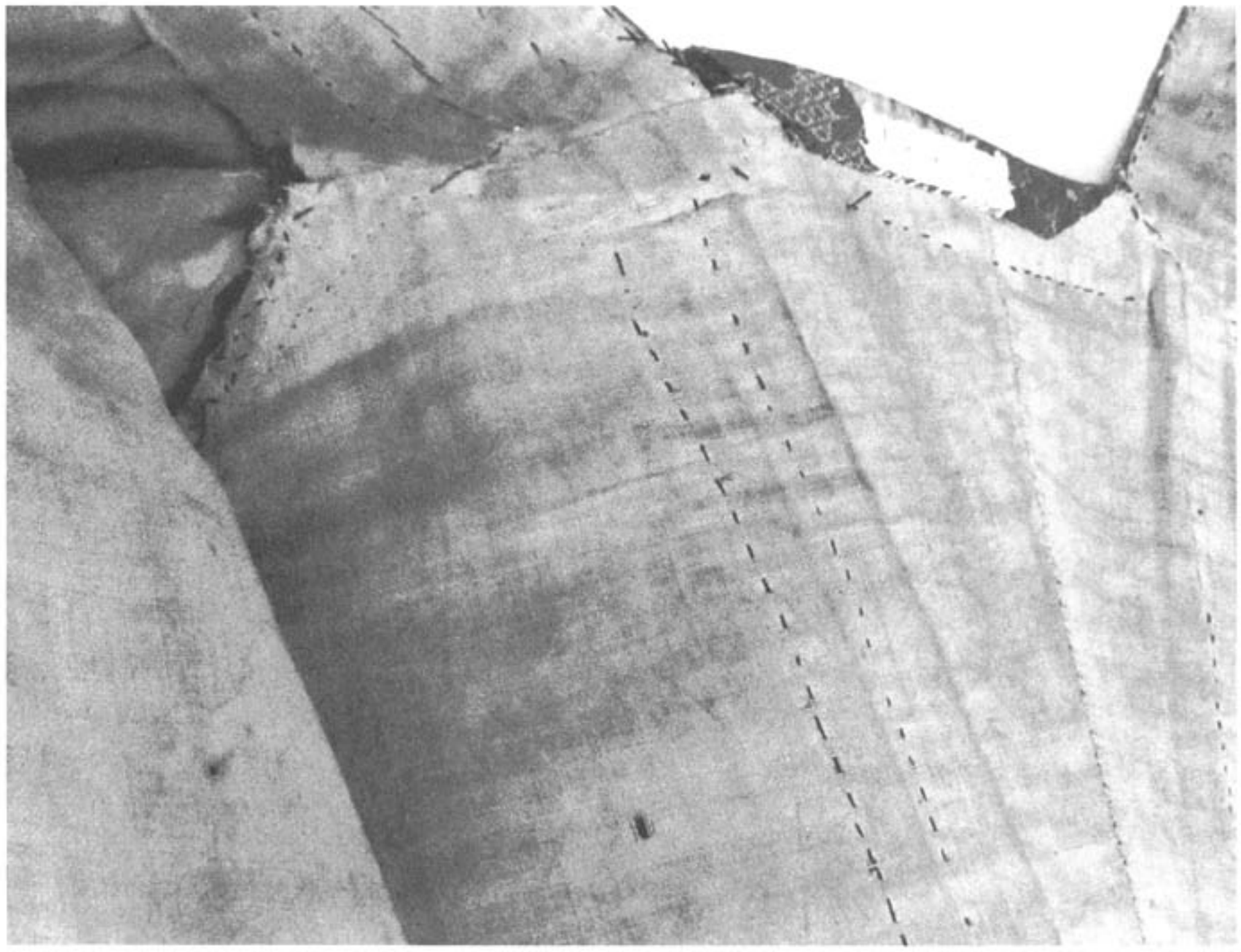
The ladies of the Netherfield party are described on their arrival at the assembly in Meryton as having "an air of decided fashion" (*PP* 10): apparently everyone present recognizes something that distinguishes them from the local ladies. But what does that phrase mean? How does their appearance differ from that of the Bennets, Lucases, and other residents of that small market-town community? This cryptic phrase, when deciphered, gives us a glimpse into the dynamics of early nineteenth-century fashion and its nuances as followed by women of different ranks and budgets.

We can at least guess that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst née Bingley are wearing the latest London modes. This hypothesis begs two questions: are the Merytonites lagging significantly behind in the latest fashions? And are the Londoners' clothes more sophisticated and complicated in cut, requiring skills beyond a small-town dressmaker? Or is there something else that is lost in translation between London and the provinces? The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries comprised a period in which dress construction was relatively uncomplicated and thus achievable by those with less than couture-level sewing skills. Reasonably affordable cottons were in style for day and evening wear. Surely the Bennets and their neighbors can manage to look fairly fashionable. What, then, comprises the subtle distinctions between those with the "air of fashion" and those without? Does the difference lie in fabric, cut, trim, accessories, or something else entirely—or a combination of factors?

To answer, we must look at how dresses were constructed at the time the



Stitching on the interior of a damask robe à l'anglaise, c.1775–1780. Though American, English examples are constructed in the same manner. Courtesy DAR Museum.

novel was written and published (the late 1790s through early 1810s); at how fashion was disseminated; and at what else the society of the time would have invested in the phrase "air of fashion."

Dressmaking had just undergone a radical change when Austen was writing her first draft of *Pride and Prejudice* as *First Impressions* in the 1790s. For a hundred years and more, gowns had been draped on the conically corseted body by a highly skilled "mantua-maker,"[1] who draped, pleated, and pinned fabric to the customer standing before her in shift and stays. The entire back bodice consisted of folded, pleated, and stitched-down lengths of fabric that continued, at center back, into the skirt (Waugh diag. IX–XXI). The stitching on these gowns was quite basic, and surviving garments, as in the image above, often show rather crude work. Nevertheless, years of apprenticeship and skill went into the "cutting out and manipulation of large scale patterned fabrics so that they were symmetrically disposed . . . without much waste" (Ginsburg 68). Such a gown must have been custom-made, being beyond the skill of the home seamstress—and no wonder there was no ready-made industry.

"The Ladies' Dress-Maker" fitting a pattern to a customer. The Book of English Trades *(1807).*

Austen might "wish such things were to be bought ready made" in vain (24–26 December 1798).

All this changed in the last years of the century. Skirts and bodices of the late nineties and early 1800s were increasingly cut separately, with bodices made of individually cut pieces.[2] Many turn-of-the-century dresses had unfitted bodice fronts closing with drawstrings; construction of both front and back opening dresses was quite simple (Waugh diag. xxxv–xxxvii). The bodice backs might still be draped on the customer's body: the illustration for the Ladies' Dress-Maker in the *Book of English Trades* showed "the Dress-Maker taking the pattern off from a lady. . . . [I]f taken in cloth, [it] becomes afterwards the lining of the dress" (225). Nevertheless, a fashionably cut dress was now within the reach of the home seamstress. Dressmakers' account books record many commissions to "cut and baste" a dress rather than to "cut and make" it, meaning the customer intended to sew the professionally cut gown at home. The 1838 sewing manual *The Workwoman's Guide* "strongly recommended to all those who can afford it, to have their best dresses invariably made

by a mantua-maker, as those which are cut out at home seldom fit . . . or look so well" (107). These best dresses could then be unstitched and copied. This technique was already in place decades earlier, when bodices were first cut in flat pieces and skirts cut separately. Harriet Smith dithers over where to send her dress materials bought at Ford's: "'my pattern gown is at Hartfield. . . . [S]end it to Hartfield, if you please. But then, Mrs. Goddard will want to see it'" (*E* 235). The "pattern gown" has probably been unstitched from Harriet's small existing wardrobe and will be used to construct a new dress. Jane Fairfax undoubtedly does the same with her own gowns (and perhaps some of them are handed down from her more well-to-do friend Mrs. Dixon and altered by Jane). Emma, by contrast, likely depends entirely on a dressmaker.

In *Pride and Prejudice* a dressmaker is undoubtedly responsible for the wardrobes of the Bingley sisters and of Lady Catherine and Anne de Bourgh. Sir William Lucas may well insist that his wife and daughter hire professionals too, as evidence of his wealth and recently elevated status. But the Bennet family, living on two thousand a year (28), probably would save the cost of dressing six females by having one or two better dresses made professionally for each and taking patterns from them to make additional dresses (not to mention extensive sharing and handing-down and altering of dresses among the sisters). Most surviving garments of this period show negligible differences in the essentials of construction, and like the earlier eighteenth-century dresses already mentioned, there is nothing particularly fine in the stitching. Except when an obviously clumsy hand has done the cutting and fitting, or when a 1790s bodice shows extraordinary creativity, it is difficult to identify a dress as the product of a home sewer or a professional from construction alone.

So although the level of dressmaking skill will be a factor, we must continue the search to define that "air of fashion" that distinguishes the Netherfield party. The Bingley ladies surely look more fashion-forward than the country dwellers. But these differences cannot be attributed to distance from London alone. Within days of publication, a London fashion magazine could make its way to a subscriber in a small town like Meryton. But by the time provincial ladies acted on a trend as published or reported, the "latest" might already be old news. Woe betide the country-dwelling lady who commissioned a fawn-colored pelisse from her dressmaker in January 1807 after reading in *La Belle Assemblée* that these have "resumed their popularity; nor do we recollect ever to have seen a colour so . . . unobtrusively elegant" (1:612), only to learn in February's issue that "fawn-colour, so universally exhibited in mantles, bonnets, and pelises, is now too common to be chosen by our first order of

females" (2:50). And by March, she will be abashed (or perhaps indignant) to read in the magazine's "General observations on the *Most Prevailing Fashions*" that "[f]awn-colour, though still much worn by the multitude, is not now considered as genteel" (2:107).

Thinking, perhaps, that life moved more slowly "back then," we can hardly believe that color and other fads could change so rapidly. But London's social whirl did indeed move at a far faster pace than Meryton's. Consider the size of London society, where styles originated. (Parisian fashions were also influential; but the fleeting fads were set in London by society's fashion leaders.) This group was extraordinarily small and elite: there were barely over 1000 members of the nobility through the eighteenth century, nowhere near all of whom would participate in the London season in any given year. Even adding untitled but fashionable gentry to the mix, it has been estimated that the fashionable world of Austen's time—the *beau monde* or *ton*—"can be roughly estimated as consisting of a few hundred individuals in any one year, and most probably no more than three or four thousand over the [eighteenth] century as a whole" (Grieg 19).

Imagine, then, a world whose numbers are somewhat smaller than a typical modern American high school, meeting each other at parties day after day during "the Season." The satirical publication *The Fashionable World Displayed* observed that London society members "become engaged in a perpetual competition with the world at large, and to a certain degree with each other. In order to maintain this struggle for pre-eminence, they are compelled to vary the modes and materials of their dress" (Christian 55). Considering the size of this social bubble, it's not incomprehensible that this set's acknowledged leaders would be setting fads, tiring of them, and creating new ones in rapid succession and that the rest of this small élite group would follow the latest mini-trends from month to month or even week to week.

These styles were imitated in their turn by people outside this rarified circle with any pretension or aspiration to gentility. Fashion magazines at this time were not illustrating styles set by designers or manufacturers as in our day (aside from the occasional promotion of various mantua-makers, most often by Mr. Bell's magazine, *La Belle Assemblée*, of fashions created by Mrs. Bell). Instead, they were faithfully reporting what the élite Londoners were wearing at court, at the opera and theaters, and in the fashionable parks. (Indeed the titles of *La Belle Assemblée* and its short-lived companion magazine aimed more at gentlemen, *Le Beau Monde*, refer to the "assembly," or group of people, or the *beau monde* whose fashions are documented in their pages.)

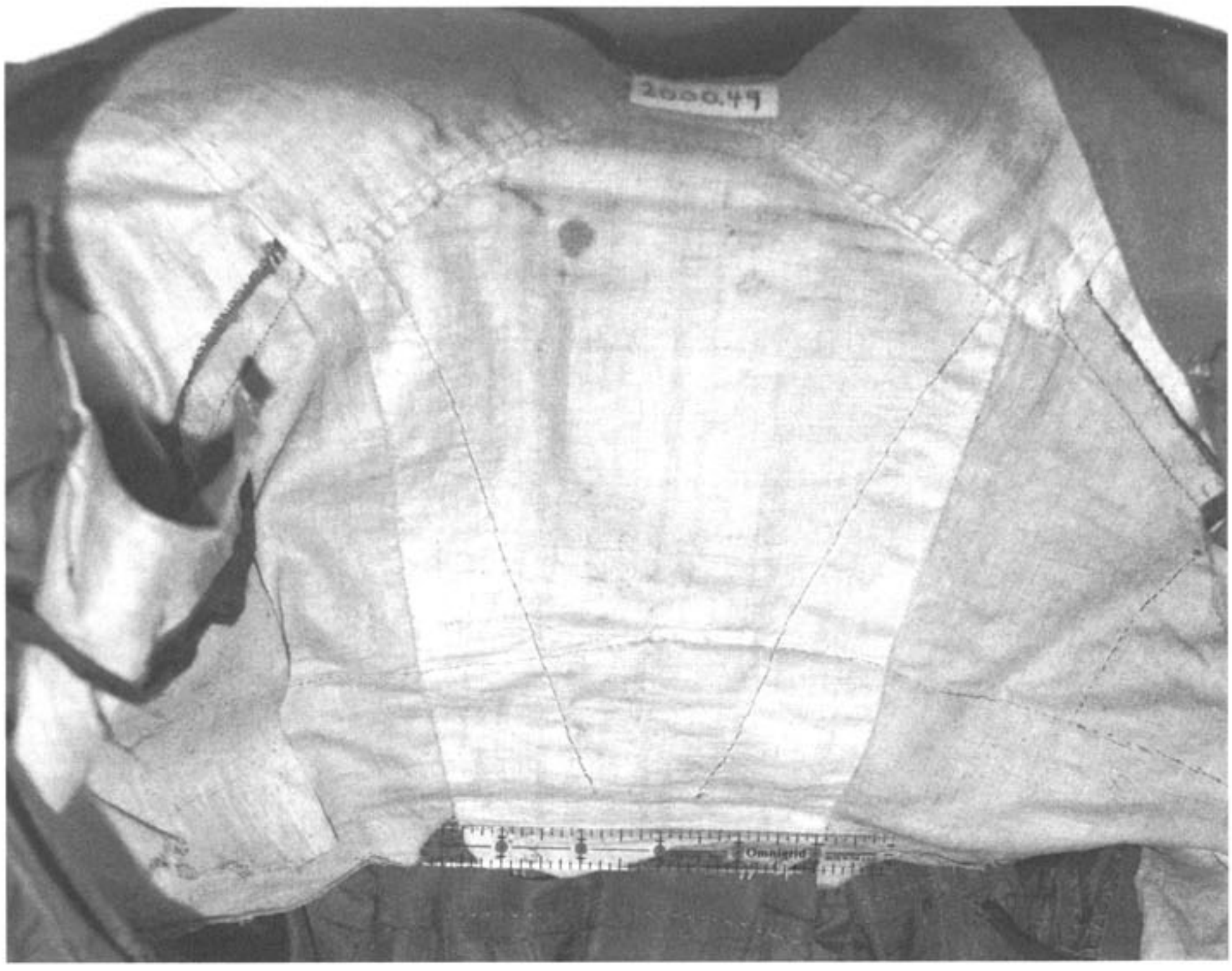
This focus is made clear by each month's fashion reports. During the London Season, "General Observations" in the London magazines will refer to specific costumes seen. At the beginning of the 1808 season, for example, the May issue of *La Belle Assemblée* lamented the difficulty in selecting among a great variety of styles, and decided its "attention must be directed therefore to those females whose unquestionable rank and elegance, entitle them to be looked up to as the standard of taste and fashion. From such sources as these we offer the following observations" (4:238).

At other times, a journal will apologize, as *Le Beau Monde* did in 1807, that "[t]he absence of the Fashionable World from London precludes the possibility of a detail on the *minutia* of Ladies' Dresses" (2:159). If the members of the *ton* are absent, nothing is happening. Women outside London depended on the magazines and on friends and relatives in fashion centers (London, and to a lesser degree, seasonally, Bath and the seaside resorts) for this news. Mrs. Gardiner, for example, is quite outside the *beau monde*'s precincts. But living in London, she will know what is "in." Visiting the Bennets in Meryton, her "first business" is to "describe the newest fashions" (139).

Of course, adoption by lower ranks spurred style-setters to seek new fads. As *The Fashionable World Displayed* put it, "through some strange infatuation, [others] ape their dress and air with the most impertinent and vexatious perseverance. What is to be done in this case? Similitude is not to be endured." New styles must be invented "[i]n order . . . to throw out their pursuers" (Christian 55). Exit fawn color, banished from elegant society.

This, then, is the dynamic of fashion in Austen's England: a tiny segment of society competes among its members for uniqueness and novelty; those outside this circle imitate styles, propelling the elite to seek new proofs of their fashion leadership and superiority. How can Meryton keep up? Most women would purchase a very few new dresses for the spring/summer season and about the same for fall/winter. Even the well-to-do members of provincial towns in Austen's novels, like the Lucases or Emma Woodhouse, would not refresh their wardrobe constantly throughout the year. Offerings in haberdashery and linendraper shops, such as Highbury's Ford's in *Emma*, would reflect overall color trends, but their customers would not order a new gown every time Ackermann's *Repository* crowned a new color queen.

Provincial ladies do make efforts to keep up: Austen's letters are full of proposed and completed updates, such as her prediction that Cassandra's "six weeks [in Southampton] will be fully occupied . . . in lengthening the waists of your gowns" (17–18 January 1809). But the many minute movements of the

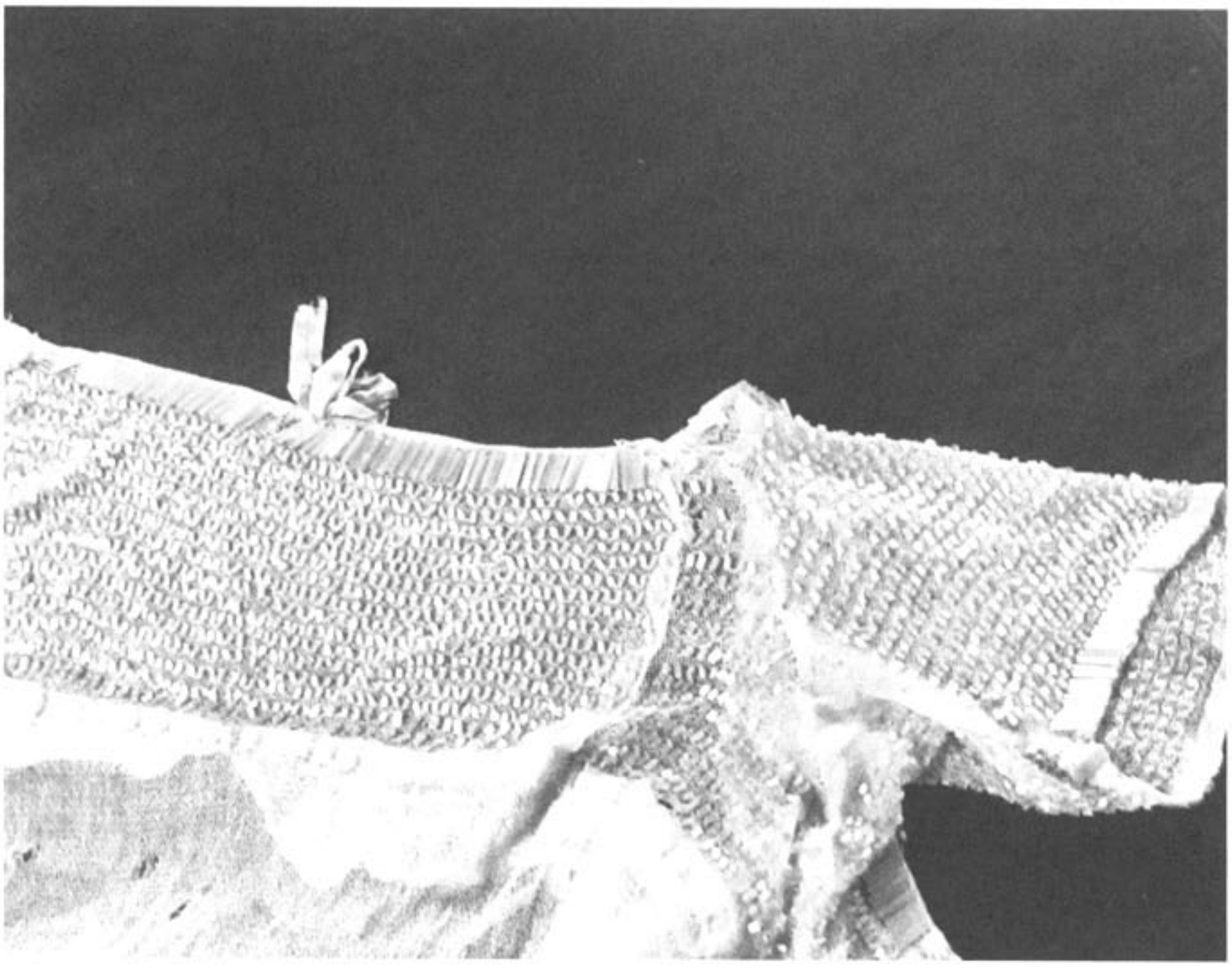


The dangling remainder of the earlier, longer bodice has been kept inside this dress, altered in the late 1790s from its early 1790s original design. Courtesy DAR Museum.

waistline and neckline, reported on the London scene as seismic shifts, would scarcely be followed in Meryton. Country women would wait to see whether each reported change heralded a longer trend or would be denounced the following month.[3]

Many dresses from this rapidly changing period display evidence of this hedging of one's sartorial bets. Old-style bodices, which fit snugly over the old conical corsets, were often preserved intact under new bodices with higher waistlines sewn atop the old (see illustration above). The skirts on these dresses have been raised several inches in the back, and the "tails" of the old bodice dangle inside the dress, ready to be put back into use should this raised-waist fad prove fleeting.[4]

A difference in budgets must also be considered. We are told that each Bingley sister has "a fortune of twenty thousand pounds" (15), which allows them to afford the finest; Austen specifically mentions too that they are "in the habit of spending more than they ought" (15). Lavishly trimmed dresses



Detail of a machine-net dress, beaded on bodice and at hem with glass bugle beads, a costly garment worn by an English peer's daughter, c. 1805–1810. Courtesy of a private collection.

in fine fabrics, accessorized with costly and extravagant headdresses and accessories, would make up their wardrobes and are probably somewhat out of place in a provincial assembly room. Mrs. Bennet "'never in [her] life saw any thing more elegant than their dresses'" (13). Simpler white muslins (some of them beautifully trimmed with white cotton or colored silk tambour work) and soft, lightweight crapes, satins, or sarsnets, all within the budgets of Meryton ladies, were also in fashion. But these would have been outclassed by others affordable only to the Bingleys: elegant figured silks; muslins embroidered with silver or gold thread; or the product of the latest technology, delicate and diaphanous machine-knit net, on which labor-intensive embroidery was often applied.[5] When Mrs. Bennet seems about to speculate on the cost of "'the lace upon Mrs. Hurst's gown'" before her husband cuts her off (13), she could mean this net, as in the illustration above, which was often loosely described as "lace" when embellished with embroidery resembling traditional lace.

Extensive trim might also add to the lavish effect and cost. Before 1810 the pure neoclassical style was being corrupted with applied trim, including

"Concert Dresses for Sept. 1807." Le Beau Monde.

tassels, cording, piping, and swags and flounces. As early as 1807 Austen reported putting "five breadths of Linen also into my flounce" (20–22 February). Later that year, in September, two deceptively simple concert (evening) dresses appeared in *Le Beau Monde.* The lady on the left wears "rich imperial muslin of a beautiful light yellow, finished at the extreme edge in a line of embossed silver and gold, worked in light open flowers, ornamented down the front, and round each side of the train, . . . with stars worked in small pearls, fastened in the centre with a gold stud, . . . over a rich white satin train petticoat, worked round the bottom with stars of pearls and dead gold." Her companion's dress is

of "rich white Italian sarsnet, with an embroidery . . . in gold thread, made open behind, and fastened with gold buttons" with a "petticoat, which is embroidered all round with gold lace, . . . the back . . . laced in the middle with gold cord" (2:106). The Bennet girls might contrive dresses that resemble these in cut, but they would be less likely to spend money on two separate layers; gold embossing, thread, buttons, lace, and cord would be out of the question.

Accessories also offered opportunity for display of style—and expenditure. The yellow-clad concert-goer sports a "calypso cap, embroidered with gold" and a "drapery of white Parisian net, tastefully [and labor-intensively] embroidered," while her friend's hair, "formed into knots at the top of the head," was "fastened with a diamond comb." Without the lady's maid trained in hair-styling undoubtedly on the Bingley ladies' staff, the Bennet girls might contrive to dress each other's hair in a similar style, but their combs will have no diamonds. Both fashion-plate ladies wear diamond earrings and necklaces, Miss Sarsnet on the right adding bracelets of the same on her upper arms. The Bingley ladies probably eschew diamonds as unsuitable for the country, but they may wear other semi-precious stones popular at the time in parures. The Meryton girls are more likely to have, at best, pendants like the Austen sisters' topaz crosses. Finally, the ladies of September 1807 wear shoes of "white satin, spotted with gold" and "kid shoes trimmed with gold lace," respectively (2:106). Lydia, and even Lizzie, may splurge on delicate kid or satin evening shoes, but without embellishments. The Londoners would scarcely dress as finely for a provincial assembly as for a London concert, but they can afford far more in the way of labor-intensive and costly fabrics and accessories, and whatever they wear would be recognizable as such.[6]

Considering the cost, complexity, and expertise that has gone into the Bingley ladies' gowns, and the probable variation in skill from small-town dressmaker to home seamstress, the differences would be discernable to the ladies of Meryton, eagerly awaiting the London party, whom they already expected to be fashionable. Spotting the difference in the quality of dresses worn by Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst and those worn by the ladies of Meryton would have been roughly comparable to seeing couture or high-end designer garments next to off-the-rack clothing from a department or chain store. Both show awareness of current trends in silhouette, style, and color, and both use occasion-appropriate fabric and detailing, but there's no question which is high-end and which is made for the consumer on a budget.

Lastly, we should consider not only the "fashion" in our mystery phrase but also what is meant by the term "air." Austen's use of the word, in keeping

with its meaning at the time, "denotes such qualities as carriage, demeanour, attitude, style, mood; the general appearance and bearing of an individual, . . . including what we might today term body language" (Lane 119). To people in the polite world, good manners included elegant ways of holding the body while standing, moving, and conversing (Annas 35ff). This bearing, in addition to steps and style on the dance floor, was painstakingly taught by dancing masters. An early nineteenth-century dance manual points out that while everyone "would wish to have it in his power to be genteel and graceful in the carriage of his person," this achievement is something that "among well-bred people, take[s] up a considerable part of their time: Nay, even those of the first rank have no other resource in these matters than to dancing masters" (Cassidy 70). Only through extensive training with a dancing master could people of fashion achieve that shared style of posture and movement that identified each other as refined and elegant.

The goal was to comport oneself "with ease, with dignity and with grace" (Cassidy 78) but without stiffness, awkwardness, or affectation: "People who would wish to be elegant in their manner, and graceful in their persons, should avoid . . . every attitude that is constrained or affected; such as a stiff deportment of the body. . . . [A]ll these movements are inconsistent with true ease and elegance" (Cassidy 71). Finding the precise manner or "air"—elegant but not affected—was surely the ultimate test of the lady or gentleman of fashion.

The Bennets, Lucases, and other children of the "'four and twenty families'" Mrs. Bennet numbers as their social circle (43) undoubtedly have had some lessons with a dancing master but for a much more limited time than real "people of fashion." They are certainly not bumpkins, but their bearing and manners might not quite achieve that overall "air of fashion"—at least not while enjoying a boisterous dance at the Meryton assembly. The Bingleys, by contrast, would have had all the necessary training instilled by years of dancing and deportment lessons. Mr. Bingley's manners are praised by Jane (not, perhaps, the most critical observer) as having "'so much ease, with such perfect good breeding,'" though his family, Austen says, came from trade and were no more than "respectable" (14–15). Their fortune rather than their breeding would provide the necessary instruction in social graces, honed by their time among people of fashion in London. It is genuine knowledge of the airs and graces of the fashionable world, and not only jealousy, that prompts Miss Bingley to see "no conversation, no stile" in Lizzie, and declare her manners "a mixture of pride and impertinence" (35), lacking the ideal woman's "'certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her

address and expressions'" (39). Lizzie at least is, according to her more generous creator, "easy and unaffected" (25). But other members of the Bennet family fall short by Austen's own descriptions: neither Lydia's "high animal spirits" (45), nor Mary's "pedantic air and conceited manner" (25), nor Mr. Collins's "awkward and solemn" bearing (90) meet the standards of elegance and ease defined by the dancing manuals. Though each of them is a gentleman or, as Lizzie defines herself to Lady Catherine, "'a gentleman's daughter'" and thus "'so far . . . equal'" to Mr. Darcy (356), the Netherfield party conveys that "air of fashion" in part through elegant bearing, making an impression of London refinement amidst the dancing at a provincial assembly ball.

Thus, it is through a combination of factors that the Bingley sisters and the gentlemen who escort them convey an "air of fashion" to the dancers at the Meryton assembly. Costly and elaborate clothes professionally made and displaying the latest London trends combine elements of style not achievable by women outside of town with more limited budgets. And the Londoners' elegant bearing and carriage would have added the necessary polish to achieve an "air of fashion." The final ingredient, their individual manners and behavior, determine whether their characters are declared to be "disagreeable" like Darcy (11), "amiable" like Bingley (11), or "proud and conceited" like his sisters (15). Yet none of these pejoratives can take away from that enviable and hard-to-define "air of fashion" that they all possess.

NOTES

1. Mantuas, the first dresses constructed in this manner, entered fashion in the late seventeenth century. The term "mantua-maker" outlived the garment by 150 years, being used into the mid-1800s, by which time it was used interchangeably with the newer term "dressmaker."

2. On the other hand, some 1790s dresses display unprecedented innovation and elaboration, with extraordinarily complicated decorative uses of pleats on the back bodices, in a sort of last gasp of the technique; these would certainly be the work of highly trained dressmakers. See, for example, the Victoria and Albert Museum's accession number T.116-1938 (Hart and North 58–59; also visible in their online database), or the Museum of London's dress 35.44/8 (Waugh diag. XXVI).

3. Jacqueline Durran, the costume designer of the 2005 film production of *Pride and Prejudice*, emphasizes this sartorial conservatism of the provinces by clothing the ladies of Meryton in gowns with waists several inches lower than Miss Bingley's. Many of the older women wear even more outdated dresses to emphasize generational difference as well as provincialism: Mrs. Bennet wears an open robe over a petticoat (skirt), and even Mrs. Gardiner wears a "caraco" jacket more suited to the 1780s than the late 1790s, the period chosen for this production. These visual cues are overdone to the savvy eye (and unfortunately, the Meryton girls' dresses are inaccurately loose-fitting) but help viewers less versed in period detail understand the differences between social groups and generations.

4. See, for example, the 1780s dress updated c.1794, pictured in Bradfield (73–74); its waist has

been raised but no new bodice has been added. The Museum of London's dress A20194 is a 1790 white muslin dress updated in the mid-1790s with a gathered bodice superimposed on its fitted one (brief description in Halls [49]; details from examination during a research visit in 1998).

5. See, for example, three such dresses in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection (numbers T.194-1958, T.175-1922, and T.279-1973), visible in their online database.

6. The 1995 miniseries used fabrics and accessories in this manner to emphasize the distinction between London and the country. Director Simon Langton "wanted pale colours . . . for the girls. . . . This meant we could keep the darker, richer colours and exotic fabrics for characters like the Bingley sisters or Lady Catherine de Bourgh" (Birtwistle 47). Designer Dinah Collin "used a lot of shot silks from India, quite a lot of lace and much brighter and stronger colours" (Birtwistle 54). The Bingley ladies' elaborate hair topped with turbans and expensive feathers, jewelry, and dresses composed of several different richly colored silks with woven designs all contrast with the Bennets' pretty but simple muslins and hair they could arrange for each other.

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