



Estimating Lace and Muslin: Dress and Fashion in Jane Austen and her World

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"Martha & I dined yesterday at Deane to meet the Powletts & Tom Chute, which we did not fail to do.—Mrs. Powlett was at once expensively & nakedly dress'd;—we have had the satisfaction of estimating her Lace & her Muslin; & she said too little to afford us much other amusement.—"

THUS JANE AUSTEN, writing to Cassandra 8-9 January 1801, delivers one of the many characteristically pithy assessments of fashion that fill her correspondence.

Jane Austen's lifetime saw some of the most radical changes in fashions and styles in history. At the time of her birth in 1775, it was still permissible for fashionable men to wear elaborately embroidered colored silks and velvets, lace, wigs and perfume. Elegant ladies of the time wore wide hoop skirts (originally called *paniers*), also lavishly decorated, and tall, elaborate, powdered coiffures. By the time of Austen's death in 1817, all this would completely change: women were wearing relatively simple, high-waisted gowns, bonnets, and shawls, and men had largely abandoned bright colors and laces for a more austere style of clothing that is the ancestor of the modern suit. This was also a period in which the choice of styles, accessories, even fabrics—the choice of lace and muslin, for exam-

ple—often had specific social and political connotations. Despite all of this, Austen rarely goes into the specifics of fashion in her novels; her letters, by contrast, are full of witty references to changes in fashions and personal tastes, her own and other people's. Although Austen often portrays fashion-consciousness as a sign of foolish or frivolous behavior in her novels (with a few revealing exceptions, as will be discussed below), she was as concerned with cutting a fine figure as everyone else.

One reason for the many references to fashion in Austen's letters is that, in a sense, people were closer to fashion then than they are now. The making, purchasing, and care of clothing were different in Austen's day than they are in our own. Certain items, like bonnets or cloaks, could be bought ready-made, but in most cases, necessary materials were purchased at a linen draper's shop and the garments would be made at a tailor's or dressmaker's shop (in Austen's time, the old-fashioned term "mantua maker" was still in use), or by family or servants at home. Even small provincial towns had some sort of haberdasher's shop (like Ford's in *Emma*). Changes in fashion tended to be made by famous arbiters (royalty, the aristocracy, and the leaders of high society) rather than by celebrity fashion designers. Austen herself was not above emulating the Prince of Wales's current mistress, as she wrote to Cassandra in December 1798: "I have changed my mind, & changed the trimmings of my Cap this morning . . . & I think it makes me look more like Lady Conyngham now than it did before, which is all that one lives for now" (18-19 December). Fashion periodicals, such as *Heideloff's Gallery of Fashion*, *Ackermann's Repository of Arts* or *La Belle Assemblée*, had just begun to appear, though people usually learned about the latest fashions from friends or relatives in London. When Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner arrive at Longbourn in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Gardiner's first duties are "to distribute her presents and describe the newest fashions" (139).

The changes in fashion that spanned Austen's lifetime were, to a very great extent, due to British influence. For most of the eighteenth century, France was considered the arbiter of tastes and styles, because of the cultural dominance of the royal court at Versailles. Later in the century, thanks to favorable trade relations and cultural exchanges between Britain and France, "Anglomania" took hold, not only in France, but elsewhere on the European continent as well. The import of continental fashions had always been eyed with skepticism, if not scorn, by many people in Britain. Particular objects of ridicule were the members of the Macaroni Club,

founded in 1764 by a coterie of hyper-fashionable British males to promote continental foods and fashions in Britain. The extravagant "Macaroni style" (mentioned in the song "Yankee Doodle" in order to ridicule the rag-tag American Revolutionary troops) was the last burst of frivolity in male dress before the onslaught of understated elegance considered to be appropriately "masculine" today.

Paniers originated at the beginning of the eighteenth century and became gradually wider, becoming so wide by the 1770s that it was necessary for ladies to go sideways through doorways. This extreme horizontality was balanced by an extreme verticality in the headdress. The hair-style was created by stiffening the hair with animal fat, combing it over a pad, adding curls of false hair as needed, and covering the whole with a powder usually made from flour. Fortunately, the powder was perfumed, particularly since such a coiffure was too complicated to undo at night, and had to be maintained over a period of weeks, if not months! Such head-dresses might be, in France at least, topped with what were called *poufs à la circonstance*: headdresses with topical illusions, such as model ships or hot air balloons, but ostrich feathers were the preferred style.

During the 1780s, a simpler type of garment for women, called a "round gown," was developed in Britain and then became popular in France as a *robe à l'anglaise*. This was worn over several layers of petticoats, as well as pads (called "rumps"), to achieve the desired bell shape for the skirt. Such a gown was worn without hoops, although corsets, usually stiffened with whalebone stays, were still worn. The towering coiffures of the 1770s were replaced by a wide structure of lightly powdered curls, which for outdoor wear would be crowned by a wide-brimmed straw hat with large plumes.

As for male clothing, not only did the styles begin to change, but the ideal physique also underwent a transformation from the potbellied figure of the early eighteenth century to a slimmer look. Silks and velvets gave way to cloth suits, lace was gradually replaced by linen, and brass buttons replaced gold or jeweled ones. It was the simpler clothing worn in the country by the aristocracy and gentry of Great Britain that provided the inspiration for a new way of dressing. The equation of the country with forthrightness and virtue and the court or city with artifice and corruption was a commonplace, but it acquired a greater popularity among educated Europeans in this period because of the writings of the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The British landed gentry, living off of and closer to the land, were thought to embody this ideal vis-à-vis their decadent continen-

tal counterparts. Plain brown or blue suits were expressive of this "natural" look, as was the broad-brimmed hat covered with beaver fur, which originated in North America. Americans, both Native Americans and colonists, seemed to have bypassed the corruption of Europe altogether, and were considered to be generally good models of Rousseauist "Noble Savages." The beaver hat was the perfect example of what might be called "Quaker Chic." Women also began to favor lighter cotton or linen fabrics, preferably in white, a color that could also symbolize purity and simplicity, as well as having other sociopolitical connotations.

Muslin, a general term for a variety of light, washable cotton materials, was the favored fabric. The best muslin came from India, particularly from Madras, and was imported into Europe by the British East India Company. Later, the British were able to produce similar materials themselves, although already in the eighteenth century, there was some discomfort about using slave-produced cotton from the Americas (as we know, Austen touches rather vaguely on the issue of slavery in *Mansfield Park*).

Certainly the most famous discussion of muslin in an Austen novel occurs in *Northanger Abbey* (Byrde 62-65) and it is worth quoting in full:

They were interrupted by Mrs. Allen:—"My dear Catherine," said she, "do take this pin out of my sleeve; I am afraid it has torn a hole already; I shall be quite sorry if it has, for this is a favorite gown, though it cost but nine shillings a yard."

"That is exactly what I should have guessed it, madam," said Mr. Tilney, looking at the muslin.

"Do you understand muslins, sir?"

"Particularly well; I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown. I bought one for her the other day, and it was pronounced to be a prodigious bargain by every lady who saw it. I gave but five shillings a yard for it, and a true Indian muslin."

Mrs. Allen was quite struck by his genius. "Men commonly take so little notice of those things," said she: "I can never get Mr. Allen to know one of my gowns from another. You must be a great comfort to your sister, sir."

"I hope I am, madam."

"And pray, sir, what do you think of Miss Morland's gown?"

"It is very pretty, madam," said he, gravely examining it; "but I do not think it will wash well; I am afraid it will fray."

"How can you," said Catherine, laughing, be so—" she had almost said, strange.

"I am quite of your opinion, sir," replied Mrs. Allen: "and so I told Miss Morland when she bought it."

"But then you know, madam, muslin always turns to some account or other; Miss Morland will get enough out of it for a handkerchief, or a cap, or a cloak.—Muslin can never be said to be wasted. I have heard my sister say so forty times, when she has been extravagant in buying more than she wanted, or careless in cutting it to pieces." (28-29)

There are several significant issues to note in this passage. First, muslins could be quite fragile, and were available in a wide variety of grades (estimation again!). Second, even someone well-to-do like Eleanor Tilney would reuse fabric, and even work on her own clothes. Third, and most important, Catherine is right; as Austen heroes go, Henry Tilney is "strange" indeed. Not only is he witty and charming in ways that are more usually to be found only in the unworthy anti-heroes of the other novels (Willoughby, Wickham, Frank Churchill); he is also the only one who "understands muslins." Try to imagine Darcy or Mr. Knightley "gravely examining" anyone's muslin, whether seriously, or in jest, which is what Henry Tilney is probably doing. The only other Austen "hero" who comes close is the dandified Edward Stanley in *Catherine or the Bower* (1792), who takes half an hour to powder his hair and change his shoes (218); Stanley's only real heir in an Austen novel is the despicably vain and shallow Sir Walter Elliot.

Similarly, Catherine Morland is the only Austen heroine one can imagine losing sleep over what to wear to a cotillion ball (*NA* 73) (although this is the occasion when Austen chooses to remind her readers, in a somewhat tongue-in-cheek manner, that "Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction," and also informs us that Catherine is intelligent enough to know better). Catherine also finds that Henry's great coats and capes contribute to his sexual allure (157). In general, *Northanger Abbey* is the most "fashion-conscious" of the completed novels. Is it because *Northanger Abbey* is, like *Catherine*, an early work, and a work that Austen did not revise later? Of course, this is only speculation, but could there have been more references to specific fashions in *Elinor and Marianne* or *First Impressions*, which were

later removed when Austen revised them for publication? Was Austen aware, even then, that too many specific references to momentary fads would date the novels too quickly?

Convenience was another reason for the increasing simplicity in dress beginning in the 1780s. Dry cleaning was not invented until the middle of the nineteenth century, and did not become commonplace until the twentieth. In Austen's time, a silk dress that got dirty was essentially ruined. The fabrics that started to become fashionable from the 1780s onward (muslin and other cotton fabrics, linen, lawn) were much easier to care for, which was part of their appeal. Nevertheless, given the absence of modern appliances, the care and maintenance of clothing still meant much work for the servants in upper- and middle-class households. As earlier eighteenth-century styles came to be viewed as blowsy, tawdry and prone to dirt, cleanliness became the fashion. Recall the Bingley sisters' contempt for Elizabeth's muddy petticoat (*PP* 36).

This English mode of dressing spread to the European continent. Its refreshing associations with the simplicity of country life à la Rousseau coincided with a burst of "Anglomania," a fascination with anything British that had begun earlier in the century with the popularity of the sentimental novels of Samuel Richardson. In turn, the French developed from this a simpler chemise dress based on the garments worn by Frenchwomen in the West Indian colonies, and hence called *robes à la Créole*. These were one-piece shifts with drawstring waists that were then usually covered by a sash. The style made its way back to Britain, and was at first worn only in informal circumstances at home, and referred to as "undress"; but it became high fashion under the influence of the trend-setting Duchess of Devonshire, who was apparently the first to wear such garments "in public."

This was the dress of Sensibility, the cult of emotional immediacy, virtuous candor and natural simplicity. It was reinforced in fashion by the vogue for sentimental accessories, such as miniature portraits and lockets containing locks of hair, both of which figure as plot devices in *Sense and Sensibility*. Such a "look" became the preferred style even of the Queen of France, Marie-Antoinette, in keeping with her longing for a carefree rustic life. This garment, sometimes referred to as a *gaulle*, sometimes as a *chemise à la Reine*, was also in the lighter muslin and linen materials that had become popular in Britain. The Queen, who had formerly been accused of bankrupting the country and setting a bad example through her extravagance in dress, was now castigated for not appearing with sufficient royal

dignity: what was she trying to do, ruin the Lyon silk industry? Ironically, as we shall see, these simpler styles would also be emblematic of populist sentiments in France during the Revolution, when such items as silk, velvet and lace seemed suspiciously reminiscent of the old royal regime.

One positive effect of this Sensibility in dress was the change in children's clothing at just this period. Until the middle of the eighteenth century, it was usual to dress children as miniature adults, complete with corsets, buckled shoes, and powdered hair or wigs. It was Rousseau who helped to popularize the idea of childhood as an age of innocence and candor which had to be carefully nurtured. (Relatively) non-restricting clothing like trousers for boys or simple, uncorseted shifts for girls embodied this new ideal. Long, unpowdered, and often unkempt hair became associated with youthfulness and would even acquire dangerously subversive connotations in Britain after the outbreak of the French Revolution.

Powdered hair would, in turn, connote political conservatism. There were situations in which hair powder was still *de rigueur*—for servants in the grander houses, for example, on very special occasions, a custom which continued into the twentieth century. This phenomenon of having servants dress in outmoded styles is not an uncommon one in the history of dress. And for the grandest servants of all—courtiers—hair powder was worn by men until the 1820s. Similarly, for women, the paniers or hoops continued to be essential for court dress even after they had gone out of fashion. This is also a common occurrence in the history of dress; what was once fashionable becomes “fossilized” for official purposes, connoting history and continuity rather than novelty and change.

Hoops, in fact, continued to be worn by ladies attending “Drawing Rooms” at court until the death of King George III in 1820, and the absurd combination of the now-fashionable high-waisted look and the unwieldy hoops was not lost on cartoonists and satirists. Louis Simond described the full-dressed lady at court as resembling “the foetus of a hippopotamus in a brandy bottle” (qtd. Arch 45). Besides, women no longer used to wearing paniered skirts had lost the knack of getting around in them. In one of Austen's favorite novels, *Belinda*, by Maria Edgeworth (1801), the worldly Lady Delacour, just returned from a Drawing Room, ridicules the “hoop awkwardness” of other ladies: “There's my friend Lady C—; in an elegant undress she passes for very genteel, but put her into a hoop and she looks as pitiable a figure, as much a prisoner, and as little able to walk, as a child in a go-cart.” Other, kinder commentators appreciated the sense of tradi-

tion that the hoops had acquired. The U.S. Minister to the Court of St. James, Richard Rush, compared official dress to “beautiful architecture the hoops the base the plume the pinnacle. Like old English buildings and Shakespeare . . . [the hoop] triumphed over criticism” (Arch 45-47). Despite such affectionate praise, however, the hoops disappeared after 1820. The “plume” that Rush refers to, namely ostrich feathers, did not; remnants of the large plumes so favored in the 1770s and 1780s, these in turn became “fossilized,” and were worn by ladies at the British Court until 1939.

As I have mentioned, clothing and hairstyles had specific political symbolism during the French Revolution. Curiously, the English style suit was considered appropriate for the authorities of the Revolutionary government, thanks to its Rousseauist connotations of virtue and dignity. The rank-and-file revolutionaries, however, wore working-class trousers, and so were referred to as the *sans-culottes* (literally “the breechless ones”). Also important was the *bonnet rouge* or Phrygian cap once worn by freed slaves in ancient Rome, and now often referred to as the “Liberty bonnet.” The wearing of the tricolor cockade, symbol of the Revolution, was made compulsory by law. In general, it was far from prudent in these circumstances to be seen wearing silk, lace, velvet, or anything that might refer to the old regime.

The period of the Directory that followed the fall of Robespierre saw the return of an interest in dress and luxury, with the addition of more styles to express more varied political leanings. The most extravagant male dandies, the *incroyables* (“incredibles”) showed their support for the abolished monarchy by wearing powdered wigs, bicorne hats, knee-breeches with silk stockings, and pumps. Republicans, on the other hand, preferred low round hats, pantaloons, and boots (Ribeiro 115). By the time of Austen’s maturity, trousers or pantaloons would lose their radical connotations, but knee breeches were still considered *de rigueur* for formal evening wear.

For women, clothing simplified even further, and in this the way was led by the *merveilleuses* (“marvelous” female dandies). Like the hippie styles of the 1960s and the punk look of the 1970s, these fashions began as shockingly daring innovations, but would eventually influence more “mainstream” looks. The fashionable waistline had by this time risen so high that dresses were belted just under the breasts. The dresses had become lighter, clinging, and, for the *merveilleuses* at least, who often wore no undergarments, daringly revealing. Similarly, hairstyles became shorter and closer

to the head, usually tightly curled; this was inspired in part by the way the hair of those condemned to be guillotined had been cut before execution. An equally ghoulish popular accessory was a red ribbon around the neck, in imitation of the cut made by the guillotine blade.

This look, variously referred to today as Empire or Regency, actually began earlier than the actual time periods of those regimes (1804–15 and 1811–20, respectively). It coincided with the contemporary renewal of interest in Ancient Greece and Rome, and it does resemble in some ways the garments of those civilizations. There were practical problems with these new styles, however; the loss of the capacious pockets of eighteenth-century dresses necessitated the carrying of a separate handbag, the reticule, usually small and round and carried by a string. There was a great deal of anxiety about the light, clinging materials: the anonymous author of *The Mirror of Graces* (1811) complained that “Our [English] autumnal evenings [combined] with . . . our gossamer apparel, have already sent many of my young female acquaintance to untimely graves,” causing “rheumatisms, palsies, consumptions, and death” (*Regency Etiquette* 44–46; 76).

Clinging muslin dresses were also thought to be body-revealing to the point of indecency, particularly in combination with a plunging neckline (this is probably what Austen means when she describes Mrs. Powlett as “expensively & nakedly dress’d”). In Austen’s youthful work *A Collection of Letters* (1790/92), the arrogant Lady Greville (a prototype of Lady Catherine de Bourgh) tells “A young Lady in distress’d Circumstances”: “You young Ladies who cannot often ride in a Carriage never mind what weather you trudge in, or how the wind shews your legs!” (159).¹ These concerns led to the introduction of shawls, which could be made of materials as wide-ranging as muslin, wool, or cashmere. The shawl was also considered to have classical antecedents, since it bore a strong resemblance (at least in form) to a type of wrap called a palla that was worn by women in ancient Rome.

Certain items of clothing were, however, very much of their time. Outerwear garments included the spencer, a long-sleeved jacket that extended only to the raised waistline. Worn by both men and women, it was named for the 2nd Earl Spencer, who, according to one version of the story, cut off the coattails of his jacket after wagering that he could invent a new fashion. For colder weather, there was the pelisse, a skirt-length overcoat, often lined and trimmed with fur, which originated in Hungary as a part of military dress. Bonnets became fashionable, essentially smaller versions of the straw hats of the 1780s, but now pulled in to frame the

face. Bonnets, like shawls, would become staples of feminine dress until at least the middle of the nineteenth century.

Men's clothing went through a similar process of simplification. The most influential figure in this development was George Bryan "Beau" Brummell (1778-1840). Brummell introduced an even more pared-down version of the cloth suit, even as he discouraged the wearing of wigs, hair powder, silk, and lace, all formerly staples of the fashionable male wardrobe. The height of Brummell's influence in Britain was between about 1800 and his leaving for exile in France in 1816, but the influence of his masculine sartorial style was profoundly influential in Britain and on the Continent.²

The Brummell "look" was based on the contrast between the dark colors of the cutaway frock coat (usually dark blue or dark green) and the crisp whiteness of the shirt and cravat (necktie). The first things the Bennet sisters can see of Bingley are his blue coat and black horse (*PP* 9). The very banality of this fashion choice heightens the humor of the situation: it is like a group of young women today being able to learn no more about a prospective suitor than that he was wearing jeans. Collars and cravats, invariably white (Brummell once said that his secret was "clean linen, plenty of it, with country washing"), were starched and tied so high that the wearer could not help but look down his nose at the rest of the world. For similar reasons, Brummell typically carried a spyglass, pretending to be near-sighted in order to avoid people he wanted to "cut" (snub). The white shirtfront would be set off by a buff-colored waistcoat. Conservative knee breeches, usually also buff-colored for daytime, were worn with white stockings. Tight-fitting pantaloons were also fashionable; these were held together by straps fastened under the instep to ensure unwrinkled smoothness. Short, highly polished "Hessian" boots or, for evening wear, black pumps with plain buckles completed the effect of understated elegance.

This was a style based on clean, uncluttered lines, and its emphasis on the form of the body made it, in its way, as "classical" as the clinging feminine fashions of the same period. Cleanliness of person was also important, and so perfume for men went out of fashion as well; Brummell believed that if one kept oneself clean and wore clean clothing, perfume was unnecessary. Brummell's genius, if you will, was twofold: he developed a masculine equivalent to the female Neoclassical style of dress; and he was able to take certain fashion choices (e.g., pantaloons versus knee breeches) out of the political arena and move them into the realm of the purely aesthetic.

In a world of increasingly sober male dress, the only real alternative

was the glitter of military dress uniform. This was an age of almost constant warfare (something which is not easy to glean from reading Austen's novels, as we know), and it may be difficult to realize how ubiquitous military dress was. Bright colors (including the red coats so beloved of Kitty and Lydia Bennet) and gold braid were not only dashing and glamorous, but also practical: it was essential to be able to distinguish friend from foe amid the smoke of the battlefield. It was not until the 1860s that khaki (the term derives from the Persian word for dust or ashes) was used by the British army in India to provide camouflage (Leavitt 120). Soldiers and fashionable civilians had this much in common: a "classical" emphasis on the form of the body, thanks especially to buckskin or elk skin breeches. This exaggeratedly masculine appearance was reinforced by the reappearance of facial hair—something that soldiers had worn throughout the eighteenth century, but which fashionable men had not worn since the middle of the seventeenth. It is not so big a step from these moustaches and *favoris* (or sideburns, as they were later called) to the full beards of Victorian patriarchs.

The reason for the prevalence of military dress in early nineteenth-century Europe was, of course, the imperial ambition of Napoleon Bonaparte. When he crowned himself Emperor of the French in December 1804, Napoleon, his family, and court all wore costumes of unparalleled magnificence, designed by the painter Jean-Baptiste Isabey. This splendor had both an economic purpose and a political one. Napoleon was determined to revive the French economy by resuscitating the luxury industries that had been so damaged during the Revolution. At Napoleon's court, the wearing of Lyons silk was not simply (to use Thorstein Veblen's later phrase) "conspicuous consumption"; it was a patriotic spur to the French economy. For the British, by contrast, muslin was not only less ostentatious, but also, because of its associations with British commercial interests in India, a patriotic statement of a different kind.

Politically, Napoleonic pomp and glitter were designed to impress the world and to justify the new regime. It is a commonplace that Napoleon looked to Greece and (especially) Imperial Rome for inspiration; but his court's costumes and uniforms in fact borrowed from a variety of traditions: the Middle Ages and Renaissance, as well as the pre-Revolutionary royal regime. Court officials wore plumed hats and capes that were reminiscent of seventeenth-century styles, along with pre-Revolutionary knee-breeches. The Empress Josephine and her ladies combined elaborately embroidered versions of the high-waisted "neoclassical" dress with six-

teenth-century style slashed-and-puffed sleeves; spiky collars similar to those made fashionable in the early seventeenth century by Marie de' Medici, consort of King Henri IV; and long sleeves going up to the knuckles that have a late Gothic look to them (Ribeiro 160). Josephine was instrumental in the development of the so-called *style troubadour*, the proto-Romantic interest in the Middle Ages.

Within a few years, the overwhelming classical influence of the turn of the century would be diluted by references to medieval and Renaissance styles. The "Medici collars" would be replaced by sixteenth-century style ruffs. The enormous popularity of the writings of Sir Walter Scott led to a fashion for Scottish plaids and tartans, which many modern historians now believe to have been an invention of eighteenth-century textile manufacturers, but which, of course, at the time were assumed to have ancient historical precedents (Trevor-Roper). These initial tendencies to Romanticism became more explicit after the fall of Napoleon, when the restored monarchies looked back to their dynastic roots, and sensitive souls found consolation for the dreariness of the present in a glamorous and exciting past.

Beginning about 1820, again under the influence of the Romantic movement, black became fashionable for men, especially for evening wear, providing an even more dramatic dark-and-light contrast. Beau Brummell, now in exile in France after having offended the future King George IV, deeply disliked this style, which he said made men look like magpies. At first, this was a look associated with dandies and poets, particularly when involving exaggeratedly high collars and padded or boned waistcoats that gave an expansive, broad-chested look. Hair might be arranged in a (carefully composed) illusion of swaggering untidiness, called in French a *coup de vent* ("gust of wind") style. The whole effect was one of Romantic (specifically Byronic) excess paradoxically combined with a kind of sinister elegance. Gradually, however, the black-and-white look became standard, its austere cut and somber colors evoking solid middle-class respectability. Thus, the modern male suit was born, and this style would change relatively little over the years.

While male costume reached a relative stasis, female clothing continued its process of elaboration. By about 1830, the waistline would complete its descent to its "natural" position. Skirts began to acquire a bell-shape once again, which would very gradually evolve into the huge crinolines of the 1850s and 1860s. Empress Josephine's puffed sleeves became larger, reinforcing the illusion of a narrow waist. Hairstyles became even

more elaborate, culminating in the so-called "Apollo knots." As men were becoming more exaggeratedly "masculine" in appearance, so women were looking more "feminine," thus paving the way for the fashionable polarity of the Victorian era.

To call the period of Jane Austen's lifetime a "transitional" one in terms of dress and fashion would be almost to underestimate its importance. All periods of fashion are in a sense transitional, as each age tries to embody its ideals of beauty and elegance in ever-changing styles. But certainly, the period 1775-1817 was one of most extraordinary transformation; by the end of it, fashionable people looked completely different from the way they had appeared at the beginning. That Austen does not go into much detail about these changes in her novels is, in its own small way, as remarkable as her avoidance of such major historical events as the Napoleonic Wars. As with the specific historical events of her time, Austen's avoidance of the momentarily fashionable only serves to make her novels the timeless masterpieces that they are.³

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Juliet McMaster for bringing this passage to my attention.
2. The following discussion is much indebted to Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummell to Beerbohm*, London and New York, 1960, 18-38.
3. The best complete discussion of this entire issue remains Penelope Byrde, *Jane Austen Fashion: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen* (Ludlow: Excellent Press, 1999). This is a revised edition of Byrde's *A Frivolous Distinction: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen*, Bath, 1979.

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