[Teel House Talk]

1. Title slide: [Thank the organizers.] We’re going to take a whirlwind tour of fashion during one of its must tumultuous times, between 1790 and 1820. Now, to be quite frank, for most people in England, France, or even North America life in this period was miserable. Poverty, war, slavery, disease, oppression…they had it all. So, I want to remind you that we will be looking at the small slice of the population. The focus is on the English gentry, the group of people who called themselves ladies and gentleman.  
   We’ll look at lots of clothes, so we can visualize what Austen would have seen both men and women wearing. Throughout, we will see the practical ways she talked about clothing in her letters, and about keeping up with the latest modes. And we will close with a range of examples of how she used fashion talk in her novels as a way to quickly delineate character.
2. So, let’s begin with a consideration of what happened in fashion during her lifetime.   
     
     
   Essentially, after one hundred or more years of wearing stiff and formal clothing, BAM! fashion leaders tore up the rules. The traditional explanation for this change is that women took one look at classical statues, got inspired by the current revolutionary fervor, shouted liberté, egalite, fraternité, then threw off their corsets, and hiked up their waistlines. “Expensively and nakedly dressed” women appeared in diaphanous gowns that, oh horrors!, showed their shape while men’s clothing also reflect neoclassical ideals And all of them tried to stay one step ahead of a growing middle-class eager to be fashionable, too.
3. In a few short years, clothing went from stiff, formal, and horizontal, to diaphanous, light, flowing and vertical. Soon, decoration became more elaborate on the bodice and skirt hem, then skirts became wider and waistlines began to lower again.
4. The question remains why? How did it happen? Were statues and revolution enough? Impossible to answer fully but we can look at some of the influences.
5. Global travel’s influence was already being felt in 18th century. This so-called “Turkish” gown is an interpretation of what European women saw as they traveled in the Orient—which in the western European mind was basically defined as everything east of Venice.
6. These revelers, including the woman on the right who is wearing men’s Persian dress are examples of the impact of costume balls on fashion.
7. In July 1798, Napoleon landed in Egypt with 400 ships and 54,000 men and proceeded to invade the country, as he had recently invaded Italy. But this Egyptian invasion was to be different. For, in addition to soldiers and sailors, Napoleon brought along 150 *savants* — scientists, engineers and scholars whose responsibility was to capture, not Egyptian soil, but Egyptian culture and history.” When news reached France of his victory, at the Battle of the Pyramids, over the warrior-class Mamelukes, the fascination with all things Egyptian kicked into high gear.
8. By January of 1799 British women, including Jane Austen, were wearing the Mameluke cap or turban. *Tuesday, 8 January 1799:* “I am not to wear my white satin cap to-night, after all; I am to wear a mamalone [mameluke] cap instead…It is all the fashion now; worn at the opera, and by Lady Mildmays at Hackwood balls.”
9. Though this white gown with coquelicott red trim does not scream Egyptian to us, the style was the rage in France.
10. Similarly, when Britain’s Thomas Hope published “Ancient Costumes” with drawings of garments taken from actual friezes and sculptures, fashionable women were quick to copy them.
11. Not to be outdone, men adopted the classical ideal by wearing the shorter waistcoats and cutaway jackets over skin-tight stretch knit pants, leaving little to the imagination.
12. June 1814 when Tsar Alexander I and other European leaders came to London to celebrate what they thought was the defeat of Napoleon, Princess Charlotte wore the sarafan, a Russian style. And Jane Austen warned Cassandra, who was in London at the time, to “take care of yourself and do not be trampled to death in running after the emperor”
13. Another major influence on men’s fashion: military pantaloons – cotton or wool knit to cling and stretch--was especially important for cavalry.
14. The Navy provided another inspiration: trousers. These were worn with straps under the instep for the landed gentleman.
15. In fact, the English gentry drew inspiration from a host of places.   
      
    In 1809 Ackermann describes fashionable clothing with the terms …
16. But fashion is not possible without textiles, and textiles are highly reliant on technology. Samuel Crompton invented the spinning **mule** in 1779 to spin finer thread that to make better and better muslins. Meanwhile chemist Claude Berthollet had perfected liquid bleach. These two developments made it possible to make the cloth and bleach it in record time. Charles Taylor describes this as: “calico…bleached white, printed in permanent colours, having undergone all these operations in less than 48 hours.”
17. Another change was happening: The globalization of textile manufacture--raw cotton from the Americas dyed white with indigo from the West Indies and woven into fine muslin/mull in India--was apparent in a gown made for Marie Antoinette in the early 1780s by her favorite dressmaker Rose Bertin. Poor Marie Antoinette. She wore the style to relax at her play farm, La petite trianon, as a way of getting away from the stiff, regimented court dress whose expense the people had complained about. But they decided to complain about this style, too, because it used muslin, a textile that was imported from Britain and its colonies. Plus, people thought it looked too much like a chemise—underwear---and so found that scandalous as well.
18. The aim was always to get a muslin as fine and transparent as that made in India, but make it in England for a much lower price.
19. But I promised you clothing, so let’s take a quick tour of the basics, gentlemen first. For the gentleman I’d like to start at the top.
20. Men (and women) had been wearing powdered wigs for more than a hundred years. William Pitt hit upon the notion that the country could rake in millions by taxing hair powder. The law went into effect in 1795 and James Gillray was prompt to point out the inevitable: a guinea a head for hair powder? Leave off wearing hair powder. (It did remain as a staple for servants in livery so Pitt’s idea wasn’t a complete waste.)
21. Gentlemen now had a choice, as this painting shows. They could continue to wear powdered wigs, or go without. In addition, though hair was shorter and in its more natural state, they were creative with styling. The statue of Titus gave its name to one style. Other styles had names like The Brutus, or The Windswept, and The Stanhope Crop. The young gentleman wears his hair long while in this portrait of Lord Byron we see a shorter, but still romantic, tousled curls. Both gentlemen leave powder, preferring the more natural style.
22. In general, for the entire period we are looking at, men wore a coat (we’d say “suit jacket”), a waistcoat (vest), and breeches.  
    The suit changed in shape and volume throughout the period. The earlier example’s waistcoat would act as a body-shaping or posture garment. The new freedom of movement and studied ease at the end of the century it is more like the latter, and at about the time Austen died we see the pegged trousers and nipped-in waist that will be popular for the next few years.
23. Breeches were made in a variety of fabrics: wool, leather, silk. Rolinda Sharples shows examples of all men’s options in her much-loved portrait of the cloak room at the Assembly Rooms at Clinton. The older gentleman on the left wears grey/light silk breeches, the army men are in their uniforms with knit pantaloons, the thirty-something husband in the middle wears black silk breeches while the young flirt wears trousers. Also note the impossibly tiny bodices on the women’s gowns and the ornate evening cap worn by the seated woman on the right.
24. But it is in the tailoring that we find the real changes. The new emphasis on exquisitely tailored and fitted coats owed much to the use of new technologies like the inch measure and the square rule. Tailors also began adding another shaped piece under the arm to allow for more custom fit. Also, the use of very high quality wool helped: wool can be shaped when heated.
25. Here we see an amazing example of skilled tailoring in a uniform coat made for the Prince of Wales August 1762-June 1830) He is shown wearing it in the portrait by Sir William Beechey. He is in his late 30s here but was already growing stout. The coat, however, is designed to fit him like a glove. This is the uniform of his 10th Regiment of Dragoons, or, more formally, “The Prince of Wales's Own Royal Regiment of Light Dragoons” also known as “The China 10th”. By the way, the 10th was designed to be a “show” regiment, not designed for battle. Hence the nickname “China” as in fragile and breakable, to be handled with care. As such it attracted young men of wealth and birth, including…
26. this gentleman. At 16, upon the death of his father, George Bryan Brummel paid his 734 pounds for a regimental commission, bought a horse (and paid for its upkeep) and instructed his tailor to create his uniform. Yes, officers’ uniforms were made by their favorite tailors. Brummel joined the 10th, becoming, in a few years, close enough to the Prince of Wales to stand up with him at his marriage to Princess Caroline. A disastrous marriage.   
    Brummel also became the Prince’s sartorial advisor, though he left the 10th after a few short years. According to legend, when told that the regiment would be posted north to Manchester, Brummel resigned saying he had not intended to see “**foreign** service”.  
     George Bryan “Beau” Brummell made understated yet exquisitely tailored clothing the mode to be followed (and which we still follow today). He was quoted as saying that his greatest accomplishment was the combination of dark coats over light colored trousers as we see here. While he did not invent trousers he certainly re-popularized them, particularly those with a strap under the instep that kept them from riding up and looking rumpled. He was also notorious for demanding a full tub bath every day, and was a perfectionist when it came to the tying of his cravats. From head to toe, the perfect gentleman.
27. Speaking of tying a neckcloth, many had fanciful names. These were usually white, especially in formal situations, but even gentlemen wore colors—blue was popular. The boxing star Tom “Jem” Belcher (1781-1811) sported his trademark spotted neckcloth. Notice that there were only a couple different types of knots: it’s the pattern of folds, dents, or creases that determine the names!
28. Drawers are still a question. Did they or didn’t they? Cavalry are rumoured not to have because it made them better able to direct and maneuver their horses with their legs (ouch) and examples exist in warm soft fabrics that indicate they were used for warmth or comfort during illnesses. But how often and by whom is still unsolved.
29. Shirts and shifts were usually made by the women in the family. The cut was simple and extremely economical, using all the width of the linen. The “workbasket” was always to hand with shirts/shifts to be sewn. And a hint: be on the lookout for the word “work” in Austen’s novels, and who is doing it. While it can include fine needlework it often means making shirts—and implies that the person working is industrious and responsible.
30. The obligatory shirt image
31. In any case, not all men were able to wear the prevailing, body hugging, styles with panache. Where nature did not cooperate, ingenuity served. A very technical explanation of the process for creating these downey calves involves raw wool fluff being teased and knit into the stockings as they are machine produced. Other strategies involved tying on bags of wool fluff or even sawdust to the calf.
32. Multiple ways for improving the deficiencies of nature were lampooned by caricaturists like Cruikshank:  
      
    1818 “Dammit I really believe I must take off my cravat or I shall never get my trowsers on.  
    “Pon honour Tom you are a charming figure – you’ll captivate the girls to a nicety.”   
    “Do you think so Charles? I shall look more the thing when I get my other calf on.”  
    “Dear me this is hardly stiff enough. I wish I had another sheet of foolscap.”  
    “You’ll find some to spare in my breeches.”
33. Dressing a Lady
34. A lady wore silk or wool stockings and a shift similar to a man’s shirt, but did she wear anything we would recognize as underwear?
35. Rowlandson’s 1800 satirical print of the “Exhibition Stair Case” shows guests climbing the stairs at Somerset House that lead to the gallery of the Royal Academy of Art. It would indicate that women did not wear drawers, the jury is still out. There is some evidence that women may sometimes have worn drawers for warmth – rather like the idea of thermal underwear--but when you are wearing a longer corset, drawers that tie around the waist, even if they are split—that is two legs tied at the waist but open at the crotch--are simply annoying.
36. James Gillray concurs—no drawers on this woman. Well, OK, he is making fun of the less voluminous women’s clothing so no **definitive** help on the drawers question there.
37. Yes, always wear a shift under your stays, no matter what they do in the movies. The name “stays” is changing to “corset” at this time. Some people consider the change to begin with The movement from heavily boned to lightly boned, but Austen, even though she is clearly wearing the later garment in 1813 still uses the term stays. Stays or corsets were generally two layers of linen, with channels for baleen or cord, with a single spiral lace—not criss-crossed like you would tie shoes, a busk (thin wooden stick about 1-2”wide – great for posture)
38. Then one or more petticoats. Unlike earlier petticoats that were designed to be seen, early 19th century petticoats were sometimes meant to be seen, sometimes not. This is a point of confusion when reading historic descriptions of clothing. You can see how it might work, though, in the image of Jane Austen done by her sister Cassandra. She appears to be wearing two petticoats, and under petticoat and an over petticoat with the overgown temporarily tucked up. So, she would have a shift, a corset, a petticoat, a second petticoat, and the skirt of her gown, and…
39. a chemisette, made of fine cotton lawn or linen or even silk. This garment was meant to fill in the neckline to protect from the sun and provide modesty. Since caps for sleeping, or for morning wear, or to wear under bonnets, or even on their own in evenings, she probably has a cap on under her bonnet. By the way, caps for morning or evening wear could be quite ornate with embroidery, lace, ribbons, and flowers.
40. These examples of shoes and nankeen boots have flat heels and pointed toes. Later shoes would have rounded, then squared toes (Victorian)
41. 18th century women wore tie-on pockets but the 19th century gowns, with their emphasis on a smooth line, necessitated the carrying of reticules. These are not to scale. The red purse is only 3 inches tall, the others from 7 to 10 inches.
42. After the big hats and bonnets of the 1790s, bonnets became smaller, lying closer to the hair. They were designed to accommodate current hairstyles as in this example for Greek styles, with the hair pulled to the back of the head.
43. But of course, cartoonists decided that these bonnets could accommodate other activities, too.
44. By the second decade hairstyles were more Roman, that is, hair was piled on top of the head. Bonnets, especially French bonnets, were all the rage. They could get quite outlandish. And after the height came down a bit at the end of the decade, they started going in new, horizontal directions.
45. A Lady of means would change several times during the day. Morning wear—another confusing term—morning was essentially any time before dinner and since dinner was served later and later as this era progresses, “morning” could extend to 3:00 or even later. Morning dress was not limited to indoor “lounge wear.” You would receive callers in morning dress.
46. Afternoon dress, or walking dress, would be worn for strolls in the park, perhaps some shopping, or visiting the library.
47. For the evening a lady might choose between several styles depending on her destination: evening wear for a dinner party, even more ornate opera dress for going to the opera or theatre, and ball dress, of course. (The ball gowns are easy to spot: less fabric, shorter hem)
48. The short Spencer jacket is one of the most familiar looks of the Austen Era. Here we see one over the voluminous gown of the late 1790s, another in 1812 with the more vertical, narrower silhouette, and the last from around 1820 where a more decorative bodice was in vogue.
49. Or this inventive and truly beautiful spencer gown composed of a petticoat, a separate bodice, and a spencer—a sort of Regency approach to “separates.”
50. Many women preferred pelisses—Austen mentions them more often. These were longer garments meant to be worn over a gown, but women also wore caped greatcoats.
51. Given the number of deaths that might occur in a family, and certainly in the late teens/early 1820s when so many members of the Royal Family died, mourning wear was always a necessity. The mourning fashion followed the styles of the day, but certain textiles were considered appropriate for mourning. Bombazine, a heavy, dull silk twill had been very popular the previous century continued through Austen’s years. Silk crepe became popular with the newer, more fluid styles. The broach is a piece of hair jewelry – the weeping willow is made of hair. I include the quote because women in mourning were typically depicted draped over urns, statues, tombstones…and Austen makes a point of teasing.
52. Specialty garments included a riding habit, usually made by a tailor, not a dressmaker, and the most special of gowns, worn only by highest echelons, was Court dress – Queen Charlotte (George III’s wife) set specific rules about court dress including things like the number of feathers, type of decoration, and length of train, etc. One of the rules that proved most irksome remained the rule until after her death. George IV finally changed it, to the gratitude of many. The rule was that women must, must wear hoops of a specific dimension, for court dress. Consider the high-waisted style.
53. Then consider wearing that with hoops. My dream is to someday see a filmmaker and costume designer do a court presentation scene that accurately reflects this.
54. In our own time and place, we often think of clothing as an expression of individuality. But Austen’s society was one of rank and hierarchy. Clothing was less about individuality and more about indicating one’s place in society. Keeping up with the latest fashion trends was a way to signal your place and stay ahead of the social climbers who were making their money in trade instead of from income generated from land holdings. To retain your spot of the social ladder you must show that you keep up with, and afford the latest fashions. You should also be able to converse wittily about the latest news, dance the latest dances, carry yourself appropriately, understand protocol, and follow appropriate social rules. This was not simply a way to be trendy or edgy. Your deportment, manners, and speech all mark you as acceptable into society.
55. Knowing who is who, and following proper deference to those above you in the hierarchy, is key. But this became increasingly difficult as those same social climbers had access to the same fashion magazines, dance instructors, and carriages that were hallmarks of the gentry. Or, as Pierce Egan said in his book titled “Walks Through Bath”  
    “…even here, amid the crowds you view,  
    ’Tis sometimes difficult to tell WHO’S WHO.”  
    Pierce Egan, *Walks Through Bath*, 1819
56. As this cartoon shows: Bobbin (reference to retail trade) Fiddle (trying to con or sham—either the family to con their way into high society, or the fiddler himself, pretending to be a French dance master)  
    “I say Monsouer Caper don’t I come it prime? Ecod I shall cut a figor!”  
    Law Pa that’s just as when you was drilling for the Whitechapel Volunteers. Only look at how Ma and I and sister Clementina does it.”  
    Ver vel sir, vere vel. You vil danse a merveileux ver soon.”
57. How could one keep up with the latest fashions? One could learn about trends from your dressmaker or in letters from your friends in the city. In fact, we see many examples of that in Jane’s letters to her sister Cassandra whenever she was in London. The rise in print publications of all kinds included the Ladies Magazine (1770-1832)--recognized as the first created specifically for women. The first edition opened with an engraving of a lady in Full, or formal, Dress and this inclusion of images became the standard.
58. The remarkable French magazine, Journals des dames et des modes, was published every 5 days from 1797-1839 by Pierre Antoine Leboux de La Mésangère and Jean-Baptiste Sellèque. Each edition contained one or more exquisite fashion plates—engravings that were hand painted in watercolours. Wounded as a bystander in an assassination attempt against Napoleon, Jean-Baptiste Sellèque died in 1801, but la Mesengere continued on.
59. The Journal was soon followed by several more publications including Heideloff’s “Gallery of Fashion” and the Beau Monde.
60. Also available were The Ladies Monthly Museum, and La Belle Assemblee. And as a wonderful bit of trivia: we can thank the publisher Mr. Bell for commissioning a new typeface for his works that did away with the use of the long s—the one that looks like an “f.” We also know that Jane’s niece Fanny owned a copy of an 1814 edition of La Belle Assemblée, which she no doubt shared with her aunts.
61. Then there is my personal favorite, Ackermann’s. As I mentioned, it was important important to be able to converse intelligently on a variety of topics. Ackermann’s, or to give it its full name “The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics” also included reviews of music, lists of bankruptcies, grain prices and images of furniture, interior design, and public buildings and places. It provided engraved--or to be more precise, aquatinted—hand water-coloured fashion images, that is, fashion plates, with detailed descriptions, as well as fashion articles.
62. Early years of Ackermann’s even included swatches of fabrics with descriptions. This January 1811 edition, for example, has actual fabric swatches glued in that describe the fabrics as suitable for “light” or “half” mourning. Nor were these publications limited to England. Ackermann’s could be subscribed to from cities around the world.
63. And even if one did not have a subscription to the magazine, so-called “scissor editors” were happy to clip the descriptions and include them in their weekly newspapers. For example, you can find the exact same description for the fashions printed in the October 1808 edition of La Belle Assemée in at least six different newspapers.
64. And the descriptions, though not the engravings, were also copied all around the world. Here is the January 1809 fashion description in Ackermann’s for “A Polish bonnet, and mantle of gold-coloured velvet…”
65. And here it is copied word for word in a Massachusetts newspaper by June of the same year. This is before copyright as we know it.
66. Fashion news traveled even further by milliners ads, dressmakers, and their clients. Those visiting the city, like Jane Austen in September 1814, could get the latest fashion ideas to their friends and family in the country in just a few days.
67. When she suggested, in October 1808, that her velvet pelisse would remain fashionable with just a bit of alteration she could state with confidence that “We must turn our black pelisses into new, for Velvet is to be very much worn this winter” because La Belle Assemblée has just said it was so.
68. Or in March 1814 she could describe how she has furbished up a gown by lowering the corners of the neckline and adding pleated ribbon.
69. In this she was not unusual. And for those who were a bit more uncertain about how a new fashion would endure, it was possible to compromise. The owner of this gown has detached the skirt and reattached it higher up as fashion demands. However, she has not cut away the now excess bodice but has instead left it in place so she can return the gown to its former style if the fashion for high waists does not last too long.
70. This brings up another challenge for women of this period: it’s not simply the style of the gown. As the writer of the *Mirror of Graces declares:* “In former ages it seemed requisite that every lady should cut out her garments by a certain erect standard.”  
    There are two key words in this statement. The first is **lady**. In this statement, the second key phrase is “erect standard.”
71. The period that spans these changes in fashion also demonstrates a change in the ideas about what was acceptable posture, stance, and movement. The 18th century had emphasized the upright, formal posture which you can see in all the members of this family, including the youngest children—in fact, even the dog has formal upright posture. BTW The gentleman here shows “a good leg”—that is, he is standing with his leg turned out to show a strong and shapely calf—a focal point for men of the time.
72. While there were variations and changing details of gowns in the 18th century, the general cut, or what I call the distribution of volume, was similar throughout. A conical upper body, shaped by stays, natural or slightly lower waistline, skirts horizontally wide below that. The structure that made this possible was a combination of stays and hoops, or panniers. Since the 16th century women had been using stays, known later as corsets, for both support and for some shaping.
73. The cut and boning layout evolved to be quite technical and efficient by century’s end. The “wall-to-wall” boning was designed to create a barrel shape with a smooth, rounded, mono-bosomed neckline. To be blunt, it was not about nipping in the waist or pushing up the boobs, although from the front your waist might look smaller--from the side it would look larger. The shape and design of the stays or corsets provides the foundation for the shape of the clothing while helping the wearer to retain a formal, upright posture.
74. This example from the TV series “Outlander” has very few bones, but it shows why a corset should be fitted properly—it should not be squashing--well I suppose it shows that 21st century people have a different aesthetic.
75. So, the cues to show that you were part of the gentry included having an acceptable grace, or air, of movement. But what was meant by acceptable? Austen gives us a perfect example in Persuasion. Anne Elliot’s “mean girl” sister Elizabeth is dishing on old family friend and mentor, Lady Russell. She complains that Lady Russell has “Something so formal and *arrangé* in her air! And she sits so upright!” Lady Russel would not have been **wearing** the out-of-date corsets or gowns—she was, after all, a fashionable woman--but Elizabeth points out that her posture and stance have betrayed her as being part of the earlier generation. The formal, erect posture of the 18th century was giving way to this new, more naturalistic form of grace.
76. But let’s return to Jane Austen and see how these ideas of gentility, of elegance, one’s air, and even one’s character, are all expressed through fashion. Remember that Austen wrote her early works before 1800 when lightweight but voluminous gowns were the style. Following a 10 year hiatus, the bulk of her writing, and the editing, revising, and publishing of her works occurred after 1811.
77. These years saw an evolution in Austen’s use of fashion to delineate character that I like to divide into 3 categories. The first is, as Austen scholar James Thompson puts it, through the use of “Few words, tellingly applied.” This is usually carried in the narrator’s speech. Then there are the foolish characters, who generally condemn themselves out of their own mouths, making their folly obvious to those around them. Good characters generally don’t talk about fashion but foolish characters do, and often at inopportune times. Third are the catty or snarky characters who weaponize their fashion speech, such as the earlier quote from Elizabeth Elliot about Lady Russell.
78. So, some of the “brief, yet telling, description” typeinstances my favorite, Henry Tilney. Catherine is smitten by his greatcoat and hat and he has already proven his worth to us by being someone who “understands muslin.” And he dances well, surely the sign of a gentleman.
79. Miss Tilney’s character is also captured in a few words, this time from the mouth of Mrs. Allen who recognizes her elegance in always wearing white.
80. Even Edmund Bertram understands the importance of white gowns, though he is probably not thinking of Fanny when contemplating a “fine woman.”
81. Bingley’s easy, unaffected manner—his air, in effect--are also indicators of his character. This, by the way, is how I personally see Bingley, at least as he might have been envisioned by Austen in the initial writing. He can afford hair powder and is reserved enough to wear it. And his blue superfine coat is as well-tailored as Brummel could have wished.
82. Willoughby is a bit more difficult. Yes his shooting jacket is admirable, but is Marianne’s imagination misplaced to rely so heavily on externals. And does she ever see through Willoughby’s externals to divine his actual character?
83. Wickham, on the other hand, is described in this odd way “he wanted (or lacked) only regimentals.” This can be read straightforwardly as a man who wants to be in the army with all its attendant glory. But there is a deeper meaning we can see once we know what he is. He is running away from creditors. So, his change to regimentals, though not necessarily a literal disguise can be seen as a figurative one.
84. As usual, Austen slips in the stiletto with her description of Mrs. Elton. She is not elegant in character like Eleanor Tilney but relies on her Showy wealth in the form of lace and pearls to make her seem so.
85. Likewise with the Steele sisters—appearance by no means ungenteel—a backwards complement if ever I heard one—and we learn fairly quickly that at least Nancy, the elder sister, is ungenteel in the extreme. Lucy is somewhat more presentable but duplicitous.
86. This example is not so much a delineation of character but more a wonderful image of how quickly the friendship between Catherine and Isabella develops (or is developed by the crafty Isabella). This line always makes me wonder, though. The image is from the 1986 Giles Foster film version of Northanger Abbey (costumes by Nicholas Rocker) Despite the films general….oddities I was so pleased to find a costume designer who would attempt the greater volume of the fashion of the late 1790s instead of sticking with the usual narrower silhouette of later Regency gowns. But when Austen edited the novel in the 18-teens she would have been well aware, as her readers would have, that women had no need to pin up their ballgowns because the hems were already short enough at that point. Did she just miss it—she was probably ill at the time—or was it just such a charming picture that she decided to leave it in despite being an anachronism?
87. Caroline Bingley’s description of an impossible woman tells us more about her than about Elizabeth…
88. But she has already made clear her prejudices about long country walks undertaken by women, or at least by one woman. Her own words condemn her as ill-mannered, and Darcy’s subsequent expressed appreciation of “a pair of fine eyes brightened by the exercise” are appropriate punishment.
89. Mrs. Allen’s concerns about mud are also clear, but by this point in the novel it may have dawned on us that she, despite her fluffy fashion talk, is really a dangerous person as far as Catherine’s actual well-being is concerned. Her fashion obsession blinds her to the very real social dangers that Catherine could face by driving with Thorpe in such a way.
90. In the Bennet family it is hard to decide who is worse, Mrs. Bennet or her daughter Lydia. In the midst of what may be the family’s greatest calamity the first thing she enquires about when her sister-in-law comes from London to console her is about the latest fashion. Austen may have been concerned about the appropriateness of wearing long sleeves in 1814, but I doubt they would have been top of her mind in a time of crisis. I must say that choosing long sleeves was a brilliant move on Austen’s part. Long sleeves for evening were not always in fashion through these years but they did have periodic resurgences. Her readers would have known this too, so they were safe for Austen to use to indicate an obsession with the latest fashion details indicators. One other personal note: Mrs. Bennet makes a point of showing her up-to-date fashion awareness so we can expect she herself would have worn or adapted the latest styles, yet filmmakers insist on depicting her in clothing that is 30 years out of date. Frustrating.
91. Lydia also shows her folly by speaking of fashion at inopportune moments. She has possibly ruined her family, is completely selfish, but leaves such a letter. Some have also suggested that Austen is indicating that it is not only Lydia’s gown that may now be considered damaged goods.
92. Mary Crawford, on the other hand, uses her fashion talk skillfully, charmingly, but deadly all the same. In this case she uses a close bonnet for her weapon, in order to determine if Fanny will be a potential rival because she is out, or a safe young woman that can be ignored as a potential rival, if she is not.
93. Austen’s last three novels have fewer fashion references and they are more subtle or gentle. In this case Harriet is talking about her pattern gown. One way women could make dress-making easier was to pick apart an old gown that fit well and use it as a pattern for a new gown. But Harriet’s dilemma does give Austen a chance to show Emma as decisive when she resolves Harriet’s dithering. The fact, though, that her pattern gown is at Hartfield also indicates that Emma’s own dressmaker has been called into service to make Harriet’s gown—an honor. By the way, taking apart a gown sounds a bit challenging but looking at the interior of this example from the Victoria and Albert museum shows how a regular woman could alter or remake her own gowns. The sewing is skilled but not extremely so—the seams are sewn with a rather large stitch that would be easy to take apart, and the design is a simple front-opening gown that would be easy to get into without a lady’s maid.
94. This example is actually from a man, Captain Wentworth. His comparison of a ship and a pelisse is warm and delightful.
95. But I will actually end with a quote from one of Austen’s letters. Notice the date, less than two months before her death in July. It is the last letter in Dierdre Le Faye’s compilation of letters and the letter itself ends a bit of gently humorous teasing in the form of, of course, a fashion reference.