

Jane Austen and the Art of Fashion

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Miss Tilney's white gown confirms her elegance, Mr. Bingley's blue coat hints of the dandy, Mrs. Elton animadverts on the want of lace, and as for repairing Lydia Bennet's muslin gown...! Austen's descriptions of clothing are sparingly, yet tellingly, applied. She uses her precise economy of language to swiftly define, and often skewer, her characters through fashion. While there are notable exceptions, those characters who speak most often of fashion are foolish, indiscrete, unlikeable, or betray their true, usually negative, character through their clothing.

In 1884, Edward, Lord Brabourne, assured the readers of his publication of Austen's edited letters that he had not removed her many references to fashion despite critics' advice to do so. Though he called them "apparently insignificant" he suggested it was "a comfort to ordinary persons to find that so superior a being as Jane Austen concerned herself about such trifles." These references provide a fascinating counterpoint to the fashion speech of her characters.

Though brief, the references are frequent, occurring throughout her lifetime. Indeed, a fashionable article of clothing—the pelisse—is mentioned in her last published letter. She occasionally poked fun at her acquaintance's fashion choices but was primarily practical and direct, discussing trends, specifics, and alterations.

Her novels and letters show a firm grasp of the rapidly changing styles of this period, the global influences that were evident in those changes, and the role fashion consciousness played in the culture of deference and class. She discusses altering her wardrobe to keep up with the latest fashions and expresses a discerning awareness of the nuances. To Martha Lloyd, in September 1814, she wrote: "I am amused by the present style of female dress. It seems a more marked change than one has lately seen."

This "marked change" is barely negligible to most modern eyes. Austen and her early readers would have envisioned her characters in the clothing of their day, yet defining even this is problematic: despite our current tendency to see that era's fashion as monolithic—high waist, puff sleeves—the fashions worn by her characters during her early writing would not have been worn by those of the later, published, versions. This envisioning is further complicated for modern readers by the pervasiveness of film and television interpretations. Directors and designers cannot sketch clothing indicators and leave the details to the reader's imagination. Viewers are presented with clear choices and those choices influence what they "see" when reading.

This presentation will explore these intertwining threads: her lifelong attention to the art of fashion, her use of this art to fashion her characters, and envisioning, then and now, the fashions worn by those characters.

Bio blurb

Hope Greenberg (MA History) studies and recreates historic clothing, focusing on the evolution of fashion during Austen's lifetime. She has presented on the topic for the Jane Austen Summer Program-UNC, JASNA-VT, history and literature courses, libraries, and other groups. As part of the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Vermont, she provides advanced consulting for faculty on integrating teaching and technology, online course design, and digitally mediated humanities research.