



“I was tempted by a pretty coloured muslin”: Jane Austen and the Art of Being Fashionable

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EVER SINCE EVE plucked that first leaf off the fig tree in the Garden of Eden and decided green was her color, women of all times and all places have been interested in fashion and in being fashionable. Jane Austen herself wrote, “I beleive Finery must have it” (23 September 1813), and in *Northanger Abbey* we read that Mrs. Allen cannot begin to enjoy the delights of Bath until she “was provided with a dress of the newest fashion” (20). Whether a woman was like Jane and “so tired & ashamed of half my present stock that I even blush at the sight of the wardrobe which contains them” (25 December 1798) or like the two Miss Beauforts in *Sanditon*, who required “six new Dresses each for a three days visit” (*Minor Works* 421), dress was a problem to be solved. There were no big-name designers with models to show off their creations. There was no *Project Runway*. There were no department stores or clothing emporiums where one could browse for and purchase garments of the latest fashion. How did a woman achieve a stylish appearance?

Just as we have *Vogue*, *Elle* and *In Style* magazines to keep us up to date on the most current styles, women of the Regency era had *The Ladies Magazine*, *La Belle Assemblée*, *Le Beau Monde*, *The Gallery of Fashion*, and a host of other publications (Decker). We know that at least one member of the Austen family read this type of publication: the 1814 yearly edition of *La Belle Assemblée* belonging to Jane’s niece Fanny Knight still exists (Decker). Such publications not only would contain illustrations and descriptions of fashionable garments but also might contain patterns for embroidery and needle-worked items as

well as snippets of news from London and other parts of Great Britain, including births, deaths, and marriages. Fanny enjoyed cutting out the fashion illustrations and replacing the gowns with pieces of fabric.

Consulting with one's dressmaker or mantua-maker, as she was often known, was another way to determine what was fashionable. It was important that a dressmaker keep up to date with the latest fashion trends. A dressmaker who could not advise on and construct a stylish garment would soon have no business. To illustrate current fashion trends, a dressmaker might have in her shop a fashion doll to show to customers. The use of fashion dolls, commonly known as Pandoras, dates back to the Middle Ages (Fraser 39). In Jane Austen's time, as now, French fashion was considered cutting edge and the most stylish. French fashion dolls would be sent to England, and in turn English fashion dolls would be sent to America (Fraser 42). In addition, paper dolls illustrating the latest in wardrobes, headdresses, and coiffures began to spread throughout Europe and England starting in the late-1700s (Fraser 43).

But in Jane Austen's books and letters, fashion news is most often spread by word of mouth. In *Northanger Abbey*, Isabella Thorpe writes to Catherine Morland, "The spring fashions are partly down; and the hats the most frightful you can imagine" (216), and in *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennet is grateful to Mrs. Gardiner for telling her about long sleeves (140). Long sleeves apparently were also of concern to Jane Austen herself: she writes to her sister Cassandra, "I wear my gauze gown today, long sleeves & all; I shall see how they succeed, but as yet I have no reason to suppose long sleeves are allowable" (9 March 1814). Later in the same letter we learn, "M^{rs} Tilson had long sleeves too, & she assured me that they are worn in the evening by many. I was glad to hear this."

Jane's letters are a veritable treasure trove of fashion gossip: "Gores not being so much worn as they were"; "Bonnetts of Cambric Muslin on the plan of Ly Bridges' are a good deal worn"; "Black gauze Cloaks are worn as much as anything" (6 May 1801); "Velvet is to be very much worn this winter" (9 October 1808); and "I am to be in Bombazeen & Crape, according to what we are told is universal *here*; & which agrees with Martha's previous observation" (15 October 1808). "Here" is Southampton, "Martha" is Martha Lloyd, and Jane, with typical sisterly devotion, passes on this tidbit of fashion news to Cassandra.

Jane delights in sharing her observations and enjoyment of the latest fashion trends with Cassandra. She passes along news from a London dressmaker's establishment: "I learnt from M^{rs} Tickars's young Lady, to my high

amusement, that the stays now are not made to force the Bosom up at all;— *that* was a very unbecoming, unnatural fashion. I was really glad to hear that they are not to be so much off the shoulders as they were” (15 September 1813). Jane is often amused by fashion trends:

I am amused by the present style of female dress;—the coloured petticoats with braces over the white Spencers & enormous Bonnets upon the full stretch, are quite entertaining. It seems to me a more marked *change* than one has lately seen.—Long sleeves appear universal, even as *Dress*, the Waists short, and as far as I have been able to judge, the Bosom covered.—I was at a little party last night at M^{rs} Latouche’s, where dress is a good deal attended to, & these are my observations from it.—Petticoats short, & generally, tho’ not always, flounced.—The broad-straps belonging to the Gown or Boddice, which cross the front of the Waist, over white, have a very pretty effect I think. (2 September 1814)

Jane even uses her observations to indulge in some gentle teasing when writing to Cassandra: “Miss Chapman’s name is Laura & she had a double flounce to her gown.—You really must get some flounces. Are not some of your large stock of white morn^g gowns just in a happy state for a flounce, too short?” (14 October 1813). Later she inquires “How do you like your flounce?—We have seen only *plain* flounces” (26 October 1813).

But learning what was stylish, what was fashion forward, was only the first of many steps to achieving a fashionable appearance. Garment design, construction or alteration, patterns, fabric choice, color and cost, and embellishments had to be decided upon before a lady could make her stylish appearance in public.

In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney tells Mrs. Allen and Catherine Morland that “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” (28). When Mr. Tilney talks about buying a gown for his sister, he means he has purchased the fabric needed to make a gown, not the actual gown itself. Ladies of Jane Austen’s era did not have the option of purchasing garments off the rack. Jane bemoans this in a letter to Cassandra, in which she writes, “I cannot determine what to do about my new Gown; I wish such things were to be bought ready made” (25 December 1798). Such garments could be made at home or commissioned through a dressmaker.

A lady of wealth, such as Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, would have a lady’s maid who, besides being skilled in dressing hair and maintaining the

garments of her mistress, would often add dressmaking to her resumé of desirable qualifications. In the days approaching the ball at Mansfield Park, the “preparations meanwhile went on, and Lady Bertram continued to sit on her sofa without any inconvenience from them. She had some extra visits from the housekeeper, and her maid was rather hurried in making up a new dress for her” (254).

The garments most likely to be sewn at home were men’s shirts—“We are very busy making Edward’s shirts, and I am proud to say I am the neatest worker of the party” (1 September 1796)—as well as children’s clothing and garments for estate dependents or charity cases. Mrs. Norris also engaged in this kind of activity, telling Fanny, “If you have no work of your own, I can supply you from the poor-basket. There is all the new calico that was bought last week, not touched yet. I am sure I almost broke my back by cutting it out” (*MP* 71). To be the recipient of a calico garment stitched by Mrs. Norris must have been cold charity indeed.

The Austen ladies very likely stitched few, if any, gowns for themselves. We do know that Jane made several caps: “I have made myself two or three caps to wear of evenings since I came home, and they save me a world of torment as to hair-dressing” (1 December 1798). They also altered or embellished existing gowns: “But I will not be much longer libelled by the possession of my coarse spot, I shall turn it into a petticoat very soon” (25 December 1798); “I can easily suppose that your [Cassandra’s] six weeks here will be fully occupied, were it only in lengthening the waist of your gowns” (17 January 1809); “I have determined to trim my lilac sarsenet with black sattin ribbon just as my China Crape is”; and “I have been ruining myself in black sattin ribbon with a proper perl edge; & now I am trying to draw it up into kind of Roses, instead of putting it in plain double plaits” (6, 7 March 1814).

Gowns also might be picked apart and dyed to extend or alter their usage. Mrs. Austen, Jane’s mother, picked apart a silk pelisse to have it dyed black for mourning. And Jane asks Cassandra, “[H]ow is your blue gown?—Mine is all to peices.—I think there must have been something wrong in the dye, for in places it divided with a Touch.—There was four shillings thrown away” (7 October 1808).

In her letters Jane mentions several dressmakers who had the making of the Austen ladies’ gowns: a Miss Burton (18 April 1811); a Miss Summers (20 November 1800); a Mrs. Mussell, who apparently was more successful with dark colored fabrics than light, as Jane was obliged to alter a white gown of her manufacture after it was completed (27 May 1801); two Miss Bakers, one of

whom made Jane a gown and the other a bonnet (15 October 1808); and a Miss Hare, who made Jane a pretty cap of “white sattin and lace, and a little white flower perking out of the left ear” (15 September 1813). The cost of a dressmaker was relatively cheap. In 1811 Jane employed the aforementioned Miss Burton to make pelisses for her and Cassandra. The dressmaker charged only 8 shillings for this job (18 April 1811), equivalent to \$41.20 US in 2008 purchasing power (Officer). Even Harriet Smith, she of uncertain parentage and no fortune, could afford to have gowns made: “as she was passing by the house where a young woman was making up a gown for her, she thought she would just step in and see how it went on” (*E* 178).

Before a new gown could be commissioned or sewn, some decisions had to be made. The gown design was important—long sleeves or short, flounces, tails, perhaps a train on the skirt—because the gown would be made to a woman’s specifications. Isabella Thorpe asks Catherine Morland, “How do you like my gown? I think it does not look amiss; the sleeves were entirely my own thought” (70). The design also would determine how much fabric might be needed. Obviously, long sleeves, flounces, or a train would require more yardage than a plain gown. “I beleive I *shall* make my new gown like my robe, but the back of the latter is all in a peice with the tail, & will 7 yards enable me to copy it in that respect?” (18 December 1798)

Garment patterns were not available to ladies of the Regency era who chose or were forced to home-sew their clothing. There were a few publications for the professional dressmaker that illustrated the shapes of garment pieces, and some magazines might include full-sized patterns of small items, such as caps or children’s garments, but commercial paper patterns such as we have today would not be available to the home seamstress for several more decades (Arnold 3). A dressmaker would make a pattern for a customer by holding a piece of paper or fabric up to the body and shaping and cutting it. If fabric was used, it would then become the lining of the garment (Arnold 9).

An existing garment could be taken apart and used as a pattern. In *Emma*, Harriet Smith leaves her pattern gown at Hartfield (235). In 1801 Jane writes to Cassandra, “Mary has likewise a message—. She will be much obliged to you if you can bring her the pattern of the Jacket & Trowsers, or whatever it is, that Elizth:’s boys wear when they are first put into breeches—; or if you could bring her an old suit itself she would be very glad” (22 January 1801). The old suit would be taken apart and used to make a pattern. Patterns also could be taken from intact garments. In *Sense and Sensibility* the Misses Steele spend time during their visit to Lady Middleton “in taking patterns of



The Ladies Dress Maker, *from*
Richard Phillips's A Book of
English Trades (1818).

some elegant new dress, in which her appearance the day before had thrown them into unceasing delight" (120). It would appear that sometimes an item might be purchased just to get a new pattern: "I am glad you like our caps—but Fanny is out of conceit with hers already; she finds that she has been buying a new cap without having a new pattern, which is true enough" (23 September 1813). Fanny undoubtedly was hoping to take a pattern from her new cap, only to discover she already had a very similar cap and pattern.

Patterns were valued and treasured, at least by Jane. She tells Cassandra, "I am quite pleased with Martha & M^{rs} Lefroy for wanting the pattern of our Caps, but I am not so well pleased with Your giving it to them" (2 June 1799). She may not have been pleased with sharing patterns, but on at least one occasion she is the recipient of some: "M^{rs} Tilson's remembrance gratifies me, & I will use her patterns if I can; but poor Woman! how can she be honestly breeding again?" (1 October 1808).

Fabric was the greatest expense in a new gown. Mr. Henry Tilney

bought a true Indian muslin for his sister at the prodigious bargain price of only 5 shillings a yard (28). Five shillings sounds like a bargain to us too, but in 2008 US dollars that is \$32.60 a yard (Officer), and at 7 yards for a gown, the fabric for that gown cost Mr. Tilney over \$220.00, a substantial amount even for a “true Indian muslin.” So choosing the right fabric was paramount. In her letters Jane mentions fabric purchases ranging in price from dimity at 2 shillings 6 pence per yard (24 May 1813), or \$11.50 US in 2008 purchasing power, to a checked muslin at 7 shillings per yard (18 April 1811), or \$36.20 US in 2008 purchasing power. She bought 10 yards of the pretty colored muslin, with a pattern of red spots, mentioned in the title of this essay, at 3 shillings 6 pence per yard (18 April 1811), or \$18.00 US in 2008 purchasing power.

White was very fashionable and considered elegant. Edmund Bertram reassures Fanny Price, “A woman can never be too fine while she is all in white” (222). Catherine Morland is told by Mrs. Allen, “Go by all means, my dear; only put on a white gown; Miss Tilney always wears white” (NA 91). And at Sanditon “in the little Green Court of an old Farm House, two Females in elegant white were actually to be seen with their books & camp stools” (383). But white gowns are fashionable and elegant only when pristine, so choosing one, particularly for day wear, that could be washed and did not fray, unlike the one Catherine Morland was wearing when she first met Henry Tilney (28), had to be done with care. Colored fabrics also required careful consideration. “I am sorry to say that my new coloured gown is very much washed out, though I charged everybody to take great care of it,” Jane tells Cassandra (1 September 1796). Sturdy fabrics such as cloth, stuff, calico, and chintz would be most suitable for informal day wear while fine muslins, satin, and sarsenet would be worn for evening or more formal occasions.

Fabric for new garments could be acquired from several different sources. Some dressmakers would have a stock of fabrics on hand from which clients could choose, but this practice was rare as it was a monetary outlay that few dressmakers could afford (Arnold 9). The customer most often would provide her own fabric. If a trip to a shop was not possible, there were always door-to-door peddlers selling fabrics and drapery goods. In 1798 Jane purchased Irish linen from one such peddler, whom she referred to as the Overton Scotchman (25 November 1798). She paid 3 shillings 6 pence per yard, or in 2008 equivalent purchasing power, \$27.60 per yard (Officer). It was not as fine as she would’ve liked, but it was less harsh than a previous purchase.

A visit to a town of any size was never wasted. Jane looked at gauzes in a

shop in Bath (2 June 1799), purchased a figured cambric muslin in Andover, a market town in Hampshire (30 November 1800), and asked Cassandra to buy fine netting silk for her when in Canterbury (22 January 1799). Even a small village such as Highbury in *Emma* would have at least one shop where fabrics could be purchased: “Ford’s was the principal woolen-drapeer, linen-drapeer, and haberdasher’s shop united; the shop first in size and fashion in the place” (178). Jane’s letters show us that she and Cassandra were often commissioned to purchase specific fabrics on behalf of each other and other family members.

Though you have given me unlimited powers concerning Your Sprig, I cannot determine what to do about it, & shall therefore in this & in every future letter continue to ask you for further directions. (11 June 1799)

I shall want two new coloured gowns for the summer, for my pink one will not do more than clear me from Steventon. I shall not trouble you, however, to get more than one of them, and that is to be a plain brown cambric muslin, for morning wear; the other, which is to be a very pretty yellow and white cloud, I mean to buy in Bath. Buy two brown ones, if you please, and both of a length, but one longer than the other—it is for a tall woman. Seven yards for my mother, seven yards and a half for me; a dark brown, but the kind of brown is left to your own choice, and I had rather they were different, as it will be always something to say, to dispute about which is prettiest. They must be cambric muslin. (25 January 1801)

Your Letter came just in time to save my going to Remnants, & fit me for Christian’s, where I bought Fanny’s dimity. I went the day before (Friday) to Laytons as I proposed, & got my Mother’s gown, 7 y^{ds} at 6/6. (24 May 1813)

Remnants was a glover, Christian & Sons a linen drapers, or a dry goods merchant, and Layton & Shears was a mercer, or a dealer in textiles, all in London (Le Faye 416), as was Grafton House, possibly the premises of the linen drapers Wilding & Kent (402). In *Pride and Prejudice* Mrs. Bennet dictates, “And tell my dear Lydia, not to give any directions about her clothes, till she has seen me, for she does not know which are the best warehouses” (288). Whether Grafton House was one of the best warehouses or not, it certainly was busy. On one visit Jane had to wait thirty minutes before she could be waited on (18 April 1811).

To return to the two Misses Beaufort of *Sanditon*, we’re told that “they

were very accomplished & very Ignorant, their time being divided between such pursuits as might attract admiration, & those Labours & Expedients of dexterous Ingenuity, by which they could dress in a stile much beyond what they *ought* to have afforded; they were some of the first in every change of fashion” (421). By observing current fashion trends, giving careful and prudent thought to fabrics, costs, and labor, they, and the ladies of Jane Austen’s era, could be among the first in every change of fashion.

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