

The relative simplicity of dress at the beginning of the century gave way to a preference for more ornate styles around 1810 ushering in the British Regency (1811-20), and a growing affluence amongst the middle class. The 'Regency period' was characterised by distinctive trends in British politics, culture, architecture, decorative and fine arts, as well as literature - in which Austen played a modest part.<sup>10</sup>

Austen's father William George Austen (1731-1805) served as the Anglican rector for the parish of Steventon, and as such the close-knit family occupied the lower echelons of the English gentry. Austen had six brothers, but both she and her elder sister Elizabeth Cassandra (1773-1845) remained unmarried. Austen confined her novels to country village and seaside settings, with occasional visits to London and Bath, which mirrored the relatively 'quiet' lives led by the sisters themselves. Nonetheless, Austen's letters to Cassandra indicate a lively interest in contemporary fashion, and an appreciation of its role in conveying both social rank and regional distinctions.<sup>11</sup>

In Austen's novels dress is often one of the textual devices she employs in order to indicate the extent of her approval for various characters.<sup>12</sup> Those who are overly preoccupied with fashion, or whose manner of dress is particularly extravagant, are often synonymous with 'worldliness', self-importance, poor conduct and ill intent. The disdainful Caroline Bingley and her sister Louisa Hurst, the haughty and domineering Lady Catherine de Bourgh, the vacuous Lydia Bennet (in *Pride and Prejudice*); the frivolous Mrs Allen, the manipulative Isabella Thorpe (in *Northanger Abbey*); the obnoxious Augusta Elton (in *Emma*); selfish Fanny Dashwood, vengeful Sophia Grey, and the sly Lucy Steele (in *Sense and Sensibility*); fickle Mary Crawford (in

*Mansfield Park*); the amoral widow Lady Susan Vernon (in *Lady Susan*) all aspire either to be admired as 'women of fashion', or parade their wealth and status in a 'vulgar', affected way in order to diminish and belittle others.

For the Austen heroine 'elegance' and 'refinement', the maintenance of 'genteel' behaviour, and appropriateness were the ultimate social attainments.<sup>13</sup> Austen's more vulnerable and impressionable female characters like Catherine Morland (in *Northanger Abbey*), Catherine "Kitty" Bennet (in *Pride and Prejudice*), and Harriet Smith (in *Emma*) are shown to be foolish and easily distracted by such fripperies, as a sign of their immaturity. In *Mansfield Park*, the 'poor relation' Fanny Price finds herself fretting before a ball, "young and inexperienced, with small means of choice and no confidence in her own taste - the 'how she should be dressed' was a point of painful solicitude."<sup>14</sup>

In the development of the plot, Austen's young ladies gradually learn to divest themselves of foolish trifles as they mature emotionally, and undergo some particular moment of clarity or insight. This process renders them sensible of both their personal and communal responsibilities, and ultimately worthy of the happy marriage awaiting them. Thus, with courteous and proper conduct towards others, they are often seen to triumph over their antagonistic 'social betters'.

Fashion is inevitably influenced by momentous events of the time; the French Revolutionary Wars (1792-1802) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15) meant that Britain had effectively been in conflict with France for over twenty years. Austen's brothers, Charles (1779-1852) and Francis (1744-1865), both attained the rank of

admiral in the Royal Navy. William Price in *Mansfield Park* and Frederic Wentworth in *Persuasion* are also sailors, and wartime England serves as a back-drop to most of her novels.

The second Treaty of Paris (November, 1815), and the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy under Louis XVIII (1755-1824), allowed travel to recommence between the two countries. Unsurprisingly the enforced separation had led to a disparity in fashion; the French had retained the high Empire waists whereas the English had lowered theirs. Up went the English waist again, this time accompanied by a widening of the skirts with deep flounces. By the 1820s women's fashion was moving away from classical references, and by the time of George IV's death in 1830 it resembled styles familiar from Austen's childhood - with the waist back in its proper (anatomical) place.

However unfairly, Austen has been cast as the "great-grandmother of chick lit", whose "three or four families in a country village" formula, in plots dealing almost exclusively with money and marriage, speaks to millions the world over.<sup>15</sup> In the very timelessness and popularity of Austen's novels perhaps there is something ultimately regrettable in the way in which the central tenets of society have not altered. Regardless of Austen's sparkling dialogue, the biting social satire, the welcome lack of moralising, and the graceful cadence of the narrative, the central 'mono-plot' remains just as relevant, as does our apparent comfort in the "truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife".<sup>16</sup> Whether it is Elizabeth Bennet, Cher Horowitz, or Bridget Jones, what the potential wife might wear is equally compelling, regardless of the prevailing fashion. □

Page 12: detail of *Dress* c.1816, (English), cotton muslin, metal, The Schofield Collection, purchased with the assistance of a special grant from the Govt. of Victoria, 1974; *Ball Dress* c.1824 (English), silk gauze, satin, floss thread and lace, cotton lining, plant material, metal, gift of Misses M. K. and A. E. Buller, 1948. Both works in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Page 13 left to right: *Costume for Mr Darcy from the BBC production of Pride and Prejudice* 1995; wool, silk, cotton, leather; collection of Cosprop, London, Dinah Collin designer. *Carriage Dress* c.1830 (English); silk (Gros de Naples), cotton lace, metal; The Schofield Collection; purchased with the assistance of a special grant from the Government of Victoria, 1974. Back view *Dress (Open robe and petticoat)* c.1770 (English), silk tafetta brocade, linen lining, cotton bobbin lace, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased, 1970.

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#### (Endnotes)

- 1) Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, in *Treasury of World Masterpieces Series: Jane Austen*, Octopus Books, London, (1982) Fourth reprint 1984, (Chapter 10) p.263.
- 2) 22 May-8 November, 2009 at the National Gallery of Victoria (International): [www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ngvinternational](http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/ngvinternational)
- 3) see, Linda Troost & Sayre Greenfield (eds), *Jane Austen In Hollywood*, The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, Second Edition, 2000; Sue Parrill, *Jane Austen On Film and Television: A Critical Study of the Adaptations*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, 2002; Gina Macdonald & Andrew F. Macdonald (eds), *Jane Austen On Screen*, Cambridge University Press, London, 2003.
- 4) Professor of the History of Design at the University of Technology, Sydney, and Foundation Chair of Fashion Studies at Stockholm University, Sweden.
- 5) Founded in 1965 by costume designer John Bright who (with collaborator Jenny Beavan) has been nominated for six Academy Awards (1984-95), winning for "A Room With A View" in 1986: [www.cosprop.co.uk](http://www.cosprop.co.uk)
- 6) Alison Barclay, "Persuaded by Mr. Darcy's daks", in *The Herald-Sun*, 19 June, 2009, p.68.

- 7) thanks to Roger Leong for his additional comments, 4 August, 2009.
- 8) Caroline Weber, *Queen of Fashion: What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution*, Aurum Press, London, 2007, p.150, 185-86. The women first met at the French Court in 1722, and last saw each other in July, 1789 just before the fall of the Bastille. See, Brian Masters, *Georgiana*, Allison & Busby, London, 1981, p.10-11, 171-73. Georgiana was the subject of Saul Dibb's film "The Duchess" (2008), which won the Academy Award for Costume Design (Michael O'Connor).
- 9) Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, *Ibid.*, (Chapter 3) p.237.
- 10) George Augustus Frederick, Prince of Wales (1762-1830), later George IV, admired Austen's works. She was duly 'invited' to dedicate *Emma* to him with a special bound volume on 15 December, 1815.
- 11) Deirdre Le Faye (ed.), *Jane Austen's Letters*, Oxford University Press, Third Edition, 1995.
- 12) Penelope Byrde, *Jane Austen Fashion: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen*, Moonrise Press, Ludlow, 2008, p.13.
- 13) see, François Nivelon, *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour (1737)*, (ed. Hugh Belsey), Paul Holberton Publishing, London, 2003.
- 14) Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, (ed. Tony Tanner), Penguin Classics, London, (1814) 1986, (Chapter 26) p.261-62.
- 15) Rosemary Neill, "Jane spotting", in *The Weekend Australian* [Review], 20-21 June, 2009, p.7.
- 16) Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, in *Treasury of World Masterpieces Series: Jane Austen*, Octopus Books, London, (1982) Fourth reprint 1984, (Chapter 1) p.15.