

# THE COSTUME OF JANE AUSTEN AND HER CHARACTERS

by Anne Buck

Jane Austen's letters were published in a collected edition in 1932, edited by Dr. R.W. Chapman. Some of them and many parts of them had been known for years from the *Memoir* by J. Austen-Leigh (1870); from Lord Brabourne's publication of letters in his possession, *Letters of Jane Austen* (1884); and from *The Life and Letters of Jane Austen* by W. and R.A. Austen-Leigh (1913); but this edition gave, for the first time, the full text of all known letters.

They were not universally welcomed. E.M. Forster, reading them now in their entirety, found them, "catalogues of trivialities which do not come alive."<sup>1</sup> Yet trivialities are Jane Austen's material as a novelist,

"What she offers is apparently a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial,"<sup>2</sup>

and she was able to use them in this masterly way because they held for her the essence of life,

"Half an hour's uninterrupted communication of all those little matters on which the daily happiness of private life depends, was one of the first gratifications of each". (p. 117)<sup>3</sup>

This is exactly what the letters are about; they are a substitute for talk with family and friends, especially with her sister Cassandra, when she and Cassandra were separated. We lose much that Cassandra and others will have understood and enjoyed for Jane Austen is not writing to us. Yet the first interest of the letters is "those little matters", a picture of Jane Austen in her daily life.

1. Forster, E.M. *Abinger Harvest* 1940 ed. p. 154
2. Woolf, V. *Common Reader*, First Series 1929 ed. p. 129
3. *Emma*, p. 117. All page references to the novels are to the Oxford Edition edited by R.W. Chapman; *Sense and Sensibility*, 2nd ed. 1925; *Pride and Prejudice*, 3rd ed. 1932; *Mansfield Park*, 3rd ed. 1934; *Emma*, 3rd ed. 1933; *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, 3rd ed. 1933.



Figure 1. Mameluke turban of white satin, white ostrich feather in front. *Fashions of London and Paris*. February 1804

She often wrote about dress. As we follow this subject through the letters it not only gives us glimpses of Jane Austen herself, wearing a dress of brown cambric muslin, a spencer of kerseymere, an ermine tippet or a black cap with a coquelicot feather, but the fashions of the time become real and vivid to us as we see them in personal terms. We see aspects of dress which the fashion journals do not reveal, the shopping, the dressmaking, the alterations and remakings. We see all this as a part of the daily life of Jane Austen, her family and friends. And beyond them we see the lives of other women of their class and time. The gaps in the correspondence with Cassandra when the sisters were talking about their clothes together instead of discussing them by letter and Cassandra's destruction of many letters after Jane Austen's death, mean that they give no sequence of dress

for the whole period. There are no letters from 1797, 1802, 1803, 1806, 1810; and only one from 1804 and 1812. So we get a very incomplete picture of Jane Austen's own dress. We read of a blue gown, but we do not know whether it was muslin or not; or of a muslin gown, with no clue whether it was white or coloured, plain or figured. We do not know whether she ever had a dress in the "very pretty yellow and white cloud I mean to buy in Bath" or whether the white gown she had made up when she was in Bath in May 1801, three months later, replaced it.

Curiosity about her personal appearance is gratified by two descriptions of her hairdressing, one when she was twenty-three in 1798,

"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, which at present gives me no trouble beyond washing and brushing, for my long hair is always



Figure 2. *The Princesses on the Terrace at Windsor*. Centre figure is wearing a hat of pipe straw interwoven with white satin ribbon and chenille. *Fashions of London and Paris September 1798*

plaited up out of sight, and my short hair curls well enough to want no papering. I have had it cut lately by Mr. Butler". (A hairdresser at Basingstoke) (p. 35)<sup>4</sup>

and another, fifteen years later, a few months after *Pride and Prejudice* had been published, when she had her hair dressed in London,

"Mr. Hall was very punctual yesterday, and curled me out at a great rate. I thought it looked hideous, and longed for a snug cap instead, but my companions silenced me by their admiration. I had only a bit of velvet round my head." (p. 323)

She seems to have had a special liking for caps. The early letters show her making her own, but later, Miss Hare, a London milliner, made caps for her. She wrote to Cassandra in 1798 about a cap she was making for a ball, "I took the liberty a few days ago of asking your Black velvet Bonnet to lend me its cawl, which it very readily did, and by which I have been enabled to give a considerable improvement of dignity to my Cap, which was before too *nidgetty* to please me ..... but I hope you will not be offended with me for following your advice as to its ornaments only in part. I still venture to retain the narrow silver round it, put twice round without any bow, and instead of the black military feather shall put in the Coquelicot one, as being smarter; & besides Coquelicot is to be all the fashion this winter<sup>5</sup>. After the Ball, I shall probably make it entirely black."

The next day, still in the same letter,

"I have changed my mind, & changed the trimmings of my Cap this morning; they are now such as you suggested; I felt as if I should not prosper if I strayed from your directions, & I think it makes me look more like Lady Conyngham now than it did before, which is all that one lives for now". (p. 37–40) After this long discussion her reluctance to describe the mameluke cap, lent to her to wear for evening, three weeks later, is a little surprising,

"I am not to wear my white satin cap tonight, after all; I am to wear a mamalone<sup>6</sup> cap instead (figure 1), which Charles Fowle sent to Mary, and which she lends me. It is all the fashion now; worn at the opera and by Lady Mildmay at Hackwood Balls. I hate describing such things and I dare say you will be able to guess what it is like." (p. 49).

4. *Jane Austen's Letters to her Sister Cassandra and Others* Collected and edited by R.W. Chapman, Oxford, 1932; 2nd ed. 1952, p. 35. All page references to the *Letters* are to the 1952 edition.
5. Coquelicot. Poppy-red or, as Susan Sibbald (1783–1812) remembered it (*Memoirs*, 1926, p. 59). "a pair of black morocco shoes bound with coqlicot, (a bright scarlet, the colour of the blazing comet geranium)".
6. *Mamalone*. The original of this letter, first published by Lord Brabourne was not traced by the editor who in a note (no. 49) to the letter (no. 17) gives Miss C. Hill's suggestion (*Jane Austen, Her Homes and her Friends*, 1901, 3rd ed. 1923, p. 76) of *mamalouc*, one of the contemporary spellings of *mameluke*. This is, no doubt, what Jane Austen wrote.

In 1813, the cap which Miss Hare made her, whose price had not to exceed one pound sixteen shillings, was "white satin and lace, and a little white flower perking out of the left ear, like Harriet Byron's feather." (p. 322) Harriet Byron, in Richardson's novel, *Sir Charles Grandison* (Letter 22) had a cap "with a little white feather perking from the left ear."

Her sister-in-law made her a present of a hat in June 1799, "not only a pretty hat, but a pretty *style* of hat too ..... instead of being all straw, half of it is narrow purple ribbon (figure 2). I flatter myself however that you can understand very little of it from this description. Heaven forbid that I should offer such encouragement to Explanations, as to give a clear one on any occasion myself." (p. 64).

We can see hats combining straw and ribbon in the fashion plates of 1798 and 1799; "a hat of pipe straw, interwoven with white satin ribbon and chenille," in a plate for September 1798, in *Fashions of London and Paris*: the fashion continued into the following summer, "bonnet of straw interwoven with coloured riband," appears in the same journal in August 1799. When Jane Austen was in Bath in 1801 she was delighted to find the straw bonnet she was wearing then, "looking very much like other people's, and quite as smart." (p.125) In London in 1811, she admired a straw hat, "of the riding hat shape" worn by Mrs. Tilson and had one made like it. (p.269).

We see the gowns she wore, sometimes only vaguely in a casual reference, sometimes sharply in an illuminating comment, sometimes in dressmakerly detail. In 1798 she discussed a new muslin gown,

"I beleive (sic) I *shall* make my new gown like my robe, but the back of the latter is all in a peice (sic) with the tail, & will 7 yards enable me to copy it in that respect"? (p. 40)

a week later she was still brooding on it,




"I cannot determine what to do about my new gown; I wish such things were to be bought ready-made". (p. 45)

and in January 1799 she described the finished gown, although we still have not learnt what sort of muslin it was,

"My gown is made very much like my blue one; which you always told me sat very well, with only these variations: the sleeves are short, the wrap fuller, the apron comes over it, and a band of the same completes the whole". (p. 49)

In 1801 she decided she needed two coloured gowns for the summer and asked Cassandra, who was in London, to buy some plain brown cambric muslin, seven and a half yards of it, for a morning gown, "a dark brown, but the kind is left to your own choice". (p.116) It may have been this material which she had made up at the beginning of May in Bath,

"Mrs. Mussell has got my gown, and I will endeavour to

explain what her intentions are. It is to be a round gown, with a jacket and a frock front, like Cath. Bigg's, to open at the side. The jacket is all in one with the body, and comes as far as the pocket holes — about a quarter of a yard deep, I suppose, all the way round, cut off straight at the corners with a broad hem. No fulness (sic) appears either in the body or the flap; the back is quite plain in this form  and the sides equally so. The front is  sloped round to the bosom and drawn in,  and there is to be a frill of the

same to put on occasionally when all one's handkerchiefs are dirty — which frill *must* fall back. She is to put two breadths and a half in the tail, and no gores — gores not being so much wore as they were. There is nothing new in the sleeves: they are to be plain, with a fulness of the same falling down and gathered up underneath, just like some of Martha's, or perhaps a little longer. Low in the back behind, and a belt of the same". (pp. 124–5)

On the 12th May she wrote,

"I like my dark gown very much indeed; colour, make & everything. I mean to have my new white one made up now" (p.128)

But this was not so successful for on 26th. May she wrote "Mrs. Mussell ..... made my dark gown very well ..... but she does not always succeed with lighter colours. My white one I was obliged to alter a good deal". (p.138)

In October 1813, she had a bombazin dress which she could not reconcile herself to turning into a morning dress; and a blue dress which might be relegated,

"I hope you have not cut off the train of your bombazin. I cannot reconcile myself to giving them up as morning gowns; they are so very sweet by candlelight. I would rather sacrifice my blue one for that purpose". (p.362)

The next month she mentioned a china crape ball dress (p.371) In the following March she acquired a lilac sarsenet, which she trimmed with black ribbon, "just as my China crape is, 6d. width at the bottom, 3d. or 4d. at top" (p.381) and also had a gauze dress with long sleeves which she wore for evening. (p.386)

In the early letters the only outdoor garment she mentioned was a cloak which cost her two pounds in Bath in 1799 (p. 63). She bought a similar one for Cassandra. Then a year later Cassandra bought one for her in London,

"My cloak came on Tuesday, and tho' I expected a good deal, the beauty of the lace astonished me. It is too handsome to be worn, almost too handsome to be looked at" (pp. 78–9).

The next year, 1801, she wrote from Bath., "Black gauze cloaks are worn as much as anything". (p.125). The fashion plates of these years show a variety of cloaks, many of black gauze or lace; they were often no more than a short cape with long scarf ends; Jane Austen noted a new form in Bath at the end of May,

"When you have made Martha's bonnet you must make

her a cloak of the same sort of materials; they are very much worn here, in different forms – many of them just like her black silk spencer, with a trimming round the armholes instead of sleeves; some are long before, & some long all round like C. Bigg's". (p.133).

This spencer-cloak form can be seen in a fashion plate for October, 1801, in the *Ladies' Monthly Museum*, from Keep, Milliner, Pall Mall, which shows "a black lace cloak à la Spencer", and a "white spencer cloak" over a blue muslin gown (figure 3).

In June 1808, when she was staying at Godmersham, the home of her brother, Edward, she wore a kerseymere spencer, "quite the comfort of our evening walks". (p.204). In the following autumn she and Cassandra, had black velvet pelisses. (p.219). In 1814 she wrote of a silk pelisse (p.399) and an ermine tippet which was much admired. (p.383). She and Cassandra seem often to have similar garments.

She had a weakness for fine silk stockings, which were rather expensive, but she greatly preferred having only two pairs to three of an inferior quality; (p. 77) in 1811 she paid "a little less than" twelve shillings a pair for stockings. (p.269). She wore green shoes in 1799 (p. 51) and had some pink ones in 1800. (p. 77). There are few references to jewellery in the letters, but in 1801 she wrote to tell Cassandra that their sailor brother Charles, had, out of his prize money, "been buying gold chains and Topaze crosses for us; he must be well scolded". The crosses survive with the letter. (p.137 and note).

The letters reveal a sharp eye for changing styles and fashions. Jane Austen wrote of Miss Debarry, "netting herself a gown in worsteds" in 1798 (p. 31). Netted cloaks and gowns often appear in fashion plates and notes during this year (figure 4). They appeared in *Fashions of London and Paris* in April and May, "Circassian robe of white satin covered with cotton netting", and "Cloak of white muslin covered with coloured netting". In May 1799, *Fashions of London and Paris* noted in its general observations, "Fruit ornaments", in the following month Jane Austen wrote from Bath, "Flowers are still worn and Fruit is still more the thing". (p. 64).

In 1809 she was reacting to one of the slight fluctuations of the waistline within this high-waisted period.

"I can easily suppose that your six weeks here will be fully occupied were it only in lengthening the waist of your gowns". (p.251). In 1813 she welcomed, with a practical eye, the appearance of flounces at the hem. "She had a double flounce to her gown: You really must get some flounces. Are not some of your large stock of white mornng. gowns just in the happy state for a flounce, too short?" (p. 348).

When she wore her long-sleeved gauze dress for evening in 1814 she was following a not completely established fashion. Long sleeves for evening appear only occasionally in the fashion plates at this time;

"I shall see how they succeed, but as yet I have no reason



Figure 3. Morning dress, a black lace cloak à la Spencer (left) and a white spencer cloak (right). *The Lady's Monthly Museum*. October 1801

to suppose long sleeves are allowable. I have lowered the bosom especially at the corners, & plaited black satin ribbon round the top". (p. 386).

So she was glad to find that,

"Mrs. Tilson had long sleeves too, & she assured me that they are worn in the evening by many".

The black ribbon was mourning for the Queen's brother, the Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. Mourning was for six weeks and on account of this she did not think it worth going to Miss Hare for new gowns. There are several references to public mourning in the letters. In 1805 she wrote,

"I suppose everybody will be in black for the D. of G. Must we buy lace, or will ribbon do". (p. 169).

Rather prematurely, they prepared for the death of the king in 1811, by going to Alton to buy mourning "against the King's death; & my Mother has had a bombasin bought for her". (p. 291).

Family bereavements also reveal the contemporary conventions in mourning dress. Her father died in 1805 and four months later she went to a concert wearing her crape sleeves and "on my head I wore my crape and Flowers but I do not think it looked particularly well". (p. 154)

When her sister-in-law, Elizabeth, died in 1808, she wrote, "I am to be in bombazeen and crape, according to what we are told is universal *here* (Southampton) and which agrees with Martha's previous observation. My mourning, however, will not impoverish me, for by having my velvet pelisse fresh lined and made up I am sure I shall have no occasion *this winter* for anything new of that sort. I take my cloak for the lining and shall send yours on the chance of its doing something of the same for you, although I believe your pelisse is in better repair than mine. *One* Miss Baker makes my gown and the other my bonnet, which is to be silk covered with crape". (p. 222).

Elizabeth's two sons came to stay; their aunt understood these schoolboys' concern about the conventions where dress was concerned.

"Edward has an old black coat, which will save *his* having a second new one; but I find that black pantaloons are considered by them as necessary, and of course one could not have them made uncomfortable by the want of what is usual on such occasions". (p. 226).

There are very few references to children's dress in the letters. The breeching – and whipping – of Edward at the age of two, in 1796 was recorded in a letter (p. 13) In 1800 she bought for another nephew, also called Edward and two years old, "some figured cambric muslin for a frock", a "very pretty manufacture", four shillings and sixpence a yard, a yard and a half wide. (p. 98). Patterns were passed from one household of nephews to another, and the aunts acted as intermediaries; Jane Austen wrote on behalf of one sister-in-law to ask if Cassandra would get a pattern from another, "the pattern of the Jacket and Trowsers, or whatever it is, that Elizths. boys wear when they are first put into breeches; or if you could bring her an old suit itself she would be very glad, but that I suppose is hardly do-able". (p. 114).

Men's dress is also rarely mentioned. In 1796 there was a criticism of Tom Lefroy's morning coat which Jane Austen thought was too light (p. 3) and later that year a rather barbed remark about a ball,

"Let me know ..... how many of the Gentlemen, Musicians and Waiters, he will have persuaded to come in their Shooting Jackets". (p. 11).

She and Cassandra made shirts for their brothers. When she was staying with Edward in 1796 she wrote that they were, "very busy making Edward's shirts, and I am proud to say that I am the neatest worker of the party". (p. 10).

and in 1799 she warned Cassandra, "When you come home you will have some shirts to make up for Charles. Mrs. Davies frightened him into buying

a piece of Irish when we were in Basingstoke". (p. 56).

Jane and Cassandra do not seem to have made their own gowns, but they did a good deal of remaking and trimming. Jane turned at least one gown into a petticoat. "I will not be much longer libelled by the possession of my coarse spot; I shall turn it into a petticoat very soon". (p. 44). She had a velvet pelisse relined with the material from a cloak; there is talk of lengthening the waists of gowns, lowering the necklines, and of making trimmings and adding flounces,

"I have been ruining myself in black satin ribbon with a proper perl edge: and now I am trying to draw it up into kind of roses instead of putting it on in plain double plaits". (p. 384).

Mrs. Austen unpicked her old silk pelisse,

"& means to have it dyed black for a gown – a very interesting scheme, tho' just now a little injured by finding that it must be placed in Mr. Wren's hands for Mr. Chambers is gone". (p. 215).

As Mr. Chambers appears as a silk dyer and Mr. Wren as a dyer in a Southampton directory, the reason for Mrs. Austen's concern is clear. Her daughter too had been having trouble with dyers,

"How is your blue gown? Mine is all to peices. (sic) 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". (p. 215).

And there was more trouble some years later, in London, "Mrs. Perigord..... tells me that we owe her master for the silk-dyeing. My poor old muslin has never been dyed yet. It has been promised to be done several times. What wicked people dyers are. They begin with dipping their own souls in scarlet sin". (p. 377).

There was also trouble with washing,

"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. I hope yours is so too". (p. 9).

The letters tell us a good deal about middle-class shopping habits. They contain many commissions from those in the country to the person in London or in Bath. When Jane Austen was in London she bought for Cassandra and her family and friends and Cassandra did the same for her. She discussed the cloak she was to buy in Bath for Cassandra in 1799, and gives a sketch of its lace in the letter.

"My Cloak is come home and here follows the pattern of its lace. If you do not think it wide enough, I can, give 3d. a yard more for yours, & not go beyond the two guineas, for my Cloak altogether does not cost quite two pounds". (p. 63). A spray of flowers or the temporarily fashionable fruit for Cassandra was another responsibility on this visit,

"Though you have given me unlimited powers concerning your sprig I cannot determine what to do about it ..... We have been to the cheap shop, and very cheap we found it, but there are only flowers made there, no fruit; and as



Figure 4. Full dress lilac dress with green net curricule. *The Lady's Monthly Museum*. August 1798

I could get four or five very pretty sprigs of the former for the same money which could procure only one Orleans plum ..... I cannot decide on the fruit till I hear from you again. Besides, I cannot help thinking that it is more natural to have flowers grow out of the head than fruit". (p. 67).

She had other commissions, including a difficult one for their friend, Martha Lloyd, for shoes, "I do not know that I shall execute Martha's commission at all, for I am not fond of ordering shoes". (p. 62).

Visits to London meant excellent opportunities for shopping. One of the shops patronised by Jane Austen was Layton and Shears, Bedford House, 11 Henrietta Street, Covent Garden. There she bought a gown for her mother in 1813, seven yards of black sarsenet at six shillings and sixpence a yard. (p.309). Buying a gown normally meant the length of material for a gown. Later in the same year when she was once more in London she wrote to Cassandra of the "very pretty English poplins at 4s. 3d.; Irish ditto at 6s., more pretty certainly – beautiful" (p.321) she had seen at Bedford House as she was contemplating buying gowns for them both. But in the following letter she said that she had bought material for Cassandra's gown – and she did not say whether it was poplin – at Grafton House. This was a very popular shop and was usually very crowded with customers. This time "by going very early we got immediate attendance" (p.325). In 1811 she had written that when they went to Grafton House they found "the whole Counter was thronged, & we waited full half an hour before we

cd. be attended to" (p.268) and again in 1815 she wrote of "encountering the miseries of Grafton House to get a purple frock for Eleanor Bridges". (p.436). When Cassandra was in London in 1813, Jane wrote on behalf of a friend, "Harriet enquires whether they sell cloths for pelisses at Bedford House – & if they do will be very much obliged to you to desire them to send her down patterns with the widths and prices – they may go from Charing Cross almost any day in the week – but if it is a *ready money* house it will not do for ..... she cannot pay for it immediately". (p.366).

She herself had silk pelisses sent from Chawton to London (p.399) and her dirty clothes returned (p.426) by Collier's Southampton coach.

The picture of their shopping is completed by comments on buying clothes in the local centres, Basingstoke and Alton. When the family lived at Steventon they shopped at Basingstoke,

"I went to Mrs. Ryders ..... There were no narrow braces for children and scarcely any notting silk; but Miss Wood, as usual, is going to town very soon and will lay in a fresh stock. I paid 2s. 3d. a yard for my flannel". (p. 23).

She again had trouble about silk for her knotting in 1799, "you quite abash me by your progress in notting, for I am still without silk. You must get me some in town or in Canterbury; it should be finer than yours". (p. 57).

Although Jane Austen could not, as she wished, buy gowns ready-made (p.45) there were some ready-made garments in the shops, for at Alton they expected to find a ready-made cloak, probably for Sally, their maid.

"There was no ready-made Cloak at Alton that would do, but Coleby has undertaken to supply one in a few days; it is to be Grey Woollen & cost ten shillings". (p.499). Travelling salesmen also brought goods to their villages, "The laceman was here only a few days ago. How unfortunate for both of us that he came so soon". (p. 25).

A Scotchman – a travelling dealer who sold goods on credit – worked from Overton, near Steventon,

"The Overton Scotchman has been kind enough to rid me of some of my money in exchange for six shifts and four pair of stockings. The Irish is not so fine as I should like it; but as I gave as much money for it as I intended I have no reason to complain. It cost me 3s. 6d. a yard". (p.32).

She did not, apparently, take advantage of his credit terms.

Letters like these spread news of changing fashions amongst women of Jane Austen's class. Anyone who travelled from the country to London or went to a fashionable gathering anywhere was expected to send news of the fashions to those at home, and visitors from London, like Mrs. Gardiner, in *Pride and Prejudice*, performed this office in person,

"The first part of Mrs. Gardiner's business on her arrival

was to distribute her presents and describe the newest fashions". (p. 139).

Jane Austen's comments on her own dress show how quickly she was aware of current fashions and a letter to Martha Lloyd in 1814 – different in tone from those to her sister – shows her quick eye and her lively interest in dress as one of the entertaining aspects of her world,

"I am amused by the present style of female dress; the coloured petticoats with braces over the white spencers and 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 Mrs. Latouche's, where dress is a good deal attended to, and these are my observations from it. Petticoats short, and 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". (p. 507).

So, in September, the long sleeves for evening wear, which Jane Austen had worn with some diffidence in March, are now fully in fashion.

Through the letters we see Jane Austen, her dress, her sewing and shopping and the part that all this played in her life. We see her also as one amongst her friends and so enter into the daily life of women of her social position at this time. But if we follow this one subject of dress from the letters into the novels we can watch its trivialities being given a new life.

Sometimes an incident or observation seems to pass straight from the letters to a novel. Caroline Morland making her brother's cravats recalls the Austen sisters at work on shirts for their brother. John Thorpe, in *Northanger Abbey*, who "seemed fearful of being thought too handsome unless he wore the dress of a groom", (p. 45) reminds us of those young men who attended a ball in their shooting jackets. Jane Austen's uncle, "still in his flannels" brings Marianne Dashwood's connection of flannel waistcoats with old age at once to mind. Sometimes comments in the letters, sharpened by ironic amusement, seem already passages from the novels, "Lizzie Bond is just apprenticed to Mrs. Small, so we may hope to see her able to spoil gowns in a few years". (p. 36) and "Mrs. Powlett was at once expensively and nakedly dress'd" (p. 105).

Reading the novels now we may miss some of their social ironies because we are outside the conventions which Jane Austen and her contemporary readers shared. Amongst the letters are clues to the subtler points of dress. When Cassandra was on a visit to Godmersham in 1801, her sister wrote hoping that she "Often wore a white gown in the morning, at the time of all the gay party's being with you". (p. 99). Later in the same year their aunt at Bath thought the wearing of white by two acquaintances when they paid her a morning visit

was "an absurd pretension in this place". (p.132). But in *Northanger Abbey* Miss Tilney, also in Bath, "always wears white". (p. 91). In *Mansfield Park* Edmund says confidently to Fanny, "A woman can never be too fine while she is all in white", (p.222) and Mrs. Norris speaks approvingly of the action of the housekeeper at Sotherton who turned away two housemaids for wearing white gowns. (p.106). White gowns for evening wear were still fashionable when *Mansfield Park* was written although muslin was beginning to give way to silk crapes and gauzes. Fanny Price's white muslin was modest and conservative. White muslin was also worn for formal morning wear for the whole period. Jane Austen expected Cassandra on a social visit to be dressed in white muslin in the mornings; informally and at home she would have worn a coloured muslin gown or her "morning stuff". A contemporary, Richenda Gurney, wrote from Cromer in 1803, "our coloured prints are the extreme of morning undress".<sup>7</sup> Eleanor Tilney's sophisticated elegance is emphasised by her constant preference for white gowns; this is approved by the fashion-conscious Mrs. Allen and offered as an example to Catherine Morland, in spite of Jane Austen's aunt. To Mrs. Norris housemaids in white gowns at any time was an outrage; print ones should have been the height of their ambition.

The sparing references to dress in the novels compared with the wealth of detail in the letters at first surprises. We do not know what Elizabeth or Jane Bennet, Emma Woodhouse or Anne Elliot wore, although the letters reveal that Jane Austen had a very clear idea about the appearance and dress of her characters. She went to an exhibition in Spring Gardens in 1813 and afterwards wrote, "I was very well pleased ..... with a small portrait of Mrs. Bingley, excessively like her. I went in hopes of seeing one of her Sister, but there was no Mrs. Darcy ..... Mrs. Bingley's is exactly herself, size, shaped face, features and sweetness, there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed that green was a favourite colour with her. I daresay Mrs. D. will be in yellow." (p.309)

In *Sense and Sensibility* which was begun in 1797 although not published until 1811, this restraint is already apparent. We know what Elinor Dashwood wore only by an ill-mannered remark of Miss Steele, "La! if you have not your spotted muslin on! I wonder you was not afraid of its being torn" (p.276). Most of the references to dress in this novel come from the vulgar Miss Steeles. But a ring enclosing a lock of hair which suddenly appears on Edward Ferrars's finger plays an important part in the plot, the focus of uncertainty and misunderstanding.

For *Northanger Abbey*, written in 1797–8 although not published until 1818 after Jane Austen's death, she

7. *Katharine Fry's Book* (1872) Edited J. Vansittart, 1966, p.53

wrote an "advertisement" in 1816 explaining that the work was originally disposed of to a bookseller in 1803 and "the public are entreated to bear in mind that thirteen years have passed since it was finished, many more since it was begun". There are two comments in the novel which reflect the date of the first writing. In a letter of 1798, Jane Austen noted that Miss Debary was netting herself a gown in worsteds. In the novel Isabella Thorpe says that Miss Andrews is "Netting herself the sweetest cloak you can conceive" (p.40). In the ballroom at Bath, "they saw nothing of the dancers but the high feathers of some of the ladies" (p.21), an impression of the fashionable high headdresses of 1796-8. Northanger Abbey is one of the shortest of the novels, but it contains more about dress than any other. As the first part of the novel is set in Bath and the heroine is a young girl making her first visit there in company with Mrs. Allen who thinks of little but dress, "Dress was her passion" (p.20), the subject is a natural one in this setting and with these characters. Jane Austen's attitude to dress in the novels tends to be satirical, at least where there is any excess of interest in it. Catherine Morland is treated gently for she is young and in Bath and this is not the only thought in her head. Her dress is given only once, and then through Henry Tilney's teasing compliment, "wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimming - plain black shoes - appeared to much advantage" (p.26). She is anxious about her appearance because she is young and unsure of herself amongst her new fashionable acquaintances and this situation is the occasion for the single passage of direct comment on dress in the novels,

"What gown and what headdress she should wear on the occasion became her chief concern. She cannot be justified in it. Dress is at all times a frivolous distinction and excessive solicitude about it often destroys its own aim... Catherine knew all this very well... and yet she lay awake ten minutes on Wednesday night debating between her spotted and her tamboured muslin and nothing but the shortness of the time prevented her from buying a new one for the evening.... It would be mortifying to the feelings of many ladies, could they be made to understand how little the heart of man is affected by what is costly or new in their attire; how little it is biassed by the texture of their muslin, and how unsusceptible of peculiar tenderness towards the spotted, the sprigged, the mull or the jackonet. Woman is fine for her satisfaction alone" (p.73).

When Catherine arrives at Northanger Abbey a little disappointed that it does not look as romantic as she thought it would, a few words about a straw bonnet lower the romantic temperature a little more and bring Catherine Morland clearly, endearingly, before our eyes, "A sudden scud of rain.... fixed all her thoughts on the welfare of her new straw bonnet" (p. 161). The four women of Northanger Abbey are nicely contrasted in their attitude to dress. Mrs. Allen in one generation, Isabella Thorpe in another think about it to excess. Catherine shares Isabella's

interest in the first excitement of Bath, but in the second half of the book when she is no longer at Bath but at Northanger Abbey with Miss Tilney the subject withers away. The elegant Miss Tilney, whether at Bath or Northanger Abbey does not talk about it.

With *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen's skill in using dress, without waste, as part of the comedy is sure, her control of her material complete. The frivolous young woman with a passion for dress, already sketched in Isabella Thorpe and, with added vulgarity in the Miss Steeles, is now perfectly portrayed in Lydia and Kitty Bennet. We see them in their element,

"Their eyes were immediately wandering up in the street in quest of the officers and nothing less than a very smart bonnet indeed or a really new muslin in a shop window could recall them" (p. 72).

A miniature comedy of character and incident arises with Lydia's new bonnet, "Look I have bought this bonnet. I do not think it is very pretty, but I thought I might as well buy it as not. I shall pull it to pieces as soon as I get home, and see if I am able to make it up better".

And when her sisters abused it as ugly she added with perfect unconcern,

**GOWLAND'S LOTION IMPROVED,**  
By Macdonald (from Dickinson's,) prepared only by  
**MACDONALD, HUMBERT, & CO.**  
At their Royal Arcanum Warehouse, 53, Longacre,  
AT REDUCED PRICES, VIZ.  
Quarts, Pints, and Half Pints, 6s. 3s. 9d. and  
2s. 3d. duty included.

To Gowland's Lotion now my muse has wing,  
Its real intrinsic worth I mean to sing:  
Long has it stood the foremost in the race  
Of cosmetics, to beautify the face:  
Eruptive humours fly before its power,  
Pimples and freckles die within an hour.  
Dread foe to beauty, thy disgusting harms  
No more shall prey upon the ladies' charms;  
No more shall scrophula with horror creep,  
And steal the beauty from the blooming cheek.  
While Britons patronize each good invention,  
This grand restorative must claim attention:  
The best prepared, as chemic art can prove,  
Once try'd, will every prejudice remove.  
Who wants to see its true and genuine maker,  
Must call at No. 53, Longacre

\* \* The Proprietors respectfully inform the public, that they can only be responsible for the good effects and efficacy of the improved Lotion: you are requested to ask for that only, or the Emollient Preventive. To be had at the Warehouse, and of every Vender in the united kingdom.

Figure 5. Advertisement for Gowland's Lotion. *Ackermann's Repository*, November 1809



‘Oh, but there were two or three much uglier in the shop and when I have bought some prettier coloured satin to trim it with fresh I think it will be tolerable’” (p. 219). Elizabeth’s visit to Rosings does not produce a description of what she wore, but more subtly what Mr. Collins thought Lady Catherine would regard as suitable, “Lady Catherine is far from requiring that elegance of dress in us, which becomes herself and daughter. I would advise you merely to put on whatever of your clothes is superior to the rest, there is no occasion for anything more. Lady Catherine will not think the worse of you for being simply dressed. She likes to have the distinction of rank preserved” (p. 160).

The only occasion when Elizabeth’s dress is directly mentioned is when she appears at Netherfield after her hasty walk from Longbourn. Her muddy petticoat and untidy hair are then the visible sign of her anxiety about her sister. On another walk the ladies, “not having shoes to encounter the remains of a white frost, turned back” (p. 156). The detail is small but it falls so naturally from the author’s complete creation of people and scene that this moment when the light shoes turn from the frosty path is vivid and alive. There are other occasions in the novels when boots and shoes play their natural part, if to walk or not to walk is needed for the movement of the story. Emma fidgets with her bootlace and finally breaks it so that Harriet Smith has to go into Mr. Elton’s house. Interested ladies and gentleman debate the thickness of Anne Elliot’s boots so that finally she can walk with Mr. Elliot and meet Captain Wentworth.

Apart from Catherine Morland, Fanny Price, in *Mansfield Park*, is the only one of Jane Austen’s heroines who gives much thought to dress. The subject which revealed Catherine Morland’s happy confusion in her first experience of the gaieties of Bath, reveals Fanny Price’s uncertainty and diffidence in her position at Mansfield Park. When she first appears there as a child of ten we are told that her cousins, “could not but hold her cheap on finding that she had but two sashes” (p. 18). When Miss Crawford met her Fanny was eighteen, and Miss Crawford was puzzled, “Pray is she out or is she not?... A girl not out always has the same sort of dress, a close bonnet, for instance, looks very demure, and never says a word” (p. 49). When Fanny is invited to a dinner party at the parsonage she had nothing to wear but the dress her uncle had given her for her cousin’s wedding. Edmund’s kind compliment on her appearance only arouses another anxiety,

“I hope it is not too fine; but I thought I ought to wear it as soon as I could, and that I might not have such another opportunity all the winter. I hope you do not think me too fine”.

“A woman can never be too fine while she is all in white, No I see no finery about you; nothing but what is perfectly proper. Your gown seems very pretty. I like these glossy spots. Has not Miss Crawford a gown something the

same?” (p.222).

Fanny and Edmund, the relationship between them and Edmund’s mind full of Miss Crawford are all caught in this short passage. The next stage of Fanny’s social progress, which finally brought her “out” came when she had a ball of her own,

“To her the cares were sometimes almost beyond the happiness; for 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: and the almost solitary ornament in her possession, a very pretty amber cross which William had brought her from Sicily, was the greatest distress of all, for she had nothing but a bit of ribbon to fasten it to; and though she had worn it in that manner once would it be allowable at such a time, in the midst of all the rich ornaments in which she supposed all the other young ladies would appear in? And yet not to wear it! William had wanted to buy her a gold chain too, but the purchase had been beyond his means” (p. 254).

The amber cross, the necklace which Miss Crawford, prompted by her brother, gives Fanny to put the cross on, the plain gold chain much more to her taste, which Edmund gives her later, are all small things. But all the people who, in one way or another, are important to Fanny’s happiness are concerned in this sequence of gifts, and the feelings they arouse lead us deep into Fanny’s mind and heart, until at last,

“Having with delightful feelings joined the chain and the cross, those memorials of the two most beloved of her heart... she was able without an effort to resolve on wearing Miss Crawford’s necklace too” (p. 271).

*Emma* is set more closely into its community than any of the other novels. In Highbury, “a large and populous village, almost amounting to a town”, Ford’s, the drapers, is the shopping and social centre,

“Ford’s was the principal woollen draper, linen draper and haberdashers shop united; the shop first in size and fashion in the place”. (p. 178).

All the characters in the novel, except Mr. Woodhouse, could naturally meet each other there. Jane Austen had already used her experience of London shopping in *Sense and Sensibility*. Elinor Dashwood went shopping at Gray’s, which was an actual shop, a jeweller’s, in Sackville Street. There Elinor suffers the inconvenience Jane Austen complained of more than once at Grafton House, “so many people before them in the room that there was not a person at liberty to attend to their orders; and they were obliged to wait. All that could be done was to sit down at the end of the counter which seemed to promise the quickest succession” (p. 220). Ford’s has been created, a character in itself, out of the country shopping at Alton and Basingstoke. Frank Churchill buys gloves there, talking to Emma, “while the sleek, well-tied parcels of ‘Men’s Beavers’ and ‘York Tan’ were bringing down and displaying on the counter” (p. 200). There Harriet Smith hangs over



Figure 6. *Pelisse*, shot brown and yellow bombazine, with yellow spot. In possession of Mrs. H.H. Jenkyns, great grand niece of Jane Austen. Photograph taken in the living room at Chawton by J. Butler-Kearney. (Jane Austen Society)

muslins changing her mind, with Emma, "Trying with all the force of her own mind, to convince her that if she wanted a plain muslin it was of no use to look at figured; and that a blue ribbon, be it ever so beautiful, would still never match her yellow pattern." (p. 235). Jane Austen makes gentle fun of Harriet, but she is also standing there with her at the counter sharing the temptations and indecisions, "in a linen draper's shop to which I went for checked muslin... I was tempted by a pretty coloured muslin and bought 10 yards of it on the chance of your liking it but... you must not think yourself obliged to take it; it is only 3/6 per yd. & I should not on the least mind keeping the whole." (p. 268).

In *Persuasion*, the last of the completed novels, Jane Austen, for the first time, creates a masculine version of vanity and preoccupation with dress and appearance. The satire here is not gentle as it plays on the middle-aged Sir Walter Elliot, but in its economy of detail is Jane Austen at her most skilful. There is no description of his own personal appearance, yet we see him clearly posturing amongst the looking glasses of his dressing-room through the reaction of a very different character, Admiral Croft, "Such a number of looking-glasses! oh Lord! there was no getting away from oneself." (p. 128).

Sir Walter's critical interest in the appearance of other people, as a measure of his own superiority, introduces the subject of cosmetics, which are otherwise rarely mentioned in the letters or novels. He criticises Lady Russell because she does not wear rouge. "If she would wear rouge she would not be afraid of being seen." (p. 215). His grudging compliment to Anne is an occasion for a display of his omniscience about complexions. "Had she been using anything in particular? 'No, nothing.' 'Merely Gowland,' he supposed. 'No, nothing at all.'..... 'You cannot be better than well; or I should recommend Gowland, the constant use of Gowland, during the summer months. Mrs. Clay has been using it at my recommendation and you will see how it has carried away her freckles.'" (p. 145-6).

Gowland's Lotion was a popular, much advertised aid to beauty and the extravagant claims made on its behalf in prose and verse, which obviously impressed the gullible Sir Walter, will have been familiar to the first readers of *Persuasion* (figure 5). Today we know Gowland only because Anne Elliot did not use it.

In the letters, the price of muslin, the cut of a dress, the trimming of a cap are faithfully recorded and reveal the limitations of the novelist's own everyday life and experience. In the novels she does not describe such things but evokes them from each completely imagined world so that a word about Gowland, a spotted muslin dress, a bonnet, an amber cross takes us to the heart of a human relationship or a comedy of character. The difference between the two is just another measure of Jane Austen's power as a novelist.

#### A Note on Two Dresses

1. A pelisse (figure 6) of brown and yellow shot bombazine with yellow spot, now in the possession of Jane Austen's great grand-niece, Mrs. H.H. Jenkyns, came to her through one intermediary, from Marianne Knight, Jane Austen's niece. A photograph and account of this appeared in the Jane Austen Society's report for 1960. I am grateful for their permission to reproduce it here.

2. A dress of blue and mauve striped silk, said to have been worn by Jane Austen, and bought from the house at Chawton, was sold at Christie's May 1970. It was bought by the Jane Austen Society and can now be seen at Chawton. It had been altered by the owners, but has been restored as far as is possible.