

Dress in
the Age of
Jane Austen

Regency Fashion

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Acknowledgements

To B. K. and A. L. C. Davidson
History is a child of arts and analysis.



Notes for the Reader

In quoting from and citing Jane Austen's correspondence, I have used the fourth edition of *Jane Austen's Letters*, Deirdre Le Faye (ed.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); all letter numbers and page references relate to this edition.

The editions of the novels referred to in the notes are those cited in the bibliography. In the case of the finished novels, the title (usually abbreviated) is followed by book, chapter and page numbers. In the case of juvenilia and unfinished works, the title is followed by a reference to the edition and a page number. For the abbreviations used in references to Austen's works, see the list at the head of the section 'Primary Sources and Editions' in the Bibliography (p. 000)

In transcriptions from manuscript and published works, long 's' has been converted to the modern short 's'.

Dimensions are given in imperial measure followed, where appropriate, by a metric equivalent in parentheses. For more general purposes:

1 inch = 2.54 cm

1 yard (3 feet) = 91.44 cm

The prices of British goods are expressed in pounds, shillings and pence (indicated by the abbreviations £, s. and *d.*). In that currency, there were 20s. to £1, and 12*d.* to 1s.; £1 was therefore worth 240*d.* A guinea was £1 1s., or 252*d.*

As an approximate indication of values during the Regency period, the average annual income for an English labourer in 1800 was around £15–20. £20 was a year's salary for a butler, exclusive of food, board and some clothing. In 1800, 21 per cent of families in England and Wales had an annual income over £100; 7 per cent had an income over £200; and those enjoying an income of £1,000 or more per annum comprised only 1.25 per cent of the population – about 28,000 families. Income over £150 per annum put a family roughly in the top 10 per cent of earners.¹

In connection with chapter 7, it is important to note that I use the name 'East Indies' in the sense that was current during the Regency period. At the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, the 'East Indies' referred to the wide territory stretching from the Indian subcontinent, through south-East Asia and the islands to the south, as far as China .

Morning gown, white cotton and silk net, c.1820, detail. The delicate cutwork detail and embroidery on the cambric ground and net inserts, combined with circular trims of gathered vandyking, are typical of the increasing hem decoration seen from the late 1810s. Such fine work took hundreds of hours of female labour to complete. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, M.2007.211.856.

CAPTION CAPTION

Introduction

A history of the ladies' dresses in England, for merely half a dozen years, would furnish matter for a bulky volume.¹

'One likes to hear what is going on, to be au fait as to the newest modes of being trifling and silly[.]'²

'Civility', 'fancying', 'imprudence'. Jane Austen used these three words more in her writing than any other author.³ They epitomise dress in the age when Austen lived and worked. A rising middle class sought ever greater *civility*, they consumed new *fancies* from other lands and times and manufacture that influenced fashions; and accusations of *imprudence* were flung against wealthy style leaders and their unsuccessful imitators.

Austen (16 December 1775–18 July 1817) is one of the world's most influential, studied and beloved authors. Her works are synonymous with the fashions of the 'Regency' period, awash with high waists, heaving bosoms and cutaway coats. Yet, what did people who lived during the times and places Austen knew really wear? She is foremost a social commentator, and dress is a nuanced social marker, so clothing and needlework pinpoint niceties of character in her novels. Austen's letters reveal a lively sartorial interest, beside concerns about how to dress well on a limited income. During the author's short life, unprecedented and accelerated change saw Britain's turbulent entry into the modern age. Clothing reflected these transitions. Over a period of twenty years, fashion moved from ornamented width to minimal, streamlined 'naturalism', then widened again with the advent of Romanticism. How did these changes correspond to national and global events? To what extent does the microcosm of dress in Austen's defined, middling-gentry world reflect larger concerns and trends? How did her contemporaries obtain clothing? What systems of local and commercial fashion exchange existed and how did technological progress affect those networks? How did fashion incorporate the burgeoning availability of consumer goods? This book attempts to paint a realistic picture of dress in Austen's era by addressing these questions.

Fig. 0.1
Cassandra Austen, portrait of Jane Austen, c.1810, pencil and watercolour on paper. The only full-face portrait incontrovertibly of Jane Austen was painted by her sister, Cassandra. The author wears a full-front day gown with a high-necked habit-shirt or chemisette underneath, and a gathered cap. National Portrait Gallery, London.

Throughout, the lodestone of the discussions is the references to dress and textiles in Austen's six completed novels and other fictional and epistolary writings, and what is known of her life and family. If Austen is how many people first encounter Regency fashion, she provides an excellent approach to understanding it, and 'for us to visualise Austen characters in all their qualities, we need to look at the clothing proper to them to be consistent with her precision'.⁴ I approach Austen not as the monumental, singular author, but as an exceptionally observant woman, who was part of the best-biographised, non-elite, late Georgian family. What has emerged repeatedly is just how typical the Austens were as middle-class consumers. Their methods of acquiring, wearing and maintaining dress fall within the general patterns of their status and income. Austen's fictional spheres are modelled closely on her observations from this pattern of life. The family, with Jane at the centre, is both the point of origin for examination and the exemplar of wider phenomena. Her 'sharp, uncompromising gaze' is as accurate, wry and humorous when turned to clothing as it is on all other subjects. The textures of life, depicted fictionally with reticence, are more specific and unconstrained in her surviving letters, 'when Austen, like other women letter writers, is able to lose the "countenance" . . . she is expected to wear in public'.⁵ These slippages let us into a more private world, where trivial domestic details that early editors dismissed are valuable records of dress practices. As in Austen's fiction, close study of the particular can reveal the universal world of clothing.

What prompted this book was its absence when I sought a single-volume survey of Regency dress. Besides fulfilling my selfish desire as a reader, the book's purpose is twofold. One is to provide others interested in Jane Austen's life and times with an understanding of dress as she, her acquaintance and her fictional characters would have understood it. The second is to create an introductory scholarly volume on Regency dress, to be built on, argued with, disagreed with, or used as a bibliographic guide by other scholars (some readers may be here only for the pictures, and you too are welcome). My aim is to synthesise current scholarship, adding a strong material understanding of the historical garments people wore, how they were produced and how they can be interpreted. Larger theoretical concerns are blended with an unfolding of aesthetic modes, and a survey of fashion, clothing and textile cultures interwoven with broader political, cultural and technological transformations.

History and Fiction

The early nineteenth century in Britain can be slippery to characterise. The eighteenth century springs into being in history books with robust Enlightenment vigour. After the Revolutionary period, 1775–93, the Western world changed. How do we define the particularity of this time, where the end of the 'long' eighteenth century blurs into the beginning of the 'long' nineteenth century? Regency people are Georgians, but are they also proto-Victorians? Might they be Romantics or Classicists? The temporal definition remains the Prince of Wales's Regency, 1811–20, which coincides with Austen's publication period of 1811–17. The Regency is a

flexible concept, a summary of the early nineteenth century sometimes starting at the French Revolution, sometimes finishing at Victoria's accession in 1837 – a transitional period that redefined clothing norms and shaped the nineteenth-century world. For clothing I define my 'long Regency' as 1795 to c.1825 – from when waistlines began to rise until soon after the Regent became George IV. Henceforth, 'Regency' refers to this rough quarter century unless otherwise specified.

The Regency is defined by strong clothing narratives. The French embraced Anglomania, waistlines rose and dresses turned white and flimsy, ornamented with fripperies borrowed from other times and cultures. Women's heads retreated into bonnets; their bosoms were newly defined and uplifted. Men transformed Classicism into a focus on the athletic body. Their muscular thighs sprang into pale, defined relief by contrast with their broad, wool-clad shoulders. Disrupted from the Continent by war and blockade, British fashion embraced French style, after Napoleon's final defeat in 1815, to succumb to a new tide of romantic influence, before George III obligingly departed and turned the Prince of Wales into George IV. Several long-lasting, major clothing changes emerged. Trousers replaced knee-breeches in the male wardrobe. Women's stays retreated into underwear, never seen again in respectable society. Front-opening gowns, established for a century, became back-opening gowns. Cotton overtook linen as the plain fabric of choice. Embellished display disappeared from male dress, replaced by sombre surfaces emphasising the lines of good tailoring. British-manufactured textiles finally started surpassing desirable imported Asian cloths such as muslin, and made cheaper dress accessories more readily available to ordinary consumers.

Like many fashion histories, this work emphasises the clothing of the middling and upper classes, 'partly because the dress of the middle classes reflects one of the most influential elements of British society at the time', but also because Jane Austen's life and works sit so neatly there.⁶ Upper-echelon clothing has received a disproportionate amount of attention as the Regency's aesthetic bastion and aspirational destination, although recent scholarship on dress of the lower sorts is changing this. While my discussion ranges from court to courtyard, its attention is closest at the genteel centre, the middling sorts and upper gentry, who owned land or were engaged in professional trades. It also concerns the people who lived and worked with them, the aristocracy they looked up to, and the labourers supporting their lifestyles. Austen gives us an excellent entrée into the complexity and social implications of gentry clothing systems of her time.

An 1824 review praised Austen's skill in envisioning 'the inmates of the cottage, the farm-house, the manse, the mansion-house, and the castle [and] my lady's saloon too', 'sketches of that sober, orderly, small-town parsonage, sort of society in which she herself had spent her life'.⁷ She was born the seventh child and second daughter of Cassandra Austen (née Leigh, 1739–1827) in the parsonage at Steventon, Hampshire, in 1775, where her father, the Reverend George Austen (1731–1805), had the living. Her brothers were James (1765–1819), George (1766–1838), Edward (1767–1852), Henry (1771–1850), Francis ('Frank', 1774–1865), and Charles, who followed her (1779–1852).

Jane was devoted to her older sister Cassandra (1773–1845) from childhood, and the pair were unusually close, especially after Cassandra’s fiancé died in 1797. Neither ever married. From her early teens, Austen entertained her literate, lively family with hilarious short fiction and boisterous histories, now collected as the *Juvenilia* (1787–93). She began drafts of some of her later published novels in the late 1790s.

In 1800 George Austen retired and moved his womenfolk to Bath, where they lived until his unexpected death in 1805. Austen began *The Watsons* there c.1804 but never completed it. Mrs Austen and the girls moved around, living in rented accommodation and then with Frank’s family in Southampton until, in 1809, Edward – who had been adopted by wealthy childless cousins and took their surname Knight in 1812 – offered his relatives Chawton Cottage, part of his Hampshire estate. Austen lived the rest of her life there until her death from a long (and unidentified) illness in July 1817, aged 41. Four novels were published (anonymously) in her lifetime: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Emma* (1815). *Persuasion* was published posthumously in 1817, in a set with a revised version of her first completed novel, now called *Northanger Abbey*, and a note revealing her authorship.⁸ Austen drafted the incomplete manuscript now called *Sanditon* before her death. Of the estimated 3,000 letters she wrote in her lifetime, 161 survive, mostly to Cassandra,⁹ plus miscellaneous poems, plans and incidental writings.

The family was never wealthy. The Revd Austen did not save much of his annual income of about £600, and after his death the women relied on small inheritances and financial support from the brothers to survive, meaning that the sisters were always careful about money, and small sums mattered. Earnings from her writing eased Austen’s worries somewhat – notably £140 from *Sense and Sensibility* – and totalled £684 13s. in her lifetime. She invested much of this to bring her an additional £30 per year. Being of genteel birth, Austen had social constraints on her money, such as charity and paying for letters received. Her budget for 1807 shows that, of her £50 15s. 6d. for the year, more than £4, or roughly a month’s income, was spent on parcels and letters, though the principal expense was £13 19s. 3d. for ‘Cloathes & Pocket’, vital to maintaining the appearance of her gentility.¹⁰ Of her actual dress, the only known survivals are a pelisse (fig. XX), a shawl (fig. XX), a topaz cross, a turquoise ring and a turquoise bracelet.¹¹

In person, Austen was tall and slender to the point of thinness, with naturally curling brown hair, round pink cheeks and bright eyes. Written references to her appearance have a range of opinions about her attractiveness, but she appears not to have been thought plain. Cassandra painted the only two securely identified portraits of the author: a full-face watercolour the family did not consider a good likeness (fig. 0.1) and a full-length back view of her sitting outside (fig. 0.2). Other contenders for images of Austen are the Rice portrait in oils on canvas, the Byrne portrait by an anonymous artist (fig. 0.3),¹² the watercolour from the album of the Revd James Stanier Clarke (fig. 0.4), and a black paper silhouette. Discussion around these pictures is extensive and often contested.¹³

Fig. 0.2

Cassandra Austen, portrait of Jane Austen, seated, 1804, pencil and watercolour on paper. This portrait shows the new back-buttoning styles of the mid-1800s. The bulky blue cotton skirts are bundled up to reveal a white petticoat, and the bonnet is made in matching fabric. A habit-shirt covers the décolletage. Private collection.



The traditional critiques applied to Austen’s writing have been that she ignores big history, meaning the charged political situations and theatres of war unfolding all over Europe, summarised by the complaint that ‘At the height of political and industrial revolution, Miss Austen composes novels almost extra-territorial to history’, although scholars regularly challenge this view.¹⁴ A twenty-first-century critic asserts that Austen ‘keeps historical reference to a bare minimum’, yet writes two sentences earlier about her descriptions of ‘volatile social formation as the English landed gentry of the early nineteenth century interlocked with an acquisitive high bourgeois society’ – history references equally important to the emergent nineteenth century and its dress.¹⁵

Ironically in an age of growing material consumerism, Austen's fictional references to dress generally decline as her publications advance. *The Watsons* (1804–5) and *Northanger Abbey* (1803) are replete with minutiae of clothing, and discussions of it – a 'striking preoccupation with the world of goods', where later she 'learns to pinpoint her characters' possessions more exactly'.¹⁶ Conversely, the fewer details attract greater significance as Austen's skills improve. When the author mentions an article of clothing or a piece of textile, the reader must pay close attention, as it tells us something about the action or character, helping us to understand her works by exploring the cultural code underlying such specificity.¹⁷ Behind the scenes in the letters, however, Austen despaired of and delighted in the niceties of getting and wearing dress as much as the next person.

Dress in fiction relies on readers' shared experience of normality, and understanding of social and sartorial conventions. The design of garments, and how they look when worn, is nearly always missing from the "literary mirror" when held up to nature; it is a pre-existing image assumed by the author to be familiar to the reader'.¹⁸ Therefore, if the text is scrupulously realised, as with Austen, fiction can become a medium for reconstructing clothing. While there is a caution in using fiction as evidence for historical research, Austen is a particularly alert historical writer. Indeed: 'Austen as an historian of her time . . . [is] an important but frequently overlooked feature of her practice as a novelist.' The same writer continues:

the novelist's status as an historical agent is ultimately indivisible from the history in her writing . . . Partly in consequence of the extended interval during which . . . Austen's narratives gradually became history, reality and temporality are admixed so that Austen's status as an historian of the everyday turns out to be an unusually precise description of her achievement.¹⁹

Austen's contemporary readers recognised this. During her life and immediately afterwards, the reality of her created worlds impressed others who had lived through the same time. 'Most Novellists fail & betray themselves in attempting to describe familiar scenes in high Life . . . here it is quite different. Everything is natural, & the situations & incidents are told in a manner which clearly evinces the Writer to belong to the Society whose manners she so ably delineates', wrote one Austen acquaintance about *Mansfield Park*.²⁰ In the year after the novelist's death, an unknown critic wrote that

Her characters, her incidents, her sentiments are obviously all drawn exclusively from experience . . . she seems to have no other object in view, than simply to paint some of the scenes which she has herself seen, and which every one, indeed, may witness daily . . . She seems to be describing such people as meet together every night, in every respectable house in London . . . Her merit consists altogether in her remarkable talent for observation. . . in recording the customs and manners of commonplace people in the commonplace intercourse of life.²¹

Fig. 0.3

Unknown artist, *Miss Jane Austen*, 1814–16, pencil and ink on vellum. The sitter wears a white-worked muslin morning gown with long sleeves and a lace frill around the low neck. A high-collared habit-shirt underneath reaches the ties of the decorative satin cap at the chin. A shawl is draped over the right arm. Private Collection.



People who read Austen and knew the times she wrote in considered her true to life, natural, accurate and observant – an excellent ground for studying 'commonplace', albeit respectable, dress of her time.

Juliette Wells emphasises that the more nearly people's important qualities in representational fiction approach the universal, the better the fiction is judged to be, so clothing, their historically determined appearance, is less relevant.²² But clothing, perceived by its wearers and observers as part of characters' identity, creates half the physical self.²³ In fiction as in life, 'the dressed body is a fleshy, phenomenological entity that is so much a part of our experience of the social world, so thoroughly embedded within the micro-dynamics of social order, as to be entirely taken for granted'.²⁴ Presenting how and why people took what for granted in their clothing is the work of dress history, especially as historical bodies are so bound up in our perceptions of their dressed bodies. How Austen's contemporaries saw people wearing clothes is not



Fig. 0.4
James Stanier Clarke, portrait of a woman, identified as Jane Austen (R. J. Wheeler, 1998), 1810s, watercolour on paper. The subject of the portrait wears a very stylish ensemble, comprising a carnation- or coquelicot-coloured silk tippet, edged with deep falls of black lace. The matching black velvet cap is festooned with ribbons and ostrich feathers, and the woman holds a fur muff. Private collection.

the same as how we see them retrospectively. To the Regency observer in London's streets a Frenchman stood out immediately, as did an English miss strolling in the Tuileries to Parisians. The dandy seeking perfect fit found it in a tighter jacket than any gentleman now would tolerate, while visible shoulder blades and upper arms could constitute scandalous female nakedness. Throughout, I have sought what was 'entirely taken for granted' in dress during Austen's lifetime and re-read her writings in the context of how she and her audience would have understood the clothed Regency body.

Observations of 'the long and continuing battles for the posthumous body of Jane Austen', played out among her biographers, 'continually being torn into parts and put back together again', are apt for this work.²⁵ If 'whatever had most to do with [Austen's] bodily life is hardest to track down', then the clothing of her age's various imaginary and real bodies has not been paid enough attention in its own context. Even before the spate of 1990s screen adaptations, a 1970 article regretted that 'For the public at large, and even . . . for some serious historians . . . the past seems to remain a Never-Never Land in which . . . the heroines of even Jane Austen's novels are scantily draped in damped muslin.'²⁶ I question such Regency dress mythologies wherever possible.

The 'heritage' Austen relies on presenting Regency fashions as part of the display of period objects authenticating the narrative space.²⁷ This book is *Dress in the Age of Jane Austen* because I recognise that in popular culture 'Regency England becomes a timeless, mythological place called Austenshire', dominated by the flickering light of cinema bedazzling audiences with all its 'bonnets and carriages and parks and starched pinnies, and Colin Firth and Alan Rickman striding about in ruffled shirts and shiny boots'.²⁸ The modern bodies of actresses portraying Austen heroines 'evoke, through carriage, gestures and attitude, a late twentieth-century Western female corporeality' enacting 'history as the present in costume' and an assertive physicality appealing to modern viewers.²⁹ No actor will ever wear his tight jacket and breeches with the unthinking ease of the Regency gentleman, who knew no other clothed experience. The weather requirements of filming costume dramas bias screen audiences towards an endless-summer view of Regency dress, according well with muslins and parasols. 'In any search for Jane Austen,' as Emily Auerbach cautions, 'we must break free of dear Aunt Jane . . . We must strip off those ruffles and ringlets added to her portrait, restore the deleted fleas and bad breath to her letters, and meet Jane Austen's sharp, uncompromising gaze head on.'³⁰ In dress terms the 'ruffles and ringlets' are the fashion-plate, screen idealisations of Regency dress, and the 'fleas and bad breath' are prosaic flannel underwear, stockings darned into lumps, and muddy, manure-coated streets. However, filmed Austen can suggest the lived effect of clothes in her lifetime, 'of interest . . . as objects of desire in their own right'.³¹ If readers, re-enactors, curators, collectors, writers and designers now desire Regency clothing, the screen has shaped their vision.³² This book takes its approach between these polarities of history and heritage.

Structure

The structure moves away from straight chronology and reflects instead Britain's social spheres as Austen would have experienced them. I focus most on England, but consider the British Isles and the British nation in the wider world, to create maps of Regency 'clothing communities', which can be understood as 'a group of friends or family, a village, a village in relation to an urban centre, a geographical region, a main road . . . positioned within their locality, and within a wider ideological and social context'.³³ I take my cue from Austen for subjects and discussions covering a surprisingly large area, from the midst of 'rural' Hampshire to New South Wales. Like many histories of clothing, the book therefore leans towards the feminine sphere – Austen's realm of knowledge and one through which her male relatives and characters are seen.

The seven chapters move from the most inward to the furthest geographical reaches of the experience of Regency dress, in concentric circles. Each expands a little further from the experience of 'Self' (chapter 1), the physical and imaginary Regency body, and the role of fashion. The next chapter, 'Home', concerns dress in the domestic spheres. The third social area – 'Village' – is where the shared experience of dress between friends, neighbours and local communities occurred. Chapter 4, 'Country', travels outwards to the populous countryside, where most people still lived, and considers how rural life and cross-country transportation contributed to dress. By contrast with provincial areas, the 'City' (chapter 5) and other urban centres were important to constructing fashioned public images. 'Nation' then considers the larger relationships of British dress with its neighbours, including the effect on dress of years of continental wars. The final chapter, 'World', locates Regency dress within its global contexts and complicated cultural trade networks, with surprising connections back to Austen. Even her modest local sphere was connected to global dress production, consumption and practices. Although she never left England, the experience of her extended family and the currents of influence among the dressed world in which she moved shape broader discussions. Her attitudes to global events are not necessarily pertinent; what is relevant here is how the same 'true Indian muslin' could and did grace British women in Antigua, London, Calcutta and Sydney simultaneously.

Many areas of clothing are not addressed owing to lack of space. Academic, judicial and legal dress are specialised clothing, less respondent to fashionable change.³⁴ Ceremonial dress is confined to clothing worn for court presentations, not for events such as coronations.³⁵ Uniforms, including those worn in charity and public schools, and clothing of religious orders are likewise excluded. Dress of the poor has a new, recent bibliography,³⁶ and children's dress is beginning to be covered in other publications, though still needing more detailed scholarship; neither is covered here. Masquerade and fancy dress is a subject ranging across too many non-quotidian times and places to explore. Jewellery, spectacles, watches, canes and other Regency accessories are considered only in relation to ensembles.

I touch on the greater social ramifications of social, political and economic changes across the turn of the nineteenth century where they affect discussion of clothing. There is a significantly greater literature on these subjects than on dress, easy for interested readers to access. Many recent works on clothing and textile history address these bigger pictures in micro-studies of external factors that influenced consumers. As Austen's writing is the focus here, attention to her work and milieu stands in place of other histories, and I ask the reader's indulgence for any gaps. I have mined the wider Austen family where possible to look at clothing as they experienced it; in this area I am grateful to previous Austen scholars, especially Deirdre Le Faye, whose dedicated archival study has created a strong foundation for family research.

I have tried to keep to the period usage of terms for discussing the items of apparel people wore, and the practices of adorning and altering the body. In Regency parlance, 'fashion' means the current style, the modish manner of being (chapter 1). 'Dress' or 'dresses' generally refers to the ensemble of male or female clothing, the entire effect, not individual female main garments, which are called 'gowns'. It also means the state of full dress, formal clothing for evenings. 'Costume' I avoid as a term, except where it appears in a contemporary text, as it is used in current scholarship for performance wear.

The subject is dress in the British Regency world; other cultures are considered only in relation to the central theme (the relationship between North American and British dress is beyond this book's scope, and has its own scholarship). Where there is published research only from non-British sources, I use this wider knowledge. In some ways, the research has been easy, as few authors are more written about than Austen. But wading through the vigorous and ever growing bibliography is quite an undertaking, as the clothing of her lifetime touches obliquely on every conceivable area of life and study. Being a twenty-first-century historian has meant keeping abreast of prolific new digital resources, giving access to otherwise inaccessible sources, while becoming anxious about sources untapped. Proof of the centrality of dress is its appearance everywhere in the archives, when least expected.

Among the flood of Austen publications, it is curious that Regency clothing has not yet had a dedicated academic monograph. One of the difficulties when writing about the period is that it straddles a change of century. Key dress histories present excellent Regency-era research as part of wider narratives on the long eighteenth century or fashion's development.³⁷ Others study one aspect of the period closely, or lose continuity across the 1799/1800 divide through century-specific models.³⁸ All this information is difficult for researchers seeking Regency-specific dress to extract from larger works, although a number of good shorter books exist on the subject.³⁹ The earliest of these, and a volume to which I am indebted, is Penelope Byrde's *A Frivolous Distinction: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen*, for many years the only work centralising Austen and dress.⁴⁰ Short articles in magazines and journals, and book chapters investigate a variety of aspects of dress and textiles in Austen's work. Muslins, fashion and shopping are popular topics, along with needlework.⁴¹ Publications from museum exhibitions offer good illustrated information.⁴²

Looking at Austen's object-strewn world from other disciplines offers some broader perspectives. Georgian and Austen studies often consider dress in passing, and new approaches in Austen biography and exhibition show the insights that material-culture-inclusive research creates.⁴³ Issues around bodies and embodiment in Austen's writing generate a more theoretical standpoint.⁴⁴ The previous lack of a single volume on Regency dress is, I hope, remedied here, providing a resource for readers of these secondary texts, and of the vast biographical and critical literature on Austen.

Materiality

Fashion is always about bodies – is produced, promoted and worn by bodies – and the body must be dressed in almost all social encounters. If fashion concerns the imaginary body, an ideal to be aspired to, dress balances clothing and adornment on the lived, experiential body. Dress in the age of Jane Austen also overlaps and interconnects with many different spheres; from relaxing at home to visiting friends, dressing for dinner, walking in damp fields, sea-bathing, watching royalty in St James, staving off heat in Bermuda, or serving on military campaign on the Continent. This book embraces the overlaps by looking at how clothing in everyday life for Austen's network acted upon their bodies, real and social, and how fashion is inextricable from its production, distribution and consumption.

Dress was, for Jane Austen, her family, her milieu and by extension her fictional characters, a negotiation based upon personal networks of taste and consumption possibilities, and it is in the eighteenth century that 'the consumer' appears for the first time as a social character. Consumption studies have made an impact upon dress histories, and underlie my research. I use these data where I can, though restricted by limited space for in-depth discussion. What people consumed came to communicate their identity, furthering the argument that 'fashion should never be decontextualised from the wider web of actions, choices, consumer behaviours and relationships in which individuals are enmeshed'.⁴⁵ To aspire was to buy, trade, make and imitate in new ways, with increasingly cheap goods sold in more complex distribution networks. The world of spending on novel and exotic paraphernalia became accessible to a new range of potential buyers during the consumer revolution of the long eighteenth century, when people, no longer content with using the same old things until they fell apart, increasingly aimed at 'the latest fashion' or something 'fashionable'.⁴⁶ More and more, dress could be replaced or updated before it wore out to reflect changes in desirable details.

Austen lived in a world increasingly reliant on its material things as markers of social connection. An object in her text has a keen relationship with a material object; this physical world of things is an essential part of my study. Although traditional history has seen a 'material turn' in the last decade or so, it is sometimes not as material as those who customarily work with things might wish. Dress historians have long called for historical narratives to incorporate material clothing. Giorgio Riello champions this approach:

Historians must integrate the findings derived from the study of material culture into their archive-based and theory-led research. Objects or artefacts (what historians call goods and commodities) need to be used as primary sources. Ignorance about object-based analyses is as dangerous as lack of attention to costs, profits, markets' dynamics, and the organisation of production.⁴⁷

Barbara Burman urges 'scholars of material culture [to] deploy the full range of social historical techniques: the skills of the curator, the social historian and the analysts of literary and visual records must somehow be combined'.⁴⁸ My background as a museum curator and dress artisan informs an approach inherently founded in what surviving historical clothes and their accessories reveal. I have looked, for example, at both the contemporary images showing perceptions of clothing's role in identity, and the real things which can subvert fashionable rhetoric.

When a non-dress historian suggested recently that 'historians can study the lived, embodied experience of gender . . . by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to material culture that combines the materiality of men's clothing with the representational', she was advocating a fundamental practice in dress history.⁴⁹ This field is necessarily multi-disciplinary with a basic technique of combining images, objects and text to analyse meaning. Close attention to historical clothing is effective in revealing larger social and economic concerns, from cotton linings marking out the fibre's new global dominance to gaiters telling us a gentleman is a successful farmer. This approach can be misunderstood. Even twenty-first-century publications have made assumptions about the taxonomic tendencies of 'costume historians' (the phrase itself is outdated), who get so lost in the trees of listing frills and ruffles that they cannot explore the forest of meaning. Other disciplines can 'discover' clothing history without engaging with the historiography. Having read works containing inaccurate dress history that the existing literature could have remedied, I am aware that this book could leave me hoist by the petard of my own ignorance in reverse. Besides literature on textiles and dress, gender, women's work, domestic production and consumption, written clothing and fashion cultures in the long eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I have delved into histories of literature, society, royalty and aristocracy, maritime and military fields, domesticity, consumption, gender, economy and colonialism for contextual understandings. Many of these areas have had stimulating new attention paid to them recently. Any misunderstandings I cheerfully own, and hope experts will (kindly) alert me to.

It is possible to synthesise theoretical and practical information. Curators are no longer seen as obsessed only with details, and historians only with documentary facts. Researchers of all sorts want to know what people were wearing, as well as why and how and what it meant when they did. An account book detailing the cost of stays and the frequency of their purchasing is less useful if the reader does not know what stays look like and how they shape the body. Conversely, there is no point cataloguing and categorising stays without setting them in a broader social context. There is a need to integrate and write new histories on the foundation of

methodologies encompassing fashion theory, economic history, gender, the body, domesticity and the material turn. How does someone with no prior knowledge start to get accurate information about Regency period clothing and the contexts in which it was produced, consumed and worn, the social roles it played? For these readers, and those who need to date garments, it is still helpful to have stylistic changes delineated and types of garments named and quantified (see pp. 290–91).

Therefore, this book starts from 'the recognition of the essentially inseparable relationship between things, ideas and experiences, between material and mental worlds', and uses this entanglement of objects, words and actions as a method to examine dress in the age of Austen.⁵⁰ There is a balance between text and images, theory and practice, specific pieces of surviving clothing and the ideas they embody. I also acknowledge the ways an ever increasing number of people engage with Austen through 'non-textual practices', including replica clothing and Regency dance events, creating different knowledge and perspectives.⁵¹ Jane Austen festivals around the world steadily increase as more women feel what it is like to dance wearing stays, and men learn to negotiate the inertia caused by top hats. To this can be added the experience of sewing Regency clothing or engaging in other period reconstruction, such as embroidery, millinery and shoemaking. A re-creation of Austen's silk pelisse was my way into dress of this period, and gave valuable insight into sewing practices, the relationships between makers and wearers, and Austen's own physical body.⁵²

This book presents Regency dress in the wake of histories reconsidering the interconnected global world and the materiality of the past. Recent Austen scholarship also recasts 'Aunt Jane' as a realistic, unromantic, professional author, whose incisive pen and extensive family connections participated in a huge range of dress practices, or uses things 'to map the threads connecting her . . . to those on the international stage'.⁵³ Applying the analytical techniques, traditional to literature studies, of reading between the lines, extrapolating, and tracing connections with contextual material, a whole world of British clothing is conjured up from Austen's 'little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory [worked] with so fine a Brush', the ground for portrait miniatures rendered as exquisitely as her own satin-stitch.⁵⁴ Austen's life is the pebble I drop into the global pond to follow the ripples of early nineteenth-century British dress as far as they go, lapping against shores of the outposts of empire.