



Self

Dress was her passion. She had a most harmless delight in being fine; and our heroine's entree into life could not take place till after three or four days had been spent in learning what was mostly worn, and her chaperone was provided with a dress of the newest fashion.¹

Human bodies are clothed in culture. Haircuts, sun exposure, marks left by work and leisure, the shaping by clothing and by mental images construct a socio-cultural 'body' identifiable in time. 'Dress lies at the margins of the body', Joanne Entwistle reminds us, 'and marks the boundary between self and other, individual and society. The boundary is intimate and personal, since our dress forms the visible envelope of the self.'² Everyone in the Regency got up in the morning and put on garments that reflected their different physical and cultural environments, balancing material garments and conceptual aesthetic imaginings to dress both their real and their social bodies. The resulting dress underwent sophisticated and constant observation by their communities, as Austen's fiction so precisely captures.

This chapter presents the fundamental bodily and imaginary selves that characterised Regency experiences of clothing, first through an overview of Regency aesthetics, encompassing the prevailing styles and construction of dress, and the influence of Classicism, and various romantic nostalgias suffusing fashion. It moves into the contemporary understanding of fashion's forces and moral qualities. In relation to dress, signalling 'fashion' was less relevant to ordinary people than what clothing revealed about its wearers. Fashion imagery contributed to ideals of beautiful, elegant figures, often relying on the health and beauty, or manipulation of the 'natural' body to create Regency silhouettes.

Fig. 5.16

Evening slippers, 1820s, silk satin. This fine pair of evening slippers belonged to Jane Austen's niece Marianne Knight. The thin soles, delicate ribbons and slight fabric uppers of such shoes wore out and dirtied quickly in the environment of a hectic ballroom. Jane Austen's House Museum, Chawton.



For women, textiles for 'dress' either absorbed or reflected light. Lamps and candles lit evening gatherings, leading to a preference for bluer tones to neutralise the yellow light.⁹⁵ Fashion writers noted that a 'pale yellow colour, which is extremely elegant in the day . . . appears soiled in the evening', and diminished the 'brilliance of the complexion'.⁹⁶ Metallic ornaments and embroideries glistened in the flickering candlelight, coming to life in a way electric light eclipses. White muslin provided a foil to the glitter of gilt-thread embroidery (fig. 5.14). Silks continued popular, forming 'a crowd of sattins and laces' in the evening.⁹⁷ There are significantly more silk evening gowns in museum collections than those made of other textiles. Fashion magazines contain many resplendent descriptions of full dress, but white silk dresses prevail among records of actual wear (see fig. 5.13). In 1813 Fanny Knight wore white sarsenet with silver in her hair to the Canterbury ball.⁹⁸ Other documented examples include white merino trimmed with satin for dinner, and a twelve-year-old white satin dress, now unfashionable, which had been worn at the lady's wedding.⁹⁹ As translucent fabrics became popular for full dress, women adopted a white (fig. 5.15) or coloured silk slip or petticoat worn under gauzes, nets and muslins, which changed the hue of the gown; Susan Ferrier remarked on the 'great beauty' of crimson gauze over sky-blue satin observed at a ball.¹⁰⁰ Evening slippers of pale satins and silks, sometimes finished with ribbons crossed up the legs, matched or contrasted with the gown (fig. 5.16). Men wore pumps of black or patent leather, which appeared to lengthen their legs, especially when combined with the cream breeches and stockings usual in the evening (though both in black were acceptable). Incredibly slim to modern eyes, shoes fitted tightly as part of fashionable style, offering ample fodder to satirists to ridicule the forcing of reality into the narrow ideal foot. Shoes were Regency consumables, constantly entering and departing the wardrobe, their lives eked out by frequent cobbling and repairs. Ladies' delicate fabric dancing slippers could disintegrate in an evening – a pair of Harriet Wynne's split at a ball.¹⁰¹ Leather soles wore out fast, no matter how well made, and required frequent replacement.

Fig. 5.17

Pair of dinner gowns, 1815, silk gauze. Sisters often wore matching gowns, and these examples, woven with vertical stripes, were said to have been worn by the Misses Percival at the Duchess of Richmond's ball in Brussels on 15 June 1815. They show the dropping waist and widening skirts, of the late 1810s, in addition to the long evening sleeves that Austen welcomed when they returned to fashion. Fashion Museum, Bath.



Austen highlights the importance of headwear in creating the right evening look. At a concert in Bath in 1805, she wore a gown with crape sleeves 'put in on the occasion; on my head I wore my crape & flowers but I do not think it looked particularly well'.¹⁰² Evening caps were, again, a way of refreshing ensembles, and the Austen women used London trips to acquire new ones. In 1813 a Miss Hare had some pretty ready-made caps in her shop, and Austen bespoke 'one like one of them, only white satin instead of blue. It will be white satin and lace, and a little white flower perking out of the left ear, like Harriot Byron's feather. I have allowed her to go as far as [£]1.16s.¹⁰³ This is clearly an evening or visiting cap, by the quality of the materials and the price – more than the guinea that a first edition of *Emma* would later cost. The Austen sisters often had dresses made in the same fabric, for evening as well as daywear; the two gowns supposed to have been worn at the Duchess of Richmond's famous Waterloo ball by a pair of sisters (fig. 5.17) provide a wonderful comparative example of this practice.¹⁰⁴

The Regency evening social activity *par excellence* was dancing, covered in many books about Austen's life and times.¹⁰⁵ In the country, dances could draw together people from up to 20 miles' radius (more than 30 km) – a travelling distance of around four hours.¹⁰⁶ Private balls, of the type Austen fictionalises most memorably at Netherfield Park, were an opportunity for sociability, entertainment and exercise. These were attended by invitation, but ticket purchase allowed anyone with the money (and the right appearance) access to public balls held in assembly rooms from the local, as in fictional Meryton, to the splendid, as in real-world Bath.

Dancing was a near universal skill for the middling sorts – "Every savage can dance," as Mr Darcy snarls.¹⁰⁷ Beside the pleasure of different company, the dance floor was, in Austen's time, 'the best opportunity for identifying romantic partners and for advancing a courtship, for testing relations between the sexes.'¹⁰⁸ Dressing for a ball, no matter where, was a careful business, as both single and married attendees were presenting their best personal display. But dancing took its toll on delicate evening attire, as Susan Sibbald found when she danced so much one night that she wore a hole in the sole of her shoe that made her foot bleed.¹⁰⁹ How to balance comfort and elegance, and secure coiffures and their decorations in place to survive long, active hours occupied women's thoughts for many days beforehand. Both sexes carried dancing shoes in bags and changed their footwear once indoors, as depicted in fig. 5.15.¹¹⁰

In the sense of the amount of exertion required of them, ballgowns may be considered a kind of decorative



Village

Such pictures of Life in Country Villages as I deal with . . . ¹

Just outside the home was the village. If Jane Austen is a novelist of ‘*discrimination* within a knowable community, . . . of narrowly drawn, closely dissected, . . . spheres, castes, classes, and circles, in which every detail . . . is delved for social meaning’, the village was where clothing communities truly began.² This local neighbourhood, the setting for daily lives and dramas, for clothing provision from shops and makers, for networks of fashion dissemination and charity, is the famous ‘3 or 4 families in a village’, which Austen told her niece Anna while she was writing *Emma* – her most village-centred fiction – was just the thing to work on.³

For all fashion’s rapid pace, the people one lived and worked among were more important to forming dress cultures in the age of Austen. Her fictional village world was one that contemporary readers recognised: ‘The picture of the younger Miss Bennets, their perpetual visits to the market town where officers are quartered, and the result, is perhaps exemplified in every provincial town in the kingdom’, wrote a critic at the time.⁴ Austen’s ‘ordinary business of life’ happened in a close network of hamlets, villages and provincial town centres strung across England in a way that meant few were truly isolated. Her family lived in Steventon and Chawton villages, and the town of Southampton, and she spent time in Godmersham, Kent, and various south coast towns (for Bath and London, see chapter 5). As Laurie Kaplan realised, the acquaintance connection could form an ‘urban village’, even in the midst of London, part of a clothing community held together through shared relationship and knowledge, local fashions, making, and shops.⁵ The social spaces of these ‘villages’ are this chapter’s subject.

Fig. 5.13

William Beechey, portrait of Harriot Beauclerk (née Mellon), 1815, oil on canvas. Harriot Mellon married the 79-year-old Thomas Courts in April 1815, so this splendid full-length portrait of rich evening dress may show her wedding attire, with enough lace and satin to satisfy even Mrs Elton. She became Duchess of St Albans upon remarrying in 1827. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Fig. 5.14

Evening gown, c.1820, muslin. Muslin gowns embroidered with gilt or silver thread are common in collections, but untarnished examples are relatively rare. This gown retains the original sparkle of the embroidery, highlighted by the soft, dull cotton ground. The waistline has descended nearly to the natural position by 1820, and sleeve size is increasing. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

drapery, and sudden changes of climate' in causing influenza, consumption and other respiratory ailments.⁹⁰ Fanny Burney declined an invitation to a party after illness, because 'I cannot yet risk an evening, and a dressed one too.'⁹¹

Anxieties about male evening dress involved tightness. While *The Whole Art of Dress!* advised that a dress-coat, distinguished by its cut, 'should never be made to button [but] should, if any thing, be even too small to meet across the waist and chest, so that it may sit open and display the waistcoat, shirt, and cravat to the utmost advantage', others perceived this as a man's coat fitting so closely that he could scarcely draw breath, 'laced within an inch of his life'. In colour, 'Black and blue are the only full-dress colours: night will not allow a dark green to be discriminated from them.'⁹² The rise of black in menswear dates from the Regency, seen in every image of male evening dress. Scholars and contemporary commentators stressed black's sombreness; but the colour is attractive, John Harvey argues, making the person look thinner, setting off the face, perhaps suggesting intensity with a 'glamorous and dashing smartness' evident in the 'elongated and elegant languor' of some and the 'charged uprightiness' of others.⁹³ His phrase recalls Emma finally noticing Mr Knightley's 'tall, firm, upright figure' and 'natural grace' when dressed for a ball.⁹⁴

by 1814 she too had altered her evening dress by lowering the bosom of her gauze gown; on the night she wore the altered gown she also experimented with the new long sleeves to see if they were 'allowable', though Mrs Tilson also wore them and 'assured her they are worn in the evening by many'.⁸⁷ Sleeves could be made separately to match a dress (Eliza Jervoise had a pair, costing 7s.). The long sleeves Mrs Bennet is 'very glad to hear of' in *Pride and Prejudice* (set in 1812) may be the result of this same change.⁸⁸ At the other extreme, in 1803 'Lady Meredith was . . . turned out of the Rooms at Bath by the Master of the Ceremonies for having *no* sleeves to her cloaths – the naked elbow appears every where with impunity, but the arm above it is not tolerated as yet.'⁸⁹ The health aspects concerned Regency people in the cumulative effect of 'naked arms and bosoms, thin shoes, short



Fig. 2.13 opposite

David Wilkie, *The Letter of Introduction*, 1816, oil on canvas. This subject is based on Wilkie's experience as a young artist in London seeking patronage. The older man is dressed informally in a dressing-gown worn over a black waistcoat, red slippers and a nightcap. National Galleries Scotland.

Fig. 2.14 above

Man's dressing-gown, c.1820, figured wool (see detail). A snug dressing-gown, made of figured, striped wool and lined with orange woollen fabric, represents comfortable, informal, private domestic wear for men. Although the gown is unshaped through the front, the back is cut in the style of an outdoor coat. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

From 1781 to 1802, Parson Woodforde bought the material for a morning gown each year, always patterned cotton. The 'contemptible article' made an appearance when Woodforde 'Had a thin flannel lining put to the Arms and Shoulders of my Cotton Gowns for the Morning . . . very comfortable wearing this time of the year', another tactic for keeping cold at bay, in addition to fur linings in winter banyans and gowns.⁷⁶ Dressing-gowns could also be made of flannel. By the early nineteenth century, men's morning gowns had moved from the looser oriental-style robe to a fitted garment, with lapels and set-in sleeves, quilted for warmth or made of woollen fabrics (fig. 2.14). They still provided more comfort and ease of movement than heavier day coats. Woodforde puttered around gardening in his cotton morning gowns, with an 'old shabby hat', and was happy for visitors to catch him in this state.⁷⁷ Perhaps less happy would have been the Mr Rose extolled by Miss Steele (S&S) as 'a prodigious smart young man, quite a beau' when fully dressed, but 'if you do but meet him of a morning, he is not fit to be seen', implying that his daily donning of his smart appearance represents a falsity of character.⁷⁸

Women's dressing-gowns were more intimate than men's, and were worn over nightgowns. Maria Edgeworth wrote letters standing in her dressing-gown, before dressing for breakfast with Lord Byron.⁷⁹ In her final illness, Austen received family visitors in her dressing-gown, and her heroine Marianne Dashwood's dressing-gowned state of distress in London prevents her from receiving non-relatives.⁸⁰ Fanny Burney,

Fig. 7.4

William Owen, portrait of Captain Gilbert Heathcote, RN, 1806?, oil on canvas. This portrait may celebrate Heathcote's promotion to captain in September 1806. His full dress uniform has its complement of ceremonial sword and lace-trimmed hat, and he wears revealing pantaloons. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

After the 1812 revision, naval undress coats, bereft of decoration, could pass for civilian ones, as the influence of new streamlined menswear reached ever further. Officers were described as appearing 'in sober simplicity, . . . strong, noble and unassuming. Plain blue and gold coats with white lapels, hats without feathers, black neckcloths, and open breasts' (that is, not covered by the waistcoat), with 'sun-burnt countenances' and unpowdered heads, giving an idea of 'honesty and honour, of real courage and untainted manners'.¹³ Tanned faces showed the seafarer, making visible Sir Walter Elliot's complaint that 'sailors do grow old betimes; I have often observed it; they soon lose the look of youth' (*Pers.*).¹⁴ By the 1820s, naval full-dress uniforms were looking archaic, with breeches instead of trousers, and waistcoats ending in points instead of straight edges. Austen contrasts this sense of the 'old' navy, represented by the bickering admirals Mary Crawford encountered when she was growing up, with William Price's open, pleasant countenance and 'frank, unstudied, but feeling and respectful manners' – the new navy man.¹⁵

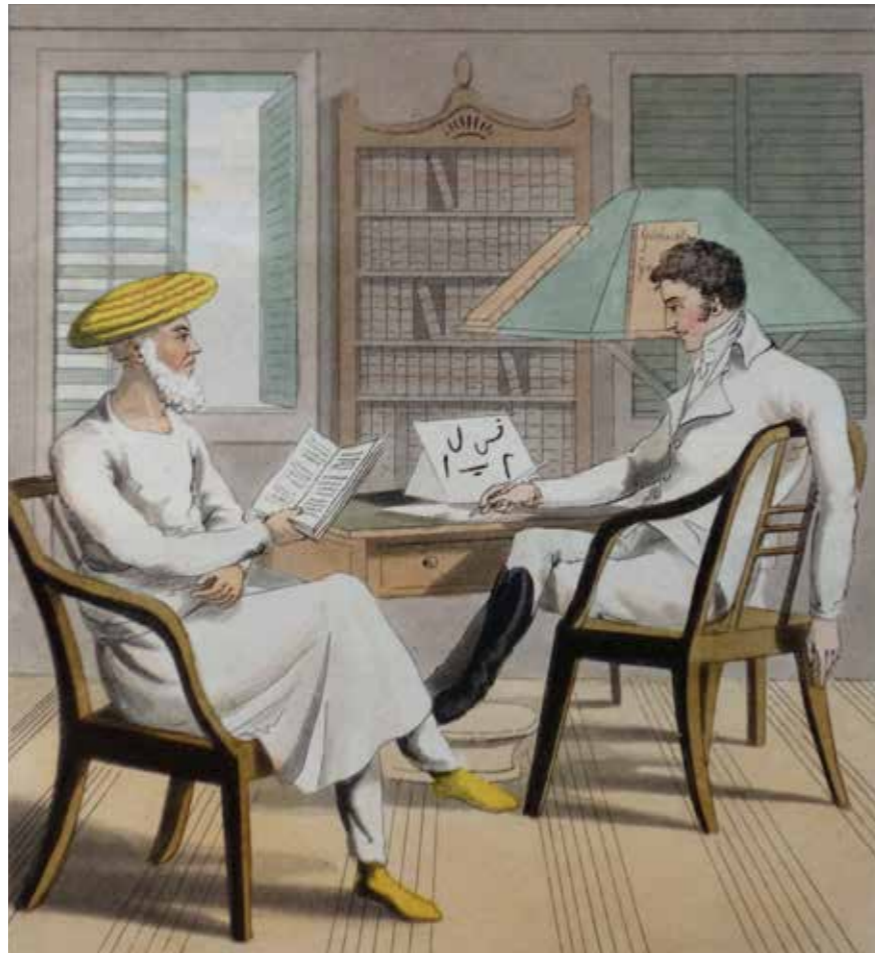
Being 'made' into a lieutenant was the highlight of a midshipman's life and the commencement of his climb up the naval career ladder. When William Price becomes second lieutenant, the new officer looks and moves 'all the taller, firmer, and more graceful' in his matching uniform set, or 'mess', got from Turner the tailor, as evoked by a caricature of 'Master Blockhead' (fig. 7.5).¹⁶ 'All the striking parts of [William's] dress' attract familial admiration, though as wear was prohibited off-duty William can only describe his uniform's beauties to the Mansfield inhabitants. Fanny happily gets to see him in it before 'all its own freshness and all the freshness of its wearer's feelings' were worn away.¹⁷ Austen could expect her readers to project the sort of excitement and flurry of preparation for sailing in a new appointment (conveyed by fig. 7.6) onto Sam Price, a younger brother of Fanny's, aged 11, who is 'starting his career in seamanship' on the *Thrush* with William. As Mrs Price distractedly exclaims, 'Sam's things . . . will never be ready in time' for the next-day sailing.¹⁸ Complete sets of specially made new clothing would have been an exciting acquisition for a young man. The Austen family twice shared that pleasure in outfitting Francis and then Charles for beginning their lives at sea. The fictional news, 'spreading general joy through a wide circle of great people', suggests their relatives' emotions in the same circumstances.¹⁹

We have seen Austen and Cassandra making shirts for their brothers, but did not consider what happened next: Austen may never have travelled abroad but her stitching crossed oceans. In early 1799 Charles bought a piece of Irish linen in Basingstoke, which, as Austen warned Cassandra, was waiting to be made into shirts when she came home. Only twenty-two months later, Charles instructed Austen 'to send his shirts by half-dozens as they are finished; one set will go next week'.²⁰ The sisters' labour accompanied their brother on his naval adventures. Lest batches of six shirts at a time seem excessive, we may note that Charles's naval colleague Captain Thomas Fremantle (1765–1819; Betsey Wynne's husband) owned fifty-six shirts by 1810 (made in sets of fourteen in 1803, 1806 and 'new' in 1808), including fourteen 'coarse' ones, with thirty-two neckcloths and forty-eight handkerchiefs to keep him presentable at sea, where laundry opportunities were scarce.²¹



Fig. 7.18

Charles Doyley, engraved by J. H. Clark and C. Dubourg, 'An European Gentleman with his Moonshee, or Native Professor of Languages', Thomas Williamson and Charles Doyley, *The Costume and Customs of Modern India* (1813), pl. 1, coloured engraving. Both men wear white cotton or linen garments; the difference lies in the style and fit. The European wears Hessian boots. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



What civilian Britons wore, once established in India, can be hard to determine from sources that prefer to emphasise exoticism in dress. In general, both men and women preferred English-style clothing. The danger was that they would modify their respectable gentry clothing in response to the 'torrid clime' and 'go native', like the European ladies living in Bengal, who 'affect, for coolness, to wear no covering on their neck', meaning that they left off the fichus expected in daywear.⁷⁶ Men wore the same garments as at home, but translated them into breezier fabrics: kerseymere or some other light cloth for coats (see fig. 5.6) and white breeches; cotton fabrics like dimity for waistcoats; nankeen for riding instead of leather, as Captain Williamson advises; and sundry linen and cotton articles made for them upon their arrival.⁷⁷ During the cold season, coats were worn when entering a house, for appearance, but speedily taken off, or replaced by a lighter-sleeved waistcoat. Britons who persisted in wearing woollen coats 'at length melted into acquiescence' with local habit.⁷⁸

The stylistically hybrid 'Company paintings' that Indians executed for Europeans sometimes show their patrons' outfits (fig. 7.17). As in all British areas, white gowns ruled supreme, but here, the textiles were indigenous and traditional, reflecting what the native population had worn for centuries. Plates in *The Costume and Customs of*

Modern India (1813) indicate that there was little to distinguish dress worn in Britain from European attire in India, except the lack of colour (fig. 7.18). Without an attribution it is rare to tell a portrait of an East India Company family member from a homeland British one (as figs 2.3 and 3.23 show). The colonial social networks ensured that the dress, taste and representations of India-dwelling Britons upheld the status quo as much as possible. The advice provided by travellers' lists really explains how to maintain oneself as a seemingly British body while accommodating new climes and cultures, without ever going native. What had become familiar in domestic dress was acceptable; the visible foreign was conscious affect or suspicious duplicity.

European materials attracted steep premiums, so Company men posted for years were enjoined 'that measures be left with the tailor, the shoe and boot maker, the hatter, &c. in order that regular supplies may be sent yearly, or half-yearly', once again exploiting the proxy medium 'of some friend in London; who could get all articles of such a description shipped in the privileges of some of the officers of the Indiamen' to Calcutta, Madras or Bombay.⁷⁹ This tactic avoided the risk of the Company servant being stuck with inexpert or delayed local substitutes, and circumvented a reliance on the exorbitant prices charged by the numerous expatriate tailors, boot- and shoemakers in India, themselves trying to make Eastern fortunes. Indian tailors were more successful with soft, non-woollen clothing. The 'durzy' (tailor) or household 'sempster', who understood 'cutting out, and making, Waistcoats, small-cloaths, pantaloons', and shirts, was indispensable.⁸⁰ The British community was short of women, so 'Durzies capable of making gowns, &c. for European ladies, being scarce, and . . . much in request', could earn double the normal wage with no more than 'moderate skill in that branch'.⁸¹

Captain Williamson raises an interesting point when he suggests that the classic high-waisted Regency gown styles were inspired by Indian fashions. He says that 'the paishwaz' (meaning the 'peshawar shalwar' – a traditional style of dress in the north of what is now Pakistan), 'small bodi[c]ed, made extremely full, and gathering up to the bosom' and reaching the ankles, was 'the robe from which our ladies have taken their present dress'.⁸² Of all the styles existing in the British-connected world in the late eighteenth century, regional Indian variations on garments with high waists or skirts starting under the bust and made of muslin are the closest match to European fashion, and may have influenced their adoption through imports and Britons returning home, like Austen's Hancock relatives. In 1792 Fanny Burney noticed the conspicuous 'Indian princess' style, 'chiefly of muslin', in the London dress of Mrs Hastings, wife of the former governor-general, just as waistlines were rising.⁸³ Classicism in dress may have been equally an East Indian Orientalism in dress (fig. 7.19).

From these colonial origins, muslin became the fabric uniting fashionable women's bodies worldwide. Muslin transformed life during Austen's generation, and it suffuses her personal and fictional worlds across all wardrobes. Authors often focus on the textile in Austen's work as it is inextricably entangled with perceptions of Regency England, the marker between old and new styles of dress.⁸⁴ For all the neo-classical

