

*Pride and Prejudice* and Pelisses: Costuming Jane Austen

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I may be the worst person in the world to watch a Jane Austen adaptation with, because I just can't quite turn off the fashion historian in me long enough to enjoy the movie. Either I'm annoyed by the historical inaccuracies, or I'm distracted by trying to figure out exactly which historical portrait or fashion plate inspired each costume and hairstyle. I haven't come here to nitpick the costumes in the 1940 *Pride and Prejudice* or any other Jane Austen movie; I recognize that effective film costuming depends on much more than historical accuracy, and, besides, I'd be up here all day. But I am going to point out a few of my pet peeves as a way of highlighting the richness and diversity of actual Regency-era fashion as Jane Austen knew it.

First, though, I'd like to address a couple of myths about Austen herself. Her novels are often dismissed by fashion historians as being very limited sources of information about dress and textiles, because we don't find long, detailed descriptions of what all the characters are wearing. Costume curator Penelope Byrde has explained that "most of her heroines do not mention or discuss their clothes in detail, not because they are uninterested in fashion but because it was not considered a suitable or interesting topic for general conversation." Indeed, when Austen's characters *do* talk about clothing, it is often evidence of their bad manners or moral or mental deficiency; in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen writes that "dress is at all times a frivolous distinction" while at the same time acknowledging the importance of "neatness and fashion"—an ambivalence echoed by many contemporary advice manuals on dress for men and women alike. In order to be considered respectable, it was important to be well dressed—but not

*too* fashionable, and certainly not wasteful or ostentatious. At the same time, needlework plays an important role in Austen's novels, invariably signifying female accomplishment and industry rather than frivolity.

As we know, Austen herself was extremely interested in fashion, as revealed by the few precious pieces of her wardrobe that have survived and by her letters to her sister, Cassandra. Fashion may have been an unsuitable topic for general conversation, but it was perfectly acceptable as the subject of correspondence between friends and family members. And I would argue that it plays a very important if subtle role in Austen's published writings. Think of the importance placed on having new shoe roses for the Netherfield ball, or Mrs. Hurst noticing the muddy hem of her Elizabeth Bennett's petticoat, or Henry Tilney's impressive knowledge of muslins in *Northanger Abbey*. These are not just surface details but plot points that would have been understood as deeply significant by Regency readers—and, indeed, they still resonate with readers today, in a way that long descriptions of petticoats and pelisses would not. They may not reveal the whats and whens of costume, but they capture the elusive hows and whys that you generally don't get from a surviving image or garment.

Equally problematic is our modern tendency to portray Jane Austen's world as being very circumscribed, primarily dealing with the sheltered lives of upper-class, rural Englishwomen around the turn of the nineteenth century. In fact, the novels often direct our attention to a wider world beyond their pages, from Captain Wentworth's and Mrs. Croft's adventures on the high seas in *Persuasion* to the sugar plantations of Antigua referenced in *Mansfield Park*, as well as the many oblique but unmistakable allusions to the Napoleonic Wars. As we know, Jane Austen had two brothers in the Royal Navy, and her readers would have been all too aware of England's military and mercantilist ambitions—including the slave trade, officially abolished in 1807 but

effectively not until a few years later. While it's easy for contemporary readers to miss these contextual details, I think the film adaptations and particularly their costumes, by bringing Austen's world to life in three dimensions, reveal it to be both socially and sartorially wide-ranging, encompassing not just fashionable female dress but military uniforms, religious vestments, sportswear, servant's livery, academic dress, wedding gowns, and, of course, swimwear. Regency fashions, too, drew their inspiration and materials from the cosmopolitan culture Austen inhabited, which is why we see so many non-Western styles in the films, particularly on the most fashion-conscious characters, including turbans, cashmere shawls, and Egyptian-inspired jewelry. Even the simple, high-waisted muslin, cambric, and cotton gowns that have become so closely associated with Regency England used textiles that were imported or copied from India and the West Indies. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland lays awake at night debating what she should wear to a ball, the spotted muslin or the tamboured muslin—tambour work is a chain-stitch embroidery technique used in India, Turkey, and Persia since the 1300s that came to England through France in the late eighteenth century. This British-made gown from about 1810 is in the National Museum of Scotland, and I hope you can see the delicate and exotic effect of the white-on-white floral embroidery, often called sprigged muslin or flowered muslin in Jane Austen's time, terms that tend to Anglicize what was originally a foreign textile and technique.

Tambour is the French word for drum, indicating the embroidery hoop used to hold the delicate fabric—it's the same word that gives us *tambourine*. It was worked with a very small, very sharp hook rather than a needle, and it became a popular feminine pastime in Britain as well as a fashion ornament. This 1773 painting titled *A Turkish Woman* almost certainly depicts a

French woman, though she is dressed in Turkish clothing including a turban and voluminous trousers of so-called sprigged muslin.

The visibility of the military in Regency society, especially evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, inspired fashions incorporating elements of military dress from around the world. Civilian men wore coats and greatcoats embellished with frogging and tasseled boots with distinctive heart-shaped tops, called “Hessians” after the German mercenaries who popularized them, though not battle-scarred but polished to a mirror-like luster; the archetypal dandy Beau Brummel supposedly polished his with champagne. Women wore Spencers and pelisses embellished with frogging and brimless hats resembling Hungarian Hussar’s tall shakos, adopted by the British infantry after the Napoleonic wars.

Costume also serves as shorthand for the passage of time in these films, indicating the changing seasons in a way that’s difficult to appreciate on the printed page. Designers use seasonal color palettes and garments like these red wool riding cloaks, a typical rural English garment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, several examples of which have survived in museum collections.

Costume also underscores changes in character, something done really wonderfully in the 1995 version of *Persuasion*, which is probably my personal favorite of all the Jane Austen adaptations. The costumes and hair and makeup do so much and they do it really well. This is one of the few Jane Austen adaptations where you actually get the sense that the actors haven’t showered or brushed their teeth recently; especially at the beginning, they all look a little greasy. Compare it to something like the Gwyneth Paltrow *Emma*, which is clean and shiny and beautifully art directed in a way that’s nice to look at but not remotely plausible for any historical time period. At the outset of *Persuasion*, Austen writes that “the years . . . had destroyed” Anne

Elliot's "youth and bloom" and we actually see Amanda Root gradually recover that bloom from the beginning to the end of the film as she falls in love with Ciaran Hinds. You don't need to know anything about fashion history to appreciate her physical transformation from an old maid to a romantic heroine. There are definitely films out there with bigger costume budgets and more attention to historical accuracy, but if everyone looks like they just stepped out of a Regency fashion plate from scene one, you lose that character development.

You also lose character differentiation. Whether the viewer realizes it or not, costumer designers use specific accessories, fabrics, and colors to signal differences in class, age, and experience. The Bennett sisters and other Austen heroines are usually portrayed in white, pastels, and earth tones, in matte cotton, often with floral patterns, symbolizing their innocence and their connection to nature. Their jewelry consists of simple pearls, gold chains, and crosses, and their hair is decorated with flowers and ribbons. Older, worldlier characters wear richer colors and fabrics and more exotic accessories. Women like Caroline Bingley, Lady Russell, Mary Crawford, and Elizabeth Elliot are sophisticated, wealthy, and well-traveled; the books explain this in great detail, but the films don't have time to do that, so it's communicated by their costumes instead.

Though many of these costume-based character clues are drawn from history, there are a few common fashion quirks that are unique to the film world of Jane Austen and would come as a surprise to Regency audiences. These are red flags to look out for, evidence that the Jane Austen adaptation you're watching is perhaps not as attentive to historical nuances as it could be, or simply trying to do too much with too small a budget. Half-up hair is something we see a lot in period dramas, regardless of *which* period, but it's particularly egregious in the Regency era, because there's simply no evidence for it—it just wasn't done. Hair was either down or up, under

a cap if you were married, and “putting your hair up” was, in fact, a common euphemism for growing up and coming out in society, so none of Austen’s heroines would appear in public with even part of their hair down. In many ways hair is even more important than clothing to a historian because hairstyles have always changed faster than clothing styles, as they required much less time and money. If I’m trying to date a portrait, I look at the head first, because a garment might be worn for a few years while hairstyles and *hat* styles could change from season to season or even month to month.

The elaborate hats and hairstyles of the Regency—obsessively chronicled by the many, many fashion magazines published in the eras—are especially easy to date. But they also look very alien and off-putting on film, and it’s often the central characters who are allowed to look the most modern and thus the most relatable, especially if they’re well-known movie stars that the audience expects to look a certain way. In many cases, it’s the secondary or supposedly “plain” characters, like Mary or Charlotte in *Pride and Prejudice*, who have the most historically accurate hairstyles—proof, by the way, that the costume designer has actually done his or her research but has chosen to set it aside for aesthetic reasons.

For men, we don’t see too much bad hair in Jane Austen movies, but facial hair is a big no-no. There’s a great little book on facial hair that the National Portrait Gallery published a couple of years ago, and it just skips right over the eighteenth century and the Regency. In this case, I think it was meant to make Mr. Bennett look older and slightly behind the times—both he and Mrs. Bennett wore very old-fashioned clothes as well—but since facial hair was basically nonexistent in England from about 1680 to 1825 he would have been more than a century behind the times.

Just as there were many Regency hairstyles, there were many regency cravats. The cravat or neckcloth was ostensibly functional, keeping the open front of a man's shirt closed, but it had several symbolic attributes, displaying a man's good taste, wealth, and general cleanliness through its fine white material and fashionable arrangement. Because it was difficult to clean your silk and wool outer garments, everyone wore a layer of linen undergarments between their skin and their clothes, and it was the state of your linen, visible at your collar and cuffs and hem, that made you clean or dirty. The cravat represented a rare opportunity for a man to express his individuality, and, like a woman's hairstyle, it could be changed frequently; indeed, a man of fashion might go through several a cravats day. The cravat of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was a large square of lawn or muslin folded into a triangle and then a long rectangle. They were often made at home; Jane Austen made her brothers' cravats, as does Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, though not very enthusiastically. By 1828, a pamphlet published in London included instructions for tying one's cravat 32 different ways, each with a unique name. Yet on a film set, in the interest of speed and continuity, costumers often pick one easy-to-replicate style and stick with it, so everyone from the hero to the coachman has his cravat tied in the exact same way, probably by the same lowly production assistant. Furthermore, they are rarely the fine, starched muslin so prized in the Regency period but sad, gray, droopy things.

A military man would wear a black stock instead of a cravat, a rectangular piece of stiffened silk or velvet that buckled around the neck, performing the same function of keeping the shirt front closed but with much less fuss and individuality than a cravat. Though not part of the regulation uniform, it was also worn by Navy men; this one belonged to Admiral Nelson.

The Regency period was the golden age of English tailoring. The French Revolution had banished bright colors, silk, embroidery, lace, and other embellishments from everyday

menswear. England's outdoorsy lifestyle and thriving wool industry combined to create a fashion culture of refined elegance. Savile Row in London became the physical and spiritual center of the bespoke tailoring trade, and the Prince Regent himself, the future George IV, set a high standard for male elegance, in sharp contrast to previous English royals who had been content to leave fashion leadership to the aristocracy and the French. There really hadn't been a male royal fashion icon since Louis XIV a century earlier, and there was no comparable female equivalent in the Regency.

With the French fashion industry and fashion magazines decimated by the Revolution, and the luxury and formality of the old regime now considered politically incorrect, England filled the fashion void with its more modest and sedate but equally elegant native style. Previously, luxurious textiles and exuberant trimmings had often disguised imprecise tailoring; now, new, scientific methods of measurement and sizing helped tailors achieve a perfect fit, the measure of a man's fashionability. The knee-length breeches of the eighteenth century were replaced by long, tight pantaloons of flesh-colored leather or cotton nankeen, cut on the bias for a clinging fit, which imitated the nudity of Greek statues and echoed the slim, neoclassical line of women's gowns. A moralist complained in 1808 that men were now stretching "their Pantaloons almost to bursting." Trousers—previously worn by the working classes alone but newly fashionable after the French Revolution--were slightly looser but often equipped with stirrups under the feet to ensure a smooth line. The tight, cutaway coat and waist-length waistcoat bared the entire leg, emphasizing the elongated silhouette. Unlike silk, wool could be heated, stretched, and molded to achieve the ideal masculine silhouette for a coat; tailors developed distinctive M and V shaped notches in coat collars that allowed them to lay flat, and elaborate methods of quilting, stiffening, and padding the interiors to correct figure flaws.

Unfortunately, you wouldn't know it from some of the baggy, saggy coats worn in Jane Austen films. Virtually all elite fashion was custom-made at the time; sadly, that's not always the case with film costumes, and if there's no budget for building new costumes then the designer has to resort to pulling stock costumes from a warehouse, resulting in a less-than-perfect fit that would have never passed muster on Savile Row. (If you look closely, you can even see some of the same coats and gowns used over and over in multiple BBC costume dramas, and not just on the extras.) English wool was the envy of the world in the nineteenth century, but period fabrics are notoriously difficult and expensive to recreate with any accuracy, and modern materials have doomed many a meticulously researched period costume.

Before the Industrial Revolution, virtually all textiles were handwoven from natural fibers; primarily silk, wool, and linen. Proportionally, clothing was much more expensive than it is today in our age of fast fashion, and you had to be extremely wealthy to follow fashion at all, with its rapid and expensive changes. There was no such thing as fake fur, pleather, or polyester; you wore the real thing, and if you weren't part of the one percent who could afford to buy it new, you bought it second or third or fourth hand; there was a thriving and highly organized resale market that would put eBay to shame. Imagine if there was no Target or H&M, and the only store we had today was Neiman Marcus; we would all have much smaller wardrobes, a lot more thrift shop finds, and vastly different attitudes towards fashion and shopping. This was beginning to change in the Regency period with the widespread availability of cotton, which was not only less expensive than silk and wool but miraculously washable, but it was still something of a novelty and an imported luxury. It would be prohibitively expensive to replicate period fabrics for a film shoot, but some do a better job than others of choosing modern materials with the correct weight and texture, so the clothes fit and drape accurately. Obviously contemporary

fabrics like these polyester gowns from the depths of the BBC archives, in colors and fibers not found in nature, not only look wrong, visually, but move in the wrong way, and cause the actors to move in the wrong way.

Costume designers inevitably incorporate other modern touches into historic costuming, whether deliberately or subconsciously. Caroline Bingley's sleeveless ballgowns in the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice* are a particularly egregious example; she might look very chic and sexy by twenty-first century standards, but by Jane Austen's standards, she's in her underwear. Mary Crawford's cutout devoré velvet sleeves in 1999's *Mansfield Park* are equally reflective of the mainstream fashions of their time.

Finally, I cringe when I see fashions from several different decades mingling in one ballroom or drawing room; it's especially noticeable if you pay attention to the extras, who are less likely to have their costumes custom-made and just go with whatever's in the warehouse that sort of fits. In *Becoming Jane*, Anne Hathaway's costumes were consistently at least five years ahead of everyone else's, though Jane Austen was hardly a fashion maverick. A five-year difference might be something only a fashion historian would notice, but in the scene on the right we're looking at a ten- or twenty-year difference and you don't need a degree in art history to see it; the waistline, corsetry, skirt volume, hair, and construction are completely different. Women of the post-Revolutionary period wore a dramatically different silhouette from the pre-Revolutionary period, with a higher waist and slimmer skirt, and if you had any claim to respectability you really couldn't get away with wearing pre-Revolutionary dress, as we see in these scenes. In the 2005 *Pride and Prejudice*, on the left, Mr. and Mrs. Bennett seem to inhabit an entirely different century than their daughters. While it's true that older people tend to dress more conservatively, in practice this means conservative versions of current fashions, or clothes

that are a few years behind the times rather than a few decades behind the times; the BBC *Pride and Prejudice* did this really well with Mrs. Bennett, who was dressed in a way that was very age-appropriate without being conspicuously out of date.

The fact that Jane Austen's novels are often set in a different year from the year they were written or published seems to give costume designers leeway to pick and choose costume elements anywhere from 1790 to 1820. *Pride and Prejudice*, for example, was written in 1796 and 1797 but not published until 1813, a huge gap in fashion terms. This Keira Knightley version was ostensibly set in 1797 but the costumes covered a range of about 30 years. *Love and Friendship*, based on *Lady Susan*, was set in the 1780s. But most Austen adaptations are set squarely in the Regency period—1811 to 1820—regardless of when they were written or published, though they often include the dress of earlier time periods. A lot of the things we think of as generic Regency fashion today were actually very specific to certain years; like the term “18<sup>th</sup> century,” it's convenient but not a monolithic entity with no variation. Short, puffed sleeves, for example, were only worn between 1815 and 1820, and you don't see much piping on gowns before 1815 either.

Of course, absolutely none of what I've said about Regency dress applies to the 1940 MGM film of *Pride and Prejudice*, because the costume designer, Adrian, lobbied to set the story in the 1830s, when the high waists, straight skirts, and delicate embroidered muslins of the Regency gave way to an exaggerated hourglass silhouette loaded with trimmings, accessories, and patterns. And I know the question on all our minds today is: why?

According to Hollywood lore, Adrian had recently finished designing a Napoleonic-era film—1937's *Conquest*, starring Greta Garbo. You'll notice that her supposedly Napoleonic gown shares a very similar aesthetic with the contemporary Adrian-designed outfit she wears on

the left. Adrian wanted to move on to a different silhouette, and he convinced director Robert Leonard that the more exuberant and decorative styles of the 1830s would serve Austen's romantic comedy better than austere neoclassicism.

As film scholar Sue Parrill has pointed out, the comedy of manners tips into screwball romantic comedy in this version, and the Romantic-era costumes were certainly better suited to the mood and to Adrian's own style, which was heavy on pattern and surface ornamentation regardless of the time period. Leonard, in turn, used Adrian's giant bonnets and pneumatic sleeves and skirts to great comic effect; for example, in one scene, Mrs. Bennet knocks over several small tables with her skirt, something she could never have accomplished in a columnar Regency gown.

As the head of the MGM wardrobe department, Adrian had a hand in designing ten or twelve films a year, but he was best known for his period pieces, including *Marie-Antoinette*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Camille*, and *The Gorgeous Hussy*, with Joan Crawford, all of which began with Adrian conducting meticulous historical research before taking off on his own flights of fancy. But the film of his that probably had the most influence on *Pride and Prejudice* may surprise you: 1939's *The Wizard of Oz*. So what's the costume connection between *The Wizard of Oz* and *Pride and Prejudice*? The Munchkins. The exaggerated silhouettes, imaginative accessories, and colorful patterns of 1830s fashion inspired Adrian's Munchkin costumes. Voluminous sleeves, collars, and capes and exaggerated hats and jewelry accentuated the diminutive proportions of the actors.

Though the Munchkins wear blue in the L. Frank Baum book, Adrian's 1830s-inspired polychrome palette made the most of the film's dramatic shift from black and white to Technicolor when Dorothy reaches Oz. Adrian fully believed that *The Wizard of Oz* and

especially the fanciful Munchkin costumes would set fashion trends, in accessories if not clothing. But he was disappointed. Instead, it was another MGM blockbuster of 1939 that became a fashion sensation: *Gone With the Wind*. It must have stung Adrian to see Walter Plunkett's period costumes for Scarlett O'Hara turned into sewing patterns and knocked off by department stores, and he undoubtedly had that film's success in mind when he proposed an 1830s setting for *Pride and Prejudice*. Indeed, some of the film's costumes seem to quote *Gone With the Wind*, though it is set 30 years earlier. Ann Rutherford as Lydia wore a bonnet very similar to one worn by Vivien Leigh as Scarlett. Clark Gable and Laurence Olivier wore matching cravats. And Edward Ashley as Wickham wore a Rhett Butler mustache and a uniform more appropriate to a Confederate than a Redcoat.

Repurposing his research for the Munchkins, Adrian leaned into the exuberance of Romantic era fashion. While the costumes are not historically accurate for Jane Austen, they are quite good as 1830s costumes go, apart from their textiles, and maybe a little too much shoulder on display. Because the film was made in black and white, Adrian emphasized contrasts. Here are his beloved horizontal stripes again—a pattern not found in 1830s England but extremely popular in 1930s America. This polka dotted ensemble managed to look like a 1930s chiffon evening gown while also evoking this spotted muslin Regency-era dress in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Caroline Bingley's dress for the Assembly Ball was black, a color that would have been reserved for deepest mourning for a young woman of the 1830s; it was chosen to contrast with Garson's pale blue one. The satin gown on the left was royal blue but closely resembles the pink one on the right in LACMA's collection.

Of course, the hair was all over the place. Predictably, star Greer Garson looked the most like her 1940 self in pencil-thin plucked eyebrows and a half-up hairstyle nothing like that of her

onscreen sisters, who wore curled topknots that echoed the elaborate updos of the 1830s. As far as we know, the film's costumes failed to inspire any high-fashion copycats. *Pride and Prejudice* would be one of Adrian's last films; tired of waiting for his costume designs to set Seventh Avenue on fire, he left MGM in 1941 and, in 1942, he launched his own fashion line, worn by many of the actresses he had dressed at MGM, and never looked back.

Each generation gets the Jane Austen adaptation it deserves. It's the universality of her stories rather than her obsessive attention to period details that gives them their enduring appeal, which may explain why their costuming has always been susceptible to larger trends in pop culture. Is mashing up *Pride and Prejudice* with *Gone With the Wind* or even *The Wizard of Oz* really any different from mashing up *Emma* and *Beverly Hills 90210* or *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Walking Dead*? Is it still Jane Austen if we take away the tight pantaloons and high-waisted muslin gowns?