

## Keeping Up Appearances

### The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England

By John Styles.

Yale University Press, 2007. xi + 432 pages. B&W/color illustrations. Hardcover. \$50.00.

Reviewed by Kelly M. McDonald.

In two letters, written to Cassandra from London in September 1813, Jane Austen makes no fewer than twelve mentions of clothing, cloth-purchases, fashion trends, stockings, caps, and lace. When Brabourne's edition of the letters was published, negative comments about their level of daily-minutiae caused harsh critics to belittle their substance; now, consumer historians see value in just such observations, indications of shopping habits, and citations of fabric costs. Although he does not draw upon Austen's letters, in *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth Century England*, John Styles utilizes minutiae unearthed from such public sources as criminal cases, foundling records, newspaper advertisements, and satirical cartoons to flesh out a comprehensive study of English clothing throughout the long eighteenth century. Styles' approach is reminiscent of *The Gentleman's Daughter*, by Amanda Vickery (to whom he is married), in that his sources are heavily rooted in the northern counties and concentrate on the lower classes. His source materials open several lines of thought: the asset value and number of clothing items in average households; the care and expense of clothing; the impressions made by the dress of average Britons upon foreign visitors; as well as the familiar "maid dressed better than the duchess" debate that kept English pamphleteers busy.

Although publication dates of the six novels fix Austen squarely in the Regency era, she spent much of her life clothed in the types of cottons, linens, and woolens illustrated, described, and dissected here. Of especial interest are the astonishing album kept by Barbara Johnson, another clergyman's daughter, and the up-close

photographs of clothing scraps by which authorities once cataloged foundlings. *The Dress of the People* therefore puts Austen into context (visually, descriptively) within England-at-large; for instance, when one juxtaposes working-class Britons and their worsted stockings with Jane's niece Fanny Knight who in 1813 purchased stockings of "Silk at 12S.—Cotton at 4.3.—She thinks them great bargains."

In opening the chapter entitled "Clothing the Metropolis," Styles points out that London "offered an extraordinary array of ways to buy, from street sellers hawking old clothes and artisan-retailers making bespoke garments in small workshops, to huge retail drapery warehouses and whole streets of shops selling ready-made and second-hand clothes, such as Rosemary Lane, Houndsditch and Monmouth street." In the two letters mentioned above, Jane refers to businesses such as Newton's in Leicester Square, Remington, Layton and Shears; a Mrs. Hare from whom she ordered a cap ("I have allowed her to go as far as £1-16"); and commissions for those at Chawton Cottage. "Regular cleaning, mending and replacement were all essential if ordinary men and women were to keep up appearances"; Styles consequently dedicates an entire chapter to the thorny questions of how one laundered, mended, or adapted old clothing to new fashion trends. Austen again comes to mind in the chapter "Clothing Provincial England," not because she lived in the provinces, but because of Styles' comments regarding the skills necessary to make gowns versus those required to make the more basic garments of shifts and shirts, such as those Jane and Cassandra sewed for their brothers. The chapter "Involuntary Consumption? Prizes, Gifts and Charity," with its discussion of Dorcas Shops (short-term charity consignments that enabled the poor to shop for clothes), actually quotes from Austen-neighbor Caroline Wiggett's reminiscences of growing up at The Vyne, the Hampshire estate of the Chute family. Helpful, given all the Austen-family clergymen, is a section within the chapter "The View

from Above," with its discussion of charity, Divine will, and the role of the clergy in the lives of the parish poor. While contemplating the position and make-up of everyday clothing, Styles also touches on such topics as the cults of politeness and sensibility—"which emphasised authenticity rather than display, sincerity of emotion rather than performance, rustic simplicity rather than metropolitan polish."

Austen, of course, sits between Styles' *plebian* consumers (a word he rather overuses) and the elite with whom most readers and museum-visitors will be familiar. This distinction points up the significance of this text for Austen studies. To quote Styles quoting Samuel Johnson: "The true state of every nation is the state of common life. . . . The great mass of nations is neither rich nor gay: they whose aggregate constitutes the people, are found in the streets, and the villages, in the shops and farms; and from them collectively considered, must the measure of general prosperity be taken." *The Dress of the People* does not collate information from Austen sources (for that, see Penelope Byrde's excellent *Jane Austen Fashion*, in its new edition by Moon Rising Press), but it will make readers consider how and where she fit into the hierarchical world described. Understanding what comes into popularity in terms of fashion and fabric during the Regency requires understanding what came before. Austenites will find food for thought in Styles' fresh approach to the perennially-fascinating subject of English fashion.

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