Fashion in the Regency Era

Katherine Bruley

Regency England has long been a source of fascination for modern audiences, from the marriage tales of Jane Austen to the mystical introspection of the Romantics. The era, which spanned from 1795 to 1837, marked a large transition in British society, ushering in brand new technologies and attitudes as postwar optimism and the Industrial Revolution brightened the minds of British citizens. This period is often typified as one of indulgence and luxury, an example set by the Regent himself; according to Professor Cheryl Wilson at Stevenson University, this included "an appetite for scandal, for sex, for delicacies, for literature, for clothing and material goods, for knowledge, and for all things new and fashionable" (2007). Fashionability indeed was an increasingly valuable trait in English society, and included not only popular clothing (as fashion is thought of today) but also certain manners, ways of speech, and physical activities. Clothing, though, is the element of Regency fashion that appears to get the most attention, as Regency dress has become an iconic image associated with the 19th century, both for men and for women. This is not without good reason: Regency dress communicates an incredible amount of information about the state of English society in the early 19th century, from the transformation of values it was experiencing to the sociocultural institutions that dictated everyday life. In the Regency period, fashion was used as a form of social currency by which members of society demonstrated adherence to popular values and attitudes; fashionability thus became a tool of the aristocracy to maintain their status and increase power over the lower classes.

Women's fashion in the regency era reflected the general decrease in conservatism that accompanied industrializing England, as silhouettes became softer and the female form more visible. Regency gowns featured long, flowing skirts with little structure; this shape, featuring decidedly less structure than the garments of the preceding Baroque and Georgian eras, emphasized the natural graces of women rather than overt displays of wealth and beauty (Larson 2020). The fashions of these eras, characterized by embellishment and ostentatious design, became largely unpopular by the arrival of the Regency as the notion of "inconspicuous consumption" began to drive fashionability (Frantz 2003). Instead of displaying wealth on one's sleeve, where it may be subject to mimicry, the fashionable classes attempted to display luxury more subtly, such as through fabrics and difficult construction techniques. Also arriving in the Regency Era was the iconic Empire waistline, a silhouette which has become almost synonymous with the period itself. An Empire line is created by a tight-fitting bodice ending just below the bust, meant to give the wearer a high-waisted appearance. Accompanied by increasingly low necklines and shorter sleeves (Smith and Stannard 2016), this shape demonstrates the Regency transition away from stringent attitudes of modesty and its encouragement of indulgence.

It is important, though, to recognize that such an understanding of the era's trends was not common among the women living at the time. As dressmaking was the most common means of acquiring clothes, and each dress was commissioned individually, knowledge of fashionable elements must have come either from the dressmaker or the commissioner (Hafner-Lahey 2010). A woman of high social standing would likely have had access to a popular dressmaker, or at least to a social circle through which she could learn of up-and-coming trends; woman of low social standing, though, would have had access to neither of these, therefore evading popular fashion altogether. The mechanization of the printing press during the Industrial Revolution contributed largely to the rise of magazines, which provided wealthy women yet another opportunity to be educated on and participatory in the latest trends. In addition, women of lower social classes likely had less to spend on clothing, and therefore had to make dresses both suitable for more than one occasion and long-lasting—rendering them almost incapable of participating in

trends in the first place. As such participation became more stratified along class lines, fashionability became a common metric used to distinguish "desirable" and "undesirable" members of society (Wilson 2007). Members of "desirable" social groups, such as aristocrats and other upper-class citizens, communicated their wealth and status through everyday garments and their construction: regular wear of a quality fabric, for example, could communicate not only enough wealth to purchase a luxury good, but enough wealth to also manage the upkeep of such a garment (Hafner-Lahey). Attempts by the lower classes to masquerade as desirable were generally averted as the upper class rapidly changed what was fashionable, enabling it to retain its domination over status and social standing.

In contrast to women's fashion, men's fashion in the Regency era reflected not an acceptance, but rather a rejection of indulgence as menswear became largely more conservative. Men transitioned from breeches to pantaloons, a garment which covered more of the leg than its predecessor; colors became more muted, often consisting only in whites, grays, blacks, and blues; author Sharon Latham describes menswear in this period as "refined, elegant, [and] sober," clearly contradicting the indulgent and indecent image often associated with the Regency. In part, this reclaiming of male conservatism may be attributed to the Great Masculine Renunciation, which refers to the "total transformation in men's fashions in the Regency era [as] an outward manifestation of a similar renunciation in men's ability to express their emotions" (2003). Similarly to the female fashions of the time, men were concerned with inconspicuous consumption and shifted away from ostentation as a means to demonstrate status. A movement known as "dandyism" which emerged in London and Paris in the 1790s was the direct result of the growing disregard for the extravagance, bringing with it the iconic image of the Regency man: tall, starched collars, dark overcoats, and precise tailoring (Boyle 2021). Regency men, however, did not reinvent their outward demonstrations of wealth as the women had with fabrics and sewing techniques; the Romantic period, occurring alongside the Regency and led by such authors as Keats, Shelley, and Lord Byron, had introduced the masculine ideal of reserve as the result of thoughtfulness and introspection, which became the primary influence on men's fashion. Neutral, unobtrusive garments suggested reserved men, who were perceived by others as more sincere than their louder counterparts.

This moral association with fashion becomes increasingly important when the Regency era is analyzed through its literature, particularly in the works of Jane Austen. Though her works are often considered commentaries on the needlessness of social conventions, Austen consistently characterizes her male characters, especially those of romantic interest to her protagonists, through their adherence (or lack thereof) to Regency fashionability. The greatest example of these characterizations comes from her novel *Pride and Prejudice*, where she contrasts the ideal Regency man, Mr. Darcy, with his unfashionable counterpart, Mr. Wickham: the former is quiet and brooding, the picture of reserve, and the latter is gregarious and charming, the picture of ostentation. Adaptations generally depict Darcy in muted shades—a simple white shirt, waistcoat, and a black overcoat—while Wickham wears his soldier's uniform—bright red, embellished with gold, and decorated in various medals. At the novel's start, the reader perceives Darcy's reserve as deceit and Wickham's openness as sincerity; however, the reader learns along with Elizabeth that the reverse is true—though Wickham wears his identity for all to see, it is Darcy who is truthful to himself. *Pride*

and Prejudice is not Austen's only use of fashionability as a moral indicator, as her novel *Emma* presents a similar comparison through the characters of Mr. George Knightley and Frank Churchill. Mr. Knightley is far more vocal than Darcy, especially in his disagreements with Emma, but is presented as humble and selfless. His lack of outward extravagance makes him one of the most trustworthy characters in the novel, Emma consistently looking to him to divine the truth. By contrast, Frank Churchill (like Wickham) is presented as overwhelmingly charming and overtly extravagant, indicative of the scheme that he is involved in throughout the novel's duration.

The inverse evolution of gendered fashion in the Regency era provides an interesting glimpse into the roles and expectations which existed for women and men in 19th-century England: the former were held to a standard of emotional expression, while the latter were held to a standard of emotional repression. Women, clothed in soft, flowing fabrics and muted colors were confined to an ideal of gracefulness, elegance, and poise; the "accomplished woman" heralded in many of Jane Austen's works embodied all of these elements. Although these traits appear to have been preserved from previous generations English society, Regency fashion reveals progress: garments from this period were greatly more conducive to activity than those from preceding eras, which were largely restrictive and, in some cases, incapacitating. The looser, lighter gowns of the Regency period provided women with a physical freedom that was then translated into a societal freedom as women gained more everyday independence. This directly contrasts the development of men's fashion at the time, which became more restrictive rather than less—the element most indicative of this is the high collar, which physically restrained motion of the head and neck and forced a taller, more commanding posture. Such restrictive garments reflected the emphasis placed on male stoicism following the Great Masculine Renunciation and entrenched Regency men in their newfound roles as passive observers.

As demonstrated, there is an interminable connection between the fashions of a period and the attitudes, constructs, and experiences that it promoted. According to Sarah Frantz, President of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, "everything in society is interconnected; interdependent, even... fashion history... and literary movements are all simultaneous products of the same society, cause and effect of one another" (2003). It is no wonder, then, that the portrayal of Regency fashion in modern adaptations tends to be a contentious issue, both for adapters and consumers of the adapted material. Research done by professors Dina Smith and Casey R. Stannard revealed the three "elements of authenticity" used by Regency enthusiasts to determine a garment's historical accuracy: accuracy of construction, method of construction, and material accuracy (2016). A truly authentic reproduction of a Regency garment is quite rare, given that many materials and methods of construction that may have been common at the time may no longer be in use or even produced in the 21st century. However, such a stringent evaluation of authenticity is hardly ever the metric favored by adapters of Regency material—as Smith and Stannard point out, garments are produced not only based on the desire of authenticity but also according to personal, functional, expressive, and aesthetic needs (2016). Depending on the intention of the adaptation, authenticity may or may not be a primary consideration, as some stories require greater truthfulness and accuracy in order to have their desired impact.

Consider, for example, the opposing critical receptions of two Regency period dramas released in 2020: *Emma*, adapted from Jane Austen's novel, and *Bridgerton*, adapted from the contemporary book series of the same name. *Emma* has been called a "love letter to the Austen Era" (Willow and Thatch 2020), praised for its intricate, sometimes exact replication of Regency garments. Bridgerton, on the other hand, was largely criticized for the historical inaccuracy of its costumes and the variety of anachronisms present in the show's designs. It is important, however, to weigh these opinions against the adaptations' respective intentions and desired impacts: though *Bridgerton* was viewed as inaccurate, this was the result of conscious choice rather than factual error by costume designer Ellen Mirojnick, who intended to "overlay the look of the Regency era with a bit of modern sensibility...a layer that would actually be very imaginative" (qtd. in Willow and Thatch 2021). *Bridgerton*'s costumes demonstrated a combination of 19th and 21st-century elements not because the designers were unable to maintain authenticity, but because authenticity and accuracy to the period were not demanded to achieve the adaptation's purpose, which was the placement of 21st-century sensibilities into a Regency setting. *Emma*, on the other hand, relied greatly on authenticity in order to maintain adaptational merit as it fiercely pushed the boundaries of Jane Austen's original work. Unlike previous adaptations of the novel, the 2020 version of *Emma* leaned fully into the whimsical, even ridiculous subtext within the story. The film's physical absurdities—from the pastel color palette to gravity-defying hairstyles, juxtapose its physical accuracies—fabrics, silhouettes, and patterns all native to the Regency period. This authenticity within the garments (as well as the set dressing and other setting elements) keeps the film grounded even as it stretches the viewer's capacity for belief, allowing it to push further against the boundaries set by its predecessors through its exploration of the satirical elements of Austen's story.

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