Constructing the Fabric of Jane Austen’s Work Today

An Honors Thesis Creative Project (HONRS 499)

By

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Abstract

In *Emma*, Jane Austen is especially careful in her description of the social position of each character within the novel. In spite of her great attention to detail, she never specifically describes the physical features or dress of any one certain character. Since *Emma* provides such an excellent stratification of the class system in Britain during Austen’s time, based on research into the fashion of the time and using Austen’s own detailed descriptions of class, I have constructed three complete costumes: one each for Emma Woodhouse, Jane Fairfax, and Harriet Smith. The costumes are each historically accurate based on fabric, color, and design appropriate to the social class of each of these characters, creating a visual representation of the classism that is so apparent in *Emma*, since each woman is representative of a different class in Highbury.

My project combines an important aspect of Austen’s writing, the attention paid to social standing, with an authentic view of Regency dress, appropriate to the varying classes I am representing, so an audience can get a real feel as to how some of their favorite characters might have dressed and see the differences visually that Austen presents with words.
Timeline

February 28, 2008: Presentation of Dresses to Dr. Joanne Edmonds’ Jane Austen Colloquium

March 28 – April 12, 2008: Display of Dresses and Rationale in Honors College Display Cases

April 2, 2008: Public Presentation of Dresses in Honors College

October 2008: Poster Presentation of Dresses at the Jane Austen Society of North America’s Annual General Meeting in Chicago, IL

The following is a visual and written representation of my creative project, which has been displayed and presented around Ball State and has been invited to the JASNA general meeting in October. I have done my best to accurately represent true-to-life the dresses and the research and work put into them in the following pages.
Artist’s Statement

My honors thesis project began on a much smaller scale with a creative project in the Jane Austen colloquium in Spring 2007. I wanted to know more about what my favorite Austen characters would have worn, in order to create my own designs to suit them. Combining my love of fashion and Jane Austen, I decided I was going to use my talents as a seamstress to make a dress for one of her creations. Undecided about which character for a while, I settled on Emma, my favorite of Austen’s protagonists, and proceeded with my process. While completing this project, I uncovered a topic that really snagged me. Not only are clothes superficially important, but they also provide an important mark of social significance. In her introduction to *The Gallery of Fashion*, Aileen Ribeiro points out, regarding painting clothing in portraits: “But if clothing is selected and depicted with intelligence and perception, it can reveal psychological insights as well as presenting the obvious in terms of sex, age, and status” (Ribeiro 10). In a book as laden as *Emma* with commentary on social class, fashion would have been important to the residents of Highbury in establishing immediate relationships to one another and even betraying true class standing to the likes of Miss Emma Woodhouse. The aspects of clothing that provide insight into class are very specific and detailed, and within the context of *Emma* would be very interesting to examine. The difference between Emma’s dress and a dress belonging to Miss Bates would be vast, and in *Emma*’s time, people would have been able to pick up on those cues immediately.

For my thesis, I wanted to pursue this further. Jane Austen says a great deal specifically about social class in *Emma*, especially noting the classes of each of the character without mincing words. However, she never wastes many words on describing
their apparel in any given situation. Based on the distinctions she makes between three characters of different social standing, Emma Woodhouse, Jane Fairfax, and Harriet Smith, I felt that I could draw from research into the culture and fashion of the period to aptly depict through clothing the hierarchy that Jane Austen wittily paints with her words. I chose to create evening ensembles because it was the social setting in which these subtle, or not so subtle, differences would be most apparently displayed.

My first step was delving into the fashion of the time, even further than I had for the original project. *Emma* was written in 1816, in a time before outlandish hoops under skirts and unbearable corsets to cinch the waistline. Dresses were simpler, and undergarments were comfortable. Fashion at this time “was subject to rapid and undisciplined changes,” accounting for the different waistlines, bustlines, and popular colors from year to year in the Regency Period (Hammel). The basic shape of all dresses was an empire waistline with a short, fitted bodice and an a-line skirt, reaching the floor, striving to achieve a “clean, uncluttered line” (Nigro 52). Day dresses had sleeves of varying lengths and modest necklines. Evening and wedding gowns showed off a woman’s décolletage, and sleeves were puffy, and either capped or slightly longer. Affluent women like Emma, had dresses made out of fine muslins and silks, and starting around 1810, patterned brocades moved in popularity from France to England. Young and unmarried women wore only white, cream, “rose”, soft shades of yellow, like “jonquil” and “straw”, and “lavender” (Forsling). Occasionally, a powder blue might be worn, but it was the least popular color, and depending on the year, “Pomona” green was in or out of style (Forsling). Older women could wear darker and more vibrant colors, and these colors sometimes appeared among the younger set in city fashion, but only on
rare occasions, generally influenced by French fashion at the time. The more money a
family had, the paler the colors their daughters wore once out in society, since it was
closer to keep light colors looking clean. The white dress was the ultimate in finery.
Regency Fashion expert Cathy Decker writes on the subject: “It was important for a
woman of style to be a woman in white” (Decker). Only families with extra money for
luxuries could afford to do laundry often enough to keep the very fragile white muslins
looking pristine during the peak of social seasons.

A typical evening ensemble for an affluent young woman would consist of an
underdress, following the basic Empire shape. Then, she would have several different
overlays or light coats that she could put over the dress to give it a different look from
event to event. Overlays were typically sleeveless, patterned muslins that fastened in
front under the bust line. They might or might not be open from there down. Coats were
made much like the dresses, from light fabrics for social wear, and usually had short
trains. Women of lower classes could not afford the extra fabric or devote the extra time
to fashioning so intricate an outfit, so they would generally settle for a single dress in a
color that was popular and fashioned from slightly sturdier material to withstand
washing. Not only did color and fabric signify social class, but ornamentation on a lady’s
dress further indicated her situation. Commentary of a fashion plate from 1816 notes:
“Hem frills are now very much in evidence” (Cassin-Scott 103). Fancy ribbon work,
embroidery, and beadwork frequently adorned only dresses of the upper class, but the
“increasingly lavish” decoration was a must for the fashion-forward (Ashelford 184).
Lace was also uncommon on dresses in the lower classes because it was “extremely
expensive,” but if come upon somehow “would probably do duty on several dresses”
Those who could not afford small amounts of ribbon to adorn dresses might use remnants of past dresses to fashion the popular flowers or Grecian patterns to make their dresses fancier and more like those of their more wealthy counterparts.

Since light fabrics, especially white muslins, were extremely popular, keeping warm was quite a problem for the Regency Woman: “1803 was a devastating year for the fashionable lady; a goodly number of them perished from the ‘muslin disease,’ the popular name given a French influenza epidemic credited with carrying off scores of scantily dressed ladies who’d braved the frigid weather in little more than wispy sheaths” (Hammel). To combat this ailment, half-coats known as spencers that covered the arms down to a dress’s waistline and pelisses, much like the outer-dress, but of a heavier material and hemmed at the knees, grew in popularity. Cloaks and capes were less popular with younger women, but still appeared at social events to make sure that young ladies were not freezing to death in the name of high fashion. A young lady’s undergarments, made of plain white or flesh colored muslin, consisted of a slip, sometimes worn over pantaloons, with short stays over it to create the desired look of round and lifted décolletage. The push to achieve this look was driven by a heavy influence from classical Greek sculpture, which emphasized the roundness and beauty of the female body. The undergarments were light so they would not show under the pale, thin fabrics, but in colder months, for day to day wear, were generally fashioned of flannel. A lady’s shoes would be crafted of the same material as her dress and might not last for more than one night out, and no ensemble was complete without a pair of gloves and a reticule, a small handbag to carry necessary items, created to make up for “the loss of the capacious pockets of eighteenth-century dresses” (Nigro 57).
Before embarking on my designs, it was necessary to get a real grasp on the hierarchy that Austen constructs in *Emma*. To represent varying classes within the novel, I chose Emma Woodhouse, Harriet Smith, and Jane Fairfax as the characters for focus in the project. I felt that only two characters would not fully represent the intricacies of the varying social classes that I wanted my costumes to show, and these three characters provide three separate classes, but fall within a specific age range and are single throughout the novel so they have many similarities, aside from their societal differences. I thought that any more than three costumes would make it difficult to create the tiny details that are necessary to demonstrate the differences between the classes.

Austen wastes no time in explaining Emma Woodhouse’s social status in *Emma*. The novel opens: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (Austen 1). Immediately, Austen establishes that Emma Woodhouse is a woman of financial substance and high social rank. Two pages later, the reader discovers: “Highbury, the large and populous village, almost amounting to a town, to which Hartfield [Emma’s family home], in spite of its separate lawn, and shrubberies, and name, did really belong, afforded her no equals. The Woodhouses were first in consequence there” (Austen 3). So, Emma and her father comprise the very top of the Highbury set. They are not titled and therefore would be classed as upper-gentry, rather than nobility. However, the Woodhouse family has ample money for luxury items and Mr. Woodhouse and Emma are both extremely aware of their positions and the importance of living comfortably and looking well in those positions. Sir Walter Scott
characterized Emma’s place in Highbury in his 1815 review upon the novel’s release:
“Miss Woodhouse walks forth, the princess paramount, superior to all her companions in wit, beauty, fortune, and accomplishments, doated upon by her father and the Westons, admired, and worshipped by the more humble companions of the whist table” (Scott 50). Any other resident of Highbury will fall on the social ladder somewhere under Emma, as evidenced by this astute summation of the details about Emma that Austen gives her audience throughout the novel.

Jane Fairfax appears as the granddaughter of Mrs. Bates. Mrs. Bates is a woman of the village who lives comfortably after her husband, the vicar, dies. Referenced as “sweet”, “amiable”, and “accomplished”, the picture painted makes Jane seem to be on level ground with Emma. At the age of three, however, Jane lost both parents and became an orphan. A friend of her father, Colonel Campbell, whose “fortune was moderate” funded her education, hoping “to be supplying the means of respectable subsistence hereafter” (Austen 142). This subsistence is to be brought about by Jane’s becoming a governess, an occupation just short of becoming a servant to a family. Sir Walter Scott settles on describing her as “a young lady of reduced fortune” (Scott 51). Her status is elevated by her connections and culture, as well as having socially suitable, albeit irritating, relations. Though frequently compared to Emma, Jane will never have all that Emma has and conversely, Emma will never have to work for what she has.

In the words of Jane Austen, “Harriet Smith was the natural daughter of somebody” (Austen 17). Harriet has no relations, no acculturation, and no money. She is always among “the inferior society of Highbury”, which Emma sees as a waste of Harriet’s beauty (Austen 18). She does not have any inkling as to who her parents might
be, as she has been raised in a boarding school. Being of questionable lineage was the surest way to the bottom of the social ladder, and although, Emma tries to subvert this matter, Harriet is still almost her societal opposite in Highbury. Although Jane Fairfax seems destined to work as a governess, Harriet Smith still falls beneath her socially because the residents of Highbury know Jane’s parents and her relatives are located there. Poor Harriet’s only chance to rise is through marriage. Sir Walter Scott’s review regards her and emphasizes her ability to marry: “Miss Harriet Smith, a boarding-school girl without family or fortune, very good humored, very pretty, very silly, and what suited Miss Woodhouse’s purpose best of all, very much disposed to be married” (Scott 50). Even friendship with Emma, though certainly helpful, could not hope to fully remove her from her inferior social situation.

After conducting research into clothing trends in England for all classes in Austen’s time, and specifically for 1816, which was closing the Regency period in British fashion, I made a few decisions about what to include in the final product. I opted for three complete ensembles, but only one set of undergarments to be displayed on their own. By 1820, the more complex corset was to have evolved from the preceding short stays and medieval corset, and women were doomed to start suffering from the vapors. I also sought out the specific passages in Austen that showed what I wanted to depict for each character. Combining what I had discovered in both sets of research, I tried to come up with designs that I felt represented each woman’s character and social status correctly. Combining bits of patterns I found and some pattern pieces of my own devices, I figured out what I needed and set out to find the fabric and notions I needed. I struggled in trying to find fabric that was just right, since textiles have evolved and changed a great deal in
two hundred years. In Jane Austen’s time, “the best muslin came from India” and was available in a variety of thicknesses and qualities, from poor and scratchy to very fine, soft, and thin (Nigro 55). Muslins today are less fine and definitely not as pretty as the ones described by Jane Ashelford in *The Art of Dress* or by Jane Austen herself in letters to her sister, Cassandra, and silks rarely come in their former pale colors at a local fabric store since dyeing techniques have made it easy to make silks bright and colorfast. It was difficult to find the colors prescribed by Yvonne Forsling in her article *Colours of the Regency*. After I settled on the colors and textiles, more specifically outlined in the descriptions of the individual dresses, I finally was able to begin sewing. For frocks that appear so simple, they have been the hardest pieces of clothing I have ever tackled making. There are so many small pieces that have to line up exactly and modern notions that you can’t use, like zippers and ruffling attachments on a sewing machine. The finishing touches to the physical components of the project have been accessories and undergarments, as well as photographs of the dresses and the model to further reflect the characters.

The final product succeeds in giving visual representation to the social differences between Emma, Jane, and Harriet, as outlined earlier by specific quotes from Austen’s novel. Emma’s dress is much finer than the other two, including many roses and an intricate beading design, and a great deal more fabric with the underdress and the coat. The fabrics used in the Emma dress are of a superior quality than those used for Harriet’s and Jane’s dresses, and are very pale in color, showing off her wealth and reflecting the high style that made white the priority color in 1816. Her dress is not made of the absolutely finest materials that would have been available in her time, noting the fact that
she is still upper-gentry rather than nobility, but the dress would have been superior to anything else found in Highbury that season, especially to "the relative poverty of Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith" (Stafford 26). The train would have floated along the ground, trailing along with the ideal "neo-classical romance" (Ribeiro 149). Jane Fairfax’s ensemble is made of a slightly heavier cotton that is a darker shade of rose than Emma’s hue of yellow, but it is still light enough that it flows nicely, following the lines of "classic drapery" (Ashelford 184). She can still afford to follow the style of floral ornamentation, but her roses would likely have been fashioned from leftover fabric from a dress that had been otherwise worn out or by a small amount of ribbon that she had managed to acquire. Her dress took less fabric, not wasting as much in the sleeves as the Emma dress with its extremely puffy sleeves. The Jane dress still mimics this trend in the sleeves, but to a less outlandish extent. The Harriet Smith dress is the most simple of all of the ensembles. The medium blue color and long sleeved styling are slightly less fashionable than Jane’s or Emma’s dresses. It lacks ornamentation because Harriet’s questionable lineage leads to questionable funds to purchase little luxury items, like ribbon, and the blue fabric is heavy enough to keep a person warm and dark enough to hide stains, but light enough to represent her youthfulness. All three dresses are styled to show off the perfect "feminine figure, rounded arms, good skin, and a long neck", but the Harriet dress fails to show off the "considerable amount of flesh" that was considered fashionable at the time (Ribeiro 155-56). When examined together, one can see the steps down the social ladder represented by the clothing I constructed to depict Austen’s words. The gradient scale of finery can be gauged by the fabrics and ornamentation,
reflecting the hierarchy that Austen constructs to demonstrate the complexity and importance of classism in the world in which she was writing.

After construction of the dresses was complete, I finally had to decide the best way to show them off. First, I did a presentation of the dresses to Dr. Joanne Edmonds’ Jane Austen colloquium, coming to their class while they were reading and discussing *Emma*. Students were given a chance to ask questions and compare the dresses. The next phase was the display in the Honors College, where anyone walking by might be able to catch a glimpse of them and read a bit about the project. I decided to do a presentation that was open to the public as well so that I could address any questions that people might have about my process and the project. Also, I think it will be beneficial for interested people to see the dresses on a person, rather than just hanging in the display cases. The final step of the project will be in Chicago, IL in October of 2008. I will be participating in the poster session of the Jane Austen Society of North America’s annual general meeting, presenting this project at the conference for true lovers of Jane Austen. It is an incredibly honor to have the opportunity to take my work outside Ball State and show it to others who share my passions.
Emma Woodhouse (Front)
Emma Woodhouse (Back)
Emma Woodhouse (Underdress)
The Emma Woodhouse Dress

The dress for Emma Woodhouse was the first I created. A member of the upper class, she gave me more options to work with in creating a design and putting the finishing touches on a garment. “Emma accordingly cherishes all of the beauty of texture and structure which life can command” (Minter 51). This quote from Minter’s essay about aesthetics in *Emma* reveals a key concept to Emma’s character, and a key point that I wanted my dress to make. The quote that truly inspired the dress is the opening line of the novel: “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her” (Austen 1).

Emma’s dress follows the basic lines that were popular during the time, incorporating the empire waistline, fitted bodice, and flared skirt. Her waistline falls right below the bosom and her bustline is as low as decency permitted. The underdress is constructed of a white muslin eyelet since Emma could afford to wear the palest colors in Highbury, and white was the most popular color of 1816. The delicate pattern on the eyelet would have been painstaking to create in 1816, but the Woodhouse family could afford such small fineries. The underdress has the exaggerated puffed, short sleeves, and lace and ribbon decorate the bottom. Lace was hard to acquire, even for a woman of Emma’s status, so this might have been the second time the lace had been used in such a way. The dress is closed by lacing up more of the ribbon that decorates the hemline, leaving no gap open for the chemise to show through. This dress probably used close to the amount of fabric that the Jane Fairfax and Harriet Smith dresses required.
I chose to make a coat for the second piece of my ensemble because I loved the elegant line the train created, and for a girl so admired and at the top of society, I imagined her to have the finest she could. The train creates the desired effect of “the folds of airy fabric falling from a high waist to trail on the ground behind” (Ribeiro 149). Coats use more fabric and would have cost more than a simple overlay, and this one is no exception. It used twice as much fabric as the underdress. The coat is a very pale yellow, reflecting Emma’s age and status within the Highbury community. Although heavier than it might have been in 1816, my fabric is supposed to mimic the heavy silks, imported from continental Europe and Asia and embroidered. I couldn’t pass it up because the color was perfect, and would have set off Emma’s bloom and hazel eyes in quite a lovely manner.

Ornamentation on the dress is to further imitate and set Emma apart from her acquaintances in Highbury. Hemline decoration was the most popular form of decoration, so the coat’s hemline is where one finds the bulk of the intricacy. The beadwork wraps all the way around at the hemline and down the sides. Beads would not have been available to the lower classes, but Emma would likely have been able to obtain some. After this dress, they would likely be used again. Large flowers were the most popular decoration, and these flowers are made out of a silk and satin blend, again mimicking the silk that would have been available in 1816. The leaves are constructed from modern florist’s ribbon, so they are probably holding their shape better than an 1816 leaf out of plain ribbon would have. Another flower was crafted to be the brooch which keeps the coat closed, in addition to the large hooks and eyes, similar to the ones that would have been used in this kind of creation. “Every swag of appliqué silk flowers and flounces would
have been stiffened by muslin” to help them keep their shape (Ashelford 184). Ashelford further notes that making any evening dress “would have demanded a high degree of time and labor” (Ashelford 184). This dress would have required more than one hundred, tiny, painstaking seams, all sewn by hand by someone in a textile or tailor’s store. The upper gentry could afford to have clothing sewn for them, and fashion plates from London and Paris would help a man or woman choose the style that they wanted that would best suit their sensibilities about style.
The Presentation
The Dress
The Display
Materials
Jane Fairfax
The Jane Fairfax Dress

Jane Fairfax represents, according to Sir Walter Scott’s 1815 review, “a young lady of reduced fortune” (Scott 51). In this state, she falls into a middling class in Highbury, dragged out of the lowest class of orphans because she had parents who were known in Highbury and continues to have relations there. The quote by Sir Walter Scott, along with discussions by Austen in the novel about how “sweet” and “amiable” Jane Fairfax’s temperament is were the inspiration for this dress.

I chose pink for Jane Fairfax’s dress since it is the ultimate color of femininity and, in my mind, matches her cool, demure reserve. The shade of rose would also work to complement her eye color, deep grey. This dress is significantly less extravagant than the one designed by Emma Woodhouse. Using about 1/3 of the fabric that the first ensemble used, it would have been much easier to obtain the correct amount of fabric that had been dyed together and therefore less expensive. This fabric is a modern cotton, meant to mimic muslins that were of middle grade, less scratchy and heavy than cheap muslins, but less fashionable than expensive types that would be imported from India. The fabric’s shade of “rose” is deeper than Emma’s shade of “primrose” is in the yellow family, and the fabric heavier than the floaty muslin of Emma’s underdress (Forsling). However, the fabric is not too heavy to recreate the neoclassical lines that were popular in the time.

The dress reflects the high style of the time, but does not go all out in its mimicry. The empire waist and low neckline create the free line that flattered the popular ideals of femininity in Regency England, drawing attention to rounded arms and a rounded bosum. The sleeves are less full than what was the height of fashion in 1816 in an effort to save
fabric since, as Austen wrote to her sister, Cassandra, in 1811, muslins were running on average, “3s 6d” per yard (Ashelford 202).

Floral accents were very popular and had to be created by hand in a lengthy process on a hand-sewn dress. On a dress of someone in Jane Fairfax’s position, bows were probably made of recycled fabric or ribbon from a previous dress that had worn out. The only other alternative was that the ribbon had come as a gift from a friend or employer for a special occasion. This dress is machine-stitched, but in 1816, it would have been entirely sewn by hand, most likely for a woman of Jane’s class, by herself or a family member. It is closed with two buttons, one at the top of the back seam, and one at the waistline. These buttons would likely be closed with loops and it is possible that a woman’s chemise might show through the gaps remaining, but that would not have been socially unacceptable during this time since buttons were also difficult to acquire in mass and many women, even fine ones, were struggling with this problem.
The Dress
The Display
Materials
Harriet Smith
The Harriet Smith Dress

As Austen points out, “Harriet Smith is the natural daughter of somebody” (Austen 17). Since we do not know who this “somebody” might be, her orphan status leaves her at the bottom of the social ladder, a fact to which her dress easily lends itself, and this is the Austen quote that most influenced the choices I made when I created the design and chose the materials for the dress.

I chose blue for Harriet’s ensemble to make her lovely blue eyes stand out. The fabric is heavy, much like the low-grade muslins that were available cheaply in England, and likely produced in Europe, rather than in India. The dress took about the same amount of fabric as the Jane Fairfax dress, but the cheaper, heavier material would have likely held up through more than a few social outings. The blue is a deep pastel periwinkle, able to hide slight dirt with ease, allowing the dress to be worn more than a couple of times without requiring laundering, a luxury that only the affluent could afford to do at high frequencies. However, the pastel still reflects her status as a young, single woman and would still have been a perfectly acceptable color to wear socially.

Her dress has the high waistline that exemplifies the style of the time, but her bustline is slightly higher than the lower, more revealing bustlines that were the peak of fashion. The sleeves are not the short, puffed sleeves that showed off a woman’s arms, but instead, are a more practical length. No fabric is wasted on a train or extra paneling to make the skirt wider. However, the stiffness of the skirt lends itself to holding the intended shape of the dress much better than the more popular, light muslins of the time, which required that “a small bustle pad would have been inserted to hold out these back
gathers to prevent the straight skirt from falling into the small of the back, spoiling the hang” (Ashelford 181).

Ornamentation is minimal with just a sash of ribbon and small bows, nothing like the outlandish beading and floral accents on Emma’s dress. This ribbon would probably have been saved for or come as a gift from a more affluent friend, like Emma, perhaps even off of a dress that the more privileged friend had replaced. The closure of the dress is just with ribbon, so time would not have been wasted on looking for buttons and creating the loops to fasten them. The ribbon through the neckline of the dress would have worked to keep the bosom lifted, with or without the aid of a short stay, and provides the look of gathers and pleats when the ends are tied together to close the dress, which creates a more decorated look, although no extra notions are required.
The Dress
The Display
Materials
Works Cited


