



“To be above Vulgar Economy”: Thrifty Measures in Jane Austen’s Letters

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AT AGE THIRTY-SEVEN, in a letter to her sister Cassandra, Jane Austen describes with scant sympathy a young niece’s dissatisfaction with a gown and cap just purchased: “I am glad you like our caps—but Fanny is out of conceit with hers already; she finds that she has been buying a new cap without having a new pattern . . . —She is rather out of luck, to like neither her gown nor her Cap—but I do not much mind it, because besides that I like them both myself, I consider it as a thing of course at her time of Life—one of the sweet taxes of Youth to chuse in a hurry & make bad bargains” (23 September 1813). Amused at these mundane concerns, particularly at the divergent opinions within the narrative community, Jane is “glad” of Cassandra’s approval but immediately opposes it to Fanny’s more heated disappointment; what *really* matters is her own opinion, defined by her satisfaction in the purchase and her recognition of larger economies, greater narratives. For Fanny, purchases are measured against the changes in fashion and their usefulness as patterns for other garments. This purchase, however, is part not only of an economy of finances but an economy of desire, and participation in these economies is mediated by one’s place in the narrative of life. Fanny must pay “the sweet taxes of Youth,” taxes no longer owed by her wise aunt, a woman educated in the competing impulses of thrift and desire, more skilled in making the bargains that reconcile those impulses, and above all confident in turning all to narrative account.

The Austens were participating in a relatively new economic world. For centuries, sumptuary laws and the high price of textiles had defined distinct differences in dress between the aristocratic rich and those beneath them. Clothing styles had changed slowly. In late eighteenth-century England, however, with what has been called the “birth of a consumer society,” fashions altered at an unprecedented rate. As Neil McKendrick explains, “commerce increasingly took over the manipulation and direction of fashion. Men and women increasingly *had* to wear what commerce dictated, had to raise or lower their hems and their heels at the dictates of the cloth manufacturers and the shoe sellers” (40–41).

The consistent attention Jane Austen pays in her letters to the shifts in fashion and to what people wear suggests her—and Cassandra’s—concern, however self-aware, to fashion themselves through the patterns of dress suitable for a lady. As Elizabeth Wilson points out, “fashion cements social solidarity and imposes group norms” (6). Ann Bermingham contends that in this new commercial culture, “sociability was valued as much as wealth” and that fashion was a sign of that sociability, “the place where the body and the symbolic intersect, . . . where society’s values become mapped onto the body and become naturalized as body” (111–12). For Wilson, dress, “an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two. Dress is the frontier between the self and the not-self” (3). Thus, Austen’s emphasis on fashion defines the self in complex relationship to her social world; in her manipulations of money and fabric we see a kind of self-fashioning.

Rapid changes in fashion and the significance of that boundary between self and world necessitated a special kind of thriftiness. According to Aileen Ribeiro, “[w]ith the trend towards simpler styles . . . and cheaper fabrics, women increased the size of their wardrobes; in addition to clothes made by a dressmaker . . . , a woman with moderate sewing ability (or her maid) could make herself plain, everyday clothes and caps” (10). Austen’s letters recount plenty of evidence of such production as well as repeated, often tedious re-trimmings and reconstruction of garments: “I can easily suppose that your six weeks here will be fully occupied, were it only in lengthening the waist of your gowns. I . . . mean to wear out my spotted Muslin before I go.—You will exclaim at this—but mine really has signs of feebleness, which with a little care may come to something” (17 January 1809). Thrift, then, is a constant concern. “People get so horridly poor & economical in this part of the World,” she writes from home (19 December 1798). Staying at Godmersham, her brother Edward’s estate, she thinks of the domestic cares at Chawton: “The Orange Wine will want our Care

soon.—But in the meantime for Elegance & Ease & Luxury—; . . . & I shall eat Ice & drink French wine, & be above Vulgar Economy” (1 July 1808).

Thrift certainly demands an attention to cost, a factor mentioned frequently. But thrift depends not merely on the allure of the bargain but on the quality of the material and the effect to be produced. A decision about what to buy to trim a hat might depend partly on price: “A plumb or green gage would cost three shillings;—Cherries & Grapes about 5” (2 June 1799); but, she reveals after further shopping, “I could get 4 or 5 very pretty sprigs of [flowers] for the same money which would procure only one Orleans plumb, in short could get more for three or four Shillings than I could have means of bringing home.” Taste—or at least its comic invocation—is an additional factor: “Besides, I cannot help thinking that it is more natural to have flowers grow out of the head than fruit” (11 June 1799). Emulation may lead her into purchases, but one cost is set against another, even amidst “very shocking” extravagance (18 April 1811). As purchases and costs increase, Austen comforts herself with what economy she can.

Thrift also denotes the care with which things are used and re-used. Caps, gowns, cloaks, pelisses are continually undergoing transformation: they are lost, found, washed, altered, trimmed, dyed, exchanged, given away, even sold. One garment can become another: “I will not be much longer libelled by the possession of my coarse spot, I shall turn it into a petticoat very soon” (25 December 1798). Dyeing, another means of thrifty transformation, has its risks: “As for Mr Floor, he is at present rather low in our estimation; how is your blue gown?—Mine is all to peices.—I think there must have been something wrong in the dye . . .—There was four shillings thrown away;—to be added to my subjects of never failing regret” (7 October 1808). Death leads to other alterations. Mourning necessitates trimming or dyeing garments as well as the purchase of new. At the death of Elizabeth Austen, sorrow and concern for their brother and his children jostle with the demands of the wardrobe (15-16 October 1808).

Needlework was a highly charged activity in a culture that defined women in terms of domestic ideology. Rousseau saw it as innately feminine: “[l]ittle girls love adornment almost from birth” (365). “[A]lmost all little girls learn to read and write with repugnance,” he asserts. “But as for holding a needle, that they always learn gladly” (368). For Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, needlework “contracts [the] faculties more than any other.” While needlework done for oneself fastens the mind on “the frippery of dress,” that done for the family, as Jane and Cassandra sew for their brothers, is a woman’s “duty, . . . her part of the family business” (75).

Jane Austen herself indicates pride in her abilities, but despite the amount of time she writes—and writes with real interest—about dress, her attitudes are mixed. Sometimes, for example, she grumbles: “I wish such things were to be bought ready made” (25 December 1798). Defining her for a Victorian audience, Jane Austen’s nephew connects her excellence in needlework to her artistry in fiction, both miniaturist and feminine: “the same hand which painted so exquisitely with the pen could work as delicately with the needle” (Austen-Leigh 79). Needlework and the thrifty measures that attend it, however, are significant strategies of defining the self. Kaja Silverman argues that “clothing is a necessary condition of subjectivity—[and] in articulating the body, it simultaneously articulates the psyche” (147). Bermingham cites clothing as “[o]ne way in which a woman could take some control over her body” (106). Indeed, given the ethos of the period, it was a way peculiarly suited to an articulation of the self: “In the age of sensibility, it was essential that the body be able to be read as a reflection of the soul” (107).

Austen’s letters show an acute awareness of clothing’s construction of the self. Owning—both possessing and acknowledging—gowns is such an intimate act that it generates a somatic effect: “I am so tired & ashamed of half my present stock that I even blush at the sight of the wardrobe which contains them” (25 December 1798). Compliments, even intuited compliments, are duly recorded as reflections of the image she presents: “My black Cap was openly admired by Mrs Lefroy, & secretly I imagine by every body else in the room” (24 December 1798). Indeed, the particular version of the self she projects can have real effect: “We . . . were not so very stupid as I expected, which I attribute to my wearing my new bonnet & being in good looks” (12 May 1801). And the image she constructs can be compared to other possible selves. The new trimming on her cap “makes me look more like Lady Conyngham now than it did before, which is all that one lives for now” (19 December 1798). Another cap “will be white sattin and lace, and a little white flower perking out of the left ear, like Harriot Byron’s feather” (15 September 1813). Lady Conyngham, a friend and later mistress of the Prince of Wales, and Richardson’s heroine Harriet Byron both become personae into whose garments Jane Austen can momentarily, even parodically, step.

This articulation of the self through clothes also involves its playful extension into, a vitalization of objects that become, in Wilson’s terms, both self and not-self. Her brother’s carriage was crowded, “though it does not become me to say so, as I and my boa were of the party” (15 June 1808). The politeness due to Cassandra, from whom she borrows the foundation for a cap, is trans-

ferred to the thing itself: "I took the liberty a few days ago of asking your Black velvet Bonnet to lend me its cawl, which it very readily did" (18 December 1798). Even her own possessions elicit her thoughtfulness, or at least provide cover for her own desires: "We . . . could have staid longer but for the arrival of my List shoes to convey me home, & I did not like to keep them waiting in the Cold" (24 January 1809). Indeed, possessions can take on their own complex emotional lives, as when she considers adding black ribbon to adapt her lilac sarsenet for mourning: "With this addition it will be a very useful gown, happy to go anywhere" (6 March 1814).

In taking on a life, a garment acquires its own narrative history. A gown over which she and Cassandra apparently disagree, makes its way through a number of letters during November of 1800, and the opinions collected define a community, humorously exemplifying vagaries of taste and attitudinal shifts. A narrative of clothes can even subsume that of their owner: Miss Debary "looks much as she used to do, is netting herself a gown in worsteds, and wears what Mrs Birch would call a *pot hat*. A short and compendious history of Miss Debary!" (25 November 1798). Miss Debary must be slight indeed for such a thrifty narrative.

In fact, narrative thrift—turning the materials of life to the best possible account—is one of the intriguing features of Jane Austen's letters. Her nephew recognizes this quality (though again miniaturizing it): "the materials may be thought inferior to the execution, for they treat only of the details of domestic life. . . . They may be said to resemble the nest which some little bird builds of the materials nearest at hand, of the twigs and mosses supplied by the tree in which it is placed" (51). Austen's language, even in the letters, shimmers, as when she complains about not hearing from Cassandra: "You have written I am sure, tho' I have received no letter from you since your leaving London;—the Post, & not yourself must have been unpunctual." That opening—sisterly confidence reversing to reveal the suspicions of an unsatisfied correspondent—is an instance of writerly thrift: "Your letter is come; it came indeed twelve lines ago, but I could not stop to acknowledge it before, & I am glad it did not arrive till I had completed my first sentence, because the sentence had been made ever since yesterday, & I think forms a very good beginning" (1 November 1800). And when a Mrs. Hill inquires whether they're acquainted with a clergyman's family by the name of Alford, on behalf of a lady "who now wishes to convey to the Miss Alfords some work, or trimming, which she has been doing for them," Jane Austen turns and pieces narrative scraps into coherence, recognizing her family in the story and adding a sardonic finish: "I cannot

think who our kind Lady can be—but I dare say we shall not like the work” (9 December 1808).

Austen’s letters, then, define the economy of the quotidian, her real concern for the financial pressures under which she and her sister lived. The letters—even in their very discursiveness—show a thriftiness of narrative and language, a playful finding, altering, trimming, and piecing, a transformation of matter that connects writer and reader, present, past, and future. Material realities—the vagaries of fashion, necessary economies, alterations and transformations of gowns and gloves—exert their own transforming pressures on writer and readers. Predictably, Austen leaves us with no single perspective on clothing, needlework, or thrift. With wondrous inventiveness, she takes up and adapts incident, character, language—any old pelisse, as Frederick Wentworth has it—to the needs of the world she creates. Possibly that multiplicity is her thriftiest measure.

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