“But the clothes, the wedding clothes!": Fashionable Bridal attire in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice

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“But the clothes, the wedding clothes!”: Fashionable Bridal attire in Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice

A fashionable wedding is foremost on Mrs. Bennet’s mind when she exclaims, “But the clothes, the wedding clothes!” (Austen 347). She is completely overcome with excitement at her beloved daughter Lydia being wed, despite the reasons for it, and it is incredibly telling that almost instantly she starts to envision what Lydia will wear! Regency ladies prized fashion, for all their sermons on the dangers of vanity, there was an insatiable desire for creativity in attire.

In the 1816 May issue of La Belle Assemblee a new niche in women’s apparel was starting: the wedding gown.

The Princess Charlotte and Prince Leopold returning from the altar after the Marriage Ceremony.

The start of the description of the princess’s dresses first describes that she wore “on her countenance that tranquil and chastened joy which a female so situated could not fail to experience” (224), in other words the romantic and sentimental bridal glow is a part of her ensemble. It may perhaps be presumed that the tradition for brides to wear white has long been the norm in European wedding ceremonies, but this is not true for the Regency where a bride’s wedding attire was often merely her best dress and would be worn until it was no longer serviceable. White dresses, however, harden back to the classical period that the Regency strived to evoke. In many of the fashion plates and descriptions found with in La Belle Assemblee the trend of “White dresses are now become general,” (39). The color was incredibly popular for dresses in general, not yet the hallmark of a bridal gown.
In fact, the princess Charlotte’s gown is one of the most famous wedding outfits of the Regency, which still survives in tact today. The dress is a “silver lama on net, over a silver tissue slip, embroidered at the bottom with silver lama in shells and flowers. Body and sleeves to correspond, elegantly trimmed with point Brussels lace. The manteau was of silver tissue lined with white satin, with a border of embroidery to answer that on the dress, and fastened in front with a splendid diamond ornament.” (224). Imported silver lace, glittering diamonds, the dress is only meant to be worn once, for the specific occasion of her wedding ceremony. Several more gowns featuring gold and silver with elements of lace, almost all of them are to be worn over a white satin slip (225). Cost does not enter into Mrs. Bennet’s dreams for “The marriage of a daughter… her thoughts and her words ran wholly on those attendants of elegant nuptials, fine muslins,” (351). Mrs. Bennet’s character is revealed to be completely frivolous and impractical in regards to the cost of such lavish preparations for Lydia as a new wardrobe. Mrs. Bennet, surely wishing to live vicariously through her daughter, plans an extravagant trousseau of several new dresses for Lydia. One can only imagine they were not on the scale of Princess Charlotte’s gowns, but never-the-less, this is a huge expense as “Mrs. Bennet found, with amazement and horror, that her husband would not advance a guinea to buy clothes for his daughter” (351). It seems at first comical that “She was more alive to the disgrace, which the want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter’s nuptials, than any sense of shame at her eloping and living with Wickham, a fortnight before they took place” (351). However, when one considers the attention to detail in the articles about Princess Charlotte’s wedding dresses, and the court dresses in “Her Majesty’s Drawing Room” it gives insight into Mrs. Bennet’s mental state of extreme dismay. The fact that photography had not yet been invented and that descriptions and drawings of the clothing would have all been done by hand, takes a considerable amount of time on the part of the authors and illustrators of fashion articles. The types of lace, the sorts of artificial flowers and the materials, the colors, and the cuts of fabric are a multitude of small elements that as a whole determined whether or not a person was fashionably attired. For a person like Mrs. Bennet whose sole ambition in life is to see her daughters married, what they wear on the day of the ceremony is the pinnacle of their lives in her eyes. Lydia in their new social position as a married woman will reflect directly on Mrs. Bennet. She wishes to show her daughter off to the neighbors in order to compete with them. If Lydia is fashionably garbed in the latest styles, which all women were to keep themselves current on, then Lydia would be perceived as superior to others less fashionably dressed. Their clothing serves as social marker as much as their new status gained from their husbands, as well as a financial one. For Mrs. Bennet what Lydia wears on her wedding day and to travel in is second only to the act of getting married. Fashion is crucial to convey the image of maternal success Mrs. Bennet wants to cultivate.

Posted by Jessie Nastasi at 9:38 AM

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