



Linore Rose Burkard

*Inspirational Romance
for the Jane Austen Soul*



Elizabeth Bennet's Wardrobe Undress, Half-Dress, Full Dress, Court Dress, and Making Sense of it All!



Morning Gown – “Undress”

From Lizzie Bennet, the main character in *Pride and Prejudice*, to Jane Austen herself, any lady of the Regency depended upon an arsenal of clothing. There were gowns for morning, afternoon, dinner, supper, dancing, opera, or theatre. And, these gowns, more often than not, were too specialized to be interchangeable. No wonder Lizzie's mother, Mrs. Bennet, was so anxious to see her five daughters married off! Throughout their lives, any 19th century lady above the working class would need enough clothing to fill all the categories. Undress, Half-Dress, Full-Dress, and—perhaps--Court Dress. But, how much was necessary? And, what did it all mean?

First, a regency gown was an ankle-to-floor dress with an Empire-waist, meaning the waist was just below the bust. This style was a picture of simplicity introduced by the French with the lofty idea of echoing the classical robes of ancient Rome and Greece. Their aim was to express the beauty of the human form through clothing, rather than hiding it beneath the clothes, as in earlier centuries.

The simplicity of the long, straight skirt and paucity of underclothes that the French embraced, crossed the Channel, and changed to encompass a more modest English embodiment. The classic lines of dress were still desired. But, as the Regency continued, the style grew accessorized and adorned to the point of departure from its classical origins.

In effect, the gain in simplicity by abandoning panniers and layers of corsets was lost by the increasing specialization of clothing. As the title of this article implies, there were numerous modes of “Dress,” and they were all necessary components of a complete wardrobe. The key to understanding the modes is to recognize that the terms are categorical, not literal. Here's a brief guide to help make sense of it all:

The term “Undress” did not signify being unclothed. It referred to clothing reserved for mornings or entire days spent at home. The idea was that you wouldn't have gone out in public in a state of undress. Though, if you were found at home in morning dress it was considered reasonable.

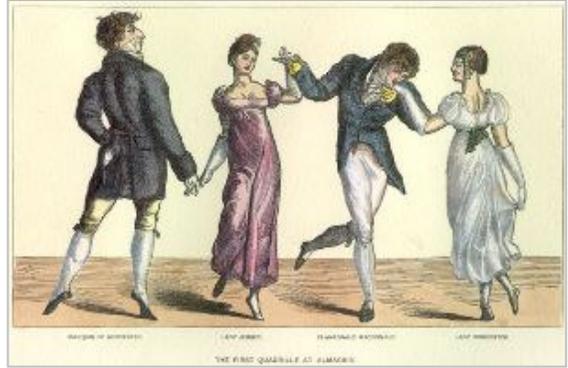


Lady in “Half-dress”

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“Half-dress” referred to clothing which was suitable to wear in public, but not quite up to snuff for anything formal, such as a ball or fancy dinner. This category encompassed walking-out, promenade, riding, carriage, and day dresses.

“Full-dress” was for the most formal events, such as attending a fancy ball, opera, or the theatre. This outfit required long gloves, short sleeves, a headdress of some sort, jewelry if the lady owned any, “slippers” of satin or some other rich fabric, and of course, a lovely gown with a deep décolletage.



Two couples dancing in “Full-dress”

“Court dress” was a particular style reserved only for visiting the royal Court. Regency women in court dress could almost be mistaken for their eighteenth-century forbears with hoopskirts, trains, and a single plume in their headdress. English Court style didn’t officially transition until after King George IV died.

Some people like to lump Regency clothing into only two categories: “Undress” and “Full-dress.” In this arrangement, Undress would include all of the gowns worn during the day. And, Full-dress encompassed all fancy evening gowns and court dress. The bottom line was that a lady, young or old, required a vast assortment of gowns to be active in society. In a small town, such as Longbourne where the Bennets lived, the categories of dress might overlap more than they would, say, for a high-society debutante in London. Nevertheless, there were a variety of gowns within each category. And, if families had more than one daughter, they probably faced a financial challenge. (By the way, men were just as expensive to clothe, but that is for a different article!)

To make things more difficult, some fashion catalogs went so far as to differentiate among one category, so that a certain style of evening dress, say, was appropriate only for opera. Another style of gown was best only for a Ball. Talk about confusing!

In theory, you were in Undress in the morning, Half-dress in the afternoon, and Full-dress for fancy evening events. Yet, according to the Georgian Index, a wonderful online resource for Regency fans, dinner and opera gowns fall into the category of Half-dress, and only “evening, ball and court gowns” passed as Full-dress. Is your head swimming, yet?

Ah...so many dresses, so little time! No wonder the all-important Regency Season included a head-spinning variety of entertainments and activities. A lady certainly would make use of her gowns, of all categories. The exception was Court dress, for which only those who were either introduced to the sovereign in a formal presentation would wear; or if one attended actual court functions.

Despite modern movie viewers’ familiarity with the Regency style in England, it was the French Court that originally influenced English “Regency” fashion. Josephine, the beautiful wife of Napoleon, began wearing a “new” trend, which was dubbed “Empire Style” in honor of Napoleon's Empire!



The Empress Josephine was responsible for introducing and popularizing the new “Empire Style” by modeling it beautifully at the Court of Napoleon.



Linore Rose Burkard writes *Inspirational Romance for the Jane Austen Soul*. Her characters take you back in time to experience life and love during the Regency in England (circa 1800 – 1830). Ms. Burkard's novels include *Before the Season Ends* and *The House in Grosvenor Square* (coming April, 2009). Her stories blend Christian faith and romance with well-researched details from the Regency period. Experience a romantic age, where timeless lessons still apply to modern life. And, enjoy a romance that reminds you happy endings are possible for everyone.

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