

“‘True Indian Muslin’ and the Politics of Consumption in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*”

[Lauren Miskin’s essay discusses Henry Tilney’s knowledge and connoisseurship of fashion—specifically of muslin fabric—in *Northanger Abbey* as an index of larger political and economic concerns in the novel, including the intersecting influences of patriarchy, imperial history, and consumerism. Miskin places Henry’s comments about fabric within a carefully researched history of muslin, arguing that such contexts are crucial for understanding the larger politics in the background of Austen’s fiction, particularly that of patriarchal oppression.]

Abstract

In Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Henry Tilney exhibits an unusual interest in women’s dress, claiming to “understand muslins” and announcing his predilection for muslins of the “true Indian” variety. This essay examines how Henry’s consumerist tastes are informed by his patriarchal privilege as well as Britain’s imperial practices. A self-proclaimed “excellent judge” of the market, Henry distinguishes genuine Indian textiles from their cheaper counterfeits and deploys this expertise to discriminate between honest women and pretentious coquettes. Henry’s regulatory tactics replicate the imperial strategies of British merchants who established policies of regulation and surveillance in order to exploit and eventually appropriate India’s manufacture of “true” muslin. By highlighting both Henry’s patriarchal privilege and muslin’s imperial history, this essay argues for a new understanding of the gender and imperial politics at work in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*.

In Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Henry Tilney and Catherine Moreland’s first flirtation occasions a lengthy discourse on muslin. Demonstrating a curiously nuanced attention to women’s dress, Henry speculates that Catherine will document their meeting in her journal by referring to her “sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings” (15). The two are soon interrupted by Catherine’s chaperone, Mrs. Allen, whose pin has torn a hole in her gown; unfortunately the dress is a “favourite” of Mrs. Allen’s, even though, as she confesses, “it cost but nine shillings a yard” (16). Examining Mrs. Allen’s

damaged muslin, Henry remarks that he would have guessed the fabric's cost "exactly," to which the astonished Mrs. Allen replies, "Do you understand muslins, sir?" (16). Henry does, in fact, "understand muslins" and understands them "particularly well," as he proves to his incredulous female audience (16). He boasts:

I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent judge; and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown. I bought one for her the other day, and it was pronounced to be a prodigious bargain by every lady who saw it. I gave but five shillings a yard for it, and a true Indian muslin. (16)

What does it mean for Austen's hero to "understand muslins," and moreover, to emphasize his penchant for those of the "true Indian" variety? I argue that Henry's preference for Indian muslins constitutes a particular mode of imperial connoisseurship, a masculine aesthetic taste that performed an important regulatory function both within the metropole and abroad. As Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins has pointed out, the literature of the long eighteenth century often "frames problems of national identity, global economy, and political power as privatized problems of taste, virtue, and individual desire" (3). More than a personal aesthetic preference, Henry's fashionable taste indicates his adherence to a new masculine identity based upon conspicuous consumption rather than inherited or landed wealth.¹ This consumerist identity developed in response to Britain's imperial expansion, which had engendered the importation and eventual domestication of Indian muslin.

Both Mary Hafner-Laney and Claire Hughes have addressed Henry's interest in muslin, though neither considers the significance of this commodity's Indian origin or the ideologies that influence Henry's consumption of it. Hafner-Laney claims that Henry and Mrs. Allen's exchange about muslin evinces Austen's enduring interest in fashion and underscores the fact that early nineteenth-century dresses were made, rather than bought "off the rack" (137). Hughes offers a more detailed reading of muslin's material and symbolic significance and argues that Henry selflessly transgresses gender boundaries to supplement Mrs. Allen's inadequate education of Catherine,

1 As Jason Solinger points out, "Over the course of the eighteenth century, the ideal of the well-born landed gentleman gradually gave way to a new figure of the gentleman, one who was defined by his urbane taste, experience and, above all, his literacy" (276). While Solinger identifies *Persuasion's* Captain Wentworth as an exemplar of this modern masculine ideal, I contend that it is also applicable to Henry.

emerging from the text as “one of Austen’s most attractive heroes” (196). I would elaborate upon Hughes’s reading of Henry and propose that his interest in “true Indian muslin” indicates not only his personal investment in Catherine’s education, but also his political allegiance to larger structures of imperial and patriarchal oppression.

Through his self-appointed position as an “excellent judge” of the market, Henry controls both female commodity consumption and virtue, policing women’s sexual purity through his interpretation of their dress. Distinguishing between true and imitative muslin equips Henry to separate honest women from artificial women and to subordinate all women to his expertise. Henry converts his knowledge of feminine fashion into patriarchal power, construing his regulation of women’s social and sexual behavior as benevolent and necessary. Likewise, British merchants of the period exploited and eventually undermined the Indian textile industry by appropriating Indian weavers’ knowledge of muslin. Just as Henry casts his criticisms of women’s dress as a mode of generous instruction, British merchants, industrial spies, and officials often present their calculating surveillance of Indian weavers as paternalistic aid. Deploying mystifying, romanticizing descriptions of Indian weavers and their labor, British writers suppress the material realities of muslin’s manufacture in order to legitimize the necessity of European oversight. British men thus claimed mastery over muslin’s foreign production and domestic consumption by asserting their allegedly unique capacity to judge muslin’s quality, which stands metonymically for the bodies of the weavers who produce it and the women who wear it.

Contrary to the narrator’s later observation that “the heart of man is little biased by the texture of [ladies’] muslin” (25), Henry’s heart is, in fact, acutely biased by women’s taste in textiles. Viewed within the context of *Northanger Abbey*’s gender politics and Britain’s imperial history, the words “true,” “Indian,” and “muslin” arise as particularly over-determined terms, fraught with complex and inter-related connotations. “True” articulates muslin’s material quality as well as the moral quality of the woman who wears it; both true muslin and true women, moreover, prove to be enduring and pliable, able to withstand Henry’s refashioning.¹ By classifying Indian muslin as the “true” muslin, Henry paradoxically acknowledges the labor of the Indian weavers who produce this textile while covering over the British appropriation of their technologies. Henry’s bias for “true

1 As Suzanne Daly has observed, in the nineteenth century “muslin” became a “disparaging slang term for ‘woman’” (49) evincing the perpetual conflation of women and their dress as well as muslin’s complicated association with female purity.

Indian muslin” thus underscores how patriarchy and imperialism operate as symbiotic, interrelated systems whose oppressive politics inform even the most innocuous acts, such as purchasing fabric, and inflect even the most seemingly insular of domestic novels, such as *Northanger Abbey*.

The “Dress of the Times”: The British Appropriation of Indian Muslin

Understanding Henry’s taste for “true Indian muslin” necessitates a preliminary reconstruction of the textile’s complicated material history, which illustrates the crucial role that muslin played in the expansion of British imperialism and the concomitant growth of British industry.¹ In the early eighteenth century, the term “muslin” (or “lawn” as it was sometimes called) referred to a finely woven cotton textile of Indian origin.² The English and Dutch East India Companies first imported muslin to Europe in the early 1600s. By 1700, England instituted a partial ban on finished Indian textiles to protect their domestic wool and silk industries and incentivize the completion of cotton fabrics within English borders. This partial ban was unsuccessful, and between 1721 and 1744, English legislators outlawed the importation of all Indian fabrics, including muslin, to

- 1 My exploration of muslin’s material history has been greatly informed by the critical discourse of thing theory. Critics such as Bill Brown, Elaine Freedgood, and Daly have initiated new and provocative conversations about the relationship between objects and subjects. As Brown explains, thing theory contemplates: “What are the poetics and politics of the object? How do objects mediate relationships between subjects, and how do subjects mediate the relation between objects? How are things and thingness used to think about the self?” (6). Such questions have inspired my interrogation of the relationship between British identity and Indian commodity in *Northanger Abbey*. I am particularly indebted to: Brown’s *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (2004), Freedgood’s *The Idea in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006), Daly’s *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* (2001), Julie Park’s *The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England* (2009), and Cynthia Wall’s *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (2006).
- 2 There are differing accounts of where the name “muslin” originated. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the English derived the name from the Iraq city of Mosul where the material was first discovered. *The Encyclopedia of Clothing and Fashion*, however, attributes the word to the French “mousse,” or foam, “which seemed to convey the feel and texture of India’s filmy cotton product.” Both of these possible linguistic origins highlight the fabric’s foreignness—either by referring to its exotic birthplace or invoking its connection with the French, the dominant purveyors of European fashions.

safeguard the country's textile industries. This secondary legislation also proved ineffectual as eager consumers quickly found means of purchasing smuggled Indian goods in seaside towns around Kent.¹ After the ban's repeal in 1744, muslin grew rapidly in popularity, becoming especially prominent in women's fashions during the 1760s.² In fact, one French writer blamed the deterioration of the Lyons silk industry solely on Marie-Antoinette's trendsetting predilection for Indian muslin.³ This change in royal fashion was promptly emulated by upper and middle-class women like the diarist Mrs. Phillip Lybbe Powys, who in 1795 recorded the royal princesses' appearance at Ascot in "the dress of the times, all clear muslin" (qtd. in Lemire, *Fashion's Favorite* 110). Muslin, particularly white muslin, appealed not only to British women of various classes, but also to women of all ages. As *Lady's Magazine* observed in 1787, "all the Sex now, from 15 to 50 and upwards ... appear in their white muslin frocks" (qtd. in Ribeiro 155). Muslin's versatility lent the fabric to both casual and formal wear; a column on the "April fashions" of 1795 in *Lady's Magazine*, for instance, recommends a "petticoat of worked muslin" with a "plain muslin handkerchief" for morning dress and a "jacket and petticoat of sprig muslin" for evening (qtd. in Buck 140).

In Britain, muslin's trendiness became especially apparent after the death of King George II in 1760 when British women bought muslin instead of the traditional silk for their mourning garments.⁴ As one Paisley silk manufacturer complained, silk's popularity had clearly waned when "a general mourning ensuing and Indian muslins being used for that purpose, this in great measure put a stop to the Paisley trade" (qtd. in Buck 194). Similarly, in 1782, a wool merchant lamented, "The ladies think no more of woollens and stuffs than of an old almanack" (qtd. in Blank 235). Following this shift in fashion, the owners of British mills, particularly those in Manchester, Lancashire, and Norwich, began to replicate Indian muslin, hoping to compete with the sale of imported cotton textiles. London dressmakers and textile merchants further encouraged British fabric

1 See Singal 98.

2 In 1784, the Duchess of Devonshire appeared at a ball dressed in an "English nightgown of muslin with small silver sprigs and all white," while Queen Charlotte wore "a very beautiful dress, of a new manufacture of worked muslin, thin, fine, and clear" (Ribeiro 157) to her husband's 1787 birthday party. Marie-Antoinette donned muslin dresses the most frequently, and E.L. Vigée-Librun famously painted the queen surrounded by roses and clad in a white muslin chemise and straw hat (see Ribeiro 153).

3 See Ribeiro 153–54.

4 See Buck 194.

suppliers to meet this new consumer demand, as evinced by Samuel Salte's advice to the proprietor of a Manchester mill: "Turn your weavers to muslins ... we now send you some patterns drawn [from] Different articles of Muslin come over as presents to the people of fashion" (qtd. in Buck 195).¹ British textile manufacturers swiftly endeavored to accommodate the desire on the part of "people of fashion" for lightweight cotton weaves. British consumers of Indian muslins therefore prompted what Maxine Berg has deemed a process of "import substitution" (99), as merchants and manufacturers rushed to imitate and supplant foreign luxury goods.²

By the time Austen finished writing *Northanger Abbey* in 1803, European manufacturers had begun to import cotton and produce muslin that rivaled the Indian fabric.³ To better secure their tenuous foothold in the muslin market, the owners of British mills demanded that the East India Company cease all textile importation, and instead, acquire only raw materials, which could then be exported and sold as finished British goods.⁴ The Company retorted that British textiles could not compare to the quality of their Indian counterparts; however, the Company's insistence upon the superiority of Indian muslin could not quell the rapid growth and expansion of European cotton mills and their products' enticing cheapness and ready availability. An 1804 trade report illustrates that one year after Austen finished writing *Northanger Abbey*, British importers were

1 This moment also marks the turning point in the larger British economy; as Mary Poovey explains, the state's control over and interference in commerce gradually decreased, transforming the nation's economy into a "relatively autonomous domain" (18).

2 Maxine Berg argues that the European imitation of luxury goods from China and India, particularly porcelain and cotton textiles, engendered the growth of Europe's fashion and luxury industries (86). Berg also claims that while Europeans replicated Asian commodities, "they did not import the technologies on which they were based" (87); however, detailed reports of European industrial spies and the evident mechanical affinity between British and Indian looms insinuate the British textile industry's indebtedness to Indian technologies. Rajani Sudan suggests that by challenging the hegemonic progress narratives of Western science and industry, "we may be able to restore a necessary complexity to the competing technologies of empire" and "identify different, non-Eurocentric discourses that the British used to make sense of new spaces they encountered in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (148).

3 As Jane Schneider explains, the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century introduced the "third great phrase of European cotton history ... marked by slavery in the New World plantation zones of cotton production, ever-cheaper transport costs for moving raw materials, and a staggering technological breakthrough in manufacture" (181).

4 See Keay 438.

alarmed by the success of their domestic competitors. The trade report warns:

We should not be so sanguine as to expect that the demand for the piece-goods of India can ever be so great as formerly, since numerous and extensive manufactories have recently been established in the interior of France as well as England. The weavers have there succeeded in imitating with so much exactness the fabrics of Bengal, particularly our coarse and middling assortment of muslins, that there is every reason to believe our trade in muslins of this description whether for the home or foreign markets must invariably dwindle to nothing. (qtd. in Hamilton 178)

If British women, like Mrs. Allen and Catherine, began to buy all their muslins from domestic sources, then the British trade in Indian textiles might “dwindle to nothing,” unraveling like Mrs. Allen’s ill-fated sleeve. Yet, the merchant appears somewhat optimistic that while European weavers have learned to reproduce “coarse and middling” fabrics and might soon monopolize the trade in “muslins of *this* description,” they have not yet discerned how to imitate softer, thinner muslins. He suggests that imported muslin might still retain its hold on the market if consumers could be persuaded to pay more for a finer, less imitable, and authentic fabric. In *Northanger Abbey*, Henry corroborates British merchants’ avowal of Indian muslin’s preeminence, boasting that the savvy consumer can purchase the genuine textile more cheaply than its counterfeits. According to Henry, Indian muslin will not tear or fray and can even be bought for a “prodigious bargain” (16), unlike the more expensive and less durable domestic cotton that appears to comprise Catherine’s and Mrs. Allen’s gowns. Nevertheless, Henry’s purchase of affordable Indian muslin actually would have been quite unusual. Prasannan Parthasarathi and Giorgio Riello demonstrate that at this time Indian cotton remained a comparably expensive textile, as “the average price of an Indonesian cotton piece was a quarter to a third of an Indian one” and in Britain “the cost of imported cottons was higher than local alternatives such as printed linen and fustians” (10). The allure of Indian cotton, Parthasarathi and Riello suggest, lay not in its affordability, but rather in its “fashionability,” which informs the stylish Henry’s urbane taste (10).

Part of muslin’s fashionability also issued from its strategically constructed mystique. British merchants frequently crafted enigmatic, exoticizing descriptions of both the commodity and its production. These romanticizing representations suppress the material

realities of the labor involved in the textile's manufacture and rhetorically conflate muslin with the bodies of both its Indian producers and its British female consumers. In his textile history, *History of the Cotton Manufacture in Great Britain* (1839), Edward Baines projects the ideal attributes of the British woman onto the fabric of her dress, praising the "superior beauty and virgin purity of the muslins" (336). Here, Baines values both Indian muslin and British women according to their possession of "superior beauty" and "virgin purity." British observations of Indian weavers further intertwine the foreign and the feminine. Dr. Anton Hove, a Polish naturalist commissioned by Joseph Banks to collect information about Indian cotton plants and weaving practices, simultaneously exoticizes and feminizes the production of Indian muslin. He describes his exclusion from a weaving house in Serapoor:

This branch is chiefly performed by women, who cannot be seen by any other person but their own caste. I therefore desired him [the interpreter] to bring me a machine, but in this I was likewise disappointed, and the cause has been ascribed to me for the superstition with which the women are prepossessed, that they could never spin so well if their work came to the light of a stranger. (qtd. in Berg 129)

Hove's perception of the weaving house issues from an orientalist fantasy of the harem; he accepts his prohibition from this all-female space, acquiescing to the "superstition" that his male, Western presence will disrupt the women's sacred and secretive labor.¹ British writers also characterize male weavers as feminized, indolent figures and belittle their labor as a pleasurable leisure activity. Baines credits the superiority of Indian muslin to the "remarkably fine sense of touch possessed by that effeminate people, by their patience and gentleness, and by the hereditary continuance of a particular species of manufacture in families through many generations" (74). In Baines's estimation, the qualities of the ideal Indian weaver—physical sensitivity, patience, and gentleness—mirror the qualities of the ideal British woman. And Baines admires both the weaver's body and the woman's body for sharing the delicacy of muslin itself. He even conflates the production of muslin with the maternal production of colonial subjects. By identifying the "hereditary continuance of a particular species of manufacture *in* families," he gestures towards

1 Of course, it is likely that the Serapoor weavers deftly manipulated Hove, playing off his European preconceptions to discourage his unwanted investigation.

the necessary manufacture *of* colonized, laboring families. Such a reproduction of laboring bodies was also crucial to the growth of the British population that would supply the manpower necessary for the nation's imperial expansion; as Felicity Nussbaum has argued, the British Empire strategically channeled the reproductive power of both British and colonized women.¹ The affinity between descriptions of British women and Indian weavers reflects the mutual exploitation of both populations.

Thus British male writers consolidated their imperial and patriarchal superiority by conflating colonial subjects and female consumers. By feminizing Indian weavers, Britons implemented what Rajani Sudan has deemed the "cultural discourse of alchemy" (165), concealing the Indian weavers' possession of sophisticated—and in some cases, superior—technology. The Indian weaver's naturally endowed, feminized body is subordinated to the power of Britain's scientific, masculinized machines. Baines, for instance, discredits Indian looms as "rude implements," and instead attributes the quality of Indian muslin to the weavers' "physical organization" (9). In contrast to the Indian weaver's unknowable and natural talent, British weavers operate "mechanical inventions," which Baines claims "have enabled the Western nations to compete with, and in some respects greatly to surpass the Hindoos, and which have suddenly given to the cotton manufacture an unparalleled extension in Europe and America" (9). Eventually, he effaces the labor of Indian workers altogether, referring to Dacca muslins as "webs of woven wind" (58). Baines narrates the triumph of Britain's sophisticated, dynamic machinery over the languid, passive Indian body; in fact, he baldly announces his intention to document "the era of invention in England" and to state "more fully and accurately than has hitherto been done, the origins and authorship of the great mechanical inventions" (7). He then offers a precise record of British weaving technology, describing "fully and accurately" each machine's parts, technical name, and mechanical function (7). For example, he meticulously renders Crompton's mule: "it has a system of rollers, to reduce the roving ... it has spindles without bobbins to give the twist, and the thread is stretched and spun at the same time by the spindles, after the rollers have ceased to give out the rove" (198). Baines similarly details the operation of Arkwright's spinning frame, employing terms like "velocity" and "longitude" (120) to lend his prose an air of

1 Nussbaum explains "that a particular kind of national imperative to control women's sexuality and fecundity emerged when the increasing demands of trade and colonization required a large, able-bodied citizenry, and that women's reproductive labor was harnessed to that task" (1).

scientific authority and precision.¹ Praising the superiority of British technology over the Indian laborer's inefficient handiwork, he celebrates the intervening "genius" of British inventions, which "stepped in to remove the difficulty [of hand spinning] and gave wings to a manufacture which had been creeping on the earth" (118–19). And yet, the basic designs of Crompton's mule and Arkwright's spinning frame, like many British weaving implements, resemble devices that Indian weavers had used for centuries.² When the British developed comparable machines in the mid-eighteenth century, they effectively mechanized the elemental operation of these Indian apparatuses.³ To

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- 1 Like most of Baines's descriptions, his account of the spinning frame is tediously exacting, as this illustrative excerpt demonstrates:

In every mode of spinning, the ends to be accomplished are, to draw out the loose fibres of the cottonwool in a regular and continuous line, and after reducing the fleecy roll to the requisite tenuity, to twist it into a thread ... Let it be remarked, that the sliver or carding requires to be drawn out to a considerably greater fineness, before it is of the proper thickness to be twisted into a thread. The way in which this is now accomplished is by two or more pairs of small rollers, placed horizontally,—the upper and lower roller of each pair revolving in contact: the sliver of cotton, being put between the first pair of rollers, is by their revolution drawn through and compressed: whilst still passing through these rollers, it is caught by another pair of rollers placed immediately in front, which revolve with three, four, or five times the velocity of the first pair, and which therefore draw out the sliver to three, four, or five times its former length and degree of fineness: after passing through the second pair of rollers, the reduced sliver is attached to a spindle and fly, the rapid revolutions of which twist it into a thread, and at the same time, wind it upon a bobbin. That the rollers may take hold of the cotton, the lower roller is fluted longitudinally, and the upper is covered with leather. (120–21)

- 2 The earliest written reference to a spinning wheel dates back to 1350 (see Parthasarathi 25). The Indian spinning wheel was further improved by the addition of the footpedal and the crank handle in the seventeenth century (see Schneider 180; Parthasarathi 25).
- 3 In the early nineteenth century, the East India Company also introduced the American cotton gin to south Indian weavers, only to learn that the machine was incompatible with Indian cotton and that Indian weavers already possessed an efficient cotton gin of their own invention (see Parthasarathi 23). While various gins were used throughout the Byzantine, Muslim, and Mongul empires, from the early sixteenth century, the "Indian-style two roller gin" persisted as the most widely popular model employed by Mediterranean weavers (see Lakwete 2). As one American weaver observed, the Indian gin's "simplicity and efficiency cannot be too much admired, notwithstanding all of the rage for the improvement of it" (qtd. in Parthasarathi 23). Lakwete argues that this Indian gin, in fact, was exported by the British to the Americas in the seventeenth century (see Lakwete 16).

cover over the British weaving industry's indebtedness to Indian technology, British writers like Baines strategically feminize Indian weavers, naturalizing their skilled labor and obscuring their technological innovations.

Eventually, the British Empire laid full economic and cultural claim to muslin as a profitable commodity and a symbol of national identity. By the nineteenth century, muslin was a definitively British fabric—so much so that one Victorian contributor in an 1867 article in *Once a Week* proclaimed that “the people of India at the present time number at least two hundred MILLION living souls, affording, in the language of the commercial world, a ‘splendid market’ for the looms of England” (712).⁴ Economic records confirm this writer's judgment, and by 1850, twenty-five percent of all British cotton textiles were exported to India, a commercial venture producing one-twelfth of Britain's national income.² Muslin's metamorphosis over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century—from a smuggled foreign good to a characteristically British product—illustrates Suzanne Daly's notion of a “particular brand of commodity fetishism” that refigures “goods produced in British India into emblems of English identity” (6).³ The Indian population that was

4 In Austen's later novels, including *Emma* (1815) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), muslin is no longer distinguished as Indian; instead, Harriet and Emma decide between different colored ribbons to adorn their “plain” muslin and Miss Steele classifies Eleanor's muslin by its pattern, “spotted,” rather than its place of origin. Henry's recognition of an Indian muslin as the “true” muslin can be read as one of *Northanger Abbey*'s many “opinions” that Austen acknowledges in her Preface to have “undergone considerable changes” (3) in the time elapsed between the novel's composition and publication. Thus, by the time Austen's novel came to print in 1817, Henry's taste for “Indian muslin” was outmoded, representative of a system of mercantile trade that would soon be supplanted by British industry.

2 See Singhal 99.

3 Austen's own letters present a compellingly thorough history of the British importation and eventual production of cotton textiles. In one of her earliest correspondences with her sister Cassandra, she describes her purchase of an Irish linen, “not so fine as I should like it [but] rather finer ... than our last, and not so harsh a cloth” (*Letters* 12, 25 November 1798). A month later, Austen writes again to her sister about her wardrobe, this time expressing her envy of Cassandra's recent “purchase [of] a new muslin Gown.” In light of the current fashions, Austen confesses that she is “ashamed” of her now outdated wardrobe, including the recently purchased Irish linen, and resolves to buy herself a “handsome” muslin like Cassandra's (see *Letters* 15, 24–26 December 1798). The following summer, Austen writes from Bath about “Gauzes for sale” in the town's fashionable shops, suggesting the increasing availability of cotton fabrics and their usurpation of coarser [continued]

once the exclusive producer of muslin likewise was transformed into a “market” dependent upon the looms of their imperial oppressors.¹ Stripped of their productivity, Indian weavers became economically akin to British female shoppers as the British textile industry solidified its mastery over domestic and foreign markets.

Baines’s textile history not only elucidates how Britons feminized the labor of Indian weavers in order to usurp their textile industry, but also how racial ideals of Britishness became interwoven with representations of muslin. Despite his initial praise of Indian muslin’s quality, Baines observes that all Indian muslins bear an undesirable “yellowish hue, caused by imperfect bleaching” (58). He then compliments the British material’s true “whiteness” (58) as a sign of its superiority, elevating British muslin over Indian muslin according to an aesthetic criteria that appears to arise from racist ideology. The sort of irreproachable whiteness esteemed in spotless muslins became central to the establishment of gendered ideals of sexual purity as well as British identity. Muslin functioned as the visual proof of a woman’s inner virtue and a metonymy for the woman herself, as both textile and wearer are frequently described in identical terms. Delicate and transparent, white muslin perpetually embodies the characteristics of the feminine ideal and encourages the regulatory scrutiny of women’s bodies.² Unraveling muslin’s material

domestic textiles like linens and woolens (see *Letters* 20, 2 June 1799).

Fifteen years later, a middle-aged Austen describes her “gauze gown, long sleeves and all” (*Letters* 99, 9 March 1814), indicating the endurance of muslin’s popularity and Austen’s continual personal preference for it. For a more thorough critical analysis of Austen’s epistolary discussions of fashion, fabric, and shopping, see Susan Allen Ford, “Thrifty Measures in Jane Austen’s *Letters*.”

- 1 Indian protestors against British rule would later re-appropriate cotton spinning as a symbol of nationalism. Most famously, in the early twentieth century Gandhi reclaimed the spinning wheel and homespun cloth as visual symbols of India’s liberation, writing that “the foundation of India’s freedom will have been laid only when the import of Lancashire cloth has stopped” (qtd. in Parthasarathi 402).
- 2 As Daly has provocatively argued, this association between white muslin and female virtue persists throughout nineteenth-century literature. Daly notes that white muslin dresses are “virtually the uniform of young, unmarried women in mid-Victorian novels” (45). In George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1874), for instance, Celia Brooke always appears clad in white muslin and her girlish dress enhances her appeal to her future husband, Sir James, who views the “little lady in white muslin” as “a pretty picture” (581). Comparable paragons of Victorian femininity, William Makepeace Thackeray’s Amelia Sedley in *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) and George Meredith’s Clara Middleton in *The Egoist* (1879) dress in “white muslin frock[s]” (47) and “thin [continued]

history thus reveals how the discourse surrounding this commodity invests it with a social value and obscures the importance of the laborers who produce it and the consumers who ensure its continued production.

Henry Tilney's Imperial Connoisseurship

Henry's praise for "true Indian muslin" reveals that at this particular historical moment, the British textile industry was still struggling to contend with its foreign competitors. His distinction between "true Indian" muslin and less authentic variations of the fabric situates the novel at a particular moment in Britain's imperial and commercial history. Austen gestures to Britain's dizzying commercial expansion by crowding her novel with descriptions of Wedgwood porcelain, satin furniture, japanned armoires, Rumford stoves, mahogany wardrobes, cocoa, hothouse pineapples, and women's turbans. Through its engagement with the contemporary marketplace, *Northanger Abbey* offers insight into the "birth of a consumer society," a juncture when some commodities, like Chinese porcelain, were successfully supplanted by British goods, while others, like Indian muslin, still clung to their tenuous hold in the market.¹

Britain's developing consumer culture provoked new debates over the propriety of consumerist practices, especially regarding the dangers allegedly posed by female, middle-class shoppers. By the end of the eighteenth century, the persistent demonization of women consumers had reached a particularly intense stage. Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace points out: "Though it had been necessary to the strong growth of the expanding British economy, the female appetite for goods ... was also perceived as a sinister force threatening male control and endangering patriarchal order" (5). On the one hand, British writers often construe women's consumerist appetites as natural and inevitable, rationalizing women's heightened participation in the public marketplace. Yet, on the other hand, middle-class, female shoppers—like Catherine Moreland—incite anxieties regarding

white muslin" (140), respectively. And in *Ruth* (1853), Elizabeth Gaskell's repentant heroine refuses to accept a gift of "delicate cambric muslin" for herself, choosing instead to wear "the coarsest linen, the homeliest dark blue print" (133). Rejecting the "delicate soft white muslin" as a sign of purity inappropriate for a fallen woman like herself, Ruth uses the material to make clothing for her child, "for whom in its purity of soul nothing could be too precious" (133). Many other Victorian novels feature similar descriptions of white muslin, implementing the trope as a convenient symbol of ideal, chaste femininity.

1 See McKendrick 1.

dress's disguising potential as well as commodities' indistinct origins and cost. In particular, cotton textiles like muslin proved to be mutable, unstable goods, which threatened to blur sartorial distinctions of rank. As one author despairs in an 1810 article for *The Universal Magazine*, "To what rank has the rage for muslin not extended, both upward and downward?" (qtd. in Lemire, *Fashion's Favorite* 114). Baines similarly observes cotton fabric's threateningly democratizing effect: "Women of all ranks, from the highest to the lowest, are clothed in ... cotton from the muslin cap on the crown of the head, to the cotton stocking under the sole of the foot" (336). The female consumer, moreover, engendered fears regarding the dangers of undisciplined female desire. Left unchecked, women's lust for material objects could compel their dishonesty and extravagance. As Bernard Mandeville complains in *The Fable of the Bees* (1714), desperate women might acquire their "Trinkets" and "Apparel" by "pinching their Families, Marketting, and other ways of cheating and pilfiring from their Husbands" (237). As shopping became increasingly gendered as a feminine pastime, it also became regarded as a potentially corrupting activity that could encourage and enable female duplicity.¹

In *Northanger Abbey*, Mrs. Allen exemplifies the dangers of frivolous, indiscriminating female consumerism. Her obsession with fashion precludes her from pursuing more conventional feminine interests, like motherhood; while Mrs. Thorpe "talk[s] chiefly of her children," Mrs. Allen speaks "of her gowns" (23). Mrs. Allen's preoccupation with dress also hinders her from acting as a proper surrogate mother to Catherine. During her naïve charge's first entry into Bath society, she tellingly exhibits "more care for the safety of her new gown than for the comfort of her protégée" (11). Fixated on her dress, Mrs. Allen devotes all of her attention to "preserv[ing] her gown from injury" (12) and comparing the quality of the other women's clothing to her own "delicate muslin" (12). She remains oblivious to her embarrassing friendlessness and Catherine's understandable discomfort with the "awkwardness of having no party to

1 As Laura Brown writes in her seminal text *The Ends of Empire*, the female shopper serves as a "scapegoat" for imperial power: "It is as if navigation, trade, and expansion are all arranged solely for the delectation and profit of womankind ... The activities and motives of male mercantilists and the systematic, bureaucratic, piratical, or mercenary dimensions of imperial expansion disappear behind the figure of the woman, who is herself subsumed by the products that she wears" (118). See also Jennie Batchelor, *Dress, Distress and Desire: Clothing and the Female Body in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (2005); Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (1997); and Erin Mackie, *Market à la Mode: Fashion, Commodity and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator* (1997).

join, no acquaintance to claim, no gentleman to assist them" (12). And despite her excessive attention to her clothes, Mrs. Allen proves a foolish consumer. Flaunting her purchasing power, she announces the worth of her muslin dress as "nine shillings a yard" (16), an enormously inflated price, especially since the muslin is implied to be of the cheaper, British variety. Mrs. Allen's profligate and obsessive consumerism threatens to corrupt Catherine, as Catherine spends her first "three or four days" in Bath shopping and "learning what was mostly worn" (10). An inexperienced shopper, Catherine is in danger of emulating Mrs. Allen's improper "passion for dress" (10).

Henry subordinates Mrs. Allen's taste to his own by brandishing his refined knowledge of textiles and his superior shopping acumen.¹ He subtly chides Mrs. Allen for her impractical spending by publicizing his own "prodigious bargain" (17), the Indian muslin bought at five shillings a yard, and later advocating the practical refashioning of a ruined or worn muslin dress into a handkerchief, cap, or cloak. By criticizing Mrs. Allen's taste in dress as both showy and inferior, Henry casts Mrs. Allen as clumsily pretentious, relegating her to a slightly lower class. An educated, urbane gentleman, Henry can distinguish rank by muslin rather than in spite of it. His paternalistic instruction in how to repurpose muslin also indicts his sister Eleanor's carelessness; her "extravag[ance]" (17) results in the excess of muslin that Henry must put to good use. He similarly reprimands Catherine for her impractical purchase of muslin that, though "pretty," will "fray" (17). The fact that Henry is able to recognize Mrs. Allen's and Catherine's muslins for what they are—expensive, but flimsy, and a "pretty" fabric, but one that will not "wash well"—suggests to Austen's female readers that even in matters of dress and self-adornment, they ought to defer to a discerning gentleman's expert judgment. Henry's authority as an arbiter of style does not immediately seem to suggest that he is representative of patriarchal or imperial power. In fact, comparisons between Henry and other male figures in the novel—his tyrannical father, his chauvinist brother, and his rakish rival, John Thorpe—emphasize his attractiveness as a suitor; even Thorpe concedes that Henry is a "good figure of a man; well put together" (76). Critical readings of Henry have tended to support this laudatory interpretation of his character, and some critics, like

1 Nine shillings roughly translates to about 58.68 in current American dollars; assuming that Mrs. Allen used about 7 or 8 yards to make her dress, her total gown would have cost between \$410.76 and \$479.44. I base my calculations on Hafner-Laney's estimations (140–2). Austen's own dress budget consisted of twenty pounds per year (or around 400 shillings); buying a dress at "only" 9 shillings a yard would have exhausted fifteen to twenty percent of her annual clothing allowance (see Ashelford 170).

Jane Spencer, have even characterized Henry as an explicitly “feminized hero” (207). By reading Henry as a “feminized hero,” Spencer highlights his indebtedness to the sensitive men that appear in gothic novels. Stephanie Eddleman further interrogates the notion of Henry’s feminization, concluding that while Henry is decidedly not “effeminate,” he is “feminized by Austen’s wit” and his knowledge of “accepted feminine behaviors” (69), such as journal writing, novel reading, and shopping. Ultimately, Eddleman perceives Henry to be a “manly and virtuous” suitor (77), who protects Catherine from the “evil patriarchal figure” of General Tilney (68) and proves that “a heroine can achieve a companionate union through marriage to a strong man, if his strength is coupled with integrity” (69). I would argue, however, that Henry’s mastery of shopping avows his superiority to, rather than his sympathy for, unskilled female consumers. Muslin’s imperial history compels us to acknowledge that though shopping became gendered as feminine, the management and evaluation of commodities remained a masculine activity. Henry’s judgment of muslins does not liken him to female shoppers but rather to male merchants, such as Hove and Baines, who claimed authority over Indian weavers by asserting themselves as arbiters of taste and efficiency. Further, Henry does not resist patriarchal power, as Eddleman suggests, but instead wields patriarchal power in more subtle and insidious ways, disguising his privilege as good taste. An imperial connoisseur, Henry’s discrimination in fabric constitutes a political as well as an aesthetic preference. Faced with cotton’s disguising potentiality, he immediately pinpoints the cost and quality of even the most ubiquitous of fabrics, muslin. An informed and discerning consumer, Henry surveys the rapidly swelling commercial world of the early nineteenth century and then reestablishes the visual markers of class and Britishness.

In some ways, Henry’s condescension towards female shoppers replicates Baines’s observation of Indian weavers. Baines casts weaving as a feminized, pleasurable pastime well suited for the naturally sensitive, “effeminate” weavers (74). According to Baines, weaving is “a sedentary occupation, and thus in harmony with [the Indian weaver’s] predominant inclination” (74). By obscuring the material circumstances of the Indian weavers’ labor and their technological sophistication, Baines suppresses the fact that such labor critically underpins Britain’s imperial project. Likewise, the gendering of shopping recasts consumption as a naturally feminine pursuit, obfuscating the British Empire’s economic dependence upon women’s purchasing of luxury imports. Britain’s commercial and imperial expansion is thus undergirded by the perception of women as natural

shoppers and colonial subjects as natural workers. Yet, as Henry's criticism of Mrs. Allen's, Catherine's, and his sister's consumerism implies, though women might be seen as natural consumers, their forays into the marketplace still demand the controlling influence of a rational male authority to supplement their fundamental lack of discernment. Henry even openly articulates his belief in women's stunted perspicacity, declaring that "the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute—neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit" (82). Baines's and Henry's misogynistic observations demonstrate how the masculine, imperial power that regulated, controlled, and profited from commodity production in India and commodity consumption in England was construed as benevolent paternalistic oversight.

Henry then exercises his expert connoisseurship to police the purity of women's bodies through the assessment of their dress. By electing to clothe his sister (and by extension, Catherine) in white muslin, Henry enforces the legibility of both women's virtue. Under Henry's influence, Catherine will learn to dress herself in "true" muslin, a sartorial statement that both bespeaks and enforces her own honesty. Muslin bore evident connotations of girlishness and virginity at the time of *Northanger Abbey*'s composition. In the *Mirror of the Graces* (1811) a "Lady of Distinction" instructs her female readers:

Where doubt may be about this or that hue being becoming or genteel ... let the puzzled beauty leave both, and securely array herself in simple white. That primeval hue never offends, and frequently is the most graceful robe that youth and loveliness can wear. (22)

The author's designation of white as a "primeval hue" illustrates the cultural perception of white muslin as an enduringly popular fabric. By dressing his sister in this classically virginal textile, Henry presents her as a pure and unsullied—and thus desirable—commodity in the marriage marketplace. He also imitates the taste of Indian nobles who were rumored to outfit their wives and concubines in white muslin. Baines quotes a seventeenth-century British merchant's account of his exclusive sale of the fabric "to the Great Mogul's seraglio" (57). The merchant recalls a titillating erotic spectacle: "the king and the lords take great pleasure to behold them in these shifts, and see them dance with nothing else upon them" (58). British women who dress in "true Indian muslin" unconsciously mimic this imagined dress of the seraglio, a fashion that entertains the male gaze by affirming the wearer's transparency, submissiveness, and desirability.

Muslin gowns also compelled the wearer's obedient self-enclosure within the domestic sphere, as such garments were ill suited for Britain's muddy landscape and chilly, wet weather.¹ In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen comments on the impracticality of donning a white dress in Bath; she compliments Mrs. and Miss Holder for "their gowns [that] look so white and so nice," but adds that her aunt considers such apparel "an absurd pretension in this place" (*Letters* 132, 21 May 1801). Because muslin dresses were so easily and frequently dirtied, their wearers depended on servants to launder their garments or a nearby laundry where they could send their soiled wash.² At the time, muslin required rigorous laundering that would have been prohibitively costly and time-consuming for members of the laboring classes, hence, in *Mansfield Park* (1814), Mrs. Norris's disapproval of foolish housemaids who dare to wear "white gowns" (84). In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine discovers a "washing bill" (126) stowed away in a locked armoire, the discarded evidence of the economic burden of keeping cotton garments clean.

When donned by an eligible middle-class woman, like Catherine, a white muslin gown both signifies and obliges the wearer's virtuous behavior. Catherine comes to learn that spotless muslin can only be maintained by confining oneself within the domestic sphere, away from the "nastiness" (75) of bad weather and bad men, like John Thorpe. The Thorpes' frequent entreaties to Catherine to join their open carriage rides threaten to stain both her reputation and her gowns, a dual danger registered by Catherine's guardians. Mr. Allen cautions Catherine against the "odd appearance" of "young men and

- 1 Ladies who favored muslins regardless of the weather sacrificed their physical health for the sake of fashion (see Blank 24). British writers routinely acknowledge that dressing improperly threatened one's health; as the physician Thomas Beddoes warned, "the modern passion for light, flimsy, airy dress, so prevalent among all ranks, no small share of the equally common prevalence of colds, fevers, rheumatisms, asthmas, consumptions, is owing" (89). Similarly, the author of *The Mirror of the Graces* cautions her young female readers that women who "wear gossamer dresses, with bare necks and naked arms, in a hard frost, [as] has been the mode in this country ... lay themselves open to the untimely ravages of rheumatisms, palsies, consumptions, and death" (68). In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen mocks one such fashion victim, the foolish "Mrs. Powlett," who ignored the frigid January weather and attended a dinner party "at once expensively and nakedly dress'd in mid-winter" (*Letters*, 8–9 January 1801).
- 2 See Blank 240, Hughes 189. Entrusting the care of one's gowns to servants, according to Austen's letters, was both expensive and stressful. Throughout October 1798, Austen laments the family's employment of an inept wash-woman, who "does not look as if anything she touched would ever be clean" (*Letters* 9, 24 October 1798).

women driving about the country in open carriages" (75), alerting her to the impropriety of such unchaperoned excursions. By presenting open carriages as the possible site of sexual impropriety, Austen reverses the trope of the closed carriage as a transgressive, sexually liberating space, which appears in so many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century novels. Always thinking of her gowns, Mrs. Allen views such jaunts as dangerous because of the threat that they pose to a woman's dress: "Open carriages are nasty things. A clean gown is not five minutes wear in them. You are splashed getting in and getting out; and the wind takes your hair and your bonnet in every direction" (75). On the one hand, Mrs. Allen's concern for the "dirtiness" of open carriages comically emphasizes her preoccupation with the trivial, which distracts her from perceiving the more pressing threat posed by John Thorpe's aggressive courtship of Catherine. On the other hand, however, Mrs. Allen's warning alludes to the way in which feminine fashions enforced the legibility of a woman's virtue. If Catherine cannot leave the home without spoiling her gown, then even the most negligent of guardians, like Mrs. Allen, will be able to detect her indiscretions. By dressing in pure white muslin, a dainty and easily stained material, Catherine announces her sexual purity and marriageability at the expense of her mobility.

Catherine ultimately proves to be faithful, enduring, and honest—essentially, a "true" woman—by submitting to Henry and attiring herself in genuine, Indian muslin. She copies Eleanor Tilney's "real elegance," and in turn, presents herself to Henry as a genuine commodity, "open, candid, artless and guileless, with affections strong but simple, forming no pretensions, and knowing no disguise" (*Northanger Abbey* 152). Catherine's emulation of Eleanor differs from both the coquettish Isabel Thorpe's strategic employment of feminine artifice and the snobbish Mrs. Allen's ostentatious consumption. In contrast, mimicking "real elegance" enhances Catherine's own authenticity and honesty. Austen implies that the comparison between true women and their false counterparts eventually advances "artless" and "guileless" femininity, just as the comparison between "true Indian muslin" and imitation fabrics promotes authentic commodity over cheap counterfeit. And like the genuine muslin that can be made into "a handkerchief, or a cap, or a cloak" (17), as Henry points out, Catherine proves to be a teachable woman who can be refashioned to meet her husband's desires. In fact, Henry admires Catherine's compliance, asserting that "teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing" (127). A genuine suitor unstained by artifice, Catherine ultimately resembles the "true" muslin that

Henry prefers.¹ Given Henry's proven investment in the consumption of textiles and women's dress, the narrator's later assertions that "dress is at all times a frivolous distinction" and "the heart of man ... is little biased by the texture of [ladies'] muslin" (52) emerge as particularly disingenuous. Catherine's choice of muslin—its provenance, quality, and texture—does, in fact, matter to Henry. By specifying his preference for "true Indian muslin," Henry asserts his imperial connoisseurship; he camouflages his patriarchal privilege as gentlemanly good taste, endorsing white, delicate dresses that act as the material record of a woman's purity. Henry's paternalistic surveillance of women's fashion, moreover, replicates the British Empire's regulation of India's textile industry. Conflations between descriptions of true women and their genuine muslin dresses, as well as between British female shoppers and Indian weavers, demonstrate how the construction of modern British masculine identity depended on the concomitant denigration of feminine and foreign bodies. Both Henry and British merchants differentiate themselves from women and colonial subjects by avowing the superiority and the necessity of their masculine judgment. Far from serving as a "frivolous distinction" (52), throughout the novel, Austen shows dress to be bound up in the larger structures of British imperialism and gender politics—both as a spoil of imperial exploitation and as a trapping of femininity that underscores the commodification of women in the marriage market.

(2015)

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1 Tellingly, the "fashionable" Isabella Thorpe never wears white, adorning herself instead in various colors and even experimenting with avant-garde accessories, like a turban (86, 160).

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