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An evening with Ackermann: Evening dress in *The Repository of Arts*, 1809–1813

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the presentation of evening dress within the first 50 issues of *The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics*, from January 1809 to February 1813. Within this early nineteenth-century British magazine, published in London by Rudolph Ackermann, several visuals and voices emerge as its primary fashion communicators. Through the written observations of two author-characters, as well as elegant hand-colored fashion plates and tactile fabric swatches of domestic manufacture, *The Repository of Arts* provided a dynamic array of sartorial instructions for its readers to consider. This study illuminates the publication's explanation of the temporal boundaries of evening dress and related dress categories, its discussion of good taste and variety in fashion, and its commentary on visual impact, light reflectivity, and bodily exposure, providing new insights into the significance of evening dress at the start of the nineteenth century.

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Introduction

For ladies living in Regency-era Britain, the evening was undoubtedly an opportunity for fashionable display. They attended balls, fêtes, dinners, and operas dressed up in their finery. But where did they turn for guidance on what to wear during this sartorially significant time of day? Beyond seeking advice from fashionable friends and trusted textile merchants and milliners, well-to-do women had access to a selection of magazines and periodicals for the latest fashion news. These included Parisian imports such as *Le Mercure Galant* and *Le Journal des Dames et des Modes* as well as British publications including *The Lady's Magazine* and *La Belle Assemblée* (Best, 2017, pp. 17–27), all of which remained in print until the 1830s. Women also enjoyed miniature magazines like *The Ladies' Mirror* or *Mental Companion* and similar “pocketbook fashion plates” (Campbell, 2016, pp. 10–11).

Within these publications, one of the most appealing features of each issue was the fashion plate (Figure 1), an artistically rendered illustration depicting one or more women dressed in the latest styles. Fashion plates and their accompanying descriptions were not only the subjects of many readers' aspirations (Best, 2017, p. 37), but they also provided technical information to dressmakers.

Perhaps because each picture speaks a thousand words, the words printed alongside nineteenth-century fashion plates are easy to overlook in the twenty-first century.

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Figure 1. "Ball dress" featuring a "bodice of marigold velvet." *The Repository of Arts*, February 1812, p. 120. Courtesy of Katie Popova, Lost Elegance.

However, these publications were densely packed with text, prompting the following questions: What fashion messages were women reading? What forms of editorial storytelling were employed to captivate their imaginations and influence their consumption habits? What does the text reveal that cannot be communicated by the images alone?

To begin to answer these questions, I turned to another early nineteenth-century publication: *The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics*. Commonly referred to as Ackermann's *Repository*, this British magazine was published by Rudolph Ackermann in London, beginning in 1809. Directing its

contents toward a readership base primarily composed of women (Ford, 1983, p. 80), *The Repository of Arts* was released monthly until the end of 1828. I have examined a sample size of the first 50 issues of this publication, from January 1809 to February 1813, for this analysis of how evening dress was presented through text, imagery, and textile samples.

Although evening dress did not dominate the culturally well-rounded magazine, the first 50 issues contained detailed commentary on fashion trends. Though its elegantly illustrated fashion plates have caught the eye of researchers and enthusiasts, the textual contents within *The Repository of Arts* have attracted less scholarly attention. However, its informative advertorials and lively articles provide substantial evidence of early nineteenth-century fashion mores and communication methods.

Toward a new understanding of the origins of evening dress

Some of the most animated discussions in *The Repository of Arts* revolve around evening fashion. More importantly, its editorial contents call for a revision of the origin story of evening dress.

An encyclopedic entry by Jane E. Hegland (2010) in the *Berg Companion to Fashion* asserted that most dress historians believe evening dress emerged as a distinct category during the mid-1820s (p. 265). Hegland cited Romanticism and developments in the textile industry as contributing factors and explained that magazines during this time contained fashion plates labeled for specific evening activities. She mentioned *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Peterson's Magazine* from the United States as two prime examples from the 1820s (p. 266). However, *Godey's* did not appear in print until 1830 (Mackrell, 1997, p. 138) and *Peterson's* launched in the 1840s. Moreover, fashion plates depicting evening dress, ball dress, and the other garment names and variations Hegland referenced were published as early as 1809 in *The Repository of Arts*. Therefore, I argue that evening dress crystallized as a category of fashion notably earlier than the mid-1820s.

Hegland (2010) also defined evening dress in relation to fashionable silhouettes, exposure of the feminine form, and surface treatments of fabric (p. 265). My findings include a few distinct patterns and observations that substantiate these as key components of evening attire.

Garments and textiles presented in *The Repository of Arts* were adaptable, with time-of-day and activity-based categories being relatively fluid in the evening. Bodily exposure, though not common in morning dress, was permissible in eveningwear, although there were mixed responses as to its decorum. The voices within Ackermann's *Repository* observed a great deal of variety in evening attire and transmitted a diverse array of options to their readers. As the publication's author-characters explained, this vestimentary variety was explored strictly within the bounds of good taste. Good taste required ladies to exhibit ease, delicacy, and a natural form rather than subject their bodies to the whalebone-induced "deformity" (Arbiter Elegantiarum, 1811b, p. 362) of structured foundational garments. The aim of preparing oneself for fashionable exhibition before the eyes of others was a carefully considered aspect of evening dress. Concerning adornment, a certain amount of sparkle

was permissible, but the overall visual impact of an evening ensemble was softened with white accessories so as not to offend the viewer.

Sources of fashion information in Ackermann's *Repository*

Scouring of *The Repository of Arts* for fashion information presents the methodological project of engaging with three different forms of media – namely, text, textiles, and fashion plates. The publication's fashion editorial section began as “Fashions for Ladies and Gentlemen,” but it was primarily restricted to ladies' dress by mid-1810. Each issue contained two hand-colored aquatint fashion plates (Mackrell, 1997, p. 114) along with accompanying descriptions and a separate column of “General Observations.” The first few issues in 1809 attributed the plates' designs and descriptions to Madame Lanchester of Saint James' Street, an authority on ladies' fashion who had published *Le Miroir de la Mode* from 1803 to 1806 (Mackrell, 1997, p. 110). By the spring of 1809, she was no longer credited. Instead, two author-characters emerged as the primary fashion communicators: Arbiter Elegantiarum and Belinda the letter-writer. These dynamic voices were tempered by an advertorial series containing textile swatches of British production.

The “General Observations” column of the “Fashion for Ladies” section included commentary by Arbiter Elegantiarum, an opinionated male character whose Latin name translates to judge of elegance. He promised to “publish dogmas and compel obedience,” but requested that his “fair readers [... first take] the advice of their sage and sapient counsellor, looking-glass” (Arbiter Elegantiarum, 1809c, p. 398) as they attempted to navigate the realm of fashion. Following this column was a series of “Letter[s] From a Young Lady in London to Her Sister in the Country.” Likely fictional letters, these were addressed from the vivacious and fashionable Belinda, whose name represents beauty, to her steadfast and attentive sister Constance. Beginning in July 1809 (Belinda, 1809a, pp. 45–46), the series continued intermittently, with 25 letters published throughout the first 50 issues. The letters typically began with details of people, places, and goings-on, and proceeded to deliver comprehensive fashion information. Belinda, living amongst the fashionable set of London, reported to her sartorially isolated sister what others wore, what she added to her own wardrobe, and what fabrics she recommended.

The first 50 issues of *The Repository of Arts* did not confirm whether Belinda's messages were works of fiction or authentic letters from one sister to another. It was common for periodicals of this time to publish readers' contributions. Cynthia White (1970, p. 35) explained that Georgian women took to writing fictionalized letters to the editors of *La Belle Assemblée* to speak their minds about frustrating friends and relatives. The *Athenian Mercury* also published reader-contributed letters. According to Kathryn Shevelow (1989, p. 69), these submissions may have been styled as private letters, but they were carefully composed in a way that made them suitable for public consumption.

However, two correspondence-style columns in Ackermann's *Repository* – “The Female Tatler” and “Letters between Amelia in London and her Mother in the Country” – were written by William Combe (Adburgham, 1972, p. 224), suggesting that Belinda's letters were fictional as well. Either way, they were created to entertain and inform readers.

In explaining Belinda's role in *The Repository of Arts*, I will borrow from Susan Hiner's analysis of Parisian men who followed the story of a Polish émigré as he attempted to make sense of the metropolis. Hiner (2010, p. 21) argued that Parisian insiders who lacked the



Figure 2. “Allegorical Wood-cut, with patterns of British manufacture.” *The Repository of Arts*, March 1809, p. 189. Courtesy of Katie Popova, Lost Elegance.

correct social skills could discretely use this foreign outsider as a cover while learning about new forms of etiquette. Similarly, Constance was an outsider who British ladies could relate to while navigating London society and its fashions.

In addition to these letters and *Arbiter Elegantiarum*’s “dogmas,” a monthly advertorial series of “Allegorical Wood-cut[s], with Patterns of British Manufacture” provided tactile fashion information in the form of physical textile samples (Figure 2). In each installment, three or four fabric swatches were secured to an ornately designed page. Every swatch was accompanied by a description of its fiber content, weave structure, and recommended uses. The magazine’s publishers requested that textile manufacturers submit the latest samples, “and if the requisites of Novelty, Fashion, and Elegance are united, the quantity necessary

for this Magazine will be ordered” (“Allegorical Wood-cut,” 1809a, p. 54). Alison Adburgham (1972, p. 226) offered Urling’s lace advertisements in *La Belle Assemblée* as the possible inspiration for this section, while Alice Mackrell (1997) asserted that its origin was German, like Ackermann himself, citing swatches in the *Journal für Fabrik* (p. 114).

Independently, these fabrics, fashion plates, and the words of Belinda and Arbiter Elegantiarum provided readers with different perspectives on what constituted appropriate and fashionable evening attire. Together, they illuminate a vivid, nuanced picture of women’s fashions in early nineteenth-century Britain.

Time-of-day dressing

While earlier periodicals described fashion as a capricious and fickle force (Best, 2017, p. 19), magazines of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries attempted to rationalize fashion. They did so by discussing the etiquette of what to wear for each season and occasion. The clothing culture of the early nineteenth century necessitated that women adapt their attire for different activities and times of day.

The three overarching categories of dress women’s fashion were undress, half dress, and full dress. Undress referred to clothing worn early in the day and for informal domestic settings, whereas half dress described smart ensembles often worn outside of the home (Percoco, 2015, p. 7). Full dress, the most formal category, was suitable for court appearances as well as opulent evening affairs. Throughout Ackermann’s *Repository*, these classifications were also referred to as the humbler, intermediate, and higher orders of attire. A woman’s evening ensemble could follow the guidelines of either half dress or full dress, depending on the formality of the occasion and the guests in attendance (Percoco, 2015, p. 7).

Dresses were typically named after a category (e.g., full dress), an occasion or activity, (e.g., evening dress), or both (e.g., evening full dress). The first 50 issues of *The Repository of Arts* featured morning dress, carriage dress, riding dress, walking or promenade dress, evening dress, opera dress, ball or dancing dress, and the occasional sea-beach costume. Interestingly, there were no fashion plates entitled dinner dress, despite many references to dressing for dinner.

The subject of evening dress – defined as the style of fashion suitable for wearing in the evening (Hegland, 2010, p. 265) – warrants a brief discussion of time and the temporal boundaries communicated in Ackermann’s *Repository*. Cassidy Percoco (2015, p. 7) concluded that Regency dinners were held from four o’clock to seven o’clock PM. However, Belinda (1810e) “never dine[d] till seven or eight” (p. 391) and took between one-and-a-half to two-and-a-half hours to get ready. In March 1810, she wrote: “Adieu, dear sister! – The dial points at half past five. I fly to my toilet, to equip myself for our gay dinner party” (Belinda, 1810c, p. 188). However, her evening diversions did not end after the meal. As explained in another letter, “[a]t dinner we assemble a gay and elegant group of fashionables; and when we retire to the drawing-room, [...] music, cards, chess, the play of the devil, together with some conversation and a little flirting, occupy us during the evening” (1810g, p. 303). Evening activities were social affairs enjoyed in the company of other well-dressed guests.

The texts within Ackermann’s *Repository* suggested that the time-of-day categories of dress could overlap, and that some garments could serve multiple functions. One of

Belinda's letters (1810b) described "a pretty and convenient dress which [...] precludes the necessity of frequent change when destined to domesticate within doors" (pp. 125–126). It was warm enough to wear in the carriage and, when accessorized differently, appropriate for the home. Likewise, some plates were designed for multiple uses with titles like "Evening or Opera Dresses" ("Fashions for Ladies," 1811, p. 104). Textiles, too, were promoted as being suitable for more than one time of day, including two muslins in the "Allegorical Wood-cut" advertorial series: One was "confined to no absolute order of costume" (1809c, pp. 334–335) and the other was considered suitable for morning wraps and evening dresses alike (1810b, p. 270).

Editorial descriptions in *The Repository of Arts* indicated that ball or dancing dresses differed from evening dresses only in their length; they were otherwise comprised of the same aesthetic qualities and materials. In April 1810, Belinda (1810d) observed that "[t]rains are making rapid advances in this order of costume; some drawing-room beauties wear them very long. No evening dress, however (unless professedly for dancing), must now be worn at a walking length" (p. 265). As she explained, the dancing dress featured a shorter hemline out of necessity, allowing ladies to move their feet nimbly and gracefully (1810a, p. 49).

Evening dress and bodily exposure

Between 1809 and 1813, dresses featured a columnar silhouette and Empire waistline, with long, gathered skirts starting below the bust and skimming over the torso. This came as a result of the Classical revival, a movement that brought ancient Greek and Roman aesthetics into contemporary design and made its way into fashion toward the end of the eighteenth century (Johnston, 2005, p. 40). The draped garments seen in antique artworks and sculptures often revealed the intimate details and contours of the bodies beneath. However, as Anne Hollander (2016[2002]) noted, eighteenth-century women were only permitted to display "an emphatic swell of the breasts" (p. 104). Because most of the female figure was covered up, the focus shifted to the bosom, arms, and shoulders as they were variously concealed and exposed throughout the day.

The differences in cut for morning and evening dress were discussed with more definitive language in *The Repository of Arts* by 1812, following earlier fluctuations. The result was that a woman's arms, shoulders, neck, and chest were often exposed in fashionable evening attire but covered completely in morning dress. Hegland (2010) identified this exposure as critical to eveningwear, describing the "evening gown [as] a special form of dress that amplifies a woman's femininity and often proclaims her desirability" through plunging necklines, bared arms, and other forms of bodily accentuation (p. 265).

The description of a textile sample in February 1812 captured these differences. The fabric, "calculated for the evening or intermediate costume [...] differs in appropriation and tasteful adaptation only in its construction. For domestic wear it should be made high and plain [...]. For the evening, it should be formed low in the bosom" ("Allegorical Wood-cut," 1812, p. 122). That July, Belinda (1812b) prescribed "long sleeves, and covered throat, in the morning [...] and in the evening, short sleeves, [and an] uncovered bosom" (p. 44). She reiterated the differences in cut in the same letter: "The morning robe is invariably made high in the neck, with long sleeves," whereas with "the evening or full dress [...] bosoms are cut very low, and the shoulders and back rather unbecomingly exposed. The sleeve is here worn short, and rather full" (pp.

44–45). In the November issue, a plate depicting a crimson evening dress was accompanied by a caption describing how the bodice was “formed so as partially to expose the bosom and shoulders” (“Fashions for Ladies,” 1812c, p. 301). These passages point to two extremes in fashion: the covered-up convention for morning or domestic attire and the preference for low-cut bodices in the evening. Evening dress was meant to expose and display parts of the female form – but this level of exposure was not always considered flattering.

The following passage reveals the period’s complex temporal notions and terminology and includes commentary on these fashionable extremities. Arbiter Elegantiarum wrote:

The misapplication of terms in fashionable nomenclature has often been the subject of entertainment to the uninitiated [. . . and may] be thought an odd perversion of language: but what will the good people say to the names applied to dress, when they are informed, that the *undress* of the present day consists of a comfortable kind of habiliment closed round the neck and covering the arms; that the *half-dress* is rather more open and exposed; and that the *full-dress* scarcely admits of any coverings at all, but in common language would be called complete nakedness*. (1812b, p. 180)

A footnote was provided to explain the accompanying fashion plate:

*The full dress given in this number, is not at all a fair specimen of *haut ton*: it should be very much lower, and more square in the front, and the sleeves much smaller; indeed, a mere strap, so that the whole of the bust, shoulders, and arms may be completely exposed: we could not overcome the modest objections of the artist, to representing the figure in the extreme of fashion. (1812b, p. 180)

While the plate itself appeared demure, the text revealed how controversial such a dress could be when adapted to the most adventurous interpretation of fashion.

This sort of style could appear immodest to some readers and, indeed, to the artist and author-characters themselves. Arbiter Eligantiarum’s (1812b) essay continued by asking, “[does] this mode of dress defeats its own purposes?” and, “what man would be ambitious to possess the confidence of a lady who freely *unbosoms* herself to all around her?” (p. 180). With these questions, he implied that a lady dressed in this revealing manner might repel rather than attract gentleman suitors by appearing sexually available instead of marriageable. For such a woman, he deemed “modesty a farce” (p. 180) and implied that she could be seen as lacking in virtue, given the low likelihood that an observer would associate her fashionable form of beauty with purity and innocence.

To counter this thought, Arbiter Eligantiarum offered an alternative perspective:

I must not, however, forget my character, and lose the fashionable in the moral censor. I must suppose that there is a code of morals as well as a set of terms peculiar to high life; and I must compel my self to believe, that a lady of fashion is so armed with conscious purity, or unconscious innocence, that she may move through the gay circle, join the festive dance, or lounge in the boxes of the Opera (like our first parents in the Garden of Eden), without knowing that she is naked. (1812b, p. 182)

Here, he grappled with the conflicting demands of evening fashion and moral piety before ultimately merging the two, devising a portrait of the fashionably exposed lady as an innocent Eve. However, while the female form was often on display in evening attire,

neckline and cut were not the only dress variations or potential causes for concern in women's fashion.

Variety and the boundaries of good taste

A principal theme running throughout the first 50 issues of Ackermann's *Repository* was the abundance of vestimentary variety of women's evening attire. As Arbiter Elegantiarum (1810b) observed in June 1810, "[v]ariety is certainly more than ever the order of the day; it is impossible to visit the drawing-room, the opera, or the promenade, without making this observation" (p. 389). The April issue of that year contained a fashion plate depicting three different evening dresses instead of just one design ("Fashions for ladies and gentlemen," 1810, p. 264). It was published alongside Belinda's (1810d) observation that "evening dress exhibits such a great variety, that I am puzzled to select from the redundancy those articles which claim the highest distinction in our circles of *haut ton*" (p. 264).

In 1811, mirroring all the vibrancy of the metropolis, she wrote: "My dear sister, were I to comply with the sum total of your requests [for fashion information], I should fill a quire, instead of a sheet of paper, so much variety every where prevails" (1811b, p. 292). Despite priding herself on her keen understanding of London fashion, Belinda (1810e) even admitted to being "so bewildered with [the] multiplicity" of evening and ball dresses that she "scarcely [knew] how to select those which claim precedence in point of taste and elegance" (p. 391). This somewhat overwhelming variety allowed ladies flexibility within the overarching codes of fashion. Readers of Ackermann's *Repository* were told that "in the evening [...] you may adorn yourself as you please, without the imputation of singularity, so great is the variety in which the present race of fashionables indulge" (Belinda, 1812b, p. 44). In addition to pointing out the variety, this guidance implied that a unique appearance was undesirable, suggesting the importance of fitting in.

Indeed, readers were reminded that fashion freedoms fell within certain style boundaries. Arbiter Elegantiarum (1812c) made this clear in the fall of 1812:

There is no period of the year in which fashion exhibits a greater variety than the present; [...] the fair votaries of the fantastic goddess have ample scope for their invention [...]. There is, however, a certain established style, from which no female can depart without endangering an application of affected singularity detrimental to the deviator [...] therefore, we enforce an attention to general style. (pp. 301–302)

Once again, sartorial singularity was to be avoided at all costs. To comply with the codes of "general style," women had to demonstrate an understanding of good taste. Arbiter Elegantiarum, the self-styled "high-priest [...] at the altar of true taste" (1810a, p. 123), promised readers of *The Repository of Arts* that "[n]othing shall appear in our pages but what is strictly compatible to good taste" (1809a, p. 250). Any lady wishing to follow the "fantastic goddess" of fashion could do so tastefully with the discerning publication's guidance. But what constituted good taste for evening dress in early nineteenth-century Britain, according to Ackermann's *Repository*?

Most importantly, fashion was not to outshine its wearer: "[A]s long as the decorations are kept in subordination to the object decorated, they will be in good taste, but [...] the moment dress becomes principal, all beauty and consistency is lost" (Arbiter Elegantiarum, 1809b, p. 329). Additionally, an undisturbed, natural silhouette was considered tasteful and beautiful,

in contrast to the “monstrous forms” (Arbiter Elegantiarum, 1811a, p. 168) of the eighteenth century that were achieved by structured foundational garments. Along with this emphasis on a natural and unstructured form, tasteful style was characterized by an easy informality and undisturbed delicacy. Arbiter Elegantiarum (1812a) “level[ed] anathemas against the stiffness and formality of courtly parade, and [...] consider[ed] ease as essential to elegance” (p. 48).

The fashionably elevated Empire waist of the early nineteenth century was quite a departure from eighteenth-century bodices, which, before the 1790s, ended near the natural waist. In Belinda’s letters and Arbiter Elegantiarum’s jeremiads, the long stay – a nineteenth-century foundational garment that smoothed out the torso and provided coverage from the bust to the hips – came up frequently as being sartorially offensive. The latter called it “that merciless destroyer of every thing that is beautiful” (Arbiter Elegantiarum, 1809c, p. 397) in June 1809 and railed at the idea of the female form being enveloped in whalebone again in June 1811:

I am merely going to say one or two words more on the hackneyed subject of the *long stay*, which, I suppose, must now have reached the climax of disgusting deformity. I have witnessed the rise and progress of this monstrous machine with emotions of horror common to all who are interested about the beauty or health of nature’s fairest works: and though I have failed in the endeavour to convince my readers how ugly, how ungraceful, how unbecoming it is; though I cannot persuade them, that it is not beautiful to be bound up like a barrel, nor graceful to be rendered stiff and unmotionless, I think I shall be successful in convincing them of the *procrustean* and leveling power of this curiously wrought machine. (Arbiter Elegantiarum, 1811b, p. 362)

Here, he referenced Procrustes, the villain from Greek mythology who forced his victims to fit an iron bed either by stretching out their bodies or cutting them to size. According to this argument, the long stay mercilessly made all bodies conform.

While Arbiter Eligantiarum lamented that he could not discourage readers by arguing against this style’s stiff, unnatural appearance, he believed he could persuade ladies of fashion with a class-based argument. He offered a stern warning about how the long stay could erase all marks of social rank:

The shopkeeper’s wife, the haberdasher’s apprentice, nay, even the common household drudge, the servant of all-work, is now become as fashionably habited, in regard to this article of dress, as the lady of the first distinction, and is equally proud of her stiff back, and her inability to move. Now, is this not alarming? [...] What is to be done? (Arbiter Elegantiarum, 1811b, p. 362)

Susan Hiner (2010, p. 15) defined distinction as taste – a social construct and a tool that elite members of society could use to assert their power and prominence over others. She explained that, in the nineteenth century, fashion was an important indicator of distinction and was frequently used to elevate certain classes (p. 11). Tastefully deployed, fashion and ornamentation separated the fashionables from the common folk, the wealthy from the poor. If the “servant of all-work” and the “lady of first distinction” were both seen in the same clothes, important class cues could be lost.

To this grave sartorial crisis, Arbiter Elegantiarum provided a solution. Though laced with irony, it provides clues as to the function of ornamentation and fashion as markers of distinction:

Suppose my fashionable readers were to wear the *corset* over, instead of under, their other dress; it might then be ornamented like the ancient stomacher, and [...] form a noble point for the display of jewels. Really the more I think of this, the more I am pleased with it [...]. Let my fair friends look to this. (1811b, p. 362)

In the eighteenth century, many bodices were secured at the front with a stomacher, a V-shaped panel of fabric that was often highly decorated. According to this satirical commentary, it would have been more acceptable for a lady of the upper class to be heavily ornamented in this outmoded style, and therefore distinguished, than stiffly corseted as any common woman could be.

However, this advice was not to be taken literally. Just as good taste called for a natural form, it also insisted that the clothes not outshine the wearer. As such, certain combinations of textiles, colors, and accessories were promoted while others were discouraged.

Visual impact and light reflectivity

As the sources of fashion information within *The Repository of Arts* suggested, there were differences in the approach between domestic dress, which would have been seen by only a small group of people, and dress for public occasions, which could have been observed by a great many people. These differences call to mind questions about the observers and the observed, seeing and being seen.

Both author-characters frequently described the fashionable triumphs and failures they witnessed. In one particularly expressive letter, Belinda described how “the *coup d’œil*” (1811c, p. 53) – the stroke of the eye or glance around the room – produced a magnificent impression at a spectacular evening affair. “With a brain agreeably bewildered by the intoxicating splendour and dazzling brightness of the Prince Regent’s *fête*, how shall I rationally collect my thoughts [...]?” (p. 53), she swooned. Here, as an awestruck observer, Belinda highlighted the significance of the visual effect of evening dress. That Belinda’s letters did not only list the details of the clothing she saw but also described how she responded to the sight of them indicates that seeing and responding were crucial parts of the transaction between wearer and viewer.

This transaction was a significant part of the clothing culture of the time. Staring was a fashionable and performative activity supported by accessories like the folding fan and the quizzing glass – a lens that could be held up to bring distant objects into focus. Rather than using this lens to correct poor vision, Susan Vincent (2018) argued that members of the upper classes embraced the quizzing glass as a fashionable accessory that communicated a clear message: “Look at me looking at you” (p. 11). If this was the case, fashionably dressed figures knew they had a responsibility to impress onlookers.

Whether they spent the evening dancing, dining, or peering out of an opera box, ladies were compelled to “complete [themselves] for fashionable exhibition” (Belinda, 1809e, p. 404) and embrace being on display. The articles within Ackermann’s *Repository* advised readers to be chiefly concerned with how others would perceive and interpret their appearance. Belinda (1809d) noted this visual consideration following a description of her own evening dress, explaining, “Although you will find nothing particularly striking in it, separately described [...] as a *whole*, I assure you it had a most becoming effect” (p. 336). On another occasion, she described her desire to impress: “We yesterday gave orders to our dressmaker for [...] an autumnal ball-dress or two, which I think will astonish the old

stagers. Madame Brunelle has promised not to exhibit them to any one, so that they will start fresh upon the sight, and eclipse alike by their novelty and elegance” (1809c, p. 194). The importance placed on “astonishing” onlookers suggested that, when ordering new evening dresses, readers should take pleasure in being seen and prepare accordingly.

Word choice often reinforced the notion of being on display. Readers were made aware of “brilliantly conspicuous” (Belinda, 1810a, p. 48) metallic trimmings and told that they could “expect to arrest no common attention” in the “attractive habits” (Belinda, 1812a, p. 49) presented in *The Repository of Arts*. They were advised that “fresh auxiliaries” were necessary “to vary your exterior *et-ceteras*, so as to keep the flame alive” (Belinda, 1811a, p. 105) with observant suitors. Belinda even shared a remarkable story about how, in her sartorial “splendour,” she “so totally [...] eclipsed” a friend and received “a *serious offer* the next morning” (1810a, p. 48) from a captivated gentleman. “[A]s I was indebted for the honour rather to my decorations than *myself*, I turned him over to my milliner” (1810a, p. 48), she added cheekily.

Adorning oneself in sparkling surfaces has long been a method for attracting attention (Barker, 2019). Accordingly, a textile’s reflective qualities were occasionally described in *The Repository of Arts*. The selection of “Patterns of British Manufacture” included one sample of “satin twilled silk,” said to “[display] a variety of shades according to the reflections of the light” (“Allegorical Wood-cut,” 1809b, p. 189). Another “mazarine and orange flowered gossamer silk, adapted for full dress,” was considered a “striking and brilliant article [...] the glowing richness of its hues renders every auxiliary unnecessary” (“Allegorical Wood-cut,” 1810a, p. 57).

These descriptions indicated which eye-catching effects were safely within the boundaries of good taste. As for the mazarine blue and orange silk, it was said that “[d]iamonds and pearls, or white beads, are the only ornaments [...] allowed with robes of this article” (“Allegorical Wood-cut,” 1810a, p. 57). White accents were permissible, but colored gems would have been visually overwhelming. The description of a yellow-gold velvet fabric “adapted for pelisses, evening robes, and mantles” echoed a similar sentiment: “Every species of white trimming is alone suitable as decorations for garments of this material. White crape long sleeves, over short ones of white satin, with [...] white satin slippers, are delicate softeners to robes of this brilliant article” (“Allegorical Wood-cut,” 1811, p. 111). According to *Arbiter Elegantiarum*, the “glare, show, and extravagance” (1812a, p. 48) of too many “discordant colours” (1811a, p. 168) and reflective textures would have been considered harsh and distasteful. A luminescent glow, balanced by white and transparent textiles, beads, and gemstones, was softer and therefore more attractive (Figure 1).

Women were also advised to accessorize with metallic trimmings. Belinda (1810a) asserted that “[g]old and silver antique trimmings are brilliantly conspicuous at evening parties” (p. 48), and the descriptions of many fashion plates confirmed this. One depicted an evening dress decorated with “epaulets of variegated gold ball-fringe, ornamented at the feet, and bottom of the waist to correspond” (“Fashions for Ladies,” 1812b, p. 111). Metallic ball fringe would have indeed been eye-catching and conspicuous with its wearer’s movement.

When Belinda (1810f) wore a dress made of a glittering fabric trimmed with gold tassels, she prefaced its dazzling description with a justification for such an extraordinary level of sparkle: She had recently moved on from an old romance. “I have sparkled in fashionable splendour at the dinner and evening party [...] and the result is, that I have preciously mortified my old love, and got a *new one* in his place” (p. 29). Boldly, she declared, “be it known to all men, that I never mean to spoil my eyes with fretting for their follies; and to all

women, that I mean to eclipse them as much as I can” (p. 29). Belinda chose her outfit for the ball not only to feel and appear empowered but also to ensure that she would outshine the other women in the room.

After setting the stage, she poetically described the ensemble:

What a *costume*, Constance [. . .]. It consists of a Persian robe of Oriental gauze, of a pale saffron colour, so interwoven with irregular sized stars of gold, that when extended, as designed, over a white gossamer satin slip, it gives you an idea of the commencement of a bright summer’s morning, when Aurora, just peeping from the east, welcomes the approach of Sol ere his refulgence has eclipsed the stars of night. (Belinda, 1810f, p. 30)

In describing the celestial effects of her Neoclassical attire, Belinda cited two figures from Roman mythology: Aurora, the goddess of dawn – who was closely associated with saffron – and her brother Sol, the god of the sun. Whether inspired by the white, sun-faded statuary of the ancient world or the demands of good taste, Belinda used white accessories to soften her dress’ golden glow:

The robe is cut round the feet in five regular deep vandyke scallops, is edged with a narrow gold braid, and each point is terminated with a rich gold tassel. This dress exhibits, *in description*, a higher degree of glitter than is generally consistent with *my style*; but it is so much softened by the white satin bodice and under-dress, with Roman slippers of the same, and the pearl ornaments which confine my hair, and compose my necklace, ear-rings, &c. that you are not sensible of too obtrusive a glare. (1810f, p. 30)

Belinda concluded this part of her letter by explaining that the ensemble, though uncharacteristically resplendent for her, was actually in keeping with current eveningwear trends: “Indeed, so brilliant, splendid, and gay is the present general style of decoration, that you do not stand in much danger of being noticed on this account” (1810f, p. 30).

Conclusion

Through this examination of how evening dress was presented in the first 50 issues of Ackermann’s *Repository*, I have demonstrated that, in early nineteenth-century Britain, conceptualizations of taste, time-of-day dress, visual impact, and bodily exposure were well-established and nuanced. Ladies of the Regency era consumed these ideas through a variety of perspectives in one single publication. Although *The Repository of Arts* reported an array of fashionable styles and categories of dress, the publication ensured that its readers were trained in the art of good taste. While it recognized that, in the din of the ballroom, fashionable variety was the refrain, it reminded readers to achieve aesthetic balance, since an ensemble’s visual impact was a significant consideration. It also urged women to prioritize distinctive ease and natural elegance over vulgar foundational garments.

The Repository of Arts provided a dynamic array of fashion messages and media for its readers to consider. Sartorial instructions and advice were conveyed through the writings of two charismatic author-characters: fictional letters from a young woman to her sister and lofty yet amusing dogmas from a male fashion authority. Additionally, elegant hand-colored illustrations and tactile fabric swatches of domestic manufacture offered visual and physical evidence of the day’s fashions. When considered together, these sources provide a glimpse into what evening dress meant to fashionable readers of the early nineteenth century.

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