

Textiles and Talent in Jane Austen's Novels
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General Sewing

General sewing, or “work,” is mentioned quite a bit in *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*.

MP 59 In *MP* it signifies obligation for Fanny to her caregivers; in one scene, Mrs. Norris scolds her for being idle and asks her to do some work from the poor basket: a sewing basket containing work to be done for the poor of the parish.

MP 128 Later, in her room, Fanny looks at the table at “work boxes and netting boxes . . . and she grew bewildered as to the amount of the debt which all these kind remembrances produced.”

In *MP* and *NA*, sewing reveals the internal state of the heroines.

MP 279 In *MP* Fanny is sewing: “Edmund watched the progress of her attention and was amused and gratified by seeing how she gradually slackened in the needle work which at the beginning seemed to occupy her totally; how it fell from her hand while she sat motionless over it, and at last how the eyes which had appeared so studiously to avoid him throughout the day, were turned and fixed on Crawford; fixed on him for minutes, fixed on him in short, till the attraction drew Crawford’s upon her, and the book was closed, and the charm was broken. Then she was shrinking again into herself, and blushing and working as hard as ever . . . “

NA 293 In *NA*, after Catherine returns home from the Tilneys: “For two days Mrs. Morland allowed it to pass even without a hint: but when a third night’s rest had neither restored her cheerfulness, improved her in useful activity, nor given her a greater inclination for needlework, she could no longer refrain from the gentle reproof of, “My dear Catherine, I am afraid you are growing quite a fine lady. I do not know when poor Richard’s cravats would be done, if he had no friend but you. Your head runs too much upon Bath; but there is a time for everything—a time for balls and plays, and a time for work. You had a long run of amusement, and now you must try to be useful.”

Yet also in *MP* and *NA*, decorative sewing signifies leisure, escape from responsibility, and lack of intelligence.

MP 15 for Mrs Bertram. “To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needle work of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children.”

NA 67 In NA "Mrs. Allan, whose vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking were such that as she never talked a great deal, so she could ever be entirely silent; and therefore, while she sat at her work, if she lost her needle or broke her thread . . . she must observe it aloud, whether there were any one at leisure to answer her or not.

Decorative Pieces

Talent and handwork are signifiers of intelligence and aptitude, especially in *PP*, *SS*, and *Emma*.

PP 38 We remember the scene in *PP* when the Bingleys, Darcy, and Elizabeth discuss the definition of an accomplished woman:

"Is Miss Darcy much grown since the spring?" said Miss Bingley; "will she be as tall as I am?"

"I think she will. She is now about Miss Elizabeth Bennet's height, or rather taller."

"How I long to see her again! I never met with anybody who delighted me so much. Such a countenance, such manners, and so extremely accomplished for her age! Her performance on the piano-forte is exquisite."

"It is amazing to me," said Bingley, "how young ladies can have patience to be so very accomplished as they all are."

"All young ladies accomplished! My dear Charles, what do you mean?"

"Yes all of them, I think. They all paint tables, cover skreens, and net purses. I scarcely know any one who cannot do all this, and I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished."

"Your list of the common extent of accomplishments," said Darcy, "has too much truth. The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse, or covering a skreen. But I am very far from agreeing with you in your estimation of ladies in general. I cannot boast of knowing more than half a dozen, in the whole range of my acquaintance, that are really accomplished."

"Nor I, I am sure," said Miss Bingley.

"Then," observed Elizabeth, "you must comprehend a great deal in your idea of an accomplished women."

"Yes; I do comprehend a great deal in it."

"Oh! certainly," cried his faithful assistant, "no one can be really esteemed accomplished, who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. A woman must

have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved."

"All this she must possess," added Darcy, "and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading."

"I am no longer surprised at your knowing *only* six accomplished women. I rather wonder now at your knowing *any*."

"Are you so severe upon your own sex, as to doubt the possibility of all this?"

"I never saw such a woman, I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united."

PP 170 Later, Lady Catherine de Bourgh gets in on the action. It is no coincidence that a discussion on women's talent follows a comment about women and inheritance:

"Your father's estate is entailed on Mr. Collins, I think. For your sake," turning to Charlotte, "I am glad of it; but otherwise I see no occasion for entailing estates from the female line. It was not thought necessary in Sir Lewis de Bourgh's family. Do you play and sing, Miss Bennet?"

"A little."

"Oh! then -- some time or other we shall be happy to hear you. Our instrument is a capital one, probably superior to -- -- You shall try it some day. Do your sisters play and sing?"

"One of them does."

"Why did not you all learn? You ought all to have learned. The Miss Webbs all play, and their father has not so good an income as yours. Do you draw?"

"No, not at all."

"What, none of you?"

"Not one."

"That is very strange. But I suppose you had no opportunity. Your mother should have taken you to town every spring for the benefit of masters."

If you are just going by Austen's novels, it is clear that to draw is the ultimate talent of women. Perhaps this is an homage to Jane's sister Cassandra, who was the family artist, producing the only known portraits of Jane Austen.

NA 23 In *NA*, Henry Tilney tells Catherine: “ I should no more lay it down as a general rule that women write better letters than men that they sing better duets or draw better landscapes. In every power of which taste is the foundation excellence is pretty fairly divided between the sexes.”

NA 133 Later, Catherine professes: “ In the present instance she confessed and lamented her want of knowledge; declared that she would give anything in the world to be able to draw; and a lecture (by Tilney) on the picturesque immediately followed.”

Emma Woodhouse might be considered, if not the most accomplished of Austen’s heroines, the most competitive.

Emma 53 When preparing to paint Harriet’s portrait in watercolor, for the duration of several pages, she describes the portraits she drew of her sister’s family. It is later the final portrait of Harriet that captures Mr Elton’s heart and even sends him off as far as London for the simple task of framing the work.

In *SS*, Elinor Dashwood had great aptitude for drawing and painting as well. And as an exemplary character, we must understand that they are very respectable talents.

SS 150 Even John Dashwood was proud of his sister’s accomplishments. In reference to a pair of screens which she painted for his wife, Fanny he says to Colonel Brandon: “These are done by my eldest sister . . . and you as a man of taste will, I dare say, be pleased with them. I do not know whether you have ever happened to see any of her performances before, but she is in general reckoned to draw extremely well.”

Mrs Ferrars, not aware of their being Elinor’s work, particularly requested to look at them; and after they had received gratifying testimony of Lady Middleton’s approbation, Fanny presented them to her mother, considerably informing her, at the same time, that they were done by Miss Dawswood.

"Hum"- said Mrs. Ferrars- "very pretty,"- and without regarding them at all, returned them to her daughter.

Perhaps Fanny thought for a moment that her mother had been quite rude enough; for, colouring a little, she immediately said,-

"They are very pretty, ma'am- an't they?" But then again the dread of having been too civil, too encouraging herself, probably came over her, for she presently added,-

"Do you not think they are something in Miss Morton's style of painting, ma'am?- She does paint most delightfully!- How beautifully her last landscape is done!"

"Beautifully indeed! But she does everything well."

SS 15 You can imagine Marianne Dashwood's reaction to these comments, as she had earlier put her own romantic spin on Elinor's art: "Edward will have greater opportunity of improving that natural taste for your favourite pursuit which must so indispensibly necessary to your future felicity. Oh! If he should be so far stimulated by your genius as to learn to draw himself, how delightful it would be!"

SS 91 Elinor's true talents are juxtaposed against those less-worthy ones exhibited by Lucy Steele whose only employment in the novel is a bit a filigree work for Lady Middleton's daughter. Filigree is quilling, rolling paper and then affixing it to boxes and other articles. And she's rather bullied into doing it at that. "Lucy insisted on continuing her paper filigree work so as not to disappoint the little girl, and "directly drew her work-table near her, and reseated herself with an alacrity and cheerfulness, which seemed to infer, that she could taste no greater delight than in making a filigree basket for a spoiled child."

Now, I must return to the needle arts to segue into Vima's lecture.

Once again, In Jane Austen, as decorative work, embroidery and work are not done by many Austen's characters; however they are featured in several of the novels to signify extravagance.

NA 28 In *NA*, when Mrs Allan runs into her old school chum, Mrs Thorpe, in Bath, she sums her up when making note of her lace pelisse, an outer garment worn by Regency women. She was "forced to sit and appear to listen to all these maternal effusions,--consoling herself, however, with the discovery, which her keen eyes soon made, that the lace on Mrs Thorpe's pelisse was not half so handsome as that on her own."

The Introduction in the Penguin edition of *NA* states:

The minor characters who represent "the World" in this novel display objects as signs to others of their own wealth, status and taste. Even the stupid Mrs Allen is keen-eyed about the lace on the pelisse of her old school friend Mrs Thorpe, since it establishes the difference in their incomes. Austen is no neutral observer of this reflection, still less does she fall in with the modernizing, entrepreneurial spirit. At times her detachment makes her analytical, at other times she becomes judgmental. Mrs Allen damns herself in the reader's eyes by using anything so trivial as lace and muslin as her yardstick of quality.

Persuasion 202 When Anne Elliot visits her old school friend Mrs Smith, a poor widow in ill health, they discuss her nurse, who is an expert gossip: "She is only nursing Mrs. Wallis of Marlborough Buildings,--a mere pretty, silly, expensive, fashionable woman, I believe,--and of course will have nothing to report but of lace and finery. I mean to make my profit of Mrs Wallis, however. She has plenty of money, and I intend she shall buy all the high-priced things I have in hand now."

Emma 374 We get a clue of Mrs Elton's silly character in *Emma* by her focus on lace. She cannot hide her true character behind a lace veil, she is a bit of a mule in a horse harness in the following description; "Mrs Elton, as elegant as lace and pearls could make her, [Mr Knightley] looked at in silence."

Emma 624 Later at a wedding (whose I shall not mention) we get Mrs Elton's response: "The wedding was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade (*because they need not affect such airs*); and Mrs Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband (*for she was clearly not invited*), thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior to her own,--'Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business!—Selina would stare when she heard of it.'"

PP 12 Lastly, after meeting the Bingleys at the Lucas's, Mrs Bennet is enraptured with the elegant Bingley family:

"Oh! my dear," continued Mrs. Bennet, "I am quite delighted with him. He is so excessively handsome! and his sisters are charming women. I never in my life saw any thing more elegant than their dresses. I dare say the lace upon Mrs. Hurst's gown" —Here she was interrupted again. Mr. Bennet protested against any description of finery.

We, however will not protest against any description of finery. So now, I give the floor to our guest speaker: a needlework artist, judge, historian, writer, teacher, designer, need I say more. We are clearly in good hands. Vima de Marchi Micheli.