



Austen, Actresses and Accessories: Much Ado About Muffs

Laura Engel

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When Jane Austen was a teenager in the late 1780's several portraits of well-known actresses holding muffs were painted by a variety of famous artists. Looking at these paintings along with satiric prints of muffs that appeared simultaneously in the public realm, the author explores how the muff functions in these images as a sign of wealth and style and as a sign of crass accumulation and overt sexuality. Turning to Austen, she examines how this vexed cultural dynamic of female celebrity is reflected in Austen's depictions of muffs in her novels. The final chapter considers James Stanier Clarke's unauthenticated sketch of Austen dressed in a stylish outfit and holding a muff. Austen's connection to the muff is a provocative invitation to re-envision her awareness of actresses, celebrity culture, Regency style and accessories. Ultimately, this book demonstrates that traditional ways of imagining Austen may be vastly different from how she might have appeared to her contemporaries.

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