Austen’s accomplishments: a (literary) history of dancing, dressing and other life skills in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain

“I am sure I never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished.” Thus Mr. Bingley in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, enthusing over ladies who “paint tables, cover screens, and net purses.” But the accomplishments and activities of Austen’s characters are often both less specialised and more meaningful than this. Dancing, conversing, dressing, reading out loud, playing cards – or the piano – are all activities with rules and conventions, the mastery of which is vital to the success of a late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century member of the gentry or professional classes.

The course takes as its focus the apparently superficial but ultimately deeply important skills and forms of knowledge which mark out the accomplished gentleman or (more often) gentlewoman in Austen’s novels. From handling incompetent or uncommunicative dance partners in *Pride and Prejudice*, to seductive readings of Shakespeare in *Mansfield Park*, the works can arguably be understood as providing how-to guides for the socially ambitious. At the same time, they offer a satirical gloss on many of the conventions that they describe, questioning the moral and even practical value of knowing the rules without grasping the principles behind them.

Austen’s writings also, in the process, tell us a great deal about life in Britain during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As such they offer a great route into the social practices and conventions of the period. The course will therefore combine literary critical readings with social history: in each class, students will look at a wide range of historical evidence – from material objects such as clothes and accessories, to etiquette guides and manuals, and reports in society magazines – to explore a series of pivotal scenes from Austen’s most famous works. The course will thus provide introductions to key novels as well as exploring the ‘real life’ British culture behind them. A combination of lectures and interactive group discussions will allow students to delve into the serious frivolities of Regency balls and house parties, develop new critical and historical insights into the materials under discussion, and discover some of the complexities of Austen’s fictions.

No previous knowledge or “homework” is required, but students who sign up for this course will benefit from having some familiarity with the works under discussion.

Class 1 Introduction: the accomplished young lady in Austen’s fiction
Class 2 Dancing by the rule: *Pride and Prejudice*
Class 3 Social drama: the etiquette of showing off in *Mansfield Park*
Class 4 Dangerous pleasures: tasteful reading in *Sense and Sensibility*
Class 5 “You say nothing of the silk stockings”: fashion in Austen’s letters and novels

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Ernest Sprott Fellow in Seventeenth-Century Literature at the Faculty of English, Cambridge. His interests range widely across early modern literature and intellectual history, though he is especially interested in questions of sovereignty, constitutionality, common sense philosophy. Other interests include the study of comedy from the seventeenth century to the present day (including stand-up), especially in relation to moral philosophy and social criticism; the use of literature in political and moral education; the literary criticism of the New York Intellectuals.