

Coming Out: Augusta Smith and Catherine Morland, at Court and in Bath

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“Miss Catherine is put upon the Shelve for the present, and I do not know that she will ever come out” -- Jane Austen, 13 March 1817. Austen, of course, uses the phrase “come out” to denote the publication of her early manuscript, but the further concept of coming out onto the world stage is addressed in this look at Miss Catherine Morland’s debut. Art imitates life and life illuminates art, when *Northanger Abbey*’s Bath Assemblies are contrasted with the 1817 London season of Augusta Smith, as recounted in the diary of Miss Smith’s sister Emma (the future Mrs. James-Edward Austen-Leigh).

Opposites in their preparations for life, Catherine is allowed to leave off her lessons, while Augusta becomes the model accomplished female (Miss Bingley would be so proud!). In examining the experiences of these eldest daughters, we also consider Austen’s own social life in Bath and London.

Catherine Morland and her sponsor Mrs. Allen devise the appropriate costume for Catherine’s debut—thereby providing a rare opportunity to discuss clothing based on narrator Jane Austen’s observation and dialogue. To approach *Northanger Abbey* from its preface, we investigate fashion in the year Austen first submitted “Miss Catherine” to Crosby & Co., as well as fashion in 1817, when Austen was obviously bemoaning the novel ever making it to press. Augusta’s Smith’s court presentation, sponsored by her aunt the Marchioness of Northampton and rife with rules, lengthy preparations, and precise court etiquette, points up the extreme demands upon young women; it also demonstrates similarities in social rituals of town and capital.

Using primary sources and passages from *Northanger Abbey*, we examine the social events undertaken by Catherine and Augusta, which announce them as eligible young ladies. A full slate of activities encompassed dances, balls, concerts, the theater. What girl wouldn’t keep souvenirs of their season? These will be shared with the audience, so expect to see swatches of ball-gown fabrics, concert programs, “shades” of friends recently acquired, prints about the latest peccadillo of the Royals or gossip of a renowned actor. Recounting fashion, people, and places in images is accomplished through the use of non-PowerPoint visual aids, and will require two artist’s easels.

Penetrate the mysteries of Austenian society with this glance into the Bath Assembly Rooms and a Regency London Season. Letters and diaries (how Henry Tilney lampoons such journalizing!) comprise evidence left to historians, and the audience will be asked to imagine themselves a Sally Morland or Emma Smith and condense their sister’s experiences into a few words for their own journals. What will *you* write?