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The Felicities of Rapid Motion: Jane Austen in the Ballroom

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> It may be possible to do without dancing entirely. Instances have been known of young people passing many, many months successively, without being at any ball of any description, and no material injury accrue either to body or mind;--but when a beginning is made--when the felicities of rapid motion have once been, though slightly, felt--it must be a very heavy set that does not ask for more. (*Emma* 246)

Jane Austen was an enthusiastic dancer in her youth, and dancing forms an important part of all of her fictional heroine's lives. From her use of dance in the novels, we can obtain a better glimpse of how dances in middle class life in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were conducted, so that the six novels become a useful source document for the dance historian. In addition, when general readers learn more about the common dances of the period and the social conventions around them, they will be in a better position to understand some of the delicate nuances of the pivotal dancing episodes in each of the novels.

Some Aspects of Dance in the late Eighteenth Century

In eighteenth-century fiction, as well as in life, there was a wide range of venues for dances, several different types of dances and various social behaviors appropriate at or for each. Perhaps the highest was at Almack's of London, which Austen never described and probably never attended, since the tickets of admission were jealously guarded by the six lady patronesses. (One could imagine that Sir Walter and Miss Elliot would have loved to attend Almack's, but the Elliots would probably be considered too provincial to attend; only Mr. and Mrs. Darcy belong to the proper social sphere.) Instead, Austen shows us private London parties and balls, such as

those given by Sir John and Lady Middleton; public dances at the Bath Assembly Rooms, such as those that Catherine Morland attends; a gentleman's private country house ball, such as that given by Mr. Bingley at Netherfield; and informal family dances, held after dinner to the playing of one amateur musician, such as those held in the Musgrove's parlor. Certain dances might be performed more often at one event than another, and certain behaviors might be more or less desirable at each of these events, yet the same individual could—with the possible exception of visiting Almack's—feel comfortable dancing at each of them.
In order to understand Austen's use of dance in her novels, let us begin with some general statements about the ballroom in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In the 1770s, a formal Assembly in London or Bath would open with a series of minuets, the French dance for one couple at a time. The rest of the participants would sit on benches that lined the room and watch, as couple after couple would apply to the Master of Ceremonies for permission to dance.

At Bath and other towns where older people congregated, a ball would continue to be opened by at least one minuet during even the early years of the nineteenth century. The dance was definitely antiquated, even in Austen's youth, however, and none of her heroines seem to know it. Instead, they enjoy the more social country dances. Country dances had had a peculiarly English character since the publication of John Playford's *The English Dancing Master* in 1651. Dances for two, three, four or more couples at a time, they were more lively and relaxed than the complex French dances like the minuet, the boure or the louvre. By the late eighteenth century, most country dances were performed in a "longways" set for five to eight couples, with partners standing opposite each other.
Dances were usually performed in what are today called "triple minor longways" sets. That is, the dance began with only the first couple starting at the top and dancing with couples two and three. At the end of one turn through the dance the first couple progressed to dance with couples three and four, while couple two waited or "stood out" at the top of the set for two more turns of the dance until they, too, had an opportunity to begin dancing.

Because so many couples stood relatively passively during the dance, they used this time as a welcome opportunity to talk and flirt—as many dancing masters, who preferred attentive silence, pointed out with indignation. The dance would continue until the original first couple had worked its way back to the "top" or the beginning of the set. Couples who danced down the set but then walked away to sit down rather than performing their social duty as inactive couples working up the set were considered selfish and disrespectful.

The romantic sensibilities embraced by Marianne Dashwood expressed themselves on the dance floor as well as in the music and literature she loved: angular lines were condemned and only curves were considered worthy of admiration. In fact, Mr. Wilson, a dancing master, criticized certain common country dance figures, such as "lead down the middle and up again" or "lead out to the wall and back" on the grounds that they were angular and dull. "Straight lines are useful," he noted, "but not elegant; and, when applied to the Human Figure, are productive of an extremely ungraceful effect" (13).

On the other hand, curving movements such as the weaving hey or the "turn partner and then corner" figure were admired. "With persons of taste, and true judges of beauty, the gently flowing Serpentine and Curved Lines, form the *acme* of grace and have always been considered

most beautiful," Wilson wrote. He further urged his readers and pupils to learn to present objects, such as a dropped glove, fan, ticket or card of address, with a beautiful and elegant curve to the arm, thereby affording the observer "ample means of drawing comparison between the accomplished and the uncultivated" (20).

Over the two hundred or so years of their general popularity, country dances could be performed with or without steps, as the period, the venue, or the dexterity of the performer might call for. For example, we know that Fanny, in a state "approaching high spirits," "[practiced] her steps about the drawing-room as long as she could be safe from the notice of her Aunt Norris" (*MP* 273). With the addition of the steps (similar in this period to modern Scottish country dance steps) and with a spirited tempo, country dances could be quite vigorous and were suited mostly for the young and fit: "When [Fanny's] two dances with [Edmund] were over, her inclination and strength for more were pretty well at an end; and Sir Thomas having seen her walk rather than dance down the shortening set, breathless and with her hand at her side, gave his orders for her sitting down entirely. From that time, Mr. Crawford sat down likewise" (279). The choice of the steps used, and the execution of them, was another test of the taste, skill—and character—of the performer.

For still in Regency as in former times, it was felt that the skill of a person's dancing expressed the quality of his or her soul or spirit. Today we do not measure our leaders of government or industry by their ability to dance—but a clearly traceable precept from Renaissance times through the Regency was this concept that one measure of determining whether a man was truly a gentleman was by his ability to dance with confidence, to stand well, to move easily without calling attention to himself, to enter a room gracefully. Clumsiness, haughtiness, and ostentatious display were to be avoided, as another dancing master, Mr. Barclay Dun, noted:

> There are many who imagine that he is the best of dancers who can leap so high as to be able to cross his legs several times before he falls, and spring or bound to an amazing distance forward, backward, or to either side. That such a person may be the most powerful of men, I readily allow; but with no other qualifications than his strength and agility, he can never hope to obtain the suffrages of those who are skilled in the art: indeed, *people of refined and delicate feeling, would reject his exhibitions with disgust. To be regarded, he must possess that sensibility of soul which enables its possessor to distinguish the true from the false, and to trace out the way of perfection*. (8; emphasis added)

Austen demonstrated this precept that gentlemanly behavior and style were both expressed in dancing several times. When the obsequious Sir William Lucas attempts to compliment Mr. Darcy, he says: "'I have been most highly gratified indeed, my dear Sir. Such very superior dancing is not often seen. *It is evident that you belong to the first circles*'" (*P&P* 92; emphasis added). While his words are silly and his timing poor, the expression of his gallantry would have been easily recognized by contemporary readers. Yet, by eighteenth century standards, Mr. Darcy by his haughty behavior and previous refusals to dance has amply demonstrated that he considers himself above his company. The more amiable Mr. Bingley, who "danced every dance" (10), has behaved in a more gentlemanly fashion.

Another example of this belief that one sure sign of a gentleman is his ability to dance and move well occurs in *Emma*, when the heroine (who has unaccountably reached her eighteenth birthday without ever having had an opportunity to see Mr. Knightly dance) observes his performance:

> [Mr. Knightley] moved a few steps nearer, and *those few steps were enough to prove in how gentlemanlike a manner, with what natural grace, he must have danced, would he but take the trouble* . . . . [Eventually he does dance, and] *His dancing proved to be just what she had believed it, extremely good* . . . . (325-26, 328; emphasis added)

Assemblies or balls were conducted with great formality. The most important lady present—distinguished by rank, debutante, or bridal status—opened the ball by dancing at the top of the first set in the room. Thus we hear of Miss Elliot that "thirteen winters' revolving frosts had seen her opening every ball of credit which a scanty neighborhood afforded" (*Persuasion* 7). Austen shows us this common convention in several more dramatic episodes: for example, in one novel, the heroine expects to open the ball but doesn't, and in another, she doesn't but does. It is Emma, of course, who is foiled—"Emma must submit to stand second to [the newly-wed] Mrs. Elton, though she had always considered the ball as peculiarly for her. It was almost enough to make her think of marrying' (325)—and it is Fanny who is honored by standing with Mr. Crawford at the top of the room, to be joined by the rest of the dancers.

At more formal or more public balls, the ladies could "draw for numbers" upon entering the ballroom. As each dance began, the Master of Ceremonies would then call out the numbers and assign the ladies and their partners to places. The topmost lady in the first set would choose the dance. This meant that a couple could ask for the specific figures associated with a specific tune, such as Bath Assembly, Trip to Tunbridge or The Duke of Kent's Waltz. It also meant that a lady could announce a group of figures that she devised herself and ask for a tune of a certain length to accompany them. At the conclusion of the dance, the Master of Ceremonies would reshuffle the sets, and a new lady would request or "call" a dance.

While this procedure may sound daunting, in any given evening, dances were probably chosen from a fairly small pool of what were considered to be the most fashionable dances for any given year. This practice was facilitated, or perhaps fostered, by the custom of music publishers to produce slim annual collections of dances, such as "Twenty Four Country Dances for the Year 17--."

These volumes all promised to include only the latest and most fashionable dances, though many of them did include reprints of earlier dances. These popular books were in fact a necessity: starting in about 1730 or so, country dances became less and less original and were attached or devised to go with a specific and easily recognizable tune. From 1730 to 1830 over twenty-seven thousand country dances with their tunes were published in England alone (Keller 8). The dances had increasingly become combinations and recombinations of a small number of figures so that the dances were not very easily differentiated from each other. Although easy to learn just by watching the top couple (a characteristic which added to their popularity), they were hard to remember. Indeed, some dancing masters found it necessary to request participants not to dance the same dance more than once in an evening—a sure sign that this proscribed behavior must have occurred frequently enough to be noticed and criticized. This very popularity of the country dance eventually contributed to its demise. Towards the end of George III's life, even the

country dances were finally going out of fashion among the "smart set"; there were too many dull dances set to dull tunes and people were ready for something innovative.

Though the Regency ballroom was dominated by country dances, there were several other major categories of dance that could be seen there: the so-called "Scotch" dances, the quadrille, and the waltz. Starting in the 1780s, a wave of romantic enthusiasm for the culture of the Gaelic North swept over England. Scottish country dances were popular in England, as were the Scotch Threesome and Foursome Reels, which featured a weaving "hey" figure interspersed with points at which performers would perform showy steps. During the course of the dance the men (and occasionally) the ladies would raise one or both arms above their heads, snap their fingers together and give the distinctive yell or "heuch."

In *Pride and Prejudice* Austen shows Scotch dances twice: first at the Lucases, where a large party is assembled. After the ladies perform a few songs, and pedantic Mary bores everyone with a long concerto, she is "glad to purchase praise and gratitude by Scotch and Irish airs, at the request of her younger sisters" who, with some young officers, start dancing at one end of the room, to the indignation of Mr. Darcy (25). Later, Miss Bingley is playing at Netherfield while Elizabeth visits due to Jane's illness. She plays a "lively Scotch air" and Mr. Darcy draws near and in a clumsy attempt to make conversation asks Elizabeth: "'Do you not feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?'" (52).

Late in the author's life, following the Peace celebrations of 1814, two other dance types became wildly popular which Austen, since her dancing years were behind her, hardly mentions in her novels. These were the quadrille and the waltz. Like the cotillon of Austen's youth, the quadrille was a dance for four couples in a square formation, but, unlike the cotillon, it consisted of, typically, five separate country dance figures, each with a distinctive name and music. Requiring balletic steps and a greater ability to remember the figures (one couldn't just watch the top couple as in a longways line), quadrilles taxed the skills of the dancer. None of Austen's fictional heroines dances a quadrille, though their author was apparently aware of at least the music for them.

The German waltz was known, but was not very popular until 1814, when Wellington's dashing young officers came back from the continent and the lively Countess Lieven, one of the patronesses of Almack's, performed it there. The waltz was considered "fast" because of the close embrace of the partners (a popular position had the partners stand face-to-face, one hand on the shoulder, one around the waist), and some parents disapproved of it. Even Lord Byron had mixed feelings about the dance:

> Endearing Waltz!—to thy more melting tune
> Bow Irish jig and ancient rigadoon.
> Scotch reels, avaunt! And country-dance, forego
> Your future claims to each fantastic toe!
> Waltz—Waltz alone—both legs and arms demands,
> Liberal of feet and lavish of her hands;
> Hands which may freely range in public sight
> Where ne'er before—but—pray "put out the light" . . . . (146-50)

The waltz appealed to adherents of the cult of romantic sensibility, as described by the eponymous hero of Goethe's wildly popular novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*:

> "Never had I danced more lightly. I felt myself more than mortal, holding this loveliest of creatures in my arms, flying with her like the wind, till I lost sight of everything else; and--Wilhelm, I vowed at that moment that a girl whom I loved, or for whom I felt the slightest attachment, should never waltz with another, even if it should be my end!" (25-29)

Given these fervid expressions of romantic sensibility, it is perhaps a shame that Marianne and Willoughby never get the opportunity to enjoy the dance! In fact, Austen mentions the waltz only once, in *Emma*, where Mrs. Weston plays an "irresistible waltz," possibly an air or perhaps or perhaps a country dance in waltz time, which Mr. Wilson tells us he helped to popularize.

Other Aspects of the Ballroom

While the above section described the dances of the period, Austen's writings depict other conventions of ballroom conduct. For example, just as today, not everyone would dance at an assembly. From Frank Churchill's careful arrangements at the Crown we see that a card room needed to be provided so that the older people could play whist. Supper was an integral part of a ball evening, and a gentleman escorted the lady with whom he last had danced to the supper room where he attended to her needs.

As late as 1778, as seen in Frances Burney's novel *Evelina*, the choice of a partner was excruciatingly important, since one danced with him all evening. By the turn of the century, however, the convention had relaxed to one of standing up for two consecutive dances together. Typically, a gentleman was expected to engage a series of partners, rather than favoring one for the whole evening; however, the romantic and careless Whiloughby and Marianne Dashwood—of whose activities both Eleanor and Austen disapprove—flout this rule by standing up together half the night.

As should be clear by now, an assembly was more than just a dance; it was a prime area for young ladies and gentlemen to get to know each other. Young people were expected to have on hand a repertoire of light conversation, with which to pass the time during the dance while they stood inactive. Readers will remember the lengthy scene in *Pride & Prejudice* where Elizabeth forces Mr. Darcy to speak during the course of their first two dances: "'It is *your* turn to say something now, Mr. Darcy. *I* talked about the dance, and *you* ought to make some kind of remark on the size of the room, or the number of couples'" (91).

Novels, plays, and poems of the past are often fruitful sources for a dance historian to learn more about the attitudes towards or conventions of the dance. Despite the fact that Austen never describes a specific dance, her novels are particularly useful sources, as we have seen. In addition, an understanding of the conventions of the period provides today's readers with a deeper understanding of the characterizations in Jane Austen's works, as illuminated by her dance episodes.

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