



A
DANCE
with
JANE AUSTEN

How a Novelist and Her Characters Went to the Ball

Susannah Fullerton



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Contents

To Amanda Jones,
with love and thanks for friendship, book talk,
and the world's most generous loans of books.

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Foreward

Some modern readers of Jane Austen's novels are apt to dismiss them out of hand as being rather dull and repetitive—'There's always a dance scene in them, every one!'—and leave their criticism at that. Such readers are of course accurate in stating this fact even though wrong in their interpretation of it. There are indeed dance scenes in each of the novels, because in Regency times the dance floor was the best place upon which to meet one's future husband or wife. Assembly balls in a country town would draw together young people from an approximately twenty-mile radius who might not otherwise have come into contact with each other, since a twenty-mile journey would have taken about four hours travelling time and so was not to be lightly undertaken.

In this book Susannah Fullerton has analyzed all the aspects of dances and dancing as personally experienced by Jane Austen and mentioned by her in her letters to Cassandra; and has studied all mentions of dances in the novels to show how they advance the plot as well as adding to the skilful betrayal of the nature and motives of some of the characters in the tale. No one who has read Susannah's in-depth analysis could possibly ever think again that Jane Austen's dance scenes are either dull or repetitive; but will be left feeling regretful that there are no more aspects left to be discussed.

DEIRDRE LE FAYE

Introduction

'May I have the pleasure of this dance?'



When a gentleman asked Jane Austen that question, she was delighted to stand up with him. Jane Austen loved to dance! ‘There were twenty dances & I danced them all, & without any fatigue,’ she recorded happily in a letter. Her correspondence is full of references to balls, who were her partners, and which couples flirted the most while they danced. Throughout her life she attended informal dances at the homes of neighbours, grander events in the houses of the local gentry, and dances at home with relations and friends. This book tells the story of her dancing life and how much she enjoyed it.

With such a love of elegantly moving to music, how could Jane Austen possibly leave dancing out of her novels? When too young to attend balls herself, she could still create fictional ones in her juvenilia. When an adult, she depicted a dance in every one of her six novels; some, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, contain several. Her unfinished work *The Watsons* provides her most detailed description of a ball to be found in her fiction.

Jane Austen wrote for her contemporaries who would all have been very familiar with the many different aspects of a ball. As modern readers, we have lost much of that knowledge. The Bennet girls dance at an assembly ball—but what was an assembly ball and who was permitted to attend one? How were the Bennets expected to dress for the occasion? What would they have eaten for supper at the end of the evening? When men asked them to join a set, who provided the music? And what sorts of dances did Elizabeth and Jane need to know? Woe betide

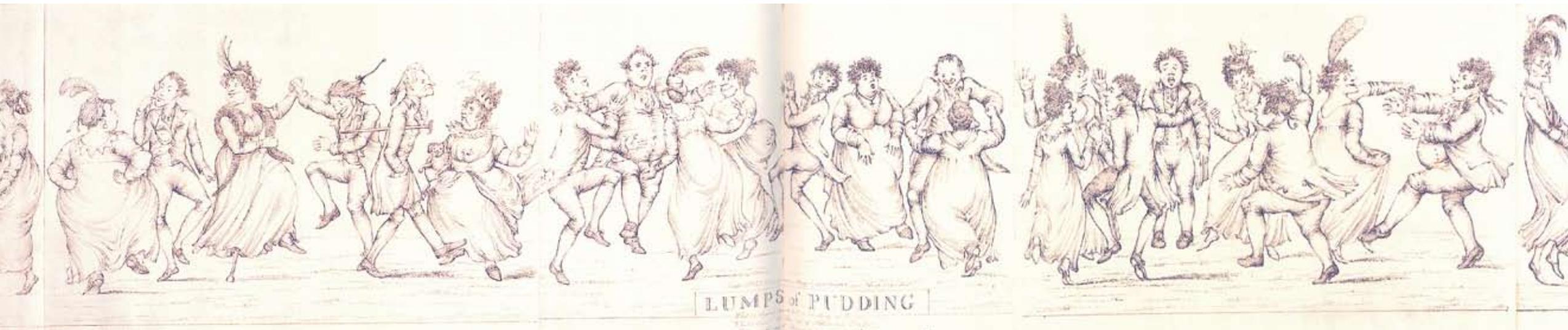
any Lydia Bennet who broke the rules of etiquette at a dance—but what were the rules? This book describes the dances, the facilities, the rules and customs of the ballrooms of Jane Austen’s era and fiction.

Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* fell in love at a ball. From *Romeo and Juliet* to *Harry Potter*, balls have been recognized as a vital arena for courtship. Jane Austen fell in love with Tom Lefroy as they danced together and their romance was conducted almost entirely at balls. In her fiction she depicts lovers, would-be lovers, disappointed lovers and those who are lovers-but-don’t-yet-realise-it, all dancing in the ballrooms of southern England. Where would the courtship of Elizabeth and Mr Darcy be without the Meryton assembly and the Netherfield ball? Dance plays such an integral role as hero and heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* fall in love. The same can be said for another couple in that novel—Jane and Mr Bingley also move from being dance partners to marriage partners. Catherine Morland is smitten by Henry Tilney at a Bath ball, Marianne and Willoughby of *Sense and Sensibility* have eyes only for each other when they dance at Barton Park, Emma first begins to see Mr Knightley as a possible lover at the Crown Inn ball, and for Fanny Price, the highlight of the Mansfield ball is when she dances with Edmund. Among Jane Austen’s heroines, only Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot are given no opportunity to dance with the men they

love. This book shows how Jane Austen’s fictional courtships begin and progress on the dance floor.

But there was no guarantee of finding true love at a ball. Jane Austen knew the horrors of a bad partner—she tried hard to avoid certain men at dances because they had two left feet. Her heroines suffer the same problems. Catherine is desperate to escape John Thorpe, while Elizabeth is almost tortured by bumbling Mr Collins. Other dance partners in the novels are simply mismatched—Henry Crawford with Fanny Price, Louisa Musgrove with Captain Wentworth, and Harriet Smith with Mr Knightley. ‘To be fond of dancing’ was not invariably ‘a certain step towards falling in love’; or at least, towards falling in love with the right person.

This book also examines the social milieu of the dance. Balls were one of the few activities that Regency men and women could enjoy together. Sir John Middleton has his hunting and other sports, his wife has children and domestic pursuits to keep her busy—but a ball brings husband and wife together. And it brings their neighbours and friends too, all joining in a communal activity, socializing, and forming attractive patterns with other dancers to be admired by any spectators. As dancers, they all have certain obligations. Mr Darcy, dramatically entering for the first time both *Pride and Prejudice* and the Meryton assem-



bly room, appears ‘above his company’ and refuses to invite local girls to dance. Mr Elton rudely shows up Harriet Smith by strutting before her instead of leading her into the set and John Thorpe is late to claim Catherine for their dance, which embarrasses her. Jane Austen always had a sharp eye for incorrect behaviour when she attended balls, and she accurately portrayed such social blunders or improprieties in her novels. Queen Elizabeth I insisted all her courtiers learn to dance, and excel at the art, because she believed dance developed not only well-regulated body movements, but a well-regulated mind as well. This view had not changed by Jane Austen’s day, and conduct book authors were still stressing the importance of dance as a reflection of the mind and personality. One arbiter of manners, Lord Chesterfield, thought dancing a ridiculous activity, yet he still advised his son Phillip to become proficient. Look at how much can be determined about Mr Collins solely from his behaviour at a ball. Or of Mr Bingley, or John Thorpe?

Mrs Bennet takes her daughters to balls, but her own dancing days are over. Fortunately for her, there was always plenty going on at the edges of a ballroom—the chaperones gossiping by the fire, card parties in a side room, alcoholic refreshment for those who (like Jane Austen in middle age) were happy to sit and watch, with a glass of wine at hand. When the musicians needed a break, there was musical entertainment (and Mary Bennet loves such opportunities to display!) or there were the men who, eager to gaze on the Georgian equivalent of eye-candy, strutted the room, ogling the local talent (Lord Osborne in *The Watsons* is one such example). Miss Bates chatters nonstop at balls, General Tilney does his social networking there, Mrs Norris disrupts and irritates, but what did a master of ceremonies do? What were the duties of those chaperones and bystanders; why were so many young ladies without partners; what was on the menu in the supper room? Jane Austen never wasted a word in her novels—whenever she provides detail of a ball, readers can be sure it is there for a purpose, an important part of characterization or plot. Dancing is an ancient human activity—rock paintings depict dancers in 3300 BC. It has always been a vital part of human culture—for celebration, ritual, courtship, and for telling sto-

ries. Jane Austen recognized its importance.

Jane Austen loved to put on her satin slippers with shoe-roses, her white gloves, and muslin gown, and go off for an evening of fun at the Basingstoke assemblies. The Bennet girls share their creator’s delight and set out joyfully to dance, and of course to meet future husbands. Why not do Elizabeth and Jane the honour of joining them, as they dance their way through this book? Follow Jane Austen’s heroines, as they learn their steps, dress in readiness, find transport to convey them to a ball, choose between public and private balls, worry over a shortage of men, prefer a cotillion to a quadrille, talk and flirt with their partners, sustain themselves with supper, fall in love, and then go home to talk it all over at the end.

And now . . . ‘On with the dance. . . .’



THE FIVE POSITIONS OF DANCING.



*The Figures show the positions of the Learner,
and the Post that of a finished Dancer.*

Learning to Dance

'We... had all the masters that were necessary'

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

According to Mr Darcy, 'every savage can dance', but Mr Darcy is wrong. A savage would actually have struggled badly and his gyrations would have been watched with horror at any of the three balls that take place in *Pride and Prejudice*—the Meryton assembly, the informal dance at Sir William Lucas's, and the ball at Netherfield.

Mr Collins is as close as we get to a savage in that novel, for he has not been properly taught to dance, so embarrasses himself and those who come near him. Having him as her partner is a miserable experience for Elizabeth Bennet: 'they were dances of mortification. Mr Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it' is a torment to her. 'The moment of her release from him was ecstasy.'

Fortunately most people attending balls were better instructed than Mr Collins. Learning to dance was an important accomplishment for ladies and gentlemen, so was included in any genteel or semi-genteel education. Fashionable schools, such as those attended by the daughters of Mrs Jennings, stressed that dancing was 'one of the most genteel and polite Accomplishments which a young Lady can possess' and Miss Bingley is quick to include it in her list of essential accomplishments for an elegant female. Dance instruction was thought to teach graceful deportment, to polish manners, and to provide healthy exercise. When Elizabeth tells Lady Catherine de Bourgh that she and her sisters 'had all the masters that were necessary', it can be safely assumed that one would have come to Longbourn. It is also safe to assume that he would



have been the only visiting instructor to earn the full attention of Lydia Bennet, who, as foolish as she was, knew that dancing was one thing she had to do properly!

The steps of a country dance were relatively simple and there were not many of them. But more than country dancing was taught—a pupil must acquire elegant movements of the arms, the correct general carriage (‘should be elevated and light; the chest thrown out, the head easily erect, but flexible to move with every turn of the figure; and the limbs should be all braced with the spirit of motion’), and there was bowing and curtsying, and the etiquette of the ballroom to learn as well. The minuet, although not danced so often by Jane Austen’s day, was always taught to young people because its formal movements were seen as a good instructional groundwork. Once the minuet was mastered, the teacher could move on to demonstrating other steps.

The dancing master visiting Longbourn could well have been shared by other families—perhaps the Lucas girls joined in the lessons? Such arrangements made it more social and enjoyable for those participating and increased the number of possible partners and ‘couples’ in the lesson, but also lessened the expense for one family. Often great houses in a neighbourhood offered local young people shared dance classes. The Duchess of Devonshire, reknown socialite and tastemaker, organized morning classes in her home, so that young ladies living near Chatsworth could master their dance steps together. Children’s balls were relatively common throughout the Georgian age; they provided a relaxed opportunity for young people to show off what they had learned and



get used to the formalities of the ballroom.

But when no ball especially for children was offered, young people were taken to adult balls. Charles Blake of *The Watsons*, ‘a fine boy of ten years old’, is brought to the assembly ball by his mother because he is ‘uncommonly fond of dancing’. He has had to learn the right etiquette, has asked his partner a week in advance to secure her for ‘the two first dances’, and he has to learn to hide his great disappointment when his partner rudely lets him down: ‘though he contrived to utter with an effort of boyish bravery “Oh! I do not mind it” —it was very evident by the unceasing agitation of his features that he minded it as much as ever.’ When Emma then says she would be happy to be his partner, Charles is given his opportunity. Although concentrating very hard on his steps, he is also mindful of his other duties as a partner—making conversation, keeping on his gloves, and thanking Emma properly when their dance is over. The scene provides a charming picture of a boy trying very hard to appear sophisticated in this adult setting, yet unable to stop his boyish enthusiasms breaking through every now and then. Although he is the only child Jane Austen mentions in a ballroom, there must have been many Charles Blakes in England learning vital lessons about dance steps, the rules and regulations, and good manners, which would turn them into accomplished partners as adults.

In *Mansfield Park* the Price family cannot afford a dancing master so the children have to teach themselves. William reminds his sister of how they used to ‘jump about together many a time . . . when the hand-organ was in the street’, but this lack of formal instruction leaves Fanny

rather uncertain so she assiduously practises her steps in the drawing room before the Mansfield ball begins.

Fanny is aware that Mary Crawford has learned to dance in London, and there dance classes were more sophisticated. A newspaper of 1784 advertized instruction in ‘the Minuet, Minuet de la Cour, Cotillons’ and offered regular opportunities for practice. Many young women in London wanted to learn from professional dancers of the Opera House as this made them appear more sophisticated (lessons that would appeal to Miss Bingley perhaps?) but Thomas Wilson disapproved and felt such teachers distorted the graceful, easy steps of the country dance into ‘extravagant theatrical imitations’. Nor was it only ladies who worried about being up-to-date with their dance skills. When on the lookout for a second wife (his first having died only a year before), James Austen, Jane’s eldest brother, worked on improving his dancing skills and assiduously went to every ball being held in the neighbourhood. ‘A Ball is nothing without him,’ his sister remarked. James knew that a man who danced badly was seriously lessening his chances of attracting a wife.

Mr Collins lacks this vital knowledge. He has either been badly taught, or has failed to teach himself properly. It was a serious social lapse to dance badly. Thomas Wilson complains: ‘a great number of Persons, who call themselves Dancers, and who are deemed so by others, are unworthy of that name’. This includes those who are out of time with the music, who shuffle and scrape, and tread on their partner’s toes, and those ‘bearing down the Hands of their Partner with all their Weight, whereby their Partner is obliged to stoop . . . of lifting the Arms of their Partners violently up and down . . . whereby they are always in laborious perpetual motion, producing the most disgusting Effect’, or simply annoying one’s partner ‘with the noise of their feet’. Even if Mr Collins only had some of these deficiencies, it is no wonder that Elizabeth sat out further dances rather than endure the misery of dancing with him again.

Thomas Wilson

Thomas Wilson was an influential dancing master of the era. Based at the King’s Theatre Opera House in London, and master of a dance academy in Holborn, he was well placed to write instruction manuals.

His first book was *An analysis of country dancing: wherein are displayed all the figures ever used in country dances, in a way so easy and familiar, that persons of the meanest capacity may in a short time acquire (without the aid of a master) a complete knowledge of that rational and polite amusement*. To which are added instructions for dancing some entire new reels; together with the rules, regulations, and complete etiquette of the ball room. It was popular because of its useful text and diagrams explaining the figures of the dances. Published in 1808, it was expanded and reissued in 1811, and then in 1815 was turned into *The Complete System of English Country Dancing*. He was the author of at least fifteen dance manuals, including *Quadrille Fan*, *Treasures of Terpsichore*, and *The Art of Dancing*. His books remained in use until the 1850s.

Thomas Wilson regarded dancing as ‘the most enchanting of all human amusements, it is the parent of joy, and the soul and support of cheerfulness; it banishes grief, cheers the evening hours of those who have studied or laboured in the day, and brings with it a mixture of delightful sensations which enrapture the senses.’ Of course such comments from Thomas Wilson were not disinterested—he wanted people to buy his manuals and pay to attend his classes. And not all of Jane Austen’s characters would agree that dancing always ‘enraptured the senses’ and ‘banished sadness’—Edmund Bertram, Tom Bertram, Elizabeth Bennet, and Catherine Morland for various reasons find themselves quite depressed at the end of an evening in the ballroom.



Jane Austen Learns To Dance

Jane Austen learned her first dance steps at Steventon. There, in the busy rectory, she was shown the patterns and movements of the dance by her mother and sister, and first practised them with her brothers. Probably Mrs Austen played dance tunes on the family harpsichord so her children could dance together. Was the 'best parlour' used for these important lessons, or was the furniture of the 'common parlour' pushed aside to make room? Henry Austen later remembered how Jane excelled in dance—perhaps he gave her some of those first lessons.

Once she had mastered the basics, young Jane had opportunities to dance in neighbourhood homes—the Lloyd sisters, Martha and Mary, came to live at nearby Deane when Jane was thirteen—just the right age for a girl to start thinking of balls. There were also six daughters in the Bigg family at Manydown. Jane Austen referred to a 'Child's Ball' held there in 1808. It's likely, with all those young people, that children's balls were a part of life at Manydown in the 1780s and 1790s. There Jane could have joined in the fun of learning new dance steps with friends she knew well.

Mr Austen was not a wealthy man—a dance master to provide private lessons for his daughters was probably out of his budget. But with an older sister and brothers, and with older friends and even parents who could all help her learn, Jane Austen 'scrambled herself into a little dance education', and was soon ready to make a more formal appearance in a ballroom.



Dance as Exercise

Dancing also provided one of the few ways in which young females could exercise. Horse riding hardly made a girl breathless, and walking at anything more than a gentle pace was frowned upon, but a ball could provide a good workout for the night. It certainly leaves Fanny Price gasping for breath and clutching her side, for the only other exercise she has is sitting on a horse and letting it take her for a gentle ride. Dancing brings on a cramp the next day in Harriet Smith, so she doesn't seem too used to exercise either, but Jane Austen found it kept her fit and healthy and she was proud of being able to dance the night away 'without any fatigue' when she was young. Pleasant music stimulated young people to action and a good evening's dancing could work up a healthy glow and help to get rid of some of those excess pounds which, in an age of heavy eating and drinking, piled on so quickly and made a Regency gown or tight breeches look unflattering. The Prince Regent, a fine dancer in his youth, was forced to give it up when his obesity gave him the nickname of 'Prince of Whales', even though he wore a corset in a ballroom.

Of course, dancing also provided exercise for those who were no longer young. Older people in need of physical exertion could continue to join the dance for many years. Mr Weston, probably going on sixty, is more than capable of leading Mrs Elton to the top of the dance and doing the honours with her.

