HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

“...A Certain Step Towards Falling in Love”

Jane Austen’s Use of Dancing in *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*.

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Hildur Friðriksdóttir

Maí 2010

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Enskuskor

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Summary

Jane Austen is one of the most widely read and beloved writers in English literature. Her novels are still considered staple reading for young women, and her storylines have been borrowed and adapted into various modern forms, for example the films *Clueless* (adapted from *Emma*) and *Bridget Jones' Diary* (loosely based on *Pride and Prejudice*). The reason her stories still apply to the lives of modern women is because of her use of the timeless themes of courtship and marriage and, of course, the implication that a happy ending is in store for every girl regardless of her circumstances. The courtship in the novels consists of very conventional exchanges, through which Austen's characters communicate their marital intentions. Austen often uses balls and dances to illustrate these exchanges between her characters, thus creates the metaphor that dances are like marriages. She cleverly has one of her characters, Henry Tilney, draw attention to the possibilities of this metaphor in *Northanger Abbey*:

> 'I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principal duties of both; and those men who do not chuse to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbour.'[1]

In this essay I will closely examine three of Jane Austen's novels (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*) to study the part dancing played in the social interactions of the period and in particular its crucial connection to courtship activity and marriage, as most notably illustrated in various ballroom scenes.

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[1] Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818; London: Penguin Books, 1995), 57.

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Introduction

Jane Austen, as one of the most prominent female writers in all of literary history, is known for having written novels that reveal the truth about female existence, or as Daiches noted: "Jane Austen's world is a woman's world and the male characters are simply symbols of the different fates in store for women."[2] Her works elegantly bring emotion, love and social structures to the forefront of each reader's mind, whilst pointing out the stereotypes and injustices within everyday life. One of Austen's best literary devices to communicate her message is the use of dance, as she put it herself at the beginning of *Pride and Prejudice:* "To be fond of dancing was a certain step towards falling in love."[3] Austen employs dancing to convey an ongoing social commentary and the relationships between the genders. She wrote in such a way that every plot opens itself to the reader like a ball, where one can explore the relationships, interactions, and personalities of each character present. Furthermore she choreographs the courtships, quite literally, by employing dancing as a metaphor, a model, and a prophecy for marriage. With dance partners often becoming marriage partners, most of Austen's heroines either meet their future husbands, or gain crucial understanding about their suitors, in the ballroom. To emphasize her point, Austen also employs the same terminology for dancing as for marriage, as Stovel highlights; a man 'offers his hand,' 'engaging' the woman as his 'partner', suggesting that this courtship dance could be a precursor to marriage.[4] Jane Austen utilized her own social background to create elegant dancing scenes, for she was herself excessively fond of

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[2] David Daiches, "Jane Austen, Karl Marx, and the Aristocratic Dance," *American Scholar* 18 (1948), 291.

[3] Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice.* (1813; London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 57. All subsequent page numbers will refer to this edition, abbreviated PP.

[4] Nora Foster Stovel, "From Page to Screen: Dancing to the Altar in Recent Film Adaptations of Jane Austen's Novels," *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal* 28 (2006), 185.

dancing.[5] Her literary genius makes each ballroom scene an insight to the character's true personality and helps to build the rhythm of the plot.

Many writers have discussed the idea of dance as a metaphor for courtship and marriage. Daniel A. Segal and Richard Handler, for example, give a very good description of it in their article. Their claim is that "courtship in general, and dance in particular, can lead to marriage—and to the complementary alternative, the rejection of a potential spouse—precisely because they are in many ways marriage-like." However, they do point out that it is not entirely 'marriage-like' because whereas marriage is exclusive, courtship has the possibility of various different spouses for each marriageable individual, which they can then whittle down to one suitable spouse.[6] The objective of this essay is, therefore, to study the role of dancing in the social interactions of the time and in particular its crucial connection to courtship activity and marriage, as most notably illustrated in various ballroom scenes in a c-few of Jane Austen's novels (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*).

[5] In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Jane Austen wrote about a Christmas Eve ball: "There were twenty Dances & I danced them all, & without any fatigue . . . I fancy I could just as well dance for a week together as for half an hour."
Jane Austen's Letters, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, (1796-1817; Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995), letter no. 15, 24. December 1798.

[6] Daniel A. Segal and Richard Handler, "Serious Play: Creative Dance and Dramatic Sensibility in Jane Austen, Ethnographer," *Man, New Series* 24:2 (1989), 324.

1. The Ballroom: Rules, etiquette and politics

In order to understand Austen's use of dance in her novels, we have to start with some general information about the ballroom in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. According to Thompson, a formal Assembly would open with a series of minuets, a French dance for one couple at a time. The other participants would sit on benches that lined the room and watch. Couple after couple would then apply to the Master of Ceremonies for permission to dance. Even in Austen's youth, this format was somewhat outdated, and none of her heroines seem to know it. Instead, they enjoy the more sociable country-dances, which were more lively and relaxed than the complex French dances. Country-dances could be performed with or without steps, as the period, venue, or dexterity of the performer allowed. The choice of the steps, and the execution of them, was another test of the skill and character of the performer. [7]

Most country-dances were performed in a "longways" set for five or more couples with partners standing opposite each other, usually in so called "triple minor longways" sets. That is, a dance would begin 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 at the top for two more "turns" of the dance until they, too, had an chance to begin dancing. The dance would continue until the original first couple had worked its way back to the top. According to Thompson "couples who danced down the set but then walked away to sit down rather than performing their social duty as inactive

[7] Allison Thompson, "Felicities of Rapid Motion: Jane Austen in the Ballroom," *Persuasions On-Line*, 21:1 (2000). Website, 04.05.2010. <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol21no1/thompson.html>
All information regarding the dance technique is gathered from this article.

couples working up the set were considered selfish and disrespectful."[8] Therefore, many couples were relatively inactive during a great deal of the dance, and they used this time as a welcome opportunity to talk and flirt.

In her novels, Jane Austen is more interested in the occasion of the dance rather than the details of the dance per se. She devotes her attention to the people involved, the etiquette, as well as the events that occur as a result of the dancing. Elsbree points out that dancing has several, distinct functions in the novels:

> (1) Dancing, particularly the ball, is for the young girl the formal announcement of her nubility – an obvious, traditional, and important function.
>
> (2) Dancing and the preparations for it are a test of a character's sense (as Jane Austen uses the word); the individual's reasons for dancing, his attitude towards a particular partner, and his success in pleasing a discriminating partner are indices of his competence in judging others accurately and in conducting himself decorously.
>
> (3) Dancing and singing reveal a character's vitality; but the failure to participate can have several causes, not all indicative of lassitude.
>
> (4) Dancing is the ritual expression of group values; the frequency and types of dances are traceable to a group's unity or discord, its allegiance to the proprieties of the landed gentry or its aspirations to the luxuries of the aristocracy and its shared leadership or benevolent autocrat. Aside from these thematic functions, dancing and singing also help set the plot's tempo by indicating a character's normal rhythm of life or change the tempo by occasioning his indiscreet remark, sudden perception,

[8] Allison Thompson, Internet.

> unexpected friendship. In all of the novels except *Persuasion*, Jane Austen uses the events of the dance to complicate the actions of the plot.[9]

So an assembly was indeed much more than a dance; it was a prime area for young ladies and gentlemen to get to know each other. Therefore, young people were expected to follow a variety of etiquette rules, to put their best foot forward as well as have a repertoire of light conversation on hand with which to pass the time while they stood passively.

The rules of society governed more than just the etiquette at the balls, they also dictated who was allowed to attend and dance at the balls. In their article, Segal and Handler give a very thorough account of these rules. Women did not attend dances until they had been properly presented to society. Married people were permitted to dance, they were not obliged to, and their dance activities frequently served only to enable those who should dance, i.e. the young and single. Married men were, therefore, generally required to offer themselves as partners to the unmarried women who had not been engaged for a particular dance. Married women, who chose not to dance, then provided the music for everyone to dance to, along with the spinsters. [10]

The men, certainly, had the advantage of choice, but propriety dictated that men should choose among the choices at hand and that no lady should go without a partner if possible. An important point to stress is that all same-sex, unmarried adults were considered equal within the frame of dancing. This could create difficulties for those who were particularly concerned about emphasising their own high status, such

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[9] Langdon Elsbree, "Jane Austen and the Dance of Fidelity and Complaisance," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 15:2 (1960), 115.

[10] Segal and Handler, 326-327.
All information regarding the rules of etiquette is gathered from this article.

as Mr Elton at the Crown Inn ball in *Emma*. Because even though he had danced all evening, he stops dancing under the pretence of being "an old married man… [whose] dancing days are over" simply to snub Harriet Smith, thus leaving poor Harriett awkwardly and visibly without a partner.[11] Similarly in *Pride and Prejudice,* Darcy's refusal to dance unless he is "particularly acquainted" with his partner not only earns him a reputation for arrogance, but also undermines his later attempts to use dance as a means of initiating courtship (PP 59). When Darcy asks Elizabeth to dance on a subsequent occasion she subtly reminds him of his previous snub and pointedly refuses to dance with him. Just as a gentleman should not leave any eligible ladies without partners, women's power of refusal had to be a generalised exchange. Thus if a woman wished to refuse an invitation to dance, she had to turn down dancing in general rather than refuse to dance with a particular partner and she had to give up dancing for the rest of the evening. Therefore, when Elizabeth refuses Darcy's invitation to dance at Lucas Lodge, she says, "'I have not the least intention of dancing'" (PP 72).

In order to court through dancing, messages of particularity and preference had to be expressed, albeit following rather restricted conventions. A man and a woman could express their mutual interest with engagements to dance together repeatedly. Still there was generally considered to be a limit to the number of times a couple should dance together, as Segal and Handler point out "'particularity' without an engagement was not acceptable."[12] The limit of dances considered acceptable, varied with the public approval of the courtship in question. In *Sense and Sensibility,* for example, Marianne and Willoughby devote themselves particularly to each other

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[11] Jane Austen, *Emma.* (1815; London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 246. All subsequent page numbers will refer to this edition, abbreviated E.

[12] Segal and Handler, 328.

at dances and various other social occasions, thereby leading everyone to presume an engagement where none, in fact, existed. By contrast, Mr Bingley goes by the book and shows his initial interest in Jane by asking her to dance twice at the same ball, but stays within the bounds of propriety by dancing with all the young ladies in the room in general. Thus, Bingley uses a limited number of repeated dances to show his interest, while maintaining the generality of the code of dancing. In addition to asking a woman to dance more than once, a man could also express his preference through a second convention: by engaging a woman for dances before a ball commences, particularly the first two dances. Everything was at stake at the ballroom and a person's future happiness rested on their ability to follow the rules and present themselves in the best way possible.

2. How dancing defines the characters

Jane Austen often uses the dance motif as a means of revealing a person's character, for "it was felt that the skill of a person's dancing expressed the quality of his or her soul or spirit."[13] That is not to say that Elinor is a less appealing character than Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet simply because she is unmusical and does not dance. Yet, one can say that a love and flair for song and dance are, to Jane Austen, signs of an admirable vitality. This vitality must, however, be disciplined so as not to lead to the sorrows of Marianne Dashwood or the downfall of Lydia Bennet. Austen shows that a lack of moderation combined with too much love of pleasure shows a dubious character, and more often than not foreshadows their later downfall. Lydia's adoration of balls and red-coated officers in *Pride and Prejudice* indicates her instability and foreshadows her later irresponsible action; Marianne's readiness to dance and sing at the drop of a hat in *Sense and Sensibility* foreshadows her future heartbreak; and also Frank Churchill's excessive zeal for dancing in *Emma* indicates his weakness of character. Austen also uses dancing to show the positive qualities of her characters, as in the case of Mr. Knightley. He shows himself to be a true gentleman when he rescues Harriet Smith from a social snub on the dance floor. Thus dancing acts as an insight into a person's character, negative as well as positive, and a character's behaviour in the ballroom is almost always indicative of their personality.

In *Sense and Sensibility* dancing is not really an important ritual in itself and the characters' willingness to dance as well as their reasons for doing so, or not doing so in Elinor's case, is the real significance. Therefore, dancing is simply one of several means of contrasting Elinor's *sense* with Marianne's *sensibility* without sharply distinguishing two qualities, merely implying that talents and energy must be

[13] Allison Thompson, Internet.

disciplined by reason and propriety. So Marianne's excess of sensibility is implicit in her readiness to dance, sing, or play the pianoforte. On the other hand, Elinor's sense is manifested in her discreet reluctance to dance, play or even listen; she is "neither musical, nor affecting to be so."[14] While at Barton, still quietly pining for Edward Ferrars, she spends one of her happiest moments in the company of Colonel Brandon, "sitting down together by mutual consent, while the others were dancing" (SS 53). Yet Elinor does, by no means, disparage the pleasures of others. On the contrary, even though she laments Marianne's improper haste in performing and the ease with which she belittles Colonel Brandon and Edward's musical limitations, she admires Marianne's skill in playing and passion for dancing.

Marianne is not as reasonable as her sister, and in her mind Willoughby, who suddenly appears and assists her home after she has sprained her ankle, is the only compelling attraction at Barton. He is also commended with the highest praise when Sir John says, "'I remember last Christmas, at a little hop at the park, he danced from eight o'clock till four, without once sitting down'" (SS 43). Her sensibility is completely won over by such news: "'Did he, indeed?' cried Marianne, with sparkling eyes, 'and with elegance, with spirit?'" (SS 43). Whatever additional confirmation Marianne needs of Willoughby's perfection is provided when he pays his first official visit to Barton Cottage the following day:

> When she saw that to the perfect good breeding of the gentleman, he united frankness and vivacity, and above all, when she heard him declare that of music and dancing he was passionately fond, she gave him such a look of approbation as secured the largest share of his discourse to herself for the rest of his stay. (SS 44)

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[14] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility.* (1811; London: Penguin Books, 1994), p. 243. All subsequent page numbers will refer to this edition, abbreviated SS.

Willoughby's superficial, opportunistic behaviour is later exemplified by his eagerness to perform with Marianne whenever she feels the urge; he shows no care for propriety or for the preservation of her virtue. It is this behaviour that shows him to be not much of a gentleman, as he is more concerned about his own pleasure and enjoyment than protecting her. After Willoughby has left for London in haste, Marianne worries about the man whose taste she believes coincides in every point with hers, and so she symbolically declares her faithfulness to Willoughby by foregoing dancing completely, denoting a hiatus in their courtship.

Out of Austen's six novels, in *Pride and Prejudice* dance is used most predominantly as a tool for revealing a character's class and values. The first volume of the novel is largely devoted to the various dances which help set the tempo for the dramatic movements within the storyline and the relationships of the main characters: Elizabeth's early relationship with Darcy, Jane's with Bingley, and the lead up to Lydia's downfall. There are constant references to dancing in the first eighteen chapters: the anticipation of balls, the events at the balls, and the whispered confidences the following morning. They not only establish the contrast between the tense rhythm of Elizabeth and Darcy and the complacent rhythm of Jane and Bingley, but also suggest Mr. Bennet's long-suffering nature, Mrs. Bennet's loud, explicit, and vulgar expectations of marriage for her daughters, as well as the silliness of Mary, Lydia, and Kitty. The Bennets are an ill formed group, and show by their conduct at the various dances that they lack leadership and are instead governed by individual whim and temperament. The family seems to be preoccupied with the proprieties of a profitable marriage, incessant visiting, gossiping, and other trivial matters, as well as impressing the newly arrived gentry.

Elizabeth Bennet is one of Jane Austen's livelier heroines, and not oblivious to the imprudent behaviour of her family. Elizabeth's liveliness and early dislike of Darcy, as well as his reluctant admiration for her, are subtly revealed in the clever dialogue during the dances. In chapter three, just after Elizabeth has first seen Darcy during a ball at the Meryton Assembly, Darcy declines to dance on the grounds that he never dances unless he knows his partner well, and Elizabeth being not handsome enough to tempt him. She takes the slight in her stride and instead of taking offense; she makes fun of Darcy and his improper pride. The following day whilst discussing the ball, her mother urges "'Another time, Lizzy, . . . I would not dance with *him*, if I were you,'" Elizabeth declares, "'I believe, Ma'am, I may safely promise you *never* to dance with him'" (PP 66). These are famous last words indeed. When Darcy then asks Elizabeth to dance on a subsequent occasion at Lucas Lodge she refuses him, partly because his earlier snub makes her to doubt the sincerity of his interest, and partly to return his insult. When they do manage to dance at the Netherfield ball, everyone is in agreement that they are perfectly matched and Sir William Lucas, attempting to compliment them, 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. Allow me to say, however, that your fair partner does not disgrace you.' (PP 135)

While his words are silly and his timing poor, the reader will discern his expression of Darcy's gallantry. However, Darcy's haughty behaviour and previous refusals to dance had amply demonstrated that he considers himself a cut above his company and thus the more amiable Bingley, who danced every dance, is considered the more desirable gentleman in the first half of the story. Jane Austen thus contrasts Bingley's eager, almost gushing promptings with Darcy's aloof, almost pompous disdain for

dancing. After establishing the values of the Bennets and the country society, and also Darcy and his social group, primarily by the means of the dance motif, Austen can well afford to drop her use of the motif after the Netherfield ball. She still continues to use it in more subtle ways in the rest of the novel, mostly to further the courtships.

In the opening parts of *Emma*, dancing is less significant than the ability to sing and play the pianoforte. The central contrast is between the performances of Emma and Jane Fairfax; Jane's are skilled renditions that are admired by all whilst Emma is a bit of a dilettante. Later, however, the three dances in the story – one improvised, one planned but postponed, and one given by Mr Weston – prove to be decidedly efficient in facilitating the courtships and revealing the true nature of the characters in the story. Furthermore, they provide the much-needed contrast between Emma's feelings towards Frank and her unconscious, but growing, feelings towards Mr Knightley. Emma Woodhouse contrives to impose her highly idiosyncratic world upon the real one. She is described as being "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition" (E 5). She is also somewhat of a spoilt dilettante, for whom the arts are a social pastime without a serious purpose. So she can allow herself to exaggerate her talents and be unenthusiastic in perfecting them, simply because she has never met anyone in Highbury whose performances would reveal the truth and the insufficiency of her skills. That is, until Jane Fairfax returns to Highbury, followed by the mysterious Frank Churchill. Emma, Jane and Frank seem to have been connected to each other by fate; they are all of a similar age and growing up in Highbury, all of them losing a parent at a very young age, and yet all but Emma are sent off to live away from their families in Highbury. In spite of similar starts in life, they are very dissimilar characters due to the differences in their upbringing.

These dissimilarities are, according to Elsbree, revealed to the reader through their practice of the arts:

> Emma's inadequately trained musical skills imply a vitality which is undisciplined; Jane Fairfax's superior performances on the pianoforte suggest disciplined, reserved feelings; Frank Churchill's avidity for dancing and impatience with propriety reveal an irresponsible vigour. [15]

Thus the first dancing scene neatly sums up the differences between the three characters; a scene that also places Mr. Knightley in pronounced contrast with Emma, Jane, and Frank. There is a large group present at the Coles' party, and Emma and Jane have already played and sung:

> Here ceased the concert part of the evening, for Miss Woodhouse and Miss Fairfax were the only young-lady-performers; but soon (within five minutes) the proposal of dancing—originating nobody exactly knew where—was so effectually promoted by Mr. and Mrs. Cole, that every thing was rapidly clearing away, to give proper space. Mrs. Weston capital in her country-dances, was seated, and beginning an irresistible waltz; and Frank Churchill, coming up with a most becoming gallantry to Emma, had secured her hand, and led her up to the top. While waiting till the other young people could pair themselves off, Emma found time … to look about, and see what became of Mr. Knightley. This would be a trial. He was no dancer in general. If he were to be very alert in engaging Jane Fairfax now, it might augur something. There was no immediate appearance. No; he was talking to Mrs. Cole—he was looking on unconcerned; Jane was asked by some-body else, and he was still talking to Mrs. Cole. Emma … led off the dance with genuine spirit and enjoyment. Not more than five couples could be mustered; but the rarity and the suddenness of it made it very delightful, and she found herself well matched in a partner. They were a couple worth

[15] Elsbree, 126

> looking at. Two dances, unfortunately, were all that could be allowed … After some attempts … they were obliged to thank Mrs. Weston, look sorrowful, and have done. 'Perhaps it is as well,' said Frank Churchill, as he attended Emma to her carriage. 'I must have asked Miss Fairfax, and her languid dancing would not have agreed with me, after yours.' (E 173-174)

There are a few major ironies in this scene, most of which stem from Emma's rather superficial interpretation of its events and the reader's retrospective comprehension of them. First of all, the reader immediately suspects that the anonymous proposer of dancing is Frank Churchill, who feigns innocence in order to conceal the elaborate and often cruel game he is playing with Jane. For Frank, the dancing is not only the ideal means to torment Jane but also continue to deceive Emma. Naïve Emma, who is captivated by the "irresistible waltz" and "a most becoming gallantry", is led to a position of prominence in the dance formation. However, she might not have been quite as impressed if she had known the truth about Frank then, indeed she probably would have found the waltz quite resistible. Emma, never known for her patience or for being someone that is happy to wait for others, finds time to speculate about the evening and the people in attendance. One of her biggest problems is that she always seems to have far too much time on her hands. She regards the opportunity to dance, as a test of Knightley's feelings towards Jane Fairfax but it is actually more like a trial of his patience with Emma, since he not only loves her but also distrusts Frank Churchill. In the end she is satisfied with his "no immediate appearance" and leads off the literal waltz and the figurative dance of courtship with "genuine spirit and enjoyment." She finds herself "well matched" in Frank Churchill, and she is right, but for the wrong reasons. As Elsbree suggests "they are both schemers, Frank and Emma

are well matched in a contest of deception in which Frank is the superior."[16] As partner and possible suitor, Frank greatly differs from Knightley, who is "no dancer in general" but who later proves himself to be a considerate and honest partner. Whilst Frank is an avid dancer, his inconsiderateness and dishonesty are nowhere more evident than when he calls his fiancée's dancing "languid" and claims that it would not "have agreed" with him after Emma's liveliness; statements, true as they might be, overlook the cause of Jane's languor. Which might either be due to the strain of their secret engagement or his constant and transparent flirting with Emma?

The second dance, although never held, serves an important purpose. It subtly realigns the four principal characters by evoking their reaction to it. Emma, originally delighted to dance with Frank and eagerly anticipating showing people again what a well-suited couple they are, has resolved to display herself with him. Making her embarrassment that much greater when she later discovers that Jane has been Frank's chosen partner all along. In retrospect Frank becomes even more ambiguous in his intentions, because even though Emma assumes he will be her partner, the reader cannot. Austen just specifies that he wished to dance, not that he only wished to dance with Emma. Jane, who very much looked forward to the ball, becomes almost pathetic and desperate once the reader finds out that she has been secretly engaged to Frank all along. She was willing to put up with Frank's devious games and jabs not to mention his philandering, just to dance with him again. Knightley is not downhearted when the ball is called off, for he believes that:

> 'Pleasure in seeing dancing!—not I, indeed—I never look at it—I do not know who does.—Fine dancing, I believe, like virtue, must be its own reward. Those who are standing by are usually thinking of something very different.' (E 194)

[16] Elsbree, 127

His disinterest in the ball also proves Emma's worries about Knightley and Jane Fairfax are without foundation. Although this slightly irks her at first, she is secretly pleased which shows that she is closer to seeing Knightley as less of a brother and more as a potential suitor.

3. How dancing defines the relationships and the storylines

It has already been established that the dance motif can be used to shed light on the characters' traits as well as expose their flaws. Furthermore, it can be used to establish and define the courtships within the novels. In the novels, most of Austen's heroines have a defining moment in their love life at a ball, albeit not always a happy one as is the case with Marianne Dashwood. From the moment Marianne and Willoughby first met, they demonstrated their mutual attraction more than propriety and society permitted, and their behaviour in the ballroom was no exception. As soon as Marianne had recovered from her injury, a season of private balls and parties at Barton Park commences, "this was a season of happiness to Marianne" (SS 52). Willoughby is always invited, due to his attachment to the Dashwoods, an attachment that grew rapidly. Marianne is so blinded by her infatuation with him, that she pays no attention to the reproaches of her sister in regard to their inappropriate behaviour. Marianne believes that:

> The restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely and unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions. (SS 51)

When they are in each other's company they only have eyes and ears for each other. When dancing was a part of the evening's entertainment, they partnered with each other for most of the night and "when obliged to separate for a couple of dances, were careful to stand together, and scarcely spoke a word to anyone else" (SS 51). This particularity of theirs along with other subtle hints, Willoughby giving Marianne a horse, her giving him a lock of her hair, and them spending hours completely unsupervised at his estate when the picnic was cancelled, leads everyone in the community, including her closest family, to believe that they are engaged. For that

reason, everyone is baffled when Willoughby suddenly casts her aside and leaves for London. The climax of their courtship happens during the sisters' visit to London. Willoughby, avoids seeing Marianne for days despite her most desperate efforts. She becomes increasingly depressed during their stay and does not act as she normally does at social occasions. In fact, at one ball she was "equally ill-disposed to receive or communicate pleasure" (SS 164), and once she learns that Willoughby was invited to that very ball she becomes "exceedingly hurt" (SS 165). They finally run into each other at a party where Willoughby gives her the cold shoulder and behaves as though they barely know each other. Stovel points out that in the 1995 film adaptation, Emma Thompson wisely set this pivotal scene at a ball because "Willoughby's snubbing Marianne so publicly at the dance, under the watchful eye of his well-heeled partner, Miss Gray, constitutes a very pointed rejection."[17] His rebuff signals Willoughby's unwillingness to consider her any longer as a potential marriage partner. After this culmination of events, dancing and singing disappears from the novel, and Austen concentrates her attention on more serious matters, such as curing Marianne's health and sensibility, praising Elinor's patience and sense, and finding suitable husbands for both girls.

In *Pride and Prejudice,* Darcy and Elizabeth's complex courtship is contrasted with the smooth sailing of Bingley's courtship of her sister Jane. Bingley pursues Jane by the book, he shows his preference, at first, by dancing most often with her and then later by reserving her for the first two dances at the Netherfield ball. So their courtship progresses in a steady pace, right until Darcy disrupts their rhythm with his intervention. In their work Segal and Handler point out that: "in *Pride and Prejudice,* the powerful yet ambivalent mutual attraction between Elizabeth and Mr Darcy is

[17] Stovel, 187.

slowly and gropingly developed by a series of encounters not *of* but *about* dancing. At first, Darcy refuses to dance with Elizabeth, then she refuses him."[18] The couple's first encounter takes place at the Meryton Assembly when Bingley invites the taciturn Darcy to dance with Elizabeth, but Darcy's *pride* causes him to decline with the words:

> 'She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men.' (PP 59)

Thus he earns Elizabeth's inflexible *prejudice*, and he gets his comeuppance at the second dance, which is set at Lucas Lodge. Sir William, ignorant of Darcy's earlier snub of Elizabeth, exercises his gallantry by urging Darcy to dance with Elizabeth. Darcy agrees this time, but Elizabeth refuses. When Sir William inquires, "'we cannot wonder at his complaisance; for who would object to such a partner?'" Elizabeth "looked archly, and turned away" (PP 73). Clearly Elizabeth is applying a woman's power of refusal. Austen choreographs their courtship as a dance in itself; wherein each time Darcy takes a step toward Elizabeth, she takes two steps back. Another defining moment in their courtship that is connected to dancing, but does not involve any actual dancing, occurs whilst Elizabeth is staying at Netherfield to nurse Jane. It is evening; Miss Bingley is playing "a lively Scotch air" (PP 96); and Darcy comes over to Elizabeth:

> 'Do not you feel a great inclination, Miss Bennet, to seize such an opportunity of dancing a reel?'
>
> She smiled, but made no answer. He repeated the question, with some surprise at her silence.
>
> 'Oh!' said she, 'I heard you before; but I could not immediately determine what to

[18] Segal and Handler, 328.

> say in reply. You wanted me, I know, to say "Yes," that you might have the pleasure of despising my taste; but I always delight in overthrowing those kinds of schemes, and cheating a person of their premeditated contempt. I have therefore made up my mind to tell you, that I do not want to dance a reel at all—and now despise me if you dare.'
>
> Indeed I do not dare.' (PP 96)

In this scene Darcy actively seeks to converse with Elizabeth, showing that he is not unaffected by her. This moves him from the role of the disinterested spectator to a would-be partner, even though Elizabeth does not seem to grasp this move and she treats him to a rather waspish reply.

The climax of Volume One, which is notably the dancing part of the novel, happens at the Netherfield Ball, where poor Elizabeth's unwanted suitors, Collins and Darcy, are both present and the charming Wickham is absent. First the absurd Mr. Collins besieges her and secures her for the first two dances, which clearly indicates his wish to marry her. His invitation to dance is a prelude to his proposal of marriage, and the next morning he makes "his declaration in form" (PP 146). However, his poor performance as a dance partner symbolizes his unsuitability as a marriage partner:

> The two first dances . . . were dances of mortification. Mr. Collins, awkward and solemn, apologising instead of attending, and often moving wrong without being aware of it, gave her all the shame and misery which a disagreeable partner for a couple of dances can give. The moment of her release from him was exstacy [sic]. (PP 133)

As David Daiches notes, "The characters circle round each other with appropriate speeches and gestures, and occasionally a grotesque like Mr. Collins joins the dance

as a symbol of one kind of fate that threatens the dancers."[19] Darcy invites Elizabeth to dance at the Netherfield ball of his own accord, and this time he "took her so much by surprise in his application for her hand, that, without knowing what she did, she accepted him" (PP 133). Elizabeth immediately scolds herself for not having enough presence of mind to refuse him. After all she has gone back on her own word, as she had proclaimed that she would *never* dance with him. When they finally do dance together, Elizabeth attempts to keep her distance from him by talking the talk expected of dancing partners.

> '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.'
>
> He smiled, and assured her that whatever she wished him to say should be said.
>
> 'Very well. – That reply will do for the present. – Perhaps by and by I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones. – But now we be silent.'
>
> 'Do you talk by rule then, while you are dancing?'
>
> 'Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know.' (PP 133-134)

She is, however, not able to keep up the polite small talk for long, as the temptation to taunt Darcy into revealing more of his character proves too great. So she brings up the subject of Wickham, which is merely a springboard to launch her into a series of questions on Darcy's character and disposition. Finally he tires of her relentless interrogation and asks her to what purpose all those questions might be; she claims that she is trying to merely trying to make out his character, something which she finds difficult because she "hears such different accounts" (PP 136) of him. Even

[19] David Daiches, 291.

though her attempt to establish his character is perfectly reasonable behaviour at a ball, Darcy is not keen on the idea and claims he would prefer if she desisted, because "there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either" (PP 136). When their dance is over Darcy hastily bids her farewell and hurries away, no doubt to intervene in Bingley's love life. The rest of the night is rather frustrating for Elizabeth because "she was teazed [sic] by Mr. Collins, who continued most perseveringly by her side, and though he could not prevail with her to dance with him again, put it out of her power to dance with others" (PP 143).

The Netherfield ball marks the end of the dancing in the novel, and one might presume the end of the courtship between Elizabeth and Darcy. However, even though she dispenses with the use of balls and dancing after the first volume of the novel, Austen continues to employ the metaphor established through the dance scenes, i.e. all the to-ing and fro-ing of their courtship. In keeping with this pattern, Darcy, against his will, his reason and his character, asks for Elizabeth's hand in marriage in Volume Two: "'In vain have I struggled. It will not do. My feelings will not be repressed. You must allow me to tell you how ardently I admire and love you'" (PP 221). Elizabeth, again according to the pattern, rejects his proposal, declaring: "'You could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it'" (PP 224). Thankfully he gives it another go in the end and she accepts him that time. In the case of Jane and Bingley, however, the dance scenes in the earlier part of the novel make it abundantly clear that they were perfectly matched and on the right track right until Darcy intervened. All it takes for them to pick up where they left off is a little prompting by Darcy, which enables Bingley to propose to Jane. Thus, Elizabeth and Darcy, Jane and Bingley, manage to dance, over the bumps in the road, all the way to the altar.

There is not a great deal of balls or dancing in the first half of *Emma,* and up until the impromptu dance at the Coles' Emma has not engaged in any dancing. This not only implies that she is not on the marriage market yet, but also that she is fairly naïve and inexperienced when it comes to actual courtship. Even though she claims to be an expert on the subject. In fact, in the beginning Emma is very insistent on her intention not to marry, and declares to Harriet Smith: "'I am not only, not going to be married, at present, but have very little intention of ever marrying at all'" (E 66). Therefore, at the Coles' when Frank Churchill "with most becoming gallantry to Emma, had secured her hand, and led her up to the top" (E 174) she is immediately flattered and sees it as possible indication of more. She comments that she is "well matched in a partner" and that they were indeed a "couple worth looking at" (E 174), thus she slowly starts to come around to the idea of marriage. As previously mentioned, the second ball in *Emma* is unceremoniously cancelled when Frank Churchill is called back to his aunt; while he is gone the truth about his secret engagement to Jane comes to light. Yet his return is still, quite fittingly, celebrated with a ball at the Crown Inn, thrown by the Westons. This ball reveals, in particular, Emma's growing awareness of Knightley's manliness. Jane Austen is able to convey the deceleration of Emma's rhythm with Frank and the acceleration of her rhythm with Knightley with very economic use of dialogue, by utilizing the symbolism of the ball itself and the ambivalence of the dance terminology. The dance begins, and "Frank turned instantly to Emma, to claim her former promise; and boasted himself an engaged man" (E 245). Although she very much enjoys dancing with him, Emma now sees Frank only as a friend and that "there was nothing like flirtation between her and her partner. They seemed more like cheerful, easy friends, than lovers. That Frank

Churchill thought less of her than he had done, was indubitable" (E 245). Emma is not able to fully enjoy herself at the ball due to Mr. Knightley's disinclination to dance:

> There he was, among the standers-by, where he ought not to be; he ought to be dancing, – not classing himself with the husbands, and fathers, and whist-players . . . so young as he looked! – He could not have appeared to greater advantage perhaps any where, than where he had placed himself. His tall, firm upright figure ... was such as Emma felt must draw every body's eyes; and, excepting her own partner, there was not one . . . who could be compared with him (E 245).

Observing his graceful movements, Emma wishes "he could love a ball-room better, and could like Frank Churchill better" (E 245). But she has little time to consider Mr. Knightley as a partner because Mr. Elton, for whose hostility and marriage she feels indirectly responsible, has been conspicuously snubbing Harriet Smith. He reaches the pinnacle of his rudeness by pointedly refusing to dance with Harriet when Mrs. Weston offers her as a partner, so Knightley steps forward: "Mr. Knightley leading Harriet to the set! – Never had she [Emma] been more surprised, seldom more delighted, than at that instant" (E 247). Emma has still further reason for gratification: "His dancing proved to be just what she had believed it, extremely good" (E 247). Austen thus lays the groundwork for Harriet's incredible delusion that Knightley loves her, which in turn evokes Emma's instantaneous resolve "that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" (E 308). But all of this is in far off in the future at this point in the novel and the distance Emma has yet to go in her comic search for truth about herself and others is considerable.

Returning to the events at the Crown Inn ball, Emma is urged by Mr. Weston to set the example by leading a dance as the most eligible lady present. Emma

creatively turns the established convention, that men have 'the advantage of choice', on its head. She does so, not by rejecting codes of conduct completely, but by uttering a subtle conditional to Knightley:

> "I am ready," said Emma, "whenever I am wanted."
> "Whom are you going to dance with?" asked Mr. Knightley.
> She hesitated a moment, and then replied, "With you, if you will ask me."
> "Will you?" said he, offering his hand.
> "Indeed I will. You have shown that you can dance, and you know we are not really so much brother and sister as to make it at all improper."
> "Brother and sister! no, indeed" (E 249-250).

Notably she never actually asks him to dance, moreover Knightley does not respond by asking her to dance but by accepting her implicit invitation. Thus, Emma transgresses the etiquette of courtship and the ascribed roles of men and women. Emma's prompting Knightley to invite her to dance prefigures her inadvertently prompting him to propose marriage. So Austen draws Knightley into the marriage market by drawing him onto the dance floor. The astute reader gets a hint of potential partnership in Knightley's emphatic response to Emma's comment on their relationship, "Brother and sister! no, indeed" (E 250). Thus, the ballroom scene at the Crown Inn unites the predestined couple and serves as a public and private acknowledgement of their union.

Conclusion

Jane Austen's novels are centred on marriage and courtship, and she subtly used the ballroom scenes to her advantage. In her first three novels, *Northanger Abbey, Sense and Sensibility, and Pride and Prejudice*, she mostly uses the dance motif as a means of revealing the traits of the characters and their compatibility in marriage. Once it has served its purpose, well before each novel is half over, it is dropped as a major means of characterization. In her later stories, *Mansfield Park, Emma, and Persuasion*, there are certain modifications to this dance motif and it becomes less important than in the earlier novels in revealing the values of the characters, but is still vital in revealing the characters' marital intentions and catapulting them into the right relationships.

Austen's focus on marriage reflected the reality that women of that time faced. There is a vast difference between the opportunities available to women in Austen's time and the present time. In those times, it was near impossible for young, respectable women to make their own fortune and be truly independent. After all, universities, politics, and careers were not open to women. The few occupations that were available to them were neither highly respected nor well paid. Therefore, the only way for women to leave their family home and to have some money was to get married. In today's society, however, most women go to university and/or have a career and most would only consider marriage if it was for love. With that in mind, Austen's popularity amongst modern women is quite unexpected. Dow Adams notes that many of Austen's novels feature "a heroine who moves, sometimes gracefully, sometimes awkwardly, through a sort of courtship dance in which she must judge each of her dancing partners for appearance, style, character, and, most importantly,

compatibility, not just for the dance, but also for possible marriage."[20] Which is what makes her writing still relevant to women of today, because women readers can identify with the heroines' difficulties in finding a husband and empathize with them as they attempt to overcome each obstacle that stands in their way. Moreover, it is somewhat comforting to the modern woman to know that even in Austen's more romantic time, women did not have an easy run of things when it came to finding a suitable husband. Ultimately, most of Austen's heroines could have saved themselves a lot of trouble and heartache if they had just gone with their first man that caught their eye. For in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet meets Mr. Darcy, flirts with George Wickham, is proposed to by the Reverend Mr. Collins, and then ends up marrying Darcy. Similarly, in *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse has known Mr. Knightley all her life, but flirts with Frank Churchill, is proposed to by the Reverend Mr. Elton, and finally realises that she is ultimately destined for Mr. Knightley. Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* has an even worse turn of things; Colonel Brandon falls for her but she spurns his advances, she falls in love with Willoughby who snubs her in the end despite being in love with her, and she ends up marrying Colonel Brandon. Even though women today do not measure their potential suitors by their ability to dance, there is an undeniable 'Darcy-effect' from Austen's novels. Which is the notion that one measure of determining whether a man is truly a gentleman is by his ability to enter a room gracefully, to move and stand well, and without calling too much attention to himself – and, of course, his ability to emerge gracefully from a pond.

[20] Timothy Dow Adams, "To Know the Dancer from the Dance: Dance as a Metaphor of Marriage in Four Novels of Jane Austen," *Studies in the Novel* 14:1 (1982), 56.

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