

# “Entering the World” of Regency Society: the Ballroom Scenes in *Northanger Abbey*, “The Watsons” and *Mansfield Park*

JACQUELINE REID-WALSH

Westmount, Quebec

Ballroom scenes are central to Jane Austen’s novels for they provide public arenas where the characters reveal both their degree of accomplishment in surface manners and their inner courtesy or vulgarity. My focus is on how the young women who are just “entering the world” of society conduct themselves in the public arenas of the assembly or ball (Gregory 31). Their entrances are moments of public scrutiny when their gestures, actions and words are studied and discussed by the company at large. I examine three heroines who are making their social debuts, Catherine Morland, Emma Watson, and Fanny Price. All manage their entrances virtually unaided for even if there is an older woman companion she provides little guidance, being more concerned about herself than about her protégée. Mrs. Allen, worrying about her dress, comes instantly to mind. These heroines do manage their entrances successfully, however, and negotiate their course with varying degrees of aplomb. Unlike Evelina in Frances Burney’s novel, Austen’s heroines are not publicly humiliated, but neither are they equally adept. Catherine must learn by experience about the implications of ballroom etiquette, while Emma and Fanny apply their knowledge in different ways.

It was commonly accepted during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that ballrooms were arenas of courtship. Henry Tilney’s witty comparison of the country dance to marriage expresses the notion of dancing as being a form of trial marriage, although Catherine sees only differences between the two. Unlike much Austen criticism, my critique takes Catherine’s emphasis on difference as its cue: “But they are such very different things!—. . . People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance, only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour” (*Northanger Abbey* 76, 77). Because of the temporary duration and the physical distance between the partners, the young women are able to assert their power of acceptance or refusal to the fullest that convention allows. Because Catherine, Emma and Fanny are competent in ballroom etiquette, to varying degrees they also understand the “politics” of the ballroom. In *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture*, Richard Handler and Daniel Segal argue that the self-conscious characters engage in analytical commentary on dancing as a “code” of marriage while participating in the conventional application of the code (91, 98). Thereby I consider the young heroines to be able to question and even resist the dance-marriage equation at the same time they apply their knowledge of etiquette (Miller 37).

I will explore the heroine’s social entrance from her “position” or “standpoint” and consider the narratives in terms of the historical details that constructed women’s lives in the early nineteenth century (Harding

(121-23). My context is drawn mainly from the Regency dance manual, and I interpret the rules for ballroom etiquette, for the steps, and for the dance figures both as literal instruction and as a construction of a community of dance. The dance manual of this period is an interesting compilation, part conduct book and part dance instruction book. The assumptions up to 1820 were the same as in the eighteenth century whereby behaviour was considered to be a reflection of morality. It was only after 1820 that the dance manual became more of a catalogue of rules concerning the ceremonious aspects of life (Aldrich 10-11).

### I. *The Country Dance as an Emblem of Equality*

Imagine yourself in the midst of a Country Dance, there all are partakers of the pleasure, there are no silent envious gazers, no sullen critics to mar the amusement or intimidate its votaries, joy and gaiety animate every countenance, while pleasure beams in every eye; the young and old are equally employed in forming the mazy circlets of the figure.

Thomas Wilson, *An Analysis of Country Dancing*, 1811 xvii

Underneath the heightened rhetoric of Thomas Wilson, the dancing master of the King's Theatre Opera House in London during the Regency, is a description of a type or "emblem" of an ideal community where all members participate joyfully, young and old, women and men. In the act of country dancing the social ills of envy and criticism are suspended in the pleasure of the dance. Because all members participate in country dancing, the period of the dance becomes a kind of isolated time of communal equity. Both women and men are equal agents while dancing, their movements are largely in parallel, synchronized and in exact balance to one another. In his introduction to his *An Analysis of Country Dancing* Wilson stresses the symmetry



Thomas Wilson, *An Analysis of Country Dancing* (1811).

between the women and men because they perform the same steps as mirror images of one another. For example, after his diagrams representing men and women and their dancing lines, Wilson stresses their exact symmetry: "Ladies may invert the book, which will bring them on their own side." This symmetry is also emphasised in the diagrams for the specific often complex figures of the dances themselves. Significantly, Wilson's introductory drawing showing the five ballet positions which are the positions of the feet stress equal skill and dexterity for both women and men.

Surrounding or framing this charmed space, however, are stringent rules of etiquette. Most obviously it is the men who have the power of asking and women only the power of acceptance or refusal. Moreover, the "laws" of the ballroom are stringent concerning a woman's privilege to refuse a potential partner. To transgress these rules brought shame and community stricture, as poor Evelina found out when she first refused a ridiculous fop by saying she would not dance at all, then accepted a personable young man, and later at a different ball pretended to be pre-engaged to dance and thereby avoided another undesirable partner (*Evelina* 18-19, 28-29). Indeed, the excuses Evelina misapplies are the only valid ones a woman might use. Refusing to dance with a partner resulted in a woman undergoing a kind of penalty, much like hockey players having to sit out for an interval after misbehaviour. In his *Pocket Companion for French and English Dancing* (1821) G. M. S. Chivers describes the conditions of refusal: "Any lady refusing to dance with a Gentleman, if disengaged, will be under the penalty of not joining the two next Dances" (in Aldrich 118). Depending on the size of the company this might last half the evening.

If the severe tone of some of the prescriptions and proscriptions made by authors of Regency dance manuals is to be interpreted as a slightly frustrated response to the ill behaviour often displayed in the ballroom, it may indicate that the demeanour of men was under considerable attack. For example, Thomas Wilson in his *Companion to the Ball Room* (1816) had to tell men what not to wear: "Gentlemen are not permitted to enter the Ball Room, in boots, spurs, gaiters, trowsers, or with canes or sticks; nor are loose pantaloons considered proper for a Full Dress Ball" (239). Another manual, *Treatise on Dancing* (1802), by Saltador, gives long and specific instructions on how to bow when asking a lady to dance: "In the simple mechanic movements of address, the foot takes the second position, the other the third, then the body gently falls forward keeping the head in a direct line with the body. The bend is made by a motion at the union of the inferior limbs with the body, and a little flexing of the limbs . . . when a person suffers his head to drop down, and his body to be bent almost into the shape of an ox-bow, he seems more to reverence the earth, than the object of his esteem (in Aldrich 99-100).

In some strictures, "person" may be a synonym for man, as in the proscription that "Snapping the fingers, in country Dancing and Reels, and the sudden howl or yell too frequently practised, ought particularly to be avoided" (*Companion to the Ball Room* 244). Yet in reading through the dance manuals it is striking to note that most instruction does not appear to be

gender specific but is aimed at both women and men generally. Because dancing masters were passionate about establishing country dancing and other ball room dances as an important art form in polite society they urged all partners equally to conduct themselves politely and inconspicuously. Taking the temerity to rewrite Henry Tilney's description of the country dance as an "emblem" of marriage, I would call the country dance an "emblem" of equality where the inequities between women and men and adults and children are temporarily suspended by the grace and joys of the dance.

## II. *Standing opposite one another in a long room in Northanger Abbey, "The Watsons" and Mansfield Park*

"Entering the world" is not an identical experience for Catherine Morland, Emma Watson, and Fanny Price in terms of the pressure of the societal gaze on their conduct. At one extreme, Catherine makes her debut in the Upper Rooms of Bath and appears in danger of never dancing at all because the Allens know no one. In the Lower Rooms however, because unattached women and men apply to the Master of Ceremony, he finds a partner for them, so Catherine is presented to Henry (Wilson Companion 242; *Northanger Abbey* 25). There is a sense that her anonymity protects her somewhat but Catherine is anxious to act properly; witness the business of driving unattended with John Thorpe through the negligence of Mrs. Allen.

At the other extreme is Fanny Price's situation at a ball held expressly for her social entrance at her home, Mansfield Park. She is the focus of everyone's gaze for different reasons. The transformation of the dowdy "poor relation" into a young lady is an object of interest to the entire community. In terms of people closer to Fanny, Sir Thomas's benign but evaluative gaze represents the power he wields over Fanny. Sir Thomas's generalized approval of Fanny's assets as an attractive young woman is paralleled by the very specific, admiring gaze of Fanny's potential suitor, Henry Crawford. There is a sense that everything Fanny does is watched with almost microscopic attention.

By contrast Emma Watson seems to occupy a middle position in this spectrum: She is an unknown variable entering a closed community where her sisters are almost too well known. Therefore she is an object of interest in the sense of providing variety in a very narrow world. Due to Emma's cultivated upbringing and due to her spirited personality she is not bothered by the social pressure of her "entrance" but rather observes the behaviour of the assembly with a detached eye even while she participates in the country dancing. Indeed Emma's behaviour resembles that of an anthropologist who is a "participant-observer" in a society; she studies a culture while acting as part of it.

Catherine Morland is the most naïve of the three heroines discussed and part of her development in *Northanger Abbey* concerns her learning by trial and error about ball etiquette. For example, Catherine learns that being pre-engaged to dance before an assembly is not necessarily an advantage, for

John Thorpe abandons her for the card table at the start of the evening. Catherine is forced to sit out with other young women not asked to dance. The narrator describes the ignominy in hyperbolic terms but note the image of the social gaze or "eye":

To be disgraced in the eye of the world, to wear the appearance of infamy while her heart is all purity, her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of her debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine's life. . . . (53)

Catherine ends up having to refuse the offer by Henry Tilney to dance due to her pre-engagement. Because she regrets the situation she has been placed in she quite properly refuses to dance with Thorpe again for a second set. Again, correctly she uses a general refusal that she will not dance at all to cover the particular refusal to dance (59; Handler & Segal 96).

It is only at the fourth assembly that Catherine manages to avoid the gaze of Thorpe (by looking at her fan) and is finally reunited with Henry as a dancing partner. This "felicity" is not unalloyed however, for Thorpe stations himself behind her while she dances and she is forced to listen to him until he was "born off by the irresistible pressure of a long string of passing ladies" (76). All this time he has been wearying her with first erroneously claiming that she had agreed to dance with him, next flattering her, and then giving a monologue on hunters and their prices. It is in this competitive context that Henry Tilney utters his famous comparison between country dancing and marriage:

That gentleman would have put me out of patience, had he staid with you half a minute longer. He has no business to withdraw the attention of my partner from me. We have entered into a contract of mutual agreeableness for the space of an evening, and all our agreeableness belongs solely to each other for that time. Nobody can fasten themselves on the notice of one, without injuring the rights of the other. 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 neighbours. (76)

Tilney then continues his extended comparison for two pages, and it is reputedly the only fully developed figure of speech in Austen's novels (Elsbree 114). Austen criticism has tended to stress however, how detached Tilney is in his witty comparison and accept the comparison as fact (Elsbree, Adams, Handler & Segal). One critic even reads the Anglican Service for the rite of marriage into the comparison (Sullivan 140).<sup>1</sup> Henry is witty indeed, his detailed comparison is in the style of the conceit of the metaphysical poets transposed to prose.<sup>2</sup> A well-known example of an extended conceit is John Donne's figure of the compass in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" where the poet-lover compares the impending separation of the two lovers to the two feet of a compass. Yet like the famous metaphysical love poets, Tilney is only adopting a pose of detached wit. On the contrary I read his display of witty talk as a means to woo Catherine by showing how amusing and clever he is for we know from their first encounter that his playful and sometimes absurd talk has made her laugh (26-28). Henry's talk

here may be erotically suggestive (Sullivan 140), and he is probably jealous. At the close of his conceit Henry directly questions Catherine about her relation with John Thorpe in particular and other men in general looking as he says for “security” (78).

Throughout this torrent of talk Henry has been silencing Catherine in several ways. When Catherine immediately rejects the country dance and marriage comparison, by literal-mindedly pointing out the differences, their exchange reveals him to be anticipating her objection:

But they are such very different things!—

—That you think they cannot be compared together.

—To be sure not. People that marry can never part, but must go and keep house together. People that dance, only stand opposite each other in a long room for half an hour. (76-77)

Catherine’s baldly stated definitions of dancing and marriage stress the temporal and spatial relativity of the country dance. From her position as a young woman the physical distance gives her an element of freedom and the brevity of the occasion delimits the consequences of her choice of partner. This is the opposite of marriage where people are permanently fixed in close proximity to one another. Thereby country dancing is perhaps to Catherine a period of suspended inequality, a time of temporary freedom and equity and an emblem of the autonomy of both partners while they dance.

Later Henry uses different strategies to overrule her: He talks her down, he deliberately appears to give value to her position by suggesting a role reversal occurs in dancing, and so on. Despite Henry’s charm and wit, Catherine maintains her position, stating “I cannot look upon them at all in the same light, nor think the same duties belong to them” (77). Her equanimity and perseverance make him ultimately claim defeat, “Then I am quite at a loss” (77). There is potency in Catherine’s transparent honesty after all!

By contrast Emma Watson is the most self-conscious, confident and assertive of the exemplary young heroines in Jane Austen’s writings. On first meeting her older sister, who asks if she is “refined,” Emma answers, “My conduct must tell you how I have been brought up. I am no judge of it” (“The Watsons” 318). Her position is unusual for she has been raised apart from her family by an aunt and had expected to inherit her fortune. Yet the middle-aged aunt marries again and Emma is dispatched home. As Robert Watson, Emma’s attorney brother, crudely puts it: “After keeping you at a distance from your family for such a length of time as must do away all natural affection among us & breeding you up (I suppose) in a superior stile, you are returned upon their hands without a sixpence” (352). Although this description almost makes Emma cry (352), she composedly adapts to her new existence by shunning squabbling siblings and sits with, reads to and converses with her invalid father.

At the centre of this fragment is a ball. At this ball Emma asks ten-year-old Charles Blake to dance when he is cruelly rejected by Miss Osborne, who was pre-engaged to dance with him. Her action is spontaneous: “Emma did not think, or reflect;—she felt & acted—” (330). Emma’s gesture performs a social rescue similar to Mr. Knightley’s in *Emma* when he invites Harriet

Smith to dance after she is snubbed by Mr. Elton. Emma's conduct reveals her personality according to the logic of the conduct books whereby manners were considered to be "morals in action" (Hemlow 753). Accordingly, her superior conduct chastises those of the others who are acting out of self-interest (Fergus 116). Emma's generosity also suggests how Emma would act in a crisis. Virginia Woolf perceptively notes:

... for some reason the little scene is moving out of all proportion to its surface solemnity. We have been made to see that if Emma acted so in the ball-room, how considerate, how tender, inspired by what sincerity of feeling she would have shown herself in those graver crises of life. (*Common Reader* 197)

Young Charles Blake's presence at the ball was in accordance with the practice of the day. Dance masters such as Thomas Wilson and many others encouraged the teaching of children, and leading moralists, such as Rev. Fordyce and Hester Chapone, approved of teaching children to dance, following no less an educational authority than John Locke: "Dancing . . . cannot be learned too early. Nothing appears more to give children so much confidence and behaviour, and so to raise them to the conversation of those above their years as dancing" (in *The Young Lady's Book* (1829, 397).

Charles's social rescue is closely rendered through Emma's point of view. An attentive observer, she quickly notes signs of the boy's distress, and her way of presenting herself is no less perceptive: "I shall be very happy to dance with you Sir, if you like it." Emma acts as if he has already requested the dance and she is accepting. Thereby Emma tactfully manages the social conventions whereby the man, not the woman, chooses the partner (Sullivan 149).

Paradoxically, this gesture, which effectively places Emma outside the country dance–courtship relation, actually proves to make her the focus of several male gazers or admirers at once. While the cultivated Mr. Howard, Charles Blake's uncle, who is a minister, properly asks Emma to dance, two other men, Tom Musgrave and Lord Osborne, are busy evaluating Emma's attractions. Emma overhears "... Ld Osborne, who was lounging on a vacant Table near her, call Tom Musgrave towards him & say, 'Why do not you dance with that beautiful Emma Watson?—I want you to dance with her—& I will come & stand by you'" (333). Indeed Osborne spends the ball lounging about and "gap[ing]" (332) at Emma. Fortunately Emma can decline Musgrave's offer because she is pre-engaged.

Consequently Lord Osborne infringes on her dance with Mr. Howard by standing at Howard's elbow (335). This rudeness repeats what he had done earlier by pretending to talk to Charles but actually looking at Emma (331) while she and Charles were dancing.

Emma also provides a closely rendered critique of the behaviour of the various guests throughout the evening. She thereby participates in the event at the same time that she analyzes and resists those practices she considers wrong (Miller 37). There is an aspect of interrogation of the customs as well as perception of the ridiculous in her description. For example, before the ball begins she notes the imbalance between women and men: While there were "continual accessions of portly Chaperons, & strings of smartly-

dressed girls" there were only "now & then a fresh gentleman straggler, who if not enough in Love to station himself near any fair Creature seemed glad to escape into the Card-room" (328). Surrounding the tea break she observes how the company deliberately creates obstructions by the arrangement of the furniture in order to create "a little bustle" (332) so all motion is compressed and there is a "scramble", not orderly movement. Emma's conduct and commentary at the ball lead to later more stringent analysis, suggesting that she had the potential to be the most socially critical of Austen's heroines.

Fanny Price is very different from both Catherine and Emma, and her position as a poor relation brought up by relatives similarly sets her apart. She has never had the luxury that enables one to be naïvely outspoken and the other a sophisticated commentator on events. Her life has been constricted and for much of her early life she has been living a deprived existence similar to that encountered in fairy tales such as "Cinderella". Indeed, like Cinderella she even leaves her own ball early, albeit at 3 a.m. (Grigsby 118). Fanny's emergence into society is marked by a ball in her honour. Continuing the motif of constriction that overarches Fanny's life this event is constricted in several ways. Rather than being a public event at a pump room or an inn, it is held in Sir Thomas's home. Indeed it is a formal "coming out" ball which marks Fanny as being "of age" and therefore marriageable (Elsbree 124). The dance is circumscribed by punctilious ceremony: When the guests arrive Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram have a formal "great circle" where Fanny is introduced to selected arrivals (273). When the ball begins Sir Thomas insists over all protest that Fanny open the ball with Henry Crawford. The country dance–marriage equation is therefore very valid here.

With respect to this however, once Fanny has endured being a spectacle during the opening dance with Henry she has ample opportunity to evaluate him during the evening since he dances two sets with her and arranges for her to sit with him for supper. His preference indicates to all, especially the observing Sir Thomas, that he is courting Fanny. Fanny evaluates Henry and despite wanting to she can find nothing amiss in his manners, however, she dislikes being publicly singled out by his attentions: "He made her feel that she was the object of all; though she could not say that it was unpleasantly done, that there was indelicacy or ostentation in his manner. . . . But still his attentions made no part of her satisfaction" (278). But she cannot describe why she is resisting Henry as a suitor.

Fanny's happiness comes from other sources: from being with William, from "knowing herself admired" and from the promise of an "indefinite engagement" with Edmund to dance (278). This term also describes the status of Fanny's love relationship with Edmund. Her heart is pre-engaged which strengthens her against Henry, but the duration of this state is to be similarly uncertain. When they do dance her happiness does not come from him, indeed he is almost rude to her in his self-absorption (Adams 64), so they dance in silence and "sober tranquillity" (279). Her happiness comes partly from seeing Edmund suffer over Mary, although she knows it is wrong for her to feel this way. Fanny's attitude to Edmund respecting their dance

encapsulates their relationship as a whole: She prefers Edmund under any circumstances, even irritable, unhappy and rejected by another woman to the attentions of Henry.

The end of the ball for Fanny comes when Sir Thomas makes a spectacle of sending her up to bed before any of the house party. The narrator speculates at the end of the chapter about possible motives: concern for her health, preventing further obvious attentions by Henry Crawford, or showing to Henry by her biddable behaviour that he "might mean to recommend her as a wife by shewing her persuadableness" (281).

Notwithstanding Sir Thomas's and Henry's machinations the joy of the night for Fanny comes from the pleasure of the country dance itself. When Fanny creeps "slowly up the principal staircase, pursued by the ceaseless country-dance, feverish with hopes and fears, soup and negus, sore-footed and fatigued, restless and agitated," she feels "in spite of every thing, that a ball was indeed delightful" (281). The evocative description suggests that Fanny responds to the power of the country dance, and has revelled in the special interval set apart when for once she was being treated like her cousins (275), enjoying herself and being eagerly selected as a partner. Because Fanny responds to the circumstances of the special world of the dance she begins imperceptibly to assert her feminine power of acceptance and refusal. Ironically, the country-dance ball where Sir Thomas views Fanny complacently and Edmund possessively is the very location that nourishes Fanny's ability to decide for herself respecting partners.

Paradoxically while Fanny's ball is the most constricted in terms of being the one most hemmed in by stiff, formal etiquette, and her happiness "chequered" by the pointed attentions of Henry Crawford, Fanny's response to country dancing is the strongest of the three heroines discussed. Before the guests come she practices steps by herself in the drawing-room, and at the end she ascends the stairs listening to country-dance music. It is as if the power of the country dance is so strong that it overrules the impediments put in Fanny's way.

My initial quote from the dancing master Thomas Wilson describes country dancing as being almost an enchanted space where people of all ages may partake in a pleasurable community where there are no "silent envious gazers" or "sullen critics" (*An Analysis of Country Dancing* xvii). Austen's heroines who are making their entrances into society are the subject of much gazing and criticism from the people around them. Nevertheless the act of performing the dances themselves allows them to enter temporarily into a special world or a separate state where they reveal their inner natures and exist in symmetry and equity with their partners. During this special interval they exert their critical faculties to the fullest while responding to the gaiety of the dance itself. The images of these young women dancing country dances symbolize promise and ideal harmony. The country dance thereby is an emblem of a utopian world which the heroines at their entrance into society temporarily enter into while performing their "mazy circlets" around the ball room floor.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This seems to be overstated. The only passage from *The Book of Common Prayer* which would have been used during Austen's period is a fleeting reference to mutuality as the third reason for marriage: "It was ordained for the mutual society, help and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity" (313).
- <sup>2</sup> In the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* a conceit is described as "an intricate or far-fetched metaphor, which functions through arousing feelings of surprise, shock or amusement." The metaphysical conceit is one "in which the spiritual qualities or functions of the described entity are presented by means of a vehicle which shares no physical features with the entity" (148).

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