

Dancing of and for Marriage

Courtship moves two people between two contrary states—from being unmarried (and perhaps being strangers) to being married and intimately attached. The gap between these two states is mediated not directly—not by a simple offer of marriage—but through a provisional and playful domain of conventionalized attentions, of which dancing is one of the most prominent. Indeed, dance is such a sure sign of courtship that it often stands for that process as a whole. “To be fond of dancing,” according to the narrative of *Pride and Prejudice*, “was a certain step towards falling in love” (*PP* 9). And the narrative of *Mansfield Park* provides this discussion of the relationship of dancing to Maria Bertram and Mr. Rushworth’s engagement: “After dancing with each other at a proper number of balls . . . an engaging . . . was entered into, much to the satisfaction of their respective families, and of the general lookers-on of the neighbourhood, who had, for many weeks past, felt the expediency of Mr. Rushworth’s marrying Miss Bertram” (*MP* 39). That both the holding of dances and the dancing of partners are means of making marital matches is made clear by the significance, in the context of dancing, of four social distinctions: (1) between opposite-sex siblings and others of the opposite sex, (2) between women who are out and those who are not, (3) between persons who are married and those who are not, and (4) between women who are eligible and those who are spinsters. Dancing between brother and sister is something other than proper dancing. To recall a discussion from *Mansfield Park*, William Price tells his sister Fanny that it would be possible for them to dance together in Northampton since “nobody would know who I was here” (*MP* 250). Women do not attend dances until they have been presented to society. Married people may dance, but they need not; their dance activities serve primarily to facilitate the dancing of those who should dance—the young and marriageable. Married men not dancing with their wives are expected to offer themselves as partners to any unmarried women who have not been engaged for a particular dance, and married women often play the music for the dancing couples. Anne Elliot’s sad slide toward spinsterhood is signaled by the fact that her friends have come to depend

on her services as a musician for their dances, and when Captain Wentworth, newly reacquainted with her, inquires about her status as a dance partner, he is told that “she has quite given up dancing. She had rather play” (*P* 71–72).

As the causal antecedents of marriage, dance and other courting activities are, at one and the same time, marriage-like and not marriage-like: as models for making marriages, they are structured as metaphoric models of marriage without its finality and exclusiveness. Dance and courtship contain a manipulable mixture of the qualities of the inclusive relations amongst eligible status equals of the opposite sex and the exclusive relations of spouses. Thus courtship and dance combine qualities of the two social relations between which they mediate.

The similarities and differences between a dancing couple and a married couple are discussed explicitly by Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland, who speak as they dance together for the first time. Mr. Tilney deems dance “an emblem of marriage,” to which Catherine responds with literalness that the lack of permanence and exclusivity between dancing partners makes an analogy between dance and marriage untenable: “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.” Henry responds by explaining the serious similarities, all in a manner that tweaks Catherine’s earnestness:

You will allow, that in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to each other till the moment of its dissolution; that it is their duty, each to endeavour to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wandering towards the perfections of their neighbours.

When Catherine insists on the difference, Henry continues his flirtation by playfully questioning Catherine’s sense of constancy:

"... may I not thence infer, that your notions of the duties of the dancing state are not so strict as your partner might wish? Have I not reason to fear, that if the gentleman who spoke to you just now were to return, or if any other gentleman were to address you, there would be nothing to restrain you from conversing with him as long as you chose?" (*NA* 76–78).

Thus Henry Tilney recognizes what Catherine denies and what their conversation, carried on while they dance, demonstrates: dancing occurs as a metaphor for marriage, and, as a result, dancing, both as an activity and as a topic of conversation, can serve as a way to play at and explore being a couple without the serious attachment of matrimony. Because dance is marriage-like without being marriage, it can serve as part of the process of producing marriages; that is, a process of selecting and rejecting possible partners. Henry and Catherine find out about each other as they exchange their views because they are taking part in an activity that simultaneously allows them playfully to be a couple and, doubly playfully, to talk about it.

While Henry Tilney's comments inform us about the ways in which an individual dance is like matrimony, Catherine Morland's comments, despite their naivete, reveal how, if we take an evening of dancing as a unit, dancing is unlike matrimony. Henry points out that within a single dance a man and woman are a couple, but Catherine notes that these couples constantly separate and regroup throughout the evening. Thus Catherine's remarks make visible, beyond her own understanding, an important distance between dance and marriage. While Henry's view is clearly more subtle and informed than Catherine's, in Austen's texts it is the dialogue of both views that gives the fullest picture.

Taken together, Henry's and Catherine's views depict dancing as a sequence of episodes of particularity, or restricted exchange, within a larger frame of generalized exchange.¹ This framing context

may thus be said to contain within it a multiplicity of potential relations of particularity. To court through dancing requires that characters markedly emphasize such particularity, in opposition to the rules of propriety, which dictate an obligation to dance with all potential spouses. Yet, dialectically, it is this ideal of inclusive exchange that allows the initiation and accentuation of particularity to occur in what is understood as a discreet and proper fashion.

The inclusive quality of exchange within an evening of dancing is evident in the social etiquette of choosing and accepting—that is, forming—dancing partners. A dance provides an acceptable means of being introduced to strangers. Wanting to dance with someone is considered good enough reason to find out his or her name or to arrange for a mutual acquaintance to make an introduction. At a public dance hall, such as the one described in *Bath* in *Northanger Abbey*, the master of ceremonies serves the purpose of introducing strangers. Introductions are both possible and expected at a dance, for within its framework all unmarried young adults of the same sex are paradigmatic equivalents. Because of this equivalence, much discretion is exercised over invitations to private dances, for the invitations construct a community of codancers and a community of potential spouses. Moreover, this equivalence of dancers may threaten those concerned to emphasize a status distinction. Thus Mr. Elton stops dancing under the pretext of being "an old married man [whose] dancing days are over" in order to snub Harriet Smith, leav-

1. Here, as in the previous chapter, we purposefully play with Lévi-Strauss's justly famous typology of marital exchanges (1969[1949]). Lévi-Strauss distinguishes between restricted exchanges (in which A gives and receives from B, and vice versa) and generalized exchanges (in which A receives from Z and

gives to B, with no vice versa, only a circuit, or better, circulation). In an evening of dancing in Austen, persons (of both sexes) circulate around the room of potential spouses as if there was a rule of generalized exchange among the (exogamous) families gathered together. From the perspective of Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, however, Austen's characters carry out this generalized circuit of exchange at breakneck speed. Yet at the same time, each dancing couple is formed by a restricted exchange of partners, compliments, conversation, and so forth. This analysis suggests that what Lévi-Strauss isolates as distinct forms of 'elementary' systems of kinship are coeval aspects of courtship in Austen's 'complex' social world. Such forms are thus less distinct social types than recurring structures of *l'esprit humain*, amenable to a dizzying variety of combinations.

ing her without a partner (*E* 327–28). Observing this, Mr. Knightley, who has not previously danced, steps in and offers Harriet a welcome invitation.

Knightley's response illustrates another way in which an evening of dance involves inclusive exchange. Though men, unlike women, have the independence to ask a partner to dance, this prerogative is not entirely free, for propriety dictates that men should obtain a partner and that no lady be neglected. To cite a second illustration of this point, Darcy's refusal to dance unless he is "particularly acquainted" with his partner (*PP* 11) quickly earns him a reputation for arrogance and thereafter undermines his attempts to use dance as a conventionalized code for initiating a courtship. When he asks Elizabeth to dance on subsequent occasions, his earlier behavior causes her to refuse him, in part because she doubts his real interest and in part because she wants to return his rejection.

Just as gentlemen should not leave any eligible ladies without partners, women's power of refusal also has qualities of inclusive exchange: when a woman not already engaged for the next dance wishes to refuse an invitation to dance, she must turn it down for a general reason rather than refuse a particular partner, and she must then give up dancing for the rest of the evening. Of course, women often make their decisions in terms of particular partners, but they must express and act on such decisions in the rhetorical form of a general principle. Thus, when Elizabeth Bennet refuses Mr. Darcy's surprising invitation to dance, she says, "I have not the least intention of dancing" (*PP* 26).

Whereas obligations to treat all potential partners equally give dancing a quality of inclusive exchange, other conventions of the dance allow the opposite quality of particularity. Courting through dance requires that this particularity, always present as a potential message of the dances within an evening of dancing, be made increasingly manifest. The characters in Austen's novels produce such messages of particularity through a number of rhetorical strategies. First, a man can express his particular attentions by asking a woman to dance with him prior to a ball's commencement, and specifically by asking for the first two dances (*MP* 268, 274; *PP* 87). Such an engagement is contingent on, and thereby signals, a preexisting and

ongoing relationship between the partners. Moreover, it imposes greatly on a woman, for if it is refused, the woman is obliged not to dance during the entire evening. A man and a woman can also express particularity to each other by dancing together again and again, and thereby departing, to various degrees, from the etiquette of circulating among all potential spouses. The range of meaningful possibilities within this second idiom of particularity is illustrated, at least in part, by the dancing of Marianne and Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane and Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Maria and Rushworth in *Mansfield Park*.

At the beginning of *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne and Willoughby devote themselves to each other with extreme particularity in the absence of an engagement, thereby leading to their "ridicule": "If dancing formed the amusement of the night, they were partners for half the time; and when obliged to separate for a couple of dances, were careful to stand together and scarcely spoke a word to any body else. Such conduct made them of course most exceedingly laughed at; but ridicule could not shame, and seemed hardly to provoke them" (*SS* 54). By contrast, Mr. Bingley shows his initial interest in Jane Bennet by asking her to dance twice, but he stays within the bounds of propriety by dancing with all the young ladies in the room. Thus Bingley uses a limited number of repeated dances to show particularity while honoring the etiquette of inclusive exchange. His actions nonetheless raise hopes (on the part of Jane, Elizabeth, and their mother), fears (on the part of Bingley's sisters and Darcy), and expectations (on the part of the neighborhood at large) that an engagement will be made between the dancing partners.

Finally, following her acceptance of Mr. Rushworth's proposal of marriage, Maria Bertram dances in an unrestricted fashion with other partners. Observing this, Rushworth's mother comments that the couple ought to be "excused from complying with the common forms" of circulating among all possible partners. To this, Maria's Aunt Norris responds that such "particularity" would be too blatant for Maria's "strict sense of propriety . . . [and her] true delicacy" (*MP* 117). Nonetheless, says Mrs. Norris, Maria's particular interest in Rushworth can be seen in the expression on her face when they

dance together. Though Mrs. Norris is able to explain Maria's behavior in terms of the rules of etiquette, Maria's unrestricted dancing prefigures her subsequent infidelity. Thus the etiquette of particularity in courtship, like other communicative codes, is supple enough not only to represent but equally to misrepresent—not only to make matches but to unmake them.

Dancing Subleties

The richest communication through dancing occurs between those characters, notably many of the heroines and their partners, who use the rhetoric of dance as a code for matrimony while simultaneously generating commentary about it. We have already examined Henry Tilney's complex dialogue with Catherine Moreland in which much more is exchanged than formal niceties. To cite a second example, Emma shows the creative potential of a code that generally seems, from the distance of late-twentieth-century America, rigid, formulaic, and inflexible. She shows that the metacommunicative aspect of cultural codes allows her to invert the social convention of men extending an invitation to dance without attacking that convention. When Mr. Knightley asks her with whom she is going to dance, Emma does not merely answer that she is unengaged but "hesitate[s] a moment" and responds, "With you, if you will ask me" (*E* 331). Thus she transgresses a rule of etiquette even as she perpetuates it. Their conversation continues in kind, with subtle messages of romantic interest communicated through a brief discussion of the presupposed cultural distinction between siblings and potential marital partners. Mr. Knightley begins by accepting Emma's offer, and she does likewise:

"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* 331)

Finally, in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth's and Darcy's powerful yet ambivalent mutual attraction is slowly and gropingly developed by a

series of encounters not of but *about* dancing. At first Darcy refuses to dance with Elizabeth, then Elizabeth refuses Darcy; when they finally dance together, Elizabeth attempts to distance herself by talking about the talk that is proper between 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 bye I may observe that private balls are much pleasanter than public ones.—But *now* we may be silent."

"Do you talk by rule then, while you are dancing?"

"Sometimes. One must speak a little, you know." (*PP* 91)

In this passage Elizabeth emphasizes the formality of the conventions of dancing. She thereby makes use of dance as a courting exchange, but with complex inversion, to express her objection to a particular partner. With such explicit consciousness of her social conventions, Elizabeth Bennet warily and subtly, creatively and pragmatically, communicates with the conventions of her culture. Her recognition of that culture as something arbitrary and something that can be denied fits neatly James Boon's description of "professional anthropologists" and their "counterparts" elsewhere who "doubt the absoluteness of their own culture" and "displace the immediacy of their audience's social lives" (1982: 6).²

To summarize our argument to this point, the etiquette of dancing illustrates that conventions can generate a context for creativity as well as an unimaginative uniformity. Metaphors of and for marriage are about marriage but are not marriage itself; they can be richly interpreted and played with as well as facetiously followed. We have suggested in this chapter and chapter 5 that Austen's exemplary characters do not naïvely reproduce courting conventions but implement a metapragmatic understanding of conventional codes as *codes*

2. Critic Tony Tanner (1986: 122–25) has borrowed Erving Goffman's idea of "role distance" to discuss Elizabeth's reflective cultural awareness.

to distance themselves from the process of courtship and, as a result, to gain some interpretive control over it. By contrast, other characters all too often allow themselves to be controlled by conventions, which thereby become, to borrow Edward Sapir's graphic description, "the dry rot of social habit, devitalized" (1949: 315).

The Austen texts thus ask us to go beyond the "of and for" of Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963: 357) and Geertz (1973: 93–94). Geertz defined culture in terms of models "of" and "for" reality in a celebrated essay entitled "Religion as a Cultural System." There he argued that "unlike genes, and other non-symbolic information sources, which are only models *for*, not models *of*, culture patterns have an intrinsic double aspect: they give meaning, that is, objective conceptual form, to social and psychological reality both by shaping themselves to it and by shaping it to themselves" (1973: 93). Earlier, Kroeber and Kluckhohn had offered a related definition: "Culture consists of patterns . . . of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols . . . culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditioning elements of further action" (1963: 357). In both discussions culture is understood as a given, and thereby something capable of providing people with conventional knowledge ("models of") and with routinized instructions for social action ("models for"). Neither definition bears on the issues of cultural creativity and social change. It is fitting, then, that Geertz has alluded to Austen in terms that suggest the conservative reading of Austen as champion of a well-ordered social world of the past: "Calculated politesse, outward form pure and simple, has there [i.e., Bali] a normative value that we . . . can scarcely, now that Jane Austen is about as far from us as Bali, any longer appreciate" (1973: 399).

Dramatic Sensibility

In our interpretation dancing is serious play; that is, a metaphor of matrimony that can lead to matrimony precisely because it is playfully unlike the restricted relationship of marriage. Using this interpretation as a point of departure, we turn to one of the thorniest problems in recent critical literature about Jane Austen—the heavily

moralistic theatrical episode of *Mansfield Park*. As Lionel Trilling has written, "There is scarcely one of our modern pieties that [*Mansfield Park*] does not offend. . . . It scandalizes the modern assumptions about social relations, about virtue, about religion, sex, and art" (Trilling 1955: 185). He continues: "The great fuss that is made over the amateur theatricals can seem to us a mere travesty on virtue. And the more so because it is never made clear why it is so very wrong for young people in a dull country house to put on a play." In brief, Trilling argues that an understanding of this "seemingly absurd episode" is foreign to those who read Jane Austen now (191–92). Here we respond to Trilling by proposing an interpretation of this exotic episode based on our previous analysis of dancing and courtship.

The proposal to stage a private theatrical causes open disagreement among the young people of Mansfield Park. Tom Bertram, the elder son and—due to his father's extended visit to his estate in the West Indies—the nominal "master of the house" (*MP* 123), becomes enthusiastic about staging a theatrical after hearing his friend Mr. Yates discuss a similar project. The project also appeals to Tom's sisters, Maria and Julia, as well as to Henry Crawford and his sister, Mary, who have come to the Mansfield Park neighborhood for an extended visit to their half-sister, Mrs. Grant, whose husband has the church living at Mansfield Park. The foolish Mr. Rushworth, whose engagement to Maria Bertram awaits only Sir Thomas's approval upon his return, also joins the project. Only Edmund Bertram, Sir Thomas's younger son, and Fanny Price, the Bertrams' adopted cousin, object to the plan. Their objections are somewhat difficult to understand, not because Edmund and Fanny are reticent but because their judgments, as Trilling observes, presuppose commonsense assumptions about the theater different from our own. For instance, Edmund makes this attempt to dissuade Tom:

In a general light, private theatricals are open to some objections, but as we are circumstanced, I must think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious, to attempt any thing of the kind. It would show great want of feeling on my father's account, absent as he is, and in some degree of constant