Dancing to the Altar

Literature and Dance in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Jane Austen to the New Woman

By Cheryl A. Wilson.
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6 B/W illustrations. Hardcover. $90.00.

Reviewed by Nora Stovel.

Literature and Dance in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Jane Austen to the New Woman comprises a useful resource for readers interested in either nineteenth-century literature or dance, but especially for those interested in the relevance of dance to nineteenth-century literature. This book is part of a series entitled "Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture" that boasts 64 titles, under the general editorship of Gillian Beer. This recent addition to the series reads like a doctoral thesis. This impression has more positive than negative implications, however. Wilson's book is indeed scholarly and well researched, as one would expect from a dissertation. It does, however, become rather repetitive at times in restating its thesis.

Wilson's thesis, fully delineated in her introduction, argues that writers employed dancing and balls to convey social commentary and cultural critique on issues of nationalism, social mobility, and gender. Wilson aims "to illustrate how the intertextual relationship between literature and dance can imbue literary works with a range of social, political, and national concerns." She argues that "the country dance, quadrille, and waltz were involved in topical debates over gender, sexuality, social mobility, and nationalism." Therefore, she includes a chapter on each of these dance forms.

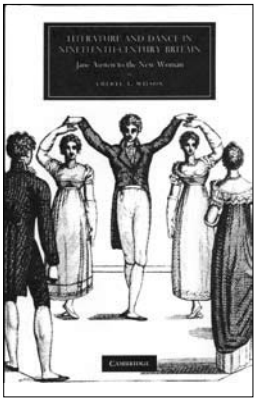
Wilson includes five chapters in all. The first, entitled "The Culture of Dance," addresses the prevalence of dance manuals, dance masters, and dance instruction. Dance masters enjoyed social mobility similar to that of the clergyman of the period.

Chapter Two, entitled "Almack's: Dancing at the Center of the World," addresses the influence of the Lady Patronesses in prescribing the principles of behaviour in the ballroom. It includes a discussion of *Emma*, as Wilson designates Emma the unofficial Lady Patroness of Hartfield who is almost upstaged by the upstart Mrs. Elton, who announces, "I am Lady Patroness, you know." Wilson argues, "From the lady Patroness of Almack's to the dance-floor seductress, writers transformed the ballroom from a 'woman's sphere' into a site of female power." In her afterword, entitled "Confessions of a Lady Patroness," Wilson positions herself as a contemporary lady patroness.

Chapter Three, entitled "Heritage and Hierarchy: the English Country Dance," includes a discussion of *Northanger Abbey,* focusing on the five ball scenes at Bath, including the ball at which Henry Tilney compares the country dance to marriage. Indeed, the parallels between dance patterns and courtship patterns are central to this study, illustrated by the parallels between proposing partnership in the dance and in matrimony. Wilson quotes Phillip Richardson: "Before the middle of the century the increasing popularity of the Quadrille and the more intimate Waltz and the invasion of our ballrooms by the Polka swept Country Dance off the floor." Wilson then proceeds to discuss these foreign invaders, developments of Regency dance, which, she says, dominated Victoria's reign.

Chapter Four, entitled "Social Circles and Dance Squares: the Quadrille," chronicles the displacement of English country dance by the French quadrille, a form that resembled North American square dancing. Wilson views the quadrille as transitional in the evolution from the hierarchical, but inclusive, country dance and the intimate, and exclusive, waltz.

Chapter Five, entitled "Les contretemps dangereaux (sic): *enter the waltz,*" explains the waltz position and its attendant critics who labeled it "scandalous." Its intimate embrace contributed to the perception of female sexual power that writers of the period highlighted in their fictions.



Wilson's study has a distinctive feminist aspect. She argues that dancing "spectacularizes" the female form. In other words, those engaged in watching the dance as a spectacle are able to view the female body in all its "performativity." Thus, balls, and their literary representations, allowed women increased social and sexual power.

Wilson focuses primarily on nineteenth-century novelists Jane Austen, W.M. Thackeray, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope, among others. In her discussions of Austen, she mainly treats *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma,* with brief references to *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. Curiously, although dance plays such an important role in *Pride and Prejudice,* Wilson scarcely alludes to it.

Wilson's text includes six illustrations of dance patterns and dancers, including one used for the dust cover. The book is handsomely bound, with good-quality paper, but the print is rather too fine and dense for comfortable reading. Nevertheless, it is a thorough and scholarly account of the dances popular in the nineteenth century and their value to authors who used them to convey matters of nationality, gender, and social mobility.

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