Pride and Prejudice: The Bicentennial

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Dance Like Jane Austen: Common Dances of the Regency

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Dancing in the Regency

As described in Jane Austen’s letters to her sister, she and her family frequented balls throughout their area. Parties like this centered on the ballroom, where, naturally, people would dance. We know for certain Jane did three kinds of dancing: country dances, cotillions, and the boulange.

Dancing in Pride and Prejudice

Jane Austen was a fan of dancing to advance a relationship, as seen in Pride and Prejudice. Because there were so many couples at a ball, Regency dances would likely take the better part of an hour, which explains why only a limited number of dances would be completed before the ball was over. Conversation during the dance was expected, and allowed for private connections between the partners to be made. This was rare for men and women, and explains the setting for Elizabeth and Darcy’s famous argument at the Netherfield Ball.

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Jane also writes of dancing cotillions at balls, which consisted of four couples dancing in a square to a specific set of figures, depending on the type of cotillion. Like the country dance, steps rather than walking was used, all fairly simple and repetitive. A good resource of the time for learning the chorus in cotillions is Giovanni Gallini’s *New Collection of Forty-Four Cotillions*.

On September 5, 1796, to her sister Cassandra, Jane Austen writes: “We dined at Goodnestone, and in the evening danced two country-dances and the Boulangeries.” Typically the Boulange was a dance for the end of the night because it was so low-energy. Couples would stand in a circle and, alternating around the circle, have the members of each couple face opposite sides of each other; then, in a pattern the dancers would alternate which way they were facing, similar to modern club dances.


"Oh! my dear Mr. Bennet...we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. ... Mr. Bingley thought her quite beautiful, and danced with [Jane] twice! ... Then the two third he danced with Miss King, and the two fourth with Maria Lucas, and the two fifth with Jane again, and the two sixth with Lizzy, and the Boulanger..." - Pride and Prejudice