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#### Recommended Citation

Swann, D. Nicole, "'There's Nothing Like Dancing, After All' Gender as Performance in Jane Austen's Dance Scenes" (2008). *Theses, Dissertations & Honors Papers*. 49.  
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"There's Nothing Like Dancing, After All"  
Gender as Performance in Jane Austen's Dance Scenes

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22 April 2008

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### Introduction

Of all the moments in Jane Austen's novels, her dance scenes remain among the most complex and memorable. Joan Grigsby writes that "the dance scenes in Jane Austen's novels sparkle through the pages . . . like candles on a Christmas Tree" (qtd. in Englehardt). Considered individually, these scenes burn in the reader's mind, but they are also structurally essential to Jane Austen's novels as they provide catalysts for major events, often launching a web of new relationships and intricate plot developments. For example, Mr. Darcy's refusal to dance with Elizabeth Bennet initiates the central conflict of the novel's plot, a dance introduces Catherine Morland to Henry Tilney, and dancing leads Highbury to assume Frank Churchill and Emma Woodhouse will ultimately unite in marriage. In Austen's novels, dancing is more than just two bodies colliding briefly in time to the music. Through dance Austen reveals a unique spin on gender roles and critiques the suitability of men and women as potential spouses.

The country dances Jane Austen describes reached the apex of popularity in the Regency era. The name "country dance" derives from the French *countré danse*, referring to the format of the dance as opposed to a specific location. The dancers face each other in two rows, one for men and one for women, and the foremost couple leads down the line and the rest follow. The couples make a variety of patterns as they lock arms and join hands (Le Faye 104). Dances in Regency England could be categorized in one of three groups: some were private events held by families who would invite close friends and neighbors, others were public gatherings to which the entire neighborhood was invited and admitted by invitation—like Bingley's party at Netherfield where Elizabeth first dances with Mr. Darcy—and some were spontaneous, similar to the



improvised dance Frank Churchill encourages at the end of a dinner gathering at Mr. and Mrs. Weston's. Usually on these impromptu occasions, an older or married woman would take a place at the piano and provide music for the younger couples, as Anne Eliot does at the Musgroves's.

Men and women took balls and dancing very seriously in Regency England. Molly Englehardt asserts that "dance was the single most popular and important recreation among any group of people." Members of the middle and upper classes depended on social events like balls as a means of meeting neighbors and other acquaintances. Young, unmarried people, in particular, went to dances with the hopes of finding a future spouse. Deidre Le Faye comments that "modern readers are sometimes puzzled as to why dance scenes have so prominent a place in Jane Austen's novels"; however, balls were "the best, and indeed almost the only place where . . . courtship could flourish" (103). Austen understood the vital importance of the dance floor to men and women; it was a unique space where they could come together in a socially acceptable, monitored atmosphere and have a semi-private encounter with the opposite sex.

Scholars differ slightly in how they view the dance scenes in Jane Austen's novels, and although each of these scholars contributes something unique to the current conversation about dance in Austen scholarship, they all agree that dance is a metaphor for marriage. Dancing, for these scholars, is the only way for "young people to experiment with the romance plot" (Englehardt) and courtship. Timothy Dow Adams in his article "To Know the Dancer from the Dance: Dance as a Metaphor of Marriage in Four Novels of Jane Austen," writes that the heroines of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*,

*Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park* “must judge each of her dancing partners for . . . compatibility, not just for the dance, but also for possible marriage” (56). Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Catherine Morland and Fanny Price choose former dance partners as husbands. But what about the other dancing couples who face alternative outcomes?

While Adams, Wilson, Englehardt and Stovel are correct in their assertions that dance is a metaphor for the social mechanism of marriage, they neglect to acknowledge the dance floor’s failed partnerships. What is it about George Knightley’s performance on the dance floor that makes him a more viable candidate for marriage than Frank Churchill, and what reveals that Fanny Price is superior to Mary Crawford? For my research I have closely read five of Austen’s main novels, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), and *Northanger Abbey* (1818) for examples of dances and dancing, and critically analyzed the different ballroom scenes and how they affect the plots’ development. I have also researched the historical context of dancing in Regency England and applied current gender theory to the performative aspects of the dance.

Dancing is the type of performance central to Judith Butler’s performance theory of gender—the idea that gender is “fabricated by acts, gestures, [and] enactments” coded by society as either masculine or feminine (136). For Butler there is no true gender identity; it is a socially constructed “law” providing the ideals of male and female characteristics (Alsop et al 99). Failure to abide by the “law” disturbs the social system, subjecting those who unsuccessfully perform their correct gender roles to social punishment. Judith Butler revolutionized feminist theory in her book *Gender Trouble*

with her distinctive philosophy about sex, the body, and, more importantly, gender performance. Influenced by Nietzsche and the deconstructionists, she claims that gender is a socially fabricated concept whose beginning is an illusion—it is a copy of a copy without an original. To illustrate her point, Butler relates her theory of gender performance to a drag show. She writes that the “performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed” (137). At a drag show, men dressed as women accentuate their femininity—“drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive and model of gender and the notion of true gender identity” (140).

The dance scenes in Austen’s novels are performative in that the dancers, male or female, emphasize their “true gender” in the ballroom. I find it interesting that Austen incorporates so many “performances” through dance in her texts. The gender bending in the ballroom reveals Austen’s covert constructions of gender beyond the dance floor.

In this study I explore further the correlation of dancing and the traditional gender roles associated with marriage. In the early nineteenth century, as now, marriage was a stabilizing social convention that formed the basis of the family, guided laws of inheritance and regulated sexual conduct. On the other hand, dancing could be a disruptive or rebellious force, leading not only to a normalizing structure like marriage, but potentially other liaisons. It is true that in due course, most of Austen’s dance partners waltz down the aisle towards matrimony, but in some instances there are other consequences. Take *Sense and Sensibility*’s Marianne Dashwood and Willoughby, for example. Their many nights of intimate dancing do not progress to the wedding chapel, but instead result in a devastating heartache for Marianne. When she finds out

Willoughby is to marry Sophia Grey, she even contemplates suicide. Willoughby is no Mr. Darcy or Mr. Knightly; he is not a reluctant dance partner but is rather an enthusiast. Is the dancing metaphor Austen's social commentary on how dancing with the right partner influences happy marriages and with the wrong partner leads to broken hearts? I believe it is.

For the purpose of my argument, I have divided Austen's characters into two categories, the "wrong" dance partner and the "right" dance partner, and I assert that Austen treats dancing as a gendered performance by which to a partner's suitability for marriage. Austen contrasts the "wrong" male dance partner, a hedonistic and sexy rascal, with the "right" partner, the upright gentleman. Unlike Henry Crawford or Frank Churchill, Austen's idea of the "wrong" partner, the decorous gentleman like Henry Tilney or Mr. Knightley displays a certain softness—a gentle, sentimental side typically associated with women as well as a logical, responsible side generally related to men. The female dance partners I explore in my study, Mary Crawford and Fanny Price, are polar opposites. One is outspoken, witty, and refuses to settle for anything less than what she sanctions for herself, while the other is meek, quiet and proper. They are similar in that they both possess masculine and feminine qualities; however, what makes Fanny Price an ideal dance partner is not her quietness and meekness, but rather her ability to balance her gendered sides successfully in a way Mary Crawford does not. Androgyny is the preferred form of "gender" for Austen. The right partners exhibit characteristics of both men and women and are ultimately the best candidates for marriage.

What makes some partners marriage material and others not? For Austen, how a person performs while dancing is a reflection of his or her gender off the dance floor. The

characteristics the wrong partners exhibit on the dance floor that appear to promote their suitability for marriage, paradoxically, deem them inadequate as future husbands or wives. Men and women who are free and open with their emotions and careless in their treatment of others are usually willing dance partners and heart breakers. Libertines like Henry Crawford, who wants Fanny Price to dance with him only to win the affection of another woman, are deceitful and will eventually lead their partners to despair. For instance, Willoughby's charming abilities on the dance floor blind Marianne to his behavior in society. He has squandered his fortune, impregnated a woman out of wedlock, and refuses to accept responsibility for his actions. Selfishness, vanity, competitiveness and a disregard for propriety are the gendered, stereotypical qualities associated with either men or women that the "wrong" partners possess. While the wrong partners gender bend on the dance floor, they bend too much. Frank Churchill's gratifies his narcissism—a decidedly feminine attribute, by dancing so much so that he forgets his masculinity. The wrong partners are not balanced in their gender shifting, ultimately making them excellent dance partners, but not suitable for marriage.

Ironically, the partners who make good spouses, those who will provide a secure future, are often guarded and reluctant dancers. Austen writes that "every savage can dance" (*P&P* 192), but it takes a person of good character to suit the realms of the ballroom and society. The right dance partners are attentive in every aspect of their lives, not just on the dance floor. They are a combination of both masculine and feminine characteristics, thereby ensuring success on the dance floor and off. For example, Mr. Knightley assumes the role of a woman and offers to move to Hartfield for Emma's happiness and security. His willingness to submit to the wishes of others makes him not



only a good dance partner but an excellent candidate for marriage. The blending of both female and male stereotypes makes for successful partnerships in dance as well as in marriage.

### Chapter 1: The “Wrong” Partner

Jane Austen knew all too well the important role marriage played in the lives of women in the early nineteenth century. In most cases, marriage was the only answer to a life of economic hardships and uncertain futures; Joan Perkin writes that because “women were economically and physically the weaker sex, the law regarded almost every woman as under tutelage to some man, usually the father or husband” (1). In her novels, Jane Austen attempts to revise the seemingly bleak plight of marriage through her dance scenes. She envisions marriage as being a level playing field for men and women, a union where traditional gender roles bend and fluctuate; a person’s dancing reflects his or her ability to perform androgyny in society, particularly marriage. The dance floor helps women, as well as men, identify the partners who will be best suited for the marriage state.

The partners who are unfit for marriage blend the worst attributes of both sexes; instead of creating a balanced androgyny, these characters exhibit extreme femininity or extreme masculinity, so much so, that he or she forgets the other half of the male/female binary and thus threatens the stability of social conventions like marriage and the general order of society. Negative gender characteristics impair the lives of Austen’s most infamous characters—stereotypes the dance floor reveals.

*Sense and Sensibility*’s John Willoughby seems to be a winning choice for Marianne as both a dance partner and as a husband; but his feminine extravagance, however, is an undesirable quality for both the dance floor and society. Claudia L. Johnson explains in *Equivocal Beings* that the late eighteenth century defined “deficiencies in self control” as feminine (8). Willoughby, despite his charming appeal,

struggles with abstaining from the pleasures of life, as shown in his dancing. After rescuing Marianne from her fateful injury, she inquires of Sir John Middleton the particulars of her hero. “He’s a good sort of fellow,” says Sir John, and then relates his character to his style of dancing, “remember[ing] last Christmas, at a little hop at the Park, he danced from eight o’clock till four, without once sitting down” (*S&S* 33). His incredible desire to dance and his unwillingness to rest between sets prove his want of self control. In fact, Willoughby’s stamina and enthusiasm to dance lead to his breach of dancing etiquette, as well as Marianne’s. In their many meetings at Barton Park, Austen writes that when dancing

formed the amusement of the night, [Marianne and Willoughby] 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 anybody else. Such conduct made them of course, most exceedingly laughed at; but ridicule could not shame, and seemed hardly to provoke them. (*S&S* 39)

Willoughby’s dancing proves he is not one to abide by social constructs; his Romantic sensibilities and disregard for convention and propriety attract Marianne, but he is not the type of “partner” she needs. Willoughby should be aware of his duty as a gentleman—the duty to maintain rules and conventions rather than break them— but his feminine lack of restraint dominates his character. Willoughby’s performance on the dance floor reveals his defective androgyny, and “exemplif[ies] his trifling, opportunistic personality” (Elsbree 21). His attention to his partner is good, but his disregard of the “rules” discredits him as a gentleman and as a future spouse. Regardless of propriety, he

continues to dance with Marianne. Willoughby's hedonistic behavior is Austen's way of sending caution, for his feminine indulgence is in direct proportion to his masculine selfishness.

Willoughby intersperses his feminine lack of control on the dance floor with the masculine trait of self-interest. In Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Fitzwilliam Darcy, the heir of the Pemberley estate under the laws of primogeniture, states that his "father, particularly, . . . allowed, encouraged, . . . taught [him] to be selfish" (241). Because his father, a man, teaches Darcy to be inconsiderate, Austen considers self-serving insensitivity a qualification of masculinity—and Willoughby admits whole heartedly that selfishness guides his attentions to Marianne on the dance floor. During the span of his relationship with Marianne, a relationship that flourishes on the dance floor, Willoughby confesses to Elinor that he "was acting in this manner, trying to engage her regard" with "meanness, selfishness, [and] cruelty"; he had no "design of returning the affection" (S&S 227). Willoughby's dancing shows he is "careless of [anyone's] happiness," that he only "thinks of his own amusement"; his selfish nature emphasizes his want of restraint (S&S 226). Although Willoughby initially seems to fit Austen's prescription of androgyny, rather than creating a balanced asexual gender, his masculine selfishness contributes to his femininity. He freely professes that thoughts of his own "amusement" lead him to "giv[e] way to feelings which [he has] always been too much in the habit of indulging" (S&S 226-227). Willoughby possesses both feminine and masculine traits; however, his masculine qualities only accentuate his feminine features, creating an imbalanced androgyny; his selfishness only contributes to his immoderacy, and his

excessive dancing pushes his femininity to an extreme, an extreme not only seen in on the dance floor, but also revealed in society.

Willoughby's lack of self control on the dance floor transposes to other arenas of his life. The future heir of Allenhurst, despite appearances of wealth, squanders his family fortune and relies on his future inheritance from Mrs. Smith to support his extravagant lifestyle. Indulgence characterizes Willoughby's lifestyle as well as his dancing; he explains to Elinor that he "had always been expensive, always in the habit of associating with people of better income" (*S&S* 227). Because of his lack of restraint, Willoughby swims in debt and economic uncertainty. Similar to his dancing, where his selfish behavior contributes to his immoderation, Willoughby's gambling and excessive lifestyle force him to be self-centered.

Willoughby's lavish feminine existence increases his display of masculine selfishness off the dance floor. His attentions to Marianne both as a dance partner and acquaintance in society are hardly appropriate, and everyone who knows the couple expects there to be a secret engagement between the two; however, contrary to popular belief, Willoughby cannot fulfill the hopes and wishes of those he misleads. Mrs. Smith decides to disinherit Willoughby after intelligence of his torrid affair with Colonel Brandon's ward Eliza surfaces. Penniless, Willoughby is now in the helpless feminine position of the Dashwood women, and on account of his economic uncertainty, he must leave Devonshire and Marianne to "re-establish [his] circumstances by marrying a woman of fortune" (*S&S* 227). Willoughby is too inconsiderate and insensitive to think of Marianne and of the pain his absence and the news his engagement will have on her feelings; the "conviction of [Marianne's] attachment" does not "outweigh that dread of

poverty, or get the better of . . . the necessity of riches . . . in an [increasingly] expensive society” (S&S 229). His only concern is for maintaining an extravagant, hedonistic life for himself, not for the women he pretends to admire. In society, just as in the ballroom, Willoughby exhibits both male and female traits, but his androgyny is still off kilter. His masculine selfishness overcompensates for his feminine indulgence. Were Willoughby and Marianne to be married, he would not care for her or provide a stable future. His feminine and masculine characteristics are cyclical in nature; one influences the other, but, though they contribute to one another, Willoughby never successfully reaches a balance between his gendered sides. His faulty androgyny while dancing directly reflects his faulty androgyny in society.

John Willoughby is just one example of Austen’s “wrong” partners; *Northanger Abbey*’s John Thorpe also exhibits an imbalanced androgyny on the dance floor that begins with his feminine vanity. Austen discusses the character flaws of both men and women in *Northanger Abbey*; she writes that “woman is fine for her own satisfaction alone” (NA 49). I take this to mean that Austen qualifies vanity as a distinctly feminine trait, yet it is a trait that plagues John Thorpe. He uses the dance floor to gratify his ego with his incessant bragging and self aggrandizement. John Thorpe seeks opportunities to promote himself in the different areas of the ballroom; whether those occasions be on the dance floor or in the card room, his purpose is the same—he wants to stroke his ego. At the first ball he attends after arriving in Bath, he requests of Catherine Moreland the opening dance; however, when the festivities begin, he is busy singing his own praises in the card room. Catherine, in her “general notions of what men ought to be” realizes that John Thorpe’s “endless conceit” does not “recommend him to her sex” as a dance partner

or as a future husband (*NA* 44). His vanity prevents him from being an attentive dance partner. When they finally dance, he only talks of his horses and gigs when he should be interested in engaging in conversation with Catherine. The dance floor is another chance to climb on his platform to promote his favorite interest, himself.

His vanity not only prevents him from being an attentive partner, but also reveals his unreliability and instability as a future spouse. Langdon Elsbree writes that “John Thorpe is, from Jane Austen’s view point, an anti-social creature of the worst kind since he possesses neither rationality nor decorum” (20). Marriage requires reliability and assurance; he will fail as a husband were he married to Catherine, or anyone for that matter, because his vanity would prevent him from considering anything not directly associated with him.

The feminine vanity John Thorpe displays on the dance floor coincides with his masculine desire for competition. The nineteenth century “loosely associated masculinity with forcefulness and competitiveness”; Jane Austen, aware of this conceptualization, may have been influenced by the common belief (Sadowski 18). John Thorpe embodies the aggressive male in the ballroom. When he sees Catherine engaged for the next dance with Henry Tilney, he immediately and imprudently shouts “what is the meaning of this?”, claiming that “[he] thought [they] were to dance together” and “firmly believes” they were to “be engaged since [the ball] Monday evening” (*NA* 50-51). John Thorpe is not upset at Catherine having another partner because of an earnest attachment; he merely takes offense at having his ego deflated, especially in front of the other men at the ball. Her dance with Henry Tilney hurts his vanity, the effeminate vanity that ironically contributes to his masculine competitive nature. He tells “all of [his] acquaintances that

[he] is going to dance with the prettiest girl in the room” and admits to Catherine he “will be quizzed famously . . . when they see [her] stand up with someone else” (*NA* 51). His only concern is his broken pride. His aggressiveness on the dance floor, compelled by his vanity, only drives Henry Tilney to a state of aggravation and shows his rude and forceful aggressiveness instead of recommending him as the “winner” of Catherine’s heart. Like Willoughby, at a cursory glance, he seems to embody the androgynous partner; but, he is quite the contrary. His feminine vanity only magnifies his masculine side, reflecting his imbalanced androgyny.

Indeed, John Thorpe is just as narcissistic off the dance floor as on. He consults with Catherine about her tastes and what she fancies, and then scoffs and laughs at her fondness for Anne Radcliffe’s novels. She asks if he has read *Udolpho* and responds in a pompous tone, “Oh, Lord! Not I; I never read novels, I have something else to do” (*NA* 43). Feeling ashamed and worthless, Catherine cannot contribute anymore to the conversation. John Thorpe breaks the code of conduct Austen stresses with dancing; he “preens himself on his worldliness; his pretensions allow Austen to indict the masculine culture that produces such figures” (Bilger 132). By discrediting her intelligence, John Thorpe reveals his need to feel superior while simultaneously indulging his narcissism. A suitable mate for marriage or for dancing would never demean a partner’s intellect, but John Thorpe and his neglectful dancing and vanity directly mirror his femininity in society.

Similar to his behavior in the ballroom, John Thorpe likewise combines his conceit with his manly, competitive side. Hoping to prove himself the best of the men in Bath, John Thorpe industriously spreads the rumor of his attachment to a lady of fortune,



Miss Moreland. At the theatre, he informs General Tilney that Catherine Moreland will inherit a sizeable fortune, heedless to the effect his lie will have on Catherine. General Tilney, seeking an advantageous connection for his younger son, immediately promotes his son's attachment to such a woman; John Thorpe, just as he competes for Catherine's time at the dance, also battles to win her heart—or as he would like to think, her supposed fortune. However, Thorpe does not contend with Henry Tilney because of true feelings for Miss Moreland; he only wants to make himself look like a better man, a man who triumphs over his competition. Again, similar to his dancing performance, John Thorpe exhibits both male and female characteristics; but his feminine vanity, unlike on the dance floor, amplifies his masculine competitive nature. He never maintains a balanced androgyny, on or off the dance floor, eliminating him as a suitable marriage partner.

The womanly attribute of vanity not only plagues John Thorpe, but it also affects *Emma*'s Frank Churchill and his dance performance. Frank Churchill, the attractive yet irresponsible son of Mr. Weston, is enthusiastic and unruly in every aspect of his life, particularly when it comes to dancing. While getting to know Emma, they talk of “general subjects. . . On his side were the inquiries. . . Balls—had they balls?” (*Emma* 191). His eagerness to dance indicates that he is a man who enjoys flattering himself; he enjoys calling attention to his “charming manners and fine figure” (*Emma* 232). He constantly seeks opportunities for dancing, and believing balls should be held “every fortnight” (*Emma* 198), he initiates several extemporaneous dances at the conclusion of dinner parties. Frank Churchill is fond of dancing because it gratifies his narcissism, not

because he wants to please his partner; his vanity encourages his masculine self-serving intentions.

Though Frank Churchill is passionate about the “idle pleasures” (*Emma* 258) of dancing, he has ulterior motives in his promotion of the sport. He is selfish, a quality Austen associates with men, in his continuous desire to move to the music. Langdon Elsbree maintains that dancing appeals to Frank Churchill because “it is not only the ideal means to torture Jane Fairfax (to whom he is secretly engaged) but also to deceive Emma” (38). His ideal partner, Emma, believes him to be an “amiable young man” and “like[s] him very well” (*Emma* 324), but unbeknownst to her, she is his choice only because it makes his secret fiancée Jane Fairfax extremely jealous. Frank, aware his constant attention to Emma is excruciatingly painful for Jane, the woman he loves, to watch, continually compliments Emma’s dancing, because she makes him look good—Mrs. Weston notes that they are indeed a “couple worth looking at” (*Emma* 229). He is essentially a flirt like Emma who “is attracted to the idea of being courted . . . but never wishes for a relationship to become serious” (Paris 83). Society finds a quality such as coy coquetry, which is expected and easily forgiven in a woman, undesirable in a man. Frank’s behavior is hurtful precisely because it disrupts social expectations. In his pre-occupation with Emma, Frank refuses to dance with Jane, saying that “her languid dancing would not agree with [him] after [Emma’s]” (*Emma* 230). An ideal partner would not neglect the woman he has promised himself to in marriage. Frank Churchill’s feminine attribute overlaps with his masculinity; however, his selfish nature only accentuates his vanity. He dances because the sport gives him pleasure while simultaneously making him the center of attention at the Highbury balls. Rather than

finding a balance between the two genders, his feminine vanity outshines his masculine self-involvement.

Frank Churchill's performance in the ball room mirrors his performance in society; he still fails to find equilibrium between his gendered sides. When Frank's father remarries, Highbury expects him to pay his father and his new bride a visit; however, he postpones his long anticipated debut until he can conveniently overlap his visit with Jane Fairfax's trip to see her aunt and grandmother. As Mr. Weston's only son, and heir to his estate, Frank Churchill has an obligation, as a man, to pay his father a visit. His failure to do so only confirms his femininity. "A sense of social responsibility and obligation" defined nineteenth-century men (Landlow). Mr. Knightley comments on Frank's negligence and labels him "a very weak man, it ought have been a habit with him by this time, of following his duty" (*Emma* 149). A man cannot forget his responsibility to society; as the dominating social figures in the nineteenth century, Frank ignores his function in the power structure and thus threatens its stability. Where Frank's feminine side rules on and off the dance floor, in both realms, he fails to exhibit a balanced androgyny, dispelling his eligibility as a future husband.

Gender bending on and off the dance floor is not limited to men; women can also perform the worst qualities of both sexes. *Mansfield Park*'s Mary Crawford seems to combine feminine and masculine qualities on the dance floor. Molly Engelhardt writes that a woman's "graceful spirit ma[kes] her intrinsically suited for the ballroom" and that "constructed codes of femininity" help a person obtain information and read other people. Mary Crawford, according to Engelhardt's description of Austen's gendering of the ballroom, accentuates her feminine traits. At Fanny's ball at Mansfield Park, Mary

Crawford takes the opportunity to gather intelligence from Fanny about her brother's upcoming visit to London; "perhaps *you* can tell me why my brother goes to town tomorrow. . . Now I must apply to you for information. Pray what is Henry going for?" (*MP* 190). Instead of complimenting Fanny, she upsets her, but, in her turns around the ballroom, Mary Crawford examines and understands the feelings of the other people present at the ball. In tune with the people who surround her, she knows what they want to hear and adapts herself accordingly. To Sir Thomas, Mary especially compliments Fanny's appearance and good manners because she knows it will flatter him, but her approach to Mrs. Norris is different. "She [knows] too well to think of gratifying *her* by commendation to Fanny" and instead regrets that the lovely Mrs. Rushworth and Miss Bertram are away from home (*MP* 190). While Mary Crawford meets the requirements of femininity established by Molly Engelhardt, her masculine selfishness motivates her feminine performance.

Underneath Mary Crawford's compliments to the Bertram family and her attentions to Fanny resides a purely self-interested motive. Selfishness, according to Piotr Sadowski, is a "prejudicial generalization" associated with masculinity; however, the "wrong" women partners can be selfish on and off the dance floor, just like Frank Churchill and John Willoughby (18). When she approaches Sir Thomas at the ball, she does so as a result of her "prevailing desire of recommending *herself* (my italics)" (*MP* 189). Mary could care less about Fanny's appearance; she flatters her simply because it is beneficial, keeping her in the good graces of the Bertram family. She knows that Sir Thomas, Lady Bertram, and Edmund, especially, have a strong attachment and affection for the modest creature. Mary's compliments secure, at least in her mind, her wish to

connect herself advantageously through marriage to the heir of Mansfield Park. However, the same self-interest that gives her the appearance of femininity also pushes her masculinity to an extreme, creating an imbalance between her gendered sides.

The selfish motive of securing an advantageous marriage affects her performance on the dance floor; caught up in the desire to marry advantageously, she forgets herself as a woman and offers a litany of outspoken opinions. Edmund believes her to be “perfectly feminine” except in the instances of her forthright, verbal critiques (*MP* 47). Mary is “in gay spirits” when she begins her two dances with the younger Bertram son; however, while they are together, her “manner of speaking of the profession to which [Edmund] was now on the point of belonging” puts an end to their joyous dancing and leaves them both in “mutual vexation” (*MP* 191). Mary Crawford is an independent woman, like most of Jane Austen’s heroines, and at first seems to maintain a balanced harmony between her feminine and masculine traits; however, as the novel progresses, her masculinity becomes excessive and dominating and she forgets herself as a woman. She would never suit Edmund as a wife because she refuses to accept his chosen profession; were they to be tied together in matrimony, that union too, would be just as quarrelsome and infuriating as their dancing.

Mary’s faulty androgyny is prominent in her behavior in society just as it is in the ballroom; her feminine “intentions to please” are much the same, but masculine selfishness directs her behavior. She gains favor with Edmund by presenting Fanny with a gold chain for the cross William bought her in Sicily; he is “so struck with the circumstance” that “Miss Crawford’s attentions to [Fanny] . . . have been invariable” (*MP* 180-1). Giving Fanny the necklace as a token of friendship is a façade; Mary’s sole

intention is self-promotion. She cares little for Fanny; in fact, after she borrows Fanny's horse for the morning and negligently forgets to return the animal punctually, she refuses to beg forgiveness, claiming "I have nothing in the world to say for myself—I knew I was very late, and that I was behaving extremely ill! . . . Selfishness must always be forgiven, you know, for there is no hope of a cure" (*MP* 61). After blatantly revealing her own shortcoming, Mary's "liveliness" continues to "curiously blind" Edmund and everyone else at Mansfield in the form of feminine attentiveness (Hardy 60). She is "careless [of others] as a woman" and as a friend (*MP* 178).

Similar to the lopsided gender Mary exhibits in the dancing arena, she also reveals the same excessive masculinity in society with her inability to hide her offending opinions. The visit to Mr. Rushworth's property emphasizes her extreme masculinity; passing by the chapel, she shows her "heedlessness" of others, more specifically Edmund. She speaks freely her opinion of the clergy: "Men love to distinguish themselves, and in either of the other lines distinction may be gained, but not in the church. A clergyman is nothing" (*MP* 81). Her rather brash, insulting critique of society and her partner's future occupation exemplifies Mary's insensitive approach to securing an advantageous marriage. Her potential as a wife is questionable because she "suggests contempt for what Edmund holds so dear" (Hardy 61). Mary Crawford does not find a balanced androgyny; she is excessively masculine both on and off the dance floor, ruining her suitability as mistress of Mansfield's Parsonage.

Imbalanced androgyny runs in the Crawford family; Henry, Mary's brother, unsuccessfully blends his masculine need for competition with feminine inconsistency. In *Mansfield Park* Austen stresses the importance of steadiness as a masculine characteristic

and further explains in *Persuasion* (rather satirically) that “songs and proverbs all talk of women’s fickleness,” echoing the nineteenth-century belief that capriciousness and inconsistency characterize women (156). Austen first describes Henry as having “unluckily a great dislike” for “anything like . . . permanence” and as being the “most horrible flirt that can be imagined” (*MP* 38). His distaste for consistency shows in his dancing. At the impromptu ball at the Grant’s parsonage, Henry Crawford attaches himself to both Maria and Julia Bertram. He is not faithful to either of his two partners, changing his mind about which one he prefers; at the heart of his feminine inconsistency, however, is the masculine drive for contest. The two Bertram sisters take a fancy to Henry’s charming “vivacity,” but because that liveliness is “thoroughly mingled” with his need to challenge himself, he enjoys engaging both sisters’ adoration (Hardy 77). He likes Maria Bertram because “an engaged woman is always more agreeable than a disengaged” (*MP* 40). He enjoys the thrill of making women fall in love with him; and he thrives on the exhilaration of competition. He knows that Julia is “quite ready to be fallen in love with”; whereas Maria is already bound in an agreement with Mr. Rushworth, Henry Crawford has to work to gain her affection. He disregards the stability and decorum Austen requires for a suitable husband.

The ball at Mansfield Park further reveals his masculine competitiveness. Henry Crawford views the ballroom as a place to compete for the attention of young women, but on this particular night, he fights to gain the attention of Fanny Price. Members of the community, especially those of the “first circle” attend the ball “to be introduced to Fanny, and no one else” (*MP* 187); the attention Fanny receives on such an occasion ignites Henry’s aggressive spirit. He quickly “with a pointedness in his manner” engages

Fanny for the first two dances and stays close to her throughout the night. In his mind, he triumphs over the other men present by obtaining Fanny as a dance companion, and although he is a “faithful partner” at the Mansfield Ball (Elsbree 30), his masculine want of competition enhances his feminine capriciousness off the dance floor.

Henry’s masculine aggressiveness influences his lack of consistency on and off the dance floor. Just as Henry changes his partners during the first dance at the Grant’s parsonage, he alters his focus from one Bertram sister to another in society. At the visit to Southerton, Henry begins the day showing favor to Julia, asking her to ride with him in the front of the carriage as it “would be a good opportunity for her to take a lesson” (*MP* 53). Towards the end of the day, however, Henry turns his attention to the elder Miss Bertram, walking alone with her in the gardens. Fanny clearly recognizes his attachment to Maria, but after she marries Mr. Rushworth, he sees an opportunity for another competition. When Henry loses Maria to Mr. Rushworth, he admits to his sister that he grows bored and has found a way to “amuse himself” on the days that he “does not hunt,” an activity that stimulates his mind and body. Instead of riding or walking, as Mary suggests, he says “*that* would be all recreation and indulgence without the wholesome alloy of labour, and I do not like to eat the bread of idleness . . . my plan is to make Fanny Price in love with me” (*MP* 198). He has never had someone look “so grave” on him (*MP* 198). It is to flatter his masculine desire for competition that he turns his attentions toward Fanny Price, but his aggressiveness forces his feminine display of inconsistency that imbalances his androgyny.

*Mansfield Park* differs from Jane Austen’s novels in relation to the “wrong” partner; Henry Crawford’s imbalanced androgyny both on the dance floor and off ruins



the stability of the Rushworths' marriage. In her other novels, Austen presents "wrong partners" who could *potentially* disrupt a stable social convention, but in *Mansfield Park*, Austen no longer subtly alludes to the dangers of dancing with the "wrong" partner. Henry's excessive femininity at first only threatens the durability of the Rushworths' marriage, but, despite Austen's continuous warnings, his imbalanced androgyny creates a dangerous situation for both Maria Rushworth and Henry Crawford, as well as for their families.

While the wrong partners seem to possess a balanced androgyny, in reality they do not. Their combination of the worst stereotypical qualities of both genders prevents them from attaining a harmony of their gendered sides. The negative characteristics imbalance one another and force the wrong partners to be excessively masculine or excessively feminine at the same time. The surplus of characteristics of one gender over the other renders these partners unsuitable for the marriage state. The imbalanced mixture of male and female characteristics Austen presents in the wrong partners is essential; in order to understand the balanced androgyny the right partners hold, it is imperative she disclose what *not* to look for in a dancing partner.

## Chapter 2: The “Right” Partner

Wrong partners aside, dancing is a metaphor for marriage in Austen’s novels. Most of Jane Austen’s heroines marry a dance partner, after all; not all partnerships formed on the dance floor result in heartache and disruption. Austen juxtaposes each “wrong” partner with her idea of a preferred partner. Lloyd W. Brown explains that in Jane Austen’s works, marriage “symbolize[s] the fruition or failure of certain human relationships” (324). The dance scenes indicate which partnerships will succeed and which will fall short in the marriage state. Where the wrong partners fail to fulfill Austen’s mold of a suitable spouse by exhibiting extreme gender bending on the dance floor, the right partners combine the best characteristics of both men and women.

As a woman living in the early nineteenth century, Jane Austen felt the injustices of a patriarchal society. In a world dominated by men, women were deemed the weaker sex, and had very little control over their future, one most often limited to the prospect of marriage. Joan Perkin writes that marriage “was the life plan of most women and the single state a fate to be avoided like the plague” (3). Jane Austen, aware of the limitations marriage placed on women, alters the perception of traditional gender roles in her novels through her dance scenes. The wrong partners are not alone in their gender bending performances; the right partners also tend to fluctuate between masculinity and femininity. Despite Brown’s assertion that Jane Austen is “*obviously*. . . not involved with questions of androgynous marriage,” I believe she is [my emphasis] (324). Through her dance scenes and the different sets of partners, Austen tampers with traditional gender roles; however, where the wrong partners discussed in the previous section threaten the

stability of the nuptial union, the balanced androgyny of the preferred partners ensures and even strengthens the social convention of marriage.

*Northanger Abbey*'s Henry Tilney proves his masculinity through his awareness of his duty as a dance partner and as a man in society. Unlike John Thorpe, who is neglectful and rude on the dance floor, Henry Tilney takes his duty as a partner very seriously. He emphasizes the correlation between the country dance and marriage, suggesting that dancing partners "enter into a contract of mutual agreeableness for the space of an evening . . . . Fidelity and compliance are the principle duties of both" (*NA* 70). His attention to his duty is a quality of utmost importance, as men of the nineteenth century defined themselves by their duty. Mr. Tilney is aware of his responsibilities as both a dance partner and future husband, implying that he is a prime candidate for marriage. Catherine's partnership with Mr. Tilney off and on the dance floor indeed ensures social stability. Henry Tilney's sense of obligation to his dance partner suggests that his "chivalric behavior and attention to reason" (Kramp 123) will provide both his future wife and his society stability. He is aware of his duty and, unlike John Thorpe, whose erratic hedonism deems him incapable of governing, Catherine's partner proves himself worthy of power. Catherine believes him to be a fine man who dances "very well" (*NA* 66), indicating that he will lead their marriage much the same way.

Henry blends the masculine quality of attention to duty with feminine modesty. Modesty, according to Thomas Gisborne and John Fordyce, "defines the glory of the 'female sex' (qtd. in Brown 325). Henry Tilney, unlike his foil, takes an interest in Catherine as a person. He does not engage in conversation to hear himself curse or brag. His humility and reserve while dancing reveal him to be a different kind of man than

John Thorpe. Rather than obtrusively promoting his attributes, he shows a genuine interest in his partner.

Henry's modesty follows him off the dance floor as he continues to engage Catherine in conversation. After they dance, he wants to know more about her and wishes to make a good impression. In Catherine's hypothetical journal entry of the night she spent with him dancing, he hopes that she will reminisce by saying "I danced with a very agreeable young man, introduced by Mr. King; had a great deal of conversation with him—hope I may know more of him" (NA 21). Despite what seems to be a shameless comment of self promotion, Henry Tilney makes his endorsement in jest—modesty and humility define his true nature. Henry is considerate enough to engage her in conversation, by which he truly gets to know her.

Afraid to broach the subject of novels because of her previous conversation with John Thorpe, Catherine supposes all men are of his opinion that novels "are not clever enough for . . . gentleman" (NA 99). In the early nineteenth century, reading novels was considered a pastime for women; however, Henry surprises her with "I have read most of Mrs. Radcliffe's works and most of them with great pleasure" (NA 100). He does not belittle Catherine's taste or intelligence. Michael Kramp asserts that "Henry has learned to value the sensations produced by these texts" (49) and just so, he values what is considered literature for women. He is not so brazenly proud to deny his enjoyment in reading gothic novels. Henry successively combines and balances attributes of both sexes; his balanced androgyny allows for him to be the ideal marriage partner.

Henry Tilney is just one of Austen's "right" dance partners; *Pride and Prejudice's* Fitzwilliam Darcy combines the stereotypical masculine logic and reason with feminine

passion and emotion. Mr. Darcy is introduced to Elizabeth Bennet in what is probably one of Austen's most renowned dance scenes. The ball welcoming Mr. Bingley and his party to the Meryton community begins the conflict between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. Unlike the enthusiastic Frank Churchill, Mr. Darcy is a rather reluctant dancer. At Bingley's urgings to dance with Elizabeth Bennet, Mr. Darcy refuses and saves his dances for his own party: "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me, and I am in no humor at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men" (*P&P* 13). His overheard remark offends Elizabeth and motivates her prejudice. However offensive Darcy's actions might be, his aversion to dancing is not to be attributed (absolutely) to his "seemingly repulsive 'pride'" (Hardy 36). Darcy simply understands his place in society. Michael Kramp confirms that Austen "base[s] her model of masculinity upon the Enlightenment tradition of reason" (27); she introduces Mr. Darcy as a man who is a slave to logic and rationality. As a wealthy male of ten thousand pounds per annum, he cannot risk his reputation and fall for a woman with "inferior . . . connections" (*P&P* 182). Mr. Darcy, unlike "the Willoughbys . . . and Henry Crawfords . . . the cads, the fools, the fops" (Englehardt) who are very much willing dance partners and cause young girls' hearts to break, he carefully analyzes the situations that surround him.

Molly Englehardt asserts that Mr. Darcy's "reluctant dancing personifies masculinity"; however, dancing does not always displease this "model of maleness." As the novel progresses, Darcy increasingly wishes to dance with Elizabeth and slowly gives way to his emotional, more feminine side. By the end of the eighteenth century, "sentimental emotions and the overflow of passions became an issue of great concern"

(Kramp 27). Kramp also writes that emotive sensitivity was a quality associated with the “fair sex” (28). Mr. Darcy’s dancing performance with Elizabeth discloses his femininity. At the Netherfield Ball, Darcy immediately engages Elizabeth for a dance, and much to her surprise, she accepts. During their first dance, Austen slowly reveals the emotional side of Mr. Darcy. The dance starts with the familiar, logical and reserved Darcy; his partner initiates small talk and, politely, he “replie[s] and [is] again silent” (*P&P* 88). But, as Elizabeth continues to question her partner, he gradually become more passionate, disclosing an emotionally vulnerable Darcy. Their communication is intense and filled with strong sentiment and excitement. Upon the subject of Wickham, Darcy grows defensive and shows traces of jealousy—he envies Elizabeth’s affections for a man he abhors. Darcy’s resentment towards Wickham attests to his true feelings toward Elizabeth and makes his dance with her all the more personal. The dance floor reveals the two different sides of the future heir of Pemberley—he can be both logical and emotional—both masculine and feminine. The passionate conversation the partners experience while dancing is crucial to the development of their relationship. The balance between reason and passion Mr. Darcy exhibits on the dance floor foreshadows his androgyny outside the ballroom.

Mr. Darcy integrates his masculinity and femininity not only on the dance floor, but also in other areas of his life; when Elizabeth confides the shocking news of Lydia’s elopement with Wickham, Mr. Darcy displays the same balanced androgyny he exhibits in the ballroom. Just as Elizabeth first perceives him at the ball in the beginning of their relationship, he remains calm and collected—almost aloof. Gaining composure of his “fixed . . . astonishment,” he “walk[s] up and down the room in earnest meditation”

(*P&P* 179,180)—Darcy's reason takes over immediately and his masculinity remains intact. He logically asks what "has been attempted to recover [Wickham and Lydia]" and, after politely assuring Elizabeth of his silence of the affair, wishes her family well and leaves (*P&P* 180). Based on Mr. Darcy's affluent status and his previous behavior on the dance floor and concern of the "inferiority of [Elizabeth's] connections . . . whose condition in life is so beneath [his] own," Elizabeth believes that she will never meet with Mr. Darcy again, that he will never renew his offer of marriage (*P&P* 127).

Mr. Darcy cannot help but feel responsible for the growing scandal in the Bennet family; his logic leads him to admit his responsibility for the "unfortunate affair" (*P&P* 180). Indirectly, Mr. Darcy is to blame for the concealment of Wickham's true character; he is familiar with the gambling, self-indulgent nature that Wickham so carefully, though not all together successfully, tries to hide. Elizabeth's self reproach for her "wretched, wretched mistake" of not doing "what [she] ought, what [she] dared, to do," compels Darcy to realize he should also bear the burden of reprimand (*P&P* 180). Instead of suppressing Wickham's treachery against his own family to protect his sister's reputation and in turn his own respectability, he logically embarks on his quest to remedy the situation.

Mr. Darcy's masculine reason, however, is not the only driving force behind his attempt to amend the state of affairs. Just as Mr. Darcy has a feminine passion while dancing, his female sensibilities aid his logic outside the ballroom. Mr. Darcy's male driven prudence is not the only factor influencing his effort to improve Lydia and the Bennets's "proof of family weakness"; his overwhelming adoration of Elizabeth enhances his urge to recover the fallen couple to "offer . . . consolation to such distress"

(*P&P* 180)—he does not deny how influential a role his emotions play in his acts of salvation for the Bennet family. He confesses that “the wish of giving happiness to [*Elizabeth*]” only “add[s] to the other inducements which led [him] on”; that is, Mr. Darcy’s reason and emotion coincide with one another—creating a balance between his masculine and feminine sides. The androgyny he re-establishes off the dance floor mirrors the androgyny he exhibits inside the ballroom. Mr. Darcy successfully finds a balance on the gender spectrum, suggesting that, although not clear at first, he is a preferred candidate for marriage, and can guarantee stability for the nuptial union.

Mr. Darcy is not Austen’s only hesitant dancer. *Emma*’s Mr. Knightley is just as reluctant a partner. Allison Thompson states that “the one measure of determining whether a man was truly a gentleman was by his ability and agreeableness to dance” (Thompson). Englehardt continues to say that “through dance instruction a young man learns the necessary grace to please and impress polite society” (Englehardt). However, for Austen, a man is a gentleman when he is hesitant to dance; his aversion towards dancing shows he is careful, and his motives for dancing are not self serving. Mr. Knightley’s careful attention to reserve and decorum indicates his masculine thought process. Mr. Knightley is logical, a masculine characteristic he shares with Mr. Darcy. His logic leads him to be reserved with self discipline, a self discipline that causes his dislike for spontaneous activity. He feels everything should be well planned and thought out, like the strawberry-picking party at his home. His distaste for improvised moments fits his idea of dancing as well. At the impromptu dance at the Coles’, per the request of Mr. Churchill, Mr. Knightley refuses to dance. His belief in well conceived action maintains his steadfast masculinity.



However, Mr. Knightley combines his masculine logic with feminine selflessness. Nora Stovel asserts that “dancing [is] a test of a character’s sense . . . the individual’s reasons for dancing, his attitude towards a particular partner . . . are indices of his competence in judging others accurately and conducting himself decorously”. Knightley passes Stovel’s “test” fabulously. He is not a dancing man, but to save Harriet Smith from humiliation he asks her to dance, satisfying Emma’s curiosities about his dancing, for it “prove[s] to be just what she believed it to be, extremely good” (*Emma* 325). Like Frank Churchill, Mr. Knightley is an accomplished dancer, but unlike his foil, he does not seek to boast of his skills. Austen’s ideal partner is subdued and confident; indeed Mr. Knightley also disapproves of a partner who flaunts his or her dancing skills as he feels “fine dancing should be its own reward” (*Emma* 239). Knightley is the epitome of selflessness; he does not seek personal gain in the act of dancing, unlike Frank Churchill.

Mr. Knightley successfully mixes his gendered traits off the dance floor as well; logically, it is his job to provide for the community that he is in charge of and he gives accordingly of himself to those around him. As the wealthy owner of Donwell Abbey, “he values the agricultural heritage [of his estate] and serves as a pastoral caretaker for the downtrodden of Highbury” (Kramp 13). Just as he attends to others on the dance floor, he is likewise courteous beyond the ballroom. He calls on the members of the community and supplies apples to Jane Fairfax when she is love-sick for Frank Churchill because she is “so fond . . . of Donwell’s Orchard” (*Emma* 432). He even sends his own personal carriage to transport the Bateses to different balls and social gatherings.

Mr. Knightley maintains a balanced androgyny, both on and off the dance floor, qualifying himself as a leader. Regency England was dominated by male power, and in

order for patriarchal society to continue, men like Mr. Knightley were best suited to regulate. Mr. Knightley provides a stability that is “indeed vital to the contentment” of his community (Kramp 123). He understands his obligation to duty and unlike Frank Churchill, whose erratic hedonism deems him incapable of governing, Mr. Knightley proves himself worthy of power. Like his dancing, his ability to lead is “extremely good” (*Emma* 325).

The letter Frank Churchill writes to Mrs. Weston revealing the truth of his romantic relationship with Jane Fairfax confirms Mr. Knightley’s judgment of Frank Churchill’s imbalanced gender. Emma sees him not as the manly dance partner she once believed him, but says he is “so unlike what a man should be!”, he has “None of the upright integrity, that strict adherence to truth and principle, that disdain, trick, and littleness, which a man should display in every transaction of his life” (*Emma* 440). Michael Kramp writes that Emma “presumes that there is a proper way for a man to act in society all males ought to know” (5). For Austen, the correct way for a man to behave is actually androgynous. Mr. Knightley is the ideal dancing and marriage partner because he can successfully maintain a balance between his masculinity and femininity, making him the most suited to rule. Because Mr. Knightly is the figure head of patriarchal society, he is a model for other men; he will lead by example, teaching young men the importance of androgyny.

Mr. Knightley, according to Michael Kramp, is “not committed to one model of male sexuality; his is a flexible masculinity” (13). Like his selfless dancing, Mr. Knightley alters masculine expectations to suit the needs of others off the dance floor. He takes on the traditional role of a newly married woman by offering to live at Hartfield

with Mr. Woodhouse so that Emma will feel comfortable marrying him and Mr. Woodhouse will not fret over the “breaking up of his family circle” (*Emma* 474). Mr. Knightley and his beliefs are not so rigid that he refuses to adapt; Highbury is “large and prosperous” (*Emma* 5) growing quickly and experiencing notable social changes” (Kramp 12) so it needs a leader who is willing to adapt. Knightley’s variability is the “face of the new English man” (Kramp 112); as society changes, so does Mr. Knightley. He is “invested in the social improvement of his community and is not frightened by “cultural updates” (Kramp 113). By amending his decision not to dance at the Crown Inn, Mr. Knightley’s performance reveals his balanced androgyny, an androgyny that ensures a continuing prosperity and stability for Highbury.

A woman can also successfully combine male and female characteristics; *Mansfield Park*’s Fanny Price blends the same feminine modesty Henry Tilney possesses with masculine consistency both on and off the dance floor. At the first ball described in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny, as Mary Crawford explains, is not yet “out.” She sits against the wall with her Aunts Bertram and Norris until her cousin Tom, who wishes to avoid a card game, anxiously demands a dance with Fanny. Austen, like the her aunts and the rest of the party, ignores Fanny’s debut dance. Only when Sir Thomas holds a ball in honor of his niece and nephew, catering to William’s “desire of seeing Fanny dance,” is Fanny’s worth as a dance partner and future wife fully recognized (*MP* 172). The dance floor amplifies Fanny’s timid nature. Lloyd W. Brown notes that “meekness and modesty” stereotypically characterized women in the early nineteenth century (325). Austen herself writes in *Mansfield Park* that “girls should be quiet and modest” (36). Fanny finds comfort in Henry Crawford engaging her so quickly for the first two dances, as she

cannot bear the thought of “receiv[ing] a partner only through a sense of inquiry, and bustle, and interference” (*MP* 188). Fanny’s aim in life is to make as little commotion as possible; she wishes to be as discreet as she can be, for fear that she will draw more attention to herself. Her reaction to Sir Thomas’s order that she “lead the way and open the ball” is one of shock—she never imagines that she would be given such a place of preference and honor (*MP* 189). Growing up with Aunt Norris, who always undervalued her position in the Bertram household, Fanny feels inferior and protests against Sir Thomas’s wish. She “could not help an exclamation . . . a hint of her unfitness” (*MP* 189). Fanny’s meek and gentle behavior on the dance floor emphasizes her femininity, but, despite her humble demeanor, Fanny’s masculine sense of propriety and obligation blend with her womanly “virtue,” establishing her balanced androgyny.

Fanny possesses a strong appreciation of decorum and accountability; her “constant heart” is a result of her being placed at Mansfield Park (*MP* 21). She has an “extraordinary degree of gratitude” for Sir Thomas that establishes the masculine characteristic of constancy, and steadiness, a quality indicative of men. Though she is timid and her dancing “modest,” she does not let her humility get in the way of doing what her uncle wishes of her, proving her thankfulness for the ball thrown in her honor (*MP* 189). One might suspect Fanny lacks dancing skills, but Austen describes her performance as having “no awkwardness”; in fact, she is rather “attractive” (*MP* 189). She makes her uncle proud. The androgynous combination of modesty and steadfast performance on the dance floor transfers to Fanny’s behavior beyond the realm of the ballroom.

The feminine meekness and reticence that characterize Fanny's dancing also influence her conduct at Mansfield Park. On the nights the Bertrams entertain, Fanny finds comfort in "sitting alone at the window" and hiding behind her aunts and cousins (*MP* 81). Whether she sits in her own private parlor (the old nursery) or takes her daily exercise, Fanny prefers to be out of the way and to herself. Langdon Elsbree credits Fanny's "isolation" to her modesty; though she is almost self-deprecating in her unpretentiousness, Fanny's "humility" is one of her most distinguishing feminine qualities. Mary Crawford even remarks to Edmund that "Miss Price is fearful of notice and praise," but as anxious as she is about drawing attention, she is not frightened of giving her opinion concerning matters of propriety and constancy (*MP* 54).

Jane Austen writes that "no man can like being driven into . . . inconsistency" (*MP* 108); Fanny, like a man, is by no means inconstant in her behavior—especially as it relates to decorum and responsibility. Much like her ballroom performance, Fanny's good judgment guides her actions elsewhere. When Edmund amends his decision to act in *Lover's Vows* to save the family from disgrace and Miss Crawford from performing intimate scenes with a stranger, Fanny cannot give her approbation: "her judgment was against Edmund's decision; she could not acquit his unsteadiness" (*MP* 111). She knows that Sir Thomas would not concede to such an endeavor; and thus, Fanny cannot go along with an act that her uncle would rule against.

However, she is not as submissive as she may seem concerning Sir Thomas's wishes. Fanny, in the face of great adversity concerning Henry Crawford's attentions, disregards her uncle's gruff commands with respect to Mr. Crawford's proposal and remains constant in her judgment of someone she "does not like as a man" (*MP* 115).

Fanny, a keen observer of the impropriety of others, notices the discrepancies in Mr. Crawford's behavior; his dancing, "though not bad, [makes] no part of her satisfaction" (*MP* 190). His attentions to her soon-to-be married cousin Maria displease her, and she cannot marry a man who cares so little for the proper behavior she holds so dear. The elopement scandal between Mr. Crawford and Mrs. Rushworth vindicates Fanny's unwavering, constant judgment. Elsbree writes that Fanny is the epitome of masculine "stability, discipline and order" (35). Fanny's respect for order and constancy suggests that she will be an excellent wife—she will not falter in her judgments, thus securing the marriage state. Because Fanny effectively maintains an equilibrium of her masculine and feminine characteristics inside and outside of the ballroom, she meets Austen's prescription of the right dance partner. Her androgyny confirms that she will be a stabilizing partner for matrimony.

The right partners, unlike the wrong partners, successfully combine the best stereotypical qualities of both sexes to create a balanced androgynous state. In a union between two people, such as marriage, partners have to change and be flexible in order for the partnership to prosper. In order to achieve a balanced androgynous state, it is necessary for them to be adaptable and conforming. Traditional gender roles, for Austen, constrict a person's natural desire to remain ambiguous; her dance scenes help assert her belief that marriage, like the gendered traits of the right partners, should be an equal state where gendered traits mingle, leveling the playing field for both men and women. The dance floor reveals what Austen believes a marriage should be: a space where two people can come together and dismantle all boundaries.

### Conclusion

Dancing in the early nineteenth century was a favorite pastime for many groups of people. Jane Austen's dance scenes, though sometimes glossed over in terms of detail, are nonetheless complex and interesting. Current scholarship associates dancing as a symbol and metaphor for the convention of marriage—but what is she saying about marriage? To simply say that the dance scenes symbolically represent matrimony is to miss something important in Austen's. Dancing was a key element of interaction for young, unmarried men and women, and one would expect Austen's employment of the dance as a motif would be saying something extremely important. A lover of dancing herself, Jane Austen was aware of the role balls played in the lives of single people, in hopes the relationships formed on the dance floor would lead to long-lasting, stable partnerships.

Austen uses the dance floor to create a new concept of matrimony for men and women, one based on equality rather than power struggles and subordination. By deconstructing and re-establishing her own guidelines for the “right” and “wrong” partners, Jane Austen revises the view of the marriage market and the traditional gender roles associated with it; for Jane Austen, the best “gender” for a person to be is androgynous. A balanced androgyny ensures the survival and strength of the marriage union.

The wrong partners possess the worst qualities associated with both sexes; although they may seem to create an androgynous state, their negative gender characteristics, characteristics that are undesirable for both a dance partner and a future spouse, disrupt the equilibrium needed to ensure the stability of the marriage union. One

negative characteristic always outweighs the other and makes the wrong partner excessively masculine or feminine. These partners are unsuitable for a stable convention like marriage because their polarized “gender” renders them rigid. They are incapable of maintaining a steady androgyny on or off the dance floor, indicating they are just as incapable of creating a durable marriage.

The right partners, contrary to their foils, successfully intertwine desirable characteristics of men and women. They not only achieve a balanced androgyny, but they also maintain it. The right partners possess a balanced androgyny, and in turn, help their desired partners obtain it as well. Although most of my “right” partners, with the exception of Fanny Price, are men, this does not mean that Austen generalizes the “right partner” to be anatomically male. Jane Austen centers her novels around a heroine’s growth and development to reach a balance between her gendered sides. The dance scenes reveal who is best capable of helping her heroine become the “right” sort of partner herself.

As a result of my study, I have found that most of Austen’s heroines (with the exception of Fanny) are dangerously close to being a “wrong” partner; it is only through the lessons taught by the “right” partner that they themselves achieve a balanced androgyny. For example, it is only after she dances with and gets to know Henry Tilney that Catherine Morland controls her female imagination with masculine reason. Similarly, Mr. Knightley teaches Emma the importance of selflessness and duty to counteract her brash outspokenness and lack of responsibility, and, finally, Fanny Price helps Edmund realize the importance of constancy so he can balance his feminine capriciousness with his masculine sense of duty.



Austen always unites her leading lady with her idea of a “right” dance partner, a partner who embodies her standards of androgyny. The partnerships formed on the dance floor that lead to matrimony lead the reader to believe these unions will be successful and prosperous; the right partner ensures the stability of marriage. Ultimately, the partners who adequately balance masculine and feminine characteristics reach a promising conclusion—marriage—only confirming that success in marriage begins with success on the dance floor. The right partner perfects the balancing act; there is balance in the individual and balance in the couple; all parts are complimentary.

Dancing was a key element in the culture of Regency England. Because of the important role dance played in the lives of men and women, it only makes sense that Austen would use the dance scenes to say something extremely important. To look at dancing simply as a metaphor for marriage or sex is to overlook part of Austen’s point. By looking beyond dancing as a metaphor for marriage and closely analyzing why some partnerships succeed while others fail, I believe my research furthers the understanding of the complexities of Jane Austen’s dance scenes. Dancing as performance is Jane Austen’s way of revising the marriage market. Her dance scenes reveal the interesting way she viewed marriage and gender; ironically, marital security derives from the instability of gender roles.

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