The role of balls and gossip in 18th century england

Literature, Novel

Jane Austen’s letters to her sister Cassandra, written between 1796-1801, shed much light upon the social events Austen includes in Pride and Prejudice. Frequently, the entire substance of Jane’s letter was a description of a ball she had just attended, a ball she was going to attend, a ball her sister might go to, and references to balls in which her sister’s name was mentioned. During the time period these letters were written, Austen was composing Pride and Prejudice. A modern reader of Pride and Prejudice might conclude that Elizabeth is a reflection of Jane’s personal nature, and that Jane was therefore above all the gossip that transpires during these balls. However, when viewed in the context provided by these letters, these conclusions may not be entirely accurate, as the girlish glee and deliciously catty descriptions that appear in Austen’s letters are almost identical to her descriptions of the assembly at Meryton and the ball at Netherfield. Although not immediately obvious to the reader of Pride and Prejudice, “ ball society” during the 18th century provided a safe way for young people to come to know each other, court, and compare experiences. The number of guests at a ball becomes an important factor because a large, mixed event better provided young people with a safe opportunity to socialize and meet prospective mates. In describing the Meryton Assembly, Austen hints at this, telling the reader that “ a report soon followed that Mr. Bingley was to bring 12 ladies and seven gentlemen with him to the assembly. The girls grieved over such a number of ladies” (Austen 7). While the social importance of this could easily be dismissed by the reader or written off as commentary on the girls’ superficiality, Austen’s letters leave no such ambiguity as they repeatedly catalog the number of attendees, their gender, their ages and

their relative desirability. For example, in her letter to Cassandra dated November 25, 1798, Austen writes “ the ball on Thursday was a small one indeed, hardly so large as an Oxford smack. There were but seven couples and only 27 people in the room” (LeFaye 22). In a letter from the following month, Austen describes another event saying, “ our ball was very thin, but by no means unpleasant. There were 31 people and only 11 ladies out of the Number and five single women in the room” (LeFaye 29). The repeated emphasis on how many gentlemen and ladies were present continues throughout the letters written in the late 1790’s and leaves no doubt regarding what constituted a desirable event. Viewed in the context of the letters, what appeared to be Austen’s cutting social commentary becomes a genuine concern regarding the nature of the event. The social “ safe haven” provided by “ ball society” was all the more important when we remember that the late 1700’s were a socially de-stabilizing time. The American Revolution, French Revolution and the declining mental health of George III created much uncertainty and changing social roles. Although politics did not intrude into Pride and Prejudice, the number of military officers speaks to the relative social instability of the time. These men are generically referred to as officers or more obliquely (for the modern reader) as “ red coats” (Austen 61). The presence of these men at the Meryton Assembly and Netherfield ball is included in Austen’s accounting of the ball guests. Her letters are frequently more explicit with references to rank. Austen’s letters to Cassandra also provide insight into the importance of gossip in Austen’s life. While it is easy for the reader to assume that Jane Austen (speaking through Elizabeth) was above the petty concerns evidenced by Elizabeth’s sisters and

mother, the letters to Cassandra suggest otherwise. For example, the anticipation with which Kitty and Lydia look forward to the Netherfield ball appears to be calculated to make the reader question the judgment of the girls. Austen notes “ nothing less than a dance on Tuesday, could have made such a Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday, endurable to Kitty and Lydia” (Austen 61). However, this eagerness was shared part and parcel by Austen. While the first sentence of her letter dated January 10, 1796 deals with perfunctory matters, in the second sentence, Austen plunges in saying “ After that necessary preamble, I shall proceed to inform you that we had an exceedingly good ball last night” (LeFaye 1) – and the balance of the letter describes the event at length. Clearly, Austen shared every bit of Lydia and Kitty’s eagerness for these social events. Similarly, observations made by those who attended the Meryton Assembly and the gossipy “ post-mortem” of the event afterwards, lead the reader to assume that Austen is perhaps offering it as social commentary. However, when viewed from the context of the letters, it becomes apparent that Austen is an inveterate gossip herself. For example, Mrs. Bennet’s rapturous comments (“ he is so excessively handsome! And his sisters are charming women. I never in my life saw any thing more elegant than their dresses. I dare say the lace upon Mrs. Hurt’s gown” (Austen 10)) leads the reader to conclude that Austen has staked out some moral high ground above her characters. However, the letters clearly establish Austen as equally gossipy. In her letter to Cassandra dated May 12, 1801, Austen reveals, I am proud to say that I have a very good eye at an Adultress, for tho’ repeatedly assured that another in the same party was the She, I fixed upon the right one from the first. – A resemblance to Mrs. Leigh

was my guide. She is not so pretty as I expected; her face has the same defect of baldness as her sister's, & her features are not so handsome;- she was highly rouged, & looked rather quietly & contentedly silly than anything else. Mrs. Badcock & two young Women were of the same party, except when Mrs. Badcock thought herself obliged to leave them, to run round the room after her drunken Husband. His avoidance, & her pursuit with the probable intoxication of both, was an amusing scene (LeFaye 85). Austen clearly takes delight in being catty – and is as inveterate a gossip as any of her characters. Austen's letters to Cassandra also provide greater understanding as to why Darcy's snub of Elizabeth was so devastating to her and why Elizabeth initially viewed him in so little esteem. Pride and Prejudice provides a veritable bookkeeping of who is a wallflower and who is engaged in the social world. Darcy's snub of Elizabeth (" she is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me" (Austen, 9)) was preceded by Elizabeth being removed from the action for lack of a partner. Austen tells the reader, " Elizabeth Bennet had been obliged by scarcity of gentlemen, to sit down for two dances" (Austen 8), leaving the reader to conclude that this somehow factored into Darcy's rejection of her. This rejection (and the underlying reason) was reciprocated by Elizabeth who observed that " At Meryton, Mr. Darcy only danced once with Miss Hurst, and once with Miss Bingley" (Austen 8) – thereby making him a person of little account in the world of 18th century ball society. What remains unclear from this exchange, however, is just how tightly coupled one's self esteem is to popularity at a ball. Here, the letters are very illuminating because they repeatedly recite a litany of how many dances were danced, who was formed to sit out and who

was standing alone. In her letter of December 24, 1798, Austen writes, There were 20 dances & I danced them all, & without any fatigue. I was glad to find myself capable of dancing so much and with such satisfaction as I did; – from my slender enjoyment of the Ashford balls (and assemblies for dancing), I had not thought myself equal to it, but with cold weather and a few couples I fancy I could just as well dance for a week together as for a half an hour. My black cap was openly admired by Mrs. LaFroy and secretly I imagine by everyone else in the room (LeFaye 29-30). On January 8, 1799, Austen was less in demand, as she wrote, " I do not think I was very much in request -. People were rather apt not to ask me until they could help it;-One's Consequence you know varies so much at times without any particular reason" (LeFaye 35). The same concerns are apparent in a letter of November 1, 1800 in which Austen writes, " I danced nine dances out of ten, five with Stephen Terry, T. Chute & James Digweed and four with Catherine. There were commonly a couple of ladies standing up together, but not often any so amiable as ourselves" (LeFaye 53). This repeated emphasis makes it patently clear that one's self-worth and social standing were intimately tied to being in demand, being an active participant and being fluid on the dance floor. Viewed in this context, Darcy's snub – which immediately followed a period in which Elizabeth was not in demand – was emotionally devastating. In summary, Austen's letters to her sister provide a window into the world of 18th century " ball society" that enhances the readers' understanding of Pride and Prejudice. It is significant that Austen was avidly involved in ball society during the writing of Pride and Prejudice. Her running commentary of these seemingly superficial events provides a deeper understanding of the

characters’ motivations, particularly with regard to Darcy’s snub and the conversations between the sisters. Shortly after the turn of the century, Austen’s letters turn to other matters and she becomes an observer of balls rather than the giddy girlish participant she was in the late 1790’s. However, during the writing of Pride and Prejudice, Austen was as catty as any of her characters – a trait that makes Pride and Prejudice a delicious read.

BibliographyAusten, Jane. Pride and Prejudice. 1813. 3rd ed. Ed. Donald Gray. A Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton, 2001. Le Faye, Deirdre, ed. Jane Austen’s Letters. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1995.