LITERATURE AND DANCE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN: JANE AUSTEN TO THE NEW WOMAN

By Cheryl A. Wilson
Reviewed by Alisa Clapp-Itneyre on 2009-09-18.

Having heard Cheryl A. Wilson present part of her research on Almack's and on silver-fork novels at two recent conferences, I was eagerly awaiting the publication of this book. It did not disappoint me. Well-researched, well-articulated, and well-explicated, it clearly proves her an expert on social dance customs and literary manifestations of them in the nineteenth century. While music, among other cultural topics, has recently been opened up to critical inquiry, social dance has been relatively untouched. This book, therefore, is well-situated within the Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture series dedicated to newer cultural contexts.

Generations of readers have, of course, noticed the scenes of dance that pervade the novels of Austen, Trollope, and others. Wilson brings an important critical eye to these literary moments. Participating in contemporary engagements with culture, she wisely avoids treating dance as simply a self-contained thematic motif, "a style of analysis," she writes, "that presents dance history as merely a context for literary study or treats dance as a literary metaphor that is removed from the physical experience of performance" (13). Instead, Wilson's approach "takes account of the physicality and cultural significance of dance. Different dance forms offered different sites for textual exchange, and the social and cultural implications of the dances themselves provide a touchstone for further inquiry" (12). By reading contemporary descriptions of specific dance form, Wilson uncovers debates surrounding gender, class mobility, and nationhood. Part of the strength of Wilson's approach is her nuanced readings of the literary dance as she explores actual dance patterns (shown with images from contemporary dance manuals) for metaphors and meanings: "Indeed, it is the 'structuredness' of nineteenth-century social dances--the careful formations, the matching of measured steps to music, and the codification of movement--that, in part, allowed for their multifaceted incorporation into nineteenth-century literature" (9). Though sometimes belabored and repetitive, Wilson's Introduction thus offers a strong articulation of her upcoming arguments.

In Chapter One, which explains the social customs of dance, Wilson provides not just a history but a close analysis of culture. Of the gendered roles of dance, for instance, she shows that "performing the man's part or the woman's part (distinctions carefully maintained in dance manuals) [...] contributes to gender socialization and construction even as it has the potential to destabilize gender norms" (34). Likewise, Wilson considers the implications of class mobility and national identity within the context of dance. As she concludes, "It is precisely because dance can be read as an agent of hegemony, reinforcing traditional gender and class ideologies, that it became so useful for nineteenth-century writers who were committed to a re-investigation of the social order" (39).

Wilson's uncovering of primary-source material is especially notable in Chapter 2. Using contemporary periodicals, articles, and reviews, she reveals an entire world of social dance unknown to a modern audience but surely vital to the social world of Regency London: the ballroom at Almack's. After demonstrating the immense political and social influence of the actual Lady Patronesses, Wilson then considers them as cultural templates for the women protagonists in Lady Charlotte Campbell Bury's The Exclusives, Marianne Spencer Stanhope's Almack's: A Novel, and Jane Austen's Emma. "The 'official' duty of the Lady Patronesses," she concludes, "was to control the dance--to construct the narratives of the ballroom. The social, political, and cultural implications of these narratives provide an
embedded subtext that reaches far beyond the doors of Almack’s, establishing a structural model that was adapted and employed by writers throughout the nineteenth century” (68).

The remaining chapters explore three prevalent types of dance—the country dance, the quadrille, and the waltz—and align them with major Victorian texts. In Chapter Three, Wilson examines not only the inherent nationalism of the English country dance but also its enactment of gender separation and class rigidity, wherein women rely upon male dance partners to move up and down the divided dance rows (69). Victorian writers use this image, she argues, to signify the increasing gap between "an antiquated social structure and the needs of individual women" (75), as found in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, and George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*. At the same time, Wilson argues, each of these authors uses the country dance to say something about English nationalism: Austen upholds English culture, Thackeray suggests an "invasion" by French culture which the English yet resist, and Eliot criticizes an over-idealism of English history (102).

Chapter Four shows how the square dance formation of the French-imported quadrille symbolizes the social pressure to "establish" and "maintain" one’s place within the set” (107)—in two novels: Catherine Gore’s *Mrs. Armytage* and Anthony Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*. Treating the quadrille in these novels as both literal and symbolic, Wilson explains how "four family sets" attempt social mobility in the face of nationalistic and class concerns.

"Enter the waltz" is the provocative subtitle to Chapter Five, "Les contretemps dangereaux," in which Wilson moves beyond the prose novel to explore not only Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters* but also Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and two short stories: Sarah Grand’s "The Yellow Leaf" and Ella Hepworth Dixon’s "One Doubtful Hour." Emphasizing the "scandalous" posture of the close-partnered waltz, its circling and repetitive patterns, and its "sense of vertigo and euphoria" (133), Wilson defines the dance characteristics that she will explore through her selected texts. In her especially deft readings of the two New-Woman short stories, she shows how sexuality and time destroy the middle-aged heroines. No longer sought-after on the dance-floor, Evangeline and Effie ultimately take their own lives in their ball-gowns, "cementing an image of [them] at [their] most desirable by assuming the costume of the ball that was once a site of social triumph" (170).

In short, this book is a lucid, smart analysis of social dance, showing how literary dance scenes signify larger social discourses—on the New Woman, for instance—and how actual dance moves represent elements of the fictional narratives (as when quadrille sets stand in for inflexible social hierarchies). Employing when needed the theories of Laura Mulvey (14), Mikhail Bakhtin (75), and Hélène Cixous (139), the book nevertheless steers clear of theoretical impasses. Other strengths are Wilson’s deliberate foreshadowing and summations of her argument throughout her chapters. Her writing is coherent and clear, and makes for very accessible reading. At times she could have used more secondary scholarship on the very famous authors she chooses, especially Thackeray, Eliot, Barrett Browning, and she often endnotes critics rather than naming them in the text (64, 84, and 93, for example). But in glossing a text with noteworthy dance scenes—Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* or Eliot’s *Adam Bede*—she is brilliant in showing what those scenes imply for the culture at large. In the three dances of Austen’s novel, for example, Wilson closely explains how the language of physical experience shifts from restriction to freedom, symbolizing Catherine’s increasing social confidence (82).

When the text lacks any obvious reference to dance, however, Wilson must work extra hard for connections: the physicality of bodies and the forming of partnerships in the otherwise "dance-less" *Aurora Leigh*, for instance. Rather than positing these generic, figurative, often forced associations, Wilson might have done better to ask what is implied by the absence of actual dance in these texts. The clever organization of chapters by dance genres also breaks down at times: in the chapter on the quadrille (Ch. 4), Wilson likens the structure of Gore’s *Mrs. Armytage* with the quadrille, yet must admit that the novel depicts only country dances and gallops (115). Anomalies such as this prompt us to question how and why certain texts were chosen for analysis, especially given the wealth of other dance-saturated novels, by the Brontës or Thomas Hardy, for instance.

These criticisms aside, I am pleased to recommend this book to many readers: Victorian scholars, cultural critics, and even lay people who wish to learn more about the importance of dance in nineteenth-century culture. As Wilson cleverly concludes in her "Afterward: Confessions of a Lady Patroness," "conducting the research, organization, and management of a set of unruly nineteenth-century writers and texts is not unlike the labors of the Lady Patronesses in organizing an Almack’s ball. [...] I only hope that my own endeavor merits assuming—or, perhaps just borrowing—the title" (173). This immensely worthwhile topic could not be in more capable hands.
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