

A WALTZ THROUGH GILDED AGE AMERICA: NINETEENTH-CENTU- RY DANCE MANUALS AND THE SOCIOSEXUAL ANXIETY OF A DEBUTANTE BALL

Introduction by Theresa Iker

Elizabeth Lindqwister's paper demonstrates the incomparable value of letting historical sources guide the writer, rather than the other way around. Early on in our seminar, Elizabeth found a treasure trove of digitized nineteenth-century ballroom dance and etiquette manuals, and instantly perceived their potential. Instead of dismissing them as frivolous or trying to squeeze them into a larger, unwieldy argument about the era, Elizabeth patiently parsed the manuals for their latent class anxieties and sexual tensions. The result, a dazzling "waltz" of nineteenth-century social history, examines everything from the pacing of new dance styles to the perfectly serious concerns that rigorous dancing might damage the womb. Let Elizabeth take the lead, and enjoy the dance.

A Waltz Through Gilded Age America: Nineteenth-Century Dance Manuals and the Sociosexual Anxiety of a Debutante Ball

Elizabeth Lindqwister

“Not choose to dance the polka! It was absurd, it was ridiculous, it was like nobody else, it was prudish, it was censorious.”¹

In the 1855 fiction classic, *The Castlebuilders*, Charlotte Yonge depicts a familiar Victorian world: social strife, aristocratic tensions, and young elites troubled with performing gentility under the pressure of socially precarious circles. The women within these circles must navigate through a particularly narrow elite society in which one wrong step — literally, if Yonge’s main character chooses not to dance the polka with a male partner — could send the women into a social purgatory devoid of marriage prospects. *The Castlebuilders* is a revealing commentary on Victorian social order; above all, the novel depicts the importance of rites of passage: of social confirmation and “coming out” to the gilded society that the wealthy were destined to join.

The strictness of the Victorian social order appeared most austere in formal social occasions: parlor rooms, elaborate dinners, and dances. Where Gilded Age wealthy women found dullness in their everyday lives, the extravagance of ballrooms and parties more than made up for it. “Coming out” and debutante balls were essential for monied families and their children; they served as the first public opportunity to present young daughters as eligible to climb the social ladder, most often via strategic marriages to wealthy bachelors. Beyond serving as grounds on which the upper classes could ensure monied unions, debutante balls became important social markers of a wealthy class. Famous families like the Vanderbilts could show off — or, rather, perform — their riches through ostentatious ballrooms, magnificent decor and catering, star-studded guest lists, and highly organized dancing to live

1 Julia Courtney, "The Castle Builders or The Deferred Confirmation," Durham University, accessed December 10, 2018, https://community.dur.ac.uk/c.e.schultze/works/castle_builders.html.

music. It was through the act of dancing, however, that affluence could be seen in ways separate from gold plated silverware or silk chignon gowns; dancing was a metric used by Gilded Age people to ascertain the marriage desirability and reproductive capability of potential suitors.

Ballroom dancing was, thus, more than a social, wealth-based performance for Gilded Age elites. As a close reading of New York City dance manuals from 1860 through 1890 illustrates, the form and function of ballroom dancing transformed alongside broader shifts in Victorian society. In particular, dancing provided an opportunity for women to interact more intimately with potential suitors and to showcase their physical compatibility to high society. Yet, as the intimacy of ballroom dancing became increasingly clear, manuals described careful rules and management for “proper” dancing — namely, dancing regulations which allowed women to still physically present their potential for marriage while simultaneously avoiding reproductive harm and inappropriate sexual tension publicly. While dance could, and often did, heighten the odds of successful marriages among wealthy pairings in Victorian society, it constantly risked physical or figurative overstepping into territory too sexual, subversive, or improper for a debutante ball.

These ballroom-based sexual anxieties arose from a series of massive social and demographic transformations that arose in the wake of the Civil War. Early nineteenth-century non-coastal states and cities were characterized by a lack of physical and social proximity and small population sizes, but underwent significant urban centralization during the Victorian period.² The centralization of people from rural towns into condensed cities fundamentally reshaped political, economic, and social realms, however. Middle- and upper-class families began moving into central city locations, abandoning factory-adjacent rural towns in favor of urban high rises and city-adjacent suburbs that gave families a physical proximity suitable for high socializing.

This demographic and social shift was most prevalent in the Northeast, which experienced a decade of growth and success immediately postwar. In 1855, 60 percent of New York’s bourgeois-

2 Louise L. Stevenson, *The Victorian Homefront: American Thought and Culture, 1860-1880* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 48.

sie participated in economic activity relating to manufacturing or commerce.³ As a result of manufacturing's centralization in urban areas, however, the economic elite of American cities diversified their work beyond public, domestic trade merchantry. Private wealth gained significance in the industrial movement, and home estates inside the city increased in both value and demand.⁴ New interests and allegiances arose within these wealthy city neighborhoods, and with such interests came a new, late-nineteenth-century set of social norms that would dictate cultural institutions and family life in ways unknown to less-populous, rural communities. Inner-city industrial monopolies, like those owned by the Carnegie and the Rockefeller families, amassed wealth from within cities rather than from traditional colonial ports. Once-exclusive coastal merchants were forced both to specialize within their trade and to diversify their investments beyond American merchants alone, while dozens of wealthy, international entrepreneurs flooded cities in search of opportunity. Subsequently, social and business-related networks grew among the elite as they adjusted to the rapidly-expanding industrial cities around them. Cities were now occupied by a "truly international" and cosmopolitan elite, which in turn transformed the once-American exclusive social scene into a hodgepodge of cultural norms.⁵

These cultural mores centered on business-oriented notions of kinship; family contacts, personal relationships, and official partnerships characterized the increasingly insular elite world that sought to perpetuate wealth within the family and friends-of-family networks.⁶ But perhaps the most important institution for the maintenance of inner-city business and personal ties was marriage. Historian Sven Beckert argues that because marriage "allowed for the fashioning of new alliances that made additional capital, information, and expertise available" to the monied elite, a well-chosen marital union became a culturally ritualized and economically legitimized aspiration. Even if a monied metropolis emerged

3 Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850-1896* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 21.

4 Ibid., 49.

5 Ibid., 21-30.

6 Ibid., 32.

from men's investing ability and accumulated wealth, the power of capital-owning New York men was ultimately derived from "a much broader intergenerational network of kin and social contacts, forged by their wives and daughters." Central to good business was the lawful union of a man and a woman.⁷

As marriage became the most important cultural institution to perpetuate a family's wealth, a series of cultural rituals developed to facilitate a healthy, advantageous union. New York's wealthiest engaged their children in formal visits within the parlors of their massive Fifth Avenue apartments; they took strategic walks around Central Park and invited whole families to match-oriented dinners; perhaps most ostentatiously, wealthy families began hosting extravagant debutante balls. It is important to note that the facilitation of these meetings was almost always the wife's sole responsibility; wives, as Beckert observes, "spun the threads that held these families together."⁸ The wife was the arbiter of a future marriage match; once a pairing was made, it became her duty to solidify the connection by contacting or visiting relatives, thus creating further opportunity for the prospective couple to interact. In certain cases, women planned formal social events, the most important of which included debutante balls.⁹

Beyond providing the opportunity for young men and women to meet, ballroom scenes were a manifestation of the elite marriage market itself. Debutante balls amassed social significance because they brought the sons and daughters of well-to-do families together in a "controlled, yet potentially intimate, environment."¹⁰ Noting that these environments were "controlled" lends credence to the notion that nineteenth-century marriage unions were not the stuff of typical romance. Indeed, the formality of the ballroom reflected the social importance of an economic union that would

7 Ibid., 33.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 33-34.

10 Ibid., 33.

unfailingly take precedence over romantic interest.¹¹ Such social importance lent itself to increased regulation of these gatherings and of the traditional conventions practiced within them. Many of the balls thrown by the wealthy elite served the express purpose of presenting eligible daughters to the outside world. Set to demonstrate the attendees' dancing ability, knowledge of the latest fashions, and inborn ease in presenting genteel behavior, ballrooms were essentially tightly controlled peacock shows for the wealthy youth to demonstrate a social consciousness fit for marriage.¹²

Conversely, balls were "potentially intimate" situations for budding romantic matches that provided opportunities for physical interaction with prospective suitors. Such intimacy added a layer of sexual tension — and subsequent anxiety — to the supposedly asexual, economic institution that balls were theoretically designed to be.¹³ Much of this sexual tension, however, arose not from interactions through conversation or eating; rather, the transformation of dance throughout the nineteenth century opened the floor for more physically personal modes of interaction.

Dancing of the form that originated in European and European-settled countries spread through the United States during the early colonial period. This European-based ballroom dancing was primarily defined by large, organized group dances and a distinct lack of physical, one-on-one intimacy between guests. However, beginning in the Victorian era, dancing became a more physically intimate action, with male and female partners pairing up individually for dances and participating in more lively waltzes or fox-trots.¹⁴ The proper execution of a waltz or polka, for example, re-

11 This isn't to say romantic love was unimportant to a marriage. There was rather a unifying of "romance" with "right" — "right" being the properly fitted, economically sound marriage choice, rather than just the purely amorous marriage choice. Numerous biographies of elite New York matches attest to the fact that many unions were made in the interest of the family business. For more on Victorian marriage and duty, see Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

12 "Western Social Dance: An Overview of the Collection," Library of Congress, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/dance-instruction-manuals-from-1490-to-1920/articles-and-essays/western-social-dance-an-overview-of-the-collection/>.

13 Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis*, 33.

14 "Western Social Dance: An Overview of the Collection," Library of Congress.

quired gentlemen to tightly “take [their] partner around the waist,” and hold her close to his body to keep the woman from falling down.¹⁵ Such physicality was a requirement to keep pace with the increasing tempo of dancing. Whereas seventeenth-century dancing had been set to a leisurely 15 bars per minute, 1850s waltzes whirled by at a blurry 70 bars per minute.¹⁶ Late nineteenth-century waltzes, written by musicians such as Johann Strauss, were described by fellow composers and city elites as powerful enough to “obscure everything.”¹⁷

What was “obscured,” however, did not include a misplaced step. Fellow Victorians observed that each dance brought with it a new characteristic, whether it be sensual, lively, or folksy, and the music stimulated the senses for each partygoer. A new song and dance could completely “ensnare the senses,” allowing the real waltz to begin “with all its raging velocity,” thus plunging the young couple into the dangers of public sensuality.¹⁸ Dancing, as much as it was a social obligation, had pressing sexual properties that at once initiated human contact and threatened to inhibit the presentation of proper etiquette. Social historian Angela McRobbie notes that dance had a mystifying, transformative ability to “create a fantasy of change, escape, and achievement for girls and young women.”¹⁹ In this sense, ballroom dancing, a social and sexual fantasy completely different from the humdrum everyday, expanded the limited leisure opportunities for young Gilded Age women while also generating a new layer of anxiety through its sociosexual norm-breaking properties.

Because debutante balls provided an enticing atmosphere and almost-taboo opportunity for female-male contact, the nature of the dancing itself reinforced the sexual fantasy attached to

15 Molly Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line: Ballrooms, Ballets, and Mobility in Victorian fiction and Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2009), 57 - 58; *How to Dance: A Complete Ball-Room and Party Guide* (New York: Tousey & Small, 1878), 18, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/musdi.098.0/?sp=20>.

16 Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line*, 58.

17 Frederic Chopin, quoted in Sadie, *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 24:74.

18 Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line*, 58.

19 Angela McRobbie, "Dance Narratives and Fantasies of Achievement," in *Feminism and Youth Culture: From "Jackie" to "Just Seventeen"* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1991), 192-193.

such an image. Certain sex-based theories of German psychologist Sigmund Freud can be applied to the particular physicality of ballroom waltzes, polkas, and other round dancing. A waltz, for example, demanded repetitive circling around a ballroom, the man and woman clutching firmly onto each other. Freud postulated that a “repetition compulsion” overrode a “pleasure principle” through the actions of this particular dance. The psychologist meant that the “compulsion to repeat” waltzing in a circle, and the “instinctual satisfaction” or “pleasure” of the repetitive motion, “seem[ed] to converge into an intimate partnership.”²⁰ Through dancing, men and women could participate in a repetitive activity “more primitive, more elementary, [and] more instinctual than the pleasure principle,” while simultaneously avoiding acting on such a pleasure — namely, by participating in socially improper displays of sex, like pre-engagement kissing or fondling.²¹

It is perhaps surprising that a scholar so infamous for his psychological theories even made mention of social and sexual relationships in the realm of dance. Yet Freud was a product of the Victorian ethos he occupied. Academic eccentricities aside, Freud had direct, personal access to the social mores of Victorian life and witnessed the sexual fantasies being acted out around him in real time. Freud’s work suggested there was a highly sexualized undercurrent for popular dances that seemingly contradicted the propriety of the ballroom itself. And yet, the rules of a waltz dictated a socially acceptable principle of repetition that could satisfy the sexual tension of a ballroom while also meeting social demands for stiff decorum. Victorians could thus “abandon themselves to the realm of fantasy” because waltzing was sexually contained within the “rhythmic and spatial boundaries of the dance.”²²

It is in these distillations, where dancing became a vehicle for displaying inappropriate libidinousness and a sexual end, that dance manuals necessarily intervened. Sexual and social tensions surrounding dance ultimately transformed the everyday ballroom into a potentially “dangerous” social location for women.²³ There

20 Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 25.

21 Ibid; Julie Malnig, “Two-Stepping to Glory: Social Dance and the Rhetoric of Social Mobility,” *Stichting Etnofoor* 10, no. 1/2 (1997): 128 - 150.

22 Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line*, 55.

23 Ibid.

was, as one manual reported, “a vice in dancing, against which pupils cannot be too carefully guarded.”²⁴ As this “anxiety builds” around a woman’s ability to reproduce and to suppress improper expressions of sexuality, Engelhardt noted that dancing’s “regulations tighten.”²⁵ One of the most popular dance manuals of the 1870s, Dick’s *Quadrille Book*, and *Ball-room Prompter*, noted that ballroom “etiquette includes both duty and behavior.”²⁶ By defining dance etiquette in this two-pronged fashion, dance manuals depicted what should be the underlying purpose of any proper ballroom-goer. It was the social and economic “duty” to a marriage match that necessitated proper decorum, and it was the regulation of social “behavior” into balanced expressions of enticement and restraint that needed detailed explanation.

Dance manuals thus detailed the dual nature of ballroom etiquette with a specific goal and audience in mind. Though manuals stipulated physical boundaries to be maintained between men and women, these descriptions were often made in the context of mutual attraction between the two parties. When instructing women how to dress — “modestly,” and with “taste and elegance” — one manual noted that specific dress colors could project a necessary symbol of virginity and romantic availability to the ballroom. But, more importantly, the manual further stated that “[g]entleman look more to the effect of dress than to its cost.”²⁷ Advice about how young women should dress and dance was almost always in the context of how women could maximize attraction of a potential suitor, and not of how men could best attract a woman’s interest. By stripping a woman’s role in the marriage-oriented ballroom down to a carefully curated object of attraction, marriage manuals nullified a woman’s ability to choose men on her own metric. Though she could socialize and dance with men, the Victorian woman could ultimately only choose her partner at the discretion of her chaperones, the narrow social circle and gender role she occupied, and the strictly defined social codes of the time period. The precarious nature of a ballroom narrowed a woman’s agency to the

24 Laurence De Garmo Brookes, *Brookes on Modern Dancing...* (New York, 1867), 14, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/musdi.027.0/?sp=17>.

25 Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line*, 53.

26 *Dick's Quadrille Call-book, and Ball-room Prompter* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1878), 15, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/musdi.013.0/?sp=10>.

27 Brookes, *Brookes on Modern Dancing*, 16.

tight metrics defined within dance manuals and forced women to present themselves in a prefabricated image that fit with the gender norms of the time.

Consequently, regulating “behavior” was intended not just to facilitate a proper match between a man and a woman. Transformations in ballroom dancing raised substantial fears about the physicality and overt eroticism of women, and subsequently necessitated policing for her “protection.” Social historian and linguist Molly Engelhardt explains that because Victorian dancing was a more physically taxing and sexually involved venture, “physiological concerns [emerged] about the negative effect of movement on women’s reproductive bodies.”²⁸ Where slow round dances of the eighteenth century preserved both the physical body and psychological image of the woman as the “gentler, softer sex,” nineteenth-century waltzes and polkas undermined the image of the woman as merely a reproductive body; the indecency of these new dances provoked a fear of moral and physical harm on the woman.²⁹ Engelhardt notes that new forms of dance were problematic because they “contested broader gender ideologies” and threw Gilded Age notions of physical etiquette into the dangerous, murky grounds of public sexual perversion. This growing anxiety over a woman’s reproductive ability, interestingly enough, did not mean women were relegated to the sidelines of the dance floor. Rather, these fears justified the need for further regulatory measures in the dance manuals that would best contain and maintain the woman’s role in the wealthy Gilded Age sphere. Regulatory forces magnified the sexuality and social tension of dancing and turned the ballroom into “a scene of expectancy and potential.”³⁰

Indeed, an analysis of a broad swath of New York City-based, nineteenth-century dance manuals shows that the Victorians were keenly aware of what each dance step and hand gesture implied on the overtly social and subtly sexual stage. “Everything [in the ballroom] is regulated to the strict code of good breeding,” notes one manual, “and . . . any departure from this code becomes a grave offence.”³¹ To that end, manuals noted for men how best to

28 Engelhardt, *Dancing Out of Line*, 53

29 Ibid., 52.

30 Ibid., 53.

31 Frank M. Reed, *The Dancer's Guide and Ball-Room Companion* (New York, 1874), 3, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/musdi.009.0/?sp=28>.

hold the female without “hurting” her: “Take her right hand in your left, holding it down by your side, without stiffness or restraint.”³² Conversely, a woman could take matters into her own hands and mitigate damage to her reproductive capability, both socially and physically, by avoiding bad male dancers (those who could not perform the polka or the waltz) and more physically vigorous dances.³³³⁴ After all, multiple manuals stipulated that “all jumping or hopping should,” for women, “be at once discarded as eminently ungraceful.” Because dancing had such a social imperative on the future of women — in most cases, marriage hinged on it — these concerns about reproducibility were not to be taken lightly. A woman would not be socially preferable to potential suitors if her abilities to reproduce and play the crucial economic role of kinship-linking wife were threatened by her actions on the ballroom floor.

Dancing’s role as a galvanizing force for Victorian socio-sexual norms meant that dance manuals served a crucial role as important social and sexual barometers for anxious elites. The restrictive sphere of the ballroom, though designed to concentrate and unite eligible bachelors and debutantes, operationally functioned as a unique platform where young elites might experience the sexual taboos and pleasures once forbidden to them in the everyday. But such sexual freedom, matched with the pressure of the social circles they occupied, created profound social and sexual anxiety. Young debutantes were constantly pushed to exhibit class, grace, and sensuality to find a fitting bachelor, but were simultaneously discouraged from too overtly expressing their romantic or sexual interests for fear of impropriety and breaking the Victorian woman’s censorious mold. The constant tug-of-war between effective matchmaking and protective sphere-maintaining thus made the ballroom an intensely stressful place for Victorian elites.

32 Ibid., 21.

33 Victorians were especially concerned about the fragility of women’s reproductive systems, and would subsequently base their fears about dancing around such fears. Their preoccupation with the idea of a moving or shifting uterus became the defining “symptom” of hysteria in women. For more on Victorian reproductive women’s health, see Frederick J. Garbit’s 1880 volume, *The Woman’s Medical Companion and Guide to Health*, https://archive.org/stream/womansmedicalcom1880garb/womansmedicalcom1880garb_djvu.txt.

34 *How to Dance: A Complete Ball-Room and Party Guide*, 18.

In this sense, dancing was not mere frivolity and a waltz was not a mere dance. Each and every action in the ballroom could impact a potential marriage between two elites; a marriage, in turn, would influence the husband's kinship network in the business world. Debutante balls carried with them the weight of not only a woman's reputation, but also her husband's, as well as the line of wealth established by her family.

As an 1867 dance manual concludes, "the art of dancing is not only necessary, but indispensable, to those who are fond of society."³⁵ Dancing, though fuel for a fire of sexual provocation and social anxiety in Victorian elites, has served as a historical mechanism by which humans can meet others in exciting, special, and ultimately intimate settings. More than just a waltz or a two-step, dancing was, and continues to be, a manifestation of socially-acceptable yet socially-precarious sexual intimacy, insecurely regulated by social norms and expectations — in this case, the economic necessity of a marriage match or the public value of Victorian propriety. "External qualifications are then," as one dance manual notes, "of great consequence to [young people]" when first appearing in public life. And this holds true. Even if dancing was an ostensibly small pocket of an elite New Yorker's average social life, it held such importance because of the long-term effects a ballroom success — or failure — could have on a woman's life. It was the difference between a polka and a partner, a well-placed hand or an uneven marriage match, a dancing social elite or a denounced social exile.

35 Brookes, *Brookes on Modern Dancing*, 15.