

It is a Truth Universally Acknowledged That There are no Secrets: Gossip's Role in the  
Regency Era Ballroom.

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## **Abstract.**

The timeless idea of gossip and its power over the inhabitants of rural towns permeates throughout our perceptions of life in the English countryside. Jane Austen's novels contribute to this quintessential image of genteel rural life and are the cornerstones of the way we view Regency England. Within them, the scenes where balls and assemblies take place display the keenest examinations of Regency social norms and the power of gossip. We seek to explore how the ballroom acted as a key location where gossip is transmitted and used to maintain the social order by blending fictional accounts such as *Pride and Prejudice* and nonfictional ones such as the letters of Jane Austen when she lived at Steventon, Hampshire and those of Catharine Tremenheere in Penzance, Cornwall. In order to approach this, we first attempt to form a coherent image of gossip in Regency Penzance through Catharine Tremenheere's description of an assembly she attended and an account book from the Penzance Assembly Rooms dated 1791, as well as her opinions on a birthday ball being held in the town. Once we establish how gossip functioned at balls in Penzance, we then analyse the gossip found in the Meryton Assembly and Netherfield Ball scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* in comparison to the nonfictional accounts of Catharine Tremenheere and Jane Austen. Finally, we weave together all three representations of the Regency ballroom to explore the seriousness of good behaviour and the consequences of bad behaviour in creating gossip about groups and individuals in a country neighbourhood. From these three examples of balls and assemblies during the Regency, we find that the ballroom was indeed a crucial space where gossip was created, spread, and used to make or break reputations within the small confines of a rural neighbourhood.

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## **Introduction: 'It is a Truth Universally Acknowledged'.**

When one mentions Regency England and the lives of its inhabitants, it tends to evoke a pastoral image of ladies wearing white empire dresses and bonnets dotting from one grand house to another paying calls, attending balls, and other scenes of provincial sociability. Yet beneath its surface of refinement and gentility, every action within this image can reveal how society during the late-Georgian period functioned. One major influence in colouring our perceptions of the Regency is the writing of Jane Austen, which portrays the workings of country neighbourhoods, village and town life, and the nuances of social norms found within them at the turn of the nineteenth-century. For example, *Pride and Prejudice* presents us with several scenes which exhibit the importance of small actions in social settings and their consequences, such as the Meryton Assembly and the Netherfield Ball. When drawing upon the letters she wrote to her sister, Cassandra Austen, we can see that these portrayals of assemblies and private balls can derive from her personal experience of being a young lady who scrutinises the behaviour of others and is, in turn, scrutinised herself. Carol Houlihan Flynn describes this notion as how 'it is Austen's awareness of the texture of domestic life that generates her densely realized novels', further demonstrating how her experiences of the world around her, as recorded in her letters, could have made their way into her fiction's critique of rural society.<sup>1</sup>

Within the letters we find many accounts of Austen attending balls, especially in the earlier correspondence, and occasionally ones where she bluntly presents behavioural indiscretions, such as how Cassandra should 'imagine to [herself] everything most

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Houlihan Flynn, 'The Letters', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. by Edward Copeland, Juliet McMaster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 97-110, (p. 98).

profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together', referencing her public flirtation with Tom Lefroy.<sup>2</sup> The implications of 'profligate and shocking' behaviour, as well as where it leads, is also explored within the Meryton Assembly and the Netherfield Ball through how the Netherfield Party's, being the new occupants of Netherfield Park, introduction to Hertfordshire informs the way Meryton perceives them and interacts with them in future. Mr and Miss Bingley, Mr and Mrs Hurst, and Mr Darcy's first appearance being at an assembly provides the perfect stage for the community to form a 'disembodied collective consciousness, to engage in acts of observation and judgment', resulting in Mr Darcy, after half of the evening, having 'his character [...] decided' upon by the assembled company.<sup>3</sup> As shades of hauteur and coldness follow most everyone of the Netherfield Party, with the exception of Mr Bingley himself, it makes Elizabeth Bennet's mortification at the ball Mr Bingley gives at Netherfield all the more potent, since the spectre of public opinion turns towards the actions of her family rather than the fresh blood of the neighbourhood.

If we take these initial glimpses at Austen's lived experiences as represented in her written correspondence with Cassandra and blend them with her fictional representations of a rural ballroom as found in *Pride and Prejudice*, we can start to piece together the foundations of our perceptions of Regency England and the overarching equivalisation of the Regency with Austen's representation of her world. Allison G. Sulloway draws a connection between Mr Bingley's attentions to Jane Bennet at the Meryton Assembly and the interactions between Lefroy and Austen in the earliest surviving letter to Cassandra,

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen, 'Letter to Cassandra Austen, Saturday 9 - Sunday 10 January 1796', in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-3.

<sup>3</sup> William Deresiewicz, 'Community and Cognition in "Pride and Prejudice"', *ELH*, 64.2 (1997), 503-535, (p. 504); Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 22.

stating that in showing a marked affection for each other, 'they [behaved] as Charles Bingley and Jane Bennet behaved at several balls, with the same futile results', bringing the importance of following social norms in a ballroom to the foreground.<sup>4</sup> Both cases, the fictional and the nonfictional, present us with a vision of the ballroom as not only a place where the neighbourhood can convene and socialise in this glamorous idealisation of Regency era refinement, but also as a place where actions have real, and potentially severe, consequences based upon whether or not they align with the communal sense of propriety and good breeding. Austen gives us a portrayal which demonstrates both of these aspects of the ballroom, as something appealing and pleasant on the surface, but more significant upon examining its position in the social order.

However, what other accounts are there from further afield than the heart of England, written by 'ordinary' members of the gentry living their daily lives in and around provincial towns? In the far west of Cornwall, we find a thriving social scene in Regency era Penzance's bustling assembly rooms. According to an account book from the Penzance Assembly Rooms, which records all the financial details for the 1791-1792, 1792-1793, and 1793-1794 social seasons, the 1791-92 season had 34 subscribers, the 1792-93 had 67, and the 1793-94 had 23, with each ball having various numbers of nonsubscribers attending in addition to those who were subscribed already.<sup>5</sup> In order to subscribe in the 1793-94 season, it cost a lady 10s 6d and a man £1 1s, to attend as a nonsubscriber; during the first two seasons which the account book records, a lady would have to pay 3s per ball and a gentleman would have to pay 3s 6d and in the last season the price for a nonsubscriber

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<sup>4</sup> Alison G. Sulloway, *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 1989), p. 151.

<sup>5</sup> Penzance, Morrab Library, 1791 Penzance Assembly Book, MOR/PEN/22.

become equal between both the sexes at 3s each.<sup>6</sup> Gillian Russell states that ‘the assembly room was defined by a constant mobility and associated conversation, which found their focus in the liveliness of the dance floor’, further declaring that they were ‘as much a temple to social intercourse as comparable, more celebrated, institutions such as the coffeehouse’, which could ring especially true for smaller towns such as Penzance where the demographic who could afford such entertainments would be significantly smaller than in urban centres, and therefore could connect with each other much more easily in spaces such as assembly rooms.<sup>7</sup>



Figure 1: The Penzance Assembly Rooms, November 2022.

One such prominent family among the Penzance gentry who frequented the assemblies were the Tremenheeres, which we can see were subscribed during the 1792-93

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.; regarding fees as method of gatekeeping attendance, see, Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 101-102.

<sup>7</sup> Gillian Russell, “‘The Place is Not Free to You’: The Georgian Assembly Room and the Ends of Sociability”, in *Social Places: Locating Culture in Romantic-Period Britain*, ed. by Kevin Gilmartin, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 143-162, (p. 146).



and 1793-94 social seasons.<sup>8</sup> Through the surviving collections of the Tremenheere family letters, which span the years from 1755 to 1844, we find many letters from Mrs Catharine Tremenheere, née Borlase, written between 1790 and 1810 which chronicle many facets of sociability in Regency Penzance and surrounding neighbourhoods, including assemblies and private balls.<sup>9</sup> Her letters, written primarily to her son Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, give a glimpse into how the social landscape in Penzance looked, containing gossip replete with pronouncements of the neighbourhood's general judgements, all dressed prettily in the eighteenth-century language of 'news'. From her experiences of being a direct participant in the Penzance assemblies, we can observe through her the way Peter Borsay describes the function of the assembly room as a space in an English town, being that 'on the night of a grand ball, they provided a labyrinth of spaces through which the company could circulate, and in which they could flirt, gossip, and intrigue', or in the case of Catharine Tremenheere, commenting on whichever personal difficulties are being sorted out in the ballroom among her neighbours.<sup>10</sup>

This notion of gossip and the powerful grip it holds on the social order of rural life, in connection with the earlier discussion of the ballroom and reputation, can play a significant role in piecing together the information which Catharine Tremenheere provides us in order to form a coherent picture of how the phenomenon of the Regency ballroom acting as an arena of good comportment manifested itself in Penzance. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her influential work *Gossip*, questions what motivates people to gossip by stating

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<sup>8</sup> Penzance, Morrab Library, 1791 Penzance Assembly Book, MOR/PEN/22.

<sup>9</sup> Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809, TR/1/32; Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – II: 1810-1844, TR/1/33.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 160.

‘perhaps the urge to participate in gossip comes from knowledge of the impossibility of knowing’, further declaring that ‘personal letters by taking possession of explosive materials reassure their unintended readers.’<sup>11</sup> In the context of Penzance, we can see what Meyer Spacks theorises in practice through Catharine Tremenheere’s speculations about a new family who took lodgings in town, with very little known about them when they first appeared at an assembly, as well as her account of a Captain Nap unintentionally wooing a Miss L. Hichens. We can infer that she mentions them precisely because she does not know the complete story, just as the rest of Penzance society does not, whose details can either condemn them to, or acquit them from, judgement and social punishment.<sup>12</sup> Personal letters, as primary methods of communication from a distance, can be used as a form of analysing, dissecting, and eventually reaching a verdict upon events which occurred within a public space such as an assembly room, the jury consisting of individual pairs who talk outside the ballroom or drawing room.

Therefore, when comparing the written correspondence of Jane Austen and Catharine Tremenheere with the social landscape Austen created in *Pride and Prejudice*, we find an interesting method to begin investigating how gossip links with Regency social norms, the piecing together of scenes of life in rural towns, and to analyse the implications found within them both. Using fiction to help colour in some of the picture adds another layer of context which the letters cannot: in realist novels, there are no repercussions for

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 90, <<https://archive.org/details/gossip00spac/mode/2up>> [Accessed April 10, 2023].

<sup>12</sup> *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, January 6, 1793*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/20; *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Mrs Deborah Tremenheere, 1808*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/65.

living people as fictional characters cannot have their reputations destroyed and be forced to live with the consequences outside their story like humans of flesh and blood do. As a representation of the author's context, the examination they conduct can help give insight into a time period in a more exploratory manner than individual letters can, but cannot be believed as entirely truthful as letters are able to. When examining Catharine Tremenheere's and Austen's own reflections upon experiences at assemblies and balls in tandem with the fictional Meryton Assembly and the Netherfield Ball, we can see Edith B. Gelles' notion of gossip's significance as how, because it 'stores and conveys the unwritten conventions of a circle of people, it is far from idle talk', portraying the weight which words and impressions have in forming opinions.<sup>13</sup> However, as gossip tends to manifest itself verbally before it is written, written gossip itself can represent an evolution of the story, or give other perspectives which may differ from the unknown.<sup>14</sup> Catharine Tremenheere's words, as a result should not, or indeed cannot, be viewed as idle talk about new faces in the neighbourhood, or how young ladies comport themselves in the ballroom, or how a rumoured love affair between a local girl and a naval officer is intended to be put to the grave at an upcoming ball, but rather a case demonstrating how a neighbourhood interacts with fluctuations in an individual's or group's conformity to the social standard.

Due to the intimacy which residents of a small town have with the minutiae of their neighbours' lives, there can be a wealth of history with the interactions various families have with each other, or as Mr Darcy bluntly states to Mrs Bennet 'in a country

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<sup>13</sup> Edith B. Gelles, 'Gossip: An Eighteenth-Century Case', *Journal of Social History*, 22.4 (1989), 667-683, (p. 668).

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, 'Borderlands: Letters and Gossip', *The Georgia Review*, 37.4 (1983), 791-893, (p. 795).

neighbourhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society'.<sup>15</sup> Don Handelman describes gossip functioning in a 'confined and unvarying society' as how 'the local meanings of items of information/gossip are, therefore, to a high degree a property of contextual factors', or in other words, dependant on the nuances of the neighbourhood they take place in.<sup>16</sup> With the ballroom having been a location that brings a neighbourhood together to socialise, it provided a space in which every aspect of behaviour could be scrutinised and news about the neighbourhood could be spread efficiently, as those in attendance were primarily well-established residents in whichever locality they were living, be it Western Cornwall or Eastern Hampshire. Observation of other people's behaviour and the resulting gossip and conversation contributed to making the ballroom a place where one can either make their reputation or destroy it. As Jane Austen and Catharine Tremenheere demonstrate in their writings, they were places where jollity and merrymaking could occur and where grace and gentility could reign supreme, but also be where minute bits of history can be made and lives altered through small actions with big reverberations in society.

### **'Our Assemblies go on Very Well': Catharine Tremenheere's Penzance.**

So far, we have not examined any of Catharine Tremenheere's specific words within the context of Regency Penzance we previously established. In a letter she wrote to her son Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, dated January 6, 1793, she dedicates half of a paragraph in

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 62.

<sup>16</sup> Don Handelman, 'Gossip in Encounters: The Transmission of Information in a Bounded Social Setting', *Man*, 8.2 (1973), 210-227, (p. 211).

discussing the Penzance Assembly, the first section describes the room itself and the general number of couples, the second on the graces of the Prideaux and Rebows families, and the third on a set of strangers who made their introduction to Penzance society at the last ball.<sup>17</sup> She states that ‘the Prideauxs and Rebows are constant attendants and Miss Rebows, the best dancer [she] ever saw & Miss Emma a sweet pretty girl’, which demonstrates the positive aspect of the assembly room as a hall of judgement and the side of gossip which can be used for social good.<sup>18</sup> This type of ‘healing’ or ‘good gossip’, as Meyer Spacks labels it, being used in such a manner acts as a reaffirmation of good opinion, or as a reinstatement of it if it has been previously lost; through declaring favourable opinions of the people concerned she is spreading her recommendation for goodwill towards them throughout the neighbourhood.<sup>19</sup> Observations of good, such as Catharine Tremenheere’s comments upon the graceful dancing of Miss Rebows and the beauty of Miss Emma, could be all that was needed in order to begin regaining public opinion, or to remain within the good graces of your neighbours, and while we do not know what exactly the relationship between the Tremenheeres, Prideauxs, and Rebows were from Catharine Tremenheere’s accounts, we can tell that there was at least a feeling of amicability in order for her to write the news that she did.

Apart from these aspects of gossip as an overt force of good, we find a more neutral representation of it in the following lines where she demonstrates how gossip can be used as a form of detective-work with an aim of stabilising uncertainty in the neighbourhood.

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<sup>17</sup> *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, January 6, 1793*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/20.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks, ‘In Praise of Gossip’, *The Hudson Review*, 35.1 (1982), 19-38, (pp. 26-27).

Regarding these strangers, she writes ‘nobody knows any thing of them yet, as they brought no recommendations but [...] a genteel appearance. They took the house for some months, but I hear they are not likely to remain here so long as they first intended’.<sup>20</sup> While there is no language of hostility or malice, there are several words which imply the efficacy of Penzance’s ability to gather information about unknown newcomers. In situations like these, where ‘gossip has functioned as a form of group problem solving’, we find where the assembly room acts as a central location.<sup>21</sup> The community has come together in the name of genteel sociability under the ceiling of the ballroom and, while everyone is watching each other as a form of conscious or unconscious collective-policing, any unknown figure would be instantly recognisable as not part of the usual company. Therefore, while continuing to watch each other, any unfamiliar entity would also have to be studied, judged according to local custom, and then, after whichever words could be exchanged in public at the assembly itself, analysed after the ball finishes.

Another method which facilitates the spreading of information within an assembly room is the geography of the room itself and how many people are in the room at any given time. As we have seen, the 1792-1793 social season had the most subscriptions for the Penzance Assembly Rooms according to the account book, and Catharine Tremenheere states that a ball ‘has never had less than 16 or 18 couple of dancers with three or four card tables’, meaning that there were at least 44-52 people, but there could easily have been a larger number present due to elderly people who could not dance, chaperones, or people

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<sup>20</sup> *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, January 6, 1793*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/20.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Horodowich, ‘Gossip’, in *Information: Keywords*, ed. by Jonathan E. Abel, Samuel Frederick, and Michele Kennerly, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), pp. 89-99, (p. 92).

without partners who would still attend.<sup>22</sup> She also provides us a description of the room's lighting, writing 'the room [was] very prettily lighted with 3 handsome chandeliers & 8 girandoles', which informs us that the bright lighting provided less space for illicit activities to clandestinely occur in plain sight.<sup>23</sup> Gillian Russell's notion that 'polite sociability throughout this period was therefore always shadowed by fear of its other – of social discordance rather than harmony', which in combination with the importance of the spatial dynamics of the assembly room, demonstrates how the numbers of people attending a ball, or even seemingly insignificant details such as lighting, plays a crucial role when linked with the power of gossip.<sup>24</sup> It all comes together to form a concoction of minutiae which keeps the social order intact, many pebbles which construct a castle.

One rock which contributes to the creation of these pebbles is the looming spectre of comportment, as Cheryl A. Wilson describes it in reference to behaviour in an assembly room, 'etiquette is important for personal discretion as well as for the public maintenance of that discretion'.<sup>25</sup> This distinction between personal discretion and the public maintenance of it is one which is vital in viewing the way which the public and the private are melted together in the crucible of upper-middle class and aristocratic sociability. The way one behaves at home during private parties and at public events are essentially transformed into being one and the same. Jurgen Habermas defines this as how 'the

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<sup>22</sup> *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, January 6, 1793*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/20; Penzance, Morrab Library, 1791 Penzance Assembly Book, MOR/PEN/22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Gillian Russell, 'Sociability', in *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. by Edward Copeland, Juliet McMaster, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 176-191, (p. 178).

<sup>25</sup> Cheryl A. Wilson, *Literature and Dance in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Jane Austen to the New Woman*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 27.

bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public'.<sup>26</sup> The individual is shaped by the effect their local social climate has on them, especially in regards to how gossip maintains or destroys reputation, as evinced by Catharine Tremenheere giving us a brief glance at the Penzance Assembly and the news which springs from it. As it only occupies such a minute portion of the letter, we can only believe that the regular cycle of assemblies and social events made it seem somewhat banal to the average person of her class during the turn of the nineteenth-century. Perhaps, though, that possible banality is what makes it so exemplary of how deeply ingrained such conventions were in the Regency psyche.

Private people coming together to form a public can also be witnessed in settings which are typically perceived as private, such as at informal gatherings of friends and neighbours in the home: a private ball can be just as eventful as a public assembly. In a letter to her daughter-in-law, Deborah Tremenheere, the wife of Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, who is affectionately referred to in the letters as 'Debby', Catharine Tremenheere writes about impending drama at an upcoming birthday ball hosted by another stalwart of Penzance society, Mrs Treweeke.<sup>27</sup> A young lady from another prominent family in Penzance, Miss L. Hichens, has unfortunately fallen in love with a naval officer, Captain Nap, which seems to have caused a stir in the neighbourhood. As Catharine Tremenheere writes 'Capt Nap has declared (upon being told the report) that he never had an idea of paying his address's to Miss L: Hichens & is quite concern'd at the report on the

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<sup>26</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), p. 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Mrs Deborah Tremenheere, 1808*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/65.



Ladys account fearing it may be a disadvantage to her'.<sup>28</sup> It is implied by the paragraphing within the letter that it was Captain Nap's intention to assert the truth of the matter at the birthday ball, a time and place when all concerned parties would be assembled. Roger D. Abrahams' notion that 'any public activity [...] is regarded as a performance; [...] from the most casual everyday event to the most stylised ceremony. Gossip is therefore seen as simply one of the many inevitable performances of everyday life,' effectively demonstrates the role Captain Nap's actions take in response to the news being spread about the supposed wooing taking place between him and Miss L. Hichens.<sup>29</sup> Socially interacting with other people in an environment where everything is at stake if one were to lose their reputation turns every single word and movement into a performance; in a ballroom, salon, or dining room privacy disappears when a public is created within a perceptibly private space.

In desiring to make a public declaration that he does not love Miss L. Hichens, no matter whether or not it comes from a gallant concern for the lady's reputation, Captain Nap effectively performs the necessary actions to dissolve any connection which Penzance society has attached to them. In essence, the ballroom is acting as the setting where a battle for truth takes place. In both cases of strangers arriving in Penzance and the positive judgements on the Prideauxs and the Rebows in the letter from 1793 and the account of the anticipated events of the birthday ball in the letter from 1808, we see the ballroom acting as a place where every party involved has a case they are putting forward to their neighbours in order to convince the world of what they believe the truth to be. Yet this truth-seeking is

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, 'A Performance-Centred Approach to Gossip', *Man*, 5.2 (1970), 290-301, (p. 293).

as subjective as the collective judgements of a rural town or neighbourhood, each version of the truth which is disseminated through talk, be it in public or private spaces, and then the reactions of those who are the subjects of said talk can exhibit the way 'gossip may [...] be used for social positioning'.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, we witness the complex nature of the ballroom, where good natured entertainment and diversion can occur alongside the swift currents of judgement, gossip, and the enforcement of the unsaid laws of socialising which run underneath the floorboards. While Catharine Tremenheere seldom records the consequences of the behaviour we find her writing about, at least in the letters which have survived the last two centuries, she helps shed light on how these convoluted consequences of sociability manifested themselves in a small town placed in a remote part of the country.

### **'A Most Excellent Ball': The Meryton Assembly and its Consequences.**

Now that we have painted a basic picture of Regency Penzance's social scene, let us delve further into the Meryton Assembly and Netherfield Ball scenes in *Pride and Prejudice* to see whether or not it realistically mirrors events which occurred in Penzance. Brian Robinson's notion of 'evaluative gossip', both in its use for social good and social evil, is something which can be found to the extreme in Mrs Bennet.<sup>31</sup> Whether it be at the beginning of the novel, with her iconic line that 'Netherfield Park is let at last' where she proceeds to tell all she knows about Mr Bingley, or just before the introduction of the Netherfield Party at the Meryton Assembly where she visits Lady Lucas under an obligation

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<sup>30</sup> Margaret G. Holland, 'What's Wrong with Telling the Truth? An Analysis of Gossip', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 33.2 (1996), 197-209, (p. 201).

<sup>31</sup> Brian Robinson, 'Character, Caricature, and Gossip', *The Monist*, 99.2 (2016), 198-211, (p. 199).

'to accept the second-hand intelligence of their neighbour', she is constantly found spreading gossip.<sup>32</sup> Yet, when the entire party arrives in the assembly room, the only one to reach the expectations of the neighbourhood is Mr Bingley himself. Mrs Hurst and Miss Bingley have no decided opinions pronounced about them, but the only named character they danced with was Mr Darcy, and while they are revealed to be shallow and haughty soon after their introduction, it is Mr Darcy whom Meryton immediately dislikes.<sup>33</sup> Erin G. Moss succinctly describes this manifestation of gossip in Austen's fiction as how 'in Austen, gossip keeps the world small': as Mr Darcy comments on country life being confined and unvarying, the use of gossip in the world of *Pride and Prejudice* makes the small and confined world have some sort of variation.<sup>34</sup>

Needless to say, the arrival of a new family in the neighbourhood, as shown by Catharine Tremenheere when one appears in Penzance, is enough to send the neighbourhood into curious excitement and when making their first public appearance at an assembly, it leaves all the more room for scrutinization. Even though the tide of opinion in Meryton was favourably disposed towards the Netherfield Party, Mr Darcy's 'manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud, to be above his company, and above being pleased', which reached its culmination when he slighted Elizabeth Bennet.<sup>35</sup> The language of insult, combined with his general unpleasant demeanour, demonstrates how 'initially the force of [Elizabeth's] shame only aggravates the problem', being that once a stranger, a handsome one at that, introduces himself by being

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<sup>32</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), pp. 11 and 19.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19-25.

<sup>34</sup> Erin M. Goss, 'Homespun Gossip: Jane West, Jane Austen, and the Task of Literary Criticism', *The Eighteenth Century*, 56.2 (2015), 165-177, (p. 172).

<sup>35</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 22.

contemptuous to a lady of good standing such as Elizabeth Bennet, it will only serve to further alienate himself from the community.<sup>36</sup> From his behaviour towards the people of Meryton, he gains the reputation of 'having the most forbidding, disagreeable countenance', all within half a night.<sup>37</sup> Mr Darcy's introduction, especially when compared to that of Mr Bingley's, demonstrates the power of mass opinion in quickly determining a verdict for the newcomers, one thing is said into one ear, and then into another, until a large chain reaction turns everyone in the room against you. Nothing is able to escape notice as indubitably somebody will have something to report to another.

However, while the Netherfield Party's reputations were almost immediately established upon their entering Meryton's assembly rooms, if we return to the notion of Mrs Bennet and the other ladies the neighbourhood being forces of evaluative gossip, we can see the influence that gossip and rumour can have on the culmination of the trials held in a ballroom. Regarding the pervasive perception of Austen's treatment of gossip, as well as of gossip more generally, it is typically regarded as a feminine phenomenon. Therefore, within the novels we tend to primarily notice women participating in gossip, reflecting the relationship between it and gender which started to develop in the earlier part of the eighteenth-century, preceding and potentially influencing Austen.<sup>38</sup> Yet the effects of gossip are by no means limited to women and feminine circles, we see this by how gossip interacts with Captain Nap in Regency Penzance as well as in how it interacts with Mr Darcy and Mr Bingley. What Casey Finch and Peter Bowen state about Highbury in *Emma* rings true as

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<sup>36</sup> Ashly Bennett, 'Shame and Sensibility: Jane Austen's Humiliated Heroines', *Studies in Romanticism*, 54.3 (2015), 377-400, (p. 391).

<sup>37</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 22

<sup>38</sup> Nicola Parsons, *Reading Gossip in Early Eighteenth-Century England*, (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2009), p. 109.

well for Meryton in *Pride and Prejudice*, in that it is 'the uncomfortable secret that there really are no secrets, the fact that there is nothing, however seemingly private, that is not somehow already illuminated by the normalizing light of public scrutiny,' in other words, everybody is privy to the affairs and business of everybody else regardless of gender.<sup>39</sup>

Mrs Bennet, through her discussions with her friends and neighbours, demonstrates the almost complete absence of privacy. Before Mr Bingley and the rest of the Netherfield Party is formally introduced to the town at the assembly, she has already ascertained his age, fortune, marital status, and a general idea of how many people he would be bringing back with him to Hertfordshire once he completed his business in London.<sup>40</sup> A similar result seems to be what Catharine Tremenheere was aiming for in her writing to her son about 'another family come on the Parrade', whom 'nobody knows any thing of [...] yet, as they brought no recommendations but [...] a genteel appearance'.<sup>41</sup> In both of these cases of ascertaining information, we see Robert Paine's notion that a gossip 'is interested in securing independent sources of information and in heightening his control over the routes of messages which he himself sends,' in that the gossip network acts as both an arbiter of general opinion, yet also a tangled web of personal biases and interpretations.<sup>42</sup> Meryton and Penzance share these qualities; we find in the world which Catharine Tremenheere inhabits families that host gatherings, such as that of Mrs Treweeke, and the subscribers to the assemblies who would see each other fortnightly, just as we see Meryton's social

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Bowen, Casey Finch, 'The Tittle-Tattle of Highbury: Gossip and the Free Indirect Style in Emma', *Representations*, 31 (1990), 1-18, (p. 2).

<sup>40</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), pp. 11-20.

<sup>41</sup> *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, January 6, 1793*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/20.

<sup>42</sup> Robert Paine, 'What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis', *Man*, 2.2 (1967), 278-285, (p. 283).

network forming in the early chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*. Did Catherine Tremenheere and Mrs Treweeke fill roles in Penzance society during the Regency in a similar way that characters like Mrs Bennet and Lady Lucas did in Meryton? From what records we have in Catherine Tremenheere's letters, we can only extrapolate bits and pieces of the full picture.

First impressions, fitting as the provisional title of *Pride and Prejudice*, played a major part in the events of the Meryton Assembly, yet the implications and judgements which arose from it rear their heads again at the Netherfield Ball, going both ways between the Bingleys, Hursts, and Mr Darcy and the Bennets. Elizabeth Bennet still describes Mr Darcy as 'of an unsociable, taciturn disposition' and Miss Bingley as an 'insolent girl', yet she is mortified by the vulgarity of her own family's shocking behaviour.<sup>43</sup> Her family's conduct, and the Netherfield Party's reactions to it, is one of the primary moments in which Elizabeth's constant battle with shame manifests itself, or as Gordon Hirsch defines it, 'reaching momentary peaks at the Netherfield ball and at the time she receives Darcy's letter, shame is the main affectual motif associated with Elizabeth throughout the novel'.<sup>44</sup> Through combining the Meryton Assembly and the Netherfield Ball, we see how behaviour in ballroom can transfer from one social gathering to another, how reputation and judgment colour future social gatherings. Each ball, whether public or private, is not an isolated event on a timeline of any given neighbourhood's history, but one part of an interconnected spectrum where past, present, and future occurrences all bleed into one another.

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<sup>43</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), pp. 121-126.

<sup>44</sup> Gordon Hirsch, 'Shame, Pride and Prejudice: Jane Austen's Psychological Sophistication', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 25.1 (1992), 63-78, (pp. 66-67).

One example of this is the display of contempt Miss Caroline Bingley shows to Elizabeth and Mrs Bennet giving Miss Bingley a reason to be contemptuous, demonstrating the furtherance of previous behaviour in other social situations. When seated at the meal during the Netherfield Ball, Mrs Bennet 'was talking to that one person (Lady Lucas) freely, openly, and of nothing else but of her expectation that Jane would soon be married to Mr Bingley', Elizabeth noting further that 'it was an animating subject'.<sup>45</sup> This same feeling that 'her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could', can be seen to give a justification to 'the silent contempt of the gentleman', being Mr Darcy, as well as 'the insolent smiles of the ladies', being Miss Bingley and Mrs Hurst, in that all their opinions of the Bennet family as witnessed at the Meryton Assembly are only being confirmed through the ridiculousness of their behaviour.<sup>46</sup> In reference to ways in which separate social groups gossip about each other, Casey Rebecca Johnson states 'when group members gossip, [...] the whole group benefits', describing how the 'us' versus 'them' dynamic creates a sense of cohesion.<sup>47</sup> The Netherfield Party gossiping among themselves, with the exception of Mr Bingley, before Mr Darcy accepts his love for Elizabeth and the union created between the Bennets gossiping with the rest of Meryton over their dislike for Mr Darcy, portrays the way in which gossip can both create union and disunion.

Between the two perspectives which we receive from Austen and Catharine Tremenheere, we find Mark Alfano and Brian Robinson's statement that 'evaluative gossip

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<sup>45</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 131.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>47</sup> Casey Rebecca Johnson, 'If You Don't Have Anything Nice to Say, Come Sit By Me: Gossip as Epistemic Good and Evil', *Social Theory and Practice*, 42.2 (2016), 304-317, (p. 308).

is a response to norm violation' rings true.<sup>48</sup> The people of Meryton immediately take against Mr Darcy due to his violation of their codes of polite conduct, the Netherfield Party takes against the Bennet family due to their violation of manners found within 'high society', and Regency Penzance, with Catharine Tremenheere being its mouthpiece in the present day, does not quite know how to handle the new family with no formal introduction nor what to make of the lack of acknowledgement of a potential courtship between Captain Nap and Miss L. Hichens. In both settings we see the principal subjects trying to emancipate themselves from public opinion, with the exception of the voiceless 'Mr Woodland, & wife, her daughter, & her Son a Mr Smyth' who have just moved to Penzance.<sup>49</sup> As we have previously stated, the ballroom acts in all of these situations as the central location where talk can occur, and subjects of conversation can originate. After all, where many people are gathered, there is bound to be at least one faux pas committed.

### **'I Can Only Expose Myself Once More': Judgement.**

Viewing this mixture of fiction and reality through the lens of *Pride and Prejudice* and Catharine Tremenheere's representation of Regency Penzance, begs the question of what Jane Austen's lived experiences of balls and assemblies were like in the more centrally located Hampshire to those of Catharine Tremenheere's in Cornwall. Jeremy Black, in his book *England in the Age of Austen*, states that 'social patterns were the product of dynamic relationships, especially the daily reaffirmation of status; the continuous interaction

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Alfano, Brian Robinson, 'Gossip as a Burdened Virtue', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 20.3 (2017), 473-487, (p. 476).

<sup>49</sup> *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Harry Pendarves Tremenheere, January 6, 1793*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters – I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/20.



between, and within, groups', which we can find evidence of in the portrayal of who interacts with whom and who speaks with whom in both Austen's and Catharine Tremenheere's letters.<sup>50</sup> We have previously mentioned Austen writing 'imagine to yourself everything that is profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together', to Cassandra in reference to her flirtation with Tom Lefroy at a ball held at Ashe Park, near Steventon, yet we have not examined the implications of those words in regards to social dynamics outside *Pride and Prejudice*.<sup>51</sup> She proceeds to acknowledge the fact that she did 'expose [herself]' to everyone present at Ashe and used the space of the ballroom in order to make a form of public declaration of her inclination towards Lefroy, not dissimilar to how Captain Nap used the birthday ball hosted by Mrs Treweeke in order to put a stopper in the talk about him and Miss L. Hichens in Penzance.<sup>52</sup>

Within both of these situations, the way in which social patterns are based off status and dynamic relationships is clearly presented. Yet as a consequence of the way social patterns manifest themselves, combined with the predictable unpredictability of public opinion, we can see how in a ballroom 'much of what was thought to be known— everything from the affiliations of foreign states to the disposition of one's neighbors— became a new source of anxiety'.<sup>53</sup> Austen's behaviour in front of the neighbourhood at the Ashe Ball, straddling the border of what is acceptable and what is not in such an environment, as well as the evident anxiety on both Captain Nap's and Penzance's behalf

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<sup>50</sup> Jeremy Black, *England in the Age of Austen*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2021), p. 23.

<sup>51</sup> Jane Austen, 'Letter to Cassandra Austen, Saturday 9 - Sunday 10 January 1796', in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*; *Mrs Catharine Tremenheere to Mrs Deborah Tremenheere, 1808*, Penzance, Morrab Library, Tremenheere Family Letters - I: 1755-1809 TR/1/32, TR1/32/65.

<sup>53</sup> David Simpson, *Romanticism and the Idea of the Stranger*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 3.

regarding the exact nature of his relationship with Miss L. Hichens, can both paint us a picture of how people we are acquainted with, whether intimately or not, can become a source of trepidation. Trepidation, rather than a beacon of safety, because friend and foe alike may become massed together when placed into a ballroom as everyone is there to fulfil the same role: the maintenance of social equilibrium. While Austen uses her characteristic sense of irony and dry wit, which we are so familiar with from the novels, in her written correspondence, the knowingness present within it both betrays the humour of the situation and the gravity of it as well. Both women, on opposite sides of the country from each other, show us the delicacy of observing and being observed in the ballroom through this sense of knowing, as friends could be just as vital to one's reputation as enemies.

Mary Ann O'Farrell, in her book on the function of blushing in nineteenth-century literature, establishes a valuable position in viewing socialisation from a physical perspective, stating that 'Austen turns to the body as the clearest source of an incivility that is yet recuperable in the world of manners'.<sup>54</sup> While neither Austen in her letter to Cassandra from January 9, 1796, or Catharine Tremenheere in her letter to Harry Pendarves Tremenheere from January 6, 1793 or to Deborah Tremenheere from 1808, mention blushing, this concept of the body in general being the source of potential incivility is present. After all, it could be argued that every action in a ballroom comes down to the positioning of bodies and how they relate to each other through the physical acts of dancing, sitting, and talking. This raises a question over the geography of the room again,

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<sup>54</sup> Mary Ann O'Farrell, *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century English Novel and the Blush*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 15.

yet in a different manner to that of the lighting and number of people within it as discussed earlier. Rather, it begs the question both in a literal and abstract sense, being who dances with whom and how well they do so alongside the emotional layout of the room. We find this in all three cases which we have been investigating: Mr Darcy slighting Elizabeth Bennet at the Meryton Assembly and her subsequent mortification at the Netherfield Ball, Jane Austen's behaviour in almost indelicately attaching herself to Tom Lefroy, and Catharine Tremenheere's accounts of the Misses Rebows and strangers at the Penzance Assembly as well as the implications behind the anxiety over Captain Nap and Miss L. Hichens. In each one there is a union between emotion and the way it is betrayed through movement and the physical embodiment of what is occurring in the supposedly private space of the mind being expressed in the public setting of the ballroom.

All of these nonfictional representations of the ballroom, though, come to us through written communication between family members, in the case of Jane Austen with her sister and Catharine Tremenheere with her son and daughter-in-law. Jane Austen and Cassandra were 'one another's most intimate friends, most essential family', leading us to understand the minute attention to mundane details present within these letters were intended for an absent sister, rather than as novel or philosophical treatise.<sup>55</sup> When considering Austen's relationship to Cassandra and considering the difference with Catharine Tremenheere writing to her children, ideas of discretion surface, in other words what is being said and what is being omitted in order to maintain some sense of propriety within a given

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<sup>55</sup> Suzanne Juhasz, 'Bonnet and Balls: Reading Jane Austen's Letters', *The Centennial Review*, 31.1 (1987), 84-104, (pp. 86-87).

relationship.<sup>56</sup> These relationships, and what is and is not said within them, put into action Bertolotti and Magnani's notion 'that gossip is an inferential activity (i.e. moving from some premises to some conclusions), displaying a collaborative nature within the group of gossipers', thus contributing to the web of information which gossip creates.<sup>57</sup> Even though relationships colour the tone of the words which are being written, they all serve the same function of enabling the search for information, what is the case and what is not. While some letters which contain more incendiary material may have been destroyed, which in itself could be linked to ideas of gossip's consequences for someone's good reputation, they show us how gossip transcends the relational boundaries between family members and the wider community.

In light of the indiscriminate nature of gossip in transferring itself through whichever conduit it can in rural areas, assemblies as a cultural phenomenon were found throughout the length and breadth of the kingdom. Mark Girouard, in his book *The English Town*, investigates the assembly room as an integral feature of English towns, stating 'by the 1770s all but the smallest towns had assembly rooms', which contradicts the notion that towns on the far peripheries of London and Bath's influence had less of the refined hallmarks of Georgian England.<sup>58</sup> From the Penzance Assembly Book and Catharine Tremenheere's letters, it does not appear as though the social scene in Regency Penzance

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<sup>56</sup> Mary Jacobus, 'Intimate Connections: Scandalous Memoirs and Epistolary Indiscretion', in *Women, Writing, and the Public Sphere, 1700-1830*, ed. by Elizabeth Eger, Charlotte Grant, Cliona O Gallchoir, Penny Warburton, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 274-289, (pp. 276-277).

<sup>57</sup> Tommaso Bertolotti, Lorenzo Magnani, 'An Epistemological Analysis of Gossip and Gossip-Based Knowledge', *Synthese*, 191.17 (2014), 4037-4067, (p. 4042).

<sup>58</sup> Mark Girouard *The English Town*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 129; on the growth of English towns, see, John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 395-398.

was altogether different to the one in which Jane Austen moved in Hampshire, as both locations were comprised of a relatively small number of people who were interlinked with many years of shared history. The function of the ballroom as a place in which ideas, opinions, and serious matters of reputation could be tried, discussed, and judged, as well as a place of recreation, is one which demonstrates the way that rural societies, like the areas around Basingstoke and Penzance during the turn of the nineteenth-century show how where there are people there will be gossip, regardless of geography.

Amanda Vickery, in her profound study on the lives of gentlewomen in Georgian England, states that 'it was gentility, not nobility, which formed the backbone of these provincial congregations [...] commentators again and again drew attention to the high visibility of women'.<sup>59</sup> When one investigates the lists of subscribers to the Penzance Assembly there is a very noticeable lack of titled individuals, the only one being a 'Sir Christopher Hawkins' who was subscribed in the 1792-93 social season, the same is also present in Jane Austen's first letter to Cassandra where the only titled individual mentioned is a 'Lady Rivers'.<sup>60</sup> From this lack of titled nobility in the context of these various balls and assemblies we are examining, one can infer that the way the gossip manifested itself was less dependent on condescension and the grandeur of there being a set of individuals with a significantly higher social status than the rest of the party, but rather that everyone had just as much to gain or lose as the others from being within a similar class. While there are nuances within this, as every landowning family occupied a different degree of prominence

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<sup>59</sup> Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 132-133.

<sup>60</sup> Penzance, Morrab Library, 1791 Penzance Assembly Book, MOR/PEN/22; Jane Austen, 'Letter to Cassandra Austen, Saturday 9 - Sunday 10 January 1796', in *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-3.

which could be either marginal or vast, being on a similar footing to everyone else within the ballroom opened up the possibility of every action, especially for women, having more consequences as all would have a similar right to harshly judge the other.

Another facet of the assembly room or ballroom being a place where people of a similar social status could partake in social warfare is how it could also be where courtships and marriages would be either discouraged or encouraged. Jane Rendall, in reference to the strict and cutthroat world of Almack's Assembly Rooms in London, states that 'the assembly room was represented as a market, a public place in which [...] gendered exchange took place', demonstrating the amorous and potentially risqué side of ballroom sociability.<sup>61</sup> When examining a ball as a marketplace where gendered exchanges take place, in combination with the idea of it also being a place where gentility was the norm over nobility, it makes the concept of love an entangled knot to untie. As we have witnessed with Jane Austen's behaviour with Tom Lefroy and Captain Nap's behaviour with Miss L. Hichens, public opinion and gossip within these small, but bustling, circles of rural gentry can also manifest itself as the commodification of its members. This idea of commodification goes hand in hand with the image that within an assembly room every single person would be on a trial, either on a small or a large scale. Jane Austen's self-judgements and Catharine Tremenheere's pronouncements of general opinion show both sides of the equation, one is in the position of those who are potentially misbehaving and is aware of the repercussions, and the other is a witness who transmits the messages whilst not getting entirely involved herself. Neighbours, friends, and family almost cease to be

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<sup>61</sup> Jane Rendell, 'Almack's Assembly Rooms: A Site of Sexual Pleasure', *Journal of Architectural Education* (1984-), 55.3 (2002), 136-149, (p. 143).

people, but potential threats to the self and the reputation which one has gained: a complicated battle between selfishness in order to survive and the truth of morality.

### **Conclusion: There are no Secrets.**

To begin with some concluding remarks, the importance of the ballroom as a space where information could be collected and then transmitted cannot be overstated. The letters of Jane Austen and those of Catharine Tremenheere, while falling into the typical generalisations of what the genre of eighteenth-century correspondence is made up of, both portray that information which can be seen as trivial rural affairs do, in fact, have more gravity in them than initially meets the eye. We see Rachael Scarborough King's notion that 'women, too, employed letters for a variety of pragmatic purposes beyond the expression of sentiment that is often assumed to be the sine qua non of women's correspondence,' applies to all three of the letters we have been exploring through the transmission of gossip which had tangible effects in the world around their authors.<sup>62</sup> Whether it is the case of young women behaving well in comporting themselves gracefully, strangers appearing in the assembly room sans-introduction, or a rumour being firmly denied at a private ball, as Catharine Tremenheere recorded, or intentionally exposing oneself before the neighbourhood through flirtation, as Jane Austen wrote to Cassandra about, they all show how typically feminine topics of conversation and gossip have deeper ramifications in small societies.

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<sup>62</sup> Rachael Scarborough King, 'A "Female Accomplishment"?: Femininity, Privacy, and Eighteenth-Century Letter-Writing Norms', in *After Print: Eighteenth-Century Manuscript Cultures*, ed. by Rachael Scarborough King, (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 2020), pp. 74-94, (p. 84).

These deeper social ramifications which we have seen in the real world are also keenly examined and portrayed through works of fiction, like *Pride and Prejudice*. The all-encompassing nature of life in rural towns and villages is one where one's acquaintances and connections form their entire world, whether or not they are comparatively isolated such as Penzance, or more closely connected to London such as Austen's neighbourhood near Basingstoke, or the Bennet family's neighbourhood near the fictional Hertfordshire town of Meryton.<sup>63</sup> As a result of this sheer interconnectedness, when there is an assembly or a ball taking place it is a manifestation of a town or village's entire world coming together in one location. Therefore, when one's entire world congregates in such a small space, the confined nature of the room itself and the way which the people within it create the neighbourhood's gravitational centre, form the basis of why every action is significant, representing how the ballroom is as essential for maintaining social order as the sun is for maintaining life.

When one creates a union between accounts from real people through their written correspondence and accounts as presented through fiction, they contribute to forming a wider picture of whichever period in time one is exploring. *Pride and Prejudice* complements the letters of its author as well as those of Catharine Tremenheere because it can portray similar situations which were experienced by living people within the Regency, yet can go further into depth into difficulties with less tangible risk than letters can. The gossip of Meryton and its effects on the lives of the Bennets and the Netherfield Party can demonstrate the era's approach to social norms and their enforcement, using the author's

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<sup>63</sup> Freya Johnston, *Jane Austen: Early and Late*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), pp. 201-202.



knowledge of her own society, without the consequences of airing a family, village, or town's dirty laundry in print. In all three settings, we see Max Gluckmann's idea that 'gossip does not have isolated roles in community life, but is part of the very blood and tissue of that life', permeates clearly throughout the cases we have investigated.<sup>64</sup> Meryton, being composed of the lives of its inhabitants, exhibits how every personality within it thrives on talking about one another and that there is a distinct lack of privacy, any secret which one does keep will inevitably be known by the entire neighbourhood.

The novel, alongside the letter, demonstrates how 'novelistic language offered a world of structured relations in which language alone expressed identity', portraying the ways in which the two can be linked in order to discern the finer nuances of whatever is being sought after.<sup>65</sup> In our case, we can see what perspective people took in the Regency towards socially awkward, or even unacceptable, behaviour through the way in which Elizabeth Bennet navigates situations of embarrassment or shame at the Meryton Assembly and Netherfield Ball. As we are meant to sympathise with her it gives us a lens into how Austen perceived her world, viewing it from the perspective of a fictional young woman of the Regency written by the hand of a living young woman of the Regency. That potent combination gives us nearly a two-fold glimpse into life at the turn of the nineteenth-century. When we home further in on the Meryton Assembly and Netherfield Ball, we can see a manifestation of how Austen understood they functioned through the establishment of social dynamics and the further maintenance of them.

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<sup>64</sup> Max Gluckman, 'Papers in Honor of Melville J. Herskovits: Gossip and Scandal', *Current Anthropology*, 4.3 (1963), 307-316, (p. 308).

<sup>65</sup> Barbara M. Benedict, 'Recent Studies in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 42.3 (2002), 619-664, (p. 622).

Therefore, in conclusion, through analysing the accounts of Catharine Tremenheere and Jane Austen of their experience at assemblies and private balls alongside those present within *Pride and Prejudice*, we can see that the ballroom indeed acted as a place where the gentry of a neighbourhood would come together and scrutinise the behaviour of every individual within their small community. This trial by jury, masquerading as a ball, collected its evidence through the neighbourhood's gossip networks assembling in one confined location and, importantly, talking to one another. While the ballroom acted as space where current and old gossip could be spoken about, it also provided an area where performances of behaviour could create new gossip from how the defendants and plaintiffs presented their cases before the rooms via their behaviour. Legal metaphors aside, the public forum which the ballroom represented to rural communities could be where reputations are broken or made. We witness it through Catharine Tremenheere's descriptions of the Prideauxs and Rebows alongside the revelation of strangers at the Penzance Assembly Rooms and the ill-fated love Miss L. Hichens felt for Captain Nap being put down at a birthday ball, Austen's descriptions of her behaviour with Tom Lefroy at a ball near Steventon, and her portrayals of the Meryton Assembly in tandem with the Netherfield Ball. As we see through both mediums of expression, being the novel and the letter, small actions in Mr Darcy's idea of a confined and unvarying society each carried an intense weight of significance, as one mistake could take a long time to rectify, if at all. Sir William Lucas, in saying 'there is nothing like dancing after all. I consider it as one of the first refinements of

polished societies', missed one crucial point: the first refinement of polished societies, rather than dancing, may in fact be gossip.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2016), p. 40.

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