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WEEKEND BREAK



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WRITER EXPLORES BEING A LADY IN REGENCY ENGLAND

By MURIEL JENSEN
For The Astorian

The danger of doing research is that it's hard to stop.

Caught up in finding all the things I wanted to know in order to set a romance novel in the Regency Period (1811-1820) — think Jane Austen's classic novel, "Pride and Prejudice" — I learned that a woman's behavior was so stifled, I wasn't sure I could create such a woman. Until I remembered that a character who does the unexpected is always where the story is.



It is fun that the rigid manners and rules of the period lend themselves to forced engagements and marriages, scandals, ruined reputations, parlor farces and all the things that challenge romance.

These are some of the rules women had to follow to be considered respectable:

Stand straight and walk tall

A woman's every movement was judged by polite society, including how she walked — even how she stood still. Movement had to be graceful, easy and elegant.

For perfect posture, many women used a backboard — a single piece of wood that ran up her back and was tied with leather straps to keep it in place. Along with rigid bodices and corsets, the backboard would have made it difficult to move, much less slouch.

Don't talk like a man

A woman had to walk a fine line between being courteous, without being too familiar or, heaven forbid, flirtatious. She was expected to treat friends and strangers alike with courteous dignity at all times. Expressing an opinion was discouraged, and her conversation could be amusing as long as she didn't laugh out loud.

Do faint if the situation calls for it

The shock of a crude or vulgar comment could cause a woman to faint — a perfectly acceptable response. She would then be led to a fainting couch and someone would pass a small jar of vapors under her nose. "Poor nerves" were considered a normal reaction to stress.

In defense of the Regency woman, we have to imagine that those backboards and corsets must have caused her to feel light-headed, and she grew up stifled by rules and unable to ever assert her independence. It's no wonder she often fainted or sometimes behaved in a childlike way.

Don't be alone in the company of a man

The simple distillation of this rule is "Don't!" An unmarried woman under the age of 30 was never to be seen in the company of a man without a chaperone present. Even to conduct business, a woman could not go to a man's office without being accompanied.

She also couldn't go out alone — even to go shopping. She had to be accompanied by another woman, a male relative or a servant. She could walk to church on Sunday morning or take an early morning constitutional around the block. Makes one wonder how much hanky-panky might have occurred on Sunday morning, or on a walk around the block.

Wait to be introduced to someone

Introductions were complicated and ignoring the rules was a serious breach of etiquette. Introductions between members of the opposite sex were usually made by elderly, respected matrons, mothers and clergy. A couple had to be introduced before they could interact socially. A man could not be called by his first name, but by his family name, or his title, if he had one. When introduced, the lady always gave an abbreviated curtsy, and the gentleman, a modest bow.

Don't dance with the same man more than twice

There was no such thing as a Ladies' Choice. The man did all the asking, and only if he'd been formally introduced to the lady.

One dance was to be expected. Two dances suggested the gentleman wanted to know the lady better. Three dances would indicate the lady was being overly familiar, which might harm her reputation.

Keep your hands to yourself

As you can imagine, in this rule-infested society, touching was to be avoided. Even a man and a woman shaking hands suggested the woman was too familiar. Ladies were permitted to squeeze the hand of a man to whom they'd been introduced, but were warned

against excessive displays of affection.

A man could place a shawl around a lady's shoulders, help her off a horse, and she could offer her hand for a kiss. Otherwise, it was hands off.

Do keep quiet about any extramarital affairs

In view of all that's gone before regarding rules, this last one strikes me as hilarious. Apparently, all the rules about dancing and touching weren't as effective as intended. And so much energy was spent on appearances, there seemed little judgment left for morality.

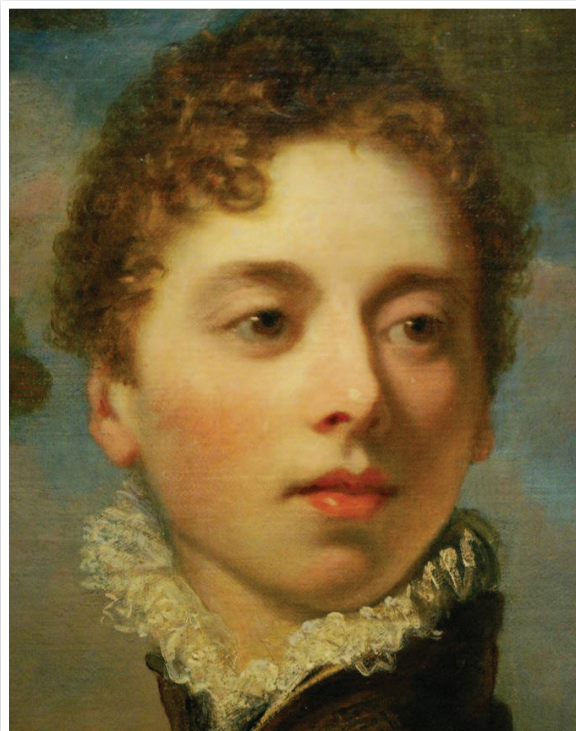
A man was advised to keep his extracurricular activities completely separate from his marriage. It was ungentlemanly to bring scandal upon his wife.

A lady could take a lover, as long as she had given birth (ideally, to two children — the classic "heir and a spare") and she was discreet.

Again, in the Regency woman's — and man's — defense, so many marriages at that time were struck to gain money, land or title that maybe their search for love is understandable if not acceptable.

So, I've created a character who flouts the rules. No heroine of mine is going to wear a backboard, have to stifle laughter, withhold opinions or displays of affection. The simple truth is that the female whose behavior is womanly, rather than lady-like, is so much better equipped to deal with life — and love.

Muriel Jensen of Astoria wrote for *Harlequin* from 1984 until her recent retirement. She's published 93 books in the *American Romance* line, *Superromance* and *Harlequin Historicals*.



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