

Getting Ready for the Ball: Jane Austen's Regency Era

by Linore Rose Burkard



Love those elegant scenes of Regency Balls in ***Pride and Prejudice***? What about the glam hair-dos, the sparkling jewels and modish accessories? How did the ladies back then get themselves ready beforehand? How long did it take? Read on for a glimpse of one young lady's preparations for just such a ball, and see for yourself. (Hint: it wasn't fast, cheap, or easy!)



Left: **Getting Ready for the Ball?**
Keira Knightley and Rosamund Pilcher in, ***Pride and Prejudice***.

If you are a woman and attended a High School prom (here in the States), you can easily imagine the sort of feeling a young regency miss would have before her first ball. Perhaps before each and every succeeding one, too!

For the Bennet girls, a ball was especially exciting, for it wasn't something that took place often near Longbourne. Prior notice of the event was essential so that ladies and gentlemen had enough time to prepare for it. Which brings us back to our question: What sort of preparation was needed?

Essential for the event were two things:

- Proper evening wear (called "evening or full dress")
- Knowledge of how to dance the latest dances.

A third ingredient we shouldn't forget is **social etiquette**.

For this article we will discuss the first concern: Costume. But we'll include a lady's "toilette."

What to Wear. A Ball required [full dress](#), the components of which were as follows:

- A short-sleeved, low-necked gown, usually white or light-colored. The dress would naturally have an empire-waist (right beneath the bust). It could be square or round, ornamented, layered, embroidered, frilled with lace, etc.
- A pair of genteel "slippers" for the feet, often made of satin, silk or



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- some other light material
- Implicit beneath was proper underclothing, such as a [chemise](#), [stays](#), and perhaps a petticoat, as well as stockings.
- Hair done up in a modish style, ornamented, or braided, or bearing an elegant tiara or [headdress](#) or ribbons
- Jewellery was appropriate here, if not actually required. Ladies commonly wore necklaces, bracelets, armlets, “ear-rings,” brooches, tiaras, or, for royals, coronets; Not to mention other jeweled hair ornaments, fans, lorgnettes, or seals. Rings were often worn over the gloves, so they would be seen.
- A pair of ball-room gloves, three-quarter length (past the elbow) should be worn.



Left: The Empress Josephine in a very fancy evening gown with accessories

Now that we know what a lady needed to wear to a ball, let us move on to watching her at her “toilette.” The following is an excerpt from my Regency Inspirational Romance, [Before the Season Ends](#). Ariana Forsythe is getting ready for an evening party at which there will be dancing.

In other words, a ball! Here is our closeup look at the rigors of her preparations:

At length Mrs. Bentley sought out Ariana to direct her remaining hours in preparations for the ball that night. It seemed outlandish, but she insisted Ariana soak in a hot tub, and then quickly into and out of a cold one. She called this “polishing the skin.”

Harrietta, the lady’s maid, then took over, trimming the nails on Ariana's feet and hands, and supplying her with an enormous array of vials and lotions, perfumes and powders and other solutions. Some were for her face and neck, others for her hands, elbows, and even her feet.

Later Ariana was allowed a small meal, followed by tea. Then, to her surprise, Mrs. Bentley announced it was time to “earnestly prepare for the evening.”

Ariana had to wonder what they had been doing all along, if not earnestly preparing for

[Note that drawing a bath in those days bears little resemblance to the task, today. The water had to be heated first, and then laboriously carried in bucketfuls up the stairs to the bedchamber or dressing room until the tub was filled. A simple tub bath, in short, was never simple.]

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the evening!

They fussed over her hair, her chemise, her stockings, her gown. Mrs. Bentley had insisted upon a small corset, or stays. Only wantons, she declared, did without them. But now she decided it needed to be tightened, and the gown was promptly removed; the stays were adjusted, more so than her mama had ever insisted upon, and Ariana felt sure she would have to adjust her breathing as well.

[The lady's maid might also have put the lady's hair into "papers" hours earlier—papers being the Regency equivalent of hair rollers. In addition, she would take out the papers, artfully leaving curls hanging about the face, and also braid, comb and coax other portions of a lady's hair into an acceptable style. She would help put pins, jewellery, or other manner of headwear in place for an elegant look to complete the regency belle's evening ensemble.

They pulled the gown carefully back over Ariana's head and arms and smoothed it into place.

By the time the two women had finished pulling, pinching, poking and pressing, Ariana felt more than ready to face the *Paragon*. Her hair was coifed elegantly atop her head, with curled tendrils about her face. (Ariana wished she had jet black hair, but Mama said her lighter tresses matched the light in her eyes, and indeed, this night her words rang true.) She was a picture of sparkling, beauteous youth.

Still, Mrs. Bentley insisted upon loaning her a matching set of jewels consisting of a necklace, earrings, brooch and bracelet. And, as a last dignifying element, a tiara: a delicate, lightly embellished headpiece, which was placed gingerly over her head and fastened into place with pins.

When at last she stood quietly resplendent in a pale pink gown of satin and net, with elegant white gloves that reached past her elbows and pale pink satin slippers upon her feet, even Mrs. Bentley had to smile. "You do me credit, my gel," she said, almost affectionately. "Even Mornay will be smitten, I daresay, eh, Harrietta?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" breathed Harrietta, fully as pleased with the way Ariana had turned out as her mistress. "So tall and strikin' as miss is, just like a princess!" Ariana's aunt smiled. "I thought at first you were too tall," she admitted, "but it turns out that 'tall' can be 'statuesque' as well!" Ariana was bustled out of the room and downstairs, to wait for Mr. Mornay in the parlour."

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Excerpt taken from, [Before the Season Ends](#), a Regency Inspirational Romance.



The Netherfield Ball (*Pride and Prejudice* 1995 BBC)

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[Linore Rose Burkard](#) is a serious watcher of period films, a Janeite, and hopeless romantic. An award winning author best known for Inspirational Regency Romance, her first book opened the genre for the CBA. Besides historical romance, Linore writes contemporary suspense (*The Pulse Effex Series*, as L.R. Burkard), contemporary romance (*Falling In*), and romantic short stories. Linore has a *magna cum laude* English Lit. degree from CUNY which she earned while taking herself far too seriously. She now resides in Ohio with her husband and family, where she turns her youthful angst into character or humor-driven plots.



"Preparing for the Ball"

Charles Haigh-Wood, 1896

Note about the painting to the right: During the Victorian era, Regency scenes became popular. While not strictly historical in all details, this painting is close enough.

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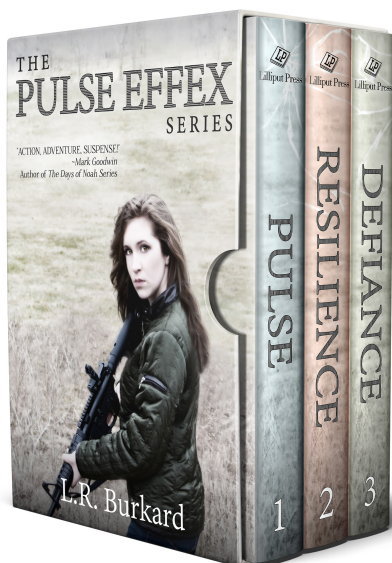
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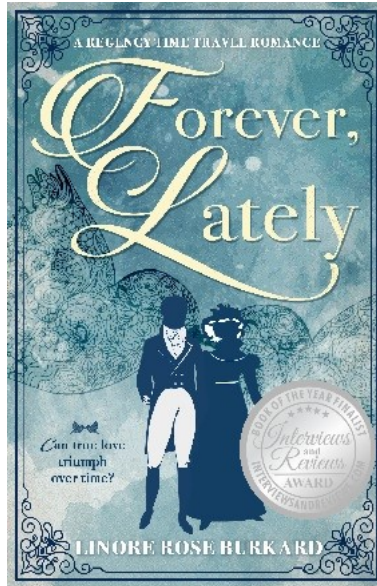
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