

On Common Ground 3: John Playford and the English Dancing Master, 1651
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CIRCLING THE SQUARE

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If the proof of a pudding is in the eating, the proof of a country dance lies, for many of us, in the satisfaction of dancing it. But it can also lie in the watching. This visual satisfaction is particularly relevant when considering the *Country Dances* of Thomas Bray, dancer and dancing master, which were published in 1699. This paper will attempt to analyse some of the figures utilized by this extraordinary choreographer in his country dances and to show how he extends what may be regarded as the norm into something more visually exciting. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Karen Morgan and Dennis Edwards, members of Bath Minuet Company, and Valerie and Ian Webster, Playford dancers, all of them also members of my renaissance dance group, Rostibolli, who provided the visual element at the Conference by realizing the four dances specifically dealt with in this paper.

It is worth noting that, in many a ballroom from the renaissance period onwards, non-dancing spectators often sat on the raised benches that lined the sides of the hall. Onlookers in such an elevated position must have enjoyed a clear view of the floor patterns described by the dancers. For them, as for us when we sit in the Grand Circle or even in the balcony of a theatre, viewing from above frequently revealed aspects of a dance which may be conceptually perceived but seldom fully appreciated by those at floor level. As a man of the theatre, Bray was undoubtedly aware of this dimension and clearly he catered for his audience at all levels. Most of his dances can be viewed from almost any angle with thoroughly satisfying results.

THOMAS BRAY

Little is known of Bray, the man, other than the fact that, from 1689, he was a dancer with the United Company, working at Drury Lane and Dorset Garden Theatres. There he worked with Josias Priest whom he subsequently replaced as dancing master in 1693. Two years later, he moved to the Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre with Thomas Betterton's new company. In all these theatres, Bray worked with professional dancers, many of them from France. His wonderful legacy to us is a small book of twenty country dances, published in 1699.

Many of the dances use music from productions staged at the theatres where Bray was working. There is, therefore, always a possibility that they may have been created for, and used as, the country dance often performed at the end of the entertainment. Most of them are markedly different from the average country dance of the period – several of them, without doubt, relatively complicated! If some were indeed performed on stage, Bray's ability to expand dances both vertically and horizontally must have provided admirable viewing from all parts of the theatre.

THE LAST OF TWENTY

Bray's one minuet country dance provides several fine examples of visual excellence. It includes three figures worthy of mention, the first being an elaborate and decorated example of corners crossing; it also provides the challenging feature of a circle danced as an enlarged back ring for four; and it demonstrates Bray's exceptional ability to 'circle the square'

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A Minuet Country Dance, call'd the laft of Twenty.

THe 1st. Man and Wo. crofs over with their backs to each other, in three Minuett steps to each others place, and turn to the left Hand with their Faces in, the 2^d. cu. do the fame at the same time, 1st. Man and 2^d. Wo. chang places with the right Hand, and turn to the left in three Minuett steps, the 1st. Wo. and 2^d. Man go half round at the same time, with their left Hand to the other cu. The fame again, only, the 1st. Wo. and 2^d. Man change places with the right Hand, and the other cu. change places as before, 3. The 1st. Man lead his Wo. up one Minuett step, and five to the left Hand round, till he comes to the 2^d. Womans place as at first; 2^d. Wo. at the same time lead her Man one step down, and five to the left Hand, to the 1st. Mans place as at first; 1st. Man and 2^d. Wo. fall back into the middle of the Room with their backs to each other, and stand all on a row crofs the Room each with his Face to his Partner 4. 1st. Man and 2^d. Wo. move three minuett steps to the left Hand, the Man up, the Wo. down, till they come on the outside, the 1st. Wo. and 2^d. Man at the same time crofs over and fall with their backs to each other as before, then each Man turn his Wo. with the right Hand the 1st. cu. below, the 2^d. cu. above 5. And so to the end,

by using a sweeping, casting figure to create a circular movement which, quite startlingly, ends by bringing the dancers into a straight line.

To look first at the decorated, corners-crossing figure. This beautiful pattern is achieved by the combination of two fairly common figures – half a Right-hand turn and a circle. By superimposing the two figures – having the First Corners dance half way round the set, as satellites, while the Second Corners make a beautiful Right-hand turn, halfway – Bray presents a highly satisfactory image. It can, ultimately, be seen to be a pre-echo of a later figure – the resolution of the two-couple back ring into a straight line. What takes this combination of figures still further out of the ordinary is Bray's instruction to the Second Corners to finish their Right-hand turn by each turning to the left hand into the other's place. The momentary circle produced by this move is magnificent (Figure 1).

Later in the dance, Bray takes that very common figure a circle and, converting it into a back ring, once again extends a basic figure beyond the norm by first separating the two couples (Figure 2). That, in itself, is visually exciting – and challenging to the dancers. But Bray goes one step further in providing visual excitement. To draw his dancers back into the set, he uses a beautiful curved shape which must be a deliberate echo of the earlier handed turn described above (Figure 3).

This pattern we can recognize (although we may be sure that Bray did not) as the basis of the more elaborate Yin and Yang symbol. Perhaps that is one reason why we find the visual representation of this circle so satisfactory. However, the S-shape would have been

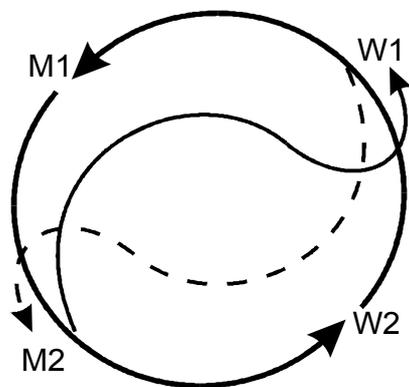


Figure 1. The right-hand turn within two satellite half circles

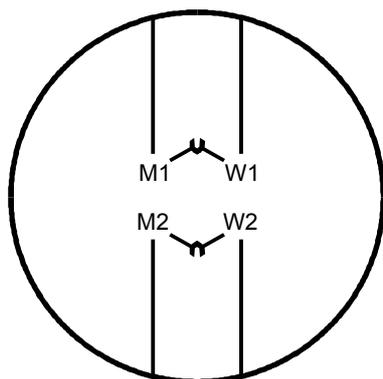


Figure 2. The lead out into back ring

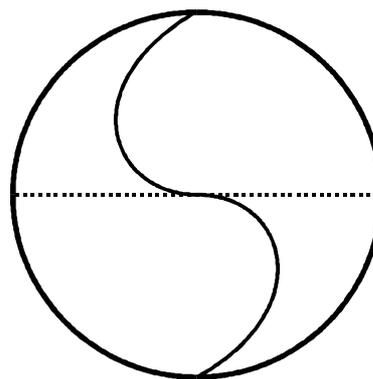


Figure 3. The draw into the straight line

readily recognized by Bray's contemporaries, both as an accustomed pattern, found not only in the formal minuet or as a quintessential aspect in much baroque art, but also in elements of horsemanship as in dressage and manège.

Bray does not stop there. Having drawn the four dancers into a straight line across the set, he proceeds to alter their positions within that line before letting both couples make a Right-hand turn out of the revised line into progressed place. The natural phrasing afforded by the momentary pause at the end of the minuet step briefly highlights each additional pattern created within the turn.

I trust that, like me, you may feel that Bray could have composed the current advertisement for Gartmore Investment Ltd. – for he too is an expert at “discovering the unexpected amongst the ordinary”, at taking well-known, standard figures and giving them that extra dimension.

The Last of Twenty uses a considerable amount of space, both horizontally, or sideways, and up and down the set, or vertically. A noticeable element in many of Bray's dances, it is one aspect which leads me to believe that several of them might have been composed specifically for performance in the theatre rather than simply for the ballroom. Of course, there are complicated ballroom dances and people then studied assiduously with their dancing masters to be able to dance them successfully. But few of those dances make quite such demanding use of the surrounding space, a feature which might not be particularly appreciated within the ballroom.

STEPS

The Last of Twenty is also a minuet and should, therefore, be danced with the specific minuet step. For historical dancers, that will present few problems. Nor should they find it difficult to use the pas de bourrée or coupé, which are the most commonly used steps in other late seventeenth and eighteenth century country dances. Other non-historical dancers are invited to try these steps and to attempt the pas de gavotte and the rigaudon, of which a somewhat oversimplified version is now current in some country dances. Many will find the reward well repays the effort as the use of these steps helps to point the phrasing of both dance and music. However, it is important that no one be deterred from trying these dances because they have not mastered the baroque step vocabulary.

Bray himself does not mention baroque steps by name. But he does, occasionally, ask the dancer to take ‘two or three steps’, sometimes adding the more precise rider ‘and close their feet’. This phraseology is similar to the wording found in the introductory ‘Table to explain the Characters’ of the Playford editions of *The Dancing Master*. Could it refer to the

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*Braye's Magott, a New Country Dance.**First Strain twice, last but once.*

THe 1st. Man goes on the outside of his Wo. till he comes betwixt the 1st. and 2^d. Wo. then take his Wo. by the left Hand, the 2^d. Wo. by the right and fall back all on a row, and lead in to the middle of the Room, 2^d. Man fall back when they fall back, and meet them in the middle of the Room right against the 1st. Man. The 1st. Man goeth the Hay with both the We. till he comes to the same place again beginning on the inside of his own Wo. First the 2^d. Man go round the other three at the same time, to the same place again with his left Hand to them. Then the 2^d. Man goes the Hay, beginning with his Wo. first, and the 1st. Man goes round with his left Hand to them, as before. *This is half the last Strain.* Then the 1st. Man takes his Wo. by both Hands and pulls her to him into the 2^d. cu. place, as at first, 2^d. Man pulls his Wo. to him at the same time, and puts her into the 1st. cu. place, as at first, then each Man turn his Wo. round with both hands. And so to the end.

double step, which is still in use in country dance today? Might it imply that, occasionally, that selfsame, basic double step is to be preferred to any other step – such as a baroque pas de bourrée? If it suggests that the dancer need not be afraid to use steps other than those in the baroque vocabulary then it is to be welcomed. These dances may be unusual, even complex at times, but they are there for all dancers to enjoy. If you have ears to hear – then listen to the music and dance!

BRAYE'S MAGOTT

Braye's Magott is a dance of compelling insistency which amply demonstrates the idea of perpetual motion. The music, in compound-triple rhythm, affords its own driving energy. For this, a pas de bourrée should be used. However, a walk will suffice – provided it is 'danced' and therefore flows with the phrasing of the music, as it should do for other dances of the period which we still enjoy – like *Hole in the Wall* or *Well Hall*.

Heys, or reels, have undoubtedly been a popular feature of dance probably since long before actual choreographies were first recorded in fifteenth century Europe. Strangely, Bray presents us with only one example – in his own *Braye's Magott*. Once again, he shows his consummate mastery of the visual by taking the standard hey and “discovering the unexpected”. In the first place, he makes the hey change sides or cross over the set. This, in itself, is not an unusual feature but Bray's variant is to have the two men in turn lead the hey from the middle position of the threesome – First Man being on the ladies' side of the set, Second Man on his own side. He then achieves the crossover by having the end dancers, the ladies,

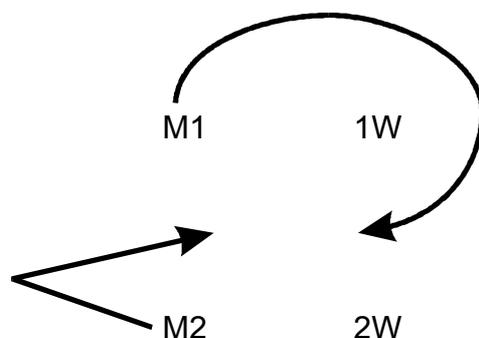


Figure 4. *Braye's Magott* - the opening move

make the crossovers from one side to the other to join the respective men. Particularly noteworthy here is the fleeting glimpse of a circle to be seen as the apparently continuous heys cross over from one side of the set to the other.

Bray then adds a stunning extra dimension by surrounding his two heys with what I have called a ‘satellite’ circle. The position of both the heys and the satellite circles is precisely indicated by Bray’s initial instruction that the 2nd Man should stand “in the middle of the Room right against the 1st Man” (Figure 4).

The quality of perpetual movement realized in this *Magott* is certainly exhilarating for the dancers. Their pace remains virtually unchanging as, after the opening two bars, all move continuously throughout. This steady flow is happily echoed by the rhythmic insistence of the music – uniquely for Bray in 9/4. This same sense of perpetual movement – so very satisfying to the modern dancer – can be found in several other dances within the collection – for example, *The Gloucester*, a gently flowing dance in Three Parts, and the energetic *Scotch Measure* – but none have quite the same intensity as *Bray’s Magott*.

Also noteworthy here is the diagonal poussette, a device Bray uses in a number of dances. Not only does the poussette flow easily out of the second hey but it has an extra, visual dimension in that, while the Second Couple perform half a push-me-pull-you poussette, the First Couple dance half a draw poussette. The diagonal movement makes a refreshing change from the standard ‘horizontal’ pattern as used by Bray in, for example, *The Wives Victory*.

LINES LONGWAYS OR ACROSS

Another of Bray’s trademarks, which we have already seen in *The Last of Twenty*, is his use of the straight line, either across the set, as there, or longways, an example of which can be seen in *The Duke of Gloucester’s March*. What is remarkable is that each time Bray brings the four dancers into a row or a line, he introduces it differently and gets them out of it by different means. For example, in *The Gloucester*, he moves the dancers in to line through handed turns; in *St. James’s House*, the couples simply meet in the middle of the set. This version is elaborated, in *Cupid’s Bridge*, by the sequential arrival of the two couples into the longways line or given a zig-zag effect by the offset meeting seen in *The Wives Victory*. *Short and Sweet* develops a decorated form of siding, the dancers meeting and casting, rather than falling, back to place.

In *The Parson’s Cap*, Bray offers yet another interesting variation to this theme when he asks the dancers to cross over, passing left shoulders, and then turn back to the left hand to meet ‘R shoulders to each other ... longways of the Room’. This move creates a pattern very similar to the crossover which occurs at the end of *The Lovers Luck*.

The opening move of *The Scotch Measure* uses a lively cross over and cast to come into line abreast while, in *Lincoln’s Inn Garden*, neighbours take hands to move, as in a partial poussette, into a longways line. The most effective introduction is surely the back ring in *The Last of Twenty* which, as we have seen, resolves itself into a straight line across the set. No fewer than twelve of Bray’s dances use some form of this figure.

To get the dancers out of the line again, Bray uses a variety of moves – small turns, small casts, or the larger, arcing casts seen in *The Last of Twenty*. Most innovative is the sequence in *St. James’s House* where the four dancers, standing side by side longways, cast – quickly, says Bray – tightly around their partners, effectively moving the line down the room, before they make a Right-hand turn into progressed place.

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The Lovers Luck, a New Country Dance.

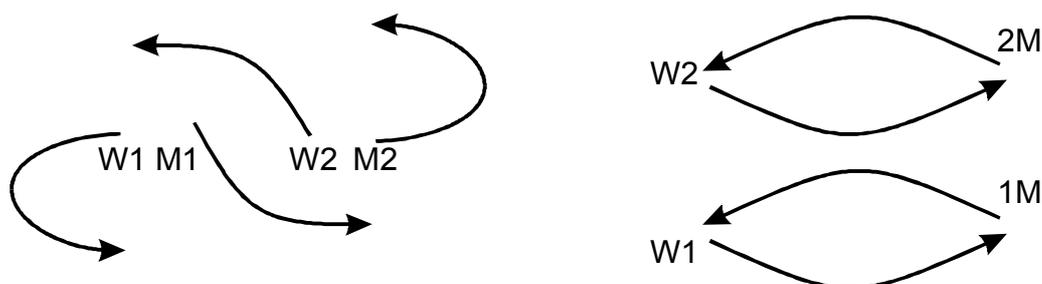
THe 1st. Man turn his Wo. with his right Hand, and fall betwixt the 2^d. cu. with his Face to his Wo. and his Wo. fall from him at the same time; 1st. Man turn the 2^d. Wo. with the left Hand, till he comes to the middle of the Room above, his Wo. turns the 2^d. Man at the same time with the left Hand, till she comes into the middle of the Room below, then 1st. Man and 1st. Wo. go round each other to the left Hand, till they come to their places as at first, and then cast off. The 2^d. cu. do the same after them. Then 1st. cu. lead up, 2^d. cu. lead down, and all turn S. then back again and turn S. then each Man turn his Wo. round with the right Hand. 1st. The Wo. cast off to the right Hand to the 2^d. Mans place, the 2^d. Man cast up to the 1st. Womans place at the same time, the other cu. following their own Partners till they come all on a row, the 1st. Man and 2^d. Wo. with their backs to each other, then all four turn to the left Hand, 1st. cu. down, 2^d. cu. up, and each Man cross over with his own. And so to the end.

THE LOVERS LUCK

We have seen a number of moments in which Bray effectively “circles the square” – taking the four dancers of the duple minor set and moving them, by different paths, from their standard positions into another position. *The Lovers Luck* affords a fine example of this as Bray, once again, achieves startling variety in pattern. After a fairly standard moment in which the two couples lead up or down and back again, Bray moves them into a straight line with a superb elongated circling move. This elongated circle is then both echoed and varied as the four dancers move out of that line into progressed places. There is a fleeting, and quite stunning, visual impression when the set is momentarily improper (Figure 5). This gently flowing dance also contains a fine example of what is now called a gipsy.

CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

Mention must be made of one other outstanding figure which Bray uses to great effect: that is, his ability to create concentric circles as dancers follow circular tracks in opposite directions. These occur, in different guises, in no less than six of the dances. *The Last of Twenty* saw one fine example; *The Wives Victory* contains a miniature instance of the same turn. The version of *Rosamond's Pond* which many of us have learnt from Jørgen Schou-Pedersen affords a beautiful example with the same twist at the end, as the dancers turn single in the reverse direction, as in *The Last of Twenty*. Bray's *Magott* offers perhaps the most visually exciting version as the ‘satellite’ gentlemen, in turn, completely encircle the two heys.

Figure 5. Crossover in *The Lovers Luck*

DUPLE MINOR FORMATION

All the dances in Bray's collection are in Longways, Duple Minor formation. All, bar two, are in the normal two-part structure: generally, though not always, accompanied by music written in standard 8-bar phrases. Yet each dance stands alone, both the music and the choreography markedly different in character and style from that of its fellows. Clearly on its own is the stately minuet, *The Last of Twenty*. Only four other dances are in triple rhythm: *Lincoln's Inn Garden* and the unusual *Cupid's Bridge*, both of which stand in fine contrast to the driving insistence of *Bray's Magott*, itself so unlike the gentle mood of *The Lovers Luck*. A further five dances are in compound-duple rhythm, three of them quite brisk, the others somewhat more relaxed in character.

Ten of Bray's twenty dances, however, are in his preferred duple rhythm or common time. Here, again, there is tremendous variety in character – from the rousing vitality of *The Scotch Measure* to the gentle tumbling quavers of *Bartlett House*, both quite distinct from the jovial, martial quality of *The Duke of Gloucester's March* which is undoubtedly the main dedicatory dance.

We might also assume that Bray was of an essentially happy nature since thirteen of his twenty dances are in a major key, most frequently B flat major. Yet some of the most exquisite melodies are in minor keys. Were they composed by Bray? I should mention that Bray used several pieces of music by well-known composers, among them one by Jeremiah Clarke and three by Purcell, to both of whom he failed to acknowledge his debt.

THE DUKE OF GLOUCESTER'S MARCH

Bray's small volume was dedicated to the then ten year old Prince William, Duke of Gloucester, a frail child but one more interested in playing at soldiers than dancing. From an early age, the boy had been more interested in military matters than in learning to dance. He spent many happy hours in the grounds of Campden House drilling his personal private 'Kensington army' of fellow youngsters, all happily equipped with paper hats and wooden swords. At the age of seven, William was installed as a Knight of the Garter. Among the dances which Bray undoubtedly composed in honour of the young prince are *The Gloucester* and *The Duke of Gloucester's March*.

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The Duke of Gloucester's March, a New Country Dance.

THe First Man and second Woman turn to their right Hand and move to the wall two or three steps, and close their feet; 1st. Wo. and 2^d. Man each follow their own Partner at the same time, and close their feet; then 1st. Wo. and 2^d. Man turn both to the left Hand round and meet in the middle of the room with their backs to each other, the 1st. Man turns down to the left Hand, and takes his Wo. by both Hands, the 2^d. Wo. turns up to the left Hand at the same time, and takes her Man by both Hands, then the 1st. Man puts his Wo. back, and the 2^d. Wo. puts her Man back, 1st. cu. below, 2^d. cu. above, then each Man changing with his own . The same thing again . First Wo. calls off to the 2^d. Man's place, and 2^d. Man calls up to the 1st. Wo. place, the other cu. following their Partners, at the same time to each others place, the same thing back again, only the 1st. Man call up into his own place as at first, the 2^d. Wo. calling down at the same time, the other cu. following them to their own places as at first . The 1st. Man and Wo. meet in the middle of the Room, the Man behind the Wo. and close their feet, the 2^d. cu. do the same after them, 1st. cu. lead up and cast off, 2^d. cu. lead up at the same time, and turn single from each other : And so to the end.

This dance reveals yet another aspect of Bray's 'infinite variety': on this occasion, his sense of humour. If Bray arranged a demonstration of the *March* for his young dedicatee, I might hope that the militaristic style which we have adopted would have afforded the Prince some amusement. Both dance and music seem to ask for the consistent use of a marching step. Precise about-turns, used for the 'turn to the right hand' before the moves to the wall and as a prelude to the two circles described by Bray as a cast half way round the set, partners following, also add to this martial flavour.

The dance contains several of the figures previously referred to – the sweeping circular patterns seen in our version of the opening moves, the diagonal poussette which takes the dancers out of that move and the straight line. This, as it appears in the final figure as the dancers first move forward and then cast outwards and back into progressed places, provides yet another fine example of Bray's ability to make uninhibited use of space.

As a choreographer of country dances, several of them possibly for immediate use in the theatre, Bray shows consummate skill in taking the standard figures and developing them into something beyond the ordinary. His collection of twenty dances reveal him as an absolute master of dramatic visual impact.

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