

**‘THAT AGAINE’ – AN EXPLORATION OF THE FORMULAIC SEQUENCES
IN EARLY ENGLISH COUNTRY DANCE**

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INTRODUCTION

It is, of course, right and proper to consider Playford’s 1651 publication as the beginning of something – it turned out, after all, to be but the first of many collections of country dances – but it is also the end of something: *The English Dancing Master* was the culmination of a long history going back certainly fifty years and almost certainly some twenty-five years or more before that, but about this history we know all too little. It behoves us, therefore, to examine carefully the tantalisingly few clues that we have whether these are external, such as the literary references, or internal such as the choreographic elements which make up the actual dances as we have them.

Considerable work has been done on the music, some has been done on possible associations of titles with masques, plays, and personages, but still little, if any, historical study has been made of the various choreographic elements. This must be partly due to the lack of sources of comparable dance-forms: there are no contemporary English dance manuals and masque records, for example, are notorious for their absence of specific dance choreographies. However, it is also partly due, it has to be said, to the persistence of what I call the English folk-roots theory of origins which is supported by the tendency to take the designation ‘country’ as the starting-point with attendant assumptions as to the meaning of the term in this context.

THE FORMULAIC SEQUENCES

One obvious choreographic element to consider is the well-known set of formulaic sequences because it is such a characteristic feature of the early dances and so may, like Ariadne’s thread, begin to lead us back through the labyrinth. It is these sequences which I now propose to explore. I scarcely need to remind this audience what these sequences are:

‘Leade up all a D. forwards and back, set and turne S. $\underline{\cdot}$ That againe $\underline{\cdot}$ ’

‘Sides all, set and turne single $\underline{\cdot}$ That againe $\underline{\cdot}$ ’

‘Armes all, set and turne S. $\underline{\cdot}$ That againe $\underline{\cdot}$ ’

Of the 105 dance descriptions in the first edition, 21 include the set of sequences just as they appear in *Upon a Summer’s Day*, and a further 18 have the introductory sequences without the associated set and turn single. Some 24 dances more include the set in one or other of these two formats with only minor variations. For example, in some dances the doubles are repeated and then the set and turn is repeated while in others the movement itself may be varied a little: in dances for couple facing couple, like *Heartsease*, sides and arms may be done first with partners and then with contraries, and in *Jack Pudding*, longways for six, only the first two couples lead up a double and back twice while the third couple lead up and down between them. In *The New Exchange* and *The Whish*, adjacent dances in the book, the set and turn single becomes, in the one, set and change places, and in the other set and fall back. Yet more dances include only the first sequence as an introduction, and, of course, one or other of the sequences may occur independently in the figures. The exact numbers have a tendency to change by a few every time I do the trawl depending on where I draw the line on the day between a variation so slight that the sequence remains

essentially the same thing and one sufficiently different for it to constitute a new figure. In fact, by going through the dances in this way, one can clearly see the transformation taking place of formulaic sequence into new figure so close in structure are they. Nevertheless, well over half of the total includes the set of sequences in the recognisably characteristic pattern.

STEPS

The only steps other than a slip step specified for use in the dances are those prescribed for the first of the three sequences and for set and turn single, in the case of the latter not in the dance instructions but in the explanation of the movements:

‘Set and turne single, is a single to one hand, and a single to the other, and turne single’.

A description of how to do these steps is also included:

‘A Double is foure steps forward or back, closing both feet.
A Single is two steps, closing both feete’.

It is just these two steps which constitute the fundamental step-units of Western European aristocratic dance as recorded from the fifteenth century onwards: Italian: sempio, doppio; French: simple, double; English: single, double. They were variously executed and ornamented according to the stylistic conventions of time and place, or, indeed, executed without any ornamentation at all which I take to be the meaning of the disparaging remark about ‘bare walkinge’, a comment on falling standards of dance technique among London law students in the earlier seventeenth century.

INNS OF COURT MANUSCRIPTS

By good fortune there happen to be extant a number of English manuscripts which include descriptions of some short dances employing these same step-units. The manuscripts are known collectively as The Inns of Court Manuscripts.

Dancing was a feature of life at the London Inns of Court educationally, socially, and theatrically in masque. Writing between 1464 and 1470, Sir John Fortescue, who was appointed Chief Justice in 1442, said:

‘There is both in the Inns of Court, and Inns of Chancery, a sort of academy, or gymnasium fit for persons of their station, [that is sons to persons of quality] where they learn singing, and all kinds of music, dancing and such other accomplishments and diversions, which are called revels, as are suitable to their quality, and such as are usually practised at court’.

As Playford himself suggests in his introductory address ‘To the Ingenious Reader’, Inns of Court men were accounted skilled dancers. John Chamberlain wrote about the unfortunate circumstances which caused the postponement of the masque to be presented by Inner Temple and Gray’s Inn as their contribution to the nuptial celebrations of Princess Elizabeth and the Elector Palatine in 1613 and remarked:

‘a great expectation there was that they should every way excel their competitors that went before them, both in devise, daintiness of apparel, and, above all, in dancing, wherein they are held excellent, and esteemed the properer men’.

As regards the manuscripts, for those of you who may not be familiar with them, there are seven currently known located in various collections of miscellanea held in libraries and other such repositories. Three are in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, and one each in the British Library, London, the Somerset Record Office in Taunton, the Royal College of Music, London, and the Inner Temple Records, London. Six of them were published in 1965 by J.P. Cunningham in *Dancing in the Inns of Court*, which is out of print. A new and careful transcription of the same six was published by David Wilson in 1987 and this is available from the Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society. The seventh manuscript, a later discovery, was transcribed by James Stokes and Ingrid Brainard, 1992. The manuscripts span approximately one hundred years from about 1570, and they are remarkable for two reasons. One is that they contain descriptions of a set of short dances most of which, despite some variations between manuscripts, are clearly the same over time and, moreover, are presented in a similar order. The other is that six of the manuscripts can be linked either directly, or by very strong indirect evidence, to gentlemen of the Inns of Court. The seventh can at least be associated with London by that strongest of all possible London links, John Stow.

THE MEASURES

In four of the manuscripts, the eight dances are called ‘The Olde Measures’, a designation the set had acquired by 1594, the date on the Taunton manuscript. The clear associations between the Old Measures described in these manuscripts and the Basse Dance of the fifteenth century have been noted and well rehearsed elsewhere. Suffice it to say for example, that sources of Burgundian Basse dance frequently state, after the title and before the dance itself, the number of measures making up that particular dance. In this sense, this means the number of step-sequences which were groups of different combinations of the same few basic steps including singles and doubles. Thus, Robert Coplande in his ‘...manere of dauncynge of bace daunces after the use of fraunce and other places translated out of frenche in englyffhe...’ gives:

‘La allemande, thre measures’

‘La royne, foure measures’

Incidentally, this two-page appendix to an introduction to writing and pronouncing French was ‘Imprynted at London in the Fleetestreet at the sign of the rose Garlande’ in ‘the yere of our lorde MCCCCXXI ye XXII day of Marche’. So, a passing nod to the 480th anniversary of this English publication of a tiny collection of ‘bace daunces’.

THE MEASURES AND THE COUNTRY DANCE SEQUENCES

The correspondences between the country dance sequences and the Inns of Court Measures are striking. There is a set and turn movement, for example, and in one of the dances, *The Black Almain*, this is variously described using a changing vocabulary which may be a function of differences in time or place, or both:

- set two single sides & turn a double round
- the man doe 2.s. & a.d. rounde. the woman as much
- Then all on the Women syde stand still and the men sett and turne
Then all the men stand still, and the women sett and turn

and lastly:

- set and turn single

The Somerset manuscript of 1594 describes the same movement in *The Queen's Almain* as:

‘:2: singles syde caste of a double rounde’

and in another manuscript this is:

‘to single sides face to face & turne a double round in your place’

which the second time through becomes:

‘sett to singles face to face & turn a double round in your place’

In fact, it was a description of *The Queen's Almain* from around the middle of the seventeenth century that was my Rosetta stone. The first part runs thus:

‘A Double forwards and a double back
with the left Legg turne face to face, and
sett and turne with the Left Legg
A Double forward and a double back with
the Right legg turne face to face and sett and
Turne with the right legg,’

In this instance, the dance is described as ‘A Round Measure’ and the first part followed by 4 doubles ‘round about the Hall’. Elsewhere the second part is given as 4 doubles forward. The first part, of course, you will have instantly recognised as the beginning of *Upon a Summer's Day* and all the other dances with the same introductory sequence. Much to my amusement, two of the manuscripts, apparently some thirty years apart, follow the second set and turn with 5 doubles forward and a double back. Although the fifth double constitutes the first double forward of the following sequence, five consecutive doubles forward is what you actually have to do and the writers seem to have happily noted down what they needed to know to do the dance without bothering about the underlying structure – some things don't change!

Another dance in the set, *Tinternell*, intersperses doubles forward and back with right-hand turn, left-hand turn:

‘...tacke wright handes & goe to singles & a double round in your places then
tacke the left hand & doe as much agen...’

and later:

‘...Then take your Woman by the right hand and slide to slides and a double
rounde in Armes both wayes...’

In the same manuscript the noteworthy phrase ‘rounde in Armes’ is also used for the two-hand turn in *The Old Almain*. The hand-turn sequence is found in fifteenth-century Italian repertoire both in dances for three where the middle dancer does a right-hand turn with the person on the right and a left-hand turn with the person on the left, and in dances for two, such as *Genevra*, a bassadanza by Guglielmo. In Barbara Sparti's translation:

‘... and then the man takes the right hand of the lady: and both go round with two
sempii and a doppio beginning with the left foot; and then change hands, and go
round again with two sempii and a doppio beginning with the right foot;...’

It will not have escaped your notice that I have managed to skip lightly from the first country dance sequence to the third and right over the one in the middle which is the real conundrum – ‘Sides’. A brief description in the explanatory table, preferably with diagram, would have saved much ado. As the movement is denoted in the shortest possible shorthand – in a word – and probably the most esoteric of all the terminology used in the book, I do think it is rather more significant than just a bit of a variation on meeting a double, or changing sides, or just an instruction to fall into a line. Perhaps it is connected with the characteristic Italian patterning of dancers facing in opposite directions and moving towards and away from each other on short linear pathways, sometimes ‘in galone’ or flankingly. Whatever its derivation, ‘sides’ was apparently of such currency in the potential market of the book that further explanation was deemed unnecessary. By dedicatory reference and, more to the point, the location of Playford’s shop ‘in the Inner Temple neere the Church doore’, that market undoubtedly included the Inns of Court. However, there does not seem to be a recognisable equivalent of the ‘sides’ movement in the Inns of Court Measures, twist the words how one might. This suggests to me that the country dance sequences are not necessarily derived directly from the Measures although they are so very closely akin that they must share the same dance legacy transmitted in a unique context. It is no accident that de Lauze in 1623 assigned to the English ‘les mesures & contredances’.

THE GRESLEY DANCE COLLECTION

Margaret Dean-Smith, among other commentators, remarked on the apparent associations between English country dances and earlier Italian forms. What was not available to her, nor indeed to us until very recently, was the Gresley Dance Collection transcribed and published by David Fallows in 1996. This is a manuscript collection contained in a small book in the Gresley family papers in the Derbyshire Record Office. It gives 91 dance titles, 26 dance descriptions and 13 tunes, and has been dated to 1500 give or take twenty years. The choreographies have elements of both French and Italian dance forms. There are the singles and doubles and the ‘Then ethir torne othir about’ as well as some oddly familiar, to us, English expressions such as ‘goo compas’. The compiler was one Johnes Banys and internal evidence from the notebook indicates that he was conversant with Latin as well as dancing and music and may possibly have been working in some kind of secretarial capacity to a family of standing in the neighbourhood. This, of course, is the profile of an Inns of Court man, and such a connection would also explain why the dances appear to be written as if for men only. I must stress that I have absolutely no external evidence for such a conjecture and it may be that others have now found evidence which would refute such a hypothesis. Be that as it may, here is the evidence for English dancing in the aristocratic Western European manner.

SURVIVAL

So why should fossilised fragments of earlier dance types survive on the one hand as a set programme of very short dances lasting some one hundred years and on the other as a set of three formulaic sequences embedded in quite another dance form? (It’s called dance archaeology, by the way!). In the case of the former the reason, in the well-known words of Shakespeare, was ‘state and ancientry’, a most apposite description of the measure as one might expect. Many were the occasions of ceremony at the Inns and one of these, the creation of new serjeants-at-law accompanied by a great feast and the giving of gold rings, was, in 1617, still considered a state

occasion along with coronations and the Feast of St. George. Believe it or not, the most senior serjeants present at formalities were referred to as ‘ancients’:

‘At the second call, the ancient with the white staffe in his hand advanceth forward and begynnes to lead the measures, followed first by the Barristers then the gentlemen under the Barre all according to their severall antiquities and when one measure is ended the Reader at the Cupboard calls for another and so in order’.

The Old Measures belonged to Grand Solemnities.

The genius of the English Country Dance lies in the transmutation of the 4 doubles forward of *The Queen’s Almain* into the two doubles to meet and back and two to ‘goe under the others armes’ of *Upon a Summer’s Day*. The endlessly varied and progressive figures, whilst being pleasing to both participants and onlookers, are intended first and foremost to intermingle the set of dancers. By contrast, in the introductory sequences the set moves in concert, dancers meeting only their partners or perhaps their contraries, but, with a few notable exceptions, the movements are not designed for change of place: in this group of country dances the social is firmly contained within a framework of formality. This may be partly a function of the musical structure, but such a constraint does not dictate the actual short sequences used nor the fact that they are different from each other – quite the reverse one might have thought.

THREE

Neither does it necessitate a succession of three. Of all numbers, the number 3 must be the one most open to myriad interpretations of esoteric symbolism. Somewhat more prosaically, in this context it so happens that it reflects the usual number of choreographed dances in Grand Masque when the noble masquers descend from the Scene to the dancing-place and dance before retiring once more to the Mount, or whatever, whence they had issued forth. During this proceeding, normally between the main dance and the finishing dance, the masquers dance with members of the audience according to a set format. They begin with the measures which thus provide the formal opening to the masque revels and continue with the fashionable dances of the day. In an Inner Temple Masque of 1615 after their second dance ‘The knights with the ladys dance here the old measures’ which were followed by Galliards, Corantos, Brawles, etc., and having led the ladies back to their places, they dance their last formal dance. This custom of audience participation in social dancing within the formal structure of the masque itself dates right back to the Tudor disguisings when masquers and ladies ‘daunced and commoned together, as the fashion of the Mask is’.

FINALE

So Ariadne’s thread has led us back as far as a hall of enchantment and ceremonial revels. Here we can share in the betrothal celebrations for Ferdinand and Miranda as they watch an ‘insubstantial pageant’. Iris summons first the Naiades from the brooks to the green land and then the sunburned sicklemen from the furrow to be merry:

‘Make holiday; your rye-straw hats put on,
And these fresh nymphs encounter every one
In country footing’.

‘Enter certaine Reapers (properly habited): they joyne with the Nimphes, in a gracefull dance...’

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