

## The Distorted Image of the Dancer in Eighteenth Century England

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Weaver was not the only one to claim that dancing was beneficial to one's body, be it within or without. And yet we shall see in this study how detractors of the stage, and of dance in particular, endeavoured to imprint the reverse onto the public mind. Throughout the eighteenth-century, the word "tumbler" was commonly associated with the dancer in general. This word reflected the very bad image of dancers in the public mind. The press, including pamphlets, books and theatrical reviews spread the clichés.

One of the arguments against dancers was based on moral values, and referred to technical skills, the excess of which being a display of sinful vanity. The theatrical reviews deplored this fashionable propensity to include an excessive amount of jumps in performances, thus marring the very art of dance. In reality, dancers tried to go beyond one's natural abilities via intense training and professionalising the genre. Such a phenomenon went hand in hand with a more refined and complex discipline and was not always favourably perceived. A great dancer called Antoine Pitrot was well known for his pirouettes that could last, to everyone's admiration, "a quarter of an hour". Sequences of several scores of entrechats or battements were a common display on stage, according to renowned dance pundits like Magri and Algarotti.<sup>1</sup> In the 1750s, this jumping competition among dancers must have reached a certain climax in France, for the *Mercure de France* called these types of capering rivalries the "war of entrechats".<sup>2</sup> In the *Spectator*, Ange Goudar named the eighteenth-century "the age of the caper".<sup>3</sup>

Pamphlets were written to criticise the arts, including dance. One was specifically designed to attack dancers, some of whom being all the more willing to attract as many people as possible, be it thanks to ceaseless jumps in the air. In *A Satyr against Dancing* (1702), the author laments on the degeneracy of stage dancing into mere physical prowess at the expense of the *Dulce et Utile* motto of the time: "Capering and Tumbling is now preferred to, and supplies the Place of, just and regular Dancing on our Theatres".<sup>4</sup> Ideally, and according to Horace's theory, any form of art should be pleasant – *Dulce* – but also instructive – *Utile*. In 1728 Ralph James, who had just started his literary career in London, bemoaned that "Grotesque Dances...met with a favourable Reception from all true Judges of Wit and Politeness, even where there was but little of the *Utile* mix'd with the *Dulce* ..." The old *Dulce and Utile* debate in Drama had not yet been severely dismantled and oozed into the realm of dance as the number of professional dancers increased and as its importance amidst the performing arts made it impossible to be eschewed by critics: how far can one discern the mere entertainment from the instruction? Be it *Dulce* or *Utile*, stage dancing also followed the common trends of the time, be it orientalism or simply the passion for ornaments as could be seen in any other forms of art.<sup>5</sup>

Along with authors like Swift and Fielding, who both wrote about good breeding,<sup>6</sup> Noverre and Angiolini agreed that excess and unnaturalness in dancing killed the artistic side that made dance closer to the liberal arts. "Such painful labour stifles the language of

sentiments” wrote Noverre in 1760.<sup>7</sup> He also laid considerable stress on what we would now call “safety” via adequate body training in order to avoid injuries, a corollary to the desire to “outrage nature and force it to do that which is most often beyond her strength”.<sup>8</sup> “The excessive quantity of ornaments mars all the arts and all their genres” was what Angiolini wrote a decade later. In a society where the theories of moderation, reason and naturalness prevailed, such excesses were bound to be a goldmine for critics of the genre who depicted dancers as mere caperers, hoppers or tumbler. Such mockeries can be traced right from the Restoration. Luke Channel, who had organized a dancing meeting in 1660 in Broad Street, was nicknamed “hop merchant” by an anonymous satirist.<sup>9</sup> The famous character Mr. Tip-toe or Beau Didapper in Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews* are both depicted as “hopping little figures”, very close to the general distorted image of the dancer or dancing-master.

Such images reflect a common fear of the time, that of fops and effeminacy.<sup>10</sup> Many a writer condemned effeminacy and satires about it abound in Restoration drama and continued after the moral revolution began. Dancers could not escape from such criticism. The body-control they had achieved could not be undone in everyday life. More often than not, their manners were more refined than many a common gentleman as they had to teach manner and etiquette and become a model for wealthy young men and women. As Rawson suggests in his article on the relationship between Gentlemen and Dancing-Masters, pundits in manners and taste “specifically excluded dancing like a dancing-master. Neither the professional expertise, nor the elaborate foppishness, would do for a gentleman”<sup>11</sup> for a dancing master was very often associated with fops in general. A satirical play on fops entitled *Kensington Gardens* (written by John Leigh – a great actor of Lincoln’s Inn Fields<sup>12</sup>) described one of its main characters, Mr. Varnish as “A Woman in Masquerade, a cringing, affected self-conceited Fop; with no more brains than a Dancing-master”.<sup>13</sup>

Effeminacy was “about unbridled passion, display, vanity and private interests rather than public duty”.<sup>14</sup> Some suggested that modern life was the cause of such a phenomenon, others, that playhouses, balls, concert halls and picture galleries were contributing to the effeminacy of gentlemen because these were venues where men and women met and mingled, and consequently where the fair sex could influence men’s manners, made them less manly and more willing to seduce. Hogarth’s *The Laughing Audience* expressed the fear of the “fop peril”, suggesting that playhouses were probably the best place to seduce a young Defoe’s Betty or a Richardson’s Clarissa. The audience, being too busy laughing at what is going on in front of them, is distracted from what is happening just nearby, and consequently from their individual duty to see to it that moral values are being respected in public. Places like Bath and its famous dance halls were just as well known for gender-mixing of all kinds, not all of these being morally good and pious, as was narrated in Defoe’s novel, *Mol Flanders*.

In a satire of the dancing-master in general, foppishness is one of the first insults inflicted onto the dancer:

But see the next, a Fop in Scarlet Hue,  
 Struts forth in Velvet, for your nearer view:  
 The dangling Fringe bedecks the Waistecoat Fine,  
 And Spangling Gemms the pretty Fingers bind.  
 (.....)  
 Big with the Honours, and the Homage paid  
 By Fidlers, Children, and by *Mol* his Maid ;

(.....)

Proud of himself, the Fop assumes an Air,  
With Men of Merit, Merit durst compare.  
His Merit ! known to ev'ry Whore in Town,  
And is indeed peculiarly his own.<sup>15</sup>

Drury Lane did not only allude to Weaver's dance theatre, it was also that of whores. The geographical closeness of mols (or prostitutes) and dancers made it easy for any critic to weld them together for the public mind to swallow. The image of the dancer or dancing-master both became distorted into that of a vain fop wallowing in lust and mixing with whores in Drury Lane. Both had in common their place of work and were seen by the population as creators of illusion. Both used their own body for their art, an object of representation, while musicians or painters could hide behind their instrument or canvas respectively and separate the art from the artist. Dancers did use costumes and masks to become someone else, a *Harlequin* a *Mars* or a *Venus*, but the confusion between the man or woman and the dancer most commonly remained. Artificiality in places like Drury Lane or Lincoln's Inns Fields is well rendered in Swift's poem on Corinna the mol:

Corinna, pride of Drury Lane,  
For whom no shepherd sighed in vain;  
....  
Takes off her artificial hair:  
Now, picking out a crystal eye,  
She wipes it clean, and lays it by  
Her eyebrows from a mouse's hide,  
Stuck on with art on either side,  
Pulls off with care, and first displays 'em,  
Then in a play-book smoothly lays 'em.<sup>16</sup>

The prop that Corinna uses to maintain her beauty against the natural passage of time – her mercury treatment against the pox being set aside – is very much akin to the function of the dancer's costumes and masks, sometimes used to hide the grimaces their faces betrayed when their dancing was physically too demanding.<sup>17</sup> It is probably not haphazardly that Swift chose a "play-book" to put her eye-brows in, alluding to the stage. It is also very probable that the word "shepherd" hinted at dancers of pantomimes. Besides, their dancing men and women's roles regardless of their sex, made them invariably close to those mollies or transvestites, other scapegoats of the eighteenth-century society. As a consequence, the stage was also considered as a place unfit for women of proper breeding, not just to Puritans, the usual stage distracters.<sup>18</sup> Two French dancers living in London, Catherine Roland and Miss Poitier were deemed morally dangerous, and so were many other "shepherd muses". Both these female dancers razed to the ground the rules of hiding one's shameful and sinful body, according to the medieval Christian doctrine, and were severely criticised in the *Theatrical review* and in a private letter to the *Grub-street Journal*.<sup>19</sup> These two anecdotes did anything but contribute to the distorted representation of the dancer.

The foreign nationality of dancers was also a source for criticism. Many dancing-masters in London were either French or Italian, in line with the enthusiasm for French or Italian art as the grand tour became ever more popular among gentlemen. French dancers capitalised on the fame of the *Academie*, which had institutionalised dance in France, to teach and

dance in London. Catherine Roland and Miss Poitier surfed on the crest of the wave too. Such a phenomenon triggered both enthusiasm and criticism alike. British artists like Hogarth, Constable and many others from the Royal Academy developed an English theory of art. Weaver followed, as connoisseurs of dance in Britain started to drive away from the very formal traditions of the *Academie* towards a more British “artful carelessness”.<sup>20</sup>

This development towards a British art and the repeated wars with France culminating with the French Revolution had an obvious impact on the world of dance. In 1755, the *Chinese Festival* directed by David Garrick turned out to be a complete failure. This ballet was supposed to attract the audience by having European dancers from France starring in it. Instead, it drew the former from the stage because of the excessive amount of foreign artists invited for the occasion.<sup>21</sup> The Famous French dancer Jean Balon – nicknamed “Balloon” in London – is certainly the French dancing-master alluded to in *Humorous and diverting dialogues between Monsieur Baboon, a French Dancing-Master, (but lately come over) and Jack Tar, an English Sailor* published the same year of the *Chinese Festival* performance.<sup>22</sup> In this satirical text, the representation of the dancing-master becomes distorted into an object of propaganda. All the clichés about France and Britain so admirably depicted by James Gilray are therein encapsulated, ranging from the competition between France and Britain to maintain a sustainable political and economic hegemony over Europe and beyond, to the influence of French manners and taste into everyday life within English genteel society.

## Conclusion

Such criticism led to a response on the part of dancers to quell such representations. Dance pundits like John Weaver along with James Ralph entered the pamphlet war to defend the world of dance. The tactics used by its defenders and detractors were very close to those used in the “Battle of the Books” in the 1690s between the Ancients and the Moderns. In the pamphlet war on dance, some classic authors condemned the dance while others wrote eulogies about it. Effeminacy and whores were excluded from the debate. The author of the *Dancing-Master, a Satyr* was acutely aware of the way dancers tried to legitimate their art through proper historical sources: “The *Greek* and *Latin* Authors are his Friends, / And always ready at his Finger’s Ends”<sup>23</sup> Ralph suggested that if the *Utile* had been forgotten in dance it is because of the Audience, the taste of her ‘Majesty the Mob’.<sup>24</sup> Dance was considered to be a way “to Please the Mob and silence the Ass”.<sup>25</sup> Other arguments were used to restore a proper image of the dancer and dancing schools. Ralph used two reasons in order to rehabilitate dance as a useful art for a modern trade society. The first one is that dance can help students understand mathematics, making it more intelligible due to its concrete use of space. The second reason was the use of body language – dance – would increase the kinaesthetic comfort of the tradesman in general who had to deal amidst the hustle and bustle of the City of London or of the noisy ports. Tradesmen could then do a step to the side or do a *balancé* to deal with a fellow merchant. Both theories evoke the imaginary world of Laputa in *Gulliver’s Travels* where mathematics and music are intertwined and where statesmen try to legitimise the silencing of their subjects by judging such a policy conducive to their health. As one can see even the defenders of the world of dance felt the need to distort the image of the dancer so as to counter the distortion their detractors had created. It will certainly take time for us to find the other side of the looking glass reflecting the “most fleeting ephemeron of all the arts”.<sup>26</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. 314.
- <sup>2</sup> *Mercure de France* June 1755, 2, 199, cited in Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. 314.
- <sup>3</sup> *The Spectator* 1712, (24 Mar.).
- <sup>4</sup> *A Satyr against Dancing*, 1702, p. 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. 64.
- <sup>6</sup> Swift, Jonathan. "Miscellanies: or Essays Literary, Political, and Moral. By the Reverend Dr. Jonathan Swift." Glasgow, 1770. 223–34 ; Fielding mentions Tom Jones as being of "natural but not artificial breeding" and "natural gallant and good nature" Fielding, Henry. *The History of Tom Jones a Foundling*. Vol. 1 and 2. 3 vols. London, 1775, 308 and 132 respectively.
- <sup>7</sup> Noverre, Jean-George. *Lettres sur la Danse, et sur les Ballets*. Stuttgart: Aimé Delaroché, 1760, pp. 283–84, cited in Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. 63.
- <sup>8</sup> Noverre, 325, cited in Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. 60.
- <sup>9</sup> "Wether Luke Cheynell or Castleton (the two Hop Merchants) reach the greater number of wenches to dance the shaking of the sheers?" *Select City Queries*, 1660, p.5.
- <sup>10</sup> Heilman, Robert B. "Some Fops and Some Versions of Foppery." *ELH*, 1982, 49 (2): 363–95.
- <sup>11</sup> Rawson, C. J. *Henry Fielding and the Augustan Ideal under Stress. Nature's Dance of Death and other Studies*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p.11.
- <sup>12</sup> Senelick, Laurence "Mollies or Men of Mode? Sodomy and the Eighteenth-Century London Stage." *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 1990, 1 (1), 33–67.
- <sup>13</sup> Leigh, Mr. (John). *Kensington-Gardens; or, the pretenders: a comedy. As it is acted by His Majesty's servants*. 2nd ed. London, 1720, p. 7.
- <sup>14</sup> John Brewer, *The pleasure of the imagination*, pp. 80–81.
- <sup>15</sup> *The Dancing-Master, a Satyr*. London, 1722, pp. 10–11.
- <sup>16</sup> Swift, Jonathan. *A beautiful young nymph going to bed. ... To which are added Strephon and Chloe. And Cassinus and Peter*. London, 1734, pp. 3–4.
- <sup>17</sup> Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. 61.
- <sup>18</sup> Morgan, Edmund S. "Puritan Hostility to the Theatre." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 1966, 110 (1), p. 340–47.
- <sup>19</sup> Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. 228–29.
- <sup>20</sup> Fletcher, Ifan K. *Essays on the Theory and Practice of Theatrical Dancing in England, 1660–1740*. New York Public Library, 1960, p. 14.
- <sup>21</sup> Brewer, John. *The Pleasure of the Imagination*, p. 330.
- <sup>22</sup> The word "baboon" could also refer to Louis XIV de Bourbon. See, Arbuthnot, John. *John Bull in his senses: being the second part of Law is a bottomless-pit*. London, 1712.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Dancing-Master, a Satyr*. London, 1722, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup> cf. Reason, Mr., *A letter from Mr. Reason, to the high and mighty Prince the Mob*. Edinburgh, 1706.

<sup>25</sup> *A Satyr against Dancing*. London, 1722.

<sup>26</sup> Fairfax, Edmund. *The Style of Eighteenth-Century Ballet*. Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2003, p. vii.