

Dancing for King and Country: the Jacobean Court Dancer

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With no surviving choreographies for the Jacobean court, how can we characterise the dances of display for this milieu and at this time? Were the English particularly negligent towards their dance repertoire or was there a lack of significant choreography to record? In this paper, I will seek to answer these questions through exploration of the nature of dancing at the Jacobean court, and identify attitudes to performance as far as they can be discerned from the records for dancing in early seventeenth century England.

My discussion will commence with a definition of the court dancer, then a description of the arena of performance. Following an overview of the Jacobean court repertoire, I will identify the international and national relevance of the dances. Finally, I will seek to solve the conundrum of the absence of recorded choreographies for the Jacobean court.

My use of the term 'court dancer' is deliberate, and part of a campaign to avoid the problems created by using the modern words 'amateur' and 'professional'. 'Amateur' is invariably taken to mean limited skill, even self-indulgent display, in contrast to the virtuosity and practised seriousness of today's 'professional', causing misleading impressions of the achievement of the court performer. Court dancers approached dancing with the same assiduity associated with professionalism: their learning commenced from an early age; coaching came from the best masters; personal skills were maintained by frequent practice and under constant scrutiny. For court occasions, only the best were selected for prominent leadership, and individual dancers were highly admired in their day. Yet they danced for amateur reasons: for the joy of dancing, for social engagement, and as a duty of high rank. Any financial reward would have demeaned their status.

Not only did the court privilege good dancing, I argue that the Jacobean court asserted a prerogative of dance, leading to the exclusion of professional dancers of any kind from participation in the social occasion. This is in contrast to France, where dancing masters and professional dancers participated in balls and ballets alongside royal and noble dancers¹. One outcome of the English aversion to such mixing is the strange development of the antimasque by professionals as a separate section of the masque, the English form of the court ballet. While the royal family and the nobility headed the court occasions, with some participation by minor nobility and upper gentry, a long tradition of exchange gave special and occasional privileges to the gentlemen of the Inns of Court, particularly those of Gray's Inn. These young gentlemen of mixed backgrounds were accepted as partners to court ladies in masque revels and on visits by the court to the lawyers' in-house celebrations. James I had striven to introduce professional dancers into the masque, but was only partially successful with the antimasque. He also campaigned against the English court for the acceptance of lower rank gentlemen in his service who were good dancers. He made progress between 1613 and 1617, as a result of the gap left in royal male leadership by Prince Henry's demise, and before the coming-of-age of Prince Charles. This facilitated the rapid progress of George Villiers in becoming Duke of Buckingham for whom excellent dance skills went hand in hand with rising status. Good dancers were publicly admired: newsletter-writers used the term 'bore away the bell' for the best dancer of the night, male or female. Dudley Carleton

when commenting on the revels for the first masque of the reign in 1604, said: 'for good grace and good footmanship [the queen] bore away the bell'². Another correspondent, John Chamberlain, praised one lady and recorded his recognition of the mixing of noble dancers with men of mere gentry status in a letter of January 10 1618 concerning the masque *Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue*: 'On Twelfth Night was the Princes maske which (besides the two marquises, the earle of Mongomerie and some other Lords) was furnished and fild up with Sir Gilbert Haughton, Aber Crommie, Ackmoutie, Hodge, Palmer, and such like dauncing companions...Master Controllers daughter bare away the bell for delicat dauncing'³. Ambassadors were often privileged by being taken to see Prince Henry or Prince Charles in practice or private dancing: a further indicator of the importance of dancing skill to the international reputation of the court and its monarch.

The term 'ball' derived from the French 'le bal' was first used within the Franco-Scottish royal circle, but did not become current until the 1630s. In England, such occasions were designated as either 'the dauncing' or a 'revel'. A very clear idea of the importance of court dancing can be derived from the evidence for the arena within which dance was performed. In English palaces, there were no rooms designated for dancing alone, as had been the case in France and Scotland since the mid-sixteenth century⁴. James VI and I was familiar with the dauncing chalmers (1582) at Holyrood House in Edinburgh, probably the same beautiful space with large windows and coats of arms called *la salle de balle* in 1563⁵. At Whitehall, the preferred spaces for dancing were the Great Chamber and the Banqueting House. These were fitted out by the joint efforts of the men of the Office of Works and of the Lord Chamberlain's department, in a procedure called 'apparelling', by which a state room was converted to a specific ceremonial use. For dancing, the monarchs' state and thrones were erected at the upper end and tiered seating, called 'degrees', fitted out around the sides. If necessary, a false floor was laid to dance on. Tapestries were hung on the walls, carefully chosen from the stores so that the iconography would match the occasion. Bright lighting was created with myriad candles strung up on wire frames. This created a magnificent arena for social dancing, a practice that continued into the eighteenth century⁶.

The splendour of the scene was enriched by the company. The Spanish ambassador in 1604 reported: 'There were present at this ball more than fifty ladies of honour very richly and elegantly dressed, and extremely beautiful, besides many others who, with noblemen and gentlemen that were present at the dinner were already engaged in dancing'⁷. As for the masques, an invitation to a court dancing was a sign of honour and special courtesy, so seating required strategic diplomacy. One rare glimpse of this for a ball rather than a masque is found in John Finett's guide to court ceremonials, circulated to record matters of precedence and good practice. For Christmas 1620, he went 'to the Ordinary French Ambassadors House, for his Lady to come that Afternoon to a Dancing appointed at White-hall; but she in her womans haste to be at these Sports being gone thither before I came,...going down the Stairs, I met there the two Marquesses of Buckingham and Hamilton coming to the purpose that I did, to conduct the Lady Ambadrice, and Mademoiselle de St. Luc her Neece to the Ball,...[I] returned to Court, and finding the Ambadrice, and her Neece in my Lord of Buckingham's Lodging, I waited on them there, and to the Ball, where the Countess of Buckinghams Mother placing her next beneath her Daughter the Marquess, and above herself...'⁸. His record reveals that the ushering and disposition of the two ladies at the ball consumed the time and attention of a leading court official, two peers and a noble lady!

There are three sources of information on the repertoire of Jacobean court dancing: court correspondence, including newsletters from courtiers and diplomatic reports; information provided for the revels within masque texts and the related evidence for the Inns of Court, notably MS Douce 280 in which J. Ramsey noted a full repertoire to ‘practise for dauncing’⁹. While the evidence is scant, it is remarkably consistent, and very revealing. Over and over again, the English court enjoyed measures (‘old’, ‘common’ or ‘ordinary’), galliards, corantoes and lavoltas, and little else. Other dances are recorded only once or twice between 1603 and 1625: Spanish pavan, spagnoletta, passemazzo, canaries, brando, brawls and country dances. Two puzzling dances are recorded. Durettoes are listed in 1613 and 1614: our only knowledge of them being a piece of music in the metre of a courante. The moriscos listed for the revels of 1614 led by the gentlemen of Grays Inn are inexplicable, as records for moriscos indicate that they were dances for performance rather than social usage, and, furthermore, that they were no longer current (unless this is another variant term for morris dancing). I will consider the core repertoire first, and then return to the additional dances.

Our knowledge of the measures depends entirely on the records associated with members of the Inns of Court. It seems likely that this group of dances is related to the repertoire of court circles, considering the close connection between the legal community and the royal court. It is also likely that the aristocratic leaders of the Inns would have been aspiring to court practice, as well as familiar with it. These simple set dances based on the pavan and almain were danced by several couples at once. For the two Christmas masques of 1603/4, the revels commenced with the ordinary (or common) measures; the eight gentlemen of the *Masque of Chinese Knights* led out the queen and seven ladies of rank, whilst some days later the lady-maskers of *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses* led out twelve noblemen. Carleton, the newsletter writer, took pains to name each of these partners¹⁰. As the measures generally came first in any sequence of dances, we can deduce that they had a formal, honourable function while easing the dancers in with gentle repetitive movements. In France, this function was fulfilled by either *le grand bal* (a processional pavan) or a branle¹¹.

The second stage of a dauncing or a revel comprised galliards, corantoes and lavoltas, so the dominance of highly energetic, leaping dances is clear. The nature of the galliard as an improvised dance form is well-known, with several manuals testifying to the complexity and virtuosity of the genre. The revels of the 1603/4 masques show the centrality of the galliards. As the first masque of the reign, the men’s costuming was not entirely successful: ‘Their attire was rich, but somewhat too heavy and cumbersome for dancers, which put them beside in their galliards’, whilst the lady-masquers in loose mantles and petticoats gave full rein to their energies: ‘The Lady Bedford and Lady Susan took out the ambassadors and they bestirred themselves very lively, especially the Spaniard, for his Spanish galliard shewed himself a lusty old reveller. The goddesses they danced with did their parts, and the rest were nothing behindhand when it came to their turns’¹². At this stage of a ball, couples danced in turn alone on the floor under the gaze of the assembled and knowledgeable company. Their prowess and grace was under close scrutiny. A sense of the close attention paid to the performance is given by the Venetian Orazio Busino in his report of the revels of 1617: ‘We counted thirty-four capers cut one after the other by one lord, but none matched the accomplished style of the marquis [of Buckingham]’¹³. The concept of virtuosic improvisation was naively expressed by John Ramsey: ‘The French Galliarde – Honour/Is

performed with ye cinquepace, halfe capers, traverses, ye round turnes & such like, learned onlye by practise'¹⁴.

The practice of dancing galliards in succession, called by Caroso Ballo del Piantone¹⁵ and by Arbeau la Lyonnaise¹⁶, was also known at the Jacobean court, forming part of the ball of 1604 led by Prince Henry¹⁷. The sequence of galliards was started by one couple, then the man retired whilst the woman chose a second partner from the company, then she retired whilst the second man chose a second lady: two full galliards were thus danced by each person.

Another use for the faster and more straightforward cinq pas galliard was to open or close the ball. In 1614, the revels for the Somerset masque were opened by the queen and the Earl of Pembroke in his function as Lord Chamberlain, with the masquers, the bride and other ladies, all taking hands and travelling around the floor in a galliard lasting several minutes¹⁸. Two of the Inns of Court records state that a sink a pace holding hands and dancing round the room should follow the measures and conclude the dancing¹⁹.

The corantoes were also danced by one couple at a time, providing a further opportunity for dancers to demonstrate their grace and versatility. However, the records of the Inns of Court show the existence of group dances for several couples, either with partially improvised sections, such as The Temple Coranto: 'Take hands & fall in to your pace, change rounde, fall from, shifte handes, voluntarylie, honour & soe ende' or with a set choreography such as the Caranto dyspayne (MS Rawlinson Poet. 108)²⁰. The lavolta was danced by one couple at a time: while it had an agreed sequence in which the couple alternated a passage of travelling around the room with the turning lifts, the length and alternation of these were executed at the whim of the couple²¹.

It is noticeable that there were no pavans and almains in their own right; also that there is no evidence for the pairing of pavan and galliard in ballroom practice, despite compositions by musicians of the time. Further, it is apparent that dances were executed in single couples or by several couples in a processional formation. The figuring of some Italian balletti or the English country dance was not found at court. Until the 1620s, the country dance still belonged to private and local practice.

It can be seen that the standard repertoire of the Jacobean court comprised three types of dance: the set communal dance, the improvised dance and the dance of minor improvisation. The measures represent set dances of unknown origin, with fixed choreographies for participation by the company. The galliards represent the dances of improvisation, in which a couple expressed their skill and understanding of the genre. The corantoes and lavoltas represent an interim type of dance, in which each couple followed a common pattern but with variation according to their taste or whim.

The other dances associated with the court have the same profile. The branles and the country dances were set dances of unknown origin. The canaries and the passemezze were improvisational dances. The Spanish pavan was a dance with a set format, but emphasising individual skill within it, whilst the spagnoletta may be of this type also. The brando is atypical, only known today from compositions by Negri as a set dance for a particular number of couples. The English evidence echoes this: one for four couples in 1604 and a 'brando alla francese' recorded by Giovanni Battista Gabaleone, the diplomatic agent from the Savoy in 1614, noteworthy for its beauty²². The intermittent records for these dances suggests a wider practice in less formal and commonplace dancing, with the prestigious court occasion showing us the tip of an iceberg of dance practice.

Following this analysis of the Jacobean court dances, it becomes apparent that the repertoire comprised dances of unknown origin and dances that featured improvisation from the international court repertoire. With the possible exception of the *brando*, there is no surviving evidence of dances of display specially choreographed by dancing masters.

The international nature of the court ball is testified to by the ease with which honoured strangers participated, and with which foreign correspondents recognised the dances. The Spanish ambassador in 1604 noted *galliard alla piantone*, the *brandi* and *corrente*. An unknown Spaniard spotted the *branles de Poitou* in 1611 and ‘an English dance that resembled a pavan’, probably a *measure*²³. The diplomatic agent of Savoy listed *gagliarde*, *corrente* and a *brando* in 1614. Meanwhile John Ramsey is practising his Spanish *pavin*, alongside his French *levolto*, *galliarde* and *Brawles*.

These international observations also reveal that there was widespread understanding of the national origins of dances. As court dancing was a significant element in international diplomacy, the choice of dances could be political rather than solely social. The 1604 ball mentioned before was central to the celebrations of the peace treaty signed between Spain and England. The report of the ball formed part of the printed account by the ambassador of honour Juan Fernandez de Velasco, Constable of Castille, recently also Governor of Milan. The ball was led by the ten-year old Prince Henry under the direction of his parents, whilst the queen and leading noblemen honoured the Constable with their dancing. Gatiss and Smith have explored the possibility of the court having access to Negri’s recent publication in Milan *Nuove Inventioni di balli* as a source for dances that would please him²⁴. Whether or not this was the case, the performance of two *brandi* led by the queen and the Earl of Southampton is surely significant. The performance of a dance form known only from the Milanese repertoire and therefore familiar to the former governor smacks of a deliberate compliment, even if we may puzzle over how it was acquired.

Using social dance for political purpose can be exemplified from a contemporary French occasion. On Sunday August 26 1612, La Reine Marguerite held a ‘grand bal’ on the occasion of the engagement of the princess royal Elizabeth to the future Philip IV of Spain, in the presence of the nuptial delegation headed by the Duke of Pastrana. The occasion was opened with a *branle* led by the eleven year old Louis XIII, the company following in order of rank. Between the *courantes* and the *gaillardes*, at the heart of the ball, the princess herself with the Marquis d’Elboeuf danced a single *canaries*, while the whole Spanish retinue stood bareheaded in respect. This was clearly a dance symbolic of her future life in Spain and in compliment to the Spaniards present representing her fiancé. The occasion closed with a *branle*, the quintessential dance of the provinces of France²⁵. The alliance of Spain and France in the forthcoming marriage was symbolised in the choice of dances.

The ability of the English court to manipulate allegiances through adopting foreign styles is noted by the Florentine agent in 1611. At this time, the choice of a bride for Prince Henry was causing much debate. For James, an alliance with either France or Spain was under review, so ambassadors of honour had been invited in turn to the Christmas festivities. Lotti notes: ‘Where, a little before, at the time of the visit of the Marshall Lavardino, the court had shown itself all French, on this day, it appeared all Spanish’²⁶. With this information, I suggest that the use of *les branles de Poitou* as a central feature of the prince’s revels in *Oberon* was a deliberate compliment to the French ambassador.

Following these instances of employing a national dance in diplomacy, I would like to finish with an example of the English country dance being used in the same way. In 1619 James I faced a major threat to his peace policies when his son-in-law Frederick accepted the crown of Bohemia. This upset the balance of power in Europe, putting pressure on the king to send forces in support of this Protestant cause against the Catholic might of Spain, a move that would be unwelcome to the French, who were currently allies. One procedure to mitigate an international crisis was the exchange of cordial hospitality with the resident French ambassador in London, Monsieur de Tillières. In response to special entertainments offered by the French establishment, the Marquis of Buckingham organised a series of informal masque performances in noblemen's townhouses along the Strand. The so-called 'running masques' were seen as following French fashion, and therefore complimentary to French taste²⁷. However, the text for these performances shows that the French-style masquerade concluded with an English-style revel. The masquers make a request that: 'According to the English fashion they may dance two or three Country Dances and so kisse and parte'²⁸. The ambassador and his family were thus paid the further compliment of admission to English domestic practice. I suggest that this occasion marks the emergence of the country dance into the international arena of court dance, previous records being of informal and local performance. Country dances were then included in the revels for *Time Vindicated* in 1623 at Whitehall, giving further significant exposure to the national genre.

In conclusion, I propose that the lack of surviving choreographies for dances of display at the Jacobean court is not due to negligence or to insufficient mastery of dancing. Rather the Jacobean court dancers excelled in improvisational modes of dancing, so that their achievement was both personal and ephemeral. They did not merely replicate the compositions of dancing masters, but mastered each genre of dance and interpreted it afresh on each occasion. The role of the dancing master was, therefore, to coach skills, guide musicality and understanding of each form of improvisational dance, and develop the ability to improvise on a theme. I suggest that any appetite in the English court dancer for especially composed dances to be learnt by heart was satisfied by the masque entries. The consequence is that when the royal family and the court danced at a great state ball, they were honouring the company with their personal dancing, executed for the greater glory of king and country.

Notes

- 1 McGowan, M. *Dance in the Renaissance*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, p.230
- 2 Lee, M. *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603–1624*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1972, p.54.
- 3 McClure, N. E. (ed.) *The Letters of John Chamberlain*. American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, 1939, Vol. 2, p. 282
- 4 McGowan, M. *Dance in the Renaissance*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, pp.68–70
- 5 Mill, A. J. *Mediaeval Plays in Scotland*. Blackwood & Son, Edinburgh, 1927, pp. 335, 145.
- 6 The practice of apprelling for dancing and masques has been gleaned from the financial records of the Jacobean court, and is detailed in Daye, A. *The Banqueting House*,

- Whitehall: a site specific to dance. *Historical Dance*, 2004, 4 (1), 3–22. (Mill 1927 335, 145
- 7 Rye, W. B. *England as seen by Foreigners*. John Russell Smith, London, 1865, p. 123.
- 8 Finett, J. *Finetti Philoxenis*, 1656, pp. 70–71.
- 9 Wilson, D. Dancing in the Inns of Court. *Historical Dance*, 1986–87, 2 (5), 3–16.
- 10 Lee, M. *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603–1624*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1972, p.54.
- 11 Arbeau, T. *Orchesographie*. Jean de Preyz, Lengres, 1596, 28v–30r.
- McGowan, M. *Dance in the Renaissance*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2008, pp. 96–97
- 12 Lee, M. *Dudley Carleton to John Chamberlain 1603–1624*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, 1972, p.54.
- 13 Orgel, S. & Strong, R. *Inigo Jones: the Theatre of the Stuart Court*. Sotheby Parke Bernet, London, 1973, p. 281 (translation from Italian: A. Daye).
- 14 Wilson, D. Dancing in the Inns of Court. *Historical Dance*, 1986–87, 2 (5), p.8.
- 15 Caroso, F. *Il Ballarino*. Ziletti, Venice, 1581, 181v–183r.
- 16 Arbeau, T. *Orchesographie*. Jean de Preyz, Lengres, 1596, 39r.
- 17 Rye, W. B. *England as seen by Foreigners*. John Russell Smith, London, 1865, p. 123.
- 18 Orrell, J. The Agent of the Savoy at the Somerset Masque. *Review of English Studies*, 28, 1977, p. 304.
- 19 Wilson, D. Dancing in the Inns of Court. *Historical Dance*, 1986–87, 2 (5), pp. 11 & 13.
- 20 Wilson, D. Dancing in the Inns of Court. *Historical Dance*, 1986–87, 2 (5), pp. 7 & 4.
- 21 Arbeau, T. *Orchesographie*. Jean de Preyz, Lengres, 1596, 63v–65v.
- 22 Orrell, J. The Agent of the Savoy at the Somerset Masque. *Review of English Studies*, 28, 1977, p. 304.
- 23 Orgel, S. & Strong, R. *Inigo Jones: the Theatre of the Stuart Court*. Sotheby Parke Bernet, London, 1973, p.206.
- 24 Smith, J. & Gatiss, I. What did Prince Henry do with his feet on Sunday 19 August 1604? *Early Music*, xiv, 1986, 198–207.
- 25 Lacroix, P. *Ballets et Mascarades de Cour de Henri III à Louis XIV*, Geneva : Gay, 1868–1870, pp.307–314.
- 26 Orrell, J. The London stage in the Florentine Correspondence, 1604–1618. *Theatre Research International*, 4 (3), 1978, p. 167.
- 27 Knowles, J. The Running Masque Recovered: a Masque for the Marquess of Buckingham. *English Manuscript Studies*, 8, 2000, 79–135.
- 28 Knowles, J. The Running Masque Recovered: a Masque for the Marquess of Buckingham. *English Manuscript Studies*, 8, 2000, p.113.