

The Art of Good Dancing – Noble Birth and Skilled Nonchalance. England 1580–1630

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“Not even though his performance is outstanding should he let it be thought that he has spent on it much time or trouble . . .”¹

It seems strange that Castiglione should be offering such advice in an age when the established rules of etiquette played such an important part in regulating the social behaviour of, at the very least, the upper classes; those who aspired to maintain their place in that society spent considerable time and money in an attempt to acquire the accepted manners. From the time of Elyot² there had been a fairly steady supply of books and treatises offering advice as to how this could be done, parental advice to sons,³ teachers advising pupils⁴ and ‘anyone’ advising the gentleman population in general.⁵ It might have been thought that the pursuit of excellence would have, in itself, deserved merit, and that prestige could be gained merely by the expenditure of time and money. The opening quotation would indicate that this was not necessarily the case, skill and exactitude needed tempering by an as yet unidentified but essential ingredient, and this was believed to be possessed only by those of appropriate birthright.⁶ It would certainly be true to say that only those of noble birth would have had the means to acquire the skilled nonchalance that results from hours of practice. But, even if others could find both time and money Castiglione⁷ maintained that they would still not be capable of the prudence and wise discrimination necessary for the making of fine judgements with regard to the appropriateness of actions; such attributes are to be found only in those of noble birth.

Dancing was certainly an established form of social behaviour in Elizabethan and Stuart England; it was a not unapproved recreational activity that survived despite constant attack from those who considered it amongst other things, a “horrible pestiferous vice”.⁸ It was an essential ingredient of the masque, the major form of entertainment at court, and, through it one could also acquire other good habits of behaviour, for example, how to walk and stand correctly, greet one’s lady or manage the skirt. Dancing masters were anxious to extol the virtues of their art in overcoming the noble birth problem, but even they found it necessary to admit that one’s social background could aid or hinder performance of the dances. Caroso⁹ claimed that the dance was beneficial

“ . . . because it exercises the strength of the body, and makes the man agile and dextrous and one learns the courtesy and honours, and all those bearings that occur in the manners and compliments”

but then has to continue that one should be “well born” to derive the most benefit.¹⁰ However, those not of gentle birth might “through devotion of spirit, become the equal of those created by birth,”¹¹ thus keeping alive the hope that such aspirations could be achieved, and in addition ensuring a supply of students for himself. Forty years later, de Lauze was still citing “good behaviour” as an inseparable part of dancing. However, he also implies that success is not dependent on gentlemanly background:

“Dance can remedy the bad actions which a negligent upbringing has ingrained.”¹²

Is this just another piece of special pleading by a dancing master anxious to emphasise the beneficial effects of his art, and thus increase the demand for his talents, or, can the practice of dancing go at least some way towards helping the individual acquire the good posture and bearing of a gentleman. Given the amount of time, energy and money expended on learning to dance at least some of the “would-be” gentlemen believed this to

be the case. For example in 1595 William Fitzwilliam, gentleman of the Inns of Court paid almost as much for one month’s dancing lesson as he did for his commons, (at that time Grays Inn charged 5s); others paid 15s in entrance fees and tips to attend dancing school.¹³ Whilst the masque preparation would not have been entirely devoted to dancing, in 1616 rehearsals took fifty days,¹⁴ and Henrietta Maria started training her ladies immediately after Christmas for the 1626 performance of *Artenice* on Shrove Tuesday.¹⁵

At this point it is perhaps necessary to defend the relevance of Castiglione,¹⁶ writing in Italy in 1528, to the manners and accepted modes of behaviour in Tudor and Stuart England. “The Courtier” was still being used as the model of good behaviour to which the gentleman aspired; it was translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby in 1561, influenced Sir Thomas Elyot¹⁷ three years later and was still being recommended by Ascham in 1570.¹⁸ It required that those who wished to be recognised as gentlemen possessed certain qualities, including noble birth and good family, ability to be a good scholar, painter and musician, and willingness to obey the Lord in everything.¹⁹ In addition, it lists suitable recreational activities, armes, hunting, swimming, jumping and tennis, and for “calmer, more restful games let him laugh, jest, banter, romp and dance.”²⁰ This would appear to clarify the situation, but then we are told that the virtue of the activities is lost if performed without dignity, or in the company of the common people either as audience or fellow participants; should the latter be unavoidable, the gentleman should ensure he can win!²¹

Since the first point that is made is the need for “noble birth” it could be assumed that if this condition cannot be met then nothing else is worth pursuing, and yet this is just what was happening in Elizabethan England. Following the social upheavals that came about as a result of the Reformation many more people were trying to gain access to the gentleman class, and it became increasingly important whether or not one made it.²² Whilst it was still considered unlikely for a person to ascend from low to high station as an “ungentle gentle”²³ education was increasingly being seen as one means of acquiring status and parents went to considerable lengths to ensure their sons profited from it. For if it is true that

“Education is the Seasoner or Instructress of Youth in the principles of Knowledge, Discourse and Action”²⁴

then it must follow that through it there is the possibility of learning the accepted models of behaviour and thus becoming socially accepted.

Up until this point the terms “courtier”, “nobleman” and “gentleman” have been used interchangeably and certainly all omit large sections of the population; this exclusion is deliberate for much of the surviving evidence of dance was written either for, or by, members of this class. Not only are most of the dance treatises addressed to them, gentlemen wrote to each other describing what they had seen²⁵ and Negri informs us that the dancing masters kept diaries of their own activities.²⁶ As a general description gentlemen were those of “gentle birth and conduct” who had the right to bear arms but who were below the grade of nobility.²⁷ The wearing of the sword was one outward visible sign of the gentleman, but more important was the need “to accompany his every act with a certain grace and fine judgement”²⁸ without which, according to Castiglione, all other “attributes and qualities would be almost worthless.” What this “grace” was is much more difficult to define; suffice to say, at this point, that those who had it recognised it in others and classified them accordingly. However, under the influence of the new humanist theories the term “gentleman” was gradually being enlarged to include the ideal type of man; one who was

distinguished by his own virtue rather than by his ancestors' chivalrous deeds.²⁹ For him education was a way of learning to emulate gentlemanly accomplishments in order to conform to the expected behaviour patterns, and dance did have a part to play in that education.

Before considering further the basis of this education it is perhaps important to realise that what is being considered is preparation for a life among the "leisured elite", for whatever else happened the seventeenth century gentleman did not work in the twentieth century sense; he would have been called upon to defend his local area and to fight for his King, but for much of his time he needed the kind of activities now called recreation; these had to fill his time purposefully but without loss of dignity. Dancing, along with hunting, hawking, wrestling and swimming, was usually seen to be appropriate, whereas gambling, dicing, cockfighting, football and attending plays were much more frequently condemned.³⁰ This is not to deny that there was considerable debate about the suitability of dance, its attraction for the unruly,³¹ transgression of the divine laws of God,³² and ability to waste time,³³ all serving to fuel the fires of those who condemned it. However, in an age when a large part of life was spent in making an entrance, assuming a mask for public life and controlling outward behaviour at all times, acquisition of skill in dancing (with the need to acquire control over the use of the body to perform the steps and actions) must have gone some way to help the gentlemen assume the appropriate image. Lord Herbert of Cherbury³⁴ in 1599 recommended dancing for just these reasons:

"that he may learn to know how to come and go out of a room where company is, how to make several courtesies handsomely according to the several degrees of person he shall encounter, how to put on and hold his hat . . . !"

Whilst it could be true that dancing can enable him to learn what to do, and a good teacher can indicate relevant occasions upon which to do it, the problem still remains of judging appropriateness. It is this which is thought to be an attribute of birth, impossible to acquire in any other way.

The basis of the education provided for the young, whether at elementary school, with private tutor, or at grammar or public school, was still that of Plato in *The Laws*. For his Guardian class (the equivalent of the gentleman) he advocated as a basis upon which other learning could build, physical culture (dancing and wrestling) and music (this included study of what is now art, poetry and literature). Dancing was itself seen to consist of two parts, the presentation of works of poetical inspiration and the development of physical fitness, nobility and beauty. Education in the choric art³⁵ was seen to embrace the whole aesthetic and moral training of the child.³⁶

In general terms these were still the values being attributed to dance by contemporary practice. The masque was a work of "poetical inspiration" in which dance was an essential ingredient; it became³⁷ a ritual by which society affirmed its wisdom and asserted its control over the world and its own destiny. The participants in the main body of the masque would have been gentlemen, for whom, according to Castiglione,³⁸ there was no better way of "demonstrating one's skill in such things as public spectacles." The parts would have been chosen to highlight good attributes and the hours spent in rehearsal would have ensured the familiarity necessary for skilled nonchalance; the costume and possibly mask provide a facade behind which the real person can hide, thus diminishing the danger of loss of dignity. Since the masque proper always purveyed good and honest qualities there was no danger of moral degradation and, positively, here was an occasion to display high level skill in dancing.

The value of dancing to physical fitness was also strongly argued by such as Mulcaster,³⁹ who advocated dancing as "laudable exercise" alongside "loudspeaking", "singing" and "laughing",⁴⁰ reminiscent of Castiglione's more "restful games". Mulcaster points out that:

"By heating and warming it driveth away stiffness from the joynts and some palsilike trembling from the legges and thighs

. . . it is a remedie to succour the stomache against weakness of digestion and rairness of humours."⁴¹

Additionally, if practised in armour it will aid nimbleness on the battlefield. Mulcaster was certainly not alone in proposing dancing as healthy exercise. James VI of Scotland advised his son to take exercise of an approved kind; dancing was, football was not.⁴² Dancing masters made use of this argument; for example, Caroso⁴³ says "it exercises the strength of the body and makes the man agile and dextrous", and Arbeau⁴⁴ sees it as a particularly virtuous exercise for the ladies as "they are not free to walk here and there." It is hard to see how these benefits are affected by birth, and it would be tempting to concede that their value to health would be increased by vigorous participation.

But, as we have seen, the value of dancing goes beyond mere exercise to the cultivation of the "diverse manners of reputation" and "greater devotion of the mind"⁴⁵ both qualities desired by gentlemen. Elyot⁴⁶ details how he sees dancing play a very real part in the development of prudence, attributing to each step, albeit of the earlier basse dance, a particular quality: to the honour, the root of prudence; to the reprise, circumspection; the singles, providence and industry; the double, election, experience and modesty. These sound as if they could be constituent elements of grace and fine judgement, the essence of gentlemanly behaviour, and would, therefore, give some hope that they might be learnt, irrespective of background.

The dancing masters offered very clear guidelines with regard to what were the accepted outward manifestations of grace, and these can be taken as fairly reliable indicators of social behaviour because it would have been against their best interests to advise anything other than that which was approved. They tell of how to "carry the person" and maintain an upright carriage, for, unless poise is correct, everything else is meaningless. For example, Negri⁴⁷ gives detailed instructions for how to walk well:

"With the person straight and the arms held level with the sides, able to move a little, and the point of the feet a little outward."

In an age when "Youth is employed in ushering his Mistress, for he walks in the street as if he were dancing a measure"⁴⁸ such advice cannot only be confined to dancing. Yet here again in Castiglione⁴⁹ there is a reminder of the fine distinction to be drawn between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, for he says "Nor should he behave like those people . . . who walking through the streets . . . are for ever dancing."

Other good habits are also discussed. Arbeau⁵⁰ has Caprioli speak of the need to be "suitably and neatly dressed with clean shoes", a dictum still applying sixty years later when Brathwait⁵¹ urges guests to arrive with clothes and person clean. Directions are given for managing the hat,⁵² a particularly important activity in everyday living when to remove one's hat was a mark of respect, but how did one decide who merited that distinction? Equally detailed instruction is given with regard to managing the cloak and sword,⁵³ both of which might be worn for dancing. Caroso⁵⁴ advises the lady how to deal with her skirt and Arbeau⁵⁵ that "clean white handkerchieves" should be used if needing to "spit or blow".

There is nothing in these instructions that could not be achieved, given appropriate diligence and attention to detail, by anyone, of any social background, and yet one is constantly being reminded that this is not necessarily the case. Even Lowin⁵⁶ in what is essentially an attack upon dancing concedes that dancing "is much abused in our age, because . . . it is practiced by a great many, without any discretion at all," for it is "an exercise rather appertayning to the Nobilitie and Gentilitie."

What then is required? *Firstly*, it is essential that the dances are performed in an appropriate context, for example, outside is inappropriate, inside usually is, but not if (unless there are special circumstances) in the presence of commoners, or if it involves steps of a too intricate nature.⁵⁷ *Secondly*, it is necessary to be able to use discretion as to the appropriateness of the actions, for example, when giving service to some great lady to know whether to kiss the glove, the bare hand or the lip.⁵⁸

Thirdly, there is a need to be aware of one's own limitations; whatever is done must be done with apparent ease, without revealing too much "application and skill".⁵⁹ This could be due to age or status, for example, Von Wedel⁶⁰ reported that one pavane was allowed for the most eminent and not so young, after which more vigorous galliards were danced; or, it may be due to inability – "merely being able to do the plaine Sinquepace is to be thought of no better than a verie bongler."⁶¹ And for poor Barnaby Riche there was no dance left he could perform, for he could not "use measure in any thyng"; his "heeles are too heavie" for the Jigg, the Round is "too giddie" and the Hornepipe he has hated from his "verie youth."⁶² Fourthly, excellence was needed in everything that was done. The performance of many dances requires considerable technical expertise but had also to appear effortless. The galliard is a good example of a dance combining physical strength and nimbleness; over two hundred and fifty variations (not necessarily all different) have been identified⁶³ all requiring agility of both body and mind for their execution. This excellence was necessary to both attract and maintain the attention, and its acquisition required both good teaching and abundant opportunity for practice, for

"A master teaches the steps, but the Grace, the carriage and the free motion of the body must come chiefly from use."⁶⁴

It was this studied "nonchalance" that was the hallmark of perfection; others may praise the expertise but the performer should let it be thought it is of little consequence.⁶⁵ Fifthly, it is important that this "nonchalance" does not degenerate into "affection"⁶⁶ – each of the various actions should be given the correct emphasis. This requires a sense of what is appropriate, and understatement was as inappropriate as overstatement. For example, although frequently steps are the same for both men and women, Arbeau⁶⁷ warns that it is

"as ill becoming a damsel to have a masculine countenance as should the man avoid feminine poses."

But equally "affection" could be seen in a too low lowering of the eyes in doing the Reverence or in having a too stiff or too "floppy" torso during the execution of the steps.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, is the need to imbue with grace, movements, gestures and the whole way of doing things.⁶⁸ It was almost universally accepted that grace cannot be learnt and yet good teachers were necessary for, as well as being part of nature, grace requires nurture if it were to be fully realised. Castiglione⁶⁹ maintains that "a single step, a single unforced and graceful movement of the body at once demonstrates the skill of the dancer." The dancing masters give some indication of what constitutes grace, for example Arbeau⁷⁰ advises that in landing in the galliard the rear foot should reach the ground a little before the front in order to avoid looking like a sack of grain, and sideways inclinations when performing a grave first one way and then the other are said to add more grace than a complete turn of the body.⁷¹ In Negri⁷² a warning is given of the need to allow the arms to move a little, for to hold them too stiff makes them ugly to look at. Whilst these visual impressions do form an important element of grace, much more important is the "inner counterpart" of these outer actions. So although it is possible to point to adjustments that can be made to the physical being, it is much more difficult, if not impossible, to do the same for that most important inner element. We do get some hints in the dance texts, for example, Caroso⁷³ and Negri⁷⁴ point to the need to "Pavoneggiare", which according to Florio⁷⁵ means to "gaze lovingly upon himselfe as a peacocke doth" or to "set up and down fondly." In the transformation of this into the actions of the dance there must have been a very fine distinction to be made between "affectation" and "grace", and yet it was just this distinction which would determine whether or not one was accepted as a "gentle gentle", i.e. one of good background and present position.

Grace is the essential ingredient in the Art of Good Dancing; it is a notion that is inextricably bound up with the lifestyle and cultural outlook of the time; it was obviously recognisable by

those who "had it", and we now have some indication of the sorts of things which contributed to its achievement, but as to how it transformed action from the ordinary to the courtly we can only make calculated guesses as we try to get inside the seventeenth century gentleman.

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8. Stubbes, p. 98.
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