THE ART OF TRANSCRIPTION:
15TH-CENTURY ITALIAN DANCE MANUSCRIPTS

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ABSTRACT

Anyone transcribing a previously unpublished manuscript needs to have a very clear idea of the purpose being served in doing so. Otherwise, muddled thinking can lead to the introduction of supposedly reader-friendly features that actually frustrate the whole purpose of the exercise, and that is not reader-friendly at all.

While it is relatively simple to state the purpose of transcription, it is another matter to carry it out in detail. This will be made clear by consideration of detailed examples taken from 15th-century Italian texts. The lessons to be learnt are, however, universal.

INTRODUCTION

Our knowledge of 15th-century Italian dance is derived principally from copies of the treatises attributed to three contemporary writers, Domenico of Piacenza (also known as Domenico of Ferrara), Antonio Cornazano, and Guglielmo Ebreo (who later took the name Giovanni Ambrosio). There are nine of these handwritten texts at present known, preserved in various institutional libraries in Italy, France and the USA [1, 2, 3]. (Other manuscript sources do exist, but for simplicity I am leaving them out of the present discussion.)

As little as ten years ago, the serious student of 15th-century Italian dance had little choice but to acquire microfilm, or printout from microfilm, of all nine manuscripts, a task requiring no little expenditure of time and money, as well as some persistence. Four of the most important (three in Paris, one in New York) were still either wholly unpublished or (in the case of the Paris 'Domenico' [**Pd**]) handled so incompetently as to remain effectively in that condition. The five manuscripts in Italian libraries had indeed been published, but in versions that were to a greater or lesser degree modernized and some-times in publications that were virtually unobtainable outside speci-alist libraries in Italy itself.

Since then the situation has changed dramatically, with the appearance of the following four publications.

1988   Christine Bailey & Lillian Pleydell.   The Art and Practice of Dancing ... by Giohanne Ambrosio. Nelson: The Nelson Historical Dance Society.
A transcript of the Paris 'Ambrosio' [**Pa**].

D. R. Wilson. Domenico of Piacenza ...   The Early Dance Circle, Sources for Early Dance, Series 1,1.
A new transcript of the Paris 'Domenico' [**Pd**].

1990   Andrea Francalanci.   The "Copia di M^o Giorgio e del giudeo di ballare basse danze e balletti" ...   Basler Jahrbuch für histor-ische Musikpraxis, **14**, 87-179.
A transcript of the New York 'Guglielmo' [**NY**].

1993   Barbara Sparti.   Guglielmo Ebreo of Pesaro ... On the Practice or Art of Dancing.   Oxford: Clarendon Press.

An edition, with translation, commentary and introduction, of the Paris 'Guglielmo' [**Pg**], supplemented by additional material taken from the Paris 'Ambrosio' [**Pa**].

By making these four texts accessible to a wider readership their editors have done a signal service to the scholarship of historical dance. The attentive reader cannot fail to notice, however, that the various editors have adopted different practices in their treatment of the original texts. Complete uniformity is not indeed a necessity, provided the principles being followed in each publication are clearly set out in an editorial preface. This is something that all the editors have been careful to do. They nevertheless vary in the completeness of their statements of editorial procedures, as they do also in the consistency with which they follow their own principles in actual practice. There is, in any case, little explicit discussion of the reasons for choosing one way of doing things in preference to another.

It seems worthwhile, therefore, to look at these matters more closely and to analyse the choices that all such editors find that they have to make.

AIMS AND METHODS OF TRANSCRIPTION

Let us begin by differentiating between a transcript and an edition. Both are produced by an editor, which some may find confusing, for a start; but their essential purposes are quite distinct.

That of an <u>edition</u> is to establish what the original author wrote. Mistakes need to be corrected, both those that the copyist made himself and those that he faithfully reproduced from the exemplar in front of him. An editor faced with a badly garbled text may need to exercise considerable imagination (controlled by recognised principles of textual criticism) in making speculative emendations to yield a plausible text. It is legitimate, though not obligatory, to modernize the spelling, punctuation and layout of the text to make it more readily comprehensible to a modern reader.

The purpose of a <u>transcript</u> is quite different. It is to present what the scribe actually wrote on each page of the manuscript. All mistakes should therefore be reproduced exactly as found, though the editor may, if she or he wishes, draw attention to them by means of footnotes. The most accurate and comprehensive way of achieving this result is obviously to make a facsimile, but facsimiles of manuscripts are hideously expensive and have the further practical disadvantage that they force every single reader to grapple with an often difficult script. Those scholars that really need to see the page as written will continue to work with microfilm or to request access to the original. For more general purposes a reliable transcript using a standard typeface is perfectly adequate and a great deal more convenient.

With literary works we do not normally encounter transcripts, as the prime purpose is to reconstruct, as best we may, the original creation of the author. Transcripts are mainly to be found for historical documents. They are needed also for our 15th-century Italian dance sources because these contain, not only versions of the three treatises mentioned above, but collections of dance descriptions, many of which are unique to a single manuscript. And even when dances are found in more than one source, variations between them may derive as much from different performing versions of them as from divergent manuscript traditions. In other words, each manuscript has, in the first instance,

to be taken on its own merits.

Now, while the aim of making a transcript is straightforward enough, its execution is less so. It is not until you do it for yourself that you realize how many tricky choices you will have to make. This is most readily communicated by simply taking the most important of them in turn and looking at what is really involved.

Spelling

This should cause no difficulty: you just write down what you see on the page. But anyone who has tried to copy English texts of the 15th century, or indeed later, will know that accurate copying of archaic documents in your own language is actually very difficult. When I reviewed Francalanci's transcript of **NY** [4], I made a comparison of his version of one of the dances with one that I had made myself. There were half a dozen discrepancies between them: of these, half were due to my own misreading of the difficult cursive script, but the other half were caused by his inadvertent and certainly unintended modernization of the original spellings. In this respect, even if in few others, an editor who is not fluent in the modern language has a certain advantage.

There was in addition one way in which Francalanci did quite deliberately alter the original spelling. Whereas in 15th-century Italian writing the letters u and v were generally interchangeable, Francalanci followed modern practice in assigning the letter v to the consonantal sound and u to the vowel. Insofar as there was any standard followed in the 15th century, it was to use v at the beginning of words and u thereafter. So, more often than not, we read vna riuerenzia, transcribed by Francalanci for the reader's convenience as una riverenzia, as in modern Italian. Yet it is not all that troublesome for the reader to adapt to the earlier spelling and it seems a small price to pay to avoid compromising the fidelity of the transcription. After all, our hypothetical reader would not be tackling a 15th-century Italian text at all unless of a fairly scholarly bent.

This matter of u and v is not actually as footling as it might at first seem. We have to remember that in most scripts of the period the letters u and n were virtually indistinguishable except by reference to the context, whereas a v was quite distinctive. You only have to add to a couple of letters that might be n or u a carelessly dotted or even undotted letter i and the number of possible readings becomes dauntingly large — and that is without even considering the letter m. So, to claim one of those letters as a v is seriously tendentious. It can be argued that the alert and critical reader should be able to see a possible u behind the v, and a possible n behind that, either in the present manuscript or in an earlier copy, but surely such a reader is entitled to know (not just to guess) what was actually written in the text being published.

I cannot help seeing this as a classic example of a procedure introduced ostensibly to help the reader, which actually frustrates the reader's primary aim, namely to learn what was really written on the page. If we cannot rely on a transcript for that, we shall have to go back to using microfilm. The golden rule for the editor of a transcript is not to put yourself between the reader and the text except for a very good reason. When you do so, you should make an explicit statement of your practice (as Francalanci did in the example quoted) but also provide some means of identifying individual instances where they occur.

Another place where such a rule applies is where the editor is uncertain of a reading. It is reasonable to supply the best reading that you can come up with, but essential to let the reader know that you are less than happy with it. This can be handled in a footnote, but it is useful also to borrow a practice used by epigraphers, which is to place a subscript dot beneath every doubtful letter. This warns the reader directly that there is a problem with the text at that point.

I have referred above to the use of a standard typeface in printing the transcript. This is advisable for reasons both of convenience and of expense. For many 15th-century manuscripts it will nevertheless be necessary to have available the letter ç. Bailley and Pleydell used a keyboard without ç for their transcript of **Pa**, so systematically used z instead, as plainly stated in their editorial preface. This is bound to cause confusion, however — even before they come to the word zuccaro, in which the z is the original spelling!

Another letter that can give difficulty is the long s. This is used in all four of the manuscripts considered here, but can be rendered by the modern form of the letter without causing misunderstanding. In the scripts of the three manuscripts in Paris the letters s and f are clearly distinguished and only inexperienced readers would confuse one of them with the other (though examples occur in the transcript of **Pa**). In the cursive text of **NY** it is more difficult to be sure which was intended on the basis of form alone, and inevitably the choice has often to be made in accordance with the sense. With the phrase vna riuerenzia insino apreso alla tera (a reverence until close to the ground) the sense is the same whether we read insino or infino, and the choice between one or the other must sometimes become quite arbitrary.

Accents

These virtually did not exist in 15th-century Italian, though there are a very few towards the end of **NY**. Accents have not been supplied by the editors of any of the texts considered here. The only times that their absence would cause any difficulty to someone used to reading the modern language are in texts where e represents both the word for 'and' (otherwise spelt et, as in Latin) and also the word for 'is' (which is accented in modern Italian). The context normally makes it obvious which is intended, but it may be necessary to read to the end of the sentence before the syntactical structure is established with complete certainty.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations present more of a problem. In most handwritten texts abbreviations are freely used. In 15th-century manuscripts they are signalled by a variety of tittles and flourishes, which in principle have each their own meaning, but in practice vary considerably both in their form and in their precise uses. In a facsimile these are reproduced exactly in all their variety, but in a transcript using a standard typeface they present a serious difficulty. The Early English Text Society, in similar circumstances, did indeed adopt a special typeface, which included the standard signs of abbreviation. They needed special type in any case because some Middle English dialects used several letters that are now obsolete; but this is a costly solution that still does not take account of the variety of form that is encountered in the Italian texts.

This last criticism is even more true of the expedients adopted by Bailey and Pleydell, who used a raised hyphen to represent tittles of several different forms, while drawing in a few of the flourishes by hand but systematically omitting others. Whatever the merits or defects of this method in itself, it puts a heavy responsibility on the transcriber and the typist, and a number of tittles are either omitted or misplaced in their transcript.

An alternative strategy is to expand the abbreviations and spell them out in full. In so doing, the editor takes on responsibility for reading letters that are implicit in the signs of abbreviation just as she or he does for those that are written on the page. This is justified, not only by avoidance of the practical difficulties noted above, but also by consideration of the convenience of the reader, who might well find these abbreviations even more tricky to decipher than the basic text.

The letters supplied by the editor should be clearly indicated, as misunderstandings are always possible and the reader is entitled to know where his editor has been at work. It is always possible that a different expansion of a given abbreviation would actually make better sense. The established convention is to print the added letters _in italic_; this acknowledges that they are already implied in the text as written and are not mere editorial insertions of the kind normally enclosed within square brackets. (Abbreviations are expanded without this italicization in Sparti's text, but, as previously remarked, hers is an edition, to which different rules apply.)

Word division

In modern Italian it is common to elide a final vowel before another vowel beginning the next word. This elision is marked by an apostrophe but no further space, showing that the two words are now being treated as though they were one. The apostrophe nevertheless separates them visually and this is something that the modern reader has come to expect. In the 15th century there were no apostrophes, and words in this relationship were written in an unbroken sequence. The spacing between letters in most of the sources is any case fairly erratic, making it difficult to be sure what was really intended at any given place. Some words appear to fall apart into several separate components, while others are combined into strings that may (or may not) conform to the rhythms of speech. By now, my own reaction to such phenomena will not be unexpected: 'print what you find, as exactly as you can determine it.'

Francalanci in his transcript of **NY** adopted a different practice, separating words that are separate in the modern language, but without apostrophe. I readily admit that this has saved me from making ignorant mistakes. In 'la forttuna', for example, the dancer who has hitherto held the leadership (_signoria_) of the dance 'senescie' with four _meze riprese_. _Senescere_ is a verb that is not found in modern Italian dictionaries, but it is implied by _senescente_, which does; its meaning must obviously be 'to grow old'. It is not difficult to see how this could come to mean 'to reach the age of retirement' and so simply 'to retire from office', which is virtually the meaning required in the dance. This dancer 'retires' both in a literal and in a figurative sense. All of this is speculative and would need confirmation from the major Italian dictionary that takes account of historical development

[5], but is rendered obsolete by Francalanci, who prints 'se n escie'. In other words, speculative retirement is transformed into an everyday exit. This is salutary, but I still do not think that it is part of a transcriber's duty to preserve his readers from ignorant errors. It is his business to reproduce the text in all its idiosyncrasy, and theirs to avoid making fools of themselves. If the editor wants to give extra help, she or he should print the text as written on one page and a cleaned up and modernized version on the opposite page. This gains the best of both worlds, but the 'text as written' is still not negotiable. (Sparti also separates words in the modern manner and moreover includes apostrophes; once again this is her privilege within the conventions of an edition.)

   In **NY** the individual words or word-groups are mostly separated by a little dot. You might think this was useful information, but Francalanci declared: 'where they were deemed to be irrelevant, all marks and points of separation between words as well as corrections, cancellations and blank spaces that are to be found in the original text have not been included in our transcription.' I shall return to corrections and deletions very shortly; as to points of separation, these provide just one example of scribal idiosyncrasies that editors have to decide whether to reproduce or not. There is no answer to that question but personal judgment, but if you do exclude any mark of that kind, you must be sure to do so systematically and without favour. It would be grossly misleading to leave in a proportion of the examples where you yourself were convinced that they carried some special meaning, because by doing so you would actually give them the meaning that they might not really have, and you would deny the reader any opportunity of weighing up the evidence.

Line division
   When a work is written in prose, the division into lines on the page is quite irrelevant to our understanding of the content. It is not irrelevant, however, to the transmission of the text. Mistakes of omission and duplication occur more often at the ends and beginnings of lines, punctuation is sometimes omitted, and it is not unknown for whole lines to drop out during careless copying. In **Pa** the scribe had the habit of starting most lines with a capital letter (lower case was used when the line began in the middle of a word). If, like Bailey and Pleydell, you print the capitals without indicating the division into lines, the reader will at best be puzzled and at worst be misled by the proliferation of capital letters. All in all, in a transcript the division into lines really does need to be indicated.

   This can be done in either of two ways. One method is to use a typographical marker, such as a vertical line, but otherwise to print the text as continuous prose. You must be sure that the marker chosen does not occur as a punctuation mark in the original, or else confusion will obviously result. This is an acceptable solution, even though, for the reader, the constant succession of vertical lines (or whatever) is actually more irritating than to encounter a text printed in the same lines as originally written. The latter is the second alternative, which has many advantages. It allows easy correlation by the editor, and also by the reader if need be, between the transcript and the original text, and it permits a simple reference system by folio and line number that applies equally to both. (Bailley and Pleydell do not

even show the division into folios, let alone their numbering.) On the other hand, when the lines are short, as they are in **Pg** and **Pa**, it may well be thought wasteful of space on the modern page to reproduce the original layout.

Deletions and corrections

I have already quoted Francalanci's statement of policy, which seems to say: 'Print what the scribe really intended and leave his mistakes in decent obscurity.' This exhibits consideration for the scribe's feelings in preference to the reader's desire to understand all aspects of the text as transmitted to us. Scribal mistakes not only tell us something about how the scribe himself worked; they also sometimes tell us something about the material he was working from. In any case, not all scribal corrections were themselves correctly made. I believe that corrections and deletions are part of the evidence which a transcribing editor has a duty to communicate, and that the first version of each word or passage (if legible) should be recorded in a footnote.

Part of the problem can actually lie in recognising where a deletion is intended. Underlining, either with a continuous line or with a row of dots, is a common mark of deletion that is sometimes misunderstood today as simply giving emphasis. Lines of dots continued all the way round a word or letter, or even just one minim within a letter, all indicate that the items so enclosed are to be understood as deleted; they are not just decoration! There is a good deal of this sort of thing in **Pa**, some of which appears in the relevant transcript and some of which does not.

CONCLUSIONS

The examples given should be sufficient to make the point that there is a good deal more to making a satisfactory transcript than at first meets the eye.

Let me try to summarize the general principles involved.

1 The essential purpose of making a transcript is to give as faithful a rendering of the written text as can reasonably be achieved. All other considerations are subservient to this.

2 The editor should study the convenience of the reader, as long as this does not frustrate the purpose of the exercise as already defined. This justifies the use of a standard typeface and the expansion of abbreviations, but not the modernization of spelling and punctuation.

3 The editor should interpose herself or himself as little as possible between the reader and the text. Where it is necessary or useful to do so, she or he should not only state in general terms what is going on, but should contrive some means of letting the reader know exactly which letters or words in each instance are actually affected.

In conclusion, I appreciate that, besides putting forward my own way of doing things, I have been criticizing the work of distinguished colleagues, at least one of whom is in no position to answer back. While this may seem invidious, it is also inevitable. I do think that I am right, but that is not what matters. What matters is that I have set out to justify my methods by reference to carefully stated principles. These principles are now open to challenge, but I hope that, now that they are explicit, they may command general assent and so help to establish that common ground which forms the theme of the present volume.

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