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# THE MISSING LINK

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## INTRODUCTION

Historical Dance is not alone as a field of enquiry in which areas of detailed knowledge alternate with those of virtual ignorance. My title, 'The Missing Link', immediately calls to mind the field of human origins, in which the survival, discovery and recognition of evidence of any kind seems little short of a miracle, and its interpretation is unavoidably controversial when it is so fragmentary and isolated. In Historical Dance we are better off: we have much detailed evidence to work with, but our delight in doing so should not blind us to its limited extent. In assessing this we need to keep in mind our dependence on the written word (or on written symbols substituting for the written word). It was only in certain times and places and in certain social contexts that there was any reason to provide a written description or a key to the dance repertoire then current, and only those dances that fitted the particular circumstances would receive such special treatment.

In general, of course, written notes were only of use to those who could read and write themselves, so we are bound to have far more evidence for the dances of the educated classes than for those of the peasantry. That, however, does not take the implications of the evidence far enough, and I shall need to go through some examples to make my argument clearer.

### Fifteenth-century France and its neighbours

Detailed records of the dance in Europe, as so far known, begin in the mid-fifteenth century. In western Europe north of the Alps the earliest such records are virtually limited to the step-sequences of Basse Dances together with the tenors of the tunes to which they were performed. On internal evidence it would appear that it was common to take well-known songs of the day and convert their tunes into Basse Dance form. This introduced an element of fashion into this kind of dancing; some tunes or dances attained lasting popularity, while others did not. As tunes of different lengths required individually tailored sequences of steps to fit them, it soon became necessary to take systematic notes of an ever-expanding repertoire. It is these notes which have come down to us, recording the step-sequences and often also the tunes of more than 300 Basse Dances.[1,2]

We should not conclude from this abundant evidence that no other kind of dance was being performed in this area between 1450 and 1525, but rather that there was no compelling reason to write them down. We have no cause to exclude the likelihood of traditional figured dances being done by nobility and gentry as well as rustics, in addition to the round dances which we see them doing in contemporary miniatures. It would be reasonable to assume that these inferred traditional dances were exempt from changes of fashion and that therefore there was, in general, no need for note-taking. A recent discovery from Derbyshire is the exception that proves this rule and I shall return to this

later, but, that apart, all we know is Basse Dances and a few other dances that are closely related to them.

**Fifteenth-century Italy**

In north Italy meanwhile, during this same period, a distinctive Lombard style of dancing was being developed and codified by Domenico of Piacenza and his followers. Details of a large and varied repertoire of dances were appended to, or incorporated in, copies of three literary works in genres that were typical of the Italian Renaissance. Domenico and Guglielmo Ebreo produced treatises promoting the status of dancing as one of the accomplishments of men and women of good breeding, while Antonio Cornazano wrote an instructional manual for the pre-teen daughter of a noble patron.[3]

The dances featured were often the creations of named dancing-masters, so it was important to their reputations that dances were given a wide currency. It is probable that many were initially devised for court entertainments, but they could survive thereafter as social dances for fifty years or more. Cornazano, who was a performer but not himself a choreographer, seems to imply that some of the older dances had become too widely known (presumably amongst the bourgeoisie) to be worth describing to his noble reader. There is thus less reason in Italy to suggest that there might be a substantial body of unrecorded dances, apart from those of peasants, but we should still be careful not to assume that we know essentially all there is to know about dance in fifteenth-century Italy. Where after all did Domenico and his followers get their ideas from ? Nobody starts from nothing, and the repertoire is strikingly varied in its choreography, even if using a more or less standardized step-system.

***MOVIMENTI* IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND**

These musings are prompted by a curious occurrence in the seventeenth-century record of an English country dance of an instance of that fifteenth-century step-system. In looking for some kind of connection between the two I shall be exploring still further the boundaries of terra incognita within the field of Historical Dance.

The country dance is 'Parsons farewell', included in John Playford, *The English Dancing Master* (1651). The relevant passage comprises the first figure, which reads as follows:

> *Men rise once, Wemen rise once, rise all foure times, turne each others Woman. Wemen rise once, men once, rise all foure times, turne each others woman.*

Anyone familiar with the fifteenth-century Italian repertoire will recognise the presence here of what Domenico and Cornazano called the *movimento*. This term simply means 'movement', which tells us little, though Cornazano added that it was a decent gesture from the man to his partner that could be made quite properly in public. This gloss might be thought to imply that in some quarters propriety was not, or had not been, adequately maintained … The equivalent movement in later fifteenth-century sources was called *scosso* or *squassetto*, both of which mean some kind of a shake, while a letter of 1517 now surviving in Nuremberg interestingly uses the term *alzada*, which means 'rise' (thus anticipating the usage displayed in Playford).

However these various movements or gestures were performed, including that in 'Parsons farewell', they are shown to be equivalent, not only occurring in several versions of particular dances, but also by the way in which they were actually used within such dances. Typically, a *movimento* (or equivalent) was first made by the man (or men, if there were more than one), to which the woman (or women, as the case may have been) responded by making another – though other sequences were also possible. Often some other step or steps followed. Then the whole sequence was repeated, with the woman (or women) leading. In 'Parsons farewell' the sequence is elaborated with four further rises done by all together, but complex sequences of *movimenti* were not unknown in the fifteenth century either (e.g. in 'Anello' and 'Tesara'). We may finally note that exchanges of *movimenti* were typical of *piva,* the briskest of the Italian measures, while 'Parsons farewell' is also usually taken at a particularly brisk pace, though on what authority I cannot myself say.

All in all, I am left in no doubt that there are *movimenti* in 'Parsons farewell', and this leaves a tiresome itch to make some kind of connection. I try to ignore it, but it will not go away!

## PRECURSORS OF ENGLISH COUNTRY DANCE

In seeking antecedents or parallels for characteristic elements of English Country Dance our first port of call must be the group of manuscripts that record what were known in the seventeenth century as 'The Old Measures'.[4,5] These dances appear to be Elizabethan in origin, and some display features that they share with known country dances. Some are, for instance, divided into a simple introduction (done to the A music) and a slightly more elaborate figure (done to the B music). The introduction is often of two doubles, repeated. All these features are shared with Arbeau's Branles as well as with country dances and must be the common coinage of vernacular European figured dance at that time.

Among the Old Measures and other dances described in the same sources the introduction in a given dance might be elaborated by insertion of another phrase of dance after each pair of doubles. This was usually the sequence so familiar from country dance: 'Set and turne Single'. In dances where the combination of introduction and figure was repeated, there might be variation of either introduction or figure, or indeed both, at the repeat; or the first introduction might be replaced with a set of honours. What we do not find is the standardized sequence of introductions featured in a great many of the 1651 country dances, in which three figures are introduced successively by the following three sequences: (first) 'Lead up all a Double forwards and back'; (second) 'Sides all'; (third) 'Arms all'. Yet siding and arming are to be found in a source of 1602, but for this we have to move to Italy.

### Sixteenth-century Italy

Our source is Cesare Negri.[6] Arming is very clearly featured in his *balletto* 'Il Bianco fiore'. The introduction to the third part of this dance has each of the two men taking right arms with the woman on his right and turning her all the way round with two standard Pavan doubles or *seguiti ordinarii*. He then takes two further doubles to circle round his left shoulder. The pattern is repeated with the woman on his left, taking

left arms with her, thereafter turning in a circle to his right. It is surely significant that in this figure (and this figure alone within this dance) the dancers take arms rather than hands. The intervening phrase of dance is not 'Set and turn Single' but 'Turn with two Doubles', yet it occupies the same position and also the same musical time as the English Country Dance equivalent. The structure is virtually identical.

My example of siding in Negri is less immediately obvious and could fairly be described as controversial. I have recently argued that this is to be seen in his *balletto* 'Sò ben mi chi ha buon tempo'.[7] Here the man and his partner face each other and perform two doubles of a particular kind. If they had been ordinary doubles, the dancers would have been advancing to stand shoulder to shoulder and then retreating back to place. On an intervening phrase they change places. They then repeat the sequence with the other foot leading, advancing to the other shoulder and falling back, before crossing back to their original places. But the doubles are not ordinary doubles; they are *doppi in ripresa minuta*, which involves them in crablike sideways movements. Nevertheless the pattern is that of siding, and the way in which it is used in its immediate context can be regarded as broadly similar to that familiar from English Country Dance.

Of course, neither of these *balletti* is in any sense a country dance or remotely like one. Negri has simply made use of a familiar dance phrase, just as he uses a hay in Part Four of 'Il Bianco fiore'. Although hays are common in English Country Dance, they are also to be found in one of Arbeau's Branles as well as in Italian court dances throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Hays are as much a part of the common tradition of European dance as is the use of singles and doubles. What we have to consider is whether siding and arming are also to be regarded as part of this common currency, or if we have to suppose that Negri was himself familiar with English Country Dance, as would be perfectly possible, considering that it was taken up at court in the latter part of Elizabeth I's reign. For the moment I shall leave this question open.

For the middle part of the sixteenth century our only major source is the unpublished manuscript of Il Papa in New York. This features frequent hays, but otherwise contributes nothing to the present discussion.

**Fifteenth-century Italy**

Moving back into the fifteenth century, we find a good deal of interest and especially in the dances of Domenico. His *ballo* 'Tesara', with its use of ribbons or kerchiefs, has a strong folk-dance flavour and involves a lot of passing up and down a longways set. The longways set recurs in 'La giloxia' and 'Pizochara', both of which contain progressions or hays that would not be out of place in an English Country Dance. (Indeed, in a variant of 'Gelosia' mentioned in the New York manuscript of Guglielmo's treatise that dance is converted essentially into a longways dance for as many as will: *posono esere moltisime chopie* (there can be very many couples). Even more suggestive is Guglielmo's *ballo* 'Colonnese', which not only includes a progression, but the following figure: 'Fall back a Double on your sides, meet again turning Single.'

Once again, these are not country dances, but they have borrowed elements that will one day be found in English Country Dances. Even 'Tesara' is not a folk-dance: it is an interpretation of folk-dancing in terms of the Lombard style. I am reminded of orches-

tral arrangements of folk-songs; you know where they are coming from, but they are not themselves folk-songs.

## CONCLUSION

When I put all these parallels and coincidences together, the explanation that I find plausible is to suppose a substantial body of European vernacular figured dance, otherwise invisible, on which the various national traditions and individual choreographers have drawn. I recognise that there is something rather unsatisfactory in explaining one phenomenon by means of another for which there is no independent evidence. Astronomers do this all the time, but in the arts (and especially in historical studies) this procedure is viewed with suspicion, because it is too convenient and because supposition is too easily converted into dogma. Yet I feel that this hypothesis is at least as good as any other that is available. Perhaps this is what everyone already believes, but had never thought worthwhile to state in public or put into print.

## A NEW DISCOVERY

And now there really is some evidence, not indeed conclusive, but certainly consistent with the picture that my imagination has been drawing in previous paragraphs. In 1996 Professor David Fallows made the first publication of a collection of dances found in a late-fifteenth-century pocket-book now in the Derbyshire Record Office.[8] This source contains, first of all, a list of 91 dance titles in approximate alphabetical order; then, verbal descriptions in English of 26 of them; and, finally, the tenors of 13 tunes, presumably for some of the same dances, though not all are adequately identified. A study of the character of these dances by Dr Jennifer Nevile is forthcoming in the next issue of *Early Music*.

The conclusion reached by these two commentators is that the Derbyshire dances have nothing in common with French Basse Dance, but both the choreographies and the tunes bear a family resemblance to what we know from contemporary Italy. I would not suggest they are close enough to be regarded as siblings, bur certainly cousins. By this I mean that I see them as having a common ancestry in what I described above as 'European vernacular figured dance'.

I should perhaps add that there is no very close resemblance to English Country Dance as we know it, but there is nevertheless enough to justify claiming the Derbyshire dances as forming at any rate one of its forebears.

So, what eventually of *movimenti* in 'Parsons farewell' ? This does seem a very specific coincidence, and the connection here still appears to be undetected. But perhaps *movimenti* too, whether coarse or more refined, were a feature of the common vernacular figured dance tradition that I have been suggesting. It seems easier to propose that than to find a more direct link between fifteenth-century 'Anello' and seventeenth-century 'Parsons farewell'.

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