

Problems and Possible Solutions in Fifteenth-Century French Basse Dance

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Introduction

With the French Basse Dance, we exchange the uncertainties of the Italian sources described by Cruickshank for the relatively straightforward account of dancing that we encounter in France and Burgundy.¹

It follows from that statement that I am not planning to devote space to the so-called ‘Nancy dances’, apparently written down by Jean of Orléans in about 1445.² Although these seven dances include the earliest examples of the Basse Dance for which we have step-sequences, they display so many differences from what comes later that, in the absence of any information about the music to which they were performed, we still have no sure basis on which to attempt a reconstruction. I am therefore leaving the Nancy dances out of account and am concentrating on the prime sources for classic fifteenth-century Basse Dance, both of which are now believed to date from the final decade of the century.

The sources

The first of these is actually the earliest known printed book on dancing in Europe. It survives in a single copy, now in the library of the Royal College of Physicians in London, and was issued in Paris around 1495 by Michel Toulouze.³ It is usual to refer to this source by his name, simply as ‘*Toulouze*’.

The parallel source has a very similar content, but a very different appearance. This is the handwritten book known as ‘the book of Basse Dances of Marguerite of Austria’, the lady who later governed the Netherlands as Regent on behalf of her nephew, Charles V. The manuscript is written with gold and silver inks on black-dyed parchment.⁴ It has been dated at various times, though with little reason, to about 1430 and to about 1470, but is now seen as having been made for presentation to Marguerite probably between 1497 and 1501.⁵ It is today in the Royal Library in Brussels and is often referred to as ‘the Brussels MS’, or simply as ‘*Brussels*’.

These two sources are clearly copies, probably at several removes, of the same original document. This document comprised a short treatise, for which they give nearly identical texts differing only at a few points (to which we shall inevitably return), followed by an appendix containing tunes and step-sequences for a substantial sample of actual dances. *Toulouze* has the details of 48 dances, five of which are not now present in *Brussels*, while *Brussels* includes 58 dances, of which 15 are not found in *Toulouze*. Putting both texts together, we have details for 63 dances in all, most (but not all) of which are in conventional Basse Dance form.

A Teach-Yourself manual

I have described the document as a ‘treatise’, but it is (in fact) quite explicitly a ‘Teach-Yourself manual’, entitled ‘*Lart et instruction de bien dancier*’. It describes how to do the steps of the Basse Dance, of which there are four; it explains the structure of this dance, which is characteristically divided into *mesures* (measures) within which steps are supposed

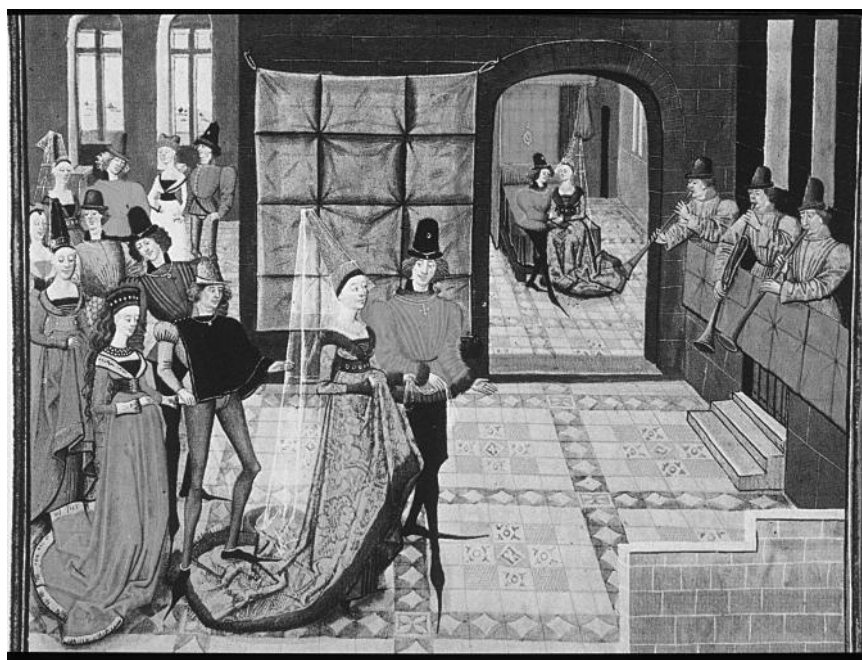


Figure 1. ‘Marriage of Renaut de Montauban’ (miniature by Loyset Liédet, 1468).

to be arranged in accordance with set conventions; and it gives enough worked-out examples of step-sequences for actual dances in the back of the book to give the student a flying start. The corresponding tunes are also present.

The only major feature of the Basse Dance to receive no attention in this manual is the floor-pattern. We get no help from sixteenth-century sources either, not even from Arbeau. Evidently, anyone wishing to learn the Basse Dance was expected to know how it proceeded on the floor. There are nevertheless hints both in the sixteenth-century sources and in general literature, first, that this was a dance for a single couple and, secondly, that it was taken alternately up and down the room.

Of these two statements, the former is the more secure. It was certainly possible for more than one couple to take the floor at the same time if you had the space; and at an informal dance it was even permissible for one man to partner two women, with one on either hand; but the dance was still essentially a single-couple dance. The processional Basse Dance performed by a number of couples advancing in a column is nothing but the invention of nineteenth-century scholars misinterpreting pictures of processions made to musical accompaniment in various contexts unconnected with dancing. I will take just one example, often reproduced in books on dancing because of the charmingly unconvincing stance of the man in second position (Figure 1).⁶ There is, however, no reason to suggest that this scene shows anything other than a wedding procession. There, in the background, are the bridal couple sitting on the end of the matrimonial bed in the matrimonial chamber; and there, in the foreground, we see them again at the head of the procession that has brought them there. The three musicians in the gallery prove that the groom is a man of substance and position, but not that the couples are dancing. (Dancing did take place at the wedding festivities, but in my opinion that is not what this picture shows.)

As to going up and down the room along the same direct path, Arena (in the second quarter of the 16th century) describes a venue in which the cleared dancing space is not wide enough for any other pattern.⁷ This chimes well with what appears to be the earliest description of the Basse Dance, which is in Alain Chartier's great poem, *Le Livre de Quatre Dames*, of a hundred years earlier:⁸

<i>Amour compasse</i>	Love disposes
<i>Ses faiz comme la dance basse:</i>	his actions like the Basse Dance:
<i>Puis va avant et puis rappasse,</i>	now he advances and then passes back again,
<i>Puis retourne, puis outrepasse.</i>	then returns, then passes beyond.

If this floor pattern is correctly conceived, it does at least provide a plausible explanation of the *mesures* into which the Basse Dance is so obsessively divided. These *mesures* are not thought to correspond with similar strains in the accompanying music, but if they mark out the distance that it was comfortable to advance on a normal dance-floor, their function in the dance thereby becomes understandable.

The practical problems

My introductory summary of what we know about the Basse Dance may give the impression that there are no significant problems to be addressed. If we have an actual contemporary teach-yourself manual (which was, incidentally, reissued in a revised edition in the sixteenth century)⁹ and can supply certain details that the manual did not trouble to provide, we must appear to be well provided for. This is the sort of information that we so notoriously lack in 15th-century Italy.

It is when you actually attempt to perform the dances that the problems start to come into view.

I am not going to say anything here about the music. Lack of comprehension of the fifteenth-century Basse Dance tunes, presented (as they are) in equal notes, held up study of these dances for a good long time, but we now have an agreed interpretation of these as being effectively the tenors of a conventional setting in several parts. This interpretation is not without its own problems, in that these dances were commonly performed to the accompaniment of a single instrument, but from our point of view as practical dancers we now have no difficulty in obtaining music, whether live or recorded, that we are ready and able to dance to. What then about the other elements of the Basse Dance that I have already referred to?

Floor pattern

Let us begin with the floor pattern. If successive *mesures* were taken in alternate directions, how did the dancers turn round in order to come back the other way? We know what they did in Italy in similar circumstances: they dropped hands and each made a half-turn on the spot. This had the interesting result of putting the woman temporarily on the left of her man as they faced in the new direction, and thus in notional control of the dance. Such changes of role were a common feature of contemporary Italian dancing, but are nowhere mentioned in French sources, which state simply that the man takes his woman in his right hand. This silence is hardly conclusive, when the change of direction is not mentioned either, but I am not convinced that this is the French way.

A simple solution, if there were enough space for it, would be for the man to lead his partner round in a loop into a position from which they could make their return. On this basis, they would advance on the first *measure*, make their turn on the second *measure*, return to their starting position on the third, and turn again on the fourth. This succession agrees well with a commonly found sequence of *measures* in which two different sorts alternate with each other: *a, b, a, b*, etc. In dances of this type the *a measure* was normally a little longer than the *b measure*. This is certainly neat, but as there were many other patterns of repetition, it can hardly be said to be conclusive.

A third possibility is described by Arbeau, writing in 1589 but recalling his youthful experience in Poitou in the 1540s. This is a manoeuvre that he called *conversion*, in which the man guided his partner in a half-circle round to the left until she stood in the place he was currently in, while he at the same time made a half-circle backwards into her place.¹⁰ In other words, they rotated as a couple anticlockwise through 180°. This can be best executed on a *pas double*. It has to be said that Arbeau does not introduce this manoeuvre as a means of turning round near the beginning of a new *measure*, and also that *conversion* was quite unknown to Arena in the Dauphiné in 1528.¹¹ Perhaps this is one of those differences that I am beginning to think that I can detect between various regional traditions of the Basse Dance. What impresses me, however, is how well this manoeuvre is adapted to dancing in the fifteenth century, when fashionable ladies wore gowns with trains that seriously inhibited backward movement. In Arbeau's youth, to save your partner from having to travel backwards would have been a politeness, but fifty years before it would have been a necessity. So, despite the lack of evidence from our fifteenth-century sources, I commend this expedient for consideration.

Steps

It is time to look at the steps used in Basse Dance. As already noted, they are individually described in the manual, but unfortunately these descriptions have been degraded as they passed from one copy to another. Of the four steps involved, only the *pas double* is described in terms that are detailed, clear, unambiguous and not contradictory. We learn that it is made 'by raising the body and stepping forward lightly three times', presumably on alternate feet. We may suppose that you 'raise the body' by lifting your heels, so the steps will be made on the toe; and you will then need to lower the heel of the supporting foot at the end of each *pas double* in order to take up the starting position for the next one.

If we know how to make a *pas double*, we should have no problem with the *pas simple*, which will be similar, but with only one forward step in place of three. So indeed *Brussels* tells us, but *Toulouze* insists that the first of the two *pas simples* that always come together should be made, not 'while raising the body', but 'while inclining the body'. This makes little sense. Not only should we expect the *pas simple* and *pas double* to be made in a similar style, but it is improbable that the very first step of the couple's advance up the room should involve some sort of stooping movement. When you recall that both texts are copied from the same original and that for the most part they differ only in their spelling, it is obvious that something has gone wrong. (There is in fact a similar confusion in the description of the *desmarche* that we shall come to shortly.) Luckily, the text in *Brussels* is convincing, so we can follow that.

About the *branle* there is little that can be added to the meagre description given in both sources. 'The *branle* should begin with the left foot and should end with the right foot; and

it is called *branle* because it oscillates (*branle*) from one foot onto the other'. In Italy and in Spain the equivalent movement was analysed as two matching steps called *continenze/continencies*, starting on the left foot, but we do not know exactly how these were done, and even if we did, there is nothing to say that the French version would have been identical.

That leaves the *desmarche*, which served both as a reverence at the beginning of the dance and also could be called *reprise* when it occurred after the *pas doubles* in the body of each *mesure*. This double role is helpful to us, both because the step is described twice and because its form has to satisfy both functions. What I mean by that is that what you do when you make a *reprise* should look sensible when the same action serves as a reverence, and vice versa. I don't think I can believe in a succession of three kneeling reverences in the second half of most Basse Dance *mesures* in the 15th century.

So what have we got? The description of the reverence makes good sense, even if it is somewhat lacking in detail. 'One makes reverence to the woman, inclining towards her, and this inclination should be done using the left foot.' In so far as it is done with the left foot and towards the woman, this resembles the *second* in the sequence of *reprises* that we shall encounter in a moment. The fact that the first and second *reprises* are described differently, as we shall see, is only one of their puzzling features. And, of course, nothing is said either in relation to the reverence or indeed anywhere else of what the woman is doing. (Is this the same as for the man, or not?)

When we come to the *desmarche*-as-*reprise*, we encounter again the discrepancy between a step made 'inclining the body' in *Toulouze* and 'raising the body' in *Brussels*. In face of this contradiction we are again entitled to consider plausibility: in a step that is capable of serving as a reverence, we do not expect the body to be raised, but we may well expect it to be inclined; so this time we are bound to favour *Toulouze*, which gives us the following.

'One *desmarche* on its own should be made using the right foot, drawing back, and it is called *desmarche* (retreat) because one draws back, and it should be done inclining your body and you should draw back the right foot near the other foot.'

It is none too clear if the dancer moves his foot twice or only once. The movement is equally puzzling in either case: if you stand with your feet level and move the right foot back either once or twice, how can it then end up next to the other one? The verb is *reculer*, and even in the fifteenth century there is nothing to suggest it could have the meaning of 'put back' in the sense of 'replace'. Frank Perenboom had a simple answer to this question at the Ghent conference three years ago: if you make a half-turn halfway through the step, you can step back with the right foot twice and still return to your original position, though you will end facing back the way you came. This could be a useful manoeuvre, as we have already seen. But most fifteenth-century *mesures* had a sequence of three *desmarches*. To make a row of three half-turns in this way one after the other seems a good deal less likely; and not to mention the turn at all when describing the step appears peculiarly unhelpful even by the standards of this source. Moreover, if the second *desmarche* really is performed differently (as is possible), you would not even end up facing back the way you had come unless it was a *mesure* that had only a single *desmarche*.

Let us look now at the second *desmarche*.

‘The second *desmarche* should be done using the left foot, inclining your body in like fashion, and you should turn a little towards the woman, then take the right foot near to the left inclining your body in like fashion.’

This is still a bit peculiar, but our only difficulty lies in deciding in how many places to make corrections. Having inclined the body in the first part of the step, we should surely raise it again in the second part, but should we be closing the right foot to the left as the text says, or should we be closing the left foot to the right? When we do not understand how the first *desmarche* is executed, we can hardly use it to clarify how to do the second, and unfortunately the same argument must apply in the reverse direction also.

For practical purposes, it is not difficult to devise a form of *desmarche* that looks convincing both as a reverence and a reprise, but we have to recognise that it bears only a passing resemblance to the descriptions given in contemporary texts. As for the *branle*, any movement that goes first onto the left foot and then onto the right will serve, without there being any danger of contradiction. In the sixteenth century they put much store on eye contact during the *branle*, so the woman must at that time have been going onto the right foot first and then the left—but we do not know whether this applies also to the fifteenth-century style that we are now discussing. Luckily, we do know more about how to make the *pas simple* and *pas double* than we do for the Italian *passo sempio* and *passo doppio*, so we can still claim that advantage.

The step-sequence

Finally, there is the step-sequence, to which so much attention was paid at the time. What distinguished one dance from another was the tune and the step-sequence. The successful marriage of tune and steps depended on there being the same number of notes in the tune (in the form that it was presented in those documents that gave the tune) as there were full steps in the step-sequence. (I say ‘full steps’ because a pair of *pas simples* only counted as one step between them.)

It is easy, when looking at any of the fifteenth- or sixteenth-century sources giving step-sequences for the Basse Dance, to suppose that each sequence of steps (after allowing for scribal or printers’ errors) is a record of the correct way in which to perform a particular dance. I have no doubt at all that this is not the case, at least in the fifteenth century. It is a record of *one* correct way to do that dance, but it is not the *only* way. This is made quite clear by *Toulouze* and *Brussels*, which contain eleven dances with the same name and tune that nevertheless are given radically different step-sequences, often in a different number of *mesures*, in the two sources. Evidently the step-sequences given are no more than suggestions, even if most of them have gained general currency. This draws attention to the assertion in *Brussels* that ‘to dance a Basse Dance correctly, two things are needed: first, to know the number of steps in each Basse Dance and, second, to know how to make them in that number.’ In other words, the man must be aware of the number of steps, and he must also be able to put together a step-sequence that will work. Usually, we may suppose that he will have memorised a sequence that has been devised for this particular dance, but, failing that, he could perfectly well substitute the sequence for some other dance of the same length that he happened to know. Or indeed, as Frank Perenboom explained at Ghent, if he was an expert, he could actually improvise what was needed.

What Perenboom did not refer to, and what is seldom discussed, is the effect of these conventions on the man's partner. It has been suggested to me that women of leisure would probably have known the standard step-sequences, if anything, better than their menfolk. But if there was no single standard, there was no guarantee that her version of the dance was going to match his, and if he substituted something else (improvised or not), she certainly would not know what was coming. This implies that any competent male dancer should have been skilled in leading his partner through the dance, and that she should have been equally adept at following his lead. There is more involved in this than merely responding to forward or backward pressure with the hand. After making the first or third of a sequence of *pas doubles*, forward pressure could be signalling either another two *pas doubles* or, alternatively, a pair of *pas simples*. There would have had to have been some agreed signal or combination of signals that made this distinction, unless this were done simply by word of mouth.

When a man danced the Basse Dance, he was thus responsible for a great deal more than simply recalling the memorised sequence of steps. If he was dancing with an unaccustomed partner, he had (if necessary) to be capable of guiding her through the sequence that he was intending to use. He also had to make decisions about where and how to turn back before he reached the end of the room. And, of course, he should be able to do all this as if he were not doing it at all. She, for her part, had to be able to follow his lead, also without appearing to do so. Dancing the Basse Dance involved a good deal more than maintaining a dignified bearing and moving with a sense of style, however important those might be.

References

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11. See note 7.