Dramatic gesture in European dance sources 1450–1720

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A look of disdain

The content of this paper was prompted by the conference title, for as I see it gesture exists at the point where dance and drama fuse.

I shall focus on gesture notated in dances from five treatises on dance, namely those of Domenico da Piacenza *c*. 1450, Arbeau *c*. 1588, Cesare Negri *c*. 1602, Gregorio Lambranzi *c*. 1716 and John Weaver *c*. 1718. I shall define gesture as any specified external movement of the body described in addition to the choreographic core of steps and patterns. From the common criteria for the assessment of gesture, that is:

a. Countenance
b. Bodily parts
c. Voice

I shall require only the first two.

The nature of the gestures will be defined from its content and context, as to whether it conveys:

a. Emotion
b. Character
c. Narrative
d. Symbolic or Representational Action.

And whether or not it is notated specifically in the accompanying music, and thus helping to determine if the gesture is to be made separately or alongside the steps. After looking at the gestures in context the following questions can be asked :

a. Are the gestures integral to the execution of the dance?
b. Could the dance exist adequately without them?
c. Why are they included?
d. Are they unique or based on an existing code? Are any visual clues provided? Have they evolved organically from past performance?
e. Finally is it possible to gain any deeper understanding of the form and nature of these dances by examining the gestures in order to place them in a wider social or performance context?
f. And why do some people dislike doing them?

Domenico: Sobria

In our earliest known European dance treatise many of Domenico's dances, though predominantly for noble social performance and recreation, are notable for their distinctive dramatic qualities, in the subtle juxtaposition of choreographic elements, semi narrative, gender imbalance and brief suggestion of emotion. One dance uses dance and drama in equal measure, Sobria a ballo for six. It has a strong narrative form and content and includes several gestures written into the text and the music. Four men pursue a knight and his lady ensnaring her after the opening salterelli. In pairs the men take turns to importune the lady, and she responds "como disdegnosa, tirisi uno poco indietro e voltige le spale"[1], she withdraws from them with a look of disdain and turns her shoulders from them. The men force

themselves upon her and signal to one another, the first of each pair specifically with his right hand urges his companion to chat her up. his companion replies signalling with his left hand that he has tried but, no luck, "non a voluto fare lui"[2], the whole according to the late Andrea Francalanci being the equivalent of a suggestive "nudge nudge, wink wink – nothing doing" and would surely have been accompanied by further facial and bodily embellishment. Their threatening behaviour prompts the lady to back away and turn with "una ciera tuta turbato"[3], a turbulent air. The couple finally escape with four frantic piva steps "in paura"[4] in fear of the men who remain threatening, "non lo serino"[5] to the end.

The gestures are obviously an essential part of this dance but turn it into a form unlike any other in the text.

Arbeau: Mimed branles

In his Orchesography, a manual for social dancing and music, Arbeau includes a number of dances which although in branle form, he also calls "branles morgues"[6], mimed branles. Originally called ballets, they were created for mascerades, of which there appear to have been many in Langres at that time, and proved so popular that the young people brought them into the ballroom, where it seems "la plupart sont dancez avec mines, morgues e gesticulations." They continued to retain their mimed elements. A quick resumé provides a wealth of detail[7]:

Branles des Maltes, devised by the Knights of Malta for a court mascerade was first danced in France some forty years earlier, by an equal number of men and ladies in a circle. Arbeau notates these in with the music, and says that for each repetition of the dance new facial expressions and gestures are made such as "touchemens de mains"[8], "elevations d'icelles avec admiration, la teste elevee au ciel"[9].

In *Branles des Chevaux* dancers are instructed to tap their feet on specific beats in imitation of impatient horses.

Inhabitants of Langres adapt their native *Branle des Sabots* to create a new mascerade dance, basing it on a Roman source, reinvented as *La Mere Folie* whose gestures have to be emulated by a string of fools.

Branle des Lavandiere is based on the working patterns of washer women beating laundry on the banks of the Seine. The dancers not only imitate by beating their hands to mime the actions and sounds, but extend the dance into narrative as couples take turns in re-enacting domestic discord, placing their hands on their hips and "menacent du doight"[10] all timed absolutely to the music.

Branle des Hermites, has its roots in the mascerade in which young men were dressed in garments like those worn by hermits. The origins of such disguise were probably not as Arbeau feared, irreligious in intent but were often a means of gaining entry to a forbidden place or person. Again the gestures are linked to the music, and the dancers have to cross their arms and bow their heads "as young novices do in greeting"[11].

Negri: La battaglia

Negri's treatise contains dances for the use of the Italian nobility in a formal social setting. However a number are included for wider performance in intermedi and commedia for celebratory court functions. Themes and characters are embellished by costume and props but no gesture or mime is given. Two of his ballroom dances do contain gesture. *La battaglia*

for two couples and *Il Torneo Amoroso* for one couple both symbolise the Pas d'Armes and the Tourney which in themselves were ritual forms of ancient battle.

La Battaglia contains a series of thirteen short dance patterns each set to its own passage of music. The stylised battle between the sexes develops from challenge and skirmish to battle, retreat and peace, all conveyed in the choreography and the gestures which occur in parts six and seven, "sfidandosi a battaglia l'uno a l'altro". The gentleman who leads the dance "dare un colpo alia sua da man, Battendo insieme tutte due le mani, la dama fa un altre colpo conle mani" and as the first couple advance and retreat in a symbolic act of attack with their hands the other couple do likewise[12]. In figure 7 they use their hands and shoulders to create further aggression. In close proximity they present arms and following the detailed mime linked directly to the music, they produce a volley of irregular blows, the man raining four quickly on the lady's right hand, after they have clashed two together, then three are given "alte and adagio" on the left and the right[13]. All is repeated on the other side. The gestures are of course integral to the dance, but there is no mention of any facial response to this formal dance game.

Lambranzi: Blacksmiths' dance

Lambranzi's *New and Curious School of Theatrical Dancing* contains 101 dances for theatrical performance. The illustrations suggest they are for professional dancers, yet the D.I.Y. self assembly choreography kit and reference to "the people's delight"[14] suggest a wider clientele.

Either way the potential for dramatic as well as dance interpretation is endless, as the content ranges from the exotic to the fantastic, gypsy, peasant and social vignettes, sporting themes, artisan numbers, Venetian specialities and many Commedia pieces. All are brief novelty items each with their own music and splendid illustrations. Gestures abound, narrative, emotional, symbolic and representational and comical as for example "Enter two old women half walking half shaking and scratch themselves before and behind"[15], but the only ones that are specifically tied to the music are those representing trades, the Cobbler, the Cooper and the Blacksmith. The Cobbler must wax his thread, thread his needle and ply his stitching to the beats and "the dancer who can imitate these actions is to be commended"[16]. Two blacksmiths must "forge a nail in time with the music until the air has been played once. Then one lays down his hammer and dances chasses, ballones, pirouettes and pas de rigadoun until the air has been repeated; meanwhile the other one forges. Finally they both dance together and exit."[17] Popular pieces for a wide audience.

Weaver: Pantomimic dance for Vulcan and Venus

In 1718 John Weaver, dancer, dancing master, dance historian and choreographer presented "The Loves of Mars and Venus" at Drury Lane, in imitation of performances he believed to have been given in classical Greece and Rome.

"It will be necessary that I let my reader know that these Mimes and Pantomimes were Dances that represented a story or fable in Motion and Measure. They were in imitation of all things as the name of Pantomime imports and performed by Gesture and the Action of the Hands, Fingers, Legs and Feet without making use of the tongue. The Face or Countenance had a large share in this Performance and they imitated the Manners, Passions and Affectations by numerous Variety of Gesticulations."[18]

Anxious that his dancers, who were professional performers, should execute this ancient art form "in a design so entirely novel and foreign to their present Manner of Dancing"[19] to the best of their ability, and that audience and reader should understand "that it is not to be attained without difficulty and application"[20], Weaver provides 21 gestures described in detail to be used by the three main characters Venus, Vulcan and Mars. He gives brief mention of Battle mime with shields and swords, Cyclops forging metal on an anvil "to a Rough Consort of Musick adapted to the particular sounds of the shop."[21] Describing the Love Interest in Scene IV he assumes that the gestures here "are so obviously relating only to Gallantry and Love that they need no Explanation."[22]

I shall focus on Scene 2 which contains a dance which expressly uses gestures from his list:

> Enter to Venus, Vulcan: They perform a dance together; in which Vulcan expresses his Admiration; Jealousie; Anger; and Despite: And Venus shews Neglect; Coquetry; Contempt; and Disdain.[23]

> This last Dance being altogether of the Pantomimic kind; it is necessary that the Spectator should know some of the most particular Gestures made use of therein; and what Passions, or Affections, they discover; represent; or expres.[24]

And I shall carry out his request, quoting from the text to indicate his level of detail and attempting to briefly show them in action.

> ADMIRATION. Admiration is discovered by the raising up of the right Hand, the Palm turn'd upwards, the Fingers clos'd; and in one Motion the Wrist turn'd round and Fingers spread; the Body reclining, and Eyes fix'd on the Object[25]

> JEALOUSY. Jealousy will appear by the Arms suspended, or a particular pointing the middle Finger to the Eye; by an irresolute movement throughout the Scene, and a Thoughtfulness of Countenance[26]

> CONTEMPT. Contempt is expressed by scornful Smiles; forbidding Looks; tossing of the Head; filliping of the Fingers; and avoiding the Object[27]

> DISTASTE. The left hand thrust forth with the Palm turn'd backward; the left Shoulder rais'd, and the Head bearing towards the Right[28]

There is no time today to discuss possible contemporary sources Weaver may have drawn on for these gestures, but he cites his deliberate intention of emulating the ancient pantomimes to create his "Great new Design"[29] but he is conscious of his work being too modern. His courage and vision enable us to gain a greater perspective on the art of gesture and its origins, which is emerging as a fresh field of research today. John Jory's current research on Pantomime Masks and their context confirms public performance of masked mime from the third century B.C.E. in which a solo dancer, an orchestes or pantomimus, danced all the roles of a story in succession, accompanied by a chorus and musicians.[30]

Lambranzi also drew on old forms to create new dances, in particular those of the Italian commedia, which by 1716 had gained its title dell' Arte but lost its unique verbal and physical originality, and the following extract gives us some insight into the style of his dances.

The improvised drama began, it seems to stultify and decline. The materials were becoming ossified, performer extravagances had crept in, public tastes had changed and the form was progressively displaced by more winning novelties – elaborate stage decoration appealed to high baroque taste – characterisation reduced to glib stereotype and comic sentimentality.[31]

No justification is needed for Negri's use of mimed aggression in La Battaglia. Every society has its own war dances, whether to re-enact past victories, to practise manoeuvres or a deep seated need from common man to nobility to dress up and fight. In 1286 when Henry II king of Cyprus came to Acre, they held a festival "with jousting and tourneys and they imitated the Round Table and the Queen of Femenie: that is to say the Knights dressed as ladies and jousted together. And they played at being Lancelot and Tristan and Palamedes with many other fine games (jeus)."[32] Negri himself draws on classical themes as was then the fashion, to form the core of his Armenian Pastorale in his treatise.

Arbeau makes constant reference to the classical past of Greece and Rome, stating knowledgeably that dance and gesture were an integral part of theatrical performance. He sees even social dance as "a kind of mute rhetoric" between the sexes and "when miming is added she has the power to stir his emotions, now to anger, now to pity and commiseration, now to hate, now to love."[33] The gestures of the mascerade still retain their credibility in the ballroom.

Domenico's *Sobria* is a unique combination of dance as performance and recreation. It is the only one of his balli from the 1450 text not to be included in later 15th century Italian works. It is my belief that although one of our first known dances, it a record of one of the last forms of dance drama, games, that formed part of a standard repertoire from at least the 13th century onwards, whether for pleasure, exercise, entertainment, social ritual or therapy. Jacques Bretel a trouvere describes all these in the Tournai de Chauvency 1285, by the court of Lorraine after each day of a week's tournament.

> After the wine, they drew together
> and began to inquire of each other
> who knows how to do the beguinage,
> the hermit, the pilgrimage,
> the provencal, the robardel,
> Berenger or the chapelet,
> Or some game to cheer
> And comfort the wounded
> Who are bruised and hurt.[34]

A fragmentary description of gestures and steps are given in more a detailed account in the performance of the of the little thief, who "dances and prances and hoots and leaps, and laughing tosses the apple, then slaps the ground with his hands"[35] and in the pastoral narrative of the Garland dance, providing what Nancy Regolado in her work on such Dance Games calls "A general code of early choreography"[36].

In this brief look at gesture in dance, common threads of form and theme emerge and reappear, in both social and theatrical sources. Each text draws on traces of its own past history . Each in turn moves the dance on to a new dimension in the use of gesture and mime, in order to tell its own story and creates greater understanding for us. And hopefully

we shall continue this organic process, as in the words of John Weaver, we make "an Attempt to encourage others more capable of bringing it to its Ancient Perfection"[37].

References

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