

‘We’ll Have a Crash Here in the Yard’

English Country Dance in early modern stage plays: an introduction*

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Iris: You Nimphs called Nayades of ye windring brooks,
With your sedg’d crownes, and ever-harmless lookes,
Leave your crisp channels, and on this greene-Land
Answer your summons. Juno does command.
Come temperate Nimphes, and helpe to celebrate
A Contract of true Love: be not too late.

Enter Certaine Nimphes.

You Sun-burn’d Sicklemen of August weary,
Come hether from the furrow, and be merry,
Make holly day: your Rye-straw hats put on
And these fresh Nimphes encounter every one
In Country footing.

*Enter certaine Reapers (properly habited:)
they joyne with the Nimphes in a graceful
dance...*

(The Tempest IV i)

Might this graceful dance of country footing have been an English Country Dance?

When John Playford published *The English Dancing Master* in 1651, the country dance was already an established form with a history. This history, however, has to be put together piecemeal from scattered references in all sorts of different sources including letters, poems, ambassadorial reports, eye-witness accounts of entertainments, and other such documentary or literary material. One source which is both varied and copious and as yet, I think, largely unexplored by the dance archaeologist, is the early modern stage play.

In 1574, Queen Elizabeth granted the first royal patent for adult players to the Earl of Leicesters’ company. This licensed them ‘to shew, publishe, exercise, and occupie to their best commoditie’ their ‘Comedies, Tragedies, Enterludes, and stage playes, to gether with their musicke’ in London and throughout the realm without ‘molestacion’. In 1642 Parliament ordained ‘that while these sad causes and set times of Humiliation doe continue, publicke Stage Playes shall cease, and be forborne’. Of course there was drama before 1574 and some stage entertainments after 1642, although the latter at great risk of ‘molestacion’ to both players and playgoers, but during this period hum-drum hacks and glorious poets alike, and often together, produced a singular wealth of plays to feed the varying appetites of the different playhouses. Andrew Gurr has pointed out in his work on the Shakespearean stage that for nearly forty years of this period London never had less than six playhouses, and four regular companies performing daily except only for Sundays, during Lent, and times of plague. Of the dramatists’ output some 400 plays remain extant.

It has been found that there are at least 350 stage directions including the word dance and references to dance, dancing, and dances abound in the plays from passing allusions to whole scenes pivotal to the plot. Romeo, after all, first sees Juliet at the Capulet revels:

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The page numbers used follow the last page of the proceedings.

Cap: Welcome Gentlemen,
Ladies that have their toes
Unplagu'd with Cornes, will walke about with you:
Ah my Mistresses, which of you all
Will now deny to dance? She that makes dainty,
She Ile sweare hath Cornes: am I come near ye now?

...

You are welcome Gentlemen, come Musicians play:

Muficke plaies; and the dance

A Hall, Hall, give room, and foote it Girles....

And the final littering of the stage with corpses customary in such plays takes place in *The Revenger's Tragedy* during a masque. Not one but two groups of murderers enter one after the other and when the second lot discover that the first lot have beaten them to it when one of the victims groans while they are still dancing:

...they all start out of their measure, and turning towards the table, they find them all to be murdered.

Actual dancing was regularly part of the performance which seems to have been a particular complaint of William Prynne's in 1633:

Those plays which are commonly attended and set forth with lascivious, mixt, effeminate, amorous dancing; either of men with women, or youths in women's apparel, are undoubtedly sinful, yea utterly unlawful unto Christians. But all our popular stage plays are commonly thus attended and set forth.

It is this prolific and dance-rich period of theatre history which happens to coincide with the appearance and apparent establishment of the country dance. A few of the play references are well-known and regularly cited, if only in passing. Further digging may, or may not, reveal a little more to add to the still surprisingly elusive early history of this enduringly popular English dance and, possibly, its relationship to Playford's first collection.

One of the earliest references which is often cited is from a play called *Misogonus*, a comedy possibly associated with Trinity College, Cambridge, and written by 1577. A conversation between several of the characters contains the following lines:

M. Trifle not the tyme then say what shall we have
What countrye dauncis do you here dayly frequent
C. The vickar of s.fooles I am sure he would crave
to that daunce of all other I see he is bent.
Sir John. Faythe no I had rather have shakinge oth shetes...
or cachinge of quales or what faire Melissa...
Melissa ...foole I see by him is geven holy to scorn
O. Preste kepe your sincopasse and foot it oth the best sorte.

This quotation, albeit early, is actually characteristic of many of the later references. It is helpfully even clearer than some in the explicit association between country dance – 'what countrye dauncis do you here dayly frequent' – and the titles mentioned – 'shakinge oth shetes' and 'cachinge

of quales’ – but it also serves as a timely warning: when the names of dances are used they must be considered in the light of their function in the speech and the context in which they appear. The dances may be real enough but it is their word–play value and not their dance merit which matters. *Shaking of the Sheets* was an obvious favourite of which two further examples will suffice:

You must not think to dance the shaking of the sheets alone (*The Insatiate Countess*, 1608, - more of her anon.)

and

Thee and I shall dance the shaking of the sheets together (*Match at Midnight*, William Rowley, 1621)

As we shall see later, it has been used with greater subtlety. All we can infer from the *Misogonus* reference is that there was a country dance called *Shaking of the Sheets* in existence by 1577, not that it was necessarily the earliest, the most popular, or anything else. A dance called *The Night Peece*, which is only later given the alternative title of *Shaking of the Sheets*, occurs in Playford’s 1651 edition as a longways for three couples. *Catching of Quales* first turns up in the fourth edition of 1670 as a Round for eight which includes hand-shaking and toe-touching figures:

First man puts his Toe to his woman’s Toe 3 times.

which does seem to chime with the sort of thing Sir John had in mind some seventy years before. Both dances have what I call the formulaic sequences – doubles, sides, arms – and *Catching of Quales* also includes set and turn single.

A country dance commonly thought to be one of the earliest if not positively the archetypal circle dance is *Sellenger’s Round*, especially as it has the alternative title of *The Beginning of the World*. It certainly features in play references although sometimes only as a tune: *The Lady of Pleasure*, by James Shirley, 1635, opens with a diatribe against country life by Aretina, Sir Thomas Bornwell’s wife and newly arrived in town:

.... I would not
 Endure again the country conversation
 To be the lady of six shires – the men
 So near the primitive making they retain
 A sense of nothing but the earth, their brains
 And barren heads standing as much in want
 Of ploughing as their ground; to hear a fellow
 Make himself merry, and his horse, with whistling
 Sellinger’s Round; to observe with what solemnity
 They keep their wakes and throw for pewter candlesticks!
 How they become the morris, with whose bells
 They ring all in to Whitsun ales, and sweat
 Through twenty scarfs and napkins till the hobby-horse
 Tire, and Maid Marian, dissolv’d to a jelly,
 Be kept for spoon meat.

She changes her tune at the end of the play, of course. In *The Court Beggar*, Brome, 1639, a figure ‘whistles and Dances Sellenger’s round, or the like’. It is Richard Brome, incidentally, whom Keith Whitlock, in his cultural-political study of *The English Dancing Master*, puts forward as the

prime candidate for the position of Playford's 'knowing Friend'. It is unfortunate, therefore, that in the words from *The Northern Lass*, 1629, quoted by Whitlock, the references to 'Arm your ladie' and 'Side your ladie' are in reverse of the usual order although, oddly, there is one 1651 dance which also has 'armes' before 'sides' – *Chestnut (or Doves figary)*. In Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West*, 1630, the court of the kingdom of Fez is treated to two English country dances, *Sillinger's Round* and *Tom Tiler*. And in Brome and Heywood's *The Late Lancashire Witches*, 1634, it is *Sellenger's Round*, according to the stage directions, which the bewitched fiddlers attempt to play at the country wedding revel. As the dancers begin, the tune unaccountably changes whereupon the fiddlers are ordered to stop and start again with the same tune which is now, in the character's speech, referred to by the alternative title:

You drunken rogues, hold, hold I say, and begin again soberly 'The Beginning of the World'.

The ensuing cacophony is said to sound like

'The Running of the Country' several ways.

The fiddlers end up smashing their instruments and a bagpiper, who happens to be loitering by, is called in to play a hornpipe during which the bride and groom 'reel'. The play was noted at the time for its 'diverse songs and dances'. When it first appears in Playford in the third edition 1657/1665, *Sellengers Round*, without alternative title, is depicted as a 'longwayes for six' although the words 'either Round, or' appear in front of 'longways' as if possibly added as an afterthought. When it appears again in the fourth, 1670, edition together with its alternative title, it is as a Round for as many as will and circle round has been added to the figures. Again, the dance includes the formulaic sequences with set and turn single and, most unusually, it also has the step sequence 'two singles and a D.back' which, in my view, does mark it out as an older choreography.

Much time and ink can be expended on debating whether or not dances we know from Playford can be associated with plays of the same title. For example, is *Hyde Parke*, a square dance from the 1651 collection, connected with Shirley's comedy of 1632? Dancing certainly features in the play, not least when the long-lost husband turns up on his wife's wedding day when the revels are under way, and later when he challenges his rival to what I can only call duel by galliard:

Bonavent: You do owe me a dance, if you remember
And I will have it now; no dispute.-Draw!

This is the pre-arranged cue for a bagpiper to play a galliard, but the rival draws his sword:

That will not serve your turn; come, shake your heels,
You hear a tune;

There is opportunity within the play for dancing a country dance especially at the wedding party; the choreography of *Hyde Parke* nicely suits the play's theme of interlinked pairs and, as a square dance, the domestic room setting. The scene includes references to footing 'chamber jigs' and even a 'vagary' but these are part of the witty, and suggestive, repartee, while the stage directions read simply 'dancing' and 'A Dance'. The possible association between play and dance, however plausible, must tantalisingly remain conjecture.

Another example worth mentioning because it is so particular in both title and form is *The Slip*, the last dance in the first edition. Appropriately enough, it seems to be a formal 'finishing' dance without the usual figures in which each couple successively leads down the set from the top with

much honouring. Although it is described as a longways for as many as will in which each couple joins on the bottom and works back up the set again, it would be elegantly in keeping to have them ‘exit’. This would also solve the problem of the whole set shuffling up each time through to keep in the space. *A Mad World, My Masters*, 1605, uses the device of a play-within-a-play set up by one Follywit and called *The Slip*. The word ‘slip’ is used regularly throughout the play proper:

- How soon he took occasion to slip into his own flattery...
- ... and yourself slipped into the form of a physician.
- Shall we let slip this mutual hour

and is repeatedly emphasised as the title of the comedy to be presented at the feast put on by the hospitable Sir Bounteous which, following the final twist of events, becomes in effect a wedding feast. Of the playlet itself there exists only the Prologue spoken to cover the exit of the rest of the supposed players who are busy making off with ill-gotten loot to be followed as soon as maybe by their leader Follywit:

The play being call’d The Slip, I vanish too.

This is a remarkable correlation between play and dance but it is worth noting that *A Mad World, My Masters* was later revived and republished in 1640. It should be borne in mind that even when the association of a country dance with a particular play seems beyond reasonable doubt, the dance may derive from a later revival and not necessarily from the play’s first staging. This would explain the inclusion of *The Slip* in Playford’s first edition from which a number of dances with very early references are omitted only to appear in later collections. This suggests to me that they no longer had any currency at the time of the 1651 collection, being sourced only when it became apparent that there was a market for further editions.

A scene or two depicting a dancing lesson wouldn’t come amiss! Cue *The Ball* and Monsieur Le Frisk, dancing master – ‘a mere French footman, sir’- complete, of course, with fiddle-kit, who waits upon the ladies and later two of the gentlemen to put them through their paces before the big event. The play by Shirley was licensed and performed in 1632 and printed in 1639. The ball also seems to have been the sign of certain gatherings, to which Shirley refers again in another play, which had acquired some notoriety, and a golden ball descends prior to the entry of Venus at the beginning of the masque which forms part of the final entertainment. At the ladies’ session, a coranto is practised then one of them, Lucinda, wants to do a country dance and invites their attendant to make up the numbers:

- Lucinda: Nay, a country dance. Scutilla, you are idle,
You know we must be at the ball anon; come.
- Le Frisk: Where is the ball this night?
- Lucinda: At my Lord Rainbow’s.
- Le Frisk: Oh, he dance finely, begore – he deserve the Ball of de world; fine, fine, gentleman! your oder men dance lop, lop, with de lame leg as they want crushes, begore, and look for l’argent in the ground, pshaw!

They dance a new country dance.

and, no, the direction doesn’t continue with ‘called – whatever’. So was ‘new’ the latest from the ballroom – or previously unknown and devised for this scene? Later, Monsieur Le Frisk attends Lord Rainbow himself when he is obliged to teach another gentleman who is a ‘cynic’ and not keen

on dancing. He wants something energetic so Le Frisk, much against his better judgement – ‘I teach you presently dance with all de grace of de body for your good, and my profit’ – tries him with 12345. The cynic takes this too fast, gets told off – ‘You be at Dover, and me at Greenwish’ - and retorts

I’ll kick him to death, and bury him in a bass-viol, Jackalent!

Might the name just possibly have stuck to that new country dance? *Jack-a-Lent* appears in 1651 and is a longways for six couples consisting of figures which each couple does in turn – ‘Every Cu. do this change’ - interspersed with leading up and back. The evening and the play ends with dancing:

Lord Rainbow: Ladies and gentlemen, now a banquet waits you;
Be pleas’d to accept, ‘twill give you breath, & then
Renew our revels, and to the Ball again.

Clearly these revels included country dancing which the participants had been practising earlier and this is the most usual context for country dance references in the plays; the revels occur mostly as part of wedding festivities which are often also associated with a masque. There may be other clues, therefore, in similar scenes which do not necessarily mention country dance specifically. One which I find particularly interesting is in *The Insatiate Countess*, 1607. This is rather an unpleasant piece – she ends up being executed on the grounds of implication in the death of one of her victims:

She died deservedly, and may like fate
Attend all women so insatiate!

At the beginning of the play, the Countess is already a recent widow and it is at the masque held in honour of her new marriage that she lights upon her next victim, the Count Rogero. At first he is unaware of this because he has the misfortune to fall over while dancing a galliard, still masked:

Stage Direction: *The Ladies sit down. Rogero dances a lavolta, or a galliard, and in the midst of it, falleth into the bride’s lap, but straight leaps up and danceth it out.*

He is praised for carrying on – ‘Bless the man, sprightly and nobly done’ – but he is properly mortified and all he wants to do is slink away:

Good gentlemen, if I have any interest in you,
Let me depart unknown; ‘tis a disgrace
Of an eternal memory.

This episode comes after a bout of social dancing which is interspersed with dialogue:

Stage Direction: *The masquers take the women and dance the first change*

Mendosa: Fair widow, how like you this change?

Lady Lentulus: I changed too lately to like any.

...

Stage Direction: *Mizaldus holds Abigail by the hand*

Abigail: You grasp my hand too hard, i’ faith, fair sir

Mizaldus: Not as you grasp my heart, unwilling wanton

...

Stage Direction: *The second change; Isabella falls in love with Rogero when the changers speak*

Isabella: Change is no robbery; yet in this change
Thou robb'st me of my heart. Sure Cupid's here,
Disguised like a pretty torch-bearer...

...

Rogero: The spheres ne'er danced unto a better tune.
Sound music there!

Isabella: 'Twas music that he spake.

Stage Direction: *They dance the third change, after which the ladies fall off*

The word 'change' is crucial to the play but stage directions only appear in subsequent printed text: in performance, the meaning of the direction must be clearly conveyed by the action, here the actual dancing itself, reinforced by the punning dialogue: 'Fair widow, how like you this change?' It is 'change', of course, which is the crucial word in country dance figures as the dancers change places with each other in a sequence of changes. In a number of dances in the 1651 collection, such a sequence is itself referred to as a 'change' - a 'change' of 'changes' - as in *Jack-a-Lent* for example: 'All doe this change' and 'Every Cu. do this change'. In many others this is simply shortened to 'Doe thus' ie this change, sometimes within the same dance as in *Have at Thy Coat Old Woman*.

In the romantic comedies, the wedding normally comes at the end of the play and the customary concluding dance may be specified in the stage direction:

Lord: Come, madam, I find here's music. Lets lead the brides a dance to stir
their appetites to dinner.

Dance

More often it is only implied in the closing speeches:

Bonwell: Our pleasures cool. Music! And when our ladies
Are tir'd with active motion, to give
Them rest, in some new rapture to advance
Full mirth, our souls shall leap into a dance.

And sometimes the clue is more subtle:

Beauford: Come, Gratiana,
My soul's best half, let's tie the sacred knot,
So long deferr'd. Never did two lovers
Meet in so little time so many changes.
Our wedding day is come; the sorrows past
Shall give our present joy more heavenly taste.

A Woman Killed with Kindness

The second scene with its well-known 'list' of dances was read out and briefly considered. The play opens with a wedding dance and the customary reference to *The Shaking of the Sheets*. Here, however, it is followed by a reference to the associated ballad with its connotations of death immediately recognisable to a contemporary audience. A subtle indication in the very opening lines

that the play is likely to prove a domestic tragedy rather than the romantic comedy it might at first appear. While the country guests dance 'country measures' within, the country fellows and wenches debate which dance to do at their own 'crash here in the yard'. It is clear from the final line spoken during the dance that this is not *Sellenger's Round* but *Put on thy Smock on Monday* which was first published in Playford's fourth edition of *The Dancing Master, 1670*. It is a round dance in which the men each turn all the women:

Jenkin: Hey, lively my lasses, here's a turn for thee.
(*A Woman Killed with Kindness* I ii 55)

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A Woman Killed with Kindness, 1603

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Middleton, *A Mad World, My Masters*, 1605-6

Rowley, *A Match at Midnight*, 1621-3

 Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1594?

The Tempest, 1610

Shirley, *The Ball*, 1632

Hyde Park, 1632

The Lady of Pleasure, 1635

The Wedding, 1626-9

Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, 1606

? *Misogonus*, by 1577

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