

# 'Il Bianco fiore' by Cesare Negri

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## Introduction

This paper starts from the premise that all too many performing versions of historical dances appear in print without adequate reference to the original sources. When checked against the text from which the printed dance is supposed to derive, it often bears remarkably little resemblance to it, major changes having been made without explanation or indeed notification. We may readily admit that changes may be called for in modern performance, to charm an inexpert audience or to accommodate an inexpert dancer, but we are entitled to know what has been done and why. All too often what is presented as the definitive version of a certain dance turns out to be the author's own free adaptation – something indeed that is not to be ashamed of but openly admitted.

In a popular handbook it would be unreasonable to insist that the source material should be cited in full, but in an academic publication three elements are required:

1. The text of the original description of the dance;
2. (Where needed) a fairly literal translation that does not conceal the ambiguities of the original;
3. A commentary that attempts both to resolve the textual problems and to provide guidance for actual performance.

As an example I take 'Il Bianco fiore' by Cesare Negri, published in his *Le Gratie d'amore* (1602), 144–7. Performing versions are given by Madeleine Inglehearn in *Ten Dances from Sixteenth Century Italy* (1983), 35–40; by Lillian Pleydell, with literal translation and commentary, in *A Study of some Sixteenth Century Dances* (1985), 53–61; and now by Anne Daye in *Quest'Arte Gentile* (handbook to the 19th Dolmetsch Historical Dance Society summer school, 1986), 34–7. The version presented here has most in common with those of Pleydell and Daye, though originally prepared without knowledge of either. Many differences remain, of which the more important are noted; a good many cannot in any case be resolved in our present state of knowledge, because of ambiguities in the original text. The important thing is not that there is disagreement, but that my interpretations are explicit and thereby invite critical appraisal from the reader.

I am glad to acknowledge the benefit of comments from the Editorial Board of *Historical Dance* in improving my presentation. A full performing version is not provided, for reasons of space, and individual steps are not described in detail except where this affects the timing or execution of a whole phrase of dance. The text of Negri is taken from the facsimile of Forni (Bologna, 1969) and preserves the original abbreviations.

A key to the abbreviations is given below.

- .R. = *riuerenza*  
.C. = *continenza*  
.S. = *seguito ordinario*  
.R. = *ripresa*  
.P. = *passo graue*  
.SP. = *fioretto spezzato*  
.T. = *trabucchetto*

## The Dance

*Balletto a quattro dell'autore detto il bianco fiore ballano due Cavalieri, & due dame.*

*In gratia dell'Illustre Signora la Signora Vittoria Castelletta e Rhò*

*Balletto for four by the author [Negri], called 'The White Flower': it is danced by two men and two women.*

By favour of the renowned Lady Vittoria Castelletta e Rhò

### PRIMA PARTE.

*Tutti quattro si fermano in mezzo del ballo in quadrangolo, come mostra'l presente disegno; e faranno tutti insieme la .R. graue due .C. alla sinistra, & alla destra, due .S. andando attorno alla sinistra,*

*& due .S. intorno alla detta mano, stando ogn'vno al suo luogo, i cavalieri fanno due .P. è vno .S. innanzi l'vn contra l'altro, è due fioretti .SP. & vno .S. intorno alla destra, & le dame fanno ancora loro il medesimo, faranno poi insieme per fianco alla sinistra tre sottopiedi in ripresa, & la cadenza sopra esso piede, vno .T. sopra'l destro, è vn .S. intorno alla sinistra si tornano à fare li sottopiedi, & il .T. & il .S. come s'è fatto à mano destra, & al fine de tutte le parti di questo ballo farāno le dette riprese da vna parte è dall'altra; e che si sono fatte di sopra.*

I. All four stand in a square at the centre of the dance (see Figure on facing page). Together they must all make the *riuerenza graue*; two *continenze*, to left and to right; two *s. ordinarii* going round to the left, and two *s. ordinarii* turning to the said [left] hand. With everyone back in his own place, the two men do two *p. graui* and a *s. ordinario* forwards to confront one another; and two *fioretti spezzati* and a *s. ordinario* turning to the right. The same sequence is done again, this time by the women. Then all together must do, sideways to the left, three *sottopiedi in ripresa* and the *cadenza* over the said [left] foot, a *trabucchetto* over the right foot, and a *s. ordinario* turning to the left. They return to do the *sottopiedi*, the *trabucchetto* and the *s. ordinario* as before but to the right; and at the end of each part of this dance they must do these sideways movements one way and then the other, repeating what has just been described.

The picture shows all four dancers facing inwards, man towards man and woman towards woman, not with one couple facing the other. This agrees with the fact that nowhere in the dance do they actually dance as couples.

After the *continenze* all go one or two places round the square. It is less hectic to move on just one place on the first two *s. ordinarii*, and this allows slightly wider spacing, which will be useful later. They then turn outwards, away from each other, to retrace their steps.

In the solo passage there is nothing to suggest that the men change places; they advance to meet on 2 *p. graui* and 1 *s. ordinario* and return to place on 2 *fioretti spezzati* and 1 *s. ordinario*. The steps have to be kept small but are not cramped, unless the original square was very tight (see preceding paragraph). (How to do the *fioretti spezzati* is a problem that is not tackled here; for Anne Daye's ingenious solution see below, p. 36.)

In the chorus the dancers all move sideways, at a tangent to the corners of their square. The distance travelled should be such that they momentarily form a new square, at 45° to their original formation, before they return to their places.

### SECONDA PARTE.

*I Cavalieri faranno quattro .SP. girando attorno alla dama, ch'è à mano sinistra. poi due .S. intorno alla destra, tornando al suo luogo, & le dame faranno altrettanto tornando anch'esse al suo luogo i cavalieri farāno due saltini innanzi, col piè sinistro alto, & tre botte della campanella, con la cadenza col piè destro; vn saltino indietro con ambidue li piedi vna botta indietro, è vn sottopiede col destro, è due fioretti innanzi col sinistro, vn .P. intorno sopra à esso piede, due botte innanzi & indietro, è la cadenza col destro, due botte innanzi, & indietro alte, col detto piede, è tre .P. indietro la cadēza col sinistro, questa mutanza è di botte 21. & è di quattro tempi di gagliarda; le dame in cambio d'essa mutanza faranno vno .S. innanzi & vna .R. indietro per fianco è due .S. scorrendo intorno alla sinistra, e tornando al suo luogo, e faranno tutti insieme le .R. per fianco come di sopra.*

II. The men must do four [seguiti] *spezzati* circling round the woman on their left hand, then two *s. ordinarii* turning to the right, returning to their place; and the women must do as much, also returning to their own place. The men must do two *saltini* forwards, with the left foot raised, and three strokes (*botte*) of the *campanella*, with the *cadenza* with the right foot; a *saltino* backwards with both feet, a *botta* back and a *sottopiede* with the

right, and two *fioretti* forward [beginning] with the left, a *passo* turning on this [left] foot, two *botte* forward and back and the *cadenza* with the right; two *botte* forward and back, high, with the said [right] foot, and three *passi* backwards, the *cadenza* with the left. This variation has 21 movements (*botte*) and is done in four *tempi* of galliard. Instead of this variation the women must do a *s. ordinario* forwards and a *ripresa* diagonally to the rear, and two *seguiti* scurrying round to the left to return to place. And all together must do the passages to the side as before.

Whatever Negri may say on his p. 103, his own usage makes clear that when he means a *fioretto spezzato*, he prints *fioretto .SP.* (as in Part I of this very dance); but when he prints merely *.SP.*, he normally means a *seguito spezzato*. That is the step that should be done at the beginning of this Part. (Anne Daye takes an even more radical view of the *fioretto spezzato* in the note already cited, p. 36 below.) Note that Negri refers to the woman on each man's left, not the "woman opposite", confirming that all are facing into the centre. After circling the two women, the men should return by the direct route, passing each other by their left shoulders. It is not made clear if the women then go round the men on *their* left (i.e. their partners), or round the men who have just been round them. Either can be given dramatic point, but the former is probably preferable.

Negri is quite clear that the variation occupies four *tempi* of galliard, equivalent to the four doubles of the women's solo passage. Inglehearn's reconstruction to eight *tempi* of galliard, simultaneously accompanied by the women's passage done twice, must evidently be mistaken. This is confirmed by the description of subsequent variations in Parts III and IV as being done *adagio*, to distinguish them from the virtuoso sequence in Part II, which is too demanding for the women to do. Nor should we expect the women to keep moving about while the men are doing their most complicated solo passage; the women will follow the men, as in Parts I and III.

Detailed reconstruction depends on the meaning attached to the word *botta* and on the number of beats allotted to each step.

*Botta* is a weakly defined word, meaning (amongst other things) a beat of music or any movement in the galliard. Although its literal meaning is 'beat', and this could describe a sharp lowering of a raised heel, as in Inglehearn's reconstruction, it is not feasible to attach such a meaning to every occurrence of *botta* in the variation. In fact, when Negri wants a beaten step, he uses the word *battuta* (see Part IV of this dance). *Botta*, when not used in a completely general sense, should be taken to mean a simple swing of the leg, not requiring more detailed description.

There are 24 beats of music in the variation, six to each *tempo*, and there are three *cadenze*. If the *cadenze* are given their normal time of two beats each, there are then 18 beats left for the other 18 movements. Some of these, however, also take more than one beat (*fioretti*, *passo intorno*), so some steps will need to be done at double speed to compensate, or else the *cadenze* will have to be reduced to one beat only. One-beat *cadenze* are not indeed unknown in the body of a variation, but are not to be expected at the end of a *tempo*, where they ought to be providing an easily recognised punctuation mark to close each phrase. To use one-beat *cadenze* here, following Pleydell, would thus be a somewhat desperate expedient.

The other doubtful step is the *sottopiede*. When this incorporates a step to the side before cutting the back foot under, as in the chorus ending all four Parts of this dance, it will naturally take two beats; but the same term can also describe the simple 'foot-under' movement in a galliard (=Arbeau's *entretaille*), done in a single beat. When a *sottopiede* is preceded by a *botta* to the rear, as here, it is natural to understand it in this second sense.

These conclusions are adopted in the reconstruction that follows. Unless otherwise stated, all movements are kept small and the free foot is not raised to any great height.

- 1 spring forward onto the R, with L foot raised
- and hop forward on the R, keeping L foot up
- 2 swing R foot back

- 3 swing R foot forward
- 4 swing R foot back
- 5+6 *cadenza* with L foot in front
- 1 jump back on both feet
- and swing R foot back
- 2 cut R foot under and swing L foot forward
- 3+4 *fioretto* with the L foot
- 5+6 *fioretto* with the R foot
- 1+2 step onto the L toe and pivot, making a complete turn to the L (counter-clockwise)
- 3 swing the R foot forward
- 4 swing the R foot back
- 5+6 *cadenza* with L foot in front
- 1 swing R foot forward (high)
- 2 swing R foot back (high)
- 3 step back on R
- and step back on L
- 4 step back on R
- 5+6 *cadenza* with R foot in front

In the two middle *tempi* it would have been neat to link them together by placing the two *fioretti* either side of division (as in Caroso's "Laura Suave", for example), but this would have left insufficient time for the steps that follow, even with a single-beat *cadenza*. To make a complete turn cleanly and to give it its full dramatic effect, requires at least two beats (Pleydell takes three), so both *fioretti* must be placed in the second *tempo*. From this it follows that the *sottopiede* takes only one beat, while the *cadenza* at the end of the third *tempo* takes two; and this in turn implies that the other *cadenze* do the same.

#### TERZA PARTE.

*I Cavalieri pigliano la lor dama per lo braccio destro, e fanno quattro .S. due intorno alla destra tornando al suo luogo, e voltandosi la faccia, si lasciano, e fanno gli altri due intorno alla sinistra, poi pigliano il braccio sinistro dell' altra dama, e fanno altri quattro .S. dall'altra parte, come s'e fatto prima essi soli faranno vn saltino col piè sinistro alto, & vn .P. innanzi col destro alto, e la cadēza cō esso piede, & vn .P. innanzi mettendo'l piè in terra cō vn poco d'inchino vna battuta, & vn .P. innāzi alto, e la cadēza col detto piede volgendo esso fianco destro, e si fà poi altrettanto col detto piede, volgendo'l fianco sinistro; questa mutanza e di sette botte, è si fà adagio, & è di due tempi della gagliarda, le dame sole fanno due volte la medesima mutanza, e tutti insieme faranno le .R. per fianco come di sopra.*

III. The men take their partner by the right arm and do four *s. ordinarii*, two of them turning to the right and returning to place, and then, turning around, they let go and do the other two turning to the left. Then they take the left arm of the other woman and do four more *s. ordinarii* the other way, exactly as before. The men on their own do a *saltino* with the left foot raised, and a *passo grave* forwards with the R foot raised and the *cadenza* with that [right] foot; and a *passo grave* forwards giving a little bow as the foot is placed on the ground, a *battuta* and a *passo grave* forwards [with the foot] raised and the *cadenza* with the said [right] foot, turning this right side. And then as much is done again with the said [right] foot, turning the left side. This variation has seven movements (*botte*) and is done slowly, in two *tempi* of galliard. The women on their own do the same variation twice. And all together must do the passages to the side as before.

After arming with their partners on the first two *s. ordinarii*, all the dancers let go and make a circle to the left in their own places. There are no grounds for taking left arms on the second two *s. ordinarii*, as suggested by Inglehearn; Negri is quite precise both about taking hold and about letting go. The second arming movement is made with the person on the other side, using the left arm, and is followed by a circle to the right. If any adjustment is needed to the size of the square to give more room for the solo passages, it can be made during this last circle.

The description of the variation is somewhat abbreviated. The phrase *vn .P. innanzi alto* in the second *tempo* has to be

expanded (by analogy with a step in the previous *tempo*) to mean 'a *passo grave* forwards with (unspecified) foot raised'. At the end of the variation comes the mysterious instruction 'turning the right side'. It is not stated if it is to be turned inwards, or outwards, or in some other direction. Daye suggests that the whole variation is directed towards the person on the dancer's right, with the repeat done similarly to the person on the left; but if this were intended, it is clumsy not to mention the fact until after the variation has been described. It seems better to take the instruction as applying to the *cadenza* only. The variation has until then been made straight forward into the centre of the square; the right foot is raised, and "turning the right side" can now be readily understood to mean making a half-turn to the right during the jump of the *cadenza*. The repeat of the variation then takes the dancer back to place.

As usual, the two *tempi* of galliard are marked off by their *cadenze*:

- 1+2 hop of R, raising L foot
- 3+4 step forwards on L, raising R foot
- 5+6 *cadenza* with L foot in front
- 1+2 step forwards on R, ending in a slight bow
- 3 stamp L foot
- 4 step forwards on L, raising R foot
- 5+6 *cadenza*, make a half-turn to the R to face outwards and landing with L foot in front

The sequence is then repeated on the other foot to take the dancer out of the centre of the square and back to place. The second bow may be directed to the bystanders.

#### QVARTA PARTE.

*Pigliano la man destra della sua dama, e fanno quattro .SP. è due .S. in treccia attorno alla destra passando prima i cavalieri dentro, è poi di fuori, e pigliando quattro volte le mani, & all'ultimo voltando la dama all'incontro si torna à fare la medesima treccia della parte sinistra, tornando ogn'vno al suo luogo; e tutti insieme faranno vn saltino col piè sinistro alto, vno .P. innanzi senza saltino col destro, è la cadenza con esso piede vno .P. indietro col sinistro, vna botta indietro, & vno sottopiede col destro, è la cadenza col sinistro; questa mutanza si fà adagio, & è di sette botte, è di due tempi di gagliarda fanno due .SP. & vno .S. intorno alla sinistra con esso piede. si fà poi la medesima mutanza dall'altra parte col piè destro; poi faranno le .R. per fianco come di sopra, e la .R. facendo fine con buona gratia al ballo.*

IV. They take their woman's right hand and do four [*seguiti*] *spezzati* and two *s. ordinarii* in a hay round to the right, with the men passing inside first and then outside, taking hands four times; the last time they turn the woman to face them and then return, doing the same hay to the left until every one has returned to place. And all together make a *saltino* with the left

foot raised, a *passo* forwards without *saltino* with the right [foot raised], and the *cadenza* with that [right] foot; a *passo* backwards with the left, a *botta* backwards and a *sottopiede* with the right, and the *cadenza* with the left. This variation is done slowly and has seven movements (*botte*), in two *tempi* of galliard. They do two [*seguiti*] *spezzati* and one *s. ordinario* turning to the left, [starting] with that [left] foot. Then the same variation is done again the other way with the right foot. Then they must do the sideways passages as before, and the *riverenza* to bring the dance to an elegant close.

In the hay the men both travel to the right (counterclockwise) and the women to the left (clockwise) around the square. They give hands four times, moving on one place each time, and turning back to face the other way on the end of the fourth change without dropping hands. On the repeat of the hay the men once again begin by passing on the inside, women on the outside.

There is one problem in the variation. At the beginning a hop (*saltino*) on the right foot is followed by a step (*passo*) on the right foot, which in turn is followed by a *cadenza* on the right foot (i.e. with left foot in front). This sequence makes little sense, and it must be the second movement that is wrong. We have to suppose that the word *alto* is either understood, or else accidentally omitted, thereby transferring the weight to the left foot. This addition is made within square brackets in the translation. According to this interpretation the first *tempo* of this variation is identical with that in Part III. This gives the impression that the variation of Part III, which was done separately by the two sexes then, is now to be done by all the dancers together; but this is shown to be incorrect as soon as they go on to the second *tempo*.

- 1+2 hop on R, raising L foot
- 3+4 step forward on L, raising R foot
- 5+6 *cadenza* with L foot in front
- 1+2 step back on L
- 3 swing R foot back
- 4 cut R foot under and swing L foot forward
- 5+6 *cadenza* with R foot in front

The variation is, *pace* Inglehearn, done by men and women together and is followed by two *s. spezzati* and one *s. ordinario* in a little circle, turning to the left the first time and to the right on the repeat.

It will be noted that if the reconstructions proposed above are accepted, the general pattern of the dance is consistent throughout its four Parts. In the first 16 bars of each, movement takes place along the four sides of the square; in the second 16 bars a variation takes the dancers into the middle and out again; and in the final 16 bars they move at a tangent to the corners of the square. This scheme achieves a satisfying balance between unity and diversity, as the varied sequences of each Part are fitted into a uniform framework.