Skill and Invention in the Renaissance Ballroom

by Anne Daye

Introduction

On Twelfth Night 1618 the masque "Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue", with text by Ben Jonson and designs by Inigo Jones, was presented at the court of King James I of England. Amongst the distinguished guests was Orazio Busino, chaplain to the Venetian Embassy, who wrote a full report of the occasion to his master The Doge. His narrative skill and attention to detail has resulted in a valuable testimony to the dancing of that time. This extract concerns the Revels towards the close of the masque, when the gentlemen masquers were dancing with the ladies of the court:

> "They performed every sort of ballet and dance of every country whatsoever, such as passamezzi, corantos, canaries, spagnolettas, and a hundred other very fine gestures devised to tickle one's fancy. Last of all they danced the spagnoletta, one at a time, each with his lady, and being well nigh tired they began to lag, whereupon the King, who is naturally choleric, got impatient and shouted aloud, "Why don't we dance? What did you make me come here for? The devil take you all – dance!" Whereupon, the Marquis of Buckingham, his Majesty's favourite, immediately sprang forward, cutting a score of lofty and very minute capers with so much grace and agility that he not only appeased the ire of his angry lord but rendered himself the admiration and delight of everybody. The other masquers, thus encouraged, continued to exhibit their prowess, one after another, with various ladies, also finishing with capers and lifting their goddesses from the ground. We counted thirty-four capers as cut by one Knight in succession, but none came up to the exquisite manner of the marquis."[1]

Busino has captured an intense moment of dance activity and dance appreciation. We note the variety of dances these twelve men and their partners could do; the way each couple dance in turn; the involvement of James in their performance but above all the extraordinary prowess suggested by the mention of "a score of lofty and very minute capers" danced by Buckingham, and the thirty four capers cut by another Knight. How was it possible for an amateur dancer to possess the technique for such movements? The only way of answering this question was to go to the dance treatises of the time. The five that have been most helpful are those that describe in detail the steps and dances of the late Renaissance period – by which I mean the last half of the sixteenth century and the first three decades of the seventeenth. The treatises are "Orchesographie" by Thoinot Arbeau published 1588;[2] "Il Ballarino" 1581[3] and "Nobilta di Dame" 1600[4] by Fabritio Caroso; "Le Gratie d'Amore" 1602[5] (also known as "Nuove Inventioni di Balli") by Cesare Negri and "Il Libro di Gagliarda"[6] by Livio Lupi da Caravaggio published 1607.

During the course of the past eight years I have reconstructed a number of dances from all of them. This entails a close study of the information on how to perform the steps; sorting out the instructions for each dance, and, with assistance, the music that goes with it; then deciding how they fit together. An important task is gathering together the extra evidence that lies scattered through each treatise in the form of passing comments. The work is then further developed when modern dancers perform the dance, and we deal with the problems that become apparent as the written word is changed into physical action. I have always tried to develop a clear idea of the social setting the dances belonged to, and have been determined not to compromise the original instructions in favour of modern taste or modern performance conditions.

During the course of this work it has become apparent that nimble footwork, good balance, and precise musicality was a requisite for even the simplest ballroom dance. In some dances long sequences of steps had to be memorised, and a command of the dancing-space was essential. In everything, a dignified and graceful bearing had to be mastered, plus an easy courtesy towards the dancing partner and other participants (including spectators) in the ball. The dances have a range of difficulty from the simple ones recorded by Arbeau to Caroso's formidable balletti designed to show the peak of his achievement as a choreographer. However, there is a large section of steps in Negri's treatise which seem exceptionally difficult to execute. Lupi da Caravaggio also describes long sequences full of capriole, jumps and pirouettes. Are these sections the place to find out more about the 'lofty and minute capers' of the Duke of Buckingham. Or are these the repertoire of a professional dancer? In fact, all Negri's instructions are quite clearly addressed to a gentleman wishing to dance at a ball with a lady. Livio Lupi includes a few words of advice to a professional, but otherwise he is addressing his patron Don Geronimo del Carretto and other gentlemen or ladies. So it does seem that we can find out more about a gentleman's elevated steps from these books.

It is clear from many contemporary comments, including Busino's, that the ability to "dance high" was greatly admired both in men and women. It was after all, the gist of a compliment to Queen Elizabeth.[7] This quality of dancing typifies the spirit of the age in its energetic and high-spirited approach to life. Negri commences his instructions for these steps by advising the dancer

> "to make the movements courteously, and nimbly, and as joyfully as possible."[5]

The strength and suppleness necessary to dance high was developed by the physical training provided by the fencing-master and the riding-master. Vaulting on horseback was also practised, as a life-saving skill on the battlefield. This was also taught by some dancing-masters. Many masters had outstanding personal skills in jumping, rapid execution of steps and agility, which they would have passed on to their noble pupils.

The Steps

Negri groups all the instructions for Virtuoso steps in his section on the galliard, and, as he analyses the movements for each, he reveals some of his training methods. He recommends practising one kind of jump using a tassel suspended an arm's length from the floor. The dancer learns to gain height by endeavouring to reach the tassel with his feet. The jump, called the '*salto del fiocco*', involves a spring off one leg, bringing both up with straight knees in front and crossing one over the other and executing a half turn landing on one foot. The nearest equivalent in ballet is a turning *cabriole* or *fouetté sauté battu*. *Capriole*, which are jumps off two feet during which the legs are moved rapidly in the air, can be learnt by holding onto two pieces of furniture. In order to master the changes of feet, the dancer should practise his jumps, starting with the feet side by side, then crossing one over the other before landing with feet side by side. He should then progress to making two changes while in the air, then go on to making four. In every description of a jumping movement Negri reiterates that the dancer should land lightly on the toes and widen the knees: exactly as young dancers today are taught to

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land through the toes and into a plié. He constantly stresses that the legs should be held straight: this was probably to counteract the habitual posture of riding and fencing. For turning movements he advises swinging the arms to assist the momentum. The arms should be held low with the fists clenched, and then placed on the hips as the turn is completed. He also advises on the need for the body and head to turn as a whole.

Amongst the long list of difficult steps, Negri describes fourteen *salti tondi*, which are jumps done with a whole turn. Amongst the variations on this are; two turns during one jump; a turning jump during which the knees are bent and the feet brought up with one foot on the other; a series of graduated jumps in one galliard measure (the first one hand high, the second two hands, and third three hands high); a turning jump in which one foot kicks forward and is then withdrawn under the buttock.

Negri presents eighteen *capriole dritte*, in which the feet are moved backwards and forwards in a straight line and with well-straightened legs. The simplest one is a *capriola in terzo* in which the feet change three times in the air before landing, and the most demanding is a *capriola in sesto* when six such changes are made. Then there are seven kinds of *capriola intrecciata* in which the legs are crossed and recrossed, and dancers are advised to jump as high as possible to achieve the changes. The term "*capriola intrecciata*" became the "entrechat" of French ballet. Ten kinds of *capriola spezzata* are described,which are beaten springs from one foot to the other and the two *sottosbalzi in capriola* are done by taking the jump from one foot and landing on the same one, having executed a *capriola* whilst off the ground.

The *zurlo* (or *girata*) is a pirouette. In its simplest form it is a spin on one foot with the other held at the ankle. Of the many developments of this movement, one is to turn at least three times with the free foot on the knee. Another variation is to open the leg out and then bring it into the knee whilst turning at least twice. Another turn involves the free foot beating forwards and backwards either on the ankle or on the knee. One spectacular variation resembles a series of pivot turns, doing ten or twelve revolutions before finishing with grace.

It is clear that the repertoire of turns and jumps is very impressive. Some of these movements may only have been mastered by a few – the Buckinghams of each court – but *capriole in terzo ò in quinto* were required for common ballroom dances; not for the galliard alone but for the passomezzo and canario as well. An interest in these virtuoso steps must have been fairly lively for both Negri and Lupi to have felt it worthwhile publishing their books. They are both very workmanlike and certainly not bedside reading. Negri also lists some of the principal dancing masters of his time, amongst whom are many notable for the beautiful galliard or canario variations they have invented. Lupi and Negri are a rich source of these variations and they show the elevated and turning steps are incorporated into a dance sequence. They could be reconstructed by a modern dancer as the length of music they must fit is indicated in terms of galliard measures. One measure is six beats of music. To take as an example the last *mutanza* (variation) described by Negri, he says it is *presto* (that is that the footwork will be rapid with some movements in half a beat which are normally done in one). He also says that there are twenty five movements to fit four measures. The *cadenza*, which always finishes a galliard variation, is one movement done in the last two beats of the measure, therefore there remain twenty four movements to do in twenty-two beats, five of which are *capriole*. In fact a modest little *mutanza* compared to that of the Duke of Buckingham. Perhaps one more suitable to the 17 year old Prince Charles, who led the masquers in "Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue" and of whom Busino observed:

> "Owing to his youth he gets winded easily: nevertheless, he cut a few capers very gracefully."[1]

Busino recognises here the mature strength that was needed to dance well in this style. Particularly so, when a gentleman had to be properly dressed for dancing, with hat, sword and cloak over his doublet and hose.

Dance Forms

The Renaissance dancer was not only expected to have a high level of skill but also an ability to invent his or her own sequences of steps. Livio Lupi's treatise makes it quite clear that there were four dance forms that were not set dances, but a structure upon which variations were devised. Thus each performance of the dance would be new and personal to the dancers. Three of these dances were well-known in Italy, France and England: the passomezzo pavan, the galliard and the canaries. The fourth, the tordiglione, appears to be little known outside Italy. As all four writers give examples of these dances, we can understand the characteristic structure of each.

The passomezzo was danced to a duple time melody, or pavan rhythm. The couple danced simultaneously throughout, with passages together at the beginning, in the middle and at the end. In the main part of the passomezzo, they dance opposite each other, taking it in turns to dance a variation whilst the other dances a passage of plain steps from side to side. Thus the variation must be sustained despite the distraction of the partner dancing a completely contrasting sequence.

The galliard had a characteristic step called *cinquepassi* which was a compound step of four springing kicks and a jump. The basic step could be varied in many different way. Also the musical unit of the variation could be extended beyond a single measure to any number up to twelve. The cadential jump was used to mark the end of a variation (but could also be used as a movement within the variation). The structure of the dance was straightforward, as partners took it in turns to dance a variation, and changed sides with each other in between each set with travelling *cinquepassi*.

The canaries had a compound duple melody, with a short tune that always ended with an extra bar for a simple *cadenza*. The basic is a sliding, lilting one, and a great variety of beaten steps were employed, plus common steps danced with extra stamps and slides. *Capriole* and turns were used, just as they were in the passomezzo, but never to the extent of the galliard which was the high dance par excellence. The keynote of the canaries was crisp footwork. The variations, taken in turn by the dancers, consisted of an advance towards the partner and a retreat to place. In Negri's version of the dance it can be seen that the lady's variation was always the same length as the man's, and that she followed the step-motif of his variation. For example, he may give emphasis to stamped steps in his *mutanza*, so her variation features stamps as well in her more womanly steps. Or he may feature sliding steps, and her sequence echoes that.

The tordiglione used a galliard rhythm and a mixture of galliard steps and smooth steps, but had a structure like the passomezzo in which one partner performed a simple *passeggio* whilst the other danced the *mutanza*.

Perhaps with this brief outline of the dances it can be seen that the gentleman and lady dancer had to have a sound intellectual grasp of the structure of each dance and its music in order to construct their own variations. They also needed a large repertoire of steps.

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The passomezzo, galliard and canaries were the common dances of the ballroom. Other opportunities for personal choice of steps came in certain balletti, particularly in a galliard or canaries section. The leader of a French branle was also required to introduce variations on the basic dance for the rest of the company to follow. Thus, the other dancers had to be ready to respond rapidly to changes of step. The branles as recorded by Arbeau are deceptively simple, probably giving only the bare bones of each dance. Similarly, the English country dance is recorded only in terms of the figures the company used. There are clues to suggest that the choice of steps was up to each individual and that a variety were used, even within one dance. Thus the ability to invent choreographies for oneself was required in the Renaissance, not only for the serious moments of a *danse à deux*, when all eyes were on one couple in the middle of the ballroom floor, but also for the companionable dances enjoyed in more relaxed circumstances.

The Masque

Another dimension in which the courtly dancer excelled was the masque or ballet. His achievement here can be better understood when one remembers the high level of technique and knowledge of the dance that he brought to a performance. The courtiers were the important dancers in a ballet, although professional dancers also appeared. In the English masque the division between professional and courtier is quite clear and unambigious. They danced separate entries and never mixed. This was an important aspect of the concept of the masque as a social occasion formalised into drama. In France and Italy the situation was more confused and changeable, with courtiers and professionals mingled in some entries. The strict etiquette of England was not preserved. However, the noble dancers were still performing in front of their peers, and were not on a public stage. Their role therefore was very different from the professional who was paid for dancing.

What was required of the gentleman or lady participating in a masque or ballet? We can see from illustrations and written records that the characteristic entry involved a group of six or more, dancing intricate patterns and forming significant figures. We know from the libretti that these entries helped to express the moral of the ballet. As noble dancers did not speak, or use mime (except for a brief gesture or pose), the choreography of their dance was the only means of communication. Sometimes this was a series of beautiful and harmonious patterns. Sometimes emblematic figures were employed, including the spelling out of a message in letters. If these were to be effective at all, then the dancers had to perform the evolutions with great precision and utmost clarity. As anyone knows who has tried to dance a set of changing spatial relationships, this is very difficult. How much more difficult wearing a face mask, which means that you cannot see sideways very clearly. Many writers paid tribute to the mastery of this art shown by courtiers. Here Balthazar de Beaujoyeulx describes the premier balet of "Le Balet Comique" of 1581:

> "In the second part of this Ballet a chain was made, comprising four interlacings, different from each other, so much so that to see them one would have said that it was a pitched battle, so well was the order kept, and so skilfully each one studied to keep her line and her cadence: so that everyone thought that Archimedes could not better understand Geometric proportions than these princesses and ladies using them in this ballet."[8]

To the Renaissance imagination the geometric shapes of the dance brought to earth the harmony of the spheres, and this idea was used by Ben Jonson in England. The compliment he pays to his ladies echoes that of Beaujoyeulx. He is describing the letter dance, spelling out the name Charles, Duke of York, which was choreographed by Thomas Giles for the Masque of Queens in 1609. Letter dances give the modern researcher a clearer idea than usual of the shapes the dancers had to achieve in the course of a single entry. For this particular dance we can also gain some idea of how they were performed to the music, as this has probably survived in the piece called 'The Queens masque, the Second'.[9] This gives sufficient musical sections for seventeen separate figures, and it is interesting to notice that three different rhythms exist in the music, including galliard ryhthm. The eleven ladies led by Anne of Denmark received great praise for their execution of the dance:

> "their motions were so even and apt and their expression so just, as, if mathematicians had lost proportion, they might there have found it."[10]

Novelty of figuring and magical interweaving was the aim of the choreographer. One useful source of information on the elaborate figuring required even for a single short dance is the dance-song of Campion's masque for the marriage of Lord Hay.[11] The libretti states that the nine dancers were "to dance according to the measure of the time which the musicians kept and the nature of the wordes which they delivered". The words of the song show that the dance featured hays, of course, as a visual pun on the name of the bridegroom, but also "winding ways", "sliding rounds", "joining three by three", and then a finish in three rows of three. The masquers personated Knights of Apollo who had attempted to seduce Cynthias's nymphs and had been turned into golden trees as a punishment. The fortitude of the gentlemen dancers in this particular entry was staggering. They wore a costume in heroic style of carnation satin to represent their true form as Knights of Apollo; over this they wore a false robe of green taffeta cut into leaves to represent their unchaste state; in addition, as enchanted trees, they bore golden trees "fifteen feet high, with arms and branches very glorious to behold." Sheer physical strength was involved here, plus dexterity in manipulating the trees through the various chain and circling figures of the dance. And yet doing nothing to spoil the illusion.

Similarly, the courage and manipulative skill of the dancing torchbearers is astonishing. Most ballet and masque entries included torchbearers as a way of bringing more light and more pomp to the important dancers. As it was a position of honour, these roles were taken by the younger sons of the gentlemen or lady masquers. On some occasions they were also required to dance bearing their tall wax tapers; for example, in the Masque of Augurs of 1622. As Negri describes the choreography of two such dances, one for men, one for ladies, we can see how jumping steps and swift-moving chain figures were used. Negri makes clear that the torches are to be shifted from hand to hand in the hay. The dance must have been spectacular, the risk great.

Were the steps kept simple then, if elaborate figures were to be executed neatly? The evidence, sparse though it is, suggests not. For example, to return to our reporter at James I's court, Orazio Busino saw a number of different steps in the masquers' first entry:

> "These twelve descended together from above the scene in the figure of a pyramid, of which the Prince formed the apex. When they reached the ground the violins, to the number of twenty-five or thirty, began to play their airs. After they had made obeisance to his Majesty, they began to dance in very good time, preserving for a while the same pyramidical figure, and with a variety of steps. Afterwards they changed places with each other in various ways, but ever ending the leap together."[1]

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This last remark "ever ending the leap together" coupled with the fact that many ballet and masque tunes used the galliard rhythm, shows that the agility of the dancers was employed in ballets. Even to do the most elementary cinquepace step, so that the cadences of the whole company were in unison, would have required a firm ryhthmic and kinaesthetic sense. This also applied to ladies. Another piece of evidence comes from the libretto of 'La Regina Sant' Orsola'[12] performed in Florence in 1625, the choreographer being Agniolo Ricco. The finale was a victory feast in which twelve Tuscan nobles participated and was a "ballo tutto in aria et in capriole". The illustration by Guilio Parigi shows the dancers in heroic costume disposed in two groups of six, plus a group of four, who are presumably the professional dancers. The combination of ensemble dancing and virtuoso steps must have been an impressive climax to the opera.

Conclusions

We can see therefore that the role of the noble dancers in masques and ballets was highly skilled. They had to show a good command of space, beyond the requirements of a social dance. They needed a mastery of steps, including elevated ones; a willingness to dance encumbered by elaborate costumes and props; a quick memory to master new dances to be performed on one occasion only; they had to possess a dignified grace and physical presence proper to their status in society. In addition to this, they had to be ready to switch from this theatrical role to a social role, because they were, after all, in a ballroom. Here the English dancer had the biggest task, as the Measures and Revels of the English masque were part of the dramatic action, and they moved in and out of the two kinds of dancing several times, whereas in France the grand bal was at the end of the ballet. In "Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue" (as seen by Busino) Daedalus invokes the gentlemen masquers to the Revels with a song with the following first four lines:

"It follows now you are to prove
The subtlest maze of all, that's love,
And if you stay too long,
The fair will think you do 'em wrong."[13]

Here he shows how social dancing requires a relationship with the dancing-partner. Only part of the mind can be given to the execution of steps and figures, the rest must be addressing the partner you are dancing with. The technique must be so well-mastered, too, that variations can be made when appropriate. My observations on this matter have led me to think that the art of dancing was pursued by gentlemen and ladies to a level that today we can only associate with professionalism and life-long dedication. Yet these were amateurs pursuing a recreation. I suggest that the moral value of dancing in the Renaissance was inseparable from the discipline of technique. Remembering the variety of steps and the use of leaping in the first masque dance of "Pleasure Reconciled to Virtue" here are the first four lines of the song that introduced it. Let Ben Jonson have the last word:

"For dancing is an exercise
Not only shows the mover's wit,
But maketh the beholder wise,
As he hath power to rise to it."[13]

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