

Situating Early Dance in Its Historical Context

EMILY F. WINEROCK

Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick, 1250–1750

Edited by Jennifer Nevile. 375 pp. Illustrated.

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. \$25 paper.

ISBN 978-0-253-21985-5.

Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick, 1250–1750 is a welcome addition to the small but growing number of essay collections attending to early European dance history.¹ These essays build on translations, critical editions, and facsimile reprints of Renaissance and baroque dancing manuals and choreographies published in recent decades.² Essay collections such as this one, edited by Jennifer Nevile, not only increase our knowledge of early dance practices through their in-depth, individual contributions, but also, through their collective breadth, improve our ability to define and delineate the fields of dance history and early dance studies.

Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick begins with two pieces by Nevile: a short introduction defining key terms such as “Renaissance” and “social dance” and an extensive overview, “Dance in Europe 1250–1750.” The overview discusses dancing masters and instruction manuals, notation types, performance spaces, and dance music, among other topics, noting shifts over time and regional variations. The length and clarity of the overview make it an excellent general introduction to early dance in Europe, whether read in conjunction with the fourteen essays that follow or as a stand-alone piece.

The first of the essays, “Dance in Late Thirteenth-Century Paris” by Karen Silen, pieces together fragments from archival sources to illuminate the dance practices of medieval Paris. Although few sources survive from this period, Silen’s detective work allows for a much more nuanced understanding of attitudes toward dance than was previously available. She discusses how sermons and *exempla* (stories used by preachers to make a point in a sermon) depict dancing, notes the role of dancing in large civic festivals such as knightings, and explores the complex views of university officials toward students’ dancing. Silen also clarifies some misconceptions about the *carole*, cautioning that, although it was sometimes danced in a circle, the *carole* could also be danced in a line or in a procession. Overall, the author

finds that, although many of the surviving records express negative views of dancing, their condemnation is restricted to public, disorderly dancing; private, modest, and orderly dancing was considered acceptable or even encouraged. While this piece floats somewhat far chronologically from the rest of the essays, its illumination of dance in a period about which we know so little more than justifies its inclusion in the collection.

The next two essays offer broader surveys of dance trends and attitudes. In “Dance and Society in *Quattrocento* Italy,” Nevile draws on personal letters and ambassadorial reports to situate the dancing described in fifteenth-century Italian dance treatises in its larger historical context. Touching on some of the complexities of dance in this period, she discusses how dancing was used in *ritualized* as well as actual courtship. She notes that dance was considered both “an external action reflecting interior spiritual movements” and true nobility, and a means to make “those men who are ill-mannered and boorish and born into a low station into a sufficiently noble person” (pp. 80, 87–8).

In “Dance in Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century France,” Margaret M. McGowan argues that dance was an essential component of the “culture of display” that created the image of magnificence promoted by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French monarchs (p. 96). McGowan discusses masquerades and balls sponsored by François I, spectacles organized by Catherine de’ Medici, and ballets commissioned by Cardinal Richelieu to celebrate Louis XIII’s martial triumphs. These spectacles forwarded political agendas at the same time as they provided entertainment. McGowan does an admirable job of presenting a broad overview even while providing detailed descriptions of specific persons and events.

John S. Powell’s “Pierre Beauchamps and the Public Theatre” illuminates the fluid boundaries between the court and the public theater through a case study of Pierre Beauchamps. One of the most important choreographers of seventeenth-century France, Beauchamps, in collaboration with Molière and Jean-Baptiste de Lully, organized the vast majority of musical, dramatic, and terpsichorean performances at both the French court and on the public stage. Powell shows how Beauchamps had to balance the demands of court and public audiences as well as negotiate internal politics, such as when Molière and Lully had a falling out. Powell also points the reader to supplementary images, facsimiles, and transcriptions on his website.

In a similar vein, “Dance in the London Theaters c.1700–1750” by Jennifer Thorp describes the presence, function, and style of dance on the public stage in eighteenth-century London. The dominant style was *la danse noble*, imported from France, and Thorp details the influence of French dancers and choreographers, such as Marie Sallé and Anthony L’Abbé, while still giving ample attention to home-grown artists, such as Hester Santlow, John Weaver, and Kellom Tomlinson. The author uses illustrations to clarify the differences between “serious” and “grotesque” dancing and effectively

conveys the excitement about and popularity of dance and dancers on the eighteenth-century English stage.

The next three essays illuminate the nuts and bolts of the dances of the early modern period. In “The Relationship between Dance and Music in Fifteenth-Century Italian Dance Practice,” Nevile explains how the different Italian dance types were distinguished by the speed and rhythm of the music. She shows that musical and choreographic phrases nearly always matched, but that melodic repetition within a section did not require a parallel repetition of steps or floor pattern. Nevile, nevertheless, argues for the aesthetic influence of the music’s constraints, saying that “when music was played, and the dancers adjusted their steps to fit that music, then dancing moved from being a natural activity to being an art” (p. 156).

David R. Wilson’s “The *Basse Dance* c.1445–c.1545” examines one of the most popular dances of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Europe. Wilson shows that the music and choreography, although linked by common rhythms, were more independent in the *basse dance* than in later dance forms: “The music and the steps each have their own structure, which move in parallel but seldom exactly coincide except at the beginning and the end of the dance” (p. 169). The author gives detailed examples of step sequences and traces shifts over time, from the earliest surviving sources to those of the mid-sixteenth century, at which point the *basse dance* was overtaken by the *pavane* as the most popular “low” or “grave and serene” dance (p. 167). He also observes how political developments influenced dance practices. For example, the defeat in 1477 of Charles the Bold of Burgundy by Louis XI resulted in French traditions gradually replacing Burgundian “cultural pre-eminence” (p. 173). This “gave scope for the wider adoption of a different tradition of *basse dance*, apparently based in the south of France” (p. 173). In addition, Wilson compares the French *basse dance* to the Spanish *baixa* or *baja*, situating his discussion of French and Burgundian practices in their larger European context.

In “Choreographic Structure in Baroque Dance,” Ken Pierce provides a clear and careful introduction to the fundamentals of dance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pierce discusses the steps, figures, dance types, and performance conventions of the French style that came to dominate Europe. He differentiates between embellishment and improvisation, gives examples of the different forms of symmetry using surviving notated dances, and explains some of the complexities of the relationship between choreography and music. This piece is quite helpful in grounding the reader in the basics of baroque dance and should be required reading for anyone about to embark on a study (or reconstruction) of baroque dancing.

In “Your Most Humble Subject, Cesare Negri Milanese,” Katherine Tucker McGinnis draws on extensive archival research to show how the Italian dancing master, Cesare Negri, navigated the ever-changing world of peninsular politics. In his dancing manuals, Negri fails to include in his

exhaustive résumé some of his most prestigious positions: *violon du roi*, dance instructor, and choreographer for three French monarchs. McGinnis hypothesizes that Negri sought favor with the Spanish governors who ruled Milan at the time of publication, and because Spain and France were then at war, Negri found it politic to omit his time spent in France. Such an argument leads the reader to wonder how representative Negri's situation was: did politics shape the choices of most dancing masters or only the handful of men successful enough to gain positions at court?

Politics were certainly evident in the terpsichorean activities of Louis XIV's court, as Julia Prest amply demonstrates in "The Politics of Ballet at the Court of Louis XIV." Of all the monarchs in Europe, Louis XIV is most closely associated with dance, but Prest shows that Louis XIV's use of the *ballet de cour* had precedents in earlier royal ballets such as *Ballet Comique de la Reyne* (1581) and the court ballets promoted by Cardinal Richelieu. Louis XIV encouraged his court to participate in the *ballet de cour* as a distraction from politicking, and Prest examines the king's very intentional use of dancing and entertainments in domestic and foreign policy. She describes specific developments, such as the publication of programs for ballets, which expanded the audience for the king's message beyond those who attended performances, and traces the changes in the king's role from "ferocious warrior" to "gifted peacemaker" in response to current events (p. 236). Prest also describes the waning of the *ballet de cour*, speculating that this may have been partially a result of its boldness in alluding to the king's personal life, especially his dalliances. An additional strength of this essay is how it refers to and builds on the other French baroque contributions by McGowan, Powell, and Pierce.

Linda J. Tomko's essay also builds on other essays in this collection, namely the Pierce and Thorp pieces. "Mr. Isaac's *The Pastorall* and Issues of 'Party'" provides a historically informed, close reading of the ballet *The Pastorall* (1713), situating it in its literary and political context. Looking at the idea of the pastoral in early eighteenth-century England, Tomko provides an overview of the debates among poets and playwrights about its function and purpose. Then she explains how an English dancing master utilized the pastoral in his ballet in honor of Queen Anne's birthday in order to support the queen's political agenda. The author argues that Mr. Isaac's ballet invoked "nostalgia for a golden age of moderate men and moderate means" by using "pastoral steps" such as the "pop-up" and "limping step" and rustic dances such as the hornpipe (pp. 249–50, 252). In addition, the dance's floor pattern took the form of a heart, reinforcing the queen's desire for the end of divisive acrimony and a return to unity and harmony in Parliament and at court (p. 258). As a side note, Tomko does not explain to what or whom she refers when describing the "modernist model that positions dance and art as occupying a realm apart, divorced from the conduct and discourse of politics," a model she opposes (pp. 242, 259). This makes it hard to gauge

the success of this aspect of her argument. Overall, however, Tomko's essay is a beautifully crafted piece that weaves detailed examination of the steps and figures into the discussion of the political significance and historical context of Isaac's choreography.

The final essays run the gamut in terms of time period and subject matter. In her introductory notes, Nevile explains that Graham Pont's essay, "Plato's Philosophy of Dance," is included in this collection because it illuminates the intellectual underpinnings of dance in this period; Plato's philosophy "continued to have a profound influence on Western thought and on writings about dance and attitudes toward it right up to the seventeenth century" (p. 265). This is certainly true, but the relevance of Plato's philosophy could have been made clearer by including more examples of medieval and early modern works that referred to Plato. (Pont gives just one, to Sir Thomas Elyot's *The Boke Named the Governour* [London, 1531].) Moreover, if the function of the essay is to inform the reader about the theoretical foundation on which medieval and early modern dance was built, it might have been better placed at the beginning of the collection, rather than at the end. Earlier placement would also have helped to explain the relevance of the book's title. Nevile defines the "body politick" in the introduction as "the political state or entity," but the term is not mentioned again until Pont's essay (pp. 2, 266, 271, 278).

Alessandro Arcangeli's contribution, "Moral Views on Dance," also provides context in which to better understand the dances described in the preceding essays. Arcangeli provides brief overviews of the theological, legal, and medical perspectives on dancing in sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Europe. He contends that these views provide "a cultural frame for the dancing body" (p. 282). They also provide an interpretive framework for the rest of the essays in this collection, most of which do not explicitly examine the reception of the dances they discuss. In many respects this essay is a summary of several articles Arcangeli has previously published, but in the process of condensing so much material into a few pages, many of the nuances of the earlier pieces have been lost.³ The theological, legal, and medical views of dancing on which Arcangeli touches all merit discussion, but had the essay focused on a single topic, it could have been developed more fully.

The final essay is Jennifer Nevile's "Order, Proportion, and Geometric Forms: The Cosmic Structure of Dance, Grand Gardens, and Architecture during the Renaissance." Nevile shows how similarities existed in the proportioning of space in Renaissance gardens, architecture, and dance choreographies. Although she mentions works created for the Florentine and French courts, the essay's emphasis is on the divine connotations of the geometry common to these art forms, rather than on how gardens, architecture, and dances created a sense of spectacle or were recruited to do political work.

Regarding the collection as a whole, my main criticism is the arrangement of the essays, which are grouped under five thematic headings: “Dance at Court and in the City,” “Dance and the Public Theater,” “Choreographic Structure and Music,” “Dance and the State,” and “Dance, Society, and the Cosmos.” Several of these themes overlap, which can make the placement of a particular article seem arbitrary. Moreover, the essays within a given section do not always relate clearly to each other or to the book’s themes of spectacle and the body politic. A concluding chapter might have clarified these relationships. Alternatively, a chronologically or regionally based organization might have provided a clearer structure for a collection that covers such a broad time frame and so many different countries.

Indeed, chronological order subdivided by region is the organizing principle of the first of the excellent appendices that follow the main text. The “List of Dance Treatises and Manuscripts, Modern Editions, and Translations” gives bibliographic information for modern editions and translations of the original, when available. Another appendix defines a small, but carefully chosen glossary of dance- and music-specific terms, and a third consists of a composite bibliography of works cited in individual chapters as well as in the recommendations for further reading that follow each chapter. The book is well edited and includes a reasonably comprehensive index.

In conclusion, although it is not always clear how the essays in *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick* relate to each other and to the themes of the book identified in the title, this is a small price to pay for the variety, breadth, and depth of this collection. Nevile’s overview should be required reading for any course that touches on early dance history or practice; Silen’s essay stands as proof that there is much to be discovered about medieval dance even when there are no extant instruction manuals; and scholars who work on fifteenth-century Italy, seventeenth-century France, or eighteenth-century England will find several valuable essays in their areas of interest. The balanced assortment of general introductions and detailed case studies makes *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick, 1250–1750* a useful collection and an engaging “read” for dance enthusiasts, reconstructors, and scholars alike.

NOTES

1. See Lynn Matluck Brooks, ed., *Women’s Work: Making Dance in Europe before 1800* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007) and the three dance essays in Timothy J. McGee, ed., *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University Press, 2003).

2. See Guglielmo Ebreo da Pesaro, *De pratica seu arte tripudii: On the Practice or Art of Dancing*, ed. and trans. Barbara Sparti (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Kellom Tomlinson, *A Work Book by Kellom Tomlinson: Commonplace Book of an Eighteenth-Century English Dancing Master, a Facsimile Edition*, ed. Jennifer Shennan (Stuyvesant, N.Y.: Pendragon Press, 1992); Fabritio Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance: A New Translation and Edition of the Nobiltà di Dame (1600)*, ed. and trans. Julia Sutton (New York: Dover Publications, 1995); Barthélemy Montagut and François de Lauze, *Louange de la*

Danse, ed. Barbara Ravelhofer (Cambridge: RTM Publications, 2000); and Lynn Matluck Brooks, *The Art of Dancing in Seventeenth-Century Spain: Juan de Esquivel Navarro and His World* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 2003).

3. See Alessandro Arcangeli, "Dance and Punishment," *Dance Research*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1992): 30–42; "Dance under Trial: The Moral Debate, 1200–1600," *Dance Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1994): 127–55; and "Dance and Health: The Renaissance Physicians' View," *Dance Research*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2000): 3–30.

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